

☐ Contemporary  
Literary Criticism

**CLC**

**353**

Volume 353

# Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works  
of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,  
Short-Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and  
Other Creative Writers

**Lawrence J. Trudeau**  
EDITOR



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## Preface

Named “one of the twenty-five most distinguished reference titles published during the past twenty-five years” by *Reference Quarterly*, the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* (CLC) series provides readers with critical commentary and general information on more than 2,000 authors from 91 countries now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Before the publication of the first volume of CLC in 1973, there was no ongoing digest monitoring scholarly and popular sources of critical opinion and explication of modern literature. CLC, therefore, has fulfilled an essential need, particularly since the complexity and variety of contemporary literature makes the function of criticism especially necessary to today’s reader.

### Scope of the Series

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Authors are selected for inclusion for a variety of reasons, among them the publication or production of a critically acclaimed new work, the reception of a major literary award, revival of interest in past writings, or the adaptation of a literary work to film or television.

Attention is also given to several other groups of writers—authors of considerable public interest—about whose work criticism is often difficult to locate. These include mystery and science-fiction writers, literary and social critics, world authors, and authors who represent particular ethnic groups.

Each CLC volume contains individual essays and reviews selected from hundreds of review periodicals, general magazines, scholarly journals, monographs, and books. Entries include critical evaluations spanning an author’s career from its inception to current commentary. Interviews, feature articles, and other works that offer insight into the author’s works are also presented. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the general critical and biographical material in CLC provides them with vital information required to write a term paper, analyze a poem, or lead a book discussion group. In addition, complete bibliographical citations note the original source and all of the information necessary for a term paper footnote or bibliography.

CLC is part of the survey of criticism and world literature that is contained in Gale’s *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism* (NCLC), *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800* (LC), *Shakespearean Criticism* (SC), and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism* (CMLC).

### Organization of the Book

A CLC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author’s actual name given in parentheses on the first line of the biographical and critical information. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by a heading that consists of the most common form of the title in English translation (if applicable) and the author’s name.

- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication information of each work is given. In the case of works not published in English, a translation of the title is provided as an aid to the reader; the translation is a published translated title or a free translation provided by the compiler of the entry. As a further aid to the reader, a list of **Principal English Translations** is provided for authors who did not publish in English; the list selects those translations most commonly considered the best by critics. Unless otherwise indicated, plays are dated by first performance, not first publication, and the location of the first performance is given, if known. Lists of **Representative Works** discussed in the entry appear with topic entries.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. All titles by the author featured in the text are printed in boldface type. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included. Criticism in topic entries is arranged chronologically under a variety of subheadings to facilitate the study of different aspects of the topic.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Citations conform to recommendations set forth in the Modern Language Association of America's *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th ed. (2009).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** describing each piece.
- Whenever possible, a recent **Author Interview** accompanies each entry.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of titles published in other languages and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, plays, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *CLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.



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# Murray Bail

## 1941-

Australian novelist, essayist, and short-story writer.

### INTRODUCTION

Regarded as one of the most successful experimental writers in Australia, Bail has produced fiction that satirizes and subverts the conventional narrative structures, stereotypes, and myths of Australian literature. With the publication of the short-story collection *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* in 1975, Bail was hailed as a Postmodern iconoclast who rejected the Realist literary tradition of his country. The stories in *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* parody portrayals of the Australian bush with its stock literary inhabitants and display Bail's interest in contemporary European philosophy, semiotics, and the role of myth in the construction of national identity. His stories are a blend of surrealist fantasy, fable, and the absurd. Bail's novel *Homesickness* (1980), a satire of Australians abroad, won Bail several literary awards, as did his subsequent novels *Holden's Performance* (1987) and *Eucalyptus* (1998). He has produced a variety of nonfiction works, including *Longhand* (1989) and *Notebooks: 1970-2003* (2005), which focus on his formative years and the process of literary creation. His biography of an Australian painter, *Ian Fairweather* (1981), reflects Bail's interest in visual art, which also appears as a motif in much of his fiction.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Bail was born to Lindsay Bail and Hazel Wood on 22 September 1941 in Adelaide, South Australia. Because of the shortages created by World War II, the family struggled during his early years, and Bail later wrote about the general absence of literary and artistic culture in both his home and community. He briefly attended art school in Adelaide and graduated from Norwood Technical High School. Bail married Margaret Wordsworth in 1965, but the marriage ended in divorce, and he escaped the provincialism of his home in 1968, when he embarked on a journey abroad. From 1968 to 1970 Bail lived in Bombay and then spent four years in England, making frequent excursions to North Africa and continental Europe. While living in London, he wrote for the *Transatlantic Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. He also recorded many of his experiences and reflections in journals later published as *Longhand* and *Notebooks*. During this period, Bail wrote several short

stories, some of which remain uncollected, for Australian literary magazines.

Following the release of Bail's well-received first collection of short stories, *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories*, he served as a council member of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra from 1976 to 1981. In 1980 his first novel, *Homesickness*, won a National Book Council Award and the Melbourne Age Book of the Year Award. In 1987 Bail produced his second novel, *Holden's Performance*, which won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award. More than a decade elapsed before publication of his third novel, *Eucalyptus*. The novel was a success, selling more than 100,000 copies in Australia and winning several literary awards, including the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and the Australian Literary Society Gold Medal. Bail collected another series of short stories in *Camouflage* (2000). Another decade separated the publication of *Eucalyptus* and his fourth novel, *The Pages* (2008). The delay was due in part to a series of personal setbacks: his marriage with the noted novelist Helen Garner ended in divorce; his mother died, as did his close friend the sculptor Robert Klippel; and he suffered a severe heart attack. Reviewers generally agreed that he returned to form with the novels *The Pages*, which was shortlisted for the Miles Franklin Award, and *The Voyage* (2012).

### MAJOR WORKS

The stories in *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* are notable for their linguistic reflexivity, which can be read as a response to European Poststructuralism. The volume illustrates Bail's interest in the fantastic and the absurd and demonstrates his fascination with literary tradition and encyclopedic approaches to his subject matter, reminding many critics of the works of the Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges. In addition, the collection often parodies the conservativeness of much Australian fiction. "The Drover's Wife" is ostensibly a monologue provoked by a painting of the same name by Australian Russell Drysdale, but it is also a refutation of the narrative techniques and values of a story with that title by the colonial-era Australian writer Henry Lawson. Upon its republication in 1984, *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories* was renamed *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*.

Bail published his first novel five years after *Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories*. *Homesickness* tells of thirteen Australian tourists on a package tour that takes them to Africa, Great Britain, South America, the United States,

and the Soviet Union. Graham Huggan (1993) defined this group as “deliberately typecast Australians . . . an encyclopedia of egregious national stereotypes.” The majority of the characters possess unsavory, even off-putting characteristics, but their comic portrayal serves as fodder for Bail’s larger concerns: broad satire of Australian mores, questions concerning the nature of national identity, and an investigation of the homogenizing effects of tourism.

In *Holden’s Performance*, Bail returned to an Australian setting. The work is set in Adelaide during the reconstruction following World War II. It tells of the childhood, growth, and development of Holden Shadbolt, but it is not so much a coming-of-age story as it is an anti-bildungsroman in which the satirically depicted protagonist fails to attain lasting self-improvement, maturity, or empowerment. *Holden’s Performance* is also concerned with the growing influence of the United States on Australian life. Robert Dixon (1991) suggested: “At one level, the Shadbolt family saga may be read as an allegory of the Americanisation of Australian popular culture between the 1940s and the late 1960s.” He argued that this can be seen in “an increasingly consumerist way of life” and “an immediately readable paradigm of Americanisation: the colonisation of the Australian cinema and news-reel industries by Hollywood.”

*Eucalyptus* is Bail’s most acclaimed novel. It tells of a widower named Holland and his beautiful daughter, Ellen. The novel is set on a riverside homestead in New South Wales, a homestead planted with dozens of rare eucalyptus trees, “virtually an outdoor museum of trees.” Holland is an over-protective father whose solicitude for his daughter is only exceeded by the attention he gives to his trees. As Ellen approaches maturity and young men begin to court her, Holland institutes a method to ward off unworthy suitors: only a man who can name every eucalyptus on the property will win Ellen’s hand in marriage. Two qualified suitors soon appear: Mr. Cave, a rational, scientific man beset by self-doubt but comforted by his empiricism and his ability to name and define each tree; and a stranger who woos Ellen with his “circuitous story-telling,” in which he makes reference to the different species of eucalyptus trees.

The three stories that make up *Camouflage* include the title story and “The Seduction of My Sister,” as well as the previously published “The Drover’s Wife.” In “Camouflage,” a piano-tuner who once aspired to be a recitalist has been drafted into the army during World War II and sent to a remote area in Austria, where he paints camouflage patterns on military aircraft and gradually comes to terms with the deterioration of his marriage. In “The Seduction of My Sister,” a strange game of catch between two suburban, teenage boys slowly reveals the changing relationship among the boys and the sister of the one who started the game. An expanded edition of *Camouflage*, containing an additional eleven previously published stories, was published in 2002.

In the novel *The Pages*, two women—one a philosopher, the other a psychoanalyst—travel from Sydney to a sheep farm to appraise the papers of a man, now deceased, who, after traveling the world, decided to return home and “create a philosophy” so that he “could die happily.” In addition to contrasting the differences between philosophy and psychology as ways of understanding the world and ourselves, the novel probes the value of pastoral life in comparison with that of urbanization and travel.

The protagonist of *The Voyage*, Frank Delage, an Australian maker of grand pianos, decides that to ensure their worldwide success he needs to market his pianos successfully in Vienna, the historical center of European music. While there, he is hosted by a cultured and wealthy family, the von Schallas. Although his pianos fail to make much of an impression on the city’s tradition-bound music aficionados, Delage finds himself romantically drawn first to his hostess, Amalia von Schalla, and then to her daughter, Elisabeth, whom he convinces to return to Australia with him. The voyage of the title refers to their time on board the *Romance*, a container ship bound for Sydney, though Delage’s larger journey of discovery is also recounted and intertwined with the story of his homecoming with Elisabeth.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Bail’s fiction has attracted a wide range of critical reaction representing a variety of perspectives. Book reviews, especially of Bail’s most widely received book, *Eucalyptus*, celebrated his creativity and innovative technique, often comparing him to international masters such as Borges. Much of the scholarly interest in Bail is focused on the issues of nationalism and identity in his work. The appropriation of land and the struggle to live in the Australian bush have long formed a part of Australians’ identity and mythos. Cristina Fernández Méndez (2008) examined how *Eucalyptus* attempts to rewrite the stereotypical colonialist view of Australia. She suggested that Bail subverted the gendered conceptions of the Australian landscape as either virginal and Edenic or barren and harsh. Nathanael O’Reilly (2009) also addressed issues of national identity in his study of *Homesickness*; his discussion of Australian identity is thus restricted to a foreign context, the apprehension of “Australianness” by others. O’Reilly claimed: “Overseas travel forces the Australian characters to confront issues of national identity, both in terms of their individual identity as Australians and the identity of the nation as a whole.”

Critics have made a distinction between the Realist tradition of Australian letters and the progressive, experimental work of Bail, who has drawn upon Modernist and Postmodernist ideas. Peter Craven (1998; see Further Reading) also acknowledged the Modernist heritage of Bail’s fiction, tracing the influence of several Modernist European authors on Bail’s short stories and novels. Bruce Bennett (1976; see

Further Reading) defined Bail's fiction as "fabulistic." He contended that Bail distinguished himself from Realism through his more obviously fictional, "consciously shaped, verbally oriented" depiction of reality. Rebecca McNeer (2002) addressed similar issues in *Eucalyptus*, finding that the novel avoids the typical "accouterments" of Realist fiction: character development, plot, and realistic narrative. Most of the scholarship on Bail's literary genres, influences, and techniques has ignored his early works. Bronwyn Lacken (2010), however, analyzed several of Bail's early, uncollected short stories, including "I Spend My Days Slowly" and "Gone." Lacken maintained that these tales show a greater fidelity than his collected stories to the normative, Realist tradition of Australian letters.

Gregory Luther

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

"I Spend My Days Slowly" and "Gone." *Under Twenty-Five: An Anthology*. Ed. Anne O'Donovan, Jayne Sanderson, and Shane Porteous. Brisbane: Jacaranda, 1966. 1-7; 168-72. (Short stories)

\**Contemporary Portraits and Other Stories*. St. Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1975. Pub. as *The Drover's Wife and Other Stories*. London: Faber and Faber, 1984. (Short stories)

*Homesickness*. South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1980. (Novel)

*Ian Fairweather*. Sydney: Bay, 1981. (Biography)

*Holden's Performance*. London: Faber and Faber, 1987. (Novel)

*The Faber Book of Contemporary Australian Short Stories*. Ed. Murray Bail. London: Faber and Faber, 1988. (Short stories)

*Longhand: A Writer's Notebook*. Melbourne: McPhee Gribble, 1989. (Notebook)

*Eucalyptus*. Melbourne: Text, 1998. (Novel)

†*Camouflage*. Melbourne: Text, 2000. Expanded ed. *Camouflage: Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. (Short stories)

*Notebooks: 1970-2003*. London: Harvill, 2005. (Notebooks)

*The Pages*. Melbourne: Text, 2008. (Novel)

*The Voyage*. Melbourne: Text, 2012. (Novel)

\*Includes the short story "The Drover's Wife" and "Huebler."

†Includes the short stories "Camouflage" and "The Seduction of My Sister."

## CRITICISM

Robert Dixon (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: Dixon, Robert. "'The Great Australian Emptiness' Revisited: Murray Bail's *Holden's Performance*." *Australian Literary Studies* 15.1 (1991): 26-37. Print.

[In the following essay, Dixon analyzes Holden's *Performance*. He asserts that the novel's Postmodern structure does not so much represent the particular history of Adelaide as it does the city's cultural history, including the effects of World War II, the increasingly consumerist life of Australians in the mid-twentieth century, and the Americanization of Australian cinema and news.]

If, as Dean MacCannell argues, tourism is the quest for a 'reality' and an 'authenticity' that are thought to be always 'elsewhere' (160), then it was perhaps inevitable that after his first novel, *Homesickness* (1980)—which deals with Australian tourists abroad—Murray Bail would turn from destinations to origins. Bail has spoken of his origins in an interview in 1981: 'It was the Menzies era . . . that time of boredom and emptiness—of almost deafening emptiness—which is yet to be properly documented' (38). His most recent novel, *Holden's Performance* (1987), is an attempt by the novelist, tourist and theorist in Bail to revisit that emptiness while retaining the perspective of 'elsewhere.'

At one level, the Shadbolt family saga may be read as an allegory of the Americanisation of Australian popular culture between the 1940s and the late 1960s. The change is signified by a procession of characters: Holden's grandfather, a Lance-Corporal in the Light Horse; his father, killed by black American Marines in Adelaide during the Second World War; the seduction of Holden's mother, then sister, by an increasingly consumerist way of life, embodied in Frank McBee; and Holden himself, the Australian 'Everyman' who, in the Cold War of the 1960s, unquestioningly works for the American Government. And at the centre of the novel a narrative which has become, after Phil Noyce's film *Newsfront* (1978), an immediately readable paradigm of Americanisation: the colonisation of the Australian cinema and newsreel industries by Hollywood.

But *Holden's Performance* cannot easily be read as a traditional historical novel. Bail has been moving in an increasingly postmodern framework that makes 'documenting' the Menzies era a more complex, even problematic, task than his remarks in the 1981 interview suggest. Fredric Jameson has argued that the historical novel 'can no longer set out to represent the historical past; it can only "represent" our ideas and stereotypes about that past.' For this reason, he advocates a new aesthetic based upon the collective representations, or 'cognitive maps,' individuals use to understand their culture (71, 89-92). Bail's approach to the past in *Holden's Performance* is illuminated by comparison with an example of such 'cognitive mapping' published



in the same year, Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay*. Subtitled 'An Essay in Spatial History,' Carter's work is a cognitive map of some nineteenth-century cultural inscriptions. The book's subject 'is not a physical object, but a cultural one. It is not the geographer's space ... [but] the spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence' (xxii).

Part one of *Holden's Performance* deals with Holden's life in Adelaide during the period of postwar reconstruction, from his birth in 1933 to his coming of age in 1954. In his engagement with this period, Bail constructs a cognitive map of Adelaide as a typical postwar Australian city. Part one begins with 'a lesson in geometry,' a description of the plan of Adelaide as laid down by William Light and overlaid by modern roads and tramlines. In describing this grid, Bail is dealing not only with a physical space, but also with a set of cultural and imaginative structures. Paul Carter writes on the grid plan of Adelaide in similar terms: 'Located against the imaginary grid, the blankness of unexplored country was translatable into a blueprint for colonization ... Light's grid plan met with approval because it was the physical embodiment of this map-like mentality' (204). The grid, like the culture, lays out an authority that is structural, transcending individual identity. But Carter rejects the argument that its authority is merely oppressive. Following Merleau-Ponty, he proposes that such grids of cultural inscription are both a condition of limitation, and the precondition for an active production of cultural meanings through difference. In an image that is strikingly relevant to Bail's Adelaide, with its grid of streets and tramlines, Merleau-Ponty observes, 'That line from me to the horizon is a rail my gaze may move upon' (qtd in Carter 220). The geometry of Adelaide is one paradigm of the 'cultural space' of modern Australia 'declaring its presence.' Yet where Carter sees the grid of that culture as 'instinct with promise,' Bail stresses its limitations: 'in Adelaide, encouraged by the puritanical streets, the brown trams always went forward in straight lines ... and somehow this suggested the overwhelming logic of *plain thinking*' (2).

Holden's Uncle Vern lives strategically at the edge of this town plan. Just beyond his property in the Hills, 'the country ... breached the town plan, indenting and serrating the perimeter' (39). As a proofreader for 'the conservative broadsheet, the [Adelaide] *Advertiser*,' his job is to patrol the boundaries, to ensure that the lines of cultural inscription run straight. 'The News' is one way the culture constructs its own ways of seeing, which it inscribes upon the disorder that falls outside its 'familiar' and 'natural' codes of representation. Vern compares the role of the newspaper to that of the weathercock on his roof: 'Nothing could be more accurate ... Those same Roman letters fixed on the spokes which marked the four corners of the earth spelt out ... his profession ... NEWS' (35). The cultural construction of 'NEWS' is like the construction of maps, and in ensuring the accuracy of the 'facts' Vern is like a surveyor, laying out the grid in which the citizens of Adelaide feel

comfortable: 'Above his city he continued to construct an ever-changing yet solid grid, an antechamber of aerial numbers, surnames and nouns, which fully encompassed him, and seemed to offer support' (66).

Within this 'solid grid' of news, Australians map their reality. The lists of events reported in the *Advertiser* provide a cultural mythology of the postwar years, a particular construction of history appropriate to this conservative city. The news of the cloud-seeding experiment is one example of the way cultures prefer certain 'facts' and endow them with meaning. In the context of postwar conservatism, 'The ideology of progress seemed even more pervasive than the reality. To the traditional idea of progress were added the new magic words of "science" and the "atomic age"' (Alomes 6-7). Because they signify this ideology, the experiments have the status of myth in Barthes' sense: 'Everybody wanted to believe. ... Rain-seeding not only erased the climatic despairs of the past and promised a verdant future, it represented a visual reversal—raining abundance—to the recent desolation of Coventry, Pearl Harbour, Hiroshima and Darwin. It fitted the mood of post-war reconstruction' (67-68).

Bail is concerned, then, with the archaeology of the period in Foucault's sense of analysing the operation of specific discourses of popular culture. But he also conducts a more traditional archaeology, grasping the material particularity of the period through a recovery of individual objects. Terry Eagleton notes a similar concern in the essays of Walter Benjamin, which are 'rife with images of excavation ... of grubbing among buried ruins and salvaging forgotten remains.' Collecting in this sense is a 'creative digression from classical narrative, a "textualising" of history that reclaims repressed and unmapped areas' (*Walter Benjamin* 55, 61). The concept of archaeology as a method of cultural analysis is raised directly in *Holden's Performance* by the 'archaeological magpies,' Gordon Wheelright and Les Flies, who construct a 'narrative' of social history with their collection of found objects. Wheelright expounds this method of 'read[ing] ... the signs on the ground' (80-1): 'History consisted "not so much of facts as artefacts." Ordinary everyday objects are discarded or swept away by events. Each one tells a story' (270).

Bail's novel is filled with lists of objects valued nostalgically for the myths that circulate through them. Cars, for example, are important bearers of cultural meanings—of Britishness and provincial conservatism: 'Little Morrisises, Austin Sevens, Prefect and Hillman, models of caution, as their names implied' (12). Holden keeps objects from the war 'reverently placed as archaeological specimens in a row above his bed' (31). In 1947, the myth of scientific progress finds material expression in 'the latest in labour-saving consumer-durables ... Hoovers ... the Frigidaire ... [the] Kooka Stove' (61-62). By the 1960s, a new set of artefacts is used to chart the Americanisation of the Australian way of life: 'This is Australia, mid-1963 ... the streets had

become infested with the horizontal glidings of chrome-laden roadhogs, fully imported from the US of A' (317).

The geometry of Adelaide is a paradigm of the 'cultural space' of postwar Australia, and it is within this space that Holden Shadbolt, Bail's Everyman figure, is constructed as a subject. Bail has said that his intention was to create a monumentally unthinking Australian, 'the antipodean head remaining more or less expressionless' (249) like the faces of Albert Tucker's paintings of this period:

the central character, Holden Shadbolt, is a very boring Australian man who doesn't believe in anything nor say much. How do you keep a book going, and interesting, with a silent bore as the central character? Australia is full of men like Holden, who perform like cars ... He's not nasty or evil, but for all I know he might serve Hitler—you never know with these people.

(Interview 1987)

Bail's conception of Holden's character may be thought of as post-structuralist in the sense that he creates the 'character' by describing the discourses that intersect at that point—the media, cinema, the motor-car subculture. But for all his awareness of the problematics of post-structuralism, Bail bemoans the dispersal of the humanist subject, which becomes the focus of a neo-conservative nostalgia, and the impulse behind his characterisation of Holden is satirical, suggesting a fervid antipathy to Australian popular culture. Underlying the characterisation, and indeed the structure of the novel, is a comparison between Holden's life, the history of modern Australia and the workings of an internal combustion engine: 'Intake, Compression, Power, Exhaust ... The moment we are born we take in knowledge ... This mixture then becomes compressed ... by experience ... it's converted into power ... We soon suffer lack of intake, exhaustion' (257-58). It is tempting to see these mechanical images as a parody of some formulations of postmodernism, such as Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, in which the optimum 'performance' of the subject is ensured by 'regulatory mechanisms' in the social system (15).

It is the first part of the novel which parodies the 'intake' phase: the subject's entry into the symbolic order. Holden is constructed by the discourses of his culture when, as a young man, he is put on a diet of page proof from the *Adelaide Advertiser*:

What did Holden's early growth consist of? Words ... In that vital growth period for testicles and intellect he began twice daily swallowing and digesting the contents of the morning newspaper ... In one sitting he'd consumed the daily history and shifting minutiae of Adelaide, and the rest of Australia, and the world beyond ... he acquired a large body of opinion ...

(83-85)

A further aspect of this 'indoctrination by the mathematics' of the culture (111) is the social construction of gender. 'The facts of life [are] revealed ceremonially' when

Holden's mentors, Wheelright, Hartnett and Flies, sit him down in Vern's bedroom to perv on the usherette who lives next door. Bail seems aware here of Laura Mulvey's influential argument that commercial cinema is the product of a patriarchal culture, and that the ideology of gender is inscribed in the codes of cinematic representation. Holden's lesson in female anatomy is conducted as a cinematic experience. Safe in the darkness of Vern's bedroom, the four men gaze at the naked usherette as if looking at a film—one even wears a raincoat: 'a light came on in the room facing them. They stared at the illuminated rectangle, as though waiting for the feature to start at the Regent ... the usherette moved into the frame and faced them' (114). Holden's 'indoctrination' is completed just before his 21st birthday, when the usherette ushers him into her bedroom. He there acts out his role in the socially constructed narrative of male sexuality as the other men watch from the darkened room next door.

Underlying Bail's treatment of subjectivity is an implied resistance to what is perceived as a commodification of the individual. This theme is developed especially in relation to Frank McBee who, at the end of the war, is transformed from a soldier into a salesman. McBee is a product of the newspapers—'His image appeared constantly in the papers' (109)—of language—'Stacked on the verandah were large plywood letters from the alphabet; parts of McBee's name' (89)—and he has a 'hankering need to direct audio-visual messages to a captive population' (117). So much is the man associated with his image, that he risks being erased by his own representation: 'With casually powerful figures such as the Premier or Frank McBee ... their printed images had become their real appearances' (97). By the time of his move to Canberra in part four, McBee has become a simulacrum: because he chooses signifiers of power that have already been 'screened' successfully by others—the toothbrush moustache and dark suit—his image *precedes* the reality.

Bail's Australia is therefore a culture increasingly dominated by the media which are, in turn, increasingly at the service of commercial forces. These issues lead, in the second part of *Holden's Performance*, to a sustained analysis of one of the central themes in recent debates about postmodernism: the integration of aesthetics into commodity production. Fredric Jameson describes the 'effacement ... of the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture.' It is marked by 'the emergence of new kinds of texts infused with the ... whole "degraded" landscape of schlock and kitsch, of TV series and Reader's Digest culture, of advertising and motels, of the late show and the grade-B Hollywood film' (54-55). Despite the value-laden terms, Jameson pointedly refuses to pass moral judgement. But his neutrality on this issue was condemned by left cultural critics such as Terry Eagleton, who remains committed to the belief that art might distance itself from commerce sufficiently to produce an effective cultural critique. For Eagleton, the

postmodern 'dissolution of art into the prevailing forms of commodity production ... mimes the formal resolution of art and social life attempted by the avant garde, while remorselessly emptying it of its political content' ('Post-modernism' 60-61).

This last point is close to Bail's position in *Holden's Performance* where, in the 'deafening emptiness' of modern Australia, the media of cultural representation have been 'remorselessly emptied of political content.' Bail's vehicle is Alex Screech's Epic Theatre, a newsreel cinema at Manly in the 1950s. Among the many allusions suggested by this name is Bertolt Brecht's theory and practice of Epic Theatre. In *Die Strassenszene* (1938) and *Kleines Organon für das Theater* (1948), Brecht argued that naturalistic theatre lulls the spectator into accepting his or her social environment as 'a part of nature, unchangeable and inescapable.' The audience 'stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance.' Brecht's response was to use film projections, montage, music and other techniques in an abrasive style of representation that would defamiliarise its content: 'The object ... is to allow the spectator to criticize constructively from a social point of view' (Willett 168ff).

When Holden comes to Manly in the mid 1950s the Epic Theatre has pretensions to the political role evoked by its Brechtian title. The door opens, releasing a gust of disinfectant into the street; it is like a 'moving newspaper' and its 'dramatic photo montages' stop Holden in his tracks. Inside, a variety of devices draw attention to the construction of news. The most abrasive is Alex Screech's own emergence in front of the screen to lecture on his theory of Epic. Standing in the path of the projector, his body a screen for its images, Screech urges his audience to grasp their own 'epic' relation to history: 'Everything that happens in the world, that's to say, everything you see on this screen, is part of an on-going epic ... Can you pinpoint your position in the larger story? ... Some people—most people—allow themselves to be simply taken along by events. Are you one of them?' (148-49).

Screech looks like a black and white cubist painting (158), and his lectures combine aesthetics with political critique: topics include 'In Praise of Black and White' and 'What Makes Me Sick About This Country' (178). His poster artist, Harriet Chandler, also has the 'French-curve' of a cubist painting: 'her face consisted of a series of interlocking quadrants ... and the distortion below her waist [the result of polio] had given extra strength of character, transmitting as obstinate curved surfaces' (156). When Holden first meets her she is staging a lone republican protest at the Royal Visit of 1956 (154). Harriet lives in a house perched high above Manly where she can 'sit and follow the goings-on of the world' (166). In contrast to the conservative proof-reading of Vern Hartnett, her art has the potential to criticise rather than simply reproduce the verities of that world: 'With scissors she attacked the blown-up photographs and

arranged pieces on powerful red cardboard ... Barbed wire from the Berlin Wall linked Pakistan with ... dark crowds out of control in Johannesburg ... she concentrated cutting around French soldiers up to their armpits in Vietnam' (167-68). As Brecht said of his Epic Theatre, montage can help people see the connections between things.

Bail's use of the newsreel cinema invites comparison with Phil Noyce's film *Newsfront* (1978), which also foregrounds the discursive construction of Australian cultural identity during the period of Americanisation. Susan Dermody and Elizabeth Jacka note that 'The found Cinesound and Movietone newsreel footage provides a complex mixture of iconography, folklore and history, as well as a way of speaking about the representation of history.' The Americanisation of an earlier, 'authentic' Australian culture is expressed in the lives of the two brothers, Len (Bill Hunter) and Frank Maguire (Gerard Kennedy). By the end of the film Frank has sold out, working for the Americans, but Len refuses to sell his coverage of the 1956 Melbourne Olympics to an American firm (2: 129ff).

The counterparts of Len and Frank Maguire in *Holden's Performance* are Alex Screech and Sid Hoadley. Like Frank McBee, Hoadley represents a convergence of commerce (he is a manufacturer of electronic goods), the media (he owns Sydney's largest cinema chain) and politics (he is a Cabinet Minister). By the 1950s, 'Anyone buying a ticket in one of Hoadley's theatres, even if it was a converted shearing shed in the middle of nowhere, could count on Technicolor and a happy ending, most films coming direct from Hollywood.' Screech, until now, has held out, preferring a 'grey-and-white policy of newsreels only' (202). But his decline has begun by the time of Holden's first visit to the Epic Theatre. Ironically, his audiences are as stupefied as those described by Brecht: 'in the afternoons you'll find old codgers falling asleep ... They must think this is a bloody library' (160). Screech's attitude to the theatre also becomes increasingly contradictory as he is seduced by Hoadley's potent blend of wealth, nationalism and conservative politics. This is because he is himself a site of contradiction. As master of ceremonies he is a Brechtian actor, urging his audience to realise their own relation to history; but as proprietor he has an eye to profit and hires Shadbolt as a bouncer to protect his capital investment. When a bush cricket team comes to Manly, Holden is asked to expel a drunk who vomits on the blue carpet in the foyer. By chance, his vomit forms a relief map of Australia. Screech's worry that it will affect business is dispelled when Holden puts a glass case over the vomit, re-framing it as a patriotic work of art: 'a disaster had been turned into a valuable asset' (172). The vomit map is a satirical image of the complicity of art, capitalism and nationalist ideology. These strands finally converge in the fourth part of the novel where the history of the Epic Theatre is completed: it is turned into a cut-price retail emporium and reopened by the Prime Minister, R. G. Amen, Bail's satirical portrait of Menzies (257-58).