1: Introduction

The work of Herbert George Ponting is a key part of the legacy of the Heroic Era of Antarctic exploration, the period from around 1895 to 1917 in which the continent was explored, mapped, and the South Pole reached. Ponting was the official photographer on Captain Robert Falcon Scott’s British Antarctic Expedition (1910-1913). He produced over one thousand still photographs considered the finest work of his career, a pioneering and acclaimed cine-film, and a vivid, successful book. His work is pervaded by intriguing contrasts: archetypal images of indomitable human spirit and endeavour occur alongside others that evoke a strong sense of humanity’s insignificance when confronted by the Antarctic sublime.

The Heroic Era is one of enduring public interest, and the story of the Scott expedition, though controversial, continues to enthrall. Much of the writing about the expedition is illustrated with Ponting’s images, but these are seldom examined in any detail. This study aims to address the deficiency with a study of the relevant literature, an analysis of Ponting’s role as ‘camera artist’ on the expedition, and a detailed examination of images produced during and after his time in Antarctica.

‘Camera artist’ was Ponting’s preferred term. He began working in travel and landscape photography around 1900, a time of rapid technical progress. He was a news photographer, travelled extensively, and published a book of photographs of Japan. When he undertook the appointment on the British Antarctic Expedition, he became the first professional photographer to work on a polar expedition (Huntford 2001), but his career was already successful.

He was in Antarctica just over a year. On the way home, in 1912, he learned of the success of Roald Amundsen’s Norwegian team in reaching the Pole first, a setback for the British expedition and also for Ponting, who intended to capitalise on his work with lectures and film footage. Back in England, he began work on this, interrupted in February 1913 by the shocking news of the death of Scott and
the polar party. Ponting’s first public statement was that they had ‘given their lives for science’ (quoted by Jones 2003:183). For the next two decades he would largely devote his own life to commemorating this sacrifice, to the detriment of his own career and life.

1. Ponting and telephoto apparatus.

**The expedition**

International political and economic rivalries and the growth in scientific knowledge and inquiry were major forces helping to create the Heroic Age of exploration, and the 1910-1913 British Antarctic Expedition’s objectives were shaped by these. Scott had been to Antarctica in 1901-04, but had not then reached the South Pole. His second expedition’s prospectus said its main aim was ‘to reach the South Pole, and to secure for the British Empire the honour of that achievement’ (quoted by Lynch 1990:219). To this end, it was from the start an imperial enterprise and was accompanied by official functions in South Africa, Australia and New Zealand as it travelled south.
But Scott himself described it as primarily an exploratory and scientific venture (Ponting 2001), and he had chosen a team of experts for this purpose. To document it photographically, he selected Ponting.

He considered photography was of such importance in exploration that it was his intention to make a special department of the art, and he asked if I would like to take charge of that part of the enterprise. (Ponting 2001:2)

The exploratory and scientific emphasis was indeed of high importance throughout the expedition, and Ponting saw his visual records as an adjunct to this and an important contribution to understanding Antarctica. He faithfully recorded all such activities and accentuated them in his public lectures after the expedition.

A scientific focus was relatively new for Antarctica, which had long been mythologised and romanticised in Western literature and culture (Leane 2004; Moss 2006). Spufford (1997) associates English views of Antarctica with the sublime, that quality of awesome grandeur in art or nature associated with imposing mountains, volcanoes, storms and the sea, and with pain and danger (Burke 1958). The transition from myth and romance to science was not always clear-cut, and this would be illustrated in Ponting’s work.

By 1910, the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration had already produced stirring tales of survival, bravery and endurance, and an epic tradition with great emotional appeal (Martin 1996)—‘sagas of a number and intensity without parallel in the exploration of other continents’ (Pyne 2004:93), which have been seen as manifestations of a late nineteenth-century Romanticism, validating ideal images of character, gallantry and honour (Karamanski 1984). To Ponting, Scott was ‘the great explorer’, whose ‘quiet force’ drew the photographer ‘irresistibly’ (Ponting 2001:1, 2). Just as the publicity surrounding the 1910 expedition captured the public imagination, so the eventual fate of Scott and his companions would provoke widespread grief.
… the whole Empire mourned, whilst priding itself that these undaunted adventurers, who in death had found immortal fame, were British. (Ponting 2001:296)

The tragedy would also have its effect on Ponting’s representation of the expedition, as he collated his photographs, wrote his book, and several times reworked his film.

**Sources**

The Scott Polar Research Institute (SPRI) at the University of Cambridge has a Herbert Ponting Collection which includes all of Ponting’s Antarctic glass plate negatives, his film and other illustrative material, and an archival collection of correspondence (161 leaves), certificates (16 leaves) and notes (44 leaves). There is also an H.J.P. Arnold collection, which has letters, photographs, articles and ephemera collected by Arnold for his book, *Photographer of the world, the biography of H G Ponting*. Other relevant collections at the SPRI are the Robert Falcon Scott Collection, the Apsley Cherry-Garrard Collection, the British Antarctic Expedition 1910-1913, and the T.A. McIereth Collection. While inspection of the original documents was beyond the scope of this research project, much can be gleaned by examining reproductions of the photographs together with Ponting’s published text(s) and secondary literature.

The British Film Institute’s National Archive holds three feature film versions of Ponting’s Antarctic footage, as well as the rough cut (early edited footage). The versions are Ponting’s 1924 *Great White Silence*, his re-edited sound feature from 1933, *90° South: With Scott to the Antarctic*, and a 1936 re-issue, *The story of Captain Scott: a chronicle of immortal adventure*, all produced in Great Britain. A DVD of *90° South*, released by Milestone Films in 1991, is still in circulation, and it was this version that was used for this thesis.

Among published material, the primary source on Ponting’s Antarctic work is his book, *The Great White South*, a detailed account of his experiences on the expedition, first published in 1921 by Duckworth, London. There is also the previously mentioned Arnold biography (1971, originally published in 1969).
Arnold was able to access the SPRI’s Ponting Collection, and to speak to surviving family members and other people who had known him.

An important recent resource on the photography is Andrews (2007), who in some fifteen pages of her book on visual representations of Antarctica analyses a number of Ponting photographs. Arnold too has written about the photography, though in more general terms, in Riffenburgh, Cruwys and Arnold (2004). Other than these, there are books which reproduce many Ponting photographs, but with text focusing on the expedition, notably Riffenburgh’s and Cruwys’ chapters in the 2004 book just mentioned, and their earlier book in 1998. Aspects of Ponting’s work are also discussed in the many other books and articles on the Scott expedition, on Antarctica, or on photography and cine-film. It can no longer be said, as Arnold did forty years ago, that ‘very little had been learned about [Ponting] beyond a few well-known (and sometimes inaccurate) facts’ (1971:11). The present project, however, with its emphasis on analysis of the work, aims to be a useful addition to the literature.

The research context

Research questions

The research questions developed for this study consider the main aspects of Ponting’s photographic work:

**Ponting as camera artist**
- What was Ponting’s brief on Scott’s expedition?
- What was his role on the expedition?
- What was his interpretation of the role of photography?
- How did the other expedition members perceive his role?

**The Photography**

Analysis of key stills and film-making considering the following:
- Subject matter, content and formal aspects of picture-making
- Ponting’s place in the context of the history of photography
- Ponting’s work in relation to a sense of place, environment and the human condition
Comparison with photographic representations by his contemporaries such as Hurley and Amundsen

How did his representations of the expedition change over time?

The Texts

What were the written (or spoken) texts Ponting produced as the result of the expedition?

Analysis of The Great White South – post-Antarctica

How does the text complement or complicate the photography?

Evaluation of Ponting’s work

In relation to art/photography and Antarctic culture

How is his work perceived today and what are the more recent representations of Ponting and the expedition?

Chapter outlines and methodology

Answers to the research questions are sought in the following chapters. Chapter 2 offers background information on Ponting’s life before and after Antarctica, and examines the literature on his involvement in the Scott expedition. The study includes an outline of representations of Antarctica in art and literature which may have influenced Ponting’s work.

In Chapter 3 Ponting’s Antarctic still photographs and cine-film are analysed. The analysis involves a range of interconnected interpretive practices. Overall, it is based on principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba 1985), a discovery-oriented approach. In the naturalistic paradigm, data are ‘the constructions offered by or in the sources’, and are viewed as ‘stemming from an interaction between the inquirer and the data sources’ (Lincoln & Guba 1985:332). As applied to the present study, Ponting’s photographs, cine-film and writings are all texts representing his construction of the realities of Antarctica and the expedition. Truths and fictions co-exist: ‘[In the photographs] is an indisputable flicker of reality. The fiction is in the message, intended or unconscious, about what this reality is’ (Brody 2008:279). Analysis is an interactive process between the analyst-researcher and the texts, through which
multiple realities and constructed meanings (Foucault 1969; Habermas 1971) may be investigated.

Within the naturalistic inquiry framework, other interpretive methods are used. Intertextuality is an important aspect of the study. In *The Great White South* Ponting refers to specific photographs and describes the circumstances of others. The book is therefore a useful aid in critical analysis through the information it provides about aspects of production—the technological, compositional and social ‘modalities’ of the images (Rose 2007:13). A visual semiotics methodology is then applied, largely based on a combination of discourse analysis (Gee 1990, 2005) and visual analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen 2006). This is a new way of examining Ponting’s images. It is considered appropriate particularly because these techniques concentrate on images themselves, allowing exploration of the effects of their compositional and social modalities and the web of intertextuality in which the individual images are embedded.

Discourse analysis is a technique for analysing the components of texts for their operant values. Discourses are socially produced understandings about the world which shape how it is represented. The linguistic and visual structures through which they are communicated point to particular interpretations of experience and forms of social interaction. All discourse is ‘organised to make itself persuasive’ (Gill 1996:143). What is expressed in language through the choice between different kinds of vocabulary and syntax, is expressed in images through the choice between different compositional structures (Barthes 1977; Kress & van Leeuwen 2006).

Analysis begins with asking questions about how the language of the image is being used. The questions relate to the values, identities and relationships enacted by the people involved (the image creator, subject/s, and viewer/s), and to the situated meanings and cultural models involved. Images, words and phrases have multiple and flexible ‘situated meanings’ according to their users’ socio-culturally defined experience (Gee 2005:59). They are associated with ‘cultural models’—explanatory theories or storylines connected by societies to concepts important to them (Gee 2005:60). Cultural models may vary within a
culture, for example, between middle-class and working-class families, and also vary over time.

Validity and reliability are based on convergence of answers to the ‘building task’ steps, on the likelihood of concurrence by users of the social languages in the data, and on the likelihood of coverage, meaning that the analysis can be applied to related sorts of data.

In Chapter 4, the concluding section of the thesis, the findings of the study are reviewed and conclusions are drawn. The discussion includes suggestions of areas for further research.

**Importance of Ponting’s work and this research**

Ponting’s work made a seminal contribution at a time of exciting advances in Antarctic exploration and in photography. This study now proceeds to address a deficiency of close examination of the images he created.