Landscape photography in the web of life: Olaf Otto Becker’s renegotiation of the sublime in a neoliberalised and climate changing world

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Olaf Otto Becker, a photographer renown for his photographs of the Arctic north, has recently turned his attention to the forests of Indonesia, Bolivia, Brazil and Australia. This is a change of subject for the photographer known for his landscapes celebrating the cold north. But, as William Ewing has noted, perhaps this change in direction is logical given that the melting of the Arctic is partly connected to the destruction of the world’s major forests (Ewing, 2015), and that Becker’s own work has become increasingly preoccupied with charting human-led changes to the environment. Taking an overview of Becker’s output from *Broken Line* (2007) to *Reading the Landscape* (2014), I will argue that Becker’s approach can be read as an attempt to resolve the relationship between human and nature, the everyday and the sublime in a time of neoliberalised capital.

The Arctic has become a significant photographic subject over the past decade, acting as a beacon for those who wish to image the effects of climate change. Photographers, artists, writers, scientists and tourists visit and work in the landscape as a means of coming to terms with the symbolic power of a place that is rapidly changing. Both the act of visiting the place, and in producing individual and collaborative responses that meditate on climate change, have become something of a significant cultural activity. The material that is produced includes campaign-style materials produced by conservation and ecological organisations such as Greenpeace, media representations, scientific imagery, as well as artists’ responses in a wide variety of media (Buckland 2006; Matilsky 2013; Wells 2012). Indeed, one could say that there has been an outpouring of concern about the loss of sea and Arctic ice, and the impact this has on wildlife such as polar bears and marine life. There is an increasing awareness of the how the loss of ice at the polar north is also affecting our weather systems.
Global air temperature during 2016 was consistently reported as being higher than the average Earth temperatures in the early twentieth century (Milman 2016; Thompson, 2016) but increases in temperature are markedly higher in the Polar Regions (World Wildlife Fund). Sea and Arctic ice, which has been reported recently at the “second lowest level since scientists began to monitor it by satellite,” is not showing signs of recovery in the winter months, or across longer time spans (Associated Press 2016). Similarly disturbing reports have been emerging about the loss of Antarctic sea ice (Reuters 2017). The impact this has on polar bears has become staple reporting, and polar bears now feature in a range of affective climate campaigns as a symbol that is sometimes clichéd, and powerfully reinvented, but never quite exhausted (Tollman 2014). James Balog and other photographers have been working to bring to wider public attention the extent and speed of the loss of ice (Balog 2009; Balog 2012; Orlowski 2012). His photographs and stop motion sequences have been successful in demonstrating the year-on-year decrease and deflation of glaciers in the Arctic and other parts of the world, whilst also delivering an emotional impact.

Whilst the representation of icebergs, glaciers melting and the Polar Regions has become a significant aspect of landscape photography, there are a range of representational strategies that have aimed to increase awareness of climate change and the risk this poses for the Arctic environment and global weather systems. Some of these artists and commentators, including Balog (2009; 2012) and Al Gore (Guggenheim 2006), have produced strongly evidential and illustrative images1 and have also worked to advise audiences on steps they can take to reduce their own carbon footprint and effect wider change. Other photographers, including Subhankar Banerjee (2013) have aimed to demonstrate the impact on caribou migration and indigenous Arctic lives through both illustrative and pensive strategies, and Camille Seaman (2015) has produced a deeply personal account that draws upon her Nature American culture to produce a reflective response to the changes in the landscapes. The repetition of the melting glacier/iceberg in photography has also led to playful and critical responses from artists including Sophie Calle, Joan Fontcuberta and

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1 The category of the illustrative image has been borrowed from Heine (2014). The illustrative image is subordinate to the text, which gives information about how to interpret or know the photograph (280-283).
others; these projects acknowledge the clichés of Arctic imagery whilst critiquing our relationships to the environment, which can be one of exploitation (Martinsson and Desplechinh 2015).

Yet climate communication specialists and artists note that viewers struggle to bridge the ‘gap’ between knowledge of the effects of climate change to changes in consumer habits and patterns of living that materially impact on our climate (Kollmuss and Agyeman 2002). Artists who address this issue, such as the duo Sayler and Morris, work more allusively in an attempt to bridge the gap between ‘seeing’ and ‘believing’; the artists argue that as climate change is a proposition (built upon a statistically-created and abstract series of research projects) that climate change is not reducible to the visual. Noting that knowing and believing are often conflated in our figures of speech they propose that photography is closer to knowledge than belief, yet fully understanding climate change and adopting new behaviours requires belief in catastrophic effects of climate change rather than knowledge. They propose that if photographs can represent facts then they can represent or create ‘knowledge’ of climate change but not necessarily create the belief that it is happening; indeed it seems that belief is often a state that the viewer brings to the image rather than acquiring it through the image (Morris and Sayler 2014: 302-303). Their response to this conundrum is to borrow from Jacques Ranciere and Roland Barthes’ ideas of the ‘pensive image’; an image that whilst indeterminate or contemplative involves “an unthought thought, a thought that cannot be attributed to the intention of the person who produces it and which has an effect on the person who views it without her linking it to a determinate object” (Ranciere in Morris and Sayler 2014: 301). The point of the ‘pensive image’ is to bypass the purely illustrative purposes of informational images (such as those found in factual reporting or in Balog’s work) and to “strengthen belief in the potential trauma of climate change” (ibid: 315) because it facilitates the evidentiary force of the image whilst engaging the viewer in “a depth (rather than an accuracy) of feeling” (ibid: 316). Basing their argument on the fundamentally traumatic properties of the image (such as the photograph’s fundamental splicing of time), the artists note that their project is one of failure but they remain hopeful about the “speculative cultural impact” of their work (ibid: 319).
Whilst Sayler and Morris are rigorous in their articulation and contextualisation of their work, they are not alone in producing, or relying on, the pensive image as a mode of practice in relation to the topic of climate change. Their practice is wide ranging and also includes strategies that traverse different discourses and modes of address, including activist and protest projects, and they are aware of the expressly depoliticised nature of their pensive projects. In contrast to Sayler and Morris, many photographers, regardless of whether their work is illustrative or allusive, frequently avoid striking explicit political positions but may provide a short list of small changes that can be accommodated within consumerist lifestyles, such as in adopting green consumption, or they suggest that they could lobby their relevant political actors for greater action without specifying too clearly what the nature of that action would be (Balog 2009; Guggenheim 2006). Certainly all photographic practices within the realm of art examined to date stop short of suggesting structural changes to our developed and highly technologised lives, quite possibly because photography, and the travel necessary to reach remote or exotic places, are necessarily dependent upon the types of advanced technologies or lifestyles that are also implicated in climate change. Indeed, it is hard to comment on climate change and other environmental disasters without the medium of photography itself being criticised for its role in different types of environmental destruction or impact, as Rebecca Solnit has acknowledged (2007). Nevertheless, there are sophisticated and thoughtful responses and interpretations of some environmental photographs that suggest that some viewers do respond in complex and analytical ways to allusive material: artistic images are therefore not simply entertainment or spectacle (Schuster 2013; Shinkle 2014).

Despite the risk that a discussion of the representation of ice within a climate change framework perpetuates something of a cliché, this chapter will address the pensive image in relation to ideas of the sublime, of ‘the north’ and politics in relation to the photographs by Olaf Otto Becker. Becker is a German artist and photographer who has made a series of books and exhibited works that depict landscapes from Iceland and Greenland, including landscapes of inhabitation; much of his work expressly addresses landscapes that are affected by climate change. His later work shifts attention to forested regions in the global South, which have been severely compromised and reduced by logging activities. Condensed into five publications, this wide-ranging subject matter is coherent in terms of
Becker’s visual approach, as well as suggesting an increased engagement with the economic and social aspects of human-induced climate change, the despoliation of various landscapes and the impact this has on local communities. Indeed, reading the production of his photographs as a continuous narrative, there is a strong suggestion that Becker has become increasingly interested in the structural impact of global capital, its fuelling of consumption and the connection this has to climate change and the degradation of indigenous habitats. Becker, in contrast to other landscape photographers in his field, seems to want to resolve, or at least engage with, the contradictions of image production within an arts context and global consumption. This chapter will specifically argue that Becker’s photographs, situated as they are between ‘straight’ or ‘pensive’ photography, the sublime and an increasing awareness of the globally financed basis of climate change, is attempting to resolve the need for information about climate change (the illustrative image) with a traumatic and pensive ‘opening’ that may facilitate deeper reflection on the structural systems fuelling climate change. This is not a straightforward discourse to negotiate and Becker’s work will be shown to both allude to the power of capitalism whilst being ambiguous in its stance. Indeed, Becker’s last book, *Reading the Landscape* (2014), attempts to tread the line between a depoliticised stance and an awareness of structural connections of the practice of photography, whilst seeming to be open to these tensions. To understand the effects of Becker practice it is necessary to examine both the aesthetics of his imagery in relation to the sublime and the straight photograph, as well as consider a structural analysis of the content of the images and their narrative as construed through the chronological development of his publications. The structural analysis will consider the extent to which the landscapes he visits are as much a product of the capitalisation of nature (including all aspects of the biosphere) and the capitalisation of arts production. It will be shown that the capitalisation of nature and the capitalisation of photography are, for the moment, inextricably entwined. To this extent, the analysis of Becker’s work will draw upon Jason W. Moore’s analysis of the capitalism in the web of life (2015).

Looking north: Ice and Life in Iceland and Greenland
A great many of Becker’s photographs have been made in the north, not the north of England or Europe, but the north that created the irrational desire to explore for exploration’s sake (Spufford 1996: 49-78). The north is a relative position, but as writers such as Peter Davidson and Francis Spufford have noted, ideas of north are frequently associated with morality and a sense of truth (Davidson 2005; Spufford 1996). The Arctic North tends to be the Ultimate Thule of many travellers, a site of ultimate truths, however vaguely these are formed (Davidson 2005: 22). It is an environment where one can prove one’s moral worth by showing determination and by overcoming significant physical hardship, and both Christoph Schaden (2005: 140-2) and Freddy Lange (2007: 8-11), who have written about Becker’s work, have recounted tales of hardship and physical prowess that Becker exhibited in the production of his work.\(^2\) The Arctic north has also been a site in which male proprietary behaviour has traditionally asserted itself (Spufford 1996: 101). The global north, which has sought to conquer the Arctic north, has also been full of associations with progress, success, growth, materialism and cultural superiority. Manhood, from the global North, has sought to prove its moral and intellectual superiority over the Arctic North, whilst also finding wonder in its marvels, especially aesthetically in the descriptions of the landscape. The Arctic North, though, is changing both as a space and as an idea. Shifting from a site of exploration for exploration’s sake, it is now a site of potential development and there are calls for it to be protected against climate change; additionally, greater attention is being paid to indigenous perspectives of the place (Banerjee 2013; Seaman 2015).

Five books cover Becker’s visual depiction of Iceland and Greenland. The first and fourth books, both titled *Under the Nordic Light* (2005; 2011) depicts Iceland and the second and third books depict Greenland. Becker initially visited Iceland to photograph waterfalls (Gilroy-Hirtz 2011: 8) and study moving subject matter, but once there seems to have been captivated by the North’s magnetism and potential. However, the first version of *Under the Nordic Light*, which is a slim publication, includes not just the sublime imagery that Becker was seeking, but also includes images of ports, dwellings and land use. When Becker revisited Iceland he retained a familiar range of imagery, noting both the social uses of land

\(^2\) Becker suffered an accident when making *Broken Line* (2005) but the stories around this event also recount how he carried on working, despite his injuries (Langer 2007: 8).
and its scenic grandeur. This chapter will rely on the later version of the book and will discuss it after Becker’s intervening two publications.

Becker’s second book, *Broken Line* (2007) charts the edge of the western side of Greenland. The images, of icebergs, seascapes, glaciers, rock faces and indigenous settlements, capture the splendour of the northern light. Some images [Fig. 1] are reminiscent of 19th Century paintings that aimed to capture the light of the northern regions and comparable with Frederick Edwin Church’s painting of 1861, *The Icebergs*. Other images are less indebted to Romanticism and are more in keeping with the straight photography with which Becker has been associated and feature pale grey ice against grey moraine. Every image in this book is titled with geographical co-ordinates collected from a GPS device and the intention is to allow for comparisons regarding ice loss and other changes to the landscape in the future to be made. Ice features extensively in the book, whether of glacier tongues, icebergs, or rock scarred by the movement of glaciers. Becker includes many photographs of indigenous houses and these are significant within the project; Becker is showing the signs of daily living in relation to a landscape that remains spectacularised in the eyes of many non-Indigenous viewers. Becker’s images, and the texts in his book, stop short of fully engaging with indigenous subjectivities and their social and political reality. Instead the images reveal signs of everyday living, including fishing, hunting, leisure, and some signs of industrial activity; boats and skimobiles feature prominently. Mention is made of one specific indigenous subject, who helped train Becker handle a dinghy for his lengthy voyages to photograph the Western coast but there are no portraits of him (Gilroy-Hirtz 2011: 9).

Becker’s third book *Above Zero* (2009), engages with the melting of the glaciers much more explicitly. Becker’s visual language is also more rigorous, achieving consistency of light and colour in the images of ice sheets [Fig. 2]. Becker has here moved from an implied ‘before and after’ technique to documenting phenomena that should not be there: rivers on ice sheets indicate melting, and contribute materially to their decline.³ This particular image depicts the end of a river where the water plummets to the bedrock below. Known as moulins they are significant as they cause the speed of travel of the glacier to increase.

³ For a discussion of the importance of rivers on ice sheets see Balog (2012) and Steffen (2009: 166-168).
These images are interesting in that they depict traditional sublime subject matter, but their restrained aesthetic and repetition of river imagery, negotiate the Romantic sublime. Examining six different rivers across the Greenland ice sheet one comes away with a very troubled image of these wide and powerful spaces as it is demonstrated that ice sheet melting is endemic. Becker also photographs scientists working at the Swiss Camp, which is studying weather and ice mass data (Steffen: 167). These photographs are highly stylised and depict figures in snow gear travelling and maintaining equipment is near-blank spaces. Becker also explores the troubled heritage of the sublime in relation to these ice sheets: at Point 660, a place where tourists can reach by car to walk over the glacier tongue is shown as a site of photographic performance. The image depicts tourists photographing the glacier and each other, spread out across the glacier tongue. These tourists, who have probably flown to Greenland (much in the same way that Becker probably did), are materially contributing to the decline of the phenomena that they have come to see before it vanishes. Brought also, in probability, by a sense of wonder, their incursion in this space, and their presence in the photograph, depicts the melancholic folly that we seem doomed to participate in.

**The Sublime and the Social**

People rarely appear in Becker’s images, even though people’s houses and belongings appear in both Broken Line (2005) and Above Zero (2007). In Under the Nordic Light (2011), though, human activity becomes the main subject matter of the book. In similarity to Edward Burtynsky’s work, perhaps, Under the Nordic Light depicts landscapes that are also used as dwelling spaces, sites of industry and prosaic activities, sites of tourism and sites of wonder. Indeed, Becker seems to be complicating the sublime. On the cover of the Under the Nordic Light (2011) is an expansive image of Iceland’s landscape taken from an elevated vantage point. The image provides a view of Jökulsá á Brú Glacier River, a deep gorge which scars the landscape and down which a river should be flowing. Instead, on the left of the image there is a concrete spillway and in the bottom left, there is an observation or control centre together with a car park. The gorge is so empty of water it is possible to imagine walking along it. In the book’s sequence of images, Becker precedes this image of the gorge
with a different view of the spillway [Fig. 3]. This image demonstrates the scale and power of the impact on the land of the construction of the dam, whilst being ambiguous enough to celebrate the achievement of the engineering project.

This version of Becker’s book signals something of a change in his output. Whilst contextualising essays have accompanied all of his publications, this book features selected captions at the back of the book, some of which are quite detailed. Whilst the image remains dominant, and the viewer must be attentive to engage with the captions, the information provided signals a desire on the part of Becker to more fully contextualise his practice with factual information: the image no longer stands on its own. The essay by Petra Gilroy-Hertz (2011: 8-10), in similarity to the essays in Becker’s earlier publications, celebrates Becker’s aesthetic sensibility, but also outlines some of the political and economic context of Iceland. Gilroy-Hirtz notes, for example, that the Kárahnjúkar Dam, which has stopped the flow of Jökulsá á Brú Glacier River and resulted in the flooding of a National Park, was built to provide power for an aluminium factory. Andri Snæfr Magnason (2013) has argued that Iceland had no need for this particular electricity generating dam prior to the production of aluminium, and aluminium is singularly one of the most energy intensive alloys to manufacture; its base constituents are also shipped long distances from other parts of the globe. Iceland’s electricity generation and consumption, then, is on behalf of global corporate consumption and its machinations of capital.

Given that Becker returned to Iceland in 2011, after the economic crash of 2008, and given that Becker had been photographing some of the social uses of land, the explicit engagement with the social and political is perhaps not a surprise. What seems to have taken shape, though, over the course of his publications, is an increasing commitment to the factual and informational supplement to his photographs. Whilst these captions are at the end of the book, in a very small font, they nevertheless trouble the aesthetic and directly visual experience of Becker’s images. Although Becker has always played with caption information, such as in the geographic co-ordinates, and has included testimonies about climate change from experts (Schaden 2007; Steffen 2009) the social and political, which has been hinted at in the visual, becomes increasingly overt. Indeed, the Icelandic images play more extensively with banality and land use than his earlier works, even though there are
many beautiful and sublime landscapes in this book. There are images of incomplete housing developments, empty out-of-town supermarkets, residential blocks as well as various industrial and shipping sites.

Becker has consistently produced images that are notable for their aesthetic command of light and colour, utilising both the language of the sublime in conjunction with the aesthetics of the everyday and the straight image. His images exhibit rigorous stylistic repetition and he typically makes very wide landscape views even if the scale, in some images, is challenging to decipher. His projects include signs of human habitation and activity, although these are situated against scenes of wildness and natural grandeur. Yet as has been hinted at throughout the description of Becker’s output, Becker is not simply reproducing the sublime. Indeed, as can be deduced by the banal features of some of his images, Becker is moving between lyricism and more mundane visual descriptions, even though his adherence to straight imagery is consistent. What does this negotiation of the sublime propose?

The sublime, both historically and in contemporary art, is associated with what lies beyond reason and certainties (Morley 2010: 12). Edmund Burke’s account of the sublime from the eighteenth century, defined as a mixture of “perverse pleasure, mixing both fear and delight” (ibid: 14) retains a popular currency today. Simon Morley, who provides an overview of how theories of the sublime developed from the Eighteenth Century into contemporary theories, notes that the sublime is still attached to the idea that “our lives are fashioned by forces beyond our control, which underpin and drive our acts of representation” (Morley 2010: 18). Morley asks whether the engagement with the sublime is a way of succumbing to the “allure … of accepting our domination by and subjection to nature?” (ibid: 18). Noting that there are broadly four forms in which the sublime informs contemporary art and culture, (the heroic act; shock and awe; reality as fundamentally indeterminate; and ecstasy), Morley holds open the sublime as a broad and important category that extends beyond aesthetics.

Barbara Claire Freeman (2010) has noted that the sublime is not necessarily politically aligned, although it is often associated with conservatism, and on occasion, with ideas of
liberty and freedom (ibid: 64). Noting that “the masculine sublime ... seeks to master, appropriate or colonise the other” (Ibid: 65) it would seem on the surface of things that Becker is reproducing a masculine sublime (mastery of landscape through producing landscape views, demonstrating his moral and physical worth). A feminine sublime, though, would take up “a position of respect in response to an incalculable otherness” and meaning would remain “open and ungovernable” (ibid: 65). Becker’s imagery certainly avoids, like many of the other artists working in the Arctic, explicit political positions, but he is also playing with notions of the social. Given that some definitions of the sublime concentrate on ‘the unrepresentable’ it is important to note that Becker uses the aesthetics of the sublime (uncertain scales, expansive vistas etc.) but he also represents the distinctly social and material aspects of contemporary life, both in Greenland and Iceland.

Robert Smithson (2010), in discussing the landscape architecture of Frederick Law Olmsted, proposes that the landscape, including the sublime engagement with it, can be dialectical:

Inherent in the theories of Price and Gilpin, and in Olmstead’s response to them, are the beginnings of a dialectic of the landscape. Burke’s notion of ‘beautiful’ and ‘sublime’ functions as a thesis of smoothness, gentle curves and delicacy of nature, and as an antithesis of terror, solitude and vastness of nature, both of which are rooted in the real world, rather than a Hegelian Ideal. Price and Gilpin provide a synthesis with their formulation of the ‘picturesque,’ which is on close examination related to chance and change in the material order of nature. The contradictions of the ‘picturesque’ depart from a static formalistic view of nature. The picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. We cannot take a one-sided view of the landscape within this dialectic. ... Price, Gilpin and Olmstead are forerunners of a dialectical materialism applied to the physical landscape. Dialectics of this type are a way of seeing things in a manifold of relations, not as isolated objects. Nature for the dialectician is indifferent to any formal ideal. (Smithson 2010: 115)

In Smithson’s essay, where he is exploring tensions between land art’s reputation for conquering the land, and transcendental ways of representing it, argues for a relationship
that resolves the tendency towards a man/nature split. Scenic beauty and its associated art, in Smithson’s eyes, is a form of spiritual snobbery and a form of retreat (ibid: 117), and he argues for a dialectical relationship instead. Whilst Smithson’s essay overlooks many of the Native American ways of understanding land, including their own earthworks and landscaping activities, Smithson’s essay points the way to understanding Becker’s images. Starting with a desire to locate the sublime (in the form of a waterfall), then moving further north in search of untouched scenery but still finding the social (such as in Broken Line), the location of transcendental landscapes in decline (Above Zero), Becker seems to be seeking the pristine and untouched, but finding a landscape powerfully altered by man. Whether we would like to preserve the Arctic or not, it has become a site of human-nature relationships and Becker’s photography cannot escape that. Intuiting, perhaps, the complex relationship between man and nature, Becker does not disavow the social in search of the untouched wilderness but is unable to give up on the idea of its existence. In this sense, Becker’s works seem to both engage with man-human relations and resist their entwinement. As noted above, the images are no longer purely visual and they also engage more fully with the social realities of the landscapes through the use of text. These observation sets the scene for Becker’s most explicit engagement with the effects of climate change and environmental devastation.

*Reading the Landscape*

Becker’s latest book, *Reading the Landscape* (2014), signals a radical departure from the icy north. Split into three Habitat sections, the book follows a trajectory from the primeval forests, to industrialised forest clearance, soil erosion and fire destruction, and then a final section on the tropical man made gardens in high rise buildings in places such as Singapore. There is a small section on California’s redwood forests, but the majority of photographs of primeval forests are taken in Indonesia and Malaysia. In contrast to Becker’s earlier work there are some images and video stills of the flora and fauna, where Becker seems fascinated with the detail of living systems rather than just their overall grandeur.
The book’s fairly simplistic structure is strongly redolent of the concerns of the conservation movement, one that proposes that it is possible to protect environments from industrial and polluting incursions (Dunaway 2005). It is entirely possible that these ‘primeval’ forests are changing as climates change and the species that these spaces support may well be adapting or in decline. Given the changing biosphere of the Earth, it does seem a little naïve to suppose that these living structures, magnificent though they are, are not disrupted. The structure of the book further implies that we can ‘protect’ nature from the worst of the changes that human activity is causing. Importantly, though, Becker does move from his Romantic appreciation of the forest to the realities of deforestation in the Far East: clearance for crops, especially Palm Oil, and the illegal confiscation of land is becoming common. Whilst people are mainly absent (in similarity to Becker’s earlier projects) one image stands out [Fig. 4]: *Amin and Yanti Petani building their new home, Riau area, Sumatra, Indonesia, 10/2013* (2014: 113). The caption for this photograph, at the back of this book, tells us that:

... We ran into Amin and Yanti Petani while walking down a road. They told us that they had just been building their own house. They had finally won their land back, after a ten year legal battle with an international paper company. The land had originally been a small paradise where their ancestors had lived. However, before they got the land back, the paper company harvested it for one last time.

In many places in Indonesia, there is no properly held land registry. This situation makes it easier for companies to exploit the land for their own purposes on a large scale (Becker 2014: 151).

The bleached colour of the image accentuates the ashen foreground and cleared background. The timber-framed house looks painfully inadequate against the forces of international capitalism but also seems ironic given the clearance of trees. The Petani’s fight to regain their land, though, signals local resistance to international capitalism even though this is not the main subject of the book.

The final section concentrates on Gardens by the Bay, in Singapore. This is a theme-park version of tropical woodland and Becker is at pains to illustrate just how much of this
paradisal structure is man made (concrete, wood carvings, sounds of birds through speakers, and an artificially conducive atmosphere). The abundance of the flora stands in contrast to the earlier photographs of forests where although there is an overall sense of profusion, there is little sense of an overpowering botanic display. The last images show high rise buildings with lush garden displays [Fig. 5]. These huge structures, which in other contexts could be read as expressions of formal innovation and technological achievement, bring the work of international capitalism more clearly into focus: such buildings are only likely to exist because of the mammoth wealth that international corporations can acquire, borrow and move around the world and such structures are rarely the sole work of local economies. Moreover, the replacement of the forest with a tall and spectacular city, signals an enclosure of the commons as only the wealthy will have access to these high rise gardens. What is being alluded to here, though, is the impact of international capital, created by the juxtaposition of the garden in the luxury hotel or office block, against the stereotype of profuse tropical greenery in the theme park version of the forest; indeed the luxurious vegetation stands in contrast to the steel and glass structure. Importantly, across the narrative of the book a message of environmental destruction elsewhere in the East and the global south is seen to fuel glacial retreat in the Arctic North.

At the end of the book, where detailed captions explain some of the imagery, Becker explains that:

Power often belongs to others. In the majority of places, large corporations already probably wield more influence than the entire elected representatives of people across the world ever had. The power of this economic system has now become so extensive and so completely amorphous that this is very difficult to grasp. Corporations tend to react to legislation and other attempts to control their actions simply by strategically shifting their position, almost always acting to their own advantage and in a manner that will protect their profits. At the end of the day, modern and sustainable behaviour is just not a profitable approach for them. Corporate ethics are applied only where they are useful – and then only as a cosmetic exercise, a pretence that can be dropped at any time, whose sole function is to promote the production and marketing of products. ... Only a rapid counter
movement could still avert the destructive consequences of this way of behaving. If that doesn’t happen, we will probably gamble away any remaining chances for generations (Becker 2014: 150).

Whilst Becker, here, is clearly sceptical about the efforts of corporations to self-police and to maintain their own policies of material and financial sustainability, he is also suggesting that we might take part in a rapid counter movement to address the very concerns that his books have raised. Whilst Becker does not offer specific direction on the form and type of action readers may take, one does not necessarily have to assume that the reader will simply think that the forces at work here are simply too great to be battled or that the battle will be over long before it has been won.

The book is more complex than my description has so far suggested. The book opens with an essay by the noted photography curator, William Ewing. Ewing situates Becker’s work in relation to the history of photography, making aesthetic, stylistic and contextual observations. He also notes the logical process by which Becker has arrived at his subject matter as Arctic decline is partly linked to rainforest destruction and an increase in consumption (Ewing 2014: 8). Ewing, then, acknowledges the global problems of climate change and how this is linked, at least in part, to deforestation and rampant consumerism. He notes how the cultural ideas associated with forests (at least in the West) have shifted from one of fear, to seeing forests as in need of protection, and that they are important in terms of the biosphere of the world. But Ewing is careful to ensure that the ‘protection’ of the environment is not seen as a threat to our lifestyles and he is keen to assure the reader that Becker is not an activist. Instead, he claims, that:

Becker is a photographer. As such, he is a realist, accepting the world as it is. He is neither overly optimistic nor overly pessimistic. He would prefer to see more responsibility on the part of his fellows toward the environment, but understands the effective forces (including human nature) that make most of our concerns ring insincere, and any action taken cosmetic (Ewing 2014: 10).
It is interesting that Ewing assumes that a viewer of Becker’s work would rather be reminded of the inherent selfishness of humanity rather than encourage a different life or, even more basically, encourage a stronger social and economic understanding of our dilemma in relation to the exploitation of the Earth. Ewing’s approach seems out of step in that there is no encouragement to reflect on our individual contributions or how we may bring about change, whether on a small scale or more structurally. More sympathetically, perhaps, Ewing is avoiding the discussion of photography’s contribution to the devastation of the Earth. Either way, Ewing’s account of Becker’s work seems reductive and it is possible to see Becker’s book, together with his previous contributions to the visual discourses around climate change, as more than an objective visual record of the state of our world. To comprehend how this might be achieved, it is necessary to challenge the split that is proposed between humanity (and art) and the rest of our biosphere. This split was partially challenged above in the proposal that the landscape is seen landscape dialectically: as places made between man’s and nature’s forces, but there are other theories that can help analyse Becker’s work in this regard.

Photography in the Web of Life

Those working in ecological philosophies have challenged the split between man and nature (Bennett 2010). Whilst the division between human and nature is understandable given that many humans live in urban environments away from rural spaces, it in no way philosophically or practically describes human/nature relationships. Yet this split is not easy to overcome, especially as urban dwellers often desire to experience wildernesses, or are encouraged to ‘get back to nature’. Indeed, Becker, as a photographer who has travelled from his home in Germany to photograph nature elsewhere, could be said to be perpetuating the separation. But as Becker’s images allow, the split between human and nature at the level of the visual in these spaces, such as the Arctic, is no longer tenable. Travelling to the Arctic means engaging with the social (such as Indigenous inhabitations and ways of living, including survival practices) and engaging with the fact of climate change (the wilderness as affected by anthropogenic climate change). As Becker’s travels have
taken him further afield in the search of the primeval, he has also found human and environmental devastation.

Finding ways to articulate the relationship between human and environment, though, has posed some challenges. One such writer, Jason W. Moore, has formulated a way of overcoming the human/nature division that proposes that we think about nature and human relationships; he also achieves a dialectical reading of these relationships by proposing the use of the word *oikeios*. *Oikeios*, for Moore, indicates “manifold species-environment configurations” (Moore 2015: 8) that includes humans, other species, environments and human organisational activities such as the creation of urban centres and human economic practices, such as capitalism (ibid: 8). Moore’s proposal enables new questions to emerge, such as, how is humanity “unified with the rest of nature?” and “how is human history a co-produced history?” (ibid: 9). His aim is not to produce a holism between humanity and other species, but to understand the historical specificity of human/environment relationships. Nature, for Moore, is a matrix rather than resource (ibid: 35) and it matters to the entirety of human processes, rather than being its context (ibid: 36). In stressing the interdependency of humans with natural processes and environments, our environmental issues become one of relationships rather than objects. Indeed, Moore is at pains to point out that capitalism (whilst in no way inevitable as a political or economic system) is a matrix that is a web of life and relationships: it is not a result of “adding up” nature with the social and political (ibid: 41). Moore uses this framework to propose that:

Nature can neither be saved nor destroyed, only transformed. The *oikeios* represents a radical elaboration of the dialectical logic immanent in Marx’s concept of metabolism... neither society nor nature can be stabilised with the fixity implied by their ideological separation. In this dialectical elaboration, species and environments are at once making and unmaking each other, always and at every turn. All life makes environments. All environments make life. (Ibid: 45)

Humans and other species create the conditions for life in different modes and we can begin to think in terms of definite configurations of acting units and acted-upon objects:

“Capitalism does not have an ecological regime; it is an ecological regime” (ibid: 112). Such a
proposition enables us to think about Becker’s imagery in different ways. Instead of seeing
his images as being split between the primeval and the depiction of international capitalism
through the representation of mammoth steel and glass structures, we can instead interpret
his imagery as a representation of our current ecological regime: the pillaging of one part of
the Earth for an unsustainable image of neoliberal capitalism in another; together these two
images depict our current oikeios.

Our current oikeios, Moore proposes, rests upon Cheap Nature: the ability of nature to be
harvested or used cheaply with little financial investment. The clearance of forests is clearly
an example of Cheap Nature: the timber that is removed can be used for many products and
space is created for monocrops such as palm oil. Is there a risk, then, that in imaging the
primeval forest that we identify spaces for capitalist exploiters to move into? As Moore has
discussed: “Cheap Nature is not just there” because it is also symbolically constructed (ibid:
193). “The conceit of capital, from its very origins was to represent the world through the
God trick: to treat the specifically capitalist ordering of the world as “natural,” claiming to
mirror the world it was seeking to reconstruct” (ibid: 211). The traversal of space from
Europe to the Arctic, and then to the Global south in search of the sublime, sounds like a
search for the natural world and, also, a lot like environmental photography. The symbolic
representation of the world as natural is part of the oikeios of capitalism as these are spaces
for exploitation.

As a Marxist, Moore’s theories encompass the social (as part of the web of life). An
alternative path to neoliberal capital can only be imagined if class struggle is also
considered:

This class struggle was the relation of production and reproduction, of power and
wealth in the web of life. In this respect, the barriers to a new agricultural revolution
are not limited to biophysical natures as such; they are also co-produced through the
class struggle, itself co-produced through nature (ibid: 286).

Indeed, in examining the photograph of Armin and Yanti Petani, their expulsion from their
home is concomitant with the destruction of their land. They are now in precarious position
of rebuilding a home in a significantly changed ecosystem and it will be interesting, in time, to see what they create.

The last full plate image in Reading the Landscape is of a botanic garden in Munich [Fig. 6]. In the caption for the image, Becker relates that he sat on the bench to write the captions for his book (2014: 151). The botanic garden, of course, harks back to a particular time in the history of oikeios, to a time when nature was being ordered, visualised and becoming subject to knowledge for capital exploitation. The creation of the botanic garden coincided with exploration, colonialism, slavery and the establishment of large plantations overseas. In this sense, Becker brings us back not just to the West after a journey to the East, but also to the history of capitalism and the web of life. So while Becker’s book brings to light the current capitalist formation for thoroughly changing nature and exploiting people, it also depicts the differing historical formations in the oikeios; from the wilderness to ordered and known nature.

Perhaps Ewing was right when he described Becker as a “realist”. Becker is brave enough, of the artists who work with the Arctic and notions of the north, to look beyond the declining landscape to examine the pressures that help to create the landscape in decline. Quite how Becker sees nature, though, is open to interpretation. On the one hand he seeks and creates images of untouched nature, but along the way he engages with the social and economic aspects of land use. If one reads his images narratively, they depict our contemporary oikeios. Depressingly, we can say that the melting Arctic landscapes are a landscape made in the web of life – it is our contemporary oikeios. Cleared forests are also part of our oikeos. Developed cities with elaborate gardens – both in skyscrapers and as botanic gardens – are our oikeos. Becker ably draws our attention to our oikeos as capitalism in the web of life. Becker links notions of North and South, East and West. He links environmental exploitation to labour and land dispossession.

Becker remains rooted in an appreciation of the environment – for the places that we wonder at, and which we experience collective urges to protect. But without a fully developed understanding of environment and capital in a web of life, there is no way of comprehending a more equal way of understanding nature, our lives and societies. (Indeed,
whilst our understanding of nature is socially constructed we do genuinely need to curtail our consumption in meaningful ways.) Importantly, there is no sense of what the future holds – unless it is more of nature in the spaces of the urban environment or more intense devastation and dispossession. As we understand the pristine wilderness to be a construction of capitalism and its desire for frontiers (as new spaces to exploit) perhaps we will be able to let go of the pristine image and embrace the new natures in which human and other natures will live more productively and less brutally.

Becker, then, is only partially successful in dialectically resolving the tensions around the sublime and the nature/human binary split. His experiences and travels seem to be showing him that the wilderness is a construct that is hard to maintain in our current oikeios but it is a powerful myth, nonetheless. Indeed, it is hard not to be moved at the loss of scenic grandeur, and to remain unconcerned about the fate of indigenous peoples whose subsistence practices are materially impacted. But as a narrative in Becker’s books, the power and brutality of global capital is exposed; it is one that is dependent on nature to exist. What could powerfully contribute to this narrative, though, are images of where the dialectical relationships in the web of life result in more positive and sustainable ways of living.

**Conclusion**

Becker’s works, whether in exhibition or book form, like many of the photographers also engaging with environmental issues in the context of the gallery or museum, both rely upon and make use of the very systems that are ensuring social and environmental devastation. Artists who sell or exhibit through private galleries, who make work with very high production values, are reliant upon global financial capital as well as technological processes that are resource heavy. Many artists in the gallery system who engage with issues such as overconsumption, social inequality and exploitation, as well as environmental devastation tread a fine line between depicting various problems and exposing their underlying structures; as Edward Burtynsky has argued, if you are not too critical of your subject they are more likely to let you in (Schuster 2013).
Some artists are perhaps more adept at making these structures and contexts more clear than others. Similarly, the writers who contextualise the work of photographers within the art world acknowledge some of the problems of capitalism without launching a full scale attack on neoliberal economic policies. Gerry Badger, writing in Becker’s *Broken Line* (2005) gives details on the rate of expiration of the glaciers (pp. 9-10). Freddy Lange in *Above Zero* (2007) acknowledges the human-altered state of the glaciers and talks about the effects of black coal dust blown in from elsewhere (Langer, 2007, pp. 10-11). And Petra Gilroy-Hirtz (2014), writing in the later version of *Under the Nordic Light*, acknowledges the economic context of Iceland and its changing landscape in the face of climate change (pp. 8-9). William Ewing in *Reading the Landscape* (2014) claims that it is impossible to stop the forces that are creating monumental changes in our landscapes, whether in the north or south. While the writers in Becker’s books have expressed concern about environmental degradation, and demonstrate varying degrees of economic critique, none have been explicit in their critique of capitalism or the economics of neoliberalism.

The curators in Becker’s books enable Becker’s work to be situated comfortably and confidently within the world of art. Yet Becker risks naming the machinations of global capital which are also connected to his work. As he does so he risks exposing his own contribution to our climate and environmental crisis as no one to date has been able to resolve the contradiction of showing devastation without also contributing to it (through the use of photography and travel) and benefitting from it (the creation of a profile, a career, sales of work). It is clear that our lives, our creativity and our audiences, are tied together through the web of global capital. Indeed, photography as an art form can be said to be part of the web of life, as part of our current *oikeios*, as part of the system that creates natural frontiers for exploitation and, as I hope this chapter has demonstrated, part of its critique.

Touring the Polar Regions has long been a moral activity, albeit an increasingly troubled one. Becker could be said to be going to these locations to prove his own worth, to define his masculinity in relation to the environment. Whilst there he tells another moral tale too: that the Arctic is in significant decline due to climate change. Becker, in similarity to other
photographers in the Arctic, is concerned that we will lose a beautiful environment that has been at the centre of our Romantic sensibilities. This is the loss of an environment that stood in for a nebulous form of truth, and for a morality tied up with notions of endurance. We lose both its sublime grandeur and its threat to those who explore in the manner of those blind to indigenous inhabitation and subsistence.

Not all these losses will be experienced in the same way, and with the same degree of mourning. The loss of a site for male proprietorial behaviour, for example, is a myth that can be amended or abandoned, especially if there are opportunities to engage with other subjectivities (Banerjee 2013). But Becker has shown his moral worth in not just a traditional way as the Arctic explorer. He is looking for causes of change and is bringing attention to that through his photography. He is not an activist, but he is reaching an art audience, creating a broader narrative about the changes of environments to our attention, in both the north and the south. He does so in the manner of other artists, such as Sayler and Morris, who do so in the hope that a “speculative cultural impact” is created. Part of this impact is through the dialectics of Becker’s practice that revolve around the sublime and the everyday, between the ambiguous image and the use of contextualising information, suggesting new ways of understanding powerful landscapes and their changes. Another of those impacts could well be a deconstruction of the binary split between nature and human and one that is replaced with a more complex understanding of the web of life.

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