

us cultural studies | **oxymoron?**
MARCUS BREEN

It's a wonderful life, if you can find it.

Nick Cave¹

— INTRODUCTION

This essay began in 1999 as an attempt to update my perceptions and experiences as a resident alien in the USA. Written expressly for what was then *The UTS Review*, it was intended to follow up my earlier piece published in 1997, 'The Cultural Studies Thing You Do: In the USA after Sokal'.² Just as the challenges initiated by that 'affair' seem to have evaporated, or been absorbed into the apparatus of systemic reinvention in the US academy, I am reinventing my correspondence. That is why I am writing this introduction.

Of course, the more time I spend in the USA, the less competent I feel to make any comment on the place. Even as a permanent resident with the glowing possibilities offered by a green card, the ethereal essence of the USA increasingly frustrates me. The more you know, the less you know. What started out as confident engagement in writing a short critique of cultural studies became a series of interrupted vagaries. As September 11 gave way to Afghanistan to Iraq to the ugly underbelly of everyday conservatism, the necessary confidence of writing turned into the vacant panic of proportion. I became just another commentator and as such a singularly isolated agent in the USA. Voices that have agency are thoroughly mediated, making life a re-run of re-runs, flying off to wherever there is money to be made in another medium. The possibility of a position evaporates into ether, as Christopher Hitchens's separation as a columnist from *The Nation* in 2002 suggested. Instead of staying on in an environment that was constrained by a leftish orthodoxy ('We hate war: ergo

we are against Bush'), Hitchens decided to take the less moral position without nice American sentiment and write in support of a higher goal of *demos*. This move earned him epithets in that polite American way of character assassination—'Hitchens shows few signs of human sympathy'—yet Hitchens came away with an established position huffing and puffing in the mainstream of the American media ether.³

As a journalist of note, Hitchens has the social and cultural heft to make the scene, appearing frequently in public and in the media—on cable television talk shows, on radio and in a bimonthly column in the glossy monthly *Vanity Fair*. He could be described as an Englishman abroad whose mix of biography and experiential journalism draws directly on the progressive, boozy Oxbridge model, most especially George Orwell, whom Hitchens wrote about in 2002 in *Orwell's Victory*. But it's the leading intellectual edge of Hitchens that makes him considerably more than the sum of his puffing parts.⁴ He can easily be accused of carrying his heart on his sleeve, which means that after more than twenty years as a correspondent in the USA he refuses to be orthodox, popping up like a manic rabbit to irritate any number of shotgun-wielding opponent 'farmers' who bang away at him with their noisy shotguns of inflected importance. He seems to care less, even as his politics change and he expresses comfortable contempt for the petty-minded ways of the USA's official spokespeople. Remarkably, he appears to be comfortable in his self-generated changing circumstances. But enough of Hitchens.

I should note that my personal circumstances changed as well. In 2000 I started working full-time as a consultant for Gartner, a global IT consulting firm, or as I was encouraged to say, 'the world's leading technology research and advisory firm'. I was working in the telecommunications policy and regulation field. But as the wheels fell off the industry and parts of the US economy, they fell off the little vehicle of my life's anticipated history as well. This added to the pathetic drama of my life's trajectory. Then early in 2002 I was involved in a minor car accident on a local freeway that produced a big reaction: chest pains led me to the local hospital's emergency room, where tests indicated that I carried a genetic condition known as Brugada Syndrome.⁵ As the cardiologists put it for the layperson, my heart's electrical system is not altogether. At any moment—especially when at rest—it could go into fibrillations and that's not what we want. To avoid such a scenario, I now carry under the skin on my upper left chest an Implantable Cardioverter Defibrillator (ICD) plus a pacemaker. Roughly the size of a cake of soap, it quietly monitors my survivability, printing out a cash register-size paper report from a computer for the cardiologist every three months. Most of the time it's a pain in the ego, as contact sports are out of the question. Wrestling with my sons is very limited and constrained.

Changed circumstances means a new perspective. I can see myself as a cyborg, while feeling literally normal. I intend to write about this one day, but now is not the time. Not

now and not in 2004, a year a North Carolina columnist described in May 2004 as follows: 'I never imagined 2004. It would be sophomoric to say that there was never a worse year to be an American ... But if this is not the worst year yet to be an American, it's the worst year by far to be one of those hag-ridden wretches who comment on the American scene.'⁶ Nevertheless, I persist with this effort, wretched and all as I am.

Not surprisingly, this piece is now a selection of fragments of my pre- and post-mortality sensibility. Re-reading earlier words, I wonder at the confidence of my earlier musings, the objectivity, comfort and intellectual bravado in light of the flight of time and the trepidation with which I now view anything I write. Life is now a struggle against the quagmire of arrogant assertion, a series of dismal reflections on the value of my decisions and an uncertainty that is palpable. I am in a transition to a transhistorical point of view. As Terry Eagleton suggested in discussing this perspective in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, 'the truth is that there *are* things which cannot be changed, as well as some which are highly unlikely to change and in some cases this is a matter to celebrate rather than lament'.⁷ I will try to celebrate.

— FALSE START

Rude, crude and thoroughly uncalled-for could be a title for this paper. After three years of life at the 'cutting edge' of modern/postmodern civilisation, this dispatch feels like something the old CEW Bean may have penned during the First World War. Had he enjoyed the benefits of digital communication, Mr Bean (bit ironic that, notes Rowan Atkinson) may have been able to dispatch his own observations of Aussies at Gallipoli and elsewhere in real time, thereby robbing us of the deliberations that came with pen and ink. Conversely, I could have opted for the fast-tracking of digital communications, but that would be to do exactly what I sense the USA does and is doing to us all—fast-tracking its culture into the globe's ecosystem. Such electronic speed offers quick rewards accompanied by short thinking time. Contradictions build up like mountains, threatening a Vesuvius-like eruption. I'm seriously thinking of reading poetry again! At least there, the rude and crude is refined to the point of having value, however deliberate.

And so to cultural studies. In particular I want to make some observations about the culture that produces cultural studies, in the hope that we can get near the core of this oxymoronic beast. My first observation then is that in the USA, cultural studies is pretty much like everything else: an exercise in grandiosity, promised benefits for all delivered to the few. It seems to speed toward nothing and everything, in a culture that never delivers. That is its mercurial appeal.

My frustration with American versions of reality probably seems confused, contrarian, even failed. And indeed it is. Furthermore, I see the failure of US cultural studies as its

realisation of US-centricity that carries its blindness like so many aspirations. As a vast machine propelled by hermeneutic anxiety, US cultural studies operates within the bosom of the culture in which it lives. In stating the obvious, it needs to be said that the obvious is often like the nose on our face ... US culture is a mass of experimental-experientialism, where libertarian vigor pours from so many hopeful pores that there cannot be a centre, a systematic position or valid identity. US cultural studies floats. However, at various locations and within the bastions of various interests (for example, *Social Text*, Fred Jameson's Duke University renderings, Santa Cruz philosophy, and University of Chicago identity studies) the laws of social life are sorely tested, as they should be. Fragments of interaction fly off at tangents, everyone seems to have a go, no-one wins and everyone keeps going at it!

If frustration is a life force, then I must have at least lived?

Once I sensed that US cultural studies is an impossibility, I had to take stock of Stuart Hall's comment made many years ago: that the US academy taking up cultural studies was a worrying prospect. Or words to that effect.⁸ I have pondered the reasons Hall offered that comment. My conclusion (with apologies for the very broad brushstrokes) is that the formation that produced the 'struggle' within British cultural studies—between Raymond Williams's 'culture of the whole society' and EP Thompson's culture as 'a whole way of conflict', as Andy Willis nicely reminded us—is, in effect, papered over by the disparate indulgences of US society to become de Certeau's cultural liberalism of everyday life: anything goes (which would be great if it did).⁹ In effect, the culture of US cultural studies is warped into unrecognisability, when read against what I would distinguish as the British/Australian form of social cultural studies, with which I am most familiar.

This is not to say that this position is clear-cut. Australian cultural studies or cultural studies more generally must now be tested by recent events. No longer can it hide behind convenient fabrications that provide an indulgent space for celebration of the popular, while those who engage in politics as the primary human ambition as reflected in cultural production and consumption are debunked. For example, Catharine Lumby says of John Hartley's critique in *A Short History of Cultural Studies*, where Hartley writes of Stuart Hall and a number of his adherents in the 'struggle' strand of cultural studies, that Hartley 'takes a crowbar to the cultural studies canon' in defence of the 'democratisation' strand.¹⁰ Read against the US approach to democracy in Iraq and elsewhere, it is indeed democracy that has now as much as ever to be contested and struggled for. The critical or struggle school of cultural studies—and in this I include those of us engaged in the policy field, which is the pragmatic counterpoint to Hartley's binaries—has by far the deeper traditions to offer the rapprochement and revision of democracy in a post-Iraq war milieu.

Having said that, the US approach to cultural studies is stymied by the disparate indulgences of individual pursuit of pleasure and materiality, which is the US culture of democracy.

This is nothing new: it is mandated in the US Constitution as ‘the pursuit of happiness!’ Hall was onto this as well, referring to ‘that historical amnesia characteristic of American culture—the tyranny of the New’.¹¹ But this takes us only so far. US cultural studies is actually the height of the fashion business, if only because in being about the culture, it is about the mood shifts and changes in the interstices of the society. As those moods swing and sway, so too do the scholarly pursuits, so that what was once cool is now, like Harry Connick Junior, just mellow. In being mellow, the cool constantly searches for ways to reinvent itself. As the temperature vacillates, the uncertainties feel palpable as scholarship becomes a chase for the scholarly rainbow. In chasing the rainbow, US cultural studies cannot stop for the pauses I desperately need and in so doing, the social evaporates in the face of the competitive urge to be fashionable. Cultural studies without the social is a sad and sorry tale indeed.

US culture is, of course, a mercurial beast, loved to death and transient like an epiphany. It rises like a mist, enveloping the world, before moving in to practice its fratricide.

I have come to realise that US culture is rarely seen, even less likely discussed. The readings generated by ‘thick description’ praxis that Clifford Gertz promulgated might proffer something revelatory. Yet that approach seems curiously *verboten*. Could US cultural studies in its academic renderings become the refuge of the scoundrel? Could its self-investment in the culture of fashion render it so thoroughly superficial that it is merely a job ticket?

In contrast, cultural studies in Hollywood and popular culture in general has captured the territory that cultural studies might ‘own’. US cultural studies becomes that once removed, mediating and distancing set of texts about texts. All of which are symbols of American colonial achievement, while always already heartwarming reminders of how ideas circulate around the public. The contradiction of the US way of life is that everything is public, but so little is of moment. (My theory on Hollywood is that it is the best manifestation of cultural studies. Without pop culture I’d suggest the USA would have had a fully franked fascist regime in place in the 1930s, were it not for the counterpoint of a popular front writing Hollywood scripts linked somehow within the deeper recesses of the remarkable FDR and his ‘populist’ New Deal reforms.)

In a 1992 interview titled ‘Cultural Studies and the Politics of Internationalization’, Stuart Hall suggested that ‘American society ... in the period of this Clinton administration ... feels like a deeply reactionary form of free-enterprise modernity’.¹² That seems to me to be giving modernity too much salience in the equation.

I was reminded of how difficult even the project of modernity is in America, when discussion of hate groups began in an online forum about computer ethics, in which I participate. During one interchange following the massacre of high school students in Colorado and during the US–NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, one participant, Bill McDaniel of McGrew

and McDaniel Group Inc, Strategic Management and Consulting for New Technologies, Texas, made the following observation:

The point is that our lifestyle here in America IS the reason we have wars raging so seldom. Here's a thought. And it pertains to how we deal with Hate groups as well ...

Public and Political apathy is our greatest strength as a nation and a people.¹³

Perhaps there's also a whiff of conceit in the academy: a 1998–99 survey of US academics noted all sorts of statistically irrelevant data, along with the following material that is used to booster essays like this:

Liberalism on the faculty doesn't necessarily translate into political and social activism ... Only 14 per cent of the respondents said influencing the political structure should be an 'essential or very important' goal of professors, down from 20 per cent in 1989. Only 38 per cent said influencing social values should be a key goal, down from 47 per cent a decade ago.¹⁴

There's a formal rejection of engagement with politics in the USA—at least as far as organised politics goes. 'Politics' is the culture, but then the public walks away from it—in its organised forms—leaving it to flap around like so many flags in a hurricane. In contrast, I'd suggest that politics and the social did once articulate in cultural studies as a project, but in its US manifestation any assumptions that continue that line of argument are severely tested. Active ossification of the social is a terrible disservice to civilisation. What seems even worse is a structure of everyday life that amounts to active, knowing disempowerment—complacency by any other name.

The national conspiracy of complacency produces in US cultural studies that form of denial that terrifies those of us who recognise the linkages between, on one hand, cultural politics and, on the other, Gramsci, organic intellectuals, bourgeois and working-class traditions of political action and so on. What is worse, those of us who have been 'organic' feel very non-organic, disconnected and irrelevant, sequestered in the academy and securely tied to the secretive bonds of tenure and so on. (When I hear that a US academic has been able to continue teaching because tenure kept the barbarians at bay—I'll write a special celebratory dispatch!) Increasingly, it feels as if US cultural studies operates in a vacuum, surrounded by the institutionalisation of cultural studies, which soundly rewards us, the cultural studies elite, with secure and relatively high-paying jobs and the disarticulation of our personal lives and politics from the public.

Of course, this turns out to be nothing new. The astute research findings provided by Gunnar Myrdal in his 1944 study, *An American Dilemma*, was well on to this. Myrdal found that Americans have 'no way' (my term) of being involved in governance and public policy

and as a result join fractured interest groups, and thus maintain a tradition of very little social political action. Americans were, suggested Myrdal, disenfranchised and, as such, not a part of the political process. What he termed 'the American Creed' produced 'idealistic aspirations' where American nationalism created the unique sense that here, at last, was a society ruled by its citizens, growing to full development. All this (and more) meant that Americans lived under the creed, 'under the spell of the great national suggestion'. I suspect that the magic has worked on the nation and on cultural studies, creating phantoms for analysis, disconnected from the traditions of public engagement, reproduced as fantasy by a highly technologised society.¹⁵

Thorstein Veblen had another take on this, which is equally informative, namely that the organic links among members of farming communities had been broken by industrialisation. (As I recall this same 'rise of the towns and cities' argument was used by Friedrich Engels to explain most of the sources for the German peasant war of 1524–25.) Consequently, the move from the land to the city—the breakdown of traditions—disengaged the sense of agency within community. Such a suggestion, made most stridently by Veblen in *Absentee Ownership and Business Enterprise in Recent Times*, prefigures the current malaise and the frenetic inability of the culture to understand itself, to work outside yet with linear logics. Indeed, the headlong rush to avoid anything like a dialectic would help. Just some Hegelian double thinking would offer to resolve much of this reinvention of the national suggestion of teleological conceits! (Don't get me started on theological motifs within the culture.)

One explanation that helped explain these observations came indirectly from Louis Menand writing about Edmund Wilson and communism in *The New Yorker*:

American critics tend to prefer binary analysis: thumbs up or thumbs down, right or left, tonic or toxin. It is difficult for them to see that most cultural products work in several ways at once. It is even harder for them to see that each element in a cultural system depends for its value on all the others—so that to alter one element is to alter every element.¹⁶

My frustration with the lack of heft in US cultural studies is in this sort of blindness that translates into popular and official unilateralism. I know that's a bald overstatement given the excellent work of many of my colleagues who would probably consider themselves 'critics' in a delimited way, namely through their work as academics. Their work is defined not so much by the limits of the binaries of thought, as proposed by Menand above (which I have discussed in my essay on *Reservoir Dogs* in *The UTS Review*), but by a more pernicious blind spot created by 'science envy'.¹⁷ In effect this blind spot is the sine qua non of US achievement, the technologising of thought and action into persistent computational binaries, producing material well-being through (literally) computerisation and technology. Real success in the USA is measured by wealth and is quantified in mathematics and science, not

critical thinking, subtlety and nuance, and argumentation. The implication is that US cultural studies is trapped by the positivist metrics of a technology fetish, which is not of its doing. (I will take this thought up again at a later date in some other forum.) It is also trapped in the materiality of the measurement of achievement of the petty bourgeois class alliances of academics.

In looking for a way of understanding what I consider the blind spots in US cultural studies, which produce the oxymoronic flavor, I had to find a suitable critical vehicle. It came with the fiftieth anniversary of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. In fact, the revelation came in an interview with Miller in *The New Yorker*. I include it as much because it reveals the sullied underbelly of my migrancy, my own feelings of failure amid unemployment, fear and uncertainty about the present (forget the future) and the sullied celebrations that US culture and cultural studies demand of us.

The whole idea of people failing with us (Americans) is that they can no longer be loved. You haven't created a persona which people will pay for, see, experience, or come close to. It's almost like death. You have a deathly touch. People who succeed are loved because they exude some magical formula for fending off destruction, fending off death.

It's the most brutal way of looking at life that one can imagine, because it discards anyone who does not measure up. It wants to destroy them. It's been going on since Puritan times. You are beyond the blessing of God. You're beyond the reach of God. That God rewards those who deserve it. It's a moral condemnation that goes on. You don't want to be near this failure.¹⁸

So then I ask myself what would cultural studies offer this fetish of success? How would it move to a plane where there is traction with the everyday? I have already suggested that Hollywood film-making is probably the premier locale for this interaction. But that too is just so much shoddy thinking on my part. My argument is that our lives risk being rendered decultured by cultural studies where it exists within the celebratory success of American life. It is oxymoronic because the only action is the pacifying professionalism that we adopt. We have too much to lose if we go out on the street. Activism and cultural studies have, in fact, been decoupled from each other, just as progressive politics and polity in the USA has shifted into enterprise neighbourhoods. The culture is a middle-class neighborhood—with apologies to those hipsters who live in inner-city tenements and such like where isolation and activism takes other forms.

for an american to speak of activism is an american who still dreams.¹⁹

Curiously and as an afterthought, I would add that Hollywood *must* be the locale where cultural studies in the academy must send it best and brightest to continue cultural studies and

whatever activism and praxis results. But the power of regeneration does not necessarily come from within the hopefully regenerative kernel of ambition that is the New World. In fact, it can be argued that the US dream of teleological self-invention is at risk of stopping, as its liberalism collapses into a vacuum.²⁰

Rather, the touchstone for consciousness—and now I am writing in mid-2004—is Europe. For all the history of the USA having left Europe ‘behind’ to be settled by those seeking the higher, less complex plain of material achievement, Europe appears now like a sustaining library of ethical and moral preternaturalism. The ‘old Europe’—referred to as such by the US Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, in 2003 when the war in Iraq went forward without the UN—now appears to be the older and wiser cousin whose blood-soaked soil echoes with human frailty, caution and ambitions of peace.

“When you are cut off from the world, things are bound to develop in interesting ways.”²¹

— HOW DOES IT FEEL?

Doing Australian cultural studies is strangely absent from the US present. I use the word ‘strangely’ because as an expatriate, the circulation of one’s own culture takes on heightened significance. In living Australianness, you search in vain for recognition of Australian values. When a news story appears in print or on broadcast media (which is probably three or four times a year and thankfully some additional oxygen from BBC radio coverage of cricket and rugby), my response is close to celebratory. It only serves to confirm the arguments of those culturalists who say that culture is the genuine arbitrator of contemporary society (they are wrong, of course, but that’s another story of which we must speak, namely the economic).

All that to say that doing Australian cultural studies is depressingly constrained by the reality of life in the ‘North’—that’s north of the equator, which inevitably gets a laugh when I make my southern-ness explicit in ‘the South’. In many respects, an Australian cultural nationalist such as I would rather damn the Yanks and get on with it. But the fact of the matter is that Australia, and its way of life, is backwatered. How does it feel, I ask myself, to be part of a disappearing civilisation? At least as far as cultural production is concerned, northerners turn their heads away from the diminishing antipodean cultural project. It is as if the coat-tails of the world have suddenly shrunk, whereby the limited chance we had of holding on has disappeared. Immobilised by the lack of interest from the north, Australians are consciously disengaged until an imperial war provides another historical moment for our leaders to catch those coat-tails of the great and powerful. Which is to say, there is probably a greater argument in the years 2000 for government activism in the field of Australian cultural production, export promotion and public investment in national culture than there ever was. And I can hear the scoffers—the market monkeys who hang from their high

branches of pop culture whooping up the joys of internationalism, enjoying the resistive moments of the popular, as read by Hollywood and so on. But I beg to differ—or as Graeme Turner said, ‘It works for me.’²² Can that level of confidence about the Australian way be maintained, or are my aspirations just so much unreconstituted sentimental drivel?

Some comedy might help me locate the national with a more hard-headed orientation. Here’s an example of a widely circulated joke, with a sense of what it feels like to those ‘away from home’ living with our national and global sensibilities dismally intact:

Last month a survey was conducted by the UN world-wide. The only question asked was: ‘Would you please give your honest opinion about solutions to the food shortage in the rest of the world.’

The survey was a dismal failure because:

In Africa they didn’t know what ‘food’ meant;

In Eastern Europe they didn’t know what ‘honest’ meant;

In Western Europe they didn’t know what ‘shortage’ meant;

In China they didn’t know what ‘opinion’ meant;

In South America they didn’t know what ‘please’ meant;

And in the USA they didn’t know what ‘the rest of the world’ meant.

*And in Australia they knew what everything meant—but nobody else in the world cared about their opinion!*²³

Perhaps I would be more circumspect and confident if I had not received the following letter from David Birch, Professor of Literary and Communication Studies, in the Faculty of Arts at Deakin University. Professor Birch is (or was) the editorial convener of *Government and Culture: Studies in Culture and Media Policy*. In a response to a proposal for a book series edited by the Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy for Publication by a UK publisher, Professor Birch sent me the following, dated 11 January 1999:

Dear Marcus,

I met with — of — in London before Christmas and the message he gave me is not good. ALL proposals I submitted to him have been rejected, with the overall message that exemplification from Asia and Australia is of no interest to —. — will only consider submitting proposals to outside readers and the — Board, if the book is of sufficient theoretical interest to a worldwide audience. And that — sees as *not* including excerpts of case studies from Asia or Australia.

This puts into serious question, I would suggest, a series edited from an Australian Key Centre—and this might require some consideration by the Centre in the future.

I return to Australia at the end of January and would be happy to discuss my meeting with — in more detail. A model book series, — suggests, would be a textbook, which could be used *worldwide*.

I am sorry to give such negative news, but if the bookshops and newspapers in the UK are anything to go by, there is little or no interest here in Asia or Australia.

My understanding is that the books already contracted will be published, but — made it clear that he will not support edited volumes or anything that is ‘regional’ and of little interest to a worldwide ‘English Language Readership’.

I would suggest some serious thinking of the series when I return.

With every best wishes,
Professor David Birch.

As far away as I was in North Carolina, this induced considerable pain. Ah, the pleasures of globalisation. Ah, the great disappearing act as the world’s island continent sinks with hardly a whimper thanks to a lack of interest from global publishers.

Of course there is an opportunity in such miserableness (I’m not of Irish descent for nothing!). A clearly articulated policy for Australian media and related policy is needed like never before. Major players in global cultural industries (such as the one mentioned in the letter above) shrivel their self-interested commercial concerns into insulated regions of shrink-wrapped uninterest in anything but high volume celebrity sales and textbooks. In the light of letters such as this, the Australia Council and state arts bodies need to recognise the demands placed upon them for activist support of cultural production, and start spending money in consistently large sums.

Instead, the only sign of Australia in the USA is its readiness to abandon independence—which it may have never had—and plunge into the morass with the USA in supporting a war in Iraq. The outcome of the immediate effort in Iraq is immaterial to me. In the longer term the impact on culture, politics and economics more generally is, has and will continue to be the reinforcement of ‘bellicose patriotism’ as a reconstruction of the baser attributes of human nature for us all.²⁴ The reallocation of credible cultural links is the real story, as Australian Prime Minister John Howard sought to take some sort of moral high ground in an effort to establish Australia’s relevance to global goodness as defined by American modernist-nationalist conservatives. Even if such an articulation of war-making morality with political action had a foundation, the most formidable barrier to comprehending Australian–US relations is that Australian culture can and should be celebrated for whatever it is, not as a reflection of some other imaginary demos. As US democratic ideology shifts under George W Bush

from so-called 'principled conservatives' to 'radical nationalists', the palpable drift in orientation makes Australia's close ties with the USA more troubling still.²⁵ This is because the view of the USA as seen from the uni-directional perspective of John Howard's office poorly reflects the volatility of the USA as a riderless horse galloping this way and that in a frenzied state of undemocratic panic.

If anything, the US system is a more stridently fragmented and utopianistic culture of production even while it founders on its own contradictions. Sometimes the banality of such contradictions is breathtaking. Its dimensions are unnerving as I disappear into a void of centrifugal anxiety. Can I take heart as cultural realities determined by common sense set in? Or am I reduced to a repetition of the somewhat disheartening notion from Irving Goh, borrowed tangentially from Duleuze and Guattari?: 'there is always the risk of an irresponsible reading, i.e., a reading that chooses to omit, conceal, ignore, forget, gloss over, critical premises of an argument or concept'.²⁶

— US CULTURE IS THE SPORT UTILITY VEHICLE

So Bush appoints a medical doctor to be the administrator of the National Highways Traffic Safety Administration. Given the centrality of highways and car transport to the American way of life and its imagination (another successful export), this is significant. It is equally relevant because of the articulation of a public debate about cars, urban sprawl, energy and inefficient fuel guzzlers like sport utility vehicles (SUVs). The worst of the SUVs are the exposed egos known as Hummers, those military-class monsters glossed up for domestic indulgence and desperados enacting social status-seeking behavior. So the regulator says of SUVs:

The theory that I'm going to protect myself and my family even if it costs other people's lives has been the operative incentive for the design of these vehicles and that's just wrong.²⁷

Given that a considerable amount of my work in and around cultural studies has been associated with a regulationist school of political economy known as institutional economics, it is this kind of statement that drives me almost insane about the USA. While Hummers are now common on highways and back roads—representing more 'all war all the time' behaviour—the person called upon to oversee regulation of traffic across the nation has a powerfully pessimistic view of human behaviour à la America. The motor car as a tool of protection, an object of domesticity and weaponry, speaks volumes about US culture and its ineffable characteristics. That a regulator should draw attention to this cultural issue in the *New York Times* 'Money and Business' section suggests that the cultural permutations of everyday consumption are configured out of commonsense readings of US extremism. By that I mean that the moral indignation of the Republican regulator cited above is a kind of palliative to

the extremes, a banal sticky note to remind the wayward that objects are an expression of values.

What is more pertinent is that conservatives make this sort of statement and it changes nothing because compared to individual rights, any policy statement operates in the territory of irrelevance. The American Creed that I mentioned earlier takes the utopic sensibility and constantly disarticulates it from meaningful dialogue in the media ether. It seems to me that this is our point of frustration with the USA as well as the point of attraction. Like moths to the flame, to get too close is to die but to be at a distance is to fail.

This is the perspective from those who intuit and know much more about life in the USA than I do. Clive James is a case in point. James could have experienced 'the potential for brighter glory or deeper obscurity' by moving to the USA; instead he moved to the old country.²⁸ The rest is history, and fame. Perhaps that's the driving force? The desire for recognition deeply bound up with ego magnifies cultural studies under the competitive microscope. And that's the rub. The level of detail, the granularity is such that we humans are a pixelated people. We are operating within a new pixelated theory of development. Like the digital refinement that is becoming everyday—watch a DVD on an average home television and marvel at the clarity of skin tones and image detail on the screen—we can break it all down to a cell of colour, a micro-image of reality that is ultimately far removed from other meanings because the relationships cannot be imagined. We are victims of our own success at refining detail.

I am not sure if there's a cultural studies effort looking at the deeper readings of the US everyday—which is precisely my point of frustration and exactly why the comment about Clive James caught my attention. A reading of Clifford Geertz's methods as applied to everyday life in the USA seems to be fraught. There just may not be any depth to plumb.

If there is depth, what will it take to see US academic cultural studies engage with deep readings of itself within the culture? My questions begin here and move to: Where is the cultural studies of consumption? Where are the deep readings of everyday realities, for example, the nexus of self-interest and SUVs? Have the questions been truncated? I suspect that they have been and are lying dormant behind the great achievements of US individuality, among the pixelated people. That is to say, the questions about culture are shovelled aside by the achievements of free market self-aggrandisement, whose contribution is to close off the terrain of investigation of individual complicity in the things that poison us all. In a discussion about cultural studies, such details are necessary. But they are also messy. 'The bankruptcy of prevailing social science theories about culture' cannot be excused.²⁹ Because if it had amounted to anything, I might feel more optimistic, I might see action. In the pixelated world of granular detail, deeper self-criticism must be the new way forward. I am not confident about seeing this emerge within the field—we are growing older, buying bigger

and better houses, sending our children to better schools while aglow with the stamp of our own tacit approval of consumption.

— SOME SORT OF ENDING

My interest is to undermine the statements Australian politicians and policy makers have been generating about the US model of the free market, as necessarily transportable to the antipodes. I am about 150 years too late! Nevertheless, the turn of political economy is here. As the privatisation of Australian society presages its cultural dismemberment, is it too much to hope that public demands for details of the economic foundations of the sustainability of culture will become more pressing? Surely public allocations of funds will have to be the equivalent of US funds, if not greater to compensate for the failure of the market to deliver national cultures to citizens. Certainly free trade agreements could mobilise economic growth engines, yet they could also cut the engines down to the size of a quibbling two-stroke motor. The debate over the Australian film industry in the free trade negotiations in 2003 is a case in point, where excellent cases were made from within the bureaucratic film establishment in defence of Australian production and content limits, and subsidies.³⁰

That doesn't offer much on cultural studies, but it does on action. My hope is that I will not become a pixelated person. My desire is that any theory of pixelated development will enable me to rejoin my ego on a front line somewhere.

— A MORE LIKELY ENDING

Setting out to write something in 1999, I find I am completing the thing in 2004. In some respects I am surprised I am still alive to complete the task. Unsurprisingly, the above is more like a bad Belgian tapestry, with fragments of thread going hither and yon. I can't beg for mercy from those high priests or priestesses of cultural studies who probably think I am unqualified to make these comments, or who view with contempt my poor academic checkpoints of logical credibility. So what, I am defensive. So what, I am late with this effort. So what, I have probably not proved that US cultural studies is oxymoronic or a series of blind spots. What I have done is to follow a nervous dreamscape, to try and unbundle my emotional and material fallibility in what Freud called 'the whole mass of material in the mind which is as yet unknown to us'.³¹ I may have conveyed a sense of defeat and disappointment at the incomprehensibility of the world around me. Hopefully not.

Sometimes it's wise to lay down your gloves and just give in ... it's a wonderful life.

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