



HAL
open science

”Images of the Nation in SBS’s Immigration Nation”

Marilyne Brun

► **To cite this version:**

Marilyne Brun. ”Images of the Nation in SBS’s Immigration Nation”. *Zeitschrift für Australienstudien* = *Australian Studies Journal*, 2014, 28, pp.67-85. hal-01525685

HAL Id: hal-01525685

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-01525685>

Submitted on 29 May 2017

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Marilyne Brun

Images of the Nation in SBS's *Immigration Nation*

As works that propose to present, explain, and at times denounce events, phenomena, and/or lives, documentaries posit a special relation to the "real", since they pose as authentic representations of the "real". However, as major documentary theorist Bill Nichols has argued, documentaries cannot be regarded as straightforward mirrors of lives, events and phenomena (x), but are articulated by a double logic:

Documentary, like other discourses of the real, retains a vestigial responsibility to describe and interpret the world of collective experience, a responsibility that is no small matter at all. But even more, it joins these other discourses (of law, family, education, economics, politics, state, and nation) in the actual *construction* of social reality. (10)

A documentary necessarily constructs social reality, it is a "*discourse about the world*" (Nichols x, emphasis in the text). Such discourse is conveyed through the documentary's main narrative, but it is also created through images, which are often seen as guaranteeing representativeness. As a visual medium, documentary film bases much of its "discourse of the real" on images and visual representations. Documentaries may use an aesthetics of literalism, but they in fact actively construct reality through editing choices and the voices that give meaning to images. As Fitzsimons, Laughren and Williamson argue, documentaries are necessarily "a historically located field of practice" (10) and should be regarded as "a production of meaning from a particular discursive position" (14).

Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us, a three-part documentary aired on SBS in January 2011, is no exception to this. The series proposes a history of the White Australia Policy from 1901 until the 1970s. As a film that addresses a sensitive issue in Australian society, *Immigration Nation* tries to reach a difficult

balance between the discussion of problematic points in early twentieth-century Australian history – the White Australia Policy and its exclusion of non-white immigration – and the presentation of more positive images of the nation. This article discusses the documentary's *visual* representation of Australia as an immigration nation, and seeks to deconstruct its aesthetics of literalism and discourse of the real.

The documentary has so far not been the object of much criticism. Beside reviews, one article has been written about multiculturalism and history in the documentary (Garnier and Kretzschmar). The present article therefore fills a gap in the scholarship on the series, and seeks to contribute to the study of documentary discourse. The discourse presented in *Immigration Nation*, which is deeply embedded in the multicultural context of 2010s Australia, offers a distinct visual representation of Australia that I will analyse in three main parts: *Immigration Nation's* visualisation of the past, the links that it draws between the past and the present, and its representation of contemporary Australia.

1. Visualising the Past

Immigration Nation is part of a long tradition of Australian documentary production, and was in 2011 the first major documentary series on immigration for a decade on Australian television (Garnier and Kretzschmar 2). Commissioned by the Australian television network SBS, it was produced by Alex West, Lucy Maclaren, and Jacob Hickey, written by Alex West and Sara Tiefenbrun and directed by Ben Shackelford. Its three episodes are structured chronologically, with a first episode that discusses the White Australia Policy from Federation in 1901 until the beginning of the Second World War. The second and third episodes address the gradual relaxation of immigration restrictions from the 1940s onwards. While the second episode deals with the White Australia Policy in the 1940s and 1950s, the third and final episode discusses the progressive end of the White Australia Policy from the 1950s until the 1970s, and ends with the first unplanned arrivals of

immigrants by boat in 1976. Although the focus of the documentary is located in the past, *Immigration Nation* is clearly concerned with the relation between past and present. While it describes and explains the policy of restrictive immigration to Australia, it also draws direct links between the White Australia Policy and current anxiety over contemporary unplanned seafaring arrivals of asylum seekers in Australia.

Immigration Nation is rather classical in terms of form. Nichols identifies four major modes of representation in documentary film, which can exist simultaneously in a single documentary. He chronologically lists the expository mode, which contains voice-of-God commentaries; the observational mode, which seeks to attenuate the filmmaker's presence; the interactive mode, which often involves a conversation between the filmmaker and social actors; and the reflexive mode, where the viewer's attention is drawn to the form of the work itself (xiv). Such modes involve specific social, aesthetic and ethic challenges and constraints. The mode that is most relevant to discuss *Immigration Nation* is the expository mode, and its challenges and constraints need to be considered in a discussion of the documentary. The series' narrative is a rather classical alternation of voice-over commentaries and interviews with immigration bureaucrats, former migrants and academics. While the main narrative is carried out by a disembodied voice-of-God which addresses the viewer directly, it is complemented by interviews with academics such as Marilyn Lake, Andrew Markus and Henry Reynolds. The documentary's general narrative is illustrated by a number of images and footage. Images include paintings, archival photographs, and administrative forms such as certificates of registration; footage varies between archival footage, videos of contemporary locations, interviews, and extracts from fiction films. The documentary's visual aspect was complimented by most reviewers and rewarded by a number of awards.¹ Garnier and Kretzschmar, for instance, describe

¹ *Immigration Nation* won the Gold Muse for Best Documentary or Factual Entertainment Promo, the Gold Isis for Best Design without Footage, the Silver Muse for Best Print Ad, the Gold Isis for Best Typography and the Silver Muse for

Immigration Nation as “visually impressive. It includes rare archival footage, precious interviews with immigration bureaucrats and several generations of ‘former migrants’, as well as high-quality academic expertise” (2).

The documentary series was received generally favourably by critics. While its visual aspect was widely praised, its representation of Australian history was the subject of a number of criticisms. As a three-hour documentary series, *Immigration Nation* necessarily offers a fragmentary, partial, and incomplete narrative on the White Australia Policy. Perhaps the strongest criticism that has been made is that its history of the White Australia Policy starts with Federation in 1901 – the motivations behind the implementation of the policy and the existence of similar laws in each colony in the nineteenth century are not mentioned. The documentary’s summary of the White Australia Policy and its demise indeed fails to provide the wider international context that influenced Australia’s immigration policies. Also absent from this narration is the complexity of the dynamics that led to the end of the policy, including the role played by international pressure and broader civil rights struggles in Australia and the world. Garnier and Kretzschmar thus point out that many of the political and social agents who played a role in the White Australia Policy (such as trade unions) are missing from the series’ narration. Many critics have also deplored that the documentary’s narrative ends with the first unplanned arrivals in the 1970s, and thus does not discuss multiculturalism and the issues surrounding it, such as the debate over Asian immigration in the 1980s and the political manipulation of the Tampa crisis by the Howard government (Garnier and Kretzschmar 4), although this aspect seems to have more to do with limitations of duration than with a deliberate choice to exclude such events from the series.²

Most Outstanding Promo of the Year at the PromaxBDA ANZ Awards. It won Gold for Best Animation and Gold for Best News/Inform Program Promotion Campaign Using Integrated Media at the International Promax Awards. The program was also successful at the Webby Awards and was awarded the Australian Effects and Animation Festival (AEAF) Best Visual Effects in a TV Series.

² The most intense – and unfounded – criticisms formulated on the documentary were unsurprisingly published in *The Quadrant* (see Izzard, “The Deceit of *Immigration Nation*”).

Like many documentaries in the expository mode, *Immigration Nation* is articulated by an informing logic and operates in terms of problem-solving: voices and images are “woven into a textual logic that subsumes and orchestrates them” (Nichols 37). The series is structured by the logic of evidence, and its engagement with the historical world is rhetorical rather than poetic or fictive.

In line with its main argument, which discusses the White Australia Policy and its relation to contemporary issues, the series offers images that represent past as well as contemporary Australia. Its representation of the past is established through a number of devices. *Immigration Nation* uses archival footage, which functions as a conventional visual representation of the past. Archival images also appear on the screen to illustrate specific points or events. Other less conventional devices are used to visualise the past. The first of these devices is the visualisation of the past through monuments. In Episode 1, which deals with Federation and the White Australia Policy until the beginning of the Second World War, a number of footages and images illustrate the narrative. The documentary shows a combination of archival images and paintings, as well footage of contemporary buildings. For instance, the Melbourne Royal Exhibition Building, which hosted the first Australian Federal Parliament in May 1901, is repeatedly shown during discussions dealing with the Immigration Restriction Act and the Pacific Island Labourers Act. Contemporary colour footage of the exterior of the Royal Exhibition Building shows pedestrians – mostly people getting to and from work – walking alongside the building and the Carlton Gardens. Here, the Royal Exhibition Building can be read as a reminder of the presence of visible markers of the past in their present-day life, and therefore functions as a metaphor for the impact of the past on contemporary dynamics.

The visibility of historical heritage is also highlighted in the same episode through indoor footage of the Exhibition Building. The footage slowly zooms in and out of details inside the building, as if the edifice itself contained clues and images to unlock the complexities of the past. Close shots of the building’s *bas-reliefs*,

paintings and dome are shown, while the voice-over explains the main aspects of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act. Both indoor and outdoor footage of the Royal Exhibition Building thus function as a metonymy for Federation and its importance in early twentieth-century Australian history: details are used to represent the wider decisions that were discussed and made in 1901. For instance, when the narrative voice discusses the status of Aborigines in the new Federation ("There is no place in this brave new world for Aboriginal people; the First Australians are beneath contempt" (5)), the camera zooms in on an Aboriginal face in the bas-relief of the Melbourne Royal Exhibition Building.

Such focus on details is also present in the series' general narrative on Australian history, which is mostly character-based. Nichols points out that there is no strict distinction between documentary and fiction:

Documentaries are fictions with plots, characters, situations, and events. They offer introductory lacks, challenges, or dilemmas; they build heightened tensions and dramatically rising conflicts, and they terminate with resolution and closure. They do all this with reference to a "reality" that is a construct, the product of signifying systems, like the documentary film itself. (107)

Immigration Nation has a clear narrative structure from its first to its third episode. Its narrative tends to emphasise *political* rather than social history in the "reality" that it represents (Garnier and Kretzschmar 1). The series focuses on a handful of actors in Australian history. The heroes of the narrative are politicians and public figures who were involved in the end of the White Australia Policy (for instance, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam, Immigration Minister Albert Grassby, and Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser). On the other hand, responsibility for the shameful past is given to a number of negatively portrayed characters, including some of the early Prime Ministers of the Australian Commonwealth (for instance, Edmund Barton, Alfred Deakin, and Billy Hughes), but more importantly Charles H. Pearson, whose 1893 *National Life and Character: A Forecast*, is identified as a major reason for the implementation of a

restrictive immigration policy.³ While there is no doubt that Pearson's theories did influence some national figures at the time (see Lake and Reynolds, Chapter 6 in particular), the documentary's emphasis on individual responsibility for the policy fails to consider the complex interplay of power relations in government and society, as well as the possibility that many ordinary Australians were receptive to his ideas. As Garnier and Kretzschmar propose, "the program often reduces Australia's immigration history to a struggle between leading political figures and non-British individual migrants fighting for inclusion" (4). *Immigration Nation's* representation of what seems today a shameful past is therefore based on a selective and individual approach to Australian history.

A similar logic of individualisation is at work in the documentary's alternation between stories of tolerance and intolerance towards non-white others. Stories of intolerance tend to be *individual* stories – the speech or attitude of individual politicians and public figures. Stories of tolerance – such as how white communities appreciated the Chinese that lived with them – are by contrast presented as decidedly collective and plural.

Immigration Nation's distinctive construction of, and discourse about, Australian society was probably driven by three main motivations. One first, and central, element in understanding the focus on individuals in the documentary is practical. There is no doubt that it is difficult, let alone illusory, to seek to generalise the attitude of ordinary Australians towards the White Australia Policy. As a documentary, *Immigration Nation* needs to *illustrate* its arguments. It is not difficult here to anticipate that it is difficult to

³ Charles H. Pearson (1830-1894) was a British-born Australian historian and politician. His 1893 *National Life and Character: A Forecast* sought to predict likely evolutions in the world and received wide international attention. While issues such as the decreasing influence of the Church, the increasing power of the State, and the decay of family were addressed in the work, one influential prediction made by Pearson was that the "lower" races (Africans and Asians) would come to dominate the "higher races" if white supremacy was not deliberately maintained through the creation of exclusively white countries. As Lake and Reynolds have demonstrated, Pearson's *National Life and Character* was cited in political debates on the White Australia Policy, and influenced a number of political figures at the time of Federation.

find witnesses willing to speak about xenophobic feelings, while historical records, which are in contrast readily available and less problematic to use, encourage a more individual approach.

Another main reason that explains the focus on the individual rather than the collective in the series can be found in the recent evolution of TV documentaries. Belinda Smaill argues that documentaries, and in particular diasporic ones, increasingly “focus on representing reality through the lens of personal experience” (273). She proposes that this focus on personal experience

challenged the direct or observational cinema movements of the previous decades that privileged the objective, and therefore seemingly “unauthored”, rendering of the historical world. [...] Thus, the inscription of the self that is at the forefront of the diasporic documentaries can be understood in light of the conditions of Australian independent documentary production, shifts in documentary practice and the way these are inflected by the broader flux of social change. (273)

Although Smaill’s object of study is diasporic documentaries, the same point can be made for mainstream documentaries such as *Immigration Nation*. Recent shifts in documentary production and practice as well as evolutions towards more individualisation in Western societies at large have resulted in an increasing concern with the self in documentaries. *Immigration Nation*’s individual approach to Australian history is partly a result of shifts in documentary practice and in Western society, which generally tends towards increased individualisation.

Finally, the documentary’s individual approach is a way of representing Australian history in a non-threatening and non-aggressive way. *Immigration Nation* lays blame for negative changes on individual politicians, which anchors responsibility for Australia’s past on the nation’s leaders and shifts accountability away from a generalised Australian population. Here, it is necessary to consider the primary aim and production context of the documentary. The fact that *Immigration Nation* was commissioned by SBS has a number of implications. In *Australian Documentary: History,*

Practices and Genres, Fitzsimons, Laughren and Williamson identify three clear phases in SBS documentaries: “the period up to the creation of SBS Independent in 1994-1995; the work produced by SBS Independent until 2006; and works commissioned by SBS after 2006” (171). According to them,

In the final period, a move to series, established formats (ironically for a multiculturally focused broadcaster, generally those derived from the UK) and hybrid documentary/light entertainment programming, resulted in material with a more consistent institutional voice and greater adherence to established generic conventions of televisual work. (171)

SBS’s identifiable “institutional voice” can be discerned in *Immigration Nation*. The series can be regarded as a “light” documentary that is concerned with building audience engagement. *Immigration Nation* is part of a new trend for TV documentaries to extend outside of the series itself through the availability of videos, forums, and extra information online (Fitzsimons, Laughren and Williamson 28): Its website, which includes four main sections – Videos, Interactive, Resources, and Your Say –, proposes further details on characters mentioned in the documentary, a list of immigration stories, and reactions to the series. Its associated website and online discussion thus seek to create a long-term event that lasts beyond the mere duration of broadcasting. *Immigration Nation* targets a wide audience, with a desire to reach all ages, and educational and cultural backgrounds. While its narrative on Australian history can be criticised, a fair critique of the documentary implies taking into account its format and audience, and therefore considering it as a primarily pedagogical, rather than historical, document, which seeks to encourage the audience towards more tolerance.

2. Past and Present

Immigration Nation’s representation of the past is consistently combined with a simultaneous representation of contemporary Australia. The introductory theme tune is exemplary in this respect.

Each episode starts with a two-minute teaser that introduces the themes developed in the next fifty minutes. While the teaser is adapted to the contents of each episode, the series theme tune that follows is the same for all three episodes. The audio track of the tune is a dramatic-sounding and invigorating track played by strings, whose rhythm and melody convey a sense of excitement and foreboding. The theme tune also includes words, phrases or sentences uttered by politicians and journalists over the string melody. The visual aspect of the introductory tune is based on the theme of the archive. It presents film reels in the background, onto which a number of photographs, posters, official immigration documents, and short film extracts are distributed as if going through a photo album of Australian history. The alternation of political statements and visual representations of history through historical footage and archival documents provides images for the White Australia Policy and attempts to give a sense of the policy and of its impact on individuals.

The central achievement of the 30-second series theme tune, however, is that it systematically links past and present by alternating contemporary and past images of Australia. Viewers see Billy Hughes's triumphant return to Australia after 1919 and hear his words ("White Australia is yours"). The image that follows is a journalistic footage of the children overboard affair, which is made clearer through the words of a reporter ("Their children were thrown overboard").⁴ Viewers are then invited to see the Melbourne Exhibition Building and hear the words "Let's celebrate a new life in this warm and friendly country", which evokes the optimism present at the creation of the Australian Commonwealth in 1901. This optimistic message is followed by a final image accompanied by words spoken by John Howard: "We will decide who comes into this

⁴ The "children overboard" affair was a political controversy that took place in October 2001. Australian Government ministers publicly announced that asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat had deliberately thrown children overboard to secure rescue and therefore entry into Australia. A Senate Inquiry later established that no children had been thrown overboard, and that the Government had deliberately misguided the public in the lead up to the Federal elections.

country". The documentary therefore creates a direct link between the White Australia Policy – embodied by Hughes in the theme tune – and contemporary debates on unplanned boat arrivals in Australia. Enthusiasm for the high standard of living in Federation Australia is contrasted with Howard's determination to select the number and type of migrants coming to Australia. The exact alternation of images of past and contemporary Australia encourages viewers to consider parallels between both periods, as well as the continued impact of immigration restrictions in contemporary Australian society.

The final image of the theme tune crystallises this desire to establish connections between the White Australia Policy and contemporary anxieties about immigration. The image is divided into four parallel strips. The strips are diagonal, which associates the different images. From left to right, the image is composed of: a colour image representing contemporary ethnic variety, a black-and-white photograph of Billy Hughes, a colour footage that shows present-day ethnic variety, and a black-and-white footage of migrants getting off a boat with their belongings – presumably Eastern European refugees arriving in Australia after the Second World War. The four sections of the final image alternate between past (black-and-white) and present (colour) Australia, thus representing both the changes that have occurred in the composition of the Australian population since the end of the White Australia Policy and the possible legacy of the policy in contemporary anxieties.

This pattern of connecting the past with the present is also developed in the documentary itself. Image inlaying is used to anchor the past into the present throughout *Immigration Nation*. There are many such instances: a black-and-white image of Alfred Deakin is overlaid on the colour footage of the Victorian Parliament as it exists today. A similar device is used in Episode 2, where a montage combines a contemporary colour image of Westminster and a black-and-white historical photograph of a conference attended by Arthur Calwell during a trip to London after the Second World War. Here again, the image of the past is easily identifiable through the

contrasting use of colour and black-and-white, yet it is somewhat naturally present in contemporary buildings, fitting perfectly on part of a wall next to the Palace of Westminster.

The device is also used with videos. In Episode 1, the Royal Exhibition Building is gradually transformed: a painting representing the opening of the first Commonwealth Parliament in 1901 is inlaid on to contemporary colour footage of the building seen from the same angle. The colour video is gradually erased by the painting, and is finally fully replaced by it. The same pattern is used with a contemporary cane field, which is slowly replaced by a historical video of Kanaka labourers working in a cane field. This device suggests that while the shot angle may be the same, the gaze of Australians *has* changed.

Graeme Blundell describes the two devices as images that are “sometimes superimposed, at other times growing almost organically out of the stone”. As he argues, in both cases contemporary buildings are transformed into “vehicles for images of the past”. It is highly significant that *Immigration Nation* inlays *past* images or footage onto *contemporary* structures; the opposite is absent from the documentary. The decision to anchor the past into the present clearly highlights the desire of the creators of the documentary to emphasise the visual reminders of the past in an urban landscape that is today often solely dedicated to work or consumerism.

Another essential aspect of the series’ visual enactment of the link between past and present is what Blundell calls the “Victorian mansion”. The main arguments of *Immigration Nation* are presented by a voice-of-God commentator, but academics also intervene at various moments in the narration to repeat, or add detail to, the arguments of the voice-over. While this is a common pattern in expository documentaries, what is specific to *Immigration Nation* is that academics are all interviewed in the same location. As Blundell explains in his review of the series:

Where possible [Alex] West [one of the producers and writers of the series] and his colleagues artfully film the historians in a seemingly abandoned Victorian mansion painted white with high ceilings and polished floors and shot from different angles, usually with a wide-angled lens. They sit or stand in corners or quietly move into shot as they speak.

The decision to film all interviews with academics in a single location is significant. Unlike other interviewees in the documentary, who seem to be filmed in their own house, office, or at least in different locations, academic figures are not filmed in their office – which gives them a position of institutional authority – as is customary in many documentaries. The scholars' presence in the same Victorian mansion suggests a unity of purpose and argument, and encourages the assumption that they start with the same postulates and that their arguments converge with those of the documentary.

The choice of a Victorian house also evokes the past; the house's emptiness – academics sit on a chair in the middle of an empty room with high ceilings – encourages a focus on the interviewees alone. The emptiness of the mansion also serves a practical purpose. Academics are at times shown in tight close-ups that “establish an affective, poetic pattern of social representation” (Nichols 27). Long shots show academics sitting on a chair in a corner or in the middle of the room, whose polished floorboards, high ceilings and white walls are then apparent. In these wide-angle long shots, the walls of the mansion are used to project images of the past next to academics. The first page of the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act is, for instance, inlaid on the wall to the left of Andrew Markus; Alex McDermott presents an argument while a photograph of Arthur Calwell welcoming 100,000th migrant Isobel Savery in 1949 is superimposed on the wall to his right.

As Blundell argues:

It's as if somehow they are occupying the past, participating while they comment, as around them images of the people and events swirl and sometimes accumulate on the walls and ceilings. Graphics and

even sets of figures somehow three-dimensionally eddy through the space while they speak.

The photographs projected onto the white walls of the Victorian house function as pedagogical devices that illustrate the main argument of the documentary, while at the same time encouraging a reflection on the links between past and contemporary Australia.

3. Representing Contemporary Australia

Immigration Nation's representation of contemporary Australia is more restricted than its representation of its past. Beside footage of contemporary buildings, which are often devoid of human presence, and thus serve as abstractions for the historical processes that took place in them, contemporary Australia is represented through one main type of footage. The main image used to symbolise the present is seemingly commonplace: people walking in the street. The footage appears natural, as if a camera was posted in a street on a weekday, and simply recorded the familiar spectacle of people navigating an urban landscape. The city remains mysterious – there are no (or few) markers that could assist viewers in identifying a particular city. The anonymity of the city posits this image as at once typical and universal. The footage shows a widely populated street, which suggests that the political program to populate Australia has been met thanks to immigration. The ethnic diversity of the population being filmed combined with the fact that most pedestrians are walking in the same direction in the shots points to the harmonious integration of non-white migrants into Australia.

While the footage is posited as being common and unworked, it in fact involves a very specific perception and representation of the Australian population. The people in the footage generally seem to be under 50 years of age and are presumably going to work. Most important of all, these pedestrians walk in an urban setting, seemingly in the city centre of a state capital. The Australia that is represented in these images is therefore not universal but highly specific: the Australians who are posited as ordinary and therefore emblematic are *young, active, and urban*. *Immigration Nation* does

not offer images of rural Australia, residential areas or poorer neighbourhoods – the footage of ordinary people walking down a street is not a commonplace image but the result of a series of choices. As Nichols remarks, documentaries

prompt us to infer that the images we see (and many of the sounds we hear) have their origin in the historical world. Technically, this means that the projected sequence of images, what occurred in front of the camera (the profilmic event), and the historical referent are taken to be congruent with one another. (25)

Documentaries, then, should be regarded as “a metonymic representation of the world as we know it” (Nichols 28). This metonymic logic becomes apparent in the case of *Immigration Nation*'s representation of contemporary Australia, where a crowd in a street is posited as characteristic and emblematic of the Australian population at large.

Nichols has also argued that documentaries in the expository mode tend to “eliminat[e] reference to the process by which knowledge is produced, organized, and regulated so that it, too, is subject to the historical and ideological processes of which the film speaks” (35). *Immigration Nation*, like many expository films, “tend[s] to mask the work of production” (Nichols 56). Evidence of such historical and ideological processes can be found in the authors' idea of immigration. Movements of immigration are only described as such when the documentary discusses post-1901 or non-white migration. Australians of English and Irish origin are not posited as the result of *immigration* but as being already in Australia, a highly problematic repetition of a historical construction.

The narrative of *Immigration Nation* focuses on the ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia as opposed to its (fantasised) homogeneity during the White Australia Policy. The seemingly ordinary footages of crowds in a street thus feature in the documentary as clear evidence of contemporary ethnic diversity. The way in which they are incorporated in the documentary's argumentative logic encourages a focus not on elements such as

gender ratio, outfits, or street signs, but solely on race.⁵ One can argue that *Immigration Nation* is informed by a 'racialising' gaze and encourages viewers to "read" race, thus reproducing the very logic that it critiques.⁶

Such ideological assumptions are even clearer in the final image of the documentary. Just before the final credits of the third episode of the series, the documentary gives information on what happened to former migrants interviewed in the series ("Nancy Prasad has been an Australian citizen for 30 years. She lives with her Greek husband and their four children in Sydney"), and provides figures on the Australian population ("Australia has one of the highest rates in the world of inter-marriage between different cultural groups") and on unplanned boat arrivals ("Since 1976 boat people have made up less than 1% of Australia's immigration intake"). The final slide states in white writing on a black background:

Today Australia is made up of 199 nationalities.

In less than a lifetime the country has transformed itself from one of the least multi-cultural places on earth to one of the most diverse.

The documentary closes with a statement that aims to demonstrate the progress made since the White Australia Policy. Australia is identified as a country that is "one of the most diverse" in the world, a declaration that celebrates the achievements of Australian multiculturalism. Yet the formulation of the celebratory statement reveals a number of ideological assumptions. The first sentence seeks to underline the ethnic diversity of contemporary Australia. Its erroneous use of the term "nationalities", however, reveals a confusion between nationality and national origin. Here, it is difficult not to argue that the statement reinforces the idea that some

⁵ Here, I follow Pierre-André Taguieff's argument that the notions of race and ethnicity should not be considered separate. For Taguieff, ethnicity is part of a number of "non-explicitly biological reformulations of racism" that appeared after the 1940s (14, my translation).

⁶ The documentary similarly decries the White Australia Policy, but the vast majority of interviewed academics are white, which reproduces the very legacy that is critiqued.

Australian citizens, because of their national origin, are not considered full Australian citizens. The term “multi-cultural” is also problematic in the statement. The sentence seeks to convey that Australia’s immigration policies have moved from being a racially intolerant country to being tolerant of all races and cultures. This idea of intolerance is not formulated in terms of racism, which has obvious negative connotations, but in positive terms, since the core of the phrase is euphemistic (“multicultural”), and the superlative “least” is added to grade this positive aspect. Australia was in fact far from being “one of the *least* multi-cultural places on earth” (my emphasis), since there was ethnic variety within white Australia, but more importantly wide ethnic variety within Aboriginal Australia.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the genre of *Immigration Nation*. Perhaps what most strikingly differentiates documentary from fiction is the civic role that documentaries often play. This role is particularly present in *Immigration Nation*, whose narration, filming, and argument seek to encourage an engagement with Australia’s contemporary debates on unplanned boat arrivals through an evocation of the past. This engagement with the past is characterised by an approach that is essentially non-threatening. Sensitive issues in Australian history are not addressed in a confrontational way, but are rather smoothed over to make way for a celebratory vision of the nation. The final sentence of the series is a clear example of this, as is the tendency in the documentary to show individual rather than collective representations of the controversial past. This dissociates the legal apparatus of immigration – set up by negatively portrayed political figures and framed by immigration policies – from the attitudes and opinions of the Australian population, and this is largely achieved through the series’ *visual* representation of the nation.

In many ways, *Immigration Nation*’s suggestion to consider parallels between the white Australia policy and contemporary angst over unplanned arrivals is done through the feeling of pride. Australian

history is presented as a success story. Some of the final words of the documentary describe Australian multiculturalism as being “remarkable progress” and as being “achieved”, which construes Australian history in terms of accomplishment. The final image of the third episode similarly seeks to generate pride for contemporary Australia, and perhaps more importantly pride for multiculturalism. This recalls Ien Ang’s argument – an argument also made by Ghassan Hage – that multiculturalism “has operated as an ideological discourse designed to provide Australians with a favourable, flattering, even triumphant representation of the national self” (75). Ang argues that this flattering ideological discourse operates on two levels:

First, in historical terms, it tells the Australian people that with the adoption of multiculturalism the nation has discarded an important part of its shameful, racist past. Second, in symbolic terms, it presents the people of Australia with a public fiction that they live in a harmonious, tolerant and peaceful country where everyone is included and gets along. (75)

Immigration Nation’s representation of Australian history in non-threatening terms can be read as being part of both commercial and pedagogical purposes. In commercial terms, documentary series needs to incite viewers to watch all three episodes, which might have been jeopardised by an overly confrontational approach. The series’ pedagogical objectives and desire to intervene on present attitudes through an evocation of the past also necessitates an approach that leans more towards celebration than accusation, even though this might lead to an uncritical glorification of the government’s multicultural policies. In his review of *Immigration Nation*, Blundell remarked: “It’s an extraordinary story, and this series sucks you right in.” Blundell’s (perhaps unconscious) decision to call the documentary a *story* seems accurate, for the series tells an extraordinary story – but not history – of the nation’s success.

Works Cited

Ang, Ien, 2001. *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living between Asia and the West*. London: Routledge.

- Blundell, Graeme, 2011. "Nation of Outsiders". Rev. of *Immigration Nation*. *The Australian* (8 January).
- Fitzsimons, Trish, Pat Laughren, and Dugald Williamson, 2011. *Australian Documentary: History, Practices and Genres*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garnier, Adèle, and Mandy Kretzschmar, 2011, March. "Contentious Past, Contentious Present? Immigration Nation and the Origins of Australia's Multiculturalism." *Australian Policy and History*. <http://aph.org.au/contentious-past-contentious-present>. Accessed on 13.02.2013.
- Hage, Ghassan, 1998. *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society*. Sydney: Pluto.
- "Immigration Nation", 2011. Website of the Documentary. <http://www.sbs.com.au/immigrationnation/>. Accessed on 13.2.2013.
- Izzard, John, 2011, March. "The Deceit of *Immigration Nation*." *The Quadrant*, 3(3), 28-33.
- Lake, Marilyn, and Henry Reynolds, 2008. *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nichols, Bill, 1991. *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Pearson, Charles, 1893; 1913. *National Life and Character: A Forecast*. London: Macmillan.
- Shackelford, Ben, dir., 2011. *Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us*. Australia: Renegade Films.
- Small, Belinda, 2006, June. "Diasporic Subjectivity in Contemporary Australian Documentary: Travel, History and the Televisual Representation of Trauma." *Continuum: Journal of Media & Culture Studies*, 20(2), 269–283.
- Taguieff, Pierre-André, 1987. *La Force du préjugé: essai sur le racisme et ses doubles*. Paris: La Découverte. (also available in English translation as *The Force of Prejudice: On Racism and its Doubles*. Trans. Hassan Melehy, 2001. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).