

MAIN SECTION

Abysses and Ghosts: Remarks for a Discourse on Anthropocene Hyper-Aesthetics.

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ABSTRACT

In reflecting on a possible aesthetic of the Anthropocene, it seems spontaneous to refer first of all to the figurative and visual outcomes that have been produced within the specific reflection on the topic or at least traditionally associated with the representation of global climate change. Just as the definition of Anthropocene has been widely questioned both from a terminological and chronological point of view, the visual contents in fact (well represented by the 2018 exhibition “Anthropocene: Burtynsky, Baichwal, de Pencier”) turn out to be partial and in some cases misleading. They are in fact representative, at most, of one of the possible discourses on the aesthetics of the Anthropocene. In order to articulate the theme better and insert these results in a more effective and broader framework, it is necessary to retrace the history of those images and integrate this narrative heritage with aesthetics generated, even if only apparently, outside the context traditionally referred to the Anthropocene.

KEYWORDS

Representation; Anthropocene; Nonhuman Agency; Photography; Narrative

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Introduction

In reflecting on a possible aesthetic of the Anthropocene, it seems spontaneous to refer first of all to the figurative and visual outcomes that have been produced within the specific reflection on the topic or at least traditionally associated with the representation of global climate change. Just as the definition of Anthropocene has been widely questioned both from a terminological and chronological point of view, the visual contents in fact (well represented by the 2018 exhibition “Anthropocene: Burtynsky, Baichwal, de Pencier”) turn out to be partial and in some cases misleading. They are in fact representative, at most, of one of the possible discourses on the aesthetics of the Anthropocene. In order to articulate the theme better and insert these results in a more effective and broader framework, it is necessary to retrace the history of those images and integrate this narrative heritage with aesthetics generated, even if only apparently, outside the context traditionally referred to the Anthropocene.

The sublime hyperobject

The images we currently associate with the Anthropocene have a sinister allure. Whether they are more or less arbitrarily chosen as symbols and metaphors (such as the well-known image of the polar bear consumed by hunger taken in 2017 by Cristina Mittermeier¹) or the outcome of a specific research project (such as the images by Burtynsky, Baichwal, and de Pencier) they tend to evoke in the observer a feeling of sublime consternation. In this regard, Bénédicte Ramade, at the end of her review of the “Sublime” exhibition at the Georges Pompidou-Metz Center in 2016, writes “the sublime will not have written a new mythology and woven a new regime of belief from the Anthropocene, but it will have dictated, with unquestionable brilliance, a dark and fatal prophecy plagued by doubts and regrets.”² In this position lies the power and the limit of the association between Anthropocene and the sublime on the aesthetic side. As already theorized by Fressoz, in fact, the Anthropocene, if read in relation to the transformations of the landscape or to the “invention of new landscapes”³, manifests itself in a sublime form under three main perspectives: “To the sublime of quantity, the Anthropocene adds the geological sublime of ages and aeons, from which it draws its most striking effects. [...] The

1 Cristina Mittermeier, “Starving-Polar-Bear Photographer Recalls What Went Wrong” in *National Geographic*, August 2018 (<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/article/explore-through-the-lens-starving-polar-bear-photo>) cit. in Marco Malvestio, *Raccontare la fine del mondo. Fantascienza e Antropocene* (Milano: nottetempo, 2021), 92.

2 “le sublime n’aura pas écrit une nouvelle mythologie et tissé un nouveau régime de croyance à partir de l’anthropocène, mais il aura dicté, avec un brio incontestable, une sombre et funeste prophétie en proie aux doutes et aux regrets.” (translated by the author). Bénédicte Ramade, (2016). “Review of Le sublime réinventé / The Sublime Reinvented / Sublime. Les tremblements du monde”, *Espace*, (114), 66–71.

3 “invention de nouveaux paysages” (translation by the author). Baldine Saint Girons (dir.), *Le Paysage et la question du sublime*, Editions de la RMN, ARAC, musée de Valence, 1997, p. 76.

discourse of the Anthropocene cultivates this aesthetic of suddenness, of the bifurcation and of the event. The sublime of the Anthropocene resides precisely in this extraordinary encounter: two centuries of human activity, an infinitesimal duration, almost negligible in terms of the Earth's history, will have been enough to provoke an alteration comparable to the great upheaval at the end of the Mesozoic 65 million years ago. The third source of the Anthropocene sublime is the sublime of the sovereign violence of nature, that of earthquakes, storms and hurricanes. The promoters of the Anthropocene readily mobilize the romantic sublime of ruins, vanished civilizations, and collapses."⁴

Whichever way one looks at the images currently associated with the Anthropocene, the relationship with the categories of the Sublime is thus evident: the vertigo of physical and temporal scales, the shock of superhuman manifestations of natural phenomena, a certain seductive expulsion of the human: these are all elements that characterize the imagery of the Anthropocene and that at the same time are installed in an extremely codified visual history. In some cases, the dance of visual themes and strategies is so intertwined and ancient that it even produces an anaesthetic effect as Mirzoeff notes: "the conquest of nature, having been aestheticised, leads to a loss of perception (aesthesia), which is to say, it becomes an anaesthetic."⁵ Although the debate on the Anthropocene is relatively recent, in its catastrophic accents it is in fact part of a system of ancient narratives that are rooted in eschatological and apocalyptic myths: since we are able to tell, we are always telling and representing the same story that is, apparently, the story of our end or of our possible endings. The idea of witnessing the end of the (or of a) world is at the very root of the view of the romantic landscape which, according to Yvon Le Scanff is "fundamentally apocalyptic, on the one hand because he is interested in the borderline states of the landscape (its disappearance and its birth)"⁶ and is particularly pervasive in the current context where, according to Fisher,

4 "Au sublime de la quantité, l'Anthropocène ajoute le sublime géologique des âges et des éons, duquel il tire ses effets les plus saisissants. [...] Le discours de l'Anthropocène cultive cette esthétique de la soudaineté, de la bifurcation et de l'événement. Le sublime de l'Anthropocène réside précisément dans cette rencontre extraordinaire : deux siècles d'activité humaine, une durée infime, quasi-nulle au regard de l'histoire terrienne, auront suffi à provoquer une altération comparable au grand bouleversement de la fin du Mésozoïque il y a 65 millions d'années. La troisième source du sublime anthropocénique est le sublime de la violence souveraine de la nature, celle des tremblements de terre, des tempêtes et des ouragans. Les promoteur-riche-s de l'Anthropocène mobilisent volontiers le sublime romantique des ruines, des civilisations disparues et des effondrements [...]" (translation by the author). Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime" in Hélène Guenin (Dir.), *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde* (Metz : Editions du Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016), 45.

5 Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", *Public Culture* 26, no. 2 (2014), 220.

6 "fondamentalement apocalyptique, d'une part parce qu'il s'intéresse aux états-limites du paysages (sa disparition et sa naissance)" Yvon Le Scanff, *Le Paysage romantique et l'expérience du sublime*, Seyssel, Champ Vallon, coll. "Pays/Paysages", 2007, p. 143.

“it’s easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism”.⁷

The interpretation of the Anthropocene as the context of the tale of the end brings us forcefully back into the realm of narratives and imaginary constructs that cannot, as we will say later, be expelled from a debate that appears only superficially scientific and technical: “from chaos to the Apocalypse, from the Flood to the end of time, from the Tower of Babel to the year 1000, from the disorder that generates order in the founding myths to the clean slate that leads to the ‘great night’ [...], countless are the imaginary constructions that bring back to the catastrophe as to a constant around which humanity has sought to define itself by defining under the sign of the accidental its relationship to the world.”⁸

This opening on the imaginary allows us to better understand the real narrative texture that underlies the work of Burtynsky, Baichwal and de Pencier and it is also useful to clarify that, if crushed on an exclusively environmental, landscape and apocalyptic dimension, the Anthropocene is likely to manifest itself according to scripts and strategies already known and codified and therefore less useful to an “awareness essential to understand what is happening to us. Because what is happening to us is not an environmental crisis, it is a geological revolution of human origin.”⁹

It is therefore appropriate, to trigger a more profitable and effective reflection, to extend the category of the sublime and our idea of the Anthropocene to embrace other aesthetics: the concept of hyperobject proposed by Morton can provide a useful indication in this sense.

The author indicates in fact as a key example of this formulation the climate change: we propose here to extend the category to the Anthropocene in a broad sense (of which climate change is one of the most obvious phenomenological outcomes). It is in fact primarily viscous or pervasive and much closer than we want to admit, something that “haunt my social and

7 The phrase is usually associated with Mark Fisher who uses it as the title of the first paragraph in Mark Fisher, *Capitalism Realism. Is there no alternative?*, London: Zero Books, 2009. Fisher himself attributes it in turn to Frederic Jameson in the context of a debate with James Ballard *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), xii; and “Future City,” *New Left Review* 21 (May/June 2003), 76. The original combination of the end of capitalism and the end of the world, where the statement made is quite different, is found in H. Bruce Franklin, “What Are We to Make of J. G. Ballard’s Apocalypse?”, in *Short Story Criticism*, vol. 1, Gale, 1988. Originally published in Claerson, Thomas D. (ed.), *Voices for the Future Essays on Major Science Fiction Writers*, vol. 2, Bowling Green: University Popular Press, 1979, pp. 82-105.

8 “[...] du chaos à l’Apocalypse, du Déluge à la fin du temps, de la tour de Babel à l’an mil, du désordre qui engendre l’ordre dans le mythes fondateurs à la table rase qui conduit au ‘grand soir’ [...], innombrables sont les constructions imaginaires qui ramènent à la catastrophe comme à une constante autour de laquelle l’humanité a cherché à se définir en définissant sous le signe de l’accidentel son rapport au monde » (translation by the author). Annie Le Brun, *Perspective dépravée : entre catastrophe réelle et catastrophe imaginaire* (Bruxelles: La Lettre volée, 1991), 19.

9 “[...] prise de conscience essentielle pour comprendre ce qui nous arrive. Car ce qui nous arrive n’est pas une crise environnementale, c’est une révolution géologique d’origine humaine.” (translation by the author). Christophe Bonneuil and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, *L’Événement Anthropocène. La Terre, l’histoire et nous* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2016), XIII.

psychic space with an always-already."¹⁰ Viscosity is a continuum from which it is difficult to distance oneself and abstract oneself, a condition that perfectly accounts for the fundamental paradox of the definition of a historical epoch carried out within that same epoch and coined by an observer who at the same time proclaims himself the main agent of the phenomenon observed. The attribute of non-locality then accounts for the spatial dislocation and the impossibility of experiencing the Anthropocene hyper-object in its entirety: "Global warming is an object of which many things are distributed pieces: the raindrops falling on my head in Northern California. The tsunami that pours through the streets of Japanese towns. The increasing earthquake activity based on changing pressure on the ocean floor. [...] Convincing some people of its existence is like convincing some two-dimensional Flatland people of the existence of apples, based on the appearance of a morphing circular shape in their world."¹¹ Simply being exposed to episodic manifestations of a hyperobject that are difficult to trace back to a causal chain therefore makes it difficult to truly believe that it exists. This is perhaps the most important and misunderstood aspect of the Anthropocene phenomenon, and it is the reason that makes most disaster films both spectacular and comforting. In many of these, the climatic apocalypse is in fact associated with phenomena "endowed with a more visible and more easily contextualized catastrophe than that which these phenomena actually have,"¹² triggered by an intelligible sequence of specifically connected events, a connection that is maintained visible and objectified by the speed with which the catastrophic phenomenon is triggered.

Everything happens so fast and in such an apparently logical way that, implicitly, it is suggested that, with timely and predictive capabilities, the catastrophe can be defused by cutting the blue wire, just when the timer marks one second to the end of the countdown. The archetypal figure of the eccentric scientist unheard for years, who is suddenly recognized as the repository of the solution to the problem is the personification of this mechanistic and linear vision of catastrophic events. The spatial non-uniformity of the phenomena related to the Anthropocene becomes even more critical if we consider the wave-like (or rather fluctuating) nature of planetary events in temporal terms: it is not by chance that the temporal limits of the Anthropocene itself fluctuate vertiginously according to the phenomenon that is chosen as a marker of the beginning of this era.

Non-locality and temporal waviness insert the hyperobject to the space of phases: specific moments in space and time in which individual aspects of the hyperobject manifest and become visible. "That's why you can't see global warming. You would have to occupy some high-dimensional

10 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects, Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 29.

11 *ibid.*, 49.

12 Malvestio, *Raccontare la fine del mondo*, 93.

space to see it unfolding explicitly"¹³: transcending the current dimension is an operable but hardly imaginable concept that concerns the hypothesis about a space that we have no words or similes to describe (but only predictive mathematical models, such as Lorenz's attractor model, cited by Morton). Ultimately, the notion of interobjectivity is instrumental in articulating the immanent and indistinguishable relationships between the elements of the hyperobject and in defining intersubjectivity as an anthropocentric subset of a boundlessly larger space. Based on these five characteristics, the Anthropocene hyperobject presents itself as irreducible to an unambiguous aesthetic and requires contemplating a multitude of aesthetic discourses involving possible visual and narrative outcomes that are also distant from each other. Let us now examine some of these possible fronts in order to define the first coordinates of a possible hyper-aesthetic discourse on the Anthropocene.

Satellite vision and war imagery

On a conceptual level, the work of Burtynsky, Baichwal and de Pencier is in continuity with a consolidated history of critical landscape photography ranging from the works of Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall¹⁴, to the project of Yann Arthus Bertrand (*Earth from Above*, 2004), from the visual research of Godfrey Reggio in his "Qatsi" trilogy¹⁵, to the work of the exponents of the Dusseldorf School (Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, and Thomas Ruff among others) and the artists involved in the 1975 exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-altered Landscape*¹⁶ (Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Nicholas Nixon, and Bernd and Hilla Becher).

If we analyse Burtynsky's images and, in general, all the photographic images conceived with the aim of showing the effects of human intervention on the landscape, we can easily find the common denominator of the zenithal setting and the width of the shot (which in cinematographic terms would be defined as a very long field): the effects of the Anthropocene on the landscape are therefore, apparently, better perceived if seen from above and, if possible, from a great distance. The idea that the large-scale effect is particularly effective (i.e., capable of making evident the impact of human activity on the ecosystem and, by implication, triggering a critical review of that activity) seems intuitive and suitable for "document the scale of anthropogenic activity on the surface of the planet"¹⁷, yet it is as

13 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 70.

14 Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall, *This is the American Earth*, (Oakland: The Sierra Club, 1960), 36.

15 *Koyaanisqatsi. Life Out of Balance*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (Island Alive, 1982), *Powaqqatsi. Life in transition*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (The Cannon Group, 1988) and *Naqoyqatsi. Life as War*, directed by Godfrey Reggio (Miramax Film, 2002).

16 William Jenkins, *New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape*, Rochester, NY: International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House, 1975.

17 Sophia Hackett, Andrea Kunard and Urk Stahel (eds.), *Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, Anthropocene*. Fredericton: Goose Lane Editions, 2018.

natural as it is contradictory in terms.

From time immemorial, the view from above has been accompanied by an "idea of control"¹⁸. The seat of the divinities, who rule over creation and creatures, is normally placed in the heavens and the challenge to this dimension, whether it takes the form of the biblical Tower of Babel or the flight of Icarus or Phaeton, is harshly punished in the mythical narrative as a challenge to the divine prerogative of the view from above. The location of military outposts follows the same logic (opposite to that of human settlement, which prefers instead flat places rich in waterways) choosing positions from which it is possible to dominate, even in purely ballistic terms, the largest portion of territory possible. Also, military cartography soon detached itself from the trigonometric (and horizontal) construction of portolans to marry the aerial-photogrammetric or satellite view that is still used in the navigation software of civil and military devices. It is therefore not surprising that this strategy of representation somehow incorporates a belligerent idea of the relationship with nature that "keeps us believing that somehow the war against nature that Western society has been waging for centuries is not only right; it is beautiful and it can be won."¹⁹ The zenithal vision, in addition to telling us about a militarized and warlike imaginary, produces, incidentally, seductive, and geometrically curious images: it amplifies in this way the effect of confinement of experience in photogenic image theorized by Susan Sontag.²⁰ It comes implicitly to consider that if the Anthropocene is so photogenic, perhaps it is not so threatening. The gaze from above has a further double aesthetic consequence: it turns downwards, towards the abyss, but at the same time it can move away to sidereal spaces and radically change its meaning.

The view from above, whether recorded from the top of a skyscraper or from the flight height of an airplane, remains in fact in the realm of possible human experiences and implies the concept of vertigo that pertains to the idea of the sublime. Natural abysses, urban abysses transfigured in science fiction imagery into metropolises of planetary proportions (from the Metropolis of Fritz Lang's film,²¹ to the Los Angeles of "Blade Runner"²² to the Coruscant of "Star Wars" movies²³), forms and artefacts recognizable only on a large scale, do not question the identity of the observer, the agency of those who record this type of image and seduce at the same

18 Simon Garfield, *In Miniature. How Small Things Illuminate the World*. (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2018), 15.

19 Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", 217.

20 "Taking photographs...is a way of certifying experience, [but] also a way of refusing it – by limiting experience to a search for the photogenic, by converting experience into an image, a souvenir.... The very activity of taking pictures is soothing and assuages general feelings of disorientation that are likely to be exacerbated by travel". Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977), 177.

21 *Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang (1927; UFA Universum Film)

22 *Blade Runner*, directed by Ridley Scott (1982; Warner Bros.)

23 In this regard, see Alain Musset, *Station Metropolis, Direction Coruscant, Ville, science-fiction et sciences sociales* (Saint Mammès: Le Béal, 2019).

time with suggestive and powerful images. This powerful aesthetic of the city of the future as a place of height and vertigo resonates in Burtynsky's zenithal images by implicitly associating them with an imagery of narrative and fiction.

If we move the point of observation beyond the atmosphere, we find ourselves in orbit with Apollo 8 at the time of the shooting, in 1968, of the famous image "Earthrise". Although the image was taken thanks to a clearly human agency (the crew of the spacecraft) the feeling that it conveys is captured to perfection by McLuhan in the article, which precedes it by a decade, entitled "At the moment of Sputnik the planet became a global theatre in which there are no spectators but only actors", where he wrote, "[...] perhaps the largest conceivable revolution in information occurred on October 17, 1957, when Sputnik created a new environment for the planet. For the first time the natural world was completely enclosed in a man-made container. At the moment that the earth went inside this new artifact, Nature ended, and Ecology was born."²⁴ The vision from space would therefore have created a new environment for the entire planet: a point of observation that, although traceable to human means and initiatives, transcended the human becoming other. This sensation of estrangement (and this drastic rescaling of human ambitions) is often associated with the rhetoric of the artifact visible from space: for a long time, this attribute was recognized only to the Chinese wall, while in recent times many of the environmental transformations induced by human action have received the same qualification (see for example the proliferation of ghost forests mentioned below). This ambivalent relationship with a stellar gaze includes the vague feeling of unease provoked by McLuhan's assertion ("there are no human spectators") and at the same time is inscribed in the visual history of the view from above. The openness to this non-human and sidereal agency, together with the conception of the Anthropocene phenomenon as a hyperobject, are two elements that can redeem the aesthetics of top-down viewing from its potentially anaesthetic dimension.

Ghosts and trees

As we have seen, the gaze from above captures some of the phases through which the Anthropocene breaks into our perception. The hyperobject, however, can also be narrated through a gaze that has an orthogonal course with respect to the previous one, a horizontal course at human height that characterizes, for example, Burtynsky's series of images at the Dandora Landfills.²⁵

24 Marshall McLuhan, "At the Moment of Sputnik the Planet Became a Global Theater in Which There Are No Spectators but Only Actors", *Journal of Communication*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1974): 48-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1974.tb00354.x>

25 Hackett, Kunard and Stahel, *Anthropocene*, 62.

But it is the Mississippi Delta that provides us with a fatally perfect example of this horizontal aesthetic that becomes, immediately, a phantasmatic aesthetic, inhabited and possessed by hyper-ghosts that manifest themselves in the form of phantom forests. "Ghost forests are chaotic stands of dead and dying trees, leafless and lifeless, bleached white by the stealthy rising of the seas. Ghost forests mark the invisible flood-line of the salty tides. The skeletal trees are visible emissaries of the planetary upheavals of the Anthropocene, but like other ghosts they also point to places of half-buried, concealed, or erased violence."²⁶

The flooded oaks, dying and covered with whitish filaments by the saline tide, are at the same time "a mourning and a warning."²⁷ They have a dual role, on the one hand witnessing hidden violence and mourning, and on the other warning and haunting the living with a sign. The delta of the Mish Sipokni / Mississippi River presents some concomitant characteristics that make it a fundamental element to open further aesthetic discourse on the Anthropocene. It is in fact a ghostscape in which different souls are stirred: it is the product of the millennial work of the river that has built and sedimented the emerged areas; it was the scene of the implementation of the slave trade in the nineteenth century; it has been the subject of the most intense extractive infrastructure in all of North America; it has been affected by natural phenomena of unspeakable violence such as hurricanes and, finally, it is being rapidly submerged and disappeared due to global warming.²⁸

Not surprisingly, McClintock summarizes the nature of this place as a synthesis of "invasive colonialism, slavery, native genocide, oil". As anticipated above, the extension of these ghost forests has become, in recent years, visible from space, that is, it has reached that planetary scale that we have seen certify the results of human ambition. Louisiana is the image of a present "haunted by the past and destined to haunt all our tomorrows,"²⁹ the anticipation of a watery world inhospitable and hostile to humans.

However, this scenario is not simply the result of a naturalistic or geographical investigation: it is a narrative context endowed with a powerful aesthetic that has found in the first season of the successful series "True Detective"³⁰ a moment of synthesis and important visual production.

As McClintock writes "[...] ghost forests mark disturbances in arrangements of property, thefts and troubled legacies, historical crimes and

26 Anne McClintock, "Ghost Forest: Atlas of a Drowning World", *E-Flux, Accumulation Project*, January 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/accumulation/440704/ghost-forest-atlas-of-a-drowning-world/>

27 *ibid.*

28 Laura Tenenbaum, "The Mississippi River Delta is the Fastest Shrinking Delta in the World. NASA Wants to Know Why," *Forbes*, February 24, 2020.

29 McClintock, "Ghost Forest".

30 *True Detective*, Cary Joji Fukunaga, director, Nic Pizzolatto, writer (HBO, 12 January - 9 March 2014).

family secrets, great forgettings, eerie unburials, and ruptures in time and space. Ghost forests are labyrinths of loss. The stricken trees create visual disturbances across the land, apparitions of shocked space and torn time that signal something is amiss: faraway melting ice caps, the invisible floods of rising saltwater; hidden burial places on slave plantations; half-remembered cemeteries of Native school children; drowning Native lands and sacred mounds; half-buried military munitions and abandoned petrochemical wastelands. I call these ecological disturbances 'ghostscapes': damaged landscapes where traces of disavowed violence haunt the margins of the visible and can now be read to animate forgotten histories and envision alternative futures"³¹ she seems to introduce the setting and the key elements of *True Detective's* plot, which is to all intents and purposes an "Anthropocene fiction"³² located in a Louisiana that, beyond the various nicknames attributed by the chronicle such as "cancer alley"³³ or "chemical corridor"³⁴ or "petroscape"³⁵, is configured in effect like a "landscape of fear"³⁶.

The series takes place in Vermilion Parish: the landscape photography handled with great skill and attention by director Cary Joji Fukunaga shows us a fatally compromised territory, ecosystem, bodies, social relations. In this context apparently devoid of future but devoured by its own past ("This place is like somebody's memory of a town, and the memory is fading. It's like there was never anything here but jungle."³⁷) the figures of the two detectives, Rustin Cohle and Martin Hart, recover only in appearance a dimension typical of noir (that is, the embodiment of a sense of justice that includes the contradictions and aporias of the American social and judicial system) but, in their struggle to bring out the truth, they represent a desire to escape from the past, not to sink with Louisiana, which makes them alien to the context in which they act. In this sense, the two protagonists represent an external, stubbornly clinical gaze: the investigation thus becomes a pretext for narrating and commenting on the effects of the Anthropocene hyperobject in all its manifestations and phases.

The manifestations are many: the degradation of the natural landscape ("Nothin' grows in the right direction."³⁸), the loss of value of human life

31 McClintock, "Ghost Forest".

32 Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 4.

33 Abigail Blodgett, "An Analysis of Pollution and Community Advocacy in 'Cancer Alley': Setting an Example for the Environmental Justice Movement in St James Parish, Louisiana", *Local Environment*. 11, n. 6 (2006): 647–661.

34 Barbara L. Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy. Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003.

35 Delia Byrnes, "I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here: Oil's Intimate Ecologies in HBO's *True Detective*," *The Global South* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 91.

36 Yi-Fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

37 "The Long Bright Dark". *True Detective* (TV series). Season 1. Episode 1. January 12, 2014. HBO.

38 "After You've Gone". *True Detective* (TV series). Season 1. Episode 7. January 12, 2014. HBO.

(the victims of the ritual murders under investigation are lost and hidden among the dozens of victims of the hurricane), the deterioration of moral codes (the undermining of political and religious institutions,³⁹ commingling with atavistic rituals of human sacrifice), the compromise of the intimate and sexual dimension (“non-futural, non-reproductive, and, non-optimistic”⁴⁰) the extreme poverty and hostility of the environment to the human, the lack of a historical perspective or a dimension of hope (enunciated literally by the character of Detective Chole who summarizes in his positions a fascinating pastiche of nihilistic theses, quotes from Schopenhauer, Cioran, Lovecraft and Ligotti⁴¹).

The impact of the hyperobject in this narrative is declined with different modalities and visual languages. The bird’s-eye view shots on the bayou, the slow zoom-out movements that open “taking off” on the landscape, closely recall the above-mentioned works by Burtynsky, Baichwal and de Pencier, but especially Richard Misrach’s Petro-chemical America series that, because of the narrative context of the series, convey a feeling of greater compromise.

Misrach’s photographs of “Cancer Alley” were published in Petrochemical America (2012), though his photographic series of the region began in 1998 and continued for years. Misrach’s landscape photography work is closely tied to the iconography of True Detective: for example, the image “Sugar Cane and Refinery, Mississippi River Corridor” constitutes the initial still of the opening title sequence to HBO’s series. If the images of the Anthropocene Project seem to be captured by a silent drone, the landscape of True Detective is visualized from the point of view of a predatory bird, ready to dive to the ground at the first sign of life. The ruin of the human, the strange animal kin and the atavistic permanence of the landscape find a representation, so to speak, happy, even in the sets drawn by the independent New Orleans-based artist Joshua Walsh. Walsh has been able to give shape to the vegetable and animal nightmare of the place that will reveal itself, at the end of the series, as the site of the celebration of the heinous rituals that are the subject of the investigation: the Fort Macomb State Historic Site. The military fort of 1822 has in fact been transformed by the artist with animal bones, oyster shells, and twisted branches into the spectral Carcosa, a place where the impact of the Anthropocene hyper-object has generated a terrifying synthesis of human and non-human.

39 Rodney Taveira, True Detective and the States of American Wound Culture, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 50.3 (2017), 585–603.

40 Byrnes, “I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here”, 88.

41 Thomas Ligotti, *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race: A Contrivance of Horror*, New York: Hippocampus Press, 2010.

Non-human.

Some of the aspects highlighted above could also be found in other television productions inspired by the same theme (such as “Treme” by David Simon⁴²) but what makes “True Detective” relevant in this discourse on the aesthetics of the Anthropocene, in addition to the extreme symbolic relevance of the setting to the theme, is an aspect that lies outside the narrative context.

In the series there are in fact some clear references to weird literature, such as the “King in Yellow” by R. W. Chambers and “Carcosa”, a city of invention created in the short story “An Inhabitant of Carcosa” (1886) by Ambrose Bierce and then cited by H. P. Lovecraft. Those references are never made explicit as such, conveying the impression that the story is located in an alternative reality where these texts have never actually been published. This strategy generates a tension that makes very strong reference to a Lovecraftian aesthetic and a potentially occult dimension (which for Pizzolatto is both the occult history of the infrastructural exploitation of the country and the history of the unnameable cults of the bayou) have forcibly placed the series in a supernatural dimension despite the clear naturalistic intentions of the author⁴³. But the shift towards the supernatural risks reducing the real impact of these aesthetics on our discourse: in fact, it is the weird suggestion of a non-human agency that seems most interesting to us in relation to an aesthetic discourse on the Anthropocene. In True Detective, non-human is the gaze that flies over the swamp, non-human is the agency that deforms and hybridizes the nature of landscape and population. The visionary transformation of man into a creature of the woods, the progressive advance of the forest recalls the works of Fina Miralles⁴⁴ or Ana Mendieta’s plant simulacra:⁴⁵ all these are elements that hybridize human, animal and vegetable with outcomes that explicitly recall the reflection of Donna Haraway.⁴⁶ A relationship is configured between the aesthetics staged in True Detective, the work of Howard Philip Lovecraft (or rather his insights into non-human agency) and the

42 *Treme*, created by David Simon (HBO, 2013).

43 In an interview with Nic Pizzolatto, creator of the series, conducted by Jeff Jensen for Entertainment Weekly in 2014 we read the following exchange.

JJ - You’ve cultivated so much palpable dread that some are convinced that supernatural forces are at work.

NP - Like Cthulhu is going to rise up and take control of the world of True Detective?

JJ - Ummm... is it?

NP - I hope the audience will be pleasantly surprised by the naturalism of the entire story. If you look at the series so far, what seems supernatural actually has real-world causes, like Cohle’s hallucinations, or even the nature of the crime. It has occult portents, but there is nothing supernatural about it.

<https://ew.com/article/2014/02/27/true-detective-nic-pizzolatto-season-1/>

44 Fina Miralles, “Générer des relations inattendues”, in Hélène Guenin (Dir.), *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde* (Metz : Editions du Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016), 187.

45 Ana Mendieta, “Le germe de l’écoféminisme”, in Hélène Guenin (Dir.), *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde* (Metz : Editions du Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016), 176-179.

46 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble. Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (London: Duke University Press, 2016).

theses of Donna Haraway. The latter, also in light of the profoundly racist and misogynist profile of the writer from Providence, in the past clearly refused the connection claiming the autonomy⁴⁷ of its reference to the spider Pimoi Cthulhu compared to the monstrous creature protagonist of the story "The Call of Cthulhu".⁴⁸ Yet it is to Lovecraft that we owe the fundamental intuition of modern weird literature, that is, the introduction of an idea of cosmic horror that derives from the hypothesis of a (marginal) contact with a totally non-human agency with respect to which our system of values is not subverted but simply ignored: a position not so distant from Donna Haraway's suggestions about tentacular thought.

The Great Old Ones of Lovecraft (monstrous entities of cosmic dimensions) are creatures that never manifest themselves directly on the physical plane: the descriptions provided in the stories are deliberately elliptical and, since even the mere mention of their name leads to madness, it is not possible in any way to describe them if not by negative. It is also not possible to perceive them distinctly, yet they pervade our reality and infest it with episodic local phenomena: they are, in a certain sense, hyperobjects that, in their being totally alien to the human, arouse in us a boundless terror. Lovecraft associates this horror to rural contexts, where in a regressive way the boundaries between human, animal and plant become thinner, and it is here, in the aesthetic and narrative context of *True Detective*, that it enters into a short circuit with the reflections of Donna Haraway.

True Detective thus charts a course that sits at the confluence of two contrasting approaches to the theme of the non-human, staging one of the possible aesthetic discourses on the Anthropocene that encompasses a wide range of relationships. Economy, bodies, the animal world, the plant world: points of impact of the hyperobject linked by a deformed and, at times, fatal kinship.

Findings

While, as we have seen, a wide spectrum of the imagery of the Anthropocene derives its forms from a military language and borrowed from the science fiction of the great urban abysses and "easy" planetary catastrophes, it seems interesting to keep open a debate on the possible aesthetics of the Anthropocene to those narratives intrinsically linked to the manifestation of this hyperobject such as, precisely, the first season of *True Detective*. This opening allows us to understand other imaginaries (such as Lovecraft's one) that digs inside bodies, remote and altered territories, integrating Haraway's thought on kinship and non-human relations. These imaginaries enable us to evoke an impact perhaps more significant and less anaesthetic than spectacularized and (tending to)

47 *ibid.*, 101.

48 Howard Philip Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu", *Weird Tales* (February 1928).

abstract representations. There is a whole horizontal aesthetic of bodies and horizons transformed by the Anthropocene (by oil in the case of True Detective) that deserves careful examination, perhaps involving more disturbing and, only apparently, less scientific narratives. It is the aesthetics of the monstrous, the corrupt and the ruined. And while the need to explore the latter direction may lead to the establishment of hierarchies or priorities among aesthetic discourses, Morton's final contribution to this reflection is that arguably, the Anthropocene hyperobject is traceable to a kind of hyper-aesthetic (or a series of hyper-aesthetics) that is articulated and integrated according to its multiple local and non-linear manifestations.

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