

Hewson's accession to a blue ribbon Liberal seat was purely axiomatic once his network of luminaries was activated. Now Hewson is weeks away from the most glittering prize of all—the keys to the Lodge. And yet, while Hewson so often prefaces remarks “to be frank”, “to be perfectly honest” and (most popular of all) “quite frankly”, we remain unsure of the shy, self-effacing man with the toothy grin. He still comes over our airwaves not as a straw man but a papier-mache man made from old neoclassical economic textbooks. All my beliefs, he mouths, come from economics. This is all we know of the man; we are left to our imagination to fill him out.

My imagination sees Hewson and his meteoric rise as bearing an uncanny resemblance to *Dr Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe's play about a man who sold his soul to the devil. Faustus, a frustrated scholar, turns to

magic and calls up Mephistopheles, with whom he makes a compact. Faustus agrees to sell his soul to Lucifer in return for 24 years of life in which he inveigles Mephistopheles into:

Letting him live in all voluptuousness,
Having thee ever to attend on me,
To give me whatsoever I shall ask,
To tell me whatsoever I demand,
To slay mine enemies and aid my friends
And always be obedient to my will.

Did the young earnest John Hewson of mediocre mind but ferocious ambition succumb to a heinous temptation one night? On the cold Canadian plain, our plodding but eager postgraduate student perhaps has a nocturnal visitor who offers him all manner of worldly “voluptuousness” (Ferraris, etc). All Hewson has to do

in the covenant is sell his soul to economics—the Devil's alchemy to some—and leave his religious beliefs behind. Accuse me of fanciful imagery, of overplaying an allegory if you like, but I am bound to be proved right. Once John Hewson applies his austere brand of economic rationalism, root and branch, to the Australian economy, all economic hell will break loose. And Hewson will be quickly dragged down to temporal damnation. Perhaps eternally.

That time might cease, and midnight never come...
The stars more still, time runs, the clock will strike,
The devil will come, and Faustus must be damned.

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THE LURE OF MELODRAMA

New Australian Cinema: Sources and Parallels in American and British Film by Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer (Cambridge University Press, 1992). Reviewed by Susan Dermody.

Recent Hollywood films have begun to show their component parts and workings in plainer view as budgets and blockbusting ambitions escalate. Think of Coppolla's *Dracula*, and Scorsese's *Cape Fear*, for instance. The full melodramatic register of everything permissible to nightmare is there: the relentless bigness of the effects and the affects, the self-conscious play with the audience's visual memory of hundreds of earlier films in the tradition and, in one case at least, the narrative charge that, once lit, sizzles and snakes through every scene, irresistibly powering the experience.

In their study of the now decades-old ‘new’ Australian cinema, Brian McFarlane and Geoff Mayer nibble away at the enigma of why Australian films are the way they are, what the differences are between how they address and are received by an Austral-

ian audience. The interesting new move made by this study, among the growing pool of such books, is to bring British films of the 40s and 50s into the same arena as Hollywood films from the 40s onwards—and of course Australian films since the 70s revival of the industry here.

The Canadian and New Zealand film industries also offer instructive comparisons with the Australian experience both on the grounds of common (wealth) histories and as English-speaking cinemas in competition with that biggest one of them all, Hollywood. The old problem of finding sufficient, marketable difference within a field of possibilities strongly conditioned by the power of the Hollywood paradigm is encountered by all ‘new’ or newly resurgent cinemas, and English-speaking cinemas have it both harder and easier than most.

But Britain is a more profound comparison in any study of origins, conscious and unconscious, than any other dominion of Hollywood. It seemed to Elizabeth Jacka and me in our 1986 and 1988 studies of this film industry that British notions of qual-

ity—of an art television kind—pulled just as hard at filmmakers as did Hollywood notions of wide and psychologically deep popular appeal—of a mainstream film kind. (In fact, Hollywood was more consciously felt at first to be the devil to be resisted, letting ‘Creeping Beauty’ in the back door, to stay.) And then, of course, the complexity of the ties to Britain, and of the process of breaking free from them, is as much a part of the story of an emergent and marketable Australian-ness in film as the shadow of Hollywood.

It is interesting that McFarlane and Mayer chose for their comparison the heyday of confident British filmmaking, rather than the shaky parallel British attempts at resuscitating an industry in the last two decades. There are many similarities in the kinds of governmental intervention in active support of a national film industry; there is also the marked significance of a strong, partly government-financed, national documentary-making tradition preceding the resurgence of the industry in both cases—although the authors note this

without according it very much significance. However, I enjoyed seeing how much of this aesthetic lies also in the British kitchen-sink realist dramas of the late 50s, when films like *Room at the Top*, and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* are explored again in a little detail.

But perhaps the real strength of this book is its grasp of the way melodrama works, really works, on an audience, and the strangeness of the persistent refusal of this power in much British and most Australian film. The bold exceptions tend to be the big successes—I hardly need to name them—but this fact has not broken the industry's resolve to stand clear of all the guilty pleasures and powers of melodrama. You hardly need to de-tour through the British industry of the 40s and 50s to find this out, but some of the lineaments of similarity in the avoidance begin to be instructive.

This question touches on some of the really deep issues in the psyche of the industry and its cultural output, and some deep questions also about the way melodrama pulls us, the moral ambivalence at the heart of this most moral of forms, the datedness of its sensibility (despite the galvanising energy that it lends to film storytelling). To my regret, such questions are not accepted as the province of this

study, which chooses a kind of non-committed observer status, not venturing far beyond the now well-established ways of understanding and explaining how narrative paradigms work in films, and a keen-eyed descriptive view of a wide body of films from two film cultures, with reference also, of course, to Hollywood.

There are interesting moments when the analysis looks like deepening. For example, following Christine Gledhill's suggestions that the "American adaptation of melodrama began to dismantle the class opposition of European melodrama", the authors glance at the class similarities and dissimilarities between the three cultures, and wonder: "Perhaps where such obvious discrepancies exist, based in class rather than the up-from-the-bottom exercise of enterprise, the issues demand, in their representation, not melodramatic resolution but corrective verisimilitude, at least among more 'serious' filmmakers." But then, just when things are getting interesting, they add: "For whatever reason, a naturalistic ethic has been at work in British and American cinemas in a way that has not been the case in mainstream United States cinema." I felt a certain disappointment whenever these "for whatever reasons" came down, marking the curtailment of

speculation.

If you were to wade into the question of why the mute eloquence of melodrama is almost fastidiously left to Hollywood by these two, intimately related Anglophone film cultures, you'd fall into the middle of another profoundly interesting question that is also strangely left on the table by this book. I'm talking about cultural identity at the level of a social imagination—a level sometimes uncovered by the best national cinema studies. Where and how is the ethos created that informs an industrial-cultural milieu like a national film industry and its audience—and does this become incarnated in films? How interesting that would be, worked out across the comparison canvassed by this book!

But to close with remarks about the book we have rather than the one I think I want, this is a valuable and instructive book, very alert within its chosen limits. If the tone sometimes errs on the side of a kind of teacherly instructiveness, this is often in the midst of some of its most valuable and clarifying chapters. ■

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Shakespearean Tragedies of Our Times



Ring the ALRM bell!
Blow wind! Come wrack!
At least we'll die with
harness on our back!

Horace

Macbeth

V: V: 51-52

EXEUNT

(This is the way ALR ends - not with a whimper but a pun)