

Perspectives on the Anthropocene

An Introduction

Jens Kirk

is associate professor of English at the Department of Culture and Learning, Aalborg University. His teaching and research areas include contemporary British writing and hydrohumanities.

Lars Bang Larsen

is an art historian and head of research at Art Hub Copenhagen. Exhibitions he has (co-)curated include, Mud Muses. A Rant About Technology (Moderna Museet, 2019) and documenta. Politik und Kunst (Deutsches Historisches Museum, 2021-22). His publications include, Networks (MIT press and Whitechapel Gallery 2015), and Georgiana Houghton. Don't Believe Every Spirit, But Try the Spirits (MUMA / Fulgur Press, forthcoming).

Morten Ziethen

is associate professor within applied philosophy at Aalborg University. His research areas include among others educational philosophy within an Anthropocene context. Together with a colleague he currently works on a monography on Bildung in the Anthropocene, which basically asks how we have to think about Bildung and the purpose of the school when the Anthropocene has become the fundamental situation on earth.

Jens Kirk,
Lars Bang Larsen &
Morten Ziethen¹

Abstract

This article falls into two sections. First, the Anthropocene is outlined in terms of a fundamental and unique shock to the imagination. Secondly, the article sketches out a range of responses and attitudes to the Anthropocene shock, including apathy, activism, and intervention.

Keywords: Anthropocene shock, apathy, activism, intervention.

It was geologist Paul Crutzen and biologist Eugene F. Stoermer, who in 2000 were the first to claim that the Earth has now entered what they called the Anthropocene. They argued that this new period has begun since the most important transformations within the life zone of earth (including the biosphere, atmosphere, hydrosphere and geosphere) are the results of human activities – and not, for instance, of meteors, volcanoes, ice ages, etc. Since then, the term has become increasingly widespread in culture and society, and our understanding of the Anthropocene has undergone important changes. Most important is the fact that the term is no longer solely used as a scientific designation for a geological period, but also as a sign for the discomfort and disorientation felt by many contemporary humans when it comes to the question about how we should continue our shared journey in time as earth dwellers. Put differently, it is the ordinary modern production apparatus, based on science, industry, and technology, and the corresponding lifestyles, that has produced the Anthropocene condition on Earth. This life is in many ways a good life (in our part of the world) – but it seems to be incompatible with Earth and its ecosystems now and in the long run. For this reason, the concept of the Anthropocene also signifies a sense of paralysis and alienation – we produce and consume more and more, knowing well that we thereby inevitably contribute to the processes accelerating the Anthropocene condition. So, what to do, and how to live – and let live? Promising a convenient solution, politicians and decision makers promote the ‘green transition’ of the production apparatus. However, will that transformation steeped as it is in paradigms of growth be enough to secure the habitability of the Earth? The stakes are of the highest magnitude, and this is why the term ‘Anthropocene’ exists as a riddle of life and death – and not just as a scientific designation.

In bringing together this volume, the editors agree with Robert Macfarlane’s claim that “the Anthropocene has administered – and will administer – a massive jolt to the imagination.” (2016, np). Macfarlane uses “jolt” in its figurative sense as a signifier for “a surprise; a shock which disturbs one’s mental composure”. Despite the experiences of being paralyzed by the “massive jolt” of the Anthropocene, it also produces demands for action and behavioral

change in the battle against CO2 emissions, global warming, habitat destruction, and mass extinction. And not everybody is paralyzed. We can identify at least three different forms of jolt-reactions. One way of reacting is represented by the activism of, for example, Greta Thunberg, Fridays for Future, Just Stop Oil, and Extinction Rebellion. Activism can be disruptive, or even involve breaking the law. And while the act of throwing soup at van Gogh's *Sunflowers* is illegal, it does bring out the idea that we tend to value art higher than life extremely well. We cherish art as eternal and protect it by laws and regulations, behind glass and in museums, so that future generations may enjoy it. Skilled professionals are at hand as restorers and conservators of great works of art to make sure they are not harmed by anything that time may throw at them. Our planet, on the other hand, we consider in a completely different light (Just Stop Oil 2023; Gayle 2022). With few exceptions, no one holds anybody responsible for protecting Earth for future generations (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2022). Instead, we colonize and deplete the resources of the future (Krznic 2020). In this manner, the Just Stop Oil activists – ironically or tragically – call our attention to the *ars longa, vita brevis* trope because art could very well outlast (human) life on earth! Activism, then, attempts to continuously disturb our mental composure.

At the other end of the spectrum, the demand for action produces the beforementioned paralyzed apathy (which notably is something else than mere not-knowing and ignorance). In response to the question why we do not do more to curb the climate crisis, moral philosopher Elizabeth Cripps lists (and rebuts) seven of the most common justifications for climate crisis apathy current in first world countries before she concludes with some resignation that “[h]owever much we should do to avert this tragedy, it’s more than most of us do now.” (Cripps 2022, 3-4). It’s difficult not to agree.

Situated somewhere between activism and apathy, perhaps, lie the numerous interventions and attempts to find new ways (or answers) that have accrued around the term since 2000, not only across academia but in the public sphere as well. As any Google search will demonstrate, the term has burrowed its way into studies of all walks of life, for instance, angling (Elmer 2017), childhood education (Sjögren 2020), food (Willett et al. 2019), gardening (Diogo et al. 2019; Paola 2018), health psychology (Bernard 2019), polic-

ing (O'Sullivan 2019), and sports (Eriksen 2021) to name but a few examples. Outside academic discourse, the April-June 2018 issue of *The Unesco Courier* entitled *Welcome to the Anthropocene* – available worldwide in nine languages, electronically as well as in print – arguably marks a high point in the popular reception history of the term so far. Moreover, YouTube distributes a large number of videos on the subject, including, for instance, Norman Wirzba's ambitious *Facing the Anthropocene* series (e.g., Wirzba 2021).

AQ25: Perspectives on the Anthropocene contains a variety of articles that together register the impact of the Anthropocene across several fields. Thus, the articles play out across genres and media, popular as well as elite, and deal with poetry, prose fiction, television, and Hollywood and Bollywood cinema. The contributions, moreover, address and represent diverse geographical locations: the USA, Greenland, Scandinavia, Europe, and India. The contributors come from across the university ranks and include students completing their degrees, doctoral students, post docs, associate and full professors. Lastly, the contributors hail from across the globe, representing nationalities from Asia, Europe, North America, and Scandinavia.

Bageshree Trivedi's article "Re-viewing the Anthropocene: Eco-feminism and Decoloniality in Dhruv Bhatt's *Akoopār*" shows how a novel by a contemporary writer from Gujarat, a state on the west coast of India, critiques the notion of the Anthropocene, offering an alternative, nonwestern, narrative of human involvement with the environment instead. In "Twisted Skeins of Women and Wilderness: Retelling Shakespeare's *Shrew* in Amit Masurkar's *Sherni*," Amar Singh and Shipra Tholia examine the contemporary Bollywood film *Sherni* and show how tropes of the shrew – familiar from Shakespeare, for instance – emerge as the film expresses its resistance to the legacies of colonialism and patriarchy, creating empathy for the nonhuman actor – a tigress. In her article "Dansk grønlandslitteratur og jagten på det antropocæne", Emilie Dybdal deals with the representation of climate change in a contemporary novel in Danish about Greenland: Bjarne Ljungdahl's *Korsveje i Nord*. Dybdal shows that it offers some interesting perspectives on the future of Greenland in the Anthropocene. Irina Souch's article "Troubling the Water: Hydro-Imagines in Nordic Television Drama" shows how Anthropocenic imagery is used by Nordic television series in

general and *The Legacy* in particular to problematize the green self-image regularly cultivated by Nordic governments. More particularly, Souch's reading demonstrates how television drama questions naive conceptions of water. In "Ghostbusting in the Late Anthropocene: The 1980s, (Un)Conscious Climate Culture, and Our Holocene Afterlives", Robert A. Saunders addresses a contemporary American film *Ghostbusters: Afterlife* – the sequel to the *Ghostbuster* movies of the '80s. Saunders argues that it critiques its precursors' values and functions as an intervention in the discussion of the climate apocalypse we're experiencing. Anna S. Reuter's article "It's complicated: On the responsibility of literature and literary criticism using the poem 'Gentle Now, Don't Add to Heartache' as an example," discusses how the Anthropocene produces new ideas of responsibility, guilt, and complicity for literary criticism. In "Econarratology, the novel, and Anthropocene imagination," Jens Kramshøj Flinker asks if fiction is able to provide forms of expression that offer an alternative to the discourse of science concerning the Anthropocene. Flinker's reading of a Danish novel - *The Abominable (Den afskyelige, 2016)* by Charlotte Weitze – demonstrates how it immerses us into a storyworld, engaging us in ways that are rarely possible outside literature. In "Knowing the Anthropocene," Mads N. Jespersen, Jens Kirk & Asger J. Rosendorf ask the question of how we best approach the Anthropocene in terms of knowledge. After a reading of attempts in STEM and SSH of imagining Anthropocene knowledge in terms of interdisciplinarity and integration, they conclude that knowing the Anthropocene remains an ongoing project.

The articles in AQ25, we hope, are helpful in administering further jolts to the imagination and thereby in contributing to the ongoing dialogue among humans who, between activism and apathy, try to find a way in the Anthropocene – for themselves, and for other living beings.

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Notes

- 1 Originally, the editors of the present volume included Jørgen Riber Christensen. Unfortunately, Christensen had to withdraw from the editorial board due to illness.