



Københavns Universitet



## **Publishing Nature – Media, Environment & the Multiple Strata of Experience**

Møhl, Perle

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# PUBLISHING NATURE

Seminar organized by  
Kirsten Hastrup, Astrid O. Andersen & Janne Flora  
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PUBLISHING NATURE – Media, Environment & the Multiple Strata of Experience

*Perle Møhl, October 23, 2015*

- I use the geological term strata because it combines both spatial and temporal parameters, drawing out millions of years of spatial formation.

## **Environment and sensory experience**

What I want to talk about today is the way we sense the environments we move, dwell and evolve in, and especially - in extension of that - the way such sensory experiences take place when conveyed or produced through audiovisual media. In such mediations, our perceptions as receivers are combined - or assembled or even entangled - with other people's sensory experiences, notably the people involved in the media-making and mediation, including those in front of the camera-&-mike, as well as ourselves as spectators and the people around us, constituting an unending process of mediated sensory experiences combined into knowledge assemblages of various sorts.

When we talk of experience, we have to think of it

- both as a wholeness - as an integrated sensory experience in the here & now
- and a fragmentation - as selective/positioned - experienced from somewhere by someone - and timely/changing - experienced over time

and often, embedded in sociality, intermingled with other beings that both are part of and have their own experiences of the environment, experiences that they communicate and enmesh with our own

So the environment is both one and multiple, and its signals or sensory inputs come to us from various parts and phenomena and speak to all our senses. Our perception is multi-sensory and even syn-aesthetic: the senses are connected and co-trigger each other when affected (Merleau-Ponty 1959). - And it has depth, it is spatially 3-dimensional (further enhanced by the 4th dimension of time). From our particular position and perspective, some things are within immediate reach and others further away, even far away, some things are hidden or covered by others, but may be discovered if we move. So when I talk of strata, I am referring to, — for one, the multiplicity of the senses — secondly, the depth where multiple layers in space coexist and inform us simultaneously, and — thirdly, the variety of different kinds of phenomena and signs that coexist and address us simultaneously. Finally, I am talking of the time dimension as it is incrustated in the multiple timelines of meaning making. I will shortly come back to that latter point.

## How nature addresses us

So how can audiovisual media in some way incorporate such experience, how can they mediate it and how can they recreate new experiences for those who are hearing and seeing them in their mediated forms?

As you can hear, I am here not concerned with, for example, media and the stuff mediated, or in a classical Saussurian *representational* relationship between sign and object - which here would amount to nature and (or vs.) film. I rather bring a whole lot of other factors and agents into the equation that make it much more rich and unruly.

Concerning digital media, Jenny Newell writes that they widen access to *material objects* by creating new, *digital objects* (2012). These new digital objects constitute objects in their own right - they do things, they convey things, they have their own materiality - they are not just copies or simulacra of the "original" objects. They convey sense between persons and, e.g., the ancestral - and not just between the "original" and the "copy". In the Yolngu universe as described by Jennifer Deger (2007), image and sound objects are even ontologically of the same order as the ancestral. They ARE the ancestral.

So we are beyond representation. By applying an approach that is not just concerned with "how true the copy is to the original" - a typical representational discussion - but instead with what the presentation - or the digital object or the film object - *does*, we open up for a much more fruitful and also more powerful debate about integrated semiotic worlds. Indeed, we are encircled by, we live in, and in some cases, we live by a whole variety of objects that have come out of other objects, but that walk on their own two/three/four/digital legs and that address our attention and our senses just as much as any other objects. - By that stroke, we also annul the classical and to my eyes unfruitful distinction between "real" and "virtual" worlds.

Having said that, as with all other objects that are part of our sensory environments, we like to know the *stories of their becoming*. Where do these digital objects come from, what are they made up of, who is and was involved in their makings and remakings, besides ourselves, current receivers and interpreters? Because things never only exist in the instant, they have traveled and been remodeled by those travels, like an echo that carries in it both the sound it originated from *and* the walls and materials it bounced upon on its way and that reflected it and kept it alive and going. *Resonance* can in a cultural and semiotic perspective be characterized as exactly that: the transformation of a sound - or a signal or a meaning or a phenomenon - by the materialities it hits, rebounds off and is reconfigured by, on its way through time, reflecting in some way also parts of that materiality and its reconfigurative forces. - That is the temporal aspect of strata that I mentioned above and that reflects how meaning is constantly configured and refigured as it travels through time and space. In relation to e.g. filmmaking, it thus relates to the many co-shapers of meaning all through the process of making, a line that has no clear-cut senders and receivers, beginning in "A"s and ending in "B"s. It is potentially unending.

## How nature addresses us

Finally, I would like to address the question of *how nature addresses us*, specifically in relation to audiovisual media. How does nature speak to us? Well, in general nature doesn't speak. Nature doesn't have language, and often doesn't have intent (that of course also goes for a lot of human

unintentional sign-making). But it certainly doesn't mean that there is no sign-making and no interpretive processes going on. It just means that nature doesn't communicate through *symbolic* signs. And maybe that is even the best *definition of nature*: it exclusively communicates through iconic and indexical signs. A nice semiotic definition of "*nature*" that cuts through classic *categorical or taxonomic* definitions. It does not define by categorizing objects in the world but through their forms of mutual communication.

So nature makes address through iconic and indexical signs (signs that either look like or are physically connected to their object). In a sense we could say that *nature publishes nature*. Film — sound-and-moving-images — also largely communicates through iconic and indexical signs, C.S. Peirce's two first sign-categories, but also to some extent through the last Peircian sign category, symbolic signs. That doesn't mean that the marriage (between nature and film) is consumed and that writing, operating exclusively through symbolic signs, cannot communicate with and about nature. But iconic and indexical signs certainly operate in different ways and communicate with us humans in very different manners, sometimes closer to our immediate *sensory experiences* of the environment. And, again, in both richer and also more unruly manners.

Certainly, the two material objects that came out of my last research project - a book and a DVD - work in very different ways, even though they are to some extent *about* the same objects. They don't supplement each other or illustrate each other, they just... do very different things in different ways. And interestingly, very little of my empirical analysis directly involves questions of nature – and nature is therefore pretty much absent in the book object – but *nature is all over and around us* in the filmic object. It is there, whether we want it or not, whether we address it or not. It is in the background and in the foreground. *IT* addresses us, all the time - us being all the other sentient agents involved in all parts of this filmmaking/meaning-making project, as I said in the beginning.

### **A semiotic exercise**

In the following, we are going to look at an excerpt from a film I made in connection with my phd research and as a premise for engaging with my field and getting to know. The excerpt is about Alipoya and a group of his peers who go out into the forest to look for a very rare liana - *beku* - that is used for fish poisoning.

But instead of just leaning back and letting yourselves be entertained, I want you to be on the look-out for signs and meaning at different levels. Nothing is being served directly to you in nice, whole and pre-digested packages - you have to do the work of meaning making yourselves - even if the other makers already did quite a lot.

I'm therefore asking you to notice all the little things that tell us something 1) about how nature communicates to us, 2) and what it is "saying", 3) about the protagonists' relation to their environment, how they inhabit and move around in it, as well as 4) what you can detect about the becoming of this film and, in extension, about the anthropological learning process it is a part of and relates to.

Link to the film excerpt: [vimeo.com/249503322](https://vimeo.com/249503322)