In her contribution to the UQP Cultural and Media Policy series, Lissane Gibson selectively surveys the last 150 years of governmental interaction with various, though usually visual, art forms in Australia that emerged from a group of British colonies to become a single federation firmly focused upon Washington rather than Westminster. Chronologically sequenced in the main, each of her seven chapters focuses upon major shifts in the history of that interaction. The last three chapters, comprising almost half the text, centre upon federal interventions during the last third of the 20th century whilst at the same time increasingly turning to the advocacy of a cultural policy towards youth rather than merely historicizing it.

The Uses of Art should have little difficulty attracting readers from the art historical, arts managerial and cultural policy domains. Of particular interest to all three is the way in which Gibson herself arrives to maintain several working assumptions. They include, for example, the beliefs that cultural policies are pre-eminently about the governance, if not formation, of communal identity and that an historical examination will disclose a multiplicity of competing forms of identity. To these two, she adds the contentions that programmatic and institutional contexts best demonstrate the uses of culture, especially within the political arena, and that artistic programs, for all their various manifestations in public debate, have traditionally and consistently targeted those who are perceived as having little or limited access to the arts but who would benefit were that increased. Who would benefit with what arts and how access might be increased are the repeatedly disputed grounds in her Antipodean story.

Many of her historically inclined readers will doubtless be intrigued by Gibson’s successive accounts of, for instance, the early colonial efforts to civilize former deportees and impoverished settlers from Britain by way of Mechanics’ Institutes, a 19th-century equivalent of adult education; the cultural re-directions of a nationalist kind at the post-colonial turn of the 20th century; the patriotic uses of art and artists during periods of global warfare; and the indirect mechanisms of cultural and moral control espoused within a democracy during the aftermath of war. However, there may be some who would regard her interpretation of such phases as open to question. Little, for example, is said about the earlier cultural impact of class distinctions upon the intelligentsia propounding the instrumental values of the arts nor about the ethnic divisions within the predominantly British population, especially between the Irish and others, nor about the institution of mass education under the auspices of both state and church. Little, too, is said about the later cultural impact of mass migration from war-torn Europe (and, more briefly, from war-torn Indo-China subsequently), nor about the laissez-faire dismantling of urban industry and consequent de-skilling and ghettoization of the populace, nor about the sheer saturation of audiovisual arts sourced from the United States, nor, for that matter, the role of a highly concentrated mass media in both the promulgation and the production of cultural events. To that extent, the construction of Australian identities, to cite Gibson’s subtitle, might well be construed as only half the story.

Perhaps these and other omissions might make more sense when readers start to investigate the theoretical underpinnings of this text. From the beginning, Gibson’s foray into cultural policy announces her adoption of Michel Foucault’s intellectual framework. For Gibson, his conception of governmentality justifies the use of the notion to embrace “the activities of all institutions concerned with the regulation and management of populations” and thus includes the role of “non-state organisations which have sponsored and organised art programs.” Adapting Foucault also commits Gibson in other ways. Firstly, it licenses her to probe the discourse of cultural policy as a means of demonstrating that there are historically specific connections between certain intellectual disciplines (or bodies of knowledge) — such as ethics and economics — and disciplinary institutions (or forms of social control), be they governmental or other.

Secondly, by following Foucault, Gibson is less concerned with the means by which (policy) utterances (énoncés) are produced and recognized and more with what is stated or meant (énoncé), which is not regarded strictly as a unit or component of discourse. Hence, énoncé should be construed through rules that govern their functioning within variable historical contexts — that is, through rules for what can be known rather than general rules for language. And to describe the rules of discourse is to examine the localized, contingent historical conditions of its usage operating in accordance with specific constraints and possibilities that Foucault identities with power. Yet power, in turn, is not something simply identified with relationships between unequal before the use of discourse or for which discourse merely provides a rhetorical flourish. Power, it appears, is better conceived discursively — that is, by the way énoncés can be organized in the talk and the texts of the times.

Thirdly, by overtly rejecting the kind of historical inquiry that embraces the impact of personal...
ities — a Redmond Barry in one century or a “Nugget” Coombs in another — in favour of a seeming recital of disembodied quotations, Gibson turns to the kind of discursive analysis associated with Foucault in an effort to determine what it is for a group of individuals to be governed or made governable and what role cultural policy plays within governance. This issue, in the final analysis, far outweighs the declared focus upon the construction of Australian identities.

How far are Gibson’s readers — whether hailing from the art historical, the arts managerial or the cultural policy arena — meant to pursue the radical underpinnings of her Foucaultian reaches into “an analysis of the discursive relations between art and the people which characterise art institutions, programs and policies”? On the one hand, to accept Foucault’s perspective upon discourse as “knowing what can be said” might help us answer a range of questions. For example, why does Gibson focus so intently upon the rhetoric of cultural policy at the expense of the actuality of artistic practice? Why, despite acknowledging how “notoriously vague” the categories are, does she continually slide between art and culture? Why does she omit or gloss over certain decades at the expense of others? On the other hand, it invites a host of more contestable commitments. Included amongst these are, for instance, that discourse insofar as it constitutes, transforms and reproduces objects of knowledge implies that it is neither a reflection of nor a reference to reality. Or again, that what produces an énoncé is to be analysed not in terms of an author intentionally addressing an audience, but by the position necessarily adopted by any individual operating specific discursive activities, be they of, say, the speculative, regulatory or persuasive kind.

Or once more, that the formulation of possible theories or themes utterable within discursive activities implies that énoncés are less a property of being uttered at a specific time or place and more a property of having a specific status within particular institutional practices.

The Uses of Art may well raise many more questions than it resolves. That, however, is a measure of its worth. But perhaps it also points to the limitations of importing certain kinds of theorizing within the analysis of cultural policy. After all, is it so obvious that the three kinds of readership mentioned above would find the curiously self-contained, non-authorial and non-historical implications of appeals to the “discursive coordinates which frame contemporary Australian cultural policy” either logically self-evident or practically applicable?

R. A. Goodrich
School of Communication and Creative Arts
Deakin University
Melbourne, Australia