Life at the Margin

The centre of gravity of the film world’s energy has shifted to the ‘margins’—to Africa and Asia internationally, and to Blacks and gays. Here Martina Nightingale and, on page 41, Jeremy Eccles survey the Melbourne and Sydney Film Festivals, which showcase the trend.

Just when you thought you had recovered from the delights and strains of last year’s Melbourne International Film Festival, the 1991 film event of the year is almost upon us. Once again, we will be enticed into the cinemas by over 200 films from many different parts of the world and a ticketing system that caters for the casual filmgoer as well as the hardened film buff. At a cost of $210 it is possible to see all of the films offered including the gala opening night at the Concert Hall.

The festival turns 40 this year—a time when conventional wisdom has it that cultural events turn into tired, less adventurous institutions. The festival has certainly become part of Melbourne’s mainstream cultural landscape, attracting ever larger and wider audiences. This year, the organisers have even been relieved of their usual pre-festival financial anxieties by attracting major corporate sponsorship. Larger patronage has meant that audiences will be accommodated in the Village Cinema as well as in the much-loved Astor, the State Film Centre and the Valhalla.

Yet the offerings this year indicate that the festival has not been spoiled by its unrivalled success. Tate Brady, the film festival director for the last four years, has travelled to international festivals and sat through hours of film mediocrity to bring us the most exciting and interesting developments in filmmaking around the world.

Although Brady assures us that each film is chosen for its individual merits, he is confident that the end result is a program which reflects significant trends in independent filmmaking. This year continues the move away from Europe to South-East Asia and North America as the burgeoning centres of film innovation. Also, for the first time, low budget, independent Australian feature films make up a major part of the festival’s program.

Some Anglo-Australians may still be secretly resistant to the reality that many of the best films in recent times have been made in Hong Kong, Thailand, Indonesia, India and Japan. Brady points out that there is no better way to come to grips with the different Asian cultures than through these films which deal with the particular complexities and contradictions of their own societies. Like some of the best Australian and American films, most of the features from the South-East Asian region are not mainstream box office hits. They come from the margins of their own countries and provide critical and unusual perspectives on past and contemporary histories.

According to Brady, among the finest films in this year’s festival is Song of the Exile, one of several Hong Kong made films, which deals with the difficult questions of Chinese identity and reunification with the mainland. This largely autobiographical film, directed by Ann Hui, concerns the difficult and fractured relationship between a young woman who was raised in China and educated in England, and her Japanese-born mother. As the film moves back and forwards over 30 years, it becomes clear that the history of the family is marred by a multi-layered process of exile and alienation. This personal story becomes an elaborate metaphor for the painful separation between the Hong Kong community and mainland China. It tells of the strong desire for reunification, despite the deep problems associated with this process.

Hong Kong is home to one of the most prolific film industries in the world, producing around 150 films a year in a wide variety of genres. Surprising as this may be to some, many of these films are subtitled and screened in Melbourne’s Chinatown. They are already so popular in the Chinese community that no one bothers to advertise the screenings in the English language press. In making his selection, Brady hopes to introduce the incredible range found in Hong Kong films to a broader audience. He points out that even the wonderfully entertaining action and slapstick comedies are deeply concerned with the issues confronting present-day Hong Kong.

Among other highlights from the South-East Asian region are two films from Thailand, by director Prince Chatri. Brady tells us that his royal status had nothing to do with his importance as a filmmaker. In fact, he is considered to be Thailand’s best, and strongly associated with the Thailand social realist movement which goes back to the mid-70s. Both films are fundamentally concerned with corruption. Song of Chipari is a simple melodrama about a husband and wife team of sand traders who bring their goods down the Chipari River to sell in Bangkok. The drama begins when the wife is kidnapped into prostitution and the husband begins a seemingly impossible search for her in the unfamiliar and crowded madness of urban Bangkok.

A very different, and perhaps better film from the same director is The Elephant Keeper. Using a most unusual combination of documentary and thriller genres, the film takes corruption and environmental carnage in the logging of the Thai forests.
For those of us who are used to casting a disdainful eye at anything North American, it is a salutary lesson to see the sheer volume of dissenting and creative power emerging from this country. The feature films and documentaries show independent American filmmakers excelling against often overwhelming odds, to produce critical, insider perspectives on many aspects of American society.

The underside of middle America and the traditional nuclear family is again under satiric scrutiny in Hal Hartley’s new film Trust. His first film, The Unbelievable Truth, was a surprise success at last year’s film festival and enjoyed a season at the Valhalla. Trust is a much more biting look at the petty, routine existence and aspirations of the urban middle classes. The principal character, Maria Couglan, played by Adrienne Shelly, is about to follow along the same predictable life plan as her parents with baby and marriage to the local football hero when her plans are derailed by her boyfriend’s refusal to play ball. The regroupings and reconciliations occur in unexpected ways that reveal Hartley’s fundamental pessimism about the future of the most romanticised of family forms.

Jon Jost is arguably America’s least known and most prolific independent filmmaker. Two Jost films will be screened at the festival. The first, All the Vermeers in New York, is described as an elegant film about the beauty of art, juxtaposed with the post crash, New York scene. In contrast, Sure Fire is a brooding drama, set in a Mormon influenced town in Utah. Jost uses this backdrop to explore the sinister and unspoken aspects of Christian Fundamentalism.

It is through political documentaries that the Americans continue to make their most outstanding contribution. One of the truly frightening films in the documentary category, Blood in the Face, continues the Christian fundamentalist theme, this time exposing the radical Right in all their dubious Christian glory. The film is a collaborative effort on the part of Anne Boyten (With Babies and Banners), Kevin Rafferty (Atomic Cafe) and Village Voice journalist James Ridgeway who has written a book on the same subject. The film follows the weird antics and racist philosophies of such well-known neo-fascist groups as the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations and the Euro-American Alliance. Without exception, all the leaders of the radical right are shown to have direct links with Christian Fundamentalist organisations. In keeping with the new anti-interventionist wisdom of documentary film-making, the film is entirely without commentary. The subjects in this documentary don’t need any assistance to demolish themselves. Indeed, the power of the film lies in the apparent ordinariness of many involved in the radical right and in the violence of their racial hatred.

The ugly consequences of white supremacy exploitation is seen in Stephanie Black’s first expose documentary H-2 Worker. The film investigates the deliberate loophole in American immigration policy which ‘allows’ Jamaicans into Florida to work for starvation level wages in the sugar plantations. Black shows in graphic detail how this H-2 temporary visa virtually holds prisoner 10,000 men in sub-human living quarters and gruelling work in the fields before they are forced to return to Jamaica.

It may appear remarkable that Black was able to gain such seemingly easy access to one of America’s best kept secrets in exposing neo-slavery policies towards black workers. But as the film progresses, it dawns on us that the authorities were duped by their own sexism in not taking seriously this young female student making her first film. Sweet feminist revenge lies in the overwhelming success of
the film which has been widely screened and won prestigious prizes at the New York Film festival.

At last we have a film which exposes how our homophobic mass culture appropriates many of its most saleable images from the gay community. In Paris is Burning Jennie Livingston uncovers the origins of 'voguing' in the gay bars of New York. To most followers of the club scene, 'voguing' is merely the latest dance craze made trendy by Madonna. It combines break dancing, gymnastics, assuming attitudes and striking the poses of fashion magazines. But for Black and Latino gays, voguing is an integral part of achieving identity and creating a community within a hostile society.

Livingston's film includes some wonderful and poignant footage of the gay drag ball extravaganzas where the criterion for winning in competition is who can create the most authentic image in such designated categories as 'Dynasty', 'Military' and 'Executive Realness'. Livingston's film is not primarily about the spectacle. Through immersing herself in this particular gay subculture and interviews with the many members of the community, she is able to explore the many layered complexities of gay men simultaneously imitating and mocking the culture which has so thoroughly rejected them.

As in previous years, there are several other gay and feminist documentaries which should be placed on our compulsory viewing list. One of the few films from the UK is Strip Jack Naked, a semi-autobiographical film about being gay in London from the early 60s to the 90s. Made by Ron Peck, the film combines some wonderful old Super-8 footage with old photographs and archival material to provide a rare insight into gay history.

Two new feminist contributions have come from Canada. The Famine Within examines the debilitating quest for the perfect body while Five Feminist Minutes represents the ultimate in participatory feminist process. It is the end result of an invitation to women from the National Film Board of Canada asking for proposals which provide five minute shots of feminist perspectives on the world. Five Feminist Minutes is an eclectic collage on film tackling such diverse issues as sexual abuse and cross cultural confusion.

The fortieth anniversary of the festival also marks the first time that Australian features have been so well represented on the program. Brady says that this reflects the positive changes in the local industry. He says that while there are fewer films made these days, Australians are producing better, more interesting films which focus on our contemporary culture.

Of particular interest to Melburnites is Leo Berkely's first feature Holidays on the River Yarra. Berkely is better known as one of Melbourne's greatest film buffs. He never misses the festival and is reputed to be one of the few who trudges faithfully along to every film.

It is fitting that he should have his own first creation included on the program and that the film itself is remarkable for the way it captures the dark and moody side of Melbourne.

Brisbane filmmaker Jackie McKimmie's new film Waiting, captures a particular Australian sense of humour and irony. Billied as 'a comedy of errors and expectations', Waiting builds its narrative around the vexed question of surrogacy. An ensemble cast, including the expectant parents converge at an isolated farmhouse in a Nimbin-like area "waiting" to support, witness and film surrogate mother-to-be Clare (Noni Hazlehurst) give birth.

Fans of Elizabeth Jolley will be pleased to know that one of her most amusing short stories has at last been turned into a feature film. The Last Crop, directed by Sydney-born Sue Clayton, fulfills the fantasy of every true lefty, as a house cleaner and aspiring property owner literally takes the system to the cleaners.

Among the many more noteworthy films is The Ear by Karel Kachyna. It is the last of the Czechoslovakian Prague Spring casualties to surface after 20 years on the shelf and captures the terror of political repression under a Stalinist regime.

Of the dozens of films made about the 'German question', Brady has chosen Sybille Schonemann's Locked Up Time as the best encapsulation of the issues confronting the new German nation. Schonemann is an east German filmmaker who was imprisoned and subsequently expelled from her home country in 1984. Locked Up Time is her personal journey back into post-unified Germany to find the elusive 'culprit'. The film festival hopes that Schonemann will be one of this year's special international guests.

If this small sampling of the films on offer is anything to go by, the 1991 International Film Festival will delight, entertain, educate and occasionally infuriate its ever-growing audiences. It is a wonderful opportunity to mix politics with pleasure. The festival starts on 7 June. Don't miss out.

MARTINA NIGHTINGALE, women's officer for the Victorian Trades Hall Council.
Oppressed for Time

Has the collective imagination of the West’s filmmakers failed in the face of the depressing realities of life in the 80s and 90s? This admittedly provocative question arises from the selections made for the 38th Sydney Film Festival by its director Paul Byrnes. It would seem that a very high proportion of those from Europe and America have their roots in the documentary rather than in any sort of fantasy world—which may take the shape of Asian spirits (as in the Okinawan Utagiru or the Indian The Dwelling) or just pure comedy, for which Byrnes has had to go back to the 30s films of Ernst Lubitsch to rediscover.

Let’s take America, a country which Byrnes represents as having more on its mind than the serial killers of The Silence of the Lambs and American Psycho infamy. There’s pricks or cocks in Dick, a celebrated collage of women’s views on the male member; and there’s food galore in Henry Jaglom’s unimaginatively titled feature, Eating—in which he asks women to talk about an alternative way to inner satisfaction, and gets answers like, “I’ve yet to meet a man who excites me as much as a baked potato” (and you thought Agent Cooper’s preference for cherry pie over Audrey in Twin Peaks was a send up!).

Then there’s one woman’s view of black gays in the New York cult film, Paris is Burning—which reveals the wildest of transvestism in Harlem’s disco. And we escape from all this private politics into the public arena only to meet Guilty by Suspicion, which re-examines the House UnAmerican Activities Committee from the 50s with the help of Robert de Niro as a leftist Hollywood director, and Clint Eastwood probing another director, John Huston, in his film about the film African Queen—Black Heart.

Over in Europe, Paul Byrnes went out of his way to try to find the fruits of German reunification as represented by the cinema. He found only documentaries like In the Splendour of Happiness, in which directors from both sides of the old border got together to cast an ironic eye over their recent pasts, and Locked Up Time in which Sibylle Schonemann, a 1985 deportee from the East to the West went back to challenge her accusers.

There’s clearly an economic factor at work. With the collapse of East German industry which resulted from the death of its government, there have been hundreds of sackings at the huge Potsdam Film Studios in Berlin, and no one’s yet emerged to fund new films, or even to sub-title the old, suppressed East German films that impressed Byrnes so much at last year’s Berlin Film Festival. But can one also discern an overwhelming of the im-

Guilty by Suspicion Directed by Irwin Winkler
agitation by sudden freedom all over Eastern Europe? A Polish director has spun a fiction on a Jewish kid surviving the war by pretending to be Aryan (Europa, Europa), and a Hungarian has made a creepy tale from some Dürrenmatt stories (Twilight). But the real appeal from an area that used to throw up classics after classics lies in two long-banned Czech films—The Ear and Funeral Ceremony. Both examine the strength that ordinary people may find under oppression.

Perhaps the oppressed always make the best films. Certainly Paul Byrnes’ four month long world-wide trawl of film festivals seems to have netted an unusually high proportion made by or about gays, women and blacks. Byrnes headlines, for instance, two of a likely 60 feature films—Poison and The Garden, both overtly gay. The former is a remarkable debut feature by American Todd Haynes, based on three Genet stories—which inevitably have a homosexual sub-text. But it’s Haynes’ overt showing of homosexual intercourse which has aroused a debate that’s reached as far as American Cable News Network—erstwhile home of the Gulf War. The problem may be that Poison has escaped from the minority ghettos by winning the Grand Jury Prize at the important Sundance Film Festival, Robert Redford’s repayment to the industry that made him, and where sex, lies and videotape was initially hailed.

The Garden is another offering from the man without whom no film festival would feel complete—Derek Jarman. Described as “a stunning dreamscape about the rage, sadness and pride of a gay film artist in the age of AIDS”, it suggests that Jarman is retreating further and further up the blind alley of his own personal ghetto. But then, perhaps the English filmmaker hasn’t got a Senator Jesse Helms to pressurise him into fighting for funds that, in America, are increasingly being tied to moral censorship. Todd Haynes has—presumably, has Jack Walls, the model and lover of the late gay photographer, Robert Mapplethorpe, who “speaks for himself” in the film Eye to Eye. That, by the way, forms part of a “Pink Panorama” evening of new gay and lesbian movies which is in addition to Poison and The Garden.

Is the bunching together, late at night, of these films itself a form of marginalisation? Paul Byrnes admits to some concern: “but I hope it serves to draw attention to them instead. One woman will be getting the works, though. Hopefully fresh from a triumph at the Cannes Directors’ Fortnight (Cannes is still the arbiter of arbiters) Jocelyn Moorhouse, writer and director of the film Proof will launch the whole festival into motion. This Australian first feature by a young TV script-writer offers a remarkable synopsis which gives a few clues to the likely feel of the film. A man who’s been blind since birth has never really trusted anyone’s reports of the world. He relies on, of all things, photography to validate it—and has Andy as a mate to describe the photos to him. But an emotional triangle develops involving Andy and his devoted housekeeper. Whom can he trust now? Sounds like Paul cox—and comes, inevitably, from the one place where the local film scene is happening, Melbourne. Holidays on the River Yarra is another Cannes-bound Melbourne movie—though Byrnes seems less enthusiastic about it.

Canadian women, too, get a go with their National Film Board compilation called Five Feminist Minutes, in which the 15th anniversary of its Women’s Unit was celebrated by handing out $10,000 and five rolls of film to the country’s finest, and screening all of the results. More concentrated will be the seven-film cycle of films from Canadian experimental artist Phil Hoffman. Byrnes believes that there’s no one in Australia working in the same way to create their own grammar of cinema, and feels that his two-year search to find an appropriate auteur like this will be justified with the world premiere screening of Hoffman’s just-completed cycle. Byrnes also sees the Lubitsch retrospective as an exemplar to Australia’s struggling makers of comedy.

When it comes to race, though, there are few laughs. Two documentaries about Aborigines are placed beside two views of American white supremacists, the exploitation of a Pakistani migrant in Austria, a post-Spike Lee (he’s now made it to Cannes) taste of Blacks and Hispanics on the streets of New York, and two slices of Black American music. As I suggested at the beginning, why write a script when life itself throws up so many nasties, oddballs and heroes? Even the increasingly manic German director, Werner Herzog, has found a madman fit for his imagination in a documentary on the Emperor Bokassa! It certainly makes Paris is Burning—with its woman director, Jennie Livingston, capturing the wild lives of Black gays—the essential film of the 170 on offer for $100 at this year’s Sydney Film Festival. The 36th Sydney Film Festival is at the State Theatre, 7-21 June.

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Desert Islands


This compelling novel by Hanan al-Shaykh has been released in Australia just when world attention is again focused on the Middle East. This will most likely snare an audience curious about Arabic literature, especially a contemporary novel written by an Arab woman with an obvious insider’s knowledge of the complex nature of modern Arab society.

This in itself is a good thing. Western readers have remained ignorant, for far too long, of an incredibly rich literary tradition. This includes Egyptian writers such as Nawal al-Saadawi—Nobel prize winner, Naguid Mahfouz and the Palestinian poet, Fadwa Tuqan, whose own traditional upbringing mirrors in many ways the women in al-Shaykh’s novel. This book will be a rewarding experience for those venturing for the first time into the realm of Arab writers, especially those whose perceptions of Arab literature have been coloured by the Rushdie affair.

Hanan al-Shaykh is one of the foremost contemporary writers in Arabic. Born in Lebanon in 1945, she was educated in Cairo and then pursued a career in journalism including a sojourn in the Arabian Gulf. Because of the continued civil war in Lebanon, she has lived in London since 1982.

al-Shaykh unfolds a story of four women who have little control over their lives. Their own awareness of this and their struggle to find a sense of identity, a sense of “self” are brought out with sensitivity and compassion.

Her four main characters are imprisoned metaphorically, in an ill-disguised desert kingdom (read Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or one of the Arab Emirates). It is a world of paradoxes, a world where women wear designer clothes and French perfumes hidden beneath their long black robes, or ‘abaya’, where men censor Western magazines and videos while pursuing foreign women with a lust verging on idiocy.

The suffocating, monotonous lives of her main characters, brilliantly recreated through the author’s description of inconsequential, minor domestic rituals, are symbolised through a simple garment which, from puberty onwards, dominates their lives. This is the ‘abaya’ which tradition decrees they must put on whenever venturing outside the confines of their homes, or in the presence of a non-related male. This garment becomes an extension of their ‘nothingness’—their invisibility.

Yet, while there is a common thread running through their individual stories, they are very different characters who find, or fail to find, the solutions to the psychological vacuum in which they’re trapped.

al-Shaykh’s style of writing is well-suited to her sensitive subject-matter and although essentially non-polemic in tone, her voice is frank as she relates the personal dilemmas the women face. The first story is told by Suha, a modern, educated Lebanese woman, unused to a restricted lifestyle. Although she identifies as a Muslim Arab, she feels no empathy with the local culture and alternates between feelings of anger and helplessness. Even after a year in her gilded cage she cannot adjust to the emptiness of life spent drinking coffee and eating cakes. Her attempts to find any meaningful work fail and she sinks into an almost hypnotic trance and an illicit affair with another woman, Nur. Although such a liaison is not approved it is condoned in preference to the far greater sin of adultery. Suha retains her determination, however, and finds a way of regaining her identity.

Tamr, in contrast to Suha, is a local tribal girl, uneducated and unsophisticated. Interwoven into her narrative is the story of her mother Taj al-Arus who lapses into occasional insanity and reflects on her marriage to a local sultan 40 years before. Although a secondary character, the mother is one of the most memorable women in the novel and when she finally looks back on her life and asks herself “Why?”, we have reached perhaps the most moving episode in the book.

Tamr’s fate will be different to that of her mother because, after a tremendous battle with her brother, she wins the right to education and a small measure of independence. al-Shaykh leaves us in no doubt that it is not Tamr’s hunger strike which defeats her brother, but the shame of being reminded, by his own wife, that the Prophet Muhammad’s daughter, Fatima, could read and write. In case the reader overlooks this central theme—that women can challenge male authority and win—the author provides another two examples elsewhere in the novel. It is through challenging the usual interpretation of the Koran and Hadith that change may occur, that some element of choice may be possible for some of her women. Indeed, many Muslim feminists believe that a redefinition of Islam in ways that are seen as legitimate, may be the only viable way of challenging a male authority which uses customary law and traditional practices to subjugate women. al-Shaykh’s writing indicates that she acknowledges this too, but she also has faith in education and outside employment as ways of forcing independence.

Through her introduction of Suzanne, at first glance an unsympathetic American woman—an ageing Marilyn Monroe of the desert as she appears to the many Arab men pursuing her—the author seems to suggest that the sexual emancipation enjoyed by Western women is hollow...
and provides no answers. Suzanne who, for the first time in her life, experiences excessive male attention, is a prisoner of her own sensuality. She fights desperately to stay on and resists her impending deportation.

The fourth female narrator is Nur, a self-destructive local beauty whose wealth and amoral behaviour corrupts those around her. Ironically, her husband is alienated because he longs for a wife with whom he can share his thoughts, not a woman whose life is one long party.

al-Shaykh's powers of narration are awesome. She reaches her peak when describing the neurotic behaviour and hysteria which weave their way incessantly through the lives of the women in her novel. The hysteria she describes is no mere simulation, nor is it self-induced by idle, pampered women. She suggests that the condition triggering hysteria is women's sexual vulnerability and oppression, portraying a male-dominated society and how it affects women psychologically, rendering them powerless and ineffectual.

al-Shaykh's intriguing novel should assist in breaking down the mystique surrounding women's seclusion in traditional Muslim countries. It is sure to be read by many Anglo-Australian feminists with a genuine desire to understand the lives of such women. Hopefully, they will resist the temptation to generalise from what they read. The lives portrayed are authentic and show us a particular reality but, of course, they do not represent the lives of all Muslim women.

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Essaying Doubt


The great Australian art critic Bernard Smith once called Meanjin "the greatest literary journal this country has produced". He went on to say that "only The Bulletin during the first quarter of its existence has had such a comparable effect upon Australian letters". A strong endorsement, but one written in defence of the journal in 1960 when Cold War intolerance threatened to shut the journal down.

One of the great strengths of this volume is that it shows the battles critical writers have had to fight in the country to create the spaces in which a living culture can survive. If The Bulletin was the journal which began the break with Colonial writing, as Sylvia Lawson contends in her marvellous book The Archibald Paradox, then Meanjin is the journal which builds upon that break the basis of a critical writing.

The Bulletin is famous for the democratic, nativist fiction and poetry it published, and Meanjin for the modern poetry which in part repudiated that tradition, and in part raised it to a higher standard. Yet the real strength of this anthology seems to me to be its essays rather than its creative writing. The non-fiction essay has something of a fugitive existence in this country--barely even recognised by the literary establishment as a genuine art. Yet this anthology shows that Australian culture was not born of mere 'creative' fictioning, but out of a critical and, at times, political reflection on the creative arts and on culture in general. Henry Lawson and Furphy are essential to the first phase of Australian cultural development, just as Judith Wright and Patrick White are a part of the second. Yet it is in critical reflection on their writings that they are made meaningful, generation after generation, according to the 'temperament' of the times.

The 'case for critics' that I am putting here is made in the volume by Kylie Tennant, writing in 1942. This brief and brilliant essay is about the critic's role in transforming the raw material of creative writing into a key to understanding rooted in social and political contexts. Furphy's sentences were written by a word-intoxicated man, wallowing, positively wallowing, in print'. It is the critic who connects it to the times. "Until a writer learns to take punishment he hasn't much stamina" says Tennant, with a typical author's masochism in relation to criticism. Yet it is criticism which reduces the self-indulgent mass of fictions streaming off the press to a significant and workable corpus of culture.

If evidence were needed of the value of a literary forum for criticism, one not directly implicated in politics but connected to it, one need only turn to some of the essays in this book. Jack Lindsay on the 'alienated intellectual' brings the theory of Georg Lukacs to bear on Patrick White and, surprisingly, Frank Hardy. He found value in Hardy's tough-minded realist novel at a time when cold war diktats were emerging ominously with high modernist literary indifference. Brian Fitzpatrick put the case for Aboriginal rights and autonomy in a 1958 essay which still needs to be heeded today. Humphrey McQueen's acerbic essay on Queensland can now, thankfully, be read in the past tense. Arthur Phillips' essay The Cultural Cringe is here too, and yes, it is the essay which gave Australia that expression. Together with "the lucky country", the "cultural cringe", as a critical concept gone vernacular, is a tribute to the power of the essay. Phillips' piece is also an indication of the cultural
power a small journal can have, or at least had.

The heyday of the Meanjin essay seems to me to have been the 50s and 60s. This was a time when literary culture was defined and celebrated. The essay was the principle genre in this cultural labour; Meanjin was a principal vehicle in which it was achieved. H P Heseltine's 1962 essay on 'The Literary Heritage' is a signal document here, in its attempt to reinterpret colonial literature for modern tastes and times. In the late 60s, things seem to slip. Douglas Kirsner's essay on new left politics is interesting now only for its stridency and vacuousness. Ian Turner's Godzone looks like a tired and impotent rant. Only Craig McGregor seems to signal a way out. As media culture proliferated and became the cultural training ground of the nation, the influence of the literary, filtered through criticism, ceased to be the central forum for cultural debate. McGregor, in taking media artefacts seriously enough to engage in criticism of them rather than generalised broadsides, showed an escape route which, for the most part, was not taken. Meanjin remained a literary journal when book-based culture was increasingly inflected through the mass media, rather than through criticism. As Bernard Smith said of the Meanjin of the 50s, "intellectuals of different disciplines and different persuasions met on common ground". The common ground of culture was, by the late 60s, a mass media culture, but intellectuals held themselves aloof from meeting on this ground, other than to denounce it.

If there is a sense of doubt hanging over Meanjin today, this is the cause of it. Its present editor, Jenny Lee, has laboured energetically to make it a critical and relevant forum. The fault lies today with writers. Academia is increasingly a place where the division of labour and increasingly scholastic criteria of 'efficiency' are forcing writers who might contribute to real cultural dialogue to opt for career-advancing 'scholarship'. Added to this is the fact that the Labor Party persists in an anti-intellectualism which is both stultifying and obsolete. It is true that the days are gone when Chifley refused Commonwealth Literary Fund money for Meanjin because it was not something for 'the workers'. Today's ALP thinks more like Robert Menzies who seconded that refusal on the grounds that 'culture' should find its way in the marketplace along with capsicums, wine and pig iron.

As Meanjin's founding editor, C B Christensen, wrote to Jim Cairns in 1973, 'The labor movement should be doing everything in its power to strengthen the cultural/intellectual side of our national life...And until worker and intellectual join in close association, no restructuring of Australian society can be possible'. At present one has to wonder if such a project is even thinkable. One also has to wonder where the spaces are where the intersection of cultural work and democratic values, the key tenets of Meanjin, can be brought into dialogue with each other. Where today is the journal (rather than magazine) not tied to an academic definition of the 'literary' or a dogmatic conception of the 'political'? To some degree Meanjin is still such a journal, but it maintains such a space with difficulty and, perhaps in the future only with increasing vigilance. This volume is a testament to several generations who kept such spaces open in our culture. Repeating the trick in the 90s might require quite a different temperament.

KEN WARK writes for both Meanjin and ALR.

Judy Horacek

The French Government today apologized for the Rainbow Warrior incident & the tests at Mururoa Atoll...

Les bombes nucléaire sont super! Merveilleux!!

Boom!! Ha ha ha!!

Encore! Encore!!

and promised that nothing of the sort would ever happen again.

And now we cross to Storin' Norman for an update on the weather
Lost Energies


The Painted Woman traces the possession and liberation of an artist daughter, Frances, by her artist father in a remote but genteel mountain setting.

As a child I remember being taken to the Blue Mountains when my mother spent a weekend there with her writing group. Sitting on the verandah out of sight, with a Virago book momentarily put to one side, I overheard enthusiastic discussions about theatrical performances using menstrual blood, interspersed with readings of poetry and prose. So artistic self-discovery in the Blue Mountains holds a specific set of resonances for me and I started reading Painted Woman with some expectation.

However, I found Sue Woolfe’s writing about the artistic experience disappointing. Her descriptions of Frances’ experience of the creative process reinforce the idea of the artist as godlike originator and creator - a conception which brings to mind Abstract Expressionist descriptions of work processes. Frances recites like Jackson Pollock “I’m in the painting.”

Statements of this kind are offered as if this is a universal truth about the artistic process and creation, rather than an interpretation, by a particular school of thought, about the art-making process.

Frances’ painting may be Expressionist but Woolfe’s writing is definitely mannerist. The repeated use of names on paint tubes, as poetic decoration for heavy prose, becomes boring. Woolfe cannot restrain herself when Frances’ painting is taken over by her father who wields a dramatic brush full of “Lamp Black”.

Perhaps it is unfair to compare Painted Woman, a first novel, with the work of more established writers. But reading The Painted Woman did bring into focus what I like about other women writers who have dealt with similar themes and material. A S Byatt’s use of the letters of Theo and Vincent Van Gogh in Still Life is a more imaginative use of artistic source material in fiction. Painted Woman has no lustre when compared with Annie Dillard’s inspirational description of artistic creation in The Writing Life, or the quirky and perceptive vision of an artist’s sensibility in Celestial Navigation by Anne Tyler.

Painted Woman highlights a problem common to many women writers in Australia. As a child eavesdropping on a verandah, I was tantalised by the energy and flow of ideas of women coming to terms with themselves and their creative power. However, that was 20 years ago and to hear echoes of these conversations revamped into muddling, dated fiction is disappointing.

Unfortunately there seems to be a trend in much Australian women’s writing to trot out ideas which were exciting and challenging 20 years ago in an unexciting and non-challenging way in order that they can be praised by peers in snappy little quotations on book jackets.

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War Torn

Still Murder, by Finola Moorehead. Reviewed by Susan Humphries.

When is a killing still murder? Finola Moorehead’s tale of detection is asking questions about bodies not usually asked by the writers of murder mysteries. The dead body is, of course, the fundamental ingredient of this genre. But Moorehead examines the body as a space. A space—living or dead—in which wars for control are fought.

Mixed up in Moorehead’s wonderfully labyrinthine plot are a group of Vietnam veterans. The reflection of one of them that there “Nobody declared war...therefore...I guess we were just murdering people” sees Moorehead introduce her central problem into the narrative. What is, and is not, murder? What constitutes warfare? And what status do those who kill and are killed by society’s guerrillas have?

At the centre of Moorehead’s book is the living body of the madwoman Patricia who is mentally inhabited by the woman-warrior Leni di Torres. Her connection to the body buried under the clump of marijuana seedlings tantalises throughout the book. But more interesting is Moorehead’s detection of ‘invisible’ killing of women’s minds and/or bodies in an undeclared gender war. Is Patricia “murdered or murderer”?

Moorehead’s book makes some neat reflections on its structure and concerns. Throughout the text, two characters piece together a jigsaw. Similarly, the newspaper clippings, diaries and personal files that make up the jigsaw narrative make for compelling reading. And as Patricia reflects, the fragments fascinate more than the order imposed by the finished puzzle.

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