

***Californication and Cultural Imperialism Baywatch and the Creation of World Culture.* Ed. Andrew Anglophone. Point Sur: Malibu University Press, 1997.**

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We live in the age of the Los  
Angelization of Planet Earth.  
William Irwin Thompson

The television series *Baywatch* premiered in 1990 on NBC and was cancelled due to poor ratings. Resurrected in 1992 as an independent, non-network production of All American Television, the series then became in world wide syndication, the most popular show in the history of the medium, currently attracting approximately 1 billion viewers in hundreds of countries around the globe.



Andrew Anglophone of the University of Northern South Dakota at Hoople has put together a collection of discerning essays for Malibu University Press entitled *Californication and Cultural Imperialism: Baywatch and the Creation of World Culture*. No doubt some will question the need for a scholarly book on such a series. Indeed, it would be almost tempting to read the essays in Anglophone’s volume—applications of sophisticated and often abstruse au courant methodologies to a very low culture phenomenon—as quasi-parodies of television criticism and cultural studies, which is, for this reviewer at least, not to condemn them or doubt their value.

Anglophone’s own introduction. “America Makes All the Images: *Baywatch* as a Semiotic Export,” takes its title from Wim Wenders’ *Tokyo-Ga*, a documentary tribute to the great Japanese auteur Ozu. During a visit to a television assembly line, the German expatriate filmmaker, having just finished a long sojourn in the United

States, muses on Japan's dominance of the industry. "The Japanese," he observes, "make all the TVs, but the Americans make all the images." With its tremendous international popularity, *Baywatch* has obviously contributed mightily to keeping America in the black in the cultural exchange economy, and it is for this reason, Anglophone argues, that it is worthy of serious consideration. Anglophone would like his book to stand as a contribution to the study of cultural imperialism, the hegemonic colonization under world capitalism of other cultures by dominant cultures like that of the United States. (It is to this coercive signifying supremacy that "the Californication" of his title refers.) To some extent he succeeds.

The title of the book, which suggests a strongly neo-Marxist approach, a cultural studies consideration of *Baywatch* as a prime case of Jameson's "late capitalism" at work, is in a sense misleading. Although it does indeed consider the series in an international context, it does much more as well, offering a variety of approaches to *Baywatch* both as text and cultural/economic phenomenon. Allow me to offer a brief guided tour, surfing over the book's deep waters and navigating carefully its shallows.

The author of an earlier book on *The Case of California*, a collection of psychoanalytic meditations on everything Californian, from fast food to Valley Girls, Lawrence A. Rickels, Professor of German at UC Santa Barbara, uses his essay, "Tan Lines and Identity: A Psychohistorical Reading of *Baywatch*," to examine *Baywatch*'s cultural moment. Just as Erik Erikson wanted to understand, in *Young Man Luther*, why the Reformation happened when it did, what factors in history's developmental psychology produced Martin Luther when and where it did, Rickels seeks to ascertain the why and wherefore of *Baywatch*. Why did the 1990s need this show? To what in our unconscious does it speak?

In "Surf and Simulation: Baudrillard and *Baywatch*," Marc Kipness adopts some of the ideas of the French philosopher of communication, especially those expressed in Baudrillard's two travel books about the United States, *America* and *Cool Memories*, in order to assess the cultural significance of *Baywatch*. California, writes Baudrillard, a PoMo de Tocqueville, is "the world center of the inauthentic." Kipness' intent is to trace the dissemination of this inauthenticity—to show how and why *Baywatch* has captured the world's imagination. *Baywatch*'s historical moment, Kipness argues, arrived at a time of cultural AIDS, to use Baudrillard's frightening metaphor:



We don't have anything to oppose to [American] cultural contamination. Culturally and philosophically exhausted, we remain unable to transform our past into living values for the present. Our cultural antibodies have acquired an immune deficiency and can't resist the virus.

Baudrillard's "we" refers, of course, to Europe and Europeans generally; but Kipness universalizes the insight: *Baywatch's* "hardbodies," his essay demonstrates, triumph with ease over the defenseless antibodies of other cultures, from east to west.

Drawing on the still-suggestive insights of Laura Mulvey, Linda Brigance takes a close look at *Baywatch's* televisual style. Focusing on its opening credit sequence and then on the series' first episode, the classic "Panic at Malibu Pier," Brigance's "T and A: Gazing *Baywatch*" provides not only a discerning analysis of the show's gender address but a suggestive thesis on the place of anatomy in the postmodern imagination. Especially illuminating is her brief history of TV T & A, from *Charlie's Angels* to *Baywatch*.

Brigance's essay foregrounds Pamela Anderson, the plasticized bimbo who has turned on a large percentage of *Baywatch's* avid world-wide following. In her piece on "David Hasselhoff: A Semiotic Approach to One of the World's Most Recognized Images," Diane Stevenson investigates the appeal of the series' real star. One of the best known individuals on the face of the earth (Stevenson ranks him right up there with Michael Jackson, Schwarzenegger, Bill Clinton), Hasselhoff has parleyed minor success in the soap opera *Young and the Restless* and modest US ratings for his series *Knightrider*, in which he played second banana to a talking car, into the tremendous world-wide international popularity of *Knightrider* and then into the megahit of *Baywatch*. Hasselhoff's popularity does not stop there, of course: overseas, especially in Europe, he is a music superstar as well, a second Elvis, a performer whose recordings all go megaplatinum and who was, for example, a featured performer at the concert that marked the dismantling of the Berlin Wall. A careful look at Hasselhoff's physical signifiers—height, age, tight buns, wavy hair, chest hair, voice—and at his character, Mitch Buchanon, on *Baywatch* (Mitch's status as a single father in the '90s attracts special attention from Stevenson) leads to a surprising thesis concerning Hasselhoff's signifieds.

Brandon Tartikoff tells the story of NBC's at first futile attempts to sell *Laverne and Shirley* into European syndication. After several failed attempts to

interest EC networks in the show, NBC remarketed the series with a frame tale added. Laverne and Shirley were reconceptualized as runaways from a mental hospital, an escape depicted in a newly added opening sequence, and the show caught on. *Baywatch* needed no such repackaging. But the history of its marketing—through ads, cds, commodity intertexts, music, World Wide Web sites—is not without interest. In “*Baywatch* as Commodity: Marketing the World’s Most Popular Show,” Dick Campbell, author of an excellent book on *60 Minutes*, catalogues more than we would ever want to know about the packaging of *Baywatch* and, in the process, has more than a little to say about how America’s entertainment taste has become the world’s taste.

Like Kipness, K. Kalinak draws on Baudrillard’s *America* for her key insight in an essay on *Baywatch*’s music. It is an obscure comment on television laugh tracks which catches her attention:

Laughter on American television has taken the place of the chorus in Greek tragedy. It is unrelenting; the news, the stock exchange reports, and the weather forecast are about the only things spared. But so obsessive is it that you go on hearing it behind the voice of Reagan or the Marines disaster in Beirut. Even behind the adverts. It is the monster from *Alien* prowling around in all the corridors of the spaceship. It is the sarcastic exhilaration of a puritan culture. In other countries the business of laughing is left to the viewers. here, their laughter is put on the screen, integrated into the show. It is the screen that is laughing and having a good time. You are simply left alone with your consternation.

Kalinak’s “Surf and Sufeit: The Role of Music in *Baywatch*” treats the series’ pounding, overbearing, annoying, awful music as equally manipulative and “alien.”

The author of a seminal earlier study on the cross-cultural impact of *Dallas*, Tamar Liebes of Hebrew University in Jerusalem sets out here to apply a similar methodology to *Baywatch*. “Decoding *Baywatch*: A Cross-Cultural, Ethnographic Study” uses interviews with fifty informants in ten countries (including Saudi Arabia, Israel, India, and Japan) in order to ascertain the various ways in which the series is actually used in different cultural contexts. The result is somewhat surprising and at least partially mitigates the argument that a series like *Baywatch* necessarily feeds the tendency toward monoculture.

Michael Dunne's "Bakhtin Goes to the Beach: Dialogism and *Baywatch*" is likewise less harsh in its criticism of the series. Drawing on Horace Newcomb's adoption of Bakhtinian notions in his depiction of the dialogic "cultural forum" offered by television, Dunne suggests that *Baywatch* is not as monological as it might appear, that indeed it speaks with many voices representing many constituencies and seeks to be, in its own stupid way, as politically correct as possible for a T and A show.

Elizabeth Kubek's deep but illuminating "Mirrors of Sand: *Baywatch* from a Lacanian Perspective" is perhaps the toughest essay in Anglophone's book, using as it does the French Freud's difficult psychoanalytic approach to study what she calls "the problematics of patriarchy" as explored in *Baywatch*. Taking as her subject "the relation of paternal or quasi-paternal authority to 'truth,'" a theme explored in the desire for belief, knowledge, and validation of its central characters, Kubek zeros in on the uncertain relationship of single father Mitch and his teenage son Hobie, a young man named after a surf board.

With an initial focus on a single *Baywatch* episode ("Now Sit Right Back" in the second season) in which the lifeguards save (in a dream sequence, of course) the stranded crew of *Gilligan's Island*, Michael Carroll details—in "Saving Gilligan: Meta- and Inter-Textuality in *Baywatch*"—the series' prominent references not only to other shows but to itself. As Carroll demonstrates, *Baywatch* not only incorporates "real" people into its plots (World Wrestling Federation superstar Hulk Hogan plays himself in one episode, the Beach Boys and gymnast Mary Lou Retton appear in others), it also incorporates the diegesis of other series. In addition to the episode cannibalizing *Gilligan's Island*, there are others in which television itself becomes the subject—the one, for example, in which *Baywatch's* women find themselves in a fantasy recreation of *Charlie's Angels*.

Other examples of inter- and metatextuality abound, as Carroll shows. In "Game of Chance" the *Baywatch* crew captures a specially designed recreational vehicle which has been used in a series of robberies—a car capable of instant conversion into a boat. At the show's end, as Mitch inspects the vehicle and its capabilities (four wheel drive, a great stereo system) are listed, he asks, apropos of nothing at all, "Does it talk?" When told that it does not, he insists, with a wink at the camera, that he is not interested in it. The wink, Carroll notes, is intertextual: a reference to David Hasselhoff's talking car in his former series, *Knightrider*. In other highly metatextual episodes, *Baywatch* seems to have become as self-conscious as

any another work of high postmodernism. In "Beauty and the Beast," for example, the series plays off of its own reputation as a showcase for the physical attributes of Pamela Anderson and others as *Inside Sports* magazine comes to Baywatch in search of a lifeguard model for its swimsuit issue. And in "Rescue Bay," for example, a sleazy television producer decides to create a new series based on the adventures of a group of California lifeguards and casts several Baywatch members in the show. (He finally decides not to do the series because no one could possibly be interested in a show about lifeguards.) *Baywatch's* allusionary nature, Kipness argues, its hyper-awareness of what Eco has deemed "the already said," thus make it essentially a postmodern text, though admittedly an unlikely one.

That television is a "producers medium" is a truism of television studies. Very little attention has been paid to either the directors or the writers of TV, who remain almost completely invisible and unacknowledged. Carol Marton's "Deborah Schwartz: A *Baywatch* Auteur" makes an effort to fill this void by examining the eighteen episodes of the series written by Deborah Schwartz. Scrutinizing the key themes, plots, characters, and images of Schwartz's teleplays, Marton wrestles with the large question of how an individual voice and vision find the means of self expression within the flow of an ongoing, highly formulaic series.

In "Bash at the Beach," from *Baywatch's* 4th Season. C.J. saves the life of wrestler Hulk Hogan. In her debt, he agrees to wrestle his nemesis Rick Flair for the Heavyweight Championship as a fund-raiser to save the Venice Beach Boys' Club. Needless to say, this episode attracts the attention of James Baker of Texas A & M University in "*Baywatch* and Television Wrestling: A Narratological Comparison." But Baker is interested in much more than this overt inclusion of professional wrestling into the text of *Baywatch*. Baker's ingenious essay offers a surprising comparison and contrast of *Baywatch's* multiple-episode, ongoing plots with the yearly metaplot of a professional wrestling season. Baker find in both the same kind of good guys and bad guys, the same plots, the same human interests, the same conflicts, the same clichés.

Baker finds correspondences between *Baywatch* and the "genre" of Professional Wrestling; Karen Basore traces all sorts of other genre signatures in her essay "All Things to All People: The Question of *Baywatch's* Genre." As Basore shows, *Baywatch* is in one sense only a "recombinant" (the term is Todd Gitlin's) warmed-over, hybridization of *Sea Hunt* and *C.H.I.P.S.*, its chief Bloomian ancestor texts. (Basore begins her essay with an hilarious reconstruction of the quintessential "all things to all people" *C.H.I.P.S.* episode, in which Jon Baker and Ponch Poncherello

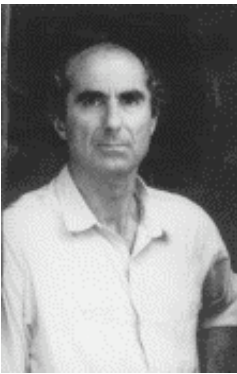
not only get their man in an exciting, ridiculously overscored motorcycle chase scene but win a disco contest during which they also manage to deliver a baby!) *Baywatch*, Basore shows, owes much as well to other television forms: to the soap opera (for its multiple story lines), to sitcoms (for its attempted humor), to disease-of-the-week movies (for its frequent tackling of topical subjects), to MTV videos (for its music montages), to cop shows (for its increasing interest in crime solving—a plot element which led eventually to *Baywatch Nights*, a spin-off show in which Mitch Buchanan moonlights as a private detective), to sun screen commercials and other advertisements (for its overall visual style).

Janice Rushing and Tom Frentz of the University of Arkansas, author of discerning analyses of “public discourse” in cultural phenomenon from Reagan’s “Star Wars” address to *E. T.*, turns her skills as an analyst of mediated rhetoric to *Baywatch* in “Amoral Moralism: *Baywatch*, Public Discourse, and the Didactic Text.” What interests Rushing and Frentz most is the series’ almost sermonish nature. *Baywatch*, she shows, is not all T and A, sand and surf, ski-doo and jet skiis: episode after episode deals with subjects of a topical, indeed public service nature: AIDS, attention-deficit disorder, oil spills, injured animals, gangs, Native American rights, the special olympics, retinitis pigmentosa, funding for youth centers, teen alcoholism, Alzheimer’s disease, obesity, designer drugs, homelessness, sexual harassment, adoption, single fathering, custody battles—all make their appearance on *Baywatch*. Rushing and Frentz find especially interesting an episode called “Desperate Encounter,” described on *Baywatch*’s own World Wide Web site as “a ground-breaking episode on the gruesome fate of unwanted horses in America.”

In “The Postmodern Inane: *Baywatch* and the Insipid,” J. P. Telotte of the Georgia Institute of Technology, wrestles with the profound question of the series’ essential vacuity. How could such a derivative, formulaic, unimaginative series become such a world-wide phenomenon? *Baywatch*’s inanity, Telotte suggests, is not a critic’s discovery; the series itself knows, as its meta- and intertextuality reveal, that it is stupid, and this self-awareness should be understood, according to Telotte, as yet another sign of what Mark Crispin Miller has called contemporary television’s “deride and conquer” strategy, its tendency to make fun of itself before its audience has the chance to, to acknowledge that its own badness is no excuse for hitting the remote button.

In several recent venues, Miller, himself the author of the book’s final essay, has commented on the ironic history of the early movie era dream that the advent of

film might lead to a common, indeed a universal, language. This dream, which, as Miller shows, was rife among the medium's founding fathers, has now been realized. The whole world is now hooked on the Hollywood text; from Kuala Lumpur to Buenos Aires, world citizens speak fluent Schwarzenegger; they are conversant in American genres, American action-adventure / dolbyized / MTV edited cinematics; their fluency, in fact, has made them largely uninterested in learning any other language. The Esperanto of the American movie export has carried the day. Such is Miller's thesis. In his essay in Anglophone's volume, "The Los Angelization of Planet Earth: *Baywatch* and the Dream of a Common Language," Miller examines *Baywatch*'s influential role in this linguistic dispersal. What exactly will it mean for the future of consciousness, Miller wants to know, that 1 billion people worldwide internalize *Baywatch*'s *weltanschauung*? on a weekly basis. "We live in the age of the Los Angelization of Planet Earth," cultural historian William Irwin Thompson has argued—a line that inspired Miller's title. *Baywatch* Los Angelizes with a vengeance.



**Did not the novelist Philip Roth predict back in the 1960s** that by century's end the front page of the *New York Times* would be indistinguishable from satire? It should not surprise us that in the age of the death of irony the real thing and the parody of it have merged. Andrew Anglophone's book on *Baywatch* epitomizes this merger, an amalgamation as natural as ABC and Disney.

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