

CULTURAL POLITICS AND ICONOGRAPHY:

AN INTRODUCTION

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This collection of papers reflects on the many dimensions of contemporary narratives of iconography in public culture in Australia and Asia. The idea for the volume arose from a series of seminars held at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research in 2002. The series 'Iconographies' was convened by Penny Edwards and centred on research undertaken in the Asia-Pacific, with papers that interrogated national and cultural icons. Just as a biography might examine the makings of a particular personality and her or his shaping of inner and outer worlds, so also iconographic narratives that trace and explore both the evolution and appropriation of particular icons help us mark key moments in the cultural politics of communities, nations and global public spheres. The present volume has two papers (Taylor and Seth) from that series and others on the themes of iconography and iconoclasm that were solicited from a group of interdisciplinary authors working on these themes.

In this collection of papers on iconography (literally meaning 'writing in images') the meanings and salience of cultural imagery are explored across a spectrum ranging from sites of pleasure and mourning at one end to those icons that reconfigure the political economy of a particular nation at the other. In

between are iconographic accounts that map aspects of popular culture, the interface of indigenous and colonial histories, narratives of modernity and Marxism in the Third World and the liminal precariousness of being human. None of the analysis undertaken is strictly formalistic in nature. The focus rather is on the total symbolic horizon of the icons concerned.

The term 'iconography' has often referred to the painting or sculptures of religious icons, where the icons are seen as the embodiment of the religious figures they represented. Icons as 'representations of the divine'¹ have attracted a long history of scholarly interest that goes back to the Renaissance. The idea that the human being was made in the image or likeness of the Creator gave an impetus to the critical study of religious icons. The study of iconography from the Renaissance onwards referred to the often painstaking work of describing, classifying and relating these religious motifs to the wider cultural frameworks within which they operated.² The gradual secularisation of intellectual labour from the post-Renaissance period to Enlightenment and beyond saw the opening up of the study of icons to incorporate visual imagery that constituted 'figures of knowledge'. One can

think, for instance, of Marx's powerful deployment of the *camera obscura* and the 'fetish' as icons figuring his conceptual elaboration of two key categories, 'ideology' and 'commodity', respectively. It is, of course, fairly common knowledge that the etymology of the term 'idea' – a mentalist construct – can be traced to the very act of 'seeing' in Greek, *eidōs*. This correspondence worried Plato enough to push him toward making a distinction between *eidōs* and *eidolon*, so that the former could connote only 'suprasensible reality' (the Platonic world of ideas and perfect forms), and the latter the actual physical sensation of 'seeing' likeness (*eikōn*) of the Platonic forms in the world around us.³ But Plato notwithstanding, the tension in meaning generated from genealogical linkages between *eidōs* (idea), *eidolon* and *eikōn* (to visualise semblance, likeness) continues to affect knowledge production in very fruitful ways. There are numerous reasons why the study of iconography has been considered an important intellectual pursuit. One dominant justification has been that in the evolution of human history across a range of cultures, images and visual symbols appeared earlier than texts. Thus, they have been and continue to be a particularly effective means of cultural communication, especially in societies which are not text-based, or where not all members are literate. In addition, in cross-cultural encounters the visual is given prominence in the immediate exchange of cultural meaning across heterogeneous boundaries.

Presently, the power of visual imagery is even more marked and influential, and although texts still have undeniable interpretive potency, icons often hold a particular challenge for us to understand them. They are everywhere – part

of political and religious spectacles, as part of marketing strategies for key multinational products and productions, even part of a global exchange of cultures through discourses of tourism and travel, to mention only a few sites of iconic circulation. Furthermore, as digital media and other forms of visual material and popular culture circulate with ever more velocity in late modern global public spheres, so too does the aspiration to acquire skills to interpret this visual onslaught gain even greater intellectual significance. When speaking of icons we, thus, refer to not only statues and visual art, but to an infinite variety of visual forms that are emblematic of the cultural life of diverse polities around the globe. In doing so the authors in this volume illustrate the power of material and symbolic forms in untangling local, national and global histories and transforming sets of power relations. As Gamboni maintains, the cultural categories 'icon', 'work of art' and 'cultural object' overlap and an emblem's identity is often multiple and contradictory.⁴

Many of the papers in this collection deploy the term 'iconography' to cover those cultural artefacts in public culture which carry forms of authority that exert a peculiarly strong influence over individuals or groups, or over whole societies. The twentieth century has been witness to many polities swayed by the power of icons, especially in Communist and fascist regimes. As Victoria Bonnell has argued in her study of the iconography of Soviet political posters, icons often function to legitimate institutions and establish relations of power.⁵ At the beginning of the twentieth century the ubiquity of religious icons in Russian homes and public buildings reflected the notion that the image itself often held

particularly concentrated power.⁶ The powerful deployment of iconography from the *Ramayana* in the 1990s by the Hindu Right in India to mobilise support for its Rama Temple building plans at the site of the demolished Babri Mosque, is yet another instance of the power of images to radically shape public opinion. In India's case, the fabric of religious or auratic imagery that became ubiquitous in the public sphere was not merely a cover for more earthly secular, political and material goals. Its very legitimacy in the eyes of the Hindu masses lay in the fact that it drew deeply on and fed into a certain libidinal investment in the very experience of the 'sacred' that pervaded Hindu religious practices.

The ability of visual representations to command an effective reach upon people has been employed in many different societies for a range of purposes. Although the intentions of producers of icons are important areas of analysis it is the reception of icons which most intrigues the authors in this collection. While icons may become charged with notions of authenticity and the implicit power to bestow an aura of legitimacy on their producers and consumers, iconographic places, images or beings are often immersed in ambiguity. Rather than bringing cohesion and certainty icons can produce anxious, uncertain moments replete with a sense of dislocation and apprehension. The diverse vocabularies of this collection destabilise and question the very grounds of belonging on which icons are constituted.

While several of the papers in this collection explore the production of iconographic imagery (Bishop, Taylor, Seth), people (Yipu) and places (Hall, Allon), several of these also detail the ever-present iconoclastic potential that cir-

culates along with iconographic power. The desire to damage the symbols of authority is often an attempt to diminish or disavow the power vested in the given authority itself.⁷ Quite a few of the papers dealing with iconoclasm do talk of the impact that iconic destruction has upon relations of control. But they also go beyond that to trace in meticulous detail the gamut of effects that certain iconoclastic acts unleash on the community. To be effective icons must generally convey a set of comprehensible and often standardised ideas and ideologies that invoke intense responses in an audience. Their compelling role as boundary makers together with the political meanings associated with their demolition mean they often attract concentrated sentiments. In term of human sociality, they thus carry a magnetic charge around which communities can cohere and rally. But icons can also mark liminal spaces and politico-cultural borderlands, especially at times when wider social and political transformations at both national and global levels, throw up enormous chaos, confusion and even terror. In such cases they carry multiple charges of meaning marking periods of immense cultural uncertainty and doubt. As an example one can think of the importance of the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan as global cultural heritage and the impotence of the international community in protecting these icons from the explosive iconoclasm of the Taliban.

Phillip Taylor's paper, 'Spirits, Iconoclasts and the Borders of the Market in Urban Vietnam', inaugurates the theme of the socio-political power of icons and their circulation within a political economy. His specific site is Vietnam and he focuses on the iconic potency of a particular goddess called the Lady of the

Realm whose shrine in a rural village in southern Vietnam attracts an unprecedented number of followers from diverse economic backgrounds. This female icon has become inflected with Vietnamese constructions of their changing social world and reveals new ways of asserting agency, in particular by working women who come to visit the shrine to ask assistance with their personal concerns, specifically those that arise in a commercial context of the marketplace such as requests for assistance in managing money. The meanings that converge upon the acts of worshippers who undertake pilgrimages to visit the Lady's shrine are related to the new social cleavages in which urbanites find themselves. A visit to the goddess re-asserts one's position in relation to other urban dwellers as well as bestowing agency to worshippers in relation to the forces of social transformation and globalisation. Most of the women who make the pilgrimage to the goddess are those who have become integrated into a market economy, many of them working in urban markets. Rather than being a rural religious cult, this goddess has recently taken on many new meanings and revitalised religious practices of urban people who have been encountering much more complex sets of social and commercial relations in this period of market reform. In this case the goddess icon becomes a means through which urban people can constitute and maintain their relations with others, at the same time as her image condenses the more complex sets of financial practices that people are located within into more manageable processes. In this reading the goddess icon also acts as intermediary between the state and civil society in Vietnam by renegotiating relationships between the Vietnamese nation-state, the diasporic Vietnamese who make the

pilgrimage and between rural and urban dwellers

In the paper that follows, Fiona Allon's 'Bali as Icon: Tourism, Death and the Pleasure Periphery', the analytic lens is turned on one of Australia's favourite holiday destinations, Bali. Fiona interprets this tropical resort as an icon of Australia's expanding territorial reach. In her exploration of the transnational connections between Bali and Australia, Allon finds a reconstitution of Bali as a site of 'real Aussie culture' arising from the history of Australian tourist culture which developed in Bali in the 1970s and 1980s. The paper opens up many new insights into the constitution of transnational relations between an 'Australianness' at home and abroad, and particularly how iconographic sites like Bali and Anzac Cove in Turkey inflect contemporary Australian nationalism. Allon interrogates the ways in which certain places like Bali become imaginary peripheries of the nation. In doing so Allon rethinks the mapping of the nation. Bali has been seen as a 'pleasure periphery' but also harbours traces of its own massacres and disturbing past masked through its rise as a site of global pleasure and as a colonial technique of the governing Indonesian state. Allon describes this process of covering the wrongs of the pasts as a 'hauntology', borrowing Derrida's term, whereby the past always erupts through the masquerade of tourism. In this play of icons in which Bali is simultaneously tourist site, massacre site and Australian 'territory' Allon's study produces a complex array of new mappings of nation for both Bali and Australia.

In the following paper we have a reading of not just the political import of icons, but also the ways in which our interpretations of them can be deployed for epistemological purposes to critique

what the author calls, 'historicist domestications of *difference*'. In 'Smashing Statues, Dancing Sivas: Two Tales of Indian Icons', Sanjay Seth begins by undertaking a form of intellectual iconoclasm by critiquing the ways in which the category 'peasant' has stood for 'backwardness' in India. He does this through an exploration of the meanings behind the destruction of icons during a period thought of as a 'cultural revolution' initiated by Maoist students in Calcutta in 1970. Seth argues that if one took into consideration the range of icons destroyed in the campaign, this iconoclasm by the students actually represented an attack on the distinction between modernity and tradition. The students seemed to have made no clear distinction between progressive and reactionary figures in history. In carrying out these actions the students were unwittingly removing the boundaries in Indian Marxism between the modern and the traditional, the advanced and the 'backward'. If socialism was the means of becoming 'modern', then in the act of iconoclasm the students were inadvertently critiquing Marxism's notions of history and politics. In the second section of his paper, Seth moves on to the intriguing story of a British legal case in which the God Siva featured as a 'juristic personality' and asks why gods cannot figure as legitimate agents in history-writing when even the law can be redefined to include them! He concludes his paper by pushing the reader to rethink ways in which the logic of history appropriates *difference*. The icons through which he mediates his arguments eventually themselves become sites of unstable meanings or as he puts it, 'the site of difference to be explored by problematizing our categories rather than merely applying them'.

The next paper, Lee-Anne Hall's 'Sit-

ting Down in the Square: Indigenous Presence in an Australian City', connects with the paper on Bali in its continuation of the theme of an ongoing spectral presence of that which has been erased or attempted to be removed from public memory. Hall writes that in Adelaide the indigenous Kaurna people have returned to the city centre to reclaim their homeland. Centuries of systematic colonisation had erased indigeneity from public sight. In her discussion of the various attempts to forbid the consumption of alcohol in public spaces Hall reveals the state's continued attempts to 'purify' public spaces of an Aboriginal presence. Hall explores the attempts to 'manage' indigeneity in the city as a process creating ambiguous sites of an iconographic Aboriginal presence which is viewed as disruptive, and criminal. Finally, Hall argues that the contradictory and complex character of an indigenous co-presence in the urban centre of Adelaide is revealed through the problematic of imposing an alcohol free zone upon Aboriginal sociality. The indigenous people, she argues, have within the confines of state restrictions managed to carve out 'third spaces' or to use Foucauldian terminology, 'heterotopic' spaces. Such spaces allow them to express their own unique and alternate modes of sociality while at the same time managing a deferral of hostile state regulation. Public space here becomes iconographic in representing the contradictions that lie at the heart of oppressive state governmentality. Here, an Aboriginal presence in town squares is not a deliberately iconoclastic act but one which nevertheless serves as a reminder of a brutal colonising history and continuous state management of Aboriginal sociality and movement. In the process it disturbs that apparently seamless and disciplined deployment of power by a

so-called democratic post-colonial state.

In Zen Yipu's paper 'Remade in Japan: the Case of Audrey Hepburn', we turn from public memory and state power to popular culture. The paper explores the modalities through which Audrey Hepburn has become the embodiment of personal desire in aspirational young Japanese women. Rather than being a desire to imitate 'the West' or Hollywood culture, the new simulated Audrey Hepburns in Japan are a particularly local Japanese invention. The new Japanese Audrey is suitably futuristic through the digitisation and virtuality of her images that have been required for commercialisation in the local technologised context of Japan. Yipu argues that rather than focus on the notion of 'authenticity' of a cultural icon, the new forms of digital media reproduction are deliberately parodying the idea of an original and the loss of integrity that a reproduction may entail. Armed with this notion of the irrelevance of the 'real' for the effectiveness of iconographic power, Yipu suggests that Audrey in contemporary Japan was 'born virtual'. At the same time the paper suggests that the particular forces at work in Japanese popular culture which have led so many young women to idolise Audrey Hepburn involve the flourishing celebrity culture which together with magazines and hyper consumerism condense around certain key iconographic figures like Audrey. This interlinked marketing and consumer process has led to very particular ways in which young Japanese women come to aspire to imitate celebrities as well as consume products associated with them.

The boundary making and boundary breaking capacities of icons are also illustrated in the last paper of the volume. In Rebecca Bishop's paper 'Journeys to the Urban Exotic: Embodiment and the Zoo-

Going Gaze', the image of the gorilla as emblematic of the indeterminate boundaries between humans and animals is explored. By analysing the reactions of visitors to the gorilla enclosure at Taronga Park Zoo in Sydney, Bishop reveals the human fascination for the indistinct and problematic nature of the boundary between animal and human. While the gorilla is viewed as both a mirror of humanness as well as a spectacle of primitiveness and animality in the contemporary desire to 'save' the gorilla from extinction, it also appears to represent the desire of a 'benevolent' humanity to protect both the image of human origins and the natural world. In unravelling the many complex ways that gorillas are viewed and imagined, Bishop generates an understanding of the mythologies surrounding human/animal boundaries and transgressions. The gorilla, like the Lady of the Realm in Vietnam, accrues new meanings in different historical milieux but in all these different cultural contexts, continues to be a representative *par excellence* of categorical ambiguity.

The specific role of iconography in the negotiation of popular consumption, public memory, social identity, and larger political movements are themes which run through the collection of essays. We hope the volume opens up new insights into the relationship between the strategic use of iconographic forms and their recontextualisation for different audiences and in different historical contexts. Where there is uncertainty over meaning, societies often employ icons to seize meaning, distil it and reconstitute public discourse. The icon as a medium of values establishes a cohesive set of public discourses and collective identities. But it also runs the risk of subsequent demolition and the consequent dissolution of established norms of public sociality. To

that extent, the study of icons allows us to trace the rise and fall of diverse public spheres around the globe.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Alain Besancon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press), 2000, 1.
- 2 Albert C. Moore, *Iconography of Religions: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press), 1977, 19.
- 3 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press,) 1986, 5.
- 4 Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism Since the French Revolution* (London: Reaktion Books), 1997
- 5 Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters Under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press), 1977, 2.
- 6 Bonnell, 4.
- 7 David Freedberg, *Iconoclasts and Their Motives* (Maarssen, Netherlands: Gary Schwartz Publishers), 1985, 25.