***Mediations of Xinjiang: For an aesthetic politics***

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ABSTRACT:

Zhang Qian's second century BCE reports on his travels through what is now the Northwestern Chinese province of Xinjiang begin two millennia of mediations of this large and fraught region. This consideration of mediations of landscape starts from Tsui Hark's film *Seven Swords*, looking back to drawing and photography, and forward to geographic information systems and financial software, each giving their own, often complex, accounts of the land. This history, and the multiplicity of contemporary practices, raises the question of subjectivity: of who or what expresses and who or what observes or understands these layers of mediation, representation and communication, in the past or today. I argue that, for ecocritique in the age of terracide, aesthetics is not merely symptomatic or ideological: it is the one sure ground for a new politics.

KEYWORDS:

Xinjiang, ecocritique, mediation, Tsui Hark, mass image, data visualisation, aesthetics, aesthetic politics

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***Mediating Xinjiang: For an aesthetic politics***

In the case of landscape, it is always a question not of what, but of how we know. I have never visited Xinjiang, and very possibly never will. I wanted to choose somewhere I had never been. I do not want the fog of reality to obscure my view of landscape mediations. Very possibly it is impossible anyway to view a landscape without ingrained cultural frames impinging, but this time I wanted to disembarrass myself of any temptation to truth. For the people who live there, the experience of place is al too real. The risk of orientalising is clear: in fact it is one of the objects of this paper to expose how the Romantic and imperialist modes of orientalism that Said (1976) addressed have moved towards new forms of cartography and datra visualisation. I am not trying to uncover a truth beyond our ways of picturing but something else: not the politics of place but the politics of how we mediate place, or fail to.

The Qing dynasty took almost seventy years to complete the conquest of Xinjiang in the far North West of China, a province split by the Tian Shen mountains. North is the Turpan Depression, largely Uighur and Muslim, south lies the traditionally Tibetan Buddhist Tarim basin, at its heart the Taklamakan desert and beyond it the Himalayas. Its importance then and now came from its strategic position on the Silk Road, and since the nineteenth century its fossil fuel deposits, including a fifth of China's coal. The setting of Liang Yusheng's 1955 *wuxia* novel *Seven Swords*, Xinjiang province remains rebellious, turbulent and strategic. Mass immigration of Han Chinese following major investment in the hydrocarbon economy since the 1990s has caused considerable friction (Millward 2007: 285ff): two hundred died in riots following a clampdown prior to the Beijing Olympics. Nonetheless, Tsui Hark shot his 2005 film adaptation of *Seven Swords* largely on location in Xinjiang with an almost exclusively Han cast.

A Google Earth satellite image gives some sense of the scale and emptiness of the place: a million and a half square kilometres, bigger than the UK, France, Germany and Spain added together, with a population less than a tenth of theirs at just over nineteen million in the 2000 census. The topography, suggestive of ancient oceans, explains both the desert depressions (the second lowest place on Earth as well as the second highest lie in Xinjiang) and the huge deposits of fossil fuels. After burning for a hundred and thirty years, the Liuhuanggou coalmine fire that started in 1874 was finally extinguished in 2004 (Wozniak 2013). Seven other major colliery fires in Xinjiang continue burning, and though the figures are controversial, a Xinhua report from 2004 estimated the burning coal from this one fire alone "emitted 100,000 tons of harmful gases - including carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide - and 40,000 tons of ashes every year" (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/3978329.stm). There is no reason to think that the West is not complicit: oil and coal from Xinjiang power factories and end up in plastics used in computers and media players, coating wires and cables, and forming the substrate and packaging of DVD and Blu-ray discs. Coal is still by far the largest energy source for electricity generation, even though the Chinese government closed a hundred and twelve mines in Xinjiang late in 2017, concentrating production at the largest facilities and slimming down oversupply to the pollution-threatened metropolises of Central China ten years after launching on the Hong Kong stock exchange. Significant military presence in the coalfields may also be evidence that unrest among miners could be a factor in the cutbacks. The nuclear facility at Lopp Nor at the extreme eastern edge of the Taklamakan, long time site of China's nuclear tests since the first in July of 1967, is also contentious, though its presence is even less visible (Bu et al 2015).

We like to think media exceed place, especially in the spatial deracination of the network condition, but no cultural work exceeds the roots that anchor it in geography and geology. Because it is made, and because making requires raw materials, every cultural act is inextricably implicated in the planetary ecology. Likewise, it cannot but have an impact on the environment. In a crude and in some respects dangerous metaphor, the engagement of photographs, films, data visualisations – and public lectures – feeds back through causal networks into the large-scale operations of a richly entangled human-natural ecology. Every human action implicates us in our world, even breathing. Why should cultural activities like making books and films be any different? But the metaphor is dangerous because 'cause', 'feedback' and 'network' are terms proper to cybernetics. Behind that cybernetic discourse lies a belief in an invisible hand – of the market in economics, of natural equilibrium in ecology – and a systemic preference for homeostasis that simultaneously reduces the ambition of environmentalism to restoring an earlier and very probably imaginary status quo and belittles the potential of human agency to the point of political defeatism.

A ChinaDailyMail image of the chairman of Xinjiang Xinxin Mining at the company’s Hong Kong stock exchange flotation not only emphasises the gulf between capitalists, workers and environmental degradation, but suggests that that gulf exists also in modes of imaging[[1]](#footnote-1). Chairman Yuan Ze is photographed in front of a board displaying live prices, driven by powerful databases supplying real-time strategic information to financiers. An alternative might have been to show an image of open-cast mining underway in the Region, which would not only be different in content: the gap between the image modes concerns the gap between the materiality of coal and the labour of extracting it on one hand, and what appears to be its dematerialisation in the form of financial transactions, not least through instruments like commodity futures swaps, where next year's coal production is already bought and sold, borrowed against, discounted and sold on. As the director of a historical drama, Tsui Hark carefully points his camera away from the new highways and railroads, power cables, haulage vehicles and worker accommodation that serve as infrastructure to the coal boom. Investment in his film, on the other hand, requires exactly the same forms of credit tangentially visible - or rather visualised - on the Hong Kong stock market screens.

These are not structural absences: they are perfectly visible if we look for them. The problem is that we imitate the camera by looking away from the material evidence of the film's implication in the world and the world's implication in the film. A ‘landscape’ in English is both a tract of land and a genre of pictures. The pictorial genre of landscape has historically tended towards the picturesque, meaning a landscape that lends itself to picturing, and which we now apply to a real landscape that is 'pretty as a picture'. With Claude Lorrain (Wine 1994) and his Dutch contemporaries (Alpers 1983), the long occlusion of landscape from Western art was definitively finished, no longer needing a Biblical or classical narrative or declaration of ownership to justify pleasure in natural beauty. But it is clear already that while landscape may be the playground of nymphs, it is also the product of labour.

No cultural artefact escapes its own time, but that time is inescapably marked by the history that enables it. A landscape is a place formed by its ancestors. In Lorrain (and his contemporary Nicholas Poussin), their presence is frequently marked by ruins; in more recent landscape work it is their absence that signifies, as in Ansel Adams' celebrated views of Yosemite, the USA's first national park, created by driving Ahwahneechee Paiute and Miwok first nations out of the area (Hull 2009). Even wilderness is constructed: the English word comes from the wild deer reservations created by the Normans who enclosed common land for aristocratic hunting. Ancestral labour made the land we picture. It also made the media we use to picture it with.

In his notebooks on machines in the *Grundrisse,* Marx (1973: 694) defines technology as 'dead labour', contrasting it with the living labour of factory hands, who are forced to submit to the rhythms of machines in which the skills of their ancestors have been congealed and turned into the master's property. When I discussed this idea with a Maori friend, he told me that was the difference between his culture and mine: that in Maori culture, they always knew the name of the ancestor responsible for a technique or a tool, and thanked them in the process of using it. We keep ours locked up and anonymous. Yet as Walter Benjamin argued (2003; as did Nicholas Cusanus [1981] five centuries earlier), there can be no redemption that does not include those who suffered, built, laboured and died before us. We are afraid of our ancestors because we have imprisoned them and denied their claim on us. A landscape – whether terrain or picture – is a place of memory, an occasion for recognising their persistence, a work of history, not nature.

Still, nature has its claims on us too. The non-human world has suffered as much as humanity over millennia of ecocide. A landscape, in Lorrain's hands as it was in older and wiser civilisations, is the playground of gods because each place is inhabited by its own spirit. We imagine, in daily life, that an ecology is a system in balance. The ancients and many indigenous cultures recognise that it is neither organised nor stable. They speak to and with the place because places demand respect and veneration, because our actions disturb the spirit of the place, and most of all because places are capable of acts of slow or sudden violence. The course of the Enlightenment began with the suppression of local divinities in favour of the one God, accompanied by brutal suppression of the old ways, condemned as witchcraft and demon worship, until finally the gods withdrew. But in landscape, it is not the gods but we who withdraw, to the vantage points of perspective, cartography and secular security. Against this secularisation I propose to use the word gods to transcribe a sense that we have obligations to the natural world and to the history of interactions with it, that we recognise both its otherness and its sufferings, and that obligation and recognition alike are the more difficult because we have lost the pagan language that made it at least thinkable to negotiate with places. Perhaps it was our neglect of the gods of place that led us to neglect the ancestors; or perhaps our imprisonment of our ancestors taught us to believe we could lock up the gods as well. Either way, unless we learn again to converse with gods and ancestors – or with ecologies and machines if you prefer – we will not survive their angry return as automata, and climate change. Landscape media are a privileged channel for us to listen to unhuman voices.

Wittgenstein (2009: ¶327) famously remarked that if a lion would speak, we would not understand it. Yet lions do speak, and we are perfectly capable of understanding what they say. It is only that, as storms, droughts and floods shriek their pain at us, we choose not to listen. The advent of the Anthropocene makes clear a second, newer factor in the practice of observation that landscapes invite: landscapes are not only places and pictures of the past; they are also premonitions of the future.

[FIG 1: Page from the album Landscapes and Flowers, Bada Shanren, Zhu da (c.1624-1705) Credit: Private Collection, Photo © Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images.

The novelty of this picturing of the future appears when we consider the media history of landscape art. Bada Shanren, who painted this page in his portfolio Landscapes and Flowers, (Figure 1) was a descendant of a Ming prince who retreated to a Buddhist monastery at the time of the Qing's first attempts to subdue Xinjiang (Wang et al 1990). The portfolio this page comes from combines his observations with a second century BCE poem describing Zhang Qian's journey to the West during the Han dynasty. Lauded as the founder of the Silk Road, Zhang Qian passed this way between 138 and 128 BCE. His story is worth recalling: here is James A Millward's account:

Xiongnu prisoners reported that the Xiongnu chanyu [leader of the nomadic confederation who established an empire in the region], upon driving the Yuezhi from Gansu, had killed the Yuezhi monarch and fashioned his skull into a drinking cup. [Han emperor] Wudi's court concluded, not unreasonably, that the Yuezhi might be amenable to an alliance with Han against the Xiongnu. Wudi thus decided to dispatch an envoy to discuss the idea with the Yuezhi. Zhang Qian, a former palace attendant, volunteered for the job and left Han in 139 BCE with an escort of over a hundred men heading across the heart of Xiongnu territory toward the Yuezhi in the Yili valley. The party was promptly captured by the Xiongnu, who held Zhang Qian prisoner at the chanyu's court north of the Gobi, but gave him a Xiongnu wife with whom he had a son. A decade later Zhang Qian escaped with his wife and some of his men and made his way west. By this time the Yuezhi had already decamped from the Yili and Chu valleys, so Zhang Qian journeyed on to Ferghana (Dayuan), Soghdiana (Kangju) and Bactria (Daxia), where he finally found the Yuezhi on the north bank of the Amu River. By then, of course, the Yuezhi had left the Xiongnu and dreams of vengeance far behind them. Zhang Qian thus returned east via the southern Tarim, and after another year-long Xiongnu detention returned to the Han court, where he became Han's pre-eminent 'Western Regions' specialist. Though he had not secured a military alliance with the Yuezhi (and would not with the Wusun either during a later mission in 116 BCE), the intelligence Zhang Qian gathered on his journeys formed the core of Han geographic, strategic and ethnographic knowledge of lands to the west (Millward 2007: 20-21).

Zhang Qian's story comes down to us via The Records of the Grand Historian, the Shiji by Sima Qian, China's 'father of history', and the two might well have met. Bada Shanren's version of the texts however comes seventeen centuries later and may well have shifted from the original: certainly his calligraphy is distinctly different to the style of early copies of the Shiji.

On this page, Bada Shanren writes to say goodbye to the calligrapher Wang Xianzhi, recalling the Tang poet Liu Zhou, describing the sunny day and explaining that he writes informally because that way the feelings flow spontaneously. The combination of spontaneity and regard for the transmission of the past through the present echoes his transcription from the Shiji. Zhang Qian's narrative must have reverberated, across the years and all the changing fortunes of the text, with the 'mad monk' Bada Shanren whose own life was largely spent in enforced exile (Wang et al 1990).

Bada Shanren's ink-and-brush work leans towards abstraction, and leaves large areas unmarked, in tune with Buddhist reflection on the void. At lower left, transient trees appear with more solidity than the eternal mountains that fade from outline into nothingness. From the co-location of fine observation of detail in the other elements on the page with this broader landscape we intuit that the observation of trees and mountains comes before any translation from them into philosophical terms. We could as happily intuit fog over the remaining parts of the vista in front of the artist. This painting, like Lorrain's landscapes, depends on neither interpretation. It stands before us complete in itself, so that we scarcely care whether it is faithful, adapted or entirely imaginary. We are however linked to the landscape by the ink, typically made from hide, bone and wood charcoal, but by Bada Shanren's time also frequently using tar, pitch and soot from burnt petroleum, that is from both organic and mineral sources, the sources depicted in these paintings. It is perhaps worth noting too that the sheet was sold at auction by Christie's of Hong Kong on the 28th of November 2016 for just under forty million Hong Kong dollars, a little more than five million US. The painting, like Tsui Hark's film, continues to be intimately connected with global circulation of materials and money. At the same time, even as commodity, the use-value of the painting stands aside from its price tag. Flowers and Mountains is a complete work, one that pivots around the invisibility of the landscape, the void in the heart of seeing and the empty core of the soul, uniting them in a single perception, an entire experience.

[FIG 2: The Second Otani expedition travelling through the Taklamakan Desert, 1908‐9. Courtesy of Ryukoku University Library, Tokyo]

The condition of this photograph (Figure 2), taken in the Taklamakan desert on the second Otani expedition led by Tachibana Zuicho in 1908 and 1909, is rather different. Count Ōtani Kōzui was the leader of an important Japanese Buddhist sect who dispatched several expeditions in search of Buddhist texts, notably three expeditions into Western China. Tachibana led the second two. This was a period of intense interest in Silk Road archaeology, but also of tension between the British Raj and the southward expansion of the Russian Empire, and Tachibana fell foul of the British representative in Kashgar who suspected he was a Russian spy (Galambos 2005). A priest eighteen years of age when he set out, Tachibana was tasked with gathering early Buddhist materials, and was remarkably successful not only in collecting them for Count Otani but joining international networks of scholars, for example as an elected member of the British Royal Geographic Society (Galambos and Koichi 2012). Japanese Buddhism was itself in need of support: the emperor was in the process of promoting Shinto as the state religion. There was also speculation that the expeditions were quietly supported by the state in preparation for later invasion. This photo of the camel train labouring over shifting dunes records a profoundly complex historical moment at the intersection of domestic religious politics and geopolitical tidal forces where archaeology served the needs of diplomacy, cultural legitimation and pan-Asian cultural dynamics as much as it did scholarship.

These realities exceed the pictorial power of a photo, even as the photograph gathers their trajectories around it and concretises them. After Roland Barthes' La Chambre claire (Barthes 1980) we are used to thinking of photographs as indexical accounts tied to the material reality they capture, but that reality always eludes its capture, unless we also include the improbability of there being a camera in the Taklamakan at that date, and the materiality of the apparatus. In 1908, the image would have required gelatine from animal bone and cartilage, as well as silver. Camels were not used for gelatine production, and Xinjiang, despite its rich mineral deposits, has never housed industrial silver production. This is a medium foreign to the land it depicts.

The image depicts an instant excerpted from the flux of its particular time, and from the broad continuum of time. It is possible that camera movement contributed to the slight blurring, much of which was caused by the uncertain footholds of the camels on shifting sand and their unsteady loads. Blur tells us that not only the pro-filmic event but the event of capture are transitory. Estranged by its materiality from the mobile world it snatches at, radically incomplete in its divorce from the flux of motion, this photograph cannot resolve the incompatibilities of the worlds before and after the lens.

In a second moment, however, that incompleteness creates a new term in the image: its ability to picture not what is but the potential of the situation it depicts. A photograph is evidence of trauma – the necessary rupture between ordered communication and primal, ontological flux. But because it is so fundamentally dialectical, it has, as painting could not have, the capacity to reveal the potential of any isolated moment of the world to become other than it is. Unlike Bada Shanren's painting, the photograph is not self-identical. Despite embracing a Western empiricist ethos where everything that is is identical to itself, photography in the act of capture sequesters the image from the world it seeks to embrace. Western being is self-identical: the photograph is non-identical, estranged from Being. Bada Shanren can draw the landscape as domain of the void from which all being springs. The photograph on the contrary multiplies beings, on the principle that zero, defined by Frege as the non-identical, is the generator of all other numbers. The instability of the single photographic frame is a profound disruption in perception and the history of imaging.

This traumatic incompletion drove the Lumières, scarcely fifty years after Daguerre's introduction of practical photography, to seek to heal the rift in time by supplementing the single frame with an endless succession of others. When Louis Lumière famously opined that cinema was an invention without a future, we can agree to the extent that it is an art that ceaselessly tries to repair the present that was torn apart by the snapshot through an endless repetition of 'and now, and now, and now', ceaselessly seeking a mechanical emulation of the flow that photography had alienated itself from. The strange temporality of film, suspended in the cinema between a recorded event that is always past and unspooling into an as-yet unseen but, for the maker, always-already concluded future, that perpetual repetition of the now is a primary source of cinema's glamour and melancholy.

FIG 3: The horse Joy Luck contemplates the foothills of Tian Shen. Seven Swords , Tsui Hark, 2005. Screen grab.

Nowhere is that combination of lustre and nostalgia more potent than in landscape cinema. Tsui Hark's Seven Swords steps back from its intense action scenes for a sequence [Seven Swords disc two, 15:49] where two of the swordsmen abandon one of their horses, Joy Luck, in the foothills of Tian Shen (Figure 3). Mirroring an earlier sequence when the team ride out together to watch the dawn, this is shot in raking golden twilight, accompanied by a Romantic theme in the strings. The gift of freedom to the horse is clearly a painful separation for both the animal and its man, but as Joy Luck abandons the attempt to catch up with its old rider, its union with the landscape is celebrated in two deep-focus wide shots profiled on the crest of a ridge, a brief recapitulation of the double status of the horse as animal and as technology.

Described in fourth century BCE Mozi writings and by the eleventh century scholar Shen Kuo, the camera obscura was reintroduced to China by Jesuit missionaries in magic lantern shows in the sixteenth or seventeenth century (Väliaho, forthcoming). The Chinese word for cinema, dianying, meaning 'electric shadows', keeps this history alive. Like horses, the technique of the camera obscura is thought to have been disseminated along the Silk Road running through Xinjiang, a pre-echo of the proximity of horses and proto-cinema in Charles-Emile Reynaud's praxinoscope and Edweard Muybridge's serial photography. After centuries of equine intimacy, Lealand Stanford still needed Muybridge to win his bet on whether a horse lifted all four feet off the ground at the gallop. The Western places horses in a similar relation to cinema as Lynne Kirby (1997) argues for cinema and the railroad, and for similar reasons: barring singing cowboy movies, horses are difficult to handle in studio sets, and invite landscape locations to make use of their legendary dynamism. The release of Joy Luck into the wild for a brief moment decentres the human gaze that almost universally binds cinema. It cannot however alter the centrality of the recurring present except in shots which, like this, depict stillness. But where a photograph is unchanging however long we look at it, even a filmed shot of a photograph is bound by its duration. Cinema demands its supplement.

[FIG 4: Results of a Google image search for ‘Xinjiang Desert’, 11 May 2018.]

To the extent that commercial films especially must be coherent, they must sacrifice completion – the burden of Gödel's theorem (Nagel and Newman 1959). This theory can be reversed. Because cinema is a necessarily incomplete response to the instability of the photographic image, it is forced to seek out coherence in narrative and stylistic symmetries. The simultaneous present absence of cinema's objects – presence of the image presuming and demanding the absence of its referent – suffuses photography and film in a mystery whose origins lie in the loss of movement as continuum in any technological form of imaging. One solution emerging in the 21st century is the move towards a total image. The perpetual 'now' that is also an irreducible 'then' calls up a new technology to produce a whole image, permanently updated. The mass image produced in databases like Instagram, Google and Facebook, here collating tourist brochures and holiday snaps, news items and fashion shoots from a search for "Xinjiang desert", (Figure 4) produces a more total picture and one that, through the database architecture, tends ever closer to a completion that neither cinema nor photography could match on their own. The more both are assimilated into streaming and storage media, the more they assist in producing what might for once deserve the appellation of an ecology of images.

This ecology is however modelled not on the primal flux that underpins phenomena but the homeostatic network causality of cybernetic systems. Each photo, and each film frame, is unique: it calls to us to attend to its uniqueness. The mass image on the contrary appeals because it is inexhaustible. The statistics are debated but conservatively thirty plus million images are uploaded daily to Twitter, fifty-two million to Instagram, 350 million to Facebook. Photo-stitching apps can read GPS and date-stamp metadata to build three-sixty degree assemblages of places and times, that an AI might supplement with millions of hours of CCTV footage and Earth-observation satellite telemetry. No single observer could attend to the whole of this mass of imaging.

It is not that, as Baudrillard (1994) believed, the real disappears under the burden of so much representation; or that humans must abandon the work of perceiving to machines, but that this agglomeration, that exceeds individual or even collective comprehension, attempts to complete the radical incompletion of capture, storage and processing that photography instigated, and that this ideology of completion thus undoes photography's gift of the incomplete and non-identical: the vision of the instant as the privileged site of potential. Instead, the mass image treats the world as given: as data.

Oxymoronically, we take as given (datum), but who is giving? We have for a long time 'taken' photographs but we 'capture' data, a more robust securing of the real, an act of enclosure like the seizure of common lands under colonialism. Bada Shanren seems to accept the world as a gift, and many photographers and photographs do the same, as do many films, charmed, surprised, filled with wonder at what the world gives us to perceive. The mass image seems rather to take the world. Derrida argued in his lectures on the gift (Derrida 1992) that giving, to be true to its nature, not only must refuse reciprocation but disguise its own generosity, not least from itself, or it falls into a merely economic relation. Where cinema supplements each image with another, and every film with another film, the images in databases are all of a kind, mutually exchangeable, and so even closer to the commodity form than individual photographs can be. The database ecology is the ecology of the market. Older image forms promised knowledge: of themselves as artefacts, added to the world, or as revelations of the world's capacity for becoming. The mass image promises not knowledge but information. Its relational topology is no longer the modernist grid (Krauss 1979) but a flexible network, constantly rewritten by searches which themselves become information to be related to the store of images (Marres 2012; Lury, Parisi and Terranova 2012). This fluidity belies the actual isolation of the database from the world: a small ecology within the greater that it depends on but which, through the translation from continual flux to ordered communication, it constantly denies. Even in this quasi-ecology of relationality, the mass image thus retains the divorce from ontological flux that defines the photographic image.

The mass image is best understood not as image but as visualisation, for at least two reasons. One, as data, an image file might as easily be parsed as an ordered list of the hexadecimal values of its pixels as it can be by facial recognition algorithms (Kember 2014). And two, the content of images is of less interest to a database than its relations with other images and users. The component elements of the mass image are images: the mass image itself is invisible save that, as a result of every new search, it presents a new constellation of elements based on the living history of relations between component images and the unique user's browsing and searching history. At the beginning of Europe's colonial era, the map; and at the dawn of the industrial revolution the statistical diagram revolutionised visual culture as profoundly as perspective had done at the beginnings of humanism, whose construction of man would be so central to science, the first body of knowledge that exceeded the reach of any one observer and so required a secular and collective replacement for divine omniscience. The intensification of metrics associated with neoliberalism and biopolitics in our own time (Beer 2016; Ruppert 2012) has amalgamated these revolutions in visual culture into forms like geographic information systems, such as a 2015 graphic (reproduced in Collins 2015) correlating violent deaths in Xinjiang with the extraction industries and centres of population activity (inventively measured indirectly by light emissions).

Infographics are no more bound to governing than perspective, which began as a sacred geometry, later finding its vocation in secular representation. Built into lens design, perspective operates easily across reactionary and revolutionary uses. Collins’ graphic intends to reveal government repression in Xinjiang and to tie it to economic interests, so encouraging critical and ultimately political and economic action. It is also true that data visualisation can be as incomplete or untruthful as perspectival representation, as liable to fantasy and to propaganda, especially in a region as contested as Xinjiang (Amnesty International 2018). On the other hand, scientific instruments, including digital audiovisual capture, tend to be more accurate than analogue, and more open to testing against the actualities they represent, but they are open to interpretation in their own manner. Accuracy and interpretation certainly demand debate, but perhaps more urgently we need to recognise that information design has become a 'symbolic form', to use Cassirer's term (1944: 87ff), on a scale not seen since the invention of perspective: ubiquitous, convincing and, like perspective, capable of generating an effectively infinite number of well-formed statements describing the world.

The twenty-first century has added real time visualisation of complex flows, like Thompson Reuters' Eikon energy markets tracking application. Even the rudimentary link to depictions of the land in GIS imagery has been severed. In financial management software, especially in high-volume trading applications for the mineral futures market, the particularity of place is subsumed under the work of abstracting data concerning flows of materials and money. Time persists only as the horizontal axis, but in a grid that turns time into space, and provides privileged and expert users with tools for simulating future trends and profiting from them in advance trading on future extraction and exchange of raw materials. The goal of a total visualisation now extends into the temporal, reducing history and landscape alike to an endless present, and demeaning our wonder, at where we find ourselves and our obligations to the factors that brought us here, to performative and instrumental uses entirely dependent on the supposed stability of a system in equilibrium. The multiple mediations of Xinjiang are not attempts at representation doomed to eradicate their referents: absolutely the contrary. They are ways of ordering the chaotic excess of mediation that constitutes the world, and they have real impacts. The land persists, even as geography succumbs to increasingly unified financial globalisation and geopolitics (Tooze 2018), but its reality is now elsewhere and in other times.

Subsumed within capital's systemic enumeration of resources and profits, and simultaneously expelled from account as economic externality and unpaid environment, technologies and natures, ancestors and gods, are discounted: as Rancière (1999) might say, the part of no part (la part des sans-part). The current political crisis of the nation state is driven by the necessity to govern both indigenous populations, as in Xinjiang and Australia, and refugees, as in Fortress Europe and Australia, without giving them a part in governing. The challenge for capital is to ride out not only the incomplete crisis of 2007/8 but the transition from US to Chinese hegemony. The challenge of the Anthropocene, which drives the economic crises and wars that in turn drive migration, concerns the government of ecologies and technologies, gods and ancestors, who we wish to govern without their participation in the polity, included and occluded in the one movement. The rise of 'strong man' neo-populism is a response to this double crisis, demonstrating that politics itself no longer commands a world driven by the cyborg logic of the market. Meanwhile, in the triumph of commercial dataveillance, we are witnessing the real subsumption of consumption into capital. Under these conditions, politics, economics and what we still refer to as society are no longer capable of bringing about change. A mediated world demands, in the broad sense of the word, an aesthetic politics.

In conclusion then, three possibilities for ecocritical aesthetic politics. Firstly, how can critique, the work of throwing into crisis, encounter a database of billions of images, or a real-time stream of financial data? Rescuing one image at a time is too slow, too nostalgic for a culture of connoisseurship, and fails to see that the value of a relational database does not lie in the individual images but in their relations. Formal languages like maths, logic and relational topologies are ahistorical; so too are the 'statements' that Deleuze (1988: 17-22) extrapolates from Foucault's writings as the units of the discourse of power. Eco (1999) describes, in contrast, an entirely historical quality of natural languages, beside lexicon and syntax: an encyclopedia underpinning any cultural mediation containing truths, untruths, superstitions and fictions, a subjunctive, incomplete, incoherent, social – and therefore entirely historical – store of shared, half-shared and idiosyncratic tropes in permanent evolution. A first task is to bring database design into crisis by confronting its commodifying hierarchy with such a historical encyclopaedia of cultural knowing.

The second possibility concerns the question of who knows. History may be a process without a subject (Althusser 2006: 190), but communication always posits one. The subject of perspective was a genderless, classless, raceless but implicitly or explicitly male holder of power, a position almost anyone could enter with a minimum of training. It was also placeless, establishing a portable point of vision: the landscape viewed remained a place, but the viewer no longer occupied it. Science no longer had even this remnant of place: even advanced professional formation could never produce a position from which the whole of scientific knowledge was available. Instead, Science knows. This abstract entity still had the virtues of collaboration and collectivity, and an ethical attachment to humanity. That attachment breaks in the formation of the subject of the mass image, the corporate cyborg, massed integrated server farms with implanted human functionaries (to recall Flusser 2000). The metricisation of life requires the operation of inhuman, necropolitical (Mbembe 2003) and ultimately terracidal machines whose blind pursuit of profit overwrites our species' (and every other's) claim to life. The obverse of the cyborg subject, massive hybrid of network and human biochips, is the vast pool of users. We still piously believe that we who upload and like are individuals, and have the selfies to prove it. But cyborg logic has no more use for the individual that until recently was the princeling of consumerism. The project to bring consumption entirely within the logic of capital has been completed by stripping away the self in favour of behaviours that can be gathered, measured and collated in database relational architectures. In the post-structural heyday of Deleuze and Guattari and Lacan, we looked forward to the shattering of the ego. Now the shattered ego triumphs in the strategic collection of swipes, clicks and purchases that generate more data for the mill. We cannot go back to ego and individualism. Aesthetic politics must seize on this actual schiz in subjectivity as the grounds for a new sociality capable of undermining the centralisation of the cyborg subject, and shattering the binary constructions of gender, race and colonised that have always derived from that terrible oxymoron, the sovereign subject (Plumwood 1993).

Upheld by a false faith that code and natural languages, realism and data, cardinals and ordinals are of a kind, the totality of data visualisation is vulnerable to contradictions within and between visual and other media, falling prey to the failing of all totalising systems: that completion and coherence are incompatible. And yet data visualisation processing in graphical or mass image form is undertaken by machines, ancestral labour, and despite their attempts to distinguish themselves from such dependency, machines that are also bonded to the operation of our planet as resource and dumping ground. The myth of the perfection of the market, like the myth of homeostatic ecology, is a closed system model based on the myth of perfect communication. No such closure or perfection exists or can exist. Communication depends on channels that are both naturally and technically irreducibly noisy. Noise is the evidence that nature generates its own mediations; and that media generate theirs. Gods and ancestors make their presence felt in glitches, interruptions and scars in the fabric of communication. Technical, social, political and economic solutions fail to the extent that their dependence on perfect communication underestimates the centrality of mediation to all their operations. This is a third and central possibility for artistic, scholarly and political work, the work of aesthetic politics, whose goal and method is to allow the repressed and very probably angry gods and ancestors to claim from us the obligations we owe so that we can form a polity worthy of their return. Noise, which cybernetics defines as the outside and enemy of signal, and which we must redefine as the mediations of excluded environments, externalities whose modes of expression run athwart the administrative order of communication, is a third unworked potentiality realised by the very search for perfection.

The land and people of Xinjiang are residues of history, which terracidal capital, from the City of London to Walmart, excludes as environments and externalities (Fuller and Starr 2003; CERD 2018). It is not enough to seek a fix. The perpetual homeostatic present of database, market and cybernetic ecology has abandoned the task of politics, which is to make the good life for all, human and non-human. While supporting every effort to ameliorate the lot of Xinjiang, ecocritique realises that the perpetual crisis of capital recurs, there or elsewhere, by the same or other means, endlessly, unless and until we build the tools for a new politics. Encyclopedia, schiz and noise are steps towards liberating the ancestral technologies that now communicate between but may yet mediate human and natural worlds, a first step to allow the torn Xinjiang that they have begun to reveal to heal itself and us. Not what we know but how we know, and who this 'we' is that might know and therefore be able to take action. A 'we' that it is the most urgent task of aesthetic politics to construct.

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1. The image can be found at https://chinadailymail.com/2015/03/25/chinese-nickel-company-in-the-black-after-registering-record-profits-as-a-result-of-indonesian-bans/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)