

Ironic Encounters in the Anthropocene: Jürgen Nefzger's Nuclear Landscape Photography

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the question of how art may help us to map and, indeed, inhabit the problematic subject position that the Anthropocene confronts us with. I focus on the landscape photography collected in Jürgen Nefzger's *Fluffy Clouds* (2010) and its use of irony to obstruct the power dynamics at work in traditional landscape aesthetics. I suggest that *Fluffy Clouds* helps

us to think subjectivity in the Anthropocene from a non-unitary position, i.e. a position that is not based on notions of individuality and identity, but is by default relational. My reading will be helped by Ernst van Alphen's interpretation of perspective as a subject-constituting device and Paul de Man's notion of the twofold, ironic self.

Introduction

While the Anthropocene has not yet been officially accepted as a new geological epoch, debates about when exactly this “new age of man” began are already filling the pages of scientific journals and daily newspapers. Just recently, on August 29 this year, an international working group of 35 scientists lead by the geologist Jan Zalasiewicz submitted their official recommendation to the International Geological Congress in Cape Town to date the beginning of the Anthropocene epoch to the mid-twentieth century. This is the time when the so-called “Great Acceleration” started, the postwar boom period in which the human population and its energy demands grew exponentially. Moreover, it is around that time that the increasing number of atomic tests created a “globally distributed primary artificial radionuclide signal” in the earth’s sediments (Zalasiewicz et al. 196 f.), providing probably the sharpest marker for a new geological division.¹

Although other (mostly climate-related) dates proposed in this context may seem to be more consistent with the trajectories of the conversation held in the sciences (for a quick survey, see Rafferty), I suggest that to engage with the set of ecological, political, and ethical problems that the Anthropocene denotes, we should stick with the mid-twentieth century for two reasons. First, the Great Acceleration marks a point of no return. Although prepared by the Industrial Revolution, it is only in the second half of the twentieth century that the ecological predicaments we face today became manifest. Second, the advent of nuclear technology and its disastrous environmental and social record helped to initiate the multiple epistemological shifts that accompany these predicaments.

In this article, I would like to focus on one particular shift: The growing collective awareness that to *dominate* the relation we have entered with a substance like uranium (we extract energy from it) does not imply that we are—cognitively and physically—*in control* of other possible relations that arise from it. I situate myself here within a line

1. To take human-generated radionuclides as geological marker allows scientists to make an extremely precise claim about the Anthropocene’s onset. Two papers published by members of the working group suggest 16 July 1945. This is the day when the world’s first nuclear bomb exploded at Alamogordo, New Mexico (Steffen et al.; Zalasiewicz et al.).

in the Anthropocene debate recently sketched by Timothy Clark in his book *Ecocriticism on the Edge*, which deals with the human inability to perceive higher levels of complexity. He refers to Braden R. Allenby and Daniel Sarewitz who interpret ecological problems as “unintended effects of interference between events at different levels of complexity” (7), an argument that is prefigured in Ulrich Beck’s characterization of modernity as “a newly uncertain, reflexive stage, the age of ‘unintended consequences’” (2). Timothy Morton aptly illustrates this position when he writes that with the rapid scientific and technological advances in the second half of the twentieth century “our cognitive powers become self-defeating,” and due to the increasing pile of scientific studies the “feeling is rather of the nonhuman out of control, withdrawn from total human access” (*Hyperobjects* 160).

At the center of this argument we find a subject that is bereft of its sovereignty over its relationship with the world, because it is forced to consult science in order to decide what is harmful and what is not. It is a subject that has to constantly navigate through conflicting spheres of information when trying to understand the wider implications of its actions, while having no prospect to settle with any simple truth or solution eventually.

How can we map and, indeed, inhabit this problematic subject position that the Anthropocene confronts us with? I shall explore this question through the nuclear landscape photography collected in Jürgen Nefzger’s *Fluffy Clouds* (2010).² The book comprises 72 analog color photographs of Western European landscapes, each of which hosts a nuclear power plant. The work is particularly interesting to look at in the context of subject-formation in this highly mediated stage of the Anthropocene, because it ironically engages with the power dynamics that are inscribed in the dominant image traditions of European and Western landscape art. In the context of the proliferating use of landscape photography in environmental activism and art, a reflexive, practice-based engagement with this historically complex genre as performed by Nefzger is, I think, indispensable for a substantiated mapping of the present.

2. I would like to thank the artist and the Galerie Françoise Paviot for allowing me to use images from the artwork in my article.

The images in *Fluffy Clouds* are page-filling and organized according to the season in which they were taken, starting in spring and ending in winter. Factual information is pared to a minimum: a list of captions at the end of the book informs the viewer when and where each picture was taken; a two-page afterword by art curator Ulrich Pohlmann situates the series in Nefzger's artistic work and addresses some of the key issues raised by the pictures. In style, *Fluffy Clouds* mimics a familiar set of generic conventions in European and Western landscape aesthetics, most prominently the seventeenth-century Dutch pastoral and the nineteenth-century German Romantic landscape. The irony resides in the smooth integration of cooling towers, reactor buildings, and artificial clouds into their scenery.³ People who occasionally figure in these nuclear landscapes appear to be oblivious to the danger looming in full view in their metaphoric backyards, which enhances the ironic effect (fig. 1). Needless to say, the series title can be read ironically, too. Evoking connotations of softness, impermanence, and innocence, it plays with the nuclear industry's self-fabricated image of the clean and safe energy solution for the future, based on the symbol of the white cloud as opposed to the "dirty" black clouds emitted by the coal industry (I shall discuss an example of such greenwashing below).

Thematically, Pohlmann situates *Fluffy Clouds* within the New Topographic Movement. According to art historian Gisela Parak, this movement started in 1975 and has shaped a whole new generation of photographers who were giving "artistic documentary testimonies" of the effects of urban development on the adjacent environment (4). She calls them "eco-images," because they are "used within the framework of a political campaign and . . . are intended to shake up the general public and appeal to the latter's ecological conscience" (4). Regarding the way this appeal is realized she refers to the medium's documentary quality. Along a similar line, Pohlmann conjures in his afterword "the documentary force of photography" (129). However, with regard to the effect to which this "force" is used in *Fluffy Clouds* he ends on a more modest note than Parak, proposing that Nefzger's images help

3. Clouds have a complex history in the popular nuclear imagination. For an extensive historical overview of nuclear imagery in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Weart.

“sharpening our perception and awareness to lasting effect, through a subtle capturing of reality” (130). No shaking up of the public, no political campaign.

I suggest that *Fluffy Clouds* does not so much sharpen as *obstruct* our perception, if with perception we mean the “chronic voyeuristic relation” to the world that photography has cultivated over the past 150 years, as Susan Sontag famously argued (Sontag 10). By doing so, I suggest that it helps us to think subjectivity in the Anthropocene from a non-unitary position, i.e. a position that is not based on notions of individuality and identity, but is by default relational. Irony plays a central role in this operation, and it appears that *Fluffy Clouds* is part of a larger trend here.

Irony is enjoying a revival in recent ecocritical scholarship. Ecocritics like Joshua Dicaglio, Bronislaw Szerszynski, Nicole Seymour, Lisa Beth Lombardo, and Timothy Morton promote irony as a self-reflexive mode of artistic expression and critical thinking that allows to productively engage with the problem of perception in the Anthropocene without slipping all too easily into finger-pointing didacticism. The kind of irony that these scholars refer to has little in common with the mockery and cynicism that is often associated with postmodern art. Rather, they talk about irony’s potential to create a sense of co-existence and community. This article aims to continue this promising conversation by discussing the potential of visual irony to produce a non-unitary subject position, using Paul de Man’s notion of the twofold, ironic self as a conceptual frame. In what follows, I shall first discuss the role of the ironist in *Fluffy Clouds* before I move on to the site of genre.

Viewers and Victims

There are a number of pictures in *Fluffy Clouds* that show people pursuing their leisure activities next to reactor buildings and cooling towers. Examples include a crowd of swimmers sharing the beach with the nuclear power station of Penly, France, that is readily visible but of which nobody seems to take notice; three middle-aged men playing golf with their backs turned on the infamous nuclear facilities of Sellafield, England, rising right behind them; a group of tourists visiting

an archaeological site near Bugey, France, while in the background a suggestive column of white clouds rises into the sky. A particularly strong picture in this context is “Kalkar, Deutschland, 2005,” because it shows a nuclear power station in Germany that has been turned into an amusement park, the *Kalkar Wunderland*, as if to mock the building’s original purpose (fig. 2). The plant never went online because of construction problems and protests. The abandoned reactor buildings and cooling tower are now part of the attractions. On the left side of the image, an almost empty children’s train winds its way through the park, while on the right side a sign asks the visitors to keep the park clean. The center of the image is prominently occupied by the cooling tower which has been transformed into a climbing wall and painted with an idealized mountain ridge.

Images like these have led critics like Thomas Köster to read *Fluffy Clouds* through the structure of superiority/inferiority that characterizes mockery. While asserting that *Fluffy Clouds* is not moralistic, Köster exploits the irony in this work to take a moral high ground from which to judge the “alberne Sorglosigkeit”—the “silly laxity”—of the people populating these images about the imminent danger that cooks up in the reactors behind their backs (par. 8). Pohlmann uses a similar, if more moderate, tone when he laments “how people are growing oblivious to the inherent threat linked to nuclear energy facilities” (129). Both authors adopt a moralizing attitude that suggests a self-evident distinction between the anonymous group of people in the photographs, the victims of irony, and themselves, the onlookers aka ironists.

Does *Fluffy Clouds*, then, reproduce the power dynamics of the classical landscape view? It is one of the main objectives of this paper to show that this is not the case. Given that the general tone of the texts I quoted from is (to a large part at least) not one of mockery but concern, this distinction was probably not intended to be as strict as I present it here. Nonetheless, their readings fail to grasp the reflexive movements of irony in this work, which, as I will demonstrate, effectively undermine the superiority/inferiority dichotomy.

In his seminal work *The Compass of Irony* the literary scholar Douglas C. Muecke defines three essential components of irony: a dual perspective on the situation presented, an incongruity between these two

perspectives, and an element of innocence, that is, the victim's confident unawareness of an "upper level or point of view that invalidates his own" (19-20). To pick up my critique of the readings offered above, it is this last element, the victim's confident unawareness or the pretense of such, that I submit to closer scrutiny in my discussion of *Fluffy Clouds*. Being not only the most original component of irony (it is present in the etymology of the term), I suggest that it is through an undermining of the dynamics between ironist and victim that *Fluffy Clouds* succeeds to instill a non-unitary subject position.⁴

Irony has the reputation of installing a sense of superiority which makes it a close kin to mockery. Muecke is very aware of the power dynamics that evolve in ironic utterances or situations. A couple of pages after his iconic list of irony's essential components, he states concerning the victim that "one of the odd things about irony is that it regards assumptions as presumptions and therefore innocence as guilt. Simple ignorance is safe from irony, but ignorance compounded with the least degree of confidence counts as intellectual hubris and is a punishable offence" (30). The same sentiment seems to have taken possession of the critics discussed earlier: The seeming ignorance about the danger associated with nuclear reactors turns into a "silly laxity" in the eyes of Köster. Indeed, the ironic effect of *Fluffy Clouds* is enhanced by the presence of tourists and other people following leisure activities who seem confidently unaware of the ironic situation they are part of, as is the case in the images described above. For me, as a viewer, they make it easy to exempt myself from the situation and recede to the moral high ground of the ironist.

However, they represent only a fragment of the series. In fact, I am not even through the first third of the book as the dynamic changes. Suddenly, I encounter the gaze of two boys who seem to have paused their game just to look calmly into the camera, one boy having a ball still tucked under his arm (fig. 3). It is here that I become aware of my own presence as a viewer looking at other people while not being seen

4. As the linguist Biljana Scott explains, irony "comes from the Greek word meaning 'pretence': is 'a dissembler'; *eirōneia* means 'assumed ignorance'" (35). She further elaborates: "The ironist was a stock character in Greek drama whose function it was to question accepted reality by introducing an element of pretence or false reality" (55).

by them. The boys' direct gaze challenges my position of superiority, because they address me, the viewer, as a constituent part of the picture. Another image invites me with an empty camping chair to join a young angler who is fishing right behind the French nuclear power station Nogent-sur-Seine that occupies the image's center. In yet another image, I am offered a seat on a bench next to an elderly couple enjoying the scenic view onto the Swiss valley of Benzau which, unsurprisingly, includes a nuclear power station.

As the power plants pile up and peopled images give way to unpeopled sceneries that offer no (human) victims onto which I could project my discomfort of being looked at, that is, of being part of a dialogue, the feeling creeps up that I was wrong all along to exempt myself from the reality inside the picture frame (especially as a citizen of Germany which still has a rather high density of nuclear power facilities). Am I not acting just like the people I looked down upon a moment ago? Is this, perhaps, the only way to arrange oneself within the Anthropocene condition—in a kind of schizoid pretence of safety? It appears that *their* blindness has been my blindness all along. What Köster and other critics hence fail to address is that the ironist is always at risk of equally becoming the victim of irony:

If this seems to put the ironist at an altogether unfair advantage it has to be observed that the ironist is equally vulnerable, for the very act of being ironical implies an assumption of superiority, an assumption one cannot make without forgetting either that the tables may be turned ..., or that one may be subject to irony from a level higher than one's own ... (Muecke 31)

This volatility of perspective is fully played out in *Fluffy Clouds*, albeit in a more complicated fashion than Muecke's quote suggests. The boys in the picture do not turn into ironists, and yet I am clearly being ironized. The question is, thus, by whom and to what effect?

Unsettling Pastorals

As I have noted in the introduction, *Fluffy Clouds* mimics the aesthetics of the seventeenth-century pastoral landscape. More specifically, it is influenced by the work of the Dutch painter Jacob van Ruisdael (Arena). And indeed, the similarities are striking. A good example is the photograph “Wylfa, Wales, 2005” in *Fluffy Clouds* (fig. 4). It shows a stretch of green pastures with grazing sheep along the coastline of Wylfa. The low horizon is drawn by a narrow stretch of seawater, granting the sky plenty of space to present its dramatically towering cumulus clouds. The shadows of the clouds run horizontally in patches through the middle ground on the right, creating an alternation of dark and light strips of land. The image is dominated by warm hues of green, gray, brown, blue, and white and conveys an atmosphere of peace and stability. The distant center of the image is occupied by the building complex of the recently decommissioned Wylfa nuclear power station. The buildings themselves are small and blend so well into this pastoral scene that it seems downright offensive.

Although I do not aim to impose a direct relation, I noticed a striking similarity between the photograph of Wylfa and Ruisdael’s painting *View of the Dunes near Bloemendaal with Bleaching Fields* (fig. 5). The painting shows five parallel bleaching fields flanked by buildings of the bleachery. The composition of the painting is almost identical with that of the photograph. The low horizon equally gives space to cumulus clouds which throw an alternating pattern of shadows onto the land. The tonal values are somewhat darker, but the color palette is basically identical. The same goes for the light. Finally, both images show a domesticated countryside, be it with bleaching grounds or grazing sheep.

What Nefzger appropriates in this photograph is not only a certain landscape iconography, but importantly also the power dynamics that come with it. Ruisdael’s paintings reflect the gaze of the city dweller onto the countryside as a “pleasant place,” that is, “an unheroic, comfortable scenery” (Gibson xxiv) with some cottages and fields through which the viewer’s eye can wander along paths, coastlines, or dunes, watch the bleachers working or the sheep grazing peacefully. In short, they are scenes from which no response is forthcoming. Moreover,

already back in the seventeenth century the rural landscape in Holland was rapidly transforming due to urbanization, giving this appropriation practice another ironic twist.

Notably, Nefzger's choice of reference did not come out of thin air. There is an image tradition in the nuclear power industry that capitalizes on this kind of iconography for its own purposes. A recent example for this is a controversial brochure published by the lobby association *Deutsches Atomforum*. The brochure is entitled "Deutschlands ungeliebte Klimaschützer" [Germany's unloved climate protectors], and aims to present nuclear power as a climate-friendly technology. It was published in spring 2007 in *medium magazine*, a German journal for journalists. Thus, to be fair, it was published before Fukushima happened, and also before the series of incidents and scandals in the summer of 2007 that would shake the public image of the German nuclear industry. However, re-reading the brochure today I find it very hard to *not* read it ironically, especially because the five images contained in the brochure could have been taken straight from Nefzger's *Fluffy Clouds*.

One photograph, for instance, shows the nuclear plant Brunsbüttel behind a herd of sheep grazing on a green pasture. They seem unaware of the storm brewing above their heads as the sky is filled with dramatically darkened cumulus clouds. The image employs an iconography very similar to Nefzger's Wylfa image. However, its atmosphere is dramatized by a digital amplification of contrast and color saturation. Moreover, there is a text written on the image, claiming that "This climate protector fights 24 hours a day for the fulfillment of the Kyoto protocol." Thus, appropriating Christian symbolism, the nuclear power station appears as a mighty guardian looking after his subjects by stopping climate change through its low CO₂ emissions. In my reading, the visual mention of pastoral iconography conjures attributes like strength and progress by presenting the nuclear power station as the twenty-first-century version of the seventeenth-century windmill: Just as the nuclear power station ensures, according to the Atomforum authors, that the land remains inhabitable by contributing to climate-change protection, windmills were used in the seventeenth century in the Netherlands to make more land inhabitable by draining it. All possible

contradictions in this equation are smoothed out on the pictorial surface of the scenic.

As if to mock this vision, one of Nefzger's photographs offers a scenic view over the fields near Grohnde, Germany, where the white cooling towers of the Grohnde nuclear power station visually align with the wind park in the front, indicating a kinship between wind energy and nuclear energy. One finds a similar narrative of progress and cleanliness in the "oceanliner aesthetics" of the Soviet nuclear industries (even after Chernobyl) that presents nuclear facilities in a utopian visual rhetoric as white concrete ensembles nested at watersides in "natural" landscapes (Wendland 282). This image, too, has its counterpart in *Fluffy Clouds*, where another perspective of the Grohnde nuclear power station shows its white buildings residing majestically over the river Weser in romantic evening light, its cooling towers mirrored on the water's surface. Only the line of willows that is seaming the river prevents the power plant from becoming an "ocean liner."

Let us have a closer look into the specific power dynamics that inform these images. In his book *Art in Mind* literary scholar and art historian Ernst van Alphen re-reads the relation between perspective and subjectivity in painting through Hubert Damisch's *The Origin of Perspective*. I shall briefly recall Van Alphen's argument as it adds significant insight to the issues discussed here. Unlike the traditional art-historical readings of perspective pioneered by scholars like Erwin Panofsky and Kenneth Clark, Damisch does not assume that the viewer dominates the visual field stretching out in front of her using perspectival constructions. Instead, he reverses this power relation. In Van Alphen's words: "[the] viewer depends on perspectival constructions for the illusion of her or his unified subjectivity. This dependence also explains the attraction of perspectival constructions for viewers. Facing a perspective painting, the viewer is 'unified'" (11). He derives from these insights a "deeper significance of perspective," which "is thus existential or philosophical rather than merely (art) historical" (11). He concludes that Damisch's "probing interpretation of perspective turns a pictorial device into a subject-constituting cultural semiotic. It argues for a vision of art that binds intellectual to experiential—indeed sensuous—living" (12).

Besides providing a powerful reading of art as a bridge between theory and lived experience, this probing reading of perspective enables a differentiated analysis of the power dynamic at work in landscape imagery. Van Alphen explains this dynamic as follows:

The illusion of mastery and ownership of the visual field provided by a perspective painting is an effect of the viewing position: seemingly the viewer has not had any position in the constellation of the perspective. The image presents itself as third-person text that has no room for an ‘I’ or a ‘you.’ But it is precisely the implicit ‘I’ that defines the structure of perspective. The lines of perspective in front of the painting create the viewing point. It is due to this invisibility and to the implicit nature of the I-you structure that the ‘I,’ that is, the viewer, can mirror him- or herself in the illusion of objectivity and coherence provided by perspective-as-seemingly-third-person-text. (12)

In other words, there is a *split* of the (viewing) subject inscribed into the perspectival construction of the image that is necessary to create the illusion of ownership over the visual field, which is only reconciled in the process of looking.⁵ Irony forces this split wide open. My desire as a viewer to assume the unified subject position that the Wylfa image offers to me and hence become part of the landscape is sabotaged by the presence of the nuclear power plant. Being associated with contamination, cancer, mutation, political scandals, and secrecy, it represents a reality I don’t want to “unite” with. Importantly, all this is not visually present in the picture. It is my own knowledge that I introduce as a context to the picture which informs this resistance. To conceptualize it within Van Alphen’s scheme: the moment that my learned response to this perspectival, pastoral landscape image runs counter my response to what I connect with nuclear power, the

5. W.T.J. Mitchell makes a similar argument for popular imagery in his seminal essay “What Do Pictures Really Want?” from 1996, when he shifts the question of what power images have to the desire they mobilize in the viewer. It is “very difficult to know anything about the real power of the image,” Mitchell argues. “What one can describe, however, is its [the image’s] construction of desire in relation to fantasies of power and impotence” (77).

“I” implied by perspective splits from the “I” of the viewer (myself), causing a series of displacements.

Irony (Self-)Encounters

Let me introduce at this point another concept, that of the “twofold, ironic self” which can be found in Paul de Man’s seminal essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality.” Departing from Romantic irony, a literary device that has been used by poets and writers to explore the relation between mind and nature, de Man discusses Baudelaire’s *dédoublement* of the self in ways that resonate with Van Alphen’s interpretation of perspective. De Man argues that the *dédoublement* or duplication of the self in irony is not a form of intersubjectivity (in which case the superiority of oneself over another would be possible). Instead the “*dédoublement* . . . designates the activity of a consciousness by which a man differentiates himself from the non-human world” (213). Importantly, the split occurs in the realm of language:

The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic. (214)

Let me re-read this quote by addressing a particular language: the set of generic conventions that form the pictorial system of landscape. It is in this sense that the split of the self occurring in language resonates with Van Alphen’s perspective-as-seemingly-third-person-text. Irony does not only disturb momentarily the unification of the implicit “I” that defines the structure of perspective, with the “I” of the viewer in front of the image. It exposes this unity as an illusion. Thus, de Man’s notion of the twofold, ironic self opens the subject to a range of posthuman readings of relationality and displacement. This involves the unsettling awareness that one will never fully understand, let alone control one’s enmeshment in the world. With the subject being no longer set apart from the world

of objects, mastery becomes precisely the kind of illusion Van Alphen addresses: it is an effect of the point of view one chooses. Once irony has got hold of the subject the position of mastery is no longer an option. The trusty and healthy-looking landscape is unmasked as a set of generic conventions that tells less about the empirical landscape outside the picture frame than about the self that is inscribed in its image. As a result, the viewer ends up as clueless as the people in Nefzger's images look, suggesting a relation of complicity rather than superiority.

We have come a long way from the superiority of the viewer as ironist in Köster. What has started out as an intersubjective relation between the ironist and the victim of irony, has developed into a reading of the "discontinuity and plurality of levels within a subject that comes to know itself by an increasing differentiation from what is not," to quote de Man (213). Notably, this ironic consciousness does not resolve in the kind of feel-good harmony with the environment that the Atomforum brochure promotes. Instead, de Man describes it as a condition of "unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness" if carried to the extreme, because irony possesses the inherent tendency to go on infinitely: "It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is unravelling and comes apart" (215). What makes it worse, this process is not reversible. Once the subject has gained ironic self-awareness, there is no return to authenticity.

This has significant implications for the question posed at the beginning of this paper of how to inhabit the Anthropocene. As posthuman ontologies (which increasingly gain momentum in the humanities) teach us, the human body is always already enmeshed in the world (Morton, *The Ecological Thought*), forming relationships of trans-corporeality (Alaimo), intra-activity (Barad), and vibrancy (Bennett) that precede and exceed human awareness and understanding. To ignore this condition would mean to engage in hypocrisy, or as de Man puts it, the willingness "to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation" (215-16). Perhaps a certain degree of such willingness is needed to inhabit the Anthropocene without going mad. After all, it is very tempting to accept the empty seat and join the angler in Nogent-sur-Seine or the old couple in Benzau.

Approaching the end of this article, I want to ask what *Fluffy Clouds* makes with the here discussed subject position of the ironic, twofold self in relation to nuclear power. Certainly, Nefzger's images suspend the demand of *positioning* oneself for or against nuclear power in favor of a deeper engagement with the schizoid act of positioning itself. However, does this engagement advance an ecological awareness of some sort, true to the image tradition of the New Topographical Movement that *Fluffy Clouds* is part of?

The persona that de Man imagines doing the ironic operations I just discussed is the philosopher who trips over his own feet. The act of ironic self-reflection over this incident makes him a wiser man. Note that wisdom should not be confused with knowledge here, but describes an increased sensibility towards the fabricated character, the inauthenticity of what one believes to know. A similar conclusion could be drawn for the viewer of *Fluffy Clouds*. While humor is certainly involved, irony does not resolve in greater knowledge. Rather, the feeling one is left with after having gone through the exhaustive loops of irony is frustration and displacement. Yet, *Fluffy Clouds* ends (arguably) on an affirmative note.

Fluffy Clouds, although betraying a political agenda (the opening image of the series shows a sign at the beach of Dounreay, Scotland, warning against nuclear particles in the sand), does not end in a militant call for anti-nuclear protest. Instead, it shows the dummy of a ghost made from linen sheets, dangling from a pine tree next to an empty road (fig. 6). The dummy's face is a sad emoticon; on its body a diagonal red cross is painted. It is a protest symbol of the Gorleben campaign against the construction of a permanent disposal site for nuclear waste near the North German city of Gorleben. In Nefzger's photograph the dummy is placed in the center of a markedly static composition that is dominated by perpendicular lines. The lower fifth of the picture is occupied by the road which runs parallel to the picture's bottom edge. It forms a kind of visual pedestal for the row of straight-lined pine trees filling most of the image space. Together with its muted color palette of gray, brown, and green (except for the flashy red of the dummy's marks), the photograph conveys a sense of deceleration, supported by the symbol of the empty road. It is up to the viewer to read into this image a negative, melancholic

dialectics of a failed *resistance* (which is factually not yet the case in Gorleben), or an affirmative politics of *insistence*. That is, an invitation to sit down and allow oneself to imagine a different world to be realized not through heroic revolutions but through a collective, modest exercise in endurance for which the Anthropocene, if aligned with the nuclear age, could offer not only a historic but also epistemic horizon.



- fig. 1. Jürgen Nefzger. "Penly, France, 2003," *Fluffy Clouds*, 55. © Jürgen Nefzger courtesy Galerie Françoise Paviot.
- fig. 2. Jürgen Nefzger. "Kalkar, Deutschland, 2005," *Fluffy Clouds*, 74. © Jürgen Nefzger courtesy Galerie Françoise Paviot.



fig. 3. Jürgen Nefzger. "Heysham, England, 2005," *Fluffy Clouds*, 31. © Jürgen Nefzger courtesy Galerie Françoise Paviot.

fig. 4. Jürgen Nefzger. "Wylfa, Wales, 2005," *Fluffy Clouds*, 26. © Jürgen Nefzger courtesy Galerie Françoise Paviot.



- fig. 5. Jacob van Ruisdael. *View of the Dunes near Bloemendaal with Bleaching Fields*. Late 1660s. Source: Slive, Seymour. *Jacob van Ruisdael: Master of Landscape*. London: Yale University Press (2005): 143. Print.
- fig. 6. Jürgen Nefzger. "Gorleben, Deutschland, 2009," *Fluffy Clouds*, 123. © Jürgen Nefzger courtesy Galerie Françoise Paviot.

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BIOGRAPHY

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