

No Country For Young People? Anxieties in Australian education

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Preamble

I thank the membership of AARE for the privilege of being President of our Association in 2008. Our 2007 annual conference began on the day following the last federal election and I think it is fair to say that Kevin Rudd's decisive victory – coupled with some delight at seeing John Howard defeated and unseated – led many of us to approach 2008 with cautious optimism.

Any optimism I felt a year ago was short-lived, lasting only a month or two beyond the Rudd government's apology to indigenous Australians on 13 February, for which I have unreserved respect and admiration. But on many other matters that concern me deeply – especially in the areas of education, environment and the arts – the new government's words and deeds increasingly fell short of the very reasonable expectations conjured. I sensed quite soon that some of my close colleagues were similarly underwhelmed. For example, I recall that at an ARDEN¹ meeting in early March, one outcome of a working group's deliberations on the determinants of possible futures for educational research was to ask: how long before Kevin Rudd becomes Tony Blair?



I am disposed to read educational problems and issues intertextually – to deliberately put them into intertextual 'play' with other cultural texts, such as popular songs, novels, movies and artworks. So when I began to reflect on my experience of being President of this Association in 2008 the text that immediately sprang to mind was J.M. Coetzee's (2007) recent novel, *Diary of a Bad Year*. This choice was very much influenced by my personal experience – this has been one of the most difficult and stressful years I have endured as an educational professional and academic since I began working as a secondary teacher in 1968. Many of these difficulties and stresses stemmed from (or were exacerbated by) my university's serious financial difficulties, exemplified by the Victorian Auditor General's unequivocal assessment of La Trobe University's 2007 financial position, namely, that 'insufficient revenue is being generated to fund operations and asset renewal.' In the Centre I direct, this led to unsustainable teaching workloads, a decline in research activity, and a dramatic slump in staff morale, in what had previously been one of the best performing academic units in the university (in terms of teaching quality and research productivity).

But personal difficulties aside, I think that 2008 can be characterised more broadly as a 'bad year' for educational researchers and for education writ large. Some dates in my diary of education's bad year include:

31 March 2008: the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released the *2008 Australian and New Zealand Standard Research Classification* (ANZSRC) to replace the Australian Standard Research Classification (ASRC) and the RFCD and SEO codes previously used for research reporting and grant applications. As I and other members of the AARE Executive have pointed out (see, e.g., Peter Goodyear, 2007; Noel Gough, 2008a, 2008b) the new FoR classification – and especially the exclusion of so many of our sub-disciplinary specialisations from Division 13 – seriously threatens the integrity of

¹ Australian Research Directors in Education Network

educational research in Australia and fragments the critical mass of educational researchers in ways that will damage Australia's reputation for producing high quality educational research.

19-20 April 2008: the much-hyped Australia 2020 Summit marginalised educators and instrumentalised education by restricting most of the input to, and deliberations during, the Summit to the productivity agenda.

13 May 2008: in the months before the Rudd Government's 2008-09 budget was delivered on this day, it had successfully lowered expectations of any increased funding for higher education pending the reports of the Cutler and Bradley reviews. The one-off capital renewal funding of \$500 million was of course welcome, but the lack of any recurrent replacement funding for student facilities and services following voluntary student unionism seemed a bit mean-spirited.

27 August 2008: the Australian Government delivered a cursory, condescending and contemptuous response to the *Top of the Class* report on the House of Representatives Inquiry into Teacher Education. For example, the Government's dismissive rejoinder to the report's detailed arguments and recommendations for establishing a dedicated Educational Research Fund was simply to assert: 'High-quality research relating to education is currently funded under the Australian Research Council's National Competitive Grants Program'.

24 November 2008: on ABC radio federal Education Minister Julia Gillard agrees that 'Rupert Murdoch is making a lot of sense' in calling Australia's public education a 'disgrace', 'a waste of human promise', 'a drain on our future workforce' and 'a moral scandal'. She is also 'impressed' by New York schools chancellor Joel Klein's education reforms, especially school league tables, which she believes had produced 'remarkable outcomes'. I prefer Michael Leunig's interpretation of Murdoch's hypocrisy.²



² http://images.theage.com.au/ftage/ffximage/2008/11/27/svCARTOON_NOV28_gallery_575x400.jpg

See also Kenneth Davidson's (2008) thoughtful and evidence-based rebuttal of Gillard's views:

<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/ratings-scheme-for-schools-fails-the-test-for-improving-them-20081126-6ir5.html>:

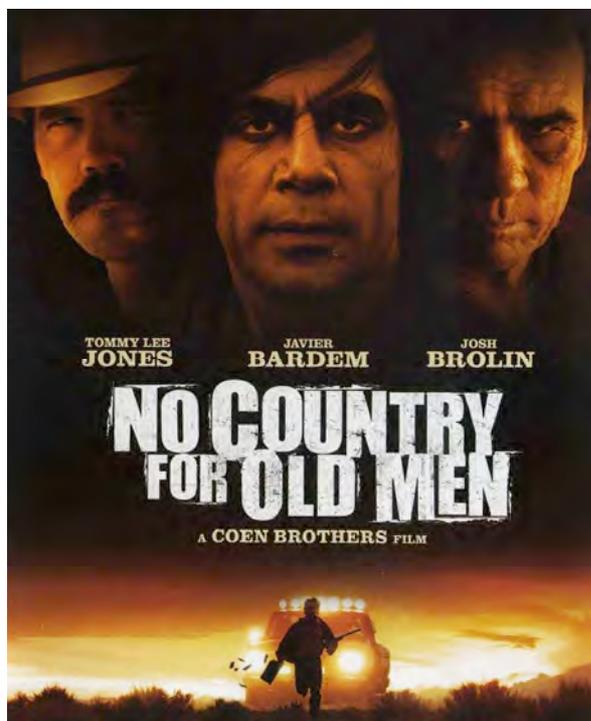
It would be all too easy to continue this litany of disappointment but I doubt that it would give either you or me much pleasure to do so. However, before I abandon *Diary of a Bad Year* entirely, I'd like to offer one of Coetzee's 'strong opinions' that comprise about half of the novel's contents:

08: ON UNIVERSITIES

It was always a bit of a lie that universities were self-governing institutions. Nevertheless, what universities suffered during the 1980s and 1990s was pretty shameful, as under threat of having their funding cut they allowed themselves to be turned into business enterprises, in which professors who had previously carried on their enquiries in sovereign freedom were transformed into harried employees required to fulfil quotas under the scrutiny of professional managers. Whether the old powers of the professoriate will ever be restored is much to be doubted.

In the days when Poland was under the Communist rule, there were dissidents who conducted night classes in their homes, running seminars on writers and philosophers excluded from the official canon (for example, Plato). No money changed hands, though there may have been other forms of payment. If the spirit of the university is to survive, something along those lines may have to come into being in countries where tertiary education has been wholly subordinated to business principles. In other words, the real university may have to move into people's homes and grant degrees for which the sole backing will be the names of the scholars who sign the certificates (pp. 31-2)

It seems to me that something like that is already happening in the Interwebs. For example, there is indeed a Plato list³ which exists 'to support thoughtful discussion about the philosophy and the dialogues of Plato. This is one of the lists hosted by The Free Lance Academy⁴, whose main purpose is to create opportunities for serious, committed intellectual inquiry outside the university, primarily by means of online media'. Perhaps what Coetzee refers to as 'the spirit of the university' will survive by moving into Yahoo groups and similar web hosts. These forums are not necessarily competing for universities' business (the competitive rewards systems of contemporary industrial societies will ensure that) but they might – and should – influence the ways that universities conduct their core business.



Anxieties in Australian education

Let me turn now to the central theme of my talk which, for those of you who are familiar with Gilles Deleuze's conceptual creations, can be understood as a 'line of flight' that takes off from Joel and Ethan Coen's (2007) movie, *No Country for Old Men*.

No Country for Old Men is a crime thriller that tells the story of a botched drug deal and the violent cat-and-mouse drama that ensues as the protagonists crisscross each other's paths in the desert landscape of 1980 West Texas.

³ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/plato/>

⁴ <http://www.freelance-academy.org/>

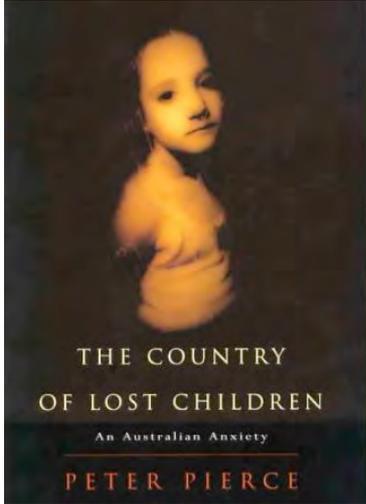


No Country for Young People is a 'mind movie' – a playful figment of my imagination. I now imagine it starring Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard and Peter Garrett playing themselves, but when I first cast it in 2007 I had different actors. I was not unhappy when one of the lead actors disappeared and another drifted out of focus and into the background... My movie thus begins in the period before the Rudd Government was elected and draws attention to the several continuities between the Howard and Rudd approaches to education.

The original cast...

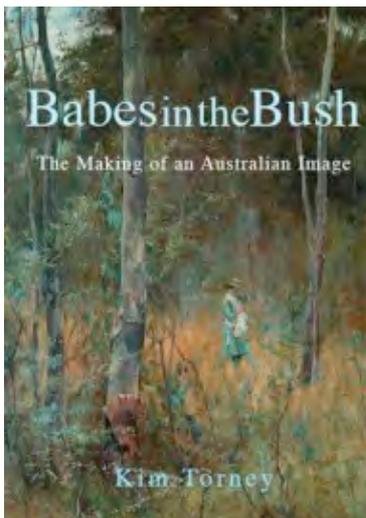


No Country for Young People is not a crime thriller, although it refers to accusations of criminality and has lashings of symbolic violence. It is a story of botched educational ideals and the political melodramas that ensue as multiple stakeholders crisscross each other's paths in the educational policy landscape of 21st century Australia. But beyond this slightly stretched comparison, *No Country for Young People* is primarily a meditation on contemporary anxieties in Australian education.



Bruce Chatwin (1987) first alerted me to the proposition that 'Australia... is the country of lost children' (p. 129), but Peter Pierce (1999), in *The Country of Lost Children*, provides the evidence and argument for defensibly portraying Australia as a place where the innocent young are most especially in jeopardy. Pierce (1999) traces continuities and discontinuities in the ways that Australian anxieties about children have been represented in literature, art, cinema, theatre, and popular media from (roughly) 1850 to the present.

The first part of his thesis is that during the second half of the nineteenth century, in literature and in art, the recurring motif of a child lost in 'the bush' became an increasingly significant dimension of European settlers' experiences.



In *Babes in the Bush: The Making of an Australian Image*, Kim Torney (2005) offers further evidence that the development of the image of the bush-lost child was uniquely Australian, and that comparable British-colonised societies were dominated by images of the captive child – of children kidnapped and kept by Indigenous people. Australian Aborigines usually feature in stories of bush-lost children as 'black trackers' – a means by which European settlers recovered their children (dead or alive) from the land. The image of the bush-lost child, and the associated bush search scenario, rapidly came to be regarded as an affirmation of community, although the stories themselves often reinforced social divisions and stratifications. For example, bush-lost children were cast as passive victims and, if they were found alive, their survival was attributed either to divine intervention or to the actions of their rescuers, who were usually men (rarely





women) and/or Aboriginal trackers working under the orders of European settlers. Bush-lost children who died (or, worse, were never found) were understood as warnings against the seductive lure of the Australian bush and the fragility of life on the margins of European settlement. As Pierce (1999) points out, one of the literary conventions of the Victorian era was to use a child to symbolize the future, and these early lost child stories can thus be seen as indicators of a deep unease about the European presence in Australia.



Pierce argues that in the second half of the twentieth century (and, I would suggest, continuing into the present) the analogous cultural narratives have shifted to urban environments and cohered around issues of children who have in some way been abandoned by their parents' generation. Pierce argues that the image of the lost child in both periods reveals a persistent insecurity about Australian people's understandings of their location in place/space and time.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, Australian anxieties about children seem to be far removed from the site-specific, exotic and idiosyncratic 'dangers' of the bush. Australia is now one of the world's most urbanized nations and, like many other industrialized countries, its cities and suburbs are places where children are aborted, abandoned, murdered or never conceived. Stories about such losses focus not on building or consolidating a community as it searches for a particular lost child but, rather, on the fragmentation or disintegration of a community as it attempts to deal with the problems of abandoned children.



Pierce (1999) argues that in these more recent stories children inhabit a world in which men, women and social institutions, either through neglect or by deliberate intention, seem to be dedicated to their ruin. In life the children are prey to parental abuse, prowling paedophiles, Internet porn peddlers, drug dealers, religious sects, and serial killers, and in death they are the raw material for sensationalizing communal fears through media-driven (and often politically motivated) moral panics. Like the bush-lost children before them, these abandoned children symbolize adult fears of the self, society, and the future, but Pierce also suggests that the lost child re-emerges in late twentieth century popular culture as the focus of further and more obscure anxieties. Characters worry about whether their children have a future in Australia, sometimes asking if succeeding generations of Australians should be brought into being at all. Doom-laden scenarios concerning global warming, food and energy security, and other aspects of Australia's social, economic and environmental sustainability exacerbate such fears.

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Uncritical elevation of a loopy fad

Luke Slattery | November 26, 2008

Article from: The Australian

IN his advice on the core national English curriculum, University of Sydney educator Peter Freebody, one of the architects of critical literacy, conspicuously avoids mention of the term; the term is also absent from the new framing document. I'm not sure we can read too much into this, as critical literacy is in the process of renewing itself, metamorphosing from a race, class and gender fixated method of enforced right-thinking into something a little more subtle.



For many conservative politicians and journalists, teachers and schools (aided and abetted by left-wing intellectuals and postmodernist academics) are in the vanguard of people and social institutions dedicated to Australian children's educational ruin. For example, Luke Slattery, currently editor of *The Australian* Higher Education section, has long waged an obsessive and ill-informed campaign against what he deems to be the 'dangers' posed by critical literacy approaches to teaching texts, with his most recent rant being published just a week ago (Luke Slattery, 2008). However, in order to examine some of the rhetorical moves Slattery deploys, I will return to one of his earlier diatribes, in which he portrayed the threats to children as being sufficiently grave to merit a front-page story in *The Australian's* weekend edition. Under the headline, 'This little pig goes post modernist', Slattery (2005) alerts readers

to such alarming practices as those endorsed by the Tasmanian Department of Education in the resources it provides for teachers of English:

In Tasmania, the official school syllabus website describes how its practitioners 'deconstruct the structures and features of texts'; 'no longer consider texts to be timeless, universal or unbiased'; ask 'if the text presents unequal positions of power' and 'work for social equity and change' (p. 1).

To position these practices as reprehensible, Slattery deploys a discourse of fear and derision (note the use of 'scare' quotes in the following excerpts) to insinuate that critical literacy approaches are deliberate acts of educational deprivation:

For a generation of young readers, Mem Fox's *Feathers and Fools* is an enchanting story about peacocks, swans and the ugliness of war. In the eyes of the postmodernist critics, however, it is a skilful piece of propaganda for the cause of male supremacy.

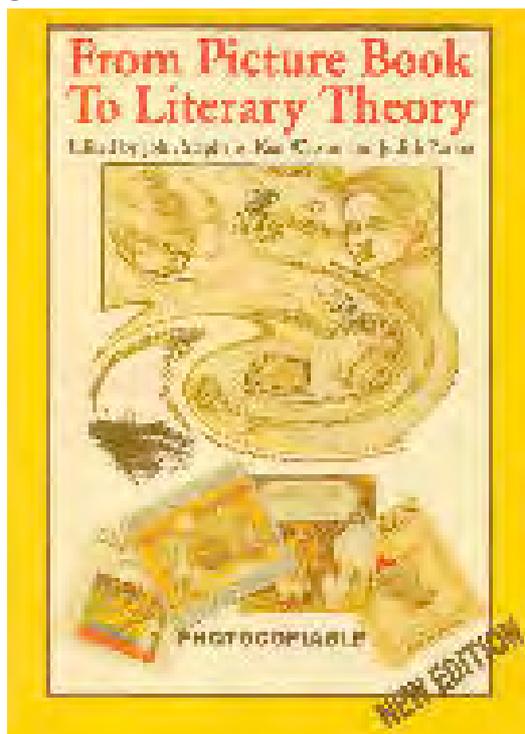
A teaching guide used in secondary schools around the country encourages students to 'deconstruct' children's picture books such as *Feathers and Fur* and to 'unpack' the concealed ideology...

Twenty years after postmodern theory stormed university humanities departments, it is working its way into Australian classrooms, politicising the study of books, films and emails, now grouped under the catch-all of 'texts'.

The culturally relativist theory, which teaches that there is no such thing as objective truth, has [been given]... new lease of life... in secondary education, under the guise of 'critical literacy'.

...the growing band of critics of critical literacy say the approach deprives students of the joy of reading for pleasure, excludes classical texts and ignores basic literacy skills. (p. 1).

Expressions such as 'working its way' and 'new lease of life' are devices through which Slattery manufactures a sense of urgency in ameliorating this alleged deprivation of students' joy, pleasure, and enchantment, but the practices he ridicules are far from new. The teaching guide to which he refers, *From Picture Book to Literary Theory* (John Stephens et al., 2003),



has apparently been popular with English and literacy teachers for more than a decade, since it is the second edition of a book first published in 1994. The title of Slattery's article refers to this book's suggestion that the story of the Three Little Pigs can be interpreted as being about 'the virtues of property ownership and the safety of the private domain' and that both of these are 'key elements of liberal/capitalist ideology'. Although Slattery passes no explicit judgment on this interpretation, he clearly wants to encourage readers to see the authors of *From Picture Book to Literary Theory* as mean-spirited, politically correct, academic killjoys hell-bent on depriving children of innocent pleasures.

Slattery might be surprised to learn that many young readers are already getting a great deal of pleasure from experiencing deconstructive readings of age-appropriate texts. For example, David Wiesner's (2001) *The Three Pigs* begins in the



familiar way, with three pigs building houses of straw, sticks, and bricks. But the wolf's huffing and puffing blows the first pig right out of the story. He talks the other two into joining him on his adventures and they all fly off on a paper airplane fashioned from a page in the book. Feedback from parents indicates that quite young children found Wiesner's text very satisfying both as a story and as an exploration of the nature of story.



History education has also become a powerful and complex site of public anxiety about the vulnerability of Australian children, driven in part by former Prime Minister John Howard's expressed concern that history in Australia's schools is being taught with 'perhaps a little too much of an emphasis on issues rather than on exactly what happened', and his opposition to the 'attempted rewriting of Australian political history by our political opponents' (quoted in Clark, 2006, p. 1). Howard's comments joined a mounting argument over Australian history that has been dominated since the early 1990s by the so-called 'History Wars' or 'Black Armband' debate, the latter term having been coined by historian Geoffrey Blainey (1993): 'To some extent the Black Armband view of history might well represent the swing of the pendulum from a position that had been

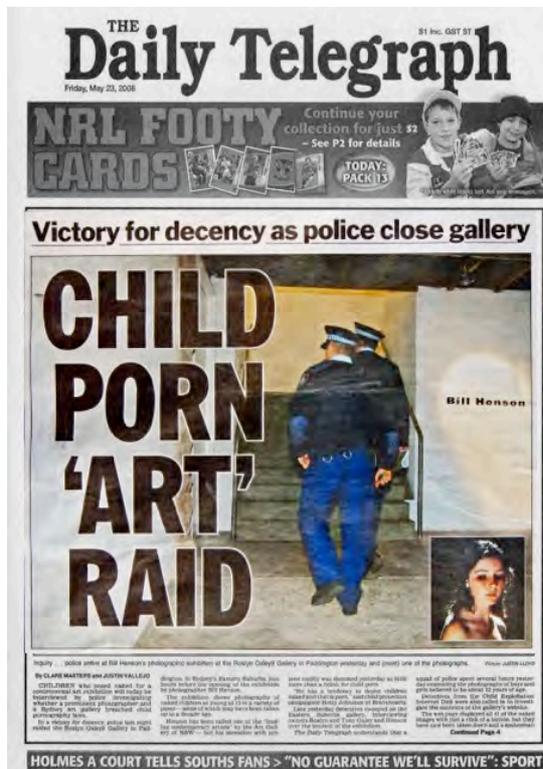
too favourable, too self-congratulatory, to an opposite extreme that is even more unreal and decidedly jaundiced' (p. 11). As Anna Clark (2006) writes: 'Howard's historical imperative to teach the "facts" is embedded in this wider debate over Australian history; schoolchildren have been centrally cast as vital but vulnerable receptors of the national past' (p. 1).

Clark explicitly cross-references her studies of the politics and pedagogy of Australian history education to Pierce's (1999) research on the image of the lost child in Australian popular culture: 'Unlike Pierce's children, the children in my study are not lost – in fact they are very present – but they are in danger, and the vulnerability that he notes is a useful comparison' (p. 17). Also, like Pierce, Clark sees children as symbols of contested futures:

it is apparent that this contest over the past is being fought over a representation of the future, contained within the image of 'the child'. Its political symbolism is obvious: the child-citizen is at once the nation and its future. Overwhelmingly, the child forms part of an anonymous, vulnerable collective that comes in all forms: youth, young people, Australia's citizens of tomorrow – they are all 'our children' (p. 15).

But I would argue that conservative critics of teachers and schools – exemplified here by Luke Slattery and John Howard – actually put Australian children in danger by deploying the anonymising, homogenising, and patronising effects of the collective pronoun ('our children'), by positioning children as passive receptors of whatever schools and teachers serve up to them, and by treating children as screens upon which to project their own anxieties. (As

an aside: Howard's imperative to teach his own rewriting of Australian political history was one driver of his government's initiatives towards a national curriculum which, as we know, is an agenda enthusiastically embraced by the Rudd Government. Bruce Petty's cautions remain very pertinent⁵).



The issue of treating children as screens upon which to project adult anxieties has, of course, been given a very public airing in 2008 as a result of the absurd moral panic that erupted on Friday 22 May 2008, the day after one of Australia's greatest living artists, Bill Henson, was to have opened his latest exhibition. David Marr (2008) describes the front page of Sydney's *Daily Telegraph* that day as follows: 'It's a tabloid page one of genius: the heavy-set coppers heading up the stairs; N's fragile face turned away in shame; Henson's name floating on the wall: the headlines reducing all the rich issues raised by the shutdown to a simple standoff between art and porn, artists and society' (p. 44).

In the story under the main photograph, the *Telegraph* gave Hetty Johnson, the founder and executive director of the child protection lobby Bravehearts, the first say: 'He has a tendency to depict children naked and that is porn'. According to Marr, Johnson had never heard of Henson until

⁵ http://www.theage.com.au/ffximage/2007/04/15/svCARTOON_gallery_470x336.jpg

late in the afternoon of 21 May: 'Thirty years of his work had passed under her radar' (p. 15). Indeed one of the puzzles in the Henson case is why, if 'depict[ing] children naked... is porn', so many previous examples of it had escaped the notice of those who would condemn it.



For example, Abigail Hadeed, a Trinidadian, won first prize in the 2004 Commonwealth Photographic Awards for her striking photograph of two young (and naked) girls in Guyana. Her photograph featured in a 'Best of the Best' exhibition of winning entries from the Awards held at the Melbourne Immigration Museum in conjunction with the 2006 Commonwealth Games.⁶ Would Kevin Rudd have called this photograph 'revolting... absolutely revolting' in 2006?

Rudd's judgment on the photograph of 'N' (as the anonymous model came to be called) is, in my view, a gratuitous and irresponsible act of symbolic violence, not only against 'N' but also against the innumerable young people who perennially struggle with the complexities of their identities and their sexualities and adult responses to them. To assert that mere nakedness equates with pornography, or that every picture of a naked child necessarily constitutes 'sexualised' imagery (as Hetty Johnson insists – see Marr 2008, p. 15), is to deprive young people of choices, to deny their autonomy in shaping their own embodiment.



⁶<http://www.melbourne2006.com.au/Festival+Melbourne2006/Performances/profiles/Commonwealth+Photographic+Awards+-+Best+of+the+Best.htm>

Bioethicist Leslie Cannold, who writes the 'Moral Maze' column of the *Sunday Sun-Herald*, spoke directly to this issue in an article titled 'shame on adults for paranoia over adolescence':

we don't have to share [Hetty Johnson's] suspicions. Instead, we could accept the obvious fact that most men are neither pornographers nor paedophiles. Secure in this knowledge, we could welcome Bill Henson's attempt to prise open the complexity of adolescence, and the response of adults to it. Betwixt and between, neither child nor adult, the adolescent body and place in society is ambiguous, uneasy and paradoxical. Beautiful and awkward, vulnerable yet powerful, Henson's photographs invite us to consider questions contemporary western societies struggles to ask, little less answer. Can the budding bodies and sexuality of adolescents be celebrated without being exploited? Can we recognise the vulnerability of adolescents, particular girls, without supporting the victim mentality that accompanies disempowering conceptions of female sexuality? Can we allow adolescents to feel proud of their bodies and sexuality, or will we - by condemning as pornographic the photographing of such bodies - forever insist on shame?



If our response to those who dare raise such questions is to label them pornographers and paedophiles, I don't like our chances.

So the final words of this column are for the young woman featured on the invitation to Henson's exhibit. The one those orchestrating the continuing witch hunt against the artist claim to be so concerned about, and whose image was among those the Prime Minister labelled, '[absolutely] revolting.

You are beautiful, darling. Be proud. Years from now, you'll still be admired while those responsible for the current stupidity will be long gone. Thank you for giving us insight into this complex time in your life: into who you are and the strong woman you are becoming. Find it in your heart to forgive adults. It is we, not you, who are in the wrong (Leslie Cannold, 2008).

By exploring through his art the sorts of complex questions to which Cannold refers, Bill Henson is neither abandoning nor neglecting young people – indeed, I would argue that he is doing more to defend them than the politicians and policy makers who pretend (or delude themselves) that they are 'protecting' young people by recklessly thrashing around with blunt instruments such as school league tables and a national curriculum.

One of the most shameful aspects of the Henson case was the gutlessness of those who might have been expected to contribute constructively to the debates it generated, such as the Minister for Arts. But Peter Garrett released a bland statement about artists having 'a responsibility to operate within the law' and then erased himself from one of the most compelling controversies about the arts in decades. As Marr puts it, Garrett was 'sheepishly ineffective':

The Henson row shredded Garrett's reputation. While it blew, he rang around arts organisations suggesting vaguely that he was about to make a statement. It never came. Arts officials, though fearful and silent for the most part themselves, looked to Garrett for leadership. There was no sign of that either. Inside and outside the arts world the general verdict on the minister's performance during the furore was: piss-weak (p. 75)

The most effective response from the arts community was orchestrated by Alison Croggon, a mother of three and author of a successful series of novels for young adults who was among

the hundred 'creatives' invited to the 2020 Summit. Her open letter to Rudd and other political leaders invited them to rethink their public comments on Henson's work and was signed by forty-three prominent members of the arts community, including Cate Blanchett, who was also the only woman on the 2020 Summit's steering committee. By signing the letter, Blanchett not only displayed the courage that Garrett and others so conspicuously lacked, but also made the letter front page news across Australia, Britain and the USA.

Like Cannold, Croggon draws attention to the key issue of *complexity* – an issue that, in my mind, links controversies such as the Henson case with debates about school league tables, back-to-phonics literacy teaching and a national curriculum:

Croggon says she wanted Rudd – 'this conservative, Queensland Christian politician' – to acknowledge the complexities of the debate he had inflamed. 'For some years I've thought the principal struggle in public discussion is between those who say, "No, hang on, things are complex" and those who just want to address them in these utter simplicities.' (Marr, 2008, p. 78)



I agree with Croggon: the most common public policy response to fear, anxiety and insecurity is to retreat to a *politics of complexity reduction*.

And here I cannot resist making a recursive loop back to Coetzee's (2008) *Diary of a Bad Year*. He refers to a recent US court ruling that public schools in a Pennsylvania district may not use science classes to teach the account of the universe known as Intelligent Design, and in particular may not teach it as an alternative to Darwinism. Coetzee explicitly distances himself from the Intelligent Design movement but admits that he continues to find evolution by random mutation and natural selection 'not just unconvincing but preposterous as an account of how complex organisms come into being':

People who claim that behind every feature of every organism lies a history of selection from random mutation should try to answer the following question: Why is it that the intellectual apparatus that has evolved for human beings seems to be incapable of comprehending *in any degree of detail* its own complexity?... I cannot see what evolutionary advantage this combination gives us – the combination of insufficiency of intellectual grasp together with consciousness that the grasp is insufficient (p. 69).



Coetzee's example is an equally powerful refutation of Darwinism's alternative: an organism deliberately built to be incapable of comprehending its own complexity would surely be a supreme example of *Unintelligent* Design. However, as an educator I am not interested in debates about whether or not we are genetically programmed to comprehend complexity in ourselves or in any other phenomena, because I am disposed to believe that humans can *learn* to comprehend complexity and use it in generative ways to improve education and society. To do that, we must also learn to recognise and resist the default tendency to comply with the hegemonic politics of complexity reduction.

Complexity invites us to understand our physical and social worlds as open, recursive, organic, nonlinear and emergent, and to be suspicious of mechanistic models that assume linear thinking, control and predictability. If we accept that there are limits to predictability and control we can understand that educational processes are *necessarily* characterised by gaps between 'inputs' (policy, curriculum, pedagogy) and 'outputs' (learning) (see Gert

Biesta, 2004). These are not gaps to be 'filled' but sites of emergence. The concept of emergence allows us to recognise that *knowledge, understanding and reality* emerge through educational processes (rather than being simply represented in and through education), and that *individuals* emerge in and through educational processes in unique and unpredictable ways. As Gert Biesta (2006) argues, education is not only about qualification (the transmission of knowledge and skills) and socialisation (the insertion of individuals into existing social, cultural and political orders), but should also be characterised by a concern for the 'coming into presence' of unique, individual beings. In this sense, complexity provides a useful vocabulary for understanding education, in an educational way (see also Deborah Osberg & Gert Biesta, 2007; Deborah Osberg et al., 2008).

The current policy initiatives around national curriculum and school accountability and transparency seem to me to be paradigmatic examples of complexity reduction in education. For example, I get no sense from the recently released framing papers for English, History, Mathematics and Science that the knowledges, understandings and realities on which these disciplines focus *emerge* through educational processes. On the contrary, the framing papers seem more like cargo manifests – packing lists that prescribe the contents of shipping containers that will be unpacked by schools across the nation. Nor do these documents invite any consideration of how they might constrain or enable the unpredictable emergence of unique, individual young people who are not merely 'qualified' and socialised to take their predetermined place in the existing socioeconomic order.

There is nothing particularly esoteric about complexity – indeed, it has characterised the interests of mainstream scientists for many years, although you would never know that from reading the National Science Curriculum Framing Paper. Science from Newton's era until the late nineteenth century focused on the material structure of simple systems but, since then, many of the objects of mainstream scientific inquiry have been the informational structures of complex systems – protein folding in cell nuclei, task switching in ant colonies, the nonlinear dynamics of the earth's atmosphere and far-from-equilibrium chemical reactions. Yet there is no mention of complexity as a scientific concept in the framing paper, and the word 'complex' only appears in passages that reinforce reductionism, such as, 'The natural world is complex but can be understood by focusing on its smaller components'. That, of course, is a guaranteed way of misunderstanding some natural phenomena.

Complexity also offers a different perspective on what is or appears to be *not* complex, and can therefore help us to understand order, structure, regularity, causality and permanence differently. This partly has to do with important distinctions within complexity itself, such as between closed and open systems (i.e., systems that do not interact or exchange information with their environment and systems that, for their existence, depend on such interchange and through this both change themselves and their environment) and between weak and strong emergence (see Osberg & Biesta 2007). But the important question complexity helps us to ask is *how* complexity reduction is achieved, and more particularly to ask *who is reducing complexity for whom and in whose interest*.

One of Biesta's (2008) theses on the politics of complexity reduction in education concerns the effects of retrospective complexity reduction:

Complexity reduction in education not only happens prospectively (through the reduction of initial variables) but also retrospectively (through backwards selection of particular trajectories). One of the most explicit examples of retrospective complexity reduction in education is assessment, because assessment validates some learning trajectories and invalidates others but always does so 'after the event.' Because education is a recursive system, the anticipation of assessment also reduces complexity. In this way assessment also functions prospectively in the reduction of complexity.

In much the same way, the anticipation of school league tables will prospectively reduce complexity in school systems. The question we must ask is: who benefits from this form of complexity reduction? Who benefits from 'naming and shaming' poorly performing schools where socioeconomic background and inadequate funding produces predictable outcomes? Under the inequitable system set up by John Howard, government schools' share of funding declined from 43% to 35% and is forecast to fall to 34% by 2011.⁷ As Ken Davidson (2008) writes, the great political virtue of Gillard's plan to publish a rating system for schools is that:

it allows governments without any real commitment to raising the standard of poorer schools to appear to be doing something.

This is bad enough in Britain and the US where the overwhelming proportion of students go to public schools and the middle class cannot escape its responsibilities to the system. It is toxic when it is applied to the Australian system of education apartheid that allows the middle class to avoid its responsibilities to public education and provides a financial incentive to do so.

Davidson's choice of the term 'toxic' reminds me of some of its synonyms: sickening, nauseating, revolting – absolutely revolting.

No Country for Old Men ends on a bleak note. The inexorability of the one-man force of destruction is emphatically captured in one of the movie's posters with the words 'YOU CAN'T STOP WHAT'S COMING'. With respect to the young people of this country, we have to ask ourselves what kinds of research might expose the deep flaws and blind spots in some aspects of the Rudd government's education revolution. Unless we do, Australia will still be the country of lost children.



⁷ New Commonwealth funding arrangements announced at a COAG meeting on 28 November 2008 provide some additional funding for all schools but do not appear to address these inequities.



Australia... is the country of lost children

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