"South of the West"*:Cultural Coordinates of the Australian Audiovisual System

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■ *The "cultural exception" debate raised around the mega-policy issue of WTO-sponsored trade liberalisation imperatives and incentives should not be locked into a Europe-USA or an English versus non-English-language opposition. Cultural diversity across the audiovisual world is much richer – and more interesting – than that. This article focuses on cultural diversity in the 'English world' – more specifically, on cultural diversity in the Australian audiovisual system. If a country that seemingly shares so much with the US and other English-language countries of the old British regime, is actually quite different in the way it mixes its cultural coordinates, the complexity and richness of the world's audiovisual systems are brought into sharper focus.*

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Structure of the Australian Audiovisual Sector

Australian audiovisual media are characterised by the dominance of commercial, private sector interests and logics, albeit with a strong history of state subvention and regulation, and structuring of markets by political as well as economic means. Australian broadcasting has a long history of a 'dual system' of public service and commercial sectors which dates from the early 1930s, when the two sectors were termed the 'A' and 'B' class stations, with equivalent audience expectations of 'highbrow' or 'lowbrow', or informative or entertaining program content (Johnson 1988). Television was introduced in 1956 on the basis of this dual system logic, first going to air in Australia on 16 September 1956, coinciding with the 1956 Melbourne Olympics. In 1956, there were two commercial stations in Sydney (TCN 9 and ATN 7) and two in Melbourne (GTV 9 and HSV 7), with one ABC (Australian Broadcasting Commission (later Corporation)- the public broadcasting service) operating in Sydney and Melbourne. Broadcast television transmission was gradually extended throughout Australia through the late 1950s, the 1960s and 1970s, and remote areas of Australia, with large indigenous populations, finally received television in the late 1980s, through the BRACS (Broadcasting to Remote Aboriginal Communities Services) in the late 1980, after the 1985 launch of the AUSSAT satellite, which enabled national television networking.

  Australian media demonstrate a hybrid quality, with its mainstream elements fashioned out of the intersection of British and American structures. Public service broadcasting has been a feature of the Australian broadcasting system since its inception, with the ABC being established on the model provided by the BBC- the unique point from which 'creativity' emerged in both the conservative and radical popular imaginaries of the time- but it has been a secondary

player alongside the commercial free-to-air sector, with audience shares roughly splitting 80:20 between the commercial and public broadcasting sectors in television. The ABC can be seen as an important expression of cultural modernism and nationalism as a force in Australia, and an instrument of national citizenship and a space-binding 'common culture' in a geographically large and dispersed nation. It would, however, be a mistake to see it as a 'high culture' adjunct to the broadcasting system, as it has always sought to balance its Charter obligations against those of audience popularity, particularly in regional Australia where it was for many years the sole provider of audiovisual media services (Craik 1991). Other manifestations of cultural nationalism in audiovisual media have included the historical miniseries in the 1980s that were imbued with the nation-building ethos of revivifying popular memory around defining moments in Australian history (Cunningham 1993), and film financing policies since the 1970s that have sought to combine critical and commercial success with occasions for mass popular reflection upon national identity (O'Regan 1996).

Australian commercial media has been dominated by a small number of family-based dynasties, most notably Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation (which accounts for 70% of Australian newspaper output, as well as having a controlling share of the FOXTEL pay TV service and controlling the Fox film studios in Sydney) and the Packer family's Publishing and Broadcasting Limited (PBL), which owns the dominant Nine Network in television, a range of magazine interests, and is in partnership with Microsoft on *ninemsn*, Australia's most accessed Web site. There are restrictions upon cross-media ownership, that have the effect of minimising News Corporation's role in free-to-air TV and prevent Packer from taking over the Fairfax print media group, although in practice the webs of interconnection between the major players are very extensive indeed (Productivity Commission 2000). While there are formal restrictions upon foreign ownership of Australian mass media, both News Corporation (whose CEO, Rupert Murdoch, is formally an American citizen) and the Can West group, a Canadian multinational that has a controlling interest over the Ten Network, have been able to operate 'under the radar' of formal legislative controls.

To this established dual system have been added significant new elements. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which commenced broadcasting in 1980, was established as a consequence of 'top-down' strategies of governance in a multicultural society. It was chartered to provide non-English language programming to Australia's many LOTE (Languages Other Than English) speaking communities, but also to promote cultural diversity in Australian society, both through ongoing commentary on issues arising from immigration and multiculturalism, and subtitling of non-English language material into English, thereby making it accessible to most sections of the community. By interpreting its Charter broadly, the SBS has proved to be an innovative provider of a diverse range of programming to a culturally diverse audience, rather than simply being a relay of non-English language programming to various diasporic communities, and by the late 1990s the SBS had arguably become Australia's most dynamic and innovative broadcasting service. There has also been sporadic government support for 'bottom-up' initiatives in the community broadcasting sector, which is particularly strong in radio but has had far more mixed outcomes in television (Rennie 2002). These developments have occurred alongside further commercialisation of mass media with the introduction of subscription broadcasting services (Pay TV) in 1995, which now has a take-up rate of over 20% (Flew and Spurgeon 2000), and the deregulation of related industries such as telecommunications.

Australian media and globalisation

Australian media culture has been strongly enmeshed in globalisation processes since its inception. Early Australian commercial television was also characterised by high levels of imported programming, particularly from the United States, with the Vincent Report into Australian television finding that, in 1962, 97 per cent of Australian television drama was imported from the United States (Flew 1995). As a consequence of local content regulations for commercial television, that have developed from the early 1960s to the present, as well as the revealed preference of Australian audiences for local content, Australian commercial television is more local in terms of its content than was the case 30 years ago. Australian content regulation ensure that

55 per cent of television drama is local content, and it is also the case that expenditure on imported programming has fallen from 55 per cent of total program expenditure in the late 1960s, to around 30 per cent of total program expenditure in the late 1990s (Flew and Cunningham 2001: 80). In this light, Tom O'Regan has argued that: 'either/or scenarios of national culture or globalisation ... mask a situation in which national and international tendencies are co-present and are variously competitive with and complementary to each other' (O'Regan 1993: 100).

While this high level of import dependence has been re-dressed to some extent by local content regulations, it re-mains the case that Australia might be viewed as an 'import culture,' or one that is especially open to global cultural in-fluence, on the basis of English language and strong his-torical and cultural linkages to the United States and Britain. Discussing the wide international and domestic success of the 1986 film *Crocodile Dundee*, Meaghan Morris (1988) has pointed to its 'positive unoriginality' in negotiating the tensions between cultural nationalism and global film industry economics. Morris shows how *Crocodile Dundee* exemplifies the dynamism of Australian culture in turning its derivativeness as a British colonial outpost that has been profoundly shaped by US culture in the 20th century to its advantage, producing a 'recombinant' cultural product well suited to the demands of the contemporary global film industry while also invoking a sense of place characteristic of national cinemas. By the 1990s, Australian films such as *Proof*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Strictly Ballroom* and *Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* exemplified a form of 'export' cinema that drew upon cultural elements sufficiently diverse and eclectic for cultural critics such as Graeme Turner to ask what had happened to the sort of Australian 'national cinema' sought by the cultural nationalist pioneers of Australian film policy in the 1960s and 1970s (Turner 1994). Notwith-standing the pleasing potential of audiovisual export, it re-mains the case that total export revenue barely touches the sides of a major historic imbalance in favour of imports. Australia's balance of cultural trade deficit is more than $3.2 billion (1996-97), with imports of films, television programs and video worth about three times export income.

It is possible to argue that 'when Australia became modern, it ceased to be interesting' - interesting, that is, to an international cultural intelligentsia and anthropological audience (Miller 1994: 206). What made Australia 'interesting' in the late 19th and early 20th century was both the radically 'pre-modern' cultural difference of its indigenous peoples set against a transplanted white settler colonial culture, and the utopian belief that the ideals of the European Enlightenment could be transplanted upon the *Terra Nullius* which, until the Australian High Court's Mabo judgement of 1992, Australian was held to be by its settler population under British Crown law. Marxist cultural critics such as Andrew Milner (1991) find in Australia an interesting case study in global postmodernism, as 'a colony of Euro-pean settlement suddenly set adrift, in intellectually and imaginatively uncharted Asian waters, by the precipitous decline of a distant Empire' (Milner 1991: 116). Such accounts obscure the significance of the nation-building state and the project of modernity undertaken in Australia in the 20th century, accepting far too readily he claim that Europe provides the templates of national political culture, and the semi-peripheral 'white settler' states established through empire are essentially derivative. But they do draw attention to Australia's distinctive position as both a historical product of the imperial projects of European modernity, yet also geographically located in the Asia-Pacific, arguably the most economically dynamic region in the 21st century. Ross Gibson (1992), in the book from which we have taken the title for this article, depicts the ambivalent nature of Australia as an antipodal relay point between Europe and Asia, the local and the global, the 'old' and the 'new' in these evocative terms:

For two hundred years the South Land has been a duplicitous object for the West. On the one hand, Australia is demonstrably a 'European' society, with exhaustive documentation available concerning its colonial inception and development. Yet on the other hand, because the society and its habitat have also been understood (for much longer than two hundred years) in the West as fantastic and other-worldly, the image of Australia is oddly doubled. Westerners can recognise themselves there at the same time as they encounter an alluringly exotic and perverse entity, the phantasm called Australia. Westerners can look South and feel 'at home', but, because the region has also served as a projective screen for European aspiration and anxiety, Australia also calls into question the assumptions and satisfactions by which any society or individual feels at

home (Gibson 1992: x).

Perhaps because of its historical and cultural links to Britain and the United States, and the dominance of the English language, Australian film and television provide important case studies of the degree to which success in international media markets entails 'playing at being American' (Caughie 1991). Tom O'Regan (1993) has referred to the 'double face' of Australian television with, on the one side, cheap imported programs cross-subsidise local production under a policy regime of domestic content quotas for commercial television, and, on the other side, industry economics that necessitate generic formats that can be exported as low-cost filler into the programming schedules of multichannel broadcasters in Europe, Asia, and North America (Cunningham and 1996). The Australian television production industry has become increasingly global in its sales and investment orientation since the late 1980s. While Australian programs were sold into international markets before the 1980s, with *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo* being the outstanding success, the pattern has since changed, with financing for much high-budget television increasingly coming from a mix of local and foreign sources, and some domestic production companies expanding their base of operations beyond Australia. Successful products have included serial drama ('soap opera') like *Prisoner*, *Neighbours*, and *Home and Away*, higher quality drama series like *Water Rats*, *Murder Call* and *Blue Heelers*, animated series such as *Blinky Bill*, children's programming such as *Bananas in Pyjamas*,, the popular science and technology format Beyond 2000. Most recently, the 'reality' documentary *The Crocodile Hunter* has achieved remarkable international success through screening on The Discovery Channel, to the point where its energetic host Steve Irwin has established sufficient international popularity for a film based on his exploits, and an episode of the US animated comedy *South Park* where the character Cartman adopted his persona.

Legislating for Localism: The Australian Content Standard as Cultural Policy

The Australian Content Standard requires that 55 per cent of programs broadcast between 6pm and midnight on

commercial television, and 50 per cent of overall programs broadcast, be of Australian origin. Such a local content standard has been in place in Australia since 1960, but it has evolved over time, particularly in the establishing of sub-quotas, based upon a points system that weights program cost as well as broadcast time, for locally-produced drama, children's programming, and documentary. Its principal objective is a cultural one, aiming to 'promote the role of commercial television in developing and reflecting a sense of Australian identity, character and cultural diversity' (quoted in Productivity Commission 2000: 380), but it is also important in industry development terms, providing a 'floor' for local production that is in competition with cheaper imported material. It is also a policy requirement that is met without difficulty by the commercial broadcasters, although there is occasional questioning of the mix of program types required. Arguments for the Australian content standard have drawn attention to the cost differentials between local and imported programming, its capacity to promote diversity and innovation in local television production, the promotion of a distinctive national culture through sustained exposure to programs with an 'Australian look', and resistance to globalising industry dynamics and 'cultural imperialism'. It has also been viewed as an instrument of cultural policy, particularly in the 1990s as cultural policy discourses established a relevance in Australian public policy and academic circles (Cunningham 1992; Bennett 1998; Bennett and Carter 2001). It has also been argued that 'pro-social' initiatives such as the local content quotas have rested historically upon a *quid pro quo*, where incumbent broadcasters have been protected from potential new competitors through policies such as the three-station to an area rule enshrined in the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*, with the result being that capital city TV stations earned average profits of 25-30% for most of the 1990s, three times the average rate of profit for Australian industry as a whole (Flew 2002).

From the late 1980s on, the continued viability of the Australian Content Standard has come under scrutiny. Reform of broadcasting legislation leading to the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* was accompanied by arguments by neo-liberal economists, both within and outside of government departments, that quotas may be little more than 'rent-seeking' behaviour by the local

audiovisual production sector (see Cunningham 1992, pp. 48-52, for a review of the arguments). There was in practice little change in this area for broadcasting, although the requirements for local production in television advertising were substantially diluted. More recently, the Productivity Commission, an agency within Treasury with responsibility for overseeing compliance of current government legislation across a range of areas with the principles of national competition policy. The Productivity Commission's Report (2000) found that the *Broadcasting Services Act*, was outdated, administratively complex, contrary to competition policy and other public policy principles, and an inadequate base from which to respond to the challenges of digitisation, technological convergence and new media services. It expressed concern about 'a history of political, technical, industrial, economic and social compromises' in Australian broadcasting policy, that had left 'a legacy of *quid pro quos* [that] has created a policy framework that is inward looking, anti-competitive and restrictive' (Productivity Commission 2000: 5). The Commission's belief that the public interest would best served by reducing barriers to the entry of new players, and promoting greater market competition, has not been supported by the conservative Howard Government, but its criticisms of the *status quo* continue to derive currency from the failure of the government's strategy to promote the transition from analog to digital television, which has largely protected the existing free-to-air sector.

The overall Australian policy position towards international trade agreements is ambiguous in relation to the audiovisual sector. Australia's overall negotiating position on the GATS and trade liberalization is a highly supportive one since Australian trade negotiators conceive of the nation as a small, open economy that benefits from multilateral trade agreements that require greater market access on the part of larger and potentially more influential nations and regions. Moreover, the perceived negative impact of the tariff system in manufacturing has helped to generate a free trade consensus or, put differently, an anti-protectionist alliance, at the higher levels of Australian policy culture. In the global arena, Australia has been pro-active in promoting multilateral trade agreements, such as forming the 'Cairns Group' of nations arguing for liberalisation of global agricultural markets. At the same time, in the Uruguay Round of GATS negotiations, audiovisual sector representatives lobbied strongly for Australia to exempt the sector from its final GATS commitments, in light of concerns that Australian trade negotiators may 'trade off' policies such as local content quotas for greater access to North American agricultural markets. More recently, the 1998 High Court decision concerning the Closer Economic Relations (CER) trade agreement between Australia and New Zealand, which found that material produced in New Zealand had to count as 'Australian' for the purpose of quotas, drew attention to the possibility that policy objectives designed to foster an Australian cultural identity can be overridden by trade policy objectives and international treaties and agreements. While the impact of the judgement on Australian television programming has been minimal, due to the lack of appeal of New Zealand programming to Australian audiences, the CER provisions have been seen by critics in the local audiovisual sector as potentially a battering ram for enforcing conformity with GATS and other provisions stipulated by international trade bodies such as the World Trade Organisation. The official Australian position is highly ambiguous at present, being both reassuring to the local audiovisual sector about the maintenance of the Australian Content Standard, but highly supportive of the WTO agenda as well as a Free Trade Agreement with the United States.

Towards a New Configuration?

The Australian audiovisual sector has sought both to provide content to domestic markets and to compete internationally. This has been reflective of a medium-sized, English-speaking nation that is highly permeable to imported cultural influences and globalising forces, seeking to turn potential vulnerability into a niche source of competitive advantage in global cultural markets. Policy towards the film and television sectors has sought to twin cultural development and industry development, partly through public subsidy and direct provision of audiovisual services (particularly in the area of public broadcasting), but also through measures that structure public assistance in forms that are cognate with- often implicit rather than publicly stated- cultural policy objectives. This has been in a context where the 'main game' of government policy more generally has promoted deregulation, trade liberalisation, and

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multilateralism.

Tom O'Regan (2001) has observed that this balancing of the national and the international, and the cultural and the industrial, served Australian audiovisual industries well up to about the mid-1990s, but has been fraying since then. The Productivity Commission's inquiry into broadcasting drew attention to some of these tensions, as it worked within a paradigm consistent with that of the global content and knowledge industries (cf. OECD 1998), whereas the local audiovisual sector is focused upon a cultural development paradigm, even if it is less sure about the nature of Australian national culture than was the case, say, 30 years ago. These conflicting discursive orientations are reflective of a bifurcation of the Australian audiovisual sector, as productions that are under foreign financial and creative control have constituted a growing proportion of local production activity, and as direct Federal government funding for film and television agencies is stagnant or declining (Flew and Cunningham 2001: 85-89). The 'perpetual crisis' (Craig 2000) of the ABC, the flagship national public broadcaster, and the growth in 'global' film productions such as *The Matrix*, *Babe: Pig in the City*, the *Star Wars* prequels, and *Mission Impossible II*, appear as two sides of the same coin. Moreover, as creative industries and new economy discourses become more significant to public policy, and as the focus is increasingly upon the development of network-based content and services, cultural policy rhetorics will be 'squeezed', and the domain of cultural policy will increasingly be in economic development agencies rather than the traditional arts policy agencies (cf. Cunningham 2002).

The impetus for cultural policy initiatives in Australia has always been industrial as much as cultural, even if it has often suited advocates to downplay the industrial side of the equation. In thinking about the possible impact of the WTO and, perhaps more urgently, a Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Australia, it is the industrial impacts that are more tangibly assessable than the cultural. This is in part because the multicultural nature of Australian society tends to see Australian culture as either remorsely hybridized or a residual form (cf. Turner 1994). Australia has always been integrated into global economic, cultural and political circuits: policy principally impacts upon the terms of these negotiations, rather than the question of whether or not to be so integrated. The impact of globalisation upon audiovisual practices in the land 'South of the West' is more upon what is produced, and the circuits through which such cultural content is circulated, than the continued existence of the sector as such. The looming paradox of policy is that the guarantee of Australian content regulation as a cornerstone of cultural policy- the protection of incumbent broadcasters from new sources of competition - may lead to the stagnation of the sector, whereas dynamism in the Australian audiovisual industry may arise out of policies that risk the viability of the sector, by opening it up further to the forces of globalisation and competition.

* Our title pays homage to an important book – Ross Gibson's 1992 *South of the West: Postcolonialism and the Narrative Construction of Australia* - which captures many of the distinctive cultural characteristics of Australia and which neither submits to nostalgia for a cultural tariff wall or glib globalisation rhetorics.

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