

There Are Full Professors in This Place Who Read Nothing but Cereal Boxes: Australian Screen in Academic Print

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Ina Bertrand, ed, *Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 1989. ISBN 0 868 40075 0. 422pp, \$39.95.

John Cruthers, ed,
Case Studies in Independent Production (Taking Care of Business Vol 2), AFTRS and AFC, Sydney, 1988. ISBN 0 642 13926 1. 107pp, \$15.

Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka, *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late 80s*, AFTRS, Sydney, 1988. ISBN 0 642 14096 0. 204pp, \$19.95.

Megan McMurchy and Jennifer Stott, *Signs of Independents: Ten Years of the Creative Development Fund*, AFC, Sydney, 1988. ISBN 0 642 14016 2. 154pp, \$10.

Albert Moran and Tom O'Regan, *The Australian Screen*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1988. ISBN 0 14 011024 0. 304pp, \$19.95.

Scott Murray, *Back of Beyond: Discovering Australian Film and Television*, AFC, Sydney, 1988. ISBN 0 7316 4390 9. 112pp, \$25.95.

Graham Shirley and Brian Adam, *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1989. ISBN 0 86819 232 5. 325pp, \$24.95.

John Tulloch and Graeme Turner, *Australian Television: Programs, Pleasures and Politics*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1989. ISBN 0 04 380030 0. 204pp, \$19.95.

Graeme Turner, *Film as Social Practice*, Routledge, London, 1988. ISBN 0 415 00735 6 (pb). 187pp, \$A21.95.

The inevitable timelag between the coming of an industrial activity and its academic sacralisation routinely produces anachronisms. Just as film studies is becoming legitimate fare in Australian educational institutions and publishing houses, the Film Finance Corporation is sending scripts to America for scrutiny and giving half of its money to TV; Channel Ten is sacking hundreds of its staff on the say of someone it gave the 'Don't Come Monday' mail message some years ago; and the networks are crying poor to the tribunal and US producers but shouting prosperous to their bankers. In short, the screen industries are shifting down a few gears – at least discursively – from lefty localism, cocaine salaries and hard-top exhibition as university training is producing hundreds of graduates and many more words designed to move, respectively, into new jobs and new bibliographic categories that may already be 'of another time'. The cult of the credential, coupled with discourses of professionalism/occupational ideology and the need for the Arts academy to appear vocationally concerned, has provided a super-abundance of over-qualified and under-experienced 21-year-olds. And at the level of academic careerism, a doubling effect is the emergence of providential new book-writing territory, with publishers drawn to a subject matter which might lend itself to an unusual confluence of the coffee-table and textbook markets.

What I want to look at in this article is a raft of publications appearing in and around the field of academic screen studies. As research into Australian cinema reaches the level of output that can describe a canon, and a delayed but significant move is made towards the study of television, it seems appropriate to take stock. In the relevant industries 1988 and '89 may have

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been years of post-pleasure let-down, but they have certainly been years of plenitude in my industry. That may not continue to be the case, for reasons I have already gestured at.

As students flocked to Australian sociology during the Vietnam War but fled it during the just-passed decade of rational consumer self-aggrandisement, so our discipline currently has a possibly temporary boost through student demand. This paper will suggest that the move towards public policy studies that has kept sociology alive is becoming evident in screen studies, and that this trend must be developed further. It's culturecrat production time.

The Omnibus Collection

Because of the government-assisted nature of Australian film production, the potential for this turn/justification has in a sense always been with us; a point made clear by *Cinema in Australia: A Documentary History*. A lavishly pictorial dustjacket might reproduce the stunning poster to *Jedda* and a Sam Neil-Judy Davis embrace, but a grainy black-and-white advertisement for Film Australia that nestles with the book's title-page is more representative.

In this instance, not only does it foreground the multi-faceted role of the state in the industry, but it is also emblematic of the standard of imagery throughout the volume. New South Wales University Press is to be commended for producing a hardback of documents at reasonable price. But the unfortunate corollary is that corners have been cut which continue the subordination of picture to print. Film is about image. Many important stills are included here, but none of them are done justice. It's shoddy and it's part of a wider process that ties students into reading books in place of reading films. The grandiloquently glossy cover flatters and misleads.

That important point aside, this is a major landmark. Editor Bertrand sensibly eschews aesthetic definitions of cinema in favour of an institutional perspective that looks at the production and circulation of an industrial output and accords a right and proper significance to non-feature sectors. The emphasis, then, is on circuits of knowledge, patterns of participation and processes of manufacture rather than great moments in the trend towards the truly cinematographic text.

Collections of documents infuriate the historian because they dilute the fetishisation of

'primary source material' by denying the purifying act of 'primary research'. Bertrand is aware of the dangers both of selecting out of context and of imagining that an originating point of truth *via* experience and contemporaneity can be either found or re-generated. But in one important respect, her book is very conventional. Order is determined by time-line, with disjunctures produced in 1914, 1939, 1956 and 1976; the coming of television and the Australian Film Commission rank with World Wars as markers of epistemological breaks. Yet unlike many such collections, Bertrand has enlisted specialist subject editors for each section of the book. Each one has an introduction, a continuous prose bibliography and about 20 individual documents covering issues such as genres, technology, exhibition, the state, training and general questions of film culture. And several sections take time to provide thorough documentation of particular films: *Thoroughbred*, *Jedda*, *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* and *My Brilliant Career*. Apart from their academic value, these extracts include enchanting little synchronic histories; journalists of the 1900s, for example, couldn't decide whether *The Kelly Gang* was a 'biograph' (the *Argus*), a 'dramagraph' or a 'pictorial drama' (the *Bulletin*) (29-30). And Saidie Parker problematised the Australian masculinity available to the industry in 1937 not because of 'the physique and the personality' but because men 'dress carelessly and...speak carelessly' for fear 'that a man belies his virility by being meticulous in the matter of clothes; that he is effeminate if punctilious in his speech' (174-75). Today, that seems as political an issue as the question 'Have you any Communists in your film society committee?' posed by *Film Guide* in 1951 (208). The South Australian Film Corporation's 1975 slogan of 'total Film ... If you want to talk film, total or, in part, talk to us - soon' (287) seems equally a creature of its time in today's moments of market as god and entrepreneur as priest. Conversely, the Sydney Women's Film Group's call in 1974 for women to 'stop being passive consumers ... DARE TO STRUGGLE...DARE TO SHOOT!' (306) reads as plaintively and urgently as it was presumably intended to be at the time that it was written. But how tragic to see Hoyt's proudly proclaiming 'No Boring Shorts' in the mid-80s (356).

The other major attempt at the comprehensive new history book for the year is *The Australian*

Screen. Editors Moran and O'Regan are careful to emphasise that: 'This book is *an account*.' It is not inconsiderable for that. And their provocative introduction encourages us to ponder the relationship of nation to state and, *inter alia*, the Australianness of the work of 'our' directors overseas. Bertrand and Routt in their chapter on the business of film from 1896 to 1929 situate Longford/Lyell's *Sentimental Bloke* within the context of other social-realist neo-comedies from other lands quite fascinatingly while describing the complex cultural *dependencia* debates about the 1920s. Routt alone, on the film family of a dominion between the wars, rightly complains that 'so much of what passes for cultural analysis fails even to gesture towards grounding its activity empirically' and proceeds to demonstrate 'that independent leading women are common in Australian films of these two decades'.

Perhaps the most ambitious chapter, Cunningham's survey from the 1930s to 'the Revival', is even of touch, lifting itself in a fine reading of the now oft-discussed *Back of Beyond*. Graeme Turner is suitably enthusiastic and ambivalent about the period film and Albert Moran offers a grand synthesis of the mountain of institutional documentary produced since the Second World War. His short and pithy sentences offer a good way in to that and to his typically limpid account of TV drama.

Adrian Martin's chapter is a quest for 'transgressive film-making', a quest which allows him a harmless autobiography of filmgoing recollection, significant perhaps because of the prospect that its readers will never see any of the films that it mentions.

Blonski and Freiberg on women's films cover a most distinguished array of texts in such a way that one could have asked for a longer piece as well as another one on features made by women. The asides of Sean Maynard (aka John Flaus) on Aborigines and film are, conversely, worrisome. Documentaries such as *Niaringu* are disparaged because blacks in them seem to be 'whingeing'. Then there is the use of the term 'tribal' for those 'Aborigines not in contact with situations with Whites' as if they were more identifiable than other groups, more important and even blacker. And what is always an unstructured piece also contains errors and absences. The Northern Territory did *not* enact land right legislation in 1976; and to argue that the character of Gary in *Backroads* was made to mimic the romantic Hollywood rebel of

conventional white filmmaking and that Marbuck in *Jedda* is a patronising myth runs counter to what is known of the making of *Backroads* and the fascinating Colin Johnson article on black masculinity (1987). The book also runs into a few problems in Tom O'Regan's chapters, on 'Ocker Films' and 'Film in the 1980s'. These could have been models of institutional/discursive analysis but the topics needed a couple of extra chapters, given the array of films they actually address. Under 'The Ocker Films', for instance, we find the TV series of *Number 96*. Why? It had 'serious' treatments of mastectomies and male homosexuality. Is this Ocker? And *Puberty Blues*? Surely that was the ultimate triumph of an autonomous junior feminism, when Nell Schofield rode her board and didn't care about boys any more. In the historical section, why and how was Mavis Bramston relevant? (Was Gordon Chater offering a conventional model of Ocker Masculinity?) How can O'Regan claim *Bazza* and *Alvin* as the product of Mavis, Auntie Jack and the writings of J D Pringle, Craig McGregor and Ronald Conway, writings which did nothing but criticise that entire ethos? The need to cover such a fund of territory has led to some lack of definitional focus. But carpings aside, the volume is worth it. If you only have room for a limited range of books about Australian film on your shelf, make this one of them alongside their earlier *Film Reader*.

Graham Shirley and Brian Adams have recently released a revised edition of *Australian Cinema: The First Eighty Years*. The narrative still concludes in 1975, but it makes use of newly available information on early films and prints of such early texts. A more centred and united account than the edited collection, it follows the well-worn writing tracks of an empirical film history that adopts tactics of unselfconsciously telling the past from the modernist standpoint of a knowing present (*viz* chapter titles such as 'The Growth of an Industry', 'Reaching towards Nationalism', 'The New Pioneers', 'Into the Void' and 'New Stirrings'). The industry is anthropomorphised.

Such an approach stands in stark contrast to the methods of Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka. Their *Imaginary Industry* picks up the strands of their two other recent collaborations on Australian film history and adds perspectives from other authors. Where Shirley and Adams are the Lord Actions of film history – the facts

are seen to speak for themselves – these writers use a readable if occasionally oxymoronic blend of psychoanalysis, Marxism, discourse theory and cultural policy. The volume juxtaposes commercial with critical, radical with conservative, nationalist with internationalist and picturesque with innovative.

Jacka's chapters on state funding support, the production business, government film organisations and overseas links are exemplars of how to make public policy and organisational studies both readable and committed. On the score of textual analysis, the book becomes a little like a shopping list in its obsessive desire to classify each and every Australian feature and/or describe the politics of particular films and their methods of advertising. But Stuart Cunningham's study of the Kennedy-Miller group's mini-series makes the necessary connections between production, narrative, filmic style and social circulation.

John Tulloch and Graeme Turner have produced the edited collection *Australian Television*, covering the other screen. The book represents an invaluable initial contribution to TV studies in this country. It contains a wide variety of approaches, beginning with a useful chapter of history from Albert Moran that isolates three key periods: 1956-65 (radio with pictures), 1965-75 (the advent of TV drama) and from 1975 (the era of new technology, a revived feature film sector and off-screen ownership histrionics). Tom O'Regan discusses the industrial and infrastructural convergence of film and television under the sign of 10BA while Bob Hodge offers a useful input to the policy discourse with his contribution on children and TV, providing, *inter alia*, a critique of the Senate Committee on the subject.

Away from an institutional focus, Graeme Turner discusses the Australian tradition of disruptive television that dates from *In Melbourne Tonight*. His chapter argues for an ambiguity, for example, in *Perfect Match*, where failure, embarrassment and confrontation act as counters to the more obvious romantic love paradigm. Stuart Cunningham details the historical mini-series. Using *Cowra Breakout*, *Bodyline* and *Vietnam* as exemplars, he isolates a trend towards topical but non-parochial treatments of an Australian past that is recounted from a range of differing perspectives. John Fiske offers a typically playful substitute for a lost opportunity to appear on game shows while

Ann Curthoys and John Docker analyse *Prisoner* and John Tulloch offers a revealing reading of *A Country Practice* in the context of its punctuating advertisements. Dugald Williamson's chapter on the documentary utilises *The Rough and the Smooth*, an ABC program from Film Australia on the Heidelberg School of painters, to make a number of points about the value of a formalist and rule-governed explanation of texts. He questions authorially-based stories within such films and in accounts of the making of those films without really indicating either why this is wicked or what would be preferable. Philip Bell and Kathe Boehringer give a suitably sceptical rendering of *Beyond 2000's* worldview and Theo van Leeuwen a musicologically radical and literate but intellectually accessible piece on the theme music to ABC News. Standing somewhat apart from these chapters are two extremely powerful contributions: John Hartley's parodic, troping story of the coming of television, the coming of television studies and the coming of Hartley to Australia and some extraordinary methodological/autobiographical insights from editor Tulloch on ethnographies of the audience. All this amounts to a most insightful collection.

The Specialism

1988 also marked the advent of some important landmarks in Australian Film Commission publishing. Firstly, and most publicly, *via Back of Beyond*, a program catalogue to the UCLA festival held that year with the financial assistance of both the AFC and the Bicentennial Authority. It carries the immodest subtitle *Discovering Australian Film and Television*, but this does not lead to the horrors of celebration/condescension that one might anticipate. Feminist film, the docu-drama, blacks on film, the latest avant-garde and the function of landscape are well outlined, the collection falling down only in a repetitive symphony of sycophancy to Kennedy-Miller.

The Commission also funded *Signs of Independents*, which looks at its own Creative Development Fund and films supported through the Fund. Less self-congratulatory than it might have been, *Signs* is an enormously useful set of plot outlines, film descriptions, credits and stills that is rendered more than that by the theoretically grounded accounts written as introductions to the field by Susan Dermody, Adrian Martin and Ross Gibson and solid

institutional tales told by editors McMurchy and Stott.

Thirdly, the Commission collaborated with the Australian Film, Television & Radio School on *Case Studies in Independent Production*, a selection of pieces on other similarly marginal films and filmmaking practices that combines textual analysis with the *minutiae* of business and film practice. John Cruthers has a rather bizarre description of the collection's methodology ('Rather than address the subject academically, the book proceeds through a series of interviews with well-known film and video-makers and producers', 5) that denies the equally confessional mode of most academic procedures. But he has gathered together quite practical messages about precisely how, where and when the difficulties of making an independent film lie. It tells you both how difficult it was to construct a financial package for Mary Callaghan's triumphal *Tender Hooks* and how comparatively easy to produce the hyper-unnecessary *Salt, Saliva, Sperm and Sweat*.

Finally, the AFT continued to support *Metro* and *Cinema Papers*, as well as the monthly *Filmnews*, surely the outstanding publication of its type anywhere, and, on a more overtly academic front, *Continuum: An Australian Journal of the Media*.

The Textbook

By its very title (*Film as Social Practice*), Graeme Turner's new introduction to screen studies sets up a paradox. 'Film' suggests an aesthetic register that stands in stark contrast to the prosaic 'Social Practice'. This tension between text and context becomes a *leit motif* in a volume that seeks to draw students of cinema away from a purely formal approach 'in which film's ability to become art through its reproduction and arrangement of sound and images is the subject of attention' and towards a concern with 'film as entertainment, as narrative, as cultural event' that introduces readers to 'film as a social practice, and the understanding of its production and consumption, its pleasures and its meanings...enclosed within the study of the workings of culture itself' (xiii).

This brief clearly meets the remit of the Studies in Communication series, which includes such well-known and commonly prescribed textbooks as John Fiske's *Introduction to Communication Studies* and John Hartley's

Understanding News. General Editor Fiske set up the series to provide basic primers that summarise state-of-the-art debates in the 'new interdisciplinary' areas (can we still use those terms?), offer a guided literature review and some particular textual analysis and introduce new perspectives where appropriate.

The vast majority of this material is well handled. The relation of camera movements to diegeses and relations of power, the account of *Screen's* debates on the realist text and Metz' Kuhnian genre theory are notably clear, to nominate just three areas of difficulty for any newcomer to the field.

Turner probably had to fight a battle with the publishers to use Australia as his model for the ground of national cinemas that has challenged Hollywood over the last 20 years. But it's there in a text clearly designed for the US market. That's a lovely thing that might be noted by people looking for an introduction to screen studies that is neither parochial nor blandly internationalist.

Nevertheless, the nature of the synthetic primer is that it offers a gloss on a multiplicity of subjects that deserve more than that. For example, despite his care in detailing and criticising the Stuart Hall line on ideology, Turner runs into some problems, I think, with the Birmingham understanding of culture. He sets culture up as an all-encompassing, non-site-specific, global concept: 'a dynamic process which produces the behaviours, the practices, the institutions, and the meanings which constitute our social existence' (42). Culture becomes limitless. It seems that nothing is outside it. And because 'it' comprises and determines everything, its analytic utility is pretty limited. The argument becomes circular; since culture *is* everything, it *produces* everything, and we are none the wiser as to why or how particular knowledges and practices come into being at the particular moment and with the particular effect that they do. For instance, the excellent discussion of the Australian industry might have been even better if it had concentrated rather less on conventional rhetorics and rather more on the discourses of neo-classical economics and their interplay with paternalistic *étatism* in the production of successive government film assistance policies. (On the need for precision and conceptual modesty in discussing 'culture', see Hunter 1988.)

From Text to Policy

That *lacuna* brings me to the general issue of policy, a question itself touched off by another query: in a relevance-led recovery for Australian higher education, what should academics say is to be done? Because writing about television and film and their attendant policy contexts and implications is a quick way to student enrolments and Consolidated Revenue funds via research consultancies. But at a cost, on all scores. First, the popular culture trivia line. In *White Noise*, Don de Lillo has Murray Jay Siskind complain:

I understand the music, I understand the movies, I even see how comic books can tell us things. But there are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes. (10)

Young Murray's worries are amplified in Clement Semmler's (1989) review of Tulloch and Turner's *Australian Television*. Semmler refers to 'exhaustive analyses of commercial TV shows which might be fairly said to represent the lowest common denominator of mass viewing', seemingly undertaken because 'academia has descended on the box'. His review is accompanied by an A5 drawing of a TV set with bars for a screen and an arm reaching out, bedecked with convict tattoos and holding a smoking remote control switch. The other hand, resting on cut-off-short trousers, holds a tabloid called 'AUSTRALIAN TV'. This tele-body is set in an armchair alongside a cup of cold nothing. So whilst student interest provides the discipline with a populism, it is hampered by catering to just such a logic because attention to the 'trivial' may *not* impress policy people.

More than that, of course, is the question of the *language* of impression. One person's specialist shorthand and precision is derided by another as excluding and self-serving. And already, responses to some of the books under review have unearthed a deep suspicion about university intellectuals. Semmler complains of 'jargon horrendously incomprehensible to the ordinary reader' and bleeds that 'diegetic' fails to appear in his dictionary. (Had he consulted the second edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he would have found the meaning of the term and its utilisation in English over the past century and a half.) From a somewhat more positive specific site, Brian Jeffrey (1989) says of *The Australian Screen* that 'Although most of the writers are from academia, the writing is generally plain and the polemic straightforward; certainly there is none of the convoluted, turgid

theorising about film which so often emanates from that source'. And David Rapsey's (1989) account of the Bertrand collection asks whether 'it's the text book that her students would have to buy in order to complete the assignments that she sets on the Australian cinema'.

Something is happening here and we ought to know what it is. Or rather, several different moves are being made at once. An uncertain dance around popular culture, a non-elitism of topic reference leavened by a secret language of theory; and a wandering away from the search for subversive texts and minority subcultures and towards influencing the policy progress. In short, a turn away from the safety of bleating and whingeing from the purity of the margins and towards the difficult task of entering policy discourses and the administrative machinery of media governance whilst avoiding a compromising co-optation. And all this on the basis – for many screen studies academics – of a *littérateur's* training, with all its forgivable obsessions with meaning. These issues have been gone over recently in an invested way by Stuart Cunningham (1989) on Australian TV content and Tony Bennett (1989), in his critique of the Department of Finance's marginalist economics approach to evaluating the utilisation of museums. This is newish territory for humanities academics, and territory that is difficult to traverse. This is not least due to questions of address and articulation. We can all complain that Semmler uses the wrong dictionaries. We can also point out that literally tens of thousands of students have now mastered the basic lexicon of narratology, film art and semiotics, that today's jargon is tomorrow's populism (witness the coming-into-the-vernacular of neo-classical economics). So let's do that. But we must also recognise that entering the policy field necessitates making some other gestures in the direction of influence: targeting offices and mobilising the rhetorics of those offices. And those rhetorics are *not* contained in one more speculative piece about representation and the textually inscribed reader. Oh, I almost forgot what happened to Murray Jay Siskind eleven chapters on in *White Noise*: 'He'd been having trouble, he said, establishing an Elvis Presley power base in the department of American environments' (De Lillo 1985, 64).

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Freelance Journalists' Agency Launched

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