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The Death of Great Ships: photography, politics and waste in the global imaginary

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Abstract

The iconic images heralding an age of connectivity are the plane and the trace of digital flows bearing information. However, not far behind has been the cumbrous yet essential 'big box' of containerisation, shipping all manner of goods across the planet on great vessels remorselessly circling the globe. Critiques of global trade have latched upon the counter image of these mighty ships' ruinous carcasses beached and being broken in South Asia. Here then is the antipode of globalisation - ships, once carrying cargoes now themselves sold around the globe for scrap and ending up broken up according to the very logics of cheap locations that their routes made possible. This paper interrogates these counter-images of global capitalism. Looking at the works of various photographers it examines how waste ships are made to work aesthetically. It examines the photodocumentary and traditions of the industrial sublime to find 'time-images' that speak to the material and labour worlds of global capital.

"We all know how ships are born, how majestic vessels are nudged into the ocean with a bottle of champagne. But few of us know how they die. And hundreds of ships meet their death every year. From five-star ocean liners, to grubby freighters, literally dumped with all their steel, their asbestos, their toxins on the beaches of some of the poorest countries in the world, countries like Bangladesh."

Bob Simon, 60 Minutes, CBS 2006

This paper examines the figuring of the globalized commodity world as material process through the representation of waste. To do this it looks to images critical of globalization that use the global flows of waste to reveal the hidden underside of capitalism. The paper focuses upon the figure of the ship as embodying global flows and ship breaking as a global waste flow. In doing this it passes through the work of key photographers to illustrate different aesthetics of globality, materiality and waste. It contrasts the documentary aesthetics of those like Sebastiao Salgadão or Sean Smith focusing on global labour with the materialist aesthetic of Edward Burtynsky. It asks what aesthetic registers are available to depict the wasting processes of globalised capitalism.

The paper asks us to move into the temporal dimension of commodities through their wasting and disposal – comprising the abject material of capitalism, which we seek to expel from our view and consciousness yet is an intrinsic part of consumption. Rendering waste invisible to its producers is now made all the easier by flows that take used commodities from consumers and break them into various constituent parts elsewhere around the globe. Discarded clothing, consumer durables, electronic goods, paper and plastic, have global circulations (for example,

see Lepawsky and McNabb 2009 for the routes taken by e-waste) to differentiated destinations for instance e-waste in West Africa (European Environment Agency, 2009), and Southern China (Iles, 2004; Tong & Wang, 2004) or textiles in India (Norris, 2005), where they are 'recycled' into yet further commodities.

Exemplary of this labour of displacement is the breaking of ships, 80% of which now occurs in South Asia. The imagery of this has been picked up by campaign groups in powerfully illustrated reports, with documentary photography highlighting the abject labour conditions and environmental damage. As Cairns notes, these NGO and photographic campaigns have gained traction in the media but have been unstudied in academic literatures (Cairns, 2007, page 266). The paper counterposes this concerned documentary photography to more aestheticised work that the paper argues recovers a polyvalent landscape, reflecting the epic scale of capitalism and the ambiguous meanings of the wastescapes in the shipbreaking beaches.

After Deleuze (1986, page 51; 1989) this calls for both movement-images and time-images to capture a world of flows. The movement image reflects a commitment 'to show or create the kind of space of movement that is prior to the representation of static objects' (Thrift & Dewsbury, 2000, page 417). The paper takes the movement image of the ship as a chronotope for global flows in a mass consumer world. The time-image suggests a move away from static objects as not just spatial but temporal – to see objects temporary stabilisations of things and relations, as coming in to being and as coming apart. The time-image or chronosign (Deleuze 1989, page 213) is an indirect representation of time, that, rather than mapping time through movement, sees time as transformations between different states (Rodowick, 1997, page 84). Time images are thus the moment of recognition of linkages, and

of disturbance, where disjunctural states are shown to connect (Deleuze, 1989, page 55). Deleuze's time-images though tend to be connected to an affirmative will to power and becoming, whereas this paper asks rather whether they might also look at the opposite processes of un-becoming.

Globality, Materiality and Unbecoming Things

Imagery of globalization all too often depicts an endless process of acceleration going hand-in-hand with a dematerialization until electronic communications create global instantaneity – summed up in the powerful figure of the shrinking world of time space compression (Kirsch, 1995). There are well known criticisms that the pattern is clearly more intricately variegated than such unidirectional accounts suggest (Crang, 2007). Allan Sekula argues we need a movement-image that counters this unilinear and dematerializing narrative:

> My argument is against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to correct the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphorical construct, "cyberspace", and the corollary myth of "instantaneous" contact between different spaces. I am often struck by the ignorance of intellectuals in this respect: the self-congratulating aggrandizement of "information" frequently is accompanied by peculiar erroneous beliefs among these is the widely held quasi-anthropomorphic notions that most of the world's cargo travels as people do, by air. This is an instance of the blinkered narcissism of the information specialist: a "materialism" that goes no further than "the

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body". In the imagination, e-mail and airmail come to bracket the totality of global movement (Sekula, 1995, page 50)

To speak to the vast material flows, and the environmental limits and consequences of a globalised world, Sekula turns to shipping.

The sea and the ship offer a movement-image that speaks to global flows but also begins to open new lines of thinking through time. DeLoughrey (2007, page 55) argues that '[u]nlike terrestrial space, the perpetual circulation of ocean currents means that as a space, [the sea] necessarily dissolves local phenomenology and defracts the accumulation of narrative. In other words, the sea suspends and distorts terrestrial markings of temporality'. The sea speaks to transoceanic subjects and cyclical times. The movement image of the ship has been used to suggest the hybrid, fluid, mobile systems of globalization be that in the black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993), or circulating radical culture around the eighteenth century north Atlantic (Linebaugh & Rediker, 2000) or suggesting 'an industrial republic of the ocean' (Sekula, 1995, page 118) to mutineering syndicalists at the end of World War 1. However, current global imaginaries leave the sea as an apparently transcended arena rendering it 'a vast reservoir of anachronisms, its representation redundant and over-coded'. This makes it a fertile site for discordant ways of depicting 'the imaginary and material geographies of the advanced capitalist world' (Sekula, 1995, page 51).

For Sekula, '[m]odernity entails a maritime victory of the detail over the panorama: these details circulate within a generalized stream of consumption... The sea is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, but only in decantable quantities' (Sekula, 1995, page 107). The image is of the abstract as expansive yet quantified – and commodified. His own photography sets panoramic works, that show the scale of material, against detailed studies of small dolls

or wrenches left by crews, that show the imprint of the hidden labour enabling global flows. Explicitly drawing upon Foucault's formulation of the ship as a heterotopia, being microcosms of globalised space, he adds an extended and fluid spatiality where movement opens out fixed spaces. As heterotopias ships bring together commodities in strange conjunctions, as in his picture where weapons for Iran and Iraq are loaded onto the same ship in Spain and for 'one moment the global supply network is comically localized' (Sekula, 1995, page 32). Ships also still circulate populations, with many sailors from poor countries among ports and on ships (Borovnik, 2004), so the ship as movement-image creates a form of 'connective aesthetics' of global entanglement (Cook & et al, 2000).

This paper follows this focus upon shipping but connects it to images around 'wastes' – products at the end of their lives, dumped, discarded and being dismantled. It does this for three reasons. First, thinking through waste creates a time-image that discloses the instability of things. An image that goes beyond a focus on being, and even one seeing things as always becoming, with its sense of positive vitality, to one that stresses their undoing and unbecoming. The second reason, is that waste highlights unbecoming things in the adjectival sense where synonyms include discreditable, indecorous, and unflattering. Those connotations make waste amenable to being used politically to highlight the negative outcomes of globalization. In part the paper is a response to the powerful images of global waste used by NGOs in strikingly illustrated reports, particularly about ship breaking (e.g. Greenpeace, 2005). Third, if the materiality of commodity flows is too easily forgotten, then the large global flows of wastes which have emerged in tandem with them restates their materiality. It is the ultimately abject material – denied, concealed and distanced from the body social yet irrevocably connected to it. Those are the scatological registers through which

the Greenpeace campaign coordinator explained why they targeted south Asian ship breaking:

> Because here there is a very direct link with Western companies [who] pretend to us here with glossy leaflets that they are so environmentally responsible. And it is a shame when they export their shit to the developing world. (quoted in Langewiesche, 2000)

The return of waste, its irruption into social consciousness, can be profoundly unsettling and has been powerful in energizing environmental campaigns (Hawkins, 2007). Ships as waste brings the restless movement of globalization, the temporalities of objects and the politics and aesthetics of waste into conjunction.

Images of wastes fit poorly into the categories of aesthetic theory concerned with beauty (Arntzen & Brady, 2008) though some art has explored their possibilities (Vergine, 2007). Three aesthetic registers are most resonant: the picturesque (especially the ruin), the sublime and the realist. For the first, if classically everything that was symmetrical, whole and smooth was associated with the beautiful then the picturesque addressed the irregular, the multifarious and worn. Anything damaged, used or in the process of decay was potentially picturesque (Kemp, 1990, page 104). Thus in the 1920s and '30s, photography began to develop this repertory with popular leitmotifs of scrap heaps, wrecked automobiles, and demolished buildings offering a melancholy reflection on the mutability of earthly things (Kemp, 1990, page 117-8). That sense of natural decay, mutability and melancholia may also be found in the ruin which, Simmel (1958) argued, was the moment when the imposition of art and artifice upon natural materials was overcome by the forces of those materials reverting to their own natures – a time-image of entropic decay. More contemporarily industrial ruins have been seen as sites which escape or fall out of previous imposed

meanings (Edensor, 2005b, page 60 ; Edensor, 2005c) either offering haunting and melancholy decay or heterotopic collisions of overlain social orders and original social orders (Edensor, 2005a) – not Sekula's heterotopic movement-image but an hetero-chronic time-image. Some objects may acquire meanings through decay, especially in the twilight when a 'half-identity' links them to their original form and status (DeSilvey, 2006, pages 320, 327).

Secondly, variants of the sublime may capture some of the aesthetic registers of global capital and ruination. Kant's definition marked out the mathematical sublime, where sheer scale produces awe, as against 'dynamic sublime' where 'it is not a vastness that is initially incommensurable to the imagination but the limitless scope of nature's destructive capacities' (Lang, 1997, page 428). DeLoughrey (2007, pages 51) shows that the vastness of the ocean emerged in British popular culture, from the eighteenth century, as a specific cultural figure offering sublime immensity and gothic terror. The oceanic sublime she sees as deeply linked with the emergence of global economies functioning from then until the present as capital's myth element (page 101), where oceans are placed under a logic of erasure and desubstantialised. So in theory, too, 'the ocean perhaps more than any other space on earth has either been ignored or read as tansparent, transitive, asocial place by the vast majority of spatial theorists' (page 53). Instead one might draw upon the aesthetic connection of the ocean and waste, both stemming from the Latin 'vastus' for oceans and empty, uninhabited wastelands, and indeed the eighteenth century shared histories of the words sewer and shore (page 81). Thinking through oceanic waste moves us away from focusing upon nature's destructive forces to those of capital, and the antinomies of waste and value. Those connections are apparent in paintings such as Turners *Slavers throwing overboard the Dead and the Dying* (1840), but it is instructive that the rendering humans as waste hidden for critics like Ruskin under the natural sublime of tempestuous ocean (page 62). The sublime

classically sets up an aesthetic encounter for disinterested contemplation (Lang, 1997, page 425) which seems the opposite of engaged realist imagery in photojournalism to which we turn after setting the scene for shipbreaking in the next section.

Pollution's Poster Child: abject labour, the beach and reportage

> 'It is one of the strangest, most striking and frightening industrial sites in the world. It is large enough to be seen from space, but remains an open secret which few American people have even heard of, let alone seen. If there is a hell on earth, this is it. In Bangladesh, 30,000 shipbreaking workers are dismantling some of the largest decommissioned tanker ships in the world—20 stories high, 650 to over 1,000 feet long, 95 to 164 feet wide, which have been run up on the beach in the Bay of Bengal, not far from the city of Chittagong. (National Labor Committee 2009, page 6)

The revelatory charge of images of ship breaking in the global south derives partly since it should not occur there at all. International law prohibits the export of hazardous waste from the developed world to less developed countries, and ships contain tonnes of hazardous waste. And yet, 80% of ship breaking globally is conducted in South Asia on open beaches, precisely due to these places of waste lacking environmental and labour regulation. The financial driver is clear when a ship sold to be broken in South Asia is worth around $300 per light weight tone (i.e. its weight in metal) whereas the owner would have to pay to have it broken in Europe or the USA. Partly this continued illegal trade is enabled by intermediaries exploiting flags of convenience, so there is a degree of legal uncertainty over the ownership

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and origin of vessels, and partly the claim this is recycling materials, which is legally allowed.

This paper focuses upon one of the main locations for ship breaking – Chittagong, in Bangladesh which in 2008-09 processed around a third of the global total and whose beaches have come to prominence through the work of a number of documentary photographers. The beach has become an archetype for an industrial hell:

> At low tide, the vast mud flat of the Bay of Bengal is almost apocalyptic. Unwanted oil tankers, passenger liners and fishing boats dot the world's largest river delta like beached leviathans, the monolithic steel forms turning coastal idyll into industrial wasteland. (Bell, 2008)

The ships are cut apart using winches and blow torches, largely through dirty manual labour by the more than 30,000 employed on the yards. The scrap is hauled from the beach to yards – themselves scarcely more than a few buildings on the shoreline, and sent to local rerolling mills. Using blow torches for hot cutting is extremely dangerous if there are any gases trapped in old tankers – and old tankers have become the specialty of Bangladesh in a race to the bottom of world labour and environmental standards (Sawyer 2001, page 548-9). It is thus all too common to hear the news that workers have died either through impact or explosion. The investigative report by the US based NGO the National Labor Committee (2009), grimly entitled 'Where Ships and Workers Go to Die,' summarised the conflicting, yet uniformly bleak, estimates of between one worker dying every month and three workers dying every week. And the deaths continue: this last Boxing day, the failure to effectively clean the tanks of the MS Agate prior to cutting led to an explosion that killed six workers, four dying at the scene then two more dying in hospital over the next two days (the last having suffered 80% burns). This story left room only for a footnote that in the same week five workers at another

yard were injured when an iron plate fell on them (Bangladesh Daily Star , December 27th 2009 and January 1, 2010). These all too common, dramatic incidents overshadow the insidious, yet probably equal, dangers that exposure to asbestos and many persistent organic toxins pose for workers. As CBS News put it:

> You can't really believe how bad it is here until you see it. It could be as close you will get to hell on earth with the smoke, the fumes, the heat. The men who labor here are the wretched of the earth doing dirty dangerous work for little more than a dollar a day.

The appalling environmental and labour conditions, coupled with its at best semi-legal status made the ship breaking trade a target for groups such as Greenpeace who saw it:

> as an obvious violation [of prohibitions on international toxic dumping]: if the ships were not themselves toxins, they were permeated with toxic materials, and were being sent to South Asia as a form of waste. Greenpeace was convinced that ships owned by companies based in the nations that had signed the [Basel waste] accord, no matter what flag those ships flew, were clearly banned from export. It was a good argument. Moreover, the shipping industry's counterargument -- that the ships went south as ships, becoming waste only after hitting the beaches -- provided a nice piece of double talk that Greenpeace could hold up for public ridicule. And [the breaking beach], with its filth and smoke, provided perfect panoramas to bring the point home. So Greenpeace went to war.' (Langewiesche, 2000)

Ship breaking thus became the focus of high profile campaigns by NGOs. The breaking beaches have become 'Pollution's Poster Child' (Langewiesche, 2000). The ships afford a powerful, affective combination of appeals to the negative aspects of globalization. They bring together a number of classic counter-narratives to globalization (Roe & van Eeten,

2004) – the overwhelming of local regulation by global flows, the environmental harm through capital accumulation, and the exploitation of labour. These counter narratives are articulated through a discourse that foregrounds visualization in extensively illustrated media. As such NGO campaigns interrelate with the number of photographic studies of this industry and this particular site. In contrast with the similar breaking beaches at Alang (India), that were closed to outsiders after NGO campaigns, the photojournalism group Panos (http://www.panos.org/ss.asp?img=13) notes that 'Many of the best known names in photojournalism have photographed the ship-breaking yards in Chittagong.' Perhaps first was Sebastião Salgado in 1989, but the interest is ongoing through to the 2008 exhibition 'Steel beaches' by Andrew Bell at the Australian National Maritime Museum. As Rebecca Solnit comments, in making this unseen world, upon which our comfortable lives depend, visible even factual pictures are political (2007, page 136).

Documentary films have also picked upon Chittagong beach with Yasmine Kabir's documentary *The Last Rites* winning the Ram Bahadur Trophy at the South Asia Film Festival 2009 following Shaheen Dill-Riaz's film *IronEaters* on the same topic which won the best documentary film award at the 2007 festival. In both cases film enables a different possibility for narrating the imagery with both tracing labour migration through workers' stories linking the beaches and origins of workers in Northern Bangladesh. The latter director has commented that Salgado's work inspired them to address the topic – stressing the power of making this scene visible. 'The place where ships are dismantled is not far from my village home. Access to the yards was strictly forbidden for anyone who didn't work there. But we heard lots of stories about the colossal ships and the serious industrial accidents. My decision to make a documentary on ship-breakers was triggered by Brazilian photographer Sebastiao Salgado's remarkable photos on the subject' (Answer at premiere of *Ironeaters*, Chittagong

26 Feb 2008). Photography has led the way in making Chittagong a site where the detritus of global consumerism becomes visible.

The ships and shore have become an effective set of icons for high profile campaigns that seek to use them to speak to the wider agenda of the environment, global responsibility and inequality. The contrast of the huge ships with the bodies of the workers is a repeated motif in the campaigning literature.

> At the yards all kinds of shipwrecks lie on the beach … Dozens of men twist their bodies in impossible angles to torch cut the steel into little pieces. It's hard physical, dangerous and unhealthy labour. They constantly breathe the toxic fumes that are released by the torch cutting. Steel plates and pieces fall off the ships and shears. None of the workers wear helmets. Only one or two wear gloves or boots.
>
> (Greenpeace, 2003, page 7)

The bodies of the workers form the object of attention here – unsurprisingly given the number of deaths and evidently vulnerable bodies. Thus Greenpeace reports on ship breaking yards from Alang and Mumbai (India), Izmir (Turkey) and Chittagong (Bangladesh) work through a standard pattern of analysing the appalling environmental damage and working conditions before ending with calls for any toxic materials on board to be removed before ships are sent for scrapping (Vardar & Harjono, 2002; Greenpeace, 2003; Kanthak & Jayaraman, 2001). Given that for most ships it is unclear which, how much and where toxic material may be located, the costs of such a clean up are often greater than the value of the ship and then may well render it unseaworthy so it cannot sail to be broken. The calls thus amount to a call for a total ban. The moral call here becomes an absolute one around abject labour conditions, toxins and exploitation. The unanswered questions are how the ships would be disposed of, what would become then of these Bangladeshi workers, the effects on

the Bangladeshi economy which is deeply entwined with the products of shipbreaking (Gregson et al forthcoming) and whether a different politics, of engagement and upskilling, might be possible. This campaigning literature parallels the scopic regime from photographers who have sought out the landscape of these beaches as sites where the global flows of capital can be visualized through the degraded conditions of people and places, but in so doing risk picking out a frozen moment in global circulations.

Realist visualities: landscapes of labour

Examples of realist visualities framing Chittagong are to be found in the work of Sebastião Salgado, Brendan Corr and Sean Smith who in different ways share a commitment to evidence working conditions and lives. As Julian Stallabrass (1997, page 147) comments, Salgado's work 'organizes its visual material so as to give concrete form to circumstances which can only be known about through the study of, say, the economy' whilst also illustrating, in Lukacs' phrase, life as it actually appears. Others say it thus oscillates between social realism and 'magical realism' invoking the spiritual (Campbell 2003, page 75).

Salgado's (2005) collection *Workers: an Archaeology of the Industrial Age* documents the state of labour around the globe. His work continues a preoccupation with enabling workers who produce goods to become visible and also to return the gaze of the consumers. Salgado aims for a photographic ethnography picturing lives from the inside (Campbell, 2003, page 83). One of his chosen sites was the ship breaking beaches of Bangladesh. His account stresses the agency and action of the workers who 'run these ships onto the beach at high speed; then they attack them from all sides, blow torches cut through its steelskin, giant hammers break up its iron and wood structure… Everything from that giant animal lying on

the beach has its use. Iron and steel will be melted down and given new roles as utensils' (Salgado, 2005, page 14). In part then Salgado's is a restatement of the presence of labour, and the pictures are an assertion of these worlds of manual toil in an age that often claims to be post-industrial; they are images out of time that depict labour conditions that many in the west have consigned to history.

The focus of his work is the doing of manual labour, though instead of looking to a bright future as with Lewis Hine's workers, where the heroic construction workers symbolically dominate their products, Salgado reworks the vision to suggest something more desperate on the margins of global capital. Salgado takes the modernist style and inverts its narrative. So where modernism developed an industrial sublime that 'used to glorify leviathan industry and occasionally its workers, it is here turned to elegy' and we have 'masked workers, and fragile figures pressed up against gigantic machinery; … all recast by Salgado in a period of decline' (Stallabrass, 1997, page 149). There is no vision of progress to either social reform or a bright new technical future here. Indeed especially in the ship breaking pictures the sense of decline is manifest in 'dramatic images of strenuous labour, of mighty hammer blows struck and great weights borne, not to make some grand vessel, but to take one apart' (Stallabrass, 1997, page 150). These are not picturesque images of decay, but ones that emphasise the physical dismantling, and hacking apart of the ship. Like Hine's builders, labour on the Bangladeshi beaches picks out the muscular and masculine in work. The workers are embodied as 'dark-skinned, no sign of excess fat, muscles developed by constant physical labour and, most frequently, smiling. Many of the figures seem more akin to models that would adorn the advertising of men's magazines than to images of poverty' (Cairns, 2007, page 267). Young male flesh is here exoticised and staged for the appalled delectation of the viewer, with other realist photographers alternating it with the injured, and damaged bodies resulting from the

appallingly risky conditions. The risk here is surely that instead of speaking of connections to western viewers' lives, the pictures may frame the workers as exotic others. The focus upon the bodies may risk decentering the material, economic connections and causes.

The images convey 'a strong sense of human presence and activity, of physical strain and fatigue, of dust and sweat, which we can all understand by virtue of being human and having to work' (Stallabrass 1997 page 150). The vision is a Marxian humanism, calling us to empathise, speaking of similarity and potential solidarity. Such moments of poignancy recall the *punctum* in Barthes, that offers moments of human identification (Olin, 2002). The Blakean visions of industry as hell are obvious referents but, often the fragility of human life appears in poignantly small touches – where lightly clad workers toil across the devastated beach to bring a cable out to winch in part of a ship, their supervisor stands with a diminutive umbrella as shade and inadequate, if welcome, shelter. The pictures emphasise the camaraderie of labour but also its very precarious existence. Stallabrass argues there is an invocation of religious imagery where:

> these involuntary neophytes are sacrificed to the numerous deities -- commodities and corporations -- of the capitalist cosmos. In this sense, to present workers as battling against forces beyond their control is to tell an uncomfortable truth. While humanity may be one, the gods, like those of the ancient world, are many and warring, and reckless in the use of their human charges (page 152)

The human figures are oppressed and outscaled by the huge materials -- in visions not of progress or technological triumph, but capitalism as disaster. As time-images these are an archaeology of the contemporary ruins of capitalism.

A different emphasis but the same genre can be found with Brendan Corr whose photoessay 'End of the line' (2006) illustrates the powerful visual rhetoric that can be deployed in this way – focusing upon the labour process set against the scale of the ships. His work is regularly re-used in the press and by NGOs such as Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide when it celebrated a recent court victory reasserting environmental controls over the Bangladeshi ship breaking industry (http://www.elaw.org/news/advocate/2009-spring). His online gallery shows 22 pictures taken on the Chittagong beaches, of which 18 are captioned with references to the tasks and injuries suffered by 'salvage workers', and one more refers to a mother and daughter depicted scavenging the cinders left by the cutting torches on the beach. The work focuses not upon the connective flows of material from west to global south but upon the vulnerable and overwhelmed bodies of the workers – such as in moving portraits of a worker scarred by hot material from cutting or with a cataract from lack of protection. Even in pictures that offer mid-range shots of the scene on the beach, revealing the jagged and strange outlines of half destroyed ships the captions emphasise the workers – one picture of a half dismantled ship is actually focused upon the diminutive figure of the worker atop it, and is captioned 'worker silhouetted'. The dynamic of scale revolves around the bodies of the workers so that the ships' bulk sets off the human fragility. Thus the picture captioned 'worker emerging from the hull of a supertanker' depicts a square access hole with a figure emerging – but the hole is set as the bottom tenth of the image, with the huge bulk of the corroded metal of a ship's hull totally filling the rest of the frame, so the focusing worker occupies less than 5% of the image. A contrast might be the recent work of the local photographer and National Geographic award winner Saiful Huq Omi (2009), schooled in photojournalism after Salgado, which deliberately works to centre and humanize workers through named portraits, captioned with stories of horrific injuries, leaving the ships as distant background.

Sean Smith's pictures from Chittagong are closer to Omi's portraiture, with close ups of workers at work. But the documentary is both personal and yet general. The particular workers are the focus and yet they also become 'everyman.' The risky and dangerous work appears but it is the workers that are the focus. So a young cutter appears in full length portrait, where we do not see the actual work but are left to infer the lack of protective clothing and so forth through the incongruity of the soiled, cheap (Bangladeshi made) fashion clothes being worn (Figure 1). What comes across in the images is a materiality of labour process, where the workers are dirty, the place is dirty and the sense of the 45 degree heat is palpable. As a group of workers drag a cable across to a ship, we see their feet sink into the glutinous, contaminated beach (Figure 2). Sean Smith's sense of camaraderie and labour offers a vision that speaks more to the materiality of the beach as workplace than in the global waste flows of ships. The visualities here of labour and vulnerable bodies in these photo-documentaries chime with the mobilization of ship breaking in NGO politics. The realist vision of these photographers, as in Salgado's almost typological framing, risks though depicting the workers as living in a remote and alien world, materially unconnected to our own.

FIGURES 1& 2 ROUND HERE

Residual landscapes: Industrial Ruins and Time Images

As Cairns notes, many photographic works on the Chittagong beaches are more ambivalent than disaster documents with pictures showing the danger and contamination but also 'the sculptural beauty of the ships, both as grand machines when first grounded and as skeletal remains during the latter stages of their dismantling' (Cairns, 2007, page 267, see figure 3).

The paper turns to that focus upon abject materials here. Photography that speaks to the materiality of waste and its connection with our consumer society has in some cases focused upon the sheer quantity, indeed enumeration of the materials, forming a numerical sublime. This paper instead looks at Edward Burtynsky who instead includes both the scale of processed but also the awful scope and power those forces for a dynamic sublime. Burtynsky's work on industrially altered landscapes for the last 30 years offers a rich sense of the material recomposition of wastes. Over that period his corpus of work extols the material counterpoint of urbanisation and industrialization – looking at the degraded environment as the negative image of cities and factories. His work focuses upon the sources and destinations of the material flows of, increasingly globalised, industrialisation. In this sense he works with what he calls the residual landscape of the consequences of capitalism.

FIGURE 3 ROUND HERE

His recent work picks out different points in the global circulation of commodities, so that he offers 'a chronicle of rarely seen points in the biography of everyday things and work environments. Presented as a kind of material culture of globalization' (Campbell, 2008, page 40). As Solnit (2007, page 168) argues, this offers a 'truly ecological photography… tracing the life of a commodity all the way from extraction to disposal.' He maintains a studied ambiguity, aesthetic and ideological, about the epic scale and grandeur of industry and sites of extraction as an industrial sublime. But equally there is a terror in his sublime – these are truly awful scenes. He plays on both the grandeur and the horror. 'My images borderline the surreal and become disarming -- because they leave the viewer to wander between recognizable and unfamiliar territories' (in Campbell 2008, page 42). Burtynsky plays around the balance between questions of beauty (the awe) and the questions of ethics (the awful) as

Cammaer (2009, page 121-22) puts it, with his painterly concern for composition jarring with the 'more realist sense of gigantic damage done to nature by worldwide industrialization, and the devastating ecological and social consequences of globalization.' The debt owed to the industrial landscape sublime in painting is clear in both content (Haworth-Booth, 2003) but also in the intent to slow viewing from the snapshot to contemplation (Burtynsky, 2003, page 48).

This is not exposé or reportage. Rather the power of the images comes from their ambiguity and lack of didacticism, which leads to the experiential 'horror' of encountering the 'detritus of our existence' in what initially appears to be abstract painting (Bozak, 2008/2009, page 69). Burtynsky disavows an intent to editorialise about what is right and wrong, being more determined to leave the pictures open to multiple readings in different registers – aesthetic, political, ecological, technological and more (Torosian, 2003, page 49).

> 'To me, what is interesting as an artist, or mediator, is to reconnect to the sources of our lifestyle, to find a way to capture the immensity of scale and activity there, but not in what most think of as a purely "documentary" fashion [about a specific example but choosing one] that somehow has a special quality that allows me as a photographer to transform it into something that goes well beyond the thing itself.'
> (Burtynsky cited in Campbell, 2008, page 42)

The pictures focus less upon indexical truth claims (that this happened there), but iconic symbols (the process at large). The referent's hold on the pictures is weakened in order to enhance the aesthetic quality (Cammaer, 2009, page 122). This is not just about making the pictures beautiful. Rather Burtynsky uses form to connect with the larger and abstract, both quantitatively and conceptually (Figure 4). This is partly done by reproducing the pictures at large scale, both to stage the scale of the process but also allow the details such as the cutter

to become apparent, yet remain minute. So his work is marked out by use of large format cameras and large format pictures with static and formally composed subjects. This affects his photographic practice and vision, as he uses a:

> 8x10 large-format "bellows" camera… Burtynsky has to use a tripod to stabilize the camera; a black focusing cloth is also necessary (to darken the image reflected on the camera's exposed ground glass plate while the practitioner adjusts focus). The symbolic logic of this artistic practice -- the artist stooped beneath the black shroud, finger poised on the cable release button, faithful to an old-fashioned mode of photography -- suggests a defiance of the reckless forward momentum of industrialization. (Bozak, 2008/2009, page 71)

So watching him work on Chittagong beach standing on the contaminated sands, with camera hood over head, he appears like some colonial throwback. It evokes 'the expeditionary images of ancient monuments in exotic lands taken by nineteenth century photographers' (Baker, 2003, page 51). Like colonial imagery what appears are impersonal documents and tableau denuded of their geographical specificity. But rather than repress the connections of viewer and viewed, as colonial photography did, here the images serve to restage the repression of global connections.

The detachment allows an aestheticisation and denies an overt critical positioning that can be troubling in the face of industrial civilization's environmental incursions (Bozak, 2008/2009). It is telling that in Jennifer Baichwal's documentary on Burtynsky, the film oscillates between trying to emulate the open spectator position encouraged by the pictures and providing narration to both picturing and the pictured that is otherwise absent (Cammaer, 2009). Baichwal suggested that the film did 'what [the images] could not do, "which was to follow the narratives that exist in all the photographs and be able to focus on the detail that

makes up that picture," the detail of human lives' (in Bozak, 2008/2009, page 68), like Dill-Riaz's documentary, the individual stories are more pronounced than the more open visual impact of the still pictures. The ambiguous detail of the half seen worker, or ladder leaning against a ship, is replaced by more filled out human stories.

Burtynsky's pictures of industrial ruins figure materiality through their topic, composition and ontology. First, the topic is material transformations, landscapes and processes – all be that in a negative sense for the 'depletion zone' (Zehle, 2008) of extractive industries. The studied ambiguity addresses altered nature without immediately judging it against an aesthetic standard of pristine nature but also without invoking the picturesque focus upon the irregular and unplanned (Ackerman, 2003). There is here a dynamic sublime about the power of industrial materiality. Second, the composition has a democratic distribution of light and space (Burtynsky, 2003, page 52; Baker, 2003) that moves it away from an anthropocentric perspective. The pictures often disorient senses of scale and dislocate any human focal point. The point of view creates, in Deleuze's terms, a nomadic *nomos* which distributes materials across a space without precise limits rather than centred Aristotelian space (Olkowski, 1997, page 478). The disorientating effect means 'they seem almost allegorical, ant like men fragmenting the colossi that are the only relief in that vast, flat expanse' (Solnit, 2007, page 138). For instance, Shipbreaking #8 (Figure 5) shows an almost classical landscape composition with horizon setting off a water edged scene and choreographed, toting a thick rope that begins and ends outside the picture frame' (Diehl, 2006, page 121). This does not foreground the labour process nor do the tiny human figures focus these pictures. 'The people in these images are there only to "remind us of their insignificance." … by rendering people almost as abstract figures, [Burtynsky] emphasizes the dehumanizing dimensions of industrialization' (Bozak, 2008/2009, page 68).

However at a third level the pictures also have a specific ontology of materiality. These images attend to the actual material recomposition of the ships on the beaches of Chittagong, and the very substance of the wastes. They speak to material changes and transformation offering not just movement-images of globalization but time-images of the life of things (Deleuze, 1989). To make an obvious but helpful contrast then they speak to waste not through organic decay but physical entropy (see Figure 3). Thus, they do not speak to the cyclical time found in work on organic waste invoke decay and rebirth (Pauli, 2003a, page 24). In Chittagong #8 as Diehl (2006, page 121) (Figure 5) suggests instead 'the massive odd-shaped sculptural elements in this play of light and shadow suggest the ruins of an ancient metropolis unknown to Westerners.'

FIGURE 5 ROUND HERE

Conclusions

Ship breaking offers both a movement-image and a time-image for global capitalism. It speaks to a world in flow, as an object that is mobile, bound to our consumer society and whose wasting is expelled from the body social. As such it evokes an affective appeal in melancholy registers regarding the 'death' of ships. The temporality we might look to is again then that of the ruin in that they are evocative of a lost order. At one level the aesthetic register one might expect is that of the melancholy picturesque – that combination of sadness yet also reflection (Brady & Haapala, 2003) -- either about the environmental damage done, or the death of the great ships. While Burtynksy has said he is interested in the 'ruins of our society' as both melancholy and monumental (Zehle, 2008, page 111), his shipbreaking

pictures do not lend themselves to that melancholy reflective moment so easily. There are some intriguing parallels with the temporalities of Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838) showing a once proud ship tugged away to be dismantled (Diehl, 2006, page 121 ; Pauli, 2003b, page 24) but more with *Rain, Steam and Speed* (1844) as a depiction of industrial process in motion as a time-image of industrial society. While both Turner and Burtynsky depict people lost in their environment with those in command nowhere in evidence, Turner was documenting the birth of the industrial world, Burtynsky shares with Salgado a more elegiac sense of the limits of that process, depicting the timespaces of creative destruction. The slowness and vastness of Burynsky's images offer a 'figure of temporalization' that 'reverse time's subordination to movement and show time for itself' (Deleuze 1989, pages 109-110). So Burtynsky's:

> "Shipbreaking" photographs, like all his works, appear to us as images of the end of time. The abandoned mines and quarries, the piles of discarded tires, the endless fields of oil derricks, the huge monoliths of retired tankers show how our attempts at industrial "progress" often leave a residue of destruction. Nevertheless there is something uncannily beautiful and breath taking in the very expansiveness of these images – it is as if the vastness of their perspective somehow opens onto the longer view of things.' (Pauli, 2003b, page 33)

The sense of both the monumental and loss of control then creates an industrial landscape sublime (Haworth-Booth, 2003) that speaks to both kinds of Kant's sublime – the mathematical and the dynamic. But this is an altered nature (Brady 2008, page 8). Now in confronting not the natural but the human altered environment Burtynsky's work marks a self-conscious shift from linking the natural with the sublime.

More especially the use of the imagery of ship destruction, in its dirty, destructive depravity acts as a shocking reminder of our inescapable connections to material flows and transformations. The focus on shipbreaking by NGOs is driven by the appalling labour condition and environmental damage through the process, but also the affective charge such images enable. The Chittagong beaches become icons, circulating a counter discourse of anti-globalisation and contesting the logics of capital. They represent the nadir of globalization:

> 'These places look inhuman for their scale and for their poisons and hazards, but they are the landscapes on which most humans now depend. It may be industrial civilization is predicated on blindness and alienation, on not knowing … [what makes] your pleasant first world urban/suburban existence impossible, for that knowledge might at least make that existence a little less pleasant' (Solnit 2007, page 135)

However while the texts of the various NGO reports tend to point the reader towards a singular interpretation grounded in assumed common values about "environmentalism" and "exploitation" the photographic representation of ship breaking can stimulate conflicting responses with senses of beauty, and even hope in the work (Cairns, 2007, page 275). In the work of Smith or Salgado the dismantling here offers more of a *punctum* into the process of capitalism. Their humanistic and documentary imperatives contrast with the aesthetically modified sublime or ruinous sense of the material object in Burtynsky which emphasise materiality and destruction.

Burtynsky's images mobilise an industrial sublime, that brings the materiality and transformative processes to the fore. It therefore both fits and does not fit the classic sublime. As with Kant's original it demands a detached viewing and thus a detached observer. As such

it risks 'a convenient formalism that engenders the politics of quietism, one might, in the sense of a 'political' sublime, see also a withdrawal that in turn makes visible a space of witnessing that is not coincident with a particular form of agency' (Zehle, 2008, page 113). There is little in this treatment to intimate that the small sometimes incidental figures are poorly paid laborers engaged in a dangerous occupation (Diehl, 2006, page 121). In that sense it speaks to a problematically cosmopolitan subject, a citizen of the world, a privileged viewer, who floats free of the graft and struggles depicted. However, it also reminds us of material transformation as a necessary and ongoing part of our world, intrinsically linked to global consumption. Unlike much documentary work it retains an attachment to the sensuality of the world (Solnit, 2007, page 139). Materiality here is the abject underbelly of global industry, its waste refound and refigured. By creating a pause for reflection, in a classic aesthetic maneuver, it opens the possibility for our discomfort as well as engagement. Burtynsky has said one reason for the large scale of his pictures is to let those details draw the viewer in. The human detail is the *punctum*, an absence marking presence, demanding attention (Olin, 2002, page 110). The workers are not looking back at us, rather our gaze is held by the ruination of the material. In decentering the ethnographic lens on remote and abject labour, do we risk the erasure of workers under the metaphor of material destruction? Does the entropic time-image, and the allusion to sublime forces naturalise the process? This paper suggests that may be a risk worth taking if the allusive, diminutive figures restage globally abject labour's relation to globally abject waste.

Acknowledgements

Online galleries for photography about Chittagong shipbreaking

Andrew Bell's online gallery contains a god selection from his 'Steel Beach' exhibition on Chittagong

http://andrewbell.net.au/shipBreaking.html

Brendan Corr's online gallery contains an album entitled 'shipbreaking'

www.brendancorrphotography.co.uk

Edward Burtynsky has exhibited Shipbreaking pictures from Chittagong in numerous contexts and collections, the most comprehensive collection is under works on ships/ shipbreaking at his main site:

http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/

Saiful Huq Omi's work can be found on his web site under portfolios 'Life in a Shipbreaking Yard'

http://www.saifulhuq.com/

Sean Smith, 12 pictures in his photoessay from the breaking Yards can be accessed here

http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/gallery/2008/apr/02/bangladesh

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Figure 1
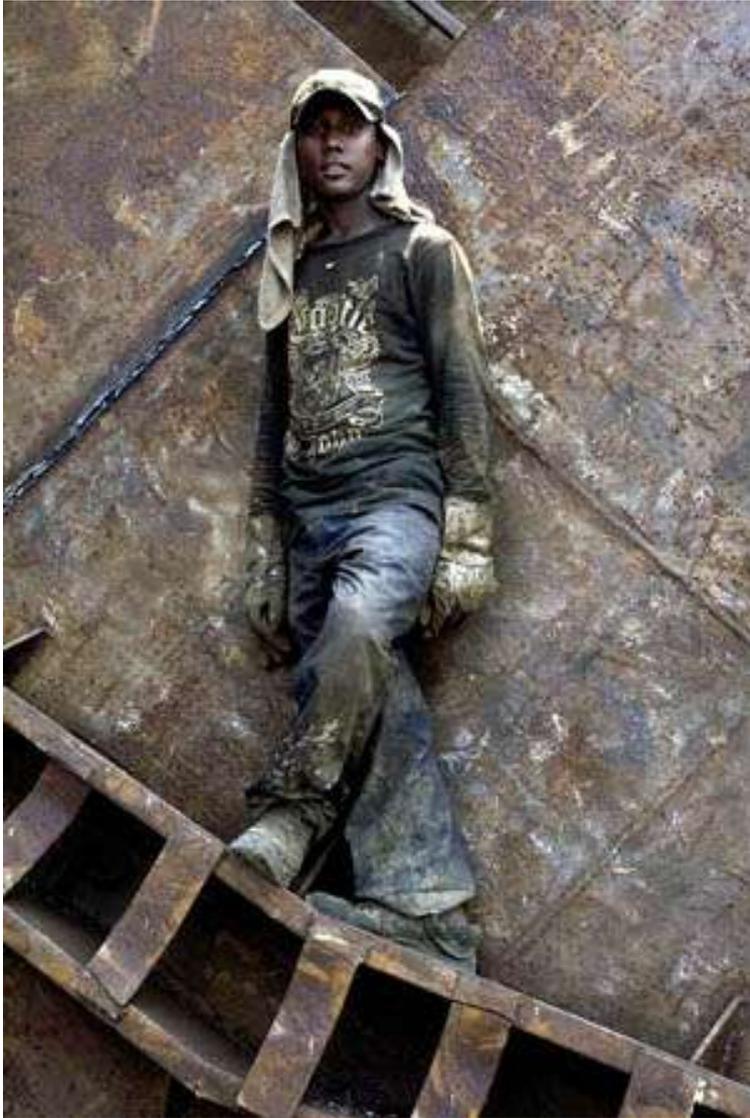
Sean Smith, untitled © Guardian News & Media Ltd 2008

Figure 2

Sean Smith, untitled © Guardian News & Media Ltd 2008

Figure 3

Edward Burtynsky Shipbreaking No. 13, Chittagong, Bangladesh 2000

© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Flowers East Gallery, London

Figure 4

Shipbreaking No. 27 with Cutter, Chittagong, Bangladesh 2001

© Edward Burtynsky, courtesy Flowers East Gallery, London

Figure 5

Edward Burtynsky, Shipbreaking No. 8, Chittagong, Bangladesh 2000

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