

OZMOSIS

Looking at Pop Culture

Is there a real Australian identity?
Tony Bennett is not so sure.

At the end of *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes argues that the mythologist must place himself or herself outside the myths he studies if he or she is to unveil their political significance. "To decipher the Tour de France or the 'good French wine'," he writes, "is to cut oneself off from those who are entertained or warmed up by them." The mythologist's connection with the world, he concludes, must be "of the order of sarcasm".

In *Myths of Oz*, John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner* set out to do for Australian culture what Barthes did for French culture: to read its myths and strip them of their innocence. They thus distance themselves from works like Russell Ward's *Australian Legend* which chart an anxious course in search of a true Australian identity or character. Instead, their concern is with the ways in which meanings and images of Australianness are organised in what they call the "lived texts" of Australian popular culture — the pub, the beach, the video-games parlour, the shopping centre. Approaching these as organised clusters of signs, they seek to reveal the meanings and political values that are invested in these spheres of everyday culture as well as to show how they are made use of and negotiated by their participants.

In this alone, *Myths of Oz* stands out from the bulk of reading matter destined to come our way in

1988. In calling attention to the heavy burden of ideological meaning which informs the seemingly trivial and incidental aspects of day-to-day life, the authors jolt the reader into an awareness of the cultural significance of aspects of behaviour which might otherwise pass unnoticed. The role of the pub (primarily for men) as a transition zone between the worlds of work and home, mediating the values of mateship and domesticity; the pleasures of looking and of being looked at associated with shopping malls; the ambiguous play with the structures of voyeurism at nudist beaches; the meanings invested in video games by unemployed youths — these are among the issues which Fiske, Hodge and Turner examine, probing them to unearth a rich and, at times, unexpected harvest of meanings.

They wear their theory lightly, too. While drawing on the disciplines of semiotics and cultural studies, they do so sparingly, avoiding lengthy theoretical expositions. For the most part, they make their points by way of details, non-technical discussions of particular examples with the result that while the analysis is often provoking, the reading is easy-going.

In brief, it's a book well worth buying and reading, and one likely, I would guess, to enjoy considerable influence — especially when its own cultural and political aspirations are taken into account. For, while Fiske et al seek, in emulating Barthes, to subject their chosen myths of Oz to a critical gaze, there is also a

countervailing tendency to their discussion. Indeed, in introducing their concerns, they state their primary intention as that of refuting the condescension of those critics who have long "bemoaned the lack of an Australian culture". The consequence is a degree of advocacy for things Australian, a commitment to show the forces of culture at work where they had previously been thought to be absent.

This does not, as I have already noted, result in a search for a single defining essence of Australianness. The pub and the beach, they write, are best seen as sites where Australians construct (and deconstruct) a plenitude of meanings, using a multitude of practices — not a single meaning with a single value" (p. ix). The stress, then, is on the plural — on *Australiannesses* rather than *Australianness*.

Nonetheless, in their commitment to identify sources of cultural richness and creativity which might be regarded as distinctively Australian, the authors approach Australian popular culture with a view to constituting it as a part of the nation's inheritance, its distinctive cultural possession. This, in turn, means that, in lieu of the Barthesian stance of sarcasm, they tend rather to write as insiders — "as typical enough denizens of Australia" (p.viii) — with an evident warmth and enthusiasm for many of the forms of everyday culture they discuss. While careful to note the many differences and contradictions which the concept of an Australian culture subsumes, Fiske and his coauthors clearly feel it important to establish that some forms of cultural activity are distinctively Australian and worth marking as such.

This foregrounds an important difference between the European contexts from which Fiske, Hodge and Turner derive most of their theories and the Australian situation to and in which they are applied. Definitions of the distinctiveness of English culture, for example, are so massively mortgaged to bourgeois conceptions of the nation that the self-respecting leftwing critic would

* John Fiske, Bob Hodge and Graeme Turner, *Myths of Oz* (Sydney, Allen and Unwin, 1987).

rarely regard this ground as one worth struggling for — although the situation is different in Scotland and Wales. In these cases, as in Australia, the fact that definitions of the national culture are, in part, shaped through the process of their emergence in opposition to the dominance of imported cultures lends such questions a political pertinence which, in other contexts, would be lacking.

That said, even where it seems to have a radical potential, the cultural currency of nationalism is made of volatile stuff and is likely to run amok unless handled carefully. Despite its many virtues, *Myths of Oz* is not — for me, at any rate — circumspect enough in this respect,

Hawkespeak — an uneasy hybrid of political officialese and the language of mateship

or at least not consistently so. This is especially true of the final chapter which, in the end, forsakes the brief of analysing myths of Oz in favour of embodying them.

Yet it gets off to a splendid start. The chapter opens with a discussion of the Australian accent and finds, in the stress Australian speech places on vowels in contrast to the English stress on consonants, a source of unity despite regional variations in language-use. However, it is also recognised that powerful differentiating forces are at work within this unity, sometimes giving rise to highly distinctive speech forms in their attempts to straddle and reconcile contradictory patterns of verbal stress and intonation. The discussions of "Hawkespeak" — an uneasy hybrid of political officialese and the language of mateship — is especially interesting in this regard.

In arguing that Australian pronunciation is characterised by a strong, underlying unity despite apparent regional and social variations, Fiske, Hodge and Turner are on strong, well-documented ground. I think they err, however, when they go on to argue:

Just as there is an Australian way of producing the sounds of English, there is an Australian way of doing many other things, such as working and playing, eating and dressing. We call all these part of an Australian accent, in a broader sense of the word. They all work in the same way, through relative shifts against a common standard, not an absolute difference. They all have a common function, to define an Australian identity.

Although intended fairly loosely, the analogy is a misleading one. There is no reason, because ways of speaking are similar, that ways of doing other things should also exhibit shared national characteristics. There is an important shift of ground here — from the determinations peculiar to a specific practice to the more general concept of a national culture — which leads the authors astray. Moreover, in seeking to distil a distinctive and common Australian accent from a wide variety of activities — from the way sports are played to the way a garbo wears his boots and stubbies — they end up not quite so far away from Russell Ward as they imagine. Dedicated to cricket, thongs and vegemite and other things that go Oz in the night, the concluding sections of the book Australianise just about everything in sight through a somewhat violent process of "ozmosis". Particular signs of Australianness become the genuine article.

The objection here, of course, is not that particular groups of Australians have not developed distinctive forms of culture and behaviour. They manifestly have and it is well worth saying so. But such distinctiveness is always double-edged, differentiating such pursuits characteristically to be conducted in other countries (whose cultures are rarely so even as they might appear from a distance) but also from the ways in which other Australians engage in them.

Fiske et al would, I think, acknowledge this point. Yet the organisation of their discussion — seeking an Australian accent rather than a variety of such accents — tends to mute its implications. For they

present the relations between different Australian accents, and the plurality of meanings and values embodied in them, such that one such accent, in being privileged above others, serves to represent a true and authentic Australianness, the real thing.

In taking Broad Australian to typify the Australian accent, *Myths of Oz* thus construes the working class as the sole source of authentic Australian linguistic creativity. "Even in Australia today," they write, "creativity still comes from below and is appropriated from above. Change that is recognised as both real and Australian, still, will have popular or working class markers attached". (p. 168) Nor is this limited to questions of language.

"In the accent of footwear as of voice," they contend, "raising the class decreases the Australianness". (p. 176) Garbos wear boots in an authentically Australian way; doctors playing garbo for the day don't.

To be clear: neither the linguistic nor the sartorial creativity of working people is in question here. The problem rather consists in the very different operation which transforms this creativity into a privileged marker of Australianness. For, at least in Barthes' book, it is in precisely this operation — making one set of signs (of workingclassness) stand for another (the nation) — that the essence of myth consists. Where their discussion takes on this aspect, Fiske and his coauthors cease to be mythologists and become myth-makers.

Or, more accurately perhaps: myth-tellers. For their arguments have a familiar ring about them. Drawing on British sub-cultural theory and grafting this onto the tradition of radical nationalism, they suggest that Australian culture is most authentically itself when it emerges from below and embodies, however embryonically, resistance to the status quo. When different forms of Australianness are compared, this always proves to be the decisive factor in discriminating between them, the means of calibrating their

degree of Australianness. There are many styles of domestic architecture in Australia but that which is distinctively Australian has a working-class inflection that is opposed to middle-class restraint. The surfer and the lifesaver are both Australian icons, but the former is preferred as the representative of a subculture which has been continuously and coherently oppositional to the dominant culture. Why is this?

In Australian patterns of representation of the two groups, if the lifesaver is culture the surfer is nature; if the lifesaver is responsible, law-abiding and community spirited, the surfer is irresponsible, feckless and "a bludger"; if the lifesaver is civilised, the surfer is primitive; the lifesaver is the land, the surfer the sea. (p. 66)

Elsewhere, in their discussion of the layout of homes and gardens, or that of Kings Park in Perth, the authors of *Myths of Oz* use the opposition between nature and culture to great effect in teasing out the organisation of particular cultural sites. Yet at others — and I think this is the central ambiguity of the book — their own analysis becomes complicit with a particular mythic ordering of the relations between nature and culture in which the former is associated with Australia, the people, the working classes, informality, resistance, sexuality; and the latter with Englishness, the middle classes, constraint, the law, sexual restraint. While, in part, it's argued that this is how some myths of Oz are structured, it's also maintained that these myths — but only these — have a ring of truth about them.

While I think this strand in the book's argument is a pity — for Australian populism shows every sign of getting along quite nicely without the added support of cultural studies — it is only one strand among many in what remains a richly argued and rewarding book. I think it would have been more so, however, for a touch more Barthesian sarcasm and a little less indulgent basking in the warmth of a

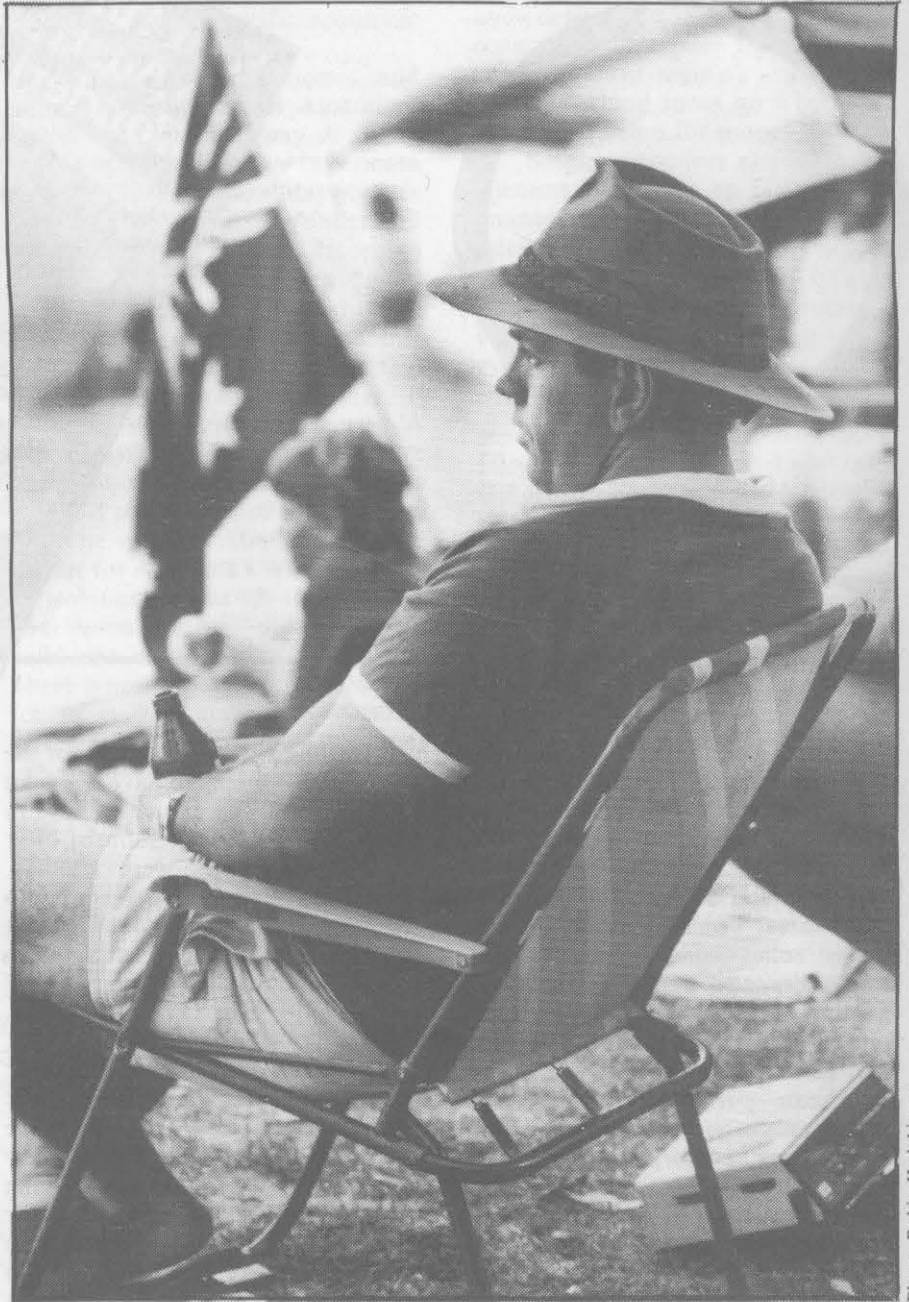


Photo: Robin Hodgkinson

familiar culture. A little more political nerve in tackling the working-class signifiers of Australianness with less sentimentality would also have been welcome.

Yet perhaps this is the prejudiced reaction of one to whom, as a "new chum", the more distanced, outsider position Barthes advocates comes more easily. And perhaps, therefore, I shouldn't press my case too hard. National peculiarities are

tricky things to meddle in. Graeme Turner recounts the discomfort he felt in England while staying with a couple "who used to fill the bath every Friday night, pop a little weed in, and allow their goldfish to 'take a walk'." At least this tells us why the English have baths. What puzzles me is: what else does he think Friday nights are for?

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