

The Guardian

Earth review – an eco-documentary with eerie and scalp-tingling landscapes

The latest film from Austrian film-maker Nikolaus Geyrhalter focuses on the damage caused by 'the most decisive geological factor of our time' – large-scale mining



Kubrickian strangeness ... Earth. Photograph: NGF

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You've heard of climate change but this latest documentary-spectacle from Austrian film-maker Nikolaus Geyrhalter is about landscape change. Geyrhalter's film is alerting us to the vast changes to terrain and geology that are being made with large-scale mining and construction, industries that are gouging out the Earth's contents, hollowing out whole areas, flattening and moving mountains. The film starts with the statistic that humans move 156m tons of rock and soil a day, making our species "the most decisive geological factor of our time". Geyrhalter supports this with eerie and scalp-tinglingly vast landscape shots that are now a feature of his work: images of Kubrickian strangeness, like pictures from another planet, some distant, grim, mineral-rich moon that we are callously exploiting because we don't care about it. His camera ranges from San Fernando in California, to the Brenner Pass between Austria and Italy, Gyöngyös in Hungary, Carrara in Italy, Minas de Riotinto in Spain, Wolfenbüttel in Germany and Fort McKay in Canada.

The images themselves are intimidatingly featureless and churned up. Whole areas the size of dozens of football fields look like the aftermath of some terrible disaster or military engagement. One worker

says that his job is to “tear the hills down”. Another says: “Once we get here, it’s not nature any more.” What we see isn’t exactly humankind, but not nature either; an anti-nature, something like what environmentalist Bill McKibben called *The End of Nature*. Very often, Geyrhalter will begin a new section with a toweringly high overhead shot, presumably achieved with a drone, in which the mine area looks like a dour abstract painting, with squiggles and circles in a reddish-brown daub. It takes a second or two before the eye sees tiny figures moving in thin tracks. These are the diggers. My reaction is something between a gasp of awe and a giggle at something like a *trompe l’oeil*; although I should say that on this purely visual basis, *Earth* does not approach the sustained astonishment that he achieved in *Homo Sapiens*, his 2016 film contemplating ruins all over the world.

Where is humanity in all this? It manages to be almost infinitesimal, compared to these colossal outdoor arenas of mine work in which all the oxygen appears to have been removed from the sky, as well as minerals from the earth – or indeed the underground vaults, cathedral-sized spaces gouged out from beneath the earth. And yet it is humanity who has created this. The hugeness is ours.

Unlike many other Geyrhalter films, however, human beings are interviewed and shown interacting on a conventional scale. We see a jolly band making music at the ceremonial opening of a mine. An official makes a solemn speech alluding delicately to the “accidental death of Imre” – an employee killed during mining work – before moving on. In his deadpan way, Geyrhalter leaves it to us to see the irony of Imre’s death being so coolly passed over, though another sort of film-maker might have wanted to find out more.

Later in the movie, Geyrhalter touches on the new industry of repurposing those vast subterranean spaces created by salt mining as places to store nuclear waste. The people doing this have to grapple with the head-spinning concept of ensuring that these spaces are safe for the next million years. Into *Eternity*, the environmental documentary by Finnish director Michael Madsen considered something very similar.

Finally, in Canada, Geyrhalter speaks to Indigenous Canadian protesters campaigning against mining corporations, and his film concludes on a note of opposition, even defiance in a way, although it is difficult not to be simply overawed by the sheer scale of what the film conjures up. You might compare this to the landscape cinema of James Benning. But Geyrhalter proves again that he is a unique figure in world cinema.

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