

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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This essay will explore the large-scale photographic works of Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky, capturing the theory of the Anthropocene sublime. The sublime evokes a human experience that gives immense power to nature, creating a feeling of awe and terror. The Anthropocene is the new epoch defined by the huge impact that humanity has on this planet. This experience has shifted from natural manifestations to man-made systems, new technologies, and infrastructure. Looking at theories of the sublime from Edmund Burke to modern-day philosophers such as Timothy Morton and Matthew Flisfeder, the central argument that will be explored is how Burtynsky and Gursky reconstruct the sublime to reveal humanity's reshaped bond with our planet. Burtynsky's work focuses on the raw materials and ecological repercussions of manufacturing, extraction, and mass consumerism. Showing environments that are visually captivating, even tho showing signs of ecological scarring on the earth. His work shows the environmental impact that capitalism has etched upon it, creating a feeling of amazement at the achievement of human superiority equal to its devastating Ramifications. Whereas Gursky constructed images that investigate the structural and metaphysical magnitude of worldwide capitalism, stock exchanges, warehouses, and networks of consumerism to which individuals break down, deep into the vast structures that surpass their dominance. Both artists express the Anthropocene sublime in inconsistent circumstances, in which human beings are both the superior force transforming our planet and progressively overpowered by the technological and economic design it has made.

How does the large-scale photography of Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky engage with themes of the Anthropocene sublime?

Introduction

“When I saw the scale of industry, as a young 18-year-old working in these places, “I could tell that if we were going to become this population of all this growth that they were projecting, then all of this was just going to amplify, this all was just going to get bigger and more insane.”

(Burtynsky, 2025)

For as long as nature has been the sublime aesthetic, the sublime has been a visceral encounter with the immeasurable force that seems to exceed perception, the sensation of awe and terror that surpasses all that we know, and which challenges humans' sense of logical process. From Edmund Burke's eighteenth-century notion of the sublime (that which creates fear and wonder) to Romantic artists who sought to place themselves above the world in front of endless spaces and realness, the sublime has long made sense of humanity as almost small and helpless in the face of the immensity of nature (Shaw, 2006, p.6). But the relationship has changed structure in our new era. With the way mankind has reshaped the world and the environment over time, the sublime of the past has undergone some alterations in the Anthropocene. The Anthropocene is a geological epoch in which human activities — through industrialisation, extraction, urbanisation, and global capitalism — have profoundly transformed Earth's ecosystems and geological processes (Pavid, n.d.). In these conditions, the sublime comes in the form not of natural forces above them as usual but of the scale and intensity of man-made infrastructure that is more powerful than nature and remains more stable than nature. New forms of awe and terror have come forth from global

warming, consumption, technological infrastructure, and global economic networks, generating what is called the Anthropocene sublime (Fressoz,2021). This sublime of the modern age expresses a mystery between the power and the helplessness that we feel in relation to the systems that we have designed. This essay will examine how the photographic practices of Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky engage with the Anthropocene sublime through their large-scale images of industrial landscapes, global infrastructure, and capitalist systems. While Burtynsky interrogates the material and environmental consequences of extraction and industrialisation, Gursky treats the metaphysical and structural pressures of global capitalism and the technological system. Both artists reimagine the sublime, reflecting on human actions, their function now, and the feeling of awe, dread, and gross discomfort in the Anthropocene.

The sublime

The sublime was both a theoretical way of thinking about the world and an emotion we perceived in the world around us, a sense of awe and a principle of fear. The feeling you experience when you are on a walk, “struck by the serene beauty of the environment that you are in, from the vast sweep of a spectacular and somehow terrifying mountain range, unable to absorb its full size” (Hall,2025). It is a sense of being overwhelmed by the approaching fear of experiencing the lasting obscurity of the natural forces that surround us as human beings. The Irish Romantic poet, Thomas Moore, recorded his experience of the Niagara Falls in a letter written to his mother in 1804:

I felt as if approaching the very residence of the deity; the tears started into my eyes, and I remained, for moments after we had lost sight of the scene, in that delicious absorption which pious enthusiasm alone can produce. We arrived at the new ladder and descended to the bottom. Here all its awful sublimities rushed full upon me ... my

whole heart and soul ascended towards the divinity in a swell of devout admiration, which I never before experienced. Oh! Bring the atheist here, and he cannot return an atheist! I pity the man who can coldly sit down to write a description of these ineffable wonders: much more do I pity him who can submit them to an admeasurement of gallons and yards ... we must have new combinations of language to describe the Fall of Niagara. (Morley,2010, p.108)

Moore's experience of the Niagara Falls would be called the experience of the sublime, a fresh relevance in the face of the most staggering summits of graphic blasphemy attained in America.

The new romantics' experience of awe and terror, endlessness and sanctitude began to break the proper confines of the early aesthetic structure. As loose and illogical as the affection it attempts to name, the sublime could be expanded to art as well as nature. To which art would look, Sublime landscape painting would become one of the major expressions.

Philosopher Edmund Burke's theory of *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, defined the sublime as an aesthetic effect fruitful of the strongest emotions that the human mind is capable of affection. Burke wrote:

"Whatever is in any sort terrible or is conversant about terrible objects or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime." (Burke,2014)

Artists wanted to invoke the vast power of objects that could overwhelm our reasoning about such enormous landscapes and storms, creating a sense of beauty that was often quite terrifying. Through the natural occurrence and immense scale, artists express the intense emotions they convey in their work, challenging human reason.

The anthropocene sublime is the shift from powerful natural force of nature to the sublime of humanity, looking at humanity's global impact on the natural world from climate change to geological forces, that now becomes the devastating, horrific but can be a fantastic power, creating a relation situation with humans as both the emissary and the issue of this boundless and frequently cataclysmic force. Our relationship with technology has now become our amazement rather than nature. We still find the romantic notion of the sublime but now only the product of mankind's process that shocks us with amazement, but as our technological development has been our main element of capitalist creation, the ideology of the market, our demand that capitalism will always satisfy our need for. That is the terror of technology. The power we created as a race that could lead to the devastating impact upon the ecological ecosystem will lead artists to be influenced and expressive to challenge the new understanding of human reason of the Anthropocene sublime.

The Anthropocene

As human beings, we have reached a new epoch, the Anthropocene, a period in which our activities as a species have become the dominant force on Earth (Davison,2019).

Overwhelmingly, humans have been terraforming the planet "through mining, urbanisation, industrialisation and agriculture" (Burtynsky, n.d.). As the human population continues to grow and consumption continues to change, the existence of technofossils such as plastic, concrete, and other human-made objects will likely be preserved, becoming a permanent trace of our technological civilisation (Carrington,2025).

Philosopher Matthew Flisfeder discusses the humanism of the Anthropocene in his book *The Hysterical Sublime: Humanism in the Age of Posthuman Capitalism*. He discusses when the

rise of the Anthropocene is evident, noting that humanity has a significant, harmful role in shaping the planet and its countless nonhuman occupants. (Flisfeder, 2025, p.21).

The term Posthumanism is often used as an umbrella term for a range of theories and philosophies, as well as for the diverse histories that congeal the facts of being resistant to human distinctiveness or anthropocentrism (human supremacy) (Flisfeder, 2025).

Posthumanism has a historical development and use, but a contempt for anthropocentrism characterises it.

Our planet's sciences refer to our own geological period as the Anthropocene. Posthumanist scholar Rosi Braidotti understands the need to "move beyond anthropocentrism," according to Flisfeder (2025,p.21), which is seen as the central point of modern posthumanist education. However, other scholars, in particular Jane Bennett and Steve Shavero (Flisfeder, 2025, p.21), defend the need for anthropomorphism as a means of avoiding anthropocentrism. The hysterical sublime lets us see mankind today not as anthropocentric, though capitalocentric, reflecting the cultural disagreement of capitalism (Jameson,1991,p.77). On the other hand, human and humanism, more simply put, and their technological impact on both nature and individuals are key to our present historical and empirical impasse. In terms of technology, it can be seen as a design regarding our historical background.

Karl Marx (cited in David, 2010, p.221) describes "Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from those relations." Man transforms nature to meet our needs with the use of technology, thus creating production for life around us, with social relations and structures created by technology and an economically constructed society, which flows from the capitalist ideas that have been built upon.

The sublime and the Anthropocene are related through the background of scale, power, and human limitation. The sublime describes the feelings of awe and terror when we come across natural forces that are beyond human dominance. Mountains and storms are forces that mankind can never truly have power over, forces that are acts of god. However, the Anthropocene, that is, the age of human impact on our planet, invokes similar feelings to the sublime, but the vast and often uncontrollable effects of human actions, such as climate change and ecological breakdown, their connections transfer, nature's power no longer overwhelms our feelings, but our understanding of human actions now functions on a global scale, manufacturing a new discomforting structure of the sublime.

Artist 1- Edward Burtynsky

Edward Burtynsky's large-scale photographic work of manufactured landscapes represents the altered environments created by massive industries that feed the capitalist appetite for material goods and profit, leading to a forever-changed ecosystem and an everlasting impact on the earth's geology from human activity (William,2005). He finds both beauty and repulsiveness in his photographs of mining, plastic waste, consumption, and waste disposal. Rather than condemning the ecological scars left by man on the land, he accepts the discord of humanity's need for economic growth and the importance of safeguarding our fragile ecosystem.

Burtynsky's photographs pull the viewer into the reality of our ravaged earth, and the geographical scale creates an unsettling illusion between beauty and horror, temptation and dread that envelops the viewer.

His photographic project and 2018 documentary, *The Anthropance*, is an investigation into the human influence and the technologies that have affected the natural landscape, and nature has now been altered by industry. The photographic project captures the most

extensive extractions on the planet, to which he has travelled to twenty countries over the past five years, collecting and documenting the immense impact that humans are actively having. Affecting the natural world, as he wrote:

“The world is my subject matter, so I travel wherever the subject is.”

(Burtynsky, 2018)



Figure 1. Edward Burtynsky, 2015 *Coal mine #1*
North Rhine, Westphalia, Germany, Robert Koch Gallery

Figure 1

In Figure 1 of Burtynsky's photograph of a coal mining rig in Germany, Burtynsky shows the might of industry and its mass impact on the need for capital in the pursuit of economic growth and for profit and control over consumption. The image highlights the raw materials that fuel our present-day reality and the devastating environmental cost of their extraction.

The photographs show the sheer power of today's coal mining industry and how much more devastating it can be to the environment. Still, they also show the mechanisms of corporate power that these big industries have over consumerism and capital accumulation.

Philosopher Timothy Morton, in his book *The Hyperobject: Philosophy and Ecology after the end of the world*, wrote:

“Capitalism has unleashed myriad objects upon us in their manifold horror and sparkling splendour.”

(Morton,2013,p.116)

Burtynsky's work shows us our need to consume and obtain as a way of human superiority over nature, and the nonhuman has led to huge industries and corporations that no longer care about the environment we live in, as long as it generates more capital.

However, to the extent that capitalism and humankind are forever changing the environment that we live in, to overindulge in our ever-consuming need for the necessities of life. In Burtynsky's work, he shows the sublime in the devastating landscape created by humankind, which can show the horror of what we as a race are doing to the environment, but also shows the magnificent sheer power of what human superiority can accomplish through the use of technology.

Burtynsky's photographs show us the industrial sublime his breathtaking photographs the awe and terror that can be felt while looking at them as if it we were staring straight out a window witnessing the sheer beauty of what human superiority is capable of, but at the same time feeling the dread and terror of what effect humanity is having on our planet, whatever last impact that we are creating.

The vantage point from which Burtynsky photographed this coal mine in Germany shows the scale of how far technology has come, enabling humanity to mine coal at such a massive scale and to change the landscape year after year. The texture and colour in the photograph convey the sense of this environment as a capitalist wasteland of profit and wealth.



Figure 2. Edward Burtynsky, 2016, *Saw Mills #1*, Lagos, Nigeria, National Gallery of Canada

Figure 2

Figure 2 continues exploring the project of Burtynsky's project of the Anthropocene in this aerial photograph of a saw mill in Nigeria. From the view of his aerial shot Burtynsky has arranged his image to look as if it was a painting, however that is to give the unsettling illusion to show the sheer scale of the mass deforestation that took place in that part of the world. The texture and colour show in the photograph give the sense of awe and beauty that is captured within the photograph, but only to realise the terror that lies in depth within the

image, the colour of decay from the harvested tresses on the land to the murky water. These details show how impactful the saw mill industry is on the environment.

All these environments being affected by the massive ecological effect of humanity can be summed up to one word to describe what all these massively distributed natural resources, Hyperobjects.

According to Morton (2013, p.1), "Hyperobjects refer to things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans". A hyperobject could be a coal mine in Germany or a saw mill in Nigeria. The hyperobject could be the vast totality of all the earth's resources, but it can also be the product of human production, such as plastic, concrete, and other man-made goods, that together sum up the continually moving mechanism of capitalism.

The relevance of this image to the Anthropocene shows that large industrial industries have created a hyperobject that now has a massive impact on natural resources, just to increase profit and economic growth and to maintain their superiority over nature. As for the sublime, it has shown that the sheer power of humanity can transform the natural landscape into a land made for profit and economic growth, creating feelings of awe and dread.

Artist 2 - Andreas Gursky

Andreas Gursky's large-scale digitally manipulated photographic work captures the mass human infrastructure and the global system (Mattei,2024). Gursky's work shows how digital technology and our global economy have changed the systems we live by as humans, becoming dominant within our own industries and public civilisation. Andreas Gurskey once wrote, "I am never interested in the individual, but in the human species and its environment. (Gurskey,2015). Gursky's work creates a visual conversation about the mass of global capitalism and a fascination with consumption and the accelerating pace of extended capitalism.

It could be argued that his goal is to show the contemporary world as it is now. It seems that Gursky has no political point of view or a representative individual; instead, he is fascinated by the world within its manufacturing operations.

His photographs correspond to the tradition of the sublime and romanticism, giving the viewer a rare insight into the workings of the capitalist and consumerist world we live in today on a large scale. This sight can be both pleasant and beautiful to look at, but it is also a shock to the negligence of worldwide capitalism. (Fineartmultiple,2015)

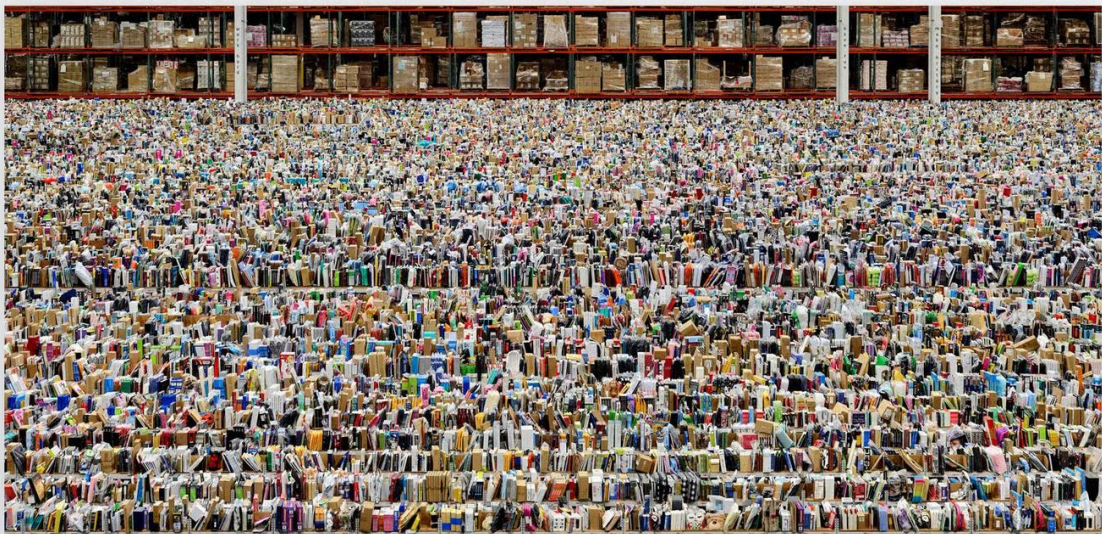


Figure 3. Andreas Gursky,2016, Amazon, Phoenix, Arizona, Sprüth Magers Gallery, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin

Figure 3

Figure 3 is a photograph taken in an Amazon warehouse located in Phoenix, Arizona, in 2016. The image shows endless shelves of the vast Amazon warehouse, filled with tens of thousands of objects ranging from kitchen appliances to sporting goods and books. They are not laid out in any noticeable order; this is due to Amazon's bewildering disorder: it does not

classify its products or arrange them into categories and sections in the warehouse, but instead uses a digital coding system that can track and identify them, rather than characterising a massive warehouse of products (Rugoff, 2018). Amazon illustrates an intense shift in our movement of space and a substantial decrease in the role of our visible insight.

Rugoff, R. (2018) 'Andreas Gursky: four decades', in Fritsch, K. (ed) *Andreas Gursky*. London: Hayward Gallery Publishing

The photograph was taken in multiple shots and then stitched together to show the overall scale of the massive number of products sent out every day, highlighting the ever-growing consumerism affecting the natural world.

The image shows no sign of human intervention, creating an abstraction of the human environment on which capitalism is built. In reference to the sublime, this image conveys the feeling of unease, knowing that massive human consumption takes place in every warehouse worldwide.



Figure 4. Andreas Gursky, 2009, *Chicago Board of Trade III*, Chicago, Hayward Gallery in London

Figure 4 is a 2009 photograph of the Chicago Board of Trade III, depicting the chaotic trading floor and presenting a superrealistic depiction of human activity and industrial might (Sotheby's, 2013). The work explores the disorder of the global capitalism ecosystem. Gursky's photograph shows the sharpness of the image, the busy activity on the floor, and the use of colour, which also adds to the mass scale of chaos shown within the image. Amongst the traders' staples are paper and bank monitors, with traders becoming part of the entire image pattern, which could be a resonant abstract painting (Tate, n.d.). The stock market is a vital and important part of capitalism. It is where farmed goods and natural resources are exchanged around the world to increase profit and well-being within the global economy. The Anthropocene relies on the stock market, as it is where major industries can buy the rights and ownership of major natural raw materials such as coal, oil, timber, and gold, leading these industries to alter the natural environment in search of these raw

materials to increase their economic growth and profits. With technology used to monitor the stock exchange, large industries know whether their investments have affected financial growth, which can lead them to make decisions that have major impacts on the environments they own to maintain their financial growth (Fullerton, 2014). The stock exchange, in relation to the sublime, shows the overwhelming scale of the global economic structures. Market crashes, financial crises, and global financial networks now act as natural forces within the man-made technological sublime.

Conclusion

To conclude, the concept of the sublime has undergone a central change in the period of the Anthropocene, embedded in encounters with the immense power of nature. The sublime has now been reshaped by human technological superiority within the industrial and systems of production. Looking at the large-scale photographic work of Edward Burtynsky and Andreas Gursky, both artists challenge the viewer with vast, disruptive scenes that can bring forth awe and terror, not by the unconscious environments or ravishing natural forces, but by the absolute greatness of humanity's involvement on earth.

Burtynsky's work has identified the phenomenal and environmental results of human activity, as shown by the landscape defaced by deforestation, the removal of vast raw materials, and manufacturing industries. His work shows environments that are both visually beautiful and ecologically devastated by the embodiment of the Anthropocene sublime, by the direct pressure amongst the beauty and the destruction. These photographs reveal humanity's ability to reshape the world to suit its needs on a gigantic scale, while highlighting the delicate ecosystem that supports life. Therefore, the sublime is rooted within Burtyński's work from the raw transformation, where our planet is now a living record of capitalist development and technological supremacy.

On the other hand, Gursky's work captures the Anthropocene sublime in its construct and structure. He represents the stock exchange, the Amazon warehouse, and the international framework, highlighting the vast scale and entanglement of modern capitalism. The economic and technological framework is a human force that is now a rival to nature, with the mass of power and uncertainty. Gursky's work shows how global capitalism works as a sublime force in its own qualities; it has become enormous, unaccountable, and far exceeds control for any individual.

Both artists have demonstrated that the Anthropocene sublime comes from human conflict with the repercussions of humanity's own actions. The large-scale photographs push viewers to figure out the mystery of the power that humanity has over nature, its ability to control and change the earth. At the same time, humanity becomes overwhelmed by the very structure that it had created. Thereby, their work rethinks the sublime for this day and age, moving from nature to humanity's manufactured environments, revealing the ethical and sustainable interference of the existence of the Anthropocene.

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