
Escaping from the City Means More than a Cheap House and a 10-Minute Commute
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Abstract

Introduction

We five friends clinked glasses in our favourite wine and cocktail bar, and considered our next collaborative writing project. We had seen M/C Journal’s call for articles for a special issue on ‘regional’ and when one of us mentioned the television program, Escape from the City, we began our critique:

“They haven’t featured Armidale yet, but wouldn’t it be great if they did?”

“Really? I mean, some say any publicity is good publicity but the few early episodes I’ve viewed seem to give little or no screen time to the sorts of lifestyle features I most value in our town.”

“Well, seeing as we all moved here from the city ages ago, let’s talk about what made us stay?”

We had found our next project.

A currently popular lifestyle television show (Escape from the City) on Australia’s national public service broadcaster, the ABC, highlights the limitations of popular cultural representations of life in a regional centre. The program is targeted at viewers interested in relocating to regional Australia. As Raymond Boyle and Lisa Kelly note, popular television is an important entry point into the construction of public knowledge as well as a launching point for viewers as they seek additional information (65). In their capacity to construct popular perceptions of ‘reality’, televsual texts offer a significant insight into our understandings and expectations of what is going on around us. Similar to the concerns raised by Esther Peeren and Irina Souch in their analysis of the popular TV show Farmer Wants a Wife (a version set in the Netherlands from 2004–present), we worry that these shows “prevent important aspects of contemporary rural life from being seen and understood” (37) by the viewers, and do a disservice to regional communities.

For the purposes of this article, we interrogate the episodes of Escape from the City screened to date in terms of the impact they may have on promoting regional Australia and speculate on how satisfied (or otherwise) we would be should the producers direct their lens onto our regional community—Armidale, in northern NSW. We start with a brief précis of Escape from the City and then, applying an autoethnographic approach (Butz and Besio) focusing on our subjective experiences, we share our reflections on living in Armidale. We blend our academic knowledge and knowledge of everyday life (Kivelan et al.) to argue there is greater cultural diversity, complexity, and value in being in the natural landscape in regional areas than is portrayed in these representations of country life that largely focus on cheaper real estate and a five-minute commute.

We employ an autoethnographic approach because it emphasises the socially and politically constituted nature of knowledge claims and allows us to focus on our own lives as a way of understanding larger social phenomena. We recognise this is a vast literature on lifestyle programs and there are many different approaches scholars can take to these. Some focus on the intention of the program, for example “the promotion of neoliberal citizenship through home investment” (White 578), while others focus on the supposed effect on audiences (Tsay-Vogel and Krakowiak). Here we only assert the effects on ourselves. We have chosen to blend our voices (Gilmore et al.) in the highlighting of the narrative voices where our individual experiences are drawn on, as we argue for an alternative representation of regional life than currently portrayed in the regional ‘escapes’ of this mainstream lifestyle television program.

Lifestyle Television

Escape from the City is one of the ‘lifestyle’ series listed on the ABC view website under the category of ‘Regional Australia’. Promotional details describe Escape from the City as a lifestyle series of 56-minute episodes in which home seekers are guided through “the trials and tribulations of their life-changing decision to escape the city” (view). Escape from the City is an example of format television, a term used to describe programs that retain the structure and style of those produced in another country but change the circumstances to suit the new cultural context. The original BBC format is entitled Escape to the Country and has been running since 2002. The reach of lifestyle television is extensive, with the number of programs growing rapidly since 2000, not just in the United Kingdom, but internationally (Hill; Collins). In Australia, they have completed, but not yet screened, 60 episodes of Escape from the City. However, with such popularity comes great potential to influence audiences and we argue this program warrants critical attention.

Like House Hunters, the United States lifestyle television show (running since 1997), Escape from the City follows “a strict formula” (Loof 168). Each episode uses the same narrative format, beginning with an introduction to the team of experts, then introducing the prospective house buyers, briefly characterising their reasons for leaving the city and what they are looking for in their new life. After this, we are shown a map of the region and the program follows the ‘escapees’ as they view four pre-selected houses. As we leave each property, the cost and features are reiterated in the written template on the screen. We, the audience, wait in anticipation for their final decision.

The focus of Escape from the City is the buying of the house: the program’s team of experts is there to help the potential ‘escapees’ find the real estate gem. Real estate value for money emerges as the primary concern, while the promise of finding a ‘life less ordinary’ as highlighted in the opening credits of the program each week, seems to fall by the wayside. Indeed, the representation of regional centres is not nuanced but limited by the emphasis placed on economics over the social and cultural.

The intended move of the ‘escapees’ is invariably portrayed as motivated by disenchantment with city life. Clearly a bigger house and a smaller mortgage also has its appeal. As the opening credits state, “Australia’s finest house hunters help buyers find the perfect home” (Loof 168). While the marketing claims may appeal, the reality is more complex and diverse. As Lyn Thomas writes in her book, Farmer Wants a Wife, “the promotion of neoliberal citizenship through home investment” (White 578) and the narrative of escape is particularly salient in regional Australia where there is a long history of migration from the city to the country. In this sense, the representation of Armidale in Escape from the City is a reflection of the broader cultural context and the representations of regional Australia on television is largely homogenous.

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As Australian regional centres strive to circumvent or halt the negative impacts of the drift in population to the cities (Chen), lifestyle programs are important ‘make or break’ narratives, shaping the appeal and bolstering—or not—a decision to relocate. With their focus on cheaper real estate prices and the freeing up of the assets of the ‘escapees’ that a move to the country may entail, the representation is so focused on the economics that it is almost placeless. While the format includes a map of the regional location, there is little sense of being in the place. Such a limited representation does not do justice to the richness of regional lives as we have experienced them.

Our Town

Like so many regional centres, Armidale has much to offer and is seeking to grow (Armidale Regional Council). The challenges regional communities face in sustaining their cultural lives are well captured in Gabrielle Chan’s account of the city-country divide (Chan) and Armidale, with its population of about 25,000, is no exception. Escape from the City fails to emphasise cultural diversity and richness, yet this is what characterises our experience of our regional city. As long-term and satisfied residents of Armidale, we are keenly aware of the persuasive power of popular cultural representations (O’Sullivan and Sheridan; Sheridan and O’Sullivan), we are concerned about the trivialising or reductive manner in which regional Australia is portrayed.

While we acknowledge there has not been an episode of Escape from the City featuring Armidale, if the characterisation of another, although larger, regional centre, Toowoomba, is anything to go by, our worst fears may be realised if our town is to feature in the future. Toowoomba is depicted as rural landscapes, ‘elegant’ buildings, a garden festival (the “Carnival of the Flowers”) and the town’s history as home of the Southern Cross windmill and the iconic lamington sponge. The episode features an old shearing shed and a stock whip demonstration, but makes no mention of the arts, or of the University that has been there since 1967. Summing up Toowoomba, the voiceover describes it as “an understated and peaceful place to live,” and provides “an attractive alternative” to city life, substantiated by a favourable comparison of median real estate prices.

Below we share our individual responses to the question raised in our opening conversation about the limitations of Escape from the City: What have we come to value about our own town since escaping from city life?

journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/rt/printFriendly/15250/0
South of my days’ circle, part of my blood’s country, 
rises that tabland, high delicate outline 
of bony slopes wincing under the winter, 
low trees, blue-leaved and olive, outcropping granite – 
clean, lean, hungry country. The creek’s leaf-silenced, 
willow choked, the slope a tangle of medlar and crabapple 
branching over and under, blotted with a green lichen; 
and the old cottage lurches in for shelter. (Wright 26)

Whilst our autoethnographic reflections may not reach the heady heights of Judith Wright, they nevertheless reflect the experience of living in, not just escaping to the country. We are disconcerted that the breadth of cultural activities and the sense of diversity and community that our stories evoke are absent from the representations of regional communities in Escape from the City.

Kate Oakley and Jonathon Ward argue that ‘visions of the good life’, in particular cultural life in the regions, need to be supported by policy which encourages a sustainable prosperity characterised by both economic and cultural development. Escape from the City, however, dwells on the material aspects of consumption—good house prices and the possibility of a private enterprise—almost to the exclusion of any coverage of the creative cultural features.

We recognise that the lifestyle genre requires simplification for viewers to digest. What we are challenging is the sense that emerges from the repetitive format week after week whereby differences between places are lost (White 580). Instead what is conveyed is Escape from the City is that regions are homogenous and monocultural. We would like to see more screen time devoted to the social and cultural aspects of the individual locations.

Conclusion
We believe coverage of a far richer and more complex nature of rural life would provide a more ‘realistic’ preview of what could be ahead for the ‘escapees’ and perhaps swing the decision to relocate. Certainly, there is some evidence that viewers gain information from lifestyle programs (Hill 106). We are concerned that a lifestyle television program that purported to provide expert advice on the benefits and possible pitfalls of a possible move to the country should be as accurate and all-encompassing as possible within the constraints of the length of the program and the genre.

So, returning to what may appear to have been a light-hearted exchange between us at our local bar, and given the above discussion, we argue that television is a powerful medium. We conclude that a popular lifestyle television program such as Escape from the City has an impact on a large viewing audience. For those city-based viewers watching, the message is that moving to the country is an ‘easy breather’, whereas the social and cultural dimensions of regional communities, which many city dwellers have sustained our lives, are overlooked. Such texts influence viewers’ perceptions and expectations of what escaping to the country may entail. Escape from the City exploits regional towns as subject matter for a lifestyle program but does not significantly challenge stereotypical representations of country life or does not fully flesh out what escaping to the country may achieve.

References
Klevan, Trude, Bengt Karlsson, Lydia Turner, Nigel Short, and Alex Grant. "‘Ah! Take on Me’s’: Bridging the North Sea with Relational Autoethnography." *Qualitative Research* 18.4 (2018): 330–44.


