

POSITION

On the Aesthetics of the Anthropocene: The Sublime and beyond – other Concepts and Forms of Visualizations

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ABSTRACT

There are many connections that link the aesthetic sphere to the set of phenomena that are encompassed by the general definition of “Anthropocene”. Among them, there are two that are explored in this contribution. On the one hand, it is a matter of getting to the bottom of the relationship between the conceptual heritage of the aesthetic-philosophical tradition and its metaphorical variants with the thematic core of the Anthropocene (§§ 2-7). On the other hand, it is a matter of ascertaining how this process intertwines and interferes with the forms of visualization of the “human epoch” and thereby conditions the possible reactions that descend from such representations (§§ 8-13). Finally, to conclude with a tentative assessment of the possibilities of countervisualization and lines of research within the conceptual field of aesthetics for a different rendering of relations with phenomena linked to the notion of the Anthropocene (§ 14).

KEYWORDS

Sublime, Aesthetic Categories, Visualization, Human Epoch, Dissonance

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1. There are many connections that link the aesthetic sphere to the set of phenomena that are encompassed by the general definition of “Anthropocene”. As the call for papers that gave rise to this and the previous issue of this journal also indicates, philosophical reflection, the study of literature, the social sciences, and the various forms of artistic expression have focused a number of issues in this regard and initiated numerous specific investigations.¹ Among them, there are two that are thought to be worth exploring in this contribution. On the one hand, it is a matter of getting to the bottom of the relationship between the conceptual heritage of the aesthetic-philosophical tradition and its metaphorical variants with the thematic core of the Anthropocene (§§ 2-7). On the other hand, it is a matter of ascertaining how this process intertwines and interferes with the forms of visualization of the “human epoch” and thereby conditions the possible reactions that descend from such representations (§§ 8-13). Finally, to conclude with a tentative assessment of the possibilities of countervisualization and lines of research within the conceptual field of aesthetics for a different rendering of relations with phenomena linked to the notion of the Anthropocene (§ 14).

2. It was the French historian of science, technology, and the environment, Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, who forcefully invoked the concept of the sublime in relation to the Anthropocene in a text that later proved to be very influential. As Fressoz writes: “The strength of the Anthropocene idea is not conceptual, scientific or heuristic: it is above all aesthetic. The concept of Anthropocene is a brilliant way to rename some of the achievements of the Earth system sciences. It emphasizes that the geochemical processes that humanity has set in motion are so inertial that the earth is leaving the climatic equilibrium that took place during the Holocene. The Anthropocene designates a point of no return. A geological bifurcation in the history of the planet Earth. If we do not know exactly what the Anthropocene will bring (simulations of the Earth system are uncertain), we can no longer doubt that something of importance on the scale of geological time has recently taken place on Earth.” And he adds: “The concept of Anthropocene is interesting, but also very problematic for political ecology, as it reactivates the springs of the aesthetics of the sublime, a western and bourgeois aesthetic par excellence, vilified by Marxist, feminist and subalternist critics, as well as by postmodernists”.²

Although it could be pointed out that the author of *The Postmodern Condition* himself, Jean-François Lyotard had shown a convergence toward a, so to speak, dissonant reading of the notion of the sublime. In his

1 See <https://cpcl.unibo.it/announcement/view/485>.

2 Jean-Baptiste Fressoz, “L’Anthropocène et l’esthétique du sublime”, in *Sublime. Les tremblements du monde*, Metz, Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2016, <https://ressourcesplurielles.wordpress.com/2020/06/15/jean-baptiste-fressoz-lanthropocene-et-lesthetique-du-sublime-2016/> pp. 1-10, here p. 1 (all texts quoted from languages other than English and not explicitly referred to a printed translation are to be considered translated by the author of this article).

close reading of the Kantian *Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard suggests an interpretation of the sublime as a model for reflexive thinking, in general, thanks to his concept of the *différend*, which emphasizes the inevitability of conflicts and incompatibilities between different notions and “phrases” or “language islands”. And, at the same time, Lyotard proposes a “post-modern sublime” in connection with his analysis of Barnett Newman’s paintings, *Newman: The Instant*, and more extensively with his essay *The Sublime and the Avant-Garde*. Situated in art’s inability to account for what is vast and unlimited, the American artist’s work brings out what is happening: “What we do not manage to think about is something happening, or, more simply, the happening. Not a major event in the media sense, not even a small event. Just an occurrence”.³ What no image can capture nor any words represent, and whose presentification therefore becomes more urgent, is the event itself, that there is something instead of nothingness. If it can be said that that contradictory feelings, such as pleasure and pain, joy and anxiety, exaltation and depression, were renamed or discovered between the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe by the name of the “sublime”: “Perhaps the locus of the whole difference between romanticism and the ‘modern’ avant-garde”—Lyotard continues—“is to translate ‘The Sublime is Now’ as ‘Now the Sublime is This’—not elsewhere, not up there or over there, not earlier or later, not once upon a time, but here, now, ‘it happens’—and it’s this painting”.⁴ The task of the avant-garde with respect of the sublime becomes, according to Lyotard, to “undo spiritual assumptions regarding time” and “the sense of the sublime is the name of the dismantling”.⁵

3. This version of the sublime as disassembly nevertheless does not seem to attract Fressoz’s attention, who instead focuses on the strong similarities he detects between the theses of the proponents of the Anthropocene and Edmund Burke’s classical version of the sublime theory. In his perspective, the discourse of the Anthropocene corresponds quite closely to the canons of the sublime as defined by Edmund Burke in 1757, in his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. According to the Anglo-Irish philosopher, 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 suddenly manifesting its omnipotence. And this becomes comparable to the claims of Anthropocene theorists who in proclaiming the transformative nature of humankind into a global geological force: Humanity, our own species, has become so large and

3 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-garde” (1984), trans. Lisa Liebmman, in *Art Forum*, April, 1985, pp. 36-43, p. 37. See also by Lyotard: *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984; “Newman: The Instant” (1985), trans. David Macey, in *The Lyotard Reader*, ed. Andrew Benjamin, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, pp. 240-249; *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime* (1991), trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

4 Jean-François Lyotard, “The Sublime and the Avant-garde” (1984), p. 37.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

active that it rivals some of the great forces of Nature in its impact on the functioning of the earth system. The human race has become a global geological force.

Following Fressoz, it becomes possible to juxtapose the two notions, Anthropocene and Sublime, because of three characteristics common to both: magnitude of size, temporal depth, the sovereign violence of nature.

On the first point, magnitude of size, it should be noted how phenomenal quantities of matter are mobilized and emitted by humanity during the 19th and 20th centuries, and that the aesthetics of the gigaton of CO₂ and exponential growth refers to what Burke noted: "greatness of dimension is a powerful cause of the sublime".⁶ And, he adds, the sublime requires the solid and the masses themselves: "the great ought to be solid, and even massive".⁷ More precisely, the Anthropocene transfers the sublime from the vast nature to the "human species". While playing with the sublime, it reverses its classical polarities: the sacred terror of nature is transferred to a geological colossus humanity.⁸

Related to the second point, time depth, the Anthropocene thesis adds the geological sublime of ages and eons, from which it draws its most striking effects and tells us in substance that the traces of our industrial age will remain for millions of years in the geological archives of the planet. Far from constituting an external, impervious and gigantic course, the time of the Earth has become commensurable with the time of human action. In two centuries at most, humanity has altered the dynamics of the earth-system for all or almost all of eternity. Everything that makes a transition excites no terror, as Burke wrote: "the transition from one extreme to the other easy, causes no terror, and consequently can be no cause of greatness."⁹ The discourse of the Anthropocene cultivates this aesthetic of suddenness, of the bifurcation and of the event. The sublime of the Anthropocene lies precisely in this extraordinary encounter: two centuries of human activity, a tiny duration, almost nil in terms of Earth's history, will have been enough to cause an alteration comparable to the great upheaval at the end of the Mesozoic 65 million years ago.

About the third point, the sublime of the sovereign violence of nature, that of earthquakes, storms and hurricanes, Fressoz notices how proponents of the Anthropocene readily mobilize the romantic sublime of ruins, vanished civilizations and collapses, saying for instance that the drivers of the Anthropocene may well threaten the viability of contemporary civilization and perhaps even the existence of homo sapiens.¹⁰ The artistic and

6 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, London: Dodsley, 1757, p. 51.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 115.

8 See Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", p. 2.

9 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, p. 66.

10 Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", pp. 2-3.

media success of the concept rests on the “painful enjoyment,” on the “negative pleasure” of which Burke speaks: “We delight in seeing things, which so far from doing, our heartiest wishes would be to see redressed [...]. I believe no man is so strangely wicked as to desire to see destroyed by a conflagration or an earthquake [...]. But suppose such a fatal accident to have happened, what numbers from all parts would crowd to behold the ruins”.¹¹

4. On the basis of this parallelism, Fressoz develops his critique of the very notion of the Anthropocene, with the underlying idea of “you who enter the Anthropocene give up all hope”, echoing the warning Dante poses at the entrance to his *Inferno*. In this perspective, the Anthropocene is based on a culture of collapse specific to Western nations, which for two centuries have admired their power by fantasizing about the ruins of their future. The Anthropocene plays on the same psychological springs as the perverse pleasure of wreckage already described by Burke and which feeds the current vogue for disaster tourism from Chernobyl to Ground zero. The violence of the Anthropocene is also that of the haughty and cold science that names the times and defines our historical condition. Violence then of naturalization, of the “putting into species” of human societies: global statistics erase the immense variation of responsibilities between peoples and social classes. Finally, the violence of the geological gaze turned towards ourselves, gauging all of history (empires, wars, techniques, hegemonies, genocides, struggles, etc.) by the measure of the sedimentary traces left in the rock. The geologist of the Anthropocene is even more appalling than Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, who, where we used to see progress, saw only catastrophe and disaster: he sees only fossils and sediments.¹²

As historians of aesthetic ideas remind us, at the origins of the cult of the sublime we find the Alps in the grand tour, as a sign of distinction being able to appreciate glaciers and arid rocks. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 which provides the real kick-off for reflections on the sublime. Burke, who published his treatise a couple of years later, refers to the aesthetic passion for rubble and ruins that then grips the whole of Europe. In 1756, Immanuel Kant also published a short work on the Lisbon earthquake and, in his later essay on the sublime, he defined sublime a “negative pleasure” that can proceed in two ways: the mathematical sublime felt in front of the immensity of nature (the starry space, the ocean, etc.) as feeling of the immense disproportion and the “dynamic sublime” provided by the violence of nature (tornado, volcano, earthquake). More generally, the sublime seems to insist on the search for the surplus of meaning (“eccedenza di senso”): “the sublime is nothing but that surplus of meaning, that invisible ultraviolet toward which we move whenever we try to lean out,

11 Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, pp. 26-27.

12 See Fressoz, “L’Anthropocène et l’esthétique du sublime”, p. 3

transforming ourselves, toward the extreme and unexplored boundaries of our experience".¹³ Following Remo Bodei's reconstruction, the transfiguration of the "horrid to amorphous places", that is, "lacking in harmony or symmetry, often incommensurable", into "sublime" places endowed with intense beauty, ambiguous and disturbing, which at the same time attracts and repels, seduces and repulses, which exalts and commands respect with its tremendous majesty, finds its origin in a "fundamental turning point in Western civilization" of which aesthetics is the main revealing reagent.¹⁴ That is, in the shift from direct confrontation with God, for the conquest of "dignity and verticality", to the agonistic confrontation with "nature in its manifestations most disturbing, in its untamed and wild forms", in order to "recognize itself [i.e. Western civilization] as intellectually and morally superior".¹⁵ A challenge from which "springs forth an unexpected pleasure mixed with horror", aimed precisely to reinforce "the idea of intellectual and moral superiority" of beings humans, "forging their individuality", and to make them "discover the voluptuousness of losing oneself in the whole".¹⁶

5. It is precisely on this identification that Fressoz's critique takes its cue. His analysis develops the consequences that the process by which the sublime of the Anthropocene, and its staging of a humanity as "telluric force", marked the historical convergence between the natural sublime of the eighteenth century and the technological sublime of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: "with the industrialization of the West, the power of the second nature is the object of an intense aesthetic celebration. The sublime transferred to technology played a central role in the diffusion of the religion of progress: railway stations, factories and skyscrapers were its permanent harangues. From that time on, the idea of a world crossed by technology, of a fusion between first and second natures, became the object of reflections and praise. One marvels at the works of art materializing the majestic union of the natural and human sublime, such as viaducts spanning valleys, tunnels crossing mountains and canals linking oceans".¹⁷ To this must be added the aggravation produced on the concept by the relationship with the post-World War II political and cultural climate, to the point that it can be considered that the Anthropocene is part of a version of the technological sublime reconfigured by the Cold War which extends the spatial vision of the planet produced by the military-industrial system: "a vision of the Earth captured from space as a system that could be understood in its entirety, a spaceship earth whose trajectory could

13 Remo Bodei, *Paesaggi sublimi. Gli uomini davanti alla natura selvaggia*, Milano: Bompiani, 2008, p. 182.

14 Remo Bodei, *Le forme del bello*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2017, p. 130.

15 Ibid., pp. 130-131.

16 Ibid., p. 131 (on the sublime, see, more extensively, *ibid.*, pp. 122-137).

17 Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", p. 4.

be controlled thanks to new knowledge about the earth-system".¹⁸ The risk foreshadowed by Fressoz is that the aesthetics of the Anthropocene "feeds more the hybris of a brutal geo-engineering than a patient, modest and ambitious work of involution and adaptation of the social".¹⁹

6. Following Terry Eagleton's analysis,²⁰ Fressoz recalls the diagnosis that the historical change leading to the development of capitalism produced a reorganization and a different placement of aesthetic categories. In particular, with the rise of the category of the sublime, the meaning of the beautiful changed. Against the "emollient aesthetics" of the beautiful, risking to transform the bourgeois subject into "decadent sensualist", the sublime "reenergized the capitalist subject as exploiter or as provider of work". As a result of this relocation, at the end of the 18th century, the sublime became "the effort, the danger, the suffering, the elevated, the majestic and the male", while the beautiful became "the harmonious, the non-productive, the soft and the feminine", thus embodying a potential threat on productivity.²¹

In the terms of this critical perspective, arriving at a tentative assessment of this examination, the sublime aesthetic of the Anthropocene poses some problems. By staging the hybridization between first and second natures, it reenergizes the technological action of the cold warriors (geo-engineering); by disconnecting the individual and local scale from what really matters (the telluric force humanity and geological times), it produces stupefied paralysis and cynicism (no future); finally, the Anthropocene, like any other sublime, is subject to the law of diminishing returns: once the audience is prepared and conditioned, its effect dwindles. In this sense, designating a work of art as "art of the Anthropocene" would be absolutely fatal to its aesthetic effectiveness. The risk is that the ecology of the sublime is then called to a permanent overbidding, similar in that to the rush to the avant-garde in the contemporary art.²²

7. One of the main limitations of resorting to the category of the sublime is that, unlike the situation in which we find ourselves and which the Anthropocene attempts to describe, it is given by the measure of distance and the negative or painful pleasure that comes with it. To set up an in-depth study of this problem to come, three lines of possible development of reasoning will be indicated in the further part of the article.

The first consists of questioning how the Anthropocene is visualized through the brief analysis of a famous film on the subject, *The Human*

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 See Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.

21 Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", p. 5.

22 See Fressoz, "L'Anthropocène et l'esthétique du sublime", pp. 5-6. On the connection between the aesthetics of the Anthropocene, the sublime, and the work of architects, see Léa Mosconi and Jean-Baptiste Fressoz "L'Anthropocène chez les architectes d'aujourd'hui", in *L'art Méme*, 78, 2019, pp. 7-9.

epoch, and through discussion of the visualization strategies it displays as a visual translation of the sublime. The second line, on the other hand, proposes to discuss some possible strategies of countervisualization and radical questioning of the position of the observer, i.e., the “Shipwreck with Spectator”. The third, is to examine whether and what other aesthetic categories might better interpret our relation to the phenomena involved in the Anthropocene.

8. A very important role in imaging and visualizing the issues revolving around the definition of the Anthropocene has been played by the work of the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky, either alone or in collaboration with others. In particular, his “large-scale prints of industrial landscapes are as seductive as they are horrific, as revealing as they are aestheticizing”.²³ And they look aestheticizing in an extremely disturbing manner when we approach visualizations of the Anthropocene.

According to the critique of University of California - Santa Cruz visual culture scholar J.T. Demos, it is typical in this regard Burtynsky’s tendency: “to make monumental, awe-inspiring photographs from scenes of environmental violence, a violence defined not only locally in terms of the damage to regional landscapes, but also globally in relation to the contribution of industrial fossil fuel production to climate change. At the same time, those scenes are interpreted as depicting the origins of modern development and the guarantee of the American way of life”.²⁴ As much as Demos quotes statements by Burtynsky himself, such as the one below, attesting to some ambivalence in his work, he is nevertheless unwilling to acknowledge him as having any decisive heuristic capacity with respect to the Anthropocene. Burtynsky quotes the following: “But time goes on, and that flush of wonder began to turn. The car that I drove cross country began to represent not only freedom, but also something much more conflicted. I began to think about oil itself: as both the source of energy that makes everything possible, and as a source of dread, for its ongoing endangerment of our habitat”. And he comments: “these images are less about staging that ambivalence – between consumer complicity and industry-led development – and more about dramatizing in spectacular fashion the perverse visual beauty of a technological, and even geological, mastery devoid of environmental ethics. While Burtynsky is right to point out the consumer-based participation in the oil economy, that frequently made observation is also part of the ruse that universalizes responsibility for climate disruption, diverting attention from the fact of corporate petroculturalism’s enormous economic influence on global politics that keeps us all locked in its clutches”.²⁵

23 T.J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*, London: Sternberg Press, 2017, p. 62.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., pp. 62-65

9. Considering also Burtynsky's *Oil Fields #27, Bakersfield, California, USA* (2004), which depicts a hydrocarbon geography, not far from Belridge, "where the oil infrastructure appears woven into a gold-bathed *chiaroscuro* that dramatically patterns this hilly topography", Demos also notices: "here too technology merges with nature, unified aesthetically, composing a picture that is, monstrously, not only visually pleasurable, but also ostensibly ethically just – an image of American 'freedom' whose historical progression, according to the familiar patriotic narrative, is necessary, inevitable, even – as pictured here – beautiful. What the photographer constructs is the petroindustrial sublime, emphasizing the awesome visuality of the catastrophic oil economy's infrastructure founded on obsessive capitalist growth, which 'we as a species', as Burtynsky says, have created".²⁶

Critics thus focus on the naturalization process implemented by Burtynsky's translation into images of petroculturalism, "with a mesmerizing imaging machine in thrall to the compositional and chromatic elements of the very framework responsible for our environmental destruction".²⁷ The trend toward mixing naturalization and aestheticization does not turn out to be an isolated phenomenon, Demos notes in the conclusion of his commentary, but Burtynsky's aestheticist version of photography is also taken up, for instance, by photographer Louis Helbig in his catalogue *Beautiful Destruction* (2014), which provides similarly disturbing and seductive imagery of the Albertan tar sands, and by others.²⁸

10. However, if we consider the best-known outcome of Burtynsky's work, the film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018) together with Jennifer Baichwal and Nicholas de Pencier,²⁹ the assessments are more controversial. Especially if one takes the gaze from afar and the gaze from above as a method of rendering the order of magnitude of environmental destruction and mammoth transformations of the landscape as well as the exponential scale of consumption, it has been observed that such forms of representation could at least partially escape a demiurgic mode of domination. As an attempt to visually grasp the extent, in Kantian terms, of the "absolutely great" transformation of the world originated by human action, the distant landscapes, "both infernally destroyed and demonically beautiful", that these films and photographs show are thus "removed from the latency of their remaining unnoticed".³⁰

Of the opposite opinion, however, seems to be the New York University's scholar of communication forms Nicholas Mirzoeff, who evokes the pair of aestheticization—one could with Georg Simmel speak of

26 Ibid., p. 65.

27 Ibid.

28 See *ibid.*, pp. 65-70.

29 See Jennifer Baichwal, Nicholas de Pencier, Edward Burtynsky, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* (2018): <https://ihavenotv.com/anthropocene-the-human-epoch>.

30 Eva Horn, "Ästhetik", in Eva Horn and Hannes Bergthaler, *Anthropozän zur Einführung*, Hamburg: Junius, 2019, pp. 120-142, here pp. 131-132.

hyper-aesthesia—and anesthetization to explain the effect of these visualizations of the Anthropocene, and their effects of subtracting from perception rather than highlighting. According to Mirzoeff, in fact, “art conquers nature by revealing the universal in a specific material object, leaving no remainder”.³¹ Following his argument, “from Thomas De Quincey’s opium eating to *The Matrix*, we have been aware that we perceive a phantasmagoria that passes for reality but is a qualitatively altered world. As we learn how to look at the (Western, imperial) artwork via aesthetics a paradox results: the conquest of nature, having been aestheticized, leads to a loss of perception (aesthesia), which is to say, it becomes an anaesthetics”.³²

11. Also from the point of view of historical reconstruction, Mirzoeff shows through the analysis of some central works of art between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries how the process of beautification to be put in place resulted in an erasure and concealment of the pollution damage produced by the eruption of the industrial revolution: “the aesthetics of the Anthropocene emerged as an unintended supplement to imperial aesthetics—it comes to seem natural, right, then beautiful—and thereby anaesthetized the perception of modern industrial pollution”.³³ Thus the yellowish hues of Impressionism’s eponymous painting, Claude Monet’s 1873 *Impression: Sun Rising*, as well as a demonstration of the artist’s skill in handling light and color, prove to be an effect of the industrial use of coal: “Coal smoke is yellow, the yellow that predominates at the top of the painting. In the early morning, it encounters the blue morning light and the red of the rising sun, producing the array of refracted color that makes Monet’s painting so stunning”.³⁴ The same coal that appears in another famous Monet painting, *Unloading Coal* (1875), where fleet of coal barges from the mines in the north invade the picture space from the bottom left to the right middle ground: “The product of this primary extraction is carried off the barges by workers who cannot be distinguished individually, precisely because as individuals they do not matter. What counts is the unloading of the coal. [...] The degradation of the air is seen as natural, right, and hence aesthetic, a key step in any visibility: it produces an anaesthetic to the actual physical conditions”.³⁵ Similarly, another painting depicting a scene of young bathers in New York City, according to Mirzoeff, constitutes perhaps the strongest example of anesthetization, George Wesley Bellows’s classic painting *Forty-Two Kids* of 1906: “the scene is dominated by the naked children getting ready to swim in the East River on a hot day. The water is black, which has rarely been mentioned in the literature. It was not a metaphor. At that time, all

31 Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, in *Public Culture*, 2, April, 2014, pp. 213-232, here p. 220.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., see pp. 220-226.

34 Ibid., p. 221.

35 Ibid., pp. 222-223.

the bodily waste of the 6 million people living around New York Harbor was piped straight into the water, along with many dead animals and industrial waste. [...] It appears that the desire to live in the modern city was so great that it literally anaesthetized the senses, or at least allowed people to disregard what they saw and smelled in the water".³⁶ Not even the third capital city of what Mirzoeff calls imperial capitalism, London, escapes a representation—in this case, predominantly through literature, from Dickens to Conan Doyle—for which, except for the tragedy of 1952, smog becomes “a positive sign of the energy and vitality of the modern metropole, whereas the smogs of developing world capitals are miasmas, threatening to health and vitality”.³⁷

If we then return to the film *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, we can see how the use of looking from above or from afar is accompanied by a reference to the constant suggestion of images implicitly likened to works of art. Thus, the gigantic excavations in red-brown rock in the shape of ammonite, refer back to land art installations, certainly subverting their meaning of reharmonization between human action and landscape with their virtuoso use of aerial photography, such as Robert Smithson's large stone spirals (*Spiral Jetty*, 1970) or Richard Long's circles (1978-2012). Or like the rectangular striped pools in the lithium “salt flats” in the Atacama Desert that turn out to be almost a geometric and chromatic cast of Paul Klee's paintings after his trip to the desert of Tunisia (1914). Or, finally, like the cyclopean rotary diggers crumbling a village in Germany, including houses and church, swallowing it into an open pit coal mine that look like something out of the steampunk imagery of the film *Mortal engine* (2018)—or vice versa?—in which the dystopian scenario of predatory mobile cities devouring each other in global competition for resources reaches the extraction from the land of any remaining usable wealth. In all these cases, but others certainly could be identified upon systematic analysis, the effect of “strategic embellishment” (W. Benjamin) and consequent anesthetization of the awareness of environmental destruction seems precisely assured by the looming forms of attractiveness elaborated within art and then extended, traversing to all aspects of life, which characterizes precisely the process of aestheticization of the world, as it has developed massively since the turn between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

12. However, can art and reflection on art play a different function with respect to the phenomena that the Anthropocene highlights or conceals? Can forms of countervisualization, and in parallel rendering into images and concepts in tension with them, be identified that reverse the trend noted thus far? In their *Art in the Anthropocene*, Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin

36 Ibid., p. 224.

37 Ibid., p. 226.

seeks to answer affirmatively to the first question.³⁸ According to them, in fact, the arts are assigned the task of making abstract concept thinkable and perceivable, since they constitute the “vehicle of *aisthesis*” they result: “central to thinking with and feeling through the Anthropocene”.³⁹ The relationship between them can be identified according to multiple layers and different scales: “First, we argue that the Anthropocene is primarily a sensorial phenomenon: the experience of living in an increasingly diminished and toxic world. Second, the way we have come to understand the Anthropocene has frequently been framed through modes of the visual, that is, through data visualization, satellite imagery, climate models, and other legacies of the ‘whole earth’. Third, art provides a polyarchic site of experimentation for ‘living in a damaged world’, as Anna Tsing has called it, and a non-moral form of address that offers a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression”.⁴⁰

To these indications, the scholar of cultural theory at the University of Vienna, Eva Horn, combines a call for awareness to which art should contribute in order to communicate the extreme urgency of dealing with the ecological crisis and to make available a new instrumentarium of thought. She also draws on the intervention of Bruno Latour who, in the face of ecological mutations, called for a deep reset with respect to the categories of modernity, precisely by presenting the exhibition he curated *Reset Modernity?*.⁴¹ Exemplarily, Latour’s own reading in his seven *Gaia-Lecture* of Caspar David Friedrich’s painting *Das Große Gehege bei Dresden* [The Great Enclosure near Dresden] (1831/1832) makes a work of art an instrument of knowledge and shows the overcoming of the traditional perspective convention typical of modern art, of a space ordered visually through a fixed point of view at a distance.⁴² The painting depicts a formless landscape made of bank mud, river banks and water surfaces, slightly curved, with the horizon line separating two spaces, the sky and the earth. The convention broken by Friedrich, according to Latour, is the one that governed the relationship of human beings with the things of nature in modernity, and the collocationless gaze of the bewildered observer thus becomes an allegory of the human position within the space of a nature in which human beings no longer occupy a stable and predetermined position: nature in the Anthropocene can no longer be depicted as a stable datum, but becomes non-totalizable and non-objectifiable.

38 *Art in the Anthropocene. Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, edited by Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, London: Open Humanities Press, 2015. See also *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Design, Deep Time, Science and Philosophy*, edited by Etienne Turpin, London: Open Humanity Press, 2014.

39 Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, *Art & Death: Lives Between the Fifth Assessment & the Sixth Extinction*, in *ibid.*, pp. 3-29, here p. 3.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

41 Horn, “Ästhetik”, p. 121.

42 See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia. Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (2015), transl. Catherine Porter, London: Polity, 2017, pp. 220-223.

13. Latour's reading, Horn comments, is emblematic for an aesthetics of the Anthropocene: instead of an intelligible and transparent order that can be sensitively grasped, we are faced with an impairment of the relationship with the world, a profound disorientation that encompasses the viewer as well as the depicted object. The Anthropocene is thus revealed as the fundamental shattering of the dualism—of object and subject, human and nonhuman, whole and part, position of the observer and space of the depiction—which has marked with itself not only our theoretical and technical access to the world but also the conventions of aesthetics. The Anthropocene is thus also shown as a new way of being in the world in which this unsettling externalizes on two levels, that of the question of how we connect with the nonhuman and through what forms of knowledge, and that of the question of how the relationship between human and nonhuman can become the object of aesthetic representation.⁴³

The construction of an aesthetics of the Anthropocene requires, in this perspective, to move from a frontal position with respect to things—what lies against—to move into things: within climate change, among different forms of life that coexist, surrounded by technologies and their consequences, depending on changing capital and material flows and ecologies in an uncontrolled manner. It may be a matter perhaps, as a columnist of the New York Times has suggested, of implementing a "global weirding", that is, of moving to a relationship with the world based on becoming uncanny of the lifeworld itself.⁴⁴ Thus, connoting such a mode of Anthropocene aesthetics would be a kind of *Verfremdung*, an alienation effect encouraging the audience to look at the familiar in a new way, that is, to make the familiar unfamiliar or strange: "unlike in the aesthetics of classical modernity, nonrepresentability here has to do not with a withdrawal of things, but with an uncanny—uncontrollable, uncircumscribable—intimacy with things, with a hypercomplexity and overdimensionality of the world".⁴⁵

The result is a kind of agenda of the challenges such aesthetics faces, not so much on the level of objects as on the level of form. Such challenging difficulties are represented by latency as a subtraction from perceptibility and representability, as also by entanglement as the structure of a new consciousness of coexistence and immanence. And, finally, by the clash between mutually incompatible scales of magnitude, whether given by the contrast between the brevity of human time and the depth of earth or future time or by the incommensurable spatial dimensions of local forms of life and transformations of the earth system, as well as by the number of actors performing individual practices and their possible multiplication

43 See Horn, "Ästhetik", pp. 122-126.

44 See Thomas L. Friedman, "Global Weirding is Here", in *New York Times*, 17/02/2010, p. 23 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/02/17/opinion/17friedman.html>).

45 Horn, "Ästhetik", p. 130.

by billions of times.⁴⁶

14. The shift in point of view that leads us to be included within the relations between things, which thus turn out to be endowed with their own agency, entails a falling away from the classical figure of the Lucretian observer who contemplates disaster (the shipwreck) from afar, as it still resonates in the Kantian evocation of the sublime and as it has been codified in Hans Blumenberg's figural reconstruction.⁴⁷ At this point, not only – following Pascal – are we all embarked, but we are led to embody the viewpoint of the castaways as in the proto-surrealist imagery of Comte de Lautréamont's poem *Songs of Maldoror*.⁴⁸

Unless one prefers to incur the fideistic fallacy that puts believing before seeing, to which the rhetoric of changing mindsets in relation to environmental threats also indulges, it seems appropriate for aesthetics to continue to reflect on new forms of visualization, on a countervisualization that contributes to the decolonization of the imaginary. For example, by accounting in images for the inequalities that the apparent uniformity of human action hides with respect to the geographic and social distribution of those who produce climate change and those who suffer its consequences, as Mirzoeff suggests in his contribution on countervisuality, where he writes: "the project is to create a mental space for action that can link the visible and the sayable. In relation to Anthropocene visibility, a move out of one's place would be the end of the de facto hierarchy of humanity that continues to affect global populations long after anthropologists and other scientists abandoned the formal attempt to classify the human".⁴⁹ And he concludes: "Like all forms of countervisuality, contesting Anthropocene visibility is a decolonial politics that claims the right to see what there is to be seen and name it as such: a planetary destabilization of the conditions supportive of life, requiring a decolonization of the biosphere itself in order to create a new sustainable and democratic way of life that has been prepared for by centuries of resistance".⁵⁰

If, as it has been attempted to show, the historical recourse to the sublime seems to evade any efficacy, in the wake of criticism of its looking from a safe distance and its recourse to pictorialism and aestheticization, it is not for this reason that the contribution that aesthetic categories can make to understanding and differently shaping environmental phenomena and the problems of life on earth is not exhausted. Among the aesthetic concepts

46 See *ibid.*, pp. 130-142.

47 See Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence* (1979), trans. Steven Rendall. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.

48 See Comte de Lautréamont (Isidore Lucien Ducasse), *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Paris: Balitout, Questroy et C.e, 1868-1869.

49 Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene", pp. 226-230, here p. 227.

50 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

that can enter into a constellation relationship with phenomena related to the Anthropocene are a few, in addition to the beautiful, which, as we have seen, represents the original rival against which the sublime asserts itself.

Apart from versions of the sublime itself that somehow escape criticism, such as Lyotard's, or others that should be explored—such as the hysterical sublime, with its both euphoric and terrifying effect, the toxic sublime, as a means of analyzing the tensions arising from visual representations of environmental contamination, or the trash sublime, which investigates the delicate balance that is created between the de-aestheticization of art and the aestheticization of commodities, waste, and droppings—there are others categories that show promise and should be focused on more carefully. Just think of a possible apology of the ugly, in which art is called upon to appropriate the ugly no longer to reconcile it with the beautiful, but to denounce through its dissonance the social relations of domination that both produce and expel it. In the same direction move the disgusting, the grotesque, the uncanny, the weird and the eerie. Or why not—if anything—think of the tragic? The tragic, which is centered on the persistence in remaining in divergence without conciliation and in contrast without resolution? An extensive body of work that appears to be far from being completed.⁵¹

51 In whole or in part and in different seminars or personal exchanges, I have had the opportunity to discuss the theses of this paper with some people, Vando Borghi and Emanuele Leonardi (University of Bologna), Marco Deriu (University of Parma), Lidia Gasperoni and Jörg Gleiter (TU - Berlin) and Christoph Wulf (FU - Berlin), whom I all thank for their suggestions, remarks and comments (AB).

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