

Producing Bare Life in the Anthropo-scene

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ABSTRACT

The article discusses the notion of the Anthropocene as a kind of anthropological machine, closely related to the regime of visibility. Giorgio Agamben points out that the anthropological machine is always an optical machine, which helps to induce visibility as an essential element of power. Similarly, Nicholas Mirzoeff discusses Anthropocene visibility as a technique which is always hierarchical and autocratic, helping to maintain the visualizer's material power. Mirzoeff suggests that the biopolitical effects of visibility can be confronted by "countervisuality", a strategy, which abandons visibility in order to achieve political equality. However, in this article I will argue that Anthropocene visibility should not be abandoned but rather reversed or redirected. In this regard, reversed visibility would mean not the replacement of the aesthetic with the political, but, on the contrary, the replacement of anthropocentric aesthetics with a different kind of aesthetics, which includes a non-human or not-quite-human gaze. If Anthropocene visibility silently presumes that the place from which it represents will remain forever intact, then post-Anthropocene visibility demonstrates that the mechanisms of exclusion and subjection are easily interchangeable and that every living being can potentially become "bare life".

KEYWORDS

biopolitics, anthropological machine, bare life, Anthropocene visibility, countervisuality, reversed visibility.

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Giorgio Agamben defines biopolitics as an anthropological machine, which functions by sorting out proper and improper, human and non-human individuals. To achieve this, biopolitics needs a special arrangement of space, an optical machine which allows the separation between human and non-human bodies. Similarly, Nicholas Mirzoeff discusses the Anthropocene as a biopolitical regime charged with the desire to visualize which can be seen as part of its imperialistic and colonizing politics. Anthropocene visibility functions as an optical machine that universalizes the human and thus masks the real agent behind the catastrophe. For Mirzoeff, Anthropocene visibility represents the position of power and authority, be it capitalism, colonialism, or patriarchy. Mirzoeff suggests that the biopolitical effects of visibility can be effaced by inventing a “countervisuality”, a strategy, which abandons visibility in order to reach the invisible – the equality of all human and non-human life and the decolonization of the biosphere. However, in this article I argue that Anthropocene visibility should not be abandoned but rather reversed or inversed. If Anthropocene visibility conceals the effects of power and represents the exceptional point of view, by contrast, post-Anthropocene visibility creates a model of meta-representation, which reveals that every subject is already an object of climate emergency and that everyone is subjected to the effects of the Anthropocene. As an example of post-Anthropocene visibility I will examine two artworks which have a similar structure: a creative documentary *Acid Forest* (2018) by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė and an opera-performance *Sun and Sea (Marina)* by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė, recently presented at the Venice Biennale. Both artworks create a reversed model of visibility, which helps to expose the human species as not having an exceptional power for visualization and control but as being incapable of confronting the emergency of climate change.

Biopolitics as the Anthropological Machine

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben describes biopolitics as a specific political regime, which strives to capture and control the biological dimension of human life.¹ In this sense biopolitics expresses the

¹ Giorgio Agamben. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.

relationship between sovereign power and the production of bare life, or between the one who exerts the power and a disposable life. In *The History of Sexuality* (1978), Michel Foucault related the emergence of biopolitics to the acceleration of capitalism and the urgent need to mobilise disposable labour power.² Agamben relates the emergence of biopolitics to modern state power and modernity in general. Modern state power functions by making a decision as to who has the power and who is merely a “bare life”, namely someone who is excluded from society (*homo sacer*) but at the same time is included into political calculations in the form of this exclusion. Thus, to function properly and reassert itself, modern state power has to maintain the reservoir of “bare life”. In this respect “bare life” is not a specific social or political category, but a biological dimension which can be found both in human and non-human bodies. As Agamben points out, “bare life is no longer confined to a particular place or definite category. It now dwells in the biological body of every living being.”³ In other words, by producing “bare life”, modern state power makes any biological body easily manageable by subjecting it to specific techniques of regulation and control.

One of these techniques is what Agamben, in *The Open: Man and Animal* (2004), names as the “anthropological machine”, which functions by means of an exclusion and an inclusion: it animalizes a human and humanizes an animal.⁴ First, the anthropological machine produces man by isolating the non-human or not-yet-human within the human: within the human population we find certain individuals that reveal the animal dimension within the human and thus can be excluded from “normalized” society. Agamben refers to the figure of the Jew, which in Nazi Germany was a case of the non-man produced within the man, or to the comatosed person, which represents the case of the animal separated within the human body itself.⁵ Second, the animalization of the human in a symmetrical way is reflected in the procedure of the humanization of an animal. Cary Wolfe refers to specific cases when human rights are delegated to animals, for example, in the Great Ape project, thus creating an animal in a human form.⁶ However, this gesture of extending human rights to animals just produces new zones of exception, where animal life is regulated and controlled. In other words, both the animalization of man and the humanization of animals are two sides of the same “anthropological machine”. As Agamben points out, “the articulation between human and animal, man and non-man, speaking being and living being, must take place. Like space of exception, this zone is, in truth, perfectly empty, and the truly human being who should occur there is only the place of a

2 “This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes”. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. by Robert Hurley, London: Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 140-141.

3 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 140.

4 Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. by Kevin Attell. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 33-38.

5 Agamben, op. cit., p. 37.

6 Cary Wolfe, *Before the Law: Humans and Other Animals in a Biopolitical Frame*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013, pp. 11-17.

ceaselessly updated decision in which the caesurae and their rearticulation are always dislocated and displaced anew. What would thus be obtained, however, is neither an animal life nor a human life, but only a life that is separated and excluded from itself – only a *bare life*.⁷

To achieve this, state power needs some specific arrangements of space where human and non-human dimensions of life can be separated and, if necessary, excluded. Foucault summarizes this intermingling of power and the arrangements of space by inventing the term apparatus or *dispositif*: the “apparatus is a heterogeneous set of power relations, consisting of “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions”.⁸ An apparatus is always inscribed into a play of power and works as a technical device which helps to sort out, discipline and control individuals. The Panopticon, as described by Foucault, is the best example of such an apparatus, which ties together visibility and the regime of power: “Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”.⁹ The Panopticon as an apparatus of power is replicated in specific enclosed spaces, such as barracks, schools, hospitals, and workplaces. Thus, power relationships are inscribed into bodies, subjecting them to the requirements of power. In this sense the regime of visibility not only keeps bodies in a certain place, but also transforms them into a disposable life: “He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”¹⁰ Thus the Panopticon amplifies and perfects the exercise of power and in this respect helps to produce “bare life”.

Similarly, Agamben points out that the “anthropological machine” always works to establish a position of authority and power, and to introduce a distinction between *Homo sapiens* and other species. To achieve this distinction, the human animal has to invent specific arrangements of space, such as a zoo or a safari park, where humans can observe non-human animality and simultaneously reinvent and acknowledge their own humanity. Therefore, the anthropological machine is an optical one: “It is an optical machine constructed in a series of mirrors in which man, looking at himself, sees his own image always already deformed in the features of an ape. *Homo* is constitutively an “anthropomorphous” animal (...), who must recognize himself in a non-man in order to be human”.¹¹ However,

7 Agamben, op. cit., p. 38.

8 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. by Colin Gordon, trans. by Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham, Kate Soper. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, pp. 194-96. For Agamben’s take on “apparatus” see: Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. By David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp. 1-24.

9 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan. London: Penguin Books, 1977, p. 201.

10 Foucault, op. cit., p. 202-203.

11 Agamben, *The Open*, p. 26-27.

this optical technique is far from neutral: the same arrangement of space is repeated in the structure of a camp or a slave plantation, where human bodies are detached from their humanity and converted into the animality of “bare life”. In both cases biopolitical power needs an optical dispositive: an apparatus, or a display, where human or animal bodies are dislocated and converted into “bare life”. In this sense we can argue that visibility always works on the side of power and is an essential part of the biopolitical apparatus.

Anthropocene Visuality

The entanglement of visibility and power is at the centre of the discourse on the Anthropocene. In his famous article “Visualizing the Anthropocene” (2014), Mirzoeff reveals that the desire to visualize the Anthropocene can be seen as part of its imperialistic and colonizing politics. In other words, Anthropocene discourse can be seen as a continuation of biopolitics: if biopolitics seeks to subject and manage both human and animal lives, turning them into disposable biological resources, in a similar way, the Anthropocene (or the Anthro-po-politics) seeks to subject and colonize the whole of nature and all natural resources. Although Mirzoeff has some reservations about Agamben’s theory of biopolitics,¹² nevertheless, his take on Anthropocene visuality can be interpreted as the continuation of the critique of biopolitical power. If biopolitical power and visuality operate in the field of biological life, Anthro-po-power and visuality function on a planetary scale.

The Anthropocene is a term suggested by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer in 2000 to name a new geological epoch, which marks the irreversible effects on the planet produced by human activity.¹³ In this sense the Anthropocene is everywhere and affects everyone. However, it cannot be sensed or perceived directly but can be visualized. Mirzoeff argues that visualization is a human-created machine, which helps to perceive the Anthropocene as something manageable and even having an aesthetic function. However, something went wrong with this machine and now it has become destructive: “while visualization is normally carried out by the agent of an action, such as the general visualizing a battlefield, the Anthropocene is a human-created machine that is now unconsciously bent on its own destruction, a purposiveness without a purpose, to repurpose Immanuel Kant’s famous definition of the aesthetic”.¹⁴ In his earlier works Mirzoeff examined visualization as a military technique: once a battlefield became too big and too extensive to perceive it, the general needs to visualize it, in other words, to rely on the descriptions and images of his troops and his own imagination.¹⁵ Thus visualization is a technique working on behalf of authority

12 Mirzoeff argues that Agamben omits the history of slavery as an important formation of biopolitics: “Agamben asserts that ‘life’ becomes a political term with the 1789 formation of a discourse of the rights of man, setting aside the entire question of slavery that is central here”. Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Spring), 2011, p. 478, fn. 20.

13 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer, “The Anthropocene”, *Global Change News Letter*, 41, 2000, pp. 17-18.

14 Nicholas Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, *Public Culture* 26 (2), 2014, p. 213.

15 Mirzoeff argues that classifying, separating, and aestheticizing together form a complex of visuality. Historically he distinguishes three complexes of visuality: plantation complex, imperial

and power: “Visualizing was and is a hierarchical, indeed autocratic, means of imagining the social as permanent conflict. Its goal is to maintain the authority of the visualizer, above and beyond the visualizer’s material power.”¹⁶ Thus, if visualization is by definition military and autocratic, how can we explain the desire to visualize the Anthropocene? Who in this case is the general and where is the battlefield?

If biopolitical visibility normalizes the exercise of power and makes it acceptable for the subjected individual, then Anthropocene visibility normalizes the conquest of nature and makes it aesthetically acceptable. As Mirzoeff points out, “Anthropocene visibility 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”.¹⁷ Anthropocene visibility, presenting catastrophic but at the same time beautiful images, has both aesthetic and anaesthetic functions, distancing us from the real consequences of what’s happening. As Mirzoeff points out, “Anthropocene visibility allows us to move on, to see nothing and keep circulating commodities, despite the destruction of the biosphere. We do so less out of venal convenience, as some might suggest, than out of a modernist conviction that ‘the authorities’ will restore everything to order in the end.”¹⁸ In this respect Anthropocene visibility can be interpreted as a scene in which humans create false stories about themselves without acknowledging that the real agent behind the catastrophe is not a universal human but capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. Having this moment in mind, we can argue that the Anthropocene thesis is just another optical and discursive machine in which man is looking at himself and (mis)recognizes himself (to use Jacques Lacan’s term) as the agent of responsibility. Similar to biopolitics, which works as a machine, sorting out proper and improper individuals, the Anthropocene discourse can be seen as a conceptual machine, which outsources responsibilities.

Thus, the question is who is this Anthropos at the heart of the Anthropocene and what kind of power does it represent. As T. J. Demos points out in *Against the Anthropocene* (2017), it is important to ask “what ideological function does the word “Anthropocene” serve”.¹⁹ On the one hand, Anthropocene imagery presents a certain visual system, which is constituted by the military-state-corporate apparatus; on the other hand, as Demos points out, “it is worth asking to what degree the Anthropocene itself – as a discursive formation with legal, political, cultural, and geological strands – is a function of that system, despite its scientific terminological origins... My argument (...) is that Anthropocene rhetoric – joining images and texts – frequently acts as a mechanism of universalization (...) which enables the military-state-corporate apparatus to disavow responsibility for the differentiated impacts of climate change (...) inadvertently making us all

complex, and industrial-military complex. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011; Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Spring), 2011, pp. 473-496.

16 Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, p. 216.

17 Mirzoeff, op. cit., p. 217.

18 Ibid.

19 T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. New York, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017, p. 16.

complicit in its destructive project”.²⁰ Thus, as many critics have pointed out, the word “Anthropocene” refers to universal “human activity” in order to mask the real agent behind the scene – capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

As Jason W. Moore proposes in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History and the Crisis of Capitalism* (2016), the real agent behind the Anthropocene is not universal humanity, but corporate capitalism; therefore, he suggests replacing the word “Anthropocene” with the term “Capitalocene”. As Moore points out, “capitalism is a way of organizing *nature as a whole*... a nature in which human organizations (classes, empires, markets, etc.) not only make environments, but are simultaneously made by the historical flux and flow of the web of life. In perspective, capitalism is a world-ecology that joins the accumulation of capital, the pursuit of power, and the co-production of nature in successive historical configurations”.²¹ Thus the term Capitalocene refers to corporate capitalism as a specific agent which not only appropriates, consumes, and exhausts natural resources but also manages to pass down the catastrophic consequences on to the poorest and the most underprivileged populations. As Demos points out, “in such narratives as these, Anthropos serves to distract attention from the economic class that has long benefitted from the financial system responsible for the catastrophic environmental change”.²² In other words, the Anthropos who is responsible for climate disruption is not universal humanity but corporate capitalism.

In a similar vein, in his article “It’s Not the Anthropocene, It’s the White Supremacy Scene” (2018), Mirzoeff argues that “the Anthropos in *Anthropocene* turns out to be our old friend the (imperialist) white male”.²³ As Mirzoeff observes, the Anthropocene thesis follows the Enlightenment ideas about universal history and universal reason. However, universal reason (or the laws of nature) is quite specific in relation to particular individuals: some of them are considered to be self-determined and others are considered to be improper and disposable. Mirzoeff asserts that “in the Enlightenment concept of universal reason, certain people are produced by ‘nature’ as those worthy of being colonized or open to being enslaved. There is, then, no ‘innocent’ nature that was later despoiled by the Anthropocene: the very idea of nature is inextricably entangled with race”.²⁴ In this sense the Anthropocene thesis is not an objective representation of nature but a scene of biopolitical regulation. If we accept the fact that the “golden spike”, marking the beginning of the Anthropocene, can be related to the arrival of Europeans in the Americas in 1610, then it follows that “the Anthropocene began with a massive colonial genocide”.²⁵ In other words, the alleged neutrality of the Anthropocene thesis masks the fact that climate injustice is a consequence of

20 T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, p. 17.

21 Jason Moore, *Anthropocene or Capitalocene: Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2016, p. 7.

22 T. J. Demos, *Against the Anthropocene*, p. 49.

23 Nicholas Mirzoeff, “It’s Not the Anthropocene, It’s the White Supremacy Scene; or, The Geological Color Line”, in: *After Extinction*, ed. by Richard Grusin, Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2018, p. 123.

24 Mirzoeff, op. cit., p. 128.

25 Mirzoeff, op. cit., p. 138.

racist and colonial politics. Therefore, as Mirzoeff points out, “it seems that white supremacy, not content with being the *übermensch*, has settled on the ultimate destiny of being a geological agent”.²⁶ In this sense it is important to acknowledge that the Anthropocene is a scene of (mis)representation and redistribution of power, where the colonizer takes the “responsibility” to represent those who are not worthy to represent themselves.

Moreover, the Anthropocene discourse effectively erases not only the reality of race but also the traces of gender. As Joanna Zylińska pointed out in *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse* (2018), the Anthropocene narrative with its messianic-apocalyptic undertones is saturated with masculinist ambitions.²⁷ What becomes a problem here is that, together with the discussion about the Anthropocene, the universal subject comes back and immediately erases all theoretical efforts to differentiate every subject as being racialized and gendered. As Claire Colebrook points out in “What Is the Anthro-Political?” (2016), “after years of theory that contested every naturalization of what was ultimately historical and political, ‘man’ has returned”.²⁸ It is as if the danger and urgency to react pushed back all theoretical work in postcolonialism and feminism and rehabilitated a new type of hyper-humanism. As Colebrook points out, “to return to ‘anthropos’, now, after all these years of difference seems to erase all the work in postcolonialism that had declared enlightenment ‘man’ to be a fiction that allowed all the world to be ‘white like me’, and all the work in feminism that exposed the man and subject of reason as he who cannibalizes all others and remakes them in his image. The Anthropocene seems to override vast amounts of critical work in queer theory, trans-animalities, post-humanism and disability theory that had destroyed the false essentialism of the human.”²⁹ Thus we can argue that Anthropocene visibility expresses not only the concern about climate emergency but also opens the door for the return of capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy.

Countervisuality or Reversed Visuality?

Having these issues in mind we can argue that the Anthropocene thesis and, as Mirzoeff defines it, Anthropocene visibility are far from being neutral and express the position of biopolitical power. As Mirzoeff points out, “the power to imagine has itself been colonized and dominated so that we understand the fundamental human impulse to be one of conflict rather than communal action. The theory and practice of the conquest of nature has become integrated into Western aesthetics throughout the Anthropocene”.³⁰ Thus, in contrast to

26 Mirzoeff, op. cit., p. 142.

27 Joanna Zylińska. *The End of Man: A Feminist Counterapocalypse*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018. Zylińska points out an interesting fact that when the Anthropocene Group, a subset of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, first convened in 2014 in Berlin to discuss if the human impact on the Earth deserves a new term, of the 29 scientists only one was a woman.

28 Claire Colebrook, “What Is the Anthro-Political?” in *Twilight of the Anthropocene Idols*, ed. by Tom Cohen, Claire Colebrook, J. Hillis Miller. London: Open Humanities Press, 2016, p. 90.

29 Colebrook, op. cit., p. 91.

30 Mirzoeff, “Visualizing the Anthropocene”, p. 219.

Anthropocene visuality, Mirzoeff suggests “countervisuality”, a strategy that has three constituent aspects: “it is a claim to move out of the ‘place’ allocated to one by birth, a claim to democracy on behalf of the part that has no part, and a means of sustaining these claims beyond the spontaneous moment of uprising. (...) In relation to Anthropocene visuality, a move out of one’s place would be the end of the de facto hierarchy of humanity that continues to affect global populations.”³¹ However, the problem with this strategy is that it is barely visual and is in fact purely political: “countervisuality” means the abandonment of visuality in order to reach the invisible – the equality of all human and non-human life and the decolonization of the biosphere.³² In contrast, I would argue that Anthropocene visuality should not be abandoned but rather reversed or redirected. In this regard, countervisuality would mean not the replacement of the aesthetic with the political, but, on the contrary, the replacement of anthropocentric aesthetics with a different kind of aesthetics, which includes a non-human or not-quite-human gaze.

In the last two decades we have observed many theoretical interventions which attempted to transcend human-centred exceptionalism and to suggest new modes of non-anthropocentric thinking, such as new materialism, agential realism, speculative realism, posthumanism, ontologies of becoming, which, all together, mark a paradigm shift in the humanities.³³ These theoretical interventions are important in trying to imagine a world without humans (as speculative realism suggests) or to see it from a non-human point of view, generated by machines, robots, AI, animals, viruses, bacteria, algae, etc. All these attempts to create a non-human or non-anthropocentric aesthetics also intervene into the discussion about the Anthropocene and can be summarized, using T. J. Demos’ phrase, as an invitation to “decolonize nature”.³⁴ The decolonization of nature would imply the decolonization of our methodologies: it means taking into account not only the critique of corporate capitalism, and the theories of postcolonialism and feminism, but also relying on indigenous cosmologies, animal studies, developmental biology, new media and technology studies, etc. These new methodologies

31 Mirzoeff, op. cit., p. 226.

32 Countervisuality includes emancipation through education as opposed to classification, democracy as opposed to separation, and aesthetics of the body as opposed to aesthetics of power. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011; Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Right to Look”, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, no. 3 (Spring), 2011, pp. 473-496.

33 See, for example, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010; Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds.), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010; Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007; Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (eds.), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne: re.press, 2011; Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013; Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.

34 For more about art and the Anthropocene, see T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016; Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin (eds.), *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, London: Open Humanities Press, 2015.

create a new mode of visibility, which could help to detach ourselves from anthropocentric representation, expressed either as an optical “anthropological machine” (Foucault, Agamben), or as Anthropocene visibility (Mirzoeff). Thus, my argument is that in giving away biopolitical visibility, sorting out individuals, or Anthropocene visibility, outsourcing responsibilities, we don’t have to give up visibility as such. Instead of visibility working on behalf of power, we have to look for new forms of visibility, exposing the mechanisms of exclusion, subjection, and colonization.

In this context I would like to introduce two artworks: a creative documentary *Acid Forest* (2018) by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė³⁵ and an opera-performance *Sun and Sea (Marina)* by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė (director), Vaiva Grainytė (librettist) and Lina Lapelytė (composer), presented at the Venice Biennale in 2019.³⁶ These artworks, although of different genres, have a similar optical structure or *dispositif* in which the Anthropos looks at itself and (mis)recognizes itself as the real agent of responsibility. For example, the creative documentary *Acid Forest* depicts a colony of cormorants which took over a pine forest in the UNESCO World Heritage Site in the Curonian Spit. The cormorants are destroying the pine forest with their excrement, and thus the documentary can be interpreted as a conflict between two ecosystems: the pine forest and the birds. **[Fig. 1]**



[Fig 1:] Still from the movie *Acid Forest*, directed by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, 2018

35 Creative documentary “Acid Forest”, 2018. <https://neonrealism.lt/acid-forest/> Accessed 5 August 2019.

36 Opera-performance “Sun and Sea (Marina)”, 2019. <https://www.sunandsea.lt/en> Accessed 5 August 2019.

However, the documentary depicts not only trees and birds but also humans who come from all around the world to see this picturesque place. The visitors come to the observation site to see the birds but actually are being observed themselves from the bird's-eye perspective. The camera is literally put into the birds' nest and presents the birds' point of view: humans are seen and heard from a certain distance, and their voices are covered by the birds' noises and cries. Human narratives, blaming the birds for destroying the forest, for eating too much fish, and even for being of black colour, have a comical effect, because they mirror the destructive actions of human themselves. As we realise from a commentary made by a biologist, cormorants are one of the ancient species which used to live on this site long before the pine forest appeared. The pine forest was planted by humans to replace the former oak forest and to stop the moving of sand dunes. Oak trees and cormorants can live in perfect symbiosis; that means that humans themselves have destroyed the ecological equilibrium and now want to restore it by trying to reduce the population of cormorants. It seems that the "anthropological machine" works incessantly, sorting out who may live and who has to die.

The documentary creates an interesting optical structure in which humans coming to the observation site – a kind of *objet trouvé* – are exposed for observation themselves. In 63 minutes of documentary we see the visitors of different ages, genders, races, and nationalities. Observed from a certain distance, from a bird's-eye perspective, humans lack individual features and seem to be like a faceless mass: this creates an effect of desublimation, presenting humans as one of the species among many other species. **[Fig. 2]**



[Fig 2:] Still from the movie *Acid Forest*, directed by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, 2018

In this sense the setting of the film creates the reversed Panopticon: in the Panopticon, described by Foucault, the observer has a central privileged position and can exert his power on the inmates by seeing and observing them, whereas in the case of the documentary, the humans themselves are seen and observed from the birds' perspective. This optical structure precludes the expected cinematic identification on the part of the audience and creates a kind of uncanny experience when humans can observe other humans as a kind of "bare life", as a sort of endangered species. This uncanny effect is supported by the reactions of site visitors, who, unaware of being filmed, often express the feeling of being cast in someone else's film ("it's a film"; "like Hitchcock"). In this sense the documentary creates a model of meta-representation or meta-visibility: if Anthropocene visibility silently presumes that the place from which it represents will remain forever intact, then post-Anthropocene visibility demonstrates that the mechanisms of exclusion and subjection are easily interchangeable and that every living being can potentially become "bare life".

The second artwork is an opera-performance, *Sun and Sea (Marina)* by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė (director), Vaiva Grainytė (librettist) and Lina Lapelytė (composer), presented at the Venice Biennale in 2019. The opera-performance can be observed from a mezzanine gallery above the stage; the stage itself is turned into an artificial sand beach populated with colourful holiday-goers, who are of different ages, genders, races, and physical appearances. [Fig. 3]



[Fig 3:] *Sun & Sea (Marina)*, opera-performance by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė, Lina Lapelytė. The Lithuanian Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2019, Venice. Photo by Andrej Vasilenko

It is important to mention that any registered individual, accompanied by children and pets, can spend some time on the beach together with the opera singers. Thus the performance presents a playful crowd, and, as the libretto unfolds, we are introduced to each character with his/her trivial everyday concerns. However, these trivial narratives give way to themes related to climate emergency, such as the bleaching of corals, the extinction of species, and express the anxiety about the approaching catastrophe. As Miles Evans points out, “frivolous micro-stories on this crowded beach give way to broader, more serious topics and grow into a global symphony, a universal human choir addressing planetary scale issues; tired bodies offering a metonym for a tired planet”.³⁷ The performance presents humans as being exhausted and tired, paralyzed with laziness, immersed into small private pleasures, such as ice cream or a sun tan. However, as Adrian Searle suggests, “threat slowly seeps in, like sun-tan oil. A lament to the eclipse of the world, as the sky and the sea change colour, the reefs bleach and nature dies, this astonishing performance slides into almost unbearable pathos and pain”³⁸. The musical pathos suggests that these could be our last minutes on the Earth before the emergence of global catastrophe.

The opera-performance has a similar structure to the documentary discussed earlier: the opera can be observed from a mezzanine gallery, which, as director Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė points out, was “subconsciously inherited” from the film *Acid Forest*.³⁹ **[Fig. 4]**

This specific architectural *dispositif* – which in this case is not found but intentionally constructed – creates an uncanny effect of a de-familiarised world. The first effect is created by the fact that opera, a quite conventional genre, is literally turned upside down, as the singers perform while lying on the beach, and the audience observes them from above, from a bird’s-eye perspective. This perspective adds another uncanny effect: the stage characters, although having quite distinct individualities, merge into an “anthropological scene”, reminiscent of a big terrarium in an imaginary museum of natural history. Here, again, we have the reversed Panopticon, where humans are not the holders of visibility and power but are themselves subjected to surveillance and thus presented as one of the engendered species. In this respect the “anthropological scene” becomes anthropo-obscene, because it presents human beings as incapable of recognising themselves as the agents of an approaching catastrophe. If Anthropocene

37 Opera-performance “Sun and Sea (Marina)”, 2019. Press Release by Miles Evans. https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1gj5_oeUan6syc06FQIMwcbW-wHhFXZzR Accessed 6 August 2019.

38 Adrian Searle, “Mawkish monuments and the beach from hell: our verdict on the Venice Biennale”, *The Guardian*, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/may/12/mawkish-monuments-beach-from-hell-our-verdict-venice-biennale?fbclid=IwAR3hRMNmo2HFqau-ZBr-koBH1grHprw9zBYyaVNtDSPxLgVes43gfTmTMjw> Accessed 28 October 2019

39 En Liang Khong, “How a Beach Opera at the 58th Venice Biennale Quietly Contends with Climate Change Catastrophe”, *Frieze*, issue 204, 2019. <https://frieze.com/article/how-beach-opera-58th-venice-biennale-quietly-contends-climate-change-catastrophe> Accessed 28 October 2019



[Fig 4:] Sun & Sea (Marina), opera-performance by Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė, Lina Lapelytė. The Lithuanian Pavilion at the Biennale Arte 2019, Venice. Photo by Andrej Vasilenko

visuality had a pacifying effect, presenting human activity as being right, moral, and aesthetic, post-Anthropocene visuality, or reversed visuality, works as a critique of human inactivity and incapacity to react in face of climate emergency.

Both artworks create the “Anthropo-scene” which might look like a democratic place, where performers and visitors of different ages, genders, races, and nationalities can come and participate. The random circulation of visitors, both in the observation site in the documentary *Acid Forest*, and of the participants in the *Sun and Sea (Marina)* performance, deconstructs any privileged position of power and arguably implicates every individual. In this sense the reversed visuality, created by these artworks, comes close to Mirzoeff’s countervisuality, which is a political space, open to every human being who has the right to leave its place of birth allocated by hierarchies and move freely in a democratic space.⁴⁰ However, the equality that these artworks imply is not an equal right to participate in a political space; it’s not an equal distribution of justice. Rather, these artworks imply that every individual is equally subjected to the threat of climate change and

40 We can ask rhetorically if art institutions, such as the Venice Biennale with its idea of national pavilions, can grant such an equality.

can be equally turned into “bare life”. The reversed visibility deconstructs the functioning of the “anthropological machine”, based on exception and exclusion, and reveals that there is no privileged or safe position. It creates a model of meta-representation, which shows that every subject is already subjected to the effects of the Anthropocene and that “bare life” is not an exception but a universal rule. There is no exception to extinction in the New Climatic Regime.

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