

Introduction

The main thrust of this essay is a lament for the loss of dialectic in our society. It is not a yearning for the past or a whinge about the present. There are fertile young minds ready to take on the challenges of the future and many offer an optimistic world view. It's hard to imagine that art will not have a place in that future, and the kind of art it should be is always up for discussion in any era. Unfortunately, the kind of art that wants to occupy a central place in society currently lacks a strong Australian backer. It is not respected and is accordingly undervalued and under-resourced. Occupied by debate, discussion, informed and knowledgeable analysis of past and present, intellectual, moral and ethical rigour, the transient space that dialectic occupies is a place where life's state of flux and contraries are on show. It is a place that is also occupied by art and artists. If that space is nullified or discredited—or, in some repressive societies, banned altogether—then art that wants to matter struggles to exist. I am suggesting that space is threatened, that dialectic has been usurped by dogma, that fixed opinion for opinion's sake has replaced the individual's ability to reason, and that this condition of national life has the tendency to stifle the essence of art.

The re-election of a Howard government for a fourth term,¹ and the platform which served both Labor and the Coalition in the pre-election campaign, tell me that many people in Australia today have bought the idea of a 'mainstream'. I can't say a 'majority' of Australians believe there is a homogeneous mainstream, because the fact is our governments are never elected by simple majorities. But I do think we have witnessed the fabrication of a myth which many people have bought. Belief in this myth presents a potential threat both to many people in our society and to some outside our country, because the myth of a mainstream also encourages fantasies about those who are *not* part of the mainstream.

The word 'minority' is not just descriptive: it diminishes the social status of its subject, whereas the mainstream myth might be debunked by the revelation of just how much common ground exists between the so-called mainstream and those currently portrayed as clinging to the banks or swimming against the tide. But the 2004 federal election did not debate those issues of common ground, and rarely elevated itself to questions of morals, ethics or humanity. It focused on greed and those things which reinforce the myth of the mainstream. It is part of the myth that matters of health and wages are unquestionably about 'mainstream' values. The fact is that those debates were already conducted within the discourse of a mythical mainstream. For a start, much of the economic debate only concerned the garnering of votes and, given the increase in the vote-sensitive numbers of an ageing population, it was no surprise to find hips and teeth

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on the national agenda: we heard little about Aboriginal health, and at no time was there, nor is there now, any attempt to align money spent on health with the money gained by government through tobacco, gambling and alcohol taxes. There was a thinly disguised desperation shown for an increase in white Australian numbers through more baby money, but little attempt to contextualise how, for instance, the urgent environmental challenges which are not currently being met will affect the life and health of those new babies.

The other side of this same coin ensures that human beings outside this alleged mainstream, no matter how populous they might be in their own countries, are granted minority status in the minds of many Australians—just as they are if they find themselves caught in the unpleasant, sometimes horrific, quest for political asylum on these shores. Regarding other human beings as ‘minor’, or not quite as human as ‘we’ are, is a time-dishonoured method of giving the ‘mainstream’ permission to persecute and discriminate at home, or declare war on them abroad. It is a process of brutalisation.

In the absence of dialectic, or even simple debate, there are few means whereby the public can be urged to question who exactly constitutes this mainstream. My belief is that if people were encouraged to scratch the surface of those lives politically marketed to be seen to share so many important values, they would find significant differences in the detail of their opinions, and deeper down, in the skeletons in their closet, surprising tastes, their intellectual flexibility,

