

Barrie McMahon

Combat, Castles and Culture: An Alien's View of Austria

Clap, the magic wagon belched one last puff of smoke through the rusty floor into the cabin, then bounced to a stop. Clap, a beat-up old Volkswagon combie had carried the McMahon family across Europe from Britain, coming to rest in a forest just over the Austrian border. The only distinctive thing about the vehicle was the kangaroo emblem on the front, signifying the occupants' desires to be identified with their homeland rather than their host country for the year of 1973, Britain.

The McMahon family was „doing Europe“, visiting as many countries as possible on their first adventure outside of Australia. This was their first experience of Austria. They knew what to expect, of course, because the media had told them... Mum and dad McMahon had been raised on a diet of war movies. Nazis goose-stepped around doing dastardly things. The two boys, eleven and seven, had the same media images recycled in their favourite television program, Combat. Not

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only had the meanings of Germany and Austria been conflated into one fuzzy smudge, but the ink blot that emerged from the smudge was rooted in the 1940's. The boys did have other, more

pleasant media experiences to draw from. They also had stories about magical castles and mountains with snow (something the family had never actually seen). The castles had lost a little of their appeal after a severe castle overdose on arrival in Britain, but mountains and snow was still a high priority on the Austrian excursion. If the sight of snow was not attainable in mid-July, then an Austrian forest would have to be a substitute. **No doubt, there would be a quaint log cabin with a friendly Austrian clad in one of those short trousers, long socks, pixie costumes to welcome the family on arrival.**

The image was quickly shattered. A vicious German Shepherd dog bark interrupted the



preparations for the McMahon's evening meal in the back of the Combie. In spite of the language difficulties, it became very clear that the family was not welcome in this forest and that the only meal would be the dog's if the family did not disappear quickly. This message was delivered by the dog's guard, devoid of cute pixie outfit but looking a prime candidate for one of the uniforms so familiar to the family through their media experiences. In their first contact with an Austrian soul, the stereotype had been reinforced! The family exited Austria next day. It would make a neat finale to the anecdote to claim that the stereotype sent the family scurrying from Austria. Alas, the truth was far more pedestrian. The state of their vehicle reflected the family fortune. Their pockets did not match the prices in the Austrian shops so they fled to Italy for cheaper food and living.

So what meanings does Austria generate now for that dad of twenty years ago? Of more interest to me, that dad, is trying to trace how I have constructed those meanings. What follows is an attempt to describe this alien's view of both the meanings and the construction at a time when Austria is celebrating its one thousandth birthday. Even that notion, of a country being one thousand years old is a startling thought for this writer, but more of that later.

People create meanings. The media are significant inputs into the process of making meanings but not exclusive sources. One's first hand experiences and established perceptions also interplay in the construction of meaning. In tracing the patterns of meaning construction it is useful to draw upon the tools of audience studies and discourse analysis. **Discourse analysis is analysis of the social process of making and reproducing meanings.** Discourse takes into account the historical context, the institutional and social processes. These discourses encourage the construction of some meanings at the expense of others.

When the McMahon family was journeying into Austria, each member of the family drew from complementary but not identical discourses. It appeared that they all tapped into the discourse of ethnicity. There may have even been an element of xenophobia brought about by their extended absence from their home country.

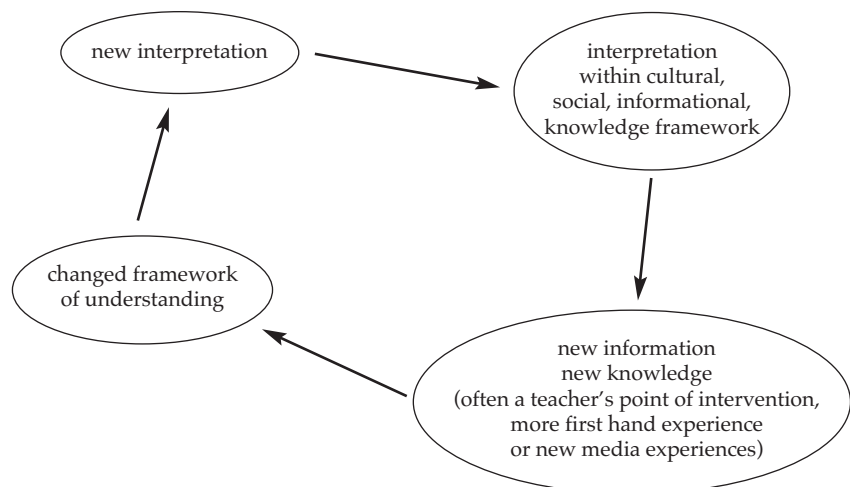
Some of the discourses that are tapped into when meanings are created support each other, some are hostile to each other while some learn to live with each other. The ethnic discourse for the McMahon family was in competition with the discourse of education. All had read and learned something about Austria. This knowledge of Austria's sophisticated cultural history, its economic success and high standard of living competed with the informal education of the media, the content of which was largely of the Germanic stereotype. The competition between the discourses changed the meanings that were created. All in the family were vulnerable to the persuasion of the stereotype but had other frames of reference that enabled them to laugh at the stereotype and themselves for giving it any credence.

Media audiences tap into various discourses. Sometimes they share the same discourse, sometimes there is overlap and sometimes there are differences. The number of meanings that can be

created therefore is not limitless, as the discourses set the parameters. Some discourses, especially media discourses, are more prestigious than others. **Media representations are significant sense makers for us.** They encapsulate quite succinctly the preferred meanings, suggesting to the audiences which discourses are those most appropriate for them to draw from.

Quin and McMahon¹ have attempted to capture this interplay between media text, discourses and eventual meanings by emphasising that meanings are not static. They suggest that meanings are shaped and reshaped by a layering effect. There is a core meaning that is generated by initial direct contact the the subject or through initial media experiences with the subject. Although the meaning emerging from the initial contact with the subject is moulded according to other related experiences, the impact of the first contact is very powerful. In the case of the McMahon family, the first media experiences of Austria overwhelmed the subsequent first hand experiences and tended to shape the first hand experiences to fit the known stereotypes.

Fortunately we are all creatures who continue to reprocess information, thereby making new meanings. According to Quin and McMahon, the process can be illustrated as shown below.



The above model is underpinned by the fundamental premise that **meaning is a product of the thinking person, not something that resides in a media product or the infinite wisdom of the teacher.**

To illustrate the above model, let us consider the meanings created about Austria by this writer. The rather bigoted set of meanings held by this writer and described in the earlier part of this paper could be seen as a point of entry into the model. As indicated on the top right of the model, an interpretation had occurred within a cultural, social and knowledge framework. Over the next twenty years, there were a few more media experiences (see bottom right of the model), not many, for Austria is a media black hole for Australians. The only protracted media coverage I can recall about Austria was the Kurt Waldheim saga. Again, this became news in Australia partly because it fitted the established media representation of Austria and Austrians. Direct experience of the country has not been repeated so this could not supplement the media experiences. There was however, some rather more significant first hand experience, with the opportunity to meet in those twenty years two Austrian educators. Ingrid and Suzanne provided me with new knowledge about Austria and were instrumental in providing quite different discourses to tap into. For me, Austria is no longer a place for tourist pictures, but a place of people, perhaps as diverse in their positions as the citizens of my country, but, like my own country, with some predominant threads. This alien sees one of the threads as bearing some similarity to Australia and with Canada. Australia has retained some of its founding colonial mentality. This is most noticeable in the arts and sports where those with talent have to revisit the „mother“ country, Britain, to prove themselves. This cultural cringe is being overcome or rather being replaced as

we begin to cringe before American culture. My experiences in Canada suggest to me that the Canadians have a similar sense of being subservient to American culture. My changed framework of understanding about Austria has as part of that framework a perception that Austria has a similar relationship with Germany. Perhaps the notion of the one thousand year birthday is also related to the power relationships between the two countries. Is it a reaffirmation of the integrity of Austria?

One thousand years old! My first reaction to this was amazement, hard to comprehend, living in a country that has not yet been a nation for one hundred years and has just celebrated two hundred years of settlement. It was the latter thought that brought this line of thought to a halt. The Aboriginal people of Australia remembered two hundred years of invasion and conquest. To the Aboriginal citizens of this country (allowed to become citizens in their own land as recently as 1969), the birth was more than forty thousand years ago, in the dream time. In making sense of

Austria's one thousand years, I had automatically tapped into an Anglo Saxon discourse. When many Australians celebrated two hundred years of settlement in 1988, there were some of us who also reflected on the shame we shared from the atrocities our forefathers had committed and our present society is perpetuating. This is all part of the experience I bring to bear when I consider Austria's forthcoming birthday celebrations. It in turn informs this alien's view of Austria.

So in summary, **what views do I have of Austria?** There is no composite meaning, but rather many fragments, of a successful society, apparently cohesive, perhaps conscious of being in Germany's shadow and certainly capable of producing some warm and deep thinking citizens. I know by listening to them, that we share similar dreams about wanting a just and equitable society for our children and one that celebrates subcultural differences. With such citizens, Austria is well placed to counter the stereotype and the elements that allow the

Stereotypes of drunken Aboriginal people



stereotype to retain its currency, for **stereotypes are distortions rather than falsities**. They draw their strength from an element of truth and prioritise this position to the exclusion of others. For example in my country, there are stereotypes of drunken Aboriginal people. The element of truth in the stereotype is that there are some Aboriginal people who do have a drinking problem (as there are non-Aboriginals with similar problems). The stereotype latches on to this image rather than the more positive representations that could have been chosen. I suspect that the ongoing use of the Germanic stereotype to represent

Austria retains its currency through the same processes because these media patterns appear to be consistent throughout the world.

So like Australia, Austria for me has many meanings, emerging from competing discourses. Perhaps the only real difference between Austria and Australia is that we are the ones with the kangaroos!

Anmerkung:

- 1) Quin and McMahon, *Teaching About Audiences* (keynote paper delivered at the Western Australian Media Education Conference 1994, unpublished)

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PRESE STIMMEN

Die Botschaft

Junge, gutaussehende, fröhliche Menschen, die im TV werbend für ein Getränk herumbertreiben, sollen eine Botschaft vermitteln. Ein ähnlicher Zweck wird angepeilt, wenn ein Fernsehspot für Zigaretten harte Männlichkeit aufbietet. Nun sagt man, solche „Botschaften“, wenn sie nur gut und eindringlich genug seien, führten außer zum Werbeerfolg eventuell auch zu einer Art sklavischem (Jugend-)Kult. Getränke- und Zigarettenfirmen unterstützen diese Kulte ja auch „werbebe-

gleitend“ mit diversen Accessoires. So weit, so gut, so bisher. Oder doch: So weit, so weiter? Eine Studie, die in Deutschland angefertigt wurde, zeigt nämlich zugleich Zwiespältiges und Erstaunliches: Die heutigen Kids durchschauen natürlich die Absicht. Aber verstimmt sind sie deshalb noch lange nicht. Was tun sie also? Sie ironisieren beides, also z. B. alberne Fernsehbotschaften und doofe Kultobjekte. Das heißt ganz und gar nicht, daß sich die Jungmenschchen von den durchschauten

Kulten abwenden. Vielmehr „zitierten“ sie Kleidung, Schuhe, Kappen, Feuerzeuge etc. „als Kultobjekte von gestern“; sie distanzieren sich, aber tragen die Botschaft voll Ironie weiter. Welch eine Aufgabe für Werbeleute, herauszufinden, ob man darauf bauen kann – oder ob die Ironiker Coca-Cola zitieren und Bier trinken? L.

aus „Die Presse“, 4. Mai 1995