Shooting Baywatch:
Resisting Cultural Invasion

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- Respond To This Article

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"[Peter] Phelps was reacting to the news that the battle to 'save' Avalon from a Baywatch film crew invasion had been won after the Queensland Government clinched an in-principle deal with the producers of the world's most watched television show." -- Austin 5; italics added for emphasis

The violent reaction of the Sydney residents of Avalon came as somewhat of a surprise to Baywatch producers and even the Australian Government, with Prime Minister John Howard reportedly commenting that the area would have benefitted from the increase in tourism and the creation of two hundred jobs. Avalon residents thought otherwise, and in the media, particularly the Sydney media, negative invasion metaphors ran rife. This disenchantment with American television culture may be considered a turning point in Australia's cultural identity analogous to an earlier example of cultural policing in the 1960s, when a new wave of nationalism saw the rejection of British and American English as the 'prestigious' varieties of English in the Australian media. It appears that parts of Australian society are again policing and promoting Australian culture through the negative, violent portrayal of American culture.

Earlier this century, there was a certain repugnance associated with the Australian accent, with cultural commentators looking towards England for a standardised form of Australian English.

"If we must follow a dialect of English in Australia, why not follow one of the charming ones? Why follow the ugliest that exists?" (Smith 1926; reported in Mitchell 63)

"The attempt to create a distinct Australian accent is mischievous. For I make bold to say at present one does not exist. There is not, and should not be, any difference in standard English as spoken here, in the Motherland, or elsewhere in the Empire." (ABC Weekly 1942; reported in Mitchell 64–5)

The linguistic manifestation of the Australian cultural cringe was complicated after World War II with the addition of American English to the 'prestigious' varieties. This attitude was exemplified in Australian radio announcers who adopted either American or British accents depending on whether the listeners were a commercial or ABC audience. The shift to an American accent for popular radio perhaps reflected the overwhelming acceptance of the American allies who had, at that stage, begun threatening England's cultural dominance. There was a clear association between America's own cultural dominance and the concepts of modernity and popular culture that were distinctly not British. The adoption of this form of English helped to perpetuate the attractiveness of the American ideology of freedom, equality, affluence and happiness (Horne 103) and to begin filtering out the hierarchical cultural snobbery associated with the British accent.

In the sixties, the allure of American English became less tantalising and arguably only remained in some lexical items or words. Australian English came back into vogue during this time with writers such as Donald Horne (The Lucky Country), initiating a new wave of nationalism by pointing out the strengths of this country. Through the work of such social commentators, the Australian accent came to positively reflect the Australian ideological construction of mateship and egalitarianism. The Australian accent replaced the American accent, becoming the 'prestigious' form of English through the promotion of this form of nationalism. Even today, the battle to maintain an unadulterated form of Australian English resistant to outside influences is evident in the opinion columns.

"As an Australian and proud of it, you get sick and tired of these characters [from American television programmes] mouthing 'guys, zerotouched, heist, ketchup and fries'." (Jefferies 8)

However whilst the struggle to maintain a distinctive Australian accent has been successful, the attractiveness of American culture in general continues as portrayed in other cultural forms, especially television. Except for some concerns over Australian content regulations and some highbrow cultural commentary, Australians seem to be happily lapping up their nightly television doses of American culture -- that is, until Baywatch proposed that they move their filming location to the very middle-class Sydney suburb of Avalon. The residents of Avalon took this move as an act of war, and so the metaphors began flying.

" .. the battle to 'save' Avalon from a Baywatch film crew invasion." (Austin 5)

"Baywatch versus Avalon." (Carroll 16) "'Here they come, we surrender' [Avalon to Baywatch]" (Nicholson 18) "'Get that leaky old tub off this beach' [Baywatch to Howard]" (Nicholson 18) "'They took over the showers and toilets'" (Who Weekly 16)

"They [Avalon residents] torpedoed plans .." (Lateline)

The language that the media adopted in reporting the Baywatch filming proposal metaphorically constructed this event as an invasion, with the Baywatch producers as a hostile force willing to
impinge upon the freedom and identity of the suburb of Avalon, which was alternatively portrayed as either a passive victim -- "'we surrender'" (Nicholson 18) -- or a virulent group armed to counterattack the Baywatch scurge -- "they torpedoed" (Who Weekly 16). Baywatch and Avalon were posed as enemies, as in "Baywatch versus Avalon" (Carroll 16), with both sides' attributes exaggerated to produce maximum difference -- the Avalon residents were described as snobby and middle class, and Baywatch became the epitome of American television trash. Yet it may be argued that this media construction of an invasion has wider, more significant cultural implications.

Metonymically, the residents of Avalon seem to be representative of Australian culture, with Baywatch becoming the manifestation of American culture in its entirety. Thus, according to the media, the 'coming' of Baywatch was nothing short of a cultural invasion, an American impingement on Australian culture. The smugness of cultural commentators could be felt as the violent protests from Avalon residents perhaps marked the start of another wave of disillusionment with American culture, this time transmitted through such popular media as television. The 'popular' culture cringe that Australia seems to be suffering from in television content may be meeting its challenge. Avalon residents have made a stand against the cultural imperialism of American culture, similar to the 60s resistance to the invasion of Americanisms in Australian English.

It will be interesting to examine the result of the Baywatch/Avalon incident, if indeed any lasting effects will be observed. It may be that Avalon's protest against Baywatch, which represents the struggle against American cultural invasion, will prove ineffectual. This is a likely outcome considering the Gold Coast's willingness to embrace this television show and its entourage before the decision to move to Hawaii. Indeed, the Gold Coast Mayor enthusiastically described the Gold Coast as Australia's answer to Hollywood. Yet an alternative result may be a positive re-examination and reappraisal of Australian television and its linked cultural identity similar to that which occurred in the 1960s with Australian English.

References


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