DOES COFFEE LEAD TO HEROIN?: YOUTH, DRUGS AND THE DISCOURSE OF AUSTRALIAN MODERNISATION

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Sydney’s Kings Cross was a focal point for the popular imaging of Australian youth as a social formation – and problem – in the 1960s and 1970s. The spectacle of a new, young generation congregating in the Cross to consume ‘alien’ substances and to indulge in ‘foreign’ fashions generated a classic moral panic. The powerful conceptual combination of youth gone astray, the historically-determined reputation of the Cross as vice capital, and unfamiliar drugs became a discursive node onto which anxieties about the process of modernisation were projected. As Australia modernised economically, opening to the world in an exceptional way, the issue of preserving ‘the national character’ was keenly debated. The public discussion of inner-city youth, apparently imitating overseas trends, was haunted by the question of how an Australian identity might survive the shocks of entry into an internationalising order. And Kings Cross was a symbolic site, a psychogeographic frontier, where ‘traditional’ values seemed to be most obviously under threat.

Aspirant young drugtakers who flocked to Kings Cross for a fix in the 60s and 70s were certainly not representative of Australian youth-in-general. Reviewing the experience of young Australia in the period, Donald Horne’s *Time of Hope* provided a useful reminder that an understanding of the national variety of youthful demographics was often distorted by a critical concentration on the seductively visual, vocal carnival of alternative and counter cultures that rallied in places like inner-city Sydney. For every beatnik or hippie, to whom ‘lighting up a joint… was like sending off a smoke signal of revolt into enemy territory’ (48), there were inestimably more young people who went to school, university or technical college, pursued careers, or played organised sport. To these, counter culture was an intriguing notion rather than an immediate reality. As Horne wrote,

> the work ethic, and for the middle classes the belief in a ‘career’, still lived. Some middle-class children now ‘dropped out’, in the sense that they took up manual labour, or some part-time job (waitressing or taxi driving, for example); but after a year or two some of them dropped back in again. And those who did not falter in their careers (which was most of them) could at least use the idea of the alternative lifestyle in their fantasy worlds, as their parents imagined winning the lottery. (49)

This smacked of Horne’s long-held disdain of ‘youth power’ and dissidence, but it had some validity. Political protest, artistic rebellion, refusnik existentialism and drugtaking by no means constituted the full story of Australian youth in the 60s and 70s. Horne’s *Time of Hope* even peddled the view that a patient, professionally-minded young generation – riding the era’s ‘new [business] confidence’ – had prepared itself to inherit the future: ‘Youth might not be at the helm, but at least, in a term developed early in the 1960s, there could be “junior executives”’: a managerial class in waiting. (45)
Nevertheless, the narrative of youth and drugs was readily amplified in the media to suggest the potential for liminal tastes to spread amongst youth at large; and the habitual imaging of the Cross as danger zone fuelled the fear that adolescent workers, with leisure time and money to spend, could gravitate there as tourists of the underground. This worry was embodied in one famous young executive; and as his experience showed, Horne’s demarcation of respectable and wayward youth was neither firm nor enforceable. Such categories proved to be fluid and unsegregated.

In 1959, 18-year-old Richard Neville was an executive in the making. The future editor of the two incarnations of Oz (Sydney and London) and author of the hippie vade mecum, Playpower, had an advertising traineeship at the Farmers emporium. In the office, Neville recalled, elegantly-wasted ‘Young men with pale skin and bloodshot eyes arrived late at their desks… in the canteen, they recited snippets from Allen Ginsberg, Peggy Lee and Omar Khayyam’, drinking coffee which was artily nicknamed ‘Neskafka’. (9) He also remembered the revelatory moment of his counter-cultural induction:

Late one Saturday night I ventured into a Kings Cross jazz cellar and daringly ordered raisin toast and a cappuccino, the latest craze. At the end of a 2 a.m. set, the goatee’d muso packed up his bass and put a question to the saxophonist: ‘Hey man, where’s the party?’ It gave me goose pimples, the sense that somewhere out there in the night was a secret city waiting to be embraced. (10)

Neville had become a ‘jazzer’: a teenage and young-adult cohort which, Jon Stratton observed in The Young Ones, locally replayed the style of America’s beatnik youth. Jazzers flocked to coffee-houses in the late 50s: ‘a more middle-class group of young people… interested in non-commercial jazz when other young working-class kids shifted their interest to rock’n’roll.’ Importantly, Stratton wrote, jazzers ‘saw themselves as specialists in the music’ and as trailblazers in its attendant lifestyle. (112) Thus Neville found himself at the cutting edge of the modern: the three great symbols of which were Beat cool, subterranean jazz and machine-made coffee.

Coffee had a special place in the catalogue of drugs that marked social life and habit in Kings Cross in the mid-late 20th century. In fact, coffee drinking was a pioneering consuming practice in redefining the Cross as a site that supposedly induced disturbing changes in the character and habit of Australian youth.

As early as 1952, Kenneth Slessor lamented the advent of coffee culture in the Cross. In ‘A Portrait of Sydney’ he observed the ‘young men and women doing and saying in coffee-shops what young men and women do and say in coffee-shops all over the world’. This, he concluded, was ‘not what I think of as Sydney.’ (4) Slessor, of course, built his literary career on the imaging of a neon-lit, ultra-modern Sydney. He embraced Modernism: developing a poetics for representing Kings Cross, or ‘Darlinghurst’, indebted to transnational models. (The photographic snapshot quality of his poem ‘Last Trams’, for example, is clearly under the influence of T.S.Eliot’s ‘Preludes’.) As Noel Macainsh wrote, Slessor’s urban weltschmerz was archetypically Modernist: it had a sense of ‘distaste, aversion, even of nausea in the face of contemporary reality.’ (31) Distaste was offset, however, by an equally Modernist ‘beauty in squalor’ aesthetic, dating to the 19th-century French poet Charles Musgrove, Brian (2004) Does coffee lead to heroin?: youth, drugs and the discourse of Australian modernisation. Eucalypt, 3. pp. 61-75. ISBN 88 477 0751 2. Author version.
Baudelaire. Slessor’s well-known ‘William Street’ typified the idea in its refrain: ‘You find this ugly, I find it lovely.’ (Slessor 1972: 117)

But things Slessor could tolerate at the level of international literary style proved abrasive, and temperamentally unacceptable, in the realm of lived experience. Where the outside world impacted on ‘his’ Kings Cross it was deteriorative – particularly when the issue of ‘youth’ was infused in the brew. In his comments on the Kings Cross coffee-shops of the early 50s, Slessor suggested a sequence of themes that became entrenched for representing Australian youth as a fault-line in the project of positive modernisation. Young men and women were not Sydney. Why? Because they existed in an international economy – of fashionable sameness, ultimately – doing its business ‘in coffee-shops all over the world’. The International style, Modernism, was debased to empty conformity. The international impetus that sustained the poet Slessor in the 1920s, 30s and early 40s had become an alienating, generational displacement: sidelining the genuinely Modern with a new form of mass modernity; threatening local identity with the tastes of a globalised culture market.

As Slessor’s ‘Portrait of Sydney’ continued, this vision was subtly darkened in its imagery of light. The youth of Kings Cross, he wrote forensically – and as if the energy of youth ended in static deathliness – gather in ‘the juke-box bars’ where ‘the intense light exposes them as nakedly as if they were sliced and stained and gummed between slides for a microscope.’ Sydney’s conformist, populist, youthful, deathly modernity also had a source: ‘One by one, the cafes of the Cross are giving way to this American paradise of mechanical music and incandescence.’ (5) This was, precisely, an antipodean premonition of the critique of youthful, consuming modernity developed later in a British context by Richard Hoggart in The Uses of Literacy (1957), with its references to ‘juke-box boys… who spend their evening listening in harshly lighted milk-bars to the “nickelodeons”’ surrounded by the ‘nastiness of their modernistic knick-knacks’. They lived in a ‘myth-world’, Hoggart wrote, which they took to be an authentic, but belated, recreation of ‘American life.’ (247–8) For both Slessor and Hoggart, youth pursued a ‘thin and pallid form of dissipation, a sort of spiritual dry-rot amid the odour of boiled milk.’ (Hoggart 248)

Caffeine catalysed one of the many reinventions Kings Cross underwent, from the artistic Bohemia of the1890s to the heroin supermarket of the 1980s. It stimulated the Cross from a period of decline into an era of renewed vibrancy. The coffee craze peaked in the late 1950s and early 60s: a time when the leisure economy of the Cross slumped, largely due to the rise of suburban leagues clubs. Lower-middle and working-class punters formerly flocked to the bars and clubs in Kings Cross. In the 50s, they began travelling elsewhere for the multi-attractions of the ‘leagies’: cheap food, cheap beer, light entertainment and team camaraderie – a process completed in the 60s, when poker machines arrived in number.

Coffee helped in the repackaging of the Cross as a with-it spot for a fresh clientele; and, through its associated subcultural tastes, the dark beverage left an after-image lasting years. A striking photograph from Donald Horne’s illustrated essay on contemporary Australia, Southern Exposure (1967), crystallised it. Juxtaposed to another emblem of the district’s immorality – the doorway of the Pink Panther strip-club – the photo in question shows a young couple sitting at a sidewalk cafe table in the Cross, with all the de rigueur trappings of cosmopolitan style. (Horne 66–67)

They wear Carnaby Street clothes. She is smoking, disregarding her partner, and a packet of Kool cigarettes lies on the table – the popular American import menthol brand, the very name of which screams Attitude. He raises the ubiquitous brown-and-white cappuccino cup and scowls at the camera: an angry young man, afflicted by urban ennui and inviting trouble. It is an image of youth as both consumer of foreign fashion and tightly-coiled menace.

Rennie Ellis and Wesley Stacey, chroniclers of the Cross, discovered that when ‘the espresso machine arrived from Italy’ around 1957, 500 coffee-shops ‘opened in as many days.’ Chips Rafferty, cinematic avatar of the Australian Legend and a long-time resident thought it ‘a bloody shame. The Cross used to be a wonderful, Bohemian sedate sort of village. I didn’t see one brawl there and everyone seemed to know everyone else until the espresso shops came.’ (Ellis and Stacey 23) Again, alienation was the keynote sounded by the movie icon. Coffee culture, with its technological armature the espresso machine, was blamed for transforming the Cross from a traditional community to an aggressive urban jungle, marked by modernity’s loss of human connection. Rafferty’s rueful remarks were also an encoded defence of Australian values. They were a reaction to the impost of foreign tastes that accompanied the tide of postwar immigration – keenly felt in Kings Cross, where many Eastern Europeans settled, preferring bagels and borsht to chips.

Ken Slessor, once again, took patriotic cudgels to the assumption that imported or international style meant superior quality. In a memoir first published in the Bulletin, ‘My Kings Cross’ (1963), Slessor wrote about foreign tastes (quite literally) and lambasted the common opinion that ‘the postwar influx of Europeans has widened our taste and improved our cooking… anybody who believes they have improved Australian eating is clearly ignorant of the state of Sydney’s restaurants in the first quarter of the century.’ (17) The elegiac mood governed a good deal of Slessor’s best work, and ‘My Kings Cross’ was an elegy for ‘the tatters of its unconformity’. The streets of the Cross were ‘just as crowded with eccentric, extroverted or fantastic people, but instead of the ripe Australian idiom of the C.J.Dennis period most of them issue torrents of Italian, Hungarian, Slavic, Dutch and German and Greek.’ (15) This image of polyglot flood was fused with the idea of tidal, generational change:

I have watched the pushes give way to the bodgies and the bodgies to the hippies (or whatever is the newest name for flash young men in search of adventure). I have watched the old William Street eating-places… turn into bistros, niteries, wine-and-dine cafes, spaghetti-bars and espresso lounges. (15)

Slessor’s rearguard action on behalf of the National Yesteryear continued by blasting thefad for convenience cuisine: ‘hamburger-counters and the lines of electrically “barbecued” chickens rotating in their glass coffins.’ (17) Fast food and foreign food, together, transformed the tastes of the Cross. More significantly, however, the new diet was supplemented by drugs. In ‘The Green Rolls Royce’ – a poem from his 1933 verse collection celebrating denizens of the Cross, Darlinghurst Nights – Slessor had warmed to the ‘eleven hundred strangers’ who lived there ‘on aspirin and beer’. (Slessor 1981: 9) By 1963, ‘The fried potato has given way to deep freeze or instant food… and the 1100 strangers living on aspirin and beer have proliferated into 11,000 strangers living on aspirin and beer and also on smoked eel, metwurst, goulash, salami, Vienna schnitzels, benzedrine and tranquillizers.’ (16) This image transmitted Musgrove, Brian (2004) *Does coffee lead to heroin?: youth, drugs and the discourse of Australian modernisation.* Eucalypt, 3. pp. 61-75. ISBN 88 477 0751 2. Author version.
a sense of metropolitan modernity’s multiplying massification, as well as providing a commentary on the dubious revolution in the resident Kings Cross drug menu.

Consuming habit and a voracious appetite for the new – from food and drink to drugs – were key characteristics of Slessor’s distasteful vision of a new, lost Cross. Consumption defined the place where there were ‘still swarms of young people eating, drinking, talking and making love in what passes for Kings Cross today’: telescopically surveyed from ‘the anguish plateau of my (and the century’s) sixties.’ (14) The intricate conceptual mapping in ‘My Kings Cross’ – the carefully-crafted linkage of foreigners, taste, modernity, youth and drugs – produced a story of cultural attenuation and identity in flux.

If, as Slessor wrote in ‘My Kings Cross’, the precinct was ‘a term rather than a place… perpetually expressing a state of mind’ (15), then the seeds of the 60s mentality were sown during World War II. Scott Carlin, curator of the 2003 exhibition Kings Cross – Bohemian Sydney, noted that the war ‘had a major impact on Kings Cross.’ In particular, the ‘Japanese submarine attack reinforced a sense of danger and a need to live for the moment.’ (7) Visiting American servicemen no doubt shared the sentiment, bringing supplies with them to intensify the momentary thrill. Although there are no firm records, it seems inconceivable that speed was not passed around – given the fact that during the war 80 to 100 million doses of amphetamines were distributed by US armed forces doctors. (Grinspoon and Hedblom 18) Marijuana, favoured by Afro-American GIs, certainly arrived and was used in jazz venues like the pivotal Booker T. Washington Club – set-up to cater for Americans on leave. But pot remained a coterie drug, gaining ‘a small following in bohemian Kings Cross and among seamen’: the population at large never encountered it. (Stratton 113)

The ethos of ‘living for the moment’ – and its association with drug experience – was an article of faith for postwar teenagers in the US, Britain and Australia. It percolated down and through successive youth subcultures. In the late 40s and 50s, working-class Australian bodgies and widgies took the legally-retailed stimulant benzedrine – the drug of Slessor’s young Cross. As Jon Stratton rightly observed, ‘like the later use of purple hearts’ – the amphetamine marketed as Drinamyl – stimulant drugs (‘uppers’) had a purchase on youth experience in an obvious fashion. English mods and their Australian replicas in the 60s took to Drinamyl over benzedrine because it was a more potent, but similar, drug for ‘extending the leisure time available to young people over weekends.’ (113)

The drug experience also served a metaphoric function; articulating youth’s thirst for the momentaneous, as Craig McGregor found when he interviewed the champion surfer Midget Farrelly. To some, surfies represented ‘a loosening of the legend of the “bronzed Anzacs” (the lifesavers)’ (Horne 1980: 49); though George Johnston pictured them ‘with their lean hard bodies and bleached hair struggling for days on foot’ in search of ‘isolated and uninhabited beaches’. This, he thought, ‘had always been with us, the same lure that led Eyre into the wilderness and drove Sturt to battle against the dancing mirages of the red Centre.’ (249) For Johnston, surfies were a youth formation representing continuity with a national past. In the pages of McGregor’s best-selling People, Politics and Pop (1968), however, surfies rebelled against the ‘RSL–Anzac Day–beer–’n’–poker–machine syndrome.’ They attracted

‘shallow anti-American sentiment’ from ‘radio commentators and beery-voiced “oldies”’; they belonged to a scene stretching ‘from Hawaii to Peru to California’: a cult revolutionised in Australia by the imported ‘short, finned, Malibu boards’. (112) More importantly, surfing suggested a very hip attitude, as Farrelly explained: ‘You go into oblivion... Nothing matters any longer but you and the board and the wave and this instant of time... I sometimes wonder whether this feeling’s a healthy thing... I’m like a drug addict then – everything seems simple, everything seems to fit into place.’ (118)

These antithetical views of surfing youth appeared at a time when the issue of Young Australia was debated under the broader umbrella of economic modernisation and national coming-of-age. This vast, complex, multi-vocal debate was conducted in many arenas: government reports, academic journals, newspapers, the electronic media, accessible state-of-the-nation tracts and coffee-table books amongst them. It would be impossible to detail the scope and nuances of this discourse here, or to wholly examine the contingent discourse on youth that it spawned.

Roughly sketched, the umbrella narrative was propelled by exhilaration at the nation’s dramatic development. The flow-in of foreign capital, the minerals and mining boom, growing technological infrastructure, improved communications and transport, agricultural advance, an up-swing in scientific research, consumer-driven affluence and tourism were all shots in the arm of the body politic. Books promoting Australia as investment opportunity, repository of limitless natural resources and a landscape of high-value tourist amenity – as well as mirroring a modernising nation to itself – flooded the market. Excitement was the common mood; and looking back from the vantage of 1971, Colin Simpson recaptured the elated feeling of social transformation:

Australia has been virtually rediscovered in the past ten years, the sixties. The new exploration of the continent – vertical instead of horizontal, geophysical rather that geographical – has uncovered vast hordes of mineral wealth, along with reservoirs of oil. It is no overstatement to say that the country that stepped affluently into the seventies is a New Australia. (6)

It was also, George Johnston typically wrote, a Young Australia ‘in more ways than the one customarily used to excuse shortcomings’: the dearth of history and heritage. (270) As he noted, half the population – 5.5 million people – were under the age of 30. In many ways, Johnston’s enormously successful coffee-table book The Australians (1966) – selling 95,000 copies – was minted from the stuff of Legend. Its most emphatic, baton-passing image of youth was the book’s final photograph: a teenage boy in cadet uniform, stood to attention at an Anzac Day parade. (284) Again, as with the comments on surfers, continuity was the keynote. It was a graphic attempt to freeze-frame a model of youthful citizenship that would linger in the reader’s mind.

In his written text, however, Johnston was less sanguine about Young Australia’s adherence to ‘obsolete’ myths. (269) With ‘intellectuals and creative people’, he thought, the young ‘share an iconoclasm which must precede further great change in the Australian landscape, internally’. The future of the national psyche was in their hands, but there was a major problem. The young were ‘better educated and more intelligent than any previous generation of Australians.’ However, in a passage conjuring the possibility of mental derailment, ‘they rattle round loosely in the great

space, some of them unhappy without quite knowing why, others anxious for redefinition or some definite new goal to aim at or image to cling to: a rhetorical parallel to Midget Farrelly’s drug-like rush into watery ‘oblivion’. (270–1) In this portrait of Young Australia as disaffected with a traditional sense of identity, and unsatisfied by unprecedented prosperity and opportunity, Johnston suggested how closely, and critically, discourses on destiny and delinquency clustered around the concept ‘youth’.

These intertwined thematics became ubiquitous. As a voice of Young Australia, Craig McGregor attempted to spin Johnston’s opinion in an optimistic direction. McGregor’s Portrait of Australia (1966) saw generational rupture – the ‘radically different’ young – as a freedom from ‘the old social mould’, praising the energy of youth as ‘the key to the future shape of Australian society.’ (277) McGregor celebrated youth’s immersion in ‘internationalised’ popular culture, and its character as ‘up to date, image-conscious, materialist [and] aware’. (278–9) He labelled the young ‘joyful materialists’; but even McGregor acknowledged the fundamental price of ‘material possessions and having a good time’ – ‘a diminution of idealism’ and intellectual delinquency. (281) Horne’s Southern Exposure followed the argument. In terms of his own preferred model of a professionalised Young Australia, Horne approved of its quest for ‘expert standards of performance’ and rejection of ‘the offensively inexpert, the unpolished, the rustic, the not-with-it.’ Still, reiterating Johnston and McGregor, Horne’s verdict on the young was stalked by doubt. Southern Exposure remained ambivalent about the knowing ‘casualness and scepticism’ that accompanied a ‘quick seizing on… international youth vogues.’ And, he fretted: ‘It is yet to be demonstrated that their education has given them enough acquaintance with the products of the mind to make an effective difference (or that their scepticism is not just another form of mindlessness).’ (128)

The photos in Southern Exposure were visual cement to Horne’s textual reflections on the localisation of international vogues. The glowering anomic of the coffee-shop scene, discussed previously; rockers idly admiring a leather-clad mate’s new motorcycle, emblazoned with the home-made sign ‘Teenage Taxi’ (72–3); a carefree, bikini-ed young woman dancing at a ‘Bondi Stomp’ beneath a banner reading ‘Latest Hits on 2UW’. (129) As the most conspicuous consumer of the products, trends and ideas issuing from transnational culture industries – phenomena parcelled with other forms of foreign interest in the country – ‘youth’ was an emergent formation and symbolic barometer. Its scales would ultimately test Australia’s capacity to either ride the wave of change or sink in its undertow.

Basically, this broader debate framed specific accounts of youthful drugtaking. Youth was the index, par excellence, for measuring the destabilising impact of change and plumbing the darker depths of modernisation: and when drugs entered the equation, the disturbance deepened.

Academics, popular polemicists and tabloid journalists joined the discursive fray. In the first of a series of state-of-the-nation feature articles run by Meanjin (1966), Ian Turner brooded on the common theme of educated youth’s debasement by modernity and overseas influence: ‘the Boeing 727 has revolutionized the culture lag, and where Pan-Am goes, can Batman be far behind?’ Right behind Batman was ‘the other great cult among young intellectuals – the drug kick.’ The Australian student ‘fascination
with marihuana and LSD – anomic drugs, turning ‘the users in on themselves’ – spelt oblivion: ‘the elevation of sensation over reason.’ (141) A widely-publicised 1967 report in Sydney’s tabloid Sun, ‘230 Drug Addicts – Average Age 19’, put education, youth, drugs and the Cross in ghastly combination. The piece cited the ‘case of a GPS master who gave the drug LSD to two High School pupils in a Kings Cross flat’ as a mere ‘fragment of Sydney’s alarming and growing problem of teenage addiction’. (3) And the most prominent work on the subject – Robert W. Connell’s Drug Scene – Kings Cross (1967) – funnelled educated youth manqué, modernity, international style, living for kicks, drugs and the Cross into a sensational exposé.

In Connell’s book, ‘Tim the Pusher’ exemplified the savvy, self-promoting spirit of Young Australia: ‘He had had a good education [and] was established in a promising career in broadcasting.’ But he was typically disillusioned, and ‘fell in with the drug crowds’ (a faceless urban mass) soon finding that ‘real money was to be made in the trafficking in drugs… Although he did not create a really big syndicate, it was large enough to net him a good income.’ Tim the Pusher had the talent of a Horne-style young executive; but this worthy attribute was horribly diverted into the underworld. And as a brash young entrepreneur, Tim the Pusher participated in the period’s ‘rediscovery’ of Australia and exploration of its resources: ‘He discovered a number of places where the cannabis plant grew wild and organised expeditions to collect it.’ (65) Ironically, but in tune with the narrative of overseas capital’s involvement in Australian economic modernisation, pot was both local and foreign. Cannabis was an indigenous plant; but it was culturally neglected and unexploited until outside styles – American Beat and pop cultures in particular – bred a recognition of its recreational utility and commercial value.

Throughout Connell’s Drug Scene, the narrative of drugs and youth was explicitly associated with the story of national economic development. The blossoming drug trade held a distorted, discursive mirror to the image of a nation engaged by a new commercial pioneering ethic and capitalising its natural-resource potential:

The map of Australia is wide and there are many vast, empty spaces where Cannabis will grow well… Already advance scouts have been sent out with quantities of seed to plant many acres in these wild, desolate areas. They take only about a year to mature, so we can expect supplies of Pot to be plentiful… we can expect a new and increased pushing on the campus, and even in the high schools. (95–6)

This image of an ingeniously exploited Outback, and a bustling new marketplace, was directly anchored in the over-arching story of national economic modernisation. And Tim the Pusher knew this potential market and where it met for fun: Kings Cross ‘coffee shops where a basic need was discovered, and the chances of being caught were not very great.’ (65–6)

In the history of Kings Cross, coffee led to heroin in the sense that the precinct was defined as a zone where ‘anything goes’ and everything new was for sale. The Cross was thoroughly recast as a youth playground by the coffee craze; so, when speed, cannabis, LSD and narcotics began arriving in commercial quantities they found an eager young market lusting for novelty and the glamour of cosmopolitan style. Just as Richard Neville and his jazzer peers were drawn to the coffee-shop incarnation of the
Cross as a limit-experience, aspiring mind-expanders of the early-mid 60s were magnetised by the drug scene there. Simon Davies, in his fine study *Shooting Up: Heroin Australia* (1986), wrote that the Cross ‘had an unsavoury reputation for most of the present century’: ‘The often painted picture of the hopeless, desperate, incorrigible addict fits in well with the reputation of the Cross, but like the puzzle of the chicken and the egg, it’s impossible to say which “evil” came first’. (96) The district became, in Robert Connell’s words, ‘the Mecca of the junkies’, exactly because it was the sort of place that should have a drug underground: ‘it is only natural that those wanting drugs find the Cross an easy hunting-ground.’ (27)

*Drug Scene – Kings Cross* was published at a time when Young Australia encountered the tastes of Americana face-to-face. Around the Cross, hotels billeted the scores of ‘young, alienated United States soldiers on rest and recreation leave from service in the Vietnam War, who brought with them, attracted, consumed, sold, and gave away considerable quantities of cannabis and heroin.’ (Manderson 144)

Their presence provoked a rapid expansion of the strip-club scene, with its charade of American hipness. Cashing-in on the fad, the Pink Pussy Cat’s owner, Louie Benedetto, told Craig McGregor that showgirls assumed ‘crazy names… Candy Bar from the Thunderbird Hotel in Las Vegas (she’s from Wollongong really)… Australians don’t know nothing about stripping.’ (24–5) The US presence also established the nation’s narcotic hub: ‘The Bourbon and Beefsteak bar in Sydney’s Kings Cross became the first centre of Australia’s heroin trade’ (Wodak 200–1): in an era when Bourbon was a quite un-Australian drink, and ‘beefsteak’ was simply known as ‘steak’. As Connell observed, the pre-publicity for the drug scene had been completed by previous overseas influences: books like Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*, Francois Sagan’s *Toxique* and Jean Cocteau’s *Opium*; the dashing reputation of Timothy Leary, ‘attempting to make drugs as American as Apple Pie and “Momism”’ (18); and, inevitably, pop music – ‘If Aldous Huxley is the god, and Timothy Leary the high priest of the drug world, then surely Bob Dylan is the poet laureate and psalmist. Wherever you go in the drug world they play his records constantly, see in his songs, his words, and his wailing voice a reflection of their own frustrations and desires.’ (46)

Connell crystallised the view of Kings Cross as a place where, as in Richard Neville’s cappuccino jazz-cellar experience, exotic tastes abounded; and where the line between respectable and wayward youth was dissolved by contact with the unfamiliar. It was a threshold at which Horne’s career-minded young Australians mutated into unnatural creatures of indeterminate identity. Connell’s opening page laid the theme, with its picture of ‘a rather strange individual. She’s a girl, though you might find it hard to distinguish her as such’. She was physically barely distinguished from ‘many boys who haunt the area’; and she was depicted as a witch, chanting ‘in a loud flat, monotone… “The streets of Kings Cross are paved with methedrine.”’ (9) This announced a recurrent concern in *Drug Scene*. Connell constantly stressed the age of drugtakers – ‘Sue, a quite well-dressed girl of seventeen’ (30) – and profiled their social status. In his account of a typical Kings Cross Pot Party – written around a series of photographs which *speak for themselves* (32) – Connell found ‘a psychiatric nurse who had been taking drugs for years, although he was now only nineteen’ (28) and ‘a young schoolteacher’ who told him how cannabis revealed ‘a kind of glory I had never seen before.’ (31) Young drugtakers circulated between two worlds, disrupting normative moral codes and confounding fixed taxonomies. This

was a shocking border that Donald Horne’s careerist young Australians stepped over: alternative lifestyles were not just compensatory fantasies, like winning the lottery, but instantly available experiences.

*Drug Scene* was hooked on the problem of where youth fit in the emergent nation: the hospital, classroom or Cross. And in a vital few paragraphs, Connell attributed the displacement of Young Australia to its separation from a traditional wellspring of national identity, the Outback, and its exposure to the jolts of modernity. National institutions were failing: ‘Our schools teach children to make a living, and not even that well. Such a task is impossible, because of ever-changing technology.’ Traditions were collapsing: ‘If our churches gave us some real spiritual values people would not seek to find them in devious paths… a new religion has been created around the use of drugs. Dr. Timothy Leary, its leader [preaches] “The Death of the Mind”’ (98): a terrifying version of Horne’s anxiety about the ‘mindlessness’ of Young Australia, Johnston’s rattling around loosely in empty mental space, or McGregor’s diminished ‘idealism’. And in a deviant variation of Colin Simpson’s vision of New Australia ‘rediscovered’ in the 60s, Connell continued:

> The extension of this theory is that, with the physical confinements of crowded city areas, man… and his offspring are becoming physically frustrated by the lack of natural environment… In the days of the early pioneers man had to overcome tremendous physical challenges – exploration, the development of uncultivated land… now man, in becoming ‘civilised’ has to a large extent lost touch with nature… In the process of civilisation, this age has become an age of the mind… it is easy to understand when a drug addict describes his addiction as ‘the New Frontier’… it is significant because it reveals that, frustrated from conquering the physical habitat, modern addicts are looking for an inner frontier… and courting disaster… (100–1)

This passage was the locus classicus on the interconnected topics of youth, drugs, modernisation and the allure of Kings Cross as cultural outer-boundary. Its pivot was the idea of drugtaking as a symbolic act that exposed modernity’s potential to go awry, and the idea of drugtaking as redirecting national Legend into dangerous mental territory. The modern young Australian drugtaker, blocked in the ‘natural instincts’ to explore ‘open ground’ (100), fatigued by metropolitan stress, was an aimless, drifting figure: a type through which contemporary social change could be morbidly contemplated as identity crisis. Rattling around in mental inner-space, at the psychogeographic boundaries of ‘being modern’ and ‘developing’, unhappy without quite knowing why, and anxious in the flux of possible redefinitions – as the country seemed to be – young Australian drugtakers were a distorted mirror held to the National Face. In the end, ‘drugtakers’ were a discursive construct onto which fears that modernity and change might be courting disaster could be projected.

**WORKS CONSULTED**


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