



Taking 'the art of politics' seriously means asserting a more genuine relation between art and politics than we casually or usually suppose. In contemporary mass-mediated societies, the concept of politics as prime-time spectacle, a carefully groomed contest between combative cult-personalities, is not new. Beyond that, however, it's possible to explore the notion that politics has an 'aesthetic' – or *is* an aesthetic practice – and that this matters.

"It is often said there is something Shakespearean about politics, providing as it does a vast stage on which colourful players enact all that is both noble and base about the human condition," *Australian* journalist Christine Jackman writes. With some embarrassment, she quickly qualifies: "But maybe that's all a bit too precious."<sup>1</sup>

It's neither precious nor merely metaphoric. Jackman's embarrassment comes from her recognition that a view of politics as show business or theatre is unoriginal: embodied in the mock-Tudor opening ceremonies of the British parliament, George W. Bush's 'Mission Accomplished' stunt, the fanfare of Australian election campaign launches after Gough Whitlam's 'It's Time', the estimation of how politicians 'come across' in televised debates, and the bear-baiting of question time. But brushing the idea aside as passé, too familiar or obvious is a failure of intellectual nerve. The aesthetic dimension of politics requires serious attention precisely because politics interweaves performance, role-play, ritual, iconography, symbolism, myth and narrative.

The 'aesthetic' is not simply an abstract philosophical category concerned with art and affect, perception and sensibility. In *The Ideology of the*

*Aesthetic*, Terry Eagleton argues that aesthetics is a field that polices everyday life. He puts forward the disarmingly simple proposition that aesthetics attempts to regulate all that is beyond the jurisdiction of 'reason' and 'law': "aesthetics is born as a discourse of the body." This means that the aesthetic functions to direct and shape the "primitive materialism" of our passions and experiences: "the whole of our sensate life together ... affections and aversions ... that which takes root in the gaze and the guts ... a society's somatic, sensational life".

Eagleton explains how "ethics, aesthetics and politics are drawn harmoniously together" in the work of two of neoconservatism's acclaimed ancestors, Adam Smith and Edmund Burke.<sup>2</sup>

In Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, human society is depicted as "an immense machine, whose regular and harmonious movements produce a thousand agreeable effects" like "any production of human art". When we replay society's harmonies in our lives, internalise its movements, then we experience not only the "beauty" of belonging but "virtue". As Eagleton makes clear, Smith's work posits that the "whole of social life is aestheticised", and that individuals thus belong in "a social order so spontaneously cohesive that its members no longer need to think about it".<sup>3</sup> This is the subtext of John Howard's famous desire for the Australian people to feel "relaxed and comfortable ... about their history ... the present ... the future". The apparently artless moment implied a cohesive, timeless social vision in which intellection was supplanted by 'feeling'. It articulated an aesthetic impulse to wholeness and harmony, a sense of balance, 'correct propor-

tion' and common-sense civility, and it invited the Australian people to empathise with Howard as a self-described "average Australian bloke" with "quintessential Australian values".<sup>4</sup>

In Burke, Eagleton discovers that the aesthetics of civility, conducted via 'manners', is a triumphant instance of Gramscian hegemony: "in the aesthetics of social conduct, or 'culture' as it would later be called, the law is always with us, as the very unconscious structure of our life". To believe and behave in a good manner, according to codes of civility, is to internalise the powers that govern us and to feel the pleasure of belonging to a harmonic social whole: "pleasurable conduct is the true index of hegemony". From his reading of Burke, Eagleton discerns that civility is a political question, and that the exercise of 'good manners' is nothing short of the taming of potentially 'barbarous' tendencies by conformity to established codes. Conformity becomes 'beautiful', an oceanic feeling, the bringing to heel of potentially unruly energies by restraint and civility, bringing a sense of aesthetic proportion to a world in crisis.<sup>5</sup>

Tom Clark sniffs this point in comments about Howard's well-documented politics of fear, and its processes of release and restraint. Clark observes that the notorious moment of 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come' involved both "unruliness" and "spillage wrought by people who do not understand ... Australia's laws", and an instantaneous "denial of that release". Clark's point underscores his argument that the aims of Howard's speech were "thoroughly poetical" – or, in Eagleton's terms, aesthetic. One can readily read a Burkean subtext here: that 'queue jumpers' are ill-mannered, there is no aesthetic self-regulation in their social behaviour. Interpellating the Australian public as a community that readily internalises and enacts the rule of law and good manners, Howard's rhetoric policed the emergency with an appeal to moral "containment".<sup>6</sup> The misery inflicted on asylum seekers could then appear, grotesquely, as a form of harmonic civility.

Any regime anchored in reason and law cannot, however, simply attempt to contain unruly passions by force. Instead, it acts to channel passion, to guide what "takes root in the gaze and the guts", to find a consensual form of mediation between the rule of reason and law and raw, everyday life.

This form of mediation is the aesthetic: a discourse that directs the life of passion and sensation into approved forms of feeling and action. And when the passionate body that requires mediation is a mass body politic, national myths, symbols, narratives and poetics – approved forms – are at hand to be mobilised. The potential consequences are troubling: the total aestheticisation of everyday life; life lived in a 'permanent present', construed around sentiment and empathy; the loss of history, the etherisation of critical thought.

In his landmark essay 'Myth Today', Roland Barthes explained that myths are intentionally manufactured then naturalised as timeless – "myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they were once made". And, as a mystification of class relations – 'false consciousness' – myth often masks a radical social vision with the appearance of stability, continuity, and a re-ordering of the world justified by 'tradition': "myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and of making [political] contingency appear eternal".<sup>7</sup>

We should never forget Barthes' dictum that "bourgeois ideology continuously transforms the products of history into essential types", producing a "cultural logic" whereby history's fractious, contradictory tendencies are supplanted by certainties, and critical "reflection is curtailed".<sup>8</sup> The aim is to re-order the world, to establish that it never was – and never could be – different. Myth beguiles as a deeper form of knowledge and organisation of 'sense' than the merely intellectual: it is eternal and visceral, the expression of a people's enduring spirit and passions. We are meant to empathise with myths, but not to think about them. As an aesthetic form, a shaping of sensibility, national myths ask us to internalise a holistic ruling-class world-view and to instinctively feel what is 'right' because that state of unreflective being is both beautiful and virtuous – aesthetic, in other words.

As a mediating mechanism, the aesthetic reconstructs emotion, redirects it into established forms that seem reasonably right. Crucially, too, the aesthetic activates the nebulous concepts of sentiment, sympathy and affinity: a sophisticated political etiquette, an ethos of sensibility which attempts to fuse our felt identity with the powers that rule us, regardless of what those powers might actually be doing. For this reason, the aesthetic is particularly

valuable to ruling classes in societies where unruliness and emergency are the actual results of a dominant ideology and political practice.

In 1940, as the very real emergency that led to his suicide closed upon him, Walter Benjamin was hastily completing 'Theses on the Philosophy of History'. In that work, he produced an incandescent guerrilla aphorism: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule." In 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' Benjamin noted that fascism was particularly adept at answering the destabilisations of modernity's 'emergencies' because of its particular mode of introducing "aesthetics into politics" – a re-ordering of the world that was a totalised policing of everyday life, giving "the masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves", but only through the rituals and values of the state.<sup>9</sup>

One has only to read Naomi Klein's *The Shock Doctrine* to be persuaded that Chicago School economics produces and thrives on states of emergency. And when the state of emergency is considered 'at home' – rather than in Third World or developing countries – the utility of culture wars to the project of neoliberal Chicago School economics becomes apparent. Many academics, writers and commentators have ascertained that the rhetorical recourse to national stereotypes and legends, traditional moral values, and the reversion to a Manichean reading of world affairs – as, say, 'crusades' against 'evil empires' or an 'Axis of Evil' – are useful strategies in managing the social corrosion and breakdown visited on communities and publics by free-market fundamentalism. "It is a crucial fact", Raewyn Connell writes, "that the neoliberal agenda has *never* had wide popular support – anywhere. There is no popular demand to privatise public institutions, to cut public services, or to remove restraints on market behaviour." From here, Connell correctly concludes that the narrow "inherited base among the wealthy" for a conservative party pushing a neoliberal agenda "cannot deliver election majorities", and this was "an important reason" for the Howard's government's "plunge into racialised wedge politics" and its inexorable march towards the poetic moment of 'We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come'.<sup>10</sup> Though Connell does not articulate the realisation fully, her point shows an awareness

of the intimate interrelation between neoliberal privateering and culture war rhetoric.

John Howard had no hesitation making the point in his recent speech to the neoconservative American Enterprise Institute when he received his Irving Kristol Award (5 March 2008). The speech was crafted for the gala night, and was replete with neoconservative platitudes intended specifically for the captive audience: the sublimity of the market; the traditional family as the greatest social welfare system ever devised; individual liberty and enterprise; the sacred bonds of the American–Australian alliance. Titled 'Sharing Our Common Values', it was also a homage to internationalised neoconservatism, praising Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan and Irving Kristol. Howard said he had learned the value of ideas from Kristol: not as "zealous ideology" but rather as "a guiding philosophy ... which provides overall consistency" – balance and proportion again. He disclosed that, in all his "years in politics", he had not heard a "more evocative political slogan" than Reagan's 'Morning in America' – the unvarnished Puritan poetry of moral reawakening.<sup>11</sup>

The punch-line came with Howard's revelation of his own 'Morning in Australia': the link between neoliberal economic transformation, with the "dislocation for communities" it brings, and the "consistency and reassurance" required to sell it to the people. His government "pursued reform and further modernisation of our economy", vitally balancing this with an emphasis on "our nation's traditional values ... pride in her history". It became "assertive about the intrinsic worth of our national identity. In the process we ended the seemingly endless seminar about that identity which had been in progress for some years".<sup>12</sup>

The choice of the word 'seminar' (not 'debate' or 'dialogue') is a neat poetic touch. It instantly associates debate about national identity with academic indulgence; it summons the image of elites who rarely descend from ivory towers and, when they do, see only themselves narcissistically reflected in a glass of chardonnay. It is a culture war cliché with an exclusionary effect. The depiction of the discussion of identity as academic banter implies that ordinary people need have no involvement and that Howard's 'we' – the ruling classes – can settle the matter for them. Political masters perform and poeticise an identity for the public; 'leadership'

legitimises the lineaments of how life-in-general will proceed; life itself is re-presented to the public as a well-proportioned aesthetic field from which discord has vanished and which, therefore, deserves no further critical reflection.

It is fitting that Howard delivered this address in the United States, where the culture wars were conceived in the 1980s as a response to an aesthetic yearning. As Lawrence Grossberg argues, Reagan inherited a nation that appeared to be in a state of emergency: “a crisis of our lack of passion, of not caring enough about the values we hold”. Or perhaps, more accurately, America was a Babel of noisy minorities whose passions pulled in different directions: shock-jock Rush Limbaugh’s hit-list of “commie libs ... feminazis ... environmental wackos ... the homeless ... and especially gays”. As America’s culture wars proceeded, through the vilification of minorities, elites and ‘special interests’, David McKnight reminds us that, in Australia “the intellectual Right represented by *Quadrant*, the Institute of Public Affairs” and others watched “with great interest”.<sup>13</sup> What they discovered was that culture wars pivoted on language, attacks on the vocabulary of ‘political correctness’. In short, they were a struggle over language and meaning: the aesthetic practice, no less, of reading worldly affairs ‘closely’, as we would a poem.

It’s no mystery, then, that in the Howard years public and political language attracted such critical attention: amongst others, Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler, James Curran, Don Watson, Judith Brett and Tim Moore have tackled the subject.

Brett considered Howard’s takeover of the Bush Legend and his facility with everyday speech: “Howard’s command of the often banal idiom of everyday Australian life has been one of his greatest political assets. Because it is the language he speaks naturally, it never fails him.”

Of course, it’s not natural: it’s a rehearsed language. What ordinary Australian uses the term ‘practical mateship’ or defines “larrikinism where that was appropriate” as a qualified facet of the national character, as Howard did in an ANZAC Day address? Moore pegged Brett on her assertion that Howard’s idiolect was a language of “reassurance” to battlers experiencing the pain of economic reform, recognising instead the co-dependence of reform and rhetoric: “radical” agendas, he said, “do not get through parliaments by themselves

– they require words to help them along”.<sup>14</sup> Radical agendas do not automatically charm publics, either. Howard’s rhetoric aimed to impassion the Australian people through their empathy with a set of ‘official’ symbols and myths, to aesthetically rebalance public sentiment, to induce harmonic feeling.

The aesthetic was not simply an adjunct to Howard’s ruthless realpolitik; it was a calculated, cultivated manner which became central to his performance of himself, his public language and political practice. Several commentators noted it. Nicolas Rothwell extravagantly praised Howard as “a kind of patriotic father figure” who “barely placed a foot wrong on the critical issues of cultural symbolism”; Paul Kelly wrote that “Howard’s [principal] frame of reference is public sentiment and Australian values”, and that “Howard chooses not to live in Canberra. He lives in Sydney and the symbolism is unmistakable – he leaves Canberra to return to the nation”, as a patriarch comes home to his family at the end of a long, hard yet rewarding day at the office.<sup>15</sup>

Guy Rundle got closest, tracing Howard’s passage from “the actual to the imaginary, from a real encounter with a changing, dynamic society to the dream of one where it all fits together, without conflict, without contradiction”. Rundle dubbed this “Howard’s dreaming”, and in doing so he identified the ruse of ‘myth today’ that Barthes exposed: the progression from “reality to representation, from economic man to mental man”, the consequence of which is to diminish history’s details, so an “agreement about facts” is dissolved into a collective and nebulous dream where facts do not conflict or matter. “Values”, Barthes writes, become paramount until “their very name becomes unnecessary”.<sup>16</sup>

For journalists and political commentators, the first ‘hundred days’ of a new prime ministership has become a symbolic milestone. The phrase comes with already-packed historical baggage. Conventionally, it refers to the period between Napoleon Bonaparte’s return from exile on Elba and his defeat at Waterloo. Conjuring this, Australia’s media implicitly asks whether our new emperor has met his Waterloo yet: a question endowing the meaningless, arbitrary ‘hundred days’ with a sense of significance. The ritual was played out on ABC Television’s *Insiders* (2 March 2008), when host Barrie Cassidy asked resident political guru Paul

Kelly how Kevin Rudd had performed in his first hundred days in office.

Without hesitation, Kelly replied: "You've got to look at the way he uses symbols." Kelly proceeded to discuss Rudd's participation in "two iconic events" (ratifying Kyoto, the Stolen Generations apology), but identified his overall project as a rebalancing of Australian "values".<sup>17</sup> To borrow David Williamson's metaphor, Rudd's objective was to level the moral ballast of a 'Cruise Ship Australia' that listed to political starboard in the Howard years.

Rudd is also wrapped in another narrative, summed up in his folksy, frequently repeated self-introduction: "Hi, I'm Kevin, I'm from Queensland and I'm here to help." This slogan crystallises the disingenuous image of the orphaned Eumundi farm boy, evicted from the land by callous landlords, who through self-belief and hard work achieved a university education, married well, pursued a diplomatic and public service career, yet remained a pious Christian and uncorrupted son of the soil. Like Howard, Rudd has rapidly developed his own political lexicon: "working families", for example, serves as Rudd-speak for "Howard's battlers"; "consensus" and "bipartisanship", the new wedge politics, as his "you're either with us or against us". Trading on his farm-boy image, Rudd rushed to align himself with Australian of the Year, Lee Kernaghan, as eagerly as Howard serially embraced sports stars, and nakedly displayed his populism when he rebuked shadow Foreign Affairs Minister Robert McClelland for suggesting, on the eve of the Bali bombings anniversary, that Australia should campaign against the death penalty in Asia. On 23 November 2007, an artfully-designed *Australian* front page endorsed Rudd as a worthy heir to Howard, bringing harmony and hope by containing disruptions from without and within: "Rudd to turn back boatpeople" and "Leader prepared to fight unions", the two main stories trumpeted.

There is no indication that Rudd will be unfaithful to his promise of 'economic conservatism' – the pursuit of continuous free-market reform initiated by Bob Hawke, extended by Paul Keating and Howard. It will also be intriguing to watch him construct his own aesthetic – he cannot do otherwise – and to chart the narratives, symbols and myths through which he will attempt to rebalance and regulate those ever passionate and unruly entities, the body politic and everyday life. We should

remind ourselves that we have a critical toolkit to understand how he does this and what the actual meanings and results of it might be.

- 1 Christine Jackman, 'A Brief Ride in Wedgie Politics', *Australian*, 23 November 2007, p. 5.
- 2 Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, pp. 13, 37.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 37.
- 4 John Howard, *Four Corners* interview, ABC Television, 19 February 1996, <abc.net.au/4corners/content/2004/s1212701.htm>.
- 5 Eagleton, p. 42.
- 6 Tom Clark, 'The Cup of John Howard's Poetry', *Overland* 190, 2008, p. 25.
- 7 Roland Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *Mythologies*, Paladin, London, 1972, p. 142.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 154–5.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' and 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.) *Illuminations*, Schocken, New York, 1969, pp. 257, 241.
- 10 Raewyn Connell, 'Chicago Values: The Neoliberal Dream and Howard Government Politics', *Overland* 183, 2006, p. 35.
- 11 'John Howard's Irving Kristol Lecture', *Australian*, 6 March 2008, <www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,23328945-5014047,00.html>.
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Lawrence Grossberg, 'It's a Sin: Politics, Post-Modernity and the Popular', in Tony Fry, Ann Curthoys and Paul Patton (eds) *It's a Sin: Essays on Postmodern Politics and Culture*, Power Publications, Sydney, 2006, p. 31; David Brock, *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*, Scribe, Carlton North, 2002, pp. 56–7; David McKnight, *Beyond Left and Right: New Politics and the Culture Wars*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2005, p. 143.
- 14 Niall Lucy and Steve Mickler, *The War on Democracy: Conservative Opinion in the Australian Press*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth, 2006; James Curran, *The Power of Speech: Australian Prime Ministers Defining the National Image*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2004; Don Watson, *Death Sentence: The Decay of Public Language*, Random House, Sydney, 2003; Judith Brett, 'Relaxed and Comfortable: The Liberal Party's Australia', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 19, 2005, p. 37; John Howard, 'ANZAC Day Address', Greenslopes Private Hospital, Brisbane, 25 April 2007, <www.pm.gov.au/mediaSpeech/2007/Speech24275.cfm>; Tim Moore, 'No "Maybes", Only "Buts": The Rhetorical Art of the Prime Minister', *Overland* 184, 2006, p. 15.
- 15 Nicolas Rothwell, 'Please Explain', in Nick Carter (ed.) *The Howard Factor: A Decade that Transformed the Nation*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 2006, p. 112; Paul Kelly, 'How Howard Governs', in *ibid.*, p. 12.
- 16 Guy Rundle, 'The Opportunist: John Howard and the Triumph of Reaction', *Quarterly Essay*, no. 3, 2001, pp. 16–17; Barthes, 'Myth Today', p. 138.
- 17 Full transcript currently unavailable.

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