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## THE RHETORIC OF SEDUCTION, THE AESTHETICS OF WASTE, AND ECOPORNOGRAPHY IN EDWARD BURTYNSKY'S SHIPBREAKING

DANIELA FARGIONE

This article analyzes Edward Burtynsky's *Shipbreaking* (2009), a controversial photographic project that inquires into the representation of environmental corruption and economic exploitation faced by disenfranchised communities. The controversy depends on the incongruity between the aesthetization of the gritty subject matter the photographs exhibit (the waste of the world and human waste) and the artist's stylistic strategy, which may improperly be seen as an example of ecopornography.

*Keywords:* ecocriticism, environmental justice, aesthetics of waste, ecopornography, Edward Burtynsky

Despite the historical results achieved at the COP21 in December 2015, general public enthusiasm for a statutory global deal seems to have gradually declined. Despite the stakes of the climate crisis and the raising awareness of global citizens, public support in tough action has dropped, while recession and economic issues have reached the front stage. Moreover, recent terrorist actions – including the July 2016 attack in Dhaka, Bangladesh, which killed 29 people – have also contributed to shift public attention while raising questions on the interlacings of gas, oil, weaponry, and terrorism within a very complex geopolitical scenario.

In these days of staggering brutality and disquiet, we have all been appalled by the “immediate [...] explosive and spectacular” violence “erupting into instant sensational visibility”<sup>1</sup>. But there is another kind of violence that afflicts all of us and invisibly affects – first and foremost – the environment of the poor. Rob Nixon calls it “slow violence”, and defines it as “a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all” as it is “incremental and accretive”<sup>2</sup>. Apparently, the *visualization* of ecological, social, and political degradation is the hub of this fraught question of violence and environmental justice, here intended as “the right of all people to share equally in the benefits bestowed by a healthy environment. [...] the right to live unthreatened by the risks posed by environmental degradation and contamination, and to afford equal ac-

<sup>1</sup> R. Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.) 2011, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

cess to natural resources that sustain life and culture”<sup>3</sup>. As a consequence, a convincing ecodiscourse on human-altered environments should instantiate a different mode of seeing, a creative process that Giovanna Di Chiro calls “*cosmovision*”<sup>4</sup> and defines as “a locally invested, grassroots ecological cosmopolitanism that imagines the creative processes of ‘acting globally’ [...] through *en-acting* thousands of local scale ‘sustainable’ solutions to protect the planet [...]”. According to Michael Ziser and Julie Sze, “the very scale of the global context presents deep challenges to the customary ways that the West imagines basic concepts like *place*, *agency*, and *justice*”<sup>5</sup> and suggest that narrative and iconic representation of the material world require new imaginative patterns. Edward Burtynsky’s controversial project *Shipbreaking* is a case in point as his photographs not only exhibit the intersection of ecological and social justice concerns, but they also shed a light on the ‘representation’ of environmental corruption and economic exploitation faced by disenfranchised communities.

### 1. *Shipbreaking*

Most of the activity of internationally renowned photographer Edward Burtynsky is an attempt to document natural landscapes altered by human endeavors: quarries, dams, factories, recycling yards, slag heaps are captured by his camera as an eerie evidence of our permanent negative impact on the planet<sup>6</sup>. *Shipbreaking* belongs to the last section of a larger photographic project called *Oil* (2009), which chronicles the production, distribution, and (mis)use of fossil fuels, while questioning the contested issue of our dependence on them. The artist explains<sup>7</sup> that the original idea was prompted by a radio program broadcast about four years after the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska, which released more than 11 million gallons of crude oil, dramatically causing one of the most devastating environmental disasters. In order to prevent that kind of catastrophe to happen again, it was decided that after the year 2004 only double-hulled ships were allowed on the open sea, but in the meantime the insurance companies were refusing to cover single-hulled tankers, eventually forcing them to be decommissioned. The oil spill and its aftermaths triggered Burtynsky’s artistic project, “a study of humanity and the skill it takes to dismantle these

<sup>3</sup> J. Adamson – M.M. Evans – R. Stein, *Introduction: Environmental Justice Politics, Poetics, and Pedagogy*, in *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, & Pedagogy*, Idem ed., The University of Arizona Press, Tucson 2002, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> G. Di Chiro, *Climate Justice Now! Imagining Grassroots Ecocosmopolitanism*, in *American Studies, Ecocriticism, and Citizenship: Thinking and Acting in the Local and Global Commons*, J. Adamson – K.N. Ruffin ed., The University of Arizona Press, Tucson 2002, pp. 204-219.

<sup>5</sup> M. Ziser – J. Sze, *Climate Change, Environmental Aesthetics, and Global Environmental Justice Cultural Studies*, “Discourse”, 29, 2007, 2-3, pp. 385.

<sup>6</sup> Burtynsky’s activity is portrayed in Jennifer Baichwal’s *Manufactured Landscapes* (2007). *The Residue of Tankers*, the seventh scene of this documentary, is devoted to *Shipbreaking*.

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site\\_contents/Photographs/Shipbreaking.html](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/Shipbreaking.html). Last accessed September 2, 2016.

things. I looked upon the shipbreaking as the ultimate in recycling [...]”<sup>8</sup>. Not surprisingly, he soon found out that most of the dismantling was occurring in India and Bangladesh, two notorious dumping grounds for both the world’s waste and for its own “redundant humans”<sup>9</sup>.

The ship breaking and recycling industry plays a significant role in Bangladesh economy<sup>10</sup>. This activity started in the 1960s when a Greek ship washed up on a beach of Chittagong attracting hundreds of locals who flocked to ravage what they could with their rudimentary tools<sup>11</sup>. The flat natural landscape, together with the cheap workforce that Bangladesh was providing, soon transformed Chittagong into a convenient center for shipbreaking, so much so that in 2008 the industry accounted for around half of all the ships scrapped in the world. The taking apart of these mammoth rusting hulls allows for vast quantities of material to be recycled; once they are dismantled, they are transformed into reinforcement bars for the construction industry, while the residual oil in the bilges is removed mostly by hand and bucket. This highly risky process is made even more dangerous by the presence of asbestos – a material that was commonly used in shipbuilding until the 1980s – and other polluting substances, such as polychlorinated biphenyls and ozone-depleting substances. Predictably, Bangladeshi regulations on occupational safety and environmental and human health are quite weak, but in 2009 the Bangladesh Environmental Lawyers Association (BELA) convinced the Supreme Court to ban all ship recycling not meeting minimum safety and environmental standards. As a consequence, many of the jobs were lost and national steel prices skyrocketed, finally convincing Bangladesh’s prime minister, Sheikh Hasina, to slacken his regulations and restore this profitable enterprise. Of late, some efforts have been made to enforce environmental regulations and reduce detrimental effects but because of the reuse and recycling of most of the tanks, shipbreaking is considered a “green industry”<sup>12</sup>. Burtynsky’s photographs capture this paradox and because of the incongruity between the gritty subject matter they focus on and the artist’s stylistic strategy, they become a compelling paradox themselves.

## 2. *The Aesthetics of Waste*

*Shipbreaking* is a reminder that in our Age of Petroleum it is the end of commodities that we need to face and that the notions of recycling and transvaluation have become at least morally ambiguous if not falsely redemptive. In addition, the conflation of “unsustainable petroleum

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*. Last accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives. Modernity and Its Outcasts*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. *World Bank*. 2010. *The Ship Breaking and Recycling Industry in Bangladesh and Pakistan*. *World Bank*. © *World Bank*. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/2968>. Last accessed November 22, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> *Hard to break up*, “The Economist”, October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.economist.com/news/asia/21565265-controversial-industry-says-it-cleaning-up-its-act-activists-still-want-it-shut-hard-break>. Last accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>12</sup> *World Bank* 2010, p. 9.



addiction<sup>13</sup>, environmental insecurity, and workforce exploitation, underscores the economic, political, and environmental obscurities hidden within the tangles of a very complex story that Burtynsky's *Oil* collection reveals. In other sections, in fact, he accumulates a vast assortment of images that, according to the photographer, appear to be "of the end of time"<sup>14</sup>: heaps of tires, rivers of pipes, airplanes and cars, dismantled oil-tankers, a whole catalogue<sup>15</sup> that evokes the imminent death of an empire, a lifecycle come to its end. And yet, despite their pervasive elegiac tone that Stephanie LeMenager would call "petromelancholia", these photographs exhibit both a world prior to pervasive industrial advance and a dimension yet to come, evoking what Bill McKibben has defined as "the postnatural age"<sup>16</sup>. More than a specific time in history, this is considered as a cultural paradigm shift that engenders progressive preoccupation with what British novelist Martin Amis once called the "toiletization of the planet", which also marks "a shift from a culture defined by its production to a culture defined by its waste"<sup>17</sup>. Burtynsky's toxic landscapes function as a metaphor for the toiletization of the natural world, but also as an expression of ontological rupture in the perception of the real, simultaneously raising questions on the concept of complicity in postindustrial ecosystems that are predicated on oil, toxicity, and waste. According to Michael Truscello, the "complex, distributed forms of agency make it difficult to create a binary division of sinners and saints, malevolent demand and benevolent supply, those who are solely responsible for the petrocultural apparatus and those [who] stand entirely outside of it"<sup>18</sup>. What is at stake here is the unresolved contention between ubiquitous oil despotism and the impossibility to see, comprehend, and represent petromodernity without the succor that this very culture produces.

Furthermore, the ambiguity that pervades Burtynsky's photographs of natural expanses challenges traditional notions of landscape aesthetics and political commitment. On more than one occasion, the artist has revealed his de-politicization of the issues he explores by creating images that aestheticize the incursions of the industrial world and suppress judgment: "The trick [...] is to provide photographic images that leave meaning open, an ambiguity necessary to gain access to sites, engender discussion, and steer clear of polemics and clichés"<sup>19</sup>. The adoption of an apparent deadpan aesthetics and his emotional detachment pair with a strategic technique that favors synoptic vision, big scale, and god's eye perspective, thus en-

<sup>13</sup> S. LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014. Cfr. especially "Petromelancholia", pp. 102-140.

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site\\_contents/Photographs/Shipbreaking.html](http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/Photographs/Shipbreaking.html). Last accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> For a thorough discourse on the agency of things and assemblages and the way they alter established notions of moral responsibility and political accountability cfr. J. Bennett, *Vibrant Matter. A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2010.

<sup>16</sup> B. McKibben, *The End of Nature*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York 1989.

<sup>17</sup> C. Deitering, *The Postnatural Novel. Toxic Consciousness in Fiction of the 1980s in The Ecocriticism Reader*, C. Glotfelty – H. Fromm ed., The University of Georgia Press, Athens – London 1996, p. 196.

<sup>18</sup> M. Truscello, *The New Topographics, Dark Ecology, and the Energy Infrastructure of Nations: Considering Agency in the Photographs of Edward Burtynsky and Mitch Epstein from a Post-Anarchist Perspective*, "Imaginations", 3-2, 2012, pp. 188-205.

<sup>19</sup> E. Burtynsky, *Extraction*, in "The Walrus", July-August 2007, <http://thewalrus.ca/extraction/>. Last accessed September 2, 2016.

gaging in a rhetoric of seduction: “beautiful images of a disaster,” art critic Greg Lindquist comments, “like the scene of an accident that you can’t stop watching”<sup>20</sup>. Further explanation comes from Burtynsky’s *Oil* book, where he states: “When I first started photographing industry it was out of a *sense of awe* [...] But time goes on, and that flush of wonder began to turn”<sup>21</sup>. This is his “oil epiphany,” which allowed him to grasp that his vast human-altered landscapes were only made possible by the discovery of oil<sup>22</sup>.

The pristine nature of Canada was a necessary reference and a starting point in Burtynsky’s landscape photography. This influence is quite evident in his first works, which in fact aesthetically translate that “sense of awe” through a series of images that may easily be associated to a Kantian anthropocentric sublime<sup>23</sup>. But the subsequent shift from ecotopic to more dystopic images also marked a shift towards a “toxic sublime,” what Jennifer Peeples defines 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”<sup>24</sup>, a sort of dissonance, in short, that aligns with Kant’s position only in the oblique pleasure derived by the conjunction of attraction and repulsion. This tension between his alluring imagery and the dreary realities he depicts or, in other words, the beautification of the materially ugly, is often seen as a stylistic strategy that for some is tantamount to “a convenient formalism that engenders the politics of quietism”<sup>25</sup>. Here lies the alleged complicity that both the photographer and the viewers share, not only in relation to the very system they are implicated in, but also in their common role of distant voyeurs. The question is: “how do we both make slow violence visible yet also challenge the privileging of the visible?”<sup>26</sup>

### 3. *Ecopornography*<sup>27</sup>

In our “culture of seeing”, the visual depiction of environment and its anthropogenic degradation allows for an understanding of nature that effects human and nonhuman interrelationships. Images, then, may be “hermeneutic stabs at showing nature”<sup>28</sup> by virtue of their power to code the viewer’s reading and to enforce a hegemonic sight, sometimes perpetu-

<sup>20</sup> G. Lindquist, *Clicking while the Gulf Burns: Edward Burtynsky’s photography*, “artcritical”, 23 October 2010, <http://www.artcritical.com/2010/10/23/burtynsky/>. Last accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> E. Burtynsky, *Oil*, Steidl, Göttingen 2009, <https://steidl.de/Books/Burtynsky-Oil-0418475158.html>. Emphasis added. Last accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. D. Fargione, *Oltre l’antropocentrismo: il sublime ecologico nel contesto anglo-americano*, “CoSMo: Comparative Studies in Modernism”, 8, 2016, pp. 113-127.

<sup>24</sup> J. Peeples, *Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes*, “Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture”, 5, 2011, 4, pp. 373-392.

<sup>25</sup> S. Zehle, *Dispatches from the Depletion Zone: Edward Burtynsky and the Documentary Sublime*, “Media International Australia”, 127, 2008, p. 113.

<sup>26</sup> R. Nixon, *Slow Violence*, p. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Coined by Jerry Mander, a former advertising executive, the term was used for the first time in 1972. Cfr. *Ecosee: Image, Rhetoric, Nature*, S.I. Dobrin – S. Morey ed., SUNY Press, New York 2009, p. 54.

<sup>28</sup> S. Morley, *A Rhetorical Look at Ecosee*, in *Ecosee*, p. 24.

ating the very violence that we perpetrate against it. As Bart H. Welling reminds us, commodifying visual representations of nature, especially those related to greenwashing, share similarities with human pornography. Ecopornography, in fact, “masks sordid agendas with illusions of beauty and perfection”<sup>29</sup> that mainly anesthetize viewers by constructing an uncritical idea of nature which, at the same time, is at the mercy of the viewer’s voyeuristic control and aesthetic pleasure by way of objectification. This is particularly true, Welling explains, in at least three instances. First, when images engage the same “woman trope” used to dominate and colonize indigenous environments. Second, when nonhumans are excluded from the picture, thus offering a self-reflective simulacrum of nature that denies agency to nonhuman life forms. Third, when images become “extreme” by showing disturbing animal deaths. Ecopornographic fantasies hence employ the seductive rhetoric used in the politics of violence and exploitation that we have been accustomed to by the industry of “educational” documentaries, commercials, and even cartoons.

Oftentimes Burtynsky’s photographs are seen as mere artistic landscapes, as decontextualized seductive panoramas of abject environmental and human geographies. Therefore, in order to dismiss accusations of ecopornography, political quietism or aesthetic anesthesia, viewers are invited to move beyond reductive readings of his images that may disorient because of their open meanings. The suggestion is to look at each ship on the Chittagong beaches as a “movement-image [that] creates a form of ‘connective aesthetics’ of global entanglement”<sup>30</sup>, in short a “cosmovision” that invites us to ponder on the invisible connections of local environmental inequity and global waste politics. If the ship stands for the fast global flows of goods, information, and human beings, its stagnant immobility epitomizes “the instability of things” and their temporality, while disclosing a process of “un-becoming”<sup>31</sup>. Caught in the moment of its dismantlement, the vessel also reminds us of material transformations and of the porous interaction between human and nonhuman forms of lives.

Incidentally, this is one of the few projects in which Burtynsky includes human figures. And yet, by reversing the “woman trope” of ecopornography, the artist exhibits male workers that emerge only as details to “remind us of their insignificance”<sup>32</sup>. Far from becoming invisible, however, those details demand full attention. While watching Burtynsky’s *Shipbreaking*, we are constantly reminded that waste and toxicity invest both natural landscapes and human societies, particularly work places. As Bauman contends, the category of “redundant human waste” includes those who no longer have work or a source of labor, becoming the “dark and shameful secret of all production”<sup>33</sup>. Work, insists Bauman, is perceived as the main purpose of our modern life, so that the worth of individuals is tanta-

<sup>29</sup> B.H. Welling, *Ecoporn. On the Limits of Visualizing the Nonhuman*, in *Ecosee*, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> M. Craig, *The Death of Great Ships: photography, politics and waste in the global imaginary*, “Environment and Planning A.”, 42, 5, pp. 1084-1102. <http://dro.dur.ac.uk/6901/1/6901.pdf>. Last accessed September 2, 2016.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>32</sup> N. Bozak, *Manufactured Landscapes*, “Film Quarterly”, 62, p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> Z. Bauman, *Wasted Lives*, p. 27.

mount to their capability to produce. As a result, the “destination of the redundant is the waste yard”<sup>34</sup>. By rendering these human figures almost as cogs of the same unvalued machine, the photographer reorients the viewer’s eye and perception towards the joint global crisis of humanity and environment.

In the last two images in the collection, “Recycling #2” and “Recycling #10”, Burtynsky engages his viewers with the question of how to engender a dialogue between aesthetics and politics. In the first image, three barefoot young workers are captured in a flushing oil puddle amid several canisters of residual oil collected from the bilges. Burtynsky’s rhetoric of the toxic sublime clashes here with a more documentary approach that he adopts to make the violence of these toxic sites more visible: contamination, resource depletion, human health, environmental and social injustice are intertwined in the same discourse on waste and victimization, while claiming all their visual force. *Shipbreaking* concludes with the image of the oily footprints left in the earth by exploited and dehumanized laborers in Chittagong. If petroculture leaves a massive and destructive footprint, we are reminded that these footprints have a human shape. They may appear to us as “images of the end of time”, but their visual prominence elicit an awareness of the connections between the ubiquity of oil capitalism, the unprecedented scale of environmental devastation, and the necessity to “persuade millions of people to join in the global conversation on sustainability”<sup>35</sup>.

In conclusion, through images of pervasive waste – both natural and human – linked to the oil industry, Edward Burtynsky’s photographs mirror not only our current environmental and economic crises, but also the epistemological and ontological crises of our petroculture by enquiring the flimsy relation between the object, its value, and its agency. As a consequence, both the photographer and the viewers are forced to confront their own wants and excesses, their responsibility and complicity, within the sites of fictional and real existence. By leaving enough room to viewers to participate in the picture, Burtynsky allows them to explore what happens in the gap between seeing the world and representing the world, while living open space to creatively ‘imagine’ new ways of re-composting it after the imminent death of its current form.

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<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> This is one of the three wishes expressed by Burtynsky at the acceptance of his Ted prize in 2005. [https://www.ted.com/talks/edward\\_burtynsky\\_on\\_manufactured\\_landscapes/transcript](https://www.ted.com/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes/transcript). Last accessed September 2, 2016.