

Champions of the Anthropocene

Description

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Modernism championed an image of the human as rational, in control, and improving. Now we human beings realise we are responsible for irreversible alterations to land, climate, and organic life on a geological scale.

So we live in the Anthropocene, and those committed to its correction, rehabilitation and remaking are Anthropoceneans. Many geographers are counted in their number â?? but where are the designers?

Geographers Thomas Thornton and Yadvinder Malhi identify four responses to Anthroprocene changes. They donâ??t think of these categories as exclusive and each has merit.

1. The prophets who attempt to sustain a sense of alarm and predict disaster (the **Moral Jeremiahs**)
2. Those who foreground progress as inevitable and costly, but think it will ultimately save us (**March of Progress**)
3. Those who believe, either blindly or with knowledge, that we can fix things with technology. This is the world of the â??**Technofix Optimist**, which emphasises climate change and other Earth System problems as solvable through human ingenuity and technology, whether through solutions such as cleaner energy supplies, more efficient urbanisation, or global geoengineeringâ?• (2). (Are designers amongst them?)
4. Those who advocate for new ways of thinking and acting. These are the **New Genesis** group who advocate for a â??fresh vision of re-enchantment emerging from the Anthropocene in which humans reconnect with Earth systemsâ?• (2). Thornton and Malhi point to the *Ecomodernist Manifesto* in which we read: â??A good Anthropocene demands that humans use their growing social, economic, and technological powers to make life better for people, stabilize the climate, and protect the natural worldâ?• (7).



Anthropocene challenges

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Geographer Lesley Head (see previous post) brands those who fit the latter category as Anthropoceneans. She thinks of them as â??the well-off citizens of the Modern world who, having contributed so much to the problems, have to try and remake ourselves and our worldsâ?• (167). So Anthropoceneans have a daunting set of responsibilities and challenges.

1. **Emotional workers**. Anthropoceneans are emotional labourers. Head says, â??Grief and other painful emotions â?? fear, anxiety, trauma â?? will be our companion on this journey â?? they are not something we can deal with and move on fromâ?• (167). As I indicated in the previous post, she focusses on the emotion of grief: â??the first step is to acknowledge this companion, grief. If part of what we are grieving for, and what we must farewell, is our modern selves, it follows that a necessary intellectual and practical task is to imagine new kinds of selvesâ?• (168). A new kind of self is the Anthropocenean.
2. **Practitioners of hope**. Drawing on several scholars who advance the theme of hope, Head concludes that we need to move beyond the idea of hope as something you *feel*, into something you *do*. Apart from fuelling major transformations, this emphasis on the practical demonstration of hope helps the individual make sense of those small gestures that may so far have little impact on improving the environment, but circulate and signal hope. We might think of dividing up our recyclables, cutting down on air miles, or catching the bus to work.
3. **Stress-free uncertainty**. Sound governance and management build on ideas about stability, predictability and balance (169), and of course these motivate building and architecture. But we may be heading for a future without these stabilities, where transience and mobility become the norm: â??On the one hand the hyper-mobilities of late modernity are a key contributor to greenhouse gas emissions; on the other hand sea level rise and other changes mean that whole societies will need to be on the moveâ?• (168). So the challenge is to adapt to the loss of spatial stabilities (perhaps tested in Europe at the moment with the refugee crisis).
4. **Relational concepts of causation**. Human beings affect nature, and nature affects us â?? but thatâ??s too simple. There are networks of causality, and certainly no teleology, i.e. inevitable progress.
5. **Multiple temporalities**. We draw on the past and heritage, but donâ??t want to return to the past. In breaking with past methods thereâ??s scope for judicious and well-researched

extreme measures: â??It is now clear that the metaphor of treading lightly on the earth does not actually help operationalise turning around this Titanicâ?• (170).

6. **Embedded in the earth**. We are ontologically connected to the earth, but also in the practical sense of managing resources, agriculture, water supply. Sheâ??s writing about the Australian context in which Indigenous approaches to the land have political pertinency. We occupy â??multifunctional landscapes with many overlapping land tenures and understandingsâ?• (170).
7. **Re-value favourable human action**. Not everything we might do is appealing or family friendly: â??We should not only focus on the gentle â?? vigilance, killing and culling are part of the package. Much environmental work is labour intensive, whether killing invasive weeds in the savanna or juggling household activities to reduce car useâ?• (171).
8. **Re-orient ourselves to time**. As well as developing renewed understandings of the past, some of us will have to adjust what we do with our time: â??Provision of food and water will probably take more hours of the day, leaving less time for commerce, formal education, cultural pursuitsâ?• (171).
9. **Sharers**. Some Anthropoceneans will obviously have to share what they produce, be prepared to draw on the generosity of strangers, and share jobs.
10. **Dealers in scarcity and abundance**. Head was writing before the current oversupply of oil, but itâ??s evident that we moderns are not very good at dealing with *abundance*, of investing for leaner times, and of dealing with fluctuations in the over supply of water and agricultural products.
11. **Go beyond activist groups**. Head indicates that Anthropoceneans donâ??t need to join organisations. She recognises that audiences need to be engaged beyond what is offered by â??environmentalismâ?• (173). Sometimes such organisations act as barriers to engagement.

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Beyond the new genesis

Thornton and Malhi (with whom I began this piece) refer to a further desirable characteristic of Anthropocene humanity, that of the Trickster. I think this is where Anthropocene theory gets interesting:

> â??Here we present one such traditional narrative that is rarely visible in global environmental discourse, that of the Trickster. The Trickster is not a devil but an amoral instigator of transgression and transformation of the existing order, pushing it toward something newâ?• (2).

Iâ??ve referenced the significance of Carl Jungâ??s Trickster function elsewhere. (See Unearthing the trickster function in Icelandic myth.) Thornton and Malhi draw on the Tricksterâ??s â??transforming capacity, unpredictability, clever, resourceful, deceptive, rule-breaking behaviour (sometimes combined with positive hero qualities), and unanticipated cosmic effects (good and bad) from this behaviourâ?• (3).

They reference the Raven as Trickster who features in North Pacific and Asian mythologies. The Raven is witness to and source of many earth changes. He pushes boundaries and steals and redistributes water and fire. Heâ??s not a â??god, scientist, humanitarian, engineer or manager, but instead a rogue demiurgeâ?• (3), exercising short term interests and having to bear the long term consequences. They account for Raven in Anthropocene terms:

> â??In many Native American traditions he begins his existence as a pure white being, only to be permanently blackened by his own misadventures with fire and its sooty, hydrocarbon emissions. Viewed as an interspecies transformer and an agent of metamorphosis, Raven may be the best

> embodiment and protagonist we have of carbonâ??s metamorphisms, cycles, fluxes and reactionsâ?• (3).

They advocate for Trickster as the metaphor for Anthropocene humanity:

> â??Ultimately his transformative, relational, human and other-than-human nature renders Raven a more sympathetic, systemic, ecological and supra-earthly figure than humankind. Although he may lack a moral compass, as a protagonist Raven shows us how to live and how not to live in this multifaceted and unpredictable worldâ?• (4).

Anthropocenean design

Elsewhere Iâ??ve aligned the Trickster function with the role of the designer, who otherwise receives scant attention in the texts Iâ??ve referenced here. I think that most makers, designers, inventors, and artists participate in a Trickster mind set â?? as creativity depends on it. Designers are after all sympathetic, systematic, and operate under a necessary delusion that they can transform the world. See Betwixt and between and Cornucopia Limited.

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Notes

- The first image is of flooded fields near York, England, 13 December 2013. The second is the dismantling of the Cockenzie power station, Scotland.
- According to Lesley Head, â??we have to assume that sometime in the next few decades, whether by force or choice, we will have to decarbonise so dramatically that many choices we take for granted in contemporary life will no longer be possibleâ?• (167).
- Lesley Head says we are not â??the centre of things â?? the earth does not actually care whether we survive or notâ?• (167).

Bibliography

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Category

1. Nature

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Date Created
April 2, 2016
Author
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