Funding the arts involves translating judgements of aesthetic and social value into cash terms. It takes the form of a subsidy paid to certain parts of an industry and not to others, and it requires the mediation of often irreconcilable interests. This is to say that the question of funding for the arts is thoroughly political, and that it is fraught with quite specific difficulties. Rowse’s book is a lucid and intelligent account of some of them, and it is the most persuasive argument we’ve yet had in Australia for a reformulation of policy priorities in relation to the arts. It also, and incidentally, poses a serious challenge to the traditional philosophical bases of aesthetic theory.

The initial force of Rowse’s argument lies simply in his use of sociological categories to question the criteria on which arts funding in Australia has been based. The chief criterion has been that of ‘excellence’, which presupposes a single scale of aesthetic value and a unitary national community. Excellence is intrinsic to the aesthetic object rather than being a function of the codes by which the object is read; but, as Glenn Withers puts it (without subscribing to the argument), this intrinsic worth ‘is not necessarily recognised by consumers in general. Thus one can assert the intrinsic value of “excellence” (and its pursuit), and can then reject the competence of all individuals, except those with special skills and insights, to make wise decisions in such matters’.¹

One case against this sleight of hand is that codes of value, rather than being unitary, function to consolidate differentiations of class

and status already established or aspired to. The inclusions and exclusions they perform are important games in the play of social power. Subsidy to the ‘high’ arts is subsidy to an educational and economic elite, and the rhetoric of excellence, argues Rowse, ‘is a language of the powerful, which effaces the social basis of that power’.

The strongest version of this case, which Rowse refers to obliquely here and more directly in an earlier Meanjin essay, is that made by Bourdieu and his collaborators at the Centre de Sociologie Européenne. In L’Amour de l’art Bourdieu and Darbel used conventional sociological tools to ask: who visits art galleries? They find a strict correlation between educational capital, social class (or rather class aspiration), and the frequency and duration of visits to art galleries (musées d’art). The correlation is most striking in the case of difficult contemporary art: for example, ‘during an exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts entitled “Antagonisms” and dedicated to the boldest forms of modern art, the proportion of visitors belonging to the upper classes reached 90%’, compared to 8.5% employees and members of the middle class, 1.5% tradespeople, 0.5% workers, and a total absence of agricultural workers.2 Here and in La Distinction, as well as in the books on the educational system, Bourdieu elaborates a complex description of the process of distribution of what he calls cultural capital. The key mechanism here is the school, which tends to reinforce initial inequalities before the domain of culture; it is able to endow the privileged competence and access of a ‘cultivated’ class with the trappings of legitimacy, so that ‘the only ones excluded are those who appear to exclude themselves’.

One traditional response in Australia to this kind of argument has been to equate the unequal distribution of cultural capital with cultural deprivation, and to propose that the schooling system be used to overcome it (this is often conflated with an argument about geographical disadvantage). Withers, for example, follows the 1976 IAC Report in suggesting that there be ‘public provision of sufficient general and specialised artistic education to provide a basis for informed free choice of work and leisure habits’.3 But this assumes that education is neutral with respect to culture (and indeed to work); it fails to recognise what Rowse calls the ‘class differentiating logic of the school system’. Further, by taking ‘high’ culture as the valued norm, it devalues the choices actually made by ‘popular’ audiences. It thereby indirectly affirms criteria of legitimacy which are identified with and espoused by Australia’s cultural and economic elites.

The argument about ‘cultural deprivation’ has been characteristic of what Rowse classes as the second phase of state patronage of the arts in Australia (roughly the 1970s during which the Australia Council was established as the main medium of government patronage). The book’s polemical interest lies in tracing and advocat-
ing the displacement of this second phase by a third phase which Rowse calls ‘decentralised’ patronage. The possibility of this transition stems from an initial tension between the Australia Council’s objectives of ‘excellence’ and those of ‘access’ and ‘participation’, and it involves a shift from general to local criteria of evaluation. This new mode of patronage, Rowse argues, ‘encourages a more pluralist conception of the cultures that make up Australian society. It challenges the question-begging that usually goes with terms such as excellence and quality. And it displaces the authority of the generation of voluntary cultural entrepreneurs whose perception of a general public interest in culture can now be seen as partisan and self-serving’.

The Community Arts, Crafts, and Aboriginal Arts Boards played a central role in developing the concepts of ‘community’ and ‘local support’ as key policy concepts, and their success was reflected in the implementation in 1983-84 of four Incentive Programs: Artist in Community; Youth Arts; Multicultural Arts; and Art and Working Life. But of course this ‘success’ has to be kept in perspective: Timothy Pascoe replied in 1984 to criticisms of changed priorities ‘by pointing to the inertia in the Council’s pattern of funding. The spectre of innumerable dahlia shows (The Australian’s caricature of community arts) could hardly survive his news that out of $32.5 million disbursed by the Council in 1983-84, only $2.8 million had gone to the Community Arts Board, while the Opera, Ballet and their supporting orchestras had received $8.9 million’. While Donald Horne can be expected to continue to push for a greater emphasis on decentralised patronage and community arts, the Hawke government has given clear indications of a willingness to intervene on behalf of the major performing arts companies and their powerful lobbies.

Rowse’s general argument is, I think, convincing and largely straightforward. Rather than repeating it in any detail, I want to take issue with some of the problems it raises and some of the implications it doesn’t follow through. The first of these problems concerns the delimitation of that part of the cultural field which is the book’s concern. The isolation of ‘the Arts’ as a domain separate from other cultural practices is surely wrong insofar as it assumes precisely that hierarchical ranking of practices that the book questions; yet this is the key methodological decision Rowse takes. Whilst recognising that expenditure on cultural activities is broader than the mainstream ‘artistic’ activities and includes ‘the ABC, the Archives, the Bicentenary Celebrations, the America’s Cup Defence, as well as the Australia Council and the Australian Film Commission’, not to mention ‘the activities of the States, including the major public libraries and museums’ and ‘the licensing of broadcasting, through the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal’, the book nevertheless ‘eschews the
America’s Cup Defence and concentrates on the Australia Council, the Australian Film Commission, and those aspects of the Australian Broadcasting Commission which deal with the broadcasting of film, video and the performing arts and the staging of live musical performance’. The extent of this eschewal can be gauged from the fact that Arguing the Arts deals with about one-sixth of the $735 million spent by the Commonwealth on ‘Culture and Recreation’ in 1984-85; this involves $46 million on assistance to the Arts, $13 million on Film Industry development and a notional one-fifth of the ABC’s $340 million. The rationale given is Withers’, that these areas ‘have the most obvious claim to be central to Commonwealth cultural policy’. Indeed they do; but that is because this policy is stitched together from a rag-bag of aesthetic, industrial, and electoral criteria, with the aesthetic having an ideological privilege (which Rowse here repeats) but not necessarily a financial privilege. It all depends on how you do the accounting: it is true, as Judith Brett says, that the structure of the Australia Council reflects ‘an arts policy already committed to certain ideas of cultural worth — with a literature board, a music board, a theatre board and a visual arts board, and no football board, gardening board or television board’; but looked at another way, football receives a range of indirect subsidies, and commercial television is the beneficiary of an enormous grant in the form of licensed and protected access to the public airwaves — although this subsidy would only show up in the federal budget if it were calculated as a written-off rental. The point is not the rightness or wrongness of these subsidies, but the fact that you can’t assess questions of equity in cultural access if you leave out sport, commercial television and film, the whole of radio, the book bounty, four-fifths of the ABC, and the SBS.

The book’s focus similarly repeats an ideological distinction between ‘commercial’ and ‘non-commercial’ culture, although Rowse is in practice ambivalent about the distinction. In the Preface he mentions that he has omitted any discussion of cultural policy towards Aborigines because ‘the most crucial decisions ... are made in mining and pastoral company boardrooms and in ministries concerned with natural resources’. But one could with equal justification point out that decisions about book publishing involve commercial considerations of local and international printing and publishing costs and the value of the Australian dollar; or that the crucial decisions about the control, size, and mix of television broadcasters (and thus in the long run about content and access: the political pressures being brought to bear in relation to Aussat and the extent and mode of networking are a good example) are taken in boardrooms, stock exchanges, the Communications Ministry, and the Federal Cabinet. It is impossible to draw any sort of clean line between Commonwealth cultural policy, between the subsidised and the non-subsidised, between the commercial and the non-commercial.
Rowse knows this, of course, and argues explicitly that to oppose commercial entertainment to subsidised quality is no longer tenable, and is indeed a major obstacle to policy reform. But his practice seems often to endorse what he describes as 'a difference which is central to contemporary culture — the difference between the (usually) commercial and electronically-distributed cultural experiences, on the one hand, and, on the other, less or non-commercial culture, which is distributed by means which are usually more exclusive'. The problem here, clearly enough, is that 'high' culture may be distributed by electronic means and it may — insofar as this distinction is at all meaningful — be fully 'commercial' in form; and, conversely, that 'popular' cultural experiences need be neither 'commercial' nor electronically distributed. The problem is compounded when Rowse moves from this mapping of the technical onto the commercial (and, implicitly, onto the popular) to using Benjamin to talk about the destruction of the aural quality of the 'high' arts, and in particular to argue that technical reproducibility and the commodity production of artworks have meant that 'a form of social authority which was based on privileged access to rarefied exposure has been eroded'. Benjamin's argument seems to me to have been discredited by his assumption that technological innovation is inherently progressive, and by his consequent failure to foresee the ways in which mass reproducibility has been used actually to enhance the aura of sacralised artworks and to develop new forms of rarefaction (the ABC/Australian Opera simulcasts, and the film and television star systems in their different ways, may serve as examples of the mass diffusion of aura). Rowse applies the argument specifically to the possibility of using television to popularise the performing arts. The case he makes is a good one, but it carries no necessary implications for a change in the status of the performance-text and its place in a system of cultural differentiation: Idomeneo on commercial television is still aural culture.

It is, nevertheless, in relation to commercial television and film that Rowse is able most effectively to spell out the crippling consequences of that dualistic logic that splits the cultural domain between private sector non-subsidised 'entertainment' and public sector subsidised 'quality'. In relation to film it has meant that, although recent governments have given a measure of support to independent film, they have not tackled the problem of distributing and exhibiting it (since these functions remain entirely in the private sector); in particular, they have been unwilling to offer incentives to or impose constraints on television to buy and screen independent film — as has been the case, for example, with Channel 4 in the UK and many of the state television bodies in Germany. On the one hand ABC television (in striking contrast with ABC radio) has a poor record in programming innovative, contentious, or intellectually challenging work. On the other hand, however, the definition of the ABC
as the locus of high culture has made it less likely that the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal will impose ‘cultural’ responsibilities on the commercial broadcasters. Rowse argues that ‘for any government or government agency to confront the major networks and the distributors of video recordings with some responsibilities for cultural policy would have disturbed the established division of responsibilities between the private and the public sector. There is a kind of unspoken consensus that Culture is a public sector matter’. The division affects a number of other areas: there seems to be no good reason, Rowse suggests, why public libraries should acquire books and not video cassettes, apart from the fact that the consignment of video recordings to the category of commercial entertainment has consolidated a policy by default. But the major effect of the logic of cultural dualism seems to me to lie beyond the reach of Arguing the Arts. This is the overriding problem of government unwillingness to see the monopolistic concentration of private ownership of newspapers and the electronic media as a matter of cultural policy, and to attempt a democratisation at the heart, rather than at the fringes, of the cultural domain.

The second complex of problems I want to look at derives from Rowse’s basic methodological decision to ask which audiences are being reached by the subsidised arts, and hence what exclusions are being performed as a result of cultural policy. The difficulty that arises here has to do with the attribution of cultural domains to social groups — that is, with the positing of a necessary or intrinsic relation between certain art forms and certain kinds of social group. One familiar form this attribution takes is the measurement of market shares through the ratings-surveys or through circulation figures. The problem with such readings is that they tend to aggregate quite disparate audiences, interests, and commitments, and that they take an apparently unified audience as a given rather than a construct.

In an essay published last year in Meanjin, Rowse argues against assumptions about the homogeneity of the ‘popular’, and distinguishes between a statistical and a generic sense of the concept. The generic sense is a way of recognising that graffiti and beach cricket and gardening are not ‘popular’ in quite the same way as Dynasty and one-day cricket and Bob Hawke. Rowse therefore suggests that ‘popular culture’ might in fact consist of ‘a series of minorities, some of them tiny’, and consequently that it is important to avoid the identification of ‘the electoral majority that might conceivably mandate a decisive change in cultural policy with the actual clients and audiences of popular culture genres’. These ‘are two quite different political entities’, and a recognition of this difference must entail a pluralism in the formulation of cultural policy.

What is at stake here is the claims to legitimacy — the political
uses — that are made on the basis of assumptions about audiences. If proponents of the ‘high’ arts tend to work with the assumption of a homogeneous national audience for the arts, the same is true in a different way of the mass broadcasters. Their claim is that television (in particular) is expressive of the ‘needs’ and interests of a popular audience, and it is on this expressive relation that their claim to ideological legitimacy is built. Television is ‘the people’ talking to itself. But the form of the popular claimed here is constructed in particular textual practices and particular ideological struggles, especially around nationalism. Rowse writes of this process of audience formation that audiences

are given images of themselves on television which confirm their democratic ordinariness, images of the familiar, of places and activities that are to be found in every lifestyle, images of the recognisably Australian. The imagery of prime-time television is the strongest projection of the audience as all of us; it acknowledges a diversity among us, to be sure, but it is a diversity imagined as an endless series of individual differences. It is an inbuilt pretension of mass systems of communication to create such a constituency, to proceed as if it existed always, and to strive to bring it into being historically by a constantly repeated invitation to see ourselves as that audience’.

Television and radio, Rowse argues, ‘have invited us to make a fetish of their own activity as if it were the supreme realisation of popular culture’; and it comes to be accepted, both by their allies and by their opponents, that the commercial broadcasters have a monopoly on the popular, identified with the ‘actually existing’ form of commercial television and radio programming. What follows from this identification, says Rowse, ‘is either to abhor the popular as vulgar and debased’, or to defend particular forms of it as ‘authentic expressions of popular desire’. Both of these positions seem to me (as they do to Rowse) to be mistaken.

Although the distinction between high and low culture is consistently mobilised at all levels of ideological practice to articulate differences of social power and status, there is no necessary correspondence between classes and cultural forms. The class essentialism that marks, for example, Bev Roberts’ championing of ‘majority’ over ‘minority’ culture simply neglects the extent to which cultural forms, rather than simply being expressive of pregiven class interests, are used to form and to claim those interests in a process of ideological struggle. Questions of value can’t be solved, either way, by an appeal to the popular or elite character of the audience for a particular form: in the first place because the equation of audiences with classes doesn’t work (audiences are neither homogeneous nor stable); and in the second place because the function of class differentiation is not the only function performed by cultural texts (and it is performed in different ways and in different degrees by different cultural forms). This doesn’t mean that questions of subsidy shouldn’t
be decided on the basis of democratic principles of equity in access to funding; but it does mean that we need to keep questions of economic equity and questions of value rigorously separate.

Rowse's preferred strategy, then, is to recognise the plurality of interests competing in the cultural sphere and to use arts funding as a way of encouraging this diversity (albeit within the constraints imposed by the existing division between the commercial and the public sectors). But whilst the recognition of a plurality of cultural capacities and traditions is clearly preferable to the patronising conception of 'cultural deprivation', there are problems with this model. What it assumes is an image of Australian society as a multiplicity of more or less cohesive communities with strong independent cultural traditions. To suggest that, unlike the pseudo-unitary nation, local community groups are truly homogeneous and not themselves subject to the strains of economic, political, and ideological divisions is to run the risk of thereby reinforcing inequalities within these groups, and in particular of assisting in the formation or consolidation of 'local' elites. The image is misleading anyway in that, whilst there are many examples in Australian life of such cohesive communities (and examples of the process of their formation and emergence, in the past and the present), this is nevertheless not the only or even the dominant form of organisation of cultural audiences in Australia.

There are two forms of organisation which cut right across these local formations and which are radically different in kind from them. The first is the mass audiences formed by the electronic media. The second is the audience of intellectuals formed by the tertiary education system. 'Intellectuals' sounds specialised, but it's not: the concept properly includes artists, teachers, journalists, politicians, scientists, professionals in law, medicine, psychology, social work, etc, trade union leaders, civil servants — a good part, in other words, of the Australian middle class. Different kinds of market operate for each of these two audience-formations, and two quite different modes of legitimacy.

Rowse tends to think the relation between these two kinds of audience through the opposition between television and the live performing arts. The problem with this model, however, is that it reinforces the dichotomy between the commercial and the non-commercial. A more useful way of thinking the relation might be through the opposition between different kinds of recorded music. Within a general 'commercial' framework, two incompatible modes of hegemony are established: that of pop music, disseminated across certain parts of the electronic media as a kind of universal musical language; and that of classical music, disseminated across other parts of the electronic media as a more truly legitimate musical language. As always, the opposition is an illusory one, constructing imaginary
class relations rather than reflecting real ones (although its effects of assertion are certainly not illusory). What this musical model does demonstrate, however, is that the notion of a dispersed plurality of local audiences has no general validity. We could perhaps take it as an ideology corresponding to certain kinds of audience structure — those of jazz or folk or ‘non-commercial’ rock, for example; but the sphere of recorded music, like many other cultural spheres, is in fact dominated by the two hegemonic systems.

Several points need to be made about these musical systems. The first is that they are both ‘mass’ systems, or at least potentially so (especially when the education system is considered as a site of cultural consumption). The second is that, whilst they are used to articulate differences in cultural capital (to articulate the status system which ‘represents’ the class system), they have nevertheless no necessary affiliation to particular classes; most Australians, and especially most intellectuals, in fact move freely between parts of both systems, and the boundaries between them are becoming increasingly blurred. And third, the reason why the division between these two formations of audience doesn’t translate directly into class terms is that the possession of cultural capital is not the same thing as the possession of monetary capital.

The crucial question here is that of the peculiar status of the intelligentsia: the question of its privileged relation to ‘high’ art, and the question of whether it does or can represent the interests of either the ruling class or the working class. These issues aren’t adequately dealt with in Arguing the Arts; it is only in the Meanjin essay ‘Doing Away With Ordinary People’, written as a critique of an earlier paper by Bob Connell, that Rowe addresses it properly. The key problem raised by Connell, Rowe argues, is that of ‘the relationship between professional intellectuals, part of Culture’s constituency, and those whom he calls “ordinary people”’. Whereas Connell takes for granted the possibility of a transparent relation of representation between the one and the other, Rowe insists on the irreducibility of class relations and so on the mythical role played by the invocation of ‘ordinary people’ as the unrepresented Other.

In support of this argument, Rowe cites Diane Austin’s claim that Connell’s sociology implies that ‘intellectuals have no peculiar class interests, but only the interest of a class for which they become scribes and representatives’; and he presses the point that Connell ‘does not discuss the place of his own cultural interests in the social order he describes as needing “cultural democracy”, but implies the transparency of the sociology that assures us of ordinary people’s “rich” lives’. Rowe then postulates that the class specificity of the intelligentsia is constituted by its historical function of managing the working class, although this function ‘does not predict the historical contingencies in which intellectuals have become a disintegrated social force’. His argument here is probably too cursory and too instru-
mentalist to be particularly useful. The point is surely to assign to
the intelligentsia neither a merely subordinate relation to the ruling
class nor the role of spokesperson for the working class, but to take
seriously the contradictory, ambivalent autonomy of the middle class
and its specific values and commitments. In Arguing the Arts,
however, Rowse is as little able as Connell to situate his own ‘cul-
tural interests’ as an intellectual.

An index of this is the way in which on several occasions he treats
questions of value as though they were merely questions of personal
taste. He refuses a ‘populist dismissal of what some call elitist cul-
ture’, for example, ‘because I like too much of it myself’, and else-
where he approaches the question of aesthetic value by writing: ‘I
would not challenge the right of anybody to make discriminations
of quality for themselves. But in what circumstances is that right
to be assumed by others who would allocate resources on our behalf?’
There are in fact two different questions here, which should as far
as possible be kept apart. One is that of the criteria according to
which questions of value are to be adjudicated. These criteria are
not simply individual, but neither should they be taken, in a reduc-
tionist way, to be directly expressive of class values and interests.

The second question is that of group and class access to government
subsidies to the arts. Here Rowse seems to me to be quite correct
in stressing the possibility of a devolution of decision-making, either
to boards made up largely of practitioners of particular arts or to
community groups who determine their own criteria of relevance
(funding can then also be used as an instrument of policy in assist-
ing disadvantaged groups). The basis for each of these strategies is
of course already in place; what is needed is a decisive political com-
mmitment to decentralisation.

To adopt a relativist position with respect to funding does not
necessarily entail a fully relativist position with respect to questions
of value. It does mean that the generalising critical stance of the
intelligentsia has to be checked by a kind of self-censorship which
enforces respect in the last instance for divergent values: a kind of
political indeterminacy principle, a refusal of absolute judgement.
Short of this last instance, intellectuals have every right and obliga-
tion to try to construct and to fight for generally valid principles of
judgement. These are not ‘universal’ principles, constructed outside
or above the play of class interests, but precisely principles deve-
loped in the political struggle between fractions of the middle class.
Socialist intellectuals, in particular, must recognise that they speak
not for or from within the working class but to and from within
the middle class; and that this role is not to be despised.

In the field of the arts the ‘cultural’ intelligentsia has adopted a
vested interest in innovation and experiment, and will tend to support
areas such as independent film and avant-garde art. There is as well,
I think, a more general agenda which Rowse's book helps to clarify.
It would clearly include support for community arts programmes, access television, the application of pressure on both commercial and non-commercial television to accept a greater degree of 'cultural' responsibility, and an end to the Sutherland/Bonygne regime at the Australian Opera. It might also include the possibility of ending subsidies to the major performing arts companies and a complete reformulation of priorities in this area. The more intractable questions — and the ultimately decisive ones — concern the fact that funding the arts involves the classic interventionist dilemma of rectifying market imbalances without making structural changes to the market itself: in particular to the monopoly control of the print and electronic media.

A brief note, finally, on geographical centralism. Rowse notes that 'a number of critics from outside of Sydney have pointed to the large proportion of the culture-dollar that goes to Sydney-based activities', but he gives the problem only the most superficial treatment — pointing in particular to the difficulty of defining the appropriate regional units. He makes no mention at all of the way the problem is exacerbated by the concentration of administrative functions in Sydney (and to a lesser degree in Melbourne). Michele Field's 1980 study 'The Geography of Arts Funding' does focus on this issue, and makes a devastating case for the disadvantaging of Melbourne in relation to Sydney; but, with an extraordinary blindness to the dimensions of her case, she completely fails to consider the other State capitals or rural areas.

I write from Perth and I grew up in country towns; the problem seems to me a good deal more serious than it apparently does to Rowse. The only solution to it is to place much more importance on regional equity (if necessary loading the criteria in favour of rural areas), and to institute a programme of decentralisation of administrative functions — permanently or in rotation — throughout the country. The present regional inequities are an important part of what's wrong with arts funding in Australia.

Notes
1 Glenn Withers et al., 'The Great Arts-Funding Debate', Meanjin, 4/1981, p. 447
3 Withers, p. 447.