

Developing an Interdisciplinary, Discursive Methodology to 'See' Government Emblems

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Design historians frequently struggle to place design artefacts that are 'outside of the realm of consumption' and do not readily fit into the accepted historical design canon. This is in part due to the limitations of commonly used methodologies. This paper discusses the formulation of an alternative, discursive methodology and its application to a historical study of government emblems. Discursive methodology facilitates consideration of government emblems simultaneously as design artefacts and political symbols. It does this by contextualising the emblems within the massive changes faced by the local design industry and local government in mid-1990s Victoria. The research thus avoids a common criticism of design histories, the object/canon bias. Close study of Foucault's work along with the work of Foucauldian scholars reveals the importance of his views on and approach to historical investigation for design historians. This paper discusses these theories, formulates them into a workable methodology for historical inquiry, and then discusses the application of the methodology to the development of an interdisciplinary history of government emblems.

Keywords: Foucault, discursive methodology, design history, emblems

1. The Illness

Almost from its inception, design history has suffered from regular crises of relevance. Although it was initially created to inform design education, the relevance of the fields to one another has been questioned (Baljon, 2002, p. 342; Drucker, 2009, p. 67). Practising designers and design researchers regularly question the perceived pedagogical necessity of histories that repeat an accepted, celebratory rendition of the origins and development of design. Other design histories are criticised for their emphasis on the visual, preferencing aesthetics and style over cultural and economic context and modes of production. Such work has been observed as detrimental to design practise, becoming in effect idea source books that facilitate a thin historicism (Hannah & Putnam, 1996, p. 140; Heller, 2004, p. 137; Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, & Jacobs, 2009, p. 27). These criticisms of design history are often summarised through reference to the object/canon bias, that is the preferencing of the designed 'object' and the 'canon,' or the generally accepted

view of how these objects, their designers and their stylistic traditions relate to one another (Fry, 1988, p. 53). Design history has few links to other historical disciplines and therefore it is low on methodological resources to combat these issues (Margolin, 2009, p. 97).

2. Diagnosis

Design historians have long been aware of these challenges, many having spent considerable effort diagnosing design history and proposing effective remedies. They have variously attributed these maladies to the object/canon bias, failures of definition and design history's origins in art and connoisseurship histories. A common observation is that design history has a narrow focus on 'the object' that excludes consideration of its cultural production and of its use.¹ British design historian John A. Walker identifies design history's origins in art history as a weakness because 'art history long ago ceased characterizing art; its real function now is that of constructing a particular tradition or way of looking at art.' Design history, he suggests, needs to be a history of design in all its forms, rather than 'retrospective constructions of a tradition' (Walker paraphrased in Dilnot, 1984, p. 5). In a recent commentary on approaches to design in history, eminent design historian Victor Margolin attributed what he sees as design history's impending irrelevance to a failure of definition. He argues that too many design histories lack significance due to design historians generally having a limited view of what constitutes design. They therefore only identify a narrow range of artefacts for study. In this he echoes Clive Dilnot's observation in his expansive survey of design history some twenty years earlier (Dilnot, 1984, p. 5; Margolin, 2009, p. 105). In an earlier essay, Margolin (2002, p. 235) also rejected the idea, left over from design history's connoisseurship origins, that judgements of quality are central to design history. Another product of these connoisseurship origins is the dependence many design histories have on 'star designers,' or the 'designer as hero' model (Hannah & Putnam, 1996, p. 135).

Although these observations are constructive in and of themselves, they also point to an underlying methodological weakness in much design history (Teymur, 1996, p. 149). The 'retrospective constructions of a tradition' that Walker laments stem from an explanatory approach to history that seeks to order historical events and artefacts in a linear, chronological procession of cause and effect. The progressive narrative is constrictive, forcing events and objects into artificially sequential roles. This empirical approach contains several implicit assumptions: first, that all of history is describable and can be explained; second, that there is a

¹ See, for a typical example, Baker's observation that 'design historians are not at the moment providing their readers with any understanding, historical or otherwise, of how the complexities of identity are given visual form by the designer, let alone going on to consider whose ends the resulting [logos] serve and how they do so.' (Baker, 1989, pp. 277-278). Also see Fry (Fry, 1988, p. 43).

‘correct’ version of history to be discovered among historical archives; and third, that it is possible for the historian to provide an objective account of this correct history (Drucker, 2009, 2008, p. 63).

3. Prognosis

Design history, and the sub-discipline of graphic design history are not alone in facing these methodological challenges. As Walker (1989, p. 197) states:

the issues confronting design historians are comparable to those which have been faced by scholars in other disciplines... It follows that design historians can avoid crass errors, gain insight into their own practices, and save themselves time by attending to debates within the social sciences and by studying the writings of major anthropologists, sociologists [and] general historians.

Many design historians in the last decade have done just that. Approaches incorporating semiotics, Marxist and feminist critique have incorporated consideration of signs, socioeconomic forces and gender issues into design history.²

Despite these inroads, there are still artefacts that design historians struggle to place, largely because there is no established approach that accounts for their existence. Non-commercial designed objects or, as Margolin describes them, those that are ‘outside of the realm of consumption’ and have no claim to the historical design canon are typically absent from the historical record, irrespective of their broader cultural significance.³ These artefacts are often produced anonymously, making them difficult to place through typical approaches, relying as they do on organisation by star designer and judgements of value. Such culturally significant yet rarely studied design objects include civic infrastructure (street signs, street furniture and public amenities), religious paraphernalia and political symbols. Non-commercial graphic design artefacts are particularly absent from the historical record.⁴

² For incorporation of semiotics into design history, see Hollis (2001). For a Marxist approach see Lavin (2001). For a gendered account of design history see Sparke (1995, p. 103). Goodall’s ‘Design and Gender’ provides a good example of a combined Marxist feminist approach (1996).

³ ‘We now write about stoves and automobiles, corporate identity and digital fonts, but we have little to say about design outside of the realm of consumption.’ (Margolin, 2009, p. 103).

⁴ This is due to a combination of the often ephemeral, anonymous nature of graphic design artefacts, the relative newness of the tradition, as compared with other design disciplines such as architecture and industrial design. For example, government emblems are highly public designed objects that inspire strong emotions, have a long, rich cultural history and are both politically and socially significant but they are rarely included in design histories.

Having observed similar symptoms in other historical writing, French philosopher Michel Foucault offered a broad explanation for such omissions. Critical theorist John Rajchman (1988, p. 92) writes:

Foucault's hypothesis was that there exists a sort of "positive unconscious" of vision which determines not what is seen, but what *can* be seen. His idea is that not all ways of visualising or rendering visible are possible at once. A period only lets some things be seen and not others. It "illuminates" some things and so casts others in the shade. There is much more regularity, much more *constraint*, in what we can see than we suppose.

The Marxist, feminist and semiotic methodologies previously discussed have been used to shed light on hitherto unconsidered design artefacts. It stands to reason then, that there are methodologies that can be used to illuminate non-commercial graphic design artefacts.

4. The Structuralist Prescription

Margolin and Dilnot have both advocated methodologies developed by the Annales school for 'seeing' such otherwise invisible design artefacts. Tunstall and Walker have suggested Foucault's work in particular 'holds relevance for design history' (Tunstall, 2007, p. 4; Walker, 1989, p. 16). The Annales school is a geographically disparate group of historians working from the 1930s to the present. They are known for taking a fundamentally interdisciplinary methodological approach as epitomised in the French journal *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations*. Many Annales historians, such as Bloch, Fevre and Braudel, used their interdisciplinary methodology to identify the structural underpinnings of society, thus their approach has come to be identified with that of other 'structuralists' (Green & Troup, 1999, p. 88). Margolin details two significant advantages of the Annales approach: the ability to tackle artefacts not previously included in the canon, and the facility to then contextualise those artefacts in their contemporary economic and social contexts.⁵

Foucault's *Madness and Civilisation* and *The Order of Things* were written in this structuralist mode, his work being greatly influenced by the first generation of Annales historians (Foucault, 2008, p. 16). Foucault's approach to history shares with the Annales scholars the notion of historical accident, a consequent questioning of causality and a commitment to interdisciplinarity. Marc Bloch, one of the founders of the Annales school, describes the importance of

⁵ It is an irony of design history that although its focus has been on squarely on commercially produced objects, it has seldom taken into account the economic circumstances surrounding them, either in terms of the macroeconomic conditions that facilitated their production, or their economic effect (Margolin, 2009, p. 100).

acknowledging how all historical events and artefacts are the result of multiple factors; they are accidents in the sense that they are one outcome in a range of infinite possibilities. For Bloch, the seeming importance of any one contributing factor over another, the ‘fetish of single cause,’ is always due to the perspective of the observer.⁶

For Foucault and the *Annales* scholars, historical investigation was intrinsically interdisciplinary because they considered the division of knowledge into various academic traditions arbitrary, and their differences from one another, illusory. It is ‘our age and it alone,’ Foucault says (1967, p. 286), ‘makes possible the appearance of that ensemble of texts which treat grammar, natural history, or political economy as so many objects.’ His work *The Archaeology of Knowledge* can be seen as an attempt to illustrate the arbitrariness of these divisions.

5. The Poststructuralist Prescription⁷

However, in his later work, Foucault went on to reject several notions central to the structuralist way of thinking. The concept of a ‘total history’ that Bloch and Fevre developed, the idea that ‘all aspects of a society were part of a historical totality’ he rejected in favour of an opposing concept he called a ‘general history,’ that is, a fragmentary history, without obvious linear or chronological links between subjects (Foucault, 2008, p. 10; Green & Troup, 1999, p. 88; Dean, 1994, p. 93). He suggested that history’s fragmentary nature is in fact its main strength. ‘What is found at the historical beginning of things,’ he says (Foucault, 1971, pp. 371-372), ‘is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things. It is disparity.’ With this statement Foucault rejects overarching narratives.

Foucault also went on to completely reject causality, claiming that cause and effect are illusory (Foucault, 1971, p. 369). Thus in terms of historical inquiry all that can be done with history is an observation of past appearances. Foucauldian scholars such as political sociologists Gavin Kendall and Gary Wickham go further, pointing out that the notion of progress itself is an illusion

⁶ He provides this example, quoting Simian: ‘For a doctor, the cause of an epidemic would be the multiplication of a microbe and its conditions the dirt and ill health occasioned by poverty; for the sociologist and the philanthropist, poverty would be the cause, and the biological factors, the condition.’ (Bloch, 1953, p. 193). Lupton and Miller situate this idea within a design context (Lupton & J Abbott Miller, 2008, p. 9).

⁷ Foucault’s rejection of the notion of structure or systemic explanation in historical analysis saw others attach his work to poststructuralism. Foucault himself sought to distance his work from this trend, citing that discourses, his area of expertise, can be studied systematically, that is, their study has a structural element, because they have common characteristics and behaviours. Wickham and Sage do a thorough job of logically explaining this (Kendall & Wickham, 1999, p. VIII) He has also been referred to as a postmodern scholar, a label he also rejected, commenting that he regarded the study of discourses and how they change over time to be the opposite of discontinuity (a central theme of postmodernism), as his work explains the transformation of discourses from one state to another (Foucault, 1967, p. 283). Despite these protestations, Foucault’s work, particularly in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *The History of Sexuality* is regularly referred to, particularly in history circles, as poststructuralist. However, in the wider academic community his work is perhaps more commonly referred to as discursive, owing to the greater influence of his later, discursive works.

(1999, p. 4). Although this rejection of causality has become popular in the fields of cultural, media and gender studies, it remains a minority view among academic historians and almost non-existent in design history.⁸

Furthermore, Foucault also famously rejected the notion that the historian could be an impartial observer, to the point of rejecting objectivity itself. The assertion of the historian's objectivity became more problematic for Annales historians when they attempted histories of the industrial age and beyond (Green & Troup, 1999, p. 93). Foucault's rejection of objectivity suggested a solution to this methodological challenge by bringing the historian and his subject into closer contact. With the distance between the historian-observer and his subject decreased, the study of recent times becomes more tenable. Despite this methodological innovation, Foucault acknowledged that there are problems inherent in historical study of the recent past, since the study of recently created archives is inevitably the study of current modes of thought (Foucault, 1967, p. 293).

6. The Discursive Prescription

Discussing the importance of history, Foucault describes how historical archives contain evidence of communication patterns that influence the behaviours and thought of both institutions and people. He calls these patterns discourses, and through his own historical inquiries demonstrates them to be a form of discipline, embodying both knowledge and power (Rose, 2007, p. 143). For its capacity to reveal discourses, Foucault considered history to be the highest form of new knowledge. However, he argues (1967, p. 284), 'there is nothing to be gained from describing... discourses unless one can relate [them] to... practices, institutions, social relations, political relations, and so on.' Much of Foucault's work was therefore devoted to describing how various discourses contributed to the formation of public attitudes and institutional biases that were previously hidden or considered 'natural.' For example, in one essay he discusses how the concept of liberty begun as an upper class social construct that later developed into a value supposedly fundamental to human existence (Foucault, 1971, p. 371).

⁸ The one exception is Anne Bush, with her work 'Through the Looking Glass: Territories of historiographic gaze' (Bush, 1994).

7. A Discursive Historical Methodology for Design History?⁹

From the sum of Foucault's historical work and writing about history, a working discursive history methodology for design historians can be formulated. Although his writing is at times opaque, Foucault's actual historical work appears to be based on several guiding principles that were developed into perhaps surprisingly systematic methods.

The main purpose of any historical investigation following a discursive mode should be identifying and describing the discourses inherent in the studied events and artefacts (Foucault, 2008, p. 49). For design history, this means identifying and describing the discourses inherent in the designed object, as well as those surrounding its development and production. This process must be interdisciplinary, observing discourses without giving preference to designerly or aesthetic considerations, since the division of knowledge into various disciplines was considered by Foucault to be completely arbitrary. Time restrictions should also be avoided, as Foucault rejected them in his own work in favour of studying a given phenomenon or 'problem' from beginning to end. The period studied is delimited by the rise and fall of a particular phenomenon rather than by time bounds arbitrarily set by the historian (Kendall & Wickham, 1999, p. 22).

All observations of discourses, events and objects should be documented without conscious value judgements. Although all descriptions are subjective, Kendall and Wickham (1999, p. 15) explain that, for this kind of inquiry, judgements can be divided into two kinds, first order and second order judgements. Second order judgements are those an observer consciously makes; first order judgements are those the observer makes when he is intending to be objective. These first order judgements are influenced by the sum of the observer's beliefs and past experiences and so, although they are in no way objective, these first impressions are of most interest to Foucauldian scholars.

Discursive methodology avoids attempts at identifying causal relations between any elements of the study. This includes rejection of notions of causality between the designer and designed object, and between the object and its users. In discursive methodology then, the 'object' is secondary to the discourses of which it is a part. The main subject of such a history should

⁹ At different stages of his career, Foucault suggested two methodologies for investigation of theoretical problems: archaeology, and later, genealogy. While consideration of these approaches is helpful for the historian, it should be noted that they represent Foucault's thinking at given stages of his career and therefore only address methodological challenges he was concerned with at a particular point in time. For example, neither of these approaches suggests a way to incorporate his later, influential work on 'governmentality.' It is also helpful to bear in mind that Foucault did not, in a lot of his work, follow his own advice.

therefore be the identified discourses, with designed objects only featuring in so far as they add insight into various discourses (Foucault, 2008, p. 52).

Ironically, this aspect of Foucault's work has spawned an influential method used across social science disciplines called 'discourse analysis.' This is a way of identifying and describing in great detail the discourses inherent in written records. Through very detailed description of discourses it sheds light on past events but avoids the pitfalls of explanation. For design history, the relatively new field of visual discourse analysis is particularly helpful (Rose, 2007, p. 146). Rajchman identifies how in his own work Foucault frequently uses the device of before-and-after pictures, to describe events and situations at the beginning of a discursive trend and then toward the end of it (Rajchman, 1988, p. 90). This device suggests the possibility of analysis without attempts at explanation, as the description of discourses, through this illustrative device, often illuminates the relationships between various objects of historical study.

8. The Project

The discursive methodology described above was formulated as a way of approaching a historical study of government emblems. These are highly public designed objects that inspire strong emotions and have a long, rich cultural history. They communicate messages about the government and the territory it represents, but also about the broader public mood, Foucault commenting that 'the same organisation a period assigns to inner or psychological processes recurs in external "public" ones,' such as graphic design artefacts, government emblems included (Rajchman, 1988, p. 92). Further, emblems are one of the many devices governments use to shape their citizens' collective and personal identities, and ultimately, to alter their behaviour (Large, 1989, p. 7; Tunstall, 2007, p. 4). Despite these historically, socially and politically significant characteristics of government emblems the design history canon struggles to 'see' them.¹⁰

As discussed, design history methodologies that employ a linear, chronological, explanatory narrative cannot adequately take into account the multiple roles government emblems perform, let alone multiple perspectives on those roles. By preferencing the ordering of authorship, aesthetics and value judgements into illusory causal relationships, the canon leaves questions of function and of broader cultural impact in relative darkness. In contrast, a discursive methodological approach views government emblems in terms of function (in its widest sense), describing how

¹⁰ Government emblems are not completely absent from the historical record. There have been at least three historical studies of government emblems to date, one conducted by Michael Large and two by Javier Gimeno Martínez. However, each of these has been conducted either as an interdisciplinary study or through a discipline other than design history. (Large, 1989; Martínez, 2006, 2008)

they are produced by and contribute to historical, social and political trends. The avoidance of causality and explanation allows for observation of discourses across disciplinary boundaries, both those that contribute to the development of the emblems and those the emblems ultimately contribute to. In this approach, aesthetic treatment and authorship are incidental, being considered only in their capacity to illustrate discourses. It is a primarily descriptive approach, wherein observations are set down as impartially as possible, in an attempt to reveal the discourses inherent in the production and use of government emblems.

The emblems studied in this project consisted of 276 crests, stamps and logos used to represent municipalities in Victoria before and after a State-wide council amalgamation occurring in the mid-1990s. In 1994, before the council amalgamations, there were 210 councils using emblems in a wide variety of forms, mostly heraldic or heraldry-inspired. The wide variety in the council emblems was matched by the variety in the size and nature of Victorian councils. They ranged in age and heraldic authenticity from the City of Melbourne coat of arms, originally designed by engraver Thomas Ham in 1842 and later granted by the Letters Patent of the Kings of Arms in 1940 to the comparatively new, in both age and style, stamp of the City of Sherbrooke (Hauser, 2006, p. 76). The symbolic representation in these emblems was broad. They depicted local flora and fauna, landmarks, the ethnicities of residents, references to local history, and representations of local industries at the time of the emblem design. Some, such as the City of Preston contained mottos bearing the council's aspirations, such as 'Industria et justicia' (Harvey, 1982, p. 164). These emblems were often originally created as three-dimensional metal engravings, for hanging on the walls of council chambers.

By the end of 1996, the amalgamations were complete, 77 new councils having been formed, bringing the total number of councils to 78. All of the 77 new councils commissioned new emblems. These new emblems were in the form of logos, and the majority of these employed a modernist, or modernist-inspired aesthetic. All of the logos were commissioned via public tender, in accordance with the tight new regulatory measures that were introduced by the State government during local government restructuring. The various notices of tender resulted in the councils receiving submissions from, and awarding tenders to, graphic designers with wide-ranging credentials and reputations. The contracts were much sought after by Victorian graphic designers. (Taffe, 2008) They were high value jobs at a time when graphic design firms were under significant financial pressure. Design literacy at the councils was low, although some Councils hired external consultants to assist with the selection of designers. Some of the logos

were designed at well-known and well-regarded graphic design studios in Melbourne (e.g. FHA), while others were created at relatively unknown graphic art houses.

Despite the significant differences in the conceptual training and experience of the logo designers, the council logos contained similar symbolic representation to one another. The majority of them contained references to the flora, fauna and geography of the local council area. Hills and water motifs featured heavily in the logos, even for councils that did not contain large amounts of either.¹¹ Where some of the old emblems featured mottos, some of the logos were adorned with advertising tag lines. These contained messages aimed more at service quality and attracting tourism than at political ideology, for example Colac-Otway Shire's tagline 'Naturally Progressive.'

The majority of the new emblems were created electronically, using a combination of traditional design tools, for example Pantone swatches, and some that were new to the industry, such as vector editing software. The introduction of new technologies into the graphic design production process around the time these logos were developed presented challenges for the graphic designers and the councils in the logo development process. The new technologies, such as scanners, disk drives, new versions of computers, operating systems and software were expensive and took many man hours to master. In addition, there was an expectation from clients that graphic designers would provide cheaper services because 'the computer does everything.' Electronic design files were becoming the accepted standard delivery format for logos, but this was hard to communicate to the client councils, and they received the logos in a variety of formats, some of which became redundant in a short space of time (Cozzolino, 2008).

Comparison of these two groups of logos, those created before and after local government restructuring, indicates that they were created for very different purposes and through vastly different production processes. Observing the contemporary political context supports this assertion. The local government restructuring was part of a broader public service restructuring in Victoria that effectively changed the nature of the Victorian public service, from a public service provider to that of a contract administrator. While the unofficial 'third tier of government' status of local government in Australia had been honoured by past State governments, as part of its public restructuring the Kennett government assigned local government to a principally service

¹¹ Mornington Peninsula Shire Council and Cardinia Shire Council represent two extremes of this water representation. Mornington Peninsula has the most coastline of any Victorian council and is represented by a shell, while Cardinia Shire Council, which contains relatively little coastline, is represented by a seagull, another sea motif.

provision role. Councils' legislative duties were temporarily suspended, as administration of State government initiatives and collection of revenue became the main priorities of Council operation. Political scientist John Alford (O'Toole & Burdess, 2007, p. 242) has summarised these changes saying that the local government restructuring 'focused on a corporate approach to governance involving new public management, corporate accountability through democratic representation and the redefinition of citizens as shareholders and customers.'

9. Conclusion

Critiques of design history methodologies by respected design historians inspired investigation into the possibilities of a discursive methodology for design history. This fundamentally interdisciplinary approach has allowed for the study of government emblems in terms of their broader social, professional and political influences and impact. The two groups of government emblems, those created before and after local government restructuring, illustrate changing administrative trends in government. Their production was influenced by the dramatic changes occurring within the graphic design industry at the time of their creation. The study has also illustrated how graphic designs artefacts communicate discourses by highlighting two of the discourses inherent in the later group of government emblems, those of government corporatisation and design technologies. This methodology serves as a potentially useful tool for other design historians and also as an example of the innovation possible by looking outside of the discipline for remedies to seemingly discipline-specific symptoms.

Illustrations



City of Melbourne coat of arms



Shire of Sherbrooke stamp



City of Preston stamp



Colac Otway
SHIRE

Naturally Progressive
Colac-Otway Shire Council logo



MORNINGTON
PENINSULA
Shire

Mornington Peninsula Shire Council logo



CARDINIA

Cardinia Shire Council logo

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