

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Steve Bradshaw. *Anthropocene*. Oley, PA: Bullfrog Films, 2015. Documentary film, DVD, 97 mins.

Reviewed by Sibylle Zavala (Environmental Consultant, Board Member of the Association for Biology, Biosciences and Biomedicine in Germany in Bavaria (VBIO e.V.))

Published on H-Water (February, 2017)

Commissioned by Yan Gao (Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society)

Humans' Signature on Planet Earth

In *Anthropocene*, a working group of international scientists reflects on whether to declare a new geological epoch, in which human activity shapes our planet more than nature itself. Although the idea of humankind impacting the earth's geology and ecology in major ways is not new, it was not until Nobel laureate Paul Crutzen coined the term in 2000 that naming a new era was taken seriously. Since then, a number of studies have been conducted to qualify and quantify the impact of humankind and to investigate those impacts in geological layers. Released in 2015, the documentary is aimed at interested professionals and general public. It was screened in 2016 at several international film festivals, striking a cord with the public at large.

In his film, director Steve Bradshaw looks into humankind's global effects and hence raises the awareness for careful, considered future actions. Over the course of ten chapters, he guides the viewer from the Big Bang to the present day and traces ecological and climatic development under human influence from a deeply thought-provoking perspective. The introductory chapter presents the concept of the Anthropocene. Scholars address the reasons that speak in favor of naming a new era and what difference it would make to the world. Chapters 1-3 focus on the historical development of humankind from being nomads until the consumption boom of the 1950s. In chapters 4-6, the filmmaker presents environmental issues associated with the on-

slaught of globalization. In chapters 7-9, humans' realization of their impact is analyzed and scholars give perspective on the consequences of this knowledge. Finally, chapter 10 provides a platform for visions of a world without humans. Since all but one of the interviewees are members of the Anthropocene Working Group of the International Commission on Stratigraphy, a proponent stance undergirds the documentary.

The film contributes to the broad debates over the starting point of the Anthropocene. According to scholarly discussions referenced in the film, the first major move by humans to alter landscapes on a large scale was the discovery of fire around eight hundred thousand years ago. Later, in the era of hunter-gatherers, humans drastically decreased the population of mega fauna and hence regenerated the vegetation to some extent. The second extensive human intervention on the planet may have started with the emergence of agriculture around eight thousand years ago, when humans began domesticating plant and animal species, an effort which may have emitted a large amount of carbon and methane into the atmosphere. However, studies have shown that the effects provoked by these changes did not leave substantial geological traces in the rock strata.

There is a consensus in the film that the Anthropocene started with the Industrial Revolution, when a global acceleration took place. Featuring archival footage and stunning pictures, the film presents the most signif-

icant individuals and inventions since the latter part of the eighteenth century. The steam machine became indispensable, farming underwent a boom with the help of mineral fertilizers, and increasing energy needs were primarily met through the use of nonrenewable resources such as oil and coal.

If the Industrial Revolution constituted the first stage of a new geological era, the Anthropocene Working Group point to the 1950s as the second stage. The film points out that reshuffled geopolitical systems and new technologies in the post-WWII world led to never-imagined rates of consumption that adversely affected the environment. Ecological consequences included land erosion, biodiversity loss, and air and water contamination, to name just a few. In a climactic moment, the film suggests that humans have made this planet an artificial one.

One could claim that humans were not the first species to radically change the world. For instance, cyanobacteria created an oxygen-rich atmosphere that allowed life to develop. However, the film argues that we humans are the first and only species to be conscious of our impact. In the words of the scholars in chapter 7, we find ourselves in a “mirror moment,” realizing how powerful we are. The question then arises whether this self-consciousness will lead to reflection on our actions and to a unified sense of responsibility. An independent journalist, Bradshaw conducts interviews with scholars who weigh in on whether our moment in the spotlight in Earth’s history will be marked by extinctions and upheavals, or if we can work to remedy the ecological and climatic problems we have wrought.

Although opponents of the Anthropocene theory cite a lack of proof, recent studies provide geological evidence of the lasting impact of humankind on the planet.[1] Proponents insist that the immense quantities of living and nonliving material being shifted around the globe definitely influence deep soil strata. Scientists’ major conclusion concerning the Anthropocene is that we need

to become comfortable with the idea of changing the way we live. In the words of geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, humankind will not be wiped out. “We’re like rats and cockroaches—we’ll be hard to shake off,” he says, with a hint of (black) humor. It is indeed a comforting thought that declaring a new geological epoch might engage people across religious, ethnic, and social barriers and change the course of the earth’s history for the better.

With good humor but without watering down the seriousness of the subject, the film ends by envisaging scenarios of a world where humans have become extinct. In a hypothetical post-human era, aliens would probably struggle to understand our demise after studying the earth’s geological layers and having worked out what happened. How ironic it would seem to them that a species able to change its planet so drastically was unable to cope with the effects.

Focusing on extensive scientific discussions of the concept of the Anthropocene, the documentary strongly represents the voice of the scientific community. That said, insights from scholars of the humanities and social sciences would have strengthened the film by exploring the social, cultural, and behavioral implications of naming a new era.

Nevertheless, the film *Anthropocene* is definitely fertile ground for discussions concerning the next chapter of the history of human habitation of Earth. Through award-winning stills and insightful interviews, it provides an informative and thought-provoking view on the Anthropocene but leaves viewers to decide where the future will lead. The more people watch this film and join the global discussion, the more progress we will be able to make, and the more hope we will have.

Note

[1]. For example, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, “Defining the Anthropocene,” *Nature* 519 (March 2015): 171-180.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-water>

Citation: Sibylle Zavala. Review of Steve Bradshaw, *Anthropocene*. H-Water, H-Net Reviews. February, 2017.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=47623>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.