

**Dark Victory**

By David Marr and Marian Wilkinson  
Chapter 15 - "Truth Overboard"

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In the "Frontline" episode, "Playing the Ego Card", the program's "anchorman", Mike Moore, is sent on a weeklong assignment to Australia's neighbour, PNG, and in the process, the composers of the text are able to elucidate to the viewers the deep-rooted manipulation that lies at the heart of "vision", a potent tool used to lure viewers. The sensationalising of an attack on Australian interests on foreign soil – in this case, on a mine in Bougainville – parallels the vicious exploitation of the children overboard saga of 2001, documented in the chapter appropriately entitled "Truth Overboard" – the double meaning clearly targeted at an erudite audience – in Marr and Wilkinson's recent book, *Dark Victory*.

In both the fictional and factual incidents, images have been intentionally, evidently and blatantly manipulated in some way to present a version of the story to the viewing public that is separate from the truth, exploiting the influence of the media and people's tendency to treat images as representations of the truth. Ratings are driven by what viewers want; as Brian says, "A reporter has to be in the story – part of it", reiterating Marty's flak jacket in "The Siege", in that pictures are indeed worth a thousand words. When Mike, in his naturally dopey manner, comes unstuck with his "dud story", he doctors the truth, by literally planting words into the mouths of the rebel soldiers, and choreographing a sequence of gunshots as he records speaks to the camera. His failings attract the laughter of the viewers of "Frontline", but when placed in a more serious context, when the stakes are higher, it no longer becomes humorous. That is the didactic value of satire, and is the form in which the composers of this text utilise to convey their message.

*Dark Victory* parallels "Playing the Ego Card", not only because it discusses dodgy images taken off the Australian mainland, but because of its didactic values, albeit in a serious journalistic manner, unbiased with all evidence weighed accordingly, indeed a distinct contrast to the subject material of both texts. The photos – apparently of desperate refugees trying to "push the government's hand" by throwing their children overboard – were released by Commander Banks of HMAS Adelaide to his superiors in Canberra. The problem just happens to be that the captions – "Attached to each was a colourful commentary by the amateur photographer" – happened to get lost as it passed along the bureaucratic jungle. Defence officials knew of the mistake, yet the politicians and advisors turned a blind eye.

Fortunately for the government, it was election time, and "The only question for the government was whether the original story would hold until election day" – an election that the Liberals won in a landslide victory. The stakes were high, yet journalists for three entire days failed in their obligations, albeit voluntary ones, under the Australian Journalist's Association code of ethics. Even in Sydney's supposedly quality newspaper, the *SMH*, Michelle Grattan's front-page article entitled "Boat people throw children overboard", sourced information from one source and one source only, that of the government, hence failing to "Report and *interpret* honestly, striving for *accuracy*". The media ended up being complicit in the cover-up, feeding off the frenzy that surrounded the caption-less images that were released.

In "Playing the Ego Card", from the very beginning, the bitchiness and in-fighting between Mike and Brooke – including the glib and false compliments they pay to each other, highlighted in particular by the close-up shots of Brooke's facial expressions, when their ulterior motive is actually to direct fame and money to themselves – constitutes a significant part of the text. This is because it reveals the media industry to be corrupted at its very roots, and serves as the running gag in the satire. However, with a text written by respected journalists Marr and Wilkinson, we need no parallels to reinforce the message, for the evidence is presented to us as responders, presumably erudite, to make up our own minds.