

How has humanity's relationship with nature evolved since the modernist era? How are shifting environmental sentiments shown within art, literature and ecological movements? What affect does consumerism have on the future of sustainability?

The collective philosophies of civilisation have undergone countless changes with the passage of time. Throughout the ages the status quo has shifted and moulded to fit within its own period of history and its circumstances. One aspect of the human outlook on life that has drastically changed over the years is our perspective of nature and how, as a species, we treat it. The most recent, and obvious example of this can be seen in the rapid societal shift into the modernist era and subsequently into the current post-modern society. The modernist era saw the environment as something to conquer and there was a general sense of human superiority over nature. Whereas the post-modern sentiment toward nature is a sense of beauty and purity, which has led to many conservationist movements. Within this essay I am going to discuss the changing outlook on the environment shown within creative forms such as art and literature as well as ecological movements and how they influence decision making across the globe. The aim of this essay is to bring attention to the transitional period humanity is in and how our philosophies regarding the environment develop as time progresses.

The modernist era and its citizens' collective ideologies become apparent when considering the creative works from this period in conjunction with historical context. Beginning in the early 1900s, in the height of the industrial revolution; a time in which human progress was the main objective, and through the harvesting of the Earth's natural resources, dominance over nature was sought to be achieved. An example of this notion can be seen throughout the literature of this period such as 'The Great Gatsby,' a novel published by F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925. This book vividly captures the spirit of the Roaring Twenties, a time in which unprecedented economic prosperity occurred within America. The grandiose mansions and parties hosted by characters like Jay Gatsby highlight the conquest of human ambition over the natural landscape and the influence of the wealthy, who have reshaped the environment to suit their desires and aspirations. One quote that highlights this theme in chapter 3, where the narrator describes the landscape of the West Egg: "In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars" (Fitzgerald, 1925, p32). This quote captures the superficiality of the social scene in West Egg, where humanity is superior, and nature is forced to the background. Throughout his portrayal of corruption and excess of the modernist era, Fitzgerald critiques the lack of morality of a society obsessed with material wealth and subsequently raises questions on how this populace views their interactions with the environment.

An example of an artwork that interacts with the theme of economic prosperity, and thus the concept of a dominance and separation from nature, is 'Metropolis,' painted by Otto Dix between 1927 and 1928. This artwork depicts the chaotic social landscape in Germany during the interwar period. It displays the lavish parties of the wealthy elite in juxtaposition with the hardships of the working class, portrayed by the starving veterans and streets rife with prostitution. Due to the lack of specific landmarks that may identify the painting to a specific urban centre, as explained by Kaia L. Magnusen, this artwork can be interpreted as a representation of life within large urban centres. It acts as a portrayal of a generalised metropolis rather than depicting any particular urban centre (Magnusen, 2020.) The idea that this painting represents the wider socioeconomic state of the world, rather than just one isolated instance, leads to the interpretation that Otto Dix was an outlier of sorts during the modernist era, influenced heavily by the hardships of the German people during the interwar

period. He put into focus the problematic ways of the time and showed that this way of life is a result of human social constructs and cannot be seen as natural, which corresponds to the concept of society's overall separation from nature.



While Otto Dix's work highlights the socioeconomic consequences of human progress, Alfred Stieglitz captured the physical alterations of the landscape such as colossal skyscrapers and extensive infrastructure within his vast collection of work depicting the rapid modernisation of New York from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His early photographs from this collection show the small neighbourhoods of Lower Manhattan, such places offer qualities that can be interpreted as inherently human, such as townhouses and horse carriages. (Clegg, date unknown) cites Katherine Hoffman's explanation that Stieglitz presentation of New York City and its smaller neighbourhoods, found within his earlier images can be identifiable as the 'old' New York, much different to the city portrayed within his later works within this collection. Hoffman continues by stating that these later images wherein buildings are comprised of abstract, geometric configurations, brings forth a feeling of coldness as a consequence of rising technology and urbanisation and that these images truly lack a sense of human presence (Hoffman, 2004) The 'coldness' that Hoffman describes within this text not only relates to the direction architecture was heading but can also be correlated to the wider changes humanity was facing at the time. For example, in the case of Otto Dix and his aforementioned artwork, the struggle of the majority juxtaposed by the lavish lifestyle of the wealthy can be seen as representative of a cold relationship between classes. It raises the question of whether this disconnection is a direct example of humanities deviance from a natural way of life, in which all humans share equal opportunities.



Through the passage of time, society's sentiments toward environmental conservation have grown. It could be said that in the Post-modern era, humanity is waking up to face the issues we have created for ourselves and is tearing them down in order to change the trajectory of civilisation as we know it. This reconstruction of societal norms can be seen throughout various ecological and human rights movements. It is as though we are subconsciously recognising how our technological progress has altered our interaction with the natural world, and this has led to a shift in philosophy surrounding the environment. For example, eco-philosopher Timothy Morton explains that the concept of 'the ecological thought' is a means of understanding humanity's interconnectedness with the environment and the complex web of relationships that exist between all living beings and ecosystems. This belief challenges traditional notions of human anthropocentrism, which prioritises human interests and needs above those of other species and the natural world. He states that contemporary economic systems have had a profound impact on the environment, while heavily influencing the way our society thinks. It is not that previous generations inherently possessed ecological awareness, rather the full depth of the 'ecological thought' was beyond the grasp of humanity in the past. He continues by saying that even today, despite the imminent threat of climate catastrophe, we are only beginning to comprehend the complexity of these ecological challenges (Morton, 2012.) These ideas suggest that humanity is approaching a turning point in history, in which the collective is becoming aware of the damage done to our planet and a decision is to be made on whether to allow further harm or to minimise and eventually reverse it.

The post-modern era has seen a rejection of anthropocentrism within much of its art and literature, a concept that prioritises human interests and needs above those of other living beings as well as the natural world itself. One example of this repudiation of human centric values is shown in Patricia Piccinini's artwork 'The Young Family' (2002) a sculpture that depicts a grotesque, human-animal hybrid nursing its young. Looking passed the more obvious feelings of disgust; this piece also expresses a merging of man and nature. It blurs the lines between humanity and the natural world, challenging the idea of human exceptionalism and suggests a more inclusive and interconnected view of humanity within

the ecosystem. Sophie Lally explains that rather than portraying a singular pregnant body, the mother in this piece acts as a metaphor for a community based on caring for one another and one grounded in the maternal. She continues by shifting away from the concept of maternity in the context of pregnancy and birth, rather, towards concepts of growth and restoration, which interlinks maternity with environmental consciousness (Lally, 2017.) It could be said that this idea of restoration and growth is in reference to the growing consensus that our impact on the planet needs to be minimised and that we need to allow it to heal. This in conjunction with the mother's offspring, symbolises our responsibility to create a good life for future generations, urging conscious action to avoid long term consequences of environmental issues.



Photographer Edward Burtynsky uses his imagery to directly capture human intervention on the landscape. His images range from large industrial landscapes to environments, untouched by humans that despite this fact are still affected by our interactions with the natural world. Images such as his large-scale aerial depictions of dried up river beds, once teeming with life act as a stark reminder of humanity's role in reshaping the landscape. His project, 'water' achieves just this. He explains within his artist statement for this project that while humanity struggles to accommodate our growing needs of water, we are having great impact on reshaping the planet. He continues that due to the emergence of our powerful role over the environment, we are now capable of engineering our own demise. He urges us to think about the long-term consequences of our unsustainable actions (Burtynsky, no date.) Through this explanation on the context surrounding this project, it becomes apparent that Burtynsky is inviting viewers to consider the consequences on the natural world and through his striking imagery, he prompts reflection on the fragility of ecosystems and the interconnectedness of all living beings.



In his project 'Anthropocene,' Burtynsky more directly displays the effects of humanity on the natural environment by capturing imagery of large industrial landscapes, showcasing the scale and complexity of our impact. In his artist statement, he explains how it has become apparent that humanity's explosion of population, industry and technological advancements, have in a very short amount of time, has led to us becoming a force of colossal change to the global environment (Burtynsky, no date.) Within this statement, he is alluding to the idea that humanity needs to consider the power we have over the fragile eco-system of our planet. This could suggest that Burtynsky recognises that our species has progressed to the point of separation from nature, and this invites the viewer to contemplate their unsustainable ways.



With shifting sentiments towards the environment within the post-modern era, the activity of the average consumer has been altered. This newfound and ever-increasing ecological consciousness has led to the phenomenon of 'green consumerism,' which in theory

challenges the fundamentally unsustainable practices of traditional consumerism. This outlines that the majority of consumers favour the prioritisation of environmentally friendly and sustainable products rather than less eco-friendly alternatives (Tietenberg and Folmer, 2000.) This shift in consumer patterns reflects society's growing recognition of the environmental consequences of individual purchasing decisions. As a whole, consumers have become much more aware of the ecological issues we face today, and these purchasing choices are a clear signifier of society's values and priorities. With the growing popularity of 'green consumerism,' it has become apparent that the majority of the population desires to align their consumption habits with environmental protection, indicating a cultural shift towards living in harmony with nature. Humanity is currently undergoing a transition, and because of this many challenges arise. Paul Connett highlights the pervasive influence of advertising and mass media, and how it shapes the consumer's behaviour. He also notes that due to the saturation of advertising, particularly on television, a culture of over-consumption has been cultivated (Connett, 2007.) This relentless promotion of materialism due to corporate greed has fuelled a cycle of consumption in excess, which will continue to lead to wastage and damage to the environment.

Taking advantage of the population's good intentions in purchasing environmentally friendly products, the rise of 'greenwashing' has become focal within a large number of corporate agendas. As these companies capitalise on the growing demand for these sustainable products, the risk increases for deceptive marketing practices being used that mislead consumers into believing certain products are more sustainable than they realistically are. This outlines the need for transparency and accountability within the marketplace to ensure that customers can make informed decisions that align with their own values. Although, despite the challenges that we face, 'green consumerism' represents a promising step in creating a sustainable world for future generations. Our ability to choose what we purchase, if combined with a transparent and truthful advertisement of products, gives us the opportunity to cause meaningful change and allows us to contribute to global efforts of environmental preservation. As our civilisation continues to navigate the complex situation regarding environmental sustainability, the role of conscious consumerism will become integral in shaping a harmony between society and the environment.

Humanity's shifting philosophies over the many eras throughout history, have significantly influenced our perspective and treatment of nature. From the modernist era and its collective perception of nature as something to conquer, to the post-modern sentiment of valuing beauty and purity, it is obvious that there has been a substantial and profound evolution of our relationship with the natural world. This evolution has become apparent through the development of our civilisation's various creative forms such as art and literature spanning throughout history. It has led to the ecological movements of the post-modern era and in combination with each other have played a crucial role in shaping societal outlooks and decision-making processes worldwide. In conclusion, while our species navigates these complexities it is paramount that the role of individuals in driving positive change is recognised in order to create a more sustainable future. Through informed decision making, we can address these environmental issues facing our planet and foster a sense of harmony between humanity and nature.

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