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Published

2014

Conference Title

Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand 5th International Conference

Version

Version of Record (VoR)

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Cultural illusion: Consumer imagery and the construction of an artificial dream

ABSTRACT

*As TV networks continue to feed viewers a steady diet of constructed visual narratives in home-renovation reality TV shows, the ‘reality’ of their motivations is itself questionable. The image of these shows is often influenced by the large sponsorship deals that are needed to afford the associated renovation and building costs. How does this barrage of idealistic and branded representations affect Australian audiences’ notion of our treasured ‘Australian Dream’ and for how long can we conceal the cracks in the attainability of this façade? This article aims to provoke discussion on the consumption of images in contemporary Western society and their capacity to influence the social and cultural perceptions that shape notions of the Australian Dream, referring, in particular, to the longstanding Australian production *The Block*.*

KEYWORDS

Australian Dream, reality TV, consumer imagery, *The Block*, home renovation, visual consumption.

INTRODUCTION

America has long influenced Australian notions of identity and culture through modes of visual communication and entertainment, such as television, films and advertising. Further, the suburban utopia so often represented through these visual modes has shaped generations of consumers and their collective desires. This article will argue that the strong perpetuation and up-sizing of ‘The Great Australian Dream’, that of a better life through home ownership, a red-brick suburban home on a quarter-acre and a patch of grass for the Hills Hoist (Aussie 2014) is being reinforced through the persuasive capabilities of the 9 Networks home-renovation reality TV show, *The Block* (2003–current). The article will discuss the significance of narrative within *The Block* and its ability to persuade consumers through utilising media psychology, such as narrative transportation and para-social relationships,

both during the real-time airing of the show and via its online presence. Finally, the article will draw upon our Americanized lust for luxury fever and our desire to emulate the rich and famous as represented through consumer imagery.

The appearance of ‘Do It Yourself’ (DIY) home renovation shows on our TV screens is not new. In the late 1980s, Australians were introduced to *Burke’s Backyard* (BBY) (1987–2004) and later, *Better Homes and Gardens* (BHG) (1995–current). Over the years, many more DIY home renovation shows have emerged, such as *The Renovators* (2011), *Backyard Blitz* (2000–2007), *Domestic Blitz* (2008–2010), *The Outdoor Room* (2008) and *House Rules* (2013–current).

The premiere season of *The Block* was filmed in Sydney’s iconic and luxurious Bondi Beach, hitting our new and sleeker flat-screen TVs around the same time as Australia’s housing bubble began to overinflate; within twelve months, land and house prices in capital cities had escalated by an average of 20 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2003). *The Block*’s format was novel as it truly capitalized on Australia’s obsession with visual consumption and home ownership. Part game-show, part soap opera and part reality TV show, co-creators and executive producers Julian Cress and David Barbour accessed Australia’s obsessive relationship with house and home, and our addiction to American-style TV shows. The producers recognized its postmillennial capitalist audience’s drive to be part of the twenty-first-century lifestyle of having it all. The reason for *The Block*’s ongoing success is its foresight in format and continual advertising investment. Unlike its predecessors *BBY* and *BHG*, *The Block* is less reliant upon a sense of ‘Australiana’ and the family suburban home, and targets a more visually saturated, technologically reliant and media-savvy audience. Further, it relies upon commercial TV shows’ constructed characterization of twenty-to-thirty-something couples who are business-focussed, financially secure, and childless, and thus have a supposedly larger disposable income. *The Block* is more like the Australian Dream meets *Beverly Hills 90210* (1990–2000) and *Being Lara Bingle* (2012). Fast-paced, competitive, at times bitchy and ultimately all about money and unnecessary consumption, this year’s show had four pairs of thirty-something’s tackle what seemed like an unachievable renovate-and-decorate of an abandoned theatre in the hip and expensive inner-city Melbourne suburb of Albert Park.

The dilapidated theatre was bought by Channel 9 for \$5.9 million (Pillisco 2013) and in the final show of the season sold four individual warehouse apartments for a staggering total of \$9.59 million (Richardson 2014). This Great Australian dream, it seems, is a lot more

costly and decadent. How did we get to this understanding of what a ‘home’ should be? That is, a flamboyant and fickle financial investment, not a shelter for our family’s protection and place of stability and wellbeing. How has our Great Australian Dream become a façade of excessive and superfluous features, decorative and symbolic consumer goods and astronomical and gluttonous sales prices? Since this year’s *The Block: Fans vs Faves* averaged 1.5–1.8 million weekly viewers (Special Broadcasting Service 2014), one can only assume many Australians have this expectation too, or at least the desire to renovate and upgrade wherever possible.

As an individual on the tail end of Generation X, I was brought up to believe in a utopian vision of home ownership, one that would come to fruition if you worked hard and saved a portion of your weekly pay packet. Further, you would nearly never be out of work because you were loyal and conscientious. How is it that my upbringing did not prepare me for a future globalized society, a world where values and beliefs are reduced to the size of the house you own and the soon-to-be-obsolete products you fill it with? My generation is the first in Australia not to be able to afford its own home. How can our generation’s promised future be nothing more than an illusion, a reality of bank debt, a job you can never guarantee, house prices you cannot afford and infinitely rising rent prices?

Evidence from the 2011 Australian Census suggests that rents rose by 83.7 per cent in the previous decade, compared to a 34.84 per cent increase in wages between the same years. This lack of affordable rent leaves individuals and families unable to save for a house deposit due to high rent demands (Australian’s for Affordable Housing 2013: 2). In fact, many individuals have to spend more than half of their income on their housing costs, whether rent or mortgage payments (Australian’s for Affordable Housing 2013: 3).

AMERICA’S LONGSTANDING INFLUENCE ON AUSTRALIAN CULTURE THROUGH CONSUMER IMAGERY

The 1980s and 1990s saw Australian commercial TV stations flood our screens with cheap reruns of American family sitcoms and dramas, allowing cultural dominance to infiltrate through visual narratives. Weekly entertainment in the form of *Family Ties* (1982–1989), *Full House* (1987–1995), *Who’s the Boss?* (1984–1992), *Growing Pains* (1985–1992), *Dawson’s Creek* (1998–2003), *Friends* (1994–2004) and *Beverly Hills 90210*, to name just a few (National Film and Sound Archive 2014), all constructed a visual of American life. The narrative woven in most shows represented the American landscape as one like no other,

where anything is possible and achievable, and all luxury goods can be consumed as money was no obstacle for any character.

American capitalist society and its culture has infiltrated the Australian home for the last fifty years, camouflaged as entertainment, showing 'ordinary American families' who live prosperous and exciting lives, carefree of the daily drudgery. The outcome over time is an ever-increasing visual production of the family home and all the consumer and branded goods that are necessary to be part of this given lifestyle.

With America's culture being commoditized and sold to Australia en masse since the Second World War, it's no wonder we often feel closer to and are more understanding of American culture than our own. 'Since 1996, cultural products have been America's largest export, worth more than automobiles, agriculture and aerospace and defence' (Weiss, Thurbon & Mathews 2007: 102). How is it that these visual representations of unachievable and unrealistic illusions start to influence our understanding and concepts of daily aspects of life, such as our homes, jobs, fashion, cars, leisure time and even relationships? Is there any way that TV can actually alter our perceptions over a period of time of what we should expect and what we think our 'reality' is? American media psychologist Karen E. Dill believes it can.

CONSUMER PERSUASION THROUGH PARA-SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS, MEDIATED NARRATIVE AND TRANSPORTATION THROUGH CONTESTANTS

Dill argues that culture or society is influenced by mass media. She defines common social beliefs as being critical in the effect of advertising and mass media constructing our knowledge and experiences. Dill reasons that we are beginning to spend more time with media images than with real people, and as a result we have 'unconsciously changed our standards to encompass media ideals' (Dill 2009: 18). She draws attention to current and ongoing research that suggests most of what we think we know we have never personally experienced. This is possible due to sophisticated visual strategies and information that has been easily and uncritically digested due to the strong historical association of image and reality.

Surely though, we, as audiences, are able to understand the narrative of *The Block*? That it is a game show and the contestants make money out of promoting and endorsing specific products so as to persuade us, while behaving more dramatically as a way to increase ratings? Surely the Australian public knows this isn't 'real' and that these people are edited to

create a specific narrative. In fact, out of the 3,000 hours filmed in the production of the season, only 55 hours of these are put to air (Knox 2014). Who controls this narrative we see? Is it the contestants, the high-paying sponsors, the advertisers, the owners and executives Cress and Barbour or is it all of these invested parties?

Reality TV shows' formats rely upon a mixture of para-social interaction and narrative transport theory to persuade audiences to connect to the contestants and therefore, the related brand(s). Para-social relationships are 'the process whereby unreciprocated, imagined relationships can be created by the reader or viewer with the characters in fictitious narratives' (Richardson 2013: 123). Seeing the emotional strains and innermost thoughts of the characters develops an illusion of intimacy and connection with the audience. Transportation theory is 'the entrance of a narrative through voluntary suspension of disbelief...which leads to persuasion through reduced tendency to critically evaluate messages' (Richardson 2013: 122). The reason these two theories are so persuasive within the context of *The Block* is that the contestants seem to be ordinary people from ordinary worlds just like us, the viewers. This allows us to not only connect with the contestants on an emotional level through their hardships and successes but also to imagine that we have what it takes to be in their (attainable) position. This notion is emphasized by the fact that 'our brains were not made to differentiate between a person in the media and a "real" live person' (Green & Dill 2013: 450). It would seem that these responses are not considered by our conscious minds as we respond on a more natural and instinctive level to media imagery and narratives as being 'real' (Green & Dill 2013).

If being consumed into the experience and the branded post-viewing of *The Block* is possible, as narrative and para-social relationship theory also suggest, then the marketers from the 9 Network have created a sophisticated and accomplished tele-online consumer experience. The initial five minutes of Episode 58 (2014) feature at least five imaged and/or verbal product placements. But this is only a glimpse of the show's thirty major sponsors; Kara goes shopping in a Suzuki with her Samsung Galaxy phone and spends up big on her NAB credit card. We start to feel that this could so easily be us, the viewer, buying all we desire for our home. If that's not enough to make you want to be part of this façade, the online sphere continues to offer us amazing consumer opportunities. NAB gives us the chance to win \$25,000 off our home loan and The Good Guys store has a link to *The Block: Insiders* on their webpage, advertising all products that the contestants are using – everything from electronic toothbrushes to hair straighteners.

When entering *The Block*'s website, there are many devices available so as to feel part of the show and close to the contestants. You can upload your own comments from your mobile phone or device, use Facebook to like them or download an app. You can shop for products by room, supplier or contestant or head to *The Block Shop* website, which allows you to purchase anything contestants have bought throughout the season. The possibilities to buy into this new Australian dream are endlessly and conveniently available.

The Block seems to be aware of new research about consumer persuasion and knows that simple product placement isn't enough anymore. Para-social relationship theory has ensured reality TV shows lure us into the narrative and the specifically chosen contestants so we can relate to them on a personal level and therefore as a brand and a lifestyle choice. *The Block* makes it easy to access the contestants and their renovation choices and styles, so that, once on the webpage, the consumer experience is too irresistible to avoid. Becoming this obsessed with reality TV home-renovation shows is costing Australian home renovators more than \$31 billion per year (Beer 2013).

AUSTRALIA'S LUST FOR LUXURY FEVER AND OUR DESIRE TO EMULATE THE RICH AND FAMOUS

Executive Director of the Australian Institute Clive Hamilton calls this 'Luxury Fever'. 'The desire to emulate the lifestyles of the very rich and famous has led to booming sales of trophy homes, luxury cars, pleasure craft, cosmetic surgery and professional quality home equipment' (Hamilton 2002: viii). He also states,

the lifestyles of the rich were [previously] seen to be out of reach of ordinary people. But rising incomes and television images have meant that many average families now aspire to luxury consumption goods previously reserved for the wealthiest in society. There is a relentless ratcheting up of standards and increasing pressure to consume at higher and higher levels. (Hamilton 2002: viii)

Following closely in the footsteps of the United States, Australians over consume high-end luxury goods and services as a means of projecting social status, importance and exclusivity. The dominant area in which Australians over consume and wish to convey their association to a higher class and sense of wealth is undoubtedly real estate and its related areas. Two of the four apartments auctioned in the last *The Block* episode (2014, episode 61) boasted luxury bathtubs, and Karla and Kyal's flooded in at an unbelievable \$8,000. Was this a strategic move in the game with no guaranteed outcome, or complete and unnecessary luxury fever? Why does anyone need an \$8,000 bathtub when 12.8 per cent of Australian people are living

below the poverty line, 17.3 per cent of Australian children are living below the poverty line, and 24 per cent of Australian households experience housing stress, which means they're paying at least 30 per cent and upwards of their income on housing costs (Australian Council of Social Services 2014)?

This is where the power of photographic representation in combination with *The Block*'s format and visual representation presents, what I believe is, a hyped-up, ongoing infomercial; an adrenalin-packed, brand-and-lifestyle driven, emotional, home-renovation rollercoaster ride that we all want to, momentarily, be part of.

These images of excessive products saturate us daily and we have become accustomed to opulence being presented as normal and attainable. The show's producers have considered all aspects of audience engagement, from the contestants and their age, looks and personalities, the brands that sponsor the show as well as the multi-layered platforms for consumption. But the most brilliant tactic of this whole façade was to employ Scott Cam as the host.

Scott 'Scotty' Cam is a 'true blue' Australian. He represents everything that it is to be an 'Aussie': he is a carpenter and has a work ethic passed down from his father. He works hard and enjoys a cold beer at the end of the day. Scotty also has his own personal DIY website (Scotty Cam 2014), where you can buy a range of Australian products. Scotty, it seems, is an iconographic Australian, with values and a lifestyle we still hold true to our vision of the Great Dream – sponsorship included – so much so that Cam won the 2014 Gold Logie for the most popular TV presenter. Good for Scotty, good for *The Block* and good for Australia.

Luxury fever will continue to increase in scale and apparent necessity, and the illusion will therefore become more difficult to navigate through. As long as there is little criticality of these representations, their significance and impact and how they should function in our society, we will continue to believe the ordinary Aussie can have it all, from dirty work boots to the \$8,000 luxury bathtub; however, only those above the poverty line may be part of our Great Australian Dream.

CONCLUSION

In recent times, the United States has created a global financial crisis, had its thirteenth city (Detroit) file for bankruptcy, and has more than 46.5 million people still living in poverty (United States Census Bureau 2014). However, few of these images make it to our TV

screens and we don't seem to be asking to see them either. Why do we blindly follow the obvious façade the United States is struggling to uphold?

Advertising in the twenty-first century is sophisticated, multi-dimensional and highly influential. Television producers and corporate marketers are using psychological research and all digital platforms available to access consumers. *The Block* is revolutionary in format and blends many aspects of popular television culture, from reality TV show, game show, infomercial, soap opera, lifestyle show and tele-drama, with the benefit of huge sponsorship deals. How much longer will Australians continue to choose individual prosperity and 'seemingly realistic' visual fantasies over our need to refocus the direction and importance of our nation's future dreams and their viability?

We will continue to spend, up-size, change, upgrade and choose different colours, not because we can, but because everyone is and it has become normality. It seems that in our contemporary commodity culture, we can have our home, our investment property, our boat, our job, our leisure time and be a proud and easy-going 'Aussie': Scotty Cam has proven it so. A regular bloke with the lot, he has the family, the mates and the sponsorship required to buy the family home, or, in his case, the three multi-million-dollar houses in his 'portfolio' (Sharp 2014).

We live in a world of future economic, political and environmental uncertainty. The expected projection of people estimated to live in Australia by 2030 is 28.9 million (Clancy 2012). Where will all the houses and the jobs come from and how far will we go to keep the fantasy of the unattainable dream alive? Visual consumption and the ability to access consumer images are increasing in quantity and quality due to technology's advancements and low production costs. It is the visual stimulation and the idealized narratives that make the \$8,000 bathtub seem essential, not necessarily the product itself. If seriously considering our country's future probabilities, keeping our eyes on the visual illusions might just also keep the 'dream' in perspective.

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SUGGESTED CITATION

Carkeek, A. (2014), 'Cultural illusion: Consumer imagery and the construction of an artificial dream', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 5th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ)*, Hobart, Australia, 18-20 June, 2014, P. Mountfort (ed), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp.141-150. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2014>.