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# Anthropocene by Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, and Nicholas De Pencier

David Shaw  
Concordia University

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***Anthropocene* by EDWARD BURTYNSKY, JENNIFER BAICHWAL, and NICHOLAS DE PENCIER**

AGO Goose Lane, 2018. \$35.00

Reviewed by **DAVID SHAW**

*Anthropocene* is the textual counterpart to Edward Burtynsky, Jennifer Baichwal, and Nicholas De Pencier's series of photographic exhibitions, films, and virtual and augmented reality installations that make up their massively ambitious "Anthropocene Project." While *Anthropocene* aims to be both a methodological account of their collaborative process throughout the project and a more portable reproduction of some of their collective's photographic works, the book is at its most effective as an artifact of the dense and potentially irresolvable tensions that are inherent in the concept of the "Anthropocene" itself. Hubristic yet humbling, planetarily vast yet still deeply personal, *Anthropocene* emerges as a document of the challenges that face anyone who aims to represent back to humans the damage that humanity has inflicted on the planet.

The Anthropocene names the proposed epoch during which human activity has become a major force on the earth's geological and environmental systems. Since it was coined in the early 2000s by atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen and ecologist Eugene Stoermer, the term has served as a catalyst for a wide range of academic and artistic interventions, each seeking to grapple in their own way with humanity's newfound role as a geological force, as well as challenge the concept of the Anthropocene itself. As Baichwal asks in her brief reflection on her and her collaborators' work in *Anthropocene*, "[h]ow do we convey, despite our brevity as a species, the magnitude of our

impact?" (202). The problem of scale is clearly one of the central undertakings of Burtynsky, Baichwal, and De Pencier's work: photographic series such as Burtynsky's "Dandora Landfill," which examines one of Nairobi's largest dumping sites of industrial, agricultural, and medical waste, render the impacts of human activity in grim detail. Plastic bottles bearing familiar branded labels are assembled into surreal landscapes of waste, capturing the aggregate effect of individuated human actors on a massive scale.

The inherent tensions built into the concept of the Anthropocene also produce some interestingly contradictory moments within the text. For example, De Pencier characterizes the shifting relationship between humans and technology by attempting to distance himself from his grandparents' generation, which, he notes, "presided over the 'Great Acceleration' after the Second World War, which scientists of the Anthropocene Working Group are touting as the definitive start to the human epoch" (205). As De Pencier goes on to describe, a central driver of his grandparents' generational culpability is the result of a kind of utopian technological determinism, wherein "human technological progress was inherently positive, [and] a natural extension of the innate impulse to expand to fill the carrying capacity of the environment around you" (205). In contradistinction to this deterministic and vaguely colonial impulse toward expansion, the present moment, argues De Pencier, is characterized by an increased sensitivity to the consequences of our unimpeded technological expansion and its impact on our environment.

Despite this heightened sense of caution, though, De Pencier still falls back

onto rhetoric that seems to imply a concerningly similar kind of deterministic trajectory for human technological development. He notes that his own technology of choice, the camera, emerges as a “natural evolution” of the distinctly human capacity for abstract thought, which, unlike earlier mediums of artistic expression, is anchored by a “dispassionate scientific credibility” (206). Thus, De Pencier both metaphorically reinscribes himself within a biological account of technological development and, more significantly, leans into the exact kind of deterministic inevitability that informed his grandparents’ generational apathy toward environmental degradation. By situating himself and his work as both inheritors of and culpable participants in the Anthropocene, De Pencier allows for a strange form of ambivalence to hang over the project’s intervention, as he aims not to “point fingers or disavow our own culpability” but rather invites his viewers to “witness these places and react in their own individual fashion” (206).

This technologically mediated ambivalence is most evident in the sequences of photographs that make up the bulk of the book’s contents. Burtynsky’s “Morenci Mine” series, for example, confronts its viewer with the sheer scale of the devastating environmental impact of copper mining while simultaneously rendering it as an oddly mesmerizing spectacle. In this way, the photographs take on an uneasy ambiguity, as both unavoidable testimony to ongoing environmental degradation and striking images in their own right. As De Pencier observes, “[i]t’s hard not to marvel at the engineering ingenuity of the massive industrial sites we filmed, and equally hard to ignore the devastation they represent” (206).

It’s these moments of tension where *Anthropocene* captures Burtynsky, Baichwal, and De Pencier’s “Anthropocene Project” at its most vulnerable angle. Precariously positioned somewhere between concerned advocates against humanity’s damaging interventions into the environment and awestruck observers of the impressive scale of the damage, Burtynsky, Baichwal, and De Pencier exemplify the grimly conflicting realities of being an environmentally engaged artist in the age of the Anthropocene.

**DAVID SHAW** is a PhD student currently studying at Concordia University. His work is supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).