Film review....

THE WORKING CLASS IN PARADISE.....

NOTES ON FJ HOLDEN

"He'll make the vinegar sweet
And make the sugar sour ....
From cracks in the concrete
He'll paint the filth and rot
Until it's spick and span.
So thank we all our God
For sending us this man."

- Brecht.

Australian cinema appears to have come a long way from the bad old days of cultural chauvinism a la Bazza McKenzie and Barry Humphries. It has been proved that Australians can make a slick, commercially successful "international" product, both elegant (Picnic at Hanging Rock) and human (Caddie). Now, as if to prove our real maturity, we have a film which purports to have a social conscience - FJ Holden - universally acclaimed as a true and confident account of contemporary working class life. (1)

Australian film critics have engaged in an orgy of congratulation based largely on the premise that producer/director Michael Thornhill and writer Terry Larsen have been both (1) brave - in tackling a subject as important yet unwieldy as contemporary western suburbs life, and (2) successful, in realising so well - "factual", "value-free", "realistic" - what Bob Ellis calls the "swamp" of working class life. A palpable sigh of relief can be heard from critics that at last Australia has produced a film of courage and integrity, at once raw and vital, fearlessly exposing the "miserable lives" of working class Australians.

What is disturbing and revealing about this degree of critical unanimity is the extent to which bourgeois film reviewers both perceive and agree with the film's central thesis - that the working class in Australia today lead "emotionally barren lives reflecting the materially rich but aimless milieu" of western suburbs life. In fact, FJ Holden is not a true and accurate evocation of this "milieu". Additionally, its distorted view is dangerous both to the working class and to those groups and movements which base their opposition to capitalist repression within it.

The film is dangerous in three senses: first in its depiction of the working class as passive, mindless, embourgeoisèd-out-of-struggle, totally accepting their conditions; second, in its presentation of those conditions as non-oppressive, non-conflictual, bland and unproblematic - that there is virtually nothing in western suburbs life which could reasonably provoke either assessment or negative reaction on the part of its citizens; third, in the insidiously "natural" style of camerawork which leads the viewer to the conclusions inherent in the narrative structure of the film without apparently doing so.

The camera, in this film, purports to be both an unselective, all-seeing eye and a mirror reflecting "reality" - therefore rendering critical response difficult. As the camera appears not to editorialise, viewers may put any vague sense of uneasiness about the portrayal down to disappointment with the object, rather than with the mirror; it is only when you question whether the film camera can be a mirror that you can also question whether the cosmetic version of young Bankstown life presented is a real picture of real people. Such questioning can allow the reality of capitalist social relations - fraught with economic, racial and sexual conflict - to emerge as vital constituents of working class existence, aspects noticeably absent in this film.

Let's look at FJ's "reality". The "neutral" camera presents us with a series of episodes in a boy-meets-girl, boy-loses-girl narrative in which the leisure pursuits of Bankstown adolescents are revealed. Against a background of casual-boring sex, benign-boring home life, and petty-boring hassles with Authority (cops, the security guard at the Bankstown shopping centre), Kev and Ann establish a relationship which, however inarticulate, is unboring. We know this is true for Kev - Anne's life is comparatively undeveloped in the film - from his behavior after Ann strongly criticises his inconsiderate treatment of her (his drinking, the constant presence of his mate, Bob): he gets drunk, becomes a stroppy and generally abusive at a party when Ann refuses to discuss their argument, and in inarticulate frustration, chucks a garden gnome (aren't our working classes quaint) through the front door. The cops are called, Kev and Bob lead and evade them in a merry car chase, and after a night of drinking beer and philosophising half-heartedly about whether your mate or your bird comes first, Kev drives home in the rosy-fingered dawn to Face the Music - parents and police arrayed in close, authoritative
Throughout the film, Kev, Ann and their peers are portrayed as leading essentially featureless lives: hassles are minor irritants rather than intolerable injustices; sex, however empty of meaning, is at least - and at last - free and easy; social expectations - for example, Ann's responsibility toward her two school-age brothers - are tiresome, but hardly relevant to this generation's understanding of themselves. In general, the picture is that life in the western suburbs is tolerable if not positively enjoyable.

Kev's FJ provides the link between the episodes, carrying Kev, Ann and Bob from one leisure zone to another - screwing in the back seat, all night drag races, a posh dinner at "Sid's of Milperra" (won't the middle class get a snicker out of that), cruising through Bankstown Square checking out the local talent, Saturday lunch at the local club, etc. etc. etc. Except for minor brushes with the law, usually over the FJ - defect notices, speeding, P-plates - nothing in the lives of these young people is more than mildly problematic, and nothing ever reaches resolution. Kev and Ann have all the bloodless charm of goldfish, idly pulsating in a watery world, easily decanted from one perfectly transparent and acceptable milieu to another.

The car - the means of decanting, as it were - carries many meanings in the film. As Kev experiences his FJ, it is both a means of personal expression - early in the film, he and Bob intentionally bumper-ride a migrant's car causing him to get booked for speeding while our heroes snigger in P-plate innocence - and as a symbol of the intrusion of impersonal authority into his life - he and Bob spend a good deal of energy ripping off and slapping on Kev's P-plates in an attempt to be more "free" than probationary status allows.

Although the car is an important motif in the film - as a means of access to Bankstown's amusements, as a point of intervention for authority, and as evidence of something rather out of the ordinary about Kev (after all, we must have some reason for following Kev as opposed to any of his mates) - it is clear that the FJ represents an area of incorporation rather than resistance. Hassles involving the car are both numerous and potentially quite serious (in the sense that we all know how difficult life can be without a car), but they are interpreted by Kev and Bob as petty problems, something you just have to grin and bear.

The presentation of the FJ as a symbol of non-concern/incorporateness is a crucial one for an understanding of the film. Not only do the filmmakers present us with a highly pasteurised version of Beautiful Downtown Bankstown - sans dole queues, drugs, corrupt cops, etc - where the people are as featureless and unresolved as their environment, but they also imply that there is no point in seeing these people or their society any differently. And the fate of the Australian FJ provides an illustration of the validity of such condescension.

Although hailed in the post-war period as a sign of Australia's coming-of-age, of industrial and productive potency, the FJ (as presented in this film) has deteriorated from national symbol to mere commodity. Labor's people's car, the production of which struck a blow for the masses (in terms of access to the good things in Australian life) is portrayed here as merely the means of moving that inarticulate and mindless mass from one location for passing the time to another. Whatever "happened" to the Holden obviously has "happened" to the working class, imploding their sociality, cauterising their personhood, rendering them autistic adults who have somehow escaped institutionalisation.

The film's message - though doubtful its makers would deny any such intention - has two levels. First, for western suburbs youth, FJ Holden encourages them to see their lives as presented: no routine, tedious work, no discrimination, relatively hassle-less sex, little pressure from authority - in short, no worries in the Pollyanna kingdom. Second, for middle-class viewers, the conclusion could be horror: omigod, how can the working class stand such aimless, inconclusive, never-getting-anywhere lives? - promoting renewed social reform measures to do something about the feckless wanderers in the trackless wastes west of Petersham. Alternatively and more likely - the reaction could be one of resigned despair, as the film validates what they knew all along about the working class - hopeless and incapable of improvement.

Both of these stances can be found in the reviews of FJ Holden in the national press; stances grounded either in an overt distaste for working class life, or in a condescension born of a sense of social, political and ethical superiority. Elizabeth Riddell, writing in The Australian, (2) gives the game away. After referring to the love life of Kev and Ann, she expresses a familiar bourgeois fear: "'It is to be hoped that they don't marry'" as "'God forbid, who needs more of them'" - a sort of Chinese red peril in reverse, the Australian working class swamping everything that civilisation (read: Protestant ethic capitalism) stands for. Bob Ellis, writing in Nation Review, (3) has no doubts as to the film's accuracy in reporting western suburbs life, "an astonishing civilisation", "a strict universe" in which the people live like "mudcrabs in a swamp", enlivened only by "dogged mateship". His concern is that Thornhill's vision is a "bit too accurate, too uncomfortable", and the nation will find the exposure too threatening to ensure a big box office. The assumption here seems to be that the working class prefers dreams "rather than a presentation of their own reality", so who
would blame the working masses for boycotting the film as it just reminds them of "their own miserable lives". Just as kangaroo slaughters in north-western New South Wales would hardly flock to see their own disgusting lives in Wake in Fright. His suggestion is that Thornhill should wake up to himself and realise that it is not profitable to be so explicit.

P.P. McGuinness' review in The National Times (4) tries not to be so crass. For him, FJ is a "picture worth a thousand boring statistical surveys"; it is a documentary yet more than a documentary, art and yet more than art - it is TRUTH itself. For McGuinness, the film has done what even pre-Socratic Greek philosophers found difficult: it has given us life in the raw, like a window on reality, through which we merely stare to see things as they really are, without the mediation of language or art. So convinced is he of FJ Holden's accuracy that he feels that he need penetrate no further west than his present frontier, Petersham.

Although the overt position of all three reviewers is to laud Thornhill for his "social realism" and uncompromising look at the awful realities of the western suburbs, their covert position is an advocacy of his picture of the working class as passive, problem-less accepters of "banal Australian life". The issue which exercises these "concerned" liberal viewers is that Bankstown youth's lack of communication, casual amorality, inability to form/maintain relationships isn't perceived by them as hallmarks of their anti-social or at least a-social existences; in short, why can't they realise how awful their lives are, and why don't they do something about it?

This point is worth emphasising. What is shown in FJ is not the gap between the objective conditions of the working class and their subjective assessments - something which left and labor movements in advanced capitalist countries are concerned to understand - but the correspondence between an unrepressive society and the unconcerned response of its youth. For bourgeois liberal critics, then, the only issue is that Kev and Ann - through impoverished language and commodified morals - don't seem to be able to actively "enjoy" their "opportunities". Affluence, the film seems to say, has been wasted on the working class. But then, That's The Way They Are.

The shared class outlook between film-makers and critics explains why the latter can be so concerned about aimlessness and meaninglessness in the western suburbs rather than the oppression and exploitation the youth there face daily. Bourgeois domination is denied; contradictions are not even admitted; the fault lies in working class individuals who mindlessly consume their vapid lives like torpid tapeworms, not in the system which encourages and enforces apathy.

Let us now look at the aesthetic and historical determinations which shape and inform FJ Holden's representation of the working class.

1. Naturalist narrative

A close analysis of the terms set down by the film for its reception and consumption reveals a significant set of assumption and conclusion. Stated briefly the assumption is that the film, because of its naturalist "style", simply mirrors facets of an obvious, natural, and recognisable reality; the conclusion is that the film's representation of western suburbs life is equatable to that life - the only difference between film and reality is that the former is a concentrated version of the latter. (5)

Now both assumption and conclusion are invalid. Furthermore, they mask the actual meanings and views produced by the film. The argument that the film's text is ideologically untainted, and an allegedly free and spontaneous reproduction is as suspect as the existence of this "reality".

Let us examine the assumption that just as a mirror placed in front of an object faithfully reflects that object, so this film by means of filming real working people in real working class houses and in real Bankstown is also a mirror, reflecting the essence of western suburbs life - that even though the story is fictional, the "life" it represents is nonetheless Factual and Natural.

We must first consider the mechanism which generates the illusion of "realism": the naturalist narrative and its structure, in which the "faithful to nature" camerawork operates. By innocently following Kev, Bob and Ann in their daily rituals, the camera never intrudes. The audience is never aware of its presence, except for certain significant moments. Generally it operates as if it were an unpretentious and transparent window through which we peer, observe and contemplate life in the western suburbs, its people trapped like flies in the amber of celluloid.

In fact, of course, the camerawork selects types of observations, which are given illustrative value, placing these observations in a hierarchy of values. One of these types - unnaturalistic camerawork - acts as the reference point for the others, providing the terms by which the others are to be judged. The camera's point of view during these significant deviations from the naturalist mode, operates as the Evaluator and Adjudicator of Kev and his world. The audience sits back, forced to judge this world before they have been allowed to understand it.
Two sequences illustrate this type of camerawork and its effects.

Example 1. Midway in the film we witness Kev preparing for a night out: quick panning shots of the interior of his home - wallpaper, commodities, ritual behavior and gestures. In the next shot we follow Kev as he picks up his mate. This cuts into another shot which breaks from the preceding sequence in that it is both elevated and distanced. This crane shot reveals the milieu surrounding Kev's quickly disappearing car, the sprawling domain of a playground and its monotonous lines of fibro, brick and red tile, stretching into what could be infinity itself. The effect of the first sequence of shots is to generalise from the particular initiated by the concrete experience inside working class life in the suburbs, the illusion is created that we are actually there observing it. The next shot - of the exterior of this life - contrasts vividly: the camera, rather than following the movements of the characters, moves away from them, ascending to provide an aerial view of the milieu of the action. Contrasting the two treatments, we have a detailed, intimate, noisy, life-like observation in the first; while in the second, there is a more general, distanced, silent, panoramic observation. By combining these two observations in this way a conclusion is generated. By detaching itself, changing the scale of observation, the camera places the rituals, characters, environment and action in a larger and broader perspective. Whereas up to this point we follow Kev's life as he experiences it, looking at it through his eyes, we now are allowed the privilege of literally and figuratively looking down at it. Importantly, as he lacks the panoramic view we have just been provided with - engaged as he is in the mindless repetition of ritual - he wallows in ignorance, while we are allowed to have knowledge, to judge from on high.

Example 2: In the last four shots of the film, Kev is presented on his return home after his skirmishes with the Law. A crane shot shows the figures of expectant authority drawn up on the lawn. This moves on to a shot of their expressions, then a shot including a close up of Kev's forlorn reaction, and finally a shot of Kev turning to the camera with an expression of resignation. Here again we have instances of the camera operating unnaturally: firstly, the crane shot of waiting parents and police reiterates the argument of the early crane shot mentioned in Example 1, that what is happening below is a generalised phenomenon within the working class. The camerawork allows the audience to see what the characters cannot, the repetitious milieu in which Kev's resignation will find its never-ending echo. Secondly, Kev's turning to the camera in the final shot appears on the surface to be a confession of despondency:

"Just look what I have to put up with. I was only having some fun. Every time I try to have fun these buggers get in the road. Well I suppose that's the way things are and I just have to accept them."

Actually, the unnaturalistic intrusion of the camerawork gives another meaning to this shot. As in the previous instance, it allows the character to act and the audience to judge. For Kev, the problem is that things just didn't work out right. For the audience, the ending is a conclusive statement on what Kev and his world is like. This judgment has two faces, depending on the class ideology through which it is arrived at:

"Just look at him. He was only having some fun, and now he's going to cop it. Ah, well, that's the way they are out there. They're just hopeless, and let themselves get pushed around."

This, then, is validating testimony for disaffected petty-bourgeois intellectuals and/or evidence of the base inferiority of the working class for the bourgeoisie.

For the working class, the conclusion might read dangerously differently:

"Just look at him. He was only having some fun. Ah, well, he had a good time while it lasted. There's lots of fun to be had - the thing is, not to get caught."

What is emphasised for this audience is the Life is Beautiful syndrome: authority must be obeyed, of course, but there is a tantalising world out there, just ripe for the taking. Given the representations in this film, the reality against which working class kids might just possibly rebel is defined away, replaced through FJ's dream factory with a vision of the Easy Life.

Through this naturalist narrative and its camerawork, then, the film organises its material and representations in such a way as to construct a case, argue it, and then draw a conclusion. By operating on the basis of this mechanism, only one overall conclusion is possible: that this is the way the working class undoubtedly are. (6)

2. Positivist aesthetic ideology: Andersonianism

Not only does the film operate on the basis of a tendentious naturalistic cinematic practice in the composition of its narrative of working class life, but it also draws on and translates into cinematic terms an old positivist world outlook. Behind the facade of "factualism" and "realism", this theory smuggles an idealist view of society into its formulations.

The high priest of this religion, John Anderson, (7) Challis Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University, 1927-58, spoke in these terms of artistic practice:

"History is the nightmare from which I am trying to awake". This awakening is art: art is not concerned with the conditions and consequences
of its subject matter. ... while it may be said to particularise in that it presents something concrete and not a general formula, it may also be said to generalise, to present an eternal essence. ... (for example) Joyce, through the medium of a day in Dublin in 1904, presents servitude and the escape from it as states of the human soul. ... Art is (therefore) concerned not with what things are 'for', nor with what they are by 'means of', but with what they are." (Emphasis added.) (8)

In this account there seems to be a paradox. Art, is at one and the same time both realistic in only dealing with the facts or things as they are and the medium or vessel through which moral forces (right versus wrong, freedom versus servitude) express themselves. These considerations in Anderson's theoretical system form one of the bases for FJ Holden, providing it with themes, categories and images for its narrative, and an aesthetic ideology with which to underpin it.

It is worthwhile to note here that the framework Anderson constructed has been enormously influential on both disciples and fellow travellers who originally "free thinkers" and "anti-authoritarians" in the forties, fifties and sixties - now occupy key positions in the capitalist society as a whole - let alone such a brutish thing as struggle. The earlier film centres on the isolated individual. FJ, in contrast, presents the struggle for Freedom) are supposedly anti-authoritarianism and the Good, are engaged in an eternal struggle with the Bad. The struggle is eternal as human nature is eternal. An attempt to 'eliminate the Bad completely would lead to a "drab existence" and in any case is impossible as Freedom has always lived a "perilous and fighting life", life always having been dominated by the servile way. (14)

The latter are the masses who are servile to social authority, motivated by conformist drives, and who allow themselves to be robbed of their freedom. (13)

Thesis 3: Although the theory's objectivism (the struggle for Truth) and radicalism (the struggle for Freedom) are supposedly anti-moralistic, in fact a nauseating moralism can be discerned.

Andersonians hold that history, as the struggle between two types of human beings is the concrete expression of the two sides of human nature. The positive side of this opposition within human nature is incarnated in Freethinkers who, as the embodiment of the virtue of opposition, sexual freedom, and anti-authoritarianism are the Good, are engaged in an eternal struggle with the Bad. The struggle is eternal as human nature is eternal. An attempt to 'eliminate the Bad completely would lead to a "drab existence" and in any case is impossible as Freedom has always lived a "perilous and fighting life", life always having been dominated by the servile way. (14)

Behind the bombast of this aesthetic stands a twisted Calvinist moralism: Freethinkers, as islands of objectivity in a sea of servility, somehow ward off that servility by flights of Will. Their presumed "objectivity" in fact leads them to take sides, i.e. against servility.

The artistic practice which derives from this aesthetic is similarly non-neutral: it has a moral function in that it intervenes in the conflict between the two ways of life - the one free, pluralistic, individualistic and oppositionist, the other collective and conformist. (15)

Let us look at the operation of theses 2 and 3 by contrasting Thornhill's earlier (1974) Between Wars with FJ Holden. There is a narrative opposition between these films which cinematically illustrates Andersonian theory and practice: "producer" vs "consumer", intellectual vs non-intellectual, opposition vs conformism ....

Between Wars (19) deals with Australian history in the inter-war years, presenting it as a period of conflict - admittedly the conflicts of an isolated individual. FJ, in contrast, presents contemporary Australia in which there is a marked absence of conflict - for individuals or society as a whole - let alone such a brutish thing as struggle. The earlier film centres on the
experiences and conflict of an articulate and oppositionist male petty-bourgeois intellectual. Dr. Trenbow: FJ Holden centres on an inarticulate and acquiescent male worker. The narrative opposition parallels the opposition in Andersonian theory and practice.

Between Wars presents the image of a veritable Freethinker in disguise, an oppositionist psychiatrist/psychoanalyst who wages war against the Victorian and Protestant ethics of Australia as manifested in censorship, sexual puritanism and nationalism. He takes up the cudgels of Freethought apparently quite spontaneously and "naturally", the force of circumstances presumably revealing him to be one of the Chosen Few who will oppose Authority. Predestined to Good, he is permitted entry into the realm of eternal moral conflict between Good and Evil. As a "free spirit", he stands to be counted as unpatriotic, refusing to participate in World War II. In this, he echoes the stance of some Andersonians of the period who argued that as Japanese culture was superior to that of Australia, a Japanese victory was preferable. (17)

His narrative opposite, FJ's Kev, is also Trenbow's moral opposite. Kev is acquiescent, collectivistic (his mateship would be anathema to Trenbow) and consumerist, lacking ideals of culture. As presented, he lacks anything remotely resembling "enterprising" (creative) capacities, transfixed as he is by a universe of commodities and ritual behaviors. Worse still, he is not an intellectual, but an inarticulate semi-autistic in a world made for semi-autistics. Kev represents his milieu "perfectly", Andersonians would argue: a milieu where the working class sit around their dinner tables in deafening silence, engaged in stimulus-response behavior like Pavlovian dogs. Given this view, it's a wonder the Australian working class has been able to organise strikes, let alone political struggle, given such severe, presumably congenial, language and cultural disabilities.

3. Suburban Images

On first appearance it may seem that the geographical location for the film and its narrative is an unproblematical reality as its connotations are both familiar and well worn in both literary and visual terms. Additionally, FJ Holden was actually filmed in Bankstown and its environs. The geographical locale acts not only as the backdrop for the narrative, but also operates as a key element in the construction of the film's argument. It is more than innocent "background", it is that notorious reality, Suburbia.

This image and concept is thoroughly bourgeois rather than a reflection of empirical reality. (18) It signifies the mollification and possible eradication of class contradiction, manifested in an embourgeoisified working class concerned more with a suburban plot of property and all its cultural appendages rather than either class struggle or the ideals put forward by radical Australian tradition.

The embryonic contours of the meaning of suburbia in the early 1930s expressed the view that through state intervention the masses had been granted the prosperity and security they sought, and a material interest in a reformed and reforming capitalism. The working class had apparently learned to sacrifice its own "narrow" interests to the national interest, turning in compensation its attention to the private world of consumption and leisure. The new citizen produced by this shift, and the new working class, were beyond the passions of class allegiance, and therefore liberated from mundane problems of material interest. The view that the working class had stopped struggling led to two conclusions, through which dominant bourgeois ideology expressed the history of the period and the terms for a future history. (19) These two streams operate as norms by means of which Australian society can recognise itself, while its class nature is masked. Let us listen to examples of these streams, the first condemning - disillusioned with the failure of the working class to carry through its historic mission as the bearer of the heroic ideals of a radical rural tradition - the second celebratory, eulogising the new direction of the working class:

Stream 1: "Behold the man - the Australian man of today, on Sunday mornings in the suburbs, when the motor-mower is calling the faithful to worship on blocks of land, a brick veneer ..... Behold him in the wilderness. What more does he want to sustain him except a Holden to polish, a beer with the boys ..... the flickering shadows in his lounge room of cops and robbers, goodies and baddies, guys and dolls." (20)

Stream 2: "The home of the 'self-contained' man is in the suburbs; and in the highly developed suburbs of an Australian city, with good accommodation, a nice garden, back yard, vegetables in his plot and fowls in the shed and a fence against intrusion, he has probably reached a higher pitch of development than anywhere else." (21)

FJ faithfully adheres to the non-struggle consensus established in these two streams (1) by centring its narrative around the leisure activities of its working class protagonist; (2) by locating the narrative in the predictable and well-worn tracks of suburban existence and (3) by the very ambivalence of meaning within the film towards the lives represented. This ambivalence can be seen in the celebratory and condemnatory effects of both the narrative and the camera work. Take, for example, the celebratory camera work in shots like the side angle of Kev's car, the central commodity of the film, where its normal canary yellow color is given a Pop Gothic blue-green effect.
The break-up between Kevin (Paul Couzens) and Anne (Eva Dickinson) in Michael Thornhill's FJ Holden

under the lighting of a petrol station. The condemnatory aspect operates in the judgmental crane shots already analysed. (22) By composing itself on the assumption of the validity of the existence of non-struggle suburbia, FJ Holden repeats the arguments of the ideological formation from which it has taken root, in cinematic form and terms.

4. Ideological Effects

FJ Holden's naturalistic pretensions become more obvious when it is located within the current cinematic context and in terms of its ideological effects.

Internationally there has been a plethora of recent films, placed in the period of the Second World War, which argue and attempt to prove in aesthetic terms a consistent thesis. Ophul’s The Sorrow and the Pity, Cavani's The Night Porter and Wertmuller's Seven Beauties, construct a cogent and credible narrative, the effect of which has been to represent past history as dominated by the absence of struggle. (23) By extension from the view that (i) the masses weren’t as anti-fascist as they might have remembered themselves to be and that (ii) they never really fought against fascism, the argument logically proceeds in these films to the conclusion that (iii) the masses have never struggled and (iv) they never will. FJ Holden echoes this absence of struggle thesis in its own terms.

In the current period this thesis has strong appeal, an argument of cynicism, witnessed in current fashion trends (back to the '20s or '50s fashions, depending on class), the revival of Rock 'n Roll, the hungering after the good times when things weren’t so bad (“certainly no worse than today”). For FJ there is nothing to struggle about - there aren’t even contradictions. On the contrary, working class life seems wrapped in a timeless aura of consumption which is both a Virtue and a Beatitude, an idealisation of contemporary reality through denial of the necessity, legitimacy or even existence of struggle.

The absence of representation of the necessity of struggle is an effective counter to the growing
disenchantment with unfulfilled capitalist promises, a disenchantment dangerous to the success of the current capitalist offensive. Dissipating this frustration and disillusionment, the film presents working class experience and existence in a narrative which argues that the '50s "good old days" are alive and well in the '70s western suburbs - all you have to do is relax and enjoy it, everything is being taken care of for you. The film diverts and dissolves contradictions by presenting them in its special naturalist form. (24) By this means it validates desirable norms of behavior and outlook with regard to Consumption, Law and Struggle.

The western suburbs, Ellis' "swamp", acts as a symbol for the existence of servile consumption - the working class apparently only consuming - this consumption being their Life. (25) Need we say that it is above all a carefree existence where commodities are plentiful, perfect, and easily gained. This goes hand in hand with - and may even be a quid pro quo for - an acceptance of bourgeois Law and its figures which in no significant way cuts across the enjoyment of those commodities.

The narrative itself only seems to exist by the presence of this Law - it begins with an unlawful act (breaking into a graveyard for some aesthetic gang-banging) and ends with the Law waiting to deliver punishment. The major areas of conflict generated by the film is not as in previous coming-of-age-in-capitalism films, between the hero and the law, FJ's narrative easily works within the parameters set by bourgeois law, and instead highlights the conflict between the kind of easy sexuality in the film in one sense celebrates (they're all liberated in the western suburbs, a quick heave, in-out-bang, bang, then Nirvana) and the desire for and possibility of commitment. Ann presents this in one way, in a demand that Kev not treat their relationship as a public commodity to which his mate has a degree of access. Bob presents this in another way, by suggesting the incompatibility of Kev's sexual and social commitment: and if a choice has to be made, then your "mate" should come before your "bird". In the event, significantly, Kev doesn't even have to make the choice.

But the film does argue that whatever conflict there is in the western suburbs, it arises in relation to the appropriate mode of consumption of "private life", where the mateship ethos conflicts with individualised consumption. Succinctly the film effects legitimation as to the necessary existence of a "public-private split", importantly as it manifests itself in "personal life".

In validating the split between sexual relations and sexual commitment, and in personalising and individualising working class experience, (26) FJ Holden denies the cul-de-sac of Kev's world. He may chafe against social bonds - the incompatibility of sexual desire and commitment, between mateship and sexual relationships, etc. - but the film argues that this is hollow rhetoric, merely setting the stage for acceptance of and acquiescence with bourgeois Law, a result of which the film approves: it all occurs quite "naturally" and spontaneously in a fictional world passed off both as a reality and as an attractive ideal.

- K. Boehringer and D. Del Favero.

FOOTNOTES

1. Not only was the film universally acclaimed, but as part of the Australian collection at Cannes 1977 it helped to rake in an estimated 2 million in contracts, a triumph for our local bourgeoisie.

2. The Australian, May 7, 1977, p.27.


5. For a discussion and analysis of the foundations of naturalism in the cinema, i.e. realism, see C McCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: Notes on some Brechtian Theses', Screen, Vol.15, No.2, 1974.

6. The only problem remaining after the demonstration, if you are doubtful of its conclusion, is to 'go and see for yourself' and observe how acquiescent the working class are. Of course, the desire and the terms for this observation will be set down by the film. In having formulated the terms of the problem it will leave you to find the answer it has already prepared for you to discover.

7. Some of Anderson's work has been collected in Studies in Empirical Philosophy (Sydney, 1962). His extremely influential 'Some Questions in Aesthetics' published in 1932 laid the stones for an indigenous and positivist aesthetics. For a useful introduction to his theory see J Passmore 'Introductory Essay' to Studies in Empirical Philosophy. See also the June and July issues of Quadrant 1977 which contain some of the lectures delivered at the University of Sydney to mark the fiftieth anniversary of his arrival in Australia.


9. For a survey and assessment of the Andersonian tradition, see J. Docker Australian Cultural Elites (Sydney 1974) and his 'Sydney Intellectual History and Sydney Libertarianism' in Politics, May 1972. As well, see J. Baker 'John Anderson and Freethinkers' in Australian Quarterly,
December 1962. Docker argues that Andersonianism is no longer a living tradition. In fact, rather than dying as Docker argues, it has been transformed and absorbed to form a formidable weapon in the arsenal of bourgeois ideology in Australia as well as a backbone for literary and cinematic production.

10. For Anderson “true art” is not only a world of neutral and free observation of life in the raw but also an “innocent eye”, thoroughly anti-moralistic. (See ‘Art and Morality’, ibid, p.265). It returns us to that golden clime and happy kingdom before the beginning of time and history when virtue was in its natural state.


13. For a discussion of the characteristics of the “consumer” (the masses) see ibid, p. 331.


15. For an illuminating discussion of this, see J. Docker, 1974, pp. 140-143.

16. The reviews of this film all took note of the fact that it was the beginnings of a new and solid Australian cinema, a change of direction from the ‘sexual saga’ movies of Petersen, etc.: See M. Morris in The Digger, January 14-February 11, 1975; J Flaus in Cinema Papers, December 1974; P. McGuinnes in National Times, November 18-23, 1974. What they are silent about is that the version of Australian history the film presents is not only old but rancid in its old age, the new marching song of an old tune.


22. It is to be noted, however, that even these shots effect ambivalent meanings. S. Dermondy in Nation Review, May 26-June 1, 1977, has also noted this ambivalence.

23. For a discussion of this thesis in regard to recent cinematic production, see M. Foucault ‘Film and Popular Memory: An Interview’, Radical Philosophy II, Summer 1975.

24. The naturalist form casts its thematic material in terms of immediate appearance, i.e. inter-subjective relations, giving it the quality of the spontaneity of lived experience. Contradictions are dissolved by being displaced into problems about Human Nature, e.g. Kev’s lack of will resolves the conflicts presented for resolution by the narrative. This cinematic formulation of working class life, by disallowing the presentation of contradiction, transforms the narrative into a Fate, everything being the inevitable result of the working of the special type of Human Nature possessed by the working class. However, there is never any indication of forces which mould this Nature, driving the characters to live their lives the way they do. They simply act without commentary, gesture without reason, in a monotony of predictable ritual. The only conclusion possible is that the forces lie outside understanding and knowledge. The working class of the film are the way they are not for any comprehensible reason. They are simply like that - a seductive and agnostic cover for the film’s moralistic arguments.


26. Personalisation and individualisation are the logical effect of the way the narrative formulates working class life by means of the psychology of its central protagonist. especially when seized on by pro-mining elements within the labor movement who use them as an excuse for watering down existing policies. But it can confidently be predicted that they will not prevent further growth of the movement. As with Vietnam, the confrontation over uranium will, in the long run, discredit conservative and reactionary policies and bring defeats for those who espouse them.

B.A.,

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