Making Tracks: Birgit Schneider

17 July 2018
Making Tracks

By **Birgit Schneider**

I have been interested in representations with a focus on visuality for a very long time. In fact, it wasn't my early childhood experiences with the outdoors that led to my interest in environmental issues in the first place, but rather my mediated experiences with nature. Like most others, I frequently encounter current environmental issues as they are presented to me through various media—in nature movies or documentaries, weather reports, maps, and even apps—making these mediated experiences even more likely than unmediated ones.

This decided my course, in a way. I became fascinated with how complex the processes of depicting reality can be, and by the power of images to *make visible the invisible*. So, after a year of studying political science, I went on to study art history, philosophy, media studies, and media art. Guided by Foucault's "ontology of the present," I learned to systematically question the present in relation to history in the course of my media theory studies. What conditions led to the "digital society" that we know today? How has this altered our perceptions of what is *real* and what is *virtual*? How did media history change the perception of reality and, by extension, our perceptions of nature?

To answer these questions, I needed to become a media archaeologist, of sorts: thinking about material media cultures from a historical perspective. This research focus led me to the excavation site of my PhD thesis, in which I turned my gaze to proto-digital images by looking at silk textile industries and how they used punch card coding (image data). My digging revealed that there had never been an analog age. Instead, the old wooden looms that processed punch card information proved to be a telling example of the indissoluble entanglements of digital techniques with media materiality. My interest in image theory, image data, visuality, and the invisible led me down yet another interesting path: a study of the history of camouflage, which allowed me to analyze for the first time the relation between visual perception, environment, and deception within the realm of animals in relation to human culture. This profoundly changed my understanding of the

relationships between technology, culture, and nature. Camouflage is a subject that permanently blurs all dualisms.

After finishing my PhD, however, I wasn't immediately sure how to go on. Although I loved working in the archives, I wanted to relate my perspectives on media, image coding, and visuality to more current topics. I wanted to explore my political interest in ongoing societal problems, such as ecology. I had followed the news on climate change research for a long time, and I found the use of data images as boundary objects between science, society, and politics to be compelling. So I started to wonder: How do scientific images of climate influence our perceptions of reality? But what would I, trained in media history, picture theory, and media studies, be able to contribute an ongoing political issue like this? Would I be able to leave the ivory tower of humanities?

My starting point was the role of visual media in climate knowledge. Most phenomena studied in climate science are invisible, and the climate as a scientific object only really reveals itself in measurements, simulations, and statistics. Since media like measuring instruments, or data maps are necessary to learn about climate change in the first place, I decided to look at how Western scientific culture obtained this view that, today, offers such a powerful guideline for reality. Since then, my interest has shifted towards the tensions between sensing media (a mediated aesthetic) and sensing nature (or phenomenology of nature). At the moment, in contrast to current approaches to forest-related education that focus on sharpening the senses in the old-fashioned "Thoreau'ian way" of experiencing nature—that is, without equipping the senses with media prostheses—I'm interested in twittering trees, the computer game *Walden, A Game*, and in forest monitoring platforms. I intend to find out to what extent scientific and mediated approaches towards nature have overwritten bodily and subjective experiences of nature, and how such new forms of relations to nature should be evaluated. At the same time, I'm fully aware that nature mediations and seemingly direct experiences of nature cannot actually be separated in human perception. A very prominent example here might be storytelling, which strongly influences how we experience and "narrate" nature.

I remember an illustrated children's book that deeply entered into my personal environmental narrative. I loved all the books about the Barbapapas, written and illustrated by Annette Tison and Talus Taylor, but my favorite was "Barbapapas Ark," originally published in 1974. I was taken with this story in particular, which tells of how the Barbapapa family saves a part of nature by putting up a wall around a sort of zoo reserve containing a protected biosphere, while all the rest of the planet is covered with thick

smoke and pale city structures. The dualism of the unnatural anthroposphere and the healthy biosphere is stark, highlighted by the grey, human sphere encircling the colorful, tiny island of the Barbapapas. Outside of this island, even the human children have to carry gas masks. When the pressure of human activity on their biosphere becomes too great, the Barbapapas build a space ship, the “Ark,” and embark on a journey to a tropical planet in outer space, untouched by humans. After a while, they discover through their telescopes that the humans—feeling great regret over the absence of animals and plants—have started to take responsibility for their planet. They set about cleaning up and re-greening their world, even building sustainable techno-garden cities.

Although the book is deeply rooted in an era of growing ecological consciousness during the 1970s, when people began to think about global limits, nearly 50 years after its publication, I reconsider the narrative of the book as an example of how ideas from this time are still powerfully structuring narratives today.