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This talk is based on the essay:


**Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes**

I first saw this image on the cover of the literary journal *Granta*. It sat on our bathroom counter for weeks. I picked it up. Put it down. I wondered why the river was so red, the ground so black. Where was the location? I wondered whether the photographer had used a filter. It captured my imagination.

I began to look at other images by Edward Burtynsky and other contemporary landscape photographers.

Vicky Goldberg (1991) photo critic for the New York time traces the transformation of environmental photography from ecotopic to more dystopic images to a 1970s group of photographers loosely grouped together as “New Topographics,” who began to “depict an American landscape that was no longer innocent or unspoiled but forever marked by the traces of human intervention”

I had done work on environmental justice rhetoric and had begun to think about toxins, especially how to discursively and visually represent them.

Toxins are difficult to constitute for an audience that does not have direct contact with them.
They are:

- Invisible
- Those that are not invisible are often hidden. Landfills are outsides of towns. Industries are zoned as to keep them out of middle-class and wealthy neighborhood. We even store our toxic chemicals in the garage and under the sink.
- Toxins are banal. We may look at a contaminated landscape and not see a thing.

Slides 3-6

At the same time I was looking at these images and thinking about toxins, I was teaching DeLuca and Demo’s 2000 article “Imaging nature” that examines the photographs of Carlton Watkins.

He was arguably the most artistic American landscape photographer in the 19th century. Carleton Watkins' Yosemite pictures were groundbreaking technically and artistically. In part because of Watkins' Yosemite pictures, in 1864 Congress passed and President Lincoln signed legislation preserving Yosemite Valley.

DeLuca and Demo’s argue that one of the reasons for his success was his use of the sublime and the beautiful in his images. They used Burke’s definition of the sublime and the beautiful for their exploration.

Edmund Burke arguing that, while beauty could be found in small objects, things that are smooth, delicate, elegant, graceful and clean, fair, and mild in color, the sublime exhibits vastness, privation, difficulty, infinity, magnitude, and magnificence
For the eighteenth century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant concluded that beauty and the sublime functioned differently. With beauty, the mind was restful and contemplative; with the sublime, the mind was moved (2007, p. 72).

Watkins put them into contrast with his images. The beauty juxtaposed to the sublime.

I wondered how the sublime and beauty functioned in contemporary landscape images in which the subject matter was human caused environmental destruction instead of pristine nature.

*I knew I was on to something when I found this quote by Burtynsky tying my serendipitous moments together.*

Slide 7

*I then began to conceptualize a transformation of our understanding of the subject matter and function of the sublime.*

Slide 8

God—

Nature—

Christing Oravec, based on her reading of John Muir’s work, posits a response people have when they encounter a sublime object in nature.

**Sublime response to nature**

1) “First, the individual is exposed to the sublime object—usually an outstanding natural object—which produces sensations of overwhelming magnitude and quality. The individual
attempts to comprehend intellectually and emotionally the sublimity of the natural object, but failure to do so leads to the second stage of the response.

2) Here a negative state is produced. Whether a result of fear, alienation, awe, or loss of identity, the sense of self is diminished and the individual feels a separation from, or lack of control of, the natural environment.

3) Finally, the individual moves past the feeling of inferiority to a sensation of exaltation, or at least wonder, at the relative grandeur of the object compared to the self (Oravec, 1982, p. 219; See also Oravec, 1981, p. 248).

Technological sublime (David Nye) and During the early 20th Century. American Technological Sublime 1994 David Nye.

The technological sublime was a sign of the “potential omnipotence of humanity”

Toxins The “man-made sublime” (Stadler, 2001), the “tainted sublime” (Cembalest, 1991; Friedman, 1997), the “industrial sublime” (McDonald, 1996; Drabble, 2008).

Slide 10

I define the term “toxic sublime” as the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe.

The differentiation between the technical and toxic sublime hinges on the perspective of the individual. Many technological wonders can elicit either response, depending on the perspective of the viewer.
This is one of the largest open pit copper mines in the world. It is both a testament to human ingenuity and also to human’s environmental hubris in creating such as toxic site.

Kant, the sublime isn’t in the object, it is in our reaction to the object. Furthermore, he maintained “it is the state of mind produced by a certain representation with which the reflective Judgment is occupied, and not the Object that is to be called the sublime” (p. 66).

This seemingly supports Whyte’s hypothesis that Butynsky’s subject matter meets “different eyes in very different ways, from environmentalists, who could easily see the work as damningly anti-capitalist, to industrialists who adopted the images as heroic tributes to their empires” (2006, p. C04).

For those who see Burtynsky’s photographs as “heroic tributes” to industry, their sublime response would fall within that of the technological sublime—pride and wonder in humans’ ability to master their environment. For those who are awed and overwhelmed by the images, but made uncomfortable by their reflections of unchecked environmental degradation, another response is elicited—the toxic sublime.

Burtynsky recognizes the tensions within his work. He maintains that he wants “to invite people into the piece . . . to make it an immersion experience where people say, ‘I’m in here but I shouldn’t like it.’ He want[ed] to create that tension, have them attracted yet repulsed, to show them the dilemma we’re in” (quoted in Allen, 2009, p. E1). His interest in generating dissonance aligns itself with Kant’s understanding of the sublime, in which the satisfaction is arrived at indirectly, as one is attracted to the sublime object, but alternatively repelled, a state Kant calls
“negative pleasure” (2007, p. 62). Elements of Burke’s sublime (vastness, difficulty, infinity, magnitude, and magnificence) plague Burtynsky’s images and those of other environmental photographers with multiple paradoxes that construct this negative pleasure to the viewing audience.

**Beauty and Ugliness**

Slides 12-16

Burtynsky and others have had their work critiqued for making something environmentally and physically ugly beautiful.

Columnist David Segal queries in the *Washington Post*, “Do Ed Burtynsky's Photos Glorify Industry or Vilify It?” After explaining that the images of Bangladeshi shipbreakers document the most dangerous worksite in the world, Segal deadpans, “But dang, it's lovely” (2005, p. C1).

In response to Emmet Gowin’s work, *New York Times* art critic Charles Hagen comments “So elegant are these figures gouged or plowed into the ground that one forgets the activities that caused them” (p. C26).

And environmental writer Wendell Berry (1997) in the preface to David Hanson’s book *Waste Land* argues, “It is unfortunately supposable that some people will account for these photographic images as ‘abstract art,’ or will see them as ‘beautiful shapes.’ But anyone who troubles to identify in these pictures the things that are readily identifiable (trees, buildings, roads, vehicles, etc.) will see that nothing in them is abstract and that their common subject is
monstrous ugliness” (p. 3). More troubling for Berry is that the beauty of the surface hides what
dwells underneath: “the steady seeping of poison into our world and our bodies” (p. 3).

**Magnitude and Insignificance**

Slides 17-20

Burtynsky: Large images (3X5 feet), large industries, large format camera. The larger the
industry the more insignificant we feel.

For many of the artists, the size of the subject matter is not always initially clear.

Framed without a horizon

Cropped the edges of the subject matter.

Extent of the industries is often unknown.

And while it is possible to get statistics for many of these sites, Kant maintains that “all
estimation of the magnitude of the objects of nature is in the end aesthetical (i.e. subjectively and
not objectively determined)” (2007, p. 66). Similarly, knowing that the Kennecott Copper Mine
is almost three miles across and a mile deep does not come close to providing the sense of
astonishment felt when one realizes that the tiny, dark, dotted line on one of the mine’s benches
is actually a full size train.

Insignificance in comparison to the size of the industry is more likely to elicit a sublime
response.

**Inhabitation and Desolation**

Slide 21-25

Humans are absent from the photographs of contemporary landscape artists.
People are monstrously present in their absence. Physical evidence of their existence. Different from Watkins. Making an argument for a pristine environment untouched by humans. Images don’t assign blame, No easy release of guilt. No rhetorical devil or scapegoat. But they don’t allow for victims either. Can be critiqued for erasing the suffering of those who live, work and play in these environments. Offer an alternative argument. Requires the viewer to examine their own relationship to the toxin. Isn’t mediated through another subject. Wonder about my own complicity in what I see.

The viewer does not compete with a subject for a connection to the sublime object, nor does the viewer question the subject’s response to the object. Instead, the viewer is left “alone” to confront the object and compare it to one’s self, the final stage of the sublime response (Oravec, 1982).

**Security and Risk**

Slides 26-29

Many of the contemporary landscape photographers I analyzed use an elevated perspective, one that allows the viewer to look down on the subject matter, and at the same time fills the photograph with the project the photographer is capturing. The high vertical angle should call forth a feeling of power and mastery, as the viewer is positioned with an unrestricted panorama of the landscape. But Burtynsky and others deny a stable ground from which to make that assessment.
Safety from not being at the place, not smelling the smell, not tasting the air or the water, but still unsure who the victim of the toxins is.

Instead, he gives the audience supremacy, but calls the power into question with the precarious positioning of the camera and the cropping of the shots. The viewer may be powerful, but is still at risk.

**Known and Unknown**

Slide 30-37

Contemporary environmental photographers create magnitude through the size of their images and the scale of the subjects, but also through visually constituting the presence and extent of the contaminants themselves. Through the use of color and particulates (smoke, fog, etc.).

While the massiveness of the *production* is established through the photograph, the magnitude of the place’s toxicity remains unknown. Photographers vary in the amount of information they present.

David Hanson provides information from the application for super fund money and topographic maps. David Maisel does not provide any information at all.

Anne Wilkes Tucker states in Maisel’s catalogue for his Terminal Mirage series, “We cannot know without expert explanation which of these colors arises from naturally occurring elements or organic matter and which are deadly toxins created from man-made processes. Nor can we tell which of the naturally occurring concentrations would be toxic if ingested. We sense that this
violent range of continuous colors is extra-ordinary and possibly dangerous. Nevertheless, we are
drawn in by their formal beauty. These pictures are both visually and intellectually engaging,
both seductive and disturbing.”

Conclusion

In response to these toxic places and images, it would appear that the viewer would be
cought in the second stage of the sublime response, the negative state, where “the sense of self is
diminished and the individual feels a separation from, or lack of control of, the [human-made]
environment” (Oravec, 1982, p. 219). But Burtynsky and other environmental photographers do
not leave the viewer in a state of paralysis. The compositional choices of the artists render
images fraught with tensions that require thought and contemplation which, as I argue, provide
the impetus necessary for attitudinal change. This can be contrasted to a potentially
overwhelming response of repulsion, fear or alienation that may accompany an unmediated
interaction with contaminated places (Baker, 2005; Diehl 2006) or an indifferent response that
can accompany unguided contact with seemingly banal sites of pollution (Pezzullo, 2007).

This sublime response to toxins is necessary to move beyond paralysis or indifference to the
active contemplation of the self in relation to the object, which is then necessary for changes in
thought or action. Stormer adds that even if one does not feel sublimity when “gazing on images
of the sublime . . . they can still lay claim to [one’s] attention and constitute a location of self-
perception” (2004, p. 221). In contrast to scientific or government documents, the choices made
by the contemporary environmental landscape photographers are not ones intended to clarify,
simplify or elucidate the object as a whole. Instead, the tensions of the toxic sublime heighten
the complexity and mystery of these places, creating the sublime responses of self-evaluation,
deliberation, and maybe audacity from these altered landscapes where these responses would not otherwise exist.

When one measures the self against these sites, it is not necessarily an evaluation of moral character or spiritual strength, as would be the case with nature. It instead requires a confrontation with our consumptive habits, what we buy, where we buy it, what organizations and industries we directly or indirectly support, and how those choices are influential in creating the sites we see.