Cycloramas of Belief

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CANVAS DOCUMENTARIES: PANORAMIC ENTERTAINMENTS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

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The visitor goes along an underground passage and up a winding stair. Then as the scene breaks upon the eye, the idea that one is in a building at all is startled out of him. He is in Belgium, on a little knoll… between the positions occupied by Napoleon and Wellington.’ Thus the Melbourne Age, 18 May 1889, described the experience of entering the cyclorama of the Battle of Waterloo, a now-vanished building on Victoria Parade on the city’s eastern fringe.

The cyclorama was a huge painting (nearly 17 metres high and over 130 metres long) displayed on the inside wall of a circular building. The two ends of the painting were joined together to enclose the viewer in the scene. The illusion was heightened by three-dimensional figures placed in the foreground, and by special effects. Sometimes these were overelaborate: the Battle of Gettysburg cyclorama, exhibited in Sydney in 1889, included the sound of water trickling in the stream, which one newspaper critic remarked ‘would in reality have been drowned out by the noise of the battle’.

Mimi Colligan’s Canvas Documentaries takes us on a tour of the cycloramas and various other forms of ‘panoramic entertainments’ that proliferated during the second half of the nineteenth century. It is beautifully designed and richly illustrated, and will become a standard reference for anyone with a serious interest in popular entertainment, urban history, adult education, the development of documentary and news media, or indeed just about any area of the visual arts from photography through to sculpture and ‘sound and light’ shows. In particular, Canvas Documentaries should prompt a rewrite of the standard histories of the cinema.

The panoramists and cycloramists were restless experimenters with aural and visual effects, and devised ingenious methods of creating the illusion of movement. A running theme in Canvas Documentaries is the relationship between the documentary-realist painting of the panoramas and developments in photography. Many panoramists were also enthusiastic photographers, but, although Colligan amply demonstrates this, she stops short of exploring the relationship between the two media. This makes for a more concise and coherent book, but also, in some ways, a strangely shy and reserved one. Colligan could have shaken the tree much more vigorously than she does. It will be a pity if her scholarly caution saves her from attack by legions of enraged cinema...
theorists, because that would mean they have ignored a ground-breaking study. The cinema hit Edwardian society like a meteor shower, and panoramas vanished within a decade, but were the panoramas obliterated, or did the impulses that created them find expression in other forms that built on the techniques and experiments of the panoramists?

Colligan is a Melbourne historian, and much of her best material comes from Victoria. You will get maximum value out of Canvas Documentaries if you can take it on a walking tour: visit the Carlton Gardens, look across at St Vincent’s Hospital, and imagine the cyclorama building, flags flying, dominating the skyline; or wander in the back streets of Cremorne, through the factories and workers’ cottages by the Yarra River, and try to visualise the pleasure gardens — genteel by day, seedy by night — that were there before the area was subdivided in the 1880s. But you will get plenty out of this book without setting foot in Melbourne. Colligan demonstrates an impressive range and depth across the whole of what was then called ‘Australasia’. Apart from one embarrassing slip — Lyttelton, not ‘Lyttleton’, is the port of Christchurch; it is in the South Island not (as implied in the discussion of Bachelder’s tour) the North — Canvas Documentaries is an exemplary exercise in trans-Tasman history.

Panoramic entertainments were spectacular events, none more so than the open-air shows produced by English pyrotechnist James Pain. ‘The Eruption of Vesuvius’ involved the building of a replica volcano; ‘The Bombardment of Port Arthur’, staged in Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne in 1904, while the Russian port was still under siege by the Japanese fleet, featured a miniature naval battle: ‘vessels are sunk or blown up … the lighthouse is seen to be blown up, and the demolition of the buildings of Port Arthur takes place before the eyes of the spectators’ (Melbourne Punch, 29 December 1904). Colligan points out that the audience would have had mixed reactions to this ‘newsreel’: fear of Russian invasion had been simmering since the Crimean War in the 1850s, so the prospect of a Russian defeat would have been welcome; but the prospect of Japanese victory over a European power fuelled alarm about the ‘Yellow Peril’, and helped to legitimise the White Australia Policy.

Were our great-grandparents more naïve about their news media than we are about ours? Maybe, maybe not. Beliefs and assumptions are like a cyclorama: a vast set of images encircling us, walling us in, purporting to depict reality. Sometimes the seam joining the ends of the painting is visible, sometimes it isn’t. We readily accept the inverted logic that a photograph proves the truth of the story it has been chosen to illustrate; when photography was a newer art-form it may have been easier to see the artifice inherent in it. But who would ever have been convinced by the headline, ‘Artist’s sketches prove children thrown overboard’?