American homes via news broadcasts, television, police dramas and 'real life' exposés of crime in America's Most Wanted and Cops. In the segregated city the white audience travels to the other side through these filtered images. They both reflect and generate public perceptions of law and order.

When the amateur video recorder shot the videotape of police officers clubbing Rodney King he brought the filmic representation of policing operations as close to reality as it can perhaps possibly get. The home video camera would seem to be the ultimate democratisation of the medium. Citizens can now videotape their own real life police dramas unedited and unrehearsed. Here the camera was pointed in the other direction and it was the police who were the criminals. But, for this jury, the filmic reality was only one negative image amid a thousand positive ones.

The defence counsel for Lawrence Powell asked the jury to suspend their belief in what they saw. To do this he instructed the jurors to place themselves in the positions of the police involved in the whole context of the beating. But while he had a seemingly impossible task, he was helped by the dominant images of race and disorder built up over generations of cultural representation.

Bryant Gumbal's incredulity at the jury verdict has an ironic edge. He was believing his eyes, for 'the camera doesn't lie'. But for the juror whose reality had been shaped by a weight of social and cultural representation over generations, including the NBC Today show, here was an exception to that rule. Gumbal, of all people, should have recognised the power of scripted reality.

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They don't like it, just as most bosses don't like it! But we don't want to interfere with their managerial prerogative, they can run their organisations badly if they want to, and a lot of clubs are run incompetently. All we want to do is to put a floor under wages and conditions to ensure that our players get a minimum turn out of it.

The NSW Rugby League introduced the retain-and-transfer system in 1960, based on the old system in British soccer, which was finally made illegal there only three years later. How do you think the League's industrial relations stand now, in comparison both with overseas sport and other sports in Australia?

By way of a benchmark, soccer in England has been industrialised since about 1912. English soccer players have got a strong and militant union, which has, for instance, recently won them a share of television proceeds. The management has had it so good out here precisely because there has never been a real players' union, or any solidarity among players. When an individual player, Denis Tutty, took on the transfer system in 1969-70, he was on his own. It cost him three years of his life and his football career.

The League are still pretty antiquarian on industrial relations. When changes are made, they tend to follow what happens in America. The draft happened first in America, then in AFL. The League thought that sounded like a good idea, and so they brought it in. But if ever you sat them down and asked them for a constructive, conceptual reason why the draft should exist, all they could do was give you anecdotes about the past. No-one had a vision of what really needed to happen. They didn't even understand their own draft.

ABC general manager and rugby league club president David Hill has described the League management as "a self-perpetuating oligarchy". Others have used terms like feudalism to describe the industrial relations system. Why is it that sport has been so slow in coming to terms with modern industrial practices?

In rugby league, it's simply because there's no real democracy. It's a big family really, a mafia form of running a business. I use the word mafia not as a sinister term, necessarily, but in the sense that people are anointed into their positions, there's no real choice there. It's been accepted that sport is not run in a way that makes its managers answerable to the people. People are allowed to set themselves up as dictators, and as long as they get away with it, they'll continue to do so.

It's the normal role of a union to protect its members from injury at work. In your case, do you see it as appropriate for the Players' Union to take part in the debate about violence in the game?

In the 1970s the players were found to be under workers compensation cover, so in 1979 the then president of the League, Kevin Humphreys, went to the state government and, with a stroke of the pen, rugby league players were removed from cover under the workers compensation legislation. Substituted in its place was a Mickey Mouse scheme called
people at the top might be getting. That’s a matter for themselves, as long as the bottom guys aren’t suffering.

How do you think the game has changed in the past few years, both on the field and in terms of marketing?

There’s a lot of hoo-ha written about changes to the game. I think the game has basically been the same since 1967, when the four-tackle rule was introduced. There have been refinements, and improvements, obviously, and players now are bigger, fitter, faster and better ball-handlers than they were 20 or 25 years ago.

Obviously, promotion and presentation has improved dramatically, and that’s one thing I’ve got to give the present administration. At least they’ve had the commonsense and humility to get other people to do the marketing, and not try to do it themselves. Whether you agree with the philosophy of what the revenue’s being spent on is another matter.

What do you see as the main problems of the revenue distribution?

First of all, it doesn’t appear to be equitable. The eleven clubs which didn’t get into the finals last year got $290,000 each from the League. Yet those clubs have salary costs of $1.3 or $1.5 million, apart from all the other costs of running a club. That’s obviously ridiculous. Something’s got to give somewhere. I do concede, though, that they don’t want to give it to inefficient clubs, obviously that’s just wasting it. I suppose the ultimate answer is simply better management of the clubs, but it’s hard to legislate for commonsense and efficiency.

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