

NOT GOING TO EXPO

A Theory of Impositions

ALEC McHOUL

It was an entirely conscious decision: to go to Brisbane in the middle of the beer commercial called 'The Bicentennial' and not to go to Expo. Conscious – but with reason? And, deeper mystery still: did I really not go?

Well, probably not. It was more likely a kind of training in the anti-establishmentism that comes from having grown up in the '60s, having limply and half-heartedly carried a certain flag during the apathetic '70s, and now finding myself faced with all kinds of enticements during the '80s to cease from all commitment and accept my post-crash yuppie lot. (Another bloody BMW? Zzzzzzzzzzzzz.)

I didn't go to Expo – but I bought a lightweight grey suit at Target in Bull Creek before I left and rolled up the sleeves, just like Don Johnson in *Miami Vice*. The two things aren't so separate. I mean, how cutely 'authentic', how working-class-made-good, to go all that way from Perth and come all the way back again, and to have it said that you 'didn't go'. In these days of concealed politics, it's the nearest we can get to refusing to collaborate. A Sartrean sacrifice: an essay in expositiveness. Going without a shave for all those weeks was very difficult. How does Don Johnson do it? Designer politics – the latest thing after situational ethics?

First day in Brisbane. Well, it wasn't possible to go to Expo that day. I had to get down to a conference on the Gold Coast. The name of that place is a continual fascination. It speaks of European interests in Africa. The only non-town in Queensland. The only area of several towns that counts demographically. More of a Miami than we can know. And could Alan Bond have known, when he put Australia's first private university there, that it was a Prieure de la Côte-d'Or who coined the term 'polytechnique' in 1725 or so?

Avoiding Expo, I set out by hire car for the casino in Broadbeach, a Gold Coast fragment. But the extensive hand of Expo meant that only the most expensive car-hire firm had any vehicles for the passing trade. I shared a car with a friend and we took off from the new airport, specially constructed for Expo, over the Gateway Bridge, with visions of an elderly Queensland Premier in a cinema advert (shown with *The*

Gods Must be Crazy) hanging unseatbelted from his limo, claiming the Bridge as his personal gift to the populace. And hanging on as Premier for twenty years was Joh's ambition – so much so that he wanted to use the opening of Expo as his official swansong. Even the Queensland National Party wasn't going to wear that. But for me there was an inescapable connection between Joh, Expo and the Bridge.

The Quasimodo-shaped bridge takes great volumes of traffic across Brisbane and away from its heart, but as we head south its massive road spans dwindle out. Suddenly a big Mack articulated truck that didn't exist a moment ago swings in close from what used to be the left lane, trying to occupy the same space as our Ford. *Shit!* We breathe some sighs as we realise that we've just moved from a six-lane highway almost to a typical Queensland single-lane track without a hint of a road sign, and passed the rest.

Broadbeach: same day, still early morning. It's raining, hard. Making contact with our conference session group just outside the casino, we proceed with umbrellas to the scene of our papers. But around this island on which the casino is situated lies a kind of mundane enchantment. It's set up to be approached by car, not on foot. We wander around and around, looking for a way in. Finally, a side door . . . into an utterly timeless space. The building has been inverted, invaginated, turned outside-in. Around the inside concrete face of the roughly tubular building are balconies strewn with very green plants. At the top, where a roof should be, the casino opens out to the sky, but is covered with a stretch of canvas, suggesting a sail, a tent, a paraglider wing. On the floor, stretching around corners of the concrete labyrinth, are contrived areas for eating, drinking, booking rooms . . . and under a ledge, unexposed to the sail-in-the-sky, the darkly lit place of betting itself – deep carpets, grinning ushers, epauletted croupiers, barmaids in red satin.

We are politely told that, conference or no conference, bags and cases are not permitted in this cave. But from just outside I watch the pale winter holiday people watching the numbers, watching the wheels, placing their votes in the casino's compulsory democracy. And then, I notice it: the sound. The sound pervades the whole place. It's a mixture of voices, plates swishing against one another, the brush of feet on carpet and concrete, the whirr of machines, the hiss of beer from pumps . . . all of these and other inextricable components, rising up to the sail-apex. The rain outside is getting heavier, beating on the flaps of the tent, but barely heard against the constant swirl of sound inside the outside-face of this place. This is, precisely and exactly, to the last detail, NOT a camping holiday in the rain.

Everyone here seems to live on a Möbius strip. There could be someone exactly like me walking underneath, or inside, in the unknown elsewhere space of the other, his soles almost touching mine.

Perhaps the noise has been specially piped along elegant ducts,

through the labyrinth, to the conference suite tucked around a corner from the main casino floor. Just in case we should maybe miss it for a moment in our intellectual nook. Just in case a hushing voice of critique might be raised against it. But don't hold your breath.

There are 2100 delegates for this conference on reading. Most of them are Americans on holiday – here for a tax-deducted Expo and just about tolerating into the bargain some tales of little girls and boys and what might or might not be going on in their heads (heads, was it?) back there in the classrooms of Ohio, Idaho, Indiana. Perfect place to come to find out, though: a casino in Queensland whose own text offers no plain, closed, cut-and-dried reading but is instead a mystery of sound particles in Brownian motion. The noisy Americans are running around like kids on the first day of school. There are also some quiet, earnest-looking women in twin-sets, sitting with their conference programmes. There are class bullies, pestering the staff behind a desk for this and that, for things not Australian, not local, for things that are good enough for them. The staff are American travel agents: they don't know the first thing about the 'caantent' of the 'caanference'.

Avoiding them, I slip into the Gents to pin on the conference tag I've kept for two years since the last reading conference in London. My little silver Karl Marx lapel badge is now covered by the legend: 'London – Eleventh World Congress on Reading'. And underneath: 'JOHN HARDIE AUSTRALIA'. I don't believe a word of it.

And in the session itself, we are trying to speak for a politics of reading to a very few ears who either already know the tale or will never in their life want to read it. In the session 'next door', divided from us by a thin seductive screen, the loudest American reading analyst of all time is whipping his elementary school audience into a frenzy with his sales pitch: 'THING WE GAADDA HAVE IN THIS BIZNESS – ONE THING THAT THE PUBLIC EXPECTS US TO BE ABLE TO DO – AND IF WE DON'T DELIVER WE'RE FAILING AS PROFESSIONALS TO PROVIDE THE SERVICE WE CLAIM – ONE THING WE GAAADDA DO HERE IS . . .' Our cool, analytic politics never had a chance against this. This is sideshow alley at the agricultural show and we just aren't barking loudly enough. Someone stands up in our room now, takes a sip of water and begins to talk about 'the ideal speech situation'.

By lunchtime the rain is very heavy but it can still only just be heard, though the concrete floors are a little damp from feet tramping in from outside – or *was* it from outside? From wherever that rain really is. Suddenly 2100 people want lunch, and they have half an hour to get it. The queues are well-mannered. Some of the class bullies push in, of course, but we expect that and we're cool. I recognise a very famous American reading specialist who has just walked out of my paper. He did the same thing in London, I remember, at the last 'How Do We Read?' fiasco. He wears a cowboy string tie and he's trying to get a hot

dog. His face is very red. There's a sign just to his left showing him where the conference lunch is being held. But he can't read it. He wants that hot dog, yes sir!

Well, this big concrete camp is probably the biggest provider of food and drink in Queensland, but half of us aren't going to get anything without turning ourselves into pigs clamouring for hot dogs. So, with a feeling of utter absurdity, I get the doorman to call me a cab and I take a \$5 ride down to a greasy café on the beach. A hamburger and a coke and a *really decent* espresso from a real Cimbali machine. Then \$5 back again for the afternoon session. Is the tax man going to believe this?

By now the US publishers have set up their books and their books-about-books all down sideshow alley. The 2100 can't move at all. No-one can be heard except those who have nothing to say but are granted microphones and a PA system. Keno speakers? We must sit and listen to what we either don't want to hear or can't. No sooner is the last marxish syllable out in our session than swift ushers (who probably know the local unemployment statistics inside out) come and take away the partitions from between the session booths, shake off the white cloths from the panel tables, push back the chairs, whisk away the overhead projectors and make way for the evening's conference dance.

Along the labyrinth a way, the casino hasn't changed. 'Outside', it's getting dark ~ though only my watch and not my senses can tell me this. A light plays against the canvas sky-screen. Nothing is different inside. People order breakfast at 6 p.m. Probably they order dinner at 6 a.m. as well. They're talking in the bar about their wins and losses at keno and roulette. There are people who've been booked in here for a fortnight, never straying out or in. Playing numbers, then retiring to their green-planted balconies and suites before another round that may or may not be another day. Exterminating angel. Perhaps we may never leave. Perhaps I should have stayed in the greasy café and taken my chances with the rain. There are people who want to stay here for another day of the conference and are looking for rooms.

I set off in the rain to find a hire car that will take me back to Brisbane for the night. It's practically a question of sanity. Otherwise I fear I shall be stuck forever in this American-abroad version of intellectual life, this betting-voting-shouting. Driving back is not so easy. The two of us in the car are tired and the rain is building up. It's 60 kilometres per hour absolute maximum on this four-to-six-lane highway. On the radio, police are asking city-dwellers not to go out because of minor flooding. Trucks are turned over on the side of the road. Cars are pulled into service stations to keep away from the madness that's going on in the space between desperation and impassability. The Gateway Bridge is closed to traffic. A truck has sprawled across all six lanes. It's a black night now, and I've exorcised the image of Joh's idiotic face grinning from his limo in the sunshine, claiming this Bridge marvel for his own. He didn't last it to the opening of

Expo. His Bridge is cut. His cops are out along the highway in orange jackets – standing straight and tall in the black rain – and the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police corruption is closed for the night. But Joh's silent name is on their breaths. They know him and why he didn't make just those few extra months into Expo – where, of course, I am not going.

On the freeway along the north bank of the river, I get my first sight of Expo snaking along the opposite bank. The river is alight and little fatty hoverthings are carrying people on joyrides under the bridges. Bright colours, especially blues, are playing across the far bank and a kind of music drifts into the car. I can see barrage balloons shaped like fat fishes, decorated like sea in the sky, floating above the Expo site, and I can see sculptures on stilts with top hats above the crowds, below the fish fluttering. A lighthouse beam is penetrating the dark sky, a tight thin cone of light piercing the storm clouds. There are fireworks too, bursting against the same black clouds. Looking over there, I hardly notice that I've drifted into the wrong lane, narrowly missing a scrape with a yellow Cortina. Oddly, the driver seems to understand. Interstate plates on the hire car – new guys in town, probably up from the country, dazzled by Expo. But, of course, I'm not going there.

And one of the reasons I'm not going is that the people I'm staying with have made it clear that they're not going to be used as a base for someone to visit Expo. Conferences in casinos are OK – but not Expo. This is the Strict & Particular sect of the Marxist-Leninist church (S&PM-L), Brisbane chapter, alias the Kelvin Grove putsch. That's who we're talking about here, see? And working-class pleasures engineered by sneering elite forms of knowledge are not to be supported. They're insupportable. Now there's this problem. I don't want to say anything good or bad about expos in general or this one in particular – but I also don't want to go. Understand: it's got absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with the fact that it's more than my life's worth. This is 'The Trip On Which I Didn't Go To Expo', after all. And I feel now like the kind of fundamentalist who condemns all the films he hasn't seen. What am I going to do when *The Last Temptation of Christ* comes to town? I'm probably going to get a T-shirt that provokes those who think their beliefs entitle them to a copyright on the representation of Jesus Christ and I'm going to accuse them of hypocrisy is, as Slothrop would s-say, what I'm going to do. Is what.

So what am I going to do? Well I'm going to another conference, in a place that is so unlike the Broadbeach casino that it begs for comparisons: the University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD 4067. (St Lucia, Gold Coast . . . where are we?) And this next day it's suddenly summer. All of last night's rain is steaming out of the soil. Everyone's out in T-shirts. I take the Expo bus to downtown Toowong where they've built THE postmodernist shopping mall with a great blueglass tower and words like DAVID JONES and COLES NEW WORLD (that has such people in 't) in subtle matt brown across the glass panels.

Can't tell the windows from the walls. Wait under here for the bus, which despatches me to the campus in a series of looping sprints past those big houses on hills where professors of English Lit. probably live. The centrepiece of this campus is a massive Victorian 'quad' – though it has a few sides to spare. Unlike the casino, the quad is spacious. Unlike the casino, it has a completely different outside space on *its* inside: trees and what looks like real sky, grass and so on. A monoplane buzzes overhead advertising something from a trailing sign.

By a trick of proportion, the buildings around seem thin, as if they were mere granite walls to this garden and the people inside had to be compressed to slide between the layers of stone. But once in there I'm struck as always by the sheer space of stone and marble: the stairwells alone would hold an entire university department these days.

There's someone I know – just over there, behind the stone pillar – eating a conference biscuit elegantly and drinking his peppermint tea. I am in his shoes. A moment's quiet joy of reunion:

– GETCHA ASS OFFA DAT FIRE!

As if. As if. Then:

– BET I KNOW WHERE YOU GOTCHA SHOES?

– WHERE?

– YOU GOTCHA SHOES RIGHT THERE ON YOUR FEET, IN THE FORGAN SMITH BUILDING, U OF Q, ST LUCIA 4067.

Ha.

But really: whispers are going up from the small conference crowd – up and being lost in the top of the stairwell. There are no loud Americans here. No one is clamouring. Someone is offering someone else hot water and a tea bag. A polite refusal. There are leather elbow patches and trimmed beards, the smell of Erinmore wafting along, a piano somewhere in a common room. Eternal tea break. Then, with an imperceptible head gesture, the small conference's organiser gets everyone to follow her to the session. Command. It's a session on . . . of course, what else . . . what I'm not going to.

The conference includes a trip to Expo and this is the briefing for the descent. A very funny woman cultural analyst gives a 'paper' which is a postmodern collage of titbits and trivia about Expo. This is a B-class expo we're having in Brisbane, she says. An A-class is where the countries build their own pavilions. So-and-so, art dealer, has bought the Expo sculptures already for *x* million dollars and intends to sell them back to the people of Brisbane by popular subscription for several times that. She keeps sneering at how people from North Queensland pronounce the word 'genre'. What on earth can she be getting at? Is there some controversy going on that I don't know about? Is this what cultural analysis has come to: a joke session?

At question time there's a guy who has just come down by bus from Cairns, Far North Queensland. He says: 'PEOPLE THERE ARE PRETTY ALARMED BY EXPO. I MEAN HERE'S ALL THIS MONEY, THEIR MONEY, GOING ON THIS FRIVOLOUS DIS-

PLAY THEY CAN'T GET TO WHICH IS TAKING AWAY THEIR TOURIST TRADE AND THEY DON'T EVEN HAVE DECENT ROADS UP THERE.' But what do you deserve if you can't say 'genre' properly? And he goes on to say what he picked up from Expo site-workers in a now-gentrified working-class pub in nearby West End. Stuff about shoddy building practices and rock-bottom cowboy tendering. Later we get news about fires and poisonous food.

Apart from the 'genre' woman, there are also serious attempts to grasp Expo. A shy architect is on next. He's visibly relieved when the lights go down for the slides – obviously used to talking in the dark about bright projected images. The model for Expo buildings is, he says, London's Crystal Palace. It was built entirely of glass and steel, with the steel framework being used during construction as a kind of miniature railway on which the workers moved the sheets of glass around. After the Exhibition it was taken down and rebuilt and used as a site of pleasure, with twopenny and one shilling days to keep the classes apart. And so on it goes, this history of demountable architecture in the collapsible twentieth century. And finally, photos of the Brisbane Expo site. I wondered: should I avert my gaze? Does looking at these images constitute 'going to Expo' after all? Oh, what the hell – so long as the S&PM-Ls don't find out. And the shy architect was right: the pavilions were just like . . . *Eskies* – bright bubbles of square polystyrene, emblazoned with national insignia. And outside and between them, utterly nothing whatsoever is going on. Blank spaces. Action degree zero. What his pictures showed were queues of people – well-mannered queues with one or two obligatory class-bullies – waiting to get into the *Eskies* and do whatever was to be done in there. People queuing for food. Then for more *Eskies*. Then for drinks. Then for rides. Then for *Eskies* again. If I went on watching, I would be in those frozen queues in his still photos: a pillar of salt, a pinch of salt.

Just as U of Q is to Broadbeach casino, so Expo is to the Brisbane Show. It is manifestly trying so hard NOT to be like *The Show* that, again, the comparisons have to be made. They put each other on the agenda. Expo is where you CAN'T see sheep and cattle, produce and commodities as you move from ride to ride. It's where you CAN'T get a show bag. It's where the food is authentic and international and not cheap and nasty. It's where the beer is imported from Stow-in-the-Wold and sold in authentic pint mugs. Expo is alternative consumption: of commodities and images. Writing of the 1967 Expo in Montreal, Umberto Eco says:

A boat, a car, a TV set are not for sailing, riding, watching, but are meant to be looked at for their own sake. They are not even meant to be bought, but just to be absorbed by the nerves, by the taut, excited senses, as one absorbs the vortex of projected colors in a discothèque. (*Travels in Hyperreality*, p.294)

Now, twenty-one years later, the merchandise itself has been done

away with. No-one pretends that anything at Expo is being exhibited as a commodity for sale. A country's goods are not, strictly, being exhibited. This Expo does not exhibit – it does not show things which are outward. Rather this *Imposition* inhibits – it allows and requires one to have something immaterial inside: a glow, a thrill, a warmth, a feeling of vertigo and so on. The goods, as such, have been done away with. The material only survives as a necessary adjunct of the emotive-affective-sensory-ideological (E-A-S-I). The question for the late '80s has been: 'How do you feel?' The Canadians don't put on a laser show in order to sell you laser technology. Perhaps at most they want to sell you tourism, a trip: which is itself another way of feeling differently, a way of collecting the full set of officially available feelings, of E-A-S-I souvenirs. We have learnt that there is more to wealth than material goods: but the economy that applied to them still hangs on in the way we treat these inner goods, these nervous commodities. We collect, we store up, we demand value and interest – we take as much as we can and give only in exchange. And, above all, we queue patiently: for casino food, the Fitzgerald spectacular, the laser show, knowledge, and the rest. We pay our fees.

Expo-Impo '88 is on the south bank of the Brisbane River, to the east of the road bridge that connects that bank with the City to the north. On the west of the road bridge, still on the Expo bank, is Brisbane's great cultural complex: library, museum, performance centre and art gallery. From the steps of the art gallery you can see the crowds lining up to get into Expo. I know this because when the conference went to Expo, I went to the gallery to see another collection of goods: The Great Australian Art Exhibition (GAAEx).

The GAAEx was definitely NOT like Expo: it was trying so hard to be a kind of anti-Expo for the non-thrill-seeker, a different sideshow for the educated Australian above all the razzmatazz – to show just how sophisticated we can be when not eating, drinking, lasering and queuing. GAAEx is a kind of Aboriginal sandwich with a stamp collection between the layers of black bread. There they are, the famous stamps: Conder's *Holiday at Mentone*, Lambert's *Sergeant of Light Horse in Palestine*, the obligatory bloody McCubbins! It was almost a disappointment to find the perforations missing. White Australia, big 200-year-old kid, flips through his album. He's seen it all before (especially if he grew up in Melbourne), but there is a comfort in going through it again – taking pride in your possessions, maybe checking them off in Gibbons, thinking of the prices they'd fetch if only you'd let them go, and so on. And the stamp collection isn't in any sense a purely Australian one. Look over there, it's a Constable (signed by Louis Buvelot), a Lautrec (signed by Blamire Young), a Monet (signed by Jane Sutherland), a Cézanne (signed by Grace Crowley) . . .

But it's not so much the images as the mode of consumption that's important here. Everywhere there are parties of schoolchildren and

tourists who are being told in very loud voices just how to see these images. The dominant mode of interrogation of the pictures turns around the *Life of the Artist*, the sacred metatext that explains all. What mood was she in when she painted this? His mother had just died and he wanted to . . . He was a shy, retiring man who wanted to get back at so and so. A group of kids standing underneath Peter Booth's *Painting 1971-1972* (Did he paint it on New Year's Eve?) saying: If we do one like that can we hang it here? And the teacher saying: If you can think of an idea of your own which could be as shocking in a gallery, then you probably could. Originality. They're queuing up here too, to get into just the right position to see the paintings. People are getting a bit impatient with those who get too close and spoil the view. Reading the titles. Too stupid to know them. There are too many people in here; it's the noisiest exhibition I've ever been in. At one point there are three interpreters all going at once on the topic of Papunya dots. I think they can hear each other because they seem to be trying to offer deliberately different readings.

This is NOT AT ALL like the Broadbeach casino. There are absolutely no things in common between the two. One could not possibly draw any connections, under any circumstances. There should be a law against trying. My goodness me yes. I mean no.

Tim Johnson has snuck out of the stamp collection and leaked into the bottom layer of black bread: there's his whiteman's papunyaish *After Canaletto* giving the finger to all that Euro-slosh back there. The polymer contains bits of sequin glitter. You can see yourself in it. It surprises me that the Queensland gallery didn't insist on cutting everything other than naturalism from the exhibition.

While the GAAEx attempts to preserve 'Australian Culture' eternally, across the way the international crowd is enjoying just whatever there is before it vanishes completely. Here, then, are the two contradictory impulses of any exhibition/exposition: to preserve grudgingly and to destroy pleasurably. At the bus stop, I run into a Solomon Islander: he's shagged out with nightly ritual performances and will be glad when a relief party arrives next week and he can go home for a rest.

When Eco was writing, film was just coming to be used in novel ways at Expo. Canadian documentaries in 'real time' began to break down the notion of the ciné-theatre as the only locale for filmic consumption. The Brisbane Expo, so I learnt next day at the conference, almost completely dispenses with film in favour of video, laser, hologram and computer-generated images. But, and this is crucial to what I'm saying here, there was no film-image to be seen at GAAEx either, although some still-photographic icons did crop up. Why no film? Why no video work? Why no laser-art installations? The answer, I suspect, has to do with the proximate geography of Expo '88 and GAAEx - an attempt to get art's old immune cells working, to put up a sanitary barrier between itself and the fun fair, between itself and the

practically popular. Eco asks whether Expos can be taken out of the hands of the rich – whether these international mountains can be taken to proletarian Mohammeds. The question has changed now. The question is: what to do at a proletarianised Expo when there's practically no proletariat left?

– What's the difference between Expo and GAAEx?

– Nothing: only the organisers don't know it yet.

Finally: not going to Expo, for me, meant going instead one evening to not-the-theatre. Under the shadow of Expo's laser lighthouse, and equally under that of a billowing cement factory, the people of West End put on a play about the Imposition. A group called Street Arts, working out of an old corrugated iron paint factory, put on *Under Wraps*. It told a simple tale: how the Expo Authority, the Liberal-Party-dominated Brisbane Council, local real-estate agents and more distant developers conspired to rob these people of their homes and haunts along the old south bank of the river and how resistance was put up. The music was provided by a tremendously versatile band who shifted from reggae to music hall, dressed up as the Salvation Army. (I had my eye on the bass player, her fleet tiny fingers cruising the big Fender neck.) The actors brought on their simple props, served drinks at proper prices in the intervals, chatted, flew on trapezes, sang, acted out the history of their place in the city and its downfall. They shuddered under blankets as the Impo fireworks banged away, not in the theatre but actually out there, reminding too many old men too much of too many wars. Urban black culture, too – and lessons of the morality of revenge. Why NOT to chip the paintwork on any old parked Mercedes. Immense dignity and determination. People who weren't actors being themselves – showing themselves dying. Showing other ways than Impo for celebrating. The S&PM-Ls dragged me along to *Under Wraps* as another way of doggedly and positively not going to Expo again. And if you'd seen it, you couldn't have gone either.

My lightweight grey suit hangs in the wardrobe in suburban Ashgrove. On the lapel, about the size of a five-cent piece, the silver badge with Karl Marx on it is exposed once more. The 'John Hardie, Australia' legend is in the waste basket. Eco's vision was that expos could be educational, that they could be places where we learn to read the difficult text of the world we live in at the end of the century; where critical theories of reading would become the most valuable intellectual property we have; where the complex genres of exhibition, pleasure, knowledge could be critically worked out. I didn't go to Expo – but in a way I did, after all. I went to where there was a possibility of Eco's kind of expo: to the International Reading Association Conference at the Broadbeach casino, to the Australian and South Pacific Association for Comparative Literary Studies Conference on Genre at St Lucia, to the Great Australian Art Exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery, to *Under Wraps* at The Paint Factory. Eco will have to wait: the queue is still very long.