LINES OF SITE

Don Hunter

In the beginning there was only darkness - long and perhaps cold - then a few lights began to appear. By 8am direct sunlight had reached the top of the mountain. Within two hours the place was a visual bustle. I could begin to imagine, to accelerate myself forward beyond that 'on screen' moment to a time when even more information would be revealed by the rise of the morning sun which might be warming the land. I scrolled the drop-down menu, clicking on 16.01 hours. A new image appeared; taken several days earlier and providing a further historical context to the view.

In my project I have been accelerating the verb (accelerate). In *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape Tourism and Identity*, Claudia Bell and John Lyall discuss our ever-accelerating access to landscape; a space ever-changing and dynamic, where all is provisional. To accelerate means to make quicker, to speed up process or access to information. Bell and Lyall define an acceleration of the touristic sublime, whereby we are no longer passive observers of the landscape but are rather active participants in an active environment. In the preface they write:

> In this discussion the authors locate landscape as a dynamic, not static, arena. Ecotourism and adventure tourism are practices that (re)activate the sublime. The participants, descendants of grand tourists viewing the 'sublime' landscape, no longer meander but accelerate through an increasingly compressed and hyperinscribed space.[1]

Acceleration in the context of my own research refers to the speeding up of information accessibility and delivery through such conduits as the worldwide web and the visitors' information centre. I will return to the term "landscape" later.

THE REAL

I'm also thinking about the 'real' in the sense that I am using web-generated images as a predictor of the future, accelerating a distant topography coming ever closer. I want to know what the weather will do and how it may feel against my body. 'Real', as my body knows cold, heat, rain and wind through the sense of touch. 'Real', as I look at webcamera images to help me imagine how my body might behave. My initial research had the 'real' and 'imagined' in two separate but interrelated camps, now I am not so sure anymore as I attempt to interpret historical images, forecast mappings and my own bodily experiences. Where does time exist in this continuum as I look at yet another website that feeds me a so-called 'real time' image that even allows me to move the camera from several hundred kilometers away to get a wider visual description of what the weather is doing. The experience of web technology and bodily experience becomes a relationship of accelerated interfaces: web camera, computer monitor, eyes, skin and imagination. I feel, I understand, I see, I imagine, I understand, I try to cross-reference this understanding by visiting another interface, this time a weather prognosis is viewed, looking forward rather than backwards.

Talking about 'topography' immediately raises the question of definition. The Princeton University online lexical database describes 'topography' as "the configuration of a surface and the relations among its man-made and natural features."[2] So, if we take this definition and tease it out a little we can surmise that topography is about a series of relationships between various objects; objects that when viewed through our eyes become a set of interrelated or configured objects. These relationships exist even if we cannot see them manifest on paper or screen as they nonetheless exist as concepts or codes of behaviour (I will also return to codes of behaviour later). The historical webcamera image and the weather prognosis image act as visual prompts to help me recall and predict. They produce a bodily topography that is not fixed, not even fixed in time but ever-shifting and negotiable.

I am creating through my action and imaging what the author Edward Tufte calls a "confection". In *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* Tufte writes:

> And a confection is an assembly of many visual events, selected (at the red dots, for example) from various Streams of Story, then brought together juxtaposed on the still flatland of paper. By means of a multiplicity of image-events, confections illustrate an argument, present and enforce visual comparisons, combine the real and the imagined, and tell us yet another story.[3]

The various interfaces I engage with create an information system, a network for access to one of our major National Parks, Aoraki/Mount Cook, a topography or a confection with no fixed frame but flexible, negotiable and ever-shifting with our society – yet decidedly fixed to the planet.

An information system or network mediates entry into a particular space. Mediation in this context works on several levels. Firstly, on a practical level, mediation enables access to web-based technology. One must have economic access to the interface – to a personal computer that is web-capable and connected to a 'user pays' internet provider. Computer literacy enables the next level of access, and once gained allows us to search with ease. The second level of mediated entry involves an applied practice or codes of behaviour through knowledge gained, perhaps from online information providers. These codes of behaviour allow the visitor to conduct themselves in a socially safe and acceptable manner whilst in Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park.

THE INFORMATION CENTRE (MEDIATION)

The building known as the Interpretive or Information Centre at Aoraki/Mount Cook is also a mediated entry point to the park where one's experience of nature is accelerated. The information centre is much more formal and explicit when compared with the internet where the range of sites vary from official governmental to commercial through to private individuals posting images of their holidays.

On one level a visitor's centre is designed to allow the visitor to experience a park from within a building as if through a portal. Portals here are referenced from three perspectives. A portal in an information technology sense is a customised set of online search engines, browser interfaces and databases designed for a specific audience or client base or to disseminate information on behalf of the host in ways favourable to the host's agenda. In a fictional sense, portals may offer an interface between two different locations, for example one can step through a mirror or looking glass as Alice did in Wonderland, and seemingly enter another world. In an architectural sense a portal can be a doorway or gateway, perhaps of monumental proportions, through which one passes perhaps to receive enlightenment or information as is the case at Aoraki/Mount Cook.

Figure 1: Aoraki/Mount Cook Visitors' Centre (photograph by the author).

The Information Centre houses a description of why Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is important from a sociocultural perspective, describing significant legends and stories associated with the area including important dates concerning development. A natural history is created through the use of stuffed animals, both native and introduced.

Figure 2: Possum (detail), Aoraki/Mount Cook Visitors' Centre (photograph by the author).

A large diorama describes the physical geography of the surrounding park. One can move around and traverse the diorama while pressing illustrated information panels that in turn illuminate LED lights embedded at the corresponding locations. The visitor can travel over the landscape as if in a plane, marking off the points of interest deemed to be worthy of note as they activate the little red LED cairns.

Figure 3: Diorama (detail), Aoraki/Mount Cook Visitors' Centre (photograph by the author).

Figure 4: Aoraki/Mount Cook: a Mediated View; *en route* between Aoraki/Mount Cook Village and Twizel (photograph by Ana Terry).

The Visitors' Centre tour of Aoraki/Mount Cook (like my visit from the comfort of my laptop) becomes a virtual experience, except that from the Visitors' Centre one can purchase a t-shirt to say one has visited one of our great National Parks.

BEING THERE

How did I get there? I travelled to Aoraki/Mount Cook through my computer screen which protected me from the physical trials and tribulations of travel overland whilst accelerating the park experience. The screen mediated my experience. The information accessed was mediated; my view was limited by the search engines available, and of course by the authors of the websites visited. My wallet is a keen mediator, not so fond of spending too much on a broadband connection and even less fond of shelling out dollars by subscribing to 'user pays' weather information. This is my portal: a creation of computer interface and selected 'bookmarks' saved to my 'Safari' web browser.

Actual visitors to the information centre have had their journey mediated too. Most obvious is the screen that has framed their entire journey, sheltering them from the elements – the contemporary windscreen allows an air conditioned traverse, high speed, along paths of asphalt (another mediator) passing through extremes of temperature well beyond the human body's ability to survive unprotected by clothing or machine for as long as the journey takes. Their view is continuously refreshed – not in a static sense as I experience it through the computer screen, but in a provisional sense – as they, the screen and the viewer, accelerate through the environment. The clear expanse of asphalt with roadsides cleared of vegetation provide a perfect foreground, accelerated so fast as to be blurred to allow the viewer to focus on and consume the magnificent middle and far distance: Aoraki/Mount Cook.

ART

My current art practice engages with the ideas referred to above. From a personal perspective, I am interested in territories relevant to leisure theory within Aotearoa/New Zealand; specifically in the spatial and organisational relationships we have with Aoraki/Mount Cook. Through performative engagement, through sculpture and moving image, I am questioning social and political constructs concerning access, or mediation of entry. I am interested in the various networks that exist to allow me remote access to Aoraki/Mount Cook. If we take the webcam at Aoraki/Mount Cook Village for example, I, like potentially millions of others, receive the image that has been generated from a camera at Aoraki/Mount Cook Village looking north towards Aoraki/Mount Cook (the mountain). What constitutes the room where the camera is sited? What else goes on in there? What sort of camera and computer are used in it? Who programmed these to take an image every two hours and send it down the copper-wire and fibre-optic network? What of the stories of those who laid those cables digging through the layers of road? Whose

property is this network running across, and how is the physical geography negotiated? I have accessed this website from overseas and wondered if the images came to me via the vast worldwide submarine telecommunications network of copper-wire and fibre-optics or if I viewed Aoraki/Mount Cook via satellite transmitters and receivers. Who made those, and what are their stories? Have these accelerated images in fact broken down social networks on a local level in favour of accelerated networking from a distance?

Figure 5: Swampy Summit I, line of sight *en route* between Dunedin City and Aoraki/ Mount Cook (photograph by the author).

Figure 6: Swampy Summit II, line of sight *en route* between Dunedin City and Aoraki/ Mount Cook (photograph by the author).

Figure 7: Swampy Summit III, line of sight *en route* between Dunedin City and Aoraki/ Mount Cook (photograph by the author).

In response to these questions I have undertaken the task of creating my own network to accelerate the experience of seeing Aoraki/Mount Cook in real time from Dunedin city.

SPEED

In this context I need to define 'real time'. To do this I use the parameter of the speed of light, or the time it takes for light to travel from Aoraki/Mount Cook to Dunedin. This is not quite instant but as close as we can get for such a short distance, hence the term 'real time'. The speed of light is approximately 300,000 kilometres per second.[4] For an image to be received in Dunedin from Aoraki/Mount Cook we are looking at approximately .0,000,002 of a second – that's quite fast!

To receive a 'true' (rather than mediated, or rather less mediated) image of Aoraki/Mount Cook in real time I propose building a series of mirrored repeater stations. The image received here in Dunedin will have been transmitted via this network of mirrored repeater stations. The repeater station site locations have been chosen on account of the need to navigate a clear line of sight around the physical geography of the land between Dunedin and Aoraki/Mount Cook. Obviously the mirror in this context still acts as a kind of mediator, as the image is reflected from mirror to mirror across the land and as close to real time as I can get.

The parameters of real time having been established, the next big issue is one of perspectival distance. Aoraki/ Mount Cook is New Zealand's tallest mountain standing at 3764 metres. However, when seen from a distance of some 300 kilometres it appears to shrink. I have calculated the perceived height of Aoraki/ Mount Cook as seen from Dunedin as being .005mm high. So what we will see is a very small image. I am working with a team to resolve this issue so we can receive a somewhat larger image (real size would be ideal but a bit beyond the scope of my

project). However, we are working on using magnifying lenses at the repeater stations to enhance the image size.

LANDSCAPE

So, in the process of constructing the repeater stations, and imaging their impacts, I have started to form a new physical network across the land. But more importantly, in a social sense this network forms a landscape. This is a new landscape that overlaps and is part of the existing landscape. My current project has led me to the first time I have directly used the word 'landscape'. Until now I have used the term 'land' to mean land as an object – existing in its own right with no social or cultural territorialising of that space. The way in which I now use the word 'landscape' is in terms of a constructed space, where layers of meaning exist and can be manifest as mapped. In *Landscape, Defence and the Study of Conflict*, John Gold and George Revill describe a perception of landscape:

> We may think of individual 'landscapes' as being comprised, partial, contested and only provisionally stable as modes of ordering the world and our engagement with it. If so, this suggests that we should not think of individual landscapes as discrete pieces of territory because they are supported by, and help to sustain, the interests of mere sections of any given society. Alternatively, we might think of landscapes as being formed in relation to other landscapes and conceptions of landscape. In that case, perhaps also we should base our analysis in terms of the interconnectedness of landscape, its links with other landscapes, other geographies.[5]

Gold and Revill are writing an introduction to a collection of essays on landscapes of defence. Defence calls for a hardening of space and a reinforcement of boundaries where provisionality is tied to occupation. In this context, the map is a set of ideas, a topography, confection or network; the physical attributes become almost a secondary consideration – a site on which to build. Such building may involve a set of ideas experienced without necessarily entailing direct physical engagement with a landscape.

I will now return to Aoraki/Mount Cook as a site. In summary, I could suggest Aoraki/Mount Cook holds nothing inherently special in its own right. However, through a process of determining Aoraki/Mount Cook becomes defined as a space or set of ideas. Such a set of ideas involves multiple layers of networks on, around and through which we can create our own sense of what we value in and about Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park. Complicit in this creation are codes of behaviour. The confection I am creating is by no means conclusive or definitive; this is not my intent. What I am creating in my project is a snapshot, a multiplicity of image events brought together for a moment in time in imaging Aoraki/Mount Cook as both an object and a site around which to create an image event.

Don Hunter works with industrial strength kinetic sculpture. He pursues and investigates the idea of function in his machines until it reaches the absurd. He thinks about power relationships, and the cultural and social impact of subverting factory standards. His inventions are perverse and willful; very often the idea of an operator is completely redundant. His slightly demented inventions promise action but seldom deliver what might reasonably be expected. During his fine arts study he undertook an exchange at Utrecht School of the Arts in the Netherlands, where he also exhibited. He is currently researching towards an MFA at Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin, New Zealand, where he is also employed as a lecturer in the Design Department. Don – collaborating with Ana Terry – is one of two 2008-9 William Hodges Fellows at the Southland Museum and Art Gallery in Invercargill.

1 Claudia Bell and John Lyall, *The Accelerated Sublime: Landscape Tourism and Identity* (Westport: Praeger,2002), xii.
2 GA Miller, http://www.wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn. Last accessed on 25 October, 2007.
3 Edward Tufte, *Visual Explanations: Images and Quantities, Evidence and Narrative* (Cheshire: GraphicsPress,1997), 121.
4 MV Goldman, Physics-2000 http://www.colorado.edu/physics/2000/waves_particles/lightspeed-1.htm. Last accessed on 27 October, 2007.
5 Don Mitchell, "Cultural Landscapes: The Dialectical Landscape – Recent Landscape Research in Human Geography", *Progress in Human Geography*, 26 (3), 2002: 381-389.