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The documentary landscape and the representation of human-nature relationships: being ecological in the photographs of Lucas Foglia

Anthropocene narratives: A Humanities Symposium
NTNU, Trondheim 28th September 2018

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In recent ecocritical thought, different writers, have called for traditional distinctions such as human/nature, inside/outside, subject/object and mind/body to be overcome (Bennett, Moore, Morton). Arguing that anthropocentrism – the privileging of human experience and needs – is causing our world to become seriously endangered through climate change and mass extinction, a body of thought has emerged that encourages humans to differently understand their place in, and their relationship to, the natural world. Moving away from anthropocentric, hierarchical and exploitative positions, these writers are encouraging new subject positions that include the non-living and the non-human. Such ideas have also been accompanied by experimental ecoart that in many instances also calls for the human/non-human divide to be renegotiated. The purpose of this paper, though, will be to question the extent to which photography is productively contributing to these radical ways of understanding the biosphere and human/non-human relationships.

Photography, unlike other art forms such as performance art, has a tendency to be strongly rationalist. This is partly due to its ordering of space through perspective and through its structural relationship to notions of the “other”: photographs can often have the effect of making people and places look as though they are “over there” rather than part of us in the here and now. Photographs, then, are perhaps not the obvious choice when it comes to representing new subjectivities or phenomenology.¹ However, photographers are also becoming conscious of new ways of talking about human and non-human relationships, and photographic practices are developing that aim to problematise some long-held distinctions about the world. One such project is Lucas Foglia’s (2017) book *Human Nature*. It opens with a statement about how climate change has affected his family’s farm, and the entire biosphere. This led him to document places on Earth that are changed by humans, and the ways in which humans are changed. Smaller in scope than Edward Burtynsky’s or Sebastiao Salgado’s photographic projects, Foglia’s photographs are richly poetic and visually stunning and avoid repeating representations of a ravaged landscape. Instead, Foglia’s photographs offer something more tantalising: human-nature interactions that are interesting, inspiring, worrying, beautiful and compelling.

The Anthropocene, as a concept, encourages us to see the scale of human activity on the planet. The originators of the term ‘Anthropocene’ argue that in the future to come we will be able to see our activities, such as the explosion of nuclear bombs, written into the geological record (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2015: 4). Whilst the Anthropocene as a geological concept has yet to be officially accepted,

¹ Many of us are affected by photographs – they’re not always about the rational world. But I guess in this instance I have in mind documentary landscape photography, rather than the family album.

there is no doubt that there is growing engagement with the term, especially from the humanities. Indeed, there is an awareness (or perhaps a resurgence) of ecocritical thought, spurred by the worry that we need to act now (if it is not too late) to prevent further catastrophic change. Whilst steps have been taken to officially define the Anthropocene as starting in the 1950s with the acceleration of human-driven activity as marked by nuclear detonations (Carrington, 2016), there is no doubt that the advent of the combustion engine, which heralds the mass release of carbon into the atmosphere through human activity, still has popular traction (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2015: 4). The term Anthropocene, though, has spawned a series of derivative terms, such as Capitalocene, Thermocene, Thanatocene, which aim to look at the vast changes in how societies and earth systems have been used and organised through different lenses, such as, respectively, a critique of capitalism, a history of energy production and exploitation, and a history of environmental destruction via war. The Anthropocene, then, has been a productive term within the humanities, spawning stories through which to consider inequalities and the exploitation of human and non-human beings. It is clear, then, that there is a multiplicity of stories forming about and around the term Anthropocene.

Stories, however, can take shape through visual means as well as written ones and indeed, visual stories about Anthropocene issues, such as climate change, environmental devastation, extreme weather events and environmental and industrial impacts on human life, which are often experienced in grossly unequal ways, abound in visual form. Visual stories can take different forms, including traditional documentary narratives as they appear in newspapers and magazines, or as extended narratives in book form. Documentary photography, however, also has its more allusive forms in art contexts, appearing in galleries and artists' monographs. These narratives are often more allusive in their intent and depend upon a high degree of competence in both the production and interpretation of the visual material. In this paper I will examine Lucas Foglia's book *Human Nature* from 2017. Foglia has published three significant bodies of work to date, with *Human Nature* being the most recent book. All of Foglia's books have been influenced by the 'back to the land' movement that his family participated in, but Foglia is also interested in the complexities of modern living. As Michael Hoppen has noted "by the time he was eighteen [Foglia's family] owned three tractors, four cars, and five computers. This mixture of the modern world in their otherwise rustic life made him curious to see what a completely self-sufficient way of living might look like" (Hoppen, n.d.). Foglia's first book *A Natural Order* (2012), took a closer look at different types of off the grid living, and the second book *Frontcountry* (2014), takes the myth of the American West as his topic, examining both the persistence of cowboy lifestyles, where particular types of farming practices predominate, and new emerging economies and ecologies in the form of a local mining boom

emerge. *Frontcountry*, in particular, manages to capture something of the complexity of living in wilder spaces, whilst depicting humans participating in shaping and changing places. *Human Nature*, in similarity, develops the themes of human-nature relationships, but this time expressly in relation to climate change. Foglia states:

In 2012, Hurricane Sandy flooded our fields and blew down the oldest trees in the woods. On the news, scientists linked the storm to climate change caused by human activity. I realized that if humans are changing the weather, then every living plant and animal has already been affected by people. ...

Responding to Hurricane Sandy and the debates that followed, I traveled [sic] around the world, befriending and photographing people who are working towards a positive future, in spite of the enormity of the task. *Human Nature* is a series of interconnected stories about our reliance on nature and the science of our relationship to the natural world. Each story is set in a different landscape: city, forest, farm, desert, ice field, ocean, and lava flow. From a newly built rainforest in urban Singapore to a Hawaiian research station measuring the cleanest air on Earth, the photographs examine our need for “wild” places—even when those places are human constructions.

Hope fuels the work of the people I photographed and drives how I use their images. I believe the stories we tell about ourselves in the present precipitate who we become. (Foglia, n.d.)

In this statement we find an awareness of the inadequacy of traditional environmental protection strategies together with a recognition of our desire for the wild in our lives [Fig. 1]. Foglia expressly buys into ideas “construction” on both literal and theoretical levels; he often depicts man-made environments and his first degree was in Semiotics. The resulting imagery, or perhaps more accurately, the narrative that is constructed, is both troubling and interesting [Fig. 2]. Aesthetically Foglia’s photography is engaging and one of the pleasures of this work is how he so compellingly photographs both people and place [Fig. 3]. But one of the questions that I have about Foglia’s practice, though, is whether it persists in generating the myth that we can solve our humanitarian and environmental problems by returning to a simpler way of living. Indeed, Foglia’s work seems suffused with an idealised engagement with nature, whether that be an experience of mud bathing or living a less technologized life.

Foglia’s photographs seem to resonate with a wide variety of ideas and questions about ecology. For example, we could ask, upon looking at his images, do we need a deeper understanding of ecology and a deep connection to nature, as proposed in deep ecology? Should we turn back the clock and

abandon technologized lives? Conversely, should we celebrate man-made changes of the landscape and celebrate human ingenuity? Should we mourn the destruction of forests, even ones that have been planted expressly for harvesting? What is it to live in close proximity to nature, or, can we every really escape nature, indeed, to what extent are we natural? What kind of new lives and ways of living are we looking for and experimenting with? These questions resonate with competing ideas of ecology: should we be seeking to preserve nature, find a sense of peace with our changing world, or should we be working with it, using our creativity and resources to co-create new ways of living? What kind of politics of nature and the environment do we want to subscribe to? Who benefits and who loses in ecological discourses and decisions we make about nature, environment and human protection and exploitation? Whilst ecological frameworks are important, and they often ask us to consider whether humans have equal access to some of the more creative opportunities on offer through ecological transformation, it is also important that we consider how we visualise these ideas, because, how we depict nature makes an impact on how we think about, relate to, and use nature and natural resources in our lives. Indeed, as Object Orientated Ontologists such as Jane Bennett (2010) have argued, if we have respect for the non-sentient and non-living as well as the non-human, we may well think much more carefully about how we relate to ourselves and to our world.

Firstly, let's take a quick tour through some of the imagery and note the subjects that Foglia covers.

Figs. 4 & 5: People enjoying the landscape whilst being studied (beautiful landscapes, technology, but also plant invasion, coldness);

Figs 6 & 7: Luscious man-made environments that feature tropical planting (hotels, leisure)

Fig. 8: Banal and everyday locations that utilise architecturally sustainable construction (McDonald's, workers)

Figs. 9 & 10: Gardens and pleasure in working class lives (raising questions about who has access to gardens, growing crops, community gardens etc.)

Fig. 11: Stress and virtual reality tests featuring representations of landscape and nature (new technology and nature; simulacrum; recreating a nature that no longer exists?)

Fig. 12: Prisoners working on farms (prison labour and exploitation, social inequality, reform and progressive programmes, perhaps even people's first experience of agriculture or nature?)

Figs 14 & 14: Pleasure and education gardens (Eden project, aviary, child-like wonder)

Fig. 15: Greenbelts in super cities (Korea, urban design, but also smog?; mass consumption)

Clearcutting of plantation forests (deforestation, monocropping, poor pay, dangerous labour)

Figs. 16, 17 & 18: Transportation of timber (old growth forest? Inequality of resources, global trade, unsafe and insecure employment)

Fig. 19: Timber and its context (American timber, perhaps also timber from other countries, such as in the previous image, beautiful landscapes, use and organisation of resources)

Figs. 20, 21 & 22: Forest fires, including controlled burns, wildfires and clearing charred timber (devastation but also control of fire)

Fig. 23: Planters and foresters (off grid? Inequality? Who gets to use timber? Portraiture, people as individuals)

Fig. 24: Children on cattle ranches, with cattle (this one looks a bit more like a fashion image!, growing up with animals)

Fig. 25: Mural on a meat packing plant (showing idealised imagery of farmer with a family in an urban location, industrial area)

Fig. 26: Romantic landscape (this one is a bit of a surprise, perhaps archetypal, idealisation of the farming landscape)

Fig. 27: Harvesting, with hints of migrant labour (Latin names, unusually deindividuated, although also anonymous – perhaps illegal labour?)

Fig. 28: Trees and fruit in urban settings (waste, overlooked, undervalued, abundance)

Fig. 29: Land clearing (fire, waste, barrenness, land use)

Fig. 30: Crop development and experimentation, as undertaken by the state (survival, inferno, genetically engineered plants)

Fig. 31: Drought and its impact

Figs. 32 & 33: Children in the landscape (but not a garden; these are quite unusual landscapes for children, what would it be like to grow up here?)

Fig. 34 Meta landscapes (the mountains on Utes as well as in the background, petrol, road trips, use and release of carbon etc.)

Figs. 35 & 36: Scientific study of landscape and nature, Lab study of nature (computer simulation, algorithms, data)

Fig. 37: State control of nature (complete with stuffed animal, haunting the corridor, a contrasting sense of banality and separation from nature, facelessness, out of touch with the natural)

Fig. 38: Nests in man-made environments (ingenuity, camouflage, nature making use of the man-made)

Fig. 39: Communing with nature (bearing the cold, masculinity)

Figs. 40, 41 & 42: More scientific contexts and the icy landscape; more communing with nature, even in a scientific context (wonder, again); the melting glacier (which is also like an abstract image but scale becomes apparent after a while; these ice floes are huge)

Fig. 43: Landscaping and restoration (nature eroding tourism, tourism means the landscape is restored?)

Fig. 44: Swimming in the ocean (wild swimming)

Fig. 45: Landscape tourism with danger (fire and water)

Fig. 46: Nature devastation/human reconstruction (the futility of human action in the face of nature's force?)

Fig. 47: Sex (luscious setting, hints of Eden?)

One of the aspects of the imagery that is so compelling is the way in which Foglia is picking up on themes relevant to political ecologies. Ecology, for Foglia, is not separate from the political effects of science, commerce, urban design, agriculture, crop development within a state context, tourism, conservation etc. We see people and imagine the effects of policy, over consumption, destruction and inequality. Our unequal access to experiences of the wild is also touched upon, particularly in relation to deforestation and timber production. Yet there is also hope, here, that working with nature can yield new ways of living and being, albeit in very commercialised ways.

However, one of the aspects of this project that really struck me was the opening and closing imagery. Foglia, I think, is at risk of romanticising his subject of how humans engage with nature and the landscape and I think this is particularly telling where one man – Matt – climbs a tree [fig.1], followed by a child – Maddie – in a lily pond [fig. 2], followed by a woman – Rachel – taking a mud bath (quite possibly in a wild location) [fig. 3]. These three people seem to be enjoying – two of them openly – reconnecting with nature, although the caption for Maddie's image indicates that the lilies she is swimming between are invasive (so perhaps there is a hint, here, of nature being too abundant, of getting in the way of a good swim).

At the very end of the book, a couple – Goda and Lev – enjoy sex in a Hawai'ian landscape, their absorption and context suggesting deep pleasure [fig. 47]. The caption for this image tells us that the couple are in the cleanest air on earth, which also suggests that sex is quite possibly more enjoyable here, whilst also hinting at the procreation of humankind. I can't look at this image without thinking about the Christian creation myth and the story of Eden and the fall. The verdure is so abundant, and the couple so perfect and absorbed, that in addition to wondering whether this image is

performative, there is a question here about a return to an idealised state. Is this image a performative desire to return to that simpler state?

Images at the start and end of narratives tend to be particularly important in terms of setting the scene and concluding the story. No matter how complex the in-between content, or the kinds of diversions and red herrings that an author might explore, we often seek a resolution to narrative, even in visual form. Whilst Foglia is showing more complex relationships, both politically in terms of inequality and exploitation, but also between humans and the non-sentient and non-living, Foglia is at risk of idealising the complex ways in which we do, in an everyday way, live with nature. In addition to that, there is the very real likelihood that Foglia privileges human actions and uses of nature rather than attempting to image a radical new way of interacting with the non-human and non-sentient. But before I dismiss the anthropocentric viewpoint and the idealisation in Foglia's imagery, it is worth asking how might we more constructively understand the narrative that Foglia has presented to us, especially given its rich content?

In the book *Humankind* (2017), Morton wants to reinvigorate Marxist theories to include the non-human. Noting that ideas such as sustainability and "saving the world" produce ideas about "preserving a reasonably human-friendly environment" (p. 37), Morton wants to experiment with ideas around communism and ecologies to see if it is possible to create a politically informed theory of reality that both includes and overcomes theories of species; the aim of this is to create ways of thinking that do not exclusively prioritise human needs and desires. Morton's book, then, connects to other political ecology debates that aims to overthrow anthropocentrism and the use of nature in wasteful and exploitative forms; indeed, the aim is to understand that "being" can be applied to the non-human and non-sentient. Of particular interest to this paper are Morton's ideas of the spectral, which give us new ways of understanding representative forms such as photography as well as new ways of understanding the non-human world. However, Morton is also interested in the very notion of *Humankind* and what it can offer to us a philosophical category. Importantly, Morton is aware of some of the pitfalls of ecological theories and theories of ontology, especially when applied to groups such as humans. Avoiding the pitfalls of essentialism and recognising the multitudinous political and cultural aspects of identity (pp. 4-5), Morton is careful to acknowledge that *humans* have diverse interests and concerns, as well as having significantly different personal and politicised experiences. Alongside that, Morton develops his theory of solidarity and he makes a case for what we have in common with the non-human and non-sentient. To achieve this Morton breaks with

correlationism and instead encourages us to understand “world” as where the real / reality boundary is much porous (p. 14).

Morton is clever about bringing together ideas from science, art, philosophy, cultural studies and other areas. Using physics, Morton notes that everything has a “shimmering or quivering” (p. 48) quality to them, that everything moves without mechanical input, and this shimmering is another name for the spectral, or in an indigenous realm, “magic” (p. 49). Morton notes that in many instances such ideas will be thought of as regressive, stupid, or worse still, as a form of cultural appropriation. But for Morton the idea is a powerful one, because if everything shimmers, then the life/non-life boundary no longer matters: “all beings are better thought of as undead, not as animate or inanimate” (p. 50). Indeed, everything in Morton’s world of ideas has an uncanny spectral dimension to it and this proves useful because production becomes what humans and non-humans *do*. Morton claims that “Species being implies symbiosis” (p. 61) and if we focus on the spectral there is an undead, zombie-like version of being alive: we are all part of the symbiotic real. Traditional Marxism, however, emphasises an anthropocentric take on the world and Morton sees a need to change Marxist theory to include the spectral. Indeed, Morton argues that “Human economic relations are simply general ecological relations with arbitrary pieces missing – colossal numbers of pieces (pp. 61-62).

The spectral, and its relationship with photography, is also something that Morton touches upon, and this is interesting because the real / reality porousness also applies to photography. Citing the act of being photographed, and the belief that photography can steal your soul, Morton notes that the photographic portrait reveals spectrality: “I cannot think of myself as “inside here” any more; I’m decisively “over there” in some way; my being is not organically locked together; my “soul” can be detached from other parts of me” (p. 71). We are, at best, partial beings and the photograph becomes a spectre of the real.

Part of Morton’s project is to deal with beauty, something which we have become uncomfortable with in our critical and academic lives. But Morton (p. 88) notes that beauty, at both a theoretical and experiential level is uncanny because it is an experience that can’t be grasped without ruining it, it is, instead, ambiguous and perhaps even a form of sadness (but not, in Morton’s view, melancholic). Beauty and sadness become part of our spectral beings (p. 88). Beauty becomes interesting in the context of examining photography and ecology, because, so much of our photographic practices are tied up with beauty: beauty is exploited (as in tourism) or spoiled (as in

industry). Beauty as a form of colonialism. But beauty itself doesn't have to be a problematic concept if we treat it as part of the spectral: it is an uncanny spectre that is part of "world".

You've probably noticed that I haven't been saying "our world" or "this world" or even "the world" and it's because world is a particularly important construct in Morton's thought. Morton turns to Heidegger's concept of world and debunks the idea that "world" is something that only humans, and particularly superior humans, can do (doing here is important – world is something that happens in consciousness). Morton argues that:

[W]orld only works if we allow nonhumans to have it... [and] in truth not only can we allow cats to have a world, but even waterfalls. We can do this because *world* is very cheap. We don't have to raise cats and waterfalls up to human status to do so, and this is great for another reason. If world is a prize for being special, the trajectory within the concept is inevitably towards Nazism. But if instead world is an incredibly cheap thing that worms can have, it's not that worms can be Nazis, but that Nazis are just very confused, puffed-up worms (p. 91).

World, for Morton, is imperfect, perforated, overlapping. World, crucially, does not depend on consciousness. "It's not about knowing that there is a world. It's about getting on with stuff, going about your doggy, or spidery, or whaley business" (p. 92). We're saved from preservation and from blanket condemnation of world. We no longer have to worry about *end of the world* as that is a normative concept that suits particular cultural groups. World is not broken in the sense that it needs fixing, but world is jagged, porous and that also means that we can share it. "We are guests of each other" (p. 93) that includes spectrality; each being has a spectre. Morton, always the imaginative but careful thinker, then considers that if everything has rights (because we decide not to use anything as a resource), then nothing can have rights. So Morton sees the discourse of rights as a dead end, and this is where he moves into solidarity. "Solidarity ... is default to the biosphere and very widely available" (p. 14). Yet anthropocentrism is precisely what prevents us from seeing that (p. 15). "Solidarity is a deeply pleasant, stirring feeling and a political state, and it is the cheapest and most readily available because it relies on the basic, default symbiotic real" (p. 19).

What I want to do now is return to Foglia's imagery, and the overall narrative to see what we might make of some of the propositions. Foglia is clearly committed to thinking about and representing the politics of the environment, and includes science, exploitation and the myriad experiences of

human-nature interactions. There is a commitment to the human, as a subject, as a shaper of world from an anthropocentric view point. In so many instances, there are no clear judgements made about the development of crops, the changing weather, the changing behaviour of birds or even of humans. We note instead the wonder and strangeness of world. It's a world that is highly porous, imperfect and shared with others. It's a world that's changing and we don't even fully understand it yet. It's a world that may have considerably more force than we do: experiencing worldness of a volcano may mean rebuilding a home in the same space but a different place [fig. 46].

Foglia's imagery, then, could be said to be where humans experience the strange spectrality of worldness through at once a highly subjective, anthropocentric and yet porous space. Worldness of tree meets worldness of human in an act of strangeness [fig. 1]. The last image in the book, then, is symbolic [fig. 47]. It is reminiscent of an idealised scene from earlier times, and there is clearly a reference to ideas of Eden here, but it is not clear whether this is before or after the fall. Given the narrative of the book, where humans are seen to have different kinds of knowledge, one could read the image not as a return to a pre-fall Eden, but a return to Eden with knowledge. This is not a return to a naïve, simplified world of back to the land living, but one where knowledge of nature and being enable a joyous expression of living.

Foglia's imagery is reminiscent of a highly idealised sensibility, one that puts the viewer in touch with many different aspects of human-nature relationships (including the highly contrived and the highly controlled), but Foglia is not suggesting that we return to a naïve place of pre-knowledge and pre-technology. We use our knowledge, our tools, our creativity in the shaping of world. Some of these uses are troubling, and I wouldn't want to idealise all technologised aspects of human-nature relationships, but Foglia's images suggests that we are part of a symbiotic whole.

The photographs, of course, represent an anthropocentric point of view. We see through the eyes of camera technology that was developed by humans, for humans (although we should note that it wasn't developed for the benefit of everybody, equally). We see views, people, human actions and reactions. We're shown inequality, exploitation, ingenuity and social resistance, emancipation. We see beauty through the eyes of the photographer who perpetuates a human point of view and everything is human scaled. We don't see the microbiome or huge systems, but systems in particular, need networks, or perhaps narratives, to represent them. I would argue that the images are romantic and idealised, but in a productive way: in a way that enables us to imagine symbiotic relationships. We may want to question some of these actions and relationships, just as we may

want to question aspects of the inequality represented in the imagery, but there is a distinct form of hope for both the non-human and the human in this narrative. Indeed, as Morton notes, “Adorno remark[ed] that true progress would look like a regression to the childishly passionate” (p. 17).

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