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Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate the critical utility of the concept of the absurd in the exploration of the combined and uneven apocalypse known as the Anthropocene. Drawing inspiration from absurdist literature, and based on extensive field research, it takes the form of a psychogeographical journey down a non-existent highway in the Peruvian Amazon. The route of this long-promised megaproject is inhabited by people adrift in the midst of meaningless ruins, haunted by spectral infrastructures that were promised but never came, and plagued by monstrous apparitions of extractive violence. Consistent with absurdist method, the paper resists the temptation to leap out of this disconcerting domain into the normalizing rituals of academic sensemaking, and aims instead to grasp and convey the disorienting lived experience of ‘space out of joint’. In doing so, it suggests that an absurdist sensibility can contribute to current debates in cultural geography on spectrality, psychogeography, and creative writing, through its emphasis on irrationality and indeterminacy, its exploration of chaotic and disintegrating spaces, and its evocation of fragmentation and disjuncture in the form of jagged shards of stark and vivid prose.

Keywords

absurd, Anthropocene, creative writing, infrastructure, megaproject, psychogeography, spectral

Introduction

‘We can put everything we know together, he realized, but it doesn’t tell us anything, except that something is wrong. . . The clues we are getting don’t give us a solution; they only show us how far-reaching the wrongness is’.¹

-Philip K. Dick, *Time Out of Joint*

The procession of white concrete columns ascended from the stick-propped slums that formed the flooded outskirts of the city of Iquitos. A Sisyphean army preparing to shoulder the superhighway

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of a million eager dreams, they bore the phantom viaduct toward the non-existent bridge that reached invisibly across the broad sweep of the River Nanay. This would be the longest bridge in Peru, and would connect Iquitos to Colombia, via a road cutting through 200 km of jungle to the border. Each column was higher than the last, gradually rising above the floodplain to meet the abutment of the bridge. The piers were each capped by a broad beam of reinforced concrete, upon which a grid of girders would provide the structure of the viaduct. For now, girders, viaduct, bridge, and road existed only in the minds of the stranded citizens of this stricken city, who had longed for decades for a highway that would connect them to the outside world. Spaced at regular intervals along a gentle curve, the steadily ascending sequence of concrete pillars provided the minimal material support required for this dream to be projected onto the landscape from the collective imagination of the population gazing upward from the surrounding slums.

Iquitos was the largest city in the world with no road access, located in the midst of the Peruvian Amazon, 3 days by rusted listing cargo ship from the end of the last road. But this was about to change. In 2017, the President of Peru had laid the first stone of the Nanay Bridge with the promise to construct ‘the bridge, the roads, the connectivity’ that would ensure that ‘this part of the world will never be isolated again’.² As his words indicated, the bridge was only one element of a far greater infrastructural plan centered on Iquitos, including highways, waterways, a railway, and an international port, which was intended to fully incorporate the city into circuits of global capital, as part of a broader process of planetary urbanization ‘consolidated through the active production of colossal urban-industrial spatial configurations that have been reflexively designed to accelerate and intensify the accumulation of capital on the world market’.³

Between August 2019 and January 2020, I explored the extraordinary network of megaprojects supposedly unfolding around Iquitos. But the Nanay Bridge turned out to be the only element of any of them to have been even half-constructed. The route of the road from Iquitos to the Colombian border, which began at the bridge, was littered with the ruins of previous infrastructure schemes, scattered with stranded communities that had resettled decades previously along tracks cut for roads that had never been built, and inhabited by perplexed people who had spent entire lifetimes waiting for the realization of repeated state promises, and who now wondered aloud if they would die before the highway arrived. The scene bore scant resemblance to the totalizing technocratic systems evoked by the literature on planetary urbanization. Instead, it recalled a short story by the Mexican author Juan José Arreola, entitled ‘The Switchman’. Published in 1952, the story begins with a ‘Stranger’ arriving at a station just in time for the departure of his train. But the train does not arrive. As he peers in exasperated confusion up the empty tracks, he is approached by the Switchman, who explains in matter-of-fact terms that there is no way of telling when or even if this or any other train might ever pass. In response to the increasingly incredulous questions of the Stranger, the Switchman patiently depicts a railway system in which those fortunate enough to catch a train have no way of knowing where it is going. They may be let off at phantom stations in the middle of the jungle, or the apparent motion of the train might be an illusion generated by rolling images on scrolls outside the windows. Many die on board without ever reaching their destination.⁴

Arreola’s story can be interpreted as both a satirical commentary on the modernizing fantasies of the developmental state embodied in the dysfunctional Mexican railway system of his day, and a quintessential example of absurdist literature, which explores the disjuncture between human expectations of meaning and a remorselessly meaningless reality. This paper draws on these twin dimensions of ‘The Switchman’ in developing an absurdist interpretation of the infrastructural projects surrounding Iquitos, which focuses on the highway from the city to the Colombian border. In doing so, it seeks to remain in the space of the absurd, between the collapse of the official meanings of such projects, and the rituals of academic sensemaking through which ambiguities are explained away and the sense of the absurd is retroactively erased. The next section sketches a

theoretical and methodological approach to this disorienting and bewildering space, in arguing that the concept of the absurd has much to offer critical theory in general, and *cultural geographies* of the Anthropocene in particular. The subsequent three sections then narrate a psychogeographical journey down a non-existent highway, echoing a journey down a road out of town depicted in Philip K. Dick's absurdist science fiction novel *Time Out of Joint*, in which the increasingly fragmented symbols of modernity constitute 'staging posts on the way towards a desert of the Real, a void beyond any constituted world'.⁵ I conclude by reflecting on what this space-out-of-joint might have to tell us about our apocalyptic present.

Toward an absurdist geography of the Anthropocene

In his reading of 'The Switchman', the literary critic George McMurray interprets Arreola's story as an illustration of the key themes of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which Albert Camus set out his existentialist approach to the absurd, understood as 'the clash between reasoning, finite man on one hand, striving for order, unity and happiness and, on the other, the silent, unreasonable world offering no response to his persistent demands'.⁶ Published in 1942, *The Myth of Sisyphus* moves from suicidal despair to an affirmation of the 'absurd hero' who stoically confronts a meaningless universe, as embodied in the figure of Sisyphus from Greek mythology, who was condemned to repeatedly roll an immense boulder to the top of a mountain for eternity, only for it to roll back down the other side.⁷ But while these two texts share a similar understanding of the absurd, Arreola's story departs from the rationalist humanism of Camus, conveying the space of the absurd in far more fantastical terms, and depicting those trapped within it as lost souls awash on a tide of incomprehensibility, rather than as rational actors trudging stoically uphill. As such, 'The Switchman' is better understood as contributing to the more radical and subversive tradition of absurdist literature epitomized by the work of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. As Martin Esslin notes in his seminal essay on the subject, this literature presents the modern world not as a rational and coherent social order, but as 'a veritable barrage of wildly irrational, often nonsensical goings-on', in which 'everything that happens seems to be beyond rational motivation, happening at random or through the demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate'.⁸ Unlike *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the writings of Arreola, Kafka, and Beckett offer no existentialist solution to the riddle of the absurd, but force us to remain in those moments – such as the experience of the Stranger arriving on time to catch a non-existent train – in which the gap between our apparently rational expectations and a seemingly irrational reality is abruptly revealed, and we are gripped by a disconcerting feeling of existential disorientation and 'cognitive estrangement'.⁹

This sensation is frequently experienced by the inhabitants and researchers of failed development projects such as those that this paper explores.¹⁰ The 'expectations of modernity' that James Ferguson encountered in the shattered dreams of the subaltern inhabitants of the Zambian Copperbelt following the collapse of the mining industry in the 1980s, for example, were rational expectations of a prosperous future colliding with the profound irrationalities of extractive capitalism.¹¹ Such experiences of the absurd are increasingly commonplace in the 'combined and uneven apocalypse' known as the Anthropocene, which remains 'haunted by imagined futures [and] dreamworlds of progress'.¹² As the gulf grows ever greater between such promises and the 'spaces of postdevelopment' onto which they continue to be projected,¹³ and as faith in the future to which they point is further undermined by images of impending planetary collapse,¹⁴ so the twin dimensions of the absurd captured by Arreola's story are simultaneously realized with ever greater force and clarity: The absurdity of state attempts to rationally manage the inherently contradictory dynamics of capitalism; and the absurdity of human efforts to rationally engage with an inherently chaotic existence driving inexorably toward destruction and death.

Faced with these unprecedented circumstances, some critical theorists have suggested the adoption of perspectives similar to the absurdist sensibility. Alenka Zupančič has argued that our tendency to hastily respond to our apocalyptic present with a barrage of diagnoses and prescriptions should be tempered by ‘a little bit more naivety and. . . a kind of ontological surprise’.¹⁵ And Jack Halberstam has called for embracing 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’.¹⁶ But despite such potential resonances, the concept of the absurd has not been addressed in the literature on the Anthropocene, and is rarely engaged with in the social sciences more broadly. This oversight is perhaps symptomatic of the pervasive scholarly commitment to ‘academic rituals of explanation. . . with their alchemical promise of yielding system from chaos’.¹⁷ From the perspective of absurdist literature, however, such sensemaking rituals are precisely the temptation to be resisted. As Mladen Dolar observes in his study of Kafka’s work: ‘Kafka stops this process on the threshold, just before the fulguration of sense. Something is revealed that is not covered by meaning. . . a reality that one cannot claim as one’s own, a moment where sense and recognition falter, an experience. . . which, once come to the foreground, casts a different light on everything’.¹⁸

In his analysis of *Time Out of Joint*, which depicts the disintegration of the phantasmatic structures of modern social reality, Mark Fisher has described this threshold as an ‘ontological interregnum [in which] a traumatic unworlding is not yet given narrative motivation; an unresolved space that awaits reincorporation into another symbolic regime’.¹⁹ As such, it can be conceptualized as *space out of joint* – a space of representational and material rupture and collapse, in which things do not make sense, and in relation to which the academic temptation toward ‘the retroactive imposition of sense on what didn’t make sense, the blissful step from blindness to insight. . . is precisely the moment of obfuscation’.²⁰ The exploration of this space offers an absurdist contribution to current debates in cultural geography regarding spectral geographies, psychogeography, and creative writing, which I will now address in turn, before turning to the set of stories that this paper tells.

Like other fields and disciplines, cultural geography has largely overlooked the concept of the absurd, despite persistently challenging entrenched rituals of academic sensemaking. Such challenges are particularly evident in the literature on spectral geographies, which opposes the scholarly tendency to prioritize the domain of presence, and to ignore the infusion of social space with multiple absences and hauntings, both supernatural and mundane. In common with absurdist literature, spectral geographies subvert the anxious academic desire to affirm ‘the “rational,” the “ordered” and the “sane,”’ and privilege explorations of ‘insubstantial, uncertain and indeterminate absent-presences [that] disrupt and often lend little sense to space’.²¹ In doing so, they not only serve to deconstruct the illusory coherence of dominant spatial configurations, but also ‘open wide the possibilities for new histories, new stories and new landscapes to emerge’.²² This approach draws its original inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s work on hauntology. As Derrida notes, in terms that resonate with the lived experiences of the non-existent highway that are the focus of this paper, ‘they are always *there*, spectres, even if they do not exist. . . even if they are not yet’.²³ This spectral space of anticipated presences whose absence itself acquires an eerie presence is akin to the space of the absurd, and Derrida himself has been identified as the quintessential ‘absurdist critic’, due to his refusal ‘to endow the meaningless with meaning’, and his stated commitment to placing himself ‘at a point so that I do not know any longer where I am going’.²⁴

This methodological commitment to becoming lost is shared by psychogeography, understood as the extensive exploration and detailed documentation of ‘what would usually be taken for ‘subjective’ associations and emotions ingrained in the urban structure’.²⁵ In contrast to conventional academic field research, which methodically addresses a set of preestablished research questions,

psychogeography is an improvisatory spatial practice based on 'following paths and making journeys that bring forth the hidden, strange and subversive', which proceeds by 'stumbling, with disoriented but purposeful vision, into a nonsensical world'.²⁶ This practice is currently undergoing a resurgence in cultural geography and beyond, characterized by a broadening of its definition to embrace a range of methods and attitudes in addition to those of the Situationist International with which it is most commonly associated.²⁷ Recent literature on psychogeography acknowledges its debt to surrealism, which was a wellspring of absurdist experimentation.²⁸ But while this literature draws attention to the interest of the early surrealists in the magical and enchanted, it overlooks the surrealist concern with the absurd, which Salvador Dalí regarded as 'a kind of fount of truths'.²⁹ In contrast to the oneiric romanticism of the initial surrealist project,³⁰ Dalí embraced the absurd in his attempts 'to systematise confusion and thereby contribute to a total discrediting of the world of reality'.³¹

Dalí's absurdist strain of surrealism was a profound inspiration for the surrealist author J.G. Ballard, who has been identified as a pioneering psychogeographer of the alienated hinterlands of urban modernity.³² Ballard describes 'the absurd [as] the phenomenology of the universe',³³ and notes that 'reason safely rationalizes reality for us. Dalí pulls the fuses out of this comfortable system'.³⁴ But whereas writers such as Kafka, Beckett, and Arreola convey absurdity primarily through the dialogs and predicaments of their central characters, Ballard inscribes the absurd into stark and vivid representations of the apocalyptic spaces in which his stories take place. The spatiality of the absurd conveyed in his writings, combined with the indeterminacy and fragmentation characteristic of the absurd as a literary mode, together offer a potentially fruitful contribution to current experiments with creative writing in cultural geography,³⁵ and particularly to attempts to capture and convey the senselessness, spectrality, and ruination of 'Anthroposcenic' landscapes in 'words offering no immediate pastoral comfort [and] little in the way of consolation'.³⁶ In what remains of this paper, I offer an absurdist psychogeographical account of a landscape of this kind, in the form of shards of disjointed narrative reminiscent of the disconnected and decomposing contours of the spaces they depict.³⁷

The great detonator

The Subdirector of Investments of the Regional Government of Loreto, of which Iquitos is the capital, was busily informing me of the astonishing array of infrastructural projects that were currently underway. I had overheard him a few days previously, impressing the significance of these schemes upon the unsuspecting inhabitants of one of the countless informal settlements that stretch across the floodplains that surround the city. They had gathered on a shattered concrete slab above the Nanay to watch the pink light of sunset play upon the white columns of the half-completed bridge. With a grand gesture across the river, the Subdirector had told them that the bridge would become 'the great detonator of the development of Iquitos', which would finally unite the city with the world.³⁸ I had introduced myself to him at the time, and he was now presenting me with the spectacular Investment Project for the Integral Development of Loreto.³⁹ The road from Iquitos to the town of El Estrecho on the border with Colombia formed by the River Putumayo, which began with the Nanay Bridge, would link up with a 600-km road construction project between Iquitos and the town of Saramiriza on the edge of the jungle, from where an existing highway across the Andes would connect Iquitos to the coast. A railway line of similar length was being constructed to another point on the fringes of the Peruvian Amazon connected by road to the Pacific. The railway would run past Iquitos to the nearby town of Sinchicuy, through which the road to El Estrecho would also pass. Sinchicuy had been designated as the location of an international port, which would be a central node of the Amazonian Waterways, a system of modernized rivers financed by Chinese

capital that would open a series of interoceanic corridors between the Peruvian and Brazilian coasts. Launched in 2013, these megaprojects would be completed by 2021, by which time Sinchicuy would have become 'a truly dynamic centre of economic activity in the area, counting on port facilities, a floating dock, platforms and access roads, warehouses, administrative offices, and a centre of innovation and technology transfer. . . with terrestrial access for heavy vehicles from the city of Iquitos'.⁴⁰

Skittering across the surface of the River Amazon, the makeshift speedboat approached the port of Sinchicuy. It was October 2019, and the transformation of the town should have been all but complete. The port was a thatched hut floating on a timber raft. The thatch was rotting away, and the gaps had been patched with scraps of corrugated metal and the remains of an immense political campaign poster – a distorted fragment of the candidate's enormous face grinning winningly into the empty sky. The timbers were waterlogged, and the hut listed at a sickly angle, the eaves of the roof touching the water on one side, while the floor of the other was thrust into the air like the prow of a sinking ship. There was no dock. The speedboat cut its outboard motor and slammed into the soft mud of the riverbank, from which point a narrow footpath picked its way through abandoned grasslands into town. The streets were lined with electricity poles that had been stripped of their wiring, and scattered with the overgrown manhole covers of a failed sewage system. On the earthen floor of his home, an Indigenous man unfurled a tattered map on which the multiple megaprojects converged upon the town. 'These projects would give us a spark of hope for some improvement', he said. 'But everything is simulations'.⁴¹

None of the megaprojects included in the plan had come to fruition. The route of the railway had been found to pass through a vast expanse of flooded forest, and would have required a prohibitively expensive system of concrete pillars set deep into the earth.⁴² The Chinese investors had withdrawn from the Amazonian Waterways after a study found that the courses of the rivers of the region were in ceaseless motion, requiring constant costly dredging to maintain a channel of sufficient draft for commercially viable container ships.⁴³ The road to Saramiriza had run aground in the same flooded forests as the railway line,⁴⁴ and the road to El Estrecho had yet to receive any financing beyond the Nanay Bridge itself, the construction of which was overbudget and behind schedule.⁴⁵ The Subdirector of Investments had provided me with a wealth of documents detailing this plethora of failed plans. Revising the Investment Project for the Integral Development of Loreto, I found that its pages had been misprinted in a nonsensical order. Turning to the Territorial Development Plan that accompanied it, I realized that the Google Earth image that formed the base of one of the maps had been cut and pasted upside down, and that the positions of Iquitos and other settlements had subsequently been superimposed on random points along the inverted river system that bore no relation to their actual locations.⁴⁶

I returned to the headquarters of the Regional Government to get a second opinion. The Head of Planning turned out to be an accountant with no experience of planning. When I asked about the 'great detonation' that the Subdirector had equated with the Nanay Bridge, he sketched a handful of intersecting lines on a sheet of scrap paper: 'So here we will complete a section of the road that goes from El Estrecho to Iquitos, and from Iquitos to Saramiriza, and everything is connected. . .'. He sighed and took a half-hearted sip from his plastic cup of coffee. A collapsing stack of moldy documents slouched in the corner beneath a broken air conditioning unit. Paint peeled from the stained walls. 'That's kind of the idea', he went on. 'There it is in the plan, like the dream of every citizen of Loreto – [the dream of] connectivity. . . But the problem is the scepticism I have. Sometimes I don't believe we can do it because there are certain difficulties all the time'. He turned to the latest in the interminable series of development plans for the region: 'This is our Concerted Development Plan, which includes five. . .' There was another long silence as he flipped through the pages of the plan, trying to find what he was talking about. Eventually he gave up. I asked what

he thought accounted for the continued isolation and impoverishment of the region. The Head of Planning shook his head. 'I don't know', he said. 'We lack an explanation'.⁴⁷

The road that wasn't there

'Welcome to the Municipal Palace of Mazán', read the sign above the door, across a faded image of a verdant jungle scene. A prerecording of a military parade played on a grainy screen at the far end of the vacant concrete room. A team of ants dragged a dead fly across the floor. Placed in a corner with her face against the wall, a large plastic mermaid stared at a shredded collage of public information. The Alderman arrived 3 hours late and squeezed himself behind a narrow desk. I asked him about his expectations for the arrival of the road from Iquitos, which was destined to transform Mazán into a location of 'strategic importance in its new role as a centre of interconnection between Iquitos and the frontier of the Putumayo'.⁴⁸ He muttered a few official platitudes about reducing transport costs and attracting investment. Then he sat back with a wry smile: 'But maybe I'll never see [the arrival of the road] . . . They've been talking about this road since I was a little boy. And now I'm 43 years old! Imagine how many years have passed, and they still haven't finished it!' He began to laugh: '43 years! That's a long time! Various times! Good times!' The Alderman shed tears of laughter over the shortcomings of the state he represented. 'Yes indeed. . .' he continued pensively, 'We, as living beings, we pray for a road that could take us [to Iquitos] in a car, for example. Can you imagine dying without the road having arrived?'

A track for the road had in fact been cut back in the 1990s. Several riverside Indigenous communities and groups of mestizo colonizers had resettled along the track in anticipation of the imminent paving of the road. But the budget for its construction was soon exhausted, and the road was never built. Over the course of the subsequent decades, the track had been consumed by foliage, and the communities along it had become stranded in the jungle. Most of their members had remained there in the hope that the road would one day arrive, and their spirits had recently been lifted by the incipient construction of the Nanay Bridge. But the track on which they were located had been cut on a long curve instead of in a straight line, allegedly to inflate costs and facilitate further embezzlement, and the new road had been plotted on a more direct route. The communities were destined to remain adrift in a sea of vegetation.

These communities could now only be accessed by a journey of several hours upriver by canoe from the port of Mazán, and then by foot through the jungle. The port lay down a rutted concrete track past a garbage dump from which vultures rose like black smoke, and a brothel serving men emerging from months working upriver in the illegal logging trade, which was profoundly entangled with political corruption.⁴⁹ From there, the motorized canoe pattered up the River Mazán, past an immense sawmill where the dark red dust of ancient cedars and mahoganies accumulated on the riverbank like blood congealing on a slaughterhouse floor.

The footpath ran from the river's edge through empty pastures hacked from the jungle by peasant farmers who had signed up for a fraudulent agrarian credit scheme. They had cleared the land in preparation for the purchase of cattle with loans issued by the Regional Government, which they had signed for but never received.⁵⁰ Beyond these phantom cattle fields the path entered a jungle stripped of its precious timber. An hour or so later it emerged in Cuatro de Abril, one of the villages constructed on the old track of the road that was cut but never paved. A small Kichwa Indigenous community had moved here from a remote riverbank in 1997, eager for the modernity that would soon arrive along the road, and had been here ever since as the jungle closed in around them. All that remained of the road was a grassy trail along which their 14 huts were arranged, which petered out into the vegetation that encroached from both directions. I had been accompanied to the village by an evangelical priest of the Church of God of Prophecy, who had established churches in several

such places, and who traveled between them to preach the Word of God and collect the 10% tithe. A blue wooden chapel stood in the middle of the village, beside a bedraggled Peruvian flag clinging to a broken bamboo pole. The sign outside the chapel assured the faithful that they were indeed standing on 'the Iquitos-Mazán Highway'. But the congregation seemed unsure if the road would ever really arrive. No-one from the government had ever visited them, and they had 'always heard different versions – some that the road will come, others that it will not. We really don't know the reality'. I began to report what I had learned about the plans to redirect the road. But the priest intervened: 'We have faith! We must pray to have the road. Because God is stronger than anything. He will make it happen!' Above the rough-hewn pews, a hand-drawn poster quoted a psalm intended to further inspire the congregation's faith in better times ahead. But it read less like a promise of salvation than a comment on the inescapability of their predicament: 'The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell therein forever'.⁵¹

Dead end

Vladimir and Estragon were sitting on plastic chairs on the side of the street, opposite the hole in the ground where the market used to be.⁵² The jungle clawed its way out of the crater into which the building had collapsed, after its construction had blocked the path of underground watercourses, resulting in a landslide. The market had been built by the Regional Government as a symbol of state presence in the frontier town of El Estrecho – the destination of the road that would connect Iquitos to Colombia (although there was no road to meet it on the other side of the border formed by the River Putumayo). Nothing had been done to rebuild the market since it had collapsed 4 years before. Estragon was a mestizo from Iquitos who held a minor position in the government of the Putumayo province. He explained that the market had been poorly built at vastly inflated expense by a prior administration, as a convenient opportunity for corruption, noting that El Estrecho was so remote that the auditors could be relied upon never to arrive. Vladimir was a local Huitoto Indigenous man, who had fought for the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) on the far side of the river. Both his legs were crippled – one from polio and the other from a bullet, and he swung himself around town on two wooden sticks. 'There are many constructions that have not been completed or that have problems', he observed. The central plaza, for example, was not a proud state monument to order and progress, but a palimpsest of unfinished projects hastily constructed by multiple administrations as so many means of embezzling their budgets: 'There are lots of posts everywhere [a proliferation of lampposts scattered across the plaza in which the lights had never been installed]. I can't see their logic! There's a point in the middle [an abstract spike cast from lumpen concrete at the centre of the plaza]. But what does it mean? They should at least have a statue – a founder of the town or something, a canoe, whatever. . . . Something that means something. But it's just a pole of cement that has no signification at all!'

Estragon agreed: 'It has no meaning!' They both howled with despairing laughter. While successive governments exhausted their scant budgets on such things, the road from Iquitos remained little more than a vaguely remembered dream. Construction had begun on a similar road at a different point between the Napo and Putumayo rivers back in the 1980s. But when it was half-complete it had reached a section of flooded forest in which the construction machinery had been sucked into the swamp.⁵³ El Estrecho was still only connected to Iquitos by military flights, or by a journey down the Putumayo to its confluence with the River Amazon in Brazil, and back up the Amazon into Peru – an odyssey that could take a month by cargo ship. As Vladimir pointed out to further laughter, 'If you ship a load of bananas, only the skin will arrive! . . . And if we had a road then in two hours we would be in Iquitos. But we will die before the road arrives!'

The subject was becoming tiresome, and Vladimir shifted to a different theme. 'I have a question for you', he said, turning to me. 'Why do gringos come here and cut off people's faces?' I had no idea, and asked him to tell me more. For many years now, he said, strange illuminated airships piloted by white men had been seen flying over the Putumayo. They shoot solitary fishermen with laser beams at night, then take them on board and cut their faces off. The victims eventually reappear in the jungle or on a riverside beach, faceless and dead. Estragon had heard of similar events, and when I made inquiries in the offices of the Provincial Government, the Deputy Mayor of Putumayo pointed to his chest and said: 'They skin the face and leave [the body with] dollars stuffed in here'.⁵⁴ 'Why do they take [their faces]?' Vladimir wondered, 'You'd think they'd take their organs, but they only take the face. What could that skin be for?'⁵⁵

A group of German and American scientists had arrived in the region a few years previously claiming to be botanists, and had assembled teams of local Indigenous guides to accompany them on expeditions deep into the jungle. Vladimir informed me of this occurrence, before confiding that he had worked on one of these teams, and had become suspicious when other members began to disappear. One night he snuck into the laboratory that the scientists had set up in the camp, where he discovered 'iron tubes containing glass cylinders that contained human bodies'. The bodies were withered, and oil was being extracted from them. The oil was pale blue in color, and was dripping into bottles along spiraling glass tubes. He reported this to the police, but no action was taken, and when he returned to the scene the laboratory had disappeared. Then an expedition of British, Chinese, and American scientists had arrived, in search of a 'Red Orchid' that contained the secret of immortality, which they wanted to patent as a drug for the prevention of death. A Chinese member of the team had discovered the orchid. But his colleagues had murdered him, escaping with the flower, and leaving his body to rot in the jungle.

Vladimir shrugged his shoulders: 'Many dark things happen in the Putumayo'. This remote region was a center of cocaine production and had been a focus of conflict in the Colombian civil war. In the 1990s those living on the Colombian side of the river had more chance of being murdered than of dying of natural causes,⁵⁶ and fumigation flights financed by the USA as part of its War on Drugs had been prevalent in the area in recent years, coinciding with the reported appearance of face-peeling gringo airships. The banks of the Putumayo were scarred by illegal gold mining operations, and their luxuriantly foliaged walls concealed coca plantations, the ruins of paramilitary camps, and the paths of cocaine smugglers and clandestine timber crews. This had also been the territory of the Peruvian Amazon Company, which was financed by British capital and was the principal Peruvian rubber producer during the boom of the early 20th century on which the original wealth of Iquitos had been based.⁵⁷ El Estrecho had been founded by members of the Huitoto enslaved by the company,⁵⁸ including Vladimir's grandfather. 'The exploitation of rubber was a very sad time', he said. 'There was slavery, and this zone was the hardest hit. . . They didn't pay the natives. They just gave them a [rubber] quota [to collect] and if they didn't meet it then they killed them just like that. . . This was the scene of the greatest massacres'.⁵⁹

Malfunctioning fireworks fell like burning rain at midnight on New Year's Eve in El Estrecho. Outside the police station on the central plaza, someone had propped an effigy on a plastic chair. The police had soaked him in gasoline and set him alight. His face was as featureless as those of the corpses dumped by the face peelers from their luminous airships. Smoldering sawdust fell from his chest as the heat melted the chair. People peered at the scene from within the forest of meaningless modern symbols that filled the plaza. Vladimir and Estragon were bickering outside the general store. The crippled FARC foot soldier was informing the jaded provincial bureaucrat that one day he would murder all the corrupt politicians in this place. As their drunken row intensified, I gazed at the flames feasting on the molten corpse.

Conclusion

This paper has told the story of a journey down a non-existent road. It started with the epic modern spectacle of the Nanay Bridge, as the keystone of an astonishingly ambitious set of integrated infrastructures that would finally connect the uniquely isolated city of Iquitos to the accelerating superhighways of planetary urbanization. But this half-completed bridge turned out to be ‘the first instalment of a future that [had] forgotten to materialize’.⁶⁰ None of the other megaprojects existed, despite in some cases having been promised for several decades. In their place lay the ruins of smaller modernizing projects: the failed electricity and sewage systems in Sinchicuy; the desolate municipal offices in Mazán; the collapsed market and nonsensical plaza in El Estrecho; the overgrown track along which the community of Cuatro de Abril had become trapped. These were not ruins of a lost modernity consigned to the past, like those of the declining industrial cities of the Global North. Instead, they were ruins of the future – of a modernity that had long been anticipated but had definitively failed to arrive. A seething ecosystem of political corruption and illegal resource extraction lurked just below the surface of this disintegrating mirage, entangling this isolated region in the tendrils of the world market, and bubbling up in the metaphorical forms of face-peeling spaceships, human oil-extracting laboratories, and murderous quests for the key to immortality. The inhabitants of this space-out-of-joint were adrift in the midst of meaningless ruins, haunted by spectral megaprojects that were promised but never came, and plagued by monstrous apparitions that gave displaced expression to the extractivist violence through which this place was actually incorporated into the accumulative circuitry of global capital.

In telling this story, I have resisted the temptation to leap out of this disconcerting domain into the normalizing rituals of academic sensemaking, and have sought instead to grasp and convey the surrealism and absurdity that infuse the lived experience of space-out-of-joint. Rather than framing each section of the paper as a clearly elucidated contribution to an explicit argument, I have aimed to communicate the profound ambiguity of the scenarios I describe, in which there was a constant and often indiscernible slippage between the domains of reality and fiction. Like the protagonist of *Time Out of Joint*, I repeatedly experienced ‘an abyssal falling away of any sense that there [was] any fundamental level which could operate as a foundation or a touchstone, securing and authenticating what [was] ultimately real’.⁶¹ My fidelity to this experience is not grounded in a relativistic abandonment of the principle of truth. After all, the embrace of the absurd ‘is by no means equivalent to a total rejection of all meaning. On the contrary, it constitutes an earnest endeavour to penetrate deeper levels of meaning and to give a truer, because more complex, picture of reality’.⁶² The point, in this case, is that the truth of the Anthropocene *is* increasingly surreal and absurd: a slapdash concoction of state-engendered fantasies projected onto a slow-motion breakdown of the socioecological order that its protagonists are seemingly powerless to avert. Never has this been more evident than in the first wave of the coronavirus pandemic that swept the world in the months following the research reported in this paper. This was the absurd staged on a planetary scale in the twin senses of Arreola’s story: the spectacle of state power suddenly reduced to ‘a desperate echo against an unravelling and untameable situation’ on one hand,⁶³ and the confrontation of humanity with its own mortality in the form of a virus generated as a symptom of global ecological devastation on the other.⁶⁴ And like the characters of a Samuel Beckett play, our collective response to this revelation has been to ignore its implications and ‘get back to normal’.⁶⁵

The adoption of an absurdist attitude in such circumstances might appear an apolitical indulgence. But I would argue that such an attitude is a political prerequisite imposed by the circumstances themselves. The dissolution of social reality that permeates the Anthropocene was omnipresent in the shattered spaces that this paper has sought to depict: a decomposing landscape littered with gutted buildings, abandoned pastures, and eviscerated forests, and scattered with the

ruins, ghosts, and monsters of a stillborn modernity. The standard machinery of academic writing is destined to function as an ideological state apparatus in such situations, to the extent that it edits out or explains away such seemingly irrelevant or superficial details in its haste to identify deeper causes and to solve more pressing problems. In doing so, it contributes to the occlusion of the 'great steaming morass of chaos that lies on the underside of order', and serves to conceal 'the massive degree of uncertainty, deception, bluff and ignorance on which such gargantuan enterprises as the ship of state rest'.⁶⁶ This is in marked contrast to the curious role played by the representatives of the state itself in the stories I have told. With the exception of the enthusiastic efforts of the Subdirector of Investments to convince me of the reality of the megaprojects of Loreto, they all adopted a distinctly absurdist attitude, foregrounding and frequently lampooning the farcical catalog of failures of the state of which they were a part. The Head of Planning pronounced his disbelief in his own plan; the Alderman wept with laughter at the thought of dying before the road arrived; and the provincial bureaucrat mocked the random modern objects of the municipal plaza. Their attitude recalls that of the Switchman in Arreola's story with which this paper began. Rather than explaining the sense of a seemingly senseless reality to the exasperated Stranger arriving at the station in rational expectation of his train, the Switchman demonstrates that it is precisely the Stranger's expectation of official meaning that is mistaken, and that the truth lies in the abyssal lack of meaning itself. Like the Stranger striding into the station, I visited each point along the planned road to El Estrecho, earnestly professing my anticipation of its imminent arrival. And like the Switchman responding to the Stranger, the disillusioned bureaucrats dutifully switched me on to the true absurdity of the situation.

As Evan Calder Williams has observed, and as is illustrated by the lives and landscapes along the non-existent road to El Estrecho, under conditions of combined and uneven apocalypse, the rational unfolding of reality along a linear path of progress falls apart, and 'what was once. . . a way out and forward, now becomes a formless field of antagonism. It isn't that the singular road of development comes to an end and reaches its destination. It's the end of the road itself'.⁶⁷ Rather than anxiously seeking an escape from this deadlock, like the Stranger waiting for his train, the absurdist attitude demands that we adopt the position of the Switchman, and 'finish wrecking – in thought – what we know to be wreckage, yet which refuses to call itself such'.⁶⁸ This project is a necessary precursor to the possibility of meaningful political action in a context in which, as Zupančič insists, we must acknowledge that 'we don't have a solution and that there is none visible on the horizon'.⁶⁹ Such a conclusion offers no immediate grounds for hope. But like the demand for meaning, the desire to end on a note of hope might be just another means of postponing the confrontation with the impossibility of our predicament. Against both temptations, an absurdist attitude requires that we remain in the domain of space-out-of-joint. This is not a gesture of defeat or futility. On the contrary, as Dolar emphasizes in his reading of Kafka, 'The injunction to yield. . . conscious control over the world of meaning is actually its opposite, the injunction to wake up from the slumber imposed by consciousness and habit'.⁷⁰ It is only through such an awakening, in which the derelict fantasies sustaining our collapsing world are collectively traversed, that we might suddenly hear a whistle in the distance and look up, like the Stranger at the end of 'The Switchman', to see 'the locomotive. . . approaching like a noisy miracle'.⁷¹

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Notes

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