

# A POPULAR PASSION

*From Fats Waller to Slim Dusty, popular entertainment has made the world go round. The left has tended to view it with a jaundiced eye — sometimes celebrating it, more often damning it. Craig McGregor doesn't think either response is enough. Here he looks at what makes rocking around the clock tick.*

**W**hen I first began writing about popular culture, instead of just living it, I was mainly concerned to defend it against the attacks of elitists, traditionalists and cultural authoritarians — and, to my surprise, some of the heaviest criticism came from the left.

I mean, here I was, this likely lad with impeccable lower-middle-class origins from Haberfield, where red brick bungs stared eyeless at each other across the canal that emptied into Iron Cove, and listening to Bessie Smith, Bunk Johnson, Jelly Roll Morton, Muddy Waters, Lightnin' Hopkins, Leadbelly, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Elvis, the Beatles, Miles Davis, Cannonball Adderley and John Coltrane (is there a Great Tradition there?), surfing amid the bluebottles and inflated condoms at Bondi, drinking beer with my mates at the Golden Sheaf, playing footie, going to dances, chundering out the door of my FJ Holden, working and writing and getting married and having kids, seeing my Mum and brothers on Saturday and my Dad when I got up the coast to Forster on holidays, and here were Ian Turner and Allan Ashbolt and other left intellectuals attacking me, and my family, and my neighbours, in fact nearly everyone I knew, as mindless victims of consumer capitalism. Zombies. They didn't like our music, or our houses, or (apparently) the

lives we led. It was the time of the great Alf controversy (Alf equals ocker), and Admass, and the Suburban Desert, and Barry Humphries' ultra-right caricatures of all who lived there, and intellectual despair at the Ugly Average Aussie. I mean, that was me.

It seemed like a betrayal, and, to a certain extent, it still does. The left stands for the rights, dignity, history, creativity, culture, ideals and infinite (and yet untested) possibilities of the common people, or it stands for nothing. But I have come to understand the emotion behind Ian Turner's and Allan Ashbolt's condemnation of how modern capitalism manipulates and distorts the great mass of people who comprise it, and why those on the left, as they grow older, become weary and even cynical about almost everything which occurs within the system. Nothing, it sometimes seems, short of revolution, will ever change it.

This confronts the left with a dilemma, because in condemning the system and what it does to people, critics are almost forced to condemn the lives led by the great majority of people in Western capitalist countries such as Australia. Whereas, as I think I know from having lived most of my life in Australia (as well as some of it in England and the United States, where the workings of the power structure are much more nakedly

exposed), the really surprising thing is the diversity, and richness, and imagination which people manage to bring to their lives despite the system.

Most lives, looked at close up, reveal profound and eternal meanings. These are expressed in a million subtle and unsubtle ways: in love, work, families, sport, pop songs, parties, gardens, barbecues, pubs, races, weekends in the bush, Friday night at the club, Anzac Day, demos, strikes, jokes, yarns, Sundays in the car, births, fucks and death ... the entire galaxy of relationships, events and rituals we have come to call popular culture.

This is a wide definition of popular culture, of course; but it is, I think, the most sensible (and, lately, the most widely accepted) meaning of the term. It has both T.S. Eliot and Antonio Gramsci on its side, so it can't be bad. It includes rituals, activities, the "way of life" of a particular people in a particular culture, and where these (popular) activities shade off into (popular) arts, these are included too. Finally, it includes the products of the mass media: radio, TV, films, newspapers, cartoons, comics, pop music — what is called, often in derogatory terms, "mass culture". One way out of the leftist dilemma, of course, is to try to make a clear distinction between "mass culture", which can safely be regarded as the corrupt and manipulative fare purveyed by advertising agencies and media



owners, and "popular culture" which refers to the culture that people create for themselves and harks back to peasant and folk meanings of the term.

I don't want to disregard the fact that there are two identifiable and important processes at work here: one in which people act, and one in which people are acted upon. But all our lives, of course, are a fusion of acting and being acted upon, and this applies to our culture as well; we both create it and have it created for us. And it seems to me that, these days, the two processes are so interfused that we simply have to recognise that Coke ads *and* kids' parodies of them, cricket on the beach *and* Packer's televised circus, ocker's party *and* Don's party, the local pub rockers *and* the latest megabuck creation of LA's rock industry, are all part of the culture of our time.

This conception tends to please neither the structuralists nor the post-structuralists, because it seems to move between Gramscian hegemonic analysis and what we might term a more pluralist, "postmodern" approach. But it recognises that, in the real world, *this is the way it is*. As Stuart Hall argues (in his essay "Notes on Deconstructing 'The Popular'"), at the heart of popular culture is a process of struggle, of contestation between the attempt to impose a cultural system upon working people and the resistance to it.

In the study of popular culture, we should always start here: with a double-stake in popular culture, the double movement of containment and resistance, which is always inevitably inside it ... Popular culture is neither, in a "pure" sense, the popular traditions of resistance ... nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked.

The word "popular", in contemporary use, has both these meanings built into it. It can refer to cultural products like soapies, video clips, comics, films, and records which are consumed by masses of people and, to a greater or lesser extent, enjoyed by them; or it can refer to what are sometimes thought

to be more "authentic" cultural forms, such as sport, folk music, hobbies, dancing, trade unions, the rituals and celebrations which are created by people for themselves. The contrast is between people as passive consumers and people as active creators, but the truth is that all people play both roles, often simultaneously.

This isn't just having it both ways, it's a recognition of the complexity of the cultural field. In Australia, especially, the mass media are crucial instruments by which the ruling elite maintains what Gramsci called its cultural (and therefore political) hegemony and manipulates the consent of the mass of people to a brutally unjust society. In this I agree with the general thesis advanced by such critics of the media as Humphrey McQueen: you don't have to write for newspapers for very long before you realise how they not only censor what people can know but also define the very parameters of whatever political debate can take place.

As the late Alex Carey once said, ain't much use having a two-party state if you've got a one-party press. Even where the mass media is not overtly political, its effects are political; as Elsaesser says of the cinema, it forms "an extensive and no doubt complex institution of socialisation and social control, i.e. an apparatus which manipulates consciousness, generated and maintained by concrete economic interests". Marcuse argued that even where popular movements seem to be in clear opposition to the dominant (bourgeois) culture a "repressive tolerance" is at work which acts to subsume such opposition within the system.

But this dominance is never complete, and people employ a myriad of strategies to resist it and to create cultural and subcultural forms which express their own needs and meanings. The only way to resolve such theoretical questions is to look at concrete cases. Pop music, for instance, is the dominant popular art of our time. It's an incredibly commercialised, manipulated music

which fits precisely the marxist schema described earlier.

But it has to be remembered that rock, which is still at the core of contemporary pop music, was taken up by young people and became popular against the weight of the entire music industry, the mass media and the ruling culture. Like jazz before it, it is an exhilarating example of a genuinely popular art (created by and for the people) forcing its way through to a position of major importance in our culture — and, like film, transforming itself into high art. By the time we reach the songs of Bob Dylan, and freedom marches, and Black power, and Woodstock, and the anti-Vietnam war movement, and sexual liberation movements such as women's liberation and gay liberation, together with the entire concept of a counter-culture, and the art, ceremony and iconography of them all, it's clear that popular culture (expressed in these forms) comprises one of the most heartening phenomena of our time.

To narrow the argument again: rhythm-and-blues, and then rock 'n' roll, like jazz thirty years before them, dragged the mass media, protesting, along behind them. Ian Turner, who I remember used to defend jazz as a genuinely popular art of real merit while denigrating rock 'n' roll as a worthless commercial plot, finally changed his mind. Years before, Francis Newton (Eric Hobsbawm) had defined the way in which all commercial music depends for its vitality upon regular infusions of non-commercial (popular) musics; even in internationalised, mediatised, twentieth-century mass art, the energy comes from the people.

### Pop marxists

The careers of some contemporary rock "superstars" illuminate the way these processes work. Sting, for instance, could be regarded as a typical rock industry figure, a somewhat manipulative musician who made an immense amount of money in a short time, turned himself into a film star, and began using his own life and his family as a suitable

subject for self-promotion. He was the focus of a very rich and very powerful part of the music business. Yet Sting's bitter-sweet songs often had a quite radical political content, dealing with everything from unemployed coalminers in Thatcher's Britain to the nuclear realities of the Cold War, and his messages were heightened by the video clips which encapsulated his songs; here, in the heart of the beast, was a political artist at work criticising and commenting on the system of which he was a part.

Rock has been going for so long now that it has set up its own traditions which sometimes run quite counter to the music industry and its values. Bob Dylan, for instance, influenced an entire generation of singer-songwriters; Dire Strait's Mark Knopfler, whose songs veer between fierce working class satire and sentimental indulgence, is among them. And Knopfler had an impact upon such groups as The Style Council, which managed, incredibly enough, to top the charts with songs which are straight marxist propaganda while appearing to conform to (parody?) the rock industry's demands of style and presentation. The list could be taken over by the system; Elvis is the classic, and tragic, example. It is true that others are products of the entertainment industry and are packaged and promoted as such right from the start. In between, however, are infinite variations and permutations: the mass media is the site of constant cultural struggle/fusion/conflict/contradiction; any attempt to impose a theoretical grid which does not allow for this is doomed to be simply wrong.

Australian country music, to take another musical example, shows just how complex this process can be and how American cultural imperialism can be turned by a local culture to its own ends. It began as a quite blatant copy of American country-and-western music in its fairly debased and commercial post-Nashville forms, and as such can be seen as a subservient response to the economic power and cultural domination exercised by the US

music industry over the Australian scene.

But the early Australian "hillbilly" singers soon began writing their own songs out of their own experience and with extraordinary rapidity created their own genre of country music. It dealt with the real concerns of country people and was closer in tone and feeling to the original Appalachian and Western songstreams of the United States folk culture than to the Nashville music which followed. Slim Dusty's first recorded song, *When the Rain Tumbles Down in July*, is virtually a list of evocative, highly charged bush images drawn as directly from his own experience as Banjo Paterson had drawn from his. Their stage names still drew on America — Tex Morton, Buddy Williams, Slim Dusty — but their music was Australian. Often they drew on Australian folk songs and bush ballads; within a decade they had created an original bush music which elicited an enormous response from country people (it still does) and developed into a widespread popular culture of music, songs, ballads, jokes, travelling shows, radio programs and all the rest of it.

Since then, Australian country music has itself been steadily commercialised; EMI suddenly realised that Slim Dusty was selling more records than any other local or overseas artist, rock, pop or country; and country music, like its US counterpart, has become a staple music of an urban working class which has only residual links with the country. But the tremendous success of such songs as *The Pub With No Beer*, and of Gordon Kirkpatrick (Slim Dusty) himself, show that the tradition still has the power to throw up popular icons and images and artists who tap into some stream of the Australian experience and perform one of the crucial roles of popular culture; expressing that which others feel but cannot speak, or sing, or write.

If contemporary popular culture were simply the manipulative and coercive creation of our social controllers, one would have to explain two further phenomena. The

first is the inability of the programmers to determine, finally, what will be popular and what won't. To use the pop music industry as an example again, reggae, punk rock and even disco and, more recently, hip-hop and "House" music became popular at grass roots level while the industry chiefs were trying to sell more easily packaged stuff; the same occurred earlier, with Dylan and the whole protest song movement, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, in fact, rock 'n' roll itself. Of course, the industry and media quickly seize upon and commercialise such movements; it is the familiar problem of the avant-garde being unable to keep ahead of the salesmen. But the popular arts never become completely manageable, as successive new movements prove.

The second phenomenon is the multiplicity of motives and interests, often conflicting, shown by those involved in the mass media. Even Australian newspapers, radio stations, TV stations, magazines, and so on, operate in a pluralistic situation. Many of their staff or those who write for them are actively opposed to the policies of the owners and use the mass media to promote counter-ideologies. The media are monopolistic, but not monolithic. (And though their owners can help create popular taste, they are also forced to respond to it; as in the music industry, the controllers are to a certain extent in the hands of the controlled.) Take one media institution, the ABC: despite its conservatism, many of its programs are opposed to the dominant ideology; the ABC Staff Union, the Women's Broadcasting Co-operative, and some individual producers have real, if limited, power.

There are alternatives. Graffiti, yarns, jokes, bawdy ballads, children's rhymes, satirical songs, and so on, can all be seen as uncensored expressions of the popular imagination. A great deal of popular culture, from sport (surfing) to art (the local rock group) to lifestyle (criminals, cosmoics, counterculturalists) to rituals (drugs, skinny dipping, orgies) exists in

defiance of, or in uneasy tension with, the dominant culture. But spray-pak graffiti on the factory wall is not a sufficient answer to the massed potency of the media, which is why the Labor Party's refusal to confront the media monopolies and its softpedalling on alternative media such as FM stations, video centres, public broadcasting and public TV is so disheartening. Labor leaders like Bob Hawke and, earlier, Neville Wran try to buy off the media chains by deregulating them and granting them Lotto concessions and the like, but this sort of action simply increases the power of the groups that are historically opposed to the ALP. Short-term solutions, long-term defeats.

### "Seeing into" culture

Before he died, Ian Turner gave a paper to the University of Exeter titled *The Bastards from the Bush: Some Comments on Class and Culture* which suggests an alternative to the condemnation by some critics of popular culture as "diversionary and escapist" and as operating "to create a false consciousness in the proletariat by means of the values it disseminates — that happiness can be achieved by individual success within a competitive, class-divided society, and measured in the material rewards of the consumer culture".

In it Turner argues that the mode of production does not directly and immediately determine culture, but rather sets the limits within which the imagination can operate. From this, he moves on to a defence of both the insights and the "escapes" of the arts and entertainments, and adds "I believe that the imagination should stand in an alternative and critical relationship to the production process and to all existing power structures". He even commends the counter-culture as lying outside and in opposition to the norms of the high culture of both the capitalist and communist worlds, and in that sense "popular".

It's a very clear and level-headed exposition of a position which Turner describes as "libertarian marxist", and it escapes the anti-populist bias which I described at the

beginning of this article. (It also demonstrates what a loss Ian Turner's death is to us all.) Without leaping at this point into the high culture/popular culture debate, it seems to me that the distinction between the two is no longer as clear as it used to be, and that the traffic between them is usually beneficial. High culture is continually reinvigorated by popular culture. And the mass media, for all its faults, has made the most highly refined creations of Western elite culture accessible to a mass audience for the first time (one million reproductions of Andy Warhol's *Marilyn*, da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*, and Beethoven's Fifth Symphony can't be wrong).

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It has been argued that such creations simply project the values of the exploitative societies they represent, but this is to misunderstand the way in which art can be a process of "seeing into" and "seeing through" the culture of the time, an imaginative mode which can be critical of, in opposition to, or transcend, the social/political superstructure. To use Turner's language, art is never wholly and utterly conditioned by the dominant economic mode of the time. That's

one of the reasons we can feel optimistic about the evolution in contemporary society of a popular culture which is popularly created and expresses the life and aspirations of the common people.

Three contemporary examples of cultural phenomena confirm this general analysis. And, to make it difficult, I should begin with one which seems to be an absolutely straightforward case of cultural manipulation by the advertising industry. The NSW Tooheys TV ads which link beer to well-known sporting figures and to the Australian sporting ethos, have been phenomenally successful. The "I feel like a Tooheys" refrain has seeped into the consciousness of millions of consumers and has helped make Tooheys, once the underdog in the NSW beer industry, one of the most popular brands in the nation.

Now, undoubtedly one of the reasons this promotion has been so successful is that it has hooked onto an important and pervasive element in Australian life, namely the emotion people feel when they are involved in or watch some sort of sporting triumph. It can be an amazing Mark Ella manoeuvre, or an unexpected marathon win, or an underdog VFL team beating the competition leaders, or anything else which creates within us all that sense of tension, and excitement, and final release which makes almost any sport such a powerful mode of popular culture.

Tooheys has commercialised that emotion for its own purposes. But it's important to realise that the power of the advertisement derives basically from the authentic sporting moment it recreates, rather than from the brand-name advertising content of the commercial. The media artists who create the ad have hooked on to something quite genuine, and though the purposes towards which the emotion has been used are trivial that does not mean the emotion itself has been invalidated.

In other words, in this concocted pop cultural form there remains enough of the sign's original power to make it communicate with

a considerable degree of integrity; we know, in our hearts, that what we are seeing on the TV set is only a *copy*, but it is a copy of something which stirs and moves us, and if the copy is good enough (art in the age of mechanical reproduction?) it communicates to us nonetheless. Which is why, when I see the Tooheys commercial, though I am aware of the insidious nature of the process at work, I (like many others) respond to it. There is a genuine process of recognition and identification going on.

A somewhat similar process occurs with those sentimental, banal pop songs of the 'thirties and 'forties which have become "standards" and form the repertoire of singers and easy listening stations all over the world. For most of my life, I've despised or ignored those songs (Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein) as fake cultural products which were mass-produced in Tin Pan Alley just as Fords are mass-produced at Broadmeadows. For me, rock 'n' roll came as a blast of fresh air: as Richard Goldstein asked, how could we ever have survived the 'sixties without Chuck Berry and his gas stations, juke boxes, schoolyards, teen queens, long distance calls, V8 jalopies and his lexicon of American pop history?

In the Australian colony, both genres were imports, but at least the second was *real*. Vicariously, my brothers and I in Rose Bay lived out the black rhythm-and-blues rebellion against honky middle class culture, just as Liverpool musicians did a few years later (*Roll Over, Beethoven* in thick Merseyside vowels). But puzzling about it since, I've come to realise that though the lyrics of the old pop songs are almost invariably corny and manipulative, their forms encapsulate popular feelings and emotions and, like the Tooheys ads, hook onto genuine cultural responses.

We know the singer's emotion is fake, but we also know the emotion she/he is referring to is *not*, and if we can feel our way through the facade we can sometimes discover the authentic behind it. At such times the fake is transformed into a genuine

cultural metaphor for the real.

By the time we reach a profound cultural form like the blues, the processes of resistance, identification and transformation which I have been talking about become obvious. The blues is not only one of the great poetic forms of the 20th Century: it is an example of the way in which popular genres, if they are good enough, can accrue a formal significance, a dominant meaning, a "charge" if you like, which persists throughout whatever artistic and social contexts it finds itself in. Thus the blues, as well as being a classic

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form in its own right, has been a significant part of rhythm-and-blues, rock 'n' roll, boogie woogie, jazz, and even contemporary funk. And in each transmogrification it has manifested much the same qualities which have characterised the form from the beginning.

What is absolutely unique to the blues, and what has made so many generations of people respond to it so powerfully, is its synthesis of sorrow and joy — a paradox which would be almost inexplicable if we were not aware of its social evolution. The sorrow that characterises the blues is derived from black slavery and the

work songs, laments, shouts, hollers, arwhoolies, spirituals and moans which were synthesised in the blues form towards the end of the nineteenth century.

But the blues can also be joyful, a fierce act of affirmation in the face of tragedy: as so many blues singers have explained, they sing "to sing the blues away", and those interlocked emotions can be heard in the voice of every major blues singer from Bessie Smith to B.B. King. And, as Wilfrid Mellers has argued in *Music In A New Found Land*, in creating the blues, the black American has created a perfect artistic metaphor for modern, alienated humanity:

(It) began as the music of a minority. This minority, having nothing more to lose, could accept its alienation and its isolation for what they were, with a desperate fortitude denied to the members of an ostensibly prosperous society. Yet in so doing this minority could imbue its awareness of dispossession with a universal significance, making its melancholy serve as a symbol of the alienation of modern, urban man. D.H. Lawrence said that humanity today is "like a great uprooted tree"; and James Joyce made the hero of his modern *Odyssey* a Jew. The American Negro was literally uprooted from his home ...

The reason that the great mass of people has responded so instinctively to the blues in one or other of its forms is that they have found in the music of a dispossessed, alienated, ex-slave race the exact expression of their own dispossession, alienation and industrial slavery. Yet they, too, seek a way out. And so in a modern blues such as B.B. King's "That's Why I Sing the Blues", which reached the top of the American charts, there is a yearning, and yet an optimism, an excitement which we all respond to. It is our music that he is singing.

#### **Loving in vain**

One Christmas holidays, in the surfbloated heat of Byron Bay, the young son of a friend was playing around on guitar and trying to work out the chords for *Love in Vain*. He was trying to sing it too. When I asked him why, he said it was because

it was the most moving love song he'd ever heard; he had just broken up with the woman he had been living with, after a long relationship. He had learnt the song from a Rolling Stones album, *Let it Bleed*, released back in 1969; but the Stones, of course, had got it from Robert Johnson, the great Mississippi Delta blues singer who had recorded it at one of the only two recording sessions he made in 1937, before he died at the age of 20 — poisoned, the story is, by a jealous girlfriend. Not many country blues singers ever sang and wrote songs with the stark and primitive passion of Robert Johnson who, even on his rare recordings, seems to be a man possessed; and *Love in Vain* is an extraordinary song, based on the traditional 12-bar blues but altered by Johnson to become an almost Shakespearean outpouring of unrequited love, and crystallised in a form which is in many ways comparable to the Elizabethan sonnet. The last verse goes:

When that train left the station it had two lights on behind  
 When that train left the station it had two lights on behind  
 The blue one was my baby, and the red one was my mind  
 When your love's in vain.

Johnson probably wrote that song, in the manner of Delta blues singers, from his own experience; there is a poetic veracity about it which we find in much great literature. He would have sung it at dances, in bars, on street corners to his own people before he recorded it, carrying out the immemorial role of the folk bard. If ever there was a music of the people, by the people, for the people, this was it. Johnson's life as an itinerant black musician was, certainly, shaped in part by the dominant capitalist system; but many societies, capitalist and non-capitalist, seem to have equivalent bards, troubadors, and wandering minstrels.

When he recorded his songs for ARC, Johnson was being used by the record company which extracted a

profit from his art, in typical capitalist fashion; yet the same system, without comprehending the cultural significance of what it was doing, distributed Johnson's records throughout the United States so that they became part of the popular culture of rural and urban black Americans and carried their messages and metaphors to a vastly wider audience than he would ever have reached in performing live in Mississippi.

More than thirty years later the Rolling Stones, a blues-based British rock band, included its own version

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of the song on one of its bestselling albums. The Stones, whose name is in itself an act of homage to one of Muddy Waters' most powerful blues, were no doubt as admiring of the song as everyone else who heard it; their version is quite faithful, in lyrics and tone, to Robert Johnson's original, through slowed down and made slightly more melodramatic. By this time the record industry was much more consciously and skilfully exploitative and the profits much larger; Johnson's song reached millions instead of thousands. Decca extracted its profit; the Stones extracted theirs; Johnson, who was dead, got nothing; but suddenly the world was given one of the great love songs of our time, a metaphor for all of us who have ever loved in vain, and which for my friend's son acted as both affirmation and catharsis.

In one sense the motives of the commercial system which made this possible are irrelevant; the cultural effect of its operations, in this case, has been the distribution throughout the entire Western world of a music which provides cultural meanings and insights for us all. The same happened with Dylan, the Beatles,

black revolutionary music of the 'seventies, and the alternative musics (punk, reggae, hip hop, House) of our time. It's a good example, I think, of how capitalism can never entirely control the effects of its operations nor determine completely what happens to the culture it helps promote; art has a way of escaping the machinations of our merchandisers.

To return to specifics: my friend's son and his own mates now write their own songs and play them — not for some commercial purpose, but because it seems a good way to create music. It certainly is; it's what people have been doing for centuries. They write songs out of their own experience, for their own peers, in an attempt to synthesise that experience, in exactly the way Robert Johnson did. If they finally get their rock group off the ground they will become much more a part of the capitalist system than they are now, but hopefully they will be able to make use of it as much as the system makes use of them. In the meantime, in Byron Bay, Oztralia, a young man has been helped to understand his own life by a song recorded 45 years ago in a San Antonio hotel room by a black blues singer — who was exactly his own age.

That's one song, heard by one person, in one place. You could expand on it a millionfold, with similar built-in complexities. I suppose that's where the role of cultural criticism lies. Some of our popular culture is manipulative, mass media-ised, capitalised in the interests of a conservative hegemony. Some of it quite consciously criticises and resists that hegemony. And some of it struggles to be free of the system, grappling with the eternal questions which confront all societies and civilisations. Most of it is somewhere in between those three trig points, a mixture. That doesn't lead us to easy theoretical answers but it leads us closer to the truth.

CRAIG MCGREGOR is head of the design school at the Sydney College of the Arts, and a writer for the *Sydney Morning Herald*.