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Cultural Identity, Soap Narrative, and Reality TV



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This article works from the established assumption that narratives produced for local audiences are always going to operate in some relation to established discourses of local or national cultural identities. In the case of Australian television soap opera, this is not in any way a radical assumption, given the format's routine construction of a recognizable version of the local-everyday as the ground on which its narratives are staged. In this article, the author argues that it is likely, in the case of certain versions of reality TV that draw on the soap opera format for their narrative and formal structures, that reality TV's representations of the real and the everyday are going to operate similarly—indigenizing even the most international of formats and genres. Thus, the way to examine “the local” in the “global” may well be through mapping processes of appropriation and adaptation rather than through the proposition of any thoroughgoing specificity or uniqueness.

Keywords: *TV soap opera; television formats; the local; national identity*

The initial provocation to this discussion actually lies outside the material it will eventually examine. That is, it lies in concerns expressed within discussions of Latin American television about the threat posed by transnational reality TV formats such as *Big Brother* to the localized or region-specific formats such as the *telenovela*.¹ In the rationale for the conference to which this was presented, comparisons were developed between the respective formats and cultural placement of the Anglo-American-Australian television soap opera and the Latin American *telenovela*. Concerns about the competing transnational reality TV formats raised by the Latin American scholars, as well as the comparison between the two narrative forms under examination, tended to rely heavily on assumptions about the relation between television narrative and cultural identity. These were evident in at least two of the continuing themes of discussion throughout the conference. On one hand, fears about the eventual outcome of the contest

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between a local telenovela and an international reality TV format implied a power relation that favored the international format and the forces of globalization. On the other hand, cultural identity was seen to be so thoroughly embedded into the telenovela as to imply a power relation that favored the local narrative format as the likely choice of Latin American audiences. There is a parallel set of concerns about Australian soap operas, even though they are not as dominant in their home market as the telenovelas are in theirs. Australian soap operas' relation to reality TV, however, suggests a quite different set of power relations, as they clearly exert an influence on the reality format developed for the Australian version of *Big Brother*. In this article, then, I want to address three interlinked issues: the relation between television soap opera and cultural identity, the relation between the two formats of soap opera and reality TV's *Big Brother*, and the degree to which the discursive influence of the soap opera on *Big Brother* in Australia reconnected it to discourses of cultural identity.

It is not common in Western television studies to argue particularly strongly for the cultural identity of television programming. Indeed, television is the default example for the processes of globalization. (This, despite the fact that it is extremely common to argue that the primary function of television is in fact to construct differentiated cultural identities—a crude version of the line taken in, say, Hartley's *Uses of Television* [1999]). Early cultural studies accounts of television focused on how television constructed a culture for their audiences to “read” or consume (Fiske and Hartley 1978; Fiske 1987). Within the dominant traditions, this culture tended not to have a national character, however, as British and American critics alike referred to television as if their own version was the norm. In Australia, that was not the case, and the “national character” of local television production was busily scrutinized from the late 1970s to the early 1990s (Moran 1985; Tulloch and Turner 1989; Cunningham and Miller 1994). Usually, such scrutiny focused on what could be described as unique, local, or national in terms of their absolute difference from anything or anywhere else. It is a mode of analysis that has lapsed recently, I admit, but I want to call it up again to suggest another way of proceeding.

In what follows, I suggest, we have a demonstration that the way to examine “the local” in such process these days may well be through mapping processes of appropriation and adaptation rather than through the proposition of a thoroughgoing specificity or uniqueness. This may not be entirely new as a general issue (see Daniel Miller's [1995] original work on the indigenization of soap operas in Trinidad), but the recent experiences of globalizing formats implicated in the spread of reality TV gives it a fresh relevance and specificity.

This is an exercise that tracks one example of the process of the indigenization of international formats. It displays at least one modest

assumption that needs to be named: that narratives produced for local audiences are always going to operate in some relation to established discourses of local or national cultural identities (an assumption dealt with at length elsewhere; see Turner [1986, 1993]). This assumption would operate in different ways for different cultural forms and products, but in the case of Australian television soap opera, it is not in any way a radical assumption, given the format's routine construction of a recognizable version of the local-everyday as the ground on which its narratives are staged. I also want to argue that it is likely, in the case of certain versions of reality TV that draw on the soap opera format for their narrative and formal structures, that reality TV's representations of the real and the everyday are going to operate similarly—indigenizing even the most international of formats and genres.

In the specific territory I want to explore, the connection between Australian soap opera and national identity is often made. When it is made, it is usually framed within one or more of the following discursive formations. First, it will note the ordinariness, the everydayness, and the "suburbanity" of the plotlines, settings, and discursive frames. Australian soaps are definitively suburban in location, and there is wide agreement that this location—physically and discursively—is responsible for the close identification between the programs and the nation that produces them. Second, attempts to explain the success of Australian soaps outside Australia (*Neighbours* remains the most successfully exported soap worldwide) tend to use national characteristics as their reference point. So the success of *Neighbours* in the United Kingdom (UK) is explained either through reference to the essential appeal of the lifestyle being depicted on screen (Australian suburban housing, the egalitarian society, the weather) or through its difference from the lifestyle available to those constituting its audience (British suburban housing, class, gloomy, cold weather). Third, critics direct attention to the ideological content of the program, which offers traditional family values and emphasizes the preeminence of the community (rather than, say, the individual as in the American soap tradition).

These are not the only relevant attributes, of course, although they are the ones most usually canvassed (see, e.g., Cunningham and Jacka 1996). But Australian soap opera is not only embedded into a national discursive repertoire; it is also embedded into the local media economy and the television production culture. Television soaps have been highly durable formats during several decades and now serve as an effective mode of identifying the individual channel or network with a range of programming and a target audience demographic. Consequently, they have come to assume a great deal of importance for network schedulers. An important aspect of this is their appeal to the youth and young adult demographic—a demographic that is pursued by advertisers, that is nevertheless declining as a

proportion of the broadcast television audience, and yet that is the most vigorously engaged in making use of the media in general for identity formation. This is a demographic that *should* be making increasing use of television, but it is not; soap's appeal to them therefore represents something of a lifeline to the industry.

The third aspect of this relation lies in the importance of TV soap as a feeder for the local celebrity system in Australia (Turner, Bonner, and Marshall 2000). Soap opera stars dominate the covers on mass-market magazines, the talk show guest lists, and the live appearances at shopping centers. They are the single most visible category of local TV celebrities. A structural reason for this is the direct corporate connections between the major commercial television networks and the major mass-market women's, girls', and entertainment magazines. Cross-promotion between television programs and mass-market magazines is routine, and promotional and publicity campaigns can be organized virtually within the one corporate identity to include appearances on television and radio and in the print media. Youth audiences are high consumers of celebrity, and celebrity is now a standard by-product of the promotion of the TV soap operas.

What may look like an unlikely competitor for this kind of cultural and industrial "embeddedness" is reality TV. In my discussion of reality TV here, I am not referencing the whole genre—from *The Weakest Link* to *Fear Factor* to *Survivor*. Rather, I have in mind those reality TV formats that focus on, or perhaps highlight in spite of themselves, cultural and community identity. Inevitably, these formats betray the influences of the discourses of the TV soap. An early British-Australian example would be *Sylvania Waters*, but the most solid recent example is Australian *Big Brother*. As I say, *Big Brother* is an unlikely candidate in that it is an international format, with well publicized versions having already been screened elsewhere well before the Australian version was produced. The program's launch in Australia during late 2001, consequent on the publicity generated elsewhere, provoked expectations of conflict and sexual adventure that promised the pleasure of voyeurism and objectification rather than an orgy of cultural identification.

Of course, there were many differences between the cultural potential and placement of local soaps and *Big Brother* reality TV. *Big Brother* was "event" TV, multiplatformed, and transnational—clearly distinct, one would have thought, from the daily performance of the local-everyday offered by the TV soap opera. Rather than focusing on traditional family values and emphasizing the importance of community and cooperation, you could argue that *Big Brother* actually provided a sardonic counterpoint to the Australian soap. The premise underlying the various versions of the format produced elsewhere (particularly in the UK and the United States) implied

a distinct lack of faith in community. *Big Brother* was a game show with competition at its heart and in which viewers expressed their hostility rather than approval—that is, through voting out the member they liked least—until the very end. And finally, but not unimportantly, the degree of exhibitionism demanded by the physical conditions and the producers' prebroadcast publicity seemed to emphasize an extroversion that is not easily located in conventional discourses of "Australian-ness."

Notwithstanding such differences, however, it is remarkable how the eventual similarities between the two formats stack up—not only in the mutations of the *Big Brother* format and its narrative but also in the kinds of attributes garnered in the process of its indigenization as the program became embedded in already established discursive patterns of cultural identification. As Jane Roscoe has reported (2001), the producers of Australian *Big Brother* made explicit use of soap opera narrative strategies: from the footage available (twenty-four hours on twelve cameras!), they selected a couple of story lines for each nightly episode, with a view to resolving one issue and continuing at least one other into the following episode, or longer. Although most of the production staff came from backgrounds in documentary, this seemed to them the best way to structure what was, after all, a serial television narrative (Peter Abbott, pers. comm.).

There was a counterstrategy to this in the inclusion of a weekly *Big Brother Uncut* episode late on Thursday nights (the other episodes aired at 7 p.m.) that offered nudity and uncensored language. The sensational promise of such a format was quickly exhausted, however, as the spectacle of people taking a shower on television soon lost its interest. As the program progressed, the interest shifted from the voyeuristic or scopophilic to a conventional interest in the development of the narrative and an equally conventional development of identification with particular contestants and narrative outcomes. Formally, the soap opera element was not at its strongest at the beginning of the program, but it was absolutely dominant by the end. Eventually, the producers canned the *Uncut* episode altogether.

The suburbanality of the soap opera was also replicated in the physical structure of the house: a modern suburban bungalow, complete with barbecue, pool, vegetable gardens, and a chicken coop. The typical Australian-ness of the house was emphasized by the producers before the event, as well as written into later accounts of the way the program had taken on "national characteristics." In an interview in the *Media* supplement of the national daily, *The Australian*, the week before the launch of the second series of Australian *Big Brother*, the executive producer was at pains to point out that the local version of the format was actually quite different than other versions. Just as *Neighbours* is the upbeat, sunny, community-oriented soap that brings sunshine to gloomy old Britain, Australian *Big Brother* was

never part of the genre of the “nasty” reality formats such as *Fear Factor* or *The Weakest Link*. Rather, said Tim Clucas (2002, 10), it was a “feel-good” program in this version, as the contestants formed a community intent on providing support for each other. This is a view most would agree with, as the values underpinning the discussion of behaviors both in the house and outside became progressively more traditional, more oriented toward helping the group of housemates function for the good of all its members. Rather than becoming increasingly individualistic as relationships in the house splintered under the pressure of competition—something the format would lead you to expect and something that certainly happened in other locations—the group of housemates turned itself into a family. Finally, in this list of “national” characteristics, the eventual winner (Ben) was the most conventional version of Australian manhood imaginable—right down to his forming his closest relationship in the house with his “best mate,” Blair.

Within the local media economy or the Australian media culture, the parallels are there as well. *Big Brother* appealed to the same core demographic—youth and young adults—as *Neighbours* or *Home and Away* for very much the same core reason: people saw versions of their own lives happening on the screen (the age range was nineteen to thirty-four, but most of the housemates were in their early twenties). And it also operated as a very effective incubator for Australian celebrities. The housemates were a collective celebrity for some months after the program was completed, appearing on television, in shopping centers, and turning up, en masse, at dance clubs. An implausibly large number went on to the beginnings of media careers: hosting celebrity specials and writing a sports column for the national daily newspaper (Ben), taking up soap opera roles (Blair in *Neighbours*), hosting reality TV series (Jemma and *Search for a Supermodel*), recording CDs (Sara Marie), and appearing as on-camera talent in the second series of *Big Brother* (Todd and Sarah Marie).

Of course, there is much about this that is not surprising. There are explicit links between soap and the construction of reality TV narratives, and they were often discussed publicly by those working in television production. The closeness of these programs’ relationship with and appeal to their audience is not difficult to explain either. Both formats are especially sensitive to audience responses to narrative lines over time; both are usually produced sufficiently close to broadcast time to enable these responses to influence at least some narrative lines or outcomes (although this is much more the case for *Big Brother*, of course). Both aim at a high level of cultural visibility and interest; despite their serial nature, they must aim at becoming in some sense public “events.” (Soaps tend to do this only from

time to time rather than constantly, but they still work at regularly constructing such moments.) These are classic “water cooler” formats that must feed into conversation and gossip as a fundamental means of maintaining audience interest and extending audience reach. What this does, of course, is to encourage a highly reflective relationship between the program’s trajectory and the viewers’ interests and preferences. In the case of *Big Brother*, the open access to the web site, with its wide variety of modes of interaction with the programming, the voting, or the gossip, dramatically amplified and accelerated the development and the playing out of this relationship.

The comparison I have been developing has its most specific point in relation to television in Australia. But it is also a case study that highlights a number of aspects about the contemporary transnational trade in television formats that may have tended to be submerged in the more general debates about globalization. It shows, for instance, how malleable these transnational formats actually are while correspondingly demonstrating how a TV narrative that is grounded in the local everyday can set up irresistibly indigenizing rhythms. On the evidence of this example, one would want to argue that serial TV in which audience preferences are a structural narrative or strategic factor is worked over by cultural codes and contexts to a degree that is perhaps both surprising and consoling—given the increasing globalization of entertainment systems and formats and the negative cultural consequences this movement is commonly assumed to produce. These particular formats are especially revealing for such an argument because it is clear that in both cases, the construction of community through the representation of narrativized relationships is a key objective. Once you accept that idea, it is not surprising that this community has to ground itself in a specific cultural location.

Note

1. These concerns were outlined in the “Call for Papers” published by the organizers of the conference, *Telenovelas and Soap Opera: Negotiating Reality*, held March 21–24, 2002, at the Humanities Research Centre in Canberra, Australia. In the “Call for Papers,” the following concern was raised: “Telenovelas and soap operas have created a social and cultural sphere. Now reality television, a mix of soap opera, game shows and reportage, has invaded the social imaginary. How reality television will interact with the established genres of soap opera and telenovela is of concern to both the industry and academia.” At the conference, representatives of the Latin American industry and the academy took up these concerns at some length, and examples of their discussions are included in this selection of articles.

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