

Abstracts

Seeing Australia: Learning and Unlearning the Visible World

Bill Ashcroft

Abstract: Seeing, like consciousness itself, is not simply passive. We must learn to structure the observed world in a way that gives it meaning. Physical sight may be understood as a model for cultural representation. Just as the visible world must be built up from assumptions and expectations, and contextualized by new experience, so colonial cultures like Australia's are 'seen' in the way we have learned to see them. The most fascinating examples of this occur in the visual representation of Australian space. When we observe the ways in which Australia has been 'seen' particularly in literature and the visual arts, we understand something about what it has become. Australia was imagined (or 'seen') in a particular way in Europe before white society arrived, it was seen by the early colonists according to certain conventions and expectations, it continues to be seen in certain ways by migrants. In all its cultural productions it demonstrates a history of seeing.

By tracing a historical trajectory through a number of paintings – with Modernist and Aboriginal paintings offering correctives to the 'learned' discourse – this paper argues that visual representations school patterns of seeing at the same time as they provide a source for unlearning and re-learning, for imbuing the quotidian with the utopian.

Aboriginal People in Chains

Corinna Erckenbrecht and Anna Haebich

Abstract: This article documents the history of an iconic series of photographs of Aboriginal people on Australia's colonial frontier. The disturbing images of Aboriginal men chained at the neck have been used in many presentations, publications and exhibitions so that, along with their importance as historical documents, the photographs' recognition value has helped to shape our contemporary visual imagination of the injustice experienced by Aboriginal people under Australian law. However, until recently, the photographs' own history was largely forgotten. Using new archival material this article adds invaluable information and insights concerning the creator, German physical anthropologist and collector Hermann Klaatsch (1863-1916), and the photographs' origins, historical and political contexts and various uses and impacts. In particular, we examine the controversies surrounding their presentation by Klaatsch at a national scientific conference in Australia in 1907. The article contributes to the study of the history of colonial photography of Indigenous peoples and the representation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia in particular.

Speculative Geographers: Imagining the Australian Continent in the 1830s

Matthew Graves and Elizabeth Rechniewski

Abstract: In the founding statement of the Royal Geographical Society of London, published in the first issue of the Journal in 1831, the president John Barlow sets out the aims and objectives of the organization. After a long development on the areas of the world awaiting knowledge, he defends the organisation against the (hypothetical) accusation that it might not be interested in “theory” and advocates the exercise of “Speculative Geography”. This article offers an illustration of the application of the principles of Speculative Geography in the work of Thomas J. Maslen, Allen F. Gardiner and James Vetch who, in the period 1827–1838, proposed projects of exploration of the as yet largely unknown Australian continent. Speculative Geography – a series of thought experiments ostensibly undertaken to advance knowledge and push back the frontiers of science – reveals itself to be, in the context of Australia, intimately tied to exploration in the interests of colonization. This article explores what the practice of conjectural geography in this period reveals about the nexus of scientific, institutional and colonial interests at work in the projects for the mapping and exploration of Australia in the 1830s and 40s.

Hanging Paintings: Aboriginal Art, Primitivism, and the Quest for Authenticity

Mitchell Rolls

Abstract: Aboriginal acrylic art of the desert regions has attracted a great deal of attention and commentary. Unlike much Aboriginal art that languished in the ethnographic sections of museums until belated recognition that it deserved a place in art galleries, almost from the outset the acrylics were hung in major national galleries (though not without some controversy). Nevertheless, these complex artworks remain ambiguous objects, and in many ways are caught suspended between the somewhat oppositional discourses of art theory/aesthetics and anthropology/culture. Although sorely needed, a critical discourse with which to appraise these objects is yet to be fully developed. In its absence, and with the collaboration of the artists themselves, notions of placedness, authenticity, and of ordinary forms remain the default descriptors of this work. This chapter critiques the ethnographic and primitivist taint that underlies analysis and discussion of these artworks. A comparison of two iconographic artworks – *Warlugulong* (Tjapaltjarri) and *Collins St, 5p.m.* (Brack) – helps illustrate revealing facets of the differing reception accorded western and Aboriginal art. It concludes by detailing how the absence of a critical discourse facilitating a more objective critique than the search for or recognition of an “embrace of origins” renders the acrylic painters of the desert regions producers of culture, not art.

Back to Country: Leah King-Smith's Double-Exposed Photography in the *Pattern of Connection* Series and Indigenous Landscape

Russell West-Pavlov

Abstract: This article examines the 'spectral' photomontage images composed by the Australian Indigenous artist Leah King-Smith in her *Patterns of Connections* series from 1991, in which photographs of contemporary Gippsland landscapes were superimposed upon images using nineteenth-century archival photographs from the State Library of Victoria. Most of the critical debate on King-Smith's work focussed upon the politics of temporality, in which representation of Indigenous subjects were recuperated from the expropriations of the past. The most obviously identifiable *content* of the *Patterns of Connection* series, the retrieved colonial archival material that King-Smith inserted into the present-day Australian landscape, was the lynchpin of such assessments. Evaluations of her work variously praised or critiqued her alignment with or deviation from such recuperative or revisionist archival politics. In this article I suggest that the *form* of the series may provoke an alternative reading of the photos. The technique used in composing the photos produces works which are atemporal in nature. This atemporal contiguity may provoke us to mediate upon another resonance of the *Patterns of Connection* series, one attuned to the spatial precedence of the landscape, rather than to a sequence of regimes of expropriation and strategies of reappropriation – thereby pointing to the significance of 'country' within contemporary Indigenous culture and the potential of an 'affirmative biopolitics' persisting in the interstices of white biopolitics.

Images Matter: Richard Flanagan, Richard Wastell and Materializations of Tasmania

Laura A. White

Abstract: Images participate in the environmental battles that for decades have been dividing Tasmania. In this paper, I analyze verbal and pictorial images created by novelist Richard Flanagan and painter Richard Wastell to demonstrate how images matter, how they materialize conceptions of human and nature that can impact environmental values and decisions. Recent ecocritical and new materialist scholarship emphasizes the pioneering role artists can play in restoring the motion and vitality that dominant representational practices have stripped from nonhuman matter. Building on this work, I argue that Flanagan and Wastell develop strategies that transform the genres of the novel and landscape painting to provide an affective vision of Tasmania that challenges instrumentalist images and the attendant treatment of the land as inert resource.

Aussie Cows and Asylum Seekers: Cartooning About Two Key Political Issues

Farida Fozdar

Abstract: In 2011 Australians were outraged by images of the treatment of ‘Australian cows’ in Indonesian abattoirs, televised on *Four Corners*, a current affairs program. Media, political and public commentary about the issue was framed around notions of barbarism and civilisation, and the special duty of care owed by Australians to ‘Australian cows’ being sent for slaughter in Muslim countries. This event occurred simultaneously with ongoing debate about asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat, who are subject to treatment that the UNHCR has criticised as inhumane. While the two issues were seldom conjoined in the media and political commentary, a number of cartoonists captured the irony of Australia’s concern for its animals, yet lack of humanity towards other people. This chapter considers the ways in which the two issues were addressed in a selection of cartoons, noting the manner of representation of the asylum seeker/cows as, the importance of borders in the imagery, representations of authority figures, and the ways in which the fundamental differences of morality were portrayed. While the potential of political cartoons to change public perceptions of issues is noted, it is argued that these cartoons apparently did not succeed in modifying Australians’ negativity towards asylum seekers.

The Ultimate Metaphor: Cane Toads as Australian Icon

Therese-Marie Meyer

Abstract: Two cult documentaries by Mark Lewis (1987, 2012) and one animated movie by Clayton and Silke (2003) on the cane toad show a certain Australian fascination with this creature that seems poised to become a national icon. Already a Queensland icon since 2006, the cane toad has, through its spread over the north of the continent, now reached a national audience. Semiotic analysis demonstrates an icon that builds strongly on representations of some and elisions of other biological features of the cane toad that suggest likeness and even identity to humans. More specifically such features relate to the continent’s settlement by white Australians. The history of the cane toads’ introduction is read as an exemplum for white Australian society. To develop this allegory, the representation of cane toads shifts from Western traditions denigrating toads as demonic to the more positive through the satirical nursery tradition of Grahame’s *Toad* (1908). The bogan anthropomorphic cane toad protagonists of the animated short movie, and Lewis’s empathic camera perspective of the first documentary, are significantly intensified to a full identification of the audience with cane toad toxin in Lewis’s more recent documentary. The ambiguity entailed in sympathising with such an animal reflects the uneasy presence of colonial history and the degree to which popular culture embraces post-colonial awareness as well as ecological discourse.

“Seeing Skippy?” Visualising and Materialising the Kangaroo

Katrina Schlunke

Abstract: Eaten, stuffed, branded, iconised and militarized, the kangaroo is both empty signifier and volatile assemblage. This paper will move between the photographic depictions of the roo as domesticated pet and those of the kangaroo as international televisual image to trace an historical imagining that simultaneously exposes and silences Indigenous knowledges and sovereignty. Representations of the kangaroo remain anchored in the colonial moment when an Indigenous home became an exoticised ‘nature’. This paper questions the ‘naturalness’ of the kangaroo through its visual record spanning the transnational environments of national branding and its role as ‘national’ representative.

Incontinence: Australia and the Archipelago

Paul Carter

Abstract: This essay starts from the premise that the way we think of Australia has been shaped by visual representations, especially those of geographers. It examines the profound influence maps and cartography with their emphasis on outline and boundary have exerted in imagining the continent. Because of the dominance of such representations indebted to Cartesian thought, images of Australia have been severely restricted not only visually but conceptually and epistemologically. Carter relates the enclosure acts of such visualisations to the ideologically motivated policing of Australia’s (coastal) borders and advocates a more free-flowing, dynamic and relational thinking of space and place. For such a revision of our notions of knowledge production Carter offers the figure of the “archipelago”. Archipelagic thinking would avoid the containment and closure strategies of conventional definitions and representations and instead favour “incontinent” thinking in terms of process and passage rather than item and entity which could prove a beneficial new method and attitude in the humanities. The essay is meant to be, at the same time, a discursive argument for as well as a demonstration of such a fluid, connective and open style of investigation which responds to complexities instead of trying to reduce them.