Introduction to the Anthropocene theme

JØRGEN BRUHN

When Leonardo DiCaprio received his Oscar in February 2016, he explained how the film crew of The Revenant was forced to move the entire production several times in order to find the snow it needed for the filming. DiCaprio argued that «climate change is real and it happens right now» and added, «Let us not take this planet for granted». His comments on global warming went viral and can be seen as one of many signs that a new planetary conscience is spreading, from scientists and activists travelling all the way to the entertainment industry, directors of feature film and documentary, to artists – and hopefully to the layman and back to deciding governmental levels all over the world.

DiCaprio was referring to the Anthropocene, a new geological periodization concept that stresses the human species as a planetary force. The Anthropocene started roughly after World War II (although other starting points have been suggested), taking over from the Holocene period, which had begun about 12,000 years earlier. The Anthropocene has had a number of dire consequences, perhaps the most devastating of which has been global warming and the changing weather patterns DiCaprio referred to. The new planetary situation has been recognized by world leaders, scientists, and religious leaders as being the major historical challenge of our epoch.

This thematic section of Ekfrase was initiated and edited by a research group from the Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal studies at Linnaeus University in Sweden that has set out to investigate the way in which aspects of the scientific concept of the Anthropocene are being transformed into aesthetic products. Now more than ever, a broad understanding of the nature and consequences of the Anthropocene is absolutely crucial, and with this issue the editors seek to further the knowledge about if and how aesthetic media can contribute to our knowledge and understanding of the Anthropocene. By gathering four strong articles from external scholars and ourselves producing five reviews of what we consider to be recent significant work relating to our interest in aesthetic mediations of the Anthropocene we hope to push just a little tiny step in the right direction; both by offering critical concepts and approaches and by highlighting important aesthetic work being done in the field.
The concept of the Anthropocene seems to be all over the place in current cultural and ideological discourses, and even though, as mentioned already, the concept of the Anthropocene is also disputed. A number of alternative and possibly more precise denominations circulate, but without really managing to do the same pragmatic, discursive work that the suggestive Anthropocene does. So for now, we want to make use of the intensive energies and affects surrounding and sticking to the concept and see what will eventually replace it.

Partly as a consequence of the lively contemporary discussions of the Anthropocene, the long and valuable tradition in the humanities for eco-critical work seems to be transforming into a second wave in recent years, where some of the more romantic and perhaps even nostalgic notions relating to nature and the environment are substituted with another set of questions and methodological and theoretical tools.

We want to reflect this new turn in eco-criticism in the following section in *Ekfrase* concentrating on «Aesthetic mediations of the Anthropocene». It will become clear that all the contributing writers take for granted the huge and very frightening environmental problems that face not only living generations but probably even more so the ones that will follow. But whereas conventional eco-criticism arguably exposed and criticised the human species and its alienated relation to nature and the environment (as well as trying to find productive representations of more sustainable relations to the world), the writers in this issue face up to another main problem. Most of the articles and the books reviewed in what follows have moved into another dimension or rather, perhaps, start from a different point as compared to the more conventional positions of eco-criticism.

The main question that interests the writers of this issue is how to represent almost un-representable phenomena like climate change, environmental disasters, or an abstract philosophical-epochal notion like the Anthropocene. The notion of the un-representable or the unsayable so often discussed in the aesthetic branches of the humanities now meets a new frontier or rather a new reality: the reality of life-threatening risks that cannot and should not remain theoretical or indeed aesthetic questions but that needs to come to the knowledge of the largest possible public, and to reach decision makers at all levels of society, all over the world. Consequently, art and literature and film are, for better or for worse, becoming battlefields in a war that is being waged between scientists on the one hand (hard scientists whom people from the humanities have not always held in the greatest esteem in terms of philosophy and theory!) and conglomerates of interests who do not want to accept the seriousness of our current situation. In the important book *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (Bloomsbury 2012) Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway offer a rather scary picture of the forces that actively fight the knowledge about major public questions, including the question of human-induced climate change. To a certain extent it is this kind of magnificently strong and well-funded opponents that artists across media and academics across the traditionally non-inclusive disciplinary borders are now facing.

And it does in fact seem as if the old borders between disciplines are being rethought in the light of the Anthropocene condition: it is, for instance, by way of a geology periodisation (the Anthropocene is originally a geological concept) that humanities scholars now try to rethink human history and culture, but this is only on the most general level. Scientists need help from photographers to popularize their knowledge about the global warming and the disappearing ice, as demonstrated by the film scholar Anne Gjelsvik and the ecology-trained Torr Cumming; documentary specialist Peter Ole Pedersen works with artist Christian Danielewitz in order to demonstrate the presence and the highly complex implications of nuclear waste in China; cultural scholar and musician Heidi Hart describes and interprets the function of music in a documentary film about scientists and artists who try to make sense of the changing ice and climate in Greenland; and Johan Blomberg and John Haglund suggest a triangular relation between the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, the abstract notion of Anthropocene,
and the specific works of contemporary artists. Many and difficult problems face both artists and academics who enter the mine fields of politics and ideology in such a relatively direct way as is the case here. There is, to begin with, the inherent risk of simplifying complex matters to an absurd degree, but there is also the risk of making lousy art or shallow academic work which is only justified by the fig leaf of the acceptable political or philosophical ideas. These dangers are not directly addressed in the four articles and the five shorter article reviews in the issue, but the question lurks in the background of all the material. It is sometimes a very thin line between opulent poster art and serious aesthetic and philosophical investigations of what is probably the greatest contemporary challenge to mankind. In the articles and reviews that follow, artists and academics face the challenge of thinking about and creating answers to the risks of a man-made world in rich, complex and stimulating ways. In this we find hope.