

FILM AND ART IN THE AUSTRALIA OF NATIONALISM AND CYNICISM

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Invited to speak at an awards ceremony at the Sydney Film School, Paul Keating used the occasion to attack John Howard's manipulation of the term 'elites' and of Howard's identification with the so-called mainstream as being anti-cosmopolitan. He uses the speech to make clear the important distinction between patriotism and nationalism—reminding people that biology, unlike human love, has no charity.

I was flattered to be asked to speak to such a distinguished group of young film makers.

I should say at the outset that I am not a film goer. That is not to say I do not like films. The films that have made an impression on me were mostly produced during my adolescence and, indeed, some before. Ones which used the medium of film to carry a message.

Too often, these days, the medium is the message, where we are showered with cinematographic phantasmagoria, expanded mightily by the boundless development of digital imaging and sound. But we, nevertheless, leave the theatre not that much the wiser for the experience.

Maybe when cinema at large rediscovers the power of writing, performance and direction may we see film return to those deeper messages that were once so much part of its milieu.

There is no question that as a medium, film has the instrumental power to represent a broad range of ideas and opinions.

In the documentary field, let alone in features, film can carry potency which the visual information media lacks. Michael Moore's films on American society and the war in Iraq are cases in point. They provided us important dialogue when demagoguery was firmly afoot.

Art has always been about revelation. And film is an element of the arts. It enjoys a huge ability to reveal things. It may even be true to say that short film, more often than not, carries more truth about it than does its grander cousins.

But it has neither the time nor the budget to indulge in cinema-graphic tricks, relying mostly, as it does, on the poignant delivery of something more recognisable and more real.

Film has become an important part of the arts. The medium for igniting our imagination, of telling us something not only about ourselves, but about the wider world we should otherwise only ponder.

Film is able to bring other cultures to us; indeed, to get inside those cultures so as to present them from their standpoint—from a vantage point we could never ourselves enjoy.

The arts provide a mirror of what we have become and have the ability to let us see ourselves, warts and all, and sometimes, at our finest.

In the modern world, the arts are central to any notion of ‘cosmopolitan-ness’ or plurality. The Oxford Dictionary describes ‘cosmopolitan’ as something ‘free from national limitations or prejudices; of or from or knowing many parts of the world; consisting of people from many or all parts’.

Art is universal, as film is universal, and that universality informs and educates us while playing to our ‘cosmopolitan-ness’.

This is especially true in a country where the antennae or receptors of people are looking for messages, in a country of people ‘of or from or knowing many parts of the world.’

It is no secret that the arts are having a very bad time of it in Australia these days: not simply in terms of funding, which is the thing most often discussed, but rather, in terms of the milieu of its growth and prosperity.

One always gets a choice: one can celebrate our cultural diversity and all that enlivens it, or one can lament it, finding comfort in a more monocultural and less cosmopolitan environment.

So, in the current political environment, when the Prime Minister, John Howard, disparages ‘elites’ over what he celebrates as the mainstream, he is in fact disparaging cosmopolitan attitudes vis-à-vis the certainties of the old monoculture, of older-style nationalism.

It has, in a sense, always been thus. A cornerstone of nationalism is a propensity to call into question the motives or to attack the attitudes of other members of the national family.

When John Howard famously advertised his wares in the 2001 election, his advertisements said ‘We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come’. The ‘we’, of course, was not meant to be all of us, but only some of us. And the ‘some of us’ are the people Howard believes are the keepers of the Holy Grail; the sentries at the gates of the true Australia, not the cosmopolitan ones of the so-called elites.

I have long been interested in views George Orwell first promulgated in 1943, when he sought to distinguish between nationalism and patriotism.

In the popular debate, nationalism and patriotism are often regarded as much of the same thing. But, in fact, they are completely different.

Orwell pointed out that nationalism is a notion arising from the myth of a people, whereas patriotism is belief in a particular place and its history. He made the point that nationalism is invariably populist, while patriotism is both traditionalist and inclusive.

The historian, John Lukacs, made the same point. He said ‘a patriot will not exclude a person of another nationality from the community where they have lived side by side and whom he has known for many years, but a populist will always remain suspicious of someone who does not seem to belong to his tribe—or, more likely, his kind of thinking’. Shades there of John Howard’s discomfort with Australia’s multicultural community and his distrust of its Islamic community.

The fact is, nationalism is arguably more exclusionary than racism. It is the generator of those phony and parochial distinctions between the civic and the human community, owing to its propensity and ability to stigmatise cultural, religious and linguistic attributes.

Indeed, Adolf Hitler, perhaps the exemplar populist, wrote explicitly on the subject in his *Mein Kampf*, ‘I was a nationalist but not a patriot.’ Hitler also said in 1927 in a speech entitled ‘Nationalism and Patriotism’ that ‘we are not national; we are nationalist’. In other words, we are not simply patriotic, we are nationalist, where he distinguished celebration of the state as between cosmopolitanism and the attitudes of the volk, the myth arising from the cultural but not cultured mainstream.

The German word ‘volksgemeinschaft’ or ‘people’s’ community’ identified and defined this primary grouping; in Hitler’s terms, his concept of the volk as distinct from the German state itself.

In English, the simple translation of the German volk is ‘people’. But the volk were not simply people or the people; rather, a community of particular people.

In the reporting of the ‘Nationalism and Patriotism’ speech, the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the Nazi party’s organ, which was edited by Hitler himself, carried the subtitle ‘the international cosmopolitanism of the upper ten thousand . . . the dynastic patriotism’. In Hitler’s day the term ‘elite’ had not come into being. Had it had, the nationalist in him would have compelled him to use it, for its easy shorthand, if nothing else.

Margaret Thatcher famously used the phrase ‘for all of us’ when, at the time, she completely meant for some of us. John Howard’s ‘all of us’ was reduced to the single word ‘we’ in his infamous 2001 advertisement.

I say this not to suggest or to align, in any way, Margaret Thatcher or John Howard with Adolf Hitler. To do so would be as unreasonable as it would be absurd.

I use Hitler's words in this narrative only to make the distinction between nationalism and patriotism which he himself made. For, importantly, in this context, he was the twentieth century's leading nationalist, its leading anti-patriot.

Lukacs tells us that 'nationalism is atavistically human, deeper and stronger than (merely) class consciousness. The trouble', he says, 'is not only its latent inhumanity, but its proclaimed love of the people'. He makes the point that nationalism is both 'self-centred and selfish' because human love cannot be the love of oneself, it must be the love of another. But not, it seems, for those outside the nationalist tabernacle or 'people's community'.

On the other hand, patriotism encompasses all that is traditional, inclusive and cosmopolitan. It is not biological because the charity of human regard has nothing to do with biology. Nature is biological but nature has and shows no charity.

Let me pull the threads of this short dissertation together.

In political terms, for instance, I am a patriot, I am not a nationalist, for all the reasons I have referred to earlier. John Howard is a nationalist and not a patriot for all the reasons I have also referred to. This is not to say John Howard does not have what we might call patriotic instincts; of course he does, but they all come from his larger carpetbag of nationalism.

For him, Gallipoli was an exercise in nationalism. For me, Kokoda was an exercise in patriotism. The nationalism surrounding the First World War and Gallipoli in particular has fuelled the Australian conservative story for nine decades. The same nationalism that prevented the conservative parties from similarly celebrating Australian heroism in Papua New Guinea and in South East Asia. Those Australians fought for all we had created here and had become, not for some notion of a ruling class or people's community, let alone an empire.

It is no coincidence at all that a predecessor party of the current Liberal Party called itself the Nationalist Party. It was led by another nationalist at the time, Prime Minister Billy Hughes, the Prime Minister most associated with the populism and jingoism of national bravery and sacrifice. The Prime Minister who threw his nationalist cloak and the flag over the long years of the mourning. These days, the conservative rural rump that once called itself the Country Party now calls itself the National Party. Different families of leopards, but always with the same spots.

All this stuff about the swelling chest of a class or group riveted by a superior sense of self is, of itself, nationalist.

Nationalism is, I believe, a dangerous and divisive tendency; its stock and trade is jingoism, populism and exclusion of the most calculating kind.

The catchcry of film in Australia has always been to tell the Australian story. But which story should it tell? The story of Australia's dynamic cosmopolitanism with all its emotional inclusion or the hard-hearted story of a community calibrating others against the smug and self-serving image it has of itself?

The Howard years have been the years of calibration; indeed, years of populist manipulation of Australia's best instincts. The country's moral compass has been recalibrated into the bargain and it is this environment which has been so deadening to the arts.

The arts flourish in times of enlargement and optimism, when the human spirit is off and running and encouraged to do its best. These are not those times in Australia. This does not mean that as individuals you should not do your best. To provide your own narrative on Australian society, but in doing so, resisting the temptation to be part of the arid philosophy that has become part and parcel of John Howard's Australia.