

CONCLUSION



Media's Spatial Wake

In closing, I would like to stay in the unstable zone between land and sea. In 1996, 20th Century Fox built a fifty-one-acre studio in the small Mexican coastal village of Popotla, Baja California. The central feature of this new studio complex was a 360,000-square foot 'infinite horizon' water tank overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The catalyst for the initial development of the studio and tank was James Cameron's 1997 film *Titanic*. In the following years, the tank was utilised by a variety of other production companies for their own oceanic escapade films, such as Warner Brothers' *Deep Blue Sea* (1999) and Buena Vista Pictures's *Pearl Harbour* (2001).



FIG. C.1. Photograph of the *Titanic* set in Popotla, Baja California, Mexico (author and date unknown).

In 1997, Allan Sekula travelled to Popotla to photograph the studio and examine its myriad impacts on the local communities and ecologies of the region. These

photographs were compiled into a photo essay entitled *Dead Letter Office* and later formed part of a multimedia exhibition entitled *TITANIC's Wake*. In the press release for the exhibition, Sekula wrote about how 20th Century Fox chose Popotla as the location for the studio primarily to exploit cheaper Mexican labour and other production-related tax breaks. Thus, the choice of Mexico as a production location for the film was primarily financially motivated: the construction and day-to-day operation of the studio would be markedly cheaper than a comparable coastal location in the USA. Such strategic relocations of cinematic production reflect capital's broader and more systemic searches for cheaper sites of production and manufacture, maximising profits by cutting a range of geographically variable operating expenses.¹ In the case of *Titanic* and the Popotla studio, such processes of financial exploitation had other interconnected spatial impacts.

Focusing on the multiple impacts of the studio, Sekula writes:

The neighboring village [Popotla], just to the south of the walls and guard towers of the set, has no running water. Efflux from the filming tanks has lowered the salinity of the coastal tide pools, damaging the traditional mussel-gathering livelihood of the villagers.²

Thus, through 20th Century Fox's global drive for overhead reduction and profit maximisation, a local ecosystem and industry were destroyed. I bring up the example of the Popotla studio to invert the dominant theoretical and methodological focus of this book. Throughout this book, I have engaged with a wide range of non-fiction works that utilise different modes of aesthetic address to sense and critique various formations of spatial power. However, what the example of the Popotla studio forces us to consider is moving image media's own capacity for spatial exploitation. Indeed, as Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt suggest in their introduction to *Ecomedia: Key Issues*, 'our love of media and media technology has become part and parcel of our global environmental crisis'.³ Such eco-critical approaches to media studies have become prevalent over recent years, with scholars keen to underscore how the different material infrastructures, formations, and movements of media 'are inextricable from their frictive landscapes of resource depletion, protest, social inequality, and environmental risk'.⁴ Thus, within a book that has explored the political potential of moving image aesthetics to sense, make sense, and critique different formations of spatial power and violence, it is also necessary to highlight how such forms of media are themselves predicated on similar forms of spatial exploitation. Indeed, as Cubitt suggests elsewhere, any media object or practice must 'take responsibility for its own existence, an existence premised on the medium's imbrication in circuits of materials and energy'.⁵ Thus, in multifarious and complex ways, different media forms leave their own traces of financial, social, political, ecological, and ultimately *spatial* violence — as the example of the *Titanic* production and Popotla studio makes starkly evident.

Clearly, such forms of industrial and material analysis account for the spatial in multiple and intersecting ways, examining the geographical and geopolitical impacts of media production. However, within these pages I have instead been concerned with the different ways in which scholars and practitioners have conceptualised the

moving image's aesthetic engagement with the spatial. Building from Fuller and Weizman's framework of aesthetic investigation, I have focused on documentary works that try and both sense and make sense of multitudinous manifestations of spatial power and violence that now surround us almost completely. Thus, the aesthetic is instrumentalised by these works as an investigatory tool for 'sensing' particular modalities of spatial violence. And, as a result, these works provide us with various strategies for reading the spatial as a 'political plastic — social forces *slowing* into form'.⁶ As I have previously suggested, this is an approach that is open to criticism. To understand the political potentiality of a particular moving image work, we must take into account its material — and, by extension, spatial — conditions of production, distribution, and exhibition. However, I bring up the example of Popotla, *Titanic*, and Sekula's work not to underscore the potential shortcomings of this book, but rather to highlight one last time the potential fecundity of such modes of aesthetic sensing when attempting to critique different formations of spatial power and violence (even when such forms of exploitation extend from the realm of media production itself). In one of Sekula's most striking diptychs from his photographic exploration of this area, we are presented with the two distinct, yet structurally intertwined, forms of production and labour in Popotla.



FIG. C.2. Photograph from *TITANIC's Wake*, by Allan Sekula (Austria, 2005).

The image on the left presents us with the under-construction *Titanic* set. The foreground of this image is dominated by a large pile of dirt and rubble, likely materials that have been excavated to make way for the water tank. A short dirt road leads up to the concrete surrounds of the tank, upon which sits the under-construction *Titanic* replica. The image on the right presents us with two mussel gatherers outside one of several shacks, cooking some of their (ever-depleting) daily catch. In the top right of the image, we catch a glimpse of the ocean. When placed side-by-side, it appears as if the large pile of rubble from the studio excavation in the left image is stacked upon the frame of the right image, about to collapse onto the mussel gatherers.

Here, Sekula seems to foreground the damaging impacts — environmental, industrial, and financial — that this new media-industrial formation in Popotla

has had. Indeed, the diptych presentation of these images draws us back to the Farockian notion of soft montage, that technique of image juxtaposition that aims for the creation of 'relations' and 'differences' rather than the oppositional logics of sequential montage. The fate of the mussel gatherers is indissolubly wedded to the ebb and flow of 20th Century Fox's media production, and Sekula's simple visual strategy makes these interconnections powerfully evident. Here, we see how Sekula's visual investigation is fundamentally concerned with examining the exploitative spatial logics of another, larger-scale form of visual media production. As a result, we enter a feedback loop of sorts. Within Sekula's photographic investigation, it becomes starkly evident that visual media can be responsible for diverse forms of spatial exploitation; however, at the same time, through the creation of these photographic diptychs, we are once again shown how a particular mode of aesthetic sensing can also function as an effective tool for spatial examination and critique. To highlight the spatial exploitations of a globally dominant visual media industry, Sekula takes up another form of visual critique; the visual to critique the visual, with a constant focus on the spatial. Ultimately, the modes of aesthetic investigation explored in this book do not close down the spatial to fixed or undialectical representation, instead they force us to apprehend it as a complex and heterogenous social product and political plastic, riven through with social, political, and economic forces that are 'slowing into form'. Consequently, whilst it is important to account for the forms of spatial exploitation upon which different media forms and practices are built, these very same forms and practices always hold the powerful potential for spatio-political critique. Media forms and formations are powerful and potentially violent industries and infrastructures, but this doesn't mean that we should discount their various political potentialities. It is this latter argument that has structured the analytical work of this book.

The discussed works collectively explore critical themes related to late capitalist exploitation, carceral spaces, and border regimes. In visualising late capitalism, the focus has been on critiquing economic exploitation, utilising Fredric Jameson's 'cognitive mapping' to reveal fissures within the operative logics of late capitalism. The exploration of carceral geographies has extended beyond physical prison boundaries, unveiling hidden spaces of sovereign violence and resisting the perception of carceral spaces as closed-off. Finally, the examination of border regimes has highlighted their proliferation in the context of transnational global capitalism, emphasising the shift from solid boundaries to fragmented modalities of spatial control. Collectively, these works seek to understand and reveal the multiple, shifting, and obfuscated mechanisms of control within these regimes, identifying material choke-points as potential sites for intervention. *Spatial Violence and the Documentary Image* has argued that an approach to the aesthetic that emphasises its ability to both sense and make sense of spatial forms of political power and violence is particularly key at a moment when such formations of power are increasingly obfuscated. Pace Fuller and Weizman, to be attuned to the aesthetic opens up new methodologies to sense and make sense of these multitudinous manifestations of power and violence that now surround us almost completely.

Aesthetic engagement can be reactivated as a decidedly politicised activity, no longer infused with its historical reputation for detached appreciation, mediation, or pleasure. More precisely, these documentaries' aesthetic engagements with different spatial formations and agglomerations allow for such politicised forms of sensing and sense-making to come to the fore. As this book has argued, the documentary image has a powerful capacity to sense modes of political-spatial violence 'slowing into form', precisely at a moment where material space is more intensely contested and exploited than ever before.

The documentary practices examined here cultivate and experiment with new and emerging forms of aesthetic practice that can more effectively render visible and critique myriad material sites and spaces and their embedded and interconnected power relations. Through the forms of aesthetic experimentation and attunement in these works, their engagements with specific spatial sites and formations always foregrounds them as 'fluid', 'alive', and 'dialectical' nodes that must be connected to broader spatio-political formations of power. By undertaking this crucial groundwork — mapping out the origins, politics, and potential future directions of this critical practice — this book points towards a whole new area of documentary study focused on such spatialised practices. By delineating the boundaries of this field of practice, the book has aimed to create a fertile space for further scholarly research and investigation within documentary and moving image studies. We must continue to forge modes of documentary practice that are intensely aware of such spatialised power relations and their obfuscated machinations and movements.

Notes to the Conclusion

1. For a more detailed examination of how cinema strategically exploits particular sites and spaces, see the forthcoming book by Kay Dickinson, *Supply Chain Cinema: Producing Global Film Workers* (London: British Film Institute, forthcoming).
2. Allan Sekula, 'TITANIC'S Wake,' *Art Journal*, 60.2 (2001), 26–37 (p. 26).
3. Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt, 'Introduction: Ecologies of Media,' in *Ecomedia: Key Issues*, ed. by Stephen Rust, Salma Monani, and Sean Cubitt (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 1–14 (p. 1).
4. Patrick Brodie, Lisa Han, and Weixian Pan, 'Becoming Environmental: Media, Logistics, and Ecological Change,' *Synoptique*, 8.1 (2019), 6–13 (p. 6).
5. Sean Cubitt, 'Film, Landscape and Political Aesthetics: Deseret,' *Screen*, 57.1 (2016), 21–34 (p. 21).
6. Weizman, *Forensic Architecture*, p. 7.

