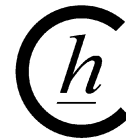


Report Card for the Small Screen

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CURRENCY HOUSE



I'm a big fan of the *The Royle Family*. I love the way they love television.

They watch it all the time; they slump in couches and armchairs every night, eating their meals in front of it, and every event and conversation happens as a backdrop to it. The entire family, Jim, Barbara, daughter Denise, son in law Dave and young Anthony live their lives as an adjunct to it. It holds them in its thrall as surely as a snake charmer with a snake. Happy television addicts.

Few of us can aspire to the level of dedication and commitment as Caroline Aherne's characters in the BBC comedy series *The Royle Family*. But most of us do watch it, some of the time, and many of us much of the time.

On this very day in 1956 the Australian Broadcasting Commission began transmission of its television service, not the first in the country but just a few weeks after channels Seven and Nine, and just in time for the opening of the Melbourne Olympic Games.

The first night on air was presented by Michael Charlton, an esteemed and very British broadcaster. It began with a speech by the Prime Minister Robert Menzies, followed by a live to air production of one of J.M.Barrie's lesser-known plays, *The Twelve Pound Look*. And then a sit com, a second world war documentary about the role of aeroplanes in the founding of the Luftwaffe, another documentary then at ten to ten, a goodnight sign off, and transmission ceased. Less than 3 hours of broadcast, all of it worthy and earnest and strongly influenced by British tastes and sensibilities. A cultural affiliation that still remains an important part of the ABC today.

Was this selection of material reflective of what life was like at the time?

Donald Horne in *The Lucky Country* describes Australia in the 1950's this way. He says, "Australians took their pleasures solemnly, like true Anglo Saxons. ... for many decades Puritanism – bizarre in the sunshine of Australia – seemed to stifle Australian society. In most states hotel bars shut at 6.00; liquor was not allowed with meals; betting was illegal; there were no social centres in the suburbs; ...the community was almost completely philistine towards the intellect and the arts; there were few good restaurants; Sundays were dismal; book banning and other forms of censorship flourished; a woman's place was in the home."

Fifty years ago, Australia was in the grip of long time prime minister Robert Menzies, the Labor party was in the throes of a traumatic split and the Democratic Labor party was on the rise with B.A.Santamaria as its leader, suburban sprawl was well underway, the Unions were strong and

left wing, and social conservatism was all pervasive. It's little wonder that the home entertainment that television offered was so enthusiastically embraced.

Television sets were expensive then, an average set cost about 200 guineas, more than half the average wage at the time. Three quarters of all televisions were bought on hire purchase, and those that couldn't afford one crowded around shop windows to enjoy the entertainment. There is a story that when the first sporting event was broadcast in 1956 that the crowds watching it outside Gowings spilled out onto the roadway in George street, blocking it to traffic.

Monday 5th November 1956 - was it a night that has left us all better off?

Or is it a reason to despair when we look at what this great communication system has delivered to us. Is Big Brother what we hoped for in 1956?

After 50 years, and 438,000 hours of television, it is time to assess its achievements. We all know television as the creator of popular culture, both the originator and celebrator of those things, which in vast numbers we endorse and enjoy.

The key popular achievements of TV have been well documented. The extraordinary power of TV to cover world events with great speed and immediacy has been demonstrated again and again, with the middle of the night footage of 9/11, the live coverage of the funeral of Diana, the recent dawn dramas of the World Cup, the spectacular opening and closing ceremonies of Olympic games, the shocking events of the boxing day tsunami, the moment by moment invasion of Iraq, the horrors of hurricane Katrina ... mean that millions if not billions of people all around the world can see and share in these events simultaneously.

Not only has the technology of production and transmission made this possible, but the penetration of television into all parts of the world, and all economic groups seems unstoppable. From affluent western homes to the most isolated and impoverished places television is there.

I remember on a trip to Bali with my son some years ago, as we wandered around Ubud, I could hear an eerily familiar tune. The theme music of **Police Rescue** was wafting from the back room of a crafts stall, and I glimpsed a dozen children sitting on the dirt floor, huddled around the set, watching it, transfixed.

And who can forget the brilliant film **Turtles Can Fly**? Set in a Kurdish refugee camp on the Iraqi-Turkish border on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq, it's the story of a dynamic and irrepressible thirteen-year-old boy nicknamed Satellite who specialises in the installation of dishes and antennae for local villages wanting to watch the latest news of Saddam on television. His other job is organizing the younger children in the sweeping and clearing of minefields and trying not to get blown up.

From refugee camp to home cinemas, television is everywhere. From news and information, from reality shows to quizzes, from documentaries to dramas, it is a diverse spread.

But at the other end of the spectrum, what is the role of TV in the intellectual and artistic life of the country? In the arts and high culture, how has television performed?

Back in the very beginnings of the BBC, broadcasting was seen as a public utility to be developed as a national service, in the public interest. But it was up to John Reith, the BBC's first director general, in 1923 to articulate the role. Georgina Born in her book about the BBC, *Uncertain Vision*, says "Reith conceived of broadcasting as a social, cultural, educative and moral force. It should entertain but it is not for entertainment alone; it must also inform and Educate. Public service broadcasting should be committed to maintaining high standards and to leading rather than simply following public tastes. It must help to diffuse knowledge and bring the best in human culture into the greatest number of homes...."

“In defining British broadcasting, a primary factor in the thinking of Reith and his peers was their distaste for American commercial broadcasting, its profit motive and market driven entertainment principle. The British system was to be defined against the American one. In Reith’s view a national broadcasting system must fulfil major social and political functions.”

TV was envisaged as a kind of adult education for the masses, a force for long life learning, and an arbiter of quality. This credo was developed at a time of minimal secondary and tertiary education in England. Fewer than 40% of the population finished secondary school. Public broadcasting was going to offer a rich mix of programming that would edify as well as entertain.

The ABC followed this approach when it was set up, modelling itself in every way on the BBC. Donald McDonald described it this way, “Those who had the privilege of higher education felt a duty to share the cultural benefits they’d had with those who had enjoyed few opportunities. The best ideas travelled in the name of quality and high culture”.

Both organisations were influenced by the Victorian reformer Mathew Arnold for whom culture was conceived as a way of lessening social divisions and class hostilities. Culture according to Arnold “seeks to do away with classes; to make the best that has been thought and known in the world current everywhere.” Both the BBC and following it, the ABC believed that the pursuit of cultural values would have intrinsic social benefits.

On its 50th birthday, now is a good time to ask the question “has there been a pursuit of cultural values and has it had intrinsic social benefits?”

I remember the early years of TV, as a child growing up in the 50’s. My father was a lover of the arts, a consumer I think we’d call him now, of classical music, of painting and sculpture, and of theatre. He disdained the thought of having a television set as if it were a barbaric and offensive intruder in the home, bringing with it the bad odour of popular culture. A view shared by many then, and even now.

We succumbed to the lure eventually and got one in our house. My father rarely watched it without holding up a copy of the Sydney Morning Herald high in front of his face, blocking his view of the set. Every now and then, the newspaper would dip, as he would take a furtive glance at the rubbish on offer, never less than surprised that something was worth watching after all. Given that we only ever watched the ABC there seems little reason now for the depth of his disdain.

Sadly that disdain is still widespread in some quarters of our community, and some say proudly “Oh I never watch television” as if that fact alone attests to their Intellectual superiority. To illustrate this phenomenon, I can do no better than quote from an article in The Australian by Deborah Hope in September this year. She begins “A few years back the New York Times critic Stephen Holden named the television show *The Sopranos* as possibly “the greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century”. I couldn’t say. I’ve never watched *The Sopranos*. Since I turned off the box when I left home in 1973 to attend university, I’ve hardly tuned in again.”

She goes on, describing her formative years at university, “Instead of being glued to the set we went to see movies by Luis Bunuel and Federico Fellini and obscure eastern European directors or else sat up all night drinking and talking, plotting the overthrow of the state, arguing over books we’d read, gossiping and reading poetry.” And she ends, “When a few weeks ago I asked my husband to turn on the TV so we could watch *The West Wing*, he replied he wasn’t sure he knew how to. He wasn’t joking.”

I am sure there are many Deborah Hopes and husbands around today. But let me tell you Deborah, I too can claim to going to Bunuel and Fellini films, to reading poetry, and discussing the downfall of the state, arguing over books, going to the theatre, engaging in intelligent conversation, but I also watched television and loved it in the same way as I have loved all the other art forms I enjoy. And Deborah's life is the poorer for missing out on *The Sopranos*.

Just to prove that TV snobbery is alive and well, and nowhere more so than in the arts, let me give you another example from this year. The Sydney Writers festival showed at each session a backdrop of a graphically bold and good looking design, showing a gun pointed at a television screen, studded with bullet holes. No mistaking the message there. Writers, REAL writers, would like to kill television. The destruction of one form by another. But for some, the boast that they never watch television is more understandable.

I remember in 1980 I was asked to script edit, or dramaturg, a series of Australian theatre plays for the ABC. I decided to approach each of the playwrights to offer them the opportunity to make any changes or add new material to adapt them for television. They were to be productions created and recorded in studio, with cameras up close and in the action, and with cast chosen and performance style suited to that intimacy. They also had to be censored for television transmission, at that time a more conservative platform than theatre.

One of the plays we chose was *Big Toys*. With great trepidation, I went to see Patrick White to talk to him about a television version of his play. 'Oh' said Patrick, 'I've never seen a teler-vision play. I don't watch teler-vision'. I explained, to his amusement, as he watched me jump through his intellectual hoops, that there was no interval on TV, that the camera made choices of emphasis and interpretation that the audience in a theatre makes for themselves, and that close up shots made the reading of expression an alternative to dialogue, and so on and so on.

He listened politely. Eventually I had exhausted the subject and had not yet mentioned censorship. Finally, and bracing myself for his utter contempt, I explained that the word 'fuck' was not OK for this "teler-vision" production. A hoot of laughter from him. "Good!" he said "Frigging! It's a better word! Change all the fucks to frigging!" So I did.

He visited the set, watched rehearsals, and as far as I know visited friends to watch it on air. Though he never acquired a television set of his own.

In the arts there is an unspoken hierarchy of creative value, in which TV comes somewhere down the bottom, well below theatre, literature, classical music, painting and opera at the top. Perhaps a hierarchy in inverse proportion to popularity ?

As Julius Sumner Miller a popular scientist from television's early years would say, "but why is it so"?

Why has the arts world been so uneasy with television? And why has television looked so rarely to the talents of playwrights and designers, and composers for ideas for programs? Why has there not been constant collaboration and goodwill between the worlds?

Individual artists and organisations want television to bring news of their work to the masses that they can't reach through the limited size and space of concert halls, and theatres and galleries, and bookshops and festivals.

Many artists recognise that television is a crucial path to publicising and promoting their work. A new opera, a visiting ballet company, a prize announced at the art gallery, an Australian writer on the Booker nominations, the latest Australian film star, a contentious exhibition, all get coverage, in news and current affairs programs. Visiting writers and famous actors, and prize winners get to do the publicity circuit and do a week or two of interviews on radio and television chat shows, from *The 7.30 Report* to *Rove*, from *Enough Rope* to daytime arts shows.

And this is important, not only for the art form itself, but as a reminder to all that the arts are part of our society. It focuses attention on the art form, and because it is on the mass medium it affirms its importance to an audience. But there is never enough coverage and never enough time. And there are always more artists and arts activities that can ever be fitted in. And in regional centres there is almost no local news about their artists and art forms.

The ABC charter requires the ABC to "promote the arts", and it does, but there are no such expectations of commercial television. On commercial television, obsessed with celebrities, reality shows and make overs, there is nothing for the discerning arts consumer.

In Australia, there has been a relatively unchallenged assumption that the need to make a profit transcends all other responsibilities. Unlike the UK, where Jeremy Isaacs, a former head of ITV, boasted that at ITV they prided themselves on taking on the BBC in a full range of programming, including the arts.

In his book *Look Me in the Eye: A Life In Television*, he says "Generally people haven't understood how varied and ambitious and rich in programming the ITV companies variously were....The ethos encouraged ITV programme makers at the Big Five companies to compete with the BBC for creative excellence across the programme genres...We lifted things in the arts, in drama and documentary...Variety is what conduced the impressiveness of ITV as a broadcasting system".

He goes on "Was I, someone who studied Latin and Greek at Oxford and who tried to be a Reithian at ITV exceptional? Did ITV always see itself in contra distinction to a high-culturalist elitist BBC channel? In my view it absolutely didn't"

Try looking for the Reithians in commercial television here. It would be a long and lonely search to find anyone who had heard of Reith, let alone subscribed to its relevance in Australia.

The Packers, the Stokes, and Can West don't spend time worrying about how to satisfy the dual obligations of public service and profit. Holding a television licence is only about profits, right? There's no duty to the public, just to the shareholders, right? The wanton and endless disregard of the viewing public, and the vicious pursuit of ratings and profit intensifies each year. If a program doesn't rate in a week or two or three, it is taken off air.

In that world, and with no underlying ethos of duty, there is no room for the creative voice or vision.

Could it have been different? Would arts groups have argued for some regulation if they had engaged with television from the beginning?

Were they frightened of tackling the media moguls and demanding some space on the mass medium, for the cultural work that occurs at the margins? Would it have been too difficult to include a simple phrase like the one in the ABC's Charter, requiring the commercial networks to "promote the arts' as one of their ongoing obligations?

What difference might that have made to the programs of the last 50 years? Would we have seen arts quiz shows, arts reality shows, arts nostalgia shows, and maybe even arts comedies?

Perhaps one of my favourites would even have found a place on Kerry's Nine network, along with *The Footy Show*. There is an arts show originating from the Style network in America, *Craft Corner Death Match*, created in the style of *World Wide Wrestling*. Sitting in rows of wire caged seats, the audience yell and scream as two combatants battle it out to make - wait for it - craft things from found objects, like collages, or winter accessories or greeting cards, fighting against the clock and the tough decisions of craft expert judges. The creations are judged out of ten, on beauty, creativity and utility. The final round pits the winner against the Craft Lady of Steel. The audience clap and cheer and chant in a frenzy of appreciation. The host whips up high

levels of aggression and tension. Craft creations have never been so exciting to watch. Design in action. It's an arts show unlike any other.

To be fair, the commercial broadcasters do fund some arts activities with sponsorships, examples like the Seven network's support for the Australian Opera, and the Nine network's support for the Sydney festival. These sponsorships are much needed and appreciated by the groups themselves, but to put a tougher spin on it, it doesn't cost the broadcaster much and it doesn't affect their real business, and it doesn't hit the bottom line of profits and it doesn't inform a wide audience.

Programs about the arts that they would consider risky and of low audience appeal are not on air, where it would affect their advertising revenues. And in any case they would argue, they don't have to, it's not required by regulation. So when it comes to the arts, all expectations and all acrimony fall on the ABC.

The ABC has a long and proud history of struggling with arts content. [I should remind you that I am not including radio or the Internet in any of these comments, since it is television's birthday we are celebrating right now.] The ABC has been trying over many years to make arts programs that will bridge the gap between the needs and wants of the highly specialised and informed aficionados, and those for whom the arts is a foreign language.

The use of an arts zone on Sunday afternoons has been an attempt to screen serious arts content to a discerning audience, at a time when it is possible to run material of different lengths, of different genres [from performance to documentary to discussion, and interview] and for three hours each week. But as well as that, there is the whole area of arts programs which the broadcaster creates and which have television authorship and point of view. Programs the ABC has made about the arts over the years fall into a number of familiar and recognisable categories.

Firstly, there are discussions shows, which have existed in various forms over many years, the title and the host endlessly changing, the tone and style very similar. All of them serious in their discussion of each art form, and all of them a little bit guilty of sounding somewhat elitist. There have been many of them over the years but the form somehow defies change and each one ends up looking and sounding not too dissimilar from the one before, and none of them appeal to large audiences.

Currently the ABC is showing *The First Tuesday Book Club* as a reading panel show, and before that *Vulture*, and before that *Critical Mass* and so on and so on. They are there because they allow for currency and topicality, audiences see different reactions to the art, and a liveliness of exchange of points of view, and they're not too expensive to make. The most successful by far is *At The Movies*, a film review program that has been running for 20 years on SBS and then the ABC, where two film critics, Margaret Pomeranz and David Stratton each review the same film each week. And often disagree, or emphatically agree, to the delight of their fans.

The second familiar form is the telecast of an existing work. Most frequently, a live recording of a symphony concert, an opera performed on stage, a ballet performance, a rock concert with classical musicians, a Gilbert and Sullivan musical and so on. The camera is there to record the existing event.

In trying to make this way of presenting live performance pleasing to a TV viewer, the limitations of the stage are a real impediment. The camera replaces the theatre goer outside the proscenium arch, but is unable to get amongst the work, and the at home audience sees a second-hand wide-shot experience, with none of the magic and intensity of the real thing. These telecasts also generally fail to attract a big audience.

The third form is the documentary, not unique to arts programming, but when done well immensely successful. One classic form of documentary involves privileged access and behind-the-scenes footage, probably the most famous being *The House*, the BBC's warts and all inside view of the management of Covent Garden, at that time led by Jeremy Isaacs. This is a form that TV does so well, but to date there have been very few made here.

Most arts organisations have been unwilling to allow film crews the kind of access needed to make this happen. In 2001, I tried to do a documentary with this company, covering the tour of Cloudstreet to New York, but all the parties could not agree and in the end it didn't happen. The same problem arose with an approach to record the historic process of Joern Utzon's involvement with renovations to the Opera House. And there are many other examples. Sadly for Australia, these are missed opportunities to record our history and to make riveting television.

The one I really like is more of a strategy than a form. It was first called "arts by stealth" in the UK. The intention is to steal up on the audience and by using popular and appealing and familiar television techniques trick them into watching what they otherwise would not. The size of the audience for traditional arts shows is a constant number, not changing much no matter who the host is, or what the title, or where on the schedule you put it. So by making programs that appeal to audiences who wouldn't normally watch them, you hope to massively increase the size of the audience, and broaden the reach of the art form to new audiences.

A few examples: *Rolf Harris Star Portraits* was the highest rating arts program ever in the UK. Each episode saw three artists painting the portrait of some one familiar to the TV audience, like Parkinson. It was fascinating to watch them try to interpret the face before them using different materials, with different approaches, and struggle to make a portrait that worked in a 2-week period. Rolf Harris says, "we've encouraged people who are not usually brave enough to come into an art gallery. We've helped people realise that art isn't for somebody else – it's for everyone." Education, in the Reith tradition BUT with entertainment.

Another example of arts by stealth, this time from a commercial broadcaster in the UK. *Operatunity*, a series that uses some of the techniques of the reality genres, in which people who've always wanted to be opera singers audition for the show, for a panel of experts, and the winner gets to sing with the opera company.

The ABC has also made its own version of this show seen recently on Sunday nights. Over 4 weeks, we watched as more than 2000 opera wannabes competed to be selected, then watched as twenty and then six of them are chosen for training. All were desperate to realise their dream of singing opera. We watch them improve with practice, and surprise the judges with the quality of their voices. And then watch as three of them sing at the Opera House in a performance of *Rigoletto*. It was a surprisingly emotional and educational experience for the viewer.

How many people, I wonder, having seen *Operatunity* would consider going to an opera for the first time, or listening to an opera on CD who would not otherwise?

A third and final example is the 90-minute special, *My Favourite Book*. This was one for readers. People were asked to vote by nominating the name of their favourite book. The list was distilled to the final 10, and then on the night in a show that used comedy, panel discussion, and dramatisation they watched the countdown of the top ten winners. The final list was full of surprises, at least for me, with *Lord of the Rings* number one, *Cloudstreet* at number 5, and A.B.Facey's *A Fortunate Life* at number 10. It was a big hit with audiences, again in numbers over a million. By contrast, an interview with a writer about their new book would be lucky to get a tenth of that number.

So, arts by stealth works at doing what TV does best, working in its own forms and simplifying the message, to dramatise it to an audience unfamiliar with the art form. Popularising complex ideas and information and creating it freshly in a form that is unique to TV.

Generally these shows are not made for those people already expert in the form, they are not for the cognoscenti, and do not pretend to be. They create an open door into a world that is unavailable to most viewers, and they make it look like fun!! And millions, rather than thousands, will watch them.

Why does the size of the audience matter? Who cares if very few people watch an opera or an interview with a potter? Why this concern with ratings? Shouldn't there be a place for minority tastes on television?

I would answer yes and no.

There are two very precious resources in TV, one is time and the other is money. After counting all the regular programs including news and current affairs each week, there are very few prime time hours left for everything else.

In the Reithian credo of inform, educate and entertain there are many obligations for a public broadcaster in these few hours. Programs about science, religion and ethics, indigenous Australia, arts, documentary, drama, satire and comedy, natural history, factual content, regional, interview shows, all compete with each other for the limited space, and they all should be there. Finding time on air is a constant and continuous pressure. So programs that rate poorly cannot be ignored.

Ratings are provided every morning, at about 8.30, and they describe everything you could want to know about television viewing in the 24 hours that has just passed. Ratings describe the audience's relationship with you. Unlike a theatre where you can see and count the audience, the ratings are the only way you can find out if anyone is there. At times, it is both humbling and infuriating to know who is watching what. And it is always in flux, as other competing programs are scheduled and other activities are demanding their attention.

With such limited time to fit everything in, and such fierce competition for audiences and such active and volatile audiences then every program and every time slot needs to work hard to appeal to its audience. Which brings us to the other precious resource, money.

Television programs are neither cheap nor easy to make. So a show that will cost hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars and that is unlikely to attract a big audience, faces intense competition for funds. This happens in all networks. It is toughest at the ABC, which has the highest expectations from the public and is increasingly short of funds. It relies on direct funding from government but is one of the lowest funded public broadcasters in the world, coming second last between Greece and Portugal.

In Australia, at the ABC, there simply isn't enough money to do what the public, and television management, believe it should do. Particularly in Australian drama.

The decline in television drama has been in the news a lot lately. And for good reason.

There is no single database that records the numbers or names of Australian dramas that have been made since 1956. But where statistics begin, after 1970, records show that over 600 mini series and telemovies have been produced.

This short form drama is the quality end of TV production, the most expensive dramas with the highest standards of production, usually longer shoot times, often actors who are unwilling to do long form series, scripts that have been years in development not weeks, and more ambitious content.

Over the years, through the time now known as the 10BA era to the mid nineties was a golden age of Australian drama. A better funded ABC, along with the tax incentives of the earlier 10BA led to a production boom that resulted in a renaissance of Australian storytelling. In one year alone at the peak of the old and most generous days of tax incentives, 20 telemovies, 25 mini series and 98 documentaries were produced.

To put that into perspective, last year, there was less than 10% of the number.

Let me give you just a few titles to refresh your memory of what used to be ...

Dramas of political and social comment include *The Dismissal*, *True Believers*, *Answered by Fire*, *Scales of Justice*, *Act of Betrayal*, *Children of the Dragon*, and *A Dangerous Life*..

Dramas about the migrant experience, *Bordertown*, *Palace of Dreams*, *Marking Time*, *Cowra Breakout*, *Displaced Persons*, *Dunera Boys*, *Leaving of Liverpool*,

Crime genres, there are many in this genre, *Halifax*, *Blue Murder*, *Water Rats*, *Janus*, *Cody*, *Wildside*, *Phoenix*, and lots more..

History dramas, like *Bodyline*, *The Alien Years*, *Captain James Cook*, *the Petrov Affair*, *The First Kangaroos*, *The Heroes*, *Changi*, *The Anzacs*, *Eureka Stockade*, *Nancy Wake*..

and numerous stories of our times, like *Simone de Beauvoir's Babies*, *The Farm*, *Brides of Christ*, *Paper Man*, *Secret Weapon*, *Fields of Fire*, *Women of the Sun*, *Secret Men's Business*, *Crash Burn*, *Love My Way*, *Crime of the Decade*..

Dramas that recreate stories of public interest like *The Disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain*, *The Day of the Roses* about the Granville train disaster, *Heroes Mountain*, about the rescue of Stuart Diver, and many many more.

When it came to adaptations, I would have guessed that Australian drama had not looked to literature very often for inspiration and for stories. I would have guessed maybe 30 or 40 books had been translated into drama. I was surprised to find how wrong I was. There are over a hundred and fifty books and plays that have made the transition.

Let me remind you of the titles of just a few of them - *Ride on Stranger*, *Come In Spinner*, *A Fortunate Life*, *A Town Like Alice*, *The Shiralee*, *On the Beach*, *Edens Lost*, *I Can Jump Puddles*, *My Brother Jack*, *All the Rivers Run*, *For the Term of his Natural Life*, *Power Without Glory*, *Seven Little Australians*, *Fields of Fire*, *Joe Wilson*, *The Timeless Land*, *Bodysurfer*, *Conferenceville*, *The Perfectionist*, *Cassidy*, *1915*, *Naked Under Capricorn*, *Descant for Gossips*, *Kings In Grass Castles*, *Lucinda Brayford*, *Boys in the Island*, *The Shark Net*.

The writers include some significant and some lesser known writers, Nevil Shute, Ruth Park, Robert Drewe, Eleanor Dark, Olaf Ruhen, Kylie Tennant, George Johnston, Marcus Clark, Frank Moorhouse, Sumner Locke Elliott, David Williamson, Ethel Turner, Martin Boyd, Thea Astley, Frank Hardy, Mary Durack, Darcy Niland, Morris West, Christopher Koch and others. Millions and millions of people have been introduced to the particular and individual talents of these writers that would not otherwise have been. And many powerful and culturally specific dramas have been made.

But to be fair, the mini series and the telemovie are not the only dramas on our screens. In fact, the most visible and enduring form is the serial or soap opera as it is mostly called.

Steven Johnson, American author of *Everything Bad is Good for You* argues "Since the early 80's, the narrative complex of ... dramas has increased noticeably. The most ambitious show on TV to date - *The Sopranos* – routinely follows a dozen distinct threads in an episode, with more than 20 recurring characters....The show doesn't distinguish between dominant and minor plots; each storyline carries its weight in the mix. and almost every sequence connects to

information outside the frame of the current episode". He adds "For a show that spends as much time on the analysts couch, *The Sopranos* doesn't waste a lot of energy on closure."

This style of drama owes much to the serial with its multi threading and extended interwoven stories with multiple characters but the real breakthroughs for these shows are the marrying of complex narrative structure with complex subject matter.

Unfortunately this has not happened in Australia. Here we don't have any continuing dramas of the quality of *Six feet Under*, *Hill St Blues*, *The Sopranos*, *West Wing*, that have tackled storytelling using the most sophisticated of content with the most accessible and common style of story telling. We have successfully mastered the serial, but not the growing up of it.

The decline in the numbers of quality Australian dramas is due to a lot of reasons. The rising costs and the decline in government subsidy mechanisms has led to a serious disappearance of Australian drama from our screens. Apart from the long running and relatively cheaper shows, like *Home and Away*, *Neighbours*, *All Saints* and *McLeods Daughters* there is very little else being made.

Without a sufficient level of production, serious problems arise. The first casualty is diversity of content. The range of stories from police shows to literary adaptations, from social comment to satire and comedy, from issue based drama to escapist fluff has dwindled to an occasional event, once or twice a year instead of a steady supply week in and week out of different and distinctive drama. Risk taking disappears, and any sense of adventurousness collapses. Secondly, the economic base of the industry collapses, writers can barely survive, actors the same, crews can't sustain a living, and nor can the small specialist businesses that service the production sector. There is simply not enough work to go around. The skills base declines. Viewers disappear.

The economy of the dwindling production sector affects many. Arts practitioners often work in and across many forms, and in the performing arts actors and writers cannot survive on work from theatre alone. They need a healthy vibrant film, television, and commercials world to sustain and support them. Directors, performers, composers, musicians, writers, artists, all need each other to survive. The ecology is fragile, and like the barrier reef, it can be threatened with irreparable damage if any of its parts are damaged beyond repair.

I fear that it has already happened in high-end television drama and that it is very close to an extinct species. I do not mean to belittle the role or quality of the long running drama series in Australia, but they do not and cannot satisfy all drama tastes and interests and they cannot be an adequate diet for the whole country. The tragedy of the loss of high quality, which often means more expensive, drama, is the loss of the individual voice. Which is the cornerstone of all art.

One thing we know is that no one else in the world needs Australian stories like we do. And if we don't make them, no one else will.

To return to Mathew Arnold and the question of cultural value and social benefit, Is it fair to judge television's cultural value through single and individual programs? Is it better to judge it as a whole, as a cultural form in itself, a cultural indicator as rich in its sum total as any art form?

Television has its own language, its understanding of how to communicate best in its own terms, inventing new forms as technology changes and makes hybrid forms possible. Television has learned to marry genres to create new ways to inform educate and entertain. There is even interactive drama coming soon with digital TV where viewers get to choose the progress of the story by a press of a button..

Today, we are talking about television in its 50th year, as we have experienced it to date, as a comprehensive broadcaster with mainstream mass media impact. But those days are drawing to an end. In time we will look back at these 50 years and see them as the halcyon days.

Technology has made the prospect of significant change not only possible but likely in the next few years. In the same way that the role of the computer in our lives has been transformed by the advent of the net, so too will TV by the impact of digital technology. The analogue signal will be turned off in Australia in a few years time, and all TV will become digital. This will create the possibility of more than 500 channels, the new spectrum is immense. It will be possible to have every kind of niche channel that you could ever want. More importantly though, every one will be able to download whatever they want to watch whenever they feel like it.

Dawn Airey, former head of channel 5 in the UK, speaking at a Royal Television Society lecture this year, argues that technological changes have brought about an irreversible shift in balance of power and knowledge away from the establishment and towards the people. "Tomorrow's viewers will see TV as a library in which they do the selecting". She sees the digital revolution as democracy in action "breaking down mass Conformity in order to liberate individual choice". Technology has set the viewer free.

The Museum of Media History in America describes the future this way, as an evolving personalised information construct, EPIC, they call it, in which people can create through their computer screen an endless individual world made up of all their own decisions about what to watch, read, listen to, and talk to. The days where we all watched the same small handful of programs and talked about them with each other will seem nostalgically warm and bonding from the isolation of your own EPIC.

The days of comprehensive broadcasting with a bit of everything for everyone will seem quaint but inefficient in the days when you can have exactly what you want when you want it. Notions of cultural value will seem fabulously nineteenth century in a world of high-speed individual media.

If we are at the end of the golden era of television how did it rate in the tests of the ideals from where it started? In the 50-year report card, how did we go?

I would have to judge public broadcasting a success, in terms of its Reithian charter to inform, educate and entertain. The relentless pursuit of relevance, information, and entertainment has been a commitment at all times. In news and analysis, in factual programs, in its history of drama, and particularly in its comedy and satire, it adds up to a significant cultural contribution to the intellectual health of the nation.

But there are some areas where the report card would have to say "can do better" and sadly the arts is one of these, along with drama. Some part of the problem is funding, but not all of it. Sometimes there has just been a lack of imagination or talent both on the part of the broadcaster and in the wider arts community.

To give you one example of the failure of arts groups, I decided to hold an arts television conference when I was director of television at the ABC to tackle the problem head on. I was aware that making arts programs is a challenging problem here because there are very few program makers interested in this area, and even fewer opportunities for those that are. We had recently held a very successful history conference for historians, independent filmmakers, and ABC program commissioners to examine new ways of producing history in an exciting and provocative way, and decided that the arts might benefit by a similar approach.

So in August 2004, we held a conference for invited guests in Melbourne. Again, filmmakers, artists, representatives of arts organisations, and ABC staff were invited. Sadly, many arts bodies showed no interest in attending, and there were few Independent filmmakers who decided to come.

We had invited two very interesting international arts program makers to address the group. One of them was Daniel Richler who runs the Canadian Book television channel. It includes everything to do with books, fiction and non-fiction, from drama adaptations, crime nights hosted by crime writers, horror genre nights, romance, history and military books, traditional writer profiles and obituaries, and even a reality writing competition. Each year, over a long weekend, 12 writers are selected from hundreds of applicants to spend the weekend writing a novel. It must be completed in 72 hours, and they are to be televised the whole time. Why would any writer subject themselves to this? Of course, for a prize, and the prize is publication. The competition has been running on the Bookchannel for 30 years, so there are obviously no shortage of entrants. It is an interesting model to look at in the digital future where very small and very inexpensive channels will be able to cater for niche audiences.

In spite of Daniel's inspiring stories of running his channel, and the fascinating insights of Fenton Bailey from *World of Wonder*, the conference failed to produce any immediate results, but it did let some few arts filmmakers know that the ABC was serious about its commitment to promoting the arts and hopefully it encouraged some lateral thinking.

It also showed how little the arts has travelled in the last 50 years in reaching out to television and embracing it by coming up with good and lateral ideas for new programs. Sadly there are still very few arts organisations who have agreed to let a film crew in to see behind the scenes on either their organisation, or one of their productions. And yet, that kind of privileged access is just what television can do so well. Wouldn't a behind the scenes documentary about the Australia Council be interesting? To sit with the panels of decision makers and observe how and why they do what they do? Why not?

In drama, the ABC's other area of poor performance; money is really the only issue here. There has been no lack of commitment or imagination at the public broadcaster on this one. Funding would fix it.

So on balance 50 years of public broadcasting gets an A rating for cultural value, not moment by moment, and not for everything it has done, but for the highlights across these years, in drama, in comedy and satire, in documentaries, and in the arts, in the widest cultural sense for taking us on the journey of making sense of who and what we are.

But commercial broadcasting gets a fail mark. Reith was right to be wary about the American commercial broadcasters and their profit motive and market driven entertainment. Australian commercial broadcasters have followed that path. With few exceptions, they have shown little regard for the notion of cultural responsibility. They have over these years made huge profits, it adds up to billions of dollars over the last 50 years, but they have always been reluctant to spend it adventurously in the creative community except when they are forced to, to comply with regulations. There has been no giving back to those who helped create the wealth.

In the UK, it is commercial television that brought us *Brideshead Revisited*, *Jewel in the Crown*, *Cracker*, *Prime Suspect*, and even *Operatunity*. Unlike the UK model, where the commercial broadcasters have worked both ends of the schedule, both high end, and low, that has not happened here. Without existing regulation, I have no doubt that there would be very little Australian drama, children's drama, or any documentaries at all on channels 7, 9, or 10.

It is also likely that the total percentage of Australian content would be significantly lower. Australia is one of the most unregulated television markets in the world. To talk about local content in other affluent societies like ours, is to be met with an uncomprehending stare. They

don't have that problem. Their screens are filled with domestic content, and very few imported shows, not by regulation but by choice.

Would it have been different if we had had an organised and aggressive arts lobby that demanded space and respect in what was then the new technology?

Would we have seen our own *Craft Corner Death Match* here, or even our own *Angels in America*?

But looking forward, it's not too late. In the landscape of media change, there are new opportunities. In the digital future, with the proliferation of channels, the arts must take the new technology seriously, and not be left out again.

They must campaign for many things, at the very least to have one channel, free to air, and funded partially by government, as an arts and culture channel.

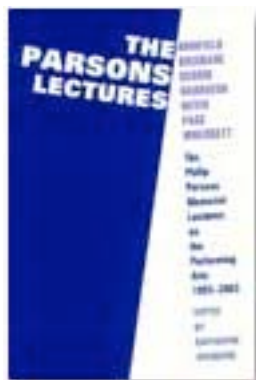
Not an earnest and worthy place to be, but a place where those who are passionate about the arts can attempt to communicate the great joy they get from what they do.

Where the pleasure and nourishment and unique experiences that comes with a creative life can be translated for the pleasure of the many.

Where nineteenth century values translate with twenty first century technology into an unforgettable experience of our time and place in the world.

'Where', to quote playwright David Edgar, "television can provide a service which meets people's needs as well as their wants, which seeks to expand as well as echo the experience of its users, which is prepared to jolt and disturb as well as confirm or sustain, which provides a site for public conversation, and which acknowledges and articulates our collective as well as our individual affinities and identities.'

Thank you.



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