

Coda

Junuh had discovered—as Bagger put it—how to stop thinking without falling asleep.

The Legend of Bagger Vance (Robert Redford, 2000)

As recent accounts would have it, sheep and the cinema are antipathetic in Australia. Since the end of 2003 a curious distinction has been drawn between the interests of Australian sheep and the future of the national cinema in the context of a public debate about the benefits of a free trade agreement between Australia and the USA. Filmmakers have lined up against farmers, claiming that the fortunes of agriculture should not be favoured at the expense of film culture. Email campaigns urged members of the film and television industries to lobby politicians. One email titled ‘Urgent—Free Trade Campaign—What Can I Do?’ summarised some of the key messages that it recommended recipients deliver to government and the media. The email started unequivocally: ‘Culture should not be seen as trade in cars or sheep. It is about a nation’s cultural identity.’¹

Not surprisingly, then, the curious distinction between sheep and cinema continued to circulate in news reports. The ABC quoted writer and director Jan Sardi at length on the Australian government’s plans: ‘As far as they are concerned it is all about sheep,’ he said. He continued by suggesting that the distinction between the world of

sheep and the world of entertainment is underlined by a larger disparity between sheep and people: 'We have good ambassadors in the film world and the entertainment world. I don't see the live sheep export trade doing as much for Australia as our actors, our filmmakers and all our wonderfully talented people.'² Industry concern reached its most vocal at the annual AFI Awards in late 2003. Sue Brooks, winner of Best Director for the film *Japanese Story* (which, despite the title, is an Australian story) chose to comment on the issue after accepting her award: 'Like everybody else has been saying tonight, it's an honour to be able to tell Australian stories. But it's also important that our cultural identity is intact and we can't just trade that off for a few lamb chops.'³

This commentary over free trade proposes an understanding of national culture that rests on the primacy of discourses of production rather than consumption. The key questions presented to the public centre on which producers (film or sheep) will be better off under the terms of the agreement. Relatively little public debate has occurred on the matter of the benefits to consumers, for example. Similar debates have also drawn on the dangers of an over-investment in sheep. When Australia forged Closer Economic Relations (CER) with New Zealand in 1998, film industry lobbyists warned us (somewhat forgetfully) that our cinemas and televisions would soon be overrun by sheep. Spokesman for Project True Blue, actor Gary Sweet posited this eventuality as anti-Australian: 'The countryside will become hillsides full of sheep ... The landscapes will change, the accents will change. It will no longer be an Australian thing, a purely Australian thing.'⁴

In their exhortation to focus on the needs of the local production industry, film industry lobbyists inadvertently invoke an image of national consumption (our own). But the unwavering concentration on the shape of film production in these debates means that the matter of consumption has always already been erased.

The current perceived enmity between sheep and the survival of the national cinema in Australia hints at a broader theoretical deficit. What is needed now, more than ever, is a concerted theory of 'consumption' (in terms of assimilation, blending, synthesis, invisibility, expenditure, anti-production and so on) that also addresses or exposes the ontological arguments at the heart of the national cinema as premised on the coincidence of production *and* consumption; on

both differences *and* similarities. It might well be that in thinking (nothing of, rather than, Nothing of) sheep, the claims of self-presence made by the national cinema might be more readily recognised for their impossibility.

Notes

- ¹ Email correspondence received by the author 13 November 2003. Subject: Urgent—Free trade campaign—What can I do??
- ² 'Film, TV industry concerned over free trade talks' (Friday, 21 November 2003) <http://abc.net.au/victoria/news/200311/s994454.htm> (accessed 12 December 2005). Here Sardi refers to a contemporary issue that vied for news headlines: the rejection at sea of a shipload of live sheep originally destined for sale in the Middle East.
- ³ Gerard Henderson, 'The trouble with our stories', *Age*, 25 November 2003, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2003/11/24/1069522534829.html> (accessed 23 November 2005). In response to the awards broadcast, Noel Campbell, chairman of the dairy company Bonlac, said it was disappointing to hear Australia's actors talking about not trading culture 'for a few lamb chops'; in Philip Hopkins, 'Dairy boss takes shot at TV, film industry', *Age, Business*, 27 November 2003, p. 3.
- ⁴ Gary Sweet cited in Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Australian Local Content in Television', *7.30 Report* (30 March 1998).

One morning I woke up and the sheep was gone. It was then I understood what it meant to be 'sheepless'. Sheer hell. The sheep goes away leaving only an idea. But without the sheep there is no expelling that idea. That is what it is to be 'sheepless'.

Haruki Murakami, *A Wild Sheep Chase*