

The Urbanisation of Australia: Representations of Australia in Popular Culture

SELINA SAMUELS, UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

American popular culture defines and glamorises the urban. Furthermore, it is not just concerned with portraying a generic urban space, but conjures specific cities: New York, Los Angeles, Chicago. These cities have a clearly articulated place within American popular culture. The specific construction of urban American space was originally designed for the domestic market, playing with the thrill of recognition and the process of self-glorification and self-mythologisation that is endemic in American culture. But the specificity of urban representations within this culture increasingly functions within the international market: we recognise the signifiers of New York, of Los Angeles. These cities have a currency that those unfamiliar with the urban geography and topography of the United States nevertheless recognise.

It is within this framework that I want to situate the urbanisation of Australian popular culture. In portraying our culture as urban we are not only going against a century or so of images of rural Australia, served up to Australians and the rest of the world alike. We are also mimicking neo-imperial America; not the Mother Country but perhaps the Step Mother Country. And, although on one level representing Australia in terms of its urban space is more 'realistic' than returning constantly to the hackneyed images of the outback, the irony is that the increasing popularity of the city as an articulation of 'authentic Australia' owes as much to the ubiquity of American culture as it does to any real bid for a truly Australian urban aesthetic. This mimicry takes the form of the adoption of certain familiar genres – the hardboiled detective story for example – and can be explained in part as a cynical bid for an international audience. It is also an example of a post-colonial urban metanarrative – writing back on one hand to the conventional portrayals of Australia as rural space, and on the other to the constructions of American popular culture.

Australian popular culture has a split vision – writers and film-makers look to America for models even as they produce material for a domestic market – which may entail an ironic approach to Australian culture. In popular culture market is always a vital factor. For Australia, with a small domestic market for films and fiction, producers must always be looking in two directions at once. This makes for a duality within the texts themselves; they function within an adopted genre or rely self-consciously on an external view of Australia. However, the gap between

the reception of the foreign audience and that of the local audience provides an ironic space in which subversion can take place: subversion of external expectations and traditional perceptions of the country and its culture. This irony is probably a better indicator of Australian identity than any hangovers from the bush myth and its associated narratives.

The texts that I will discuss here – Marele Day's Claudia Valentine detective novels and Gillian Armstrong's film *The Last Days of Chez Nous* – are situated very specifically and vividly in Sydney, and they are more vivid and far more powerful when their specific locations are appreciated. Products of the late 1980s and early 90s (*The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender* was published in 1988; *Chez Nous* was released in 1992), they seemed, when I first encountered them, to be some of the first and most impressive examples of specific renditions of Sydney – not Opera House/Harbour Bridge Sydney, but 'real' Sydney. What is also interesting about these examples is the way in which both Day and Armstrong appropriate urban space as the site of female empowerment. They feminise the urban, and specifically Sydney. There are several explanations for this tendency. It is in part a reaction to the masculinist constructions of rural Australia. It is also a gesture to the US, and to recent feminist appropriations of popular culture genres, particularly the genre of detective fiction (for example, Sara Paretsky with her female detective V.I. Warshawski). And it may be, as Marele Day suggests in the first Claudia Valentine mystery, *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender*, that Sydney is female, a particular type of female: beautiful, tawdry, variable, moody and a bit dangerous. A bit like a high class, and, I should add, self-employed, hooker with PMT. Day puts it like this in *Harry Lavender*:

Officially it was autumn but the summer lingered on. Not that Sydney took a blind bit of notice of the seasons. Variable, she blew hot and cold like a moody child. Once, in a movie, I heard California described as a beautiful dancing lady, high on heroin, enchanting like the drug, who doesn't know she's dying till you show her the marks. Sydney was like that: not so high, not so dying, only sick sometimes . . . She'd been a very sickly child, poxy and plague-ridden. But she'd grown strong, like the mushroom on a dung heap. Like an exotic mushroom I'd seen once at Gary's. A beautiful crimson fungus had sprung out of the ground like a spider flower. But in its centre was a dark foetid substance that smelled exactly like human excrement (*Harry Lavender*, 46–47).

Marele Day's detective novels are private eye fiction, belonging to the hard-boiled genre as it is sometimes called. To the extent that the private eye story in America was a form of cultural nationalism, a reaction, as Stephen Knight has suggested, against 'English rustic murder stories of high conventionalism and low probability' (Knight, 132–133), the adoption of such a genre by an Australian writer might be considered also to be a sort of post-colonial rewriting of genre convention. The hard-boiled school replaces the English detective, who works with the police and is often genteel, upper-class, sophisticated, with a hard-drinking and flawed protagonist. Rather than country estates, where all the suspects just happen to be gathered, or trains, or other more pastoral devices, these novels

are situated in the city, and usually a large, polluted and corrupt city. Day's protagonist, Claudia Valentine, a karate-kicking, non-gun-carrying private eye, is 30-something, divorced with two kids who live with their father. She is not directly associated with the police although she does call in a few favours from her friend Carol in the force. She drinks scotch (often too much and she frequently has a hangover) and she lives a fairly impermanent life in a pub in Balmain. She is definitely in the Philip Marlowe mould.

In his study of Australian crime fiction, *Continent of Mystery*, Stephen Knight identifies certain consistencies within Australian crime fiction and its treatment of place. There are the tourist thrillers which glamorise the landscape and particularly the outback, and an obvious example of this is Arthur Upfield's novels about Bony. He mentions the internationalisation of crime fiction, where novels were set both in Australia and overseas to suggest an international crime syndicate (stereotypically exotic), and to avoid boring the readers with parochialism and descriptions of a culturally insignificant space. And, thirdly, he discusses the treatment, in many crime novels, of place as null. That is, the texts do not identify place or if they do, the place is essentially irrelevant to the narrative. Knight sees this as a form of cultural anxiety. I would describe it as a sign of *dépaysement*, literally the sense of disorientation which is felt in an alien place or culture. Here I use it to refer to that peculiar sense of displacement experienced within one's own culture which is fuelled by growing up in a society that privileges an external culture over its own. The influence of American popular culture is particularly relevant in this context.

If constructing place as null is a sign of *dépaysement*, adopting a genre identified strongly with a dominant, external culture could also be seen as a sign of *dépaysement*. Certainly, Day's adoption and adaptation of the hard-boiled detective genre has earned her international readership and success. She won the 1993 Shamus Crime Fiction Award (an American award) for her third novel *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado*. And considering Day's popularity in America as well as in Australia, it is evident that the genre does not require a clear recognition by the readership of specific locations. However, the shock of recognition that these novels provide for Australian, and particularly Sydney, readers provides a strong sense of playfulness which adds considerable depth to the novels. The playfulness and irony of Day's novels are keys to her potentially subversive appropriation of the genre. Day is deliberately engaged in confronting the hegemonic power of American popular culture by translating a paradigmatic structure into an unfamiliar location. Day's use of an urban setting in her novels is also ironic, as I have already mentioned, because she is subverting Australian literary and cultural conventions which ascribe national authenticity to representations of the outback. This is a function of the genre: in Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett and the work of their successors, the city appears almost as a character itself. This feature of the genre is particularly attractive to Day. She says of her motivation in the appropriately named article 'Bitch City': 'I wanted to write a book in which Sydney was the 'character', living, breathing, which generated the human characters in the

story. From that came the idea to work in the hard-boiled genre because in this genre, the city is not simply a backdrop but has a sense of presence'(129). Here Sydney is more than just a presence, it is mythologised, posited, as Day herself says, as both a real city and the site on which fictional cities are built ('Bitch City', 126). The myth is built on the foundations of a sustained, unexpected, attention to real detail. The representation of the city then becomes mythic through its assumption of symbolic significance.

The shock of recognition experienced by Day's readers is achieved through her portrayal of the suburbs, and her insider's affection for the apparently ordinary. *The Case of the Chinese Boxes* is set in Chinatown but also in Cabramatta. In *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado* Claudia walks the mean streets of Newtown, Lidcombe, Redfern, Coogee and Randwick. In *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi* Claudia finds herself in Lugarno, Leichhardt, Darlinghurst and Surry Hills. Day highlights our unfamiliarity with representations of ourselves; the unfamiliarity of the familiar. That is, we are more used to images of other places, conveyed through the popular culture, than we are of self-representations. The urbanisation of representations of Australia in popular culture serves both to familiarise the cityscape and to mythologise it. It is familiar, but it also occupies its own semiotic, narrative space in the novel. As a representation it ceases to be merely the city itself, but becomes a site of discourse, a site of narrative and a source of plot.

For an international audience, Day's evocations of Sydney constitute the creation of a mythscape that is exotic because it is alien. It is the site of a narrative structure which is familiar (particularly to an American audience), but it is destabilised because certain expectations are refused, such as the familiarity of the setting. There is also a frisson created by the representation of an Australian cityscape as opposed to the more familiar representations of Australia as a primarily rural community (capitalised on by earlier writers such as Arthur Upfield).

Day is also engaged in a reconstruction of the city as a site for female endeavour. In the traditional hardboiled novels (as Day points out) the city is portrayed as a 'bitch', a woman who is beautiful and corrupt. She is seductive, dangerous, a *femme fatale*. This is how Day represents Sydney as well. However, she also makes it clear that this is the result of male corruption: this is the Sydney that the villain, Harry Lavender, has created. Juxtaposed with this image of the city is Claudia's city; a feminised location, the place of the old girls' network, of walking in the park after the rain, or ice cream at Bondi. Although coded as dangerous, decaying, sinister, it is also benevolent and protective to those who know it. It is perhaps Claudia's familiarity with this space (she has lived here all her life) that feminises it and protects her. She knows its geography, understands its threats. Her knowledge enables her to fade into the shadows. And it is her knowledge of the city as much as the city itself that protects her in the end: she survives the clearly murderous attack of Lavender's Maori offside by jumping over the opening Pymont Bridge, which she remembers in the nick of time. She leaps and gains the other side; her attacker falls 'like a rock into the waters of Darling Harbour'(Harry Lav-

ender, 163). So, rather than merely perpetuate the feminisation of the city which is central to the genre, Day suggests that it is a location for female success rather than simply a site of danger and corruption.

Gillian Armstrong's film *The Last Days of Chez Nous* also has a dual focus, conscious of its reception by an international as well as an Australian audience. For international viewers (and certainly for my American students), the film's trip into the Outback seems to carry a symbolic, even a sacred resonance. It defines the film, at least in their eyes, as one that perpetuates the rural/urban divide, still positing the search for true Australian identity as one ideally situated in the bush heart of the country. At the same time, *Chez Nous* is – to an Australian audience at any rate – a 'parody' film. Indeed, it is perhaps the first in a line of films in recent years (*Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Siam Sunset*) to rely upon the audience's familiarity with certain stereotypical representations of Australia, which are then parodied and dismantled. Of course, there are some problems with seeing these films as unmediated parody. *Priscilla*, for example, benefits from, as it parodies, the placement of the Red Centre as symbolic signifier of Australian culture and place of personal revelation. But for *Chez Nous*, which focuses on female identity and empowerment rather than on constructions of masculinity, the moment of revelation occurs not during the journey into the desert, but on return to the urban space.

The Last Days of Chez Nous is a strongly feminist film which has at its core the female protagonist's progress to self-understanding and personal freedom. It was directed by Gillian Armstrong from a screenplay by Helen Garner, and contains a particularly second generation feminist interrogation of the lives of women in the 1990s, still defined and confined by their family and their relationships. Beth is a writer who lives with her French husband, J-P, and her daughter Annie in a terrace house in Glebe. There are two central events in the film: the return from Italy of Beth's younger sister Vicky, and Beth's determination to resolve the uncomfortable relationship she has with her father by travelling with him into the desert. The central trope parodied in the film is the stereotypical construction of Australian identity in terms of the rural landscape (just as J-P's Frenchness is parodically represented in terms of his obsession with cheese). Australia is defined as three paradigmatic spaces: urban, suburban and Outback. The representations of these spaces (and particularly the urban and the rural) are fundamentally subversive.

Beth's trip into the centre is constructed as the only way to resolve her relationship with her father, and, by implication, with her 'ordinary' Australian identity (the father, defined by the film as suburban, is also, through the casting of Bill Hunter, iconically Australian). However, this journey of resolution is ultimately inconclusive. Beth rejects her father's night-time offering of water that he has carried religiously from Sydney; corn chips and ice-cream are the front line in their battle to maintain their independence. When Beth asks her father, in the most harmonious moment in this trip, if he believes in God, his response is a dismissive, 'Fair go'. Beth finds on this journey, as J-P had warned her, that 'there is

nothing' at the heart of the country, and perhaps nothing at the heart of her relationship with her father. The film presents the emptiness of the Outback in real terms as well as in spiritual terms. This emptiness is both a reference to the original European perceptions of the landscape and the country as a whole, and a subversion of later Australian romanticism of the bush. They spend a lot of time gazing on what Beth's father considers to be interchangeable views. Indeed, Beth confesses that she's not really very interested in landscapes, she prefers still-lives and things on tables (a comment which, not surprisingly, is met with derision).

Beth's preference for domestic scenes is in keeping with Armstrong's emphasis. She focuses on domestic space (emphasised by the title of the film) and particularly on women within that space. Beth's revelation and self-awareness are to come to her, not in the traditional (and traditionally masculine) rural landscape of the country, but in the city, when she returns to discover the relationship that has developed between her husband and her sister. This relationship is all about her, but its existence – while shattering on one level – enables her to be free from their dependency on her. This is Armstrong's (and Garner's) vision of the understanding of self, which is only possible for a woman when she is free from other people's projections of her identity. It is from the apparent banality of romantic and domestic betrayal, rather than from the paradigmatic journey into the Outback, that Beth acquires strength and independence, an ironic reversal of the bush myth tradition.

Beth's crisis and the ensuing catharsis are entirely urban. Earlier in the film she laments her inability – due to preoccupation and time constraints – to find the church whose spire she can see from her house through the tree tops. At the end of the film she sets off to find the church, signalling her decision to explore her urban environment as she has explored the country's rural landscape, and positioning the sacred within the urban.

Like *Day*, Armstrong parodies not only Australian stereotypes, but the international expectations of Australia and its representations; they are both being commercial abroad and subversive at home. *Dépaysement* and the associated cultural cringe can be resisted in the ironic gap between what they expect and what we recognise. Central to the duality of Australian popular culture is the city, which both subverts and generates mythology. It is possible, with the globalisation of culture and particularly popular culture, that the city rather than the larger nation will come to be the site where individual identity is inscribed. Beth's steeple may represent a new independence, or just another dependency looming on the horizon.

Works Cited

- Day, Marele. *The Life and Crimes of Harry Lavender*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988.
- . *The Case of the Chinese Boxes*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1990.
- . *The Last Tango of Dolores Delgado*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992.
- . 'Bitch City', *Killing Women: Rewriting Detective Fiction*. Ed. Delys Bird, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1993.

———. *The Disappearances of Madalena Grimaldi*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1994.

Keneally, Cath. "What if Vic Warshawski Had To Pick Up the Kids From School?". *Overland*, No.138 (1995): 18–21.

Knight, Stephen. *Continent of Mystery: A Thematic History of Australian Crime Fiction*, Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1997.

Muriel's Wedding. Dir. P.J. Hogan, 1994.

Prisilla, Queen of the Desert. Dir. Stephan Elliot, 1994.

Siam Sunset. Dir. John Polson, 1999.

The Last Days of Chez Nous. Dir. Gillian Armstrong, 1992.