

**KATHARINE BRISBANE*****AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH : PRESS
CRITICISM AND PUBLIC ISSUES***

Speech to the Sydney Institute - 09/09/97

I chose the title for this speech some three months ago, when I was invited to give a talk to discuss a book I recently edited and published called *Critical Perspectives*. This book is a collection of essays on critical commentary in the press by the eight winners of the Pascall Prize. The essays cover music, theatre, film, art, literature, popular music and restaurants; and are by some of the liveliest and most experienced minds in the business. The writing is sharp and gives a critical insight into the pressures and constraints that prevail in the daily press, and particularly the insistent demands of commercialism. It's a good book and I recommend it to you. But I want to talk to you not about these authors but about the subtext of their work: the way the press mediates between us and reality; and the way the arts and its critical observers have been disempowered.

But I should have known that it was unwise to expect anything to do with the media to remain unchanged. In the last week I was compelled to recast what I wrote, to accommodate some mention of the death and funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales. These events, and the extraordinary expression of emotion they have generated, are almost an apotheosis of the need for empathy in public life which was central to my argument.

I believe that we are losing the power to imagine. I see an attack upon imagination at all levels in public life: on television, meaning is collapsed into a kind of visual muzak; in the education system, universities are stripped of any sense of the contestability of knowledge, geared instead to notions of quantifiable outcomes; in the prevailing political ideology, the limitations imposed by economic reality are not only accepted but have become an end in themselves in the form of economic rationalism; in the the delegitimising of intellectual discussion which has made the assault upon the ABC possible.

And lately I see it in the arts.

A curious paradox obtains today in our public life. The arts have been subsidised, industrialised and mainstreamed into amusement and advertising until they now reflect the needs of government and corporations. At the same time so arid has our capacity for empathy become, and so adversarial our attitudes to public issues, that in order to raise these issues in the public mind they must be shaped and dramatised. No news item on television can be related without an enactment or a graphic. The only way we can imagine ourselves into someone else's real-life dilemma is to make a comparison with fiction. 'It's like a Tarantino movie', we say. 'It's like something out of Dickens.' The more our parliamentarians and public figures talk of practical politics, the more they seek dramatic impact for their statements; the more these statements are edited, dramatised and subjected to photo opportunities. Where once our leaders ruminated in oratory, expecting and receiving our time and consideration, today they master the ten-second grab. The world has changed irrevocably since Vance Packard wrote *The Hidden Persuaders* and Richard Nixon's five o'clock shadow became the focus of a presidential election. Demand for instant gratification imposes other people's imagination upon our own, leaving us with an illusion of communication, of involvement in the exchange of ideas, of involvement in the democratic process; but which remains nothing more than that — illusion.

Television, which more than any medium gives rise to that illusion, is a further paradox. It brings into our lives public figures and events with a degree of intimacy which no previous century could have imagined; and which even film cannot reproduce. And yet it discourages understanding. Put a debate on TV and the bulk of viewers change the channel. TV is antipathetic to argument; words are a minor adjunct to the power of colour, movement and music. TV has trained us to react within the narrowest of spectrums but not to engage.

If I describe the Princess of Wales' life and death as the most extreme example of the power of this illusion, I am in no way referring to the real tragedy behind it, the death of a sympathetic and compassionate young woman at the hands of an allegedly drunken driver. But by marrying the Prince of Wales she entered into a fiction created by royal tradition and the imagination of the British public. What made her exceptional was that

she learnt how to appropriate that fiction. She understood the power of the drama in a way that the royal family never did; and reinvented herself, first as a celebrity and then, much more dangerously for family tradition, as a classless, hands-on humanitarian. She upstaged her husband and her peers; she subverted the role she had been called upon to play, revealing in the process the emptiness of the establishment from which, latterly, she had been excluded. In becoming the People's Princess she kept her finger upon the emotional needs of her public, using the skills of all great performers. She understood the camera intimately; the camera empowered her; the press was her lifeblood and she learnt to manipulate it to create new episodes of her long-running fiction. In the public mind her death has now taken on the inevitability of a morality tale which will continue, as Monroe's, Elvis's and the Kennedys' have continued.

The extent of the emotional response to Diana's death surprised everyone. Its source again was the illusion created by the media that we knew Diana intimately — something she had encouraged by the sympathy she radiated, and by her confessional behaviour. The death of Mother Teresa on Friday night will compound these perceptions and further confuse the definition of saintliness. But there was more to Diana's adoration than that. People need their stories, their rituals, the chance to share emotions with someone away from the adversarial world of politics and the law. Diana offered them all that; as once the Queen did, when as a too-young woman she took on the burden of sovereignty in Westminster Abbey in 1953; and adoring crowds learnt from a lipreader that a supportive Prince Philip had whispered: 'Where did you get that hat?' But their story is old now, and full of disillusion. The British people were grieving for the loss of more than Diana. They were grieving for themselves.

But six million people in a state of high emotion is a dangerous force. In this case it has been a gentle and unifying force; in other circumstances, as Britons have seen, anger can turn to riot. In his chapter on propaganda in *The Unconscious Civilization* John Ralston Saul quotes Mussolini: 'The crowd doesn't have to know. It must believe...If only we can give them faith that mountains can be moved, they will accept the illusion that mountains are moveable, and thus an illusion may become reality.' 'One of the characteristics of propaganda', Saul goes on, 'is that wherever possible, music and images

replace words. This is particularly easy on television and in films where words are innately of tertiary importance... For propaganda, language is virtually irrelevant. That is the point of it.'

In Australia recently there has been a great deal of emotion in public life; and it is a worrying thing to me that we have a Prime Minister who, like the Queen, does not understand the power of the imagination. It cannot be said that John Howard understands ceremony or sympathy. Instead, he wants to fix our frustrations with practical politics. He is doing his best to be a practical man; but all the big issues he has had to face in his first year in office have been emotional ones: the Port Arthur massacre, the reduction of the public service, the Wik decision, greenhouse gases, desalination, the stolen children, rising rumours of racism and a declining reputation in Asia; the closure of BHP Newcastle, media ownership, parliamentarians' rights and rorts, the leak of embarrassing Treasury documents. Practical solutions do not suffice for any of these. What is also needed is the reassurance that the moral significance is understood, that pain inflicted by government decisions is recognised, that we are in this together. That is the Australian way. Our present government has been admirably successful at reducing our deficit. But we are not yet gaining much comfort from the achievement.

The cusp of the millennium is one of the most exciting times in which we could be living; the speed of change is also making it one of the most frightening; and our response to that so far has been to demand that our masters take control. In the light of this it is no surprise that a conservative government was swept into office with such single-mindedness in 1996. But no government anywhere today can offer that reassurance. And since our new leaders did not at once demonstrate the kind of dynamic which embraced all our concerns we have begun to seek saviours nearer to home. History has demonstrated that ignoring a problem will not make it go away; and that resentment breeds revenge. Pauline Hanson did not go away; the stolen children have not gone away. They are now part of the history of the Howard Government. Real life does not come edited like fiction or the news. It needs ceremony, it needs a good theatrical director. And it needs good social critics.

The arts are the guardians of social criticism. Not only do they hold the mirror up to nature, they shape it, they bring it consciously to order to enable

us to examine, realise and understand the life around us. Today our arts are richer and more diverse than they have ever been in our history, thanks to the investment of public and private funds over the past 30 years. The arts and entertainment are a huge industry today, rapidly becoming, thanks to film and TV, one of our major exports. That is part of the problem — the industry. The objectives of art and entertainment have become indistinguishable in the public mind — and that of government — in the same way that research and development face the same imperatives as mass production. The arts over the past 30 years, since the Australian Council for the Arts and other funding bodies were established, have been enormously influential in changing our view of ourselves — of even teaching us to recognise ourselves — on stage, film, television, in literature and the visual arts. Australian writers are read as widely as foreign writers; and are studied by students as widely as the classics. I don't need to give you examples. But there has been a price. The industrialisation of the arts has discouraged subversion, has ignored the lessons of history, and in many cases has led to gross self-indulgence. The industrialisation of the press has done the same.

America's richest man, the money-market tycoon George Soros, in a now notorious article in the *Atlantic Monthly* recently summed up the dilemma and called for change. 'There is an ongoing conflict', he wrote, between market values and other, more traditional value systems ... As the market mechanism has extended its sway, the fiction that people act on the basis of a given set of non-market values has become progressively more difficult to maintain. Advertising, marketing, even packaging, aim at shaping people's preferences rather than, as *laissez-faire* theory holds, merely responding to them. Unsure of what they stand for, people increasingly rely on money as the criterion of value. What is more expensive is considered better. The value of a work of art can be judged by the price it fetches. People deserve respect and admiration because they are rich. What used to be a medium of exchange has usurped the place of fundamental values, reversing the relationship postulated by economic theory. What used to be professions have turned into businesses. The cult of success has replaced a belief in principles. Society has lost its anchor. This is not news to any of us but it is compelling that it comes from a man who chooses to give away 300 million dollars a year for the public good and who single-handedly has attempted to address the economic problems of Eastern Europe in defiance of his own

government's apathy.

Thanks to the revolution of the 60s, and the major role played by federal and state governments, Australia has created one of the most vital artistic movements in the world. The originality, the lustful energy, the apparent lack of inhibition; and in the case of indigenous art, the arcane mystery; all these things are matters of astonishment to other countries, that so much talent comes from so small a population. And yet it is not being used as a social force for the public good. The artist's voice, which has always been a clarion call for change, is today hardly heard in the community. The art patrons are heard, the government servants are heard, celebrities litter the newspapers. But when it comes to the big issues, the issues of God and Death, as Phillip Adams would call them, the artist is silent.

There are several reasons for this. For one, the government does not understand the issues; but the newspapers also share a responsibility. I would like to outline briefly how newspapers have changed in my lifetime. I did my cadetship on *The West Australian* in the 1950s when it was a paternalistic organisation with a strong sense of rectitude. Fact and opinion were rigorously separated; opinion was permitted only by specialists with by-lines; and in editorials. The checking of facts, correct spelling and grammar, and impartiality were the basis of our training.

In 1967 I was living in Sydney when my experience as drama reviewer on *The West Australian* gained me the job of national drama critic of the fledgling Australian newspaper. I was contracted to write two columns a week. To show you how things have changed I only have to tell you that it was then a part-time job to cover the whole of Australia. There was then no arts page — my column was published on the leader page — part of the real-life world — and I shared the space in turn with the music, art and film reviewers.

The influence of *The Australian's* columns brought about the end of overnight reviewing. Offset printing was introduced, quickly followed by computer setting and the end of the linotype operator. The computer transformed the newspaper industry forever — and not entirely for the better. The first thing that happened was the break-up of the reporter's room camaraderie. The scattering of journalists had a profound impact upon the dynamic of their relationship with the office — and upon the solidarity

of the Australian Journalists' Association. We could now phone in our copy. We seldom met our colleagues, we lost direct control over sub-editing. The second result of the computer was the downsizing of staff. Fewer reporters were now needed. A leaner, more efficient, more profitable newspaper could be achieved. There were big sackings in the 70s at all levels of newspaper production.

And so began the era of the newspaper columnist. It soon became apparent that with fewer reporters covering more events the quality was becoming thinner. This in due course began to be supplied by the freelance columnist — a good economic use of resources. At the same time the loosening up of the market began a rapid shakeup of ownership which further eroded the stability of editorial management and the understanding of journalistic ethics.

By the mid-80s in the arts field there were almost no reviewers left who regarded themselves as career journalists: that is, as someone trained to bring you, within their capacity, all the news that's fit to print. Other sections also began to employ contributors. Freelance workers are powerless workers within the hierarchy; therefore their allegiance, their power base if they have one, must lie elsewhere. Today a high proportion of our most influential columnists no longer owe their livelihood to the paper that publishes them. In some cases their name is more important than what they write. Newspapers are becoming dependent upon them.

The second major influence for change has been the rise of the publicist — known as public relations until the 60s. By the mid-70s arts editors were appointed to handle the lobbyists; the arts pages were devised initially to shield the news editor from the need to recognise the news value of anything to do with the arts; and the outcome is that news value is no longer an imperative. The imperative is consumerism. Nowadays it is generally no longer the arts critics' prerogative to gather news or comment upon it. On the contrary, their principal task, and that of the arts editors, is to defend themselves from the publicity machine. Only once or twice in my seven years at *The Australian* — and that in the last year — did I write a promotional article. Now the bulk of the arts pages is what I call 'promises, promises' and the reviews which follow a day or two later are very often old, unwelcome, news.

Newspapers these days are divided into sections and supplements which make it difficult to gain an overview; and difficult for a commentator to extend his/her research or commentary into the wider world. Further, too many commentators generally, I believe, have disempowered themselves with the misapprehension that their personal opinion is of importance to the reader. 'Being true to oneself', was how one described it. At all levels the separation from the reporter's room has elevated the personal opinion and downgraded the duty to provide information, analysis and debate.

But in this fragmented world we need information, analysis and debate; and thankfully some good journalists still find their way through the system to write as they want. We need writers to read the books for us, to draw attention, to make connections — not to impose their opinion but to arouse our interest, to question our perceptions. And we need critics like Robert Hughes, John Ralston Saul, Robert Manne and Stephanie Dowrick to stir us and reassure us of our common humanity. The bestseller lists every week demonstrate that need. But we have come a long way from Matthew Arnold's definition of criticism — if we ever believed it: 'a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world.' We have even forgotten the proper meaning of 'disinterested'. In this competitive world of resolution by confrontation, the only places where an argument can be played out passionately without an imperative to act upon the resolution are in books, plays and films.

We all know of the dangers inherent in too-narrow media ownership; but less has been said about the control over the imagination which is also imposed. Whole sections of our arts have allowed themselves to be appropriated by commercial interests, undermining their capacity to threaten the ideology of economics which is the measure today of achievement. The arts are by their nature impractical. In partnership with industry they can be put to practical use.

So, of what practical use are our arts and our artists? Can they help employment? Solve the Wik debate? Diminish greenhouse gases? Achieve industrial harmony? The answer is yes. Because they listen and observe. Because they make connections. Because they create fictions which reveal a truth. Because they challenge the accepted. Because they integrate the disparate. And lastly because they exercise the imagination. It takes

imagination to foresee the consequences of our actions; it takes imagination to hear patiently the unwelcome facts, to see the other person's point of view; it takes imagination to embrace the abstract; to conceive of alternative ways of thinking, ways of living, ways of believing; to mend the fragmentation of modern life; to reduce the complex to the simple; to know when to hold one's peace; it takes imagination to engage in a disinterested debate. We are crying out for government to use their imagination.

At the top now we Australians are deeply divided: the country is in open revolt against the city; miners from conservationists; whites from Aborigines; Caucasians from Asians; the employed from the unemployed. Racism is a predictable response to our sense of powerlessness, our need to have someone outside ourselves to blame. People at the grass roots, however, know that reconciliation is essential to survival. Individual pastoral leases have made their own treaties; communities are forming action groups to address their own relationships; Aboriginal communities, in the past alienated from each other by tribal allegiances, are more and more united; and producing spokespeople of such magnanimity that our white leaders are simply outclassed. By the time the government succeeds in passing its ten-point Wik legislation — if it ever does — the many disparate communities of this great country will have already made their own reconciliations.

Which brings me back to my first point about the uses of imagination. You may think that you are a practical person; that the creative world of fiction has no impact on your life. But you would be wrong. The news you read or hear, and particularly the news you see on television, is edited, dramatised, made palatable; and its selection is determined not by public need but by the quality of visuals. An issue has no substance until it exists as an image. It is not 'real' until it has been dramatised — that is, imagined, become the product of someone else's imagination. Language in the daily press is constantly manipulated, usually to appropriate power to the speaker or the writer. It is no coincidence that in the wash-up of union amalgamation the Australian Journalists' Association was married to Actors' Equity.

It is important that we understand when we are being manipulated. That we learn to be our own critics. If we cannot use the powers that language offers, then we are vulnerable to every kind of exploitation. This is where the imaginative, critical mind — as opposed to the 'expert' mind with its vested

interest — can help us. Teach us to discriminate. Show us, for example, how many different meanings the word ‘ownership’ has in different hands; how to distinguish between ‘knowledge’ and ‘information’; between ‘service’ and ‘industry’; between ‘learning’ and ‘realising’; between ‘simplicity’ and ‘simplistic’; between ‘education’ and ‘training’. Regrettably, our declining education system, in which curiosity is being defined as ‘wastage’ of university resources and vocational training is replacing learning, is depriving us of the discriminating mind.

We talk a lot about pragmatism, which we call practical politics. We are exhorted to deal with the real world. But it is not the real world that is determining our opinions today — and probably never was, since the days of the troubadours. We need to know how to deduce, how to imagine, in order to interpret for ourselves. Scepticism is no more a protection than ideology.

It was the sceptics who invented pragmatism or moral utilitarianism, the opposite of ideology. The gun ban was an excellent example of pragmatism at work: the taking of practical action based on the evidence available in the interest of the public good — or rather, the greatest good of the greatest number. But not all such decisions in our recent history can be regarded by the majority of Australians as being in the public interest or fit the definition of ‘moral utilitarianism’. The moral aspect of utilitarianism, ‘the fiction of non-market values’ as George Soros calls them, is being lost from the equation because morality is conceptual, not empirical — it exists by faith, not by sight, and requires imagination to realise, to see beyond the practical, beyond the means to the end.

I would like to give you one simple example of how fiction and public life interact. David Williamson, who I have been publishing for 25 years, has extraordinary antennae for how Australians are feeling. Readers are often puzzled at the apparent ordinariness of his writing style; but the secret of his success lies in this instinct for the public mood and his focus upon writing within his audience’s experience. Earlier this year I read a draft of his latest play, *After the Ball*, which, he has publicly averred, was inspired by emotions surrounding the death of his mother. The play did not attract me. The principal characters are a frustrated and vindictive mother, a weak-willed father and a self-serving, compassionless son. ‘Why would I want to spend two hours in the company of such unpleasant people?’ I asked myself.

And would others? I was wrong, of course. Robyn Nevin's production of the play in Brisbane in July left me awash with emotion. And with the emotion came the realisation that the issues of the play were not simply David's personal demons but our own. What public issue has been supreme for the last twelve months? Reconciliation, of course. And of what does the play leave us convinced? That only after we receive forgiveness, from others and ourselves, can our lives move on. This play is also as savage a critique of family values and their legacy as the funeral of Diana could expose.

That's how a good fiction works — critical examination through realisation. That's why it is subversive. To translate it to real life I have only to remind you that in the debate surrounding the release of the Human Rights Commission's stolen children report *Bringing Them Home*, the gap between the response of those who read with their head and those who realised with their heart was palpable — and will have long-lasting effect. The tragic thing about our Prime Minister's discomfort over the stolen generation issue was that he appeared genuinely not to understand the meaning of ceremony or the weight of a spontaneous gesture of sympathy. What we do not understand or control we cannot help but fear.

Such processes are those of the drama, of learning, of realising by enactment. Information we learn and forget if it has no immediate application for us. But those things that engage our emotions as well as our reason, that make us realise the truth of the evidence before us, we store away in our hearts. These are the things that will affect our future behaviour and our future judgement. If, as some have predicted, Princess Diana's death begins the end of the British monarchy, it will be not through the rational arguments but because people don't feel the same any more.

On the evidence of the language it uses, our government no longer sees itself as visionary, nor even as a servant of the public good; but as a corporation reporting to 'stakeholders' — and one whose job it is to downsize its expenditure and to keep up the price of its shares. This division into industries, each trying to make a profit, at the expense of others, is making our world more and more fragmented. The government is trying to solve our problems — as have all governments in living memory — with legalism, by persuading us Procrustean beds are comfortable for all. This is causing a deal of passion in the country — and it is through the containment of

emotion itself, curiously enough, that cracks are beginning to appear in the Coalition solidarity. Frustration leads to anger and anger to violence. It is the responsibility of everyone in public life to read the signs. The important sign at Diana's funeral was that the monarch was forced to acknowledge the will of the people and that the modern Prime Minister Tony Blair understood and stage-managed the drama.

Do we, yet, understand the drama of the Wik debate? And will it be resolved by 400 pages of legislation? To me it is like the White Knight in *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, trying to cover every contingency:

'I was wondering what the mouse-trap was for', said Alice. 'It isn't very likely there would be any mice on the horse's back.'

'Not very likely, perhaps,' said the Knight, 'but if they do come, I don't choose to have them running all about.'

'You see, he went on after a pause, 'it's as well to be provide for everything. That's the reason the horse has all those anklets round his feet.'

'But what are they for?' Alice asked in a tone of great curiosity.

'To guard against the bites of sharks.'

Being practical, objective, keeping empathy and imagination at bay is a lonely course and antipathetic to human nature. What you cannot imagine you cannot resolve. Being a practical person and thinking of everything, is too difficult for the individual human being. The only solution we have is to help each other and to share a sense of humour. For however much we believe in our own views, however much we care for the public good, however much we choose to disguise our motives, in public life the way we think and act reveals us. 'I am a human being', said Terence, 'and believe nothing that is human is alien to me.' In the end we must learn to be our own critics as we face the daily revelations in the press, the adversarial tone, the headlining, the beat-ups and the human dramas, the moralising of the columnists; we must make our way together through the sound and fury, recognising we are all human beings, and try to find inside it all a still small voice of truth.

Katharine Brisbane

References

Matthew Arnold, 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time'

Katharine Brisbane (ed.) *Critical Perspectives*. Sydney: Currency Press and Pascall Foundation 1997

John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilisation*, Ringwood, Victoria: Penguin 1997

George Soros, 'The Capitalist Threat', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1997

Terence, *Heauton Timoroumenos*, 25

David Williamson, *After the Ball*. Sydney: Currency 1997