

The Future Myth of Ice

Michèle Noach

Like everyone else, I presume, I feel an attraction for zero points, for the axes and points of reference from which the positions and distances of any object in the universe can be determined.

Georges Perec from Species of Spaces (1974)

Into the glaciosphere. Leaving the reddening urban tangle behind and sailing North, glorious North and into the lethal, crystalline white. The vast toothpaste palaces laced with television-blue hieroglyphs, towering above us, threatening and innocent, in the way of all utter beauty.

Twice I have clambered aboard Cape Farewell vessels and headed into the High Arctic: once in 2004 on the *Noorderlicht*, a century-old Dutch schooner upon which we circumnavigated Svalbard (the archipelago halfway between the top of Norway and the North Pole), and again in 2008 on the Finnish research vessel Grigory Mikheev, which took us up north along the West Greenland coast. Twice, heading towards the brass clasp of the toy globe, we dodged icebergs the size of colleges, leaking bleach-blue ink, crackling like kisses. Twice I sank into the Northern reverie that renders you dumb, floundering for adjectives or expletives, when silence is better.

Caveat sailor. Sailing into the ice makes you not want to come back. The daring simplicity of the Arctic challenges you to think any other way of life has meaning, it mocks your ambitions and desires and lays its sublime cards on the ice, trumping any hand you hold. Its oblivion burns too delicious to deny. Its crazy, mindless beauty, its indifference and fragility all conspire to set the spell.

The scientists always got to work right away: they had their measuring devices and were envied by us artists because they could so accurately record their findings. They got busy defining their discoveries with the minutiae of diligent practice. They had solid, irrefutable data, numbers, graphs, volumes. The artists had a sense of the place, but what the hell is that? How to nail this thing? Paralysed with the panic of not knowing what to do, we needn't have worried. Porous sponges, we could not help but absorb great vats of strangeness that the Arctic offered up and like a deck full of alarm clocks, we started ringing one after the other, as ideas and irresistible inspiration set us off.

Scrambling up a very Northern ice-cap, around the 80th parallel, was a literal turning point. Having separated from the others, I climbed to the top of the ice where the sky, sea, air and ground were all the same non-colour. I was nowhere, but stood at the top of the world, like James Cagney, ready to explode with the reality of it. Not right at the top, not at 90°, but because the ice-sheet was curved and there was no-one else visible, looking down, all the world was revolving to the South of me; all the frenetic, histrionic business of living our voracious lives, the hysteric consumer trolley-dash to the finish line, all lay below my feet. I had world vertigo.

And then on a freezing breeze came liberation and peacefulness. There was a very clear sense of where I was: one of the great cooling towers of Earth. A crucial regulator, a thermostat in the world's attic. Like an Ant & Bee drawing, or like the Clangers on their planet, I knew precisely and for the first time, *where* on Earth I was. The whole became apparent and simple. The gorgeousness of the place was clear, but an understanding of what this insane place does for a living was also revealing itself.



Bondhusbræ | Bondhusbreen, Michèle Noach

On that first trip I decided to steal the authoritative templates of science to make pseudo-scientific graphs and charts called *'The Arctic Feel-O-Graphs'*. These measured how the Arctic felt: the one thing that the scientists could not measure. I used lenticulars as a medium because they replicate ice so well: an illusory 3-dimensional medium that captures the translucency of ice, its ability to manipulate light and colour. Lenticulars hint at the information contained, emulating ice (a natural two way mirror, a classic heterotopic space) with its hundreds of thousands of years of data encapsulated in the frozen bubbles of air deep within it, lost to the atmosphere as it melts away. And as the viewer moves, so does the image, making you doubt what you've seen. Your viewpoint affects your viewpoint, so to speak.

After the second expedition, glaciers and their architecture became increasingly puzzling and tantalising to me and during the summer of 2009 I travelled to five further Norwegian glaciers (Brixdals-, Kjennalds-, Suphelle-, Bøya- and Bondhusbreen) to archive their retreat. I had been collecting Norwegian postcards of these specific glaciers, circa 1890-1930. The postcards (dated and geographically located) represent an accurate, and more interestingly, unintentional record of the position and condition of glaciers a century ago, mostly captured in a desire to communicate the romanticism of the area, for tourists, travellers and those abroad who could not reach these places. There are also mysterious figures in the postcards, Norwegian tourists of that era, standing proudly or fearfully, beside these regal frozen tongues that slid down dark mountains to greet them. The compositions seem to hint at nostalgia for a lost ice world before we even knew we were losing it. The anonymous photographers cannot have known they were creating brilliant semi-scientific data that would be of such interest to geographers, scientists, climatologists and artists of the future.

Scoping the faces of the Victorian tourists as they edge their way in front of the creaking glaciers of the theatrically gesturing coast, one searches for some sign that these travellers knew something of what they had started, sensed that they were part of a world culture that was unstoppable, a machine of infinite momentum and appetite. Were they the last of the breed or the first? And could they have wondered already then if that hunger for growth, material wealth, comfort, that wildly, dizzying success of being Modern, would have written in its very DNA its undoing. Or at least, that the racing car of progress had its brakes hardwired to stop, perhaps screeching, two hundred years hence. Had they factored in the Promethean fault-line, the finger wagging of Icarus?

The Industrial Revolution, now well underway, was watching over the first population to assume machinery as part of life, the generation that would be comfortable with dominance over nature on an industrial scale and be absolutely unencumbered by worries of concomitant pollution. And as costumes mutated in the foreground, the hinterland machinery cranked its grinding gears into growing evermore colossal, ubiquitous, irresistible. How vividly we see the dark satanic millinery that dressed the new mercantile rich on their increasingly exotic vacations abroad, whilst the bonded workforce oiled, fed and were eaten by the fabulous mechanical monoliths of the new commercial world. How wonderful - there was now nothing we couldn't do. And until the Titanic and WWI, the twin towers of our loss of innocence, all bets were on. No mote of doubt would arrest this thrilling explosion of industry. The future, including nature, the very world's fabric, was ours. No room for cynicism, Luddites be damned, We Can All Have Everything, read all about it. On your slate or your Kindle.



Bøyumsbræ | Bøyabreen, Michèle Noach

This handsome monochrome landscape, drawing admirers from afar to stand in awe of these sensuous iced tendrils adorning the fjordal mountains. The dark chasms lit by ice, brought to enchanted life by the semi-magical phenomena of The Glacier. Supra-compacted ice forming a squeezing organic slo-mo river; a visceral rock, liquid giggling crystal of the mountain's distillery.

A century on and these glaciers have shrunk, admonished by the warmed air. Climate changes are complicated and maritime glaciers expand during warm periods sometimes, due to excessive winter rainfall combined with mild summers, so reading the runes is not straightforward. But in conversations with glaciologists in Norway it was clear, sadly, that the overall arc of data showed a general decline in all the glaciers, with some in very rapid retreat. All the ones I visited had shrunk dramatically, and despite a small flourish in the late 90's all gains have since been lost.

'Through The Ice, Darkly' is a series of 3D lenticular prints based on these travels to the glaciers as they stand now and their old depictions, presented in pairs. My real interest was in capturing the change of atmosphere, archiving how the landscape had altered and how that felt, and not a detailed *before* and *after* comparison of ice mass.

In this series, when representing the revisited glacier sites, I slipped in characters from the old postcards, and had them looking for the vanished ice. Who had taken their glacier? They crossed a century to wander an eerily dark rockscape, as I had, in search of the once terrifying glaciated fronts of ice and moraine, which had in most cases diminished to a trickle of melt water.

Sea-level rise (from melting ice-sheets), drought, flood, hurricanes, populations on the move, crop failure, creeping disease, rising sea temperature (thus more flooding as the seas expand) and the exponential effects of positive feedback (for example permafrost methane release): all this is increasing in frequency around the world, highly visibly and the reduction of the glaciers is just one more teacup to fall off the table.

Is the world ready for what lies beneath the ice? Are we prepared for an unglaciated Norwegian coastline that is bare, dark rock? Is an ice-free Arctic imaginable? How will we describe what ice was like without sounding fanciful? Ice is on course to acquiring mythical status, something that belonged to another age and is hard to imagine, a notional and phantasmic nostalgia.

What did you do when the ice melted?

Absolutely nothing. We stood in static horror at what we'd done - this breathless hubris that resolved into a climate's revolt and we left the children to clear it up.

Was there really ice? What was it like? Was it really that cold and white? Was it soft like Plasticine? What did it taste of? How loud was it when those office blocks of ice collapsed? Was it really like the gods roaring?

Narnia, Ultima Thule and the Snow Queen's realm, these mythic, enchanted worlds we invent and desire: they are real, we have them right here on our doorstep. Magic but ours. And still we insist on turning the production of our luxuries up to 11. Will children in decades to come really believe that ice formed a metamorphic skin on these black rocks? That glaciers hundreds of metres thick squeezed their imperious way down through the future rubble landscape,



Kongsfjord Bræ | Kongsbreen, Michèle Noach

transforming mountains and creating domains of ice-laden valleys. How fantastical might it sound? Cold and clear and cackling and a thousand hues of white, powerful as gravity, delicate as web. Old folks dreaming.

Michael Collins of the Apollo 11 space mission said Earth was a fragile gem he'd never considered before he saw it from space. A cyan-emerald gemstone suspended vulnerably in the liquid blackness; he said his primary instinct was to protect it. Why do we always have to go on holiday to get perspective? Why to the moon to see the Earth? We are magnificent. The very least we are capable of is housekeeping.

These souls wandering around the glaciers and again a hundred years later, the empty glacial valleys: They mid-wifed the CO2 exhaling monster, the flatulent ogre of our comfort and wealth that had life breathed into it by our very competence, ingenuity, creativity. Oh, what was wrought? To this day we can't bear the thought of being rent apart from this guarantee of infinite output, excellence, material wealth, property, profit and propulsive progress. Our attachment, so undentable, so *understandable*, is now our weakness - we are growth junkies.

Please, *please*, someone ration me.



Kjendalsbræ | Kjenndalsbreen, Michèle Noach