

Antipodean Media Ecologies: Journeys to Nowhere and Back

Su Ballard

Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand.
sballard@tekotago.ac.nz

“They discovered that there was another world on this planet, where the cloudy sky produced a milky green light that reflected off an icy ground, uniformly illuminating the air around them as if the landscape were glowing in the dark. It was a landscape without matter, only light. There was neither luminous source nor shadow, only reflection and incidence” (The Association of Freed Times (AFT) 2005, 299).

“Now that the cloud was there, I began to doubt my memory, and to be uncertain whether it had been more than a blue line of distant vapour that had filled up the opening” (Butler 1985, 56).

In summer 2005 The Association of Freed Times (AFT) published an article in *Artforum*. “El Diaro del Fin del Mundo: A Journey That Wasn’t” described environmental damage to the Antarctic ice shelf and the subsequent mutations occurring within the Antarctic ecosystem. One of these mutants is rumoured to be a solitary albino penguin living on an uncharted island near Marguerite Bay. The article documents French artist Pierre Huyghe’s journey to find the island and its mysterious inhabitant, and forms the first part of an event that culminated in a musical on the Wollman ice rink in New York’s Central Park, where “in accordance with a principle of equivalence, a symphony orchestra ‘plays’ the form of this island” (Leydier 2006, 33). The expedition, film, installation, narrative and performance *A Journey that Wasn’t* documents European imaginings of elsewhere, while at the same time suspending relationships between fiction and reality. Questions remain over whether Huyghe and his team undertook the trip, and if so, what it was they found there. “Perhaps, they reasoned, desire itself might produce the island” (AFT 2005, 299).

In 2004 Australian artists David Haines and Joyce Hinterding undertook a residency in Dunedin New Zealand where they filmed source materials for their

installation *Purple Rain*. *Purple Rain* documents the destruction of a virtual (yet real) montage of New Zealand’s southern alps by analogue broadcast frequencies. The artists describe the effect as a “mountain falls through radio waves” (Haines and Hinterding 2003). In the installation large television antennas hang from the ceiling. Reading the electromagnetic energies passing through the space, the antennas generate waves of sound which motivate an avalanche on the projected mountain. In a literal correspondence, the sound both causes and prevents the snow to fall. The actual material disintegration of the image is dependant on the off screen radio energy. The mountain itself is also not present, but created through logarithms of data. This is no longer a specific mountain but a generated amalgam of digital memories of mountain-like forms. The visual image is nothing more than information made visible and set into motion by the shifting surfaces of the sound waves, which corrupt and control its obedience to gravity. The work then largely occurs off screen in the interstitial spaces of transmission. The sound is tremendous, yet the damage is minimal.

Purple Rain is part sound collected off screen and made visual, and part visual image degraded and frozen by the actions of sound (Haines, 2004). In *A Journey That Wasn’t* Huyghe takes a different approach, distributing the source and impact of the sound across hemispheres. On a wind swept Antarctic island the orange safety-clad artists are seen unfurling a giant inflatable structure: part weather balloon, part monolith. The “experimental device ... translated the island’s shape into a complex sequence of sound and light, not unlike a luminous, musical variation of Morse code” (AFT 2005, 300). We see the cautious approach of familiar animals and then for a fleeting second a small white creature circles the device before disappearing into the weather. “It stood upright, perhaps a few feet tall. It blinked its round eyes, unaware that anyone had been searching for it all these weeks” (AFT 2005, 301). The sounds of the encounter were returned to New York where Joshua Cody rendered them into a composition ultimately based on sonic data derived from the topography of the island. The

composition formed the basis for the re-introduction of the albino penguin to Central Park's uncanny world of black ice and howling winds.¹

media ecologies

This paper narrates an engagement with natural environments disturbed and somehow remade by technologies of sonification, visualisation and exploration. These works offer fascinating documentation of the shifting powers of new media as they map antipodean space. Haines and Hinterding make visible the magic of sonic forces as radio waves are seen to move mountains. Huyghe seeks an intangible engagement with a mythical creature that is made real by documentation. *Purple Rain* and *A Journey That Wasn't* use media to reconsider narratives of the natural environment. But more than this, they suggest a different kind of structuring of our understanding of media that is not focused on the artefact but on its environmental interrelations. Something else is being formed: a meditation on the relationships between the natural world as located in some elsewhere space of the antipodes and the communications networks that mean that these spaces are neither pure nor innocent. In his pioneering work conducted alongside Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman wrote: "media ecology is the study of media as environments ... their structure, content, and impact on people. An environment is, after all, a complex message system which imposes on human beings certain ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving" (Postman, 1970, 160). Complex message systems involve relations of transmission and communication. Haines and Hinterding make us particularly aware of how transmission flows across and through material forces. The transmission waves that seem to disturb the tranquillity of the mountain scene do so by mapping fluctuations in communication. By watching the screen and listening to its associated sonic systems a viewer pieces together off screen and on screen. This process suggests an investment of presence in sound. A listener has to be there to hear the sound, for it to be communicated.

elsewhere

As media ecologies, antipodean ecosystems are not separate to the communications technologies they embody. Each work maps a zone of activity — an event rather than an artifact. Huyghe takes a receiving station to Antarctica and translates the shape of the island into noise. The hums, clicks and buzzes produced sound like animal communication, at the least; it seems to be enough to summon the penguin.

Because they are manifestations of systems, ecologies cannot be dissected, and individual segments cannot be analysed in isolation. The borders of such systems are constantly in flux. Huyghe says "there is a need to produce zones of not-knowing from which stories and monsters might emerge" (Leydier 2006, 31). This desire to turn fiction into fact is written into the history of the southern antipodes. The South Island of New Zealand was a stepping off point for many early explorers of Antarctic regions.² In the 1880s British writer Samuel Butler travelled to New Zealand, and set up a successful sheep farm that he named Erewhon (no-where). The farm became the setting for a tale of societal control. In *Erewhon* Butler recognised an ecological intensity that heralded a terrifying shift in the relations of nature to technology. Butler's observations of machinic ecology question the tension between real fictions and virtual potentials as rendered through contemporary media technologies. Like *Purple Rain* and *The Journey that Wasn't*, Erewhon is a media fiction that blurs distinctions of real and virtual.

In each case a journey is undertaken, however its representation is not diagrammatic, nor diaristic. Butler travels over the Southern Alps to find a verdant green place where it appears all technology has been eliminated. Haines and Hinterding have constructed a space that can never be elsewhere because it is always infected by here, by the radio waves that are present amidst us. Huyghe carefully restages the presence of the penguin without turning it into an eco-touristic trophy.

Media relationships are never singular. In one location radio transmissions move mountains and in another, they summon mysterious creatures. Manuel DeLanda writes: “ecosystems involve processes operating at several simultaneous time scales.” (DeLanda 2003, 119). Media ecologies involve the movements of time and space, through the mediations of communications technology.

The media fictions highlighted in these works include the virtualised time and space of the antipodean journey. And like any ecology, paying attention reflects our current mediated location while allowing a glimpse of no-place.

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- 1 The location of Central Park is not incidental. In the mid 19th Century, Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux designed Central Park to reflect the lost wilderness of Manhattan. It was a utopian gesture designed to remind its inhabitants of an elsewhere rendered distant by time and urbanism.
 - 2 New Zealand has had a permanent base in Antarctica since 1958, see <http://www.antarcticnz.govt.nz>

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