

Terra Nova / Terra Nullius

TEXT / PAUL D. MILLER

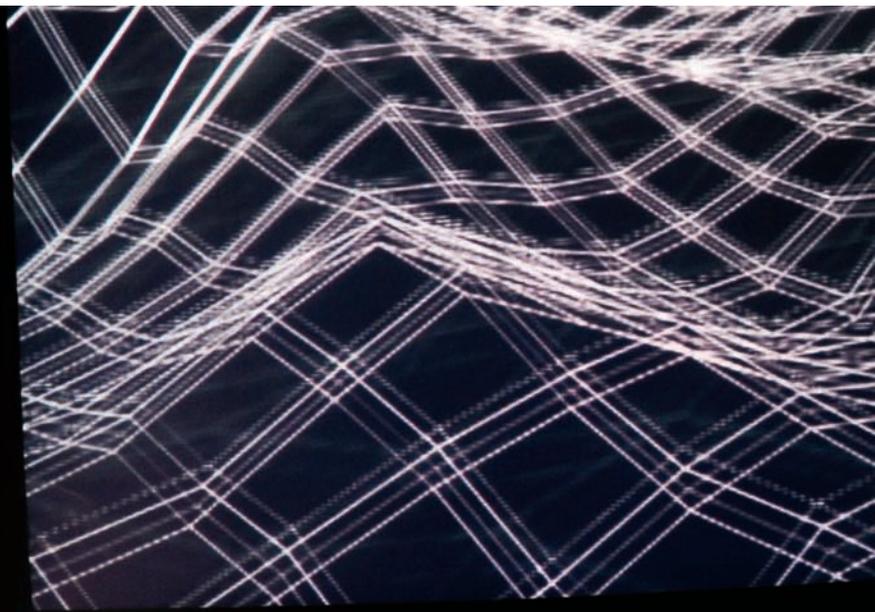
In 2008, I began my composition *Terra Nova/Terra Nullius* as an examination of Antarctica and its particular ability to be examined autonomously and at the same time serve as a stand-in for both global climate change and a deeper examination of the concept of territory. Antarctica represents a place at the most remote extreme of the planet—a place where, by consensus, no nation owns or controls the land. In 1959, many of the world’s “great nations” signed a treaty that forbade military use of Antarctic territories and set the tone for an almost utopian vision of Antarctica as the last natural place on Earth, unsoiled by humanity. In the fifty years since the founding of the Antarctic Treaty regimen, Earth has seen dramatic signs of climate change in almost every aspect of daily life—from the massive storms and unseasonal droughts and rains to the large-scale extinction of many species of animals, insects, and fish. Looking back over the last several centuries, an intense amount of energy has been expended all over the world exploring and unraveling the meaning of humanity’s condition on the planet. Much of this energy has been spent in perverse and self-defeating ways. My composition, while focused on the changing landscape of Antarctica, is a larger examination of climate change, massive economic crises, globalization—a sonic portrait of 21st-century issues.

The composer Richard Wagner begins his 1849 essay “Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft” (The Artwork of the Future) with “As Man stands to Nature, so stands Art to Man.” My own practice is an exploration of these relationships in the context of the constantly changing facets of contemporary life in our information-economy-dominated post-everything 21st-century. How does music interpret some of the political and environmental issues facing the continent? The composition explores the linkage of concepts like “res nullius” (nobody’s thing) and above all “terra nullius” (nobody’s land). Both are terms derived from Roman law, which posits “res” and “terra” as a kind of open-system response to the idea of the “commons.”

Photo: Paul D. Miller









The “terra nullius” principle justified colonization of much of the world, as exemplified in the “carving up” of Africa by the European powers (see *Scramble for Africa*) and the dislocation of native people in Australia. It is the concept that even though there may be indigenous peoples residing in “newly discovered” land, it is the right of the “more civilized” to take the land and put it to “good use.” Today, concepts like “land” and “territory” are becoming more and more abstract—the Internet has radically changed the way we relate to both concepts. The “commons” in our information-economy-based global culture is just as intimately linked to climate change in Antarctica as in anywhere else in the world. For “terra nullius”—the legal concept that land considered “ownerless” property is usually free to be owned—how do we portray that in music? The same concept applies to the surface and mineral rights in Antarctica. For me, the composition I made while I was in Antarctica is kind of a document of collective memory and a meditation on what happens when we take away the idea of “ownership.” I guess you could call it a post-colonial composition.

How do we interpret landscape in the form of song? In 1905, composer Debussy wrote his famous composition *La Mer*. The way Debussy captured the ocean’s color, light, and mood—using the orchestra as his paintbrush—gave composers new ways to think about writing orchestral music. John Cage’s 1948 *In A Landscape*, George Frederic Handel’s *Water Music* of 1717, and Wagner’s concept of “Gesamtkunstwerk” serve as inspiration for new forms of composition. Charles Ives’ *Central Park in the Dark* collage-based aesthetic offers the listener glimmers of sound from every angle of the park. In “Terra Nullius,” I reference artist Annea Lockwood’s *A Sound Map of the Hudson River*, Ralph Vaughan Williams’ 1948 *Sinfonia Antartica*—the first symphony to be written about Antarctica, and *Symphony No. 8: Antarctica* by British composer Peter Maxwell Davies—all serving as primers on using music to translate an experience of nature.

Each of these composers explored the realm of nature through the prism of composition—and like some of the art movements of the beginning of the 20th century, they faced a kind of aesthetic revolution. Impressionism, Futurism, Surrealism, Cubism . . . you name it, the music of the era was a mirror reflection of social and political upheaval. In the 21st century, the analogy still holds. Music is a mirror we hold up to society. I reference Debussy, because for him, like myself, music was a kind of palette: and the analogy of comparing music to painting is just a form of a new way of thinking about digital media’s inheritance from previous avant-garde movements. Like the Impressionists, Debussy conjured his imagery not in a sonic blur, but from seemingly disparate but carefully arranged flecks—move close to any Impressionist painting and the misty atmosphere ripens into a mosaic of intensely colored fragments. That is where the subtle sense of layer and collage that informs his work connects with contemporary “ambient” forms of music like *Terra Nova/Terra Nullius*. And, like the Impressionists, Debussy’s work suggests open-air sketches in its seeming naturalness and spontaneity, and its inspiration in nature.

DJ Spooky, *Terra Nova* concert, Oi Casa Grande, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, November 30, 2011
(photo: Andre Camara)

Debussy once wrote: “There is nothing more musical than a sunset.” He advised young composers to “listen to the wind,” and found the piping of a shepherd to have more complex harmonies than any musical text. What happens if we think of music facing the haunting ice and landscapes of Antarctica? That was a question that went through my mind when I spent four weeks there working on several compositions—you can think of *Terra Nullius* as a kind of musical interpretation of a condition of 21st-century life, where remote events, and the collapse of geography through the fiber-optic cables and satellite dishes that hold our modern world together, have been collapsed. *Terra Nullius* is a work about the remotest part of the world when seen through the mind of a DJ and artist.

There are so many layers to the term “in medias res”—it’s a nonlinear way of looking at how we organize experiences. It simply refers to a literary and artistic technique where the narrative starts in the middle of the story instead of from its beginning. The characters, setting, and conflict are often introduced through a series of flashbacks or through characters relating past events to each other. Reverse engineer the concept, and you’re led directly to DJ culture’s fondness of sampling, collage, and above all, “the mix.” “The mix” is a sonic location where small fragments of sounds, stories, and poetry are collaged right into a club mix. *Terra Nova/Terra Nullius* looks at this kind of collage as an update of what Wagner called *gesamtkunstwerk*—total artwork. *Terra Nullius* explores composition through the medium of collage, and in the process becomes an installation that can be a song, a song that can be a text, a text that can be a digital media artwork. Sampling “in media res,” we’re taken to the history of how modern storytelling (YouTube, Wikipedia, etc.—they’re all non-linear) inherits from ancient storytelling modes. Possibly originating from an oral tradition, the technique is a convention of epic poetry, two of the earliest and most prominent examples in Western literature being Homer’s *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. Other epics beginning in medias res include the Indian *Mahābhārata*, the Portuguese *The Lusians*, the Spanish *El Cantar de Mio Cid*, Germany’s *Nibelungenlied* (*The Song of the Nibelungs*), and the Finnish *Kalevala*. Several *Arabian Nights* tales such as “Sinbad the Sailor” and “The Three Apples” also employ this technique. *Aeneid* began the tradition in literature of imitating Homer, continued in Torquato Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*, John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and *Inferno* from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. I want *Terra Nullius* to look at the history of these ancient classics, and update the situation through digital media for our modern information-based economy.

The idea of landscape in American art evokes many past collisions between art and artifact. In the end, *Terra Nullius*, the composition, occupies one portion of a larger exploration. The Terra Nova Project and the subsequent Nauru Elegies, based on a similar environmental exploration of the South Pacific, find convergence between graphic design, music composition, and architecture by reconceptualizing “social space” as touchstones for the use of digital media to navigate the data we use to describe the world around us. In turn, these info-aesthetic motifs create “acoustic” and “data” driven portraits depicting the urgent need to understand climate change as a modern, anthropogenic phenomenon.

Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, is the first artist-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2012-2013). His project *The Met Reframed* will include *Of Water and Ice*, a new composition and video commissioned by the Met that is an expansion of the Terra Nova Project. Miller’s work has also appeared in the Whitney Biennial; The Venice Biennial for Architecture; the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, Germany; Kunsthalle, Vienna; The Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, and many other museums and galleries. He has produced and composed work for Yoko Ono, Thurston Moore, and scores for artists and award-winning films. Miller is the executive editor of *ORIGIN Magazine* and his book *Sound Unbound*, an anthology of writings on electronic music and digital media, is a best-selling title for MIT Press. He has written for many publications, including the *Village Voice*, *The Source*, *Artforum*, *Aperture*, and *The Wire*. His DJ MIXER iPad app has seen more than 12 million downloads in the last year.