

PRODUCING NATURE(S) AND THE TOURIST GAZE

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Keynote Address

Introduction

When Libby Lester and Claire Ellis invited me to present a keynote address to the conference, I was flattered, surprised and panic-ridden all at the same time. A formerly UK-based academic ‘rocking up’ in Tasmania to talk about media, environment and tourism in such a photogenic, environmentally contested and tourist-friendly place would surely be like taking coals to Newcastle, or computers to Silicon valley! When the panic momentarily subsided I reasoned that perhaps a useful keynote address shouldn’t try to offload whatever research materials I simply had to hand but rather introduce some relevant theoretical co-ordinates that others may want to develop or deepen later in the conference. At least that’s my excuse for the paper that follows! So, in the time allotted to me, I’d simply like to make reference to two productive over-arching frameworks of thought that for me, and perhaps for others too, are of critical relevance to the themes of this conference: *‘Imaging Nature: Environment, Media and Tourism’*. My aim, then, is simply to put these ideas on the conference map, draw out their relevance and, with your permission, smuggle in some of my own research findings which may have some bearing on these wider theoretical positions - especially in respect to considerations of media production and the representations of risk, environment and nature.

In my state of panic – I know little about the study of tourism - I was galvanised to pick up an essay written by John Urry some time ago, ‘The Tourist Gaze and the “Environment”’ (1992) published in *Theory, Culture and Society* (the book, *The Tourist Gaze* (1990), has recently been revised (2002)). This essay brilliantly, I think, captures the intermeshing of real-world processes of globalization, the exponential growth of tourism and the consumption and visualisation of environments – as well as the impact of this consumption, both beneficial and destructive on different environments. (1) Urry notes four general forms of intervention, often overlapping, in the environment, all of which can be observed in today’s societies:

- *stewardship* (conservation of heritage)
- *exploitation* (instrumental appropriation)
- *scientization* (object of scientific investigation and control)
- *visual consumption* (aesthetic consumption).

Focusing on the last of these, he makes the case for how different environments have been subject to historically changing and socially and culturally specific forms of visualisation. ‘Everyone in the “West”’, he says, ‘is now entitled to engage in visual consumption and appropriate landscapes and townscapes’ (p.4). This

'democratization' of the tourist gaze is also reflected in the anti-elitist practices of photography (Sontag 1979) - and here I think we should also add (and research) the 'democratizing' performance and potential of television and other mass media in visualizing the environment. (Raymond Williams' earlier ideas of 'mobile privatisation', for example, seem particularly relevant here (Williams 1974, p.26)). Could it be that television contributes powerfully to the emergence and sustaining of today's environment 'tourist gaze'? As a technology and cultural form television is supremely situated to construct a globalizing 'tourist' gaze – whether through 'armchair travel' facilitated by holiday shows, natural history programs, reality TV programmes set in exotic locations or the local to global flows of 'spectacular' environmental news now circulated by terrestrial and satellite news organizations and emanating from diverse places and spaces. At the heart of contemporary tourism in respect of the environment, Urry discerns an aesthetic stance, termed the 'romantic tourist gaze'. This is defined as 'the solitudinous contemplation of an undisturbed nature', which typically involves vision, awe and aura (p.17). This 'widespread and colonizing tourist gaze', he suggests, has 'the effect of transforming environments, many of which are reconstructed for visual consumption' (p.22).

(Lest this talk of the 'romantic tourist gaze' should be seen as the preserve of the mass Other it is worth considering Urry's ideas on processes of *dedifferentiation* - here, for example, shopping, sport, culture, hobbies or education can all merge with tourism (p.23). Could this be at work I wonder in our own attendance at this scenically situated conference as we gaze out at Cradle Mountain?)

Urry's essay, then, encapsulates the intersection of globalization, tourism and environment in respect to contemporary processes of consumption and the cultural appropriations of the tourist gaze. It has less to say, however, about the role of the media in producing and circulating environmental messages and meanings, or the conflicts and contestation that frequently inform these (and which may fracture or splinter 'the romantic gaze') (see Eder 1996, Lash, Szerszynski, and Wynne (1996), Macnaghten and Urry 1998). It emphasises processes of *cultural consumption* embedded within the romantic tourist gaze, rather than those institutional logics and professional processes of *cultural production* and mediatization that serve to constitute or sustain them.

Also, for a sharper engagement with the field of ecological politics we can usefully turn to the ideas of another social theorist who has sought to theorise the environment and media approached as a contested field of 'relations and definitions' and who does so in the encompassing terms of 'risk society'. In studies such as *Risk Society* (1992) and *World Risk Society* (2001) Ulrich Beck argues that today's unprecedented risks:

... induce systematic and often *irreversible* harm, generally remain invisible, are based on *causal interpretations*, and thus initially only exist in terms of the (scientific or anti-scientific) *knowledge* about them. They can thus be changed, magnified, dramatized or minimized within knowledge, and to that extent they are particularly open to *social definition and construction*. Hence the mass media and the scientific and legal professions in charge of defining risks become key social and political positions.

(Beck 1992: 22-23)

Beck is sensitive, then, to the powerful role performed by the media in processes of public risk definition and, like Urry, he is also aware of the importance of visualisation in processes of social construction of the environment, though now we might say that for Beck the 'romantic tourist gaze' operates under a negative sign.

The cultural blindness of daily life in the civilization of threat can ultimately not be removed; but culture 'sees' in symbols. The images in the news of skeletal trees or of dying seals have opened people's eyes. Making the threats publicly visible and arousing attention in detail, in one's own living space – these are cultural eyes through which the 'blind *citoyens*' can perhaps win back the autonomy of their own judgement.

(Beck 2001: 71)

Beck's theorisation of risk society and the ecological politics that processes of reflexive modernization gives rise to, challenges a nature-society dualism (given the entwined dependencies and fates of both) and provides an encompassing view of the contemporary globalising world, manufactured uncertainties and the circulation of environmental 'bads'.

The theory of world risk society thus replaces talk of the 'destruction of nature' with the following key idea. The conversion of the unseen side-effects of industrial production into global ecological flashpoints is not strictly a problem of the world surrounding us – not a so-called 'environmental problem' – but rather *a deep institutional crisis of the first (national) phase of industrial modernity* ('reflexive modernization'). So long as these new developments are grasped within the conceptual horizon of industrial society, they continue to be seen as negative side-effects of seemingly accountable and calculable action ('residual risks'), rather than as trends which are eroding the system and delegitimizing the bases of rationality'.

(Beck, 2001, p. 33)

Beck's work, inevitably perhaps given its theoretical ambitions and scope, has generated considerable debate and criticism, including in respect of his underdeveloped statements on the media (Cottle, 1998, Allan et al 2000, Allan 2002). Its ability to speak to the momentous ecological challenges of our time, in contrast to much of the 'decorative sociology' (Rojek and Turner 2001) practiced elsewhere, however, has considerable resonance for many. Beck's thesis can be criticised, amongst other things, for its social theoretical focus on 'risk' as the key explanatory frame of reference; its ambiguous conceptualisation (and periodisation) of reflexive modernization, and overly rationalist and cognitivist understanding of processes of risk definition and assessment – notwithstanding his identification of the 'voices-of-the side effects' and how these embody 'social rationality' in response to the technician and 'scientific rationality' of experts.

Also, as I have argued elsewhere, his writings remain relatively underdeveloped in respect of the institutional fields in which 'relations of definition' compete and contend for media access and public legitimacy (Cottle 1998). Beck identifies experts, scientists and lawyers as key players contesting the public high-ground of 'risks' and their consequences. But who, exactly, these claims-makers are, how they relate to

each other institutionally, professionally and politically, and by what information strategies and rhetorical moves have yet to find detailed discussion in his work – as has the interplay between lay and expert views and opinions. Here the sociological work on ‘claims-making’, ‘hierarchies of access’ and ‘primary definition’ in news framing as well as source strategies and interventions into the news production process all provide a more developed, and empirically grounded, understanding (for a review of this literature see: Cottle 2003a). The complexities of cultural mediatization – how differentiated media forms, images, symbols and discourses convey, display and deliberate – have also yet to be acknowledged and theorised in his speculative elaborations on the communication of global ecological risks.

Criticisms notwithstanding, the theoretical work of both Urry and Beck, I think, provide frameworks of over-arching relevance to this conference and its themes. Urry with his concern with the aestheticisation of nature and how this has become embedded in the practices of tourism and drives, in part, the global tourism industry; and Beck with his social theorisation of the momentous processes of late-modernization and reflexive modernization and the construction and contestation of ecological crises and global risks. While both acknowledge media and media representations as central to the cultural circulation of the ‘tourism gaze’ or the conflicted communication of risk, neither inquires into the professional dynamics and changing forms of media that produce such public representations. This silence or lacuna in our understanding is unfortunate, both theoretically and possibly politically. For it is only on the basis of a more grounded acquaintance with the structures, dynamics and changing nature of contemporary media forms that we are able to understand (and possibly intervene within) the locus of mediatized power – both symbolic and strategic – and how this impacts on the mediatization of cultural ‘views’ of nature and the contested politics of ecological risks. I’d now like to introduce some findings of my own that may help to ground some of these theoretical preoccupations and which help I think to develop a sharper sense of how the media actually produce, condition and *mediate* the ‘tourism gaze’ as well as the politics of ‘environmental risk’.

Two Video Clips:

Visuals, contention and mediatization

- 1) TV news environment clips
- 2) Wildlife – Steve Irwin

TV News Visualising Environment and Risk: Some Key Findings *

- Both content analytic and more qualitative studies of television environmental news (in the UK) suggest that the environment is in fact a routine and notable theme within television news discourse and representation. And, moreover, this is often visually ‘displayed’ in ‘spectacular ways’, that is, ways which invite us to gaze in awe and appreciate the natural beauty and mythic values culturally etched into such scenic views.
- Contrary to ideas of news as discourse, contention, argument and debate, much television news (especially popular and populist formats, mid-day news, early morning news magazines, local news especially) provide ‘spectacular’ representation of environmental coverage – in both senses.

- Moreover, alongside images of nature visualised or consumed in terms of spectacle and landscape, TV news also routinely visualises the environment as under threat and can ‘champion’ certain environmental causes. The principal finding here, then, is that TV news trades both commercially and symbolically in an environmental sensibility that resonates with cultural views of nature and environmental hazards.
- What still needs further clarification, is the extent to which TV news serves as a barometer registering (and giving voice to) the explosion in environmental consciousness and discourses, or simply relies upon and activates a historically longer-serving set of cultural motifs, symbols and feelings.
- Cross-cultural comparative work is much needed.
- Beck’s ‘voices of the side-effects’ though sometimes accessed onto the news stage to symbolise and embody environmental risks, are granted precious few opportunities to elaborate a form of social rationality and challenge the scientific rationality of the experts.
- And in-between, environmental groups and the spokespersons of new social movements who engage in the politics of spectacle to gain news interest run the gauntlet of lost credibility or media invisibility.
- But, the historical roots of environmental consciousness are historically long and culturally deep and, positioned on the terrain of popular culture, the media is not immune to the cultural resonance of the environment.
- There are political, strategic and cultural complexities of mediatization here that need to be incorporated into culturally informed views of the ‘tourist gaze’ as well as the strategic plays of power enacted in ‘world risk society’.

* Cottle, S. (1993a,b)(2000)(2001)(2003a,b)

Producing Nature(s): Some Key Findings *

- A recent study of the changing ecology of television production of natural history programmes by the BBC’s Natural History Unit, Commercial TV companies, satellite channels and independent producers also provides findings of relevance in respect of the informing dynamics and determinants of natural history television production and the changing nature(s) of its representation.
- New technologies of production and delivery, heightened competitiveness, industrial centralisation, fragmenting audiences and internationalising markets have all dramatically impacted on the ‘production ecology’ of wildlife programmes. The case study also affords a glimpse into how these wider forces are professionally managed and creatively negotiated by programme makers.

Changing TV Landscapes: Apex Predators and Survival and the Fittest

- In 2001, Granada acquired for one and three quarters billion pounds United News and Media's (UNM) franchises, Meridian, HTV, and Anglia the host company of *Survival*. This brought Granada's total franchises to seven and made it the largest company in the UK television commercial sector. Granada subsequently sold the HTV franchise to Carlton PLC, the second largest franchise owner, for £320 million to reduce its share of the total national audience below 15% in line with regulatory requirements. As part of this centralisation process Granada then pooled its wildlife television production at its factual production facilities at HTV studios in Bristol with the loss of 35 jobs, announcing that the company expected to rely more on freelance staff recruited project by project in the future. Granada had earlier also acquired Partridge Films in 1997, a respected independent production house making popular wildlife films founded in 1974 under the directorship of Michael Rosenberg, who subsequently resigned following the dilution of the Partridge brand. The trade press reported on this latest Granada acquisition and consolidation of its business interests as follows:

Granada has dumped its inherited United Wildlife brand and is overhauling the division as a major supplier of 'blue-chip' films shot on video tape under the new name of Granada Wild. The move ... also sees the disposal of former United Wildlife brands Partridge Films and Survival. *Broadcast*, 6.4.01.

Independents in the food chain

- Traditional blue-chip programmes, which can take up to two or three years to produce and which require considerable time in the field, are relatively expensive to produce. At the top end of the market in 2001-2002 a spectacular BBC/Discovery series like *Blue Planet* cost £850,000 per programme (seven million for the 8 x 50 series) and was produced over 5 years, while the maximum commission a respected independent company could probably command was around £550,000 per programme. £40 to 50,000 per programme are more likely at the lower-end of commissions while library and archive-based programmes and very cheap commissions can be as little as £15,000 per half hour programme. In 2001, Animal Planet's European Director of Programmes had 50 hours to commission on budgets averaging only £30,000 an hour. The Director commissioned a series about vets in Abu Dhabi called *Vets in the Sun*, *Wildlife Police Undercover*, a video-clip series on the *Planets Funniest Animals* and *Adopt a Wild Animal* (reported in *Broadcast*, 24.8.01, p.2). In such commercial circumstances independent producers struggled to stay afloat whilst trying to meet changing market conditions and programme commissioners' requirements.

Producing Nature(s): Killer Content and Kissing Snakes

Migrations: Presenters to Celebrities

- Within the evolution of natural history programmes (Bousé 2000), on screen presenters have come and gone, and come again. In some quarters programme presenters have migrated from 'presenting' the subject of their programmes to

arguably becoming the subject itself. This trend is most evident within the commercialised sectors of cable and satellite history programme delivery, though it now extends across all sectors. Discovery, for example, is in no doubt of the popularity of its most successful programme, nor of the role of the ‘presenter’ within this. Under a close-up picture of Steve Irwin holding a deadly snake inches away from his face, Discovery promotes the programme series, and markets the video of the same, as follows.

“Watch the Croc hunter tackle these slithering killers with unmatched bravado and fearlessness while displaying his unique wit. As the most watched program on Discovery, the Croc Hunter Series has taken Steve Irwin across the globe to find the world’s most deadly creatures. Now, he’s reached new heights with these African snakes with some of the most deadly venom on earth. Let’s hope he has his anti-venom handy!”

- Many producers in the field are highly critical of such programmes:

I’ve not seen one of those programmes where there has been a good reason for that Australian presenter to go there with a film crew and grab a snake or kiss it or swim in a river with it or whatever. I do not understand that...

Independent Producer

- This ‘personalised’ approach to wildlife programming has nonetheless helped to make *The Crocodile Hunter* series Animal Planet’s highest rated series and served to propel Steve Irwin to celebrity status. This commercial value of celebrity was then partially cashed-in by Discovery with a global partnership with Toys R Us with its chain of 1,500 outlets around the world selling toys and products modelled on the series.
- Independent producers have also seized on the increased ratings that apparently follow the incorporation of celebrities. Tigress Productions, for example, has produced a string of such programmes seeking to replicate its initial successes in this vein. Programmes include *Born to be Wild – Operation Lemur with John Cleese*, and, under its *In the Wild* series, *Orang Utans with Julia Roberts*, *The Galapagos Mystery with Richard Dreyfuss*, *Cheetahs with Holly Hunter*, *Dolphins with Robin Williams*, *Asian Elephants with Goldie Hawn*, and *Wolves with Timothy Dalton*.

Jaws, Claws and Mauls: Killer Content

- The wildlife genre has always had to deal with ‘adult’ themes of sex, violence and death; it goes with the territory. In pursuit of audiences, ratings, subscriptions and advertising revenues broadcasters have recently begun to overcome earlier conceptions of audience squeamishness and/or moral discomfort and most now actively seek out, albeit in different ways, the drama and pathos as well as the action and excitement that attend the life and death struggles of animals.

Natural history films are like a football match, with a beginning, middle and end, and predation is like the goal being scored. In this series we are producing a ‘*Match of the Day*’, putting all the goals, or predation sequences, together, because in these moments you get to see what the animals are built for.

Producer, *Predators*, BBC1, *Broadcast* 28.4.00,

p.30

- Such scenes, like the ‘money shot’ in pornography, are widely thought to be what the audience wants and this helps accounts for their increased prevalence within recent programmes as well as the increased numbers of programmes devoted to the big predators, often sharks, and even more specifically the Great White. To put it another way, the political economy of natural history programmes disenfranchises invertebrates.

There’s been a pressure, that’s the kill, kill, kill pressure. It’s certainly the case that the natural history programmes have been increasingly sold on their ability to deliver the kind of wham, bang, killer shot.

Documentary/Film Maker

- Across recent years countless programmes have focused on, or included, sharks – perhaps since the film *Jaws* the most deeply feared of all species. Here’s just a few of them: *Maneaters: Sharks* (Tigress Productions), *Blue Water Predators* (Granada Wild/Animal Planet), *Predators* (NHU/Discovery); *Ultimate Killers* (BBC NHU), *Killers of...* (Granada Wild), *Shark Encounters* (BBC1/Animal Planet), *Shark Summer* (BBC1), *Sensitive Sharks* (Wildlife on One, BBC).

Human Habitats, Wither Environment?

- A recurring complaint about earlier nature programmes, especially those that appeared to endorse the blue-chip representation of humanly untouched environments, was that these ‘timeless’ representations failed to provide any means for understanding how animal habitats and behaviour are in fact influenced by human activity and processes of environmental degradation. More recently, as we have heard, the return to presenter-led programmes and dramatic storylines has led commissioners and programme producers to explore various forms of animal-human interaction.

The old fashioned biology lesson approach has to change. We want to find strong emotional storylines and more interaction with people.

Granada Wild, Managing Director, *Broadcast*, 24.8.01,

p.2.

- The pursuit of emotional storylines and interaction is apparent in the recent spate of programmes about sharks, as well as elsewhere. The producer of

Shark Encounters outlines the informing ideas set out by the commissioning organisation, Animal Planet:

They wanted me to work in Michaela Strachen (TV presenter) in a slightly more grown-up role than she had been in kids programmes; and they wanted to get close up to the sharks. And we went back to the shark attack victims, we went back to scientists and a photographer who was actually attacked by the shark while he was filming it, so he's a good story. ...I wasn't constrained only to the Great White, but they wanted the man-eaters basically. They wanted the big three – the Tigers, the Bulls, and the White.

Producer, *Shark Encounters*

- A very different strategy to incorporate emotional storylines and human interaction draws more on the dramatic devices and narratives of soap-opera than the documentary tradition of film-making. And this also has the commercial benefit of being incredibly cheap to produce. A series of 15 x 30 minute programmes, *Safari School*, produced by Cicada Films for Animal Planet follows eight young trainee safari tour guides as they learn survival skills in an African game reserve. Soap opera angles are used to hook audiences into the unfolding narrative across the episodes. The series was produced on a micro-budget of £15,000 per 30 minute episode, with the director herself shooting much of the DVcam material, before editing each programme in five days. The 'shaky-cam' effect that results from using a hand-held camera was felt by the Director to give the programme a *NYPD Blue on Safari* feel, music introduced mood, and slowed-down sequences helped to accelerated action scenes. The Director also explains how:

We only had a five day edit so there was no way that we could produce something that flows in the traditional way – with perfect cut-aways etc – so we chose a more dynamic, vital style using visual effects, jump cuts, and music very much like they do in drama productions. This creates real immediacy and excitement.

Director, *Safari School*, Broadcast 6.7.01.

p.16

- Here we see how constraints of budget and commissioning have in fact been creatively negotiated by this director to produce, in this instance, a blend of TV genres whilst pushing the boundaries of the wild-life genre in new directions. Human interactions with animals and nature are also on the horizons of producers working for the BBC.
- While this may be thought to be an important development on the 'timeless' portrayals of habitats depicted earlier in 'blue-chip' productions, the absence of a politicised environmental agenda across most of these programmes is all too apparent, and strangely out of step with the known growth in environmental politics and wider public environmental concerns.

Any proposal that had the word ‘environment’ or ‘conservation’ in it was immediately in the bin. What wasn’t permitted was to look at a story within a wider context, environmental or ecological.

Independent Producer/Director

I’m wary about these ‘e’ words, the ‘environment’ and ‘ecology’. I’ve been told explicitly that I can’t have a strong conservation message.

Producer/Director

Blue-Chip to Micro-Chip: Future(s)

- The production of natural history programmes has always been intimately dependent on the development of new technologies that have allowed film crews to record animal behaviour in their natural settings or examine certain aspects of behaviour in microscopic detail under laboratory conditions or slowed down to the nth degree within the editing suite and so on. Blue chip films were as much dependent on the arrival of new portable technologies of recording as today’s programme makers are on miniaturized cameras and new post-production technologies facilitating the construction of virtual habitats, simulated animals and interactive applications. The BBC’s *Walking with Dinosaurs*, and *Walking with Beasts* are only the most well-publicised of what is anticipated to be a long line of simulated animal portrayals (3D animations) artificially recreated and narrativised entirely in the studio.
- These technological applications however, are deployed within the changing production ecology of natural history programmes and, as such, do not escape the shifting priorities and approaches informing the producers’ pursuit of commissions, audiences and market success, as well as the disadvantages of scale and resources to capitalise upon new technologies. Computer graphics are increasingly being used, for example, to enhance the viewers’ perspectives on animal killing, continuing current ‘killer content’ enthusiasms as well as, it seems, the fascination with shark attacks. An independent producer ironically comments on this continuing fascination.

The next thing that I’m going to do is about sharks and what we’re doing between very, very expensive graphics is we are looking in intimate detail at a shark killing a particular thing. What we’re trying to do is look at that from the point of view of all the other animals on the reef. ‘Give me a break’! But it will go down well; the public will be wowed by the graphics. Anyway, it’s 16 weeks work over the next 6 months. Yea, that’s the next 6 months sorted, thank you very much!

Independent Producer

Summary Overview

Notes

(1) Urry notes four fundamental ways in which mass tourism has helped to broaden concern with the environment:

- wider range of environments to be gazed upon
- globalization of tourist gaze enables comparison of environments,
- aesthetic judgement and increased importance of visual consumption (based on wider socio-cultural shift from production to consumption)
- demographic trends – education, age structures, professional/ managerial jobs. (also, reflects anti-urbanism – closer to nature etc).

Tourism can both conserve the environment (leading to national heritage sites for example) but can also damage by ‘honey-pot’ or magnet effect leading to environment overcrowding and degradation as well as: congestion and infrastructural strain; changing in farming patterns; and siting of large tourism developments.

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