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The Promise of Modernity: Ken G. Hall's *Dad and Dave Come to Town*, 1938/39

(Possible sub-heading)

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Andrew McNamara

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The state gallery director and newspaper critic, J.S. MacDonald earned an unsavory reputation due to his remarkable heralding of Australians as the last of the “thoroughbred Aryans.” This startling declaration appeared in the concluding stages of an otherwise stolid 1931 discussion of Arthur Streeton’s pastoral landscape paintings. His general proposition, however, remained in tune with a more pervasive conservative sentiment of the inter-war period warning about the alienating effects of modernity. “Let others if they are bent upon it,” MacDonald thundered, “mass produce themselves into robotry; thinking and looking like mechanical monkeys chained to organs whose tunes are furnished by riveting machines.” Such concern about mass industrialization occurred across all points of the political and cultural spectrum—witness Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (1936) and Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927). MacDonald, however, clearly subscribed to the view that the chief damage wrought by modernity was its rupture of the organic link between blood and soil.ⁱ Streeton thereby not only struck a “national chord,” MacDonald asserted, but more importantly his canvasses “point to the way in which life should be lived in Australia, with the maximum of flocks and the minimum of factories.”ⁱⁱ

In the inter-war period, modernism and modernity were regularly conflated—and the conflation was intensely political. Modernism and modernity were viewed as the twin agents of an estranging cosmopolitanism and the most disparaging assessments were couched in physiognomic terms warning of their threat to the otherwise harmonious (and purportedly pure) social body.ⁱⁱⁱ Right at the end of this period, on the eve of World War Two, an intriguing Australian film was released—Ken G. Hall’s 1938/39 comedy classic, *Dad and Dave Come to Town*—which wades directly into the controversies surrounding modernity.^{iv} The film’s humour derives from the transplantation of the rural Rudd family into the heart of the wholly foreign world of metropolitan life once the key character, Dad Rudd, inherits a fashion store in the city, *Cecille’s Fashion and Dress Emporium*—“a frock shop.” The experience of modernity is depicted as an endless comedy of errors as two vastly different worlds—the rural and the metropolitan—collide; the film thus thrives on a “fish out of the water” theme that was later popularized by the 1960s TV program, “The Beverly Hillbillies.”

From the moment the Rudd family first set foot in the city they confront its chaotic character when, just like the famous modernist architect Le Corbusier, the bustling street traffic gives them an impression of modern city life as a vast impenetrable wall of fluid, but dangerous motion so that even the relatively simple task of crossing the road becomes a peril requiring special skills of negotiation.^v In addition, the scope of technology is equally overwhelming because it is so embedded in the fabric of the city that it has become invisible, almost “natural,” making ordinary tasks suddenly complex. Dad and Dave, for instance, cannot figure out the complexity of a modern bathroom because their experience of washing is restricted to the dam back on the farm. As Dave surveys all the puzzling apparatuses, he ponders: “A bloke would have to be pretty dirty to use all these things.” Dad and Dave also wake up too early and immediately face the prospect that even the experience of time differs from a society of agricultural tradition, with its endless rotating cycles, to modernity with its chronometric slicing of time into measures of productivity and leisure, which gave rise to a whole new concept of the “weekend.” One key site of leisure depicted in the film is the milk bar.

The fashion store, by contrast, is a complex web of industrial productivity and leisure or spectacle. The film therefore underscores the fact that modernity, as Jean Baudrillard points out, “is not just the reality of technical, scientific and political upheavals since the 16th century; it is also the play of signs, customs, and culture which translates these structural changes at the level of ritual and social habitus.”^{vi} In fact, while the disparaging political and cultural debates of the inter-war years distilled the complex and often ambiguous scope of modernity into a few crude but acute images, Hall's *Dad and Dave Come to Town* in contrast actually captures a wider picture of modernity, particularly through the eyes of the incredulous Dad and Dave who try to negotiate its seemingly infinite complexity. This is a new world of artifice, so that phantasms seem to be pervasive. Dad and Dave at first have difficulty telling what is real from unreal. They confuse mannequins for real people and then Dave confuses a real woman for a mannequin. There are doppelgangers (twins controlling two lifts) and when on wireless Dad and Dave confuse direct broadcast with direct conversations, exposing how the new media make communication seem immediate, yet they do so by displacing and dispersing the once intimate time and spatial co-ordinates of “direct” face to face communication.

Foreignness abounds in a myriad of other ways. It points to the inherent timidity and insularity of Australian culture, for example, when Dad complains about city food—à la this and à la that—“how’s a man to enjoy his dinner when he can’t even pronounce it?” Foreignness is signaled by all things French and personified by the character, Pierre, the deceitful fashion store competitor. Pierre is surrounded by the fashionable “moderne” trappings and is also engaged in underhand dealing aimed at destroying the Rudd’s business—thus, a peril of modernity is incipient monopolists! In a surprising contrast for time, the highly camp “floor-walker” Mr. Entwhistle is portrayed as not only sincere, but genuine, even though the duplicitous Mr. Rawlings (in league with Pierre) notes that Entwhistle is so focused on the dresses “he can’t even see

the women inside them” and therefore misses all hint of the corruption going on around him.

While the film achieves its comic effect by accentuating every exotic difference—beginning with the suggestion that the city is parasitic and lives off the back of the country’s hard work and toil—it gradually moves to display an eventual accommodation. The Rudds may live a relatively more simple life, but they are canny and resourceful—exemplified by the figure of the daughter, Jill (played by Shirley Ann Richards), a representative both of the new professional woman in the workforce and of a new generation quick and eager to adapt. Rather than the accentuation of differences, it is the capacity to adapt that is shown to be the key to success. While the city is first presented as though it were akin to visiting a dangerous and foreign land, the transition to accommodation suggests a parallel to the European population’s adaptation to the Australian continent. When a crisis point is reached in the dress shop business, Dad Rudd rallies the family to the task ahead with a speech outlining how in the past he had met previous challenges by investing capital to upgrade and modernize the farm equipment. He will do the same in the city. He suggests mass-production fashion, not simply haut-couture; they do a media blitz, engage publicity and put on a spectacular fashion show. Everyone pulls together.

The film both accentuates the foreignness of modernity and ultimately over-estimates the easy accommodation of traditional cultures to modernity, and of primary to industrial production, with their differing experiences and expectations of life. Its message is that the future of Australia will not be the split between city and country, the pastoral and the industrial. The modernization and industrialization of primary industries shows that they do not present two different irreconcilable cultures, as a figure like J.S. MacDonald might have us believe. At the film’s conclusion, Mum suggests to Dad Rudd that maybe people in the city live quite differently, but he quietly dismisses any radical difference: “Whether it’s poured out of a silver pot or out of a tin billy, it’s tea just the same!”

Dad and Dave Come to Town’s essentially optimistic image of modernity hints that it comprises Australia’s natural pathway, perhaps its genuine “nature.” This is not as strange as it might seem; as Baudrillard asserts, “to speak of modernity scarcely has meaning in a country without tradition or Middle Ages, like the United States.” To which, one can add Australia. The film actually shows this to be true right from the outset when it depicts the hapless Dave constantly seeking new inventions and patents. Though each experiment ends badly, it reveals a willingness to invent and to confront change and transformation—the *raison d’être* of modernist culture’s unwieldy adherence to “permanent change” as its common or “consistent” feature. Yet, as Baudrillard also notes, while modernity virtually constitutes a “natural” condition for states that develop in its era, “inversely, modernization has a very strong impact in Third World countries with strong traditional cultures.”^{vii} The same dramatic impact is evident for “naturally modernist” nations with indigenous populations, such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. The essentially eudemonic vision presented in Hall’s film does

not and cannot depict this inverse impact on indigenous traditions. Instead, it offers a vision of the pastoral harmoniously enveloped in modernity—and it does so just at the moment the world is about to be plunged into the most catastrophic conflict ever witnessed, which will have its own dramatic bearing on the future meaning and course of modernity throughout the globe.

ⁱ When the Bauhaus opened in Weimar in 1919 right wing critics complained that the Bauhaus had eradicated the old art school, which had been “thoroughly national and modest, German in the best sense of the word.” Éva Forgács, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics*, trans. John Bártki, Central European Press, 1997, p.42.

ⁱⁱ J.S. MacDonald, “Arthur Streeton,” (1931) in Stephen, McNamara & Goad, eds., *Modernism and Australia: Documents on Art, Design and Architecture 1917-1967*, 2006, pp. 97-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is, of course, possible to be an advocate of modernity and despise modern art. Modernity does not necessarily go hand in hand with democracy either: Napoleon was one of history’s great modernizers, the great advocate of modern state, whereas the Nazis loathed modernism, but built autobahns and thrived on an ethos of mass production and industrialization. See Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture, and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, Cambridge University Press, 1984.

^{iv} The film was released in Australia in 1938 and in Britain in 1939 and became one of Australian film’s most successful exports up till that time.

^v In the foreword to his 1924 book, *The City of Tomorrow (Urbanisme* in French) Corbusier recalls a similar scene in Paris: “the traffic was more furious than ever. Day by day the fury of the traffic grew. To leave your house meant that ... you were a possible sacrifice to death in the shape of innumerable motors. I think back twenty years ... the road belonged to us then; we sang in it and argued in it, while the horse-‘bus swept calmly along.” See Le Corbusier, *The City of Tomorrow*, trans. Frederick Etchells, The Architectural Press, London, 1987 edition, p. xxiii. See also the commentary in Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, Verso, 1983, pp. 165-8.

^{vi} Jean Baudrillard, “Modernité,” *Encyclopaedia Universalis*, Vol. 12 (Paris: Encyclopaedia Universalis France, 1985), pp. 424-426; cited in translation by David James Miller, *Canadian Journal of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Théorie Politique et Sociale*, 11 (3), 1987, p. 65.

^{vii} Baudrillard, “Modernity,” p. 64.