

Introduction: Between Limits and Extremes

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“How can there be limits to representation?,” asks Norman Simms in the opening article to this collection, and here indeed is the principal question at stake. That is, what are the legal, moral, ethical, and aesthetic limitations to dealing with material that sits on some kind of limit of acceptance? The articles in this special issue were gathered principally from a symposium held at the University of Sydney in April 2011. The event was organised to, in one way, celebrate the ‘un-banning’ in 2010 of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (1975), but participants sought their own boundaries and how these were transgressed. Professor Simms has spent his life studying Judaism, a faith that, it seems, has a very clear limit on representing the divine, as stated in the Second Commandment. Yet, Simms’ statement is also something of a plea to the heavens: “*how* can there be limits?”! His article, by giving a firm sense of the mania of speed that descended on the world in the nineteenth century, suggests that, between the lines, war was an inevitable psychological outburst from bodies and minds buffeted by the new world erupting at this stage. As I ask in my contribution, given the horrors of the twentieth century and the way that the trauma of reality is now a part of our heritage, *how* indeed can there be limits to representation? And yet, we return to this issue of taste.

What we as aestheticians should consider about texts and artworks that cross boundaries is: does the form of art, in its radical and transgressive nature, support or subvert the moral, emotive, or political import inherent in it? The Canadian lawyer and politician Howard Hampton, to an extent, concludes “no.” In his reading of Hollywood in the 1950s, he suggests that a care in the execution of any work of art can give the plot such power as to leave modern limit-crossers looking lame by comparison. He writes:

[g]oing too far is the hallmark of extremity, but there is a special art to disorientation: a way of undermining expectations, disrupting conventions, with emotional intensity and plasticity instead of clobbering the viewer with programmatic-didactic excess. In its unyielding, creation-through-self-destruction method, it requires a singular focus that is actually tougher to nail than social realism or ideological climate control in the Notre Musak vein. A director such as Takashi Miike will dish out dozens of viciously outrageous cult flicks at a vending machine clip, but while a high school girl shooting poison darts from her vagina is a good side show act, it

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seems instantly dated and film-geekish next to the circa 1950 toughmindedness of *Nightmare Alley*, *Gun Crazy*...or *The Furies*.¹

I would disagree with Hampton in one vital dimension; sometimes going beyond the limits of what is recognised as suitable or legal can give us a view of ourselves as a society that is illuminating.

In one sense, we in the contemporary globalised West flatter ourselves with the slogans we chant. We tell ourselves that we have systems that guarantee basic freedoms, especially the freedom of speech and thought, even though these freedoms are, in many senses, restrictive and their exercise can attract, in certain circumstances, dire and unjust penalties.² We are sure that, as our slogans tell us, we can “just do it,” and that there are “no limits” to the stuff that we *just* do. Limits, however, abound. When it comes to culture, and thus the representations of reality that constitutes culture, we believe that there is nothing that cannot be said or represented no matter how radical. In fact, most societies keep a cabal of radical artists and writers on their fringe just to prove, through their regular controversies, that one can indeed cross lines. But even the lines that the artist crosses can sometimes do very little to highlight the real limits to representation that exist in our “open” societies. Not only do we live in a world where much cannot be represented, but also, by convention, that which cannot be represented goes unspoken. In this way, societies develop lines in the sand that, through the convention of being unspoken, breed even newer levels of ignorance from the fact that we remain ignorant of them.

This edition of *Literature and Aesthetics* is inspired by one limit to representation that has plagued the Australian public since 1975. I refer generally to state censorship of culture that, in this country, has some invidious dimensions, specifically in reference to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò*. This film has a long history of censorship, but in Australia it has a particular one. Banned

¹ Howard Hampton, *Born in Flames* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 33.

² A recent and compelling Australian example of how fragile our rights in a Western democracy can be is found in Andrew Moore’s 2011 biography of Ray Fitzpatrick. In 1955 Fitzpatrick and a colleague, after attacking a Member of Parliament in the press, were put on trial directly by the Federal Parliament of Australia. They were convicted and sentenced without legal representation and without the right of appeal. See Andrew Moore, *Mr Big of Bankstown: The Scandalous Fitzpatrick and Browne Affair* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2011). See also Donald Horne, *His Excellency’s Pleasure* (Sydney: Thomas Nelson, 1977), which plays out a scenario whereby a Governor General exercises all of his or her prerogatives as outlined in the Australian Constitution. This includes appointing his or her own cabinet, proroguing parliament, and taking complete control of the military, the civil administration, and the press.

from 1976 to 1993, the film thereafter became legal to view. Moreover, it became legal for academics and film critics to study the film, as censorship in Australia is absolute and there are no exceptions for academics or film festivals to examine a banned film. Then, in 1998, the film was banned once again. The problem then was that thousands of Australians had, at the time of the second ban, legally seen a banned film. That is, in 1993 there were judged to be able to cope with seeing such a film; in 1998 they were not. Libraries across the country with holdings of films and home movie collections were suddenly holding illegal material for which their owners could be prosecuted. More worrying, for me especially, was that one of the most significant films from the mind of one of Italy's greatest twentieth century poets and cineastes was illegal in the lecture hall, and any published research on the film inferred that one owned a copy, leaving scholars open to prosecution. Most lecturers dropped any mention of *Salò* from their courses. Others persisted in introducing the film to their students and for very good reason. In my mind, and I leave myself open to the possibility of being very wrong, *Salò* was never about pornography or child abuse *per se*; it was about the ways in which the state (that is, those in power) are able to completely dehumanise their fellow human beings by taking delight in the latter's abject degradation. The film does what other films have tried to do – use sex play, nakedness, and degradation, not for the immediate sexual satisfaction of the viewer (which would make the work pornographic, and it is clearly not), but use the human body as a site upon which political arguments can be made. *Salò*, if it is anything, is a vicious attack on Fascism. If it were not such a vicious political attack, the film would be, from my perspective, indefensible as a work of art. The film remains one of the great commentaries on the abuse of power. It is interesting then that one could easily argue that the Government of Australia severely abused the power it may exercise in wilfully ignoring the true import of the film and the metaphorical dimension to scenes which are, I admit, sometimes very hard to watch. As it stands, from 2010, the DVD version of *Salò* was released with an R18+ rating by the Classification Board. The film's Australian censorship saga is ongoing, and we may very well see the film banned once more.³

Pasolini's *Salò* brings us into the heart of an aesthetic discussion; that is, what level of extreme imagery is justified in the examination of a particular thematic? In the study of literature, a growing field of scholarship is beginning

³ See 'Film Censorship: *Salò*, or the 120 Days of Sodom (1975),' *Refused-Classification.com: Censorship in Australia*, at <http://www.refused-classification.com/censorship/films/salo-or-the-120-days-of-sodom-1975-1.html>. Accessed 21/12/2011.

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to address what is now known as the ‘contemporary extreme’ in reaction to the works of writers such as the American novelist Brett Easton Ellis (especially his *American Psycho*, 1991) and the French author and filmmaker Michel Houellebecq, who use their journeys into the repugnant and disturbing to make a claim for a nihilistic view of the universe. In a way, their efforts are reflected in the sort of contemporary art that is being collected at museums such as the Hobart-located Museum of Old and New Art (MONA), which features extreme installations; some of these are discussed in this volume by Sarah Balstrup, particularly those where animals are used in art to challenge our ethical sensitivities to the human-animal relationship. This is a relationship that, if it is perceived to be cruel or inappropriate, can not only generate hysterical crowd reactions but can also call down legal action against the artist.

A more subtle form of censorship lies behind the contribution on Derek Jarman’s *Sebastiane* (1976). As George Ioannides was completing his article ‘Pietistic Penetration,’ a rumination on the aesthetics of queer sacrality in Jarman’s film, fans put up copies of the film on the Jarman channel on YouTube on several occasions that were repeatedly taken down by the YouTube administrators due to the film’s graphic display of the nude male body.⁴ Most of the other films of Jarman appear on this channel, so one wonders if the constant removal of this film will continue to hide the film or, indeed, stress its importance through its absence. Jarman’s film was one of the first to be unapologetically homoerotic in the way the camera lingers on the male bodies in what is, ostensibly, a Christian story. Ioannides provides a view of the film that considers limits, and views this film not in terms of heteronormative standards, but in relation to a queer understanding of text. Here he hits on a theme that appears in most of the scholarship in this volume: to what extent can we make judgements about art without considering the full import of its context?

Danielle Kirby’s article, ‘Transgressive Representations: Satanic Ritual Abuse, Thee Temple ov Psychick Youth, and *First Transmission*,’ goes deeper into this issue of context and limits. The amazing episode in the history of British television that she recounts, concerns the broadcast of an edgy art-house clip mistakenly reappraised as evidence of satanic ritual abuse. Again, with reference to Balstrup’s article, we see that sometimes a work of art can cross boundaries not only because it is a challenging work, but also because hysteria and rumour reframe the work and overwhelm sober examination of the same.

⁴ ‘DerekJarmanDIR’s Channel,’ *YouTube* (23 October 2011), at <http://www.youtube.com/user/DerekJarmanDIR>. Accessed 3/11/2011.

Zoe Alderton's article, 'The Limits of Taste: Politics, Aesthetics, and Christ in Contemporary Australia,' goes into a range of controversies that have erupted within one of Australia's premier art prizes, the Blake Prize for Religious Art. Clearly, in Alderton's research we see political attitudes bashing against rumour and hysteria of the popular press on one side, and a series of artists determined to play with controversial themes on the other. The tragedy, as Alderton unveils it, is the perpetuation of deep misunderstandings between the artists' intent and their supposed intent in seeming to cross acceptable limits of representation, fuelled by the vacuous comments of politicians who have no real interest or training in art.

The limits that are unspoken – limits of taste, limits of legality – supply some ways to examine the limits of representation; the very psychology of pushing ourselves always in the direction of limits is a manifestation of 'modernist' living. Norman Simms opens this edition with such a possibility in mind and, using a somewhat comparative stance, Milad Milani also questions how one can and cannot shift the ground between two worldviews seemingly quite separate – in this case, Islam and Christianity – when they come to form their own images regarding the importance of Jesus. Milani shows that, despite arguments to the contrary that encourage an inter-religious ground of meaning upon the image of Jesus, this image in Muslim/Sufi terms remains irresolutely Muslim under the closest examination. Similarly, in Liam Sutherland's contribution, 'The Survival of Indigenous Spirituality in Contemporary Australia,' we see how the Indigenous peoples of Australia have battled to retain limits of representations that demarcate their spirituality as surviving, and not as threatened, doomed, or in need of White protection.

Finally, it is in the contribution by Catalina Botez that we meet the term *peratology*; that is, the study of limits as a way of approaching texts such as W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001). Sebald's novel, and Botez's examination of it through paradigms of transnationality and transfiction, widens the scope of the study of limits to its fullest theoretical extent, as the main character of the work – the architect Austerlitz – begins to understand the full import of his self as a late-modernist being. Fittingly, and in reference to Simms' article, we see the ultimate legacy of the speeding up of the world, and the complete industrialisation of all aspects of existence including war, death, and genocide. It is the last manifestation of human atrocity that Austerlitz must deal with as a part of his own history and self understanding.

It is this ghost of the Holocaust that sits behind many of the aesthetic manifestations of the inappropriate and the controversial that our authors mention in this article, not as an immediate referent, but as an extreme case of the real that puts many lesser limits of representation into stark contrast. It is in

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crossing many of the limits identified in this collection that we can achieve a deeper clarity on the human condition, but also, I suggest, it is the crossing of limits in how we represent our lives that can aid in how effectively we deal with the trauma of our post-twentieth century selves. In this respect, the present collection is offered both as an examination and a healing.