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Urban Studies

DOI:

[10.1177/00420980221118817](https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221118817)

E-pub ahead of print: 05/09/2022

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Cyswllt i'r cyhoeddiad / Link to publication](#)

Dyfyniad o'r fersiwn a gyhoeddwyd / Citation for published version (APA):

Wilson, J. (2022). Apocalyptic urban surrealism in the city at the end of the world. *Urban Studies*, 60(4), 718-733. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00420980221118817>

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Apocalyptic urban surrealism in the city at the end of the world

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2023, Vol. 60(4) 718–733

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DOI: 10.1177/00420980221118817

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Abstract

This paper responds to calls for radical experimentation in urban theory in the context of the material and psychological upheavals of Anthropocene. It does so through the development of an *apocalyptic urban surrealism*, based on a set of principles drawn from surrealist attempts to simulate the experience of reality characteristic of psychotic breakdown. These principles are put to work in the psychogeographical exploration of an urban resettlement scheme on the outskirts of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon, and the flooded informal settlement that this scheme seeks to replace. Through the relinquishment of established modes of academic sense-making, and their replacement with a surrealist interpretive delirium, alternative meanings emerge within the entrails of cannibal capitalism and the wreckage of state-regulated reality.

Keywords

Anthropocene, built environment, method, surrealism, theory

摘要

本文回应了在人类世物质和心理剧变的背景下对城市理论进行激进实验的呼吁。我们的方法是发展一种大灾变城市超现实主义，该超现实主义基于一套从超现实主义尝试中汲取的原则，以模拟精神崩溃的现实特征体验。这些原则被用于对秘鲁亚马逊地区伊基托斯（Iquitos）郊区的城市重新安置计划（以及该计划试图取代的被洪水淹没的非正规住区）进行心理地理探索。通过放弃既定的学术意义建构模式，并代之以超现实主义的解释性狂热，在食人资本主义的内脏和政府监管现实的残骸中出现了另外的意义。

关键词

人类世、建筑环境、方法、超现实主义、理论

Received March 2022; accepted July 2022

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Introduction

‘What if the everyday environment was itself a huge mental breakdown?’ (Ballard, 2008: 236). This question is explored by the surrealist science fiction author JG Ballard in *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Published in 1970, the novel consists of a series of disjointed narratives in which the delirious thought-processes of someone undergoing a psychotic breakdown and the disintegrating structures of the surrounding city are inextricably entangled (Ballard, 2014a). This paper takes this scenario as a pertinent starting point for exploring the everyday urban environments of the Anthropocene, as an epoch defined by seemingly unstoppable socio-ecological disintegration on one hand, and by the incapacity of our established modes of thought to grasp this unprecedented situation on the other (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, 2017; Tsing et al., 2017). These circumstances have contributed to a proliferation of new urban theories (Rickards et al., 2016), inspired in part by the necessity to think the urban and the Anthropocene together as ‘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: 1118). But in a recent issue of *Urban Studies*, Stephanie Wakefield insists on ‘the need 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: 920, 919).

This challenge resonates with that posed by a small but growing number of critical theorists – both in the field of urban studies and beyond – who argue that the apocalypse seemingly forewarned by the Anthropocene should be approached, not as a future event

to be avoided, but as an ongoing process that is already unfolding unevenly across our planetary present (Calder Williams, 2011; Cunningham and Warwick, 2013; Pohl, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2022; Zupančič, 2017). Such an approach requires new ‘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: 17, 3). The depth and scale of the ‘combined and uneven apocalypse’ that we collectively confront demands radical experimentation in this regard, replacing the familiar tropes of dystopian urban realism with something ‘more full-blooded, savage, surreal’ (Calder Williams, 2011: 206).

This paper responds to the multidimensional challenge of pushing the limits of urban theory and method in the context of thinking and conveying the actuality of apocalypse in the Anthropocene. It does so by building on the unsettling Ballardian suggestion that the interpretation of external reality through the prism of psychotic breakdown might provide a more appropriate approach to our current predicament than those of state and academic sense-making. To this end, the following section sets out the principles of an *apocalyptic urban surrealism*. The subsequent three sections then apply these principles to the mutating peripheries of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon: the largest city in the world with no road access, which is interpreted as an actually existing example of a city at the end of the world. These sections draw on field research conducted in Iquitos from August 2019 to January 2020, including interviews with planners, bureaucrats, politicians, artists, journalists, and subaltern inhabitants of the city, as well as psychogeographical explorations, through which I seek to draw out ‘what would usually be taken for “subjective” associations and emotions ingrained in the urban structure’ (Smith, 2010: 104). In

contrast to ‘academic rituals of explanation... with their alchemical promise of yielding system from chaos’ (Taussig, 1987: xiv), these sections take inspiration from Ballard’s vivid and miasmatic evocation of apocalyptic landscapes, and follow the surrealist method of focusing intently on the concrete details of everyday experience while relying on ‘the interpretive power of images that make conceptual points directly’ (Buck-Morss, 1989: 6). These points are drawn out in the concluding section.

Towards an apocalyptic urban surrealism

Surrealism has always been urban and apocalyptic. Emerging in Paris in the early 1920s, the movement was motivated by the decaying arcades of the city and the catastrophic violence of World War One. The early surrealists responded to this panorama of decadence and destruction by drawing on Freudian theory in the repudiation of bourgeois illusions of order and rationality (Ades and Richardson, 2015; Baxter, 2009). 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: 9). Following Freud’s method of free association, Breton developed automatic writing as a technique for capturing and conveying this surreal dimension. Together with *Paris Peasant*, Louis Aragon’s surrealist psycho-geography of the Parisian arcades published in 1926 (Aragon, 1994), Breton’s manifesto inspired *The Arcades Project*, in which Walter Benjamin explored the spatial phantasmagorias of an emergent urban modernity and sought to shake the proletariat from its commodity-induced slumber (Benjamin, 1999).

Unlike the urban dreamworlds analysed by Benjamin, however, the Anthropocene is not a nightmare from which we can hope to awaken. Instead, it is ‘a long term, slow-motion catastrophe... a chronic and seemingly permanent condition. We live, oxymoronically, in a state of perpetual, but never resolved, convulsion and contradiction’ (Shaviro, 2015: 7, 9). Apocalyptic urban surrealism accordingly takes an alternative point of departure, beginning not with Breton and Aragon, but with Salvador Dalí. The Catalan artist joined the surrealists in 1929, and would eventually become a fascistic commercial parody of himself, expelled from the movement and dismissed by Breton with the anagram Avida Dollars. But his writings of the early 1930s revolutionised surrealism, replacing the passive oneiric romanticism of its initial incarnation with a more active, critical, and systematic approach devoted not to the fusion of dreams and reality but to the overthrow of social reality as such, based on the creative delusions of paranoid psychosis. This approach was first set out in an essay entitled ‘The Rotting Donkey’, in which Dalí announced: ‘I believe the moment is drawing near when, by a thought process of a paranoid and active character, it would be possible... to systematise confusion and thereby contribute to a total discrediting of the world of reality’ (Dalí, 2015: 264–265). The essay influenced Lacan’s early psychoanalytical work on paranoia when he was also involved with the surrealist movement (Lacan, 1988), which in turn inspired Dalí to further develop his approach. Dalí came to call this approach the ‘paranoiac-critical method’ (Finkelstein, 1975; Jenny and Trezise, 1989; Polsani, 2001).

In a series of essays on surrealism written in the late 1960s while he was working on *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Ballard rejected Breton’s ‘pure psychic automatism’, and endorsed the paranoiac-critical method,

observing that ‘reason safely rationalizes reality for us. Dalí pulls the fuses out of this comfortable system’ (Ballard, 1997a: 85, 1997b: 94). *The Atrocity Exhibition* follows Dalí’s lead in this regard. Its ‘psychologic’ begins with a situation in which ‘the distinction between what is real and what is fictional in the outside world has broken down’, leading to an abyssal confrontation with ‘the absurdity of the world’, which is overcome through the conviction that ‘although the external world does not make sense, sense can be wrung from it... in strange ways’ (Perry and Wilkie, 1975: 3). This three-phase process corresponds to the Lacanian understanding of psychotic breakdown and reconstitution, which likewise begins with an experience of disintegration in which the elements of ‘what we take for granted as reality... bricks, newspapers, tables and chairs can all lose their everyday meaning and become enigmatic and threatening’ (Leader, 2012: 44). This psychological coming apart of signifier and signified is mirrored by processes of urban breakdown. As Ballard has noted of his childhood in Shanghai in World War Two:

One of the things I took from my wartime experiences was that reality was a stage set. The realities that you took for granted... the school, the home where one lives, the familiar street and all the rest of it... could be dismantled overnight (Ballard, 2014b: 179).

Our physical and psychological landscapes are thus intimately connected, to the extent that our experience of reality is structured by social fantasies embodied in the concrete materiality of the urban fabric. Confronted with circumstances in which ‘the phantasmatic frame disintegrates, the subject undergoes a “loss of reality” and starts to perceive reality as an “irreal” nightmarish universe with no firm ontological foundation’ (Žižek, 2008: 84). This entry into a world in which things do not make sense marks the second

phase of psychotic breakdown, in which ‘a hole has opened up in the world of meaning’, which can give rise to ‘the idea that the world has ended’ (Leader, 2012: 174, 172). The terror induced by this apocalyptic experience can motivate an escape into the third phase, which is characterised by the delusional creation of ‘a new meaning or set of meanings... which reintroduces an order into the world’ (Leader, 2012: 174). This psychological process is again entangled with processes at work in the urban world. In *Delirious New York*, published in 1978, Rem Koolhaas draws on Dalí’s paranoiac-critical method in interpreting architecture as ‘the imposition on the world of structures it never asked for and that existed previously only in clouds of conjectures in the minds of their creators’, which frequently responds to the perceived threat of an imminent end of the world: ‘Modern architecture is invariably presented as a last-minute opportunity for redemption, an urgent invitation to share the paranoiac thesis that a calamity will wipe out that unwise part of mankind that clings to old forms of habitation and urban coexistence’ (Koolhaas, 1994: 246). The principal target of Koolhaas’s critique is the classical modernism of Le Corbusier. But the Anthropocene is proving to be an even more fertile ground for such apocalyptic fantasies (Pohl, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2022), and for the concomitant conviction that new urban forms can save the world (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020; Keil, 2020).

Apocalyptic urban surrealism deconstructs such paranoid construction methods in the name of ‘the ruin and discredit of the perceptible and intellectual world’ (Dalí, 1998: 110). The aim is not to escape the senselessness of things, but to intensify the collapse of meaning characteristic of urban breakdown under conditions of ‘combined and uneven apocalypse’ (Calder Williams, 2011). This is not a purely destructive operation, but opens space for the exploration of

alternative forms of meaning, drawing delirious interpretive energy from ‘distracted or furious states of mind’ (Dalí, 1998: 38), devoted not to the construction of further paranoid delusions, but to the revelation of what such delusions conceal. Through this surrealist version of the Lacanian project of traversing the fantasy, ‘what we wanted to hide and what we weren’t aware of hiding from ourselves, keenly develops a taste for light’ (Dalí, 1998: 64). The three principles of apocalyptic urban surrealism can thus be formulated as follows: reality is a stage set; things do not make sense; what was hidden comes to light. These principles are applied in the following three sections.

Reality is a stage set

Gleaming in the luxuriant sunlight that poured with unimpeded force into a broad clearing carved out of the jungle, three austere monoliths rose assertively from the centre of the New City of Belén – the first planned city of the Peruvian Amazon (Díaz Ruiz, 2015). These slim rectangular prisms, each taller than the last, ascended in strict sequence, as if to symbolise the stages of development that the state was finally delivering to this long-neglected region. A plaque on the lowest prism was engraved with the names of the Peruvian President and the Minister of Housing, Construction and Sanitation. Strung across the rectilinear streets that surrounded this proud monument, rows of brightly coloured bunting still fluttered from the recent celebrations of the first anniversary of Phase Two of the project, like the multitude of hopes that had brought the people to the city.

The members of the Front for the Defence of the New City of Belén had assembled near the monument to discuss the city’s progress. They described the dystopian conditions of the sprawling flooded slum of Bajo Belén from which they had escaped: a

place lacking water and sewage systems and filled with violent crime and crack addiction, where garbage removal trucks and fire engines could not operate, police dared not enter, people defecated in the same river in which they bathed, and children frequently drowned. It had come into existence as the first of many informal settlements through which the city of Iquitos had expanded chaotically across the floodplains that surrounded the raised table of land on which it had originally been constructed in the late 19th century (Espinoza Soriano, 2016; Reátegui Bartra, 2015). By the early 21st century, the uncontrolled growth of Bajo Belén, and its high rates of poverty, crime, and water-borne diseases, had led urban planners to judge the situation to be ‘out of control’ (Ríos Moreno and Eduardo López, 2014: 206). Matters came to a head in 2012, when unusually high seasonal floods resulted in an outbreak of cholera, followed by an immense fire that swept through the flimsy wooden structures of the settlement. A law was passed in 2014 decreeing ‘the urgent and publicly necessary relocation of the population of Bajo Belén... due to being a zone of constant flooding... and of imminent danger for the health and safety of its population’ (El Peruano, 2014).¹

The result was the New City of Belén. Built at a cost of US\$60 million on unflooded land 13 km outside Iquitos, this satellite city of 2,500 houses would accommodate the 16,000 inhabitants of Bajo Belén. The project attracted international attention as a potential example of the kind of resettlement scheme that would increasingly be required around the world in the context of rising sea levels and increasing urban inundation under conditions of climate change. A report on the New City financed by the Dutch and British state development agencies noted that ‘given the magnitude of future displacements, it becomes necessary to think of new urban

centres and cities that offer shelter to displaced persons as well as allow for individual and community development' (Desmaison, 2018: 6). A computer model shown to its future inhabitants depicted the utopian urban antithesis of their dystopian circumstances: grids of standardised houses, orderly thoroughfares, tree-lined pedestrian avenues, a landscaped park, and spaciouly arranged public buildings, playgrounds, sport pitches, and other amenities, bypassed by a highway filled with sedate saloons and sleek sports cars.² The first 200 houses were completed in 2016 and immediately inhabited. Sitting in the middle of the materialisation of this model three years later, the mestizo president of the Front for the Defence of the New City of Belén recalled the moment she had seen the computer model with which they had been convinced to move: 'A modern city! An organized city! It had everything! Everything a city should have!' An Indigenous member of the Front spoke of the stigma of living in Bajo Belén, when 'the whole world used to look on us as criminals and delinquents... But now I am from the New City of Belén!' He described 'the emotion, the effervescence of living this quality of life', and predicted the imminent arrival of large-scale investments in hotels and businesses, through which this 'unique urban prototype' would eventually replace Iquitos itself as the centre of the region due to 'its urban style, and all the rest of it. Everyone envies us for this new city! It is enviable!'³

I looked around me as he spoke. The three abstract obelisks that bore the names of the President and Housing Minister had been poorly cast in weak concrete, and their sharp angles were beginning to crumble. The monument was surrounded by a dusty wasteland strewn with garbage. The celebratory bunting from the launch of Phase Two of the project hung limply in the stagnant heat, beneath a thin coating of the white sand that stormed around the town whenever the wind

picked up. Mould spread up the cement walls of the houses from the moist soils, and their prefabricated roofs were rotting in the humid air. The streets were unpaved, the college was housed in a set of portacabins, employment schemes had been promised but not provided, and there were no signs of the hospital, commercial centre, or police station included in the plan. Open sewers had been hacked into the dirt roads after the failure of the sanitation system. The sandy soil had collapsed into the trenches to mingle with the effluent, creating an efflorescent pestilential sludge. Slung over rusty fencing, a printed child's blanket had been hung upside down to dry. Above a sky filled with floating teddy bears and cherubic baby heads, the spires of an inverted Disneyland castle plunged towards the scum, like the disintegrating wreckage of a utopian delusion.

Things do not make sense

Rising from the swampland at the mouth of the lagoon, Bajo Belén loomed like the exposed ruins of an impoverished Atlantis. The river that engulfed it every year was at its lowest ebb, and the floating huts that formed the indeterminate edge of this metamorphic settlement had been stranded on the shoreline by the retreating water. Sinking through decaying layers of plastic trash and amorphous matter discarded by the local market, the huts had come to rest in the tar-black garbage sediment of the riverbank. They were extraordinary artefacts of subaltern salvage, propped on rafts of rotten tree-trunks discarded by the sprawling timberyards at the mouth of the river, and cobbled together out of offcut planks of wood, rejected scraps of iron and the shredded remnants of immense electoral campaign posters. The smooth round faces of the politicians that had beamed down on Bajo Belén with their promises of progress were now folded, stretched and crushed into

the forms most conducive to their precarious new existence in the improvised roofing.

Prior to the relocation project of the New City of Belén, the most recent and ambitious of these progressive promises had envisioned the comprehensive reengineering of Bajo Belén itself, under the name of Sustainable Belén. The PowerPoint presentation with which its architect had unveiled the scheme opened with a quote from Le Corbusier: ‘Without a plan there is only arbitrariness and disorder... Modern life demands and awaits a new plan for the house and the city’ (Tapullima Flores, 2019). The presentation juxtaposed photographs of Bajo Belén that conveyed this arbitrariness and disorder to computerised images of Sustainable Belén: two thousand terraced houses on raised plinths were connected by a network of elevated streets, while the floodable level of the town comprised an elegant arrangement of submergible roads and pedestrian parks.

An aspirational mural had been painted by a well-meaning NGO on a wall in the centre of Bajo Belén, in anticipation of its imminent replacement by Sustainable Belén. It depicted a beaming child standing in the orderly surroundings of the regenerated settlement before a gleaming backdrop of crystalline river and verdant jungle. The first 120 houses had been built following the flood and fire of 2012. But the elevated streets turned out to be prohibitively expensive, and the housing materials had to be modified after the US\$70 million budget had been embezzled by each descending level of the state. The houses had eventually been erected on cheap wooden stakes that quickly rotted, while their weight caused them to subside into the deep layers of solid waste and soft soils that underlay the settlement (Desmaison, 2018: 186–188). Those houses that had not yet collapsed had been abandoned and stripped of their roofing. Piles of trash had accumulated against the base of the aspirational mural, rising through the clear waters of its crystalline river like a nightmare

gradually overwhelming a feeble and anxious dream.⁴

The cancellation of Sustainable Belén in 2013 had led the central government to renounce all efforts to reform Bajo Belén, and to pass the law enforcing the relocation of the entire population. But at least 70% of the people were refusing to escape to the New City of Belén (Desmaison, 2018: 34). Instead of fleeing this apparently catastrophic slum, women calmly washed clothes on rafts beside their floating latrines, and men idly fished from dugout canoes with pieces of string tied to sticks held by a single hand. When the waters were high, the families simply moved to the upper levels of their homes, and if the flood reached the upper floors, they raised their furniture on wooden blocks and went fishing without getting out of bed.⁵ When the waters were low, the lands they exposed were free and fertile, enriched by the silt of the river and the shit of the city. In the words of one man: ‘We don’t want to leave because we have everything here... The *belenino* is a wood-gatherer, a fisherman, a chicken-skinner. He plants [on the floodplains], and there his watermelon, cucumber, melon and coriander are born. He does a bit of everything in his life here. It is his own life’. His friend compared this to the fate of those seduced by the New City of Belén, who were now far from the river and market that had sustained them: ‘In what state are they living? They don’t have sewers. They don’t have a clinic. They don’t have a college. They don’t even have water. They have zero. That is how they have been cheated by the state’.⁶

Confronted by these circumstances, people were abandoning the New City and returning to Bajo Belén. They were unable to reinhabit their old homes, however, as they had only received a place in the New City in return for dismantling their huts and ceding their land titles to the government. House-sized spaces had been cleared within

the tangle of intersecting alleys. Random girths of driftwood laboriously lashed into a crosshatched raft had yet to be removed from beneath the absent form of a demolished shack. The concrete legs that had once lifted a more affluent hut above the flood-water continued to thrust their naked lengths of rebar into the sky. In one recently cleared space, a Peruvian flag lay limply against its proudly erected pole. But apart from preventing their previous inhabitants from returning to make use of them, the state was doing nothing with these spaces, which were being rapidly colonised by dense undergrowth infested with snakes, rats and mosquitoes. Pointing to one such morass flourishing alongside his house, a local leader shook his head in confusion: 'These places are becoming jungles again. And we can't intervene because they come and say "No! Who is doing that?" It's a labyrinth. We don't understand'.⁷

Unable to reoccupy these spaces, those returning from the New City of Belén were joining the already overcrowded houses of other family members, or building new huts on the even more precarious and flood-prone outskirts of the slum. Furthermore, the law decreeing the relocation of the population of Bajo Belén prohibited the government from making new investments there, and ever since it had been passed in 2014, the decrepit infrastructures of the slum had been steadily eroding.⁸ Far from improving the living conditions of its inhabitants, the state was intensifying the emergency it had sought to resolve, while building a farcical simulation of urban modernity in the New City of Belén, which promised utopian deliverance, but which delivered a reality so dystopian that its inhabitants were returning to Bajo Belén to live in conditions even worse than those they had initially escaped. The situation was beyond comprehension. In the words of another local leader: 'It doesn't make sense! We've never been able to get to

the bottom of it, and they've never explained it to us... It's chaos. Instead of organizing they are disorganizing!'⁹

What was hidden comes to light

Beneath the art nouveau arches of the derelict pavillion in the crumbling central plaza of Bajo Belén, a young woman in a thin white dress reclined upon a wooden pyre. Its terraced levels overflowed with mangos, pineapples, passionfruit, watermelons, papayas, and cakes covered in glittering icing of soft pink and baby blue. People gazed at the delectable spectacle in silence from the humble stalls of the surrounding market. A child reached out and took a piece of fruit. Another carried a pink cake carefully away. The market descended on the pyre. The woman got to her knees and smashed herself in the face with chunks of fruit. The mass of people around the pyre scrambled over and under one another in their haste to grasp the evaporating loot. The prim ironwork of the pavillion cast delicate shadows on the cannibalistic feasting of the crowd.

Bajo Belén heaved itself like a garbage leviathan from the trash into which it sunk. Knocked together and falling apart, scrambling upwards and slumping down. As the river began to rise, the piles of refuse that had accumulated over the long months of the dry season floated out from their random resting places to choke the emerging canals, which were thronged with motorised canoes laden with the plants and animals of the wild waterways that writhed around the city. The mundane rituals of commerce, consumption, rest, and recreation were performed amid a mute carnival of disposed and degrading objects, beneath a black rush of descending vulture wings. The variegated garbage of the city sprawled into a collage of obsolete commodities, in which the cheerful colours of once desired things shone

through a dark humus of disintegrating matter: the pink chassis of a broken toy pram, the red label of a Coca-Cola bottle, the yellow stripes of a ragged football shirt, the shapeless blue protrusions of a sodden plastic bag. This miasma of detritus sank into sluggish black streams bridged by makeshift latrines and overwhelmed with flourishing weeds. A girl drew water to the upper floor of a half-flooded hut with a plastic bucket held by a nylon rope. A boy dragged a green plastic chair through trash-infested shallows. His other hand grasped a silver balloon.

The benevolent missionaries of modernity earnestly pointed the path to a better tomorrow. But Bajo Belén was not a laggard runt to be dragged along behind them. It was their own reality stripped of the phantasmatic exclusion of our apocalyptic present. A surrealist montage in which the trash and lies of capitalism were mashed up and spat out in a luxuriant vomit of dissociated objects, on which thrived a riotous profusion of rebellious survival and improvised design. The huts were thrown up with wanton disregard for what the architects committed to their urgent replacement would understand as the simplest building standards and most rudimentary aesthetic principles. Short lengths of wood were lashed to one another to form disjointed joists. Narrow strips of timber were banged together to create ungainly corner posts. If a rotten plank fell out of a wall, it was replaced by a random scrap of tin of a different size. When the wall gave way completely, a tattered tarpaulin would be hung to roughly fill the gap. An entire wall was made of old doors, except the door, which was made of an old section of wall. Enormous advertisements had been stripped from billboards in the wealthier sections of Iquitos, dragged here and hung at random angles as satirical components of the salvaged city: upside down from the side of a slumping hut, beneath the gaze of ravenous vultures in the pounding rain, two

blonde models draped themselves across a sleek red car against the background of a bright blue sky.

The bars of Bajo Belén were festooned with neon murals of the surrounding jungle, which seemed to shine with all the lustre of the commodities it contained. They were painted by the autodidact street artists of the city, who infused its peripheral barrios with 'a living, colourful, unprejudiced, libertine, excessive and overflowing art' (Bendayán and Villar, 2013: 11). The forests of precious timber were red and purple, indigo and violet, and washed in lime green sunlight, as if the sun itself were made of 100-dollar bills. They teemed with the beasts of the exotic animal trade, transmuted from mere creatures into the spiritual bearers of the social power of money. Gathered on the riverbanks in utopian abundance, jaguars blazed with hallucinatory intensity and alligators cavorted with bare-breasted mermaids. In the distant centre of the oceanic river, ramshackle oil barges, illegal gold-dredging rigs, and listing cargo boats laden with timber and cocaine lurched towards the ruined skyline of the city that crouched on the radiant horizon.

Bajo Belén was built from the leftovers of this orgy of extraction, the remains of a diminishing sequence of destructive resource booms. Iquitos had been transformed from an anonymous hamlet into a prosperous modern city by the rubber boom that began in the late 19th century. The centre of the city had been adorned with the ostentatious architecture of the European belle époque, such as the art nouveau pavilion that had since been relocated to Bajo Belén. Belén itself had become an important port, in which the rubber collected by enslaved Indigenous labour throughout the Peruvian Amazon was unloaded and prepared for shipment to the markets of Europe and the USA. When the boom abruptly ended in the 1910s, capital fled Iquitos, while destitute

Indigenous slaves arrived in Belén (Reátegui Bartra, 2015). Many were survivors of the genocidal violence of the rubber stations, which had exterminated an estimated 30,000 members of the Huitoto and Bora peoples of the Putumayo region: ‘They are tortured by means of fire and water, and by tying them up, crucified, head down... They are cut to pieces and dismembered with knives, axes and machetes’ (Hardenburg, 1913: 185). Following the short-lived oil boom of the 1970s, a further migrant wave of 15,000 unemployed oil workers and their families arrived in Bajo Belén and other flooded informal settlements (Ramírez Tamani, 2014; Santos Granero and Barclay, 2015). Now the place survived on the residual spoils available to those on the bottom rungs of the illegal gold, timber, and cocaine trades, and on whatever flora and fauna could be stripped out of the jungle and sold in the market (Dourojeanni, 2013; Gasche Suess, 2014). It was a subaltern form of ‘salvage accumulation’ (Tsing, 2015), conducted at the margins of state and capital, and expressed in the ‘salvagepunk’ aesthetic of the vernacular architecture and street art of the city (Calder Williams, 2011). Its practitioners were prone to insurrectional explosions. The first occurred in 1908, at the height of the rubber boom, when the elite trading houses of Iquitos were ransacked by the inhabitants of Belén, and over the subsequent century there had been several moments in which this rebel barrio had descended on the centre of the city, looting bourgeois businesses and burning government offices to the ground (Espinoza Soriano, 2016; Reátegui Bartra, 2000). If the state continued withholding investment and forcing the population to move to the New City of Belén, then another such eruption was inevitable. In the words of one local leader: ‘Belén is dangerous! ... There will be burnings, lootings! ... Let [the bureaucrats]

come here to be beaten! Let them come here to be macheted! Let them come here to be shot!’¹⁰

This hidden history of the city was explored by the Iquitos-born artist Christian Bendayán in 2012, in an exhibition entitled *The Devil’s Paradise*, in reference to the initial revelations of the violence of the rubber boom published under the same name a century before (Hardenburg, 1913). The exhibition included a painting called *The Banquet*, which echoed *The Cannibal Feast* by Méret Oppenheim: a controversial piece of performance art displayed at the International Exhibition of Surrealism in Paris in 1959, in which food was eaten by the audience off the body of a naked woman (Ades and Richardson, 2015). The murderous exploitation of the Huitoto and Bora peoples during the rubber boom had been justified as a civilising act in response to their alleged cannibalism (Taussig, 1987). But as noted by Roger Casement, who had visited the Putumayo region to investigate these crimes, the true cannibalism was that of the surplus value extracted through their enslavement, and he hoped the investors who had financed these operations on the London Stock Exchange would ‘enjoy the taste of their dividends, for at every meal they sit at a cannibal feast’ (quoted in Wylie, 2013: 99). The descendants of the survivors of this violence now survived in turn by cannibalising the extractivist system that had been imposed upon them and regurgitating their own form of modernity, described by the Peruvian curator Gustavo Buntinx as a ‘a reinvented cannibal dream that is voracious in its digestion of all glories and disgraces’ (Buntinx, 2019: 12). But this affirmative act of reappropriation had its own underside, which Bendayán also sought to represent in his version of *The Cannibal Feast*, as he explained when I asked him about the meaning of *The Banquet*: ‘The Amazon and its resources are

laid out to eat as if they were a banquet. And we are like cannibals who do not realize that we are feasting on ourselves'.¹¹

The body of a young Indigenous woman is draped across a table, her breasts and thighs arranged among jungle fruits and fishes, like the meat at the centre of a feast. The white men in suits sitting around her laugh about their latest profits and corruptions, inhaling the sweet scents of the fruits and puking their fine whiskies onto their half-unbuttoned shirts. They do not notice that the tangled flowers spilling from the table are merging with the tiled floor into which they sink. They do not see the light blazing in the ravished woman's eyes. I ask Bendayán about the painting at the end of our interview as he is on his way out of the door. He tells me to come to Bajo Belén the next day, where it will be performed. I leap onto the stage of the art nouveau pavillion along with the rest of the looting crowd. The woman hands me a piece of cake and stares into my eyes, holding her own piece in her hand. I thrust my cake into my mouth with the same lust as the men gorging themselves in the painting, sugar exploding on my tongue and icing sliding down my throat. She crushes hers into her hair and smears it across her face, stripping her dress from her breasts and plunging into the remains of the devoured feast. People drift away and she is left alone. Vultures gather on the tin rooves around the plaza. The evening sunlight cuts through the side of the pavilion, the shadow of an ornate arch carved into the juices glowing on her human flesh.¹²

Conclusion

This paper has drawn on a set of principles distilled from surrealist attempts to simulate the experience of reality characteristic of psychotic breakdown. Responding to recent calls for radical theoretical and methodological experimentation in the urban

Anthropocene, I have suggested that this unconventional approach is appropriate to the task at hand, given the actual breakdown of socially constituted reality, and the fact that 'the external world [increasingly] seems to be governed by the rules that govern mental breakdowns rather than [those] that govern sanity' (Ballard, 2012: 458). I conclude by reflecting on the principles of apocalyptic urban surrealism, in relation to the combined and uneven apocalypse of which Iquitos forms an urban cutting edge.

Reality is a stage set: The structuring of reality by a web of reassuring social fantasies is increasingly difficult for power to sustain in a global situation in which the Real of socio-ecological breakdown imposes itself with ever-intensifying force. But we ourselves are often eagerly complicit in the staging of such phantasmatic 'AnthropoScenes' in the form of resilient cities, geoengineering, Green New Deals and the like (Swyngedouw and Ernstson, 2018). The Front for the Defence of the New City of Belén displayed this attitude in their determined praise of the utopian modernity of the town, despite being surrounded by stark evidence of its farcical failure. Such circumstances lend themselves to the deployment of Dalí's paranoiac-critical method in the generation of 'a double image: in other words, the representation of an object that is also, without the slightest pictorial or anatomical modification, the representation of another entirely different object' (Dalí, 2015: 265). By presenting both dimensions of failed AnthropoScenes – utopia and catastrophe, Imaginary and Real – alongside each other without privileging either one, the double image captures the psychotic experience of the separation of the two, and their uncanny coexistence within the buckling symbolic structures of state-sanctioned reality. This was the approach taken in the first empirical section of this paper, in which the utopian fantasy of the New City of

Belén was depicted alongside its material breakdown. This method can be compared to that of the dialectical image in *The Arcades Project*, with which Benjamin sought to shock the dialectical process into motion by awakening the proletariat to a world trapped in a nightmare of endless repetition (Benjamin, 1999). Just as apocalyptic urban surrealism replaces the more romantic surrealism that inspired Benjamin, so the double image replaces the dialectical image at a time when the dialectic has definitively broken down, and ‘what was once a line, a direction, a teleology, a way out and forward, now becomes the formless field of antagonism’ (Calder Williams, 2011: 218).

Things do not make sense: Once the fantasies sustaining the stage-set of reality have been forsaken, we are cast adrift amidst the senselessness of things. This ‘ontological interregnum [constitutes] an unresolved space that awaits reincorporation into another symbolic regime’ (Fisher, 2018: 22). Like the psychotic subject, the state scrambles to put such a regime in place. Academia is complicit in this task. Perhaps the central role performed by both mainstream and critical academia in the increasingly tenuous reproduction of the existing social order under conditions of combined and uneven apocalypse is the projection of explanatory coherence onto situations in which no such coherence exists. The scholarly report on the New City of Belén financed by the Dutch and British state development agencies discussed above, for example, acknowledges many of the project’s deficiencies, but interprets these as useful lessons for adaptive governance and urban resilience in the future, noting ‘the possible limitations of the project’s urban design’, and suggesting ‘the need for a revision of the methodology used by the state in the generation of urban projects’ (Desmaison, 2018: 380). Against this stubborn commitment to making sense of things that do not make sense, apocalyptic

urban surrealism seeks ‘to finish wrecking – in thought – what we know to be wreckage, yet which refuses to call itself such’ (Calder Williams, 2011: 37). Instead of responding to the wildly irrational implementation of the law decreeing the relocation of the population of Bajo Belén by suggesting better practices for the resettlement of precarious populations, or by searching for ulterior motives that might explain the failure of such projects, this paper has accordingly aimed to remain within the space of the senseless itself, based on ‘simple notation, the observation of facts. What digs a great gulf between this and other [methods] is that such facts... are irrational, incoherent, unexplainable’ (Dalí, 1998: 108).

What was hidden comes to light: In her call to abandon the inherited frameworks of urban theory, Wakefield wonders: ‘Rather than a seemingly endless expanse of resilient cities and urban processes, might the Anthropocene’s environmental and human transformations produce something else?’ (Wakefield, 2022: 920). This paper has suggested that this is indeed the case, while insisting that is only by renouncing the paranoid projection of delusional signification typical of academic sense-making that such latent meanings and alternative realities can emerge. This premise is central to apocalyptic urban surrealism, given that apocalypse is not only about the endings of worlds, but also about the revelation of ‘that which was hidden’ (Calder Williams, 2011: 33). This was Ballard’s approach in his apocalyptic writings, which trace ‘the inevitable breakdown of technocratic structures in the face of all-encompassing catastrophe and... reveal a complex mesh of submerged visions and desires’ (Daley, 2014: 148–149). As Dalí insisted, such an approach cannot be purely passive but requires its own ‘delirium of interpretation’ (Dalí, 2015: 265), based on an embrace of ‘objective chance’, understood as ‘lightning flashes that reveal [what

was hidden] dazzlingly for a brief moment' (Breton, quoted in Finkelstein, 1975: 65). I had long been fascinated by the painting called *The Banquet*, which seemed to communicate a profound but as yet undefined message about the entanglement of destruction and desire at work in the Anthropocene in general and in Iquitos in particular. In a moment of objective chance, I was invited to the performance of the painting, and stepped through the canvas to become a participant in the scene. The embrace of this experience depicted in the last section of this paper contributed to an interpretive delirium plagued by a concatenation of anthropophagous allusions: the painting's own staging of the surrealist performance of *The Cannibal Feast*; the colonial evocation of the spectre of anthropophagy to justify genocidal violence and extractivist enslavement; the mashed-up modernity of Bajo Belén in which images of corporate models and corrupt politicians are cannibalised by the descendants of the survivors of these atrocities; the multiple forms of salvage accumulation through which the resources of the surrounding jungle are being ravenously exhausted by global capital and local populace alike; the surrealist street art of the city that seems to give expression to 'a hedonistic apocalypse... a twilight world in festive self-consumption, eating itself out, devouring its own entrails' (Buntinx, 2019: 25); and the gluttonous looting of the performance of *The Banquet* by the inhabitants of Bajo Belén, through which they subverted the power of state and capital portrayed in the painting, not by resisting cannibal capitalism, but by becoming cannibals themselves. Kay Zevallos, the Iquitos-born artist who staged the installation of *The Banquet*, had not anticipated that the looting would take place. In her improvised performance, the exploited woman depicted in the painting initially repudiated the pillage underway around her. But she ended up joining the

cannibal feast, forcing the flesh of the fruit into her mouth and squeezing the juice until it was pouring down her arms. In her words: 'It's a way of surviving. In the end, as much as you are part of the wealth, you also exploit it, and you also need it... Or maybe it was an act of rebellion on her part. She chews the fruit because she realizes that the whole world does the same'.¹³ And something we were not aware of hiding from ourselves now starts to move into the light. Not the Anthropocene but the *Anthropophacene*.


Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Notes

1. In this paragraph and throughout the paper, information drawn from cited works is augmented by that obtained through author interviews and personal observations.
2. 'Proyecto Nueva Ciudad de Belén'. Video produced by the Peruvian Ministry of Housing, Construction and Sanitation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7suKvhS8eg> (accessed 12 January 2022).
3. Members of the Frente de Defensa de la Nueva Ciudad de Belén, author interview, 19 October 2019, Nueva Ciudad de Belén, Peru.
4. This account of the failure of Sustainable Belén draws on author interviews with the mayor of Belén, the lead architect of the project, and local leaders in Bajo Belén, as well as personal observations.

5. This was described by an inhabitant of Bajo Belén (author interview, 27 October 2019, Iquitos, Peru).
6. Members of the Comisión No a la Reubicación (an organisation of inhabitants of Bajo Belén rejecting relocation to the New City of Belén), author interview, 22 December 2019, Iquitos.
7. Community leader in Bajo Belén #1, author interview, 28 October 2019, Iquitos.
8. This policy was confirmed by the member of the Housing Ministry responsible for the relocation of the population to the New City of Belén (author interview, 11 December 2019, Iquitos).
9. Community leader in Bajo Belén #2, author interview, 28 October 2019, Iquitos.
10. Member of the Comisión No a la Reubicación, author interview, 22 December 2019, Iquitos.
11. Christian Bendayán, author interview, 20 December 2019, Iquitos.
12. A seven-minute film based on the four-hour installation-performance referred to in this section can be seen on the website of the artist: <https://kayzevallos.com/work/la-glorieta/> (accessed 15 June 2022).
13. Kay Zevallos, author interview, 15 January 2022, Paris, France (via Zoom).

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