

## **Blue Murder: a RE-IMAGINED history**

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Erich Auerbach, whilst discussing the influence of Joyce and Proust's use of reflected consciousness and time strata, makes an interesting comparison between a novel's conception of time and a film's:

a concentration of space and time such as can be achieved by the film (for example the representation, within a few seconds and by means of a few pictures, of the situation of a widely dispersed group of people, of a great city, an army, a war, an entire country) can never be within the reach of the spoken or written word. (Auerbach, 1991:546)

The interesting part for us is the phrase "a great city". In a few sequences a film can give you a version of the past far richer in detail than any history book in the same space of time. This paper will apply this idea to the tele-movie *Blue Murder* (1995), a quasi-fictional account of Sydney's criminal milieu of the 1970s and 80s. Made in 1995 and screened on ABC TV in most parts of Australia shortly after, *Blue Murder* was not broadcast in NSW and the ACT until July 31, 2001. The 6-year delay was caused by a legal embargo placed on the mini-series because Neddy Smith, the main character depicted in the piece, was still on trial for the crimes he portrayed. We compare *Blue Murder*'s representation of events in Sydney's past with impressions of the present by visiting the haunts of the central characters and experiencing the space between representation and actual lived perception. This provides us with an insight into how the film's narrative has compressed space and time; how Sydney's past is recontextualised as a film and etched into the viewer's consciousness, introducing a tension between depictions of the recent past, a vastly changed present and the fractured identity that results.

In the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, the media's representation of crime in Sydney circled ravenously around a few key names, eager for the slightest sensation: Arthur "Neddy" Smith, Detective Sergeant Roger Rogerson, Christopher Dale Flannery and Sally Anne Huckstep among other colourful local identities and celebrities. The tales that projected these names into Sydney's various public spheres were not only fed upon by the media but also by pub patrons. Neddy Smith, a leading criminal figure of the time, was careful to keep his face out of the media for years, yet was still regularly recognised in pubs all over the city, inner and outer suburbs. According to legend, he would walk in and, on the strength of his reputation, strangers queued to buy him drinks. But pubs were a changing environment in those days. It was a time of transformation with the pub where you went to drink, buy stolen goods or get in a fight slowly submitting to the will of today's post-industrial patron, who goes to the pub to socialise after a hard day's data shuffling at the office.

With this in mind, a trio of seasoned knowledge workers commenced their tour. We started our research at the Star Hotel in Chinatown. Its proximity to the 'labour mile' of Sussex Street made it a traditional NSW Labor Party drinking hole, frequented by various characters employed by the party and the unions. Presumably connections were made here between shady politicians, strong-arm unionists and criminals who shared their taste for power and action. In Neddy Smith's book, *Neddy* (2002), this was one of a number of pubs around the inner city where he allegedly kept money in the safe, guns behind the bar and met associates with various relationships to NSW criminal law. It is also where he reputedly shot a man in the heart at point blank range, spraying the wall with his insides. Is this a place where my research associates and I want to be on a Friday night? Based on the reputation of events that happened at the Star Hotel in the late 80s, it would be very reasonable to assume that this place would be far too violent for proto-knowledge workers like us.

Traditionally Sydney pubs like this one characterised themselves as havens for the working man. Even when they were primarily patronised by politicians, they were still constructed around the ethos that authentic culture is built upon the efforts of the blue-collar worker. This could have something to do with the central myths of Australian national identity

being based on the myth of the “bushman”, who Ward described as:

a practical man, rough and ready in his manners and quick to decry any appearance of affectation in others. He is a great improviser, ever willing to “have a go” at anything, but willing too to be content with a task done in a way that is “near enough”. Though capable of great exertion in an emergency, he normally feels no impulse to work hard without good cause. He swears hard and consistently, gambles heavily and often, and drinks deeply on occasion. (1965:1-2)

Traditionally, academic types like us were categorised in relation to this national identity. That is, not workers but endurable if we behaved according to the norms of the ethos and donned its garb when traversing its terrain, structures and language. This has become problematic in recent times. Theorists are saying we now exist in an information society – a society refashioned by “the massive social impacts of new information technologies of computing and telecommunications” (Lyon, 1988:vii). They argue that these days “the engine of much of the dynamics of economic activity and the source of much of the growth of added economic value can be attributed to knowledge” (Stehr, 2004:212). According to these theorists, the growth of societies like Sydney are now dependent on the efforts of knowledge workers.

How is this shift reflected in the Star Hotel? The working class’s move away from city dwelling began in the 1960s as factories moved to the outer suburbs (or off-shore) to make room for white collar office space. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the Star would perhaps have been having an identity crisis; white collar patrons who weren’t sure if they identified with the worker ethos or with the new suburban bourgeoisie chic. An ideal environment for a fashionably dressed, gun slinging, heroin dealer like Neddy.

In 2004, it is just like any other corner pub in Sydney, cloned through the combined effects of licensing laws, random breath testing and property speculation. The main bar is dominated by the TAB and its flock of elevated TV screens and the pokies are in the next room. Jackpots flash, horses scurry around distant tracks and Friday night footy lurches across the plasma screens. The traditional working class pub fare of gambling and sport still dominate; all that has changed is the mode of delivery and its associated atmosphere. On the night we were there the crowd was part after-work suits and part pre-dinner restaurant patrons; a far cry from the pub mentioned in the book *Neddy*. The man behind the bar looked like he’d seen some action but was extremely polite and professional. If you hadn’t read the book you wouldn’t know this space once oozed trouble. Now it felt hollowed out and sanitised like so many buildings in post-industrial Sydney.

We talked about the work ahead in excited though hushed voices. We had to be quiet because we couldn’t help using our favourite *Blue Murder* quotes and trying to imitate the character’s voices and we didn’t want to fulfil the Australian stereotype of “intellectuals” and look like wankers. These days residents of Sydney are very aware of the events with which we were trying to relate. Pub patrons still feed off stories about Neddy, The Dodger and “Abo” Henry, though in new ways. In the 1980s and early 1990s, each name stood alone and the (inevitably embellished) associated story was passed on by word-of-mouth, usually started by someone who actually witnessed the events. Now, the stories are packaged rather than muttered from increasingly toothless mouths. The names are inseparable. You can’t hear about Neddy or the Dodger without hearing about Lanfranchi, Abo or even Chopper. This particular historic field has been compressed by the film *Blue Murder* and other true crime narratives. The actual events have been plucked from what Carlyle called a “Chaos of Being” (in White, 1975:144), and crammed together with a poetic narrative. *Blue Murder* wasn’t the first attempt to make these events history but, to paraphrase Auerbach, because of the fact that it is a mini-series, it is by far the most efficient in reaching a large audience and therefore the most influential.

It is unlikely that most television audience members would consider *Blue Murder* a historical document. It is a “dramatisation” of events, based on books written by Neddy Smith and Michael Drury, an ex-policeman, neither noted historians and therefore, given the assumptions of the role of the historian in our society, incapable of relating objective fact. The audience would probably be unable to imagine these non-historians’ tales as part of the normative history of their community. Yet the audience would also probably not be able to come up with a good explanation for why historians get a particular claim on the “truth” of the past. The conception of the historian as a person who stands outside of culture, politics

and life, looks on objectively and then delivers measured, scientific interpretations of events is still very popular today. This positivist tradition developed in the mid-1800s when writers such as Ranke began to believe that “the task of the historian was ‘simply to show how it really was’” (Carr, 1986:3); to impartially portray facts as they happened. This attitude ignores the idea that “portraying” an event implies a narrative shaping of some sort, an argument made by many writers since. However, judging by the emphasis the Australian media have placed on the “History Wars” since the early 1990s (and the fact that some “populist” historians can still make a living on alterations of the fabric of history, tailored to be happily consumed in the better suburban homes and retirement villages) the positivist version of historical consciousness still holds sway over most of the Australian TV audience and consequently reproduces itself in the productions made for it.

A misconception that is often associated with positivist historical consciousness holds that the historian should be an apolitical observer and that good history is that which can be shown to have not taken sides. This often seems to be regarded as “the common-sense view of history” (Carr, 1989:3-4). It is a misconception because this position is impossible and becomes simply a rhetorical trick to sell a particular point of view. As Hayden White puts it, there is an “irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality” (1975:21). While the tradition holds that the historian has access to the “truth”, many writers have argued convincingly that there are many truths; no one truth can be held up as the truest. Indeed, an analysis of a truth can reveal more about the person claiming it than the historical event itself.

Hayden White’s theories of historical narrative are very helpful in this analysis. White points out that history serves a poetic function in society rather than simply being the source of facts about the past. He postulates four principal modes of historical consciousness on the basis of the ideological intention which informs each of them: Metaphor, Synecdoche, Metonymy and Irony (metaphor is representational, synecdoche is integrative, metonymy is reductionist and irony is negational) (White, 1975:31-38). Each of these modes of consciousness serve as the basis of a linguistic protocol which is used to prefigure the historical field and provide strategies for interpretation.

The historian’s choice of narrative mode is largely an aesthetic one and White suggests this is the underlying poetic function of history. These narratives stem from the impulse in the historian to collect events into stories; to trace similarities between facts and imbue them with meaning. On the surface, *Blue Murder* seems to follow the conventions of a fictional tragedy. The main characters are brought to their downfalls by the very qualities which make them interesting. However, if we analyse it as a history, it is a good example of real events drawn together into a narrative cast in the ironic mode. It tells a story of Sydney’s past which superficially seems to celebrate some mythical characteristics of the audience’s community while bearing an underlying message of self-criticism. The main characters demonstrate many archetypal traits that the audience recognises from the historical discourse of what Benedict Anderson has called their “imagined community” (1991). This is any community large enough that a member could never come face to face with the majority of the other members. Applied to a historical representation presented to a TV audience this could lead to both broad and specific difference of interpretation within one community. Specifically, the discourse ethics of representing crime could vary from one part of Sydney to another (perhaps circumscribed by the rings left by a schooner glass on a tabloid paper, or a teacup on a broadsheet - either history being factual within the stain). However, on a broader level certain things can have a more unified appeal on a larger, national level.

Near the beginning of the film, as Ned is being released from Long Bay, he tells us in a voiceover that he had the dash to “go out and get his” while most of the other inmates in the prison were “shit men” who bludged on the dole and had no guts, no moral fibre. This is an appeal to Ward’s archetypal myth of Australian character, that is, male individualists with little respect for authority and enough courage and initiative to make it on their own in the world. Familiar with the myth through their consumption of media, the audience can identify with these traits and get the feeling that Ned is someone to be admired for his entrepreneurial spirit. The tragic part is that Ned applies his initiative and courage to selling heroin, armed robbery, pimping, drinking and fighting. This gives the audience the sense that if only Ned was not so misguided he could be a real asset to the community. It is ironic that these character strengths are also his weaknesses and lead to his final downfall. This mode of historical narrative ties the events together to form a story which ultimately carries the message, “crime doesn’t pay” accompanied by a sly, ironic wink that adds, “but we always had a good time”.

We will now use an ironic historical consciousness to continue the story of our research pilgrimage...

We soon gave up on the thoroughly safe Star Hotel. The denizens were far too interested in the poker machines and TVs to present us with any distinct local character and even our Blue Murderesque banter had become boring. We decided to get some Chinese food. Chinese food is a recurring theme throughout *Blue Murder* and *Neddy*. It seems that whenever Rogerson and Smith got together for lunch it was at a Chinese restaurant. In one particular scene they are waiting for their meals to arrive while Ned is trying to convince the Dodger that he should help him beat some charges. The food is very slow in arriving and the ever dynamic Rogerson is impatient. "Christ I'm hungry", he says loudly, the sort of man who doesn't need to wait quietly. We strode into BBQ King hoping for a similar scene.<sup>1</sup> Kept waiting for our food, we would talk business loudly and bemoan the woeful service. It was not to be. We were served very quickly and then efficiently moved out as we finished to make way for more patrons. We tried a few *Blue Murder* quotes, started singing, "Hey diddle diddle", but there was no point. The regular BBQ King hubbub was too loud for us to hear ourselves and our hearts weren't in it - the food was very nice and even if there had been anything to complain about we wouldn't have had the dash. Were we shit-men?

After that we strolled down to The Rocks, headed for the oldest pub in Sydney, The Lord Nelson. Along the way, the changes the city had been through since the 1980s were very noticeable. The most obvious is the construction boom. Up and down Sussex Street and Kent Street there are road works and building sites in abundance. In the 1980s and the early 1990s (when the film was shot), almost every block had at least one giant hole, barricaded by the high white walls that permeate our older memories of the city. Another sign of the coming of the information age, green bans have been overturned and the green light has been given to property development.

We had an uneventful quick top-up in the empty Captain Cook and then entered the Nelson. This pub is mentioned quite often in *Neddy* as one of Smith's favourite drinking spots. The Lord Nelson claims to be Sydney's oldest pub and has been authentically refurbished to what it was like when it first opened its doors ([www.lordnelson.com.au](http://www.lordnelson.com.au), cited 20.7.04). How this accounts for the giant television screens and the central heating we couldn't work out, but they *are* a micro-brewery. Which means they produce their own "authentic" Sydney beer and sell it to you in pints. They embrace the Australian working class beer drinking tradition, which they themselves have been a big part of for Sydney workers for over 150 years, yet the cheapest pints cost at least seven dollars; they don't have schooner glasses and, while they stock something called Quayle Ale, they don't sell Tooheys New. The place was full of expensive suits and thirsty cultural researchers such as ourselves, low rent workers of the information age, could not afford to stay there for more than one drink. We'd run out of chat by then and our eyes couldn't help being turned upwards by the TVs. Rugby Union instead of Rugby League. We tried to imagine a *Neddy*-style fight breaking out here: sweeping aside the life-sized cardboard Bundy Bear we'd grab an inflatable baseball bat from the Bacardi Cruiser promotions girl and lay into the accountants who'd come in with their top buttons fastened and ties unloosened. But there was too many of them so we backed down. And the atmosphere wasn't right; by embracing the cultural mythos of Australia, the Lord Nelson has become "unAustralian". We didn't know how long this had been happening here; some reports say since the mid 1970s and the factories were gone before then. Now there are fetta and olives where a packet of "salt and vinegar" would have done. An ironic tragedy.

This is a path that a lot of city pubs have gone down while Sydney has become an increasingly post-industrialised node of the information society. They give the appearance of embracing the discourse of the historic Sydney while actually focusing on a completely different clientele and *raison d'être*. In *The Rise of the Network Society*, Castells (2001:28-69) describes an information technology revolution that took place between the mid 1970s and the late 1990s (a timeframe which roughly coincides with *Neddy* Smith's rise and fall as an icon of the near weightless economy of heroin). Similar to the two industrial revolutions (steam then electricity) its effects were pervasive. The invention and maturity of technological systems and methods of production based solely on information transference led to changes at every level of society, from work to family life to government to globalisation to crime and organised crime. Capitalism has undergone massive restructuring, financial markets have become global, information systems have redefined the third world and created the information poor, while, at the same time, the relationship between women and the workforce has changed the nature of the family and sexuality. The media has become more personalised and politics has become more mediated. The gap between

the rich and poor is widening and whatever was in between is vanishing. Even vice is no longer what it was; you can catch a government bus to the casino, prostitutes pay tax and you can get a drink anywhere on Easter Sunday.

Life has changed to the extent that “in such a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national” (ibid.:3). Social meaning and the formation of identity has fragmented to the extent that it has been reduced to the desire to find a map. People can no longer find meaning in the places where it has traditionally been: the mainstream church, work, unions etc. In the network society, “identity is always an open, complex, unfinished game... it always moved into the future through a symbolic detour through the past” (Hall, 1999:43). As Foucault put it, “a certain fragility has been discovered in the bedrock of existence” and we are seeing “an insurrection of subjugated knowledges” (1984:201). The audience for *Blue Murder* lives in this post-industrial information society and, because traditional conceptions of historical truth have been subtly undermined as much as other touchstones of identity, construction of its identity could be influenced by the portrayal of events in the film.

Our next port of call was a place that does not appear in *Blue Murder* or *Neddy*, the Triple Ace Bar on Elizabeth Street in Surry Hills. Why? Because we had heard a rumour that Roger Rogerson still drinks there. But instead of bloody noses, spilt beer and scattered teeth, some young Japanese backpackers were playing drinking games.

Despite what has already been written here, we do not feel some romantic longing for the return of pub culture of the 1980s. An article appeared in “The Heckler” section of *The Sydney Morning Herald* (April 10, 2002), bemoaning the atmosphere and décor of the current white collar pub (or worse, the McDonaldized Irish chain pub), longing for the old days and concluding that “given a choice of drinking buddies I’d take Neddy Smith over the Corrs any day”. We are not of the same opinion. The last person we would like to meet in a pub is a drug dealing, murderer who would beat you senseless if you looked at him the wrong way. But the chance to see the real, ‘unrepresentational’ as it were, Rogerson in the flesh would give us the final link in the theoretical hand-cuffs. To the viewing audience Rogerson is Roxborough, a man who cries when he reminisces about the show-down between Ray Kelly, a NSW police force legend, and Chow Hayes, an uber-criminal of earlier times. We wanted to know how the style of discourse which shaped *Blue Murder* has affected the man himself.

Sadly, he wasn’t there. The place is more TAB than pub and beige tiles predominate. The bistro was closed, though the restaurant upstairs looked interesting; hard to find anything else to say about the place. If he does drink there we couldn’t see the attraction. In fact, this was becoming central to our conversation. Apparently we are what writers such as Charles Leadbetter have called, “knowledge workers” (1999:1-2). That is, educated people with ideas who can work from anywhere, any time as long as they have a computer. Certainly, we’re the information rich, the only problem being that this hasn’t translated into the associated capital promised by Castells, Leadbetter and others. Is it just us who feel left out of the Sydney pub scene; who don’t feel at home in either the poker machine dominated, TAB bars or the boutique, chrome lined micro-breweries?

Manning Clark wrote that, by the 1980s:

all that seemed to survive was the idea of Australia as a place of “uncommonly large profit”. History has blurred the vision of Eden, allowing Mammon to infest the land. A turbulent emptiness seized the people as they moved into a post-Christian, post-Enlightenment era. No one any longer knew the direction of the river of life. No one had anything to say’. (1987:500)

As mentioned earlier, the traditional areas of identification don’t hold as much sway as they used to and people have to look for new icons to cling to. Perhaps this is where Neddy and Rogerson fit in. Iconic 1980s men Rogerson, Mark “Chopper” Read and Warwick Capper do speaking tours at pubs around Australia that are equally popular at the Bridge Hotel in Balmain and Rooty Hill RSL. If the gaps between social strata are becoming bigger then Rogerson, Neddy and other elements from Sydney’s past could be some sort of common denominator. After all, *Blue Murder* was made with an audience in mind. Even though it was broadcast on a non-commercial station it still had to speak to a public. This effects

the style of the discourse behind the relating of its tale. Its narrative potentially shapes to some degree the way the audience constructs its sense of community identity. This in turn has an influence on the way Sydney represents itself in the present and in what it is becoming. There are already cricket clubs from other states that plan their end of season trips around visiting pubs featured in *Blue Murder*. How long before the gangster chic becomes “the Blue Murder Theme Pub ä”, perhaps staffed by the rogues’ gallery of Australian actors who bought the characters to life?

The last pub on the official research crawl was the Random Bar . Before it was the Random Bar it was the Brendan Behan Hotel and before that, the Britannia. It was outside the Britannia, on the corner of Dangar Place and Abercrombie Street, where Roger Rogerson allegedly shot and killed Warren Lanfranchi. We walked up Dangar Place to see what it was like. In the 1980s it was an alley between disused factories, deserted relics of a blue collar past. In our imaginations an industrial wilderness, deserted as the gangsters face off and a plastic bag blows across the scene. Now it’s an alley between apartment buildings with washing hanging from balcony railings.

Inside, the Random Bar looks like a fading B movie actress, a decade or two post-prime, who has had one too many naïve facelifts. It’s going for a techno chic with its unbearably loud DJ and giant, anatomically correct statue of a lion. But, again, it wasn’t us and it definitely didn’t seem very Rogerson. Unlike the lion, he wasn’t all show - he had what it took. We tried to discuss issues of vital importance to our research – is the only unAustralian crime disorganised crime? Would criminals like Neddy Smith, so hands on in his love of armed robbery, bother with it all today in an age of ATMs and credit cards? Has the information age’s electronic funds transaction dried up the loose cash he used to gain so much pleasure from violently stealing? Even his heroin trade would have taken a slide in popularity as party drugs took over. Where would we go to kick on? Where should we go to lose the ambivalence this mission had created in us? Were we shit-men or just alienated by an overly commercial pub scene?

We stumbled down to the Lansdowne as our last port of call. Assaulted by a wall of industrial metal as we entered, we climbed the staircase to relative quiet. A few chairs perched on the landing at the top of the stairs next to a baby grand. We sat down to catch our breath. Andrew opened the lid on the piano and found the thing was roughly in tune. We knew he could play so we demanded he do so to soothe our disturbed psyches. He played for about ten minutes – sparse, bluesy improvisation, capturing our mood perfectly. Then he paused for a moment and applause came from round the corner where the bar was, followed shortly by the bartender. “Thank you, that was beautiful” she said, “but you’ll have to go downstairs, we’re closing up here.”

The way we represent the past, the style of discourse we use, inevitably becomes the way we look at the present. As Auerbach put it, “a change in our manner of viewing history will of necessity soon be transferred to our manner of viewing current conditions” (1991:443). As Nietzsche points out, humans are not a fixed form; they change constantly with the times because “there are no eternal facts, nor are there any absolute truths” (1994:15). As subjugated histories gain influence the power of mainstream history becomes fragmented and leaves a space for changes in the way we represent the past. Films like *Blue Murder* can therefore change the way we view the present. While it is a representation of Sydney that clearly reinforces traditional, “universal” Western moral norms, the audience can now only receive these messages with a sense of self-critical irony. Consequently, the only element of this film that actually has an effect on the present self-awareness of Sydney is its narrative mode. Present representations of the identity of Sydney’s “imagined community”, effected by the film, become ironic and self-critical and, as a result, the pubs (and perhaps social areas in general, whether physical or virtual) become increasingly detached from any actual use value. They are more preoccupied with selling an image than creating a comfortable social space for people to consume alcohol. That is, alienation takes place. And this was the point our discussion reached at the Random Bar: how can you have alienation in an information society characterised by fragmentation where there is no unified subject? But we were too drunk by then to figure it out.

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1 BBQ King itself was recently associated with the new crime of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its co-owner was kidnapped by two Chinese nationals seeking a ransom from the other respected and successful owners.

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