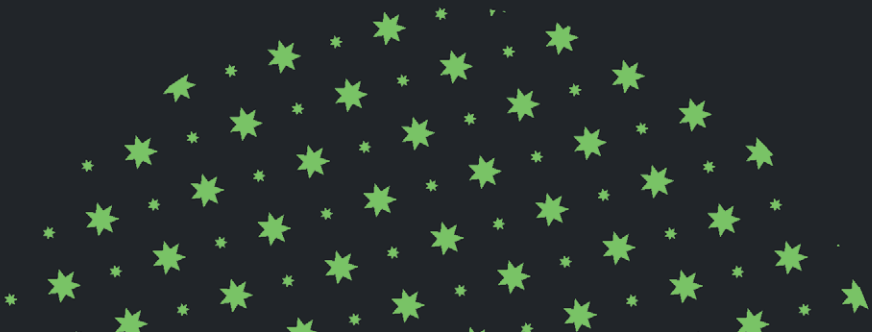




EMERALD POINTS

**THE
ANTHROPOCENE
AND POPULAR
CULTURE**

LEE BARRON



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THE ANTHROPOCENE AND POPULAR CULTURE

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION: IMAGINING THE ANTHROPOCENE

While the Anthropocene has not yet been formally ratified as a distinctive geological epoch, it is a concept that has become a culturally significant one. The conjoining of the Greek word for “humans,” anthropos, and cene, from kainos, the Greek word for “new” has created the concept of the Anthropocene, otherwise known as: “the new epoch of humans” (Schwägerl, 2014, p. 10). The Anthropocene, therefore, arguably represents a new condition of the world that has been dubbed “the age of humanity” (Merchant, 2020, p. 1), a period in which humans have become a “planetary force” (Ejsing, 2023, p. 243) to the extent that human activity constitutes “a new geological layer” (Blok, 2017, p. 139) that represents “a new phase in the history of the Earth, when natural forces and human forces [have become] intertwined” (Wark, 2016, p. xii). In the face of human-made phenomena, the scale of which it is argued, thanks to the enormous energy levels permanently expended by human settlements that rivals the natural power of volcanos and tsunamis and sees the environment transforming powers of humans compared to the force of plate tectonics (Latour, 2017), it is perceived to be an entirely new geological age initiated by the actions of humans. While uneven levels of power and the use of technologies and resources across the world means that the causes (and consequences) of human environmental effects have not been universally created and its effects universally experienced in the same ways (Malm & Hornborg, 2014), nevertheless, as Will Steffen, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill describe it:

The term Anthropocene... suggests that the Earth has now left its natural geological epoch, the present interglacial state called the Holocene. Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary terra incognita. The Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state. (2007, p. 614)

The Anthropocene, then, describes the extent to which humans have become so powerful as a species that they have ushered in an entirely new geological era due to fundamental (and potentially disastrous) changes made to the planet, alternations can be read in the geological strata of the Earth. Yet, while a fundamentally scientific and geological concept, it has become integrated into wider fields. For instance, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the Anthropocene is “perhaps the only term of geological periodization that has been widely debated among humanist scholars with no formal training in stratigraphy, the branch of geology concerned with the ordering of earthly strata and their relationship to geological time” (2018, p. 5). While the debates concerning the nature (and ultimate confirmation of) the Anthropocene were, and remain, rooted in the discipline of geology, in the view of the anthropologist Anna Tsing, it has been artists who have played a pivotal role as the “first outside of the natural sciences to bring the idea of the Anthropocene to public attention” (Tsing & Lassila, 2017, p. 26). In this context, there have been a range of art projects created to reflect and communicate the nature and potential consequences of the Anthropocene, from Alexis Rockman’s paintings, such as *Manifest Destiny*, that depicts a flood-engulfed New York that has “rendered the metropolis a semitropical water world” (Marsh, 2017, p. 109), to digital projects like *Dear Climate*, designed to enable individuals to engage with climate change (Anderson, 2015). Alternatively, Angela Tiatia’s art video installation, *Holding On*, saw the artist constantly rocked by waves on a concrete platform in the Pacific Ocean to visually communicate the threat of rising sea levels for Pacific islanders (Ballard, 2021).

In the field of photography, Monira Al Qadiri’s *Deep Float* captures hands emerging from an oil-filled bathtub to signal the Gulf States’ economic reliance on oil production (Fowkes & Fowkes, 2022). Alternatively, the photojournalist George Steinmetz has employed paraglider wings and remotely piloted drones to capture scenes of deforestation, the impact of the fossil fuel industry, city expansion, industrial air pollution, and rising sea levels to photographically document the degree to which such human effects represent the beginning of the Anthropocene (Steinmetz & Revkin, 2020). Similarly, Jamie Krise and Elizabeth Ellsworth (2015) have produced images of ice, water, and landscapes to explore and illustrate geological change, while Joanna Zylińska’s *Nonhuman Photography* uses drones to create aerial views that document environmental changes, Gideon Mandel’s photographic work captures the impact of flooding in Europe, the Americas, Asia, and Australia, and the short film of Tomonari Nishikawa documents the invisible presence but manifest effects of radiation in the wake of the Fukushima nuclear meltdown in 2011 (Braeunert, 2023). Furthermore, graffiti street art has been used to represent

engaging modes of public communication of the challenges of living in the era of the Anthropocene whereby “inscriptions on neighborhood walls are seen as signs of life” (Iverson, 2015, p. 78).

However, it is not only art in which images and understandings of this proposed human-influenced epoch are present, as Andrew McGregor and Donna Houston observe of the idea and the status of the Anthropocene:

The concept is unproved and controversial, with scientific investigations ongoing; however, almost irrespective of the outcomes of such enquiry, the concept of the Anthropocene is developing a social and political life of its own, becoming an increasingly recognised and influential concept within academia and popular culture. (2017, p. 3)

For Sy Taffel (2016a), media has directly and physically contributed to the geologically present seam of technofossils in the form of discarded plastics (such as CDs, MiniDiscs, DVDs and Blu-rays) that will ultimately become geological objects and that will become part of the planet’s future stratigraphic strata, and so becoming a contributing element in validating the Anthropocene. However, the content of media and popular culture has also produced a rich collection of discourses in terms of fiction, film, television, social media, celebrity voices, and music that critically explores the beginnings, nature, forms, effects, and potential future aftermaths of the Anthropocene as climate change and the Anthropocene has “climbed out of academic discourse and into the popular imagination” (Wallace-Wells, 2019, p. 20). Yet, the power of imagination, as both a means of understanding the nature and potentials of the Anthropocene and how its effects may be mitigated is a factor that is argued by Tony Fry (from the perspective of methodologies of design inspiration and practice) to be an important, if not crucial, mode of action and change to counter processes of environmental damage (2009, 2011). Fry argues that such impact predates the Industrial Revolution, but it has intensified in scale and destructiveness as industrial society matured and it has been intensified by technological advances, factors which need to be reevaluated and countered by new design and social organizational strategies if a vital condition of “sustainability” is to be reached and the excesses of the “anthropocentric miasma” (2017, p. 4) curbed. In terms of understanding and acting upon this condition, Fry argues in *Writing Design Fiction* that climate change created by human activity from both the past and the present is a factor that affects all life on the planet, and in terms of envisioning design-driven responses and potential solutions to the adverse impacts and future consequences of the Anthropocene, speculation and the analysis of fictional representations of environmental and

societal factors is a crucial tool. In this regard, the consideration of “what if” scenarios can (and do) provide plausible visions (based on present conditions) of potential futures, risks, and trends, whether in the form of utopic or dystopic creative narratives. In this way, fiction:

[Needs] to be understood as a contribution of the means to be able to discover and explore appropriate pathways to ethically futural action...It can be deployed to explore the acuteness of a crisis in order to directly critically respond with a mode of imagination and modes of action that may (or may not) offer forms of adaptation or 'solutions'. (2022, p. 14)

Speculative design fiction can enable the discovery of pathways to alternative ethical futures and can act as a stimulus to relate to reality and engage with cultural and social factors, whereby inspiration can be found in cinematic and fictional worlds that establish cautionary tales (Dunne & Raby, 2013). In considering the ways in which popular culture creates a myriad of “what if” scenarios, John Green, in *The Anthropocene Reviewed*, states that through “the rich world of imagination, we’ve seen apocalypses large and small” (2023, p.19) and from this perspective *The Anthropocene and Popular Culture* draws on Fry’s value of speculative analysis. This is because it considers a range of discourses that imagine such scenarios that present imaginings of an Anthropocene that is a manifestation of the planet’s “inability to absorb more human abuse” (Rockström, 2022, p. 32) and that the point of irreversible climatic tipping points has been reached. As such, these arguments and perceptions of a world that has, or is close to, shifting away from the Holocene period and into disastrous climate futures will be explored through the cultural imagination, from optimistic stories of societies pulling back from climatically disastrous tipping points and media-driven warnings of the need for immediate environmental human change, to the nihilistic and potentially catastrophic endpoints for much of the life on Earth as a result of the forces unleashed by the Anthropocene. As Jonathan Elmore stresses in *Fiction and the Sixth Extinction*, there is an urgency for stories in the current era to the extent that climate-inspired science fiction novels may be the most important tool available for understanding and surviving the Anthropocene (2020, p. 3). Fictional representations of the human-impacted world, therefore, form a potent set of narratives to understand and even pave (or at least indicate) the way, from the perspective of speculative design thinking and practice to a viable post-Anthropocene world. Yet, whether grounded in scientific reality or the product of creative imagination, popular culture is now replete with stories articulating environmental crisis, all of which (in differing ways) illustrate,

visualize, inform, and interrogate the concept of the Anthropocene and so provide a series of accessible and engaging portals with which to understand this concept from a myriad of different perspectives.

In terms of structure and thematic approach, *The Anthropocene and Popular Culture* draws on an array of approaches to the Anthropocene, using sociology, literary theory, philosophy, environmental studies, geology, history, film, and media to interrogate environmental change (and crisis) through the lens of various kinds of fictional stories and storytelling. In terms of the structure of the book, Chapter 1 sets out the foundations of what the Anthropocene means, its development and potential future trajectories for the Earth and human and biodiverse life and critically surveys the differing arguments as to when this new geological epoch arguably began. The beginnings of the Anthropocene vary from the first use of fire by humans in the Pleistocene Epoch and the subsequent Megafauna Extinctions (that occurred between 50,000 and 100,000 years ago) to the immediate aftermath of the colonization of the “New World” in 1492 (establishing the world trade system known as the Colombian Exchange). However, prominent Anthropocene theorists such as Paul A. Crutzen posit that the Anthropocene resulted from the impact (and continued effect) of the Industrial Revolution and its reliance on fossil fuels, from 1760, while others cite that the new human-based epoch was initiated as part of the 20th century’s Great Acceleration, and was initiated on Monday, July 16, 1945, the date of the first atomic bomb detonation in the New Mexico desert, whereby radioactive isotopes from the explosion entered Earth’s sedimentary record. While considering alternative terms to capture the nature of the Anthropocene (such as the Capitalocene, Chthulucene, or Technocene) and its accumulated effects of climate change (desertification, ocean acidification, and sea rises), the chapter forms the foundation for explaining the fundamental nature of the Anthropocene, a condition that while, as Nigel Clark states, “we may have yet to witness the Anthropocene’s full unfurling” (2014, p. 23), has been represented and explored in various forms of popular culture.

Chapter 2 explores the Anthropocene from the perspective of fiction and looks at differing perceptions, impacts, and speculations of the origins of the Anthropocene and what its future effects could be on the planet and how humans might respond. As such, the chapter considers fictional discussions of the early human harnessing of fire and the human effects of the conquest of the Americas, to novels that examine the early effects on the world and on humans of industrialization and the impact of fossil fuel extraction (novels such as Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times*, Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*, Émile Zola’s *Germinal*, and Upton Sinclair’s *Oil!* (1926)). More expansively, the

chapter takes a speculative exploration of what the ultimate impacts of the world of the Anthropocene could be, from climate changed landscapes, overpopulation, bioengineered worlds, flooded cities, new temperate zones, to genetic experimentations, global climate-driven catastrophes, and geo-engineering solutions that capture the differing inception points for the Anthropocene, and its current and potential futures.

Chapter 3 surveys differing perspectives on the Anthropocene that reflect the key tenets of the differing arguments, explanations, and future visions of what will/may happen to the planet and human society from the perspective of film. The chapter covers popular and well-less covered films that deal with differing aspects of the Anthropocene and its potential inception points, such as the impact of the discovery of fire and its environmental/human impact, representations of the era of the Columbia Exchange, and films that depict the transformative impact of fossil fuels. In terms of explorations of the Great Acceleration, the chapter covers the effects of nuclear testing, how humans react to changing environmental conditions, rising sea levels, and human-destroyed natural worlds, in addition to counter-Anthropocene measures, such as geoengineering. In this context, the chapter discusses films as varied as *Quest for Fire*, *Apocalypto*, *There Will Be Blood*, *Godzilla Minus One*, *Oppenheimer*, *Waterworld*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Snowpiercer*, *Blade Runner 2049*, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, *Ready Player One*, *Aniara*, *Restart the Earth*, *Reminiscence*, *Geostorm*, and *Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*. From this perspective, the forces of the Anthropocene (its effects and potential responses to it) now have a series of films that visualize the differing components of the Anthropocene.

Chapter 4 examines media representations of the Anthropocene in two different ways relating to television, streaming content, and documentaries that explore the arguments that humans have had a decisive impact on the planet, to the point of leaving geological traces. Firstly, the chapter looks at television/drama serials that reflect aspects of the Anthropocene (such as *Years and Years*, *Chernobyl*, *Twin Peaks: The Return*, *Fortitude*, *The Swarm*, *The Last of Us*, and *Fallout*), then considers major documentaries that range from *An Inconvenient Truth* to *Anthropocene: The Human Epoch* and *Planet of the Humans* that raise a range of critical points of discussion of human-created environmental change. Finally, the chapter examines the impact on Anthropocene awareness via the influence of “eco-celebrities”, such as Greta Thunberg, Al Gore, and Leonardo Di Caprio, to explore the ways in which celebrity culture can play a role in the communication of environmental change and stress the message of the impact of the Anthropocene in the context of popular culture and media.

Chapter 5 considers the Anthropocene in the context of popular music, firstly discussing the impact of the music industry in terms of its carbon footprint with regard to the environmental costs of touring and merchandize that can contribute to landfill and explores how, in this context, artists (such as Coldplay and K-pop bands and fan groups) are taking concrete steps to minimize the environmental impact of touring, such as employing recycling and carbon reduction processes, and embracing new green technologies. Hence, the chapter will stress that popular music not only articulates ideas and messages concerning the Anthropocene and human-created ecological and environmental impacts but can play an active role in mitigating climate change and the environmental impacts of the industry. Secondly, the chapter examines instances of performers and bands that have addressed environmental concerns, such as Joni Mitchell, Marvin Gaye, The Beach Boys, Neil Young, and Billie Eilish, to those that have specifically cited the Anthropocene, such as Nick Cave & The Bad Seeds, Grimes, and OMD. The chapter also has a substantive focus on extreme metal bands such as Botanist and especially the American deathgrind band Cattle Decapitation in relation to their “Anthropocene trilogy” of albums: *The Anthropocene Extinction*, *Death Atlas*, and *Terrasite*, all of which explicitly address the Anthropocene in their lyrics and imagery and which consider differing elements of the current impact (and potential future) of a human-influenced Earth.

As Ian Angus (2015) argues, the concept of the “Anthropocene” was one that was largely unrecognized in popular discourse some two decades ago, but it is now established as an increasingly visible concept across the fields of academia and news reportage in relation to climate change, but also in many differing domains of popular culture, to the extent that it reaches from geological debate and investigation and the forefront of academic conferences to its articulation in novels, film, media, and even heavy metal albums. It is from this perspective that *The Anthropocene and Popular Culture* interrogates and critically illustrates this concept from the perspective of cultural “what if” imaginings that speculate on but also evocatively communicate the impact and potential catastrophic endpoint of human-driven environmental transformation that is the Anthropocene.

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