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Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand



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EDITORIAL

Paul Mountfort

Editor's log: Startdate 2016 - An overview (of the Apocalypse)

In my 2015 editorial I referenced multiple convergent global crises including climate change, political upheaval and terrorism that could call into question the apparently cosy relationship pop cultural scholars sometimes have with late capitalist popular culture. Ultimately, however, I concluded that our critical practice and even – at times – fannish engagement is more important than ever. 2016 has seen an attenuation of the factors previously discussed, including the break up of the transatlantic liberal consensus that while, admittedly, involved bipartisan support for the basic tenets of neoliberalism, was also comparatively socially liberal. Today those old certainties look increasingly shaky, with the rise of populist demagoguery and the ‘alt-right’ making the left’s focus on identity politics, often at the expense of class analysis (think Clinton and the moneyed, East Coast ‘liberal elite’ Democrats), both increasingly questionable and yet more indispensable and in need of impassioned defence than ever.

Popular culture studies can sometimes partake in the elevation of personal subjectivities over objective analysis of the mechanics of class warfare which the 1% continue to wage on the rest of us. There is almost an apologetic attitude on the ‘liberal left’ at talk of class war, as if it smacks of ‘unreconstructed socialism,’ a paralysing lack of conviction that our economic overlords do not share in the least (as Warren Buffet said, ‘there’s class warfare, all right, but it’s my class, the rich class, that’s making war, and we’re winning.’). What seems obvious is that the courageous resistance to conservative social mores and self-affirmation of identity that distinguishes social liberalism needs to be mobilised to join forces with good old fashioned – or refashioned for the twenty-first century – class struggle. Thus the rights of women, suppressed ethnicities, other genders and sexualities, on the one hand, and those of anybody else who has a stake in the shared collective future of our world, on the other, need to be marshalled to fight not just the

neoliberal despoliation of the globe but the new far right movements who have arisen to tap the fear and anger of the masses. In other words, we need populist movements unashamedly of the left to counter those of the newly radicalized far right.

Part of this mobilization involves continuing cultural critique and, yes, affirmation where there are things to be celebrated. While much ‘popular culture’ sits downstream of massive multimedia conglomerates and associated franchises, fan appropriation and subversion are also everywhere to be seen. Culture is a social practice, or set of social practices, not a background given, and needs to use the materials at hand to fashion what it can out of the ruins of dystopia. In this light, the papers in this Proceedings are part of a vital collective endeavour, which is to chart, criticize and – when we are moved to do so – celebrate the myriad forms of popular culture in which we are all enmeshed. It is up to us, as much as to anyone else, to try to ensure that there is a future to look back on and appreciate the sweeping pop cultural microclimates of today, from ‘evergreen valleys to broken down slums and trash can alleys,’ as Nobel prize winner Bob Dylan spun it in his eulogy to Woody Guthrie, that we, the archivists, are busily charting. For the archive is also a creative enterprise, an active construction of knowledge, rather than passive reflection of some pre-existent ur-ground.

2016’s Proceedings has papers under the diverse areas of biography, business, fandoms, fiction, girlhood, gothic and horror, performance, television and visual arts. Anyone who has sat at the Bennelong bar at the Sydney Opera House of a Saturday evening enjoying the view to the harbour will know that they are partaking in one of the world’s great civic spaces. In ‘A backstage biography of the Sydney Opera House’ Simon Dwyer takes us backstage in a micro-ethnography of its various functionaries (‘administrators, technicians and tradespeople’) to tease out stories often overlooked in official ‘biographies’ of its construction. Also under biography, in ‘Habeas Corpus: the wrongful imprisonment of Steven Avery’ Rachel Franks and Kim D. Weinert look at the newly beleaguered (in Western democracies, at least) right of *habeas corpus* through the popular cultural lens of a 10 part documentary, *Making a Murderer* (2015), about wrongful imprisonment. Finally, Franks and Anne Reddacliffe offer a ‘political memoir,’ ‘The Militant Suffragette: memoir of a political movement or a true crime tale?’, told through popular print media of the times, of women’s right to vote as a kind of crime writing, given ‘the radical militancy of some suffragettes.’

Following this, the two sole offerings in business and fandoms reconsider, respectively, an overlooked mover-and-shaker from mid-century Australia and a famous

country music singer. Margot Riley's 'A woman of opinion: Sylvia Ashby and the Ashby Research Service' exhumes story of a pioneering but largely ignored Australian business woman who founded Australia's first independent market research company. Riley's object is 'the study of social practices and cultural meanings [that] continue to cast light on the everyday Australian consumer attitudes that shape our society.' In 'Ryan Adams and Fandom as Symbolic Resistance' Alison Blair argues that singer-songwriter Ryan Adams has 're-articulated the figure of the country music outlaw throughout his fourteen-album solo career.' Blair examines Adams' 'outlaw-ness' in terms of his troubling of the generic and symbolic conventions of not just country music, but alt-country itself, exploring this relations between indie cultural capital and that of music industry hegemony.

Papers under fiction include Jillene Bydder's 'The detective and the Sagas: Erlendur in the novels of Arnaldur Indriðason' and Tracey Clement's 'Finding a hidden heroine in J.G. Ballard's sci-fi novel, *The Drowned World*.' Everybody knows that cultural production from Scandinavia has been enjoying the status of hot (or rather, ice cold) thing-on-the-block for some years now now, from *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2005-) franchise, to *The Killing* (2007-2012), to *Occupied* (2016). Bydder looks at how Detective Erlendur Sveinsson's team in Arnaldur Indriðason's Erlendur novels, set in Iceland, deals with serious crimes, murders, and missing persons against a backdrop of the influence of the medieval Icelandic sagas, often regarded as the prototype of the modern social realist novel. Ballard is also enjoying a revival with the recent release of the Tom Hiddleston vehicle, *High Rise* (2016), but Clement goes a step further in offering us 'an imaginary Chapter 3.55 into the existing plot framework of *The Drowned World* in order to reveal Beatrice's complexity and her role in conveying one of the key messages of the novel,' originally published in 1962. This critical/creative practice reminds us of the great tradition of the postcolonial rewrite, staged by authors in works such as Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* (1969), Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), and J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986).

G is for girlhood and gothic this year. Jessica Jackson's 'Hashtag Skater Girl: Popular Culture and Extreme Sports' examines board sports by means of a critical study of tweets, Facebook postings, advertisements, interviews with amateurs and professionals and observations of female skaters at skate parks to 'address and/or illuminate sexist praxis as well as to develop a plan for its management for future generations of extreme athletes.' Unashamedly activist and emancipatory, Jackson's paper critiques how mainstream – and especially social – media has transformed skateboarding in particular to advertise brand via

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their conscription of these ‘athletes.’ Corey R. Walden’s ‘Weird Tales and Monstrous Subversions: Comparing the Mythic Cycle and H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos’ does, in a sense, for Lovecraft what Bydder does for Arnaldur Indriðason – except this time in relation to Celtic rather than Nordic pretexts. He argues that while Lovecraft’s writing shares superficial similarities with what Joseph Campbell called the monomyth, his work is ultimately subversive of this model in that far from reinscribing the hero’s journey the ‘only triumph in Lovecraft’s work is the continuance of the loathsome entities encountered within his stories.’

The three television area papers remind us that this old media is still very much with us in the new media landscape, for both better and worse. Rosser Johnson discusses in ‘Hypercommercial Television: An Introduction’ how the commercial ‘free-to-air’ broadcasting model’s introduction in New Zealand developed into the loathsome entity it is today, as anyone who has turned on the idiot box here for even a moment will appreciate. What Johnson shows is how a magazine style model of ‘sponsored information’ ran amok to the extent that infotainment and advertorial become virtually indistinguishable. Ximena Smith’s “‘Real’ love on television: a thematic analysis of how gender is performed and constructed in *The Bachelor New Zealand*’ sits downstream of this, in one sense, in that a benchmark of this hypercommercial model today is the endlessly reiterated reality TV favoured by certain individuals in the networks, despite declining overall viewing numbers. Smith’s target, however, is how gender norms in popular media are ‘are internalized to a degree by audiences regardless of the fictionality or “realness” of the content being displayed.’ The aim of approaching such shows with ‘a critical eye’ is more critical than ever at a time when a once beauty show financier is set to take the reins of the United States presidency, merging reality and reality TV. Grace Torcasio provides us with a nuanced reading of a critically acclaimed series in her “‘More of an idea than a place’’: Utopic spaces in AMC’s *Mad Men*.’ The analysis is of the show’s depiction of utopian space, and in particular ‘California as ethereal fantasy space’ in the Season Two episode, ‘The Jet Set.’ Torcasio aims to ‘draw out a dynamic between nostalgia and utopia both present within Don’s search for meaning within the series and the recurrent usage of the frontier trope within cultural mythologization.’

Technically coming in before the television papers, the sole performance paper seems to belong with its visual arts peer so I have placed them together as the final dynamic duo in my brief preview of this fascinating collection. In ‘Justice, Fear and Public Safety (in the Age

of Terror): Anthony Weigh's *2,000 Feet Away* (2007),' Ivan Cañadas analyses a play performed in recent years in London and Chicago. Set in the American Midwest, the play's title refers to 'legislation requiring registered sex offenders to maintain that minimum distance from child-frequented places' and Cañanas discusses how the play 'explores the conflict and controversy surrounding the subject through an offender and the residents of the quintessential rural community' – Eldon, Iowa, site of Grant Wood's iconic painting, *American Gothic* (1930) – against a background of endemic fear and intolerance of outsiders. Cherine Fahd's 'The Politics of Appearing' examines the status of Arabic appearance in a predominantly Anglo culture like Australia. In particular, she unpacks a performance piece in which young men of 'Arabic appearance' were invited to wear beards 'not due to religious or cultural requirements nor as a statement of political allegiance but rather as a style choice.' The resulting eight large scale portraits play on popular cultural stereotypes of both terrorist and metrosexual, hipster Others to unmask and mock the meshing of men of Mideastern appearance and jihadism in the popular imagination. Finally, talking of Stardate 2016, Steven Gil's paper explores the place of science, and scientific accuracy, in *Star Trek*, in celebration of the franchise's half century of boldly going where none had gone before.

A heady mix then, of precisely the kinds of concerns I alluded to earlier as one of the main justifications as to why popular culture studies is not just important but vital. Thanks again to editorial assistant Olivia Oliver-Hopkins' forensic scrutiny of these papers, though as always any residual anomalies remain the editor's responsibility. As well as being challenged and confronted, we hope, as they say in the staccato codes of social media presaging a link, that you will also... 'enjoy...'!

Auckland City

2 December, 2016