

SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISM AND ORDINARY AUSTRALIA

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If the number of films which feature a church reflected that church's size and impact, then either the Seventh-day Adventist church would be much bigger and more influential, or else two Australian films would disappear. It has taken very particular circumstances to generate the films featuring a rather small church with a low public profile and poor popular image, a church whose beliefs and practices are so much at variance with Australian society.

The Adventist church lacks the recognition and acceptance of other churches such as the Anglican, Presbyterian and Catholic churches because of its novel origins and unusual beliefs. As a new religion, imported from America (breeding ground of a variety of sects and cults), it lacks the stature of the older churches, who have built themselves into the very fabric of western society. Adventism has been perceived as a narrowly focussed, intense, evangelistic, even crusading image, which Australians tend to be cautious about.

The mainstream religions have a more mellow image, more in harmony with their societies, as they have usually had periods of political ascendancy, when the church has been responsible for the affairs of the secular state. This has placed these churches in the very centre of national life, entrenched in politics and business. While Australians tend to be sceptical about all organised religions, at least they have learned to live with the ones they have inherited. By contrast Adventism is a novelty which tries to impose its alien self on a culture which is rather hostile to both its style and its aims. (Imagine in you can a non-drinking, non-swearing, non-gambling vegetarian Australia, where no sport was played on Saturdays, and whose people believed in the imminent return of Jesus and the destruction of this world as we know it.)

As an offshoot of established American churches, particularly the Baptists and

Methodists, Adventism was rejected both by the American and Australian mainstreams, and in return it labelled the mainstream as apostate Christianity. The idea of a faithful remnant, to which their outcast status pushed them, was further promoted by the adoption of beliefs and practices unusual in Christianity, which ensured their marginality. While the Adventist emphasis on diet and health is now quite acceptable, Adventism is cut off from mainstream Christianity by worshipping on Saturday, and from non-religious Australia by its stand on sabbath observance, alcohol, and many other forms of popular recreation.

Mainstream Christian churches are only now beginning to accept that the Seventh-day Adventist church may be a legitimate Christian church, and not a dangerous sect who believe in salvation by works, eschatological oddities and which has an extra-Biblical canon of sacred writings. For most Australians however, the church remains unseen, despite the fact that they stuff themselves with Adventist Weet-bix and cornflakes daily. Its beliefs and practices are frequently confused with Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, two other groups labelled as non-Christian sects. Hence, any film that deals with Adventism must address an audience mostly ignorant of the church, probably holding some misconceptions, and possibly a certain amount of prejudice.

The first film, **Evil Angels** (US release title **A Cry in the Dark**), stems from the most celebrated legal case of the eighties, the death of baby Azaria Chamberlain. The second, **The Nostradamus Kid**, is the semi-autobiographical product of writer-director Bob Ellis's continuing struggle with his Adventist upbringing.

Film and reality

Because both films have a strong grounding in events that have actually occurred, they raise the difficult question of the relationship

between film and reality and truth. This is something which we can deal with only briefly here, by way of introduction, and in order to relate correctly these specific films to their historical context. Studies of films based on actual events reveal that one must distinguish between the events themselves, historical records of the events, and their fictional representations. Whereas history is an academic interpretation of the significance of events, fiction explores the emotional significance of the same events. As Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky states, 'Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known'.¹

Ien Ang distinguishes between what she calls empirical and emotional realism in her study of the soap opera *Dallas*. She notes that while the soap is unrealistic in the measurable, quantifiable sense - the empirical, in another sense many people find that it captures an emotional truth about their lives. In effect, its conflicts and dilemmas are similar in nature, if also rather more frequent and intense, to those that ordinary people face from day to day. This she terms emotional realism.²

One might distinguish between history and fiction by using the terms 'denotation' and 'connotation'. Whereas history must stick close to the objective and quantifiable, fiction (in this case feature film) is free to range over the emotive, subjective nature of things. Both are aspects of reality, and both have a truth to speak, just as both denotation and connotation indicate dimensions of meaning. One cannot pretend that the 'real' meaning of a word lies in either alone; similarly, fiction brings a dimension of truth that strict history finds difficult to capture. Thus it would be a mistake to look at these films merely to find 'errors' of fact.

Our main task is to examine the representation of the emotional reality of Seventh-day Adventism - a difficult task if we are to pass judgement, but easier if we are making observations ourselves. With *Evil Angels*, the task is relatively easy because of the rather straightforward split in attitudes which the film depicts. *The Nostradamus Kid* is much richer, not only in its foregrounding of

Adventism, but also in its ambivalent portrayal of the church. While both films ground themselves in recognisable events and settings, neither is bound by them, adapting the context and mood to suit the purposes of the films. Neither must be seen as a totally accurate portrayal of Adventism, yet both must be seen as potentially offering some insight into the experience of being Adventist.

The films have contrasting approaches to their representation of Seventh-day Adventism. *Evil Angels* is at pains to portray the Chamberlains and other Adventists as being typical Australians; it is only the fringe characters who treat the religion as being cultic and sinister. On the other hand, *The Nostradamus Kid* seeks to portray a most sectarian and un-Australian Adventism. This basic contrast stems from the essential differences in the purposes of both films. *Evil Angels* is about the miscarriage of justice towards two innocent people, often motivated by popular ignorance about an obscure religion. In order to build sympathy with the characters, the film emphasises their normality, their averageness, and ignores aspects of Adventism that do not fit in with the image it wishes to project of the Chamberlains. In *The Nostradamus Kid*, Ellis wants to use the outsidership of Adventism as a key to understanding his own sense of outsider status in Australian society and arts; so, in contrast to *Evil Angels*, he spotlights and magnifies the oddities of the church. However, his portrayal of Adventism is more complex and ambivalent than the essentially simple view put forward by *Evil Angels*.

Evil Angels

Evil Angels is only indirectly about the Seventh-day Adventist church. Very little of its theology and lifestyle are shown. Adventism is in many ways only of marginal interest to the film, a background factor that was nevertheless a catalyst in producing the scepticism and prejudice evident towards the Chamberlains. Hence only a few typically Adventist themes are highlighted, such as vegetarianism, teetotalism, non-smoking, the sabbath (which is never overtly mentioned as being a Saturday), and these elements are carefully framed in the context of what one might normally expect a typical Australian home to be like, as we shall

see. We are also given glimpses of the Adventist community: fragments of several church services including the dedication of baby Azaria, various family and friends (one of whom entrusts her child to Lindy's care), and the Adventist college where Michael later studies. In all cases these are so unexceptionally normal that it is difficult to make any particular comment about them.

The Adventist community comes across as helpful and supportive, and in no way out of the ordinary. The only qualification of this is the pastor in Darwin who arranges alternative accommodation for the Chamberlains during the trial, done with the best of intentions, but not particularly practical for a very pregnant lady who has to use an outside toilet frequently. The main avenue of representation of the church comes through the Chamberlains, who act as metonyms for the church. The film portrays them as ordinary Australians, who incidentally happen to be Seventh-day Adventists, and allows that to make a statement about the nature of Adventism.

The Chamberlains

Given the popular picture of Adventists, *Evil Angels* sets out on the difficult task of achieving audience identification with the characters of Lindy and Michael Chamberlain, a task made doubly difficult by the fact that by the time the film emerged, many people had already formed a negative opinion about them, which has proved surprisingly resilient to change. This is done in three ways: by minimising the differences between Adventism and the 'average' Australian; by framing those elements portrayed of Adventism in the ordinariness of the Chamberlains; and by assigning critical comments to bit characters who are clearly shown to be ignorant and prejudiced. Michael's vegetarianism and teetotalism is presented at the same time as he is talking about powerful motorbikes and cars – a typical Australian male subject, and teasing Greg and Sally, other campers at Ayers Rock, who are trying to guess his profession. His Five Day stop smoking campaign, officially sponsored by the church, is in line with the attitudes of a society which is increasingly acting to counter the habit of smoking. Lindy says to the police when they raid their Cooranbong home that the day is the Chamberlains' sabbath, an odd enough idea to

most Australians, but it is framed in the context of the violation of the sanctity of the Australian home and private property. Hence audience outrage at the brusque intrusion of the police into the home allows the awkward sabbath issue to appear as an extension of personal liberty.

Other potentially weird things are grounded in ordinariness or typical human idiosyncrasies. Lindy's taste for black baby clothes for one of her boys is clearly identified as idiosyncratic, when her friend (possibly an Adventist, but not stated) considers it to be 'yuck'. There is nothing sinister about it, merely a question of unusual personal taste. The small coffin that Michael owns is seen in the context of the community service he provides through his stop smoking seminars. These things, which will later surface in misinformed and distorted gossip, are early deprived of sinister significance.

In other ways the Chamberlains are represented as ordinary Australians. Michael wants to go barramundi fishing, and is teased by Lindy about his exaggerated prowess at catching them. Typically they take a family holiday to Ayers Rock, are interested in photography, display a sense of humour (Lindy jokes about the evil temper of the camel she rode, Michael teases Greg who tries to guess his profession) and have the ability to get on with other typical Australians. They are not particularly wealthy, taking a camping holiday rather than motels, but can afford some luxuries, such as Michael's quality camera equipment. Once baby Azaria is taken by the dingo, they display very human reactions, moving through various stages of grief, blaming themselves and each other, as well as God. These act to qualify their public statements about trusting in God, and having faith that nothing happens outside of God's will. Furthermore, overt statements are made as to their ordinariness, when Michael states in so many words in an interview that they are just a couple of ordinary Australians. More specifically, their attitude to Azaria is portrayed as precisely that which all decent Australians expect of good parents. Lindy shows all the characteristics of good motherhood, sewing a dress, washing Azaria at the Rock, and posing for family snaps with the baby.

The Chamberlains are not merely normal; they are, in the best Adventist tradition, community service minded. As well as his stop

smoking work, Michael also does counselling, and later in the film, when the Chamberlains are asked to explain the presence of blood in the car, Lindy talks of the people they helped with first aid.

The film goes so far as to qualify the Chamberlains' potential saintliness by portraying their foibles and weaknesses as well. These are no pious do-gooders, but rather real people. Michael is shown to have various ambitions and vanities: he parades his knowledge of motorbikes, clocks himself running down Ayers Rock, and seems to take pride in his camera equipment. He also has ambitions of further study. Minor disagreements, characteristic of any household, emerge: Michael wants to go barramundi fishing, but 'mother had other plans'. There is not the slightest shadow of a hint that this is anything but a typical, normal, human Australian family.

Public Perceptions Of The Chamberlains

By contrast, public perceptions of the Chamberlains and of Adventism are marginalised and made to appear distorted - at best misinformed and at worst malicious. These perceptions are portrayed in the film through two main avenues. Firstly, we are given, from time to time, snatches of gossip from a wide range of Australians in various social settings, and, secondly, we hear from the media, either from television reports or through questions posed by journalists or from remarks made by them. Both sources come across as predatory: the media feed on them to make money, and the public out of a sceptical, macabre delight. Hence a television news item reports that the Chamberlains have accepted the death as the will of God, which, while it is not far removed from what they actually said, is isolated and presented in a way that appears cultic and weird. Similarly, other journalists, harping on the religious dimension to get good headline quotes, ask whether God was responsible for killing Azaria, and if the death was punishment for travelling on the Sabbath, concepts alien both to actual Seventh-day Adventism and to the way the Chamberlains are portrayed in the film.³

Various public reactions associate Adventism with the supposed murder of Azaria. One group relate to each other how they had heard that

Azaria had been injured falling out of a trolley jeep, then add that, as Seventh-day Adventists, 'those sort of people don't like children who aren't normal'. Others argue that the witnesses at the fateful campsite were all Adventists, perjuring their testimony to protect the Chamberlains. Lindy actually gives an interview denying the rumours that Azaria had been killed as a cultic ritual to atone for Adventist sins (a bizarre distortion of Adventist atonement theology). Even before the tragedy, a passing truckie accuses the Adventists outside their church of being wealthy.

In the context of the film, these extravagant claims and distortions appear as just that. It is interesting that the Chamberlains' defenders in various conversations do so on grounds of commonsense. This has significance in two ways; firstly that commonsense and Adventism are allied (a point reinforced throughout the film through the normality of the Chamberlains), and secondly that little specific is popularly known about Adventist belief and practice. Where these are referred to, the gossipers generally have it wrong, and are generally critical of the Chamberlains.

Perhaps the mistake of the Chamberlains is to portray their reaction to the death of Azaria in fairly simplistic, religious terms. Their public statements refer to the peace that they have from God even though tragedy strikes, and of their assurance that God is in control of all events. They appear somewhat over-eager to use the media coverage as a means of testifying to and propagating their faith, all noble Adventist objectives, but unwise in the circumstances. These statements from people belonging to a little known, therefore easily suspect, religion, married to their publicly cool demeanour (Lindy in particular is considered too collected to be a distressed mother when describing how a dingo could take the baby out of the jumpsuit), are meat and drink to a sensation-seeking media, which highlights their unusualness, and, therefore, by implication their guilt.

The media and the gossipers harp with unnecessary emphasis on their Adventism, as if in some way this proves that they are the murderers. The argument goes simply that a bizarre religion indicates cultic people which indicates guilt. All of this is contrasted with the reaction we see in the film of the Chamberlains. Behind the scenes we are shown a far from

simplistic response; on the contrary they argue with each other, cast blame even on the very God they trust, and struggle to fit the tragedy into the framework of assurance which make up their public utterances.

Of course the film is not really about Adventists, but rather about how opinions and prejudices are frequently held contrary to evidence. It also has something to say about the intolerance of Australian society, and societies in general, towards minority groups, who do not fit into the perceived norm, and how the media, far from objectively reporting events, use occurrences for their own purposes. Ironically, this message is portrayed through another media form, the feature film. Adventism in the film forms only a small part, almost incidental to the theme. Its significance is that it provided a catalyst and continuing excuse for many people to label the Chamberlains as criminal.

The film, then, makes a relatively simple distinction between the innocuous, if naive, Adventist community and the malice of much of Australian society, which with few exceptions exercised a great deal of prejudice towards the Chamberlains, much of it stemming from attitudes towards their religion. The exaggeration and distortion of Adventism by the public leads to the film representing the church as being at the other end of the spectrum; decent, normal, and in harmony with Australian values. Given the amount of publicity about the case, the issues of truth and reality are very much at stake. The film uses both rational argument and emotional force to press home its claim to be telling the truth about the Chamberlains and the Seventh-day Adventist church. As such Adventism in *Evil Angels* is portrayed quite positively.

The Nostradamus Kid

The Nostradamus Kid is quite a different film in its approach to Adventism. Here the church is more central to the film's themes, being the cause of the main character's dilemmas. While *The Nostradamus Kid* portrays a cultic, extreme Adventism, its attitude to the church is somewhat ambivalent. Elkin, the main character, suffers nostalgia for some aspects of the religion which he has rejected and, to the end, is unable to free himself from elements of his boyhood faith.

Perhaps the most useful description of the

portrayal of Adventism in the film comes from writer-director Bob Ellis, who described the representation of the camp meeting as 'a little fantasicated, [but] dramatised with as much emotional truth as I could muster'. (4) This suggests both a truthfulness of intent as well as an intensification of events, similar to our earlier definition of the function of fiction as a representer of emotional rather than empirical realism. A number of Seventh-day Adventists have told me that they find the film true of their own experiences in many ways, although at the same time they point out a certain artistic license, quite valid for the dramatic structure of the film, but nevertheless capable of being confused with 'real' Adventism.

We might best distinguish then between what the film denotes about Adventism (the least significant and most petty approach) and what it connotes (the area of real significance). Given that the film is strongly autobiographical, the denotations and connotations have added significance in their claims for 'truth' or 'reality'.

Theology And Lifestyle

At the level of strict denotation, the film is fairly accurate in representing both theology and lifestyle. It speaks more or less correctly of baptism by immersion, signs of the end of the world, the treatment of Ellen G. White (Sister White) as a prophetess and of her writings as a guide to Adventist behaviour, and standards such as the opposition to drink, dancing, and swearing. Its representation of Adventist camp meetings is basically accurate, as is the portrayal of the existence of Houteff, a member of the breakaway movement labelled Shepherd's Rod, whose exotic apocalyptic theology created a group so far removed from the Adventist church that it was publicly disowned. The character on whom Houteff is based travelled in a caravan and later committed suicide when his predictions failed to eventuate. (Shepherd's Rod would itself later spawn further breakaway movements, one of which created its own fiery apocalypse at Waco, Texas). So too did a president, similar in name and style to Dibley, of the then-named Australasian Division of the Adventist church collapse at the Lismore camp meeting. Elkin's description of Adventist belief about the end of time to his lover, Jennie, is a fair thumbnail sketch of traditional Adventist teaching couched in characteristic Adventist-

Biblical metaphors. The 1980s also saw many Adventists leave the church over revelations that Ellen White borrowed material from other writers.

A couple of empirical inaccuracies along the way do little to upset the basically orthodox presentation of Adventist theology and practice. Ellis has Pastor Anderson saying that Alwin Houteff, the heretic Shepherd's Rod, will 'thrash and writhe and scream forever in the lake of fire', contrary to Adventist belief in a brief rather than eternal fire in which the wicked will suffer. Elkin also refers to an Adventist index of banned books - an invention used to indicate the opposition to fiction reading in some Adventist circles, which has never been formalised into anything like an index. A further petty point is the way in which the Junior Missionary Volunteers meeting seems to encompass a wide variety of age groups, when in fact Adventist meetings usually have separate meetings for a range of age groups. For cinematic convenience, Ellis rightly lumps them all together.

While the empirical element is fairly secure, the connotations given to them are loaded in a particular direction. Just about every element of Adventism which would label it as cultic is highlighted in the film. Just as **Evil Angels** stressed the normality of Adventism, so by contrast does **The Nostradamus Kid** make it appear as odd as possible. The film portrays an Adventism characterised by a petty but all-pervading legalism, an obsessive emphasis on sin, a cultic theology and mentality, and a narrow, intolerant view of the world. These things go naturally together, and Ellis labels them as primitive and unreal.

The end of the world

The list of things so treated is long, but worth examining. Perhaps the most significant theme of Adventism in the film, and one which Elkin never shakes off, is its concern with the end of the world. From the very beginning this concept drives Elkin to live life urgently, expecting each day to be his last. Eventually his friend McAlister tells him that he will have to face the awful fact that he may live to be ninety. The source of Elkin's apocalyptic visions is clear: it is a recurrent theme of Adventist sermons. Pastor Anderson preaches one pointing to the 'signs of the times' - Adventist jargon for the indicators

of the imminent return of Jesus (taken from Matthew 24, the same chapter that provides the disturbing verse that Elkin wrestles with at the Junior Missionary Volunteer meeting). Anderson's signs are television, jet travel, pubs open till 10 pm, and the heretical Jehovah's Witnesses doubling their numbers in three years. All this is delivered in melodramatic style, adding to the comic effect for the viewer.

Few Australians could accept that any of these things could possibly signal the end of the world, especially as by now they are rather old hat. There is a nice irony too in the references to heresy: Adventism, so open to the same charges, labels the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Shepherd's Rod as heretics, and Elkin himself is accused of it by flirting with all sorts of heresies such as doubting Matthew 24:34, and later writing that Jesus was a homosexual.

Houteff totes his own ominous version of the end of the world, much more imminent and quite specifically aimed at the Adventist Church which has rejected him. Elkin is horrified at discovering that he will die tomorrow, but, unlike Houteff, the failures of both the Rod's and the Adventist church's apocalyptic promises never seem to shake his faith in them. In fact, Elkin is convinced of the truth of Houteff's warnings when Dibley collapses in the middle of another end-time sermon. Some of the most melodramatic and memorable occasions of his youth are thus associated with eschatological theology. Years later, on meeting his old Adventist friend Wayland, who has just quit the church, Elkin displays regret when Wayland insists that the end of the world is not nigh. 'Apocalypse Never', says Wayland. 'I don't like the sound of that', replies Elkin. The oddity of such an obsession is made clear in the film. Elkin recounts to his 'cannibal' friend that he has wasted eighteen years knocking on doors, shyly saying the end of the world is nigh. People would reply, 'Sorry, we're Catholic', the implication being that Catholicism, that good mainstream Australian religion, could not possibly be interested in anything as extreme as the end of the world.

His Presbyterian friend McAlister is equally impervious to the threat of the end of the world. Again, Elkin is ironically exposed when he accuses McAlister of being obsessed with Bob Mitchum, when he, Elkin, is displaying a far more dangerous and extreme obsession himself.

As Elkin comments in a later voice-over, the Presbyterians (a mainstream religion like the Catholics and the Anglicans) were much better behaved than the Adventists, and hence were more successful in the city. Adventism's outsider status condemns its members to the fringes forever. As the final voice-over says, 'I looked out over the civilisation I still wasn't a part of'. To be an Adventist, or even to have been raised an Adventist, is to be forever condemned to the margin of a society one can only hope will be soon destroyed. Elkin's dilemma is that at the same time he desperately craves the pleasures, favours and esteem of that self-same society.

Perceptions of Adventism

Elkin highlights many other elements of Adventism that condemn him to the margins of Australian society: its prudery, forbidding the holding of hands before engagement or kissing before marriage; banning the reading of fiction, drinking, dancing, theatre attendance, gambling, eating prawns, telling jokes without a moral purpose (mentioned twice, adding to the puritanically sober image of Adventism - the end of the world is no laughing matter!), eating licorice or chocolate frogs, riding motorbikes with boys, swearing, eating meat, and acting. It takes Elkin some time to shake off many of these Adventist habits - the opening scene shows him trying to have sex for the first time, but still clinging to his non-drinking ways, because he is not allowed! By what odd standard he may do one yet be forbidden the other is not exactly clear.

Not only is the religion of the film legalistic, but also absolute, as evidenced by the imperious manner of the man running 'musical knees' in the church hall, and by the tyranny of Ellen White statements, which are pulled out on just about any occasion where Elkin threatens to enjoy himself. The ridicule to which Elkin is exposed for doubting the wild explanation of the flamboyant young American at the Junior Missionary Volunteer meeting also labels the church as intolerant. Elkin, in voice-over, states 'being a Seventh-day Adventist was hard but it was kind of fair. They quickly sorted out the ones they couldn't trust like Meryl and me and branded us with the mark of Cain and sent us wandering fugitive sinners through the land of Nod for all our days'. This tendency to label things as 'sin' and the perpetrators as 'sinners' is also very evident in the film. Elkin's doubts

about Matthew 24:34 are labelled as 'sin in your heart', the young man on their bikes are called sinners by the Adventist girls who refuse a ride, novel reading is a sin, as is dancing. Elkin asks Meryl if she feels sinful after an illicit motorbike ride, and later Meryl takes the stage name of 'Cinnamon' for her strip act, calling herself 'Cin' for short. The list of forbidden things grates on Elkin, who doubts that even a heaven full of Adventists could compensate for the banning of things he wants to do. Indeed, one suspects that his impression of heaven is perhaps better described as hell.

The narrowness of Adventism's world is exposed when Wayland wants to see the world - for instance Brisbane and Cairns! Wayland later is uneasy in the pub and unable to accept even a lemon squash for fear of what 'they' might put in it. In all these ways the church appears like a sect, bordering on the level of a cult. It has an exclusive mentality in which its members are the elect, the deviators are cast out, and the outsiders are sinners. It also holds to dogmatic assertions, unsupported or even contradicted by common sense, and a written religious authority outside of the Bible which prescribes in petty detail right and wrong behaviour (some of which consist of 'sins' obviously innocuous).

Nevertheless, in a number of ways it becomes evident that the form of Adventism to which Elkin adheres is not universally held. For example, although his girlfriend Esther won't let him hold her hand, quoting 'Sister White' in support, and accusing him of not being a true Christian for trying, his friend Wayland has been kissing Esther's sister Sarai around the corner. Wayland and Sarai will remain Adventists for many years; indeed Sarai is Pastor Anderson's daughter. Obviously, Sister White's injunctions did not weigh so heavily on the consciences of all Adventists. Elkin's mother, while disapproving of his swearing (a not uncommon phenomenon among mothers of all religious persuasions, especially at the time), also appears to show him compassion and understanding for the dilemmas he finds himself in.

Despite the earnestness which Elkin and Esther display towards their religion, it is obvious that others are not so grim faced or cult minded.

Pastors

This is most evident in the portrayal of the two pastors, Anderson and Dibley. Anderson may have the grim manner of a dour Victorian Englishman, but he displays a surprising humanity and humour in his response to Elkin's letters to his daughter Esther. His dry suggestion that Elkin could keep writing letters provided they were addressed to the whole family is actually quite funny and reveals a sense of humour concealed by his manner.

Dibley is much more expansive. He revels in a form of theatrical exaggeration that he fully expects his audience to recognise. Hence his story about the bucking horse brings a good-natured heckle from a listener. He is in fact the master of melodrama, who uses the pulpit as his stage and Seventh-day Adventist eschatology as the text for his performances. Anderson himself has a music-hall background, much to Elkin's surprise, who loves to perform and would fancy life on the stage - if only it wasn't a sin. It is the inherent melodrama of the apocalypse that in fact ties Elkin to it, even though he abandons the other aspects of his Adventism. What he fails to recognise is the potential for the church to allow him to fulfil his theatrical ambitions.

Outside the church, he uses precisely the same techniques as old 'Dib', who by careful exaggeration and dramatic posturing 'never missed an opportunity to be memorable'. Hence Dib's self-conscious deathbed scene twenty years before his expiration and his suggestion that Elkin not attend Adventist schools on the grounds that it would rot his mind. Dib's life is a melodrama - he never went to Adventist schools, but by force of personality has risen to President of the Australasian Communion (sic).

Bob Ellis/Elkin

Bob Ellis himself has been described by a television producer as 'very quotable' in an article that goes on to say that 'he is a born performer and a practised one'. Later it says that 'self-aggrandisement is an Ellis forte'.⁵ These are not bad descriptions of the portrayal of Dibley in the film, who never lets the facts interfere with a good story. What makes Dibley so likeable is the sense that we know that he is performing - and that he knows that we know; in fact we are supposed to know. It softens the egotistical nature of the man. This self-awareness,

effectively a sense of humour, of perspective and humility, is the difference between Dibley and Houteff. Houteff is 'a true believer', without humour, who takes himself utterly seriously, with comic consequences for Elkin and tragic ones for himself.

It is Elkin's failure to see the humour in Adventism, his insistence of taking every element of it in dead earnestness, that contributes so much to his disillusionment. As Ellis comments in his introduction to one of his plays, 'the Adventist parsons were often less fanatical [than Shepherd's Rod]', and he goes on to note their all-too-evidently frail humanity.⁶ Somehow neither Ellis in real life nor Elkin in the film seem to have perceived that another form of Adventism was flourishing under their very eyes, one which lacked the dogmatic, sectarian mentality to which they insistently held. The adult Ellis virtually says as much:

Someone once said that all of us have our sustaining fantasies. We know that they are not real but they are what keeps us going. I needed the end of the world. If the Seventh Day (sic) Adventists hadn't been there, I probably would have invented something else. I think a lot of people do similar things - it's part of the human condition.⁷

In effect, then, it seems that Elkin is determined to keep the church dogmatic and narrow, in order to suit his own melodramatic imagination. A boy who aims to be 'the greatest man who ever lives' needs a suitable platform from which to launch himself, and the oddities of Adventism give him an advantage. As his New Guinea friend notes, 'it can be good sometimes to come into real life from an unusual angle. You see things more clearly'. It is in Elkin's best interests, then, that Adventism be as unusual an angle as possible, and this partly governs how it is presented in the film, as to some degree his own creation. Hence the love-hate relationship that Elkin has with Adventism: he needs it desperately in order to make his way, but at the same time he finds its restrictions impede both his pleasure and his progress. Ultimately, as we have noted, Elkin considers himself to be locked outside of the society he so wishes to dominate.

Part of the reason Elkin still loves the church is seen in some of the positive elements that are presented. The church is portrayed as providing a sense of community, of belonging, and of

simplifying the complexities of life into black-and-white dichotomies. The New Guinean says, 'We were both brought up in primitive religions. They can be a comfort sometimes'. Adventism, primitive like cannibalism, fails in comparison to McAlister's socially sophisticated Presbyterianism, but does keep issues down to simple good-bad choices. There is also a sense of fellowship evident at the camp meeting and at Wayland and Sarai's wedding. Elkin's nostalgic voice-over says, 'These were my own people. I felt at home and not at home at the same time. I wasn't one of them any more, but I should have been'. Earlier he comments that he wondered if Meryl/Cinnamon 'wasn't better off in church', despite the fact that she seemed to be happy in her life of strip tease and prostitution. He remarks to her that they are like lost lambs gone astray, on the downhill slope, with nowhere to go home to now. Adventism represents a security that both annoys and comforts him; he misses the simplicities of dogma as much as he bucks against its constraints.

Connotatively the film touches many an Adventist nerve. There is much in the film that rings true. It captures well the atmosphere of late 50s, early 60s rural Adventism, especially the camp meetings, and the struggles and dilemmas of young Adventists. One fairly conservative church administrator, the son of an old-time evangelist, who saw the film at a theatre (something almost unthinkable in the 60s) told me that he was struck by two things: the way in which the film captures the atmosphere of the Adventism of the time; and how much Adventism had changed since then. The way in which Elkin perceives the church matches closely the experienced of many others who were raised as Adventists, though their responses have varied. Some, like Elkin and Ellis, have quit the church; others, like Wayland and Sarai, dropped out most during the difficult 80s; still others have remained as members and church employees. The picture of Adventism in the film is precisely the kind that could arise out of the meeting of 50s-60s Adventism with a young man with a sensitive conscience and a flair for self-promoting melodrama.

Hence we have two Australian films about Adventism, neither of them necessarily taking

an unfavourable view, although superficially **The Nostradamus Kid** is not very flattering press. In context, however, one can see that the portrayal of the church in an extreme manner is both essential to the theme outsidersness, and not entirely unfair, and that the film shows evidenced of recognising that others see the church differently. **Evil Angels**, as we have seen, paints a favourable picture of the church. Ironically the clergy of mainstream Christianity, particularly the Catholic and Anglican churches, have often been the butt of satirical and negative portrayals, while unknown Adventism has rather good representations of its ministers. In the context of a society that knows little about it and doesn't really like much of what it knows, the Seventh-day Adventist church has been represented quite positively and relatively fairly in Australian feature films.

NOTES

1. Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', quoted in J. Dudley Andrew, **The Major Film Theories. An Introduction**. London, Oxford University Press, 1976, 80
2. Ien Ang, **Watching Dallas. Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination**. London, Methuen, 1985, 36-50.
3. I watched a television reconstruction of the Chamberlain case, giving both the defence and the prosecution case, being screened before an Adventist audience. At the point portraying the ritual killing as alleged by the prosecution, the audience broke into hoots of utter disbelief. It was clear to them that what was alleged was totally incompatible with the religion that was supposed to have led the Chamberlains to commit the murder. While, of course, it is possible for any religion to harbour the mentally unstable and the criminal, the disbelief arose from the implication that the killing was in harmony with Adventist theology and practice.
4. Bob Ellis, 'The Year My Heart Broke', **Sydney Morning Herald**, Saturday, 2 October 1993, 6A Spectrum
5. Ginny Dougary, 'Ellis in Wonderland'. **Look and Listen**, December 1984, 62
6. Bob Ellis, **The Legend of King O'Malley**, Sydney, Angus & Robertson, xvi
7. Vivienne Skinner, 'Death and Other Fantasies', **The University of Sydney Gazette**, Vol 20, No 4, December 1992, 5