

Aurora Australis

In *Aurora Australis*, Minnette Vári re-interprets the scrambled video signal of non-decoded pay-television, comparing its aleatoric character to the light and colour of the natural phenomenon of the southern lights (Aurora Australis). The artist's intervention in the broken media stream becomes a physical one as she casts herself into some of the scenes, replicating or completing the actions of actors, wrestling the apparent chaos to make way for new plots to be revealed. Her intervention also comments on the power struggle inherent in the ownership of information; entitlement (or lack thereof) through the degree of access to the image. Presenting her work as a digital painting, Vári explores the poetic potential in our grasp and interpretation of the endless flow of information emitted by the world. By doing this, she becomes a kind of augur, trying to interpret, or decode, a narrative from the storm of cryptic information. As the artist states: "I would like to be able to read the signs of the world in the same way that the ancient peoples made sense of nature's everyday and more uncommon displays."

Artist's Statement

Television, after radio, is accessed daily by millions in South Africa who rely on this medium for their daily fix of cheap entertainment (soaps, especially), to follow their favourite sport and to see what the newest developments are in international and local politics and other affairs. Television has come to be called a 'tool of true democracy, spreading information and education to all'. Although there are certainly arguments against this, it does stand that a great many people access their share of entertainment, world news and education from the small screen, even if it is from the classroom or the house of a neighbour.

As in many other countries in the world, exclusive television entertainment has become big business in South Africa, and sets itself quite a long way apart from the state-monitored National broadcaster. In this spirit there are a few 'pay channels' that make their material available only to subscribers who have the appropriate decoders. As is the international custom, these exclusive services scramble their broadcasts so as to render their programmes unwatchable by the non-paying public.

At times I can sit and watch these scrambled signals for hours, marvelling at the strange combinations of recognisable image and sheer visual 'noise', all the while noticing that the soundtrack is not at all part of the programme being broadcast, since they rotate the same lame 1980's songs over and over again. Intermittent break-ups in the audio signal bring storms of electronic hiss and crackle, or long stretches of silence followed by the voice of an unaccountably excited host announcing upcoming attractions that will remain just 'noise' to me and millions of other South Africans, until I can afford my decoder, that is. Despite this, there are moments where I think I recognise the flash of mangled footage as coming from a movie that I've seen before, or footage of some other event that I know of, and this keeps me riveted to the screen for more clues. Invariably I come away seeing flashes of light when I close my blood-shot eyes.

The TV is like a hearth that gathers families and strangers alike around its flashing bluish glow; it emits rays of light-borne infor-

mation to countless pairs of eyes - information that illuminates or confuses, encourages understanding and tolerance or incites violence and hatred. Or simply moves people to buy stuff they will never use. All things and all energies can be seen as information in transit, and here I thought of the sun that emits a constant shower of solar wind-driven sub-atomic particles out into space, causing chemical and electrical reactions to occur - sometimes on a grand scale.

The solar wind flows over and around the planet, hitting the Earth's magnetic field at around 400 kilometres per second. The field deflects the stream towards the magnetic poles, where the electric charge of the particles reacts with the chemistry of the upper atmosphere. The resulting photo-electrical discharge lights up the night sky and creates the famous Aurora Australis of the South Polar Region, exactly as happens in the North Polar Region's Aurora Borealis.

Great flowing ribbons of coloured light brightens the skies over the polar region too far south to be seen from the southernmost part of my country. And yet, because of its location I feel strangely territorial about this grand display. Just like the coloured bands in the scrambled transmission on my TV set, these seem to carry some hidden message, and holds some remote enchantment, even a chance at intellectual and spiritual illumination to those who watch. Like the goddess of dawn, Aurora (or Greek Eos), it heralds of something out there, something greater, a cryptogram of things to come.

In *Aurora Australis*, the encrypted television footage from my home TV appears on the screen, slowed down to a whisper of motion to show the shifting ribbons of colour and light and the strange flashes of life and fantasy that they partially obscure, partially reveal. Faces and gestures, figures moving in different locations, hinting at sport, politics, intrigue, high action, romance. This work will track the scrambled versions of a few selected programmes and movies related in some way to the concepts I have written about above.

Given the geographic location of the place where I encounter this televisual scramble, even if it originates from a totally different source, and the mythological links to the auroral phenomenon (Aurora, dawn, the east where the sun rises), I have started to follow broadcasts of movies that in their title or content have a link with the South (Africa and Australia) and the East (East Germany, Pakistan, China).

I engage physically in these images, casting myself as a 'double' of some of the actors, replicating certain actions or completing their actions for them. Picking up on certain themes, I will enter into a physical struggle with the apparent chaos by wrestling with the colour bands to make way for a new plot to be revealed. I will become a kind of Augur, trying to interpret, or decode, a narrative from the storm of cryptic information.

Of course what is revealed is likely to have nothing to do with the 'found' scrambled information, which is precisely the point. Part of my struggle here will be to show the endless possibilities for poetry in every person's grasp of the world in the endless stream of information emitted by the world. That which the world presents us with is in no way ever straightforward or uncoded. The struggle to make sense of our histories and experiences, even of our truths, holds a lot of freedom, but in essence it remains a struggle of great risk, significance and magnitude. I would like to be able to read the signs of the world in the same way that the ancient peoples made sense of nature's everyday and more uncommon displays.

Minnette Vári

Johannesburg, September 2001

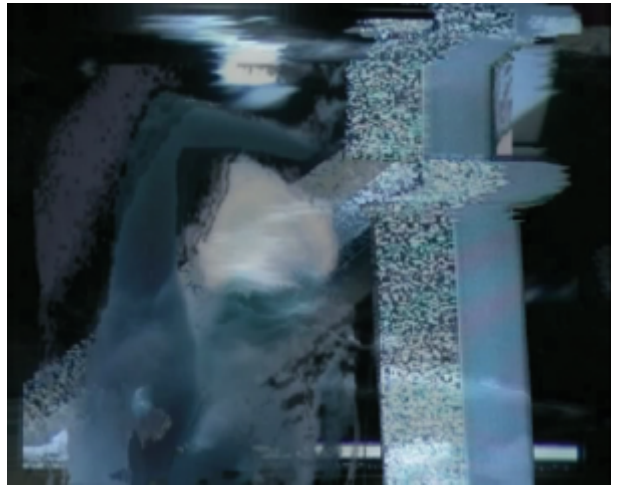
Aurora Australis

2001

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Video Animation

Duration: 9 minutes, looped indefinitely



AURORA AUSTRALIS

2001

video animation · dimensions: variable · duration: 9 minutes · looped indefinitely