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**Edward Burtynsky's photographs are the industrial landscape sublime.**

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## 1. List of Figures

**Figure 1** - De Louthembourg, H. J.. (1803) *An Avalanche in the Alps*. [oil paint on canvas] Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/de-louthembourg-an-avalanche-in-the-alps-t00772> Last accessed 6th January 2014.



**Figure 2** - Burtynsky, E.. (1991). *Rock of Ages #39, Active Section, E.L. Smith Quarry, Barre, Vermont.* [photographic print] From: Edward Burtynsky Quarries. p.57.



## **2. Introduction**

To review a photograph by Edward Burtynsky is to be silenced. To be awestruck by beauty but to fear what it is that is beautiful. To be terrified and at the same time overwhelmed by the vastness of its content. To feel empowered, yet somehow powerless. Most of all it is to feel absolutely insignificant.

In this essay I will briefly look at the history of Edward Burtynsky. I will then consider the genre of photography that Edward Burtynsky contributes to, and whom it is he is photographing for.

I will then discuss the history of the sublime in context to art of the eighteenth century and compare it to one photograph by Edward Burtynsky. The reason I have chosen to use only one photograph is because of the uniformity of context and aesthetics within his vast bodies of work. I feel it is of more benefit to look at one picture than at several, especially when considering the size of this essay.

### **3.1 Biography**

Born in 1955 of Ukrainian heritage in St. Catharine's, Ontario, Burtynsky is a graduate of Ryerson University, with a Bachelor of Applied Arts in Photography. (Burtynsky, 2013)

Burtynsky is one of Canada's most respected photographers. He has exhibited in more than fifty major museums worldwide including the National Gallery of Canada, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New York. (Burtynsky, 2013). He has published several photo books and has featured in and made two documentary films.

Burtynsky was raised around the sites and images of the vast General Motors plant in Ontario, which inspired the development of his photographic depictions of global industrial landscapes. (Burtynsky, 2013) His thought-provoking imagery explores the relationship between industry and nature. Whilst photographing man-altered landscapes such as quarries, mines and refineries, he presents his viewers with their own contradiction. That is, the unavoidable concern for the health of our debilitating planet, and our undeniable reliance on its natural resources in order to feed our twenty-first century lifestyles.

Although Burtynsky is primarily a landscape photographer, I would also argue that he could be considered a documentary photographer, in view of the way in which he photographs. As curator Paul Roth discusses in his essay on Burtynsky:

The artists overlook assumes a cold authority, a depersonalisation. Through the lens, we assume his viewpoint. Absent overt mediation, we are simply present, watching. We sense no filter, no interpretative voice to cloud our knowledge. No camera to bring us the view. Our insight seems total.

(2009, p167)

This depersonalisation is quintessential to documentary photography. Burtynsky's pictures do not tell you what to think. They sit quietly, allowing you to interpret them freely. This also tells us that his pictures are not made for any type of person, but are to be interpreted without bias by many.

### 3.2 The Sublime

The theory of the sublime was discussed across many western cultures, but was particularly topical to eighteenth-century Britain, because of the increasing importance of landscape as a subject category for artists and critics and because of the impact of the Irishman Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, (1757) who's treatise became the best known and described theory of the sublime. (Riding and Llewellyn, 2009-10)

Burke states that, in order to understand the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful, we must examine the experience and associations between pain and pleasure. (Burke, 1759, p.44-50) On the simplest level, a sublime experience is transformative. It is a sensation that is beyond expression and which impairs the intellectual faculties; the idea that contemplation of the sublime transports the spectator; and the association of the themes of grandeur and elevation from pain and terror. (Riding and Llewellyn, 2009-10)

The sublime was associated in particular with human responses to the immensity or turbulence of the natural world. It was at this point in history that visual artists became deeply intrigued by the challenge of representing the sublime, asking how can an artist paint the sensation that we experience when words fail or when we find ourselves beyond the limits of reason. (Riding and Llewellyn, 2009-10)

Artists such as John Martin and Philip James de Loutherbourg depicted the sublime by painting dramatic scenes of natural phenomena such as violent storms, volcanic eruptions or avalanches often dwarfing human figures, in fiery, romantic colours.

De Louthembourg's *An Avalanche in the Alps* (Fig 1) depicts the sublime by placing small, impotent figures, into a violent landscape, overshadowed by nature's frightening, yet strikingly beautiful power.

### **3.3 Rock of Ages #39, Active Section, E.L. Smith Quarry, Barre, Vermont, 1991**

In Figure 2, Burtynsky photographs the largest deep-hole granite quarry, nearly six hundred feet deep. (Barrerock, 2009) Whilst no effort is required to see that the majority of the frame is filled with towering rock, the bottom right section of the picture reveals hints of human activity. At first, the small red cabins and ladders are drawn to our attention. Only if you observe closely, you will see the handful of workers. It is at this point that perspective divulges scale and we are reminded of the eighteenth century paintings of the sublime, where a similar juxtaposition is created between man and landscape.

In both cases, nature dwarfs man, emphasising the power of nature and our curious desire to feel seduced and at the same time endangered. However, Burtynsky's photograph stands for something else. That is, the dichotomy that nature is beautiful, yet is being exploited for our own selfish pleasures.

Burtynsky mirrors De Louthembourg's idea of the disempowerment of people by placing his figures in the far bottom corner. A position that feels oppressive and awkward, adding an emphasis to the vast scale of the picture. It would seem that the picture has been composed in such a way deliberately, to draw attention to scale, a major theme in Burtynsky's work.

Figure 2 is a good representation of how Burtynsky's aesthetic style shows detail that is clinical in its accuracy. He uses a large-format view camera to achieve this

tremendous detail. It is likely he has used rise and fall technique to correct the perspective of the vertical lines and a large aperture, in order to guarantee the maximum depth of field. Such aesthetic precision is effective, injecting fear into the viewer by stressing reality. These are landscapes that we are never likely to see. Their scale is something we cannot comprehend. It seems therefore necessary to emphasise that this is the actuality we are all participants of.

Burtynsky typically shoots from above, often using cranes and helicopters to achieve improbable angles. By doing so, an undeniable sense of power is given to the viewer, which is similar to the feeling gained from *An Avalanche in the Alps* where De Louthembourg uses a similar angle for his painting (Fig 1). To observe such a formidable landscape from such a fierce perspective is to be made to feel responsible for it. By imposing such authority on the viewer, Burtynsky borrows Burke's ideas of pain and pleasure with regards to the sublime, as power is something we both seek and repulse.

*Quarries* is a prodigious body of work and is reflective of his global vision. In an artist statement Burtynsky explains, "I no longer see my world as delineated by countries, with borders, or language, but as 6.5 billion humans living off a precariously balanced, finite planet." (2012, p.7) Similarly, for each project Burtynsky travels globally, covering everywhere necessary in order to form an extensive documental archive of each given man altered landscape. This helps broaden the viewer's vision and reiterates the idea that the issues being witnessed are not merely local. In this example, *Rock of Ages #39* is one of one hundred and seventy-three photographic images, each picture documenting the largest quarried landscapes in the world.

The size of the individual photograph in both exhibition and book form is also reflective of Burtynsky's vision. He has exhibited *Quarries* worldwide at forty inches

by fifty inches per photograph. Although not enormous, when coupled with the size of the landscape and the extensive amount of pictures within the project, there is still a strong emphasis on scale. *Quarries* (2007) has also been published by Steidl in the form of a large hardback picture book, dedicating one picture per double page spread, highlighting the importance and equality of each individual landscape.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Whilst Burtynsky presents his images without the burden of his own opinion, he makes it easy for his viewers to form opinions of their own.

Burke's testimony on the sublime describes an association between pain and pleasure. Therefore, portraying the sublime in art, is certain to produce visually dramatic and thought-provoking imagery.

It can therefore be said that both De Louthembourg's painting (Fig 1) and Burtynsky's *Rock of Ages #39* (Fig 2) stir the emotions described in Burke's treatise. However, I would argue that they achieve this in very different ways.

De Louthembourg, along with many painters seek to depict the sublime in the natural world, where as Burtynsky draws his terrifying sublime from the world of order rather than the forces of nature. The rock face is imprinted with that order and with it, our methodologies, desire and need to rationalise. To be able to place a human perspective on these images, is to be dwarfed by the spaces we have created. (Burtynsky, 2007)

Burtynsky's detailed aesthetic coupled with his tendency to photograph from such an unlikely position, not only supports the ideas of the sublime but is consistent throughout his works. Producing such extensive, uniform work reinforces the idea of

mass industry, technology and global consumption. Once again we are posed with the same dilemma. That is, to be drawn by desire, whilst being consciously or unconsciously aware that the world is suffering for our own success. (Burtynsky, 2013)

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