



by Robyn Gillam

AUSTRALIAN CULTURAL THEORY: CRITIQUES & POSSIBILITIES*

When I left Australia fifteen years ago, the discipline of cultural studies did not exist.

Now, as a practice based on the study of mass or popular culture from the neo-Marxist perspective, cultural studies is one of the fastest growing and prestigious areas of academe. Australian contributions to cultural studies have played a surprisingly large role in this process. I found out more about this in 1991, during a brief visit to Melbourne and Sydney. I spoke to some of the most active practitioners of Australian cultural studies, including Jenny Lee, Editor of *Meanjin*, McKenzie Wark of Macquarie University, Stephen Muecke of the University of Technology Sydney, and Helen Grace of the University of Western Sydney.

ARTICLES

Over the past ten years, Australian Cultural Theory has developed as a recognizable field of discourse. It has produced such important writers as the cultural theorist Meaghan Morris,

the philosopher Elizabeth Grosz, and historians like Ian Hunter and Tony Bennett. It has explored a variety of themes and has debated them. In the beginning, few of these debates were actually carried on in an academic setting.

Australian has a small population of sixteen million people. 160,000 of these are of aboriginal descent and the rest are made up of settlers from Europe (in the past, principally Britain) and, in increasing numbers, Asia and the Pacific. Formerly, the Australian economy was dependent on the export of raw materials such as agricultural products and minerals, but, as elsewhere, restructuring of markets for these commodities has put pressure on Australia's high standard of living.

Australian political consensus fractured in the wake of a small but vociferous anti-war movement in the late sixties. The rise of feminism shortly thereafter, along with Gay Liberation, challenged the patriarchal and homophobic character of the Australian social fabric. The early seventies also saw the rise of the Aboriginal Land

Rights Movement, which, whatever its success as a strategy for self-government, irrevocably shifted the moral centre of gravity away from white, Anglo-Saxon culture. Australians of British descent have also been forced to acknowledge the presence of large numbers of other European and Asian communities, especially in the cities, where nine out of ten people live.

Although the Federal Labour Party led by E. Gough Whitlam, elected to Government after 23 years in opposition, was only in power for three years, its progressive social programmes outlived it. As Meaghan Morris has pointed out in *Pirate's Fiancée*, Labour's social programmes helped make possible the occupation of positions of real social and political power by the left and also had an empowering effect on independent activist or community groups.

Against this background, Australian cultural theory began to emerge in the late seventies. Its main participants originated in feminist and gay activism. Although people like Paul Foss (later co-editor of *Art & Text*) and

Meaghan Morris worked in activist community groups, they were also exposed to Marxist and neo-Marxist theory being studied in the universities. Morris left to study French literature in Paris in the late seventies, and others including Stephen Muecke and Elizabeth Grosz followed her into French academe. The impact of this exposure can be seen in the later numbers of *Working Papers*, a Sydney publication replacing *Gay Liberation Press*, founded by a collective which included Paul Foss, and later Meaghan Morris. *Working Papers* and other such publications often included translations of writings of prominent French thinkers, as well as interviews with them. Some of these translations of figures such as Baudrillard, Barthes, Deleuze, Guattari, and Lyotard, predated by years those in other parts of the English speaking world.

At this point the intellectual complexity of writers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan began to prove more attractive. Initially, the contributors to *Working Papers* were more interested in the practical appli-

cation of French theory: Lacan's re-writing of Freud and Foucault's "histories" of institutions were of interest to the anti-psychiatry movement, for example. However, in the conservative political climate of the late seventies, more and more people, disillusioned with political activism, turned to the study of pure theory.

By the beginning of the eighties, interest in French theoretical writing, under the general rubric of "semiotics," had become so widespread on the left and in the arts community in Australia that a backlash began to occur against it, not so much in conservative journalistic and academic circles, as amongst members of the more traditional activist left. Xenophobic nationalism and even old English Francophobia began to surface. Anxiety that wholesale appropriation of French thought had somehow "diluted" Australian cultural identity raised the awkward question of what that cultural identity actually was in the first place. A conference entitled "Foreign Bodies" was convened in Sydney in 1982 to address these issues. Almost all

of the conference's participants seemed disillusioned with the very idea of political mobilization. The adoption of this foreign body of theory showed how problematic the very notion of a speaking position was. It suggested cultural models other than British or American and made irrelevant a quasi-Maoist strain of nationalism that had flourished in the seventies. Most importantly, the participants in "Foreign Bodies" demonstrated that theory could still be useful, but in a contingent, highly specific way.

Art & Text was founded by Paul Taylor in 1981 specifically to foster an interdisciplinary approach to art and its critical practices. Taylor also hoped to elevate what he regarded as the abysmal standard of art criticism in Australia. *Art & Text* built on the theoretical foundations of *Working Papers*, locating itself in a left cultural tradition, in spite of its editor's more conservative politics. As Taylor editorialized in the second issue of the magazine:

ART & TEXT

new Australian art magazine



It becomes increasingly apparent that the exhibition gallery, art school and art magazines are not neutral or transparent spaces for the presentation and promotion of art. They themselves are culturally determined objects whose cultivation is one of the tasks of today's 'advanced' art.

When Art & Text first began publication Popism was thriving on the Australian art scene. Popism reworked the concerns and themes of sixties Pop art. French psychoanalytic and cultural theory was used to interpret Popism and, by extension, the mass cultural material on which it was based. In this way, the writers who contributed to Art & Text, many of whom were also connected with Working Papers, were drawn into the realm of cultural theory. Important articles, such as Meaghan Morris' essay on *Crocodile Dundee* as well as pieces by Eric Michaels on Aboriginal-made television programmes and Stephen Muecke on nomadology, all appeared in the magazine in the mid-eighties. Art & Text

had now achieved world-wide recognition. But at this point in the history of the magazine, and of Australian cultural studies as a whole, a moment of symbolic rupture occurred.

Around 1983 there appeared a parody of Art & Text entitled *Art and a Texta*. *Texta Colour* was the brand name of a felt-tipped pen of Japanese manufacture which was sold in Australia in the early sixties. Its name, in popular speech, referred to all felt pens, which, in Australia, as elsewhere, are the preferred medium of expression for graffiti artists. Although the name *Art and a Texta* suggests an oppositional, anarchic stance, it was basically intended as a joke. However, Paul Taylor did not see

it this way. He was able to prevent its circulation and took its creators to court on the grounds that Art & Text was his commodity and he did not want anyone else exploiting his trade name or writers.

The shock expressed by the artistic and intellectual community at Taylor's course of action marks the self-conscious entry of Australian art and life into the postmodern age. The politically conservative, middle-class Taylor with his connections to the gay community and international art world had apparently squashed a collective led by a working-class, ex-footballer (who had kicked the winning goal in a Victorian grand final game) with a left-wing populist slant. It was a struggle that pitted exchange value against use value and life against culture. Dubious though these oppositions were, they were to furnish an important theme in the institutionalized version of Australian cultural studies, created under the aegis of the British academic, John Fiske.

John Fiske arrived in Western Australia in 1983. By the time he left at the end of the decade, an entire academic discipline, heavily funded by the government, had been created in his image (or at least the image of the school of thought that he represented). The institutional and popular success of British cultural studies in Australia can be explained by a confluence of social, political, and economic factors.

It was also in 1983 that the Federal Labour Party under Robert

(Bob) Hawke, the former president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions, regained power. While skillfully making use of a populist, leftist rhetoric, the Hawke government embarked on a monetarist, neo-conservative restructuring of the economy. Many changes resulted, most notably the drying up of funds for arts and community groups. The resulting disappearance of the small magazines that had supported freelance writing meant that many cultural theorists of the early eighties had to drop out of local cultural practice entirely or, if they were lucky, find positions in universities. This process was exacerbated by a restructuring of higher education as recommended by two government reports in 1988, known collectively as the Dawkins Report, after the then-Federal minister of Education.

The Whitlam government had attempted to open up education to a greater proportion of the population by abolishing university fees. This had long been a cause for irritation on the

right, so too had the proliferation of regional universities and CAEs (Colleges of Advanced Education) which led to calls for streamlining, cost effectiveness, and installation of the user-pays principle. The Dawkins report called for the implementation of these objectives as well as institutional and financial centralization. Small institutions were amalgamated into larger, more "efficient" units, with CAEs being absorbed completely by universities. This had many serious consequences, not the least of which were high enrollments as a guarantee of funding and lessened control of research funds by universities and their departments. However, the students of CAEs did obtain easier access to academic resources such as libraries and laboratories.

The homogenization of the student body of universities and colleges and the emphasis on enrollment numbers put pressure on university departments to offer courses with a wide general appeal. Cultural studies conformed to this requirement perfectly, and its expansion in Departments of English and Communication across Australia took place at the expense of more traditional subjects. Thus the growth of cultural studies as an academic discipline in Australia can be explained both by a supply and

demand approach to higher education, as well as an Australian nationalist populism often, but not always, of leftist character.

The popularity of cultural studies had, however, other sources. Throughout the mid to late eighties, before the Dawkins Report, it had been generously funded in anticipation of the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988. Government policies on multiculturalism and national identity converged to create images of a diverse society, united by an irreverent popular wisdom and a series of routine but apparently random everyday practices. An early forerunner of this imagery is to be found in the State of Victoria's Life Be In It campaign which had similar aims to the Canadian Participaction initiative. Beginning in the late seventies, the campaign consisted of advertisements in the form of cartoons which featured Norm, a sort of couch potato, as Everyman. Public service or "humanity" ads later aired on Australian commercial television exalting the work and

leisure activities of similarly symbolic Australians. The climax of this genre is surely the Living Together campaign, designed to whip up patriotic fervour for the Bicentennial. Best known to the outside world through postage stamps, Living Together celebrated every conceivable aspect of Australian life. As well as essential public services and commercial activities, other aspects of social life such as diving, surfing, children (two boys eating meat pies), and ten pin bowling were lovingly documented, often in a humorous way. Women were seldom shown, except in traditional female roles, and Aborigines and multicultural groups were almost invisible in this celebration of everyday life.

If the content and approach of such media bear an uncanny resemblance to the later versions of British Cultural Theory, it is perhaps not entirely a coincidence. Although Australian nationalist populism, which dates back to the early 1900s, provided the form and content of this discourse, British cultural studies gave it intellectual legitimation and played up the opposition between high and low culture that had crystallized around the *Art and a Texta* affair.

This strategy mirrors a practice used by cultural theorists of the metro-

politan centres. Meaghan Morris has described how some British and North American writers discredit opposition to their theories by marginalizing their critics within the discipline of Cultural Theory. Such critics are often related intellectually to the Frankfurt School or feminism, and their basic sin is a refusal to join in the unqualified celebration of everyday life as it is mirrored in mass cultural products. This strategy seems to be a response to a situation where any effective political opposition to global capitalism has completely evaporated. More unfortunately, this tactic, particularly popular in British cultural studies, also has helped validate the misogynist, homophobic, and racist tendencies of Australian society at a time when they finally seemed to be losing their credibility. These aspects of

Australian society found their apotheosis, not only in the official celebrations of the Bicentenary, but in a book which was the collective work of John Fiske, Graeme Turner, and Bob Hodge,

Myths of Oz.

Myths of Oz, a local bestseller, drew mixed reviews, the most negative of which came from academia. Many of these were knee-jerk condemnations of "popularization." However, as Graeme Turner later admitted, the book's main failing was that it applied theories formulated to explain British conditions to Australia, which presented a far different social and cultural landscape. It was difficult to contest such formulations since the little magazines, accessible to any intellectually curious reader, which had been the original forum of debate in cultural studies, were no longer perceived as a legitimate arena for the exchange of ideas. Academic journals from the metropolitan centres or their colonial outposts had supplanted them as vehicles of reliable information and authoritative utterance. These academic publications, such as *The Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, are so expensive that they are beyond the means of the kind of freelance writers who founded cultural studies in the late seventies. Thus, such people, unable to secure positions in universities, are cut off from the latest developments and their intellectual credibility is diminished.

The bureaucratization of Australian universities was hastened



by the implementation of the Dawkins report, which introduced an invidious

distinction between research and arship. An obsession with the profitable applications of research and development has discouraged academics from participating in public debates, and the drying up of freelance work has conspired to make the Australian public intellectual almost as rare as her North American counterpart. Meaghan Morris and John Docker are among the few survivors.

The institutionalization of formerly independent thinkers in the cultural studies field has led to the formation of professional organizations and newsletters as well as the organization of conferences, such as the Australian cultural studies conference, held at the University of West Sydney in December, 1990. Such gatherings and organizations are not perfect, however. Although Aboriginal and feminist concerns have been addressed to some extent, multicultural representation is practically non-existent.

A notable innovation of Australian cultural studies is the sub-discipline dedicated to the formulation of, and intervention in, public policy. It is centered in Brisbane at the Queensland University of Technology and Griffith University and includes Tony Bennett and Ian Hunter. Ian Hunter suggests that British cultural



studies suffers from a lack of consideration of public policy, as generated by government institutions, in its definition of culture. He has made an innovative study of British government interventions in culture in the nineteenth century. Hunter, Bennett, and their colleagues believe that cultural studies should adopt a reformist stance, to train its students to be citizens rather than consumers, and, above all, to intervene to apply the methods and conclusions of cultural studies to the arena of governmental policy towards the mass media. To date, however, no one, with the troubling exception of John Docker, has heeded their calls for Australian cultural theorists to intervene in the public arena.

John Docker, like Meaghan Morris, has operated as a freelance writer throughout his career, although his recent choice of patrons is in stark contrast to that of Morris. In the past decade, Docker's political orientation has completely reversed itself. Born into a Communist family, he began the sev-

enties in the New Left. By the mid-eighties he had moved from Maoist-inspired nationalism to celebrating the consumer society under the banner of cultural theory.

In 1988 Docker helped write a submission for the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations which was presented to the Australian Broadcasting Tribunal's enquiry into Australian content. The report argued for the abolition of all Australian broadcasting content regulations, suggesting that government regulations privileged elite culture against the popular. Docker made extensive use of the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, the great Russian critic, especially his writings on the European carnival. He projected Bakhtin's ideas about carnival as an authentic cultural expression of the lower classes onto entertainment television, especially quiz shows, newscasts, and soap operas. Because they are dependent on selling audiences to advertising, Docker argued, commercial radio and television are a genuine populist forum. As such, they have been responsible for the revival of this suppressed, carnivalesque popular culture. He further maintained that the privileging of serious drama in content regulations is the result of self-interested lobbying by theatrical craft unions. In other words, content regulations had

been formed in response to pressure groups representing bourgeois culture.

The scholars at Griffith University replied to Docker, showing that his argument was a tissue of half truths and obfuscations. It misrepresented the intentions of commercial broadcasters, and offered misleading interpretations of the history of Australian broadcasting and the development of modern western culture. Docker's submission was not even taken seriously by the Broadcasting Tribunal. However, his polemic should send a shiver down the spine of any cultural theorist who reads it. The authorities he cites include Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Foucault, Tania Modelski, Andrew Ross, and Raymond Williams. Although the contemporary theorists cited would not likely agree with Docker's conclusions, his views are a perfectly plausible extrapolation of their theories and in an important sense, as Graeme Turner puts it, they are "directly licensed" by them.

How could a left, ostensibly neo-Marxist form of cultural critique come to be used as an apologia for the consumer-based free market? Stuart Cunningham of Griffith University has suggested that the resolutely optimistic stance of British-inspired cultural studies has led it to ignore any connection between the exercise of political power and media control.

Concerns about the wider politics of cultural production have been voiced in the public and academic sphere, most notably in Canada and through the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), an initiative of UNESCO, originating with Third World nations concerned about their cultural autonomy. The criticisms voiced through NWICO, and the report of the MacBride Commission, have been dismissed in North American academic circles for their lack of intellectual sophistication. This especially applies to anxieties about the loss of cultural self-determination. Cultural self-determination is, of course, dreadfully passé.

However, some academics working in Communication Studies, a field somewhat more attuned to everyday political and social realities than cultural studies, have taken NWICO and the MacBride Report more seriously. Both Colleen Roach and Herbert Schiller have noted that North American critiques of these documents serve

political and economic rather than philosophical ends. The validity of NWICO's arguments was not accepted because it was a Third World initiative and was seen to pose a direct threat to the markets for U.S. cultural products (now that country's second biggest earner of foreign exchange after arms). Furthermore, suggests Roach, the theories of John Fiske and others like him reflect or even celebrate their authors' political context. Arising in a world where any credible vernacular practice of leftist politics has been erased, Fiske's later writings, such as *Reading/Understanding Popular Culture* and so on, seek to undermine not only the notion of cultural imperialism but of ideology itself. Conceptual tools such as ideology and class structure are dismissed as the product of Marxist delusion. Indeed, Fiske has repudiated his earlier writings, such as *Reading Television*, which utilized such conceptual frameworks, as being outmoded, although to an unbiased ("uninformed") reader, they display a more

cautious and critical use of sources and the empirical method so beloved of this writer. Fiske's celebratory vindication of mass culture, which dovetails perfectly with the needs of the postmodern power structures, can be placed in the same context as American Francis Fukuyama's thesis in *The End of History and the Last Man*. Fukuyama argues that history in the sense of events generated by competition between systems with differing ideologies and economic systems is over, with liberal democracy and the free market reigning supreme. For Fukuyama, as well as most supply-side economists and neo-conservative politicians, the fraudulent nature of Marxist and all other leftist political thought as a blueprint for social and economic activity is supposedly demonstrated by the repudiation of Communism in eastern Europe and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Such momentous events can be events are linked, with the benefit of hindsight, to the rise of neo-conservative governments around the world, both in the developed and developing world. The thought that the collapse of the Eastern Bloc has structural, economic causes, or that dissent in this area was both fed and directed by transborder flows of cultural information or propaganda from the west, is too trivial and sordid to impinge into such a pure theoretical

realm. Likewise, the suspicion that governments in the west are elected by small, marginal groups of swinging voters (the "undecided/confused" persons of former Canadian pollster Allan Gregg), who are particularly vulnerable to the corporate media barrage, is disagreeable to entertain in our new, free-market Jerusalem.

Critiques of cultural studies such as those of Roach and Schiller deserve a good deal of attention, although I doubt that they will get it. Even within U.S. academe, such challenges, coming from outside the narrow field of cultural studies, can easily be dismissed as theoretically uninformed and unsophisticated. The "theory" in cultural theory, which has been its ticket to academic professionalization and credibility, is

also its protection against wider intellectual scrutiny and social responsibility. If the grey eminences of this field have nothing to fear from their fellow Americans, how much less they need heed the voices of those on the colonial periphery, in places like Australia and Canada! As McKenzie Wark of Macquarie University has noted, someone working and writing on this periphery cannot make the slightest difference to the Fiskes of this world, not because of intellectual inferiority, but because of the (hidden) realities of economic and cultural geopolitics.

Although Australia is a small country with a highly concentrated intellectual culture, strategies tried there for dealing with trans-border flows of cultural information, are, in this time of global communication networks, worth considering in Canada and Europe. The Australian model of informed intervention in government and private sector media policy is one worth considering for any western country. For example, those

Canadian academics and intellectuals who bewail the lack of independent and informed debate on cultural matters in their country may find a more tangible explanation in the effect of the imposition of the Goods and Services Tax on printed matter and the disappearance of special mailing rates for books and magazines than in the writings of Fredric Jameson or Andrew Ross. Legislation affecting cultural practices is the result of activity by actual bureaucrats and politicians who are situated at a specific location. They may be interpellated by such mundane means as letters, petitions, committees, lobby groups, or even the telephone. Although the sphere of governmental control of culture, as of other activities, has shrunk in the last decade, it provides the

essential regulatory framework in which the corporate sector operates and is far more accessible to the public. Last, but not least, as the Australian experience clearly shows, possession of a graduate degree or tenured position is not a necessary prerequisite for embarking on the study of contemporary culture. Anyone interested in cultural practice, as well as theory, is ill-advised to lose track of vernacular realities.

* This article is based on a paper which was read at the annual conference of the Popular Culture Association, Louisville, Kentucky, March 19th, 1992.

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