National Identity and Global Television: Re-making Australia’s *Rake* for American Audiences

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**Trans-national TV and Globalisation: The Re-make**

This essay considers questions of Australian and American identity, focusing on the U.S. remake of the Australian TV series *Rake* in order to unpack ideas to do with national and trans-national media. The U.S. *Rake*, which was launched in January 2014 by Fox Broadcasting, is of interest because the series complicates long-standing trends, including U.S. media dominance and the British heritage of most foreign re-makes on U.S. television. The U.S. *Rake’s* short, tumultuous history also exemplifies the diverse challenges of re-makes, many of which have had limited success or have failed completely, such as the U.S. re-makes (NBC, 2008-2009; NBC, 2003) of the Australian *Kath & Kim* (ABC, 2002-2005) and the British series *Coupling* (BBC2, 2000-2004).
Given the voracious desire and disruptive behaviour traditionally associated with the figure of the rake, transferring the original’s frank tone and content to the U.S proved delicate work, complicated by the relatively restrictive nature of American network broadcasting, although the direct involvement of the original’s creators, particularly Peter Duncan, suggests a close connection between the Rakes.

Key differences are evident in the broadcasters (the commercial Fox in the U.S.; the government-funded ABC1 in Australia); cast (Greg Kinnear in the U.S.; Richard Roxburgh in Australia); the nature of their respective television audiences; and the dissimilar rules governing each nation’s TV content. The resulting negotiation and its conclusion provide a rich background for an exploration of intertextuality and questions of national identity against a global television landscape.

The evolution of that landscape is due, in part, to the move to trans-national TV ownership and production facilitated, as Barbara J. Selznick discusses in her 2008 book Global Television: Co-Producing Culture, by privatisation and deregulation in the 1980s and 1990s. The result, Selznick argues, is a global culture that is overtaking national culture despite a continued preference on the part of national audiences for local programming with domestic stars in a familiar language.¹

American TV offers a complex case regarding national TV and global culture. Early development and promotion led to a significant global presence, enhanced in recent years by the immense reach of U.S.-owned media conglomerates such as Time Warner, Viacom, and Disney. These export U.S. programmes both ‘as is’ and as formats to be re-made to suit national tastes. While U.S. TV spread globally, other nations’
TV has on the whole found less success in the U.S., resulting in a close alignment of nation and national TV in the U.S. and also a certain cultural myopia.

This is shifting, however, owing to the increased presence of and access to foreign content, in its original form or re-made, on U.S. screens. British programming is especially prevalent: the number of British shows re-made for the U.S., for example, dwarfing those sent by the U.S. to Britain. Of these, reality shows figure prominently, though comedies and dramas have thrived - *Sanford and Son* (NBC, 1972-1977), based on the 1960s/70s British *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1962-1965; 1970-1975), *The Office* (BBC2, 2001; NBC, 2005-2013), and *Queer as Folk* (Channel 4, 1999 and 2000; Showtime 2000-2005).

**Australian Television**

While Britain and the U.S. have influenced each other to varying degrees, both have shaped Australian TV. This is due to the latter’s relative late arrival, and hybridity in structure (a combination of government-funded broadcasters, as in Britain’s BBC, with commercial broadcasters, as in the U.S., whose Big Three broadcast networks are NBC, ABC, and CBS, with Fox a later addition). Such hybridity extends to content, with a mix of foreign and national programming impacting Australian discourses of nation and culture. As Sue Turnbull has noted, Australians watched imported - largely British - TV such as *Steptoe and Son* (BBC, 1962 onwards) and *The Rag Trade* (BBC, 1961-1963) until the first Australian sitcom aired in 1964.²

Efforts to foreground Australian programming include the work of the Australian Communications and Media Authority which, like the U.S.’s Federal Communications Commission,
handles regulation and censorship. Unlike the FCC, it also works to foster a vigorous home-grown TV, mandating that commercial broadcasters broadcast at least 55% Australian content. Despite such efforts, foreign programming, particularly British and American series, comprise a significant portion of the schedules and exert substantial influence. A 2011 list of the ten most popular TV programmes from 2009-2011 reveals that an average of four are from the U.S., with two to three from the U.K., meaning that at least half or more of the popular programmes are foreign.³

The challenges Australian programmes face at home are echoed by difficulties abroad. Australian film has had an international presence for decades, yet Australian TV largely remains domestic despite Australian production companies’ advantages in creating programmes for the international market. As Stuart Cunningham and Toby Miller have shown, these include low production costs, a history of efficiency, and English-language production.⁴

When Australian exports have succeeded, that success has often been linked to genre, with soap operas such as Neighbors (Seven Network, 1985; Network Ten, 1986-2010) and, to a lesser extent, dramas including The Flying Doctors (Nine Network, 1986-1993) doing well in multiple countries. Cunningham and Miller argue that the British market has been the most amenable. The U.S. has been less welcoming, demonstrated by the failure of the imported Neighbors in the early 1990s and the U.S. remake of Kath & Kim in the mid-2000s. One success is the comedy Wilfred, first aired in Australia (SBS, 2007 and 2010) and then re-made for American audiences, running on the basic cable channels FX (2011-2013) and FXX (2014), both owned by the Fox Entertainment Group.
Comments about the two Wilfreds anticipate the feedback from critics and audiences regarding the Rakes. The re-make of Wilfred was tailored to comply with the greater regulation of language and nudity on American TV, while greater emotional depth was injected into the characters to appeal to this new audience. Critics noted that the Australian version was edgier in content and darker in tone than the U.S. one, despite close similarities. This combination of toned-down content and emotional affect re-appears in the U.S. Rake.

The Australian Rake’s critical success attracted the attention of Fox executives, but rather than re-air the original the decision was made, as with Kath & Kim and Wilfred, to re-make it. This decision underlines a crucial difference between the nations and their television systems. U.S. programmes normally air on Australian TV in their original form, which assumes that Australian audiences should easily understand and enjoy TV from other nations, as Turnbull notes. In contrast, foreign programmes are usually re-made for U.S. TV. Factors which have been identified as hindering Australian exports, particularly to the U.S., include unfamiliar accents and language use, low production values, and the inappropriateness of foreign material on commercial broadcast television.

**The Australian and American Rakes**

Rake is a particularly challenging text to re-make in line with U.S. standards because of the identity of its main character, a rake - a libertine who relentlessly pursues his appetites, particularly for sex. Originating in literature, the rake figure appears at a particular moment and place - the Restoration England of Charles II - yet has antecedents in other times and locales, from the Spanish picaro to the ‘Vice’ figure of English
morality plays. Circulation is an essential trait: the rake moves from person to person, and from place to place, in pursuit of his desires. Texts featuring rakes likewise circulated nationally and globally; for example, John Gay’s 1729 The Beggar’s Opera, featuring the rakish highwayman Macheath, gained fans not only in Britain but also worldwide. That the rake is deeply linked to both the nation and the globe is particularly apt in thinking about the two Rake productions and their association with the national and trans-national.

The original Rake, co-created by Duncan and actor Richard Roxburgh, who plays the title character, captures the rake’s transgressive aspects: he is always on the move - physically, verbally, and sexually - and constantly crossing social and sexual borders. An exchange in Season 3 between the rake, barrister Cleaver Greene, and a woman succinctly encapsulates the character. As Greene drinks, the woman - a friend, fling, and fellow barrister - notes: “You’ve always been a sexual version of ‘Doctors Without Borders ... Sex Sans Frontières!” This Rake takes full advantage of Australian broadcasting’s verbal and visual freedom to detail Greene’s picaresque adventures and complexity: he’s a passionate defender of the law who is perpetually embroiled in trouble and constantly in chaos - with no proper office, outrageous clients (largely guilty), and a voracious appetite for booze, gambling, and sex.

The show has largely been embraced by Australian critics and audiences, who praise Roxburgh’s performance, the ensemble cast, and the show’s darkly comic tone. Filmed in locations such as Sydney’s Central Business District, a commercial centre which is also home to law courts and barristers, this Rake is connected to the local - Sydney law and politics - and the nation. This Australian essence is a quality that
commentators on the Australian independent news website *Crikey* pinpoint as desirable and enjoyable, yet one that forestalls easy translation to the U.S.⁷

The U.S. *Rake* shares staff with its Australian predecessor, particularly co-creator Duncan, who shepherded the U.S. version with U.S. show runner Peter Tolan of *Rescue Me* (2004-2011) and U.S. director Sam Raimi, whose experience producing TV for global audiences includes the syndicated *Hercules* (1995-1999) and *Xena* (1995-2001). This continuity promised that the re-make might build on the original’s success, but differences between the two series in terms of broadcasters, protagonists, and audiences, made such continuity a burden as much as a benefit.

Despite the re-make inheriting many of the original’s narratives and characters, a number of factors limited direct reproduction and provide challenges, including dissimilarities in running time and differences in permissable content. To accommodate commercials, the U.S. *Rake* ran 42 minutes in contrast to the Australian original’s 60, allowing less time to develop the characters around the protagonist and the his world as a whole. Differences between the Aussie broadcaster ABC1, a government broadcaster, and Fox Broadcasting, and content rules in each country are also significant. Nudity and language are given greater latitude on Australian TV, while U.S. TV is more restrictive, especially in the case of broadcast networks such as Fox.

**Cultural Differentiations**

The respective *Rake* protagonists and the actors who play them also differ, their variance reflecting the diverse nature of each show and audience. The Aussie Cleaver Greene is an
unapologetically glorious mess, a menace to everyone, though primarily himself. The series plays with the dichotomy of the character’s intellectual and verbal dexterity, his wit getting him into greater trouble, not less. The visual disjunction between the professional Greene, clad in formal court gear, and his often-dishevelled private appearance in mussed suits or bathrobes is just one way in which this dichotomy is highlighted.

Roxburgh, a veteran of theatre, film, and TV, is often cast as a villain, from Moulin Rouge’s Duke of Monroth (2001) to Van Helsing’s Dracula (2004), and he brings to the character a devilish streak. With his deep, rich voice, wolfish face, and unkempt hair, his rake is handsome and disreputable, mighty and broken. His vaguely aristocratic air – that of a nobleman who is slumming it - recalls the rake’s roots in the court of Charles II, the ‘Merry Monarch’.

The film and TV star Greg Kinnear plays the U.S. protagonist, re-named Keegan Deane, as a softer figure in a series with a lighter tone overall. Kinnear’s roles have alternated between heroes and villains; his Deane is less wolf than dog, albeit a naughty one. Writing of the shows’ and protagonists’ differences for The Huffington Post, Maureen Ryan notes: “Perhaps the squishy ambivalence of ‘Rake’ is somehow appropriate to the show. Its lead character, Keegan Deane, can’t quite decide what kind of man he wants to be, and the show can’t seem to decide what it wants to be, either.”

The manner in which each version introduces its main character and his world is also different. The Australian pilot sets the series’ darkly humorous tone, depicting Greene defending a government economist - and cannibal - who is accused of murder. Early promotions for the U.S re-make’s
première cited the same narrative, but when it aired a different episode was shown instead: episodes were moved around and re-written, with the former première airing as Episode 4.

Discussing the U.S. première and the larger issue of creating shows for a competitive TV landscape with little room for middling choices in terms of form and content, Alan Sepinwall of entertainment website HitFix notes: “The first pilot was already emblematic of the struggle to do cable-style weirdness and moral ambiguity in a broadcast network context; the new pilot [...] sands off several of the edges that survived the first time.”

In the same article Sepinwall cites the concerns of showrunner Peter Tolan, who says: 'We found that we had an episode that had maybe an overload of not drama [sic], I’ll say, but maybe a little sadness [...] which worked against the episode. And so we refigured it, sort of toning that down." The result was a softened protagonist and show, in contrast to the more full-throttle naughtiness of the original, and American critics and viewers found the results so-so.

Rake’s generic status as a ‘dramedy’ also presented a problem, straddling the provocative, difficult to balance, overlap between drama and comedy. Historically, humour is challenging to translate, particularly across nations. As Turnbull points out, echoing other commentators, the specificities of humour with regard to character and place makes it “stubbornly resistant to broad-based exploitation in a multiplicity of markets”, as Cunningham and Jacka put it in their 1996 study of global television markets. Turnbull comments that “it might be more correct to suggest that ‘some’ humour is more ‘stubbornly resistant’ than others”, and
argues moreover that this might be particularly the case where Australian humour is concerned.\textsuperscript{10}

So what was the aftermath of this negotiation featuring one concept, two nations, and two similar but different shows? The Aussie \textit{Rake} completed its third season in 2014 and Roxburgh said it would be the last. Yet the original \textit{Rake} refuses to disappear: Roxburgh will return in 2016 for a fourth season. Kinnear’s series is not so lucky. The fate of the U.S. \textit{Rake} echoes that of the earlier U.S. re-make of \textit{Kath & Kim} and provides a cautionary counter to the promise of re-making another nation’s hit TV series: cancellation after a single season.

\textbf{Notes and References}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Barbara Selznick, \textit{Global Television: Co-Producing Culture}, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008, p. 3.
\item \textsuperscript{3} Amanda Meade, ‘Aussies Love US TV Shows’, \textit{The Australian}, online, 20 September 2011.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Turnbull, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 112.
\item \textsuperscript{6} Cunningham and Miller, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 120.
\end{itemize}


9 Alan Sepinwall, ‘Review: In Fox’s Rake, Greg Kinnear is Bad - but only to a Point’, *Hitfix*, online, 22 January 2014.