"The Glittering Tart": Imaging Sydney

edited by Catherine Simpson & Anthony Lambert

Flying over the red roofs
and blinding water
of my glittering tart Sydney
(Dorothy Porter, Monkey’s Mask, p. 199)

Most of the epithets used to describe Sydney: "Sin city", "the glittering tart", "superficial Sydney", "emerald City" refer to its status as a tourist destination with overwhelming natural beauty or alternatively its narrative underbelly of crime, drugs and hedonism. Dorothy Porter’s phrase, "glittering tart" (1994:199) exemplifies for us both these aspects of Sydney. The articles presented in this issue of Scan filter these familiar representations of the city through the themes of encounter, arrival, negotiation, colour, branding and re-imagined history.

Much recent work in media and cultural studies has focused on the relationship between cinema, cities and (post)modernity. As an emerging global city, what is Sydney’s role within this configuration? This issue of Scan provides what we hope will be the beginning of a continuing discussion about Sydney as a cultural experience and a cultural "production"; the way it has been imagined in film, TV, advertising, the web and the media more broadly. When we launched the "call for papers" last year, we intended to have at least one essay looking at the imaging of Sydney in feature filmmaking but unfortunately this didn’t eventuate. As a prelude to a larger project we have included as part of the information section of this edition, Anthony Lambert’s extensive annotated filmography which includes almost 150 films featuring Sydney.

"The Glittering Tart" was inspired by the October 2003 symposium "Imaging the City" organised by Macquarie University’s Media Department which brought together artists, filmmakers, writers and academics to discuss Sydney, its representation and its cultural politics. The day also featured archival footage of a Sydney erased from cultural memory and a screening of Michael Bates remarkable short film, The Projectionist (2003). Two of the presentations from that symposium are published here (James Donald’s, and Fuller + Harley’s) and another three have already featured in earlier editions of Scan (See Kathryn Millard’s "Designing Suburbia on Screen: Parklands and Travelling Light", Merilyn Fairskye’s "Light Moves: Discussion notes" and Alec Morgan’s "Lost City of the Senses" in Scan Magazine). What connects all the following essays is a sense of Sydney being part of wider cultural and economic global flows whether as tourist destination, aviopolis or automobile-city.

James Donald’s "The Enigma of Arrival" prefaces the following collection of essays with a meditation on arrivals in modern European cities such as Berlin and Paris. This paper provides a journey through the mystery, abstraction and anxiety of arrival in early film as well as the literature of a number of notable émigrés. The author, a "flitting Brit", provides an entré into what it might be to arrive in Sydney.

Sydney is unique amongst global cities in having an airport virtually at its heart. Through their image/text, Fuller + Harley invoke a poetic exploration of Sydney as a global aviopolis. Coupling an arresting series of photographs with text, "SYD: the city as airport" argues that the airport invites a different command over (city)space, one that entwines motion, commerce, land, sky, matter and information into the connection and flow of multiple ecologies and multiple possibilities.

We move from "Sydney as airport-city" to "Sydney as automobile-city" in the next essay, Sherman Young’s "Morphings"
and Ur-Forms: From Driveur to Flaneur". In this, Young argues that Sydney is produced through "a directed flanerie" located in the driver’s seat of the automobile where the urban environment becomes largely an "aesthetic distraction". Sydney as "a metropolis of driveurs" where speed and destination have transplanted the need for the journey is further explored in new media representations such as Project Gotham II where the city’s geography is turned into a racetrack for the solitary gameur.

Images of Sydney’s glimmering blue harbour and status as a global tourist destination resonate in the next two essays. The first, "Drawing Sydney: Flatlands and the Chromatic Contours of a Global City" discusses the "imageability" of Sydney as a global city. Instead of relying on existing mediated images of Sydney in TV, film and advertising, the authors adopt the rather novel approach of asking overseas students and short-term residents to draw mental maps of Sydney and choose colours associated with the city. Hemelryk Donald and Gammack argue that Sydney is overwhelmingly imagined as "blue" in comparison to other global cities studied such as Shanghai and Hong Kong. The second essay explores the branding of Sydney in the 1980s with a discussion of Ken Done’s work. Susie Khamis’s, "I’d rather take methadone than Ken Done" describes how Done’s signature style in the 1980s sold the concept of Sydney to the rest of the world. However the most recent Tourism Commission’s campaign (2004) uses the work of Brett Whiteley rather than Ken Done suggesting Done designs belong to a distinct moment in Australia’s history.

The final essay in this collection, by Greg Levine and Stephen McElhinney, investigates the ABC mini-series, Blue Murder’s (1995) representation of events in Sydney’s past with impressions of the present by a visit to the haunts of characters such as "Neddy" Smith, Roger Rogerson and Christopher Dale Flannery. True to the experience of these characters, "Blue Murder: A Re-Imagined History" takes us on a pub crawl through legendary crimes and post-industrial possibilities, marking Sydney as a product of both the historical and the fictional. In fact, this entire edition speaks of Sydney as a peculiar site of imaging and imagining.

References


Scan is a project of the Media Department @ Macquarie University, Sydney