

# From fiction to documentary: The toxic sublime as an aesthetic of the Anthropocene

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*Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, Jennifer Baichwal, Edward Burtynsky, Nicholas de Pencier, 2018 © Mongrel Media - Les Films Seville / Seville International

In 2014, the US TV network HBO began broadcasting the first season of the series *True Detective*. In a disquieting Louisiana, two policemen, played by Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, investigate a series of murders. In 2018, the documentary film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, directed by [Jennifer Baichwal](#), [Nicholas de Pencier](#) and [Edward Burtynsky](#), was released in cinemas. As the title suggests, the film was inspired by the hypothesis of a new geological age, the Anthropocene, which is based on the idea that the impact of human activities on the planet is a major telluric force. In a fascinating journey through images, the authors provide a portrait of the places where this impact has manifested most vigorously.

What do a detective series and an environmental documentary film have in common? The answer might come as a surprise. It is aesthetics, an aesthetics of the Anthropocene, which is anticipated, so to speak, in the drama production and used deliberately and extensively in the documentary film.

In this text, I will look at why the concept of aesthetics is associated with the notion of the Anthropocene. What is the relationship between artistic and visual expression and the hypothesis of a new age of planetary geology? The key is in the Anthropocene, this sometimes ambiguous, still variable, still evolving notion that is gradually colonising not just the life and earth sciences but also the human and social sciences and public debate about the relationship between human societies and the environment. In an attempt to understand this 'aesthetic' aspect of the Anthropocene, we draw on the two audiovisual objects mentioned above, which in different ways and modalities use codes and languages that reflect deeply on the role that environmental imagery can play in our spatiotemporal experiences.

## ***1. You can't eat Anthropocene!***

The sudden emergence of the notion of the Anthropocene has shaken up numerous scientific and cultural sectors in recent years. Beginning in the fields of biochemistry and geology, the notion quickly entered the human and social sciences and is now starting to tentatively emerge from academia. The Anthropocene fundamentally refers to a fascinating hypothesis that we are no longer in the Holocene but in a new age marked by human actions. The argument is based on the observation that human activities should now be considered a major telluric force, capable of generating global-scale changes that radically modify the earth's biochemical balance. This hypothesis has been attributed to Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul J. Crutzen, who is said to have come up with this exciting new term in the early 2000s. In actual fact, the term 'Anthropocene' had first appeared at the beginning of the 20th century and had been used more recently (in the 1980s and 1990s) by the biologist Eugene F. Stoermer and the journalist Andrew Revkin. However, it was Crutzen who gave the term a whole new lease of life. During a conference in Mexico in 2000, he is said to have stood up and shouted 'Stop using the word 'Holocene'. We're not in the Holocene any more. We're in the ... the ... the Anthropocene'. [1] This powerful and dramatic statement was instantly transformed into a genuine geological hypothesis. Two decades on, the Anthropocene is a concept that is still being evaluated by the scientific community, particularly by geologists.

In the life and earth sciences, the debate is ongoing. As far as the human and social sciences are concerned, the Anthropocene is seen as an attractive notion that is capable of producing a series of questions concerning not only the relationship between humans and nature and between humans and historical and geological time and multi-scalar geographical space but also the centrality of humankind and its destiny as a species. The reflection on the notion has therefore taken on a very philosophical dimension. In this regard, science historians Bonneuil and Fressoz stated that the Anthropocene represents a point of no return, 'a step change in the history of the earth, of life and of human beings'. [2] They pointed out that the philosopher Bruno Latour, for example, classed the Anthropocene as 'the most decisive philosophical, religious, anthropological and, as we shall see, political concept yet produced as an alternative to the very notions of "Modern" and

“modernity” [3] and above all that he considered it a concept that could bridge the gap between nature and culture, between the history of humans and the history of life and the earth. The debate, which is obviously extremely rich and is ongoing at several levels, has thus prompted a theoretical convergence – unprecedented in terms of its potential implications – between the life and earth sciences and the human and social sciences.

However, the Anthropocene is based on a paradox or, more circumspectly, on a peculiarity. Basically, this notion essentially belongs in the domain of epistemology for the time being in the sense that the hypothesis of a new geological age with a ‘human’ matrix has not been formulated on the basis of any new discoveries. The phenomena that have given rise to this idea are well-known. Our knowledge of the impact of human activities on the earth’s biochemical and geological systems is nothing new. From this point of view, we can see that, behind the Anthropocene, there is a developing reflection concerning a new way of conceiving the place of humanity on the planet, which is viewed as a complex and living system: ‘humankind, our own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system’ [4]. In a way, the Anthropocene gives a label to a series of phenomena that we have been aware of (and studied) for some time now. Moreover, the scale of geological ages suggests long periods that are often incompatible with human and even historical temporalities. We need only think of one of the primary quarrels concerning this notion: when did we enter the Anthropocene? In other words, at what point can we legitimately consider the Holocene age to have ended? The hypotheses proliferate. Crutzen, for example, suggested the industrial revolution as the endpoint and conventionally opted for the invention of Watt’s steam engine at the end of the 18th century. This hypothesis is not unanimously accepted, however. Some have suggested the Holocene age ended with Neolithic settlement and the invention of agriculture. Others have proposed a more recent endpoint and pinpointed the huge acceleration of the second half of the 20th century, which has been symbolised by the invention of the atomic bomb and humanity’s capacity to self-destruct in a very short space of time.

The debate, as I have said, continues. However, two observations must be made. The first concerns the place that the Anthropocene occupies outside purely academic circles. Even though the term has not yet fully crossed the divide between specific and collective knowledge, the questions it mobilises are becoming increasingly pressing on an ever larger scale. Contrary to certain common schools of thought, ecology and ecological thinking more generally are not a recent invention either. However, the objectification of certain phenomena (notably climate change and its short-, medium- and long-term effects) has given renewed vigour to an environmental issue that seemed to have lost its momentum. Ecological alarmism, negationism (still too powerful) and the relationship between society, humanity and the environment have all made massive inroads into collective concerns by integrating economic, social and political issues. From this point of view, the real strength of the Anthropocene, with its aim to give new momentum to environmental awareness, is probably political.

The second observation concerns the notion's aesthetic scope. The science historian [Fressoz](#), who co-authored with [Bonneuil](#) one of the reference works on the Anthropocene in the French-speaking world [\[5\]](#), stated in 2016 that 'the strength of the idea of the Anthropocene is not conceptual, scientific or heuristic. It is above all aesthetic. At present, the concept of the Anthropocene is a brilliant way of renaming certain achievements of the earth system sciences'. [\[6\]](#)

So why would a geological hypothesis involve an aesthetic phenomenon? What is the role of this aesthetic within questions concerning the relationship between humanity, society and the environment?

## ***2. The aesthetics of the Anthropocene***

The aesthetics concept remains highly polysemous, and its variations fluctuate depending on whether the domain is everyday language or philosophy and specific studies. In his *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, Lalande distinguished between the adjective and the noun. The adjective refers to anything that concerns beauty, while the noun denotes a science 'whose purpose is the judgement of appreciation insofar as it applies to the distinction between the Beautiful and the Ugly'. [\[7\]](#) Lalande indicated that the first variation in usage appeared in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the expression *Transcendental Aesthetic* is used to refer to the a priori forms of sensibility, that is time and space. In *Critique of Judgement*, however, the term 'aesthetics' indicates reflections referencing judgements of appreciation, which is closer to the meaning offered by Lalande (science of the Beautiful and the Ugly). In any case, the term began to assume its modern meaning in the 18th century. Shortly before Kant's works appeared, the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten defined aesthetics as a form of intuitive and sensible knowledge. Alongside philosophical and mathematical truths then, there was another truth that was historical, poetic and rhetorical. A more current definition has been proposed by [Treccani](#) [\[8\]](#), the Italian dictionary of philosophy, which defines aesthetics as an 'experience' that is determined at the point at which one judges a work of art, an object, an individual or a natural landscape after seeing it or them.

From a philosophical point of view, the question of aesthetics is clearly huge. Moreover, there is a notable discrepancy between the everyday, recurrent uses of the word and its specific and philosophical meanings. In everyday language, the word 'aesthetic' (in both its adjectival and substantive forms) encompasses the ideas of form, of visible appearance, while presupposing a conceptual separation between the sensible forms and the contents of expression. Of course things are more complex than this, and the separation between form and content is today generally considered wrong. Just to give an example, the Italian philosopher Gramsci said: 'The fact that form and content overlap only means that, in art, content is not "the abstract subject" (i.e. the plot of a novel or a particular mass of generic feelings) but the art itself, a philosophical category, "a distinct moment" in the mind etc. Nor the fact that form corresponds to technique, as the Scholar assumes, etc.' [\[9\]](#) To understand the importance of aesthetics and especially its

place in the debate on the Anthropocene, it is essential to start from the premise that the clear division between forms and contents of expression is at least problematic. Aesthetics is also a form of sensible knowledge that is based on a much richer and more complex equation than just a simple separation between signifier and signified.

Seeking to distinguish one or more aesthetics of the Anthropocene inevitably involves referring to the importance of images and their role in the processes of representation and figuration of the world. The various forms of environmental imagery are the basis for a broader collective awareness-raising process. In other words, images have played and continue to play a decisive role in the dissemination and anchoring of the potential renewal of our environmental culture.

For the life and earth sciences, the Anthropocene is above all an epistemological problem, which therefore concerns the classification of geological ages. There is no doubt about the impact that human activities have had and are still having on the planet's biophysical balance. It is in other domains, paradoxically, that the Anthropocene becomes a more tricky, ramified argument. Hidden behind the geological classification is a possible mutation of our collective experiences, of our ways of conceiving the relationship between humanity, society and the planetary environment. On the one hand, we have a science that has de facto already proven the harmful effects of a certain way of occupying the surface of the planet, and on the other, we have a public debate, political visions, feelings and collective perceptions that are all variable and constantly evolving.

While the Anthropocene is merely a label as far as geologists are concerned, for other domains (both scientific and public), the Anthropocene can reasonably be said to indicate a profound change in our *imago mundi*, a process that aims to consolidate a new *Weltanschauung*, a new way of understanding ourselves and the world we live in, both at individual and societal levels and more especially as a biological species. In the definition of this *imago mundi*, environmental imagery should be considered a major instrument and vehicle of meaning. These images mediate between the scientific representations of the phenomena in question (such as global warming, rising ocean salinity, the resurgence of extinctions, etc.) and their collective visibility, although this process sometimes risks producing approximate, superficial or even misleading appreciations. Images also help us to reflect on and take into account another issue linked to the Anthropocene, which is the difference in scale. Concepts such as 'geological age' and phenomena such as global warming, rising ocean salinity and changing nitrate cycles are conceived on a very large scale – bordering on the gigantic – both from a geographical and temporal point of view. Images could give collective visibility to phenomena that are difficult to represent outside of specific knowledge domains. What remains to be evaluated are the ways in which images take charge of disseminating these contents and above all the action and effects of all the pitfalls hidden behind visual communication. This is why the aesthetics of the Anthropocene is important. It is seen as the formalisation of a process of mediation and representation that both

describes and contributes to forging relationships with the environmental problematic.

### ***3. The role of the sublime***

As already mentioned, the question of aesthetics implies experience, that is a sensible knowledge linked to our ways of *experiencing* the spatiotemporal connections that govern our relationship to the world. The experience of the Anthropocene seems to have a very precise connotation. It is above all an experience of the sublime. According to [Fressoz](#), 'the discourse of the Anthropocene corresponds [...] quite closely to the canons of the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke in 1757'. [10] Like the word 'aesthetic', 'sublime' is often the victim of excessive and sometimes even inappropriate use in relation to its original meaning. 'Sublime' is not a synonym for 'beautiful'. Etymologically, 'sublime' comes from the Latin *sub + limen*, literally 'below' + 'threshold'. The modern meaning of the term comes from Burke and Kant. For Burke, the sublime was a kind of 'delicious terror' deriving from the fact that the subject perceives a danger or a risk, such as the perception of the formless, the terrible, the disproportionate. This perception is indissociably linked to nature and its forces, the real elements that produce this experience. 'The experience of the sublime is associated with sensations of amazement and terror. The sublime is based on the feeling of our own insignificance in the face of a distant, vast nature that suddenly manifests its omnipotence'. [11] It is the magnificence of nature and its potentially destructive force that prompts this feeling of terror and this search for a 'position' just below the limits of our own experience.

Kant focused on the idea of a sensible appreciation. For him, the mere fact that a person can conceive of the sublime 'attests to a capacity of the soul that is superior to any sensory measure'. For this philosopher from Königsberg, it was nature's magnificence, power and potentially destructive force that generates this feeling of bewilderment and frustration and makes us aware of our moral superiority. This superiority is due to our ability to act morally. Because of this experience, we test the limits of rationality and acknowledge the existence of an extra-sensible dimension that manifests on a purely emotional level. [12]

It is therefore clear that the humanity/nature relationship is at the centre of the question of the sublime. To better understand the aesthetic significance of the notion of the Anthropocene, [Fressoz](#) efficaciously cited a passage from Crutzen: 'humankind, our own species, has become so large and active that it now rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the Earth system. Humankind has become a global geological force'. [13]

This romantic, bourgeois feeling of bewilderment in the face of forces beyond our control, which simultaneously fascinate and haunt us and whose magnificence we appreciate but whose potentially destructive power we fear, had thus changed its own referent. These forces no longer belonged to the domain of a nature that was separated from humankind but derived from humankind, from our capacities, our activities: 'The sacred terror of nature has been transferred to a colossal

geological humanity'. [14] The new aesthetics of the Anthropocene thus involved a crucial shift from a natural to an artificial dimension.

However, this change of referent was much more articulate and began to manifest well before the debate on the Anthropocene emerged. The 19th century, a period that remains decisive in terms of understanding our contemporary world, was already evidencing an aesthetic mutation in the sublime. While the Romanticism that dominated the first half of the century was the time of the natural sublime, the advances of industrialisation and scientific and technological developments and the huge economic, social and cultural changes prompted the sudden arrival of what can be defined as the 'technological sublime'. [15] As Fressoz noted, 'when the sublime transferred to technology, it played a central role in the dissemination of the religion of progress, and the railway stations, factories and tower blocks were its permanent harangues'. Science historians have continued their contribution by focusing on two points that seem worthy of interest. The first concerns the role of this aesthetics in the context of capitalism and its decisive role in the development of the phenomena that have led us to speak of the Anthropocene today. According to this perspective, the terms 'Anthropocene' and 'Capitalocene' are not structured around a regime of opposition. The second point highlights the dangers of this aesthetics in the context of a greater process of abstracting the relationship between nature and humanity. In other words, one model of development – industrial capitalism – has become so dominant, so indisputable, that it has become 'second nature'. We all know the extent to which this development model relies on controlling and exploiting nature. The effects of this 'naturalisation' of something artificial and profoundly ideological are summed up well in the famous phrase that has been attributed variously to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek: 'It is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism'.

The aesthetics of the Anthropocene is thus based on changes in referent that have revolved around the experience of the sublime. The register of natural forces was replaced by the technological powers of man in the triumphant modernity of the second half of the 19th century, and the Anthropocene today is characterised by the addition of a further artificial referent, the toxic sublime. I will try to describe the connections between these artificial referents through two encounters between photography and the audiovisual.

## ***4. From True Detective to Anthropocene: The Human Epoch and from Misrach to Burtynsky***

### ***4.1 True Detective et Petrochemical America***

In 2018, I published an article on geographical imaginaries in the *True Detective* series. [16] The aim was to reflect on the way in which the authors had staged space, namely Louisiana, and in particular the Lower Mississippi River region between the cities of Baton Rouge and New Orleans. The analysis drew, for example, on numerous contributions on the series [17], on the imaginaries of the

bayou and wetlands more generally [18] and on Southern Gothic. [19] Several elements emerged. First, there was a correspondence between the diegetic geography and the extra-diegetic context of its production. Overall, the series was shot in the locations in which the story was set. The focus was on the dominant landscape of the Louisiana Petrochemical Corridor, one of the densest industrial areas in the United States and infamously known as Cancer Alley because of the environmental problems and their effects on the health of the surrounding population. One of the findings was based on a metaphorical interpretation of the American series, which, behind its police storyline, depicted a territory devastated by decades of petrochemical pollution and a population 'intoxicated' by this contamination. In particular, I highlighted the transformation of the imaginary of the bayou in the series. This ultimate wild, untamed space, this *locus horridus* that hosts a savage, threatening, hostile nature, becomes the scene of a true toxic ecocide. In the series, it remains a *locus horridus*, but, in relation to the crystallised imaginary, its monstrous, unhealthy characteristics derive from human activity. These characteristics are symbolised by the characters, with all their addictions, perversions and physical and mental illnesses. The series 'plunges the viewer into a world of vulnerability, a world of physical and economic precariousness in an America in ruins that is confronted with an ancestral hubris. It is a reality marked by poverty, decadence, industrial pollution and the idea of an apocalypse that has already taken place'. [20]

Second, key to understanding the aesthetic functioning of the series is its direct relationship with the photographic work *Petrochemical America*. [21] This work is the result of a collaboration between photographer Richard Misrach and landscape artist Kate Orff. Misrach spent a decade travelling through Cancer Alley compiling a photographic work that was then accompanied by a cartographic apparatus showing the various issues relating to petrochemical production in the area and its effects on the ecosystems and human biology there. Misrach's photos play a very important role in the whole aesthetic of the series, starting with the title sequence, where some of the photos were reworked. As Patrick Clair, director of Elastic, the company that produced the titles, said, 'Visually, we were inspired by photographic double exposures. Fragmented portraits, created by using human figures as windows into partial landscapes, served as a great way to show characters that are marginalised or internally divided. It made sense for the titles to feature portraits of the lead characters built out the place they lived. This became a graphic way of doing what the show does in the drama: reveal character through location'. [22]



Figure 1: Photogram of the *True Detective* title sequence. Misrach's 'Sugar Cane and Refinery' photograph is juxtaposed with a portrait of Matthew McConaughey.

More specifically, the researcher Lirette has argued that 'The influence of *Petrochemical America* does not stay within the title sequence, but seeps into the story, creating a heterogeneous geography, a palimpsest Louisiana with varied, distinct meanings and genealogies'. [23] Misrach's images thus play a role throughout the whole *mise en scène*, particularly in the choice of locations, the dominant landscapes and, of course, the way in which the territory is staged. This 'petrochemical' aesthetic is also part of the register of a sublime that has transitioned from the natural to the artificial. The bayou's wild and disquieting nature appears profoundly transformed by the gigantic petrochemical installations that have turned the territory into a toxic, abandoned, suffering *locus horridus*. The wilderness of the marshland has been replaced by a toxic wasteland that is every bit as inhospitable.

However, despite the recurrent presence of large-scale human installations (including the dams along the Mississippi but mainly the petrochemical plants), the sublime in Misrach's work and *True Detective* cannot be described as 'technological', at least not in the way Fressoz described it, that is a fusion of first and second nature, a 'majestic union of the natural and human sublimés'. [24] Misrach's (and *True Detective*'s) sublime comes from other factors such as the frame composition and perspectives, chromatisms and lighting. Misrach's photographs often juxtapose different elements. The petrochemical installations (the plants, pipelines, ships, etc.) are often set in a landscape that hints at its true natural purpose (the green banks of the Mississippi, the bayou and the various wetlands). Sometimes two artificial elements – with different functions and meanings – are juxtaposed. The petrochemical installations 'coexist' in the frame with houses and other artefacts that suggest the daily life of a population,

and this aspect materialises despite the almost total absence of human figures. This absence takes on its full meaning in the dialectic between the frame and the off-frame. Showing spaces that are lived in but devoid of any human presence reinforces not just the incompatibility between the petrochemical plant and human life but also one of the undeniable effects of this coexistence, abandonment.

Beyond providing the fictional inspiration for a detective series, Misrach's work is based on an undeniable, material principle of reality, that is industrial contamination and its effects on the living. The aesthetic challenge lies in visibilising a series of phenomena that are very difficult to show. I am talking, of course, about toxic pollution and its associated illnesses, which led to the creation of the toponym Cancer Alley. As Kelly (2017) and others have suggested, the series' aesthetic reference, particularly because of its connections with Misrach's work, falls into the category of the toxic sublime.

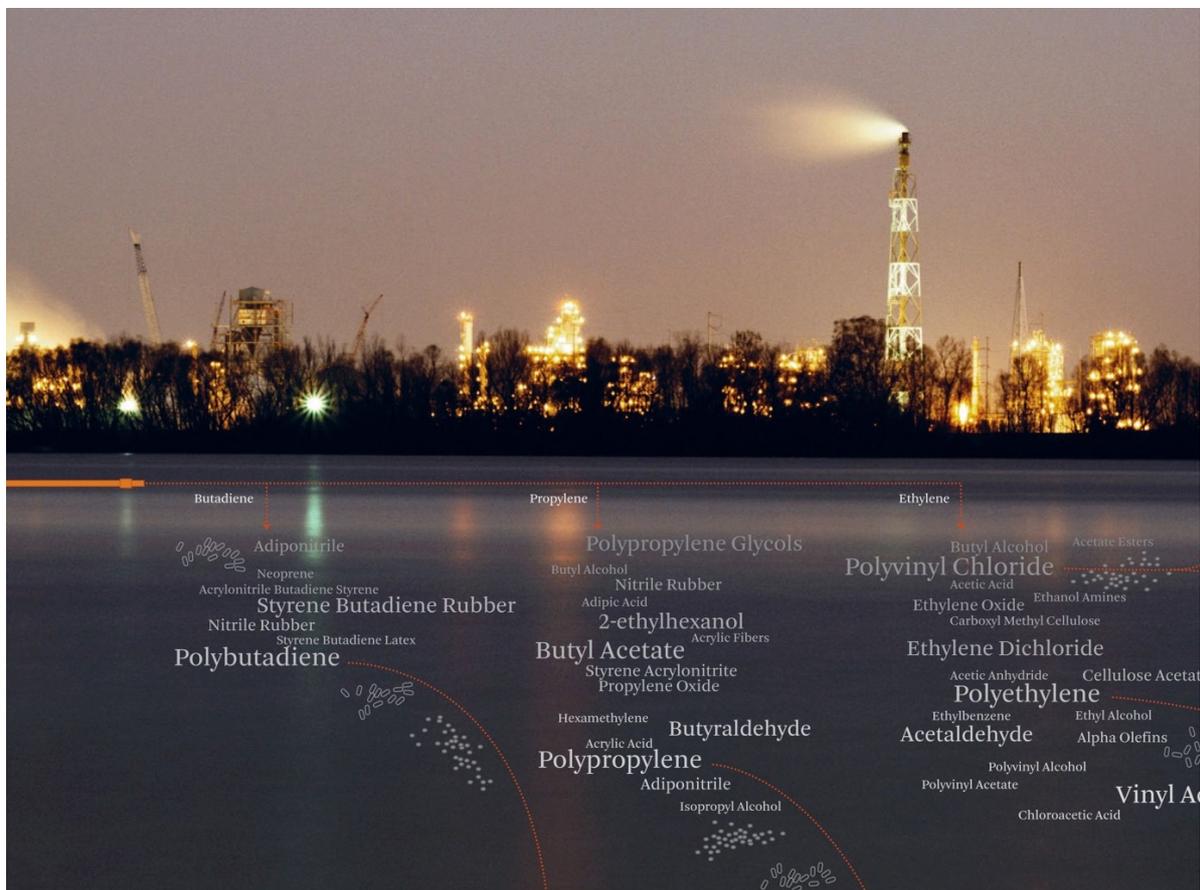


Figure 2: An extract from *Petrochemical America*. A Mirach photograph was used as a background for the didascalical section produced by Kate Orff.

#### 4.2. *Burtynsky and Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*

As Peeples noted [25], the notion of the toxic sublime is central to understanding the visual work of photographer [Burtynsky](#). In collaboration with the directors [Baichwal](#) and [de Pencier](#), [Burtynsky](#) authored the documentary film [Anthropocene: The Human Epoch](#) (2018). This time, the encounter between

the photography and the audiovisual has been well formalised and structured using environmental documentary film codes. The film forms part of a larger multimedia project that seeks to bring together scientific research on the earth's chronostratigraphy and visual culture (photography, documentary film, 3D and augmented reality). The starting point for the project was the research produced by the Working Group on the Anthropocene, which aims to obtain definitive approval of Crutzen's hypothesis that we are no longer in the Holocene but in the Anthropocene. Two of the scientists in this group, Jan Zalasiewicz and Colin Waters, actively contributed to the [Burtynsky/Baichwal/de Pencier](#) project by providing scientific expertise and proposing the popular works that appear in the volume *Anthropocene*. [26] In addition to the film, the project includes a series of exhibitions in Canada and Europe of [Burtynsky's](#) photographic work and in particular intense educational outreach campaigns aimed at schools and supported by the Royal Canadian Geographical Society.

As the online presentation states, 'The Anthropocene Project is a multidisciplinary body of work from world-renowned collaborators [Nicholas de Pencier](#), [Edward Burtynsky](#) and [Jennifer Baichwal](#). Combining art, film, virtual reality, augmented reality, and scientific research, the project investigates human influence on the state, dynamic and future of the Earth'. [27]

The film is the third part of a trilogy that began in 2006 with *Manufactured Landscapes*, which follows photographer [Burtynsky's](#) travels to document human alterations to the landscape. Released a few years later, the film [Watermark](#) (2013), as the title suggests, focuses on issues related to water use in different parts of the world.



Figure 3: Demolition of ships in Chittagong, Bangladesh. [Edward Burtynsky](#).



Figure 4: Fish farming in China. [Edward Burtynsky](#).

The third part, therefore, seeks to transform the key elements of the chronostratigraphic question of the Anthropocene, which is currently being validated, into a narrative through images. The film opens with a ceremony in Kenya during which the authorities publicly burn a massive quantity of ivory tusks requisitioned from the poachers. From here, the film takes you on a journey of visual exploration through, for example, the mining town of Norilsk in Russia (one of the most polluted on the planet), the Hambach coal mine in Germany, the Massa Carrara marble quarries in Italy, the lithium evaporation pools in the Atacama Desert, the construction of a huge breakwater dam in China and a potassium mine in Russia.

The mark of [Burtynsky's](#) aesthetic is not just manifest, it is central to the whole *mise en scène*. In keeping with the two preceding works, [Anthropocene: The Human Epoch](#) adopts a non-didactic approach in which the experience of the visible is dominant. There is thus limited space given over to verbal information in voiceover or superimposition. Rather than trying to popularise and make accessible the key points of the geological debate (how and why the proposed change in our geological classification criteria came about), the work seems to be more oriented towards creating a sensible experience. How do you translate to screen a scientific problem that concerns the earth's chronostratigraphy and that therefore operates on a colossal spatial and temporal scale? There is a paradox in a way, a contradiction manifested in the substantial, scientific, philosophical difference between a scientific approach based on observing and measuring phenomena, on

the one hand, and experience, or rather a form of sensible knowledge, on the other. In reality, the documentary film, nolens volens, takes into account the range of varied meanings assumed by the Anthropocene notion by focusing in particular on a problem of scale. How do you represent a geological age? How do you give narrative visibility to something that acts at global level and on such a huge temporal scale?

The sublime has probably been mobilised to respond to this challenge. All in all, the documentary film adds sound and movement to [Burtynsky's](#) aesthetics, which can be found in the formal and chromatic compositions that give the landscapes their fascinating but disquieting beauty. The sequences are regularly constructed according to the same pattern, with the scene opening with shots of elements that are difficult to identify and recognise. The accentuation of the chromatisms and structures therefore tends towards abstraction. It is the camera movements, particularly the backward tracking and panning shots, that gradually allow the viewer to recognise the object/structure and insert it into a context that identifies it. The framing choice, or the point of view that the director uses to place the camera, also often creates a lack of orientation in the viewer, who has difficulty in situating themselves in the filmic space. In this respect, the aerial and elevated shots contribute to depriving the image of scalar proportions, which sometimes exacerbates the disjointedness of scales.

This aesthetic choice, which [Burtynsky](#) had previously mobilised in photographic series such as *Quarries, Mines, Water and Salt Pans*, is ultimately characterised by an exaggerated tendency towards abstraction aimed at disorienting the observer. The visual experience offered suggests that it is impossible to fully grasp the dimensions of the Anthropocene. However, the challenges presented by this aesthetic choice go beyond the problem of dimensions. The objects and landscapes depicted seem to express the quest for a virginal beauty, an aesthetic purity that is achieved through a profoundly artificial *mise en scène*. The construction of the image and its effects is manifest and can visually only produce a cognitive short-circuit. The undeniable beauty of the compositions and chromatisms inevitably conflicts with the process of recognition and therefore with the contents of what we see. An initial image appears on the screen. We are awe-struck. But then, because of the camera movements or other framings, we begin to realise that the image is of waste materials or a devastated landscape or a pollutant or an element that has been profoundly altered by human actions.

This type of experience falls squarely within the framework of an artificial sublime. Nature's virginal but nevertheless threatening beauty is replaced by humanity's destructive powers. In her analysis of [Burtynsky's](#) toxic sublime, Peeples [28] summarises a series of oppositions that generate the experience of the toxic sublime: beauty vs ugliness, magnitude vs insignificance, known vs unknown, inhabitation vs desolation and security vs risk. With particular reference to the documentary film [Burtynsky](#) made with [Baichwal](#) and [de Pencier](#), the tensions most frequently mobilised are beauty vs ugliness and more especially magnitude vs insignificance. Take for example the ivory tusks shown in the first

sequence. Their mass is immense, and at the start it is difficult to grasp their scale in relation to human size. In a similar but even more unsettling way, the problem of size manifests again in the sequence on the marble quarries in Carrara, where the forms and colours of this excavated landscape muddy the viewer's perceptions by making it difficult to place it in a diegetic situation. Another example is the sequence showing the huge Hambach mine, where we fail to truly grasp the size of the enormous excavating machines for a good few moments. This emphasis on excessive magnitude is an essential element in understanding the sublime. According to Kant (as we are reminded by Peeples), an object is sublime when its magnitude overflows not just the setting but also our capacity to grasp it. This leads to a fundamental clarification concerning the 'artificial' and 'toxic' natures of the sublime: 'I define the term "toxic sublime" as the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe'. [29]

However, relative to the photographic series analysed by Peeples, the film offers different forms of artificial sublime that also encompass the technological question discussed by Fressoz. [30] As far as the toxic sublime is concerned, the transition from the natural to the artificial register remains, but the toxic sublime is complicated by the fact that the 'toxicity' rarely manifests on a visible level: 'the toxic sublime produces dissonance by simultaneously showing beauty and ugliness, the magnitude of the projects and the insignificance of humans, illustrating what is known of production and unknown of effect, questions the role of the individual in the toxic landscape while simultaneously eliciting the feelings of security and risk, power and powerlessness'. [31]

We can define [Burtynsky's](#) imagery as a radical and perpetual quest for the artificial sublime, whether toxic or technological. This is a choice that is nevertheless not without its ethical and political implications. According to [Sontag](#), photography has 'a crucial influence in shaping the crises and catastrophes that come to our attention'. [32] From epidemics to disasters, 'images heighten our awareness of the fragility of our life systems in the face of various forms of risk'. [33] Peeples does, however, mention several criticisms of [Burtynsky's](#) aesthetic choices in her analysis, which also apply to [\*Anthropocene: The Human Epoch\*](#).

We have seen that the cognitive short-circuiting of the sublime is based on the discrepancy between the formal perfection of images and the nature of the phenomena they represent, in other words making beautiful, fascinating and even almost desirable what is not and cannot be. The criticisms reported by Peeples stress this point and question whether this aesthetic process might actually be a way of downplaying the critical significance. [Burtynsky](#) has always asserted the non-didactic purpose of his work and made clear his intention to avoid any ethical or moral judgement concerning the phenomena he represents. This choice, which might appear neutral at first glance, results from a precise visual project. The feeling of abstraction, the disorientation and the blurring of scale all produce an inevitable physical and scalar distance that separates the subject from the object.

All in all, however, this visual project is ultimately in keeping with the original meaning of the Anthropocene. How, for example, do you translate a geological age into images? The Holocene has never been the subject of such activities. The age of humankind, as a geological age, is paradoxically something that is incompatible with the spatialities and temporalities of humankind. A geological age is measured in thousands and thousands of years and encompasses the entire planet as a single, homogeneous entity. Furthermore, this dimensional disparity, this difficulty that the viewer has in situating themselves in the diegetic dimensions is an aspect that reinforces the idea of incompatibility between human life and the changes that the planet is undergoing. The neutrality of this non-didactic representation, which is apparently devoid of any ethical or moral judgement, is therefore illusory, because the Anthropocene, relative to other geological eras, is a deeply connoted notion that conveys a political and environmental awareness. Human beings are producing something that goes far beyond the human scale.

From this point of view, [Burtynsky](#), [Baichwal](#) and [de Pencier's](#) documentary film does not seek either to prove this hypothesis or to describe the phenomena that justify its existence. To understand the importance of this type of environmental imagery, we must examine the terrain of experience that the film seeks to produce rather than describe. The Anthropocene is first and foremost a sublime object, and as such it amazes, fascinates and worries us, not only because of its disastrous implications but also and above all because of the intrinsic difficulty of understanding it.

The dangers intrinsic to the imagery of abstraction, disorientation and scalar disparity are by no means exclusive to the aesthetics of the artificial and toxic sublime of imagery. These dangers are inherent in the very nature of a notion that is yet to be objectified from more than just a chronostratigraphic point of view. Behind this 'human' geological age is a whole series of phenomena that inevitably affect the experiences, lives, health and destinies of millions of people. The danger presented by this debate and its dissemination, including therefore the Anthropocene project that this documentary film is part of, is precisely its potential to dismantle the relationship between the local and the global. The aesthetics of the sublime (toxic or artificial) is probably dependent on this dismantling of scales, which inevitably leads to an imagery dominated by an abstraction that decontextualises the object and disorients the subject. This position is roughly the one expressed by [Fressoz \[34\]](#), who focused on the relationship between capitalism, the sublime and the Anthropocene. 'For contemporary political ecology, however, the sublime aesthetics of the Anthropocene pose a problem. By staging the hybridisation between first and second nature, it re-energises the technological action of the cold warriors (geo-engineering). By disconnecting the individual and local scales from what really matters (humanity as a telluric force and geological timescales), it produces paralysis and cynicism (no future). And finally, the Anthropocene, like any other sublime, is subject to the law of diminishing returns. Once the audience is prepared and conditioned, its effect wanes'. [\[35\]](#)

## ***Conclusion: describing and experiencing the Anthropocene***

It is always difficult to compare two forms of visual language that differ in their form, content, issues, functions and reception. The comparative study presented here is an exception, however, because of the obvious correspondence between visual arts such as photography, documentary film and fiction. Above all, they all draw on similar aesthetics, which can be transferred from photography to fiction and the documentary film. In addition, this study was justified by the visual and aesthetic importance of the notion of the Anthropocene, not just as a geological hypothesis but as a human and sensible experience.

The first season of the *True Detective* series owes much to the work of Richard Misrach. It uses his aesthetic as a subtext and assigns the role of socioenvironmental signification to the metaphorical processes of the narrative. The series uses the narrative codes of the detective story and an original and interesting reinvention of Southern Gothic to present a world that metaphorically represents the experience of the Anthropocene through the socioenvironmental problem of petrochemical production. This process of signification is achieved through the convergence of a precise and referenced aesthetic (Misrach and Orff's *Petrochemical America*), a detective narrative and an interpretive work driven by metaphor and symbol. It goes without saying that the aim of the series was not and could not be the same as that of the documentary film. The crime series viewer is not necessarily interested in the environmental question of the Louisiana Petrochemical Corridor. However, the *mise en scène* and fictionalisation choices in *True Detective* convey meaning about the geography of these territories. This is why the Louisiana researcher Lirette concluded that the series had a paradoxically realistic character, due not so much to the events narrated but to the geographical, social, cultural and environmental context in which they play out.

The film [\*Anthropocene: The Human Epoch\*](#) constructs a documentary narrative by staging real situations, objects and landscapes that have not been reconstituted ad hoc. The whole question of the Anthropocene, its aesthetics and the experience of it is based on significant scientific support and debated, directly or indirectly, publicly on a large scale. However, the radicalisation of an exclusively sublime aesthetic inevitably leads to an abstraction and therefore to a loss of realism that sometimes risks distancing the viewer from the heart of the debate, which should revolve not so much around the affirmation or not of a new geological classification but around the phenomena that are upsetting the planetary balance.

On the face of it, this 'unsuitable' comparison seems to present a curious paradox. An entirely fictional police series manages to provide a realistic geographical portrait through its aesthetic choices and a narrative that lends itself well to a metaphorical reading. By contrast, a documentary film, which is supposed to portray a set of real situations and phenomena, delivers a portrait that is sometimes disconnected and disorienting and that distances the subject from the object. This effect essentially derives from an aesthetic radicalism and a weak narrativisation. In reality, this interpretation does not take into account the experience factor mentioned above. These two audiovisual productions allow for

an interesting reflection on the Anthropocene, not only in terms of a geological hypothesis or a political and environmental debate but as a human and sensible experience. *True Detective* describes a toxic lived experience in which the sublime is used to give substance to the incompatibility between humans and their murderous creations. The characters, the narrative and their geography thus present the experience of a profound environmental degradation. By contrast, [Baichwal](#), [Burtynsky](#) and [de Pencier's](#) documentary film does not aim to describe this experience but to produce it in the viewer. The purpose of [Burtynsky's](#) aesthetics was therefore not didactic, explanatory or descriptive. The challenge embraced by the authors was to put into images something that, by its nature, escapes our human spatial and temporal scales, namely a geological age. The aim of [Burtynsky's](#) 'extreme' artificial sublime was for us to experience a phenomenon that is beyond our capacity to understand it.

The issues at stake in d'[Anthropocene: The Human Epoch](#) are therefore consistent with the original meaning of the Anthropocene notion, which is the hypothesis that our activities have led us to act with the same impact of a major telluric force. However, these issues carry the risks mentioned by [Fressoz \[36\]](#), namely the public's cynical paralysis and desensitisation in the face of pressing issues. This applies not just to this type of environmental documentary but also to the direction that the debate on the Anthropocene is taking. One solution might be to implement an intermediate aesthetic and narrative approach that is more heterogeneous. This would effectively represent the indisputable links between the local and the global, in other words between the global and millennial scales of geology and the spatiotemporal experiences of individuals and societies living, often tragically, with the phenomena at the root of the Anthropocene.

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## NOTES

[1] See [Bonneuil, C.](#), [Fressoz, J.-B.](#), *L'événement Anthropocène. La Terre, l'histoire et nous*, Paris, Points 2016.

[2] *Ivi*, p. 33. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from French sources have been translated into English.

[3] Latour, B., *Facing Gaia : Six Lectures on the Political Theology of Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion*, Edinburgh, 18-28 February 2013, p. 77

[4] Steffen, W., Grinewald, J., Crutzen, P. J., McNeill, J. R., 'The Anthropocene : Conceptual and historical perspectives', *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Societies A*, vol. 369 no 1938, 2011, p. 842-867, p. 843.

[5] See [Bonneuil, C.](#), [Fressoz, J.-B.](#), *L'événement Anthropocène*, *op. cit.*

[6] [Fressoz, J.-B.](#), *L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime*, <<http://mouvements.info/sublime-anthropocene/>>, 2016, accessed 3/1/2020.

[7] Lalande, A., *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, Paris, PUF, 1909 ed. 2006, p. 302

[8] <[http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/estetica\\_%28Dizionario-di-filosofia%29/](http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/estetica_%28Dizionario-di-filosofia%29/)>, accessed 21/3/2020.

[9] Gramsci, A., *Quaderni del Carcere*, critical edition directed by V. Gerratana, Milan, Einaudi, 1975, p. 1062. Translated via the author's French translation of the original quote.

[10] [Fressoz, J.-B.](#), *L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime*, *op. cit.*

[11] *Ibidem.*

[12] On this subject, I refer the reader to the first part of Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and in particular to Book 2, 'Analytic of the sublime'.

[13] Steffen, W., Grinewald, J., Crutzen, P. J., McNeill, J. R., 'The Anthropocene: Conceptual and historical perspectives', *op. cit.*, p. 843.

[14] [Fressoz, J.-B.](#), *L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime*, *op. cit.*

[15] See Nye, D.E., *American technological sublime*, Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1994.

[16] See Pinto, A., 'L'imaginaire de la Louisiane dans *True Detective*. Une réinvention du *Southern Gothic*', <[espacetemps.net](http://espacetemps.net)>, <<https://www.espacetemps.net/en/articles/liminaire-de-louisiane-true-detective/>>, 2018.

[17] See Astié, M., 'True Detective et la nature de Louisiane comme impasse' *Entrelacs* special issue no 4, 2016, p. 29-40 ; Kelly, C. R., 'The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO's *True Detective* (2014)', *Communication, Culture & Critique* no 10, 2017, p. 39-57; Lirette, C., 'Something true about Louisiana. HBO's *True Detective* and Petrochemical America Aesthetic', 2014, <<https://southernspaces.org/2014/something-true-about-louisiana-hbos-true-detective-and-petrochemical-america-aesthetic>>, accessed 26/12/2016; Maillos, M., 'L'homme contre la nature dans *True Detective*', *Entrelacs* special issue no 4, 2016, p. 41-50; Thill, C., 'True Detective & Le Roi en Jaune. Les clés pour mieux comprendre la série', in Chambers R., ed. 2014, *Le Roi en Jaune*, trans. by C. Thill, Paris, Librairie Générale Française, 2014 p. 365-381.

[18] See Lécole-Solnychkine, S., Laury-Nuria, A., 'L'imaginaire du marais chez Apollonios de Rhodes et Quintus de Smyrne' in *Annales de l'APLAES*, Proceedings from the Science Day at the 45th APLAES conference, 2014, p. 27-39.

[19] See Liénard, M., 'Le gothique américain', in *Études* no 4086, June 2008, p. 789-798.

[20] Pinto, A., 'L'imaginaire de la Louisiane dans *True Detective*. Une réinvention du *Southern Gothic*', *op. cit.*

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- [22] The interview is available in full at <<https://www.artofthetitle.com/title/true-detective>>.
- [23] Lirette, C., 'Something true about Louisiana. HBO's True Detective and Petrochemical America Aesthetic', *op. cit.*, p. 8.
- [24] [Fresso, J.-B.](#), *L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime*, *op. cit.*
- [25] Peeples, J., 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', *Environnemental Communication* vol. 5 no 4, 2011, p. 373-392.
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- [27] <<https://theanthropocene.org/>> accessed 20/4/2020.
- [28] Peeples, J., 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', *op. cit.*
- [29] *Ivi*, p. 375.
- [30] [Fresso, J.-B.](#), *L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime*, *op. cit.*
- [31] Peeples, J., 'Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes', *op. cit.*
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- [34] [Fresso, J.-B.](#), *L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime*, *op. cit.*
- [35] *Ibidem.*
- [36] *Ibidem.*