**Bringing the sublime back down to earth: Olaf Otto Becker’s renegotiation of the sublime in a neoliberalised and climate changing world**

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Olaf Otto Becker, a German 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 as 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* (2015), I will argue that Becker’s visual language has subtly altered, producing a productive tension within the sublime. The wide open spaces, grandeur of scenery, the muted colour palettes, the sense of danger or threat are still persistent, but new subjects, such as the inclusion of people who have been affected by illegal logging and burning, have appeared in Becker’s images too. In the midst of the experience of the sublime in Becker’s imagery, we are faced with the impact of the power of global capital. Becker’s visual approach avoids passing obvious judgement on these scenes (we have instead an apparently ‘straight’ image), but these landscapes are troubled with a sense of banal harm (new housing developments, office blocks, lush gardens, and recreation centres), creating an increasingly politicised and social experience for the viewer. Additionally, his image captions in his later projects suggest a strong commitment to the knowledge of the social and economic context. Whilst there is much to be in thrall at in Becker’s images, the human impact on the landscape seems to result in a sense of banality and harm rather than a celebration of man’s power.

**Keywords**: Olaf Otto Becker, sublime, global capital, climate change

Olaf Otto Becker, a German artist and photographer, has made a series of books and exhibited works that engage with ideas of the North, the sublime, the human-altered landscape, climate change and deforestation, and other subjects. His first four books concentrate on Greenland and Iceland, whilst his recent work shifts attention to the regions of the world that contain forests. Condensed into five publications, this wide-ranging subject matter is both 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.

Becker has consistently, in each publication, demonstrated an awareness of the aesthetics of image production, utilising both the language of the sublime in conjunction with the aesthetics of the everyday and the straight image. His images exhibit rigorous repetition of the use of light and the sense of scale; he typically makes very wide landscape views even if the scale, in some images, is ambiguous. His projects include signs of human habitation and activity, although these are situated against scenes of wildness and natural grandeur. Early reviews of his work acknowledge stylistic similarities to Stephen Shore and Joel Meyerowitz (<http://www.photoeye.com/bookstore/citation.cfm?catalog=ZC870&i=3932187490&i2>=, Accessed, 1st July 2014), as well as Robert Adams and Richard Misrach (Gilroy-Hirtz, 2011, p. 10, Badger, 2007, p. 11). Becker reports that one of the qualities that drew him to these northern landscapes was the light, (Schaden, 2005, p. 140); indeed, in *Broken Line*, Becker made extensive use of the lowest light available in the summer, which was also the most diffuse (Schaden, 2005, p. 141).

In Becker’s latest book, which shows images of primeval forests, forest fires and deforestation, together with images of gardens and greenery as part of architectural splendour, William Ewing provides an introduction to Becker’s work. Ewing, a noted writer and curator, 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, although expresses initial surprise at the apparent change in direction. He reflects:

A long term admirer of Olaf Otto Becker’s work, I must admit to somewhat of a psychic jolt when I first laid eyes on a preliminary maquette of his *Reading the Landscape* project. I had always thought of Becker exclusively as a photographer of the Far North, for whom icebergs and glaciers were sole passions; so what was he doing so far from “home”, in both the literal and figurative sense? (Ewing in Becker, 2014, p. 8)

After musing on Robert Frost's poem *Fire and Ice*, Ewing deduces:

Perhaps the two subjects in Becker's work, though seemingly diametrically opposed, formed a cohesive whole after all. Or in more colloquial terms, were they not two sides of the same coin? (Ewing in Becker, 2014, p. 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 important in terms of the biosphere of the world. Ewing also situates Becker’s own preoccupation with notions of home, which Becker defines as:

1. *Lebensraum;* 2. Biosphere/bio trope; 3. Living space/space to live; 4. Natural environment; 5. Home; 6. Refuge. I think of habitat in all these senses, concentrated in that one word. But the important thing for me is, that there is no difference between the space in which men live and the space in which all the other species live, except that, only we have the power and with this power the responsibility not to use everything only for ourselves. We will not survive without most of the other species. We are part of the habitat of a big community of species, but without behaviour we treat all other species, of animals and plants in a way that betrays our belief that we can mange the world completely by ourselves. Our huge habitat/world is ultimately only a microscopic place on a tiny, tiny grain of dust in the universe. Our scientific and technical knowledge and our inventions do not add up to much in the face of that fact (Becker, 2014, p. 9).

Despite the expressly global context that Becker allows, Ewing is curiously adverse to situating Becker’s work as explicitly political. He sees Becker’s change of subject as “logical [rather] than radical” (Ewing in Becker, 2014, p. 10). Ice, for Becker, has become an exhausted subject and trees offered new developments for him as an artist. Becker goes in search for the primeval but of course finds much destruction, although the search for wide sweeping, pristine or awe inspiring landscapes is another connection to his earlier works. Ewing, using Becker’s own words, seems keen to downplay the social, economic and political context that these landscapes are a part of. For example, Ewing quotes Becker as saying that “We cannot stop the process… But it is important to talk about it, and that we are the reason for it” (Becker, 2014, p. 10). Ewing continues:

Most of us consider the damage to the environment a price worth paying for our material progress, but this only in part because what is out of sight (the unspoiled areas of the world) is out of mind. Becker would like to insert his images in our consciousness and into our conscience, front and centre. We are all likely to be more protective of nature if we have some idea of what it means (Ewing in Becker, 2014, p. 10).

The desire to bring awareness of the changes to the world’s landscapes is a familiar concern: there are many such photographers now working to document these massive and significant changes. But what is striking is the Ewing’s final words on the matter of whether we, as readers, viewers and fellow consumers might do, or even make, of Becker’s work:

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 in Becker, 2014, p. 10).

I confess to being rather shocked by Ewing’s cavalier, or perhaps jaded, response to humanity and to Becker’s work. Is this a statement about the lack of interest in taking action to avert the worst changes? Is this acceptance that we are stuck with economic policies that prioritise growth over and above any other social and environmental concern? Is Ewing assuming that viewers may be moved, but nothing more, at the sight of Becker’s imagery? Ewing’s text is baffling in that it is out of step with so much writing on the environment – there is no passionate call for change and there is an absence of a discussion of the forces at stake here (I think human greed has a lot to answer for but corporate power and our current economic policies are probably more immediately accountable). Importantly, though, one might ask how Becker’s photographs can be read – do they overlook the wider social and political contexts in which this environmental devastation is happening? I would like to argue that Becker’s work is more complex, and provocative, than Ewing allows.

**Looking north: Ice and life in Iceland and Greenland**

A great many of Becker’s photographs have been made in the Arctic North; not the north of England or Europe, but the north that created the irrational desire to explore for exploration’s sake (Spufford, 1996, pp. 49-78). Becker initially visited Iceland to photograph waterfalls (Gilroy-Hirtz, 2014, p. 8) and study moving subject matter, but once there seems to have been captivated by the North’s magnetism and potential. Becker seems to belonging to an increasing number of photographers who are moving north for their landscape imagery.

“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 and 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, p. 22). It is an environment where one can prove one’s moral worth, and the writers who have introduced Becker’s work today certainly seem to agree with these ideas as Becker proves his openness to Inuk techniques of survival, and a commitment to seeing expeditions through despite significant injuries and physical hardship (see Schaden, 2005, pp. 140-2; Langer, 2007, pp. 8-11 ). The Arctic north, though, is a complex space for ideas and it has also been an environment against which to pitch oneself, to prove one’s manhood; it is a site in which male proprietary behaviour asserts itself (Spufford, 1996, p. 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. It is now in need of protection against climate change. It is still an environment of danger, adventure and peril; as Becker shows it is still an environment of potential bodily harm and likely hardship.[[1]](#footnote-1) But it is an environment in decline; glaciers are both retreating and deflating, the permafrost is thawing and industries perilous to the local ecologies are moving in. Economically, socially, and historically, the landscape is in decline because of the “progress” of the global North. In the burning of fossil fuels, and in the unsustainable increase in consumption, the climate is changing causing the Arctic and Antarctic regions to warm, and to warm much more quickly than the other parts of the globe.

*Broken Line* (2005) 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, compare 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 [Fig. 2]. Every image is titled with geographical co-ordinates collected from a GPS device; the intention is to allow for comparisons in the future to be made. Becker’s shots of indigenous living [Fig. 3] are socially important, although the work stops short of fully engaging with indigenous subjectivities and their social and political reality (the texts in the book, for the main part, also steer clear of a discussion of this indigenous politics). Mention is made of an indigenous subject, who helped train Becker handle a dinghy for his lengthy voyages to photograph the Western coast (Gilroy-Hirtz, 2014, p. 9).

Becker’s next book *Above Zero* (2007), 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 these images of ice sheets [Fig. 4]. Becker has here moved from an implied ‘before and after’ technique to documenting phenomena that should not be there: rivers on ice sheets indicate their melting, and contribute materially to their speedy decline.[[2]](#footnote-2) Images of Moulins are also significant [Fig. 5]: this is where water plummets to the bedrock below, causing the speed of travel of the glacier to increase. These images are interesting in that they depict traditional sublime subject matter, but their restrained aesthetic (the limited colour palette and the avoidance of the expression of height) and repetition negotiate the Romantic sublime in different ways. Examining six different rivers across the Greenland ice sheet one comes away with a very troubled image of these wide and powerful spaces: they are shrinking in problematic ways. Becker further 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 tourist performance [Fig. 6]. 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 strangeness of the encounter, though, makes for a compelling image.

People rarely appear, though, in Becker’s images. Signs of houses and people’s belongings appear in both *Broken Line* (2005) and *Above Zero* (2007). In *Under the Nordic* Light (2014) this is the main subject matter of the book: nature reserves are changed by an incursion of a dam [Fig. 7] and houses are left half built [Fig. 8], their development halted by the economic upheavals of 2008 (which hit Iceland particularly hard). In similarity to Edward Burtynsky’s work, perhaps, *Under the Nordic Light*, shows the negotiation of landscapes that are also used as dwelling spaces, sites of industry and prosaic activities, sites of tourism and sites of wonder. In this book, and in contrast to Becker’s earlier books, there are extended captions for some of the images at the back of the book; this enables Becker to provide detail on the *what* of the photograph and *how* the photograph depicts a contested space. In this book Becker is no longer taking it for granted that viewers will understand the significance of what it is they are being shown. Engaging with the protest of the construction of a dam, or informing the viewer of the geological import of the traces of glacier action on rock, Becker takes on a more reflective and pedagogic role.

**Moving South**

This truncated romp through Becker’s work brings us to his more recent imagery in *Reading the Landscape* (2014). Split into three Habitat sections, the book follows a trajectory from the primeval forests, to forest clearance, soil erosion and fire destruction, and then a final section on the tropical man made gardens in high rise buildings in the Far East, in place 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 [Fig. 9]. In contrast to Becker’s earlier work there are some images of the flora and fauna, where Becker seems fascinated with more of the detail of living systems rather than just their overall grandeur [Fig. 10].

To some extent I find myself with the simplistic structure of this book. 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. It further supports the idea that we can ‘protect’ nature from the worst of the changes that human activity is bringing about. 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. 11]: *Amin and Yanti Petani building their new home, Riau area, Sumatra, Indonesia, 10/2013* (2014, p. 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, p. 151).

The bleached-out colours of the images (one wonder if Becker has artificially reduced both green and blue in this image) accentuates the ashen foreground and cleared background. The irony of a timber-framed house in this environment looks painfully destructive and inadequate against the forces of international capitalism (no information is provided on local subsistence practices but sympathetic uses of woodland are known to exist in Indonesia). Whilst not ostensibly the subject of Becker’s book, one becomes aware of the international forces of destruction and more aware of local opposition to such practices.

The final section, the artificial gardens of Gardens by the Bay, Singapore, are the subject of Becker’s gaze [Fig. 12]. Becker is at pains to point 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, which show high rise buildings with lush garden displays [Fig. 13]. 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. Both the gardens and the high rise gardens speak of alienation from the wilder aspects of life and for those living in urban centres they are not necessarily bad experiences (indeed, in the West, many forms of urban living are less impactful on the environment than living in rural contexts). The addition of living greenery can bring health and wellbeing, but what is being dwelt upon here is the structures that enable and support such experiences (such as a luxury hotel within a network of international capitalism), against the limited types (even a stereotype) of profuse tropical greenery. Both the limited palette of what constitutes the garden, and the structure within it, shed light on the forces that are bringing about destruction elsewhere in the Far East. And of course, looking back on Becker’s earlier output, this destruction and reconstruction of the tropics is fuelling glacial retreat in the Arctic North.

Becker’s reflection at the end of the book is far less equivocal than Ewing's:

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, p. 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 addressed. Whilst there is no specific direction on the form and type of action, 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 (although I will admit these are tempting thoughts…) After all, it is not just the spaces of the Arctic North and the primeval forests that we stand to lose, it is also our local habitats and livelihoods that will be at stake too.

**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; after all, many artists and photographers are not in a position to bite the hand that feeds (or at least, can’t bite it too hard). Some artists are perhaps more adept at making these structures and contexts more clear than others; many that I have surveyed to date show awareness of the environmental impact of their work but balance the resources needed against the messages conveyed.[[3]](#footnote-3) Similarly, the writers who contextualise the work of photographers within the art world similarly acknowledge some of the problems without launching a full scale attack on neoliberal economic policies, but some have been more explicit than others. 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 (it speeds up melting rates) (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). None of the writers to date, though, have been explicit in their critique of capitalism or the economics of neoliberalism. *Reading the Landscape* (2014), which contains Ewing’s curiously avoidant text, also contains Becker’s own passionate words. Unlike Ewing, he names the machinations of global capital in relation to his work. Ewing’s avoidance of the harder aspects of social and environmental devastation, then, feels as though it has missed the mark, as though he has avoided precisely what is so devastating about the world in which we live: that our lives, our creativity and our audiences, are tied together through the web of global capital, the very thing that Becker, along with other photographers and artists, are showing is a cause for change that we need to be able to face.

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. But he tells another moral tale too – the morality of the Arctic is that it needs our protection from climate change and resource extraction (although he does not engage with the challenges that indigenous Greenlanders face). In losing the Arctic we will lose several things:

Firstly, the site of fresh water storage, the release of which will materially impact on the composition of the oceans and will result in increasing water levels.

Secondly, the loss of these ice sheets will have an enormous impact on our global weather patterns, so our familiar weather patterns will be lost.

Thirdly, we will lose a beautiful environment which has been at the centre of our Romantic sensibilities. This is the loss of an environment which 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.

Perhaps 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 less pressing for me and I’m interested to see what kinds of new subjectivities may emerge, especially Indigenous subjectivities. 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 loss of important environments to our attention, in both the north and the south.

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1. 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, p. 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although there are a few glaciers in the world that are growing, a vast number of glaciers, including those in Iceland, Greenland, the Arctic, Antartic and South America, are retreating and deflating at alarming rates. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Photographers surveyed include: Richard Misrach, Edward Burtynsky, Stephen Maisel, Daniel Beltra This is a complex topic but all these photographers state that they are trying to raise awareness of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)