AMERICAN/GLOBAL: AUSTRALIAN/LOCAL

Philip Bell and Roger Bell

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

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

United States culture – from the ‘political’ to the ‘popular’ – is deeply and variously implicated in Australia’s recent history. Often represented as rampant ‘Americanisation’, the forces putatively transforming modern Australia are carried by consumer capitalism and embedded in the triumph of the ‘American Century’. Links between cultural and political change were widely assumed as postwar Australia became closely identified with US interests in the Cold War, Vietnam, and the so-called ‘war against terrorism’. Despite populist local fears of ‘Americanisation’ this paper argues that cultural shifts in the smaller nation are not directly or causally linked to politico-strategic decisions which identify it closely with US power and ambition. In the new world (dis)order following the Gulf War, Australia has been called on to again demonstrate its allegiance to the United States, especially in concert against terrorism, while continuing as a good international citizen working sympathetically with the United Nations and international legal and humanitarian tribunals. At the same time during the past decade Australia has actively promoted to the world its own changing social and cultural identity through sport, television, cinema and the performing arts. These idealized expressions of ‘Australian-ness’ climaxed in the September 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. This paper argues that the political and cultural dependencies of Australia on the United States have been radically transformed since the end of the Cold War as ‘what Australia means’ has been rewritten in an increasingly post-modern, global vocabulary. These two spheres, the political and cultural, have become increasingly independent of each other, we suggest, and Australia’s military/political subservience to Washington offers little insight into the complex cultural relationships between the two nations. First, we consider the claims made by many commentators that Australian politico-strategic deference to the US has increased and is linked to the great powers’ unparalleled global hegemony. Second, we evaluate the claim that cultural infiltration and coercion by American ‘soft power’ has strengthened during the past decade, by exploring two key cultural fields – local broadcast television and the nationalist stories celebrated in the opening ceremony of the 2000 Olympics.

**International Relations and Cultural Change**

Australia’s emergence as a modern industrial society, which John Docker and others have argued ‘meant in effect moving from a British to an American model’, was a ‘complex and contradictory process’. The paradox of cultural resistance in the face of pervasive social change and political accommodation was apparent from the early postwar years. At least at the level of public utterance, Americanisation could be denied even when it could not be delayed. To borrow Max Lerner’s observation on Europe in the postwar decades, Australia was ‘caught between the need for America and the recoil from it’. Indeed elements of this
cultural schizophrenia were evident as early as the nineteenth century. Modern Australia was obviously the product of complex, contending forces. Australia’s own traditions and identities, British legacies, its deepening multicultural complexion since the 1950s, as well as distinct religious, class and regional characteristics formed the social grid into which American pressures were incorporated and adapted.

Over more than a century, Australia’s anxious search for security was paralleled by its increasing economic and cultural links to the US. Like much of the modern world, especially English-speaking societies, Australia was increasingly influenced by American products, ideas and practices as it was joined inextricably to the ‘American Century’. From the 1920s especially, US political culture, business culture and popular culture increasingly infused Australian society, challenging British influences and reshaping local practices and values. The new nation’s constitution, advertising, marketing and shopping, housing design, suburban culture, consumerism, anti-communism, ideas on ‘race’ masculinity or individualism, Hollywood, television, and popular music were some of the many areas significantly influenced by American importations and American models. Australia became an increasing target of US investment capital and trade. Yet as a number of authors have separately observed, it was not until the late 1960s – a generation after Pearl Harbor and a decade after the Suez crisis – that economic links along with ‘American ideas, values and information had made substantial inroads into the traditionally British cultural and ideological hegemony in Australia’. And, at the same time as Britain’s empire and influence retreated after World War II, fears bred of the evils of the ‘air-conditioned [American] nightmare’ were voiced increasingly.

Cultural resistance, often expressed simply in anti-American slogans, resurfaced as Australia was joined to American interventions abroad during the Cold War. Many Australian commentators and scholars – anxious since the 1960s to identify and protect an emerging national identity – were convinced of the transforming power of America and Americanisation on receiving cultures. As US cultural influences grew and a conservative Australian government went ‘all the way with LBJ’ in Vietnam, cultural and political resistance to putative Americanisation strengthened. From the mid-1960s, as in the 1920s, US culture was widely decried as vulgar and concern was expressed at the ‘steadily growing…Americanisation of this country.’ Left nationalist attacks against the incursions of American popular culture and political ideology intensified after the war. ‘Coca-Cola colonisation’ became a symbol of unacceptable American modernity and excessive consumerism. A curious alliance of Anglophile conservative, British ‘race’ patriots and left-nationalists expressed concern with the barbarism of mass culture and its levelling effects on Anglo-Australian values and pastimes. As Geoffrey Serle’s much quoted claim implied, a substantial cross-section of educated Australians lamented what they understood as a sudden shift from traditional British cultural associations to corrupt or vacuous American importations – even if most welcomed the protection of the US against the tide of change in decolonising Asia and watched their children consume American film, music and television with alacrity. Political cartoons from the late 1960s were equally convinced of the implications of American power and cultural imperialism for Australian independence and identity. In The Sydney Morning Herald, for example Molnar’s much-reproduced cartoon of 1966 depicted the Australian flag with the stars and stripes replacing the Union Jack in the top left-hand corner. Two decades later, Moir used a now familiar image of a satellite controlled from Washington to suggest Australia’s uncontested dependence on its great powerful ally. In 2002, popular local commentators ironically welcomed Australia’s incorporation as the fifty-first star of the American flag and echoing anti-Vietnam rhetoric, wrote of Australia again going ‘all the way to the USA’. Yet if such representations were judgements about Australia’s putative Americanisation, they were also appealing popular statements of anti-
Americanism which symbolised the limits of cultural subservience to Australia’s so-called protector. Just as Australia’s involvement in Vietnam gave rise to contradictory expressions of bilateral commitment and anti-Americanism, so Australia’s post-Cold War role as deputy sheriff in the Asia-Pacific has sharpened expressions of national independence and anti-Americanism.

Throughout much of the Cold War, ambivalence about America and fear of ‘Americanisation’ continued, giving voice to both local nationalist discourses as well as residual British traditions. In short, British political culture and popular culture remained significant even as American influences increased. And if culture is carried in the baggage of immigrants, Britain and Europe, not the US, remained at the centre of Australia’s cultural practices and ideas – even as a more independent nation celebrated its multicultural complexion and embrace of Asia. Further, if trade and investment are rough yardsticks of the extent of foreign borrowings, Australia’s cultural links were not significantly reoriented towards the US until the late 1960s – after the strategic importance of the US had been demonstrated in World War II, formalised under ANZUS and deepened by decolonisation and subsequent regional conflicts.8

Complaints about so-called Americanisation have, since, the end of the Cold War, largely shifted from the political to the cultural sphere – from alarm over Australia’s subservience to American power and interests, to fears over the erosion of national identity and local cultural authority. ‘Imported’ ‘Americanising’ language, dress, drugs, screenagers, sport, fast food, film, television, music, tabloid journalism, crime and punishment, fashion and ‘lifestyle’ have largely displaced foreign policy and the Pentagon as the focus of Australian concern. Yet close strategic and economic links do not necessarily reflect, or serve as precursors of cultural imitation or subservience. As in the past, Canberra’s current willingness to play ‘deputy sheriff’ to Washington reflects perceived national interests, not persuasive Americanisation. Indeed many Anglo-Australians, from Robert Menzies to John Howard, have been happy to seek an intimate alliance with the US, even as they longed nostalgically for the Mother Country and sought to reinvent ‘core’ national values centred on a British-Australian past or the nation’s independent exploits in wars abroad.

Like much of Western Europe and Canada, Australia has a long love-hate relationship with US exports, whether these be material or ideological. These continue to be both welcomed as the glittering promise of modernity, capitalism and democracy and resisted as a hegemonic threat to national differences and diversity in an increasingly globalised/Americanized world. This contradictory understanding and reception of America abroad implicitly suggests flaws in the claim that unequal societies are simply vulnerable to the Great Power’s influences, unable to resist the homogenising consequences of its ‘soft power’. Yet the Australian example – like that of say, France, Germany or the UK – indicates that American influences have been variously effective and unpredictable within different national cultures. Cultural resistance, negotiation, adaptation, modification, and outright rejection as well as different or varied levels of acceptance or accommodation, are everywhere apparent. From within an allegedly imitative culture, like Australia, particular local responses are generated by distinct historical legacies, unique social forces and particular cultural forms. For example, in the field of television – an apparent spearhead of Americanisation – local programs and productions have flourished despite the popularity of some US sitcoms, big budget movies and transplanted current affairs formats. Over fifty years of viewing, a vernacular Australian voice, local accents and Australian stories have not been swamped or indeed diminished by television product made for the US market (a claim argued in detail later in this paper).

Obviously the US remains a powerful social model and cultural precursor which other states find difficult to ignore. However, in a variety of studies of Americanisation published from the early 1990s, interpretations built on ideas of unilateral domination or cultural
imperialism have been rejected. Rob Kroes, a leading European scholar in this field, summarises these arguments perceptively: ‘America’s culture has become an unavoidable presence’ globally, but its ‘reception knows many voices: there is a resilience in other cultures that refuses to be washed away’.9

Recent studies also agree that so-called Americanisation cannot be separated from even broader processes or modernisation, consumerism and globalisation – processes of which America is a part but for which it is not separately responsible. Writing of France, Richard Kuisel argues that ‘Americanisation’ has ‘become increasingly disconnected from America’, is confused with global changes affecting much of the postwar world, and might best be identified as ‘the coming of consumer society’.10 Writing of how Australia was ‘implicated’ in America and Americanisation, Bell and Bell have suggested that broadly parallel developments in different modern societies – from suburbanisation to fashion or ‘economic rationalism’ – should not be interpreted as caused by the US imposing its own image on other willing, or unwilling imitative cultures. It is appropriate to view Australia as following the US along a broadly similar if somewhat retarded road towards post-industrial status, passing through stages of modernization that characterize most capitalist or mixed economies this century. Thus, in this interpretation, the suburbs, freeways and mass culture were not symptomatic of the Americanisation of Australia but of the modernization of both the US and Australia.11

Exaggerated fears of external threat and cultural loss have characterised Australian history since the mid nineteenth century. Australia has long struggled to reconcile the forces of its European past with the imperatives of its geographic location. Even if it were true that domestic Australia has been overwhelmed by Americanisation, its foreign relations continue to be shaped fundamentally by national interests not cultural integration with another state. While US culture has been deeply and variously implicated in Australia’s modern history, it does not necessarily follow that American cultural power has reoriented Australia’s insecure international gaze from Britain and Europe. Realpolitik, not cultural or social similarity, shaped Australia’s quest for American strategic assurances. In peace, as in war, national interests not shared values or pastimes, determined fundamental shifts in Australia’s diplomacy and foreign policy.

Lamenting the ‘loss’ of Australian autonomy
The ‘Americanisation’ of global culture after 1945 has been widely understood as a vital precursor of the triumph of the US in the Cold War. America’s global reach was, and is, underpinned by its cultural ascendency – by the appeal of its so-called ‘soft power’.12 Writing of Australia during the Cold War, Richard White suggested that it could possibly be argued that the ‘Americanisation of popular culture created the conditions in which American investment and military alliances were accepted without popular opposition.’13 Given its modern Anglophone culture, Australia, Geoffrey Serle claimed, was more vulnerable to Americanisation than were other Western nations.14 In the wake of Vietnam, a growing number of Australian scholars explored the complex ‘web of dependence’ that it was claimed underpinned the expanding postwar relationship between their nation and the US. ‘No examination of the Australian-American connection, however general, would be complete’, Joseph Camilleri argued in 1980, ‘without at least passing reference to the pervasive influence which the US came to exert over Australian culture and politics.’ Several other studies also attempted to detail the level of Australia’s postwar ‘dependency’ on the dominant power of capitalist America. Although essentially concerned with economics or ‘political economy’, some of these analysed culture, media, and ideology. To cite Camilleri again: ‘The phenomenon of dependence in Australia’s external relations, though most conspicuous in the diplomatic and military alignment with the US, has also had a critical economic and cultural
component.’ His work accepted that ‘American values, institutions and policies have come to dominate not only Australia’s external conduct but its economic and political life.’

This defensive judgement resonates through much recent Australian commentary on international affairs, cultural change and national identity. During the 1990s a chorus of complaint about American domination has been raised in the pages of Australian newspapers and magazines. Columnist Phillip Adams satirically observed ‘…if the Americans can put a man on the moon, they can fit Australia into their Flag’. This rather backward-looking rhetoric echoes Don Watson’s eloquent lament:

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

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

The existing panoply of symbols and mantras excludes too many people and too much of what has happened since the War (WWII) – the migrants, Vietnam, the increase in the educated population, the beneficiaries and victims of the new economy, the new roles for women and new awareness of their roles in the past, a new awareness of the land. Australia now contains multitudes that the legend cannot accommodate.

So long as our leaders ply the legend as if it can accommodate them, the further we drift from the truth about ourselves.

Of course, Watson is correct: Australia needs to imagine new versions of its many communities. The old stories do exclude too many ‘new’ Australians (both local and overseas born) and their cultures. But it does not follow that no stories make sense to ‘us’, nor that the dialogues we call ‘culture’ have been silenced. Modern postwar society is now caught up in dynamic global and bilateral political and cultural currents that might better be called post-modern.

Watson does allow that the newly-globalised Australia is ‘pluralist and post-modern’, although he seems to believe that such a cultural multiplicity is as incoherent as it is inauthentic. It is inauthentic because it is modeled on the US and defies definition in traditionally local terms:

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

Obviously, if one demands that cultures be univocal, homogenous and consensual, they are more easily imprisoned than if they are plural and dynamic, a possibility that Watson seems to lament, along with the Australian Prime Minister. He therefore links global economic forces to cultural and social changes that he fears are disintegrating. He sees the newly minted deregulation of wages and the economy as a counterfeit currency, undermining consensus and coherence, and equates globalisation with Americanisation:

The most useful thing to is recognize that in taking these decisions we took the biggest step we have ever taken towards the American social model. And this has profound implications for how we conceive of Australia and how we make it cohere.

We would argue that Australian cultures are authentic and coherent, though they are not consensual, static or backward looking. Watson’s (and Phillip Adam’s) defeatist nostalgia is unwarranted. Globally-oriented and irreverent it may sometimes be, but recent Australian proclamations of what the nation values are unmistakably local and historically-grounded.
This is despite some American accents and presentational styles, as the recent Olympic ceremonial attests.

**Celebrating Australia in post-modern ways**

Global media events, according to Dayan and Katz, promote societal integration, nationalistic loyalty and consensus around notions of ‘Humanity’ (‘We are the world’, etc). They proclaim themselves ‘historic’, and are preplanned, yet they are not ostensibly designed for the media.\(^{18}\) However they offer a golden opportunity for nationalistic self-promotion, for turning old stereotypes of a country around, a process in which Australia has been deeply involved especially through its tourism and education industries, during the past two decades.

If it is a *sine qua non* of being post-modern that a nation shifts from resources and manufacturing to service industries (moving the dirty and heavy work offshore), then Australia was, in 2000, a very different kind of place from 1956 when Melbourne hosed the Olympics. The cultural and social debates which, in Australia, are displacing the more formally ‘political’ discourses of those times when the nation ‘rode on the sheep’s back’, before the Australian dollar was ‘floated’, echo these transformative economic and industrial movements. Locally inflected lifestyle consumerism, sports and nostalgic nationalism are increasingly seen as culturally salient overseas, as is the smiling face of state sanctioned multiculturalism. Of course, the ongoing debates around Aboriginal land rights (Mabo), the ‘stolen generations’ and reconciliation, refugees and human rights, do not intrude into the publicity brochures for our distant and exotic example of somewhere to visit.

Herman noted before the Sydney Games that:

> The advertising of Australia has started to incorporate characteristics associated with ‘the post-modern’, such as irony, parody and self-reflexivity. An example (was) the dotted kangaroos on bicycles in the eight minute Australian advertisement at the closing ceremony in Atlanta. In line with Australia’s status as post-national, post-colonial or a post-modern archetype, the country has come to be advertised as a model for a globalised society with a fluid multicultural identity and a flourishing indigenous culture.\(^{19}\)

Other commentators have noted also that Australia’s tourist and Olympic marketing has become increasingly engaged in selling images of an exotic transhistorical place, a place of tradition, but also of post-colonial innovation and fun. As Australia is only one among many settler societies coming to terms with its own history, the unique brand of exoticism and spectacle it offers needs to be highlighted. How better than to turn away from temporal history towards a metonymic and metaphoric (what Freud would call ‘displaced and condensed’) dreamscape? Here, Peter Conrad observes, in the global tourist-inviting, post-modern media-panorama, a new but ancient people and place (or perhaps a more general ‘space’) could be imagined, building on contemporary European projections and tourism rhetoric.

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

Conrad notes that Australia has been ‘re-branded’.\(^{20}\) We would add that it is now again brand-new (see below): ‘Discover the other side of yourself’ – Australia is ‘…the envy of a world that once ignored its existence. Dreams now travel in a different direction, gravitating back from a deracinated northern hemisphere to the earthy enchanted south.’ (The *National Geographic Magazine* also focused on Sydney, ‘Olympic City’ in its August 2000 edition. Bill Bryson’s piece was studded with sunlit beaches and glittering water. He too pointed to the vibrancy of the city being ‘old and young’ at the same time.)
From the perspective of Europe or America, the re-enchanted antipodes are unsullied by such vices as the televisually-inescapable racism, including genocidal wars, in the former Yugoslavia or Rwanda. Australia also seems safely distant from blatant technological power (such as that evidenced in the US’ Gulf War, and in silicon chip imperialism). Similarly, the corruption scandals surrounding the Olympic movement itself needed to be distanced and put in the past by Sydney. ‘Australia’ therefore seemed to be created as a label for a kind of European-originated innocence which connoted youth, fun, irony (of an unserious kind) and domestic hospitality. In short, the fresh face of the child as the newest, smiling version of European modernity. Perhaps Australia was presenting itself as a ‘new age’, transcendent version of post-modernity. It certainly saw itself optimistically, and adopted a peculiarly local iconic and verbal vernacular as it smiled at the huge international television audience. It is true that the symbolic reconciliation between Aboriginal and European Australians enacted during the ceremony could be read as an ideologically-driven attempt to excuse colonial oppression, and that the exploitation of Cathy Freeman (‘an Aboriginal’ athlete) to light the cauldron smacked of protesting too much, but even these gestures would have been impossible in, say, the corresponding ceremony of 1956, a time when Australia was importing unprecedented numbers of immigrants and following the ‘American social model’ of modernization (pace Watson, above).

The vernacular Olympic ceremony showcased a very particular story about Australianness to sell a new brand of national sensibility. The story resonated ideologically with the discourses of contemporary tourism, promoting Australia as a utopian example of successful Westernisation, neither European nor American, but echoing both. This may appear inauthentic if one assumes that Australia ‘has’ a fixed character or identity, based on pioneering Anglocentric traditions, but the Olympic festivities were understood and endorsed by most who saw them, both locally and globally.

Vernacular television

Looking back to the first two decades of Australian television, there is little evidence of a distinctive, local voice. American programs and formats dominated commercial channels’ schedules, with the most popular genres centred on the family (Leave it to Beaver, I Love Lucy); adventures, including Westerns; the law and the underworld; institutions (especially hospitals) and Disney-ing fantasy. Bell and Bell have commented on the first two decades of Australian television thus:

That more Australians watched Roots than any other television broadcast prior to 1980 suggest that the idioms and cultural content of American history and American television were familiar and pleasurable in Australia. More generally, however, it is clear from the empirical evidence of the ‘ratings’ at least, that Australians watched American genre series in huge numbers from the first years of television. Until The Mavis Brampton Show (1965) and Homicide (1967), locally produced entertainment programs other than the news, sport, or games shows, were too rare to be genuinely competitive with American imports (if one allows that ratings data demonstrate cultural ‘preferences’). Three years after the introduction of television, in 1959, all of the ‘top ten’ programs in Australia originated from the United States: 77 Sunset Strip, Wagon Train, Sea Hunt, Rescue 8, Maverick, Perry Mason, Leave it to Beaver, Father Knows Best, Rifleman, and Sunday night movies.21

However, summaries of audience ratings during Australian television’s first 25 years cannot be extrapolated to describe the 1980s and 1990s. Since the relatively late introduction of colour into the Australian medium, increasingly local programming has flourished. As Jacka and Dermody have shown, the introduction of colour television corresponded with a resurgent nationalism and nationalistic cinema-generating locally-inflected genres in current affairs, sports and magazine programming.22 Recent developments in Australian commercial television extend the above quoted generalizations and, in important respects, contradict them.
In particular, the rise of magazine-style, ‘infotainment’, comedy, and consumer advocacy genres has led local audience preferences since the mid-to-late 1980s especially. This change corresponds roughly to the years of the Hawke-Keating governments, when financial institutions were deregulated and there was strong growth in tourism and other service industry employment, the introduction of competition in telecommunications and the multiplication of ‘information industries’ jobs.

Australian consumerism has shifted towards services and information. This is reflected in new demographics which drive television programming via advertising – the ‘key link’ in the relationships amongst television industries, audiences and program genres and schedules. Increasingly, many of the most watched programs conflate advertising and their infotainment content. The popularity of these programs, we argue, reinforces retrospective complacency and closes the gate on possible intrusions by the political or the public. In short, they ask audiences to be ‘relaxed and comfortable’, echoing the disaffection which Prime Minister John Howard’s ‘battlers’ and former One Nation Party leader, Pauline Hanson’s ‘mainstream’, expressed. High levels of rural unemployment, the relative impoverishment of the would-be middle-class, increasing hours of work for static incomes and the dismantling of social security – these might be soil in which such programs thrive.

This is not to argue that during the past twenty years the details of television’s populist discourses have not changed. In the 1990s, the global and the American are linked symbolically and Australia itself is represented as relatively disempowered. The corporatist ‘other’ of populism from which ‘Aussies’ are estranged is now more opaque and indescribable. But the authentication of ‘our’ ordinary selves in the privately public rituals of home and leisure remains patent and potent in commercial television. Against the strident banality of the local program, the glamour and professionalism of imported shows is artificial and escapist (‘unreal’). American television shows are those in the third person. Australians are addressed as ‘you’ in the hyper-vernacularised discourses of the genres we have discussed. Through television, we consume our most ordinary, our most Australian selves.

Commercial television’s populism is directed against not America, not the State, but public life, corporatis government and all things which proclaim themselves as ‘political’, although these entities are not named in the televised rituals which celebrate their irrelevance: In King and Rowse’s words, ‘… the non-popular entity remains unnamed and the ‘popular’ remains plural and inclusive’.23 ‘Real’ Australian sports and domestic consumerism are the ground of television’s address; the figure consists of the artifice, imported dramas and political display which are segregated from the populist programs by advertisements and station promotions. The latter proclaim television’s own power to represent Australia by displacing the public/political, and providing ‘all you need to know’ about ‘the way it is’.

In these popular genres no discernible social context (no particular class, suburb or demographic) is implied. Predominantly Anglo-centric (Anglo/Australo-centric?), chattily optimistic, sentimental or mildly humorous, these genres present their ordinary audiences themselves as their ‘stars’. Their ‘nationalistic realism’ is the realism of the putative reflection – never before has the ‘just-like-us-ness’ of television been so blatant, so common (in every sense). Australian commercial television has indigenised imported American formats. It has vernacularised almost to the point of parody (cf. Roy and H.G . during the Olympics; Elle McFeast; The Fat) and has domesticated even the limited images of people in public that earlier genres celebrated.

Many of the programs that have achieved great popularity in the last decade are incorrigibly domestic, sub-urban, nostalgic and ostensibly class-less. They suggest that television’s inadvertent, distracted audience uses the medium as well as being used by it to rehearse various facets of its identity/ies. To focus on the American origins of television programs is to ignore their destinations in the current Australian context. It is in the address of
‘live’ broadcasts and of locally produced infotainment shows that local populism is principally advanced via various modes of a ‘nationalist realism’ in which ‘Australia’ is ritualistically rehearsed. The assertion that television is a conduit for cultural ‘Americanisation’ seems difficult to sustain in the face of the popularity of the genres considered. Not only are examples of such genres increasing, they are increasingly popular. We believe they are also distinctively populist in emphasizing the authenticity of ordinary people in the non-political realm. The origins of such genres of commercial television and the prevalence of American entertainment notwithstanding, ‘Australian’ television has vernacularised and indigenised imported formats throughout its history. In the context of global Anglophone culture (with an American accent), local television has increasingly practiced being different during the past decade.

**American/global/local**

The blanket term ‘Americanisation’ is frequently no more than an assumption concerning the origins of a cultural example (language, dress, food) which may or may not be accurate. It is applied indiscriminately within Australian media discourse to label an array of factors seen as threatening to national(istic) identity, way of life or values. This pejorative use of ‘Americanisation’ sees Australia as adopting social practices and cultural values which putatively originate in the United States (or in Hollywood, Los Angeles, or some metonymic reference to that nation). It assumes that the offending items are not meaningful within the Australian context merely because they make cultural sense to some local groups, but that they carry with them their alien ‘American’ origins. It follows that popular discourse on this issue is frequently nationalistic, assuming a uniquely Australian cultural and political identity and consensus which US-originated culture threatens.

Australian complaints about putative Americanisation have shifted from the economic to the cultural sphere, at least since the rise of global capital in the 1980s which seems to have displaced the Yankee dollar as the preferred culprit in the popular discussions of US influence on other nations. Culture (language, dress and sport in particular) has attracted the most vocal reactions – if the correspondents to and professional commentators in the local media are taken as the yardstick. Yet cultural reception and transformation (what Bell and Bell called ‘negotiation’ in *Implicated*) involve complex processes, much more than ‘imitation’ or ‘domination’ suggest. As Australia is increasingly an exporter as well as an importer of commercial Anglophone culture (such as TV ‘soaps’) it is increasingly difficult to see all such commerce in imperialistic terms.

Recent culturalist analyses have moved away from ‘essentialist’, fixed typifications of identity towards more contested, even contradictory and shifting or provisional postulations of ‘identities’ (always in quotation marks, usually plural). Such a discursive approach emphasises that what we label national ‘identities’ are not aggregations of psychological types; instead they can be thought of as particular modes and fields of representation itself: Australian cultural identity, then, refers to particular discursive productions rather than to psychological character types or some list of ideal cultural ‘values’ which have no precise material basis or context. Identity, ironically, is not singular, but a fabric of textual strands with no fixed boundaries.

In *Implicated*, Bell and Bell adopted a linguistic metaphor to express the fluidity and dynamism of cultural influence:

> If one thinks of Australian culture and society as structured like a language, ...then one might think of ‘Americanisation’ as like linguistic infiltration. It does not so much replace or displace the local lexicon as supplement it and change its elements...change is effected throughout the whole structure even though no obliteration of a previous lexicon may occur..."
We have argued that international political relationships are not reducible to cultural ‘influences’, and that the latter are never simple. Local cultures may become increasingly vernacular and confidently proclaim their distinctiveness to a globalised or American-dominated international community while, at the same time, the smaller nation-state (even an Anglophone, treaty-bound nation-state like Australia), aligns itself more intimately with American initiatives internationally. If the trajectory of Australian foreign relations remains relatively fixed within an American orbit, its cultural borders are continually re-imagined in unexpected and complex ways.

NOTES

7. These cartoons are reproduced in Bell and Bell, *Implicated*…op. cit., pp. 188-89 (prints).

Sections of this paper discussing culture and ‘Americanisation’ are informed by the collaborative work of Philip Bell and Roger Bell – work jointly published during the 1990s, as indicated in the notes above.