

# realtime 78

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onscreen - media art

apocalypse near you

darren tofts enters northern void



Philip Samartzis on location, Northern Void

IT USED TO BE CALLED THE TOP. IT WAS LITERALLY THE END OF THE LINE FOR THE TRAM SERVICE THAT SNAKED ITS WAY THROUGH THE INNER CITY TO THE NORTHERN MELBOURNE SUBURB OF PRESTON. THE CULMINATION OF THIS JOURNEY WAS A TERMINUS LINED WITH SHOPS, A PLACE OF CONCLUSION AND WAITING, OF BROWSING AND PURCHASING. IN NORTHERN VOID, A REPRESENTATIVE STRETCH OF PLENTY ROAD, PRESTON IS IMAGINED AS A VAGUE, ANACHRONISTIC TIME WARP SPANNING A THOUSAND YEARS, WHERE PEOPLE STILL HANG AROUND THE STREET OUTSIDE EMPTY AND DERELICT SHOPS, WAITING FOR TRAMS THAT NEVER SEEM TO ARRIVE.

Northern Void ostensibly explores the notion of what suburbs might look like in the future. For Philip Brophy there is no such thing as the end of the line. Social and urban decrepitude, like rust, never sleeps and in Brophy's universe the future ain't rosy. Here is an anti-pastoral, dystopian world of breakdown and decline, where once thriving, reliable local shopping strips have yielded to the forces of time and the irresistible gravitational force of the mega-malls. Preston and its neighbouring Reservoir were once frontier suburbs, outposts of civilisation on the brink of the sprawling wastelands of rock and thistle that led the way to Sydney. Brophy's northern void is not out there. It is the very fabric of suburban progress, a condition of place as much as time. Suburban corrosion is implosive, impacting inwardly as large centres such as Northland offering clamorous 'one stop shopping' and 'worlds of entertainment' drew

retailers, offering glamorous one-stop shopping and venues of entertainment, drew custom away from the archetypal "High" street. Since opening in 1967, Northland became an alternative place to hang out and by the early 80s the Top became a kind of fossilised badland, a 'desolate plain' that you passed through on the way to somewhere else.

The work is structured around a series of three stylised tableaux vivants, depicting the present (2013), future (2085) and post-future (3079). In each sequence the same strip of road and shop frontages is revisited, as if to chart the progress of suburban decay over time. We witness Plenty Road's disintegration as a body slowly dying in a persistent future tense. Its zombie-like inhabitants mirror this dismemberment as they become ever more spectral, eventually resembling vapour more than flesh.

For me the least dramatic thing about Northern Void is its visualisation of what a post-apocalyptic world might look like in the next millennium. The present, 2013, looks uncannily like 2007. We are already the dead. The full-on compositing and digital effects of the third age strips out windows and leaves buildings barely standing as fragile shells. Harsh solarizing effects transform the sky into a sterile nothingness. These scorched and garish tonings may signify 'the future', but it is the unadorned photographic glimpses in the opening sequence that are more suggestive of the sedimentary quality of the street as an archive of past, present and future devastation. You can't simulate that kind of brutality.

The repetitive, looping structure of Northern Void stands out as the work's most remarkable and, for many viewers, troubling feature. Here is an unforgiving abstraction that tests the patience of its audience. Brophy never allows us to become complacent, to simply 'get it.' His vision of Hell resembles Dante's: it is the tedium of repetitive cycles, rather than fire and brimstone, that torments protagonist and audience alike. There are also strong echoes here of Samuel Beckett's more severe stage and video works, such as *Play* (1964) and *Arena Quad* (1980), which is included in the touring Centre Pompidou collection of video art, currently on at ACMI. In these arid, mathematically precise works, action is reduced to the serial repetition of minimalist gestures that don't have any obvious reference other than relentless adherence to unseen and forbidding rules. We see this in the tics, abrasions and crutches of Brophy's characters that, like those of Dante and Beckett, are indicative of their fall.

Northern Void begins and ends with swarms of bats and flying foxes, creatures of the night that see through sound. This is an apt framing device for a collaboration between Brophy and Philip Samartzis, whose sonic imaginations interpret the visual world through a mix of sampled, electronically produced sounds and natural and industrial field recordings. Performed live, the score animates the atrophying world on the screen, sculpting the theatre into an immersive audiovisual space of terminal conditions. My only criticism was that the amplification was no way near loud enough on the night. If I am to spend a season in hell, I want to feel it tear through every sinew. The live orchestral quality of Northern Void enables us to experience the visceral audiovisuality of the terminus as a state of things endlessly winding down. But be warned, it's going to be a long wait to the top.

Northern Void, Philip Brophy and Philip Samartzis, Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne, Feb 17-18

See RealTime 77, [p28](#) for Philip Brophy's personal account of the creation of Northern  
Void

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