Chewing the Crud

Bob Collins, defending Pay TV, recently stood up for TV 'crud'. As Terry Flew explains it, he unintentionally put his foot in it.

Bob Collins, the new Minister for Transport and Communications, makes an unlikely 20th century Marie Antoinette. Yet his recent comment on the Pay TV debate that, if people want to pay to watch "crud", then he won't tell them not to, both recalls that ill-fated 18th century monarch and points to an increasingly vexing question in cultural policy.

Recent analyses of popular culture have insisted that audiences are not dupes or stooges, brainwashed and manipulated by the corporate heavyweights but, rather, are discriminating in their uses of popular culture and derive particular pleasures from such forms; that the academic, activist or expert does not possess a 'critical distance' from these forms which enables them to exercise all-encompassing judgments upon popular culture; and that attempts at social engineering to force audiences to consume 'higher' or 'better' forms of culture are likely to be actively resisted. In short, what's wrong with crud, and who says it's wrong?

Yet in the arena of cultural policy these observations can lead to some unintended consequences. The defence of popular judgment against criticism from cultural elites can be interpreted as leading to the conclusion that only market mechanisms and commercial principles can give the people what they want, and that any attempts to set guidelines upon product are undemocratic and counter-productive. In its most extreme form, this would suggest that public broadcasters should either be privatised or should have any specific 'cultural' mandates removed from their charters, and that regulations upon commercial broadcasters, such as those for diversity, innovation and Australian content in their programming, should be lifted.

Ten years ago this was not a problem for cultural studies. Its origins in the marxist critique of mass culture enabled its theorists to say with confidence that mass culture was bad and operated as a means of keeping the otherwise militant masses in line through the instruments of 'false consciousness'. The main line of criticism of this monolithic view of popular culture came from British cultural studies, which argued that some forms of popular culture were sites of resistance of counter-hegemony. Even so, this only really meant a slight loosening of the strictures of 'correct' forms of popular culture, allowing Billy Bragg and The Young Ones to join Bertolt Brecht and 'socialist realist' cinema on the list of politically-correct forms of cultural consumption.

This 'Left' critique of popular culture was always fraught with problems. First, it fitted in all too well with the traditional conservative critique of popular culture as inherently vulgar, and which stressed the need for cultural guardians from either the churches or the middle classes to exercise some discipline over popular pleasures. Second, it was based upon a contrived defence of 'authenticity' over artificiality. (In the 1950s American blues artists such as Big Bill Broonzy were required to play acoustic guitars for their 'educated' British audiences, even though they now played electric guitar to their hometown audiences in the US.) This led to its third problem; it drew its assumptions about popular audiences from sociology textbooks rather than from an understanding of, and engagement with, the ways in which popular cultural forms are actually used in everyday life.

The analysis was inherently anti-television. As the great 'Leviathan in the loungeroom', television was the medium least likely to produce anything but 'crud culture', with its concentrated patterns of ownership, assembly-line forms of production, dependence upon advertising and privatised patterns of consumption, not to mention the overwhelming influence of American programs. The ABC, as the bastion of British-style moral uplift and mass education, was the only hope of redemption.

The influence of postmodernism in cultural studies has dramatically transformed this discourse. Postmodern accounts of popular culture emphasise the aestheticism of everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, its rediscovery of audiences, and its emphasis upon stylistic promiscuity, irony, pastiche and playfulness. Everything from afternoon soaps to rugby league, and game shows to disco music, can now be discussed and assessed openly and, indeed, celebrated rather than remaining a guilty secret. Yet it has, on occasion, led to peculiar inversions of the old orthodoxy—such as John Docker's claim that the commercial sector has been the true innovator in Australian television, despite the shackling effects of public regulation aimed at making it more like the ABC. This claim was adopted (not surprisingly) by FACTS to bolster its case for both deregulation of its own activities and to argue against the introduction of Pay TV.

Where do these new directions in cultural studies leave us in terms of assessing the pros and cons of introducing Pay TV? In a quandary. The critics are most likely correct in arguing that Pay TV will give us more 'crud culture'—reruns of MASH and Here's Lucy, 'reality television', more sports coverage, made-for-video movies and shows about sex with audience participation. In other words, something like we've already got with the free-to-air system. To many this might seem a strong cultural case against the introduction of Pay TV.
Foucault of Many Colours

Michel Foucault, by Didier Eribon, translated by Betsy Wing (Harvard University Press 1991), $44.95. Michel Foucault Philosopher, by Timothy J Armstrong (Harvester Wheatsheaf), $38.50. Reviewed by Peter Beilharz.

Who is Michel Foucault? Or rather, who was Foucault? They are, in fact, two very different questions, or at least questions with different answers. Foucault is, for many today, the voice of critical theory. For undergraduates in the 1990s he is the equivalent of Marcuse in the 1960s: the theorist as rebel, defiant, nay-saying. His best-known work—'the prisons book', Discipline and Punish—has many parallels to Marcuse's best-seller, One Dimensional Man (1964). Most strikingly, both are books which paint a black world with a red stripe, or adorn it with a black flag. Both are libertarian attacks on a world cast as totalitarian.

People today talk of a Foucault effect. In the work of some Anglo followers, Foucault’s interests in power and in institutions become enabling. They do good work, on medicine, on welfare and psychiatry. For others, Foucault becomes a spray-on, a new hero, Bob Marley sans dreadlocks. Foucault thus becomes an excuse for thinking. But this he was not, did not intend to be.

Foucault is a pop-star, and he was a celebrity. But he also had a history, a biography, a process with a subject, a context which is typically ignored by the zealots, as though his ideas arrived by post or by immaculate conception. History, of course, demands some labour, and some thinking. Of this Foucault was certain, but not all his followers would take the advice as friendly.