

Contemporary Australian masculinities and De Certeau's concept of *la perruque* in Christos Tsiolkas' novel *The Slap* (2008)

Abstract

This paper will focus on how Christos Tsiolkas the author of *The Slap* (2008) invites us to view the complex range of private lives of his male characters living in suburban Melbourne through their daily routines, conversations and innermost thoughts. On the surface most appear to be participating in and achieving a certain level of success in their lives. However, this novel reveals when we agitate and dig below the “practices of everyday life” there is often a disquiet simmering away under the facade of family harmony, male bravado and contentment. This paper will argue that as a result of dissatisfaction with the established order of their lives, each man has managed to create another level of meaning for himself, his own form of *la perruque* (De Certeau 2011: 29), the concept of living proposed by Michel De Certeau. A treatment of the characters in this article draws on, and is used to illustrate the paradigm.

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Introduction:

While he was conducting the final edits of his novel *The Slap* (2008), Christos Tsiolkas revealed in an interview (Williams: 2012) that he was reading the *Longest Decade* by George Megalogenis (2006). In his book, Megalogenis outlines the political, economic, social and cultural issues which influenced Australian society profoundly particularly during the Howard years of government. This paper will focus on how Tsiolkas invites us to view the complex private lives of his male characters living in suburban Melbourne during this era through their daily routines, conversations and innermost thoughts. On the surface most appear to be participating in and achieving a certain level of success in their lives. However, this novel reveals that when we agitate and dig below the “practices of everyday life” there is often a disquiet simmering away under the facade of family harmony, male bravado and contentment.

The central argument alluded to in this article is that as a result of dissatisfaction with the established order of their lives, each male character has managed to create another level of meaning for himself, his own form of *la perruque*, the device for managing a life, proposed by Michel De Certeau (De Certeau 2011: 29), by performing a series of tactics and strategies. The article is a preliminary statement, indicating how the De Certeau approach may be used for framing, to show ways that the reader might draw meaning and understanding from a novel or screenplay, such as *The Slap*.

This analysis will discuss four male characters: Hector a 40 year old second generation Greek-Australian, his cousin Harry also a second-generation Greek-Australian, Richie a 15 year-old school boy and Gary, who is the father of Hugo, the child slapped by Harry. Each of these men appears to be suffering anxieties caused by a range of economic, social and cultural issues. The youngest male, Richie, is experiencing anxieties around the awkwardness of adolescence and his emerging homosexuality. The explosive issue of “The Slap” and ensuing conversations, actions and dialogue reveals the ways these characters are engaging in *la perruque* (De Certeau: 2011, and through various strategies and tactics aim, when given the opportunity, to turn their everyday practices into something of greater meaning.

La perruque

La perruque involves an individual performing an “alternative” activity or action to the one expected within a particular situation and underpins De Certeau’s theories in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). While these actions do not involve breaking the law directly such as stealing, nor do they equal absenteeism, they do involve a form of “putting one over” (2003:150), hence De Certeau uses the French term for wig; *la perruque*. For example De Certeau cites the case of the company secretary who may be writing a personal letter during company time: “*la perruque* is the worker’s own work disguised as work for his [or her] employer” (2003: 105). Time is the commodity which the worker takes from this situation rather than material goods: “Accused of stealing or turning material to his [or her] own ends and using the machines for his own profit, the worker who indulges in *la perruque* actually diverts time” (108).

In *The Slap* there are numerous instances of the male characters performing an alternative action to that expected of them within the suburban space by “making do” (De Certeau 2003: 107) in their own particular way. The actions one employs and “ways of operating” (2003: 108) depend upon strategies and tactics. A strategy is the more formal of the two actions and is located within the “proper” such as formal institutions and according to De Certeau it involves: “the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated.” (2011: 36). A strategy also has the benefit of long term planning, for example within the formal institution of marriage one may feel trapped but over time an individual can introduce their own “way of operating” within the structure. Therefore a person may decide upon a strategy to keep a lover in another location. The strategy located in the “proper” writes De Certeau, “is a victory of space over time” and so requires a goal and long term planning with an end result in mind.

The tactic on the other hand, “has at its disposal no [proper] base” (2010: xix) and “insinuates itself into the other’s place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety, without being able to keep it at a distance” (xix). Many of the tactical actions constituting *la perruque* played out within *The Slap* are of an impulsive nature as a tactic makes the most of random

opportunities. The male characters who are the subject of this paper are making use of time that other family members believe is being used for work, sleeping, shopping or running errands. De Certeau says there are numerous examples of *la perruque* practices operating as a “constant presence ... in the most ordered spheres of modern life” (105). *The Slap* provides numerous fictional examples of how *the tactic* involves the ability to insert a second level of meaning into the rules of the first (30) thus enabling “victories of the weak over the strong” (2010: xix). With *The Slap*, we have the opportunity of better appreciating the characters through the application of De Certeau’s proposal, and in the process, illustrating and delving further into the interpretation that he offers of human life.

Overview of *The Slap*

The title of *The Slap* makes reference to the actual slap of Gary’s child, at a barbecue party, by Harry who is unrelated to the boy. We quickly learn how the male characters in this text have all in some way been impacted by the fallout of the incident around “the slap”. After this episode we are privy to the daily routines and everyday practices of both the male and female characters. However, as their stories unfold, the incident at the barbecue becomes a catalyst for a wider conversation around a range of issues for the men and brings into sharper relief their pre-existing anxieties.

Each chapter of this novel is the individual story of one of the eight characters who reveals where they were when Hugo (the child) was hit and where their loyalties lie in relation to Harry and his actions. The narrative is about everybody’s personal beliefs on who is the “right” person to support and this in turn reveals their beliefs about many aspects of contemporary life. There are the strong supporters of Harry, the ones who are strongly opposed to his actions and the ones who would rather be impartial and are caught somewhere in the middle.

In many ways this narrative reflects the changing societal structure of modern Australia. The new middle class is a melting pot of ideas around parenting, value systems, sexuality, increased materialisation, wealth, loyalty and family. It is also a class consisting of Anglo-Australians, second generation Australians such as Harry and Hector as well as those “newer Australians” such as Middle Eastern Muslims, Indians, African refugees and

refugees from the Balkan wars. Despite their myriad backgrounds, there is a strong sense of camaraderie amongst this community.

Hector

The Slap begins on the morning of Hector's 40th birthday party amidst the rhythm of domestic life in the home he shares with his wife Aisha and their two children Adam and Melissa. On the surface Hector appears to have it all: a loving family, reliable employment, good looks and financial security. However, in the lead up to his party, Hector's thoughts are preoccupied with his ageing body and the teenage girl Connie, who works in his wife's veterinary practice. Hector's infatuation with his appearance and his affair are revealed to the reader while he performs his daily workout on the floor of his bedroom: "The daily routine was a series of exercises that he executed without fail every morning" (Tsiolkas: 2). Methodically Hector provides an inventory of his routine: jump out of bed, exercise, turn the coffee percolator on, walk to the local milk bar and purchase a paper, and after walking back home again "he would pour himself a coffee, walk out onto the back verandah, light a smoke, turn to the sports pages, and begin to read" (Tsiolkas: 3).

Thoughts about Connie are interwoven throughout this performance while he is playing with the kids, showering, and discussing the birthday lunch with Aisha. Hector's version of *la perruque*, which is his secret affair with Connie, is dependent upon him maintaining the "law of the place" (De Certeau 2011: 29), which is his and Aisha's own family routine carried out primarily within their suburban home. Paradoxically these laws also provide Hector tactical opportunities to manipulate and turn them to his advantage given the right moment and his ability to "use, manipulate and divert" certain spaces (De Certeau 2011: 30). Ultimately, a tactic does not obey the law of the place "for they are not defined or identified by it." (2011: 29). Under the pretence of going to pick up some valium from Aisha's surgery, and with her consent, Hector is provided with the opportunity to visit Connie and share a cigarette and a sexually charged conversation. Afterwards, fully aware of his actions he momentarily reprimands himself: "you are such a prick, such a fucking lying prick" (Tsiolkas 2008: 8). However, Hector's guilt lasts only as long as the car ride home when he then masturbates over "the luscious buttocks of a Vietnamese woman he had spied at the market." (14) Hector's

transgressions – mental and physical - are carried out within the home environment, in and around the everyday activities of his family life. Driving Connie home after babysitting his children also provides a tactical opportunity for Hector to indulge in his version of *la perruque* in his family's car outside her family home.

Hector also manages to create another level of meaning while performing his domestic routine in some of the most mundane places. For a tactic, writes De Certeau, "inserts itself into the other's place, fragmentarily, without taking it over in its entirety" (2011: xix). Places such as the toilet, sitting with Connie on the back verandah during the lead up to "the slap", and stealing a moment with her in the laundry are all random opportunities. These tactics shape Hector's *la perruque* into a suburban affair; an affair which is far removed from the exotic surrounds of Bali where Aisha later in the novel, conducts her own form of *la perruque* with another man at a conference.

Richie

There are numerous incidents of tactical subversions by the other characters demonstrating their ability to insert a second level of meaning into the first such as when Richie visits his father Craig Hillis; a man who has been absent for most of his young life. According to Richie, Craig lives far out in suburbia along the Maroondah Highway. It is so far out, Richie feels as though he has arrived onto the set of *Night of The Living Dead*. Throughout the night he continuously texts Connie who happens to be his best friend with messages such as: "*The Zmbies R Coming, the Zmbies R Coming*" (Tsiolkas 2008: 432), even at dinner with his father:

It was a tacky pokies pub in the middle of nowhere, boganville. Every street looked the same, every house looked the same, everybody looked the same. It was where you came to die. Zombies lived here. He could hear them monotonously tapping away at the machines (429).

Back at his father's flat Richie is encouraged to engage in a series of rituals associated with an older out-dated type of masculinity; one closely aligned to the "blokey", racist or "ocker" style of Australian manhood demonstrated by

Gary and at times Harry. A diehard supporter of the Collingwood football club, his father had tried to initiate Richie into his sport's loving world early on but by fourteen, "father and son literally had nothing to say to one another" (431). As the night unfolds in the tiny flat, Richie's dad works hard to mould Richie into a heterosexual version of himself: "She's your girlfriend, right?" (432) he asks about Connie. Tolerating his father's buffoonery all night and then hearing his racist comment towards Arabs is the final straw for Richie who begins to fight back: "'You don't like Arabs or Asians or black people or fags or anyone except boring white people out here in zombie suburbia'. Richie rocked back and forth in his chair. 'I bet you voted for John Howard'" (432). Richie who is appalled and shocked by his father's racist and homophobic slurs decides "that if he ended up anything like his old man he would off himself" (429).

According to De Certeau a tactic is defined by a series of tricks, and it is the weak who make use of tactic: "It operates in isolated actions, blow by blow" (1988: 37). Richie as a young teenage boy does not have much more than the use of the tactic at his disposal to retaliate or subvert the situation he finds himself in with this boorish man. Later when his father has fallen asleep and after sharing in his beer and bongs, Richie surveys the bachelor pad which amounts to "a small red-brick shitbox flat on the first floor" (434) with a "sunken snot-green sofa", the jumble of clothes stuffed in a "hanging canvas frame" (434) in the bedroom furnished with a doubled over mattress and strewn sheets. Next to it was a stack of magazines: an AFL guide, *Ralph*, *Drive*, a *Penthouse* and a cache of heterosexual porn which only provoked a giggle in Richie. It is a photo of a twenty-something Hector, randomly stolen in an impulsive act from the home of Gary and his partner Rosie, which fulfils Richie's homoerotic fantasy as he masturbates in his father's bed. The laws of this heterosexual space have been transgressed by Richie as he defies the assumptions his father holds about him. Through his erotic fantasy Richie manages to insert a second level of meaning into the constraining order of (De Certeau: 30) his father's space by "re-using" it for *his* pleasure on *his* terms.

The next morning after showering, Richie stuffs his cum-stained underpants down the toilet rather than wear them again: "He'd fucked the drain. Richie shrugged. Let his father deal with it" (438). Having woven a second level of meaning into his father's heterosexual space he leaves his soiled underpants

as a grotesque form of *la perruque*; a homosexual triumph by inserting an alternative male desire within this hyper-masculine outer suburban space.

Harry

Harry's form of *la perruque* involves him "putting one over" (De Certeau: 2003: 150) across a number of Melbourne spaces; from his house in bayside Brighton, and as he weaves across his businesses in Altona, Moorabbin and Hawthorn, to a flat on the Geelong Road. His actions have been strategic rather than tactical; carefully developed over a period of time and are more sophisticated in design than Hector's tactical version of *la perruque*, which is dependent upon opportunistic uses of time and random opportunities. Both Harry's homes are at first glance housing quite "traditional" monogamous domestic arrangements. But Harry has managed to introduce his own ways of operating within these spaces by "putting one over" his wife, relatives, employees and friends. In the traditionally wealthy suburb of Brighton, Harry lives with his son Rocco and wife Sandi, who is a tall fair woman of Serbian descent. To all outward appearances Harry and Sandi are devoted to each other and to their son Rocco. But on the outskirts of industrial Melbourne lives Harry's mistress Kelly, who in contrast to his wife's golden physique is a short, dark, plump woman of Lebanese heritage. She too has a child, a daughter named Angela who refers to Harry as "Uncle Harry". Harry supports both women financially and in return he expects unconditional loyalty, respect and sex on demand.

Into both of these domestic arrangements Harry has introduced amongst the rhythms of everyday life – and it appears with minimal disruption -- his own ways of performing *la perruque*. His is almost the perfect strategy: "without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law for him, he established within it a degree of plurality and creativity" (2003:108). Harry's creativity and plurality is exercised around his work commitments, particularly when visiting Kelly. Leaving his business in Altona, Harry detours for a ten minute drive to Kelly's flat. In this space Harry has created *la perruque* within a second domestic environment while operating within the daily routine of the first. It is also one that is set up purely for his sexual gratification and one that is miles away in many forms from the gentrified suburb of Brighton. In this outer suburban kitchen there are no terms of endearment like those given by Harry to Sandi, such as "your

majesty”, afforded to Kelly. Kelly, just like Sandi, spends most of her time at home. However Harry’s relationship with Kelly is a purely a business arrangement for both parties:

He had given Kelly the mobile that she was to use when calling him and he only paid for that. Kelly was a good woman. She only ever used that phone, never exposed him to danger with his wife. He watched her as she walked around the flat. She was tiny, with a cushiony, fleshy arse and large, low-hanging breasts. She was also dark and plump, a real contrast to Sandi’s tallness and Serbian fairness” (97). And yet unlike Sandi “he didn’t owe her commitment” (99).

An important aspect of strategic action is the isolation of a “proper” power base from which to plot and plan further action: “It allows one to capitalise acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions” (36) and unlike the tactic, provides “certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances” (36). Kelly’s home on the outskirts of Melbourne provides Harry with distance, independence, and therefore is in terms of De Certeau’s strategic actions “a triumph of place over time” (36). Harry’s Brighton home is more than his castle; it is also the power base “proper” from where he can plan his “style of action” (30). Moreover it sustains his particular version of *la perruque*; one which is more sophisticated and far reaching than the random tactics employed by Hector and Richie. Harry’s bayside power base also supports another effect of the strategic action:

The division of space makes possible a panoptic practice proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign forces into objects than can be observed and measured and thus control and include them within its scope of vision. (36).

This aspect of the panopticon serves Harry well for his affair with Kelly and yet it also serves a more sinister role which he performs from within the family home. While Sandi cooks his lunch in their kitchen and Rocco watches television in the lounge room, Harry “observes”, “measures” and “includes” a group of young bikini-clad girls from his balcony overlooking Brighton Beach into his “scope of vision”. Supplying his fantasy in this way, Harry exerts control over how their actions are viewed as they shower in the

park. From within the domestic space Harry creates a second level of meaning as he considers the girls through his predatory gaze:

He could smell the meat that Sandi was sizzling in the kitchen and he rubbed his hand over his stomach, anticipating dinner. Harry smiled to himself. ...Four young girls in thin strips of bikinis were showering in the park. They had pert adolescent tits, they were blonde and lithe. Grinning, he pushed his crotch against the dark tinted glass of the balcony wall. ...His penis lengthened and hardened, stretched against the lycra. ... Come on, bitch, he mouthed to himself. One of the girls had bent over and he let out a small groan at glimpsing her full, toned buttocks. Wouldn’t you want my cock up that hole you little whore” (983).

Gary

In this story it is the white Anglo-Australian male, the ginger haired character of Gary who represents much of the ugliness and anxiety in contemporary Australian life in the novel. Gary demonstrates how it is alcohol which enables him to perform *la perruque* in almost any social context. His tactic is to insert a second level of meaning into the first by performing an “alternative” action to the one expected within a particular situation. For example, from the moment Gary arrives at Hector’s birthday party he is portrayed as an outsider for a number of reasons: he is sexist, a chronic underachiever, and a boorish drunk with a tendency to binge drink. Gary’s anti-social drinking habits were a “running joke” in Hector’s family and when he became belligerent as he was wont to do; “Hector’s mother would turn to the other Greeks, raise her eyebrows and exclaim, *Australezi*, what you expect? It’s in their blood” (Tsiolkas 2008: 21).

Ultimately, a tactic does not obey the law of the place “for they are not defined or identified by it” (De Certeau 2011: 29), and Gary drunk, was like a wounded animal ready to take offence at any threat perceived or otherwise. His drinking was one of the reasons Hector “preferred detachment in his interactions with him” (32). With Gary there was no small talk, he “didn’t trust their world, that was very clear” (32). There is also a whining attitude underlining Gary’s masculinity about the success of what he perceived to be the boring middle classes, and given the opportunity, he would attack

anyone he perceived to be “bourgeois” (259). However, according to George Megalogenis, Gary’s insecurities about his place in the hierarchy of successful masculinities were not totally unfounded:

By the 1990s, the Australian-born children of immigrants had reached their twenties and thirties. ...in 2002 ...the children of non-English speaking immigrants were better qualified and had better jobs than all the others in their peer group. They exceeded the locals, the Australian-born of the Australian-born, as well as the Australian-born of English-speaking immigrants (Megalogenis: 40).

De Certeau writes that “*la perruque* ... is infiltrating itself everywhere and becoming more and more common ... Sly as a fox and twice as quick: there are countless ways of ‘making do’” (2011: 29) Gary’s early adult life had been dependent on “making do” and reinventing himself from school dropout, to unqualified carpenter, rent boy, pimp, and heroin addict until he finally left Sydney “owing thousands” (258). As an older man, Gary rejects what he perceives to be the middle class values of false mateship, arrogance and aloofness, traits of the men in his and Rosie’s social group. (260) And yet Gary himself has profited from living off the misery of others, criticising artists instead of practising himself, parading as an intellectual and while “Honesty was his God” (259), Gary couldn’t see the sham his life really was.

In this novel the “Australians”, such as the ‘Anglo-Australians,’ are referred to in several instances with contempt, such as “Aussie yobbo shit” (107), as if being an Anglo- Australian was a curse. Gary knows men like him are dying out, being outsmarted and usurped by better educated, wealthier and better connected “new Australians”. Living each week from pay check to pay check, Gary’s only option for transcending the everyday practices of his existence is to engage in tactics which are, writes De Certeau, the “art of the weak” (2011: 27). Aspiring to be an artist without encouragement or training, Gary has all but given up on his dream and Hector notices in a moment of pity how exhausted he is “working in a shit job, not his own boss, raising a family” (35). Gary’s circumstances reduce him to relying on the laws of the tactic:

The space of a tactic is the space of the other. Thus it must play on and with a terrain imposed on it and organised by the law of a foreign power. (2011: 37).

In this (uneven) playing field it also becomes obvious that Harry’s wealth is an affront to Gary, his manhood and status as an “Australian”, particularly when Harry discusses some of the various options relating to his children’s education which his wealth affords him. Gary, like many of his generation is beginning to feel like an outsider in his own country as an “us and them” attitude has settled into the foundation of his thinking predisposing him to use alcohol in his form of *la perruque*.

Conclusion

This paper has delved into Christos Tsiolkas’ 1988 novel *The Slap* to view the private lives of four male characters who are experiencing a certain amount of dissatisfaction and anxiety with everyday life in contemporary Melbourne. The incident of “the slap” in this text was the catalyst for a closer analysis of how each man engages with the concept of *la perruque* to regain some sense of self. De Certeau writes of contemporary life:

In our societies, as local stabilities break down, it is as if, no longer fixed by a subscribed community, tactics wander out of orbit, making consumers into immigrants, in a system too vast to be their own, too tightly woven for them to escape from it. ... Strategies in contrast, conceal beneath objective calculations, their connection with the power that sustains them from within the stronghold of its own proper place or institution (De Certeau 2011: xx).

Relying on De Certeau, as a guide and framework, to make acquaintance with *The Slap*, this article has posited that the male characters are all attempting in some way to find meaning and “make do” in a constantly changing society. It has proposed that each man’s way of connecting with and feeling in charge of his everyday life is to perform his own version of *la perruque* either through the use of tactics or strategies.

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