

Rooting for Goliath: Implications of Corporatism for Would-Be Independent Australian filmmakers

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Abstract

Ideas and concepts from the writings of Edward Said and John Ralston Saul are applied to better understand the functioning of some of the institutions of the Australian film and television industry.

Keywords: corporatism, worldliness, functionalism, exile, reality TV, documentary, quietism.

Introduction

This paper is a personal appraisal of certain aspects of the Australian film and television industry. In it I attempt to apply some of the ideas of two writers whose names are not usually linked to film, television or media criticism. Edward Said is best known for *Orientalism*. Other than the abiding focus on formerly colonised people's struggles for justice and recognition, I am here more interested in concepts and methodologies he employed in other texts, particularly in *Reflections On Exile and Other Essays*.¹

Said's "exile" is much more than a political or physical condition. For the writer, artist or critic, exile means a distancing from both the colonised and the coloniser because "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's home".² Good scholarship or critical analysis should exhibit "worldliness", a knowing and brave attitude toward exploring the world we live in, the highest function of the critic being to "speak the truth to power".³ Said's worldliness is perhaps more easily understood, *inter alia*, in his criticism of the western academy. Deconstruction, for instance, is, or has become, *nonworldly* because of its elitist jargon and its deliberate detachment from current or historical events. It has become a stagnant critical orthodoxy that, in effect, capitulates to the existing power structures that it purports to critique.⁴



Edward Said

While covering largely different territory, John Ralston Saul shares Said's trope of outsiderhood or otherness. I don't know if they ever met but both were known to quote the same line from Socrates: "the unexamined life is not worth living". Saul shuns the "dictatorship of reason" that he sees as dominating the academy. In *The Unconscious Civilisation*⁵ and later in *On Equilibrium*,⁶ he advocates disloyalty and dissent as essential elements of citizen empowerment in the face of a dominant ideology of corporatism.



John Ralston Saul

I believe there are strong constructs within the writings of Saul and Said that promote a worldly understanding of Australia's film and television industry. I attempt to use and elaborate upon some of their fundamental ideas in what follows.

Two other elements make up the mix of this approach. First, functionalism. I use this term in its American emanation which dominated the study of sociology and anthropology in the 1950s, 60s and beyond, where "function is understood to refer to the vital or organic processes considered in the respects in which they contribute to the maintenance of the organism".⁷ I argue below that the organic metaphor of society remains a potent and conservative institutional force in the Australian industry.

Finally, a letter. John Hughes is an independent Australian documentary maker who wrote an open letter to Jane Roscoe.⁸ Roscoe was then a senior executive at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School and a media commentator. This is an essay, a polemic, in which the writer questions why we see what we see on public television and why public broadcasters appear to ape their commercial corporate cousins. It is one of the few "speaking the truth to power" texts to emerge from the independent sector in Australia.

Australian Film Industry Texts

The Australian film and television industries are in crisis. I read about it in the weekly media coverage in *The Age* and *The Australian*. Almost every week one or other aspect of crisis is covered. Feature films are declining in number and most Australian films of

the last decade have bombed at the box office, locally produced television is not as good as the imports, locally produced drama is a shrinking element within the television industry, the documentaries are few and hardly worth commenting on, advertising dollars are falling, the ABC is tearing itself apart ... yet again. Crisis.

There are more optimistic chroniclers of the industry. Underpinning the work of such writers as Tom O'Regan⁹ and Felicity Collins¹⁰ is, I argue, an assumption of functionalism. While not painting an entirely rosy picture of past eras many critics broadly hold the position that creative Australian film and television practitioners will continue to produce fine works promoted and assisted by the existing and evolving social and economic structures and institutions of the industry.

American sociologists of the 1950s and 60s, led by Talcott Parsons, based macro-theory upon the tenet that society's institutions are inter-dependent and function for the wellbeing of the whole. This is sometimes called the "organic metaphor". Institutions — families, schools, hospitals or television networks — are, ultimately, society's legitimate structures. Individuals contract socially with these institutions. There are winners and losers but, ultimately, the health of the social organism is enhanced. Homeostasis is what society is programmed to work towards. Parsonian functionalism was the dominant force in American social sciences from the 1950s to the 1970s as expounded in the works of Robert Merton among many others¹¹ and later critiqued by sociologists including Alvin Gouldner. Gouldner argued that Parsons works amounted to little more than a rationalisation of the status quo and an apologia for corporate capitalism "Parsons' shortcoming, therefore, was not that he failed to engage problems of contemporary relevance but that he continued to view them from the standpoint of an American optimism. Because he saw them from this optimistic standpoint, he one-sidedly emphasised the adaptability of the status quo, considering the ways in which it was open to change rather than the manner in which its own characteristics were inducing disorder and resisting adaptation to it".¹²

In this paper I argue, after Gouldner, that old-fashioned, teleological functionalism remains a hidden text in much that has been written, said and done about the institutions, practices and products of Australia's film industry. Critics of the industry are, I argue, likewise influenced by a covert set of assumptions. George Miller writes that "political correctness is killing our film industry". Of Australian films: "Sometimes they are boring, sometimes they are depressing and too often they are both boring and depressing. Sometimes they are funny but that's usually unintentional".¹³ Grahame Morris writes that "our cosseted film industry tells a sad Australian story".¹⁴ Such criticism often extols the virtues of free trade with the US and promotes the elimination, down-sizing or privatisation of public institutions such as the state film agencies, the Australian Film Commission or the ABC.

Underpinning this commentary is a commitment to market force economics. John Ralston Saul comments: "our civilisation (is) locked in the grip of an ideology — corporatism. An ideology that denies and undermines the legitimacy of the individual as a citizen in a

democracy. The particular imbalance of this ideology leads to a worship of self-interest and a denial of the public good”.¹⁵

The ideology of corporatism mirrors that of early functionalism. Where one sanctifies the institutions of society the other worships the free market.

To understand how the Australian film and television industry works and fails, functions and dysfunctions, it is necessary to move beyond these fundamentalisms that underpin the writings of many supporters, apologists, critics and denigrators of the industry itself or of its various elements.

Personal Contexts

All the films I have written, directed and/or produced deal with questions of identity: national, social, cultural, Aboriginal; identity as “Other”; identity through community; identity through reconciliation; identity as history. And all these considerations within the context of the Australian nation. I’m not sure what has motivated this focus although I offer a few suggestions, below. However, I am certain that the critical perspectives offered in my works are an important component of a greater body of nationally significant works produced by Australian independent filmmakers.



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Paradoxical (dic: contradictory, ambiguous, obscure, ironic). Edward Said never tired of making the point that human identity is paradoxical. His writings suggest to me contexts to my own works: “No culture on earth is made up of homogeneous natives; ... no culture exists in isolation ... as one’s own culture is studied (one) must also look at other cultures, other traditions, other national communities. ... Intellectual discourse must (not) worship at the altar of national identity and thereby denigrate or diminish other cultures”.¹⁶ Identity is a process and a battle, not a given, particularly if one is in exile or if one’s historically patterned affiliations are negatively stigmatised by policy or prejudice.



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“Right or wrong, my country”. I heard this phrase often when I visited my birthplace in the mid-west of the United States near the end of the Vietnam war. Political leaders have always foisted simplistic mantras, such as this, upon citizens. Corporatism, the dominant ideology of our time, churns out asinine texts deifying the Market God and demanding conformity to His neo-conservative commandments. Whistleblower Dominic Hogan suggested to his boss at the Australian Wheat Board that the company appeared to be paying bribes to Iraq. Hogan’s concerns were “dismissed immediately ... Had he taken the matter further he’d have been lucky to last another week ... Such is corporate culture”.¹⁷ Indeed, such it is. We are surrounded by corporate men and women: CEOs in mufti masquerading as presidents, prime ministers, public servants, even as public broadcasters.

It was not always so. Australia Day was a non-event when I was a kid, no fireworks, no police warnings, no more binge drinking than was the case on any other holiday. A few politicians may have made speeches but most Australians ignored the occasion. Australia Day, 2006 and I take my aging mother to a crowded picnic spot on the Swan River, Perth. Every second person seems to be brandishing — or wearing — the Australian flag, made in China. Who *are* these people, my troubled mother asks. A very good question. A question that is asked in the texts of all the films I have made and a question that, I argue, is no longer considered to be a serious one within the proliferating establishment of gatekeepers of Australia’s television industry and, to a lesser but growing extent, its film industry, as well.

I was eight years old when my family came to Australia. A few weeks later in a school playground I faced a dozen frenzied boys shouting, “Yank, Yank, septic tank”, jostling me and spitting in my face. I was frightened and humiliated. My American accent expired overnight. This was my second remembered experience of racism. The first was a year earlier, in another schoolyard, where I spent a recess defending Mike Hubbard from a bombardment of snowballs. Mike was my best friend. He was the only black kid in my class. Black? “Negro” was the identifying noun back then.

Selling social documentary stories to television has always been a difficult assignment for independent Australian filmmakers. John Hughes writes that, unlike Canada, the Netherlands or (even) England, there is no assumption in the broader Australian culture that documentary filmmakers have any value in contributing ideas about the place and its people.¹⁸ Nonetheless I survived the period from 1988 to 2000 with many documentary and drama credits, usually as writer/producer/director, or co-director, that screened on ABC or SBS. They won prizes, were heralded as “nationally significant”, screened overseas and found their way into schools and universities.



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This century has been a drought for me as it has been for many of my colleagues. Public broadcasters and Film Australia are no longer interested in the stories we wish to tell. This article suggests reasons why this might be and offers a big picture analysis of important aspects of the culture of public broadcasting and other film industry institutions in this country.



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Aspects of Crisis in the Australian Industry: Documentary Production

Functionalism invites a conservative interpretation of social institutions. Because they are there (therefore) they have a function. The existence and creation of institutions under the rule of law promotes the good functioning of the social organism. The values, norms and institutions that regulate the relationship between husband and wife, employer and employee, teacher and student, filmmaker and film bureaucracy are, ultimately, rational.

Another viewpoint questions the functionality of the ABC's current decision-makers. "Arts criticism and genuine locally produced documentaries, rather than contrived fly-on-wall 'reality' shows funded by external agencies, no longer appear on the ABC television schedule ... The ABC is suffering from a severe disorder. Its once active engagement with the arts, writing and cultural communities is being eroded to the point of mutual contempt and ridicule".¹⁹

In *Letter to Jane* (2003) independent documentary filmmaker John Hughes explores the despondency of Australian documentary practitioners in the present century describing them (us) as "out-workers for the television industry". Hughes' open letter is a response to a paper by Jane Roscoe delivered to the Australian Independent Documentary Conference that year.

Although conditions of program-making have always been difficult, especially in the independent sector, now there is "a kind of pincer action ... squeezing (traditional documentary) into a corner from which it may well not emerge in a recognisable form".²⁰ The sector is in a state of emergency: "Markets for documentary, here and overseas, seem to be moving in favour of popular factual forms and franchised formats".

In Australia documentary is looked upon as a sort of high art, a highbrow form. Hughes argues that this is not the case: documentary has always been part of popular culture. Part of *that* tradition of social documentary is "tired earnestness" ("boring" or "niche market" in television's ratings world) but numerous Australian documentaries have parted from traditional formats and crossed or mixed genres of story-telling. And rated. Most of the programmes I have made fit this description.

Hughes describes the dismissive top-down attitudes encountered when submitting well-researched and often high public interest stories whose telling is arguably of national significance. There is no doubt that many of these programmes would have been commissioned ten or fifteen years ago. Now, unless strong reality TV elements are present within a documentary submission, it is likely to be received (by SBS or ABC) with rejection.²¹ Hughes depicts this marginalisation of Australian independents as bordering on stigmatisation. Saul contextualises this depiction: corporate managers dismiss art as somehow not real, "the assumption being that reality is a tough, down-to-earth business that demands structure, method and management. In this view civilisation is a process and 'art' is a marginal after-dinner diversion for the middle classes when they come home from managing reality".²²

Hughes traces the history of this predicament through the 1970s to the present day. The ideology of neo-liberalism and the influence of globalisation “caught the imagination of a generation of Australian social engineers” by the early 1980s and is manifested in constant reviews and evaluations, reports, restructurings and re-organisations of the administrations of *all* our cultural institutions. For two decades we have witnessed an ongoing series of “regime change”, new brooms and new redundancies “delivering economically rationalised administrative apparatus across the board”.

A major factor in the marginalisation of documentary is a fixation with television ratings. Hughes argues that ratings are far too crude an instrument to evaluate the social impact of documentary. He explores how ratings-driven thinking has had colossal impact on public broadcasters and other public institutions such as the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC) and suggests that the (often hidden) pursuit of ratings has profoundly distorted the shape of the documentary sector’s output. “There is a kind of cognitive dissonance in play when institutions financed explicitly to meet nationally endorsed public functions find themselves pathetically aping the functionality, objectives and methodologies of the dominant commercial media they have been established precisely to compliment”.²³

“Today, most media owners and their shareholders regard their business as no different to any other one.”²⁴ Robert McNamara expressed this defining mantra of corporatism most starkly forty five years ago when President Kennedy persuaded him to move from the Ford corporation to be his Secretary of Defence: “Running the Department of Defence is not different from running the Ford Motor Company or the Catholic Church, for that matter”, responded young Robert.²⁵

Saul writes of the impact on the public sector of the corporate model such as schools and hospitals being run by technocrats as if they were businesses. One can imagine most of the executives and managers of the ABC, SBS, Film Australia and the FFC sharing, or secretly sharing these McNamara-esque sentiments or, perhaps, being unaware that their institutional behaviour precisely mirrors McNamara’s “mouthpiece of corporatism” statement. Unawareness may well be the operative word, underpinned by the all-pervasive ideology of corporatism together with the assumption of functionalism: the institutions are there because they’re there because they’re there ... etc, and when dysfunction occurs (eg a ratings failure) we, as managers, exercise our power to reorganise and streamline and rationalise their structures and achieve hunky dory functionality.

“When the structural balance allows the weight of the broadcaster to overwhelm the independence of the free-lance producers, the system begins to look much more like the kind of machine that manufactured consent with the ABC during the 1960s and again in the 1980s”.²⁶ Hughes is writing of periods of extreme institutional conformism arising out of corporate hegemony and political interference. Saul comments on the currency of Mussolini’s version of corporate modernity: “liberty was alright for cavemen but civilisation means a progressive diminution in personal freedoms”.²⁷ Saul describes an essential element of corporatism, whether neo-conservatism or old-fashioned fascism, as

the assumption that legitimacy lies with the group, not the individual. Saul writes: “treating the excluded as excluded fits naturally into corporatist societies which do not believe in inclusion or in citizenship as the basis of society’s legitimacy”.²⁸

Neo-conservatives have been highly successful in demonising the public sector and have turned much of the citizenry against their own mechanism (government) and its institutions. Kicking governments for perceived inefficiencies (for *not* behaving like corporations) is not only a national but an international obsession. It is daily bread to media corporations such as Murdoch’s News Corporation.



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Crises in public institutions such as public health and public education are mirrored by the emergency Hughes describes in public broadcasting. Makers of serious social documentary are among the excluded, the non-citizens, the losers. We are not part of the modern corporate team. We are like teachers who refuse to adopt the latest assessment regime (because it prevents them from teaching) or nurses naive enough to pledge loyalty to their patients rather than to the constantly expanding rule-books written by the managerial apparatchiks of our millionaire health CEOs.

Australian documentary makers are exiles in their own country.

To make (or attempt to make) social documentaries, stories about aspects of one’s country, whether its joys or sadnesses, its successes or failures, is necessarily to be a critic. We are drawn to stories that we believe to be currently or eternally significant and these are often stories that question national orthodoxies and expose “the Other” in unorthodox or even heretical ways. Chroniclers working in other technologies faced similar social positioning in the past: the painter Sydney Nolan, writers such as Patterson and Lawson and Patrick White, to name a few. All national heroes now, each was pilloried at times during a creative life for being storyteller and artist and, thereby, critic.

For Edward Said, the condition of exile is portrayed as an almost necessary condition of critical worldliness. The canon of western criticism is largely the work of exiles.²⁹ Exiles experience duality. Identity is paradoxical, difficult and painful.

Makers of social documentary struggle with these issues and accept that this is part of the turf: Where do we come from? What do we value in our world or town or suburb? Who are we? What are the significant issues of our identity? There has never been a truly halcyon period for Australian independents. That's fine. However, to be marginalised to the point of irrelevance or extinction by our national public institutions, which Hughes paints as the current reality is, indeed, a situation of emergency.

Quietism is the primary and archetypal response to an overwhelming and ideologically virile oppression. In the present period, that oppression is Corporatism. Don't march in the street, don't whistle-blow, don't rock the boat. Not now: now is untimely. Now is not a time to protest, it's a time to renovate your house. John Ralston Saul, like Edward Said, describes the basis of the fear that underpins the contemporary vacuum of individual or organised dissent in the West: "Serious, important decisions are not made through democratic discussion or participation but through negotiation between relevant groups based on expertise, interest and the ability to exercise power ... we know that real expressions of individualism are not only discouraged but punished. The active, outspoken citizen is unlikely to have a successful career".³⁰

Both writers view the genesis of global quietism and conformism as a quasi-religious phenomenon. Said wrote of the "priestly class of acolytes", the enforcers of quietism.³¹ Saul locates religious texts in the writings of the advocates of globalisation who constantly invoke the concept of inevitability. "Inevitability" has the same force as "predestination" in early texts of the Reformation. It is a major component of the discourse and disempowers (quietens) those whom it disenfranchises, colonises and oppresses.

What are the implications of the above for the Australian film industry with regard to documentary and the commissioning of factual stories in Australia as well as to independent drama? To answer this question it is first necessary to consider the phenomenon of reality TV which colours much of the canvas of present and future television praxis. By critically analysing what I regard as important aspects of the worldliness of reality TV and its practitioners I will reconnect with the themes presented at the beginning of this paper and introduce Goliath.

The Pervasive Influence of Reality TV

The influence of reality TV upon Australian public broadcasters is undoubtedly massive. Most executives at ABC and SBS openly embrace the expansion of its programming as a way, if not *the* way, of the future. Others are tight-lipped about their attitudes. However, any analysis of the actual programmes that are being locally commissioned or purchased (mainly from Britain) indicates that reality TV *utterly dominates* the headspace of these particular aspirational media bureaucrats. Their enthusiasm pertains not only to "factual" programming but to drama, too.

Gamedocs, makeover programmes, talent contests, docusoaps, dating shows, court programmes and reality-based sitcoms are subsumed in the genre whose overarching characteristic is its claim to be real: the audience is witnessing real human behaviour which may be interaction between host and contestant, question and answer, males and females, females and females, males and males, as it happens, as it goes down. This is achieved through aesthetic strategies such as the use of cinema verité techniques, surveillance video, low-end production values, or "natural settings", a relentless obsession with the intimate, a focus on ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances and a particular fascination with the values of winning or losing.

Robert Thompson states that reality TV in the twenty-first century represents “a new way of telling a story which [is] half fiction — the producers and creators set up a universe, they give it rules, they make a setting, they cast it according to specific guidelines as to who they think are going to provide good pyrotechnics. But then they bring in non-actors with no scripts and allow this kind of improvisation like a jazz piece to occur”.³²

Reality TV is a global phenomenon. Non-US companies are the originators of many of the formats that have become the most watched in the USA, Australia and other territories. Endemol (the Netherlands) is one of the most successful producers of such formats (*Big Brother* and *Fear Factor*). BBC and Channel Four have also prospered as exporters.

Selling formats instead of providing already produced programmes for international distribution is a relatively new industrial practice. Believing that a programme can be evacuated of its cultural particulars and then refilled with new ones once it arrives in another country, production companies assume that the basics of reality programming maintain a universal, global appeal.

Writers trace the history of reality television from *An American Family* (1973) and in Australia from *Sylvania Waters* (1992). *Candid Camera* is also cited and this dates from 1948. This long-lasting series promoted itself as “catching people in the act of being themselves”.³³ The year 2000 is often considered the starting point of the (current) reality television phenomenon in the US because it marked the initial appearance and unexpected popularity of *Survivor* and *Big Brother*.³⁴

Continuity or Change in Television Programming

There is huge hype surrounding the ratings successes and proliferation of reality programmes. “The world as we knew it is over”, proclaimed the President of CBS Television in a 2003 front-page story in the *New York Times*.³⁵ Many commentators and program makers emphasise the newness of the phenomenon and of each “new” format as it is copyrighted. Yet others see continuity: television goes through phases and, after all, reality TV has been with us from the early days.

What is clear is that reality TV has *evolved*. American television drama has become more violent and sexually explicit; likewise, the more recent sitcoms have been constructed

around far more aggressive and aggressively self-interested characters than was the standard in the 1960s, 70s or 80s. Reality TV has also evolved into a genre that has presented meaner, more competitive, and sometimes more hurtful versions of “reality”. It is as if the producers of these programmes have taken the David and Goliath story and given it a new ending. Goliath wins. Goliath is the hero and role-model.



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However, to conceive reality TV as “a *new* way of telling a story which [is] half fiction” [my italics]³⁶ does not sustain analysis. No single programme contains all the elements of the genre. One program stars celebrities, another stars slob; ruthless competition is scripted into one format and doesn’t exist in another, and so on. But *all* the elements of the genre are relatively old. They’ve all been done before. The aspects that have been arched up include sex and violence, angst and swearing. The depiction of semi-naked young people occupying a house and ruthlessly competing with one another may shock but, other than language and costume, there is nothing essentially *new* about it. Likewise, the commercial attraction of reality TV, the quest for “boffo” ratings and low production costs, is as *un-new* as television itself.

There is a great muddying about what is new and what isn’t in TV-land. I argue that this soft focus serves the interests a corporatist ideology and, particularly, those interests as they now manifest in the public institutions of the film and television industries in Australia, Britain and elsewhere.

What has changed in television? Technology has changed; network ownership has changed and been concentrated; and the *mix* in programming has changed. Despairing critics call for “a return to highly innovative, hard-hitting documentaries and news programmes (that) were once the hallmark of network TV and have been nearly abandoned”.³⁷ Now around 25% of programming on American networks ABC and CBS is reality-based and it is a similar story in Australia.

What has not changed? The bigger picture of commercial television broadcasting is one of remarkable continuity over fifty years. Comparing programmes screened in the

1950s/80s with today strongly suggests that there are no *new* ways of telling a television story. The “world as we knew it” in earlier days of commercial television is, substantially, the television world of today.

The Worldliness of Reality TV: Rooting for Goliath

A dumbed-down television genre rates and the networks churn it out. Audiences get hooked on voyeurism. Simple. What else is there to ponder? There is a danger here to trivialise or take a simplistic functionalist view of the reality TV phenomenon (or even, for that matter, to view it as a stand-alone “phenomenon”). Texts are constructed out of many discourses, they are “enmeshed in time, society, circumstance”.³⁸ They are also matters of authority, ownership and power. How are the texts of reality TV to be read? What is their worldliness?

“These shows still look glossy and new, but there is something distinctly old-fashioned about them” comments Jane Roscoe. “What connects the good, the bad and the ugly of reality programming is the re-emergence of a particular set of moral and ethical discourses. These programmes fetishise the mundane and banal aspects of everyday life, and in doing so have created a space in which emotions, interpersonal relations and sexuality are to be scrutinised and examined”.³⁹

Roscoe argues that after an initial period which generated “transformative” public debates questioning traditional norms and values in areas such as (presumably) family, gender and sexuality, we now have reality programs that “are all structured around conservative moral agendas seeking to provide life lessons on how to live ethically. It is a particular configuration of ethics and morality, one based on personal experience and expressed through confessional modes ... (wherein) the camera watches and records 24/7 in a bid to capture the moment of self-realisation, of self-actualisation”.⁴⁰

What is often perceived as new, shocking, anarchic or radical about reality TV is, according to this analysis, essentially a conservative (I would argue, *neo-conservative*) opus whose direct antecedents are American sitcoms of the 1950s. This is not a time for radical thinking, argues Roscoe, but a time to conform to group norms. “Ideologically this is a return to the closed world where morality and ethics seek to preserve the status quo rather than challenge it”.⁴¹

Roscoe’s analysis is at odds with most commentaries. After the initial spectacular ratings success of *Survivor*, Robert Thompson warned, “Those people who don't like this trend had better fasten their seat belts. We're going to see a lot more bizarre stuff. We'll look back a year from now and see *Survivor* and *Big Brother* as the classy and tame early period”.⁴²

Although there have been “bizarre” incarnations of the genre most of these have been short-lived or failed outright in the ratings. The common view expressed by Thompson that the “envelope” is constantly being pushed by reality TV producers is not sustained. It is an entirely *superficial* view — and one that those producers would be pleased to see being disseminated. What Roscoe found by looking *beneath* the marketing and PR hype

is “*conservative* moral agendas” and a common and peculiar religiosity, what I would describe as a quasi- or pseudo-religiosity, expressed in “*confessional* modes”. This analysis allows us to view *Big Brother* and the like in a different light, essentially as expressions of conformism, rather than lewd and promiscuous house parties.



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In George Orwell’s *1984*, the original Big Brother brainwashes the masses with propaganda in the form of ever-repeated slogans such as “ignorance is strength” and “freedom is slavery”. Perhaps this old text provides more insight into what sells on television than the writings of enthusiastic producers and academics.

Guy Rundle traces “the triumph of the Right” to Reagan-Thatcherism which he conceives as “a *faith* in anti-Keynsian market-oriented economics ... (together) with a *belief* in ‘born again’ fundamentalism and the return of ‘traditional values’” [my italics].⁴³ The irony within this definition is the nouns: faith and belief. The most *rational* civilisation of all time rests on blind and simple faith? How can this be? Ralston Saul similarly writes of a resurgence of early nineteenth-century *moralism*. Saul views moralism as a sort of homage to classism, a retreat into a (mythical) rosy time when there were rulers and ruled, haves and have-nots and the have-nots either accepted their place as the “deserving poor” or were locked away because they were delinquents, outcasts, heretics — or what Edward Said would call “Other”. For Saul, moralism is a fundamental *operandus* of corporatism. Within Said’s epistemology it would qualify as a discourse, a system of statements within which and by which the world can be known.

Saul insists that the “marginalisation of ethics” is fundamental to the efficacy of moralism. “Ethics (are) denied in favour of moralism, citizens’ rights converted into clientism”.⁴⁴ Saul’s linking of moralism to the *repudiation* of ethics conflicts with Roscoe’s positioning of reality TV’s main text as “a particular (conservative) configuration of ethics and morality”. Roscoe’s analysis, while enlightening, is shallow at this point. She ascribes a dumbing-down of reality TV and its de-radicalisation to the terrorist attacks on the US in September 2001. This does not ring true as cause and effect. A deeper reading would reveal that the texts of reality TV have never been radical. They have always been conservative and corporatist.

I suggest that the morality Roscoe encounters in reality TV is not morality, but *moralism*. Moralism's invocations — its enunciated system of statements — *work*. Likewise the ethics that she sees in play are not *real* ethics. They are the *virtual* ethics that Peter Weir explored in *The Truman Show*, the *pseudo* ethics of Australia's current Prime Minister when he invokes mateship as a national value — mateshipism is what he means — and the *totalitarian* "ethics" of Orwell's *1984*. The "conversions" that mass reality TV audiences await with baited breath — what Roscoe describes as "self-actualisations" — are quasi-religious rather than religious. They are melodrama rather than drama. Their template is not Moses "seeing the light", but Winston Smith "learning to love Big Brother". These are corporatist revelations whose hidden mantras include "big is beautiful", "might is right", "greed is good" ... and "Goliath beats David every time".

In Edward Said's terms, all of the above would constitute aspects of the "enmeshment" of reality TV. I argue that the reality of reality TV begins and ends in corpus corporatism. It is not fundamentally "a space in which emotions, interpersonal relations and sexuality are to be scrutinised and examined."⁴⁵ It is not a stage upon which social and sexual experimentation is unleashed. It is not a radical exercise in freedom of speech, free and open self-expression — or plain sexual titillation, for that matter. When told that the masses had no bread, Marie Antoinette famously instructed, "feed them cake instead." The ideology of corporatism, as previously discussed, is fundamentally and essentially anti-dissent. It demands passivity, a quietened citizenry. Quietism is the core worldliness of reality TV.

There is no conspiracy evoked here, no demonisation. We should seek to understand the worldliness of reality TV not in any literal reading of the writings and speeches of its producers, purveyors, populists — or its critics — but in what Said described as their particular "affiliations", their unwarenesses, their spectacular unconsciousness.

The Case of Local (Reality TV) Drama

Consider the case of Australian-made drama. In 2005 the ABC screened under 15 hours of locally produced adult drama. This is an all-time low and compares with around 100 hours five years ago. ABC's then director of television Sandra Levy described this as "very painful." ABC former broadcaster Martin Harrison calls it "calamitous ... another indicator of ABC's failure to live up to its charter" and independent producer Errol Sullivan comments: "(Making drama) is what you demand of a national broadcaster, otherwise why have one?"⁴⁶ *Brides of Christ* (1991), *Blue Murder* (2002) and *SeaChange* (2000) are now no more than fading memories. How did this situation arise?

The ABC's then managing director Russell Balding blamed budget cuts and lack of federal funding. Clearly the ABC is under-funded and has been for over 20 years. Australia's per capita spending on public broadcasting is about a third of that spent by the UK, Germany or New Zealand.⁴⁷ However, the ABC's funding has been maintained, in real terms, for the past nine years.

There have to be other reasons for the rapid virtual demise of drama on ABC. *Outback House* is probably the main one. Levy consistently refused to say what the budget was for this eight-part series but it boasted a “huge by Australian standards” behind-the-scenes team of 120.⁴⁸ What was *Outback House*?

This series was the latest in a format first produced for Channel Four in 1999 (*1900 House*, *Edwardian House* and others and sold to the USA where it manifested as *Frontier House* and several others before it was bought by ABC in Australia). The format is: place a family and members of its community in a house back in time and place, let them fend for themselves, film them multi-camera and edit each programme so that it looks authentic, verité and “real.” As if it were *beneath* the ABC to produce reality TV, Levy described *Outback House* as “living history” and ridiculed the notion that its commissioning was ratings-driven.⁴⁹ Levy fools no-one with these semantics. *House* is universally accepted as a central member of reality TV genres by audiences and critics alike.



[CLICK HERE TO LAUNCH VIDEO FILE *Outback House* \(mpeg 4 format – size 730 kb\)](#)

Levy was obviously sensitive about the ABC commissioning programs of “good taste”. “*Spicks and Specks* is not a quiz show”, she retorted to journalist’s question, “it’s a celebration of music”.⁵⁰ Levy left the job at the ABC for Channel Nine at the end of 2005. Like Robert McNamara when he left Ford for the Defence Department, she moved from one corporation to another. It should surprise no one if her next job is running a mining company, a brewery or a casino.

One of the often-cited attractions to networks of reality TV is cost. Fees for actors and writers are lowered or eliminated. The *House* (particularly — and very obviously — the *house-in-the-past*) sub-genre of Reality TV is not cheap. It is very expensive. Why would a strapped-for-cash public broadcaster choose to make an expensive foreign-formatted programme when it had brilliant locally conceived Australian-content scripts, created by brilliant local writers, on its table?

Conclusion

There are no simple answers to this question. What I hoped to achieve in this paper was a probing of such questions, invoking the concept of worldliness and other ideas from the writings of Edward Said and JR Saul, and thus provoke debate. The decision by ABC managers to commit a huge chunk of its budget to a program like *Outback House* — and shun, *inter alia*, as has clearly been done, local documentary and drama — would not have been accepted a decade ago. The same applies to decisions consistently made by SBS's managers over the past six or seven years to forgo independent documentary, dealing with serious national issues, in favour of commissioning a string of lightweight personality-based info-tainment series (e.g. *Rockwiz*).

SBS and ABC are public broadcasters that are supposedly required to conduct their businesses in accordance with the legislation under which they were set up. The ABC Charter⁵¹ specifically recognises different roles, responsibilities and clearly perceives different content for the ABC in distinction with, and comparison to, the commercial sector. The SBS Charter⁵² emphasises this institution's central duties and purposes with respect to promoting harmony and understanding in multicultural Australia.

When I first pre-sold a documentary to SBS, part of their contracting was a one-page document called "The SBS Mission". This was a proud statement of the broadcaster's commitment, statutory and chosen, to the promotion of racial and gender equality and inter-cultural respect. Recently I looked for it on SBS's website but it was nowhere to be found. The SBS Mission is not even optional reading for the network's current managers. Quentin Dempster notes that ABC's Corporate Plan for 2004-07 lists as a "strategic priority" the need to increase audiences. The executive are instructed to: "grow audiences through innovative scheduling based on a mix of competitive programming and counter-programming".⁵³ Innovative content is not mentioned. "This is a business plan. It is not a cultural plan or a plan for creative diversity ... It is not a plan which puts the ABC's charter obligations first — to inform, entertain, educate through innovative and distinctive programs".⁵⁴ Dempster calls on the ABC to "reverse its current self-destructive tendency (surely more than a *tendency*) to low-quality populist programming, an approach which is founded on the (false) hope that it will win the broadcaster more money from Canberra".⁵⁵

Were it so simple! In terms of the radical or, should I say, *neo-conservative*, downsizing of local drama and documentary, the "we're under-funded" defence, as previously argued, doesn't stand up. Neither does the "chasing ratings" rationale. *House* was massively promoted (advertised) on ABC before its screening but it rated pretty well ABC-average as did the massively promoted *We Can Be Heroes*, the other Reality TV-based drama series commissioned by ABC in 2005. The Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance comments, as follows, on the ABC's submission to the Federal Government for triennial funding in 2006-2009: "The submission says the ABC will fund ... an extra 57 hours of additional production, split between drama, arts and documentary production. That is not nearly enough to reverse what is already an appalling downturn in the production of television drama in Australia. The ABC's submission is a national shame

... measly in comparison (to what Nine and Seven produce in local drama) and this submission does not respond to the crisis in Australian production".⁵⁶

The virtual abandonment and flouting of their Charters by SBS and ABC managements only makes sense if we consider it in the context of the worldliness of corporatism. All the public institutions of the Australian film and television industry are highly influenced by and, in some instances, utterly dominated by this powerful ideology. Consciousness is another matter. In *The Unconscious Civilisation*, John Saul argued that corporatism is like a drug that blinds us to the increasing inhumanity of our lives, causes us to deny and undermine the legitimacy of the individual citizen leading to the adoration of self-interest and the denial of the public good. Conformity and passivity are the overall effects on the individual.

I still believe that David was a hero and that we need to stand up to those leaders of our unconscious civilisation who are so busily rooting for Goliath and would have us do the same.

Table 1

The ABC Charter includes these provisions:

(1) Functions of the ABC:

(a) to provide within Australia innovative and comprehensive broadcasting services of a high standard as part of the Australian broadcasting system consisting of national, commercial and public sectors and, without limiting the generality of the foregoing, to provide:

- (i) broadcasting programmes that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community; and
- (ii) broadcasting programmes of an educational nature;

(c) to encourage and promote the musical, dramatic and other performing arts in Australia.

2(a) the Corporation shall take account of:

- (i) the broadcasting services provided by the commercial and public sectors of the Australian broadcasting system;
- (ii) the standards from time to time determined by the Australian Broadcasting Authority in respect of broadcasting services;
- (iii) the responsibility of the Corporation as the provider of an independent national broadcasting service to provide a balance between broadcasting programs of wide appeal and specialised broadcasting programs;
- (iv) the multicultural character of the Australian community;

Table 2

The SBS Charter states, in part:

(1) The principal function of SBS is to provide multilingual and multicultural radio and television services that inform, educate and entertain all Australians and, in doing so, reflect Australia's multicultural society.

(2) SBS, in performing its principal function, must:

(a) contribute to meeting the communications needs of Australia's multicultural society, including ethnic, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities; and

(b) increase awareness of the contribution of a diversity of cultures to the continuing development of Australian society; and

(c) promote understanding and acceptance of the cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of the Australian people; and

(d) contribute to the retention and continuing development of language and other cultural skills; and

(e) as far as practicable, inform, educate and entertain Australians in their preferred languages; and

(f) make use of Australia's diverse creative resources; and

(g) contribute to the overall diversity of Australian television and radio services, particularly taking into account the contribution of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and the community broadcasting sector; and

(h) contribute to extending the range of Australian television and radio services, and reflect the changing nature of Australian society, by presenting many points of view and using innovative forms of expression.

Notes

¹ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 2002.

² Said *Reflections*, p. 13.

³ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, London: Vintage, p. 102.

⁴ Edward Said, "On Defiance and Taking Positions" in *Reflections on Exile*.

⁵ John Ralston Saul, *The Unconscious Civilisation*, New York: Free Press, 1997.

⁶ John Ralston Saul, *On Equilibrium*, London: Penguin Books, 2002.

⁷ R.K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, New York: Free Press, 1968, p. 75.

⁸ Letter to Jane, 2003.

⁹ Tom O'Regan, *Australian National Cinema*, New York: Routledge, 1996.

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- ¹⁰ Felicity Collins in F. Collins and T. Davis, *Australian Cinema After Mabo*, Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2004.
- ¹¹ See R.K. Merton, *Social Theory*, pp. 100-101, pp. 136-137, pp. 348-349.
- ¹² Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, New York: Basic Books, 1970, p. 147.
- ¹³ *Financial Review*, 31 January, 2005.
- ¹⁴ *The Australian*, 16 June, 2005.
- ¹⁵ Saul, *The Unconscious Civilisation*, p. 186.
- ¹⁶ Said, "Identity, Authority and Freedom", in *Reflections*, p. 396.
- ¹⁷ *The Australian*, 7 February, 2006.
- ¹⁸ Letter to Jane, 2003.
- ¹⁹ Quentin Dempster, "The Slow Destruction of the ABC", in Robert Manne (ed), *Do Not Disturb: is the Media Failing Australia?* Melbourne: Black Ink, 2005, p.105 and p.107.
- ²⁰ Letter to Jane, 2003, p. 2.
- ²¹ The influence of reality TV is discussed in the following section of this paper.
- ²² Saul, *On Equilibrium*, p. 41.
- ²³ Letter to Jane, p. 10.
- ²⁴ Eric Beecher, "The Decline of the Quality Press", in *Do Not Disturb*, Manne, p. 9.
- ²⁵ Deborah Shapely, *Promise and Power: The Life and Times of Robert McNamara*, Little, Brown, p. 519.
- ²⁶ Letter to Jane, p. 15.
- ²⁷ Saul, *On Equilibrium*, p. 91.
- ²⁸ Saul, *On Equilibrium*, p. 60.
- ²⁹ Bill Ashcroft & Pal Ahluwali, *Edward Said*, New York: Routledge, 2001, p. 41.
- ³⁰ Saul, *The Unconscious Civilisation*, p. 33.
- ³¹ Said, cited in *Edward Said*, p. 33.
- ³² R. Thompson, Director of the Centre for the Study of Popular Television, Syracuse University. Online: <http://www.enotes.com/reality-tv-article/>
- ³³ Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "Reality Television", internet; "History of Reality TV", http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reality_Television.
- ³⁴ Discussed by Susan Murray in Murray, Susan and Laurie, Ouellette, *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*, New York: New York Univ. Press, 2004.

³⁵ Cited in Murray, *Reality Television*.

³⁶ Thompson.

³⁷ John Rash, director of broadcast negotiations at Campbell Mithun advertising agency. Online. <http://www.enotes.com/reality-tv-article/>.

³⁸ Cited in *Edward Said*, p. 20.

³⁹ Transcript, Dr Jane Roscoe, Head of the Centre for Screen Studies and Research , Australian Film, Television and Radio School, *Australia Talks Back*, ABC Radio National, 6 June, 2003.

⁴⁰ Roscoe, *Australia*.

⁴¹ Roscoe, *Australia*.

⁴² R. Thompson, Director, Centre for the Study of Popular Television, Syracuse University, quoted by John W. Kennedy, *Christianity Today*, September 4, 2000, internet.

⁴³ R. Manne (ed.) “The Rise of the Right” in *Do Not Disturb – Is the Media failing Australia?*, Melbourne: Black Ink, 2005, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Saul, *On Equilibrium*, p. 60.

⁴⁵ Roscoe, *Australia*.

⁴⁶ Rosemary Neill, “Troubles with our Aunt”, *The Australian*, July 9, 2005, p 6.

⁴⁷ Neill, p. 6.

⁴⁸ Neill, p. 6.

⁴⁹ Neill, p. 6.

⁵⁰ Margaret Simons, “Inside the ABC”, in Manne *Do Not*, p. 141.

⁵¹ *Section 6 of the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act*, 1983.

⁵² ** Section 6 of the *Special Broadcasting Services Act*, 1991.

⁵³ Dempster, “The Slow Destruction of the ABC, p. 101.

⁵⁴ Dempster, p. 102.

⁵⁵ Dempster, p. 120.

⁵⁶ Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, press release, 3 February, 2006.