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Peck, Julia ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5134-2471> (2019) Spaces of the Anthropocene? Photography's representations of environmental degradation and some progressive developments. In: Beyond Green: Rethinking Nature in Urban Public Spaces, 12th June 2019, University of Gloucestershire. (Unpublished)

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/7094>

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Spaces of the Anthropocene? Photography's representations of environmental degradation and some progressive developments

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Delivered at: *Beyond Green: Rethinking Nature in Urban Public Spaces*, University of Gloucestershire, 12th June 2019

The geological epoch of the Anthropocene has its persuasive detractors, and critiques of the concept include questions about the unequal ways that the human global population have contributed to climate change and environmental degradation. In addition to that the very term the 'Anthropocene,' whilst aiming to bring to consciousness the myriad ways that humans have contributed to the changing environment, keeps anthropocentric concerns firmly at the fore. Many argue, including Donna Haraway and T.J. Demos, that this is a time when we need alternative ways of thinking and being that facilitate understanding of, and engagements with, the non-human and non-living; such approaches also encourage future-thinking and imagining. The Anthropocene has become an important concept for photographic practitioners, not least those concerned with large-scale environmental degradation. Such photography, however, risks perpetuating both anthropocentric and defeatist depictions of degraded landscapes and acts of mourning. This paper, then, undertakes a brief analysis of some current landscape practices, including Edward Burtynsky's *Anthropocene* (2018) and Marcus Coates' *Dawn Chorus* (2007). This short paper argues that Coates' *Dawn Chorus* more rightly belongs to the Chthulucene: a multispecies and unfinished process that emphasises the connected and the contingent, the material and agentic in the name of creative survival.

Introduction

Photography has had an important role to play in bringing to consciousness the significant impacts of the Anthropocene. Photographers, some with international profiles, have been documenting the myriad ways that environmental degradation, resource extraction, deforestation, pollution, and, the impact of radioactive contamination have been shaping the Earth's systems and leaving a permanent record within geological structures. Such photographic documentation is important and it provides an important informational role in our desire to slow down climate catastrophe and environmental ruin; some photography

even considers the impact on human lives and the grossly unequal experience of environmental degradation and climate crisis. Yet in this paper I want to consider the import of practices that aim to develop an awareness not just of the spaces of the Anthropocene but also of relationships and beings, and this is where we may begin to see more progressive discourses and creative practices emerging. Questions about the effectiveness of photography and other lens-based practices to image and imagine the agentic capacities of the non-human and non-living abound. This paper begins to explore these issues, arguing that photographic practices *can* image the complexities of these contemporary complex issues, including representing the Chthulucene. I will do this by undertaking a brief critique of the Anthropocene and its photographic representations, before investigating a contrasting practice in relation to the idea of the Chthulucene.

Edward Burtynsky and the Anthropocene

The Anthropocene is a label for a new geological epoch that is human influenced, namely that humans actively affect and shape the biospheric, geologic, hydrologic and broader Earth systems. Made popular as a concept by Paul Crutzen in the year 2000 (Haraway, 2016, pp. 44-45), the idea of Anthropocene has led the Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA) to define the starting point of the Anthropocene as the age of nuclear detonation, namely 1945 (Carrington, 2016). The scientists that are in the WGA believe that nuclear fallout and radiation will be detectable in Earth's geologic layers in the years to come. The International Union of Geological Sciences has yet to decide whether the Anthropocene, and its proposed starting date, will be accepted as a new geological epoch, but, it is clear that the idea has been potent for scientists, artists, designers, environmentalists, activists and for the public.

An influential idea, of course, is usually subject to debate. The most common debate regarding the Anthropocene, is its starting point. Some argue that the age of agriculture would make for a better starting point, others for the age of coal and steam, others the age of acceleration, associated with the explosion of consumption in the 1950s (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2015 and Moore, 2015). Whatever the starting point, though, in recent years it has become possible to see the enormity of humanity's impact on the planet. In photography,

probably the leading proponent of the depiction of the Anthropocene is Edward Burtynsky, who in 2018 published a majestic book of the same title (2018a), which was accompanied by a major exhibition at the Art Gallery of Ontario, an accessible exhibition catalogue (Burtynsky, 2018b), and, a feature documentary film of the same name (which has yet to become available on general release).

Burtynsky, whose career in photography has spanned several decades, has previously published nine monographs, and whilst his photography has exhibited many bravura characteristics, his photographs have become increasingly monumental both in terms of what they depict and in their presentation to the public. His approach to any of his subjects tends to be encyclopaedic and inclusive, and he tends to travel widely for his photography and use advanced technologies for their execution. Making a selection from his recent imagery is a challenge, but in addition to marble quarrying, Burtynsky's *Anthropocene* project includes depictions of oil bunkering, copper extraction and slag disposal, underground mining for potash, and open cast mining. Burtynsky's imagery is clearly moving and spectacular, engaging and awesome. Accompanied by extended captions informing the viewer of the wider economic, social and ecological impact of these activities, in book form at least, Burtynsky is making a considerable effort to educate his viewers. Burtynsky has also recently adopted a more expressly pro-environmental stance¹ (Burtynsky, Baichwal and De Pencier, 2018a, pp. 6-7), articulating the need for humanity to reconsider its impact on the Earth and ask whether such activities, at such speed and scale, are sustainable.

However, there are different kinds of debates to be had about the Anthropocene as an idea and how this is represented in photographic form. To engage with the photographs first, there is considerable debate within the photographic community about the resources needed by Burtynsky and his production team to make such images (helicopters feature strongly) (Pauli, 2003, Schuster, 2013 and Solnit, 2007). There is also considerable disquiet at the possibility that Burtynsky celebrates human ingenuity as much as destruction (the "look what we can do!" effect). Regardless of Burtynsky's position on environmental

¹ Burtynsky has, until recently, avoided identifying with environmental stances. See Schuster (2013) and Pauli (2003) for a discussion of Burtynsky's neutral stances towards extraction, consumption and environmental impact.

devastation and the impact of mass consumption, though, Burtynsky's photography is successful at garnering attention. However, there is also the possibility that some viewers find themselves feeling disempowered and helpless, questioning the point of attempting to create change: this goes to the heart of the question about effective communication about climate and environment, which there is insufficient time to debate on this occasion.

Where there is perhaps greater cause for concern is in the concept of the Anthropocene itself. Whilst important as a framework for understanding the scale of human-driven change on Earth it also potentially limits our thinking and understanding about causes and relationships, and if we can't sufficiently understand causes and relationships, our solutions may also be limited or damaging in their response. An important criticism of the Anthropocene, then, is in the prefix *Anthropos*. Whilst we need to understand that collectively humans are driving unprecedented change on the Earth's systems, we need to understand this impact in lots of different ways and for humans and non-humans. Missing from some of these discourses is an understanding of what is happening to different types of systems for the non-human and non-living. Whilst I don't have time to fully introduce such frameworks, Object-Oriented-Ontology [OOO], a branch of philosophy concerned with being, asks about the being of others that are not necessarily human. Thinking about beings beyond the human is important because it is only in understanding, and being considerate of, other beings that we may fully appreciate the consequences of our actions (Bennett, 2010). The Anthropocene as a framework, then, risks seeing human-driven change only through human eyes.

Those of you concerned with communities, societies and the marginalised will already have spotted the second criticism of the Anthropocene: the concept of *human-driven* change. As a phrase it suggests that we are all equally culpable and responsible (Yusoff, 2018), yet it is clear that many around the world have had no say, or benefit from, the great acceleration and are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation, pollution and climate change. Kathryn Yusoff, for example, analyses the relationship between geology, the Anthropocene and questions of race and exploitation (2018, p. 3), noting that "Geology is the mode of accumulation, on the one hand, and of dispossession, on the other, depending on what side of the geologic color [sic] line you end up on". The Anthropocene framework,

then, fails to account for inequalities across the world as experienced by different genders, ethnicities, nationalities and different social classes. The Anthropocene, then, creates a grand narrative that fails to distinguish the differences of experience for the complexity of humanity, *and* for the non-human and non-living. Indeed, such criticisms have spawned a plethora of competing terms for the Anthropocene, including: the Thermocene, the Thanatocene, and the Capitalocene, to name a few (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016). Of import within the new *-ocenes*, though, is the idea of the Chthulucene, as proposed by Donna Haraway (2016).

The Chthulucene purposely aims to engage with survival and intra-species communication and being (Demos, 2017, p. 87). Influenced by science, science fiction, feminism and speculative fabulation, Haraway's idea uses H.P. Lovecraft's Chthulhu (a malevolent monster) to propose, instead, a mythical being that references *kainos*: "myriad temporalities and spatialities and myriad intra-active entities-in-assemblages, including the more-than-human, other-than-human, inhuman, and human-as-humus" (Haraway in Demos, 2017, p. 87). Haraway explicitly rejects the anthropocentric individualist of the Anthropocene and instead focuses on the future where "The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding, and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pests, presents and futures" (Haraway in Demos, 2017, p. 87). The Chthulucene emphasises the entangled-ness of beings, their interconnectedness and their distribution in an effort to locate "life's ongoingness". Avoiding defeatism and cynicism, Haraway, noting the symbiosis and sympoietic nature of life, observes the "interspecies collaborations" of co-becoming (Haraway in Demos, 2017, p. 88).

You may be wondering how on earth this can be represented in photographic practices and I think, today, I have only a partial answer but one that I hope to subject to further research. To achieve this, I would like to draw upon the video work of Marcus Coates, an artist and ornithologist based in London.

Coates has long had an interest in *becoming animal* and his works explored the animals and ideas associated with places such as the Galapagos Islands. His *Human Report* (2008), is a

mockumentary based on a TV news report that was broadcast in the Galapagos Islands. The report relates the conditions and habits of humans living on the Galapagos Islands as told through the eyes of a Blue-Footed Booby. Coates, dressed as the Blue-Footed Booby, walks through settlements narrating a short news item on the humans of the Islands to great comic effect, whilst also reversing the traditional preoccupation with the spectacle of nature that many tourists visiting the islands go there for. In addition to tourists we also see Ecuadorians who live and work for the significant tourist and service industries on the Islands, and their social and economic circumstances are somewhat evident in the short film.

An installation, made originally in 2007, but exhibited in Fabrica in Brighton in 2015, named *Dawn Chorus*, draws upon a different kind of human-nature relationship and, to my mind, begins to speak of intra-species relationships. It certainly changes the boundaries of what it is to be human, whilst also, perhaps, suggesting what it might mean to be bird.

The installation features a series of screens in a darkened space, positioned at a variety of heights. On each screen is a person who intermittently sings the birdsong of a specific species. Between bursts of song each person sits quietly or continues with their usual business. Each person is filmed in a domestic or work location and there is a strong sense of the everyday in the imagery. Notable in the experience of the work is the movement of each person as they sing: they not only do they sound like birds, to my amazement when I experienced this installation, they also moved like birds. To achieve this artwork, where humans are able to reproduce bird song, Coates worked with Geoff Sample, an audio recording specialist to record the bird song live, slowed the recordings down by 16 times, notated the bird song at that speed and pitch, and then asked amateur singers to sing the notated songs. Filming the people at human speed, but then speeding up the footage by 16 times, enabled the participants to reproduce bird song, which is often highly pitched and very fast. In the resulting footage, and especially in the experience of the installation, it seemed possible to understand humans in a way that had not been offered before. Witnessing the flighty humans singing beyond their usual capacities but so brilliantly reproducing bird sounds, the humans were other than human, yet their everyday surroundings and their gestures, clothing and facial expressions are still strongly redolent of

the human in their habitat. Yet there is something else at play here: these singers are not just human, they are also Chthulu, a mythical being that speaks of intra-species relationships.

I'm aware, at this stage in the research, that the spaces of the Chthulucene, as discussed so far, are very redolent of the survival of *human* spaces, and less about the spaces that birds need to survive and perhaps also about the bird species themselves. Yet in the powerfully empathic installation of the dawn chorus Coates prompts his audience to consider what life would be like without bird song² but also what life is like when able to *be* a bird. Encouraging intra-species understanding whilst dialling down anthropocentrism signals encouragement for understanding a world after the ravages of the Anthropocene. My future research, I hope, will continue to wonder what the *spaces* of the Chthulucene may look like.

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² Yet in a substantially different way to Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*.

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