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Natural Selection Among the Ruins

Su Ballard

University of Wollongong, sballard@uow.edu.au

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Natural Selection Among the Ruins

Abstract

At about the same time that the railways were snaking their way across the major continents of the earth, animals and plants were finding themselves increasingly enclosed. Exponential increases in industrialization had facilitated shifts in scale and experience. For the human, the movement was from the local to the national, for the animal, it was from the farm to the factory, for the plants it was the process of becoming fuel for the massive belching machines inhabiting the landscape in their place.

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"We have modified our environment so radically that we must now modify ourselves in order to exist in this new environment. We can no longer live in the old one."

Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings* Sphere Books, 1968 p.43.

At about the same time that the railways were snaking their way across the major continents of the earth, animals and plants were finding themselves increasingly enclosed. Exponential increases in industrialization had facilitated shifts in scale and experience. For the human, the movement was from the local to the national, for the animal, it was from the farm to the factory, for the plants it was the process of becoming fuel for the massive belching machines inhabiting the landscape in their place.

Seated upon the trains, humans experienced vistas never before visible; landscapes flew past at a new unimaginable speed. The wilderness was now quantifiable, and was there to be seen from a window. It was defined: 'nature'. From their windows in motion humans began to understand nature as a great operative force of wonder and awe. Almost as soon as it was defined nature became something to be protected from the encroaching industrialization of city and machine. In an attempt to capture and retain the aesthetic experience of the wild, national parks and conservation areas were established. In the name of the sovereign, trees, bushland, rocks, and the spaces between them were designated heritage areas. These were spaces for humans to move thorough, leaving only footprints.

It all made sense. The great belching chimneys of coal and steel were symbols of forward momentum, of progress that made human lives faster, cleaner, and brighter. Subtle interventions in space and time were no more. And despite the romance of train travel, it didn't end up being very romantic at all. The guzzling machines of nature contributed to a standardized understanding of space and time that dispensed with all future contemplations of what it might mean to occupy this earth. Now space and time were at the behest of the timetable. Standardized behaviours meant that trains arrived and left at regular intervals, that the worker naturalised into ergonomic cubicles and that the production of food entered into equally regulated environments.

In another place, on the other side of the world the industrial revolution took a slower although no less dramatic pace. It was also accompanied with fire. In order to tame the land for agricultural production, huge fires were lit, and a new colonizing force of rats (including the kiore), stoats, cats, weasels, ferrets and possums, consumed any of the birdlife that could escape the flames. Over a period of 750 years New Zealand lost 50% of its native animal population. Later, once they made the shocking realization that the birds were gone, the humans reoccupied the space establishing eco-sanctuaries; microcosmic areas of land surrounded by clear felled dirt and fences that burrowed underground as deeply as their barbed wire tops soared into the air. In these small protective zones, humans tried to regenerate what had been lost. A Kaka here, a Kokako or a Totara there. The hope was that at some point the birds will fly beyond the fences, the trees self-seed, and the wilderness return. This twenty-first century revision of the scars of industry (otherwise known as conservation) is about a return to an essence. The eco-sanctuary is a lected natural space created by humans to imagine what the land looked like before they appeared.

This unnatural selection, presented a kind of counter to the three prongs of Darwin's theories of evolution, both only controversially becoming acknowledged during the evolution and expansion of the machines. It would make a good story if it weren't true.

That is all in the past. Today, documentary filmmakers revisit the relics of these environments with a purpose. They harbor a hope of catching a glimpse of an animal in its newly formed natural habitat and filming it; editing its mundane life into moments of dramatic action for our televisual pleasure. Using the tools of stunning high-speed or painful slow motion the filmmaker sets up a kind of diorama across which pieces of action may occur. The solitary animal appears and, just for a moment as we hold our breath, it is there moving across the screen before us. Ignorant or disdainful of our presence, the animal performs its daily ablutions, while we stare captured before its image. It becomes like a twenty-first century version of the game 'animal, mineral, vegetable'.

Categorization is key and nothing is under dispute, every single element in this new ecologically safe and sustainable world fits. The bird is a bird and the tree is a tree.

However. In a small corner of one of these designated areas something else has started to happen, and it is difficult to know how to respond. In a small autonomous space, nature is rejuvenating without the need for humans at all. It is not clear if this environment was part of a nature reserve or something else not made by humans at all. Birds of the wrong kind have started to take things into their own hands. These are seductive birds. This is a different kind of nature. Deluding us with their abilities to communicate, the birds call to one another using the only voices they have. But there is no call and response. Just a call, repeated, and never answered.

Mediated and transformed into technological ring tones they pierce the environment with their desperate search for a mate. Before the screen the human is met with an immediate sense of loss. What kind of response should we make? Do they know we are here? Despite its depleted state, this corner of a petrified forest seems at a remove to the histories that possibly brought it into being. It is neither romantic nor nostalgic, but it is breathing. It is disturbed and remade by the lost voices of a new kind of species attempting to communicate across space and time.

The film we are left with is of a new world order, the humans have long gone, and are no longer necessary. The bush has taken on the patina of the petrified concrete that used to mark the spectacular skyscrapers of the past. The trees are the twisted and rusting steel of towers no longer fit for human habitation. These selected remnants of nature take our breath as we once again attempt to redefine our relationship to them. The new nature of natural selection spread before us, it is a captured truth that demands that we question how we define ourselves differently to the other inhabitants of this earth. Cultural traces are found in the bush. The birds seem to have established a routine and placed a sentinel in the watch tower. The air is full of the sounds of hope, a new day dawns. The birds make eye contact across time and space. They dispassionately tell us of our encroachments. Evolution is now in their hands.

Su Ballard
University of Wollongong
July 2013

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[Hayden Fowler's 'New World Order': natural selection amid the ruins.](#)

[Su Ballard](#)