Idiot Box: Mick Cameron as Yobbo Flâneur

Rebecca Johnke

Campus Lite has obtained an exclusive interview with David Caesar, who will share some insights to his film Idiot Box (1997) with us. Idiot Box is a bleak ‘coming of age’ narrative that presents audiences with a stark but humorous dose of social realism in the ‘backblocks’ in the 1990s. The film pumps with crude, frustrated energy via sharp editing and a frenetic soundtrack that combines urban cacophony and raw Australian music to create a high-octane feel. 

Idiot Box is set in a desolate and fatherless realm, and investigates the world of working-class young men who are grappling with the challenge of manifesting an ‘honourable’ code of ambulatory masculinity. Kev and Mick are unemployed, marginalised, frustrated, and looking for some direction (or at least something to do) to overcome their feelings of suffocation and boredom. A panel of characters, actors, and expert commentators has been assembled to share their views about Kev, Mick and life in the western suburbs.

This is a story about ‘the young and the bloody useless’ — about working-class masculinity, unemployment, suburbia and car-lessness, and this encourages contemplation about gendered public space and pedestrians. The film’s depiction of blokes, cars, and flânerie will be interrogated in relation to how working-class masculinity is performed. Campus Lite will argue that Caesar uses the car as a means for both the characters and the audience to measure masculinity (with all of the related factors of power, aggression, success, mobility and a close relationship with technology). This article will examine how Kev is defeated by his status as pedestrian but how Mick is more adaptable and creative in defiantly reinventing himself from carless ‘loser’ to yobbo flâneur.

Caesar is passionate about telling stories about working-class Australians, and he is acutely conscious of class politics and the role that capitalism and consumerism play in Australian society. He is now recognised as somewhat of a spokesperson for working-class blokes, and he is a favourite with the media who can rely on him for a memorable ‘ten second grab’ about Australian masculinity.

Interviewer: David, can you tell our readers about your films?

David Caesar: [E]ssentially all my films are about the same thing — the lack of place there is for working-class men.

Interviewer: Can you expand on that?

David Caesar: Most of the stuff I want to do is about trying to understand what it is to be a man in a world that is not very masculine any more … working-class men over the past thirty years have become redundant and marginalised … within urbanised, suburbanised society, the things that men were traditionally good at — and whether they were biologically good at them or not, I don’t know — are useless. There are no sabre-tooth tigers outside the door that men have to protect people from. There are no woolly mammoths to hunt down and celebrate
afterwards. I think that men in other classes are suffering from this, too. But what they do is sail around the world by themselves or go climb a mountain. They have the economic possibilities to channel those energies into constructive avenues. With the men who don’t have the financial position to express that creatively, it becomes a destructive force.3

[Editor: I’ll scream if he mentions Robert Bly, Sam Keen, or Steve Biddulph. Honestly, the man is a Neanderthal, one of those sentences ends in a preposition. Does he really think it was fabulous to wake up to a spot of mammoth killing before breakfast everyday? Did the FFC give this idiot public monies? I’m unsure about the validity of engaging him in this debate anyway, isn’t he famous for slagging off academics and the intelligentsia? Perhaps Campus Lite should consider an interview with Jane Campion instead?]

[Student: Calm down and don’t be such a snob. Remember this bloke loves playing the fool for the media (and they’ll lap up the mammoth line), but he’s a very smart bloke.]

Interviewer: Ben, you played Kev, what are your thoughts about the film? How would you define the young men in Idiot Box?

Ben Mendelsohn: They’re sort of a window on to what Australian males used to be. They’re a type of male that is now completely redundant in today’s society … They aren’t skilled, they don’t have anything to contribute.4

Interviewer: Dr Butterss, I see that you have written a few words about Idiot Box in Metro Magazine. I would be interested to know if you agree with David and Ben. You make some astute observations about protest masculinity or hypermasculinity. How do you imagine the audience relates to the figures of Kev and Mick?

Philip Butterss: In Idiot Box, the attitude to the young men and the masculinity they live out is ambivalent in different ways. In spite of Kev’s appalling treatment of his girlfriend, and his potential for violence, he remains likeable, to a degree, through his sense of humour, and through sympathy on the audience’s part for the hopelessness of his situation. Mick, a part-time poet and a more stable and sensitive character, is more unequivocally attractive. By the end of the film it is the aggressive and self-destructive masculinity that the audience is positioned to reject out of hand, not the individuals themselves.5

Interviewer: Yes. Caesar does not expect viewers to condone their behaviour or valorise it. He wants to tell stories about ‘real’ issues affecting working-class lives and this does not necessarily mean that he intends the characters to be heroes or role models. Like Mark Davis, Caesar deliberately engages in the debate about how ‘society’ vilifies the young, and he exposes the deceit of an Australian culture that deifies consumption and hegemonic masculinity, yet blames working-class men for their attempts to negotiate that culture.6 As Butterss notes, in such circumstances Kev has little choice but to self-destruct, thus removing the threat of his ‘excessive masculinity’, and allowing society to kid itself that Kev is entirely culpable for his predicament.7 Accordingly, Idiot Box also investigates
theories of screen violence and ‘vulnerable’ audiences … [Editor: Stop! Don’t rehash Ferres’s argument, just refer readers to her.]

[Student: Err, ok. I also intended to have a section here which demonstrates my knowledge of male hysteria, resistance, marginalisation and Kev’s self destructive tendencies (linked very adroitly to Ned Kelly, Bon Scott and Gallipoli). What do you think?]

[Editor: Forget it. Refer them to Biber’s book and her thesis; she’s covered that ground and she is as sharp as a tack. Do you have anything new to contribute?]

Interviewer: I would like to move on with our discussion about masculinity and expand our focus. David, do you have any thoughts on suburbia and its place in Australian culture?

David Caesar: It is the world of Australians, not just working-class but middle-class as well. If there is any Australian culture that has any value, it will come from there because that’s the experience of most Australians. And if something has any real value, it has to speak a tribal language that people can embrace. And mythologise.

[Student: I’m not sure what he means by ‘tribal’. It sounds a bit like Iron John meets Joseph Campbell.]

[Editor: For God’s sake, get rid of it. Where is this going? Who cares what he thinks he was doing?]

Interviewer: Mmmm, interesting point David. I believe that by placing Kev and Mick in the outer suburbs (the ‘backblocks’), isolated from the centre, their geographic position on the margins mirrors their characters’ economic and cultural isolation. In Idiot Box, we see Kev and Mick walking around a flat, dry and culturally desolate setting — they appear to be trapped in a bland and sterile environment, with no means of escape.

Police: Well, if this isn’t the arsehole of the universe, you can smell it from here.

Interviewer: Err, yes, nicely put. In this context, the roads and cars become significant texts, and in the car-dependant outer suburbs depicted in Idiot Box, the streets and pavements are eerily empty. For working-class young men in particular, having access to a car is especially significant if they are denied other means to demonstrate their masculinity (such as a job, money, higher education or political power). The car, as a signifier of freedom, escape, masculinity and adulthood, is one of the most potent symbols in the film. Like the ‘idiot box’, the car has become a signifier of much more than a collection of nuts and bolts — and its place in Australian society, and in Australian film, is iconic. The way that the lads promenade in the streets informs the audience of their status and their self-image — about how they feel as men. Mick and Kev strut, head up, chest out. There is both a laconic air and an aura of bubbling aggression in their stance. The more demeaning and hopeless the aim of the outing (for instance, a trip to the social security office), the more the strut is affected — a performance of masculinity and bravado is paramount. Not only are the suburbs not designed for walkers (some streets do not appear to have footpaths) but the
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lads refuse the status of pedestrians and defiantly claim the roads. They usually parade down the middle of the street, rather than on footpaths; they claim the territory of cars even when they do not drive. In one scene, Kev literally walks right over a car. Indeed, to emphasise the point that Kev and Mick should not be on the roads (but are anyway), the film opens with the scene where the lads play chicken at night on the freeway.

**Ben Goldsmith:** Tracking through long grass the camera picks out car headlights travelling straight towards us, as effortlessly we stand and follow a young man, Mick, nonchalantly crossing the busy road. As he reaches the other side Mick turns to wait for his mate, Kev, who slowly and defiantly walks towards him. Cars surge past, horns blare, a driver yells ‘Get off the road’, but Kev does not hurry or lengthen his gait. A car fills the screen, Kev barely steals a glance out of the corner of his eye. The camera swoops around, before Mick pulls Kev out of the line of fire of the car’s blinding headlights, both of them falling into a ditch as the car screams past.¹³

**Interviewer:** The lads know that they are transgressing into motorists’ territory; this is what makes the game meaningful as well as thrilling. They understand that society wants them off the roads and streets, and out of sight. In the scene where they are rehearsing the robbery, they case the bank on their dragster bikes, which of course makes them appear juvenile and pathetic rather than hardened criminals. What was it the police labelled them as?

**Police:** Dickheads of the week.

**Interviewer:** Thanks. Even when they manage to steal a car, it is an ancient, mustard-coloured station wagon. The car’s owner reclaims it easily and treats them like naughty boys rather than dangerous armed robbers. Despite their posturing, the lads do not have the agency to be on the roads, and this reduces them to the status of perpetual boys. As in so many books and films, the car is a symbol of freedom and consolidates a man’s adulthood and masculinity. Significantly, the lads’ envy and frustration manifests itself in behaviour such as playing chicken, deliberately setting off car alarms, or stealing a car and spending a few blissful minutes spinning in circles on an unpaved road or in a field. Manipulation of the automobile as a sign, is the principal means for Caesar to convey sensations of blissful release, transcendence and rebellion, and the pleasure derived from such behaviour is underlined by the use of slow motion sequences.

Would you agree, Dr Butterss?

**Philip Butterss:** The importance of bodily pleasures to this kind of masculinity is underlined in the slow-motion moments of ecstasy which Kev experiences after his most excessively wild or violent behaviour. These brief snatches of release are the only times when he experiences peace.¹⁴

**Interviewer:** The success of such filmmaking techniques has been exploited by directors of road movies and car action films. The car provides filmmakers with a well-recognised metaphor — an effective means of conveying messages to cine-literate audiences. *Campus Lite* would now like to discuss how, in a film about
working-class masculinity, automobiles loom as integral to Mick’s status as pedestrian and poet (the relationship between gender, technology, class and language), and to the way that he (literally) approaches life.

David, can you provide any insights into why you made Mick a poet?

David Caesar: I am quite obsessed about language. I am very conscious of what I perceive to be the poetry of non-mainstream language. Especially marginalised people, whether they are Aborigines or whether they are from an Anglo-Celtic background. Working-class men are usually portrayed as stupid rapists in film … That’s why I made Mick a poet. To mock that stereotype.

Interviewer: If we note that Mick’s personality is defined by his gender, class, and his economic status as an unemployed pedestrian poet, these factors combine to make him a reluctant and unlikely suburban flâneur. By definition, a flâneur is a male intellectual, usually a poet, who leisurely walks the streets of a city, consumes the visual and aural texts around him, and then produces an artistic text that reflects upon his experiences. His ambulatory gaze is turned on everyone and everything at street level, and he is a spectator who wishes to move without fanfare amongst the crowds and record his experiences without himself being observed. He rejects the domestic, the constrained, the private (potential triggers of nausea), and seeks inspiration in the public — in being not so much in the crowd, but of the crowd. For over a century we have been encouraged to think reverently of figures such as Edgar Allan Poe, Edmund White, Charles Baudelaire or Walter Benjamin, as both the archetypes and the creators of flânerie. As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson notes, however, the practice of flânerie was not always the intellectual and genteel occupation of dandies with a fondness for walking turtles or lobsters. In the early nineteenth century, flâneurs had to counter the accusation that they were bored ‘loafers’ or ‘lazybones’.

Rob Shields: [T]he flâneur is the embodiment of alienation.

Interviewer: So Mick Cameron may have much in common with these men, and perhaps he merely requires better PR (and a turtle). [Editor: Get rid of the turtle joke.]

Interviewer: Mick’s status as flâneur reclaims flânerie’s roots in boredom, laziness, alienation, nausea, and marginalisation, but this does not make him any less of an artist or intellectual. His days and nights are spent patrolling the streets, pubs and lounge rooms of his suburb. He reads the environment around him — the male gaze embodied in the form of an unemployed westie yobbo. Unlike his predecessors, he cannot hide in the crowd, because the streets where he roams are generally empty, and this makes him visible and vulnerable. His relationship with capitalism and consumption is more complex, yet also simpler than that of his predecessors. He does not have to worry about being contaminated by sumptuous goods proffered in expensive arcades; he can barely afford the occasional few beers and a packet of chips. Nevertheless, he is bombarded by images of consumer goods every time he turns on the television, and his alienation from engaging in commercial transactions marginalises him even further.

Kev: Fuck youse, you rich cunts!
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Interviewer: Err, thanks Kev, anyway to continue … The texts he reads from the screen promote violence and consumerism, and the streets he reads tell a story of sterility, sameness, and the death of community. From such source material, he produces his crude but beautiful poems such as ‘Hope’.

Mick: Every second Thursday they pay the dole into my bank account/ So I go to the teller machine/ and hope I can remember my pin number.

Edmund White: Most experience ends up interpreted as — and replaced by — knowledge, but for the flâneur the experience remains somehow pure, useless, raw.20

Interviewer: Mick proves that it is possible to create poems about his quotidian experiences (‘pure, useless, raw’), and he processes what he observes about his life and surroundings, and he spontaneously transcribes his thoughts into art. He does not choose to be a flâneur and yet because of his jobless, purposeless, car-less condition the role has almost chosen him. What is it that De Certeau says about walking in the city?

Michel De Certeau: The walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (tours) and detours that can be compared to ‘turns of phrase’ or ‘stylistic figures’. There is a rhetoric of walking. The art of ‘turning’ phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (tourner un parcours). Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses.21

Interviewer: Few would label Mick as a ‘typical’ intellectual, his mates scoff at his adoption of the moniker ‘poet’. He is a curiosity in a social milieu that rejects pretension and resists recognising poetry that does not rhyme and is not legitimised by being printed in a book. Excuse me madam, what is your reaction to Mick’s poem ‘Hope’?

Barmaid: Poems are about flowers and sunsets and shit like that. You can’t have a poem about being on the dole.

Mick: If you say something is a poem, then it is.

Interviewer: Quite so. It is poignant that one of Mick’s favourite diversions is to stand on an overpass over a busy highway and fantasise about the people who drive by below. Again, it is Mick as poet and flâneur, who sees the overpass as a venue for contemplation and creation. Even if he can only dream about the freedom and independence that ownership of a car would provide, he at least thinks and fantasises, and as a pedestrian, the people he watches drive away take on a mythic dimension. The drivers are going places, but the lads are going nowhere, and they know it. When Mick asks Lani on a date, their choices for entertainment (until they are well acquainted enough to have sex) are either watching television or going for a walk. Before embarking on their walk, Mick warns that there is nothing to see and, inevitably, they end up at the overpass where they are caged behind safety fences — an image that reinforces their isolation, entrapment and inertia. As they gaze down at the passing cars, Mick admits that he did not think that Lani would be interested in him because he does not have a job or a car.

Mick, can you remember what you told Lani about your attitude to cars?
Mick: Christ, who wouldn’t want a car? You could just go, pfft.

Interviewer: Forced to walk the streets of suburban Sydney (hardly the conventional flâneur’s territory of London, Paris or Berlin), he is encouraged to view them in a way that contrasts with both his intellectual peers and his motorised brothers. Motorists experience the streets and suburbs as a haze, visible only at acceleration, and not really even seen, but rather travelled through, transgressed, endured, palatable only when blurred by speed. Zygmunt Bauman, I see that you have made a similar observation about the changed status of contemporary flânerie, how would you describe this trend?

Zygmunt Bauman: Today’s action is, after all, different: it is, mostly, about passing from here to there, as fast as one can manage, preferably without stopping, better still without looking around … The street is the ‘out there’ from which one hides, at home or inside the car, behind security locks and burglar alarms.22

Interviewer: My point exactly. Mick would prefer to be in a car rather than on foot on the streets, he would like to be at a workplace rather than constrained to the domestic, but he has no choice. His circumstances mould him into practising flânerie, both on the streets and in the living room. In fact, the whole film could be said to reflect Mick’s point of view as flâneur because the suburbs are usually not contemplated, reflected upon, indeed even seen, if city dwellers and filmmakers can help it. Although films like Romper Stomper, The Boys, Head On, and Death in Brunswick have broadened Australia’s cinematic horizons. These are not the type of neighbourhood or the calibre of character that usually grace our screens — without cars and wheels, the locus shifts. Caesar makes us slow down, directs our gaze at the western suburbs, and refuses to allow us to avert our eyes from the incessant ugliness, and occasional beauty, of the physical and cultural environment. Mick acts as our tour guide and interpreter in this alien setting, and Caesar presents viewers with a bleak but humorous working-class bildungsroman that offers a different take on the gender-technology relation.

[Editor: This is looking suspiciously like a monologue rather than an interview, but go on.]

Interviewer: I believe Zygmunt Bauman has made another interesting observation about contemporary flânerie, which may prove interesting in regard to Mick and his expert status as a consumer of television and video. He notes that one does not need to travel physically to engage in postmodern flânerie — now possible as a sluggish form of mental meandering with a remote control in hand.23 Although often slumped in a chair, Mick is not a passive viewer, but an expert one who actively engages with the material he watches, and with his fellow watchers. During waking hours, the television is always on — whether it is in private homes, the pub, or even the social security office. It is a persistent source of violent (often sexist) images, and appeals to consumerism, and it acts as a unit of both social and commercial exchange. Caesar does far more than merely have Kev put the boot into television, and he illustrates that characters such as Mick, Kev, the police and criminals all learn how to behave via television and video viewing. Mick learns how to perform oral sex and how to rob a bank, the detectives mirror the behaviour.
learned from formulaic police dramas, Colin is aware of the ‘good cop/bad cop’ routine being played out, and so on — and all without having to leave the couch.

Betty: I’ve seen it … everyone’s seen it.

Interviewer: These characters understand their surroundings and they know how to negotiate their relationships because they have seen it all before on the box. Whether this makes them ‘idiots’ or expert, active viewers is one of the questions Caesar seeks to investigate. Significantly, television also breaks the silence and provides a link to the outside world, while simultaneously stymieing conversation and keeping people isolated in their homes, rather than interacting in public spaces.

Interviewer: Mick notes this phenomenon in one of his poems entitled ‘Quiet’.

Mick: When I get home, I put the telly on/ For the noise/ I hate the quiet/ I fucken hate it.

Interviewer: This fear of silence, of quiet, reflects an anxiety about absence and agency. The lads use noise as a means to both disrupt and to remind themselves, and the world, that they exist, that their voices deserve to be heard.

Ben Goldsmith: For Mick … noise is equally desirable, a familiar, comfortable state to which he aspires. But noise also has a different resonance for Mick. For him it is disruptive, an intervention in, and an obstacle to, the transfer of information along established and privileged channels from which he is excluded by virtue of his social status (unskilled, unemployed) and his geographic situation in the outer suburbs … he refuses to be bound by the unwritten rules which his contemporaries unquestioningly assume exclude them from the realms of poetry and the imagination.

Interviewer: Nicely said, Ben. The difference between Mick and Kev could be categorised as the difference between a larrikin loafer and a flâneur. Kev hungrily consumes texts but has trouble digesting or regurgitating them in a thoughtful way. He patrols the local shopping centre and his gaze labels passing women as ‘dogs’ or ‘spunks’, and he states that his ‘special skill’ is as a ‘fashion photographer’ (again, employing the male gaze).

Interviewer: However, unlike Mick, he is only playing at being the artist, the archivist or the intellectual. Kev does not have Mick’s facility with language (the ‘go’ or ‘gun’ incident demonstrates his clumsiness), and his only ‘poem’ is his motto ‘Maximum fear. Minimum time’. His vocation (being bored) and his hobby (being angry) act as mental shackles that imprison his imagination, and reduce him to performing larrikin ‘tricks’ to divert and entertain.
As Collins notes, Caesar sets up this comedic interplay between Kev as the
character who performs the sight gag and Mick who provides the verbal
gymnastics. Mick prods Kev to think (he explains the five mistakes criminals
always make), to plan (using a toilet brush as a gun he makes Kev plan the robbery
and exhorts him not to ‘drink and rob’) and to exercise discipline (he forces Kev
to rehearse the robbery on his dragster bike). Sadly, Mick’s tutoring comes to
nothing when Kev proceeds to make all of the predictable mistakes (telling his
‘missus’, pissing off a local criminal, and so on), decides to rob the bank without
a getaway car, and then almost invites the police to shoot him.

_Campus Lite_ wishes to conclude with some comments about masculinity, cars,
and _flânerie_, and how Mick and Kev perform their gender. Kev ingests texts, but
he remains inward looking and is a consumer rather than a producer, a larrikin
rather than a poet. He is a bored, angry, violent and marginalised misogynist, who
overcompensates for his feelings of powerless — his performance of masculinity
is a sizzling frenzy of testosterone-fuelled protest. [Editor: Tone it down. You’re
not writing for the _Advertiser_.] He resembles his cinematic predecessors from
westerns, action flicks, or car crash films where gnomic action (usually vehicular)
dominates, and talking (let alone reciting poetry) is linked with hysteria, weakness
and femininity.

In contrast, Mick is a communicator, a peacemaker, forever making cups of tea
and spouting poetry. In many ways, his role could be seen as feminine —
unemployed and therefore constrained to the domestic, a pedestrian rather than a
driver, a talker who relates well to women (his sexual performance in comparison
with Kev’s speaks volumes) and he even wears a type of apron or skirt in the form
of a flannelette shirt. Nevertheless, Mick performs the masculine, just as Kev
does; he struts and parades, he claims the public domain of the streets (even if only
on foot) and he utilises the male gaze to perform that most masculine of pursuits
— _flânerie_. Kev is atavistic and self-destructive, but Mick is a survivor and in
many ways: this yobbo _flâneur_ could be held up as a poster-boy for new age
blokes.

[Editor: Mmm, there are still a few flaws in your argument, but it’s looking better,
and there is material here that you could explore more thoroughly elsewhere.
Perhaps give someone else the last word?]

_Anke Gleber:_ The _flâneur_ ... represents a disposition that is closely affiliated with
the gaze of the camera, renders the sensitivity of a director who records his own
vision, and repeats the spectatorship of a moviegoer who perceives the images of
reality as an ongoing film of modernity.

_Mick:_ You shit me to tears/ I’m goin’ down the pub.
Notes to pp 142–152

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Although not placed in quotation marks, all of the text represented as answers to the interviewer’s questions are direct quotes taken from various sources (screenplays, academic essays, magazine and newspaper articles and so on), however, I have taken their words out of their original context and used them to suit my purposes. I trust that the characters and individuals ‘interviewed’ will allow me this artistic license.

Thanks to Philip Butterss and to the two anonymous readers for their helpful comments.


4 Rebecca Thorpe, Frankston Standard, 24 February 1997, p 76.


6 Kay Ferres, ‘Idiot Box: Television, urban myths and ethical scenarios’, in Ian Craven, op. cit.

7 Butterss, op. cit., p 45.

8 Ferres, op. cit.


12 For discussions regarding using cars as textual vehicles, see for example: Peter Marsh and Peter Collett, Driving Passion, Jonathon Cape, 1986; Kristen Ross, Fast Cars, Clean Bodies, MIT Press, 1995; Ronald Primeau, Romance of the Road, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1996; and Roger Casey, Textual Vehicles, Garland Publishing, 1997.

13 Goldsmith, op. cit., p 126.

14 Butterss, op. cit., p 40.


20 Edmund White, op. cit., p 47.
21 De Certeau, op. cit., p 158.
23 ibid., p 155.
26 ibid., p 127.
29 Collins, op. cit., p 74.
31 Gleber, op. cit., p 6.