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PART

Global Mediascapes: Theory and Industry

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Theoretical Perspectives

The last ten years have seen profound changes in the television cultures of many countries. Technological innovation, industrial realignments and changes in regulatory philosophy have transformed a collection of comparatively self-contained systems into one of increasingly international patterns of ownership and increasingly global flows of programming. Australia has been the slowest of the developed countries to change; at the time of writing it still has virtually no television other than the traditional free-to-air channels, nevertheless it has not been cut off from the changing patterns of world television. In particular, as it has developed for its size a robust and efficient program-production industry, nurtured by years of government intervention, Australia has begun to become a significant middle-sized exporter of programming. Its best and most lucrative market remains the UK but Australian programs now turn up virtually in every television market in the world.

In this book we trace how Australia came to occupy that position within what we can call the world television system. In the process we analyse how this system has itself evolved, how it operates both as an industrial system and a system of cultural exchange, and what the political, economic and cultural effects of these patterns might be. In doing so we investigate current debates about globalisation, cultural imperialism, the nation and cultural identity. We examine the local history of the development of the Australian program production industry and show how state policies of industry development have evolved and how they have been conceptually sustained. We analyse why traditional arguments for intervention, which have depended on notions of protecting national identity and cultural integrity, are giving way to new rationales framed in terms of international competitiveness and the cultivation of export markets, and what the limits and problems of these shifts are.

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We also look at the effects the changing geo-political patterns within the world system – most notably the partial dismantling of national boundaries in Europe, the demise of Communism and the rise of the Asian economies – are having on cultural ecologies and the consequent receptiveness of many regions of the world to new cultural influences, including new sources and kinds of television. This will help us to understand how and why Australian programs have been able to find acceptance in international markets. We argue that the reasons for this are industrial as much as cultural since, in many places where Australian-originated programs act as filler material, they would not be perceived as falling into any category other than foreign. In order to show the broad industrial and cultural reasons for the appearance of Australian programming across the world, we develop a middle-range methodology, which steers a course between the 'total' explanations of political-economic theories and the narrow 'micro-situational' audience analysis informed by ethnography.

Europe and North America historically have been the richest television markets and they are also the largest sources of program export revenue for Australia. We examine the flow of programs from Australia to five European countries (the UK, Ireland, France, Germany and The Netherlands) and to the US and Canada, and analyse the complex factors – industrial, regulatory, cultural, historical, linguistic and aesthetic – that influence the receptiveness of these television cultures to Australian programs.

In recent years, Asian television has seen a proliferation of new commercial services and a dismantling of many of the state-imposed barriers to inward cultural flows, including television programs. Australia has a unique position as a multicultural nation of European heritage but an increasing Asian character. Geographically positioned in the region, it has many historical, economic and cultural links with Asia and with Asian broadcasting institutions. Government policy explicitly targets the further development of trading and economic planning links with Asia; the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), has begun a free-to-air satellite service to the region. We review the changing Asian media landscape and the progress of the ABC's service.

If Australia has traditionally been a net importer of programs from the rest of the world, especially the US and the UK, and thus in the discourse of cultural imperialism is a 'victim', it has acted more like an imperialiser in its own immediate region of the Pacific. New Zealand has always had a particularly acute sense of its own subordination to its bigger trans-Tasman

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first cousin (rather like Canada's attitude to the US), and indeed, following the radical de-regulation of the New Zealand broadcasting system that occurred in the late 1980s, Australian programs appeared to flood New Zealand screens. In tiny Pacific nations like Papua New Guinea, Australia has had a determining influence on the fledgling television system and has been a major source of programming.

CULTURAL IMPERIALISM

The rhetoric for the policies of cultural protection and support followed by Australia since the mid-1960s has been sustained by a version of the cultural imperialism thesis. This dominant media studies paradigm has also shaped most of the debate about international cultural flows since the 1970s, when key interventions such as the research of Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis on international television flows, the work of Herbert Schiller on the US domination of the international communications industries, and the theorisations of dependency and cultural domination by Latin American scholars and the UNESCO movement for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) set the paradigm firmly in place (Nordenstreng and Varis 1974; Schiller 1976; Mattelart 1979; MacBride 1980).

As John Tomlinson (1991) has established, the cultural imperialism thesis is not actually one thesis but a complex and often contradictory set of views, which have been increasingly seen as both conceptually flawed and insufficiently supported by empirical evidence. In the classic formulation by a scholar such as Herbert Schiller, the thesis sees the US domination of international audiovisual flows as part of a strategy to reinforce US economic and political domination of the rest of the world. As recently as 1991, in an article tellingly entitled 'Not yet the post-imperialist era', Schiller restates his position:

> Media-cultural imperialism is a sub-set of the *general* system of imperialism. It is not free-standing; the media-cultural component in a developed, corporate economy supports the economic objectives of the decisive industrial-financial sectors ... what is regarded as cultural output also is ideological and profit-serving to the system at large (Schiller 1991, p.14).

While there is plenty of evidence to show that the US often consciously used the mass media as a diplomatic instrument (Guback 1969; Swoch 1993; Curtin 1993) to further political and economic interests, it cannot

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be assumed, as Schiller does, that this process was actually effective; in other words, that mere exposure to US product leads automatically to the cultural effect assumed.

In his 1991 article, Schiller is responding to a growing body of work that began to appear as early as 1980 and that started to question the validity of the cultural imperialism thesis. A number of critics began to examine its conceptual soundness (for example, Lee 1980; Fejes 1981), to question the empirical basis on which it was founded (Tracey 1985, 1988) and to challenge the theorisation of audience response on which it rested (Ang 1985; Katz and Liebes 1985). The usefulness of Tomlinson's critique is to show that at least one reason why the debate has been so unresolvable is that the thesis is actually composed of a complex of at least four distinct discourses: cultural imperialism can be equated with media imperialism; it can operate as a discourse of nationality; it can operate as a discourse of global capitalism; and/or it can stand as a critique of modernity (Tomlinson 1991, p.19ff.). Separating out these strands is the first task of beginning to engage with and test the thesis in ways that are adequate to the current historical phase.

Tomlinson, following Chin-Chuan Lee's account (1980), discusses the distinction between cultural imperialism and media imperialism and argues that left-wing scholars like Herbert Schiller conflate them. In this view, the undoubted dominance of the US in certain areas of mass *media* export (film, television, recorded music, publishing, advertising, video games) leads automatically to *cultural* domination. The next step then is to assume rather than demonstrate an automatic connection between cultural domination and domination in the political and economic arena.

The most obvious flaw in this argument is the assumption that media exhaust culture. Culture is much more than media even if media are part of culture. The second problem is the failure to conceptualise sufficiently the connection between the economic, political and cultural domains. Work in cultural studies and in other disciplines, especially that done from a post-modernist and post-colonial perspective, has clearly established the inadequacy of this marxist topology of base and superstructure (Hall 1977; Bennett 1982). A further flaw is the inadequacy of the way in which media effects are theorised. Textual and audience studies since the 1970s indicate that individual texts can be read in a multiplicity of ways, and empirical research is required to determine what role imported media products actually do play in formations of culture in any particular localities and moments. The final critique of media imperialism is based on historical grounds. In its classic form, the thesis was developed in the 1960s and

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early 1970s when the US still dominated the world system and when it was easier to demonstrate that television exchange was characterised by a one-way flow of media products from the US to other Western countries with very little in the way of exchange or flows from one peripheral country to another. Since then, however, things have changed (Sinclair *et al.* 1995).

The US is no longer as dominant in the world economy as that economy has globalised; for one thing the growth of global media firms means it is no longer necessary for them to be located in any one place. Economies once considered peripheral are developing rapidly, which is leading to new flows of people, money, goods and cultural products in new directions. As a consequence the model of the world that envisages a single centre of power and a number of peripheral societies on the receiving end can no longer be sustained.

GLOBALISATION OF THE MEDIA

> Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole (Robertson 1992, p.8).

The term 'globalisation' is difficult to escape; it has become almost a cliche in contemporary theoretical and policy debates, and myths about it abound (Ferguson 1992). Its meaning is certainly no less ambiguous than the notion of cultural imperialism it has tended to displace. Marshall McLuhan's visionary concept of the 'global village' is the most famous early notion of a global culture (1964; *see also* McLuhan and Powers 1989), but the concept has gained increased currency since the mid-1980s. It remains unresolved whether globalisation is a new phenomenon or whether the present era is simply a new stage of a process that has been proceeding over centuries.

As Immanuel Wallerstein has shown, the globalising processes are as old as capitalism itself (Robertson 1992, p.9). Since the sixteenth century at the latest, exploration and colonisation had begun to link points on the entire globe; transport and communications technology had always played a crucial role in this linking and in the consequent spread of the capitalist mode of production and of cultural modernity. Navigation is the first such technology but what Harold Innis called the 'control of empires' accelerated enormously in the nineteenth century with the invention of the telegraph and the telephone and even more in the twentieth century

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with the arrival of the mass media, especially television, with its capacity to 'bind' space and 'compress' time (Carey 1989, p.160). The technology that presents us with the next large leap in space-binding and time-compressing capabilities is the satellite; it is the advent of satellite television, which can address a global community in real time, that has precipitated the latest round of concern about globalisation and the media.

The cultural significance of communication technologies is their ability to 're-spatialise' the globe, to create new cultural geographies, that is, to link already existing communities or even create new ones (Morley and Robins 1989, p.22). Until recently, the communities the mass media created were largely national or sub-national ones; both commercial and public service media were constructed along national lines and addressed national audiences, playing their role in various sorts of nation-binding ideological projects. Certainly since their inception the media have had globalising elements: the growth of international news agencies, owned by the US and Europe since the nineteenth century (Tunstall and Palmer 1991, p.46ff.), the world-wide pre-eminence of Hollywood since the First World War (Thompson 1985) and the dominance of the US as a supplier of television programs (Wildman and Siwek 1988, p.26). But the satellite era undoubtedly introduces new elements into the globalisation picture, namely the ability to address trans- and cross-national communities.

In the spirit of Tomlinson's disaggregation of cultural imperialism, we can similarly disaggregate the concept of global media. There are global media *events*, when virtually everyone with access to a television set is able to witness major events at the same time (for example, the Gulf War, the crackdown in Tienanmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Bosnian conflict). Then there is the regional and potentially global spread of *service delivery platforms* (for example, Star TV, CNN, BBC World TV). On a broader scale, it can mean the formation of global media *firms*, which own and/or control media outlets in most regions of the world (News Corporation, Time-Warner, Sony or Matsushita). Finally, the concept can refer to the global *distribution* of media, including television programs.

While the first of these is not our major concern (global media events have been extensively analysed by other commentators (Wark 1994a; 1994b)), we shall have cause to examine each of the other three. Global distribution is not new – television programs have been exchanged since television began in the 1950s – but in the last ten years this phenomenon has increased exponentially due to the great proliferation of services worldwide, and because the sources from which programs come have

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widened. We shall be exploring the unfolding of this process and the place that Australia is playing within this diversification of world television flows. Global media firms and service delivery platforms are qualitatively new phenomena which have come into existence only since the profound re-configuration of world television, which occurred during the 1980s.

The debate about the cultural effects of globalisation bears similarities to the arguments forwarded by proponents of the cultural imperialism thesis against the earlier modernisation paradigm. On the one hand, an emerging global culture can be celebrated as bringing peoples together in a new cosmopolitanism and internationalism, taking the world beyond sectarian nationalisms, 'Cold Warrior' power blocs and the old imperium of first-, second- and third-world divisions. New communities of interest will emerge to displace the old world order: 'Afro-Caribbeans in Brixton could have more in common with Moroccans in Paris than with their upper-class neighbours in Dulwich' (Mulgan and Warpole 1986, p.113). On the other, commentators like Herbert Schiller see globalisation as leading to an intensification of cultural imperialism.

> The role of television in the global arena of cultural domination has not diminished in the 1990s. Reinforced by new delivery systems – communication satellites and cable networks – the image flow is heavier than ever. Its source of origin also has not changed that much in the last quarter of the century (Schiller 1991, p.15).

We shall argue against both the utopian and dystopian views of globalisation – a new cosmopolitan internationalism versus the further homogenisation of culture. Rather, the concept of globalisation is a myth precisely in the sense of a powerful grid of understanding that outstrips the evidential basis for it (*see* Ferguson 1992). And the power of the myth may already be passing. As Ien Ang (1994, p.325) has argued, talk about globalisation may have been 'part of a short-lived rhetoric which coincided with a precise historical moment' during the late 1980s and early 1990s. This was a period when major political transformations (such as the end of the Cold War, the breakdown of Communism and the advent of the European Union) were carried by and to the world through media such as CNN, with global reach. These developments coalesced to 'produce an apocalyptic sense of globalised reality'. She suggests that our present and immediate future can be characterised as a '*post*-globalised world rife with regional realignments and fracturings, nationalist and ethnic separatisms,

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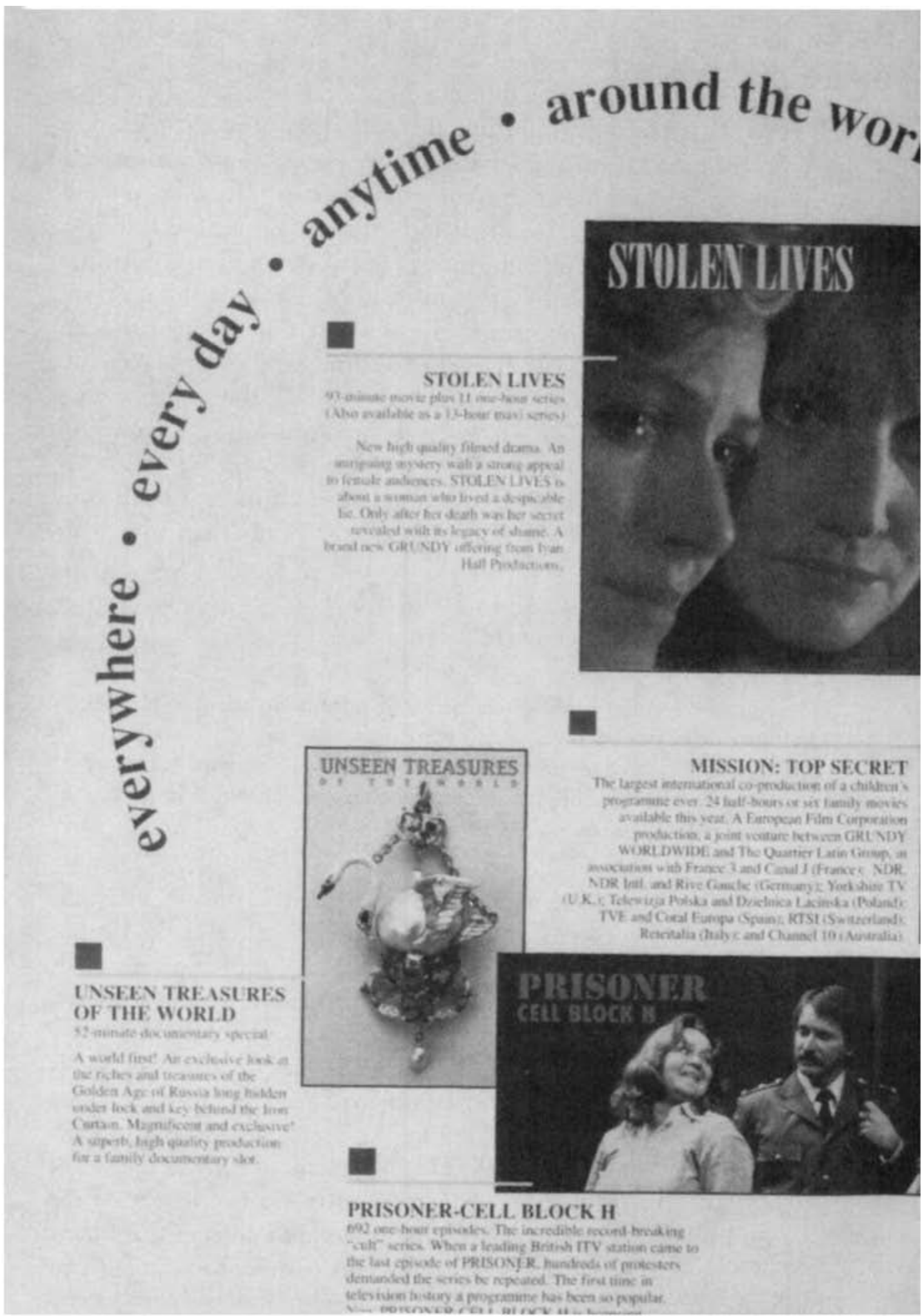

Grundys' key globalising strategy is dubbed 'parochial internationalisation' by company founder, Reg Grundy. (Advertisement in *Variety*, 5 April 1993.)

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