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Disintegration highway: Towards a psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown

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This paper develops a psychogeographical approach to our apocalyptic urban present, based on a journey down a highway on the outskirts of the city of Iquitos in the Peruvian Amazon. The intensity of psychogeographical method brings out elements of the senselessness and violence of planetary urbanization imperceptible at more abstract levels of analysis, while the subjective impact of this spatial unravelling demands a surrealist psychogeography less attuned to the oneiric and marvellous than the chaotic and absurd. These conceptual reflections are interspersed with depictions of my walk along the highway, as fragments of a psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown. Instead of seeking to explain the political ecology of the road, I aim to contribute to an aesthetic of accelerating collapse that can undermine the normalizing ideological function of our sense-making mechanisms.

Keywords: psychogeography, planetary urbanization, surrealism, creative writing, Peruvian Amazon

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Introduction

This is not the abstract space of the modern highway, in which rational individuals move smoothly through what JG Ballard once described as 'an elaborately signalled landscape' (Ballard, 2014a: 191). It is a deranged palimpsest of dysfunctional signs and implicit symbols clambering blindly across each other without coherence or direction. A multilayered universe of fragmented meaning that communicates an accelerating trajectory of agglomerated violence, infused with an unconscious and inscrutable utopia. The white sand that once sustained the annihilated jungle glitters in black holes gouged from the thin asphalt of the road. Diesel rainbows spiral in stagnant water trapped in decayed steel piping. Teeth gnash from a dental advertisement ground into the dirt. A plastic horse gallops through a pile of decomposing trash. Dense tangles of thin wire shoved to the roadside mark where tyres were burned on fleeting barricades. The road signs have been used before. Some placed upside-down, others sideways up, their original messages are still visible beneath the new ones. A warning of a sharp right-hand turn has been superimposed on an identical warning of a sharp turn to the left. Twisted vertically, a sign marking the entrance to an urban zone has been painted over with an arrow pointing in a different direction (Figure 1). These nonsensical images communicate their own truth. This is an urban zone, and it is not. Both directions are wrong.

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Figure 1. *Twisted entrance to urban zone.*

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These signs are scattered along the only highway out of Iquitos, a metropolis in the Peruvian Amazon and the largest city in the world with no road access (Wilson, 2023a; 2023b). The highway runs for a hundred kilometres to the town of Nauta on the Marañon River, from which it is a three-day journey by cargo ship to the nearest road on the national network. Completed in 2005 after decades of corrupt construction, it has been judged the most expensive road in the world in terms of cost per kilometre (Harvey & Knox, 2012; Knox, 2017). It is supposed to be a small part of an integrated system of highways, railways and waterways that should have hardwired Iquitos into the global economy long ago (Wilson, 2024). But the other components remain unbuilt, and the road stands alone as an isolated fragment of planetary urbanization. In the absence of its intended infrastructural context, it has mutated in the nineteen years of its existence into a catastrophic corridor of sand mines, chicken farms, land invasions, derelict water parks, ravaged nature reserves, psychedelic tourist lodges, and sprawling garbage landscapes. As such, the road embodies the surreal process of accelerating collapse that characterizes planetary urban breakdown.

In 2022, beginning in Iquitos, I walked the first 58 kilometres of the highway, as part of an attempted psychogeography of planetary urbanization. The concept of planetary urbanization has generated a vast literature in the last decade or so, as a powerful lens for perceiving the spatial dynamics of global capitalism in the Anthropocene, which explores the unsettling ways in which the urban process explodes the limits of the city (Angelo, 2017; Brenner, 2014; 2019; Castriota & Tonucci, 2018; Schmid &

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Streule, 2023). At the same time, there has been a resurgence of interest in psychogeography as an experimental approach to the micropolitics and aesthetics of urban space (Coverley, 2010; Mason *et al*., 2023; Sidaway, 2022). Like planetary urbanization, psychogeography is 'about crossing established boundaries, whether metaphorically or physically, locally or globally' (Richardson, 2015: 2), and is open to exploring the urban landscape as 'a site of entropy, where weirdness is breaking through the surface of normal life' (Bonnett, 2017: 480). As James Sidaway has noted, potential synergies thus exist between the growing interest in psychogeography and 'work examining the expansive boundaries of the urban in the emerging debates around so-called planetary urbanization' (Sidaway, 2022: 564). Yet despite their evident affinities, these approaches have yet to be brought together. By drawing on the fine-grained images and associations generated by psychogeography and the walking method with which it is associated (Mason *et al*. 2023; Richardson, 2015), a synthesis of this kind can respond to criticisms of the literature on planetary urbanization, which suggest that it presents an abstract and totalizing conceptual vision of a complex and nuanced global reality (Reddy, 2018).[1] In contrast to such abstractions, psychogeography is well placed to contribute to an emergent literature that seeks to capture planetary urbanization in the mundane and catastrophic process of its everyday becoming, as a variegated multiplicity of fragile, contingent, and constantly mutating material forms (Jamieson, 2024; Patrón, 2024).

This paper takes some preliminary steps towards a synthesis of this kind, inspired by my walk along the highway out of Iquitos.[2] Rather than applying established psychogeographical techniques to the spatial phenomena of planetary urbanization, I begin from the assumption that the unprecedented material reconfigurations implied by the latter demand an extensive reconceptualization of the former. While the origins of psychogeography lie in the surrealist movement of the 1920s, the concept was coined in 1955 by Guy Debord of the Situationist International. Debord incorporated psychogeography into his broader project of subverting the alienation of the capitalist city, defining the practice as 'the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (Debord, 1955: 1). Much of the recent literature on psychogeography, however, adopts a more freewheeling literary approach, which is less concerned with the critique of capitalist urbanization than with the celebration of enchantment and mysticism as an antidote to the overbearing abstractions and rationalizations of modernity (Bonnett, 2017). This shift has both been celebrated for breathing new life into the practice (Coverley, 2010), and accused of replacing the radicalism of the situationists with a depoliticized lyrical reverie (Bennett, 2011; Hanson, 2007).

Rather than aligning itself with either of these two dominant psychogeographical traditions, this paper reformulates psychogeography in a different direction. It does so by reconnecting the practice with its surrealist origins, and drawing out its overlooked psychoanalytic dimension, in an approach that combines the spirit of literary experimentation that characterizes recent psychogeography with fidelity to the critical political project of its situationist formulation. The intense focus of psychogeographical method brings out elements of the senselessness and violence of planetary urbanization imperceptible at more abstract levels of analysis, while the subjective impact of this spatial unravelling demands a surrealist psychogeography less attuned to the oneiric and marvellous than the chaotic and absurd. The development of this approach over the course of the paper leads from the romantic early surrealism that inspired

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the situationists, towards later iterations of the surrealist project grounded in absurdist literature and the paranoiac-critical method of Salvador Dalí, resulting in a reconfiguration of psychogeography in terms more appropriate to the circumstances of our apocalyptic planetary urban present (Pohl, 2021; Swyngedouw, 2022; Wilson, 2023c). My aim in this regard is not to define the sole way in which psychogeography should be conceived and performed—which would be anathema to its inherent unruliness—but only to offer one further possible modality in which psychogeography can be thought and done. These conceptual reflections are interspersed with passages documenting my journey down the highway, as fragments of a psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown, and scattered with photographs corresponding to splinters of these fragmented passages.[3] Instead of seeking to comprehensively explain the political ecology of the road, I aim to contribute to an aesthetic of accelerating collapse that can undermine the normalizing ideological function of our sense-making mechanisms and blast holes through the symbolic structures of reality.

Enchantment and absurdity

The surrealist movement in which psychogeography has its roots emerged in the 1920s as an artistic and literary critique of rationalist understandings of reality and bourgeois illusions of coherence, which had stubbornly persisted despite the senseless violence of World War One (Ades & Richardson, 2015; Schoneboom, 2022). In the first Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, Andre Breton argued that Freud's discovery of the unconscious implied the abolition of the strict division between reality and dreams (Breton, 1969). This founding principle of surrealism led to a fascination amongst the early surrealists with dreamlike elements of waking life, including magic and enchantment (Bonnett, 2017). The first surrealist experiment in what later came to be known as psychogeography was *Paris Peasant* by Breton's close collaborator Louis Aragon. Published in 1926, the text documents Aragon's wanderings through the streets of Paris, and his reflections on the mythical elements of an emergent consumer society increasingly saturated with commodity fetishism. Aragon's concern was to demonstrate the extent to which the supposedly disenchanted epoch of capitalist modernity was in fact infused with its own magic and mysticism, grounded in the concrete irrationalities of the commodity form (Aragon, 1994). Together with Breton's surrealist manifesto, *Paris Peasant* inspired *The Arcades Project*, another pioneering text of psychogeography (Coverley, 2010), 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).

This iteration of the psychogeographical project was appropriate to its time. But by the time Henri Lefebvre wrote the essay that coined the concept of planetary urbanization in 1989, the utopian potentialities of 'the urban' exemplified by the Paris of Breton and Aragon were 'fading concurrently with the last illusions of modernity', as 'the more the city is extended, the more its social relations deteriorate' (Lefebvre, 2014: 566).[4] This deterioration has intensified over the course of subsequent decades, during which our planetary urban condition has increasingly assumed the form of 'a long term, slow-motion catastrophe… We live, oxymoronically, in a state of perpetual, but never resolved, convulsion and contradiction' (Shaviro, 2015: 7, 9). This remains a profoundly surreal realm, but one increasingly reminiscent of the science fiction novels of Philip K Dick, 'in which space and time start to rot and disintegrate, where actions are interrupted and follow incomprehensible courses' (Danowski & Viveiros de Castro, 2017: 42). Planetary urbanization would thus seem to call for a

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form of psychogeography concerned less with the oneiric and marvellous than with the chaotic and absurd, in the tradition of absurdist literature in which 'everything that happens seems to be beyond rational motivation, happening at random or through the demented caprice of an unaccountable idiot fate' (Esslin, 1960: 3).

This absurdity is well illustrated by the history of the Iquitos-Nauta Highway. Construction of the highway began in the 1970s, and by the mid-1990s the project was being lampooned in the local press as 'a pilgrimage plagued with accidents, obstacles, penalties, shocks and frustrations, travelling through indecipherable bureaucratic labyrinths. To begin again, to eternally begin again… A true myth of Sisyphus' (*Kanatari*, 1994).[5] Although the road had been intended to open up a new agrarian frontier, the surrounding soils proved to be highly acidic, and the land allocations and agrarian credits issued to colonizers in the 1980s had been distributed through clientelist networks with scant concern for commercial viability or environmental sustainability. Zero-interest loans offered for land settlement and development led to speculative deforestation of extremely fragile and highly biodiverse ecosystems, followed by rapid abandonment of the infertile land. Much of this land was then given over to the extraction of sand for construction projects in Iquitos, and for the extension of the road itself, with the vast majority of the loans never being repaid (Maki *et al.*, 2001; IIAP, 2002). Meanwhile the construction of the highway provided a seemingly limitless smorgasbord of opportunities for the embezzlement of public funds, through which politicians with close connections to the construction industry and organized crime created a complex network of phantom companies; falsified payments for machine-hours on hired plant; systematically overvalued construction materials; and rented elements of their own property to themselves via third parties (*Kanatari*, 2004). In 2000, an assessment of the highway by a government research institute found that its ongoing construction was catalyzing 'a rapid and disorganized process of the occupation of geographical space, which is generating grave environmental problems due to the erroneous localization of diverse productive and urban activities' (IIAP, 2002: 9). In recent years, these activities have included a proliferation of ayahuasca lodges where spiritual tourists from Europe and the USA consume hallucinogenic plant medicines in a commodified form of enchantment, in which Western hippie investors stage neocolonial fantasies of Amazonian natives living in harmony with a venerated nature, amid the brutally despoiled landscapes of the road to Nauta (Freedman, 2014; Gearin, 2022).

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The edges of the city fall away like shards of shrapnel at the limits of a detonating bomb. Tenuous utopian realities flicker on the fringes of this shattering periphery. Beside a mine hacked from forests formed over millennia on the white sands of the region stands the town of El Dorado, named after the myth that first drove Spanish conquistadors to ransack the Amazon in search of a kingdom of gold (Wilson, 2021). The state's promise of abundant lands financed by agrarian credits led thousands of landless peasants and unemployed oil workers to create such settlements in the 1980s along the track of the promised road (Maki *et al.*, 2001). As this dream faded into thin soils and corrupt administration, others formed from its remains. Twisting through the sparse shacks that stretch back from the road, a rutted street leads past a barn covered in an image of a congregation reaching for the sky: 'The Salvation: Church of God of Peru'. Western ayahuasca tourists used to pass through here on their way to the Phoenix Ayahuasca Lodge, for which the initial settlers had sold a chunk of land to an

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Australian entrepreneur. The phantasmatic power of the Amazon Rainforest in the symbolic universe of the global wellness industry had coated the poverty and dereliction of El Dorado in a dust of gold, and the psychedelic travellers reached the Phoenix Lodge with their own dream of salvation unscathed. The Phoenix Lodge staged this dream for them in the form of rush rooved huts set amongst ceiba trees above a bucolic stream. In 2015, an unstable English green tech financier in the grip of an ayahuasca-induced psychosis was murdered here by a messianic Canadian seeking a spiritual cure for a persistent skin disease (*Guardian*, 2016; *Dazed*, 2016). The lodge has long since been demolished; Australian entrepreneur departed; ceiba trees hacked down. Glimmers of bulldozers ramming new tracks through secondary jungle on my return to the road. Collapsed corrugated fencing exposes ribcage of half-constructed building. Fuse box torn from wall consumed by green flames of crumbling graffiti. Dissociated words leap from amalgamated packaging. Broken broom. Busted lock. Tangled bikini. Inscrutable gesture of a single twisted glove. Obliterated anaconda unfurls across the highway like lightning crushed into solid black space (Figure 2).

Drifting on the edge

The situationist iteration of psychogeography sought to disrupt the normalizing commercial and bureaucratic structures of capitalist urban space. A key strategy in this regard was the *dérive*—a way of drifting through the city in random or irrational directions, which aimed to subvert its rigid spatial form (Arnold, 2019; Smith, 2010). But how are we to drift through the spaces of planetary urbanization? Aside from the odd detour down a dirt track, the route of my walk along the road to Nauta was imposed

Figure 2. *Obliterated anaconda unfurls like crushed lightning.*

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by the straight line of the road itself, and it was precisely by adhering to this predetermined trajectory that the surreality of planetary urban breakdown was revealed. In such contexts, the escape from ingrained meanings that the *dérive* was designed to facilitate can be achieved through the deployment of surrealist ways of seeing, which seek to remain on the metaphorical edge between dreaming and awakening, where the dominant symbolic order has yet to structure our perceptions. This method is summarized by Mladen Dolar in his analysis of the absurdist writings of Franz Kafka:

> 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 (Dolar, 2017: 11).

For the surrealists, this drift along the threshold of meaning was enacted through the practice of automatic writing, which sought to mobilize the creative potentials of free association deployed in Freudian psychanalytic method (Jenny & Trezise, 1989).[6] In common with the recent trend towards creative writing methods in human geography (DeLyser & Hawkins, 2014), surrealist writing seeks to 'cultivate perceptions and inclinations that are not provoked through didactic or expository prose' (Cameron, 2012: 586). The surrealist technique of montage, for example, has been drawn upon in exploring the materially and psychologically fragmented spaces of the Anthropocene (Hawkins, 2015; Hill, 2013), which 'cannot be woven into a coherent narrative [but] can only be contingently assembled out of a jumble of disconnected things, occurrences and sensations' (DeSilvey & Edensor, 2012: 10).

A surrealist psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown therefore seeks to reproduce the spatial form of its experience in the linguistic form in which it is expressed. Not in the positivist sense of descriptive accuracy of a rational external world, but with the aim of collapsing this division between subject and object, and dismantling 'academic rituals of explanation… with their alchemical promise of yielding system from chaos' (Taussig, 1987: xiv). This approach is thus both a research method and a form of writing, which strives in both respects to distance itself from the imposition of socially sanctioned meaning: 'Like walkers who are lost, [the aim is to] linger in the fullness of attention, in which things are as yet unformed' (Ingold, 2023: 33). The slow pace, meditative rhythm, and embodied perspective inherent to the walking method associated with psychogeography are crucial in this regard, and are uniquely well suited to drawing out the subjective relation to landscape (Mason *et al*. 2023). This process is captured by a depiction of a trip out of town in Philip K Dick's novel *Time Out of Joint*, in which the main character's psychological deterioration is indistinguishable from the dissolution of the urban landscape along the road itself (Dick, 2003). Trapped in a previously familiar metropolitan reality of abruptly collapsing signifiers, the protagonist sets out on a desperate journey down a highway reminiscent of the road out of Iquitos, along which the suburban strip malls, rundown mechanics, and other increasingly fragmented material symbols of modernity constitute 'staging posts on the way towards a desert of the Real, a void beyond any constituted world' (Fisher, 2018: 22).

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Rusted rebar breaks through jade green paint decaying into rotted concrete monoliths of half-constructed buildings. Mashed up nappies, tin cans, shoes, sinks, television screens, jeans, foam mattresses, a sky-blue umbrella decorated with radiant palm trees.

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Flaming cheetah clambers from plastic packaging into gaping neck of decapitated doll (Figure 3). Weeds sprout and flourish through this inorganic confusion, forming delirious reconfigurations of the shattered relationship between humanity and nature. Mud encrusted images of gold necklaces, sapphire broaches and pearl earrings ricochet across multiple dumped copies of an inflight magazine. The mouth of a dead dog rots into the bare snarl inscribed by the aggression of the impact. Vines soaked in pesticide slide down steel fencing. Fractals of petroleum and effluent bloom in a clogged culvert. The road runs along a high ridge above eroded canopies of decimated jungle. Plastic bottles melted into charred bare ground. Trash sedimented by fire into chunks of mangled strata. Black wires spiral from piles of incinerated plastic like the spooling vapour trails of plunging aircraft. Steel sprouts like smashed teeth from raw brick of broken wall.

Breakdown as method

Psychogeography has been defined by Iain Sinclair as ‘a way of psychoanalysing the psychosis of… place’ (quoted in Coverley, 2010: 122). Yet despite the role of psychoanalysis in the surrealist origins of psychogeography, the relationship between the two has been largely overlooked (Phelan & Philo, 2021). Rather than resurrecting the Freudian theory of the unconscious that informed its initial surrealist iteration, however, a psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown is more consistent with the later psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan, which Mark Fisher has described as a ‘weird psychoanalysis… untethered from any naturalisation or sense of homeliness’

Figure 3. *Flaming cheetah clambers into neck of decapitated doll.*

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(Fisher, 2018: 7). Lacanian theory has been prominent in the recently emergent literature on 'psychoanalytic geographies', which approaches the world as 'always lacking and marked by antagonism; as an unstable, shifting, and necessarily incomplete register, which constantly struggles with immanent contradictions and never really gets to a point of serenity, harmony and balance' (Pohl, 2023: 308). Consistent with the psychogeographical interpenetration of subjective and material space, the Lacanian approach does not locate the unconscious 'deep down in people's minds, [but] in the (social, political, economic, environmental, etc.) spaces "outside" the subject' (Pohl, 2023: 208).

This is precisely the starting point for Salvador Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, which replaces the fusion of dreams and reality that was the focus of early surrealism with the decomposition of social reality as such, in the generation of hallucinatory images intended to 'take on the forms and colours of demoralisation and confusion… The lethal activity of these new images may contribute to the collapse of reality' (Dalí, 2015: 267). For Dalí, as for Lacan, social reality is an elaborately structured symbolic system, and the process of its construction and reproduction in the buttressing of the dominant social order is akin to that of a paranoid delusion. Instead of participating in this collective process of social sense-making, Dalí sought to emulate the symbolic disorientation characteristic of psychotic breakdown (Finkelstein, 1975; Polsani, 2001). In doing so, he aimed to transform surrealism from a relatively passive exploration of unconscious phenomena into an active and subversive method capable of discrediting the symbolic system it opposed by 'depicting the images of concrete irrationality with a realism of fastidious precision' (Polsani, 2001: 161).[7]

Understood in this sense, a psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown would document the simultaneous disintegration of urban reality and psychological space, and deconstruct the illusory division between the two. This was JG Ballard's project in his experimental novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (Ballard, 2014b), which has been described as a key work of surrealist psychogeography, 'explicitly drawing upon surrealist imagery and techniques… [in] a detailed psychogeographical map of the modern urban hinterland' (Coverley, 2010: 116). Published in 1970, *The Atrocity Exhibition* 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. Inspired by Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, the novel explores the question: 'What if the everyday environment was itself a huge mental breakdown?' (Ballard, 2008: 236).

The architect Rem Koolhaas has likewise drawn on paranoiac-critical method—explicitly in his study of Manhattan, *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1994), and more implicitly in a later essay, 'Junkspace', which can be interpreted as a psychogeographical journey through the disintegrating spaces of the postmodern urban landscape. Evoking the avalanche of incoherent images experienced on a typical trip through the anonymous consumption centres of global capitalism, Koolhaas notes 'the absurdity of these forced *dérives*, [in which] we meekly submit to grotesque journeys past perfume, asylum-seekers, building site, underwear, oysters, pornography, cell phone—incredible adventures for the brain, the eye, the nose, the tongue, the womb, the testicles…' (Koolhaas, 2002: 181). In opposition to the scholarly instinct to 'provide insight, squeeze meaning, read intention', he demands that we 'stop making sense out of the utterly senseless' (Koolhaas, 2002: 188). Breaking with the conventional structure of the academic paper, 'Junkspace' replicates the spatial form that it depicts, through a nonstop barrage of discontinuous text, including the following fragments:

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> Junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course… There is no form, only proliferation… Instead of development, it offers entropy… When did time stop moving forward, begin to spool in every direction, like a tape spinning out of control? … Change has been divorced from the idea of improvement. There is no progress; like a crab on LSD, culture staggers endlessly sideways… Letters drop out of signs, air conditioning units start dripping, cracks appear as if from otherwise unregistered earthquakes; sections rot, are no longer viable, but remain joined to the flesh of the main body via gangrenous passages… (Koolhaas, 2002).

Commenting on 'Junkspace', Fredric Jameson refers us once again to the work of Philip K Dick: 'These alarming Alzheimer-like deteriorations are realisations of the nightmare moments in Philip K Dick, when reality begins to sag like a drug hallucination and to undergo vertiginous transmutations' (Jameson, 2003: 74). If reality itself is beginning to behave in this way, then a surrealist method that embraces this disintegration of meaning is paradoxically more realistic than scientific rituals of academic sense-making, which function as an ideological state apparatus in their projection of an illusory coherence onto a reality that has ceased to make sense. This seemingly outrageous proposition is consistent with claims in the critical literature on the Anthropocene that 'the repercussions of humanity's geophysical agency can only be tracked through a "derangement"… of the scales of cognition, remembrance, and representation' (Crownshaw, 2018: 501). The protagonist of *Time Out of Joint* reaches a similar conclusion: 'We can put everything we know together, he realised, 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' (Dick, 2003: 87–8).

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The air is thick with mangled symbols. A florescent lion painted on the mudguard of a makeshift bus flashes its claws at an exhaust pipe protruding through the fabric like the snout of a bestial machine (Figure 4). The head of a soaring eagle painted on another mudguard has been torn off and replaced with a heavy rusted axle. Image of river winding through unspoilt jungle shredded by torn tin wall of bus to which it has been affixed. Technicolour hawk dissolves into spectral black and white behind freshly plastered posters of a leering politician. Christ points to his own exposed heart beneath leaping flames and lolling tongues. Faded leopard launches like savage phantom into tangled traffic. On the wall of a roadside bar, a raging shark decants cold beer into its black gut. Flights of boarding stairs end in empty space beside stacks of hacked up airplane wings and overgrown cross sections of hollow fuselage. Dismantled motorcycle taxis, pickups stripped of parts, husks of foliage-choked trucks, flooded dirt tracks hacked into tired jungle, gutted wooden huts sliding into roadside gorges.

Riptide of the blast

A sign bearing the logo of the Ministry of the Environment marks the boundary of the Allpahuayo Mishana National Reserve, 'established by Supreme Decree' in 2004, which runs along the Western edge of the highway. Bags of trash slump and burst at its base. The reserve is abutted by a broiler chicken farm. Brutalist air extraction tubes protrude from hunched concrete barns. This intensely produced second nature directly confronts its phantasmatic supplement in the form of the half-hearted performance of pristine rainforest staged by the reserve with which the chicken farm collides. Its

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Figure 4. *Florescent lion flashes claws at snout of bestial machine.*

'objective of creation', the sign proudly announces, was to 'conserve the biological diversity and habitat of the… forests that grow on the white sands characteristic of the Napo Ecoregion'. Like much of the rest of the highway, the opposite side of the road is dominated by the blinding deserts of spent illegal sand mines (Maki *et al.*, 2001). The fragile division between the fantasy of nature and the Real of its destruction is marked by the cracked black line of the highway itself. The sand mines are interspersed with abandoned recreation parks that failed to cash in on their proximity to the reserve. Here the precarious division between fantasy and the Real disintegrates into dissociated landscapes of socioecological breakdown. Empty sun loungers survey the rainforest from across a drained swimming pool filled with the cracked blue plaster remnants of its own collapsing walls. A fibreglass waterslide in the shape of a cheerful pelican disgorges its absent clientele into the brown algae covered waters of an effluent-infested pool.

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In his recent paper on psychogeography, James Sidaway notes that 'planetary urbanization is not simply a process or epoch that human agency has yielded, but a subjectivity of becoming more deeply conscious of the production of nature' (Sidaway, 2022: 565). As we have seen, it is precisely this complex relationship between material and psychological space that is explored by psychogeographical method. In recent years, a 'new nature writing' has emerged in and beyond academia, which deploys psychogeographical techniques to research and write about spaces beyond the city, no longer as domains of pristine wilderness, but as realms in which

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nature itself is being transformed by the urban process (Daniels & Lorimer, 2012; Hubbard & Wilkinson, 2019). Despite unflinchingly documenting this transformation, much of this literature expresses nostalgia for the lost harmony of an imagined natural world. From a Lacanian perspective, however, this framing of nature is a phantasmatic construct to be dismantled. As Lucas Pohl has noted, ‘After losing nature as a horizon or a limit, we are left with nothing but the Real of nature, a rotten nature without any sense of stable equilibrium or organic wholeness’ (Pohl, 2021: 204). Through the process of planetary urbanization, a new aesthetic emerges, which Neil Brenner has referred to in terms of ‘the apocalyptic sublime’ (Brenner, 2014: 26). Brenner suggests that ‘there is a surreal, if deeply unsettling, beauty in shockingly degraded landscapes’ (Brenner, 2014: 26), and Ballard once similarly claimed that ‘there is a certain beauty in looking at a lake that has a bright metallic scum floating on top of it’ (Ballard, 2012: 64). This seemingly anti-ecological sentiment is consistent with Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, according to which the ‘humble, living, joyous, comforting clarities’ with which we like to reassure ourselves must be replaced with a more extreme aesthetic marked by a determination ‘to see an entire world of rotting things’, and to develop an ‘art that is sublime, deliquescent, bitter, putrefied’ (Dalí, 1998: 8).

A psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown must accordingly search for beauty and possibility in the inescapable reality of this world of rotting things, instead of staging fantasies of reconstituted harmony and order. But how should this task be approached? According to Brenner, planetary urbanization is defined by a dialectic of ‘implosion-explosion’, in which ‘processes of concentration and dispersion… are superimposed upon one another across places, territories and scales, creating a kaleidoscopic churning of socio-spatial arrangements’ (Brenner, 2014: 17). The aesthetic dimensions of each moment of this chaotic process have been addressed by recent cultural accounts of our apocalyptic present. The moment of *explosion* is conveyed by what Steven Shaviro calls ‘aesthetic accelerationism’, a trend he discerns in elements of contemporary science fiction, which begins from the accelerationist premise—shared by the literature on planetary urbanization— that there is no longer any outside to global capitalism. But whereas political accelerationism argues that the only way out of the system therefore lies in driving its explosive dynamics to their limit and miraculously escaping into an emancipated future, aesthetic accelerationism recognizes that capitalism thrives cannibalistically on these very same contradictions in the absurdity of its endless expansion, and that a politics based on their utopian transcendence is thus as illusory as the romantic reconstruction of an imagined past. The acknowledgement of this deadlock allows aesthetic accelerationism to ‘explore the abyss of accelerationist ambivalence, without prematurely pretending to resolve it’, and to engage with ‘a world devastated by relentless accumulation’, not by condemning it, but by submitting to ‘the snarl of the engine… and the onrushing emptiness of the road ahead’ (Shaviro, 2015: 21, 24).

Meanwhile, the moment of *implosion* finds artistic expression in what Jack Halberstam (2021) calls ‘the aesthetics of collapse’, which ‘isn't simply [about] one thing coming down. It's many things coming down together. A system coming down’. Halberstam focuses on the work of the gay Black photographer Alvin Baltrop, who documented cruising culture in the derelict West Pier region of New York in 1970s. Looking beyond the homoerotic scenes that are the explicit focus of the photographs, Halberstam draws our attention to the ‘dark, dramatic images of the collapsing landscape of the post-industrial waterfront’ in the background, arguing that these images invite us to ‘look at decay and collapse… as a kind of aesthetic created through the implosion of the architecture itself’ (Halberstam, 2021).

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Each of these contrasting aesthetics of acceleration and collapse captures one moment of the dialectic of implosion-explosion, by holding it in abstraction from the other. In doing so, however, they both miss the weirder and more essential relationship between the two. The implosion is exploding, the acceleration is collapsing, and vice-versa. This dialectic has perhaps most effectively been conveyed by the Bolivian author Maximiliano Barrientos, who can be read as a postcolonial Ballard. In his recent novel, *Thousands of Eyes*, Barrientos explicitly draws inspiration from the surrealist psychogeography of *The Atrocity Exhibition*, depicting a protagonist for whom 'the dividing line had broken, and space was nothing other than the continuation of his mind' (Barrientos, 2022: 42). The novel explores the hallucinatory aesthetics of planetary urbanization in its simultaneously implosive and explosive dimensions, through the story of a subaltern speed-cult seeking utopian transcendence through new fusions of humanity and nature achieved by high-speed collisions between pimped-up automobiles and immense mutated trees, set amidst the booming decay of the vast operational landscapes of the Bolivian lowlands. This apocalyptic panorama is bereft of illusory solutions: 'Instead of answers there is only the roar of engines, thousands of furious engines' (Barrientos, 2022: 241). And yet it generates its own weird beauty:

> It was its own universe. It contained all accidents: vehicles obliterated by plunging over cliffs and colliding with other vehicles and against the walls of abandoned buildings. All these shards of glass and steel were beautiful. They shone like stars (Barrientos, 2022: 75).

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The highway is seared with the violence of speed and fire. Megaton dump trucks morph the weak asphalt into an abstract landscape of cracked whorls and gouged canyons. Black ash of burned brush flung by the wind across a white sand wasteland strewn with shallow escarpments carved by excavator claws. Iridescent green weeds burst through webs of dead vines clambering a burned slope of red sand. Childrens' shoes eggshells remote controls banana skins float on the sea of black slurry they will become. Smashed prams contorted rebar satellite dishes traffic cones blue-haired dolls burned-out microwaves empty strips of paracetamol sheets of crushed metal flung together in collided piles on the roadside. Trucks stripped of their parts rot like scavenged skeletons. Chunks of immense vehicles come to rest in random places like the aftermath of an explosion. A dump-truck cabin has been torn from its base and flung into its own bed. A blue tractor chassis has been hurled into a fenced off wasteland. A sign depicting armed soldiers guarding private property with orders to shoot on sight has been torn from its barbed-wire fencing and crushed into meaningless configurations by a forced incursion. A bikini-clad woman glances over her shoulder from spent plastic packaging, inviting the desirous consumer to follow her deep into a pile of rotting trash. The flesh of an iguana is ground into the road. Rat's eye burst from head by force of the collision. Mangled paws and splintered teeth of an unidentifiable animal have been crushed by multiple trucks into a new mutant lifeform. Fine lines embossed with brick dust and pink blossom engraved by pure speed into the surface of the highway. Anonymous concrete monoliths crouch in the undergrowth like the inscrutable ruins of an obliterated civilization. Abstractions of blasted paint spilled from accelerating trucks. The yellow line that marked the centre of the road has eroded into a dancing filament of light. Dead snake curled into a rut gouged from the speed-exploded asphalt (Figure 5). Reality unravels in the riptide of the blast.

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Figure 5. *Dead snake curled into speed-exploded asphalt.*

Conclusion

The psychogeography of planetary urban breakdown developed in this paper began by returning to the surrealist origins of psychogeographical method, before reconstructing the project in a form appropriate to the socio-spatial circumstances of our apocalyptic present. In contrast to the early surrealists' fascination with the marvellous and enchanted, which is shared by the dominant form of contemporary psychogeography, the method sketched in this paper draws attention to the chaotic and absurd aspects of the planetary urban process. Whereas the situationists sought to disrupt the rigid spatial order of the modernist city by charting subversive paths through its material structures, this alternative approach charts the disintegration of urban space itself by remaining adrift on the edge of meaning, and by refusing to participate in the academic projection of greater order onto reality than it in fact possesses. Drawing on Dalí's paranoiac-critical method, it simulates mental breakdown as a means of capturing its material equivalent, consistent with the psychogeographical exploration of the fusion of social and psychological space. Rejecting nostalgic lamentations that seek to recreate a phantasmatic natural past, and accelerationist dreams of a radiant future in which capitalism disappears into its own dialectical overcoming, this approach develops an aesthetic attentiveness to the dynamic deadlock of implosion-explosion that characterizes the material process of planetary urban breakdown.

This methodology has been informed by my walk along the Iquitos-Nauta highway, and the paper is scattered with passages that draw on this experience. I have not sought to explain the urban political ecology of the road in any detail, or to describe it in a way that corresponds in positivistic terms to its material reality. The political value

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of the images that such an approach produces lies less in the empirical accuracy of their representation of a putatively objective external world, than in their subversion of the ideological function performed by such rationalizing representations, and their creation of what Ballard would call an 'extreme metaphor' for the simultaneously physical and psychological condition of planetary urban breakdown (Ballard, 2012: 182). Instead of endlessly repeating what everyone already knows concerning the depth and urgency of the catastrophe in which we are engulfed (Pohl & Swyngedouw, 2023), the surrealist approach adopted in this paper suggests that we must somehow generate a rupture in the dominant symbolic order through which this knowledge is relentlessly normalized. The resulting images of chaotic absurdity and senseless violence are intended to bring us closer to the Real of our predicament. But they are also infused with strange utopian flashes that flicker like flames licking through the wreckage: the quotidian dreams encoded in the names of improvised towns and the images painted on makeshift buses; the shadows of rebellion inscribed in the remains of barricades and traces of land invasions; the delirious subversion of consumer capitalism unconsciously generated by the demented complexity of roadside garbage vistas. These images make no argument, offer no hope, add up to nothing. In Dalí's words: 'The ideal images of surrealism are at the service of an imminent crisis of consciousness, at the service of the Revolution' (Dalí, 2015: 267).

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Endnotes

1 Such criticisms, it should be noted, underestimate the analytical value of the vision of totality offered by this literature (Goonewardena, 2018), and overlook multiple studies of planetary urbanization in practice (see for example Arboleda, 2016; Kanai, 2014; Schmid & Topalovic, 2023; Wilson & Bayón, 2015).

2 I walked the highway over a period of five days, taking extensive fieldnotes and photographs throughout. My account of this journey shares certain similarities with ethnographic accounts of roads in the Amazon (Campbell, 2012; Harvey & Knox, 2012; Uribe, 2019), and other parts of the world (Stewart, 2014; Twidle, 2017). These articles, however, are not framed in terms of psychogeography or planetary urbanization, and the approach taken in this paper is written more in the spirit of the road trip depicted in Hunter S Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which could be interpreted as a surrealist psychogeography (Thompson, 2005). Like the surrealists, Thompson regarded the sense-making operations of literary convention as a 'signature of complicity in a desperate plot to maintain the social superstructure in spite of the crumbling foundation', and infused his prose with 'the "truer reality" he senses: chaos, violence, disintegration, proliferation of inhuman proportions, absurdity' (Bruce-Novoa, 1979: 42). While his 'gonzo' approach has inspired radical ethnographic and sociological methods (Sefcovic, 1995; Wozniak, 2014; Wilson, 2023d), its psychogeographical dimensions and potentials have yet to be explored. Such an exploration unfortunately lies outside the scope of this paper.

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3 Photography is itself a significant surrealist medium, which forces 'visual confrontations with undocumented histories and latent physical and psychological realities within the landscapes of modernity' (Baxter, 2008: 508). According to Salvador Dalí, 'In addition to the implacable rigour to which photographic data subject or mind, they are … the most agile process for perceiving the most delicate osmoses that are established between reality and surreality… Nothing has come to prove surrealism more correct than photography' (Dalí, 1998: 71).

4 Lefebvre opens this brief essay with a quote about the utopian potentials of Paris taken from a poem by the proto-surrealist Appollinaire, and he maintained a complex relationship with surrealism throughout his life. He was associated with Breton and Aragon in the early years of the surrealist movement, but subsequently distanced himself from the surrealists due to what he perceived as their failure to formulate a materialist politics (Gardiner, 1995). His *Critique of Everyday Life Volume 1* includes a lengthy anti-surrealist diatribe along these lines, which he partially retracted in a later foreword to the book, in which he acknowledged the significance of surrealism's 'scorn for the prosaic bourgeois world, its radical rebellion', and affirmed the surrealist 'hypothesis that only the excessive image can come to grips with the profundity of the real world' (Lefebvre, 2008: 261).

5 This myth, of course, was the focus of Albert Camus' classic treatise on absurdity (Camus, 2013).

6 The edge between sleeping and awakening evoked by the surrealists is not purely metaphorical, and Breton suggested that automatic writing is best practised in the early morning while we remain in this space between dreams and waking life (Breton, 1969). I deployed this method in my writings on the road to Nauta. I began each morning by reviewing a series of photographs I had taken of the road, waiting for an idea to form on their basis, and then writing a paragraph or two of free association exploring the relation between the images and the idea.

7 This theory was set out in an article published in 1929 in the surrealist journal *Minotaure*, titled 'The Rotting Donkey' (Dalí, 2015), which had an immense impact on the surrealist movement, including Lacan himself, who was involved in the movement at the time (Finkelstein, 1975; Jenny & Trezise, 1989). Lacan's own early work on paranoia was published in the same journal, and was profoundly influenced by Dalí's paranoiac-critical method (Esman, 2011). Surrealism thus played an overlooked role in the origins of psychoanalytic geography.

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