

What's in a Mainstream?: Critical Possibilities

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Talking about a 'mainstream' is instantly contentious. Over the years of my PhD research into its current status and its potential critical utility, mention of the term sparked many conversations with strangers. It seemed like my thesis touched on one of 'those' topics about which almost everyone seems to have an opinion. That 'mainstream' has a status that appears as apparently 'commonsensical', with a meaning so obvious that it didn't require discussion. This always appeared to assist the flow of discussion and the exhibition of opinions about the term that ranged from revulsion to apathy. But it was this seeming 'commonsensical', 'natural' status of the term that, in the first place, had piqued my own interest in the word itself and the things it was used to represent or describe. Common sense implies a consensus of meaning about the term, however I am not convinced that what is implied in its use has ever been agreed upon, in spite of its continued use in both popular and academic discourse. At the very least, mainstream seems to bring with it unresolved notions of cultural value that still need careful consideration.

In a sense, then, this article represents some of the discussions that circulate about the term. It investigates some of the contention that surrounds 'mainstream', and considers a variety of its registers of use, while also acknowledging some of the conceptual 'baggage' that the term carries with it. Beyond this discussion, however, is a desire to locate a critical utility for the term, not least because of what I see to be a lack of adequate vocabulary in cultural studies to describe and engage critically with 'dominant' forms of culture. 'Mainstream' is often used in such contexts, but to what it actually refers demands more extrapolation. In spite of what might appear to be its immediate shortcomings, I want to suggest that the term holds considerable possibilities for new ways of thinking about mass, popular and massively popular cultural forms. I begin, however, with a discussion of what might be termed a 'mainstream moment', which serves as a point of orientation for the ways in which I want to think about the utility of 'mainstream' as a critical concept.

The two Casey Donovans

On the morning of Monday 22 November 2004, many devoted fans of Casey Donovan, winner of the *Australian Idol* final held on the evening before, visited www.caseydonovan.com, as instructed by numerous advertisements in the morning newspapers celebrating her win. The ads were part of communications company Telstra's campaign to promote its new online digital service, BigPond Music. By striking an 'exclusive' deal with *Idol*, BigPond Music had Casey's winning version of the single, 'Listen With Your Heart', available for download almost immediately following the announcement of the result. Large-font text extolled Casey's win as a 'Big Touchdown!'; a phrase that *Australian Idol* judge, Mark Holden, had made his catchcry celebratory reaction to premium performances. Referring with such ease to the *Idol* vernacular served the purpose of allying BigPond Music with the logic of the

show, in an attempt to equate BigPond with this version of cultural dominance. In other words, by paying homage to the most powerful signifier of mainstream music and success of the moment, BigPond Music hoped to make its own splash in the mainstream.

In an interesting twist, those who visited www.caseydonovan.com didn't find information about Casey Donovan, the female contestant who had won *Australian Idol*, but were instead confronted by images of the 1980s gay male porn star, Casey Donovan, in all his naked glory. The simple omission of the '.au' from the end of the URL printed above Casey's picture was the oversight that led many of her fans, hungry for more information about their newly crowned idol, to discover the 'other' Casey Donovan. Quite unexpectedly, by fortune of human error, Casey Donovan, porn star, occupied the space of the mainstream alongside Casey Donovan, pop star. It was, as many mainstream moments are, fleeting, as media reports were rushed out to alert the public to Telstra's error, though in their very warnings to parents and children issued to compensate for the oversight, Casey Donovan, porn star, still shone brightly in the mainstream imagination. A couple of years on, his mainstream notoriety has now faded, perhaps leaving only a few traces in memory, as the (now flagging) career of Casey Donovan, pop star, replaces any memory of this strange event.

However, there was something special about Casey Donovan's victory in *Australian Idol*. Despite the participation of a variety of well-groomed, well-spoken, clean-living, conventionally attractive contestants who looked (as well as sounded) like plausible pop stars, the winner was a dreadlocked, mumbling, plump goth from Sydney's western suburbs with a pack-a-day smoking habit. She was also a 16 year-old Aboriginal woman. It was, indeed, unusual for this person to find her way into people's lounge rooms via TV, to make them listen and pay attention to her, and then for the majority of those watching her to be on her side. In some ways, the appearance of Casey Donovan, pop star, in the mainstream was as unlikely as that of Casey Donovan, porn star. It was for this viewer a particularly interesting mainstream moment that articulated the possibilities for and the historical particularities of cultural dominance.

For entirely different reasons, it was also of interest to the conservative columnist with Melbourne's *Herald Sun* tabloid newspaper, Andrew Bolt, who hailed Donovan's win as evidence that Australia was 'colour-blind', not 'racist' as he says so many left-wing academics, journalists and other public figures want us to believe. Like Pauline Hanson¹, Bolt has argued for many years against what he calls Australia's divisive 'New Racism' which, by its acknowledgement of cultural difference, seeks to separate what should be the homogeneous identity, 'Australian', into ethnic and racial groups. He reminds his readers frequently of the fact that this politics is effectively dividing Australia into an 'us' and 'them', where various 'special interest groups' will undermine the silent majority's rights. In a typical statement inspired by this ideology, he commented in his article on Donovan's victory, 'we are to be split into tribes again, with Victoria's Constitution even rewritten last month to enthrone Aborigines as the "first people" with a "unique status"'.² Donovan's

win, he claimed, is emblematic of the ways in which Australia is a tolerant society, ready to give credit where credit is due, and vote for the most appropriate candidate, regardless of their race or ethnicity, and shows without doubt that Australia is not the racist country its critics claim it to be. He wrote,

... Reality TV shines its bright light into our gloom-menaced homes and shows us that young Australia, at least, has worked out what an old fraud this racism industry is. Thank God we see a generation that is blind to colour and impatient with the old, divisive politics of race. Last year, for instance, hundreds of thousands of people voted by phone or internet to make a Malaysian-born man, Guy Sebastian, the winner of Channel 10's *Australian Idol* talent show. In July, they voted dark-skinned Trevor Butler, from a Fijian family, the \$1 million winner of *Big Brother*. And on Sunday they chose as winner of this year's *Australian Idol* Casey Donovan, a 16-year-old Sydney girl whose biological father is Aboriginal. Her success made one of the show's judges, Marcia Hines, tear up, and why not? Hines knows well the warmth of Australia's embrace, being a Jamaican-born immigrant who was voted three times our own much-loved Queen of Pop.³

Of course, this attitude is one that has sustained racist points of view since time immemorial, but what is interesting to me here is how Bolt (ironically, ever the staunch critic of all things cultural studies) has tried to 'read' the workings of this popular cultural text in order to locate the 'signs' that prove this political point. Bolt's argument does work according to its own logic, and perhaps some of his readers felt warmed by his praise of their 'colour-blindness' that had brought about the 'unusual' result of black dominance in white cultural spaces. But, go looking for instances of 'racial tolerance' in mainstream popular culture, and you will find it, alongside all those instances of subversion, resistance and agency. Bolt's general assertion that Australia is not racist is drawn from these specific mainstream moments, producing a particularly objectionable political argument.

Politics aside, however, Bolt's approach is not one entirely dissimilar to the 'banal' cultural studies whose methodology produces the banal analyses that Meaghan Morris has so famously criticised.⁴ Such an approach to Donovan's win might be equally successful if its intention was to analyse Donovan as a text that signifies alterity to notions of dominant or normative identity. This kind of analysis might be able to 'prove' her presence in this forum as a form of 'resistance' and 'subversion', conclusions that have in some ways become standard narratives in popular cultural studies' history and practice. To be sure, such a set of conclusions would make sense using these familiar rhetorical strategies, but only by 'removing' her from the mainstream space in which she appears.

Idol landed on Australia's shores in 2003. It is one of a growing number of 'reality television' programmes to lay bare the production of pop stars, and chart the transformation of ordinary nobody into extraordinary somebody, arguably with the result of making that very extraordinariness seem rather ordinary. As Graeme Turner notes, the broad 'reality' genre's main business

has become the production of the 'ordinary celebrity'.⁵ Celebrity is 'no longer a magical condition', argues Turner, but has become so prosaic that it is something that might be 'an almost reasonable expectation for us to have of our everyday lives' (156). Though this might suggest a anti-elitist turn toward the 'democratisation' of celebrity, Turner makes clear that this new version of celebrity continues to be deeply embedded in the industrial logics of TV, where 'media industries still remain in control of the symbolic economy [and they] still operate this economy in the service of their own interests' (157). In other words, the 'ordinary celebrity' does not – and cannot – function independently of his or her own industrialisation. Neither, it could be said, does the consumer. *Idol* asks its audience to vote for their preferred pop star based on the contestants' weekly singing performances via a tolled phone line. The prize for the popularly-voted winner is a recording contract and an almost guaranteed Number 1 single and album. During each season, the programme tracks the fortunes of a 'final twelve' from their early auditions with tens of thousands of others, to workshops with a pool of 118 finalists, to their emergence as the popularly chosen dozen from a 'Top 30'. Indeed, it exhibits all the traits of a Top 40-style 'countdown' to the Number 1 in the popular hierarchy. The concept was developed by 19TV (a company owned by Simon Fuller, ex-manager of the Spice Girls) and FremantleMedia, and the format has become hugely successful in countries around the world.⁶ *Australian Idol* is, in many ways, reflective of broader issues in the contemporary music industry: by mobilising multiple media resources in strategic cross-promotions between television, record company SonyBMG, internet, radio, magazines, newspapers and telecommunications (both mobile and landline networks), as well as large numbers of advertising sponsors, the focus for the programme's profits is less on the music itself and more on the other forms of mediation which accompany it. In this sense, then, it represents the diversifying profit-seeking interests of the contemporary music industry aiming to harness changes in technology and attendant habits in consumption. Using this multi-platform approach, the programme aims to achieve saturation publicity and the ongoing attention of its audience, an aim met in the 2004 season of *Australian Idol*, when viewers numbering an enormous 3.35 million tuned in across Australia for its final episode.⁷

Australian Idol's significant presence in a wide variety of media means that it is difficult to avoid in everyday life, and is part of the everyday presence of Top 40 culture. Like many shows in the broad format of reality television, the programme has a strong story it tells about itself through these media channels. *Idol* uses the metaphor of 'the journey' to describe the narrative progression of the show. Through repetition – recapping past moments, referring to its points of origin and plotting the subsequent path to the programme's destination – *Idol* becomes a programme about becoming *Idol*. A clear example of this practice appears in the Sunday night programme, in which each contestant performs a song that fits the week's theme. As soon as all the contestants have performed, the 'most memorable' parts of their performances are chosen by the show's producers, edited together, and replayed to remind the audience of what happened only minutes before, producing a strong sense of 'where we've been' in order to get to 'where we are'. Viewers then vote (via either telephone call or SMS) based on this re-

presentation of the contestants' performances. The votes are tallied overnight, and the programme televised on the following evening reveals these results, but only after considerable revisitation and replaying of content from the previous night's show. The programme's online presence also provides a page of 'recaps' for each of the shows in the series, with quotes and description written to relay these highlights.⁸ The narrative of the *Idol* 'journey', then, is one that revolves around 'key moments' that are played, replayed and edited together in order to construct the programme's narrative and the stories of its contestants. *Australian Idol* is always caught between its past and its present, between contemporaneity and nostalgia. Its mode of remembering, however, is as selective as Top 40 history, because the 'moments' memorialised in this editorial process are ones that are chosen to shock, delight, entertain, and are not the plethora of moments that represent none of these things. Therefore, the many banal moments of the 'journey' are forgotten by the *Idol* narrative in favour of its 'highlights'.

The reason for this brief description of the programme is, in some senses, rather obvious: I want to draw attention to the particularity of *Australian Idol*. Beyond being simply an example of 'mainstream culture', I want to point out that *Idol* represents specific kinds of cultural practices and processes – practices and processes which in turn point to the particularity of 'mainstreamness' itself. This is a broad way of thinking about the contents of the mainstream which operates beyond the languages of 'resistance' and 'subversion', two terms of analysis that might seem, in their own way, 'commonsense' rhetorical manoeuvres to employ in an cultural studies critique of Casey Donovan's victory. Recalling Graeme Turner's observations, this is a victory that still operates within the control of the media industries, in spite of what might seem like its 'subversion' of or 'resistance' to normative versions of televisual identity. I want to emphasise here instead that *Idol* itself is a site of specificity; this 'mainstream' cultural product has an internal logic that must be considered in itself as part of the production of this cultural moment. What seems important is to think about dominant, massified cultural forms in their own terms; to think constitutively about the practices and processes which produce things that appear to us as 'mainstream culture', regardless of what its 'content' is, or appears to be.

In this sense, then, I want to suggest that *Idol*'s moments, which are of course short-lived and easily forgotten, offer themselves as points of entry into thinking about the workings of this 'mainstream', enabling exposure of the practices that constitute them, and the processes that work together to construct its limits. I want to suggest at this point, then, that a programme like *Australian Idol* is a reminder of the distinctiveness of mainstream popular cultural formations. More than this, I want to suggest that 'mainstream', as a critical term, might yet describe something unique.

But what is this mainstream?

One problem with arguing for the critical utility of the term, mainstream, is its uncertain definition and multipurpose use. I first became interested in the idea of the mainstream as an undergraduate in the early 1990s when I began to

notice the almost incessant negativity that seemed to accompany its use in the context of some music scenes, particularly in the form of conversations and writing about music that I liked. Almost everyone I encountered seemed to complain about 'mainstream music', to dislike it with vigour, and to fear the possibility of actually 'becoming mainstream' if the music you liked happened to 'cross over' into this realm. 'Mainstream music' was, quite simply, the sort of music that 'most people' enjoyed, and was accompanied by familiar connotations of conservatism, 'sold-out' conformity, and inferior cultural value. The term was always used in generality, but while it had no specificity, 'we' all knew what was being discussed. This version of the mainstream, and its association with cultures of popular music, is one with an enduring presence in fan, journalistic and academic discourse alike.

Interestingly, during the mid to late 1990s and into the new millennium, mainstream began to take on a political dimension in my Australian encounters with it, as its use in political and public discourse became commonplace (or perhaps it was that my newly attuned ears began to hear it more often). From Pauline Hanson's artless maiden speech to the federal House of Representatives, espousing startling attitudes towards race and ethnicity on behalf her electorate, which, she claimed, 'is typical of mainstream Australia',⁹ to Prime Minister John Howard's reincarnation as 'Mainstream Man' laying claim to a particular kind of ordinariness,¹⁰ to the almost ubiquitous rallying call to 'mainstream Australia' from all points on the political spectrum, the term was undoubtedly, well... mainstream. This 'new' mainstream possessed some of the traits that the musical mainstream was accused of having, too, though in these contexts, these points of homogeneity and ordinariness were portrayed as positive. People were being encouraged to think like part of the mainstream, to avoid alliances with 'special interest groups', and to dive in and become part of what Howard referred to as the 'great Australian mainstream'. Mainstream in this discourse therefore became one of a whole range of terms that could stand in for the idea of nation.¹¹ Being included in this mainstream, though, had certain conditions. As Carol Johnson has argued,

the Australians who could feel most confident that they were part of Howard's 'mainstream' were white, anglo-celtic, heterosexual men and women in more traditional family/gender relationships. They were also Australians who didn't identify strongly as trade unionists, or as activists on social issues, or who suspected that their social attitudes consigned them to being categorised as members of a 'politically correct' intellectual 'elite'.¹²

This mainstream contained people whose identities made them socially dominant in a variety of ways (in particular because of their race, ethnicity, sexuality), but who, according to the Howard/Hanson rhetoric, had been left out of political decision-making processes for so long they had been denied the rights of dominance. This rhetoric became an extremely powerful way of grouping the national electorate into an 'us' and a 'them': a mainstream of ordinary Australians with ordinary concerns and values was presented in clear contrast to elites, the intelligentsia, Aborigines and other 'special interest

groups' whose concerns and values could never be consistent with those of the mainstream. This deployment of mainstream was, in other words, a call to populist arms for the mythic 'silent majority'. This was mainstream identity marshalled for particular political gain, as a part of a broadening, conservative political agenda. Mainstream here was an imagined social category presented as normative identity, and was the brand of normativity desired and spoken to by this rhetoric. Crucially, though, political, social and cultural dominance is not prescribed to exhibit or signify the kinds of homogeneous whiteness and heterosexist anti-intellectualism naturalised in this mainstream. But this was the way that dominance was imagined and then mobilised – with great effectiveness – by these conservative politicians. Therefore, it was not the word, 'mainstream', itself that provided the conservative discursive effect in this political context, but rather the way in which cultural dominance was envisaged during this historical moment that made 'mainstream' seem like a conservative rhetorical device.

Most interesting to me are the discrepancies between the two uses of mainstream that I have so far described that, I think, provide the key to the potential utility of mainstream in cultural critique – on the one hand, my acquaintances had constructed the idea of a musical mainstream that was homogeneous and represented mass consumption and so therefore was necessarily undesirable, while on the other hand, these politicians had constructed the idea of a political and social mainstream that was homogeneous and represented mass society and so therefore was necessarily desirable. The first is a 'cultural mainstream', the second a 'socio-political mainstream'. While these might first appear to be different kinds of mainstreams, it seems to me that they operate in similar ways. In both instances, regardless of the value ascribed to the idea, mainstream refers to dominance – be it cultural, social, political. In both instances, it seems to me obvious that somehow we need a way of imagining, describing and ascribing the notion of dominance. In both instances, mainstream seems to be used and relied upon by very different kinds of people as a way of starting to articulate the idea of dominance. Perhaps the political and the cultural mainstreams are not so different after all; indeed, this comparison seems to suggest that 'mainstream' could enable ways of thinking about the political and the cultural together, exposing the culture of politics and the politics of culture.

Mainstream: ideology, history, discourse?

Nevertheless, mainstream represents a number of familiar contradictions: it is at once a category that is imagined but real, both contemporary and historical. This fluidity of mainstream's meaning, coupled with its multi-purpose deployment, and its status as an illusory category of both inclusion/exclusion, has led to suggestion that 'mainstream' is a term that might not hold much critical purchase in cultural studies. Indeed, in the mid-1990s, after a long interrogation of the term in her early 1990s study, *Club Cultures*, Sarah Thornton concluded that, 'whatever its exact status, mainstream is an inadequate term for the sociology of culture'.¹³ In her analysis, still one of the only extended considerations of the term, Thornton argues that the term not

only encourages binary thinking, but is also classed and gendered (101-105). For Thornton, mainstream is an ideological term, which is used as a mode of distinction. While it operates with particular efficacy in the club cultures in which she conducted her ethnographic research and found its use rife as an Other to make sense of the UK club scene's notion of 'hipness', it has no place in critical vocabulary because it is ideology.¹⁴

Other commentators from within the music industry also find the term's use ineffective, though on rather different grounds. In a recent interview reflecting upon the release of the 2006 Triple J *Hottest 100* listener-voted poll, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) national 'youth' broadcaster's Richard Kingsmill commented, 'As music director, I'm not into the too-cool-for-school attitude. A good record is a good record and at Triple J, we play it and f--- the image... In the 1990s there was that alternative-versus-mainstream type argument... These days it's a bit more confused, and good records cross over...'.¹⁵ At its heart, Kingsmill's comment suggests that the mainstream-alternative divide no longer has the potency it once did. For Kingsmill, the 'alternative-versus-mainstream type argument' has been relegated to an anomaly of the past, in favour of less clear-cut categorical divisions between popular music's cultural products. The difference in the new millennium, according to Kingsmill, lies in the fact that 'good' music now 'crosses over' into the mainstream, which, by implication, was previously the sole domain of 'bad' music. So this comment also betrays what remains a continuing conflation of 'alternative' music with cultural value, that is superior to music from the 'mainstream', while simultaneously reasserting the potency of the mainstream-alternative paradigm as a way of making sense of contemporary cultural forms.

I'm interested in Kingsmill's comment for a number of reasons, not least because it represents an industry-based recognition of the existence of the imagined divide between 'alternative' and 'mainstream' culture. However, I'm also interested in the way that it seems to echo observations made by Lawrence Grossberg in the late 1990s about the contemporary status of the notion 'mainstream'. Back then, during what Kingsmill might regard to be the zenith of 'alternative-versus-mainstream' moment, Grossberg suggested that academic research in cultural studies itself needed to stretch beyond its rehearsal of the familiar binary oppositions that frequently organise its analysis in favour of a 'more dynamic model of the circulation of popular practices'.¹⁶ For Grossberg, binary thinking disables and undermines thinking productively and differently about popular culture, suggesting that,

... too much of cultural studies has continued to locate popular culture within two binary normative economies: on the one hand, the popular (as poaching, fragmented, contradictory, bodily, carnivalesque, pleasurable) versus the legitimate (as reified, hierarchical, intellectual, etc.), and, on the other hand, the popular (as stylized, artificial disruptive, marginal, resisting) versus the mainstream (as naturalized, commonsensical, incorporated, etc.)... Critics divide up popular culture, identifying specific forms of resistance, and relegating all others to a

cultural mainstream in which they are 'contained' by the existing structures of power (219).

Grossberg finds cultural criticism stalling at these binary categories, carving up the contemporary cultural landscape with an either/or, and directing analysis along category lines. Moreover, Grossberg contends that comparisons between mainstream and margins, which he claims inevitably seem to advocate resistance for its own sake, are based on misguided desires to segregate culture into 'politically resonant categories' (220). This characterisation points to the misdirected assumption that marginality and resistance are *always* politically progressive, and thus favourable, while the mainstream of culture is *always* politically conservative, regressive, or at best a-political, and thus unfavourable. In particular, this commentary Grossberg offers makes a compelling argument against the enforcement of binary oppositions in cultural criticism. Instead, Grossberg maintains that the connection between the mainstream of culture and its alternatives is better described as relational rather than oppositional, if these categories are to be relied upon at all:

I do not see popular culture in opposition to legitimate culture... Nor do I see a 'co-opted' mainstream against a resistant margin. Instead, I see a complex range of possibilities for the differentially articulated effects of cultural practices. In other words, being 'in the mainstream' is never defined in purely textual terms, nor is it solely a matter of audiences; rather, it is a description of a relationship between cultural practices and their contexts (220-221).

Grossberg's argument here has certain seductive qualities. In many ways, this approach is designed to dissolve the hierarchy by which cultural products and consumers are often judged in academic and other kinds of critical discourse. Of course, one of the main bothers of binary oppositions is that they privilege one of the pair. In the mainstream/alternative divide, it would be difficult to argue successfully that it is the mainstream that comes out 'on top'. But in the way that Grossberg theorises the relationship between mainstream and margins, it becomes pretty much impossible to compare and contrast the mainstream with margins (and as a result denigrate the mass or the most popular of popular cultures as 'co-opted' or 'inauthentic') because all cultural products and their consumption and, consequently, their cultural meanings exist in the same cultural space.

These of course are ideas that have developed from Grossberg's well-known assertions in *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* about the breakdown, if not impossibility, of 'authenticity' in contemporary culture, the absence of which traditionally connotes the conservative derivativeness of a sold-out mainstream.¹⁷ Grossberg argues that dichotomies like, 'inauthentic vs. authentic; centre vs. margin; mainstream vs. underground; commercial vs. independent; coopted vs. resistant; pop vs. rock', are now old binaries, which emerged alongside rock culture in the 1960s, and were deployed to display, 'rock's inextricable tie to resistance, refusal, alienation, marginality, etc' (206).

Instead, he argues against the possible existence (imaginary or otherwise) of a substantive 'mainstream' which might be interpreted as discrete from and in opposition to a space of 'privileged marginality' in postmodernity, since by now, 'we are all in the same space, already coopted' (227). While Richard Kingsmill suggests that the mainstream-alternative divide just doesn't seem to matter anymore in 'real world' 2006 because things have become a lot more confusing than they were in the 1990s, Lawrence Grossberg's analysis, written in the 1990s, suggests that it is academic inquiry itself that needs to make this kind of division matter less in the way that contemporary culture is conceptualised.

Lining these commentaries on the mainstream up against each other seems to produce even more confusion about the status of the mainstream, and the possibility of its utility. However, regardless of claims that the alternative-mainstream divide doesn't exist anymore (Kingsmill) or shouldn't be relied upon and (re)produced through academic discourse (Grossberg) or is an ideological mode of distinction (Thornton), 'mainstream' still looms large in the cultural imaginary, even if only in denials of its existence. It remains, I suspect, a key way of articulating the notion of what Raymond Williams might refer to as 'dominant' forms of culture, ideology and practice.¹⁸

Mainstream's utility

However, while I acknowledge the various difficulties with definition and have discussed these problems elsewhere,¹⁹ what I wish to suggest here is that mainstream as a cultural category might operate as an important way of trying to understand dominant modes of mass or popular culture in ways that are not easily explained with any existing critical vocabulary. Many writers, from Stuart Hall²⁰ to John Frow²¹ to Meaghan Morris²², have noted that the terms 'popular' and 'mass' have not always been helpful in directing scholarship towards 'dominant' forms of culture and practice, and their specificities. Rather than operating only as an ill-defined binary opposite to 'alternative' or 'underground' or 'commercial', or as a catch-all phrase to describe a generalised notion of social and cultural hegemony, I want to suggest, instead, that thinking with the mainstream might in fact expose the specificities of products and practices that are culturally dominant. It is, I want to suggest, the very particularities of 'mainstreamness' – in other words, what it means to 'be (in the) mainstream' – that are often erased by the general and negative connotations associated with the term, and explained away under the banner of 'ideology' or 'hegemony'.

As John Frow has observed, popular culture as it is studied in the academy often appears to have a 'unitary' form, not least because of the 'privileging of certain key examples' which have become 'implicitly normative' in the discipline: as an example, Frow points out that the popular cultural artefacts of 'reggae, hip-hop, and scratch video are given a status which is denied to Val Doonican, Kenny Rogers, and family'.²³ Moreover, in some cases, extensive analyses of symbolic examples seem to 'stand in' for more nuanced or expansive engagements with mass popular culture, and so become signifiers that are supposed to represent cultural studies' populist bent. Frequently,

studies about such examples grow teleologically, as scholars retreat to the safety of multiple references, write about things that already have an academic history, and so tread territory that has a normative path of its own: nowhere is this more obvious than in the enormous volume of work about Madonna, whose career in the academy almost matches her musical one. Frow also makes the suggestion that it is the studies of youth subcultures that have become normative in the discipline, with the result of discursively privileging, 'urban, public, and... male cultural forms' (82). He concludes that, 'it may ultimately be important to argue for such normative distinctions, but it is surely crucial in the first instance to recognise the sheer diversity of the field drawn together by the term "popular"' (82) something with which it seems cultural studies is still grappling. Further, as Leon Hunt points out in an incisive postscript to his book on what he calls British 'low' culture, 'if you really wanted to find the populist cutting edge now, you might try writing about *Heartbeat*, Andrew Lloyd Webber or *Wet Wet Wet*'.²⁴ His point is that none of these (now aging) examples has been sanctioned by the academy; there has been no 'critical consensus' reached (160). These examples are popular in culture, yet unpopular in the academy. In other words, they are in the mainstream of culture, but do not feature in the mainstream academy.

For Jason Toynbee, whose 2002 piece about mainstream sits alongside Thornton's and Grossberg's as the most recent part of a small body of academic work about the term, the utility of mainstream lies in its reference to something specific. Rather than being caught in an outdated binary opposition, or being purely ideological, or a category for the performance of distinction, mainstream for Toynbee describes something substantive. It describes a cultural formation. In fact, he offers a discrete definition of the term: 'a mainstream is a formation that brings together large numbers of people from diverse social groups and across large geographical areas in affiliation to a musical style.'²⁵ Mainstream, therefore, is most productively thought of as 'a *process* rather than a category' (150, emphasis mine) That is to say that mainstream might most usefully describe certain kinds of practices, or sets of practices, in relation to the production of cultural products, rather than stand for something that is 'simply' discursive or ideological. Mainstream, in this incarnation, is a substantive cultural formation constructed by practice.

While I cannot do justice to the complexities of Toynbee's argument here²⁶, one key feature of his argument for my purposes is the identification of the specificities of 'mainstream'. For example, he argues that one of them is the 'star' which is an important tool of and for mainstream music because stars 'embody the continuity of the mainstream, its temporal flow' (156). Therefore, stars are signifiers of mainstream-ness and its temporality, and the marketing of stars contributes to the commonality – in other words, the market and cultural dominance – of mainstream music and artists. This *specific* use of star figures seems to counter the characterisation of mainstream as an unuseful 'amorphous' category: they are historical and historicised figures that serve as marketing devices for the mainstream as well as being points of contact for audiences. In other words, mainstream stars are *particular* kinds of stars, and their stardom is specific to, and specifically created by, the cultural practices that are enacted to construct mainstream space. In the case of the

'reality TV' genre, they are the kinds of 'ordinary celebrity' that Graeme Turner describes. Mainstream, therefore, is best thought of as specific and particular, rather than amorphous and nebulous. If mainstream is processural, then it is the particularities of these processes that we need to know more about.

***Australian Idol* as Mainstream**

So in a roundabout way this returns me to the case of the 'two Casey Donovans' and their momentary occupation of the mainstream. The confluence of factors that produced this almost bizarre event (involving a variety of electronic and print media, as well as accompanying new-millennium modes of production, consumption and distribution) exposes some of the specificities of the processes and practices that produce the contemporary 'mainstream'. This is not a mainstream that is necessarily predictable and homogeneous simply because of its 'mainstreamness', or its popularity, or its multi-mediation. Indeed, much more crucially, if the accusations of 'predictability' and 'homogeneity' remain as the starting point for an engagement with mainstream culture, then we are likely to miss identifying its specificities, which themselves might produce results that are unexpected, particularly when they intersect with the rhythms of everyday life. The intersection that occurred at this odd moment – between newspaper advertising, internet and the routines of everyday cultural practice – that produced the collision between these two Caseys, argues for more creative ways of thinking about how these moments exist in the everyday. The process of producing a mainstream seems laid bare. Dominance has a particular kind of shape and presence that can still produce unanticipated results. The logic of this mainstream in this instance actually 'mainstreamed' two cultural subjects, whose cultural presence is usually marginal.

This peculiar moment therefore gestures towards considering more closely the ways in which mainstream culture – cultural dominance – appears alongside and within the flow of everyday life, and about how it is articulated with and through the technologies of the everyday. Inspired by John Frow's commentary, I would hesitate to use the term 'popular' to describe a massified cultural product like *Australian Idol*; rather, I would suggest that acknowledging it as 'mainstream' might enable a more productive engagement with such a form of dominant culture, which need not begin from the premise that it requires redemption because of its populism and massification. Instead, it is the trajectories which are traversed to produce this populism and massification which constitute and shore up this cultural mainstream. Along with Lawrence Grossberg, I would contend that *Idol's* mainstreamness itself does not constitute conservatism from which it must be 'redeemed', nor does it need to be understood as an oppositional category to 'real' or 'authentic' forms of popular culture; instead it is an example of an historicised form of cultural dominance which requires consideration in its own terms. Rather, like Toynebee, I see this as a mainstream whose specificities have been produced.

In this sense, then, the example from 2004's *Australian Idol* also points us towards considering cultural production in new ways. This time the focus

might not be, as it was for the Frankfurt School, on the culture industry producing standardised cultural products for consumers in the thrall of capitalism. These days, the workings of cultural production are not always opaque but are frequently laid bare for consumers – as they are in *Idol* – and their idiosyncrasies are now just another part of contemporary practices of consumption. The logic of cultural dominance now poses some new questions about the politics of production in a differently mediated world.

Disturbed as I may be by Andrew Bolt, I do agree with one implication of his commentary about the programme (though I am confident that he would not articulate it in quite the same way): that an analysis of *Australian Idol* as an example of cultural dominance provides instructive access to the workings of this mainstream. *Idol* does have resonances, both cultural and critical, beyond itself. Thankfully, this is where our similarities end, since, I would argue strongly that looking solely at the content and the 'meanings' of popular cultural texts can distract attention from their production, distribution, consumption and, ultimately, the processes that produce their presence as 'mainstream'. Following the trajectories of these processes and practices provides a key way of thinking differently about mainstream and its possibilities as a critical tool in cultural studies, and at the same time produces an example of how to start to articulate the specificities of cultural dominance. Only via these circuitous routes do we arrive at the 'texts' that inhabit this space. For me, therefore, the presence of the two Casey Donovans in the logic of the mainstream is most interesting because of the ways in which this presence was produced; how it became 'mainstream'.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Chris Healy and Sarah Baker for their assistance with this material. Thanks also to the article's anonymous referees for their fresh eyes.

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¹ Pauline Hanson was the Australian federal parliamentary member for the electorate of Oxley, Queensland, from 1996-1998 and leader of the One Nation Party. She caused considerable controversy with her views on, among other things, immigration and immigrants, Aborigines, and other 'special interest groups', who she claimed were extended social and economic benefits that were denied to 'ordinary Australians'. Her maiden speech to parliament which outlined these views can be downloaded from the House of Representatives Official Hansard, at: <<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/rep/dailys/dr100996.pdf>>

² Bolt, Andrew. 'Colour-blind Idol', *Herald Sun*, 24 November 2004. <http://www.heraldsun.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,5478,11476971%255E25717,00.html>

³ Bolt, 'Colour-blind Idol'.

⁴ Morris, Meaghan. 'Banality in Cultural Studies'. *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Ed Patricia Mellencamp. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990. 14-43.

⁵ Graeme Turner. 'The Mass Production of Celebrity: "Celetoids", Reality TV and the "Demotic Turn"'. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 9.2 (2006): 153-165. 155.

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- ⁶ Holmes, Su. "Reality Goes Pop!": Reality TV, Popular Music, and Narratives of Stardom in *Pop Idol*. *Television & New Media* 5.2 (2004): 147-172. 150.
- ⁷ fremantlemedia.com. 'Australian Idol Final Achieves Record Ratings', 24 November 2004. <<http://www.fremantlemedia.com/page.asp?partid=283>>
- ⁸ See <<http://au.australianidol.yahoo.com/recaps/>>
- ⁹ Hanson, Pauline. 'Maiden Speech to the House of Representatives', *House of Representatives Official Hansard*. 10 September 1996: 3860-3863. 3863. <<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/reps/dailys/dr100996.pdf>>
- ¹⁰ See Morris, Meaghan, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*. Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1998. p. 220.
- ¹¹ See Brett, Judith, *Australian Liberals and the Moral Middle Class: from Alfred Deakin to John Howard*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2003. 187.
- ¹² Johnson, Carol. 'John Howard and the Mainstream'. *Howard's Agenda: the 1998 Australian Election*. Ed. Marian Simms and John Warhurst. University of Queensland Press: St Lucia, 2000. 19.
- ¹³ Thornton, Sarah. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Polity Press: Oxford, 1995. 115.
- ¹⁴ For a longer discussion of Thornton's argument, see Alison Huber, 'Learning to Love the Mainstream: Top 40 Culture in Melbourne'. Unpublished PhD thesis. Department of English with Cultural Studies, University of Melbourne, 2005. 66-72.
- ¹⁵ Quoted in Andrew Murphett, 'One-Hundred Hit Wonder'. *EG supplement, The Age* 3 February 2006, 4.
- ¹⁶ Grossberg, Lawrence. 'Re-placing Popular Culture'. *The Clubcultures Reader: Readings in Popular Cultural Studies*. Ed. Steve Redhead, Derek Wynne and Justin O'Connor. Blackwell Publishers: Oxford, 1997: 217-237. 220.
- ¹⁷ Grossberg, Lawrence. *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*. Routledge: New York & London, 1992.
- ¹⁸ See Williams, Raymond, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory'. *New Left Review* 82 (November-December 1973): 3-16.
- ¹⁹ Huber, 'Learning to Love the Mainstream', see in particular Chapters 1 & 2.
- ²⁰ Hall, Stuart. 'Notes on Deconstructing "the Popular"'. *People's History and Socialist Theory*. Ed. Raphael Samuel. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1981: 227-239.
- ²¹ Frow, John. *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*. Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1995.
- ²² Morris, 'Banality in Cultural Studies'.
- ²³ Frow, *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value*, 82.
- ²⁴ Hunt, Leon. *British Low Culture: From Safari Suits to Sexploitation*. Routledge: London and New York, 1998. 160.
- ²⁵ Toynbee, Jason. 'Mainstreaming, from Hegemonic Centre to Global Networks'. *Popular Music Studies*. Ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus. Arnold: London, 2002. 149-163.
- ²⁶ For further discussion, see Huber, 'Learning to Love the Mainstream', 73-83.