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VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS

HANDBOOK OF THE ANTHROPOCENE
IN LATIN AMERICA VI



 **CALAS**

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Gerardo Cham, Juan Arturo Camacho Becerra, Olaf Kaltmeier, Elissa Rashkin
(eds.)

Visual Representations – Handbook of the Anthropocene in Latin America VI

The Anthropocene as Multiple Crisis: Perspectives from Latin America

Editorial

The aim of the six-volume Handbook **The Anthropocene as Multiple Crisis: Perspectives from Latin America** is, first, to think about the Anthropocene from a particular region of the Global South. Thus, this Handbook offers a platform to discuss the multiple "anthropogenic" socio-environmental crises from a specifically Latin American point of view, without losing sight of their global and planetary dimensions. The second objective is to systematize, from the perspective of Latin American social sciences and humanities, the multifaceted environmental crises that reached and crossed the planetary boundaries of the earth-systems and led to the new geological time of the Anthropocene. In doing so, we generate an empirical basis for the genealogy of the Anthropocene in an unprecedented global region with key regional and historical differentiations.

The series is edited by Olaf Kaltmeier, Eleonora Rohland, Gerardo Cham and Susana Herrera Lima.

Gerardo Cham is a full-time professor in the Department of Literary Studies at the University of Guadalajara. He holds a PhD in Discourse Analysis from Universidad Autónoma de Madrid. From 2017 to 2023 he has been Co-Director of the Maria Sibylla Merian Center for Advanced Latin American Studies (CALAS). Since 2002 he belongs to the National System of Researchers of Secihti in Mexico. He teaches discourse analysis, semiotics and literary theory.

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Gerardo Cham, Juan Arturo Camacho Becerra, Olaf Kaltmeier, Elissa Rashkin
(eds.)

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Denilson Baniwa, *Oh, I see, real civilized!* (2015). Digital Engraving. Source: <https://www.behance.net/gallery/57605855/Oh-I-see-real-civilized/modules/339146863#>.

There is always an ominous feeling of doom in discussions about the Anthropocene. After all, the geological era defined by the imprint humans have already left upon the earth is rife with somber news: anthropogenic climate change, large-scale deforestation, acidification of the oceans and mass extinctions of more-than-human beings are just some of the ills *Homo sapiens* has showered upon the planet. Is the Anthropocene a sign that the apocalypse is near? Does it embody the material conditions for the onset of conquest, war, famine, and death, the grim four apocalyptic horsemen?

In *Oh, I see, real civilized!* (2015), artist Denilson Baniwa (1984-) comments upon the Western view of the apocalypse and its ties to the also Western conception of the Anthropocene. A member of the Baniwa people who live in the Northwestern region of the Brazilian Amazon, Baniwa subtly refers to the history and cultural heritage of Indigenous communities in his work derived from a scene from the famous *Mad Max* (1979) apocalyptic series of movies. In this artwork, he modifies a still from *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (George Miller, 1981), in which the well-known policeman-turned-avenger “Mad” Max (Mel Gibson), walks together with his faithful dog along a seemingly endless road across an arid, deserted landscape. In Baniwa’s version, however, the character is fitted with an Indigenous feathered headpiece and carries a bow and arrows. What is Baniwa hinting at with his superimposition of traditional Indigenous warrior artifacts onto the quintessential Western protagonist of *Mad Max*? And what does his artwork tell us about Amazonian Indigenous views on the Anthropocene apocalypse?

It is worth remembering that the *Mad Max* movie series, which started with a homonymous film in 1979, is set in a post-apocalyptic, dry, and mostly barren world in which organized social life has ceased to exist and pockets of surviving humans are left to fend for themselves and fight against predatory gangs. While, in the first movie, the causes of civilizational breakdown are left unspecified, *Mad Max 2* (1981) explicitly refers to fuel wars; indeed, fuel shortages are the main driver of the plot. Subsequent films again revolve around energy (*Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome*, 1985) and water shortages (*Mad Max: Fury Road*, 2015) that – viewers are prompted to imagine – have led to societal collapse and the fierce desire to conquer the last hidden “place of abundance” in order to consume it (*Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga*, 2024).

A glaring blind spot of all *Mad Max* movies is the contrast between the obvious glorification of a fossil-fuel dependent life and the environmental catastrophe that serves as their background. The films revel in long-drawn, repetitive truck, car and motorbike chases, exhaust pipes fuming abundantly, and engines revving loudly in an orgiastic celebration of fossil fuel culture. In fact, the thin plot of the movies appears to be just an excuse for these long sequences of pursuit and the display of speed fetishism. It does not occur to characters in the films – nor to the films’ director and crew, apparently – that there is a direct correlation between the energy shortages and environmental predicament in which they find themselves and their incessant car chases. Environmental catastrophe is left unthematized, as something that just happened for no easily identifiable reason. The series exists in a blissful state of denial as to the environmental consequences of fossil fuel reliance, even as it paradoxically draws an implicit link between car and motorbike idolization and the apocalypse. The films take place in a scenario where the worst features of the Anthropocene have been exacerbated, yet choose to ignore anthropogenic environmental change. What could be more emblematic of the current Western *Weltanschauung*?

The scathingly ironic title of Baniwa's image based on the *Mad Max* still, *Oh, I see, real civilized*, draws attention to the very meaning of civilization from the point of view of those Indigenous communities who have been deemed "barbaric" throughout the history of Western colonialism. Are car and motorbike chases, together with the horrific violence celebrated in the movies, the epitome of Western culture, what it will all boil down to in the end times, once the Apocalypse has robbed the world of the last trappings of politics and politeness? Is an environmentally deadly fossil-fueled lifestyle the best the West has to offer, and are these the customs Indigenous people should adopt in order to become "civilized"? "Who are the real barbarians?," Baniwa seems to be asking through his artwork.

The toxic masculinity depicted in the movies, in which rape and the exploitation of women are commonplace, is another feature of the films that Baniwa's artwork comments upon. The fixation on speed, cars, trucks, and motorbikes appeals to an imaginary traditionally associated with white, heterosexual men and with the patriarchal, Western worldview that has shaped the Anthropocene. The cult of the heroic white man Max who fights against the bad guys in turn evokes the frontier cowboy of old, a harbinger of civilization in places where savagery had hitherto ruled. Max is a post-apocalyptic, "loner" conquistador who helps different groups of settlers sow the seeds for new civilizations among the wreckage of barbarism. How does this all-too-familiar familiar picture change in Baniwa's work? For one, the artist's reference to an Indigenous context evokes the countless examples of sexual violence perpetrated against Indigenous women in the Amazon and throughout the world, not by people who stand for the collapse of civilization, as is the case in the movies, but by those who were purportedly bringing progress to Indigenous communities. Ultimately, Baniwa questions the prerogative of Max as a last representative of the civilized world and wonders how the same character would be interpreted were he an Indigenous person.

Baniwa's work rewrites an icon of post-apocalyptic, Western narratives through a metaphysical short-circuit that invites viewers to perceive the notions of "end" and of "world" from an Indigenous perspective. He does so through a superimposition of paradoxical elements onto the original film still. The outcome preserves the original referent, while adding to it an estrangement effect that keeps the original context and, at the same time, creates a dialogue with a different set of Indigenous referents.

Max is a hero that represents the dusk of a world – the Western world – as a result of its own internal collapse. In the films, the actions of the human survivors set in motion a regression to a state of ecological, social, and moral disintegration, where everything continues to exist in an indefinite temporality after the Fall. People live in a Cartesian world, the geography of which is crisscrossed by rectilinear roads that seem to lead nowhere. This very linearity is the foundation for the Apocalyptic eschatology that propels characters to compulsively search for their lost humanity in a perverse game of shadows.

In contrast to its filmic counterpart, the character created by Baniwa embodies a radical critique of Western dystopian narratives and the ideologies that bolster them. These narratives are questioned by Amazonian Indigenous peoples such as the Baniwa, who conceive of the world as a continuous process of creations and destructions that are part of its own creative dynamics. In the dystopian imaginary of the films, the life of the human survivors is reduced to a rapid extractive cycle of consumption and death, controlled by tyrannical regimes. Conversely, from an Amazonian Indigenous point of view, there is no one world, but rather plural worlds defined by a system of relations. Every aspect of material and spiritual human life has a counterpart in more-than-human existence, which means that the material forms and physical transformations of the visible world inform humans about the invisible reality of more than humans. This knowledge fosters the emergence of a stable network of relations: more-than-human and human communities are organized according to the same principles and the interaction between humans and more than humans is the same as the connections between different human communities. In the *Mad Max* films, there are barely any more-than-human beings. Max's dog in *Mad Max 2* (1981), which appears in Baniwa's work, is killed in the end of the movie, a telling sign of the destruction of all more-than-human life. For Amazonian Indigenous peoples, in contrast, the world is a cosmic society of "peoples" and "communities," human and more-than-human, that exist in an intensely relational environment.

Amazonian Indigenous ontologies conceive of the world in a way that is antithetical to the future imagined in the *Mad Max* saga. In the latter, the desire for speed turns machines into protagonists that preside over a toxic present and perpetuate the self-destructive practices that lead to humanity's downfall. The films present a post-apocalyptic scenario that re-enacts its pre-apocalyptic conditions. In spite of the hardships of this world about to end, the movies seem to actively reject alternatives to the social models that led to disaster. The Indigenous Max imagined by Baniwa diverges from this model in that he is not just a survivor but, rather a "specialist in ends of the world" (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2019: 195). This idea was expressed with piercing irony by Indigenous intellectual Ailton Krenak in his 2020 book *Ideias para adiar o fim do mundo* (Ideas to Postpone the End of the World). In this volume, Krenak states that Indigenous peoples have been resisting Western efforts to annihilate them for 500 years, thus what he worries about is the survival of white people (31). Krenak playfully reminds his readers that South American Indigenous peoples have experienced the end of their worlds multiple times and still managed to survive, so it is the fate of the Western world(view) that hangs in the balance in the Anthropocene.

Baniwa's *Oh, I see, real civilized!* hints at possible ways to overcome the forms of inhabiting the planet that have led to the worst features of the Anthropocene. By subverting and Indigenousizing *Mad Max*, Baniwa calls for a rejection of colonial and

neo-colonial practices, often tied to extractivism, and for imagining other worlds. Drawing on Amazonian Indigenous experience, he advocates for a re-thinking of what “end” and “world” mean for both humans and more than humans, and for an understanding of the dusk of Civilization depicted in the *Mad Max* films as an affirmation of other possibilities.

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Appendix

Biographical Notes

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Rossana Barragán, PhD in History from the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences (EHESS) in Paris, has been a senior researcher at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam (2011–2022), where she is now an Associate. She is currently a researcher and professor at the postgraduate center of CIDES-UMSA in La Paz. Among her books are *Espacio urbano y dinámica étnica en La Paz*, published in 2024; *Indios, mujeres y ciudadanos en el siglo XIX*; *Mundos del trabajo en transformación: entre lo local y lo global* in 2014; *The Bolivia Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, with Sinclair Thomson and other authors; and *Trabajos y trabajadores en América Latina*. In 2024, she published *Natural Resources and Political Struggles* with Carmen Soliz. She has just published, in 2025, *El Imperio del trabajo. Historia social de la producción de plata de Potosí para el mundo (s.XVI-XVIII)*.

Lukas Becker is a PhD student at the University of Geneva. His thesis focuses on the social and environmental history of oil cities in Latin America in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a particular focus on the labor and social movements in Barrancabermeja, Colombia. His work is part of the research project “AnthropoSouth: Latin American Oil Revolutions in the Development Century”, financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation. He has published in journals including *Duke Environmental Humanities* and is co-author of a volume written with the An-

thropoSOUTH research team (*Power to the Periphery: Connected Histories of Oil in Latin America*).

Lisa Blackmore is a researcher, curator and educator, working with art and water cultures in Latin America. Since 2018, she has been directing *entre-ríos*, a platform whose collaborative methodologies (re)connect diverse communities to bodies of water through curatorial, editorial and pedagogical projects. She is a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Environmental Science, Policy, and Management at UC Berkeley and Senior Lecturer in Art History and Interdisciplinary Studies at the University of Essex, UK. In 2023, she was a British Academy Mid-Career Fellow for her project *Imagining the Hydrocommons: Art, Water and Infrastructure in Latin America*. Her recent publications include “Water” in *Handbook to Latin American Environmental Aesthetics* (2023) and the co-edited volume *Hydrocommons Cultures: Art, Pedagogy and Care Practices in the Americas* (2024).

Alejandra Bottinelli Wolleter is associate professor in the Department of Literature at the Faculty of Philosophy and Humanities, University of Chile. She is a co-researcher on the research projects: “Disaster Writing and the Pink Tide in Latin America: Venezuela, Argentina, and Bolivia (1999–2019)” (Fondecyt, Chile); and “Poetics and Politics of the End in Contemporary Latin America” (Edital CNPq/MCTI, Brazil). Her latest books include: *Nación y cultura en el Brasil finisecular. La Troya de barro de la república: Os Sertões, de Euclides da Cunha* (2022) and *Retóricas de la violencia y ficciones del cuerpo: ensayos sobre literatura y arte latinoamericanos* (co-editor, 2022). She has been a visiting researcher at the Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Postapocalyptic Studies at the University of Heidelberg (2021–2022). Her recent work deals with violence and representation, imaginaries of crisis, and poetics of the end.

Juan Arturo Camacho Becerra earned his PhD in Art History from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) (2006). Professor of Art History at the University of Guadalajara since 2000, he participated in the Research Seminar of the National Museum of Art (2002, 2012). Research areas: History of photography and nineteenth and twentieth-century painting in Mexico and Jalisco. Key publications include *Papeles del artista* (2010) and *Patria o vida. Indicios de Ilustración y síntomas de insurgencia* (2010). He coordinated the three-volume publication *La catedral de Guadalajara, su historia y significados* (2012) and *La Enseñanza y ejercicio de la música en México* (CIESAS, CONACyT, 2013). Most recent work: *Catálogo de pintura del Museo Regional de Guadalajara* (coordinator). He has been a visiting professor teaching Mexican art at the University of Cologne (Germany), University of Calgary (Canada), and Middlebury College (USA).

Elisa Cárdenas Ayala is a research professor in the Department of Social Movements Studies at the University of Guadalajara who earned her PhD in History from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University. A specialist in nineteenth and twentieth-century Mexican political history and the history of secularization in Hispanic America, she is a full member of the Mexican Academy of History. Among her notable publications are *Roma: El descubrimiento de América* (2018) and *El derrumbe. Jalisco microcosmos de la revolución mexicana* (2010), and she co-edited, with Francisco A. Ortega, *El lenguaje de la secularización en América Latina. Contribuciones para un léxico* (2023). She has also coordinated community memory recovery projects, including *Temacapulín: una historia desde dentro* (2018) and *Mezcala ¡se querían llevar la isla!* (2010).

Kevin Coleman is associate professor of History at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *A Camera in the Garden of Eden* (2016) and co-editor of *Capitalism and the Camera* (2021), and *Coups d'état in Cold War Latin America* (2025). His research has been funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and has been awarded prizes from the American Historical Association and the Canadian Historical Association. He is the writer and director of *Stolen Photo*, a documentary film coproduced by Señal Colombia and supported by the National Film Board of Canada; the film tells the story of the 1928 massacre of banana workers in Colombia through a single photograph. He is currently writing a book on the life and legacy of Óscar Romero.

Maria Letícia Corrêa is a professor of Brazilian History at the Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. She holds a PhD in History from the Universidade Federal Fluminense. She was a visiting professor at the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of the Twentieth Century, CEIS20, University of Coimbra (2018–2019). Her research interests include intellectuals and intellectual history; engineers and the history of science; water, mines, and nature. She has published numerous articles and chapters, including, most recently: “Natureza, modernidade e impressões do Brasil na obra de Marie Robinson Wright,” in Rogelio de la Mora et al., *Las naturalezas del pasado: miradas cruzadas desde la Historia Intelectual, siglos XIX–XXI* (2024) and “Geografía, política e literatura de viagem na obra de Marie Robinson Wright: A identidade pan-americana como um ‘jogo de espelhos’” (*Revista Brasileira de História*, 2025), both co-authored with Mônica Martins.

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