

In the Agora

What's a Nice Archive Like You Doing in a Place Like This?

Ray Edmondson

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In 1987 he was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) for his professional work, and in 2003 received the Silver Light Award of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) for career achievement. Long active in the international forums of the audiovisual archiving field, Ray currently holds office in two of its federations (SEAPAVAA and AMIA), and teaches and consults in several countries. In 2002 he completed the revised *General Guidelines* for UNESCO's 'Memory of the World' program, and in 2004 UNESCO published the revised edition of his work *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles*.

Closer to home, Ray is President of Music Roll Australia and Secretary of Archive Forum. He is currently a doctoral student at Charles Sturt University.

Author's note: This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the conference *The Future of the Archive*, convened in Canberra by the Friends of the NFSA and the ACT Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists, 3 to 4 July 2004. This article expresses my own personal and professional opinions, which do not necessarily reflect those of any organisation or group with which I am associated.

I begin in Hanoi, which may seem to be a strange place to be deliberating on the future of Australia's National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA, also known as ScreenSound) but a conference in the Vietnamese capital may prove to be one historical marker point in the fight for the Archive's institutional survival.

The occasion was the joint annual conference of two international bodies – the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) and the South East Asia-Pacific AudioVisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) – from 19 to 24 April 2004, where the traditional threats facing audiovisual archives, namely the realities of collection decay and the lack of funding, were very much to the fore. This time, though, a particular segment of the conference, the 'Second Century Forum', had to also consider a different kind of threat, related less to economic issues than to an assault on the fundamental values of archiving, and indeed the very survival of certain archives as recognisable entities. Interventions by Robert Daudelin, Paolo Cherchi Usai and the author instanced the threats facing Canada's Cinematheque Quebecoise, Britain's venerable National Film and Television Archive (NFTVA) and Australia's NFSA/ScreenSound. Having been previously aired on professional listservs, the main facts were already known to many delegates. What could professional associations do in such crises?

They could inform, and they could assert values. By the end of the conference, FIAF had put both the NFTVA and NFSA on notice that their membership status is to be formally reviewed – to test whether they still have the autonomy and organisational integrity to retain it. SEAPAVAA, with its less prescriptive membership basis, has reported on the NFSA's travails in its newsletter – as have other professional associations. It seems an ominous coincidence that two large archives

which have been regarded as such successful models within the global profession should see their organisational survival under threat at the same time. It was only after the conference, at the end of June, that the NFTVA's plight emerged as a matter of public controversy, as opposed to internal professional concern. The NFSA's situation, however, had already become a focus of public protest back in December 2003.

Background

Originally created in 1984 from elements that were then part of the National Library of Australia, the NFSA had grown from a small 15-person operation at the beginning to a major institution with state of the art facilities and a staff of over 230 by 2003. Although the promised legislation to establish it as a statutory authority had never arrived, by then it was poised, with all preparations in place, to become the next best thing — an 'executive agency'. Only Ministerial endorsement was awaited to formalise long standing reality. In practice, the Archive had always functioned as an autonomous institution within the Arts portfolio.

Following a government review of collecting institutions in 2002/03, however, it was instead unexpectedly placed under the authority of the Australian Film Commission (AFC), a much smaller, narrowly focused funding and promotional agency with no background in archiving or heritage management. After changes to the AFC Act passed Parliament, this switch took effect on 1 July 2003.

The striking feature of this rearrangement was the way it was done. The logic of the marriage was never cogently justified, and the government has repeatedly refused to make public the report or even the terms of reference of the review which led to it. The legislative change was hurried through in a matter of weeks, precluding public discussion. The minimal amendments to its Act merely gave the AFC responsibility for the 'national collection': there was no mention of an archival institution, entity or context, though promises were made that the NFSA's identity, independence and integrity would be protected. What was expected to be an equal partnership, however, quickly proved to be a hostile takeover.

The AFC embarked on reviews of the Archive to which constituents at first gave willing support and advice, despite a gathering unease. The

denouement came on 12 December when the AFC released its *Stage 2 Directions* paper, revealing a radical agenda to dismantle the Archive organisationally and geographically, reduce its visibility and – on the basis of a proposed restructure – remove senior staff who represented the corporate memory.¹ Public reaction was immediate in the media, on the streets (there were protest demonstrations), on the listservs and in the galvanising of constituency response in submissions, letters, emails, petitions and Parliamentary debate. This demonstrated an overwhelming demand for the protection of the Archive's institutional integrity and autonomy.

While the outcry forced the AFC to withdraw the most draconian of its proposals, the rest remain on the table. The written views of constituents now add up to a formidable body of documentation: over 140 submissions, the records of five 'stakeholder forums', petitions totalling over 2000 signatures, countless letters and emails and so on. These require a detailed response but have so far received none.

In early July, the ACT Branch of the Australian Society of Archivists, together with the Friends of the NFSA, held a conference in Canberra on the *Future of the Archive*. Among other speakers, three of the four major political parties – Labor, the Greens and the Australian Democrats – sent speakers who affirmed the support of their parties for giving the NFSA statutory authority status in its own right. The Arts Minister, Rod Kemp, declined to attend. The conference communiqué, which includes twenty-six resolutions, was sent to the Minister and the AFC but ignored by both.

Why we should be worried

Film and sound archives, like other public collecting institutions, rely on many kinds of trust: in their stability and continuity, in their values and standards, in their professional skills, and in their autonomy, free of undue influence. There is an expectation that their overlords in Parliament and Government – the trustees of this heritage – will in turn act responsibly in safeguarding them. That is the logic behind the legislative base for so many of these institutions, and so far as laws and the will of Parliament ever can, they guarantee the security, professional character and accountability of the structures which protect and preserve our collections.

Yet what happened to the NFSA appears to be a callous betrayal of this trust. A major national institution and its collection, defenceless without a Director and Council, was handed on a plate to the AFC — a hostile agency, bereft of experience in managing heritage collections, but nevertheless with its own agenda. Prior consultation with experts and stakeholders was not only omitted but, apparently, deliberately avoided. Post-facto consultation, for all anyone can yet tell, has amounted to little more than going through the motions. The AFC and NFSA are organisations so different in character and motivation that one has to conclude that the forced marriage was an inept mistake, or a bureaucratic back-room deal, or most seriously of all, that the dismantling and subsuming of the institution is for reasons still secret, deliberate government policy. Perceived political interference in the operation of other national custodial institutions gives some credence to the last view.

The AFC is publicly accountable for its actions in theory — but not, it seems, in practice. It appears to ignore government commitments with impunity, notably those concerning the autonomy of the Archive. Extracting answers from it in such forums as Senate Estimates Committees is like extracting teeth, as will be apparent from reading the Hansard! In the media and in other ways it demonises those it perceives as critics and even tries to inhibit ordinary reportage which it deems unfavourable. It ignores issues raised by constituents in submissions, and avoids opening itself to free discussion and debate. Those who attended them will remember the tightly controlled management of both agenda and discussion in the ‘stakeholder forums’ of January and February 2004. It breaks ‘iron clad’ promises. Post-protest promises in December 2003 that no senior positions would be moved from Canberra have been broken. One position has already gone.

Yet the most remarkable thing about the AFC’s *Stage 2 Directions* paper is not its innumerable mistakes and omissions, nor the deprecation and hostility to the Archive which it betrays, nor the lack of justification for its proposals, nor even the agenda which it reveals. Rather, it is the very fact that such an ignorant and shoddy blueprint, with such far reaching consequences, should ever have been released by a responsible taxpayer funded authority which, moreover, claims policy writing as one of its strengths.² If it typifies AFC standards — and CEO Kim Dalton declared it to be ‘thoughtful and rigorous’ — it raises larger questions about the general competence of the AFC itself.

In 1985 the NFSA's original Advisory Committee produced *Time in our Hands*, a detailed and visionary blueprint for the growth of the new institution which has been followed and vindicated by the test of time. It is now a classic of its kind. On the other hand, the AFC's *Directions* paper, which summarily dismisses *Time in our Hands*, is in my view likely to be permanently remembered as its antithesis, and a symbol of the vulnerability and fragility of our national institutions.

Cultural differences

There are profound differences between, on one hand, the ethos and culture of a permanent national archival institution with broad public responsibilities and collegial management style, and on the other, an impermanent funding and promotional agency with a narrow brief and a top-down, command management style. Trying to meld these incompatibles has not only traumatised Archive staff, some of whom have left as a result, but also consumed huge amounts of time and money. In just one instance, over \$70 000 in fees was paid to one 'change management' consultant.

Disturbingly, in the culture of the AFC such things as coercion, entrapment, threats, misrepresentation, secret agendas and possibly outright deception appear to be acceptable behaviour. Instances of all these are documented, though not all can be discussed publicly. An Archive which is dependent on transparency and public trust cannot operate in such an atmosphere. It is no wonder that many Archive supporters, having first generously given the AFC the benefit of the doubt, are now on record as declaring that the AFC cannot be trusted.

After a year of dealing with it (and I mean this as a descriptive, not a derogatory, comment) I have concluded that the AFC is not just obtuse, but is simply incapable of understanding the nature of archives, the ethos of archivists, and the concerns of their constituencies. Further, it seems unable to publicly admit error or to be teachable where it is out of its depth. Maybe that's why a frustrated senior AFC staffer undertaking a review of the Archive is on record as saying that no Archive staff members would admit to any problems, and that they all thought everything they did was perfect!

Traditionally there has been a complementary and collaborative working relationship between the NFSA and the AFC: they have been good friends, but now the AFC is proving a poor master. And it has all happened before. Some years ago a decision to move the government production entity Film Australia under the AFC's jurisdiction proved a mistake, and the marriage had to be undone by giving Film Australia its own legislation. We seem to be going through the same cycle again.

'Directions'

The AFC's fixation with its discredited *Directions* agenda seems an eloquent expression of its culture. Despite its rejection by the Archive's constituency, and despite the ministerially forced retraction of some extreme measures which CEO Dalton had insisted could not be dropped, it has so far refused to withdraw the paper. While claiming that it is simply a group of proposals – and more recently that it is 'a summary of issues that need to be addressed' – the AFC has treated it very much as a blueprint and as a way of constraining debate, repeatedly reminding us that it has a 'vision' for the Archive with 'exciting possibilities.' So far it has not seemed much interested in whether its vision – whatever that now is – coincides with anyone else's.

There are constant indicators, most recently with the branding of public presentations of the Archive's magnificent reconstruction of *The Sentimental Bloke* as an AFC, not an Archive, activity that since *Directions* couldn't be implemented through a frontal assault, it will be achieved piece by piece with what Sir Humphrey Appleby would call 'salami tactics'.

Adapting to change

As the NFSA's constituency began to take up the AFC's public invitation to respond to *Directions*, one group – Archive Forum – decided to prepare an extensive commentary on the whole document.³ Called *Cinderella Betrayed*, it was lodged in late January and quickly drew a public reaction from the AFC. In several press reports Kim Dalton described Archive Forum as 'lacking vision' and 'lacking willingness to accept change'. Indeed, *Directions* does describe itself as offering a 'context for change'.

Directions certainly foreshadowed massive change for the Archive, for to be absorbed by an organisation a quarter of its size it would have to be dismantled as a coherent institution. Otherwise it would completely overshadow the host body. The manifold contradictions and conflicts of interest involved in mixing up two such culturally and philosophically divergent entities are nowhere addressed in *Directions* and perhaps had not even occurred to the AFC. The opposite strategy of dismantling the smaller AFC and attaching its elements to various parts of the Archive should have been more than obvious, and would have made slightly better sense, but this idea does not seem to have been entertained.

For here is the starkest contradiction of all. While 'change' is extolled and imposed on the Archive and its supporters, there is no change to the AFC itself: neither its name nor its Board membership nor its structural philosophy has been reshaped to reflect its vastly broadened responsibilities. Even adding the position of an additional deputy chair of the Board, ostensibly to represent the AFC's new archival responsibilities, has had no effect because the position has not been filled. It is little wonder that so much public money has had to be spent on 'change management' consultants who, by all accounts, have concluded that it is the AFC which needs cultural change, not the Archive.

Clearly, those who most want change, *radical change*, and who have a vision for the future are the constituents, the authors of the 140-odd submissions and other documents which, for all we know, still lie unread by AFC management and Board. And what they want is what the AFC cannot deliver: separate statutory status with all its implications and possibilities.

The BFI connection

In July the AFC promoted the visit of Richard Patterson, a representative of the British Film Institute's (BFI) screen education program whose brief bore an interesting similarity to the main thrust of the AFC's *Directions* paper. Those who are observing the current politics of the BFI will find some uncomfortable resonances with our situation here.⁴

Britain's National Film and Television Archive – the mother of film archives worldwide, including Australia – has always been a department of the BFI. It has always been an uncomfortable relationship. With the Archive being larger than the rest of the BFI put together, the

tail has wagged the dog. So over the last two decades there has been an internal war of attrition, with bits of the Archive being progressively removed into the generality of the institute. In 1998 the Archive even lost its name, though this was later restored. Now it is facing final dismantlement and the battle has at last become public. British archivists have been quick to draw their own parallels with the NFSAs' circumstances, and the NFSAs' newly appointed Director, Dr Paolo Cherchi Usai, has commented that these are currently the two major crisis points in the film archiving world. More information about his visit can be found at <http://www.filmarchiveaction.org> .

The BFI and the AFC even seem to be using the same language in defence of their positions, such as comments about disgruntled staff, and people being resistant to change. Is all this coincidental?

Summarising the current challenges

Protecting the Archive's integrity

Over the last year the AFC has 'integrated' personnel, IT and administrative functions, is poised to physically subsume the Archive's Sydney office, and has encroached on the Archive's control of its public programs and identity. It won't stop there and the new Director faces a challenging task in keeping the wolves at bay. We will need to be vigilant.

Addressing stakeholder feedback

The AFC has shown itself dismissive of stakeholder input and, inevitably, it will fall to the new Director and Archive staff to do what they can to address the massive volume of submissions and other advice. We need to make this process cooperative and productive, and we need to see proper, ongoing consultative mechanisms – like a high level advisory committee working to the Board – put in place.

Supporting the staff and director

Moral support will be needed. We must keep in mind the AFC's record of twisting any criticism of the Archive, no matter how constructive, to its own ends.⁵ We need to pursue changes to AFC Board membership so that it gains an adequate measure of archival expertise, and get the vacant deputy chair's position filled by a person qualified in the archival profession.

Keeping the bigger picture in view

There are strong indications from advance publicity that the AFC will encourage the view that now the new Director for the NFSA is in place, everything is fixed. But of course it isn't. All that has happened is that a particular area of uncertainty, of the AFC's own making, has been resolved. The fundamentals have not changed and the constituency groups will need to keep drawing attention to them.

Pursuing statutory authority status

The Archive will never be safe or permanent until it has its own legislation. No matter how successful the new Director and staff are in repairing damage and returning the Archive to some normality, its survival will remain subject to the whim of the AFC, and it would be irresponsible to encourage people to believe otherwise. Personalities and circumstances change. The illusion of permanency is no substitute for the reality.

Whither the AFC?

The AFC was established in 1975 as a funding and development agency to support the revival of the moribund Australian film industry, at a time when the concept of government support for film production was still in its pioneering phase. It has had a long and supportive relationship with the NFSA. It played an important part in the long sequence of events which led to the NFSA being separated from the National Library as a new institution in 1984. In 1980 it bankrolled the Archive's first major film reconstruction, a new version of the 1927 epic *For the Term of His Natural Life*.

It is an indication of changing times and culture that the advocacy groups now expressing greatest concern about the AFC's recent handling of the Archive number among their members some former board members, senior executives and staff of the AFC. The present author is not alone in his view that its brutal and inept performance in taking over the Archive would have been out of character for the organisation earlier in its history. It has become obvious that the AFC itself is overdue for a thorough performance review — a more open, competent and objective one than its own analysis of the Archive proved to be.

This raises a more fundamental question. Is the AFC, as a concept, past its use-by date? When it was created in 1975, as the successor to the pioneering Australian Film Development Corporation, government structures in the field were few. Thirty years later, it shares the task of industry support federally with the Australian Film Finance Corporation, and a large range of comparable entities at the state and territory level, such as Film Victoria and the NSW Film and Television Office. Today the industry, and the wider world, is a vastly different place, and perhaps in need of different structures. The AFC is showing signs of being an authority in need of a function, and it is fair to ask whether it is feeding on the Archive in order to prop up its own survival. By their nature, archives are permanent entities: to suggest otherwise negates their *raison d'être*. Funding authorities, by contrast, are service and disbursement mechanisms, and such mechanisms are essentially transitory — they move with changing times and changing needs. Would the AFC's current activities be better handled by other bodies?

Is there hope?

To see a destructive agenda pursued in the face of overwhelming stakeholder opposition is depressing, and can only undermine faith in public heritage institutions generally. When the public trustees fail in their duty, the initiative has to fall to the curators, the supporters and the general public. The scale of the outcry over the NFSA may be without precedent in the history of Australian cultural institutions, and even of the audiovisual archiving movement internationally. Where governments ignore the popular will and professional common sense, stakeholders will, in the end, look for alternatives. Let us hope that we never again need recourse to the tactics of Henri Langlois, legendary founder of the Cinematheque Francaise, who secreted his collection during the war in small caches all over Paris, to keep them out of the hands of the Nazis. And yes, the Cinematheque is another archive currently under threat.

The appointment of a well credentialed new director for the NFSA, in the form of Dr Paolo Cherchi Usai, has heartened supporters and staff alike. But how successful he will be in protecting the Archive's institutional autonomy from its overlords, and how much of *Directions* is still lurking in the dark like a bad dream, remains to be seen.

Meanwhile the systemic problems flowing from the fundamentally incompatible AFC-NFSA marriage remain unresolved.

Had the Federal election resulted in a change of government, we could have expected a resolution, as the Labor Party made a public commitment to dissolve the marriage and create the NFSA as a statutory authority. It has maintained this commitment despite reported moves by the AFC to make the merger difficult to unscramble. The Democrats and the Greens have both come out in support of Labor's position.⁶ It is hoped that the Coalition too can return to its original support for statutory status, for the issue is essentially one of principle, not politics, and it would be a pity if the long-term wellbeing of the Archive could not enjoy bipartisan support.

Otherwise the fundamental problems will remain. The theme of the Hanoi conference was 'No time, no money, moving image and sound archiving under emergency conditions'. In retrospect it seems oddly prescient. The theme was devised with the traditional problem of limited resources in mind, without anticipating that a new kind of emergency would arise in the meantime. Now the audiovisual archiving movement has an additional kind of emergency to face, and I fear it may be a sign of the times.

Maybe it's just possible that, having shown how grass roots activism led to the creation, in 1984, of a new institutional concept – the autonomous film *and* sound archive, since copied by others – we may be able to show now how the same activism can definitively overcome the threat to institutional survival. History tells us that the powerless, if they refuse to be silenced, can change the world.

Endnotes

1 See <<http://www.afc.gov.au>> for access to the *Directions* paper, and for access to over 140 public submissions in response. (You may have to drill down a few layers to get to these).

2 The AFC's website says: 'the AFC's role in policy development and as the premier provider of high-quality research, information and analysis continues to grow in response to the increasingly sophisticated needs of a mature industry'.

3 See <<http://www.afiresearch.rmit.edu.au/archiveforum>> for the papers and resources of Archive Forum, one of the leading advocacy groups for the NFSA.

4 See <<http://www.filmarchiveaction.org>> for the fight to protect Britain's NFTVA from dismantlement by its parent body, the British Film Institute.

5 This particular point was highlighted in *Cinderellas Betrayed*.

6 The points in this paragraph were affirmed by spokespersons of all three parties at the conference on the *Future of the Archive*, convened in Canberra on 3-4 July.