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Slide 1: → I'm Mike and I am going to be speaking a little bit about photography and ecology today. Working with ecology and environmental theory, my thesis is an exploration of landscape and nature photography through the work of James Balog. I am going to talk a little about Balog's landscape photos, repeat photography, its history, its relationship to the notion of wilderness, and how it might be used to rethink it.

Intro

(**Slide 2**) In the summer of 2004, while on assignment to photograph the icy tundras of Greenland, environmental photographer James Balog had an idea inspired by time-lapse photography: He realized that if he were able to methodically take enough photographs of the same glaciers from the same position, the resulting images could be turned into time-lapse photograph sets that could be compared with one another, demonstrating glacial movement. Using photography this way, he would be able to provide visual proof of global warming, which some thinkers like Rob Nixon consider to be a “slow violence” that lacks the spectacle necessary to make events urgent to the public.

Balog is a former student of geology turned landscape photographer for National Geographic, The Wild Foundation, and Nikon. Photography was only a hobby he honed during his hiking and backpacking expeditions for field research, later becoming his main occupation. Balog believes that ice—particularly glaciers—are a “symbol of our times.”¹

In 2006 Balog created the Extreme Ice Survey (abbreviated EIS—German for *ice*), sponsored by The Wild Foundation, which he describes as a “long-term photography project that

¹ Terry Gross and James Balog, “Environmental Photographer Focuses on the Climate and its People,” *Fresh Air*, August 2019, NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2019/02/06/691967491/environmental-photographer-focuses-on-protecting-the-climate-and-its-people>

merges art and science to give a ‘visual voice’ to the planet’s changing ecosystems.”² The overarching mission, in his words, is to create “the most comprehensive glacial documentary photography project ever undertaken.”³ The EIS’s work is ongoing, continuing through today and ostensibly into the future, with their team continually monitoring the same glaciers for now over a decade. Balog felt that data, graphs, and scientific models did not adequately convey the reality of climate change. Instead, he sought to provide an alternative mechanism for communicating climate change through “incontrovertible photographic evidence” of its occurrence that could “speak for itself.”⁴ To do this, Balog turned to cameras to amend what he calls the “perceptual problems” of global warming and seeks to make visible “what is happening *now*” but exists “outside normal human imagination.”⁵ Indeed, Balog sees the camera as “an integral sensing mechanism of the human animal” calling photographs “the antennas of civilization” capable of making people see things differently, changing their minds through the perceived primacy of photographic perception.⁶

With 28 cameras set up to photograph 13 glaciers on 3 different continents, Balog employs, among people, “robot-cameras,” which snap open every half-hour during daylight, producing over 8,000 frames per camera per year. His project is ongoing and alive to this day, with updated photographs of the glaciers he studies being published around every 4 years. To date, Balog and his team have captured almost 2 million images. His work has been featured by NASA and three times at the U.N. Conferences on Climate Action.

Photographs by Balog and his team tend to fit into three types of photography: (1) wide-angle landscape photography that resonates most closely with the traditional landscape

² Extreme Ice Survey, October 22 2019, www.ExtremeIceSurvey.org

³ James Balog, *Portraits of Vanishing Glaciers*, 2014.

⁴ Fred Richtin and James Balog, “Of Art and Ice: James Balog,” (New York 2010), p. 3.

⁵ Ibid, 5

⁶ Ibid.

photography of those such as Timothy O’Sullivan, George Grant, Herbert Ponting, and so on, (2) close-up ‘portraiture’ of ice, centering the ice in each photograph, shown with a curious mix of detail and abstraction, and (3) repeat photography, which is a subset of (1), used extensively in ecological restoration.

My full thesis is well beyond the scope of this presentation, so I’ll talk a little about landscape photography and why on its own it is problematic for thinking ecologically before moving to repeat photography to explain its potential for ecological engagement.

Landscape Photo

(Slide 3) Balog’s landscape photographs like the one pictured here (*Columbia Glacier, Alaska* 2007) share a relationship to the American notion of ‘the wilderness.’ Balog’s photograph contains a clear embodied distance related to the ‘over there’ depicted by the recession into space toward a vanishing point, emphasized by the black cryoconite lines in the glacier that disappear into the distance. There is a generalization of the environment contained with landscape photographs. The photograph also demonstrates the massive scale and power of the manifestations of nature like glaciers and mountains, rivaling each other for dominance in the photograph.

The American notion of ‘wilderness’ is understood by environmental theorists as pristine, a feeling rather than a specific location, inspiring awe from an encounter with the power of Nature to forge and create, and is always ‘over there’ rather than right here. Balog’s photographs—as with most landscape photographs—contain the immensity of glaciers and carry the ‘over there’ associated with wilderness to its visual conclusion: a wide, distanced view of the environment that is “expansive” and “dropping away from you.” Unlike traditional landscape photographs, which contained objects and people “for scale” to lend more scientific credibility to the photograph, Balog’s landscape photographs intentionally leave humans and other objects for

scale absent, leaving the attention of the viewer firmly on the manifestations of nature, furthering the idea that what we see is untouched by humans. This erasure of the human reaffirms the notion of wilderness as pristine and fundamentally external to humans. But this obfuscates the shared relationship between humans and the environment, perpetuating a dichotomy between what is ‘here’ and ‘over there.’

(Slide 4) Likewise, Balog’s portraits of “Ice Diamonds”—the diamond-like shards of melted glaciers that wash along the shores of a beach in Iceland— leave humans absent from visibility as well. This careful omission suggests that the visible material ‘actants’ of sand, water, and ice form the ice diamonds on their own instead of its actual cause—global warming and melting glaciers. These portraits fail to connect the “ice diamonds” to their cause, instead leading the viewer to marginalize, if not entirely exclude, the role of the human in what is created in the photograph. Balog’s work again depicts a kind of wilderness—a nature absent of humans—that seeks to refocus attention on the creative capacity of nature and objects rather than the impact of humans. As I suggest, this amounts to a kind of speculative photography—an Object-Oriented Photography—that reanimates the notion of wilderness by emphasizing the actants’ capacity to create and their existence as external to humans. But for imagery dedicated to providing irrefutable visual evidence of climate change, both Balog’s singular landscape photographs and portraits of ice obfuscate the role of the human involved with what is represented.

The combination of photographs and text in Balog’s work that successfully connect the environment depicted to its human causes are found in his repeat photographs. Repeat photography is the practice of taking a photograph in one point in time, leaving an interval of some amount, and trying to reproduce it by assuming the same position as the original photographer to take a photograph of the same space. Repeat photography requires the passage

of time and thought. Although it is a practice with decidedly scientific application, it is equally a practice of continual self-criticality, as it necessitates contemplation, reflection, and reassessment. I want to suggest that because of this, repeat photography challenges the ‘wilderness’ rather than visually reinscribes it like his singular landscape photographs do.

Balog’s repeat photography project is predicated on a continual “checking in” on ecosystems. Unlike other repeat photography projects which can have a century or more between photographs—Balog’s compulsive and methodical photography project enables what Douglas Weiner calls “an environmentalism of continual self-criticism.”⁷ This process of self-reflection is immanent to photography itself. As James Elkins explains, in a photograph “there exists a strange stasis, a stasis of arrest. In the forced and unpleasant stillness, I recognize myself seeing.”⁸ Repeat photography promotes self-reflection and sustained attention to detail—indispensable features of a sufficiently critical ecological engagement.

(Slide 5) As is clear in the photographs from 2007 to 2012, Columbia Glacier—once a massive manifestation of the force of wilderness—is shown shrunken and receded. While historically glaciers were seen both as “sites touched by God’s magic” and “fearful reminders of the indiscriminate forces of nature”, they now exist as an endangered species. The myth of the wilderness as untouched by humans and radically external becomes untenable in repeat photography. By revealing the vulnerability of wilderness sites—once thought to be ‘over there’, pristine, and where the full authority of Nature can be imagined and felt—repeat photography disintegrates the notion of a providential wilderness ideal, particularly in the case of Balog’s work which discloses the rapid recession of glaciers all around the world. By doing this, these photographs efface the already tenuous distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’, reminding viewers

⁷ Douglas Weiner, “Demythologizing Environmentalism,” *History of Biology*, 1994. p. 410

⁸ *Ibid*, 55

that their actions ‘here’ are profoundly interconnected with the places and ecosystems ‘there.’ As Anna Tsing says, “as certain tales lose traction, it becomes possible to *look differently*.”⁹

(Slide 6) This is in part because of the imperative inherent to repeat photography to check in on ecosystems, relook at them, allow oneself to look differently at them, and recognize that they too are not static, external authorities but shifting and adapting assemblages of biota and abiota. Balog’s work instills an environmentalism of continual self reflection—the kind “best equipped to prevent harmful myths from ossifying and rooting themselves in the social tissue,” myths like the ‘wilderness.’¹⁰ We can use repeat photography to subvert the familiar because of what it engenders as a practice rather than purely as evidence. It has the potential to contest wilderness by demonstrating connectivity and necessitates an ongoing relationship predicated on looking and relooking, which reveals the dynamic quality of ecosystems, breaking the transhistorical notion of wilderness and the dichotomy it produces between here and there.

Seeing glaciers anew is the project of Balog and EIS. Seeing and looking again is the result of the imperative observational attitude repeat photography engenders. Quite literally, when observing repeat photographs one must physically look, relook, and shuttle between the two again and again for any change (or lack thereof) in the photographs to become legible. Repeat photography necessarily invites *looking differently*, to look anew, again and again. New notions of wilderness can be formed through this act of looking again, opening the space for alternative understandings of Nature, ecology, and environment outside the dominant ones to gain more substantial traction, refiguring and complicating the wilderness of the environmental imaginary.

⁹ Anna Tsing, *Mushrooms at the End of the World: The Possibility of Life in Late Capitalist Ruins*, (California 2015), 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 412.

By virtue of the medium and practice itself, repeat photography insists upon a will to remember, especially in regard to marginal ecosystems like glaciers. They are, as Pierre Nora describes, “intentionally produced by a society for their future reproduction—a tether between the once past and the at hand.”¹¹ The digital image archives are references that provide traces of how wilderness has changed—contesting the immutability associated with it. This predication on engagement and ecological care enlists human intervention and action through time. Unlike Balog’s other photographs, they implicate the human. Environmental damage is no singular event, it is a slow process of negotiation between humans and nonhumans determined by social relations that extend through time—and photography the means by which to comprehend it.

(Slide 7) Repeat photographs task the viewer with self-reflection by relying heavily on the viewer’s own cognitive faculties to complete the comparisons between the images, to become aware of the process of looking and relooking as a mode of ecological care. An intimate relationship is formed between details within photographs and one’s own imagination in the interplay between them. Balog’s repeat photographs of glacial landscapes try, for their efforts, to make visible the “unrepresentable slow violence of environmental degradation.”¹² As previously demonstrated, Balog’s repeat photography of glaciers envisions part of this supposedly unrepresentable dimension of environmental damage. It is through repeat photography and its imperative to reconsider, to self reflect, and sustain attention to detail that Balog’s glacial imagery contains in it the potential for looking and thinking differently about the environment.

Repeat photography is endless and compulsive and that is exactly how our relationship to environments should be: there will be no end point, no final omniscient position, no eternal inhuman view from which we may peer in at the world, detached from all our entanglements, to

¹¹ Ibid, 23.

¹² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, (New Jersey 2017), p. 14

see the world ‘as it really is.’ Likewise, stewardship has no terminal destination of ecological stasis. It is an ongoing engagement and practice that can never be solved or finalized—its only immutable condition: uncertainty. Its relations: contingent. For if there is uncritical acceptance of certain myths too readily—like a transhistorical notion of wilderness—there is a risk of ossifying it, allowing it to establish itself in the fibers of institutions, inscribed still further by human hands.

I recall working as a steward at a mining site that was restored by an ecologist in western Illinois. We set out each morning with our localized pesticides, axes, and shearing blades out into the forested woodlands. Any invasive we spotted we cut, shredded the roots, and applied the pesticide. It was an involvement of my cognition (being able to identify plants) and my physical body in a sustained relationship with the nonhuman. There was no end to this practice. There were always too many buckthorns, the woods were always overgrown with autumn olives, and the forest floor was always covered with too many garlic mustard (all invasive). There cannot be an expectation to “solve” the environment or reach an end goal, for any solution to environmental problems is only temporary, as the environment is itself always shifting and being shifted, and along with it us.

What are Balog’s photographs if not the opportunity to look back and forward, to look differently, and to see ourselves in the ice and confront the imbalance of the current system’s relationship to greater environmental health? However, we lose this self critical dimension if we understand what we see as merely data, means to an end, or if we view the contents of the images as the product of a purely externalized Nature rather than an ongoing negotiation—of which we remain a part, even as stewards.

(Slide 8)

