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VOL. 12, NO. 2, 1994

COVER DETAILS

The Glyde River, Arnhem Land
Photo credit: Djon Mundine

FRONT:

David Malangi, Glyde River mouth, bark painting
Courtesy Bulabula Arts

BACK:

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J.A. WAINWRIGHT
AUSTRALIA NORTH:
THE GAZE FROM ABOVE/ DOWN UNDER
IN MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART

*They say everything can be replaced
They say every distance is not near*

—Bob Dylan

*O blessed rage for order, pale Ramon
The maker's rage to order words of the sea*

—Wallace Stevens

Vincent Ward's film *Map of the Human Heart* appears to have its heart in the right place. It seems to speak—both through eloquent dialogue and in terms of startling landscape images—on behalf of Native peoples in the Canadian Arctic and further south, presenting their plight at the hands of intrusive colonisers who use, abuse, and leave them without so much as a backward glance.¹ Avik, the film's protagonist, seems indeed a tragic figure, son of a lost, white father and an Inuit mother, who cannot live in either parent's culture yet who yearns for acceptance from each. His lover, Albertine, is the self-designated "half-breed" daughter of an absent Québécois father and Cree Indian mother who wants desperately "to live like a real white person and never be hated again". Into their lives, at separate times, comes Walter Russell, the map-maker who serves as father-figure to both and, in addition, lover to Albertine. As portrayed by Patrick Bergin (and directed by Vincent Ward) Russell is a pipe-smoking Errol Flynn figure, an egotist, even misogynist, who emotionally maps the human Other as he demarcates the Arctic landscape—in linear and possessive terms that are Euro-centred and structured. The politics of race and gender are destructively

combined as Ward's Natives are inscribed by the Bergin character very much as he pinpoints women in his self-centred journey through the world: "You have to understand their longitude and what latitude you can take", proclaims Walter Russell to Avik. Such inscription draws Albertine into Russell's sexual sphere and Avik into British Bomber Command as he becomes a bomb-aimer in the obliteration of Dresden in 1945. Death of the unknown (German) Other by fire is a chiasmic prolepsis of Avik's own death by ice years later, in his war with the self he has never clearly known.

We are so often told after seeing a film that we should read the book upon which the film has been based. *Map of the Human Heart* is an original screenplay by Louis Nowra, but since it is an Australian production, and very much an encounter with history and landscape, Paul Carter's *The Road to Botany Bay* (1988) might serve as a significant gloss, though not perhaps as Vincent Ward would like. Of the colonising gaze Carter writes, "The eye which sees ... is not random, open-minded, equally attentive to all directions, all phenomena. On the contrary, it looks down a telescope" (1988, xx). As for the film it is crucial that not once in Ward's glittering display of the eastern Arctic seascape does the viewer glimpse an iceberg. There are extraordinary shots of pan and floe ice breaking up and redolent of map configurations, but none where the camera gaze slips beneath the surface to examine the nine-tenths of an ice formation that defies surface interpretation. Ward is fascinated by the telescopic gaze from above—Young Avik looks down on whales and cavoring polar bears, and even the city of Montreal, from an airplane; Avik and Albertine survey England's culture from high in the Royal Albert Hall and then her "green and pleasant Land" from the top of a moored dirigible as they make love; and later, there is Avik's bubble-view from a Lancaster bomber of the reflecting eye of Dresden's fire-storm. But such a gaze, as brilliant and attractive as it might be, lacks depth and involves a totalising classification that the Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul² relates to the alignment of mapping [read filming] and power:

A map represents something which already exists objectively "there". In the history I have described, this relationship was reversed. A map anticipated spatial reality, not vice-versa. In other words, a map was a model for, rather than a model of, what it purported to represent. It had become a real instrument to concretize projections on the earth's surface. (Anderson, 1983, 310)

This connects with Paul Carter's assertion that "spatial history begins: not in a particular year, nor in a particular place, but in the act of

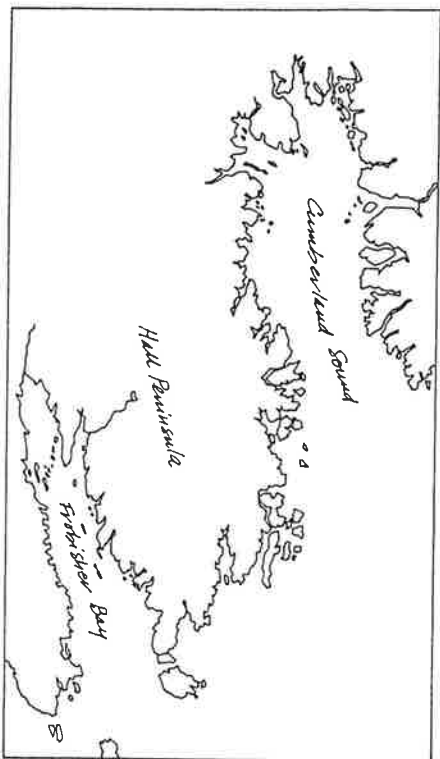
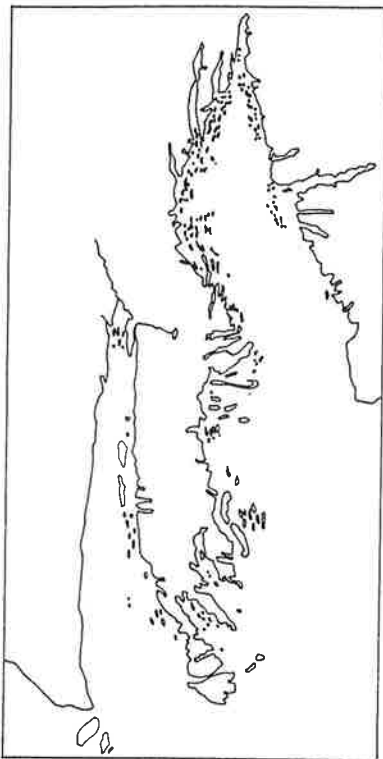
naming. For by the act of place-naming, space is transformed symbolically into place, that is, a space with a history" (1988, xxiv).

Vincent Ward offers a well-intentioned map of the Canadian Arctic and its peoples for inscription on cinema screens around the world. In his film, space is named through image supported by word. We should note, for example, Ward's all-inclusive term "Arctic" followed by historical dates (1965, 1931, 1941) that appears on the screen as caption for an unvarying landscape of snow and ice. Walter Benjamin, so influential in the early development of film theory, certainly did not have the Inuit or any colonised peoples in mind when he wrote his 1930s essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", but one of his major assertions ironically illumines the cartography of *Map of the Human Heart*: "Its [film's] social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage" (Benjamin, 1968, 221). Benjamin was speaking, of course, of the dominant cultural heritage that was being undermined by film-making when he wrote the essay, but it is considerably the expurgation of dominated cultures that we need to address when we consider the politics of film today.

The gaze of colonising power and authority is immediately problematised, as is the practice of mapping, if one is aware of the relation between mythical and natural landscapes in the North and of how ice and light combine to create mirages and extraordinary difficulties with scale and depth perception. In *Arctic Dreams: Imagination and Desire in a Northern Landscape*, Barry Lopez (1986) writes of "A Swedish explorer [who] had all but completed a written description in his notebook of a craggy headland with two unusually symmetrical valley glaciers, the whole of it a part of a large island, when he discovered what he was looking at was a walrus" (239). Under certain conditions in the Arctic "Light rays that ... might travel straight off into space are bent, or refracted, back earthward in a series of small steps as they pass through layers of air at different temperatures" (236). Many nineteenth-century explorers, as a result, "set down mountains and islands on their charts where there was nothing but empty sky" (238). As if anticipating the limitations and damage of Ward's view from above, Lopez insists there must be "time to walk away from the plane, which daily enters and leaves the Arctic like some sort of bullet" (286).

Ward's metaphor of the map essentially fails because the map's power to exert control over the unpredictable Arctic landscape and its

complex life-forms is not ironised in the film; he seems unaware that, as Lopez says, "Eskimos [Inuit] were making and using maps long before they met Europeans, both as mnemonic devices for ordering extensive systems of place names and as navigational aids" (289).



Above, map of the Cumberland Sound-Frobisher Bay region, drawn from memory by an Eskimo named Sunapiqunq. Below, map of the same area generated with modern cartographic techniques.

SOURCE: BARRY LOPEZ, *ARCTIC DREAMS: IMAGINATION AND DESIRE IN A NORTHERN LANDSCAPE* (1986) p288.

What is truly ironic (though not ironised) is the momentary and uncontextualised glimpse Ward provides in one scene of the Inukshuk, a stone, human figure of the eastern Arctic that was of practical use and has now attained mythic proportion. Seemingly scattered across the landscape in great numbers, the Inukshuk once served as a precise landmark for travellers and as a strategic funneling device to aid in the entrapment of caribou, both vital aspects of Inuit survival. More recently the Inukshuk has become a significant figure in Inuit lore, part of a past that is being reclaimed in creative opposition to what Native poet Daniel David Moses calls the "dead silence" of change in the Canadian North. Paul Carter comments on the detachment of an indigenous object from its historical and geographical surroundings, emphasising the loss of "all power to signify beyond itself, to suggest lines of development or the subtler influences of climate, ground, and aspect. In short, its ecology, its existence in a given, living space is lost in the moment of scientific discovery" (1988, 22).

We have all seen filmic portraits of Native peoples—North American or otherwise—captivated by European technology: fearful of a piece of glass, in awe of advanced weaponry or anything mechanical, they make fools of themselves and become the little children of White, imperial dreams (such portraits are found in numerous pre-1960s Hollywood Westerns, but one prominent, recent presentation is found in the opening of Bruce Beresford's *Black Robe*). Near the beginning of *Map of the Human Heart* in 1931, Avik's Inuit friends are tossing him in the air with a hand-held, walrus-skin trampoline, a traditional Inuit game. But when they scatter and run before a low-flying aircraft, leaving Avik to land on his head in the snow, tradition and the basic human concerns of *The People* disappear in an instant as if they were of no consequence. We have already encountered, in the film's opening sequence, a powerful metaphor of White technology's inscription on blank Arctic space, as a helicopter, like the chariot of a god, emerges from its self-created whiteout. At this point in 1965 Avik does say ironically, "The cavalry's here"; but this is the irony of doom and defeat rather than the humour of any dignified survival as he also admits, "My life's a map ... of death".

In his consideration of first contact between Australian Aborigines and Europeans, Paul Carter resists this reductive view of Native peoples bowing before the White inventions of the world. He refers to the Aborigines as "figure[s] at once [so] spontaneous and wholly dominated by the space of [their] desire", and possessing "an intensity of intention" in regard to their lived experience in the traditional and familiar, that it

was possible, as one sailor of the day noted, for them to appear to be “‘intirely unmoved’” (Carter, 1988, 351) by the appearance of Cook’s flagship *Endeavour* in the place which Cook (much later) named Botany Bay. Unfortunately, the “inadequacies” of the Inuit and “half-breeds” in the face of non-Native power and authority are emphasised throughout *Map of the Human Heart*.

What Canadian poet Irving Layton called “the round bound eye of the camera” is merciless. Avik’s maternal grandmother must be Inuit because we have the obligatory scene of her chopping away on raw seal meat that has been thawed in a fire.³ But she must be Inuit as well because in 1931 when Russell discovers that Avik has tuberculosis and wants to fly him out to Montreal for treatment, the grandmother can offer only token resistance, as the following exchange between her and Russell indicates:

“We have our own cures.”

“He has the white man’s disease. He needs white man’s medicine.”

“He’s the only man I’ve got. He’s going to be a great hunter.”

“I’m taking him.”

When Russell returns to the Arctic in 1941, we learn that this “inadequate woman” is teaching Avik to be a shaman. But despite her apparent knowledge of Inuit spirituality and tradition (only suggested in one statement by Avik to Russell), she is portrayed as helplessly unable to sew or prepare food. Just as the tribe has been infected by tuberculosis, it is infected by the “bad luck” Avik brings through his contact with Whites in Montreal and his continuing desire to go south again—so Avik is banished. All grandmother can do in the face of such inscription is tumble overboard from a canoe and die a symbolic as well as a literal death.

Meanwhile, at the Montreal hospital, Avik-as-Inuit and Albertine-as-Métis are mapped by technology even as they try to resist stereotypical categorisation by doctors and nuns. Albertine wants to sing a song that her lost white father will hear on the radio, ironically a Métis song that Ward has hit the Canadian airwaves a few decades before such material was actually recorded and broadcast. Avik is fascinated by the X-ray of Albertine’s chest and they steal and keep it as a talisman, passing it back and forth between them through the years. He carries this heart-less image with him as he parachutes down into the fire-storm of Dresden after his bomber has been hit by flak—when the real pressure is on, the Inuit bomb-aimer cannot measure up to the technology he worships and

leads his crew in too low. Although he survives physically, after Dresden, Avik is spiritually lost.

As for Albertine, race and gender are predictably bound together by Ward as she evolves into a confused sexual siren who lures Avik because he knows where she has come from but tempts the misogynistic Russell because she wants “to live like a real white person”. Any Métis cultural power she appears to have (as expressed in her song, for example) is undermined by her fascination with the high imperialist culture of the Royal Albert Hall where she first seduces Avik and by their making love on the all-white but *moored* dirigible (my irony intended) above England’s “pleasant pastures”.⁴ Any sexual power she appears to possess is contained by Russell’s female manikin, engraved with map lines, that he keeps in his office. The woman-as-Other image—powerless before the white *man’s* gaze—is terribly articulated when Russell, in charge of the bombing operation against Dresden, tells Avik of the young German student with whom he fell in love years before. She told him that she hated his obsession with maps, and Russell moves from this to the assumption that she was “two-timing” him. “As far as I know”, he coldly announces to Avik, “she’s still in Dresden.”

STILL FROM MAP OF THE HUMAN HEART



Photograph:
Manifesto Film Sales

All of this seems excessively paradigmatic, a narrative and display of image that reveals the story of Avik and Albertine as part of what Carter (1988) calls the European explorer's (map-maker's) "notion of the journey as linear progression [which] of course has its exact counterpart in the chronologically linear scheme (birth-childhood-youth-adulthood-death) of biography" (76). For the explorer, space becomes a track, and "the life of this space resides in succession, in the demonstration that its parts link up, looking forward and backwards along the orientation of the journey" (76). Ironically, the routes of eighteenth and nineteenth-century European sailors and inland trekkers of Australia were no more uniformly progressive than those of the Arctic explorers of the same period.

For many decades, indeed for the better part of two centuries, the Arctic was considered a possible Northwest Passage to the riches of the Far East (the other Other). In *Playing Dead: A Contemplation Concerning the Arctic* (1989), Canadian writer Rudy Wiebe considers the complexities of this desired passage, how the attempt to move through the Arctic in rigid, undeviating fashion from A to B prevented fulfillment. Thus various British explorers in particular made "exact readings of latitude, longitude, and recorded] weather, minerals, flora and fauna" (Wiebe, 1989, 20) to mark the track of entrance into, and proposed exit from, the North, and thus, as Carter says, "even the most distant objects [were brought] into the uniform, continuous world of the text" (1988, 69). Ward's text is the film and, to paraphrase Carter, the landscape that emerges from the director's camera is not a physical object: it is an object of desire, a series of visual images outlining the director's particular exploratory impulse (81). One can extend this concept to the film's characters: they become figures of speech in Ward's linear passage through his Arctic, what Carter calls "a rhetorical construction, a product of language and the intentional gaze" (36).

In *Playing Dead* Wiebe (1989) turns the usual North American map around so the Arctic is writ large and the Inuit view to the diminishing south is provided: he pronounces "I desire true North, not Passage to anywhere" (114), aware that this is an appropriation of the Native's space of desire. Wiebe is writing, very ironically, about White appropriation in and of the Arctic, and includes himself among the guilty, while Ward presumes "that aboriginal history can be treated as a subset of white history, as a history within history" (Carter, 1988, 325). Thus Avik cannot move from the linear track prescribed for him and is imag(in)ed by Ward into a death redolent of that of the consummate British explorer of the Arctic, Sir John Franklin, who died when his

ships were held by pack ice and could no longer be a part of "history's celestial viewpoint" (Carter, 1988, xx).

In 1965 Avik is old and worn, telling his life story for a whisky to yet another white map-maker. He has been so infected by his experience with Whites that he has utterly no immunity to their continued impact upon him. He returns to the Arctic because, after Dresden, he "thought all white people were cannibals", but the North is no place of sustenance for him and no place he can bring Albertine either. By the time we hear Avik trying to convince a bar customer to buy him another drink for the same life story, we know there has been little in the film to offset this customer's vacuous remark: "Eskimos—what a lazy fucked-up race of people!" But then Avik meets his and Albertine's daughter who has come to find her father and tell him that her mother has always loved him. "Come south to my wedding", says this next-generation siren who is more White than her parents, and Avik hears her call. There is absolutely no place for the man-child in the promised land. Racing to meet up with the boat going south, Avik drunkenly crashes his snowmobile onto an ice floe and is frozen there by Ward in the crucified position. As we look down on him with our telescopic, camera gaze, Avik looks back at us, "about a mile from where he was born", dreaming of escaping this spot with Albertine in a hot-air balloon, the map of his self and of his origins an increasingly ghostlier demarcation, only the Métis music we hear over the final credits striving to make keener sounds.

NOTES

- 1 My colleague Victor Li refers to the film as an "ethnocentric elegy".
- 2 Thongchai Winichakul wrote his Ph.D. thesis, "Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of Siam", at the University of Sydney.
- 3 "Eskimo" is from the French Esquimaux, possibly from eskipot, an Algonquian word meaning 'an eater of raw flesh' (Lopez, 1986, 418). However, in *Eskimo Essays*, Ann Fienup-Riordan (1990) states that the name "originated in a Montagnais form meaning 'snowshoe-netter'. An original etymological confusion and the general public's continued willingness to see Eskimos as the ultimate 'natural men' have combined to perpetuate the error. One does not easily dismiss a name that so succinctly embodies one's preconceptions, accurate or otherwise" (3).
- 4 Victor Li asks, "Isn't the 'western' concert hall 'refunctioned' into a trysting-place for lovers, and isn't the druggible, a product of western technology, turned into a private space for the two lovers. Perhaps what is at work is the desperate 'irony' of the lovers aware of their inevitable separation and defeat".