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Exhibition Review

Where the World is Melting:

Arctic Heroism in the Photographs of Ragnar Axelsson

Where the World is Melting is the title of the exhibition on the Icelandic photographer Ragnar Axelsson, shown at the *Versicherungskammer der Kulturstiftung* in Munich from 15 December 2021 – 18 April 2022. In his monochrome photographs, the artist, who is also the author of numerous books, presents the endangered lives of people and animals in the Arctic Circle. Axelsson's photographs document everyday impressions from the artist's travels to Iceland, Greenland and Siberia and are grouped into thematic sections within the exhibition. The section *Arctic Heroes*, which is also the title of an illustrated book by Axelsson published in 2020, functions as the thematic background of the exhibition. However, visitors expecting to see photographs of past and present polar expeditions will be disappointed, as Axelsson confronts us with a completely different kind of Arctic heroism. The black and white photographs direct our attention to the voids in polar heroic narratives and thus in our cultural imaginaries of the Arctic by featuring sled dogs, indigenous hunters and fishermen.

The imagination of the Arctic as an endless stage on which the white male hero can act out extraordinary deeds has been inscribed in the cultural memory of the Western world since the polar conquests of the 19th and early 20th century. As a result of the expansionist ambitions of Europe and the USA, the idea of the Arctic as an empty white expanse is colonially marked. It testifies to an ignorance about the living beings who made the polar voyages possible in the first place, i.e., people and non-human beings who had lived in the Arctic before. The persistent imagination of the Arctic as a stable and reliable stage on which to perform heroic acts also ignores the climate-related threats to the region which severely affect the Arctic ice and make life increasingly difficult for its inhabitants. Axelsson, who is currently working on a project on climate-related destruction in eight Arctic states, makes the invisible interconnectedness of

Arctic people with nature visible. In doing so, he questions the historical shaping of our imagination of the region and its underlying values.

By banishing the Western explorer from the centre of his icy landscapes, Axelsson's photographs become the place where the viewer encounters alternative heroic figures such as animal protagonists. Especially the sled dogs – sometimes photographed as a black silhouette against the endless white of the snow, sometimes seemingly approaching the surface of the image and confronting us, or slumped to the ground exhausted from their perilous journeys in the ice – appear full of wisdom, commitment and loyalty. The artist calls these animals the greatest heroes “the North has ever known, heroes who have made it possible for mankind to reach both poles of the earth.” In Axelsson's opinion, the dogs thus deserve to occupy the centre of our perception of the Arctic from now on. This approach to our historic as well as current entanglement with the Arctic and its history forms a sharp contrast to the publications by the popular Arctic voyagers of the 19th and 20th centuries. These usually completely overlooked the commitment and death of many sled dogs – with a few exceptions, such as the Norwegian polar explorer Fridtjof Nansen. Axelsson's photographs are therefore images of awareness, not only of the dogs' achievements, but also of their continuing importance for the Inuits' ways of life and the threatening loss of a unique geographical region.

In addition, Axelsson's photographs are witnesses. They testify to the interconnectedness between Arctic creatures, their environment, and their endangerment by telling stories that the photographer experienced or heard during his travels. The black-and-white photographs, which in size are often reminiscent of history paintings, make the viewer into a kind of eyewitness to an ecological loss as well as to personal tragedies. Moreover, the nostalgic aesthetics evoke the impression of witnessing a loss that has already happened in the past and is now to

mourn. Thus, the historic importance of the sled dogs but also the possibly irretrievable destruction of their ecosystem is communicated.

Anthropomorphisation and dehumanisation are key artistic techniques of climate-critical art. Axelsson makes the sled dogs of Greenland the real protagonists of his Arctic stages. Their facial expressions correspond to those of their human owners (hunters) and vice versa. The exhibition texts tell stories of the animals' ability to communicate with humans under extreme conditions and hardships. We encounter these new heroic figures of the Arctic in the foreground of Axelsson's photographs often in close-ups, whereby feelings of immediacy, connectedness and responsibility are evoked regardless of the nostalgic aesthetics. As a consequence, the landscapes no longer follow an anthropocentric perspective. Instead, we as viewers get entangled in the way of life of the Inuit and their deep connection with their dogs.

Another of Axelsson's methods of re-adjusting an anthropocentric standpoint is his use of a sublime aesthetic. In the tradition of the philosophers Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, chaotic, disordered and boundless landscapes became a popular motif in the literature and arts of the early 19th century. In this context, the author Chauncey Loomis even spoke of a special form of an *Arctic Sublime* to describe the delightful horror and overwhelming effect that has defined our perception of the Arctic and has its roots in the logbooks of early polar voyages.

Axelsson's photographs of vast icescapes have something spectacular about them, because of their panoramic size, the vastness of the icescapes and the often unusual perspective from which the Arctic region is shown. Sometimes, our gaze follows the seemingly horizontal expanse of the landscape; at other times we seem to be looking down on the ice topography below us like one of Axelsson's birds of prey. Animal and human perspectives thus intertwine to form an indissoluble unity. Beyond this, the landscape itself is anthropomorphised. Deep cracks in diminishing glacial regions gape like open wounds while at the same time forming abstract patterns. This continuous shift in identification creates a tension between an empathic participation and distanced reflection on the conditions of the ice regions. The evoked fictional immersion of the viewers in Axelsson's Arctic worlds thus also offers space for (self-)critical reflections on climate-related changes on our planet. The photographed Arctic landscapes become in themselves heroic in the sense that the viewer watches their slow death. Our gaze is directed towards a broken world.

The exhibition not only initiates an encounter with the Arctic, or a confrontation with our historically shaped imaginations of the High North; instead, it also gives expression to the artist's personal connection to the region. In the exhibition texts, Axelsson portrays himself as an artist hero whose nature-loving youth has prepared him for the hardships of becoming a climate-critical photographer. The final exhibition texts even bear testimony to the artist's wild ride as a child on an unsaddled white horse through raging glacier streams and also describe a moment of initiation/revelation for the photographer during his first flight over the Arctic ice. What is more, the artist is quoted as being inspired by the adventure stories of "great polar explorers."

In this biographical horizon of the exhibition, Axelsson uses personal storytelling in order to touch the viewers and thus sensitise them to the ecological message of his photographs. We as exhibition visitors become affected witnesses to the Inuits' ways of life as well as the fascinating adventures of the artist's younger self. In addition, we fall for the wondrous character of the wild North. This is probably the only criticism that can be made of the exhibition's conception: The thoroughness with which Axelsson criticises common imaginaries of polar heroism is not extended to the way he presents himself. After all, Axelsson not only inserts himself among his Arctic heroes, but also refrains from any critical reflection on his own complicity in climate-related changes as a member of modern-day life. Essentially, a core problem of climate-critical aesthetics becomes clear in this element of hubris in the exhibition: The need to appeal to the viewers emotionally by using sublime aesthetics, while at the same time replacing the heroic sublayer of meaning with alternative protagonists and a more general reminder of individual responsibility, is contradictory in itself.