(Pre)Occupied Territories: Polar Landscapes in the Cinema

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Rhetoric and the Designated Emphasis in Film Studies in the Graduate Division of the University of California, Berkeley

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Abstract

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This dissertation argues against the tendency to treat landscape as an aesthetic object and asks, instead, how landscape might be imagined as a representation of place – even if spectacular – that is constituted by narrative and that constitutes narrative in return. I extend W. J. T. Mitchell’s definition of the landscape-as-medium to the cinema-as-medium, exploring how motion pictures render landscapes as places of convergence and mediation for humans and non-humans, natures and technologies. I look to new materialism and to phenomenology in order to describe landscape as a site of mediation that challenges the inside/outside binarisms and implicit anthropo- or biocentrisms of “environmentalist” thinking. I identify how landscape functions as a field of significant materialities in which embodied human vision can be conceived in relation to non-human and technological forces and agencies.

Polar landscapes are particularly apt sites through which to articulate anxieties about the meeting of human, non-human, and technological being. The poles have functioned as rich sites at which to imagine encounters between terrestrial and extraterrestrial others and the subjective and social conflicts that they animate and signify. Accordingly, this argument offers a cinematic history of these sites and sights, from silent and early sound films that attempt to map and interpret polar landscapes in service of imperial aims to contemporary representations of lands un-appropriable and un-masterable by the human because they are always already occupied by their Others: forces and agencies that exceed and defy a merely-human understanding. My readings describe how cinema has framed polar territories as “pre-occupied”: dynamic and significant sites occupied by a myriad of forces and agencies that relentlessly de-stabilize human claims to habitation. Ultimately, I argue that a phenomenologically inflected exploration of the cinematic imagination of the polar indicates how we might reconceive of landscape as more than an aesthetic category. In this way, my argument considers polar history to be a preoccupied territory in its own right. My aim is not to illustrate how cinema has screened the “real” landscapes at the poles, nor is it to produce utopian readings of “good” landscape representations. Instead, I aim to show how each text positions its audience in relation to the territory it pictures and to the forms of thing-ly and creaturely life that pre-occupy it.
For
my parents
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Chapter 1:  
(Pre)Occupied Territories

1. Landscape and environment as rhetorical problems

‘The eye can travel across this landscape, reading it small or reading it large, following directives, bumping into obstacles, circumnavigating colors, treading softly over precarious textures, questioning obscurities and ambiguities, understanding a reference point, bypassing unknown territory. In such a way we read a map of the landscape. In such a way, in the end, we ‘read’ everything, putting forward some personal or borrowed order with which to discipline every chaos, hoping for rules – and if there aren’t any, then inventing some.’

‘By virtue of being re-presentations of the ‘real’ world, films are a type of virtual environment that at the same time model for us ways of perceiving and engaging with material and organic environments. From this standpoint, as a specific type of environmentally oriented cinema, ecocinema can offer us alternative models for how to represent and engage with the natural world; these models have the potential to foster a healthier and more sustainable relationship to that world.’

The term “landscape” is derived from the Dutch “landschap,” translatable in English as land-ship. The meaning of the first half of this noun is easy to guess; the second has mildly surprising implications. The suffix “-ship,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is typically added to nouns to “denote the state or condition of being what is expressed by the noun,” as in the words “friendship” or “companionship.” A land-ship, then, is in the first instance a kind of tautology: land in the condition of land, land as land. Yet the suffix is also applied to “nouns forming compounds having a collective sense” – as in the term “township.” It is this second case to which I would like to call attention, because here the notion of land-ship stops being a bland tautology and becomes something more interesting. In Old English, a “township” designates – and thus unites – “the inhabitants or population of a tūn collectively” or “the community dwelling in or occupying a tūn”; the term is also applied to the region as a territorial division, especially in matters of its governance. In the etymology of the term, then, we locate a “landscape” that functions as a potentially collective formation, an in-dwelling assemblage of agencies that are not necessarily human.

“Environment”, like “landscape”, seems at first to denote a simple condition: in this case, the condition of envoirning. But the difference between “environ” (as verb) and “land” (as noun) has particularly problematic consequences. David Mazel has shown that, whereas words like “judgment” and “government” still carry the force of their verb stems, which “echo with the full senses of the actions and the actors upon which they necessarily follow[,]” what remains of our

2 Paula Willoquet-Maricondi, Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010), 9.
sense of environment...is not any action but a thing; thanks to a nominalizing process that effaces both act and actor, we no longer speak of what environs us, but of what our environment is.”

In Mazel’s analysis, common contemporary notions of environment reduce the process of environing or the performance of environment to a static, knowable, impersonal “it.” In this, Mazel argues, “the genuine agency at work in acts of environment” belongs rhetorically to the human – to “the speaker who is environed” and to “the action of the entering and occupying humans [for whom] to have an environment is to have entered and remained.” Mazel points with suspicion to, but ultimately cannot escape, this occupation’s tendency to constitute its surroundings as an external totality, a doubly-marked outside zone of internally un-differentiated difference. Thus “landscape” may be a boring tautology, but “environment” is a nominalization that covertly abstracts agency from the forms of life that constitute a place only to attribute it slyly to its occupiers. And because it “requires two creations of difference, both of which can be construed as thoroughly political,” environmentalism itself is, rhetorically, a thoroughly problematic discourse for our time.

On these grounds I have chosen “landscape” over “environment” as the concept around which to organize what would otherwise be considered an “environmentalist” set of readings. A landscape, as I will frame it, is a community with no outside, a collective in which human and non-human actors might participate; the environment, as we commonly conceive of it, is not. The environment is one half of a binary equation in which human and non-human worlds must stand apart. It is not enough to advocate or elevate the environmental “other” over and against the privileged category of the human, thereby demonstrating the mutual dependence of one upon the other. It will be necessary to dispense with the category of environment and the discourse of environmentalism so that, over the course of what follows, I might reassemble them differently. Accordingly, this dissertation begins by considering landscape and environment as rhetorical problems in order to funnel the lessons of such an inquiry into an energetic investigation of landscape, its place in the cinema, and its usefulness to the field of media studies. I argue that landscape functions in the cinema as an aesthetic form that engages the history of landscape images across media, but that also represents a land occupied and mediated by a range of human, natural, and technological forces and agencies. Moreover, as I think “landscape” as an alternative to “environment” in the cinema, I de-emphasize a second privileged category – human presence or occupation – in order to highlight cinema’s role in representing a particularly rich range of “pre-occupied territories.” A preoccupied territory, as I conceive of it, is a representation and a real space that can be de-naturalized, its cultural conventions and natural histories rendered transparent, and the anxieties we project upon it brought into focus. As the title of my dissertation, of course, this phrase names what is at stake in the landscape representations with which I will engage most closely. These stakes, I argue, could not be adequately served by “environmentalist” analysis.

Lest I seem glib, let me stress that although I disavow the term “environmentalist” and jettison the notion of the “environment” on political grounds, I do ally myself with a companion practice in the humanities: ecocriticism. The alliance, however, is limited and must be qualified. Cherryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm, in what is considered a field-defining text for ecocritical literary studies, describe ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the

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7 Ibid., 139.
8 Ibid., 142.
physical environment.” More specifically, elaborates Lawrence Buell, ecocriticism seeks to identify “environmentally oriented” works, and to examine how they figure nature. He isolates four criteria by which to recognize such works. First, “[t]he nonhuman environment is present not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history.”

Second, “[t]he human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest.” Third, “[h]uman accountability to the environment is part of the text’s ethical orientation.” Fourth, “[s]ome sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text.” The inside/outside, human/nonhuman binaries that make “environment” so problematic a concept are legible here, but so is a concern for the relationships that such a term tends to obscure. In Buell’s formulation of ecocritique, biocentrism replaces anthropomorphism, relationships between human, natural, and technological categories become urgent historical and ethical concerns, and the verbal or visual languages through which texts describe those categories can be problematized or re-invented. Landscape is the ground – real and figurative – on which my ecocritical intervention, my problematization and re-invention of cinema’s practice of picturing the world, will take place.

2. Exploring the landscape as medium

To speak of landscape in the cinema is to speak both literally and figuratively. The world is the landscape of every film, but the landscape in cinema cannot be reduced either to the literal profilmic site in which the camera captures its images – as it is, for instance, when we think of the on-screen landscape as static, incidental, un-formed but for the presence of the camera – or, as is ever more often the case, to the literally invented worlds of animation. Whether profilmic or digitally produced, the landscapes from which film builds its worlds are rarely “mere” natural or artificial spaces. They are often real places in which human, natural, and technological forces converge and interact. These lively mediations give shape to landscapes that exist simultaneously as literal fields of meaning and as meaningful fields of figures. To think too literally about landscape in cinema might be to confer an almost documentary status on its view of space. The metaphorical function of landscape in the cinema is not to be underestimated; yet it is rarely able to fully account for the lived experiences of those who dwell in the places we see figured on screen. To think of cinematic landscape in terms that are exclusively literal (as passive nature) or exclusively metaphorical (landscape-as-figure) is to risk rendering it invisible in the relationships that constitute the places we inhabit; it is to think of landscape as mere mise en scène or aesthetic object: as a static view of a static space.

The landscape in cinema is not a static view, as in a painting or photograph. The camera captures and frames dynamic landscapes; montage assembles these motile scenes into comprehensible places. As it passes through the projector, the filmstrip composes from single, still pictures a moving image of landscape in motion. In the case of digital cinema, no still frame exists; images of landscape are dispersed as units of information that depend even more on recomposition for their mobile intelligibility. Whether on celluloid or rendered digitally, the

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11 Ibid., 7.
12 Ibid., 7.
13 Ibid., 8.
landscape in cinema is framed, composed, constituted by movements in the place depicted, in the camera’s visual field, of the camera itself, and in the spectator conscripted to the regime of vision that all of these produce. Tom Gunning has argued that “[t]he relation between landscape and cinema must be understood in relation to a long history of transformations in framing, the view framed and the role of the spectator.”

These transformations – from Claudean Ideal Landscape conventions through the phantom ride and early cinema – are characterized by the tension between a fantasy of penetration and the fragmentary and unstable succession and multiplication of views that this voyage would produce. Gunning focuses on the ways in which early cinema’s travel films maintained and ruptured the frame, realizing the old dream of a journey into pictured space but to different effect.

As Michael Fried has shown, Diderot’s fantasy of wandering into a landscape painting signaled a historical shift. Whereas strict observation of perspectival rules positioned viewers in a single, idealized position of implied mastery outside the frame, Diderot’s fantasy speaks to representational conventions that invited viewers to a slightly different kind of mastery – a mastery to be achieved by penetrating the image. This trope of penetration aligned the viewer with the “magisterial gaze” through which landscapes might be surveyed and controlled from without and within the frame. But whereas the mastery of painted landscapes depended on a practice of contemplation, the experience of landscapes-in-motion produced often-uncontrollable psychophysical reactions. Although Gunning has successfully challenged the primal scene story of running hysterically from the projected image of an approaching train, he acknowledges reports of seasickness, vertigo, and other unpleasant reactions to the experience of mobile landscape imagery. In the cases of the phantom ride and of travel films, these sensations were capable of effecting a nightmarish reversal of the stable priority of viewer over viewed: a terrifying abstraction of agency from the human and the apparatus of vision as well as to consciousness of spatiality and to the “ever-renewed landscape” into which the spectator felt herself to rush. It is worth quoting Gunning at length:

The vanishing point, the fixed convergence of classical perspective, its point of coherence, becomes in the phantom ride a point of constant transformation and instability. From it new vistas emerge like ants swarming up from an unseen anthill. Instead of the point where things vanish, the far distance becomes the point of entrance into visibility. Our point of view, as stand-ins for the camera, becomes the point at which everything converges and then disappears, reversing the traditional schema of perspective. The reversal reworks perspective’s inherent sense of visual dominance into an experience of an abject subjection to the course of movement and the logic of the track. As shaped by the camera lens… the foreground of a phantom ride represents the narrowest point of the image, as well as the point of greatest velocity, the anticipated site of collision. To watch a phantom ride film, I find, provokes not only a crisis within the spectator’s relation to space and landscape, but a heightened awareness of perception and consciousness itself, its temporal protentions and retentions, its constant reach into the distance, balanced by its sense of passing by and leaving behind.

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16 Ibid., 59.
Here, the coherence of landscape and the fantasy of contemplation-through-penetration runs aground on an inconstant view against which the viewer is held powerlessly in place. Gunning’s use of the metaphor of the anthill to represent the uncanny bubbling-forth or “swarming” of new views is apt, as it suggests an alliance between the natural spaces pictured by these films and the seemingly-alien forms of life that populated them. The film medium, it seems, is on the verge of suggesting something important about the landscape medium – something that Gunning does not fully express here but that I find elaborated in part by W. J. T. Mitchell and that I hope to make the focus of this dissertation.

W. J. T. Mitchell’s “Imperial Landscape” begins with a series of “theses” that explore the tension between landscape-as-place and landscape-as-metaphor. The first thesis, for instance, begins to define landscape-as-place by extending landscape beyond the discourse of art history. By claiming that “[l]andscape is not a genre of art but a medium,” Mitchell effectively argues that “landscape” is not just a place or a kind of picture defined by a set of conventions: this or that measure of nature, this or that degree of manifest human and/or animal presence. Instead of reinforcing the stability of landscape-as-place, he asserts that landscape is a mode of communication and exchange. Mitchell’s next thesis clarifies this proposition: “Landscape is a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other. As such, it is like money: good for nothing in itself, but expressive of a potentially limitless reserve of value.” What is at stake, then, in Mitchell’s definition of landscape, is not only a certain representation of the purportedly “natural” world, but a complex set of relationships between actors that span the range of human and nonhuman – and, I argue, the technological – that expresses values rather than merely containing them, ready-made.

Mitchell’s third and fourth theses make the stakes of representing landscapes even more explicit. “Like money,” he writes, “landscape is a social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value. It does so by naturalizing its conventions and conventionalizing its nature.” Landscape images tend to obscure the natures they represent by masking them with conventions; in particular historical formations, that of European imperialism in particular, they also use those conventions to make themselves appear transparent. Finally, in the thesis that foregrounds the concerns I will voice here, Mitchell argues that “[l]andscape is a natural scene mediated by culture. It is both a represented and presented space, both a signifier and a signified, both a frame and what the frame contains, both a real place and its simulacrum, both a package and the commodity inside the package.”

The notion that landscapes, whether literal places, representations, or ideas, are media drives this dissertation; the forms that this mediation takes are the primary objects of my analysis. Mitchell’s theses – and his rhetorical analysis of art historical discourses on landscape imagery – are one point of departure for this argument about landscape in the cinema. Mitchell explains that traditional art historical accounts of landscape painting frame the emergence of the form in a language of liberation. Whereas the landscapes represented in older works were viewed as “backgrounds” for human subjects or “digressions” from an otherwise unified theme, seventeenth-century landscape paintings that took nature as their principal subject presented

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
something new and wholly different. Against the claim that “‘we moderns’ are somehow different from and essentially superior to everything that preceded us, free of superstition and convention, masters of a unified, natural language epitomized by landscape painting,” Mitchell argues that landscape painting merely renders visible another set of conventions: an ideology of landscape through which “we moderns” have cloaked real relations between humans, natures, and technologies.

Mitchell’s definitions of landscape as “a medium of cultural expression” or “a medium of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other” seek to restore a sense of the relations of exchange and communication between these forces. Although the history he describes acknowledges that there does indeed exist a genre of art we call landscape, Mitchell points out that its subject matter is itself a multisensory medium (“vegetation, water, sky, sound and silence, light and darkness”) in which various kinds of agency take their place and, moreover, “not simply raw material to be represented in paint but […] always already a symbolic form in its own right.” This claim adds another valence to the deceptively simple yet often overlooked distinction between landscape as a representation, a “view,” and landscape as the material disposition of a set of real substances that are themselves the media through which humans and non-humans interact and make their lives.

Geographer Denis Cosgrove describes this distinction as one that delimits an “inside” and outside” of landscape representation. The landscape idea, he argues, arises with the transition from feudalism to capitalism as a product of transformations in human relations with the land. As both the land and the labor through which humans were bound to it became a commodity, so did the concept of landscape. The landscape idea – landscape as a “way of seeing” – thus has currency (is currency) both as an image and as a geography. Both “are intimately connected both historically and in terms of a common way of appropriating the world through the objectivity accorded to the faculty of sight and its related technique of pictorial representation.” Landscape painting, especial perspectival landscape painting, “is composed, regulated and offered as a static image for individual appreciation, or better, appropriation.” For Cosgrove, the individual named in this analysis, significantly, is not one with intimate ties to the view that is represented.

In order to define this intimacy, Cosgrove distinguishes between “insiders and outsiders” in the landscape idea. Insiders are those for whom the lands cannot be abstract, idealized, made static or appropriable. “The insider does not enjoy the privilege of being able to walk away from the scene as we can walk away from a framed picture or from a tourist viewpoint,” he writes; the insider is one “for whom what we may call landscape is a dimension of existence, collectively produced, lived and maintained.” The outsider’s perspective, by contrast, is that represented by the landscape scene in which “the experience of the insider, the landscape as subject, and the collective life within it are all implicitly denied.” As a consequence, “subjectivity is rendered the property of the artist and the viewer – those who control the landscape – not those who belong to it.”

Cosgrove’s study is dedicated to the history of this landscape idea: the inside-

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21 Ibid., 11.
22 Ibid., 13.
23 Ibid., 14.
26 Ibid., 19.
27 Ibid., 26.
28 Ibid.
outside relationship framed by the representational process. The “outside world” is circumscribed by the frame and the insider’s experience is simultaneously externalized and annihilated: something to which the viewing subject is acknowledged not to belong even though he may possess the image. I am interested less in Cosgrove’s identification of an inside/outside binary that subordinates the notion of landscape, than by his recognition of its destructive consequences. The landscape concept I would like to develop here is, as I suggested at the outset and as I will elaborate below, allergic to such distinctions.

Mitchell and Cosgrove agree that landscape is thus an ideological concept; their work on that concept consists in revealing what it veils and in redefining landscape not as a form of completed representation but a mediation in progress – and not only in the sense that a landscape is mediated, “aesthetically processed” land. Such a definition of landscape as medium opens the concept up to an analysis of interactions and exchanges that are foreclosed by the static view of landscape provided by many studies of the genre. To conceive of landscape as a medium is to extend one’s thinking to environmental science and history, geography and ecology: disciplines for which mediation is an apt description of the processes in progress on the land, whether visible or not. It is to this understanding of landscape that Mitchell speaks when he writes that “landscape is a medium not only for expressing value but also for expressing meaning, for communication between persons – most radically, for communication between the Human and the non-Human. Landscape mediates the cultural and the natural.”

This dissertation challenges recent writing on landscape in the cinema by arguing that such scholarship defines landscape as an aesthetic object in such a way as to reductively reproduce the spectacle/narrative divide. Martin Lefebvre, for example, in “Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema,” argues that landscape exists on film either as landscape imagery that functions as the setting of narrative space and the frame for events and action, or as a relatively static view freed from narrative itself. Lefebvre employs Derrida’s reading of the distinction between ergon and parergon in landscape imagery to claim that “the emancipation of landscape from its supporting role as background or setting to events and characters” constitutes “its emergence as a completely distinct aesthetic object.” Lefebvre also uses Laura Mulvey’s writing on the gendered split between spectacle and narrative in cinema to reinforce the idea that cinematic landscapes are restricted to “two modes of spectatorial activity: a narrative mode and a spectacular mode.” In Lefebvre’s argument, landscape assumes the place of the woman in Mulvey’s argument: site of pure spectacle, to be appropriated by a mastering “landscape gaze.” Although he allows that the process of reading landscapes as static views is an interpretive act performed by the spectator, he declines to pursue the implications of this process. His examples of “autonomous landscapes” in the cinema are images abstracted from narrative but that serve story by offering symbolic commentary: the desert in Pasolini’s Teorema (1968), for instance, is an “extra-diegetic space” that serves as a “metaphor for the spiritual aridity of the modern world laid bare.”

This allegorizing view predominates in writing on landscape in narrative cinema, to such an extent that often the word “landscape” almost exclusively describes a natural setting taken to

29 Mitchell, 15.
30 Martin Lefebvre, “Between Setting and Landscape in the Cinema,” in Landscape and Film (New York: Routledge, 2006).
31 Ibid., 23.
32 Ibid., 29.
33 Ibid., 48.
34 Ibid., 37.
symbolically or allegorically represent historical forces of social values in totalizing terms. Despite their strengths, these readings often fail to consider how the landscape functions as a “real” place of interaction in narrative cinema even when that landscape is entirely fabricated. I would like to caution against the tendency to elevate landscape as an aesthetic object over and against its function as setting and to ask, instead, how landscape might be imagined as a representation of place – even if spectacular – that is constituted by narrative and that constitutes narrative in return. In his analysis of landscape imagery, art historian Malcolm Andrews uses the very same passage from Derrida’s *The Truth in Painting* that Lefebvre cites, but in order to argue not only that landscape should be considered more than a mere accessory to narrative, but also that landscape and the story that plays out within it are necessarily constituted by a tension that simultaneously distinguishes them and binds them together. In my view, landscape is neither inside nor outside of narrative; in the film medium, I argue, the landscape-as-medium often composes the material and inter-subjective conditions of narrative.

To the landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted we credit some of the most well-known built landscapes: Central Park, Niagara Falls, the Biltmore Estate, to name but a few. Though the lands on which these spectacular landscapes were formed certainly pre-dated him, Olmsted designed the roads and paths, overlooks and open spaces that shape human interaction with – and aesthetic appreciation of – each site. In Anne Whiston Spirn’s analysis, however, Olmsted’s landscapes become places of natural-cultural mediation-in-motion, case studies that suggest how we might rethink these divisions. “Landscapes blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman,” she writes. “Calling some landscapes ‘natural’ and others ‘artificial’ or ‘cultural’ ignores the fact that landscapes are never wholly one or the other.”\(^{35}\) The opposition between humans, natures, and technologies is rendered more than unstable here; divisions between city and wilderness, artificial and natural seem unsatisfying if we consider that these spaces are all “shaped by rivers and rain, plants and animals, human hands and minds. They are phenomena of nature and products of culture.”\(^{36}\) Spirn thus offers a version of landscape as mediation by agencies human and otherwise. “For the world is not infinitely malleable,” she concludes; “nature may be constructed, but it is not only a construction.”\(^{37}\)

Donna Haraway echoes this sentiment by arguing that the boundary between nature and culture is effectively dissolved when we consider nature as both *topos* and *tropos*. As “a topos, a place, in the sense of a rhetorician’s place or topic for consideration of common themes, nature is, strictly, a commonplace.”\(^{38}\) Nature, operating as a figure of a place that is simultaneously exhausted and lively, may just allow us “to reinhabit, precisely, common places – locations that are widely shared, inescapably local, worldly, inspired.”\(^{39}\) In a Nature like this, Haraway claims, we might “rebuild public culture.”\(^{40}\) Haraway would define the landscape of this public culture as an extension of agency beyond ethnocentric, gender-specific and class-bound definitions of the human. As a *tropos*, moreover, a “figure, construction, artefact, movement, displacement,” we can see that “Nature cannot pre-exist its construction, its articulation in

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\(^{36}\) Ibid., 113.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.


\(^{39}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{40}\) Ibid.
heterogeneous social encounters, where all of the actors are not human and all of the humans are not ‘us,’ however defined.” Together, Haraway and Spirn articulate a definition of landscape in which agency is available to someone other than a single imagined viewing subject. For them, the “natural” landscape is a place of convergence and mediation for humans and non-humans, natures and technologies.

Landscape in the cinema is just such a place of convergence: a real place of exchange and communication between dramatically different forms of force and agency, an image of this space through which the spectator engages in real and symbolic exchange with landscape ideas, and a concept through which to renegotiate relations between spaces and images. Although Landscape and Power does not devote time to cinematic landscapes, Mitchell’s introduction acknowledges that landscape – like cinema – “is a dynamic medium, in which we ‘live and move and have our being,’ but also a medium that is itself in motion from one place or time to another.” Yet, as I have suggested, the field of film studies has engaged the function and effects of landscape in cinema primarily as the vehicle of metaphor. I am not arguing that we must dispense with metaphor. Metaphor is an important device through which films represent natural, human, and technological relations. At the same time, if we stop there, Mitchell’s contention that “landscape circulates as a medium of exchange, a site of visual appropriation, a focus for the formation of identity” – in the cinema – remains an unexamined proposition.

3. Natura naturans

In order to consider landscape as a site of mediation that defies the inside/outside binarisms and implicit anthro- or biocentrics of “environmentalist” thinking, I turn to new materialism and to phenomenology. “New materialist” scholars, as the editors of a recent collection explain, “are rediscovering a materiality that materializes, evincing immanent modes of self-transformation that compel us to think of causation in far more complex terms; to recognize that phenomena are caught in a multitude of interlocking systems and forces and to consider anew the location and nature of capacities for agency.” Such scholarship often takes the form of phenomenological description; it elaborates the self-organizing, emergent properties of entangled phenomena, ever seeking to expand the notion of what it means to be and to act in such configurations. These models tend to discard or de-emphasize (individual) intentionality as a phenomenological, cognitive, or moral category in order to re-think purposive action as the effect of plural, unpredictable organizations of materiality and force.

Jane Bennett, for instance, opens her Vital Materialism by considering the sudden and surprising significance that adhered one morning to her encounter with a set of objects – “glove, pollen, rat, cap, stick” – that running water had assembled around a storm drain near her home. “In this assemblage,” she argues, “objects appeared as things, that is, as vivid entities not entirely reducible to the contexts in which (human) subjects set them, never entirely exhausted by their semiotics.” As the unacknowledged, forgotten, or abject debris of urban life constituted itself as a meaningful constellation, it transformed under Bennett’s gaze, seeming to disclose the

41 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
profound significance of its own vibrant materiality. Bennett criticizes environmental discourses subtended by rigid distinctions between inside and outside, self and other, for defining non-human materiality as a set of discrete, lifeless, practico-inert substrates. Bennett’s “vital materialism”, by contrast, stresses the lively, effective togethernesses produced in material “confederation” when she characterizes Spinoza’s notion of the conatus of bodies or modes – their “stubbornness or inertial tendency to persist” – as a tendency “to form allegiances and enter assemblages…to mod(e)ify and be modified by others.” The notion of conjoint material forces – Deleuze and Guattari’s heterogeneous assemblages are another model for thinking this concept – underlies a redefinition of agency: not as a hierarchical distribution of power but instead as an “efficacy or effectivity…distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field.” This field of difference, oriented not vertically (hierarchically) but horizontally and laterally, is precisely the landscape I will imagine in what follows. In the landscapes that each text represents, I would like to note how cinema pictures sites where we might begin “to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally…to take a step toward a more ecological sensibility.” As I have suggested above in my reading of Gunning and Mitchell, and as I will elaborate in later chapters, cinema’s roots in optical technologies founded in classical perspective’s fascination with depth, horizons, and vanishing points primes it not to consolidate but to problematize the privilege of the human gaze, human intentionality, and the agency of the human body.

In thinking landscape as a horizontal field of “productive contingencies” in which the human may laugh but not always last, Bennett and other new materialist scholars frequently cite phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Diana Coole points out that Merleau-Ponty’s lectures on nature begin by identifying in ontological questions a tension between the Averroësian distinction between natura naturata and natura naturans. The former, translated as “nature natured”, indicates phenomena created or shaped from the outside. The latter – “nature naturing” – represents emergent, generative agential capacities of what might otherwise be viewed as “inanimate” material. Unsurprisingly Merleau-Ponty invests his phenomenological description of the relations between seer and seen, touched and touching in the “productive immanence of matter” that only a nature naturing can entail. For Merleau-Ponty, nature naturing occurs in a “topological space”, a non-Euclidean landscape, a “milieu in which are circumscribed relations of proximity, of envelopment” that constitute the flesh of the world, a “wild or brute being that intervenes at all levels to overcome the problems of the classical ontology (mechanism, finalism, in every case: artificialism)”. Here milieu is not a static, external environment but rather as the Umwelt described by Jacob von Uexküll, which Coole glosses as “the environment to which behavior is practically oriented through experiencing stimuli as meaningful signs.” It is toward this engulfing, sensible and sensate, palpably significant notion of landscape that my argument aspires in later chapters. I aim to demonstrate how landscape in cinema might operate as an intercorporeal field, as the “flesh” theorized by Merleau-Ponty.

46 Ibid., 22.
47 Ibid., 23.
48 Ibid., 10.
49 Coole and Frost, 7.
52 Coole, 103
This endeavor requires thinking both landscape and the cinema phenomenologically, and for that I require the assistance of Vivian Sobchack. In her phenomenology of film experience, Sobchack describes the cinema as a sensible, sensate thing – as an empowered material that perceives and that we, in turn, perceive. Taking Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility of perception as her starting point, Sobchack describes “the entailment of incarnate consciousness and the ‘flesh’ of the world of which it is a part” as “the basis for the origination of the general structures of cinematic signification, structures that are themselves produced in the performance of specific modes of existential and embodied communication in the film experience (that is, in the activity of vision intersubjectively connecting film and its spectator with a world and each other.)”\(^{53}\) In experiencing cinema thus as a thinking, feeling assemblage of meanings, we may enjoy special access to landscape as a thinking, feeling assemblage of the same order: again, in Haraway’s words, a set of “encounters, where all of the actors are not human and all of the humans are not ‘us,’ however defined.”\(^{54}\) With Sobchack, this dissertation argues that

[w]hat we look at projected on the screen – whether Merleau-Ponty’s ‘the things, the waves, and the forests,’ or only abstract lines and colors – addresses us as the expressed perception of an anonymous, yet present, ‘other.’ And, as we watch this expressive projection of an ‘other’s’ experience, we, too, express our perceptive experience. Through the address of our own vision, we speak back to the cinematic expression before us, using a visual language that is also tactile, that takes hold of and actively grasps the perceptual expression, the seeing, the direct experience of that anonymously present, sensing and sentient ‘other.’\(^{55}\)

In the cinema, we can be alongside and with what Merleau-Ponty called “wild meaning”: with landscape as an assemblage of significant materialities.

4. “Canaries in the coal mine”

The significant materiality of landscape is crucial to the discourse of climate change shaped by contemporary environmentalism. I would like to turn now to Davis Guggenheim’s 2006 documentary An Inconvenient Truth, which combines a synthesis of scientific data, cinematic and photographic records in order to present climate change as an anthropogenic phenomenon with disastrous material consequences that entangle human and nonhuman, natural and technological actors. Guggenheim interweaves Gore’s presentation of data with images of landscapes transformed by climate change (glacial melt, droughts, forest fires, extreme weather events) and with Gore’s retelling of family crises that produce an analogy between such domestic catastrophes and the larger family drama of planetary life – a life in which present inaction may lead to untold future sorrows. Gore argues that, because it is “thin” enough to be altered fundamentally, the earth’s atmosphere is the most vulnerable part of the earth’s ecological system. Yet the film’s most persuasive evidence comes from sources not in the air, but on the ground – within the nexus of agencies and effects that constitute terrestrial land-, sea-, and ice-scapes. And none of these are more important to the film than those of the polar regions. The


\(^{54}\) Haraway, 71.

\(^{55}\) Sobchack, 9.
poles, Gore declares, are “canaries in the coal mine”: areas of the globe from which some of the most important warming data are being drawn and areas where some of the most potentially world-changing transformations of land- and ice-scapes are taking place. One of the most important gestures of An Inconvenient Truth is to bring these seemingly remote and unchanging landscapes back into the global imaginary by visualizing the dramatic changes reshaping them – and the equally dramatic effects of polar melt that will be experienced elsewhere if warming continues apace.

Gore founds this argument in the first photograph taken of the Earth from space: the image now known as “Earthrise,” captured during the Apollo 8 mission on Christmas Eve of 1968. “That one picture,” Gore explains, “exploded in the consciousness of human kind” by presenting the globe in its fullness from a distance that demonstrated its grandeur but also its smallness and isolation in the cosmos. Ursula Heise demonstrates in Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global how this image galvanized the American environmentalist movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and how critiques of the closely-related Gaia hypothesis and “Blue Planet” notion have cultivated strands of environmentalist thought in which global and local exist in exquisite tension.56 Gore’s next image, from Apollo 17 in 1972, features the topography of Africa and Antarctica in the southern hemisphere. The planet’s coldest continent clings mysteriously to the bottom of the globe here, wreathed in clouds that reach up into more densely inhabited landscapes. Gore’s argument will turn on the fragility of this continent. “The ice has stories to tell us,” Gore explains, clarifying that ice cores drilled in the Antarctic contain evidence of hundreds of thousands of years of fluctuations in atmospheric composition and temperature. The ice speaks plainly and to the naked eye, its physical record rendering visible, Gore recalls, a marked difference in the color of the ice corresponding to the years before and after ratification of the Clean Air Act. This frozen record allows scientists to weave together natural and human history, postulating the relationship between co-incidence and consequence by noting the confluence of factors that may produce more or less rapid change. From the data provided by these Arctic and Antarctic ice samples – and from images that suggest the thickness and general life cycle of the ice itself – Gore weaves his narrative of transformation.

Polar regions, he explains, are “experiencing faster impact from global warming” because planetary temperature change occurs unevenly. Graphs and animated sequences visualize these transformations as Gore describes them. A relatively small average increase of one degree Fahrenheit at the equator may be felt at the poles, because of wind and water currents, as a twelve-degree average increase during the same period. And because of the different thermal behaviors of water and ice, melt produces more melt. The dark seawater surrounding the poles absorbs more heat than its ice, which tends to reflect solar radiation back into the atmosphere. As ice melts, the darker surface area of the ocean increases, as does its absorption of thermal energy from the sun. This, in turn, raises temperatures both below and above the surface of the sea – creating warming conditions that accelerate melt. A slightly different kind of animation begins as Gore explains that two major studies predict the total disappearance of the ice cap in the next 50 to 70 years: an animated sequence in which a lone polar bear arrives at what appears to be the last ice floe in an open sea. The creature tries to hoist itself to the top of the puny platform, but fails as the ice breaks and melts beneath its paws. The field of vision grows wider and wider, revealing no ice upon which the creature might take refuge. This sequence

dramatizes the very real situation faced by polar bears in the Arctic whose hunting grounds, diminished by melt, have drowned looking for food or a place to rest.

The long sequence that concludes with the polar bear works by moving from data viewed with the naked eye to the ultimate imaginative rendering of tragic animal loneliness and death. Gore’s lecture/narration retreats a bit from this affective appeal by explaining these cycles in more emotionally muted terms using metaphors that compare climate systems to machines. The action of the “Ocean Conveyor” moves water along the routes of ocean currents driven by temperature change dependent on salinity levels. Large releases of fresh meltwater from Arctic or Antarctic ice, he explains, might produce rapid changes that would “shut the pump off,” preventing the redistribution of heat in the ocean and plunging a large swathe of the Northern hemisphere into an Ice Age. If Gore’s description of such an hypothesis has turned down the affective volume, the photographic surface and satellite images that demonstrate the beginning of the process turn it back up. The volume continues to rise as Gore explains that, “if half of Greenland or half of West Antarctica broke up and melted,” sea levels all over the world would rise, inundating metropolitan areas inhabited by hundreds of millions of people. These famous images of Manhattan, Miami, and the San Francisco Bay Area – not to mention far more populous cities like Shanghai – have become nearly iconic for their visualization of massive change. The predictions Gore provides here are not those of a Roland Emmerich in The Day After Tomorrow or 2012; unlike the plight of the cartoon polar bear, these images seem all the more appalling for being apparently unmarked by artifice. Satellite images, especially those provided by Google Earth and Google Maps, have become commonplaces, tropes in the landscape of the everyday.

On the morning of September 30, 2010, Brian McClendon, Vice President of Engineering at Google’s division of Earth and Maps, took to the company’s official blog to announce an update to its geographical imaging systems (GISs). As of that day, he reported, Google was “happy to announce that you can now explore Street View Imagery on all seven continents, with the addition … of Brazil, Ireland, and Antarctica.”57 News personalities and bloggers covering the announcement seemed to celebrate the irony of the addition of “street views” of Antarctica to Google Earth and Google Maps. In his post, McClendon had commented that Google “hope[d] this new imagery will help … even the penguins of Antarctica to navigate nearby, as well as enable people around the world to learn more about these areas.”58 Because the Antarctic boasts neither cities nor the streets that would compose them, and because human, potential-internet-using occupants of the continent are vastly outnumbered by wildlife like the penguins that McClendon jokingly mentions, the addition of a “Street View” for this location seemed slightly absurd. Frances Perraudin of Time Magazine responded with an article titled “Penguins Rejoice! Google StreetView Arrives in Antarctica.”59

Other responses called to mind the controversy that StreetView images and Google’s data-collection activities have generated. Josh Halliday of the Guardian, for instance, responded in an article titled “Google Street View: No more privacy for penguins as Antarctica gets

58 Ibid., emphasis added.
mapped.”

Technology blog Softpedia covered the announcement in a post titled, “Lookout Penguin Privacy Groups, Google Street View Antarctica is Here.” And The Globe and Mail’s Dakshana Basaramurty titled her report “Morning Radar: Spying on penguins, thanks to Google maps.” Titles like these remind readers of the dark side of Google’s avowed mission to democratize the world picture. Since its May 2007 release, the Street View function has come under fire for violating the privacy and threatening the security of individuals, businesses, national governments, and international bodies. In the weeks following its release, scores of articles detailed the concerns of users who had spotted their pets in apartment windows, crimes in progress, and friends sunbathing nude in Street View images. The governments of Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Spain, and the United Kingdom have vigorously protested the mapping of their public spaces, arguing that Google’s data collection methods violate national privacy laws. Google has responded to those challenges by allowing users to flag for removal any material they find to be inappropriate; users in Germany, in particular, have been given the opportunity to “opt out,” effectively screening their homes from view on the website.

Using Google Earth software and the Google Maps website to track the appearance of hilarious, bizarre, or disturbing images has become something of an obsession to some: an obsession that has led to renewed public discourse on surveillance technologies and public space, to increased scrutiny of Google’s data collection practices, and to conscription of the mapping software to advance activist goals in cases of war or natural disaster.

Indeed, within days of McClendon’s announcement regarding the addition of Brazil, users had begun to call attention to the appearance of dead bodies in Street View images of the country. By promptly removing these images from its service, however, Google seems to have participated in a kind of polite street-sweeping, a sanitization of public space that challenges – or, perhaps, ironically reveals – something about the aims and effects of the Street View function. In an early press release, Google described Street View as a means by which users could render unfamiliar places more accessible and navigable: “With Street View users can virtually walk the streets of a city, check out a restaurant before arriving, or even zoom in on bus stops and street signs to make travel


plans.” But the removal of ostensibly objectionable material, even when motivated by privacy concerns, suggests that navigability and masterability depend on a friendly tidiness that must be collectively produced by users who flag nose-pickers, license plates, and corpses and Google engineers who respond by selectively blurring or removing the offensive contents of the visual field. The practice of cleansing bodies and information from the visual field is made all the more disturbing by reports that a UC San Diego computer scientist is developing a “pedestrian remover” program by which human figures might be entirely edited out of Street View content, revealing a human-free and “ghost-free” world.

Academic critics of Google Earth and Maps tend to treat the software as a manifestation of the infinite, transcendent, disembodied gaze of state and corporate power, which converts landscapes into images in order to control spaces and dominate their inhabitants. Denis Cosgrove has argued that the history of cartography is that of the development and instrumentalization of the “Apollonian Eye” by which early modern map-makers used the image of Phoebus Apollo astride the globe to conceive of the world as an infinitely visualizable and controllable space. Today, he remarks, “[g]lobalization – economic, geopolitical, technological, and cultural – is widely regarded as a distinguishing feature of life at the second millennium, actualizing the Apollonian view across a networked, virtual surface.” Donna Haraway was not the first of feminist critics to regard this “view of infinite vision [as] an illusion, a god trick.” And Chad Harris argues that geographical information systems (GISs) like Google Earth use satellite imagery to “produce objectivity, a techno-discursive distance between the observer and the observed, and a particular kind of modern surveillant subject. This subjectivity is structured by an omniscient, imperial gaze…that signifies dominance over what is being observed.”

Historians of landscape representations in Western cultural history, including Cosgrove himself, have identified this imperial gaze as the mode through which landscape as a concept takes shape. Some, however, treat Google Earth as an opportunity to problematize such assessments. Paul Kingsbury and John Paul Jones III, in an article titled “Walter Benjamin’s Dionysian Adventures on Google Earth,” “attempt to engage rather than repudiate” Google’s geospatial technologies (GSTs) by linking user-generated content and discourse about satellite imagery and Street View functions to practices of resistance by which the political and aesthetic uses of programs like Google Earth can be examined together. For Kingsbury and Jones, “Benjamin’s much studied Parisian flâneur invites numerous parallels to the Google Earth user as an anonymous wandering detective, an active spectator whose meanders over the landscape are guided in parts by the former’s ‘distracted attentions’ and in other parts by the latter’s web-

66 Denis Cosgrove, Apollo’s Eye: A Cartographic Genealogy of the Earth in the Western Imagination (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 3.
produced ‘attentive distractions.’” Kingsbury and Jones use the figure of the flâneur to explore the conversion of cityscape to landscape more generally. “[B]oth flâneur and Googler Earthling,” they write, “stroll (or scroll) through space: ‘Landscape – that, in fact, is what Paris becomes for the flâneur […] the city splits for him into its dialectical poles. It opens up to him as a landscape, even as it closes around him as a room.’” This simultaneous unfolding and compression of space approximates the experience of navigating Google Earth’s street views, and strangely evokes the position of the cinematic viewer that this mobile, embodied gaze might approximate. That tension between open and closed spaces, public and private concerns, is analogically mirrored later when Kingsbury and Jones use Friedrich Nietzsche’s notions of Apollonian and Dionysian modes to suggest that, through user-generated blogs like Google Earth Hacks, Google Sightseeing, and Ogle Earth, the service “arguably not only incites as much discussion as it does exploration, it also blurs and collapses the very distinction between the two.” The closed Apollonian love of ordered knowledge and the open Dionysian abandonment of certainty, they claim, “make Google Earth go round.”

Towards the end of their argument, Kingsbury and Jones bring their focus to Antarctica: to an image posted in response to a competition to find weird stuff in Google Earth’s high-resolution satellite landscape imagery. “The image,” Kingsbury and Jones explain, “shows a strange face (Berkner Island, the southern-most island in the world) as part of Western Antarctica’s frozen landscape, on the coast of the Weddell Sea.” The authors proceed to liken this ice-sculpted face to that of Benjamin’s Angel of History, the Angelus Novus of Paul Klee. The face, they argue, “stares with mouth open wide, perhaps turned toward a recent past where it also perceives a chain of events and one potential catastrophe: the ecological destruction of Planet Earth.” They continue:

We wonder if the face, partly an exposure of snow and ice, is the result of one of the storms of progress we call global warming. And how will the face metamorphose in the future? Will it melt and disintegrate, only to be washed over with newly-formed debris resulting from rising sea levels? We do not know the answer to these questions, but amidst these speculations on Google Earth, we take heart in Oscar Wilde’s …reminder that it is ‘only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.’

Here Kingsbury and Jones indulge in a moment of Dionysian dreaming that simultaneously evokes the ways in which landscape images are interpreted allegorically and the way that an ever-increasing store of such images contributes to a global imaginary that places state power

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70 Kingsbury and Jones, 504-505. The authors borrow the concepts of “distracted attention” and “attentive distraction” from anthropologist Raymond Lucas’s study of the architectural fantasy in Tokyo, in which Lucas borrows the figure of Baudelaire’s flâneur to describe a trip through Shinjuku station.
71 Kingsbury and Jones, 505. The authors report that the quotation with which they conclude this passage comes from Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 417.
72 Ibid., 506.
73 Ibid., 506
74 Ibid., 510; The image in question can be viewed at its original source: Lester Haines, “Google Earth: the black helicopters have landed,” The Register, October 14, 2005, accessed October 1, 2010, http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/14/google_earth_competition_results/page5.html.
75 Ibid, 510-11.
76 Ibid., 511.
and ecological critique on the same (web) page. Perhaps more importantly, however, Kingsbury and Jones offer a way of thinking historically and eco-critically about the way that the polar landscape in particular is disclosed, made visible: not only by contemporary GSTs, but by the multitude of visualization technologies through which Antarctica and the Arctic have been pictured over the history of their exploration.

5. “A dumb blankness, full of meaning”: Cartography of a bi-polar argument

The history of visual representation of polar landscapes is fraught with imperial gazes and surveillant subjectivities – but also with the means of their undoing. As a result, the poles are important but as-yet-underexplored sites for ecocriticism and for cinema’s history. Polar land-, sea-, and icescapes offer a record of atmospheric temperatures and compositions, meteorological and geological changes, and non-human biota. Accumulations of material that encode the complex semiotics of planetary history, the poles are simultaneously archival sites and indices of the current pace and character of global warming. This is not a purely scientific proposition; although the polar record may seem obscure, changes in the polar landscape will be felt everywhere. If the ice caps melt, the oceans will rise and the world will need to be remapped. But, to borrow Gore’s idiom, these are not the only stories that the ice has to tell.

For a large part of human history, polar landscapes have been provinces of myth and legend. These landscapes were too remote, and their climates too demanding, to be known – except by the imagination. Though humans have inhabited the Arctic for millennia, they have been certain of the existence of an Antarctic continent for only about three hundred years and sighted the North and South geographical poles only in the last century. The poles were blank, white spaces on the maps of the Western imagination. Americans and Europeans in search of the Northwest Passage or of new whaling grounds in the South Seas returned to give fantastic accounts of their travels that sparked a vast polar literature.

Scholars like Francis Spufford, in his excellent *I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination*, document the ways in which literature about the poles cultivated fascination with the vast cold of these landscapes – and the themes that suited its bleak purity. This literature filled in the blank, white cartographic space of polar regions with images as empty and forbidding as the mystery they replaced. Spufford suggests that Ishmael’s account of whiteness in Melville’s *Moby Dick* speaks to the dread and fascination evoked by the polar sublime. I reproduce the passage in question in its entirety here:

Is it that by its indefiniteness it shadows forth the heartless voids and immensities of the universe, and thus stabs us from behind with the thought of annihilation, when beholding the milky way? Or is it, that as in essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour, and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colourless, all-colour of atheism from which we shrink? And when we consider that other theory of the natural philosophers, that all other earthly hues – every stately or lovely emblazoning – the sweet tinges of sunset skies and woods; yea, and the

gilded velvets of butterflies, and the butterfly cheeks of young girls; all these are but subtle deceits, not actually inherent in substances, but only laid on from without; so that all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within; and when we proceed further, and consider that the mystical cosmetic which produces every one of her hues, the great principle of light, for ever remains white or colourless in itself, and if operating without medium upon matter, would touch all objects, even tulips and roses, with its own blank tinge – pondering all this, the palsied universe lies before us like a leper; and like willful travellers in Lapland, who refuse to wear coloured and colouring glasses upon their eyes, so the wretched infidel gazes himself blind at the monumental white shroud that wraps all the prospect round him.78

Spufford argues that Ishmael’s dread of the color represents the horror vacui, or fear of the void.79 Yet I read, in this passage, the symptom of my own fascination with polar regions and the traits of the films I will discuss here: the overwhelming sense that the emptiness of these landscapes is also a plenitude. The “dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows” is precisely what I am, here, to describe in the cinematic terms Melville anticipates while wondering at the action of “the principal of light,” a “mystical cosmetic,” that “would touch all objects…with its own blank tinge,” revealing the world at which we might gaze ourselves blind.

In the pages that follow, I offer a cinematic history of these sites and sights, from silent and early sound films that attempt to map and interpret polar landscapes in service of imperial aims to contemporary representations of lands un-appropriable and un-masterable by the human because they are always already occupied by their Others: forces and agencies that exceed and defy a merely-human understanding. My readings aim to articulate the terms by which the cinema has framed polar territories as pre-occupied, dynamic sites in which to dramatize shifts in human, natural, and technological relations. And ultimately, I will argue that an ecocritical exploration of the cinema of the poles shows how we might newly “see landscapes in the cinema.” In this way, my argument considers polar history to be a preoccupied territory in its own right. Arctic and Antarctic landscapes have been imagined through similar aesthetic/literary discourses but are defined as real spaces by very different interests and debates. Each chapter of what follows attempts to situate its texts in these changing aesthetic and political contexts. I would like to conclude here by describing how my dissertation will move back and forth between these two poles and what I hope to accomplish in doing so.

The early 20th century saw explorers “claim” the poles, bringing an end to a quest that had preoccupied nations on either side of the Atlantic for several centuries. Robert Peary’s arrival, in 1909, at the North Geographic Pole was followed only two years later by news that Norwegian Roald Amundsen had reached its opposite number in the South. The deaths of British explorer Robert Falcon Scott and four of his compatriots during their polar jaunt that same summer are thought to have signaled the beginning of the end for the “Heroic Age” of polar exploration. In Chapter Two I examine three films that are exemplary in their descriptions of the polar imaginary of the international audiences to which they were addressed: Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) and Herbert Ponting’s The Great White Silence (1924) and 90 Degrees South (1933). These texts occupy a special place in my cinematic history of the

79 Spufford 90.
poles not by being the first films to represent Arctic or Antarctic landscapes, but because they
draw upon the history of polar representations in other media. Their cartographic, panoramic,
and photographic representations of polar landscapes and their inhabitants foreground tropes of
absorption and disappearance that figured largely in Arctic and Antarctic exploration imagery
dating from the early 19th century and offer fruitful grounds for dialogue with Merleau-Pontian
notions of engulfment and enfoldment within the flesh. Perhaps most importantly, they set the
terms of a documentary rhetoric of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence, that films in
later chapters will extend and transform by different means.

Joseph W. Campbell, Jr.’s novella “Who Goes There?”, for instance, describes an
encounter between humans, natures, and technologies in an Antarctic research station. For
Campbell and his contemporaries, the remoteness and isolation of the south polar landscape
offered an excellent setting in which to examine the psychological consequences of an encounter
with the other. In the post-“Heroic Age” interwar years, the Antarctic was a site of national
territorial claims often at odds with the project of scientific research. Within this context
Campbell’s science fiction tale signifies the limits of scientific knowledge. The landscape
challenges the protagonists’ scientific expertise by presenting them with impossible atmospheric
and topological conditions. These conditions – this landscape – harbors an ancient alien creature
able to absorb and transform other life forms, rendering them perfect – but murderous –
imitations. Campbell’s tale was adapted to the screen by Christian Nyby and Howard Hawks as
1951’s The Thing from Another World. This science fiction film relocated Campbell’s tale to a
north polar scientific compound – and converted its alien “Thing” from absorbing animal to
venal vegetable – in order to explore anxieties about competing ideological claims. What is
remarkable about this film, however, is not its reference to the Red Scare but its manner of
expressing the tension between scientific and un-scientific modes of engagement with the
landscape. The Cold War period saw the creation of the International Geophysical Year in 1957-
8 and the Antarctic Treaty System in 1962 – both of which enterprises nullified territorial claims
on the poles by prioritizing scientific over political goals. The Antarctic Treaty System annexed
the Antarctic continent as the preserve of international science. John Carpenter’s The Thing of
1982 pokes fun at the apparent triumph of science over politics: first by returning to the Antarctic
continent and second by attending carefully to the horrifying premise of absorption by an
extraterrestrial other.

In Chapter Three I read Campbell’s novella and its cinematic adaptations for their
attention to the landscape as the object of a failed scientific project, where the boundaries of
inside and outside, self and other threaten to dissolve. This chapter will show how science
fiction and horror genres, pre-occupied as they are with questions of vision and embodiment, can
engage Jane Bennett’s notion of “thing-power” as a means of recovering or redeeming the abject.
Bennett calls “thing-power”: “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to
produce effects dramatic and subtle.” Landscapes’ thing-power might lie not in its nominal
facticity (as noun, object) but its verbal liveliness (as activity, process). “To landscape”: to
represent as a landscape, to produce or lay out as a landscape. My question, in this chapter, is:
how do science fiction and horror landscape the poles?

Science is at a loss again in Chapter Four – but science fiction and horror are not! In this
chapter, the thrillers Smilla’s Sense of Snow (Bille August, 1997) and The Last Winter (Larry
Fessenden, 2006) reflect the growing importance of polar landscapes in the global warming
discourse of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These films tie the emergence of the alien

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80 Bennett, 6.
other to the dirty deeds of energy corporations bent on natural resource extraction. In *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*, half-American, half-Greenlandic Smilla Jaspersen becomes involved in an international conspiracy to conceal the relationship between a newly-discovered, inexhaustible extraterrestrial energy source in a Greenlandic glacier and the release of a deadly prehistoric parasite. As the film’s title suggests, Smilla’s uncanny understanding of the epistemology of ice and snow enables her to read the landscape as an elaborate sign system that helps her solve the murder mystery at the heart of the tale. In *The Last Winter*, the inhabitants of an oil company compound on Alaska’s North Slope are utterly unable to read or signify upon the landscape. Haunted by the ancient life forms whose physical remains constitute the substance they are there to harvest, they become increasingly lost and disoriented. These films, too, screen the tropes of absorption and disappearance through the landscape and the forms of creaturely life that inhabit it. Yet here the landscape disgorges the otherwise invisible forms of ancient creaturely life whose disappearance produces the natural resources that corporate capitalism would devour.

My argument draws to a close in an Epilogue that returns to the Antarctic continent and to the documentary mode. In his *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007), Werner Herzog lives and travels on the Antarctic continent documenting all the forms of creaturely life that inhabit it. Herzog makes the human-natural-technological interactions that form and perform the relation we call “landscape” plain. Moreover, he foregrounds the historical issues that shape our understanding of polar regions. Ultimately, *Encounters at the End of the World* suggests a sense of the fullness of real polar landscapes – of how they activate and are activated in the medium of film. I conclude with Herzog because of the ways in which he expresses a desire to look at landscape in terms that vibrate between the poles of metaphorical and material, figurative and literal, documentary and fictive. My aim is not to illustrate how cinema has screened the “real” landscapes at the poles, nor is it to produce utopian readings of “good” landscape representations. Instead, I aim to show how each text positions its audience in relation to the territory it pictures and to the forms of thing-ly and creaturely life that pre-occupy it.
Chapter 2

Freezing to Death: Still Life at the Poles

‘How entirely we are losing the sense of wonder in certain matters...That we were seeing real seals and penguins, possibly living still...that the men who smiled and died lie there still, and will lie unchanged, I suppose, for a thousand centuries, was not realized by us...Things that never happened are now made so real to us that we are unable truly to apprehend the reality of things that have happened.’

‘Had we lived, I should have had a tale to tell of the hardihood, endurance, and courage of my companions which would have stirred the heart of every Englishman. These rough notes and our dead bodies must tell the tale...’

1. Absorbing fictions

In this chapter I examine the cartographic and panoramic strategies through which Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North (1922) and Herbert Ponting’s The Great White Silence (1924) and 90 Degrees South (1933) attempted to render vast and unknown polar landscapes comprehensible to their audiences. All three texts use maps to figure Arctic and Antarctic territories as pre-occupied: to establish a sense of their scale, but also to stake symbolic claims there, activating the tropes of the polar imaginary of the 19th and early 20th centuries. At the same time, these films make use of panoramic views and camera movements that ultimately undermine the masterful cartographic gaze and figure pre-occupation of another order. The tension between map and panorama in these films, when taken together with the circumstances surrounding their production, demonstrates how the early 20th-century cinematic imagination of the poles struggled to represent these landscapes' mythical, ineffable qualities: the impossibility of knowing or inhabiting polar regions and the utter failure of attempts to do so. The tension between the map’s promise of mastery and the panorama’s fragmentation of the visual field signals not only their citation of the tropes of polar representation I will explain below, but also their phenomenological revision of those concepts.

Equally interesting are the ways in which each film documents the lives and deaths of those they picture. Nanook of the North closes in an igloo on the sleeping/dead face of the Inuit Allakariallak. Ponting’s films narrate the Antarctic journey of Robert Falcon Scott, concluding with that explorer’s death and the image of the ice cairn erected over his body’s resting place. The final images that either film provides of its protagonist are those in which his eyes are closed. My guiding questions are most succinctly stated thus: What do we make of these occlusions? How might we read these photographs, and the films of which they eventually became part, as demonstrative of the problem of visualizing polar landscapes? And how might we use such images to re-think the relationship between cinema and landscape as pre-occupied territories? This chapter is animated by this absence of gazes: by the closed eyes of Nanook and

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82 Scott’s final journal entry
of Robert Falcon Scott. It argues that Flaherty’s and Ponting’s films memorialize an encounter with the landscape that cannot be recovered; each functions as a *memento mori*, an image of still(ed) life at the poles.

These early cinematic images of polar landscapes are the aesthetic and intellectual heirs of a boom in polar exploration that extended the domain of Arctic and Antarctic landscape imagery from literary to visual culture. At the close of the Napoleonic Wars, the British navy undertook in earnest the exploration of Arctic territories in Canada with a view to locating a navigable route to lucrative markets in Asia: the Northwest Passage. The Arctic was at first envisioned as a gateway to economic, scientific, and political wealth; yet the accounts of returning explorers described the region not as a boreal El Dorado but as a nightmarish, desolate landscape of unspeakable beauty and irrecoverable loss. Coincident with these developments was the emergence of such media as the panorama, magic lanterns, photography, and the illustrated press— all forms that served as vehicles for the popularization of polar lore and imagery and the transformation of polar exploration into a phenomenon of international interest. Russell Potter reports that “[b]etween 1818 and 1883, no fewer than 60 Arctic shows— including 22 moving panoramas, 3 fixed panoramas, 12 lantern exhibitions, 4 mechanical automata theaters, and 4 exhibitions of “Esquimaux” …were presented to the public. Later in the century… at least 16 different commercial sets of lantern slides, and well over 400 stereoscopic views, were produced for home use as well.”

For Potter, “[t]his was a result not just of parallel histories of exploration and exhibition, but of a deep cultural and geographical cathexis between new technologies of vision and the regions of the earth most difficult— and terrifying— to behold.”

The fact that spectators at home in warmer climes would visit Arctic and Antarctic regions only imaginatively seems to have enriched the manifold significances of such representations. Contemporary readers of these images note that they conceived of polar space as a blank slate upon which to project the drama of British (and later American) imperial dreams and to problematize colonial conflict in an aesthetically and historically sanitized landscape where national ideals might be easily consolidated. Jen Hill puts it thus: “Numerous widely read polar exploration accounts… manufactured both swashbuckling heroes and a familiar ‘Arctic,’ one in which a narrative of exploration often became a narrative of survival that foregrounded the explorer’s embattled body while providing evidence of the resilience, ingenuity, and staunchness associated with British national character.”

This consolidation depended on the stability of gender and racial categories that were, by most accounts, the point of the literature and imagery of polar exploration; Arctic and Antarctic encounters were figured as romantic contests between human agents and natural forces. The “irrefutable, ‘hard’ masculinity” embodied by the human figures in this drama “answered threats of effeminacy, miscegenation, and vulnerability to physical, psychological, and moral weakness associated with Britain’s tropical colonies”; for Hill, again, “the Arctic was thus a space that could provide a counter to the troubling moral questions raised by domestic economic reliance on slavery and other forms of colonial exploitation, an ultimate space of white masculine self-reliance.”

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
occasion, the deaths of expedition parties such as Sir John Franklin’s in the 1840s revealed the narrative of self-reliance as a fiction, the verso of the Arctic coin glittered menacingly: “[t]he great blank Arctic expanse on which Franklin had promised to write an imperial narrative revealed itself to be a potent, life-taking force that turned on and absorbed the British explorer.” The trope of bodily absorption – of the disappearance or erasure of whole parties of explorers with their ships and provisions – was represented extensively in the polar media that emerged to account for the successes and failures of each expedition cycle. A brief look at several key moments in this pictorial history may suffice to demonstrate the conventionality of such a trope, and to suggest what is important about the tension between images of live and dead, still and moving bodies in the panoramic, photographic, and finally cinematic depiction of polar landscapes.

Henry Aston Barker’s View of the North Coast of Spitzbergen, exhibited at the Panorama in Leicester Square in 1819-20, offered to the public the first panoramic view of the Arctic north. Barker’s panorama depicts a moment from the 1818 expedition of the Dorothea and Trent, led by David Buchan and a young John Franklin: forced to turn toward the coast by a storm, Buchan and Franklin contemplate the damage done to their ships and the possibility of removing them safely from the pack ice. This image dramatizes a process that was cause for concern for Buchan and Franklin but that would later become a strategy for polar explorers planning long expeditions in Arctic territories: a ship, held fast by the pressure of ice on all sides, is literally frozen in place upon a sea-scape become land. The angular opposition of left-leaning ice formations and right-leaning ships signals the opposition of human and natural forces and the tension between the deathly stillness of the icy surface and the otherwise-mobile vessels it entraps.

Caspar David Friedrich’s Das Eismeer (Sea of Ice) of 1823-1824, however, illustrates one frequent and disastrous consequence of such miring. Ships frozen in place were, especially in the early 19th century, frequently damaged or destroyed by the rapid expansion and contraction of ice floes driven to ever greater densities and tensions by wind and water currents. Great slabs and shards of multicolored ice rise up out of the surface of an otherwise flat, frozen seascape to dominate the foreground of Das Eismeer. The sharp, chaotic configuration of angles almost entirely conceals the presence of a ship, turned on its side and lying partially covered by one thick blue plane of sea ice in the middle distance to the right of the frame. The ship is present here only as it recedes from the visible. We can detect no survivors or traces of life wending their way out of the frame; there is only the hint of a structure that will soon fall beneath the solid waves of Arctic winter.

John Sartain’s 1854 Graves of Sir John Franklin’s Men simultaneously makes the traces – and invisibility – of the “survivors” of Franklin’s last expedition explicit. Sartain’s engraving was based on a watercolor by the artist James Hamilton, which was itself based on a sketch by Elisha Kent Kane, the explorer who discovered the graves in question. Here, another polar landscape contrasts vertical cliffs of an icy coast – and a berg in the distance – with the placid vertical of a seascape that blends into the snowy shore almost imperceptibly. The scene would be serene but for the existence in the foreground of three headstones, half-buried in the snow. In this image, the bodies are doubly buried: both they and the means by which their presence in the landscape is marked are about to disappear.

In both format and composition, these images tend to dramatize exploration as a process of revelation and concealment: the expansion and contraction of literal and figurative horizons. Stephan Oettermann describes how the notion of the horizon functioned in each capacity in the

87 Ibid., 15.
second half of the 18th century, during which the line that marked the edge of vision seemed a source of “profound and exciting discovery.” In this reading, it is not the view itself but the experience of the horizon that appeals. The spires of cathedrals, Oettermann explains, “no longer directed the gaze of the faithful heavenward; instead of looking up, human beings… now looked down from towers that served their need to see.” Mountains, too, were transformed by those who sought such an experience. According to Oettermann, before the late eighteenth century mountains like the Alps were regarded “utterly inhospitable and viewed with shudders from afar.” Later, however, it was the dynamic view not of a mountain range, but from one, that drove tourists to seek the heights. In this context the panorama serves not only to bring images of battles and historical events to the public, but also to produce an extended experience of unfolding horizontality that replicated the conditions under which travelers sought views of the horizon as such. An observation platform, “often disguised as a tower, hilltop, or the deck of a ship” provided a stable, central position from which to experience the unfolding of an entire world – and to perceive, with a thrill, its limits.

Oettermann’s observations on this score may, in a sense, reinforce the notion that panoramic vision offered a world-as-image ready for consumption and appropriation; they may also, however, hint at ways in which the ever-present horizon-as-vanishing-point provided a stark reminder of the limits of vision. The panoramic landscape that receded into the distance was always bounded by such a line. In Chapter 1 I examined how Tom Gunning has argued that the phantom ride and like moving images radically undermine the privileged position of the spectator as origin and guarantor of vision by making the horizon and the boundaries of the frame, instead, the source of renewal for the image. According to this logic, we might ask to what extent the obsession with the horizon documented by Oettermann celebrates – and attempts to master – this displacement by endlessly reenacting it. In this regard, following Alison Griffiths, I would like to read the panorama’s obsession with reenactment, which “came to define the very idea of the panorama effect as one of revisitation, of witnessing again”, as participating in a dialogue of sorts with the photographic and cinematic depictions of polar landscapes in the films I analyze here. The position of the witness begins to seem provisional, contingent. Indeed, the relationship between horizon and spectator seems to reinforce the instability of the latter. In the sections that follow, I will show how Flaherty’s and Ponting’s films express and revise these valences of cartographic and panoramic, linking them to the Merleau-Pontian notions of flesh and reversibility which, in Galen Johnson’s words, “are notions meant to express both envelopment and distance, the paradox of unity at a distance or sameness with difference.”

2. “Ilimitable spaces which top the world”

An early generation of film scholars celebrated Nanook of the North for inaugurating documentary cinema. Yet recent scholarship illuminates the film’s narrative qualities: the extent to which Flaherty called upon Allakariallak, the Inuit who "played" Nanook, and his family to perform the activity of daily life in scenes staged for the camera, and the sense in which these staged performances conscripted life in the Arctic to imperialist metanarratives of wild northern

89Ibid., 11.
90Ibid.
nature and of the supposed primitivism of its indigenous communities. Flaherty's film does not document; as its subtitle plainly explains, it is "a Story of Life and Love in the Actual Arctic", marketed as a family drama distinguished by having been shot on location in an extraordinary place. Viewers must acknowledge, as William Rothman points out, that "the 'self' that [Allakariallak] plays and the 'self' who plays him do not simply coincide." This much is clear from the film's opening titles, in which Flaherty explains his impulse "to take a single character and make him typify the Eskimos as [he] had known them so long and well." This type, Shari Huhndorf notes, was itself typical of a tendency which, "drawing in part on Christianity's associations with whiteness and the dominance of whiteness in Arctic images (as opposed to the "darkness" of other colonial spaces), ... depicted Eskimos as better rather than baser versions of Europeans ... [and] the Arctic as a place of cleanliness, purity, virtue, and even redemption." As Huhndorf suggests, it is not only the human actors who perform here; the landscape, too, exists in a tenuous relation of coincidence and non-coincidence with the "Actual Arctic." In this section, I will show how Flaherty's film attempts to match a staged interpretation of Itivimuit life to cartographic and panoramic interpretations of the Arctic landscape – and how these models of landscape interpretation code mastery of and lostness in the landscape.

Flaherty frames the film within a textual prehistory of lost originals and repeated failures, and in the process figures his own experience in the Arctic as one that recapitulates the history of polar exploration. Flaherty's map of the landscape begins before the narrative proper, with the acknowledgement that the film results from a series of journeys to the North "carried out on behalf of Sir William Mackenzie from 1910 to 1916." During these several-month-long journeys, intertitles explain, Flaherty travelled with several Inuit "companions," and the experience produced an "insight" and "deep regard" for the life-ways of the "kindly, brave, simple Esquimo." The negatives produced on these first forays were lost, however, and a subsequent attempt rendered an "indifferent" film in which Flaherty was gravely disappointed. Only after these initial failures did Flaherty return to the Arctic with the plan for what would become *Nanook of the North*.

Yet the film’s textual prehistory is more complicated than Flaherty lets on. Flaherty had traveled extensively in the Arctic, mapping and staking mineral claims, since his adolescence. During early excursions, he accompanied his father; later, he voyaged independently, preparing maps for areas as yet unseen by white men and locating deposits of iron ore and other minerals. Flaherty described his experience as a cartographer as continuous with his work as a photographer and filmmaker. "All art, I suppose, is a kind of exploring," he mused in 1949 during a talk given at the BBC: "Whether or not it's true of art, that's the way I started filmmaking. I was an explorer first and a filmmaker long after." It is important to remember, however, that Flaherty's photographic and cinematic images performed functions other than the artistic. Jo-Anne Birnie Danzker reminds that, "numerous expeditions photographed local Inuit as part of a documenting, mapping process which gave proof of possession over territory. This was particularly important at a time when different nations were laying claim, or disputing claims, to the same territory. Flaherty's documentary-type photographs clearly lie within this...

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tradition." The frame that bears the film's full title furnishes an additional detail of the film's production history. According to the Flaherty legend, the director met Captain Thierry Mallet of the Revillon Frères fur traders at a cocktail party in 1920 and, by the end of the evening, had charmed the man so thoroughly with Arctic tales that only a few days later the company had agreed to fund a filmmaking excursion in the North. Huhndorf elaborates that, "the film was, in fact, initially designed as a feature-length advertisement for the company, which in the 1910s and 1920s was engaged in fierce competition with the Hudson Bay Company."

The vocabulary of polar exploration is more explicit in Flaherty's portrait of "the mysterious Barren lands" inhabited by his subjects: "desolate, boulder-strewn, windswept -- illimitable spaces which top the world." This account cites the mythological accounts of polar regions that would have been commonplace to contemporary viewers: landscapes of indeterminate and therefore unimaginable size and character. Flaherty layers this information over a dark, seemingly empty frame at the bottom of which two wolves appear in silhouette against barely-illuminated snow. Having represented the landscape as unknown and uninhabited, a blank but shadowy slate to be conquered by the camera, Flaherty hastens to populate it. The titles that follow highlight how the "sterility of the soil and the rigor of the climate" are survivable only by a people "utterly dependent upon animal life," the "fearless, lovable, happy-go-lucky Esquimo." This coupling of hostile landscape and childlike people consolidates a number of early twentieth century attitudes toward the mythical Arctic, as well as Flaherty's position as what Rothman calls "a self-styled artist-explorer in a colonialist mold." Flaherty, as filmmaker, enters this Arctic landscape with both reverence and colonialist condescension for the Inuit others upon whose knowledge he depends.

The viewer's secure entry into the landscape depends on a different device. Having described the territory, Flaherty proceeds to map it. Intertitles explain that the story takes place in Hopewell Sound, Northern Ungava; subsequent images map the area onscreen. The first and largest map image extends from Northwestern Canada to the American Southeast region in its North-South orientation and from the middle of the North-American continent to the middle of the North Atlantic on its West-East axis. Upper-case letters identify the nation of Canada, the Hudson and James Bays, Capes Smith and Dufferin, the territory of Ungava, and the cities of Quebec and Halifax; south of a dotted line implicitly indicating the boundary between Canada and the United States (for there is no need to label the southern half of this pair) are marked the cities Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, New York, and Philadelphia (Fig. 2). But Flaherty's interpretive work is not complete until he has turned the Arctic into a fiefdom in which Nanook and his "followers" inhabit an area "a little kingdom in size -- nearly as large as England, yet occupied by less than three hundred souls." This smaller area is described by a new map of the Hudson Bay region, in which the area of Nanook's community hunting ground is indicated by a small leaf-shaped outline, shaded with horizontal lines (Fig. 3). Flaherty's cartographic analogy provides viewers with important geographical and cultural coordinates. The area in which the film takes place, audiences now understand, is almost the size of England, is ruled by something like a king (Nanook, "Chief of the 'Itivimuits' and as a great hunter famous through all Ungava"), and occupied by a group of Nanook's loyal "follower"-subjects that seems small in number.

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96 Rotha, 28.
97 Huhndorf, 136.
98 Rothman, 24.
Figures 2 and 3. “A little kingdom in size – nearly as large as England, yet occupied by less than three hundred souls”; The Hudson Bay and Ungava
given the size of the territory. These maps also implicitly tame the "illimitable spaces which top the world" by turning them into an empty colonial analogue.

For Huhndorf, this cartographic analogy offers problematic "accounts of the region and its peoples [which] both enacted and attempted to conceal Western colonial dominance." Not only do Flaherty’s mapping strategies "create an illusion of possession and (for the spectator, vicarious) mastery of the landscape"; Nanook of the North’s focus on the drama of survival "veils the effects of colonialism by making nature (rather than the colonizer) the threat."99 Nonetheless, although the prefatory, interpretive intertitles that make Nanook king of an ersatz England – and his the only people fit to survive in this landscape -- seem to manifest Western colonial dominance, Nanook of the North narratively and formally challenges this dominance. His maps may attempt to make Ungava knowable, but Flaherty consistently undermines that desire by casting nature and death as his primary antagonists and by using panoramic shots to picture surprising disclosures of life and death from within the landscape.

For André Bazin, in Nanook of the North "the mainspring of the action is not in man but nature."100 For Rothman, too, "[i]n Nanook, there are no villains: the threat to Nanook's family comes from within nature."101 "What is threatened," he argues, "is death itself, a part of nature. And what saves the human community from this threat, or grants them a reprieve, is part of nature, too (the ice of the igloo that provides shelter from the storm, the sealskin blanket, the bodily warmth of huddled human animals)."102 Huhndorf extends this observation yet further. "It is, in fact, the precariousness of these Natives' existence," she writes, "their constant struggle to survive in this harshest of environments, that drives the narrative. The camera repeatedly scans the frozen landscape, and in the first minutes of the film viewers learn that 'the desert interior, if deer hunting fails, is the country of death.'"103 This is not death in the abstract, a romantic prospect central to the myth of the Arctic, but a death that the film visualizes repeatedly in violent acts that place human characters and sled dogs on a continuum of animality that remains unresolved even at the film's conclusion. As I will demonstrate below, the film’s panoramic and near-still shots picture living dynamism and frozen death in ways that productively challenge the knowability of the landscape.

Flaherty's choice of a Bell and Howell camera for his first two attempts at filmmaking in the Arctic was disastrous. The camera's mechanisms, lubricated with sticky oil and grease, froze nearly as frequently as the fragile film stock, which was constantly at risk of shattering into brittle, icy shards. Flaherty lost the footage he obtained during these early expeditions -- once on a sled that plummeted through rotten ice and once to his own carelessness with a stray cigarette butt in the editing studio -- but returned at last with a new pair of machines: Akeley cameras. These, designed by celebrated taxidermist Carl Akeley to capture images of African wildlife on the move, were lubricated with graphite -- which did not freeze -- and featured a gyroscopic head that made it possible to pan and tilt the camera simultaneously. Paul Rotha argues that "Flaherty could rightly claim to be a pioneer in the use of the gyro tripod; and although Nanook of the North does not contain many examples of pans or tilts, they are an important -- indeed vital -- feature of all his subsequent work."104 Although Flaherty's use of pans and tilts in this film seems

99 Huhndorf, 137-38 and 142.
101 Rothman, 33.
102 Ibid.
103 Huhndorf, 135-6.
104 Rotha, 29.
minimal to Rotha, these are nonetheless key features of several illuminating sequences.

The lateral motion of a panoramic view begins in the first photographic sequence of the film. Having described the frigid conditions of the territory in intertitles featuring painted landscape scenes, Flaherty relocates the viewer not quite in the landscape itself, but on the deck of a ship cruising icy waters off the coast of what we presume is Ungava. As the ship pitches with each crest of the waves, the panoramic view provided by this traveling shot recalls the early 19th-century panoramas and silent films of ocean views that provided an impression of the motion of rolling waves so realistic that it induced seasickness in a number of spectators. The effect evokes the mode of panoramic perception that Wolfgang Schivelbusch accords to traveling shots produced on or within moving trains which, “in contrast to traditional perception, no longer belongs to the same space as the perceived objects: the traveler sees the landscape, objects, etc. through the apparatus which moves him through the world.” This separation, Tom Gunning argues, is a key element of the cinema’s participation in the transformation of world into image that Gunning equates with Martin Heidegger’s notion of the world picture. “[F]or Heidegger,” Gunning writes, “the metaphysical (and destructive) nature of modern Western man views the world as something that can be appropriated through becoming a picture. No better illustration of this could be conceived than the travel images of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.”

The cartographic analogy between Nanook’s home and England seems at first complicit with Flaherty’s panoramic vision of the waves that carry us toward the coast of Ungava. Yet it is from beneath these waves, a few moments later, that Flaherty’s first surprising disclosure occurs, disrupting the acquisitive promise of both map and panorama. Here the camera is positioned on the rocky shore, a stone’s throw from the water’s edge to which Nanook paddles in a small kayak. He appears at first to be accompanied only by a single small child, sprawled across the fore of the boat. But as he stands, from within the kayak’s skin hold emerges his family in its entirety: first Nyla, then an infant, followed by Cunayou and Comock the puppy. Here the panorama of land as seen from sea unfolds a spectacular and promising view; the camera pans, slowly and haltingly, moments later to place a limit on this visibility. The visual mastery Flaherty’s camera promises from the deck of the ship on which we, as spectators, arrive, is taken away by the arrival of Nanook’s family in a far smaller craft. The panoramic traveling shot of our arrival at these shores promises visual mastery by spatializing time; the pan by which the group arrives reasserts the temporality of the image by lingering, ultimately, on the arrival of what we could not see.

Here a second valence of panoramic vision returns to haunt the first. As Gunning reminds, the construction of both stationary and moving panoramic paintings seemed to abolish their own frames. In each, “the circular form of the painting and the arrangement of lighting and architecture (which de-emphasized the upper and lower edges) created a sense of an image without borders.” Thus the panorama’s pretense to comprehensive vision must constantly be undermined by the spectator’s inability to seize it as a whole. The spectator’s vision circulates, doubles back on itself, but can never appropriate what is given as a simple, contained picture. And the cinematic quality, here, adds to the disturbing sense in which the viewer just can’t get enough. “The moving camera’s ability to seem to surpass its own frame,” Gunning argues,

106 Gunning, 33.
107 Gunning, 34.
“creates another image, which seems to pass beyond its own borders.”\textsuperscript{108} In \textit{Nanook of the North}, panoramic traveling shots and camera “pans” produce this sense of an expansive but imperfectly accessible visual field, in which we are not given all there is to see. Member after member of Nanook’s family seem to have been hiding in plain sight; though spectators may have expected to master this landscape by mastering its image, this scene suggests how the landscape image may withhold such satisfaction.

Flaherty takes great pains to show, nonetheless, Nanook reading signs of life in the landscape that seem inscrutable to outsiders. In one sequence, the camera pans to follow Nanook as he navigates ice floes in his kayak and on foot in order to fish. The temporality of Nanook’s interaction with this landscape – the care he takes to read the signs of weak and strong ice and currents, his patience as he waits for the fish to bite – becomes important to the inscription of human inhabitation of the landscape. The walrus and seal hunts take part in this attention to duration. For André Bazin, the temporality of the hunt is one in which “montage plays no part, unless it be the negative one of inevitable elimination where reality superabounds.”\textsuperscript{109} The abundance of reality cannot be given fully to vision, but Flaherty’s long takes focus on the unfolding of what can: “The camera cannot see everything at once but it makes sure not to lose any part of what it chooses to see.”\textsuperscript{110} Here, as in the arrival of the family in the kayak, we are reminded that the life of the landscape extends beyond the registers of visibility that outsiders might import to it. Snow and ice signal the presence of a fox or seal. Snow and ice comprise the material of the igloo, a home cut from the landscape itself. For Nanook these signs in the landscape are transparent, but this literacy, like the camera’s vision, can only redeem so much. \textit{Nanook} figures this limit by concluding, like Scott’s 1912 polar jaunt, in retreat to the preoccupied dwelling of an unknown predecessor and a series of symbolic disappearances and deaths.

In these sequences, landscape’s significant materiality is disclosed through surprising and lively eruptions of human and non-human life. These disclosures repeatedly undermine the mastery promised by Flaherty’s maps. In this, I argue, the film makes a sophisticated phenomenological argument. Maurice Merleau-Ponty discards an abstract, mathematical notion of space in favor of one in which the sensible sentient body is intractably engulfed. Space is not the former, he argues, “a network of relations between objects such as would be seen by a third party, witnessing my vision, or by a geometry looking over it and reconstructing it from outside.”\textsuperscript{111} Instead, it is always already inhabited by what perceives it and fills it. In the case of the human, he explains, “I do not see it according to its exterior envelope; I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me.”\textsuperscript{112} The Arctic landscapes constructed by \textit{Nanook of the North}, likewise, undermine the surveying, third-party, aerial view of the mapmaker. Instead of locating itself outside the “exterior envelope” of the landscape, as the map suggests it should, Flaherty’s film does something surprising. It dedicates itself to observing the interactions that define immersion. It shows us the world around Nanook, not the one we might expect to be laid before our eyes by the white ethnographer. But this look – the look-around, rather than the gaze-at – cannot be sustained. The film’s conclusion

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{111} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, \textit{The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting} (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1933), 138.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid.
figuratively expels us from the landscape by confronting us with the closed eyes of its representative. Nanook, through whom we have experienced the Arctic landscape’s lively interiority, feigns sleep for the camera. In closing his eyes, he closes himself against our look, and ceases to return our gaze.

The film’s final sequences chronicle the arrival of a storm and the family’s desperate need to find shelter and food. The camera tilts to capture the transit of billowing clouds across the sky and pans to follow dogs, sledge, and humans across snow that seems to smoke in the wind. “Almost perishing from the icy blasts and unable to reach their own snowhouse,” an intertitle explains, “the little family is driven to take refuge in a deserted igloo.” We see them enter, amid gusts of wind and snow that seem to blur the image. But the interior of the igloo appears to be a set: large shafts of light illuminate the interior in some shots, suggesting that the structure is open to the elements. While the dogs “outside” sit or lie still, with heads bowed to the wind and snow accumulating in their fur, the family within settles for the night. The film’s final shot is of Nanook’s face. Eyes closed, his breathing visibly shallow and uneven, a faint frown on his face, he appears to be sleeping (Fig. 4). The next frame, a painted intertitle depicting a dog seated beside a partially collapsed igloo, pronounces this “‘Tia Mak’ (The End)”.

Shari Huhndorf reads this scene as an allegory for the consequences of the Inuit encounter with Euro-American imperialism. “The implications of the Eskimos’ entry into the capitalist, technological world...become clear in the final sequence of the film, a metaphorical death scene,” she writes. “Fearing the strength of the oncoming storm, Nanook and his family build an igloo and go to sleep inside. Meanwhile, their master dog howls mournfully outside as snow buries the igloo, a symbolic grave.”113 Although the setup of the interior shots of the igloo indicates that these scenes were staged and represent a rehearsed domestic routine rather than a desperate situation, the stillness of these sleeping forms and the expression on Nanook’s face are grave.

Fhatimah Tobing Rony argues that this image represents the death of indigenous lifeways implicit in what she calls the “taxidermic” impulse of visual ethnography. “Taxidermy,” she writes, “seeks to make that which is dead look as if it were still living...since indigenous people were assumed to be already dying if not dead, the ethnographic ‘taxidermist’ turned to artifice, seeking an image more true to the posited original.”114 That is to say that the film effectively stills Nanook’s liveliness in order to authenticate it; Allakariallak’s subsequent death retroactively authorizes the freeze frame. “In ethnographic cinema,” Rony explains, “the narrative of the film hinges upon the body of the native – plugged into the narrative of evolution and the myth of vanishing races...That Allakariallak died two years after the film was released, of either starvation or disease, only enhanced the film’s status as a work of authenticity.”115 This authenticity bears on both the human body and the landscape it inhabits, subtly proposing a metaphorical equivalence that legitimizes conquest.

The film opens and closes with images of Nanook’s face and the painted Arctic landscape: two bodies poised narratively and formally between liveliness and disappearance, motion and stillness. “[T]hroughout the film the camera surveys Nanook’s face and it becomes a landscape; at the end of the film it is this landscape which is also penetrated. The sleeping body of Nanook, like a corpse, represents the triumph of salvage ethnography: he is captured forever

113 Huhndorf, 143.
115 Rony, 104.
Fig. 4 *Nanook: still life*
on film, both alive and dead, his death and life to be replayed every time the film is screened.”

But death wins out in Nanook of the North. To be sure, what operates here in large part is Bazin’s mummy complex, the desire “to preserve, artificially, [Allakariallak’s] bodily appearance…to snatch it from the flow of time, to stow it away neatly, so to speak, in the hold of life.” For Bazin, photography participates in the function of funerary statuary – “the preservation of life by a representation of life” – but trumps the limits of the representational, substitutive plastic arts because it “shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it is the model.” In the case of cinema, the ontological identity is temporalized; “for the first time, the image of things is likewise the image of their duration, change mummified as it were.” In the cinema, then, things that have lived can live again. And in Nanook, as I have suggested above, the image of duration makes surprising disclosures and demonstrates the mysterious legibility of a landscape unfamiliar to its viewers.

Rony’s allusions to taxidermy are also illuminating, especially in connection to Donna Haraway’s reading of the art as practiced by Carl Akeley. Akeley’s dioramas for the American Museum of Natural History in the early 20th century, according to Haraway, prophylactically preserved an idealized version of Anglo-Saxon masculinity against the physical and spiritual decay threatened by rapid urbanization and immigration. Akeley’s dioramas froze the moment of encounter between hunter and beast – always a moment punctuated by the death of the latter – thereby placing humans and animals in a hierarchy guaranteed by the realism of displays that naturalized the continuum they represented. The connection between Akeley’s dioramas and Nanook’s story is enlivened further by the fact that Flaherty shot Nanook with a camera of Akeley’s design. The genius of Akeley’s camera, for many of its early operators, lay in the gyroscopic mechanism that enabled simultaneous pans and tilts. For Akeley, what was important was that this range of motion be similar to that of a firearm. Haraway reports that “Akeley said he set out to design a camera ‘that you can aim…with about the same ease that you can point a pistol.’” In this, and more, he succeeded: “Even at the literal level of physical appearance, ‘[t]o one familiar with the old types of camera the Akeley resembled a machine gun quite as much as it resembled a camera.’” In this connection, Rony is correct: Nanook is “captured forever on film, both alive and dead, his death and life to be replayed every time the film is screened.” Yet I would argue that most important here is the rehearsal – we might even say “realization” – of his death.

Nanook of the North needs Nanook to freeze to death, to be claimed by the landscape, so that it can thereby authenticate the danger and wildness of that landscape. Allakariallak’s later disappearance conveniently signifies a retreat from visibility that contradicts Flaherty’s praise of Inuit hardiness by suggesting that only the white fur traders are equipped to survive in the cold North. Some sources – including Flaherty’s film – reported that Allakariallak died of starvation while hunting in the interior of the Ungava peninsula. Yet elsewhere there are indications that

116 Ibid., 115.
118 Ibid., 10.
119 Ibid., 14.
120 Ibid., 15.
122 Ibid., 39.
Allakariallak had exhibited symptoms of tuberculosis prior to his disappearance. The suspicion that it was a disease imported by whites like Flaherty that put an end to Nanook the Bear is telling; the encounter between white traders and explorers and “the kindly, brave, simple Eskimo” seems to have been deadly. In this sense, not only does Flaherty’s film prefigure and perform the death of its subject; it bears a direct relation to the matrix of human and non-human materialities that produced that death. Indigenous humans and non-humans, related by ties of consumption and labor, constitute one piece of this matrix. Nanook and his family, the dogs with whom they shared food, shelter, and work, the seals and walruses that fed and clothed them, the Arctic: body, activity, and place seem to mutually direct and constitute one another. The human and non-human outsiders – white traders and explorers and the microbial ecosystems they imported – compose a second, ultimately lethal set of conditions. 

Nanook may not have killed Nanook, but its representation of his death exceeds the figurative.

3. “The Uttermost End of the Earth”

Herbert Ponting’s The Great White Silence and 90 Degrees South take great pains to confine their representations of death to the figural. These were the first images of actual polar landscapes to be released to a global cinema audience. Gaumont exhibited pieces of Ponting’s footage in episodic short form until news of Scott’s death found its way North in February 1913. Over a decade later, Ponting bought his footage back from Gaumont. He later reassembled and re-released it as the feature-length The Great White Silence. Ponting released 90 Degrees South in 1933 with a full musical score, an introduction featuring himself and Vice-Admiral Edward Evans, who had been Scott’s second-in-command, and his own full voice-over narrative commentary. By the time Ponting released these iterations of the footage he had gathered during the early months of the Scott expedition, the fates of the final five were a foregone conclusion. As he saw it, his task in the years that followed their demise was to re-signify their failure as heroism, and to do that heroism justice; in his lecture tours and films, Ponting used his Antarctic imagery to demonstrate that the courage and gentlemanly passions of Scott and his team were as great as, if not greater than, the forces to which they succumbed. In advancing this argument, Ponting’s films focus not on images of the men themselves but on the act of framing the immense and seemingly empty Antarctic landscape. But Ponting rhetorically constructs this framing practice in such a way as to suggest that it cannot be adequate to its task. Cartographic analogies, maps, and dioramas attempt to establish a sense of scale; other panoramic, photographic, and cartographic renderings of the landscape obscure the reference points that make mastery possible.

124 Thomas Edison’s 1901 film of the Arctic display in Buffalo is not the first cinematic record of a polar landscape, real or fabricated. John Frazer notes that “Lumière made a reconstructed newsreel in 1897 called The Explorer Andrée at the North Pole,” which together with Edison’s short and Robert Paul’s 1903 Voyage of the Arctic, or How Captain Kettle Discovered the North Pole constitute the earliest known cinematic imaginings of the poles. George Méliès’ 1912 A la Conquête du Pole satirized the turn-of-the-century craze for all things polar. And cinematography became standard practice during the last years of polar exploration’s so-called "Heroic Age." Rachel Low notes that footage of Shackleton's Antarctic and the Carnegie Museum's Alaska-Siberia voyages, both of 1909, were screened after each expedition's return. See: Low, Rachel, History of British Film (London: Routledge, 2010), 153-5.
In this way, Ponting’s films offer a cartographic-panoramic-photographic tension similar to that offered by Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North*. Here, however, the stakes of disclosure are obviously changed. *Nanook*, released a dozen years after the attainment of the North Pole, is not about polar exploration but rather the arguably more difficult practice of maintaining a day-to-day existence in the Arctic landscape. Maps orient the viewer, but subsequent disclosures of liveliness surprise and disorient her. Nevertheless the film allows the spectator to recuperate her secure position by transferring her lostness onto the figure of Nanook, whose symbolic death closes the narrative. Although Ponting’s films, like Flaherty’s, use maps and dioramas to orient their audiences, secure knowledge of one’s place therein remains elusive. By the story’s end, viewers may feel as lost as Scott and his team – and the ice cairn in which those figures were buried becomes Nanook’s igloo. This section aims to show how Ponting’s imagery of the Scott expedition to Antarctica constructs the polar landscape as a space of mastery denied. Whereas *Nanook* could only temporarily hint it, Ponting’s films may better approximate the unstable, disorienting envelopment of spectators in the polar landscape.

*The Great White Silence* and *90 Degrees South* tell the same tale, but with significantly different technologies. Both films are composed of Ponting’s photographic and cinematographic records of the Scott expedition; the most meaningful differences inhere in the visual representations of the Antarctic landscape and in the form of Ponting’s interpretive commentary. Both films use maps to track the *Terra Nova*’s southward course, and to indicate points of interest on the Antarctic coastline: the locations of capes and mountains, as well as the sites of encampments including the Hut where Scott’s crew overwintered, and Scott’s and Amundsen’s respective routes to the Pole. Yet each film contains visibly different cartographic renderings: the maps used in *The Great White Silence* are coded in conventional cartographic terms, but the maps of *90 Degrees South* adopt the visual language of animation.

But this is not the only difference. In *The Great White Silence*, the standardized cartographic look of the Royal Geographic Society is but one half of a two-pronged representational strategy argument. The other half: the photographed diorama. Ponting had a diorama produced that depicted the Antarctic coastline and the route of Scott’s journey. This diorama, photographed “from above,” gave the impression of aerial landscape photography: most dramatically in sequences that dramatized sunset and sunrise. Intertitles describe the onset of polar winter; then, from its position above the polar diorama, the camera registers the effects of the sun’s retreat on the landscape. Shadows lengthen as the light source descends toward and then beyond the out-of-frame horizon line. The sun sinks lower, and light tracks toward the top of the model Mount Erebus, to disappear from the tips of its ragged peaks. When the sun returns, the effect is reproduced in reverse. Spectators thus mark time in the polar landscape artificially by witnessing a re-enactment of the retreat and re-appearance of light. The diorama also provides the landscape setting for Ponting’s re-enactment, on a minuscule scale, of Scott’s journey toward and away from the Pole. As intertitles describe the polar party’s trek across the ice shelf and up the Beardmore glacier, little figures representing each man and sledge progress in stop-motion fashion across the diorama landscape. These figures are not made to scale, one presumes; yet their exceedingly small size, against the stark white background of the fairly realistic-looking diorama, evokes the courage that their undertaking required.

The “look” of the maps and diorama of *The Great White Silence* becomes significant only in comparison to the graphic conventions with which Ponting replaced them in *90 Degrees South*. My reading of Ponting’s representation of the Scott expedition will focus in the pages that follow on the latter, somewhat longer version of the film. I will consistently highlight how
this film’s imagery and visual argument differs from that of its predecessor in offering a more radical vision of the landscape. The maps and diorama of *The Great White Silence* look down on the Antarctic landscape from above. Those of *90 Degrees South*, by contrast, disrupt the mastery of this surveillant gaze and locate the viewer ever more insistently in a landscape in which scale and distance are impossible to measure and in which the human form is unpicturable. The viewer thus experiences something like the disorientation faced by Scott and his team— a disorientation which, as I will suggest, offers something closer to Merleau-Ponty’s vision of phenomenological engulfment.

Although Ponting’s still and motion-picture cameras provide extensive documentation of Scott’s expedition, the film hesitates to picture its ultimate goal: the South Pole, or 90 degrees south latitude. In *90 Degrees South*, we see Antarctica first as a painted image: a snowy, rippling vista, with rays of sunlight—but no sun—extruding from a slightly concave horizon line. The film’s title appears in large, rounded, ice-encrusted letters super-imposed above and below the horizon line, replicating its gentle curve and suggesting that 90° South latitude—the South Pole—lies somewhere at or beyond the limits of our vision, perhaps at the place from which those rays of light radiate. At left and right in the foreground of the image stand repoussoirs of icy rock that frame and shelter the viewer just outside the pictured terrain, which recedes toward the horizon, leading the viewer’s eye into an indeterminate space. Scale is uncertain here, and the roughly textured letters of the title seem crude when laid over the gentle waves of the snow. Though these first images hold the viewer at a distance, Ponting promises that viewers will receive an almost experiential access to the expedition: “I have endeavoured,” explains the self-professed “camera artist,” “to arrange this film in such a manner that, when you have seen it, I hope that you will personally feel that you have been on a great adventure.” Like a travelogue, this film is meant to initiate its audience into the fraternity of explorers.

Accordingly, the story begins by delivering a sense of spatial and geographical mastery in the form of a map. This map pictures the course of the Terra Nova from London around the southern tip of Africa, past Australia to its final stop in Littleton, New Zealand. As I have noted, the “look” of this mapping process in *90 Degrees South* differs from that of *The Great White Silence*. In the 1924 film, the sea is white, the land is grey, and the Terra Nova’s course is traced as a thin black line. In *90 Degrees South*, the color scheme shifts. Landmasses are bright against the dark gray seas; the Terra Nova’s journey is represented by a single white line that crosses the globe. As Ponting narrates the ship’s arrival in Littleton, the motion picture footage of the expedition begins. Thus, though the opening frames of the film seem to withhold access, Ponting’s introduction to the expedition treats the viewer as a co-adventurer and moves progressively toward the seeming security of the motion-picture view.

Having figuratively offered viewers a berth, Ponting hastens to represent the traveling conditions. He takes great pains to describe the Terra Nova, its crew of humans, dogs, and ponies, and the supplies and specially designed technologies with which it was loaded at this last port. The ship itself was a retired whaling vessel—a detail which, invoking Melville, foreshadows the fate of the expedition’s captain. The animals that were brought aboard at this point in the journey were Siberian; Ponting explains that they were suited by their provenance to “the low temperatures that would have to be endured in the perilous work that lay before them.” This detail, too, seems to bode ill: the ponies were accustomed to low temperatures, but would not survive the expedition. Yet as these animals and supplies are brought on board, Ponting’s footage and narration are celebratory. He takes pains to show that “perilous work” was yet a long way off; scenes and photographs of crewmen dancing, boxing, playing with the dogs, caring
for the horses, and giving one another terrible haircuts demonstrate the good humor of the group and the intimacy that close quarters produced. As the expedition gets underway, Ponting positions his motion picture camera on the deck to capture the crush of well-wishers waving from the pier as the Terra Nova sails smoothly out of port. Unlike the panoramic view provided by Flaherty’s traveling shot of Canadian shores, these images are claustrophobic; New Zealand disappears through a ropy crisscrossed lattice of the ship’s rigging that obscures and segments the view, signifying the extent to which the ship’s inhabitants would be bound together in the coming months.

Shifting sea- and landscapes challenge the ship’s southward journey, and 90 Degrees South mimetically registers each test. First, the ship pitches violently between enormous waves as the stormy seas grow turbulent. But when the Terra Nova gets stuck in ice floes farther south, the motion pictures stop and still photographs formally reflect this pause in the journey. These images show the ship frozen – figuratively and literally – amid upturned escarpments of ice, crewmembers at rest and at work, and even a lone penguin watching from a nearby ice platform. Here the ship doesn’t seek the spectacle of frozen landscape; it becomes part of such a scene, observed by the wildlife that inhabits it. Christmas Eve 1910, Ponting explains, is celebrated in a “scene of infinite peace.” This serenity is temporary; as the journey gets back underway, Ponting’s camera lingers in close up on the prow of the boat as it splits the ice ahead. This sequence recuperates the temporary break in action and stilling of the moving image in order to re-assert the thrill of breaking ice barriers in the push southward. In The Great White Silence, Ponting accompanies this footage with photographs of the rig he used to capture it. His showmanship also serves to underscore the dangerous conditions under which he labored.

As the expedition nears the continent, the film’s mimetic mastery of seascapes becomes a mastery of landscapes. In 90 Degrees South, a second painted image – this one a combination of landscape view and topographical map – stretches forward from the lower quarter of the frame into the distance at the top. Ponting describes the Ross Sea and the Great Ice Barrier, giving its dimensions and sketching its geographical features. In order to establish a sense of the continent’s scale, Ponting explains that, “if England could be layed on the Great Ice Barrier, it would look like this” (Fig. 5). And the dark outline of the British Isles materializes on the surface of the ice, disposed toward the viewer in such a way that, as the viewer looks south over the painted map toward the South Pole, England lies before her, with what is in geographical reality its northernmost tip stretching toward the pole itself. This inverted superimposition of the expedition’s home country visualizes Great Britain’s conquest of the continent: the film tentatively, retroactively figures the discovery that Scott did not accomplish. In a second, similar analogy, Ponting explains that the largest of the icebergs sighted was 23 miles long and, at that size, “could carry London and most of its suburbs on its back!” This attempt to provide an analog for the size of both barrier and berg was surely as useful and inspiring to British audiences as it was a formidable assertion of imperial power to those outside the United Kingdom.

The gesture, which is peculiar to 90 Degrees South, recalls Flaherty’s cartographic analogy, but with a difference. Flaherty’s map of Ungava described the region as Nanook’s kingdom even as it measured the territory by comparing it to the British Isle. Ponting’s map makes the superimposition explicit and literal; he lays England on the ice barrier and imagines London traveling atop the berg. Arrival at the continent provides Ponting with an occasion to wax poetic about the sublime beauty of its ice cliffs and the “glorious prospect of Mount Erebus rising to the Heavens.” As the Terra Nova weighs anchor, the motion picture pauses for a
Fig. 5 “If England could be layered on the Great Ice Barrier, it would look like this.”
moment on two sharp still photographs. The first of these depicts the side of the mountain from
the vantage of the ship; in the second, the viewer has made landfall and sees the ship from the
perspective of its icy shores. The audience, as virtual explorer, has arrived. In The Great White
Silence, on the other hand, Ponting signals arrival at the ice shelf not with a map but with the
first look at his diorama of the coastline. The white cliffs of the ice shelf draw a dramatic outline
against the grey sea. But more impressive is the profile of the massive Mount Erebus rising just
inland from this point. A small black representation of the Terra Nova sits to the lower right of
the coast. As I suggested above, this marker of human presence in the landscape is not to scale –
it is not small enough – but succeeds in evoking the vastness of the landscape against which it is
posed.

During the film’s second act the crew unloads the ship, builds living quarters, and begins
to prepare for the trip to the Pole. This sequence illustrates how human and animal expedition
members devoted their day-to-day lives to maintaining a presence on the continent. To occupy
even a small area required a series of human-natural-technological encounters shaped by
incredible labor; this sequence describes the materials or practices that built the expedition
compound and to the domestic intimacy to be found within its tiny interiors. This was an
interspecies intimacy. Ponting’s voiceover narration praises the ponies and dogs, explaining
how their hard work alongside the human crew ensured the smooth function of the station and
suggesting that the bonds formed between animal and humans laboring together were profound.
Although he gives the ponies fairly little screen time, he treats the dogs with special respect. He
introduces them one by one, displaying a photographic portrait of each animal; later, he
proclaims that the dogs “seemed to regard work as the only sort of fun to be had in those regions,
as they were not far wrong.” Ponting does not appear to admire Antarctic wildlife in such a
way. While he frames equine and canine as co-worker, he reduces Antarctic wildlife to silly
types. Ponting and expedition zoologist Wilson spent countless hours observing seals and
penguins, documenting hitherto unseen behaviors. Ponting uses nature film conventions to
anthropomorphize these animals and to incorporate them into an imaginary heterosexual
economy. He describes baby seals, for instance, as “the prettiest creatures” – but notes that,
judging by the looks of their “Mammas,” they don’t get better with age. Perhaps for this reason,
Ponting spends the most time recounting the life cycle of the Adélie penguins. The story begins
with courtship, continues during chick-rearing, and concludes as older penguins teach adolescent
offspring to nourish themselves. Ponting describes the skua gulls and orca whales that prey on
these creatures as cunning, vicious killers.

The expedition’s photographic record virtually stops when the polar party heads South
near the end of the film. Nearly all of the other images that describe the polar party’s journey
come in the form of painted landscape scenes that function almost as topographical maps. If
these were indeed Wilson’s paintings, it is sad and fitting that they should describe the final leg
of the dead artist’s journey. The last motion-picture footage we see of the party describes the
difficult conditions under which they would labor and the technological failures that seemed to
doom them from the start. Ponting explains, and shows, that Scott had brought specially
designed snow “tractors” which he had hoped would give him an advantage over Amundsen in
the 1800-mile-long roundtrip journey to the pole. These vehicles failed immediately. Ponting
saves face by assuring his audience that, as they had been only an experiment, “their failure did
not seriously embarrass operations.” Yet as Ponting explains that this failure forced polar party
members to “man-haul” their supplies, things begin to seem dire. Still photographs picture the
disfiguring blisters of frostbite and the faces of the men blackened by exposure to sun and cold.

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These stills are as close as viewers will get to the frozen bodies of the dead. Another disclosure comes here, surprisingly, in the form of footage Ponting shot earlier in the summer of the polar party practicing the set-up of their camp. Ponting explains each step of the erection of the tent, stowing of supplies, and preparation of the evening meal. These scenes recall the igloo-construction and final sequences of Flaherty’s Nanook, which rehearse the same domestic scenarios. It is during this sequence that Ponting recalls Scott’s comment: “What fun it will be when we are home again and see this at the cinema!” These words will seem tragic when, at the end of the film, Ponting explains the scene that awaited the search party that discovered the bodies of Scott, Bowers, and Wilson the following spring. Scott and his men did not freeze to death before Ponting’s camera, but the images of frostbite and rehearsal of life within the sledging party’s tent gesture profoundly to their suffering.

But such a gesture is all that Ponting can do to represent the final phase of the polar expedition. Ponting’s description of Scott’s route toward the pole – marked in 90 Degrees South only as a thin black line proceeding slowly across a relatively featureless white painted landscape – foreshadows the party’s failure. In this frame, there is no horizon line at which vision might terminate (Fig. 6). The black line inches across this bright white expanse from the bottom edge of the frame to the top, where it seems to continue out of our view. We look toward the pole, but not at or into the mystery it represents. One might also argue that it is not their failure, but the unrepresentability of their fate, that is foretold. Where they go, Ponting’s camera cannot follow. Only Scott’s journals and the photographs captured by the team on their voyage out remain to testify to the struggle of those final days. And only now does Ponting’s tone change from that of triumphant hero to bearer of bad news. As he explains, finally, that Scott had competition – that he was, in effect, trying to beat Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen to the end of the Earth – the two journeys are traced in parallel on another painted landscape-map. This map features a visual echo of the film’s title image: its horizon line is curved, and the words “90° South” appear above it in large white letters. As the black line representing Scott’s approach nears this threshold, a photograph of a black flag planted in the snow replaces the map. This emblem, planted as a course marker a dozen miles from the pole, signaled that Amundsen’s team had preceded them to the site. Scott and his team reached 90 degrees South latitude to find the Norwegian’s abandoned tent and a record declaring that he had come and gone over a month beforehand. Ponting had provided a camera to the team, but the film uses only three of the photographs yielded by the journey: portraits of all five of its members at the pole, standing dejectedly around the tent and its Norwegian flag, replaced in other photographs with the Union Jack. As I suggested at the outset, their faces are inscrutable; standing in listless contrapposto stance, wrapped in bulky gear, their faces barely visible, squinting at the sun and cold, they seem dazed. What is pictured here is, perhaps, the interiority of their failure, a sentiment we can imagine but not access visually.

The photographs that picture this moment cannot represent it, and neither can what follows. Whereas The Great White Silence represents Scott coming and going using stop-motion animation in the diorama, in 90 Degrees South Ponting narrates the group’s disastrous return trip over an excruciatingly slow pan across a painted landscape that features a rippling snowy vista and dark craggy mountains – but no proxy for Scott, no symbol of his party. The pan’s glacial pace seems to mimic the team’s slow progress; hampered by snow-blindness and by broken bones and concussions sustained in tumbles on the ice, the team inched across the landscape at an ever-decreasing pace. Ponting interrupts the pan with still photographs of the kinds of ice crevasses and cliffs that slowed the five down and raised their risk of injury. “More than once
Fig. 6  No horizon: the camera cannot follow.
they lost their way,” he explains, “and found themselves in ice that for miles was broken by pressure into the most appalling confusion and seamed with mazes of treacherous crevasses.” Scale and depth are impossible to make out in these images, which do as much to disorient the viewer as the conditions themselves must have delayed the sledging party. These photographs — and Ponting’s description thereof — represent the landscape as fragmented, labyrinthine, impossible to decipher or master, let alone traverse. The painted panorama continues, ridged with the mountains and ice formations Ponting has described (Fig. 7).

Jonathan Crary’s reading of Théodore Géricault’s massive painting, “The Raft of the Medusa”, is helpful here. For Crary, Géricault’s painting of the 1816 disaster — which memorializes the moment at which, after 13 days adrift on a hastily assembled raft, the 15 survivors of the Medusa shipwreck, driven mad by dehydration, starvation, and cannibalism, sight their rescue ship on the horizon — figures the privatization and interiority of vision that would soon subtend modern visual culture. In this regard, Crary argues, Géricault’s Medusa models “the relative separation of a viewer from a milieu of distraction…the detachment of an image from a larger background…[and] a broader psychic, perceptual and social insularity of the viewer, as well as a pervasive privileging of vision over the senses of touch and smell.”

The Medusa represents this transformation for Crary because it “incarnates a vision all but cut off from the possibility of a reciprocal exchange of gazes. For reprieve and deliverance in this image would consist in a mutual exchange of gazes, in being acknowledged by the ship, which is here tragically denied or at least deferred.”

Ponting’s excruciatingly slow pan over Wilson’s broad watercolor landscapes describes a different experience, but with echoes of the problematic that Crary identifies in Géricault’s work. Scott’s polar expedition is figuratively shipwrecked. And in this case, the viewer gazes not at the sign of relief on the horizon, but out either toward a horizon that is wholly unlocatable amid the obscure atmospherics of ice and snow or into the middle distance. We conjure the bodies of the exhausted, suffering travelers. We imagine them, bowed against the harnesses of their heavy sledges, trudging forward on feet that blistered and rotted in their frozen boots, searching in the blowing snow for the horizon that they, like us, fail to see (Fig. 7). The viewer cannot but recall the topographical landscape paintings over which Ponting described Scott’s trajectory: the thin black line that traced his route continued beyond the limits of visibility, out of a frame that had no horizon. We imagine them gazing back at us from the photographs we have just seen and from their journey through the landscape itself. But this is only an imaginary exchange of glances, ever deferred across the matte plane of the watercolor image. Crary reminds that panoramic and cinematic images light “an autonomous luminous screen of attraction, whose apparitional appeal is an effect of both its uncertain spatial location and its detachment from a broader visual field.” Such an experience “involves a detachment of the image from a wider field of possible sensory stimulation and creates a calculated confusion about the literal location of the painted surface as a way of enhancing its illusions of presence and distance.”

Wilson’s painting of the polar plateau participates in precisely this uncertainty, this detachment, this confusion of scale, depth, and presence. We are not crossing the glacier with Scott, but imagining his descent toward the coast from somewhere above the icefall. We cannot picture

126 Crary, 15.
127 Crary, 19.
128 Ibid.
Fig. 7 Wilson’s horizonless watercolor: “A mutual exchange of gazes...tragically denied or at least deferred.”
him or his companions, who Ponting describes as dying quietly in the night (Evans) or wandering out into the blizzard, never to return (Oates).

Here our situated centrality generates an embodied vision that cannot be categorized as controlling or mastering. We take (a) place in a landscape that engulfs, that surrounds, that *environs* – but according to a distinctly non-binary logic. There is no interior-exterior division here, only an immersion, an absorption into, the field of seen and seeing flesh. And that field is anything but transparent. Whatever “command” of the visible we might possess is trumped by the fact of our situatedness at the center of this slowly revolving pan. Merleau-Ponty writes that, “[s]ince the total visible is always behind, or after, or between the aspects we see of it… our body commands the visible for us, but it does not explain it, does not clarify it, only concentrates the mystery of its scattered visibility; and it is indeed a paradox of Being, not a paradox of man, that we are dealing with here.”129 As Wilson’s painted landscapes scroll past on the screen, we have the sense of turning in circles, searching the “behind,” “after,” and “between” for landmarks that would make space legible as place. Our body turns us, showing us, commanding the visible by positioning our fantasmatic body as though to see it all, to see in every direction. But we can’t; to see more is not to see better. We cannot take possession of the visible, of the landscape: cannot convert it to the known. In Merleau-Ponty’s words, again: “Immersed in the visible by his body, itself visible, the see-er does not appropriate what he sees; he merely approaches it by looking, he opens onto the world.”130 And that opening-onto the world lets the cold in at last.

Ponting withholds a vision of the party’s frozen end. He layers his description of the last days of the remaining three over the blurry painted image – again, we presume, Wilson’s – of a tent buffeted by strong winds and driving snows. There are no cozy domestic interior views here; no peaceful sleeping faces, however staged. Evans dies of a concussion after falling through ice. Oates, “maimed by frozen feet,” rises one morning and walks out into a blizzard, remarking only: “I am just going outside, and I may be some time.” He is never seen again. Scott’s story concludes as he, Bowers, and Wilson freeze to death in a tent eleven miles from a supply depot. When search parties located this site months later, Ponting explains, they erected a cairn of ice and adorned it with a cross to commemorate the end of these three lives. Over a painting of this memorial is superimposed Scott’s handwritten script: his last journal entries. Ponting reads to the end of the final entry, but without speaking Scott’s name. Painting fades to photographic image: a low-angle view, a statue of Scott standing in his expedition garb. The film closes, now, with the word FINIS and a still image of the Antarctic coast.

Ponting concludes *90 Degrees South* by framing the departed polar party as ghostly occupiers of the continent. Because we cannot access their final moments, it is as though they are still occurring. Unphotographed, they remain part of the photographic present. Un-representable and unrecoverable, they have been absorbed by the landscape – and, in the process, have symbolically taken possession of it. The bodies of the dead were not removed. Evans was buried at the foot of the Beardmore Glacier. Oates was never found. Scott, Bowers, and Wilson were entombed at a site that shortly froze over and was absorbed into the sediments of snow and ice that compose the Ross Ice Shelf, moving ever northward. Thus even in their crypt, the three final members of the polar party continue their journey, eventually to be released by glacial melt into the sea. Until then, they will be frozen in death as they were frozen in life in Bowers’ photographs. Hidden in the ice, they are invisible.

Yet in Bowers’ photographs, they signal what, for Roland Barthes, is “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.”\footnote{Barthes Roland, trans. Richard Howard, \textit{Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography} (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 9.} Bowers and Dr. Edward A. Wilson took seven photographs at the South Pole on the 17\textsuperscript{th} of January 1912. In none can we see Scott’s eyes; in every picture they are directed out of frame, narrowed or closed entirely against cold and wind. This seems a remarkable fact, given that Scott knew that the first images of human beings at the highest latitudes were sure to be iconic and repeatedly rehearsed the scene before departing for the pole. Ponting had meticulously trained Scott and Bowers for this purpose and dispatched them with detailed instructions for exposure times, the quality of light, poses, and how they should wear their gear when the time came to release the shutter. The explorers did not doubt that they would be recording a moment of triumph. Their expressions, and Scott’s averted eyes, put the lie to this ambition. Roland Barthes begins \textit{Camera Lucida} by marveling at the realization that, when encountering a photograph of Napoleon’s brother Jerome, he was “looking at eyes that looked at the Emperor.”\footnote{Ibid., 3.} In Bowers’ images, we are looking at eyes that looked at the southern geographical pole. Yet the pole is an abstraction, a set of mathematical coordinates invisible to the naked eye, marked for Scott by the flag of the Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, who had only just beaten him there. Here we are looking at – looking ever \textit{for} – eyes that saw not triumph or glory, not a decisive claim laid upon the end of the earth, but rather the traces of another, the signs of belatedness, defeat and humiliation. Scott, Bowers, Wilson, Evans, and Oates had set out as conquering heroes but arrived in a preoccupied territory.

4. Frozen, framed: On the turning away

“A human body is present when, between the see-er and the visible, between touching and touched, between one eye and the other, between hand and hand a kind of crossover occurs, when the spark of the sensing/sensible is lit, when the fire starts to burn that will not cease until some accident befalls the body, undoing what no accident would have sufficed to do.”\footnote{Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind”, \textit{The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting} (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1933), 125.}

I would like to return, by way of conclusion, to the absent gazes of Nanook, his face stilled in slumber, and of the Scott polar party, standing listless and defeated at the pole. In all of the ways I have described above, these faces do not look back at us. And this, perhaps, is demonstrative of the problem of visualizing polar landscapes in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century: the poles are available only as objects of vision that spectacularize emptiness and absence. We, in confronting polar landscapes, find our gaze directed ever toward the inaccessible. In a map’s faulty analogy, in a horizonless topography, in the play of visible and invisible, we can look toward the poles, or for them – but never \textit{at} them. The site can be pictured; the thing itself cannot appear. The landscape does not appear, does not look back; it absorbs the gazes and bodies of those who enter it. Neither the figure nor the form returns. The poles – invisible, mathematically abstracted markers of the axis upon which the earth turns – are ever turning away.

But, on film, the human body resists such disappearances. One final image may serve to
illustrate how this challenge to the absorbing fiction of the polar landscape suggests how we might re-read its emptiness. On May 29, 2010 the American Museum of Natural History opened the doors of an exhibition chronicling Amundsen’s and Scott’s south polar quests. Ross D. E. MacPhee’s companion book to the exhibition reproduces four of the photographs that Scott’s party took at the South Pole. “The first two,” the accompanying caption notes, “have been frequently reproduced, but the third and fourth very rarely because of their poorer quality and, perhaps, a certain disturbing element they exhibit.”134 The formal features that suggest that these latter two photographs are of “poorer quality” are precisely what make them so “disturbing.” First of all, each image is markedly blurry; without MacPhee’s captions it would be difficult even to identify the figures positioned there. And this blur produces the most startling effect: each man’s body seems to flicker in the frame. In the last, most extraordinary of these images, Wilson, Scott, Evans, and Oates stand before Amundsen’s tent; Oates seems to have shifted his weight as the shutter is released, and we have only a vague impression of him. MacPhee’s caption asks: “Is Oates already starting to disappear?” Even more ghostly is the embrace of a shadowy arm stretched across the top of the frame, which is entirely occupied to the right by the side of Bowers’s body as he reaches out in some mysterious gesture. The five men do seem to be disappearing before our eyes, dissolving into the snowy landscape. Perhaps this “very rarely” reproduced image, itself thus a casualty of sorts, is an apt figure for the last such disappearance of the so-called “heroic age” of polar exploration. In this image, the human body refuses to freeze to death. Instead, it flickers between absence and presence, hazily visible but impossible to resolve, to decipher.

On one hand, Allakariallak’s death mask and the Scott team’s last self-portraits signal what Barthes found announced by his own photographic image: death, “a catastrophe that has already occurred.”135 As these men’s fates have been known to the world for nearly a century, this conclusion requires little of the imagination. But that is not all that these photographs communicate. Reflecting upon his experience as the subject-becoming-object before the camera, Barthes describes his discomfort at feeling out-of-step with his own image. “What I want, in short,” he confesses, “is that my (mobile) image, buffeted among a thousand shifting photographs, altering with situation and age, should always coincide with my (profound) “self”; but it is the contrary that must be said: ‘myself’ never coincides with my image; for it is the image which is heavy, motionless, stubborn…and ‘myself’ which is light, divided, dispersed.”136 The non-coincidence Barthes identifies here belongs not only to the human body, but also to the living, thinking landscape of Flaherty’s and Ponting’s films. Barthes attributes non-coincidence to the problem of possession. The “disturbance” that “the advent of myself as other” produces is “ultimately one of ownership”: the question “to whom does the photograph belong?”137 Barthes answers this question with another: “Is landscape itself only a kind of loan made by the owner of the terrain?”138

By putting to question the terms of Barthes’ formulation, we might begin to unravel the complicated and contradictory set of assumptions that make these two films so intriguing. Barthes wants to live in an image of “an old house, a shadowy porch, tiles, a crumbling Arab

135 Barthes, 96.
136 Ibid., 12.
137 Ibid., 12-13.
138 Ibid., 13.
Fig. 1 Scott’s Polar Party. Henry R. “Birdie” Bowers, 1912.
decoration, a man sitting against the wall, a deserted street, a Mediterranean tree”; for him, “photographs of landscape (urban or country) must be habitable, not visitable.”

Put simply, Barthes wants a landscape image he can occupy. In the passage that I have just quoted, the possibility of occupation is bound to the materially legible history of what is pictured. Barthes wants to live, not in the aesthetically sanitized space of a landscape painting, but in a resolutely particular place that displays its lived-in-ness. The age of the house, the porch shadows that indicate the time of day, the evidence of past decorative styles and cultural belonging, the presence of another human being, regional flora: each one is a potential punctum, a marker of particularity, of situatedness, of prior claims, of historicity – of pre-occupation. Put differently, Barthes’s question about belonging might read: “Is landscape pre-occupied?” In other words, does it come to us through the markers of its historicity, its lived-in-ness, the networks of human-natural-technological interaction that constitute it? In light of what I have argued above, I suggest responding in the affirmative. Yes, I would say: the kind of landscape Barthes describes here is always pre-occupied. We enter, as viewers and as prospective inhabitants, only tentatively; we borrow our time here from what- and whom-ever has gone before.

The pre-occupied territories of Nanook of the North and 90 Degrees South evoke the reversal of priority that Tom Gunning identifies in the travel film. As I showed in Chapter 1, Gunning finds that the travel film’s mobile landscape imagery, its illusion of entry into the landscape, reverses the privilege that the laws of perspective seem to guarantee. In travel films, the world does not seem organized for the benefit of a secure and stable viewer. On the contrary: here, the horizon births the world and we are its vanishing point. Flaherty’s and Ponting’s films seem to echo this conclusion. The Arctic and Antarctic landscapes engulf each film’s human subjects. Nanook and the Scott team do not enable our vision of the landscape; they are the place into which it disappears. Here, the body and the horizon switch places. Outside and inside are confused, and the subject dissipates into its surroundings.

Flaherty’s and Ponting’s pre-occupied landscapes are moving, touching – and not only figuratively. We are connected to them, subjects and objects alike: humans become still life or things animated in the flicker of light upon the screen. A visceral sense of shared vulnerability exceeds the thematic. For Barthes, “a sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed.”

Barthes’ movement from “thing” to “anyone” here is not an accident. It suggests an enfolding of the bare material world and a subversion of the boundary between absent and present, object and subject. This lively material intermingling of absent and present bodies given through vision recalls the reversibility of perception that characterizes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh. Flesh is the instantiation of a principle of Being activated when a seer is seen and a toucher is touched. “When,” here, is not contingent upon the entrance of a human subject to guarantee a gaze or a caress by returning it. The “when” is the condition of existence: a “when” spread across time and space of visible materialities. Matter is – depends on its being for – its envelopment in a field of perceptible, perceptive (“sensible sentient”) flesh. All things, human and otherwise, are folds in the flesh, “hollows” where touch perceives itself as touched and seer perceives itself as seen. In this schema, things are discrete from, but not opposed to, one another. Merleau-Ponty explains that, in the phenomenal world, there are “not things first identical with themselves, which would then offer themselves to the seer, nor...a

139 Ibid., 38.
140 Ibid., 81.
141 Merleau-Ponty, 136.
seer who is first empty and who, afterward, would open himself to them – but something to
which we could not be closer than by palpating it with our look, things we could not dream of
seeing ‘all naked’ because the gaze itself envelops them, clothes them with its own flesh.”
Here Merleau-Ponty describes the reversibility of perception as a “palpating with the look” that
is also a “gaze” that “envelops” things. The absorbing gaze is that of a living, thinking human
body and a living, thinking landscape.

But what kind of living, thinking landscape do we find at the poles? One, as I suggested
in Chapter 1, that shifts constantly with local meteorological and geological change; one that is
itself an engine of global climatic transformation. One, in other words, that incarnates the
multiple semiotic systems of planetary history. The polar landscape is pre-occupied with this
incarnation, the sensible sentient flesh of the ends of the earth. In Flaherty’s and Ponting’s films,
this flesh is deadly cold, a flesh that freezes. Ponting’s companions on the Scott expedition
converted his name into the verb “to pont” – in Ponting’s own translation, “to pose until nearly
frozen, in all sorts of uncomfortable positions, for my photographs.”

Each member of the Scott expedition, as Ponting tells it, had to be ready at any moment to render his body for the
camera: to figuratively freeze, but under the risk of literally succumbing to the cold. And that
they did, preserved for ever in the ice of the Beardmore glacier, which, in its inexorable trek
toward the sea, will eventually release them.

The flesh of Allakariallak in the North, and of Scott and his companions in the South,
absorbed into the flesh of the visible landscape, figures the early 20th century polar imaginary’s
obsession with still and mobile bodies and the question of representable and unrepresentable
deaths. In this chapter, I have shown how Flaherty and Ponting’s attempts to map Arctic and
Antarctic landscapes demonstrate their unmappability, screening Merleau-Ponty’s claim that,
“[b]eyond a certain degree of deformation” vision “refers us back…to our own vantage point; as
for the things, they flee into a remoteness out of reach of all thought.” Indeed, at the poles
“something about space evades our attempts to survey it from above.” The cold and windy
poles require an opening-onto the world that necessitate the human body’s fatal participation in
its frozen materiality. At the poles, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the flesh is deadly; it precludes
self-identity or identification with things through any mechanism beyond that of a reversibility
that Flaherty and Ponting figure as fatal. Here, possession of the visible – of the landscape in
which human and nonhuman things interact – is impossible. In Chapter Three, I will identify a
second phase in the cinematic imaginary of the poles, which uses the conventions of horror and
science fiction cinema to figure absorption into and emergence from the landscape as monstrous.
In what follows, I will examine two (re)visionary accounts of such an emergence: that described
by John Campbell’s novella “Who Goes There?” and brought to the screen by Howard Hawks
and Christian Nyby in 1951’s The Thing from Another World and by John Carpenter in 1982’s
The Thing. In these science fiction and horror films, what emerges from the landscape is not the
forgotten but knowable body of the dead but an un-known, unimaginably lively monstrous other
of a different order.

142 Ibid., 121.
144 Ibid., 135
bid., 135.
Chapter 3

Human, Animal, Thing: “Who Goes There?”

1. “Of human beings and their associates”

Although it is one of many interwar science fiction tales set in Antarctica, John W. Campbell’s 1938 novella “Who Goes There?” is singular in its extension and transformation of the trope of bodily absorption I outlined in Chapter 2. In Campbell’s tale, human flesh does not open onto the world in the act of freezing to death. On the contrary, the troubling encounter at the heart of “Who Goes There?” results from the thawing-out and resurrection of a non-human Other. This extraterrestrial Other possesses the horrifying capacity to breach and reform bounded bodies and subjectivities at will. The drama, then, is not that of the flesh’s heroic surrender to the cold and wind of the polar landscape, but of its need to incorporate and materialize others in order to survive. That is to say, this Other – which cinematic adaptations of the story refer to simply as “the thing” – visually and thematically undoes the human bodily and subjective boundaries typically consolidated over and against the polar setting.

Campbell and his interwar contemporaries, writing in journals like Astounding Science Fiction (in which publication Campbell’s tale appeared under the pseudonym Don A. Stuart while he himself was its editor), belonged to a community of authors fascinated with the remoteness and isolation of the Antarctic continent. Although Byrd had flown over the South Pole in 1928, and aerial photography would shortly assist in the mapping of the land- and ice-masses in their entirety, there remained thousands of square miles of unexplored and utterly unknown terrain rife for speculation – and for speculative fiction. But, as Elizabeth Leane suggests, only Campbell used the polar landscape as more than a setting. As she puts it, “Antarctica is dis-placed in Campbell’s story in a very literal sense: an undefinable, seemingly limitless place is transferred to the figure of a monster that shares its disturbing spatial qualities – its amorphousness, disrespect for boundaries, its ability to absorb anything in its path – but which can nonetheless be conquered and killed.”

For Leane, the alien antagonist of “Who Goes There?” is a manifestation of the landscape itself.

In this sense, Campbell’s novella treats the Antarctic landscape not as “something in the background” but as “an integral element of [the text’s] meaning.” Leane is keen on situating Campbell’s novella not only within the context of early twentieth-century science fiction, but also in the history of representations of the poles. The emptiness and eerie isolation of Arctic and Antarctic landscapes is a commonplace. But Leane draws from Joscelyn Goodwin and Victoria Nelson to situate Campbell’s version of polar atmospherics in relation to distinct northern and southern polar imaginaries. Her elegant and amusing synthesis is worth quoting at length:

Nelson observes that the poles were initially celestial rather than terrestrial features, ‘fixed points in the celestial sphere around which the stars seemed to revolve’. According to Greek thought, it was at ‘the northernmost and southernmost points of the zodiac, or the apex and nadir of the heavens,’ that respective openings existed for the

147 Leane, 228.
departure of souls after death and their return at rebirth. During the Renaissance, Nelson observes, the poles were transferred to the Earth: they became points where the celestial axis met the terrestrial sphere. The mythological holes in the heavens thus became holes in the Earth, with several sixteenth-century maps depicting a vortex at the North Pole, down which the waters of the world emptied. The seventeenth-century Jesuit Athanasius Kircher, in his *Mundus Subterraneus* (1678), outlined a model of the Earth in which this North Polar vortex is balanced by a corresponding one at the South Pole at which waters emerge. Godwin notes that Kircher justified this model partly by an argument likening the Earth to the human body: the Earth absorbs useful minerals from the waters taken in at the north, and ‘[t]he undigested remains are then expelled at the nether end’. The North Pole, in this mythology, is the mouth of the world, which absorbs nutrients for its ongoing survival. The South Pole, however, is, as Godwin suggests, ‘in a most undignified position’ – it is the sphincter of the Earth, in Kircher’s model, or, extrapolating the Greek notion of a southern hole for the return of souls, a birth canal. In either case, it is a place where the borders of inner and outer space are breached.\(^\text{148}\)

This passage indicates how the history of polar representation illuminates the inside/outside boundaries in Campbell’s tale. The notion of the poles as cosmic-yet-bodily entrances and exits suggests how Campbell’s tale transfers motifs of absorption and disappearance, contagion and metamorphosis from the polar landscape to its monstrous creaturely incarnation. To theorize this projection, Leane turns to Julia Kristeva’s notion of the abject: that “material that mediates the space between the inside and outside of the body…that which disturbs the perceived division between subject and object, and which correspondingly signals the instability of the subject’s sense of unity.”\(^\text{149}\) For Leane, both the Antarctic landscape and the alien life form it conceals are abject: the pole for the reasons I quoted above, and the Thing for its life-in-death, its propensity to leak fluids and extrude mysterious appendages, and its habit of invading, consuming, and reconstituting the bodies of its victims. Thus for Leane dissolution of boundaries between interior and exterior bodies and spaces produces the story’s profoundly horrifying effects.

Talia Schaffer’s and Wendy Pearson’s queer readings of Campbell’s novella argue that this dissolution represents anxieties about the permeability of masculine bodies and the perceived contagion of aberrant behaviors. For Schaffer, creatures like Campbell’s Thing, which possess the power to transform their unwitting victims from within through an exchange of bodily fluids, are the heirs of Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, which she locates “among the first epidemiological horror novels, concerning involuntary physical and psychological alteration caused by something that one person can ‘catch’ from another.”\(^\text{150}\) In this regard, she argues, “*Dracula* is the progenitor of ‘Alien,’ ‘The Thing,’ ‘Dawn of the Dead,’ and ‘Invasion of the Body-Snatchers,’ where evil infects random victims’ bodies and characters.”\(^\text{151}\) “Though this horror genre may have originated from late nineteenth-century fears of infectious diseases like syphilis and…undetectable omnipotent ‘germs,’” she claims, “homosexuality was the primary object of the new epidemiology, as medical theorists asked what ‘caused,’ ‘cured,’ and ‘communicated’ same-sex desire.”\(^\text{152}\) Pearson’s close reading of Campbell’s novella extends this notion in order

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\(^{148}\) Ibid., 230.

\(^{149}\) Ibid., 231.

\(^{150}\) Talia Schaffer, “‘A Wilde Desire Took Me’: The Homoerotic History of *Dracula*”, *ELH* 61(2): 407.

\(^{151}\) Ibid.

\(^{152}\) Ibid.
to show that “‘Who Goes There?’ serves as a near perfect example of the way in which the story of the alien who passes as human derives from the precise confluence of anxieties that serve to claim, *at the same time*, that homosexuality is always written on the body and that it is always able to pass.” Pearson notes that “[t]he actual moment of alien takeover is never shown to us, taking place discreetly ‘off camera’; yet it is figured in terms of both consumption and consummation: the alien inserts a part of its substance into the men, taking them over completely.” Schaffer and Pearson argue that Campbell’s novella advances the homophobic proposition that “the alien…[must] recruit its forces by converting the normal in literally physical ways – consumption and appropriation – into the monstrous.”

In what follows, I will examine how Campbell’s novella and its cinematic iterations, Howard Hawks and Christian Nyby’s *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and John Carpenter’s *The Thing* (1982), cast the monstrous Thing as a figure for the landscape. This figure proposes to revise stable notions of the masculine body, scientific and military discourses, by proposing a phenomenological revision. *The Thing from Another World* assigns its Thing to one half of a set of binary oppositions that compete for mastery for the Arctic landscape. But by visually and narratively assimilating that landscape to a Cold War competition between capitalist and communist, military and scientific ideologies, it must reify those binaries, not disrupt them. Carpenter’s *The Thing* makes similarly conservative claims at the level of its narrative, but undercuts them by foregrounding the visual spectacle of fleshly unfolding and interpenetration.

As science fiction and horror films, these texts screen the phenomenal landscape differently than the films I surveyed in Chapter 2. Flaherty’s *Nanook of the North* and Ponting’s *The Great White Silence* and *90 Degrees South* struggle to represent the bleak plenitude of the polar regions: the paradoxical sense in which the blank cartographic spaces of Arctic and Antarctic landscapes conceal a fullness that deranges the senses and resists mastery. The documentary format converts the polar landscape-as-spectacle, backdrop for the heroically striving human body-in-motion, into a landscape-as-narrative that arrests and absorbs that body. Yet Flaherty and Ponting sanitize death by figuring it as slumber or altogether refusing to represent it. In *Nanook of the North* (1922), Nanook’s figurative death suggests that even a “native” intimacy with the landscape’s fullness is no safeguard against its dangers. Even Nanook the Bear, reader of the invisible signs of life in the landscape, ends up lost and hungry. In *The Great White Silence* (1924) and *90 Degrees North* (1933), the human figure disappears from the film as Scott and his party near their final resting place on the Beardmore Glacier. In the latter Ponting film, photographic and cinematographic records of the landscape give way to a series of horizonless maps and painted scenes in which distance and scale are unintelligible and a stable viewing position cannot be consolidated. Scott’s team meets death alone and out of sight. In Flaherty’s and Ponting’s renderings, death at the poles is clean, cold, heroic, and – most importantly – takes place off-camera.

This is not the case with the texts I survey in this chapter. Campbell’s tale troubles the landscape-as-spectacle versus landscape-as-narrative binary through the device of a monster that functions as a figure for the landscape. This is a complicated move. Campbell re-codes the definitively natural monster outside as the troublingly un-natural monster within. That is, the story displaces themes of absorption and disappearance from a conflict between humans and the white polar landscape onto the crowded interior (homo)social world of a human community

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154 Ibid.
155 Ibid., 8.
struggling to recognize and eradicate the other among them. In this way, the figure of the monstrous Thing also permits each text to directly confront the “plenitude” half of the “bleak plenitude” formulation: to visualize the embodied excesses of signification that lie beneath the surface of the ostensibly empty polar landscape. Thus Campbell’s Thing and its cinematic successors take embodied excess seriously by representing phenomenological reversibility as a spectacularly gruesome fleshly interpenetration.

Although Campbell’s position in the history of 20th century science fiction literature locates “Who Goes There?” in the SF canon, and Hawks’ and Nyby’s The Thing From Another World is typically read as an example of Cold War-era American SF cinema, I join scholars like Leane, Pearson, and Schaffer in reading these as SF and horror texts. This is not only because Carpenter so consistently allies himself with the latter genre. It is primarily because all three clearly dramatize the social-bodily-subjective disruptions that populate the conjunction of the two modes. For instance, Barbara Creed’s examination of the monstrous feminine in the Alien series declares that “[o]ne of the major concerns of the science fiction horror film...is the reworking of the primal scene in relation to the representation of other forms of copulation and procreation.” The Thing from Another World and The Thing emphasize monstrous (re)productive capacities: not of the uncanny maternal body, but of an Other coded and re-coded as alien, animal, plant, queer.

The elements that mark these stories as “science fiction” are easy to point out: each iteration of Campbell’s tale recounts the discovery of an alien life form entombed near a crashed spacecraft in the polar ice. That life form, presumed dead but accidentally thawed out, rises to confront its captors with a spectacular display of otherness. Yet this confrontation takes different visual and narrative forms in each text. Although the conflict is the same (the priority and stability of the category “human” is always pitted against its other), the variations that adaptation introduces suggest how the conventions of the horror genre activate the phenomenological issues with which my argument about polar landscapes is especially concerned. These texts share with Chapter 2’s films a concern with visibility and invisibility, human and non-human. Yet, operating in the mode of SF and horror, they use the figure of the monstrous alien to articulate a decentering of human priority and a troubling of the boundaries between subject and object, human and non-human that seems all the more radical because it fantasizes the spectacle of an other that, materialized, looks back from a body that may masquerade as one’s own.

Vital materialist scholarship suggests a vocabulary for describing the intimate inter-active agency of human and non-human materialities that conspire thus within the pre-occupied territory of landscape. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue that matter, “rather than extending toward inertia or a state of equilibrium” that has been proscribed for it by the kinds of “constructivist science” Merleau-Ponty denounces, “exhibit[s] immanently self-organizing properties subtended by an intricate filigree of relationships.” These scholars anchor their notion of the “productive contingencies” of matter in current research in the physical and social sciences. But they also acknowledge a debt to phenomenological thinking that evokes Bennett’s horizontal relationality: an earthly, landscape-bound and subject-desstabilizing rapport rather than a vertical and hierarchically subject-assuring one. Coole remarks that “bodies coexist within a relational field that loops and effervesces around and through them, where flesh folds over itself.

to engender, traverse, and ‘animate other bodies than my own’.”158 These bodies, she continues, “are caught in the pell-mell of an anonymous, prepersonal visibility…whence they are caught in the circuitry of a world whose ‘intercorporeal, intermundane space’ they inhabit.”159 This, she concludes, is the “immanent generativity of existence” at work.160

Campbell, Hawks and Nyby, and Carpenter route their readings of the intercorporeal, intermundane Arctic and Antarctic spaces through the figure of an extraterrestrial Other that draws on both science fiction and horror conventions in order to say something more radical and disturbing about polar landscapes. These texts exhibit horror’s profound concern with the exchange of looks and with the location of social and spatial anxieties in a monstrous body, signalling an important transformation of polar aesthetics. Campbell’s novella establishes the intimacy of human, non-human, and technological bodies, and on the uncanny and even abject qualities of their interpenetration. Hawks and Nyby replace the Thing’s most baffling biological traits with a vegetable logic, displacing the most troubling consequences of a confrontation between human and non-human onto the struggle between scientific and military attempts to map and master the landscape and the alien. Carpenter’s Thing discards what The Thing From Another World’s Doctor Carrington might call the “neat and unconfused” plant-communism allegory in favor of spectacular bodily disruptions that returns us most obviously to the discourses of contemporary horror where, as Judith Halberstam puts it, “monstrosity has become a conspiracy of bodies rather than a singular form.”161

2. “From beyond to another beyond”

Campbell’s novella establishes these stakes by mixing selves and substances beneath the surface of the Antarctic landscape. We meet the monster in a subterranean enclosure, a research station defined by the scent of commingling human, animal, and technological bodies. “The place stank,” the story begins, of “reeking human sweat,” “the heavy, fish-oil stench of melted seal blubber,” “an overtone of liniment,” “the musty smell of sweat-and-snow drenched furs,” “the acrid odor of burnt cooking fat,” “the animal, not-unpleasant smell of dogs,” “lingering odors of machine oil,” “the taint of harness dressing and leather,” “all that reek of human beings and their associates – dogs, machines, and cooking.”162 The station’s scientific and technical personnel have assembled around the “thing” that lies bound in the galley, producing “another taint”: “a queer, neck-ruffling thing, a faintest suggestion of an odor alien among the smells of industry and life” that is nevertheless “a life-smell.”163

This scent belongs to a legitimately otherworldly Thing that nevertheless signals its affinity with the polar landscape through its local proxy provenance. It has only just been excavated from a crash site located at the source of a magnetic disturbance great enough to produce a kind of secondary pole: a faint doubling of the endpoint of the planet’s magnetic axis. “Meteorologically impossible” high wind and low temperatures above the surface mirror this

159 Ibid., 40.
160 Ibid.
163 Ibid., 7.
disturbance beneath the landscape. The scientific party accidentally destroys the ship in the process of attempting to enter it, and the detonation lights the landscape from within; the team watches “the whole ice-field illuminated from beneath with an unbearable light” in the midst of which “the ship’s shadow was a great, dark cone reaching off toward the north”—a massive, ghostly subterranean compass needle that signifies the secondary pole even as it points towards the opposite end of the earth. The “blinding inferno” culminates in a release of energy that brings land- and sky-scapes together: “[a]ll Earth’s field they’d soaked up twenty million years before broke loose” and the “aurora…licked down, and the whole plateau there was bathed in a cold fire that blanketed vision.”

The alien creature is figured as the extraterrestrial equivalent of a dinosaur, the continent’s accidental original inhabitant. McReady and others suggest as much by repeatedly comparing the apparently lifeless thing to “those frozen mammoths they find in Siberia.” McReady estimates that the alien has “been frozen there since Antarctica froze twenty million years ago.” The analogies to ancient terrestrial creatures begin and end there, however; no occupant of “Big Magnet” mistakes the Thing for an earthly form of life. And this not only because of what is assumed about its provenance.

Every description of the Thing emphasizes its extreme otherness. The most important aspect of its physical appearance seems to be its mesmerizing, malevolent gaze. The Thing, unveiled: “Three mad, hate-filled eyes blazed up with a living fire, bright as fresh-spilled blood, from a face ringed with a writhing, loathsome nest of worms, blue, mobile worms that crawled where hair should grow.” It is not difficult, here, to see the head of the Medusa. The excess of vision signaled by three hot, blood-red eyes, is a potentially annihilating counter-gaze. The subject to which that look belongs will eventually de-animate them, not turning them to stone, perhaps, but absorbing and converting their bodies into vehicles for its own inscrutable desires. For team member Vance Norris the horror inspired by these features is nothing compared to the emotions they convey. Its affect is utterly alien, not reflected in the mirror of the human regard—or, at least, by that of “Man.” “Nothing Earth ever spawned,” Norris asserts wildly, “had the unutterable sublimation of devastating wrath that thing let loose in its face when it looked around its frozen desolation twenty million years ago. Mad? It was mad clear through—searing, blistering mad!”

Norris’s fear and hatred of the creature responds both to its appearance and affect and also to the dreams he and his fellows have experienced since pulling it from the ice. Whether these dreams are birthed by the men’s unconscious or communicated telepathically, we are not initially sure; regardless, these dreams—“that [the thing] wasn’t made like we are…but of a different kind of flesh that it can really control”—begin to come true. The creature, it seems, possesses the ability to imitate other life-forms at will, to simultaneously absorb and become them, devouring a body and replacing it on a cellular level. The thing-dog product that the scientists arrest in transformation, if allowed to mature, would become a perfect copy of its

\[164\] Ibid., 10.
\[165\] Ibid., 13.
\[166\] Ibid., 13-14.
\[167\] Ibid., 15.
\[168\] Ibid.
\[169\] Ibid., 19.
\[170\] Ibid., 17.
\[171\] Ibid.

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“original” dog, an imitation for which there would remain no original. “In time,” Blair admits, “not even a microscope would have shown the difference.”\textsuperscript{172}

The scientific labor of establishing “the difference” takes up most of the rest of the text. Having established that any number of the station’s occupants may be one of these copies – a digested and reconstituted human-thing – the crew sets about devising tests that might help them tell “real” from “imitation.” The tests prove unreliable, but Things begin to reveal themselves all over the station: dogs, cattle, humans. It is not long before the Thing has absorbed and transformed all of the station’s animals; having understood its methods and destroyed the infected creatures, the station’s remaining occupants divine its plan. In order to counteract it, however, they must engage in the Thing’s own commerce of creaturely corpi. That is, in order to tell human from non-human, the scientists develop a series of tests that requires them to inject animals with human blood in order to make them “human-immune.” The humans ingest milk that they soon realize was produced by imitation cows. The confusion of bodies suggested by scent at the outset of the novella is made literal not only by the shape-shifting thing, which absorbs and becomes its others, but by the humans and animals who, whether intentionally or not, engage thus with one another.

At last, theorizing that parts of the imitation-whole would react as defensively as if they were an entire organism, McReady determines to draw blood samples from each man and expose them to an electric current. If, as he suspects, “[e]very piece is self-sufficient, an animal in itself,” the blood drawn “will live – and try to crawl away from a hot needle.”\textsuperscript{173} One by one, this test proves the station’s remaining occupants to be human or other-wise. Blair, confined to an outbuilding after having seemed to go insane, is last to number among the dead. The survivors find that Blair – or the thing that had been Blair – had nearly finished assembling an atomic generator and an anti-gravity jacket out of spare parts. With this last Thing dead, the novella concludes as the crew reflects on their near-failure to prevent the spread of this extraterrestrial contagion.

As I suggested above, Campbell’s novella embeds its earthly and extraterrestrial creatures in the Antarctic landscape both figuratively and literally. “Big Magnet,” the research station in which the majority of the story takes place, is composed of a series of corridors and chambers buried in the south polar plateau; the spacecraft and its occupant are likewise discovered encased in ice at the foot of a mountain ridge. The conditions of its excavation are stunning. The novella carefully describes the contrast between the claustrophobic crush of human and animal bodies within the closed sub-surface spaces of the station with the landscape above. Nonetheless, in representing that landscape’s comparative openness the text avoids the tropes of sublime vastness and grandeur in favor of language that accentuates the limits of vision and spatial orientation.

Descriptions of the surface world emphasize the forces that tug at, confuse, displace and absorb bodies. McReady imagines the descent of the spacecraft as it “tangled with Earth’s magnetic field” and “came south here, out of control probably, circling the magnetic pole.”\textsuperscript{174} The continent was in the process of glaciating then, 20 million years ago, and “the swirl there must have been particularly bad, the wind hurling a solid blanket of white over the lip of that snow-buried mountain.”\textsuperscript{175} As it emerged from the ship, he postulates, “[t]he thing was lost

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 65-6.
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 10.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 11.
completely in ten paces.” Even the research station, the text suggests, is somewhat lost; its layout and orientation remain mysterious to the reader. Descriptions of the exterior emphasize sky, not ground: “Out there, the slim, black finger of the radio mast lifted 300 feet into the air, and at its peak was the clear night sky. A sky of thin, whining wind rushing steadily from beyond to another beyond under the licking, curling mantle of aurora. And off north, the horizon flamed with queer, angry colors of the midnight twilight.” Although this passage quantifies the vertical, it gestures to a horizon defined only as the sensual extension of unknown elsewheres stretching with the force of the wind “from beyond to another beyond.” A second passage binds disorientation in and absorption by the landscape to a dangerous seduction; in this case, wind and cold sensually caress the human body. “At the surface,” one passage reads, “it was white death. Death of a needle-fingered cold driven before the wind, sucking heat from any warm thing. Cold – and white mist of endless, everlasting drift, the fine, fine particles of licking snow that obscured all things.” The “sucking” wind and “licking” snow sensually rob the body of its warmth and unmoor it from its surroundings.

As we saw in Chapter 1, discourses of lostness and disorientation are not new to polar literature. Generations of explorers have described instances in which the angle of the sun or the presence or absence of clouds made it impossible to gauge relations of distance and scale in the landscape. Nearly every meteorological condition in Antarctica presents its own hazards. Clear days produce mirages that make *sastrugi* seem like distant mountain ranges; blizzards turn the very air white and obscure the horizon line, making horizon-dependent navigation impracticable; even calm, cloudy days make the snow surface appear uniform, rendering crevasses and other dangerous ice formations undetectable. And this is to say nothing of snow-blindness or of the strange effects produced by refractions in the atmosphere: *parahelia* (false suns) and discolorations that seem surreal or hallucinatory. Elizabeth Leane points out that such conditions would have been familiar to Campbell and his contemporaries, who had read exploration narratives so extensively that they often felt compelled to copy description and dialogue from them nearly verbatim. The challenge of placing or finding oneself in such a landscape also reflects the literal difficulties faced by national powers as they tried to establish territorial claims on the continent in the early 20th century. Between 1908 and 1943, seven nations claimed pieces of the continent; these often-overlapping claims further enlivened international relations already fraught with tension during the two world wars.

The text activates these questions by mobilizing, as its antagonist, an ancient-yet-otherworldly challenger to human occupation. McReady’s lengthy explanation of the crash site establishes that the Thing’s spacecraft had been encased in ice on the continent for 20 million years; because south polar regions contain no indigenous land animals, Campbell’s Thing could be considered the only life form to have resided on, or in, Antarctica. The secondary pole that McReady’s team sets out to investigate is the sign of this prior claim. What emerges thus from the landscape is most disturbing not because of its extraterrestrial provenance for the physical characteristics it shares with the polar terrestrial landscape. Campbell’s Thing brings with it the threat of the troubling sensuality and bodily absorption that heretofore has belonged to forces at

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176 Ibid.
177 Ibid.
178 Ibid.
179 Leane notes some of Campbell’s most obvious imitations of Byrd’s accounts in Leane, 227.
work on the landscape. As I will show in the next section, *The Thing from Another World* revises the trope of absorption by transferring conflict away from threats posed to the human body and toward a discursive competition between science and the military.

3. “The neat and unconfused reproductive technique of vegetation”

Howard Hawks and Christian Nyby exchange Campbell’s South Polar setting for its Northern opposite. The 1951 film figures the Arctic landscape as ground zero for Cold War anxieties about the confrontation of capitalist and communist ideologies. An American Air Force officer focuses the threat of a Soviet air attack from over the top of the globe early in the film by commenting that the Russians are “all over the pole, like flies.” *The Thing from Another World* resolves this confrontation by stressing the imperative of military containment. Yet this is not as straightforward a tale of military heroism as it might initially seem. As Elena Glasberg notes, it displaces the question of national security onto the conflict between military and scientific interests. The visual and narrative strategies through which this film projects these tensions onto the polar landscape, mute the radical argument of Campbell’s story.

*The Thing from Another World* proposes from the outset that the Arctic is properly a military space. The film opens over snowy landscape images buffeted by howling winds. A newspaper reporter arrives at the Officers’ Club of the Air Force base in Anchorage Alaska. Inside, bored officers sit playing cards and joking about their romantic exploits in a room painted with murals of the same snowy mountain vistas we were given to see outside (Fig. 1). Although the lax atmosphere seems at first to suggest that, as far as the military is concerned, there’s nothing doing at the pole, conversation soon reveals that both Captain Pat Hendry and General Maclaren, the base’s commanding officer, have interests in the far North. A research station at the North Pole directed by a Dr. Carrington proves to be of more than passing concern when the General receives word that scientists there have detected the crash of a large object nearby. At first, Maclaren and Hendry suspect a Russian incursion; the Soviets, Hendry remarks, are “all over the pole, like flies.” Hendry, his men, and Scotty the newspaperman are dispatched to investigate, but soon find a threat greater than even the Red Menace.

This threat is signaled by a disturbance in the landscape that military and scientific, capitalist and communist discourses compete to describe. The romance between Captain Hendry and Carrington’s assistant, Nikki Nicholson, represents one pole of the these oppositions; Dr. Carrington represents the other. The film’s expository first act establishes this binary. The romantic couple takes narrative priority, but the rapport is tenuous and vaguely antagonistic – Hawks trademarks put to service here for science fiction. Upon arrival at the research station, Hendry does not rush to Doctor Carrington in search of an explanation of the magnetic disturbance. Instead, he makes haste to the office of the Doctor’s assistant, Nikki Nicholson. The conversation between these two indicates that they are on-again, off-again lovers, and that Nikki holds all the cards because she doesn’t take Hendry seriously as a potential partner. She implies that he confessed his promiscuity at their last meeting – a fact that she seems to find endearing and non-threatening because she herself is likewise little invested. He is a man like any other, and despite his claims to the contrary she presumes that he regards her as equally exchangeable. Moreover, Nikki playfully disparages Hendry on the grounds of his comments regarding a mysterious incident in San Francisco, activating a vague queer subtext that the film reinforces in a series of comical homoerotic exchanges (one officer is heard to refer to the Thing
Figures 1 and 2. The murals that adorn the walls of the officer’s club create a subtle visual echo between the mise en scene of Arctic exterior and interior.
as “our boyfriend”) and a scene of frank bondage play. But the film neutralizes these threats by locating them in the queer body of the plant monster.

The next scene introduces the other pole of the film’s structural ideological oppositions: Doctor Carrington. When we encounter this figure for the first time, he is bent over a piece of equipment that seems to scream: “Science!” Nikki announces Hendry as the doctor finishes taking readings from the instrument, but Carrington does not address the Captain until he has dictated measurements for the woman to record. For Carrington, the military presence is clearly secondary to the precision of the scientific project. Focus and accuracy are paramount to Carrington, who commands Nikki to read his notes aloud in order to clarify “the vagueness of [his] information” because he “dislike[s] being vague.” She obliges, explaining that the explosive “deviation” recorded by the station’s sound detectors and seismographs “is possible only if a disturbing force equivalent to twenty thousand tons of steel or iron ore had become part of the earth at about a 50-mile radius.” Thus it is not merely that some great quantity of metal has fallen to earth, but that it has “become part of” it – joined the landscape in such a way as to generate consistent “interference” among the scientific station’s instruments.

Science attests to more than the craft’s mere magnetism. This scene is certainly the most tedious in the film, primarily because it so painstakingly describes instruments and evidence by self-consciously emphasizing their scientific register. Carrington and Redding (an assistant who, unlike Nikki, is male and therefore qualified to touch the machinery) use set after set of instruments to disprove Hendry’s theories about the mysterious object. Hendry guesses at first that it is a meteor, but Redding offers photographic evidence that the object could not have been so ordinary a projectile. “Special telescopic cameras” triggered by Geiger counters sensing radioactivity have captured a series of images in which the trajectory of the unknown object seems extraordinary. Moving at first from North to South, parallel to the horizon line – in keeping with the movement of an ordinary meteor – the object then changes direction abruptly before vanishing into the surface. “A meteor might move almost horizontal to the earth,” Carrington explains, “but never upward.” It is thus the object’s anomalous orientation relative to the horizon line that signals its singularity. Hendry questions Redding about the method of determining the distance from the station to the point of impact; this second scientist takes great pleasure in explaining these simple and routine computations.

But Hendry, despite his skill with an aircraft, is not a man of science. “Well, you’ve lost me there, but I’ll take your word for it,” he concludes, turning away. The film recuperates Hendry’s ineptitude by distinguishing it from the scientists’ proprietary discourse. Carrington and Redding have mapped and mastered the landscape only by noting an invisible “deviation”; the norm, to them, is all but unintelligible. This is established when, as Hendry’s plane bears the scientific and military crews to the crash site, Carrington expresses surprise that the Captain is able to navigate despite the compass deviation generated by the magnetic disturbance. Hendry explains: “That peak ahead is practically due east.” Science may be able to determine the the composition and boundaries of this landscape, but only the military’s situational knowledge enables them to move within it.

Accordingly, alien creature recovered from the ice will be known by science but controlled by the military. Carrington’s team determines that it is composed of plant tissue, not animal – but that it is able to thrive and regenerate by drinking blood. The reporter Scotty, unimpressed, refers to it as a “super carrot.” In response Carrington pontificates on the “superior intelligence” of this creature, whose “development was not handicapped by emotional or sexual factors.” Carrington glowingly compares the Thing to the telegraph vine and century plant,
Figure 3. *Man, the measure of all things: scientists and military officers spread out to identify the crashed craft.*
which eat animals and can communicate with others of their species over great distances. Terrestrial nature, Carrington suggests, is rife with instances of this sort of intelligence on a smaller scale. And the creature’s hand has revealed a seed pod: in Carrington’s description, “the neat and unconfused reproductive technique of vegetation.” We could not be further from Campbell’s creature here. Although the Thing of Nyby’s film does feed vampirically on other creatures, its survival does not depend on their colonization. The creature’s intelligence seems perfect to Carrington in all the ways that Campbell’s creature is horrifying: it absorbs the bodily fluid of its others, but as part of a life cycle that preserves the boundaries between organisms and requires no transformations, produces no ontological uncertainty. At no point – except, perhaps, through the vehicle of Carrington’s much-derided admiration – is any character in this text menaced by the possibility of becoming-other. This Thing is not contagious, just competitive.

Dr. Carrington’s fur-ruffled coat and ushanka hat “underscore a suspect patriotism”; his supervision of atomic tests at Bikini atoll, combined with his desire to nurture the Thing’s seed pods and his praise of the creature’s intellectual and genetic superiority align him with “the destabilizing potential of science” and communism. As Glasberg explains, “after the US bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent development of Soviet nuclear ability, atomic power no longer seemed an advantage to the US military on the ground: the competition now emphasized containment, a strategy that relied on strategic geopolitical presence, not scientific-ballistic mastery.” The landscape and climate of the Arctic make it easy to allegorize this notion of containment; in Glasberg’s reading, “the polar setting suggests that a ‘freeze’ in the destabilizing, globalizing tendencies of scientific knowledge is a trade-off necessary for security.” As I suggested above, Carrington’s visually coded association with Soviet communism and his alliance with the questionable aims of scientific inquiry implicitly explain his admiration for the creature’s biological systems and the film’s unquestioning extermination thereof. Eric Smooldin confirms a connection between communism and the biological form that 1950s science fiction and horror cinema’s things and body-snatchers take. “Appearing as they do in movies made in a period of cold war and McCarthyism,” he writes, “these un-Americans clearly represent the perceived Soviet threat.” But what is curious is the way that science fiction films in particular figure their allegorical communists as natural. Smooldin’s evidence in this regard is films like Invasion of the Body Snatchers and Invaders from Mars, in which interlopers arrive in pea pods or absorb their victims from below the soil. “Instead of being absolutely foreign,” Smooldin observes, “the Soviet threat is associated with the natural world, with that which routinely surrounds us and which, because it is so commonplace, hardly stands out as noticeable.” The Thing stands out, and Carrington’s attempts to recuperate and naturalize it nearly cost him his life.

In this way, The Thing from Another World underscores the commonplace distinctions of which I am so deeply suspicious. As I noted in Chapter 1, popular environmentalist discourse uncritically reifies outside-inside boundaries, describing “nature” as that which is “outside” and “the human” as that which stands as privileged category at its center. As the product of the Cold War anxieties I identified above, the film can only confirm this scheme and advocate the

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182 Ibid., 650.
183 Ibid., 651.
185 Ibid., 36.
“containment” of the alien interloper. Hawks and Nyby retain Campbell’s preoccupation with contagion and the other, but recuperate the risks they pose by transposing their threats onto contemporary ideological conflict. John Carpenter’s *The Thing*, as I will show in the next section, is far messier.

4. “The ‘others’ along with whom I haunt”

We meet the crew of an Antarctic scientific outpost, as we did in Campbell’s tale, at the moment of their first encounter with the extraterrestrial Thing that gives the film its name. A lone dog – the Thing disguised as animal – arrives at the research station, pursued by a Norwegian helicopter. After a confrontation, the helicopter’s occupants are killed and the dog enters the station. MacReady and Copper travel to the Norwegian outpost only to discover a trail of incinerated and frozen bodies: some clearly murdered, and others clearly the product of suicide. They deduce from clues in the burned-out shell of the station that the Norwegians encountered a craft buried in the ice and excavated a body from the vicinity of the site. They return to their own compound with the charred remains of the creature (Fig. 4). After examining it, they conclude that it is no longer a threat.

The camera suggests otherwise, following the canine newcomer as it wanders through the station. Its movements are slow, silent, exploratory, but not timid or uncertain; eventually, it begins to seem as though the animal is hunting. The creature enters a room in which, through an open doorway, a man’s head is visible silhouetted in shadow upon the wall. The head turns, as if in greeting, but the scene ends there. The Thing has been seen by this unknown character, but we cannot know what this exchange of gazes produced.

The first such transformation that we witness, tellingly, occurs in a space so dark as to be nearly unintelligible. The newly-adopted dog is confined in a darkened pen with the station’s other animals, who immediately recognize and react to its otherness. The creature’s body splits open at multiple points, extruding tentacles that alternately grasp and squirt liquids at the other dogs. Spiderlike legs emerge from its abdomen. One by one, the animals under attack appear melt, absorbed by the Thing’s twitching, writhing appendages and its sizzling fluids (Fig. 5). Roused by the sounds of the attack, the men attempt to shoot and incinerate the creature. It escapes roaring into the night. The remainder of the film narrates the characters’ attempts to understand how the Thing is able to transform, then to track its movements and to prevent its consumption and transformation of the remaining human and animal inhabitants of the compound. Because the Thing may transform and imitate any body it wishes to become, this is a vexed proposition. The atmosphere of the station quickly becomes one of suspicious claustrophobia. The team uses the tests Campbell’s tale described to attempt to identify one another, to sort one another into categories of Thing and human. Predictably, this results in ever more baroque scenes of transformation as what had been successful imitation-men melt and erupt, turning inside out as they disclose their otherness.

Carpenter returns Campbell’s tale to its setting in an Antarctic research station, cynically defusing the tension between military and scientific, capitalist and communist aims that was so central to Hawks and Nyby’s adaptation. Elena Glasberg reads Carpenter’s *Thing* as denying both scientific and military supremacy. “If [Admiral Robert] Byrd and international science under the ATS reenanchanted Antarctica as a space for a wary global peace-through-science,” she

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186 Carpenter spells the character’s name differently than Campbell.
Figure 4. MacReady and Blair return from the Norwegian camp with the body of a dead Thing strapped to the helicopter. We watch from within the station in an over-the-shoulder shot that captures the dog-Thing’s look at the evidence of its Otherness.
Figure 5. In/ex utero: Thing becoming dog(s)
argues, “Carpenter disempowers both science and the military in a final scenario of mushroom cloud destruction... The final standoff between two insecurely human survivors is a nightmare of détente from which no future – and no remakes – can emerge.” In short, she concludes, “the genre of horror under Carpenter transforms Antarctic possibility into the surety of doom.” This conclusion, for Glasberg, guarantees that the Antarctic landscape and its others will remain an imaginations-only port of call. Having prevented the thing’s escape, they have contained their others to the continent.

Stephen Prince’s excellent reading of Carpenter’s The Thing situates it within a social theory of horror. Regretting that most evaluations of horror films focus on the psychological at the expense of the social, Prince reconceives of the genre by describing its not as psychic projections or the return of the repressed but as “truly social manifestations.” Prince borrows the anthropological notions of taboo. Cultural work, he explains, is predicated on “systems of order based on a network of culturally constructed classifications – human and nonhuman, female and male, edible and inedible, holy and profane.” These boundary markers legislate the contours of social space, but also inevitably create a “system of disorder, whose categories are regarded by members of the social community as dirt, pollution, taboo.” “This is a concomitance,” he continues, “of the ability to perceive the social world as filled with separate things: such things are separate only because ‘nonthings’ fill the interstices.” The Thing, in this reading, is disturbing precisely because it is a non-thing, a presence that disturbs the homosocial environment of the research compound not only by disrupting the priority of its human occupants but by colonizing their bodies as well. If “the horror film may be regarded as a visualization of the dialectic between linguistic and socially imposed systems of order and the breakdown of those systems through their own internal contradictions,” Carpenter’s The Thing “details the breakdown of the team’s networks of authority, friendship and trust as the social order is infiltrated by... a pathenogenic organism whose spread is portrayed in epidemiological terms.” For Prince’s thing, this is only the beginning. The inside/outside boundary that marks the station off from the Norwegian precinct and from the exterior landscape itself begins to dissolve as characters transform and either disappear altogether into the polar night or are engulfed in flame on the snows.

Prince’s reading changes gears in his discussion of the Thing’s bodily transformations, borrowing Sartre’s concept of “Anti-value” – the experience of dissolution that accompanies the perception of slimy textures. Incorporating this notion into his reading of the Thing as taboo, Prince writes that, “[a]s a horribly anomalous animal, the thing represents a form of cosmic pollution, an entity existing outside the accepted categories that give shape to human life and knowledge...It threatens to erase the distinctions and, in doing so, to erase the bounded human world.” In the final analysis, for Prince the human is abolished in the act of its preservation. Turning on one another, unleashing spectacular violence against fellow humans and Things

187 Glasberg, 652.
188 Ibid., 652.
190 Ibid.
191 Ibid., 121.
192 Ibid., 121.
193 Ibid., 123.
194 Ibid., 126.
195 Ibid., 126.
alike, they explode the social distinctions that gave their presence in the station meaning. In this way, Prince argues, “[t]aboo – Antivalue, that which is simultaneously dog and not-dog, human and not-human – which is normally anchored and stabilized through ritual becomes fluid and expansive, engulfing the social order with formlessness.”

Although I agree in part that, “[r]ather than mirroring the projection of psychological demons,” Carpenter’s The Thing “addresses the persistent question of what must be done to remain human,” I would suggest that Carpenter’s film is interested less in the discursive or ideological polarities signaled by Prince’s social theory of horror than in using the Thing to figure disruption and transformation of embodied subjectivity.

As I suggested above, Elizabeth Leane’s reading of the Thing as a manifestation of the pole-as-abject is one potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry in this regard. Leane associates the Thing’s shape-shifting capacity with the quality of abjection – as theorized by Kristeva, “that which threatens boundaries between inner and outer spaces, between subject and object, and between life and death.” Kristeva makes the discomfort or disgust felt by a subject encountering the abject plain at the outset of her Powers of Horror, referring to such a manifestation as “a massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A ‘something’ that I do not recognize as a thing.” The Thing’s thinghood, viewed through this lens, is necessarily a “less-than” – it is the status of a mere object, not elevated to the status of what we might encounter legibly. It is important, moreover, that Kristeva here links this condition to the uncanny: to a thing that is familiar but somehow emptied of its significance, divested of what might have raised it above mere matter. In holding forth as something with which we might have been “familiar…in an opaque and forgotten life,” the abject clearly falls into the category of objects or events repressed by the unconscious, forbidden to come to light. This is the abject wholly emptied of the potential for subjectivity.

Judith Butler is more generous in her description of “the domain of abject beings, who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside of the domain of the subject.” Butler accords such forms being, at least, and positions them within “social life” – but only because she is speaking of the abject as experienced by or projected upon the human, in which case “the abject designates…those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject.” Forms of life like these, as Barbara Creed has shown, take the form of the “monstrous feminine” in horror and sf films. Her analysis begins, in fact, with the illustrative example of the Medusa who, “with her ‘evil eye,’ head of writhing serpents and lolling tongue, was queen of the pantheon of female monsters; men unfortunate enough to look at her were turned immediately to stone.” I have already noted the likeness between Campbell’s Thing and the Medusa’s head. Creed’s reading of Kristeva’s theory the abject shows that this notion is, indeed, kin to Prince’s diagnosis of “taboo.” But what is perhaps most important is the way that, “Although the subject must exclude

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196 Ibid., 128.
197 Ibid., 128.
198 Leane, 230.
201 Ibid.
the abject, it must, nevertheless, be tolerated, for that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life.” Expulsion or rejection of the abject is a sign of one’s accession to subjectivity. Creed enumerates the forms that abject figures in horror may take: vampire, zombie, ghoul, witch, werewolf, splatterers, cannibals, human sacrifants, slashers.

Kristeva locates abjection at the site of the mother, in dialogue with whom the child learns to map the body’s proper and improper, clean and unclean zones and processes prior to the imposition of the father’s symbolic law. The bodily fluids associated with the abject horrify, in Kristeva’s analysis, because they render the division between maternal and paternal authorities plain. Creed criticizes Kristeva’s analysis for its totalizations, for its failure to account for distinctions in male and female children’s experience of differentiation from and rejection of abjection. But she retains the notion of the abject mother in order to explore the category of “monstrous feminine” in the horror film Alien. The monstrous mother “is there in [Alien’s] scenarios of the primal scene, of birth and death; she is there in her many guises as the treacherous mother, the oral sadistic mother, the mother as primordial abyss; and she is there in the film’s images of blood, of the all-devouring vagina, the toothed vagina, the vagina as Pandora’s box; and finally she is there in the chameleon figure of the alien, the monster as fetish-object of and for the mother.” In more than one of these figures we may see Campbell’s and Carpenter’s Things, which, while not figured explicitly as maternal, nevertheless represent a primordial, changeable body out of which threatening forms emerge. In this regard we need recall not only Campbell’s description of the creature’s head – adorned with serpent-like tentacles of blue hair and angry, blood-red eyes – but also the process by which it devours and annihilates its prey, mimicking life for which it knows no original because it is not empowered to signify in its own terms.

Campbell’s rendering of these powers spectacularizes them. Blair’s “autopsy” of the creature’s body requires the demonstration of incisions made upon the amorphous body that, pulled apart like the labia of the vagina, reveal the furry, multi-eyed, as-yet-unformed monsters within. Prince recognizes the Sartrean “anti-value” of what he calls the creature’s “slimy, amniotic-like fluid, which, in later scenes, it will shoot into its victims and use to digest them.” But even Prince’s slight to the womb here reveals the other side of the coin: queer readings of the narrative’s homophobic subtext regard the creature’s penetration of its victims as the more dangerous of its acts. The abject does seem a fitting category by which to judge the narrative function of the shape-shifting thing, but a vital materialist and phenomenological analysis redeems the “taboo” of a slimy and dangerously mimetic creature by focusing on the exuberance of these transformations and by the transgressive fashion in which they may be felt by the audience.

Carpenter’s Thing offers a different conception of the potentialities of active, perceiving and perceptible materialities: of being in the landscape. Such a notion requires a hands-off approach impossible for science, which, Merleau-Ponty, “manipulates things and gives up living in them.” We might say the same of the non- or anti-scientific alternative. Merleau-Ponty insists that, “operating within its own realm, [scientific discourse] makes constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their

\[203\] Ibid., 46.
\[204\] Ibid., 54.
\[205\] Prince, 125.
difference, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals.” 206 The phenomenologist would replace the abstracting, difference-annihilating, god’s-eye view of the scientific apparatus with a concern for the web of interactions that constitute the life of the landscape. “Scientific thinking,” he argues, “a thinking which looks on from above, and thinks of the object-in-general, must return to the ‘there is’ which precedes it; to the site, the soil of the sensible and humanly modified world such as it is in our lives and for our bodies.” 207 The “there is,” we might say, of Campbell’s and Carpenter’s tales, is that of a prior occupation: the presence of an object that is yet not an object-in-general but a lively and capacious thing. Recalling the reek of “human beings and their associates” that characterizes the subterranean space of Campbell’s research station, we might consider how, in Merleau-Ponty’s words, the human and its “associated bodies must be revived…[as] ‘others’ along with whom I haunt a single, present, and actual Being as no animal ever haunted those of his own species, territory, or habitat.” 208 By changing our orientation to such ‘others,’ Merleau-Ponty implies, we might begin to understand how “the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh.” 209

In this light we might re-read the Thing’s purportedly monstrous otherness, its alien drives to devour and imitate its others, through Kristeva’s admission that the space of confusion and dissolution associated with the abject is also a space of desire. The transformation of human characters into Things, in this way, becomes a pleasurable spectacle of dissolution that figures the “flesh” of each agent in almost Merleau-Pontian terms. In his lectures on Nature, for instance, Merleau-Ponty writes that “the theory of the flesh…has nothing in common with a consciousness that would descend into a body-object. It is, on the contrary, the wrapping of a body-object around itself.” 210 Here Merleau-Ponty refers to the wrapping-around that characterizes engulfment or absorption of the material body into the folds of the flesh of the world. And yet this enfolding is of a piece with the ecstatic consumption and consummation experienced by the human subjects-become-things glimpsed in bloody, languorous, inchoate postures of abandon in each iteration of Campbell’s tale. Campbell’s Thing is dreadfully, exuberantly animate, and Bennett’s notion of “thing-power” illuminates its capacities. For Bennett, from the abject bodies of the unclean and abandoned, “thing-power rose from a pile of trash…the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.” 211

Campbell and his successors represent these effects, extending and transforming the phenomenology of polar aesthetics. The Thing is extraterrestrial, but it has been buried in the ice for millennia. Because it precedes the human, it exerts a prior claim on the landscape. The Thing renders the poles pre-occupied territories in this literal sense. This shape-shifting and inscrutable Other also devours human and animal alike, displacing priorities and dissolving the boundaries of body and subject. And to the extent that it does this while operating as a figure for the landscape itself, it radically challenges the interior/exterior boundary that divides the human from an “environment” conceived as the ultimate outside.

207 Ibid., 122.
208 Ibid., 122-3.
209 Ibid., 137.
All three of the texts I’ve examined here sit at the juncture of science fiction and horror. In doing so, they activate the social and psychological resonances of these genres and their special modes of concern for the limits of the body and of visibility. Robin Wood’s analysis of horror is pertinent here. For Wood, “the true subject of the horror genre is the struggle for recognition of all that our civilization represses or oppresses.”212 For Steven Shaviro, the films of David Cronenberg screen this struggle for recognition with an exuberance that trumps the dread of bodily transformation with a fascination at the permeability of our embodied selves. For Shaviro, films like Cronenberg’s The Fly (1986) produce an experience in which “[e]very abjection is also an exaltation” from which the viewer acquires “a deep, unresolvable ambivalence in the contact of the flesh, a continual affective oscillation. This indeterminacy is not empty, but overly, insufferably full: a hypertrophic surplus of irreconcilable sensations and passions, the bodily contours of my desire.”213 In Campbell’s novella and its adaptations the Thing as excessive, monstrous figure for the landscape is a product of repressed human-nonhuman alliances and a protest against them, a force that threatens to reconstitute the world by devouring and becoming it. Campbell’s text and its adaptations – Carpenter’s especially – activate the surplus Shaviro is describing in a way that both supplements and undermines the terror they wish to produce. Here, as I suggested above, the abject can be redeemed in the space of desire that it produces.

In Chapter 4, I address two films that also draw upon the conventions of science fiction and horror genres. Like Campbell’s novella and its adaptations, these films invest their landscapes with the situated significance of pre-occupied territories. Unlike the films I have examined here, however, Smilla’s Sense of Snow (Bille August, 1997) and The Last Winter (Larry Fessenden, 2006) do not transfer the qualities of landscape onto a monstrous Other. The landscape here functions alternately as a home and as a horrifying external world; in either case, it is a site haunted by the prehistoric Other.


Chapter 4

Redemptive Un-Mapping: The Phenomenology of Ice and Snow

1. Mining the past

This chapter examines late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century films in which human occupants of polar landscapes encounter their ancient Others. In Smilla’s Sense of Snow (Bille August, 1997; based on the novel Froken Smillas fornemmelse for sne by Peter Hoeg), half-American, half-Greenlandic Smilla Jaspersen must solve the mystery surrounding the death of a child tied to an international mining company’s latest Arctic find. And in The Last Winter (Larry Fessenden, 2006), American energy company North Industries finds its plans to reopen an abandoned oil well in northern Alaska thwarted by ghostly forces preying upon the inhabitants of a compound near the site. These films play with the tropes of absorption and of the confusion of bodily and subjective boundaries that I explored through the figure of the Thing in Chapter 3, but distinguish themselves from these narratives in several important respects.

First, they transfer anxiety from figures of scientific and military control to that of the corporation. These texts assimilate human presence in the Arctic to a corporate project – locating and extracting natural resources – that accords more value to this seemingly inert material than to the lives that must be sacrificed to obtain it. Here, the scientist-protagonist aims to counter such depredations not by replacing one form of mastery with another, but by suggesting that comprehensive knowledge is itself impossible. Each film suggests that these characters understand the forces at work in the polar landscape because they know how to look at it; this special way of looking at landscape positions them to undermine corporate control. The title of the film Smilla’s Sense of Snow suggests how its protagonist’s knowledge of the Arctic landscape exceeds that of the Greenland Mining company she will try to overthrow. In The Last Winter, North Industries hires James Hoffman to prepare an environmental impact assessment that will approve drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

What is significant about these figures, for my purposes, is that it isn’t scientific expertise that grants them access to the landscape but rather the desire to look at all. Smilla, while an expert on the phenomenology of ice and snow, is especially attuned to it in part because her Greenlandic childhood taught her how to move within the landscape it produces. For Smilla, snow isn’t just stuff; it is a place to read the habitation of the landscape by seen and unseen forces. Smilla can read those signs; she always knows the way home. Hoffman, on the other hand, notes atmospheric conditions but freely admits that they do not allow him to articulate what is taking place in the landscape. The shift that takes place around him exceeds and defies scientific description. For Hoffman, there is “no way home.” Both protagonists, in other words, identify and (attempt to) describe the landscape’s significant materiality.

Second, these films re-signify the Other. The creatures that haunt these texts do function as figures for the landscape, but they are not all-devouring monsters. In Smilla’s Sense of Snow, we encounter a prehistoric parasite living unseen in the body of a young boy. Although the parasite is said to have killed several men (including the boy’s father), it is virtually non-present for most of the film. Yet eventually the film reveals that Greenland Mining has extensively examined the boy’s body in order to track the parasite’s development and its effects. The child is a vessel for a creature that signifies both the primordial past and the landscape, but he is “possessed” – his body discursively mapped and produced – by the corporation. Ultimately, the
film codes the corporation as the real Other in the landscape by visually and narratively associating it with the meteor that released the parasite in the first place. In *The Last Winter*, the monsters are phantoms: spirits of the ancient creatures whose decomposed bodies make up the resources to be extracted from the landscape. These creatures, ghostly and immaterial, are arguably more frightening than the Thing because, like Smilla’s parasite, they are there and yet not there. All we see of them is the traces of life that they leave behind.

Third, both films argue that traces like these constitute the landscape as legible only to a certain kind of look. *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* takes care to establish that, although she is profoundly drawn to scientific or mathematical expressions of enworlded relationships, its heroine’s ability to orient herself in the landscape is a function of the special knowledge that her Greenlandic childhood instilled. The film credits Smilla’s sensitivity to landscape semiotics to an un-learned sense of direction. Science allows adult Smilla to cultivate this sense, rather than replace it with other forms of mastery. The fact that Smilla is half-Greenlandic and half-American suggests the politically retrograde idea that her relationship with the landscape is due to her status as a “native.” Yet her childhood experiential knowledge does not compete with her scientific expertise for legitimacy in the film, which demonstrates that she needs both to read the landscape and solve the mystery. James Hoffman, as I suggested above, finds that his experience of the landscape challenges the scientific discourses he would use to describe it. Hoffman’s science doesn’t put up a fight; when we meet him he already seems to have surrendered a hard-and-fast allegiance to it in favor of some as-yet-undefined alternative way of seeing that is colored by reference to figures from the heroic age of polar exploration. The fact that Hoffman looks to such long-dead figures for answers that surely will not come is telling of the film’s attitude toward the history of polar exploration and the others it has displaced. *The Last Winter* contrasts Hoffman’s position with that of another character, Maxwell, who seems only too ready to see the landscape differently. As I will suggest, Maxwell’s surrender to fleshly reversibility echoes the work done by Flaherty’s and Ponting’s films while making a more radical argument about absorption and disappearance, lostness and orientation in the Arctic landscape.

In what follows, I will show how *Smilla’s Sense of Snow* and *The Last Winter* thus construct their Arctic landscapes as pre-occupied territories. Humans can take place here, the films suggest, only by learning to see and be in a particular way. Each film situates embodied vision in the landscape, arguing that the phenomenology of ice and snow preclude scientific seeing and require an opening that admits to the reversibility of enworlded flesh. In arguing that the films construct an intercorporeal field of human-nonhuman semiosis, I will return to – and extend – vital materialist discourses.

2. “You knew exactly how to get home”: *Smilla’s Sense of Snow*

*Smilla’s Sense of Snow* opens with an encounter that visually and narratively constructs the landscape as a place disrupted by invading others. The film begins with a series of traveling shots that cruise over the craggy bergs and ice floes of Greenland. These aerial traveling shots, rather than providing a stable sense of acquisitive visual mastery, propel us ever deeper into a landscape that seems to issue from the horizon. The film thus argues that this landscape generates itself for itself and not for the gaze of the outsider. What happens next associates this outsider gaze with an extraterrestrial materiality: a meteorite shatters the ice and destroys the human and non-human life that exists upon it. The traveling camera closes in on several figures in the snow below: an Inuit hunter and his dog team. The hunter stands motionless, peering into
a hole in the ice, waiting to harpoon the seal turning slowly just out of reach of his weapon. This, a subtitle tells us, is “Gela Alta, Greenland” in the year 1859. Waiting with the hunter, we are anchored to the temporality of the hunt and to the silence of the landscape. All is still and quiet: frozen, but not in the sublime and terrible way described by Western legends of the Arctic. As we wait for the hunter to make his move, we join the dogs in noting something descending from the sky, crashing to the earth in the distance. The startled hunter stands for a brief moment illuminated in the bright light of the explosion, frozen as if in the flash of a photographer’s bulb. The resulting image is striking, as it plainly cites Flaherty’s most celebrated image of Nanook the hunter (See Fig. 1). Now jolted from the temporality of the hunt by the threat of encroaching danger, the hunter attempts to flee on his sledge. The explosion’s shockwave, following closely behind him, breaks up the ice at his heels, dissolving the ice-scape as it advances, eventually overtaking and absorbing human and animal in a thundering airborne wave of ice and freezing water (See Fig. 2).

This opening sequence situates Smilla’s Sense of Snow in a cinematic history of Arctic representations by citing Nanook and the theme of absorption and disappearance. Here, the viewer arrives in a traveling aerial shot that is retroactively coded as “alien invasion” by the meteor and by subsequent narrative revelations. This sequence symbolizes the arrival of white Western others and the disintegration of the landscape’s integrity and the death/disappearance of the indigenous human and non-human body. The hunter’s and dogs’ deaths take place off camera, as did Allakariallak’s; the film pictures their disappearance behind a boundary of furiously advancing ice and snow. The meteor’s/Westerner’s arrival has radically upset the landscape: materially undone it. Subsequent interactions with the landscape thus defined rely on the uncanny understanding of a single character in whom both perspectives unite: non-Western and Western, traditional and modern scientific conceptions of the Arctic.

The film indicates this unity formally in a “dissolve” whereby the macroscopic view of the landscape as it rises up to engulf its inhabitants fades to white, only to be replaced by a microscopic view of ice crystals. We see the latter through the eyes of Smilla, who we soon learn is an expert on snow and ice. Smilla’s understanding of its forms and behaviors, of the lay of the land beneath it, and of the human traces that mark it in turn mark her as an exceptional reader of the landscape. We encounter her far from what she might call her home. Copenhagen, where she lives, is a place of exile for her. Her home is Greenland – where she was born and where her “sense of snow” originated. While visiting her father, Moritz, and his young wife Benja, she watches a video of herself as a young child. Her father notes that this footage pictures Smilla’s return from a hunting trip with her mother. The hunters had been beset by “bad weather, a lot of fog,” he explains; “You were lost. Everyone had given up hope.” But Smilla’s abilities saved the group: “Your mother said you suddenly pointed with complete conviction; you knew the way home. No one could explain it. From that day on, they always strapped you to the front of the sledge whenever they went on a hunting trip. You knew exactly how to get home… How the hell do you explain that?” Smilla replies without hesitating: “I don’t know, I just knew.” She cannot account for ability, but trusts it utterly. Benja intervenes derisively, calling Smilla “a regular eagle scout, a real little Nanook of the North.” But the film implies that the real Nanook-figure is Smilla’s mother who, though an excellent hunter, did not find her way home. She disappeared on a hunt, leaving behind only her kayak. The father, Moritz, brought his daughter to Denmark in order to escape the memory of his wife’s death. This history describes but cannot account for one aspect of Smilla’s mastery of the landscape: an unshakable
Figure 1 and 2. The new, old Nanook frozen in the flashbulb flare of the outsider’s arrival, and fleeing the disruption it produces.
sense of place and orientation. The second aspect of this mastery, as we soon learn, is the ability to read the forms of snow and ice for the human traces left there. This skill produces the circumstances for Smilla’s involvement in the murder mystery that drives the narrative of the film.

This mystery begins, of course, with a message in the snow. Smilla returns to her apartment building one evening to find that her neighbor and friend, six-year-old Isaiah, has either jumped or fallen from the roof. Smilla joins the investigator and the crime-scene photographer who are busy documenting the child’s footprints atop the building. From this evidence Smilla rapidly reconstructs the boy’s last moments. The police insist that Isaiah fell to his death while playing, but Smilla challenges their interpretation by noting that “[t]he tracks go in a straight line toward the edge” and that “no child in the world would play like that.” To another character she later remarks that, from the angle and force of the indentations of his footprints, she knows that the child was running: running away from something.

As the mystery of Isaiah’s death unfolds, traces in the snow are only one form of a maze of evidence that link the child’s body and vision to the Greenlandic landscape and suggest a cover-up of epic proportions. The medical examiner who inspected Isaiah’s body finds puncture wounds in Isaiah’s body and clothing that suggest that the child’s flesh had been biopsied after his death. Another doctor, Johannes Loyen, founder of the Institute for Arctic Medicine, had been examining the boy every month and insisted on personally performing the autopsy. The signs Smilla reads in the snow slowly begin to align with the markings on Isaiah’s body and eventually to the recent death of the child’s father, Norsaq, on a Greenland Mining expedition. Smilla’s investigation uncovers maps and data purloined from the Mining company’s archives, images from the autopsy of Isaiah’s father, and an audiotaped description of the circumstances surrounding this prior death that seem to link Isaiah to a Greenland Mining site on the Gela Alta glacier and to a mysterious parasite thought to have gone extinct in the Mesozoic era. With the help of her neighbor and lover, the unnamed “Mechanic”, she secures a berth on the ship that will bear Andreas Tork, Greenland Mining’s head of operations, toward the Gela Alta glacier near the Davis Strait.

These sights and sites are knit together by videotapes that Smilla covertly watches en route to Greenland. In one set of footage, Tork addresses what appears to be a board meeting, explaining, “What we are planning to bring back from our expedition to Greenland is a scientific sensation, the most valuable discovery ever made: an energy-producing meteorite, a fragment from a planet back from the beginning of creation, back from the origin of the solar system. Not only will it multiply our investment; it will give our company a very dominant position in the world.” The meteorite that disrupted the icescape and swallowed our faux-Nanook at the film’s outset, it appears, has embedded an extraterrestrial history in the terrestrial landscape, producing not a magnetic disturbance like that noted in Campbell’s and Nyby’s iterations of the Thing narrative, but rather an enduring source of energy. This extraterrestrial energy source, however, emanates strange energies. It has somehow re-animated an ancient terrestrial parasite that subsequently killed divers at the site. “The only survivor,” Loyen concedes in grim tones, “is a child who unfortunately ran into the water to reach his father, one of the divers.” Isaiah, he continues, is infected with the parasite but appears unharmed by it. “It seems young people can live with it longer,” Loyen muses, “presumably because their immune systems are stronger.”

When the ship arrives at the ice pack surrounding the Greenlandic coast, Smilla disembarks. Her unfailing sense of direction takes her directly to the icy cavern in the Gela Alta glacier in which Greenland Mining’s extraterrestrial power source lies waiting to be extracted.
By this time the ship, too, has arrived, and Smilla confronts Tork and Loyen deep in the interior of the glacier. In the way of all overly confident villains, Tork explains everything. “It’s not a real meteorite,” he assures her. “Meteorites are cold; this is warm. Meteorites are dead; this…is alive.” Smilla, outraged by the fact that he seems not to care what dangers the discovery might present, suggests that he reconsider. His response: “Death is always a waste, but sometimes it is the only way to arouse people. Bohr participated in the construction of the atom bomb and thought it would promote peace!” This speech illustrates Tork’s corporate-scientific instrumentalist worldview, animating it with a science fiction twist. Tork doesn’t see the meteorite as dead matter, but as an animate and animating force. He understands, as Jane Bennett might say, its thing-power: “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”214

This complicates things considerably. As I suggested in my reading of the film’s opening sequence, the meteor’s arrival operates on one level as an allegory for Western exploration of the Arctic and the consequent disruption of Inuit and animal life. In that the meteor emanates energy that awakens a deadly parasite, it also represents the contagions of disease and technological change that whites brought with them: contagions that were perceived as polluting and destroying indigenous bodies and ways of life. Tork’s admiration for the meteorite’s power, then, seems redundant. But this “redundancy” may also be “reflexivity”: the film’s comment on Western corporate-scientific self-congratulation. Smilla and the Mechanic punish Tork and Loyen, holding them responsible for Norsaq’s and Isaiah’s deaths. When the Mechanic detonates an explosive next to the meteorite, the force of the explosion indicates that the object has been destroyed. Smilla stands, gazing out to sea, as the image of her face is replaced on screen with that of Isaiah’s. The transformation is reversed – from child to woman – and the film closes in the air, with the same aerial tracking shots that carried us to the Inuit hunter of 1859. This conclusion does not expel the white invader so much as the evidence of the evil he has wrought. The pyrotechnic spectacle of the meteorite’s destruction mirrors its explosive arrival in the opening scene. The camera’s gaze returns to the sky where it may survey the landscape but never master it.

Like Campbell’s “Who Goes There?”, Smilla figures its polar landscape as a site occupied by long-dormant others whose bodies emerge to confront the human. Campbell’s Thing is the dormant extraterrestrial; Smilla’s is the terrestrial parasite reanimated by the meteorite’s obscure, lively alien energies. Smilla’s reading of the multiple semiotic systems that describe the Greenlandic landscape and the circumstances surrounding Isaiah’s death seems to re-produce them, too, as para-sites. The Oxford English dictionary (OED) explains that the term “parasite” combines the Greek terms para and sitos, meaning “beside” and “food.”215 The common translation: one who dines at another’s table.216 I would like to retain this etymological resonance while also considering the components of the term in an expanded conceptual field. First of all, in modern English prefix “para-” indicates what is “analogous or parallel to, but separate from or going beyond, what is denoted by the root word.”217 Second, the OED’s first definition for the term “site” is not the contemporary understanding of the term (“the place or

216 Ibid.
position occupied by some specified thing”), but rather a meaning derived from an Old Norse term denoting “care or sorrow; grief, trouble of any kind.”\footnote{\cite[‡ site, n.1]{oed}}

Thus extended, *Smilla’s* parasite multiplies and signifies the “parallel”, “separate”, or beyond” of many sorrows, bodies, landscapes, times, and memories. The creature that invaded Norsaq’s and Isaiah’s bodies knits them into an intercorporeal agential field in which vibrant and dormant, past and present, terrestrial and extraterrestrial materialities interpenetrate and circulate. Here, Isaiah’s and Norsaq’s bodies act as para-sites for the revivification of a long-vanished terrestrial life form. The past is born again through them. The meteorite acts as a para-site for its own extraterrestrial origins, carrying with it the mysterious energy that makes it both dangerous and potentially lucrative. Because Smilla’s father sees his wife in her, Smilla acts as a para-site for the mother’s body and its indigeneity; because of her sensibility to the phenomenology of ice and snow, she acts as a para-site for her own Greenlandic past. Before his death Smilla taught Isaiah Inuit ways but was frank with him about their status as exiles; these interactions formed a para-site for the experience of a shared memory and suffering estrangement from the landscape. That Isaiah’s body tolerates the creature living within him suggests that something of these multiple para-sites endures (in) him. His death necessitates Smilla’s journey home, her trek across the ice, and the destruction of the forces that have invaded that landscape and seek to instrumentalize it.

*Smilla’s Sense of Snow* argues against the corporate-scientific view of landscape-as-resource by privileging the kind of look that only Smilla wields. Only Smilla, born on the ice and possessed of a striking ability to find her way home, can read the multiple semiotic systems – Isaiah’s footprints, the evidence of experimentation upon his body, the maps and documents that encode the mystery of his father’s death, the confessions of corporate officials – that constitute the narrative in which bodies, places, and times interpenetrate and render one another visible. *The Last Winter* is not as optimistic. As my close reading will show, this film strenuously argues against the instrumentalizing scientific view of landscape by relentlessly undermining its mapping and mastering gaze. Here, human looks are displaced again and again by forces both seen and unseen. The result is a meditation on lostness and the uncanny that ultimately posits new ways of thinking landscape phenomenologically.

3. “No Way Home”: *The Last Winter*

*The Last Winter* establishes an opposition between the corporate-scientific view of landscape and an alternative view that stresses instability and irresolution. It forwards its aesthetic concern with concealment and disclosure early in the film by introducing us to the landscape via a corporate training video that renders non-human life invisible and replaces it with views of human and technological labor and non-human extinction. Here, the landscape-as-spectacle is won, conquered, and transformed; the market turns beauty into profit. On a formal level, however, these sequences prepare us for a more subtle argument; they seem to offer and then refuse an understanding of simple spatial relationships. Over the course of the film, this visual scheme transforms to privilege a gaze that seems to exceed the human. Lighting and camera work isolate human characters in an ever more unfamiliar and unfriendly landscape, producing a sense of profound disorientation.

\footnote{\cite[‡ site, n.1]{oed}}
The film’s opening scene presents a North Industries video that makes the corporate-scientific argument. A sultry female voiceover identifies Alaska’s North Slope as a “vast wilderness of the North, land of great natural beauty and diversity” – but, more importantly, “land of black gold.” The images that follow are not views of an aestheticized “wilderness”, but rather of human figures in baggy black jumpsuits supervising the construction of an oil rig. “Only once have prospectors gained access to this barren landscape,” we are told. North Industries, the corporation behind the video text we now understand to be a piece of propaganda, aims to bring the secret riches buried beneath the KIK Corporation’s test well to light.

This video functions as a framing device that signals the film’s conflicts and thematic concerns. The video-text’s historical narrative appropriates the land to the authorial agency behind its representation: North Industries. The video describes this terrain as tamed space and wild place, clearly divided into the “land” of Alaska and the “landscape” of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. North Industries frames the state as rich on both aesthetic and ecological grounds. The refuge that it contains, by contrast, is described in word and image as a “barren landscape.” This region sustains itself aesthetically and politically in distinction to the fertile “land” because, despite its name, it is ostensibly empty. Significantly, in these images of a wildlife refuge, there is no wildlife to be found. The footage underscores that the grandeur of this “prospect” depends on its vacancy. The video contains no sign of life other than the human and technological; in effect, North effaces the sign of creaturely presence and replaces it with the image of the KIK well, a sign of human intervention on the land. The metonym is problematic but meaningful. It is the “carefully-guarded secret” buried beneath the KIK site – one intimately and terrifyingly connected to the creaturely life that claims this territory – that preoccupies both texts. As we will see, The Last Winter takes issue not with North’s conflation of the refuge and its secret, but with the terms in which it values human and non-human inhabitants of the landscape.

The KIK well will “reveal her secrets,” but not in the way that North predicts. Before work at the site begins, project supervisors Ed Pollack and Abby Sellers must receive the go-ahead from the pair of experts commissioned to deliver an environmental impact report. Unfortunately for North, however, the data collected by James Hoffman and Elliot Jenkins indicates that temperatures at the site are eerily, unseasonably high, and the scientific team concludes that the tundra is not cold enough to support the weight of the immense rigs that must facilitate extraction. The weather, moreover, is not their only problem. Maxwell, the young man whose curiosity about the KIK well enables our view of North’s video at the outset of the film, is troubled by the sense that something is rotten on the Refuge. As Maxwell’s sense of dread – and a set of seemingly impossible ghostly visions – spreads among the crew of the remote station, it seems that what North Industries is out to get may also be out to get North Industries.

Our first look at the diegetic Arctic landscape is, tellingly, at traces of extinction: two partial skeletons – one a skull, one a set of antlers – cast in dark relief against the pale blue drifts. These images further complicate the notion of a wildlife refuge by suggesting that the region is inhabited only by the dead. Indeed, as we will see, the film is committed to the idea that claims on this land are constituted primarily through death. The film cuts from these images to a shot in which we see a small twin-engine plane from above. At first we cannot see a horizon line, and it is impossible to judge the aircraft’s distance from the ground or from any other point of reference. The vertiginous abstraction makes loss of scale palpable as the horizon line dances palely across the upper limit of the frame. It is as if the camera eye is drawn downward by some special gravity of the land, and must fill the screen accordingly: like the bones of those dead.
creatures that adorn the ground, its gaze is called back to the earth. In North’s training/propaganda video, the aerial tracking shot signalled a masterfully mobile gaze. In this shot, the aerial view becomes frightening as it compels us to contemplate not a pleasurable surveillance but our threatening-because-unreckonable proximity to the earth beneath us (See Fig. 3).

This sense of the landscape as unquantifiable space becomes a major visual refrain of the film. When the North Industries crew plays a game of football outside the station at night, the boundaries of their play are determined by the range of illumination provided by lights affixed to the portable buildings. Whereas the previous scene owed its eerie quality to abstraction, open space, and light, here the darkness and closeness of bodies produce a vertiginous claustrophobia. The players do not seem perturbed by it, but one has a sense that the darkness presses further and further in on them, herding or hunting them like animals, restricting their movement. The next sequence consists of an exterior shot that circles the buildings, moving from window to window from a vantage that cannot be identified with any of the characters. We have the sense that we are watching from outside in more ways than one. With whom — or what — this look is to be identified, we do not yet know. This is the first instance of an unidentified gaze that, throughout the film, will puzzle over the movements of its characters from a position outside their tenuous community. It is markedly voyeuristic, and compels us literally to play a game of Peeping Tom in the darkness, observing the characters in their solitary — and not so solitary — activities.

Only Maxwell seems ready to look back. When he does, it is not yet at the camera itself, but still out into the night from which our gaze imposes itself. At the conclusion of the orbital sequence, we return to this character, who has left the compound and stands staring across the boundary of light and dark that constrained the football game. The camera approaches from behind, in a low-angle shot that rises slowly to his eye level, smoothly rotating around his body until we are looking directly into his face, again like a predator circling its prey. The thunder of hoofbeats rises around us, drowning out the music, and our look at Maxwell’s face suddenly acquires the significance of a reaction shot. Our point of view shifts abruptly, merging with his in the next frame: Maxwell’s look at the ghostly white figures of scores of unidentifiable animals running across the night. Are these the creatures whose look has directed our movements around the compound? They are spectral, indistinct, unidentifiable. We might surmise by their shape and the sound of their hoofbeats that they are caribou, but their wraithlike appearance marks them as unreal.

These wild, predatorial looks recur to startling effect in a pair of scenes set on the following day. In the first, Hoffman treks out to take measurements and review his data in a small, untidy hut not far from the station. As he recounts his observations and interpretations in voice-over, we see images of his journal. “Something up here is off,” he says, “It’s in the numbers, but, also… I can feel it.” Hoffman’s inchoate reflections are interrupted by the arrival of a crow at the window. When Hoffman approaches it, the crow takes flight suddenly, and we are whisked away with it, over the ground in a tracking shot that pulls rapidly away from the hut, careening giddily as if to mimic the motion of the creature’s flight. It is as though we see from the point of view of the crow, but in the wrong direction, looking over its shoulder at Hoffman’s structure retreating into the distance (See Fig. 4). The horizon line is only faintly distinguishable in these images of flight, and the rarely interrupted white-on-white of snow and sky, combined with the speed and sweeping movement of our travel, produce a keen sense of disorientation.

This dizzying absence of visual reference points is even more pronounced at the abrupt cut that moves us into the next scene, in which we join Maxwell as he arrives on a snowmobile at
Figures 3 and 4. An absence of horizon lines disorients us; a creaturely gaze spirits us away.
the site of the KIK well. The landscape seems flattened, emptied, abstracted; the dark figures of man and machine seem utterly alone as they travel across the bright white field. Maxwell dismounts and walks unsteadily toward the camera. A reverse shot shows us the object of his gaze: the white box that marks the site of the KIK test well. A crow – possibly the one with whom we were only just traveling – passes noisily overhead, and Maxwell cranes his neck to see it. His radio screeches inarticulately: a voice, possibly Abby’s, but only garbled partial words. “Maxwell over,” he speaks into it, but it returns only a static scream of interference. Does the radio malfunction, we wonder, or is it the landscape itself that “interferes”?

As if in response to this thought, Maxwell turns the radio off and considers the well again, advancing finally toward it. The next shot provides a shocking realization of scale. Against the blank background of snow and sky, it is impossible to guess at the white box’s dimensions. But when Maxwell appears at the right edge of the frame, it takes on enormous proportions: it stands at least a head taller than he, rising monolithically from the center of the image. He approaches cautiously as the low moan of the wind rises around him on the sound track. Abruptly we are very close to the box. The camera tracks up and over its edge – bounding, almost like an animal – to reveal Maxwell standing on the opposite side. Wind and snow rise together with the camera movement and Maxwell stumbles backwards with the force of it; we are carried away on yet another aerial tracking shot that returns quickly overland to Hoffman in the hut. The link between places is not broken by a cut this time, and we seem to be with the wind even as it invades the tiny structure. Hoffman struggles against the chaotic whirl of maps to stumble out the door. He falls face down in the snow, into the impressions of innumerable footprints. The camera pulls back, straight up into the air, and we see that the hut itself is surrounded by these footprints, hundreds of them, circling the hut and Hoffman’s body prostrate in the snow.

This sequence does more than establish a connection between Maxwell’s and Hoffman’s feeling that “something up here is off.” The spectacular absence of points of reference in these landscape images unmoors characters and viewers alike, renders us all equally incapable of finding purchase on the terrain. These scenes visually describe the landscape as the vacant abstraction “wilderness” that North identifies. It is a sublime landscape: awesomely beautiful but also distinctly menacing, bewildering, and isolating to its human inhabitants. Nevertheless, we are not in North’s video anymore. Instead, we might read this emptiness as a landscape that effaces itself, that will not be seen, that refuses human presence and its significant claims. This space is un-organizable, un-masterable, utterly empty – except to the gaze of the creaturely life that inhabits it freely through the mystifying but irresistible movement in which we have just participated. This movement through the landscape is as dizzying as the voyeuristic gaze from outside the compound was menacing. The sinister, disruptive presence of the force with whom we pass over the bewildering space finds an even more alarming echo in the mysterious footprints. The footprints that ring Hoffman’s remote outpost, we are given to suspect, provide an impossible indexical trace of the ghostly creatures that circle the larger station at night. Their commanding, disruptive gaze and their sign on the landscape are irrefutable evidence of their presence and their will.

The film associates this inscrutable nonhuman presence with a human inability to signify upon the landscape. This incapacity is largely localized in the character Maxwell, who seems especially vulnerable to disorientation. Maxwell goes missing, only to return to the station with a GPS locator that indicates that he has traveled three hundred miles. The compound’s occupants diagnose him with “big eye”: an insomniac madness provoked by poor acclimation to
overly-short or -long solar cycles in polar regions. We might read this as an apt euphemism for Maxwell’s anxious preoccupation with the KIK well, and for his steady gaze at the ghostly creatures of the night: signs of his openness to the Other forms of life that populate the landscape. We might also find this an apt descriptor for the variety of camera movement that will continue to delineate the non-character-identified gaze that dominates the film’s representation of the winter landscape. Big eye, indeed.

Maxwell’s lostness is not the only sign of his disorientation. When Pollack, Hoffman, Abby, and Lee visit potential extraction sites, they find that Maxwell has failed to mark them in preparation for the arrival of the drilling equipment. The crew arrives in a frame that is utterly blank, without a horizon line or any other mark by which distance might be measured. Here the crew is forced to confront Maxwell’s disorientation through graphic evidence of his inability to satisfactorily measure, master, and signify his own presence upon the landscape. Indeed, the fact that Maxwell’s work is never pictured forces us to participate in his lostness. We do not see how he has marked the land; the trace of his presence here is unrepresented. It is perplexingly absent, a disorder beyond the visible – behind our point of view, literally, due to the fixed position of the camera. By refusing to let us see Maxwell’s mistake, the camera eye conceals the landscape, allows us only the abstract vision of isolated figures moving leadenly in a blank field. We possess not a mastering gaze but a vulnerable look, frustrated by the film’s momentary refusal of suture. Suddenly it is not only Maxwell’s security as a subject in discourse that is at stake, but our own. And in a more radical and disturbing sense, by refusing the sight of Maxwell’s signs the film formally argues that the land cannot be marked. From our vantage in a blank landscape in which near and far, left and right are indistinguishable, Maxwell’s disorientation seems the only option.

Maxwell’s disorientation is only one symptom of the conflict between human and non-human gazes at the heart of The Last Winter. Hoffman’s journals offer another. Elliot sneaks out to Hoffman’s hut and begins to read his journal. Over a montage of close-ups of the pages of this volume, we hear Hoffman’s voice-over testify to his grim suspicions. The “empathy with the land” of which Hoffman speaks might be read first and foremost as an ability to participate in the “feelings” of the embodied world. This notion rejects North Industries’ exploitative view in favor of a sense of common materiality and vulnerability. Indeed, here recalls Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological notion of the “flesh” in which the relationship between subject and object is rendered as a boundary only to the extent that it can be experienced as a shifting and reversible place of conjunction. Of this sensing and sensible “flesh” I will have more to say later; here, because Hoffman rejects the notion almost instantly, it is worth noting primarily as a presence that will soon be undone.

For the land of our collective childhood, Hoffman claims, is “changed…become unfamiliar and erratic.” This formulation evokes Freud’s reading of the uncanny. The world in which we might feel at home – the heimlich natural world – has been rendered inhospitable, menacing, distinctly unheimlich. Yet Hoffman immediately dismisses the notion of a “vengeful” nature, claiming that nature’s “indifference” prohibits such an idea. Hoffman’s is a nature that from the beginning did not care for human life, and the character’s suggestion that “we fight for our survival, not nature’s” casts his status as environmental expert in a different light. He rejects the contemporary environmentalist discourse that aims to preserve wildness for its own sake (the very discourse that produces spaces like the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge), suggesting instead that conservation’s true aim is the preservation of human life against a radically transformed natural world. That radical transformation is telegraphed by his monologue by the “fierceness in
the wind” – a fierceness signaled elsewhere in the film on the sound track, usually accompanied by the sound of the invisible horde – and by liquid elements, oil and water, as they are seen in the montage rising above the ground and covering over natural and man-made artifacts. The image of automobiles partially submerged in dark, reflective water serves a symbolic commentary on the politics of oil, in particular: the ever-increasing demand for this resource, driven by corporate and governmental interests, results in a literal drowning.

Hoffman’s next few remarks circulate ambiguously around the mutually-oppositional emotional response of human to natural and vice versa. In one, he suggests that it is humankind that “despise[s] the world that gave us life,” that “alienate[s]” that world; in the next, he makes an about-face in order to ask, “Why wouldn’t the wilderness fight us, like any organism would fend off a virus?” This last question seems to return to the point of view Hoffman invoked earlier, this time completing the configuration by casting both sides of the battle: humankind fights for its survival, but it is fighting as a parasite fights to conquer its host. Empathy with the land – a phenomenological conception of mutual constitution from common flesh – seems impossible according to the binary of definitive differentiation. For Hoffman, that war seems to have been lost and reconciliation is impossible, for “the world we grew up in is changed forever” and “[t]here is no way home.”

The notion of the uncanny returns here, complicated by the sense not only that the familiarity of the heimlich has been lost, but that it cannot be recuperated – even by the scientific knowledge that seeks to claim it for human knowledge and mastery. Hoffman’s last questions, and the answers he seems to pose to them, reject the comforts of scientific rationality in favor of horror at the un-representable nature rising unbidden from the earth. “Is there something beyond science that is happening…out here? What if the very thing we are here to pull out of the ground were to rise willingly and confront us? What would that look like?” he asks. The answer: “This is the last winter. Total collapse. Hope…dies.” The final pages of the journal, rendered in medium close-up as Elliot flips through them, are almost entirely blackened by manic scribbling. The pages are covered from top to bottom with chaotic marks; these are not words or figures, and it is as though the oil pictured in the preceding images had, indeed, risen to confront Hoffman, spilled violently from his pen, overwhelming and obliterating the surface of inscription. These pages suggest that “nature” (re)emerges as an unrepresentable force in order to overwrite the human, either by prohibiting signification or by permitting it in the form of an illegible excess. Whereas the film has hitherto argued for the impossibility of inscription upon the landscape primarily by picturing or withholding the image of that landscape, here it seems that signification both upon and about the natural is either impracticable or doomed by its own excess. In either case, the project of human signification – the reflective discourse through which a relationship with the natural might be expressed or explored – is rendered hopeless.

And yet, as we have seen, the film does not prohibit signification as such – only that of human characters attempting to rationalize the landscape according to their own puny metrics, as in Maxwell’s case, or that of human characters attempting to describe an incomprehensible transformation, as in Hoffman’s. As if to mockingly remind us that, in Alfred Korzybski’s phrase, “the map is not the territory,” The Last Winter seems determined either to get us lost or to ally us with an unknown force that knows the landscape by other means.

The film’s foreclosure of human signification in favor of that of the animal directly counters the Western philosophical tradition’s tendency to privilege human over animal being on the grounds of the former’s mastery of language. Martin Heidegger, for instance, argues that because the animal has no language by which it might perform the abstracting, externalizing
operation of reflection upon the world, it is unable to conceive of other entities “as such” and is therefore either “poor in world” or without world entirely. “Language alone,” he writes, “brings what is, as something that is, into the Open for the first time. Where there is no language, as in the being of stone, plant, and animal, there is also no openness either of that which is not and of the empty.”

If language is the place in which both fullness and nothingness become possible, an absence of language, for non-human beings, renders the conception of death-as-nothingness impossible. Heidegger writes: “To die means to be capable of death as death. Only man dies. The animal perishes. It has death neither ahead of itself nor behind it.” But regardless of the animal’s ability to conceive of its own death as a departure from existence – its own non-being – it does exist; its being is in jeopardy, and on the grounds of their radical vulnerability Heidegger later situates both plant and animal in the Open despite the poverty of language which, earlier in his career, made them worldless. In his writing on Rilke, Heidegger seems ready to reverse his position. “With the heightening of consciousness…the standing and the counterstanding of objects are also heightened,” he explains; “The higher its consciousness, the more the conscious being is excluded from the world. This is why man, in the words of Rilke’s letter, is ‘before the world.’ He is not admitted into the Open. Man stands over against the world.”

Akira Lippitt’s reading of this trajectory in Heidegger’s thought concludes by cautioning against viewing this as a total reversal. For Lippitt, temporality serves as final arbiter of presence in and to the world. “The fullest manifestation of Heidegger’s world,” Lippitt argues, “is none other than the future: to have world is to have a future…The world is essentially a world to come, and humanity stands in it even while being denied the Open.” For the animal, it seems, the world is present spatially and temporally. In Lippitt’s reading, Heidegger’s animal is without future because it possesses drive in the place of the hope or desire that would orient it (and its worldedness) toward the world-to-come – and that would give it a past through the world-forming (distancing) capacity of language. “Without language,” Lippitt explains, “the animal remains in the memories of a merely passed world: undying, undestined, and unmourned.” As we will see, The Last Winter argues that, while the creaturely life that roams the Refuge does not speak, it can signify; although it is illiterate, it can read the landscape. It may be undying, but it is neither undestined nor unmourned. Hoffman, with his oblique references to the uncanny return of the natural repressed and a “heimlich” world turned menacing, can not tell us why. Maxwell, on the other hand, provides the most interesting expository diagnosis of uncanny experience – and of the non-human semiosis privileged by this film.

Maxwell cannot account explicitly for his lostness, but the film has visually argued for a relationship between the landscape, its ghostly inhabitants, and characters’ psychic disturbances that prepares us for his tentative attempt at an answer. “Out by the KIK well… It’s haunted. We shouldn’t be here. We’re graverobbers. It’s coming up from the ground. Ghosts. I mean, what is oil, anyway, but fossils? Plants and animals from, whatever… millions of years ago.” Hoffman suggests that he “go home” – a ludicrous suggestion, given what we have just witnessed of his own thoughts on this matter. For Hoffman, we know, there is no way home. But Maxwell insists that “there’s something out there that’s trying to drive us out of here. It’s

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219 Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” 73
220 The Thing 178
221 What Are Poets For? 108
222 Lippitt 65
223 Lippitt 66
like a force fighting back.” Maxwell thus develops Hoffman’s assertion that the world is no longer home-like, familiar, by directly attributing this anxiety to what is for Freud one of the keenest sources of uncanny sentiment: the presence of the dead. “Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies,” Freud explains, “to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts.” Maxwell’s use of the term “haunted” points directly to this experience as it is located or directed at the KIK test well, the place from which the spirits of the dead emerge as petrochemical remains. Freud refers to the fear of death itself as “primitive” and explains that this fear “still implies the old belief that the dead man becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off to share his new life with him.” The sense in which this enemy threatens to “carry Maxwell off” has already been proposed by the film’s camera work, and will be tragically literalized later in the narrative. For now it is enough to note that we refer not to a dead man but to a form of un-dead creaturely being – an undefinable, unlocatable form with which the film has sided formally by identifying its gaze primarily with a mobile, subjective but not character-identified look. Its movement aligns it with a mysterious predatorial gaze, with a bird in flight, and with the wind.

The dead here are a primordial but still present form of life, as absent as the marks by which we might fix our place in the snowy landscape, but as present as the indexical traces of mobility that they leave behind. These are the only significant marks that seem possible in what Hoffman calls “the last winter,” a final battle between man and nature in which human claims on the landscape face “total collapse” and all traces of mastery must be obliterated. It is no coincidence that such footprints ring the hut in which Hoffman manically obliterates the pages of his journal, performing his own failure of signification. It is not human, but non-human life that is significant here, that communicates with the human through its traces on the landscape. These render the landscape not as receptive surface for inscription, but as medium of exchange between past and present, human and non-human life. The landscape is more than the site at which communication occurs; it is the vehicle of a conversation between dead and living, non-human and human.

This significant conversation constitutes the “placehood” of landscape first and foremost through the claims of the dead. For Robert Pogue Harrison, it is the human body whose death matters – that gives matter to, materializes a place. “The wherewithal of place,” he claims, “does not preexist the act of building but is created by humanity’s mark – its edified sign or signature – on the landscape.” Moreover, the “aboriginal” exemplar of such signification is the grave marker. “A place can not come into being,” he explains, “without human time’s intervention in nature’s eternally self-renewing cycles... What intervenes in natural time is human finitude, which is unlike other finite things in that death claims our awareness before it claims our lives.” Yet in claiming our awareness, Harrison argues, death represents not the end of discourse but the beginning of human signification. “It is not for nothing,” he writes, “that the Greek word for sign, sema, is also the word for grave. For the Greeks the grave marker was not just one sign among others. It was a sign that signified the source of signification itself, since it stood for what it stood in – the ground of burial as such.” In doing so, it “effectively opened

225 Ibid.
227 Ibid, 351.
228 Ibid.

85
up the place of the ‘here,’ giving it that human foundation without which there would be no places in nature.”

The exemplary signs in the landscape of *The Last Winter*, however, do not claim space for the human by marking the burial site of human dead. Perhaps more than the indexical traces of vanished animals in the snow, perhaps even more than the skeletons we glimpsed at the film’s outset, it is the KIK well itself – that blanched, tombstone-like box capping an untapped vein of petrochemical death – that signifies the *hic jacet* or “here lies” of the remains of primordial creatures. At the same time, this box indicates not the definitive closure of the time of their mortality, but the “well” from which their life springs again in a new form. It is the site of a human intervention into nature, yes – but one that does not so much claim placehood on behalf of “human time” as signal human alienation from the “self-renewing cycles” of a deeper geological temporality. While for Harrison the *hic jacet* to which the human *sema* testifies is the *Da* in which the Heideggerian Dasein becomes situated and historical, the KIK site is for *The Last Winter* the space of alienation of the human in the face of the eruption of an historically-Other form of being.

Moreover, Harrison goes on to argue that this understanding of the *hic jacet* suggests that “Dasein can inhabit its *Da* only because the *Da* is preinhabited by those who came before,” and that “the essence of human ‘subjectivity’ may well consist in such preinhabitation.” If human subjectivity in a place is predicated on this kind of continuous signification, it is no surprise that the terrain surrounding the KIK site produces psychic “gushers.” Human subjectivity and signification are impossible here precisely because this place is constituted by the prior claims of an Other form of life. Here, gazes and signs belong to that Other. The film’s treatment of the landscape suggests as much: visual fields resist perspectival mastery by spectacularizing their own emptiness; the ambiguously identified gaze wanders about the land, freely instituting and refusing the gaze to the discomfort and frustration of the viewer. Furthermore, at the level of the narrative, Maxwell, Hoffman, and Elliot have been directly and indirectly approached – menaced, even – by that Other. All of this constitutes an allegiance with a mode of vision and signification that elides human identification and mastery.

I take issue here not with Harrison’s notion that dasein requires prehabitation, but that the prehabitation must be strictly human. This problem comes with the territory, so to speak, in dealing with Heidegger; as we have already seen, Heidegger denies dasein to the animal on multiple grounds. Yet Neil Evernden’s reading of dasein allows us to extend this category of being beyond human exceptionalism and into the creaturely world. For Evernden, the most important feature of dasein is its relationship of “care” for the world: dasein denotes not only “a being for whom Being is an issue” but also one “whose way of relating to the planet is through ‘care.’”

Perhaps most importantly, Evernden conceives of this care in terms that refuse the objectifying register of externality that subtly inflects Heidegger’s own writing. Evernden uses the term “field of care,” in order “to avoid speaking of distinct objects.” “It is useful,” he explains, “for we have experience of magnetic fields in which there is clearly ‘something going on,’ and yet nothing tangible or visible.” The analogy to the magnetic field has explanatory

229 Ibid.
230 Ibid., 353.
231 Evernden 63
232 Evernden 63
233 Evernden 63
force here in part because it describes the kind of attunement or attraction Merleau-Ponty attributes to the sensible-sentient flesh. What’s more, Evernden continues, “if we could conceive of a ‘field of care’ or a ‘field of concern,’ we might have a means of gaining partial understanding of Heidegger’s description of human being... We know a territory by the actions of its occupant; we know Dasein by the evidence of care.” Although he often draws on the explanatory power of human life and language, Evernden’s use of the magnetic and landscape metaphors here suggests that the field of care as a sphere of consequential actions and relationships ought to be extended beyond the human. Human geographer Yi-Fu Tuan also uses the term “field of care” to describe landscape as an ever-unfolding sense of the multiple that constitute it. For Tuan, fields of care are “networks of interpersonal concern,” to be paradoxically distinguished from public symbols by their invisibility to outsiders.²³⁴ Whereas monumental “public symbols,” he argues, “command attention and even awe,” “fields of care do not seek to project an image to outsiders; they are inconspicuous visually.”²³⁵ Although Tuan uses this term to refer primarily to human relationships of meaning and affection, an ecological, biosemiotic reading suggests that, Evernden’s and Tuan’s “fields of care” name that to which the human cannot accede in The Last Winter.

Indeed, biosemiotics provides a vocabulary that may enrich this reading of dasein and the “field of care” and at least partially attenuate its anthropocentrism. For Maurita Harney, Merleau-Ponty’s transition from the concept of the embodied intentionality of body-subject to that of the “flesh of the world” in The Visible and the Invisible means that “intentionality can now be generalized to all living organisms, and through this to the whole of nature.”²³⁶ Drawing upon the work of C. S. Peirce and Jakob von Uexkull, Harney pushes the field of biosemiotics to posit that intentionality is manifest in the signifying practices of all the world: the biosemiotic structure of relationships that inform everything from geological transformation to the life processes of plants and animals. As Jesper Hoffmeyer puts it, “the life sphere is permeated by sign processes (semiosis) and signification. Whatever an organism senses also means something to it – food, escape, sexual reproduction, etc., and all organisms are thus born into a semiosphere, i.e., a world of meaning and communication” that may include “sounds, odours, movements, colors, electric fields, waves of any kind, chemical signals, touch, etc.”²³⁷ In Harney’s view, the conjunction of biosemiotics and eco-phenomenology establish that meaning arises not first from the human but from matter itself: the “flesh of the world” in its reciprocally sensing and sensible qualities. The problem, in The Last Winter, is that the human is denied access to the “field of care” that the bio-semiotic, phenomenally significant presence of trans-historical non-human life constitutes. In giving priority to this form of life, The Last Winter radically de-privileges the human. As we will see, the cynicism of this radical move may negate its promise.

But what of the look with which The Last Winter identifies the traces of non-human signification upon the landscape? Its mode seems to subvert the human-subjective/natural-objective binary. Indeed, it is tempting to suggest that this mobile gaze moves somehow between the two poles, operating according to the logic of a free indirect discourse. But if what we see in the predatory look of that gaze as it circles the compound, circles Maxwell, or travels as a bird or inspired gust of wind is to be considered a species of free indirect discourse, it is understandable explicitly as a species that is not human. This look is not only not composed of

²³⁴ Tuan 451
²³⁵ Tuan 447
²³⁶ Harney 133
²³⁷ Hoffmeyer qtd. in Harney 135.
juxtapositions or identified with any of the film’s characters; it performs functions that none of those characters could perform. It sees as they cannot see, from without and above and around. It is as though it circumscribes the small human community, as mystified and menaced by that community as it is mystifying and menacing in its own right. If it speaks in the “first person singular,” it does not do so by way of recourse to a “pretextual character” that exists within the “cultural limits of the filmmaker.”238 What we see here – or, perhaps more accurately, the way that the film produces us as seers – is something more like an animorphic gaze.

In her reading of Krysztof Kieslowski’s Decalogue, Vivian Sobchack suggests that Kieslowski’s use of close-ups of objects, excessively tight framing of characters, and the evasion of eyeline matches effects an “isolation and depersonalization of the gaze [that] expands the film’s field of visuality and signification well beyond both its empirical constriction in space and its epistemological circumscription of a purely – or even primarily – anthropocentric form of sight.”239 This expanded field of visuality, and the expanded gaze that enables it, are attributed to the perception of an object’s capacity to look back at us from a point of view that is entirely outside us and, to an extent, unthinkable by us. For Sobchack, Lacan’s account of this phenomenon is the most evocative. Lacan likens the “look back” of the object to a stain upon the visual field that “casts a dark and dreadful shadow that not only obscures our vision and makes us suddenly aware of our depersonalization in a field of visuality and meaning…but also makes us, through its sudden and dark excess, acutely aware of human finitude and death.”240

The shadow par excellence, for Lacan, is that of the death’s head at the feet of Hans Holbein’s Ambassadors (1533). Whereas the painting itself seems to produce a “rational, ‘straight-on,’ and anthropocentric vision of human mastery,” the death’s head does not.241 The distortion of its disposition in the frame suggests that it is “rationally” comprehensible – that it might be seen “straight on” – but only from a position that is not only not ours, but that is not imagined by the order of representation in which the rest of the image participates. The death’s head is an anamorphic image, distorted in a way that points always to a space outside its frame. It decenters the gaze of the observer by pointing to a prior gaze that stakes its claim from some other invisible, and seemingly impossible, position.

We might hear in Sobchack’s description of the expanded, non-anthropocentric gaze a tentative definition of what we have seen thus far in The Last Winter. Nevertheless it is neither through the framing of objects and characters, nor through a form of anamorphosis, that the film makes its most compelling claims. As we have seen, the anthropocentric gaze is not so much decentered as replaced entirely with another look. The ghostly creatures that Maxwell sees stampeding through the night do not seem to look back; still, the viewer cannot shake the voyeuristic, predatory feeling that results from the camera’s having stalked the compound, Maxwell, and Elliot. Such purposive movement, whether real or imagined, seems to indicate that something, someone else has a purchase on this visual field that cannot be shared by its contemporary human inhabitants. This is not to mention the fact that such creatures are, if actually present, in-visible. The film’s non-human characters are given to appear, but as North’s video representation of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge unwittingly demonstrates, they take

240 Ibid.
241 Ibid, 95.
sanctuary only in an invisibility that nonetheless leaves a trace of their absent presence. The mobile gaze experienced during the scenes of the film that I have described above is never attributed with any certainty to any creature, human or animal. Yet through the apparent intelligence of its purposeful looks, it seems to participate in a kind of creaturely consciousness, a subjectivity, all the same. In this way we might say that it indicates not an animorphic, but an ambiguously animorphic, form of vision – one into which the spectator is relentlessly drawn.

Against this form of vision the film ultimately posits an extremely fragile and limited conception of the human look, not only through its refusal of that vision but also through the way it represents the event of Maxwell’s death. The manner of this death and the film’s visual record of it will return us, by way of conclusion, to several unexplored questions of the uncanny and of the claims that mortality makes on placehood, as well as to the relationship between death and the practice of signification, human and otherwise.

After his outburst, Maxwell leaves the compound nude and carrying only a video camera. When they discover that he is again missing, the crew sets out to find him. Outside, the camera tracks slowly forward over the ground, following Maxwell’s footprints until they cease. They have not simply continued into the distance; they stop abruptly, as though their maker had vanished. When the camera sutures us into the space by showing Pollack and Motor scanning the empty landscape, we know that Maxwell is not to be found with the trace of his travel. The purloined video camera, however, remains (See Fig. 5). Hoffman and Lee find Maxwell’s body at the KIK well, lying face up in the now-familiar field of white (See Fig. 6). His skin is pale and his eyes are missing. Two crows sit atop the KIK box, picking those eyes apart. After reuniting camera and body at the station, the crew gathers around the video monitor to watch Maxwell’s farewell footage.

Maxwell’s video attempts to describe and visually capture the ghostly non-human presence that has been haunting him. We watch Maxwell’s face, illuminated in eerie greenish-white by the camera’s night-vision function, as he pleads his case. “Ever since I got here,” he intones, “I could tell that there was something wrong. Not the job, not the cold, not the being isolated, but feeling… I’ve seen something out there in the snow. I want to show you. Do you see it?” Maxwell trains the camera out on the snowy night, and pleads for the recognition of his father: “Dad, Dad – do you hear that? Listen…See it, Dad? They’re out there. They’re right out there. You see that?” But we see and hear nothing but snow, wind, ragged breathing. Maxwell trains the camera on his face one last time, and we have begun to suspect that there really is nothing there – until a ghostly form emerges from the darkness over his shoulder. Maxwell gasps with shock, and we see through the camera a glimpse of the young man’s foot as the camera falls to the ground and lies motionless, abandoned. Maxwell’s body, we intuit from our own experience early in the film, has been whisked away to the KIK well. This time, the camera will not follow.

The film treats Maxwell’s death as the limit of his ability to signify in several ways. This, the film’s second video text, is preoccupied with the limits of its desire to make viewers – and in particular, the Father by whose law we are initiated into discourse– literally see what can not be accommodated (explained, dominated, possessed) by that discourse. As he has told Hoffman, Maxwell can’t simply “explain” this to his father. Ultimately, he can only try to make it appear, to make the father witness to the expanded field of care: “Dad, Dad – do you hear that? See it, Dad? They’re out there.” But at this point we do not see “them” in the video image,
Figures 5 and 6. Maxwell’s traces and remains
Maxwell fails. Though the film’s enunciatory process has made us party to Maxwell’s visions before, the video at first seems to reinforce his failure to signify on or about the landscape. And so when we do see the creature that appears behind him, it takes both him and us by surprise. This sudden appearance is governed not by Maxwell’s agency but by the will of the creature we have seen stalk this compound from the opening scenes of the film. We, through the creature’s gaze, snuck up on Maxwell then; now it sneaks up on us. Now we see it as it confronts us from the other side of the look. Maxwell has not made the creature appear in a final triumph of significatory power; the creature has revealed itself in order to silence him.

Moreover, what we witness here is the moment at which Maxwell himself, as a signifying being, disappears from the scene of representation. The ghostly creature snatches him once and for all away from the apparatus through which he stages his last attempt to master the visual field by forcing its disclosure. When we encounter Maxwell again, it is in death. The representation of this disappearance through the abrupt cessation of footprints in the previous scene prepares us to attribute this disappearance to the agency of the creaturely gaze with which we have been conjoined in the past. Maxwell has been snatched up bodily just as we were by the bird and the wind that passed over the KIK well earlier in the film. It is not outside the realm of possibility that the same crow that transported us so rapidly away from Hoffman’s hut—that stole us from his view—is one of the birds that literally steals and consumes Maxwell’s dead eyes atop the KIK box.

We might even read Maxwell’s corpse itself as the paradoxical signifier of the end of semiosis. For Vivian Sobchack, such a corpse possesses a triple semiotic force. “It is a significant bodily sign,” she writes, “of the body that no longer has the iconic power to intentionally signify itself as lived. Instead, the corpse engages our sympathy as an indexical object existentially connected to a subject who was once an intentional and responsive ‘being.’” Moreover, “it generates our horror as a symbolic object bereft of subjectivity and responsiveness that stands for a condition we cannot existentially know and yet to which we must succumb.” Indeed, Maxwell’s last encounter with the creaturely being that has haunted him in its death fuses him with the status of that being at the same moment that it negates his own. In death, Maxwell shares the status of the fantasmatic irruption of the primordial past that is buried beneath the KIK site. He is present but can signify only his own absence from subjective existence; he horrifies us to the extent that he now represents the unknowable. This is the position from which the animorphic gaze has spoken all along.

Maxwell’s body will effect yet another, even more ambiguous disappearance. The airplane bearing “the boss” arrives the next morning only to crash-land at the compound in a burst of flame. As they attempt to rescue the craft’s passengers, Pollack and the crew find that Maxwell’s body is not where they left it on the previous day. Pollack spots the body burning on the ground at some distance from the building, and runs to it with a fire extinguisher. Hoffman follows him, asks what he is doing, and when the camera cuts to a vantage in the middle distance, we see that there is no body here, either. Later, Hoffman and Abby will engage in an exchange that indicates that Maxwell’s body has not, in fact, vanished. As they argue over what has happened and what to do about it, Abby insists that Hoffman’s theories are worthless without evidence. “There’s a corpse outside,” Hoffman insists hysterically. “That’s evidence of something.” “That’s evidence of a major malfunction on Maxwell’s part,” Abby replies.

242 Ibid, 236.
243 Ibid.
This “malfunction” seems, again, to have something to do with Freud’s uncanny: not in its relation to an unhomely space or in its bearing on death, but in a form of final comment on the character’s lostness. Vivian Sobchack thinks through the various forms of spatial and temporal dislocation implied by lostness in an imaginary landscape, taking as her point of departure Freud’s account of his own uncanny experience of “going round in circles” in the streets of an unfamiliar city. Desirous of departure from a neighborhood “the character of which could not long remain in doubt,” Freud finds that every attempt at escape returns him to the same street. We might see in this situation, as Sobchack puts it, “‘involuntary repetition’ as a constituent quality of the uncanny” to which Maxwell himself is subject.244 Maxwell does, as we have seen, become lost in the landscape. He gets lost after a trip to the KIK well, wandering an impossible 300 miles only to return inexplicably to the station without knowing why or how. Later, his corpse is returned to the KIK box, the originary site of this disorientation.

The temporal import of this involuntary return is of some interest here. “Informed with a specific temporal dimension,” Sobchack argues, “the experience of going round in circles is oriented toward the past since one finds oneself continually revisiting and relocating there.”245 Indeed, Maxwell’s lostness seems oriented precisely not only toward but also by the past, by the prior claims of the creatures whose intentionality frightens him and whose agency displaces him perceptually and physically. This, in a narrative that begins by asserting, through the voice of the North Industries promotional video, a future-oriented claim on the land and its resources! Maxwell embodies – his body is subjected to and, in death, desubjectivized by – the extent to which this landscape has already been claimed by a force that refuses the narrative of progress. Sobchack refers to Freud’s tale of being trapped in a red-light district as displacing an “anxiety about being spatially and temporally ‘arrested’ and stuck in place in a present become the past, about the future’s foreclosure, about the literal prohibition of forward movement literally intended by ‘red lights.’”246 The environmentalist narrative of decline and recovery cease and desist. The film effects this arrest and foreclosure through Maxwell’s death and the escape attempts that follow it. In each instance, to return to Sobchack, “‘going round in circles’ produces a context in which purposive activity and forward momentum are treated as futile and, in response, become increasingly desperate and frenetic in quality.”247

The attempts at escape that follow upon Maxwell’s death dramatically reinforce both arrest and foreclosure. With the station’s communication equipment destroyed by the crash, Pollack and Hoffman will set out to find help. Pollack insists that they head first not to a nearby town, but to a North Industries crew who are constructing ice roads some distance away. When they arrive at the site, they find the ice trucks, but no people. They change course and head for the town, but never make it. The predatory, circling gaze of the creature is back, and this time we see it clearly through Hoffman’s eyes. It is a monstrous chimera, translucent, standing upright on two legs. It attacks the pair of men, and carries Hoffman away. We see the landscape whirl past from his point of view in the arms of the enormous creature, and the film image changes. Suddenly we are following a small child as it races through a different snowy landscape in black and white. The child runs toward a house, shouting to its mother that it has come home. In death, Hoffman seems to have returned to his own childhood in order to find the “way home” he had thought impossible. Pollack’s fate is not so nice; the camera watches from

244 Sobchack 23.
245 Ibid.
above as several of the ghostly creatures rip him to shreds. To return to Sobchack for a moment, we see again an instance in which “‘going round in circles’ produces a context in which purposive activity and forward momentum are sensed as futile and, in response, become increasingly desperate and frenetic in quality.”248 Pollack’s and Hoffman’s final attempts at forward movement-as-escape end only in the final escape of death, a representation of the inescapable finitude of human temporality in a landscape possessed by the past.

4. An animorphic gaze, a (pre)occupied territory

*The Last Winter* represents environmental apocalypse – an un-veiling of the natural – in extra-ordinary terms. The video text that opens the film describes the Refuge as an ideal space: abstract, empty and thus available for mastery. But subsequent scenes argue against this attitude by formally subverting or refusing such mastery. Yes, the landscape may be abstract, they say, but not as a pretext for secure human domination. On the contrary, the film describes its landscapes as depthless, abstract spaces in order to aesthetically isolate characters and to psychologically bewilder them. The landscape is not effaced by or subordinated to the human regard; instead, it seems to make itself invisible or inscrutable only in order to derange human occupants and their attempts to take place therein. These visual strategies and narrative concerns transform the film’s setting from spectacular scenery to narrative agent. Only a subjective but not character-identified gaze – an animorphic gaze – may roam freely over the land, stalking its human inhabitants and leaving significant traces of its creaturely presence. These traces signal ephemerally what the KIK well unwittingly declares: that this land is claimed not by the technoscientific national projects of American frontier ideology, but by the lives and deaths of its primordial non-human dwellers. Characters’ encounters with the landscape are uncanny to the extent that they call forth the notion of the threatening presence of these dead as a sign of human insignificance.

The film (de)articulates its landscape by investing it with creaturely life, agency, and signifying power. This is not mere scenery, conveniently featureless backdrop for the human drama. From the outset, the landscape seems to exert an almost gravitational force on the visual strategies of the film: concealment and disclosure, abstraction and disorientation, refusal and transfer of gazes. Indeed, *The Last Winter* accords most of its look to obscure agencies that infuse the landscape. To be sure, the film plays with the idea that what we see here (as we have seen in cycles of films past) is the revenge of an oppressed or forgotten nature; it suggests more than once that the uncanny experiences of its characters results from their encounter with the return of the repressed. Ultimately, however, the film’s investment in this notion is complicated by its manipulation of the gaze and by its formal and narrative commitment to a more complex argument about landscape’s role as medium of exchange between human and non-human.

In some senses, *The Last Winter* does use voyeuristic and predatory gazes to oppose human and non-human nature. Nevertheless, its play of concealments and disclosures, of presence and absence, of significations and agencies, offer a radically different vision of possession of the land. To be sure, the oil company North’s visionary rendering of oil extraction imagines the transformation of abstract landscape into material land. At the same time, the animorphic gaze through which *The Last Winter* contacts and produces its spectators establishes the Arctic landscape as a matrix of human and non-human actors. Ultimately, *The Last Winter* dramatizes the way that landscape, like cinema, is always already a (pre)occupied territory: a

thinking and feeling thing, a field of care or concern articulated by both human and non-human histories.

The Last Winter discloses its landscape to us as a field of concern out of which humans are irrevocably locked. If, as W. J. T. Mitchell theorizes, the “landscape is a medium of exchange” – a semiotic or biosemiotic system of communication between human and non-human, it is one in which signs rebound against one another only destructively. And yet, if we follow Vivian Sobchack in considering that the cinema must be lived phenomenologically as a shared experience of reciprocal thinking and feeling structures, what viewers see and touch here is all the more extraordinary. For Sobchack, “the cinema makes visible and audible the primordial origins of language in the reversibility of embodied and enworlded perception and expression.”249 The Last Winter dramatizes the pressing need for such a potentially revelatory experience, and some of its consequences. Both landscape and cinema – as media of communication and exchange between folds in the flesh of the world – are pre-occupied territories upon which vitally necessary transformations must occur.

249 Sobchack 4.
Epilogue

The End (of the World)

Douglas MacAyeal is a glaciologist, and one of the first people we meet in Werner Herzog’s *Encounters at the End of the World* (2007). MacAyeal has come to Antarctica to study “b-15”, an iceberg with which he has developed an intimacy that haunts his dreams. “I dream,” he tells us, of being “adrift in the ocean, a vagabond floating in the ocean, and below my feet, I can feel the rumble of the iceberg, I can feel the change, the cry of the iceberg as it’s screeching, and as it’s bouncing off the sea bed, as it’s steering the ocean currents…I can feel that sound coming up through the bottoms of my feet and telling me that this iceberg is coming north.” MacAyeal reads B-15 as a living, thinking thing with material effects that carry far beyond its source at the “end of the world.” In the dream he describes, he is but a stowaway – a lonely, drifting “vagabond” – borne across the ocean by the immense iceberg whose cries and agencies he feels vibrating through his body.

MacAyeal explains that his view of B-15 and the Antarctic ice from which it cleaved as a kind of living creature reflects changing views of the continent. “Unlike Scott and Shackleton, who viewed the ice as this sort of static monster…we scientists are able to see the ice as a dynamic, living entity that is sortof producing change.” This change brings Antarctica into a complex dialogue with the shifting materialities of the global climate and its effects – one that, in MacAyeal’s view, is fraught with expectation and even fear. “I’d be happy to see Antarctica…as a cold monolith of ice, sortof like the way people back in the past used to see it. But now, our comfortable thought about Antarctica is over. Now we’re seeing it as dynamic, as producing change… change that it’s broadcasting to the rest of the world, possibly in response to what the world has brought down to Antarctica.” Antarctica, MacAyeal seems to be arguing, is neither as remote or unchanging as its enthusiasts once thought. Indeed, his comments here express the view that Al Gore articulates in *An Inconvenient Truth*: that this landscape at the “end of the world” plays an important role in the patterns of material circulation and renewal that sustain life on the planet. In this sense, the poles’ periphery-to-center “broadcasts” denote the vast biosemiotic system of communication and transformation that pull humans, natures, and technologies together as co-actants across the field of landscape.

MacAyeal’s view of the Antarctic ice resonates with much of what I’ve argued in preceding pages and provides a point of departure for considering several of the issues that remain in describing the complex view of landscape that has emerged in my readings of films spanning a century of the cinematic imagination of the poles. This conclusion will focus on sequences of Herzog’s *Encounters* that illuminate these concerns and direct us back to the guiding questions of this study.

In Chapter One I argued that W. J. T. Mitchell’s claim that landscape, conceived as “not a genre of art but a medium...of exchange between the human and the natural, the self and the other,” offers a way to re-think landscape not as an aesthetic form but as an alternative to concepts of environment that rely on binary thinking. Moreover, I suggested that by conceiving of landscape and cinema simultaneously as living, thinking things that are phenomenologically available to us as spectators, we might arrive at a previously unthinkable

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form of ecocriticism that draws its force from a commitment to both the figurative and literal modes of landscape representations available to film and media scholars. In Chapters Two, Three, and Four, I noted how the tropes of absorption and disappearance foreground the tenuous materiality of human, natural, and technological presence in the landscape in the polar imaginary, and track the roles that these tropes play in visualizing occupation or inhabitation of Arctic and Antarctic landscapes. Throughout, I have argued, cinema imagines the poles as preoccupied territories: as places that think and feel in ways that de-privilege belated, flimsy human claims to possession. If these landscapes are occupied, it is never by the human and always by the complex materiality of transhistorical forces and agencies that include but exceed human understanding and mastery. In the few pages that follow, I would like to show how several sequences in Herzog’s *Encounters at the End of the World* describe such forces and agencies.

Despite the comforts introduced by contemporary conveniences, Herzog finds that twenty-first century Antarctica is no more legible to the human gaze, and no less deadly, than it was to Robert Falcon Scott. Herzog is startled to find that McMurdo, the most populous human “settlement” in Antarctica, looks “like an ugly mining town filled with Caterpillars and noisy construction sites.” “From the very first day,” Herzog explains, “we just wanted to get out of this place. McMurdo has climate controlled housing facilities, its own radio station, a bowling alley, and abominations such as an aerobics studio and yoga classes…For all these reasons I wanted to get out into the field as soon as possible.” But Herzog’s escape to the interior is contingent on his completion of a survival seminar, a “two-day exercise…called ‘happy camper.’” Without disclosing anything about the director’s own competency in such exercises, Herzog’s camera follows participants as they learn to build survival trenches and igloos.

The most interesting exercise, of course, is the one that dramatizes the difficulties of human placement in and mastery of the landscape. In what is affectionately referred to as the “buckethead” scenario, participants must cover their heads in white buckets in order to simulate the whiteout conditions of a blizzard. Thus blinded, they must work together to move from one point to another and back. They fail, of course, miserably and hilariously (Fig. 1). The leader does quite well at moving the group in one direction, but when it comes time to change course, the group soon accumulates and wraps around itself. All sense of direction is soon lost, and the group must return to their point of departure to try again. This, too, seems to prove impossible. Although one presumes that each group’s successful completion of the seminar depends on their performance in this exercise, Herzog turns the camera off before these participants find their way back to point A. He thus suggests that confusion is the point of the exercise – an apt observation but one that represented thus seems to foreclose any possibility of successful self-orientation in the landscape. Without vision, humans are hopelessly lost.

The same cannot be said of a second group of creatures that Herzog encounters soon thereafter: the tree foraminifera studied by a group of scientists at a dive station to the South. These “primordial single-celled organisms,” as Herzog explains, which “branch out in the shape of trees” and extrude microscopic “pseudopodia … that gather and assemble grains of sand into a protective shell around the twigs.” Microscopic builders, these foraminifera depend upon a confusion of bodily boundaries. Their secreted tendrils bond chemically with sand granules and other organic materials on the seabed, drawing them back in and using them to form structures that support further growth. Samuel S. Bowser, the lead cell biologist for this research group, explains that the organism’s method of selecting and rejecting each piece of material is a behavioral manifestation of the creature’s intelligence. This sightless lifeform yields a force and
Figure 1. Bucketheads
agency that both Bowser and Herzog struggle to describe.

The same descriptive problems surface again in Herzog’s encounter with a physicist attempting to measure the activity of neutrinos. Dr. Peter Gorham explains that he and his colleagues hope to “be the first scientific group to detect the highest-energy neutrinos in the universe.” When asked by Herzog what a neutrino is, Gorham’s enthusiastic reply demonstrates the figurative and literal difficulty of apprehending them. “The neutrino is… the most ridiculous particle you can imagine,” he says, “it…you… a billion neutrinos went through my nose as we were talking. A trillion! A trillion of them went through my nose just now! And they did nothing to me. They pass through all of the matter around us continuously in a huge, huge blast of particles that does nothing at all. They almost exist in a separate universe, but we know as physicists, we can measure them, we can make precisions and predictions, and measurements… they exist, but we can’t get our hands on them because they seem to just exist in another place, and yet without neutrinos, the beginning of the universe would not have worked.” In Gorham’s account, physicists postulate that this invisible, here-and-not-here force was responsible for the formation of the elements that compose all matter in the universe. But this hypothesized form of energy – described as formative because the material composition of the universe cannot be explained without it – is nowhere to be found, seeming to exist “almost in a separate universe.” Gorham describes his struggle to comprehend the particulate force that suffuses all matter as an embodied sensation: a gut feeling. “As a physicist, even though I understand it mathematically and intellectually it still hits me in the gut that there is something here…surrounding me, almost like some sort of spirit or god that I can’t touch but that I can measure.”

Such an acute sense of the mysterious, ineffable forces that subtend material existence suffuses many of Herzog’s conversations with the scientists he meets in Antarctica. One of the most poignant of these encounters focuses on a lost penguin. Herzog jokingly admits at the outset of the film that he was surprised to have received National Science Foundation funding for a film that would not be about cute, fluffy penguins. But the director’s travels take him to the penguin colony at Cape Royds. Here he is taken with the sight of a lone penguin who has set off toward the Transantarctic Mountain range dozens of kilometers away. Heading thus toward the interior of the continent, Herzog explains, “he is headed toward certain death”: no food sources or open water lie to the South, and the scientists cannot account for the penguin’s determination to travel in this direction. Herzog’s commentary on this and like “disoriented or deranged” creatures does not pause to note, as one might expect that he would, the curious resemblance between “them” and “us” – this remarkable and inexplicable determination to reach a landscape that, though not by any means empty, seems to hold nothing of value. The penguin’s quest in this regard is emblematic of the project of polar exploration in general, and the fate of Scott’s Captain Oates in particular. As I recounted in Chapter Two, Oates, wandering into the blizzard in a gesture of self-sacrifice, accounted for his departure by telling his companions that he was going out and “might be some time.” Oates, of course, never returned; neither will the penguin (Fig. 2).

Encounters at the End of the World works to describe the tension between the imaginary polar site and the scientific research conducted there in order to highlight how human inhabitation of the pole is contingent upon tenuous relationships with the forces and agencies that have composed terrestrial landscapes throughout their planetary histories. The Antarctic of Herzog’s film is a site where human and natural histories witness one another unfolding; this filmmaker’s examination of the south polar continent shows how natural, human, and technological confront and understand (or do not understand) one another both imaginatively and
materially in this landscape. But if I have shown here how the poles provide excellent sites for examining confrontations between past and present, human and non-human, visible and invisible in the cinema, I must also acknowledge that my argument could be extended fruitfully to other sites. Polar landscapes have historically been imagined as blank slates for the projection of competing aims and visions. The cinematic metaphor of projection is apt, but need not limit us to considering films about the Arctic and Antarctic as “only projections.” As Anne Whiston Spirn writes, “nature may be constructed, but it is not only a construction.” I might revise this statement thus: “cinematic landscapes may be projected, but they are not only projections.”

The practice of interrogating the landscapes of cinema knows no home; indeed, perhaps it is best considered a project that pertains not only to the landscapes of our own planet, but to the extraterrestrial landscapes screened in documentaries as well as those postulated by science fiction, fantasy, and adventure films that visualize alternate worlds and alternate modes of enworlded being. My research continues at these terrestrial and extraterrestrial sites, where revisions of earthly phenomenological engagements take forms that promise to disturb the landscape concept even more radically.

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Figure 2. He may be some time.