Camera artist in Antarctica: Herbert Ponting’s images of Scott’s last expedition.

Patricia Margaret Millar

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Faculty of Science, Engineering and Technology
University of Tasmania
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This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the thesis, and to the best of my knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the thesis.

Patricia Margaret Millar

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Illustrations

*Herbert Ponting and the cinematograph, Scott writing his journal, Herbert Ponting at work in the darkroom,* are from Andrews 2007:82, 85, 86.

*Ponting and telephoto apparatus, Ponting: Mt Fuji, 1907, Ponting lecturing on Japan using lantern slides, Adélie penguin track and sledge track crossing, Sastrugi on Barne Glacier, Sledger at the foot of glacier and Mt Erebus, Captain Scott: just before leaving for the Southern journey 26 Jan 1911, Captain Oates at the stable door, Captain Oates and Seaman Abbott picketing ponies, Dr Atkinson’s frostbitten hand, Angry penguin attacking Herbert Ponting,* are reproduced with permission of the Royal Geographical Society, London.


*Ponting and stuffed penguin, Terra Nova held up in the pack, Telephoto of Mt Lister, Point of the Barne Glacier, Ice-cave in Land’s End Glacier, Captain Scott, 28 Apr. 1911, Scott’s 43rd birthday, 6 June 1911, Dr Simpson at the magnetometer, Mechanic Lashly, Clissold the cook, Leader of sledge dogs Osman, Bowers, Dr Wilson, Lieut. Bowers, Cherry-Garrard before leaving for Cape Crozier, Cecil H. Meares on return from the Barrier, Petty Officer Keohane, Weddell seal calf, Mother seals fighting, One of the still photographs of the Polar Party at the South Pole, Ponting cinematographing the prow of the Terra Nova,* are reproduced with permission of the Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge.

*Mt Erebus* is from Savours 1974:41.

*Wilson, 21 Apr. 1911* is from Arnold 1971:75.

*Midwinter Day Dinner, 1911* is from Wilson 1972:138.

*Dr Wilson, Lieut. Bowers, Cherry-Garrard on return from winter trip to Cape Crozier, 1 Aug. 1911* is from Riffenburgh, Cruwys & Arnold 2004: 41.
Abstract

Herbert Ponting was the first professional photographer to work in Antarctica. Selected by R.F. Scott to record and document the British Antarctic Expedition (1910-13), Ponting produced over one thousand still photographs, generally considered the finest work of his career, a pioneering and acclaimed cine-film, *90° South: With Scott to the Antarctic*, and a successful book, *The Great White South*. His images of the ultimately tragic enterprise are vivid constructions of the realities of Antarctica and the expedition, as he perceived them.

The images are used to illustrate many books about the expedition, but are seldom examined in any detail. This thesis aims to address this deficiency by studying relevant literature produced by Ponting and other writers, followed by an analysis of Ponting’s role as ‘camera artist’ on the expedition, and a detailed examination of images. A visual semiotics methodology is used, based on a combination of discourse analysis (Gee 1990, 2005) and visual analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). There are 38 illustrations in the thesis.

Ponting’s focus is on the beauty of Antarctica, the nobility of the venture, the fineness of the men. He had a keen sense of his audience, which would in the first instance be a British one, and discourses of cultural pride flow through much of the work, a visual language which contemporary audiences would have associated with their inherited ways of being, behaving, and valuing. Interwoven themes, however, allude to darker aspects. His landscapes have resonances of the awe and power associated with the concept of the sublime. Photographs of exhausted and injured men evoke reminders of the transience of life.

A connecting theme throughout the work is Ponting’s expression of his own personal and professional role. A complex man who wanted close relationships, yet resisted them, he remained something of a loner, his sense of personal identity strongly merged with the professional one. In the years after Antarctica, he remained fixated on the expedition, dedicated to keeping alive the public’s memory of it and its tragedy. But his achievements went beyond this. His work
was an intrinsic part of that promotion of Antarctic science which was the expedition’s most substantial legacy. Ponting increased contemporary knowledge of the Antarctic environment and topography, and made a direct contribution to the life sciences through his substantial depiction of wildlife in photographs and film.

Ponting skillfully used techniques such as composition, lighting and tone to construct images which have stirred strong responses in viewers from his own time to the present. His place in the history of camera art is a specialised one, closely associated with Antarctica, but the best of his images endure as works of art in their own right. His work was seminal, paving the way for other fine photographers of the polar region.
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