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table of contents

Editorial		1
Feature Articles		
David Elkins	Canada in the 21st Century	3
Gaile McGregor	Imitation and Resistance: The Differential Assimilation of American Popular Culture	17
Christine Prentice	Storytelling in Alice Munro's <i>Lives of Girls and Women</i> and Patricia Grace's <i>Potiki</i>	27
Jennifer Strauss	Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman: Cultural Contexts and the Quest for Identity in Alice Munro's <i>Lives of Girls and Women</i> and in Miles Franklin's <i>My Brilliant Career</i> and <i>My Career Goes Bung</i>	41
C. Michael Hall and John Shultis	Railways, Tourism and Worthless Lands: The Establishment of National Parks in Australia, New Zealand and the United States	57
Elsbeth Young	Marginal Lands and Marginalised People: The Potential Development Contribution of Indigenous People in Remote Australia and Canada	75
Review Essays		
John Atchison	The Murky Matter of Immigration	99
Brian Edwards	The Odd Sanity of Stones	105
	The Eloquence of Silence	109
Taking Issue		
Russell McDougall	Canadian Literature: 'Not For Sale!'	115
In Review		121
Notes on Contributors		131

Imitation and Resistance: The Differential Assimilation of American Popular Culture¹

gaile mcgregor

Canadian nationalists have been complaining for years about the extent to which our television programming is permeated by American imports and American values. Despite the geographical distance, the same complaint dominates commentary - and with the same obvious grounds - in Australia. Notwithstanding, when I visited that country a few years ago I was less struck by the number than by the *kind* of imports found on television. Even a cursory survey soon revealed that during the mid-eighties at least the Australians were making very few action/drama series, and virtually no comedy. For the former they typically went to North America; for the latter to Britain. I attributed this to the fact that both of these genres are highly structured and formulaic. Insofar as Australian novelists have historically evinced a preference for the loosely knit, naturalistic, monolinear narrative (see McGregor, 1989; on the 'aesthetic' implications of this bias, see also McDougall, 1988), it did not surprise me that the two categories of programmes the country was producing for itself should be the mini-series and what is locally known as the 'soapie'. A little more surprising, on the other hand, were the preferences implied by choices *among* available imports, particularly in the former category.

Of particular note was the fact that the focal protagonists of approximately half the dozen-plus American action/adventure shows scheduled for prime time viewing in the winter of 1986 were neither loners nor rebels - as one would expect, given the great Australian myth of national anti-authoritarianism - but the duly accredited personnel of law enforcement or state security or intelligence agencies. Of the three British entries, similarly, two were police shows. I have demonstrated elsewhere (forthcoming) the ambivalence that undercolours the purportedly uncompromising Australian attitude toward authority figures. The combination of cop-dominated imports with a total absence of homegrown action drama struck me, however, as peculiar enough to require some explanation. When I reviewed the history of Australian television production, the picture that emerged seemed at first to muddy the issue even further - it quickly eliminated the thesis that only 'foreign' cops were acceptable, for instance - but when the situation was re-read against the international, and particularly the American context, an interesting pattern began to emerge.

The first Australian television programme, aired live in Sydney on 5 November, 1956, was a play, *The Twelve Pound Look*. My sources do not comment on its quality. But good or bad, the fact that it was a dramatic production is itself enough to set it apart from the bulk of programming that followed. The early years of Australian television were, as indigenous critic Sandra Hall notes, dominated by low-budget, almost militantly amateurish variety-and-chat shows. 'Possibly no country in the world has given so many people the opportunity to sit in front of a television camera and talk about the inconsequential', she says. 'The only qualification has been that they be mildly extrovert [Hall, 1976, p.85]'. How, apart from the obvious financial considerations, does she explain the apparent not merely acceptance of, but preference for, mediocrity? Pretensions being anathema to the national mythos, she says, 'a strain of television... developed in Australia predicated on the assumption that people like to watch other people like themselves'. Hence the almost-institutionalisation of talk shows populated by second-rate 'personalities', talent shows in which amateurs were both exposed and insulted, and quiz shows 'based on the notion that [the viewer] can do just as well as the person [he/she is] watching [Hall, 1976, p. 85]'.

Early imports seemed to express the same preference for delineations of ordinariness. 'The two most popular programmes in Australia during the first two years', says Christopher Day, 'were *I Love Lucy* and the archetypal wholesome family situation comedy-drama *Father Knows Best* [1981, p.40]'. Within two years, however, there were clear signs of the radical split between homegrown and imported programming that I observed on my trip. 'Richard Boone in *Have Gun Will Travel* and Hugh O'Brien as Wyatt Earp were the first to clatter into the Top Ten in 1958' Day notes. 'A year later westerns and crime shows had captured nearly everybody... At one stage there were more than 30 westerns running in prime time TV in the US and Australia saw most of them [Day, 1981, p.140]'. As the years passed, the trend to depending on imports to fill the national appetite for excitement became all the more entrenched. 'The nation stayed indoors on the nights Raymond Burr's monumental *Perry Mason* filled the screen', says Day. And 'in 1962 - just as things were beginning to happen in local production houses - ... a new programme, *Ben Casey*, leapfrogged the established *Bonanza* and *The Untouchables* to take first place in the ratings [Day, 1981, p.141]'.

Apart from a few (largely uninspiring) one-shot historical dramas, the situation remained generally unchanged for almost a decade. After the mid sixties, however, there were increasingly widespread complaints about the endemic Americanisation (see O'Regan, 1986, p.9ff). For the first time, it seemed, there was a will within the community to produce its own heroic fictions. When it did - intriguingly enough - it was the police drama which became the national genre. 'On the night of 20 October 1964', reports Brian Davies,

HSV-7 screened 'The Stunt', the first episode of a new Australian drama series the station was trying out called *Homicide*. The first Anderson rating survey gave

Episode One a rating of thirty-three. McNair estimated a twenty-eight. The next episodes surveyed, Four and Five, were measured at thirty-one and thirty-three respectively [Davies, 1981, p.96]

Early indicators were not misleading. *Homicide* ran for eleven years, for a total of 509 episodes (O'Regan, 1986, p.14). For nine of those years it was placed in the national Top Ten; for five it was number one (Beilby, 1981, p.58ff). Scoring as high as thirty-six in 1965, says Davies, it 'really took off in 1966, hitting ratings of forty regularly and a peak of forty-two. In the following year, 1967, it ran for forty-eight weeks and its ratings in Melbourne rarely fell below forty [Davies, 1981, p.98]'. Was *Homicide* a fluke? Apparently not. Other networks quickly got on the police-show bandwagon, and while none quite equalled the popularity of the prototype, it was obvious from the ratings that the Australian audience was just as happy - indeed, happier - with homegrown 'cops' as it had been with American ones. In the fifteen years between 1965 and 1980, *Division 4* made the top ten six times, *Cop Shop* twice, *Hunter* (the Australian, not the American version) and *Matlock Police* once each (Beilby, 1981).

Even apart from its reflections vis-à-vis the nation's purported identification with anti-social types like the bushranger and the urban larikin, the *Homicide* phenomenon raises a number of intriguing questions. For one thing, and most obviously, we have to ask why the trend didn't continue. In 1972 the Ten network initiated a soap opera about the excitements of life in an inner-Sydney suburb (see Davies, 1981, p.104), and from that moment, though it would take a decade to become fully apparent, Australia's own action drama was a doomed species. By 1986, as I noted earlier, it was apparently extinct. The question is, why? If Australians, as their own legends imply (see, for instance, Seal's 1980 review of the omnipresent, ever-changing Ned Kelly myth), despise the policeman - or even if they only think they do - why did they virtually canonise the cop show? And if they don't, as implied by the *Homicide* phenomenon, why, in the eighties, did they turn their backs on what was such a popular form? Because they were tired of it? Perhaps. No fashion lasts forever. But in that case, why resume importing exactly the genre that they had ceased to produce for themselves?

The answers to these questions are, I think, to be found not in Australia itself, but in the United States. I have elsewhere shown how American culture, far from monolithic, tends to oscillate on an irregular but systematic basis between two 'positions' or mind-sets one might epitomise as *primitivism* and *progressivism* (McGregor, 1988). Particularly pertinent to the subject at hand is the fact that the country's preferential hero also changes systematically with the shift in public mood. During primitivistic periods, he tends to be introspective, socially isolated, and aligned with 'nature'. During progressivistic phases, on the other hand, he is just the opposite, deriving both his legitimacy and his power from extrinsic sources such as technology, the Law, and/or formalised (domestic or institutional) social alignments (McGregor, 1987). On the basis of the Australian's much-touted traditional self-image, it is obviously the former, more independent,

typos who *should* appeal. Against this, however, is the fact that it was during the primitivistic sixties that the American hero fell out of favour, and during the progressivistic eighties that he was rehabilitated again. If this isn't enough to hammer home the point, it is clear from the character of those briefly regnant homegrown cop shows - and particularly from their emphasis on the institutional and community background rather than the lone protagonist² - that during the hiatus, unable to purchase a satisfactorily domesticated hero from their usual sources, the Australians set out to produce one for themselves.

What are we to conclude from this? One possibility is that the Australian sense of self is really quite different from advertised. Another and (viewed contextually) more likely explanation is that, their native pessimism exacerbated in the case of television by an equally ingrained technophobia, the Australians were unable to imagine a version of self sufficiently competent to satisfy the perceived norms of the electronic fantasyland. Just as in life they have so often looked to the United States for both policy and hardware, they were hence almost bound to construct their version of 'television hero' in the image of the, or at least an, American. But why fixate on the policeman in particular? It is clear from the communal text that Australians identify not only nature but culture as well - the whole territory of civilisation. from 'mum' to motherland - as feminine. Given their widely touted and eminently demonstrable gynophobia, this puts them in a bit of a bind as far as *both* American hero types are concerned. Insofar as their historical experience makes them even more ambivalent about the former than the latter, however, and especially given the disquieting omnipresence of strong women in adjacent genres (it is worth noting, for instance, that in marked contrast to the United States, where the prototypical antagonist is the patriarch, the villain of choice in Australian folklore and literature is the phallic mother³ the primitive hero, with his 'feminine' dependence on natural instrumentalities, can obviously only exacerbate local anxieties. American pioneer myths notwithstanding, the only one capable of holding his own against the *Australian* version of 'nature' - the desert, the black hole in the middle, realm of death and the Jungian unconscious - is a formally designated agent of that equally alien but equally potent entity, the cultural (m)other. The insistence on institutionalisation is merely an attempt, since the figure is no longer distanced by an ascriptive 'foreignness', to minimise or contain the danger that the feminine *always* presents.

Quite apart from its anecdotal value, this story has important implications for currently prevailing views on the relationship between the consumers and the consumed in the field of mass media. Viewed in isolation, the discrepancy I observed between the kind of programmes Australia was making in the mid-eighties and those it was importing *could* simply have signified a lack of the technical resources necessary to produce an adequate homegrown facsimile of the highly valued drama series. The details of the country's production history do not, however, support this simple economic explanation. What they suggest, rather, is that Australians see something quite different in the American programmes from American viewers, and it is this difference which determines

their choices on the level of both production *and* consumption. I'll come back to that 'something' later. For now, though, I think we have to give some thought to the fact that the very possibility of this kind of resistance is theoretically problematic.

On the face of it, the common-sensible notion of differential reception does not seem particularly revolutionary. Taking a longer view, one comes up against the realisation that its implications, counter to common sense, are peculiarly incongruent with some of the most entrenched axioms of current communications research. Despite the variety of paradigms and approaches developed over the last quarter-century, the one thing virtually *all* variants have in common is an unvoiced assumption that what we are dealing with when we talk about mass, and particularly electronic, media is a monolithic and homogeneous entity rapidly spreading from the industrialised to the non-industrialised world. While most salient when combined with a conspiracy theory attributing this spread to Class or Capital or Uncle Sam, it is implicit even in more neutral formulations, such as MacLuhan's global village or Baudrillard's simulacrum world. Even calls for a grounded research - as were heard during the sixties and seventies from the Birmingham Group in England - have for the most part taken their mandate not from any perception that differences *do* exist, but from a desire, rather, to expose and dethrone the oppressing overvision in order that differences, whether class-based or national, *may* be inscribed in the future. One could claim, of course, that the demand for change presupposes belief in the possibility of change. The problem is, though, as we see across the gamut of Canadian responses, the keynote to this kind of critique, far from promissory, tends to be a kind of horrified resignation. 'By controlling and dominating the screens of the world, the United States insists literally that its "vision" is the only one that shall prevail [Nelson, 1987, p.127]'. 'The ubiquitous and crushing presence of American cultural artifacts... crowds out domestic voices (Meisel, 1987). 'As backdrop for [the Consciousness Industry is]... the whole Monopoly Capitalist system: the Military-Industrial Complex, telecommunications, banks, insurance, finance, real estate, the gambling industry, and crime, both organized and unorganized [Smythe, 1986, p.9]'. '[M]edia of communication... in Canada... have⁴ been deployed consistently... to further Canadian political, economic and cultural absorption into the U.S.A. [Babe, 1988]'. Whatever they might say of our *impulse* to resist the homogeny - and the whole thrust of Canadian broadcasting policy, with its carrot-and-stick protectiveness, is to formalise such resistance - in their defensive postures such statements as the preceding ones only reinforce the impression of an all-encompassing, undifferentiated mediascape.

Theory aside, a prejudice like this cannot help but deform even the most pragmatic applications. This is not to imply, of course, that there are no good studies of local conditions - even studies which highlight the problematics of reception. One such is Hodge and Tripp's (1986) analysis of the way that Aboriginal children 'use' minority stereotypes in American situation comedies; another is Schiff's (1985) examination of the *Dynasty* cult among American gays.

'The character of Alexis', says Australian critic John Fiske of this latter, while 'normally' seen as an apotheosis of femininity, may be read by gays as 'a destroyer of sexual difference'. For members of this particular subculture, he continues,

her incorporation of masculine traits into a feminine body produces an inversion of the male gay that is equally subversive of dominant gender roles... [thus providing them] with a means of articulating [their] own form of oppositional relationship to the dominant system [Fiske, 1987, p. 71].

Perplexingly, such instances of systematic, socially motivated, ideological destabilisation are rarely read back on the broader context. Few make the leap from variance to variability. The tendency, in fact, is almost entirely to dissociate the general from the particular.

Fiske's *Television Culture* provides a prime example of such dissociation - an example all the more striking because the book is otherwise one of the best and most comprehensive survey works on the subject. Despite his categorical rejection of the image of the viewer as passive consumer - despite his foregrounding of such topics as plurality, and the social construction of texts, and the potential for counter-readings by individuals or groups - when he *generalises* about the thing-in-itself, defining programme types or notating genres and effects, this writer neither gives credence to, nor makes allowance for, source-specific differences, seeming to accept without question that the American product, if not the American response, can legitimately be taken to 'stand for' some kind of international norm. The myopia holds even when the difference being obscured is his own. There is, for instance, a significant degree of variance between American and Australian soap operas. Where the former is notable for its resistance to closure, the latter tends to be segmentally plotted. Where the former is stylistically excessive, the latter affirms mundanity. Where the former is interminably talky and endlessly introspective, the latter coasts along the surface of events, privileging action over dialogue and invoking rather than anatomising emotion.⁴ There is no hint of this in Fiske. He talks of gender-bias. He speculates about the way the form might function for individual women as a kind of emotional counterweight to hegemony. He suggests the possibility of multiple interpretations. He does *not* question the validity of extrapolating from *Dallas* to the world. When it comes to the bottom line, his reconstruction of the entity called 'soap opera' is both a singular and an American one.

This brings me back to what I was talking about earlier. The real problem with taking the global village as a given is not simply the fact that it obscures local products, downgrading them to the status of copies or substitutes, but the extent to which such misrepresentation in itself obscures the whole phenomenon of cultural borrowing. It is clear from the story I began with that neither the presence nor even the size of an American component in a country's television programming - in any aspect of popular culture, for that matter - can be taken as a reliable marker for Americanisation. Because, as Fiske and others have acknowledged, different groups can assign different meanings to an identical

discourse, the mere fact of consumption is not enough to prove a convergence of use-values. Actual influence can be inferred, I would hold, *only* when the community in question begins, to the best of its ability, to reproduce not just the styles and objects of the American corpus, but also its psycho-symbolic subtext. The task for the critic, then, is not simply to point with horror at the *amount* of incursion but to determine what given elements 'mean' in their new contexts. Only so can we distinguish between real and apparent resemblance, real and apparent cultural colonisation.

The question is, to be sure, how in practice we can accomplish this task of discrimination. In Australia much was gleaned simply by comparing what was made with what was bought, and what was bought with what was available. In Canada, unfortunately, the mere fact of our geographical proximity makes the situation more difficult to read. For us, American culture is not something we consciously select and import; it's simply *there*, all around us. If our homegrown production differs in kind, therefore, it may be for a variety of reasons, not just because our tastes or our needs are distinct. It may, for instance, reflect official rather than popular preferences. It may be sheer defensiveness. Or it could just indicate that the appetite for American-style discourse is already well satisfied. How do we get around this? The one place we are most likely to see the effects of spontaneous indigenous bias, paradoxically enough, is in programmes that are actually *trying* to look American. Departures from a specifically invoked convention, in other words, are liable, under our particular circumstances, to be more revealing than a deliberate, motivated choice of alternative forms. But how can we be sure in any given case that the variance in question does not merely signal ineptness? You may recall that I pointed out certain structural and thematic similarities between Australian television and other aspects of Australian culture. The same holds true for Canada. What appears on internationalist criteria to be deformation of an American prototype, when read against our own communal text quite frequently turns out to document Canadianness.

Take the series *Night Heat*, for instance. On the surface this programme would seem almost painfully conventional - a lower key, poor man's version of the generic ensemble cop show. Everything about it shouts *Americanness*. We see it in the constitution and characterisation of the squadroom family: the street-wise older detective with his hot-blooded younger partner, the fatherly lieutenant, the token black, the good-looking female rookie, the sleazy narc, the comic snitch. We see it in the implied background ambience of street crime, drug dealers, and gangs. We see it in the clichéd, melodramatic, social-issues-related plots. Read subtextually, however - read *structurally* - this apparent near-perfect clone in fact nullifies the American aggressive fantasy it seems designed to reproduce. It is not, for instance, coincidental that in an age of designer T-shirts, *these* heroes wear ties. In Miami it's hard to tell the players without a game card. In Toronto - even a Toronto slovened up to look 'normal' - we want the bad guys kept separate; the interface clearly marked; the cop, with his licence to

aggress, institutionally buffered.

The interesting point about all this is not the fact that it documents hedging, but the way that that hedging is accomplished. Almost everything that strikes us as different in Canadian programmes can, in fact, be traced to parallel strategies in Canadian art and literature. I'm not suggesting influence, here. What I'm suggesting is that site-specific psychological structuration will not only impress itself equally upon different aspects of cultural production but will do so in homologous ways. It's not coincidental, for instance, that Canada's longest running situation comedy - *The Beachcombers* - unlike its American counterparts, is preferentially set in neither the boardroom nor the bedroom but in a space *intermediate* to public and private: the cafe, the docks, the unofficial gathering places of the community. It's also not coincidental that this 'space', in both form and function, should so closely resemble the small town which is the favoured setting for classic Canadian fiction (McGregor, 1985, chapter 12). Interiorised, self-protective, and markedly apolitical, Canadians are obsessed with mediate, and hence implicitly mediating, spaces and mechanisms. 'Betweenness' is consequently almost always both a critical and a numinous feature of Canadian artworks.⁵ And not just in the sense of locale either. When Colville and Pratt mask their painted personae, when Robertson Davies harps on the importance of social ritual, when Canadian experimental filmmakers place more emphasis on the fact of the frame than on its oft times incidental content,⁶ they are all in different ways acknowledging the omnipotentousness of the interface between self and other. Exactly the same thing might be said of the counter-coding we find in the TV adventure drama.

The key to this particular code lies in our attitude toward the hero. Unlike the American, the Canadian is conditioned to view the active typos - whether warrior or magician - not as *self*-symbol but as *other*. The hero, in other words, may be potent, may be successful, may be fascinating - indeed, is often all these things - but he is also quite definitely 'not us'. That makes him frightening - even dangerous. Canadian novels are full of cautionary tales about the havoc-wreaking champion. They are also, however - and here is the important point for deciphering our television fable - full of recipes for 'managing' our interactions with this problematic figure. Sometimes he is punished. (Mutilations and amputations abound throughout the corpus, a kind of simultaneous badge of power and penalty for hubris.) Sometimes he is disguised. (It is notable that so many of the narrator-protagonists of Canadian fiction, far from god-life creators, are journalists or academics or diarists - people who merely and meekly collect facts.) Virtually always, however, he is distanced or contained by the language and the structures of the text, our potential identification with him buffered, or better still nipped in the bud.⁷ This, of course, brings us back to *Night Heat*. It is not coincidental - again I have to use the phrase - that this programme is narrated by a non-combatant. By standing between us and the heroes, the newspaperman not only marks them but marks them *off*. In doing so, he provides a verbal equivalent to the aforementioned neckties. Just as the violence

of the plot is contained in the penultimate black-and-white newscast, the distancing voice-over symbolically 'contains' the violence of the American-style undermyth.

Appearances notwithstanding, this reticence is not unusual among our homegrown drama series. We find similar buffering functions in Adderly's lost hand; in the reiterant insistence of *Seeing Things* that its protagonist has not control over or responsibility for his empowering visions. What these features tell us is that the Americanness of their vehicles is not only deceptive but unexpectedly instrumental. In Canada as in Australia, far from signalling acquiescence, the way we imitate contains the key to our resistance. Not only do we pick and choose our borrowings to suit local needs, but we reconstruct the products in our own image. The very process of recoding enacts our neutralisation of the *ostensibly* omnipotent other.

Notes

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented at the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association Conference in Quebec City, May, 1989. A fuller discussion of the cultural background(s) to the analysis is provided in the author's ongoing series of semio-ethnographic studies of English-speaking post-frontier cultures. See McGregor, 1985, 1988, and forthcoming (excerpted in 1989). The collective title of this series is 'Voice in the Wilderness'.
2. See Moran, 1985, chapter 8.
3. See McGregor, 1989; see also, re television in particular, Stern, 1977; Moran, 1985.
4. See, for example, Stern, 1977, p. 43.
5. It is important to distinguish the Canadian *concern with* mediation from the Australian's *privileging of* mediacy. For the former, the space between is a nexus both of promise and of danger. For the latter, in contrast, it is simply the site of self. Verandah, suburb, beach, bush, pub: in marked contrast to the Canadian penchant for enclosure images in art and life (McGregor, 1985, ch. 5), it is notable that nearly every preferred 'space' in Australian folklore (see, for instance, Fiske et al., 1987) represents a neutral or buffer zone between outside and inside, public and private - mother nature and 'mum'.
6. See, for instance, Elder, 1982.
7. For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, see McGregor, 1985, especially chapters 9 and 10.

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