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The Cognitive Paradigm and its Discontents: A Plea for New Directions in Australian Children's Television Research

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John Rowe Townsend, speaking of children's literature professionals, once made the distinction between 'book people' and 'child people'. He distinguished between those critics for whom texts and those for whom *children* (their utilization of, or pleasure in, texts) are the object of critical attention. Televised narrative is now the dominant form of children's fiction, yet the media equivalents of the professional 'book people' are yet to find a significant voice in the professional and academic journals. Recent articles on children's film in *Lion and Unicorn*, together with special issues, like this number of *Papers*, on 'Children and Media' (my italics), go some way towards filling this silence. However, it is important to note that the publications which address screened *narrative for children* are generally those specializing in children's literature. The mainstream media and communications journals, when they deal with children's programs at all, almost exclusively publish research informed by the cognitive paradigm. Regulatory and cultural policy is the other major area to feature in discussions, as witnessed by the most recent number of *Media Information Australia, incorporating Culture and Policy* (Keys & Buckingham (eds), 1999) with its special theme section, *Children's Television Policy: International Perspectives*. Regulatory policy, in the area of children's culture, is itself influenced by research within the cognitive/ developmental paradigm.

The cognitive paradigm articulates a specific kind of childhood, one defined in terms of developmental stages, both 'cognitive' and 'social'. Research informed by this construction of childhood focuses on how screened texts further the developmental and social goals of the child viewer. The discourse has political uses: what is at stake in the production of children's culture is, thus, the *welfare* of children. The recent advocacy in favour of 'Children's Charters' (for television viewing rights) builds a doctrine of universal, 'natural rights' of the child upon this cognitive paradigm.

What is left out of this universalised model of 'growing up' is, of course, any notion of cultural difference. Programs produced with the developmental model in mind, I would argue, tend to naturalize a middle-class, liberal vision of childhood and the conditions of growing

up. There is nothing wrong with such visions, only that we don't seem to have imagined that there could be another *kind* of childhood. By focussing on universal developmental 'goals' our research has not allowed us to focus on cultural values and issues of difference.

The kind of research I would like to see legitimized would not attempt to settle definitively the question of the cognitive and affective nature of children, or to provide an authoritative definition of their intellectual or social needs (although these questions and the answers provided by various interest groups do form part of the cultural milieu in which screened fictional texts for children are constructed and understood). It would focus on the operation of a discourse of childhood in the production of 'children's culture'. It would be more interested in the child viewer anticipated by, and articulated in, the text (screened children's fiction) - and in the publicity, marketing and discussion which frame that text.

In the meantime we know so little about Australian children's *television*. What kinds of programs have been produced? What are their antecedents, formats, characteristic narratives, stylistics? Which cultural pressures have framed and constrained these acts of storytelling? A new direction in Australian children's media studies would foreground the text, production environment and cultural context, rather than maintaining the child viewer as its object of analysis.

THE COGNITIVE PARADIGM AND ITS DISCONTENTS: OVERVIEW OF PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The social science tradition of 'effects research' has been the dominant mode of inquiry into children and television, especially in the United States. The empirical research of behavioural psychologists utilized a paradigm of stimulus (TV) and response (reactive/passive child), to attempt to discover the long term psychological/sociological effects of TV viewing on children. The research in this area is too numerous to cite; perhaps the best-known US research is that commissioned over a number of years by the Surgeon General's Department. Significantly, this line of inquiry is usually understood in terms of a discourse of (mental) health. An exhaustive survey is to be found in Carmen

Luke's study *Constructing the Child Viewer: A History of the American Discourse on Television and Children* (1990). David Buckingham gives a briefer critical evaluation in his influential book, *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy* (1993).

The work of 'cognitive'/developmental psychology on the other hand, envisaged a process of cognitive activity rather than passivity. It considers the ways in which children mentally process TV/narrative information, acting as active decoders/constructors of meaning from TV texts. This type of research has often looked at formal qualities of works in the context of an account of children's attention to and comprehension of programs. A model of development, derived from the work of Piaget, charts this intellectual use of media on the basis of a developmental progression. Grant Noble's 1975 study, *Children in Front of the Small Screen*, was a landmark in this area. *Children Communicating* (ed. Wartella 1979), was another influential collection.

A more socially directed focus is found in 'uses and gratifications' research, which examines the way in which individuals/groups actively choose and utilize various media texts for their own needs and purposes - which may be social as well as emotional (Noble & Noble 1976; Kippax and Murray 1980). This line of investigation has similarities with the audience-focussed research influenced by semiotics and cultural studies (eg: Hodge and Tripp 1986; Ang 1991; Morley 1992). The latter work often utilizes neo-Marxist cultural and discursive analysis to picture an active, even transgressive audience, seeing children as active, purposeful and discriminating viewers. *Children and Television: A Semiotic Approach* (Hodge and Tripp, 1986) is justly the best known and most radical. It combines semiotic methods for analysing narrative with 'cognitive' hypotheses about children's forms of thought and experience. Working within a cultural studies tradition it both critiques the notion of the passive child viewer and interrogates the ideological ground of subject formation.

Other research within the sociological/discursive tradition has charted the ways in which children (and their parents) define, understand (and take pleasure in) television discursively, by 'talking television' (Buckingham 1993;

Palmer 1986a, 1986b; Gilbert and Taylor 1991). This process is usually seen, ultimately, to be covertly subversive of 'middle-class'/adult values. David Buckingham is the leading figure in this tradition in Britain. His most recent book, *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television* (1996) attempts to diffuse the rhetoric of 'moral panic' associated with the representation of violence in the media. Analysing children's own discourse about their television viewing, Buckingham traces children's pleasure in viewing horror and melodrama, and argues for viewer discrimination between the boundaries of 'fact' and 'fiction'.

In all these research traditions the audience, rather than the text or its production processes, has been the primary object of analysis. Industry analysis is rare indeed and, until recently, almost unknown in Australia. The financial and corporate pressures on children's television production have been discussed, in the North American context, by the leftist cultural historian, Stephen Kline in his seminal critique *Out of the Garden* (1993) and by industry apologist Cy Schneider (1987). The advent of 'cultural policy studies' in Australia has led to work on the financial and regulatory constraints on children's television production (Aisbett, 1999), together with some brief accounts of the corporate and institutional goals of some major producers (Cunningham & Jacka 1996, pp.100-105).

In Australia, in addition to several Senate/Government Inquiries, and the research undertaken or sponsored by the various Broadcasting Authorities, the debates regarding broadcast law and policy have been documented and theorized (Bailey 1979; de Chiera 1980; Edgar 1983; Hodge 1989; Palmer [Gillard] 1992; Jacka 1991b; Cunningham 1992). In addition, there exists research sponsored by, and largely centred on the activities and charter of, the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) The question formulated by such publications and fora such as *What do we understand by Kids TV* (1985), or *The World Summit on Children and Television* (1995), has always been: what do children really need/want, and how best should broadcasters, producers, legislators and/or policy makers give it to them? To answer this question, the 'challenge' is to

define 'the child', to fully understand its mental, emotional and social essence and then to produce/legislate for a 'text' to fit that essential child. All such debate, thus, overtly or covertly, depends on a theory of childhood.

TOWARDS A CULTURAL STUDY OF AUSTRALIAN CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

So what might a cultural study of Australian children's television look like? What questions would it ask?

To begin with, research might examine the repertoires of programs produced. Are there any characteristic formats/genres/televsual styles of Australian children's drama programs? What discursive traditions may have been influential? For example, how many BBC-concept programs have been adapted for the local audience and how might their stylistics and 'storytelling conventions' have influenced local productions? For example ABC media releases heralding the advent of the local version of *Play School* stressed the novelty of an all-Australian cast (*TV Times*, July 13, 1966). How might we explain the predominance of the science fiction genre in Australian children's television drama (programs such as *Andra*, *Girl From Tomorrow*, *Escape from Jupiter*, *Ocean Girl*, *Spellbinder*)?

In *Australia's Television Culture* (1993, p. xix.) Tom O'Regan argued that television critics typically privilege programs at the expense of 'political and social disposition' of television in space and time. (The broader understanding of Australia's 'television culture' envisaged by O'Regan is certainly something I would wish to aim for; however, while certain adult and family genres certainly have been examined - sitcoms, soaps, news formats, drama, 'transgressive' game/studio formats and cult science fiction - there are no similar studies for children's genres. An understanding of the range, chronology and production environments of children's television must be put together from the pages of TV journalism, trade journals, the public documents of the Australian Broadcasting Control Board (ABCB) and Australian Broadcasting Tribunal/Authority (ABT/ABA), or from brief comments on the formal features 'content' of programs in the comments of child/industry advocates or in the written work of psychologists, sociologists and educationalists concerned

with children and television.

The narratives of Disney's animated films have recently been treated in American studies, often in the pages of children's literature journals. Kline's *Out of the Garden*, cited above, discusses the particulars of some North American programming. *Sesame Street* has also been discussed at length, though again largely in the context of its success as an educational tool. In Australia, the work of Grant Noble and others, while focussing on the responses of children to *Play School* and other programs, gives information on some of the formal and technical features of the shows. A few scattered references to individual Australian programs can be found in books and journal articles (Hall 1976, 1981; Jacka 1991a; Landman 1991; Macpherson 1988; Moran 1994). Hodge and Tripp (1986) provide a semiotic analysis of a particular cartoon, while 'content' analysis of violence and gender roles is found in the work of Patricia Edgar (Edgar 1977), Pam Gilbert and Sandra Taylor (Gilbert & Taylor 1991), and Patricia Palmer [Gillard] (Palmer 1986a).

The high-profile activities of the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF), as both a producer of and ambassador for children's television, have focussed public debate on the level of 'quality' services for children. The Foundation organizes conferences, publishes monographs, maintains a Web Site with on-line resources for teachers, and facilitates teaching resource packages designed for school use in line with its educational charter (White 1992). However, the work of sustained narrative analysis remains to be done.

Clearly, comprehensive viewing of Australian children's television would be necessary for the understanding of these programs as 'visible fictions'. The first stage of such a project would require sustained filmographic work. Albert Moran's invaluable *Guide to Australian Drama Series* (1994), gives a plot summary and some production history for scripted children's drama. While this is an invaluable tool, Moran has worked from archival records alone and offers no textual or detailed narrative analysis. Even the wealth of publicity surrounding the productions of the Australian Children's Television Foundation (there is a veritable curriculum industry in

teaching resource packages which are designed for school use) has yielded only rare examples of narrative analysis and ideological critique (McCallum 1998). Overviews of the work of Yoram Gross (Starkiewicz 1984; Caputo 1993) and my own analysis of puppetry and live action drama (Rutherford 2000) add a few more isolated voices. One can only contrast this situation with the critical, historical and theoretical material available to scholars and students in the field of children's literature.

This suggested approach may seem a little retrograde to some TV theorists who argue that the experience of television depends on the interaction of repertoires and textures, of the segmentation of broadcasting, the mingling of program 'narratives', advertising 'narratives', promos, station IDs - thus constituting a unique and continuous discourse (Hartley 1989; Martin 1994). To look at programs out of their broadcast context (scheduling, packaging, promotion) may be questioned. Indeed, to privilege Australian-produced children's television without considering (1) children's programming in general, and (2) the mix of scheduling for different audience segments throughout the hours of transmission, may be contested as a reactionary attachment to the idea of a closed and bounded 'fictional' text at the expense of a study of 'television' as a system of discourse. By remaining alert to the institutional, cultural and discursive factors which surround the production and broadcast of programs for children, the potential dangers inherent in separating 'text' from social 'context' could be avoided by the researcher.

WHAT INFLUENCES MIGHT AFFECT CULTURAL PRODUCTION FOR CHILDREN IN AUSTRALIA?

Business and industry culture may influence the narratives produced for children as profoundly as generic or aesthetic norms. Programs may be produced to imitate another successful or popular format. The organizational and professional culture of a producer may affect stylistic repertoires (Moran 1982; Moran & Tulloch 1986; Jacka 1991a). For example, how many ABC drama programs bear the stylistic stamp of their BBC or US progenitors? Studio hosted programs of the past, such as Children's Channel Seven and The Channel Niner's Club, which mixed studio activities with cartoons and magazine

segments, were arguably influenced by the success of Disney's *Mickey Mouse Club* and radio progenitors, such as *The Argonauts*.

Such a project would be informed by an understanding of other cultural factors:

Organizational Structures

During various periods broadcasters/networks/stations have maintained 'children's' departments. Responsibility for Children's television drama programs within the ABC, for example, has been shared variously between departments of Drama, Light Entertainment, Young People's Programs, Education and Children's Television (currently Children's and Educational: CHED). In addition, especially in the ABT period, with the pressure of License Renewal procedures, commercial stations have often maintained more public, 'Children's Advisory Committees' - an indication of at least 'symbolic' influence of various professional and public interests on production and programming.

Business cycles: economic/trade/technological factors

Most of the factors which have influenced Australia's broadcasting and production industries, its place in world trade in audiovisual services, are well documented. The broad context of 'Australia's Television Culture' is represented in existing studies (Cunningham and Turner 1993; Cunningham and Miller 1994; Curthoys 1991; Jacka 1991b; Moran 1985, 1994a, 1994b; O'Regan 1993). In some instances, however, specific impacts upon Australian Children's television of some of these factors may warrant more detailed analysis. (The particular dynamic of the co-production environment engendered by 10BA tax concessions on producers, might be a case in point). On the stylistic level, the influence of new technologies have changed the camera, animation and editing styles of youth programs and have filtered down to influence the face of broadcast popular culture more generally.

Public Policy: Cultural and Regulatory

The legislation which regulates broadcasting and advertising, and the funding regimes which cover

education, the arts and 'culture industries', have obviously had an effect on the production and scheduling of Australian Children's Television. The role of advocates or organized lobby groups, whether representing the interests of the relevant industries, or the perspectives of professionals, educationalists, psychologists, parents and other 'child advocates', as well as the place of influential 'institutionalized' producers, such as the Australian Children's Television Foundation, would need to be considered when attempting to chart the process of policy making.

TOWARDS A CRITIQUE OF THE STATUS QUO?

During 1999 The Australian Broadcasting Authority (ABA), in conjunction with the Australian Children's Television Foundation (ACTF) and the Australian Film Finance Corporation (FFC), commissioned a research project to examine 20 years of C (children's) programming. (The Australian Broadcasting Tribunal - the ABA's institutional predecessor - instituted the Children's Television Standards for programs in 1979.) What I find most remarkable (some might say sinister) about this publicly-funded project is that it has been conceived and implemented by a consortium of the major stakeholders in the production, financing and regulation of children's television. It will clearly examine financial and policy pressures and changes to the broadcasting and datacasting environment within which the industry operates (Aisbett, 1999). So far, so good. When evaluating the 'success' of 20 years of children's television in Australia will this research simultaneously critique the historical processes by which (children's) culture is produced and reproduced?

The discourse of childhood is itself a narrative about our culture. The way in which we represent/speak/write about childhood/parenting/socialization can be seen as one aspect of the 'playing out' of certain anxieties about the future of our culture. Texts aimed at children (whether books or television shows) reflect and reproduce what Christopher Candlin, in his preface to Stephens' *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, 1992, calls a 'rich polyphony of discourse'. The text may imply, or orient itself, as much towards an adult 'reader/viewer' as towards

a child - the child 'viewer' may be engaged by the 'voices' of the text, but offered a constrained or limited 'subject' position - hence, also, the observed 'other', the one who is 'different' from 'us'. Or, in thrall to the cognitive paradigm, the text may efface historical, class and cultural difference. It is significant that many texts for children gain high adult praise for their subversiveness; however, as Peter Hunt (1991) and John Stephens have argued, challenges to the status quo are more often represented only within predictable limits. Such challenges therefore reinforce prevailing values while appearing to countermand them. A cultural study of Australian children's television would, finally, analyse the ideological and cultural positions carried by the 'adult' voices of children's television, alert to the ways in which these inscribe political and moral debates within the historical framework.

CASE STUDY: *THE GENIE FROM DOWN UNDER*, SERIES 1 (ACTF, DIR. ESSEN STORM, EXEC. PRODS, PATRICIA EDGAR AND ANNA HOME, 13 X 25 MINUTE DRAMA SERIES)

Given that I've 'plead' for so much in the discussion above, any worked example I might provide would, inevitably, not fulfil all of my own desired criteria. However, some brief notes towards a cultural analysis of a particular program should serve to illustrate the direction I hope future research in Australian children's television might take. The example I have selected is the Australian Children's Television Foundation's comedy drama series, *The Genie From Down Under*.¹

I have argued for an analysis which:

- Examines the operation of a discourse of childhood in children's culture:
 - Foregrounds text, production environment and cultural context
- Examines the repertoires of programs produced:
 - What generic and discursive traditions might have been influential?
 - What technological factors may have been influential?
- Examines the production environment:

- What business and institutional factors may have been influential?
- What ideological and cultural positions are carried by the 'adult' voices of children's television?

Questions of discourse and narrative are the simplest issues to address in a paper of this length. A comprehensive study of the history and institutional culture of the Australian Children's Television Foundation would be intensely fascinating (as well as strategically important for the field of cultural policy studies) but such a project would require both the cooperation of the organization itself *and* significant funding.² However, some acknowledgment of the status of the ACTF as a producer must inform the discussion here.

The Australian Children's Television Foundation was established in the late 1970s as a result of both Federal and Victorian State Government funding; it was incorporated in 1982. The Foundation is by far the most influential producer of Australian children's television, and is the mainstay of Australia's role as a key player in world children's television. It enjoys extensive subsidies, both Government and private (businesswoman, Janet Holmes a Court is one of its key financial patrons). In addition to producing, distributing and distributing children's television programming, the ACTF acts as 'a kind of think-tank and clearing house for children's television advocacy' (Cunningham and Jacka 1996, p. 101). Its activity includes maintaining a link between production and 'social and policy objectives'. Direct involvement in international marketing has led to a number of international co-productions, including its partnership with the BBC in two 13-part comedy series, *The Genie from Down Under*, and more recently *The Crash Zone*, for the Disney channel. In addition, it maintains a flourishing ancillary market in educational and commercial merchandising, many products which articulate with classroom and daycare activities (Cunningham and Jacka 1996, p. 103).

The ACTF actively pursues international co-producers and international sales for its products. There are good economic reasons for this: not only are the high production costs of children's drama shared in co-production deals, such a partnership guarantees distribution and presales in

more than one market. *The Genie From Down Under* was produced by the Foundation in association with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation and BBC Children's International. The kind of budget allowed by this production environment ensures a high technical standard for the production, allowing elaborate special effects, the use of outdoor locations, and an international cast.

The international co-production may also have other, narrative, consequences:

- Characters in the drama who are 'marked' as being from different national or ethnic groups. Film Australia's children's drama series, *Escape From Jupiter* (1994), a co-production with NHK Japan, featured 'Japanese' characters, as well as having a Japanese Production Designer (Kazuo Sasaki) and sharing direction (Kate Woods and Fumitaka Tamura).
- A discourse of 'multiculturalism': while surface, cultural traits may be marked in the text, a universal, liberal subjectivity is usually represented; kids are 'all the same under the skin' with a universal trajectory of maturation and moral growth.

The major, non-Australian co-producer for *The Genie From Down Under* is the BBC. At the risk of stating the obvious, it must 'address' both a British and an Australian audience. Where *Escape From Jupiter*, a science-fiction/ adventure series, marks the ethnicity of the adolescent, 'Japanese' female lead (played by Anna Choy) to achieve market/ audience identification, the influence of 'nation' on 'narration' in *Genie* is inflected by its operation in the genre of comedy.

The successful functioning of comedy depends on shared cultural conventions and knowledge/s which may be invoked, parodied, transgressed. Comedy is, thus, an 'interpretation of the general mind' (George Meredith, cited in Schirato 1998: 189). Comedy also depends on a shared politics of cultural differentiation, a delimiting of hierarchies of 'us' and 'them'. Schirato calls this the 'place of superiority in the comic' while Heather Scutter draws our attention to comedy as a 'politics of exclusion' (Scutter 1999, pp.77-102). For a British-Australian comedy, the two-way cultural exchange of media products between the two nations makes the sharing of comic tropes and stereotypes a relatively simple matter.

The Genie From Down Under uses the difference between cultures as an organizing principle, Australia being the cultural norm. The narrative is structured by a series of cultural oppositions between the central adolescent character - the 14-year-old English girl. [The Hon.] Penelope Townes - and the Australian genie, 'Bruce' [what else?], with his son, 'Baz'. The plot is episodic: each episode has a narrative which is loosely self-contained, based on the chaos caused as Bruce and Baz wilfully misinterpret Penelope's 'wishes'; however, each part is also open-ended, the narrative progressing throughout the series. The story translates the traditional Middle-Eastern folk tale to resonate with Australian cultural discourses. The aristocratic English brat, Penelope, is unfortunately encumbered with social values and aspirations which are no longer supported by her (widowed) mother's income. She inadvertently discovers two Australian Genies inside a magic Opal in the attic of her ancestral home. Like all genies, Bruce and Baz seek to be 'free'. This motif is revised to a desire to return to 'live in Australia' and to return the (stolen) opal to its sacred cave, the mythic domain of its original Aboriginal owners.

This trajectory can be read in terms of the evolution of the way in which 'Australia' is read by British and Australian audiences. Nuances of cultural appropriation in the colonial past are present, but also the idea of the greater 'freedom' and exuberance of the Australian experience. There is also a comic disjunction between the tropes 'Genie' (exotic/oriental/time-honoured) and 'Down Under' (prosaic, even vulgar/debased, colonized western offshoot/modern). Bruce and Baz are caricature genies. Their ethnicity is farcically inappropriate in an almost Pythonesque manner. Instead of silks and turbans, the iconic Akubras, moleskins and 'R.M. Williams' clothing mark them as 'Australian' for both British and Australian audiences. Even the gesture they use to enact their magic is clearly designed to evoke and parody 'the Great Aussie Salute'.

The characters in *The Genie from Down Under* are large, cultural stereotypes. The British upper classes and earthy, vulgar 'Ockers', such as Otto von Meister, the 'tour guide from Hell', are the butts of most of the exclusive humour. (Who is addressed by such humour, then? Perhaps the politics of identification invites the middle-ground: that is, middle-

class liberal, sensitive and culturally literate but not effete.)

Penelope Townes partakes of a stereotype common in girls' School stories: the snobbish, pretentious and ultimately hypocritical character who has to be taken down a peg or two, and thus integrated into the group. Her 'growth' in character, however, has nothing to do with her interaction with her English schoolfriends, Marcia and Sophie, and everything to do with her enforced and gradual assimilation of the values of the genies and of 'Australia'. The English group seems to offer nothing but the conformity of caste, parodied in the costuming and dialogue of Penelope's 'fair weather', school-chums. Marcia and Sophie are dressed and styled alike, and frequently speak in unison or parrot-fashion in their scenes. In her direct addresses to the camera - a collusive narratorial device quite common in teenage comedies of maturation and manners - Penelope condemns her 'Sloane' chums as 'insincere' and hypocritical. With a fine dramatic irony, however, her own effusive (and wistful?) soliciting of their peer-friendship demonstrates precisely those vices. However, Penelope is never allowed to achieve her 'wished-for' caste acceptance, due to the deliberate 'adult' interference of her magic Genie. In sabotaging her wishes, in ripping her from Wiltshire to outback Australia, Bruce initiates Penelope's comic-serious character development.

Miss Mossop, the faithful family retainer, is another comic stereotype. 'Mossie' is marked by her strong provincial accent, her tendency to over-nurture her upper-class 'chicks' (with lashings of Shepherd's Pie). She is the type of the loyal servant sidekick, re-iterating and, at the same time, parodying the class system. The lower-class Australian characters, tour-guide Otto von Meister and his nephew, Conrad, are characterized by physicality and excess.

Otto von Meister is a sweaty, fleshy character, played with full-bodied exuberance by ACTF favourite, Mark Mitchell. The sound cue for the von Meisters is a cowboy theme, evoking an association with 'wild', uncultivated and predatory behaviour. They are marked with the icons of outback adventurers - military-style khaki shorts and shirts, boots and a slouch hat, a 4WD tour van and (for the unlikely yuppie, Conrad) a mobile phone. Otto is

frequently framed with camera angles which emphasise his sweaty corpulence. The humour surrounding Otto is predicated on the physical and the articulation of taboo. Toilet jokes, over-eating, overt and exuberant lustfulness are all represented. Unlike the effete 'Bubbles' (Lord Ackrington-Smythe, Lady Diana's would-be suitor) who has to attend self-help groups such as 'gentlemen who want to get in touch with their inner chap', Otto has no hang-ups about his own bodily functions and desires. As part of this binary, the 'natural' Australian is a disruptive, transgressive force, liberating the repressed and giving it expression. Otto is something of the villain of the piece, seeking to 'reclaim' [aka steal] the 'von Meister' opal. His predatory greed is also demonstrated in his exploitation of the various groups of tourists who have the misfortune to fall into his clutches. However, he is also represented as 'honest' and 'childlike' in his frank and exuberant physicality.

The plot of the series appears to operate on structural oppositions between England and Australia. Two primary locations are employed - Townes Hall in Wiltshire (shot at Werribee Park, in Victoria) and the outback station, Townes Downs (filmed at Wentworth, NSW) - while the change from one location to another is cued by an iconic use of sound (the opening bars of 'Rule Britannia' and a didgeridoo theme respectively). However, to read *Genie* as a clash of cultures narrative would miss the main ideological work of the series. The apparent cultural binary acts as a kind of smokescreen for a *bildungsroman* narrative, in which the 'true' opposition and disjunction is that between adult and child. The enslavement of the genie 'from Down Under' reflects less on the political question of Australia's autonomy from its former colonizer than on the power relationship between adults and children.

Penelope is a child with power she is not mature enough to handle. Her slave is an adult: 'You're the Genie, I'm the Master', as the theme song puts it. The Master-Genie relationship positions Penelope as a surrogate 'adult' and Bruce as the subordinated 'child'. Normal hierarchies are overturned as the adult must 'obey' the orders of the child, however egocentric and antisocial they may prove. The values here are essentially conservative. The child's desire for autonomy is represented in Penelope's shallow

and self-serving wishes; the fitness of adult control is demonstrated by the compassion and moral superiority of the Genie and by the misrule which results from the 'Master's' choices. Bruce takes the words of Penelope's wishes literally; the ensuing chaos and humiliation teaches Penelope the childishness of her egocentric desires. Her direct address to the audience which concludes each episode wearily acknowledges each 'lesson' and offers consolation for the inevitable thwarting of childish longings for autonomy.

The classic battle of master against servant is recapitulated here, with some modulations which perform more gendered ideological work. The battle of wills and intellects which develops between Penelope and Bruce structures each episode, as they continually try to outwit each other. However, the narrative progression throughout the series favours adult and familial control. Each episode involves the frustration of Penelope's 'wishes' and, whenever Bruce grants one of these wishes, he comes a little closer to finally outmanoeuvring her in order to gain his own and his son's freedom. However, this gamesmanship is complicated by a developing romantic attachment between Bruce and Penelope's mother, Lady Diana Townes. Australia becomes the site not only of freedom from restraint, but a 'garden', a place of nature in which romantic love can flourish. There is a comic enactment of this potential in the unrequited desire of Penelope for Conrad von Meister. Lady Diana, on the other hand, a widow whose life lacks colour and passion in wintry England, blooms in outback Australia. This is marked visually in her change from conservative black and white clothing for the 'Townes Hall' scenes to red or floral dresses and summery hats in the Australian setting. Her romantic attachment to Bruce is also symbolized by her sudden interest in gardening.

The unequal power relationship between child-master and adult-slave is thus poised to be rectified in a resumption of normative family structures. Penelope and Lady Diana constitute one single-parent family, Bruce and Baz the other. Diana, a hapless organizer, always on the verge of losing her stately home and ending up as a bag lady under Westminster Bridge, needs love and someone to look after her. Baz, a wistful little boy for well over 500 years,

needs a mother, a role Diana is all too willing to take on. All generational and gender roles are thus waiting to be normatively restored in the last episode of the series. [Episode 13 of Series 1 ends with only partial closure, foreshadowing the completion of the romance and family integration in the following series. Penelope and Conrad renounce the Mastery of the Opal, while Bruce renounces his freedom, at least temporarily, as all join forces to rescue Diana from destitution.]. The comedy of *The Genie from Down Under* may seem to transgress the adult-child and male-female inequalities of power, but the status quo is hardly disturbed. As Heather Scutter writes in another context, the adolescent female is allowed to disturb 'the powermongers' only to a certain culturally allowable and textually encoded extent (Scutter 1999, p.82).

The interrogation of cultural difference is also allowed only within limits. The 'tour group' motif allows the introduction of stereotypical national and other groups which are exploited to broad humorous effect. Much of this comedy is double-edged: both the Ocker and predatory Otto von Meister, 'the tour guide from Hell,' and the tourists he exploits are victims of the satire. The broad typecasting trades on cultural assumptions: the loud demanding American, the effete and wimpish British, the ridiculousness of disability (the agoraphobics who all cluster in a tent or a toilet together). Humour is characteristically employed as a release from anxieties generated by cultural and physical difference. However, the stereotyped groups also become players in the master-narrative of personal growth and maturation. The effete, straw-boated English who, with the unlikely champion of the arch-wimp 'Bubbles', refuse to remain victims and the ultra-timid agoraphobics, who overcome the challenge of 'the great outdoors' to help look for Baz, begin the great quest for self-development. Bubbles' membership of a seemingly endless series of self-help groups is an (unconsciously?) ironic mirror of these 'messages' which encode the series' socializing ideology.

Given the structural opposition between British (origin) and Australian (settler) culture which informs the humour of the series, it is not surprising that one national group which features in the colonial history of the two nations

is barely mentioned. The humour of the drama is based on the triumph of the underdog: the vulgar colonials win out, in space, largesse, conscience and passion. Given this symbolic opposition, the traces of Aboriginal cultural difference are either comically assimilated or mythologized. Trish Emu is marked as an aboriginal character in both appearance and vocal inflection, but her role in the comedy is that of the 'comic sidekick' of the chief antagonist, Otto von Meister. This kind of role is often assigned to a black American in US comedies or to a working-class character (like Mossie) in British comedies. Her cultural difference is effaced in the role she plays in the series, though her casting is clearly a conscious political decision by the ACTF, which routinely uses characters from 'multicultural' backgrounds as part of the dramatized community. Yet Trish Emu's presence as an Aboriginal person is token, not germane to the narrative. The other use of Aboriginal culture in the series is in the mythic origins of the Opal and its magic. Aboriginal culture is thus removed from the historical drama of conflict, and situated in the realm of myth and magic.

To conclude this brief case study, then, *The Genie From Down Under* supports a normative ideology of liberal self-growth and affectionate family integration. It appears to problematize cultural difference and to experiment with generational autonomy. However, the closure subordinates these to the progress made in the socialization of Penelope and the distance gained to the satisfactory 'romance' ending of marriage between the 'adult' partners and the integration of the children into the secure, traditional family.

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NOTES

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²Wendy Keys' Masters research (Griffith University) targeted the policy environment in which the Foundation operates but, to the best of my knowledge, no study has focussed on how the ACTF, as an institution, discursively 'frames' the child.

³Compare *The Secret Loves of Dobie Gillis, The Wonder Years, The Diary of Adrian Mole*.



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