

by **FRED INGLIS**

***Thinking Popular Culture: war, terrorism and writing* by Tara Brabazon**

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I remember reading *Ladies who Lunge* half a dozen years ago and thinking, as so often, 'Thank God for Australian academics'. Stereotype is a synonym for category, and Tara Brabazon fully fitted, as she does all her clothes, the essential category of Australian feminist and intellectual, the first uniform for which was designed for Britain by Germaine Greer forty years ago.

The paradox is then that each stereotype is unique. There is no-one else with Tara Brabazon's combination of raucousness and subtlety, offensive pugnacity and dazzling charm, terrific garrulity and razor incisiveness.

Each of these qualities, sometimes blazing, sometimes swamping, have fairly tumbled out of her half-dozen books since *Ladies*, and flash onto the pages of (where else for a migrant Australian?) *The Times*, when she has cutting heresies to voice about the decline of standards and the irrepressible excellence of her students. She rebuts by her living, fiery example the bad-tempered laments intoned by such as Janet Street-Porter over the emptiness of media and cultural studies.

Indeed, this new, packed and fizzing book is, in many of its sections, a celebration sung over the great achievements and works of art wrung from this epoch by both television and the great frescos of popular culture, especially rock music, which provides its staple. Not that Brabazon ever lets shoddy art, lax attitudes to criticism, glazed-eyed relaxation in front of the PC, or mere bigotry and cruelty get away with their skins unlacerated.

In a theme she has also broached in her dashing sallies into daily news, she fiercely criticises the unreal city of Google and her students' complicity in it ('It's there. What else would they do?'), for its obstructing thought, clotting the mind with the thick stuff the students can copy off the screen without ever having to read the books mentioned, or to grapple in a live, disinterested way, with (in Yeats's wonderful phrase) "the fascination of what's difficult".

This new book reads like a pasted-together (but perfectly coherent) series of shortish newspaper articles. I don't know whether it is or not, but the point is really that this swift, darting movement of her mind from topic to subject permits her to spin a long, ravelling and gossamer thread of continuity and connectedness along the multitudinous quiddity of popular and televised cultural life.

The sub-theme she ascribes to her flights over this terrain partakes, for my political taste, a bit too much of that high-pitched melodrama which cultural studies as a discipline (let the oxymoron pass) too much indulges. 9/11 was not that important, least of all by comparison with the last world war and then the cold one (seventeen million dead), respectively a mere sixty-odd and barely twenty years over. The church of Islam is a durable and variegated caravanserai, and not the wrong side of the preposterous Samuel Huntington's clash of civilisations.

If Professor Brabazon (ha!) longs for the passion of a good cause and a horrible enemy, she has one to hand in her excellent Australian leftism to set against the hideous injustice as well as the grotesque self-indulgence both brought by the latest, craziest moment of consumer capitalism.

That is quite enough of a moral method with which to uncover a comforting solidarity amongst a thrilling motley of outlaws in the forest, ambushing the helots of managerialism (a splendid essay in praise of *The Office*), making great musical art of itself – as it always is – a repudiation of quotidian meaninglessness at home or at work (a moving and musically minute eulogy of Eric Clapton and his heirs), calling us to the imaginative colours of old heroism against the dark forces (a hymn of praise for Christopher Eccleston as the last Time Lord and for Russell Davies's Shakespearean resurrection of *Dr Who*).

These are much more than fragments shored against a ruined culture. For Tara Brabazon, culture is, as Edward Thompson once put it, "a way of struggle", and her exemplary positives – Johnny Cash, Billy Bragg, *The Panics*, *The Byrds*, Bob Dylan, all of them comrades, she has plenty of them to summon up in these populous pages – are each according to his or her ability and the art or craft in hand, engaged in a ceaseless struggle to vanquish the Enemy and cause the Good to prevail.

Not that she writes in capital letters. But the stirring thing about this scrappy, gripping book is that in a way quite unlike most academic tracts for the times, it implies a vigorous picture throughout of how things ought to be, and is explicit in its condemnation of how they ought not to be.

The first word of her title is 'thinking', but in point of fact she had done the thinking before she began to write. Subtle as she can be in, say, her analysis of Roger McGuinn's innovations in guitar 'picking', right and rousing as she is in her criticism of robotic news presenters and the diminishing sound-bite, earnest and humane as are her frequent invocations to solidarity against the Iraq war, the Darfur genocide, these are all finished judgements. In the rapidity, even the haste of her writing, she rarely pauses to allow what William Empson well called "the mind's recoil upon itself".

As a result the book is more *bien-sentant* than one expects and demands. One wants to ask for a picture of popular culture successfully crossing the boundary into politics, but when it did so, with *Live Aid*, she dismisses Bob Geldof's efforts as so much time-serving.

There is in this, I think, a too-great reliance on the very limited intellectual resources banked by cultural studies. Tara Brabazon has too good a mind and too ardent a nature to be satisfied with the pious lucubrations of the received reading list. It would be invidious to name those I have in mind and in any case she cites her canonical authors at regular intervals.

But she doesn't need them. They are enclave liturgists, writing for the pious. She needs, let us say, Wittgenstein *On Certainty*, Clifford Geertz on *Negara*, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum on *The Quality of Life*, T J Clark bidding *Farewell to an Idea*.

There is no one intellectual I know with her range of popular cultural reference, no other academic who would write "The game of life is not won by those with the tightest skin and perkier bum", no feminist who would so cheerfully confess to the delight she takes (me, too) in retail therapy.

All that this admiring reader asks, putting down (and snatching up) this exhilarating, racy, headlong book, is that next time she absolutely must search out and make an argument, the kind of tough, difficult argument which would stand up though the world end tomorrow.