women in post-industrial society, but I do feel it offers a more positive portrayal of women’s strength than Chez Nous. Like the earlier, and somewhat blacker, Heathers, it is part of a new genre of mocking hyper-American films, which sometimes feature smart-mouthed girls as unwitting heroes. Buffy, the central character, begins as an archetypal ‘airhead’ who is unbelievably rich, has unbelievably rich friends and handsome boyfriend. Ambitions? To marry Christian Slater and perhaps, if a career is unavailable, to be a buyer—although of what she is not sure; she just liked the sound of it. Her parody of femininity is too complete to be truly offensive. She’s a cheerleader, she sneers at non-WASP boys, she has vast quantities of blonde hair, will almost certainly be the prom queen, and won’t buy a jacket because a friend scoffs that it is “so five minutes ago”. Her name is Buffy for God’s sake.

What is fascinating to watch is the transformation as she is told by Merrick (Donald Sutherland) that she is the “chosen one” who must single-handedly fight the vampire nation. At first she is contemptuous and disbelieving (“Get out of my facial”). Then she is pleased to discover that someone understands her dreams—dreams she had always kept secret. She’s not so dumb after all. When Merrick tricks Buffy and betrays her trust she responds by punching him so fiercely that she knocks him over—and then remarks she hadn’t known she was so strong, because she’d never hit anyone before. (A nice parable of female empowerment if ever I saw one.) Now that she does know her own strength, Buffy takes rather a liking to it. She works out, she jumps and kicks, she slays a few vampires—she’s got a knack for this, and the camera emphasises the power of her physical work in the (plentiful) action scenes.

It becomes clear that Buffy doesn’t fit in any more, and she’s no longer happy with her old life. When her boyfriend’s sleazy friend grabs her arse, as he has done on previous occasions, she responds by hurling him to the floor. We start to see her in flannelette shirts and cutoff denim shorts. At one stage a biker’s offer of “something hot and powerful between your legs” is taken up; his face hits the tarmac and she roars off on his motorbike to cries of “Dyke!” from his mates. “Yo tough Buffy!” cried someone in the audience.

There are a lot of nice messages about this transformation. When Merrick complains that Buffy is the most difficult girl he has ever trained and that she “does everything wrong”, he adds that it’s just fine that she does it all her way. Merrick knows, and we know, that she’s going to win because she’s stubborn and strong. Buffy’s obligatory love interest is a daggy boy, Pike (Luke Perry) who, although he tries to be of assistance, is mostly just overpowered and faint. She won’t do what he tells her to do, either, so he ends up accepting his limitations and sharpens wooden stakes for her. A nice finishing touch comes when Buffy and Pike (Those names! A match made in heaven, really) go to a dance together. Pike asks defensively “I suppose you want to lead?” “No” says Buffy, “Do you?” He shakes his head, and they try to work a way around it. Cutesy perhaps, but also a striking contrast to the she’s-tough-but-bows-down-to-the-man-she-loves theme of film orthodoxy.

Of course there is a gulf between the films’ approaches; after all, Buffy is a fantasy while Chez Nous is making a stab at social realism. And it’s always a lot easier for women to be naughty and get away with it when no-one’s going to take it seriously. Still, when it comes to having a fun night out and getting an ‘it’s really good being a girl’ feeling at the end, my vote is: go with Buffy and leave the post-feminists to sit at home with their insight and their AFI awards.

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THE JOY OF BEX

Barry Humphries and Sylvania Waters have got Australians worried about their self-image again. Do they mean us? wonders David Nichols.

It was, of course, pure coincidence that Barry Humphries jetted into Australia exactly the same week that Sylvania Waters’ final episode saw Noeline and Laurie jetting out. But considering the reaction that the hijinks of the Sylvania Waters household sparked, Humphries might wonder if his 35-year career of coercing and cajoling his homeland had ever happened. The same questions were cropping up. Is this the way we want to be seen? Is this bad publicity for Australia? What will people think?

Humphries was on the Sylvania Waters bandwagon immediately (rumour has it he received a full set of shows from the ABC within 24 hours of his arrival and watched the whole series three times)—proclaiming Noeline a possible successor to Dame Edna’s Housewife Superstar mantle.

Like the latterday Humphries oeuvre, Sylvania Waters was more a British show about British perceptions of Australians (via soap opera) than it was about Australians themselves. Remember, that while Neighbours, Home and Away and so on seem extraordinarily daggy to almost anyone over 12 in this country, they’re the height of escapist glamour to the Brits, a slightly-out-of-reach sun-drenched heaven.

Yet, inescapably, the real-life cast of the show was thrown into fame, and watching them try to grapple with it was a glorious sight. Mostly, for them, it seemed to centre around money—how they didn’t get any for the show originally and how everyone thought they did, or how much they might possibly get from the show when it was screened in the UK. They insisted they were dramatically misrepresented in the final cut of the programs, something it is hard to doubt. Nevertheless, ABC TV’s Lateline took defence of the Donahers to absurd extremes when it forced the program’s producer to con-
fess he had not warned the family they might not enjoy the show. It would be nice if everyone involved with a film or TV production—right down to the audience, if possible—could receive such a warning.

The true postscript, however, to *Sylvania Waters* was the Hard Copy screening of Noelene and Laurie watching the final episode of the show at home. From pervig on ourselves on telly we've made a quick leap to pervig on ourselves watching telly on telly! And the worst thing was that we don't have the slightest guilty feeling—it's too fascinating.

Meanwhile, the Australian family unit has come under attack in other quarters in Barry Humphries' *More Please*, an exceptionally readable and personal autobiography by a man who has probably done more than anyone else to change the way Australians think about themselves.

Humphries' work is not always good, and he is the first to admit it. On the other hand, when he's spot on, he's so spot on that some of his sketches—early suburban Edna and Sandy Stone—now read almost as social realism. Australians (over 25, at least) know all too well the feelings Humphries experienced in the mid-60s as he leafed through the pages of *Australian Women's Weekly* in a Cornish farm cottage. "I felt instantly transported back home to a world of cosy certainties," he writes, "a land of sponge cakes and pavlovas and curried Hawaiian spag hoops." Perhaps *Sylvania Waters* is more upmarket, less cosy—but when it comes down to basics, it's really just some exotic dip with only nominal resemblance to its European ancestor (or a new way of cooking chicken so the fat falls off) which has taken the place of the curried Hawaiian spag hoop.

Humphries, constantly attacking Australians, is under constant attack himself. He writes of being confronted over his 'Neil Singleton' character by a journalist who appeared to be a living, breathing version of Neil. "There's a cultural renaissance going on here, y'know... You're living in the past, mate, and so are your characters." Oddly enough (and Humphries is happy to admit it when not defending himself from Singletonian critics) it's quite true; he does live in the past, in a sentimental version of old Australia.

Oppressive yet innocent, blindly prejudiced yet refreshingly naive; it's a vision which had already begun to fade by the time Barry was born. On the other hand, he can capture the essence of modern Australia in a vulgar aphorism, neatly wrapped like Bex powders, Barry McKenzie, Edna, Sandy, Sir Les: they're all bloody Australians, crystallised.

Barry Humphries appeared on *Ray at Midday* to publicise his book to Ray's audience—most of them, like Humphries himself—probably nudging 60—the day before *Sylvania Waters*'s Paul and Dione appeared on JJJ to farewell the Australian public. Both are selling us back to ourselves in one way or another; both find us incredibly eager to know what we're like.

There can't be too many countries like Australia, self-conscious to the point of watching TV programs with the hope of putting ourselves in the place of the overseas country at which they are really directed. Travelogues by local celebrities made good are lapped up here; we may never go to see Uluru ourselves but we would really like to see how Olivia Newton-John presents it to the Americans, thanks.

The dual attack of Humphries/ *Sylvania Waters* on the Australian family might not have had quite the sensational impact of the *Murphy Brown* vs. Dan Quayle phenomenon in the US—another 'family portrayal' issue. But in its own subtle way it made us take a look at ourselves, if only to say, "Christ, we're not really like that..."

"Or are we?"

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