ANZAC Day, April 25th is here again and once again Australians are being asked to stand together and declare “Lest we forget”. Every year though, during the avalanche of militaristic imagery and words that marks this “celebration”, I reflect how it hasn’t always been like this in Australia. During my lifetime I have watched ANZAC day being changed from a fading historical relic to a day elevated to a virtual state religion, central to the mythic narrative of Australian nationalism.

This change is personified by my experiences singing in primary school as a ten year old. Once a week, the highlight of my primary school week was joining the whole class “Let’s sing” session. The old radio would be turned on at the front of the class, we would take out our colorful song books and belt out an eclectic mix of songs together. In 1983, the songbook contained a song that leave a deep impression on me, Eric Bogle’s “And the band played Waltzing Matilda”.

The song is a haunting ballad of the journey of a young Australian man heading off to Gallipoli, cheered off by excited crowds, only to experience the hell of war and return maimed physically and emotionally. Written in 1971 at the height of the anti-Vietnam war movement, it strikes a powerful blow against war and the false “celebrations” of ANZAC day that are meant to sanctify this horror.

The song certainly left a powerful impression on me and I am always struck by the fact it is pretty much my only memory of engaging with ANZAC day from Primary school. The 80’s were a time when the “Vietnam Syndrome” still hung in the air. This
“syndrome” is the ruling classes term for the lingering anti-war sentiment that existed in the mass of the working class after that murderous war. They knew something had to be done and they got to work.

Since the Hawke Labor Government of the 1980’s, literally billions has been spent in Australia on constructing a virtual state religion around ANZAC Day. Hawke was the first Prime Minister to make the “pilgrimage” to Turkey on ANZAC Day in 1990. Since then we have had endless speeches, parades, expanded war memorials, documentaries and books. The education system has been flooded with “educational materials” to teach this curriculum including picture books about animals who “fought” for Australia for pre-schoolers! Even when I was teaching history over ten years ago, I would surreptitiously throw out the glossy pamphlets, DVD’s etc I was sent each year but now I believe teachers are forced to teach this curriculum.

Australian culture is now saturated annually with militaristic imagery on ANZAC Day. Even this year, under conditions of pandemic, we are being encouraged to mark ANZAC Day by lighting candles in our driveway at dawn. Whilst for ordinary people, the phrase “Lest we forget” may contain some confused anti-war sentiments, the ruling class knows full well the purpose of cultivating this “celebration”. The ruling class has been working for decades to try and ensure that the next generation will be ready when called upon to “make the ultimate sacrifice” in US Imperialism’s next bloodbath could be another World War, this time with China and Russia. For the ruling class the phrase “Lest we forget” is not a phrase to mourn the death of soldiers past but to lay the groundwork for murdering more young people in the meat grinder of imperialist war.
How dated the following lines now seem from Eric Bogle’s classic:

“And now every April I sit on my porch
And I watch the parade pass before me
I see my old comrades, how proudly they march
Reliving their dreams of past glory
I see the old men, all twisted and torn
The forgotten heroes of a forgotten war
And the young people ask me, “what are they
Marching for?”
And I ask myself the same question
And the band plays Waltzing Matilda
And the old men still answer to the call
But year after year their numbers get fewer
Some day no one will march there at all”

However, I remain grateful for being exposed to the truths of this song and the anti-imperialist and anti-war seeds it planted in my mind. One day, when the working class has overthrown capitalism and humanity has thrown off the shackles of mindless nationalism, we can again look back at ANZAC as a ritual from another time, a time when young people were forced to fight for “God and Country” and died in the mud. A time when trillions were wasted on war instead on fighting disease and hunger.

So I will mark ANZAC Day this year by once again listening to the Pogues’ haunting version of “And the band plays Waltzing Matilda” and look forward to a future April 25th, when no one will march there at all.
Theatre of Life: the gourmet’s response to conditions of social crisis

By Owen Hsieh – 30/11/2019

"..it belongs to everybody, the responsibility to take care of other people that are in dire straits, but I believe that it comes natural, for a lot of cooks to want to take care of people because that’s what we do every day, you feed people.”

Visiting chef Rene Redzepi, Noma (restaurant), Copenhagen, Denmark.

"..We dont pretend we are going to change their lives, we’ll give them 2 hours, a small moment of joy, that’s all. This is the ambition.”

Visiting chef Alain Ducasse, Du Plaza Athenee, Paris, France.

Theatre of life is a documentary film set in Milan, Italy; it chronicles the formation and running of a soup kitchen using seconds and expired foodstuffs from the 2015 world expo in Milan to give aid to the indigent. Refettorio Ambrosiano in the Greco district of Milan, is founded by chef Massimo Bottura. Using his many connections as a successful chef, he
assembles team of colleagues and co thinkers to renovate to an derelict theatre, repurposing it as a modern commercial kitchen with a tastefully appointed dining hall. The scene is set, chef Bottura then makes a round of phone calls to enlist a number of successful chefs from all over the globe to volunteer to come visit and work in kitchen, highly acclaimed chefs from afar as America, Brazil and Japan come to help run this initiative.

The next series of scenes are of the visiting chefs, and their brigades, using their vision and technical skills to cook and present the waste ingredients in interesting and exciting ways. Most of the dishes are made using day old bread from the various pavilions at the expo as it is cheap and abundant. Bread becomes a core ingredient Refettorio Ambrosiano, a versatile ingredient which is used in many creative recipes, i.e. ground and used as a base for soup, as cake batter and so on.

Encompassing the whole experience of the Refettorio, the film is set in the kitchen, the dining room, and in exploring the life and times of its patrons. We see the construction of the kitchen and renovation of the building, those who pick up the ingredients, the operation of the kitchen, the personal gastronomic philosophies of the various celebrity chefs and finally the reception from the diners and its impact on their lives, with a number of in depth profiles and interviews with them.

An uplifting film as some 90 volunteers come to work in the kitchen and dining room during the production of the film, these people are genuinely concerned about the impact of poverty and food waste and wish to help. To this day Refettorio Ambrosiano is open serving meals to those in need.
Chef Bottura has gone on to found the charity Food for Soul which has gone on to set up several other Refettorios in other countries.

But

A definite weakness of the film is the inability or unwillingness to question the social context which makes this whole venture necessary. This film declines to address the roots of the crisis of hunger, food insecurity, and the overall precariousness of the life of the diners. This is beyond the ken of the chefs and the filmmaker.

Further to this point we see a definite unwillingness on the part of our chefs to discuss wider social themes, at one point chef Bottura grows agitated at the mention of wider problems of everyday life by the diners, replying with a platitudinous sympathy before walking away.

Padre Don Giuliano Savina, who is heavily involved in the project, as his parish is next door, reinforces this as he justifies this group’s casual lighthearted approach towards their diners:

“We sit around a table, and there is no curiosity about what happened to you. How you ended up in this situation. Because what counts right now is you. When people understand there is no curiosity, there is no ulterior motive, there is simply an interest in spending time, what more can you ask for?”

Yet the world beyond the table makes and appearance; one
diner, Fawaz Naser, after being continually frustrated by his inability to obtain crisis accommodation in chronically overloaded homeless shelters, grows impatient with the Refettorio towards the end of the film:

“We need to eat. But the chefs, they speak about the tables, about Expo, about everything. But our problems, nobody speak about that. For this, I prefer to go out from there. Because I feel that I’m an object, not a person. Because the real problems are here, how to go to sleep, how to eat.”

Refettorio Ambrosiano is an admirable initiative, Theatre of Life is a charming film, yet for not exploring wider social and political processes in any depth, it suffers. Theatre of Life in its generosity and effort offers us something, but it doesn’t go nearly far enough. It is but the beginning of a necessary, wider foray into these burning issues. For Svaték and chef Bottura, thinking with their stomach only got them so far, there is a disproportionate discussion of food, cookery and fine dining that wafts above the life and times of our downtrodden compatriots.

A better approach to the massive problem of the polarisation of society, with the relative and absolute impoverishment of the working class majority; where access to decent housing and a proper diet is routinely denied, is best encapsulated in the following quote:

“They try to solve the problem of poverty, for instance, by keeping the poor alive; or, in the case of a very advanced school, by amusing the poor. But this is not a solution: it is an aggravation of the difficulty. The proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be
impossible."

Excerpt from Oscar Wilde – The Soul of Man under Socialism

The film prompts the question: under what actual conditions can we solve world hunger, eradicate poverty and homelessness? How can we ‘reconstruct society’ to further this aim? In this respect the better use of stale bread to give a dirt will not be a panacea, it is laughable to think otherwise. Big picture thinking is required, in the final analysis, nothing short of a political revolution will help the great mass of people drawn into poverty. The demand must be advanced for the redistribution of the productive capacities of society, so that the basic necessities in the ‘theatre of life’ are available to all, providing a dignified, meaningful existence to everyone, and not just those who can afford it, society will then be immeasurably enriched and enlivened for it.

Theatre of Life
Director: Peter Svatek
93 minutes
2016
Shooting the Messenger by Andrew Fowler: Book Review

by Owen Hsieh, January 23rd 2019

Published by Routledge Press, Shooting the Messenger: Criminalizing Journalism is a valuable contribution to understanding the decline of the media landscape in both the corporate and state press. Featuring a number of case studies, from the media coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions based on the weapons of mass destruction lies, the protection of journalist sources with reference to the Pentagon Papers, to the future of the conventional media in the faces of declining revenues, and the restrictions on their craft through onerous “War on Terror” legislation.
This wide ranging, critical foray is the work of Andrew Fowler, a former investigative journalist for the ABC TV Four Corners program. Fowler was the reporter behind the special on the conspiracy to extradite Julian — ‘Sex, Lies and Julian Assange’ in 2010 (which can be streamed here). Since then he has authored a biography of Julian Assange entitled The Most Dangerous Man in the World (2011), The War on Journalism – Media Moguls, Whistleblowers, and the Price of Freedom (2015). Shooting the Messenger (2018) is his latest work.

One chapter of Shooting the Messenger deals with the Snowden revelations around mass surveillance. It serves as an interesting case study of mistakes in handling sensitive information obtained in the public interest, with proof of many missed opportunities.

Fowler takes aim at the coterie of Glenn Greenwald, Laura Poitras and The Guardian for their mismanagement of the Snowden leaks.

To focus only on Greenwald’s comedy of errors

He failed to install the PGP software Snowden requested. “It was Poitras that received the all important communication from Snowden by encrypted email. Greenwald had failed to install the program despite detailed prompts and even lessons from Snowden.”

In a breathtaking example of irresponsibility, he failed to prevent the Government obtaining the documents. This occurred when his partner was traveling from the UK home to Brazil, trusted as courier of hardware and information pertaining to the Snowden leaks. Of course he was detained in Heathrow Airport by intelligence personnel wherein his laptop, external hard drive were seized. At that time they seized a “written note giving the key” to access information stored on a number
of memory sticks holding an index of the information stored.

Fowler also accuses Greenwald of using the information as its personal fiefdom, becoming a “gold mine for The Intercept” and using the exclusive information given in privilege to form the basis for founding his website, The Intercept.

‘The documents thus far leaked by Greenwald are very US-centric, at the expense of information around the other 5 eyes countries’. Fowler further notes, ‘the documents in the Snowden leaks are fast losing their currency, and are being leaked at an inordinately slow rate.’

‘Though the leaks were handled responsibly in the early days, instead of making the information widely available, they have leaked the documents when it best suited them. They have not utilized the expertise of a lot of leading academics and journalists.’

Taken from an interview with a colleague, Fowler states: “it was unfortunate that Snowden gave the information to just two people”.

A damning indictment.

Fowler’s book reads like a fleshed out version of Pilger’s Vichy journalists speech delivered at the Free Julian Assange rally organised by the Socialist Equality Party in 2018 (watch here), in which Pilger said:

"The Guardian, reputedly once a great liberal newspaper has conducted a vendetta against Julian Assange. Like a spurned lover, the Guardian has aimed its personal, petty and inhuman cowardly attacks on a man who’s work they once published and profited from... Part of a plan to raise cover price, to make money, often big money. While Wikileaks and Julian struggled to survive, with not a penny for Wikileaks... they also revealed the secret password Julian had given the guardian in
confidence, which was designed to protect a digital file containing the US embassy cables... ...this is how low the craft of Journalism has sunk.”

Although largely an academic text, it is still an insightful and enjoyable read. Shooting the Messenger is a powerful contribution to a full examination of recent history and its coverage in conventional media sources.

Shooting the Messenger – Criminalising Journalism
Andrew Fowler
2018
Routledge, New York

VICE: Film Review – Black comedy showing the black heart of U.S. Imperialism

Vice is a Hollywood biography of former Vice President Dick Cheney. This black comedy paints a damning portrait, not only of the Machiavellian Cheney, but of the trail of horror left behind by U.S. Imperialism. For all the movie’s limitations, it contains moments that so viscerally capture the impact of these crimes that as a viewer I didn’t know whether I wanted to look away in horror or walk up to the screen to punch Cheney in the face. These moments alone make this a
significant Hollywood movie and worth seeing.

Vice is written and directed by Adam McKay who has most notably directed The Big Short examining the GFC. Vice is slickly directed and flashes between scenes that cut across place and time for dramatic and comedic effect.

As the movie opens a statement appears acknowledging the difficulty of presenting the story of “one of the most secretive leaders in history”. Perhaps the full story of Cheney crimes will not be told until after the socialist revolution when the archives are opened and Cheney is in the dock for his war crimes!

McKay gives it a red hot go though. The movie focusses on Cheney time as Vice President under George Bush Jnr but also shows how Cheney’s career began as Donald Rumsfeld’s intern under Nixon. This highlights that the cabal of warmongers (Cheney, Rumsfeld and Wolfowitz) who engineered the Iraq invasion had worked together for decades. I was also unaware that Cheney was Secretary of Defence under George Bush Snr when the U.S. unleashed the attack on Iraq in 1991.
The movie is well acted with Bale both convincing and charismatic as Cheney. As someone who remembers Rumsfeld’s cheerfully fraudulent press statements amidst the mounting evidence of disaster in Iraq, I thought Steve Carrol did a great job capturing the exuberantly evil Rumsfeld. Sam Rockwell is also uncanny as the cynical but dopey George Bush Jnr. He almost steals the movie in the scene where, as he casually snacks on some chicken wings, he readily agrees to appoint Cheney his VP in return for Cheney running the more “mundane” areas such as “overseeing bureaucracy, managing military, energy, foreign policy.” Amy Adams as Lynne Cheney is also strong as the “Lady Macbeth” of the Cheney drama, ruthlessly supporting her husband’s pursuit of power.

The most memorable moments of the movie almost flashed by. In one scene, set in 1968, Rumsfeld tells a young Cheney how at that moment, Kissinger and Nixon were in an office deciding to bomb Cambodia. As he talks the film flashes to a village scene of Cambodian peasants.
Rumsfeld boasts that because of that conversation bombs would soon be dropping and “That was kind of power that exists in this building”. The film then flashes back to Cambodia just long enough to show the Cambodian civilians being obliterated by an exploding bomb.

Bombing of Baghdad March 2003.

A similar device is used when showing George Bush Jnr announcing the commencement of the “Shock and Awe” bombing of Iraq. The camera pans down and shows a nervous Bush tapping his toes. The film flashes to a family cowering under a table in Baghdad as U.S. bombs fall and the camera reveals the fathers toes nervously tapping. In other scenes Cheney is shown giving orders whilst flashes appear of people being brutally waterboarded, tortured or kidnapped by the CIA.
The cumulative effect of these short scenes is to undermine the collective amnesia propagated by the ruling class. Such amnesia is necessary to maintain the lie that the U.S. Empire upholds humanitarian values rather than brutally advancing geopolitical interests. To see cinema used this way to emphasize rather than obscure reality only emphasizes how Hollywood serves to chloroform popular consciousness much of the time.

Though limited in its focus on the “villain” Cheney, the movie reveals the decay of U.S. democracy over the last fifty years. It shows how a culture of growing impunity and lawlessness developed from Watergate, to the stolen election of 2000 and then to the fall scale assault on democratic rights and institutions launched under the bogus “War on Terror.

Cheney is shown working to give a veneer of legality to torture, surveillance and war crimes including the infamous “Torture memo” of 2002. Cheney justified these actions under an extreme interpretation of the “Unitary Executive Theory” which views the President as able
to act without any oversight from the other branches of government. It is essentially the legal view of Nixon’s infamous statement “Well, when the president does it, that means that it is not illegal”.

The threadbare nature of this “legality” is suggested by the scene where Rumsfeld, after being fired by Cheney as the Iraq War goes from bad to worse, mutters into the phone “Do you think they will indict us?”. There is a reason that the U.S. refuses to ratify the International Criminal Court Convention and under Bush/Cheney Congress passed a law authorizing the President to “use all means necessary” to release any U.S and allied personal detained by the ICC. Just recently John Bolton threatened sanctions and even the arrest of ICC officials if they dared to investigate U.S. war crimes in Afghanistan or Israel’s war crimes in Gaza.

The cynical use of the “War on Terror” is also excoriated. In a chilling scene a calm Cheney is shown in the war room in the
hours after the 9/11 attacks whilst those around him panic. The narrator explains that Cheney saw something in those moments that others couldn’t – “opportunity”. Indeed audiences are told how FOI requests reveal Cheney met with oil company executives prior to 9/11 and dividing up a map of Iraq into various company concessions. It is also made clear how Cheney and Haliburton both made out like bandits through the privatisation of swathes of the Iraq War. McKay explains that ISIS is actually a product of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and the blood of the thousands of people murdered by them subsequently ultimately lies at the foot of U.S. Imperialism.

The movie however suffers from some serious political limitations. In terms of the War on Terror the movie tries to “have a bob each way”. Whilst showing that the invasion of Iraq was indeed a premeditated act of plunder some scenes imply that Cheney was acting from genuine if misguided motivations to “protect” the United States in response to the attacks of 9/11.

This points to a deeper flaw in the director Mckay’s perspective, that the crimes of Cheney do not flow from the actions of a small malevolent cabal of Washington insiders but inevitably from U.S. Imperialism attempts to offset its relative decline over the last forty years though increasingly reckless use of military power. This is the dynamic that has driven the explosion of U.S. violence across the Middle East in the last 27 years, backed by Republicans and Democrats and is now driving the U.S. into conflict with Russia.
and China threatening World War 3.

McKay’s presentation of events also seems to imply that the U.S. wars of aggression can be divided into “good” and “bad” wars. Clearly Vietnam and the 2003 Iraq war fall in his view into the “bad” wars. Meanwhile he offers no criticisms of either the Persian Gulf War of 1991 or the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 both which resulted in horrific loss of life.

In an interview with “Entertainment Weekly” McKay discussed an amusing sequence in the middle of the film where inserted a counterfactual “ending” based on a reality where Cheney never takes the job as VP but instead devotes himself to among other things the breeding of pedigree Golden Retrievers! McKay in his discussion states fairly clearly that he has no objection to Cheney’s involvement in the Persian Gulf War:
“There is an underlying emotion. In writing this story, it so easily could have ended there. The guy had a solid career. Yeah, he was a little to the right, and he saw some dodgy things, but he did a good job as secretary of defense. I mean, he was making a fortune as a CEO of Halliburton. That could’ve been it, and he got that phone call.”

The most serious flaw in the movie though is the free pass it gives the Democrats. Whilst acknowledging Hillary Clinton’s support for the 2003 invasion the movie presents both Carter and Obama in a wholly uncritical way. This is not entirely surprising when the end credits reveal the producers of Vice included well know Hollywood Democrat supporters such as Will Ferrell and Brad Pitt.

The movie’s politics would have been immeasurably strengthened by even a brief mention of the way Obama protected the CIA torturers, kept Guantanamo open, built on the surveillance powers of
Bush/Cheney, expanded lethal drone bombings, was personally involved in drawing up kill lists and oversaw the destruction of Libya. Instead the only shot of Obama is crowds cheering him at his inauguration.

It’s as if Obama’s Presidency played no part in the continued decay of U.S. democracy. The baton of imperialist violence was instead passed somehow from Nixon to Bush Jnr to Trump without ever touching the unsullied hand of the Democrats!

The final weakness of the movie is its portrayal of the U.S. working class. Ordinary people are repeatedly portrayed as gullible, easily manipulated and distracted by mindless pursuits. The metaphor of Cheney baiting a hook is used repeatedly throughout the movie to demonstrate his Machiavellian methods. Watching Vice, one would think that every American “took the bait”.

The protests against the 2000 stolen election are airbrushed out of view. We see a shot of Bush’s limousine speeding to the White House on inauguration day in an empty street. It is not explained the streets are empty as police struggled to keep thousands of protestors who lined the streets away from the motorcade.
Protesters march in San Francisco Thursday, March 20, 2003. (AP Photo/Noah Berger)

Whilst the effectiveness of the Cheney orchestrated lies about WMD’s is emphasized the movie omits any reference to the fact February 2003 saw the largest protests in history within the U.S. and internationally against the looming invasion.

This makes one of the final scene in the movies ring hollow when Cheney breaks the forth wall and accuses the audience of being partly responsible for his crimes stating “you chose me”. Not only does this ignore the very real opposition that existed to Bush/Cheney, the fraudulent way they gained power but it also ignores the way under capitalism the U.S. working class is trapped within the bogus “choice” of two war mongering parties of Wall St.

Despite all of these limitations, Vice contains more political truths about the nature of U.S. Imperialism and the sickness at the heart of the U.S. ruling class than any other comparable Hollywood movie in recent times. It is a timely and important contribution.

Perhaps the most terrifying point that flows from Vice though is all the illegitimate powers that were concentrated in the hands of the Presidency are now available for the openly
fascist Trump to utilise. Trump has made it clear he intends to try to extend these powers into a full Presidential dictatorship where the President can amend the Constitution by decree and authorize any spending that he wishes such as on “The Wall” without Congressional approval. Trump is both the product and an active agent in the complete collapse of bourgeois democratic norms that is now occurring within the U.S. I could only think of Trump when I watched a chilling moment in Vice, where Cheney whispers to his wife “The world has not yet seen the full power of the American Presidency.”

The Islamist – by Ed Husain: Book Review

The Islamist is the story of a young man’s journey in and outside of radical fundamentalist Islamic groups in Britain in the 90s and early 2000s. In this memoir he writes of his youth, college and university years, his time as a graduate working at HSBC, and travels abroad to as a TESOL teacher in Syria and Saudi Arabia before returning to the UK. In The Islamist he provides and insightful, reasoned critique of the political philosophy of radical Islam.
ED HUSAIN

Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, what I saw inside and why I left

THE ISLAMIST
Although his family followed a spiritual form of Islam, Husain was later recruited by a school friend and took on the radical invective of political Islam through associations formed in the notorious East London Mosque, becoming a member of the Young Muslim Organisation UK – The youth movement of the Islamic foundation of the UK, supporters of Jamat-e-Islami, openly calling for the creation of an Islamic state.

Through college, Husain was a leading member of the YMO, campaigning aggressively to build the Islamist group in opposition to the Socialist Workers Party on campus, Husain was central to their undertaking a number of controversial media stunts to build support and media attention.

Later during the Bosnian war, part the partition of the former Yugoslavia, the students on campus railed against the atrocities therin and sought to stop the genocidal war. Against the parochial outlook of the YMO, in it’s exclusive focus over the Indian subcontinent, and its inability or unwillingness to send speakers for students events on these questions, the students began to invite speakers from Hizb-ut-Tahir and other Wahabi groups to the campus. The world view and system of thought in the Hizb were seen to be more comprehensive and wide ranging than the YMO, which led to support for literalist interpretations of the Koran on campus.

Husain being one of those students, he soon changed his organisational commitment, attending private study, building and attending events and canvassing for Hizb.

Through his dedication Husain was soon seen as an active leading member, until a terrible episode of intramural violence on campus led him to reconsider. Combined with rampant organisational hypocrisy, thus began his gradual period of turning away from fanaticism.

“Establishing the Islamic state was more important than minor matters such as praying, reciting the Koran, giving to
charity, or being kind to parents or fellow muslims... ... My life was consumed with fury, inner confusion, a desire to dominate everything, and my abject failure to be a good Muslim. I had started out on this journey ‘wanting more Islam’ and ended up losing its essence.” (148)

Though this is not all, his story is unique. What makes this book special is as a former insider and social sciences student, he was able to study and work through the Hizb’s writings and internal documents, thus in the process of overcoming them he critiqued the political philosophy of the Islamists of its founder, Nabhani. In its ‘original pure Muslim doctrine’ he found it constituted an immense intellectual fraud, and in some cases outright plagiarism.

The prescribed writings of Nabhani borrowed heavily from European political thought, based heavily on the thought of Hegel, Rosseau and Gramsci.

“My new readings of Nabhani’s writings suggested that his conceptual framework of a so called Islamic state was not the continuation of a political entity set up by the prophet, maintained by the caliphs down the ages (however debatable) but in fact Nabhani’s response to the circumstances he encountered: secular modernism” (161)

“Nabhani’s ideas were not innovatory Muslim thinking, but wholly derived from European political thought. In and of itself this was not a negative development. My objection, was and removing, the deception of the Hizb -ut-Tahir in claiming that it was ‘pure in thought’, not influenced by Kufr.” (162)

“Nabhani’s major mistake was to accept an emphasis on the state over other social structures, and then assume that the prophet Mohammed had struggled to establish a political entity. Rather than approach the life of the Prophet in its proper context of seventh-century pagan tribalism, which the Prophet marvellously reversed to the belief in the one god and
Abraham. Nabhani saw only the political office of the prophet and have precedence over all else.

In my mind Nabhani had fallen from his pedestal. And with him, all of Hizb Ut-Tahir’s claims to political purity, intellectual superiority, deep thoughts and the dressing up in religious terms of a political agenda born in the 1950s. Islamism became an empty bankrupt ideology”. (164)

Husain then turned away from the Hizb, in what he calls an identity crisis he began a short association with the Islamic Society of Britain (ISB), which he found equally repugnant. In the closed Koran study sessions, it was more of the same.

“Among Islamists I was a ‘brother’. I was not to dispute our unquestioned perceptions: hatred of Jews, Hindus, Americans, Gays, the subordination of women” (171)

Though there was one upside to this brief association, through the ISB he discovered the spiritual Islam of Imam Hamza Yusuf Hanson by chance. A prominent islamic scholar advocating for the resurgence of the spiritual movement of Islam, he held a profound grasp of theological questions, finding support for his positions by quoting heavily from the poetry of the Koran.

This revelation preceded Husain’s return to the spiritual form of Islam, coming a full circle, to the form of Islam practiced in his youth at home. His views were later reinforced by observing devout Sufi Muslims while travelling in Turkey, learning Arabic, his time in the predominantly Muslim societies of Syria and Saudi Arabia as a TESOL teacher, and an avowal of non-violence after seeing violence on campus, 9/11 and the 2005 London Tube attacks.

As a short popular memoir he it could be said he necessarily glosses over some pressing questions of the day that deserve wider investigation and discussion i.e. the promotion of identity politics, the cultivation of nationalism and chauvinism, nor does he account for his personal support for
war criminal Tony Blair and the Labour Party. Despite the obvious restrictions of its form it would appear at the time of its writing the Islamist has no answers for the aforementioned.

Despite this Husain achieves his objective and provides a well rounded, thorough critique of Islamism in the UK with references to his experiences as a young man through the 90s and early 2000s. This along with his vignettes of student politics, the inner life of various Islamist groups and his travels abroad, the book is worthy reading. The Islamist is its own small contribution to uniting the working class, overcoming xenophobia and nationalism in a common struggle across race, religion and nationality.

There is some promise in Husain, as he has since gone on to write a short history: ‘The house of Islam: A global history’ published in 2018. The blurb reads:

“Today, Islam is to many in the west an alien force with Muslims held in suspicion. Failure to grasp the inner working of religion and geopolitics has haunted American Foreign policy for decades and has been decisive in the new administration’s controversial orders. The intricacies and shadings must be understood by the West not only to build a stronger, more harmonious relationship between the two cultures, but also for greater accuracy in predictions as to how current crises, such as the growth of ISIS, will develop and from where the next might emerge.”

Perhaps this next instalment as it were will go some way to redressing the foibles and weakness of Husain’s first work?

The Islamist: Why I joined radical Islam in Britain, What i saw inside and why I left
Ed Husain
Penguin books
2007.
Hunter: For the Record: Documentary Review

Hunter for the Record tells the story of the life of rapper Robert Hunter aka MC Hunter (1975-2011). It is a comprehensive look at Hunter’s life and times with reference to his music, live shows and interviews interspersed with comments from friends and family.

MC Hunter is an important figure in the history of Australian Hip Hop. As a pioneering figure who first started to rap in 1994, mostly by participating in public freestyle battle rap competitions. Initially taking elements from American gangster rap and B Boy culture before his music became more authentic – to rap in in a more authentic manner – In his colloquial language about his own experiences.

He is remembered as a tireless advocate of Australian music, in the creation of his numerous albums in collaboration with the West Australian musical collective Syllabolix – SBX.

This crowd funded Documentary shows his full life and times, starting from boyhood, his later dependence on drugs and alcohol, becoming a father, the relationship with his ex, his diagnosis with cancer and his struggle with his own mortality.
– the documentary shows his changing into a different man.

Some of the footage from the documentary comes from Hunter’s personal video camera, initially capturing his drunken, drug fuelled early life where his sole concern was ‘to have a good time’. Against footage from a later period after his diagnosis with cancer where he is seen to settle down.

Around this time he was quoted to say “Cancer is the best thing that happened to me”, it was only in remission that he realised some of his past follies and the great amount of time he had wasted.

He sought to repair his relationship with his son Marley and ex Laura. He also came back to making music with a renewed sense of urgency and vigour. His music was seen to contain more messages as he thought about what he could pass on and what was to be his legacy.

Consider this – During the early 2000s, he produced two albums Done DL in 2002 and Going back to Yokine in 2006, counterposed to his later years he would go on to produce 3 albums within as many years, along with a number of other smaller projects and collaborations – Monster House in 2010, Fear and Loathing in 2011, and Bring It All Back – released posthumously in 2013. Also producing a compilation rap album – Australian Hip Hop supports CanTeen in 2011 – which raised over $100 000 for this charity which provides support for young people with Cancer. A very noble act of philanthropy.

Under the weight of events, Hunter moved from making fairly offensive rap with a raw style – for which he is most well known for with songs like I’m a Cunt to making more introspective, thoughtful rap music such as You and Me. These two songs can form the basis of a quick example of the stark contrast of Hunter’s voice and thought from his earlier lyricism to his later music.
The documentary shows him as a dynamic, complex figure who dramatically changed after his diagnosis with cancer. By his simply recognising his youthful excesses he can hardly be compared to who he once was, in his twilight years he gave up the party lifestyle and wanted little more than to spend time with his son.

Hunter fought a long and hard battle with Cancer, living life to the full in writing, recording and performing his music despite his immense physical deterioration up til his passing. At the time of his death he was only 36 years old.

A limitation of the documentary is that it does not including any information or discussion about his last album produced posthumously – *Bring It All Back*. Perhaps the explanation is that the film was released a year prior to that of the final album – but in any case the documentary centred largely around Hunters final years is incomplete without it, *Bring It All Back* contained much that was to be his last testament so to speak.

Despite this minor shortfall, Hunter for the record is a fair attempt to portray the life and times of this influential Australian rapper. One of the more interesting documentaries in showing him not as a static and fixed personality, but a figure who was able to dramatically change as he sought to best respond and live differently under an illness with very serious and grave implications.

Hunter is a genre defining figure in the canon of Australian rap and hip hop, for that he will continue to excersize a positive lasting influence.
Persons of Interest: ASIO’s dirty war on dissent: Documentary Series Review

Persons of Interest is a four part documentary series exploring the lives of a cross section of Australia’s radicals through delving into their previously classified ASIO documents. It portrays their changing political perspectives in a roving discussion of their’ life and times, through interviews and with reference to the archived material in the reports, photos and footage from their files.

The documentary traverses decades of Australian’ political life in examining their changing fortunes, from the post war period, through Mcarthyism, the campaign against Australia’s involvement in Vietnam, right up to the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is a meticulously researched and well crafted documentary series, it is a gives great insight into these tumultuous periods.

The first disk shows the story of Roger Milliss and his father
Bruce, both Communist Party members. Next shown is Michael Hyde, part of the student protests against Australia’s involvement in the Vietnam war. The third disk is centred on Gary Foley, a black nationalist modelled after the Black Panther movement. The final story is that of Frank Hardy, Australian novelist and Communist.

Within this short documentary series is the entire gamut of the characters involved, from the people formerly under investigation themselves, their family, acquaintances, the informants that spied on them, and even former ASIO intelligence agents are interviewed. Along with historians and other academics who give insightful and worthy commentary.

The film it is hostile to the intrusion of ASIO into the personal life of the various political opponents of the government of the day. In an obvious reference to the leaks of Snowden, it contrasts the crude surveillance of an earlier era, against “the recent leaks that exposed spying and surveillance on a massive scale”. This alongside the continual year on year increases in the powers, budget, staff numbers of Australia’s intelligence agencies, with the implementation of various anti terror laws, the narrator grimly states that: “it paints a bright future” for them. Since the documentary’ release the process has continue uninterrupted, most recently with the passing of the foreign interference bill.

Since making Persons Of Interest for in 2014, Smart Street Films have struggled to secure funding for a second season, largely due to the perennial budget cuts to Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the semi-privatisation of SBS, both a component of the ongoing austerity and the slashing of social spending. The first four documentaries were envisaged as only the first series in a running project, there are lots of stories to be told from reading though the archives. After the filmmakers lobbying and petitioning the two state broadcasters, it was only recently that we saw the announcement that they have secured a new contract to produced
a program of short 12 minute documentaries on major news stories from the last 40 years for ABC Iview to be called Retro-Report.

The trend towards ever increasing funds for the Intelligence agencies alongside the decimation of funding for arts and culture shows no sign of abating, in the 2018-19 budget, the Turnbull cabinet announced:

“To deal with anticipated social and political disaffection, the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO), will receive a $24.4 million boost this year, up from $518.6 million, adding 121 full-time jobs to its staff of about 1,800.” (1)

And in the next breath:

“Australian Broadcasting Corporation news services and jobs will be further gutted by freezing its funding until 2021–22, slicing another $83.7 million over three years, on top of $254 million in cuts imposed since 2014.” (1)

Nearly limitless funds for the intelligence agencies while funding for access to high quality arts and culture through the public broadcaster is slashed!

Despite the egregious state of affairs, Persons of Interest is a great concept, it is a fascinating documentary. It acts as a damning exposure on the pernicious influence excersized by the intelligence agencies over the lives of ordinary Australians. I would even go so far to say that it is exciting to see this reasoned, probative look into Australian history produced. To that end it deserves a wider audience.

Persons of Interest: ASIO’s dirty war on dissent
4 x 52 minute films
Smart Street Films
2014
Director: Hayden Keenan
The Commissar Vanishes: the falsification of photographs and art in Stalin’s Russia By David King: Book review

The Commissar Vanishes is another anthology of images from the David King collection in which he displays original artwork and photographs from the early period following the Russian revolution, against later images where people were edited out and removed in the campaign of political genocide initiated by Stalin.

Unlike Russian Revolutionary Posters, The Commissar Vanishes does not confine itself to discussing only one medium, it is a wide foray into a range of images from all types of photography and art. Secondly in the previously reviewed work, King let the images speak for themselves as it were, providing only a short scintillating introduction along with short footnotes for each image. Thankfully this is a larger book at 192 allowowwing King to provide a much larger body of text, a welcome development. The commentary in the back story for each image, and the subsequent developments in the constant re-editing of each images are thought provoking.
The book takes its title from a photo from the celebration of the second anniversary of the October revolution in Red Square Moscow (page 46). In this image, Trotsky and Lenin are standing side by side, it is later retouched to remove Trotsky along with Kamenev and other minor figures in the Bolshevik party that fell out of favour. The original photo published in 1919, the highly edited version later appearing in 1967, 14 years after Stalin’s Death! So much for Kruschev’s secret speech and his call for the period of glastnost and perestroika with the full rehabilitation of the bureaucracies’ victims. This treatment did not apply for Trotsky and the most ardent Left Oppositionists. The falsification of Soviet history via direct orders from the Kremlin continued on long after Stalin’s death.
Next the cover shows a striking example of the ultimate absurdity of this historical revisionism. The original photo shows Stalin and three others “in Leningrad 1926, celebrating the destruction of Zinoviev’s anti-Stalinist opposition”. In subsequent photos one figure disappears at a time, until “Stalin the executioner alone remains” (page 104). The ‘grey blur’ of the revolution eliminated all rivals and revised history to sit him front and centre in the Bolshevik Party and the history of the Russian Revolution as a whole, in all official records and books he was said to be Lenin’s best disciple.

Stalin and his cohorts were devastatingly characterised in Trotsky’s autobiography *My Life* as follows:
“the beginning of 1917 found them left to their own resources. The political situation was difficult. Here was there chance to show what they had learned in Lenin’s school and what they could do without Lenin. Let them name one of their number who arrived independently at the position achieved identically by Lenin in Geneva and by me in New York. They cannot name a single one. The Petrograd Pravda, which was edited by Stalin and Kamenev until Lenins arrival, will always remain a document of limited understanding, blindness and opportunism. And yet the mass membership of the party, like the working class as a whole, was moving spontaneously towards the fight for power. There was no other path for either the party or the country.

In the years of reaction, one needed political foresight in order to hold fast to the prospect of a permanent revolution. Probably nothing more than political sense was required to advance the slogan of the fight for power in March, 1917. Not a single one of the present leaders revealed such a foresight or such a sense. Not one of them went beyond the position of the left petty bourgeoise democrat in March 1917. Not one of them stood the test of history.” (1)

And again in Victor Serge’s brilliant novel Midnight in the Century, wherein two exiled Left Oppositionists are again
imprisoned in the days leading up to a coming party congress, from prison they are allowed to write appeals for their case, but in the finest traditions set by other Marxists on trial they sought to use the trial as a political exposure of the real criminals, their letters from prison are vehement in their denunciations of Stalin, one prisoner writes from his cell:

“What more would you do. Kona Djugashvili Stalin, the Cain of tomorrow, what more would you do if, like the agent provocateur Avec, you were a mere tool of the bourgeois police scum? You were kicked out of the party in 1907 for pushing it into highway robbery; Mou were an opportunist in 1917, and opportunist in 1923, slapped down by Lenin in his last letter, an opponent of industrialisation until 1926, an apologist for the rich peasantry in 1926, an accomplice of Chiang Kaishek in 1927, responsible for the useless Canton massacre, the harbinger of Fascism in Germany, the organiser of famine, the persecutor of proletarian Leninists…” Ryzhik had written these lines – and many more vehement lines - in his impersonal hand, every letter etched deeply into the grey paper. With each sentence, as he wrote, Ryzhik had leaped to his feet and paced around his cell, gesticulating. Aloud, he harangued the Other: ‘Koba! Koba! You scoundrel! What have you done to the party? What have you done to our iron cohort? You’re as supple as a noose, lying to us at every congress, every politburo meeting, bastard, bastard, bastard…”

Like the fictional Rhyzik quoted above, King has successfully exposed the historical revisionism of the Stalinist bureaucracy by comparing the original images against later revisions, effectively demonstrating how political figures in the Soviet Union, Trotsky above all, were murdered then scrubbed from history. The Commissar Vanishes is another splendid contribution to the study of the Soviet Union. He has done us all a great service in preserving these images, and getting the message out there about what really happened in
the degeneration of the first workers state though his many published works and exhibitions.

*The Comissar Vanishes: the falsification of photographs and art in Stalin’s Russia*
David King
Metropolitan books
192 pp, 1997

**References**

1. Leon Trostky, My Life, pp 259

2. Victor Serge, Midnight in the century, pp 183

**Further reading**

Exposing Stalin’s “retouching”

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**Russian Revolutionary Posters: from civil war to Socialist Realism, from**
Bolshevism to the end of Stalinism by David King: Book Review

Russian Revolutionary Posters is the contribution of David King (1943-2016) in fighting for historical truth in preserving posters and artwork from the Soviet Union for posterity.

King begins by giving the fascinating prelude to this story in first learning of the existence of, and then trying to secure a copy of “Russki Revolyutsionnii Plakat” by Vyacheslav Polonsky, formerly in charge of the Literature and Publishing department of the Red Army Political Administration under the direction of the Revolutionary Military Council (chaired of Leon Trotsky no less!). In 1925 Polonsky published an anthology of the best posters, reproducing 200 and cataloguing 854 others.

Giving a brief biography of the man, King writes:

“Polonskys book is the first authoritative work to have been written on the subject and is still an invaluable record. It also contributed to getting him into trouble. Throughout the entire 200 plus pages of the book there is no mention of, let alone image, of Stalin, his importance being almost negligible – “a grey blur” – until the late 1920s.. ...Polonsky was soon silenced. After Trotsky was arrested, exiled and finally banished forever from soviet soil, Polonsky was accused of “ideological and political mistakes”, “counter revolutionary activities”, denounced as a Trotskyist and a “right-wing
opportunist”. While on a lecture tour of Magnitogorsk in February 1932 he contracted typhus and died on the train travelling back to Moscow. He was aged 45.”

He speaks about the quest to find this rare book, Polonski having fallen out of favor, his work was largely lost and forgotten. With very few of this special book known in existence, King tramps through rare and antiquarian bookstores specialising in this type of literature where he receives tips to the possible whereabouts of surviving copies. He eventually finds a copy and through his fame and reputation as an archivist and publisher he also met those who had the originals and other posters of interest who either gave them freely or sold them to him.

King then goes on to provide something of a short history of the Soviet Union, discussing and documenting the posters starting with the immediate aftermath of the Russian Revolution in the period of civil war and imperialist intervention, the suppression of democracy in the Soviet Union after the death of Lenin in 1924, the mass terror of the 1930s, the ‘great patriotic war’, and the post war period until Stalin’s death. The posters are all annotated and are displayed chronologically. The posters referenced in the text so the reader can flip forward to see the one under discussion. Besides a short biography of Polonsky, King gives a few other glimpses into the life of select Soviet poster artists.

Through his meticulous research and study, King has a great knowledge and insight into Russian history, his introduction and comments on individual works, though short, are exceedingly well written. In the time of the post Stalinist school of historical falsification wherein the professional liars of Robert Service et al seek to deny the historical significance of the October revolution, Russian Revolutionary Posters is a joy to read as it is an honest work. This book is an excellent contribution to understanding the tragic fate of
the artistic and cultural impulses that initially flourished and then were destroyed in the degeneration of the first workers state under Stalin.

Secondly the efforts of King are counterposed against that of the Russian ruling class, even since the period of Glastnost and Perestroika, there are still much historical material under lock and key, and accessing these archives has become increasingly onerous as they place tougher restrictions on their use. In a recent episode they have been proven to have even gone as far as to wilfully destroying records from the Gulags! These posters are ultimately printed on fragile sheets of paper, through improper storage and negligence many could have been lost forever, we owe King a debt of gratitude for preserving and sharing the posters for future generations to enjoy and study, without his efforts we cant be sure it would have ever happened at all.

Russian Revolutionary Posters
David King
Tate Publishing (September 1, 2012)

Further reading:

David King 1943-2016: Revolutionary socialist, artist and defender of historical truth
https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2016/05/14/king-m14.html

Now available from Mehring Books: Russian Revolutionary Posters by David King
Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom: film review

Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom is a film about a small team at an NGO called the dinosaur protection group, centred around former Jurassic Park Operations manager Claire Dearing (Bryce Dallas Howard), they are given the opportunity to travel to Jurassic Park to try save key species from a second extinction as a Volcano on the island is set to erupt and wipe out all life that inhabits it.

After landing on the island they work with a team of professional poachers and animal traffickers to capture and load the creatures on to a large ship and escape moments before disaster strikes. With their mission complete, the creatures are en route for their new sanctuary island that has been specifically prepared for them, but not all is as it seems.

Similar to the last Jurassic World film, It is a Hollywood blockbuster, a largely formulaic action film replete with tense scenes of near misses and close calls, it grows tiring after a while and it all seem a little too far fetched. Though it is set to entertain and make big dollars, the film seeks to stay relevant and includes a small portion of social commentary in the form of depicting the military intelligence community and the world of big business in what is a generally poor light.
The efforts of the biologists and naturalists in preserving various species for posterity is counterposed against the perversion and corruption of their scientific achievements for potential military application and the continued self enrichment of the ultra wealthy top 1% of society. Around this point in the film, there is a character who has a remarkable likeness to Donald Trump, down to the trademark hairstyle. He plays an essential role in the proceedings wherein the transformation of the creatures to vehicles of profit and war are discussed.

Secondly there is a monologue at the opening and closing of the film, wherein Dr Ian Malcolm (a recurring character in this series of films played by Jeff Goldblum), speaks to a senate committee hearing about the park, speaking at length about the interplay between mankind and the natural world to the detriment of the later.

“We’re causing our own extinction, too many red lines have been crossed. Our home has in fundamental ways been polluted by avarice and political megalomania.”

Despite its social aspect, I wouldn’t get too excited about it. The characters are poorly developed and only come across as crude caricatures in an infantile dichotomy of good vs evil, relying more on fast action scenes with heavy special effects, than the import of character development, dialogue etc.

The last word on this film can only be given by this excellent summation of the last film in the series provided on the World Socialist Website:

“Of course, all of this, as sincere as it may be, has to be
taken with a large grain of salt. The mild criticisms occur in a film that is very much an integral part of the Hollywood blockbuster phenomenon, which largely obstructs reflecting seriously on anything...All in all, unfortunately, Jurassic World does what it was designed to do: entertain without demanding too much of the audience.” (1)

Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom
Director: Juan Antonio Bayona
Universal Studios
128 mins
Rated: M
Released in Au: 22 June

Reference

1. Jurassic World, Summer Blockbuster; WWS, 23 June 2015