A National Character: 
Crocodile Dundee

I was in a provincial working-class pub in England over Christmas, one which used to be my "local". Spurred by my presence into talk about Australia, the conversation moved, not to the America's Cup, nor to the Test series, nor even to the weather, but to Crocodile Dundee, just released on the provincial circuits.

Actually, I should say that the conversation moved on to Paul Hogan as Mick "Crocodile" Dundee, the film's hero and main character. Most of the drinkers hadn't seen the film yet but they had, through television trailers, seen that excerpt. That excerpt is the one where, in New York, Hogan and his girlfriend are confronted by three young blacks, one of them menacingly holding a flick knife. The exchange goes something like this: "What's that?" asks Hogan, looking at the knife; "That's a knife, man", says one of the blacks. Hogan's laconic response is to pull out his two-foot machete-cum-croc-killer and say, "That's not a knife, this is a knife." The blacks run away. It's a magical resolution to a moral panic and has audiences laughing and cheering.

Hogan, as Mick Dundee, solves lots of problems like this in the film. First of all, he solves the problem of the giant crocodile who lunges out of the water, about to make a meal out of the woman reporter who has tracked Mick Dundee down and whom he has been ogling by the edge of the water. He rushes out of the scrub and plunges the knife — that knife — into the beast's head. Well, if he hadn't been ogling her, he wouldn't have saved her, would he? Later, transported as the ingenu to New York, the subject of a Time-style feature, he solves other problems too, or at least provides quick-fire solutions to a range of social complexities. Confronted by the social and class distinctions of New York yuppie lifestyle, Hogan's response is either a quick debunking word or, with more effect in one scene with the fiancé of the woman reporter, a smart smack in the mouth carrying with it the mystical power and strength of the man from the wilderness. The same power that had earlier calmed a water buffalo with two fingers and a steady gaze. It is a quick, quiet and unnoticed punch which lays the yuppie flat.

Having dealt with the irritations of social class, Hogan moves on to race: "What tribe are you from mate?", he innocently asks of his black New York chauffeur. (In the outback, Hogan had been a bona fide participant at a corroboree.) In a later scene, this same black chauffeur wrenches the boomerang-like bonnet motif from the limousine and downs one of Hogan's assailants with it. The "tribal" connection of New York blacks and Aborigines is comically confirmed for Hogan.

And from race to sexuality: in a Manhattan bar Hogan is chatted up by a transvestite. Alerted by a taxi driver friend to some ambiguity, Hogan solves the problem by grabbing the elegantly dressed character in the
crotch. The (male) transvestite doubles up, the occupants of the bar — and of the cinema I was in when I saw it — double up, too, but for different reasons.

Class, race, sexuality, law and order: these are precisely the problems which *Crocodile Dundee* confronts and solves, usually with a single and very "masculine" gesture. And, let's be fair, it's funny and successful too. The film, as we know, has been immensely successful in Australia, in the United States — coming second only to the more Reaganesque *Top Gun* — and, as far as current figures show, in the UK as well. It is easy to dismiss this popularity as the effect of some overarching "capitalist ideology" — a deeply pessimistic theory of "mass culture" — but this really won't do. As I argued a couple of issues back, it is not enough to sit back and dismiss cultural forms like this as if they were only to the side of the "main issues" of serious politics.

As I suggest above, *Crocodile Dundee* is, in its own way, about class, sex, race, law and order, albeit in abbreviated form. But then one of the keys to comedy is precisely this "economy" in the presentation of complex situations and their resolution. And Hogan is certainly a skilful and economic comedian, deploying a wide range of comic and dramatic techniques, often only by means of a facial expression or a single word. It would be worth our while to consider the question of what techniques we have to meet these forms of effective comic populism.

It is, of course, Hogan, as star, personality and quintessential Australian, who carries *Crocodile Dundee* which, as Frank Campbell in *The Sydney Morning Herald* (7 January 1987) rightly said, is an "unpretentious Australian film". Why, then, is the film so popular? Part of the answer to this is in the methods by which Hogan draws on a wide range of popular motifs and genres. The United States now has its various Rambos but it is a long while since it has had a simple, unpretentious populist hero. *Crocodile Dundee* carries some of the cultural heritage of films made by Frank Capra in the '30s and '40s, mostly starring Gary Cooper:

films like *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) and *Meet John Doe* (1941). In this genre, the power of simple honesty and individualism overcomes, variously, urban pretension, political corruption and totalitarian political philosophies. Such a popular hero can no longer come from rural American settings of course; these have been tainted by mass murders, chainsaws and Orange People. Australia, and the myths of the bush and the outback now provide both the ideal of the wilderness and an increasingly popular tourist destination. From here comes the bush-wise Dundee. Not a naive innocent in the mode of Gary Cooper, Hogan draws on other resources and forms of imagery as well.

The "character" of Hogan is continuous across the genres in which he works: from film to comedy series, to beer and tourism ads. This was part of the point about that conversation in an English pub: the "That's not a knife" scene worked especially well with Hogan in it because that is precisely the "quintessentially Australian" character which he is known for. There is a beer ad shown on British TV, for example, where Hogan witnesses an angler come ashore and hold up with pride what, by British standards, is a prize catch. Hogan, talking congenially to the camera, waves past the proud fisherman, snatch the fish out of his hand and, innocently, says "Thanks for the bait mate". It is a humour based firstly on a form of identification — predominantly with the white male working class (now the main lager drinkers and the targetted market) — and a corresponding antagonism to Anglo-pomposity, yuppie pretensions, the "Rodneys" of the smart set and the quaint pastimes of what, in an oversimplified version, represents the British ruling class. It is, of course, nothing like this, but Hogan's treatment of these antagonisms is popular and effective. Why, or, more importantly, how is this? It is not often that I agree with Bernard Levin, British high Tory of the paternalistic variety and cultural commentator. But he, in a review of *Crocodile Dundee* in *The Australian* (13 February 1987), suggests that there is nothing "mere" about the entertainment which a film like this produces. Reviewers have tended to go on a bit about the film's "mythic" qualities, the theme of the innocent in the big city and so on, and, more precisely in the case of Frank Campbell, about Hogan's skill in tapping an American public beset by moral panics over mugging, drug use and sexuality. Certainly, part of the film's success does indeed lie in this use of received genres and models for storytelling and in the familiar comic strategies of abbreviating, puncturing and resolving complex social problems. But I am a little worried about such "universal" assessments of this movie and would want to suggest that, in addition to this skilful use of genres and themes, there is also an important and strategic area which Hogan handles with supreme and, as yet unchallenged, skill: the area of "national character".

Back to that English pub again: "He's so Australian" was a familiar and repeated comment about Hogan. What this means in effect is that Hogan has effectively come to represent the "quintessential Australian" for UK and US audiences. And this has not been by virtue of any intrinsic or natural qualities but rather through a skilful, comic and strategic elaboration of a preferred version of character — laconic, laid back, debunking, quasi-innocent and, of course, endowed with certain important "masculine" qualities. These are, of course, all familiar traits but the questions we need to be asking about this is how do they become familiar, acceptable and thereby dominant? How, in the field of
entertainment especially, do the “cultural meanings” with which the character of Hogan is saturated come to be made operative, circulated and sustained?

Bernard Levin is right on the point that entertainment is never “mere”: from the beginning of the nineteenth century when entertainment first began to be consolidated as both a mass and politically strategic phenomenon, the notion of “character” in both popular and “high” forms of culture has been enormously important as a location of forms of moral and political training and persuasion. In popular fiction, forms of melodrama and music hall, the representation of character, and, more recently, of “personalities” in television and the Hollywood star system, has never been “merely” concerned with a straight depiction of interesting “types”; rather, there has been an insistent concern with making concrete, popular and acceptable an array of character traits and, at the same time, making unacceptable other qualities and inclinations.

The questions we need insistently to ask of this process is what precisely is it that makes up this preferred image of the national character, and what qualities have been excluded? How far, for example, does the character of Hogan cue in the features of the “New Nationalism” and to what effect? Is this character merely a manipulative construct as some seem to suggest, or is it the case that Hogan’s populist and popular style manages to secure, at various levels, contact and consent with his various audiences? If this latter is the case, as I suspect it is, then it would seem that we need to take Mick Dundee, Paul Hogan and public response more seriously than we are accustomed to do in our critical left perspectives.

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Style Revisited

I
t’s not hard to understand the sense of bewilderment that has settled on a good number of people who thought their many years in politics might have given them some idea what the left’s political agenda really was. Now it seems they’re wrong. Not about substantive issues (or not on the face of it); but more about a tone, a preoccupation.

I’m talking here about the curious preoccupation with fashion. ALR took it on board last issue, and Tribune has given it a run a couple of times in the last few years. But its real home is in Britain, particularly in the Labour Party’s New Socialist. There, among other things, a bond seems to have been forged with the pinnacle of young radical sophistication — the magazine the Face. Those in Australia without subscriptions or cosmopolitan newsagents will have seen it briefly in (one of my favourite) ads for a product which escapes me, but which lists the world’s “coolest” items.

New Socialist has been redesigned by the designer of the Face. In fact, it has forced the Communist Party’s Marxism Today to follow suit with its own redesign. New Socialist has also included in its substantial list of articles on fashion at least one by the Face’s associate editor, Robert Elms. The article — “Ditching the Drabbies” — was one of the most facile contributions to the debate so far, but it shows just how strong the nexus between the young left (a term I’d generously interpret to include my own peers) and the arbiters of radical fashion has become.

Now to come clean, I should say that if the question is simply, “should we care about clothes, design and so on; should we debate it and champion it?”, then my answer is a definite “yes”. Bewildering or not, there’s something vital at stake here, as William Morris could have told us. But that’s not the only question. First, we should try to say why, in terms which do a good deal more than accuse previous generations of the left of being drab or boring — personally and, by implication, politically. It’s not a very good tactic. But it’s also wrong.

But then we should try to draw some distinctions. One fairly obvious one is between “appearance”, “pleasure”, or “style” and “fashion”. I’ll say how I think these should be distinguished in a moment.

I’d like to think this was a confusion. But really I don’t think it is. The champions of fashion are clearer than I’ve given them credit for about their attack. You see, if the charge was that the left has ignored style, the response would be obvious. The sixties, which is a particular target, was obsessed about style and clothing. But the real charge is not that the sixties was not style conscious, but that it was drab. Worse, that it was earnest — that its choice of styles was hedged around with external values which determined what was rejected or accepted, and which implicitly set them as a new orthodoxy.

This, in fact, is the complaint against the unconverted left — that they refuse to change; that they don’t dress because it’s fun, but because the clothing represents some virtue. In another sense, the complaint is that