

# BURTYNSKY'S ANTHROPO(S)CENIC VISUALITY AND THE NEED FOR A NEW TRADITION OF ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

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*I attended Edward Burtynsky's Anthropocene Exhibit at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in 2018. I remember his landscape photographs shaking me to my core; I left the AGO that day overwhelmed, and I felt strangely guilty for being a human in the time of the Anthropocene.*

In this paper, I will engage in a critical analysis of Edward Burtynsky's *Anthropocene* project, but I engage in this critique primarily to create an opening and a means to question the current state of industrial landscape photography as a visual representation of the Anthropocene. In the first section I will contextualize Burtynsky's photographic work, particularly in its current relation to the theoretical framework of the Anthropocene as a geologic and theoretical concept. In this first section, I will also provide important context regarding the history of landscape photography and its changing relationship with the sublime. In section two, I will draw on Peeples' *toxic sublime* and Kover's reading of Lyotard's *postmodern sublime* to analyze how Burtynsky's artistic choices create a sense of unimaginable scale that ultimately leads to a restricted a/effective response in the viewer. Next, I will position this limited viewer response as a necessary result of a) Burtynsky's invocation of the sublime and b) his framing of his landscapes as 'neutral' representations of the Anthropocene, which I argue ultimately fall short in responding effectively to the scale and demands of the current environmental crisis. While I concede that Burtynsky's photographs can prove to do important work to make visible sites of industry and toxicity that usually remain unseen, I suggest that Burtynsky's (and others') invocation of the sublime

and the Anthropocene in industrial photography can work to create individual affective responses that do not lead to true mobilization, threaten to reify the human/environment divide, and problematically strip landscape visuality from its inherent political foundation and implications. Finally, I join with other critical thinkers in voicing my critique of the Anthropocene as an ideology and join the call for activist forms of landscape photography that turn away from the sublime.

## **Edward Burtynsky, Anthropocene, and the History of the Sublime in Landscape Photography**

Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky's work has been the subject of both high praise and harsh criticism. His *The Anthropocene Project* launched in September 2018 as a collaboration with Nicholas de Pencier and Jennifer Baichwal that included a travelling museum exhibition, numerous photographs, a documentary film, a book, an educational program, and a variety of Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) immersive experiences. I will be focusing primarily on

Burtynsky's photographs.<sup>1</sup> Burtynsky's landscape photography tends to focus on the bookends of industry, depicting the landscapes formed by the extraction of raw materials and the subsequent disposal of consumer goods. He produces highly aesthetic, often aerial shots of mines, solar farms, oil fields, deforested areas, tailing ponds, sawmills, as well as landfills and recycling facilities. His most recent project turns its sights to the Anthropocene, which he defines plainly on his website: "The proposed current geological epoch, in which humans are the primary cause of permanent planetary change" (The Anthropocene Project, 2018).

The Anthropocene, initially formulated by Paul Crutzen and Eugene F Stoermer, originated as a suggestion that we have entered a new geological epoch where humans are collectively Earth's most powerful geophysical force (Kover, 2014)<sup>2</sup>. Since its proposal in 2000, the term has become widely used not only in the sciences but also in pop culture, policymaking, the humanities, the arts, and cultural criticism to indicate the immense impact that 'humans' have caused on the environment. Nonetheless, the Anthropocene remains a highly contested concept. I will return to critiques of the term in the third section of this paper.

As Demos (2017) articulates, attempts to visualize the Anthropocene present "major challenges to representational systems" due to its extended spatial and temporal scale (p.12-13). Fittingly, Burtynsky's photographs are part of—and deeply inspired by—a longstanding tradition of landscape photography that takes as almost its defining quality, its aesthetic ability to capture *scale* so great it is considered *sublime*. Kover (2014) provides a helpful general definition for understanding the sublime: "an aesthetic sensibility

or quality evoked by an encounter with an object or phenomenon of such overwhelming power, grandeur, and immensity that it is almost beyond comprehension. ... borders on the edge of outright terror yet is also combined at the same time with a sense of exhilaration and elation" (p. 125). The sublime, according to philosophical tradition, was often associated with the experience of 'wild' nature that often revealed to the observer a sense of the vast power of nature compared to the frailty of human beings (Thompson & Howard, 2019). The sublime response is widely studied in association with landscape photography because it is often the ideal and intended response, at least in reference to the greats of 19th and 20th century landscape photography. Thus, for consumers of popular landscape photography, the sublime can feel almost inseparable from the photographic landscape; when we are placed in front of a landscape photograph, we come to expect that we will be swept away by the aesthetic sense of the sheer, enormous scale of the landscape. It is distinctly because of photography's ability to elicit sublime responses that photography has the power to confer value upon landscape (Thompson & Howard, 2019). Markedly, the sublime majesty of nature captured in photographs has served the interest of colonial expansion (see Thompson & Howard, 2019), helped conserve natural wonders<sup>3</sup> (see Kover, 2014), and has helped draw attention to pressing environmental issues. While in general tradition, its content "lacks any critical intent" beyond the aesthetic (Thomson & Howard), its potential for diverse secondary political effects gives plenty of reason to be highly critical of how landscape (particularly industrial landscape) is represented through photography.

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<sup>1</sup> Given that I do not have permission to include any of Burtynsky's photos in this paper, you can access a small sample of his photos for free on his [website](#).

<sup>2</sup> The disembodied voiceover in The Anthropocene Project's accompanying film, *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch*, eerily states: "Every year humans extract between 60 and a 100 tonnes of material from the earth,

and move more sediment than all the rivers of the earth combined" (Baichwal et al., 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Carleton Watkins' photos of Yosemite, for example, famously helped convince President Lincoln to preserve Yosemite as a national park in 1890 (Thomson & Howard, 2019).

## Burtynsky's Sublime

One of the most popular critiques of Burtynsky's oeuvre is that his aestheticization of industrial landscapes could work to justify the industries themselves by suggesting that their impact on the landscape, due to its beauty, could be interpreted as something to admire (see, for example, Kover, 2014; and Peeples, 2011). Granted, the sheer aesthetic power of Burtynsky's work is hard to deny. In her 2011 paper, Jennifer Peeples tracks the history of the sublime in landscape photography from the natural sublime to the technological sublime in order to finally situate Burtynsky's industrial photographs in what she terms the "toxic sublime." This toxic sublime encompasses "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" (Peeples, 2011). Peeples adds that the reaction to the *tensions* in Burtynsky's work leads viewers to contend with their own complicity in creating the toxic landscapes he captures. It is important to note here that the "tensions" Peeples refers to are all the results of artistic and aesthetic choices that Burtynsky makes during the photographic process; the sublime is not something that is inherent to representations of landscape, rather, it is most often specifically and intentionally invoked through careful aesthetic choices. For one, inspired by the natural sublime landscape tradition, Burtynsky's often tries to capture his landscape from high vantage points, often using drones or shooting from helicopters and airplanes 600-1500 feet off the ground (Macfarlane & Burtynsky, 2018). The choice of high vantage point, which allows Burtynsky to create a sense of sublime scale, is another commonly critiqued element of his work: this raised, distanced viewing of industrial landscape is often associated with a colonial mastery of land and superior knowledge (Milliken, 2023). Notably, Burtynsky's "God's eye view" perspective creates a sense of sublime grandeur in his landscapes, such that "any human presence is completely lost and enveloped into the sheer massive scale of the shattered

landscape" (Kover, 2014, p.136). It is precisely due to this invocation of scale that Kover (2014) posits Burtynsky's work within a refiguring of Lyotard's postmodern sublime; for Kover, the sublime in Burtynsky's work lies in the fact that the severity of climate change is "unrepresentable or cannot be adequately captured in terms of our symbolic or narrative frameworks" (2014, p.139). This scale and scope of landscape is so unimaginably large that it feels almost impossible to comprehend, leading to a sublime response from viewers. While this sublime response is undeniably an intense affective response, I question whether high *affect* is truly *effective* in meeting the demands of representing the environmental crisis. Burtynsky notably does not take a distinct political stance on his work.

Burtynsky's political neutrality is somewhat reconciled within the framework of Peeples' toxic sublime. Peeples emphasizes that Burtynsky's work does not depict a clear environmental ethic, but that it does so in order to create *tensions* and *dissonance* that promote individual reflection (2011). Additionally, Peeples admits that the toxic sublime involves, at least in part, a marvelling at human accomplishments paired with an alarm for the immensity of destruction that results (2011). Beyond the tensions between magnitude and insignificance, Peeples also posits that Burtynsky creates an intentional tension between the known and the unknown; he severely limits the text and exposition associated with each photograph, often simply naming the subject of the shot (oil refinery, lithium mine, etc.) and the city where it is located. Burtynsky very rarely includes the effect of the materials shown on humans or non-humans, nor does he name the companies who are in charge of each site. Combined with the fact that the most impacted beings (workers, inhabitants, local animals, non-human life, etc.) are very rarely included within the captured landscape, Burtynsky's work circumvents both the naming of culprit and victim. Peeples, however, suggests that the lack of visible individuals denies the audience the closure of knowing all three elements of a toxic narrative: the contaminant, the victim, and the site

(2011), which in turn spurs individual reflection about self-complicity and self-victimhood. Ultimately, though Peeples frames each of Burtynsky's choices as a calculated effort to create a sense of scale and tension, each of these choices could just as easily be read as an attempt to remain politically neutral<sup>4</sup>. Burtynsky's work does not have a distinct political bend; his work is neither an endorsement nor a condemnation of the industry he photographs (Kover, 2014).

### **Critiques to the Anthropocene and a Call for Activist Landscape Photography**

Burtynsky makes distinct artistic choices in order to create a sense of large scale that, according to Peeples, can have an individualizing effect as viewers compare themselves to the expansive, sublime industrial landscapes. However, Burtynsky's recent association with the concept of Anthropocene creates a simultaneously *universalizing* effect. Many thinkers in the critical humanities critique or dismiss the concept of Anthropocene altogether; it can be interpreted to act as a "mechanism of universalization" that universalizes the blame for climate change onto all humans. This universalizing of blame can prove to invisibilize the culprits —people and systems—of climate change and enable the "military-state-corporate apparatus" to disavow responsibility for the impact of climate change" (Demos, 2017). Thus, Anthropocene acts as a kind of "earth unifying" concept that repudiates the potential for differentiated responsibility and impact and instead homogeneously allocates agency to the generic member of humanity. Thus, a so-called politically neutral treatment of the Anthropocene is "inevitably complicity in the very non-neutrality of the Anthropocene ideology" (Demos, 2017). Mirzoeff (2022) helps to point out the politics of representing industry in his formation of the "aesthetics of the

Anthropocene" which represent a kind of "(an)aesthetic" that renders landscapes of industrial extraction and pollution into "comfortably familiar" scenes (Mirzoeff, 2022, p. 222). Inspired by Mirzoeff's call for counter visualities, I align myself with the growing list of scholars who contest the very basis of the Anthropocene and join Demos (2017) in questioning what visualities could be created "against the Anthropocene." With the severity of the environmental crisis, it is imperative to consider what kinds of representations we create of industrial, toxic, and landfill landscapes. There are many prominent, existing critiques of the Anthropocene from scholars in a wide range of fields. However, I have seen very little scholarly critique aimed towards the *photographic* appeal to the sublime in Anthropocene industrial landscapes, which I argue upholds an *Anthropo(s)cenic* ideological foundation; ergo, in the rest of this section, I contend that the sublime industrial landscape—at least in its current formulation—has little to no place in a new contemporary photographic tradition that moves *against the Anthropocene*.

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the natural sublime can be highly effective in creating a sense of reverence toward natural landscapes. In fact, the sublime is so deeply entrenched within the landscape photographic tradition that it is difficult to imagine a landscape photograph without it. Still, I argue that it is imperative that we still do try to imagine it. Both *Anthropocene* and the Western tradition of landscape photography are founded on the basis of a distinct and fabricated divide between humanity and nature. As Mirzoeff reminds us, we therefore require a kind of "countervisuality" that does not include a visualization of the planet as a battlefield —between man and nature or between north and south (2014). One avenue I have identified as a potential opening to begin dismantling the sublime-as-default-

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<sup>4</sup> Addressing Burtynsky's political 'neutrality', Milliken (2023) contends that it could be a tactical decision in order for Burtynsky to continue gaining access to

industrial sites, why may not be so willing to let a self-proclaimed environmentalist photographer onto their site.

aesthetic in landscape photography is to critically consider the aesthetic representation (and exaggerated creation) of scale in the landscape photography tradition. For example, photographing the landscape from a plane creates a sense of environment as distinct and quite literally below humans; the treatment of landscape as “mere backdrop” (Alaimo, 2010). In her book, *Bodily Natures*, Stacy Alaimo provides a potent new way of thinking about humanity’s relation to landscape through her description of *transcorporeality*. She suggests that we can think of human corporeality as a kind of transcorporeality wherein: “the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world” and “the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from ‘the environment’” (2010, p. 2). In this difficult reframing, Alaimo calls us to consider our own materiality to accept that human bodies are highly permeable and thus, to begin to consider ourselves inseparable from the environment; “nature is always closer than one’s own skin—perhaps even closer” (Alaimo, 2010, p. 2). Alaimo’s concept of transcorporeality, and Demos and others’ critique about the universalizing nature of the Anthropocene suggests the need for a visual representation of landscape that reveals the unequal, distributional politics of the environmental crisis and works to break down the human/environment divide to create an environmental justice tradition of landscape photography *against the Anthropocene*.

### **A Move Towards Activist Landscape Photography**

I don’t intend to suggest that Burtynsky’s work is politically wrong, nor do I go as far as some scholars<sup>5</sup> in dismissing his projects as keys to resignation. However, due to the prominence of his work and his expressed inspiration from the

landscape photographic tradition of the 19th and 20th centuries, Burtynsky’s oeuvre is a good contemporary example of what I call *Anthropo(s)scenic* landscape photography. If we are correct in stating that the term Anthropocene<sup>6</sup> implicitly involves a reverence and awe towards the singular impact of ‘humanity’ on the planet and a distinct divide between human and environment, then the scale and sublime in Burtynsky’s work are indeed representative of an Anthropocene ideology. However, due to photography’s historical association with realism, Burtynsky seemingly tries to present his photos as both aesthetic works (that could be shown in a gallery as art) while simultaneously suggesting that it is also “neutral” evidentiary photography (that bears witness to human industry<sup>7</sup>). In response to this neutrality, a move towards an anti-Anthropocene tradition of landscape photography could begin with an explicit or implicit acknowledgement of the politics involved in photographic representation of landscape. In fact, in light of the severity of the climate crisis, the political nature of photography, if accepted wholeheartedly, could be integral in the movement towards activist forms of landscape photography.

As Demos points out, visual representations of the Anthropocene often neglect “bottom-up” kinds of change and instead fall into a reliance on geoengineering solutions to climate change (2017). If an *Anthropo(s)scenic* aesthetic involves the separation of humans from the “backdrop” of nature and a tendency toward “neutral” political narratives, *what would a distinctly political, transcorporeal reimagining of landscape look like?* One example forwarded by Demos involves the work of Andrea

<sup>5</sup> Kover (2014) describes Burtynsky’s work as “less a call to arms and more an invitation to sit back and enjoy the environmental apocalypse as an aesthetic experience.”

<sup>6</sup> Many scholars have suggested alternative namings or critical reimaginings of the Anthropocene that are sadly

beyond the scope of this paper (see: Demos, 2017, Haraway, 2018)

<sup>7</sup> The subtitle of Edward Burtynsky’s website reads: “Over 40 years of bearing witness to the impacts of human industry on the planet” (Edward Burtynsky, 2025)

Liggins<sup>8</sup>, a photographer and landscape photography researcher who takes landscape photos from the “bush or shrub layer” (2017). Rather than shooting from a God’s eye perspective, Liggins “looks out of the landscape rather than at it” and aims to “find an alternative photographic aesthetic to promote environments that do not conform to picturesque ideals” (Liggins, 2018). Liggins’s landscapes, granted, do not elicit a sublime response in viewers and look nothing like what one might imagine landscape photography to look like; Liggins’s work has blurry horizon lines and limited scale, as opposed to Burtynsky’s style that favours “an elevated perspective so that the foreground begins quite far away, and the scene unfolds as the eye moves into mid-aspect and on into infinity” (Edward Burtynsky, 2025). What results in Liggins’ work is a sense of being *within* or *of* the landscape. While Liggins’ work is not of industrial sites, her photos spur us to consider how a bush-level photograph of a toxic or industrial site would feel next to Burtynsky’s God’s eye perspective of the same scene. The awareness of the landscape’s toxicity would perhaps be brought to the forefront as the viewer contemplates the safety of the photographer, and the scene would prompt the viewer to imagine what it would feel like, affectively, sensuously, and corporeally, to witness the landscape with boots on the ground. Alternatively, though, what might be discovered is that those sites are not visually remarkable at all, nor would the danger or toxicity be particularly visible; as Peebles admits, toxicity is often invisible and reveals itself slowly in the bodies of those who live in close proximity (2011). Burtynsky himself concedes that many of these sites are not sublime for those who witness them from the ground<sup>9</sup>.

Another move away from traditional landscape photography can be seen in the collaboration between Misrach and Orff on their project, *Petrochemical America* (2013). The project combines aerial photographs of “Cancer Alley” (stretching from Baton Rouge to New Orleans), overlaid with text and graphic design to show the presence of invisible pollutants—polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (HPAHs) that are carcinogenic (Scott, 2022, p. 160). Her work lies in distinct contrast to Burtynsky’s non-didactic approach to landscape as Orff directly “encourages viewers to participate in the growing opposition to fossil fuel extractivism” (Scott, 2022, p. 71). Scott advocates for this kind of use of augmented reality in photography to align the ethical values of photography with environmental activism, wherein the artist has an obligation to inform the audience about the environmental issues affecting the landscape they are representing (2022). Indeed, this shift to challenge traditional notions of the sublime and the picturesque in landscape could reveal a new kind of activist photography that views environment as intricately intermeshed with our permeable human bodies and treats landscape as a distinctly political concept. Returning to Alaimo, in doing so we may let go of our sense of mastery (fueled by enlightenment thinking) *over* the landscape and instead find ourselves “inextricably part of the flux and flow of the world” (2010, p.17) and be willing to “name the culprits” (Demos, 2017, p. 54) behind climate change.

Burtynsky’s Anthropocene aesthetic involves an invocation of the sublime that positions the viewer to look at landscape from a planetary scale rather than at a bodily scale or at a scale of localities. While I have explored how this can, in some cases, be effective as a form of (albeit

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<sup>8</sup> See some examples of her work on her website [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> In an interview Burtynsky states: “I walk into a mine company and I start wandering around, looking and wondering at this chaos, and a place that’s by and large pretty ugly and boring. Most people would walk into a

mine and just walk right out again and say “Jesus, that’s pretty grim, visually.” I walk in there and say, I’m not going to give up.” (Macfarlane & Burtynsky, 2018)

aestheticised) evidence of human impact, it is limited in its neutrality and in its separation of the viewer from the landscape. I argue that a literal and figurative environmental justice *reframing* of landscape photography against the Anthropocene would involve a movement away from the sublime and towards an overtly politicized photographic practice. My critique of Burtynsky is not intended to be an indication that it is impossible or immoral to try and visually represent ‘human’ impact on the landscape. In fact, I hope my critiques have instead pointed to the immense importance of critically considering representations of ‘human’ impact on the planet, especially given its potential to rouse people to join mobilized collective action networks against extractivism, colonialism, capitalism, and various other sources of environmental injustice. I have positioned Burtynsky's work as simultaneously individualizing—due to his invocation of scale and the sublime—and universalizing—due to his association with the Anthropocene. Throughout this critique, I question, though do not claim to definitively answer, whether the traditional aesthetics of nature-based landscape photography that rely on a sense of reverence and sublime are up to the task of representing, witnessing, or even creating an e/affective response to the devastating environmental crisis. Finally, I join contemporary visual culture scholars and photographers in calling for a *non-anthropo(s)centric reframing* of landscape photography towards activist and transcorporeal reimaginings of humanity's relationship to landscape through a relinquishing of the longstanding dedication to the sublime in contemporary industrial landscape photography.

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