

The anthropocene is a new form of romanticism, an essay by
Meliz Sabanci, 2015

Romanticism was a movement that originated in Europe toward the end of the 18th century and was all about passion. Artists would express their feelings and beliefs through their art. However, romanticism was not purely visual, it influenced music and literature including Les Misérables and the hunchback of Notre Dame, though these novels are most famously known for their adaptations through film. These types of romantic novels tended to encapsulate the intense drama of the moment and would depict the shock of the event. Romanticism rejected industrialization and made countryside and country people the subject. They painted what was seen as honest work.

Revolution was another common topic in romanticism because the art movement was born in the wake of the American revolution in 1776 and French revolution in 1789, although romanticism did not reach its peak until 1800 -1850. The revolutionary energy fuelled romanticism – they believed in expressing themselves with great intensity which is what is happening now with the anthropocene as artists who approach this topic tend to create very sublime work that challenge the viewer.

Other topics would depict nature as a fierce and all-powerful force, much like the anthropocene it would use the idea of lost hope to express humankind abandoned to the fate that we put ourselves in. You can see how the anthropocene is the new romanticism through man's touch with the environment and its destructive habits, its uncontrollable power and force with nature, which seems to take over today's society. The anthropocene stressed strong emotion as a source of aesthetic experience, confronting the sublimity of nature.

Before Romanticism came the age of enlightenment. This movement was very important for both the anthropocene and romanticism, although they both formed out of retaliation from the enlightenment. The age of enlightenment questioned ideas, religions and the monarchy, alike romanticism that would question nature and the monarchy, with the anthropocene questioning mankind's effect on nature. I agree with Rousseau, a philosopher of the enlightenment period, when he stated that man in his natural state, is entirely free and it is only when human beings gather together and form societies

that we become capable of jealousy and greed. I feel that society has a corrupting influence on humanity and it is the reason we are in anthropocene right now – because of our unnatural obsessions with things like oil. The differences between the Enlightenment belief and romanticism are that in enlightenment, emotions are a hindrance to rationality. However, Romanticism accepts emotions as the only true way to understand the world. Enlightenment would favor order for society while a Romanticist would adore the chaos of nature. Literary writer Emerson of the Romanticism period thought that if human beings were able to return to their “natural state” they would be much happier. This belief has been transferred to the anthropocene as we are forced to see firsthand the destructive chaos of what we have done to our planet and the hope for a less dystopian world, Burtynsky, a contemporary photographer captures this idea in his work. Rousseau once stated, “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains”. I think that what Rousseau meant by “being in chains” was that the industrializing society of his own time was a negative influence on human development. This idea has carried on throughout generations and reached the anthropocene where we have become responsible for our own destruction with nature.

It could be argued that romanticism and the anthropocene developed as a response to the Industrial Revolution. Many intellectuals and artists in the early 19th century considered industrialism to be unnatural and revolted against what they felt to be the increasingly inhumane mechanization of modern life. While the Industrial Revolution enabled the middle- classes to become dominant, it also drove many into horrific working conditions and had devastating consequences for the natural environment. Machines would leave pollution in the air and life would become much more focused on mechanics – as if distancing yourself from traditions and turning more and more into a dystopian world.

It also brought along the arts and crafts movement, which was going against the effects of the industrial revolution of the time. William Morris, a pioneer of the movement called on traditional beliefs that the home should be beautiful, full of hand crafted designs. The work was politically motivating and had strong ideologies, it challenged the way we see our world and encouraged us to go back to how life used to be. The industrial revolution is a big factor for why we are in the anthropocene but if we adopted a new way of thinking and reformed our relationship with nature then perhaps we could find a way out of the anthropocene.



In this painting 'The Raft of the Medusa' Gericault tackles a contemporary, politically sensitive subject of a captain who abandoned his ship after it was hit by a storm. The captain was very inexperienced for the voyage so it was

considered very corrupt of the King to have appointed that particular man. France was in a period called the restoration, the French revolution had failed and The King, a corrupt monarch was once again on the throne of France.



This links back to the anthropocene as the raft fell because of human impact. You can see in Burtynsky's work how similar this is because he is showing us how photography updates the romantic landscape to reflect another century of human impact.

There were not enough lifeboats so the 150 seamen fashioned a raft but only 15 survived after 10 days. You can see how Gericault has captured the moment where they see the ship that will save them and bring them to safety. The emotionalism and human suffering in the Raft of the Medusa is an example of Romanticism in France. The turbulent sea and feelings of hopelessness and despair of the men facing the ocean's relentless onslaught makes nature here seem all-powerful and uncontrollable.

Gericault aimed to replicate the event as accurately as possible through his art, he would study drowned bodies at the morgue and immerse himself with decapitated heads and even went to the trial

where the captain was indicted. However, this is a quite a proto romantic painting because it mixes the real and the unreal – you can see how Gericault has drawn influence from Caravaggio with how the figures appear to be much more heroic and healthier than they would have been when they were rescued.

There is a broad spectrum of emotion in this painting, in the bottom left there seems to be a terrible despair but slowly going to the upper right there is an apex of hope with the men trying to flag down the ship. The crescendo of optimism rising up from lower left to upper right fuses the bodies into one single action shot. The way Gericault has moved the raft more and more into the viewers' space and foreshortened it to engage us directly and emotionally is very similar to how Burtynsky approaches his photography.

TED prizewinner Edward Burtynsky photographs landscapes that document humanity's impact on the world to help persuade people to be more sustainable. His photographs force you to look, it is in the foreground happening right before you, engaging and challenging the audience. It seems to be a forbidden pleasure to be enjoying the photography because it is visually aesthetic and sublime but terrifying at the same time. There seems to be an Apex of doom instead of an apex of hope here as there is a little hint of what could have been in the left corner. Although the tires seem to completely take over the image, you can still see the small brown roots so we are reminded that there is a little bit of hope for nature. Burtynsky is trying to show us the negative effects of the industrial revolution by showing an extreme form of realism where the actual material is shown to prove his point – he over identifies with the problem to build attention to it. Perhaps this is what is needed though, if you present a visually dramatic view to people then maybe we can change the way we think and become more sustainable in our actions.

Burtynsky follows romantic approaches towards his work as he follows similar ideals that the old romantic masters did, he encapsulates his audience with the problem that human impact is altering the Earth's natural landscape. For me, these images function by showing our potential reality in the near future through nature. I'd like to sum up my argument by saying that the anthropocene is a new form of romanticism because human impact seems to be responsible for events happening today and in the romantic period. The anthropocene stresses such strong emotion and urges us to confront the problem that we put ourselves in.