

Cold Culture: Polar Media and the Nazi Occult

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ABSTRACT

The inaccessibility of the North and South Pole makes them a crucible for persistent questions of access and data visualization that characterize the information age. Arctic and Antarctic have become increasingly topical in popular cinema as well as in media arts. As representations of polar regions grapple with the fictions that mark representations of science, they illustrate the perils and perks of polar travel in the age of digital media. This essay sets out to trace representations of the Arctic and Antarctic in media history. To this day, the attraction of South Pole and North Pole remains one of heroic detection: they have been discovered, inspired myth, literature, science, and art, yet the polar regions remain unrepresentable - there to be found and rediscovered. This is true for the kind of art history that hews to patterns of the detective novel, reconstructing from traces a grammar of objects and authorship; and it applies also to film and media art in the age of eco-tourism, where discovery remains the motive, following snow-blown trails into nothingness, even and especially after the preceding discoverers had imprinted the landscape with their names and deaths. Polar media raise complex issues of mapping cultural space from colonialism to post-industrial globalization. One trajectory of what one ought to be able to excavate as the historical logic of polar media indicates a shift, in the 19th century, from a pronounced emphasis on race to a growing concern with environmental factors, with weather, and with the global meteorological consequences of melting polar ice caps in the course of the 20th and into the 21st century.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

A.0 [General Literary Works]: science fiction, ecology, media arts, race.

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory.

Keywords

Polar media, ecology, race, cinematic and web representations of the North and South Pole regions..

1. INTRODUCTION

Polar media have not only become an integral part of our planetary imaginary, they also owe one of their quintessential high-tech references to the onset of what one might call our contemporary planetary consciousness. For Antarctica figures prominently in what is probably the most commonly recognised

image, the most widely distributed image, and the most often reproduced image ever: that of Planet Earth, taken by the astronauts of Apollo 17 on December 7th, 1972. "When you get 250,000 miles from earth and look back the earth is really beautiful. You can see the roundness, you can see from the snowcap of the North Pole to the ice caps of the South Pole. You can see across continents. You look for the strings that are holding this earth up and you look for the fulcrum and it doesn't exist."¹ American minimalist composer Terry Riley was commissioned by the Kronos Quartet and Bertram Ulrich, curator of the NASA Art Program, to use audio tapes of cosmic phenomena recorded by the University of Iowa Physics Department, and also made use of a very similar quote from the first astronaut to walk on the moon, Neil Armstrong: "You see from pole to pole and across oceans and continents. You can watch it turn, and there's no strings holding it up. And it's moving in a blackness that is almost beyond conception."² In the original photo, the south polar ice cap appears on top, and the north was at the bottom of the photo because of the orientation in which the astronauts were traveling.³ As art takes advantage of new ways to access and visualize and utilize information beyond the traditional optics of reflection, long associated with linear perspective, and types of refraction associated with aerial perspective, it grapples with the fictions and facts that characterize the representations of science. Yet by the same token, technoscience is commonly alleged to have impoverished our individual experience: a characteristic of what modern thought, as a departure from bourgeois interiority, identifies as *tabula rasa*—the modernist gesture of "erasing all traces," as Benjamin quoted Brecht.⁴ Instead of richly layered myths and interlacing stories of survival and adventure, we get measurements and extrapolations, prognoses and doomsday scenarios. The resulting difference is arguably not unrelated to that between a historic milestone like *Nanook of the North* (1922) and a blockbuster like *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), or that between Disney's remake of a Japanese film under title *8 Below* (2006) and the documents on a meteorite discovery upon which

¹ {8} and [15]. To date, Cernan is the last person to walk on the moon.

² [42]

³ [25] shows that Apollo 17 photograph of Earth countless times. Every time Tom Hanks look out the window, he sees Antarctica: the planet does not rotate for Hollywood.

⁴ [4]

the original was based. Just as the International Polar Year (2007–08) and preceding efforts rely on a massive deployment of equipment, the history of the metaphorical field of polar media is accessible only via an abundance of intertextual traces in myths and stories. Yet technoscience also fully partakes of the strands of mythical and imaginary attractions to the polar region. As Benjamin pointed out, the return of superstitions is not a proper revival, but a “galvanization” that masks the poverty of experience. To study polar media is to delineate trajectories of evidentiary material left behind by centuries of polar imaginings. Perhaps popular movies such as *March of the Penguins* (2005) or *Polar Express* (2004) might be read differently from the vantage point of such a cursory overview of the history of representing the Arctic and Antarctic: from ancient mythology to the drawings and reports of surviving explorers, from early photographs to the International Polar Year sponsoring artists and writers, from early film such as George Melies' *Conquest of the Pole* (1912) to recent movies like *Alien vs Predator* (2005), the polar regions hold a particular fascination. This mythological tradition fashions polar expeditions into metatextual metaphors: in this manner, attempts to lay claim to the last remaining territory on the globe become legible as grasping for the primary, the untouched, an original unmarked emptiness. Tracing the outlines of the unknown, illuminating the previously unexposed, this cartography of areas without any traces of human life and history seeks to shed light on the differences and connections between the Arctic and the Antarctic.

2. EXCAVATIONS

One trajectory of what one ought to be able to excavate as the historical logic of polar media indicates a shift, in the 19th century, from a pronounced emphasis on race to a growing concern with environmental factors, with weather, and with the global meteorological consequences of melting polar ice caps in the course of the 20th and into the 21st century. Indeed one might claim that the complex racial tensions that used to be found in nearly every canonical text more recently yield to climate consciousness and global politics. Analyzing the racist heritage of our polar imagination is what it means to confront the labors of inheriting our polar imaginary. Racist conspiracy theories organized around inchoate ideas of purity culminate where the pole, elsewhere imagined as vortex, void, or whirlpool, becomes a tunnel into a different realm: the geographical prize here turns into a spiritual prize. Throughout the 19th century, Antarctica figured as a southern counterpart to the *Ultima Thule* of occult and racist fantasies about the north; where the imaginary line that would be the Earth's axis exits or enters, John Cleves Symmes posited a hole, or rather a tunnel. Finding *Symzonia*, the land of perfect whiteness and “abode of a race perfect in its kind” was held out in Harper's to be a great motivation for Antarctic exploration. “I declare the earth is hollow and habitable within,” Symmes declared, arguing of the entire globe “that it is open at the poles.”⁵ In 1873, the *Atlantic Monthly* could still argue the feasibility of this theory; only the Amundsen and Scott expeditions laid it to rest. Edgar Allan Poe was greatly fascinated with the hollow Earth idea of Symmes, and may have projected onto his global fantasy the tensions between North and South in the United States. Furthermore, Poe ends the travel narrative of Pym with a fictive

⁵ [3, 10, 18, 32 42, 47].

editor's framing note that associates the white-out of the South Pole with the black cavern of the inverted Eden he calls Tsalal, along with speculations on black-on-white scribbles that, we are given to understand, denote shade and darkness in esoteric languages. Beyond the model of *Gulliver's Travels* or similar fare, darkness here is interpolated with and dissolved in snow and ice, reminiscent of the allegorical complications of the whiteness of Melville's whale or of the albatross in so many stories. At this intersection of the trajectories of race and ecology we also find *Frankenstein*—where the hubris of creating life meets its double by in Walton's desire to “sate my curiosity with the sight of a part of the world never before visited.”⁶ As Shelley wrote, “What may not be expected in a country of eternal light? I may there discover the wondrous power which attracts the needle and may regulate a thousand celestial observations that require only this voyage to render their seeming eccentricities consistent forever.”⁷ Yet viewers of James Whale's classic horror films based on Shelley's *Frankenstein* realize that this landscape is by the same token one of eternal darkness, where proximity to one source of magnetism occludes the opposite, balancing pole.

A new media artwork that reflects on the peculiar fantasy of the pole as a seductive gravity well opening into the unknown is Ed Osborn's *Vortex* (2006).⁸ Osborn had already produced *Flyover* (2002), working with a sequence of aerial reconnaissance photographs produced in the early sixties to map the Antarctic continent, and the *Antarctic Images Project* for the 2002 Art & Industry Urban Arts Biennial, Christchurch, New Zealand, both as part of a series about Antarctica he calls *Anemomania*. His gravity well, *Vortex*, is an interactive sound installation that amplifies the motion of a small metal ball circling closer and closer around the hole at the bottom, representing the disorienting magnetic maelstrom that fertilized Poe's as well as Verne's polar imagination. As Osborn also points out, the metaphor was taken up in Stephen Pyne's description of Antarctica as an information sink – absorbing all sorts of speculative ideas about the polar region without reflecting them back. Osborn's mechanical rendering of the vortex metaphor tracks the ball with a camera while the sound renders the pull of the opening in the gravity well as what one might perceive as aural vertigo: and the more visitors surround the installation, the thicker the sound-mix to present a stronger gravitational force. Here, the force of the magnetic pole is visualized, but also enacted in the spatial register through acoustic means – as does another Antarctic new media artwork: Joe Winter's kinetic sound sculpture, *One Ship Encounters a Series of Notable Exceptions* (2006), sends a ship to explore the South Pole, navigating pack ice and being struck by heavy weather and lightning before discovering a “tropical island” in the Antarctic.⁹ Winter suspends a loop of magnetic audio tape in a transparent armature to produce three-dimensional line drawings that sound out as well as trace the imaginary polar exploration. And even Pynchon evokes the hollow earth theory with the

⁶ [43], p. 194. Coleridge and Poe personify the pole as an animal-lover, inhuman but nonetheless (selectively) protecting life.

⁷ [43], p. 1.

⁸ For Ed Osborn's work, see <http://www.roving.net> [September 2, 2007]; images courtesy of the New Zealand Antarctic Institute Antarctic Collection, University of Canterbury.

⁹ Joe Winter, see <http://www.severalprojects.com/beall>

fantasy of “a barbaric and unknown race, employed by God knows whom, are even now blasting the Antarctic ice with dynamite, preparing to enter a subterranean network of natural tunnels, a network whose existence is known only to the inhabitants of Vheissu, the Royal Geographic Society in London, Herr Godolphin, and the spies of Florence”.¹⁰ In yoking together exploration of natural resources with the chthonic fantasies that predate the industrial age, Pynchon layers his *V* not only with Victoria and Vesuvius, but with another potential meaning of Vheissu, which might taste to a Germanic tongue of *Verheissung* or promised land: “Having explored the volcanoes of their own region,” she went on, “certain natives of the Vheissu district were the first to become available of these tunnels, which lace the earth’s interior [...]” A few pages later, Godolphin even claims that he let the world believe that he had not made it to the Pole, and thus “had thrown away a sure knighthood, rejected glory for the first time in my career” in the name of the discovery of the secret of Vheissu.¹¹ For there, standing “in the dead center of the carousel,” he hoped, “at one of the only two motionless places on this gyrating world, I might have peace to solve Vheissu’s riddle.” The imagery of the invisible axis from pole to pole around which our planet revolves also requires us to complicate the topos of scientific hubris and of the techno-scientific attitude—the coldness of purported objectivity that Nietzsche already observed in the ascetic attitude of science, the merely descriptive mirror, in his time:

One observes a sad, stern, but resolute glance—an eye that looks far, the way a lonely Arctic explorer looks far (so as not to look within, perhaps? so as not to look back?...) Here is snow; life has grown silent; the last crows whose cries are audible here are called “wherefore?,” “in vain!,” “*nada!*”—here nothing will grow or prosper any longer.¹²

In the midst of industrial society, military tradition institutes what one might call a “cold culture.”¹³ In encouraging the hibernation of ego as the supposed guarantor of coherence, balance, and continuity, “cool conduct” enables the quick adaptation to rapidly changing situations, mastering the quick transformations and discontinuities of motion needed by the military.

A curious conspiracy theory, still extant on the internet, maintains that “Germany lost the European war in 1945 in order to win the South Polar one in 1947”.¹⁴ In this connection, it is often asserted that purported UFOs are not actually alien vessels, but Nazi flying saucers. Indeed some advanced German aircraft designs did actually reach the prototype stage in 1944 and 1945. However, it does not follow, as a few conspiracy theorists continue to allege, that leading Nazis were “able to escape the ruins of the Third Reich and continue their nefarious plans for world domination in the icy fastnesses of the Arctic and Antarctic”.¹⁵ But by the same

¹⁰ [38], p. 207.

¹¹ [38], p. 216.

¹² [35], p. 157 [III.26].

¹³ [30], p. 11.

¹⁴ <http://www.germanufochatter.com/Nazi-South-Polar-Base/index.html>

¹⁵ [1], chapter 8.

token, there can be no doubt that the power of flight changed not only the conduct of warfare, but also the very accessibility of the polar regions, as well as their visibility and traversability. The behaviorist Skinner was surely not the only one to start working towards a cybernetic integration of pilot training and automation: as he recalls in an autobiographical mode,

By the end of the 1930s the Nazis had demonstrated the power of the airplane as an offensive weapon. On a train from Minneapolis to Chicago in the spring of 1939, I was speculating rather idly about surface-to-air missiles as a possible means of defense. How could they be controlled? I knew nothing about radar, of course, but infrared radiation from the exhaust of the engines seemed a possibility. Was visible radiation out of the question? I noticed a flock of birds flying alongside the train, and it suddenly occurred to me that I might have the answer in my own research. Why not teach animals to guide missiles?¹⁶

Faithful to the basic axiom of science fiction that overcoming gravity equals overcoming the grave, Robinson 1998, although set in the near future, brings back the Zeppelin. Moreover, a stubbornly Germanic set of associations in Robinson’s novel (which reach from allusions to various Antarctic novels with Nazi characters to stump-speech condemnations of the global status quo as “Götterdämmerung Capitalism” to the protagonists’ names: particularly the tall and strong tour guide Val, as in Valkyrie) sits somewhat uneasily with the subplots of a Feng Shui expert delivering a live feed from the Antarctic, where X always marks the good spot. Despite some references to polar crossings in planes, for the most part flight is described as relatively primitive, as technically stopped right after the World War II. Other vehicles, from dog-sleds and ski to manned and unmanned ground vehicles, are described in his novel only in sepulchral tones, and again the history of Antarctic exploration delivers plenty of grisly frozen remains of failed transport. A curiously lutek utopia of going native in Antarctica is made possible by Germanic blimps: going forward by going back to the Nazi imaginary. And this may indeed be the strange loop inscribed in the continent of science: in the all-out science fiction effort to conquer the uninhabitable regions of the globe (and to exploit their natural resources), we still remain stuck in high modernity, forever between two World Wars.¹⁷

As has been repeated many times since Adorno, we tend to repress the shock and awe of the recent past only to see it return in the fantastic configurations of popular culture – what Rickels has called “the uncanny continuity that keeps us closer to Nazi Germany than we might like to be”.¹⁸ Thus “if crisis arrives to force you to live out the deepest scripts in you” (199), Robinson explicitly evokes the military ethos, and its related formations in the British public school and international boy scout ethos, as behavioral modifications that make Antarctic travel possible and survivable. This redeployment of military experience was certainly what pushed polar explorations in historical phases; for millions, the war was the site where human behavior was shaped

¹⁶ [44], p. 402.

¹⁷ [48], p. 1.

¹⁸ For details, see [39].

and transformed under the pressure of mortal danger. This heritage is not merely one of the British Empire: German artists of the early 20th century including Adolf Loos, Paul Klee, and Paul Scheerbart seized this idea of a new beginning; the cool persona was also celebrated and even adopted by artists such as Otto Dix, casting a merciless gaze back from the canvas, or George Grosz celebrating his own “pack-ice character,” or poets like Gottfried Benn proclaiming the necessity of putting moral criteria “on ice” so that one’s perception may be precise.¹⁹ In “Fatzter” and elsewhere, Bertolt Brecht portrayed military virtue, “born in the tank,” as the ability to discharge one’s duty and react quickly. Ernst Jünger’s construction of the worker melds the cool persona with the iron figure of the soldier in an amalgamation that regards industrial workers as metallized bodies.²⁰ Max Weber proposed defiant disenchantment as intellectual style, taking its cues from the Nietzschean polar explorer: “No summer’s bloom lies ahead of us, but rather a polar night of icy darkness and hardness, no matter which group may triumph externally now.”²¹ Our global heritage of two all-out efforts in war and science, namely the two World Wars, is clearly inscribed as science fiction mainstay, and a lot of science fiction set in Antarctica remains stuck on Nazi flying saucers.

Take the example of Andrew Farago’s webcomic “William Bazillion” for a recent example of digital culture reflecting on polar media through that particular lens; the serial is subtitled “The Race for Santa’s Nazi Gold”. The plot of this webcomic incorporates time travel and rapid cloning as well as interdimensional travel.²² Most of the action takes place on Svalbard, an archipelago in the Arctic Ocean half way between Norway and the North Pole. In the webcomic, Dale Warlock, an accountant, gives three boys quests: “the hunt for Santa’s Nazi gold”. It turns out that Günter Klaus, working for Santa Inc, wanted to turn Santa’s large toy factory into a munitions factory for the Germans in 1944. He received gold ingots as payment. But the weapons came too late to turn the war around. Klaus eliminated all Elves who knew. Or so he thought: one survived. Günter Klaus has an Arctic base, 750 miles from Svalbard. The accountant Dale is pitting teams of kid adventurers against each other, sending them all towards the North Pole. But on Svalbard, William Bazillion watches as the kids test Santa’s defenses: nutcracker robots attack, an interlude stars Franklin Delano Roosevelt assisted by a cossack named Konstantin and a nemesis called Max O’Millions the kid plutocrat... But despite the hodgepodge, the webcomic remains faithful to science fiction notions, above all to the idea of a doomsday device that could destroy all life on the Earth. It is with this twist that the history of polar media turns from Hitler studies to an ecological focus.

A few years ago, the UN Global Crop Diversity Trust built a “doomsday” seed bank in Svalbard (in cooperation with the government of Norway) to protect and preserve the biodiversity of the world’s crop varieties. The seed bank is a 120-meter tunnel on Spitsbergen cut into rock so as to securely freeze, as a kind of insurance against accident, mismanagement, equipment failure,

¹⁹ [30], p. 104-5.

²⁰ [30], p. 134 and passim.

²¹ [30], p. 43.

²² [19].

war or natural disaster, or due to a regional or global catastrophe, around 1,400 botanical repositories from around the world. Oddly, in the “William Bazillion” webcomic, Svalbard has a museum that is also a monastery, and in a nostalgic invocation of storage and preservation of culture, not just agriculture, it is the museum in the webcomic that includes the doomsday seed repository. It is hardly a coincidence that the Svalbard Global Seed Vault closely mirrors the Antarctic vault that contains the ancient alien virus around which the plot of the movie *The X Files* (1998, filmed in the hiatus between the TV show’s fourth and fifth seasons) revolves, a secret installation that in the end turns out to be a giant spaceship. Like the popular 1990s TV show, the movie revolves around an FBI special agent who seeks to unmask a vast conspiracy to hide the existence of UFOs and aliens who plan a terrifying way to eradicate the human race.

Switching polarity again from the Antarctic to its antipodean regions, in the webcomic “William Bazillion,” a doomsday weapon is triggered at the North Pole. The boys survive the doomsday weapon by hiding in the seed vault, since it is constructed to survive nuclear attack. They find five thousand people preserved there, too. Four copies each, one hundred and twenty people, among them Harry Belafonte, Ethel Merman, Liberace, and Peter Sellers – and it was of course Sellers whose star turn in Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb* (1964) revolves around the concept of a “doomsday device” that would be the ultimate deterrent against global thermonuclear war.²³ Richard Nixon is the villain in Farago’s webcomic “William Bazillion”; the boys find one of his tapes and play it, only to learn that Nixon had himself and a lot of pop culture figures from the 1970s cloned - that way he could survive in Svalbard. But then another Nixon attacks, and the accountant has to zap them all during tax time, while he is tallying how many side-kicks and Nixons his employer, William Bazillion, has gone through.

Svalbard is of course also featured as an important setting for major parts of the popular trilogy *His Dark Materials* (Pullman 2000) and the motion picture based on the first volume, *The Golden Compass* (2007).²⁴ – In a demonstration of the pop-cultural melting pot that is Wikipedia, Andrew Farago challenged the readers of his webcomic to insert a reference to “William Bazillion” in the online encyclopedia’s entry for Svalbard, promising a signed original drawing as a reward.²⁵ – In numerous

²³ Besides the title role, Sellers also played Group Captain Lionel Mandrake and President Merkin Muffley in the same film.

²⁴ [37] comes with a board game called “Peril to the Pole,” which is also mentioned in the story. In Stephenson 1999, two main characters, Andrew Loeb and Randy Waterhouse, team up to combine software design and historical scholarship in developing a fantasy role-playing computer game about life in the Arctic Circle. One example for a polar-themed game is Risk Devolution, an online game by Blizzard Entertainment featuring Svalbard, but there is a multitude of games set near the poles.

²⁵ See http://nice.purrsia.com/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic:f=28:t=001743 - as an aside, it might be noted that cartoon curator Farago’s name is certainly apt in the context of postmodern pastiche, since “farrago” means mixed fodder, hodgepodge. Nonetheless, there is also [19].

other contemporary products of popular culture, the polar regions have come to play major roles, particularly in conjunction with American fighting Nazis. In Chabon 2000, Joe Kavalier joins the Navy in December 1941, is stationed as radioman at Kelvinator Station in Antarctica, and monitors the Germans in Queen Maud Land. A German World War II connection is also perpetuated in potboilers by Cussler (1988, 1996, 1999, and 2001). For another handful of recent, popular polar fiction deploying Nazi myth, one might list Dietrich 1998, Farren 2002, or Henrick 1994.

But we will have to refrain from going through the entire library of thrillers and science fiction novels that have the Nazis escape to the South Pole: suffice it to say that esoteric Hitlerism and Nazi occultism was connected in a number of bizarre ways to the Arctic and Antarctic.²⁶ One of the most curious examples may be the German science fiction novel *A Star Fell From The Sky* (Dominik 1934), in which a German expedition to Antarctica deploys advanced technologies including jet propulsion and automatic steering to discover a meteorite full of gold, thus again giving rise to the suggestion that a secret Nazi base near the South Pole could be feasible.²⁷ Between 1946 and 1947, Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd worked on the US Navy Antarctic Developments Project, also known as Operation Highjump – ostensibly an exercise in polar combat, survival and exploration, yet conspiracy theorists like to insinuate that the operation was intended as an actual assault force on surviving Nazi forces in Antarctica. Allegedly, Admiral Byrd later told people that it would be necessary for the USA to take defensive actions against enemy air fighters which come from the polar regions, and that the USA could be attacked by fighters that are able to fly from one pole to the other with incredible speed.²⁸

Yet the redeployment at the turn of the 21st century is not always one of military personnel, as many of the earlier seafaring explorations were (particularly for the English Navy after the Napoleonic Wars), but just as often one of industrial resources, whereby the very remoteness, the lasting darkness, of Arctic and Antarctic is pictured, broadcast, webcast; whereby former Soviet icebreakers that threatened to become unsupportable on dwindling budgets are turned over to private enterprise as lucrative tourist vessels venturing into extreme regions. The US National Academy of Sciences asserts that “Polar regions play key roles in understanding impacts of ever-changing space weather on technologies for modern communication and power distribution.”²⁹ Howard Hughes’ obsession with the cold war thriller *Ice Station Zebra* (1968) looms large here, and “The Secret Land” (1948), a documentary on the secretive ‘Operation High Jump’ US Navy expedition led by Admiral Byrd, was the

²⁶ Compare [1] and [22].

²⁷ Coincidentally, Dominik was a boarding school student of science fiction pioneer Kurd Lasswitz; see [39] vol 3., p. 179f., on Dominik’s science fiction from the 1930s.

²⁸ It does not help that the MGM Technicolor documentary about the expedition, called *The Secret Land* (1948), is not only hampered by allegations of heavy-handed censorship, but also exceedingly difficult to find.

²⁹ “Rationale,” US Committee to the International Polar Year 2007–2008, <http://dels.nas.edu/us-ipy/rationale.shtml>.

first non-war-related film to win a Documentary Oscar.³⁰ Ready illustrations of this type of vested interest in polar regions range from the Distant Early Warning System, a series of Cold War era radar installations that Canada allowed the US to build in the Arctic Circle in the 1950s, to contemporary defense contractors retreating to the frozen wasteland of the Antarctic for weapons testing.³¹

3. POLAR IMAGINARY

A cursory appreciation of the popular imaginary of polar media, incorporated in Farago’s webcomic “William Bazillion” or in Robinson’s novel *Antarctica* by way of a post-modern pastiche, also requires parsing what is carried in films like *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *The Thing* (1982). Like adventure tourism to the North and South Poles, they illustrate what Robinson’s novel denotes as the purest form of escapism: “most people who came to Antarctica to do something hard came precisely because it was so much easier than staying at home and facing whatever they had to face there”.³² Howard Hawk’s 1951 film, *The Thing from Another World*, exposes scientists and soldiers to a destructive magnetic field after a recent meteor fell into the Arctic near an American early warning installation. At the site of the impact, they discover a flying saucer, which is destroyed in the attempt to recover it. But they manage to thaw out the alien pilot, and although some scientists initially argue for the preservation of alien life, the military eventually manages to destroy the Thing after it goes on a rampage.³³ As with most cold war horror, the implied moral is simplistic and xenophobic. Three decades later, John Carpenter’s remake of *The Thing* switches the polarity, not only by transferring the setting from the DEW Line near the North Pole to the Antarctic, but also by having only the Thing survive, substituting despair and paranoia for the jingoistic stance of the McCarthy era. Coming after the Korean and Vietnam War experiences, his film illustrates the impossibility of victory by exploiting a collective fear of a beast within man, marking the Antarctic as a profoundly alien space.³⁴ Here the

³⁰ [34] and [46] both revolve around satellite espionage: “The Russians put our camera made by our German scientists and your film made by your German scientists into their satellite made by their German scientists.” Department of Defense objections over the screenplay delayed the start of production for several years. [2] has an American spacecraft carrying a secret weapon crash-lands in Antarctica, and a British Intelligence officer is sent to retrieve the weapon.

³¹ [5] sends its protagonist five millennia back in time, where he meets the Antarkans. As commentators note, it is unusual for pre-World War II stories to mention atomic bombs; presumably the US government ignored such science fiction so that the Manhattan Project could continue in secrecy.

³² [41], p. 325.

³³ Only a few years after [7], the Antarctic ice released the bodies of three members of the 1845 expedition led by Sir John Franklin... See also the use of polar regions the *Transformers* movie (2007).

³⁴ [28], compare [6]. And [31] locates an entire two-million-year-old Antarctic megalopolis at an altitude of 23,570 feet. This nexus is of course a mark of science fiction going back all the way to Kurd Lasswitz’ *On Two Planets*.

Thing is a shape-shifter, first encountering the scientists investigating the fate of their Norwegian colleagues as a dog.

We may do well to remember this twist on the companion animal and emergency protein source for polar explorers – a chilly twist on how science maintains a tenuous hold on the inhospitable terrain. For while the “DEW line” was eventually replaced by satellites, there are at least 28 nations that maintain a regular human presence in the Antarctic, and dog patrols or dog-sled expeditions are the norm around the Arctic circle wherever politics and science are in play.³⁵ By the same token, cool conduct led to rising temperatures. You may feel it on your cheeks: climate change, if not shame. 2004 was the fourth hottest year ever recorded, and the past decade was the warmest since measurements began in 1861. Global surface temperature increased by more than 0.6C in the past century. The rate of change for the period since 1976 is roughly three times that for the past 100 years as a whole. As Robinson’s novel quietly insists, these facts will lead to much starker images than any floods movies may regale us with. Consulting the *RealClimate* website, browsing data compiled by the World Meteorological Organization, or consulting NASA reports, it becomes plain that the ice changes around earth’s frozen caps, and that sea levels are rising.³⁶ UNESCO urges us to consider species extinction, referring to its universal declaration on cultural diversity.³⁷ This concern for life on the planet should not merely extend to huskie heroics, melodrama displaced upon the sacrifice or consumption of man’s best friend, or to capturing the humanoid waddling of penguins. Where Coleridge and Poe personified the pole as an animal-lover, inhuman yet selectively protecting life, Robinson 1998’s final pages leave us with a decidedly more ambiguous vision – what emerges on the horizon after a synesthetic staging of Sibelius at sunrise performed by a “thawing orchestra” could be skuas, could be blimps. The sheer scale of the polar regions fuses landscape and technological sublime in our mediatic imagination, until it becomes clear that in a world of global positioning and technological constitution of vision and imagination, we can know these forbidding regions only through technology while yet defining them by an absence of technology – out of space, out of time.

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³⁵ [29].

³⁶ The Center for Astrophysical Research in Antarctica offers a virtual tour of the South Pole at <http://astro.uchicago.edu/cara/vtour/pole> [August 28, 2007].

³⁷ See the Arctic Climate Impact Assessment (ACIA) <http://www.acia.uaf.edu>, October 2004), as well as <http://realclimate.org>, <http://www.nasa.gov/vision/earth/lookingatearth/icecover.html>, http://www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/red_list_2004/Extinction_media_brief_2004.pdf, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001271/127160m.pdf>, <http://www.eia.doe.gov/oiaf/kyoto/kyotorpt.html>, <http://www.newscientist.com/article.ns?id=dn6816> [August 28, 2007].

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