

Boris Becker

La ligne claire
– Die helle Linie



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For this collaborative Franco-German project, the acclaimed German photographer Boris Becker (born 1961) explores the rivers of the European Saar-Lor-Lux region. On his photographic journey, he follows the Moselle, the Meurthe, the Marne-Rhine Canal, the Saar Coal Canal and, finally, the Saar itself. The series of pictures taken for La ligne claire – Die helle Linie (A Clear Line) reveals how our present is shaped – it moves between past and future, is carried by water as a connecting element, and simultaneously documents differences and commonalities across borders. Studying under Bernd Becher at the Düsseldorf Art Academy from 1984 to 1990, Becker is one of the foremost alumni of the Düsseldorf School of Photography. La ligne claire – Die helle Linie (A Clear Line) reveals is an art project by the Nouvel Observatoire Photographique du Grand Est (NOP-GE), the Département Moselle (both FR) and the Saarland (DE).

The rivers in our region have always served as transport routes and as a driving force for economic and cultural change. Since the 19th century, the river landscapes have provided resources and favourable conditions for the establishment of industry. Yet, paradoxically, change is characterised by continuity: entire sectors of industry have been plunged into crisis by structural change. This is just as clearly visible along our rivers as the stirrings of new developments. Boris Becker's photography is rooted in the documentary tradition, which ultimately traces its origins back to the New Topographics movement of the mid-1970s. This movement directed a photographic eye towards the boundaries between town and country, often defying the viewer's visual expectations and devoted primarily to the man-altered landscape. Becker focuses not on familiar natural and cultural landmarks, but on the traces of change brought about by human activity. His subjects usually confront the viewer very directly and stress the forms of the objects depicted, bringing them from the margins of our consciousness straight into the centre of the picture.

'Today, we are once again seeing European borders being closed due to the refugee issue, with border controls being introduced in many places. Through my photographic work, I hope to ensure that the open, liberal space created in recent years by the [...] waters of the Saar, Moselle and Meurthe continues to be perceived as unifying rather than divisive.'

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Be sure to visit the second part of the exhibition (open-air) at the Bliesbruck-Reinheim European Cultural Park from 11 April to 31 August 2026.

Dombasle-sur-Meurthe

South of Nancy lies the locality of Dombasle, situated between the Meurthe and the Canal de la Marne au Rhin. Becker divides the view across the canal into four horizontal bands: at the top, a narrow strip of sky; below that, the (temporary) cladding of a bridge, which obscures the view into the depths of the peaceful landscape. The bridge and the shoreline are shown in equal parts as an inverted reflection in the water at the bottom of the picture. The horizontal composition reminds us of a widescreen cinema film. It is hard to believe that, in the opposite direction, one would see huge industrial complexes.



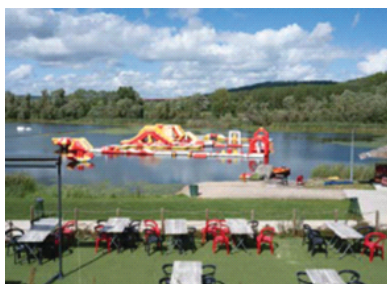
Sarralbe – Herbitzheim

The villages of Sarralbe and Herbitzheim are linked by the Saar Coal Canal. Becker took this photograph somewhere between them. A bridge-like metal structure, painted light blue with patches of rust adding brownish contrasts, spans the historic canal built from 1862 to 1866. On the right-hand side, wooden planks provide a footway. The structure serves no apparent purpose; it appears to draw the viewer into the depths, as if it were a machine that creates perspective, existing solely to guide the eye to the opposite bank.



Champey-sur-Moselle

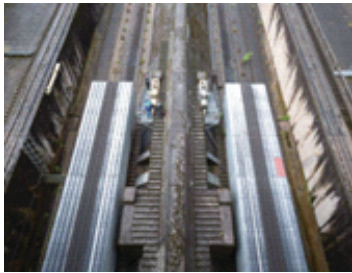
On the outskirts of Champey-sur-Moselle, a leisure park has been built on one of the flooded gravel pits typical of the French Moselle valley. Where sand and gravel were once extracted, a garishly coloured structure now sits in the middle of the idyllically still water. Jetties, slides and ramps enhance the swimming and leisure experience. But inexplicably to the photographer, both the structure in the water and the outdoor dining



areas are deserted on a sunny late summer's day. Unable to see the view, Becker photographed the closed complex, where he had expected plenty going on, with his arm outstretched over the fence.

Saint-Louis, Arzwiller

In the middle of a technical installation, where colossal metal slabs are designed to move along two sets of rails, three people responsible for technical maintenance are working on a platform next to a flight of steps. It is not immediately apparent from the picture that this is a ship lift. What is striking is the contrast between the bright and shiny metal slabs at the edges and the grey ones in the middle. Compared to the size of the structure, the technicians look minute, making their task all the more gargantuan.



Thionville

Right on the banks of the Moselle in Thionville, two very similar residential blocks, each over ten storeys high, stretch up into the light-grey sky. Standing at right angles to one another, they look as if they have been folded open by a hinge. A rational design featuring horizontal bands dominates the façades and recalls Le Corbusier's architecture.



The riverbank is also emphasised horizontally, bordered by a strip of rust-brown sheet piling. The green hedge above forms an equally linear band. The Moselle was made navigable here from 1958 to 1964, developed into a major European shipping route and connects the industrial regions of Lorraine with Luxembourg, Germany and the Dutch seaports.

Serrig

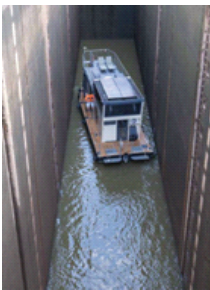
From 1974 to 1994, the River Saar was developed into a European waterway from its confluence with the Moselle at Konz through to Saarbrücken. The lock and weir in Serrig were built from 1981 to 1986. It is precisely here, at the top of the weir, that Becker photographs a staircase canopy made of very solid concrete, standing monumentally on a pier, like a landmark. In the foreground, a road crosses the



structure; in the middle ground, one can see the river and wooded hills; and finally, in the background, a blue sky. The downward-sloping roof surface gives the structure its enigmatic shape and creates the effect of a tilted perspective.

Serrig

Deep down in the 14.5-metre-deep lock chamber for smaller vessels at the Serrig weir, sits a houseboat. As a boat owner



himself, Becker knows that locks pose a challenge for skippers: the aim is to keep the boat straight while it is being lifted or lowered and to prevent it from touching the lock walls. In his photograph, the houseboat has not yet achieved a position parallel to the lock walls. In the dark chamber, it looks like a cornered animal with no clear escape route.

Faid

Not far from the Moselle valley near Faid, Becker discovers this scene: work is underway on a high-voltage pylon amidst a web of steel struts, scaffolding and safety nets.



The small group of workers in orange safety gear, perched on one of the cross members of the pylon, look tiny in the picture. This engineering project is one of many intended to ensure the flow of electricity from the German offshore power stations in the north to the south in a climate-neutral future. – Here, beyond the contemporary context, Becker recognises the analogy between the flow of energy and that of water in rivers.

Schweich

Not far from the Moselle valley motorway junction near Schweich, Becker casts a rare glance beneath the motorway. As a viaduct resting on piers, it winds its way around a hill in a sweeping curve. Below the slope, a combined pedestrian and cycle lane runs in the same direction, whilst in the middle ground the Moselle flowing alongside the motorway, traces a curve to the right as a bright line. This creates a



tension between the natural-looking riverscape on the right and the artificial feat of engineering on the left. The image opens Becker's series with a view upstream towards Trier, Saarbrücken, Luxembourg and Lorraine.

Saarbrücken

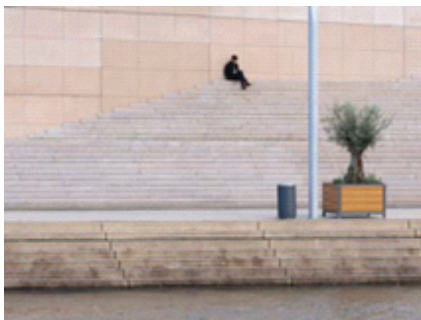
Rivers serve in all cultures as transport routes. In Saarbrücken, a motorway was built in the 1950s with impressive slip-road roundabouts and new bridges running directly alongside the Saar, as seen here at the Wilhelm-Heinrich-Brücke in the city centre. Becker photographs the river and the traffic on the opposite bank from beneath this bridge. An orange lorry drives past, framed by two bridge piers decorated with graffiti.



It is dramatically backlit by daylight streaming through the open centre of the roundabout. A white car on the right and another on the left of the picture create symmetry and look artificially positioned – but they are not. In this basement level of reality, the graffiti bolsters the impression of a literal subculture.

Saarbrücken

Not far from the shooting location beneath the Wilhelm-Heinrich-Brücke, this photograph was taken of the large flight of steps on the Sankt Johanner bank of the Saar, which was built between 2010 and 2013 as part of the 'riverside city centre' urban development project. In this picture, the only signs of life at this location popular in the afternoons and evenings are a person looking at their mobile phone and an olive tree. The tree is flanked by a litter bin and a lamppost. Taken together, these four elements – including the young man – are, to the highest degree, solitary entities.



Niderviller – Arzviller

As if out of nowhere, the historic Canal de la Marne au Rhin (built from 1839 to 1853 and running from Strasbourg via Nancy to Vitry-le François near Châlon-en-Champagne) emerges from a tunnel and winds its way through dense woodland on both sides of the narrow waterway. Yet one neither sees the tunnel – one can only sense it from the vantage point above the western opening – nor are there any clues as to where the perspective leads, for there is no horizon nor a vanishing point in the classical sense. What remains is the impression of a fragment, a slice through the landscape, through space.



Vandières

From the German border to the vicinity of Nancy, the French Moselle valley is dotted with countless lakes resulting from previous and ongoing sand and gravel quarrying, as is the case near the village of Vandières. Nature has reclaimed many of these lakes from industrial use, as evidenced by the lush shoreline vegetation shown in the picture.



Standing monolithically in the middle of the lake is a bridge pier, in all its brutalist glory. In the photograph, it is largely detached from the architectural context of the all of 1.5 km long Moselle Viaduct (2005) on the Paris–Strasbourg TGV railway line. The pier flares upwards to take up the loads and discharge them downwards. It stands in formal harmony, yet in thematic contrast to the lake, which – it seems – could have been created as a backdrop for the pier.

translated by Tim Chafer

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