It was about 6.30 pm on a late January evening on a hillside in Sydney's Eastern Creek. The day had been extremely hot, the crowd was extremely large, defiantly young and growing ever more excited as 8.00 pm, bringing Guns and Roses on stage drew near. Sebastian Bach, support band Skid Row's front, was in extremely fine voice—whatever you think about him, the guy can sing. At one stage he left off his enthusiastically applauded diatribe against all boring old farts and the things they cherish, to give praise where it was due.

"Wanna hear it for Rose Tattoo. They're good friends of ours and a fuckin' great band."

Rose Tattoo had performed earlier with badly distorted sound that the faithful had no trouble deciphering into songs. They were led by a bouncing Angry Anderson—who, from a quarter of a mile away looked like nothing less than a tattooed Humpty Dumpty in an Elvis suit (even through binoculars). But that sort of distance reduces everyone without extreme star aura—and the techno effects to substantiate it—to muppet appeal.

"Whoa-yay-yo!" the crowd graciously screamed back.

"And how 'bout the guys who gave us the great fuckin' beer?"

"Yeah!" bellowed the crowd in growing ecstasy.

"And waddabout those security guys. They've done a fuckin' terrific job in this fuckin' heat."

"Yo!!!" The response thundered around the hills—the crowd was now thoroughly aroused by their own volume.

"An' now lemme hear it for... Kylie Minogue!"

I swear there was a guarded pause before the crowd obliged:

"BOOOOOO" The bang had become a whimper when up from behind, one lone intrepid defender threw her fist in the air and yelled out "yay Kylie". And
then "fuck the lotta ya!" to all who'd jerked round in disbelief.

I wanted to laugh. I did. I wanted to yell out "what she said". I didn't. I was only one of four baby boomers among 79,996 of our descendants. I figured my support could only undermine Kylie's case.

But for those of us who work in cultural analysis, arguing Kylie's case always seems difficult. It's a difficulty which is focused by two popular notions in current criticism—those of "reinvention" and "the woman who articulates stardom on her own terms." Before expanding on these terms, however, I need to explain the dilemma within the following interpretation of stars.

It's easy to focus on stars as subjects of myth and fantasy—as characters in a story whose stage is the whole world and whose author is its people. It's a focus which was given direction by the Hollywood studio system from which actors came complete with carefully constructed star biographies. No hint of human deficiency, no lesser-than-heroic traits were allowed to crease the perfection of the image. In today's information society with its proliferation of stories purporting to reveal the real person behind the star, this degree of manipulation isn't possible. But rather than destabilising the star structure, such stories make myth-makers of us all; now we all collude in masking a star's human traits to construct a super-human hero. As subjects of popular imagination, pop stars can tell us a lot about our society. Filling the leading roles in our collectively constructed narratives, they reveal what characteristics and behaviours are significant to us and in which contexts.

And so to the reinvention of Kylie and the question of her legitimacy: is she or is she not a 'legitimate role model', a woman who "articulates stardom on her own terms?" "Reinvention" is a nice succinct term, useful for describing the process of image change that some music stars, like Kylie, like to undergo. It's one of those buzz words which the 90s has unproblematically inherited from the 80s, probably because it has currency in both popular and academic criticism. But the value of this currency rises and falls according to who it's applied to.

Using the term to describe Michael Jackson's metamorphosis seems rather like trying to use monopoly money to buy the real thing—it is, after all, a description of a surface rather than the structural change which Jackson has sought by attacking his very gene pool. Applied to a George Michael or a Taylor Dane, it has connotations of development and approval—an enthusiastic back-pat for moving away from the triviality of their pop days to the seriousness of the solo rock artist—always supposing there is a recognisable line separating pop from rock.

When applied to Kylie Minogue the term reinvention often implies a change for the sake of change, a constant search for a new, more shocking image to keep herself ever new, endlessly consumable. This meaning assumes that previous images have been erased from an accommodating public memory and she has significance only in terms of her current image. And what other interpretation could there be? Minogue's music is, after all, pure pop, uncluttered by any sort of political or artistic project (at least not so you'd notice).

This position is defined by Stuart Maconie, in the British magazine New Musical Express when he summarises Minogue as "the pop plaything turned scantily clad nymphet". Maconie's article is typical of this genre. Undeniably supportive, with a hefty and gleeful tilt at the elitism of what he calls "the gerontocracy of the music establishment", it yet fails to convince us that Minogue should be taken seriously except as a genuinely likeable sexy little thing who sings good pop songs. This is, of course, a far cry from the sneers she faced in former years. It could even be the height of praise for pop fans. But it's nowhere like a paean of praise for a significant artist. Kylie becomes, in this analysis, merely an object to be looked at—certainly not one of the new pop women in control of her own stardom. Is it possible for a star with no political significance to also be able to stand as representative of the 'woman in control'? Critics such as former Rolling Stone editor Toby Creswell have, however, had no trouble locating her in this admired group—although the exact terms on which they justify her membership can remain unclear.

The argument becomes clear if we acknowledge that Minogue's changes in image are, despite the seeming weightlessness of her music, inherently political. In a recent book From Pop to Punk to Postmodernism, edited by Phillip Hayward (Allen and Unwin), I proposed that Kylie's stardom rests firmly on the manner in which her changes of image mimic her growth from "the girl next door" to the woman in charge of the seemingly private but most public of spaces—that in front of the camera. In effect, she demonstrates the transition which we all must make from the safety of the home to the gaze of the public eye and does so with conviction and authority. In doing so she demonstrates for countless young women (and others who find themselves pushed into society's margins), possibilities for being in control in a society which frequently denies their right to be so. Being little, young and blonde, Minogue's lack of physical status enhances the potency of this representation.

The early videoclip I've Got to Be Certain (1988) is an excellent example of this theme. In this song the lyrics are one side of a dialogue in which the person/singer is asking another to wait until she's sure she wants them to be together. If the lyrics express uncertainty, the visuals and music don't. Here, Kylie refuses to be placed by the words in the position of subordination that heterosexual romance can entail for women. She appears in an upmarket restaurant, walking beside a harbour, a river, and on a high-rise rooftop at night time, in daylight and usually alone. She asserts her right to be in those diverse public spaces by striding over them in time to the refrain of the song—thereby effectively marking them out as her territory. Changes in clothes emphasise her familiarity with each context. And the impression of joyous determination is iterated by the dance tempo of the music. Here is a woman in control.

But while we can redeem, to a
large extent, the content of Minogue's work, there are those who would question her credentials to be engaged in the work of music making at all. Because Kylie's music (disco) is perceived as lightweight and worthless, unpolitical, her background was in females' television (soap opera) and her audience is widely assumed to be very young and female, she is considered by many to be scarcely credible. As well, her apprenticeship in the already-judged-worthless soap opera context doesn't fit with accepted notions of musical pedigree in Australia—notions which revolve around the pub as the legitimate performance context; the live audience as the legitimate audience; and guitar-based pub music as the legitimate sound. Dues paying or work within these parameters has been seen as the true breeding ground of rock musos.

But when she released Locomotion, Minogue had been acting on the public stage for seven years. In anyone's terms that's a decent sort of apprenticeship. Given that the production of a television series is normally a high-pressure, work-intensive experience, she also came from a tradition of hard work. What we have, therefore, is a distinction based, not on the amount of work but on the content of that work—music against acting—and the context of that work—pubs and live gigs rather than television, and, more specifically, soap opera. We are by now reconciled to the idea of soap stars turning into recording stars. I'd argue that this reconciliation has come about as much through a re-conceptualisation of soap opera as an acceptable incubating context as it has through the frequency with which it occurs.

On these terms, Kylie's career can be depicted as the development of a successful worker. To be considered as a successful worker on today's terms, there must be an acknowledgment that one's work is defined, in some sense, "on one's own terms". Extended to Kylie's stardom, it confers on her the right to be seen as a woman who "articulates stardom on her own terms".

Such interpretations of Kylie—as worker/star, as a "woman in control of her own stardom" and as an artist with a positive cultural/political significance—jeopardise the ideological bent of the "star as commodity" argument. For commodities are things we buy and sell and which have merely an exchange, not a use value. Unlike our pop stars, they can't give positive expression to our experiences and articulate positive ways of being in society, or impart strategies of resistance to social inscriptions.

One wonders how many other "ideologically unsound" facets of our multi-faceted society have been unjustly discarded and denigrated as a result of our own blindness. How many other realities are there behind the appearances our analyses have constructed?

"Yay Kylie." "Fuck the lotta ya!"

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THE COMFORT OF ALEX

There must be very few adults these days who, upon buying the daily paper, immediately turn to the comic section: those that do are probably self-consciously trying to rekindle some childhood pleasure. Most people probably don't even read the comics anymore, and certainly the days are long-gone when a paper's popularity stood or fell on its comic section.

More fool them. Even when the mainstream comic sections aren't funny (that is, most of the strips most of the time) they're an essential "take" on the western world—even doodle stars. In fact especially doodle stars.

But there are at least three strips appearing in Australian newspapers which are extremely entertaining in themselves. Two of these—Calvin and Hobbes and Alex—deal with self-centred males struggling to keep their own comfortable corner of an uncaring environment. Both characters inhabit worlds where nothing is as it seems to be—until reality, the inevitable punchline, comes to shatter their—and our—perception.

Alex, by Charles Peattie and Russell Taylor, is the only strip run by the Australian Financial Review. It originally ran in the London Independent, until its creators defected to The Daily Telegraph last year. The strip is also regularly collected into 'best of' volumes, the most recent of which is Alex IV (published by Fairfax at $12.95); the authors also produce the similar Celeb for Private Eye under the pen-name Ligger. Alex is their foray into the world of so-called high-flying big business; while Alex himself never comes down from his high-flying with a bump (except for one episode where he literally crashes into a rainforest) there are few around him who escape his self-centred greed. Alex is an entirely unsympathetic character who, not very surprisingly, seems to spend his impeccable existence with his eyes closed or at least wincing. But those around him do not present any sort of contrast or relief; he's a ruthless man in a ruthless environment. Appearance is everything and success very much an end in itself (though being seen to succeed is possibly even more important).

Peattie and Taylor are effective satirists, but like many daily cartoonists they also rely on an ingenious formula to get their point across while giving the regular reader some anticipatory enjoyment. Often, a four or five-frame strip will be an extended pun, so cleverly constructed that the reader will go back and trace the way...