

TOBY MILLER

## THE 'VISIBLE SCENARIO' OF POLITICS QUESTION TIME ON SCREEN

It is a very common practice for the Ministers and people on the other side to stand in the way that men do and put their feet up on the furniture. I find it appalling. The furniture belongs to the Australian people and the Australian people will see those feet on the furniture, if parliament is televised. (Senator Powell, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates* 31 May 1990, 1630)

In May 1990 the Australian Senate approved a trial telecast of Question Time on the ABC for the Budget Session, to be held between August and October. Shortly afterwards, the House of Representatives decided against a similar course of action (*MIA* 57, 139–40). Instead, the Hawke Government offered the Opposition a possible future trial, contingent on this being one component of a package of Lower House procedural reforms, to include computerised voting, rostering of Ministers in attendance at Question Time and the development of special bipartisan debates. This occurred against a backdrop of parliament sitting for just 36 days of the year, the smallest number since the Second World War (Power 1990, 4).

This article considers the beginnings of the Senate trial from four perspectives:

- an account of the diegesis or 'story world' of the program
- how the participants view television
- how they view the audience
- how they view each other.

### The Diegesis of Question Time Television (QTTV)

The story world of QTTV is, in one sense, conventional. An equilibrium is indicated, in which the President or Acting President of the Senate announces QT. The disequilibrium occurs as speakers dispute

and engage with each other, often in unruly ways. At the end of an hour, the presiding officer calls a close, and equilibrium is restored in formal terms — in the sense that we are returned to the state of the story that applied at the beginning of the program. As a credits marker of this, a parallelism is established between the introduction and the conclusion, with a fully-groomed boy and girl opening and then closing doors to welcome and farewell us.

But QTTV also breaks many rules of the continuity system. Apart from the usual oddities of outside broadcasts, the lack of fit between action and sound and disruption of shooting conventions make a case for QTTV to be acclaimed as an anti-realist text that questions the possibility of perfect knowledge on the part of the viewer. Cuts from speakers to interruptors frequently leave us with sound coming from off-screen while a truculent interjector is in-shot but silenced. Most structurally dislocating of all is the refusal to abide by the 180° rule of camera placement. The AFTRS's recently-released *Guide to Video Production* advises users to envisage an imaginary line between aspects of the *mise en scène* so that their camera positions will not cause objects to move to opposite sides of the frame in alternating shots. Crossing the line — deploying the circumference of a circle — will appear to make the action occur in reverse direction (Ayers et al 1990, 87–88). The myth of seamless editing/realism is threatened unless, in Graeme Turner's phrase:

the viewer is given a consistent representation of the spatial relations between the actors and their surroundings (1988, 62)

QTTV radically subverts such conventions. Like a film by Ozu or Tati it uses 360°, which makes it very hard to be clear about who is speaking, what their party position is or, indeed, whom they are addressing. The viewer is encouraged to concentrate quite hard (Bordwell & Thompson 1986, 311). Dialectic shot/reverse shot relations are deployed to set up a duel between questioner and Minister, but so are disruptive cut-aways to MPs talking on the phone, laughing boyishly and reading. Wide angle master shots dwarf the process. Shifting sound levels, graphics which identify speakers' affiliations by an isolated map of their state of origin, and a complete dissonance between the prearranged narcissism of government questions and the semi-spontaneous spleen of opposition ones, produce a quite hysterical program at a formal level, for all the apparent pomp. This is actually television of people at work, with the non-Tayloristic chaos which that implies. So its directors' attempts to get away from the tedium of talking heads make for disruption to the realist text (an apprehension doubly engaged by our knowledge that robots operate the cameras in what Senator Vanstone has termed 'the biggest television production studio in the country' (CPD 31 May 1990, 1624; cf *Encore* 1990, 4). So much is available to produce so little that the outcome is excess.

Such a result will be of little surprise to Robert Ray. In opposing the televising of proceedings, the Manager of Government Business in the Senate made telling parody of the parliament's attempt to constrain reuse of file tape:

The producers cannot use an excerpt to satirise and ridicule anyone. Half the clowns who jump up here ridicule and satirise themselves. Does that mean half the senators are never going to get any television exposure? (CPD 31 May 1990, 1626)

### Viewing Television

This is particularly interesting when it is considered in the context of the participants' express views on television and its audience. These amount to a will to infantilise which John Hartley (1987) has so tellingly neologised in another context

as a regime of 'paedocracy', where the institutions of television construct an account of their audience that calls it up as a subject for training and protection. This will seems to be shared by MPs and parliamentary bureaucrats alike.

There is a routine struggle going on here, balancing out the sacred and profane of TV. Consider the decision taken in July 1990 by a New South Wales parliamentary committee not to proceed with a proposal to televise the proceedings of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) on the grounds that 'visual images were "tremendously powerful"' (Cooper 1990, 4). Even proponents of telecasting ICAC acknowledged problems with 'television's propensity to trivialise and merely entertain', as the *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial put it (29 March 1990, 16). At one and the same time, then, it is held that TV will wreak havoc to the orderly conduct of ICAC and yet have no real effects. It narcotises as it stimulates. Similarly, within one report, the *Courier-Mail* can advise that before the March 1990 federal election, the opposition had refused coverage of the Lower House because it believed that this would give the ALP an unfair advantage, and go on to say that the government believed no one would watch QTTV (Rodgers 1990, 8). TV is an omniscient beast welling up and controlling everything; but its end result is nothing.

Austin Mitchell, a British Labour MP, has labelled this the 'fear of television'. Using the old hypodermic model of media effects, where TV enters the soma sometimes to drive to madness and other times to instil quietude, he refers to concerns that:

TV politics may even inoculate against understanding and build up antibodies against politics itself. (1990, 2 and 7)

Conversely, in the Australian Senate, the Opposition Whip argues that:

Senators normally hope to encounter television in the course of their work and they should be dressed for it. (Taylor 1990, 1)

This respectful attitude of obedience to the aesthetic of the medium — here, one senses that TV is the electorate, that it is

metonymic for the voter — is in a constant state of tension with the view that televising Parliament will see it 'turned into a circus' (Senator Ray, *CPD* 31 May 1990, 1621).

### Viewing the Audience

At different points, this tension may be expressed either as debates between people or as contradictions within their discourse. Such contradictions are nowhere better exemplified than in the conduct of the parliamentary bureaucracy.

Consider the recent special issue of the Australasian Study of Parliament Group's journal on 'The Media and Parliamentary Education' (note, not education *of* the Parliament, but *by* it, *in* it). The contribution from a Senate official included the following observation about the threat to 'Australian democracy' posed by:

an impotent television-bound nation, trusting in politicians and parties that are as reliable as any other TV commodity that must be dressed up and pushed. (O'Keefe 1990, 19)

This patrician certainty of ignorance on the part of the 'other' is an article of faith in such a discourse about the TV audience. The ignoble savage that devours television does so in a way that is always already connected to its failure to know enough about parliamentary politics.

The first day of QTTV began with ABC commentators explaining how Parliament 'works'. Vox pops were used to prove the ignorance of the public: no one knew how many MPs there were in Canberra (Devine 1990, 3). *QED*, I don't think. This reminds me of the American survey reporting that children aged 8-12 could identify more brands of beer than they could US Presidents (Yronwode 1989). But it would have met with the approval of Democrat Senator McLean, who is disturbed by the 'great ignorance, indifference and apathy in the community about things parliamentary' (1990, 15); or, indeed, with the views of Channel 9, which argued for ICAC-TV on the grounds of its 'educative function' (Simper 1990, 2).

This of course denies the 'Sesame Street problem', where programs designed

to uplift the informationally underprivileged are lapped up by those more privileged, leaving pre-existing power relations of knowledge undisturbed. Surveys from Britain suggest that those most likely to watch QTTV are the people who are already familiar with the parliamentary domain (Wober 1990, 17 & 20). But more than that, there is a multifaceted ambivalence at play here: TV is all-powerful as an instrument of apathy, TV is all-powerful as an instrument of education; TV is evil, TV is our salvation.

### Senators Watching Senators

This is particularly interesting, to return to my earlier point about the supposed lameness of party politics, in the context of the Senate, with its will to find its own significance, a counter-cyclical attempt to rein in Executive power which has been a recurring theme in the auto-panegyrics of parliamentary bureaucrats and romantic political scientists.

Consider a recent cover story of the American magazine *Business Week* on the problems associated with Congress as a democratic forum. It argued for the passion and commitment that come from ideological positions policed by strong party machines, lamenting the fact that 'in the television age, political organisations are withering' (Harbrecht & Dwyer 1990, 55). The US broadcasting and political systems are quite different from those here. But this does bring into question the idea of a necessary nexus between centralised party power and an ignorant TV electorate.

The critical point is this: since the parliament and its apparatchiks — along with the rest of us — are so divided about what television *is*, they should concentrate on what they presumably *can* know; ie themselves. Max Harris saw in QTTV a 'sea of nonentities [without any] ... sense of ... self-absurdity' (1990, Review 2). And *Blitz* magazine's survey of the new House of Commons TV coverage found a 'hopeless dominance of custom over democratic function' (Shelley 1990, 34).

What is the Senate hoping to do when it 'educates' the ignorant via the pomposity of wigs and high chairs for

grown men, juxtaposed with incomprehensible laughter from the floor of the Chamber? It is meet to think here about the *Code of Ethics* which has been promulgated for the producer of QTTV, the Sound and Vision Office. The *Code* advises that the Office operates in 'the special and sensitive context of serving the Parliament' and that its staff must conduct themselves at all times in ways that 'respect the institution of the Parliament' (Senate Estimates 1990, A10). This looks absurd against the tedious, procedural, filibustering and ill-informed (and altogether arcane) pageant that most of us find when we watch QTTV. So let's consider the real subjects of television, the people genuinely 'affected' by its gaze: the politicians. They, after all, are the product.

In arguing that televising parliament would increase the standard of debate, John Hewson maintained that:

You would only oppose a decision like that if you had something to hide. (*West Australian* 21 August 1990, 15)

It has been suggested that QTTV will have the long-term effect of rendering QT less vilificatory but also more cautious (Steketee 1990, 12-13 and Senator Vanstone, *CPD*, 31 May 1990, 1624), a way of halting the decline in 'classic parliamentary principles and behaviour' (O'Keefe 1990, 18).

Research into the impact that televising the House of Lords has had since 1985 suggests that the practice has altered the people on-screen much more than those watching it (Wober 1990, 25-26). So it should be. In a world where no one can decide whether TV is God, Beelzebub or A N Other, perhaps the real regime of education needs to be that between parliamentary institutions and themselves, their self-interrogatory auto-critique and re-formation before the mythic public. This much may already be clear from the force of QTTV. For it stands as sturdy evidence for the need to reshape the Senate, not the viewer; already QTTV has provided us with, as Godard (1982, 129) might say:

a visible scenario, that one can see, like proof in a court of law.

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