

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The articles collected in this issue of *Sydney Studies in English* take as their common point of interest texts delivered by means other than the printed word. Not that the book is neglected, but an interest in it is supplemented by an equal interest in film and television. There are two essential reasons for this: first, this collection is a recognition of the fact that the cinematic or televisual text falls as readily within the purview of a department of literature as does the novel, play or poem; and second, it is a demonstration of the view that literary scholars can bring insights and perspectives to the reading of these kinds of texts that can prove illuminating in certain distinctive ways.

It is an appropriate time to collect a set of essays of this kind, as the central importance of film and mass media and debate about the survival of traditional literature are main features of late twentieth-century culture. This is especially the case in Australia today, at a time when the nation's cultural sense of self appears increasingly to be defined by, and fashioned by, its cinematic productions. And yet, as Adrian Mitchell argues in 'Tripping on the Light Fantastic', the continuity of cultural imagery and preoccupations across aesthetic media has long been a central feature of Australian film and literature, and as a consequence an understanding of one should inform and enrich an appreciation of the other.

In a broader context, it seems fair to say that the contemporary reader is more likely to be introduced to the works of canonical authors through the film of the work – whether at the cinema or as a mini-series on television – rather than through the work itself, and consequently today more than ever before a sense of literature is being shaped by a prior sense of film. This issue is addressed in the current collection by articles dealing with various questions arising from the translation of literature into film — questions about adaptation, textual theory, genre, comparative textuality – in relation to such canonical figures as Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens and James. In each case the point is not to argue for the superiority

of one medium over another, but to gain a fuller sense of the negotiations that occur between media, and the transformations and continuities of meaning that occur within narratives as they unfold at different times, in different media, and in different cultural contexts. Thus Penny Gay finds much to enthuse over in *Clueless*, a recent imaginative reworking of Jane Austen's *Emma*, while Anthony Miller's discussion of *Forbidden Planet* reveals surprising literary depths to this classic 1950s science fiction makeover of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The issue of fidelity is then taken up in extended critical considerations of less fanciful adaptations of canonical texts in Catherine Runcie's analysis of the novel and film of *Little Dorrit* and in my own comparative analysis of Henry James's and Jane Campion's *The Portrait of a Lady*.

Finally, Axel Kruse turns a literary-critical eye upon *The X Files*. This programme has become a 1990s television phenomenon and has a worldwide cult audience, yet despite its sense of urgent contemporaneity Kruse shows how it takes its place within generic and textual traditions that help to explain both its form and the nature of its 'millennial cool' appeal.

Over the last decade film and mass media have become increasingly important elements in the research interests and teaching syllabus of the Sydney University English Department, just as they have become increasingly important in secondary schools' curricula across the nation. These developments give evidence of a significant inflection within the curve of our cultural experience, affecting not only our interests and habits but also our aesthetic evaluations. The essays that follow are intended to map this curve, in part, from a literary critical perspective, perhaps thereby demonstrating not only the distinctiveness of the knowledge such a perspective brings, but demonstrating also the necessity for that perspective in our cultural debates, literary or otherwise.

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