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The Nature of Irrevocability: Anthropocene Nostalgia in Hayley Eichenbaum's Photography Series *The Mother Road*

ABSTRACT

The recent acknowledgement of the Anthropocene, resulting from the increasingly visible human-induced effects on the biosphere, has ultimately obliterated the nature/culture division (Latour; Chakrabarty), prompting sociocultural changes (Autin). Hayley Eichenbaum's photography series *The Mother Road* (2015–19) serves as a prominent example of a contemporary American cultural text which reinterprets existing aesthetic strategies and shows symptoms of what I propose to identify as Anthropocene nostalgia. This new sentiment is characterized by the awareness that a return to the past is impossible and would be pernicious, given the detrimental effects of reckless capitalism fuelled by twentieth-century American consumer culture. This article aims to analyze this distinctive type of nostalgia and its juxtaposition with the Anthropocene in Eichenbaum's series. An analysis of *The Mother Road* identifies why and how this new sentiment corresponds with the aesthetics of previous decades, as well as notions of temporality and time. Building on previously conceptualized traditions as codes of reference, Eichenbaum reinterprets the representation of Route 66 by playing with its iconography, creating images which evoke desolate, quasi-post-apocalyptic landscapes. With the use of synthetic colours, digital manipulation, kitsch imagery, and mindful deconstruction of past aesthetic strategies, the analyzed series demythologizes the past and displays the loss of both nature itself and of pre-Anthropocene perception.

Keywords: Anthropocene, temporality, Hayley Eichenbaum, Route 66, nostalgia, kitsch.

The Anthropocene has led to disastrous consequences for the biosphere. It has also marked a fundamental shift in global understanding of natural and cultural phenomena, as well as their interdependence. The division between nature and culture has been recently deemed obsolete, as the new climate change-induced geohistorical period leads to a redefinition of what we understand as nature, making us more “earthbound” than ever (Latour, *Facing Gaia* 38). The growing awareness of an impending natural catastrophe leads to eco-anxiety (Ojala), irreversibly changing the common perception of natural, cultural, and social relations. The Anthropocene is then understood as a “dissonant difference” (Colebrook 6), as well as “the most pertinent philosophical, religious, anthropological and . . . political concept” for our times (Latour, *Facing Gaia* 116). As a result, the crisis of climate change, along with its widespread repercussions, finds its resonance in culture, including the arts, leading to reinterpretation of different ideas and notions. A salient example of this is the emergence of a new type of nostalgia.

This article investigates the intersection of nostalgia and the Anthropocene in a photography series by a young American artist based in Milwaukee and Los Angeles, Hayley Eichenbaum (1992–). Entitled *The Mother Road* (2015–19), this series employs the new mode of nostalgia to which we will henceforth refer as “Anthropocene nostalgia.” Unlike other modes of this sentiment, this type of nostalgia does not elicit a yearning for the past despite the aesthetic appeal of the images and clear references to the previous decades. This considerable revision of the old notion is associated with (and caused by) the recent common acknowledgement of the Anthropocene and its negative consequences. Contradictory in its nature, Anthropocene nostalgia refers to the past but does so in a critical manner, with the use of aestheticization, irony, digital manipulation, and an unvarnished yet accurate representation of the previous decades. The majority of the aforementioned tools are employed by Eichenbaum in the discussed series. Significantly, the images we will analyze evoke a post-apocalyptic landscape that has been emptied of people, visualizing the world on the verge between unrestricted technological progress and an Anthropocene apocalypse. *The Mother Road's* desolate, post-industrial sceneries show the havoc of laissez-faire capitalism, which is one of the major causes of the current state of the environment (McDuff). Elements of Route 66 infrastructure presented in the photographs, although in a state of decay, are heavily aestheticized, hence the term “nostalgia” juxtaposed with the concept of the Anthropocene. Nevertheless, as the Anthropocene means “a radical change in the conditions of visibility and the subsequent transformation of the world into images” (Emmelhainz), the photographs which we will discuss serve as a remarkable example of this shift, without

belonging to the conventional environmental photography genre. There are other representatives of Anthropocene nostalgia in contemporary photography (such as Troy Paiva, Emmanuel Monzon, Christopher Soukup, or Dana Yurcisin), and the aesthetic strategies they employ are varied. The specificity of Eichenbaum's images lies in that they challenge the traditional roles of nostalgia and Anthropocene-related photography by reproducing and altering past aesthetics and apparatuses.

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Eichenbaum's *The Mother Road* (as well as the concepts of nostalgia and the Anthropocene) is closely related to the notions of temporality and memory. The images portray the icon of "the Old America"—the famous Route 66 with all its surrounding infrastructure, such as elements of Google architecture, diners, trailers, and other emblems of petroleum culture. The photographs perfectly encompass the long-gone past and the post-industrial present, picturing "a place where deterioration and romance coexist" (Eichenbaum, "Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral")—a landscape highly characteristic of the imagery of Anthropocene nostalgia.

Time and the notion of temporality have been crucial in defining nostalgia—both as a sentiment and as a cultural construct. Recognized in the eighteenth century as "a suffering attached to a memory" (Fuentenebro de Diego and Ots 406), nostalgia has been since then understood as longing for the past. The term was once again reinterpreted at the close of the twentieth century by Fredric Jameson in *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). Jameson analyzed nostalgia as a mode, that is, the imagination of a given period and specific aspects subjectively attributed to it rather than its realistic representation. He famously described this tendency as "nostalgia for the present" (Jameson 279), which allows us to consume the past in the form of "stylistic connotation[s]" (19). Another distinguished theorist in nostalgia studies, Svetlana Boym, proposed a different classification, also inherently linked with memory and temporality. In *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), she described two categories: a restorative nostalgia and a reflective one. Restorative nostalgia involves taking a real action resulting from a strong willingness to return to the past—this feeling often manifests itself "in total reconstructions of monuments of the past," putting emphasis on *nóstos* (Boym 44). In turn, a reflective type has no intention of changing anything, as it is "dwell[ing] in *álg[os]*"—lingering on a "patina of time" and focusing on the poignant feeling of wistfulness (Boym 41). Along with the more theoretical works appeared analyses concentrated

on specific, not yet examined types of nostalgia. In *Monochrome Memories* (2002), Paul Grainge discussed the 1990s American nostalgia that referred mostly to the first half of the twentieth century by means of black-and-white images. Therefore, I propose Anthropocene nostalgia as a new, twenty-first-century mode of this sentiment, as it effectively encompasses the intersection of major categories of the current era: time, temporality, and climate change.

Similarly to nostalgia, the Anthropocene is a notion significantly entangled with time in multiple ways. According to Timothy Morton, time is a crucial factor in defining the so-called hyperobjects. Hyperobjects (examples of which are the solar system, uranium, or styrofoam) are defined by time; they are stretched out over time to the point of being imperceptible, or rather, subliminally overlooked. With the Anthropocene being one of the most representative examples of Morton's concept, hyperobjects "envelop us, yet they are so massively distributed in time that they seem to taper off" (Morton 55). In coherence with the complex relationship between time and space which we will observe in Eichenbaum's photographs and in the type of nostalgia they represent, Morton defines the Anthropocene as an era when "we're no longer dealing with time or space as containers, but including time and space as dimensions of the high-dimensional phase space," with time "rippling through" the objects. Therefore, he advocates for a growing awareness of the climate crisis and for "thinking hyperobjects as transdimensional real things" in order to transit to an "ecological age" (Morton 73). Interestingly, Eichenbaum's images seem to play a role in this kind of transition (though not in a direct form, the way the awareness-raising environmental art does): they show how time has "rippled through" the objects she captures. This effect is emphasized by synthetic colours that accentuate the extent to which the Western world has intentionally turned away from nature, altering and destroying it over the course of centuries. Thus, contrary to Kathryn Yusoff and Jennifer Gabrys's claim that "[c]limate change is a social, environmental, and scientific phenomenon that is characterized by its relationship to futures" (518), I argue that it is defined mostly by its relation to the past, as well as to the present it has so severely affected, given the recently accelerating pace of irreversible environmental degradation.

Taking the above into consideration, the irrevocable transience of time is painfully experienced in the era of the Anthropocene. It is highlighted by emptiness that accompanies the sceneries pictured by Eichenbaum, asserting that the Mother Road is long past its heyday. With the recognition of the Anthropocene as a possible new geological period came realization that human history and Earth history have been ultimately interwoven. Since "[t]he narrative of world history has now collided (in our thoughts)

with the much longer-term geological history of the planet or—as we now think of it—of the Earth system” (Chakrabarty 23), this situation has brought about serious consequences for the perception of time and our position in world history. As a result, humans are both deemed responsible for and feel helpless against the current state of the environment, with “the main revolutionary event . . . behind us, since we have already crossed a few of the nine ‘planetary boundaries’ considered by some scientists as the ultimate barrier not to overstep” (Latour, “Agency” 1). Given the massive, long-term changes to the biosphere that cannot be reversed over the course of human life (if at all), we come to acknowledge the tragic predicament we are in, when “there is no prayer, and no chance of escaping to anywhere else” (Latour, “Agency” 4). Thus, acknowledgement of the transience of time does not bring hope for the resolution to the environmental problems. Also, it makes it impossible to long for the previous decades—a time when we failed to take urgent action that could have led to substantial mitigation of the climate change effects (Rich). Therefore, Anthropocene nostalgia appears to be an effective and powerful expression of these complex feelings, with bittersweet reflection upon our pre-Anthropocenic convictions in a time of uncertainty and helplessness.

The author of *The Mother Road* herself stresses the importance of the issue of temporality in her series. “A trip through the American South West,” she claims, “is one way to feel like you’re avoiding the forward nature of time” (Eichenbaum, “Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral”). As avoidance is one of the main coping mechanisms for different forms of anxiety, including the above-mentioned eco-anxiety (Holahan et al. 659), the artist hyperbolizes the escapist feeling she refers to by “clearing” the photographs. In the process of post-production (that is, digital editing of the images), she erases all the elements that make the photographs seem more earthly. To achieve precise geometrical organization with unrealistically clear lines and symmetry that characterize *The Mother Road* (see fig. 1 and fig. 4), the artist disposes of the “visual clutter”:

I have one rule: Clean it up. Take out the distractions. All images are genuine moments, with the visual clutter removed (such as excessive power-lines, garbage, etc.) that does not contribute to my final vision. . . . When I upload the images, I begin to edit out what I perceive as disorder. (Eichenbaum, “Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral”)

The extensive manipulation of the images, which attempts to rid the landscapes of traces of realism, in a paradoxical way challenges the avoidance of “the forward nature of time,” performatively proving such an avoidance to be impossible to imagine. Given the aforementioned painful

acknowledgement of the irreversibility of time, specifically in relation to the recognition of the rapid, negative environmental change and its hazards, Anthropocene nostalgia reduces the restorative sentiments to absurdity. The above-discussed restorative nostalgia, as conceptualized by Svetlana Boym, calls for a return to the past in terms of politics, social norms, and cultural strategies. The use of Anthropocene nostalgia in contemporary texts (such as *The Mother Road*) indicates how perception of time and history has been significantly altered by the acknowledgement of climate change and its severe effects. Given the current environmental situation, an attempt to return to the previous decades in the above-mentioned categories would turn out to be grotesque and false—if not tragic—just like the artificially-looking landscapes in Eichenbaum's works.



Fig. 1. Eichenbaum, Hayley. "The Mother Road I." Hayley Eichenbaum, <http://www.hayley-eichenbaum.com/mother-road-series-ii/2019/6/21/lxrjtia08jipubpff7igjk02hish5i>, accessed 3 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

NATURE AND KI'TSCH IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

Although, as already indicated, *The Mother Road* is not environmental photography, the representation of nature in Eichenbaum's works is distinctive and deserves analytical attention. If at all present in the discussed images, the elements of flora are suppressed, as if crushed by the burden of the ubiquitous concrete. Bushes and trees, often pruned and trimmed into

geometrical shapes, look either highly artificial or lifeless and somewhat withered. They are devoid of any trace of natural environment, since there is no soil around them—only cement. Substantially marginalized, the depicted flora feebly leans out of the buildings, borders windows, or grows in tiny patches of soil between pavements and edifices. As regards the representation of fauna, there is one photograph in the series that portrays an animal (fig. 2). In this picture, a grey donkey, sauntering down the pavement, past an unidentified, abandoned building, constitutes a surrealistic compositional counterpoint to its surroundings. Clearly not in its natural habitat, the animal appears ill-maintained, noticeably neglected, with its ribs showing. Thus, nature in Eichenbaum's visuals is presented as subjugated, reduced to nothing more than an aesthetic addendum to a landscape drastically altered by humans. Traditionally categorized as a domesticated, working animal, the donkey reminds us of America's agricultural past before industrialization, urbanization, and the expansion of the fossil fuel industry. Nevertheless, the photograph, employing Anthropocene nostalgia, does not evoke yearning for that time—it remains clear that the shift from agriculture to industry, marking the emergence of the Anthropocene (cf. Steffen et al.), cannot be overturned. Hence, Eichenbaum's series does not moralize or provide us with simple solutions. Instead, it illustrates the complexity of problems resulting from the Anthropocene as it is—with all the aspects and cause-and-effect relationships of this new geological period.

It is important to note that *The Mother Road* photographs and Route 66 itself are characterized by the aesthetic of kitsch. Interestingly, kitsch imagery can also be observed in other cultural texts employing Anthropocene nostalgia (e.g., Troy Paiva's *Lost America* [2013] or the photography series by Dana Yurcisin [2018–22]). To quote Eichenbaum, her series intended to “examine an environment that remains dependent on the adoration of its glory days and celebrate its surviving kitsch” (“Hayley Eichenbaum Captures the ‘Wilting Romanticism’”). Kitsch and aestheticization (another aforementioned characteristic of the nostalgia in question) are tightly linked, as aestheticism—“impos[ing] a generally more subtle and complex signified than would be possible with other connotation procedures” (Barthes 24)—“has to lead kitsch to descend into life” (Harries 142). It is also a way to resort to illusion, an “act of compensation” (Jameson 147) in the face of global crises, such as the ongoing environmental degradation. Eichenbaum's photographs aptly illustrate this phenomenon, juxtaposing the unnaturally coloured icons of old-style American consumerism with the sense of desolateness and eeriness. One of the provided images (see fig. 1) serves as a good example of this strategy: the donut shop, though extremely neat and coloured—visibly

aestheticized by the artist—is abandoned, with virtually no indication of human activity. This intersection of kitsch and gloominess arguably has a symbolic resonance, suggesting a powerful yet nuanced commentary on the nature/culture paradigm.



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Fig. 2. Eichenbaum, Hayley. "The Mother Road XI." *Hayley Eichenbaum*, <http://www.hayley-eichenbaum.com/mother-road-series/q7tehaflnajqy8wiunp1v5r51h2j>, accessed 10 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

What is more, kitsch emerged as a prevalent aesthetic at the same time as the Anthropocene. As Clement Greenberg states, it did not exist before the modern era and is most likely “a product of the industrial revolution” (9). Greenberg links the emergence of kitsch with universal literacy, which is the result of industrialization and urbanization. Since literacy became a basic skill, it “no longer served to distinguish an individual’s cultural inclinations, since it was no longer the exclusive concomitant of refined tastes” (9). Thus, neither “formal culture” nor “folk culture” seemed fit for the newly-created social classes: proletariat and petty bourgeois. As a result, an aesthetic of kitsch was created: an “ersatz culture . . . destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide” (Greenberg 10). As pointed out above, the industrial revolution, with its significant economic, social, and cultural changes, is considered as one of the possible starting points of the Anthropocene (Steffen et al.), which might explain why kitsch is one of the characteristic tools of Anthropocene nostalgia.

Apart from the above-discussed correlations, the aesthetic of kitsch is also very often associated with the notion of nostalgia, regardless of the sentiment’s modes. This relation has its psychological explanation: “[W]hen we feel vulnerable and dependent, a longing for safety and relatedness [nostalgia] attracts us not only to familiar and trustworthy individuals but also to conventional aesthetic stimuli charged with positive emotions (kitsch)” (Ortlieb and Carbon 1). Although this theory applies to the traditional type of nostalgia that evokes longing for a certain period, it is in accordance with the *modus operandi* of Anthropocene nostalgia as well, since Ortlieb and Carbon mention a longing for safety and relatedness, which is very present in times of trauma and anxiety such as ours, provoked by the awareness of the impending climate catastrophe.

RE-READING OLD STRATEGIES AND AESTHETIC FORMS

An important aspect of the mode of nostalgia employed in *The Mother Road* is the reproduction of past aesthetics and cultural trends. Existing traditions and structures are being reframed and manipulated to demonstrate the tragedy of our predicament resulting from the drastic changes to the climate. According to Fredric Jameson’s aforementioned theory of nostalgia, the urge to refer to elements of the culture of previous decades, or to present contemporary imagery as if it belonged to the past, is caused by the crisis of historicity. “Everything in our culture,” writes Jameson, “suggests that we have not, for all that, ceased to be preoccupied by history,” yet “we also

universally diagnose contemporary culture as irredeemably historicist, in the bad sense of an omnipresent and indiscriminate appetite for dead styles and fashions; indeed, for all the styles and fashions of a dead past" (285). Nonetheless, when he describes his idea of "nostalgia for the present," he refers to a phenomenon observed in the second half of the twentieth century. In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, I argue, the use of past styles has been purposefully reinterpreted by artists (especially those belonging to a younger generation, such as Hayley Eichenbaum)—not to sentimentally refer to a given period or to "nostalgify" the present (thus making it more of a product than a part of history), but to critically reflect on how environmentally harmful activities of the previous decades have caused the crisis we are trying to deal with nowadays. Thus, Eichenbaum's series displays multiple references not only to the previous era, picturing the emblems of bygone American myths, but also to the artistic visual traditions of the United States, deconstructing the works of icons of the past, such as Edward Hopper or the New Topographics.

Thus, one of the ways in which the photographs allude to the previous decades is, as indicated above, through a peculiar exploitation of then-powerful symbols of America, such as key elements of Route 66's infrastructure. Allegedly the most famous American highway, the Mother Road (as it was named by John Steinbeck) crosses eight states and three time zones. It was officially removed from the United States Highway System on June 27, 1985, after having seen its heyday in the middle part of the twentieth century ("History of Illinois Route 66"). Before that time, it was one of the major arteries of the country, with "a distinctive roadside culture" (Gambino) created around it. Its parking lots, motels, gas stations, and diners were filled with large numbers of people daily. Almost 40 years since its decommission, it has become a mere tourist attraction. Thus, Eichenbaum's work shows the highway as "more of an impoverished great-grandmother" (Gambino) than the Mother Road. The eerie feeling evoked by the analyzed photographs is substantially heightened by digital manipulation through which the depicted objects—now nearly or completely out of use—appear ready for non-existent customers. Apart from aestheticizing the images in terms of composition and colour scheme, Eichenbaum uses light effects in the editing process, so that old neons or out-of-use vending machines look not only brand new, but also as if they were in operation. As a result, the imagery of naïve, Google architecture of old-fashioned venues (such as teepee-shaped curio shops or deserted pawn shops), digitally enhanced in a clearly artificial way, fosters the awareness of the time distance separating us from the Mother Road's glory days. These images of tattered remnants of this American icon are a bitter commentary on the drawbacks of rapid technological development—one of the most important factors associated with the Anthropocene (Cera). In fact,

Route 66 itself has fallen into disuse because of the expansion of automobile industry. Paradoxically, its increasing popularity “with traffic swelling beyond its two-lane capacity” (Gambino) rendered it inefficient, so that it had to be replaced with several other freeways (“History of Illinois Route 66”). Eichenbaum’s photographs document the results of what was then seen as economic and technological progress, and what created a culture built on the automobile industry and fossil fuels. Juxtaposed with heartrending emptiness and distressing neatness, the visuals conjure up a post-human imagination, an effect of the Anthropocenic changes (cf. Zylinska).

Another way in which Eichenbaum’s photographs interact with the past is through the reproduction and reinterpretation of past styles and modes of expression—a technique characteristic of Anthropocene nostalgia. *The Mother Road* photographs seem to have been influenced by aesthetics of several past decades, from as early as the 1940s and 1950s, when the Beat poets initially contributed to mythicizing the highway, to the 1970s and 1980s. Listing her inspirations, Eichenbaum mentions works from the 1960s and 1970s—when the objects and places she pictures in her photographs were created and reached their most flourishing period. What she considers her “immediate influences” are the works of Stephen Shore and William Eggleston, as well as science-fiction films of the 1960s and the early films of Stanley Kubrick (Eichenbaum, “Hayley Eichenbaum on Going Viral”). Apart from that, resemblances between Eichenbaum’s series and the *oeuvre* of such acclaimed American artists as Edward Hopper, Edward Ruscha, or representatives of the New Topographics movement of the 1970s cannot go unnoticed. However, she employs past aesthetics, artistic strategies, and techniques only as codes of reference: despite considerable aesthetic similarities, the photographer markedly departs from the original ideas of her inspirations in terms of purpose, composition, and style.

As for the above-mentioned photographs—by Shore, Eggleston, Ruscha, and the New Topographics—it is vital to note that they document what was considered modern in the America of the 1960s and 1970s: gas stations, cars, and motels. Therefore, there is nothing “nostalgic” in these images—at least in a traditional, non-Jamesonian understanding of the word. At the time, the works of Eggleston and Shore were considered groundbreaking, “feel[ing] like raw and direct vision . . . describ[ing] the hues and textures of 1970s America” (Campany 170) and focusing, to quote Eudora Welty, on the “everyday . . . mundane world” (qtd. in Twersky). So whereas the aforementioned images from the 1960s and 1970s present the contemporaneity of the era, Eichenbaum’s photographs picture elements of the past that have had a significant negative impact on the present, as reckless capitalism has contributed to the massive exploitation of the environment. The difference is quite complex yet significant, and

so is the phenomenon of Anthropocene nostalgia itself: both Eichenbaum and the photographers she refers to capture venues created in the same era, but the purposes of their artistic decisions, as well as the effects, are divergent, which manifests the profound change in perception caused by the awareness of the Anthropocene.

In addition, despite obvious resemblances between her photographs and 1970s American photography, Eichenbaum adopts a diacritical strategy with regard to style and composition, which is particularly noticeable when one compares *The Mother Road* with the works of the New Topographics or Edward Ruscha. The subtitle of the New Topographics' first exhibition was "Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape," since they put an emphasis on the urban and suburban areas of the United States in the 1970s. At the time, the country's developing economy allowed to ceaselessly urbanize what was left of the famous American wilderness. The results of this shift from natural landscapes to industrial ones were documented by photographers such as Lewis Baltz, Robert Adams, or Nicholas Nixon. Given their shared main area of interest, as well as thematics seemingly congruous with that of *The Mother Road*, one could assume that Eichenbaum would compose her photographs likewise. However, the New Topographics, as well as Ed Ruscha (who greatly influenced the movement), marked their works with an apparent lack of composition, concentrating on "mundane but oddly fascinating topography" (O'Hagan). Images of trailer parks, high-voltage lines, and roads were intended to appear "deskilled" and "deadpan" (Campany 54). As is implied by the word "topographic," the photographs were supposed to portray the landscape as it is, without any changes or embellishment, unlike Eichenbaum's works. Shot mainly in black and white, the New Topographics' visuals were "stripped of context" or colour—they were intended to enhance the "sense of dislocation or placelessness" (Rosenberg 225). Similarly, Ed Ruscha's acclaimed collection *Twenty-six Gasoline Stations* which, like Eichenbaum's series, constituted a documentation of Route 66 and its infrastructure, consisted of images that were "plain visual statements" with "no poetry," as if "they might have been real estate photos or snapshots found and reused" (Campany 54). In contrast, *The Mother Road* photographs, though documenting the placelessness of today's world (just as the works by the New Topographics), are characterized by the above-mentioned precise composition and use of stark colours (see fig. 1). As a result, despite the same, or very similar, subjects, the "man-altered landscapes" of the 1960s and 1970s appear strikingly natural in comparison with Eichenbaum's surrealistically neat outlooks of the human-defined era she depicts and plays with.

As already mentioned, *The Mother Road* is significantly influenced not only by photographs, but also by paintings of the old American masters such as Edward Hopper. Similarly seemingly serene and vacant, both Eichenbaum's

and Hopper's *oeuvres* are critical of the current socioeconomic and cultural affairs (Joseph). The subjects of both artists' works—motels, diners, or gas stations—are also analogous. Thus, Eichenbaum (again) emulates the aesthetics not only of past infrastructure but also of past artistic and visual traditions, translating them into a painfully precise illustration of the Anthropocene and its possible future threats. Picturing the shattered remains of Route 66—a cultural icon that “became a stage on which Americans acted out their aspirations” (Gambino) only several decades ago—Eichenbaum presents the inevitable results of Anthropocenic activity by depicting landscapes of deteriorated car-dependent infrastructure devoid of humans (see fig. 3). Importantly, the photographs provide no specific indication of when they were taken (apart from the obvious suggestion that they were captured a long time after the Mother Road's prime). Therefore, these images can be seen as both documenting the present and predicting the future effects of human-induced climate changes, as climate migration (and, hence, land abandonment) is cited as one of the major consequences of the Anthropocene. The so-called climate exodus is soon to take place in various regions of the world, including the United States, as 13 million Americans will be “forced to move away from submerged coastlines” and “one in 12 Americans in the Southern half of the country will move toward California, the Mountain West or the Northwest over the next 45 years because of climate influences alone” (Lustgarten).

Hopper's works are human-centred, “speculating on past and impending events, on the relationships between the characters, and on the desires and anxieties” (Joseph). Conversely, Eichenbaum's photographs are, as discussed above, lacking human representation, which is characteristic both of the visualities in the Anthropocene and, more specifically, of photographs employing Anthropocene nostalgia. Since the very name of the new geological period concentrates on humans that are responsible for the destruction of the biosphere, a nonhuman perspective has recently proliferated in art (especially photography), as claimed by Joanna Zylińska. Thus, “the practice of imagining and imaging a certain future ‘after the human’ from the viewpoint of the here and now” has become a “[predominant] . . . aesthetic and visual trope” (Zylińska 85). A response to it is a recent trend of “enclosing and enframing” the ecological crisis “in a series of horrifying yet ultimately digestible images” to turn catastrophe “into visual entertainment as a form of relief” (Zylińska 88), which is convergent with Eichenbaum's aestheticization strategies. The dichotomy between representation of the quasi-post-apocalyptic world almost completely devoid of human presence and the use of aesthetics aiming at “visual entertainment” is particularly characteristic of Anthropocene nostalgia and the climate-related anxieties from which it stems.

Hopper's "great theme" is the aloneness and solitude of "insecure selfhoods in a country that is only abstractly a nation" (Schjeldahl), concentrating on human alienation. As pointed out above, the motif of solitude and abandonment in Eichenbaum's works is exercised differently, from a nonhuman point of view. She presents a world where the lonely (abandoned) objects are not persons, but places—left bereft by the rapid pace of technology which has led to catastrophic climate change. Although today's technology is seen as a twofold power—contributing "to the detachment and also connection of people and nature; domination, domestication as well as caring and protecting nature and humans"—swift technological changes, especially those fueled by the substantial growth of fossil fuel industry, as in the case of Route 66's demise, have been consequently "associated with massive environmental degradation, enhanced social inequities, and threats to human health and survival" (Dube et al. A1). Thus, the Anthropocene and the increased rate of technological development are closely related; hence another term proposed as a name for the same geological epoch: technocene.



Fig. 3. Eichenbaum, Hayley. "The Mother Road XII." *Sight Unseen*, https://sightunseen.com/content/uploads/2017/01/Eichenbaum_12.jpg, accessed 12 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

While Anthropocene nostalgia uses (and reproduces) existing aesthetic strategies, the cultural texts that employ it go beyond the typical, well-known genres. Therefore, the series we are discussing also differs greatly from environmental photography—both thematically and aesthetically. Represented by such artists as Ansel Adams or Richard Misrach, the environmental genre develops either an “emphatic eco-centric approach’ bearing a ‘misanthropic’ streak” or the one that “centers on the vulnerability of human existence” (Heine 277). Instead of explicitly presenting the effects of the human impact on the biosphere, implementing either one or both of these strategies, Eichenbaum’s works provide a much more layered critique of the Anthropocene. The absent humans, abandoned post-industrial spaces, and destroyed elements of nature have all reached the same, miserable position. The past, the present, and the possible, dystopian future are interconnected in *The Mother Road*: elements of past infrastructure which contributed to climate change (the past), portrayed vacant and abandoned (the present), with an extensive, unnatural aestheticization that shows the wrong direction of the Anthropocene’s civilizational progress (the future). Presented drive-in motels and gas stations, though heavily coloured by Eichenbaum, are nowadays visibly out of use (see fig. 3). Undeniably, they belong to the long-gone era when climate and the environmental impacts of fossil fuels (and, thus, the car culture they represent)—such as water and air pollution, extreme weather, ocean acidification, or sea level rise (Bertrand)—were not a subject of public debate. This conscious negligence has resulted in the serious biosphere disturbance we are currently witnessing, with its more negative effects to come in the upcoming decades (cf. Rich). *The Mother Road* photographs take part of this rhetoric, though not as directly as the aforementioned eco-art. As one of the provided photographs shows (see fig. 3), the depicted motel stands in the middle of a plain, with no infrastructure around it—desolate and decayed. Its windows and doors are boarded up, which clearly indicates no chance of returning it back to operations; it is a ruin that will soon become nothing more than construction waste. Thus, vivid colours added to the presented landscapes ironically counterpoint the destructive changes forced by the Anthropocene, showing the effects of the domination of culture over nature within the well-known nature/culture paradigm. Another example of use of this peculiar irony stemming from the disturbance of balance between nature and human activities on Earth can be observed in a photograph depicting the small, one-storey building with an old-fashioned trailer standing next to it (see fig. 4). The bungalow is decorated in a compelling manner: a vista of hoodoo landforms is painted on one of its walls. This seemingly incongruous element—the representation of a landscape typical of nearby-located states such as New

Mexico or Utah—is symbolic of the new, Anthropocene-induced reality: the effacement of boundaries between natural sceneries (which are being systematically destroyed by humans) and their human-made imitations is a metaphor of ultimate dominance over the environment, the results of which we are suffering from.



Fig. 4. Eichenbaum, Hayley. “The Mother Road IV.” Hayley Eichenbaum, <http://www.hayley-eichenbaum.com/mother-road-series/3aihs33414ltmrdy6jiptwa7fau0ap>, accessed 16 Sept. 2021. Printed by permission of Hayley Eichenbaum.

CONCLUSION

In her photographs, Eichenbaum does what is specific to Anthropocene nostalgia: she plays with the images of the past to show that a return to the previous decades, as well as to the previous geological era (that is, the Holocene), is impossible. Capturing the abandoned symbols of 1960s and 1970s capitalism—the “non-places” (Augé)—*The Mother Road* series is far from being nostalgic in a traditional way. The mode of nostalgia in question creates a sense of temporal ambiguity by alluding to different aspects of the past, including past aesthetics. Strongly coloured and aestheticized, the

landscapes in Eichenbaum's photographs are devoid of human presence. This post-apocalyptic vision reflects the results of the swift development of capitalism which, along with consumerism and industrialization, has led to the current state of the environment. As Route 66 is considered "a tremendous cross section of American history" (Gambino) where the country's heritage is preserved, Eichenbaum skillfully plays with this imagination. By employing Anthropocene nostalgia, she presents a moral dichotomy between cherishing American car culture traditions and acknowledging climate change as a looming global catastrophe. Therefore, unlike the conventional type of nostalgia which troubles time and manipulates the way a given period is remembered to evoke a sentimental longing, the sentiment in question—because of its intersection with the Anthropocene—allows for a deconstruction of the techniques of its traditional counterpart to critically contemplate the past. Portraying hollow places that were emblematic of the previous decades, *The Mother Road* visuals manifest not only the effects of aggressive human activity but also the inevitable passage of time.

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