

**“MOTHERS LIKE HIM”:
Graham Kennedy and the great divide**

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Abstract

*During its establishment period, local live television was seen as a blank canvas, and generated a great deal of discussion about the most appropriate way of behaving in front of the camera. In the event, the first local personality to make his mark merely made these debates livelier and less conclusive. Rather than providing a template for the successful TV personality, Graham Kennedy, host of the weeknight variety show *In Melbourne Tonight*, was considered to have broken the mould. Kennedy had managed to transplant from daytime radio a relaxed intimacy of address that was not a recognisable property of 1950s understandings of masculinity. Moreover, an integral part of his television persona was the special rapport that he had developed with female viewers. This vital aspect of his allure was also part of his capacity to polarise opinion. Kennedy’s huge popularity was matched by the strength of the dislike felt by those viewers who just did not “get” what it was that he was offering. In this paper I trace the way that uncertainties about Kennedy’s mode of performance reveal a set of anxieties about women and mass culture.*

There was never any grey area to opinions about Kennedy’s work. People loathed or loved it. In the early days there was not a man around our board table, apart from me, who would admit that Kennedy had any appeal, but the breakthrough came when director after director mentioned with amazement that he was finding it increasingly difficult to get his wife or daughters away from the receiver set when Kennedy was on air. Of course, they would add, they still thought he was terrible. (Colin Bednall, Managing Director GTV-9, in Blundell, 2003, pp.118-119.)

During its establishment period, local live television was seen as a blank canvas, and generated a great deal of discussion about the most appropriate way of behaving in front of the camera. In the event, the first local personality to make his mark merely made these debates livelier and less conclusive. Rather than providing a template for the successful TV personality, Graham Kennedy, host of the weeknight variety show *In Melbourne Tonight*, was considered to have broken the mould. Kennedy had managed to transplant from daytime radio a relaxed intimacy of address that was not a recognisable property of 1950s understandings of masculinity. Moreover, an integral part of his television persona was the special rapport that he had developed with female viewers. This vital aspect of his allure was also part of his capacity to polarise opinion. Kennedy’s huge popularity was matched by the strength of the dislike felt by those viewers who just did not “get” what it was that he was offering. In this paper I trace the way that

uncertainties about Kennedy’s mode of performance reveal a set of anxieties about women and mass culture.

Although Kennedy’s present-day image is based on an unequivocal notion of TV genius, for most of his long tenure his performance style was considered a matter of taste. He deployed this characteristic style in an assortment of TV shows during his career, but *IMT* has earned him his place in the TV pantheon. Originally based on the American *Tonight Show* format that ATN-7 had pioneered in Sydney as the *Keith Walshe Show*, *IMT* was broadcast live in Melbourne each weeknight at 9.30. Kennedy soon dropped the interviews that were a staple of the American show (Blundell, 2003, p. 102) and *IMT* continued on as a mix of music and dance, novelty acts, comedy skits and ad-libbed commercials. The show proved a cash cow for GTV-9 when products began walking out the door after Kennedy had “rubbished” them: “sponsors soon cottoned on to the fact that if Kennedy had been hurling their product abusively around the set the night before, punters would be queuing up next morning to buy it” (Goldsworthy, 2005, p. 52). The unanticipated success of Kennedy’s nightly performance resulted in a series of efforts to market him more widely. In 1960 a national show, *The Graham Kennedy Show*, was recorded on Friday nights in Melbourne and broadcast the next week in Sydney, Brisbane and Adelaide. This program was constructed more conventionally than the disorderly *IMT* and aimed for a more expensive and polished look. The riotous aspects of *IMT* that so delighted Melbourne viewers were incorporated in a more deliberate fashion and lost a lot of spontaneity in the process: “The problem was the show was labelled as “prestige” and was rehearsed and produced way above normal *IMT* standards and Kennedy became a very different performer” (Stuckey in Blundell, 2003, pp. 190-91). Melburnians commented on the difference when, each Friday, the tape would be turned off at the end of the hour-long *Graham Kennedy Show* and the relaxed silliness of *IMT* would take over (Blundell).

The key to the success of *IMT* in Melbourne was the unpredictability of Kennedy’s disorderly performance; it delighted fans and contributed to the perception that *IMT* was a shared experience. Yet, the sense of ownership that Kennedy and *IMT* engendered in

Melbourne viewers motivated a hostile counter-response that was the negative face of the show’s unexpected success. The intensity of feeling, positive and negative, provoked by Kennedy at the peak of *IMT*’s popularity gave Melbourne viewers the opportunity to define their viewing tastes in relation both to the show and to their fellow viewers. During the late fifties and the early sixties, the letters pages of Melbourne’s three weekly TV magazines were testimony to the desire of viewers to register their allegiances in print. (Kennedy also received a significant number of letters from both fans and hostile viewers -- a practice that was much-publicised.) Many of the letters were enthusiastic in their praise. He was sent “kisses” in *TV Week*, “orchids” in *Listener In-TV* and “bouquets” in *TV Times*. However, these were matched by “kicks”, “axes” and “brickbats” respectively. Because of this configuration, the letters pages often took on the structure of a debate, so that, despite Kennedy’s immense popularity, the letters sent in his praise were often quite defensive: “Here is one family who is tired of people writing to *TV Week* and running down Graham and Panda. We love them both (Wally, George, Ivy, Emma and Jimmy Clarke” *TV Week*, 1960, p. 21). Those who were not so keen on Kennedy were more assertive. The diversions offered by Kennedy and *In Melbourne Tonight* could easily be dismissed by viewers and critics who chose not to be diverted:

How could anyone in their right mind sit glued to a television set for five nights a week, watching a poor unfortunate little man grin like a Cheshire cat, read advertisements straight from a paper sheet and still say, “Oh, I could not go on living without seeing Graham every night (‘Fed Up’, 1959, p. 16).

As Ien Ang observed in her work on the American prime time soap opera, *Dallas*, it is difficult to “explain” the fun and enjoyment of an entertaining TV show, while there is a readily available language of disapproval with which to condemn it (1985).

Yet, while it can be satisfying to adopt a disdainful superiority to someone else’s mass cultural choices, the Melbourne viewers who were inured to Kennedy’s on-camera allure must also have felt exiled from the heart of the public conversation about their city’s fledgling television service. Kennedy’s unexpected and phenomenal popularity was such that not being a fan became, at least within the discursive framework established by the print media, a fundamental characteristic of a viewer’s identity and connection to the

local service: “As one who does not share the view that TV rises and sets with performances of ‘IMT’, it was with great pleasure that I read of a really first class show...namely the Perry Como Show” (Bristow, 1960).

A sense of being the odd-one-out was surely the impetus for many of the hostile letters sent to magazines and – a more extreme response – to Kennedy himself. There was a perception that those who were not part of the *In Melbourne Tonight* club had condemned themselves to the sidelines of Melbourne’s burgeoning TV culture: “All those people who rave on about Graham Kennedy should have their heads read. Our family can’t see what there is to rave about” (‘Thank You’ [to Digby Wolfe], 1961, p.38). This aspect of Kennedy’s home-town popularity was underscored when frustrated Melbourne viewers sided with the Sydney audience in their rejection of Kennedy’s national show: “Kicks to Graham Kennedy, the most childish, idiotic person on TV. I don’t blame Sydney for turning their noses up at him” (Morris, 1960, p. 21). This point of view was offered even more decisively by William Gibb (“Not a Fan”) who set aside his usual contempt for “Sydneysiders” to compliment them for their “remarkable sense” in rejecting *The Graham Kennedy Show*: “Although it is heresy to admit it, I can’t find it in me to be a Graham Kennedy fan....Will we ever see the day when Melbourne follows Sydney taste? I doubt it, but here is one viewer who is prepared to take the lead” (1960, p. 21). By turning away from the home community to cast in his lot with the Sydney TV audience, this viewer demonstrated Ien Ang’s suggestion that a belief in the superiority of one’s viewing taste can be diminished by a sense of alienation. In rejecting a popular show, its “opponents often seem to feel frustratingly isolated, part of an enlightened minority surrounded by a horde of passive cultural dopes” (Ang, 1989, p.74).

The idea that Kennedy’s allure was a mystery that needed to be solved or explained was something that persisted throughout his career. In fact, only a few months after his TV debut, an *Age* journalist was already asking what it was about this unlikely young man that had struck such a chord with viewers (Ryan, 1957, p.10). Moreover, even in this early article Kennedy’s particular fascination for female viewers was something that needed to be explained and accounted for: “Kennedy agrees his ‘under-fed look’ appeals

to woman viewers. ‘They feel motherly towards me,’ he said” (Ryan). By the beginning of the following year, Kennedy’s capacity to polarise viewer opinion had become an explicit part of his TV persona, so that in an *Age* overview of the first full year of television, he was described as a performer “whose expressions (facial and verbal) and mannerisms [had] been watched (if not admired) by every TV viewer in Melbourne” (Editor, 1958, p. 5).

The carnivalesque pleasures that were a trade-mark of the “anything goes” *IMT* have become pivotal to Kennedy’s place in the Australian TV pantheon:

Kennedy...highlighted his face and body as grotesque, with his protruding eyes, open gaping mouth, and long wandering tongue. His comedy was indeed risqué, calling on every aspect of the body to bring down solemnity or pomposity or pretension (Docker, 1994, p. 211)...¹

However, during this early period of TV production, the enjoyment to be found in Kennedy’s subversive style was less easily articulated or authenticated. *IMT* was a curious hybrid. The American-style sophistication of its musical numbers contrasted with both the vaudevillian naughtiness of the comedy skits and Kennedy’s precocious deconstruction of the conventions of commercial television. In a televised interview with Ray Martin in 1994 (*The King of Television*), Kennedy shied away from the idea that the show was transgressive by suggesting that he and his team could not be classed as rule breakers as “there were no rules” to be broken during television’s establishment period. However, from the beginning of broadcasting Australian programs were judged on their capacity to look like the imported shows that were such a feature of the prime time schedule. While the popularity of *IMT* is an indication that his viewers relished the way that Kennedy used the “liveness” of his show to create a sense of complicity, it was hard for them to explain how delightful this disruption of the “surface” of TV could be when the discourse that dominated the public discussion of the new TV service centred on ideas of “quality” and “polish” (Bye, 2007).

¹ See also Turner, 1989, pp. 25-38.

In the print media, it was commonplace for viewers and critics to express their impatience at the amateurism of much local production; “sophistication” stood out as an undisputed measure of good television. When the urbane English comedian, Digby Wolfe, appeared on the scene, he and his show *Revue 61 and 62*, were considered to have delivered a cosmopolitan finesse that had been missing from Australian-produced television. Closer to home, corpulent stage actor, Noel Ferrier, became the darling of viewers who were not comfortable with Kennedy’s disorderly mode of performance. When Ferrier took over the Friday night *IMT* slot, his tightly scripted musical comedy style show could be complimented for a structured and “writerly” stylishness that Kennedy’s disruptive comedy sought to avoid:

What would we do without scriptwriter Jeff Underhill?...There may be some who enjoy the repetitious slapstick antics that are mostly of questionable taste, but I for one am delighted to see some worthwhile sophisticated comedy. Noel Ferrier makes an excellent avenue through which to explore this new field (“Anti-slapstick”, 1964, p. 70).²

This letter made it clear that the capacity to appreciate “sophisticated comedy” can only be the privilege of the sophisticated viewer. Disliking Kennedy offered viewers a cosmopolitanism that separated their viewing tastes from the parochialism of less discriminating Melburnians: “A million kicks to *IMT*. I have viewed in several countries throughout the world, but never have I seen a cornier show than this” (TV Fan [but not of Graham Kennedy], 1963, p.33).

Just such a circular attribution of value was pivotal to the Sydney print media’s response to Kennedy’s national show; the Sydney audience’s tepid response to Kennedy became unequivocal evidence of the superior TV taste and maturity of harbour city viewers. While Sydney reviewers declared themselves astonished at the amateurish and “old-fashioned” nature of Kennedy’s national show (“at one hit we were back in the clumsy prehistoric days of ‘Sydney Tonight’” [“Sydney says ‘No’”, 1960, p.11]), Melbourne reviewer Lesley Dare wished for the national show to be replaced by a highlights package that “might give interstate viewers more respect for Melbourne’s judgment” (1961, p.

² See Ferrier, 1985, pp. 48-51. Ferrier’s *IMT* received the 1964 logie for ‘Most Popular Program’ while Kennedy and Newton shared the award for ‘Most Popular Male’.

22). Yet, *TV Times* journalist John Query reminded his Melbourne readers that there were plenty of Melbourne viewers who could not stand Kennedy or *IMT*: “Then what is it that makes Kennedy delight about 50 per cent of Melbourne people, repel the other half, and bore the majority of Sydney viewers who have seen him?” (1960b, pp. 19-20). In answering this question, Query pretty much managed to dispense with Kennedy and his fans in one fell swoop. Despite claiming to be “more or less an intrastate person”, the *TV Times* journalist’s sense of Kennedy’s attraction was very much a Sydney one, in which the *IMT* host’s charm lay in the “homespun, hearthside” qualities of his performance: “Graham Kennedy is the saccharine antithesis of the Angry Young Man. Some people prefer their young men angry” (Query).

Query’s suggestion that Kennedy could never appeal to viewers with a taste for a more robust kind of entertainment or, indeed, for a more robust kind of young man formed part of the ongoing discussion in the print media of Kennedy’s mysterious allure. This was undoubtedly the crux of an interview Query had conducted with *IMT* program manager (and guru), Norm Spencer, just prior to the launch of Kennedy’s national show. In analysing Kennedy’s appeal, Spencer, rather curiously, played down the star performer’s unique qualities, and chose to attribute Kennedy’s phenomenal success to his being a typical “Aussie”: “Well, Graham is a natural Australian; he’s easy, he does exactly the same things on television as any young fellow would do” (1960a, p.10). Dubious about Spencer’s bland description of Kennedy’s charms, Query proposed instead that Kennedy’s allure was far from “average” and that he “appeal[ed] to the mother instinct in women” in much the same way as the flamboyant pianist Liberace (Query). Spencer’s response was fairly noncommittal: “I admit a lot of women would like to mother him and so forth, but I think that’s just because he’s a nice lad” (Query). This was surely a disingenuous description of GTV-9’s hottest property, someone who had been wowing and irritating Melbourne viewers for nearly three years and was hardly being sold to a national audience on the basis of his ordinariness. Nevertheless, it would not have been

surprising if Spencer had been wary of the kind of “specialness” that Query was suggesting or of the comparison he had drawn with Liberace.³

Liberace was famously loathed by male critics while pleasing a predominantly female audience with his flamboyance, showy musicianship and intimate camera style. It was undoubtedly provocative to compare Kennedy’s celebrated appeal to women viewers to Liberace’s, especially in the light of the sensational law suit that had taken place in the middle of 1959, when Liberace had sued a London journalist for a vicious diatribe that cast doubt on his heterosexual masculinity, and interpreted his popularity in terms of blight and contamination: ““there must be something wrong with us that our teenagers longing for sex and our middle-aged matrons fed up with sex alike should fall for such a sugary mountain of jingling claptrap wrapped up in such a preposterous clown”” (Quoted by Pyron, 2000). The astonishing spleen underpinning this article by “Cassandra” of the *Daily Mail* points to the sense of threat generated by this performer who disturbed the conventional gender boundaries.

Query was not the first person to make the association between Kennedy and Liberace. Not long after the Liberace case hit the headlines, Kennedy had himself told Query in an interview that an abusive letter-writer had made the comparison and drawn out the implications. The gist of the letter was that everything that had been written of Liberace could be applied to Kennedy and that he should “get off the screen” (1959, p. 11). Melbourne University psychologist, R J Thomson, suggested in a much more benign manner that the two performers shared a certain amount of ground. Albeit acknowledging the glittering pianist’s greater flamboyance, Thomson commented that, like Liberace, Kennedy had superimposed an elaborate, artificial performance style over “a personality which, beneath the trimmings and the gimmicks really is spontaneously natural and guileless, almost naïve” (1959, p. 10). This on-screen combination of bravura and vulnerability gave the “Moms” in the audience “the fantasy son who will never terrify them by growing beyond them”, and attracted young people who were alienated by more

³ Hugh Stuckey told Blundell that Spencer was, in fact, quite concerned that some of Kennedy’s gestures appeared effeminate and was determined to eliminate them (2003, p. 161).

sophisticated TV personalities (Thomson). Thomson’s analysis was gentle and affectionate, but his vision of enfeebling mothers and enfeebled youth had an echo of the blighted vision offered in the *Daily Mirror* of Liberace’s fans.

In the process of feeding the public fascination with Kennedy, the print media commentary often hinted that there was something perverse about the level of enthusiasm for this home-grown star. It is not surprising that a psychologist was called on to “diagnose” Kennedy’s popularity, and that he should suggest that his celebrity had as much to do with the female fans who fetishised him, as with his own talent. Andreas Huyssen has pointed to the conventional association of mass culture with women consumers and a feminine mode of consumption, “while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men” (1986, p. 47). For Huyssen, this “conscious strategy of exclusion” is linked to a modernist fear of contamination (Huyssen, p.vii) but in the discourse surrounding Kennedy’s huge but divided popularity this split is reworked *within* a mass cultural context to suggest a division between a vigorous, masculine locally produced TV culture and a less substantial, trivial brand of TV diversion. What this more robust TV fare might involve was either constituted in relation to various alternative TV hosts like Ferrier and Wolfe or, just as often, left to the imagination.

This public weighing up of Kennedy’s merit as a performer coincided with a distinction between a productive, ever-intact masculine mode of viewing and a more susceptible, feminine surrender to the distractions offered by TV. The idea that women viewers fail to maintain an appropriate distance from the mass cultural object was taken up by John Burrowes in his comparison of Kennedy’s on-screen attraction with that of popular daytime TV host, Larry Nixon: “If Kennedy is the type the woman viewer would like to be her son, then Nixon could qualify as the type she might like to be her Dad” (Burrowes, 1960, p. 7).⁴ This notion that Kennedy’s appeal had more to do with the susceptibility of his fans than with his elusive talent was only one of a number of

⁴ Albeit prompted by the coincidence of their names matching those of the US presidential candidates, it was still a bit odd to compare a daytime and night time presenter in this way. Nixon’s *Lady for a Day* was a big daytime hit on HSV-7 for a few years but, as GTV-9’s prime time cash cow, Kennedy’s *IMT* was in another league all together.

responses to GTV-9’s star performer during the *IMT* years. However, it was a recurring theme, and one that carried with it a certain uneasiness about fan activity, with its rejection of “aesthetic distance” and an accompanying overinvestment in a “devalued cultural object” (Jenkins, 1992, p, 10). Moreover, in outlining the cultural anxieties fuelled by these practices, Henry Jenkins has highlighted the significance of gender in this attribution of taste so that, for instance, (male) sports fans have a status denied (female or feminised) media fans (Jenkins).

This scale of value undoubtedly informed the discussion of Kennedy’s ever-expanding pay-packet.⁵ His popular success and its accompanying financial rewards undid the hierarchy of aesthetic merit identified by Bourdieu and that Jenkins describes as integral to anxieties about fan activity (Jenkins, 1992 p.16). The consideration that particular tastes are reasonable while others are unreasonable underpinned disbelieving responses to Kennedy’s generous salary. Accordingly, when Kennedy’s contract was renewed in 1963 for a further three years, his phenomenal salary increase prompted the question: “What’s He Got that’s Worth £50, 000?” (Doherty, 1963, pp. 6-7)⁶ In the process of answering this question, *TV Times* critic, Frank Doherty, declared that he was immune to Kennedy’s charms, but had never yet met a Melbourne woman who did not like the *IMT* star. Female viewers were suckers for his sweet, boyish charm, while male viewers could not begin to understand the attraction. Instead, they could only “shrug in [good-natured] wonder”: “Well, he must have SOMETHING – and darn good luck to him if he can get dough like that for it” (Doherty). Doherty and his imagined readers may have been magnanimous in their puzzlement, but their shoulder-shrugging bemusement undoubtedly smacked of condescension.

This declaration of benign superiority was underpinned by a determined misreading of Kennedy’s performance style and the nature of his appeal. By the time Doherty was writing this piece, Kennedy had been hosting *IMT* for nearly six years and was renowned

⁵ Liberace’s financial success contributed to the critical antagonism he attracted. He famously used to respond that he “cried all the way to the bank”.

⁶ A few weeks later, *TV Times* quizzed Kennedy on the details of his financial arrangements: “How Graham Spends his Money”, 1963, p.7.

for the quickness of his repartee, his unpredictability and his capacity for disruption. Yet, Doherty read those moments when “Mr Kennedy has been unnecessarily rude to others on his program” as an aberration and antithetical to the ““nice young man image”” that appealed to the cloying, maternal desires of older female viewers and the unformed, immature fantasies of his younger fans. If viewers were really looking for a clean-cut and boyish personality, Bert Newton was a more obvious choice and, certainly, a number of viewers pledged their allegiance to Newton in precisely these terms. Yet, however popular Newton became, he never generated the passionate and conflicting responses that Kennedy did. In fact, there were plenty of nice young men on TV at the time, but none had Kennedy’s flair for making the most ordinary of television moments risky. Kennedy’s most distinctive quality was his capacity to exploit the dangerous “liveness” of the TV present. As a loyal (male) fan commented in response to Nine’s plans to tighten up *IMT* in response to the success of *Revue ‘61*: “One of the things that makes people sit up night after night is the knowledge that the unexpected can – and often does – happen” (Regan, 1961, p.38).

In his discussion of *IMT*’s unassailable position at the forefront of the “public archive” of Australian television, Alan McKee highlights the Australian Broadcasting Control Board’s long-running struggle to “deal with” the aspect of the show that viewers like R.L. Regan found most appealing: its capacity for disruption. In particular, the Board was concerned with the double entendre and suggestiveness that was a mainstay of Kennedy’s comic style (and of other comic performances of the period). Functioning on two levels, the comedy worked as a form of code: “presenting language that was on one level clean enough for the family circle at home but was simultaneously dirty enough for those adults who could go to the Tivoli theatre if they wanted to” (McKee, 2005, p.25). This suggestiveness depended on the audience choosing to read the second level of meaning and in this way addressed the initiated audience members as complicit. As Kennedy commented, the people who complained of him seemed to have a surprisingly intimate knowledge of his show. Kennedy’s implication was that, for these viewers, his show was a guilty pleasure which they hated him and themselves for (Perkin, 1961, p.11). While the ABCB returned again and again to the problem of TV vulgarity in response to the

complaints it regularly received from viewers, Kennedy’s large audience was delighted by his capacity to add a little spice to the weekday routine: “This bloke’s liable to say anything!”(Hutchinson, 1986, p. 259) What stands out in the commentary that circulated around Kennedy’s TV success is the particular fascination that this “dangerous” television had for women viewers in particular. Yet, remarkably, his appeal to women was never attributed to the subversive suggestiveness that earned him so many complaints.

A key aspect of *IMT* mythology was the central role of women in choosing to watch the show. As Kennedy told John Burrowes “many women write to tell me that although their husbands may not like me they do. It appears from the mail that the women have the say on what the household is watching” (Burrowes, 1960, p. 7)” The image of men meekly watching *IMT* at their wives’ behest is intriguing, going against the grain of conventional assumptions that “Father” was in charge of the channel dial.⁷ It was actually unlikely that Kennedy’s audience was as dominated by women as the lively conversation that percolated around him in the print media suggested. Rather, the idea that Kennedy’s show was too silly and unsophisticated for manly viewers may have made his show an illicit pleasure for many of his male fans. By the same token, the misfit between conventional understandings of fifties housewives and Kennedy’s much-documented appeal to the “mums” in his audience is, at the very least, unsettling of any monochromatic vision of female culture during this period. With retrospective insight, Gerald Stone equates the liberating appeal of Kennedy’s gently “blue” humour with Lucille Ball’s unruly disruption of the domestic space, suggesting that each of these performers gave women an alternative to mainstream understandings of “a woman’s place” (2000, pp. 81-2).

At the time when it was all happening, the determination to read Kennedy’s success in terms of his “niceness” and his youth was clearly an attempt to domesticate Kennedy’s

⁷ For instance, Australian families were envisioned “preparing for the great day when they’ll be able to pull the chairs round in a semi-circle, switch on the standard lamp, and sit back and wait for Father to twiddle the dials of the new £175 set (Frizell, 1955, p. 20)”.

“naughtiness” in order to make its attraction more appropriate. It was suggested on a number of occasions that the roots of Kennedy’s popularity lay in his audience’s lingering affection for the radio show that he did with the adored “Nicky” (Clifford Nicholls Whitta). While this was a perfectly reasonable suggestion, this link to radio was made in order to illustrate the backward-looking, parochial and safe nature of Kennedy’s appeal. In this context, John Query described Kennedy as a Melbourne “habit” (1960b, p. 20), while Frank Doherty suggested that Kennedy’s ongoing success in Melbourne could be linked to his status as the local boy made good: “Women particularly, for they formed the majority of his listeners when he was a lad broadcasting from 3UZ with Nicky, nurture this picture of him: the boy who came from a teacup-toter to the biggest property in show business” (1963, p.7).

In his biography of Kennedy, Graeme Blundell is also keen to suggest that the time on radio with Nicky was integral to Kennedy’s subsequent success on television. However, this success was not based on shared history or familiarity but, rather, on the communication and performance skills that Nicky had passed on during their time together. Blundell argues that Nicky unsettled the patriarchal status quo of fifties Melbourne by addressing his predominantly female audience with intimate directness and registering his allegiance to their point of view. In his role as offsider, Kennedy enhanced the impression that the show was an enclave. As Blundell describes it: “They belonged to the unofficial housewives association of Victoria and treated women as knowing equals, unlike the men their audience cooked and cleaned for” (2003, p. 44). The cosy camaraderie of this daytime radio show was a private pleasure which Nicky and Graham’s predominantly female listeners snatched out of the potentially oppressive routine of everyday suburban life. However, the relaxed informality of the radio address took on a different flavour when it was transplanted into the “family circle” gathered around the TV set. No longer “mother’s secret”, the gently subversive delights of daytime radio became, in *IMT*, a definitive and extremely public part of the Melbourne television landscape. While many viewers delighted in the unruliness and unstructured intimacy that Kennedy brought to television from the daytime world of radio, others felt that this mode of performance was too backward-looking:

To the miraculous new invention, young Graham Kennedy brought nothing new. He simply transferred to video the supercharged jollity of radio breakfast [sic] sessions. The device not only worked – but to the astonishment and chagrin of the opposition camps, it continued to work....In 1961, good enough is not enough. Live shows must be reasonably good – or take the kicks. It’s a viewers’ market (Ion, 1961, p.4).

Kennedy was by no means alone in using radio as a source for his television performance. In fact, Albert Moran describes the first period of television as “radio with pictures” (1989). Kennedy, however, defied convention by mining a daytime/women’s show for prime time television. After all, the address described by Blundell that made Nicky’s radio show so special was a feature of the daytime variety shows that were such a hit on US television in the fifties (and which developed directly out of radio). In particular, Gary Moore’s interaction with the audience involved a similar production of intimacy, while Arthur Godfrey, like Nicky on radio and Kennedy on TV, used the commercials that sustained his show as an opportunity for disruption (Cassidy, 2005). Moore maintained that he preferred the daytime format because he “was freer to ‘rattle around’ and get closer to viewers” (Cassidy, p. 81). With this in mind, it could be argued that Graham Kennedy’s secret was that, like Moore and Godfrey, he successfully translated the informality of daytime radio into the address he developed for television. However, unlike the “charm boys” (Cassidy, pp. 75-6)⁸ who dominated the daytime TV schedule in the States, Kennedy took his own particular charm into prime time. In contrast to the more concert-style variety shows that were a feature of the Australian television landscape at this time, *IMT* – at least on the nights that Kennedy was host -- was a format in which the interconnection with the viewing audience (“grounded in a kind of confidentiality” [Goldsworthy, 2005, p.52]) was as important as the performance itself: “Digby Wolfe is a polished performer and pleasant to watch, but Graham seems more like one of the family, and seems to come right into our living room” (Mrs Rita Blakeney, 1961, p. 36). Like Nicky’s crazy daytime radio show, *IMT* offered women “time-out” from the daily grind: “At the end of a working day, I look forward to relaxing

⁸ Cassidy is referring to a *Time* article that stated “from morning to sunset, television ‘turns loose an avalanche of masculine charm that would overwhelm any audience less hardy than U.S. housewives’ (2005).”

and laughing with Graham (Blakeney).” A similar testimony to Graham’s relaxing TV persona appeared in the *TV Week*:

I can’t stand by any longer and see Graham run down so much as he has been lately. I am just another weary mother and housewife and look forward to “IMT” after the children are in bed, when I can relax and laugh with Graham (Housewife, 1960, p.52).

Jim Murphy has suggested that Kennedy was unique in his capacity to translate into his TV persona the relaxed sociability he had developed on radio. It was more usual for TV presenters to adopt a formal style as a response to the demands of the new medium (1981, p.63).⁹ Kennedy’s lack of formality, which his critics described as amateurish, was clearly what set him apart.¹⁰

IMT is, of course, best remembered for Kennedy’s cheeky subversion of the commercials that provided his livelihood. This kind of send-up had been a signature of Nicky’s radio presentation, and Kennedy used it to great effect when he made it to television: “Of blisters you’re certain when you wear Raoul Merton.” Or: “Have you seen that commercial? A nice vanilla slice made out of two Sao biscuits. How about that? Sounds like dysentery to me.” In the United States, Arthur Godfrey was renowned for his disrespectful attitude to his sponsors, but he always insisted that he never lampooned the product, only the company or advertising agency that was marketing the goods (Cassidy, 2005, p. 98). Kennedy, on the other hand, could be magnificently rude about the product that he had been commissioned to sell. Yet, like Godfrey, his ultimate satirical object was the bizarre process of media advertising. Also like Godfrey, Kennedy’s irreverence had the perverse result of making this process work even more effectively. Cassidy observes that “Godfrey’s outspoken annoyance with television’s commercial structures seemingly aligned him with the viewer, yet evidence proves that in the end these complaints paradoxically served to strengthen his persuasive efficacy” (Cassidy.). When describing

⁹ See also Frances Bonner, 2005.

¹⁰ Mary Rossi, who hosted the first women’s sessions at the ABC in Sydney has commented that she strove to reproduce the naturalness of her everyday mode of communication when presenting the show. Yet, she is now surprised by how “unnatural” she sounds in her old shows (Hogan, 2006, p.18).

this process in relation to Kennedy, Blundell attributes the success of his disruptive sales technique to a kind of inadvertent lapse in the female shopper’s concentration:

Many women discovered that while in principal they rebelled against television advertising, they would wander into a self-service store, see something and think that somebody they knew had said that it was good. They would put the item in the basket and only later realise that it was Graham Kennedy who said it was worth buying (Blundell, 2003, p.135).

Blundell generally reads Kennedy’s celebrated rapport with his viewers in more subtle terms. With this in mind, considering how crucial Kennedy’s advertising technique has become to his legendary rejection of the conventions of commercial television, it is remarkable that Blundell should deny the audience to whom these advertisements were addressed any of the ironic distance that the ads clearly invited.

The idea that women -- female consumers – are peculiarly susceptible to the media message is a recurring theme in the discourse of mass culture and a recurring theme in the discussion that bubbled around Kennedy during the heyday of *IMT*. Kennedy’s fans were not only eager to “buy” the inferior entertainment goods that were offered on *IMT*, but compounded this misrecognition by buying the products he treated with such disrespect. In attempting to pin down the elusive secret of Kennedy’s success, Frank Doherty was certain of only one thing: “GTV-9 management knows that Kennedy can sell. Therefore, they pay him as the No.1 salesman” (1963, p.6). “Disgruntled” of Brighton Beach professed amazement at the capacity of Kennedy’s audience to deceive themselves about the commercial bottom-line underpinning both *IMT* and the *Graham Kennedy Show* (a glorified “In Melbourne Tonight” with twice as many commercials): “Wake up to yourself, viewers, the shows aren’t meant to amuse you, at best they’re designed to sell us things we don’t need” (1960, p.16). The decision to read the success of Kennedy’s disruptive and very funny advertising technique in these terms required a notion of a double-double cross that viewed Kennedy’s technique of exposing and lampooning the rationale of TV advertising as a “trick”, rather than a shared joke about the absurdities of

everyday life.¹¹ Of course, Kennedy’s highly lucrative “send-ups” did not involve any radical turning away from the fruits of capitalism, but viewers delighted in his capacity to inject a satisfying anarchy into the routines of suburban life: “Kennedy proceeded from the basic assumption that the consumers at whom these ads were aimed – mostly women – knew perfectly well when the sponsors were taking them for idiots” (Goldsworthy, 2005, p. 53).

The implication that there was something not quite right with Kennedy’s ability to make advertising work linked up with the notion that the world of consumption was a female one. His role as salesman removed him from the productive world of work so that, instead, he was constituted in relation to the decadent desires of the consumer. In fact, as Ann Curthoys has detailed, prior to the introduction of television into Australia, there were anxious debates about the destructive potential of commercial television. These concerns were not commonly articulated in the popular print media once broadcasting began, but Kennedy’s enormous success – he was dubbed the “golden boy” – worried those who failed to “get” what it was that he was offering, and led them to believe that his audience had proved themselves vulnerable in precisely the way that had been feared prior to the commencement of broadcasting. (It is fascinating that Kennedy and his team decided to launch his national show with a huge production number from *The Music Man* – the story of a confidence trickster.) As I have documented, the Melbourne press and those viewers who wrote to express their scorn tended to attribute this failure of taste to the inferior cultural discrimination of suburban women. When the Sydney press went to town on the national show, they chose to read Kennedy’s popularity in Melbourne as evidence of a generally feeble and emasculated cultural landscape. In 1963, when plans were made to link Kennedy and Sydney’s Dave Allen by coaxial cable, F.C. Kennedy’s use of metaphor drew out the notion of a peculiarly feminine susceptibility propping up Kennedy’s popularity: “When they [Melbourne’s heroes] do badly they are not condemned and their failures are overlooked with the shortsightedness of a doting mother covering the weaknesses of a favourite offspring” (p. 4).

¹¹ For instance, John Clemenger, a principal of the advertising company that sent Kennedy much of his work, considered it “reverse advertising (Blundell, 2003, p.133)”.

Not only had Kennedy’s viewers made a mistake about the quality of the show, their misplaced enthusiasm had skewed Melbourne’s viewing landscape. Although this tug of war was taking place in the context of a television service with a prime time schedule dominated by Hollywood imports, for those who had not cultivated a taste for *IMT*, Kennedy’s popularity posed a much greater danger to the developing service. Fans of the show were considered to be complicit in a process that licensed Kennedy to sap the city’s television of its masculine vigour. (One male viewer who wrote in to demand an “adult and spicy” late show for hardworking men described Melbourne’s commercial TV stations as “henpecked” [RAN, 1963, p.35].) It was from this perspective that, in 1968, a *TV Week* reviewer announced approvingly that Kennedy had had enough of “flogging the dreary procession of shoes, insect sprays and the other adoring sponsor’s products *IMT* is clogged with” (Gott, 1968, p.23) and had become someone with an “I-don’t-give-a-damn-attitude”. The implication was that Kennedy had become a “real man” and that, as such, would have something to offer “people who couldn’t stand Kennedy for years when he was a slender ‘darling of the mums’ boy trying so hard to please and smarting because viewers in tough old Sydney wouldn’t take to him” (Gott). This description provided a foretaste of the defiant persona that would produce the “crow call” that has become such an important part of Kennedy’s place in popular memory. With the crow call, Kennedy put paid to any lingering, feminine-seeming “niceness” and inserted himself into Australian television history as a larrikin.

Suggestiveness, vulgarity, but not obscenity -- not quite obeying the rules of what television should, so the authorities say, be about – this is what Kennedy and Kennedy’s FAAARK are about, how they are remembered in the public archive, and what they have to contribute to our cultural heritage (McKee, 2001, p.30).

Kennedy went on to disrupt the early evening timeslot with the game show *Blankety Blanks* (0-10 Network, 1977-8) and risqué jokes about “Peter the Phantom Puller” and, some years later, to use the late evening *Coast to Coast* (Nine Network, 1988-9) to flirt with John Mangos or talk about the Queen’s breasts (Docker, 1994, pp. 210-13). However, these “transgressive” performances never produced the intense and sustained

hostility that was the flipside of his early popularity.¹² On the contrary, they had a satisfying “blokishness” that is a sanctioned part of Australian television culture. *IMT* and Graham Kennedy have become pivotal to the Australian understanding of its local television industry. In pointing out “how central a lack of respect for TV’s conventions and formulas is within the history of Australian television production and its audience”, Graeme Turner singled out *IMT* as “perhaps the best example of a host and a show which was always trying to break out of its frame (1989, p. 32)”. It is in these terms, that Kennedy has been crowned “King of Television”, while *IMT* is now the definitive Australian TV show. Yet, at the time of its broadcast, the show and its host were the controversial centre of a public argument about proper viewing tastes and the appropriate development of Australian television.

¹² They did, of course, receive their fair share of viewer complaints.

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