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Consider the roadside picnic place: reflections from the making of the short film Picnic Places

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Abstract

In my short film, *Picnic Places*, roadside infrastructure is cast as an assemblage of objects 'containing multitudes', providing an alternative consideration of these locations. I see them as somewhere other than a place to stop and stretch on a long Australian road journey. Catalogued by an archaeologist from the future, they constitute an archive of absence, which elides other ways of knowing the places we travel through. In a discursive leap, picnic places are juxtaposed against the satellite launch sites being developed to attain Australian 'sovereign launch capacity'. Through such incongruous connections, it is proposed a film on these geographical markers of the Anthropocene may create new considerations of the narrative pathway that the settler state is pursuing, as part of the global rush to travel off-world.

Please click on this link to be directed to watch the short film on which this paper is based. Link: *Picnic Places* (6'30"). The password is: picnic



Figure 1: Roadside picnic place on the Stuart Highway, overlooking a section of the Woomera rocket range / South Australia (Nugent, 2020)

The Roadside Picnic Place

Roadside picnic places offer temporary respite from the long Australian road journey. A person, or perhaps a committee, from a state or local council, will have sat down and plotted the location for that exact place where the weary traveller may find themselves. A contract for the construction of the picnic place will have been let to an engineering firm. As well as a concrete table and seating area there may be a litter bin and shade structure, all drawn from a civic design manual, unique to each municipality or state jurisdiction.

The place may hold connections to generations of travellers who wore informal paths, becoming tracks and then a main road. Perhaps here stagecoach horses once watered. Or the place may exist as a simple geographic coincidence on a national highway, at some mandated distance in a health and safety road manual, linked to a small rise, with a brown sign pointing from the road to a lookout point. In one way or another, they all will have a story attached to their existence. If judged worthy, a decision to install a plaque may be made. The story of the place will then be drafted (an historical consultant may be employed at this point), redrafted, officially sanctioned and the words sent to a foundry. A set of engineering criteria will be applied to ensure the story of the place can withstand the vicissitudes of public life as a plaque on the side of an isolated road.

In self-consciously revisiting the making of *Picnic Places*, which arose from my encounters with these locations, I highlight a reflective period that occurs after the creation of a film, where more is revealed to myself as the maker. Ideas from the rich lines of philosophical thought, that place has inspired, may be superimposed onto a scene and from this 'lookout', another passage divined. The philosopher Edward Casey, in his book *The fate of place*, observed

'we are implaced beings ... place is an *a priori* of our existence on Earth' (Casey, 1997, p. 6). In my imagination roadside picnic places become Foucault's *panopticon* – infrastructure that allows lines of vision to the past, present, and future. Foucault also formulated the idea of the 'heteroptia' (Foucault, 1967), which Casey sees as an 'expansion of the range of place beyond its role as a strict container or simple locator ...', observing the 'panopticon is a paradigm of analytically arranged space, a veritable laboratory of sited power' (Casey, 1997, p. 284). In this way the roadside picnic place may become more than just a parenthetical moment on the way to one's true destination.

I am a little in awe of the extradiegetic reflections I endure when filmmaking. They feel unbidden. My inner workings happen as outcrops of associations, arising from scribbled notes in my diary. This process of exegesis, with an epistemology originally grounded in the interpretation of religious texts, starts with watching rushes at the end of each day and grows sequentially throughout the process of filmmaking and beyond.

The iterative, *posteriori*, process of reflection is revealing about my ways and means. Paul Carter has cautioned arts practitioners for only later explaining their work in terms of this critical theory or that. Carter says 'discourses [should be] coeval with those of the process rather than parasitic on it ... hopefully offering more than pretentious post-hoc rationalisation' (Carter, 2004, p. 9). I see this process of image interrogation as coalescing the unformed 'poetic' of their conception, and usefully and constructively helps me make my next film. So, it is not mere explication of what has past that I seek here, nor a situating of my own work in relation to a wider film corpus. These considerations provide guidance for how I may proceed.

Picnic Places fell serendipitously from the making of *Night Parrot Stories*, and the fore-ever provisional relationship I have with the memories of the time and place of my filming. In his film *Sans Soleil* (1983), the French filmmaker Chris Marker said of his practice 'I don't know how anyone who doesn't film remembers anything'. When I see my rushes, say from my film *End of the Rainbow* (2007), or those from *Night Parrot Stories* (2016), I am swept back to the moments of their conception. I can feel my time in that place in fantastic, mimetic detail, even decades later. I suppose this is a universal phenomenon, but I wonder how images work as a mnemonic in ways that are peculiar to the mind of a filmmaker, as we come to ask of each scene what dramaturgical burden may you bear. From all my rushes that never make the final film, I imagine making other films.

When engaging with contingent reality, camera in-hand, I am not consciously contemplating the typology of an object or the cultural values it may embody. How I initially came to ponder roadside picnic places is essentially prosaic and my encounters the same as any fellow traveller. These are scarcely regarded amorphous places, found amid the clutter of infrastructure that affords passage through a settled landscape, not sites where one commonly ruminates on the philosophy of place. They are predestined to be care worn, smelling of engine oil, graffitied, with rubbish bins overflowing, where one stretches oblivious to surroundings. This reveals a secondary nature of the process of observation; how the eye may be worn down by ubiquity, familiarity and repetition. Only later, captured and recorded, do these places come to serve other purposes.

I had not set out to make a film on roadside picnic places. Travelling on an east-west transect, from Queensland, through the Northern Territory and on to Western Australia, aligning with the Tropic of Capricorn, and the Australian continent's paleo-drainage lines and deep interior salt lakes, here you will find the last known habitats of the night parrot. Zigzagging my way on remote minor roads I aimed to visit the places where the night parrot had been historically recorded. I hoped to conjure, in a film, something of its present-day existence, for the night parrot was a mythological creature, thought extinct for a century. The journey became the film *Night Parrot Stories* (2016).

It was a lonely journey and I often felt quite lost. Out of fear that there may be nothing to film at the next location where the night parrot had once been seen, filming roadside picnic places became a diversion to take my mind off greater concerns. What would scientists and historians from some distant future may make of our present, if the only archaeological evidence of our civilisation were picnic places?

It's a rhetorical trope of course. The counterfactual timeline is a staple of science fiction narrative and the Soviet-Russian authors, Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, had been here before me, in their classic science fiction novel *Roadside Picnic* (Strugatsky, 1972), where the detritus left by a passing alien civilisation becomes valuable to the local inhabitants, while remaining essentially incomprehensible to them. The Russian filmmaker Andre Tarkovsky based his film *Stalker* (1979) on the premise of *Roadside Picnic*. In Tarkovsky's vision the place where the artefacts of the vanished alien civilisation have been discarded has become a dangerous 'zone' cordoned off by anonymous authorities, who use the strange objects for their own dystopian purposes. In my own version of *Roadside Picnic*, the zone is contained by the central imaginary of the desert, a signifier for all things remote.

The guiding voice in my film is female and spoken in a language (Polish) that would not be understood by the intended audience; monolingual anglophone middle class urbanites. The words on the plaques become important, not merely as information, but for how their authorial presence directs interpretation and the formation of meaning. For instance, the final scene with our commentator is from her first person POV, spoken in Polish, subtitled in English, reiterating the same English on the plaque; a last straw effort to disentangle the inscription from its emplacement.

As a filmmaker I am constantly asked 'what is the story about?' In my mind the question becomes 'where's the explanatory plaque?' I am proposing that the form of a plaque reorientates the lived experience of being present in a place, one that privileges the presentation of the words cast in stone, brass or wood. Here I am deploying a trope of ordered authority, reinforced by the use of the familiar communication tool, PowerPoint, which, regrettably, continues to appeal to academics even into the far future.

In documentary film, particularly Western anglophone documentary, there is often a servile adherence to an ontology of 'aboutness' that ensures the audience consumes images as an authoritative, neatly illustrated 'commodity' (Story, 2021). The film must be 'about' its subject in a strictly unambiguous way. In their introduction to their volume of essays 'Beyond Story' (Lebow & Juhasz, 2021), in which the Canadian filmmaker, Brett Story's paper is published, Juhasz and Lebow see the transformation of western documentary film storytelling into 'an unchallenged neoliberal palliative ... a way to make us feel better' (Lebow & Juhasz, 2021, p. 1). *Picnic Places* is a wilful provocation in response to the hegemony of this mode of documentary 'storytelling'. My aim is to disrupt how recordings of contingent reality are used to construct a cinematic narrative. *Picnic Places* is not about picnic places at all, in the same way that satellite launch facilities are not simply about rocketry.

From picnic places to rocket launch sites

New commercial space ports are being developed around the Australian coast, from where rockets will launch satellites into low earth orbit. These places are part of Australia's push to establish, what the freshly minted Australian Space Agency calls, 'sovereign launch capacity'. In its simplest form a rocket launch facility is a concrete launch pad surrounded by lots of empty space – similar to the requirements for a roadside picnic place. While orders of magnitude in scale and complexity separate the two developments, they are places conjoined in my imagination. By conflating picnic places and satellite launch facilities I am aiming for a discursive effect, not dissimilar to how a film may ask an audience to consider improbable connections through the juxtaposition of incongruous images.

My current film, exploring what I am calling 'a cinema of planetary regard', is being developed from fragmentary social geographies – localised 'heterotopias' – incongruously placed next to the overarching, heraldic future geography of space. This is the 'ground truth' of how the narrative of 'space' in Australia is unfolding and a film made up of this subject matter necessarily needs to account for, and draw together, previously disparate elements. In the

process, new considerations and connotations of place may arise. If an Earthly space development were merely a mining operation it would adhere to a known narrative, comprehensible to the community and accompanied by a well grooved governmental assessment process. But rocketry is emphatically novel and of the future.

Space never strolls humbly into town. Its arrival is accompanied by a strictly controlled narrative. In 2022 a new branch of the defence force was established, the Australian Space Command. One of Space Command's first initiatives, as well as putting out a several billion-dollar tender for the provision of four new military communication satellites, was to contract a Sydney based creative branding agency to take charge of 'managing the space narrative' (anon. pers com). The Australian Space Agency also has an active media section. The interface between private commercial space companies and the public is similarly proscribed. Space messaging is couched in terms very familiar to the popular imagination. Space is always an unambiguously good news story of national security, jobs and economic growth, a narrative that aligns with how the settler state continues to evolve in Australia.

Katarina Damjanov observes that space is highly technically mediated, and the narratives of technology have migrated into space, as have attendant media technologies. This is enabled by situations of power and control on Earth, forming, what she calls a 'mediatic' condition that is shaping the 'social horizon of our futures on and beyond the globe' (Damjanov, 2015, p. 892). This 'mediatic' condition is analogous to the 'conditions of visibility' found in cinematic narratives of the Anthropocene (Emmelhainz, 2015; Fay, 2018). The space imaginary becomes a force field, that Damjanov observes 'provides the vital infrastructure for its high-tech pursuit of power, knowledge and wealth' (Damjanov, 2015, p. 889), through the creation of a beguiling narrative of its own mythos. This is how an Australian space imaginary may be critiqued, appearing out of the story of the 'hero's journey' and a self-appointed space mandate, which says 'Stand back, the future has arrived'. Any positioning of Australia's engagement with space needs to reference the historically tardy, but immensely entertaining and shrewdly observed film, *The Dish* (2000). So wonderfully homemade, the film tapped into how, as a nation, we need to feel part of the global North's space endeavour. *The Dish* is an exemplar of how a fictionalised account of a space event may capture and reconstitute the minds of the public. It could be argued that Parkes, a small town in western NSW, was transformed into a nationally recognised metonym for outer space not by its involvement with the first moon landing, but by its space infrastructure's starring role in the film.

Proponents of the civilian space race in Australia cast the story as one of nation building, with the promise of big rewards for the swift and the bold. Encouraged by state and federal governments, private enterprise is applying to build permanent rocket launch facilities in South Australia, Western Australia, Queensland and the Northern Territory. In the absence of any government designated, space-specific zoning for such developments, these companies will have scanned the continent from Google Earth, looking for isolated promontories that may be propitious locations to launch satellites into polar, sun synchronous or equatorial orbits. They will have then engaged 'ground truth' analysis, with an eye on the tenure of the land, for access through the gateways to space must be strictly controlled on Earth. These are, after-all, the border checkpoints of the future. The new space ports in Australia are being emplaced on private land, purchased, or leased from their owners, so access can be managed by private property rights. In South Australia a satellite launch complex is being developed on privately owned land at Whalers Way at the very southern tip of the Eyre Peninsula and another in Queensland, on land owned by the Adani Company, within the gates of their coal export facility north of Bowen. In the Northern Territory, the company Equatorial Launch has established a site leased from Aboriginal freehold near an Aluminium mine. As well as the latitude of the range, which determines a satellite's orbital trajectory, the facilities will be situated for rocketry over an open stretch of ocean, in order to minimise the chance of harm should things go awry. Concrete will be poured, and facilities built to house control rooms, supply power, communications, propellant bunkers and the rockets themselves.

While restricted to a handful of locations, space is becoming embodied in the infrastructure of our progress. Space objects in the landscape may someday become as comprehensible as picnic places. They are artifacts of a new age, the problematic Anthropocene. The story of the Anthropocene inherently speaks to how important it has become to situate human developments on Earth within the landscape of the stories they are built upon.

In her book *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019) sees how 'questions about narrative and representation are vital to understanding the Anthropocene because, as an epoch that reflects a radical break from the past, it poses specific epistemological and ontological challenges' (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 2). DeLoughrey provides place specific case studies of untold stories, which show the importance of allegorical art in opposing the alienating proposition of the Anthropocene and its 'mutually constitutive' association with empire.

Stories arising from passage through landscapes, like Shelley's *Ozymandias*, are destined to be lost one way or another. For instance, the plaque marking the location of the death of Lasseter, a doomed gold prospector, is being erased by the vandal of time. There are other, more immediate erasures. Plaques, and the stories they carry, are being prized from their plinths. The fastening bolts are cut and twisted. One can imagine large devices and some ingenuity being used to violently remove the plaque. Where do these stolen plaques go, and why would anyone do this? For the memento? An act of defiance against the empire? The impulse may be something even the plaque-stealer themselves never quite understands. Does the plaque still hold the same valence, now that it hangs on a pool room wall, disassociated from the landscape it once stood upon?



Figure 2: Stolen plaque south of Newman, WA In *Picnic Places* I am proposing such absences become elided narratives, creating a 'storyless' place, 'where all the things that never happened go' (Murray, 2003). The empty frame, left by a missing plaque, is an exemplar of the ways understanding of place may be lost to, or stolen from, the regard of the future.



Figure 3: When not being used for launching satellites, the newly established Whalers Way private rocket launch 'complex' in South Australia is used as a picnic place (Nugent 2022)

Conclusion

It is now over two years since I made *Picnic Places*, which itself was compiled from the fragments of a journey I undertook four years before. Reflecting on this small film, I see it has become layered amid the strata of my life, as a shell may be buried in a midden. For the sharp-eyed future archaeologist, the wreckage of a British Blue Streak rocket, which crashed near Warakurna in central Australia during intercontinental ballistic missile tests in the 1950s, makes a cameo appearance in *Picnic Places*. Its remains are displayed in the picnic area of the remote Giles Weather Station, consecrated with a plaque telling a heroic story of rocketry. This object, and its emplacement, is not unconnected to the film that I am currently making on the social geographies and landscapes of Earth's new space ports.

Such places point to how alternative considerations and insights into future directions may be gained simply by looking on the side of a road as one travels about.

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About the author

Robert Nugent is a filmmaker grappling with entanglements between human and nonhuman places and situations. His films have arisen from encounters, during speculative expeditions to remote locations in Indonesia, Guinea, Iraq, Ethiopia, Egypt, Tanzania and Australia. 'End of the Rainbow' was the story of an eternal gold mine, wandering from one place to another on planet earth. It won international film awards and screened in Europe, the US and Australia. 'Memoirs of a Plague', tackled the locust story, heretically proposing that these Biblically imagined insects actually don't cause famine. His last film, 'Night Parrot Stories', sought to reconcile western perspectives on a rare bird with other ways of knowing and thinking about Australian geographies. He is currently making a film on Australia's engagement with new planetary horizons, as seen from the off-world geographies found beyond the Kármán line.

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