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Margaret Nixon
University of Wollongong

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Queer-ing the Screen: Sexuality and Australian Film and Television by Samantha Searle. St Kilda, Victoria: Australian Teachers of Media, Australian Film Institute, and Deakin University, 1997. (The Moving Image, No.5). Pp.119. AU$19.95 (paperback). ISBN 0 958 84432 1

The keywords in Queering the Screen: Sexuality and Australian Film and Television are Space of Exhibition, Audience, Address and Critical Programming. Searle makes this plain from the outset. Her subtitle relates to her interest in these specific screen practices, in which notions of who controls exhibition and to whom Australian broadcasters broadcast are tantamount.

Readers should not come looking here for a deconstruction of Australian screen sexualities or personas. Rather, the considerable strength of Searle’s book lies in its attention to interaction between a particular brand of media economics and cultural politics, what Searle accurately describes as ‘the complex relationship between nation and queer communities’ (p.29).

There are, of course, limitations to this approach, not least of which is the author’s decision to introduce definitions of such important concepts as ‘visibility’, ‘mobilisation’ and ‘diversity’ early in the book but to locate the cultural formation of these in a relatively narrow range of contemporary actions and interactions. The case for the importance of particular lexical usage is only made clear by comparison with its generic identity and such a comparison is not made explicitly enough, or strongly enough, to support Searle’s case for interpretative diversity.

Despite such misgivings, Searle deals very well with the wider implications of the practices she deconstructs; not least of which in relation to notions of Australian citizenship and their foundations in the economics of Australian media industries. In this regard, she raises significant questions about the programming policies of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and Special Broadcasting Service and their relationship to the politics of identity and representation. Of particular note are Searle’s case studies of the ABC’s broadcast of Sydney’s 1994 Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Parade and the SBS’s queer programming strand, namely the 1993 series of the program Out. Both in the case of the Mardi Gras and of Out, Searle extracts the position of specific broadcast and queer programming from wider debates about Australian cultural diversity and multiculturalism. She states:

SBS’s queer programming needs to be placed within a network of competing institutional discourses: between top-down multiculturalism as ethnicity and cultural ‘diversity’, including sexual subcultures; between addressing minority audiences and seeking general audiences; between maintaining subcultures and speaking to ‘all Australians’; between accessibility and arthouse/intellectual programming. (p.65)

Indeed, the question of accessibility identified here is greatly extended in the chapter ‘Politics of Exhibition: Queer Film and Video Festivals’. Noting the important position festivals play in queer screen culture, it is an important point to make that festivals allow for ‘queer-committed spaces, collective cultural organising’ (p.95). An important point, but not a new one, and it would have been useful to find Searle locating her arguments within a context of discussion of carnival and subcultural exhibition for which Bakhtinian analysis has so often been identified as the exemplar. Indeed, one of Searle’s main points here is that festivals ‘are primarily marked by the presentation of works less concerned with, from commercial point of view, offending ‘majority’ straight audiences with representations of sexuality’ (p.81). It is impossible not to see this as a means of making familiar relations strange, as Mikhail Bakhtin puts it, of drawing attention to the variety of social roles in existence, and of declaring the body’s intercorporeal role. Searle’s analysis, however, is located almost entirely in the contemporary, gaining immediacy from this but losing a degree of contextualisation.

Nevertheless, Searle uses the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s broadcasting of such programs as Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit and Portrait of a Marriage to good effect to identify the contradictions raised by broadcasting policies which locate ‘quality’ drama in high production values and literariness derived from British Broadcasting Corporation paradigms. In doing so, these effectively shut down the significance of lesbianism in the two productions. The reactions of mainstream critics to the two programs, she notes, largely exemplify the problems of recognition this creates.

In her discussion of community television and pay TV, Searle extends such arguments about the political institutionalisation of screen art to the discussion of the role Australian community television could play, given adequate funding, in realising a television audience for queer independent and experimental film and video makers. She concludes that it is not an analysis of queer sexualities in screen texts which might prove most productive in realising queer political aspirations but, rather, more concerted attention to the practices of exhibition, distribution and criticism. If this is the case, and Searle’s book goes some substantial way toward proving that it is, Queer-ing the Screen represents a strong argument for reconsidering the ways in which mainstream cultural criticism damps the political and economic character of screen aesthetics in preference for a ‘more acceptable’ textual condition.

Graeme Harper
University of Wales, Bangor


The work begins with a description of Murray’s methodology, outlining some of the decision-making behind the compilation of the guide. He defines his terms and explains why he has included some documentaries with substantial ‘drama content’ and excluded others. But the big issue is how one decides a production is Australian. How (and why) one determines the nationality of any cultural production is problematic enough, and the difficulties (and necessities) of doing so in the globalised mobile economy of world media illustrate how slippery the category of nationality can be. For Murray, nationality can be determined by a range of considerations including the location of principal photography, sources of finance, the director’s nationality, and where the copyright is held. Murray refuses to settle on which determinations are used in this guide so one is left to assume that some or all of these factors were considered. That the selection criteria are not explicitly stated is only mildly frustrating until the...

Institutional definitions of questions of national and cultural identity — such as ‘What makes a film or TV programme “Australian”? (p.viii) — are the foundations of Get the Picture, the Australian Film Commission’s collection of information from a diverse range of sources on Australian film, television, video and the new media. Indeed, discourses and debates about the functions and boundaries of contemporary Australian media industries present not insignificant challenges for the fourth edition of Get the Picture, as the compilation not only confronts a major expansion in the data available, but also has itself expanded to include a chapter on new media industries, and the fluid boundaries of which defy easy categorisation.

Not only is the precise nature of industry sectors an issue, but there is also a special emphasis upon the clarity of the presentation of the data, especially on how that data may be elucidated by interpretation. So, not only is information clearly classified and tabulated, but six of the nine chapters also include commentary by a key industry writer that summarises trends. Sandy George provides an overview of the expansion of screen-based entertainment since the mid-1990s that comprises the first chapter. The state of the flux that is new media is discussed in the second chapter, and the ‘Distribution’ chapter provides analysis of the TV industry, cinema distribution and exhibition, and the video industry. The relationship between quantity and popularity introduces the ‘Success’ chapter, which includes tables on Australia’s successes in film and television in the UK and USA, as well as Australia’s performance in Cannes, the Oscars and other national and international festivals. An examination of the production of film and television commercials and an analysis of the trends in audiovisual import and export figures are also provided. The value of the revised edition of Get the Picture lies not only in its updated and expanded information and commentary, but equally in its accessible organisation and clear layout, so facilitating diverse kinds of enquiry, whether concerning the retrieval of a single piece of information or the construction of an interpretive picture of the full magnitude of the Australian audiovisual industry in the mid-1990s.

JULIE PAVLOU KIRRI
University of Newcastle


Even given the legendary Australian obsession with sport, my initial response to this book was to wonder how anyone could possibly manage to fill over 250 pages on such a topic. While plenty of sport has indeed been played in Australia since the European invasion, until recently not that many Australian plays had been performed and I could only think of a few in which sport was prominent. In fact, the title turns out to be one of the few unsatisfactory things about this book. ‘Sport on the Australian Stage and