Government, Film and the National Image: Reappraising the Australian Film Development Corporation

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Given the high profile of Australian films in 1996, a casual observer might quite correctly conclude that film is an established, buoyant and valued presence in the national culture. In all probability, between 20 and 30 Australian films will be released this year. Such levels of production are however a recent phenomenon. In the entire decade before 1970, a total of just 17 feature films were made in Australia, few of which could justifiably be called ‘Australian’ in any meaningful sense of the word. In 1963 and 1964, no features were produced at all. By contrast, in the five years following the creation in 1970 of the first government film agency, the Australian Film Development Corporation (AFDC), 62 feature films were made.

In the years since the Australian Film Commission (AFC) replaced the AFDC in 1975, the number of features produced has risen dramatically to the impressive levels of the 1980s and 1990s. As the current government awaits the findings of its latest review of the film industry (probably as a prelude to initiating significant cuts in its commitments to the primary funding agencies), it is perhaps appropriate to reconsider the early years of the revived industry, to assess progress and possibilities. Clearly it is not stating the case too strongly to argue that the Australian film industry would not exist in its present form without the substantial financial commitment and involvement of federal and state agencies over the past 26 years. By examining the formation of the first major federal funding agency, the AFDC, and its changing mission between 1970 and 1975, the aim here is to contextualise contemporary debate on the industry, and to fill a significant gap in film scholarship.

The period between the publication of the Senate Select Committee Report on the Encouragement of Australian Productions for Television (the Vincent Report) in 1963, and the creation of the AFC in 1975, was a crucial one; in both the development of the modern Australian feature film industry, and in the use of film as a medium implicated in processes of national
cultural representation. During this time, key questions regarding the place of film within Australian society, its status as a ‘culture industry’, and the legitimacy of state involvement in the production of mass-circulation images of Australia, were debated and (problematically) resolved. These concerns continue to resonate and to be debated today, albeit with one significant difference. Today, film is a thriving industry in Australia, with an average of around 30 features released annually, many of which have achieved significant domestic and international success. To discuss the relevance and importance of film to the culture in the 1990s, is then to argue against the background of an established industry, and to contribute to a debate with a recognised history, in which reference can be made to achieved critical positions, actual films, and to established styles and genres of filmmaking.

The revival of the film industry in the early 1970s occurred in less secure discursive contexts, and was a direct result of the broadening of government involvement in the arts from the late 1960s. Tim Rowse identifies the foundation of the Australian Council for the Arts (ACFTA) in 1968 as a watershed in state commitment to cultural subsidy. Before this date, Rowse argues, the dominant mode of support for the arts was ‘voluntary entrepreneurship’, whereby arts organisations relied largely on charitable donations, or the backing of wealthy benefactors for their existence. The period after 1968 is characterised by what Rowse calls ‘statutory patronage’, as successive governments took a much more active and interventionist role in the arts. The shift in policy was in part a response to a campaign for assistance to the film industry which, employing cultural nationalist rhetoric in tune with a ground swell of popular feeling, had grown exponentially through the 1960s. Significantly, however, in the light of subsequent developments, changes in Liberal Party policy, and a new attitude to cultural dirigisme, which led to the creation of the ACFTA, the shift also reflected a recognition on the part of the incumbent Liberal administration, of the need to reinvent the Party for the post-Menzies era, and present a modern vision of Australia’s identity and future.

By the late 1960s, free-lance culture lobbyists, politicians and bureaucrats were all becoming convinced of the need to actively redefine Australia’s image, both domestically and overseas. Australia’s traditional economic, defensive and political ties to Britain had become increasingly fray ed since the end of the Second World War, and the anachronism of cultural genuflection to the ‘mother country’ was increasingly apparent. Indeed it was becoming obvious to policy-makers that they no longer appeared to be in control of the movement for social change, as public opposition to Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam War grew, alongside demands for the revision of paternalistic and discriminatory policies
towards migrants and Australia’s indigenous population. The time for cultural redefinition was clearly ripe.

A Council for The Arts

Provisions for support for a (limited) local film industry were included in the Holt Government’s proposal to form a ‘Council’ for the Arts (ACFTA), announced in November 1967. The Council marked the beginning of the expansion of official assistance to the arts, and was designed to act as the Government’s financial agent and adviser, whilst co-ordinating government policies ‘for all Arts forms’.² Ironically, in relation to film, Holt’s proposals awakened those campaigning for government assistance for the industry, to the potential dangers and drawbacks of government involvement. Holt’s prescription that assistance would only be given to ‘films for educational and cultural purposes for television’ exemplified, for some, the potential for the government to determine and condition cultural production. The question of a ‘corporation’ dedicated to film was neatly side-stepped within the proposals, with the Prime Minister merely noting it as ‘a separate proposition which needs more study’. By placing the future of the industry in the hands of the government through its control of funding, the direction of the industry, and the type and style of the films themselves, could be prescribed from above. As The Bulletin noted: ‘This is a perfect illustration of the official attitude: you’ll have culture because it’s good for you, but we’ll prescribe the dose.’³

The Council for the Arts provided a useful vehicle for the construction of Holt’s successor, John Gorton, as a concerned nationalist, as an innovator, and as the new, modern face of the Liberal Party. Looking back on its creation, some years later, the Council’s first chairman, H.C. Coombs, was in no doubt about the real motives behind the new Prime Minister’s encouragement of moves to establish the government’s role in the arts. As Coombs noted in his autobiography, ‘Gorton’s support was based on a belief that the Arts were politically important – that support for them would earn the government votes’.⁴ Whereas, according to Coombs, Holt had been genuinely interested and involved in the Arts, Gorton ‘paraded indifference’, which ‘was partly a consciously chosen element in the political image he cultivated, but contained a genuine dislike for the more socially pretentious and elitist elements often associated with their presentation’.⁵

Gorton’s ‘indifference’ then, real or exaggerated, served to reinforce his ‘typical Australian’ image, and to highlight the egalitarian streak he prized so highly. Although his personal preferences in film were regularly ridiculed by critics,⁶ Gorton professed interest in the future of the industry.
The appointment of the Film and Television Committee of the ACFTA reflected this interest, and at the same time allowed Gorton to ‘make a very personal and distinctive mark’ on the ‘virgin territory’ of film.⁹

Two of the Committee’s members in particular, Barry Jones and Phillip Adams, would play a significant role, in both the drafting of its Interim Report on the state of the film sector, and in the subsequent foundation of the industry. Jones and Adams were accomplished rhetoricians, and shared a vision of film as the defining medium of the age. Through their influence, Gorton himself came to view film as a vital industrial, cultural and social tool with which to mould the emerging Australia. Film, he came to believe, could help to shape a distinctive, aggressively Australian self-image that mirrored his own self-construction. Adams later wrote modestly of his role in the sculpting of Gorton’s cultural priorities, claiming: ‘We wrote Gorton’s speeches and we started cajoling him in such terms as: “You don’t want to be like Harold Holt and go for all those poofier arts, all that opera, etc. Movies, mate; that’s the go”’.¹⁰

The Interim Report of the Film Committee, bearing the influence of Jones and Adams, formed the blueprint for later government intervention into the film industry. Employing a language that reinforced a particular sense of the function of film (and by extension, of the role of the government in Arts funding) as vital to national and cultural development, the Report brought undoubted freshness to the ongoing discussions. Yet, its substance also recognised the familiar preoccupation of much critical debate through the preceding years: that is, with what contribution film (and television) could make to the formation of a vibrant national identity, so hampered as it was by the dominance of foreign involvement in the field:

It is in the interests of this nation to encourage its local film and television industry so as to increase the quantity and improve the quality of local material in our cinemas and on our television screens. Cinema and television are, of course, amongst the most powerful forces in influencing our national character. Yet relatively little of our dramatic television and virtually none of the feature films screened in our cinemas are of local origin. Thus our audiences are subjected to the ever-increasing sociological influence of imported material and our writers, actors and film-makers are unable to fulfil their creative potential. In addition, this situation hampers Australia’s efforts to interpret itself to the rest of the world.¹¹

The Report recommended that ‘immediate action should be given to a policy of encouragement’ to provide local filmmakers with the opportunity to represent Australia on film.¹² A variety of styles was proposed as the key to the development of the local industry, and the foregrounding of local
cultural concerns:

We need a higher output of frankly commercial films and television series, both to give experience and to provide an all-important continuity of employment. We need as well a percentage of serious interpretive feature films, or art films, which may or may not have box-office potential ... the sort of films that will gain acceptance at international festivals. And we need a constant flow of short experimental films which, as well as allowing young film-makers to spread their wings, will broaden the vocabulary of the medium and pin-point those individuals with a high level of creative potential.¹³

This mingling of cultural, commercial, industrial, artistic and experimental aspirations reflected the diversity of interests within the campaign which had prompted the Committee’s appointment. As Tom O’Regan observes, there was however one significant factor masked by the rhetoric of the campaign, but increasingly evident within the reality envisaged by the Committee: ‘Without an existing industry there were little grounds for these diverse strands to be brought into conflict’.¹⁴ There were of course points of connection between these aims and expectations, which were not necessarily antithetical, but equally, neither were they automatically compatible. As the prospect of subsidised, continuous production edged closer it became patently clear that it would be almost impossible to foster all of these aims without privileging one over the others.

The Film Committee’s Interim Report placed great emphasis on the proposed Film And Television Development Corporation, suggesting that it ‘should be the main instrument of government support for the ‘industry’ in its commercial aspects’.¹⁵ Coupled with its observation that ‘cinema and television are, of course, amongst the most powerful forces in influencing our national character’, the Report had then stated both the centrality of film within the culture, and identified the government’s most appropriate role within the industry. At the same time, the Report had pinpointed the fundamental dichotomy that would characterise the relationship between government and industry in the decades to come. From the moment of the Interim Report Onwards, the tension between cultural expectations and commercial/industrial realities would define the boundaries within which the emergent film industry could grow.

The government’s intentions for the Corporation and the film industry as a whole were clarified by Prime Minister Gorton, during the Second Reading of the AFDC Bill. In his speech of 5 March 1970, Gorton made explicit the connection envisaged between a clearly conscious act of cultural dirigisme, and the promotion of a new national outlook in general. Australian film would have cultural significance in both the local and
international spheres since:

film and television distributed throughout the world is perhaps the most effective means by which the image of a country can be projected abroad – the most effective means by which the ideas and way of life of a nation can become known ... It gives me great personal pleasure to introduce this Bill. It expresses the government's belief that we should devote ourselves not only to wresting produce and minerals from the earth of Australia, not only to material standards, but also to involvement in and encouragement and development of the Arts. The human values we will thereby nurture, the satisfaction we will offer to individual development, the improvement of the quality of life are essential for any nation if it is to merit the description 'great'.

As John Tulloch has argued, such rhetoric – especially when employed by politicians to situate the domestic film industry, as a vital part of the promotion of cultural identity – usually implies the construction of 'some sense of Australianness, of our nationalism as a distinct form of social organisation'. And to this extent, Gorton expressed a desire to affirm and define a national distinctness which had, of course, been a recurrent feature of the debates surrounding Australian cultural identity since at least the 1890s. Gorton's rhetoric was also certainly symptomatic of changing senses of Australia's geo-political positioning. As Graeme Turner has noted, for a post-colonial country like Australia, national cultural identity can often assume 'an exaggerated political importance as a point of resistance to domination, and as a point where local interests may be asserted and defended'. Gaining widespread popular and political support through the 1960s by highlighting the potential for film to act as a 'point of resistance' to foreign (primarily American) cultural domination, the campaign for revived local filmmaking provided ample evidence of such 'exaggeration'. Such reasoning, which foregrounded film's ability to reflect, represent and contribute to the development of cultural identity, came to underpin the discussion of national cultural identity in much subsequent official discourse.

Agitation for a revived film industry in the 1960s relied heavily upon the notion of the innate 'authenticity' of locally specific production. The campaign was waged primarily on the pages of newspapers and magazines, and led by film critics such as Sylvia Lawson (who wrote for a variety of magazines including Nation and Quadrant), Colin Bennett (The Age) and Michael Thornhill (The Australian). Film, they argued, was imbued with cultural significance in specific, localised contexts, by virtue of its function as a medium of communication. The dominance of Hollywood films in
Australia was perceived as culturally inappropriate, since these films signified and communicated the meanings of another culture, and encouraged identification with its norms and standards. This situation was particularly exacerbated by those Hollywood films set or made in Australia, which encouraged more damaging misrecognitions. In a review of the film The Sundowners in 1961 Lawson fumed:

It is not merely pathetic that people should gasp in ecstasy when the camera picks out a koala and the shearers play two-up, and should chuckle joyfully when Mitchum utters a stone-the-flamin’-crows or Rafferty, “what’s this, bush week?” It is horrifying – that we should have to be so touchingly grateful to Warner Brothers for giving this continent a pat on the head, for throwing a few pink galahs on the screen, for showing us ourselves, or our country cousins, in terms proper to folksy radio-serial or the domestic comic strip. Those gasps of joy were the clearest possible demonstration that we need our own film industry to show us who and what we are.20

Such critical interventions certainly raised the temperature of debate, although Lawson later suggested that the industrial revival was ‘due only in part to the campaigning of filmmakers and their supporters’ and that much was ‘due also to Gorton and to political chance … ’.21 Whilst the ‘chance’ factor remains debatable; what is clear is that there was a growing recognition, within liberal orthodoxy in the late 1960s, of the need to respond to the cultural nationalist challenge, and to reposition the government at the forefront of the debate.

**Liberalism and the New Criticism**

The decision to initiate programmes of assistance to the Arts in the late 1960s reflected changes in the Liberal government’s policy toward cultural subsidy, and indicated the growing influence of a strain of liberal thought which Tim Rowse has termed ‘New Criticism’. The New Critics, men like Geoffrey Blainey, Donald Horne, Robin Boyd and Peter Coleman, encouraged reappraisal within liberal thinking, particularly around Australia’s role as a regional power in South East Asia, and the enthusiastic promotion of images of Australia as an homogenous, ‘middle class’ society. Rowse argues that the rise of New Criticism, with its emphasis on the modernising of political and cultural life, stemmed from the ‘cycle of prosperity and political stability’ which characterised the Australian experience in the years following the Second World War.22 For Rowse, the expansion of ‘medium management’ opportunities, provided by increasing multinational investment in Australia through the 1960s, holds the key to
the emergence of what Horne described as a new, rising middle class.\textsuperscript{23} Rowse thus identifies ‘managerialism’ as one of the main strands of New Critical thought, which, along with ‘pluralism’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’, informed the New Critics’ emphasis on ‘modernising’ Australia’s image and outlook.

The managerialist impulse in New Critical thought was designed to redress ‘traditional’ Australian hostilities to entrepreneurialism, by characterising the businessman as the determinant social and cultural actor, and central agent of change in modern Australia. As Rowse put it, managerialism was ‘applied as a philosophy of state action’, thereby enabling the Liberal Party to present itself as the ‘true national party in that it could both manage an essentially free-enterprise economy, and yet keep social consensus by its commitment to the full employment and welfare policies initiated by Labor in the forties’.\textsuperscript{24}

In emphasising successful ‘management’ of the economy, of welfare, and of social and cultural development, the New Critics were able to position themselves as an alternative cultural élite, and provided the post-Menzing LIBERAL Party with the outline of a nationalist cultural programme. The privileging of the ethics of professionalism and managerialism enabled men like Horne, Coleman and H.C. Coombs to present themselves as public intellectuals, or cultural entrepreneurs using their knowledge and experience in various fields (as journalists, editors, historians, academics) to build their status as legitimate ‘cultural managers’ or ‘professional administrators’.

The influence of the New Criticism was apparent in the rhetoric surrounding the creation of the AFDC at various levels. Presenting the Second Reading of the AFDC Bill, Gorton announced confidently: ‘The Corporation will seek to encourage the production of films which are box-office successes and which have those excellences of production, camerawork and technical presentation which justify the description “high quality”’. In promising a cinema of professional standards, the Prime Minister was also effectively extending the framework of the Corporation, beyond that outlined in the Interim Report:

The fund ... is not intended as a giveaway project ... It is not intended as a vehicle for underwriting the full cost of a film or films ... We believe that after a period of time properly made investments will be returning profits to the Corporation and there will then be no need for the Government to replenish the fund each year. That is our objective and the measure of the scheme’s success will be judged partly on this.\textsuperscript{25}

Visions of the cultural import of film were therefore conditioned by
expectations of commercial viability, offering a further indication of the influence of the New Critics on the re-styled liberal orthodoxy. The emphasis in New Critical thought on the importance of managerialism and professionalism is clearly evident here, and was inscribed in the Film Development Corporation from its inception. Peter Coleman (Liberal MLA, editor of Quadrant magazine, and a prominent exponent of New Criticism) chaired the Film Committee of the Australian Council for the Arts which produced the report recommending a film corporation,\textsuperscript{26} and, in a reflection of the New Critics’ emphasis on entrepreneurialism and sound financial management, two of the original five board members of the Corporation were bankers, including its chairman John Darling.\textsuperscript{27}

For Dermody and Jacka, the lack of policy exhibited by the AFDC was reflective of ‘the passive attitude of the banker’ in the emergent film industry. Yet the appointment of bankers to the board of the AFDC was an essential part of the Gorton government’s incorporation of New Critical approaches, as it highlighted the centrality of business ethics in the new approach to cultural representation. In keeping with the managerialist and pluralist elements of New Criticism, which foregrounded the contribution of business to national definition, the government considered bankers appropriate mediators of a modernised national image and identity.

The initial requirement that the AFDC only provide financial support to projects which promised ‘a good chance of economic success’ reflected the primacy given to economic over cultural considerations, in the Gorton government’s rationale for support. This policy required applicants to obtain finance or guarantees for the majority of a proposed film’s budget from outside sources, and to submit detailed production plans and sales forecasts, before the Corporation would provide assistance in the form of a loan. These requirements tended initially to favour television productions over feature projects, and up to 15 March 1971, the only feature project intended for theatrical release to receive funding was Spectrum Film’s Stockade, which received a production loan of $16,000 towards its total budget of $92,000.

Predictably perhaps, the Corporation’s financial policy was heavily criticised by filmmakers for being excessively restrictive, and was seen by some as actually working to inhibit film production. Opposition was particularly directed at stipulations that loans were expected to be repaid ‘irrespective of the financial result of the film’, and that the Corporation’s subsidy should be ‘the first recouped from the net income available to a film producer’.\textsuperscript{28} Unsurprisingly, these criticisms were voiced with greater frequency by the production lobby, following the 1971 decision of the McMahon government’s Minister for the Arts, Peter Howson, not to recapitalise the Corporation.
As a result of much adverse criticism of its financial policy, amendments were subsequently made in the requirements for projects to be supported by the Corporation. These revisions reflected a changing emphasis, away from pure commercial viability as the key prerequisite for the commitment of funds, which became more marked after the change of government in late 1972. Such an alteration in policy emphasis enabled the Corporation to 'invest' (in the very broadest sense) in film production, rather than simply providing strictly controlled loans. The first film to benefit from this new sense of the AFDC’s role was The Adventures of Barry McKenzie, for which the Corporation (albeit reluctantly) provided the entire budget of $250,000. Support at this level, for one of the key ‘ocker’ films of the early 1970s, would impact on the historical reception of the Corporation as an agent of cultural management, and would eventually result in significant re-definition of the cultural mission of the Corporation’s successor, the Australian Film Commission (AFC).

One other significant change in the Corporation’s policy at this time similarly reflected an awareness that its initial requirements for support may have hindered rather than helped film production. Both to broaden the range of potential output, and to explore less commercial ‘standards’, the Corporation now committed funds to projects in the pre-production phase, primarily in the form of assistance for script development. Projects aided in this way included Sandy Harbutt’s biker-movie Stone (1974), Michael Thornhill’s first feature Between Wars (1974), and Bruce Beresford’s adaptation of David Williamson’s play Don’s Party (1976). Most significantly perhaps, the move facilitated the making of several films which would later be characterised as typifying the AFC genre of art-house and ‘period films’ including Caddie (1976) and Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975). Indeed in the first years of the AFC, pre-production assistance became a key means through which the twin goals of supporting the making of ‘quality’ pictures and culturally responsible or relevant films could be achieved.

The apparent commercial failure of many of the projects supported by the AFDC has strengthened claims that the Corporation itself failed, in both its commercial and cultural missions. The economic failure argument is not, however, necessarily borne out by those figures available, despite the restrictions imposed on the Corporation during the McMahon/Howson period in particular. The AFDC itself calculated that in its first four years of existence, 500 applications for assistance had been received. Up to 30 June 1974, the AFDC had provided a total of $3,781,080 in loans and investments to 88 projects, 46 of which were feature films. The Corporation estimated that its assistance overall comprised around 30 per cent of total film expenditure in Australia in this period, making a total of around $14.5 million dollars invested in the industry between 1970 and 1974.29
During its last year of existence, Kirsten Schou has calculated that the AFDC committed assistance to a further 28 projects, 20 of which were feature films. Schou notes that ‘as many as 709 projects were submitted to the Corporation with requests for assistance in one form or another’ between 1970 and 1975. A total of 116 projects received assistance of some kind, either through direct investment or loans to facilitate production, assistance for script development and pre-production, finance to support the distribution of films, and/or the provision of guarantees.  

Performance and Product

In providing a basis for continuous feature production (which had been an integral part of both the critical and industrial arguments for revival) the AFDC can be judged to have been relatively successful on this evidence. Furthermore, on the economic information available, the AFDC appears to have been reasonably efficient, despite its failure to achieve the Gorton government’s aim of creating the conditions for a self-supporting industry which after a time would no longer require state assistance.

Between June 1970 and July 1975, the AFDC received a total of $4.6 million in government funding. As Schou notes, this amount ‘represents the overall costs to the community of assistance to the film industry in that period. However, when the value of the assets (ownership of copyright in films) created are accounted for, the net cost is reduced to $894,542 or $178,908 per year’. According to the AFDC Annual Report of 1975, in its five years of operation, the Corporation had a direct income of $596,469 in returns from investments and loans, which represents roughly 13 per cent of the total funds invested in the industry. This figure will have increased steadily over the next few years, as the AFDC’s most successful investments (such as The Adventures of Barry McKenzie and Picnic at Hanging Rock) began to return profits to the Corporation’s successor, the Australian Film Commission.

The passage of the Australian Film Development Corporation Act in 1970, with bi-partisan support, instituted the practice of government assistance to the feature film industry which continues to this day. The Act did not however merely facilitate the revival of feature production. The policy of the Corporation, clearly stated in each of its Annual Reports, in turn demarcated the ‘legal space’, that is ‘the space defined by market conditions and the State’s procedures’ within which filmmakers seeking state aid would be forced to work. The 1970–71 Annual Report made this explicit:

To qualify for consideration, a project must be an Australian film which is defined in the Act as follows: (a) a film that has been made wholly or substantially in Australia and, in the opinion of the
Corporation, has a significant Australian content; (b) a film that is to be made wholly or substantially in Australia and, in the opinion of the Corporation will have a significant Australian content; or (c) a film that has been, or is to be, made in pursuance of an agreement or arrangement entered into between the Government of the Commonwealth or an authority of the Commonwealth and the Government of another country or an authority of the Government of another country; In forming an opinion whether a film has or will have a significant Australian content, the Corporation is required to have regard to: (a) the subject-matter of the film; (b) the place or places where the film was, or is to be, made; (c) the places of residence of the persons taking part in the making of the film (including authors, musical composers, actors and technicians); (d) the source from which moneys [sic] to be used in the making of the film will be derived; (e) the ownership of the shares or stock in the capital of any company concerned in the making of the film; (f) the ownership of the copyright in the film; and (g) any other matters that it thinks relevant.  

Subsequent moves introduced greater flexibility. In its Annual Report for 1972/3, for example, the AFDC qualified its understanding of ‘significant Australian content’, recognising that the ‘use of the adjective “significant” before “Australian content” in the Act obliges the Corporation to make a value judgement in respect of each application submitted to it’. Determining ‘significant Australian content’ now depended primarily on identifying the nationality of those involved in production: Australian residents were now expected to occupy ‘at least five of the individual command positions’ (that is, scriptwriter, producer, director, director of photography, art director, film editor and music composer), and to comprise ‘at least 70 per cent of the artistic personnel’ and ‘at least 90 per cent of all technical personnel’.  

This elaboration, along with changes in the Corporation’s funding priorities, which allowed for direct investment and the provision of finance for script development, represented a shift in the role of the AFDC as an agent of cultural management. Prompted in part by the chorus of disapproval voiced at the Tariff Board hearings, and encouraged by the new mood of optimism ushered in by the election of the Whitlam Labor government, the AFDC increased its investment portfolio considerably. Such amendments to the Corporation’s procedures went a long way towards guaranteeing continuous production, by ensuring that a growing pool of actors and technicians gained practical experience of filmmaking. At the same time, the requirement that projects employ a majority Australian crew implicitly appeared able to provide a definite guarantee the cultural authenticity of the films produced (at least in the way the term was
understood in critical commentary at this time), whilst assessors would no longer be required to make (arguably more arbitrary) value judgements of the 'Australianness' of proposed projects.

Significantly the first film of the revival to gain widespread popular success both in Australia and overseas (primarily in Britain) was also the first film funded entirely by the AFDC, The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972). Tim Burstall’s Stork (1971) had previously proven popular at the domestic box office, but only ten per cent of the film’s $70,000 budget had come from government sources (that is, from the Experimental Film and Television Fund). Stork’s place within the new film culture may however be gauged by the fact that the film was awarded a $5,000 prize by the AFDC at the 1972 Australian Film Institute Awards for best narrative feature, and a $1,000 prize for best direction. Because of the box-office success of these films, and the massive popularity of another sex-comedy with a perpetually adolescent hero, Alvin Purple (1973), and as a result of the emphasis placed on the commercial viability of the early films by the AFDC, the ocker film has tended to be seen as characterising the AFDC period, in sharp contrast with the costume dramas similarly associated with the AFC of the later 1970s. In drawing such a distinction between these two genres of film, O’Regan observes that ‘the ocker films are not ... easily incorporated within, nor bounded by, the traditional spaces of cinema. They are not so much films in a film world as films with a particular kind of relation to their social audience of the time’.35

Certainly the ocker films contributed to the contemporary preoccupation with urban Australia, and exhibited much of the ambivalence displayed in cultural discourse elsewhere towards suburbia. These aspects are particularly evident in other, non-cker films of the AFDC period, such as A City’s Child (1972), 27A (1974), and Stone (1974). At the same time, several films produced with government subsidy re-addressed small country town and outback life in Australia, a process begun by Ted Kotcheff’s adaptation of Kenneth Cook’s novel Wake in Fright (1971), and spanning such films as The Cars that Ate Paris (1974), Night of Fear (1973), and Sunstruck (1972).36 Similarly, the ongoing obsession with the period film can be seen to have its (contemporary) roots in the films of the AFDC period: the first feature (shot on 16mm) supported by the AFDC, Stockade (1971), retold the story of the Eureka uprising. The AFDC also provided half the budget for Michael Thornhill’s critically acclaimed period piece Between Wars (1974); invested heavily in Caddie (1976) set in the 1930s; and facilitated the making of the film that for many critics remains the epitome of the AFC period genre, Picnic at Hanging Rock (1975).
Conclusions

Clearly much work remains to be done on this period in Australian film and cultural history. One area which cries out for further investigation is that of audience response, evaluation of which might help to demonstrate the ways in which cultural meaning is received and understood. This brief overview has however indicated that the ways in which film was framed within institutional and industrial discourse in the late 1960s and early 1970s provide grounds for a reappraisal of the significance of the AFDC, within the development of a state-directed culture. The ascription to film of the power to lead and reflect cultural development, implicit in official discourse since 1970, would seem to be reason enough to examine the institutionalisation of film culture in detail. On the evidence presented here, it is possible to argue that the creation of the Australian Film Development Corporation by an Act of Parliament in 1970, represented a significant change of course for the film industry in Australia in terms of the physical production of film (the industrial structure), and in the utilisation of film as a producer of particular cultural meanings. The framing of industrial policy through the AFDC thus reveals much about the organisation and intent of a state-managed culture, and remains valuable to any current analysis of the operation of state subsidy to the film industry.

NOTES


2. The Australian Council for the Arts became the Australia Council in 1975, the same year that the Australian Film Commission replaced the Australian Film Development Corporation.

3. See Rowse, Arguing the Arts, pp.6–30.


8. A sample of typical assessments of Gorton’s tastes would include: ‘... the film tastes of the Prime Minister, Mr. Gorton, incline towards a robust philistinism (“I want to have a chance to watch a program in which a private-eye gets bashed over the head with beer bottles and telegraph poles”) ...’ Evan Williams, Sydney Morning Herald, 26 Jan. 1970, p.2.

‘... [the Prime Minister’s] tastes, self-confessed, run to tough private-eye movies and westerns in which one gunfighter advances on another, pronouncing the immortal words: “I wouldn’t do that if I were you, Toledo!”’, Margaret Jones, Sydney Morning Herald, 1 March 1971, p.6.

‘Mr Gorton, whose avowed preference for westerns did not preclude support for more artistic aspirations ...’ anonymous, Sydney Morning Herald, 2 Sept. 1971, p.7.


12. Ibid., p.172.

13. Ibid., p.171.


19. This desire to define authenticity as a key determinant of cultural identity/exactitude is by no means unique to this period. The search for authenticity, for distinctive, unique local characteristics had preoccupied cultural producers for many years. Sylvia Lawson, one of those proclaiming, in the 1960s, the need for local filmmakers in terms of the authenticity of their vision, later wrote:

   The dialectic of authentic and inauthentic has plagued and blessed Australian cultural debate for at least a century. When film industry activists ... have contended that we need an industry in order to communicate ‘the real Australia’ – implicitly to be distinguished from a whole array of false ones – they echoed the troubled ghosts of the balladists, short story writers, and lyricists of the 1890s. This nationalist worrying often invites dismissal, particularly when it seems to confine the desired authenticity to images out of Australia’s beer-and-football, hard gambling machismo; but however naively it may be put, the perennial anxiety about its identity is real.


The act of defining and promoting an ‘authentic’ culture within an institutionalised culture industry has received much recent attention in the academic discourse of cultural studies. My analysis of this process is informed by the work of Henry A. Giroux and Roger I. Simon. Giroux and Simon argue that the:

‘culture of authenticity’ forms part of ‘a romanticised view of popular experience that somehow manages to escape from the relations and contradictions at work in the larger society...[This view] deeply underestimates the most central feature of cultural power in the twentieth century. In failing to acknowledge popular culture as one sphere in a complex field of domination and subordination, this view ignores the necessity of providing an understanding of how power produces different levels of cultural relations, experience, and values that articulate the multilayered ideologies and social practices of any society.


20. Sylvia Lawson, ‘The Sight of Green Galahs’, *Nation*, 16 Dec. 1961, p.22. The project of defining ‘Australia’ in opposition to ‘the foreign’ (meaning in the case of cinema, Hollywood, and by extension the US as a whole) signifying a threat to the ‘authenticity’ of local cultural production is a theme which runs through both official and critical commentary in this period. The 1963 Report of the Senate Select Committee on the Encouragement of
Australian Productions for Television (the Vincent Report) implicitly made the distinction between local cultural values (without specifying what those values were) and those transmitted by American films and television programmes, noting that:

Perhaps the greatest danger lies in [the] effect upon the rising generation ... who, day after day, are not only receiving anything but the most inadequate picture of Australia, her national traditions, culture and way of life, but in its place are recipients of a highly coloured and exaggerated picture of the way of life and morals of other countries (p.16)

In a similar vein, the Film Committee of the Australian Council for the Arts noted in its Interim Report in 1969 that:

it is in the interests of this nation to encourage its local film and television industry so as to increase the quantity and improve the quality of local material in our cinema and on our television screens ... our audiences are subjected to the ever-increasing sociological influence of imported material, and our writers, actors and film-makers are unable to fulfill their creative potential. In addition, this situation hampers Australia's efforts to interpret itself to the rest of the world. (p.171)

This 'notion of foreignness' is, as Elizabeth Jacka notes, the covert other in the definition of "Australian": describing something as Australian depends on differentiating it from something which is not", in 'Australian Cinema: An Anachronism in the 80s?' in Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka (eds.), The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late 80s (North Ryde, NSW: Australian Film, Radio and Television School, 1988), p.119.

The lack of precise definition of either what is 'Australian' and what 'foreign' in this construction works to naturalise or essentialise 'Australianness' as homogenous and inclusive, supporting the argument that films made by Australians in Australia will be reflective of this ill-defined 'Australianness'. The reality is, of course, as Jacka observes, that 'the media do not reflect, but rather render material in a way that is infinitely complicated by narrative, genre, representational and other codes and conventions' (ibid.).

26. Coleman was later appointed chairman of the Interim Council for the Australian Film and Television School, which in October 1971 took over from the Australian Council for the Arts all its responsibilities in the fields of film and television. The Interim Council was thereafter responsible for the administration of the Experimental Film and Television Fund, and the Film and Television Development Fund, which provided 'support to creative work of quality in film and television [in contrast to the commercial orientation of the Field Project supported by the AFDC] and encouragement of an appreciation of high standards in these media amongst the general public ... [A]s things now stand, the Interim Council is responsible for advising the Commonwealth on policy in relation to film and television, and the implementation of Government programmes of assistance in these fields, as well as for the establishment and operation of the Film and Television School' (see Interim Council for the Australian Film and Television School File 72/184 – Film and Television Advisory Panel: General, Item 20/21). Coleman was replaced as chairman in 1973, after the succession of the Whitlam Labor government. He later claimed that his influence on the initial committee which recommended the creation of the film corporation had been minimal, and that in effect the real decision had already been made:

Like most Government-appointed committees we were politically balanced but otherwise a mixture of the solemn and the good-humoured, the professional and the charlatan, the
expert and the windbag. One difference was that we already knew what advice would be accepted (money for making films) and what would be rejected or referred elsewhere and forgotten (protection, tariffs, quotas). In any case the Prime Minister was impatient. He was often on the phone to me, barking unannounced: 'Where's the report? Don't you know what to say?'... It was only fitting that the first major film [the AFDC] funded – Bruce Beresford's *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* – should be a spoof of the very cultural nationalism which the film bank had been created to promote.


27. The initial board members were, Darling, Ronald Elliott of the Commonwealth Development Bank, Talbot Duckmanton (ABC), Denys Brown (Commonwealth Film Unit) and Barry Jones.


31. Ibid. p.7.


34. *Australian Film Development Corporation Annual Report*: 1972-73.


36. *Sunstruck* has a significant place in Australian film history, not only by virtue of its concentration on the difficulties experienced by a Welsh schoolteacher (Harry Secombe) in culturally acclimatising to outback Australia, but because it was the first 35mm feature film supported by the AFDC (which provided one quarter of the $400,000 budget).