Out from Down Under: Post-modern Australian Culture(s)

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You just walk out of the world and into Australia (D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo,* 1923)

The cultural transition is almost complete….If Americans can put a man on the moon they can fit Australia into their flag (Phillip Adams, *All the Way with the USA,* 2002)

O wad some Pow'r, the gifty gi'e us: to see ourselves as others see us (Robbie Burns, *To a Louse*, 1785)

Because fears of American 'cultural imperialism' persist into the 21st Century I've chosen to address the issue of the American 'empire' in terms of cultural influence—the 'soft power' of America—from the perspective of Australia in the twenty-first century.

In Australia, the conservative Howard government's decade in office (1996–2007) provoked charges of sycophancy and cowardice in our national diplomatic attachment to American foreign policy, including its anti-terrorism adventures following '9/11.' In migration, refugee policy, 'border protection,' but especially in defence where Australia committed small numbers of troops to the 'coalition of the willing' in Afghanistan and in Iraq, the ex-British colony fell into line with the USA.

However, in parallel with these continuing international dependencies, Australian cultural conversations, and hence its so-called 'identity,' moved in other directions, increasingly independently of the USA. I will argue that the meanings and values that are the feared currency of America's version of cultural modernity are increasingly irrelevant to what it means to identify as 'Australian' in the 21st Century.

Domination and resistance

It cannot be denied that United States culture—from the 'political' to the 'popular'—is deeply and variously implicated in Australia's post-WWII history. Often represented as rampant 'Americanisation,' the forces putatively transforming modern Australia were carried by consumer capitalism and embedded in the triumph of the 'American Century.' Australian cultural and political change were widely assumed to depend on and imitate those of the USA as post-war Australia became closely identified with American interests during the Cold War, Vietnam, and the so-called 'war against terrorism.' Commentators left and right lamented these influences, reacting to the assumed 'soft power' of the USA.

In the first decade of the new century, the complaint continues: Australia is still 'the fifty-first (United) State,' still enjoying a 'special' political and perhaps cultural relationship with the USA. As the Bush administration stumbles into history, as the *real politic* of oil and climate change re-write global relationships, Australian pundits, cartoonists, even the Deputy

Prime Minister, lament our imitation and consumption of American commercial culture.

In the new world (dis)order following the 'first' Gulf War, Australia has been called on to again demonstrate its allegiance to the United States, especially in concert against terrorism, while continuing as a good international citizen working sympathetically with the UN and international legal and humanitarian tribunals. At the same time during the past decade Australia has actively promoted to the world its own increasingly distinct social and cultural identity through sport, television, cinema and the performing arts. It speaks with strident voice and unique accent, and increasingly looks to Asia and Europe for inspiration and response in cultural conversation and, to some extent, in political allegiance.

I argue in this paper that the political and cultural dependencies of Australia on the United States have been radically transformed since the end of the Cold War as 'what Australia means' has been re-written in an increasingly post-modern, global vocabulary. Despite populist local fears of 'Americanisation,' I will argue that recently accelerating developments in the diversifying cultural life of the smaller nation are not directly or causally linked to politico-strategic decisions that identify it closely with US power and ambition. The political and cultural spheres have become increasingly independent of each other, I suggest, and Australia's military/political subservience to the Washington offers little insight into the complex cultural relationships between the two nations.

Two important reasons for this assertion are that Australia is increasingly ethnically diverse and politically pragmatic. Its commercial cultures are less and less identifiably 'American,' if they ever were. Australia is no clone of US culture, and its contradictory, multi-faceted sense of itself is changing as rapidly as its demographic mix. To understand these developments from the perspective of Australia one needs to examine the smaller Pacific nation's explicit attempts to define itself in ways that can be advertised to the world at large. So I will illustrate some of the ways by which Australia proclaimed its self-identity during the past decade, most distinctly for the Sydney Olympic rituals (2000), but also in idealising 'racial' diversity, and in the most culturally important domain of everyday life, broadcast television.

Negotiation and change

Like much of Western Europe and Canada, Australia has a long 'love-hate' relationship with US exports, whether these be material or cultural. These continue to be both *welcomed* as the glittering promise of modernity, capitalism and democracy, and *resisted* as a hegemonic threat to national differences and diversity in an increasingly globalised/ Americanised world. This contradictory understanding and reception of America abroad implicitly suggests flaws in the claim that unequal societies are simply vulnerable to the Great Power's influences, unable to resist the homogenising consequences of its 'soft power.'

In the unique case of post-colonial Australia, cultural resistance, negotiation, adaptation, modification, and outright rejection of US commercial culture have been the norm. While some examples of accommodation, even acceptance, can be seen, these never end in simple

servile imitation (think of car culture, Drive-in cinemas, 'fast food,' the 'republic debate'). From *within* an allegedly imitative culture, like Australia, particular local responses are generated by distinct histories, unique social forces and institutions, and by local cultural practices. For example, in the field of television—a putative spearhead of Americanisation—local programs and productions have flourished *despite* the popularity of some US sitcoms, big budget movies and transplanted news formats. Over almost fifty years of viewing, the vernacular Australian voice, local accents and Australian stories have not been swamped, nor indeed, diminished by television products made for the US market (a claim argued in detail later in this paper).

In our 1993 book, *Implicated*, Roger Bell and I adopted a linguistic metaphor to express the fluidity and dynamism of cultural influence:

> If one thinks of Australian culture and society as structured like a language, … then one might think of 'Americanisation' as like linguistic infiltration. It does not so much replace or displace the local lexicon as supplement it and change its elements … change is effected throughout the whole structure even though no obliteration of a previous lexicon may occur …[1]

I would add that international political relationships are not reducible to cultural 'influences,' and that the latter are never simple. Local cultures may become increasingly vernacular and more confidently proclaim their distinctiveness to a globalised or American-dominated international community while, at the same time, the smaller nation-state (even an Anglophone, treaty-bound nation-state like Australia) aligns itself more intimately with American initiatives internationally. Moreover, as a model of all that was 'modern,' Twentieth Century America has been understood in Australia as embodying opposed extremes: it displayed both a gleaming utopia, but also a tawdry dystopia.

Obviously the US remains a powerful social model and cultural example that other nations find difficult to ignore. However, in a variety of studies of Americanisation published from the early 1990s, interpretations built on ideas of unilateral domination or cultural imperialism have been rejected. Rob Kroes, a leading European scholar in this field, summarises these arguments: 'America's culture has become an unavoidable presence' globally, but its 'reception knows many voices: there is a resilience in other cultures that refuses to be washed away.'[2]

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[1] P. Bell and R. Bell, *Implicated: The United States in Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1993), 202–6.

[2] R. Kroes, "Americanization: What Are We Talking About?" in *Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe*, ed. R. Kroes, R. Rydell and D. Bosscher, 302–20 (Amsterdam: Vu University Press, 1993).

Recent analysts agree that so-called Americanisation cannot be separated from broader processes or modernisation, consumerism and globalisation—processes of which America is a part, but for which it is not separately responsible. Focusing on France, Richard Kuisel argues that 'Americanisation' has 'become increasingly disconnected from America,' is confused with global changes affecting much of the post-war world, and might best be identified as 'the coming of consumer society.' [3]

Roger Bell and I have suggested that broadly parallel developments in different modern societies—from suburbanisation to fashion or 'economic rationalism'—should not be interpreted as *caused* by the US imposing its own image on other willing, or unwilling, imitative cultures. It is more appropriate to view Australia as following the US along a broadly similar if somewhat retarded road towards post-industrial status, passing through stages of modernization that characterise most capitalist or mixed economies. So, on this interpretation, suburbs, freeways and mass culture were not symptoms of the Americanisation of Australia but of the modernisation and hyper-modernisation of *both* the US and Australia.[4]

The complications of *post*-modernity

During the 1990s, and again in the shadow of the US Iraq invasion, a chorus of complaint about American domination has been raised in the pages of Australian newspapers and magazines. Columnist Phillip Adams satirically observed '… if the Americans can put a man on the moon, they can fit Australia into their Flag.' [5] This rather backward-looking rhetoric echoes essayist Don Watson's lament:

These days we are in no doubt about it: we are America's deputy and trusty as they come. Ask not whether this is an honourable destiny and a fitting conclusion to a century of nationhood; it is a fait accompli, both sides of politics broadly agree on it.

Watson believes that the Anglo-Australian identity, built on pioneering hardship and war-time bravery, has been swamped by migration and modernisation:

The existing panoply of symbols and mantras excludes too many people and too much of what has happened since the War (WWII)—the migrants, Vietnam, the increase in the educated population, the beneficiaries and victims of the new economy, the new roles for women and new awareness of their roles in the past, a new awareness of the land.

[3] R. Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press,1993), 1–4. For a broader interpretation of American influences on postwar Europe, see R. Pells, *Not Like Us: How Europeans Have Loved, Hated and Transformed American Culture Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1997); and Kroes et al., eds., *Cultural Transmissions*.

[4] See generally, P. Bell and R. Bell, eds., *Americanization and Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1998).

[5] P. Adams, "All the Way With the USA," *The Weekend Australian*, July 6–7, 2002, R32.

> Australia now contains multitudes that the legend cannot accommodate. So long as our leaders ply the legend as if it can accommodate them, the further we drift from the truth about ourselves.

Of course, Watson is correct: Australia needs to imagine new versions of its many communities. The old stories do exclude too many 'new' Australians (both local and overseas born) and their cultures. But it does not follow that no stories make sense to 'us,' nor that the dialogues we call 'culture' have been silenced.

Western-style, post-war societies are all caught up in dynamic global and bi-lateral political and cultural currents that might better be characterized as 'post'-modern. Watson does allow that the newly-globalised Australia is 'pluralist and post-modern,' although he seems to believe that Australian cultural diversity is as incoherent as it is inauthentic. It is inauthentic because it is modeled on the USA and defies definition in traditionally local terms:

> If the country has a problem, so has [Prime Minister] John Howard. He has been trying to stuff a pluralist, post-modern bird into a pre-modern cage. The bird won't go. It's not that it won't fit, but rather that it's not a bird. It's no one thing. It's our multitudes.[6]

Obviously, if one demands that cultures be univocal, homogenous and consensual, they are more easily imprisoned than if they are plural and dynamic, a possibility that Watson seemed to lament, along with the then Australian Prime Minister, Howard. He therefore linked global economic forces to cultural and social changes that he feared were disintegrating. He saw the newly minted de-regulation of wages and the economy as a counterfeit currency, undermining consensus and coherence, and so equated globalisation with Americanisation. Watson's version of post-modernity perpetuates the rhetoric of Western cultural decline that follows in the wake of American-style consumer capitalism. This is ironic because, as I will illustrate later in this paper, during the current decade Australian post-modernising imagery has become playfully optimistic.

The innocence of Australian *post*-modernity

The 2000 Olympic Ceremony

The notion of a post-modern condition implies diverse cultural identities and new kinds of 'subjectivities' (to use the jargon). Politically, it advertises a brand of ultra-liberalism. It celebrates 'difference,' seeing traditional knowledge/authority as antithetical to the interests of the diverse modes of liberal 'citizenship'—what one author calls '*do it yourself*

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[6] D. Watson, "Rabbit Syndrome: Australia and America," *Quarterly Essay* 4 (2001): 5, 57, 48.

citizenship,' defined in terms of culture, not of the State.[7] Post-modern culture highlights experience rather than meaning, pastiche instead of narrative, the present not the past. Critical post-modern commentators lament the disintegration of 'high' cultural traditions, and predict that cultures that fail to honour their historical traditions will produce 'subjects' with only a 'shallow' sense of person-hood.

Such deep changes cannot be conclusively demonstrated. However, insofar as it is relevant to the question of putative Americanisation of cultural identity, there are compelling signs that Australian public and commercial culture is re-defining many of its traditional ways of thinking about being Australian. These changes are most notable this century, but they build on, rather than invent anew, self-consciously 'Australian' versions of identity rooted in the country's colonial past. A revealing encapsulation of these changes was the 2000 Sydney Olympic Ceremony.

The Opening Ceremony began as a vacant arena of red earth (*terra nullius*?) that was soon occupied by a flag-carrying cavalry of 'men from Snowy River.' As the horse-riders retreated to the perimeter of the oval, the Australian national anthem, *Advance Australia Fair*, became the focus of the world's televisual attention. Surprisingly two versions of the anthem were presented: one, sung by a male quartet *(Human Nature)* harmonising in a popular international/American ('Mid-Atlantic') style that rendered the anthem almost unrecognizable to Australian ears; the second, a formal solo version, sung by Julie Anthony, on top of a giant stairway, filmed from below. He accent was formal Australian, her dress conservative blue.

By contrast, in 1956, the Melbourne Olympics were declared 'open' by Prince Philip of Edinburgh. A military band presented the Australian anthem, 'God Save the Queen.' (The Queen of England and therefore of Australia was, in fact, the wife of Prince Philip!) Eleven Olympics later, and these risible colonial connotations had given way to internationalist, entertainment performances of the Australia's national song. The two recent versions could be read as metonymically referring to the traditional, formal nation state (Julie Anthony), but also to the idea that Australia is an entertainment space, a global commodity itself: the *Human Nature* version was a popular song like any other. Perhaps one rendition of *Advance Australia Fair* curtsied to the Queen; certainly, the other saluted Uncle Sam.

A list of the principal 'movements' of the television rendition of the Sydney ceremony reminds us that the post-colonial nation re-wrote its colonial and racist past as it celebrated its multi-ethnic future:

1．Aerial approach to Sydney
2．Mounted Stockmen ('Men from Snowy River' dress)
3．Deep Sea Dreaming (Nikki Webster as girl in pink)
4．Corroboree: *Awakening* (Djakapurra Munyarryn and 900 indigenous dancers)

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[7] J. Hartley, *Uses of Television* (London: Routledge, 1999).

 5．Floral Australia
 6．*The Tin Symphony*: Colonial tableaux (Captain Cook, Ned Kelly …)
 7．*Arrivals* (migrations)
 8．World diversity celebration
 9．Athletes and coaches assembly
 10．The Torch Ceremony ('Aboriginal' athlete, Cathy Freeman lights Games torch).

The 'tin symphony' used American/Irish fiddle arrangements of popular Australian songs to celebrate colonial life: Australia's past was no longer 'the bush' against which British pioneers struggled, no longer a brutally contested frontier, certainly not the arena for colonial and racial power.

The Olympics use of Cathy Freeman and the explicitly reconciliatory dances and exchanges of the ceremony had sought to cleanse Australian popular imagery of the blood of the frontier as well. The Sydney ceremony itself enacted a show-business version of a reconciliation ceremony as it confabulated a massive 'dream-scape' of pre-historical (natural) and historical (cultural) 'fun'—innocent fun, dreamt up by a cute girl on the metonymic Australian beach. The voice-over that guided the international viewers through the spectacle anchored its meanings to non-historical abstractions. So it was that the ancient and the modern were linked as inevitable and as natural, as natural as the turning of the earth. As Captain Cook brought Europe to Australia, the commentary explained (perhaps significantly, in the present tense):

> But Australian's ancient revelry is disturbed by an irresistible force with the arrival of a new culture, a new people—it's an age of discovery, the beginning of modernisation, the dawning of a new era in a land as old as time.

Most commentators discussing the dramaturgical and ritual character of grand public spectacles emphasise the significance of audience experiences of 'liminality' (marginality and transition across thresholds) as well as 'communitas' (open inter-subjective, encounters that celebrate a common humanity without ethnic or political divisions). Symbolically, opening ceremonies also enact a kind of gift-giving from the host country to the rest of the world. Global media events promote societal integration, nationalistic loyalty and consensus around notions of 'Humanity' ('We are the world,' etc). They proclaim themselves 'historic,' are minutely pre-planned, and primarily designed for the world's media.[8] As the Beijing example also shows, they offer a golden opportunity for nationalistic self-promotion, for turning old stereotypes of a country around, a process in which Australia has been deeply involved especially through its tourism and education industries, during the past two-to-three decades.

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[8] Cited in J. Larson and H.S. Park, *Global Television and the Politics of the Seoul Olympics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

Cultural and social debates are displacing the more formally 'political' discourses of those times when the nation 'rode on the sheep's back,' before the Australian dollar was 'floated.' Locally accented 'life*style*' consumerism, sports and nostalgic nationalism are increasingly seen as culturally salient overseas, as is the smiling face of state-sanctioned multiculturalism. Of course, the ongoing debates around Aboriginal land rights ('Mabo') the 'stolen generations' and reconciliation, refugees and human rights, do not intrude into the publicity brochures for our distant and exotic example of somewhere to visit. Identity is always represented as an idealisation. But the ideal is changing.

One commentator noted before the Sydney Games that:

> The advertising of Australia has started to incorporate characteristics associated with 'the postmodern,' such as irony, parody and self-reflexivity. An example (was) the dotted kangaroos on bicycles in the eight-minute Australian advertisement at the closing ceremony in Atlanta. In line with Australia's status as post-national, postcolonial or a post-modern archetype, the country has come to be advertised as a model for a globalised society with a fluid multicultural identity and a flourishing indigenous culture.[9]

Others have noted also that Australia's tourist and Olympic marketing had become increasingly engaged in selling images of an exotic trans-historical place, a place of tradition, but also of post-colonial innovation and fun. As Australia is only one among many settler societies coming to terms with its own history, the unique brand of exoticism and spectacle it offers needed to be highlighted. Peter Conrad observed that in the global, tourist-inviting, media panorama, new but ancient Australian people and place could be imagined.

> In England, the advertising agencies have transformed Australian holidays into existential quests, adventures in self-transformation. One television campaign tells a series of short, therapeutic stories … (of) life-changing expeditions (in the outback).

Conrad claimed that Australia has been 're-branded.'[10] I would add that it is now again brand-new: 'Discover the other side of yourself'―Australia is '… the envy of a world that once ignored its existence. Dreams now travel in a different direction, gravitating back from a deracinated northern hemisphere to the earthy enchanted south.' (*The National Geographic Magazine* also focused on Sydney, the 'Olympic City' in its August 2000 edition. Bill Bryson's piece was studded with sunlit beaches and glittering water. He too pointed to the vibrancy of the city both 'old and young' at the same time.)

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[9] E. Herman, "Sale of the Millennium: The 2000 Olympics and Australia's Corporate Identity," *Media International Australia* 94 (2000): 176.

[10] P. Conrad, "The New World," *Granta: The Magazine of New Writing* 70 (2000): 25.

So at the turn of the millennium, 'Australia' seemed to become the label for a kind of European-originated innocence that connoted youth, fun, irony (of an unserious kind) and domestic hospitality. The ancient country looked like the youngest nation. The fresh face of a child on the beach symbolised the newest version of 'no-longer-colonial.' Perhaps Australia was presenting itself as a 'new-age,' transcendent version of post-modernity. It certainly saw itself optimistically, and adopted a peculiarly local iconic and verbal vernacular as it smiled at the huge international television audience. It is true that the symbolic reconciliation between Aboriginal and European Australians enacted during the ceremony could be read as an ideologically driven attempt to excuse colonial oppression, and that the exploitation of Cathy Freeman ('an Aboriginal' athlete) to light the cauldron smacked of protesting too much. But even these gestures would have been impossible in, say, the corresponding ceremony of 1956, a time when Australia was importing unprecedented numbers of British and Continental European immigrants, and was more obviously following the 'American social model' of modernisation (*pace* Watson, above).

Integration and multi-ethnicity

Waves of Asian and Pacific immigration since the Vietnam War have had a marked effect on Australian culture and fractured the monolith of European-Australian ethnicity. A revealing sign of a new-found sense of assimilated diversity and of the virtues of hybridity is found in the faces that increasingly and unexceptionally populate Australian television screens and sports carnivals. A memorable example of these new versions of assimilation centered on putatively 'Asian' facial features, was a 2005 front-page item in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. A colour photogaph of a young female fashion model of 'mixed' Asian/European background was headlined 'Beauty and the East.' Below it was shown a series of computer-generated faces embodying increasing 'degrees' of 'Asian' features, and correspondingly fewer 'European' features as one read from the left hand image to the right. The models at each facially opposite end of the hypothetical continuum were young women. It was reported that a scientific sample of Australians judged the fictional face that was mid-way between 'Asian' and 'European'—that is, literally in the middle of the putative racially melded series—to be the 'most beautiful.'

The SMH example might be seen as reifying racial hybridity epitomised in youthful beauty. In the newspaper its digitised facticity became a metonym for a newly idealised, notion of what it meant to be judged beautiful as an Australian. The photos appeared to show racial blending and to demonstrate happy acceptance of the hypothetical result. Hybridity was an ideal, not just a tolerable option (at least where young women's faces were concerned). It is possible to see in this example a new kind of assimilationism, one modeled on diversity and lacking an essential racial ideal (certainly a British ideal).

Sydney: still the post-modern party-place

Recently (in July, 2008) the **Catholic World Youth Day** (actually a week-long festival)

was held in Sydney. As it did for the Olympics, the Pacific city dressed up as the sunlit place where youthfulness beckoned pilgrims from around the world. Again, European friendliness and innocence nodded acceptance to ancient Aboriginal presence, just as had occurred during the Olympics. A year earlier the **Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation** had been hosted with much security and fanfare. For that event, however, Australians criticised and satirised the security and pomp of the international gathering. Flattered, angered and bemused in equal measure, Australia saw the demonstrations of international (especially American) power as excessive. The fleeting visit of President Bush rendered the event of little more than comical interest to a media intent on celebrating the difference between ironic Australian informality and imperial American excess.

Through these events watched by the world, the Antipodean outpost of England happily hosted the West's most powerful political leader and most celebrated religious figure. But local presentations and reflections on these events stressed that Australia was beholden neither to the Catholic Church nor to the USA. Australia (a nation set in the distant East from Europe) continued to tell the world that its example was unique. It reassured itself and the northern Hemisphere that the wide brown land was no more than an ironic monarchy, and an embarrassed republic. It didn't want to appear to be trying too hard to show off its international status. So the media invoked the vocabulary that had been honed during the Olympics—'*friendly*', '*hospitable*', '*youthful*', '*innocent*', '*fun*'—to flatter its local readers and viewers.

'Hyper-vernacular' television

Entertainment has always been the arena where Australian commentators have confronted what they see as 'Americanisation.' So my final example is television, a medium that I see as mundane and local, yet culturally most important because of its ubiquity and cultural subtlety. Far from representing the most egregious and aggressive form of US 'soft power,' I will argue, television provides the strongest *counter*-example to the thesis that Americanisation undermines or displaces local meaning and values.

Bell and Bell (1993) commented on the first two decades of Australian television:

That more Australians watched Roots than any other television broadcast prior to 1980 suggest that the idioms and cultural content of American history and American television were familiar and pleasurable in Australia. More generally, however, it is clear from the empirical evidence of the 'ratings' at least, that Australians watched American genre series in huge numbers from the first years of television. Until the Mavis Brampton Show (1965) and Homicide (1967), locally produced entertainment programs other than the news, sport, or games shows, were too rare to be genuinely competitive with American imports (if one allows that ratings data demonstrate cultural 'preferences'). Three years after the introduction of television, in 1959, all of the 'top-ten' programs in Australia originated from the United States: 77 Sunset Strip, Wagon Train, Sea Hunt,

> Rescue 8, Maverick, Perry Mason, Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best, Rifleman, and Sunday night movies.[11]

During the past one and a half decades, however, things have changed. Magazine-style, 'infotainment,' comedy, 'reality,' and consumer-advocacy genres have led local audience preferences. It is possible that this change began roughly during the years of the Hawke-Keating governments, when financial institutions were deregulated and there was strong growth in tourism and other service industry employment, the introduction of competition in telecommunications and the multiplication of 'information industries' jobs. Ironically, greater internationalisation of the economic and cultural worlds seemed irrelevant to the cultural content of popular television. Indeed, led by sport and 'light' entertainment programming, it became more confidently 'local,' less beholden to international influence.

The last decade has seen this localisation continue apace. This is clear in a summary of recent trends in television content and popularity:

Typical mainland capitals ratings figures during 2008 show that

- During the past decade, Reality TV (usually local) and Sport, Lifestyle (home improvement, *The Block*) have proven increasingly popular.
- US imported prime-time high cost drama and comedy, but local sport (e.g. 'State-of-origin' Rugby League), reality/lifestyle and 'current affairs' are now the staple of 'network' broadcast television.
- Younger viewers (16–39) prefer US shows, including *The Simpsons*, *Grey's Anatomy*, but local lifestyle and reality shows are also popular with this demographic, even on the ABC (*Rove*, *Good News Week, Spiks and Specks*).
- However, older viewers watch more TV and more local content (especially on ABC) and UK imports.
- About 20% of viewers habitually use ABC (Australian/British) and SBS (international programs, local and imported soccer).
- Most watched programs during a typical week in mid-2008, were:
  Ch 7 *News* (Sunday) (Aust)
  Australia's got talent (Aust)
  NCIS (US)
  Domestic Blitz (Aust).
  Better Homes and Gardens (Aust).
- Subscription TV's most watched programs were Australian Rules and Rugby football, '*Australia's Next Top Model'* and '*Selling Houses Australia.'*

It should be noted that these patterns are very stable: the routine fare of vernacular, local,

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[11] Bell and Bell, *Implicated,*173.

immediate, ephemeral programs with low production values mean that *Broadcast* television is less and less 'American' and more and more self-consciously Australian (or Anglo-Australian) compared to the patterns of the 1980–90s (c.f. *Implicated,* 1993, quoted above).

Second, the most popular American productions are generically narrow comedies and dramas. They are enjoyed as diverting, seen as 'entertainment' with high production values, rather than being understood as 'about us' in any ethno-cultural sense. They are often labeled as 'American' when discussed by viewers (e.g. *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, *The X-Files* are of interest because they are 'different'). It might be argued that they are often understood *by contrast* with Australian programs, not as part of the same local cultural domain. Because they not reassuringly Australian they are not used to 'rehearse identity,' as recent commentators might say.

Despite globalisation and digitisation, Australian television is increasingly locally focused and vernacular, even parodically so. 'American,' it is not. Sometimes it does address Americanisation, but only to laugh at the excesses of US culture or behaviour: In early 2008, the Commonwealth Bank introduced a series of TV Commercials that satirised the stereotypical American ignorance of Australian culture and laughed at US imported experts' ability to complicate even the most simple tasks. This was contrasted with direct, Australian know-how—what Australians might call a lack of 'bullshit' (echoes of *Crocodile Dundee* and the legendary pragmatism of the bushman can perhaps be seen in these examples).

Advertising is the 'key link' in the relationships amongst television industries, audiences and program genres and schedules. Increasingly, many of the most watched programs conflate advertising with their infotainment content. The new Rudd Labor government has presented itself as an administratively efficient, economically conservative, though environmentally and socially progressive regime. But, rather like television's versions of the world, it has encouraged a de-politicisation of politics, a very (if I may say so) 'postmodern' thing to do: new politics is not about class, just as television is unconcerned with social division. Instead, the domestic, the consumerist and the mundane prevail. Politically and culturally older Australia seems preoccupied with health, housing, consumerism and 'lifestyle,' and just occasionally with the environment. The popularity of these programs, could be argued to reinforce retrospective complacency: It closes the gate on possible intrusions by the political or the public into recreational television.

What America means

Recent cultural analyses have moved away from assuming 'essentialist,' fixed national types of identity towards more contested, even contradictory and shifting or provisional postulations of 'identit*ies*' (always in quotation marks, usually plural). Such a discursive approach emphasises that what we label national 'identities' are not aggregations of psychological types; instead they can be thought of as particular modes and fields of representation itself: Australian cultural identity, then, does not refer to a list of ideal cultural 'values' that have no precise material basis or context. Ironically, identity is not one, not

unified; rather, it is a fabric of textual strands with no fixed boundaries.

The blanket term 'Americanisation' is frequently no more than an assumption concerning the origins of a cultural example (language, dress, food) that may or may not be accurate. It has been applied indiscriminately within Australian media discourse to label an array of factors seen as threatening to national(istic) identity, way of life, or 'consensus values.' This pejorative use of 'Americanisation' lamented social practices and cultural values that putatively originated in the United States (or in Hollywood, Los Angeles, or some metonymic reference to that nation). It assumed that the offending items were not meaningful within the Australian context merely because they made cultural sense to some local groups but that they carried with them their alien 'American' origins. It follows that popular discourse on this issue is frequently nationalistic, assuming both an essential Australian cultural and political identity, and a general consensus to which US-originated commercial culture is seen as a threat.

Australian complaints about putative Americanisation shifted from the economic to the cultural sphere with the rise of global capital in the 1980s. Cultural concern seems to have displaced the Yankee dollar as the preferred culprit in the popular discussions of US influence on other nations. Culture (language, dress and sport in particular) has attracted the most vocal reactions—if the correspondents and professional commentators in the local media are taken as the yard-stick. Yet cultural reception and transformation (what Bell and Bell called 'negotiation' in *Implicated*) involve complex processes, much more than 'imitation' or 'domination' suggest.

As I have illustrated by discussing prominent cultural examples, the past decade especially has seen 'America' recede from Australian cultural conversations. The 'Great Power' resonates only faintly in how Australia describes itself and its place in various global communities. The USA is a big ship to turn around when the storms of oil shortages and global warming demand flexible navigation. More agile, smaller nations like Australia may be better equipped to participate the post-modern commodity-based cultures that are emerging in the new century. Australian postmodern nationalism, or pseudo-nationalism, is culturally so pervasive that America is becoming increasingly distant from local consciousness.

Many other examples suggest themselves: I could have discussed sport, linguistic conventions, dress, 'celebrity culture,' gastronomy, or even what might be called the post-national university. Of the last, Readings[12] notes that, in the contemporary (what he terms the 'post-historical') university, means are increasingly seen as ends and universities have largely relinquished their role of educating citizens in their own national culture. Readings sees this as evidence that cultural globalisation is becoming the dominant version of what was once feared as Americanisation. However, the effect of this conflation is paradoxical:

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[12] B. Readings, *The University in Ruins* (London: Harvard University Press, 1997).

"Global 'Americanization' today (unlike during the period of the Cold War…) does not mean American national predominance but a global realization of the contentlessness of the American national idea, which shares the emptiness of the cash nexus and excellence. Despite the enormous energy expended in attempts to isolate and define an 'Americanness' in American studies programs, one might read these efforts as nothing more than an attempt to mask the fundamental anxiety that it in some sense means nothing to be an American, that American culture is becoming increasingly a structural oxymoron.[13]

The grand narrative of the liberal state progressing through industrialised modernity is now a story without a final chapter. This is because national cultures are no longer 'national' in the sense once thought possible and desirable. Therefore, nationalistically defined 'Australian' culture is also increasingly anachronistic as the content of a local curriculum (except in the sense spectacularly proclaimed in the Olympics or mumbled in the parodic vernacular of television). So I have argued that a resurgent although novel kind of pseudo-nationalism is emerging from under assumed American cultural hegemony.

Moreover, I have assumed that international political relationships are seldom directly tied to cultural 'influences.' Local cultures may become increasingly vernacular and confidently proclaim their distinctiveness to a globalised or America-dominated international community while, at the same time, they are firmly bound to the larger power by treaty and commerce. I would also emphasise that *post*-modern cultures and global markets are not even uniformly accented let alone hegemonic. So my principal point in this paper is that no national culture can usefully be understood as dominated by another and hence not as 'Americanised.' Whatever 'America' means to a Pacific, post-colonial nation like Australia, even the paragon of modernity is herself caught up in the same global yet decentred and decentring circuits of meaning and identity as the smaller Pacific country. So from the 'down under' perspective, culturally at least, 'America' means less and less than it used to.

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[13] Ibid., 35.