

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

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’s 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 (Morley,2010, p.108)

“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.”

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." (Tate, n.d.)

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 humanities global impact on the natural world from climate change to geological forces, that now becomes the devastating, Horrific but can be an amazing 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 that mankind produces that shock 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 artist 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). Posthumanism has a historical development and use, but it is characterised by a contempt for anthropocentrism.

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 Shaviro, defend the need for anthropomorphism as a means of avoiding anthropomorphism.

The hysterical sublime lets us see mankind today not as anthropocentric, though capitalocentric, reflecting the cultural disagreement of capitalism. 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 describes this in his footnote on Machines and Large-scale Industry in A Companion to Marx's Capital, chapter eight, "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."(David,2010,p.221)

Integrating nature and culture has become decentering for the humanist subject, as the sight of human-animal dualism obstructs ethical guidance on the treatment of non-human animals and a resistance to accepting human excellence.

The human domain focuses on specific human actions and limitations in relation to the figure and its technological

Edward Burtynsky's large-scale photographic work of these 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. 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 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 20 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)

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

Figure 2 continues exploring the project of Burtynsky's project of the Anthropocene, this photograph of a saw mill in Nigeria was an 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 benign 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 total of all of the earth's resources, but yet it can be the product of human produce good such as plastic, concrete and other man made goods that can sum up the continually moving mechanism of capitalism.



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

Andreas Gursky's large-scale digitally manipulated photographic work captures the mass human infrastructure and the global system. 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. 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.

His goal is to show the contemporary world as it is now. 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 pleasant and beautiful to look at, but it is also the shock of the negligence of worldwide capitalism.

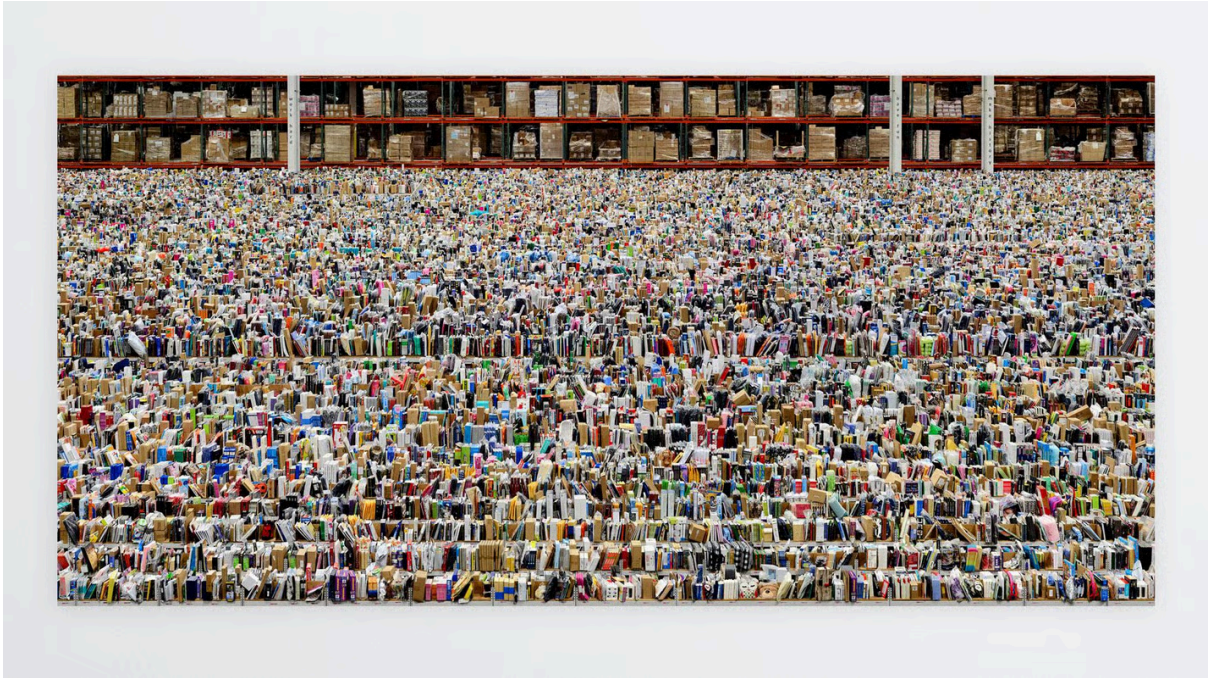


Figure 3. Andreas Gursky, 2016, Amazon, Phoenix, Arizona, Sprüth Magers Gallery, Los Angeles, London, and Berlin