

Television and simulation: *Seachange* as a nostalgic imaginary.

Wendy Davis

*School of Humanities, Central Queensland University,
Bundaberg*

Abstract

The television program, Seachange, appears to construct or 'simulate' Australian life within a 1950s imaginary based on simple values and life free from the complexity and pace of sophisticated urban society. As a simulation, Seachange imagines a world, with specific space/time dimensions and a particular mode of being. It constitutes a specific scene where the drama of resistance to change is continually played out. In this paper, I will examine this scene as a television simulation – as produced through a particular technology in which the past, present and future merge in a nostalgic imagining of a heterotopic world allowing for an intermingling of roles and values. This paper is based on my research in television as a cultural form, and includes concepts and theory drawn from the post-structuralist writings of Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, and Brian Massumi.

The Australian Broadcasting Commission's (ABC) television drama, *Seachange*, maintained its popularity and high ratings for three series, the last of which screened late in 2000. *Seachange* continued in the tradition of Australian soap operas, like *A Country Practice*, *The Flying Doctors* and *Blue Heelers*, set in small rural communities. This trend is also noticeable in overseas dramas such as *Northern Exposure*, *Hamish Macbeth* and *Ballykissangel*. Like *Seachange*, these series have displaced outsiders as their central characters and subplots revolving around the inhabitants of a small community. However in spite of its popularity, *Seachange* has not been immune to criticism. Writing an article in *The Courier Mail* about his dislike of the series, Peter Wear stated,

Wendy Davis

Seachange is, I'd say, about 1958. *Seachange* is the white Anglo-Saxon dreamtime, when the living was easy, the folks were all folksy, and the unsettling shadow of 'other races' rarely darkened our lives (Wear 2000, p.17).

Claiming that the world imagined by *Seachange* is 1958 is a gesture which defines the world of *Seachange* as belonging solely to the past. However to see *Seachange* as a copy or representation of a past time is problematic in light of its contemporary setting. Seeing television as a technology which presents copies or representations of the real world is a common academic approach which I intend to question in this paper. Statements like Wear's, misrecognise the specificity and power of television as a visual technology and raise some interesting points about both the specific nature of *Seachange* and general approaches to television as a form. There is another more valuable way to see the technology of television that the quote by Wear actually alludes to. In his assertion of the 'dreamtime' of *Seachange* he points to the manner in which television simulates or imagines worlds for us. As a 'dreamtime', or imagined world, *Seachange* creatively simulates its time and space and there is a strong argument to be made for *Seachange*'s time and space being more complex than just an imagining of the 1950s.

In this paper it will be demonstrated that the world of *Seachange* is imagined as a time and space in which the past, present and future merge, producing a world of affective nostalgia. Various visual and narrative aspects of *Seachange* will be examined in order to demonstrate how the affect of nostalgia is produced through an intermingling of various temporalities. Drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) performative theory of gender, *Seachange* will be discussed as a performance of conservatism which produces an in-between world where change is both resisted and embraced. Theoretical concepts drawn from Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari and Brian Massumi will be employed in support of this analysis of *Seachange*. In light of *Seachange*'s tremendous popularity, its affective nostalgia has interesting resonances with Walter Benjamin's theory of the cultural commodity which will also be discussed.

The nostalgic affect

Nostalgia has been discussed by various writers as one of the defining features of postmodernism (Harvey 1990; Jameson

1988). Using Frederic Jameson's discussion of the nostalgic film a difference can be determined between a nostalgic yearning and a yearning to return to the past. According to Jameson, nostalgia requires aspects of the past to manifest themselves as particular invocations of the present in which a desire for the future is immanent. This is different to the yearning or longing which desires a complete return or reinvention of the past (Jameson 1988, pp.13-29). In this way there is a resonance between the imagining and dreaming that Wear (2000) identifies in his statement about *Seachange* and the future orientation of nostalgia. In light of Jameson's argument, nostalgia can be understood as a desire to intensify an awareness of the present's contingent relationship to the past. This type of nostalgic affect acknowledges the complexity and contingency of the present and its reliance on both the past and the future. The nostalgic affect can be identified in *Seachange*'s intermingling of the past and the future, produced as the unfolding of the present.

The simulacrum of Pearl Bay

Seachange is a televisual simulacrum which simulates or imagines a world for the television audience. Brian Massumi (1987) has developed a theory of the simulacrum which draws on the writings of the French post-structuralists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Massumi argues that whether or not a simulacrum resembles or imitates a 'reality' is of little consequence. Therefore Wear's (2000) statement about the 1958 imagining of *Seachange* constricts our understanding of the televisual world as it likens it to a real time in the past. Drawing on Deleuze, Massumi (1987, p.91) states,

The simulacrum bears only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model. The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model: its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect of illusion.

There is an important distinction which is made in this theory between the idea of the copy and the simulacrum. Massumi follows Deleuze (1969, p.262) on this point who states, 'The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies *the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction*'.

This theory of the simulacrum allows us to conceive of the affective power of a televisual world like Pearl Bay. Deleuze's

Wendy Davis

(1969) 'positive power' of the simulacrum makes viable a discussion of television which is not anchored in issues of representation but can attempt to analyse its specificity. Defining the time and space of *Seachange* as 1958, as Wear (2000) does, recognises the similarity of some aspects of the televisual simulacrum with a past time. He uses Laura Gibson's utterance of the word 'Crikey' as an example of the 1950s temporality of *Seachange*. However in drawing such a comparison *Seachange* will always have the status of a 'degraded copy'. As stated earlier it cannot be ignored that the narrative setting of Pearl Bay is contemporary and as I shall demonstrate here, there are many other aspects of the simulacrum which do not fit into a 1950s temporality. These aspects of *Seachange*'s simulacrum raise questions about the validity of defining the time and space of *Seachange* as 1958.

The heterotopic world of Pearl Bay

Pearl Bay, the fictional town of *Seachange*, is a 'heterotopia', imagined as a composite of various spaces with no centre or core (Foucault 1984, pp.237-244). Pearl Bay visually unfolds as compositionally different in every episode of *Seachange*. Temporally its acentred unfolding can be described as 'rhizomatic'. The rhizome is a concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987, pp.3-25) and they elaborate on its characteristics in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. The rhizome is a 'map and not a tracing. The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification' (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p.12). These aspects of the rhizome resonate with the visual unfolding of Pearl Bay. In each episode the space of the town unfolds in a different order and therefore is mapped differently. Some spaces disappear, some appear for the first time and others reappear in transformed states.

The simulacrum of Pearl Bay is constantly modifying itself and changing shape. For example, in series three of *Seachange*, the boatshed is torn down and Max has to move into a fishing shack situated above some mudflats. Similarly, Phrani's gift shop disappears while a new space on the waterfront appears as the location for her cafe and the local paper. Recurring spaces include the Gibson's beach house, the caravan park, the pub, the courthouse, police station, Bob Jelly's real estate agency and the two-story mansion which is the Jelly family home. The ocean is prominent as a place for swimming, surfing and general gazing out to sea and the bay appears regularly in the saga of the broken bridge to neighbouring and more prosperous Port Deakin. The

Gibson house is a useful example of a transforming but recurring space. Initially in series one it appeared as a tumbledown beach shack with boarded up windows and peeling paint. In series three it now appears as a holiday home stylishly furnished and grandly situated with magnificent views of the ocean.

The spaces just described are landscapes and settings which produce a world with many potential modes of existence for its inhabitants. There is nothing in the visual space of Pearl Bay which invokes the 1950s. Instead the heterotopic and rhizomatic visual composition of Pearl Bay maps a liminal space meaning there is potential for its inhabitants to take part in varying and changing modes of existence. The way that each episode of *Seachange* slightly varies from the previous one supports my argument that television imagines worlds for its audience. This quality of *Seachange's* world resonates with the qualities of imagination. To imagine is to be creative, original and orientated towards the future. This originality and creativity also resonates with the definition of the heterotopia. Foucault (1984, p.241) states, 'The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place, several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible.'

Towards the end of the third series of *Seachange*, there was an episode which dealt with the death of Kevin's father. The final scene of this episode was a good example of the intermingling and imaginative production of space which is characteristic of *Seachange*. As Kevin and his family buried his father's guitar on the headland against a backdrop of ocean, Australian band 'The Master's Apprentices' appeared in the same place playing a song which continued as a soundtrack into the space of the pub and then to Max's house. In an interesting collapse of diegetic and extra-diegetic sound, disparate and incompatible spaces were juxtaposed into a momentarily cohesive space. The cemetery scene, the pub and Max's house were constructed through the televisual unfolding as one liminal and heterotopic space.

The liminal, heterotopic space of *Seachange* is a quality it shares with other soap operas and this has been identified by established writers on television like John Fiske (1989). He discusses how soap operas are 'always in the middle' because the beginning and end of a soap opera is never in sight. In many ways my discussion so far has restated these observations about soap opera forms. However the theory employed has allowed an initial rejection of the criticism of *Seachange* as a representation of the 1950s. It has been demonstrated that the visual unfolding of the landscape and space is not a copy of any particular historical time but is an open-ended, unfolding present. While many popular and academic writers condemn soap operas for being 'unrealistic' or

melodramatic, I would emphasise that this is not the primary capacity of television and that its 'unreality' is part of its precise specificity as a form.

However, in responding to the criticism of *Seachange*, it is not sufficient to discuss only its space and visuality. These aspects of the simulacrum need to be examined in relation to the characters and narrative who inhabit its world. Wear's (2000) criticism can be further rejected by looking specifically at the character of Laura Gibson who performs conservative values at the same time as subverting them. She is ambiguously conservative and not conservative at the same time. The 1950s conservatism identified in Laura's utterance of 'Crikey' or the town's rejection of contemporary capitalist values in the continual satire of Bob Jelly is only part of *Seachange's* imagined world. Pearl Bay fights off the outside world in order to preserve the freedom its liminal space offers its inhabitants. All the main characters appear as conservative replicas from the 1950s or some other idyllic rural past at the same time as possessing qualities which would make them completely unacceptable to the values of the 1950s. Heather Jelly is a performance of a disempowered wife, reluctant to stand up to her husband but at the same time successfully running Bob's real estate business. Meredith is the wise and kindly landlady who is also living in a defacto relationship. Harold is a performance of a quintessential gentleman lawyer but is also an alcoholic. Angus is a respectable court clerk by day in order to support the surfing lifestyle and its escapism from the mainstream culture.

Laura – a performance of conservative femininity

Of all the characters, it is Laura whose performance of conservatism is most interesting especially in light of Fiske's (1989) discussion of middle-aged women in soap opera. He argues that typically they are figures of sexual and economic power. Fiske (1989, p.184) states, 'In soaps, the sexual power of the middle-aged woman goes hand in hand with her economic power in a significant reversal of conventional gender ascription.' As the local magistrate, Laura is economically powerful however sexually she has a tremendous capacity for passivity, seemingly reinforcing Wear's (2000) criticism of *Seachange's* 1950s world. However in drawing on Judith Butler's (1990) theory of performance we can see Laura's ambiguity and subversion of the conservative female values she is performing.

Judith Butler (1990) argues that gender is self-constituting. She states that gender is performative in that it has 'no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality' (Butler 1990, p.136). Butler (1990, p. 25) states, 'There is no

gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.’ This theory of performativity also resonates with the argument for the imaginary worlds of television because if they are self-constituting they cannot also be degraded copies or representations.

In series three of *Seachange*, Laura’s relationship with Max is one of denial and repression while she engages in a passionless attachment to the sensible and boring Warwick Munro. She seems to be fulfilling the values of a past historical time by taking the sensible man who says and does all the proper things, inoffensive but completely dull. At the same time Laura’s attraction and desire for Max is visually coded through the repetition of the conventional soap-opera close-ups and the meaningful glances of the shot-reverse-shot. Her sexual desire for Max is visible but is narratively denied by her conservative behaviour. In this way Laura is a manifestation of the nostalgic affect. Her desire for Max, visible in their close-ups and denial of desire, is future oriented while at the same time Laura performs the conservative values of a past time in her passivity and choice of fiancée. However, she ends up living happily ever after with Max in the final episodes of series three. Her performance of conservatism has actually subverted the conservative values she was performing. She produces a nostalgic affect, in that her present existence is conditioned by the past as a means of driving toward the future. Interestingly her future looks like being a continual rearticulation of the past, reinforcing the overpowering affect of nostalgia produced in *Seachange*. Laura ends series three pregnant, embracing stay-at-home motherhood, having left her position as magistrate.

The performances of conservatism that occur in *Seachange* imagine the past, but conservative values are unable to resolve the problems of the characters. In this way *Seachange* is not a copy of the past, the present or the future. Instead, *Seachange* is a simulacrum of a present which is imbued with a past temporality. As a televisual simulacrum its world is imagined and in the concept of imagining is oriented toward the future. *Seachange* then, is a performance of conservatism which takes place in a heterotopia, imagining a world in which past, present and future merge. It is this temporality which produces the nostalgic affect of *Seachange* where the contingency of the present results from its enveloping of the past and the future.

Wendy Davis

Television, nostalgia and the cultural commodity

The tremendous popularity of *Seachange*, its status as a televisual cultural commodity and its imagination of a nostalgic world is also interesting when considered in relation to the temporality of the commodity outlined in the work of Walter Benjamin. It has been argued that nostalgia rejects a linear view of history where the past remains in the past. Jameson (1988, p.20) sees the trend of nostalgia as part of postmodernism's inability to focus on the present, describing the nostalgia mode as 'an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history.' However, I would argue that the nostalgic imaginary of *Seachange* acknowledges the contingency of the present as an effective way of confronting the problem of the present in a postmodern world.

The complexity and contingency of time and memory are central concerns of Walter Benjamin's writing. He argues that history is not longitudinal but must be read 'in an upward direction at every single one of its points' (as cited in Buck-morss 1989, p.243). He drew on this concept to develop his theory of the dialectical image in his discussion of cultural commodities of the Paris Arcades. This dialectical image is where the past comes together with the present in what Benjamin referred to as a 'constellation' (Buck-morss 1989, p.291). This theory on the merging of the past and the present has obvious resonance with the nostalgic affect of *Seachange*, but it also resonates with the temporal unfolding of television as a form.

The televisual way of revealing the world occurs through an extensive unfolding. The images appear on the screen. In the moment of their appearing and disappearing there is no graspable duration of their present. In their appeared and appearing is also a disappearance which is simultaneously the next 'about to appear'. Television is always just appeared and about to appear, past and future. These two things are inextricable from each other and make television's present that of the 'future-past' (Masumi 1992, p.20). Like the world of *Seachange*, television's present is constituted through a contingent relationship to the past and future.

Seachange imagines a world of affective nostalgia through its intermingling of past, present and future. Similarly the visual unfolding of television is also a contingent and inextricable mix of past, present and future. Lastly the work of Benjamin allows us to see this contingent temporality in all commodities. Maybe then *Seachange*'s popularity, its success as a cultural commodity is not because it is representing the idyllic past of the 1950s to us, but because it is making tangible and visible the affectual capacity of

all commodities by foregrounding their contingent temporality as the nostalgic affect. In a telling quote with regard to the force with which *Seachange* gathered together an audience, Benjamin (as cited in Buck-morss 1989, p.250) stated, 'The shock of recognition with which the juxtapositions of past and present are perceived is like electricity.'

Conclusion

The analysis of the temporality of *Seachange* as a means of identifying its affect of nostalgia has allowed an argument to be made against the series being a simulation of a 1950s world. Butler's theory of performativity and the rhizomatic mapping of Deleuze and Guattari emphasise the originary power of the televisual simulacrum. Employing these concepts allow us to move past questions of representation when analysing television. A discussion of affect, like nostalgia, enables the recognition of the power of television as a cultural form. More interestingly, the temporality of nostalgia has valuable correlations with the theory of the cultural commodity discussed in the work of Walter Benjamin, pointing to possible future directions for work on television as a cultural form.

References

- Buck-morss, S. 1989, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.
- Butler, J. 1990, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, London.
- Deleuze, G. 1969, *The Logic of Sense.*, trans. C. V. Boundas, Althone Press, London.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. 1987, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- Fiske, J. 1989, *Television Culture*, Routledge, London.
- Harvey, D. 1990, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*, Blackwell, Cambridge MA.
- Jameson, F. 1988, 'Postmodernism and consumer society' in Kaplan E.A. (ed), *Postmodernism and its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, Verso, London, pp.13-29.
- Massumi, B. 1987, 'Realer than real - the simulacrum according to Deleuze and Guattari' *Copyright 1*, pp.90-97.
- Massumi, B. 1992, *A User's guide to Capitalism and Schizophrenia: Deviations from Deleuze and Guattari*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA.

Wendy Davis

Wear, P. 2000, 'Crikey! It's back to a pantomime past', *The Courier Mail*, 6 September, p.17.
Seachange, Beyond Productions, ABC TV.