

# Celebrities, culture and cyberspace: the light on the hill in a postmodern world

McKenzie Wark, Pluto Press, 1999.

Recommended retail price \$24.95. ISBN number 186-403-0453

Watching television program *Good News Week* the other night, the title "senator" was only occasionally applied to celebrity guest Natasha Stott Despoja, and then to highlight the incongruity of it. She has reached celebrity status where her presence no longer relies on her political position. *Good News Week* is a perfect case study for the issues that McKenzie Wark's latest book, *Celebrities, culture and cyberspace* canvasses. The move from the ABC to Channel 10 confirms *Good News Week's* status as popular culture; it relies on celebrities and creates its own, and conveys political information through new mediums and channels.

The book is subtitled *The light on the hill in the postmodern world*. It proposes a new way forward for the political left. A way located less in traditional categories of class difference and more in a reconfigured postmodern culture: one in which our experiences are mediated by broadcast and post-broadcast "vectors".

Those who privilege their politics above the level of popular culture may find it difficult navigating their entry into this book. For me, politicians are still a different breed to celebrities. Celebrities are the people that grace front covers of magazines at the supermarket check out. Maybe I think politics is too important for this treatment but I suspect Wark would not think it important enough. But with more thought I realised that the realms of politics

and celebrity are merging - it's Cheryl Kernot on the front cover of *Women's Weekly* and John Schumann and before him, Peter Garrett, running for parliament. This book offers a way of understanding, or at least approaching, these apparent contradictions.

Still feeling that yielding to the book's unfamiliar structure might be a bit dangerous I searched for a theme that would function as my safety rail through the text. I choose "information"; in many ways this is what the book is about - how information is received, from whom and the importance attached to it.

For Wark the hierarchies of information are breaking down, or perhaps have always been less rigid than we might think. They are being replaced by "vectors" - channels of communication or information flows that cut across our traditional class and geography based thinking. Movies *Strictly Ballroom* and *The Sum of Us* are used to illustrate the argument that the homogeneous concept of the suburbs is being broken down by new information. Both films highlight the presence of difference, the migrant or the homosexual, and demand of the characters new ways of communicating - the ballroom dance or the gay disco, both forms of cultural expression.

Wark's next task is to position left politics within this framework. Unfortunately his analysis is restricted to the Labor Party and in so doing he misses an opportunity to apply his arguments to the emergence of new forms of political organising and coalitions. Wark makes a plea for the left to acknowledge a reconfiguring of society yet largely ignores the emergence of the politics of sexuality and the continuing and growing political presence

of indigenous people. Perhaps these do not give rise to the celebrities that Wark contemplates: the reasons for that would be a book in itself.

Instead he identifies a realignment of the means of production whereby disadvantage takes new forms. Adopting Barry Jones' language, Wark speaks of the information proletariat: the information rich and the information poor, and argues that the new divide is based on access to information and the capacity to use it. To fill the void created by information inequality various forms of bad information emerge, information fuelled by the anti-intellectualism of parts of the right and the racist slogans of One Nation.

Excited by these treatments of information I then found the political analysis less satisfying. The faults of the Labor Party over the past decades have been picked over elsewhere. By examining its future in terms of a contest between the views of Lindsay Tanner and Mark Latham, Wark locates his analysis firmly within the Party when the remainder of the book invites the reader to step boldly outside their comfort zones.

*Celebrities, culture and cyberspace* has much to offer, whether you use the index to dip in and out or read it from start to finish. You probably need to read it at least once in order to appreciate Wark's ability to craft an argument that moves seamlessly between the categories of the title. I hope that many do attempt this book, for while Wark successfully establishes an alternative analytical approach, it may be for others to apply it to broader political debates.

Kate MacNeill