6 Australian (dis)contents: film, mass media and multiculturalism
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Realities and fantasies: media relations to social structure

Australians, whatever their ethnic or racial origins, are heavy consumers of mass media—from the Hong Kong Kung Fu movies of Sydney's China Town, to the language programs of the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association's radio broadcasts across the north of Australia, to the never-ending television soaps showing in suburban and provincial households every evening. The population spends a large part of its time in imaginative exploration, and uses the media to enable those voyages. Yet we have to ask of a mass media in a society which promotes an image of itself as multicultural: how does this occur? If culture is increasingly formed and reformed through an interaction between audiences and media producers, then which cultures are presented as players in the multicultural game, and how are they presented? What do those variegated audiences discover as they voyage? What landscapes are painted for them to walk through? And who or what constructs the backdrop and paints the flats?

The media, with all its diversity, are deeply implicated in the formulation of our understandings of what the range of meanings lying behind the label 'Australia' might be. Significant creative energy is expended on capturing the mythic qualities of Australian society and culture, qualities which can be reformed and redirected to audiences for their pleasure. In this chapter the concept of myth offers the organising core for the argument. By myth I follow the approach that F.G. Bailey articulated, that a myth:

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. . . tells us what one should desire . . . and how to get it; the way people are and how they should be; the reasons why things happen the way they do, especially when they go wrong; in short, myths provide values and meaning and ideas and plans and stratagems and alternative forms of social organisation. Only through a myth does one see the 'real' world. (Bailey, 1977, p. 7 quoted in Clegg, 1989, p. 26)

Myths offer a process through which political and ideological constructs can be rendered 'non-political' and naturalised so that the cultural and social assumptions and the power structures they reinforce remain disguised. It is exactly because of their mythological characteristics that they reveal so much under-analysis about power relations and social conflict. The construction of media content is inevitably a conflictual process. Yet, such conflict need not be hostile: it is often creative and expansive. New ideas challenge the old, new attempts to capture the social mosaic and communicate it to audiences find spaces already occupied. The material to which audiences have access offers an expansive milieux through which social difference and diversity can be explored, represented, contested, reproduced and modified. The mass media thrive on differentiated genres and sites, yet seek to set these always in terms of the known and comfortable. Audiences have access to 'reality' in forms such as news or current affairs. Their world views are also tied into conflicts scripted as sport, drama or comedy; as quiz shows; dance contests; cartoons; and in soaps and serials. In magazines they read news reports and evaluative pieces, editorial comment and explanatory in-depth articles, comic and cartoon representations. They read recipes and advertisements, 'how to' do everything from baby care to car repair. They can pursue fantasies of body, dress, lifestyle, or analyses of major social, economic and scientific issues.

Such a melange of opportunity suggests that any simple line of argument will flounder in alternative examples and complex, multilevel, readings. In part this must be so, as the ideologies which pervade the media are problematic sets of values and aspirations, strongly affected by the diversity of responses in audiences, however privileged particular readings of the content may be through iconic pointers and guideposts to interpretations which might be proffered by producers, writers and editors. Ideology serves, then, as a shorthand term for that 'complex set of meanings and a structuralization of the processes of production and consumption of meaning on the part of' audiences (Hodge and Tripp, 1989, p. 23). Ideologies are more, though, than sets of ideas linked together—they also serve to rationalise and progress sectional social interests.

However, these ideologies are not 'unattached', suspended in some space in which ideas alone struggle for dominance. Ideologies have

very real material roots—that is, they are articulations in the realm of ideas of conflicts and interests in the economic and social structures of society. I am not here arguing a simplistic line, that all ideologies can be unvaryingly 'read off' from the social locations of their proponents, nor that there is some knowable 'pure state' of ideology-free undistorted communication. Rather, ideologies act as patterns of ideas which link individual identity and consciousness to wider social practices and forces. These wider social forces 'appear' in individual rationales and perceptions, drawing on the social to give meaning to the individual space and, meanwhile, reinforcing the social by feeding back, through behaviour, reinforcement for those social values. Ideologies can disguise material interests, or be used to confuse the general with the specific (for instance, where one group, such as those supporting the retention of the monarchy in Australia, speaks of the nation as though its interests alone were paramount).

The media are organisations for the production, dissemination and consumption of meaning. We are drawn then to ask how are meanings produced, disseminated and consumed? Ien Ang (1991) has spoken of meaning being increasingly produced globally but consumed locally—of large systems and corporations commodifying meaning and distributing it across the world to be interpreted, negotiated, modified, twisted, reconstructed and then to re-emerge intertwined with local history and culture, never the same nuance and pattern twice, always different. The local becomes, then, analogous to difference. Difference is produced through the localisation of human experience in the face of globalising tendencies which seek to smooth away difference and reconstitute dissimilarity as homogeneity.

It is also important to recognise another dimension to the analysis. That is, the material relations of production in the media industries directly affect the content (conceived of as ideology). The content of media is shaped by these material relations, to fit in with the interests (and often, though not necessarily always, the specific political orientation) of the owners and controllers of media. In particular the content of media is 'commodified', and the ideas and values communicated through the media are transformed in the processes of production into commodities to be exchanged in the marketplace—as with art more narrowly defined.

There are two intertwined implications of my approach:

• Media in an ostensibly multicultural society will still function to reinforce the values most congenial to the economic and politically dominant groups (which may contain some particular version of the multicultural project).

• The media function to generate the commodification of cultural relationships and myths through a process which reconstructs popular culture into a culture of consumption of commodities.

The media becomes, then, an arena in which only those who are powerful enough to participate can exert any effective influence. All others gain access (Andy Warhol's fifteen minutes of fame in a lifetime) only when their experiences are either sufficiently interesting or bizarre to be of material value as information to the more powerful, or susceptible to commodification as entertainment for the creation of audiences for sale to advertisers (Smythe, 1977).

Herman and Chomsky (1988) have argued that the media content, particularly in relation to news and current affairs, is heavily influenced by the corporations who own and control the media and the other interests they might have. They write of the media as 'manufacturing consent', actively developing and communicating propaganda designed to delegitimise revolutionary struggles against imperialism, and to validate those social forces acting in the United States government and multinational corporation interests in the Third World and, by implication, to invalidate minority struggles within the multicultural metropolitan society. Such a view directly challenges claims to democratic independence and impartiality in the presentation of international and national news. They see the key filters on news as being the size and scope of the ownership of media, the power of advertisers, and the sourcing and choosing of news.

The continuous articulation of difference is one of the main exercises undertaken within the media. As this process continues it has the effect of assuming and reinforcing boundaries, of legitimating ways of seeing the world and understanding it in terms of race and, thereby, almost because it is so unself-conscious, in facilitating the slide from differentiation to discrimination. This process of cultural development is hedged by what JanMohamed and Lloyd have referred to as 'the pathos of hegemony [which] is frequently matched by its interested celebration of differences, but of differences in the aestheticized form of recreations' (JanMohamed and Lloyd, 1987, p. 8). Nowhere, are the power relations of a racially and ethnically diverse and stratified society so open to this aestheticisation of difference as in the cinema.

Images of Australia: the nation in the cinema—white and black, us and them

Australia is both colony and coloniser—both dominant and subordinate. Many old certainties—or myths—are dissolving under these

pressures and new myths are being forged to make sense of the changing futures. While a comprehensive history of race, ethnicity and Australian cinema has yet to be written, the issue of race and the defining of Australianness are clearly a continuing mainstay of the media.

The cinematic encounter with Aboriginality and the ideological engagement with the invasion and its psychic and social consequences, both for Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, and for the European invaders and their international descendants and successors, has reached widely into the myths of the past and the present. Since the enshrining of multiculturalism as state ideology in the late 1970s, and as a consequence of the rising energy and effectiveness of the Aboriginal movement, white film-makers have sought to re-examine the experience of Aborigines in ways which move beyond the great icon of earlier Australian cinema, Robert Tudawali's representation of Marbuck and Ngarla Kunoth in the title role, in the Chauvels' 1956 film of primordial sensuality and the tragedy of a dying race in *Jedda*.

Perhaps the most significant film directly to confront black/white relations, Fred Schepisi's drama of Thomas Keneally's novel, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, took as its theme the corruption and destruction of Aboriginal culture and identity through the imposition of white culture in its most powerful mythic form—religion. The moment is the formation of the Commonwealth in 1900, where white Australia collectively seeks to invoke the myth of unity, and expunge the past of violence and abuse through a celebratory new vision. Tommy Lewis as Jimmy is presented as the incarnated dilemma—the man from a dying race who can be saved by marriage to a white woman, but whom the society to which he is drawn rejects and destroys. Here we find the nation personified in the young white woman, whose purity is to be protected by the white men to defend the inheritance of land and wealth for themselves and their successors.

A number of commentators have noted that *Chant* was rather more successful outside Australia than within. In Australia, its sustained critique of white cultural and physical oppression of blacks, unrelieved by any suggestion of a real desire by whites to resolve the problems equitably for the blacks, represented too direct an engagement with the foundation myths of white society. Hodge and Mishra (1991) have noted in their study of Australian literary engagements with race and ethnicity, encompassed in what they have called 'the postcolonial mind', that Australian culture is unable to manage the reality of its history except through processes of appropriation, suppression, marginalisation and exclusion of black voices.

One line of engagement with Aboriginality has been through the

celebration of the mythical elements within various Aboriginal cultures. There were elements of this in *Jedda* with the distant sound of tribal music challenging European sonatas for Jedda's attention, but this tendency was exemplified in the 1977 film by Peter Weir, *The Last Wave*, in which contemporary concerns raised by the resurgent land rights movement were incorporated into a search for a mythic past hidden below the land.

As multiculturalism has become transformed by its incorporation into state perspectives which celebrate economy, efficiency and the perception of culture and language as resources to be utilised, so too Aboriginality has entered the mainstream of the media. This path was exemplified by the *Crocodile Dundee* films of the 1980s, where David Gulpillil, Aboriginal dancer and actor, was used as a human indicator of the primeval and unique Australian landscape. Cinema has now placed Aborigines as part of the contemporary discourse of the Australian nation, as iconic markers for the differentiation of Australia as being typified in its culture by its locale.

Yet, few Aborigines or Torres Strait Islanders themselves speak through the cinema; for the most part the voices here are white. One contemporary challenge to this hegemony is the work of black feminist film-maker Tracey Moffatt, whose series of short films and photographic installations, beginning in 1987 with *Nice Coloured Girls*, challenge a social structure in which patriarchy and racism are intertwined. Karen Jennings has described Moffatt's later work, *Night Cries: A Rural Tragedy* as a much more elusive, evocative and critical reworking of *Jedda*, with the men, black and white, gone, and a middle-aged Jedda caring for the dying foster mother, both missing part of themselves, but locked together unto death—a redolent image for Aboriginal/white relations in Australia, particularly after Mabo (Langton, 1993).

The cinematic engagement with Aboriginality finds resonance with the narratives relating to non-Anglo immigrants and the cultures they re-established in Australia. The immigrant experience has, however, been fashioned only in part by the ideological and mythic parameters of the 'host' society. In contemporary terms, the ethnic film-makers have begun to assert a specific perception of Australian society that transcends the problematic relationship with Britain that Dermody and Jacka have argued typifies the cultural heartland of the resurgence of Australian cinema in the 1970s and 1980s. In their view (Dermody and Jacka, 1987; 1988), the deep problematic that focused the generation of directors such as Beresford, Weir, Carroll, Miller and the others who came to maturity during that period, concerned the evocation of a peculiarly Australian identity, in which they played protagonists against the underlying antagonism of English culture and 'Thameocentric' loyalties. They were in the

Lawsonian tradition of seeking, in particular constructions of the landscape and the myths of mateship, a sense of that identity. Yet, for the many post-war immigrants and their children, this structured disengagement from Britain and even the re-engagement with America (as in Thornhill's *Coca Cola Kid*) occurred in a realm far removed from the new heartland of the outer and inner western suburbs of the big cities, of an experience that was set by transitions embedded in migration. While immigration had been a theme for Australian cinema (leaving aside the ethnocentrism and anti-Chinese racism of the early century) since Maslyn William's *Mike and Stefani* in 1952 and the British production of the mainstream Australian account of settlement *They're a Weird Mob* (1966) (from the book by John O'Grady masquerading as Italian immigrant Nino Culotta), it took some time for a migrant voice to begin to be heard.

Perhaps one of the first cinematic engagements by a migrant who had been part of the second wave of post-war settlements of the 1960s, was Ayten Kuyululu's tragedy of tortured alienation *The Golden Cage* (1973). Kuyululu, a Turkish film-maker, followed the lives of two young Turkish immigrants who lived and died in Sydney in the first years after the Australian–Turkish migration agreements of the late 1960s. She shows a very different and scathing view of the new golden mountain (a nineteenth-century Chinese term for Australia). She shows the urban landscape far removed from the beaches and camaraderie which had characterised the mythic dimensions of life in the Nino Culotta landscape of *Weird Mob*. Kuyululu's film echoed the emerging voice of the migrant workers' struggles rather than the more mellow assimilationist credo of the Sydney suburbs.

It was not until the emergence of the second generation of migrant film-makers, with their roots in Australian culture (many from the Australian Film and Television School), that a rather more alien perspective began to articulate a sense of distance from the heartland—now that the heartland was not England but the Australia created by those escaping England. Sophie Turkiewicz, a film-maker concerned with questions of culture and gender, offered a series of accounts through her 1977 *Letters from Poland* and then the feature film which has become a symbol of the first wave of post-war migration *Silver City* (1984) set in the settlement camps and areas of first settlement in the 1950s cities. It is a classic story of displacement and renewal, of reintegration and the stumbling erratic process of refashioning meanings which have been unshelled and scattered by war and transition.

In a minor key, with an intensity and cerebralism not common in Australian film, Paul Cox has knitted a series of films in which the characters sit alone and wistful, edged to the mainstream,

somewhat like travellers linking their fingers with one another so as not to be torn free by the torrent. In *My First Wife* (1984) a middle-European (or Western really, given Cox's Dutch childhood) is entangled with something quintessentially Australian, in a brooding melancholic search for a sense of secure space—but neither culture can allow this to the other.

However, it has been the Asian relationship to the Australian mainstream that has provided the locus for a fuller exploration of questions of national identity and cultural pluralism. The Europeans could be amalgamated into the iconic representation of Australian-ness. The Asian features were more challenging, for they represented a fundamental contest with the residuum of the white Australia policy. Solrun Hoaas's strongly feminist challenge to Australian masculine and nationalist images of mateship and the 'fair go', are conveyed in her striking *Aya* (1990), the story of a Japanese war bride and her psychic torture in an Australian suburban dream. Hoaas's earlier work on the Okinawan priestesses of Hatoma Island (*Sacred Vandals*, 1983) offered her an entree into Japanese society. This entree carried into the extraordinary insight of the feature film. Hoaas could not gain support from the Australian government to show her later film in Asian festivals, 'because, it is suggested, the film does not depict Australians in a sufficiently positive light' (Shaw, 1992, p. 38).

We are beginning to see more direct and controversial explorations of the new multicultural Australia. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this is the R-rated Romeo and Juliet film, *Romper Stomper* (director Geoffrey Wright, 1992). Confronting directly the Geoffrey Blainey vision of a mainstream Australian culture with a paper-thin skin above its racism in which inter-ethnic warfare is just waiting to burst forth, the film follows the track of a neo-Nazi gang of thugs whose biggest thrill is bashing up Vietnamese youth. The climax of the film is a reverse Rambo, when the Vietnamese become galvanised to defend themselves and, in a final maelstrom of gore, defeat the neo-Nazis. A mixture of social realism, *Terminator 2*, and *Kung Fu* movie, the reception for the film has been varied—its writer/director is neither a right-winger nor a Vietnamese, but rather from within the left liberal milieu of Australian metropolitan film-making. Criticisms have been made that the film is racist despite itself, glorifying violence as a solution to racial intolerance, manipulating 'positive' rather than 'negative' stereotypes of Asians, this time as martial arts aficionados rather than wimps.

Australian cinema is affected still by the general problem of multiculturalism as a policy not having yet effectively drawn significant numbers of ethnic film-makers into major film production. While the Australian Film Commission continues to file its Access

and Equity statements, the push for multiculturalism in the heartland of Australian film culture remains a challenging task. Monica Pellizzari's account of her struggle to create a space for a voice which challenges Anglo-Australian models of 'the good film' suggests that mainstream and even independent film-makers find some approaches rather too challenging (Pellizzari, 1991, p. 80). Her views are reinforced by Bill Mousoulis (1991, p. 81), whose account of the rise of ethnic film-makers and films addressing multicultural themes, while important as a chronicle, reveals the long road still to be followed.

Impact of migration: immigration as news—framing the threat and the promise

A boat chugs across a tropical sea. It is packed with people. The camera zooms in on their density; their wretchedness. Soon the boat is at rest, clearly now Asian passengers can be seen twisting and turning in a stream of water hosed on them from above. The camera withdraws; the boat and its burden framed on the one side by a naval gun barrel and on the other by the Australian flag. The commentary tells of Cambodian boat people arriving under guard in Broome, Western Australia.

The boat people story carries important implications about the ways in which media representation can penetrate popular cultural understandings of the meanings of multiculturalism. One of the most important sagas of the nation's recent political life in relation to immigration (the arrival of refugees by sea onto the northern coast of Australia) generated a series of images and narratives that fed into broader cultural debates. The story of the boat people was broken by the media in the late 1970s, after an intensive period of arrival following the fall of Saigon. In that case, the refugees were overwhelmingly Vietnamese. However, in 1990 a new group of people began to appear. At first, they were refugees from Cambodia, but by the early 1990s there were also arrivals from China in an apparently well-organised, illegal migration program (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 June 1992).

The continuing narrative surrounding the boat people was sustained throughout 1990, 1991 and into 1992. By April 1992, two years after the seizure of the boats off Broome and the arrest of their occupants, the Australian government had decided to try to send the boat people, definitely now identified as Cambodians, back to Cambodia. The public debate had been heightened by the discovery, at the end of 1991, of a group of Chinese illegal immigrants who had beached their boat on the Kimberley coast of north west Australia,

and walked hundreds of kilometres to a remote outback station, from where they were transferred to Darwin. The rescue of the people had been a story of high drama in-January 1992, following air and land searches across inhospitable terrain. The press reports offered two narratives throughout the period: the 'vulnerability' of Australia to illegal Asian entry and the 'strength and resilience' of the boat people themselves in surviving the ordeal. They had survived in country where 'no white person would go'; it was 'blackfella country', too savage, too dangerous, too threatening, and yet they had wandered through it almost unharmed. This capacity for survival, heralded initially as a 'positive' value, began to be reinterpreted as a threat once more. A threat exacerbated by the apparent difficulty the government had in organising the deportation of the new arrivals and indeed the repatriation of any of the boat people from previous years.

In March 1992, a particularly significant intervention was made by 'Four Corners', the ABC's flagship current affairs program. The program, produced by Marian Wilkinson, concentrated on the plight of the refugees while the government concurrently sought to resolve the tension between the rights of the refugees and the problem of the rapidly increasing internationalisation of populations which characterise contemporary world affairs. The program pointed to the poor conditions under which the refugees were being kept, their desires to remain in Australia, the contradictory standards of the government, and the 'search for freedom' that the voyages and the arrival in Australia signified.

The vulnerability of the nation to 'penetration' narrative suggested a weakness and incapacity of the state to protect the nation/ethnic group/family from pollution. In the 'Four Corners' program, this subterranean theme of purity and danger, of security and pollution, found final expression in the extended close-up of the abandoned Chinese vessel, burning in a mangrove creek, set alight, we assume, by Customs officials to destroy any disease that might be harboured on it. It also gave another message, that for the boat people there would be no returning to wherever it was they had come from, using the transport that had brought them, no 'going back'—burning boats rather than bridges behind them.

'The other' as a polluted threat, to be 'washed' or 'burnt' into purity, before being carried into detention, recurs as a marker of difference. The images allow 'us' to say what 'we' are not: not 'them'. 'We' are not Asian, not refugees, not scared to the edge of insanity, not driven to flee through exhaustion into the totally unknown, lost, without location or place—we are clean, uniformed, white, humane, ordered, located, specifically placed, our territory neatly defined. But, increasingly we are told of our need to be wary, suspicious, our bluff,

outgoing culture already corroded into hesitancy and violence, not by 'our' choice, but through 'their' doing; their arrival; their desire. Indeed, the more intensely they desire (us?), the more urgently we fear (them?).

Televisuals: soaps, mini-series and dramas

Genre is a term in communication and cultural studies which identifies a type of media product—a paradigmatic set of characteristics which are coded in the film or radio program or short story and which orient the audience to expect that they will be called upon to respond in particular ways (for example, through laughter at a comedy, or through decoding of archetypal characters in a western). This is the sense in which all media are said to be 'read' by their audiences, in which the response codes are decoded and audiences draw on previous experiences of the genre to aid them in interpretation. They are, however, dynamic paradigms, undergoing change and reformulation through creativity and inventiveness. O'Sullivan *et al.* (1983) write of this process as one of 'ideological closure', through which genres limit the meaning potential of a given text. Thus, genres gain their meanings in part from their differences from other genres—westerns from crime, musical comedies from historical dramas, news from situation comedy.

This process of signification needs, however, to be set in a social context, as the meanings of texts are not universal to all audiences, or to the same audience over time. Thus Hodge and Kress (1988) stress that the social context plays a crucial role in media meanings. They are not simply the outcome of the intention of their creators, even though, in the process of creation, the creators assume a convergence of meanings and, implicitly, class and cultural assumptions, with the audience. However, every act of communication is also an exercise in power—over a range from domination to solidarity. In a media system and social environment dominated by one cultural group, genres will, in fact, have a variety of effects, depending on the social position and relationship to the media system, of the audience members, and the social networks to which they belong.

Thus, I use genre to refer to dynamic paradigms, which require an understanding of three dimensions:

- the conventions used within the genre (and therefore the manipulation of audience expectations of genre for creative effect);
- the differences between genres, and the negotiation and location of boundaries; and
- the social context of the text or media product, particularly

focusing on the power of the audience to influence the conventions utilised.

Television soaps—serials with continuing casts and a continuing story—are embedded in the tradition of melodrama in literature. The original forms were the serials in weekly editions of news magazines (Dickens, for instance, published in this format) which were taken up by North American broadcasters seeking a way of attracting listeners to the new phenomenon of radio. They were sponsored by soap companies—thus 'soaps'. With the translation into television they tended to lose the ubiquitous authoritative narrator of the radio form. However, they spread throughout the world, carrying complex and contradictory messages about American and other societies into a range of situations.

One example of the complexity of soaps has been the response to 'Dallas'. It provides a paradigm of the genre and also allows an exploration of how audiences might use 'Dallas', and how the meanings of 'Dallas' are negotiated and sustained. Liebes and Katz undertook qualitative research on a number of different audiences for 'Dallas' in Israel and America—Arabs, newly arrived Russians, Moroccan Jews, kibbutzniks and Anglo-Americans in Los Angeles. The Moroccan Jews and Arabs viewed 'Dallas' as a real representation of American upper-class life, and relate to the program as outsiders—them and us. They criticise the behaviour, in particular of the women, who are seen as having poor morals. They reject its values. The Russians on the other hand see it as ideology—as manipulation of the masses who are being told the wealthy are really unhappy. They accept, however, that significant classes of people do behave as they are portrayed in 'Dallas'. The Americans and the kibbutzniks deal with the reality of the program more playfully—for them, it is not reality but a fantasy construct that no-one could take seriously (Liebes and Katz, 1988).

Given the multiple readings that are possible for soaps in a culturally pluralistic environment, it is worth reflecting on the readings privileged by two Australian soaps—a 'quality' soap, 'A Country Practice' and the Australian archetype, 'Neighbours'. 'A Country Practice' was, for many years, the highest rating series drama on Australian television. It has the reputation of being more serious in that it deals with social issues. 'Neighbours', on the other hand, avoids issues. 'A Country Practice' has been the subject of a major study, one of the authors of which has argued that it exactly plays out the extremes of the soap through its conjoining of the large problems of human existence with the daily chores (Tulloch, 1989, p. 129). Its concentration on issues provides the mobilisation for this linkage. However, despite the argument made by Tulloch that an

episode in the mid-1980s did explicitly explore the relations of class, gender and ethnicity, and despite four episodes that used Aboriginal actor Gary Foley to introduce themes of Aboriginal deprivation and poverty, the series is centrally white and Anglo-Australian. All its key roles are middle-class Australia—even the comic roles are drawn from within that historic culture.

'Neighbours' engulfs the viewer with a sense of a community signified as normal and diverse—a cross-section of personalities and problems—and yet there is a falsehood here. In a society where middle-class suburbs would have a fair sprinkling of Asian faces, there are none. Perhaps class excludes the Aborigines and Vietnamese, as 'Neighbours' is set in leafy groves far from the Cabramattas or Redferns. Yet, the continual claim is made by the program that it does represent the reality of Australian life. It is an Australian life idealised and transmuted into what it might have been like were the post-war migration program never to have occurred. Even more than the celebration of the family and a continual process of its reintegration whenever the family momentarily fractures, it is a celebration of a view of race and ethnicity in which the centre is white and unself-consciously homogeneous.

There are soaps which do attempt to address the multicultural nature of Australian society. In programs such as the ABC's 'GP', a medical drama which deals with controversial social issues, one of the leading characters is Greek Australian. So, too, is one of the leads in the ABC's 'Police Rescue', even though the part is played by an Italo-Australian actor. In general, it is the commercial drama sector which has the greatest problem incorporating the diversity of Australian society into its products, and the reason for this may well lie in the restricted range of writers employed to develop story lines and characters and to write episodes. The plot development process depends heavily for its outcomes of verisimilitude on peer group validation of concepts and themes—that is, writers and producers talk to each other about ideas, and tend to test the 'bite' of a story line by reference to their direct or indirect experiences. If there are no writers able to contribute a different cultural experience to the pot, it is not surprising that similar cultural visions are continually reproduced.

The comic: caricature, genre and relief

Comedy has provided a systematic approach to the management of outsiders in almost every culture. It has been argued that it is the most appropriate genre for representing the lives of the middle and lower orders of society, those groups whose manners, behaviour and

values are considered by the dominant social groups as somewhat trivial or unglamorous. The approach will be dependent on parody (aesthetic) and satire (social) as responses to conventional values and behaviour. In Australia, the comic ethnic has been a stand-by for generations, with television soaps the most common locale. Since the Bicentenary in 1988, the incorporation into comedy of the problem of ethnic diversity has increased substantially. The two most interesting examples of the comic art in the mainstream (leaving aside the more fringe ethnic comics) occur in the commercial TV programs—'The Comedy Company' and 'Acropolis Now'.

Mark Mitchell, a 'blacked-up' Anglo-Australian developed and enshrined a very specific stereotype of the southern European in the long-running and iconic character of Con the Fruiterer, an English-mangling, slightly stupid, sexist and physically gross caricature for whom Mitchell also provided the wife, Marika, a moustachioed harridan. Tony Mitchell (1992) has described Con's role as that of the colonised mimicking the coloniser, becoming the avenue through which the centre is left untouched by the waves of cultural challenge. For Mitchell:

> Con the Fruiterer would seem to fit the bill as a satirical antidote to 'minority activists'—in the sense of those who campaign for the rights of ethnic minorities in Australia—and fodder for the anti-migration cause represented by people like [Sydney radio announcer John] Laws . . . [It is an] elision of coloniser and colonised [which] is never in doubt, and the apparatus of colonial discourse is never questioned. (Mitchell, 1992, pp. 123–5)

A rather more interesting example of comedy emerging from the experience of ethnic communities can be found in the stage show *Wogs Out of Work*, a remarkable representation of immigrant—host relationships, as seen through the critical eyes of a group of Melbourne ethnic actors and writers. A phenomenal success in the stage version, it was picked up and transformed into a television series as 'Acropolis Now' in which the set piece encounters of 'Wogs' was reconstructed as the interactions of a company around the classic Greek restaurant–coffee lounge. One major change took place in the transformation—the management of the comic fools (all ethnic) was given to the relatively straight character of a blonde Anglo-Australian woman, who thus stood between the audience and the raw energy of the ethnics.

Mitchell has also commented on this transformation, arguing that:

> . . . it could be concluded that the ultimate effect of 'Acropolis Now' has been to reverse all the gains in race relations and NESB self-esteem achieved by *Wogs Out of Work*. But this would be to

> ignore the speaking position of working-class NESB young people, for whom there is nothing offensive about 'Acropolis Now' and to whom it provides an important focal point for out-group identity, and fuel to fight against discrimination by 'skips' [a term used to describe Anglo-Australians based on the TV kangaroo 'Skippy'] . . . [There is] a form of mimicry which is a defiant enactment of an exaggerated ethnicity which challenges both the strictures and constraints imposed by migrant parents and stigmatisation by Anglo-Australians. (Mitchell, 1992, p. 132)

Yet within these compromises, and slides into accommodation with Anglo-Australian sensibilities, sharper and rougher characterisations survive. 'Effie', the Greek girl, with her over-the-top hairstyles and aggressive, self-mocking but ultimately heroic and life-affirming parodies, has emerged as a role model for young non-Anglo women. The comic has been appropriated to assert a difference as creative and cutting, a space to be both different and a part of the mainstream.

Comedy offers an important site for the recomposition of the mythic forms of a society. An understanding of the use of comedy as an element in ethnic relations suggests that the emergence of mainstream comic characters will be one very crucial test of the way in which multiculturalism has been incorporated into the parameters of popular culture.

Structured for change? SBS

The most direct media involvement with multiculturalism has been the government organisation, the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS). Established in 1978 to provide ethnic radio and later multicultural television, the organisation achieved its own charter in 1992, and introduced advertising onto television at the same time. The debate about the value of SBS in the development of multiculturalism has been heated, yet most commentators have concluded that it is the most important institutional expression of the multicultural project (for example, O'Regan, 1993; Jakubowicz, 1989).

The definition of multiculturalism effectively adopted by SBS is one which opens up cultural diversity to the mainstream. It is predicated on the belief that the multicultural project requires not simply a plurality of minorities, though SBS has committed itself to that element in its programming and not only restricted itself to ethnic minorities, it is also the major gay and lesbian programmer in the country. Rather, multiculturalism has to open the consciousness of all social groups to the vast array of experiences within society. Most importantly, it serves a national goal, even if never articulated,

of educating Australian society for the new global world through an internationalisation of perspectives and understandings, in which the local undertakes to engage critically and creatively with the global.

While this may appear celebratory of a state institution, it is interesting to note that SBS has, during its existence, been headed by one Anglo-Australian executive after another, with many of the senior staff recruited from the ABC. Indeed, one of the most sustained criticisms of SBS has been its perceived colonial flavour, in which some ethnic community activists have argued it appropriates the political strength of the ethnic lobby to defend itself while pursuing cosmopolitan rather than specifically ethnic agendas. The pressures on the organisation are nowhere clearer than in the area of radio, where ethnic agendas are *de rigeur*, but where the changing nature of the ethnic population and homeland politics have embroiled the organisation in an array of controversial and complex decisions.

It is worth marking the milestones with which SBS has been involved. Perhaps the most significant was the broadcast in the early 1980s of 'Women of the Sun', a mini-series tracing a number of generations of Aboriginal women in their contact and engulfment by white society. An extraordinary vehicle as drama and politics, the program fundamentally challenged the conception of Aborigines and Aboriginal women in particular which had dominated the media—a voiceless pitiful collection of damaged human beings. In their place there was portrayed a proud and courageous people anxious to defend their culture and protect an identity under grievous and continuing threat.

From that point, SBS made a number of important contributions to the development of multiculturalism in the arts. These included the development of the program 'Eat Carpet', which showcased short films; the three-part documentary by Franco di Chiera, 'A Change of Face', which directly addressed the representation of ethnic minorities and Aborigines in the media; and a number of mini-series and special seasons of Australian drama. While some of the early attempts were a bit gauche (as in the series 'Westside' and 'Girl from Steel City') the resource problem (i.e. lack of it) meant that SBS was continually seeking external sponsors and developing co-production deals with government agencies such as the Office of Multicultural Affairs. With the advent of advertising, which was rationalised on the need for local production money, there may be some greater commitment possible. The historic involvement of SBS in supporting ethnic writers (for example, Angelo Loukakis) may begin to bear more fruit.

Ideas for which Australia? Local content(ment)?

The national experience of multiculturalism as a political program in relation to the media draws us immediately to question the links between the state, media and national culture. Australian content offers the arena in which this debate is carried on, though it is as though the arguments have developed to a point of apparent impasse—trapped between whether there should be government intervention to define and defend national culture, and a more diffuse exploration of what a national culture might be in a period of increasing globalisation of communication and media production.

Should there be Australian content regulations in relation to Australian cultural development and, if so, what role should the multicultural project seek to take in the process of defining the parameters for regulation? Under pressure from the United States during the Uruguay round of the GATT talks, Australian government negotiators have had to dwell with some intensity on the economic and social rationale for rules which constrain the entry into the Australian television and film marketplace of foreign produced television material.

The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal (ABT) addressed the overall question in its 'Inquiry into Australian content' which was undertaken between 1987 and 1988 (a sort of Bicentennial project all on its own). The ABT issued a background paper which canvassed some of the key dimensions of the policy guidelines, reflecting on Canadian film development policies, funding criteria adopted by the Australian Film Commission, and the federal government's Department of the Arts during the period of Section 10 b(a) *Taxation Act* support for films seeking certification as 'Australian' for taxation write-off purposes. These structural supports to local production had a great deal to do with employment in the film industry and offered a spin-off in local movies, but did not specifically address the cultural content of the product—only its key personnel and sources of funds.

The ABT was also interested in the idea of an 'Australian look', a content-focused approach which would allow allocation of a higher points score to fulfil local production quotas, imposed by the ABT on commercial broadcasters. The points system had been introduced in 1973 by the Broadcasting Control Board (precursor to the ABT) to induce greater quality and diversity in programming. However, it became the tendency for the Board to become captive of the industry it was designed to regulate. Thus, it had to be 'freed' to operate in the wider public interest (which it also had to define and enunciate). John Docker, in a strong argument against Australian content regulation, has attacked the whole question of state discipline in relation

to popular culture (Docker, 1991). Docker is highly critical of the division between high and popular culture implicit in the ABT policy in relation to Australian content. He argues that conservative visions of the role of the state in both protecting audiences from the supposedly corrosive effects of mass culture (particularly imported material) and in stimulating audiences through ensuring access to 'quality' programs, particularly drama, have emerged from a long tradition of bourgeois distaste for the potentially oppositional tendencies in popular entertainment—the subversion of authority implicit, say, in the carnivalesque tradition.

Public interest groups, Docker says, confront the community with a narrow and limiting perspective on the choices they might want— the public in fact have a great deal of power through the buttons they push to signify their interest or lack of it to the commercial broadcasters. Arguments for regulation, he continues, are arguments for elitism, which are fundamentally contemptuous of the authenticity of popular opinion and the capacity of the population at large to make choices in terms of their own needs and pleasures. It is a struggle by popular culture against repression, suppression, censorship, moralising, surveillance and impositions (Docker, 1991, p. 24).

Yet, what are we to make of this argument when the effect of even existing regulation, minimalist as it is in relation to Aborigines and ethnic minorities, and even where it is written into the charter of the ABC, has had so little effect? This is particularly problematic for Docker as he ties his attack on the high-culture bias of regulation to the advocacy of the internationalisation of program flows—he suggests that there is no danger in Americanisation of Australian television, as here again the cultural marketplace will assign value and, in time, resolve the conflicts through the active participation of audiences.

One is reminded of the old Marxist adage, that people make their own history, but not on terrain of their own choosing. It is as though Docker has sought to rescue the role of the audience as subject from what he saw as the torment of structuralist imposition, only to lose in the process a handle on that process and the context in which it occurred. Stuart Cunningham offers a similar critique of Docker when he suggests that Docker is being disingenuous in his presentation of:

> . . . commercial broadcasters as 'acutely sensitive' to popular interests, seeking to serve the carnivalesque desires of the working class, and being constantly hampered by regulatory bodies and interest groups. (Cunningham, 1991, p. 29)

From another perspective, there is some strength in arguments, such as those of Terry Flew, that existing structures of control (despite

ABT Television Program Standards (14[1]b) which seek to recognise the diversity of backgrounds represented in the Australian community) have not done very much to overcome the marginalisation of ethnic communities and Aborigines in television discourses (Flew, 1991). Indeed, there are far more blacks and non-Anglos in American material on Australian television than in any Australian series. We make this point again later in relation to advertising on children's television and it is often made for the US market. The popularity of 'The Cosby Show' and the findings of the Australian Broadcasting Authority report on cultural diversity (Nugent et al., 1993), suggests that it is not Australian audiences that necessarily have a problem with these issues. Rather, Australian program makers appear to have been reluctant to offer the diversity which the regulatory system also has been unwilling to pursue with any degree of conviction.

The strongest arguments against Australian content rules have come from the advertising sector and, in particular, the Australian Association of National Advertisers (many of the members of which are either transnational companies or local distributors of transnational products) and the Advertising Federation of Australia, representing agencies. There were sixty-one submissions listed by the ABT in its summary of submissions (ABT 1988), of which twenty-four came from the advertising industry or from advertisers. Their overall claim was that current practices increased the cost of production and that requirements should be removed. Against their position, submissions from Actors Equity, a number of independent production houses and a number of professional associations (Writers Guild, Teachers of Media) stressed the importance of maintaining controls to protect and enhance the industry.

The Australian content debate has significant implications for the position of ethnic minorities and Aborigines in the Australian media. The nature and extent of these implications are not self-evident. The cultural marketplace does not necessarily produce a more diverse or culturally sensitive and complex result. If a mass audience drives the provision of media product and that audience is significantly racist, then even if there are substantial minorities they may be able to exert very little real effect on the outcomes. Furthermore, in the face of the assimilationist messages of the media world, non-Anglo immigrants and Aborigines may be less than anxious to place themselves in a debate in which the majority values, which dominate the landscape, have such a residual and minor place for them. The argument that they can influence the marketplace if they so choose indeed begs the question—if there is precious little evidence of a pluralist discourse, of images, issues, voices and faces with which they can identify, what is the likelihood they will demand such things? Or indeed, for the Anglophonic mass, what chance that they

will see the complexity currently denied to them as something they might enjoy were it available?

Conclusion

The multicultural project encompasses a broad sweep of social, creative and political perspectives. It engages with mass and avant garde cultural areas, with elements of cultural life previously distinguished as 'high culture' and 'low culture'. Within film and drama and literature there are many audiences, each exploring experience through engagement with different genres. Crude distinctions in this regard are of little value, for individuals weave their own narratives of contemporary Australia as they navigate the diversity and reflect on it in their groups.

At its most demanding, the multicultural project seeks to reconstruct the vision that Australians have for themselves, in a way which recognises and appreciates differences of gender, history and culture. We are constantly involved in processes which refashion the mythology of the society to meld cultural diversity into the production of film and other media. This project still faces considerable opposition, and experiences significant frustration as it engages with cultural priorities which marginalise or patronise 'the other'.

I remember sitting in a Wollongong hall a decade or more ago with a group of young Macedonian Australians from Port Kembla and Warrawong, watching Dusan Makaveyev's *Montenegro, Montenegro: Or pearls before swine*, a particularly redolent memory of cultural critique for a society now torn to pieces on the basis of 'ethnic cleansing'. The film offers a parody of a vision of life for Yugoslav immigrants in Sweden in the late 1970s, swirling around the comic/tragedy of their encounters with Swedish society through their home away from home, the aptly named Club Zanzibar. There was a *joie de vivre* overlaid with a sense of horror and an insight into both societies and their idiosyncratic failings.

I turned to one of my companions that night and said that the cultural struggle by ethnic communities for a place in this cosmopolitan nation would be measured by the potency of the imagery they generated about their Australian experiences. As the Australian mainstream seeks to define its distinctive qualities it (we) may well find it will only be able to do so with passion and conviction when the images and stories and participants are creatively multicultural, in more accurate resonance with the voices on the nation's streets.

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