

All Australian Graffiti and the Cultural Cringe

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When I first saw the exhibition, 'We're a Weird Mob', I found the images produced by All Australian Graffiti in the mid-1970s paradoxical. On the one hand, the images and the strategies of the artists seemed entirely rooted in the moment of their production, perhaps even 'old fashioned' in their interest in iconic Australiana and the stuff of Australian identity. Yet on the other hand, I found the images fresh and forward-looking; clever parodies on the destiny of the national in a globalised world. This paper contemplates these initial and rather simple reactions as a productive paradox by returning to the well-known but regularly misused phrase, 'the cultural cringe'. The sub-title of this exhibition suggests that AAG were involved in 'Designing a Cultural Identity'. If that's true, then AAG were doing that work within a specific cultural ecology. The notion of a Cultural Cringe provides a way of thinking about that historically moment and of reflecting on how we might remember AAG for the twenty-first century.

Arthur Phillips's, 'The Cultural Cringe', appeared in the Melbourne literary and cultural journal *Meanjin* in 1950.¹ The essay begins with a discussion of an ABC radio program, *Incognito*, in which paired musical performances are broadcast; one by an Australian and one by an overseas performer. Attributions are withheld until the end of the performance when the listener is meant to guess the nationality of the performer, one possibility being that the guess is wrong and, 'strange to say, the local lad proves to be no worse than the foreigner.' Phillips writes;

'The programme's designer has rightly diagnosed a disease of the Australian mind and is applying a sensible curative treatment. The dismaying circumstance is that such a

treatment should be necessary, or even possible; that in any nation, there should be an assumption that the domestic cultural products will be worse than the imported article.’ And he immediately goes on to say; ‘The devil of it is that the assumption will often be correct.’

That Australian cultural commodities might be inferior to those produced in ‘the great cultural metropolises’ is, for Phillips something about which we should be level-headed; the size and scale of cultural ecologies will produce real effects in terms of number of high quality works of art made in particular places. So what he’s really concerned with is not that there will be times when ‘domestic cultural products will be worse than the imported article’ but the **assumption** that ‘the domestic cultural products will be worse than the imported article’. As he writes: ‘The Cringe mainly appears in an inability to escape needless comparisons.’ For Phillips this predicament is produced by a particular Australian orientation to the ‘intimidating mass of Anglo-Saxon culture ... the characteristic Australian Cultural Cringe—appearing either as the Cringe Direct, or as Cringe Inverted’.

The Cringe Inverted is relatively simple and it’s a disposition we’ve heard a lot of in the last half-century. Phillips writes that the Cringe Inverted is ‘the attitude of the Blatant Blatherskite, the Gods-Own-Country and I’m-a-better-man-than-you-are Australian Bore.’ It’s this attitude which unpins much Australian media nationalism, jingoism and xenophobia, not to mention the endless and tragic reiteration by public intellectuals of another famous characterisation, the recently departed Donald Horne’s phrase, ‘the lucky country’, as a true account of the nation and a deeply felt structure of feeling.

The Cringe Direct seems to me both more complicated and more interesting. By using the word cringe, Phillips wants to imply the protective comportment of a person defending themselves from an anticipated blow. But it’s also more nuanced. In the first place it’s a kind of superego voice bothering the producers and consumers of Australian cultural commodities:

‘The Australian reader, more or less consciously, hedges and hesitates, asking himself
“Yes, but what would a cultivated Englishman think of this?”’

And it’s similar for the Australian writer. Phillips uses the example of Henry Handel Richardson remarking to her husband, “‘How did I ever dare to write *Maurice Guest*—a poor little colonial like me?’” For Phillips this is infuriating because;

‘Her cultural experience was probably richer than that of such contemporary [British] novelists such as Wells or Bennett. It was primarily the simple damnation of being an Australian which made her feel limited.’

So, the Cringe Direct describes a cultural world in which suppositions about vernacular inferiority arise from pointless comparison in the realm of fantasy that re-circulate to produce a cultural ecology that is destructively self-deprecating and creatively stifling.

Phillips goes on to identify another form of the Cringe which plays an important role in this ecology. Despite the importance that he places on this character(istic), he doesn't name it. I'll call the Alienated Cringe, personified by,

‘a certain type of Australian intellectual who is forever sidling up to the cultivated Englishman, insinuating: “I, of course, am not like these other crude Australians; I understand how you must feel about them; I should be spiritually more at home in Oxford or Bloomsbury.”’

Importantly, Phillips insists that he's not objecting to criticism of vernacular cultural production. On the contrary,

‘the critical attitude of the intellectual...could be a healthy, even creative thing, influence, if the criticism were felt to come from within, if the critic had a sense of identification with his subject, if his irritation came from a sense of shared shame rather than a disdainful separation. It is his refusal to participate, the arch of his indifferent eyebrows, which exerts the chilling and stultifying influence.’

Phillips worries that his phrase, the Cultural Cringe, is just the kind of ‘missile’ that such estranged intellectuals ‘delights to toss at the Australian mob.’ So just to be sure he reminds us, ‘I regard the denaturalised Intellectual as the Cringe's unhappiest victim.’ Yet, in 1950, Phillips was confident that the days of the Cringe (in all its forms) are numbered. He writes;

‘The most important development of the last twenty years in Australian writing has been the progress made in the art of being unselfconsciously ourselves ... I believe that progress will quicken when we articulately realise two facts: that the Cringe is a worse enemy to our cultural development than our isolation, and that the opposite of the Cringe is not the Strut, but a relaxed erectness of carriage.’

From the vantage of the early twenty-first century I think we have to admit that although he was a very good diagnostician, Phillips was overly optimistic. It's clear that the Cringe has been much

more enduring than Phillips hoped. Thirteen years on the syndrome is alive and well when Chris Wallace-Crabbe writes of Melbourne;

‘We find that Melburnians bitterly resent any criticism offered by overseas visitors, are nervously titillated when a novelist refers to Flinders Street or East Brunswick, and find it impossible to image that a song entitled ‘I Love Melbourne in the Springtime’ or a movie about dark passions in Murrumbidgee could be other than ludicrous.’ⁱⁱ

There’s also a zombie or undead version of the Alienated Cringe that persists in the present, not only in English departments but, more prominently, in popular media. Today however it’s less likely to be an intellectual sidling up to an Englishman than Peter Overton on *60 Minutes* sidling up to a creature of the global culture industry like Tom Cruise with a just the same disdainful asides on the vernacular and ingratiating smirk, only this time about the how ‘we’re’ at home in LA. In some respects too, between the new nationalism of the late 1960s/early 1970s and the Bicentennial nationalism of the 1980s, the Cringe Inverted—in forms ranging from Barry McKenzie to Bob Hawke—was perhaps more publicly prominent than the Cringe Direct.

It’s in this context that I want to return to All Australian Graffiti. In the first place what’s striking about the work of AAG is that it seems happily deaf to the voice of the Cringe and playfully distinct from the Cringe Inverted. This is a result, in large part, of AAG’s intellectual and cultural location. Phillips’s cringers were formed in literary culture and Wallace-Crabbe’s in aspirational middle-brow culture. AAG by contrast seem much more rooted in visual, popular and commercial culture; and their references points stretched from the international to the suburban. In this sense AAG were simply outside of the straight-jacketed anxiety of the Cultural Cringe. A Jindyworobak author might use the literary expression ‘galah-breasted dawn’ about which Phillips writes; ‘What the phrase has gained in immediacy, it has lost in spontaneity.’ In contrast, AAG images of racing kangaroos and deranged marsupials seem comfortably spontaneous. They seem more of a piece with Christina Stead, commenting on her return to Australia in 1974;

‘I didn’t notice any great change. Oh, except a ridiculous infection which I expect will go away soon, which I read in the papers about the cultural cringe—I had no idea what it was. It’s an abject and contemptible expression ... when I was here before, there was culture everywhere.’ⁱⁱⁱ

Stead perceptively identifies one of the preconditions of the cringe, that anticipating judgement from elsewhere can leave one blind to the everyday world that’s near at hand. Like Stead, AAG lived in a world in which it was simply part of commonsense that ‘culture was everywhere’ and that everyday culture was the stuff of their work.

Can we say then that AAG left the Cringe behind by adopting a ‘relaxed erectness of carriage’? If the phrase is not a direct citation of C.E.W. Bean in his account of ANZAC infantrymen at Gallipoli, it’s one in exactly the same homosocial spirit that observes, from a class-based distance, such comportment in other men and finds it deeply attractive. I’m sure it’s the same sensation John Howard feels as he watches the Australian cricket team take the field at Lords. But it’s certainly not the comportment we’d associate with cultural warriors like Patrick White or Emily Kngwarreye, and perhaps not a style worth promoting. AAG’s alternative is Kevin Pappas the wog-roo centaur who might be relaxed and erect but who jumps rather than perambulates, certainly not a figure in ‘the art of being unselfconsciously ourselves’. The genius of AAG is that they’re image-making seems entirely self-conscious in both their anti-realism and their constructivism. It’s obvious that AAG’s images are driven by playful, surrealist, absurdist and parodying impulses rather than the weirdly stifling naturalism of, say, much Australian film and TV in the 1970s. But it’s in what I think of as their constructivism that AAG is perhaps most distinctive. Phillips thought that the Cultural Cringe would be solved through organic growth from the national soil. AAG on the other hand appear to want to construct an alternative to the Cultural Cringe by channelling transnational cultural energies and mining the archive of Australiana. Personal histories of migrancy together with new kinds of connections to global cultural flows appear to animate and charge the work of AAG. Simultaneously the ephemeral image-archive that gave rise to *Symbols of Australia* provides many of the building blocks for their constructed worlds. In both senses, AAG’s images are—like much advertising—designed to produce effects; to bring into existence a flash of insight or recognition, an inversion or a perversion, a juxtaposition or irony. They are world-making images. But, at the end of the day, the work of All Australian Graffiti seems to me transcend the Cultural Cringe and allow us to think about and live differently in vernacular culture for one basic reason: you can’t laugh and cringe at the same time.

ⁱ Arthur Phillips, ‘The Cultural Cringe’, *Meanjin*, no. 4, 1950. All of the following quotations are from the republication of the essay in *The Temperament of Generations*, pp. 102-5.

ⁱⁱ *Melbourne or the Bush*, Sydney, 1974, p. 67.

ⁱⁱⁱ Interview with Rodney Wetherell, first broadcast by the ABC, 24 Feb 1980.