

LET'S GET EMPIRICAL

THE MEDIA by Keith Windschuttle. Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1984, 436 pages, paperback, \$12.95.



Keith Windschuttle's latest valuable book is a thumping big one (over 400 pages) on the Australian mass media. In it he also delivers a thumping to left critics of the mass media and popular culture. All marxist theories are not only wrong but elitist. They have all been influenced by the 1940s' Frankfurt School of marxists. Frankfurters see the mass media as a tool for ideological control, imposing the "dominant ideology of capitalism" on a "passive, uncomprehending, mindless, artless, manipulated, dominated and anaesthetised working class".

While the Frankfurters see people as cultural sausages (uniformly churned out by the cultural industries, stuffed with rubbish ideas), popular culture, according to Windschuttle, is far more complex and contradictory. It originates from, and serves the needs and interests of, the working class and is an arena of class contestation. Thus, certain TV programs have high ratings, capitalist newspapers continue to be bought in huge numbers, and radio continues to throw up its celebrities and sport its stars, not because the workers have been conned into "false consciousness", but because much mass culture is truly popular. Much of the media is "attractive and appealing" to many people.

So Paul Hogan, for example, is a genuine working class hero, representing "the accumulation of nearly 200 years of working class experience in this country, of countless untold struggles between authority and its unruly subjects". Hogan may have been "culturally expropriated" by the ruling class to sell cigarettes but expropriation is not control or domination.

In a similar way, while only people "with a degree in English or philosophy" see TV as "mind-dulling pap", the soap opera, for example, is a "socially progressive form of drama". Much TV, radio, news, sport and other cultural forms are "genuine popular cultural expressions".

Eschewing the "grand theory" of radical intellectuals, Windschuttle gets empirical. He examines the actual content and values of TV programs, radio, magazines, newspapers, music, etc. This focus on the evidence is a refreshing approach, redressing the theoretical waffle of many critics of popular culture so lost in the stratosphere of their jargon that one wonders whether they ever watch the box or go to the oval. He dispenses the fog of those incomprehensible academic parlour games (you know the type — pick a buzz word between semiotics and deconstructionism, take away functionalism, and — wacko! — you get post-Althusserian structuralism).

Many marxists have been blind to the contradictions within popular culture and, to be fair, Windschuttle's empiricism does make visible the links between manufactured mass culture and truly popular culture. While Windschuttle is right, however, to reject theory without empiricism, the strength of his attack carries him over into a workerist/populist position which holds that whatever the workers/people get, do, read or watch is what they want, need, in their interests and largely beyond criticism.

In his eagerness to attack the cultural sausage theories of the Frankfurters, Windschuttle's populism runs into its own snags (sorry!). His interpretation of cultural reality is open to query. It is true, for example, that some elements of soap opera do "perform popular culture's traditional functions of moral support and the confirmation of community values" such as ingenuity, courage, loyalty, persistence, justice. Soapies, however, also support reactionary values such as women's "proper" nature and role, and sexual difference as deviance. Soapies do show there is a "social dimension to problems such as drugs, domestic violence, divorce, etc." but they do not suggest social solutions; the problem may be social, the solution is private. Political change is written off the script of the soapie.

**Reviewed by
Phil Shannon**

Sport, too, is interpreted by Windschuttle to fit the demands of his populism. Competitive sport "preserves values essential for struggle within a class-divided society". Sport, however, also preserves values such as competition, masculinism, aggression, the work ethic and the primacy of winning, all integral to a successful capitalism and a divided working class. Windschuttle scorns "non-competitive participatory sports", especially jogging, "whose only product is an individual sense of well-being" and which thus produce a passive working class. So much for the values of co-operation, friendship, non-violent social interaction, fun and health.

Windschuttle's attempt to defend his populism by an objective empiricism breaks down when some evidence won't fit his theory. Packer/TV-created one-day cricket, which draws huge audiences, must, for Windschuttle, "eventually die" because it is "an inferior quality generic brand of a supermarket product", it is not "the real thing", it is "mere spectacle", "inherently unsatisfying". Windschuttle undoes his own thesis here. He dismisses the massive support for "circus" cricket as false and believes that "real" cricket will re-emerge to satisfy the "real" needs of the cricket public. His theory does not address the fact that not all popular culture is necessarily good and that the mass media can selectively promote or repress certain values.

In general, Windschuttle's over-zealous desire to avoid "blanket condemnation" of the media, a stance which he falsely attributes to the whole left, leads him to his own blanket condemnation of all socialist critiques of mass culture. He tends to see what he wants to in the evidence. He accepts too much mass culture too uncritically. He underplays the power of capitalist-controlled media to influence people's beliefs and lives. People do falsely believe that strikes, for example, cause unemployment, push up prices and hurt the nation despite the counter-evidence that industrial accidents are far more costly and that strikes hurt profits far more than people. These facts, of course, are rarely to be found in the media. He replaces the old orthodoxy of "false consciousness" with a new orthodoxy



of the mass media as reflecting genuine popular consciousness.

Thus, while he rightly sees the Soviet press as a tool of totalitarian control and manipulation, he allows himself the luxury of believing that a more democratic capitalism allows a press more open to working class influence. There is some validity to this but, while the capitalist press are not (always) successful in telling us *what* to think, they set a tight agenda on what we can think *about*. Uranium, for example, gets reasonable coverage (if opportunistically to play up the splits in the ALP rather than on the merits of the issue itself) but alternative, renewable energy is ignored to oblivion. Similarly, issues of law and justice are (over)exposed in the sensationalist Chamberlain case, but the institutionalised use of law and justice against Aborigines is relegated to the margins (although a hard-line populist could argue that this is a reflection of Australian racism — a popular ideology and therefore to be supported?). The nature of the capitalist media, in its ability to set the cultural agenda, is, in this sense, as totalitarian as TASS.

Windschuttle is right to show that there must be something in the popularity of the mass media but he is less enthusiastic about showing that there must also be something in the rejection of much mass media by the left.

He notes that there is a correlation between more education and a critical attitude to the mass media, but he uses this as an excuse for sniffing at radical intellectuals rather than arguing for the socialist principle of extending (even capitalist) education to more people to increase their critical awareness of the world and the images through which that world is presented to us by the mass media.

Windschuttle's populism devalues the good grounds why many people, especially socialists (not all of whom are middle class egg-heads), feel uneasy about embracing Paul Hogan as hero, soapies as liberating or "tele-politics" as expressing the "pre-existing" political culture of the working class.

There are good reasons, too, why many of us are driven from the bland stodge of commercial TV and radio, where you can't tell the chat from the news or the music from the ads, into the arms of the ABC, community radio and the leftwing press.

Windschuttle offers us only the narrow choice between a Hogan (whom he approves) and an Edna Everage (whom he disapproves as an elitist "attack on the dumb slob in suburbia"). There has got to be more of a choice than that.

Let none of this, however, dissuade you from reading the book. There is much to learn from it, including exhaustive (and exhausting) details on the ownership and control of the Australian (state-protected) "free" press, bias in reporting of strikes, how advertising works, etc.

His proposals for reform are worth serious attention although, despite his digs at the elitism of the over-educated left, his call to revive "a quality, consciously elite paper" like the old *Nation Review*, "retreating to the up-market, highly educated audiences", seems less viable and less democratic than developing *Tribune* as a mass left newspaper.

The media affects us all (some would say like a flu virus) and we are all media critics. There will always be disagreement. Windschuttle and his readers will enjoy and relish the debate.

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