

# The Panoramic Narrative and the Production of Historical Consciousness: This is Australia.

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*These two strands—the love of the land we have invaded, and the guilt of the invasion—have become part of me. It is a haunted country.*

Judith Wright, *The Broken Links* (1981) in *Born of the Conquerors* (1991).

This paper takes a cross-disciplinary approach drawing on developments in Australian historical and cultural studies to investigate the role of design in the production of national cultures and more specifically the construction of colonising histories. It argues that in modern settler nations such as Australia, graphic design has had a significant role in the shaping of the public imagination of nationhood.

As the opening ceremony of 2000 Sydney Olympic Games illustrated the panoramic narrative has become a central trope of celebrations of nationhood: the continuous flow of historically familiar visual icons through a technologically orchestrated time, space, place continuum providing the public with one emotional hit after the other. This paper investigates the historical involvement of the graphic designer in constructing the visual vocabulary and communication strategies of the modern panoramic narrative and its origins in 1930s when business and government turned to modern design to bring aesthetic and psychological edge to the promotion and selling of Australia. Culturally sophisticated designers, including Gert Sellheim and Douglas Annand, were employed to produce tourist posters, trade exhibitions, publications and public murals that visualised Australia's rapid evolution from the pre-history time zone of its indigenous people and the arrival of the first fleet into a modern nation of the future. Experimenting with modern technologies and aesthetics – photo-mechanical reproduction, abstraction, montage and primitivism – these designers shaped a visual language, a set of archetypal colours, forms and images and a visual rhetoric, which told instantaneously recognisable 'This is Australia stories'. This visual imagination, as the Olympic Games showed, still informs Australia's discourse of memory and identity, that is its historical consciousness or as Meaghan Morris phrases it its 'national image-space'.

In establishing the panoramic narrative as a favoured device for celebrating and selling the nation the designers gave visual and emotional form to the colonising narratives of possession and dispossession that underpinned the Federal Government's Assimilation Policy, otherwise known as the white Australia policy. Their narratives of the birth of nation fostered white Australians' economic, emotional and spiritual bonds with the land at the expense of the indigenous population who were depicted as a vanishing race. Furthermore, the almost unconscious ideology of social Darwinism that underpinned their thinking, encouraged the designers to 'protect' the visual culture of the Australian Aboriginal from 'extinction' by converting it into graphic signifiers of an ancient historical past, while also appropriating it to create an authentically Australian style of modern primitivism. In thus constructing visual history, memories and identity for white Australia, the designers unintentionally helped to obscure and destroy the identity and memories of indigenous Australians and contributed to the process of colonisation.

This paper concludes that there is a need for critical design histories that look beyond the construction of economic and national identities, taste and material culture to the legacy of design's involvement in the construction of history and the process of colonisation, which in this instance involved the shaping a utopian visual history for white Australians which obscured and denied their violent treatment of indigenous Australians.

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The opening ceremony of 2000 Sydney Olympic Games was a landmark in Australia's discourse of national identity with even the most cynical admitting to feeling proud because it somehow encapsulated what it meant to be Australian. The central trope of this celebration of nationhood was the panoramic narrative: the continuous flow of historically familiar visual icons through a technologically orchestrated time, space, place continuum providing the public with one emotional hit after the other. People were transported by the all encompassing, seamless nature of this visual spectacular which, beginning with pre-dreamtime and aboriginal occupancy, unfolded rapidly into a story of settlement and the building of national myths and culture. As the daily press reported people emerged transformed feeling bonded together as a nation, proud at the self-image that was projected to the world and hopeful that the tensions of Reconciliation politics were easing.

What was striking was the inherently graphic and popular culture nature of the stereotypes and vignettes, the origins of which owed more to the histories of tourism, commerce, media and advertising than art and literature. For me, it drew attention to the insidious manner in which the ephemeral production of commercial design has shaped Australia's historical consciousness, that is its discourse of memory and identity or as Cultural Studies scholar Meaghan Morris phrases it, its *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 nations.<sup>1</sup>

With its dominant rhetoric being the birth of nation the Games ceremony raised questions about the role of design in shaping the public imagination and more specifically in constructing the colonising histories of settler nations as such Australia. And it is these issues I want to explore in this paper 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 nation.<sup>ii</sup>

To do this we will need to look back at its origins in the mid-twentieth century when business and government turned to modern advertising and design to bring a new aesthetic and psychological edge to the imaging and promotion of Australia. The Depression driving a need to build a confident image of modern expansion in order to attract foreign investment and stimulate trade and market growth independently from the ties of Empire marketing. A new generation of commercial artists, including Gert Sellheim, Eileen Mayo and Douglas Annand, were employed to produce sophisticated tourist posters, trade exhibitions and promotional publications that visualised Australia's rapid evolution into a nation of the future. Experimenting with modern 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 recognisable *This is Australia* stories. What I am interested in exploring is how their imaging of Australia helped build European Australians' economic, emotional and spiritual bonds with the land at the expense of the original landowners, and how their appropriation and conversion of Aboriginal art and culture into signifiers of Australianness fostered a colonising rhetoric of possession and dispossession.

### The Classic Panorama

The classic panorama with its all-seeing gaze was the product of the same industrial modernisation process that informed the invasion of Australia in the late 1700s. From its beginnings in London in the 1780s, it used a 365-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, Paris etc), military triumphs (the Battle of Waterloo, Battle for Algiers etc), and desirable exotic countries like The Congo. Its weaving of the spectacle of empire into mass education and tourism made it ideal for propaganda. Extremely popular as public entertainment 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, The Franco Prussian War, and the Story of Petroleum. As the titles indicate the panorama was able to convert the abstract into convincingly illusions of an ordered and totalising world. Standing within the overarching view of the panorama, the audience could grasp the concept of an entire city, nation 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.<sup>iii</sup>

#### The Panoramic View and *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 from the arts and historiography, to business, media and government. 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 bathed in the glowing heat of every day is a new day-type sun, was well established as the formula for selling Australia by the 1920s and 1930s. As Meaghan Morris argues this type of commercial tourist and promotional imagery is an important mode of consciousness making that converts the politics of nationhood into popular self-images and myths.<sup>iv</sup>

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 new migrants, tourists and investors. The rhetoric of empire is unmistakable especially in To Australia with its promise that for just one 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 progressive world of the future.

The consistent feature of this very archetypical imagery, with its combination of aerial viewpoint and panorama 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 Jardine, 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 which is one of the most powerful graphic depictions of a colonising discourse of possession and dispossession. Designed by Gert Sellheim in 1957 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 sun, sea and surf island playground in the South Pacific. Ideal because while a pristine tropical paradise Australia 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.<sup>v</sup> Here Sellheim exploits the formal and symbolic language of the poster to powerfully translate the complex ideas that constitute nationhood into visible and emotional form. In a few short seconds- in an instance the myth of Australia graphically unfolds, stimulating the viewer's imagination while building their intuitive recognition of history and landscape. A promotional, *This is Australia*, image it confidently depicts post-1956 Olympic Games Australia emerging on the back of the wool industry, sport and tourism as a mature international nation with its own distinctive identity and culture. A sign of this maturity being the distinctive iconic language of symbols and colour and 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, dispossessed and assimilated into the modern white Australia in which all, according to government policies, be they indigenous or migrant settlers are One People.<sup>vi</sup> 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.

### Cultural Appropriation

As Tom Griffiths outlines in his excellent study, Hunters and Collectors the use of Aboriginal motifs, subjects and styles in art, design and popular culture took on a particular impetus in the 1920s and 1930s. This was partly due to the discovery of primitive art by western artists and the influences of Boasian cultural anthropology and Freudian psychology on modern ideas. More specifically it was stimulated by the wide spread promotion the Aborigine, together with the indigenous fauna and flora, as a part of Australia's unique natural heritage.<sup>vii</sup> The Australian Aboriginal Art exhibition, held at the Melbourne Museum in 1929, in particular stimulated the appreciation of Aboriginal

material culture as primitive art rather than archaeological artefact. Its illustrated catalogue with its cover image of the primal Aborigine making the first creative gesture was extremely influential staying in print well into the late 1950s. As the cover indicates it used a social Darwinist rhetoric to promote Australian Aborigines as the last survivors of the Stone Age frozen in time within the natural history museum of the Australian continent: their rock galleries and art work offering the world's intellectuals unrivalled opportunities to see at first hand the origins of man's creative, psychological and mythological thinking.

In Charles L Barrett's influential essay, Aborigines were romanticised as childlike 'living fossils' who were failing to keep up with pace of civilisation. Therefore, it was the responsibility of European Australians to preserve their paintings and carvings as 'national possessions'. For designers this process was facilitated by the catalogue's line illustrations that provided an extensive repertoire of primitive marks, iconic pictographs and totemic motifs that could be used to develop a unique design language for modern Australia, the primitive roots of which reached back into pre-historical times.<sup>viii</sup> (And while there was much discussion about the need for a uniquely Australian style with many using Aboriginal art to this end, I suspect a degree of designer pragmatism was at work as the line based marks and pattern making were ideal for black and white art-work of the day.)

I need to make it clear that the moral rights and wrongs of these cultural borrowings are not my concern. Rather like the Cross-Cultural Studies scholar Nicholas Thomas, I am interested in the particular contexts in which the borrowings take place, together with the reasons and power relationships that informed the process, and how they in turn have contributed to the construction of our historical consciousness and the place of the Australian Aboriginal within it.<sup>ix</sup>

### A Vanishing Race

Gert Sellheim was amongst the first modernist designers to incorporate Aboriginal motifs, subjects and styles into his work. His whimsical interpretations of rock art widely

applied in posters, stamps, gift cards, lettering, murals and publications became a stylistic signature that was highly sought.<sup>x</sup> Many of Sellheim's clients came from the tourist and promotional industry that, like the Australian National Travel Association, were involved in selling Australia nationally and internationally. Through designs such as his ANTA poster Corroboree c.1930 Sellheim helped develop the language of modern tourism in which the indigenous inhabitants of colonial countries were stereotyped as exotic picturesque sights for the tourist gaze. No doubt because of their graphic adaptability the Druk Druk men featured in Corroboree were used as a decorative device by other graphic artists including Daphne Mayo and Douglas Annand.

As Griffiths and Morris note it was tourism, and more specifically the ANTA, that shaped the popular self-image for Australia from the 1930s to 1960s creating in the process a set of stereotypical themes, the most popular of which was nature in the form of the Aboriginal, fauna, flora, and pastoral and outback landscapes including Uluru. Icons of modern progress such as the Sydney Harbour Bridge, the city and beach culture also were popular. The ANTA records show that in 1930s the Aboriginal, together with wildflowers, the koala and kangaroo, were the most widely produced and disseminated: the traditional grouping of Aborigine and kangaroo being particularly popular.<sup>xi</sup> But often as in Percy Trompf's TransAustralian Railway, 193?, and Warner's Go North to Alice Springs with TAA Jetliner, 1960, 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 Aborigine becomes at one and the same time, a symbol of Australia's unique antiquity and a touchstone of the colony's success and progress.

#### A Historical and Spatial Consciousness

Given their capacity to signify both evolutionary history and cultural uniqueness, images of Aborigines combined with modernist re-interpretations of Aboriginal art, became established as key graphic devices in panoramic celebrations of nationhood from the late

1930s onwards. Sellheim contributed to this process through his innovative design of *This is Australia* publications from the late 1930s into the 1970s. A favoured device of government and industry for building national pride and cohesiveness, and promoting Australia as a progressive modern nation to investors and settlers, *This is Australia* publications were an important form of popular history and myth making.

Working with publisher 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.<sup>xii</sup> The classic panorama as Bernard Comment noted was a product of modern technologies, most specifically photographic. In translating the panoramic logic into print, Sellheim and Ziegler responded to the advances in photomechanical reproduction that saw Herbert Bayer amongst others developing a new visual language that, in the case of his 1935 The Miracle of Life exhibition brochure, used a panoramic logic to visualise big picture, abstract and complex ideas as simple and comprehensible. Ideas such as man's biological place in the universe and ideological issues such as ancestry and race.<sup>xiii</sup>

Like Bayer, Sellheim used a combination of abstraction and symbolism, photomontage, illustration, expressive type and dynamic page layout to convert the book into a panoramic time, space and place continuum. As the reader enters *This is Australia* they enter a cultural space and embark on an imaginative journey through which they learn to read the land in terms of history, national character and progress, and in process interiorising what it means to be Australian. Beginning with the cover and end pages, the journey reaches back into ancient Aboriginal dreamtime (that is the beginning of time) before rushing forward past the indigenous aborigine, who still lives as primitive man, together with ancient flora and fauna in his remote Never Never Lands, to the evolutionary turning point of discovery (Came the colonist-and found a strange land), and building the nation (Now-in this our time), to the creation of ideology (These-our tasks) government, cities, primary and manufacturing industries, leisure and culture.

This historical narrative is intricately interwoven with a spatial narrative, as page after page unfolds to a multiplicity of aerial views of vast tracts of wide open land, and even entire states (Tasmania-land of contrasts), ready for exploration, settlement and pleasure (Welcome The Settler), seamlessly juxtaposed against images of political, economic and urban growth, of industries (Hardboard) and cities (Sydney), and intimate close ups of Australians at work and play. The impression is one of an all-encompassing wholeness as all is viewed through the colonising, panoramic lens with its promise of vast frontiers and new tomorrows. All is made persuasive by Sellheim's use of photomontage that makes the totality of the nation, its aspirations, character and people, tangible and comprehensible. Not only does he successfully evoke an emotionally engaging story of a continent being transformed into a modern western nation, he also mythologises character-building intangibles such as distance and isolation, which technology in the form of the aeroplane and radio helps to transcend, uniting people in spirit and endeavour. (Internal Airways)

Learning to see

In his brilliant The Road to Botany Bay, Paul Carter argues that the Australia discovered by Captain Cook was so unfamiliar that it had to be taught to speak by the early explorers and settlers: it had to be shaped into a stage on which European history could unfold. As they moved through the land, converting it from unchartered space into place through the process of naming and identifying, the explorers shaped a new spatial consciousness and established our central mode of story and history telling, the explorer traveller journal.<sup>xiv</sup> Sellheim's *This is Australia* narratives modernise the explorer journal as each page offers a new vista, a new discovery of place. They are essentially formal exercises in learning to see, know and love the land, that in the process naturalise the panoramic gaze into the public imagination.

Significantly they also extend the colonising rhetoric of possession and dispossession beyond land to the appropriation of Aboriginal history and culture to create an epic history for European Australia. As Sellheim's historical narrative illustrates the weaving of Aboriginal dreamtime into the story of nationhood promoted and legitimised white

Australia's claim to a unique and anthropologically ancient history. Stereotypically standing in the wilderness, looking forward to a future, in which he will either die out or be assimilated into the universal story of white civilisation, the Aboriginal becomes an enigmatic symbol of racial and cultural difference as well as progress, and the basis for the argument that it is the unique ancientness of the continent that shapes the nation's character and psyche.

Sellheim gives visible form to this mythic psyche with his primitive pictographs and motifs which, juxtaposed against the visions of modern progress, float within the spatial expanses of book, like the ancient spirit voice of the country. Looking back at Sellheim's *This is Australia* posters and publications one is struck by how rather than synthesising aboriginal motifs and styles into a new assimilated Australian style, Sellheim used them in an illustrative and explicit manner that draws attention to the aboriginal presence. Ironically you could argue that rather than the aboriginal presence being permanently effaced through assimilation, it lives on, creating what the poet Judith Wright describes as a troubling tension between, the love of the land we have inhabited and the guilt of the invasion.

What I have sought to do in this paper by focusing on *This is Australia* narratives is explore the role of graphic designers in creating a national iconography and graphic language that, as the 2000 Olympic Games illustrated, informs the public imagination in a deeply instinctive and emotional manner. I have sought to question whether cultural differences in design are more subtle and complex than traditional nationalist design histories indicate and put a case for a more critical analysis of Australian design history. Focusing on the graphic production of the panoramic narrative, I have raised the possibility that Australia's inherently international modernist design is informed by a distinctive formal logic and handling of space, time and narrative, that speaks of the historical experiences and imperatives of being a settler nation. In doing this I wanted to draw attention to the power of graphic design to bond people to ideology by not only creating instantaneously recognisable images of nationhood but also by shaping a more insidious spatial and historical consciousness at the heart of which is a panoramic rhetoric

of possession and dispossession. The challenge for today being how this panoramic logic will be reworked to reflect changing values such as Reconciliation, cultural diversity, environment and progress.

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<sup>i</sup> Meaghan Morris, "Panorama: The Live, The Dead and the Living", Paul Foss (ed.), Island in the Stream, New South Wales, Pluto Press, 1988, p. 161.

<sup>ii</sup> Meaghan Morris, pp.161-162.

<sup>iii</sup> Bernard Comment, The Panorama, London, Reaktion Books, 1999, passim.

<sup>iv</sup> Morris, Panorama, pp.160-162.

<sup>v</sup> Armin Hofmann, His Work, Quest and Philosophy, Basel, Birkhauser Verlag, 1989, p. 21.

<sup>vi</sup> One People: 1961, Minister for Territories, Canberra, 1961.

<sup>vii</sup> Tom Griffiths, Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia, pp.181-183.

<sup>viii</sup> Charles L. Barrett and A.S.Kenyon, Australian Aboriginal Art, Melbourne, National Museum of Victoria, revised ed., 1958, passim.

<sup>ix</sup> Nicholas Thomas, "Dangerous Territory: Indigenous Reference in Australian Art", Claire Baddeley, Motif and Meaning: Aboriginal Influences in Australian Art 1930-1970, Ballarat, Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, 1999, p. 24.

<sup>x</sup> Roger Butler, "Uniquely Australian: Gert Sellheim and the Graphic Arts, Roger Butler (ed.) The European: Emigré Artists in Australia 1930-1960, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 1997, p.p18-19.

<sup>xi</sup> Roger Butler, The Street as Art Galleries-Walls Sometimes Speak: Poster Art in Australia, Canberra, National Gallery of Australia, 1993, p.21.

<sup>xii</sup> I will be using Oswald Zeigler, (ed.) This is Australia, Sydney, Oswald S. Zeigler, 1947, and Oswald Zeigler, (ed.) This is Australia, Sydney, Oswald S. Zeigler, 1956.

<sup>xiii</sup> "Modern Art Gets Down to Business", Commercial Art and Industry, April 1935, pp.156-159.

<sup>xiv</sup> Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay: An Essay in Spatial History, London, Faber, 1987, pp. 59-68.