

R E V I E W

Male bonding *Hollywood style*

Rain Man, directed by Barry Levinson. Showing at Hoyts nationally. Reviewed by Adam Farrar.

The movie *Rainman* has won four Academy Awards - which says both that it is an example of the best of Hollywood, and also that it is quintessentially Hollywood. This doesn't mean that it's not very enjoyable and, as I will go on to describe, can set us on important tracks that lead well beyond this particular film. But before setting off down these tracks, let's consider the film itself for a moment or two.

There's no doubt that the characters created by its lead actors, Tom Cruise and Dustin Hoffman, are out of the top drawer. In their very different ways, they produce strong immediate emotional responses from their audiences - on one side almost unbearable aversion and on the other sympathy and, perhaps more immediately, breathless admiration for Dustin Hoffman's virtuoso performance. The movie's theme is imaginative and adventurous. It takes on the incredibly difficult subject of intellectual disability almost without a stumble. And it is another of the new run of Hollywood films damning the values of America's new breed of yuppie go-getters. But, despite this, it is essentially a Hollywood formula film.

Where else but the US film industry would a director have been unselfconscious enough to team up the worst case of "greed is good" young American entrepreneur with the paradigm of helplessness, autism, in a "long-lost brothers discover each other and themselves on the road in the USA" film? To make the film work for its market the contrasts are extreme and the more interesting and progressive themes are warmly wrapped in messages about the need for - no, the *right* of American boys to - bonding between father and son or brother and brother.



There's even a hint that with loving father-son relationships American capitalists would be a whole lot nicer people. And really, while we can't help cheering on the film while it shows that ruthless, selfish capitalists come unstuck, it's much less easy to get worked up about the corollary that once you learn to care your business ventures will come good too. Then there's the none too subtle message that it's fine to play the "casino" by any rules you like, as long as you take down the heavies who run it and not your friends or those who are defenceless.

All of this is the schmaltzy, dubious padding of Hollywood-with-a-conscience. I'm not really knocking it. It is precisely these formulas which send you out of the cinema with a warm feeling and a hell of a lot more respect for people with intellectual disabilities. But there are a couple of other things going on too.

One of these is an investigation of independence and dependence. This

theme is very densely woven throughout the film. Tom Cruise's's manipulative, exploitative, self-obsessed character is rooted in his father's refusal to acknowledge his capacity or independence. Instead of independence based on family support he is driven to a fierce independence based on theft, abandonment and exploitation of friends and lovers. At the same time, he is exposed as utterly dependent on juggling the deals and financing of his shonky end of the market. The symbol of this web of dependency is the American classic roadster which his father would not let him drive. It is also the only thing left to him on his father's death, and in which he is forced into a cross-America journey after kidnapping his autistic brother from the institution he has lived in most of his life.

This is a brilliant device for throwing into silhouette the nature of *inter-dependence* by confronting a Tom Cruise who can be completely blind to the needs of his lover, with a character

whose utterly uncompromising needs and abilities defeat any attempts to ignore them: it also means that the shortcomings of institutional dependence become the other half of the story. The kidnap may have been nothing more than an attempt to extort from the institution's director some of Cruise's father's millions of which he has become the trustee, but it ends as a defence of the capacity and right to autonomy of the intellectually disabled. No doubt the point is made easier for a Hollywood market by choosing no ordinary intellectual disability, but an idiot savant - a person who, despite having virtually no capacity for ordinary abstract understanding and profoundly limited interpersonal abilities, has powers of mathematical understanding that defy comprehension.

It is probably a moot point whether this helps or hinders our understanding of the rights of the people with intellectual disabilities, but at least it puts it on the agenda at a time when, here and now in Australia, deinstitutionalisation is an urgent issue.

Perhaps not surprisingly, on both scores - institutionalisation and "regeneration" capitalism - the movie takes the Hollywood way out. By the end of the movie both characters return to their worlds. Capitalism is fine and institutions are fine if they can be mediated by caring family relations. We know that the first is rubbish. With a bit of luck, the left might become a bit more aware of the problems of the second.

A second theme that can be teased out of the film is even more interesting. It is the question of what we count as abilities or disabilities. One way into this is to take the autism so brilliantly portrayed by Dustin Hoffman as a metaphor for the entrepreneurial world of Tom Cruise. At least in part the movie can be read as the claim that it is quite unclear who is the "autistic" one, who has the greater disability. Or put another way, that "autism" is as much part of the "normal" world (indeed in this film Dustin Hoffman is as adept at winning in this world as his brother) as it is in the world of disability.

Equally, there is the question of whose *abilities* are more important. In the movie, if this question is really there at all, it is petty glib. But the same question has been raised in a much richer

way in Oliver Sacks' acclaimed book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. For any philosopher, the case studies of the incredible range of neurological conditions which Sacks turns into a journey into the phenomenology of areas of human experience and worlds of existence most of us never dream of, is a fascinating and vital resource.

But the book is more than that. It is a polemic about respect for diversity, which insists that the "normal" commonsense world we operate in certainly has no claim to be uniquely sensible. Sacks shows how the mathematical abilities of autistic savant twins, just like the character played by Dustin Hoffman, are not an astounding but meaningless sideshow trick, but instead are a glimpse of a whole world of forms of numbers - with landscapes of primes, multiples, square roots and so on, as immediate as money and laws and interpersonal judgments are to us - which is closed to us and which, for those who live in such a world, has all the aesthetic value of a wilderness or a symphony.

If this is right, then where we draw the line between ability and disability is

a pretty arbitrary business. But what is worse, on the basis of this arbitrary distinction we have split the world up into independent lives and dependent lives. What is still to be accepted is that what we should be working for is a wide variety of forms of *inter-dependence* by which society guarantees autonomy for all people by responding to their differences.

These are not esoteric points. The whole question of autonomy, of forms of inter-dependence, and respect for diversity is fundamental to "mainstream" liberation struggles for women, Aboriginal people, other cultures and other sexualities. It is profoundly political. And, similarly, disability is profoundly political. If *Rainman* could go some way to making this point using the values of middle America, we on the left should be able to go a lot further down the track. It really has quite a lot to do with the kind of social justice or socialism we are looking for.

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The Poetry of Dialogue

A Politics of Poetry, Reconstructing Social Democracy by Denis Altman (with a Rejoinder by Bob McMullan). Second in the series: *Strategies for Renewal*, published by Pluto Press in association with the Australian Fabian Society and Socialist forum. \$6.95. Reviewed by David McKnight.

Denis Altman's *A Politics of Poetry - Reconstructing Social Democracy* is full of good ideas of which the left should take note.

A small but growing section of the left, both inside the ALP and outside it, would agree with Altman that "for the left to regain the initiative in Australian

public life it needs to recognise that traditional divisions along class lines and the traditional solutions of greater government intervention in economic affairs are no longer sufficient".

Altman also argues that the cynical view that only the hip pocket nerve matters was probably never true and is certainly not so today. It is, after all, what the Liberals' new Future Directions policy is all about. He then takes issue with left figures such as John Mathews whose blind spots, he says, are a disinterest in small business and a neglect of the growing importance of the non-work sphere of people's lives: as consumers, citizens, partners in relationships and so on.

While I find myself most at odds with Denis Altman's self-imposed confinement to the Labor Party - hence the debate takes place with Senator Bob McMullan rather than with radical non-

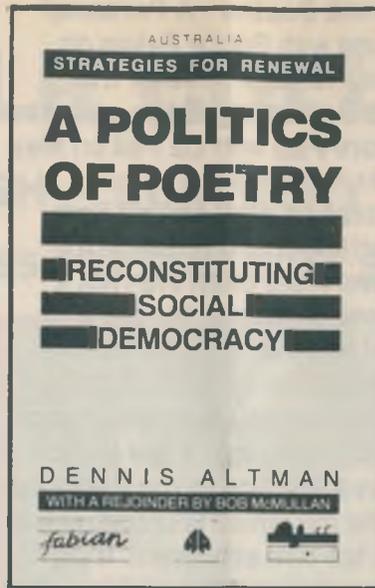
Labor individuals - I do agree with Altman that "there is still room for a refurbished social democratic vision". Because Altman sees the Labor Party as the prime political focus, however, social movements (and presumably trade unionism which he hardly mentions) are relegated to an important but secondary focus.

This is conveyed in his discussion of a new political formation proposed by Jim Falk and Joe Camilleri: "there is a powerful argument for seeing these social movements as the most powerful when they act precisely as single issue movements, and thus avoiding the compromises over priorities and practicalities that is a necessary part of democratic politics".

This argument could have been applied to the trade unions in the 1890s who formed the ALP, but it would have been wrong then, too. A close association between social movements and a political party doesn't necessarily mean the "corruption" of the social movement, nor does it mean that those who favour a new left party or a green party see it as "replacing" the ALP. Altman's own addition to the political dictionary is his notion of an "orange left" - a combination of red and green politics (though he admits, rather amusingly, that this actually makes the rather non-descript colour brown).

What way forward? This is the weak part of Altman's essay - though to be fair, no one else has yet produced a credible and renewed socialist philosophy and set of politics. The problem is "understanding why the old validities no longer work and also putting forth our own values and goals in ways that fit the lived realities of a changing society". Although he talks about "certain values in Australian society to which the left might profitably appeal" and about the left taking seriously the words of *Advance Australia Fair* (with a new meaning given to "fair"), he fails to flesh out these values in any way.

His basic analysis is that Australia's "radical" political culture is moving towards a "liberal" phase. He draws the terms from an American theorist who contrasts the historic roots of US society which emphasises individual freedom (and hence market liberalism) to Australia's radicalism which stresses



collective or social solutions through strong trade unionism, social services and protection for manufacturing.

Altman rightly points out the complex and changing class structure of advanced capitalist societies but the changes go deeper than that - to the part work itself plays in our lives.

The Labor Party derives much of its structure from industries and from the very nature of work in the twentieth century, yet work, as such, now plays a smaller role in people's lives than it ever did. It is less likely to be physical and the condition of employment less onerous than in the days when unionism was founded. Along with this is the growing importance of culture - families and personal relationships, popular culture such as TV, sport and leisure. Class consciousness will never be the same as it was in the 1930s or '40s because personal identity is being increasingly fashioned from these fields.

If Altman's analysis does not go far enough into uncharted waters, it is a triumph compared with the shallow piece of navigation offered by Senator Bob McMullan, former ALP federal secretary.

After brief patronising praise of the Altman article, he then picks up several of Altman's themes but gives them a conservative twist. "One very dangerous characteristic of the Left", McMullan opines, "is a tendency to refuse to believe the evidence of change or community attitudes which do not fit preconceived conclusions".....

Most ALR readers would be familiar with the traditional leftwing suspicion of opinion polls. While polls are often designed to produce a specific result, too often the left simply doesn't want to believe that its ideas are not widely shared. I've seen this phenomenon many times on the left, but now it is apparent that the left is grappling with a new reality - of which Altman's views are a part.

What is not apparent is any commitment from Labor leaders - right, left or centre - to try boldly to change the conservative beliefs and values often disclosed by opinion polls. All we hear are platitudes, such as that mouthed by McMullan: "It is of course true that it is an abrogation of political obligations to allow the professional assessment of current mood to determine political attitudes. We need to be prepared to lead rather than merely follow".

But the apparatchiks of Labor have done nothing but follow - either that or constantly yielded to the interests of powerful business lobbies. They followed the cultural and political revolution of the 'sixties and 'seventies and now they are following the drift to conservatism.

Labor had an enthusiastic and popular mandate in 1983 which it chose to squander so that less than two years later it found a large protest vote.

McMullan's most useful contribution comes when he discusses the dessicated round of number crunching exercises which pass for internal ALP political life. He supports the actual discussion of ideas and policies within the party and the reconstitution of branches as interest groups. But, while worthy, such moves are organisational solutions for a party whose horizon on issues of social change has narrowed to an unprecedented degree.

It would be more profitable for Denis Altman to conduct a dialogue with the emerging left which avoids the pitfalls of sterile sectarianism as well as uninspiring pragmatism.

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