

---

This essay applies a rhetorical analysis of Series 1 of the TV drama *Total Control* (2019), considering the current Australian political climate regarding gender and recognition of Indigenous Australians. It analyses rhetorical and narrative techniques from key moments in the series demonstrating how they work to persuade the viewer towards specific outcomes.

There are arguably no more important issues in contemporary Australia than the changing status of women and the recognition of the role of Australia's first inhabitants in national identity. *Total Control* explores these issues through a nuanced articulation of their intersection. It tells the story of an Indigenous woman, Alex Irving, who is parachuted into the Australian Senate by a woman Prime Minister, Rachel Anderson. The show takes the viewer through the political and ethical ramifications the two women face as they navigate a power structure dominated by white men. These struggles revolve around key themes of Aboriginal land rights, Aboriginal deaths in custody, and the intersection of race and gender. This essay examines key aspects of these three themes.

This is a rhetorical analysis. It applies Grotkopp's (2021) analysis of audio-visual rhetoric, revealing "how language and the dynamic of audiovisual movement mutually structure one another in order to affect the spectator so that he or she takes on cognitive and moral attitudes, perceiving certain persons, objects, and issues as to be desired or rejected," (Grotkopp 2021, p.189). Aristotle's three elements of rhetoric, *lógos*, *êthos*, and *pathos*, are used to analyse the ways in which the series works at persuading the audience towards the issues (Grotkopp 2021). Bordwell's narrative theory is brought in to understand rhetorical dimensions of technical and narrative techniques.

*Total Control* brings issues of race and gender to the public sphere. According to Hartley (2004), the Indigenous public sphere is "the mediated public 'space' for evolving notions of Indigeneity," (Hartley 2004, p.12). Hartley says national television has historically played a role in shaping notions of national identity and Indigeneity. Broadcast television of the 1950s and 60s established an era of "television as national culture" and "[b]ecause of the coevolution of citizenship and media", Indigeneity "became the site around which Australian national identity in general was narrated, disputed and thought through," (Hartley 2004, p.12 – 13). *Total Control* carries this forward in a contemporary context. The issue of gender is largely centred on the character of Prime Minister Anderson. She is drawn in a public sphere in which issues of women in politics are undergoing critical analysis. Figures such as Australian of the Year, Grace Tame, Brittany Higgins, and the ABC series *Ms Represented* (2021) have exposed the entrenched sexism in Australia's political system. The character of Anderson in *Total Control* is the emblem of the issues raised in *Ms Represented*. These political public spheres provide the ideological through-lines of *Total Control*.

A rhetorical approach requires a consideration of who is speaking, what are they speaking about, and under what authority. Aristotle calls this aspect the *êthos*. Grotkopp (2021) suggests that this should not be reduced to merely identifying with the "empirical speaker or protagonist", but requires "a particular form of affective effect on the side of the addressee, a gentle, constant emotional bridge [...] between the speaker and the audience," (Grotkopp 2021, p.192). In this case the bridge begins to be built by trust in the credentials of the

production company, Blackfella Films, and the ABC. Blackfella Films, founded by Arrernte/Kalkadoon woman Rachel Perkins, has a respected reputation of award winning Indigenous-produced film and TV. This voice speaks through key Indigenous protagonists to carry the viewer on a continually developing affective journey. The ABC is airing this in their role as national broadcaster to bring these issues into the public sphere. The ABC and Blackfella Films are working to persuade the audience to consider the role of Indigenous in Australian national identity as a crucial issue. This collaboration provides a strong rhetorical *ethos* from which the argument is presented. The aim is to “shape a construction of identity – be it national, be it an idea of world citizenship – which is linked with moral evidence,” (Grotkopp 2021, p.195).

The *logos*, or argument, is that existing power structures work against Indigenous people and women in Australia. The show pursues the argument using formal narratological and rhetorical devices. Key Indigenous characters and the prime minister exhibit fully formed character arcs, facing ethical dilemmas and overcoming obstacles, whereas the only fully developed male character is Senator Irving’s assistant, Jonathan, who evolves from using his sexuality transactionally, to advance his power, to eventually following Irving’s quest for justice. The other male characters are one-dimensional agents of the power structure faced by the main characters.

One of the major motivating themes in *Total Control* is Indigenous land rights. Irving’s first role as a senator is to negotiate a deal between the federal government and the local Indigenous community in her hometown, where a military base is proposed to be built on Native Title land. The politics of the land deal provides the series with its primary dramatic thread, the unfolding events of Bordwell’s *syuzhet*, which “organizes the actions and states of affairs in the story world,” where there is often “some sort of change, and...conflict...and the *syuzhet* structures it according to widely recognized principles,” (Bordwell 2007, p.102). This thematic thread lays out all the circumstances on which Senator Irving’s character arc develops. Her relationships with family, elders, her love interest, conflict with the prime minister, her own personal moral crisis, and the political machinations by which she brings down the government are shaped by the issue.

The viewer is taken on Senator Irving’s journey from the contrasting worlds of outback Queensland to parliament house. When she first arrives in Canberra, the camera closes in on her smile and hair flowing in the breeze. The music is uplifting. Parliament house is shot from the ground-up to emphasise its imposing presence and ariel shots show its grand man-made geometry. This is the *stylistic patterning*, or deliberate stylistic choices, which aim to create an effect on the viewer to assist in the creation of the *fabula* or story world (Bordwell 2007). This is a stark contrast to the dusty, disorganised town from earlier scenes. Irving is small in comparison to the halls of the building. The logic of the composition tells the audience that this Indigenous woman is out of place here. As Grotkopp points out, *lógos* “seems to favour language” however, “we cannot assume any theoretical priority between word and moving image,” (Grotkopp 2021, p.192). In terms of *pathos*, the contrasting worlds provide a backdrop against which the viewer closely follows Irving’s journey and “the continuous modelling of a complex emotion that unfolds over the course of the film (a mood, an atmosphere), which is grounded in aesthetic pleasure,” (Grotkopp 2021, p.194).

The theme of Indigenous deaths in custody runs through the entire series through the journey of young Indigenous woman Jess, who has escaped from a detention centre after her cellmate Macy is killed by tear gas thrown into their cell. She has a video on her phone of the murder which she is trying to get to Senator Irving. The grainy, amateur phone footage is repeated for the viewer throughout the series. This purposeful stylistic device is, as Bordwell observes, also a narrational choice, which “shape[s] what information we get and how we get it,” (Bordwell 2007 p.97). In episode 5, the viewer is given a significant plot point where Jess finally makes contact with Irving. They come together on the street in an emotional encounter, where Irving promises justice. Police appear, the music becomes threatening, and Jess flees out onto the street where she is killed by a car. This is in effect another death in custody. The viewer’s response is an empathic, affective experience of the inevitability of injustice that Indigenous people feel. In terms of *pathos*, the series creators work here at “affectively grounding a value-community as the basis for sensing certain issues with specific feelings like disgust, rage, shame, or guilt...as the basis for experiencing one’s own sociality and being-in-relation in one’s own body as a painful of pleasurable partisanship,” (Grotkopp 2021, p.193). Through these particularly affective moments, the audience is persuaded to question Indigenous treatment and identity.

The primary rhetorical arguments of the intersection of race and gender are perhaps most vividly played out in the final episode of the series. Irving concocts a scheme to bring down the prime minister, who has betrayed her in the land negotiations. The episode culminates in an argument between the two women on the ultimate moral and political issue of the series: the battle between justice and power. After suffering humiliation in the House of Representatives, Anderson walks past a series of portraits of recent prime ministers. The last is an oversized portrait of Julia Gillard, Australia’s first woman prime minister, who was treated with appalling sexism (Harmon & Siddeek 2020). In the end, the two women face off. The prime minister says the system is imperfect but it works, and that virtue, referring to Irving, is an insufficient political motivator. She also raises the issue of gender to Irving when she remarks: “so much for the sisterhood”. Irving replies that Anderson only acts on the sisterhood when it suits her aims. She has eventually been brought down by acting for power rather than the greater moral good. In the ultimate rhetorical gesture, the cause of justice is seen to override the cause of power.

Irving has won, but she, and the audience are left with the dilemma that she has become just another manipulator of the system. As a journalist, who she had enlisted to her scheme, had challenged her in episode 5, what happened to “the barefoot senator” who was “different from the others?”.

Series 1 of *Total Control* (2019) puts forward a powerful argument for the consideration of two prominent themes in the current Australian political and public sphere: the difficult relationship between gender and power, and the role of institutionalised racism as an obstacle to the recognition of Indigenous Australians as part of national identity. The series weaves together the intersection of the two themes in skilfully crafted dramatic situations featuring well-drawn characters navigating the power structures. An analysis of the rhetorical and narrative techniques at work in key themes and scenes in the series demonstrates how the creators work to persuade the viewer towards specific ends.

## References

Bordwell, D 2007, chapter 3 'Three Dimensions of Film Narrative', in *Poetics of Cinema*, Taylor & Francis Group, p.85-133.

Grotkopp M 2021, 'The Future: Global Responsibility and the Rhetoric of Climate Change' in *Cinematic Poetics of Guilt: Audiovisual Accusation as a Mode of Commonality*, De Gruyter, Berlin, p. 188 – 205.

Harmon & Siddeek 2020, 'It took on a life of its own': the story behind Julia Gillard's misogyny speech', *The Guardian*, February 7, viewed October 5 2021.

Hartley, J 2004, 'Television, Nation and Indigenous Media' in *Television & New Media*. Vol 5, Issue 1, p.7 – 25.

*Ms Represented* 2021, television program, ABC TV, July 13, viewed July 2021.

*Total Control* 2019, series 1, episode 5, Blackfella Films, television program, ABC iview, November 10, viewed September 30 2021.

*Total Control* 2019, series 1, episode 6, Blackfella Films, television program, ABC iview, November 17, viewed September 30 2021.