

Illuminating Futures: Solar Thermal Technology and Society's Energy Aspirations

Janina Priebe

I am currently part of a larger research project about energy transition in the so-called peripheral areas of the Arctic. Energy production and use in these places are often presented as being readily available and 'empty.' Although the Arctic has historically been imagined as an empty space onto which external visions can be projected, these peripheries are not unique to the Arctic but can also be found in other places where there is a perceived current lack of energy being used and produced. They are peripheries from the point of view of an energy-hungry society.

In the project I am pursuing during my stay at the Rachel Carson Center, I examine energy as a reflection of societal aspirations and an embodiment of our collective vision for the future. Now, as the world pivots toward renewables to confront climate change and bolster energy security, solar energy has reclaimed its role in shaping the narratives of the future. This shift—from fossil fuels back to the most prominent and oldest energy source available to us on Earth, along with wind—invites not only technological innovation, but also reflection on how these advances are visually represented in our landscapes and cultural imaginations. Energy production is thus also about aesthetics, that is, the interpretation of the world and individual understanding of what is fitting in our interaction with the world.

In my project which is based on visual representations of renewable energy in peripheral areas, I underline that our struggle is not with energy production, but with energy storage. Specifically, I examine visual representations of the Ivanpah Solar Energy Project and the Crescent Dunes Project, both located near Las Vegas, focusing on documentary and artistic photography. These facilities harness the sun's concentrated heat, standing as monumental examples of humanity's effort to reimagine energy storage and production. In the current energy transition, the focus is often on energy sources and production. But more than anything, it is the way in which energy is stored that shapes how it is then used, and the visions of energy use that are conjured up. Is there a lack of storage, for example, and does the energy have to be consumed on the spot in large-scale operations? Or can it be stored effectively and distributed over long distances to small users? These structures also produce different societies.