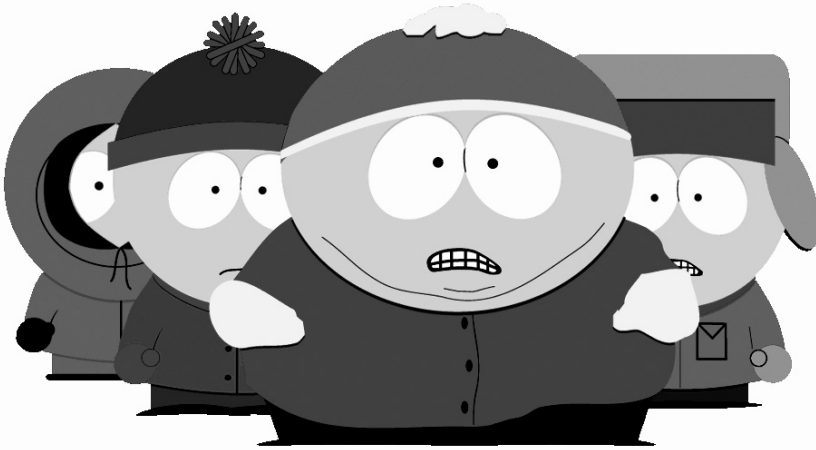


# The Culture Wars, Yes ... But Whose Culture?

Andrew McIntyre



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As a son of the privileged Jamaican plantocracy, Michael Manley, Prime Minister of that country for eight years until 1980 and at the time charismatic head of the non-aligned nations, was wont to listen to Beethoven string quartets and cultivate roses, while his anti-American rhetoric intensified and he dragged his increasingly socialist and economically struggling nation towards neighbouring Cuba.

The chardonnay socialists, *la gauche caviar*—as the French call them—the vanguard, nomenclatura, literati, culturati, doctors wives—whatever—distinguish themselves by their education, life-style, refined taste ... and their politics. Although these qualities can, apart from the politics, fit conservatives, it is nevertheless a truism that Left elites—elites in the worst sense of the term—see themselves as a sort of new aristocracy, with a belief that their knowledge, refinement and taste give them a *self-evident right* to impose their

ideas on others and treat the rest of us, especially the Howard-voting aspirationalists, with barely concealed contempt and paternalism. That the ‘Arts’ is the pivotal battleground in the culture wars was made clear by Ross Fitzgerald in *The Australian* recently: ‘Mention the arts and Howard will run a mile: the words “arts” and “culture” will never cross Howard’s lips with passion. Mention the arts and most Laborites will revert to dreamy Whitlamesque visions of government patronage for the enrichment of Australia’s “identity”.’

There is a self-evident informal alliance between the arts industry—artists, writers, actors, comedians, directors, producers and other beneficiaries of taxpayer largesse, whether through the Australia Council, the ABC or other state-sanctioned and subsidized creative outlets—and their attitudes towards the Howard Government and any of its policies. This alliance goes back a long way and became clear under the generous patronage of Whitlam, and later

Keating with his personal largesse in ‘The Keatings’ grants. The cultural elite has no illusion on which side its bread is buttered, as the most recent and high profile example of ‘State Art’ demonstrated in full force with the recent Melbourne Theatre Company’s production of Hannie Rayson’s *Two Brothers*. While proclaiming moral ambiguity, this play is a shallow and superficial attack on border protection and the boat refugees; all conservatives are pictured as tainted, corrupt and venal, and all those who oppose the government’s policy on refugees and boat people are portrayed as saints. Criticized even by several Left commentators, the play had the predictable moral complexity of Snow White and the Wicked Witch.

This propensity to political bias extends to all things cultural, but of particular importance is the fault-line between so called ‘high’ Arts and popular, mass entertainment. Australian film is in crisis, and this is due in large part to a refusal to create films that the film-going public are interested in. Politically correct films, viewed as ‘challenging’ or ‘important’, receive uncritical rave reviews from our avuncular ‘Pomastraton’ on the ABC, while the films bomb at the box office. Australian films last year generated less than 1.3 per cent of a national box of \$907 million, a record low proportion. One film-goer was reported in the media as saying ‘Oh that film; you wouldn’t want to see that—I’m pretty sure it’s Australian’. So an industry that is supported so vociferously by our leading international actors and actresses as ‘an important voice for Australian identity’ somehow manages to supply a voice which Australians themselves do not identify with. ▶

The Australian Film Commission, responsible for audience development policies, perversely appears to play down the significance of the box office as a measure of industry success and ignores this huge irony.

In literature, the same tensions can be seen. The media reported two small brawls earlier this year in the book world, demonstrating how divorced book-chat culture can be from the world where people go into shops and pay money for books. There were even allegations that the ‘jackals of commerce’ were not paying the literary lions sufficient respect. Surely an Australian Charles Dickens or Jane Austin would be writing for *Neighbours* and *Home and Away*, or already be a David Williamson, who is popular and does manage to capture the public’s imagination and does have his plays become box office hits. But success has always been resented, not just because, in Williamson’s case—for example, *Dead White Males*—he steps out of the political orthodoxy, but because he appeals to the public and is entertaining. Bryce Courtney and Colleen McCullough are similarly resented.

Our subsidized writers, the unpopular ones, can only think of how crass the public is in not buying what some might say are post-modernist, narcissistic outpourings, and rail against commercialism and free markets. It could be, perhaps, that subsidies are a part of the problem. An Australia Council report in 2003, *Don’t give up your day job*, found that the number of professional writers had *tripled* in 20 years and that one in four earned below the poverty line. The average income was \$35,000 a year, but less than \$5,000 came from writing. Doesn’t this suggest that they should change careers or get a serious job, like everyone else? They are encouraged to stay as impoverished writers even without a guarantee of success. Delia Falconer, with just one well-selling book, has had three literature Board grants of \$15,000, \$25,000 and \$25,000, an \$18,000 Barten Bequest Traveling Scholarship, two stints at the Blue Mountains writers’ retreat

Varuna, a six-week residency at the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in Ireland worth \$8,000 and a stay at Bundanon, Arthur Boyd’s former home. She has the NSW Writer’s Fellowship to research her next novel and finish a collection of stories.

This elitist belief in an inalienable ‘right’ to be a subsidized artist is present in the even more remote and esoteric domain of ‘classical’ or ‘serious’ music. A personal communication to this writer from a well-known contemporary

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Australian composer—the sinecured academic type—insisted that he had the right to have his works commissioned and played to subscriber audiences for ABC Symphony Concert series. Never mind that people hated them. He said, ‘They should be educated. It is good for them’. This arrogance is reminiscent of Stalin who gave factory workers in totalitarian Russia free tickets to attend symphony music concerts.

### POPULAR COMPETITION

The problem confronting these elitists across all artistic styles and manifestations is cultural competition and proliferation. Nick Gillespie, in a piece for *Reasononline* titled ‘All Culture, All the Time’, puts it this way: ‘It’s easier than ever to make and buy culture. No wonder some people are so upset.’ Indeed. Just think of the transformations in Australia over the last two decades. There has been an enormous and sustained

increase in the production and availability of music, literature, art, film, video and other forms of creative expression. In classical music alone, in Melbourne, and this applies to all Australian capital cities, it was once only the ABC’s Melbourne Symphony Orchestra that gave concerts of any substance and it was only the ABC which brought overseas artists to perform. In the 1960s, *Musica Viva* was a new and exciting innovation for overseas touring chamber groups. Nowadays, and in spite of the recent much-criticized threat of cutbacks for some of the regional ABC Orchestras, there has been an unprecedented profusion of concerts, whether chamber, orchestral or solo, ranging from amateur and semi-professional groups and choral societies, to visiting orchestras, ensembles and international festivals. There has never been as much classical music, theatre, musicals, installation art, comedy festivals, dance performance, in Australia, ever. And we haven’t even mentioned the unprecedented number of highly skilled graduates from music, drama, art, and dance schools and universities throughout the land adding to the supply side.

The same goes for books. In Australia, there are more retail outlets than ever before: Readings, the Borders chain, second-hand and remainders book shops. But even more significant in this supply and availability is the Internet and providers such as amazon.com. More than half of Amazon’s book sales come from outside its own top-selling 130,000 titles. In other words, the market for books that don’t ever get to appear in even the biggest Australian stores *is far larger than the whole market for those that are in those retail outlets.*

In spite of one of Australia’s biggest and oldest book chains, Collins Booksellers, going to the wall—book sales have never been higher or more diverse. As for special interest magazines, any suburban news agency routinely stocks over 800 separate titles.

Ironically, The Australia Institute has just released a study on wasteful consumption. It revealed that

our homes are stuffed with books that no-one reads and CDs that no-one listens to. As for CDs, Garry Barker, the Technology Editor for *The Age* newspaper, explains that much of the music he listens to now comes directly through the Internet: programmes from a jazz station in France, a country music station in Nebraska, the BBC and classic FM in London. He has a wireless network so that his PC can be in any room of the house. He no longer even uses a CD player. A network sends music stored on the computer to small slave radio receivers linked to the stereo system.

There is now a proliferation of digital streaming in music. Detra, Australia's biggest supplier of online music has more than 500,000 songs. Apple's online iTunes music stores will be arriving in Australia shortly—something which will, it is claimed, revolutionize the way we buy, listen to and share music. Monash University research director of the Australian Centre for Retail Studies, Michael Morrison, says, 'It's going to force retailers to look at their shopping experience'.

Then there is the explosion in access to both free-to-air and cable television. Not only are we watching more TV—available non-stop 24 hours a day (remember ABC test patterns?)—we have cable television and a profusion of video rental shops. In our suburbs, not only can anyone rent a video of the latest Hollywood releases, but also films from Yugoslavia, Vietnam, China, Sri Lanka ... in any style or category. If you want the 1959 *Black Orpheus* by French director Marcel Camus, or Fellini's *Roma*, or Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, it's yours for the taking.

And that's just video stores. In an intriguing analysis by Chris Anderson in *Wired Magazine*, 'The Long Tail' explores specifically just how the new digital revolution is really revolutionizing culture by capitalizing on the millions of niche markets that otherwise would not be accessible. For traditional cultural outlets, such as bookshops, video stores and cinemas, there has to be suf-

ficient turnover to make the stocking of a book or screening of a film profitable. If the variety of films is already mind-boggling, Anderson shows that the Amazon principle is working for documentaries, foreign films, animé, independent movies, British television dramas and old American TV sitcoms.

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Video stores will become old-fashioned and obsolete. In America already, these seemingly underserved markets make up a big chunk of the digital Internet-accessible rental service Netflix. Bollywood alone accounts for nearly 100,000 rentals each month. Even though there are 1.7 million Indians in the United States, these people are so spread out geographically that it is not viable to show the films in cinemas. Almost no Bollywood films ever get shown on the big screen. The same is true for documentaries. Netflix offers more than one thousand of these.

As Anderson says, digital Internet delivery has made a good business out of what is unprofitable fare in movie theatres and video rental shops because it can aggregate dispersed audiences. In a world of what appeared to be scarcity—dependent on what was popular to the lowest common denominator—this is now being transformed by the Internet and digital storage and powerful search engines into a world of almost unlimited abundance.

Don't even think about DIY videos, digital cameras, Websites, and cam girls.

In this context of proliferation, diversity and specialization of tastes, it is barely comprehensible that Rosemary Neill, in an article in *The Australian*, seriously reiterates the question that floats perennially around the Australian Arts Establishment. 'Is the financial enrichment of the country leading, paradoxically, to an impoverishment of the culture?' Surely she is only talking about government subsidies? Or worse, from Jill Berry, general manager of the Bell Shakespeare Company, 'The dark ages for the Arts is here, absolutely ... the dumbing down of Australia is rampant'. She feels that Australia is stuck at a level of 'naiveté and immaturity' which means that it 'looks abroad for leadership on issues such as the Iraq war'. Not surprisingly, with rhetoric like that, Bell has had no principal sponsor for five years. And coincidentally, the company is enduring a 'box office backlash'.

Oh, for the good old era of Gough Whitlam. ALP apparatchik Phillip Adams muses, 'Once there was a golden era which depended on having the ear of prime ministers and premiers ... but that's nostalgia'. Truth is, it was a golden era neither for the consumer nor for the taxpayer.

### THE VULGARITY OF IT ALL

So, not only have we a huge range of cultural activity to choose from, which undermines the exclusivity of the 'elitist' and politically correct subsidized Arts, we have seen a harping and defensive pattern from these same political elites condemning popular culture. As far back as early last century, the Marxist sociologist and musicologist, Theodore Adorno, in his contempt for vulgar capitalism, but more particularly in an attack on music enjoyed by the vast majority of people, made contemptuous and patronizing claims that 'in popular music, complications have no consequence' and that it was 'rhythmically obedient music ... expressing their desire to obey ... [with] unabating jazz beats ... [and] a renunciation of one's own human feelings'. Apart from appearing to wipe off almost all ▶

of world music which, in the main, is or was used for dancing in one form or another, it is a nonsense analysis. This telling dichotomy is further revealed by Benjamin R Barber in *Jihad vs McWorld: How Globalism and Tribalism are Reshaping the World*. He is an anti-capitalist champion of what might be called contemplative art. As he puts it, 'not an art of commerce; it is an art of patronage, or enlightened taste'. Further he claims that 'By immersing themselves

**This is a bottom-up revolution, not top-down.**

in such made-for-profit vulgarity people undermine any hope they might have of achieving a just, civil society'. Typically, he sees consumer choice as a 'charming fraud'.

This is the core of the argument. And it is the same argument used by our elites that somehow the Australian electorate was defrauded by Howard's policies. In a recent article published in *Reasononline* by Charles Paul Freund, 'In Praise of Vulgarity: How commercial culture liberates Islam – and the West', a strong message is drawn from the unbridled desire that people have for that which pleases them and how this reflects a fundamental democratic impulse for freedom. Simple symbolic acts can be seen as acts of freedom. Just as the French smoked Lucky Strikes upon liberation at the end of the Second World War, so did Afghans shave their beards; it was the smoothness itself that symbolized freedom from the Taliban. As Freund explains, 'simple things, where a local singer Zahir sang "It's now or never", was not only from popular American culture, it was one of the few things that the country's many ethnic groups had in common. Video stores offered *Gladiator*, *Police Story*, and *Independence Day*. In short, the first breath of cultural freedom that

Afghans had enjoyed since 1995 was suffused with the stuff of commercially generated popular culture'.

In the Soviet Union, during a critical time of oppression under Stalin, young people developed the *stulyagi*, who copied the vulgar decorated broad ties, shirts and suits they had seen in American films and smoked cigarettes in packets disguised as American. When Russian athletes returned from the Melbourne Olympics in 1956, they brought back rock music, and the authorities tried everything to combat this new rock subculture. They banned it, belittled it, and co-opted it with state-approved rock bands. Nothing worked, nor could it, because it was used by individuals for their own expressive purposes. Even in the '70s one of the easiest things to sell in the USSR as a tourist were the jeans one was wearing in the street. As Freund puts it, unlike the Soviets, 'The citizens of the post-subsistence world have a historically remarkable luxury: They can experiment with who they are.... That's what meaning is'.

So let's forget the admonition that our culture is 'dumbing down'. In addition to the proliferation described above, let us rejoice in *Neighbours*, *Kath and Kim*, *The Simpsons* and *South Park*; anything that the subsidized cultural commissars tell us is 'naïve' or 'immature'. *South Park* is far more than the strident voices and unpolished animation that its surface appears to show. In a new book by Brian C. Anderson, *South Park Conservatives*, we are reminded, as is the case in Australia, that American cultural life and the arts has suffered from a smug Left, politically correct, piety-restricting debate. Whether it is feminism, affirmative action, or even paedophilia, any opposition to the orthodoxy was considered 'a form of bigotry and extremism'. Universities here in Australia have been stifled by speech codes, and spelled out the rules of enlightened conduct. This has certainly seeped into our state-subsidized film and book cultures, even to our State Galleries and Museums. What *South*

*Park* does with savage satire is explode these constraints and add a vital dimension to public discussion of issues. There is a perversely reassuring ring to the busy, market-driven, anarchic free-for-all which is our popular culture.

The beauty of it is that no-one can control it. This is a bottom-up revolution, not top-down. It is profoundly democratic because it empowers the individual. Jay Rosen, a visiting Professor of Journalism from NYU claims we are seeing the end of mass media.

The Age of mass media, is just that, it's an age. It doesn't have to last for ever. The classic age of the block buster movies, books, TV shows [will be] a kind of a relic. Now we are in a different world. I think we are going to a great age of decontrol. And all of the Arts, that of control, that were learned both by media and by governments and states aren't going to be useful in the future. It is going to be very hard for closed systems of any kind to survive.

Hollywood moguls, guessing the next box office success will have less say, publishers with big advertising budgets will become less relevant when the digital revolution makes 'best sellers' redundant. The elite 'cultural commissars' will have less control and their grip on government subsidies will weaken. It is this choice, this staggering diversity, where anything and anyone can say and do what they like which is the most reassuring aspect of this revolution. It is truly spontaneous and truly democratic.

Let's bring on *Waltzing Matilda* for our national anthem.

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