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Playing backwards: Anticipatory memories in the Antipodes

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Playing backwards: Anticipatory memories in the Antipodes

Abstract
When I first relocated to Australia, there was a clear three month delay for cultural products coming from North America to arrive. It was the era of Jurassic Park and for those three months I had a high level of what Bourdieu originally called "cultural capital" amongst a certain age group who were anticipating the breakthrough computer-generated images of the flocking dinosaurs and the menacing intelligence of the raptors. At that time, there was no basketball team named after a dinosaur (Toronto Raptors) and only the first season of an ice-hockey team named after a movie (Anaheim Mighty Ducks). It was 1993 and life apparently was simpler and idyllic.

It is a definitive cultural condition in Australia to already possess a great deal of knowledge about a television programme or a film before it has arrived. For film reviewers, they are aware of box office receipts in the United States, other reviewers' comments and the wealth of promotional material that is part of their press kits. For the audience, according to key publicists in Australia, magazines and television rarely now hold to the rule of following the conventions of matching the release date of a given product for their release of a 'feature' article on its stars. The three months gap of knowledge has eroded completely in Australia. In fact, the Internet through websites destroys the organisation of Australian-targetted promotional campaigns for X-Files episodes/movies as fans seek out advanced information well before their domestic release. We already know who not to trust before we experience the actual programme and it produces a fundamentally changed cultural experience. Harry Jay Knowles's website "ain't it cool" has revelled in the infamy of disrupting Hollywood's carefully crafted saturation promotion and ad campaigns.

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Playing Backwards:
Anticipatory Memories in the Antipodes

- P. David Marshall
- Respond To This Article

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"As the old technologies become automatic and invisible, we find ourselves more concerned with fighting or embracing what’s new"—Dennis Baron, From Pencils to Pixels: The Stage of Literacy Technologies

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To capture this Australian sensibility that can be labelled 'anticipatory memory', it is worth looking at the most recent example of this phenomenon and its implications. Seinfeld, as millions of people are aware, has completed its concluding season finale. It went to air in North America in May 1998, but its scheduled broadcast in Australia on the Ten Network was August 20th, 1998. The lead-up to the last episode was followed closely by newspapers, magazines and television in Australia, so closely that it became a joke to believe you could watch the programme in August without knowing exactly what was about to happen. Newspapers printed synopses; interviews with stars were regularly reported in magazines and broadcast on television. There was no avoiding the endgame of the series. All of this promotional work was connected to an event that was organised for the North American audience.

However, in a synaptic misfiring that is part of the current global cultural economy, we were drawn into the same vortex, the same hype, the same anticipation. The episode has premiered and the Australian Ten Network had constructed an entire network-level promotion for what they have called Sein-off Month. When the programme actually aired, we had lived through an experience that we had already partially played out; it felt a little bit like celebrating the new year three days late and getting one's cues about how to celebrate it from looking at the dance moves from videotaped versions of the American Dick Clark in Times Square. The ritual of watching did occur, but the celebratory quality or the sense of the ecstatic had already been dispersed.

Anticipatory memory is not exclusive to Australia. It is a feature of all forms of entertainment that possess large budgets for promotion. Although Australians regularly endure a longer run of publicity than North Americans for something like Armageddon, providing the material for how we should remember programmes is a pervasive pattern of both commercial and non-commercial television promotion throughout the world. John Hartley has described this as part of the "paedocratic regime" of television: in the promotions, we are told not only what we should watch but also how we should enjoy, what parts to revel in and what parts to engage in emotionally. We are heavily guided by the voice-over narrators of these "stings" and "trailers" of either television or film so that whether we are children or not, we are treated as if we are children. In fact, the narrators themselves for these promotions are a small group of incredibly familiar voices, fatherly voices. Australian television networks rarely employ more than two male narrators to tell us authoritatively how to watch.
The repercussions of anticipatory memories are manifold, but one of the key effects of this promotional regime which guides our pleasure is that generic patterns that are employed in American television become the standards for other television systems. Thus, the sitcom becomes a formation of audience pleasure that other national broadcasters try to reproduce. This is not to say that these variations on a genre are not genuinely pleasurable and might relate very well to the regional or local cultural landscape; it is more to say that promotion and the construction of anticipatory memories is a critical factor in shaping how humour itself is conceptualised by producers and then reproduced.

The continual barrage of anticipatory memories in either film or television makes Australia less susceptible to the hype of promotion -- we are a cynical lot in the Antipodes and turn things upside down for a while. Nevertheless these long demonstrations of what we should enjoy do shift what we in fact consider worthy of producing.

References


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