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Barrett Hodsdon, *Straight roads and crossed lines: the quest for film culture in Australia?* Shenton Park, WA: Bernt Porrridge Group, 2001

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(Review copy supplied by the publishers)

I like the question mark at the end of Barrett Hodsdon's book title. It seems to cast doubt on whether there is a quest for film culture in Australia at all. And given the current government's preference for pointing the policy vacuum at anything that moves, you could be excused for wondering how such a quest might even occur any more. Which is where Hodsdon's book comes in handy. By charting the recent cultural history of both the independent and government-sponsored film industry Hodsdon is able to navigate between the *straight roads* and their *crossed lines* like a seasoned traveller. The book is part travelogue, drawn from Hodsdon's own extensive experience of film culture in this country. But it is also a deeper enquiry into the motivation, meaning and value of that journey.

You have to admire the way Hodsdon abandons all qualms and leaps into his manuscript at the outset by asking the question that has confounded any real discussion of screen culture in this country – is an agreed definition of the term "screen culture" even possible? What might any definition of screen culture look like? And how has the name of screen culture been mobilised in the service of particular interests and institutions for instance?

Unlike the Gonski Report (the lone document that has wreaked more havoc for screen culture in Australia than any other) Hodsdon takes to his subject with enormous enterprise. The Gonski Report avoided difficult questions by summarily suggesting screen culture simply wasn't interesting or important enough to warrant detailed discussion let alone funding. In the wake of its brusque dismissal of screen culture there has been an enormous amount of energy expended on questions of definition from all directions – except of course the government and its agencies. At the end of one marathon defense of screen culture, an underwhelmed Senator was even heard to ask – "so are you saying that if I go to the movies at my local cinema *that's* screen culture?" Apparently you could hear the unmistakable sound of a plug being pulled in the ensuing silence.

So Hodsdon must list amongst his considerable talents, his impeccable sense of timing. His book couldn't have appeared at a more crucial point in the history of Australian film culture, his questions could not have been more prescient, his attempts to elevate debate could not have been more urgent.

For the current government, the meaning of screen culture has been reduced to whatever drains its resources that cannot be called a film production. It's a sort of recognisable absence, a "not-production" activity. It's a handy catchphrase that is brandished only in order to offset protestant industry policies that give preference to the act of exposing film stock (whether anyone is there to see the result or not). Its parameters include no real interest in the actual cultural life of the film industry's many and varied participants. Screen culture is retained in name only, in the vain hope that it might generate a good celebrity photo opportunity for a government official. A recent and relevant example of the government's opportunistic uses of screen culture occurred recently when the current Australian Film Commission (AFC) head, Kim Dalton, disingenuously quoted Hodsdon's book in order to defend the government's de-funding of the Australian Film Institute (AFI). (*Metro*, no. 134, p. 10) Were he a cynical man (which he is not) Hodsdon may have been delighted that his work should be drawn into a public fracas between two organizations in such a way. But despite his admitted intention to provoke debate I imagine Hodsdon would be horrified to find his words taken to defend an argument based on such a slight act of reading.

The book's position in regard to the AFI is actually a complicated one. In Hodsdon's depiction the AFI wavers uncertainly between a Straight Line and its intersection. In some ways Hodsdon's criticisms of the AFI might have benefited from a deeper exploration of its vexed position in relation to its funding taskmasters. At other times the AFI serves as shorthand for a critique of the perils of bureaucratisation. All too often the AFI is held responsible for policy initiatives which in fact belong to its funding agency the AFC (and the same could be said of the latter and its relationship to its funding source in the government of the day.)

This critique of the film industry bureaucracy is both the book's strength and a possible weakness. On the one hand, Hodsdon gives deserved attention to the "unofficial" cultural networks that underpinned any understanding of the film industry in the 1960s and '70s. In many instances the making official of industry mechanisms from the mid-seventies signalled the ossification or end of these communities. So whilst Hodsdon's book is a plea for an opening up of screen culture, perhaps its greatest strength is

his documentation of those chapters of Australia's film history that are now closed. The demise of the university film societies, the Sydney filmmaker's co-op, and the myriad film journals that sprang up in the '60s and '70s.

But Hodsdon's disenchantment with the bureaucratisation of the industry occasionally leads Hodsdon to a reduced discussion of key cultural organizations, describing their impact largely in terms of their capacity to soak up money like "blotting paper". Whilst there are many criticisms to be made of the key cultural organizations, the AFI amongst them, it could also be argued that the recent dismantling of funded film media outlets (*Filmnews*, *Cinema papers*) and secure organisational frameworks (AFI for instance), is actively undermining the persistence of "cultural memory". Screen culture in Australia now seems to rebuild its wheels over and over again – reducing its momentum (straight or crossed) and actually blunting its critical edge.

Hence the crucial relevance of Hodson's observation, that there is currently a lack of "resolve and perspicacity" in the analysis of the Australian film industry. I'd be inclined to agree except for the fact that Hodsdon's own resolute and perspicacious contribution to this analysis in *Straight roads and crossed lines* actually undermines the surety of his assertion.

Addendum

Since this review was written the May 2003 Federal Australian Budget delivered its bombshell announcement that the AFC and Screensound (formerly the National Film and Sound Archive) would summarily be merged. The government's decision, to be made effective from July 1, was arrived at without industry and stakeholder consultation, and presented as a *fait accompli*. The merger (or "integration" as it has been more accurately described by a key AFC official) represents a significant legislative step forward for the Archive which will now share the AFC's status as a statutory authority after years of languishing in the direct purview of DCITA. It does however beg the sorts of question marks of which Barrett Hodsdon is so fond. Whilst the move to AFC represents a legislative improvement it is not clear yet how the core functions of the Archive will benefit from the new arrangements, or indeed what the detail of the arrangements will in fact be. But even though very little detail about the structure of the merger is available at this stage, a few initial observations can be made:

Although Screensound is a far weightier organization than the AFC, (some 250 or so staff compared to about 60) the AFC will administer the newly merged entities and that the Archive will have minimal representation amongst the AFC Commissioners. The key message here is that, once again, film culture is subservient to the administration of film production subsidies (the AFC's principal activity). In fact the AFC's argument, that bringing the Archive under the AFC will raise the profile of screen culture rests on the assumption that substantial PR benefits are derived by association with "industry", that the Archive will be better off defined as a *de facto* production activity.

Then there is the matter of the AFC's hostility toward the film education sector. The Archive on the other hand has a strong community of education stakeholders who may feel that any rhetoric around the merger that emphasises the Archive's newfound "industry relevance" will be at the expense of its crucial role in education.

A key statement of the government's press release suggests the merger makes sense because of "the AFC's ability to support national exhibition programmes" – a claim for which little substantial evidence appears to exist. The statement might instead be seen to suggest that one purpose of the merger is to provide an audio-visual resource from which the AFC might expand its role in administering its own exhibition programs (rather than supporting the work of other cultural organizations for instance). It isn't clear yet whether funds ordinarily divested through the AFC's cultural development branch will be redirected to support exhibition activities operated directly by the new AFC-Archive. Nor how the many cultural organisations that rely both on funding from AFC and additional (in kind or other) support from Archive will fare. There is for example, a risk is that once the AFC and the Archive are merged there may arise conflicts of interest in which it is either in the AFC's interest to fund an independent activity (because it will realise additional income from Archive rentals/footage sales etc) or not to fund an activity (because it requires further unfunded support from the Archive).

Finally there is a larger question around why a government so committed to a broad economic and political program of rationalism finds instead in the cultural sector an overriding interest in bringing an increasing range of cultural or exhibition activities within the government's administration. There's a strange irony in seeing this trend to the concentration of screen cultural activities in the hands of a funding agencies at a federal level. Over the last few years in Victoria - at the insistence of the production industry - significant resources have been expended on "unmerging" the functions of the organization formerly known as Cinemedia into separate exhibition and production defined organizations (ACMI & Film Victoria respectively).

With the 20/20 hindsight provided by this merger it might now be possible to understand some of the more inexplicable features of the screen cultural landscape of recent years. If, as the current reorganisation of the players suggests, the end game has always been to produce a kind of (former) British model for Australian film policy then we can explain the sudden reduction of the AFI's functions to their Awards only (think of the BAFTAs). And the merger of the AFC and the Archive certainly creates an organization that looks a lot like the BFI used to look. Of course, this cosy industry model has since been reviewed in Britain and superseded by the UK Film Council, a private company that has responsibility for all direct government film funding from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport,

providing a mechanism for distributing film production funding as well as funding the BFI which remains a separate and independent body. In this policy context, the question that is now most pressing in the Australian film industry is what should/will happen to the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) which is looking increasingly vulnerable to a merger itself?

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