CAMILLE SERISIER
THE WONDERFUL LAND OF OZ

MAAP MEDIA BANK

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RIPPING YARNS: *THE WONDERFUL LAND OF OZ*

BY COURTNEY PEDERSON

The adventure story can tell us a lot about national myths and national anxieties. In his 1995 study of colonial adventure stories in the late nineteenth century and pre-war period, Robert Dixon makes the point that while romantic adventure tales are often disparaged as the poor relations of Australian realist literature, they speak volumes about our nation's uncomfortable place in the world:

> Caught at the site of seemingly opposing and incommensurable discourses about gender, race and nation at precisely the moment when the new Commonwealth of Australia was narrated into being, they stage a construction of the national culture whose conflictual and endlessly proliferating identities are, in a word, implausible. It is precisely this implausibility that makes them such a revealing and symptomatic form of cultural signification (Dixon 1995, 8-9).

Camille Serisier embraces implausible stories. While this body of work, *The Wonderful Land of Oz,* clearly taps into a *Magic Pudding* vein of Australiana, her other key point of reference is the fantastical storytelling of the French pioneering filmmaker, Georges Méliès. Méliès' science fiction film, *Le Voyage dans la lune* (1902), can be read as a parable of European colonial expansion, but as Elizabeth Ezra points out, a rather mocking one, embracing the absurdist techniques seen in Alfred Jarry's play, *Ubu Roi* of the same period (Ezra 2000, 121). In Méliès' film a group of important scientist/explorers travel to the moon where they aggressively strike out at the native inhabitants, causing them to explode. In Serisier's parable, the lunar-inhabiting 'Selenites' are replaced by Australian fauna, and the jolly explorers are reduced to a single figure – a white bird sailing in a boat, with a mast that looms above it; impossibly heavy, more like a cross being carried to Calvary. This bird, in imitation of the biblical dove, strikes out in search of land, and in his childish enthusiasm for novelty and power, misunderstands and mistreats all that he encounters.

Our enterprising and adventurous bird turns out to be a cygnet, growing into a white swan – an elegant symbol of European monarchical privilege. Serisier's perspective on the Western relationship with the natural world has been significantly influenced by Carolyn Merchant's ecofeminist thought. In her 1980 book, *The Death of Nature*, Merchant found an equivalence between the English philosopher/statesman Francis Bacon's methods for the scientific study of nature and King James' pursuit of witches. Merchant proposed that modern science was built on a legal, interrogative model similar to an Inquisition, and that under this model, nature was made subject to the same sort of violent control as unruly women. In Serisier's whimsical parable, the white swan can be seen exercising his *droit divin*, the divine right of kings, a principle that reached its peak in the English-speaking world during the Tudor and Stuart periods that Merchant analysed. In her still-controversial opinion, nature (personified as female) was tortured in the name of early science. As she points out, "Bacon's efforts to define the experimental method were buttressed by his rhetoric and that the very essence of the experimental method arose out of techniques of human torture transferred onto nature. Such techniques are fundamental to the human domination of nature" (Merchant 2006, 532). In Oz, the white swan whips, beats and enslaves the creatures he meets.

But the Antipodes can also be his undoing. In the land of the 'black swan of trespass'[1], he is the alien. He cannot read the landscape that he believes he has possessed and is driven to the brink by a magical creature he cannot comprehend. The tragedy of this story of oppression and mutual dispossession is tempered by Serisier's signature paper cut-out sets and costumes. Like Méliès, she aims to seduce and delight her audience. She also appropriates a technique used by the avant-garde Jarry, who was inspired by the French puppet theatre tradition (guignol), and integrated the techniques of puppetry into his absurdist plays. As Michael Spingler points out, the tragi-comic figure of Ubu was designed to function in a puppet-like way on stage: "Jarry sought, through use of the guignol tradition, to eliminate a dual presence in which the actor would be perceived as well as the character. For, once a puppet is animated, it exists totally within itself. The living actor's presence does not complicate the puppet's image" (Spingler 1973, 3). With the addition of their paper and card costumes, the actors in Serisier's works become more like puppet-masters, temporarily animating archetypal characters that will exist independently beyond their portrayal in a set that reminds us of a marionette theatre.

Jarry's Ubu and Méliès' films are products of the same period that saw the triumph of nationalism. This momentum was visible in the campaign for the creation of the Australian nation. Neville Meaning has suggested that the spirit of Anglo-nationalism grew even more forcefully in Australia than it did in Britain in the late nineteenth century. As the now-excised verse of *Advance Australia Fair* maintained, "Britannia then shall surely know, beyond wide oceans' rolls, her sons in fair Australia's land, still keep a British soul" (Meaning 2001, 80). Unlike Britain itself, with his historical local loyalties and diverse linguistic and cultural heritages, the colony of Australia was imagined as a blank sheet of paper on which the new homogenous nation could be drawn. For the Australian colonists, nationalism's collective identity was a refuge: "The sense of having but a fragile hold on a vast land set in an Asian sea intensified further the emotional trauma and made the colonists even more receptive to the atavistic idea of community" (Meaning 2001, 81). That Australia was already home to ancient and diverse communities, able to both comprehend and make best use of the land around them, was as unthinkable as negotiating with the Selenites on the moon.

Nationalism relies on cultural certainties, while the fantastical approaches of *fin de siècle* culture destabilised certainty and embraced the poetic and illogical. In this context, European descriptions of Australian animals as "'extraordinary', 'remarkable', 'peculiar', 'curious' and 'singular'" (Olsen 2010, 3) make them the perfect vehicle for a tale of adventure and the absurd. Serisier capitalises on this natural advantage to draw unpredictable connections between experiments in early film, theatrical traditions, and Australian fairy tales. In this body of work, Serisier brings together ideas that have both fascinated and troubled her – ideas that form the basis of much of her practice. There is humour and compassion, but ultimately it is the implausibility of European colonial control's legitimisation as a new nation in ancient territory that underpins Serisier's allegorical journey to Oz.

[1] With thanks to Ern Malley.

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Left image: 'Digging for China #5' (detail), 2014