Michael Gow recently replaced Robyn Nevin as Artistic Director of the Queensland Theatre Company. His appointment commencing in 2000 not only signals the QTC's eagerness to develop new and younger audiences, but also confirms that Gow’s stocks are again at a premium in Australian theatre circles, following a brief but telling period in the wilderness in the late 1980s. As Gow navigates his flagship through the uncertain waters of the new millennium, it seems timely to re-consider The Kid (1983), the impressive first work which launched his playwriting career. Of particular interest is the play's discursive construction of space; the characters moving from a bleak, spiritless rural landscape into an apocalyptic city which finally consumes them. Engaging issues such as nuclear war, youth suicide and the welfare state, The Kid situates these immediate concerns within a much more ambitious vision, in which the dramatic world is invested with a quality of mythic transcendence.

As a consequence of the infamous mauling of his Bicentennial play 1841 at the hands of newspaper reviewers, Michael Gow left the playwriting arena for several years. Until he retired hurt in 1988, however, Gow had been accorded quasi-celebrity status in the 'post-New Wave' or 'Second Wave' period of 1980s Australian drama. Together with Louis Nowra, Stephen Sewell and (to a lesser extent) Alma de Groen and Janis Balodis, Gow was a high-profile playwright, and as with the work of those other dramatists, his plays continue to be widely read and performed. In particular, Away (1986) gains a substantial new readership annually, largely by virtue of its inclusion on a number of state upper secondary syllabuses. While Away remains Gow's most popular drama, many of its thematic concerns and narrative devices recur throughout his work: the core group of characters in several of his plays, for example, is (various formulations of) a family, and there is a recurrent concern with notions of faith in the redemptive or transformative potential of the physical journey — of going away.

These characteristic interests in the family and the journey, discernible in most of Gow's writing, are each anticipated in his first play. The Kid is the story of a family — albeit an unconventional, non-nuclear family of disaffected adolescents — whose quest into Sydney constitutes the play's structural spine and serves as one of its primary metaphors. The disjunctive arrangement of scenes and apocalyptic thematics are consistent with other types of episodic ‘journey’ narrative, one important modern type of which is the road movie. In a larger sense, though, comparisons can also be drawn between the kids' journey and descents towards chaos depicted in works as diverse as Dante's Inferno and Conrad's modernist parable Heart of Darkness. As with Away and another Gow play On Top Of The World (1986), the journey charted in The Kid takes the form of a family travelling along the New South Wales coast. Importantly, however, while those other two works depict journeys north, away from Sydney, The Kid shows its protagonists southbound, heading into and then being consumed by the city. Their place of origin is unspecified in performance — a farm, perhaps, or rural community, designated in the printed text merely as ‘the North’.

It might be expected that a narrative depicting ‘the mythic Australian journey from country to city’ would suggest a transition from one human state or condition into another antithetical to it; if constructed according to standard European discourses of landscape, this transition would be from Nature into Culture. And given the extent ‘the City’ — the essential site and sign of Western culture — has been impugned (especially in the twentieth century), such a journey might be expected to trace a movement from a type of pastoral or Edenic innocence into worldly experience, into some condition of inauthenticity or alienation. But while The Kid does make use of a city/country dialectic, any conventional dichotomising of the two is resisted. For ‘the Country’ in this play is no more or less valorised than is ‘the City’. The early scenes,
set in various nondescript country locations, depict an economically depressed and spiritually void rural culture. The kids are already alienated as they set out for the city, the traditional pastoral myths of country life having no relation to their experience of unemployment, domestic abuse and welfare dependence. Their indifference to the consolatory white fictions proffered by the Australian bush tradition is made particularly apparent in the play's second scene. The proprietor of a country bookshop, keen to enthuse the kids with his crass coffee-table celebrations of ‘our … heroic beginnings’ (10), emerges as a pathetic figure, reduced to peddling pornography under the counter in order to stay in business.

_The Kid _allows of no future at all; its vision is unrelievedly nihilistic. At the beginning of the play the kids do have faith in a metropolitan salvation, but the tenor of the drama is such that their hope seems inevitably ill-fated. The play's thematic compass is broad and ambitious, including topical social issues such as youth suicide and the welfare state. These concerns, though, are contextualised within a more broadly conceived interrogation — and ultimately condemnation — of the entire ethical basis, the condition and direction, of modern post-industrial society. Nadia Fletcher, describing _The Kid _as ‘outstandingly the best new contemporary play from anywhere staged in Sydney in 1983’, contends that ‘its theme is no less than a reflection on the collapse of Western civilization’. Somewhat surprisingly (with regard to existing commentary on plays such as Esson's _The Drovers _and Lawler's _Summer of the Seventeenth Doll _) Fletcher claims that _The Kid_ is ‘as close to genuine tragedy as Australian drama has ever come’. In any case, the play is unambiguous in its diagnosis of contemporary culture as moribund, if not already dead, and in its suggestion that the damage has been self-inflicted.

Perhaps the central point of interest for critical analysis of _The Kid_ lies in the means by which the play implies a profundity of experience beyond that evoked by its ‘surface’ narrative, such that the tawdry mundanity of the kids' world is invested with a kind of transcendent moment. Veronica Kelly touches on this aspect of the play in a discussion which draws comparisons between _The Kid_, Nowra's _Sunrise_ and Sewell's _The Blind Giant Is Dancing_. All three works premiered in 1983, and as Kelly observes, all are strikingly similar in theme and dramaturgy: ‘All use extensive and deliberate intertextual allusion, gaining ironic effect by their juxtaposition of Australian history with past European consensual certainties, be they theatrical classics, high bourgeois art-forms like opera, or the Christian myth.’ Indeed, _The Kid_ makes ironic reference to all these embodiments of a once unshakeable European cultural arrogance, although it is Wagner's classic operatic cycle _The Nibelungen _which provides the primary point of reference for the play's intertextuality. The allusions to _The Ring_ and other operas — introduced explicitly in dialogue and musical effects, but also less overtly through plot and characterisation — require careful consideration, not least because they are probably the play's most contentious aspect. Tony Mitchell, for example, takes issue with Gow's apparent adoption (and the critics' endorsement) of ‘European classical literary sources as a means of achieving “higher” artistic value in Australian theatre’. Certainly, there is an awkwardness about the ways in which the musical fragments are interpolated; even if it could be assumed that audiences will recognise the allusions, the use of the fragments as bridges between episodes appears at times gratuitous, their chief benefit being to ‘fill’ between scene changes.

Yet Gow's operatic allusions are explicable not merely in terms of an unproblematised deference to the European cultural ‘centre’. For while there is considerable irony in the tension between the depressed reality of the kids' experience and the play's appeal to a supposedly higher frame of cultural reference, that irony is not born simply of contrast. The play's despairing vision resists conceptions of a European Romantic Golden Age, lionised at the expense of an entropic present; rather, _The Kid_ laments the entire Western historico-cultural tradition, of which the present is merely the pathetic but logical endpoint, and of which _The Ring_ is conventionally held up as a crowning achievement. Gow appropriates Wagner's apocalyptic vision — itself an adaptation of an ancient apocalyptic master-m mythology of _ekpyrosis_ — to highlight European culture's historical complicity in the decay of the present. The ironic relation between the kids' Sydney and Wagner's mythic Valhalla, therefore:

_is by no means conservative, directed merely at a shrunken present, presumed fallen from some implied height of inherited immanent significance. The provisional and ideological nature of all culture is foregrounded, and the European Faustian heritage interrogated …_
In the end, all the signs of the European cultural tradition, including its high art (metonymically evoked by the opera records which appear as props at various points in performance), have no greater status than the rest of the detritus cluttering the adult world.

In its concern with spiritual alienation and apocalypse, and in its intertextuality, the play projects a typically modernist sensibility; but its cannibalisation and ultimate condemnation of Western culture perhaps reflect a more truly postmodern consciousness. Andreas Huyssen, reviewing modernism ‘at the stage of its exhaustion’, argues that ‘the modernist project … always upheld a vision of a redemption of modern life through culture. That such visions are no longer possible to sustain may be at the heart of the postmodern condition.’ Nevertheless, as this discussion will make clear, while the rendering of The Kid’s dramatic world may reflect a postmodern consciousness, the play’s relatively conventional modes of dramaturgy and characterisation are such that the text as a whole cannot properly be characterised as ‘postmodernist’.

The Kid depends centrally on the simultaneous evocation of disparate realms of experience. The gritty reality and immediacy of the kids’ world, their low humour, cynicism and despair, are always resonant with the deeper mythopoeic chords struck by ‘an operatic cycle almost appalling in its self-confidence and its huge visions of heroism and catastrophe’. Operating throughout, therefore, is a kind of double referentiality. The immediate, ‘surface’ level of narrative is familiar and directly accessible to contemporary Australian audience. At this level, the landscape’s pervasive red glow and oppressive heat, intensifying as the journey unfolds, are realistically motivated, recognisable as the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983 (or indeed as the equally devastating fires which raged through New South Wales in the summer of 1994). Also at this quasi-naturalistic narrative level, the city beckoning the kids is Sydney, specifically located in time and space. Beneath this surface, though, is constructed an alternative, mythic reality; here the heat and glare of the fires become signifiers not of a local and physical, but of a profound moral, disorder: a ‘flaw in the cosmic machinery’. The city in these terms is figured as a grotesque dystopia, terrible enough in its apathy and horror to be the site at which the end of the world can be played out.

The play's representation of the contemporary local world, then, is overlaid with a (Western) universalist conception of the mythic. Together with this double referentiality, the play adopts a stylistic variety, wherein the naturalistic ‘surface’ is underpinned by an expressionist impulse. Throughout, elements of expressionist dramaturgy, made manifest in terms of action, language, and character, can be discerned in scenes which conform, superficially at least, to naturalistic conventions. There are for example several sudden outbursts of intensely violent action. In general, such episodes are incidental to the unfolding narrative, functioning instead as expressionistic eruptions of the generalised crisis afflicting the world. One particularly disturbing outburst occurs in Scene Seven, set in ‘The Department’, in which Man C is shown tormenting Woman D, perhaps his wife; the man’s verbal abuse of the woman precipitates a series of physical attacks on her. A further example of violent display occurs when Aspro experiences ‘The Other Thing’ (17). His manic screaming and leaping, realistically motivated by his physical illness, are explicable as outward embodiments of his, and indeed of the other kids’, inner condition; their collective crisis is marked on his body. An expressionist logic also informs the characterisation of adults in The Kid, all of whom remain anonymous, their identities indicated in the printed text simply by letters: Man A, Woman C and so on. None of these adults is drawn as a fully developed character, each tending towards caricature in individual scenes. Many of the play's short ‘telegraphic’ bursts of violent or crude dialogue are also expressionist in tone and form.

Of special significance here is that the play's stylistic hybridity, its conjunction of naturalistic and expressionist techniques, also informs its evocations of place and space. At the naturalistic level, the play's landscapes are understandable as the actual physical and socio-cultural environments of contemporary Australia. In these terms, the kids' hardships and cynicism are shown as causally determined, forced upon them by an economically depressed rural sector, dysfunctional bureaucratic structures and incomprehensibly complex, unaccommodating urban spaces. These environments, especially those in the city, embody an institutionalised adult world. They are the landscapes of contemporary culture which determine the terms of the kids' existence and deny them any form of social agency. At the same time, though, the play's landscapes function expressionistically to project not the actual physical or social world, but two distinct types of inner crisis. In the first instance, the fractured, oppressive landscapes reflect a condition of moral decay — a condition associated with the adult world. In this sense, the play implicitly attaches blame to its (emblematic)
adult characters for the condition of the world into which the kids blunder. Simultaneously, though, the
play's landscapes reflect a complementary condition of spiritual vacuity, a kind of inner absence which
afflicts all the kids. And the play formulates a relation between these conditions of inner crisis, suggesting
that the moral decay of the adult world (representative of Western culture in general), expressed through
its institutions, is visited on the kids, bringing about their spiritual collapse. The adults, then, are both
responsible for and expressions of a world in decay; the kids, journeying into that world, become its victims.

The journey from country to city passes through landscapes which are, at one level, recognisably
real, but which are never staged naturalistically. Nine of the eleven scenes are set indoors, and staging
requirements are not especially demanding. No scene calls for a full or detailed rendering of location, and
indications given in the printed text as to setting are scant. Accordingly, dialogue rather than scenic effects
is the principal medium for creating landscapes, although lighting and other technical means would seem
crucial in suggesting the surrounding ‘firescape’. To a large extent, of course, this minimalist scenography
is determined pragmatically. The play's episodic structure, and the physical territory 'covered' by the kids,
necessitate a stage design flexible enough to facilitate fairly rapid scene changes. Beyond these technical
considerations, though, and more importantly, a minimum of set and properties works to enhance the play's
theatricalisation of its thematic concerns. As Peter Fitzpatrick argues, 'in the physicality of performance, the
absence of visual clues in the stage picture can be as suggestive as their presence, in developing images of
emptiness, anonymity and disorientation'.

Fitzpatrick's comments are part of an analysis of urban imagery
in Australian drama, but they are instructive in relation to
The Kid's early 'country' scenes as well as to the
later scenes set in Sydney. For as suggested earlier, a sense of alienation and decay pervades both urban and
rural landscapes in the play, and a relative absence of visual clues in the stage picture suggests these qualities
equally in both contexts.

The Kid's eleven relatively autonomous scenes each advance to some degree the play's 'story', but
individual scenes are best understood as contributing in different ways to the atmosphere and impact of
the whole: to the evocation of a world in crisis. While the play's principal landscape is the city (eight of its
eleven scenes are set there), the opening sequence of three ‘country’ scenes is important in establishing the
nature of the kids' dramatic world.

The first scene (5–8) is set in a country cafe. Far from being characterised by rural charm and warmth,
the cafe has an eerie sense of emptiness and slow, quiet decay. Prior to the kids' raucous arrival, 'it's very
quiet’ as the first of the anonymous adult characters, Woman A, relates her recurring nightmare to Donald,
who sits silently staring into space. Woman A's surreal monologue is notable for its prefiguring of the play's
larger interest in notions of fragmentation and disintegration. She describes the nightmare vision of her
dead husband ‘in little pieces falling slowly to the ground’. This image is echoed shortly after in Snake's
description of her sick brother Aspro: 'He's going to pieces.’ Various indications that the (unnamed) town
was once a thriving centre throw into relief its present malaise. The woman, nostalgic for an irrecoverable
past, tells Donald: 'Nineteen fifty-two. Before the by-pass. This town was a resort then. The main street was
criss-crossed with coloured lights all summer. On New Year's Eve we all stood in the street and held hands
and cried like on VE night.' Her image of the vitality of the town's past is countered when Donald explains
to Dean that: ‘This place has had it. They put a by-pass in. It's really dead.’ Similarly, Snake's typically
abrupt inquiry — ‘Was this town designed by a moron or what? There's one other milkbar right up the other
end of the street and it's closed’ — helps to convey the sense of an empty town in the final stages of an
insidious degeneration.

This opening scene has an important establishing role, but Scene Two (8–12) has a greater bearing on
this discussion, for here the play makes some pointed observations concerning the discursive construction
and mythologising of landscape. Having left the town, the kids return the following morning, the charismatic
Dean intent on 'claiming’ Donald. In the bookshop where Donald works, they encounter the second of
the play's anonymous adult characters, Man A, the bookseller. This scene is driven by Man A's fetishistic
heroicising of the colonial past and the bush legend. His stock of books — ‘Campfire Yarns’, ‘Bush Ballads'
and so on — is steeped in the familiar, hackneyed rhetoric of pioneering spirit and mateship. Many of them,
apparently, marshal images of the landscape’s 'savage beauty' and other such clichés, the standard fare of
that broad discursive field. Snake, for example, reads aloud these lines from W. H. Ogilvie's nineteenth-
century verse ‘Abandoned Selections’:


_The Gray Selections lie_

And their lonely, grief-stained faces

Are turned to a pitiless sky.

They are wrinkled and seamed with drought-fire

And wound at the throat with weeds

They sob in the aching loneness

But never a passer heeds._

The central role of landscape discourse in a broad Australianist agenda is foregrounded here. In its sentimental tropes of personification, its simultaneous celebration and demonisation of the natural environment, the poem is typical of the literary style favoured and made famous by the _Bulletin_. This image of a harsh but beautiful landscape has traditionally been, and remains, a key strategic device in the propagation of Australian nationalist ideology. The bookshop is a monument to Australianism — to ‘a great time now vanished’ as Man A laments — but Nadia Fletcher points out that it is ‘a romanticised “legend of the nineties” Australia which the street-kids cannot recognise’. For them, history is irrelevant; there is no solace in a past whose mythologies are as insignificant and hollow as those of the present. This disjuncture between the adult world-view and that of the kids has been suggested earlier in the scene. In a moment which foreshadows the appearance of ‘God’s Survival Kit’ later in the play, the bookseller is shown rhapsodising over a carton of lavish colour-plate history books; for him (as later for Desiree), the boxes have a kind of cargo cult status — they are the packaged faiths he invests with ultimate meaning. For the kids, though, they are rubbish, and Dean actually throws some of the books in a bin in the scene’s conclusion.

Prior to that, though, the wastepaper bin has featured comically. Dean, persuaded to speak a passage from a play the bookseller has written for the local historical society — ‘just to see how it reads’ — dons the bin to ‘get the effect’ of the town’s ‘own bushranger’ Danny McReady. He reads Man A’s script aloud:

> **DEAN:** This is a hard land, a cruel land. A land of savage beauty. A land of dry bones beneath a bleaching sun. It will be hard to win, but win it we (sic) will. We will struggle against the elements: fire, wind, flooding rain and searing endless drought, to build here a land of free men, of proud tall men ....

In its melodramatic triteness, Gow's invented dialogue comes pretty close, as good satire must, to some existing genuine articles. This episode has a comic effect, but it is largely a humour of recognition; the speech’s imagery, its sentiment of struggle against the land, are redolent of many Australian novels, plays and verses. Its deployment of stereotypical landscape imagery, as with Ogilvie’s verse earlier in the scene, highlights the extent to which an idealised image of Australianness is predicated on a particular discursive construction of landscape. But the framing of the speech here is ironic and pejorative, so that it functions as a critique of the co-option of this landscape discourse within the nation-building enterprise. Dean’s appraisal of the speech is blunt: ‘So this is what intellectuals write. Load of shit. I wipe my arse of intellectuals.’ [He does so, with the script.]

Scene Three (12–14), the last of the scenes located in the country, offers a kind of pastoral hiatus prior to the kids’ arrival in the city. Set in an unspecified ‘open country’ location, the scene begins with an intimate conversation between Dean and Donald. The boys' exchange of confidences is characterised by an unusual tonal mix. Their directness with one another has a certain innocent charm, but the dialogue is at the same time fairly confronting. Much of it is sexually explicit and raw, detailing stories of violence and homosexual sex; most of what Dean says is self-aggrandising invention. (His claim, for example, that ‘no one else knows’ about his tattoo is contradicted by Snake in the play’s final moments.) Nevertheless, it is one of the few instances in the play of a close, confidential human exchange, and there is gentle pathos in Donald’s account of his first sexual encounter. Snake’s monologue, following the boys’ conversation, is important on a number of levels. She reveals that this is merely the latest in a long series of trips to the city, the trials of which have become almost ritualised: ‘Honestly. I hate this trip. It’s always chaos. Always a fight. By the time we get to Auntie Eileen’s, no one’s talking to anyone. I have to do everything. Get the boys ready. Stock up on drinks and Marlboro and chips. Hate it.’ Snake’s bad temper is contrasted by her modest vision of a utopian future — ‘when we get the money’ — in which she envisages the family, truly happy,
operating a service station. The scene ends energetically with signs of life in anticipation of the big smoke: ‘Beer everywhere. Wind. The city appears in splendour at the back. Music: end of Das Rheingold.’ The kids are approaching their Valhalla.

The remainder of the play is set in Sydney. With no intermediate suburban phase, the action shifts abruptly to the city, to a ‘small fl at, no more than a box with doors’ (14), part of the ‘largest [block of flats] in the Southern Hemisphere. Not counting Housing Commission, of course’ (18). This building, a signal location, will be discussed in detail shortly. It need only be mentioned here that the play’s short fourth scene (14–15) introduces Woman B, the caretaker of the flats, in an introductory exchange with Desiree, while Man B, Desiree’s brutal father, ‘lours in a corner of the room’. Possessed by a ‘charismatic certainty’ of impending holocaust, Desiree is in a sense a modern Cassandra, the tortured, captive visionary of Greek tragedy. Given the particular nature of The Kid’s intertextuality, however, her role is more usefully considered in its relation to The Ring. There are parallels, for example, between ‘Brunnhilde’s heroic self-immolation and Desiree’s infatuation with cosmic doom’, while ‘in Desiree’s relationship to her powerful and destructive father there are echoes of Brunnhilde and Wotan’.

The following scene, however, is more instructive with regard to the play’s depiction of the oppressive cityscape. For it is Scene Five (16–18), in which the kids arrive at what they believe to be their Aunt’s house, that marks the beginning of their urban disintegration. Proceeding as a series of confusions and disappointments, the scene is propelled erratically by dialogue working at cross-purposes. Alone in the living room of a house, Woman C is discovered, weeping, in a pill-induced stupor. The room is a site of depressing containment; its door might offer escape, but only into the threat and chaos of the surrounding city, itself surrounded by fire. Woman C’s ex-lover, having given her notice to leave, has accused her of stifling him: ‘I have to go. I box him in. I imprison him. I hang around his neck. Like a dead whatever.’ Following the initial confusion of the kids’ arrival — ‘I thought something was up. The houses have all been painted’ — it is revealed that something indeed is wrong. The kids’ Auntie Eileen has died, and her house has been sold as a deceased estate. With this revelation, the kids’ only link to the city is severed. Suddenly, they are alone in the city, without refuge and without a point of reference from which to orient themselves. Aspro’s plaintive question — ‘Are we in the wrong house?’ — encapsulates the deep sense of bewilderment and anxiety which characterises the kids’ urban experience for the remainder of the play. From here, a series of discrete episodes is offered which, in accumulation, form an image of a hostile and ultimately unnegotiable metropolis. The city is presented as ‘fragmented and transparent rather than tangible and coherent, a place consisting of bits, pieces and shifting moods; it…stand[s] under the sign of discontinuity and dissociation rather than community’. Also from here are more insistent reminders of the relation between the play’s formal structure and its concern with social breakdown. The rapid-fire episodic form evokes ‘modern urban rhythms of space and time — fragmented, short-range, immediate’.

The narrative focus shifts back to the block of flats referred to above, where the kids rent ‘a small flat identical to that in Scene Four’. This location parallels and advances the stifling confinement suggested in the previous scene: the flat, euphemistically described as ‘compact’ by the caretaker, is tiny. More importantly, though, the play’s concern with the moral debasement of the adult world is particularly acute in this sixth scene (18–24), in which this moral condition is given spatial expression. The block of flats physically manifests a corrupt social order, embodying the inequities of social power. A rigid social hierarchy in the building, representing a more general social stratification, corresponds directly to its physical form. There are one hundred and sixty units in the block, the size and standard of each being relative to the building’s vertical structure: the higher the better. The kids meet the caretaker, but their landlords remain abstracted and anonymous. Woman B’s account of the construction of the flats suggests that due process was disregarded in their planning, the building having been enabled only by virtue of local political corruption, and at the expense of the disenfranchised:

WOMAN B: No, against all opposition this place was built. No help from the unions, no help from the locals. The Council actually rushed through a by-law to allow it to be built. The Mayor and his wife live on the top floor. I’ve been up there once. Sweeping views. She’s the chairman of the residents’ committee. You’ve got to own before you can be on that. Like everything else.
Woman B’s dialogue in this scene is worth noting for a number of reasons. First, it indicates a vertical stratification of social power, not only in the building but more generally as well. Moreover, in this speech quoted above, and in earlier dialogue, the woman makes some suggestive references to windows and views. She mentions, for example, the ‘sweeping views’ from the Mayor’s top-floor apartment. The equation here between political power and sweeping views stands in contrast to an earlier sequence in which the woman shows Dean the lower-floor flat:

WOMAN B: View? Yes, there is one. Come here. You really need a chair, but open it up. [They lean out.] See there, between the kiddies’ bike factory and the wogs on the corner. That’s a bit of the bay, that gray bit, past the smoke stacks. See it? Let me guide your head.

The kids’ impoverished outlook reinforces their relegation to society’s lower depths. No agency or prestige is suggested by their view to the world outside, and even the physical act of looking is manipulated by an adult. These observations find a parallel in an essay by Peter Fitzpatrick, alluded to earlier in this discussion. In ‘Views of the Harbour: The Empty City in Australian Drama’, Fitzpatrick compares six Australian ‘city-plays of the ‘eighties’. He notes the tendency in all of these works, including The Kid, towards non-naturalistic scenography, suggesting that ‘the strength of naturalistic signification runs directly counter to the multiple locations and the impersonal forms of power which the dramatising of the city entails’:

[All six develop the metaphor of ‘the view’, not only as an index of social hierarchy, but as the central term in an analysis of states of profound moral failure. … The more commanding the view, the more visible the command. … The view … signifies a disconnection from the social realities below, and from the self.

However, in contrast to the other plays in Fitzpatrick’s analysis, The Kid’s concern is ‘wholly with the powerless, and with the view from below’. The kids’ social reality of alienation and subjection is made all too apparent by their restricted view of a polluted industrial cityscape. Physically on the same level as the city’s lower order, they have a horizontal rather than a vertical relation to it.

The play’s spatialisation of social power is reworked later in Scene Six when Aspro delivers a long, disconsolate speech about walking the city streets. Aspro’s monologue details the horrors of being ritually subjected to bureaucratic incompetence and apathy in his quest for compensation. He describes being shunted from one government agency to another, having to walk from office to office in the ‘boiling heat in the middle of the day’. Here again, the notion of being in a horizontal and hence powerless relation to the city is emphasised. Experienced from below, from within, the city remains fractured and incoherent:

The inhabitant or visitor basically experiences the city as a labyrinth, although one with which he may be familiar. He cannot see the whole of a labyrinth at once, except from above, when it becomes a map. Therefore his impressions of it at street level at any given moment will be fragmentary and limited: rooms, buildings, streets.

Experiencing the city from below is the subject of Michel de Certeau’s essay ‘Walking in the City’. De Certeau’s observations are illuminating here, even though his central contention is that walking in the city is potentially empowering for the individual, since the ‘rhetoric’ of walking offers a means of resisting large metropolitan power structures. Beginning with an assertion of an inherent ‘texturology’ in large cities, de Certeau draws a distinction between the urban experience of the ‘voyeur’ and that of the ‘walker’. He suggests, as do Pike and Fitzpatrick in their essays, that seeing the city from above has the effect of totalising it; such a view satisfies a ‘scopic drive’ to make the ‘complexity of the city readable’. This ‘seeing the whole [totalises] the most immoderate of human texts’ and produces a ‘voluptuous pleasure’. The main thrust of de Certeau’s argument, however, is that walkers — ‘Wandersmänner’ — can resist the city’s spatial power structures by ‘writing’ as they walk, choosing pathways in a text they cannot read.

James S. Duncan and Nancy G. Duncan note that Roland Barthes formulates a similar idea in his essay ‘Semiology and the Urban’ (1971). They paraphrase Barthes’ article thus: ‘[Barthes] argues that all participants in the urban drama write landscape poetry as they wend their own particular paths through the city streets. He quotes Victor Hugo’s comment that ‘those who move through the city are readers’ … and
adds his own observation that ‘they can also be thought of as writers … .’ As discussed above, *The Kid* evinces a similar concern with the power dynamics inherent in views from above, and from within, the city. Crucially, however, whereas Barthes and de Certeau offer postmodernist models of resistance ‘from below’, any such suggestion of choice or agency is absent in *The Kid*. For the play’s protagonists, walking in the city is both disempowering and futile. Again, in these terms, the play might be understood as being about postmodernity without actually being postmodernist.

Scene Seven (24–26), set in ‘The Department’, is the play’s most pointed dramatisation of the consequences of the power imbalance between bureaucracy and the individuals supposedly served by its structures. The scene offers a disturbing evocation of social decay, both at the institutional and (accordingly) at the interpersonal level. The play’s refusal to make clear precisely which state agency is responsible for processing Aspro’s claim works to distance and dehumanise the Department, effectively suggesting the sense of it as an inaccessible, unaccountable monolith. The minimalist stage setting — simply a row of seats — suggests an atmosphere of utilitarian blandness that seems to typify a generalised government bureaucracy. As noted earlier, it is here that the anonymous Man C, apparently a victim of ‘The System’, unleashes his frustration in a grotesque display of violence against his partner.

The play’s final movement of four scenes brings with it an intensifying sense of impending apocalypse, of the city crumbling around the crumbling family. The eighth scene (26–30) begins with a monologue by Donald, himself now alienated from the family yet pathetically trying to retain Dean’s affections. He describes the cityscape immediately beyond the flat: ‘The city’s surrounded by fire. The air is full of ash. … There are fires in the town as well. They start by themselves it’s so hot. Spontaneous combustion. The city’s at a standstill. All the streets are blocked off.’ The motif of apocalypse becomes more insistant in this scene and is brought sharply into focus with Desiree’s slide-show presentation of ‘God’s wonderful message’. There is an ironic pathos in the image of the kids presented here. Together in a tiny darkened room, the venetian blinds lowered against the inferno outside, they watch packaged, propagandist images of global destruction projected on the wall. It is a kind of inversion of a cartoon by Michael Leunig in which a father and son gaze awestruck at a sunrise on television, oblivious to a view of the real thing through their window. The biblical promises of catastrophe are for Desiree a form of deliverance, a longed-for final solution to her suffering at the hands of her father. Of all the kids, Desiree is the most spiritually deadened, despite (or rather because of) her rigid adherence to fundamentalist dogma. Brutalised and powerless, she has relinquished any desire for control of her life: ‘The day our first Kit arrived from America I stopped feeling I had to work everything out for myself. There was this incredible silence in my head. All I have to do now is wait.’ The scene ends in chaos: Dean, physically fighting with his sister, is punched by Donald; as Desiree’s father comes in and takes her daughter away, Aspro collapses, vomiting blood.

The remainder of the play traces the final stages of the family’s destruction. The last three scenes are all short, each dominated by images of hostility and defeat. Scenes Nine and Eleven are set in the flat building. In Scene Nine, Dean assaults Desiree’s father offstage, almost certainly killing him, then leads Desiree away from the building. Snake reveals in Scene Eleven that Aspro has died. Donald leaves, Snake leaves, and the play’s final image is of Dean overdosing on the tablets stolen from Woman B. It is Scene Ten (31–32), however, which requires some brief comment with regard to the play’s depiction of the city, partly because this is the only scene in the play located outdoors in the city. Set in ‘open ground somewhere’, this scene suggests something of an urban wasteland. Dean and Desiree are shown locked in a struggle on the ground. Above them, the night-sky glows red, while the surrounding silence is punctuated by the wail of sirens. Rather than being a refuge, this is an exposed and unprotected area to which Dean and his captive Desiree have retreated while the city collapses around them. Desiree, rejecting Dean’s sexual advances — ‘I’m alone. I don’t want you’ — craves withdrawal from the landscape entirely, imagining herself locked underground in a nuclear shelter. She closes her eyes and wills the final inferno: ‘End. Now.’ It seems certain that she uses her father’s shotgun to kill herself.

It might be argued that *The Kid* is less concerned with a world headed for apocalyptic destruction than a world in which the end has already happened; not with a bang but a whimper. Yet these two possibilities — slow decay of a (Western cultural) corpse long dead or imminent catastrophe — are by no means mutually exclusive. Rather, the play can be understood as showing human spirituality and morality as having died, while the social and physical world — the institutional landscape — stumbles on towards its inevitable
destruction. And it is in reading the play's landscapes that both these conditions are suggested. Landscape is presented as both the cause and the expression of social decay. Particularly the city, conventionally understood as the site of ‘advanced’ human culture, but also the bush, are ambivalently inscribed as the social and physical landscapes of the adult world, and as projections of inner states of crisis. In this way *The Kid* maintains a key Australian dramatic tradition, in which the physical landscape becomes the primary site for the intersection of characters' inner (psycho-spiritual) and outer (historico-political) worlds.

**NOTES**

1. All quotations from the play in this essay refer to *The Kid* (Sydney: Currency Press in association with the Nimrod Theatre Company, 1983).

2. For a detailed account of the critical de/construction of Gow, see Tony Mitchell, ‘Great White Hope or Great White Hype? The Critical Construction (and Demolition) of Michael Gow’, *Spectator Burns* 3 (1989): 17–27. Gow has since returned to playwriting. His play *Furious* was produced by the Sydney Theatre Company's research and development wing New Stages in 1991. Several other works have followed, including the acclaimed *All Stops Out* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991); and *Sweet Phoebe* (Sydney: Currency Press in association with Playbox Theatre Centre, Monash University, 1995).

3. Writing in 1994, Bob Evans observed: ‘Away has spawned a secondary theatrical industry. Currency Press, which publishes the script, has sold about 60,000 copies of the play. Compare that with the average sale of about 500 copies a year for most Currency play texts. *Away* is nothing if not a phenomenon.’ Bob Evans, ‘The Trial That Won't Go Away’, *Sydney Morning Herald* (5 August 1994): 20.

4. The central figure of the family occurs in *The Kid, Away, On Top Of The World* and *Sweet Phoebe*; the journey motif features in all these works, as it does also in *Europe* and 1841. See Luke Simon, *Michael Gow's Plays: A Thematic Approach* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1991) for an introductory discussion of ‘Family’ and ‘Going Away’ as recurrent concerns in Gow's work.


6. Burton Pike has made a detailed study of the image of the city in modern literature. The principal theme of his book is the paradoxical idea of the city as a ‘paved solitude’. That is, the city is ‘a highly developed form of social organization… yet [it embodies] the isolation or exclusion of the individual from a community, and in the twentieth century… the fragmentation of the very concept of community. … [The city] of necessity represents a separation from the world of nature, the imposition of man’s will on a natural order. … In modern times the real cities of Western Europe and America have generally tended to be associated with the evils of human nature. …’ See Burton Pike, *The Image of the City in Modern Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981): xi–7.


9. Tony Mitchell, 19. Veronica Kelly offers an interesting reflection on Mitchell's critique. She states that Mitchell ‘interprets the transparently ideological manoeuvres of the mainstream press as exact reflections of the project of the plays themselves; whereas arguably the plays are amenable to alternative and less comfortable readings’. See Veronica Kelly, ‘The Melodrama of Defeat: Political Patterns in Some Colonial and Contemporary Australian Plays’, *Southerly* 50; 2 (June 1990): 137.

10. Delia Falconer has argued that apocalypse is ‘perhaps the empowering narrative of western cultural hegemony’. Her observation finds an historical context in these observations by Saily Kester. ‘[A]pocalypse represents both the consummation and the destruction of time, and its typical form is the image of fire in a mighty cosmic conflagration (the Greek ekpyrosis, the Norse [Eddic] Ragnarök [the Norse Edda was Wagner's mythic model for *The Ring*, Götterdämmerung…]), in which the world is consumed by fire. In many religions and mythologies the ekpyrosis is preceded by a period of corruption at all levels of human society: the fire comes as a judgement upon a crepuscular and degenerate world.’ For Falconer's comments, see Mark Gibson, ‘The Figure of Apocalypse and Contemporary Culture’, *Southern Review* 26.1 (March 1993): 129; for Kester's, see Sally Kester, ‘The Archetypal Motives of Cosmogony and Apocalypse in *The Ring*, Miscellanea Musicologica 14 (1985): 108.

See for example Scene Five (17) when Woman C scratches some of Colin’s opera records with her fingernails, and gives the others to the kids; Scene Six (20) when Donald asks Dean to listen to *The Ring*; and Scene Eight (26) in which Donald’s stolen portable stereo contains a tape recording of *Fidelio*. There are also numerous spoken references to opera, such as in Scene One (8); Scene Three (13); and Scene Eleven (32).


Fletcher, p.117.

Kester, p.99.


Fletcher, p.117.

See Kelly, ‘Apocalypse and After’, p. 70.

The speech is comparable in tone and sentiment, for example, to Barcroft Boake’s late nineteenth-century bush ballad ‘Where the Dead Men Lie’: ‘Out on the wastes of the Never Never/ That’s where the dead men lie!/ There where the heat waves dance for ever/ That’s where the dead men lie!/ … Out where the grinning skulls bleach whitely/ Under the saltbush sparkling brightly/ Out where the wild dogs chorus nightly/ That’s where the dead men lie!’ See Russel Ward, ed., *The Penguin Book of Australian Ballads* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1964): 111–113.


Pike, p. 72.

Fitzpatrick notes as well that this image of the city’s disintegration is achieved substantially at a formal level: ‘The fragmentation of the plot here directly reflects the perception of the mystified victim. Gow’s disaffected street kids are presented as casualties of the modern city.’ See ‘Views of the Harbour’, p. 55.


