Renate Brosch, Kylie Crane (Eds.)

Visualising Australia

Images, Icons, Imaginations

Vol. 11

K ONZEPTE
O RIENTIERUNGEN
A BHANDLUNGEN
L EKTÜREN
A **USTRALIEN**
S **TUDIEN**

Eine Schriftenreihe
im Auftrag der *Gesellschaft für Australienstudien e.V.*

Renate Brosch, Kylie Crane (Eds.)

Visualising Australia

Images, Icons, Imaginations

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier

Visualising Australia: Images, Icons, Imaginations /
Renate Brosch, Kylie Crane (Eds.).-
Trier : WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014
(KOALAS; Vol. 11)
ISBN 978-3-86821-551-9

Cover Illustration: Rob Griffith, picture alliance / Associated Press

Cover Design: Brigitta Disseldorf

ISBN 978-3-86821-551-9

WVT Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier
Bergstraße 27, 54295 Trier
Postfach 4005, 54230 Trier
Tel.: (0651) 41503, Fax: (0651) 41504
Internet: http://www.wvttrier.de
E-Mail: wvt@wvttrier.de

Table of Contents

Visualising Australia: An Introduction

Renate Brosch and Kylie Crane

The topic of this volume is visual representations of Australia. The name *Visualising Australia* is anything but incidental: with the gerund form, we hope to stress processes, the ways in which such visualisations are ongoing. The particularisation that may thus emerge is encapsulated in a number of 'snapshots' – to pick up on the visual metaphor – provided by the contributions to this volume. Faced with the daunting task of some form of contextualisation, we resist the urge to provide a conclusive, cohesive narrative that traces a trajectory through the contributions, rather choosing instead to foreground specific concerns and problems we feel are integral to the overall topic. This introduction thus provides forays into visual cultural studies and key images pertaining to visual culture in the Australian context, before then providing a brief overview of the contributions that form the bulk of the volume.

Since the 'iconic turn,' which questioned Western culture's conceptual link between vision and knowledge and abandoned its tradition of consistently privileging the word over the image, images have provided a rich field of cultural enquiry. Visual images with their immediate and direct appeal are particularly powerful vehicles of identity, capable of transporting ideas of an 'imagined community' (cf. Anderson) and thus aiding the formation of such communities. Thus, some images are recognized as quintessentially 'Australian,' both from within and from outside of this community, and this, in spite of evidence that their legitimacy lies in collective myths. These myths, or nationalist narratives, are reiterated not only verbally but also through the continued use of key visual images. As Richard White states in his book *Inventing Australia*:

> Most new nations go through the formality of inventing a national identity, but Australia has long supported a whole industry of image-makers to tell us what we are. Throughout its white history, there have been countless attempts to get Australia down on paper and to catch its essence […] [,] to describe the continent, […] to give it an individuality, a personality. This they call Australian, but it is more likely to reflect the hopes, fears or needs of its inventor. (White viii)

To consider visual images within the framework of nation thus entails a reflective component that critiques certain assumptions that uphold this framework.

The following collection investigates images that are associated with Australian identities. In discussing visual representations pertinent to Australian cultures, the volume seeks to integrate Australian Studies and Visual Culture Studies. Specifically, it seeks to apply the insights of Visual Culture Studies to regional and cultural specifics. Visual culture is a field of scholarship that has flourished since the 1980s, but is yet to be addressed on a larger scale in conjunction with Australia.[1] Therefore, this intro-

1 Accordingly White's study, which is an important exception, stops short in 1980. The neglect is remarkable because of the availability of means of image reproduction at an early stage in the

duction will first address the premises, assumptions and methods of Visual Culture before engaging in a discussion of Australia's visual identity construction, while the subsequent articles deal with particular instances of Australian Visual Culture.

Visual Culture Studies

The visual has become more and more central to meaning-making processes in Western societies. Although contemporary culture is often assumed to be dominated by the visual, many Visual Culture scholars claim that the advance of visual technologies and the corresponding increasing frequency of images in everyday life are in fact accompanied by a reduction in visual literacy. Whereas in literature gaps and indeterminacies are well-known characteristics considered integral to the production of meaning, pictures are often taken to be self-evident and directly accessible. In Mitchell's words the "image is a sign that pretends not to be a sign, masquerading as natural immediacy and presence" (Mitchell 1986, 43). This common sense idea of the transparency of the image, though fallacious, is well-established through the "resolutely ocularcentric" epistemological regime which dominated Western society for 400 years (Jay 3-7). Visual imagery is never autonomous or innocent. We are surrounded by images, but no matter how impressive our techniques for capturing images may have become, these do not comprise transparent windows on the world but always interpret it in certain ways. As Nicholas Mirzoeff points out, the more our society is dominated by the visual, the less we are able to analyse it (Mirzoeff 3). This is where the need for Visual Culture Studies arises.

Vision is merely a faculty allowing us to see; visuality determines what we (think we) see. 'Visuality' refers to visual events and their attendant discourses in a particular culture at a particular point in time. Hence, investigating visuality means enquiring into the social, political and cultural determinants of seeing and images (Christ and Jordan ix). Images depend on and elicit certain practices of viewing, which in turn speak to specific culturally conditioned identities, thus permitting spectators to situate themselves in a viewing position. Visual practices are always embedded in a wider culture, where the appeal an image exerts does not just derive from the unique inspiration of an artist or the corresponding sensibility on the part of an educated viewer but is also determined by a range of assumptions and beliefs that characterise the cultural moment of a picture. Viewers, spectators and audiences never come to see an image with an "innocent eye", every beholder inevitably looks with a "period eye" (Baxandall 40). Therefore in Visual Studies, habits of vision and modes of cognitive perception particular to a period, social group or location need to be taken account of.

According to Martin Jay, Western visuality is grounded in a rigorous ontological separation of subject and perceived object. This Cartesian duality is particularly potent in a

---

settler culture and the prevalence of the visual in Australian culture where visual media have had a larger share in public discourses than in countries with a longer Western tradition.