

Jonathan Lam

Prof. Germano

HUM324 – Polar Imagination

10 / 18 / 21

Response to Blum, Herskos, Singh: Ecomedia

I felt that these texts were much more difficult than the previous (long) texts we have read so far: the Blum paper for the density of ideas, and the description of the two artists' works about the poles (Herskos and Singh) because I do not easily grasp artistic subtleties (e.g., I cannot hope to imagine what many of Singh's works have to do with the Arctic, such as the sand timer with the magnetic dust). The Blum paper in particular was charged with a richer vocabulary and density of ideas, so that I feel that I could use a lot more time digesting it.

The title of Blum's book, *The News at the End of the World*, intrigued me. At face value, the poles are the *extremes* of the Earth. But to call them the *end* of the Earth – what exactly does that mean? The term is used colloquially to mean some sort of extrema, but the Earth has a spherical rather than a linear geometry. We may reach the pole (a point on the surface of the sphere, or a ray from the center of the Earth) and then walk past it to begin moving southward again, and in this way it is not strictly an “end.” On the other hand, we are also talking about the “end” in the temporal dimension, as climate change is bringing the poles to their finale. Arguably, the second meaning of the word “end” may be the more important one, as Blum repeatedly talks about the “motility” of the poles and man in the poles. This means that the ice is changing over time, perhaps with some movement, but more generally shifting in various ways – emitting trapped gases, opening undersea caves for explorers, or changing form to become seawater.

Hersko dramatizes not the beauty of the Arctic, but the story of its end. The melting of the poles is drawn akin to a second Holocaust. This characterization gives the disaster a more human and personal aspect, rather than appealing to the scale of the calamity that is climate change. For instance,

she takes time to examine the tragedy of snail shells dissolving due to ocean acidification. Bloom describes the purpose of this approach: “In some ways her work addresses the failure of perception and cognition, the result of which is our inability to deal with critical changes facing us over extended time” (Bloom 21) – while we cannot comprehend the commonplace statistics about flooding levels or a global temperature difference of two degrees Celsius (after all, daily temperatures fluctuate much more wildly), we can observe the dying snail and mourn the loss of its shell.

When reading about Hersko’s work, I was thinking about two movies that have affected me most strongly: *Princess Mononoke* and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* by Studio Ghibli. Ghibli’s director, Hayao Miyazaki, is well-known for being an environmentalist, and Ghibli’s animated movies are famous for their humanity, partially due to subtleties such as their pacing: mixing significant and insignificant moments (perhaps like calving glaciers versus a partially-dissolved snail shell). These two movies are about, respectively, the end of a gentle nature and the end of a grand civilization, both at the hand of greedy men. While such a plot in movies usually feels whimsical and dull to me in many movies (“just another dystopian apocalypse”) Miyazaki’s movies have the character of great wonder and great tragedy. I feel that this has much to do with focusing on the small, and giving a human-sized narrative to something otherwise too large to feel sad about, in the same way Hersko aspires to do.

When thinking about ends (or future ends), I am tempted to make the comparison once again to space (as Singh also notes). Perhaps in our lifetime, we may be able to terraform the Moon or Mars. We already have probes that have reached the edge of the solar system, and have scanned much farther than that. The ability of man to affect its environment, and even its planet – as Blum notes, man does not only live *on* the planet, we live *with* it now – means that we have the ability to cause harm at the planetary level. Now, when new planets are our frontier as continents used to be, perhaps there may be a realization and a tragedy akin to climate change on the scale of multiplanetary systems waiting after the height of space exploration.