"Art is the Windowpane": Novels of Australian Women and Modernism in Inter-war Europe

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During the 1990s there was a growing interest in the role played by women in the development of Australian modernist art. Books by Caroline Ambrus, *Australian Women Artists: First Fleet to 1945* (1992), and Helen Topliss, *Modernism and Feminism: Australian Women Artists 1900–1940* (1996), were particularly influential. Ambrus and Topliss argued that women had been effectively removed from the prevailing history of Australian art, and in particular they sought to highlight the vital role they had played in the engagement with modernism between the wars.

The contribution made by women to Australian modernism received further attention in 1999, when Drusilla Modjeska's *Stravinsky's Lunch* was published. This dual biography of Stella Bowen and Grace Cossington Smith traced the life stories of two very different women, both of whom had been significant early Australian practitioners of modernist styles. Despite their important and seemingly obvious accomplishments, Bowen and Cossington Smith were, along with other women painters of the period, slow in being acknowledged.

Following the publication of *Stravinsky's Lunch*, the *Modern Australian Women: Paintings and Prints 1925–1945* exhibition toured several Australian cities in 2000 and 2001. The exhibition featured paintings by Bowen and Cossington Smith, plus other women whose art had also made an important contribution to Australian modernism. In the exhibition catalogue Ron Radford argued that although the modernist heroes of Australian art were almost entirely men who achieved their fame in the 1940s and 50s—Arthur Boyd, Sidney Nolan, Russell Drysdale, Albert Tucker, John Perceval—that the most accomplished of their forerunners were nearly all women. Radford wrote that:

> now there is general acknowledgment in Australian art literature that
> artists like Margaret Preston, Clarice Beckett, Grace Cossington
> Smith, Grace Crowley, Dorrit Black and Kathleen O'Connor were
> the major Australian artists of the 1920s and 1930s. It is now fully
> understood that women outshone men in both painting and
> printmaking of the period as they did also in the crafts. (113)

Part of what Ambrus, Topliss, Modjeska and Radford achieved was to trace the lineage of influence and learning in the art of these women, thereby establishing their credentials as self-conscious and reflective practitioners rather than merely mimics or dabblers. The foremost evidence for this claim to seriousness of purpose was attached to what was a rite of passage for embryonic artists of the period, the first hand exposure to the galleries and art schools of Europe.

Ann Galbally, in an account of Australian artists who travelled to Europe before the First War, concluded that, "In the years 1881–1899 seventeen significant artists left Australia [for Europe]" (58). All of those she names were men. Travelling in search of an art education inevitably meant time in Paris, but Galbally points out that for most of these men this was an essentially conservative experience. For while they were drawn to Paris "as the most vital and daring place to be studying, their social aspirations remained fervently directed towards London" (64). Even more tellingly, the Paris schools and ateliers at which they chose to study were amongst the least adventurous and largely immune from the emerging practice of modernism.

During the years immediately before and following the first world war, however, a generation of women artists began to join their male counterparts in Europe. Belying their perceived role as amateurs, they not only found their way to London and Paris, but particularly in the post war years they made increasingly adventurous decisions as to exactly where they would pursue their education. At a time when, as John Williams argued in his book *Quarantined Culture: Australian Reactions to Modernism*, Australians generally took a reactionary and anti-modern backstep following the war, there was a core group of women who consciously sought out the opportunity to engage with the modernist forms of representation emerging in Europe, particularly on the continent. Amongst those who made the pilgrimage were Bessie Davidson, Stella Bowen, Margaret Preston, Hilda Rix Nicholas, Thea Proctor, Jessie Traill, Kathleen O'Connor, Agnes Goodsir, Dorrit Black, Grace Crowley, Anne Dangar and Ethel Spowers. Some of them such as Davidson, Bowen and Goodsir spent most or all of their lives thereafter in Europe, while others continually moved between Europe and Australia.

The academic interest in the role of women artists in embracing modernism has also been reflected in fiction. This essay considers three recent novels—Gail Jones' *Black Mirror* (2002), Rodney Hall's *The Day We Had Hitler Home* (2000),

and Alex Miller's *Conditions of Faith* (2000)—each of which provides a reflection on the role of Australian women and their encounter with modernism in Europe in the inter-war years.

The theme of the return to the ancestral European home is of course not new in Australian fiction. In a 1988 essay Tony Hassall nominated "the quest for 'home' in Europe" as one of "three interrelated quests which have haunted the imagination of European Australians" (390). Referring to novels by Henry Handel Richardson, Martin Boyd, Patrick White and Christina Stead, Hassall presented this quest as a nostalgic longing for a lost and declining world and he argued that it attains its "classic expression" in Boyd's Lucinda Brayford, where Europe is revealed to be "a cultural museum, full of gorgeous buildings, but in the process of losing its cultural wealth and acquiring [. . .] corrupted values" (401). In contrast, Australia is represented as being a last land of opportunity, and a final chance to slough off the skin of the moribund Old World.

More recently Elizabeth Webby has noted the importance of the "travelling heroine" in contemporary Australian fiction. Webby noted that while novels featuring stories of arrival and departure are to be expected of a settler culture in its formative period, it was "a surprise" to still find so many novels featuring travel. She noted in particular the number of contemporary novels set in the first half of the twentieth century and featuring a central female character who travels to Europe.

This essay addresses the manner in which the three novels under consideration break down the Old World/ New World dichotomy of the "quest" novel discussed by Hassall. It examines why contemporary Australian novelists—armed with an awareness of the ongoing revision of the histories of modernism—have found the woman artist travelling in Europe and encountering a world that is paradoxically both Old and New, to be a fertile point of departure for an interrogation of established narratives of modernism and post-colonialism.

Gail Jones *Black Mirror*

In *Black Mirror* Gail Jones tells the dual stories of artist Victoria Morrell and her biographer Anna Griffin. From the novel's opening Anna is seen as projecting herself in to the world of her subject, by imagining herself as the focus of a modernist painting.

> She pops open her umbrella, holds it close above her, and is transformed to a domed shape [. . .].
> For some reason this is the way she imagines herself, as a modernist composition in a hypothetical artwork, caught in the possibilities of the elements and their visual trickery. (1)

Anna finds an iconic representation of the experience of the female modernist artist—a talent distorted and neglected due to her role as model and concubine—in Victoria's life.

The two women are connected by childhoods spent in the Western Australian goldfields. Whereas Anna was born on the goldfields, Victoria was born in Melbourne in 1910, moved to Kalgoorlie as a child, and then to London at the age of twenty. This goldfields connection is a powerful element in the novel. The young Anna realises that the "desert around here was a forest of symbols" (125). These symbols unite the two women, in particular the spectre of the intricate maze of the underground mine which Victoria's father—a personification of the modern, industrial spirit—has brought to the goldfields. As Anna writes, "*We share images* [. . .] What could be more intimate? The desert. The mines. The search in darkness for gold" (35).

The mines form part of a web of fantastic symbols and images which Jones represents as a dream awaiting expression by a surrealist's brush. It is a landscape where small animals are tossed through the air by violent winds, where trees dangle upside down in mirage twinned by a "vague and spectral duplication" (73), where men spend their lives in a "night-shaded other-world," their faces revealed only by a "splash of circular light" (126). Jones writes that Victoria was a "child who knew that horizons swung and that the look of things converted, and understood that marvellous conjunctions reconfigure the ordinary as excitement." And as she absorbed her landscape and its symbols, it is said that "She was practicing Surrealism" (174).

The Kalgoorlie of Victoria's childhood is being exposed to the first experience of some of the defining symbols of modernism. Her father buys and flies one of the first planes in the country and in doing so introduces the girl to new versions of familiar landscapes where, "the shape of wings skimmed over the ground and Victoria understood that this was their own projected shadow, their inhuman shape cast over an altered geography" (167). The Lyric Theatre is built, and in the darkened cinema the young Victoria is exposed to a "completely new empire of signs" (193). These signs and the other dreamlike images which crowd Victoria's world can't, however, find an appropriate artistic expression in Australia at this time.

Eventually with her mother dead and estranged from the rest of the family, Victoria travels to London. The city presents Victoria with an intense exposure to the urban face of modernism. She is catapulted into a twentieth-century city, one that magnifies and condenses the industrial and technological precursors to modernism which were appearing in her goldfields town. The single cinema has become an industry; the one plane transformed into a network of mass transportation; and the subterranean world of the mine has become a labyrinthine underground rail network. It is also a world of startling juxtapositions—unimaginable

in Australia—where a visit to the British Museum provides a kaleidoscopic view of other worlds, all based on "Surrealism [and] its presumption of peep-showing the world's everything" (36).

Victoria commences art studies, but she doesn't yet have the means to express an understanding of her image-saturated life or the world in which she now lives. She is she says "A colonial. Lost" (36). Her epiphany arrives, however, when at a moment when she is feeling most nostalgic for desert landscapes, she attends a Surrealist exhibition in London. Here she encounters the work of continental artists such as Ernst, Oppenheim and Dali, and is "overwhelmed with a sense of providential culmination" by an exhibition that supplies her with a "new intelligibility" (69).

Fired by her enthusiasm Victoria immediately decamps for Paris where she is drawn into an *avant-garde* surrealist and masculine circle that includes Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, Man Ray and Andre Breton. It is a world of experimentation, excitement and challenge, but also of casual cruelty, insult and disregard. It is a world Victoria finds both fascinating and appalling, and so unlike the Australia she left behind. Jones writes that to Victoria:

> Breton signified Paris itself. He was what Victoria wanted, and also what repelled her. He was Europe. He was Surrealism. He was high-aestheticism. Victoria had carried her own nationality like an inferiority complex, convinced of the superiority of all-things-European [. . .] She felt unknown to herself. Lost in Paris. And when she said out loud the word Australian [. . .] she heard resident in her own voice an apology and deviation. [145]

In this milieu Victoria plays her assigned roles of temptress, lover and model, all the while learning to paint her own surreal vision of the world in the shadow of the great names. But although she learns to paint in a style capable of expressing the complex symbolic web that connects her childhood landscapes, her relationship with her dysfunctional family, and her exposure to a compelling but troubled Europe, she receives scant recognition in the obdurately male circle in which she moves. Her personal life dissolves into drunkenness and casual sex, while Paris is thrown into the darkest pit of the modern experience during the wartime occupation. Her Jewish lover is lost to a concentration camp and Victoria is humiliated and raped by German soldiers.

After the war Victoria retreats to London to continue painting. She eventually establishes a reputation as a minor surrealist painter, although it is only late in her life—when she is located by Anna—that her work is being favourably re-appraised.

RODNEY HALL, *THE DAY WE HAD HITLER HOME*

Rodney Hall's *The Day We Had Hitler Home* (2000) commences in the New South Wales town of Yandilli. Eighteen year old Audrey McNeil has an encounter with a German soldier who has been mistakenly repatriated from France. Audrey is immediately transfixed; "After all he was that fabulous creature, a European" (53). There is some confusion about the man's identity, but he gives his name as Adolf Hitler. Hitler is temporarily blinded and his eyes are bound.

Together with her brother-in-law Immanuel, Audrey conspires to return Hitler to German territory in New Guinea. This is achieved by that most modern of means, air travel. Immanuel is another pioneer aviator, who owns his own Avro biplane. "You never saw anything so modern" (77) Audrey exclaims. By this instrument of modernity, Audrey finds that she is able to transcend the limitations of time and place that have previously left her rooted to the commonplace world of Yandilli. Once aloft she discovers that:

> The future was limbo, vast as the horizon out there and intimate as the chipped rim of our little windscreen. We had done it! Defied the law. Defied nature. And defied the time itself. This was living! I revelled in the new space we entered, never to go back [. . .]. (82)

Together in the Avro, Audrey and Immanuel successfully return Hitler to German territory.

At this same time, Audrey is experimenting with her own iconic mechanism of modernity, the movie camera. She is an aspiring film-maker who is transfixed by film, which like air travel has the capacity to rupture the common understanding of time and place and disclose a new reality:

> Film changed the world. Film was going to wind back on itself, back to those puzzled days of childhood, to eventually reveal the causes of pain. Here was a mechanism by which life itself might be lived a second time. My feet knew it. My hands knew it. My eye knew it. (26)

In the wake of her adventure with the mysterious and charismatic Hitler, Audrey travels to Munich. She has decided that it is in Europe that the modern world is being formed. When Audrey is introduced again at the start of the European section of the novel she has become the essence of the modern woman.

> *Audrey sits in a Munich café, her gloves on the table beside a half-empty coffee cup. The street outside can be glimpsed through a window.*

> She sits, ruminating [. . .]. She is already that exotic creature: a
> foreign woman, alone, and not looking for help. (123)

She declares that Munich is "my first city ever" (123), and she throws herself in to planning the movie that will record the experience.

What she is discovering through her lens is a vision of the modern that has only been hinted at via her experience of machinery in Yandilli. In Munich she discovers the machinery of the modern metropolis itself.

> The camera meant there was no such thing as a wasted day [. . .].
> Weird and funny things happened to me and I got busy filming
> them [. . .]. The chaos of goods for sale and things rotting. The city
> din enough to make your blood race. The breathtaking pandemo-
> nium of a hundred collisions narrowly avoided. A woman carrying a
> baby wrapped in newspaper [. . .].
> Passing fur-collared-coats, chests in jackets with horn buttons,
> bosoms, legs, high-heeled shoes and women's lace-up motoring
> boots. Street vistas. A film-set of lumpy church towers. Grist for my
> sifting. Shoppers nursing wicker baskets aboard a tram. Trains taking
> on such crowds you would never imagine [. . .]. (127)

Acquiring a new handheld movie camera which she declares "The most modern thing" (126), Audrey determines that she will film, "the longest documentary ever shot. One whole year of daily life in Munich, the ultimate European city" (125).

And having found her subject, Audrey soon discovers her style; for just as Victoria had her revelation in a surrealist exhibition, Audrey's comes in a concert hall. Here she discovers a form of expression that invokes not only the cacophonous and strife-ridden world outside, but also the mounting unease within herself:

> the orchestra it seemed got hopelessly lost, different sections bowing
> or blowing in a frenzy. Whoever heard such stuff?
>   [But] Instantly a weird world enveloped me. A world of innu-
> endo. This orchestra wasn't lost at all, once you gave away any
> attempt at making sense of the fragments. Violins languished,
> uttering a wisp of melody which might have been recognisable the
> other way up. Gone. A xylophone dingled. Deep gongs throbbed,
> trombones growled, drums thumped, all hinting at something
> already evident out there in the city, stirrings in the night, the
> lawless chaos of gang brawls, a forest darkness still lingering even
> along empty laneways, a chill that made you sit up suddenly in bed

and shake off your dreams [. . .]. Squashed harmonies, grotesques.
The music unwound, faltering, fading, until a leftover wisp drifted
into the stratosphere. (135–36)

Tellingly the music has been written by a Jew, and as the composer battles to
escape the outraged crowd Audrey realises that she has encountered not only an
artistic expression of modernism, but also the dark side of its political manifesta-
tion.

Under the influence of this experience Audrey pursues her art. She announces
that she is "keen to specialize in modern and mechanical subjects," and she perse-
veres to the point where she develops "a technique for mechanizing natural ob-
jects, reducing even these to abstracts" (169).

But she now finds that her art is infused by the politics of her chosen city. Even
as she scripts her movie to commence within that temple of modernism, the
department store, the portents of evil impinge.

> *Scene 1: Department store: gunfire breaks out in the street, just as a young*
> *woman, collar blown against her cheek by a blustery wind, collapses her*
> *umbrella and hastens in through the glass door held open by a concierge.*
> (124–25)

Audrey foresees what those around her choose to ignore. Germany is strug-
gling with the aftermath of the first war, the depression is looming at the edges of
city life, and National Socialism, under the direction of her former associate Hit-
ler, is gaining momentum. As she takes to the sky again, this time over her be-
loved Munich, she grasps the full extent of the evil of the political modernism
that despoils her beloved city.

> Below us, Munich rotated around an axis like a great stone mill
> wheel. My city, my discovery, with its humble districts growing
> shabbier while the main thoroughfares blossomed with the banners
> and pamphlets of political outrage, a conflict of good causes, a
> magnet for suburbanites who [. . .] swarmed across railway platforms
> and stepped giddily off buses to form factions and wage war against
> one another, fighting over ideas, tearing at abstract promises with
> their teeth and nails. (173)

Audrey's dilemma of attraction to and repulsion from the competing faces of
modernism becomes personal when she takes a black lover, Bello. The relation-
ship is doomed by its context however, and Bello is beaten to death by a group of
Nazi thugs.

Pregnant with Bello's child, Audrey flees to Australia. Here she finds a country on the cusp of change, struggling with its own issues of race and homeland, but as yet without the ideological viciousness of the modern European political machine. The unfinished film Audrey has with her attests to her journey of exploration of a foreign world and a new age, and she realises that she has been "piecing Europe together as *Terra Incognita*." She decides to complete the film in an appropriately modernist form, as "a reckless rush of images and dissolves, tracking shots, double exposures and repetitions, building image upon image, shown and reshown, the themes recurring in waves, never the same twice" (330).

ALEX MILLER, *CONDITIONS OF FAITH*

Alex Miller's *Conditions of Faith* (2000) foregrounds the relationship between women and modernism in quite a different way, suggesting that it is possible to be "modern" without necessarily embracing modernism. The novel again begins in Australia, where Emily Stanton has just completed a first in the history of classical civilizations. Passing up the opportunity to pursue further study in Cambridge, she meets and marries the modernist par excellence, Georges Elder. Georges is a Parisian based engineer of Scottish-French descent in Australia to do preparatory work on a tender for the design of what will become the nation's foremost modernist edifice, the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

The newlyweds return to Paris where Georges becomes absorbed in his work on the tender. The restless Emily visits Georges' family in Chartres, and while there she engages in a passionate interlude in the crypt of the Cathedral with young Father Bertrand Etinceler. She soon discovers that she is expecting a child, and she is uncertain as to whether the father is her husband or Father Bertrand.

The pregnant Emily leaves for Tunisia to ponder her situation. While on the journey she is reinvigorated in her love for the study of ancient civilizations, and under the influence of American academic Olive Kallen she commences a study of the life of Perpetua, who surrendered her baby before suffering a martyr's death. Emily's passion for recovering the life of Perpetua leads her to resent both her own unborn child and her designated role as wife and mother.

The symbolism of the moment is precise and obvious—the young Australian woman soon to give birth to the future of her country and uncertain as to which version of European manhood has sired her child. Is it the traditional and conservative Europe represented by Father Bernard and the conception in the crypt, or the modern, restless and ambitious spirit typified by Georges? And all the while Emily is distracted from her presumed destiny as a wife and mother by the single-minded interests of the American imperialist archaeologist.

By the time a daughter, Marie, is born Emily is convinced that Father Bertrand is the father, a fact of which Georges remains ignorant. In the novel's concluding sections Emily struggles with her major decision. Will she return to Australia and continue her marriage in support of Georges' work on the bridge, or will she leave her husband and return to Tunisia to pursue her research? Georges initially resists Emily's bid for her independence, but eventually concedes to the inevitability of letting her resume her academic career on the condition that he can return to Australia with Marie. Having been fathered by old Europe, Marie is to be raised in the New World by a man who embodies the energetic industrial spirit of modernism.

Georges' return to Australia is not the triumph of which he dreamed. Not only is he separated from his wife, but also his company has failed to win the competition to design the bridge. He departs for Sydney, with his ambitions severely curtailed, in order to take a position engineering the approaches to the bridge.

Emily may not be an artist but—with her determination to pursue an independent life and to fulfil her personal dreams and vision—she is certainly an artist manqué. Unlike Victoria and Audrey, however, she recoils from rather than embraces the obvious manifestation of the modernist moment denoted by the Harbour Bridge. Rather, she retreats not only into old Europe as represented by Chartres, but even more profoundly into the ancient world of the archaeological excavations in Tunisia and her identification with Perpetua. Just like Victoria and Audrey, however, she is defined by her embrace of the opportunities offered by modern Europe. The opportunities, that is, given to women to travel independently, to live alone, to dedicate themselves to scholarship, and to pursue their own dreams.

MODERNISM, WOMEN AND THE CONTEMPORARY NOVELIST

To the novels discussed above one could also add Frank Moorehouse's *Grand Days* (1993) and *Dark Palace* (2000). How can we account for this interest in recent Australian fiction in the travelling heroine and her encounter with modernism?

Broadly, these novels contain many elements of "quest" for the European home identified by Tony Hassall. It is a quest that remains driven by nostalgic underpinnings, but it has also evolved and taken on complex new meaning. The Europe of the 1920s and 30s is no longer presented as a museum of traditional and conservative values, but rather as the troubled fulcrum of an emerging world. On one hand it is enervated, dangerous and plunging headlong into the abyss of war, but on the other hand it is energised and made new by the social, political and industrial maelstrom of the modern metropolis.

Why then the focus on the experience of women, and women of an artistic

bent in particular, as they are exposed to this exciting but dangerous new world? The books discussed in the introduction dealing with the reclamation of the reputations of Australia's women modernist artists have been part of a wider, international effort to recover the contribution made by women to modernity. This has been driven by a growing awareness that the experience of women had been largely removed from the prevailing histories of modernity. As Janet Wolff wrote in 1990:

> The literature of modernity describes the experience of men. It is essentially a literature about transformations in the public world and in its associated consciousness. The actual date of the advent of "the modern" varies in different accounts, and so do the characteristics of "modernity" identified by different writers. But what nearly all of the accounts have in common is their concern with the public world of work, politics and city life. And these are areas from which women were excluded, or in which they were practically invisible. (34)

As attempts to reposition women in discussions about modernity gathered pace, there have been reasons why particular attention has been given to women artists. Firstly their art production offers visual evidence of the often enthusiastic embrace of modernity by women. In many ways the transformations wrought by modernity—in particular the sudden accessibility of public spaces and the shifts in understanding of what were suitable occupations and pastimes—had a greater impact on women than on men. Women artists faithfully recorded the expanded possibilities in their lives as they represented the city and its associated phenomena. As Victoria declares in *Black Mirror*, "Art is the windowpane, the barrier, against which we press our searching faces" (251). And as Jones and Hall in particular explore in their novels, women's art of the period also captures their willingness to embrace the particular styles and methods of visual representation generally referred to as "modernist."

Secondly, the world of art provided sufficiently skilled women with a means of bridging the gap between the private and public spheres; that is, between the experience of women and the experience of men. As Rosemary Betterton has noted, the area of art practice was seized upon by women keen to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the various social transformations that accompanied modernity.

> As women entered into higher education and the professions, the boundaries between their experience and those of men became less clear-cut, enabling a fragile space to open up within which women could position themselves as producers of modern art. (19)

Women had long engaged in painting and other forms of cultural production within their private realms, but as "producers" they were finally able to access the public domains of art practice. This included gaining entry to certain art schools and winning the opportunity to exhibit in galleries alongside their male counterparts. The sometimes troubled transition between the private and public realms is explored through the trials of Victoria Morrell. Victoria is initially driven to paint by a fierce need to express her "private" experience of the world. She finds, however, that she can only achieve this to her satisfaction by learning from established practitioners of modernist styles. Victoria therefore uses her independence as a modern woman to attach herself to the public world of the dominant male figures of Parisian art circles. At the height of her creativity, however, she is still denied access to the benefits of public exposure and recognition, and it is only in her advanced years that she finds her work winning attention.

Thirdly, the practice of art provided women with an opportunity—or an excuse—to indulge that most modern of pastimes, the desire to "look." As with men, women embraced the city as an object of fascination and engaged with its multitude of visual attractions by the twin means of walking and looking. And if the *flaneur*—or indeed the *flaneuse*—is an iconic human face of modernity, then as a type they are epitomised by the "artist-observer," who wanders the urban landscape framing and recording fragments of city life. It is a role in which Audrey McNeil in particular is shown to revel. She freely roams the streets of Munich, with her ever-present camera serving not only to explain her presence and purpose, but also acting as a prosthetic enhancement to her artist's gaze.

To the postmodern novelist—ever keen to subvert the assumed norms of dominant narratives—the woman artist therefore serves as a rich source from which to explore an alternative experience of modernity. Her gender places her outside of the prevailing history which is being revised, and her particular skills and temperament situate her in such a way that she is driven to both observe and record the transitions at hand.

This use of women protagonists in order to revise the histories of modernity may be particularly apposite in those societies—such as Australia—that have a second dominant twentieth century narrative in the form of post-colonialism. For if the place and role of women in modernism has been overlooked until recently, it is also the case that women were under-represented in the prevailing narratives of colonialism and post-colonialism. Nations such as Australia were experiencing the impact of modernism at much the same time as they negotiated the difficult transition from colonialism to post-colonialism. It was a period that encompassed the ongoing push for colonial independence; the continued nostalgic links between new nations and their former colonial powers; and the emergence of a neo-imperialism on the European continent that would profoundly shift established relationships between nations.

Each of the three novels discussed above provides fertile ground for post-colonial readings. For the novelist, plots involving travel to the centres of colonial power are an acute means of examining the post-colonial condition, and Jones, Hall and Miller find in their heroines' experience of inter-war Europe an appealing foundation for an examination of alternative histories of—and the interstices between—modernism and post-colonialism. And as these novels examine, developments in modernism and post-colonialism were far from being independent of each other. The political, social and technological transformations associated with modernism frequently served to further the claims for independence of colonies and former colonies.

These novels also justify their use of female central characters by emphasising the extent to which the experience of modernity was indeed gendered. The male characters are shown as being too seduced by the industrial, technological and political manifestations of modernism to be open to an encounter with its more subtle and representational forms. Victoria's father Herbert revels in his ownership of railways and the building of ships, and looks to his Kalgoorlie mine in search of "truly world-dominating wealth" (170). Audrey's brother-in-law Immanuel's wealth has been accumulated by war profiteering, and he is described as "a man clever enough to make more money that anybody ever heard of" (8). And when Emily looks in to Georges' eyes she sees only "The Bridge" (139).

Each of these very masculine men is, however, symbolically emasculated. Herbert is cuckolded by his wife's affair with the family chauffeur, who it transpires is Victoria's biological father. Immanuel marries his wife Sybil after she has had a child to another man. That child, Audrey, is brought up as Sybil's sister, and Immanuel's true love is for Audrey rather than his wife. And Georges is also cuckolded, unaware that the daughter he will raise is not his own. Indeed themes derived from mistaken and absent fathers and abandoned children run deep in each of these novels. These themes carry heavy suggestions of social and familial upheaval, and they challenge the traditional male roles in the home and in parenting. More broadly, they might be said to refer to the crises of identity and security endemic in a society coming to terms with the twin forces of modernism and post-colonialism.

The women's choice of lovers—as opposed to husbands—can also be seen to allude to the transitional nature of the world they inhabit. They are invariably men who are from outside their own ethnic and/or social group. In *Black Mirror* Victoria's major relationships are with working class Louis Bell and Jewish photographer Jules Levy, and Anna's is with a married black man, Jamaican Winston Field. In *The Day We Had Hitler Home* Audrey falls in love with and becomes pregnant to Bello, another married black man; and in *Conditions of Faith* Emily's only real passion is expended on the priest Bertrand Etinceler. Louis, Jules and Bello are all murdered and Winston and Father Bertrand are unavailable as part-

ners due to their other commitments.

In this oddly emasculated world, it is the Australian women who are placed at the centre of the considerations about modernism. In their dual role as "outsiders"—that is not only as women, but as women of an artistic temperament—it is they who are most capable of intuiting the significance of the modern moment, and embracing the new modes of representation demanded by their experience. The art that Victoria and Audrey produce is true to the spirit of modernism, but it is a hybrid form—one which represents and interrogates their experience of the world, which has been shaped by both an Australian upbringing and European modernity.

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