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This is Australia: the panoramic narrative, graphic design and spatial consciousness

Denise Whitehouse

We encounter 'This is Australia' stories everyday, in tourist advertisements and brochures, in celebrations of nationhood like the opening of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, in promotional posters and those glossy photographic books that are so often titled 'Australia'. The key trope of these depictions of nationhood is the use of the panoramic narrative and the language of stereotypes to construct an all-encompassing vision of an instantly recognisable and reassuringly familiar Australia. Inherently commercial and propagandistic they give visual form to the popular imagination of what it means to be Australian and playa central role in shaping what Meaghan Morris terms, the 'national image-space'. This image space being the public zone in which popular histories, aesthetic symbols, ideas and myths circulate and endure through the agency of design, giving visible form to the imagined community that binds people and place into a nation.

What interests me about 'This is Australia' stories are the insights they offer into the insidious role that design has played in shaping Australia's historical consciousness, by which I mean its discourse of memory and identity as a settler nation. And it is these issues I want to explore by investigating the involvement of the graphic designer in constructing the visual vocabulary and communication strategies of the modern panoramic narrative as a favoured device for celebrating and selling the nationhood.

To do this we need to look back to the mid-twentieth century when a new generation of commercial artists, including Gert Sellheim, were employed by government and business to bring an aesthetic and psychological edge to the imaging and promotion of Australia. Experimenting with modernist technologies and aesthetics – photomechanical reproduction, abstraction, montage and primitivism, they shaped a visual language - a set of archetypal colours, forms, images and themes, and a visual rhetoric that told instantaneously recognizable "This is Australia" stories. Circulated nationally and internationally as tourist and promotional posters, their imagery helped build European Australians' economic and emotional bonds with the land at the expense of the original landowners and helped foster a colonising rhetoric of possession and dispossession which I suspect still informs the popular spatial and graphic imaginations.

The Classic Panorama

With its all-seeing gaze, the classic panorama was the product of the same industrial modernization process that informed the invasion of Australia in the late 1700s. From its beginnings in London in the 1780s, it used a 360-degree bird's eye view of the world to bring the spectacle of modern expansion alive. As Bernard Comment relates it made the ideologies of imperialist countries
visible and comprehensible through its depictions of subject matter such as the new metropolis (London), military triumphs (the Battle of Waterloo), and exotic locales like The Congo. The classic panorama's weaving of the spectacle of empire into mass education and tourism made it ideal for propaganda and it became a feature of trade exhibitions with the 1889 Great Exhibition in Paris offering seven panoramas which brought to life in sound, colour, light and even smell, big picture concepts such as The History of the Century, All of Paris and the Story of Petroleum. As the titles indicate the panorama was able to convert the abstract into convincing illusions of an ordered and totalising world. Standing within the overarching view of the panorama, the audience could grasp the concept of an entire nation, city or century and feel secure in this knowledge. Such was its popularity, that Comment argues its logic filtered into the public imagination and created a new way of imagining the world, at the heart of which is the imperialist possessive gaze.

The Panoramic Gaze and myth of Terra Nullius

Not surprisingly the panoramic view and narrative are key tropes of settler cultures, obsessed as they are with discovery, exploration, settlement and nation building. In Australia they have, together with the myth of terra nullius, informed all aspects of cultural production. Think of those Qantas advertisements whose panoramic landscapes and skies present Australia as a vast space open for visiting, developing and settling. This archetypically Australian landscape, with its aerial viewpoint, high horizon, vast open land and infinite blue skies, was well established as the formula for selling Australia by the 1920s and 1930s, and its use by designers within promotional posters functioned as an important mode of consciousness-making that converted the politics of nationhood into popular self-images and myths.

In Advertise Australia (Albert Collins, Australasian Advertiser's Manual and Newspaper Directory, 1924) and To Australia for 37 pounds (Raphael Roussel, P&O, 1921), for example, the panoramic vista is used to give popular and visual form to the myth of terra nullius in order to attract migrants, tourists and investors. The rhetoric of empire is unmistakable especially in To Australia with its promise that with a 37 pound P&O ticket you can have a new beginning in a land of unlimited opportunity and capital gain. Indeed as the hero settler suggests with his expansive gestures you too will become bronzed and prosperous as you carve out your dream in the last new world which, largely unoccupied, is being awakened by the home fires of settlement as an expanding infrastructure of roads, transportation, agriculture and industry ensures that this will be a modern world of the future.

The consistent feature of this archetypical imagery, with its combination of aerial viewpoint and panoramic vista, is the outward-looking, possessive gaze that invites ownership, not only of the immediate land but also of the imagined frontiers. There is also the romanticisation of landscape as transformative, giving visible form to the myth that the distinctive character, emotions and
spirit of the nation have been formed by the struggle to settle and bond with the land. As the Akubra attired grazier (Walter lardine, Akubra, c.1940) appraising his pastoral empire indicates, it is the experience of the land that naturalises successive generations of invaders so that they become not only possessive of the land but also possessed by it.

Possession and Dispossession

I now want to jump forward thirty years to an Australian National Travel Association poster and one of the most powerful graphic depictions of a colonising discourse of possession and dispossession. Designed around 1957 by Gert Sellheim it abstracts the nation into a montage of instantly recognisable icons that, floating in vast panoramic time-space continuum form an image of Australia as the ideal island playground in the South Pacific. Ideal, because while Australia is a pristine tropical paradise it is also modern and urban as the beach culture with its surfing and yachting signify. Better still it has an exotic primitive and prehistoric past, as the boomerang alive with bold, modernised aboriginal colours, and the cave paintings of antipodean fauna illustrate.

Armin Hofmann argued that the poster reveals a society’s state of mind. Here Sellheim exploits the formal and symbolic language of the poster to translate the complex and abstract ideas that constitute nationhood into visible and emotional form. In an instant glance the myth of Australia graphically unfolds, stimulating the viewer’s imagination while building their intuitive recognition of history and landscape. A promotional image, ‘This is Australia’ confidently depicts, post-1956 Olympic Games Australia emerging on the back of the wool industry, sport and tourism as a mature international nation. This maturity being signified by the distinctive iconic language of symbols and colour, and the graphic rhetoric that includes the integration of Aboriginal culture to create a modernist vernacular that is authentically Australian.

There also is the clever use of the panoramic narrative to suggest a shared ancient historical consciousness as Australia, signified by the boomerang, spins forward out of its distant Stone Age dreamtime into a space age future, taking on the layers of European civilisation in the process. As the boomerang moves into the future so the Aboriginal fades further into the past, is possessed and assimilated into the modern white Australia in which all, according to government policies, be they indigenous or migrant settlers are One People. Juxtaposed against this 1961 government pamphlet promoting the assimilation of the Aborigine into a white race, and read through the lens of today’s Reconciliation politics, the poster is both a powerful image of white Australia and a tale of dispossession as the process of colonisation strips indigenous people of their land and culture.
As Tom Griffiths outlines in *Hunters and Collectors*, the use of Aboriginal motifs, subjects and styles in design and popular culture took on a particular impetus following Melbourne Museum's 1929 Australian Aboriginal Art exhibition. The essays in its catalogue encouraged European Australians to preserve the visual culture of the Aborigine (because they were a dying race) by using it to develop a unique design language for modern Australia, the primitive roots of which reached back into pre-historical times.

Sellheim, was amongst the first designers to incorporate Aboriginal motifs, subjects and styles into their work to inject it with a distinctive Australianness. His whimsical interpretations of rock art, widely applied in posters, stamps, gift cards, lettering, murals and publications, were highly sought by his clients, and most especially the Australian National Travel Association whose function was to sell Australia nationally and internationally As we saw with 'This is Australia' and is evident in Corroboree c.1930 Sellheim's use of aboriginal motifs and subjects injected his European inspired modernism with an instant Australian identity and the exotic allure of primitivism. But on a deeper level, Sellheim's and his contemporaries' use of aboriginal motifs and subject matter to sell and promote Australia, carried in it subliminal messages about the place of first nation people within the space/time continuum of Australian history In PercyTrompf's *TransAustralian Railway*, c 1930, for example, the Aborigine is depicted as the noble hunter, with loin cloth and spear, standing passively and alone within the desert as modern progress speeds in opening up the interior to tourism, exploration and development No matter how you look at it, the stereotype is one of a dying race, a static Stone Age people frozen in pre-history timelessness that has no past and no future As such the Aboriginal becomes at one and the same time, a symbol of Australia's unique antiquity and a touchstone of the colony's success and progress.

Sellheim was instrumental in translating this colonising panoramic logic into print through his innovative design of several 'This is Australia' publications from the late 1930s into the 1970s. A favoured device for building national pride, and promoting Australia to investors and Settlers, 'This is Australia' publications were a popular form of history and myth making. Working with Oswald Ziegler, a major advocate for Australian publication design, Sellheim drew on the latest communication strategies to create psychologically seductive, pictorial panoramic narratives of the birth and growth of nationhood, which echoed the colonising rhetoric of the posters we have seen, and set in place the graphic language that still informs the design of 'This is Australia' type publications today.

**A Spatial Consciousness?**

In writing this piece I do not want to position Sellheim and his contemporaries as morally wrong or ignorant they were the product of their time. Rather I want to question to what extent the rhetoric of nationhood informs our spatial
imaginations and the way we see, design and structure space. And following this whether the key to understanding national and regional differences in modern design lie not with stereotypical symbols, colours, materials and themes but with more subtle and insidious factors such as a peculiar spatial and historical consciousness. Could it be, I wonder, that Australian visual imagery and more specific graphic design is informed by a distinctive and intuitive way of seeing and reading spaces and narrative, which has been historically formed by the imperatives of being colonisers and viewing the world with a possessive panoramic gaze?


Tom Griffiths, Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia, pp 181-183

Charles L. Barrett and AS. Kenyon, Australian Aboriginal Art, Melbourne, National Museum of Victoria, revised ed" 1958, passim


Oswald Zeigler, (ed.) This is Australia, Sydney, Oswald S. Zeigler, 1956