Style, Form and History in Australian Mini-Series

I

In retrospect, the program that is generally regarded as the first Australian "historical" mini-series, Against the Wind, can be seen to have pioneered many of the protocols of production and reception that have characterised this distinctive television drama format. Produced in 1978 for the Seven Network at, for the time, the considerable cost of $76,000 per episode, the program consisted of thirteen one-hour episodes and dealt, with critical historiographical insight, with the first decades of colonisation in Australia. Against the Wind – with its large number of episodes and its discrete as well as continuous episodic structure – tended to resemble earlier Australian "historical" serials (such as the thirteen-episode Lake's Kingdom, 1974-75) more than the mini-series proper. However, its epic historical thematics and narrative coverage, its widely-discussed "revisionist" account of the historical record on early convictism, its promotion and reception as "history" as well as drama, and its huge critical and ratings success all foreshadow the contours of the historical mini-series "phenomenon" of the 1980s.

And quite a phenomenon it has become. From 1980 to mid 1986, fifty mini-series were made in Australia, and the Bicentennial year has seen the release of another considerable group (Captain James Cook, Melba, True Believers, Dirtwater Dynasty, The Alien Years, All the Way) together with the recycling of several series. The mini-series "boom" is very much an outgrowth of the 10BA tax legislation: its inauguration in 1980, and the diminution of its benefits and effective replacement by 1988, neatly bound the "high" period of mini-series production.¹ These close links indicate something of the complex of institutional preconditions and contexts for the prioritising of the mini-series at the high-budget end of film and television financing in the 1980s in Australia.² These favourable conditions have given us such memorable critical and ratings successes as A Town Like Alice (1981); 1915 (1982); The Dismissal, Waterfront and Power Without Glory (1983); The Last Bastion, Bodyline and Eureka Stockade (1984); Anzacs, The Dunera Boys and Coura Breakout (1985); A Fortunate Life and The Lancaster Miller Affair (1986); and Vietnam (1987).

However, it is not my purpose here to analyse these "preconditions and contexts," nor to survey in broad strokes this contemporary plethora of mini-series. Rather, I want to be both more abstract and more particular than either of these approaches would determine. I want to
address the distinctiveness of the mini-series as a televisual format and to indicate some of the innovations and challenges that Australian historical mini-series present in both their representations of national history and in their expansion of the "horizons of possibility" of televisual form. Such an approach attempts to construct a stylistic and generic "map" of the Australian mini-series, demonstrating continuities and variations within the format.

II A Hybrid Form

The mini-series is a quite recent addition to the established array of television formats – news, current affairs, light entertainment, series and serial drama, documentary, sport and so on. It is a veritable hybrid, split between the series and serial drama formats, and between documentary and dramatic modes. It can be defined as a limited-run program of more than two and less than the thirteen-part season or half-season block associated with continuing serial or series programming, with episodes that are not narratively autonomous (as they are in the series format). Thus, strictly speaking, the term "mini-series" is a misnomer. However, it is closer to the series format in so far as it moves to conclusive narrative resolution across a limited number of episodes, unlike the serial, with its indefinitely (and what seems at times, infinitely) deferred denouements. Its "hybridisation" of documentary and dramatic modes creates real definitional problems, perturbs many viewers and commentators because of the ethical, legal and political imponderables raised by its taste for "impersonating history," but excites just as much rapturous response for the risks and challenges it takes as it "inscribes the document into experience."

The mini-series' hybrid status, as might be expected, poses further problems for general theories of televisual form. Commentators have thus sought family resemblances between cinematic forms and modes of promotion, and the mini-series. While there are intriguing connections, the dramaturgical structures deployed in mini-series defy easy assimilation to a cinematic model. Finally, the approaches to issues and events taken up in the most interesting examples of the format move easily around traditional categories usually held to divide televisual material into "entertainment" and "information/education." I want to look at these questions more closely now.

III "Quality" Television

Taking perhaps the most evident aspect first, the Australian historical mini-series is "quality," "event" television. Its status is analogous to that of the "art cinema" in relation to mainstream commercial cinema, albeit without the financial and promotional marginalisation typically experi-
enced by art cinema. Historical mini-series are produced on regularly record-breaking budgets for television, are accompanied by major promotional campaigns, often as flag-carriers leading into new ratings periods, and in turn attract lavish spin-off campaigns and critical and ratings successes, all of which contributes to their status as “exceptional” television.

The mini-series’ placement as “quality” television registers at several interrelated levels. At an institutional level, it can be traced to the need for the major American commercial networks to inaugurate and market their own genre of up-market material in order to counteract the allegiances public television, cable and subscription services were soliciting from the demographically sensitive market sectors with high disposable incomes. It is evidenced by the diverse and high-profile “circulation” of the mini-series as event in contiguous formats – from glossy presentations on production history (Brian Carroll’s The Making of A Fortunate Life), novelisations (Sue MacKinnon’s Waterfront), reprints of journalistic accounts (Paul Kelly’s The Unmaking of Gough reprinted as The Dismissal upon the release of the mini-series by the same name), coffee-table “records” of the series (Kristin Williamson’s The Last Bastion), through to voluminous numbers of “letters to the editor,” historical reminiscence by actual protagonists, lavish and detailed critical reviews by more usually dyspeptic newspaper critics, and many educational packages produced for secondary students of history, media and social studies.

Further, it is on display in the textual forms and protocols of production of the mini-series. With their high “production values” – a fastidious attention to historical verisimilitude, “epic” shooting schedules, the use of film rather than videotape as shooting stock, the highly-publicised use of theatrical workshopshop techniques to prepare actors exhaustively for historical impersonation – mini-series bear direct comparison with other established zones of “quality” such as the BBC and ABC classic serials (The Windsors, The Sullivans) or the Australian “period” film of the mid to late 1970s (The Getting of Wisdom, The Irishman). The way this textual and production rhetoric of “quality” marks out a difference for the mini-series now requires further analysis in terms of its modes of historical representation, its patterns of dramaturgical and narrative structure, and in terms of its inflection of the hybrid form of “documentary-drama.”

IV Historical Representation

Consider the relation of historical mini-series like The Last Bastion, The Dismissal, Coura Breakout or Vietnam to other forms of Australian historical drama, such as the period film – The Getting of Wisdom, The Irishman, The Mango Tree, and so on – and television series like Rush, The Sullivans
and Carson’s Law. These texts typically centre fictional characters who achieve a form of “everyman” status such that they can be considered representative of a nation and its experiences (in youth, in war, in depression). Thus The Sullivans presents a “typical” wartime Australian family. Crucially, these texts operate to set predominantly fictional narratives and character’s lives against the backdrop of historical events: wars, depressions. As Tom Ryan notes of the period film protagonist, however, these people do not influence the course of history to any extent: they are victims of, rather than participants in, historical events. They achieve representative status precisely because of their historical anonymity.

In contrast, the historical mini-series often deals directly with actual historical events – the Eureka Stockade, the First and Second World Wars, the dismissal of the Whitlam government, the Kelly story, the Castle Hill rebellion – and offers accounts of those events. Moreover, it often deals with “large” historical figures – Menzies, Curtin, Churchill, Roosevelt (The Last Bastion), Lalor (Eureka Stockade), Kelly (The Last Outlaw), Bradman, Jardine (Bodyline), still familiar politicians (The Dismissal), Melba (Melba), Kingsford Smith (A Thousand Skies). Rather than being victims of history, or in some cases actually attempting to evade historical change, these characters tend to be represented as the makers of history determining and directly influencing the course of events. In centring such figures and constructing accounts of the events in which they participated, the historical mini-series attempts to accede to “history” in direct rather than mediated terms – as merely the backdrop for a narrative. In doing so, it operates in different conceptual terms from the period film. For in so far as the protagonist of the period film achieves a sort of “everyman” status, the genre itself operates in a literary or mythical rather than a historical register. This point is underscored when one considers the reliance on literary adaptation in the period film – for example, Picnic at Hanging Rock, The Getting of Wisdom, My Brilliant Career, We of the Never Never – and the lack of it in the most pertinent instances of the historical mini-series. This, in turn, invites a rather different position for the viewer of the mini-series: as knowledgeable citizen, rather than distracted consumer.

The period film tends also to reconstruct the past in nostalgic terms. It presents the past as a lost, desirable time, as a “golden age” of lost ways and values. In contrast, the historical mini-series’ representation of the past is not so much nostalgic as it is critical and interventionary. While the period film trades on this mythic representation of a national past, the historical mini-series frequently recreates Australia’s past in less nostalgic terms. Thus it criticises the Australian’s naivety (rather than innocence) in The Last Bastion and The Dismissal and presents lazy, prejudiced Australian soldiers as prison guards in The Cowna Breakout. A Fortunate Life is primarily an account of a young man’s ability to survive a neglected childhood rather than an affectionate reminiscence of a difficult past.
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Many mini-series, particularly those produced by the Kennedy-Miller organisation, also promote a more radical “multiperspectivism,” one that effectively displaces the unreflective chauvinism to which so much recent Australian media is prey. In doing so, these mini-series produce remarkably innovative **elliptical** approaches to major historical events in the nation’s history. Thus almost half of **Covra Breakout** is spent on the Japanese “side,” encouraging empathy with their point of view. The Japanese scenes contain Japanese dialogue and English subtitles—an extremely unusual departure from the conditions of intelligibility of commercial television. Similarly, **Bodyline**—while more conventionally reverting to a “little Aussie battler” mode in its latter stages—constructs much of its account with reference to the point of view of Jardine (captain of the MCC tourists in 1932-33 and a convenient “Lucifer” in Australian sports hagiographies), Edith (Jardine’s English sweetheart), and Fender (friend of Jardine and “gentleman” cricketer). **The Dismissal** multiplies perspectives and points of narratorial authority with dizzying speed. **Vietnam**, like **Covra Breakout**, insists on Vietnamese perspectives and shows them to be as fraught with division as Australian positions with regard to the war and the personal tensions it provoked.

Further, it is arguable that these mini-series take seriously the radical historiographical dictum that “the past is only interesting politically because of something which touches us in the present.” Thus, **The Last Bastion** mounts a case, inter alia, for a greater multilateralism in Australian foreign policy at a time (1984) when the ANZUS alliance was in crisis over New Zealand’s refusal to allow American nuclear warships into its harbours and America’s consequent withdrawal from bilateral defence arrangements. This much is explicitly claimed for the series by one of its producers and scriptwriter, David Williamson, in an interview in the documentary **The Making of The Last Bastion**. Similarly, it is clear that both **Covra Breakout** and **Vietnam** are major documents contributing to setting the emergent discourse of multiculturalism on the national agenda. **The Dismissal** was deemed by the Ten Network to be a sufficient potential intervention in early 1980s politics to delay its broadcast twice until after the March 1983 Federal election. It was held to be a unique, and uniquely courageous, staging so close to the event of the most destabilising contravention of constitutional convention in Australian, and probably Westminster, political history.

V Dramaturgy and Narrative

Second, the historical mini-series presents us with innovative narrative and dramaturgical models when compared with established television formats. All mini-series present themselves with a rhetoric of epic structuration, virtually all operate on the model of the nineteenth-century **Bildungsroman**, and several of the best engage with formative
historical events in a documentary-drama mode. What are the salient implications to be drawn from these shared formal characteristics?

Epic structure means extreme etiolation of narrative trajectory. A good deal of the criticism that mini-series attract focuses on this point: skeletal narratives “padded out” to fit pre-determined program durations. However, if we consider both the usual length of the mini-series—eight to ten hours of viewing time—together with the propensity for historical mini-series to rework events whose “narrative” consequences are already widely known, its dramaturgical cues for sustaining viewers’ interest must lie outside narrative enigma. The commodious temporal format typically allows for a displacement of event by causation and consequence: the “events” inscribed in titles such as The Dismissal, Bodyline and Cowra Breakout occur well into the second half of the respective series; in the case of The Dismissal, The Last Bastion and Vietnam, there is a pointed following-through of the political, social and public policy issues that are consequent on the events which are the series’ raison d’être.

In this sense, the historical mini-series offers an unparalleled upgrading of the terms within which historical information and argument are mediated through mainstream television. Consider, by comparison, that television’s representations of history either trade on a comforting nostalgia or a superficial nominalism: on the one hand, history as a lost Eden of traditional values (The Sullivans) or as a pure spectacle of the “otherness” of a national past (This Fabulous Century); on the other, history as merely an indefinitely prolonged series of discrete phenomena (news and current affairs).

The “pull,” then, of narrative enigma is displaced in the historical mini-series by the fact that its plot and resolution have gained social currency before the text is screened. The series’ initial prologue might announce its resolution (the early narration of The Dismissal), the narrative may be familiar as social knowledge or as part of a canon of well-known literary texts (Bodyline, The Dismissal, Eureka Stockade, The Challenge, A Town like Alice). Regardless, the circulation of publicity around the screening of a mini-series guarantees such prior knowledge. As a consequence, a different viewing “position” is invited. The central position conventionally occupied by suspense in televised drama is replaced by an emphasis on what John Caughie has called the “documentary look”: the terms in which the viewer is situated in relation to the text’s careful reconstruction of the past (Caughie, 342). The “ambience” of this recreation can become a central focus of the historical mini-series. This is not to suggest that there are never suspense structures. The known nature of the outcome of the plot, however, alters the function of suspense. One experiences a sense of pathos and tragedy in The Dismissal because of the knowledge that Whitlam will be sacked. Similarly, we attend to the mode of debate about Japanese honour in the Cowra internment camp because its consequences are foregiven.
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Of course, much of this "foregiven" status of the mini-series text has been ascribed by less sanguine critics to an all-pervading "recognition-effect" that secures a safely confirming viewing position. This criticism, however, overlooks or elides crucial aspects of audience composition and response. Not all audiences "recognise" the historical material with the facility and smugness implied by such criticism. On the contrary, for younger audience sectors the historical mini-series may be an unparallelled means by which the "document is inscribed into experience," if the number of educational packages produced to accompany mini-series into the classroom is any guide. Second, far from being lulled, many viewers regard mini-series as significant - verifiable or falsifiable - historical arguments, if the amount and nature of public correspondence generated around them is taken into account. Third, such a criticism smacks of a governing "aesthetics of suspicion": the pleasure taken in the "recognition-effect" need not necessarily be ideologically complicit in principle.

Perhaps the most crucial narratorial and dramaturgical modality of the historical mini-series, however, is its multiperspectivism. By this I mean the way in which the "epic" length and structure of the mini-series both necessitates and makes possible a multiplication of authorising perspectives within a "sprawling" narrative field characterised by the Bildungsroman format. Albert Moran puts it this way:

Structurally, such narratives tend to sprawl. Although the focus is on one or two individuals, nevertheless, as part of an epic sweep, there is often a variety of stories and the accumulation of much social material, the latter often characterised by a painstaking accuracy of detail. The historical credentials of the form are often doubly secured; the elongated time scheme, as well as the extended social and even geographic dimensions and the narrative trajectory of the central figures, is frequently intermeshed with the narrative of more public events. Such narratives often require a "slowing-down" of the main story. With the accumulation of parallel plots, tangential episodes, multiple themes and so on, the main narrative is frequently displaced. In the end, such a narrative may accumulate so much diverse material that it is difficult to bring it to a close. Endings are often not so much a climax as a "point of let-up", where certain resolutions are achieved and the story is over. (Moran, 207)

In the most interesting examples, there is a foregrounded "battle" for enunciative authority where narrative order is put under considerable stress by contending claims on the historical record. The entrusting of narrative authority on the English "side" for most of the first half of Bodyline was certainly a controversial displacement of enshrined Australian chauvinism. The Dismissal's radically complex mode of narration disseminates narrative authority across time and political combatants.
Commentators have variously equated the "line" the program takes with that of Fraser, Kerr or a Left-Labor position of "maintaining the rage." Whatever else such differing readings suggest, they attest to the innovative multiperspectivism that certain historical mini-series produce.

VI Documentary-Drama
A Stylistic and Historical Continuum

A third general issue of the nature of the historical mini-series as a textual system concerns the vexed question of "documentary-drama." The BBC's banning of Peter Watkins' The War Game and the diplomatic crisis between Britain and Saudi Arabia over The Death of a Princess are two of the more explosive events which attest to the legal and political as well as textual volatility of the form. This volatility should caution against attempts to "define" the format; rather, it is more constructive to consider documentary-drama in the historical mini-series on a continuum between two sets of limiting markers. Towards the "conservative" limit, one might situate mini-series like 1915, which presents itself as a straight literary adaptation, is structured around fictional characters against a "backdrop" of historical events, and which attempts little, if any, textual work integrating archival material into the dramatic reconstruction. Towards the "innovative" limit might be found programs like The Dismissal and Vietnam which work from original screenplays and make complex use of mixtures of fictional and historical protagonists and archival and reconstructed diegetic material. Somewhere between the two are situated mini-series like Power Without Glory: derived from an innovative roman à clef; Anzacs, The Last Outlaw and Against the Wind: historical mini-series with original scripts written by experts on their respective subjects which attempt some measure of historical revisionism, but which are essentially "straight" historical dramas; or The Last Bastion and Bodyline: with their original scripts, mainly historical protagonists and set piece mixtures of archive and drama.

Let us consider this question of a stylistic and representational continuum comprehending a broad range of approaches to televisual form and to history in Australian mini-series in some detail. There are, of course, many methods of constructing critical parameters for the sixty or so series — more than four hundred television hours! — under consideration. We could start with their consistent and undoubted importance as rating successes, and pursue the implications of this for the "reinvention" of indigenous, serious drama with commercial potential. The industrial emergence and fortunes of the format might be the focus. Alternatively, we might follow topic, period or source groupings in the mini-series, producing an account such as the following:

(1) literary adaptations: 1915, A Fortunate Life, Water Under the Bridge, For the Term of His Natural Life, A Town Like Alice, Robbery Under Arms, Lucinda Brayford.
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(2) non-historical: Return to Eden.
(3) contemporary history: The Dismissal, The Challenge, Tracy, Vietnam, Sword of Honour, All the Way, Shout!
(4) early history: The Timeless Land, Captain James Cook, Against the Wind, The Last Outlaw, For the Term of His Natural Life, Eureka Stockade, Robbery Under Arms.
(7) generational "sweep": Dirtwater Dynasty, Women of the Sun.

Rather than pursue these kinds of groupings, however, a stylistic and representational continuum would attempt to establish qualitative criteria for discriminating amongst mini-series in terms of their use of the format and their approach to historical reconstruction. Employing the criteria introduced above, this would involve setting "conservative" and "innovative" markers on two axes, the stylistic and the historical.

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**HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTION**

A grid like this, gross as it is, can act as a heuristic device to suggest some fruitful means of categorisation, enabling us to specify the stylistic and representational parameters of Australian mini-series. Let us plot, then, some of the "points" on this grid.
VII The Last Bastion

The Last Bastion (1984) is significant for its uncompromising focus on the historical moment of Australia's greatest danger during the Second World War. It is one of the only mini-series (The Dismissal is the only other significant example) to suppress romance as a major dramaturgical motor and concentrate throughout on political-diplomatic-military vectors in order to structure the drama of the series. It is thus peopled entirely by "large" historical figures in what are at times complex narrative interactions, which are nevertheless rendered as classically dramatic. This mini-series marks the only contribution to the format by the pre-eminent scriptwriter David Williamson (who was also co-producer). In contrast, The Petrov Affair (1987) attempts a reconstruction of a similarly complex historical moment, but fails to develop a coherent dramatic field. Like Against the Wind (1978) and The Last Outlaw (1981), The Last Bastion's principals claim to have done original research on their subject that will "substantially rewrite Australian history."

As we have seen, the series also makes a strong political argument against Australian diplomatic and military dependency, and by its resilient focus on the drama of diplomatic manoeuvres against the backdrop of a nationalist reading of Australia's marginal international status it takes a reasoned stand against the moralist doxa of both conservative populism and gauchiste purism that parliamentary politics and allied diplomacy is a corrupt and corrupting game. Throughout The Last Bastion, the effect and affect of political rhetoric is centred and successfully dramatised, as it is in few other mini-series, The Dismissal and Vietnam excepted. This is a considerable achievement in and of itself.

One of the most intriguing issues a series like The Last Bastion raises is that it arrives at a classical Whittamite position of greater diplomatic and military independence for Australia by a route which runs counter to the way the same position is argued by contemporary Left historians; Michael Dunn, for instance, in the tradition of the anti-Nationalist Left historiography of Humphrey MacQueen, puts Curtin in the position of having merely shifted dependencies from Britain to America. It suggests much about the commerical and dramaturgical imperatives of research and scripting for television mini-series that Curtin is produced as a Whittamite avant la lettre in The Last Bastion. But it also suggests something of the import of such television work that it is ordering "popular memories" to provide antecedents and traditions for what is still today (within political agenda-setting) considered aberrant and utopian.
VIII  The Petrov Affair and The Dismissal

Compare The Petrov Affair on the one hand, and The Dismissal (1983), on the other, with The Last Bastion. The latter series, by the insistence of its achieved political and diplomatic focus, creates a kind of correlative formal interest when considered against dominant character structures of television drama. Petrov, by comparison, is an "incoherent text" both at the level of political-historical argument and of dramatic structure. Drew Cottle, in his discussion of this series, needn't have worried so much over the pernicious New Right ventriloquism of the series, because it has failed to find a line – dramatic as much as political – through the dense weave of issues surrounding the Petrov affair. Nevertheless, Petrov is an interesting failure because it suggests something of the difficulties posed by the hybrid form of the mini-series. In this case, the genre recipe of the spy thriller and the complexities of political and popular address around an excessively localised moment in Australian history don't play off each other productively.

The Dismissal, by contrast, succeeds spectacularly in finding a dramatic style appropriate to an equally complex and divisive political moment: the sacking of the Whitlam government. This is the mode of reconstructed Greek tragedy: an audacious hyperdramatisation that grasps the literal import of the cliché "political theatre," attempting as it does to perform the psychic-social ritual of turning solipsistic "left-wing melancholy" into a more productive work of "national mourning." It is within this global purpose that the radical stylistic gestures of The Dismissal – the overwrought omniscience of narratorial voice, the dramaturgical and character architecture of classical Greek tragedy, the quasi-Method actors' preparation and physiognomic and gestural impersonation – should be understood. The Dismissal, as its producer and scriptwriter Terry Hayes has noted, "changed the landscape of Australian television."

IX  Melba and Shout!

Another obvious pairing of mini-series is that of Melba (1988) and Shout! The Story of Johnny O'Keefe (1986). What a strange text Melba is, exemplifying as it does so many of the stylistic imponderables of the mini-series format. It has all the hallmarks of the "conservative" spirit of reconstruction: period costume, chamber drama, and a "straight" biographic focus cutting against any claims to multiperspectivism. On the other hand, this only describes perhaps half the program time; after the first episode, the rest is given over to enormous chunks of Linda Cropper deftly mouthing a veritable catalogue raisonné of Melba's operatic career. Like Count Breakout and Vietnam's expansive periods of subtitled Japanese and
Vietnamese, the mere fact that commercial network television is taking to its bosom such "marginal" interests – opera, "multiculturalism" – is cause to suggest stylistic departures of some moment.

Look also at the demands that the dramaturgy of Melba places on audiences: its ponderous pacing and movement (or rather lack of it), its mostly unrelieved reliance on a talking heads/chamber drama format, and the evaporation of narrative tension or enigma through excessive signposting. The success of Melba must point to the successful marketing of mini-series as addressing the heightened "civic consciousness" of audiences, as providing informative "history lessons." This form of address legitimises a divergent (reflective, conscientious?) mode of dramaturgy within the regimes of commercial television and therefore creates a space, however underdeveloped as it is in many mini-series, for such strangenesses as, here, the oracularity of opera repeatedly suspending an already extremely leisurely narrative movement.

Interestingly, though, the address to a heightened "national consciousness" in Melba can be regarded as very much balanced against the more recent industrial imperatives to sell the high-budgeted mini-series in overseas markets. The series' investment prospectus claims Melba "will be an international series which combines a major title, momentous events and international locations." As can be seen from this series, as well as such examples as The Last Frontier (1987), Nancy Wake (1987) and The Dirtwater Dynasty (1988), these industrial vectors have decided effects on choices of location, generic convention and cast.

The same could not be said for Shout! Arguably one of the most tightly narrativised mini-series (written by Robert Caswell), it also has a highly complex form of "local" address and a powerful approach to the relation of archive and drama. Historian Ray Evans' fine analysis of this series dwells on some of the problems posed by its compelling attempt to represent the dialectics of cultural dependency in an import culture such as Australia. The historian will still find much that falls short of the full amplitude of considered analytical research in even the most outstanding television drama, but that should not divert our attention from the achievements of such television drama, of which Shout! is indisputably an example. Let us look briefly at Shout!'s achievements in the areas of dramaturgical form, cultural politics and relations of archive and drama.

For a mini-series, Shout! has a frenetic, almost hysterical, narrative pacing and a central characterisation, Terry Serio as the The Wild One himself, who stands alone amongst principal characters in mini-series (Nicole Kidman's performance as Megan Goddard in Vietnam comes to mind as similar) as a whirlwind presence. The opening sequence sets this tone: the oneric camera movement through an empty Sydney Stadium, into the past, into the big production theme number "Shout," and then out again, in slow motion, to a surreal gesture of childhood psycho-
drama, with little Johnny screaming to get his own way with his mother, and a teacher Brother Mazzerini ominously laying down The Law of the Father. The dense circumambient aurality, the onerics, the performer as ritual sacrifice—it all recalls Martin Scorsese's Raging Bull, and not simply because it's set in a converted boxing ring.

The dream theme is doubly appropriate, because it is the dream of movement within the fixed rules of exchange in a culturally dependent nation that is the narrative crux of Shout! 1954: Johnny courts Maryanne at the flicks; they watch a Cinesound Review item that tells them that Australian car manufacturing can't at the moment be as good as overseas models—"in the meantime, we can always dream." 1956: Lee Gordon, displaced American, has a dream of "world-class entertainment for Australia." 1956: Johnny and Maryanne kiss at a shop-front display of televisions as Shirley Strickland and Betty Cuthbert win gold at the Melbourne Olympics, giving Johnny the opportunity to demand recognition that Australians can be as good as anyone in the world.

But Shout! is minimally chauvinistic in its cultural politics. If anything, as Evans points out, it accords too great a role to the enabling status of Lee Gordon, and its strict bio-pic parameters move the focus away from developments parallel to that of O'Keefe in Australian rock. Nevertheless, it "performs" the dialectics of exchange in an import culture brilliantly and, on the way, provides—as does Melba—an extraordinary repertoire of the aurial and visual archive running from the fifties to the "psychedelic" seventies.

X Sword of Honour and Vietnam

Finally, consider another comparison between two mini-series with similar thematic foci, Sword of Honour (1986) and Vietnam (1987). Both deal with the effects of the Vietnam war on several members of a family; both cover similar time frames—the mid 1960s to 1972 (in the case of Vietnam) or 1975 (in the case of Sword of Honour). Both map generational difference and conflict onto national conflict; both deal with the intensified intra-generational conflict posed by war service on the one hand and the counter-cultural peace movement on the other; both have major reconciliatory finales. However, the manifest differences between the two can serve as a telling demonstration of the kinds of issues that I have considered central to an appreciation of style and representation in Australian mini-series.

These two series belong towards opposite ends of the continuum. Sword is a straight character drama which does little with the capacious narrative potential of the mini-series format except fulfill its worst-case scenario; incredible slackness of narrative movement unrelieved by anything else punctuating or layering the plot at the level of archival inscription, the insertion of "large" historical figures, or even a heartfelt
chauvinistic nationalism. Gestures towards some of these "bottom-line" elements help to salvage bits of otherwise equally awful series such as *All the Way* (1988), *The Challenge* (1986) or *Captain James Cook* (1988). Even in its central theme – the fortunes of an extended "family" group over an extended time span – *Sword* manages little, because the characters undergo little fundamental reorientation, as *Vietnam*’s central quartet of characters do. Perhaps the only moment of layering or arresting intensity in the eight hours was in the third hour, when Tony is taken to Frank’s private altar to military glory, mateship and death. *Sword* might have elegant symmetries of character construction, as Ina Bertrand’s analysis of this and other treatments of Vietnam in recent film and television posts, but they never move off the analyst’s page.18

*Vietnam*, by contrast, has all the hallmarks of an omega point in Australian mini-series production. It has invented a dramaturgy of the archive, going further than any other series not only in archival inscription, but in integrating that into a complex, multiperspectival dramatic structure. Each pivotal character – Douglas, Evelyn, Phil and Megan – has their own narrative trajectory, which interweaves with other "pivotal" trajectories as well as providing the focus for a series of relatively autonomous subsidiary narrative worlds. Historical movement – eight years from November 1964 to December 1972 – also means the slow accretion or layering of perspectives such that when the family finally "reforms" at the end, we have learned to think of them historically. To think of the "central characters" historically is to decentre them in purely characterological terms. They gradually assume the status of markers of sectoral divisions within a historically delineated population, itself undergoing irreversible sea-change. Their tentative reconciliation at the end is strongly overdetermined by its taking place on the night of Whitlam’s 1972 electoral triumph. This propitiatory utopianism is probably the most breathtaking example of the mini-series best-case scenario – the successful mapping of the personal on to the public and vice versa. The narrative architectonics are constantly enlivened by a prodigiously pleasurable amount of archival quotation, aural as much as visual, which can be read both for its own sake – the texture and pathos of instant recognition and impossible difference – and in terms of its layering of narrative. *Vietnam* can lay claim to constitute a remarkable *Gesamtkunstwerk* of Australian television.19

XI

Consideration of the general characteristics of the Australian mini-series in this discussion has prevented extensive analysis of more than a few important examples, but it has suggested that such work is valuable: the mini-series offers a rich field for investigating the potential for innovation in contemporary television. The format, and the uses to which it has
been put in certain series at the “innovative” end of my continuum, might suggest a greater range of possibility for broadcast television than general accounts of it and of its differences from cinema have suggested. Further, it has arguably given local and international audiences many memorable representations of major determinants of Australian history.

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A shorter version of this paper appeared in *Filmviews* 136 (1988): 30-36. Dates for mini-series discussed are dates of first broadcast in the major metropolitan areas; in some cases, these differ from year of production or year of screening in other areas.


7 See Andrew Goodwin et al., eds, *Drama-Documentary* (London: BFI, 1983), for accounts of these and other significant controversies around documentary drama.


Michael Dunn, Australia and the Empire: From 1788 to the Present (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1984), especially Ch.6.

For a much fuller treatment of The Last Bastion, see the well-argued piece by Geoff Mayer, one of the very few that engages with questions of both style and representation, "The Last Bastion: History or Drama?" Cinema Papers 48 (1985): 38-41, 87.

Drew Cottle, "The Petrov Affair: Constructing the Right Past?" paper delivered at the Fourth History and Film Conference, University of Queensland, December 1987.

See Freud’s distinction between “mourning” and “melancholia,” which this point follows, in “Mourning and Melancholia,” On Metapsychology (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984) 245-68. The point is developed brilliantly, within a social psychology framework, by Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich, The Inability to Mourn (New York: Grove, 1975).

Terry Hayes, interview with Keryn Curtis, 6 February 1988. For more detail, see my "The Dismissal and Australian Television" in Stuart Cunningham et al., The Dismissal: Perspectives (North Ryde: AFTS, 1984) 1-6 and Cunningham, "Kennedy-Miller: 'House Style' in Australian Television."


Ina Bertrand, "From Silence to Reconciliation," paper delivered at the Fourth History and Film Conference, University of Queensland, December 1987.


See, for example, John Ellis, Visible Fictions (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).