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The Sublime and The Sewer

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ABSTRACT: *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk* (2017) follows a solitary male adventurer's six-day hike around California's Salton Sea as both a personal test of his own strength and perseverance as well as an opportunity to document and promote awareness of the sea's receding shoreline and the ecological disaster that would result from its complete disappearance. This documentary derives and draws from a legacy of the sublime imaginary and landscape photography that helped shape the contemporary, Western view of nature. *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk* relies on three kinds of images to represent the landscape: the overhead drone shot, satellite images and a handheld camera. These images directly inherit, as technics, the aesthetic ideology of the sublime upon which colonial, imperial and other extractivist projects have relied. They depend on human technological power to capture and enclose the image from the outside. The natural landscape is fashioned into an object of the human gaze and desire, but of a very particular kind: an object that lives and speaks on the condition of its always imminent disappearance. The film seems to suggest that only through more technical and human intervention can the Salton Sea return, however paradoxically, to its pristine and pure, although constructed, natural state.

KEYWORDS: sublime, landscape, extraction, Salton Sea, documentary

Introduction: Technics of the Solitary Walker

SOS: The Salton Sea Walk (2017) follows a solitary male adventurer who puts himself through physical and mental challenges in order to bring attention to a specific landscape and its accelerating precarity. Randy Brown, the film's protagonist, takes a six-day hike around the Salton Sea's 116-mile periphery. His goal is two-fold: a personal test of his own strength and perseverance as he attempts to become the first person to walk around the sea, as well as an opportunity to document and promote awareness of the sea's receding shoreline and the ecological disaster that would come from its complete disappearance. The film thus immediately announces its affiliation with a complex legacy of performances both physical and aesthetic. These include the solitary, philosophical-literary walks characteristic of European Romanticism and American Transcendentalism (Rousseau, Wordsworth, Thoreau, *et al.*), the more modern, filmic variations of these walks (*Paris, Texas*, *Into the Wild*, *etc.*), and the perhaps more banal, philanthropical walks devoted to "causes" (Cancer, ALS, *etc.*) that take place on any weekend. The documentary thus recruits its viewer as someone who moves, who thinks, who feels, and who cares, whether or not that viewer is aware of this legacy.

In both form and content, *SOS*: *The Salton Sea Walk* draws from the legacy of the sublime imaginary and landscape photography that has contributed to the shape of that same spectator's view of nature. The sublime, with its emphasis on enormity, on excess and disproportion, unlike the pacifying harmonies of the beautiful, inspires a mixture of pleasure and pain, awe and fear, diminishment and transcendence. In the case of landscape photography like that of Carleton Watkins in the western United States, sublime aesthetics were activated through images of natural structures—mountains, glaciers, waterfalls, etc. While the human viewer feels small, perhaps even menaced, besides and below these natural monuments, she is also separated from them through her ability to capture, through reason and technology (the camera), the object of her gaze. A transcendental, indeed exceptional subject, becomes the correlative of a sublime object. Nature is put on a pedestal to be admired and protected by an invisible force. In order to exalt and protect nature, it must be simultaneously emptied of human presence. Empty space, however, lends itself to colonization, the extraction of resources and depositing of wastes. In *SOS: The Salton Sea Walk*, by following a solitary white man, nature is symbolically emptied out through the use of sublime imagery, which allows for the visual re-colonization of the space. Thus, although its heart is sublimely in the right place, the documentary, as informative or even inspirational as it may be, unintentionally highlights the need for alternative forms of visuality in the response to environmental crisis.

SOS: The Salton Sea Walk relies on three kinds of images to represent the landscape and the accelerating ecological disaster: the overhead drone shot, satellite images and a handheld camera. These images directly inherit, as technics, the aesthetic ideology of the sublime upon which colonial, imperial and other, subsequent extractivist projects have relied. They depend on human technological power to capture and enclose the image from the outside. Through optical technics, the earth is visually externalized as landscape and thus transformed into an object. This object of the human gaze

and desire is disappearing; and the film seems to suggest that only through more technical and human intervention can this extinction event be avoided, and the sea returned to its pristine and pure natural state. Nevertheless, the restoration process remains highly ambiguous. The sea is in many ways a testament to three ages of the extractivist project and the processes of its visual or aesthetic occlusion. Initially created from the byproducts of fertilizer-nutrient extraction and industrial-scale agriculture, it was then re-purposed as a leisure and vacation destination. Finally, plans for its remediation include transforming the sea into a lithium mining operation. Thus, the sea is the (in)visible sign of the early industrial colonization and transformation of a landscape, upon which rests an age of consumerist re-colonization, and potentially succeeded by a third age of renewed extraction supporting globalist fantasies of techno-capitalist sustainability. The shimmering surface of the sea reflects and deflects this stratified history. The film's images, then, can be considered the technical, visual correlatives of the site's geo-engineering.

I. Imperial City, Imperial Valley

Both the sublime and extraction require the emptying out of the landscape and the erasure or invisibility of its inhabitants, both physically and symbolically. The act of emptying requires a multi-directional flow of both materials and images. In "The Urban Intensions of Geontopower," Elizabeth Povinelli discusses these dynamics of flow in the context of the European colonial project in the Congo. Water, she argues, is one of the "unseen infrastructures" of the colonial world:

> These water infrastructures were built from industrial trade that had a mediated relationship to colonial worlds […] Under the auspices of scientific inquiry and civilizational uplift, Leopold II would extract the countless fortunes that built Brussels into a wonder of the world and later the capital of Europe, on the backs of ravaged Congolese people and lands. (n.p.)

The violence required for the design, materials and construction of the colonial metropolis, is hidden in faraway places and excused in the name of progress; simultaneously, the toxic residue of the process, human waste, is also hidden, encased and moved underground in the form of a sewer. In addition to the physical removal, there is an aesthetics at play that enables and also dissimulates the project of building the colonial or imperial city. The visual dynamics include emptying the colony in order to extract resources and submerging infrastructure in order to waste or secrete, thus maintaining a clean and proper distance from the colonial violence and an aesthetic and psychological distance from the human body as organism. Without the acknowledged presence of the human bodies ravaged by the process, seemingly unoccupied land is then colonized and used for the extraction of resources and depositing of wastes. Meanwhile, the imperial subject is placed at a distance from the extraction of wealth and from its own toxicity, waste.

The physical engineering of the imperial city with its invisible sewers corresponds to the aesthetic engineering of empty landscapes by artists and explorers through photography and language. Inhabitants are disappeared from the image's frame and thus the spectator understands the ideal image of nature to be empty. In *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor,* Rob Nixon argues:

> Through the invention of emptiness—emptiness being the wrong kind of presence—'underdeveloped' people on 'underdeveloped' land can be rendered spectral uninhabitants whose territory may be cleared to stage the national theatrics of megadams and nuclear explosions, those certifiable acts that mark the 'developing' nation's ascent into modernity's pantheon. Emptiness is an industry that needs constant rhetorical replenishment: the promotion of megadams depends on such emptying out, on actively administered invisibility. Within the dynamics of invisibility and hypervisibility, the myths of emptiness generate unimagined—or at the very least, underimagined—communities. (165)

Empty land, then, requires labor and lends itself to the extraction of materials, which flow from symbolically emptied spaces to service city or colonial centers. What returns, hidden from view is the waste.

In the United States, landscape photography was one of the motors of this kind of work. The use of the sublime in landscape photography helped to separate faraway viewers and consumers of images from their extraction and the actual violence inherent in that extraction. Photography performed the work of replenishing the myth of emptiness that Nixon discusses. However, as Povinelli points out, the consequences of extraction are no longer hidden: "this idea that toxicity could be kept at a distance was always a fantasy. This fantasy has now been punctured. The toxic waterways they sealed far away from their view or right below their own feet are now overflowing" ("Urban Intensions"). The waste has overflowed the sewer. In our contemporary epoch, the so-called age of the human[1], the landscape image that portrays nature as pristine and empty of human presence and impact seems to have exhausted its symbolic power. Instead, what is captured are images of ruin and waste.

The Salton Sea is a kind of North American variation on the imperial city as described by Povinelli. Here too, flows and distributions of water and waste are inextricably linked to forms and technics of visibility and invisibility. A landlocked sea in California's Imperial Valley, the Salton Sea was created through the flooding of

the Colorado River and is sustained by water from agricultural run-off. As a result, the sea is extremely nutrient rich, which causes massive algae blooms that suck the oxygen out of the water, leading to biota destruction including large amounts of fish death. In addition, the Salton Sea is drying up and as the shoreline recedes, more area of dry playa is exposed. The chemicals from the agricultural run-off, which are neutralized when wet, stick to the sand and dirt of the dry playa and are picked up by the wind. These particles can travel as far south as Mexico and east to Arizona, and when inhaled cause respiratory diseases. The blowback, then, overflows national borders.

II. Sublime Extraction

The Salton Sea is a site of both extraction and waste, and it is represented in the documentary through the aesthetic and performative practice of the sublime. In their reading of the Kantian sublime, Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaller explain that "the sublime is an experience of being overwhelmed by the object of contemplation" and that these objects are generally natural phenomena. What is essential to the experience of the sublime, they continue, "is the reflexive distancing performed by the viewer [...] The sublime overpowers the senses, but it is mastered and contained by reason" (100). I would add too, that it is also captured by the technology of images, in photography and film. An aesthetics of the Anthropocene, Horn and Bergthaller continue, should move away from the Kantian sublime and the notion of nature as other (101). What we see in *SOS* is at once a mourning of a loss of nature and a nostalgia to return it to its pristine state—which perhaps coincides with the experience of being overwhelmed—and a technology of capture—the human capacity and superiority over nature. In the technological, we can both return nature to its pure state and separate ourselves from it as object. The film's project then, is one of double restoration through the sublime: to restore a *constructed* nature—to engineer nature as natural—and to restore a model of the human over and against, as well as a kind of reflection of, that constructed nature. In the "Imperial" Valley, man is also restored as sovereign, maybe even the subliminal force. The film's rhetoric of restoration reflects the colonial rhetoric discussed by Povinelli. It is out of destruction, violence, and extraction that colonial cities and colonial power are restored:

> Great cities rose from the smolder; and within these cities new topologies of glistening paving stones and stinking alleyways. As human and nonhuman worlds were ripped from one place to produce wealth in another, the great harvester would return, digging deeper into previously ravaged spaces, this time with imperial and corporate armies. ("Urban Intensions")

The glistening surface of the sea once corresponded to the "glistening paving stones" of the imperial city, although in the different context of American consumerism. But the same dynamics undermining the integrity of the urban fabric have undermined the vacation paradise. The distance from the bath to the toilet becomes indistinct.

The photographic sublime that constituted the image of the American West has its roots in the great gold mining projects of the 1850s. Again, like the colonial projects analyzed by Povinelli, there was a crucial aesthetic component that invariably worked alongside the brutal extractivist component. In the early 1850's, Carleton Watkins, whose photography helped influence the preservation of Yosemite National Park, went to California as part of the Gold Rush. Prior to his famous images of Yosemite, he captured images of hydraulic mines that were used to help defend mining interests and raise capital investments (Scott 189). In "Photographing Mining Pollution in Gold Rush: California," Conohar Scott argues that "Watkins' aesthetic approach to photographing the hydraulic mine was calculated to elicit a sense of power and awe in the minds of a contemporary audience, who might not previously have encountered a photographic representation of industrial transformation on such a vast scale" (191). Watkins also composed his images of the mine so that the industrial infrastructure harmonized with the landscape, naturalizing the relationship between extraction and its environment (193). Watkins' photographs were awe-inspiring because they portrayed industrial progress and human exceptionalism. However, today images of mines produce a very different kind of reaction. As the Gold Rush is replaced by the "white gold rush" of lithium, these kinds of images disgust the viewer rather than defend mining interests. The corporate armies arriving in the Imperial Valley and the Salton Sea today are looking for lithium. Lithium extraction, whether through mining or geoengineering, is supposed to lead humans into a "greener" future, technologically restoring the world and visually restoring the landscape.

As *SOS* points out, the Salton Sea contains significant amounts of lithium stored in the salt brines. Lithium has recently been termed "white gold" because of its importance in battery and electric car manufacturing. Extraction of lithium from the sea provides an alternative to traditional lithium mining, the kind performed by the company Lithium Americas, which at the moment is preparing to start blasting and digging a new mine on top of a dormant volcano in Nevada. This form of traditional mining, even when its goal is to produce materials for renewable energy, conforms to the usual extractivist paradigm. Lithium Americas' proposed project would consume 3,224 gallons of water per minute and create 354 million cubic yards of waste, including radioactive uranium. Projects in lithium extraction are ramping up because of the demands for "clean" energy. The United States has some of the world's largest lithium reserves but imports most of its supply from Latin America and Australia, which is then processed in China. However, as the electric vehicle industry grows, so does the demand for lithium. There is an international race for lithium extraction and processing and the United States, unsurprisingly, wants to be at the forefront.

Currently, the United States only has one large-scale mine, so the country must find new places for its extraction, like Lithium Americas' project (Penn and Lipton, "The Lithium Gold Rush"). However, images of lithium extraction endanger the sublime. Outsourcing this dirty industry allows for, as Povinelli argued, the relegating of "the monstrosities of colonial capitalism to places far away" and the continued obstruction of waste ("Urban Intensions"). The lithium-green economy avails itself of the same aesthetic procedures as the mining of the 1850s: dissimulating both extraction and waste. Local consumers of "green" energy can then congratulate themselves for combatting climate change by simply buying more electric cars while actively ignoring the brutality of extraction.

III. *SOS* and Photography

Landscape photography and its use of the sublime has evolved alongside technology and has continued to shape our view of nature. Early landscape photography was funded by surveying projects and national expansion goals, like Watkins' photographs of the hydraulic mines and even those of Yosemite. As the nation expanded westward, images of the land returned to the east that represented the land in specific ways. These photographs depicted nature from below and placed the viewer besides and below the awe-inspiring natural structures. In later years, war making moved the camera and the viewer upwards to view the landscape from the air. Jeremy Adelman explains that "Instead of looking up at the peaks, or off into the distance, the viewer increasingly found herself looking down at a more enclosed space" (60). From above, the viewer feels herself as existing outside the image, with the potential to escape whatever wreckage has been left behind. At the same time, looking down on nature gives the viewer a sense of power over the space and over the image.

SOS utilizes three types of images to represent the landscape: the drone shot, satellite images, and the handheld camera. The most prevalent way we see the landscape is through the first type: sweeping overhead drone shots. Many of these shots move slowly across the landscape and show the blue sea in contrast with the desert and the mountains. The film starts with these images combined with dramatic music and a voiceover that says: "water is the driving force of all nature." It is unclear if this "nature" includes humans. These images either move laterally from sea to desert and back or split the screen in half with sea on one side and desert on the other. The camera moves slowly overhead and Brown's figure walking below is almost imperceptible. The camera flies above and slightly behind him as we watch him walk into the distance between these two contrasting landscapes. These images portray the human as small and insignificant in comparison to nature but at the same time are captured by human-made technology. These images elicit both a sense of awe in the presence of nature and power over nature.

Another contrast shown from above is again the beautiful pristine and glass-like image of the sea with the sun reflecting off it and the dilapidated structures that litter the beach. Similar contrasts are shown between large patches of green from the surrounding agriculture and the desert, the dead fish and dried up playa and the immense amount of bird life. These overhead shots provide striking contrasts between life and the lack thereof. The images of waste and emptiness can be understood as what Iyko Day calls ruin porn. Day describes it as a "twenty-first-century reprisal of the nineteenth-century pictorial landscape, [in which] ruin porn commingles the themes of manifest destiny and imperialist nostalgia" (129). These themes are also reflected in Brown's own nostalgia to return to the sea of his childhood, which is again, a constructed natural environment.

The film also takes advantage of various satellite and time lapse images in which we see the drying up of lakes like the Salton Sea and a computerized image of what looks like an explosion, meant to represent the potential dust storm that would occur if the sea disappeared. These images move the viewer even farther away from the ecological site and historical moment as they show what these places used to look like and what they will look like if nothing is done. This follows Day's argument that "ruin porn aestheticizes the loss of historical reference as a form of 'colonial unknowing'" (129). Day uses this term from Vimalassery et al.'s introduction to *On Colonial Unknowing* in which they outline different articulations from postcolonial and feminist scholars on ways in which epistemologies of unknowing "endeavors to render unintelligible the entanglements of racialization and colonization, occluding the mutable historicity of colonial structures and attributing finality to events of conquest and dispossession" (1). They argue that this is not just a forgotten past made invisible through the passive act of forgetting but is an "act of ignoring" that is "aggressively made and reproduced" (1). The aesthetics of the sublime and the infrastructure of the sewers perform this act of ignoring through invisibility and the emptying out of space. With satellite images, the viewer is completely removed from the physical space, placed so high above and far away that these entanglements and historical structures are ignored. As T.J Demos argues, these images offer "'whole earth' perspectives of the planet as not only devoid of social conflict but also safely in the grips of an emergent scientific mastery" ("To Save a World").

Google Earth images are also used to follow Brown's journey from outside, again separating the viewer from the specific site of the walk, while a handheld camera shakily follows Brown closely, spending a lot of time capturing his moving feet. We are at once removed and brought outside the Earth to witness the walk and then brought back down into the close and personal space of the protagonist. As the camera plays with scale, we understand the forthcoming ecological disaster to be multi-scalar as well, affecting humans and nonhumans across the hemisphere, but still controlled by the individual and his technology. This is a feature of the film that deserves praise although I would argue it is still inadequate. A more

adequate multi-scalar response might be through a more collective performance.

While aerial images of ecological ruin can illustrate the consequences of extractionist projects and perhaps mobilize a defense, Demos argues that they "tend to grant viewers a sense of control over the represented object of their gaze, even if that control is far from reality" (*Against the Anthropocene* 28). In his critique of geoengineering and what he terms the "good" Anthropocene—the idea that there are technological fixes to climate change—he argues that these kinds of aerial images as well as images of Earth from space, promote human exceptionalism:

> Anthropocene visuality tends to reinforce the techno-utopian position that 'we' have indeed mastered nature, just as we have mastered its imaging—and in fact the two, the dual colonization of nature and representation, appear inextricably intertwined [...] the Anthropocene places technocrats and scientists in the role of bringing about a great awakening regarding climate change and then conveniently puts those same figures in the position of being the only ones that can fix the problem—via geo-engineering. (28)

Along with the aerial and satellite images of the sea, the film, through both images and narrative, proposes geoengineering fixes to the Salton Sea's problem. With the technology of the drone, the film captures the geothermal power plants that surround the sea as well as the steam coming out of the natural mud pots. Brown explains that there is a lot of geothermal power in the area that needs to be taken advantage of. The proposed solution to the sea's disappearance is a sea-to-sea canal that would bring a constant flow of water by way of the Pacific Ocean and Mexico. This is presumably quite expensive and would require binational cooperation. To pay for this fix, some suggest taking advantage of the sea's lithium stores. The geoengineering of lithium extraction from the sea is a possible solution. These suggestions do not so much save the sea as put into place a new geoengineering project that would restore the aesthetics, but like the sewers of colonial Europe described by Povinelli, just move the waste through the construction of new flows and extractions.

Conclusion: Alternative forms of visibility

Sublime imagery has the dual effect of producing awe and wonder and placing the viewer in a position of power over the very object of awe that might otherwise threaten to negate it. Historically, the sublime has been used in landscape photography in efforts to symbolically empty out a space; human presence is generally rendered invisible in these types of images. Nixon describes the wilderness sublime as "a discourse that enfolded elements of eulogy and elegy. The wilderness sublime became inseparable from a contest over the rhetoric of the monumental: a clash between transcendent engineering and transcendent geology invested with awe and grandeur" (155). Landscape photography, such as that of Watkins, worked to both hide the "transcendent engineering" of the natural structures by extractive mining in order to portray a nature in need of protection by means of "awe and grandeur." Both cases, symbolically and physically, depended on extraction and a multidirectional flow of image and material. Properly and honestly tracing these flows, which would also include the minerals constitutive of the photographic process itself (silver, for example, for Watkins, lithium for Brown), requires alternative or counter forms of visibility.

One of these alternatives forms of visibility come from another physical and aesthetic performance of a walk: the Fort McDermitt tribe's 273-mile prayer run to protest the construction of the Lithium Americas' mining project. The run was organized to raise awareness of the potential water contamination and accumulation of waste from a mine "which sits in an area historically controlled by the tribe before it was taken by the United States in 1863" (Penn and Lipton). It is interesting to compare this prayer run with Brown's solitary walk around the Salton Sea as both actions are meant to raise awareness of environmental degradation. Brown's walk is individual, and he is driven by his memories of vacations at the sea, a place of his childhood that he does not want to lose. As he walks, he remembers what the shoreline used to looks like, the people that crowded some of the beaches and surrounding businesses, and the time spent with his family. At the end of the walk, however, Brown will leave. Perhaps he will continue to try and bring attention to the sea, but its future will not substantially affect his livelihood. This is quite different from the Fort McDermitt residents. Their run is one of collective action. One person does not run the entire 273-miles but it is completed as a community. This is also the land on which they live and of which they have already been dispossessed. This is not to say that Brown's walk is insincere; indeed, it is its profound sincerity that sutures it to the sublime imaginary. But it is a different kind of performance. Towards the end of the film and the end of Brown's walk, he starts to talk about the "finish line" and the end point of his challenge. He poses the question of "then what?" as if his personal race ends here. In many ways, this walk is portrayed as Brown's individual challenge that has a finish line or end point. Visually, this finish line is represented from above with a drone shot. Brown crosses the finish line as if winning a race and is congratulated by his family and supporters and in this image, we don't even see the sea, but the yacht club, a general site of wealth and exclusion. For the members of the Fort McDermitt tribe, like many other Native American land defenders, this is not a race to a specific finish line but a way of sustaining and fighting for their lives. Thus, aesthetics is displaced by ethics, sublimity by the demand for justice. The images of the prayer run in the *New York Times* show a group of people with protest signs linked arm and arm. The still photograph captures the Nevada landscape in the background but is focused on

the faces and bodies of the protesters. While the overhead images of *SOS* separate the spectators from the performance of Brown's walk, the *Times* photograph puts the viewer at eye level and side by side with the protesters.

The deadlock of the environmental documentary is that it invariably encounters the limits of visuality as politically effective. In correlation with the physical efforts to restore the Salton Sea for renewed extraction, the documentary attempts to perform the aesthetic work of visually restoring the landscape through the use of the sublime. However, this double restoration project never successfully contests or otherwise diverts the invisible flows required to sustain neocolonial/techno-capitalist imaginaries. Perhaps the eye level view of the Lithium Americas protesters performs less an aesthetic than directly political contestation to the faceless nature of the sublime which may have to be given up to do justice to the planet.

NOTES

[1] The Anthropocene was coined by chemist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene Stoermer to name the geological period following the Holocene, identifying humans as a geological force (Horn and Bergthaller 1).

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