

The Sustainable Image

Edward Burtynsky's photography and the feminist Anthropocene

Maartje Willemijn Smits
Research Master Gender & Ethnicity
Utrecht University
Supervisor dr. Marta Zarzycka
Second reader prof. dr. Rosemarie Buikema

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Introduction

It is an average Sunday morning in summer, with the sun fighting its way through the clouds, cyclists in a relaxed pace and a bus passing by with just one or two passengers – those few early birds on their way somewhere – when I open the door to my balcony on which a green, exuberant collection of plants is greeting me. While sipping from my tea, I spot a pod hanging down from my pea plant. Surprised and proud as a child, I put down my cup to harvest my first home-grown vegetables, an impressive result: three peas.

In the meantime the television in the living room is screening the Dutch program *Filosofisch Kwintet*¹ (Philosophical Quintet), a one-hour show in which the established journalist Clair Polak and philosopher Ad Verbrugge discuss philosophical questions with guest speakers from different backgrounds (professional as well as academic). This series theme is ‘Technology and Moral’ in which they take up the question ‘whether everything that is possible is also desirable’: Should the fast technological developments be imposed with moral limitations? This specific episode on Sunday morning discusses to what extent technology provides a solution to our energy use.

When discussing the relation between consciousness and action Sabine Roeser (professor of Ethics and Technique Philosophy at the Technical University of Delft) claims the problem is a lack of feeling an urgency among people to act differently. This derives from, what she calls, a ‘cognitive dissonance’; there is a discrepancy between the desire for the Western contemporary lifestyle and a critical reflection upon the amount of energy it demands. According to Roeser it is not ‘hot’ to overhaul your own consumerist behaviour, as ‘everybody wants to have everything’: smartphones, cars and go on holidays to far destinations. In response philosopher Ad Verbrugge states it is not so much a lack of consciousness, but a deficiency of realization; it is not a heartfelt insight. If you do not experience something first hand, you will not change your actions, despite knowing their consequences. He argues people in the West do not experience first-hand the effects of the exploitative energy use on the other side of the world; everybody knows it, but we do not *feel* it.

This Sunday morning provides just a few examples that signal to what is becoming an increasing debate on environmental issues, the effects of mass consumption and questions of sustainability, that reaches beyond growing your own vegetables or a television program. The current ecological crisis is involving everyone every day in more or less direct manners. Whether it is a lack of

¹ ‘Technologie, moraal en energievoorziening’, *Filosofisch Kwintet*. Human, broadcasted on 13-07-2014.

realization or a cognitive dissonance, the tension between the ethical concerns on the environment and the (material) desires in our daily lives generates a problematic relation between the human and the environment.

In fact, theorists are speaking of a new geological epoch in history, defined by the overwhelming human influence upon the earth: the Anthropocene (Steffen et al. 2011). This term was first coined in the 1980s by the Nobel Prize-winner and atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen (2002, 2006), who explains the roots of this new, distinct epoch at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century. Since then, the concept of the Anthropocene has been expanded by other scholars, not exclusively of the hard sciences. Scientists in the humanities and social sciences afforded the Anthropocene as a compelling idea to reframe the relationship between the human and the environment (Birkhout 2014:1). Within this interdisciplinary context the main claims of the Anthropocene are that it problematizes the classical distinction between Man and Nature, and raises questions of sustainability.

This thesis is concerned with the way in which artworks are helping to attain the large-scale perspectives on the actual conditions of the Anthropocene. In specific, my research investigates the landscape photography of the Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky as an artistic practice that affects people through compelling exposures of the present conditions of the troubling relation between the human and the environment. As I will demonstrate, reading his work along with feminist theory² will expose the potential of his images as powerful political tools that can change the imagery and imaginary of people in debates on environmentalism and sustainability. I am particularly interested in developing a reading of his work that is informed by an understanding of aesthetics not as merely concerned with ‘beauty’, but as a notion that relies on the idea of artistic practices as deeply interconnected with ethics and politics. In this manner, my analysis of the landscape photography of Burtynsky aims at exploring how an encounter with his photography fuels a ‘sustainable’ relation, both between the viewer and the artwork, as well as the human and the environment at large.

As the hypothesis of this thesis I argue that Burtynsky’s work, in relating to the art historical tradition of the landscape genre, yet simultaneously challenging this genre, problematizes the nature/culture binary and that the encounter between the photograph and the viewer stimulates a critical reflection among the viewer upon the relation between the human and the environment. His photography does so by first, challenging the notion of the landscape in its art historical tradition by representing landscapes that are not natural, but completely manufactured by humans. Second,

² With feminist theory I am here referring to scholars that work at the crossroads of documentary studies (such as Elizabeth Cowie), photography studies (such as Susan Sontag and Ariella Azoulay), ecofeminism and environmental feminism (such as Janis Birkeland and Greta Gaard), Feminist Science and Technology Studies (such as Donna Haraway and Karen Barad), and posthumanism and new materialism (such as Rosi Braidotti and Stacy Alaimo).

through the choices in composition, materiality and size of the photographs, the photographs evoke and simultaneously challenge the art historical concept of the Sublime (Rosenblum 1997; Peeples 2011) that is connected to the landscape genre, specifically of the Romantic period. Instead of illustrating the immense power of nature over humans, the photographs of Burtynsky evoke a certain affective response³ that is a paradoxical ‘forbidden pleasure’; the overwhelming feeling is both an amazement for the human’s ability to create such large-scale landscapes and an uncomfortable uneasiness towards its effects on the environment. This ‘double Sublime’, as I define within this thesis, provides the impetus for a productive position of the viewer in which both consciousness and action reinforce each other. Instead of a state of paralysis – the viewer being merely overwhelmed – the double Sublime instigates a more productive response that, after their encounter with the photography makes the viewer act differently in their daily practices. In other words, the manufactured landscapes of Edward Burtynsky challenge our conceptions of nature and culture in which the landscape is no longer simply nature, and the human is no longer simply overwhelmed by it. The main research question of this thesis is therefore:

How does the concept of the landscape present in the photographs of Edward Burtynsky challenge the nature/culture binary and thereby problematize the relation between the human and the environment?

Unlike other scholarly work on Burtynsky’s photography that focused almost solely on the notion of the Sublime⁴, my thesis analyses his work on a more complex and interdisciplinary level. What is innovative about my thesis is that I analyse his photography as a potential medium for political purposes and social change with regards to environmentalism, by connecting his photography to feminist Anthropocene theory. Consequently, this thesis not only analyses his work in relation to the landscape genre and the Sublime, but also critically reflects upon the social, historical and cultural constructions of these categories as such. In this manner the research performed in this thesis deconstructs the images as well as their contextualization. It explores the encounter with his photography in terms of aesthetics, ethics and politics, and what it can bring to feminist theory and activism. I thereby connect landscape photography, environmentalism and feminism, taking the work of Edward Burtynsky as the main object of study, which has not been done before in this

³ The field of affect theory is very rich and broad in its approaches. See for one of the latest feminist contributions *Carnal Aesthetics* (Papenburg & Zarzycka 2013).

⁴ See for example: Diehl, Carol. 2006. ‘The Toxic Sublime’, *Art in America*, 94.2:118-122; Hodgins, Peter, and Peter Thompson. 2011. ‘Taking the romance out of extraction: Contemporary Canadian artists and the subversion of the romantic/extractive gaze’, *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5.4:393-410; Peeples, Jennifer. 2011. ‘Toxic Sublime: Imagined Contaminated Landscapes’, in *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* 5.4:373-392; Zehle, Soenke. 2008. ‘Dispatches from the Depletion Zone: Edward Burtynsky and the Documentary Sublime’, *Media International Australia*, issue 127:109-115.

elaborate and thorough manner. The issues of this inquiry are reflected in the thesis' title *The Sustainable Image. Edward Burtynsky's photography and the feminist Anthropocene*, which I will clarify in more detail in the following paragraph.

Sustainable encounters

In the context of this thesis, I argue for an understanding of aesthetics that is not merely concerned with a sense of 'beautiful images', but one that takes into account the cultural values of the material, embodied, sensorial aspects of the encounter with images. In this manner my inquiry is informed by a collapse between the viewer and the image in terms of distance, which consequently entails – following the lines of recent feminist scholarship on the politics of representation and the politics of perception (see for example Papenburg & Zarzyka 2013) – an approach in which the viewer is no longer understood as merely a viewer, but a subject of an embodied encounter. I thereby seek to develop a reading of Burtynsky's photography that explores how the notion of sustainability, such as it is traditionally related to issues of environmentalism, can be connected to aesthetics, and to the encounter between the viewer and images. Sustainability here is understood in a feminist manner that is affirmative and productive, and celebrates long-term endurance and diversity. I base this conception on a large field of 'feminist environmentalism' that has engaged with the relation between human and environment since the 1970s. The attempt to *rethink* this relation in more affirmative manners, has been articulated in feminist thought both in theory and practice (Alaimo 2010; Gaard 1993; Grosz 2005; Mack-Canty 2004; Plumwood 1993). Throughout the years this theoretical exploration has expanded and exacerbated, became more complex, and is renamed in directions such as ecofeminism, queer ecology, anthropocene feminism and posthumanism.

Today, also the proliferating term 'sustainability' is being critically investigated by feminists, as a discourse that smoothly got co-opted and institutionalized in a technocratic and apolitical domain (Alaimo 2012:559). Within this dominant framework of sustainability the effects on the environment are presented as a problem "out there, distinct from one's self" for which system management and technological fixes will provide solutions (561). As Stacy Alaimo explains, from a feminist perspective this technological and techno-scientific perspective not only obscures the power and political differences by dividing the subject from object, the knower from the known – exemplary of Donna Haraway's famous 'god trick' that claims to see "from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully" (1988:854) – it also presents a specific anthropocentric idea of human agency with its "master plans that will get things under control" (Alaimo 2012:560-561).

Instead, current feminist thoughts on environmentalism and sustainability propose an epistemological rupture that understands the relation between human and environment as substantially interconnected and interdependent (Alaimo 2007, Barad 2007, 2010, Braidotti 2011,

2013, Haraway 2003, 2008). This theoretical proposition not only problematizes the traditional categories of Man and Nature – the dualism nature/culture – but also rethinks them in less oppositional manners. What it is to be human is no longer self-evident, and the category of nature is deconstructed as a social, political and historical concept. This is a thorough indictment to the very foundational structures that construct Western society: patriarchy, humanism, militarism, anthropocentrism and androcentrism. In this radical feminist move, away from binaries and dualisms, the human is de-centralized and no longer considered the dominant point of reference. Instead of the universal, free, autonomous and reasonable human subject, its relation with the environment is built upon notions of interconnectedness and interdependencies. We are not opposite from nature, hence nature is not something that needs to be constrained and dominated. The human is *part of* nature and cannot be separated from it; this entails a different thinking about the engagement between the human and the world in its fullness (Haraway 2013). To think of nature and culture as deeply interconnected and interdependent, consequently requires a different approach to environmental issues. It is not about a destructive critique on human, leading to an apocalyptic idea that we are all doomed. Nor is it about a nostalgic dreaming of previous times in which the human was supposedly still in peace and balance with the earth. It is thus not a matter of utopias or dystopias, but according to Donna Haraway it entails a ‘staying with the trouble’ (2013).

Consequently, this relation raises questions of agency and materiality, and proposes feminist grounds of accountability and responsibilities for the acknowledgement of this interrelation and interdependency. In other words, a feminist reweaving of the nature/culture binary entails an establishment of an embodied perspective that values the diversity and differences of all others in this world, both human and non-human; the other species of the natural world.

In relation to environmentalism and its ethical concerns, this idea of interconnectedness with the world dramatically reshapes the notion of sustainability. The aforementioned ‘human master plans of system management and technological fixes to control the effects on the environment’ are here debunked as traditional models of scientific distancing, authority and objectivity. Sustainability is then no longer something that is apolitical and can be applied to environmentalism, but becomes an embodied and political practice. In this feminist context, Rosi Braidotti argues sustainability stands for “a regrounding of the subject in a materially embedded sense of responsibility and ethical accountability for the environments she or he inhabits” (2006:137). Infusing this idea of sustainability with the Deleuzian sense of becoming she states: “The ethical subject of sustainable becoming practices a humble kind of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life: simple strategies to hold, sustain and map out thresholds of sustainable transformation (278).”

The politics of sustainability stress an idea of endurance, taking responsibility for your enabling practices and assuming to have faith in a future in which these values are passed on to

future generations for a liveable world (Braidotti 2013:138). It is this feminist idea of sustainability as a practice that I apply to the encounter between viewer and image, between aesthetics and subjects. In the realm of contemporary Western society in which we are ‘bombarded’ with the relentless increase of images (Buikema and Zarzycka 2011:119), and in which we are increasingly struggling with the relation as humans towards the environment, I argue that what we need are ‘sustainable images’, in their most visual and imagery, but also theoretical, philosophical and imaginary manner. With the analysis of the landscape photography of Edward Burtynsky I aim to develop a tool of analysis that contributes towards scholarship on artistic and cultural practices, and on ethics and politics within the context of feminism, photography and environmentalism. The ‘sustainable image’ is thus an image that visualizes the challenge of the Anthropocene, makes us think differently about our relation between human and environment and has the potential to change the social reality of all lives towards more sustainable futures.

Case studies and methods

Edward Burtynsky’s work is exemplary, albeit not unique, in engaging the audience with questions of the (un)sustainable relation between the human and the environment. His photographs represent large-scale landscapes located all over the world which have been altered by human activity; they are what he calls ‘manufactured landscapes’. Thematically Burtynsky’s work explores the intrinsic link between human industry and nature by photographing spaces of mining, shipping, oil production, recycling, quarrying and manufacturing. Feasibly his most famous exhibition is the series *Manufactured Landscapes* (2004-2007) that exists among others of photographs from his travels through the rapid developing country of China. For this collection Burtynsky collaborated together with film maker Jennifer Baichwal who made the consonant documentary (2006) in which she records Burtynsky’s work practices on location, in his studio, at exhibitions and uses extensive footage from the TEDtalk Burtynsky gave in 2005 after receiving the TEDprize.⁵ And as he explains:

These images are meant as metaphors to the dilemma of our modern existence; they search for a dialogue between attraction and repulsion, seduction and fear. We are drawn by desire - a chance at good living, yet we are consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our success. Our dependence on nature to provide the materials for our consumption and our concern for the health of our planet sets us into an uneasy contradiction. For me, these images function as reflecting pools of our

⁵ The TEDprize is a yearly award given to a person who has a ‘fresh, bold vision for sparking global change’. Since 2013 the winner receives \$1.000.000,- after they will present at the annual TED conference their wish and their plan for accomplishing it. Burtynsky’s wish in 2005 was that his images would help persuade millions to join a global conversation on sustainability. <http://www.ted.com/about/programs-initiatives/ted-prize> [last accessed 8-2-2015].

times.⁶

Similar to what has been stated in the anecdote of this introduction, Burtynsky detects a discrepancy between the ethical environmental concerns and the desires of (material) life. His response to this issue is creating images of manufactured landscapes that potentially help to visualize this problem and create ‘a dialogue’ and reflection. The encounter with his photography thus provokes questions of environmentalism and creates a potential relation of sustainability.

In this manner, the notion of the landscape – traditionally understood as an apolitical and neutral concept – is being politicized and used in this thesis as a lens to investigate how the medium of photography can be used as a political tool to reflect upon the relation between the human and environment, and raise awareness of the current ecological crisis. The complexity and richness of the photographs of Burtynsky provide productive examples of what ‘sustainable images’ could look like, therefore I investigate their representations in relation to the theoretical, political concerns of feminist Anthropocene thought. This thesis thereby investigates the potential as well as its limitations of Edward Burtynsky’s photography in debates on environmentalism and sustainability.

As a case-study I focus on three photographs, namely ‘Feng Jie #3&4’, ‘Bao Steel #10’ and ‘Manufacturing #10ab’, from the specific series *China* (2005) which is part of the exhibition *Manufactured Landscapes* (2004-2007). Although these images share many characteristics that are distinctive of Burtynsky’s work, I have chosen them as illustrative representations of specific concepts and effects. The case studies that I will discuss will address separately: the concept of the landscape as such (‘Feng Jie #3&4’), the manufacturedness of the landscape (‘Bao Steel #10’, and the Sublime affective response (‘Manufacturing #10ab’). In order to explore how Burtynsky’s photographs become meaningful, this study critically reflects upon the visual conventions that have become self-evident and unquestioned (for example, what a landscape is or the affective Sublime). It thereby challenges the traditional ways of looking at his images, and tries to develop a language to understand Burtynsky’s work in relation to the theoretical, feminist, Anthropocene thought. Hence, the feminist visual literacy that I opt for reflects upon “the visual traditions as well as the social practices and power relations in which they are embedded” (Buikema & Zarzycka 2011:119). In placing the work of Burtynsky in its broader cultural, social, historical and geopolitical context, I aim at developing an understanding of the way in which his images come into being, and how they work on their audiences.

For the in-depth analysis of the case-study I deploy a visual methodology that is build up from Gillian Rose’s approach in *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (2001) in which I will analyse three different ‘sites’, namely the production of the

⁶ See http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/About/introAbout.html [last accessed 8-2-2015].

image, the site of the image itself, and the site(s) where it is seen by audiences (16). These sites are ascribed with three different modalities: technological, compositional and social (17). This system provides a clear structure to deconstruct Burtynsky's photographs, as it categorizes the different elements and layers of images. Of most importance at the site of production are questions of how it is made (technological modality), the genre (compositional modality) and by who, when, for whom and why (social modality). With regards to the site of the image itself, the analysis will focus mostly on the visual effects (technological modality), composition (compositional modality) and visual meanings (social modality). With this visual methodology I aim at covering a formal, semiotic, material and contextual analysis of the three photographs, and thereby deconstructing the different compositional 'strategies' that are being performed in Burtynsky's work.

Structure of the thesis

To analyse the relevance and potential of Burtynsky's photographs in relation to environmentalism and sustainability, this inquiry is performed in a twofold manner. The structure of the thesis is as follows. The first part is chapter 1 in which I propose an interdisciplinary, theoretical framework that maps out the fields of art history, visual studies, environmentalism, cultural theory and feminist theory. The second part consists of chapter 2, 3 and 4 in which I present the in-depth analysis of the case studies of the three photographs (one per chapter).

Chapter 1 positions Burtynsky as a photographer and his work in relation to the larger theoretical debates on environmentalism, feminism and photography. The aim is to bring together three fields of study that ostensibly seem unrelated, but which prove to be necessarily connected through the work of Burtynsky. In fact, what will become clear is that they *need* each other, and therefore cannot be thought of separately. Environmentalism needs feminism, as it provides the angle from which to approach the ecological crisis in a manner that deconstructs all the layers, power dynamics and subject constructions that caused it in the first place. Simultaneously, feminism cannot be thought of without environmentalism, as the struggle of oppression and domination cannot be battled without fighting for all life, that is both human and nonhuman. To this end, I argue that in our mediatised world both environmentalism and feminism need photography as a political tool to visualize the conditions of the relation between human and environment under which they operate.

One of the main theoretical elaborations in this chapter provides a historical contextualization of the link between photography and landscape as an art and cultural tradition, and of the link between photography and environmentalism. In doing so, I trace the art historical

genre of landscape and link it to environmentalism as a ‘visible evidence’⁷ for ecological changes. Taking into account the earlier mentioned feminist visual literacy – which entails among others a critical engagement with the primacy of vision and visibility (Haraway 1988; Jay 1993) – this section elaborates on the political dimensions of photography in its relation to issues of the ecological crisis, and the concomitant relation between the human and environment.

The second main theoretical debate that is presented in chapter 1 is feminist theory in Western academic debates on environmental issues. Specific attention is being paid to (eco)feminism since the 1990s that deconstructed mainstream environmentalism not only as anthropocentric, but foremost as androcentric (Birkeland 1993; Gaard 1993, 1998; Salleh 1991). To illustrate the persistent need for a feminist understanding of the Anthropocene I compare the exemplary work of Bruno Latour (2005) and Timothy Morton (2010), with the feminist activist and scholarly work since the 1970s, and point out these two influential contemporary scholars remain perpetually blind for their anthropocentric and androcentric pitfalls. The chapter therefore concludes by mapping out feminist accounts of posthuman, new materialist and nomadic subjectivities that pertain to sustainable values of the relation between human and environment.

Chapter 2 analyses the image ‘Feng Jie #3&4’, in which the focus is on the landscape as a concept and art genre. The main aim of this chapter is to explore the notion of the landscape as something that is constructed according to a specific Western, art historical tradition (Lefebvre 2006, 2011; Mitchell 2002). The chapter traces the ‘birth’ of the landscape as an autonomous entity within the arts around the seventeenth century, and elaborates on its further establishment as an independent genre of landscape painting in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, up to contemporary ‘drone’ photography. I demonstrate how the image ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ relates to this genre, in its adaptation of comparable features in the compositionality. Using the theory of Martin Lefebvre this chapter also shows how the diptych ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ represents a landscape that is not only a *representation* of something over *there*, but also a *perception* of a space we are living in *here*. In this sense this chapter points the attention to and deconstructs the naturalization and taken-for-grantedness of what we understand as a landscape.

Chapter 3 analyses the image ‘Bao Steel #10’, which further complexifies this notion of the landscape by bringing in questions of nature and culture. ‘Bao Steel #10’ is exemplary in challenging the art historical tradition of natural landscapes, by representing a landscape that consists of natural material, yet is manufactured by humans. This problematizes the rigid dichotomy of what is natural and what is cultural through a landscape that is both at the same time. With the

⁷ The idea of ‘visible evidence’ will be elaborated upon in chapter 1, in which I explain how the photograph has a specific relation to ‘reality’ and ‘the real’ through its indexical quality. Furthermore, the work of Burtynsky being classified as ‘documentary’ and thereby strengthening this relation to ‘what is out there’ even more, I demonstrate here how his photography therefore functions as convincing ‘visible evidence’ of environmental changes.

conceptual tool of naturecultures (Haraway 2003) and feminist theory of (new) materialism, posthumanism and environmentalism (Alaimo and Hekman 2009; Barad 2009, 2003; Haraway 2008, 2003) this chapter deconstructs the nature/culture dualism. Through the landscape of 'Bao Steel #10' it thereby extends further questions of agency, responsibility and accountability in relation to environmentalism and sustainability.

Chapter 4 analyses the image 'Manufacturing #10ab' and focuses on the affective response that the manufactured landscapes evoke. Through the compositional repetition this photograph is exemplary in illustrating the scale of the landscape. I demonstrate how this representation of scale relates to the Sublime in its art historical tradition (Baumeister 2005; Kleiner & Mamiya 2006; Peeples 2011), especially that of the Romantic landscape painting in which I situate the work of Edward Burtynsky at large. Instead of the Romantic Sublime of the human being overwhelmed by nature, this chapter demonstrates how the manufactured landscape in 'Manufacturing #10ab' evokes a different kind of Sublime; one in which the human is not merely overwhelmed, but also triggered to productively reflect upon their own position towards and within the represented landscape. I demonstrate how this Sublime creates a double affective response. On the one hand the spectator is amazed by the scale and manufacturedness of the landscape, yet on the other hand this also creates a feeling of discomfort that makes the viewer reflect upon their own share in this landscape. Consequently, I investigate the idea of sustainability in the encounter with 'Manufacturing #10ab', as an affective response that is productive for necessary attitudinal change; looking at this photograph does not paralyse the viewer, but triggers a different engagement with environmentalism that potentially leads to social change in the everyday practices of the viewer.

ONE

Mapping the fields

None of this work is about finding sweet and nice - “feminine” - worlds and knowledges free of the ravages and productivities of power. Rather, feminist inquiry is about understanding how things work, who is in the action, what might be possible, and how worldly actors might somehow be accountable to and love each other less violently.

Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, p. 7.

1.1 Growing up with vast hinterlands

The three photographs from the series *China* (2005) that form the case study of this thesis are part of over thirty years of photographic work by Edward Burtynsky, known as one of Canada’s most respected photographers. Since the 1980s Burtynsky’s photographs have become some of the most recognizable work of contemporary landscape photographers, evidenced by the numerous awards that celebrate his excellence as a photographer.⁸ Using his images to promote environmental sustainability won him the TEDprize in 2005, a yearly award given to people whose ideas ‘change the world’. Besides exposing his work in museums, galleries and coffee table books, it appears frequently in (news)magazines such as *The Washington Post*, *New York Times*, *Life Magazine*, *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek* and *The National Geographic Society*.

A short bibliographical background is helpful to contextualize the artist’s photographic work in the larger theoretical debates that are outlined in this chapter. In 1951 Burtynsky’s parents immigrated from Ukraine to Canada, and in 1955 Burtynsky was born in St. Catharines, Ontario. Growing up in a country with a small population and a vast hinterland is one of the reasons Burtynsky felt compelled to take the landscape as the subject of his work (Torosian 2003:46). From an early age, his father took him on trips to remote places such as Kapuskasing and Cochrane, where he would camp, canoe, paddle and watch the shorelines that have been unaffected by humans, giving him a feeling of eternity and immutability. It was during these trips that he formed his perspective on the relationship between the human and the environment: as a human subject being just a momentary presence inhabiting this place on earth.

After being accepted at the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute in 1976, for one of the first assignments Burtynsky traced the route of an old canal that later had been filled, searching for the architectural remnant that was left standing; a pattern of evidences of human presence and impact. It

⁸ For a full list of all the awards and honours see http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/site_contents/About/aboutCV.html [last accessed 14-10-2014].

was the first photographic project that formed his position as a photographer by using the camera as a tool to look for the evidence of how the world was “transformed by man” (48). As he states: “I think a lot of what I photograph are the ruins of our society, the ruins in the landscape, the things that are left behind (48).”

Another moment that Burtynsky identifies as characteristic in forming the theme of his work was a two-week trip through the United States. After taking a wrong turn on a highway in Pennsylvania, he ended up in Frackville, a small town with one of the largest anthracite coal mines of the region. When he got out of the car he was surrounded by a surreal landscape consisting out of hills of coal slag, white birch trees growing through the black mounds, and ponds filled with lime green water. He had never seen a landscape being transformed on this scale. When returning to Toronto and being confronted with skyscrapers of seventy floors high, he formed the main theme and aim of his photographic work. As he explains:

For things to be on this scale, I thought, there has to be something equally monumental in the landscape where we have been taken all this material from. I felt that Newtonian law implied a reciprocal action in nature – a hole in the ground meets the scale of the rising of the skyscrapers – and my task was to go in search of the evidence of that reciprocal action, to see what the residual world looked like (49).



Mines #22 by Edward Burtynsky, 1983

These residual spaces in the world are the landscapes that make it possible to live in skyscrapers, have smartphones, drive cars, and fly around the world. The factories, mines, oil fields and quarries are the spaces that make other spaces and material goods possible. Phrased differently, the material

desire in the everyday life of the (Western) world demands an exploitative energy use that forms new landscapes, not only of the ‘end products’, but also at the extraction and processing of their raw materials. It is inescapable that, what Burtynsky refers to as “our collective appetite for our life styles”⁹ – the way in which we want to live our lives in the material sense but also in other practices – is doing something to landscapes on a scale never seen before. This sobering moment is the main concern of Burtynsky.

1.2 From pristine to altered landscapes

The work of Burtynsky is part of a long tradition of landscape photography that finds its roots in the early nineteenth century. The interest in the outdoor as a subject matter for photography grew since the 1800s, but culminated during the mid-century between 1830 and 1880 in both Europe and the United States of America (Naef 1975:12). The awareness of nature and an interest in the land coincided with the invention and rapid development of photography as a visual medium. Thus, photography played a significant role in the shifting of the relationship between traditional and modern perceptions of nature and the environment (Rosenblum 1997:95).

With the invention of the *camera obscura* and light-sensitive paper in the eighteenth century, photography became believed to have a dual function: the photographs might reveal an accurate form and structure of nature, and at the same time will present this information in an artistically appealing manner (95). The first – the idea photography presents a truthful representation of the real world without sentimentality – was an important objective to many nineteenth century scientists and intellectuals. In this positivist view the camera was regarded to be the key device to understanding nature in a scientific manner (95). The first photographic techniques, such as daguerreotype, calotypes and collodion presented views of nature that had never been seen in such detail. It caused a dramatic shift in the sciences where nature was no longer represented in textual descriptions or visual drawings and paintings, but could be observed through the view of the camera. The consciousness of the landscape was thus expressed in the eagerness of scientists to learn about the forms and structures of nature (Naef 1975:12).

Photography became not only a visual medium for scientific purposes, but also for professional, artistic and commercial usage. Technological development that made cameras lighter and easier to transport, and the appreciation of nature as a work of art, was essential to the rise landscape photography. The genre landscape photography, similar to landscape painting, developed in Europe before it did in the United States. Simultaneously in Great Britain and France, landscape photography evolved around the 1850s with photographers like Philip Delamotte, Roger Fenton,

⁹ This quote comes from the speech he gave after receiving the TED-award in 2005. <http://youtu.be/U2Dd4k63-zM> [last accessed 14-10-2014].

Gustave Le Gray and Thomas Sutton as key figures (22). In the United States in the period between 1860 and 1885, for the first time in its history a great number of photographs were made outdoors, introducing a ‘golden age of landscape photography’ (12). Of this generation only a small number of photographers focussed specifically on landscape photography, as distinct from other outdoor photography with subject matters such as architecture, transportation or portraits. These landscape photographers are often labelled as ‘documentary’¹⁰, because their work was done under governmental or institutional patronage (12). This group, either employed by railroad companies or professionals with established studios in West Coast cities, accompanied geological survey teams exploring the relatively unknown west part of the continent (Rosenblum 1997:144). Important figures of this group whose careers have determined the rise of American landscape photography are William Bell, A. A. Hart, William H. Jackson, Eadweard Muybridge, A. J. Russel, C. R. Savage, Timothy O’Sullivan and C. L. Weed. Perhaps one of the most important protagonists, and whose work has been a major source of inspiration for Edward Burtynsky (Torosian 2003:46), was Carleton E. Watkins. By 1867 Watkins had built up a reputation as a highly experienced landscape photographer, influenced in terms of visual style by the European Romantic landscape masters, with pictures of dramatic, remote landscapes. By travelling to places that had been little photographed before, such as Yosemite and Oregon, he established himself as a famous photographer with images of nature untouched by the human (Naef 1975:84).



Half Dome, Yosemite Valley by Carleton E. Watkins, circa 1865.

¹⁰ The usage of the term ‘documentary’ refers here specifically to photographers who were working for the government or institutions to ‘document’ the land during explorations. Later on this chapter and in the rest of my thesis I use the term ‘documentary’ to refer to a visual genre for artistic practices that relates to a creative treatment of actuality, and thereby has a specific relation to ‘reality’ and ‘the real’.

As a result of marketing developments the role of the outdoor photographer began to change in the period between 1870 and 1875 (86). Prior to this period the commerce in photographs was still at an infant state and there were no guidelines on what photographers should photograph. However, technological developments and the consequential increase of tourism radically changed this. In the United States the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 caused an increasing stream of travellers along a very specific route, which created a demand for a set of standard subjects that were to be found along this travel. Also in nineteenth century Europe, photographs of landscape scenes were considered souvenirs for travellers and restoratives for businessmen who are tied to the city. Naomi Rosenblum explains this increasing mass audience desired a picture that was not only pleasing but foremost recognizable (1997:107). Consequently, artistic effects were not considered of primary importance, insofar as they contributed to producing agreeable compositions; a photographic image should be merely the visible evidence of a first-hand experience of a landscape (107). Consequently, the market for photographs grew, yet in a limited manner with a small number of predictable subjects. Outdoor photography, and landscape photography in particular, became a lucrative business in which the output became dominated by mediocre talents who produced bland and uninspired photographs (Neaf 1975:86). This development was seriously damaging the careers of photographers like Carleton E. Watkins, whose photographed landscapes were located far away from the routes that tourists took. It declared the end of an era of landscape photography made by professional photographers with a certain sensitive eye and imagination, and the beginning of a postcard aesthetic in which natural wonders became clichés, photographed by mediocre photographers (76).

As a reaction, in the 1870s this lack of atmosphere and feeling in commercial views of landscapes began to fashion a new aesthetic in landscape photography, establishing itself as a niche market of a serious artistic genre. Especially in England, Germany, France and Scandinavian countries photographers started to reflect a Romantic style; encapsulating a sense of the sublime (Rosenblum 1997:112). Topics included solitary nature unaltered by humans, and romantic themes such as ruins, mountains gorges, rugged rocks and waterfalls. Most often the work of Edward Burtynsky is explained as seamlessly fitting this romantic landscape photography tradition of the late nineteenth century in Europe (Diehl 2006; Hodgins & Thompsen 2011; Peeples 2011; Zehle 2008). In fact, in an interview Burtynsky states that if he would have been born in that era, most likely it would have been the kind of photography he would make (Torosian 2003:46). There is however one crucial difference in Burtynsky's photography that conflicts with this landscape genre. Instead of landscapes of untouched nature in opposition to the human, Burtynsky represents altered landscapes by human industry to specifically trigger a questioning of the problematic relation between human and environment. He states:

I began photographing the “pristine” landscape, but I felt I was born a hundred years too late to be searching for the sublime in nature. [...] I decided that what was relevant for our times were pictures that showed how we have changed the landscape in significant ways in the pursuit of progress (47).

Preliminary visions of these altered landscapes had already been photographed by the early generation of 1865 in the United States who explored, under the auspices of the government surveys and expeditions and railroads, how industrialization started to change the landscape. They used the photograph to both celebrate technology, as well as expressing the reverence for the landscape being threatened by its advance (Rosenblum 1997:144). Throughout the 1860s Carleton E. Watkins photographed wilderness landscapes, and little else, yet between 1875 and 1880 he started to photograph subjects such as the logging works and trackages of railroad systems (Naef 1975:87). Albeit it never became his main subject matter, these photographs were the first steps in thinking about the human influence upon the landscape. It was one of the earliest attempts to forming a genre of landscape photography that relates to the European art tradition of Romanticism, yet meddles with this genre by representing a different kind of landscape; one that is not solely romantic untouched nature, but affected by the dominating human influence on earth.

About a century later, in the 1970s, a group of photographers, loosely grouped together as ‘New Topographics’, fully established this new genre as they began to depict an American landscape that was no longer innocent or unspoiled, but forever marked by the traces of human intervention (Peeples 2011:376). Their name was acquired from the exhibition *New Topographics: Photographs of Man-Altered Landscapes* in 1975, curated by William Jenkins at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, which was a clear reference to nineteenth-century topographic photographers such as Carleton E. Watkins, yet also an acknowledgement of the alteration of those explored landscapes in the twentieth century. Among the New Topographics were photographers such as Robert Adams, Lewis Baltz, Joe Deal, Frank Gohlke, Art Sinsabaugh and Stephen Shore, who questioned as one of the first prominent examples in the history of photography the distinction between natural and cultural landscapes by ironizing the ‘pristine’ landscape such as it was photographed in the nineteenth-century, as well as the post-war images of landscape photographers such as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams (Jenkins 1975). In photographing the signs of the lost American dream, such as impoverished boomtowns, mobile homes and lower-middle-class housing tracts, they questioned the validity of some of the most mythologized imagery in the Western art historical tradition: the natural landscape.¹¹

¹¹ Despite the influence of the New Topographics on future generations of landscape photographers there has been fairly little scholarship on their work, and outside the art world there are only a few familiar with them. For the most significant and lengthy scholarly treatment see Deborah Bright (1985) ‘Of Mother Nature and Marlboro Man’.

Vicky Goldberg and Robert Bruce Silberman explain the altered landscapes of the New Topographics were largely constructed according to three different compositional structures (1999:200). The first is the ‘photographic plea’: images of beautiful and pristine sites that are in danger of destruction, or that have been destroyed since. The second is the ‘environmental nightmare’: here images function as apocalyptic visions of what is yet to come if we do not put a hold to the exploitation of the earth. And the third compositional structure juxtaposes the plea and the nightmare in the same photograph: the unspoiled beauty is positioned within the same pictorial image next to the despoiled sites.

Jennifer Peeples argues the taxonomy of landscape photography, such as it was developed by Goldberg and Silberman, does not adequately categorize the work of contemporary landscape photographers such as Edward Burtynsky (2011:376). The work of Burtynsky, albeit clearly referencing to early landscape photographers such as Carleton E. Watkins and the New Topographics group of the 1970s, differs in its subject matter, aesthetics and strategies. Instead of contrasting the plea and the nightmare, Peeples argues Burtynsky’s work creates beauty *in* destruction (376); they are aesthetically beautiful images of devastated environments.

Consequently, this compositional structure makes it impossible to have a straightforward and rigid argumentation on the alteration of landscapes. It problematizes what is considered ‘beautiful’¹² and what is ‘devastation’, but also contests the victim-perpetrator division and who needs to be protected and saved from what. It is in this sense that the photography of Edward Burtynsky contributes something different to contemporary environmental debates. Deborah Bright (1985) argues the failure of New Topographics was their default to historicize their subject and neglecting the articulation of a clear social critique; instead they remained mere ‘art objects’ without any social concern of the photographer. And despite their use of irony to expose the false consciousness of the photographers in the nineteenth century capturing the ‘pristine’ West that never was inhabited – not only were there already native Americans living in the lands, also the nineteenth-century photographers obviously left their footprints in order to photograph their views (Banham 1987:5) – the New Topographics conveyed an ethical ambiguity that did not manage to go beyond a negative trope to expose a frontier myth of the West (Owens 1992:149). The irony and lack of rigorous ambitions to let their landscape photography have an actual impact on the social reality of the world resulted in the renouncement of their work to contribute productively to debates on environmentalism.

What I will demonstrate in this thesis is that the landscapes in Burtynsky’s work eloquently

¹² I have put ‘beautiful’ within inverted commas to point the attention to the historical and cultural construction of the term. There is a large field of study that engages with questions of aesthetics and beauty in (visual) arts, hence there is not fixed meaning or understanding of the term. I am here referring to a general and standard idea of what is considered ‘beautiful’ in terms of an aesthetic pleasure.

visualize a level of complexity of the landscape that has not been portrayed before, thereby contribute as political tools to environmentalism. What will become clear through the three case studies is that his images have a certain aesthetic quality through their compositionality – a beauty *in* destruction as Peeples (2011:376) argues – that adopts a romantic view of sublime landscapes, yet problematizes the stabilized natural landscape through the subject matter of landscapes that are both nature and culture at the same time. Furthermore, as a crucial element in his photographs, they visualize a sense of scale on which the environment is being affected by the human. The latter, namely the size of the alteration, is one of the important reasons that makes it difficult to conceive the current obscure effects of the human influence on the environment. Phrased differently, today it is a ‘perceptual challenge’ in the most literal sense of the word, to understand the state of the human-environment relation and its condition. Grasping the state of this relationship is not only a challenge to comprehend what is caused by whom and why. It is foremost the scale on which things are happening that is in need of strategies in order to cope with its vastness. The problem of environmentalism is so big, that it is almost impossible to conceive it.

By using the landscape as a lens to approach this challenge, Burtynsky’s work is exemplary in representing the large-scale perspectives on the altered environments by human influence. His photographs visualize these conditions through – what might seem obvious but is crucial here – a distant view of zoomed-out, wide shots from a high angle. As a result this compositionality forms a wide overview of a large space: a traditional ‘horizontal’ landscape format implying an endless sweep of land. What I am suggesting here is that in order to cope with the *perceptual challenge* of environmentalism, it is not only important what kind of spaces are visualized, but foremost the scale of those spaces. The most proficient strategy to encompass as much space as possible within one image is thus through the genre of the landscape.

To use photography as the medium to capture these altered landscapes brings in an extra dimension that is of particular interest for environmental debates, namely the idea it has a specific relation to ‘reality’ and representing the ‘real’. The next section will unpack this argument further by demonstrating how photography visualizes a ‘visible evidence’ of the changing environment. In doing so, I thereby situate the landscape photography of Burtynsky in the broader field of ‘environmental art’.

1.3 The almost unimaginable

One of the main conviction of this thesis is that artistic practices, in specific landscape photography, can play significant roles in the visualization of the state of the relation between human and environment, and can touch people in an affective manner to take action in their daily lives. As Lynn Keller states: “The arts can influence people through emotionally and intellectually

compelling exposures of present conditions and of the material and ethical implications of traditional assumptions and current practices (2012:581).” and “[W]e inhabitants of the Anthropocene epoch need artworks that help us think about what is almost unimaginable: works that attain a large-scale perspective on the actual conditions of our degraded and racially, though perhaps, unspectacularly, altered environment (582).”

In order to visualize what this ‘almost unimaginable’ is, the connection with photography is essential here. That is because, in contrast to other visual practices such as painting, the specificity of the medium photography (digitally not manipulated) can only picture what is, and not what is unimaginable. To explain, in a straightforward and general understanding, it can be said that the camera only captures what is front of it, and cannot picture something that is not there, something that only exists in the minds of people and not in ‘real life’. In contrast, the hand of the artist paints what is in the mind and the subject of the painting does not necessarily need to be actually present in front of the painter. This specific relation of photography to ‘reality’ – it can only represent a real and existing environment that is in front of the camera – is what makes it a powerful political tool for environmentalism. When it comes to environmental art, Andrew Brown states it is not surprising many artists use photography as a medium to shed light on the relation between human and environment, since throughout history it has been associated with objectivity, hence being the most appropriate form to document the external world “truthfully and honestly” (2014:18). The photograph literally functions as ‘visible evidence’ of the environmental condition. In other words, I argue here that the medium of photography does something different in comparison to other artistic practices, and therefore can have a different effect – while possible invoking different affects – with regard to environmental politics. In order to understand how photography is a powerful political tool for environmentalism, a historical contextualization of the relation between photography, objectivity and reality is necessary.

One of the most ground breaking critiques on photographic images, and how they manufacture a sense of reality, is provided by Susan Sontag in the 1970s. With the invention of the *camera obscura* photography was considered a practice with a mere copy machine; the photographer operates, but it is the camera that sees (Sontag 1971:88-89). Within this logic, the photographer was not interfering, but an acute observer. The camera was considered an observation station that implied a notion of objectivity and the hand was reduced to a device for the camera. However, since the mid-nineteenth century, critics contested the Enlightenment idea of the image as the perfect, transparent window on the world, the medium through which reality is represented. That is because it quickly became clear that people take different images of the same thing, hence photographs are foremost evidences of what an individual sees, and not the camera.

Today a large body of (feminist) visual studies has long exposed this impartial truth of the

camera as a myth (Barthes 1981; Goodman 1976; hooks 2003; Jones 2010; Mirzoeff 2002; Mitchell 1986; Mulvey 2006; Rancière 2004; Pollock 1988; Sontag 1971). The act of photographing is not just a passive observing, despite the camera being an observation station. As Sontag explains, a photograph is an event in itself with peremptory rights to interfere, to invade or to ignore certain things that are going on (1971:11). And as Ariella Azoulay further elaborates, every photographic image is “always, of necessity, a product of an encounter, even if a violent one, between a photographer, a photographed subject, and a camera” (2008:13). Furthermore, this encounter can never be presented fully, as the image is always partial, obscured and questionable (191). What is visible in the photograph on the one hand attests to that ‘what was there’, but on the other hand that ‘what was there’ can *never* be the only thing that is visible in the photograph (126-127). Azoulay alludes here to the role of the spectator to take part, to take responsibility, and to provide a visual literacy to, as it were, speak on behalf of the photograph (169). With this point she directly criticizes both Roland Barthes and Susan Sontag, who she claims reduce the role of the spectator to making mere aesthetic judgments, which would imply it is possible to have a stable meaning of what is visible in the photograph (130). According to Azoulay a photograph is not given and easy accessible, let alone encompass only one definition or explanation. A photograph is always partial and therefore requires “collaboration” (411) and “negotiation” (311) of its viewers.

What is thus important to address is that Edward Burtynsky does not merely ‘documents’ landscapes, but rather ‘constructs’ them. As Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain: “[T]he creation of an image through a camera lens always involves some degree of subjective choice through selection, framing, and personalization (2009:16).” And as Donna Haraway states: “There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds (1988:583).”

Today images are considered enigmas; they are understood as a “sort of sign that presents a deceptive appearance of naturalness and transparency concealing an opaque, distorting, arbitrary mechanism of representation, a process of ideological mystification” (Mitchell 1986:8). Images are not static entities, but ‘active agents’ that are located in a network of exchanges that are permeated by power relations (Sturken and Cartwright 2009:4). In other words, images function in a system of representation in which power, ideology, knowledge and vision are interconnected, and that determines what is visible and invisible, and for whom.¹³ A visualizing practice such as

¹³ See for a valuable theoretical framework here the work of Jacques Rancière (2004) to understand how, within the Western context, images function in a system of naturalized and internalized beliefs and ideas. He distinguishes three different ‘regimes’ throughout history and demonstrates how each regime has a specific relationship between aesthetics and politics that not only reveals what is common to communities, but also their forms of making things visible and invisible. To what extent an individual has the ability or inability to take charge of what is common to a community depends on, what Rancière refers to as, ‘the distribution of the sensible’.

photography is thus always “a question of the power to see” (Haraway 1988:585).

However, despite considering a photograph as partial visual data that needs translation, what remains unresolved here is the tension between the idea of ‘reality’ and the degree of subjective choice of the photographer. Furthermore, how does this double association of photography relates to being ‘visible evidence’ for environmental issues? Sontag explains photographs do not simply render reality, but reality is evaluated and scrutinized for its fidelity to photographs (1971:87). In other words, photographs have become the norm for the way in which things appear to us that are considered reality. This idea of truth-value is culturally and historically rooted in the photographic image: what is real is what you see on the photograph, because you took a picture of it with a camera. The fact that we understand photographs having an evidentiary force that exceeds other arts is thus culturally and ideologically constructed. A useful approach or method to understand more thoroughly how this works for photography is semiology. It is impossible to cover within this chapter the elaborate analytical vocabulary for describing how signs make sense. Therefore I have selected the work of Charles S. Peirce as analytical emphasis.

Peirce, an American philosopher and scientist and a contemporary of Ferdinand de Saussure, further refined Saussure’s model of how systems of arbitrary signs work by making a differentiation between the ways in which the relation between the signifier and signified is understood. He created a ‘second trichotomy of signs’, which refers to the division into icons, indexes and symbols (Wollen 1998:83). The main important quality of an iconic sign is its likeness or resemblance. According to Peirce, an icon is a sign which represents its object mainly by its similarity (83). An indexical sign is typified by virtue of an existential and inherent relation between itself and its object – the signifier and signified (83). Different from the iconic sign, whose resemblance quality suffices to comprehend meaning, the indexical sign only obtains meaning by a trace of presence of the signified (83). Photography or photographic images are the result of the basic iconic code combined with the indexical one. As Peirce explains:

Photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that in certain respects they are exactly like the objects they represent. But this resemblance is due to the photographs having been produced under such circumstances that they were physically forced to correspond point by point to nature. In that aspect, then, they belong to the second class of signs, those by physical connection (cited in Wollen, 84).

The technique of photosensitive paper results in a visual likeness with a degree of ‘truthfulness’ and

accuracy, and consequently it appears the represented object is being ‘imprinted’ on the image.¹⁴ As feminist theorist Elizabeth Cowie explains further: “This indexicality has seemed to guarantee photography and cinematography’s truth to reality (2007:91).” The indexical dimension of photography makes a photographic image appear as if it possesses ‘the traces of the real’; it has a ‘real connection’ to what is represented. This indexical quality thus results in a reciprocal relation between the reality and the photographic sign. Accordingly, the photograph is determined and affects, is forced to correspond to and directs the attention to the object, the one visible *in* the photograph. This makes the photographic image having a specific privileged relation with reality: it is *haunted by it*.¹⁵

The indexical quality of the photograph is thus an evidential force that points to the ‘real landscape’ in the world. This specific understanding of photography is what makes photographs ‘visible evidence’, hence makes photography especially interesting to provide proof of environmental changes. Instead of numbers and facts, you *see* the visible evidence of the ecological crisis: you see the real landscape. Hence, not only does photography generate social and political power, it is the notion of the “visual evidence of the extent or severity of the problem” (Peeples 2011:374) that makes photography a crucial productive political medium for environmentalism.

In the case of Edward Burtynsky, what strengthens this notion further is the genre of documentary photography which scholars, critics and curators ascribe to his work (Bozak 2008; Pauli 2005; Zelhe 2008). In the broadest sense, this specific genre covers all non-fictional representations, hence obtains the idea of opposing that what is fantasy; not real. The first photographs that were labelled as documentary represented the social and political realities of real, ordinary people. Yet the claim for truth was a key issue from the start, as documentary photographers alike other photographers are not neutral observers, despite them photographing non-fictional scenes (Warner Marien 2006:276-277). Hence this ostensible notion of objectivity in documentary came under attack.

The word ‘documentary’ was first coined by John Grierson in his review of the film *Moana* in 1929 (277) and he provided the renowned definition of “a ‘creative’ treatment of actuality” (Rosenthal 1988:13). Bill Nichols, one of the founding scholars in the field of documentary studies, adds: “[D]ocumentaries were forms of re-presentation, never clear windows onto ‘reality’ (49).” In other words, documentary – whether that is photography, film or any other visual medium –

¹⁴ See for a further elaboration on the photograph in relation to semiology the work of Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* (1982). Here he explains that, despite the manipulation of framing, cropping and filtering, a photograph always retains a visual trace of what was there when the photographs was made. A photograph thus always carries its referent with itself in a way other visual imagery cannot.

¹⁵ See for an elaborate analysis of how this is of specific importance in relation to documentary film and photography the dissertation of Domitilla Olivieri (2012) *Haunted by Reality. Towards a Feminist Study of Documentary Film: Indexicality, Vision and the Artifice*.

depends on a selection and manipulation of political codes. The legitimization of the film or photographs does not depend on the techniques; old or new techniques both manipulate, select, edit and organize. According to Brian Winston the real concern has to do with questions of purpose (28). Stories must be told, and the role of documentary is to set the agenda and define the important issues for the public debate; as he argues, the key function of documentary is to continue asking the hard and disturbing questions pertinent to our age (29). This resonates seemingly with Susan Sontag's claim when she states that photographs have a "determining influence in shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to" (2003:105). What we see is what we talk about.

Feminist scholars in documentary studies provide a critical contribution to this idea, as they not merely deconstruct the 'real' in documentary, but also question its function (Ann Kaplan 1983; Minh-ha 1988, 1992; Waldman & Walker 1999). Elizabeth Cowie points the attention to how documentary is "an art of "seeing anew", as evidentiary of the contingent as well as the socially organized worlds that, juxtaposed, bring about new connections" (2007:97). While tracing the historical tradition of documentary studies, semiology and film theory she questions the possibility of 'seeing anew' through an estrangement of the everyday, in which the use of documentary enables a response that exceeds the factual, and engages the viewer to think "outside of the givenness of the so-called factual and its immediacy" (100). In other words, the question of the real in documentary precisely pushes to engage with the obviousness of reality and the everyday, and makes the viewer aware of that what is not represented, and outside of the frame. Again, this ties in with feminist goals to change the everyday practices such as it was elaborated upon in the introduction. With regard to environmentalism Braidotti's notion of feminist sustainability entails being an "ethical subject of sustainable becoming" that "practices a humble kind of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life" (2006:278). In this sense the working definition of 'documentary as a creative treatment of reality that sets the agenda for the public debate' is indispensable in relation to the landscape photography of Edward Burtynsky. Because of the idea of reality in his photography, his work instigates questions of sustainability, and does so by making the viewer reflect on their daily practices in relation to the landscapes in his photographs. In other words, his work engages the viewer to situate themselves in relation to the image, as well as in the image itself. It is an encounter with the photograph that makes the viewer situate themselves in the landscape on the photograph, and simultaneously in their own surrounded environment. The photograph being 'visible evidence' troubles this relationship, because it demands a more than mere aesthetic experience. As I have argued in the introduction, it asks for a certain sustainable relation.

The role of photography as an artistic practice that intervenes in debates on the relation between the human and environment is therefore becoming more pertinent and worth exploring further. In the last two decades scholars already have begun to examine how images function in

environmental communication, primarily focussing on images of nature (DeLuca & Demo 2000; Dobrin & Morey 2009; Holloran & Clark 2006).¹⁶ One of the earliest examples is the photograph ‘The Blue Marble’, taken on December 7, 1972, by the crew of the Apollo 17 spacecraft at a distance of approximately 45.000 kilometres. During environmental activism in the 1970s this photograph became the depiction of the vulnerability of the earth in the endless black space; the wide public acclaimed through this image that “the planet is dying” (Heller 1993:219). ‘The Blue Marble’ became the icon of a new global consciousness that nourished a call for a more sustainable relation between the human and the planet.



‘The Blue Marble’, by Apollo 17 crew: Eugene Cernan, Ronald Evans and Jack Schmitt, 1972

As ‘The Blue Marble’ demonstrates, visual representations are often necessary for eliciting social response. Therefore, to engage with environmental problems, a lack of visual representation can mean a lack of social or political power, as there is no visual evidence of the extent or severity of the problem (Peeples 2011:374). Today, over forty years later, Western cultures are increasingly permeated by visual images that produce a wide array of effects, emotions and responses. The increasing awareness of ecological matters has given added impetus and urgency to many artistic practices. As Andrew Brown states in *Art and Ecology*: “It seems almost impossible to walk into a contemporary gallery or museum these days, or to browse through an art magazine or website, without coming across work that expresses some kind of engagement with the natural world (2014:6).” According to Brown what was once an area of interest for a relatively small group of people, in the past five years has become part of the artistic mainstream (6). Today art seeks to ask questions about the environment, not as a peripheral activity, but at a centre stage, and thereby

¹⁶ See for one of the most recent publications for example the special issue of *Public Culture* (2014) vol. 26, no. 2, issue 73 on ‘Visualizing the Environment’.

responding to and shaping debates in broader society.¹⁷

With ‘a relatively small group of people’ Brown refers to ‘environmental art’ such as it emerged in the 1960s, not surprisingly during a period of increased concern for the environment, specifically in the United States. At the time artists such as Carl André, Michael Heizer, Nancy Holt, Walter de Maria, Robert Morris and Richard Serra used a wide range of artworks, most of them site-specific and existing outdoors, to call attention to the landscape (Kleiner & Mamiya 2006:831). A leading environmental artist was the American Robert Smithson who manipulated vast quantities of earth and rock at isolated sites, such as the famous work *Spiral Jetty* (1970).



Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson, 1970

At the time and throughout the years these different types of performative environmental art have been given a host of labels such as eco-art, ecological art, environmental sculpture, land art and site-specific art. John E. Thornes (2008) therefore expresses a need for a new genre that covers these labels, as well as representational practices such as painting, video, photography and film. He uses the term ‘environmental art’ as a useful overarching genre that encompasses different works of art – representational, nonrepresentational and performative – that are concerned with the environment and have been composed or displayed either in- or outdoors. In this manner the genre is not limited to the environmental art such as it was prominent during the 1960s and 70s, but broadens the genre by including representational forms and other artistic practices that ask similar questions on the environment yet in different manners. In doing so the genre not only includes landscape photography such as that of Edward Burtynsky, but also art forms that transgress the seemingly rigid boundaries between representational, nonrepresentational and performative. An example is the installation *The Weather Project* (2003/2004) by Olafur Eliasson in Tate Modern, which questions

¹⁷ A recent example of this emphasis on ecological matters in the arts in the Netherlands *Yes Naturally. How Art Saves the World* in the Den Haag Gemeentemuseum in 2013. Here fifty artists engaged with the current (un)sustainable relation between the human and the planet.

the relationship between society and nature by representing nineteenth-century foggy London and yet is also nonrepresentational and performative since it demands the participation of the audience by lying on the floor and thereby including their bodies within the installation.

Thus to speak of contemporary environmental art entails a broad and inclusive genre in which the landscape is a prominent, albeit not exclusive, focus, and in which different methods, approaches and beliefs result in a wide range of artistic forms. Some artists work with a raw materials to make art pieces in the landscape itself, such as the work of Nils-Udo or Andy Goldsworthy. Others work with photography and digital tools to create images that critically reflect upon mass consumerism, such as the work of Chris Jordan and Edward Burtynsky. A third example is artist collectives such as 'Red Earth' that work together with farmers, architects, ecologists, archaeologists and other communities to create experimental connections between art, science and nature. An overarching theme is the growing awareness that the condition of the environment is dependent on a set of interrelated systems (such as ecology, politics, technology, social practices etc.), which consequently demands interdisciplinary approaches to understand and solve the problems facing the planet (Brown 2014:7-8). According to Brown, the artist's role is not to provide definitive answers, as merely asking the question of the environment is often enough (8). What makes the work of Edward Burytnsky valuable here, is that his photography is exemplary in questioning the relation between human and environment by precisely visualizing this idea of interrelated systems: his manufactured landscapes are the necessary cause and result of our material everyday life. The argument that I will develop throughout this thesis is that the landscapes in the photography of Burtynsky are not only representations of sites *over there*, but they simultaneously relate to perceptions of the spaces that we are living in *here*.

His work is therefore very different from the images that have been studied in the past two decades in environmental communication. Here the primary focus has been on images of nature, in specific natural landscapes. These studies analysed the functioning of nature in advertising, news reports, tourism and activism (Corbett 2006; DeLuca & Demo 2000; Dobrin & Morey 2009; Halloran & Clark 2006; Hope 2004; Slawter 2008; Smith 1998; Stamou & Paraskevopoulos 2004). In problematizing the issues of environmentalism, Burtynsky's work instead does not take for granted what nature is, but problematizes the nature/culture binary through the representation of manufactured landscapes. In this sense a study of Burtynsky's work such as it is deployed in this thesis is very different, because it not only situates his images in an artistic context in which they communicate with their audience, but also demonstrates how his work relates to environmentalism by representing images of 'naturecultures' (Haraway 2003), and not nature and natural landscapes. This is of particular interest for feminist environmentalism, as it is precisely this problematizing of the categories nature and culture, and thereby the relation between human and environment that is

necessary in order to build a more sustainable relation. The next section will therefore map out the field of feminist Anthropocene from the roots of ecofeminism in the 1960s up to (new)materialist, posthumanist and Anthropocene approaches of today.

1.4 Thinking the environment in the feminist Anthropocene

Burtynsky's photography is not only part of an increasing field of environmental art, it is also part of a much larger field of interdisciplinary approaches to think of the relation between nature and culture, the human and the environment. Similar to artistic practices, recent years demonstrate a popularization of environmental issues in a theoretical manner within different faculties, fields and disciplines of academia.¹⁸

As explained in the introduction, the umbrella term 'Anthropocene' provides a powerful framework to think differently of the relation between human and environment. Within this larger field feminists have detected that the recent notion of the Anthropocene might affirm in some ways feminist arguments of the human dominating and destroying the earth, while at the same time, these 'popular' or 'mainstream' theories of Anthropocene environmentalism deprive feminism from the grounds on which such indictments are being based.¹⁹ In other words, the genealogy of a feminist Anthropocene has been largely ignored and erased by the (masculine) authority of science that now claims to pay innovative attention to current pressing issues of environmentalism.²⁰ They renounce that the claim to critically (re)think the categories of human and nature, and their relationship, has been a feminist concern for decades already.

Ecofeminism as a term is often associated with the work of the French Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974), (Gaard 1998; Salleh 1991), however, it became an informal term in the 1970s in relation to the so-called development activities (Mack-Canty 2004:169). Perhaps best known is the Chipko Movement that started in India, with Vandana Shiva, today a most respected feminist activist and scholar. The movement was initiated by village women of the Himalayan to protect

¹⁸ To illustrate the diversity: the Department of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara announced a tenure-track Assistant Professor position in Media and the Environment starting on July 1, 2015. In April this year, Sage journals published the first issue of the new journal *The Anthropocene Review*, a trans-disciplinary journal that brings together articles on all aspects of research pertaining to the Anthropocene, from earth and environmental sciences, social sciences, material sciences, and humanities. From April 30 to May 3 of 2015, the NEMLA (Northeast Modern Language Association) of Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada, will organize the seminar 'Environmental Futurity', in which they interrogate hegemonic modes of environmental futurity and consider alternative or resistant modes in literature and culture. From 3 to 5 September this year, Utrecht University organized the joint annual conference 'Philosophy After Nature' with speakers engaging with notions of critique, science, ecology, technology and subjectivity as bound up with conceptions of nature.

¹⁹ I have put popular and mainstream in between quotation marks, because these terms are rather diffuse and can be problematic in their connotations. Here I am referring to theories that are not in particular identified as feminist, such as the two examples explained in this chapter of Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton.

²⁰ From April 10 to 12 2014, the Center for 21st Century Studies organized the 'Anthropocene Feminism' conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, United States of America. As stated on the website, this was one of the important motivations for organizing this conference. <http://c21uwm.com/anthropocene/> [last accessed 19-02-2015]

their forests from deforestation by felling through the non-violent act of ‘hugging trees’; a practice that was quickly adopted throughout the country, and inspired others all over the world. Also in the Western context feminists participated in environmental activism, in which they drew important connections between environmental damage done by humans, and militarism, sexism, racism and classism.

In the 1980s activism expanded itself into ecofeminist theory which developed more thoroughly in utilizing the principles of ecology – that is, the interdependence and diversity of all life forms – with the insight of feminism into all forms of oppression such as race, class, gender, sexuality and physical abilities, and the oppression of nature. In its theoretical base it calls for an end to all oppression, and a sense of self that is interconnected with all life. One of the most famous quotes used here is of Adrienne Rich: “[I]f it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth (1984:214).” What is most often depicted as the framework that authorizes these forms of oppression is patriarchy, an ideology that justifies and supports a system where men or the masculine is considered superior to women or the feminine. This ideology is based upon a fundamental self/other distinction in which this self is separate from and superior to the other. This is opposed to the ecofeminist conception of self as interdependent and interconnected with all life (Gaard 1993:2). The disconnected sense of self is to be understood as the root of the ecological crisis, as it fails to recognize connections with others. This notion of self in opposition to other – and thereby a construction of hierarchy in which one is considered less than the other – can lead to violence in any form of oppression, including against nature.²¹

As early as the 1990s ecofeminists started reflecting thoroughly on the lack of acknowledgement of feminist knowledges within environmentalism. In *Ecofeminism: women, animals, nature* (1993), an edited collection of essays by established ecofeminists, Greta Gaard points out a possible explanation:

What has kept ecofeminists from joining wholeheartedly with environmentalists thus far is a fear of the ecological 'melting pot'. Repeatedly, women who join men in progressive movements have been silenced or relegated to traditionally feminine, supportive roles (5).

This implies a dubiety on the side of ecofeminists to consciously eschew mainstream environmentalism; a strategic move to prevent women from ending up in subjugated positions again. However, it also relates to deeply rooted (behaviour) patterns and structural relationships. It

²¹ The notion of self/other has been contested heavily in its oppositional, dualistic and hierarchical construction which resulted in a rich canon of feminist scholarship that has pushed this binary to its limits and beyond, enforcing a subject construction that is based on (sexual) difference, and foremost thinking differently about this difference. That is, not as different *from*, and therefore as lack or less, but as different *within*. See for elaborate contributions for example the work of Genevieve Lloyd (1993), Rosi Braidotti (2011) and Elizabeth Grosz (2005).

is not just a matter of wanting to participate or not. What is at stake is a need to transform the cultural infrastructures; our frameworks of thinking, relating and acting.

Two of the main important critiques that were pointed out in the 1990s towards mainstream ‘green philosophy’ – and which partially apply to today’s mainstream Anthropocene theories – is that it is a gender-blind analysis and that it retains the basic androcentric or male-centred premises. Problematic about an ostensibly gender-neutral theory is that it protects the power structures by concealing the ideological basis of exploitative relationships; it hides problems of how power is centred and subsequent structures of dominance (Birkeland 1993:25-26). Janis Birkeland debunks the gender-blindness of what she effectively calls ‘Manstream’ theory on environmentalism, as polarizing masculine and feminine archetypes, and reconfirming the historic association of women and nature. Furthermore, it perpetuates the idea of Man as autonomous from nature, universalizes male experiences and values, and links the power over others with masculinity (24-25). To this end, mainstream or ‘Manstream’ environmentalism is gender-blind for its own male-centeredness and sexism.

The second point of critique that Birkeland identified seems to be the most pertinacious of all, as it remains the main critique of contemporary (eco)feminists on mainstream environmentalist philosophy and theory. In the 1990s Birkeland detected the tendency among ‘green philosophy’ to see anthropocentrism as the main problem operating behind the environmental crisis, as it supposedly legitimizes the exploitation of nature. To be more specific, a major concept in the field was (and is) to understand the belief of human beings as central or the most significant species on the earth being the root of the environmental problems: the Anthropocene epoch. However, instead of anthropocentrism, Birkeland claims it just a symptom of a deeper problem, namely androcentrism (16). In other words, the problem is not that humans consider themselves the centre of the world, but that it is the male-human or masculine viewpoint that is the main point of reference. The gender-blindness conceals this malecentredness with the cover of the human in its most universalised and unified form.

To illustrate how this feminist critique has been overlooked in mainstream Anthropocene thought the influential scholars Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton, are exemplary here. In *The Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Science into Democracy* (2004), Latour proposes a new approach to political ecology. In a compelling elaboration he states the need of rethinking the terms ‘ecology’, ‘politics’ and ‘nature’ in relation to the sciences, and points the attention to the construction of these terms, formed through networks of instruments, and subsequent notions of value and factuality (2-3). He concludes: “[T]he belief that political ecology is interested in nature is the childhood illness of the field, keeping it in a state of impotence by preventing it from ever understanding its own practice (5).” and “My hypothesis is that the ecology movement have sought

to position themselves on the political chessboard without redrawing its squares, without redefining the rules of the game, without redesigning the pawns (5).” This call for understanding your own practices and analysing the complex historical, cultural and social construction of categories such as ‘nature’ and ‘human’ seems to relate closely to an (eco)feminist requisite of ‘situated knowledges’ and a rethinking of what is nature and what is culture (‘naturecultures’). Yet, throughout his book of over 300 pages there is no critical reflection upon the ostensible universal category of ‘human’. Latour refers to feminist theory in just two sentences on two pages and in two footnotes in which he credits feminists for having shown the assimilation of women to nature, and debunking the unmarked category of ‘man’. He thus remains gender-blind, and deprives feminism from its importance by narrowing down forty decades of feminist scholarship on environmentalism in two arguments.

As a second example, in ‘Environmentalism’ Timothy Morton states: “Ecofeminism holds that the ecological crisis results from long-term patriarchal social structures and beliefs. Ecofeminists observe that the domination of women is a symptom of a larger oppression: nature has been objectified, turned into an other, a mute object of sexist sadism (2005:697).” Also here there is not only the lack of references to feminist scholars, it also implies a unified idea of what ecofeminism is, thereby similar to Latour, discarding the historical development, complexity and diversity of the field.

As a final example, in ‘Treating Objects like Women’ Morton claims ecocriticism should revisit a notion of essentialism such as it was subscribed by French and 1970s American feminism. I argue this claim demands a very careful historical and elaborate argumentation that delves deep into the decades of quarrel in feminist scholarship. Unfortunately, Morton seems to dismiss the complexity of this manner in all its sensitivities, by boldly stating “relationist and process-based ontologies do not serve ecofeminism well” (2013:56). According to him, scholarship in the fields of gender and sexuality tends to be anti-essentialism, and considers “things as simply the sum of their relations, or instantiations of a process” (58). To state feminist scholarship is anti-essentialistic is an oversimplification and undermining of the important motivations behind the suspicion of essence among feminists. There is a long tradition of strategically deconstructing essentialism in order to disprove the violent notion that women and any other subjugated minorities are inferior to the dominant male position in society.²² Especially the relation between woman and nature has been severely disentangled, due to its oppressive character of understanding women to have a ‘closer

²² Yet, there has also been a reversed development, especially within (feminist) postcolonial studies, namely ‘strategic essentialism’. This concept was introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the 1980s and refers to a strategy in which certain groups present themselves, despite their strong differences, with a simplified and ‘essentialized’ group identity, in order to achieve their goals. See for example her essay (1988) ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ in: *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

connection to nature' hence irrational and emotional (Lloyd 1993). Instead, understandably so, the category of women was transported to cultural realm (you become a woman) and thus inside the realm of the human (that is, the autonomous, free, rational man) (Alaimo 2010). My argument is thus that feminism and essentialism are not solely terms that can be twisted around and combined in a new manner to, as Morton aims, "allow for more degrees of freedom in the possibility spaces of scholarship in ecology, gender, and sexuality" (59).

This tension – in specific the lack of recognition of feminist theories and knowledge in environmentalism – has been anticipated within the academic context in Feminist (Science) Studies. Throughout the years ecofeminism has embraced heterogeneous strategies and solutions, expanding and evolving the field in different directions correlating the broad vision of a more egalitarian world which asserts the fundamental interconnectedness of all life. After the 1990s feminist scholars have produced extensive work on this inquiry. Contemporary strands of feminist philosophy and theory labelled as queer ecology, feminist environmentalism, posthumanism and new materialism have broadened feminist Anthropocene in terms of questions of agency, materiality, sustainability, the dualistic structure of human and nature, and the idea of a human subject as de-centralized. They are all careful attempts to rethink these relations based on notions such as accountability and responsibility of the acknowledgement of the interrelation and interdependency between the human and the environment; humans and nonhumans (Alaimo 2010; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007, 2010; Braidotti 2011, 2013; Grosz 2005; Haraway 2003, 2008; Wolfe 2010).

As Kathrine Gibson-Graham points out: "The Anthropocene calls to us to recognize that we all participants in the 'becoming world', where everything is interconnected (2011:4)." This is a project that requires a reframing of our living worlds and a challenge to live differently with all others on this earth. In fact, Val Plumwood argues that if our species – the human – will not survive the ecological crisis, this is due to its failure to imagine and establish new ways of living with all others (2007:1). She claims the only possible way is a completely different mode of humanity, or not at all. Crucial to this different 'mode of humanity' is as deconstruction of the human-centeredness of current humanity and the binary thinking of nature/culture. The latter entails a starting point of the human/nature distinction and aims at critically reflecting upon these categories as such, and reweaving this binary. The concept of 'naturecultures' by Donna Haraway (2003), that I use within this thesis as an analytical tool, is exemplary here. Deconstruction thus not results in a separation, but in connections and interdependencies: it is a project of belonging. To be more precise, a framework that does not operate on the self/other disjunction offers an ethical foundation that involves a certain sensory and intellectual receptivity.

A prominent strategy to think in such connections, and what environmental feminists early on have insisted, is an account of the materiality of all things, that is, both human and nonhuman

(Alaimo & Hekman 2009:4). Bringing back materiality and to rethink it, is a reaction to the epistemology of postmodernism that considers that everything is constituted by discursive practices, hence focussing exclusively on discourse, language, ideology and representation. The ‘material turn’ in feminism²³ instead takes matter seriously, and thereby explores questions of ontology, epistemology, as well as ethics and politics by thinking of the semiotic force, dynamics of bodies, and nature (7). It explores the interaction between the material and discursive; the relation between the human and the nonhuman. As Stacy Alaimo points out:

If nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of materiality [...] Potent ethical and political possibilities emerge from the literal contact zone between human corporeality and more-than-human nature. Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from “the environment” (2010:2).

As founding feminist texts in which this attention to materiality is underscored in a philosophical manner for environmentalism is Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies* (1994), and her later *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (2005). In opting for the significance of Darwinism she demonstrates how trans-corporeality consistently insists that the human is always already made out of the very stuff of the contingent and messy material world; the human is *part of* nature. An understanding of the substance of the human materiality as interconnected with the wider environment hence marks a profound shift in subjectivity, as Alaimo convincingly argues:

As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become the very stuff of the crises at hand (2010:20).

In the age of the feminist Anthropocene, which calls for a different mode of humanity, what is thus needed is a renewal of subjectivity, a new theory of the human subject itself. An affirmative and compelling feminist project that is of great value here is the idea of the posthuman such as it is developed by Rosi Braidotti. As aforementioned, she proposed the “ethical subject of sustainable becoming” in *Transpositions* (2006) which is grounded in materiality, has an embedded sense of accountability and responsibility, and practices this in everyday life. She further develops this mode of subjectivity as nomadic in her later work *Nomadic Subjects* (2011) in which she uses the figure

²³ It is important to keep in mind that the material turn by no means is exclusive to feminist theory. New conceptions of materiality are emerging in different disciplines such as disability studies, transgender theory, animal studies, new media studies, race studies and other fields.

of the nomad as a conceptual tool to rethink the subject as non-unitary, post-anthropocentric, embodied, non-individualistic and relational. It is in her latest work *The Posthuman* (2013) that this mode of subjectivity is fully evolved into a posthuman subject: one that is materialist, vitalist, embodied, embedded, located and which questions the sustainability of our planet as a whole. This subject has its roots in the Spinozian concept of a 'monistic universe' which refers to the idea that "matter, the world and humans are not dualistic entities structured according to principles of internal or external opposition" but instead emphasizes the "unity of all matter" (Braidotti 2013:56). The idea of monism results in a relocating of differences in which the centrality is the relation to multiple others, and not its separation. This rejection of classical Humanism and anthropocentrism thus forms the building blocks for a new mode of humanity, in the age of the Anthropocene, that expresses rich alternatives for the relationship between human and environment. Braidotti demonstrates how this radical post-anthropocentric position provides an affirmative approach to issues of environmentalism, to ecological awareness and sustainability. As she states: "It produces a new way of combining self-interests with the well-being of an enlarged community, based on environmental inter-connections (48)." It is thus through the posthuman subject, one that "works across differences" and has an "ethics of becoming", that the relation between human and environment is rethought and based on a strong sense of collectivity, community building and relationality (49).

Conclusion

This chapter demonstrated that through the work of Burtynsky three fields that ostensibly seem unrelated are in fact connected. The question of the landscape as the result of the relation between the human and the environment brings together environmentalism and feminism through the medium of photography.

I have argued how feminism provides the angle from which to approach the ecological crisis, as it deconstructs all power relations and subject constructions that caused it in the first place: a masculine viewpoint on a dualistic relation between human and nature. At the same time, feminism can therefore not be thought of without environmentalism, as these power relations and subject constructions are not only oppressing humans, but also nonhumans. A rich body of feminist scholarship provides alternative modes of humanity and subjectivity to envision a more sustainable relation between human and environment; one that starts from the idea of interconnectedness and interrelationality. In order to dispute the 'perceptual challenge' of the current troubling state of the Anthropocene I have demonstrated how the medium of photography, because of its privileged relation to 'the real', provides the useful political tool to visualize the urgent conditions of the environment that feminism and environmentalism address. The subjective aspects of photography

that frame politics, ethics and aesthetics correlate with the ‘objective’ visible evidence of the affected landscapes. The genre of landscape photography such as it has been mapped out in this chapter thus provides the compositional qualities to represent the scale on which the environment has been altered by the human. An engagement with the landscape out there on the photograph is in need of feminist perspectives of the landscapes we are in every day. How the images of Burtynsky ‘help persuade millions to join a global conversation on sustainability’,²⁴ and thereby taking accountability and responsibility for the conditions these images visualize and produce, will be explored via the three case studies presented in the subsequent chapters. The next chapter will first situate the landscape genre in its art historical context by which I critically investigate the concept of the landscape as such.

²⁴ This quote comes from the TEDtalk he gave in February 2005 where he accepted his TED Prize. See for full talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/edward_burtynsky_on_manufactured_landscapes [last accessed 12-09-2014].



'Feng Jie #3&4' by Edward Burtynsky 2002

TWO

The Landscape Tradition

Feng Jie #3&4

2.1 Destruction or not?

At first glance this diptych evokes the impression of a destructed war zone that has been severely wounded for a long period of time due to endless rivalries between humans. In a stretched out landscape that is build up out of piled rubble, stones, wood and other materials, forming a wavy sea of destruction; there is barely any building left that is still standing properly on its feet. It seems any construction that could have potentially provided shelter, let alone a place to live, has been destroyed. On the left side in the front, a group of ten people, which are positioned too far away from the camera to distinct any specific features, are gathered around a tent-like construction made of blue-white-red striped plastic patches with next to it a plume of smoke rising from a fire not visible in the image. Some pots and pans on a table betray this is a provisional kitchen.

In the background on the left two buildings are still standing rather firmly, even though there is no sign that betrays whether they are actually being inhabited by people. In between the two buildings a strip of green escapes from which a few trees arise. More towards the front and in the middle of the image a single tree stands as the only natural object in this defeated landscape. Despite surviving stubbornly, its right branch is already leaning towards the ground in order to surrender to its destructed surroundings. More in the middle on the right, a human figure, dressed all in black with just a hint of a white T-shirt peeking through the jacket, leans slightly too much to the right and seems to almost fall down. Instead of hinting at any kind of action or movement to

break his fall, he stands statue-like, on the verge of descending against the ground. In the front of the diptych lie several square-shaped piles of carefully sorted bricks, surrounded by rubble in which a small piece of bright red cloth sticks out and catches attention.

Also on the right image, here and there a human figure is walking or sitting amidst the destruction, all too far away from us to be distinguished in any specific way. Fires that are burning throughout the landscape towards the horizon betray there are many more people. In the middle, a tent construction is decorated with a line of colourful flags, as if it is someone's birthday. A vague background of mountains tries to break through the grey, smoggy sky that shows not even a single beam of sunlight. The only notion this landscape radiates now is that of prostrate survival. Anyone who is still alive here is lost in a wilderness of demolished urbanity.

In this chapter I will analyze 'Feng Jie #3&4' and focus on the landscape as a concept, genre and art historical tradition. I will present an overview that spans from the fifteenth century with the example of 'Diptych of Jean du Cellier' by Hans Memling, until contemporary so-called 'drone-art' of which Burtynsky's latest project *Water* is exemplary. In tracing the concept of the landscape as specific cultural, historical construction, I explore how 'Feng Jie #3&4' relates to the notion of the landscape, and to the art historical landscape genre. What I will demonstrate within this chapter is how Burtynsky appropriates this pictorial style of painting, in specific that of the Romantic period in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, through specific compositional choices as a subject matter for his photography.

To first briefly contextualize this photograph, Three Gorges Dam is arguably the most impressive project Burtynsky photographed for the series *China*. Spanning the Yangtze River and located in the Yiling District, Hubei province, this is the world's largest hydroelectric dam ever built by men. Burtynsky explains that during its building process most engineers left the project, as they considered it too big to be executed.²⁵ Over a length of 600 kilometres it took a total of fifteen days to fill up this water reservoir, which caused a measurable wobble in the earth's spinning. In 2012 the project was completed, after which 13 cities, 140 towns and 1350 villages, hence approximately one to two million people (depending on which statistics you consult) had to be relocated in order to make space for the dam; it induced the largest peacetime evacuation in history. Not surprisingly, this moving process did not happen without setbacks and difficulties. In fact, it proved to be a rather harsh and painful project affecting not only minds but also bodies of people. With basic equipment

²⁵ Burtynsky explains the context of a selection of his work in his TEDtalk (2005).

the local residents had to single-handedly demolish their own cities, literally being paid per brick by the government, as dynamite was only provided for a total of eleven buildings.²⁶

Burtynsky took a total of three trips to the Three Gorges Dam, therefore being able to carefully observe the radical transformation of the landscape. He witnessed how entire cities were taken apart and relocated by their residents in a total of only ten weeks. The diptych 'Feng Jie #3&4' represents one of these cities that was demolished in order to make space for the largest dam in the world.

2.2 Neutral colours and flattened spaces

To analyse the colour palette there are three notions – hue, saturation and value – that are important components of this diptych's compositionality. The first is hue – the actual colours of the image (Rose 2001:39) – which are here predominantly various shades of grey, brown, a little dark green from the trees, some black and white, and hints of bright red and blue. The second is saturation, the purity of the colours in relation to its appearance in the colour spectrum (39). In 'Feng Jie #3&4' the colours are not bright, intense or vivid, but nearly neutral, hence the saturation of all colours is rather low. The only colours that really stick out are the reds and blues. The third component is value, the lightness or darkness of a colour (39). Overall the colours are more light than dark; especially the shades of grey are all relatively light, hence their value is high. Also the different colours of brown are more light-brown than dark-brown. The only colours that are darker are the greens and thus have a lower value.

The effect of the colours in this diptych is that they stress the notion of sadness, being subdued and motionless. Especially the dominant grey tones evoke a tendency of loneliness, emotionless and detachment. What was once a space where people lived and loved, has been deprived from its liveliness and character. Furthermore, the memories and histories of the space are being effaced by destructing everything to the last brick, leaving nothing in its original state. This erasing of an entire city and its inhabitants is done by the very same people that formed it; they erased their own living history. The grey and brown colours emphasize the depersonalised aspect of this remaining destructed materiality. Even though the reds and blues are bright colours, they do not accomplish to lift or energize the overall grey colours.

²⁶ The consequences of this project have been enormous both in positive and negative manners, which made the Three Gorges Dam a controversial project from the beginning. For example, on the one hand seasonal flooding of farmland can now be controlled, but on the other hand hundreds of acres of fertile agricultural land had to make space to build the dam. Another example is that it is considered a product of historical state-of-the-art engineering, while it also has led to the loss of about 1300 archaeological sites. Above all, the construction of the dam has led to significant ecological changes, including increased risk of landslides, erosion, sedimentation, and endangerment of the biodiversity of wildlife.

Another crucial component for the analysis of the image is the spatial organization. There are two related aspects of this organization, namely the organization of space 'within' the image, and the way in which the spatial organization of an image offers a particular viewing position to its viewer (40). Starting with the first, on both images, the eye level – the horizon – is positioned at three-quarter of the image, therefore leaving only a quarter of the image to a grey sky. The left image is build up out of several volumes: the mountains in the left background, the buildings on the upper left, the rubble on the mid-right, the mount on which a group of ten people gathered around a tent in the front left and the piles of stones in the front right. The lines of the volumes, excluding the mountains and the buildings in the background, are more or less following lines of directions towards the right low corner of the image. The composition gives the impression there is a stream of rubble, stones and wood floating towards the position of the camera. The right image is build up out of similar volumes as its mirror image: mountains in the right background, rubble in the middle, a mount of bricks on the front right and piles of stones in the front left. Also here the lines of the volumes are following lines of directions towards the left low corner of the image. Together the composition gives a rather symmetrical impression of two floods of stones moving towards the middle of the diptych. As a result, this spatial component resembles the shape of a pit form, hence creates the association with the future water reservoir of the dam that is being build.

The organization of space in this diptych is also important in relation to perspective. The vanishing point at the horizon – the eye level at which the rays of vision converge – are in both images in the middle at three-quarter of the image. However, as aforementioned, the direction of the lines of the volumes in both images points towards the middle of the diptych. This brings in the second aspect of the spatial organization, namely the way in which the picture offers a particular position to its viewers. What happens with this diptych is an interesting play with vision and perspective. Each image is taken with one eye (the camera), and together they form two eyes with two geometrical perspectives within one diptych (one vanishing point in each photograph). But because of the organization of space (the direction of the volumes towards the middle) and the material form of the diptych (two images next to each other) these two separate images seem to form one panorama shot, that then appears as one vision again: that of the spectator.

This position of the viewer is constructed through a specific arrangement of different elements in the image. Three elements that are most prominent in 'Feng Jie #3&4' are angle, height and distance. The angle from which both images are shot is frontal, which invites a more open engagement of viewer with that what is pictured, than if the angle would be oblique (44). There is also an apparent difference in height between the spectator and what is pictured, as it seems the viewer is looking from a high-angle down. This might imply a power over the subject matter (44), but in the case of 'Feng Jie #3&4' it also serves a different function. The aspect of distance offers an

additional element here. Through the high-angle and far distance from that what is pictured, Burtynsky creates a spatial organization of the composition that draws attention, not to the specific elements in the diptych, but to the landscape as a whole. As he states himself:

Through my selection of lens, and distance from the scene, I try to flatten the space so that the elements in the image have an equal weighting – there is no predominant object. [...] I am trying to put everything into what I refer to as “the democratic distribution of light and space” across the whole field. I want everything to have an equal value so that the viewer will fall into the surface and read the detail (Torosian 2003:52).

This flattening of the space is a crucial aspect of Burtynsky’s work, and provokes certain effects and affects in the images. It could be argued that this flattening is related to the effect of not having any predominant object in the photograph, as also the human figures are abstracted and absorbed in the landscape. Curator Lori Pauli explains the strategy to not have humans as the focal point in the images is a way to not assign blame (Peeples 2011:384). The people who are perpetrators or victims of the resulting landscape are never included in the titles or the content of the images. Pauli states the reason is to not have any easy release of guilt for the audience. The people in the image are not the one to be blamed. Perhaps even more significant, they are also not victims, as the suffering of people does not directly appear in these photographs. This absence leaves open the space for viewers to question to what extent they themselves might share a part in the construction of this landscape. The flattening of the space hence complexifies the relation between the viewer and the viewed, and the victim and the blamed who needs to take responsibility for this landscape. Despite this being a valid point, the strategy to flatten the space and not give anything a dominant focus, is not only resulting in a challenging relation between the viewer and the photograph. What it enables in these photographs is for the landscape to become the main subject matter. These images are not about the people responsible for or victims of this destructed space: these photographs are about the landscape itself.

By having no predominant object that draws the attention, what emerges in this photograph is the landscape as an autonomous entity. The objects that are closest to the front are still relatively far away, therefore none of them are demanding the dominant focus. The scenery is build up out of different materials that forms too much a coherent entity for individual pieces to stand out; none of the objects are demanding exclusive attention. As seen earlier, the colours scheme is overall grey and brown, with no specific bright colours standing out. Also, all the people in this diptych are too far away from the camera position to be distinguished. Their facial expressions remain invisible and subsequently it impedes a relational connection; they stay anonymous and unknown to the viewer. Subsequently, what is represented are not particular events, the individual people or objects, but the

landscape itself. Again, the diptych is not about this specific demolishing of this city by these inhabitants due to the building of the Three Gorges Dam. This knowledge serves merely as background information to what the main content of these images is, namely the landscape.

To clarify this point, let me use the ‘Diptych of Jean du Cellier’ by Hans Memling as a comparison, painted around 1475. The left hand panel represents the Betrothal of Saint Catherine of Alexandria; a virgin saint that was believed to have entered into a special spiritual marriage (the Mystic Marriage) with Christ. The right hand panel represents the donor of the art work with Saint John the Baptist. Even though the scenery in both panels is similar – the colour palette, the surroundings with trees and grass, the background with mountains and a river are comparable – they are two different images that are not forming a singular representation of one scenery. The scenery on the left with its high trees and mountain peak is different from the scenery on the right panel with its lake and rocks. Furthermore, not only is the scenery distinct, they are also two separate narratives: on the left panel ‘virgin with child’ and on the right panel ‘donor with Saint John the Baptist’. The scenery serves as a setting for the event. This setting in the background is not of importance, to the extent that the dominant focus is on the narratives of the human subjects; the scene could have been set somewhere else without drastically changing its meaning.



‘Diptych of Jean de Cellier’ by Hans Memling, circa 1475, oil on panel, 25 cm x 15 cm.

On the contrary, in ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ both images form a diptych that represents a singular representation in which the subject matter is not the individual human subjects and their events, as none of these demand dominant focus. The left image of ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ flows almost seamlessly into the right, as there is no discrepancy between subject matter and scenery. The piles of stones in the foreground on the left image are blending into the piles of stones on the right image. Also the piles of stones centred more in the middle of the images, as well as the way in which the horizon extends from one image to the other creates the notion of a single view in two images.

Consequently, in opposition to 'Diptych of Jean du Cellier' the scenery in 'Feng Jie #3&4' does not serve as a background to complement the narratives of the events and human subjects, but it is the other way around. The events and human subjects and their narratives are subordinate to the scenery. It is the landscape that is dominant, and forms the subject matter of these images. It is here that a specific distinction clarifies my point, in 'Diptych of Jean du Cellier' there is a *setting*, while in 'Feng Jie #3&4' there is a *landscape*.

To understand this difference between setting and landscape an elaboration on the notion of landscape as concept, a genre and an art historical tradition is necessary. Landscape as a term should not be taken for granted, and is more complicated than perhaps expected. The next section will demonstrate how the representation of the landscape functions in a system of visual meanings that is constructed according the certain power relations that determine what is included and what excluded, and what is visible and invisible as a visual representation. In short, the next section will demonstrate what is called a landscape and why.

2.3 Landscape as an autonomous entity in art

In his book *Landscape and Film* Martin Lefebvre provides a clear explanation to demonstrate and complexify what it is we are seeing when looking at 'Feng Jui #3&4'. He starts by explaining two common meanings of the word landscape, a term that only entered the English lexicon during the seventeenth century (Lefebvre 2006:20). At that time the word was borrowed from languages of northern European countries, and today it is used in various contexts that may refer to very different objects (e.g. architecture, geography, paintings), but also metaphorical meanings (e.g. the cultural landscape, the intellectual landscape). The two common meanings Lefebvre distinguishes are the pictorial *representation* of a space, and the real *perception* of a space (20). Thus, is a landscape something we see over *there*, or is it something we are living *here*? This is a question of distance and proximity.²⁷ If a landscape is over there it relates to a notion of observation, yet if it is something we are living in, it would entail a more sensuous immersion. It is this question, or tension, that proves the concept landscape is not straight forward, but rather multiple and complex.

Often the 'birth' of landscape as a significant component of pictorial productions is considered to be somewhere around the end of the seventeenth century in the West. This distinction is relative, as it depends on the setting of certain criteria. Following Lefebvre, one of the important criteria to talk of a birth would be the distinction between *paregion* and *ergon* (23); that is, landscape as a spatial accessory to a painted scene, or as the primary and independent subject matter

²⁷ Lefebvre argues here this is also a question of mind and body. I have left this out on purpose, as it is a very problematic statement for which I unfortunately have no space to engage with here. Not only is there is a large body of feminist work that has deconstructed this Cartesian mind/body split, I also connect the notion of distance to the idea of observation as a neutral and objective position which has been heavily contested as the 'primacy of vision' by among others Donna Haraway (1988).

of a work. The earlier made comparison between the two diptychs is illustrative here: in Memling's work the landscape functions as a spatial supplement to the subject matter; it is a setting. In Burtynsky's diptych the landscape is the primary subject matter; it is an autonomous entity. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century the demands of representation in pictorial art changed from depicting events or actions, to a liberation of restrictions in which landscape painting was able to emerge (23).²⁸ In other words, specific (religious) scenes and narratives no longer formed the only acceptable subject matter to be painted, hence it became possible for artists to paint natural sceneries without any human narrative having the dominant focus. It is this development that enabled the emancipation of the landscape from its role as a background to events. Having a less strict hierarchy of genres, subject matters and forms in the arts established the condition for the landscape to become a completely distinct aesthetic object (23). This freedom from landscape-as-setting to an autonomous landscape started to form landscape painting as an individual genre.

In the nineteenth century the landscape had become a completely distinct object for the arts with the pictorial styles of Claude Monet, Jacob Isaackz van Ruisdael, Tom Thompson and perhaps most famously Caspar David Friedrich and William Turner. Especially during this century landscape painting flourished, due to expanding tourism, and leading painters making it their main profession (Kleiner & Mamiya 2006:670). What characterizes this genre is the overwhelming natural landscape in which the human is dwarfed. What is an interesting development during the Romantic period in relation to the work of Burtynsky is that the landscape not only was worthy of being painted, but obtained a specific function. In the Romantic view artists no longer simply painted nature, but used it as an allegory (Sturken & Mamiya 2006:670). The particular natural landscape – natural environments completely overwhelming and marginalizing the human actors and events – such as it became dominant in the nineteenth century, translated “the viewer's mood, into aesthetic form” (670). The Romantic landscape became an effective vehicle to comment on spiritual, moral, historical or philosophical issues (670).

The photograph 'Feng Jie #3&4', and Burtynsky's work more broadly, has clear references to this particular genre of Romantic landscape painting and is often explained within the context of (neo)romanticism (Hodgins & Thompson 2011). In a similar manner as seen in the nineteenth century, in the photograph 'Feng Jie #&4' the environment – to what extent it is natural or not will be discussed in chapter 3 – completely overwhelms and marginalizes the human actors and events. Seen in the previous section the different components of the compositionality contribute to emphasizing the idea of the landscape: the colours, spatial organization in the image with a high

²⁸ This is a clear example of what Jacques Rancière refers to as a shift in regime. In 'The Distribution of the Sensible' (2004) he distinguishes three different regimes: the ethical regime, the representative regime and the aesthetic regime of arts. The third regime, started with Romanticism, deconstructs the hierarchies of representation by democratizing genres, forms and subject matters. The result is, among others, that the landscape could emerge as an autonomous subject matter for art.

horizon and the arrangement of the different volumes. The human figures are far removed from the camera position, hence making them appear small in the immense destructed landscape. As concluded earlier, due to the flattening of this space nothing demands attention, hence everything is being dominated by the landscape itself. These compositional components of the photograph create to a certain extent a similar Romantic transcendental landscape; one in which the human or actions are being submissive to their environment.

As a comparison, let me turn to the work 'Seashore with Shipwreck by Moonlight' (1825-1830) by Caspar David Friedrich. What dominates the painting is the natural scenery of the sea and the sky, with a dramatization of the natural forces: the sea, the wind and the sun reflected by the moonlight evoke a sense of dynamic and powerful movement. Within this landscape lies a shipwreck, destructed by the powers of nature and surrendering to its will. It is the signal of the human significance in relation to its environment. At the same time it is also a ruin, like the demolished landscape of Burtynsky is a ruin, that in the feminist Anthropocene manner of interconnectedness demonstrates the relation with nature. Even though the destructed buildings of the city in 'Feng Jie #3&4' are human made, hence conflict with the natural scenery in Friedrich's painting, both the shipwreck and the materiality in 'Feng Jie #3&4' eventually come from nature, and are absorbed in its landscape again: natural or human-made. Similar to the human subjects in 'Feng Jie #3&4' the shipwreck is positioned far from the viewer's perspective and positioned slightly left of the centre. It does not demand the dominant attention as its colours are almost seemingly being absorbed by its surroundings. Only a small light and the peak of the mast pointing above the horizon function attempt to hint at a liveliness of human presence similar to the little colourful flags in 'Feng Jie #3&4'. Then again, also here it cannot emancipate itself from its surroundings as an autonomous individual: the landscape dominates.



‘Seashore with Shipwreck by Moonlight’ by Caspar David Friedrich, 1825-1830

What we today understand as landscape, is thus constituted by the artistic genre of Western pictorial landscape that fully established itself in the nineteenth century (Lefebvre 2006:23). Hence, the composition of Burtynsky’s photograph and the fact that the viewer recognizes this image as a landscape relates to a specific artistic, historical context. The conception of landscape by Martin Lefebvre’s in landscape theory provides a very useful entry point to deconstruct the social, cultural and historical construction of the concept and its genre As Lefebvre rightfully points out: “[T]he birth of landscape should really be understood as the birth of a way of seeing, the birth of a gaze (that of the painter, the collector, or the critic) (27).” This is a crucial statement on which Lefebvre unfortunately does not reflect upon enough. In fact, in an attempt to understand this new way of seeing, he asks the doubtful question to identify “the subject of this (original) gaze” (27). Lefebvre questions whether it is the painter or the connoisseur (collector, commentator, critic) who instigated the transformation of landscape towards an autonomous subject. I would argue that the question is foremost about *how* to see, since “instruments of vision mediate standpoints” (Haraway 1988:586) which consequently determine who sees what.²⁹ Thus, to speak of ‘Feng Jui #3&4’ in terms of landscape, is only possible because the concept of landscape, ‘born’ in the seventeenth century, allows us to understand it in that manner. As W.J.T. Mitchell, in his book *Landscape and Power* states:

²⁹ I am here reminded of an interesting example a befriended Anthropologist once told me. She explained me that the Inuit, the name for a group of culturally similar indigenous peoples inhabiting the Arctic regions of North America and Greenland, have over fifty different words for the concept of snow. Consequently when they see an Arctic landscape, they detect all the different types and nuances, whereas my ‘Western eyes’ would only see a unified blanket of white snow. It is a crucial tool for survival as with their ‘way of seeing’ they can find the safest route through the landscape. Here the ‘power’ directly relates to a specific kind of knowledge and vision of the Inuit, who sees the same scenery differently from me. In this case the interconnection of vision, power and knowledge is literally a matter of life and death.

Landscape as a cultural medium thus has a double role with respect to something like ideology: it naturalizes a cultural and social construction, representing an artificial world as if it were simply given and inevitable, and it also makes that representation operational by interpellating its beholder in some more or less determinate relation to its givenness as sight and site (2002:2).

This means that first of all, the concept of landscape appears to be something that is natural and taken for granted: when looking at 'Feng Jui #3&4' we see a landscape without hesitation. However, as Lefebvre explains, this is a particular way of seeing, and as Mitchell supplements, because the concept of landscape is in fact a cultural and social construction. To be more specific, it is a particular Western construction derived from a particular artistic genre developed in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century. Today we are trained to see certain representations with certain visualizing practices and concepts such as 'landscape', to the extent that we understand those representations as 'that is how it is'. Whereas chapter 1 of this thesis deconstructed photography as a medium that selects, frames and organizes, even though it is still associated with 'reality' and 'objectivity', here I demonstrate that with a critical lens it becomes clear how also talking about landscapes entails including certain notions and excluding others, creating specific representations that are appropriated as 'that is what a landscape is'. From a feminist perspective it is thus crucial to keep in mind that the (natural) scenery that we today understand as a landscape, excluded other ideas of what a landscape could be in its formation.

Secondly, in the above mentioned quote, Mitchell contributes with another important point, namely that this naturalization of the representation of landscape can almost only be understood as such: "makes the representation operational" (2). That is, in the moment landscape as a cultural medium is being naturalized, it also establishes a certain relation between the representation and its viewer that is not only based on this 'natural' perception, but foremost thereby more or less determines this relation. In other words, you see a landscape, because you see nothing *but* a landscape: both the term and its relation towards the viewer have become fixed. The visualizing practices of understanding representations of landscapes are as rigid as photography being understood as a medium of reality, to the extent there is no escape from perceiving them otherwise.

Refocussing on the qualities of the image, it should be remembered how, in chapter 1 I have positioned Burtynsky's photography within a long tradition of landscape photography. Albeit the representations of landscapes, both in photography and painting, have changed over time, there are certain characteristics that remain necessary for it to constitute a landscape. The 'traditional horizontal landscape format' such as it was established in the eighteenth and nineteenth century has remained the prominent idea for representations of landscapes. This traditional midline placement of the horizon that results in a compositional balance between the earth and the sky – a pristine and

endless landscape – was formed in romantic landscape painting and recurred in the photographic work of Carleton E. Watkins, and later Ansel Adams. It is the New Topographics in the 1970s that for the first time deliberately repositioned the horizon above or below the midline to create a landscape that is out of balance, constrained and becomes cluttered. Also in Burtynsky's work often the horizon is at three-quarters, leaving only a little strip of sky, and at times is completely absent; it results in a flattening of the space, such as discussed earlier, that works alienating and disruptive.

The most extreme practice that meddles with the traditional horizontal landscape is contemporary aerial or so-called 'drone' photography. Even though the field is still in its infancy the rapid technological developments results in models with GPS systems that can fly low, through trees and with their quiet rotors close to flocks of birds³⁰, providing new modes of working for photographers. Edward Burtynsky already used helicopters for previous projects such as *Oil* (2009), but the lightweight drone provided a whole new way of photographing. Not only does Burtynsky stay on the ground, and operates the camera from a distance, he is also dependent on the person who controls of the drone. This requires a careful navigation between him, the controller and the drone. The latest project of Burtynsky *Water* (2012) is exemplary of this form of landscape photography, in which he explores different sites from all over the world that in one way or another have been completely transformed for its usage of water. These images transform the traditional horizontal landscape frame from the ground, to a birds-eye view in which the horizon is askew or completely absent, resulting in a flattened landscape of patterns and shapes from a perspective never seen before.



'Rice Terraces #2' by Edward Burtynsky, 2012

³⁰ See for example the BBC documentary *Earthflight* from 2011.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have mapped out the landscape genre and contextualized the diptych 'Feng Jie #3&4' herein. I demonstrated how Burtynsky appropriates the Romantic landscape genre from the eighteenth and nineteenth century by using the trope of human subjects being overwhelmed by their surroundings seen in the example of Caspar David Friedrich. Burtynsky's usage of the landscape to address the relationship between the human and the environment relates seamlessly to the use of natural landscapes as an allegory to address the Romantic idea of the human in relation to its natural surroundings. In this manner the photograph 'Feng Jie #3&4' simultaneously relates and rethinks the Romantic landscape genre, by using the landscape as a tool to address our current problematic relation between the human and environment.

As the first chapter pointed out, the environmental crisis is a problem of scale and size that requires a 'perceptual challenge'. In this second chapter I have presented a first step or example of how the challenge for photographs to instigate a thinking about the relation between human and environment lies in representing this scale and size in a most effective and productive manner. It is thus a challenge of representing spatial relations. The notion of the landscape, as a tool, an art tradition, a photographic genre, a way of seeing and a cultural and social concept provides the components to challenge this ability to define the spatial relationships between the human and the environment. In the work of Burtynsky, and 'Feng Jie #3&4' in particular, the landscape functions as an entity that simultaneously includes a great amount of detail due to the flattening of the space, yet reciprocally emphasize the massiveness of this landscape as a whole in which the human is dwarfed.

What will become clear throughout this thesis, is that it is this effect that makes it most effective when it comes to environmental ethics and politics. Through the landscape the viewer is confronted and supported in the perceptual challenge of the human alteration of the environment. The representation of landscape, such as is it understood in contemporary (western) culture, has the characteristics – high-angle, distance, height, composition – for the viewer to translate this *representation* into a *perception* of space. The landscape is then not only something to see over *there* on the photograph, but also something we are living in *here*.

In the next chapter I will analyse the photograph 'Bao Steel #10' in which I further explore the notion of the landscape as manufactured or human-made. In doing so I contextualize the manufactured landscape within the landscape tradition, and analyze to what extent it adopts similar features and how it is different: not a natural landscape such as it is seen in the artistic landscape genre. By using the conceptual tool of 'naturecultures' by Donna Haraway I demonstrate how the manufactured landscape is of particular interest for environmentalism as it questions what is nature and what is culture, hence problematizes the nature/culture binary.



'Bao Steel #10' by Edward Burtynsky, 2005

THREE

The Manufactured Landscape

Bao Steel #10

3.1 An unworldly landscape

Without any background knowledge it is not immediately clear what the content of this image is. At first glance the black seems to form a quite uniform texture, reaching until the horizon. Then again, looking more closely, the black coal appears in different consistencies and colours; most likely due to a difference in consistence. Throughout this landscape some machines are scattered that help to put the coal in organized piles by transporting the coal over a conveyor belt and throwing it from a high distance down to form the pointy shape. On the left and right side of the strip of piles in the middle, two straight roads of several kilometres run all the way down to the vanishing point at the horizon which is located in the middle of the image. The road on the left side is wider than the one of the right, and is demarcated by small posts. There are no humans visible in this image, hence their presence is foremost predicated by their lack of it. That is, they

are themselves not visible as human figures within the photograph, but the fact that this landscape is human made makes their presence inescapable. The only clear indicator of human presence in this landscape is a red truck in the front on the left side of the image. It is almost escaping the frame of the photograph and seems to be insignificantly small within this large landscape. What is it doing there? And where is it coming from? There is nothing else in this stretched out landscape apart from the black piles of coal and a transportation network of roads. Even at the horizon – that shows no variation in colour, just mere uniform grey fog – there is no view of a city, mountains or any other indication of other life nearby. The landscape in ‘Bao Steel #10’ seems to be not of this world.

In this chapter I will analyse the photograph ‘Bao Steel #10’ as an exemplary image of a landscape that questions the binary nature/culture. I demonstrate how the manufactured landscape in this photograph complexifies this rigid dichotomy by being a landscape that is not natural, but human-made, yet it consists out of natural material: coal. I argue that the division of what is natural and what is cultural is problematized through this landscape that is both at the same time. The aim of this chapter is to explore how this photograph relates to the art historical genre of the landscape, but foremost how it functions in relation to feminist environmentalism that tries to reweave the nature/culture binary. With the conceptual tool of ‘naturecultures’ by Donna Haraway (2003) and feminist theory of (new) materialism, posthumanism and environmentalism (Alaimo and Hekman 2009; Barad 2009, 2003; Haraway 2008, 2003) this chapter further explores the manufactured landscape as tool to question the relation between human and environment. This rethinking of the categories nature and culture also brings forth the ethical question of agency, which I will explore further with the work of Karen Barad (2009, 2003).

To first briefly situate the photograph, Shanghai Baosteel Group Corporation, commonly referred to as Baosteel, is part of one of the largest industries in China: the steel industry. This state-owned company provides the coal and iron supply for the factories such as the Cankun factory, the factory in the diptych ‘Manufacturing #10ab’ that I discuss in chapter 4 of this thesis. It covers over eighteen squared kilometres of land, employed almost 130.500 employees by the end of 2012, and has an annual output of 30 million tons.³¹ Baosteel is an exemplary

³¹ See http://www.baosteel.com/group_en/ [last accessed 27-02-2015].

result of how China is trying to deal with the rapid increasing demand for steel for its industries.

For Burtynsky to get access to this company was a complicated and cumbersome process that demanded a careful approach, which interestingly illustrates the strained relationship between the different actors within debates on environmentalism. In a scene in the documentary *Manufactured Landscapes* (2006) by Jennifer Baichwal, we see the moment when this photograph is taken. This scene provides an insight into the complex relation between Burtynsky as a photographer and the corporations that he photographs to address issues of sustainability and environmentalism. To briefly illustrate: in this scene a series of photographs, followed by moving images of ships unloading coal, is supported by, what appears to be, a voice over of Burtynsky and his team talking to spokesmen of Baosteel. The translator explains Burtynsky is making a book about the industrial development of China, and therefore would like to take photographs of the coal industry. The image then cuts to a shot of the group that is being filmed unnoticed by discretely directing the camera to the ground. Subsequently, a female voice says: “No filming!” To which someone of Burtynsky’s team replies: “He is not filming, he is just taking a photo.” Thereafter the image cuts to a black screen and then to a series of still images of the group and the voice over continues.

In those conversations it appears that the problem is that Chinese court has decided that the media is not allowed to enter Baosteel, while a certain ‘Mr. Chenling’ granted Burtynsky permission. To provide another reason for not shooting, one of the spokesmen states it is very windy and dirty today; the gloomy weather would not make it a good day to take pictures. The translator of Burtynsky replies that through his lens, and through his eyes, it will anyway look beautiful. As proof they show the spokesmen of Baosteel Burtynsky’s earlier photographs of industrial waste, stating: “Doesn’t it look beautiful?” One of Burtynsky’s team members then continues to explain Burtynsky is now working on a book that covers the last 20 years of his career, pointing to photographs that have been taken in other countries such as Canada, hence direction the attention away from China as a country of industrial development. Still hesitant, one of the spokesmen explains they are afraid of negative publicity. As a solution the translator proposes to let Burtynsky make test shots that the spokesmen of Baosteel can evaluate. The scene then cuts to a series of still images in which Burtynsky stands behind his camera on the tripod and one of his crew members helping him, whilst a Chinese man stands next to them, overlooking the coal landscape. In the following two still images the group is looking collectively at the test shots Burtynsky just made. The scene ends with a zooming out from a detail to the overall landscape: the photograph ‘Bao Steel #10’.

3.2 Estrangement through colours and composition

'Bao Steel #10' appears to be a black and white image, due to the hue colours of the black of the coal, the grey roads and the foggy grey sky at the horizon. The only thing that betrays this is in fact a coloured picture is the bright red of the truck in the front. Albeit the red contrasts the black and grey colours, it appears to be dominated by them, and is highly weakened in its vividness. In this sense the colour palette of 'Bao Steel #10' shows more likeness with that of 'Feng Jie #3&4' than 'Manufacturing #10ab' which will be analysed in chapter 4. The saturation of the colours is very low, as the colours are not bright and vivid. This is also related to the value of the colours, which is predominantly low since most colours are more dark than light.

This palette is persistent throughout Burtynsky's early work, as restricted himself to black and white photography in the beginning of his career (Torosian 2003). To shoot black and white requires a very different mind-set, than to shoot in colour.³² When he moved to colour he brought his black and white sensibility into his new work, which resulted in a conscious subtle use of colour. As he states: "I tried to find landscapes that literally looked like black and white images in the real world with small bits of muted colour coming through (52)." Albeit his later work ventured out into different colour palettes, 'Bao Steel #10' is exemplary of this ostensible black and white photography. The red truck in the left front of the image proves this is not black and white photography, but that the black, grey and white are the actual colours of the landscape. This colour palette of dominant dark grey and black is rarely found in the natural world, let alone on the scale of this landscape. The result of this colour palette is that the photograph affects a sense of alienation, and contrasts realism. For a landscape to have these colours it seems to be science-fiction and from a different (future) world. Yet the red truck betrays this landscape is contemporary and real. In other words, by using only small hints of colour it perpetuates the estrangement of this landscape and simultaneously contextualizes it in its contemporary time frame. The landscape is actual because it is necessary for our time in which our material desires demand a certain amount of energy use. The alienation of the landscape reminds me of Elizabeth Cowie's argument in chapter 1 of this thesis when she argues for the potential in documentary to 'seeing anew' through an estrangement of the everyday. The

³² Being trained in art school as a photographer myself, I find it important to stress this point since I notice a general lack of understanding this difference. Shooting in black and white requires a very different way of thinking and seeing during the work process. You need to have the mindset of seeing in black and white already through the camera, consequently focussing on the specificity of the light, shadows, shapes and forms. When you are shooting in colour this entails a dominant focus on building a certain colour palette, hence focussing less on shadows and shapes. This adds an extra dimension to your view through the camera. My point is thus that Burtynsky demonstrates his skill and technique to think in both mindsets, and plays with it in 'Bao Steel #10' by bringing in a hint of red colour in what appears to be a black and white photograph.

landscape in 'Bao Steel #10' is inherently connected to our daily practices, hence by observing it in the photograph pushes to engage with the obviousness of the materiality that we use in our daily lives. The photograph makes the viewer aware of what they are not seeing in their everyday practices, namely this enormous manufactured landscape. Therefore it inescapably contributes to a thinking of the relation between human and environment.

The effect of estrangement is not solely caused by the colours, but foremost by the fact that it is an entire landscape of its own. An analysis of the spatial organization shows how through the composition a landscape arises in its recognizable traditional format; yet one that is alien from what the tradition represented thus far. The other work of Burtynsky alike, also here the eye level is characteristically high at five-sixth of the image. Consequently the majority of the space of the image is filled with the view of the ground, leaving only a small strip of grey sky; it is a similar flattening of the space, such as it was seen in chapter 2 of this thesis. In terms of volumes the image is largely build up out of four shapes; the sky, the row of coal piles in the middle, and two rows of coal piles on the left and right, separated by the roads from the middle part. Because of the straight shape of the roads and where Burtynsky positioned himself accordingly, it gives the image a symmetrical impression similar to 'Manufacturing #10ab' which I will demonstrate in chapter 4. All the lines in the image are diagonally directed towards the vanishing point at the horizon. Albeit some piles of coal are shaped differently than others, giving it a more irregular outlook similar to 'Feng Jie #3&4' and less repetitious than 'Manufacturing #10ab', the overall play of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines is similarly consistent.

In 'Bao Steel #10' the camera is positioned in the middle of the coal pile, with the symmetrical straight roads on each side towards the horizon. Consequently the convergence of the rays of vision appears to be in the middle of the horizon, in the middle of the image. As a result, 'Bao Steel #10' clearly demonstrates the compositional structures that constitute the common idea of a landscape, namely a traditional horizontal 'landscape' format that has a compositional balance which implies an endless sweep of land reaching until the vanishing point at the middle of the horizon. The effect of the symmetrical play of lines reminds of the practice of drawing artificial perspective in landscapes. When learning to draw, the basic principle starts with a horizontal line often at three-quarters and a vanishing point in the middle of the horizon to which all the lines are directed. With everything you draw, you direct its lines to the vanishing point. This trick makes it able to draw objects in perspective towards each other. In 'Bao Steel #10' the spatial organization of the volumes – the roads and piles of coal – and their play of lines – straight towards the vanishing point at the middle of the horizon – similarly demonstrate this

notion of perspective drawing in landscapes.

This relates to the three other components – angle, height and distance – that arrange a particular position to the viewer; the specific spectators perspective. The other two chapters alike, ‘Bao Steel #10’ is taken from a frontal angle, with a large height difference, and a far distance between the view of the camera and the landscape. Here the high-angle and far distance perspective is not only enforcing the notion of the landscape and its scale, but also further estranges the viewer from what is pictured. Coal is extracted from mines as a small and refined product with pieces that are not bigger than the size of a hand. Due to the far distance and high angle position of the camera, the details of the coal are undermined. Similar to ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ the image is flattened, as nothing demands dominant importance.

As a result of these compositional choices, the piles of coal become abstract, endless, black, wavy seas and hills, forming an alien landscape. Similar to the landscape in ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ of the previous chapter this landscape is manufactured by the human. Yet, what makes ‘Bao Steel #10’ different is that here the landscape is made out of a ‘natural’ product. In this manner the manufacturedness of the landscape contests in specific the dualistic nature/culture binary. Whereas the landscape in ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ consists out of bricks, rubble and other human-made material, the landscape of ‘Bao Steel #10’ is made out of coal. This questions in a more straightforward manner to what extent the landscape is natural or cultural. Thus, both ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ and ‘Bao Steel #10’ represent landscapes that are manufactured by the human, yet differ in what they contest. The next section will further deconstruct this manufactured landscape made out of a natural product.

3.3 The human-made natural landscape

As the previous chapter explained, in the nineteenth century the Romantic landscape genre – with its view of natural environments completely overwhelming and marginalizing human subjects and events – was used to comment on spiritual, moral, historical or philosophical issues (Sturken & Mamiya 2006:670). One of the prominent ideas in the nineteenth century was the Romantic theme of ‘the soul being unified with the natural world’ (670). This conception is an interesting thought in relation to the work of Burtynsky and the proposed feminist Anthropocene notion to understand the human and environment as interrelated and interconnected. If the soul is to be understood as the human, an unification between the soul and the natural world, implies a merging of the nature/culture binary. Human and nature are not separate, but in fact unified and whole; phrased differently, the human is *part of* nature and not opposite of it. In the nineteenth century nature was considered to be something mysterious with signs, symbols and

emblems of universal spirit, disguised in visible material things (670). In order to understand nature, artists in the nineteenth century used the landscape to translate the transcendent meanings of nature: the Romantic transcendental landscape.

I argue that in a similar manner ‘Bao Steel #10’ and the work of Burtynsky more broadly uses the landscape to translate a certain idea of interconnectedness between human and nature. ‘Bao Steel #10’, more than the other two photographs by Burtynsky I analyse in my thesis, is exemplary in demonstrating this idea of interconnectedness, because the content of this photograph shows the natural resource that is necessary to make our lives possible in the way we live them every day. The landscape is here more complex than in the other two case studies, since its manufacturedness transgresses both nature and culture. It is a ‘natural’ landscape in as much as it is manufactured by the human with natural material. Furthermore, this materiality inherently constitutes the lives of humans, and cannot be thought of separate. The romantic idea of ‘the soul being unified with the natural world’ is thus similar, yet accomplished in a different manner. In the Romantic period the subject matter was a landscape of untouched nature, with insignificant human figures being dwarfed in their overwhelming surroundings. See for example the work *Uttewalder Grund* by Caspar David Friedrich.



‘Uttewalder Grund’ by Caspar David Friedrich, circa 1825, oil on canvas, 91.5 × 70.5 cm

Here the human figure is almost not noticeable in the wide landscape of mountains, trees and waterfalls. It could easily be one of the remote places where Burtynsky used to camp with his father when he was young; the unaffected sites that gave him a feeling of eternity and

immutability (Torosian 2003). However, as pointed out in chapter 1 and 2, what Burtynsky regards relevant for our contemporary is not the ‘sublime in nature’ but the landscapes that have significantly changed due to the pursuit of progress (47). The Romantic landscape in which the soul is unified with the natural world, is thus not one of the natural world, but one in which nature is being problematized in its relation to the human. The search for the connection between the human and nature – and thinking of a more sustainable relation between human and environment – thus requires a different approach. It is not about human subjects wondering in overwhelming natural landscapes in order to (re)appreciate the beauty of nature, hence therefore potentially obtain a more sustainable relation towards the environment. With the manufactured landscape that consists out of natural resources Burtynsky enters questions of sustainability and environmentalism by asking how landscapes have been altered by the human. It makes the human dwarf in the landscape it created itself. Furthermore, it is a landscape in which the rigid dichotomy of what is natural and what is cultural is being blurred. The coals are ‘natural’, yet how they are forming a landscape is ‘cultural’. Hence, ‘Bao Steel #10’ asks the question of nature and sustainability through a different kind of landscape: the manufactured landscape. What ‘Bao Steel #10’ demonstrates is that nature is not something *out there* to be visited by the human subject, but something that is deeply rooted in our everyday practices. This is a potential productive thought when it comes to changing our attitudinal practices along the lines proposed by Braidotti’s “ethical subject of sustainable becoming” (2006:137). To understand what really is at stake here a further elaboration on the categories of nature and culture is necessary.

Nature versus culture is a distinction that is central to Western thought and can be traced back to Greek philosophy (Mack-Canty 2004:155). As part of a large feminist project that was already deployed with the advent of postmodernism and poststructuralism, feminists argued to move to an understanding that does not rest on oppositions, and to deconstruct dichotomies such as nature/culture (Alaimo and Hekman 2009:2). Suffice to say, a large body of feminist theory and practice have been significantly insightful here. The construction of the dualism nature/culture, man – as ostensible, universal, human subject – was seen as representing culture, opposing to nature which had to be constrained and dominated.³³ This nature/culture dichotomy has been challenged and identified by feminists as the underlying major cause of the sexual hierarchy in which women are structurally distorted and excluded (Mack-Canty 2004:155). Disembodied characteristics such as freedom, order, and reason were identified with men, in

³³ In *The Man of Reason* (1993) Genevieve Lloyd gives a condensed though extensive overview of Western philosophy from the Greek philosopher Plato to Simone de Beauvoir on the male-female distinction that operates as a symbol in traditional philosophical texts on the views of the nature/culture binary.

opposition to the lesser women's allegedly 'natural' and embodied characteristics such as passion, disorder, and physical necessity (155). Third-wave feminism started to reweave this specific duality in order to reestablish embodiment and deconstruct the relations between man-reason and woman-natural: the development of embodied perspectives (situated knowledges and standpoint theories). In addition, ecofeminism extended the values of diversity and interconnectedness to other species of the natural world (156).

However, there is also a shortcoming in the promise of postmodernism to be a theoretical grounding for feminism, to which feminist scholars such as Donna Haraway responded. The problem detected by a growing strand of feminism is the retreat of materiality, and focussing exclusively on representation, ideology, discourse and language (Alaimo & Hekman 2006:4). The epistemology of postmodernism is that the real or the material is entirely constituted by language; reality is solely a product of discursive practices. In response, environmental feminists have insisted early on that feminism needs to take materiality seriously, that of the human and nonhuman (4).³⁴ From a feminist environmentalist standpoint the major concern of the legacies of poststructuralism and postmodern feminism – social constructionism – is what Stacy Alaimo refers to as the “flight from nature” (2010:237). Because ‘woman’ has long been defined as entangled with ‘nature’, and thus outside of the realm of the human (‘man’) rationality, agency and subjectivity, feminist theorists have disentangled this connection. The category of ‘woman’ has been transported to the realm of culture; it is something you become, as Simone de Beauvoir ([1949] 2011) explained. The revolutionary concept of gender as distinct from biological sex further predicated this sharp duality of nature and culture.³⁵ However, this has caused a severing of the biological, corporeal body and its interconnections with the material world, terminating to something that is ethically, politically and theoretically undesirable. As Alaimo points out:

Rather than fleeing from this debased nature, associated with corporeality, mindlessness, and passivity, it would be more productive for feminist theory to undertake the transformation of gendered dualisms – nature, culture, body, mind, object, subject, resource, agency, and others – that have been cultivated to denigrate and silence certain groups of humans as well as nonhuman life (240).

³⁴ According to Alaimo & Hekman the main objective of mainstream feminist theory towards ecofeminism was the fear that the relation between feminism and environmentalism would result in a naïve and romantic account of reality (2006:4). As this thesis will hopefully convince, the relation between feminism and environmentalism is in fact inescapable and necessary. I argue it will precisely *not* present a romantic, naïve account of reality, but will engage and deconstruct its hidden power laden categories and structures.

³⁵ At first the concept of gender paradoxically re-established the nature/culture binary that feminist were trying to disentangle. The work of Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has been crucial in reweaving this sex/gender distinction, and hence complexifying this dualism.

This focus on materiality extended the paradigms of poststructuralism and postmodern feminism by rethinking materiality, and hence providing a more productive account of agency, bodies and natures. Embracing different strategies – turning to the work of Spinoza and Deleuze as countertraditions to the linguistic turn³⁶ or rereading poststructuralist theorists such as Derrida, Foucault and Butler³⁷ – the overall concern is that material feminism takes matter seriously. What is crucial to understand here, is that this is not a return to essentialism, as they do not consider nature or the human body exists prior to discourse, instead they radically recast the foundations of essentialism by understanding materiality as co-constituted by various forms of power and knowledge (243). As Karen Barad points out: “Crucial to understanding the workings of power is an understanding of the nature of power in the fullness of its materiality (2003:810).”

Within this framework the representation of ‘Bao Steel #10’ is then not excluded to understanding it as a discursive practice of language within a certain ideology. The question of materiality brings in the ethical and political dimension that, I argue, is necessary with regards to environmentalism and questions of sustainability; it entails taking accountability and responsibility.

As one of the most influential scholars in this field, Donna Haraway provides the term ‘naturecultures’ as a useful concept to think differently about how to engage with the world in its fullness.³⁸ According to Haraway, in order to deal with the problem of our modern existence we need to understand what it means *to be* in this world, as well as how to *become-with* (2013:110). She pushes to think not in an oppositional structure, but in interdependencies and interconnections between nature and culture. It is the concept ‘naturecultures’ that is useful to deconstruct the human-made landscape in the photograph ‘Bao Steel #10’.

Let me first briefly contextualize this concept in the theoretical framework of Donna Haraway. After the figuration of the cyborg from her influential manifesto ‘A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Social-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century’ (1988), she explored new figurations to broaden the scope of “the much bigger queer family of companion species” in ‘The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness’ (2003). With the cyborg and its notion of non-origin and non-unitary Haraway analyzed the implosion of life and technoscience in the technofob society of the 1980s and 1990s. However, in the past decades

³⁶ See for example the work of Claire Colebrook, Elizabeth Bray, Moira Gatens and Rosi Braidotti.

³⁷ See for example the work of Elizabeth Wilson, Karen Barad and Vicky Kirby.

³⁸ The concept ‘naturecultures’ has inspired many other scholars to write on modernist oppositions. For example, in 2011 Utrecht University dedicated the conference ‘New Materialism: Naturecultures’ to the concept and invited Donna Haraway to give a lecture. See for scholarly work for example: Merrick (2005), O’Brien (2007) or Puig de la Bellacasa (2010).

the cyborgization and technologization has put the cyborg too much in a comfort zone. In order to stir things up again – to provoke a different way of thinking – the new figuration of the dog was necessary to foreground “the implosion of nature and culture in the relentless historically specific, joint lives of dogs and people, who are bonded in significant otherness” (2003:16). Haraway opened the space for questions on engagement that go beyond human and technology; she broadened the possible ‘other’ to all non-humans. The manifesto is a “kinship claim” (9):

Dogs are about the inescapable, contradictory story of relationships – co-constitutive relationships in which none of the partners pre-exists the relating, and the relating is never done once and for all. Historical specificity and contingent mutability rule all the way down, into nature and culture, into naturecultures. There is no foundation (12).

Nature and culture are thus not opposites, but are drawn upon relationality and interconnectedness. To think in naturecultures provides one way to get out of, what she phrases effectively in *When Species Meet* as, “the institutionalized, dominant Western fantasy that all that is fully human is fallen from Eden, separated from the mother, in the domain of the artificial, deracinated, alienated, and therefore free” (2008:11). It is an indictment to patriarchy, militarism, colonialism, capitalism, racism, sexism, anthropocentrism and ultimately androcentrism.

In relation to the photograph ‘Bao Steel #10’ it provides a productive concept for thinking differently about the represented landscape. Instead of concluding it is either nature (because, landscape of natural products), or culture (because, human-made), understanding it as naturecultures stresses the interrelation between the human and the non-human. To consider the landscape of ‘Bao Steel #10’ as naturecultures entails problematizing the binary nature/culture. As Edward Burtynsky indicates: “All things we inhabit, and all the things we possess, the material world that we surround ourselves with, all comes from nature (Torosian 2003:49).” This is essentially what the landscapes of Burtynsky are about: showing the intrinsic link between the human and its environment in the materiality of our everyday practices.

However, in his argumentation Burtynsky still remains stuck in an oppositional narration, as he positions nature as something *out there*. Despite his rhetoric that we all come from nature, he remains stuck in the dichotomy of nature/culture, since he also claims that “we should not harm nature, as then we ultimately harm ourselves”.³⁹ According to Burtynsky, it is important to

³⁹ This statement comes from the introduction of the documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*, directed by Jennifer Baichwall. 2006. Canada: Foundry Films, National Film Board of Canada (NFB).

have a certain reverence for what nature is, because if we destroy nature, we destroy ourselves. Albeit he speaks in terms of connections and relations, and hence tries to work through the binary of nature/culture, his phrasing of nature as something that needs to be protected, implies he is still lingering in the Romantic notion of human opposing nature. I argue this perpetuates nature in its traditional ideology, as something that is passive and needs to be saved by the heroic human. Eventually this is still an oppositional thinking in which the human is still the central figure: it remains dualistic and anthropocentric. On the contrary, as ecofeminism in the 90s demonstrated, the general idea of the human subject (whether it is saving or destroying nature), especially in the rhetoric of mainstream environmentalism, is foremost deeply androcentric. It is Haraway's "unmarked position of Man and White" (1988:581).

In understanding the manufactured landscape in the feminist context as a naturecultures, 'Bao Steel #10' does not become a call to rescue nature, but shows the interrelations and interdependencies between all humans and environments all over the world. The raw material of coal is connected to all the objects that we surround ourselves with, whether as actual material, or because it made it possible to produce them. By not being the natural landscape such as it was seen in the Romantic period, but a manufactured landscape that is formed out of natural elements – a natureculture – 'Bao Steel #10' demonstrates the pattern of relationality between the viewer and what is being viewed. And as Haraway states, it is precisely "the patterns of relationality that need rethinking" (2008:17). To think of the manufactured landscape in this framework then brings in necessary ethical questions of responsibility and accountability for these landscapes in relation to debates on environmentalism and sustainability. It is here where the work of Burtynsky meets feminist environmentalism.

To think further on how to shape the idea of responsibility and accountability in a feminist manner to environmentalism and sustainability – to envision Braidotti's "ethical subject of sustainable becoming" (2006:137) – brings forth the significant question of agency. A rethinking of the categories nature and culture essentially requires to decentralize the human subject (to not be anthropocentric) and to envision a different kind of partnership between the human and the non-human. If we want to relate differently to the manufactured landscape in 'Bao Steel #10', it is crucial to not only rethink the categories (naturecultures, instead of nature/culture), but also to rethink how we relate to the landscape and how the landscape relates to us. The human created the landscape, but to what extent does the natural resource of coal also creates the landscape? Who is in fact creating who? In order to answer these questions, the work of Karen Barad, emerged from physics, provides a possible helpful reconceptualization of agency.

In ‘Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter’ (2003) Barad offers a condensed reading of her other work, in which she explores a more abstract understanding of material agency.⁴⁰ As she states: “It is vitally important that we understand how matter matters (801).” This agency encompasses an account of all matters – human and nonhuman – and the material-discursive practices that constitute them. In transporting quantum physics, in specific the ideas of Niels Bohr, into feminist theory, Barad constructed the notion of ‘agential realism’. According to Bohr the world is not made out of independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties, but rather of phenomena (815). These phenomena are, in Barad’s agential realist elaboration, “*the ontological inseparability of agentially intra-action “components”* [emphasis Barad] (815).”

This is a profound conceptual shift. Instead of ‘interaction’ (which presumes a prior existence of independent entities: at least two, that then interact), Barad rethinks the relation between objects as ‘intra-action’; they are phenomena that emerge *in* their relation. It is through particular intra-actions, that the boundaries and properties of objects are determined and gain their meaning. In Barad words: “[R]elata do not preexist relations; rather, relata-within-phenomena emerge through specific intra-actions (815).” These agential intra-actions are specific material enactments that involve both human and nonhuman.

In fact, it is precisely these practices that differentiate the boundaries between these two ‘categories’, and consequently constitute reality. Hence, reality is not composed out of things-in-themselves (independent objects), but of “‘things’-in-phenomena” (817). It is thus through material-discursive practices that a differential sense of being is enacted, constituting the boundaries between different phenomena, such as human and that what is not human. According to Barad, it is through these specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the word: as materiality and of importance (817). On the one hand it constitutes the material form, demarcating one phenomena from the other. On the other hand, this is also a formation of agency, as it determines the relations of connectivity and exclusion; it determines what is intelligible or not, and what is stabilized and destabilized (817). The power relations involved in the intra-action process are always resulting in processes of inclusion and exclusion. In this sense the notion of agency shifts from a possession to an active depiction:

Agency is a matter of intra-acting; it is an enactment, not something that someone or something has. Agency cannot be designed as an attribute of “subjects” or “objects” (since they do not preexists as

⁴⁰ Barad develops the concept of ‘agential realism’ more thoroughly in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007).

such). Agency is not an attribute whatsoever – it is a “doing”/“being” in its intra-activity (826-827).

Agency is here also about the possibilities and accountability entailed in the material-discursive practices, as it marks what matters, and what is excluded from mattering. According to Alaimo it is this acknowledgement and Barad’s radical reconceptualization of materiality that does not sever nature from culture, or the human from nonhuman, that offers the potential for environmental ethics (2008:249). To consider the agency of the ‘more-than-human world’ is crucial, as it challenges the practice of reducing nature into passive, distinct resources for human use and control (249). It radically contrasts the dualistic notion of nature/culture, in which nature is to be dominated by culture.

This conception of agency results in considering the landscape of ‘Bao Steel #10’ not as merely a passive scenery of coals with which humans ‘interact’ to use it for their consumer goods in their daily life. In Barad’s conception, the material-discursive practice of demarcating the boundary between the coal and the human configures its active agency; by naming it a landscape of coal as such, it has come to matter, both in its discursive and its material form. It is this practice that we need to take accountability for. This is not a matter of simply ‘giving agency to nature’, as if it is something that can be obtained by someone. As Barad points out, it is an enactment and a doing. To see the coal landscape of ‘Bao Steel #10’ and understanding it is not separate from us, but deeply interconnected and interrelated brings forth an ethics that takes responsibility and accountability for your enabling practices. It is about questioning the landscape itself and our relation to it. As Barad explains, “[e]thics is about accounting for our part of the tangled webs we weave” (2007:384). The landscape of ‘Bao Steel #10’ is an affective visualization of the massiveness of such networks that have been created. The next step is to explore how and where to take stance within these networks.

Conclusion

This chapter argued that the compositional choices in ‘Bao Steel #10’ have a chance to subvert the dualistic construction between nature and culture. By representing a landscape that is both at the same time (namely being culturally manufactured, yet consisting out of natural material) ‘Bao Steel #10’ deconstructs the traditional idea of what nature and what culture is. After elaborating on the social, historical and cultural construction of these categories as such I have explored this photograph further by reading it together with feminist theory, in specific the (eco)feminist tools ‘naturecultures’ and ‘agential realism’. Understanding the manufactured landscape not merely as passive natural resources that have been composed by human control,

but as a vibrant, active, emergent agents, also requires a serious engagement with questions of accountability and responsibility.

This makes the manufactured landscape an interesting tool with regards to environmentalism and sustainability, and as the Romantic visualization of ‘the soul being unified with the natural world’. I argue that within this framework the landscape in ‘Bao Steel #10’ becomes complexified as something that is not merely *out there*, but as a landscape that is also related to everything around us in our daily practices *here*. This bring me back to the Lefebvre’s notion of a landscape in chapter two, as a pictorial *representation* of over there and a *perception* of space we are in here (2006:20). In this manner the landscape is not merely a representation, but brings the materiality of it into our daily lives. Furthermore, if the landscape in ‘Bao Steel #10’ is intrinsically connected to something we are living in here, it also implies a questioning of distance and proximity towards the landscape. Even though the physical distance of the actual space can be very far, paradoxically the very material of the coal, modified and commodified is also rather close, for example, in your hands in the shape of phone. In that manner the landscape in ‘Bao Steel #10’ is not only something to be observed, implying a distancing relation, but also something that entails a more sensuous, immersed and embodied experience. This tension in the landscape provides a further potential for environmental ethics, hence the photographs of Burtynsky can possibly generate actions of change among the viewers. Although the relation between these images and the actions they might trigger is difficult to quantify or map; other scholars are interrogating the importance of these potential effects.

In ‘The media as moral education: mediation and action’ Lilie Chouliraki states the crucial connection between media representation and public action remains under-theorized (2010:831). She proposes to investigate the ways in which representations offers a spectrum of options of engagement for the viewer. Albeit her focus is on images of suffering, nevertheless her argument of “media texts as performative” since “they enact paradigmatic forms of agency” is interesting in relation to this chapter. As she states:

Mediation as moral education then strongly relies on what I have earlier referred to as the performative capacity of representation: its capacity not only to re-present the world to its audiences but also to propose to them how to think and feel about the world (838).

This chapter demonstrated how ‘Bao Steel #10’ is exemplary in contributing to a thinking, but foremost a rethinking of how to engage with our world. It reconnects our everyday practices to the landscapes that made them possible in the first place. In the next chapter I will further

explore what kind of affective response this generates among the viewer by analysing the diptych 'Manufacturing #10ab' with the concept of the Sublime; a term that is deeply connected to the Romantic landscape genre and American landscape photography genre to which Burtynsky's work is related.



'Manufacturing #10ab' by Edward Burtynsky, 2005

FOUR

Scale, Sublime, Sustainability

Manufacturing #10ab

In my view, China is the most recent participant to be seduced by western ideals – the hollow promise of fulfilment and happiness through material gain. The troubling downside of this is something that I am only too aware of from my experience of life in a developed nation. The mass consumerism these ideals ignite and the resulting degradation of our environment intrinsic to the process of making things should be deep concern to all.

Edward Burtynsky, *China* (2005)

4.1 The industrial repetition

At first glance the left and right image appear to be identical mirror images that show a factory hall with endless rows of tables at which workers are standing or sitting, reaching all the way the vanishing point at the horizon. In both images the large green tables the closest to the camera position functions as a template for all the other tables that are seen in this diptych. It is impossible to count the amount of tables, as they blur into a blob of green and grey, let alone estimate the number of yellow shirts, boxes or black objects on the tables, giving the impression this space is endless. On the left side an aisle runs towards the end of the vanishing point with every few meters large piles of cardboard boxes. The windows on the left and in the middle of the ceiling leave in daylight, but most light comes from the set of three lamps per row hanging

from the high ceiling.

Each table is divided in seven squares which are again divided by yellow lines in smaller rectangles, is being occupied on both sides by workers in identical yellow shirts with a grey stripe on the shoulder with in the middle a logo. Some are standing, some are sitting on small stools without back, but all of them have black hair, more or less the same length, making them appear rather similar. The camera is positioned too far away to see details of faces, but all of them have a prostate and calm embodiment. That is, nobody is running, chatting with their neighbours or making any expressive movement. Instead, everybody works calmly at the table assembling bits and pieces that to go into larger black objects positioned in front of them. They are surrounded by plastic and cardboard boxes in which accessories come out and complete assembled objects go back in. Every work station has an orange spiral hanging down on which a welder is attached, and each worker has a blue tray with metal accessories to be weld on the black objects. The production process is ordered neatly, as there is no mess of empty plastic bags, rubbish or other undefined objects on their tables or on the floor around them. Everything seems clean and controlled. In comparison to the other two case studies discussed in this thesis, the colour palette of this dyptich is very different. Instead of grey, brown and black, here the dominant colours are yellow, green and blue, making the factory hall appear as a bright and light space and not heavy and dark.

The right image flows seamlessly into the left, with similar rows of tables with workers in canary yellow and grey shirts reaching until the vanishing point. There are no windows on the right side, but fortunately also here the ceiling and lamps provide a very light working space. On the right side a staircase reaches to a higher platform that runs towards the vanishing point, on which two workers in yellow shirt are standing. It is not clear what they are doing, and whether they have a different rank on the work floor, but interestingly enough they are the only two workers standing on this hundreds of meters long platform to which two other staircases lead, positioned further along the aisle, overlooking the work stations with employees. This factory hall, where humans have become tiny anonymous robots at a production belt, reminds us of what is most likely one of the biggest fears of Little Tramp, the character in *Modern Times* (1936) by Charlie Chaplin.

In this chapter I will analyse the diptych 'Manufacturing #10ab' in which the focus is on the affective response that this manufactured landscape evokes. Even though the space is inside,

what I will demonstrate is that through its compositional modalities it forms a landscape that resonates with the genre of the Romantic landscape such as it was elaborated upon in the other chapters of this thesis. Hence, this chapter explores how ‘Manufacturing #10ab’ relates to this art historical genre, in which I particularly focus on the notion of the Sublime herein as a specific affective response to representations of landscapes (Peeples 2011). I argue that in representing in a most effective way the size and scale through repetition, symmetry and multiplication in this inside manufactured landscape, the diptych challenges the Sublime and complexifies it as a double affective response. This Sublime affect makes the viewer think in a productive manner about their own position towards and within this landscape: one that does not paralyzes but provokes taking action. The scale thus evokes a certain subliminal affect, which then generates a potential relation of sustainability. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate the potential of this affective response to sharpen the position of the viewer in thinking about the relation between the human and the environment. I thereby return to the idea that aesthetics generate a sustainable relation in the encounter with photography, such as I elaborated upon in the introduction.

Let me first briefly situate the context, this diptych is taken at one of the factory halls of the Cankun Factory, one of the largest factories in the world, located in Xiamen City, Zhangzhou Fujian Province, China. The factory takes up the same amount of space as an average European city, and the specific hall on ‘Manufacturing #10ab’ is half a kilometer long. At the time the photograph was taken the Cankun Factory employed 23.000 workers, producing solely irons and espresso machines exclusively for the Western market.

This diptych is also the final image in the famous and highly appreciated opening of the documentary *Manufactured Landscapes* directed by Jennifer Baichwal.⁴¹ This scene opens with one of the long row of tables shot from side, at which Chinese workers in identical canary-yellow shirt are working. In a consistent and persistent pace the camera tracks along these work stations for over eight minutes; a cinematic eternity. After the first few minutes a sense of amazement arises of the immense scale of these endless rows of tables, but after four or five minutes this is being replaced by a feeling of discomfort. How long will this shot continue? Slowly the marvel of the scale is being replaced by questions on the impact, the necessity and the greediness of this same scale. Is this the result of the Western capitalist desire for cheapness and opulence? Is this what is behind the label ‘Made in China’, which has become so self-evident for Western consumers in the last decades?

⁴¹ See for example the review of Lisa Schwarzbaum in *Entertainment Weekly* (June 20, 2007), Jim Ridley in *Vile Voice* (June 12, 2007) or the review in *New York Magazine* (June 21, 2007).

In this scene the voice-over of Burytnsky asks: “Is there a way that I can actually talk about nature? And bring a certain appreciation of what it represents? That we come from nature, and that we have to understand what it is.” The space of the factory hall is so big it formed a landscape of its own, albeit not in the common understanding of what a landscape it. Instead of an outside landscape (whether natural or cultural), ‘Manufacturing #10ab’ represents a landscape inside a space. In this sense, the factory seen in this opening tracking-shot is not something that is separate from nature, but the new landscape of our time. It is a landscape that is changed and disrupted in the pursuit of progress. As also the previous chapters demonstrated, the landscape that questions this relation is not the Romantic natural landscape in which the human is dwarfed, but it is the industrial landscape that defines who we are and what our relationship to the planet is. In the case of ‘Manufacturing #10ab’ this landscape is not only industrial, but also an inside landscape, which makes it even more interesting to analyse in the larger context of this thesis.

4.2 Size, symmetry and multiplication

The impact of Burtynsky’s photographs is often ascribed to their large size prints (Mizgala 2003:30). For exhibition purposes Burtynsky’s photographs are printed on large chromogenic colour prints of 100,30 cm by 125,70 cm, forming a large diptych of 106,70 cm by 262,20 cm.⁴² Due to the high-resolution film this results in large-size photographs with extremely vivid colours that are incredibly detailed, yet because of its compositionality presenting large spaces. The viewer is then drawn to the details, hence becomes absorbed into the image due to its large size.

⁴² In order to be able to print images this large and detailed, there is a certain level of technological quality needed. Burtynsky works with a Hasselblad camera, a medium-format camera that uses 6 x 6 cm or 6 x 4,5 cm high-resolution film. Different from the 35mm film, this large-size film gives the possibility to show a great amount of detail, simply because more information fits on one single piece of film. It is thus important to understand that to present the photographs in this manner, and foremost to present the landscape in this way, is only possible due to the use of certain technology. Burtynsky started working with the digital format only recently, and in fact still mostly uses analogue film. The difference between a small-format camera and medium-format camera in terms of digital capacities works differently than with film. Here it is a question of the size of the sensor that can record a certain amount of information.



Photographer unknown, copyright Sundaram Tagore Gallery

However, it is not only the actual size of the prints, but is also the compositionality and scale of the landscape that work to unsettle the viewer. The photographs demand the audience to put their human perspective into the images as “our presence is dwarfed by the spaces we’ve created” (Torosian 2003:52-53).

A crucial aspect here is scale, which is represented through symmetry, repetition and multiplication in its composition. A careful analysis of the spatial organization makes this more clear. On both images the eye level is positioned, characteristic for Burtynsky’s work, at three-quarter of the image. This leaves the majority of the space to the work floor of the factory hall, and only a quarter of the image to the ceiling. In terms of volumes both images are perfectly mirroring each other. They are both build up out of a four triangular shapes: the work floor, the wall on the left and on the right, the ceiling, and the wall with the pillars on the right and on the left. All these volumes ‘start’ at the sides of the image and then following diagonal lines towards the vanishing point at the horizon. This gives the images their first four strong and dominant lines, causing a very symmetrical impression.

Due to the organization of the space this symmetry is further enhanced. Each volume is divided in strong lines that are either horizontal or vertical. The work floor is build up out of a row of tables that are all divided through steal constructions into seven work stations at which, on both sides, people are working. Thus, one horizontal line is in itself already divided in smaller squares through six vertical lines. This volume of one row is multiplied until the vanishing point. The ceiling is divided in smaller rectangles through the steal construction of the blue pillars that carry the roof. Also here this volume is repeated in perfection and symmetry until the horizon. On the left image the volume on the left side is cut up in squared shapes of the windows and the steal constructions around them. With minor exceptions in shape, there is a

very consistent repetition towards the vanishing point. On the right image the volume on the right side is cut up in similar squares by the steel construction of the blue pillars. This volume is further cut through the middle horizontally by the line of the platform. On both images the row of blue pillars cuts up the volume on the right and left side into endless vertical lines, vanishing at the eye level, with a grey girder in the middle adding yet another diagonal line towards the horizon.

My point here is that this play of lines is repetitious, multiplied and very consistent, which affects a sense of industrial and mechanical estrangement. What is of particular importance here is the fact that this inside space – which would normally be finite because it is an enclosed space – appears to be endless with no visible beginning (somewhere behind the camera) or end (beyond the vanishing point at the horizon). Instead of optimism and cheerfulness, that what the colour palette evokes, the scale of the repetition and endless multiplication enforces a overwhelming feeling of industrial detachment and anonymity. The workers are absorbed in the composition as anonymous machine-like objects that are alienated from the overall production process of goods, and reduced to minor and insignificant contributors of an immense system of production. It is this sense of tedium and weariness, evoked by the composition, that – paradoxically and/or ironically – highly contrasts the canary-yellow shirt of the workers.

In terms of perspective, similar to ‘Feng Jie #3&4’, this diptych constructs a particular position of its viewers. In both images the angle is frontal and there is large height difference between the view of the camera and what is pictured. This high-angle perspective makes the viewer look down on the work stations of the employees, as if it were a superior position. Also the distance from what is pictured is rather far, hence making it impossible to see the detailed faces of the workers. Consequently they stay anonymous and identical with their black hair and canary-yellow shirts; as seen earlier, they appear machine-like workers, not human beings.

Albeit the notion of anonymity of the workers can be easily critiqued as dismissing their stories and histories⁴³, I argue for an alternative and affirmative reading. Similar to the ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ the workers in this diptych are not proposed as the one to be blamed nor are the victims of this landscape. They are depersonalized in order for the landscape to emerge as the main subject matter. More importantly the strategy to have a large distance between the camera and the workers serves to enhance two crucial notions of this diptych, namely scale and repetition. Because of the distance they lose their human recognition and become abstract figures in this

⁴³ Especially feminist and postcolonial perspectives critiques on industrialized labour can be insightful here. See for example Acker, 2004; Anderson 2000; Mies 1998; Moghadam 2000; Parpart 1993.

immense space. It emphasizes them as workers in a factory where they are part of a much larger production process. By removing any possibility of personal, emotional attachment the perspective of this diptych enhances the mechanical aspect of their work. The high-angle and distance of the camera gives enough detail for the first row of tables to understand the work of human figures, and simultaneously gives an overview of the length of the hall to give an impression of how many others are in this same space. In sum, the construction of the factory hall in combination with the position of the camera results in a compositionality in which shapes and lines are enhancing the notion of repetition, and hence of the scale of this landscape.

In relation to the Romantic landscape genre this diptych presents a completely different type of landscape – namely human-made, inside, structured and organized, instead natural, outside, chaotic and unorganized – yet it plays with similar effects of the human subject being overwhelmed and dwarfed in it as tiny figures in a large landscape. The Sublime in this diptych is thus not one over nature, but one over industry. The next section will further explore the subliminal affective response in this diptych and demonstrate how it provokes a potential for an encounter that gears towards a sense of sustainability.

4.3 The Sublime as a sustainable encounter

As discussed in the previous chapters, in the eighteenth and nineteenth century the landscape became increasingly important as a subject matter for artists and critics. A crucial contribution herein was Edmund Burke's work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), in which he explores how the sublime and the beautiful are two exclusive experiences. To understand their origins Burke focused on the associations of pain and pleasure. His main point was that in the sublime, these two experiences are not separated, but that there is a sense of pleasure in the horror (Riding & Llewellyn 2009-10). Immanuel Kant further defined the sublime as a mental state that is caused by an inability to fathom the power, vastness, magnitude and magnificence when witnessing an object (Peeples 2011:379). It refers to that which exceeds our sensory comprehension and relates to the expansion of things in space and time; that which is formless, boundless, immense and immoderate (Baumeister 2005:251). Beauty on the other hand functions differently, as it keeps the mind restful and contemplative, and can be found in small objects that are smooth, delicate, elegant and graceful.

It is therefore not surprising that the Sublime was initially connected foremost to nature and natural objects. Wandering in the natural landscape the human was overwhelmed by the turbulence and immensity of the natural world, hence finding itself beyond the limits of reason; having no words to describe their experience (Riding & Llewellyn 2009-10). The challenge for

landscape painters was to represent this sensation that could not be rationalized and translated into written language (and thereby exceeding the limitations of other media, for example poetry). This resulted in dangerous and life-threatening subject matters in their paintings, such as mountain ranges, violent storms, rough seas, avalanches or volcanic eruptions. See for example the work *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Island in the Bay of Naples* by Joseph Wright of Derby.



‘Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples’ by Joseph Wright of Derby
circa 1776. Oil on canvas, 122 x176,4 cm

Thus, where the eighteenth century artists regarded the pleasurable and aesthetic mood of natural landscape worth of being painted, it is with the Romantic view in the early nineteenth century that transcendent meanings of nature arrived through the sublime feelings landscapes inspired (Kleiner & Mamiya 2006:670). As seen earlier in this thesis, one of the first and famous examples in northern Europe is Caspar David Friedrich whose style renders a sense of human insignificance and morality.

The evolution of the Romantic landscape painting was greatly impacted by another development: the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Consequently, what counts as a sublime object shifted. During the early twentieth century the sublime came to be associated with human-made objects (Peeples 2011:379). The work of J. M. W. Turner is one the earliest explorations of this changing industrial landscape. An illustrative example is *Rain, Steam and Speed – The Great Western Railway* (1844). In this painting a black locomotive seems to approach directly the position of the viewer, speeding towards change. In the bottom right corner a tiny hare appears, arguably so as a reference to the danger of technology in destroying the sublime elements of nature.



‘Rain, Steam and Speed - The Great Western Railway’ by J.M.W. Turner, 1844, oil on canvas, 91 x 121,8 cm

The sublime response to natural objects thus transformed into the ‘technological sublime’ which is evoked when witnessing industrial leaps (379). Initially this created a sense of nostalgia for picturesque scenes of the countryside, but later produced an idea of the omnipotence of the human. In the case of Burtynsky, his work and in specific the image ‘Manufacturing #10ab’ evoke an experience that seems to exceed our comprehension of what we are seeing. The scale of the factory hall is so large that the end is not visible in the photographs, but disappears into the vanishing point at the horizon. The play of lines such as I analysed earlier is most effective here, as it evokes the sense of endless repetition and multiplication. The working stations with their anonymous employees have no beginning and no end. Consequently, the number of people at work, machines, boxes, tables and equipment exceeds any possible conception. It appears to be immense, endless and excessive.

According to Carol Diehl Burtynsky is not portraying his landscapes as merely unmitigated degradation. In that case, we would be assaulted and might turn away, as it would be too much to absorb (2006:120). Instead the photographs of Burtynsky depict an ‘overwhelming beauty’, such as the Romantic landscape painters in the nineteenth century. As a comparison Diehl takes the work of J. M. W. Turner, who documented the birth of the Industrial Revolution with oversize sweeping panorama's, eloquently cultivating a dynamic atmosphere (120-121). The parallel between Turner and Burtynsky is that they both depict people as lost in the immensity of their environment, yet in the case of Burtynsky these are specific landscapes in which the large-scale industry is completely transforming the untouched natural environments. This evokes what she refers to as a ‘toxic sublime’.

Jennifer Peebles extends this idea of the toxic sublime in Burtynsky’s work further and thereby provides an interesting framework to analyze the image ‘Manufacturing #10ab’. She argues Burtynsky’s photographs fall within two sublimes; pride and wonder in human’s ability

to master their environment, yet being overwhelmed and uncomfortable in the reflection of unchecked environmental degradation (Peeples 2011:380). This ambiguous visual pleasure is an aesthetic horror that has a clear perceptual connection to other nature photographers, such as Carleton Watkins (identified by Burtynsky himself as a model for his work), whose work explored the first industrial developments and their effects on the environment in the United States in a more ‘romantic manner’. Burtynsky implements the crafting elements of the sublime as it was used by nature photographers like Watkins, to present landscapes that have been altered by human technology and industry (374). The affective response that these landscapes most often elicit is a ‘toxic sublime’ that Peeples defines as: “[T]he tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe (375).”⁴⁴ She states that his work is “at once stunningly beautiful and unnerving, the color scheme harmonious yet still wrong somehow” (Peeples 2011:374). In fact, this double affective response of a visual pleasure that oscillates between ‘beautiful’ and ‘scary’ is what Burtynsky deliberately goals towards, as he explains:

Through my photographs I’m hoping to be able to engage the audiences of my work, and to not immediately be rejected by the image. Not to say: “Oh my God, what is it?” But to be challenged by it. To say: “This is beautiful on one level, but on another level this is scary. I shouldn’t be enjoying it.” Like a forbidden pleasure.⁴⁵

This affect is not only the result of the actual factory hall being very big. It is foremost accomplished through the size of the photographs and their compositional modalities of high-angle and distanced perspective. In fact, the composition and framing suggests the scale of the subject matter is even bigger than what the viewer sees; it is too large to be fully included in the scope of the frame of the photograph. Consequently, this requires a process of recognition that comes with uncertainty, insignificance and astonishment. The viewer has to situate oneself in the image and thereby relate to its own insignificance towards the scale of the landscape represented. It causes, what Kant refers to as, a paradoxical ‘negative pleasure’, and Burtynsky himself names as ‘forbidden pleasure’.

Whether the work of Burtynsky depicts the ‘toxic sublime’, the ‘industrial sublime’ or the ‘documentary sublime’ (Diehl 2006; Hodgins & Thompson 2011; Peeples 2011; Zehle

⁴⁴ Even though this working definition is useful, I regard the word toxic too confining for the subject matter of the photographs, hence I prefer to use the notion of ‘double Sublime’.

⁴⁵ See TEDtalk 2005, 00.04:39 hrs. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U2Dd4k63-zM> [last accessed 17-11-2014].

2008), what connects these different readings of the Sublime is the idea that there is something happening in the work of Burtynsky that evokes an affective response that is more than just seeing a 'beautiful' photograph. As Carol Diehl states:

While always aware of the devastated nature of what we're viewing, we keep on looking because there's always some visual pleasure to engage us, whether in the lyrical graphic and sculptural elements we take in from far away, or in the minute, sharp-focused details that are revealed up close (Diehl 2006:120).

The effect of seeing "lyrical graphic and sculptural elements" from far away and "minute, sharp-focused details" up close relates directly to the spatial compositionality that has been explained earlier with the other two photographs as well, namely the flattening of space. In chapter two I argued this made the landscape emerge as an autonomous entity, as nothing demanded dominant focus. Chapter 3 explained how this flattening of space causes an effect of estrangement from what is pictured. In 'Manufacturing #10ab' the flattening of space relates to the specific emphasis on scale. To explain further, by compressing the space through a high-angle and far distanced position of the camera, and a high placed horizon in the image, the landscape is levelled out into a large flat surface in which nothing stands out in terms of shape or colour. Consequently it yields an ambiguity of the scale of this landscape. It is only after you see a detail which size you recognize, that you understand how large the landscape is. As aforementioned, due to the large-size prints of the photographs, the viewer does not merely experiences an aesthetic 'beauty', but is drawn to the surface and into the image, resulting in a more complex encounter.

This feeling of amazement and at the same time discomfort is the similar affective response that happens with the viewer in the eight-minute opening scene of the documentary *Manufactured Landscapes*. It is an attempt to relate to the scale and repetition, first by understanding the scale of the landscape represented, and second by positioning oneself as a human subject in relation to this landscape. According to Burtynsky it is what makes people look at his photographs, as it resonates with what Western audiences are feeling: an ambiguous movement of attraction and repulsion. On the one hand the image pulls the viewer in due to its aesthetic beauty, but on the other hand it pushes the viewer away because of the problematic scale of the subject matter. It is this moment that is the productive position for the viewer, as Peebles explains:

When one measures the self against these sites, it is not necessarily an evaluation of moral character or spiritual strength, as would be the case with nature. It instead requires a confrontation with our consumptive habits, what we buy, where we buy it, what organizations and industries we directly or indirectly support, and how those choices are influential in creating the sites we see (387).

The experience of the viewer when seeing these large-size photographs that are incredibly detailed and rich in colour quality results in making the image more than a flat representation; the viewer is drawn to the materiality of the surface; the texture of the photograph. In this way the experience goes beyond the image, the surface being a place of contact between the viewer and the photograph. The photograph's surface then becomes a site in which a specific mediation takes place, one that is more immersed and embodied and in which lies a political potential for change: a subliminal affect.⁴⁶

The 'toxic sublime' is therefore perhaps not so poisonous, but in fact potentially vulnerable. The confrontation does not leave the viewer in a state of paralysis, but provides impetus for necessary attitudinal change. It is precisely the toggle between beauty and scare of the double Sublime that brings me back to the idea of sustainability as a practice, such as it was elaborated upon in the introduction. An encounter with 'Manufacturing #10ab' demands to reflect upon your own position as a Western consumer, namely to face: wanting a life with a certain material standard and the consequential landscapes, on the other side of the world. It is here, in the affective response that the question of ethics, accountability and responsibility arises. The distance between the viewer and the photograph thus collapses and results in an embodied encounter that aims at changing the viewer's relation to the environment in a more endured and sustainable manner. Aesthetics can therefore no longer be thought of as mere 'beauty', but entails ethics and politics that, in a feminist Anthropocene understanding, assume having a deeply interconnected and interdependent relation to the landscape that is represented in the image; one that is in need of more sustainable futures.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have demonstrated how the Sublime as a symbol for inner realities, thoughts and conflicts provides a productive angle from which to analyse the affective response to the

⁴⁶ Unfortunately there is no space within this thesis to engage further with the idea of the materiality of the surface as a site of mediation between the viewer and the photograph. It would be very interesting develop more thoughts on the representational strategies and perceptual modalities, the specific quality of the materiality of the photographs, in relation to affective embodied experiences of viewers, and ultimately about the ethics and politics of aesthetics in this photographic image. See for further readings Bruno (2014) *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*, and Papenburg & Zarzycka (2012) *Carnal Aesthetics: Transgressive Imagery and Feminist Politics*.

scale of the landscape in 'Manufacturing #10ab'. Important to understand is that what kind of connotation is attached to this scale of the landscape, always relates to the social modality of the diptych. In other words, *how* the viewer reads this scale and repetition is determined on the social, cultural, and historical context of these terms in the relation to the spectator. To analyse 'Manufacturing #10ab' with the concept of the Sublime, requires taking in consideration the broader systems of meaning and how they are constructed according to certain ideologies, power relations and consequential processes of inclusion and exclusion.⁴⁷ Therefore I stress that within the Western context, large scale altered landscape representations such as 'Manufacturing #10ab' evoke among audiences the specific response of beauty and scare. This foremost derives from the Western art historical genre of Romantic landscape painting and the theoretical and philosophical concept of the Sublime. Within the Western context this aesthetic style is the most affective/effective when it comes to instigating a social response and attitudinal change towards environmental issues. How a Chinese audience would respond to Edward Burtynsky's images is different and would most likely not evoke a similar affective response.⁴⁸

An interesting comparison to illustrate the specificity of Burtynsky's compositional strategies of scale, repetition and multiplication to evoke the sense of sublime, is the fellow countryman Benoit Aquin. He also photographed human-made landscapes in China: one of the largest deserts in the world created by damaging farming practices, and causing enormous dust clouds that are affecting three hundred million people in China alone. His approach is very different, as he shoots always from human eye level, with horizons varying from three-quarter to half, to one-third. Therefore he does not provide a clear overview of the space he photographs, but only reaches as far as a maximum of thirty meters. There is no symmetry in terms of composition and most often human figures play the central role in his photographs.

⁴⁷ Unfortunately there was no space for such an analysis within this chapter, but for example semiology, in specific Charles Sanders Peirce (1955) provides a very useful framework to deconstruct the visual meanings in photographic images.

⁴⁸ Burtynsky exhibited only once in China, which was in 2014 with his latest project *Water* at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Hong Kong. There are no reviews of Chinese audiences known. The documentary *Manufactured Landscapes* shows a few scenes in which Chinese workers and representatives are commenting on the scale of the projects that they are involved in. Either they do not consider the scale as worth noting, since they are just doing their job, or they consider the scale of the project a source of national pride and prestige.



Title unknown, part of series 'China's Dust Bowl' by Benoit Aquin

<http://www.benoit-aquin.com/the-chinese-dust-bowl/62sfaqj6oh899u5x3g8bwglljgiy1w> [last accessed 27-2-2015]

However, also here photography scholars explain his work is having a great beauty, that simultaneously is held in check by the reality of what the viewer is looking at: a catastrophe (Brown 2013:21). The narrative, subject matter, location and political motivation of Aquin is similar to Burtynsky, yet the compositional choices result in a different visual outcome. There is no sublime affect such as it functions in Romantic landscape painting or the photography of Burtynsky. In order to generate social response towards the relation between human and environment, Burtynsky specifically portrays a landscape in which the scale becomes ambiguous and consequently sparks an affective response that does not leave the viewer comfortable and settled. To see this scale is disturbingly moving the mind.

Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to open a field of inquiry in which feminism, environmentalism and photography are explored in their relation and potential intra-actions, situated within the larger framework of the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch that is defined by the overwhelming human influence upon the earth. In specific this research aimed at demonstrating how the notion of the landscape, such as it is represented in the photography of Edward Burtynsky, can serve as an affective political tool with regards to debates on environmentalism and sustainability in a feminist manner that critically reflects upon the nature/culture binary, deconstructs the categories as such and rethinks the relation between human and environment. In connecting the interdisciplinary domains of feminism, environmentalism and photography I have explored Burtynsky's work with the different theoretical tools therein, and thereby focussed on issues relates to the concept of landscape, the nature/culture binary, and scale, Sublime and sustainability. What guided this research was the research question:

How does the concept of the landscape represented in the photography of Edward Burtynsky challenge the nature/culture binary and thereby problematize the relation between the human and the environment?

To answer this question, chapter 1 contextualized the three fields that are intersected in this research – feminism, environmentalism and photography – how they are essentially connected to each other, and foremost in their relation to the photography of Burtynsky. First I have traced the historical relation between landscape photography and environmental art, and the landscape in photography. Herein I demonstrated the historical relation between photography and nature, first in the positivist view as device to reveal an accurate form of nature, and later as a medium to represent nature in an artistic manner for a broader market (Rosenblum 1997). More specifically, I have demonstrated how the landscape in (visual) art has functioned as way to translate a relation between human and nature. The latter became of crucial importance for environmentalism, as the landscape provided the tool to critique the problematics of this relationship by representing landscapes that have been altered or affect by human influence. The second notion that made photography of specific interest for environmentalism is that throughout history photography has been associated with notions of 'reality' and 'objectivity',

hence providing a sense of a truthful and objective ‘visible evidence’ of the changing environment (Brown 2014; Peeples 2011). Despite the debunking of the impartial truth of the camera, understanding it as a subjective medium that selects and frames (Sturken & Cartwright 2009), and contextualizing the photographs in a system of representation in which power, ideology, knowledge and vision are interconnected (Haraway 1988; Mitchell 1986), I demonstrated that the indexical quality of photography and its cultural association with ‘reality’ and ‘objectivity’ (Sontag 1971), specifically in its genre as documentary (Cowie 2007) provide the social and political power for the photographs of Burtynsky as ‘visible evidence’.

Chapter 1 further elaborated on the theoretical framework of ecofeminism since the 1970s and the subsequent strands that directed from it, in order to critique ‘mainstream’ environmentalism. By explaining the main concerns of anthropocentrism and androcentrism by ecofeminism (Birkeland 1993), I demonstrated that feminist theory on environmentalism provides the angle that deconstructs the power relations and subjects constructions that caused the ecological crisis in the first place: that is, a masculine viewpoint on the dualistic, oppositional relation between human and nature. To strengthen this argument I have demonstrated how the work of Bruno Latour and Timothy Morton, both not unfamiliar with feminist theory, are exemplary in lacking a recognition of feminist knowledges in environmentalism. To propose the theoretical framework with which to read the landscape photography of Edward Burtynsky chapter 1 ultimately mapped out the feminist Anthropocene, in which the relation between human and environment is not oppositional and oppressive, but is understood as interconnected, interrelated and interdependent (Alaimo 2010; Alaimo and Hekman 2008; Barad 2007, 2010; Braidotti 2011, 2013; Grosz 2005; Haraway 2003, 2008; Wolfe 2010).

In the second chapter I analysed the first photograph ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ in which the focus was on the notion of the landscape as a social, historical and cultural constructed concept. Through the analysis of the image and with landscape theory (Lefebvre 2006) I explained how the landscape as we understand it today, emerged in the seventeenth century and derived from the specific Western, art historical tradition of pictorial landscape genre. I demonstrated how through its compositionality the landscape in ‘Feng Jie #3&4’ confiscates a similar idea of the human subject being overwhelmed by its environment, such as it was prominent in the Romantic period in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

Chapter 3 analysed the photograph ‘Bao Steel #10’, here I demonstrated how this image represents a landscape that problematizes the nature/culture binary, by being both at the same time: human-made (hence cultural) but consists out coal (hence natural). With the concepts of

‘naturecultures’ (Haraway 2003; 2008) and ‘agential realism’ (Barad 2003) I questioned the political dimension of this landscape, and how it is not only a landscape over *there*, but becomes a perception over *here* through visualizing the interconnectedness and interrelation between the landscape on the photograph and the materiality in the daily lives of the viewer. That is, the landscape on the photograph is the result and necessity to live the life that we are living in the material sense.

The consequences and potential of this political dimension have been explored in chapter 4 by analysing the affective response in the encounter with the photograph ‘Manufacturing #10ab’. This chapter specifically engaged with the notion of scale, repetition and multiplication which evokes a certain affective response that resonates with the Sublime, such as it was theorized in relation to the Romantic natural landscapes in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, yet I redefined it as a double Sublime: both amazement and discomfort. In analysing how the compositionality evokes a sense of scale, and tracing the art historical notion of the Sublime (Baumeister 2005; Riding & Llewellyn 2009), I argued that the manufactured landscape of Burtynsky evokes a sublime affective response in which the viewer is not merely overwhelmed, but finds themselves in an uncomfortable position in which they have to reflect upon their own position within the landscape. I argue that it is precisely this double Sublime that has the potential to connect consciousness with action, hence generating actual change. It is here that in the encounter between the viewer and the image something happens that transcends a mere aesthetic experience of beauty, but evokes a feminist account of sustainability.

Thus, through the analysis of the three photographs, and the exploration of debates and theories in the field of feminism, environmentalism and photography, I have demonstrated that the landscape in Edward Burtynsky’s photography is a site of critical and political potential for engaging with the current ecological crisis, and challenging the problematic relation between the human and environment. Within this context of environmentalism and questions of sustainability, I have shown how his manufactured landscape photographs in their encounter with the viewer become ‘sustainable images’. This brings me back to the anecdote that opened the introduction of this thesis in which the relation between consciousness and action was being questioned in the television programme *Filosofisch Kwintet*. According to the speakers there is a cognitive dissonance and a lack of feeling an urgency for behavioural change, because, as they argue, we do not *experience* and *feel* the consequences of the exploitative energy use that our material desires demand. The main concern of this thesis was to explore to what extent the photography of Burtynsky can challenge this ‘cognitive dissonance’, and contribute in generating an awareness of the problematic relation between human and environment, and

stimulate an actual change in the social reality of its audience, because it generates a certain productive affective response: because seeing his photographs is an sustainable encounter.

Of most importance in this research was a reinterpretation of the notion of the landscape, in order to reconceptualize it as representation of something *over there*, yet simultaneously affecting the viewer *over here*. This brings me back to Rosi Braidotti's "ethical subject of sustainable becoming" whose ordinary micro-practices of everyday life are embedded in a sense of responsibility and accountability for the environment she or he inhabits (2006:137, 278). The ecological crisis is an increasingly complex problem for which there are no easy answers or solutions available. The state of environmental perils is complex to the extent it is impossible to encompass both problems and resolutions in simple numbers and graphics. What is needed is a different way of thinking; a different way of seeing. What my research has proven is that the photography of Edward Burtynsky is very rich and compelling in providing potential and possible alternative modes on how to relate to ourselves and our desires, the environments that we surround ourselves in and the landscapes that have been created subsequently.

Still, this is not an easy task, yet an encounter with inspiring work such as that of Burtynsky, gives us something very precious, namely to take the time for contemplation. To observe his photographs brings us back to the very nature of the view a camera imposes: stasis. In the ever accelerating modern, Western society where everything needs to be fast – communication, food, transport, studying, life itself – I opt for slowness. The reflection upon one's position as a human being in relation to the environment cannot and should not be done in the pace in which neo-liberal structures are dominating everyday life and its practices. The hunger for more, better and faster production is what led to the beautiful yet disturbing manufactured landscapes in Burtynsky's photographs. So look at them again, take your time to observe, find your way to the images slowly and let the distance between you and the photographs collapse. Let them build up a sustainable relation between you and your environment towards endurable futures. In the meantime I will return to my balcony and start to plant the seeds for a new generation.

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