

# digital landscape and nature-morte

"Reinventing the Medium" - AAANZ Melbourne Conference 8 December 2006

Sean Cubitt

Susan Collins' *Glenlandia* (and its immediate predecessor *Fenlandia*) employs a webcam on location feeding a plasma screen with a resolution of 320 x 240. The pixels arrive at one per second. It takes 76,800 seconds to complete an image, 21.33 hours, just under a day. Chances are that there will be a dark area of night (though Collins reports instances of a smear of moon across a night-time sky) and inexplicable artefacts, pixels of intense and unexpected colours appearing day or night, perhaps starlight or some unwitting creature flitting across the field of view. Hovering between photograph and moving image, the slow accrual of image, the slow erasure of the previous picture, make this in some interesting ways exemplary of the capacities of digital media, in particular some aspects of referentiality, and most specifically, in the first instance, the question of the representation of time.

While landscape art has long addressed space, the increasingly ecological understanding of the pastoral requires another understanding of the green world, as the repository of a necessary time, a physical law, typically the second law of thermodynamics which observes the universe's tendency towards equilibrium. This is the famous law according to which time has a direction, dictated by the gradual erasure of difference and therefore of potential energy. Thus the second law abstracts time and makes it integral to the universe, not just to our experience of it. The necessity of time takes it out of the domain of the rational, insofar as reason is a quality of human beings. Natural law negates freedom, and in particular of that freedom from necessity which constitutes the human will in Kant, and the grounds of ethical decision-making in the Kantian Enlightenment.

Kant's moral philosophy rests on an antinomy between the laws of nature on the one hand, and freedom as the ability to instigate an action which is not caused by them on the other, even though the act itself and its consequences must abide by those physical laws.

Thus Kant can argue that freedom is rooted in causality; that both abject obedience to nature and absolute freedom would produce chaos; and that order depends paradoxically on the restraining power of freedom over the blind determination of physics. In the transcendental aesthetic, the aporia in the moral philosophy begins to emerge. Time, along with space and distinct from it for perhaps the first time, is always *a priori*, given for all human actions. The determinate nature of human actions as actions in time is always circumscribed by the physical law of time. What we do is free to the extent that it is not determined, and yet as deed is *a priori* a temporal act and to that extent constrained to occur within a regime whose structure is always already given in advance. The problem is compounded by the fact that both freedom and necessity in the form of the a prioris and of natural laws are universals. As Adorno observes, there is however a hierarchy: natural law is subaltern to freedom, but freedom is nonetheless constrained to obey it. It is as if, Adorno concludes, there is not enough causation to go round.

There is a certain analogy with this problem in the concept, already very old in the Western tradition, that time is in some way excluded from art. Art's freedom, not least in the Kantian sense of a freedom from human interests, belongs with its curious and multiple statuses in time. To take the oldest first, there is the ancient belief that deeds and words might secure a place for themselves and perhaps for their makers in immortality. Action and speech, as Hannah Arendt argues, were for the ancient Greeks the one way to secure a bulwark against death. Intriguingly, she also argues that this immortality, to the extent that it requires witnesses, is the grounds of human society. Though the ancients excluded from immortal acts the practice of art (as a demeaning activity pursued by artisans and slaves), the yearning to secure immortality through art is audible in the poets, in Ronsard for example at the dawn of the modern period, and in Michelangelo's sonnets. And yet by the time of Shakespeare's sonnets, immortality had somehow shrunk in its dimensions, shrunk in fact to the scale of posterity. The future would judge: our acts, our verses, our loves, and our art. The Romantic movement began to posit another possibility, an existence beyond time, an ahistorical, asocial and strictly speaking anaesthetic sublime. The sublime work would exit the human world, and indeed the world of natural order, and in doing so reconcile the impossible antinomies of Kantian freedom and necessity by negating both in a single act that saw the world and its temporalities well lost for art.

In some respects the concept of the image that pervades Western art history has to do with this exception from the rule of time. Some years ago in Germany I met a group of art

historians who had spent decades on the image. Confronted in a conference by film and video artists and scholars, they had a profound question for us. After all this time, they said, we have a fundamental idea of what an image is. We can even contemplate the complexity of a diptych. But for us the idea of a *moving* image is absurd, denying the fundamental unity which they ascribed to the image as concept and as phenomenon.

Unity of the image, a unity which is dependent on its discretion, that is to say its quality of being apart from the world, presumes a certain temporality. The image, something like Memling's *Portrait of a Man*, is whole and entire unto itself. It passes through the centuries with its contemplative silence entirely internal to itself. This is not necessarily the organic unity of the Romantics: rather the idea of an image which exists exclusively inside the boundaries of its own extension, and which is unique in the Aristotelean sense that it is identical with itself, and is not something other than itself. The moving image of course does not have this character. It is always on the brink of disappearance, if considered as a stream of still images, or alternatively it is never self-identical to the extent that it is always in process of becoming something other than itself. There is always the possibility that a moving image (a video or film) is whole, entire and self-identical within the boundaries of its duration, but since every screening is subtly different from its predecessors, its unity remains in question. There is something admirable about such a faith in the sublimity of images: in their abstraction from the laws of physics and of freedom, whose intertwining is the process we call history. I envy it as I envy religious belief: the kind of certainty that makes life bearable. Yet at the same time, as with religious belief, I find that certainty unbearable, and worse than that, dangerous. To know what is the case with such absolute assurance is a curse.

And so we have to wonder about what other temporalities occur within and beyond the image: the times of its making and restoration, the times of its decay, the times intrinsic to its occupancy of space where elements respond to one another, and the times of its appreciation. An image as brief as a photograph, say Arno Fischer's 1953 *Wedding*, which might fit the definition of a work which contains in itself the reasons why it is so and not otherwise, is nonetheless a temporal experience, as your eye finds the hairline crack that fissures the wall through the occupied window, snaking through the textured brick like slow lightning; or takes in the unoccupied hole in the wall, half like a door, but a door to what? The enigma of the image is itself a temporal phenomenon, an experience of withheld explanation, and of an explanation that, with the years, becomes ever less recuperable. We

have no guarantee that the building still exists, still less the man whose face emerges startled into the sunlight, nor can we ever recapture that explicit moment in which the light falls just so and not otherwise. Some loss must always accompany instantaneity.

The appreciation not just of a particular image but of whole media of imaging change with time. The meaning of oil painting is no longer the same as it once was, nor even the meaning of photomechanical media.

Susan Collins' work seems to me to speak to these temporalities very directly. Here the pixels that arrive, one by one, have the quality of angels, the messengers between irreconcilable realms. The quanta of light converted to electronic impulses, and reconverted in the plasma screen, translate light from the natural to the artificial realm, in a process established by an act of freedom, but one that submits itself willingly to the laws of physics, and to processes at the brink of human understanding, certainly that of most of its viewers. Like angels, the conversions between zones of the electro-magnetic spectrum occupy a third space which is neither the natural landscape nor the human audience, a zone of *techne*, where machines perceive, rather than human beings. Angelic, the pixel announces only truth, but in languages that are not, or only residually, human. To this extent, *fenlandia* and its more recent companion piece *Glenlandia* belong in a relatively recent landscape tradition for which the landscape is in some sense its own message.

Altdorfer's *St George in the Forest* for example holds in its complex times the wilderness of the Schwarzwald, the short vista of farmland, and beyond it the mountain wilderness as an allegory of life – as Dante would find himself halfway through this our mortal life in a dark forest, or as Dürer would portray in *The Knight, Death and the Devil* the *vita activa* as a pilgrimage through a thorny, rocky, unconsolably fallen world. How different from Breughel's so much more secular *Hunters* whose landscape, barring the distant fantastic outcrops to the upper right is entirely humanised: farmed, fenced, owned – everything but four birds, one of them hurling itself into space. Somehow that bird seems to voice in its cruciform glide an other world that borders on this winter. If such a thought meandered through the painter's head as he applied the pigments, undoubtedly it would have been, as with Altdorfer, a Christian allegory he intuited, but for us it is (also) the peculiar freedom of flight, a freedom to inhabit worlds other than our own that are entirely this-worldly and yet not ours, nor controllable by men any more than the snow (My Fijian taxi driver in Wellington 7.12.06 told me that as a child, the presence of stormy petrels overhead when they flew their kites betokened an arriving typhoon: who is to say this bird does not speak of some other lost meteorological wisdom?). The crags in the distance, we realise, are a con-

tinuation of the wilderness from which the hunters return to the bosom of the social with their dogs; the birds are not so much free, then, as the spirit of what in the green world – mountain, soil, river and sea – is not human. Breughel's winter landscape, for all its evidence of settlement, can stand for a quality of much, perhaps most landscape art, the quality of addressing in one mode or another the difference of nature, or more generally *physis* from the social world. The hunters in Breughel's canvas also move, like the artist, between *physis* and *polis*. Unbent, nonetheless the precisely observed tramp through the snow from woods to valley is clearly work. The passage between worlds takes energy; it also takes time.

*Fenlandia* has particular resonance for me: these fens were the kinds of countryside I grew up in, the meres and holts, the lone telegraph pole athwart a horizon that stretches to the sky's rim, the luminescence of the fenland evening. I recall the particular electric aquamarine and emerald tones between the night sky and dawn towards the upper edge of the lit area. Nostalgia, especially when it is literally a longing for home, is the model for this kind of narrative journey: in that the longed for destination is impossible – a longing not just for a place but for how it was in the unvisitable past. The privilege of recognising the depicted world dissolves, its claim to truth partial as both memory and representation are partial; fictive to the extent that remembering and narrating are storyteller crafts; and its truth dependent on a communication which can only be grounded in analogy and similarity, not identity. Unlike truth, that idealist concept, that religious certainty, knowledge, and communication too, take time. Like anyone else I must find mysterious the cloud beside the telegraph pole: what could hold its form or some form in time for so long, two hours perhaps, the form of a flocking of birds or of smoke in a still sky?

Or some pixellated artefact of fogging on the webcam lens? Though the instant of its arrival is 'real time' – that is, subject to the universal constant of the speed of light, and determined by the distance and electrical qualities of the system it travels through to arrive on screen – the map of the field of light before the webcam is repetitive, but in two modes: one the repetition of the act of sampling, one repeating the cell as form in which the light is registered. That each arriving pixel overwrites its predecessor is in turn a third mode of repetition. Recall that the fens themselves are a doubled landscape: once marshland bogs that the last Saxons used as a base to attack the invading Normans, they were drained in the 18th century to become some of the richest farmland in Europe. There is no simple truth in these entirely artificial landscapes

A similar landscape temporality appears in Monet's repetitive practice of cycling through canvases to capture the precise fall of light over his plane trees at Epte in 1881. Consider the ordered planting that defines their serpentine passage through the image, tracing a history of plantation dating back to Colbert, a deeply practical as well as charming improvement to the land. Like Monet's series, Collins' work placidly observes the rain of light. For neither project is there any chance of exactly the same light effects occurring twice, nor any possibility of completion. Collins' installations last for weeks, and could continue indefinitely. The repetition of time is its own mystery, and as installed, or streamed in a small window on Collins' website, the arrival of each pixel brings with it a sense that to sample the world, much as Monet undertook, is both homage and submission to cyclical times that logically and biologically precede the human. What makes it different is the automation. What the automation achieves is not the end of aura, far from it in the case of these landscapes now endowed with their own *haecceitas*, but the end of allegory: a permission won to present the landscape under its own guise, with no need to rehearse its divine or secular meaning.

The French term for still life, *nature morte*, must have some intellectual as well as etymological root in those Dutch still lives in which the appearance of fish emblematised sexual deprecation, plucked fowl recalled the inevitability of death, and glistening fruit reminded of the decay that follows perfect beauty. In Cézanne's still lives, something else seems to occur, which may illuminate the restless incapacity of Collins work to exhaust its object. Who can miss the sensuality of the fruit, the open necks of the jars, the folds as of a rumped bed. Yet the apples of Cézanne are also strangely dislocated, in ways quite different to the way the neck of the green vase is tilted towards the picture plane. Each is bounded by dark bands of paint, each fruit discrete, marked off as separate from its fellows as if forbidden to touch. The sensuality of each fruit is bound within its own circle, a stack of strangers. The *nature morte* no more than the landscape needs no allegory, finally, to admit to necessity, the necessity in this case as in Monet's of the intervention of the artist in the process of the art. Sagely, Adorno observes in the *Aesthetic Theory* that, since we live in an age in which the social construction of the individual, while merely a construct, is nonetheless the hallmark of the social, then art must respond not only by picturing the world but by doing so through the necessary lens of individuality. After allegory, the individuality of the act of perceptio and translation replaces meaning as the passage between landscape and art. In the process, however, the art opens itself up to the critique that the cult of

the personality has brought about the end of nature, subsuming the green world in the artifice of the individual.

Entirely forgivable, entirely condonable, yet the artist's eye and manner with her medium will always intervene. After Marx however, and perhaps one should add after Freud and Nietzsche, it is no longer possible to consider the individual as the site of freedom. On the contrary, necessity marks our conscious and unconscious moves, our most intimate and most public actions. Ideology, the unconscious and the legacy of history constrain and shape what it is we can make of the world. To escape that, art turned towards automatism in many guises over much of the last hundred years, from pointillism to John Cayly's poetic software. The camera was a new tool in this. The digital camera as much so, and most of all when re-engineered to gather its light one photon at a time.

What makes this different from the mortal nature of the old still life, or the dead nature of the individualist variant, as much as from both the allegorical and the phenomenological legacies of landscape art, and what marks Collins off from landscape photography, is her engagement with the landscape through the medium of the machine she has designed. No one screen's gathering of light conforms to any one experience of the place it images. To some extent, as one feels sometimes with Corot, the image betrays what no-one wants or should want to see. What distinguishes it from Cézanne's still life, to make another pass at the issue, is the agreement to admit that unwanted into the image, the decision not to exercise freedom, nor even to be that individual through whom the world speaks, but to begin another dialogue, in which the green world tells its tale to a machine, and it is the machine that speaks.

In a society which in the course of its history has grown so large that there is no place for the ancients' immortality, action has become a matter of statistical probability. In many respects digital sampling corresponds all too well to the aesthetics of the probable, an aesthetic which we tell ourselves is brutally mechanical. And yet it is people who have become multitude, the statistical aggregate that shoals together and in which Hardt and Negri see the emergence of a new, post-individualistic and post-mass politics. We make art now not for eternity or for future generations but for the people who live with us today, scarcely daring to believe that if the species survives at all, the survivors will have any better idea than we did of the value of what we made. If a statistical sample of people now like our work well enough, well and good. And yet: the image is unstill because the world is unstill; because the mechanical eye that scans it is all too perceptive, and can see not only across light years and in spectra that escape human vision, but into time as an accumulation of change, and a field of unforeseeable and innocent events.

The sacrifice of Kantian freedom requires an other ethics, The tree to the left of the webcam was lopped before the end of the installation at Ely: but since the point of the installation is not recording but live translation (a bringing rather than a 'mission' or sending across), there is no record of the event. Collins strikes prints from the stream of screens, but they have a very different status, more closely related to the history of printmaking, attached to the traditions in which an engraving or lithograph derived from an actual artwork establishes itself as an autonomous work, or as Whistler's Thames engravings work a different aesthetic between observation of an extended moment in time and its spatialisation in a print. In the installed works, the angel of technology mediates between two antagonists, the human world and the natural, and in so doing becomes a partner in the dialogue. The quantum-current-quantum flow depends upon both the laws of physics and the political organisation of power supplies. Equally the human experience of the art depends upon the presence of the landscape at the remote location, and the complex of physical law and embedded ingenuity that comprises the technological apparatus. The power and therefore the ethics devolve then perversely enough on the lack of dependence of nature, which in the fens in an extreme example depends on the continuing functioning of a centuries old technological apparatus of dykes and locks, but is otherwise not dependent on the humans who, in this remove, observe it and leave no footprints. The lost tree suggests that the relationship is entirely negative: humans can be relied on only to damage. Collins' partnership with the technological angel may indicate that the ethical onus lies on the human, after meaning, after individuality.

We may need to understand something else about the deaths – among them the deaths of meaning and nature – surrounding the secularisation of the nature morte, and its reinvention in the technological mediation of Collins' work. Marx also observed that factory technologies embedded in themselves the skills of dead labour, so much so that the terms 'fixed capital' and 'dead labour' are interchangeable in the latter pages of the *Grundrisse* and throughout *Kapital*. The idea is not so new: it is visible in Maori culture and presumably other traditional cultures, where various tools and techniques are associated with specific, named ancestors. Technology is to modernity what the ancestors are to tradition: a repository of the dead, a medium through which their actuality as completed lives can be reverted into the potentiality of new generations. In technologies like Collins' webcam, the dead become again virtual, the energy that opens infinite possibilities at the moment when the apparatus blinks on. The unforeseeable nature of what they will produce in their new

network form is evidence that what governs here is not mortality but what Arendt names 'natality', the indefinite potential of the infant child to become anything, anything whatever. The submission of *Fenlandia* to both land and machine is then a natal strategy. Dependent on the death of nature as it is on the deaths of the ancestors, this technology designed to remove individuality from human contemplation of landscape. This apparatus delineates a new temporality because it articulates the possibility of a dialogue between the anonymous ancestors and the always vanishing, damaged green world, a dialogue on which we eavesdrop in search of new potential futures. It is a new temporality in particular, because it abandons the appeal to immortality (the sublime) or the future (romanticism) in favour of finding its ethical ground in the present and its negotiation. As potential, the future is no longer remote but immanent, product of a new sociality of physis, techne and polis which is only now emergent, whose freedom is produced specifically in its interdependence, and whose prenatal ultrasound scans appear in works like *Fenlandia*.