Australian vernacular modernities: people, sites and practices

Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly

Australia’s engagement with the experience of international modernity from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century now forms the subject of exciting research in many fields of cultural endeavour: in architecture, fine arts, design, cinema, theatre, and music; in urban studies, literary history and Aboriginal studies.1 Impact of the Modern brings together examples of this new interdisciplinary work on modern Australian culture by 21 leading scholars. The essays collected here produce an original and revealing account of a ‘modernising’ Australia that was always dynamic and creative, and always interactively linked with international processes and ideas.

The content and approach of the book are intended to contribute to a more outward-looking, internationalising phase of Australian studies. Since the early 1990s, in a number of disciplines including Australian history, theatre and performance studies, cinema and cultural studies, comparative or ‘world’ literature,2 and the new imperial history, there have been signs of a growing unease with the idea of the nation as the principal organising category. There has been a movement outwards from the study of the national, to the centres and peripheries characteristic of postcolonial studies,3 to new models of decentred global flows and networks characteristic of such fields as the new imperial history, transnational history and globalisation studies.4 Researchers have come to see that the concept of the nation, originally valuable in establishing Australian and other nation-based studies both intellectually and institutionally, can also circumvent explorations of vital connections existing in complex relationships within and outside of national spaces. There are calls to imagine new types of cultural history concerned with the circulation of people, capital, practices, ideas and institutions within, but also beyond, the conceptual and territorial spaces of the nation.
Here, for example, is the historian David Thelen on the challenge to American studies:

… people, ideas, and institutions do not have clear national identities. Rather, people may translate and assemble pieces from different cultures. Instead of assuming that something was distinctively American, we might assume that elements of it began or ended somewhere else. We may discover that what people create between national centres provides a promising way to rethink many topics in American history.⁵

In the case of Australian studies, this implies new kinds of cultural history which acknowledge and interrogate, rather than elide, the divided affiliations and multiple identities of modern Australia. Impact of the Modern inquires into the different manifestations of international modernity which have affected creative and entrepreneurial lives both positively and negatively, and both within and beyond Australia.

In The Culture of Time and Space, Stephen Kern defines modernity as an historical period extending from about 1880 to the end of the Great War, in which ‘a series of sweeping changes in technology and culture created distinctive new modes of thinking about time and space.’⁶ In his influential study, All That is Solid Melts into Air, Marshall Berman also approaches modernity historically, dividing it into three distinct phases: a first moment from 1500 to 1789; a middle period, 1789–1900; and a third phase from 1900 onwards. These are successive stages in the progressive development and realisation of global modernity. ‘The maelstrom of modern life’, Berman argues, ‘has been fed from many sources: great discoveries in the physical sciences, changing our images of the universe and our place in it; the industrialisation of production, which transforms scientific knowledge into technology, creates new human environments and destroys old ones, speeds up the whole tempo of life’.⁷ But as Lynda Nead has shown, such accounts of modernity as a progressive sequence that can be plotted in conventional terms of early, middle and late have been re-thought in more complex ways in the work of such French theorists as Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Michel Serres. Modernity is no longer understood as a rupture or series of ruptures with the past, but as ‘a set of processes and representations that were engaged in an urgent and inventive dialogue with their own historical conditions of existence.’⁸ Serres, for example, compares modernity to a late-model car, which is a ‘disparate aggregate’
of technical and aesthetic solutions, dating from a multiplicity of historical moments. In this sense, modernity is multi-temporal and its spaces are heteronomous, an amalgam of the past, the contemporary and the future. Nead explains,

This image of pleated time is literally visualised by Serres in his metaphor of the handkerchief. Spread out and ironed, the handkerchief represents a metrical, geometric concept of time, in which distance and proximity are stable and clearly defined; but crumpled in the pocket, the handkerchief evokes a ‘topological’ concept of time, in which previously distant points ‘become close, or even superimposed’. Moreover, if the fabric is torn, previously adjacent points may be rendered distant and unrelated … Modernity … can be imagined as pleated or crumpled time, drawing together past, present and future into constant and unexpected relations and the product of a multiplicity of historical eras.9

In his work on Melodrama and Modernity, Ben Singer develops useful categories for distinguishing the interlinked cultural phenomena of modernity: a ‘striking explosion’ of industrialisation, urbanisation, migrations, transportation, mass communication, amusement and consumerism. More significantly for this book, he relates these modernising forces to the complex and contradictory expressions of aesthetic and programmatic Modernism, which variously contest, protest, proselytise or offer to act as sanctuary from, or antidote to, the mass culture produced by modernity.10 For among the most visible consequences of the commercial and technological changes of modernisation are ‘the explosion of forms of mass communications and mass amusements, as well as mass merchandising and consumerism’, and ‘heterosocial public circulation and interaction (epitomised by the entrance of women into public space).”11 This last issue, in particular, is taken up by the essays in Impact of the Modern, as is the central issue of the vernacular. As Jill Julius Matthews points out in her chapter, ‘Erotic Modernities’, it was in Miriam Hansen’s immensely influential article, ‘The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism’, that the terms ‘modernism’, ‘modernity’ and ‘vernacular’ were first authoritatively juxtaposed.12 As an historian of early cinema, Hansen’s concept of the ‘vernacular modern’ especially involves the
sensuous and emotional effects upon everyday life of technology-driven, mass popular consumer culture.

The concept of vernacular modernity implies distinctions in aesthetic hierarchies and taste between avant-garde, bourgeois or high art, on the one hand, and popular cultural preferences and practices on the other. This is a concept which the essays in this book contest. While fresh accounts of the modernist pioneer impresarios Mary Alice Evatt, Bryan Robertson, Mary Cecil Allen and Alleyne ‘Clarice’ Zander are given, contributors to this collection are equally interested in the vernacular as in the high aesthetic manifestations of Modernism. They present original analyses of the dialogic relationship maintained between the high and vernacular expressions of modernity. Such moments of contact frequently have a gendered aspect. These are analysed, for example, in Kerry Heckenberg’s discussion of the ‘vulgar’ flower illustrations of Ellis Rowan, in the various reception sites and class framings of modernist Orientalist dancers studied by Amanda Card, and in Jeanette Hoorn’s analysis of Hilda and Elsie Rix’s engagement with traditionally male cultures of travel on their trip to Morocco in 1914. Important to all contributors is the concept of the local: not only local creation and reception but also the way in which such ‘home-grown’ activities are framed and influenced by Australian understandings of how other international modernities might operate.

This focus on the vernacular also supports Paul Fussell’s conclusions in *The Great War and Modern Memory* that even extraordinary ‘explosions’ in the geopolitical sphere do not necessarily incur Modernist or avant-garde ruptures in popular understandings of inherited culture. Rather, as Robert Dixon argues, modern time is experienced as a series of temporal ‘folds’ or continuities, displaying in new technologies such as photography, early cinema and sound recording the survivals of the texts, *mentalités* and practices of the pre-industrial and even the deep past. Melissa Bellanta examines such an example in the sceptical and religious reception frames accorded to the Davenport brothers, the American spiritualist mediums who toured Australia in the 1870s. In their essays on indigenous performers in film and popular music, Barbara Creed and Bill Casey show the survival and revival of discourses of the primitive. Modernity’s continuing and renovated fusion of the exotic and the feminine is typified in the Orientalist-influenced women performers examined by Angela Woollacott and Jeanette Hoorn. In
Deborah Jordan’s chapter, atavistic notions of the modern nation grounded in an organic community are contested through the cosmopolitan critiques of Vance and Nettie Palmer.

In Australian scholarship, one area where these internationalising approaches first emerged was in work on popular entertainment by scholars such as Richard Waterhouse (1990), Katharine Brisbane (1991) and Veronica Kelly (1996, 2005, 2006). In theatre and early screen studies, Kelly’s internationalising project has recently been examined from the British perspective in Elizabeth Schafer and Susan Bradley Smith’s *Playing Australia: Australian Theatre and the International Stage* (2003), and in a special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Theatre and Film* (2006): two collections of essays that emphasise multi-directional circulation in people, practices, texts and intellectual properties. To date, Jill Julius Matthews’ *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney’s Romance with Modernity* (2005) is the major Australian study to take up the challenge posed in Hansen’s pioneering research on ‘vernacular modernities’. Angela Woollacott focuses on women, modernity and imperial cosmopolitanism in her studies *To Try Her Fortune in London* (2001) and *Gender and Empire* (2006). Other studies whose themes are also addressed in the essays of *Impact of the Modern* include Roslyn Poignant’s *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*, Ann Stephen, Andrew McNamara and Philip Goad’s collection, *Modernism and Australia* (2006) and Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake’s anthology, *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (2005). Robert Dixon’s *Travelling Mass-Media Circus: Frank Hurley and Colonial Modernity* will be published in 2009. Like the present volume, a number of these publications have been edited collections, drawing together the ranges of disciplinary expertise needed to disclose the extent and complexity of Australia’s experience of modernity in the early twentieth century.

The essays in *Impact of the Modern* raise important questions about the relations between the ‘national’ and the ‘cosmopolitan’, the ‘Australian’ and the ‘expatriate’, cross-reading and interrogating these terms through the careers of key figures who were – variously or simultaneously – ‘impresarios, artists and celebrities’, Australian and cosmopolitan. They situate Australia, not only as an import culture, but also as a vital generating centre of international cultural innovation. The complexity of these movements of people and ideas is identified by some of the key phrases in the titles of the chapters: ‘exotic or home grown?’; ‘making it
accessible’; ‘pioneering cultural exchange’; ‘cosmopolitans at home’; ‘chasing modernity’; ‘modernity denied’; ‘letter from Tangiers’; ‘Australian femininities on global display’.

Earlier critiques of the manifestations of modernity in Australia, such as the journalism of Vance and Nettie Palmer, and P. R. Stephensen’s *The Foundations of Culture in Australia* (1936), tended to view ‘Americanisation’ as a synonym for modernisation as such, and the United States as the sole originator of mass-industrialised modernity. Stephensen understood that modern Australian culture was coming into being at the same time as an emerging ‘world-culture’ based on globalising systems of travel, communication and finance. To describe this world-system, he used the term ‘internationalism’. At its best, internationalism involves a two-way traffic between distinct national cultures. Stephensen’s purpose was to advocate a sufficiently strong national culture for it to survive the rigours of the international economy, in which strong national cultures tend to ‘bastardise’ weaker ones. In repudiating imported, middlebrow culture, Stephensen echoes F. R. Leavis in *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1931). His concern with mediocrity, with salesmanship and advertising, with the influence of ‘America’, was therefore part of an international trend in the 1930s toward reactive cultural nationalisms in the literary provinces:

If, in Australian bookshops far and wide throughout the Commonwealth, nine hundred and ninety-nine books and magazines of a thousand on show are English and American; if, in the cinema-theatres of every Australian city, suburb, town, township and hamlet, practically all the films shown are American and English; if, on the wireless stations cluttering every millimetre of the Australian ether, gramophone records of English and American origin are broadcast and rebroadcast ad nauseam; if, in the columns of the Australian press, a priority is given … to news from overseas – in all these disseminations of overseas culture (and the cumulative effect of them is paralysing to the Australian idea), I detect nothing more sinister than a superior salesmanship, a superior marketing and distributing technique, on the part of the vendors of the ubiquitous overseas culture-stuff.19

In the essays in *Impact of the Modern*, Australia’s relations to America and to the British Empire emerge freshly conceptualised as equal vectors of
the modern, while the older assumptions of colonial supplementarity, cultural invasion and passive reception exemplified by Stephensen’s polemic are productively challenged. From these studies emerges a more complex picture of artistic innovation, but also of the modern vernacular as defined through Australian social knowledges, consumption patterns, economic and political initiatives, popular pastimes and cultural practices.

The collection also demonstrates the value of career biography – or prosopography – as a productive and highly accessible method of conceptualising new research in cultural history. Reflected in the essays gathered in the section ‘Impresarios, Artists and Celebrities’ are the energies, enterprise and opportunity-making of cultural creators and entrepreneurial personalities who emerge as typical drivers of Australian cosmopolitanism. Such impresarios of the modern are models of international cultural exchange. Mass popular entertainment and high Modernist art were international phenomena in which the commodified and the popular exchanged texts and effects with the aesthetics of high Modernism. Australian performers and entrepreneurs played major roles in centralising, displaying and brokering important aesthetic innovations. Entrepreneurs of entertainment and modern dance who worked in Australia, America and elsewhere include the American comic actor and entrepreneur Hugh Ward, and Henry and Clara Bracy. This ambitious internationalisation of production is summarised in the creation and maintenance of the international Australasian cartel, the J. C. Williamson organisation, whose actors, as Desley Deacon attests, attained global careers in film, dance and theatre.

Where much of cultural studies in the 1990s was exercised by broader social processes and practices, the original and detailed career biographies so often used here as a research method return us to the importance of the mobility and strategic agency of individuals. These agents were often ‘small’ players as well as stars and celebrities, and their generative function was also taken up by major local cultural organisations such as J. C. Williamson Ltd. They include Aboriginal tenor Harold Blair; aviatrix Jean Batten, art impresarios Mary Alice Evatt and Bryan Robertson; artists Ellis Rowan and Elsie Rix; actors Rose Quong, Joan Henry and Joan Joske; the American illusionist duo the Davenport brothers; and authors Vance and Nettie Palmer. Also in this picture of dynamic engagement with modern life are international figures
with significant Australian connections through training or cultural impact. They include theatrical and film stars such as the Australian-born Judith Anderson; the reputedly Tasmanian Merle Oberon; the scandalous Canadian Salomé dancer Maud Allan; and the champion swimmer and Hollywood film artiste Annette Kellerman. The untrained Aboriginal actors Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunoth who performed in Charles Chauvel’s 1955 film, Jedda, were launched into visibility within the international discourses of Darwinism and négritude which framed their performances of indigeneity. The collection therefore performs a task of rich historical recovery in bringing back to visibility a heterogeneous and sometimes forgotten group of people who exemplify the processes of Australia’s encounters with modernity. These people are symptomatic of the vast confidence with which ‘Australian’ subjects engaged with modernity locally and internationally: from the art gallery or the Hollywood studio to the aerodrome and the suburban swimming pool.

The latter are examples of what Peter Bailey, the pre-eminent historian of English popular culture and entertainment, calls ‘sites of modernity’: the music hall, the department store, the musical theatre and the amusement park. Impact of the Modern includes detailed historical analyses of the investments and meanings of Australian leisure sites, many of which have vanished. Ailsa McPherson traces the colonial self-marketings of the Sydney International Exhibition of 1879; Susan Aykut and Hannah Lewi examine the architectural design and marketing of Turkish baths and of urban and rural swimming pools as sites of hygiene and modernisation; Gillian Arrighi relates how the Fitzgerald brothers, major Australian international circus managers, built in Melbourne the integrated leisure and retail centres, the Olympia and Prince’s Court, on the land now occupied by the Victorian Arts Centre. Art galleries, too, play a role as key sites of modernity: in the 1960s Bryan Robertson, the expatriate Australian art entrepreneur, organised major exhibitions of contemporary Australian and American artists at London’s Whitechapel Art Gallery; earlier entrepreneurs, however, are Mary Cecil Allen and Clarice Zander, who, in the 1930s, organised the first innovative exhibitions of new Australian painting in America, and the first important exhibition of British Modernist art in Australia.

Taken together, the essays in Impact of the Modern raise a series of key questions about Australia’s response to international vernacular
modernity. What spatial metaphors best describe the movement of modernity within and between nations: imperial networks, webs of empire, the traffic in colonial knowledge, or the international circulation of agents, technologies and texts? Such studies of colonial modernity can enrich our understanding of the relations between modernity, imperialism and globalisation. Were Britain and the Empire always belated in relation to American industrial innovation and popular culture, or can the Empire, too, be a vector of modernity? What were the main vectors of colonial modernity: older trade routes, or new modes of transport, commerce, and communication technologies? Was a specifically colonial modernity a consequence of vernacular rather than elite forms of modernism – cinema, illustrated magazines and the popular stage, say, rather than poetry and the novel? What is the gender of modernity? What were the relationships between its main technologies of representation: photography, cinema, mediated and live performance, or newsprint? How was the English-speaking world divided into territorial rights arrangements by publishers, manufacturers of technologies, entertainment agencies, performers, theatre syndicates and individual entrepreneurs? What were the generative spaces or sites of colonial modernity? What was the temporality of colonial modernity? Were provincial cultures doomed always to be belated, or did modern urban entertainments allow them to be coeval with metropolitan centres and to experience or imagine simultaneity? Could there be an indigenous or Aboriginal modernity?

In response to these inter-related questions, which can be re-evaluated through other reading pathways implying differing strategic modes of organisation, *Impact of the Modern* is organised into four sections: Erotic, exotic and primitive; Impresarios, artists and celebrities; Cosmopolitanism and international performer networks; and Sites of leisure, pleasure and consumption.

The essays in *Impact of the Modern* were first presented as papers at the conference, ‘Australian Vernacular Modernities’, convened by the editors at the University of Queensland on 5–7 December 2006. Plenary papers were invited from Jill Julius Matthews and Angela Woollacott, and their focus on the erotic and the gendered spaces and aspects of popular modernity provides both the overt thematic and tacit structure of the material of the collection. Through such vital shifting categories as the ‘modern’, the ‘erotic’ and the ‘primitive’, they frame the role of these
powerful concepts in the formation of Australian identities. As essential components of the historical processes of innovation and modernisation, these questions of gender and public sociality are taken up in diverse ways in all of the other essays.

The conference was hosted by the School of English, Media Studies and Art History at the University of Queensland, and ably and brilliantly organised by the School’s Research Administrator Vicky McNicol, assisted by postgraduate candidates Martina Lipton and Megan Hoffmann. An accompanying exhibition curated by Joanne Ritale titled ‘Impact of the Modern’ was held to showcase the resources in the Fryer Library, the University of Queensland’s specialist rare books and Australian collection. The conference and the publication of this book were financially supported by Robert Dixon’s ARC Professorial Fellowship, ‘Frank Hurley: The Making of a Modern Cultural Icon’. Additional funding for two early career researchers to attend the conference was provided by the Cultural Histories and Geographies node of the ARC Cultural Research Network. We wish to acknowledge the contributions of these people and institutions, and the intellectual generosity and enthusiasm of all the delegates to the conference. The publication of this collection has been encouraged by Susan Murray-Smith, and by the inspiring layout and design by Agata Mrva-Montoya and Miguel Yamin at Sydney University Press. Editorial and administrative assistance has been expeditiously and efficiently undertaken by Jacinta van den Berg and Nathan Garvey of the School of Letters, Art and Media at the University of Sydney.


9 Nead, p. 8.


18 Roslyn Poignant, *Profession Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004); Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake, eds., *Connected Worlds*.


