

Guest Editorial

Sean Cubitt

It seems strange to be writing this here, in Melbourne, and now, at the beginning of what promises to be a history-making drought. We talk to friends in Aotearoa about the weather – storms, wind and rain they complain, and we get envious. Australia is strange to me. The hard ground and yellow grass, even down here on the coast. The wind whips in, and there are days of persistent drizzle but as a farmer told me on the train the other day, it doesn't even reach the ground.

We went to see Al Gore's documentary about global warming: there were ripples of applause in the auditorium of our local cinema. This was a few days before the first member of the Howard cabinet to break ranks mentioned in a speech that global warming was, after all, a problem, and that maybe the government should think about doing something. The timing was interesting – state elections are coming up, and water rights especially are a big issue for the influential rural voters. Since the states are almost all Labour while the Canberra government is Liberal, there's a lot to play for.

We caught the story on satellite TV about the two-meter-wide jellyfish washing up on Great Barrier Island. In our six years in Aotearoa, we never made it there, but it sits high up on our list of places to go when we come back for holidays and to escape the February heat.

Two years back or so, we went to see Germaine Greer commemorating her infamous arrest with a speech at the Auckland Town Hall. She talked there about Australia's ecological disaster and offered a theory about how it happened. The white fellas were never at home here, she said. They had already traded continents, and they weren't locked into the land they tended. Once the water was gone, or the minerals, or the forests, they just moved on, until there wasn't anywhere left to move. Which is about

when we decided to arrive to take up my new job at Melbourne Uni.

My people were Irish. Dad was from Kerry on the West Coast. Mum was from Cork City. He was a young doctor when he volunteered for the British Army at the start of World War Two. He was with the paratroop regiment, and saw more than his share of action. Mum was in the war damage commission, and tending my new-born older sister. After the war they settled in rural Lincolnshire, where there were other émigrés, some wealthy like the Dutch tulip farming family, some less so like the Polish carpenter, who attended the Catholic Church. It was a small town. I was itching to escape.

University was a huge liberation. I took an opportunity to go to Montreal after that, and spent four years there. By the time I moved back to London, everything had moved on. Ten years in London, then ten years in Liverpool, then we moved to Aotearoa.

The Irish have wandering hearts. I suppose that's part of it. And then there's the sociology of work today. The university trade is international, and a PhD is a kind of passport, the poor man's gateway to the freedoms of the cosmopolitan elite. Like them I can, indeed almost must, travel to make my career. Like them, I am (almost) at home wherever there's a university or an academic conference. But

lecturers aren't the only ones. All the statistics we have agree: people move. It's a rare achievement now to live a life in one town, even one city; to stay in one job with one company. The small daily migrations of commuters are effects of a shift that began in the 1930s, when the majority of workers lived in walking distance of the factory that employed them.

I loved Montreal: most of all I loved the rich Québécois French culture, and the heady pleasure of changing languages, skipping from one way of living and thinking to another. Of course the winters are bitter, and they are getting worse: colder, drier, less snow. I loved London, though it wasn't my home: loved the punk ethos, the squats, the DIY culture that was, for me at least, the cutting edge of the 1980s. I loved the crashing clashing cultures, the intellectual challenge of it as well as the emotional charge. Through it all, and self consciously (because after all I'm an academic) I had a pleasurable alibi, an unearned nostalgia for an Irishness I'd never really experienced. That I suppose was my way of claiming an identity, but it was always a fiction, and I knew it, of course, and could be suitably, post-modernly, ironic about it too.

But then we came to Aotearoa. I didn't understand at first – lots of things I didn't understand. Some of those are things for poems and stories, stumbling thoughts and somehow private reflection. In public though, I think I can now make some kind of public sense of my experience, especially now I have to look back at my years when Aotearoa was home.

Here is the first idea, and it's a borrowed one, from an essay by Vilém Flusser, a Czech Jew who escaped to Brazil, devoted himself to his adopted country, but eventually fled during the period of military dictatorship, back to Europe, but this time to France, though he spent a large part of his later years writing and lecturing in German. His essay is called "The Freedom of the Migrant" and appears in the book of the same name.

Flusser says that the migrant has two freedoms, or ought to have. The first is one perhaps every migrant recognizes, however guiltily. We are free when we flee the stranglehold of tradition, of what's know and familiar, when we escape the bonds of family and community, when we set sail, young and anonymous, into the wide world. This first freedom

makes you a stranger in your adopted culture, sure enough, but it also has the heady, possibly even arrogant sensation of being better than those you left behind, clearer eyed, more able to see how narrow and restricted their world remains, as you soar free in the wild air. I think this is rather like Nietzsche's idea of the superman, someone who exiles themselves from the common lot, and looks down on them with aristocratic assurance of their own superiority to the herd. But there is a second, more dangerous freedom. It is the freedom that recognises that the other side of liberty is responsibility. The second freedom comes through taking responsibility for either the home culture or the adopted one, or both, using the first freedom as a lever. Because the migrant is doubly a stranger, back home and now here, she is uniquely placed to see either culture or both from a special vantage point, both integral and external. We migrants, Flusser seems to say, have the freedom and the responsibility to tell both cultures what's wrong with them. This isn't a very sensible thing to do. People tend to respond to this kind of criticism with baseball bats. But it is the freedom, the special charge, the duty of the migrant.

Now here's the second idea, which comes from years of reading, but most of all from my all too short experience of Aotearoa. The typical sociological analysis makes a distinction between two partners: migrants and locals.

For the locals, the migrant are always other. And there's a massive literature arguing whether, for example, locals become locals precisely by distinguishing themselves from the others, in fact by othering. This had seemed terribly important in London especially during the Thatcher years with their anti-racist and multicultural foment. I should have had an inkling from my time in Québec, where the struggle between French and English was so important, much more so than anything to do with migrants, and altogether more significant back then than indigenous rights.

But it was in Aotearoa that the weakness of the local-stranger opposition as a tool for thinking with really hit me. The New Zealand Wars were Victoria's Vietnam: the biggest army the world had ever seen fought to a standstill by Māori. Cheated, oppressed, Māori had never been beaten. They are nobody's victim. And they alter the status of localness. It is no

longer possible to think of migration in terms of its difference to one thing. Now, it seems to me, the central fact of our rootless lifestyle is its double difference, between the indigenous, the settler and the migrant.

It is as absurd and as profound to say 'we are all indigenous now' as to say 'we are all migrants'. 'We' and 'all' are very big words, even though they have very few letters. Writing here today in Melbourne, a handful of months into our Australian adventure, it isn't the drought, or the government, or the strange language of milk bars and eskies that makes us feel uprooted. It is a far more common thing, so common you wouldn't even notice unless you'd lived in Aotearoa, or perhaps gone to spend some decent amount of time in the desert here. It is an absence, which makes it even harder to pinpoint: the lack of the third term. Aborigines are almost completely absent from this city, or at least the suburbs I cycle through, the University where I work, and the CBD. There is a constant gap, a link missing, that makes it absurdly difficult to place ourselves. We know we aren't dinkum Aussies. But we don't know it in the way we know that we aren't Māori. Without that ground, will we too be like the farmers who stripped this land of its water and moved on?

Sean Cubitt was born in England of Irish parents. He has lived in Canada, the USA, Scotland, England and most recently Aotearoa New Zealand where he was head of Screen and Media Studies at the University of Waikato until moving to the University of Melbourne in 2006. He has written a number of books, most recently *The Cinema Effect* and *EcoMedia*, as well as articles, catalogue essays and web poems. He lives on the coast in suburban Melbourne and misses the fish.