

# Political? After a Fashion

*How does one justify fashion in a world  
wracked by Serious Issues?  
Kate Stead wonders...*

KULCHA



Photo: John Fairfax & Sons

**E**arlier this year, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published an extract from a new novel called *Fabulous Nobodies* by Lee Tulloch. Already on the stands was *Follow Me* magazine with a lengthy extract and interview. That Saturday *The Australian* reviewed the book and the successive issues of *Vogue* and *Harpers Bazaar* were simultaneously launched containing articles written by, or about, Lee Tulloch.

It was only the beginning of an avalanche of media attention to come in the following months.

Someone should write an article about the power of publicity. But this is not it. Nor is it another interview with Lee Tulloch who, by the time you're reading this, will probably be busy preparing for wealth and fame back in her adopted New York City.

If *Fabulous Nobodies* doesn't command the biggest cult following since Audrey Hepburn showed her funny face on film, and if the book doesn't become a fabulous movie to boot (thigh high, please), I'll eat my Phillippe Model hat.

Any yarn that could turn Phillip Adams on to fashion has got to be good. It's particularly medicinal for someone struggling for the meaning of life in a sea of chiffon (read velvet/linen/wool/lycra, depending on the month; stripes, prints, plain or tie-dyed depending on the year).

To watch yourself considering the importance of hem length with all the earnestness of a brain surgeon washing his or her hands is, with kindness to oneself, a cringing experience.

Imagine telling a real journalist - say Robert Haupt, instigator of Royal Commissions - that you write about frocks. Try justifying hours of watching fashion parades when you see a group of handicapped children shining with joy in the simple pleasure of being taken to the zoo. What's it all about Satisfied?

Well, *Fabulous Nobodies* comes close to revealing all.

The title is almost self-explanatory and if you don't know the story of the character named Reality Nirvana Tuttle (her mother was a hippie) by now, you're not exactly out, but you're borderline for sure.

If you can manage to get a copy, read it fast, fly to New York, barge past the 'doorwhore' of the hippest nightclub in Manhattan (we don't think it's Nell's any more) with the book under your arm before its release in America, then you will be assured of fabulousness too.

Well, for a minute anyway. The rest is up to you - as Reality Tuttle says "there are dozens of rules. If you're fabulous, you know them instinctively, if you're not, you don't. It's simple." If you're not intrinsically fabulous, she'll expose you in a second.

It is tempting to consider the idea of this book being a kind of personal exorcism for Lee Tulloch. She did tell Phillip Adams on the wireless that as the editor of *Harpers Bazaar Australia* she had a struggle with a conscience that told her there were more important things in life than the latest shade of pink. At her book launch she told us she was satisfied in the end that fashion is a valid pursuit.

An ex-*Harpers* beauty writer recalls Tulloch's style - "she was always searching for alternative ways to show fashions. She called her vision of the magazine 'one that had intelligent fashion'."

In the book, the central character, Reality Tuttle, is someone whose

universe is bordered by Avenue A and Second Avenue, First Street and Fourteenth Street. Her conversations are confined to matters of frocks. The most important decision of her day is what to wear (or who to be) at night when she emerges from a tiny apartment to her real world of the hippest nightclub in town. Here, she is a powerful arbiter of style, picking and choosing suitable patrons and turning away the hordes of nobodies who don't qualify for fabulousness. Her greatest ambition is to own a Chanel suit.

Basically, Reality is stupid. She's self-absorbed, superficial - a maniac who talks to her clothes and wears nylon pyjamas called Carol to bed.

Reality is not exactly an intellectual but you can't help liking her and this is how Lee Tulloch has achieved her aim of validating fashion. Simply by making it funny.

It's useless to preach lessons on the role fashion has to play in the economy. It has its role but so does the drug trade.

It's hypocritical to call it a contribution to society and the arts. It is. But so is graffiti.

Look at the six o'clock news, watch a trained labrador display his duty with a single focus while steering a blind person from danger. Visit Calcutta. Tell me fashion is important. It's not. But neither is the six o'clock news.

What it is, is fun. And funny... Recognising this is the only way to validate fashion.

Oddly, the worlds of sport, politics and fashion are closely paralleled. In each game the players so easily forget that it is a game and give the object, real or imagined, more importance.

*Fabulous Nobodies* reminds us that the game of fashion, at least, is played best with a light touch, a sense of humour, and madness. It's much more fun that way.

Kate Stead is fashion editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald*.

## China Correspondent

*The Chinese massacre in June disappeared from our TV screens as quickly as it appeared. Nick Stuart, who recently returned to Australia, recalls the dilemmas of a Western reporter in China.*

It is still hot and humid in Beijing. Watermelons can be bought from the street vendors day and night, but the apricots have finished their season. You really have to search for army roadblocks now, and the deep gashes left by the tank tracks on the steaming bitumen are only a memory. But for everyone in Beijing, they are a pervasive memory.

Only days before I left the capital my taxi driver stopped at an intersection. Responding to my queries, he got out, scratched his head and pointed to the footpath. The last time he was here, he

said, this guttering had been broken up and two bodies were being carried away on makeshift bicycle ambulances. From around the corner he could hear the high-pitched, squeaky rumble of an armoured personnel carrier. Again he shook his head, doubting the evidence of his own eyes as he gazed around. The small shrubs had been replanted in the median strips, and bullet holes at eye level patched up. It was only gazing up at a tree trunk that we found the proof of what had happened in that street where a branch had been pockmarked and shattered by automatic rifle fire.

The intensity of the cover-up in China is hard to imagine. George Orwell could not have envisaged the skilful editing of

videotape to turn night into day, and bloody repression into 'counter-revolutionary turmoil'. At times, the claims of the Chinese authorities have been so brazen as to invite complete disbelief. The allegations that "no shooting occurred in the square" and "only three hundred people died in the turmoil" fall into this category. But, at other times, a skilful mixture of truth, or half-plausible statements integrate themselves with the brazen lies, and it is soon impossible even to guess at what has really happened. In such a climate rumours spread and are embellished at every step of the way, leading the foreign journalists to near despair of ever getting at the truth.

Ordinary Chinese cannot speak out. Indoctrination sessions for party cadres have ensured the propagation of a government line which will be spouted readily whenever required. Nevertheless, that does not mean the people, particularly those in Beijing, have been fooled. Instead, they, along with former students who have now returned to their provincial homes, have become the crystallising force for a simmering resentment which threatens to bubble over again at the slightest provocation.

To counter this threat, the government has called for increased ideological rigidity and acceptance of pure, maoist-

leninist thought. The problem for the authorities is reconciling an increasingly conservative ideological line with ongoing economic reforms at a time when the economy is plunging from crisis to crisis.

Discontent is almost tangible, not only in the cities but also in the countryside. The economic reforms began in Sichwan Province in the South of China. Yet, when I visited farms outside the provincial capital of Cheng du, relatively wealthy agricultural workers complained that they were being paid by IOUs, with inflation eating away at their savings. Their reasons for dislike of central government policies were rarely well articulated, but they felt sure something was going wrong. Not identifying with the student protests, they still voiced their anger at corrupt party officials, high inflation and petty restrictions.

Within Cheng du itself, factory workers were also angry that they weren't sharing in the full benefits of the reforms. They could see the higher standard of living being enjoyed by many farmers, but had little opportunity to share in the liberalisation themselves.

The events in Cheng du provide a glimpse of what was happening all over China in early June. Restrictions on journalists meant that the events in Beijing received almost blanket coverage, while the provinces were ignored. But those who could travel saw scenes of rebellion all over China.

A cocktail of resentment formed in Cheng du on 4 June: it was brought to a head on 7 June, just after the Beijing soldiers cleared Tiananmen Square. Peoples Armed Police surrounded a statue of Mao which dominates the central boulevard in Cheng du. Here, a small group of between twenty and forty students had set up a loudspeaker system and were maintaining a vigil. Eyewitnesses reported that the police moved in with horrifying brutality. According to students, a young woman was bayoneted to death, while another male speaker was beaten repeatedly with rifle butts until he also died.

However, the Armed Police did not envisage the intensity of the reaction against their actions. By eleven o'clock the next morning, a huge crowd of thousands of people had formed, protesting against the violence. Soon another confrontation began and the thin line of police had to be reinforced.



Photo: Michel Lipchitz/AP

Protesters staggered to the back of the crowd with blood streaming from head wounds, but the police soon gave ground under the weight of numbers, and broke up. Those who could were left to cower in their barracks, occasionally firing tear gas grenades. Others were beaten by the workers who now formed the majority of the demonstrators. Some were even saved by students who everywhere remained remarkably disciplined. A fire began in the market quarter of the city, razing it to the ground and, finally, a hooligan element took over, looting shops and raiding the two foreign hotels on the main avenue. It was only then that the police finally regained control of the city, as many of the students had left the demonstration once they saw the anarchy it had become.

Again, in Cheng du, the same scenes of repression took place. I toured deserted university campuses. Armed police marched and patrolled throughout the city. Shots could be heard in residential areas at night. But

the rule of terror is not tackling the underlying causes of the protests.

The western media often finds it difficult to portray our own society accurately. Pressures of deadlines, incomplete information and the need to provide titillating stories for the punters interfere with newsgathering and reporting. Those pressures were accentuated in China to a degree which sometimes compromised reports and occasionally provided the wrong impression altogether.

Who can forget the television pictures of the lone student who stood in front of, and then halted, a column of tanks by his sheer bravery? The image was a graphic symbol of 'people power'. But the camera operator could not follow up the career of the tank commander who was reportedly demoted and 're-educated' - or the student. Hong Kong press reports say he was shot by troops hours later ... part of the story television cannot tell.

There was little apparent logic in the deportations. At the same time as a British ITV television crew was arrested at one university, an ABC TV crew was filming a short distance away and remained undisturbed as they took photos of burnt-out buses and trucks, near where a Reuters camera operator was arrested. At almost any time the Chinese authorities could have deported nearly all the western journalists, most of whom were admitted on tourist visas as proper accreditation was impossible to get. Inexplicably, they did not.

These contradictions sum up much of the reporting of China. Revelations would suddenly illuminate one part of the jigsaw puzzle of events. An example was the time the soldier on guard outside the Australian Embassy laughed at my concern when he pointed his AK47 rifle in my direction. Pointing to the safety catch, he showed me there were no bullets in his magazine - the rifle was unloaded. It was only as I walked away I saw a pouch on his uniform was slightly open. From the magazine inside I clearly saw the matt bronze of bullets. Whatever the failings of the Western media, it is providing some glimpse of the brutal repression that's still going on in China - repression to which the Chinese media can't and won't admit.

NICK STUART reported from China for ABC radio in June.

**T**here's a lot we already know about the story of *Scandal!* In 1961, nineteen-year-old Christine Keeler was sleeping with two men: one, the Conservative government's Minister of War, and the other, Ivanov, a suspected Soviet spy. Two years later it became a security scandal and drew a messy resignation from Jack Profumo.

Five days later, Stephen Ward was arrested and charged with living off the immoral earnings of Keeler and Mandy Rice Davies. The following furore centred around these players in the trial, with Stephen Ward made the 'evil man' and overdosing before the jury found him guilty.

We also know that there was a grave miscarriage of justice, a whitewash of an inquiry; that Stephen was either being used by MI5 or spying for the Russians, and his trial became a not entirely successful device to distract attention from intelligence matters. We know his aristocratic friends' abandonment of him showed not his guilt, as Justice Marshall hinted to the jury, but the hypocrisy of members of the establishment. And it was all very well for Profumo to go on living quietly and be knighted for his charity work in the East End of London, but Christine was reviled for years after she was spat upon outside the Old Bailey.

But are these the stuff of film or just of cliché? None of this common knowledge tells us why the case caused such massive consternation and delight; why it has continued to mobilise such enduring fascination, or why even now it is still invoked as the case which 'brought down a government'.

Part of the game of scandal is that we cannot completely *know*. We have rumours, stories, accounts, but no absolute truth, no final version. Was Macmillan prevented from confronting Profumo by a revulsion to the whole idea of adultery that stemmed from his wife Dorothy's thirty year long affair with Tory MP Bob Boothby? Would Profumo have been unable to deny the truth if Macmillan had? Would he and the government have got away with it if he had not lied to the House? Was Stephen patriot or spy, charming socialite or manipulating lecher?

It is the multiplicity and disparity of these stories and the questions they trail

## Show and Tell

*After almost thirty years Britain's Profumo affair is still 'sexy' copy. But Gillian Swanson argues that Scandal! only scratches the surface.*



Photo: CEL

that reveal the insecurities around shifting class relations, notions of Britishness and, most crucially, a notion of sexuality defined in opposition to family life which obscures its politics of gender and class behind discourses of morality. As Macmillan later remarked, the problem wasn't that Profumo had his affair but that he didn't keep the two sides of his life separate. Less a matter of morality than domestic management.

This drama has become a byword for a hypocrisy that can be pinned on something called 'the establishment' and so disappears with a fallen government. But it is the arrangements made within the pressures and constraints of the social, the contradictions of ordinary ways of living shown by it that has allowed the Profumo Affair to mobilise fascination and repulsion in the public imagination for twenty-five years. These are the points of its intelligibility.

If it is conflict and contradiction, stories upon stories, which lend power to the intrigue of scandal, these are entirely absent in the case of *Scandal!* It functions as a blow-by-blow account of events that fit, where narrative tampering simply reinforces the sense of there being a 'real' story and diverts us from the more involving mythology that surrounds it, the questions that circle around individual motivations and behaviour.

The film runs past us yet again the popular assumption that people will do whatever they can get away with, the one about privilege and opportunity and diseased upper classes, the one about those who have come from nothing and have nothing taking what they can, the one about getting caught being the problem and the affair leaving no one but victims. So there is no room for gendering the account of who took advantage of whom, how, nor for considering the ethics of conduct. In this tightly-worked mono-dimensional narrative of the social, all-too-predictable in its outcome, there is no way of situating an audience within its boundaries of implication and naivety, nor allowing it positions of judgment. We are what we are told.

And what of the figure around which the instabilities and ambiguities of the scandal cluster, Christine Keeler? Heroine of the chat show, Christine has achieved a new becoming. No longer is she the broken bitter victim who lives in the past, but a woman who lives (in a

*Chelsea* council flat) with her grown-up son, wears a black cutaway Emmanuel gown that gets her top billing at the premiere, and has a smart remark for Jana Wendt. There are two Christine Keelers: the figure who writes her own autobiography and identifies herself with the woman who participated in the events, and the symbolic object around which others' fears and desires are played out.

Christine's account of her early life is almost unendurably painful and the story of her repeated pursuit and rape a nightmare. But as she moves through her account, her voice emerges to situate herself as an active participant in her narrative, instead of the object of others' actions. Unfortunately, this is a much more unpalatable Christine: snobbish, dying to dump on Mandy, a woman whose self-justifications become disingenuous against her con-

---

**"She is an icon of  
dangerous sexuality  
which has an  
enormous symbolic  
potency..."**

---

tinual abuses of friendship, casual betrayals and petty exploitation. Though she has been excused for her youth and class, it is more difficult to do so for her parade of such actions now and they undermine her romantic claims that she would be with Stephen today if not for the Profumo Affair.

Christine as object is the central figure of ambiguity and notoriety; Christine represents the unspeakable of that scandal. She is an icon of dangerous sexuality which has enormous symbolic potency not because of what she did but because of how others used her to exercise the preoccupations familiar to conventional masculinity. As object, she is as difficult and unknowable as she is a narrator - both rely on a tension between the different versions of her story, what her accounts tell us and what we learn from other sources.

And so the film trades off her. Its poster is dotted with stills of the actors but, in the space where Joanna Whalley should be is Lewis Morley's famous shot of Christine sitting astride a chair, knees bent as they meet the floor in a

pose which hints at abjection, her stare coolly absent. But while films can become important when the stories of the past are explored through the concerns of the present, this one asks none of the interesting questions raised in the interim about what it all - or she - meant.

It is the iron hand of a simplistic form of realism (something which has blighted so much of recent British cinema) which prevents the film managing this ambiguity. Realism as a style depends on appearances being what they seem, detail being authentic. It is too literal to cope with these diverse dimensions. It avoids the dilemmas of knowing. For the narrative film to move into history it needs an acknowledgment of contradiction and dimensions other than surface and length. Melodrama, the derided centre in the history of British popular cinema, does this by endowing the moment with the weight of unspoken conflict. *Scandal!* fails to build the heaviness of meaning which informs both melodrama and historical representation; the analysis and connections. For that, see *Dance With a Stranger*, which is a decent melodrama as well as being a remarkable account of class and gender relations in 'fifties Britain.

Here Joanne Whalley shoots lingering heavy-lidded looks around while she measures out her Nescafe from the tin. But they are empty of the resonance of heavy implication characteristic of melodramatic complexity. Christine is indeed shown only through what others make of her, a surface on which others project their desires. That no one making this film thought to examine the contradictions of her own persona, the tension of her conflicting desires, surprises me, to say the least. There's a shot in the film where her face is obliterated by a huge glass penis on a table occupying the foreground. It says more than it's meant to.

This isn't much like a film review and so I'll remedy that by saying John Hurt was good and so was Ian McKeller (despite his unfortunate plastic head) And some of us would have been quite happy watching the opening - Stephen Sinatra, London buses and paste-frocks. As Christine herself says in her review of the film: "the scenery is pretty and the clothes are OK".

GILLIAN SWANSON teaches  
in Humanities at Griffith University.

# The Year of Producing Dangerously

*Australian films are likely to keep that American accent, says Toby Miller.*

**1**989, 'The Year of the Producer', according to the Australian Film, Television and Radio School. On one level this registers the school's own shift away from degree-style programs and towards short courses catering to film industry professionals. But it also points to a watershed in Australian screen financing, with the replacement of taxation incentives by the Film Financing Corporation (FFC): funding before the fact via direct public investment, scheduled to amount to about \$300 million over the next four years.

It's a more innovative, positive investment than the old 10BA system, described by Paul Keating as a scheme "which we now equate with 254T". The catch is that 30 percent of the money for films sponsored by the FFC must come from the private sector before any corporation support is forthcoming. With financial institutions advising yuppies that a 12 percent return on film does not match 20 percent on negatively geared property, producers are frequently having to raise such finance themselves and through pre-sales to overseas outlets.

The FFC is actually misnamed in that almost half of its money is destined for television. Of the forty-one projects approved since November, only thirteen are feature films. Now the overall trend in tele-drama is towards international joint ventures. (The Seven Network reportedly has a dozen co-productions planned.)

Increased overseas production costs and decreased overseas commercial TV profits, coupled with the success of satellite and cable services, have provided a leg-in to overseas markets for Australian TV. That, plus the 'need' for our feature films to cross the Pacific in search of US audiences has encouraged the FFC to pay unnamed American sources to provide marketing assessments of proposals. It's an internationalism that sits well with many producers ("our criterion now is not 'Where's a great Australian story that we can make?', it's 'Where's a great story?' and *where* it's made doesn't matter"). But it has also led to a bitter public correspondence between the FFC and others who are disturbed by the 'un-Australian' elements implicit and explicit in such arrangements and are asking about the likely impact of such procedures on local content within scripts.

This has flushed out divisions within the corporation itself. In the same week as the FFC's chair, Kim Williams, gleefully announced that it "makes no assessment of the aesthetic or intrinsic worth of a script. It assesses only the deal", his deputy, Patricia Edgar, was reported as calling for revised guidelines from government which would encourage "projects which show quality, craft, interest and Australian identity".

What is going on in the corporation's \$250,000 a year banker-style North Sydney accommodation?

We know that the Australian film-going public is at record levels of activity. 1988 saw admissions up by seven million, box office revenues up by \$40

million and two Australian films in the top ten grossing releases. It may be that this is to do with the rediscovery of cinema as event by an audience that has over-consumed video. One senses that it is distribution and exhibition conservatism that precludes a decent outing for quality Australian films. *The Accused* is a 'difficult' Hollywood film that succeeded here. But we wouldn't really know about the 'standard' audience's taste in wonderful local sub-cultural movies like *Mull* and *Tender Hooks* because major distributors choose to offer it either the elaborate rape fantasy of *Dead Calm* or the pre-modern bourgeois mid-life crisis of *Emerald City*.

These sorts of issues are gone over in detail in *The Imaginary Industry: Australian Film in the Late 80s\**, Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka's recent update of their invaluable two-volume *Screening of Australia*. The volume is built around the opposition of commercial with critical, radical with conservative, nationalist with internationalist and picturesque with innovative. These oppositions are never absolute, but they are convincing representations of the debates that form the entity known as 'Australian cinema'.

Jacka's chapters on state funding support, the production business, government film organisations and overseas links are exemplars of how to make public policy and organisational studies both readable and committed. On the score of textual analysis, the book becomes a little like a shopping list in its obsessive desire to classify each and every Australian feature and/or describe the politics of particular films and their methods of advertising. Unlike their first two books, Dermody and Jacka have enlisted other writers, and it is in Stuart Cunningham's admirable study of the Kennedy-Miller group's mini-series that the necessary connections are drawn between production, narrative, filmic style and social circulation. If we are to keep up with where the industry is going, this approach provides the best way forward at a time which offers both constraints and opportunities for progressive Australian film practice.

TOBY MILLER teaches in Humanities at Griffith University.

\*S. Dermody & E. Jacka, *The Imaginary Industry: Aust. Film in the Late 80s* (Sydney, Aust. Film, TV & Radio School, 1989).