

“Like watching a movie”: Notes on the possibilities of art in the Anthropocene

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ABSTRACT:

This paper highlights a central problem of representation within the Anthropocene: the difficulty of representing the effects of human activity on the planet. Such impacts take place at temporal and physical scales that challenge human perception: the slow leeching and accretion of toxins invisible to the human eye, the gradual accumulation of micro-fibers and plastics in oceans and beaches, the species die-offs of the Sixth Extinction, shifts in climate, weather patterns, and other global systems, and so on. These incremental changes remain largely invisible to the general population, due in part to our increasingly spectacular media landscapes. Drawing on the work of Rob Nixon, we examine one example of Anthropogenic violence—the largest natural disaster in Canada’s history, a forest fire in the northern Albertan city of Fort McMurray—for the ways it became framed as a cinematic event, short-lived, contained, and divorced from its context within a warming climate. In contrast to the spectacular cinematic framing of Anthropocene events like this one, we look to contemporary video and installation art for models of different ways of representing and understanding the less easily grasped impacts of the Anthropocene.

BIO:

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Introduction

On May 7th, 2016, the *St. Albert Gazette* ran a cover story on the forest fire in northern Alberta, Canada that caused the evacuation of the town of Fort McMurray and environs. Below a photograph of a billowing pyrocumulus cloud blocking out the sky, the header reads: "It was like watching a movie." Halfway into the article, the evacuee expands on his description: "'It was like watching a movie,' he said. 'Smoke everywhere, you're seeing people walking down the road with their kids and a gas can, looking for gas...ambulances and fire trucks going everywhere'" (Paterson 2016). The fire was like a

movie, then, and a specific type of movie at that. The language resonates with the genres of disaster, of science fiction, of apocalypse and dystopia, in which the trappings of civilization have been ripped away, and individuals are left on their own to seek out the barest of necessities: fuel, family members, and so on. From this spare description, the conventions of the film seem readily apparent, part *The Road* and part *Armageddon*.

And of course, for those 80,000 individuals forced to flee, this was a kind of apocalypse, as homes and possession were destroyed, by fire or water or smoke or the pollution that comes from modern subdivisions going up in flames. “The Beast,” as the Canadian media nicknamed the fire, was active around the town for almost a month, and although it retreated northeast by mid-June, it is still burning nearly a year later, having overwintered below ground in the peat, moss, and dirt of the boreal forest (Quinlan 2017: np). At its height the fire consumed 1.5 million acres of land. All told, the fire’s damages have been estimated at nearly 10 billion dollars Canadian in direct and indirect costs, and will likely go higher (Weber 2017: np); the Fort McMurray forest fire is the most expensive natural disaster in Canada’s history.

We are struck by the phrasing of this description of the fire; “like watching a movie” captures, we thought, something important about the ways in which, we as a society, have been responding to natural disasters within an era of pandemic climate change. For all its flat banality, the phrase signals a certain way of seeing, and hence of relating to, the catastrophic impacts of what has come in the last decade to be called the “Anthropocene.” That is, the genre that it implies—contemporary action films of various types—indicates a form of understanding, one predicated on a specific duration, descriptive arc, character types, mode of consumption, and narrative closure. This phrase

contains latent within it an aesthetic and ethics of the spectacular: apolitical (in the sense of maintaining the status quo); idealist (cut off from the material histories that made such an event more likely); individualized (rather than social or structural); and atemporal (existing as a kind of non-event outside of time, with no history or future). Framing an extreme event such as this outside of its climatic context (global warming increases the likelihood and severity of wildfires), framing it as spectacle, makes it all the easier to ignore the decidedly non-spectacular causes and effects of that context. This is a serious problem, if we are to confront the changing conditions of life in the Anthropocene: the spectacle-events of climate change and global warming captivate our attention, making it more difficult to focus on all those effects that are less visually arresting, or even visible.

Why connect this natural disaster, among so many, to issues of representation raised by and in this new epoch? Its location, for one. Fort McMurray sits roughly 400 kilometres north of Edmonton, the province of Alberta's capital city, and acts as key site for the development and expansion of the Athabasca tar sands; these deposits are the largest in Canada, containing roughly 166 billion barrels worth of extractable oil in the form of crude and crude bitumen (Alberta Energy Regulator, 2016: 4). Alberta's tar sands development are regularly singled out by environmental groups within North America and globally as a major source of air and water pollution, and a significant contributor to process of global warming. According to a 2013 report in *Scientific American*, each barrel of oil produced out of the tar sands emits between 79 and 116 kilograms of greenhouse gas (depending on the type of extraction process used), "roughly 14 percent more...than the average oil used in the U.S." (np). Fort McMurray's population, economy, and demographics have therefore been primarily driven by tar sands

development and extraction. It was perhaps unsurprising, then, that the fire instigated a public debate about its links to climate change, and the culpability of the city in contributing to global warming--and hence, to the increased likelihood of disasters like the fire. On the one side of the debate stood those who saw any such links as disingenuous at best, and politicizing a disaster at worst; on the other, those convinced that the tar sands projects directly contribute to global warming, which in turn leads to more common, and more intense, forest fires.

Encapsulated in this throw-away phrase, then, we can discern a larger problem of representation, one highlighted in recent theoretical works on the Anthropocene. Rob Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, and Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*, seem particularly resonant here. The introduction to Nixon's work lays out this problematic with a sharply pointed question:

in an age when the media venerate the spectacular...how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow making and long in the making...that are anonymous and star nobody...that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?
(2011: 3)

While Nixon poses this question in the context of postcolonial literatures and environmental activism, to tease out the interrelations between them, this question seems especially pertinent in the context of the current study. The view of Fort McMurray-as-spectacle implied by comparing it to a movie brackets out everything that doesn't fit within a filmic frame, eliding spatial and temporal scales, the history of tar sands production and of Fort McMurray itself, along with the material impacts left behind by

the fire: the pollution caused by the burning of modern homes; the impacts on infrastructures, both physical and social; the cardiovascular issues and instances of PTSD now cropping in residents and first responders alike; and so on. None of these fit within the frame of the film, either too large or small in scope and importance for an action film. Indeed, the simile of “like watching” seems to emphasize the issues with such framing, at once creating an equivalence between film and event to reduce the latter’s importance—exactly like a movie, and only a movie, untethered from its larger import or meaning—while at the same time suggesting a certain passivity.

As Haraway has commented in her recent work, the scale of the stories we tell ourselves matters: too big, and they can overwhelm us, breeding fatalism and nihilistic self-destruction; too small, and they seem unimportant, and can just easily breed either acceptance or ignorance, neither of which seem likely to generate action. This simile diminishes the story of the Fort McMurray fire in both ways, shutting down possibilities for thought and action by positioning its representation within a story that is too big (the generic form of the apocalyptic disaster narrative, in which the end, after all, is already determined in advance), and too small (only a spectacle happening to others, nothing to get too worried about), in which participants in the larger story of the Anthropocene (that is, all humans) become passive viewers cut off from any specific Anthropocene event. Further, it becomes a once in a lifetime event for those directly affected, something that took place outside of their everyday, ‘real’ life, and can easily be turned into a story deployed again and again rather than something with which to grapple.

This mapping of event onto film speaks to an inability or refusal to cognitively map our current situation within a story that is large enough to impel action, yet small

enough to dispel paralysis. As Haraway puts it (consciously echoing the words of anthropologist Marilyn Strathern), “it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories” (Haraway 2013: np). The types of stories we tell ourselves, the materials we use to build our stories, and how we build them, impact the new types of stories that we can be able to tell, and the stories, materials, and generic forms made available through this spectacle’s apocalyptic action seem poorly designed to generate new stories that will lead to greater flourishing.

What, then, is to be done? How can we combat the spatio-temporal closure Nixon identifies in the contemporary spectacle of certain symptoms of climate change? How can we identify, tell, and create stories that are “just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges open and greedy for surprising new and old connections” (Haraway 2015: 260)? While we don’t have any easy answers to these questions, we want to suggest that this is a place in which contemporary art has a role to play.

Art, we contend, particularly works that trouble audience expectations of scale and narrative, holds out the possibility of undoing the simplistic cognitive mapping the ways that subject position themselves in relation to the larger social totality, or in this case fail to do so, we see in the example of Fort McMurray. The inability to cognitively process a disaster at the scale of Fort McMurray without aid of representation, in this case an easily identified film genre, is where art within the Anthropocene becomes a generative lens through which to situate ourselves at both the macro and micro levels. With the Anthropocene, we must confront the scope of both the temporal and spatial scales, and of a systems complexity with which our cognitive faculties have difficulty grappling. For thousands of years, humans have employed artistic media to deal with

scales that would otherwise escape our powers of representation. The cave paintings of Lascaux, for example, now 17,000 years old, span across hundred of generations of humans, mapping out relationships between environment, migration, community, and spirituality. Or, from a different cultural context, the paintings, sculpture, stone arrangements, stories, and string-figure traditions of indigenous Australian groups, used for millennia to engage with Altjira (generally translated as “Dreamtime”), to navigate and interact with the environment, and to inform all aspects of life in a holistic way. In examples such as these, art provides a way to calibrate human sensoria and faculties beyond their everyday functions.

The difficulty with art, something often seen within the apocalyptic film genre, is that it can try to represent too much, it can tell too big of a story, while, on the other hand, our individual senses can tell too small a story. Telling too big (or too small) a story leaves out many of the complexities, textures, and richness that should be the generative fodder we use to make new connections, potentials, and futures. When things become spectacular they limit their ability to become practical and usable, and, instead, become narratological and predictable. Art, then, must try and tell stories that are just big enough, as to have the possibility of breaking this narratological thinking, and open up new spaces for perception and thinking. Visual art, and particularly time-based art, has the dual ability to tell stories that are just big enough and also challenge the unthought types of narrative thinking suggested by the comparison that living in the Anthropocene is akin to viewing a Hollywood film. We want to turn, now, to two examples of contemporary art that may prove exemplary in the ways that they perform such a duality, Charles Stankievech’s 2013 film *The Soniferous Æther* and Pierre Huyghe’s *Untilled*, a landscape

installation or biotope constructed for dOCUMENTA 13 in 2012. The two works offer, we suggest, new ways of thinking stories, and call into question the passivity of more spectacular narratives, and the too-easy narrativization of both apocalyptic and utopian visions.

We chose these two works for a number of reasons, in terms of their content, their formal qualities, and their methods of production. First, both pieces are deeply invested in thinking through and representing landscapes; they both deploy specific environments (Canada's arctic and the compost site of a Baroque garden, respectively) in ways that call into question traditional ways of thinking about landscape, or nature more broadly. Each engages with its site as a central aspect of the conditions of its production, so that the specificity of the landscape drives the process of artistic creation. Second, both works directly challenge the too-easy closure presented by the simile discussed above, by inviting viewer to consider environments and connections that extend beyond the frame of works themselves, or beyond the scope of human perception. Third, both pieces operate as forms of anti-narratives, and call into question the anthropocentrism of traditional narrative as such, by rendering intelligible human finitude, on the one hand, and the interconnectedness of the world beyond humanity. *The Soniferous Æther* foregrounds problems of spatial and temporal scale, while *Untilled* highlights the difficulty of making meaning in interconnected and complex systems, developing a logic of compost (rather than composition) to resist the power of the spectacle and undercut the anthropocentric ground from which all spectacular modes of representation ultimately spring. The two, we want to suggest, offer us new and striking images of the Anthropocene, a form of imagery missing from anything watched "like a movie."

The Soniferous Æther (2013), Charles Stankievech

First exhibited at the Ottawa Art Gallery in 2013 by Canadian artist Charles Stankievech, *The Soniferous Æther of The Land Beyond The Land Beyond* (TSA) is a 10-minute film captured in the most northernmost settlement on Earth—CFS Alert Signals Intelligence Station. Stankievech completed a residency there as part of his fieldwork around architectures embedded within the landscape. The film comprises a series of computer-controlled timelapse vignettes of the frozen landscape, buildings, and, later in the film, inside the facility itself. The shots are devoid of humans, populated instead by their traces: frozen machines, buildings pouring out steam and artificial light, and the interiors of bowling alleys, hallways, and workstations.

In this sense, we see the film as a kind of pseudo-post-apocalypse, in a similar vein as recent works of “science fiction,” a genre of texts that “depict the world after...extinction of the human race” (Bellamy and Szeman, 2014: 193) by extrapolating contemporary scientific facts and projections with science-fictional interpretations of possible future outcomes. Unlike the apocalypse suggested by the Fort McMurray fire, however, or other, more didactic texts in the genre, Stankievech’s science-fictional film resists narrative closure, and indeed, eschews explicit narrative completely. Where the spectacle of apocalyptic film tends to limit the need for viewer engagement, providing a kind of implicit script by virtue of their generic and narrative conventions that close off the need for critical thought, TSA renders viewers bereft of such clues, obliging them to generate meaning on their own.

The film begins with a strobing light and a piercing acoustic pulse, immediately unmooring the viewer, then cutting to a slow rotation of the sky centered on a static

Northstar with the rest of the cosmos being dragged around it. Slowly, a voice lifted from shortwave broadcasts begins speaking repetitive signal- and code-words with Cold War precision, joined by the slow oscillation of a high-pitched frequency, distorted sounds recorded on location, and a remixed loop of Glenn Gould performing Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, slowly morphing to create a rich and otherworldly soundscape. The film cuts from shot to shot, not staying on any landscape for long; but the combination of the slow computer-controlled pan and time lapse makes each shot of this frozen landscape seem to escape temporal closure—this terrain, after all, has remained relatively static since the last ice age. Without any visible beings to act as our stand-in, we are left only with the slow crawl of the camera to provide footing. However, there is no agency in this position, just an incessant, pushing movement that places us in a new temporal geography, which draws attention to the stretching geological and cosmological scale of a place that seems to exist without beginning or perceivable end. This polar cap, our most northern settlement, is not just a focal point for physically witnessing climate change within our human physiological and generational time scales, but provides a slowly crawling vision of a landscape devoid of life, filled with the detritus of civilization and haunted by the spectre of human habitation.

The film operates, then, in the tradition of Canadian landscape art found in the paintings of Emily Carr, Tom Thomson, and the Group of Seven, but also in the often anxiety-ridden works of Canadian landscape fictions, beginning with the works of Susanna Moodie in the 1830s and continuing through the Confederation poets to the present. Stankievec's landscapes, though, call into question the separation and conflict between the human and the environment that weighed heavily on works like Moodie's

Roughing it in the Bush, and eschew any hint of the fantasy promulgated by the Group of Seven of the landscape as a kind of blank slate. Here, we see instead the landscape from the other side of civilization: not presented as a *terra nullius* open to colonization, settlement, and technological manipulation, but rather as both inextricably linked with the civilization that entered it, and enigmatic, even hostile to habitation.

The film also refuses to engage in another project of the Group of Seven, the Confederation poets, and other artists drawing on the Canadian landscape: the creation of a distinct national identity. TSA works against any such attempt at spatial closure. The starkly lit and bleak landscape resists integration into the narrative nationality and place, appearing as an anonymous, alien space uninterested in the concerns of human politics; indeed, some of the slow panning shots of the icy ground share a similar aesthetic to images of lunar or Martian landscapes. Coupled with the night sky stretching down to touch the horizon in all directions, this has the effect of further uncutting the stability of place: the film, it seems, might as well have been shot at an abandoned extraterrestrial outpost as on planet earth.

Stankieveh talks about the landscape of TSA as an ““embedded”” one, which “shapes us as much as we shape it” (Wlusek and Stankieveh, 2013: np), and it is in this reciprocal shaping that we identify a further difference between TSA and the film suggested by our opening simile. TSA draws the viewer into contemplating, and hopefully wrestling with, the complexities of meaning-making in an era where humanity and the environment have become co-constitutive to a never-before experienced degree. The more spectacular movie, in contrast, closes off such contemplation, cropping out the broader connections between event and viewer, landscape and human, film and critical

engagement, and thereby reducing the problem(s) of the Anthropocene “to an apocalyptic fantasy of human finitude [and] world finitude” contained in a manageable, if terrible, event like the Fort McMurray fire (Emmelhainz, 2015: np.).

The materiality of film is also of interest, something often not readily considered in this medium, since it too will gradually decay with each showing. The work is transferred from a series of black and white photographs on 35mm film and is exhibited on a film projector, already taking on a granular look, which will only increase each time it loops, hour on hour, day on day. A viewer on the first day of an exhibit will see a slightly clearer film than someone at the end of its exhibition. This almost imperceptible incremental destruction is very similar to our experience of climate change, a slow saturation of micro-scale changes, thickening and gaining in momentum. These are changes you cannot perceive as a data point, for instance a particularly hot day or on a single viewing of the film, but, over longitudinal records and the passage of time, one might apprehend the slow but inexorable momentum of those gradual distortions. Through its use of 35mm film, and the continuous looping that gradually impinges upon its initial clarity, the material form of TSA’s presentation in the gallery space draws the reader into another kind of embedded landscape, echoing that represented through the film itself.

Untilled (2012), Pierre Huyghe

Consider Pierre Huyghe’s work *Untilled* from 2012, which was displayed at DOCUMENTA 13 in a composting site on the exhibition’s grounds in Kassel, Germany. The outdoor installation encompasses an assemblage of disparate works: an odalisque nude made of concrete, with an active beehive as its head; a free-roaming dog named

“Human” with one leg painted pink; piles of concrete rubble; a pond, full of algae and other micro-organisms; poisonous, psychotropic, and aphrodisiac plants; an uprooted oak tree from Joseph Beuys’ 1982 piece *7000 Oaks*; and an on-site gardener among other objects and actors. These works rarely come within line of sight of each other as they are spread across the large expanse of the site. Instead, they create smaller sites, that, if read alone, could constitute distinct artworks; when taken together, however, they form a disparate narrative not easily read. The most noticeable connecting agents are the dog, as it freely wanders between the sites, sometimes leaving the area entirely, and the gardener who tends to the free-growing saplings, bushes, and psychotropic plants overtaking the sites. At no point can the viewer take in the totality of the work as a whole: Huyghe’s piece deliberately resists the closure of the spectacular gaze.

At a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts and Creativity that occurred in conjunction with dOCUMENTA 13, Huyghe talked about how he is unsure where his hand as an artist ends and where nature simply takes over (does it end in the puddle formed within his space, where bacteria now are multiplying and thriving? In the interactions of insects, plants, and animals?). Deep within the Anthropocene the perceived divide between nature and unnatural becomes muddled, like a bed of compost, where the unnatural (technology, (post)humans) have embedded themselves within this dying world.

In a public lecture at the Banff Centre, Huyghe describes his artistic method as deploying a kind of anti-narrative, striving to “de-link, or to de-narrate, or to de-script the imaginary language of the narrative authority” that “makes a relation between things” (Banff, 2013). In *Untilled* we see this method deployed in the uncontrollable nature of his

materials, the sheer complexity of the various elements acting according to their natures in relation to each other, and to the environment of the site itself. Indeed, the title of the work itself suggests an unwillingness to deform what exists with one's predetermined intent: although the artist has brought the different components of the biotope together, the forms that their interaction may take are left unplanned and contingent. As he describes it, this piece in particular involves accepting "the uncertain, the unreasoned, and the unknown" in order to "intensify the speculative potential within a given body," whether of an exhibit, and institution, an artwork, and so on (Banff, 2013). Such speculative potentials are precisely what spectacular representations close off: the certainty of the spectacular narrative shuts down the possibility of speculation that might allow other stories to be told, or render the existing narrative more malleable.

Huyghe's *Untilled* resists narration, and indeed, actively fights against the idea of narrative as such; he describes it stemming from "the need...to separate the sedimentation of narrative" from the works' various "elements in space," to leave the various "markers [from] history....without culture within that compost" (Banff, 2013). The piece works from a logic of *compost* rather than *composition*, to become a sympoetic site in which the elements mix and change without the top-down hierarchy of planned space or narrative. There is at once too much going on—how to track the movements of each insect, the pollination of each flower, the meanderings of the dog, the shifts within the pond—and too little framing—one could stumble upon the space and not even recognize it for what it is—for *Untilled* to be transposed into a simile: it is like nothing but itself, deliberately resisting even the narrative of comparison. Huyghe's "methodology of the compost,...[his] attempt to intensify what a compost is," determines both the work's

structure and its generative processes, so that the elements generate new forms as they “leak” into one another and “into the physical, chemical reality” of the space (Banff, 2013).

Conclusion

Like the signs of human existence that litter the land- and soundscapes of *The Soniferous Ether*, Huyghe’s compost “becomes a place where things are left without culture...indifferent to us, metabolizing, allowing the emergence of new forms” (Huyghe, cited in Godden, 2012: np). Also like *TSA*, the biotope refuses to conform to a logic of the spectacle, in which the object or image is put on display for the viewing subject: as Huyghe states, it is “indifferent” to the viewer, “not displayed for a public” so much as standing as “raw witness” to its own “topological operations” (cited in Godden, 2012: np). As Andy Weir puts it, *Untilled* offers a “continual ungrounding (or compostation) of anthropocentric experience” (2013: 29), much as *TSA* decentres anthropocentric spectacle in its omission of the human form, otherworldly landscapes, and more general refusal of narrative closure.

In both of these case studies, we encounter stories that attempt to represent scales (spatio-temporal, rates of change, and systems complexity) that exist outside of or challenge human sensory and cognitive faculties—they extend them beyond their everyday uses, affording us different ways of seeing and narrating, with generative opportunities for investigating and experiencing the Anthropocene. When confronted with immense objects of the Anthropocene (climate change and so on) humanity collectively disassociates from the immediate (and distant) implications and, instead,

process them through familiar narrative structures. We cling to our familiar stories, and resist the imposition of the material world when it rises up to complicate or unmake them.

And here we return to the problematic with which we began, the issue of representing the Anthropocene beyond any single spectacular event within it. In a recent essay on visibility within the Anthropocene, Irmgard Emmelhainz phrases this problem as one of reduction:

Instead of being conceived as speculative images of our future economic and political system, the Anthropocene has been reduced to an apocalyptic fantasy....

(2015: np)

The reaction of the Fort McMurray evacuee with which we began, along with so many other representation of specific Anthropocene events (extreme weather patterns, ice-cap melt, species die-off), demonstrate precisely this form of reduction: the narrative closure of apocalypse replaces the interconnected reality and scalar shifts of the Anthropocene. Like Huyghe's *Untilled*, the Anthropocene is an assemblage of images, stories, things, and effects, not a single event or even a series of events: the stuff that happens between spectacles is just as much part of the Anthropocene as the next wildfire, flood, or heatwave. The Anthropocene needs to be confronted in all of its sheer *banality* if we are to engage with it—forestall it, limit, learn to live and die within it—in a meaningful way. As Heather Swanson points out, it is easier for those most immediately impacted by Anthropocene events to understand their own precarity within it (although that understanding can be swiftly undone through the remapping offered by familiar narratives) (2017: np); how much harder will that be to those for whom such events are merely images on screens, encountered as if one were watching a movie?

The type of contemporary art exemplified by *The Soniferous Ether* and *Untilled* (one might even refer to this as Anthropocene art) performs a different way of encountering the Anthropocene and of imagining one's place within it. Such works provide something that Emmelhainz, Haraway, Nixon, and others have contended is missing: images of the Anthropocene, instead of the spectacular pictures that we have now (Emmelhainz, 2017: np). These works perform the Anthropocene in various ways, calling our attention to its complexity, scale, and increasing rates of change, foregrounding the interconnectedness of systems, species, and physical forces within it, and challenging the viewer to engage in a critical mode of visibility, to think critically, and to eschew the easy abstraction and closure of thinking like a movie. We need more images of the Anthropocene: microcosms of the Anthropocene; interconnected they can exceed narrative closure, fill in the banal gaps of time from one extreme event to the next, and break with the comfortable narratives that brought us to this juncture in the first place.

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