



Imagining Colonial Space in Regional Queensland: film and governance

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Transformations, No. 1 (September 2000)

<http://www.cqu.edu.au/transformations>

ISSN 1444-3775

Abstract

A series of films commissioned by the Queensland government in 1898 were made, showing a variety of scenes of metropolitan Brisbane and rural regions of Queensland. This paper examines some of these films in terms of the way they constitute a 'colonial imaginary' involving the positioning of the spectator in time and space. By drawing on Metz's ideas of the cinema apparatus, as well as Foucault's arguments concerning the surveillance of space, the paper shows how these films can be read in terms of an imagined audience based on immigration policies at the time. Overall, the paper argues that films from previous eras should not be read simply as objective representations of a social context, but in terms of an imaginary constitution which is virtually located within the real, and involving a range of rhetorical and aesthetic practices and modes of presentation.

Key Terms: film, history, governance, Queensland, colonialism, aesthetics

Introduction

The viewing of surviving film from the colonial and federation era in Australia provides an opportunity to not only to see first hand the everyday life of that period (1895 – 1914), but also to reflect upon some of the social and institutional practices operating at the time. Luckily, films commissioned by the Queensland government department of Agriculture and Stock during this period have survived.¹ These unique films give some indication of the way the capital of Brisbane looked at the time, as well as showing some of the rural regions in Queensland. It is tempting to view them in terms of what they tell us about the social, cultural and institutional structures, values and practices in late colonial and early federation Queensland.

However, I do not assume that these films are simply an objective account of everyday life and farming practices of the time. Rather I will take into account the fact that the films are themselves the product of certain practices by the film makers and the government department for which they were commissioned. As a consequence, I will read them in terms of the 'stake' in which the films themselves have in representing metropolitan life and farming practices in Queensland. In other words, I am concerned to show how these films helped contribute to a certain

'colonial imaginary', involving the mediation of physical reality by an illusionistic photovisual space. In this case, it becomes important to analyse the spectatorial position, or the structured space at the interface between the film text and the spectator, providing the possibility of intersubjective experiences for the audience.²

Film and Governance in Colonial Queensland

In 1898 the Queensland government decided to employ a professional photographer, Frederick Wills and an assistant Henry Mobsby, to make some moving films of various aspects of Queensland life (Long and Laughren, 1993).³ The aim of this project was to publicise Queensland in Britain as an attractive destination for migrants; a place fit for yeoman farmers, business people and tradesmen to settle in a land of unlimited opportunity; a land with the unique combination of modern urban lifestyle in the capital of Brisbane and rich farming pastures in the vast coastal and inland plains immediately to the north and west. Through a special act of parliament, land was made available in Queensland at cheap rates, and heavily publicised in literature and the press. Queensland's special envoy in England George Randall was employed to promote Queensland as an agricultural state at various rural exhibitions across England, hoping to attract English yeoman farmers to the fledgling colony (p. 36).

As Long and Laughren point out, the films were never screened to their intended audience: the yeoman farmers of England. This is because Randall deemed them (the films) to be unsuitable (Long and Laughren, p. 59). Apparently Randall had developed a set against film as publicity because it seemed to him to attract the wrong type ('the flotsam and jetsam of the cities') suggesting as much about the audience for film in general at the time, and the resistance to film by the wealthier classes. Immediately after they were made, the films were screened on only one occasion: to senior staff of the Agricultural Department. They were not shown to the general public in Queensland until 1993 (p. 59).

In addressing an audience, all films set up a spectatorial position which is anticipated in the 'apparatus' of the film (Metz, 1975, 18-19). Film making is as much about ensuring the visual images are addressed *to someone* as they are about capturing or constructing certain scenes.⁴ In viewing the Wills and Mobsby films, I have kept in mind that the 'spectatorial position' of the film text is based on an imagined audience interpellated into the structure of the film which is not necessarily made up of Queenslanders or other Australians, but potential migrants drawn from the yeoman farmers of England.

Given this kind of imagined audience, the films present interesting viewing in the context of immigration. One of the main problems for Queensland immigration policy at the time, was attracting what was considered to be the right kind of migrant.⁵ It was thought that too many unskilled migrants gravitating to the cities were detrimental to the colony whose economic strength, so it was believed, lay in agricultural development based on smaller independent farms. The yeoman farmers of the agricultural shires of England, with their sturdy Protestant individualism and ethic of hard work, as well as tradesmen with specific skills, were regarded as ideal types to settle in Queensland (Johnston, pp. 89-90). Of course, the fact that Queensland's climate was subtropical with an extremely dry interior, and subject to drought and flood did not figure in this push for migration.⁶ Rather the emphasis was on presenting Queensland as an antipodean version of Britain; an inverted extension of Empire in which all that was lacking in the mother country could be found in abundance in a land of milk and honey at its farthest reaches. This vision of

Queensland was promoted at the many agricultural fairs taking place throughout England, where extravagant displays of produce were set up for the public to see.⁷

After visiting the Queensland produce exhibition at one of the county fairs in England in 1899, the famous English novelist and prominent farmer H. Rider Haggard had this to say about Queensland (which he had never visited):

In one of the galleries of the Hall the Queensland government has a stall, set there doubtless to attract the intending emigrant. I must say it attracted me. Such heads of Indian corn, such samples of wheat and barley—the latter a little pale coloured perhaps. The gentleman at the stall gave me a bundle of literature, which I perused all the way home, with the result that by the time I reached Ditchingham I was inclined to book a passage to Queensland by the next steamer. A country which is twice the size of the German Empire, with a nice warm climate and a death rate of only 12-10 per thousand, where anything will grow, from a pineapple to a cabbage, where horses, sheep, and cattle flourish, where, in short, nothing is lacking except the many and varied plagues of Africa—what could a man want more? Moreover, there the land is dirt cheap, and arranged in lots to suit all purses; and—best of everything—the British flag flies over it, with nobody to question its supremacy.(Haggard, pp. 431-432)

Haggard goes on at length about the opportunities of migration to places like Queensland for those in Britain stifled by the class system, and unable to rise beyond their station in life. His praise of Queensland is couched in terms of a class ideology which valued individual labour and hard work in the formation of a virtuous character. The rural ideal of the uncomplicated 'Adam Bede' working hand-in-hand with nature was seen by Haggard to be the answer to the problems of industrialisation and its debilitating effects on workers: 'But in these new homes across the seas, it is different, for there he [the farmer] can draw nearer to nature, and, though the advantages of civilization remain unforfeited, to the happy conditions of a simple uncomplicated man.' (p. 432). This vision of a sturdy and virtuous yeomanry populating the farthest reaches of the British Empire was also held by liberal politicians in Queensland in their ideological struggle with conservative and pastoralist interests. (Johnston, pp. 52-53). The harsh realities of agricultural life in Queensland meant however, that small crop farming was never fully successful, while large scale pastoralism in some form (especially sugar cane farming) continued to be the main source of agricultural production. Some of the tension between these two competing views finds its way into the Wills and Mobsby films, and, as we shall see later, can be detected in terms of an ambivalence surrounding the visual style and content of the scenes depicted.

What I propose to do in the rest of this paper is to undertake a 'viewing' of some of the films shot by Wills and Mobsby as visual traces of Queensland's colonial past, to uncover the way Queensland was 'imagined' from within its own governmental circles so that it might be publicised to audiences throughout the world.⁸ My aim is to see these films as more than illustrations of historical events and social realities. Rather they constitute a set of panoramic scenes within an emerging photovisual formation, which actively constituted a 'public imaginary' at the time. By viewing the films along these lines, as 'imagined realities' with a specific audience in mind, I want to show how a sense of Queensland regional identity was formed through governmental publicity practices, and how this sense of identity was able to enter into contexts within Queensland and elsewhere as a potential force for change.

Urban Modernity

The surviving films of Brisbane show various scenes of daily life, including passengers alighting from a train at Roma Street station (shot by Wills and Mobsby in 1899) and a 'phantom' ride on an electric tram over the Victoria Bridge and down Queen and George Streets (possibly shot by Mobsby in 1905).⁹ In these films we see a modern city with well-developed railway and electric tram system, both of which were powerful signifiers of modernity at the time.¹⁰ When these scenes of urban life were combined with other films shot at the time featuring farming practices in regional areas, we are presented with a particular view of Queensland as a prosperous agriculturally based colony with a modern city at its centre.

This view of Queensland, which placed the capital of Brisbane at the centre with outlying areas of agricultural farming, was not the way many Queenslanders saw their own colony. Other Queensland cities such as Ipswich, Rockhampton and Maryborough, vied with Brisbane for prominence during the first fifty years of the fledgling colony's existence (Johnson, p. 93). There was much concern in the other regions over the ascendancy of Brisbane, tucked way in the south east corner, and the kind of 'liberal' urban culture and politics which emerged there at that time. Political struggles in Queensland during this period were between on one hand, conservative pastoral interests which favoured freehold land ownership to protect existing large scale properties run by a 'squattocracy', and on the other, liberal urban interests which favoured an agriculturally based society in which individual yeoman farmers were encouraged to set up small scale farming operations.

Either way, Queensland developed as a rural based society where urban centres supplied the necessary services and infrastructure for the efficient management of pastures and farms in the interior and along the coastal plains. As a consequence, Queensland developed as a decentralised state in which rural and agricultural interests were served by a series of towns established all the way up the coast. In this situation, it became difficult for any one town to emerge as a centre without at the same time draining others of government resources. The Wills and Mobsby films need to be seen in the context of this conflict between an urban based sensibility in which the capital city existed as a powerful resource for a rural society of yeoman farmers, and a rural based sensibility in which regions figured as autonomous economic zones with their own resources and infrastructure. This uneasy tension between these two competing ideas of Queensland can be seen in the way the Wills and Mobsby films present Queensland as a set of images to the spectator.

In the 1905 film a modern city comes to life before our eyes as we are virtually 'taken for a ride' on one of Brisbane's ultra-modern electric trams.¹¹ As the inner spaces of the city yield to the advancing camera strapped to the front of the moving

tram, we are drawn into the world of people going about their daily business in the city streets and along the footpaths and shopfronts of the metropolis. As the tram travels over Victoria Bridge and down Queen Street, we see it rapidly close on another tram ahead which has stopped to pick up passengers. As we get closer, distant figures in the back of the stationary tram are revealed as a tram conductor and two passengers tendering money for their tickets. At this point, the conductor, who now appears in close-up, looks straight into the camera, holding our gaze. In this amazing shot, we enter fully into a subjective dimension of the film, an illusory world of inner feelings and thoughts which we assume to exist as part of the conductor's 'being'. For one brief moment, the distance between the past and the present is dissolved, as we seem to share an intersubjective sense of being-with the conductor and his passengers.

This moment which flashes before us, imbues the film image with a certain kind of virtual life in which the spectators' investment in the film is transformed into one of human *concern*. As the figures on the screen appear to reach out to the spectator, their 'destiny' becomes an issue (who are they? where are they going? what are they thinking? what do they want of me?). The spectator's view is thus made to resonate with this event, taking place in the virtual world of the screen-spectator relationship, which otherwise might remain detached and indifferent to the life unfolding in the film. Charles Musser has discussed the effect of train travel on human perception, and its adoption by film makers as a major positioning device for the making and screening of travel films: 'The sensation of separation which the traveller feels on viewing the rapidly passing landscape has much in common with theatrical experience of the spectator. The allusion of the train window with the screen's rectangle was frequent within this travel sub-genre' (p. 127) Musser goes on to point out how the illusion of disembodied movement is generated: 'The point-of-view shot out of the window or from the front of the train was privileged in such a system because it elided camera, character and narration (p. 127). These shots are a fully developed exploitation of the virtualisation of the spectator's body through perception inherent in film exhibition. They play on the simultaneous appearance and disappearance of the film image, and its capacity to draw the spectator into a diegetic world, detached from real time and space.

In the other film, shot in 1899 and showing the arrival of a train at Roma Street station, a similar virtual event takes place, as passengers alighting from the train ascend a flight of stairs and file past the camera, sometimes glancing directly into the camera lens. In both these films a certain kind of viewing sensibility emerges in which the spectator becomes caught up within the 'presence' of the event as it unfolds on the screen.¹² The effect of this is to bind both spectator and the 'beings' whose images appear on the screen into the same virtual space, thereby collapsing the temporal distance between the space in which the spectator views the film and the space shown on the screen. Consequently, the city becomes a place saturated with the immediate concern of the spectator, teeming with the interiority associated with living human life. The spectator position set up in these films is one of immanence to the event, where the subjectivity of the spectator merges with the event as a life-like experience of co-extensivity. In this case the distance in time and space between the spectator and the filmed event is temporarily reconstituted in virtual form as an experience of *immediacy* on each and every occasion of screening.

Rural Surveillance

Another interesting film made by Wills and Mobsby, this time in 1899, shows scenes of cane harvesting in the Nambour district, just north of Brisbane. Despite its brevity, this film tells us much about the way the Queensland imaginary was proposed at the time, especially when viewed in relation to the films of Brisbane. The opening shots show the harvesting of cane by a group of 'Kanakas' or indentured Melanesian labourers, under the watchful eye of a white overseer. We see the cutters systematically cutting and stripping the unburnt cane stalks, tossing them to one side so that they can be picked up later and taken to the mill for crushing, while the overseer walks behind them, checking their work. Near the end of the film, we see the overseer approach the cutter closest to us in the foreground of the film, where an interesting little exchange takes place. Without missing a beat, the cutter half turns, offering his work to the view of the overseer in a gesture which appears to be seeking approval. The overseer then bends down to pick up a cut stalk. Unfortunately the film stops abruptly at this point.

In this film we see the formation of what Foucault has termed the 'docile body' of modern surveillance systems in which the body of the worker is made to conform to a regulated practice within an 'apparatus of production' (Foucault, 1977, pp. 153-153). According to Foucault, modern surveillance systems are based on a panoptic principle in which the subject of surveillance can be seen without seeing back: 'he who is subject to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles, he becomes the principle of his own subjection' (Foucault, 1977, p. 203). The role of the overseer is not to maintain total visual control of the field, but to act as a reminder of the power of the system and its claim on the body of the worker, as subject to this field.

In this film, the presence of the camera in the filmed event acts as a form of visual surveillance over the 'actors' appearing in the scene. Both overseer and canecutter are caught in a 'field of surveillance' created by the film. Furthermore, this filmic field incorporates another field of surveillance, the one set up by the system of overseer control within the plantation system of cane growing and harvesting. This film thus activates two modes of surveillance: one involving the surveillance of the labourer by the overseer, and the other involving the surveillance of both the overseer and the labourers alike by the camera itself, watching on behalf of an unknown audience. Here we see the establishment of a spectatorial position based on voyeuristic control over a field of visibility.¹³ This technique consolidates the authority of surveillance by allowing the viewer to adopt an objective and detached viewpoint, while at the same time, partaking vicariously in the 'control' of the workers. The experience of the event is focalised not through the overseer, but through an all-seeing anonymous subject, ambiguously detached from the event.

Not long after this film was shot, the practice of using indentured islander labour was abolished by the Queensland government, and instead the gang system involving teams of mainly white labourers moving from field to field was introduced (Johnson, pp. 131-133). In this system there was no need to have an overseer because the incentive to undertake the work was built into the contract. In effect, this system required cane cutters to internalise their own forms of self-surveillance, because of the economic interest involved. The Wills and Mobsby film taken prior to these developments is thus an interesting record of the plantation system, and its use of non-white labour. It suggests a voyeuristic spectatorial position, switching from detachment to engagement, which establishes a form visual control typical of the

colonial era, and similar to the anthropological photographic and film practices undertaken elsewhere at the time (Green 1984).

Pastoral Sublime

If we compare the cane cutting film to a series of films of harvesting wheat on the Darling Downs, we see a somewhat different picture of agricultural life appear. In these films, the emphasis is on new technology through the use of mechanised harvesting machines, mechanical wheat hoists and steam driven conveyers operating on site. The films show vast wheat fields stretching to the horizon, traversed by horse drawn mechanised harvesters. The path of the harvesters has traced patterns into the field, which is dotted by clumps of neatly tied cut wheat. Labourers are seen busily at work on the machines, or forking the cut wheat into conveyer belts.

In these films, which together make up the wheat harvesting sequence, there is a strong sense of a pastoral aesthetic at work, unifying the filmed activities into an overall idea of farming life. This idea is dominated by a sense of the team or the collective engaged in 'virtuous industry', where the work ethic comes readily from the labourers themselves, and not from the threat of a supervisory presence. In places the films are remarkably abstract, especially in the scenes where the harvesters have left patterns in the fields, suggesting a modern sensibility conditioned by the machine age. Here we see the merging of the pastoral and the modern into a form of 'progressive romanticism' in which human labour is elevated into a form of techno-sublime activity (man and machine in harmony with nature). The ideal yeoman farmer, described by Haggard (above) as the 'simple uncomplicated man' drawn close to nature, is seen here working with technology in a land of plenty, where massive industrial machinery and infrastructure can be put to use in harmony with both man and nature (the fields, the clouds, the horizon, all merging within a work space foregrounded by man and machine).

From the evidence of the rural films viewed, there appears to be an inconsistency of vision involved. On one hand the films of wheat harvesting conform to a romanticised, pastoral view of Queensland where the autonomy of the individual worker is celebrated as a kind of collective effort. On the other hand, those of cane cutting are more in line with a controlled, bureaucratic vision of Queensland in which work must conform to strict hierarchical controls and surveillance practices. It is tempting to attribute this difference to the difference in managerial practices of the respective industries, as if the films merely reflected the reality presented to the viewer. However, to assume this is to overlook the decisions of the film makers in choosing *these* particular scenes of rural industry, and not others (for instance there are no scenes of individual or family-based work undertaken by small land holders, who made up a large proportion of the rural population at the time).

Rather than see these films as reflections or representations of rural and urban life, they need to be seen as part of an active constitution of a certain imaginary, involving colonial life and modernity, in which some scenes will prove useful rather than others, and which involves a certain rhetorical work utilising aesthetic conventions available at the time. The problem boils down to the capacity to portray Queensland as both part of the romantic ideal of rural life conforming to British and European aesthetic sensibilities, as well as an extension of the industrial age, unfettered by European obsessions with class and inherited land ownership.

The inconsistency of vision is also partly explained by the experimental nature of these films. Although Wills and Mobsby should be considered pioneers of film making

and editing, they were nevertheless working at a time when film narrative had not yet been 'invented'. The tradition in which they worked was framed by the still photograph and nineteenth century pictorialism in which photographic views were made to conform to allegorised versions of idealised life. Any film making undertaken in these circumstances is bound to run into aesthetic and artistic problems concerning on one hand, the desire to allegorise, thereby conforming with prevailing aesthetic expectations of the time, and on the other, the desire to exploit the immediacy and realism of the photographic and film image, thereby turning the films into visual realities with their own story-telling power.

Despite the inconsistency of vision between these two 'rural' film scenes, there is a strong similarity between them in that they both portray labour as a form of collective work within large scale agricultural industry. The 'intended' audience of these films is clearly someone willing to imagine a modern society dominated by industrialised agriculture, where capital might flourish by deploying labour in certain 'collective' ways. These are not films designed to attract the manual labourer or even the small farmer, except insofar as they might already be 'captured' within an imaginary dominated by large scale enterprises and involving large amounts of capital.¹⁴

Conclusion

In their screening to an audience, the short films of urban life in Brisbane in 1899 provide an interiority of vision, lacking in the other films of Queensland life shot by Wills and Mobsby during their period of film making. The effect of this is to centralise the vision of Queensland in an urban imaginary based on technologically advanced city life. In viewing the entire suite of films, the spectator would become far more intersubjectively involved in the films of Brisbane than in the others, suggesting that the core of colonial life emanated from the capital, radiating outward to the periphery. City life is subject to immanent experiences, whereas rural life is experienced voyeuristically, either by control at a distance, typified by plantation surveillance, or through a sublime aesthetics that portrayed agricultural practices as a form of idealised labour.

It is difficult to say just which view of Queensland predominates: the liberal-progressive view based on urban ideas of individualism, or the conservative view based on large scale collective achievements. Indeed, like the so-called 'Griffithwraith' government of the early 1890s, which combined the liberal and conservative forces against Labour in the Queensland parliament, these films seem to present a hybrid of both city and country interests, not just in their content, but also in their style of presentation. They do not display a single coherent vision of Queensland, but rather a mixture of scenes and ways of seeing, suggesting a certain incoherence in the possibility of imagining Queensland as a single unitary field. Perhaps this has more to do with the experimental nature of the films themselves, as Wills and Mobsby searched for the right kind of filming techniques. Further research into archival material might reveal more about the actual filming process.

My point is that the possibility of a vision of Queensland, as a land fit for yeoman farmers, has been constituted upon an ideal which does not emanate from Queensland itself, but from imperial hopes and aspirations mainly to be found in Britain, which have been 'localised' not only in terms of its content, but also in terms of the way the films are made as visual technologies. These early films of Queensland are thus based on a globalisation of the imaginary through which Queensland was initially founded as a rural and regional society based on

progressive, expansionist policies of agricultural development. Further research in the making of film by the Queensland government and other institutions in the early part of this century may provide even stronger indications of this globalised regional identity, which seems to be peculiar to Queensland within the Australian context even today.

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Endnotes

¹ These films have been reproduced in video format and distributed by the National Film and Sound Archive, Canberra.

² The idea of a spectatorial position made possible by the apparatus of cinema, was initially proposed by Christian Metz (Metz, 1975).

³ The inspiration for the research culminating in this paper is partly derived from Chris Long's and Pat Laughren's groundbreaking research into early Australian film (Long and Laughren, 1993).

⁴ The spectatorial position of these films is made complicated by the fact that had they been screened it would most likely have been with an accompanying set of lantern slides together with a lecture (see Musser 1990, p. 123). Unfortunately, if they existed in the first place, these have not survived. Analysis of the films needs to take these extra-filmic elements into account as part of the context of exhibition.

⁵ It was thought that a certain 'Australian' working man type: sturdier, stronger and more stalwart than his British counterpart, was emerging throughout Australia (Evans et.al., p. 39) It appears that the 'White Australia' policy, which excluded the immigration of non-whites, also extended to the white community itself, to some degree.

⁶ For a first hand description of the difficulties small crop farmers had in Queensland due to natural disasters, see the diaries of Ole Matsen, a Danish immigrant to Queensland (Evans et.al., p. 33)

⁷ Randalls' personal papers held at the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland are full of reports of the fairs. Randall's job involved setting up the displays and taking public inquiries. Numerous photographs, programs and press clippings give some indication of the large enterprise involved.

⁸ The films were actually commissioned by the Department of Agriculture and Stock. Because government departments tended to act as autonomous entities, as they do today in many matters, decisions concerning subject matter may very well have emanated from the within the department and not directly from the government. Further research in the archives will be necessary to settle this point. I am indebted to my colleague and historian Steve Mullins, School of Humanities, Central Queensland University, for pointing this out.

⁹ Wills had resigned his post with the Department of Agriculture and Stock in 1903. Mobsby continued as official photographer. (Long and Laughren, p. 59)

¹⁰ By 1905 Brisbane had the most electric tram mileage of any Australian city (Lawson, 1973, p. 11).

¹¹ The technique of filming from a moving tram or train was popular in film making at the turn of the century. These so called 'phantom' train rides placed the viewer in a position of involvement in, rather than detachment from, the unfolding scene (Musser, 1990, p. 128). This was an entirely new kind of viewing experience at the time. By 'virtualising' the viewer's body in space and time, these phantom ride films were perhaps the first to properly exploit the dynamic relation between space and time in moving film.

¹² Wills and Mobsby shot other films in Brisbane as well. These films are more conventional than the two I have examined, providing a more detached, objective viewing position compared with the intersubjective viewing position of the train and tram films.

¹³ By voyeurism I refer to the pleasure gained when the spectator is able to enter into a scene, yet remain detached at the same time. Film and photography is essentially voyeuristic when it passes itself off as objectively 'real' by concealing its status as a visual technology.

¹⁴ This is, of course, always a precondition of audienceship. Audience members may identify with a scene which is entirely at odds with their economic, social and cultural reality. Such is the work of ideology.