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## **BIG THINGS: CONSUMER TOTEMISM AND SERIAL MONUMENTALITY**

This analysis of Big Things aims to raise some questions about regional identity and postmodern tourism. It proceeds from a persistent ambivalence about the ideological workings of popular culture. Beneath my analysis lie other, unresolved, questions: Is the commodification of the natural world and of place necessarily or always a "bad thing? How do fetishes and totems work? What are the political effects of the univocality of tourist identity? What *is*, finally, a region?

Let me begin with a modest taxonomy. Most Big Things are agricultural or horticultural: the Big Merino, Oyster, Prawn, Fish, Ear of Wheat, Banana, Pineapple, Orange, Apple, and so on. There are very few Big versions either of indigenous flora or fauna or of natural products that are not harvested or grown as resources: only the Big Koala and the Giant Earthworm come to mind. One or two historical Big Things wrest the business of history-making away from the realms of public statues and serious monuments: the Big Ned Kelly for example. A few Big Things represent people: types, like the Big Gold-Panner, rather than individuals. Even a few mechanical or man-made Big Things—lawnmower, tap and golf ball—have begun to dot the highways. Most Big Things are vertical, although there are exceptions (most notably, the Giant Earthworm, which strives to achieve horizontal massivity). Most importantly of all, for my purposes, Big Things are place-markers and place-makers. They are an attempt to inscribe the rural into a postmodern national imaginary. Big Things seem to me to be about both the dream of Having It All and the fear of Missing Out. Considered as a national network, the plethora of Big Things can be seen to contribute to a sanguine myth of Australian nationhood: Australia as a cornucopia, a land of abundance. A hyperbole of both size and number (monumentality and serialism) reinforce this myth.

### **Serial Monumentality and the Logic of the Collection**

Big Things are serial phenomena, deriving their meaning from the fact that they form a network. They partake neither of the banal and therefore seemingly invisible serialism of, say, the suburban kit home, nor of the elite aura of the unique, authored architectural form, like the Opera House or Parliament House. Paradigmatically, they signify in relation to other monumental structures, such as towers, pillars, antennae—all popularly readable as phallic; to site markers and place-makers, such as statues and

plaques; to other tourist sites; to roadside stalls; and to the natural features to which they refer. Most importantly, they signify in relation to other Big Things. As semiotic phenomena, they are iconic signs—representations bearing a necessary relation to the original to which they refer. They stand in metonymic relation to the region they represent; that is, they function as a part standing in for the whole. In Dean MacCannell's (1976) terms, they are markers that have themselves become sites.

Big Things can also be read as partaking of the logic of the (bourgeois) collection.<sup>1</sup> Susan Stewart (1993: 153) claims that collections are about a logic of wholeness. Individual elements have meaning in relation to the whole, not for themselves (153). Big Things differ from a collection in that they are scattered over space and therefore over time; they cannot be visited simultaneously, and rarely will any one tourist see the complete network. The meaning of any one Big Thing relies on the overall taxonomy and the principles of organisation that underlie it. A visit to any one Big Thing is not so much an intrinsically exciting tourist event as a participation in a larger system of classification; visiting is to some extent a process of ticking it off a list ("look, there's another one").

Since the collection works to extract individual items from their original contexts, its logic is fetishistic in character. It's also therefore latently consumerist, as commodity fetishism is one of the primary processes of consumer culture. The collection "represents the total aestheticization of use value. [It] is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context" (Stewart, 1993: 151).

The playful nature of the Big Things network is thus not only a result of the sanguine myth of natural abundance that it dramatises, but also, perhaps, an inherent feature of the logic of any collection. Stewart (1993: 165) argues that the collection, insofar as it masks the context of origin of its constituent items, presents the illusion of a world that is magically given, not produced: "[I]n the collection, the mode of production is made magical. In this belief in fortune we see a further erasure of labor."

There's also a *transformation* of labour at stake. According to Robert Hewison (1987), post-industrial capitalism has witnessed the rise of tertiary industry at the expense of secondary industries. The industries of modernity sometimes incorporate—and frequently give way to—postmodern simulacra. Hewison gives the example of miners redeployed from ailing coal mines in the north of Britain to become tourist guides around those very same mines. This phenomenon is not unknown in Australia. Farmer John Bull, for example, takes tourists on tractor rides around his farm, over which presides, of course,

the Big Cow (Walker, 1991). Dean MacCannell (1976: 36) calls this phenomenon "work displays"—where essentially industrial sites are converted into tourist sites in "a museumization of work and work relations."

## Size

According to Susan Stewart, the gigantic was—in European mythology at least—associated with nature and with myths of foundation. Stewart (1993: 71) details many examples of mythological giants who figured in tales about the formation of the natural landscape, often in the form of mythical projections of the giant's body onto the land. Stewart (1993: 79–80) charts, though, the gradual extraction of the giant from the natural world and his/her abstraction into the world of commerce.

Whereas the gigantic was once a figure of ambivalence—being both generative and destructive—it has been domesticated and acculturated, such that its disruptive, ambivalent and carnivalesque meanings have by and large been abstracted, de-corporealised and domesticated in consumer culture:

The twentieth century has signaled the appropriation of the sphere of the gigantic by a centralized mode of commercial advertising. . . . Contemporary giants such as "the Jolly Green Giant" or "Mr Clean" are nothing more than their products. Behind them we see not labor but frozen peas and the smell of disinfectant. . . (Stewart, 1993: 101)

Big Things remind us not only of the transformation of nature into produce, but also the *commodification* of this produce, as witnessed in, for example, the annoying sticky labels on fruit. The relentless productivity of capitalism means that novelty pales quickly: "the transition from the exotic to the commonplace traces the history of most commodities in a society where abundance means surplus" says Susan Willis (1991: 47) in her essay "Learning from the Banana." Bananas, "commonplace" fruit, unable to be upgraded each year with a new scent, colour, design or package (Willis, 1991: 46), can only be differentiated by the logo sticker, argues Willis (1991: 50–51), which "in the absence of any clues as to how the bananas were grown, . . . packaged, . . . shipped, . . . marketed and distributed . . . seems to offer itself as some sort of explanation." It welds the corporation onto the produce and thus, in some sense, onto "nature." In the Australian context, the Big Banana at Coffs Harbour presides over a local community where growers are under increasing pressure to become part of multinational corporations and accept the conditions of corporate uniformity that go with this (not only the compulsory stickers, but also the throwing out of "undersized" or "unacceptable" fruit).

I do not hold the Big Banana personally responsible for this late capitalist transition. For Big Things participate more ambiguously in the

commodification of the natural world, on the one hand celebrating the transformation of nature through agricultural labour, while on the other hand having pretensions to speak for region rather than company, although occasionally intertwining the two. They celebrate labour and selected histories, while also effacing them in favour of the fruit/site commodity.

Big Things reflect consumer culture's obsession with novelty. Gigantification is part of the spectacularising impulse of post-industrial popular culture, an "articulation of quantity over quality, of 'façade' over 'content' . . . ":

. . . the gigantic in pop art celebrates the proliferation of the new. . . . The pop gigantic exists in the abstract space of mass production. The human body is not gigantic here; the image is, and the image is an object whether its referent is in fact an object or not. (Stewart, 1993: 92-93)

As postmodern simulacra, Big Things come to exceed and in some sense precede the real on which they were modelled, since no real prawn, for example, can ever hope to match the lustrous orange of the Ballina Big Prawn nor the eerie glow of its eyes at night. The Big Banana is a Platonic ideal, modelled from "the ideal that every banana grower would desire," according to the Consulting Engineer for the Banana project (Walker, 1991). The Big Cow, too, is modelled on a photo of a "genuine" local Ayrshire cow, and has been awarded a blue ribbon by a cattle judge (Walker, 1991).

This postmodern aesthetic is also complicit with the logic of advertising (see Crilley, 1993), which draws on the familiar in order to anchor its messages firmly within compelling and already functional paradigms. According to Darrel Crilley (1993: 237), much postmodern urban redevelopment is an insidious form of architectural advertising, insofar as "'the public' are interpellated as spectators at a series of triumphant architectural displays." For Crilley, postmodern urban redevelopment, like advertising, is fetishistic in the Marxist sense, in that it diverts attention away from conditions of production; crucial material questions like "who builds what, where, for whom, with whose finance and at whose expense" (Crilley, 1993: 251) remain hidden beneath discussions of "style."

I don't see Big Things as in any way "insidious" (they're far too homely for that, they may well incorporate elements of pastiche, and in any case, they're not part of the urban redevelopment that Crilley is describing). Nonetheless, to the extent that they can come to stand in for the prime activity or identity of a region, in the short-hand way of tourist iconography, they are a fascinating blend of place-makers, architecture, popular art and advertising.

What labour, what flow of capital, what environmental practice, what appropriation of land, goes into the production of, say, a shiny orange? The social and temporal relation of the fruit to the land is obscured in favour of the static and spatial relation of thing to thing—the place of a Big Thing in the network. Under this postmodern sign, some material and historical conditions are deflected by the fruit-as-spectacle: environmental questions—histories of land clearance and degradation, soil erosion, pesticides; labour conditions and contexts—the sometimes unacknowledged stories of Aboriginal farm workers, the unpaid labour of women, or the toll exacted on rural workers by city dwellers whose demand for perfect fruit and veg at minimal prices all year round determines what can be grown, how, and how profitably.

### Commodity Relations

Big Things, then, are about the exchange of both images and capital, and the relationship between these two. On the crudest level, most are combined with gift shops. Sometimes the shop seems to have motivated the Big Thing; at other times the Big Thing has produced the shop. Big sign, small building, is the (rather Freudian) logic of popular commercial architecture, say Robert Venturi and his colleagues (1972). According to the duck/decorated shed opposition formulated by Venturi *et al*, Big Things are definitely ducks. That is, they are “buildings-become-sculpture”—buildings that are a symbol, rather than buildings that have symbols applied to them in the form of ornamentation. Big Things *are themselves* the sign out the front of the shop.

Big Things help effect a commodification of place, often exceeding their status as advertising a product and coming to advertise a region. The commodification of place is, of course, crucial to postmodern economics, as an essay in Philo and Kearns' (1993) book *Selling Cities* makes clear. Local government representative Andrew Fretter (in Philo and Kearns 1993: 165–72) itemises “the essential elements of place marketing,” under the following headings: “Vision,” “Know Yourself,” “Define Your Customers,” “Adapt and Improve Your Product to Customer Requirements,” “Know Your Competitors,” “Find A Real Point Of Difference” and “One Voice.” Here, the unironic adoption of the language of marketing points to the supremacy of commodity relations as paradigmatic in late twentieth century western thought (see Bowlby, 1993).

“Place marketing” is not just a matter of individual entrepreneurship, it's now a central role of local government. It involves more than simply selling:

Selling is trying to get the customer to buy what you have, whereas marketing meets the needs of the customer profitably. . . . Place marketing . . . can now be viewed as a fundamental part of planning, a fundamental part of guiding the development of places in a desired fashion. (Fretter, 1993: 165)

Thus, place marketing is heavy cultural, economic and mythological work.

## Myths of Place

Photographer Paul Ryan, who has been engaged in a long-term study of Big Things and the people who build them, points out that many of them were built by migrants and were thus crucial acts of home-making.<sup>2</sup> As semiotic phenomena, they seem to me also to partake both of the fantasy of abundance and the fear of Missing Out. They create the fiction of a unique, singular, optimistic and ahistorical regional identity. They are implicated in the process of naming "empty" spaces, in "the classical image of an Australian space as structured by a void or an absence which needs to be filled in" (Morris, 1982: 56). This colonial trope is the linchpin of the legal fiction of Terra Nullius. Striving to compete in a semiotic economy that privileges individual "sites," Big Things inscribe identity onto otherwise "empty" or "featureless" regions in a fetishistic attempt to displace a perceived lack. In this, they also resemble advertising which, according to Darrel Crilley (1993: 237), aims to "fill the 'hollowed-out' world of consumer goods with meaning." Advertising must create lack in order to be seen to fill it.

Big Things testify to a fear that we have no history. Of course, the fear that we have no history hides the history that we fear—that is, the history of colonial invasion, appropriation of the land and the attempted subjugation of Aboriginal people. Constructing monuments that invent regional identities is a logical extension of Terra Nullius, though of course I'm not suggesting that the makers intend them that way. It seems to me no coincidence that there are virtually no indigenous animals or plants in Big form and that there are few individualised people (though Ned Kelly is one exception). Thus, Big Things are unlike urban public art, which is often authored and abstract, and unlike public statues of heroes, historical figures or pioneers, which memorialise certain historical narratives about individuals. They are also unlike that other network of rural sculptures—the town war memorial, which celebrates and names but does not represent local, "ordinary" people. Big Things differ from all these: they represent things not people and types rather than singularities. Thus, they replace histories with icons—or rather, they memorialise some stories and not others.

In this, they again resemble collections, which are ahistorical in impulse:

The collection replaces history with *classification*, with order beyond the realm of temporality. In the collection, time is not something to be restored to an origin; rather, all time is made simultaneous or synchronous within the collection's world. (Stewart, 1993: 151)

Big Things create some regional identities at the cost of others, since tourist identities work best when they are distinct, relatively singular and easily reproducible visually. As Andrew Fretter (1993: 172) advises, under the heading "One Voice": "Confused messages weaken the argument." One concerted marketing message will help potential tourists and investors believe that the place has "got its act together," he claims (1993: 172). Difference gets subsumed under the marketing logic of brand recognition.

Tourist identities, then, are ultimately part of the far-reaching myth of coherent identity. They claim to represent an identity that is single rather than multiple—let alone contradictory, identities. So, following Stephen Slemon (1987), who has argued that allegory is a preferred colonial mode, since it is predicated on an assumed identity between things, we could say that Big Things work allegorically, effacing, most notably, Aboriginal definitions of regional, tribal, spiritual, linguistic or other space.

### Postmodern Totems

Thus, Big Things are produced by and help to effect a writing of history, an inscription and reification of identity and a production of community. But there are many ways of thinking community, some of them more friendly than the reading that sees Big Things as a metonym of colonialism.

To turn for a moment to the community of tourists who visit Big Things. Cultural Studies might encourage us to imagine Big Things as postmodern phenomena open to playful readings, and to consider the variety of ways in which these monuments are visited. Such approaches would encourage us to recognise the knowingness of both tourists and architects, the diversity of tourist responses, and the potential for parodic consumption. Certainly, it would be hard to imagine an unselfconscious visit to a Big Lawnmower. I'm thinking here of Feifer's (in Urry, 1990: 100) concept of the "post-tourist," one who recognises that the modernist search for the authentic tourist experience is doomed to failure and who engages in a knowing and sometimes whimsical play of signifiers.

Such a celebratory and anti-elitist reading might be suggested by the approach to the urban vernacular suggested by Venturi et al in their seminal book *Learning from Las Vegas* (1977; orig. 1972). They argue that Las Vegas teaches us

to reassess the role of symbolism in architecture, and . . . to learn a new receptivity to the tastes and values of other people and a new modesty in our designs and in our perception of our role as architects in society. (1977: xvii)

Since Big Things are the archetypal "ducks" of Venturi *et al*'s formulations, it might seem reasonable to approach them with a postmodern respect for the popular.

Another friendly reading of Big Things is suggested to me by Tom Mitchell's (1994) recent fruitful speculations about "what pictures want"—in particular, his distinction between fetishes, idols and totems. To paraphrase Mitchell: "fetishes are beautiful objects wanting to be adored in private interchange with the gazer; idols are sublime, wanting masses of beholders; totems are companionable forms—friends, rather like dolls. They are the objects of playful game playing and they interpellate the beholder into a community," he says. Inspired by Mitchell's categories, I would want to suggest that despite their monumental massivity and their role as fetish, Big Things could also be read through this third category—as totemic icons to be regarded familiarly, often ironically, as representations of ordinary things that function to produce a sense of communal identity.

This reading of Big Things as companionable and familiar seems to do justice to their homeliness. For Big Things seem rather benign in their crudity. This might be partly because of the intrinsically paradoxical nature of the simulacrum, which, as a second-order imitation, locates the locus of desire back in the original even while, as bad copy, it comes nonetheless to precede the real. To draw on Andrew Ross's (1989: 145) charming distinction, Big Things are "schlock" rather than kitsch or camp since they are "truly unpretentious—nice, harmless things. . . designed primarily to fill a space in people's lives and environments."

But the notion of familiarity returns me to those "other" companionable forms—the Aboriginal totems that were implicated in prior circuits of meaning, prior social relations, prior forms of community, prior forms of exchange, and prior inscriptions of meaning onto landscape and region. I want neither to romanticise the circuits of exchange that preceded commodity culture, nor to engage in an ahistorical, anti-environmentalist and anti-postcolonial romanticisation of the ironic spectacle of popular culture. So I'm left wondering what to make of the clash between these possible "readings" of Big Things, which seems to point as much to the limits of hermeneutics as to the complexity of Big Things. Just what the relationship might be between academic readings, popular practices, political action and social change remains—for this paper—the Biggest Thing of all.

## Notes

1. I take Stewart to mean, primarily, bourgeois collections rather than museums. Certainly, her argument works best in relation to these.
2. Paul Ryan made these helpful comments in the discussion after I presented this paper at the "Mapping Regional Cultures" conference, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton, July 1996. I'd like to signal his mammoth project here, which involves in-depth ethnographic work with the makers and owners of all the Big Things in Australia.

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