26

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

title:

Necrotic Landscape: On Visualizing the Necrocene

author:

Marcin Stachowicz

source:

Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture 26 (2020)

URL:

https://www.pismowidok.org/en/archive/empathetic-images/zgorzel-w-krajobrazie

doi:

https://doi.org/10.36854/widok/2020.26.2140

publisher:

Widok. Foundation for Visual Culture

affiliation:

SWPS University

University of Warsaw

keywords:

necrocene; photography; Ada Zielińska; anthropocene; catastrophe

abstract:

Critical analysis of Ada Zielińska's Pistater Cruisin' photographic series.

Marcin Stachowicz - Ph.D. student in the Section of Film and Visual Culture at the Institute of Polish Culture, member of the Theory of Moving Image Research Team. He graduated from psychology and cultural studies. His principal research interests include visual study, film theory and relationships between visuality and politics. In his dissertation he aims to examine the category of „pro-development shaming" in Polish visual culture after 1989. Author of numerous articles and film reviews, published among others in „Więź", „Res Publica", „mała kultura współczesna", „Kultura Liberalna", „Filmweb.pl", „Gazeta Wyborcza".

Necrotic Landscape: On Visualizing the Necrocene

It seems like a distant memory, almost from another era, but I remember it clearly – a time before Greta Thunberg, before climate jeremiads in every other issue of *The Guardian* and *Gazeta Wyborcza*, and before the pandemic. A skyscraper built at 20 Fenchurch Street, London, mockingly nicknamed the "Walkie-Talkie," proved itself capable of melting luxury cars.[1] Some said it was just a flaw in the design of its glass facade, a fluke that made it act like a giant lens that focused sunlight. But it could just as well have been driven by the implacable temptation for destruction. While the ziggurat, itself an altar to the unbridled accumulation of capital, laid waste to smaller private businesses around it, the media focused solely on its inadvertent destruction of luxury property – in particular the melted body of Martin Lindsay's Jaguar, parked on nearby Eastcheap Street. The now-ugly and unimpressive car, its black metal exterior twisted and torn, was nevertheless powerful enough as an image to evoke all the tired environmental Gothic clichés, straight out of a disaster movie.[2] Here is the City of London, international hub of business and finance, attacked by a monster with a laser eye, burning and killing everything in sight. Only the oldest employees of the City's many brokerages could remember the beast's true intentions.

Eschatological catastrophism, experienced in response to the anticipated loss of the world as we know it, could be considered one of the archetypal moods of the Anthropocene.[3] We live in the end times, and there are those among us who are not afraid of discussing it openly. When we could still travel freely, before the coronavirus pandemic hit, we sometimes visited these old wounds and places haunted by the ghosts of disasters past. The majority of critical interpretations – a perspective I find myself veering closest to – saw disaster tourism as, first and foremost,

a harmful postcolonial and voyeuristic exploitation of the suffering of others, as it applied primarily to the countries of the Global South. There were those, however, who believed the practice could – a long shot, but a chance nevertheless – engender a sort of extraordinary empathy, stemming from immediate, direct contact, the opportunity to remember specific places and faces. To witness freely, rather than through the glowing rectangle of the computer or television screen.

Although I fail to see this practice of "immediacy" as effective, from the perspective of Ada Zielińska's photographic project *Disaster Cruisin'*, disaster tourism may indeed gain empathic undertones and begin to resemble a sort of post-tourism – a journey to the future of the Earth. The artist's outlook on the anthropocenic planetary crisis elicits emotional proximity to the depicted post-apocalyptic landscape by visualizing the near future and laying imaginary (yet spectacular) waste to iconic tourist sites, immediately recognizable and unmistakable on account of the global movement of bodies and the circulation of the postcard-perfect visuals that underpin much of the modern tourism industry. Zielińska seeks to identify echoes of future planet loss in what we now see as manifestations of a triumphant culture of homogeneity, of closing gaps and superficial "prosperity for all" (which is nothing else than the earliest stage of what has been called "adaptation apartheid"[4]) – multi-lane highways, sprawling roadside parking lots, and marvelous suburbs, which remain, to tourists gazing out from behind car windows (the entire series is permeated by what could be considered a critique of "rapid sightseeing"), little more than a blurry, vague backdrop; a modern non-place we visit on the way to our destination, out of sight and out of mind. At the same time, these images represent goods and experiences so entrenched in the collective consciousness of the late capitalist consumer that visualizing their destruction and severance from the "civilized world" may produce Gothic terror – in

a manner similar to classic images of urban landscapes being reclaimed by the wilderness – and the urge to empathize with what seems undeniably familiar.

Here, such proximity is of a dual nature – it is simultaneously the near future, capable of prompting denial or dissociation ("This doesn't concern me," "I won't live to see it happen"), and an "approximate representation," an image of the shared and the similar. In most of Zielińska's photographs, authenticity and specificity (the latter conceived as pertaining to a particular location) – identified as key principles of "visual climate change communication"[5] – become apparent without the involvement of human bodies. This absence, however, is only illusory, as the artist is chiefly interested in "post-environmental" landscapes: those "reshaped by human hyperagency,"[6] and thus inherently seeded with *Homo sapiens*. Ewa Bińczyk writes that "in the Anthropocene, nearly every natural disaster, be it flooding, wildfires, plague, or famine, carries within it traces of human agency."[7] This post-natural landscape is built by the inextricable amalgamation of technology and nature, transcending planetary boundaries and imbued with the possibility of destroying all life on Earth. This threat of annihilation can either paralyze or compel to action, both outcomes driven by unprecedented anxiety about the future.

In *Disaster Cruisin'* – a photographic record of Zielińska's journey retracing the 2018 California wildfires, which devoured over 766 hectares of woodland and caused more than $3.5 billion in damages – car plastics melt like cheese slices on a hot pan, headlights crack and spill out of their frames like bloody organic eye matter, and fenders split crosswise like grotesque lips open in a moribund bark of laughter. In the motorized paradise that the United States always sought to be, high-priced, gleaming SUVs become mere victims of the climate catastrophe, their hulking metal carcasses evidence of their contribution to the planet's (and their own) death. The category

of the Anthropocene is incomplete, and seeks to place blame where it is easy to hide, behind the veil of diffuse responsibility.[8] It's not that human greed ravages Nature (necessarily with a capital "N") and Nature takes revenge on mankind in return – as in the Californian city of Paradise, where only brick chimneys and pieces of walls remained of entire homes – burning both property and itself in the process. Proponents of ecomodernist discourses, more or less inclined toward techno-optimism, like to argue that we are witness to the ultimate clash between ancient beasts of a Gothic tale whose victor – enraged Nature or green technology – will determine the fate of the world.[9]

In reality, however, there is only one monster – and its name is Big Capital, its avatars including capitalist overproduction and the top carbon emitters and polluters, the automotive industry chief among them. The hollowed-out shells of luxury cars are not mere bystanders here, caught up in the fires by accident; their sacrifice was always written into their internal combustion DNA.

The disaster landscapes from Zielińska's post-tourist series – alongside California, the artist also photographed the streets of Venice flooded in November 2019 and the Australian wildfires that swept the country earlier this year, taking pictures from an RV she drove from Sydney to Mallacoota – are no postcards from some geographically remote "present," but a sort of spontaneous trip to Earth's necrocenic future, with the term "Necrocene" used here in the sense first conceived by Justin McBrien – as the practice of rewriting the history of capitalism using categories like extinction, destruction, decay, extraction, and irreversible climate change

(triggering, in turn, unprecedented wildfires, hurricanes, and flooding – in other words, another wave of destruction).[10] In Zielińska's photography, this necrocenic "rewriting of history" implies a shift in optics, a stripping of the veneer of modernity from images of capitalist prosperity, which veils death and decay – the "planned obsolescence of all life"[11] – and the neoliberal ideology of limitless growth, the latter fully conscious of the inexorable destruction of Earth's biodiversity. It is also an attempt to shape a particular "necrocenic gaze," which would be terrifying yet empathic on account of being rooted in caring for that which still remains but already carries the mark of "irreparable loss."[12] McBrien writes that, today, "the deep time of past cataclysm becomes the deep time of future catastrophe."[13] The Necrocene is the era of mass death that the sweeping power of capital prevents us from seeing; it is "the repressed counter-image to capitalism's growing prosperity. It is the long shadow of destruction, death, and extinction-making following the light of capitalism's accumulation and productivity."[14]

This is a dark Gothic tale of modernity, in which the ghosts are played not by beings from other dimensions or realms of existence, but by ourselves, our spectral presence haunting not the present but the future. David Farrier offers an incisive interpretation in his *Deep Time's Uncanny Future*, cited by Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland in the introduction to the inaugural issue of *Gothic Nature*: that there is something essentially "uncanny" in mankind's awareness of the inevitability of the climate catastrophe, "in witnessing our familiar earthly home mutate into something strange and seeing ourselves transform into powerful agents of geologic time," leaving behind "undead" vestiges of its past presence, like plastics or the mass extinction of wildlife.[15]

"We are conjuring ourselves as ghosts that will haunt the very deep future," Farrier writes.[16] But to rephrase, rather than haunt the future, these ghost selves of ours actually pull it toward them,

draw it closer with each liter of gasoline and kilogram of carbon emitted. It's the sunset snapped by Zielińska, reflected in the wing mirror of a hurtling car: a laser-like glow growing in intensity, eerily similar to the atomic mushroom cloud. Below the reflected flash of solar radiation is the caption etched in the bottom part of the glass: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear." The phrase itself is a fitting metaphor for the catastrophic convergence of temporal proximity and negation, a phenomenon I have described above: the more climate change is established as a scientific fact, an inevitable "here and now," the louder all sorts of techno-optimists clamor that we still have time, that the planetary crisis is a question of some distant future, regardless of whether 20 or 220 years away. Zielińska's pictures, therefore, not only seek the future in the present, but bring this future into existence; they are an attempt at devising a visual form that would perfectly represent the necrocenic imagination, situated somewhere between documentary realism and a dream about the coming catastrophe. These two separate regimes seem to nullify each other within the image – the dream, after all, is already a reality, while the documentary increasingly resembles materialized fantasy; a cliché comprising a thousand "end of mankind" tropes which we keep under our eyelids like a priceless souvenir from our visit to the land of tomorrow.

The fossil – the remains of petrified capitalism, its accumulations entirely different from organic matter residue – thus becomes the central figure in Necrocene visuality. McBrien writes that fossil-fuel-based industry itself prompted the emergence of catastrophism as one potential trajectory that life on Earth can take. Novel forms of exploiting the planet and its resources, including drilling new shafts, strip mining, and building rail infrastructure, all had an unexpected side effect – the discovery of "bizarre relics of animals, plants, and other hominids that spoke of an ancient and unknown disaster."[17] It could be

argued that capitalism successfully "exhumed extinct life,"[18] and then, in true scavenger fashion, began feeding on it by burning coal and oil deposits. "The transition from a biomass to hydrocarbon regime marked the moment when capital, having exhausted contemporary nature, tapped into deep time: the decayed, dead world now harnessed for sake of capital's world-ecology,"[19] McBrien writes. However, "accumulating extinction" is more than just digging for calories in the remains of extinguished life – it is the active promotion of death and destruction. "The residue of life in hydrocarbons becomes the residue of capital in petrochemical plastics."[20] The body of capital, sated with the carcass of the past, now turns to feast on organic matter.

In the Necrocene, however, extinction is no peaceful farewell to life, but both the result and part of the necrotic process – the violent death prompted by "traumatic injury."[21] The term itself is related, among other fields, to plant biology: in response to enzymes and toxins secreted by pathogens, green plant tissues turn brown or black and then dry out and break down.[22] Necrosis can be local, taking the form of so-called "necrotic spots," or total, affecting the entire organism. In contrast to apoptosis, which is a form of programmed cell death, the chain of pathological events in necrosis is beyond the body's control and often triggers intense inflammatory reactions.[23]

Our contemporary reality seems situated somewhere between local and general necrosis, on the edges of the inexorable decay of planetary tissue. Identifying local centers of necrosis no longer requires complex technical means – the process itself has been violently moving into everyday visibility. In Zielińska's pictures, these necrocapitalist necroses extend outward – carving up space with broad brown swathes of burned vegetation, houses, cars, road infrastructure, and suburban gardens, separated by isolated oases of vibrant greenery. In the Necrocene, human death is inextricably linked with its non-human counterpart – burned-out trees are

indistinguishable from the charred, rusting skeletons of cars. Necrocapital draws no boundaries and is indiscriminate in how it affects reality, burning everything in its way, even itself, incinerating all marks and traces. By the highway near Mallacoota, Australia, Zielińska snapped a picture of a road sign with the names of destinations completely burned off, leaving only unidentified distances – as if capital pays no mind to what worlds and spaces it devours as it "necrotizes the entire planet,"[24] to cite McBrien. Against all laws of geology and history, the present seems to be transmuting into a fossil from the future: Australian trees, burned from the inside and still glowing with smoldering embers, harden into empty shells that eventually smother the blacktop and the rest of the modern urban infrastructure. Severing the population from global supply chains, they remake the global village into a network of local, autonomous nodes, and draw in the few adrenaline junkies with the promise of seeing (and experiencing) hell on Earth in the clichéd flesh.

It is essentially impossible to engage with Zielińska's photographs without reflecting on landscape as a form and practice of the global tourism industry, which establishes a collective of locations and experiences and – when it becomes part of a post-tourism that is conscious of global interdependencies – facilitates empathizing with what is frail and vulnerable to destruction. Flooded Venice, the capital of late capitalist tourism, is haunted by a future so certain and inevitable that it could be said to elicit a somewhat perverse sort of anticipation. Venice itself is a fossil, a rotting monument to Europe's early

industrial history, whose nooks are penetrated by contemporary capital. Its narrow streets are the stage for an incessant, high-volume turnover of flesh goods, thoughts, and bodily fluids, which necrotizes local reality – the everyday hustle and bustle of local residents – replacing it with the gangrene of endless sightseeing and consumption: hundreds of luxury boutiques, currency exchanges, banks, and souvenir shops. The city's landscape is so entrenched in the collective consciousness, a breadth of representations reproduced every year in millions of copies, that the sight of it overrun with floodwaters so high as to reach the iconic statue of Victor Emanuel II may evoke apocalyptic connotations and push some to ask, not without a measure of irony: Is this Photoshopped? Another artistic provocation? An attempt to penetrate the ossified shell of human conscience? Floodwater seeping into luxury boutiques is even more Gothic than the blackened, burned-out remains of trees in the Australian wilderness. And Zielińska frames it as a "liminal space [...] its topography unstable," symbolically dividing "dry land" (living under capitalism) from the "invisible" depths of the sea (dying in the Necrocene).[25]

Water, an element believed to have been subdued, thus changes into "Gothic nature" – a landscape of fear, binding familiar urban scenery with horror triggered by the uncontrolled intrusion and spread of catastrophe.

It is hard to believe that the safe world of hyperconsumption and services driven primarily by customer satisfaction is no match for the propensity for destruction and extinction coded into the very cells of necrocapitalism. Rather than with "change," as a sign captured in one of the pictures reads, we're dealing here with an "exchange" of capital for extinction, of accumulation for the cumulation of crises and catastrophe: in 2020, the climate crisis converged with a worldwide health emergency and a global economic downturn, thus opening a portal that allowed us, for a couple of months at least, to glimpse our inevitable

future. The lockdown offered us a trial run at being "disaster tourists" – those frail, pale-skinned figures that Zielińska captured looking at the massive plumes of smoke billowing over the Australian wildfires. Most Westerners are unable to accept amber-tinged darkness at 4 p.m. and roiling heat literally pouring from the sky as empirical reality rather than post-apocalyptic fantasy. The climate, meanwhile, fuses everything together, geographically connecting remote points into a web of connections and nuances so subtle that they remain elusive to even the most well-trained and well-equipped eye.

The lens we used yesterday to interpret the Australian wildfires can be reused today to make sense of the coronavirus pandemic. Widespread deforestation – a practice reaching back thousands of years but recently accelerating across massive swaths of Asia and South America – contributed significantly to the jump of this novel coronavirus from animals to humans.[26] Pictures of carbonized Australian forests bind our reality to the grand imaginary of disaster: the fossilized reality of the past; present reality represented by the virus crawling out of the jungle in thousands of stock photos; and our future reality, driven by unbearable heat, desertification, coastal displacement, and the melting, burning, and necrotization of earthly tissue. All three temporal regimes share the same affect – that of Gothic torpor, the sensation of hurtling toward a dark precipice.

Anthropocenic passivity is rarely, if ever, associated with empathy; rather, it connotes the anticipation of a technological revolution that would make all of these problems disappear with the proverbial wave of a magic wand. The "necrocenic gaze" attempts to subvert this inertia: driven by the post-touristic desire to see, with one's own eyes, that which is

seemingly imperceptible (global climate interdependencies in this case), it grows increasingly conscious of the fragility of planetary systems and their potential disruption or demise lurking just around the corner. Combined with an iconic visual – a "postcard" from the era of raging post-natural disasters – a gaze transcending the present may inspire empathy toward far-off eras and the lives we still lead, but which the future will take from us. The horror that the vision of the Necrocene elicits emerges as a new modality – the proverbial kick in the behind that might very well wake us from our torpor. Zielińska's project allows us to narrativize and visualize catastrophe as the inevitable "now" calling to us from the future. It might also, in the vein of the classic Gothic ghost story, allow us to remake darkness into light, or at least stimulate a more stubborn, relentless curiosity as to the future fate of the planet.

1 Marc Lallanilla, "This London skyscraper can melt cars and set buildings on fire," *NBC News*, September 4, 2013, (accessed June 20, 2020).

2 On ecogothic and the "Gothic nature" category – conceived as a narrative convention and the dominant mood of the Anthropocene – in the context of the climate catastrophe and the shift from Gothic ecophobia toward climate activism, see the entire inaugural issue of the *Gothic Nature* journal, especially: Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland, Gothic Nature: An Introduction," Gothic Nature 1 (2019) (accessed June 20, 2020).

3 On categories of "planetary loss" and "future loss," see: Ewa Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka. Retoryka i marazm antropocenu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2018), 269, 277.

4 See: ibid., 110.

5 See: Adam Corner, Robin Webster, and Christian Teriete, Climate Visuals: Seven Principles for Visual Climate Change Communication (Based on International Social Research) (Oxford: Climate Outreach, 2016) (accessed July 3, 2020).

6 Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka*, 118.

7 Ibid., 118.

8 See: Justin McBrien, "Accumulating Extinction: Planetary Catastrophism in the Necrocene," in: *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, ed. Jason W. Moore (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), 119.

9 On ecomodernism, see: Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka*, 141–145, 149–155.

10 McBrien, "Accumulating Extinction," 116–137.

11 Ibid., 116.

12 See: Bińczyk, *Epoka człowieka*, 30, 113–114, 177.

13 McBrien, "Accumulating Extinction," 116.

14 Parker and Poland, "Gothic Nature: An Introduction," 10.

15 Ibid., 10.

16 David Farrier, Deep time's uncanny future is full of ghostly human traces, *Aeon*, October 31, 2016 (accessed June 20, 2020).

17 McBrien, "Accumulating Extinction," 122.

18 Ibid., 122.

19 Ibid., 122.

20 Ibid., 116.

21 Ibid., 117.

22 *Fitopatologia. Tom 1*, eds. Selim Kryczyński and Zbigniew Weber (Poznań: Powszechne Wydawnictwo Rolnicze i Leśne, 2010), 388–389.

23 "Uszkodzenie i śmierć komórki," in: Wenancjusz Domagała and Maria Chosia, *Patologia: słowo o chorobie. Tom 1* (Krakow: Polska Akademia Umiejętności, 2008), 14–15.

24 McBrien, "Accumulating Extinction," 116.

25 Parker and Poland, "Gothic Nature: An Introduction," 4. See also: Emily Alder, "Through Oceans Darkly: Sea Literature and the Nautical Gothic," *Gothic Studies* 19, no. 2 (2017), 1–15.

26 See, for example: Catrin Einhorn, Animal Viruses Are Jumping to Humans. Forest Loss Makes It Easier, *The New York Times*, April 9, 2020 (accessed June 20, 2020).