

National Creativity and Collaboration in Co-produced Television Drama

Dr Jane Landman

School of Communication, Culture and Languages, Faculty of Arts, Education and Human Development, Victoria University

Abstract

This paper looks at some of the implications of developments in television production in a multi-channel marketplace, for how we think about 'national television'. It considers the case of the science fiction series, *Farscape*, a US-Australian co-production that qualified as Australian content. It argues that whilst there are well-motivated discomforts associated with 'collaborating' with dominant US television producers, study of the process of production does not support an argument that Australians were exploited or creatively stymied in its making, and proposes a re-evaluation or opening out of what can be understood as national production and/or national creativity in co-productions.

Introduction

In Australia's regulated media market, free to air television has been formatively linked to nation building and to the ongoing cultural work of national maintenance, with civic responsibilities significantly invested in the public services of the ABC and the SBS (O'Regan, 1993; Morley, 2000). At the same, television has always been simultaneously national *and* global in Australia's relatively small market, broadcasting a mix overwhelming comprised of Australian, American and British programming (with some greater diversity available on SBS). For primarily cultural reasons, Australian production has been 'protected' by binding licence requirements that stipulate quotas for local content. These quotas may be seen as less of an impost on commercial networks (and instead as good business practice) as audience ratings consistently indicate a strong preference for local productions in the area of 'factual' entertainment and 'ordinary television' (Bonner, 2003), formats which tend to travel poorly across national borders. This preference may be extended to drama (McKee, 2001), but the status, popularity and extent of drama production can be quite historically variable. In recent years, Australian television drama has been struggling, in very public ways, to compete with 'high-concept' US productions.ⁱ

Long foreshadowed and much discussed shifts arising from inter-related policy change and technological development, have seen a broadcast model of limited, nationally-authorised providers slowly giving way to a media marketplace supplemented by multiple subscriber channels, as well as alternative delivery modes for television content, such as rental, sell-through and downloading options, situations that present challenges the snapshot of the TV industry as national provided above. Presented with other domestic and mobile entertainment offerings, the market for free to air television has both diversified and fractured.

The paper looks at some of the implications of developments in television production in a multi-channel marketplace, for how we think about 'national television'. It considers the case of the science fiction series, *Farscape*, a US-Australian co-production that qualified as Australian content. Although *Farscape* is innovative and prize-winning science fiction, it was a failure in Australia, a strange hybrid that floundered in the broadcast race.ⁱⁱ It 'failed' to secure the ratings that would accord it a regular schedule and was 'programmed into oblivion' by Channel 9 (Mattessi, Jan 15, 2004). Debuting in May 2000 at 8.30 on Saturday night, the series was pulled after six episodes, and then scheduled erratically and disadvantageously - for instance it was rescheduled without notice, episodes were drastically re-edited.ⁱⁱⁱ The erratic scheduling also sets up the possible objection that the local content quota, supposed to quarantine some part of the prime-time schedule for Australian viewing, was being thrown away on culturally and/or nationally unworthy fare.

I think that the series' failure needs to be located within the context of the lack of fit between Australia's partial 'post' broadcast market and such generic programming directed at global niche markets. Whilst there are well-motivated discomforts about 'collaborating' with giant media entertainment companies (a discomfort which is itself preceded by long-seated anxieties about cultural imperialism), such as NBC Universal, the parent company of the US Sci Fi Channel that commissioned the series, I propose that study of the production process does not support an argument that Australians were exploited or creatively stymied in its making. Finally, taking a lead from arguments made by Ben Goldsmith and Tom O'Regan (2003; 2005), and O'Regan and Susan Ward (2006), this paper proposes that the increase in the amount of costly drama that is being co-produced, calls for a re-evaluation or opening out of what can be understood as national production and/or national creativity in co-productions.

Co-production and national television in Australia

Co-productions are frequently seen as bland and/or indigestible textual ‘puddings’, boiling up ingredients to appease the creatively incommensurate interests of the various market investors. In Shawn Simpach’s (2005) account, for example, which focuses on *Highlander: the Series* (1992-1998) but also touches on the Australian co-productions *Beastmaster* (1998-2001) and *Lost World* (1998-2001) made at the Gold Coast Studios, co-productions are ‘complex cultural objects embodying contradictory discourses and multiple resonances’ that may in fact fail to resonate with any of their intended audiences.

Farscape (1998-2002) was initiated by Brian Hensen (son of *Muppets* producer Bill Hensen), and commissioned by the US Sci Fi Channel, in a partnership deal with Hallmark and the Nine Network, and made in Sydney.^{iv} This series is a significant case in respect to recent discussions about the ways in which foreign production, co-production - and the studio complexes developed to attract such production – are considered and evaluated in respect to the industrial health and cultural value of national audio-visual industries (for example Herd, 2004; Miller & Yudice, 2002). As Tom O’Regan and Sue Ward (2006, p.19) note, the Australian market has moved both more slowly and more hesitantly towards multi-channelling compared to other large overseas markets. This has resulted in a still dominant free to air sector, that is nevertheless feeling (or at least fearing) the impact of a contracting market share. The high cost of drama production means that overseas sales are needed to defray costs, whilst at the same time,

the stop-start approach to pay-TV and the regulatory approaches which have inhibited its development [have] ensured a fundamental misfit between the local and international television environments which made it increasingly difficult for local producers fashioning product for the international markets. (O’Regan and Ward, 2000, p.19)

Nick Herd’s (2004, p.86) study of foreign film production and studio development in Australia, finds little of cultural value in ‘chasing runaways’ - in other words offering incentives such as tax breaks or investing in studio complexes whose establishment costs are subsidised to attract foreign productions. Herd finds that whilst it is incontestable that foreign film productions and co-productions have a ‘positive economic impact’, they nevertheless result in Australia ‘mak[ing] available a valuable resource of its human creativity and physical infrastructure on terms that are largely dictated elsewhere’ as key creative control, as well as that over finance and intellectual property, remains with Hollywood’s media conglomerates (2004, p. 89). So whilst actors, production crews and post-production services gain employment and experience, the ‘heart of cultural creation’- the key roles of heads of departments, writing, directing and producing - are withheld, though Herd also notes that co-productions offer more creative space than wholly-foreign production, and television more than film (2004, p.88). Herd concludes with a warning against government strategies that are focused on largely on employment rather than genuinely national cultural aims (‘telling our own stories’), which reflects more broadly expressed tensions between cultural and industry policy.

Yet there are few straightforward or isomorphic parallels to be drawn between such production concerns as the location of the production, the national embodiment of cast and crew, and cultural, textual and ideological questions about value, or textual or reception issues of resonance. Herd’s laudable concern to maintain and defend a specifically local industry does not address the fraught and complexly layered considerations lurking behind

the persuasively appealing phase ‘telling our own stories.’ There is no space to adequately gloss this central problematic in Australian cultural policy here. An important point to be made however, is that local television is formed in part through a cultural dialogue with influential international styles and genres, that sometimes takes the form of franchised formats (Cunningham, Jacka & Sinclair, 1996). Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2006), question whether imagining nations as territorial entities (‘container thinking’) sets up frameworks that miss complex intersecting forces operating in the ‘transnational social spaces’ constituted by contemporary media cultures:

In a time of globalisation, communicative connectivity is becoming more and more deterritorialised. With the distribution of media productions across different national borders and the emergence of the internet, global communicative connectivity grows, which makes the thickenings of national media cultures relative and overlapping. (2006, p.9)

Such de-territorialised connectivity certainly operates amongst science fiction or ‘cult’ fans, some of whom are Australian. Yet a fragment of a global niche audience is not a recognisable ‘Australian audience’ in a television discourse dominated by notions of shared or consensual national experience of television. Nor is screen science fiction (which is prohibitively expensive) easily considered ‘Australian’ alongside genres conventionally associated with the nation, such as the teen soaps, historical mini-series or small-town series drama. Yet it may reductively miss the point of the ‘relative and overlapping’ nature of communicative connectivity to attempt to isolate a national portion in the complex dimensions of reception, or conversely, to fail to recognise that *Farscape* may serve in allegorical ways as ‘our story’ for Australian viewers of science fiction.

The creative contribution of the Australian location

The ‘command and control’ centre of *Farscape* production is incontestably Los Angeles. The impetus for the production lay in the imperatives and opportunities of the US domestic and export market, and with the creative and commercial interests of Americans executive producer Brian Henson (who initiated the series) and series creator Rockne O’ Bannon (also credited as executive producer, executive consultant and writer-producer). Various US stakeholders hold intellectual copyright, making Australia a minor and delimited partner in these respects. The unanticipated cancellation of the series after season four was a decision of the Sci Fi network and outside of the control of local partners and participants. Nevertheless such was the depth and extent of the Australian contribution to the series that it would be oddly self-denying to position the Australian cast and crew in the role of handmaidens to American enterprise.

In their work on the developments in and deployments of studio complexes around the world and in Australia, Ben Goldsmith and Tom O’Regan (2003; 2005) seek to dislodge or at least recast some of the inherent ‘container thinking’ of much of the discourse on national culture and screen industries. They point out that the term ‘runaway’ production implies that production has a ‘natural’ home is the US, ‘which continues to describe in nationally defined ways a production ecology which ... is largely internationally rather than nationally defined.’ In their account, the contemporary studios’ range of location offerings blurs distinctions between ‘reality, artifice, superficiality and verisimilitude’: the studio constitutes a ‘stargate’-like portal to a suite of location offerings, that may include permanent specialist sets, sound

stages and proximate exteriors, so that the term 'location' now refers to 'totality of what is available in a place ... [including] the range, skill and depth of film service providers and crews' (2005, p. 7 -9). Thus place retains specific significance in this account, even if geographic locations are only one part of the 'totality of what is available in a place' (Goldsmith and O'Regan 2005: p.8). Sue Milliken, a highly experienced Australian producer who worked extensively on *Farscape*, proposes that Australia's other advantages are 'labour depth, facilities, infrastructure, locations and climate' (2003, p. 6-7).

Exterior locations may have the cultural significance or relevance to serve as themselves, they may be 'bent' to substitute as others, or they may do both (2005, p. 9). While Goldsmith and O'Regan seek to dis-articulate the 'bending' of locations to serve as other places from associations with cultural exploitation (or colonisation), they note investments and sensitivities in Australia, where for budgetary as well as aesthetic reasons, location shooting has a privileged tradition associated with cultural authenticity (2003).^v

The science fiction-borrowed 'stargate' analogy is particularly apposite in the light of the preponderance of fantasy genres made in co-production (including *Stargate SG-1* itself). *Farscape* is a good example of such an eclectic approach to location: it re-makes iconic science fiction landscapes as part of its self-conscious generic play, and amongst these are recognisable debts to the 'pop pageantry', desert landscape and vehicle chases of later *Mad Max* films (Miller in Martin 2003, p. 45). It 'bends' exterior locations, as well as using Australian landscapes as themselves, such as the return-to-earth first season story where the lead human character, Crichton, lands in Sydney (1-16). Australian locations, real or mythic, are neither privileged nor effaced in the logic of the production.

Place contributes in nuanced ways that differentially inflect reception in different sites. O'Bannon, for example, argues that the 'dislocated' Australian site of production contributes a certain off-centeredness that assists in creating the sense of being in another galaxy, for example in the use of unfamiliar (at least to non-Australians) actors. Concomitantly, for some Australasian viewers, watching well-known actors such as Claudia Karvan (2.19), Magda Szubanski (1-11, 3-14, 3-15) and Alex Dimitriades (2.07) in science fiction drag, in a genre habitually associated with US television, adds a different sort of dislocation to the viewing experience. While actors were instructed to use 'mid-Atlantic accents' (neither American, Australian nor British) this blending is unevenly realised, and in a report for AusFilm, producer Sue Milliken suggests that the fact that Australian actors were *not* required to use American accents was no small point, but 'a major breakthrough in US production in Australia' (O'Bannon in Kaplan, 2002; Milliken 2003).

National interests may be flattened out in co-productions between unequal or culturally diverse partners, as Simpach suggests. *Farscape* was the first project of the Nine Network's new Film and TV Unit, specifically planned to boost an international, rather than national profile and accounts suggest that the network had little involvement in the production (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Sept. 14, p.2).^{vi} Nine's director of drama, Kris Noble, was one of the executive producers of the first season, however the key location liaison role was performed by the independent producer Matt Carroll (*Sydney Morning Herald* Sept 14: 2). Nine's logo appears on all four of the seasons, and as the series first went to air, Noble described the series as 'sit [ting] on the world platform of high-concept drama and promises to break through barriers of television production to open up a brand new genre in Australia' (in O'Conner, May 18, 2000), though other accounts suggest that embarrassment and contempt characterised the reaction of Nine executives (Hoskin, 2003, p.110).

Yet notwithstanding a lack of creative involvement on the part of the Nine Network, Herd's argument about limited creative control for Australian crew is simply not born out by the case of *Farscape*. The obvious first point is that Australians held 'key' positions, as Milliken reports:

All the directors were Australian. We hired as many Australian writers as we could find – this generally amounted to about one third of the writing team on each season. The producer designer, director of photography, music composer, costume designer, key make-up, puppeteers and all the film editors were Australian. (2003)

Further it is too limiting to restrict the notion of creative role to these key positions. Goldsmith and O'Regan (2003, p.12) suggest that 'as post production bleeds into production, post production workers are playing a role at an earlier stage and are involved in creative decision-making'. They further argue that the creative contribution of location managers, set designers, props manufacturers, costumiers and make-up artists 'cannot be ignored'. These last roles are of particular significance in 'non versimilitudinous' genres (Johnson 2005, p.5), dependent on the evocation of internally coherent otherworldly worlds.

Reports, articles, DVD commentary and interviews about the production process also emphasise its broadly collaborative nature. This is evident in the flexible positions occupied by key production crew, who were rotated and promoted and re-positioned over the four years. This reinforces Milliken's claim that *Farscape* provided a valuable training ground for both experienced and inexperienced members of the Australian crew. Australian writer Justin Monjo, who wrote the scripts of thirteen episodes, for example, is also credited as executive producer, script consultant and creative consultant. The four Australian directors also diversified: for example, Andrew Prowse was also co-producer and assistant producer for periods of production, Rowan Woods made an quirky *auteurist* guest appearance as a 'fat ugly blue guy'.

Producer David Kemper, O'Bannon and principal actor, American Ben Browder, all comment on the relative freedom that ensued from producing the series in Australia and the contribution of a local sensibility:

The Australian approach to work is more egalitarian ... Hollywood is founded on a star system They create franchises and they create stars ... I don't think you could make this show in the US or even Canada because you are too close to the normal powers who control the mood of television. There is an irreverence and a sense of humour infused in the show that I think is particularly Australian ... there is an acerbic wit, sarcasm, irony and ability to take a jab at the conventions of science fiction, while at the same time playing homage to them that *Farscape* does. (cited in Rainsbury May 28, 2000:, p.5)

Prowse describes the production process as developing 'organically'. He accredits its relatively unstructured nature to the Australian crew's experience of working in the less hierarchically organised and systematised working mode characteristic of low budget cinema. For example, unusually for television, the four regular Australian directors - who each came to specialise in particular type of episode - collaboratively contributed to each others' work as well. Story ideas emerged from myriad sources, including possibilities suggested by props and effects. Scripts worked as starting points, modified and contributed to by the directors, and other crew as well as the actors and this loose exchange contributes to the show an improvisational and eclectic quality that feeds into the rather lurching, erratic, seemingly

unplanned adventures of the characters. In the discourse of published production accounts at least, the site of production meshed with, facilitated and spurred on the creative interests of O'Bannon and Kemper (for example see Kaplan, 2002).

Conclusions

The 'key' creative positions occupied by Australians, the extent of the Australian above and below-the-line contribution, the collaborative nature of the production process, the absence of attempts to repress or efface locationist local signs - all these factors contribute to a series that is very evidently marked by its site of production. In this context, the process of production and the product, become some sort of dialogic cultural exchange where the creative desires of O'Bannon and Kemper, for a generic re-positioning of the science fiction series, found a compatible and enabling base, a place from which to significantly de-centre and rework conventions of US exemplars of the genre. Its failure in the Australian market has no necessary connection to the unworthy provenance or dubious creativity of co-productions, but rather to its nature as exemplary generic narrow-casting, unlikely to succeed in any broadcast context drawing on such relatively small audience pool.

Endnotes

ⁱ Reports in 2005/6 suggest that such are the ongoing difficulties of drama production at Nine, such as the rapid turnover of heads of drama, that they may not meet their quota requirements to produce 100 hours a year of Australian drama requirements. Warneke (Nov 3: 2005) cites 'the tough new economics of Australian television' where rising costs make it increasingly uneconomic to produce drama without overseas sales, along with flagging audience interest in local programming. In another report, Southern Star producer John Edwards comments on successive cancellations of new drama series, seeing the outlook as bleak: 'Things [programs] have genuinely failed and I've done a couple of them. No one is confident about new things, but they are unsure about doing the same old things' (Ziffer Dec 24, 2004).

ⁱⁱ Nominations and awards for *Farscape* include:

2005 Nominated Saturn Award Best DVD Television Programming, for season 4.

2004 Nominated Saturn Award Best Syndicated/Cable Television Series.

2003 Won Saturn Award Best Syndicated/Cable Television Series.

2002 Won Saturn Award Best Actor in a Television Series: Ben Browder.

2001 Won Saturn Award Best Syndicated/Cable Television Series.

2001 Won Award of Distinction Telefeatures, TV Drama & Mini Series Craig Barden: For episode 7.

2001 Won Australian Screen Music Award Best Music for an Animation: Guy Gross. For series 2, episode #316.

2002 Won ASSG (Australian Screen Sound Guild) Award Best Achievement in Sound for a Drama Series (Film), for the episode 'Crichton Kicks'.

2002 Won Screen Music Award (Australia) Best Music for a Television Series or Serial: Guy Gross.

ⁱⁱⁱ Journalist Robin Oliver links the scheduling shifts to intensified competition, and disadvantageous new figures for Nine, after the new rating system, OZTAM, was introduced, however the 'spin cycle' of shifting programming and cancellations well exceeds this transition period (Oliver April 2, 2001).

^{iv} The series was cancelled after 4 seasons, then it was revived in 2004 for a four-hour mini-series that concluded major plot lines. The concerted fan campaign that led to this short-lived revival underlines the series' status as 'cult' TV.

^v Further, local productions rarely have the budgets to use studio spaces themselves, even at relatively low rates offered in the interests of cross-subsidising local production. Many local productions cannot afford to build studio sets (Goldsmith & O'Regan 2003).

^{vi} In fact it is the *lack* of evidence that leads to this conclusion. In all the extensive production accounts on fan sites, published magazines, the trade press, newspapers and on the DVDs, only these few facts about Nine appear.

References

- Bonner, F. (2003). *Ordinary Television: Analyzing Popular TV*. London: Sage.
- Couldry, N. and A. Hepp (2006). 'What should comparative media research be comparing?: Towards a transcultural approach to 'media cultures'. *Internationalising Media Studies: Imperatives and Impediments Conference*, University of Westminster, London.
- Goldsmith, B. and T. O'Regan (2003). *Cinema Cities, Media Cities: The Contemporary International Studio Complex*. Brisbane: AFC/Australian Key Centre for Cultural Studies and Media Policy.
- Herd, N. (2004). *Chasing the Runaways: Foreign Film Production and Studio Film Development in Australia 1988-2002*. Sydney: Currency House.
- Hoskin, D. (2002). 'TV eye - Muppets in space.' *Metro* No 140, p. 110.
- Johnson, C. (2005). *Telefantasy*. London: BFI.
- Kaplan, A. L. (2002). 'Farscape: Season Three'. *Cinefantastique*, 34, pp. 66-69, 72-73.
- McKee, A. (2001). *Australian Television: A Genealogy of Great Moments*. South Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Miller, T. and Yúdice, G. (2002). *Cultural Policy*. Sage: London.
- Milliken, S. (2003). *Annaxure to the report, The case for extension of the 12.5% refundable tax offset to large budget television series and bundled non-theatrical films*. Moore Park, NSW: AUSfilm.
- Morley, D. (2000). *Home Territories: Media, Mobility and Identity*. London: Routledge
- O'Regan, T. (1993). *Australian Television Culture*. St Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Oliver, R. (2001). 'TV's spin cycle'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, April 2, p.6.

-
- O'Regan, T. & S. Ward, S. (2006). 'Experimenting with the local and the transnational: television drama production on the Gold Coast.' *Continuum* 20(1), 17-31.
- Rainsbury, Sharon. (2000). 'Out of this world'. *Sunday Herald Sun TV Extra*, May 28, 2000: pp. 4-5.
- Simpach, S. (2005). 'The immortal cosmopolitan: The international co-production and global circulation of Highlander: The Series' *Cultural Studies*, 19 (3) March 2005, pp. 338-371.
- Sinclair, J., Jacka, E and Cunningham, S. (1996). *New Patterns in Global Television: Peripheral Vision*. New York: Oxford University Press.