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## **Landscape photography in the web of life: Olaf Otto Becker's documentary sublime**

Julia Peck

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 comprehending, and communicating messages about, the changes in the landscape. Both the act of visiting the Arctic, and producing individual and collaborative responses that meditate on climate change, have become a significant cultural activity. The material includes campaign-style communication 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; Barth 2008; 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, marine life, and on the planetary weather system. There is also concern at the impact of changing biospheric phenomena on social living conditions both in the Arctic and in coastal regions around the world (Braschler and Fisher 2011).

This chapter investigates the photography of 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 and scientific study; much of his work expressly addresses landscapes that are seriously affected by climate change. His later work shifts attention to forested regions in the global South, which have been severely compromised and reduced by fires and logging activities. Condensed into five publications, this wide-ranging subject matter is coherent in terms of Becker's visual approach, and represents an affective and effective criticism of neoliberal consumption and the operations of global capital.

Becker's photographs invite analysis across both aesthetics and the social-economic context of the production of his work. This chapter will specifically argue that Becker's practice utilises the language of the pensive photograph - allusive or ambiguous images - whilst also seeking to limit their ambiguities. His work plays dialectically with the conventions of ambiguity and facts, as presented through both image and text, in order to maximise the potential of his images to produce both informed and affective responses to the landscape. This dialectical interaction between the factual and allusive is further explored in relation to the aesthetics of his images where the conventions of the Arctic sublime are brought into play with the visual description of inhabited and working areas. Becker's imagery, then, can be said to utilise both the sublime and the documentary.

The analysis of Becker's photographs will be supported by an examination of the relationship between capitalism and the biosphere as proposed by Jason W. Moore in *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015). Moore's work, which can be seen as part of a broader movement to find ways of articulating the ecology of human/nature relationships, aims to overcome the dualism of Nature/Society by proposing that capitalism is a world-ecology, a "way of organising nature" through the "co-production of earth-moving, idea-making, and power-creating across the geographical layers of human experience" (2-3); this contrasts with traditional narratives of destruction under capitalism, which emphasise nature as external and affected or destroyed by human activity. Moore, as a consequence, has questioned whether the term Anthropocene is an adequate category for understanding our current world ecology and has instead proposed that we call our current era the Capitalocene.

Whilst there have been numerous writers encouraging the understanding of ecology as a series of relationships that includes humans, technologies, and the environment, many of these texts have excluded, or only partially accounted for capitalism as a producer within the concept of ecology (Bennett 2010; Guattari 2000). Moore's thesis, which proposes that capitalism emerged in the Sixteenth Century, links many activities of ordering and controlling nature to the growth of

capitalism before it took full shape in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. Moreover, Moore's thesis can be extended to consider the part that photography plays within capitalism's global project. Photography, like other forms of visual culture, plays a role in producing and reproducing the ideas of nature, especially as the representations that it produces are pervasive in Western culture. Photography is also exploited by capitalism's opportunities for profit and this in turn creates opportunities for photographers and artists to create artworks that are part of our world ecologies. This ecology of landscape photography, though, creates a multitude of practices where a critique of neoliberalism can be enacted.

Becker's photographs, which typically depict landscapes away from his native Germany, could be read as viewing nature as an external entity that is acted upon by capitalism, but I will suggest a broader interpretation: Becker's work visualises the ways in which nature is re-imagined by capitalism as a resource for appropriation as part of world-ecology; in this sense nature is a co-producer of capitalism. For Moore, nature under capitalism is Cheap Nature: a resource that is equivalent to unpaid work or energy and that exists in parallel to other forms of unpaid work/labour such as human reproduction (Moore 2015: 65). As this chapter will demonstrate the exploitation and appropriation of nature is central to Becker's imagery.

Connected to this argument is the question of photography's contribution to capitalist systems and consumption, here primarily within the art world. Although the production and consumption of art spans many different contexts, some art is made for, or subject to, capitalist exploitation and is a form of conspicuous consumption. Becker makes imagery for consumption, whether in book form, in a gallery context, or for private ownership, as well as engaging with artistic and environmental discourses. Undeniably, photography's entire system of production, from the manufacture of cameras and materials, to the ways of seeing that it produces, is part of the industrial heritage of the Nineteenth Century and the rise of photography's commercial industries (Edwards 2006: 1-18). This could be seen to limit the power of photography's critique, especially as critiques of capitalism are frequently reincorporated within capitalism's liberalism. But borrowing from



Moore's thesis that natures and technologies are part of our world-ecology, it can be seen that photography is also part of the world-ecology, producing and reproducing our world-ecology through imagery, as well as producing a critique of that very system. Through this examination, it can be seen that Becker's practice is itself an ecology of social relations in the art world that takes as its topic neoliberalism and its relationship to nature. The resulting projects produce a critique of capitalism, climate change, and social inequality, whilst also using the mechanism of capitalism that it critiques and represents.

To demonstrate this argument I will first unpack the discussion around Becker's aesthetic, which has been described as a 'lyrical documentary' practice (Badger 2007). I will reposition this categorisation as one of a dialectical relationship around sublime and documentary aesthetics. Part of this examination and argument will consider the importance of the ambiguity of his imagery and the use of captions, and therefore a discussion of the category of the 'pensive image' is instructive here. Unpacking these categories in relation to Becker's imagery will enable the analysis of the relationship to neoliberalism, both in terms of *what* Becker photographs and *how* his photographs are discussed in the art world. This dialectic of reproducing the conditions of capital and appropriation, combined with critique, is a component of the Capitalocene as conceived by Moore.

### **Aesthetic language**

Olaf Otto Becker initially became known for his photographs of Iceland and Greenland as represented in the books *Under the Nordic Light* (2005; 2011), *Broken Line* (2007) and *Above Zero* (2009); and he has more recently photographed the forests of Malaysia and Indonesia and published them in *Reading the Landscape* (2014). Becker's projects have included sublime imagery of inaccessible places, including Greenland glaciers and ice sheets, but he is equally well known for his photographs of indigenous settlements, dwellings, working landscapes, cities, and images of conspicuous environmental change, such as forest clearances. All of Becker's books to date have combined images of inhabitation, images of

environmental impact and images that are indebted to a tradition of wilderness photography.

One of the intriguing aspects of Becker's own account of his work is that he has been keen to stress the formal qualities of his imagery, such as light and movement, and also understands the landscape as a "mirror" to his own subjectivity (Gilroy-Hirtz 2011: 8). The journey that led him to Iceland was to find waterfalls so that he could study "the movement of water in contrast to the fixity of stones" (Becker in Gilroy-Hirtz 2011: 8). However, the resulting projects have more to say about the complexity of modern life and its relationship to landscape than Becker initially admitted. In Becker's last two books, *Under the Nordic Light* (2011) and *Reading the Landscape* (2014), Becker's awareness of the social, political and economic relationship to landscape becomes much more explicit and appears in the form of captions and commentary placed at the end of his books. The critics who have contextualised Becker's practice, including Freddy Lange (2009), William Ewing (2014), Christoph Schaden (2007), Petra Gilroy-Hirtz (2011), and Gerry Badger (2007), have all acknowledged aspects of the social and political content of Becker's imagery, but have also been keen to discuss Becker's imagery in formal terms.

Establishing Becker's aesthetic context and heritage has been important to Becker's critics. In the introduction to *Broken Line* (2007), Becker's book on the west coast of Greenland, Gerry Badger situated his practice as part of the American lyrical documentary tradition noting stylistic similarities to the photographs by Stephen Shore, Joel Sternfeld and Alec Soth (2007: 10). This heritage has been confirmed and repeated by later writers on Becker's photographs and indeed, his use of a large format camera, the production of wide landscape vistas, his deadpan style and inclusion of everyday settlements and buildings, has lent weight to Badger's positioning of Becker's practice. One of the compelling aspects of Becker's projects is their documentary content: although the images are aesthetic and occasionally Romantic, they are also depictions of the real. Becker's use of captions has also emphasised the documentary weight of his images: even in the most remote and wild locations Becker has consistently provided caption information about the exact

co-ordinates of the site of the camera in the form of latitudinal and longitudinal data, together with the date of the photograph (see *Broken Line* and *Above Zero*).

Less frequently mentioned are the sublime aesthetics of Becker's imagery. Both Gilroy-Hirtz (2011: 9) and Langer (2009: 10) have acknowledged that some of Becker's images are expressly sublime but an in-depth discussion about the sublime has not been undertaken. It is hard to know whether this absence is because it is too obvious, or whether the reference to the sublime problematises the artistic lineage established for Becker, which concentrates on lyrical documentary photography. It may also be that Becker's work has been thought to be too complex to be straightforwardly forced into the sublime aesthetic as there are numerous photographs of buildings, including dwellings and unfinished shopping centres, as well as images of sites of work, agriculture and leisure.

Yet Becker has consistently produced images that are notable for their aesthetic command of light and colour, although this is perhaps most obvious in *Broken Line*, especially in relation to the photographs of the icebergs. In Becker's northern photographs, the use of colour became more restrained over time, but even with a limited colour palette, the sublime is still present in the work. Even from a distance, the Skaftfell Glacier's power can be sensed, and the overcast cloud is effective in producing a brooding mood. A photograph of the spillway chute of Kárahnjúkar Dam, which depicts a man-made incursion into a nature reserve, also works in the sublime mode, even though the image is dryly descriptive. 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” (ibid: 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). Morley notes 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. In this framework, it is clear that the sublime is a broad and important category that extends beyond aesthetics.

Barbara Claire Freeman (2010: 64) 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. Given that “the masculine sublime ... seeks to master, appropriate or colonise the other” (Ibid: 65) Becker could be accused of reproducing the masculine sublime, proving mastery of the landscapes he traverses, whilst proving his moral and physical worth.<sup>1</sup> A feminine sublime, in contrast, 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 is by no means feminist and there are, indeed, contextualising narratives that situate his work as masculine. Given that some definitions of the sublime concentrate on ‘the unrepresentable’ it is important to note that Becker uses the aesthetics of the sublime, including uncertainty of scale, expansive vistas and large-scale human incursions into space, *and* he also represents the distinctly social and material aspects of contemporary life in Greenland, Iceland and across Malaysia and Indonesia.

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

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<sup>1</sup> Becker’s desire to traverse inaccessible landscapes, which was emphasised in the narratives surrounding *Broken Line* and *Above Zero*, would support this reading. See Langer (2009) and Gilroy-Hirtz (2011).

can be dialectical. Using the theories of Uvedale Price and William Gilpin, Smithson proposes that Olmsted produced “a dialectic of the landscape” (115):

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 picturesque, far from being an inner movement of the mind, is based on real land; it precedes the mind in its material external existence. ... 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)

Smithson’s essay explores tensions between land art’s reputation for conquering the land and transcendental ways of representing it. Scenic beauty and its associated art, in Smithson’s eyes, are a form of spiritual snobbery and a form of retreat (ibid: 117), and he argues for a series of dialectical relationships around the Nature/Society divide. Such an approach points the way to understanding Becker’s images.

Both Morley’s idea that the sublime represents forces beyond our control and Smithson’s proposal that the sublime can be a dialectic of the landscape when it engages with the real, support reading Becker’s practice as sublime. For example, one could ask whether the sublime, as it refers to forces beyond our control, now also refers to the domination and subjection to capitalism, particularly the forces of international neoliberal capital. Indeed, such an observation may be made about Kárahnjúkar Dam, which was built to provide hydroelectric power for an aluminium manufacturing plant, a type of metal processing that is notoriously energy dependent. The plant employs eight Icelanders, the bauxite used in aluminium is shipped from other parts of the globe, and the resulting aluminium is shipped elsewhere for consumption: this is the use of Iceland’s waterpower for global economic trade (Becker 2011: 154; Magnason 2013).

Becker's image of the dam, and the concrete spillway chute, is sublime aesthetically. We can see the original depth of a gorge down which a powerful river used to run. On the opposite side of the gorge is a large concrete construction, flanked by the rubble of the dam on one side and a long fence on the other; the concrete spillway carves its way through the space. The enormity of the spillway chute is evident and impressive, and the incursions into the landscape, in the form of earthworks, are still new. The grey rock and plain grey sky are brooding and oppressive: this is landscape not as a sunny optimistic future, or even a beautiful place, but a space of awe and shock. This is an incursion that required mechanical power and considerable capital to bring about; it was also resisted by Icelanders who did not want to see their nature reserve impacted in this way.

Becker's own narrative of the development of his practice emphasises the visual effects of light and the challenge of accessing hard to reach landscapes. In later projects, especially *Above Zero*, Becker becomes expressly concerned with the impact of climate change (Langer 2009: 8). Becker refrains from positing his own thoughts on the context in which these changes are realised, but instead asks Conrad Steffen, a noted climate scientist working in Greenland, to contextualise his practice (2009: 166-168). The resulting images enable him to use the sublime whilst documenting the formation of rivers and moulins, both of which materially speed up the deflation of glaciers and ice sheets. Becker's narrative, then, is one of searching for the pristine and untouched, but finding a landscape powerfully altered by man. The Arctic has become a site of human/nature relationships and Becker intuitively understands 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 the latter's existence. In this sense, Becker's photographs represent Nature/Society relationships in a dialectical relationship. Becker is not attempting to resolve what the Nature/Society dialectic might produce, especially as the environments that are made, such as melting glaciers, are far from an ideal synthesis of man and nature. This is powerfully demonstrated in his book *Above Zero* (2009), where rivers forming on the ice sheets are materially accelerating the decline of the ice. Becker's imagery, which is ambiguous in scale, plays with the sublime partly to expose the horror of

the collapse of the Greenland ice sheets, but also to visualise the difficulty of comprehending the scale of glacial retreat [fig. 1].



Fig. 1 River 02, 07/2008, Position 16  
69°46'33"N, 49°42'20"W, Altitude  
870m, by Olaf Otto Becker

The images, and increasingly the text that Becker writes, engage with the social realities of the landscapes. This visual and written development sets the scene for Becker's most explicit commitment to the representation of the effects of climate change and environmental devastation as produced in *Reading the Landscape* (2014). To this end it is important that Becker presents information and description around these landscapes so that they are not simply visual, even though the images' aesthetic power is a prominent feature of his oeuvre. It is useful, now, to turn to the idea of the 'pensive image', in order to understand this dialectical tension between the aesthetics and social aspects of the images, a tension arising partly through the

content of the photographs but also through their accompanying written captions.

### **The pensive image and climate change**

The facts of climate change are reported daily across media platforms and discussed amongst climate scientists. 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, low lying islands and land masses, and global weather systems. Some of these artists and commentators, including James Balog (2009; 2012; Orłowski 2012) and Al Gore (Guggenheim 2006), have produced strongly evidential and illustrative images<sup>2</sup> and have also worked to advise audiences on steps they can take to reduce their own carbon footprint and effect wider change. Camille Seaman (2015) has produced a deeply personal account that draws upon her Native 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 others; these projects acknowledge the tropes of Arctic imagery whilst critiquing our relationships to the environment, which can be one of spectacle and exploitation (Martinsson and Desplechin 2015).

Artists interested in climate change have used mixed strategies around photography, utilising both pensive images - ambiguous and open to the audience's experience and interpretation - and illustrative images in which meaning is immanent. For example, Subhankar Banerjee (2013) has aimed to demonstrate the impact on caribou migration and indigenous Arctic lives through illustrative strategies, but he also makes pensive images, strongly emphasising the visual qualities of the image over its potential factual content. Pensive or allusive images require more

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<sup>2</sup> 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).



engagement from the viewer, as they do not immediately explain their intent or communicate a straightforward message, but this may be part of their effectiveness. Pensive and allusive imagery may be important in climate change communication because of the limited impact that illustrative images and factual information alone have had in changing behaviour and policy (Cox and Pezzullo 2016: 198-199). Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) have argued that readers and viewers struggle to bridge the 'gap' between knowledge of the effects of climate change and consumer habits and patterns of living that materially impact on our climate. Cox and Pezzullo (2016: 199-200), summarising a body of work investigating this issue, have also noted that the values of the audience, and those expressed in the act of communication itself, strongly influence whether behavioural change will follow; messages need to align to the audience's values to be effective.

The artist duo Sayler and Morris attempt to address this 'gap' by addressing belief and argue that knowledge and belief are separate ways of understanding climate change. The artists argue that climate change is apprehended as a form of knowledge built upon a statistically created and abstract series of research projects, yet they maintain that fully understanding climate change and adopting new behaviours requires *belief* in the catastrophic effects of climate change. They also note that climate change is not easily communicated through visual means<sup>3</sup> and that photographs also commonly work to convey information – knowledge – rather than propagate belief. 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; 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 challenge is to borrow from Jacques Rancière 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" (Rancière 2009:

107 in Morris and Sayler 2014: 301). The point of the 'pensive image' is to bypass the purely illustrative purposes of informational images 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). Their images, of landscapes where scientists are studying the impact of climate change, are displayed in a variety of ways. In a science museum or classroom, greater attention will be paid to pedagogy and contextualising captions, whereas other locations, such as galleries, billboards and bus advertisements, explore disorientation and a collapse of scale (ibid: 300).

The responses and actions of the audience for a pensive image are not guaranteed, and the gap between communication and action is by no means closed by the pensive image; Sayler and Morris therefore argue that their pensive images are failures. Sayler and Morris, who are dedicated to activism, are aware that their pensive images fail to directly address social justice and survival in relation to climate

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<sup>3</sup> The artists are not alone here: Julie Doyle has argued that climate change is particularly difficult to communicate through visual means (Doyle 2009).

Burtynsky, Ian Teh or Pieter Hugo, have given rise to important and nuanced interpretations of their work by sophisticated commentators (Schuster 2013; Shinkle 2014). Yet there are questions here about the reach of such work: if one needs considerable cultural capital in order to understand the implied messaging of the images, how large is the audience being reached? In a context where the production of images requires materials and energy surely there is a moral imperative for resulting messages, which are crucial and need to be widely engaged with, to be widely understandable? This is not to say that artists should be discouraged from making sophisticated, ground-breaking and challenging work, or that art for the culturally astute cannot be made, but there are risks that elite art can end up breeding complacency rather than producing real social, political and economic change. In this vein, the pedagogic and illustrative aspects of climate change imagery remain important and it is therefore significant that Becker seeks *both* the affect of the pensive image whilst explaining and contextualising the content of his imagery.

### **The environment as neoliberal resource**

Whilst Becker's earlier books examined the icy north for their sublime aesthetics and their traces of the actions of neoliberal capital, Becker's concern with the ravaged environment and its connection to neoliberalised economies becomes more pressing in his last book *Reading the Landscape* (2014); the book also signals a departure from the icy north. Split into three habitat sections, the book follows a trajectory from the primeval forests, to industrial-scale forest clearance, soil erosion and fire destruction, to a final section on the tropical man-made gardens in 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 *Reading the Landscape* includes some close up images and video stills of the local flora and fauna: Becker is celebrating the living systems of the places he photographs.

The book has a simple structure of primeval forest, followed by ravaged land and finishes with developed cityscapes, which could be read as an uncritical narrative of capitalism's technological progress, or as a critique of the loss of living systems.



Fig. 2 Armin and Yanti Petani building their new home, Riau area, Sumatra, Indonesia 10/2013, by Olaf Otto Becker

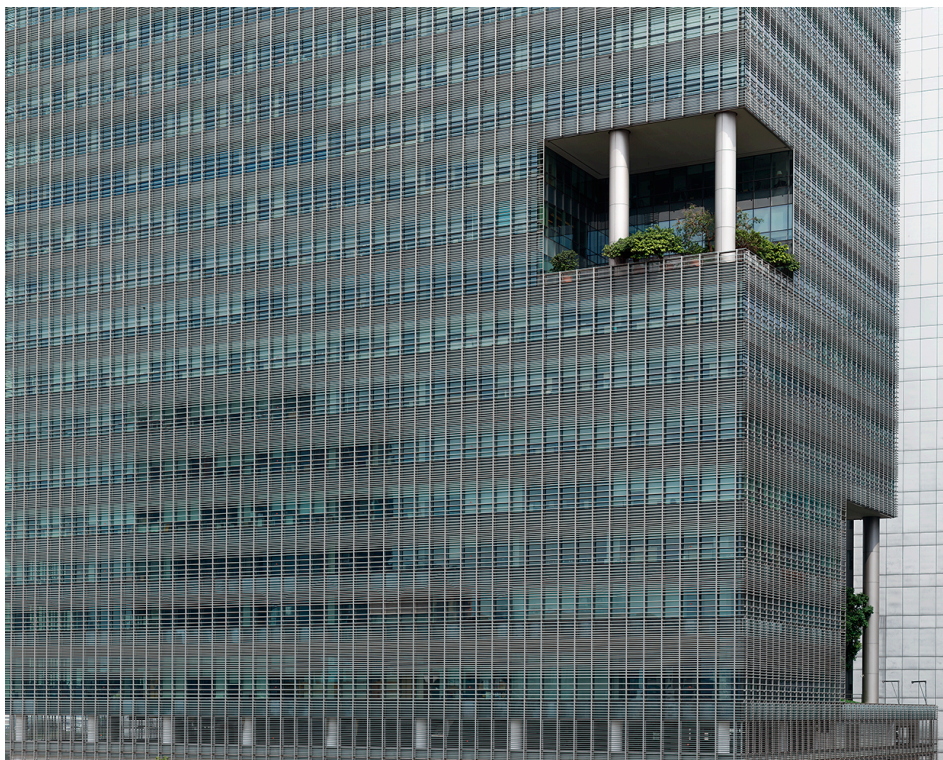


Fig. 3 Business Building, Singapore 11/2013, by Olaf Otto Becker

Becker moves from a romanticised appreciation of the forest to the realities of

deforestation in the Far East where clearance for crops, especially palm oil, illegal fires and coastal erosion caused by the removal of mangrove forests are shown to be widespread. Becker's narrative 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; indeed, Dunaway (2005) has shown that photography has been a powerful tool in protecting specific environments in the past. However, Becker's awareness of climate change has brought him to these forested regions and it is therefore anticipated that a naïve attempt at conservation is not important.

Whilst people are mainly absent in Becker's books, one image stands out in *Reading the Landscape* [Fig. 2]: *Armin 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 the Petanis had won their land back after a lengthy legal battle. Devastatingly, the forest had just been harvested for paper before the Patanis regained their ownership, making the rebuilding of a home not just a matter of shelter, but also one of reconstructing the surrounding ecosystem (Becker 2014: 151).

The final section of the book concentrates on Gardens by the Bay, in Singapore, and other corporate landscapes. This is a theme-park version of tropical woodland and Becker is at pains to illustrate just how much of this paradisaical structure is man made, including concrete, wood carvings, recorded sounds of birds piped through speakers, and an artificially maintained climate. The diversity 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 floral display. The final photographs depict high-rise buildings with lush garden displays [Fig. 3]. These huge structures, which in other contexts could be read as expressions of formal innovation and technological achievement, bring the power of international capital 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, together with the stereotype of profuse tropical greenery in the theme park version of the forest: the luxurious vegetation stands in contrast to the steel and glass structure. Importantly, across the narrative of Becker's books a message of environmental destruction in the East and the global south is seen to fuel glacial retreat in the Arctic North.

Although Becker sought opportunities to depict the Romantic sublime he has been brought into contact with the social-economic and environmental realities of the places that he has visited. In *Under the Nordic Light*, Becker found the imagery of the North and the sublime that he set out for: waterfalls plummeting from great heights.

Yet his books already show the changing landscape that accommodates the incursion of both everyday life and the specific impacts of global international capital. Having explored Iceland, and found a landscape under transition even in the spaces that were designated as a nature reserve, Becker travelled further north, seeking opportunities to work with pristine landscapes. In *Broken Line* he found the icebergs and glaciers that the region is famous for, but he also found small communities struggling to survive and landscapes transformed due to climate change. This led to a desire specifically to document the rivers on the ice sheets, which are materially hastening the decline of the glaciers, as explored in *Above Zero*. Photographing the work of scientists and the incursions of tourists it is clear that Becker's photographs allow us to explore the human fascination with the sublime alongside concerns for the ecosystem.

The writers who have contextualised his practice to date have acknowledged, to varying degrees, the impact of capitalism on the landscapes that he visits. Gerry Badger, writing in Becker's *Broken Line* (2007: 9-10) gives details on the rate of expiration of the glaciers. Freddy Lange, in *Above Zero* (2007: 10-11), acknowledges the human-altered state of the glaciers and describes the warming effects of black coal dust blown in from elsewhere. Petra Gilroy-Hirtz (2011: 8-10), writing in the later version of *Under the Nordic Light*, acknowledges the economic context of



Iceland, particularly, the global financial crisis of 2006. William Ewing, the writer for *Reading the Landscape*, 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 of hardwoods (Ewing 2014: 8). Ewing acknowledges the global problems of climate change and how this is linked, at least in part, to deforestation and rampant consumerism. But Ewing 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 (2014: 10).

For Ewing, a viewer of Becker's work would rather be reminded of the inherent selfishness of humanity than engage with a social and economic understanding of our dilemma in relation to the exploitation of the Earth. Ewing's account of Becker's work is 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 a descriptive and aesthetic visual record of the decline of our world.

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. Ewing, in particular, claims that it is impossible to stop the economic forces that are creating monumental changes in our landscapes, whether in the north or south. This is in contrast to Becker himself, who in *Reading the Landscape*, has noted the power at play in global capitalism:

... 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 (2014: 150).

Becker reflects on the materials in his own living and working environment that have originated from the forests that he has photographed (2014: 150) and his imagery can be also be read as a sustained critique of neoliberalism, one that acknowledges his own role within neoliberalised economies and contexts. In the second section of *Reading the Landscape*, a series of images depicts cleared and burned forest. The captions to the images are significant even though they are at the back of the book. Becker provides information about the value and extraction of hardwood timbers, which are removed first and with fewer devastating effects for the forest. After the valuable timbers are removed, widespread burning is used to clear land so that acacia and palm oil plantations can be created; the logging and fire burning is often undertaken illegally (ibid: 150-1). Becker notes that local people are often poor and unable to prevent logging and burning, but Becker also documents instances of resistance and activism, and indeed activists facilitate his access to the forests (ibid: 151). Becker also notes the ways in which tropical plants are used in decorating the cities in Singapore and other new city constructions. In this way Becker is reflecting on the raw materials of nature that are exploited as resources and commodities. Importantly, Becker concludes his book with an image of a botanic garden: not a modern theme-park garden, but an old one in Munich, Germany [fig 4].



Fig. 4 Greenhouse, Munich Botanical Garden, 05/2014, by Olaf Otto Becker



The study of plants has long been a project within both colonialism and capitalism (Moore 2015: 193-217). This study has been partly a visual project, with the representation and visual identification of plants and other fauna being important to the propagation and dispersal of species to new habitats. Much of this dispersal, of course, has been to further wealth in trade or the expansion of organised agriculture. The study of botany was crucial to the expansion of colonialism and capitalism, enabling crops to flourish in new places and landscapes were irretrievably changed in the process of creating new environments.

In the first section of *Reading the Landscape*, Becker includes photographs of plants, flowers and fauna. At the end of the book, Becker states:

The only way we can develop an awareness of and a relationship to our world is by taking an interest in it and by studying it in various ways. We will only ever be able to value and preserve what we have already got to know. ... These tropical habitats seem to be so multi-layered and unique that their complexity actually transcends human understanding. And yet, having encountered them, I've brought home something that, for me, comes very close to a kind of understanding (ibid: 150).

Historically the study of botany has privileged drawing over photographic representations of plants. Yet it is clear that Becker sees his own work as an accumulation and production of knowledge, albeit this time in the framework of a call to curtail rampant consumerism rather than encouraging its spread. The image could be used as a tool for resource exploitation but the captions do not provide information on the uses of the plants or animals. Instead Becker reflects on the experience of being in the forest and seeing plants and animals; the resulting images convey a sense of that wonder. Becker's work creates an image of the ecosystem of the forest but does not provide detailed knowledge of the forest as a resource.

The final image in *Reading the Landscape*, of Munich Botanic Garden, becomes significant in the regard to botany, knowledge and the ordering of the world [fig. 4].

The garden opened in 1809, moved to larger premises in 1914, and has a long history of generating botanic knowledge; indeed research is still an important aspect of its work today. It is also a site of leisure and pleasure, and was the site for Becker to write part of the text for his book (ibid: 150). Bringing new knowledge and experiences about the actions of neoliberal capital to a site of capitalist and colonial power is fitting, and the image can be read critically. The botanic garden and the contents of this glasshouse, ordered here taxonomically, are no replacement for a living system. The plants are dependent upon the gardeners, the technology of the glasshouse, and human labour for their continued existence. Whilst the glasshouse is a site of learning and pleasure it is no replacement for our living world but it is potentially where we are heading if other Nature/Society relationships are not imagined.

### **Art's capitalisms and photography's ecology**

Many photographers engaging with the environment or climate change, 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 adopting green consumption, or lobbying their relevant political actors for greater action, without specifying too clearly what the nature of that action would be (Balog 2009; Guggenheim 2006). 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 argued (2007). Indeed, she notes that Kodak was New York State's largest polluter, with the manufacturer emitting carcinogens in large quantities. That photographers such as Edward Burtynsky have omitted to criticise industries that are changing the world's landscapes through extraction and pollution is, in Solnit's eyes, an avoidance of hypocrisy but also an opportunity for reflective thought (139).

Becker's work is situated in the context of the art market, a market preoccupied with selling luxurious goods to wealthy people, but it also has a powerful critical effect and is part of a wider cultural phenomenon in the art world of acknowledging

capitalism's exploitation of nature. Some of this may well prove to be a form of green washing on the part of corporate sponsors but there is little doubt that there are photographers, designers and artists who are concerned about our environment. Whilst much of this work treats the environment as a separate space that we should aim to protect, or presents a spectacle of environmental destruction, work such as Becker's utilises the language and technologies of photography to create messages about the biosphere, connecting together environments, resources and lifestyles. In Becker's photographs, nature is both a resource for exploitation and a co-producer of capitalism's power: water in a dam creates electricity for the production of aluminium and trees provide resources for elaborate gardens or other type of manufacturing [figs. 2 and 3]. Photography's role in this, as a vehicle for imaging our lives, enables us as viewers to respond to the web of life as created by capitalism's organisation of the world: we are able to reflect on the knowledge and belief that climate change, and the extent of exploitation, is shaping our world in a way that we may find intolerable and unacceptable. To achieve this, however, we need to be able to imagine that our social and economic world can be imagined in different configurations.

## **Conclusion**

The written contextualising essays included in Becker's books have situated his work within the lyrical, documentary tradition, supporting his reception within the world of art and environmental photography. Nevertheless, the reading offered by these contextualising essays overlook the ambiguity of his images and the dialectical tension within them created through the juxtaposition of written information and visual description with the sublime and the lyrical. If the sublime can be a way of representing nature as pristine and other, Becker's renegotiation of its familiar subject matter through a combination of the affective and the factual can invest it with new meaning whilst retaining its potency. In its original as well as current usage the sublime signifies forces beyond our control, but when employed by Becker it can denote something equally powerful yet more specific: the world's subjection to, its domination and ruination by, global capitalism.

In his renegotiation of the sublime through an engagement with the real, Becker

challenges the role photography, like other forms of visual culture, plays in producing and reproducing the ideas of nature, its separateness and otherness. Becker's images parallel Jason Moore's argument that nature and society are in a dynamic relationship and that nature is itself a component of the process of capitalism. The interpretation of Becker's imagery could emphasise the ecological impact alone, focusing on the damage done to environments, but this overlooks how Becker visualises new environments created by consumption and neoliberal capital: Becker's imagery, treated as a whole, represents a powerful ecology that is shaping our world in dynamic but unsustainable and undesirable ways. Becker's photography demonstrates the power of neoliberal capital, but there is an opening provided by the dialectical operations of the sublime and the documentary: the ecologies of neoliberalism are not fixed or permanent. Using the dialectics of Becker's images we may be able to imagine new ways of moving beyond the accumulation of wealth to the creation of sustainable ways of living.

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