remind us they are still around. What is particularly eloquent, and shocking in its own right, is the characters' absolute self-confidence, the assurance with which their values are held and invoked. It is impossible not to be deeply impressed by the categoric certainty of Laurie's account of his stepson, Michael's, motivations, for instance, or by Noeline's complete lack of self-doubt. Watching her, I was repeatedly reminded of one of Magda Szubanska's characters in *Fast Forward*: the chain-smoking, heavily made-up office worker whose children are abandoned to all kinds of misfortune while she wearily complains about their ingratitude.

Unlike most soap opera, however, *Sylvania Waters* does get harder to watch. I find it increasingly uncomfortable precisely because it demonstrates the hardiness of social myths and prejudices, how old attitudes die hard. In some of the conversations, we do hear the conventional public voice of a contemporary, liberal-democratic Australia. But always insistently elbowing its way in is a much less tolerant, democratic, and pluralistic set of views. *Sylvania Waters* is often just plain ugly, because the ideologies which surface in 'private' conversations and behaviours are unrepentantly consumerist, racist, xenophobic, homophobic, and sexist. In contrast to the material sophistication of their resort-style way of life, what these people say makes them seem like they just stepped off the set of *Married with Children*—only this is no sitcom. The result, for many viewers I have talked to, is major embarrassment. Noeline's expression of pride in her lust for a black stripper, a pride that is actually fuelled rather than undercut by her racism, gets my vote as one of the most embarrassing moments in Australian television.

Australian television has a strong tradition of the exploitation of embarrassment—from Norman Gunston to *Perfect Match* to *Red Faces*. But it's never been quite like this. In the past, the 'ordinary Australian' has largely been left off the hook. Even our sitcoms have been relatively tactful in comparison with those of other national TV industries. The Australian television industry has not produced the equivalent of *Till Death Us Do Part*, or *All in the Family*—sharply satirical but ultimately tolerant representations of lumpen regressiveness—until now. (The closest we got was probably *Kingwood Country*.) The worry is that while *All in the Family* relied on scripts performed by professional actors before an audience, *Sylvania Waters* involves members of the middle class performing renditions of their everyday life for the sole benefit of seeing themselves on TV. Where the worry turns to fascination is that the performances not only establish the differences between them and us, they also make it hard to deny the similarities.

Relief from this discomfort is on its way, however. At least one commercial channel is producing its own version of *Sylvania Waters* to counter the ABC, and to avoid surrendering a whole genre of television to the competition. The sharp edge is clearly going to get duller when we face an evening with 'suburbia verité' on all channels, offering us the choice of *Sylvania Waters*, *Killarney Heights*, *Green Valley* and *Sanctuary Cove*. Thank God, SBS can't afford to produce its own.

GRAEME TURNER teaches in English at the University of Queensland. He is co-author of *Myths of Queensland*. He is also the co-author of *Myths of Oz* (Allen and Unwin).

---

**Cultural Football**

The treasures of Angkor Wat are in Canberra: how they got there is a complicated story. Jeremy Eccles explains.

Culture as a political football is a metaphor that we don't often encounter in white Australia, where football is so much more important than the arts, education and history that it usually appropriates all the best imagery. Will we ever compare the flashing elegance of the 'Macedonian Marvel' Peter Daicos to a Zofrea? The positional sense of Mark Ella to Rover Thomas? Or the curving runs of Brett Kenny to Brett Whitely?

There are, of course, pros and cons to the notion. But, to encounter the arts of a country that matter so much that its hopes and aspirations can be directly linked to its temples, its statues and its bronzes is an inspiring experience. Cambodia is the country in question; the great temple of Angkor Wat is the image that appears on its flag; and 35 of its artistic treasures have left the country for the first time ever for Canberra, on a journey that has a variety of (mainly political) motives.

Perhaps the first thing to insist upon is that the treasures are worth seeing for purely aesthetic reasons. The sheer youthfulness of the faces and bodies of the Khmer statuary will be my most lasting impression of this glorious work, made between the sixth and 13th centuries AD.; the youth, and the beauty of the very human models, compared to the more stylized work being done elsewhere in Asia at the same time. The gods are the same—Buddha, Vishnu, Krishna, and so on. But the royal princess whose likeness was used for the Buddhist goddess of Perfect Wisdom is recognisably a child before she is divine; the seventh century standing Buddha has liquid drapery covering its youthful swelling tummy; and the tenderly meditative stone *Head of Jayavarman VII*—both King and Buddha—forever seals in his youth a King who may have reigned into his 90s.

But the politics were there from the start. Indian traders allowed the mon-
soons to blow them eastwards, but then had to wait a few months on the other side of the Gulf of Thailand before return was possible. They had plenty of time to pass on ideas and art styles to the distinctly less sophisticated Khmers — who were probably only then, in the fifth and sixth centuries, emerging from tribalism. Hinduism and Buddhism seem to have been bought separately by the tribal leaders and the people, with the future kings particularly taken with the Hindu concept of the deva-rahja, the god-king. To have your authority backed by divine force was much better than the vote.

But you had to be able to prove it. Hence, every king from 800 to 1250—and some lesser mortals—built his own temple city. Angkor Wat, the most famous temple, is but one of these: a moated area 1300 by 1500 metres which housed religious officials in a sub-division of the city named Angkor by subsequent generations. No one knows its original name. The lower, perimeter galleries of the temple housed educational bas reliefs telling stories from *The Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Priests officiated at higher levels while the King himself held Brahmanistic court with the gods in the uppermost sanctuary—possibly going through nightly fecundity rites.

The whole pattern was modelled on Borobudur in Java, recreating Mount Meru, the mountain home of the gods.

What no one knows from the evidence of existing stone tablets — no other writing survives — is who the nonymous artists and craftsmen were who created these many wonders, which certainly didn’t just copy Indian models. It has been assumed that the wealth necessary to afford so much non-productive labour derived from a parallel massive irrigation system. Over 250 years, three huge barays were built to hold 75 million cubic metres of water which, in turn, allowed three rice crops a year. But some historians throw doubts on this efficiency— and no one seems to know whether an assumed Angkor population of 750,000 was held in slavery to achieve all this, or whether they willingly accepted a metempsychotic society in which only the royals were hereditary (and had divine backing) and everyone else earned their place.

How did this whole edifice crumble into the jungles? In 1298, a Chinese traveller described a going civilisation (including the then 300 year old *Reclining Vishnu* statue in bronze whose gnarled and pitted head and shoulders amazingly sit in Canberra today). Then nothing, until the French ‘rediscovered’ the temples in the 19th century and tried to tell their colonial subjects that they must have been built by a different race of giants.

It seems likely that encroaching Chams (from Vietnam) and the Thais were involved. There have been suggestions of drugs and homosexuality. The last kings’ conversion to the people’s religion of Buddhism may have diminished their power (while also producing the miraculously meditative *Head of Jayavarman VII*). Maybe all that temple building destroyed the economy, for the wonderful Bayon temple required 54 towers decorated with 216 giant Buddhist heads. Could there even have been a positive decision to relocate to Phnom Penh on that great artery of trade and communication, the Mekong?

Whatever their motives, the French did much to tell the world about the Khmer wonders. They excavated in stifling heat, they hacked back jungle trees and creepers, they rebuilt heaps of stones into temples, and they founded the National Museum. Virtually none of their research, though, was fed back to the Cambodians; the Canberra exhibition catalogue is claimed to be the first in both English and Khmer. This perhaps goes some way to explain why the Khmer Rouge, while attempting to deny the very existence of history with their concept of...
Identity Crisis


Take the (not entirely hypothetical) example of a women's health centre. You might expect a congenial and committed working place, but instead you find the place seething with acrimony: each woman is proclaiming that she has been more oppressed than the others by reason of a) her class background, b) her cultural background, c) her sexuality and d) her disabilities. There is, in short, a peculiar competition in play whereby each woman is attempting to be top of the pecking order—is somehow "purer"—by dint of the number of points of oppression she can lay claim to. The scene is reminiscent of Werner Hertzog's terrifying film, Even Dwarves Started Small. Forgotten in this power struggle are the two points that connect these workers: the common ground of being women and of working for the health of other women.

If such a scenario is possible in a working environment where you might expect a sense of professionalism, of discipline, to prevail, then how is cooperation, let alone harmony, to be found in voluntary associations, community organisations and ordinary social relations between individuals? You may think this is the stuff of science fiction, but such are the concerns of those who speculate on the politics of identity. Associated with this politics of identity is what Jan Pettman calls the politics of boundary making which, in turn, makes use of Foucault's nexus between power and knowledge, a notion not so far removed from the older Gramscian notion of hegemony.

According to this view, dominant discourses in effect put boundaries around social groups like women, Aborigines and migrants that serve to oppress such groups and to denote those who are to be included in the subordinate groupings or excluded from the dominant group. Such boundaries are imagined, but are at the same time real. In the case of women, Aborigines and migrants, the boundaries once had to do with supposed