

## Notes on a Moving Image Study of Smeerenburg Glacier Calving

Instead of the sudden apocalypse brought about by Vesuvius, our future fossils layers are piling up slowly but steadily as an emblem of an apocalypse in slow motion.

- Jussi Parikka, from *A Geology of Media*

*The following is an excerpt from the artist's field notes, written on location:*

Within the moment of being in the frozen North, standing on-board the *Antigua* and filming the falling ice, I am fully aware that glacier calving is a natural phenomenon- it's what glaciers do and have always done. Excess snowfall on higher-ground compacts into rivers of slow-moving ice that descend to the ocean where they break into icebergs of varying size. I know that glaciers can store ice for hundreds, even thousands of years.

But what modern science irrefutably tells us is that 'we' as a species of nearly 8 billion individual organisms, are through our own behaviour changing the very dynamics of nature. Specifically, we know that anthropogenic climate change includes a global warming trend that is increasing the speed of the movement and deterioration of polar glaciers- just like this one in front of me now.

And we know that as the polar ice caps melt faster each year, and the ice masses move from their homes on land into the ocean, global sea levels will rise and destroy many coastal environments, including towns and cities.

This moment, my own personal ecosublime moment in time, is one in which I, as both a subjective human and as a cinematographer standing in front of a calving glacier, realise *in the moment* that as one of a species of nearly 8 billion individual organisms *I have a direct responsibility to how this glacier behaves.*

Within this moment I experience a realization that I am so closely connected to the glacier as to be almost one and the same thing. I am keenly aware of my being in the world and inter-being with the landscape I am looking at, with the environment I am standing in. I sense the ice moving before I hear it or see it fall- there is a trembling in me that I have experienced only a handful of times in my life. I feel the movement in the water through my feet standing amidst as the ice produces waves. I am overcome, as the ice face shears and cracks, by new shades of blue that I have never seen before. I think of my children and feel simultaneously a palpable fear of the future and an absurd sense of hope.

*A Moving Image Study of Smeerenburg Glacier Calving* was filmed at a latitude of nearly 80° North on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard in June of 2017, where I was one of 30 artists and scientists on a residency aboard the sailing ship *Antigua*. The work is part of a larger cinematography project exploring how the concept of an ecosublime landscape is at the heart of how 'we, the human' frame ourselves within the Anthropocene.

The full film will be framed by a spoken essay poem- for this space we decided to screen just the images, sounds and the score. The intention behind this decision is to enable the viewer to focus on the experience of watching the calving, as if it were a poem or a meditation. These notes are intended as a brief contextualisation of some of the thinking behind the sequence shown here.

We have also included Nick Drake's poem *The Ice Core Sample*, as part of the exhibition because it speaks to many things that me and my shipmates felt, experienced and talked about on our journey in the High Arctic. I appreciate how the words give a focus and context to the images- in the same way I hope that the images add colour and shape to the ideas that the words evoke.

We live in a visual age- we learn and receive information by, create narratives in and express ourselves through pictures. Every image, whether it is reportage, documentation, montage, propaganda, graffiti, artist video or cinema represents a specific and considered view of the world that suggests a persons 'truth' or perspective of how they see themselves and/or the world around them.

And in this visual age, the proliferation of 'the selfie' as an act of identification, witness and as a means of expression, demonstrates a very specific and clear idea- that of we the human consciously putting ourselves at the centre of everything around us.

The first time I visited New York I went to MoMA hoping to view Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, but couldn't get near it for people taking pictures of themselves standing in front of the famous landscape painting. When I visited the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin the same phenomenon- tourists climbing all over the concrete slabs with 'selfie-sticks' and 360° cameras - "Look at me being in the world!!"

In my research I suggest that an ecosublime landscape is the antithesis of the selfie- a reframing of 'we, the human' as both an intrinsic and integral part of the landscape, instead of merely placing ourselves in front it, forcing it to serve as a backdrop to our own personal stories.

What is an ecosublime landscape? I believe that it is the latest of three distinct yet inter-related categories of landscape- the first being simply landscape, and the second being sublime landscape.

**Landscape** is concerned with how humans see the world- how we frame it in ways that we can control or make sense of it, specifically in ways that aren't overwhelming. Landscape is often beautiful, for example a pastoral scene or postcard of a sunset- it is pleasantly un-wild and manageable.

**Sublime landscape** stems from early philosophy and Romantic poetry, made visual first in painting and then photography and cinema- and specifically depicts the human figure in relation to the power of nature in the landscape. For the Romantics this often depicted man's terror in and fear of nature- they would undoubtedly have identified this glacier calving as sublime. We witness the power of nature and the relatively insignificant human figures and vessels where humans can do little more than stare at the awesome forces at work within the landscape.



- Philip James De Loutherbourg's *An Avalanche in the Alps* (1803)

While such a word as sublime can be both divisive and wholly subjective, there is evidence in visual art that illustrates a clear difference between a landscape and a sublime landscape, namely that something within the landscape suggests 'the human'- a figure, a vessel, a building, a track or pathway- but nature is always the central character. There might be a battle between darkness or shadow and light- something in the balance of colour and contrast suggests something powerful has taken place, or is about to occur. The sublime landscape makes very specific use of the weather and the elements in its composition, and incorporates either the sun or the moon as the primary lighting source. The balance of the sky and the land is carefully considered, compositionally, in terms of narrative or tone. Thematically there is

the suggestion of a journey in progress, a crossroads or a decision to be made; sublime landscapes often draw on mythological, religious or spiritual visual or narrative themes; and there is usually a sense of isolation, desolation or jeopardy within the themes of the image.

Moving on from this, the third and most contemporary iteration of landscape is, almost by necessity, an **ecosublime landscape**- that is a sublime landscape that is directly tied to ecological disaster and the environmental impacts of anthropogenic climate change. A reference is the work of Edward Burtynsky, where the relationship of human industry and the subsequent impact on the environment is striking.



- Edward Burtynsky's *Sudbury Nickel Tailings* #34 (1996)

Another reference is the increase in recent decades of commercial cinema that has caught the popular imagination by exploring future dystopian and post-apocalyptic worlds- *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The Road* (2009), *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)- as well as mainstream documentary films that attempt to break new ground in merging science, politics and art- *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *Chasing Ice* (2012), *Racing Extinction* (2015)- all of which feature landscapes that relate to the notion of an ecosublime.

And yet more references can be found in the daily news bulletins featuring out-of-control wildfires in California and parts of Australia; boatloads of migrants capsizing in the Mediterranean as they flee the war-torn Middle East and Africa; the collapse of the Antarctic ice shelves; and extreme weather behaviour in almost every corner of the globe.

For me the ecosublime landscape represents the opportunity for a reinvigoration of an old philosophical concept- as science and scientific methods develop, and we better understand the natural world and our impact on it, so the sublime itself must be reconceptualised and

contemporised.

This need for change is both political and philosophical, and is driven in no small part by the iteration of technological tools available to the artist through which to explore and express the sublime, i.e. analogue film to digital cinema. So as our relationship to how we see or experience the sublime develops, so the concept itself is forced to progress and change.

For example, where the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich or the photographs of Edward Burtynsky offer a meditation on an 'eco/sublime landscape moment' in time, the dynamic power of cinematography enables me as a cinematographer to move towards, through and beyond an eco/sublime landscape moment. And the movement that cinema provides- both physical movement in a geographical space and temporal movement through the documented past, the 'live' present and the proposed future- allows me as the cinematographer, and subsequently the viewer, to experience the eco/sublime landscape like never before.

My own subjective experience of filming the calving sequence had three parts (distinct from the practical preparations before I even arrived in the North, and the subsequent narrative that I've shaped through editing and colouring the work).

The first part of my experience is a physical arrival in a location, practical preparation and my presence as an artist in and witness of landscape. I see, breathe and feel in the landscape; my hands and eyes manoeuvre and adjust my camera, my mechanical eye; my breath and energy determine what I can capture and for how long; the build up of tension, waiting for the moment of calving to occur; the rifle reports of ice cracking and splintering further up the glacier; the excitement of the birds who anticipate a new meal scraped up from the fjord bed as the ice churns the water; the adrenaline spike as the ice finally falls and everyone whoops and cheers, while I try to remain steady and calm enough to capture the moment; the aftermath and the thrill of the mini tsunami generated by the calving that rocks the *Antigua* like a fairground ride; the calm and peaceful aftermath.

The second part is an acceptance that the visual presence of other humans within the image render's the landscape sublime. This human presence is minimal- 'we' are there only as tourists and for scale, watching on as nature goes about its violent and awesome business. We are in no doubt what is the central 'character' of the images.

Beyond this, my own presence as cinematographer and the presence of the others on board the *Antigua*, recording and experiencing the moment- even the very act of our listening and watching- changes the meaning of the moment. The landscape is witnessed and offers us an experience that binds us to it- as we take our thousands of images, audio clips, video and film footage from a landscape, so the landscape takes something from us. This is why we feel so bereft or homesick for places and landscapes that we have only spent short amounts of time

with. Take a moment to think back- how many places that you have travelled to keep a hold on you, just as you take away with you memories of those places?

The third part of my experience is something that is inherent, but perhaps latent, in these images. Something nearly impossible to put into words: the suggested existence of an ecosublime landscape moment, best reflected in the excerpt from my field notes at the start of this piece of writing.

It is a moment where the romance of a place- it's energy and power and rhythm- and the passion and subjectivity that every human carries with them, meets with the objectivity of what science tells us is real and that which we know on a fundamental level to be true- that the way we live is unsustainable and that the ones who will truly pay the price for our actions will be other species and the children of our children. And that somehow we have to either change this, or else accept and make peace with it.

For me it is a moment of pure being-in-the-world- a letting go and a peaceful surrender. I understand, with alarming force, the idea of Parikka's apocalypse in slow motion- an apocalypse so creeping and insidious that for decades we've been able to fool ourselves into believing that it didn't exist. Or if it did then it was a long way off in the distant future- we simply no longer have that luxury.

I finish with a few more words from my field notes from the trip:

I believe that the role of contemporary artist is to encourage two things in those who view and experience their work. The first is to foster a hope that is reasonable and practical. We must be realistic and accept that the odds are heavily stacked against us- and yet I believe that hope is important. Not the tired hope of yesterday, of our fore-parents or that centuries of religious bigotry have indoctrinated in us; not the ambiguous hope for the future, that one day things might just come right and that something or someone might save the day; but the hope of the present where each day we try to make a positive difference to the lives of all creatures of the earth, and strive to live mindfully for the moment with compassion, empathy and love.

The second thing is to explore the idea that we need to accept responsibility for our being in the world, and make peace with our place in the landscape of the Anthropocene. Walk out into nature and get lost in landscapes, so that you can find peace and inspiration there.

There will continue to be great beauty and sublime moments in the difficult and painful times ahead. As artists we must continue to seek them out- to paint them, take pictures of them, write songs and tell stories about them, so that others may experience them and be inspired by them too.