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BOOK REVIEW

Dogs in Space: The Book

Diarmuid Maguire

University of Sydney

Corresponding author: Diarmuid Maguire: diarmuid.maguire@sydney.edu.au; Jane Foss Russell Building (G02), Darlington Campus

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Dogs in Space: A Film Archive by Richard Lowenstein, Ann Standish, Helen Bandis
Melbourne: Melbourne Books, 2019.

ISBN: 9781925556445; Recommended Retail Price: \$49.95 (paperback)

Richard Lowenstein was part of a young community that shared a house in the punk-era of the 1970s. This inspired him to direct the film *Dogs in Space* (1986) in which actors played his real-life housemates, two of whom belonged to the punk rock band Ears. Lowenstein, however, did not cast anyone to play himself. Absent from the film, Lowenstein now takes centre stage with the publication of this archive, providing evidence to demonstrate that he was far more than the director of the film. Reproducing visual and written material, this short book conveys how Lowenstein fought to get the film financed, rewrote the script, and dealt with a crew that included Michael Hutchence and a group of, at times, crazy extras. While Hutchence was the undisputed star of *Dogs in Space*, Lowenstein is in command of the historical archive. This is the Director's Cut, with imaginative control reasserted not with restored footage but by rummaging away in old cupboards for stuff you never threw away. That doesn't mean that Lowenstein is the only creator of this book. Ann Standish and Helen Bandis provide an excellent opening article. They introduce the film, the director, his archives, and an interpretation of the relationship between these new archives and the film itself. 'Here,' they write, 'it is possible to see *Dogs in Space* being made and, at the same time, see it in the present.' We learn a lot about a film that was made in 1986, and its relevance to the craft of filmmaking today. Most of all we find out about 'what happened beyond the camera frame and around the edges; the planning and the writing, the crew and actors at work, the down time, the conflicts. And it shows what happened afterwards - the wrap parties, the trip to Cannes.' (12). This is an insider account written for the fan who either remembers the film's

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arrival on the scene or understands its legacy. The many photographs included provide affective immediacy whether you were there or, like me, not.

To begin Lowenstein writes about his search for finance to make the film. He has a wry sense of humour, particularly in relation to the seeming compromises he had to make to keep potential investors happy. We learn that at the beginning he decided to operate two budgets - one for Australian Film that demanded production costs kept below \$300,000 and a real one that quickly exceeded that figure. One of the finance corporations threatened to close the film down four weeks prior to shooting. Even though we know the film eventually gets made, Lowenstein keeps the tension live between creative and corporate investment. Some of the corporations issue a series of demands at the last moment but Lowenstein seems to know when to resist or bend to these demands. There is a constant round of letters and telexes applying pressure but Lowenstein maintains an outwardly cool demeanour. Adding to the problem of the budget, conflict arose within the crew. Less cool. Key figures resigned and INXS decided to play in Canada. Lowenstein gets around all these obstacles using the skills he learned as a director of music videos but what comes across is his sheer determination to make this particular film. Shooting only begins a third of the way through the archive. There is an obvious lesson here for the would-be filmmaker.

There are many amusing tales along the way. Lowenstein witnesses Australian film critic David Stratton giving some money to a prostrate Hutchence at the Cannes Film Festival, presumably thinking he was down on his luck. Before production, an old flatmate contacted Lowenstein worried that his life would appear on screen. Assured by Lowenstein to the contrary, he then accused the director of being 'snobbish in not acknowledging him' (100). The real Sam, after reading the script, asks for his name to be changed 'so his mother wouldn't be embarrassed at the scene where she arrives with his dinner and cleans his room' (88). Lowenstein doesn't even have to hint at what he thinks about this request and we also learn that Sam gives interviews to *TV Week*. One member of the cast tells him 'about killing 27 men in the Lebanese army' (140). Lowenstein doesn't believe him. The Gary Foley story is far too good to spoil in this review, but let's say fact mixes with fiction like in so much else. Some fun is unintentional, as with Lowenstein's constant fretting about whether he will be flown business or economy to London, Cannes, and Los Angeles.

All this information is communicated through the mindset of a hoarder-archivist. Lowenstein's mother was a communist historian and this had an influence on his early filmmaking and much else. Perhaps that was his real communist poster in the *Dogs in Space*? He certainly keeps copies of absolutely everything he comes across, right down to his expired passport which appears on page 70. There is a cute handwritten letter from Gael Macpherson asking for a job as an extra, along with two passport photos. She got the job. There is even a photograph of Lowenstein's broken-down car, stopped on its way to the airport. Typical. Also included is a wonderful letter written by Lowenstein to the Hoyts Corporation in George Street, Sydney, in which he threatens to kill them because of their sound system. It is signed 'Violently yours' (166). The script is also included, in its various manifestations, followed by some sketches of the famous Volkswagen scene. There is a great guide to wardrobe design, again mostly photographic. The editing tale is fascinating both in terms of story and sound. Reviews of the film are included, good and bad, with some interesting responses written in. Finally, there is an interview with Lowenstein just as he was about to release *Mystify* (2019), his recent documentary about Hutchence.

As to the message of *Dogs in Space*, there are several possibilities canvassed. Standish and Bandis argue for the idealism of punk being overtaken by individualism and drugs, whereas

Lowenstein claims it was about a young community establishing itself as they moved away from family. At the same time, he says, it was an attempt to reproduce the 'little band scene' in Melbourne of late 70s. One of the best moments in the film is Primitive Calculators performing 'Pumping Ugly Muscle.' In the foreground, however, Sam (Hutchence) can be seen taking drugs and this attracted an R rating from the Censorship Board which led to the commercial failure of the film. Lowenstein insists the film's presentation of drugs was a warning to 'the youth of today, in the hope that they may listen and learn from the message we have to tell and not make the same mistakes' (182). Paternalism aside, he is right that the film presents a more realistic portrayal of drugs than any 'Just Say No!' campaign. Either way, there is no doubting Lowenstein's defence of young people in general.

The tone of the book is unapologetically Aussie. Lowenstein frequently shows contempt for the Pommies and Yanks. After a trip to London he notes that 'It's good to see the Pommies don't know anything more about the actual processes of filmmaking than we do' (65). He has a cheap go at the standard of food in England (some targets are too easy) and berates the Yanks whose journalists are 'belligerent' (106). Worst of all, he can't stand one Pommie because he talks like a Yank. But Lowenstein's sense of place isn't just national; what shines through is his proud Melburnian tribalism, which he carries almost to the point of sectarianism. We have familiar anti-Sydney rhetoric, including a snide reference to Sydney film production. According to ads for the various book launches, if you want this book signed you need to know that Lowenstein is available only in Melbourne.

Yet this archive also allows the reader to see the process of filmmaking from a more universal point of view. It is an excellent collection for those who want to understand the perils and joys of making a film, with some local particularities thrown in. We learn about the role of the dreaded 'completion guarantors' (194) who, as the name implies, guarantee completion of the film. There are many other aspects of the industry that the outsider discovers for the first time. In short, this book should be stored by every library serious about boosting its collection on film and should be studied by all film scholars. It is also a testament to the film, which can currently be streamed on SBS TV. Existing fans of the film will delight in the ephemera. For those approaching it for the first time, I advise reading the book first and then watching the film. Of course, this year it was possible to view *Dogs in Space* and *Mystify* on the big-screen as a double feature, but only in Melbourne.