



## The Rotting City : Surrealist Arts of Noticing the Urban Anthropocene

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# The Rotting City: Surrealist Arts of Noticing the Urban Anthropocene

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## Abstract

This article develops a surrealist approach to researching and writing about the urban Anthropocene, as a critical contribution to existing literatures on “arts of noticing” and “staying with the trouble.” Drawing on psychogeographical explorations of the city of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon and distancing itself from conventional modes of academic writing, the article presents a montage of surrealist images of this (post)apocalyptic metropolis. Iquitos emerges as a palimpsest of the wreckage of repeated resource booms, strewn with the ruins of a stillborn modernity and incubating an uncanny fusion of apocalyptic and utopian elements observable in the everyday practices of its subaltern inhabitants. Just as Paris was the capital of the 19th century for Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, so the interpretation of Iquitos as an extreme metaphor for our combined and uneven apocalypse designates it as the capital of the Anthropocene.

## Keywords

surrealism, arts of noticing, staying with the trouble, apocalypse, Anthropocene

“Nothing can convince me that this merciless putrefaction of the donkey is anything other than the hard and blinding glint of new precious stones.”

-Salvador Dalí, “The Rotting Donkey”

Iquitos is a surrealist object. Like a steam engine bursting through a bourgeois fireplace, it is where it should not and cannot be.<sup>1</sup> A metropolitan explosion in the midst of trackless wilderness. Not the jungle city as the decisive victory of an all-conquering civilization over a savage nature, hardwired into the world market by the illuminated superhighways of planetary urbanization. Instead, the impossible spectacle of an immense city without any apparent physical connection to the global system. A gradual accretion of sporadic urban eruptions, a belching mechanical volcano fuelled by a demonic and invisible source. An inorganic parasite sprawling across a narrow strip of blasted land, stretching with blind hunger into intricately winding rivers, propped on wooden crutches over desiccated floodplains. The city is strewn with implausible realities, evocative ciphers, and oblique juxtapositions. In place of the horizontal planes, vertical columns, and rigid right-angles that

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structure urban modernity, these unsettling forms are set against a derangement of unrelated shapes and broken lines. A collage of dissociated objects in a disintegrating space.

This article develops a surrealist approach to researching and writing about the urban Anthropocene, through an exploration of Iquitos that seeks to convey apocalyptic breakdown as a planetary process in which much of the world is already inextricably engulfed (Cunningham & Warwick, 2013; Pohl, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2022; Wilson, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Zupančič, 2017). Located in the heart of the Peruvian Amazon, Iquitos is the largest city in the world with no road access and can only be reached by river or air. As such, it is *the city at the end of the world*—a uniquely isolated metropolis in an age of unprecedented global connectivity. But it is also the city at the end of the world in the sense of its location at the cutting edge of the “combined and uneven apocalypse” of the Anthropocene, in which “the world is already apocalyptic, just not all at the same time” (Calder Williams, 2011, p. 149). Iquitos can be regarded as a (post)apocalyptic city in at least three respects. First, the original accumulation of its wealth was based on the enslavement and genocidal murder of the Indigenous inhabitants of the surrounding region during the rubber boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Second, the sudden end of the rubber boom in the 1910s led to the rapid ruination of the city, the center of which had been filled with sumptuous mansions, but from which capital abruptly disappeared. And third, the city has subsequently survived through a series of smaller extractive booms: precious hardwoods, exotic animals, oil, gold, and cocaine. These booms have devastated the surrounding jungle, while fuelling a process of unregulated urban mutation, through which the ruined mansions of the rubber boom have become interspersed with gaudy concrete hotels and casinos financed by petrodollars and money laundering, while the impoverished peripheries of the city have expanded beyond the narrow table of raised land on which it was originally constructed and are spreading inexorably across the surrounding floodplains in an improvised wooden latticework of floating rafts and stilted huts. These densely populated settlements are flooded for several months of the year when the rivers of the region rise, and stranded on the dry plains when the waters fall, contributing to a landscape of multidimensional urban breakdown and ecological collapse (Ríos Moreno & López Hurtado, 2014; Santos Granero & Barclay, 2015; Wilson, 2023a).

Like countless other contemporary cities, the case of Iquitos confronts us with “an unthinkable threshold or limit condition—the hauntology of the Anthropocene and the hauntology of the urban, both implicated in a thinking of an ending: the end of the wild, the end of a world” (Ruddick, 2015, p. 1118). These circumstances have generated a multiplicity of new urban theories (Rickards et al., 2016). But Stephanie Wakefield has recently asserted that the material and epistemological upheavals of the Anthropocene require us “to push the call for abandoning inherited frameworks and pursuing relentless theoretical experimentation much further,” while learning to “open our eyes to mutations in urban form and process produced by contemporary capitalism” (Wakefield, 2022, pp. 920, 919). This is arguably less a question of theory than of method. In her influential book, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, Anna Tsing insists that in the chaos of the present “it makes no sense to crystallize first principles or seek natural laws that generate best cases”; instead, we should develop “arts of noticing” through which “we might look around to notice this strange new world, and . . . stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours” (Tsing, 2015, pp. 255, 3). Donna Haraway has similarly stressed the need for critical scholarship to “stay with the trouble,” by abandoning dreams of technological redemption and “learning to be truly present . . . in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings” (Haraway, 2016, p. 1). In a collected volume to which Haraway contributes a chapter, Tsing and her co-editors suggest that it is through such practices that possibilities as well as problems might emerge:

Somehow, in the midst of ruins, we must maintain enough curiosity to notice the strange and wonderful as well as the terrible and terrifying . . . Living in a time of planetary catastrophe thus

begins with a practice at once humble and difficult: noticing the worlds around us. (Swanson et al., 2017, p. M7)

In common with many critical scholars, I have drawn significant inspiration from the twin projects of staying with the trouble and developing arts of noticing, as potent methodological principles for creatively engaging with our apocalyptic present. But in this article, I want to suggest an alternative application of these principles, which is both more appropriate to the urban context and arguably truer to the principles themselves. The following section sets out a surrealist art of noticing the urban Anthropocene. The subsequent three sections then mobilize this approach, based on field research undertaken in Iquitos between August 2019 and January 2020, which included extensive psychogeographical explorations of the city. Taking inspiration from the structure of J. G. Ballard's surrealist novel *The Atrocity Exhibition* (Ballard, 2014), these sections take the form of collaged portraits capturing diverse fragmented elements of "the same apocalyptic landscape" (Kunzru, 2014, p. xv). Like *The Atrocity Exhibition*, they do not attempt to represent the city as a unified whole, but instead operate "like cutting through the stem of a plant to expose the cross-section of its main vessels" (Ballard, 2012, p. 52). In contrast to standard scholarly prose, and consistent with the surrealist commitment to "the interpretive power of images that make conceptual points concretely" (Buck-Morss, 1989, p. 6), these sections make no explicit argument and provide only minimal explanation of the scenes they describe, most of which is contained in the endnotes. This approach aims to escape "academic rituals of explanation . . . with their alchemical promises of yielding system from chaos" (Taussig, 1987, p. xiv) and to replace them with a concerted attempt "to meet the landscape on its own terms," through which Iquitos emerges as an "extreme metaphor" for our planetary urban predicament (Ballard, 2012, pp. 52, 182). The article concludes by considering what this montage of surrealist images might reveal about the city at the end of the world.

## Surrealist Arts of Noticing and Staying With the Trouble

Surrealism can be defined as a radical art of noticing urban space. Emerging in Paris in the early 1920s, the movement was motivated by the decaying arcades of the city and the ruination wrought by World War One. The early surrealists responded to this panorama of decadence and destruction by drawing on psychoanalytic theory in the subversion of bourgeois illusions of order and rationality and the excavation of the mythical and marvelous dimensions flourishing within the alienated spaces of urban modernity (Ades & Richardson, 2015). In the first surrealist manifesto of 1924, André Breton suggested that Freud's discovery of the unconscious implied the collapse of the strict division between dreams and reality maintained by bourgeois common sense "into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*, if one may so speak" (Breton, 1969, p. 9). This principle was applied to urban inquiry by Louis Aragon in *Paris Peasant*, a pioneering work of psychogeography, which is based on extensive urban exploration and detailed description of "what would usually be taken for 'subjective' associations and emotions ingrained in the urban structure" (Smith, 2010, p. 104). Published in 1926, *Paris Peasant* takes the form of a dreamlike wandering through the streets and arcades of Paris that aims to evoke "the vertigo of the modern," in which objects as apparently mundane as petrol pumps become "metallic phantoms . . . possessing just one long, supple arm, a luminous faceless head, a single foot, and a numbered wheel in the belly" (Aragon, 1994, pp. 114, 117). The book inspired *The Arcades Project*, in which Walter Benjamin attempted to "cojoin a heightened graphicness to the realization of Marxist method" (Benjamin, 1999, p. 461). Through a vivid critique of the spatial phantasmagorias of the emergent urban modernity of 19th-century Paris, Benjamin sought to awaken the proletariat from its commodity-induced slumber.

Unlike the urban dreamworlds analyzed by Aragon and Benjamin, however, the Anthropocene is not a nightmare from which we can hope to wake up. It is "a long term, slow-motion catastrophe

... a chronic and seemingly permanent condition,” and the century since their surrealist experiments has only served to demonstrate that “the worse its own internal contradictions get, the more thoroughly capitalism is empowered” (Shaviro, 2015, pp. 7, 9). The urban Anthropocene remains a profoundly surreal realm, but one of a rather different kind, “in which space and time start to rot and disintegrate, where actions are interrupted and follow incomprehensible courses” (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017, p. 42). As such, it demands a darker, more twisted form of surrealism concerned less with the oneiric and marvelous than with the chaotic and absurd. This is the surrealism that Salvador Dalí proposed in “The Rotting Donkey.” Published in 1930, this brief article revolutionized the surrealist movement, replacing the fusion of dreams and reality with the decomposition of social reality as such, based on the simulation of paranoid psychosis in the generation of images that “take on the forms and colours of demoralisation and confusion . . . The lethal activity of these new images . . . may contribute to the collapse of reality” (Dalí, 2015, p. 267).

Despite its evident resonances with the projects of arts of noticing and staying with the trouble, surrealism is not discussed in the literature on these themes. Tsing defines her arts of noticing the Anthropocene in terms of being attentive to what emerges once the modern obsession with progress is abandoned. Her concern is with learning to look in different places, based on the claim that the story of urban modernity and its failed utopian promises is already well known and has been told too many times. On this basis, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* turns its attention from the city to forgotten sites of rural ruination and to the overlooked practices of survival that emerge in such spaces, such as mushroom foraging (Tsing, 2015). A surrealist art of noticing, by contrast, is concerned with looking not in different places, but in different ways. In Dalí’s words: “Let us be content with the miracle of opening our eyes and being adept in the apprenticeship of looking properly” (Dalí, 1998, p. 12). Urban modernity and its enduring fantasies of progress accordingly remain crucial subjects of enquiry in the Anthropocene, but must be looked at anew, from an apocalyptically surrealist perspective (Wilson, 2023b). As Evan Calder Williams (2011, p. 158) argues, “The post-apocalyptic is not an image of that-to-be. . . It is a perspectival stance to be taken up now.” The primary focus of our attention, he suggests, must be “the city as a lived wasteland that gives shape to the combined and uneven apocalypse of international capitalism,” and our way of looking needs to be “more full-blooded, savage, surreal” (Calder Williams, 2011, pp. 234, 206).

This approach departs from the “green magical realism [and] ecological lyrical melancholy” that permeate more conventional arts of noticing (Calder Williams, 2011, p. 174). In the collected volume *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet*, for example, Tsing and her co-editors lament that “While we gain plastic gyres and parking lots, we lose rainforests and coral reefs” (Gan et al., 2017, p. G4), and the volume opens with an essay by the Taoist science fiction author Ursula Le Guin, who claims that “by demonstrating and performing aesthetic order or beauty, poetry can move minds to the sense of fellowship that prevents careless usage and exploitation of our fellow beings” (Le Guin, 2017, p. M16). But according to Dalí (1998, p. 8), such “humble, living, joyous, comforting clarities” must be replaced with a more extreme aesthetic, which is marked by a determination “to see an entire world of rotting things,” and to develop an “art that is sublime, deliquescent, bitter, putrefied.” Dalí’s “paranoiac-critical method” inspired the apocalyptic urban visions of the surrealist science fiction author J. G. Ballard (1997, p. 85; Gandy, 2006; Wilson, 2023b), who once responded to an interview question about “doomsday—ecology and pollution” in similarly subversive terms:

Personally, I’m not that opposed to pollution. I think the transformation of the old landscape by concrete fields and all that isn’t necessarily bad by definition. I feel there’s a certain beauty in looking at a lake that has a bright metallic scum floating on top of it. (Ballard, 2012, p. 64)

This seemingly scandalous attitude should be interpreted, not as a flippant dismissal of environmentalism, but as a challenge to look beyond the ideological seductions of ecological nostalgia, and to notice “the deep brutal weirdness of an earth altered beyond repair” (Calder Williams, 2011, p. 192). A surrealist art of noticing searches for beauty and possibility in the inescapable reality of this weirdness, instead of staging fantasies of reconstituted harmony and order. This is the approach taken by the Bolivian author Maximiliano Barrientos, one of a new wave of South American writers breaking with the magical realism with which the region has been associated, and experimenting with gothic and surrealist styles more appropriate to capturing and conveying our apocalyptic present (Youkee, 2021). In his recent surrealist novel *Miles de ojos* (*Thousands of Eyes*), Barrientos provides a stark depiction of the booming city of Santa Cruz in the Bolivian lowlands, not as a call to return to a harmonious nature, but as an opportunity to grasp the weirdness of the urban Anthropocene, and to celebrate the deranged accelerationism of the fictionalized subaltern inhabitants of the city:

It was its own universe. It contained all accidents: vehicles obliterated by plunging over cliffs and colliding with other vehicles and against the walls of abandoned buildings. All these shards of glass and steel were beautiful. They shone like stars. (Barrientos, 2022)

As I aim to demonstrate in subsequent sections of this article, such unsettling perspectives come closer to capturing the disturbing nature of our combined and uneven apocalypse than Tsing’s arts of noticing, or Haraway’s version of staying with the trouble. Despite Haraway’s insistence that “we cannot denounce the world in the name of an ideal world” (Haraway, 2016, p. 12), her book is filled with worlds of this kind, such as a knitting group devoted to crocheting coral reefs, a computer game in which an Indigenous child saves her people’s land with the help of an arctic fox, and a “speculative fabulation” of a utopian future in which human beings decide to drastically reduce birth-rates and build symbiotic communities with monarch butterflies. The suggestion is that such examples might provide us with “the map sense to navigate in the troubled times and places” (Haraway, 2016, p. 29). But the production of utopian maps of this kind would appear to perform the precise opposite of staying with the trouble (Iveson, 2017). Articulating comparable projects of dwelling in the apocalyptic present, Alenka Zupančič (2017) argues against resorting to such hope-instilling speculations, while Jack Halberstam (2021) calls for the embrace of an “aesthetics of collapse,” based on an epistemology of “bewilderment . . . as a form of lostness and unknowing” in relation to “a disorder of things that emerges and takes ghastly shape in the shadows cast by the very project that discerns, desires and demands order in the first place.” (Halberstam, 2020, pp. 12, 31). In common with these approaches, a surrealist art of noticing constitutes a radical form of realism grounded in existential disorientation, which is committed to “dwelling in the brutality of the symptoms . . . and tracing the scattered landscape of the scrapheap . . . This is the task of an alternative mapping: the constellation of scars” (Calder Williams, 2011, p. 223).

## Terminal Metropolis

The riverbanks around Iquitos are a snarl of modern ruins, an endless linear graveyard of obsolete barges and defunct cargo ships. Adrift in the roadless wasteland of the rainforest, this vast depository of scrap metal cannot be profitably reincorporated into the endlessly mutating engine of global capital that it once sustained.<sup>2</sup> The distant roar of this infernal machine is silenced by the depths of the intervening jungle. Stranded on a sandbank, an enormous vessel tilts ponderously toward the churning expanse of the River Amazon. Its vacant windows and exposed structures resemble a bombed-out building on the outskirts of a war-torn city. Silhouetted human forms wash clothes and shelter from the sun under torn tarpaulins propped

on rotting branches. Miniscule tin crafts are moored amid derelict tankers and incinerated naval speedboats. Makeshift shacks have been erected on the riverbank from pieces of driftwood and rusted metal. Fragments of concrete walls stand at random angles interspersed with the remnants of flatbed trucks, oil barrels, tractor chasses, and portacabins—leftovers from the laying of the pipeline through which the waste crude of the declining regional oil industry creeps beneath the river to be burned in the municipal power station.<sup>3</sup> Fires rage deep in the decimated jungle that stretches to the radiant horizon. Plumes of pale-yellow smoke dissolve into a slouching barrage of swollen bellied storm-clouds.

The boulevard is haunted by the mansions of the rubber boom. Through the construction of these ostentatious palaces, the cosmopolitan elite competed to demonstrate their accumulated wealth in the creation of a modern urban space embroidered with the most exquisite phantasmagorias. Vibrant azulejos fused mathematical rigor with writhing organic forms. Dainty balconies were enclosed by intricate iron ferns and vines. This erotic union of an assertive modernity with a voluptuous nature concealed the slaughter of the Indigenous inhabitants of the surrounding jungle on which the wealth itself was based.<sup>4</sup> Now the edges of the azulejos are lined with black mold, their stylized silver flowers flourishing with green slime. Ferns leap from the gaps between the tiles on which they are represented. Vines clamber through wrought iron reproductions of themselves. Behind broken boards nailed over smashed windows, the jungle riots inside the gutted reception rooms. Ragged trees burst like bullet-shredded flesh against the roofless sky.

The ruins of the rubber boom are interspersed with those of the subsequent golden age of oil and cocaine.<sup>5</sup> Electric blue paint peels from the blackened concrete of an abandoned hotel on the corner of the plaza. The interlocking planes of its octagonal structure scatter like exhausted lightning across the decomposing voids of its cantilevered floors. Purple stars explode in plastic rainbow fountains over the entrance to the Atlantis Casino, obscured by thick tangles of electric wiring and coated in a thin sheen of brown mold. From the edge of the sallow floodplain that surrounds the retreating lagoon, a derelict cargo ship plunges its battered prow into the base of the collapsing boulevard. Above the deserted swimming pool of the Hotel Anaconda, the arachnid trees infesting the chrome balconies are reflected in the black glass of the vacant rooms.

## Ruins of the Future

The white concrete columns march in a long arc toward the river. An army of Atlases preparing to shoulder the superhighway of a million eager dreams, they bear the phantom viaduct toward the nonexistent bridge that reaches invisibly from the edge of Iquitos across the broad sweep of the River Nanay. This will be the longest bridge in Peru and will connect Iquitos to Colombia, via a road cutting through 200 km of jungle to the border.<sup>6</sup> Each column is higher than the last, gradually rising above the dry lagoon to meet the abutment of the bridge. Each pier is capped by a broad beam of reinforced concrete, upon which a gridwork of girders will provide the underlying structure of the viaduct. For the time being, girders, viaduct, bridge, and road exist only in the minds of the stranded citizens of this stricken city. Spaced at regular intervals along a smooth and gentle curve, the steadily ascending sequence of concrete pillars provides the minimal material support required for the dream of connectivity to be projected onto the landscape from the collective imagination of the population gazing upward from the surrounding slums.

The skyline of Iquitos is dominated by the water towers. Twelve concrete obelisks spring from the ground on thick white stalks before erupting into squat yellow cylinders, the scattered repetition of their abstract fungal forms silhouetted against the sky like frozen mushroom clouds. Each of these vertical reservoirs is emblazoned with a huge number—R-8, R-3, R-11—denoting its position in the series. Visible from far across the city, and projected onto these monumental infrastructures, this abstract code seems to convey the rational order imposed on this remote territory by the national state. But the construction of the towers was mired in

corruption.<sup>7</sup> They do not contain enough water to supply the city, and they generate insufficient pressure to distribute it effectively. Intended as proud symbols of a benevolent state, they have become indelible manifestations of governmental hubris and failure, brooding over the city like specters of a stillborn future.

Surrounded by verdant marshland ringed by seething jungle, the sewage treatment plant crouches on the western edge of Iquitos like a hostile alien spacecraft. Its clean lines, gleaming control panels, and calculated configurations of vents and motors seem to mock the ramshackle tin-and-clapboard huts that tilt on their wooden stilts toward the hungry swamp. Sunlight cascades across the tight mesh of chain metal sheeting that fills the concrete chambers of the aeration tanks, ricocheting between the elemental components of a ruthless geometry: a vast abstraction of cylinders and planes traversed by dry aqueducts and crosshatched with deserted gangways. The uncompromising symmetry of these complex structures would appear to reassert the dominance of scientific order against a demented profusion of vegetation. But the objects in which this defiant message has been written are filled with stagnant rainwater and excremental remains, upon which flourishes a panoply of berserk organic forms. The plant was constructed at vast expense by the regional government but ceased to operate soon after its inauguration.<sup>8</sup> Lianas unfurl along metal trestles. Methane bubbles through crusted algae. Weeds carpet the flooded grit chambers and sludge digestion systems. Effluent fills the canals leading from the primary clarifiers to the aeration tanks. Perfect circles of vivid scum clog their weed-encrusted mouths, into which the shining heads of the suction pumps have been shoved, as if in punishment for their arrogant modernity.

## New Precious Stones

The concrete watchtower stares blankly across the river from the peripheral barrio of Santa Clara, its rusted iron ribcage breaking through its crumbling cement skin. Beneath it, half-clothed figures wallow drunkenly in the muddy shallows at the edge of the trash-strewn dirt-road shore. The road is filled with motorcycle taxis pimped with spiderweb screens and decorated with demonic eyes, from whose open sides people spill into the water and jump into canoes headed to the white sand beach upriver. Hammocks have been strung between the trees that surround the beach exposed by the receding water. The river teems with inebriated human beings glutted on the free gifts of the jungle. Scrambling ashore, they shelter under plastic parasols from the demented sun. Hairless dogs and naked children splash among half-submerged stalls selling balls of rice wrapped in banana leaves. Rampant parrots jabber along to the roaring generators from their perches in the makeshift bars. As the clouds turn black, the impoverished inhabitants of the city pile back into the canoes and stream back to Santa Clara, where the rain rages ecstatically on the thin tin roof of an ultraviolet bar filled with florescent images of psychedelic vines, humanoid dolphins, bikini-clad medusas, and neon murals in which the surrounding jungle seems to shine with all the necrotic luster of the commodities it once so plentifully contained.<sup>9</sup> The trees of the timber boom are indigo and violet, and washed in lime green sunlight, as if the sun itself were made of hundred-dollar bills. The imagined forest seethes with fantastical beasts whose value in the exotic animal trade has transformed them into the spiritualized embodiments of the alchemical power of money. Gathered on the riverbank in utopian abundance, jaguars blaze with hallucinatory intensity and alligators cavort with bare-breasted mermaids. Through the wood-barred window on the far side of the room, in the pounding rain beyond the dilapidated dock, the dark red dust of the timberyards accumulates along the riverbank like blood congealing on a slaughterhouse floor.<sup>10</sup>

The flooded informal settlement of Bajo Belén heaves itself like a garbage leviathan from the trash into which it sinks.<sup>11</sup> Knocked together and falling apart, scrambling upward and slumping down. Every haphazard structure is listing and disintegrating. Every piece of broken board and



scrap of torn tin is wantonly out of whack. No attempt has been made to mimic the prim order of the modern city. On the contrary, there is a subversive impudence to this vernacular architectural chaos, as if the huts have been thrown together, not in a desperate act of marginalized survival, but as a mocking provocation to the bourgeois illusion of coherence. Short lengths of wood are lashed to one another to form disjointed joists. Narrow strips of timber are banged together to create ungainly corner posts. An entire wall is made of old doors, except the door, which is made of an old section of wall. Billboards are torn down and dragged into the slum where they are hung from random angles as satirical components of the salvaged city: upside down from the side of a slumping hut, two blonde models drape themselves across a sleek red car. The wall of another hut is covered with a mural of a crystalline river surrounded by virgin jungle, like a mirror reflecting a romantic rural past onto an urban montage in which the trash and lies of capitalism are mashed up and spat out in a luxuriant vomit of technicolor garbage: the pink chassis of a broken toy pram, the yellow stripes of a ragged football shirt, the shapeless blue protrusions of a sodden plastic bag.

The social reality of the rotting city is not structured by the phantasmatic exclusion of our apocalyptic present. The mundane rituals of commerce, consumption, rest, and recreation are performed amid a mute carnival of disposed and degrading objects, beneath a black rush of descending vulture wings. As the waters at last begin to rise, the piles of refuse that had accumulated over the long months of the dry season drift out from their random resting places to choke the emerging canals, which are thronged with motorized canoes laden with the plundered riches of the wild rivers that writhe around the city. The resurrected garbage sprawls into a surrealist collage of obsolete commodities, in which the cheerful colors of once desired things shine through a dark humus of disintegrating matter. A child draws water to the upper floor of a half-flooded hut with a plastic bucket held by a nylon rope. Two lovers talk intently on a departing canoe. Drifting free from the floating slum, a single hut has lodged itself in the middle of the expanding lagoon. Pink plywood on a plateau of silver water. Its thin walls peel from its feeble structure beneath a jagged chunk of rainbow and a flock of jeweled birds.

## Capital of the Anthropocene

In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin described Paris as “the capital of the nineteenth century” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 3), in the sense of the city in which the emergent urban modernity of the period was most paradigmatically expressed. Just as Benjamin drew on the early surrealism of Breton and Aragon in a highly visual portrayal of Paris in these terms, so this article has drawn on the darker strain of surrealism later developed by Dalí and Ballard in a portrayal of Iquitos as the capital of the Anthropocene, in the sense of a city that can stand as an extreme metaphor for our apocalyptic urban present. In her call for radical experimentation in theorizing the urban Anthropocene, Wakefield (2022) suggests that Miami should be afforded this title, given the threat posed to the city by rising sea levels, through which it stands to be cut off from the material infrastructures of planetary urbanization. But Iquitos prefigures the future of this and other First-World cities, to the extent that it is already flooded, and has always existed in isolation from such infrastructural networks. And Iquitos is already a (post)apocalyptic city, in the sense of a city built on the annihilation of Indigenous lifeworlds, which takes the form of a palimpsest of the accreted wreckage of repeated resource booms. The destructive violence of these waves of extractive accumulation, the spatial dissociation produced by their decline, and the vast chthonic forces of the rivers and rainforests that they feast upon and by which their remains are consumed, together function as an immense engine for the spontaneous generation of surrealist objects. Adrift in space without apparent purpose and juxtaposed to one another in jarring and paradoxical configurations, these objects possess an eerie quality that seems to point to a meaning beyond themselves. In the derelict mansions and overgrown hotels of Iquitos, in its faded casinos and

abandoned cargo ships, “in these ever-growing piles of inert, dysfunctional ‘stuff,’ whose use-less, inert presence cannot fail to strike us, we can, as it were, perceive the capitalist drive at rest” (Žižek, 2006, p. 170).

This article has sought to convey this inherently surreal reality, not through the standard conventions of academic argumentation, but through the construction of a montage of surrealist images. As Lucas Pohl (2021, p. 199) has noted, “while apocalyptic images of hypothetical future catastrophes dominate twenty-first century media and politics, there is a lack of an image that properly determines the post-apocalyptic status quo.” Pohl argues that the infrastructural ruins of urban modernity can function as images of this kind: “When faced from one angle, they appear as magnificent rem(a)inders invested with cultural meaning, value and memory; when faced from another angle, they appear as repulsive, albeit imposing, piles of waste” (Pohl, 2022, p. 11). This is the duality that Benjamin sought to illuminate through the revelation of dialectical images: “With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings . . . Dialectical images are constellated between alienated things and incoming and disappearing meanings” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 466). The infrastructural ruins of Iquitos present us with images of this kind, in which the transformative promises of water towers and sewage works persist in the public consciousness alongside the knowledge of their corrupt construction and absurdist failure. As with the surrealist objects of past resource booms, these ruins reveal the “great steaming morass of chaos that lies on the underside of order” (Taussig, 1987, p. 4). But unlike the modern ruins at the core of global capitalism, the ruins of the city at the end of the world are not remnants of an irretrievable past but monuments to an obsolete future, in which “what was once a line, a direction, a teleology, now becomes a formless field of antagonism” (Calder Williams, 2011, p. 218).

Under such circumstances, in which the dialectical process on which Benjamin continued to stake his emancipatory hopes would appear to have definitively broken down, we should perhaps turn from the dialectical image to Dalí’s concept of the double image. In “The Rotting Donkey,” Dalí defines the double image as “a representation of an object that is also, without the slightest pictorial or anatomical modification, the representation of another entirely different object” (Dalí, 2015, p. 265). As an example, he sketches a double image of the rotting donkey itself, in which “the merciless putrefaction of the donkey” is simultaneously “the hard and blinding glint of new precious stones” (Dalí, 2015, p. 266). This returns us to the discussion of surrealist arts of noticing and staying with the trouble with which this article began, according to which it is only by renouncing the frantic search for solutions to apocalyptic breakdown, abandoning the aesthetics of ecological nostalgia, and becoming ruthlessly attentive to a reality stripped of all fantasies of escape, that we might begin to notice the strange beauty of the scrapheap, and the myriad ways in which subaltern subjects are already building something different from the wreckage in which they stand. In this article, the application of surrealist arts of noticing to Iquitos has produced a double image in which the ruins of the future and the detritus of repeated resource booms coexist alongside an uncannily utopian dimension observable in the everyday lives of the subaltern inhabitants of the city, fuelled by their participation in the extractive ransacking of the surrounding jungle, and embodied in the anarchic aesthetic of the floating slums, the hedonistic spirit of the riverside beaches, and the surrealistic art of the garbage-strewn streets. This apocalyptic utopia has been described as “modernity gone wild . . . voracious in its exuberant digestion of all glories and disgraces. . . A twilight world in festive self-consumption, eating itself out, devouring its own entrails” (Buntinx, 2019, pp. 21, 12, 25). This is not the proletarian awakening that Benjamin had envisioned in *The Arcades Project*. And it is far removed from the wholesome utopian imaginaries evoked by Haraway, and the humble acts of mushroom foraging celebrated by Tsing. Indeed, “there is something peculiar and frightening in this dedication to salvage, as if everyone were taking advantage of the end of the world to gather up riches before the last bits are destroyed” (Tsing, 2015, p. 274). But there is also something to be celebrated in the capacity of

those at the cutting edge of our combined and uneven apocalypse to batten onto the death drive of global capital and “develop an ethos of abundance . . . even in the face of terror and dispossession” (Shaviro, 2015, p. 60). This is the hard and blinding glint of the city at the end of the world.

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### Notes

1. The reference is to René Magritte’s classic surrealist painting of 1938, *Time Transfixed*.
2. Many of the ships that line the rivers around Iquitos are relics of the oil boom of the 1970s. Foreign oil companies descended on the region following the discovery of oil in 1971, shipping in the machinery and supplies required for extraction. But the reserves discovered did not meet expectations, and by the end of the decade the boom was over. Extraction has continued, however, resulting in the socioecological devastation of the oil-producing regions of the surrounding jungle (Santos Granero & Barclay, 2015).
3. Iquitos is not connected to the National Grid due to its geographical isolation, and its electricity supply is generated by the burning of the lowest grade oil produced by the local refinery.
4. The Iquitos of the rubber boom has been described as “a coquette Iberian city ensconced in the heart of Amazonian darkness” (Buntinx, 2019, p. 22). The boom was fuelled by the enslavement of the Indigenous inhabitants of the surrounding jungle, many of whom were tortured and murdered for failing to meet their rubber quotas. It is estimated that one rubber company alone, the Peruvian Amazon Company, was responsible for at least 30,000 deaths over the course of the boom (Mitchell, 1997).
5. Like the oil boom, the cocaine boom was short-lived. The two coincided in the 1970s. But by the mid-1980s, the supply routes to Colombia had shifted elsewhere (Ríos Moreno & López Hurtado, 2014). Drug money continues to be laundered through the city, however, and recent years have seen a significant increase in coca production in the remote jungles of the immense local region of Loreto (Dourojeanni, 2013).
6. The road is part of a network of planned megaprojects designed to finally hardwire Iquitos into the global economy. But there is no road to meet it on the other side of the border, and at the time of the research reported here the half-completed bridge was the only element of any of the projects to have come to fruition. I explore these projects in detail in Wilson 2022, in relation to the surrealist concept of the absurd.
7. Each “R” is locally said to stand not for “Reservoir” but for “Robbery” (Chirif, 2020).
8. The plant was part of a modern sewage system, which cost over US\$200 million and was inaugurated in 2014. Alleged corruption in the construction of the system led to its failure shortly afterwards. The raw sewage of Iquitos continues to be discharged directly into the surrounding rivers and lagoons.
9. The street art of Iquitos has developed its own style and iconography. Created by untrained commercial painters, it infuses the bars, restaurants, nightclubs and brothels of the poorer neighborhoods of Iquitos, and is scattered across the external walls of buildings throughout the city. It has been described as “a living, colourful, unprejudiced, excessive and overflowing art” (Bendayán & Villar, 2013, p. 11).

10. The precious timber and exotic animal booms of the mid-20th century stripped the vast jungles of Loreto of the great majority of these resources, resulting in the almost complete eradication of cedar and mahogany, and the near extinction of several fish and animal species. Despite their subsequent regulation, these industries continue on a largely illegal basis. Illegal gold mining is also expanding rapidly, alongside the exploitation of lower-value tree species, and the overfishing of the rivers of the region (Dourojeanni, 2013).
11. Bajo Belén is the oldest and largest of the flooded informal settlements to have formed around Iquitos, and has expanded through the arrival of waves of Indigenous migrants from the surrounding jungle. Belén is the poorest district of the city, and has recently been the site of severe flooding, devastating fires, and an outbreak of cholera. But it is also home to the largest market in the city, and is regarded by its inhabitants as the heart of Iquitos. A popular history of Belén has predicted that “the end of the world will find this *pueblo* dancing, fighting, fornicating. . . refreshing its body in the storm” (Reátegui Bartra, 2015, p. 41).

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