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In Interview: David Stratton on Reviewing and *At the Movies*

This interview was conducted in person by Steven Maras with David Stratton in October 2019. The location was David's home screening room. It was conducted before the interview with Margaret. Case study analysis relies on triangulation of different types of data. The audio interviews were originally conceived in this way, as a form of data gathering used to guide my developing ideas. I felt that a semi-structured approach was best suited to the task after reading and listening to several interviews with them conducted by journalists. I realized that both subjects would be extremely familiar with media interviews, but less familiar with research interviews conducted under ethics approval. I also wanted both subjects to understand that this was a still-developing research project. Characteristic of semi-structured interviews, similar sets of questions on the same topics were posed to Margaret and David, with the intention of examining what they said against prior interviews and statements. This also afforded them the opportunity to respond to, or update, the record. The interviews were not at the time intended to be published. With the evolution of the project, however, and the fact that Margaret and David gave such considered responses, it was later decided in 2023 to publish them. Given the lapse in time, the edited versions were provided to them for approval and permission. The interviews are edited and organized into sections which more or less respect the flow of the original discussion, with only minor adjustments. Rather than present every question, the topic of the main question forms the subheading. This is intended to allow the reader to compare the responses across both interviews.

On Screenwriting and What Makes a Good Screenplay

DAVID STRATTON (DS): It's safe to say that when we were doing the show, whether it was *The Movie Show* or *At the Movies*, it was Margaret who was the one really focused on screenplays because she was a writer – is a writer – more than me; whereas I tend to be more holistic and look at the whole thing. But to try and answer your question, I think it very much depends on what kind of project it is. If it's an adaptation of a novel or a play then obviously it's going to be very different than if it is an original screenplay. I think it's also fair to note that for many filmmakers the screenplay is only just the start. I always remember Robert Altman telling me that he used the screenplay just to get the money, and then threw it away and did his own thing; from *M*A*S*H*(1970) onwards.

I grew up at a time when my cinema world was rather in tune to the auteur theory, which was not so very interested in screenwriters but more the idea that the director was the author of the film. But then I always remember a friend of mine, Richard Corliss, telling me that he had done a bit of research into a well-known Hollywood screenwriter called Howard Koch (1901–1995). Koch wrote lots of screenplays, but an uncanny number of them had to do with means of communication. Koch wrote *The Letter* (1940) with Bette Davis which was a film version of a play that had actually been filmed before. He wrote *Letter from an Unknown Woman* (1948). He wrote *Casablanca* (1942) which is about letters of transit, among other things. He wrote *The 13th Letter* (1951) which was the American Hollywood version of Clouzot's *Le Corbeau* (1943), and he wrote *No Sad Songs for Me* (1950) which centres around letters. So there you have the screenwriter as auteur. But when Corliss interviewed Koch he never made that connection.

What makes a good screenplay is a combination of a good story told with clarity – which is often not the case – and good dialogue.

STEVEN MARAS (SM): What makes a bad screenplay then? I remember reading one of your reviews and you commented 'the problem is the screenplay'. What would you mean by that?

DS: I would probably say that for a film where I felt the qualities of the story and the theme have not been realized in the writing; either because the pacing is stodgy, because it's overwritten or possibly because it's underwritten. There's got to be a happy medium. Often, I think writers fall into the trap of writing too much, but then it certainly is up to the director to pare that down, and if the director isn't successful in doing that you can have a problem I think.

I'm not very comfortable with this whole idea of separating the screenplay from the film because I grant you the screenplay is the blueprint, the starting point, but in the end I'm looking at the film itself. If the screenplay stands out it's usually because it's not good. It should be subsumed into the whole thing, so that the film is the experience that you're getting: the totality of it. And you can always see where you've got terrific screenplay which has been really beautifully handled for a film. I think of *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), which is a film based on a book, scripted by James Agee who was a film writer, but the screenplay is only the starting point for Charles Laughton's vision.

SM: So, if I can ask you to elaborate on your aesthetic […]

DS: You use words like 'aesthetic'. I'm not very pretentious about these things – I don't mean to say that you are. When we did *The Movie Show*, and I think Margaret would back me up, we were never wanting to intellectualize any of this. We wanted to get across to a wide television audience our love of film, or our disappointment in certain things. We always liked to praise films more than to not praise them, and we didn't have the time or the inclination to analyse them in too much detail.

SM: I grant that certainly. I guess what I am asking is what goes on when you notice a bad screenplay.

DS: It doesn't fulfil the potential of the story. Many years ago, I was talking to a very good screenwriter, Robert Bolt, who wrote screenplays for *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and so on. *Doctor Zhivago* was a case in point that here was a huge novel which had to be condensed into a film that ran about three hours. To do that you obviously had to leave out a lot of stuff, but you had to keep the essence of it, the spirit of it, the feel of it. David Lean as director was a past master of doing that because he'd done it with the Dickens films. He'd done it brilliantly with *Oliver Twist* (1948) and *Great Expectations* (1946), and those are pretty weighty books as well, with lots of characters that had to be condensed but those films are brilliant, I think.

It's a collaborative art, but it's interesting that Lean did it over and over again and so he was obviously very good at it. But he worked with very good writers, and I remember Bolt saying to me: 'Look, if you're trying to condense a huge book like Zhivago into a film, you do have to change. You have to delete things but in the process of deleting things you might have to actually change things; maybe even change the ending.' He was actually referring to *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957), which has a completely

different ending from the book. Now if you see that film you couldn't imagine a different ending to *Bridge on the River Kwai*, but for people who knew the book it was a betrayal.

SM: You have discussed examples of adaptations, what about original screenplays?

DS: Well, the original screenplay of course allows the writer – who is often also the director – to start from scratch which of course is great. *Citizen Kane* (1941) being a formidable example, which Welles wrote with Herman Mankiewicz. The original screenplay is often the more interesting way to start, I feel, but again it's only a start, it's only a blueprint.

SM: Knowing that you came at this from an auteur perspective, and that you put your focus on the final film, do you ever consult a screenplay when you do a review?

DS: No.

SM: I recall with Romper Stomper you said you'd seen the screenplay?

DS: Yes, I had read the screenplay for *Romper Stomper* (1992). The people who were looking to fund the film asked me if I'd have a look at it and see what I thought. I hate doing this and in fact I've never done it since I don't think.

SM: There has been a trend in Australia through the 1980s to 2000s to declare that there was a problem with Australian scripts, that the script was the problem. Do you think that still applies?

DS: It's hard to make a sweeping statement. In some cases, I think films might go into production a bit too soon before the script is ready, or before the director has completely reshaped the script to reflect his or her concerns and wishes. But again, it depends on the film; I mean each one is different.

I have this theory that sometimes when a film is made, let's say an Australian film, everybody involved in making it is very close to it and I don't think often enough, when it's nearly finished, they take it out of that bubble and show it to people who know nothing about it. Not to me and not to critics but to people. They do it a lot in America, I don't think they do it so much elsewhere, and sometimes I look at a film and think, why did you do

that? Why couldn't you see that that just doesn't work, and surely if you'd shown it to somebody who had nothing to do with it, they'd realize that that doesn't make sense.

SM: Do you think Australian screenwriters have it particularly tough, or is their situation unique in any way?

DS: I wouldn't think it was tougher here than anywhere else. I think everywhere it's a challenge.

SM: In the period of working on *At the Movies*, which of you was tougher on, or more friendly towards, screenwriting and screenwriters?

DS: I wouldn't think either one. As I said Margaret, because she is a writer, was often more attuned to the script than I was.

On the Language of Screenwriting

SM: I notice in my early analysis of the scripts for the programme you would use the word 'script' and Margaret would often use the word 'screenplay'. Is there a reason for that preference?

DS: No.

SM: They're interchangeable?

DS: Pretty much.

SM: There's an idea that the script is a kind of more studio-oriented term, more like the blueprint, and the screenplay is more like the writer's term […]

DS: Maybe, but I never thought of it that way.

On the Origins of At the Movies

SM: In the early days of the programme at SBS the format seemed inspired by Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert's *At the Movies*; was there awareness of what they were doing? If so, what aspect of that was influential or inspiring?

DS: Not that much. I was very friendly with Roger Ebert. I met Roger back in the late 1960s – before they started that show – and so I was certainly aware of what they were doing. I think I only ever watched it once. I certainly didn't make any kind of study of it. Margaret wasn't aware of it at all, I don't think. There was also a programme in England that Barry Norman did for many years where he reviewed the films, and he also did a lot of interviews. Gene and Roger didn't do interviews, they just reviewed the films, and discussed them, and gave them a thumbs up or thumbs down. So when we were talking about doing a film review programme we sort of combined the best of those two things without actually really doing much analysis of them. I can't emphasize this enough – we didn't come at this in any intellectual way. It was just pretty instinctive.

What we were unaware of at the time, because we're both from New South Wales, was that there had been a programme on Melbourne television – a film review programme with Jim Murphy and Ivan Hutchinson called *Two on the Aisle* (1971–1974). We were completely unaware of that; we'd never heard of it.

SM: How did you script your reviews for *At the Movies*?

DS: Well, the first thing we would do is have a discussion a week before, usually immediately after the show. So, we've done a show, we'd meet and have a coffee, and we'd look at the films that are opening next week which the production manager, or the show, has put together for us. It would be as simple as Margaret saying, 'Oh, I'd like to do that one', and I'd say 'Okay, well I'll do that one', so that we more or less did the same number. Then we would go and write that sort of 'to camera' review and send it in. The discussion that followed was completely unscripted and quite spontaneous because I never knew what Margaret had written. I didn't want to know how many stars she was going to give it, and vice versa. Sometimes she had some idea about what I was thinking because I might have said something, but generally speaking we didn't exchange any views. We would always do a run through immediately before camera shooting; and that's the first time I would know what she was thinking, and sometimes I would be absolutely gobsmacked and I'm sure she would be too.

SM: And so was there much of an editorial process around the actual scripts, was there bouncing it back and forward from the producers […]

DS: Not at all, not at all. The contribution of the producers was to find the clips and to integrate them. We would leave a gap usually for where the

clip should go, and sometimes we would suggest a scene, but we were very lucky we had very good producers all the time. It's very different obviously from writing a review for a newspaper, because you know that some of the plot of the film is going to be told through the clips so you don't need to do so much of that, and also you use different wording. It's a completely different thing actually.

On Dynamics and Personae

SM: There have been lots of attempts to describe the chemistry between the two of you. Journalist Doug Anderson (2011) once noted that what was important was the way you both addressed audiences. That your 'opinions were always accessible, never didactic'. What's your view of this, why is this so important?

DS: Well, that's going back to what I said at the beginning, that we never set out to intellectualize any of this. We just set out to entertain an audience with our views of the films, because we both loved films. Margaret maybe not quite so much to begin with, but I think she came to love films as well. Margaret was coming at it as someone who had been going to the Sydney Film Festival, who saw a lot of films, but not everything. And I'd always seen everything from the time I was young: good, bad and ugly. Margaret like most people had just chosen the things she thought she wanted to see, so she wasn't really very familiar with some of the weirder directions that cinema can take. I think she sort of discovered those through *The Movie Show* because we tried to review everything.

SM: Are you happy with some of the stereotypes that, for instance, sees one of you as more passionate and the other intellectual, one as emotional and the other more rational, one as a film critic versus the other the movie critic?

DS: I don't quite know what that last one means, the difference between a film critic and a movie critic. I don't care, I mean if that's the way people saw us, fine.

SM: I've often thought that you can be just as passionate about films as say Margaret is, and she's just as intellectual about films as you can be […]

DS: Yes, except I'm not very.

SM: Do you think some of these ideas of one of you being 'more passionate', 'more intellectual', 'emotional', 'rational', or focused on 'film' versus 'movies', have to do with popular culture, and popular versus more serious ways of seeing movies?

DS: Maybe. I guess I've always enjoyed both popular culture and more serious ways of seeing movies, although I must say I'm less attracted to popular culture these days.

SM: Would you say that you carry with you a kind of persona, a critical persona that you need to maintain?

DS: I don't think so. If I do, I'm sort of not really aware of it.

SM: Working together, how conscious were you of the other's point of view or take on things; did you ever make accommodation or adjustments?

DS: I had a very good idea of some of Margaret's leanings, I guess, as I'm sure she did of mine, because we had our favourites and our dislikes as well. There were certain filmmakers, and also one or two actors, I think, that she had doubts about, which tended to colour her opinion of the film – unfairly sometimes, I thought. I don't think I have quite so many feelings like that, but maybe I do and I'm not really aware of it.

On the Power of Reviewing

SM: What do viewers expect from a review today, in an age where there's an abundance of information about films available, and films themselves are experienced in different ways across different platforms?

DS: That's a difficult question. People are watching films in all sorts of different ways and they're getting their commentary on films from all sorts of different sources. It always amazes me when I see people watching movies on their mobile phone on the train and then they say they've seen the film. They haven't seen the film obviously. If somebody thinks they've seen *Joker* (2019) on a phone, well good luck to them but they haven't. So there's that. I think that more commentary on films the better, from as many sources as possible is great.

What do people expect from reviews? I think honestly, on the part of the reviewer, you can only express your honest opinion. I'm sure there are

people – if they read me in *The Australian* now, which is the only place I review these days[1] – they've probably got some idea of where I'm coming from in various areas.

There's an important difference, I think, between a reviewer who is reviewing basically the new films as they open for the newspaper or on television or radio, and writing for a magazine like *Sight and Sound* or *Film Comment*, where you can expand considerably on your ideas about the film. I don't do that, and I haven't done that. You have a very limited space to talk or to write about the film. I have a page in *The Australian* every Saturday and most weeks I have to cover three films; so you don't have a great deal of space to expound on things.

I'm quite happy to do what I do. You have to do a sort of short cut really. I don't like being negative, it gives me no pleasure to say a film is bad, and I try not to say it. I suppose that's why when Margaret and I were dishing out the different films, I would always try and do the ones that I liked more – and it's the same with *The Australian* now. I try to do the films I like because I'd rather write positively about a film than negatively about a film because I know that, especially in the Australian environment, it's a real struggle to get a film made and even more sometimes to get it shown and seen. I don't like putting down people who put their heart and soul into something and thought they were making something great and maybe they didn't for whatever reason. So, I don't enjoy that, it gives me no pleasure at all and I would rather urge people to see something than urge them not to see something. I feel that when people are writing almost like they've got some personal gripe against the film, and they're thrilled that they can say that it's bad, that is ugly and I don't think they should be reviewing films. There's nothing wrong with personal taste, I mean we all have that. I express my personal taste all the time. It's just the nastiness that creeps into a lot of reviews.

SM: Does this have to do with looking to the box office as the criteria of quality?

DS: Well, that would certainly be not a good thing to do. Look, it's a hard question. When I was growing up, films were hard to see. I would go to see a film in the cinema and very often that film, if it was not a huge success and therefore would be revived, you might not see it again, ever, unless it came on television. On television it would be pan and scanned or fiddled around with to fit the format, so you're not really seeing the film. So, you'd go and see a film – I'm thinking back to when I was a teenager and really discovering films – and you'd think, will I ever see this film again? Very often I would go

and see a film and I would go back and see it again the next day if I really loved it, because I'd think I may never see this film again. Now, of course, you have every opportunity to see everything and so it's very different and so maybe it's not as precious a commodity.

SM: Do you think reviewers need training?

DS: I don't know. The most important thing is the person who's reading the review. That's who you're doing it for, you're not doing it for you, you're doing it for that unknown person out there who will pick up a copy of the paper and read it. So what you're trying to say is look, I don't know what you'll like, but coming from where I am, I think this is terrific. Or I think this is flawed but it's really interesting on this level and that level, but that's my view and I'd love you to share it.

SM: Reviewing has been seen as a poor cousin of criticism or inferior to criticism, but my reading is you both treated the review quite seriously and bridged the gap between the review and the critical piece. What are your thoughts on this?

DS: I've never sort of separated them quite that way. I can see why you would say that. Critical has the connotation of criticizing and reviewing is more what I do, I guess. I've never sort of got hung up on these differences.

SM: This comes out of Richard Corliss' (1990) work where he sees the critical as the longer form, not trapped in that window of new releases.

DS: I know he does. Which is what we were talking about before.

SM: It also comes a bit from Huw Walmsley-Evans (2018) who interviewed you in 2010, and wrote, 'For David reviewing is the least important part of his critical work, it's actually more the education and the teaching and the curation […]'

DS: Oh, that's certainly true.

SM: From that I wondered if you see it as an inferior form?

DS: Not inferior, but I think what I said to him, and what I would say to you, is that if you ask me what I enjoy most, by far, it's teaching about film.

On the 'David and Margaret Effect'

DS: I've not really heard of it. I think we had a big effect on small films, especially small Australian ones. Definitely. I think we had no effect whatsoever on Hollywood blockbusters. Nothing we said, good or bad, would change any of that. But if you take a small film – and a good example was *Samson & Delilah* (2009) where we both gave it five stars – that could have a big effect on the relative success of that film in Australia. I think it's interesting that during the dying days of *At the Movies* when we were taking a break, they were testing other reviewers. Rolf de Heer's *Charlie's Country* (2013) was up that week. Now Margaret and I both love *Charlie's Country*, but the host Jason Di Rosso gave it two stars or something. He didn't like it at all, and the film died. A bad review can really kill an Australian film – stone dead – and so I think that's something. We were criticized about our attitude towards Australian films. That was always something that was very much on our minds. The Hollywood industry can look after itself, but Australian films are fragile.

So the reviewer has a big responsibility I think, a very big responsibility. Because after all it's only their opinion, they're obviously being honest – well they should be honest – with their opinion, but it only is their opinion and you're talking about possibly destroying something that the people who created it spent years of their lives working on. It's a pretty big responsibility.

SM: How important is it to have a strong social radar for a reviewer, around key social issues or social movements?

DS: I think it's quite important to have an awareness of issues to me because if you're completely immune to what's happening in the world I don't think you make a very good reviewer. I'm not sure that reviewers should promote social issues or social movements or speak against them. They're reviewing a film. I think they definitely should be very conscious and aware of them and probably hold a position on them, but they're reviewing films not pushing political platforms. If you reviewed a political film then it's another question. *Vice* (2018) was a very powerful political film, and it divided people in its depiction of Dick Cheney. I thought it was a remarkable achievement, but not everybody did. Maybe this is because of how I felt about Dick Cheney anyway, it confirmed my feelings.

SM: Should a reviewer conceal or hide their politics?

DS: A reviewer shouldn't flaunt their politics and they shouldn't conceal them either. It wouldn't normally be part of the review I don't think.

SM: Are they cultural gatekeepers around social issues?

DS: Well no, again I think the reviewer is reviewing the film. If the film delves into some issues then the reviewer can perhaps describe the way the film successfully or unsuccessfully delves into those issues; but it's not up to the reviewer to put in his or her own politics. The best description that I ever heard of a reviewer was given to me many years ago by Bernardo Bertolucci. I was at a dinner with him, another critic Derek Malcolm, and others, and we were asked 'Have you ever thought of making films yourselves?' Before we could answer Bertolucci said, 'Don't even say that, because we filmmakers need people like Derek and David because they're the bridge between us and the audience, we need that bridge.' I always thought that was a really good description.

SM: Do they follow or can they lead audiences? Are reviewers bound to the same standards or criteria of their audiences or can they lead audiences to different standards?

DS: I think they should lead audiences. I mean I think reviewers should be very knowledgeable. Maybe that's why I take issue with some younger reviewers today, because I don't think they are very knowledgeable. I'd be surprised if they actually sit down sometimes and watch silent films, for instance. But anyway, reviewers should be very knowledgeable and very authoritative in their appreciation of not just contemporary cinema, but the cinema of the past, and where it has led to where we are now; and not just in Australia, America, or in England, but in Iran and Venezuela, and so on. So I think critics should be ahead and persuade audiences to come and say, 'Hey, this is something very unusual, very different, very exciting, go and see it.'

SM: How is this changing in the digital age of aggregated opinions?

DS: I think every everybody who is writing about film or talking about film is doing it for the audience that is reading or listening. I write now, for *The Australian*. I used to write for *Variety*. It's a very different readership, you can imagine. *Variety*, an American trade paper, has a very high standard of reviews, they always have. They're among the best reviews. *Hollywood Reporter* too. But you're writing initially to the industry. I wrote a review of a film in some festival somewhere and got a message from Steven Spielberg's

office: 'How can I contact this bloke? I read your review I want to meet the guy who made that film.' So those are the people you're writing it to, filmmakers, writers, and such. That's very different from writing for *The Australian*, which will probably be a conservative readership, and not that you're pandering to that at all, but you're aware of the fact that it's probably an older, conservative audience. It's the same basic review. You don't change your opinion of the film, you just change the way you address it.

On Being an Insider or an Outsider

SM: How do you keep your independence as a reviewer in the face of trade forces, marketing publicity and the view that reviewing is an adjunct of marketing or a consumer guide.

DS: We never, ever, from memory anyway, had distributors or publicists trying to influence us. They'll be very helpful, or they won't be very helpful. They'll be eager to love you to see this film ahead of time, that sort of thing, but they won't put any pressure on you at all and I never had that.

SM: How aware you that your comments might end up on a movie poster?

DS: Well that's fair enough, I mean, why not? You don't seek that. You don't write little grabs. But if they want to use it, sure, why shouldn't they.

SM: Do you consider yourself to be an insider or an outsider to the film industry?

DS: I don't think I consider myself either one. I'm certainly not an outsider and I don't think I'm an insider either.

SM: So this goes back to some of issues of responsibility: to whom is owed the greater loyalty, Australian filmmakers or film audiences?

DS: Audiences, or readers, definitely, but I'm not ashamed, and I don't think Margaret would be ashamed either, of the fact that we might be a little bit more tolerant to Australian films than to others.

SM: Did personal relationships with filmmakers ever get in the way of your reviews?

DS: No, not really. In a small industry like this it's hard not to know people and because I was directing the Sydney Film Festival for a number of years of course I got to know many of that generation of filmmakers. One of the more difficult reviews I had to write was one of Paul Cox's later films and I knew Paul quite well and I thought I'd give him the courtesy of phoning him to warn him. I rang him up and said, 'Look, I'm not giving you a good review'. At least he was forewarned. He rang me up and said it was much worse than he thought.

On Romper Stomper *(1992)*

SM: Do you still see it the same way? Would you make the same call today?

DS: I never denied the fact that there were powerful performances in the film; I think Russell Crowe is terrific in it. Russell and I have talked about it a lot over the years. You know my position, I'm sure, on the film and the mistake I made I guess was thinking that if I just didn't score it […] It wasn't that I gave it zero, I never gave it zero, I just didn't want to give it anything. Of course, that was seized on by Roadshow who was distributing the film as if I'd given it zero, which was not true. But what could you do? So fine, they used it for publicity, and I think it's probably Geoffrey Wright's best film. I think what he's made since is some justification for my misgivings about him as a filmmaker. It was made at a time where there was a lot of racism, especially in Melbourne, as I was getting letters about from Vietnamese communities, and so on. I don't resile from what I said. I probably should have found a better way to do it but I can't honestly now think how I could have done it any other way.

SM: One of the things you talk about in the DVD documentary you did with Sally Aitken is the desire for a counter voice or a counter position, but that's a particular form or quality that's not in every film, you know you don't always see these.

DS: No, but in that film there should have been, in my view. I think it needed a character the audience could identify with.

SM: What's the meaning of giving no stars or zero stars or refusing to review? Is it still within the rules of the game?

DS: Why not? We made the rules.

SM: So in the case of *Romper Stomper*, with no stars, is that a bigger slap in the face than a zero star?

DS: It wasn't meant to be. I wouldn't have given it zero because it was a film that had, as I said, some qualities in terms of acting and staging, and so on. I mean there's so many elements that make up a film. I just didn't want to give it any encouragement, and in hindsight I probably did it wrong but I don't know what else I could have done to be honest. I mean, if you wanted to objectively give a film like that stars, you could probably give it three and a half in terms of quality as a film, so I couldn't do that because I didn't want to do that.

On Wolf Creek 2 *(2013)*

SM: Would you make the same call not to review today; in retrospect was there a lost opportunity to talk to the public about a mean aspect of the Australian body politic?

DS: It's funny I don't really know why this is a controversy at all. I saw *Wolf Creek 2* at the Venice Film Festival, where it had its world premiere. I loathed it, but was quite happy to review it. But, before it was released in Australia it was modified by the distributor, presumably with the director's approval – I'm making an assumption here but I assume the censors gave it an 'R' and the distributors wanted 'MA' so they made some cuts.[2] Now I couldn't go on television and talk about the film I'd seen in Venice because this was no longer the same film, and there was no way in the wide world that I was going to watch it again. So, I discussed it with Margaret (she, I don't think, even saw it) and we said, 'Alright well, let's let it go.' And somehow it became a big deal. I mean we try to review everything but we didn't actually always review everything – but I was not going to watch that film again.

SM: There was a sense in that controversy, from other writers, that you may not have somehow fulfilled your responsibility as critics because it was an Australian box office success there was some obligation to review.

DS: That's bullshit. I don't think we had any obligation. Our obligation was to our viewers. But in this case, as I explained to you, those were the circumstances, and I don't see that argument at all.

SM: The other feature of this is that there's a perception that torture porn is just something that neither you or Margaret like which may well be the case – but has the genre of torture porn been fully understood in its kind of historical context? I mean Australia has become somewhat mean in its relationship to travellers and foreigners and so on so there is a new reading of torture porn that it reflects the new body politic. I remember your review saying, 'This is not the place to discuss torture porn,' but perhaps it was the place to talk about torture porn?

DS: Torture porn is something that I find, to be honest, to be reprehensible. In my view, there is no valid reason to show in detail people being hurt in the way some of those films do. So, I have no time for the films that fall into that genre, I think they're pretty despicable to be honest. They're encouraging people to get off on. They're not cautionary tales. It could be a far more influential cautionary tale if it was handled in a different, less sensational way, and so I don't have any respect for filmmakers who use that, and I guess if you want a moral judgement from me, that's the moral judgement.

SM: But if you're defenders of Australian film and it's a box office success, doesn't the film demand a review?

DS: I don't think that's got anything to do with it. Box office was not something that we were doing. I mean if we had a weekly segment saying this is what's hot at the box office, then maybe you'd have a point – but that's not what we were doing. We were reviewing the films of the week. Okay, so we chose not to review this one, maybe because Margaret said I'm just not going to see it. I mean I guess I could have reviewed the film I saw in Venice, but it wouldn't have been the same, so we all agreed.

SM: Well this goes back to the rules of the game. You said, 'Why not? We make the rules,' but the market also makes the rules and the audiences also have expectations […]

DS: Not for our programme they didn't. I mean our programme wasn't interested in the market. Well, I suppose we were, but that wasn't what we were addressing the audience about.

SM: And the audiences feel as though they have expectations, and the filmmakers have an expectation that you will review them.

DS: I don't think they would have liked the review we would have done on *Wolf Creek 2*.

NOTES

1. David retired from this role in December 2023.
2. Journalist Vicki Roach confirms this (see Roach 2014).