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Locating Human Agency in the Anthropocene. Environmental Universalism, Natural Catastrophes, and the Possibilities of Critique

Institutional critique, we are told, was an artistic trend arising between the sixties and the eighties of the former century. It intended to make evident to artistic audiences that the apparently neutral space of a museum or art gallery, usually presented as a white, anonymous surface, had something else behind that image. That something was, one can argue, everything: from questions of artistic privilege and validation, to the economic system behind the art world. The artists of the so called first generation of institutional critique believed that by revealing the economic and political conditions operating in art spaces, they could have a sense of awareness of the strategies taking place within the art world. Some familiar episodes are attached to that movement: think, for example, on Marcel Broodthaers' *Musée d´Art Moderne. Département des Aigles;* or on Hans Haacke´s banned exhibition in MOMA and his famous *A Poll* installation (banned by the same museum, by the way), in which he launched a tricky political voting involving Nelson Rockefeller. Add Michael Asher´s experiments with the gallery space, or Daniel Buren´s public interventions in France and later in Los Angeles, and we will complete the most recognizable framework of institutional critique.

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But institutional critique was (is) something else[1]. Think now on Richard Long´s, Robert Smithson´s or Richard Serra´s interest in fleeing from the traditional exhibition space in order to make interventions in a bigger scenario, namely the earth. We are no more in the realm of institutional critique, one may think; this is land art´s most recognizable canon. That´s essentially true. There are, however, many issues in common, many things approaching both initiatives: some of them have to do with the awareness of the medium where the artwork is developed, a concern with artistic and institutional agency or a sense of unease in relation to external, apparently innocuous forces conditioning the artistic process[2]. Robert Smithson saw in the museum´s white cube the worst kind of structure used for the confinement and neutralization of creativity. For him, that space works as a particularly harmful and corrosive kind of asylum or laboratory, where artists are relegated to the task of guinea pigs driven by the needs of curators, collectors and the like. Within that context, there is but one alternative:

> Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized, it is ready to be consumed by society. All is reduced to visual fodder and transportable merchandise. Innovations are allowed only if they support this kind of confinement.[3]

His alternative was a rowdy nature, one "that interacts with the physical contradictions inherent in natural forces as they are – nature

[1] See Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson, eds., *Institutional Critique. An Anthology of Artists´ Writings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009); Gerald Raunig and Gene Ray, eds., *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique* (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009).

[2] Those shared points were also evident in the case of those artists, such as Haacke, who worked closer to the prerogatives of conceptual art. For a "green" analysis of Haacke´s contribution to institutional critique, see Luke Skrebowski, "After Hans Haacke. Tue Greenfort and Eco-Institutional Critique," *Third Text* 27*,* no. 1 (2013): 115-130.

[3] Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," in *Institutional Critique. An Anthology of Artists´ Writings,* ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 140.

as both sunny and stormy."[4] Within that landscape, the artist – and, by extension, any creating subject – would not only be more exposed to the imaginative forces of the unexpected, more aware of the spatial conditions surrounding the creative act. Since "nature is never finished", she would also be situated at the perfect spot to dialogue with it, to intervene in it, ultimately to project onto it her creative agency.

Now, what does all that have to do with environmental agency, natural catastrophes and universalism, this article´s main concern? In 2000, the Nobel Prize Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer announced that we have entered a new phase in the life of our planet: the Anthropocene[5]. The term aimed to designate a particular moment in which humankind has become a geological force. In the Anthropocene, our capacity to impact on the earth has grown to such a level, that we have come to alter the entire landscape in which human action takes place. As opposed to the Holocene, when human actions were influenced by geologic constraints, the Anthropocene introduces a new situation; from now on, "global climate may depart significantly from natural behavior for many millennia to come."[6] Whereas major debates are still in play about how to date the Anthropocene[7] or whether we should identify it with a new stage (it seems to be that it has to do with stratigraphy: either we can track that transformation in the stratigraphical layers of our planet, so the scientist say, or we will not be able to speak about a new geological period[8]), some kind of consensus exists on the urgency of posing some questions. And it turns out that many of those questions were somehow already present in the panorama outlined above.

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4 Smithson, "Cultural Confinement", 141.

5 Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, "The Anthropocene," *Global Change Newsletter* 41 (2000), 17-18. http://www.igbp.net/download/18.316f18321323470177580001401/NL41.pdf. The term would be further developed by Crutzen two years later in a new article published in *Nature.* See Paul J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," *Nature* 415, no. 3 (2002): 23.

6 Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind," 23.

7 See, for example, Bruce H. Wilkinson, "Humans as geologic agents: A deep-time perspective," *Geology* 33 (2005): 161–164.

8 See Jan Zalasiewicz et al., "Are we living now in the Anthropocene?" *GSAToday* 18 (2008): 4-8.

Suddenly, all the dreams, dangers and worries, of Smithson, Long, and many others became materialized. The Anthropocene placed human action within a new dimension, posing unavoidable questions concerning security, agency, responsibility, and risk management. Far from being a neutral terrain, the "equality" and "proximity" it calls for cannot be understood as an absolute, non-historical, non-geographical reality. For Haacke and his generation, a decisive turn would come by discovering and exposing the limiting factors operating in institutional spaces. However, when trying to accomplish that task, a major contradiction appeared through the capacity of the art institution to swallow critique and to "naturalize" it, to downplay it to tolerable levels and to use it for other means. Doesn´t something similar happen when we defer the agency and the responsibility on environmental issues? When we consider our predicament as part of a vague "global" agency? Something similar happens with responsibility. Of course, there is enough evidence of the impact of our footprint in the planet, and I do not intend to deny it. Nor do I want to compare the anxieties of institutional critique about the awareness of the artistic medium with the present environmental situation, or to enter the scientific debates on the Anthropocene. If I have dug out some of the major worries of institutional critique, it is because I do think that some of these issues can help us understand the human consequences and the geopolitical administration taking place within the Anthropocene.

However, the space in which we operate overturns by far that of the museum or the art institution. The global scale in which each human action remains for now on entangled is particularly daring. As Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, to think of humankind as a geological, and not merely biological, agent is to "scale up our imagination of the human."[9] The theorization of the Anthropocene implies many things, but among those there is a sense of vicinity, of proximity, that forces us to rethink our position within the world in a new way, one attentive to the continuities and disarrangements with former spatial imperial imaginations[10]. Put

[9] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History. Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009): 206.

[10] See Simon Dalby, *Environmental Security* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

in another words; no matter whether can we identify a new period in stratigraphic terms, the Anthropocene points to a new spatial distribution, a "more global, more universal" geopolitics. However, it is clear that important inequalities still persists: some territories get the benefit of globalization and global exchanges, and some others have to cope with pollution, overpopulation and wars on resources, which are strongly linked to imperial power[11]. It is possible to outline a critique of the Anthropocene and, by extension, of other "globalizing scientific models" of imaging and understanding the history of our planet and particularly our most recent contributions to that history?[12] If so, what are the best terms to frame it? Is that universal scale a condition sine qua non for any understanding of our present? Who is the universal "we" in the Anthropocene? Whose agencies are in play? Whither?

This article´s main concern is with the relation between environment, universalism and critique[13]. My central hypothesis is that the imagining of a global landscape of shared responsibilities somehow occludes the existence of dissimilarities and inequalities operating at different levels and composing an alternative cartography. Too often our environmental agency has been linked with economic and cultural globalization; however, I will argue that none of those phenomena can be understood as uniform, a-ideological realities. On the contrary, there is a direct correlation between the image we have of our position within the world and our relation with nature and the environment, and

[11] A good example of that distribution in the classic work of Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London and New York: Verso, 2006).

[12] Indeed, some interesting answers to those questions have already been offered. A critical overview, close to our objectives in this article, can be found in Simon Dalby, "Anthropocene Geopolitics: Globalisation, Empire, Environment and Critique," *Geography Compass,* no.1 (2007): 103-118. Although I will echo the remarks posed by Dalby and Chakrabarty, the ideological and iconological element that constitutes my main concern here distances this article from both reflections on the Anthropocene.

[13] The interest in the relation between environmental issues and universal history has experienced an exponential growth in the last three decades. A summary of that development can be found in Sverker Sörlin, "The Contemporaneity of Environmental history: Negotiating Scholarship, Useful History, and the New Human Condition," *Journal of Contemporary History* 46*,* no. 3 (2011): 610-630.

the geopolitical distributions lying under the uniform appearance of our global reality[14]. As the geography of globalization overlaps with the geography of imperial dominance and postcolonial resistance, something similar happens with the "geography" of the Anthropocene. There is, in other words, nothing "more political", nothing more attached to complex geopolitical distributions of security, governability and freedom, that our supposedly homogeneous geological agency. Our predicament concerning our environmental present is not just outdated or incomplete; rather, "that being outdated or incomplete" functions in many cases as a key element to generate and *locate* responsibilities and to silence inequalities. A quick look at the visual economy of natural catastrophes will reveal it[15]. Even more, the fact of conceiving ourselves as a "species", as a geological agent, cannot be taken for granted; it has to be seen as a complex asseveration that is ideologically charged. I will deal mostly, then, with the images of the Anthropocene, but that implies both "material" and mental images. Far from being a passive representation of a given state of things, the concepts and images we use to define our reality play an active role, hiding or making visible certain events, naturalizing or making cultural certain phenomena. By discussing keystone contributions on environmental issues such as Ulrick Beck´s *Risk Society* and Dipesh Chakrabarty´s analysis of the Anthropocene, I intend to disclose what´s behind the still landscape of universalism that presides many theoretical and scientific frameworks. Whereas our global present may show that "we live closer to each other" than ever, there still exist persistent-yet-no-always-evident political and social distributions that should not be dismissed under any universal plea. It will be necessary to think what´s exactly "the human in the Anthropocene"[16] "The "zero level of ideology", Žižek argues, "consists

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[14] Dalby, "Anthropocene Geopolitics", 107-108.

[15] I use here catastrophe and not disaster, following the differentiation of Ben Wisner, Piers Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People´s Vulnerability and Disasters* (London: Routledge, 2004). See also François Walter, *Catastrophes. Une histoire Culturelle XVIe-XXIe siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2008); Alessa Johns, ed., *Dreadful Visitations. Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

[16] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcolonial studies and the challenge of climate change," *New Literary History* 43, no.1 (2012): 1-18.

in (mis)perceiving a discursive formation as an extra-discursive fact."[17] Considering the Anthropocene under that perspective may be a good exercise. Nicholas Mirzoeff defends that the Anthropocene can be visualized[18]. Throughout this text I argue that this process of imagining the Anthropocene, its "diaspora" to any sort of disciplines[19] – even to common language –, conceals some contradictions and some silences that should be taken seriously. To reveal and underscore some of those will be my main objective throughout this text.

In order to do that my itinerary is as follows. First, I will analyze how environmental issues have been increasingly charged with a universal, global dimension, and how the fact of its superior scaling has important implications for our understanding of human agency. Secondly, I will approach the debates on the Anthropocene, seeking to explore how that universalism has been framed within a more precise, postcolonial perspective. Then I will try to confront that reality with the images of natural catastrophes and the imagination of the Anthropocene, seizing the potential of critique for unsettling the stability of the universalist aspirations of some readings of our environmental presents and futures.

Universal Risk

Ulrick Beck´s *Risk Society* arises as one of the most influential theorization of the last decades on universal risk and governability. Beck´s hypothesis is that the absence of any possible refuge from the atomic era on has changed drastically our being in the world. According to him, atomic contamination is *the end of the others,* of any possibility of defining a political or cultural outside with respect to catastrophes. That process also marks the beginning of a new modernity dominated by the globalization of risk. The difference between the last years of

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[17] Slavoj Žižek, "The Spectre of Ideology," in *Mapping Ideology,* ed. Slavoj Žižek (New York: Verso, 1994), 10.

[18] Nicholas Mirzoeff, "Visualizing the Anthropocene," *Public Culture* 26, no.2 (2014): 213-232.

[19] The notion of the "diaspora" of a concept into the domain of other disciplines was used by Roger Brubaker referring to the diaspora concept itself. See Roger Brubaker, "The Diaspora Diaspora," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no.1 (2005): 1-19.

the twentieth century and former periods of the history of mankind is estimated in the impossibility to find external causes to natural and human threads. Everything is "internal", even nature; risks are fabricated and managed by society, overtaking even the production of wealth. For Beck, the West had lived under the possibility of distancing, based on the existence of an Other who gets the side effects of modernization. From the moment when this curtain falls, we would be facing the agambensian bare life, a moment in which the state of exception and disasters will acquire the condition of everyday reality. That reality, according to Beck, implies a constant and bidirectional exchange between the natural and the political:

> In smaller or larger increments – a smog alarm, a toxic spill, etc. – what thus emerges in risk society is the *political potential of catastrophes.* Averting and managing these can include a *reorganization of power and authority.* Risk society is a *catastrophic* society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm.[20]

That globalized normality will inaugurate a new period connected to the consequences of modernity:

> The risks and hazards of today thus differ in an essential way from the superficially similar ones in the Middle Ages through the global nature of their threat (people, animals and plants) and through their *modern* causes. They are risks *of modernization.* They are a *wholesale product* of industrialization, and are systematically intensified as it becomes global.[21]

By considering the expansion of risk as a systemic reaction, Beck inserts the particular within a new model of globalization that is impossible not to join. The distribution of wealth has been replaced by the distribution of risk. In fact, risk would be part of our postmodern ethos. In Beck´s analysis it constitutes something not material, to some extent unreal. For him, "the promise of security grows with the risks

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[20] Ulrick Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity* (London: Sage, 1992), 24.
[21] *Ibid.,* 21.

and destruction and must be reaffirmed over and over again to an alert and critical public through cosmetic or real interventions in the techno-economic development."[22] However, Beck´s idea of a global distribution of risk arises as problematic. The idea of a global risk society implies an uneven transposition from advanced capitalism to risk, in which the existence of material conflicts constitutes a negative condition in the transformation of one model onto another. Are the societies "without hunger", without "basic" conflicts, the ones that can decree their entrance in the risk society? Beck establishes a radical difference between a Third World still subjected to "basic issues" such as survival and nourishment, and a First World in which those problems would no longer be part of our present[23]. By projecting risk onto our common future as species and decreeing its universality, Becks cancels any possibility of agency ("Action belongs to yesterday anyway"[24], he points out), condemning mankind to a hardly desirable future. Moreover, if risk is everywhere and no ivory towers are possible, then what to do? What Beck calls latent secondary side effects are the results of externalizing the costs of progress in other latitudes, within and outside privileged countries. Beck´s "new modernity" is therefore not so new, and in any case not alien to geopolitical considerations. To pay attention to the presence of imperial powers in those has been the main objective of the "social" interpretations of the Anthropocene.

The Anthropocene (and the) Postcolonial

The Anthropocene became a "catchy" term quite soon, migrating to any sort of disciplines, from anthropology to political sciences, economy, cultural studies and even art and literature. In that sense, we can talk about a "diaspora" of the Anthropocene, similar to the one that the own term "diaspora" experienced by the early 2000s. There are, in that sense, many "Anthropocenes", not only one. Dipesh Chakrabarty´s is so far the most interested in complicating the universal dimension

[22] *Ibid*., 20.
[23] *Ibid*., 27-30.
[24] *Ibid*., 37.

of the "geological" turn of mankind from a historical perspective. Furthermore, he aimed to challenge the uniformity of universalism by making us aware of the existence of power dynamics coming from imperial and postcolonial struggles. There is, he adds, an inherent tension between the universal subject the Anthropocene propels us to become, and the divisions and inequalities of our past and present. Being those issues central to my interests here, I will focus on Chakrabarty´s vision of the Anthropocene throughout this section.

Chakrabarty points at the temporal and political entanglements the concept of Anthropocene implies. More than with defining a geological era, Chakrabarty is concerned with analyzing "how the current crisis can precipitate a sense of the present that disconnects the future from the past by putting such a future beyond the grasp of historical sensibility"[25] Our temporality, Chakrabarty goes, is far from being the stable tense of uniformed, global capitalism, rather it evinces the persistence of tensions and violence inherited from our colonial and imperial pasts. Though not always evident, those emerge frequently in our present, dismantling the certainties of our temporal and geopolitical arrangements. In that sense, Chakrabarty´s approach to the Anthropocene reveals how the notion crisscrosses our historical narratives and our present and future agendas linked to colonialism and imperialism:

> what scientists have said about climate change challenges not only the ideas about the human that usually sustain the discipline of history but also the analytic strategies that postcolonial and postimperial historians have deployed in the last two decades in response to the postwar scenario of decolonization and globalization.[26]

Chakrabarty´s understanding of climate change and crisis, secondly, opens those debates up to the possibility of a historical, social critique. More than that, his reading has the virtue of "particularizing" the newness and the success of the Anthropocene. "Chakrabarty´s Anthropocene" is part of a political impasse, one that has to do with the

[25] Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History", 197.
[26] *Ibid*., 198.

distribution of presence and silence concerning environmental issues. In other words, when he says that "global warming [...] did not become a public concern until the 2000s"[27], in order to try later on to explain the consequences and the significance of this emergence, he is forcing us to think the "global" and the "universal" of climate change against the backdrop of a landscape that is far from being homogeneous. On the contrary, he shows how "the urgency" of environmental issues is directly linked to political and economic bonds not differing much from the postcolonial geopolitical landscape we live in. It may be that our "horizons of expectation", our capacity to imagine situations and states of crisis and change, our ability to foresee potential futures with or without us, are rooted in the temporal overlapping that shape of our present deeper than we thought. It may be, finally, that those processes "are not so global" unless we define that "global" from a more problematic perspective, one, we might think, emerging at the light of criticism.

Now, how can we deal with all that? Chakrabarty points at a second issue that is equally fundamental: it is not that the "Anthropocene" is shaped by the entanglements and the disconnections of our postcolonial present; the Anthropocene (ought to) shape in turn our understanding of that present. In other words, our historical awareness will be incomplete without the Anthropocene, without the environmental. We have come to a moment, he argues, in which the only way of coming to terms with the political distributions and emergences goes through conceiving the environmental as the central battlefield where the forces of global capitalism and the pervasiveness of imperial power aim to impose their will. And it turns out that our current tools are not sharp enough to come to terms with this process properly:

> I realized that all my readings in theories of globalization, Marxist analysis of capital, subaltern studies, and postcolonial criticism over the last twenty-five years, while enormously useful in studying globalization, had not really prepared me for making sense of this planetary conjuncture within which humanity finds itself today.[28]

[27] *Ibid*., 199.
[28] *Ibid*.

Shall we, then, give up the task of accomplishing such an analysis? Shouldn´t we stand apart of scientific debates, attempting to focus on the alternatives opened up by our representations and expectations of natural phenomena?

I believe that something significant changes after accepting Chakrabarty´s assumption. Two consequences of that change are particularly salient for us: first, our critical tools as social scientists and historians might not be the best ones, but that excuse becomes insignificant when we consider the urgency of using them. The "geological turn" of the human species can be only imagined through a collective agency, through the foundation of a collective subject, a new "we". Chakrabarty´s words reveal how the scientific consensus around the Anthropocene is a man-made, political distribution[29]. Consequently, the examination of the prerogatives of that geological "we" can be only framed from social sciences. In Chakrabarty´s image of the Anthropocene we are dealing, thus, with a social subject, but since that subject´s scope of action involves the entire earth, its footprint will be measurable only as a totality uniting the natural and the human. To put it simpler: for Chakrabarty (this is his first thesis) we are witnessing a collapse of the old separation between human and natural sciences. A direct consequence of that implies a complete reframing of our understanding of freedom, emancipation and agency, as well as the terrain where those were, and are, to be framed. *"*In no discussion of freedom in the period since the Enlightenment*",* points Chakrabarty, *"*was there ever any awareness of the geological agency that human beings were acquiring at the same time as and through processes closely linked to their acquisition of freedom.*"*[30] If we accept the geological agency of humankind and the collapse of the divide between human and natural sciences we will be, Chakrabarty sharply indicates, directly linking "the geological agency of humans" and "the pursuit of freedom", being the former the price we pay for the latter[31]. That vision, which calls for a new, retrospective, critical reading of our past in common, demands also the

[29] *Ibid*., 201.
[30] *Ibid*., 208.
[31] *Ibid*., 210.

presence of critique synchronized with our present and futures. "In the era of the Anthropocene, we need the Enlightenment", as he puts it. The importance of critique propels Chakrabarty´s analysis to his third thesis, namely the entanglement of human history and the history of capitalism (and, by extension, colonialism and imperialism) as the only possible way of explaining our present. The registers of the development of modernity can no longer stand for a proper justification of our position in the world. That position, Chakrabarty argues following Crutzen, puts us in a tricky position concerning the definition of its collective subject. Is that subject a "species" or an amount of hierarchically organized groups? Who is the subject of human geological history?

It is at this point that Chakrabarty´s "postcolonial Anthropocene" appears clearer. The uneven development of human agency, he points out, can be framed as the "unfolding of capitalism in the West and the imperial or quasi-imperial domination by the West of the rest of the world."[32] Instead of Beck´s planetary globalization of risk, here we face a totally different subject. For the main character of Chakrabarty´s Anthropocene is a conflictive totality, one dependent on the institutions of modernity and development. More than that, it is a pressing totality, one built under the plea of urgency: from now on, we are no longer bounded to the development of any cognitive map, of any political institution, be it named capitalism, socialism or otherwise. (One may remember here Fredric Jameson highly suggestive question on whether the end of capitalism has become less unlikely than the end of human life in earth by cause of a meteorite). Chakrabarty again:

> The problematic of globalization allows us to read climate change only as a crisis of capitalist management. While there is no denying that climate change has profoundly to do with the history of capital, a critique that is only a critique of capital is not sufficient for addressing questions relating to human history once the crisis of climate change has been acknowledged and the Anthropocene has begun to loom on the horizon of our present. The geologic now of the Anthropocene has become entangled with the now of human history.[33]

[32] *Ibid*., 216.
[33] *Ibid*., 212.

Two levels compete here: the first one is that of the species, the new universal dimension we have reached. The other has to do with our traditional geopolitical, imperial/postcolonial mappings. Which one shall we choose? How to conciliate both of them? For Chakrabarty, there is an emotional response to that question. After the Anthropocene, there won´t be but universal futures; the commitment towards those has to adopt the collective figure of the species, even if now it still has a vague, non-defined form. It is by naming this possibility a “negative universal history” that Chakrabarty ends his article on the Anthropocene, and it will be from there that I aim to complete and challenge it.

The Anthropocene and the Critique of Natural Catastrophes

Chakrabarty´s approach to the Anthropocene from a historical, postcolonial point of view acquires a central relevancy when we analyze together globalization and climate change. Chakrabarty links that situation to the historicity of modernization and imperialism, revealing two impossibilities: that of making a difference between social and natural history in the present; and that of dissociating any emancipative project from the geological conditions surrounding it. Those conditions are shaped by catastrophe and risk. The divisions of capitalism and empire, affirms Chakrabarty, will persist; however in this case, “unlike in the crises of capitalism, there are no lifeboats here for the rich and the privileged.”[34] The collective subject arising from that landscape is “more like a universal that arises from a shared sense of a catastrophe.”[35] Is catastrophe the condition of our global proximity? It is enough to surpass, as Chakrabarty argues, the distributions created by former and present imperial forces? It is enough to create a “common”?

Imagine the most predictable and absurd dystopian film. What makes sense of our approaching to it is that we can learn from our (potential) futures valuable things about our present. There is a sense

[34] *Ibid.*, 221.
[35] *Ibid.*, 222.

of latency in our social imagination about fictive catastrophes[36]. What makes valuable our regard to utopian and dystopian speculations on our future is the way those are connected to the anxieties and burdens of our political imagination. In a similar way, catastrophic futures are not only plausible endings; are also suggestive instances allowing a critical reading of their conditions of possibility. Now, can we extract similar lessons from our catastrophic present? Our everyday reality seems to be marked by the omnipresence of natural disasters. A quick review of the last ten years will suffice: hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, nuclear disasters, seem to be more frequent than ever, and what is more important, seem to affect the entire planet in equal terms, including key power centers of "the North". Take, for instance, hurricane Sandy, which devastated in 2012 New York and the Caribbean; or the 2011 nuclear "accident" of Fukushima. Both "events" affected highly technological, ultra-secured spaces. Of course, they are neither new nor exceptional: a quick look at the environmental history of the East Coast of the United States will reveal the frequency with which those phenomena appear[37].

One question arises, then. Is there anything new in this landscape? Were not natural catastrophes a familiar element in our past, from Pompeii to the Lisbon Earthquake? That question is not banal, and its response would lead to two alternative paths. On the one hand we can accept that the proliferation and global dissemination of disasters is the consequence of human agency and climate change. Then, we will be facing a panorama marked by a new distribution of risk and therefore by a new sense of global community and universalism, one united by the sharing of a threatened future. In that case, catastrophe will be an omnipresent reality, against which no ivory tower is possible, one matching our recently gained geological condition. On the other hand, secondly, there is the possibility of considering those menaces under the dissimilar capacity of control and management of each territory. This second possibility points at a more geopolitical, more traditional,

[36] See Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future. The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (New York: Verso, 2005).

[37] "Historical Hurricanes1 Impacting New York Coast", Weather 2000 – forecast research, last modified April 9, 2013, accessed November 10, 2015, http://www.weather2000.com/NY_Hurricanes.html

apparently "less universal" division. However, at the light of the last decades, one cannot deny that "those events are happening". Are they?

Natural catastrophes are indissolubly linked to their perception as such. That "*Die Natur kennt keine Katastrophen*"[38] was already known in the eighteen century. Natural catastrophes are indissolubly attached to our cultural interpretations of them. They are dependent of our conceiving of them as events, as phenomena susceptible of being historicized. Of course, that condition is not a matter of subjective opinion. Natural catastrophes *happen.* Nevertheless, that asseveration is conditioned by the weight and the newness we confer to those events, and in that sense "environmental visualizations are political and politicized as much as aesthetic and aestheticized."[39] What, again, is new in the geographical distribution of natural catastrophes in the era of climate change? At a moment when nature is no longer "an outside" thanks to our geological agency, the catastrophic event opens up a fertile field for critique.

We must not forget that cyclones and hurricanes were considered as something cyclical in many parts of our planet. Sandy and Katrina, the two hurricanes that impacted heavily different areas of the States, also had heavy effects in the Caribbean. There is, to say it that way, a "Caribbean" history of Sandy and Katrina, yet that one is less visible, less "accountable as event", less likely to form part of the global imaginary of natural disasters of our era. Indeed, that division takes part also within the same country: the image of desolation and chaos surrounding post-Katrina´s New Orleans has nothing to do with the organized response following "Sandy´s New York", and the reasons of that are obvious. To a great extent, this has to do with the consumption of what has been called "poverty porn"[40], with the naturalization of human and natural chaos in "unruly" and "underdeveloped" areas of

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[38] Max Frisch, (1979) *Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän: eine Erzählung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 103, quoted in Walter, *Catastrophes*, 16.

[39] Allison Carruth and Robert P. Marzec, "Environmental Visualization in the Anthropocene: Technologies, Aesthetics, Ethics," *Public Culture* 73, no. 26/2 (2014): http://publicculture.org/articles/view/26/2/environmental-visualization-in-the-anthropocene-technologies-aesthetics-ethics

[40] See T.J. Demos, *Return to the Postcolony. Specters of Colonialism in Contemporary Art* (Berlin: Stenberg, 2013).

our planet. Again, this is not new; even "the possibility of conceiving a space as a landscape" has imperial connotations, as Mitchell suggests[41]. Against the same catastrophe, then, we have to competing images: one of disorder and inevitability, another of control, prompt reaction and management. Whereas the first one "naturalizes" catastrophe, the latter "culturalizes" it. This becomes evident by leafing through the main international newspapers and by looking at the visual representations of catastrophe. But, one can argue, at the end of the day images are just that, images. Are they?

Jean and John Comaroff argue that the North is inheriting many of the hazards and conditions of the postcolonial South, in which the disorder associated to colonial territories is gaining momentum in the legal and social frameworks of the West, yet without losing an aura of "respectability" aiming to make a difference[42]. What is interesting in the Comaroffs' theorization, letting aside their focus on law and governance issues, is that it introduces an ideological element that links and at the same time explains the parallel images of crisis, disaster and management. Comaroffs´ geopolitics implies a sense of the "common", has universal dimensions. However, unlike Chakrabarty´s and other social interpretations of the Anthropocene, it allows us to explain how the global responsibility and agency linked to climate change and geological impact in the planet *works.* From that perspective, the incorporation of natural catastrophe within the American and European imaginaries becomes indissolubly linked to the capacity of decreeing, of identifying, it as such. Images, then, are not passive representations of a global (dystopian) state of things; they are at the same time agents playing a decisive role in the Anthropocene postcolonial geopolitics.

Conclusions

Let me go back for a second to the discussions on institutional critique. I argued at the beginning of this article that one of the main debates

41 W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape," in *Landscape and Empire,* ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 5-34.

42 Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff, *Theory from the South. Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa* (Boulder: Paradigm Books, 2012).

in institutional practices had to do with de-naturalizing the ideological apparatus of the art center. No matter if some of the practices I mentioned became "institutionalized" and criticism became appropriated by the institution. The main contribution of the first generations of institutional critique was decisive in revealing that "space matters", above all when it pretends to be a neutral container. Nowadays institutional critique is being revitalized and revised. Above all, institutional space is no longer conceived as a physical container, and the oppositional dynamics of artists and audiences are being perceived in a more relational way. As American artist Andrea Fraser says following Bourdieu´s theorization of the field, institutional attitudes "trap" everyone, making impossible any breaking out of the immersive, engulfing systemic logic[43]. However, Fraser´s is not the only updating of institutional critique´s legacy, and more optimistic voices are also joining the debate. Among those, a "way out" of "institutional universalism" is being framed through the potentiality of critique, placed in many cases outside the domain of any interpretation of institutional critique as an artistic trend or specific field. Critique, in those readings, has to do with understanding differently the ideological nature of the silences present in a given state of things, with not taking it for granted.

In a similar way, thinking the Anthropocene and, more generally, the consequences of our enhanced agency for the planet and for us as species implies thinking the geographical and geopolitical dimensions of action and responsibility carefully. In this article I have tried to argue that the universal dimension of environmental change has ineluctable social and historical connotations, and that those are linked to our perception and imagination of universalism and locality. Let us be clear at this point. We cannot be against universalism when considering any social or environmental issue. This would take us to a conservative particularism, in which only "our group" matters. What I am calling in this text for is a self-reflexive curiosity about the conditions under which our position in the world involves a "being with". The "silence" and "eloquence" of the images of natural catastrophe is not only

[43] Andrea Fraser, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique," *Artforum* 44, no.1 (2005): 278-286.

a reflection of globalization and climate change. It points to a more complex distribution with postcolonial arrays, as Chakrabarty shows. However, in his words, in front of the environmental crisis proliferating within the Anthropocene there are no "lifeboats". In this text I have tried to argue that the role of the image works somehow as a kind of lifeboat allowing precise and intentioned uses of key issues related to security, management, risk and governability. What happens with the imaginary of natural catastrophe, I think, is something far more complex than a direct representation of a new geological era. The silence and naturalization of some catastrophes is symptomatic of a deeper differentiation related to the necessity of setting up the rules of our present. Images, Mitchell argues, "want a voice, and a poetics of enuntiation"[44]. Looking at the imaginary of the Anthropocene, we realize that some of them are more successful than others in pursuing that goal. That success is connected to the evolution of imperial geopolitics, here I agree with Chakrabarty. But it is also linked to the persistence of imperial imagination. Hence the importance of critique, and the eloquence of natural catastrophes. Critique points at the easiness with which some facts and globalized or naturalized, at how we "(mis)perceiv[e] a discursive formation as an extra-discursive fact", if we remember Žižek´s words. The imaginary of natural catastrophes, I have tried to show, reveals to be particularly eloquent at this point.

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[44] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 29.

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Mexican Children Discussing "The Situation of Insecurity" in the City of Monterrey, Mexico

Introduction

During the presidency of Felipe Calderon in Mexico (2006-2012), the main issue in his political agenda was to start a "Drug War" all over the country to remove the power of drug cartels. At the same time, the criminal organizations were fighting against each other to claim territories. The incapacity of the police and army to maintain order – strengthened by corruption in public institutions – triggered a crime wave, evidenced by the increase of robberies, frauds, extortions, kidnappings, murders and 'narco-blockings'[1] in several states. Monterrey, as one of the three most important cities in Mexico, was one of the populations that were most affected due to its proximity to the U.S.A. border.

It was because of this that many cities and towns became unsafe, and that this topic turned out to be popular not only in news, but also in soap operas, TV series, and films. The saturation in the media agenda inspired the research that will be partly presented in this article. The portrayal of both crimes and criminals defines stereotypes within Mexican society, which may create or strengthen stigmatization towards certain minorities and places in cities. The study focused on childhood; this was possible because even when media was not addressing this topic directly to them, children were exposed to this information (schools constantly practiced

[1] Narco-blockings were events were cartels would organize road-blocks all over the city to provoke chaos in traffic.

security plans in case there was a shooting nearby), or they even played games taking the role of cartels (instead of cops or thieves).

The initial suppositions were that children's attitudes would be between two possible extreme scenarios: on one hand, they could accept/admire/aspire criminal behavior since it was what soap operas, TV series, films and videogames depicted on delinquency (they mainly represented them as heroes in action adventures). On the other hand, they could have classist and racist attitudes, because they were highly promoted through news where only lower class and dark-skinned criminals appeared, as well as only some lower and middle class neighborhoods would frequently be shown as violent and unsafe.

Within the metropolitan area of Monterrey (pop. 4+ million), San Pedro Garza Garcia was the municipality with least violence denounced according to the local leading newspaper *El Norte*[2]. It was also the second highest HDI rate in the country, highest income per capita in Mexico, and highest Gini index of the state[3]. The last one measures the social inequality in San Pedro, which is high because of the concentration of upper class families, which contrasts with the remaining lower class residents. The political preference is right wing, and the mayor at the time of the research – Mauricio Fernandez – was known for his ambition to "shield San Pedro from organized crime", which relatively speaking (compared to other municipalities of the metropolitan area) was more or less achieved successfully.

Considering these circumstances, the supposition was that children would be less influenced by experiences (since it was the safest municipality) and more by media on this topic, which allowed us to study media presence on their construction of social representations of insecurity.

Given this background, the questions that guided this research were how were children understanding crime under this context and creating attitudes; and what role played each source of information in

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[2] "Mapa del crimen 2011," *El Norte,* November, 2012, online version: http://gruporeforma.elnorte.com/libre/offlines/mty/mapas/MapaDelCrimen2011.htm

[3] Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, *IDH* (2008), Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo México, accessed October 1st 2012, www.undp.org.mx/IMG/xls/Base_de_datos.xls

the construction of their social representations. This paper will analyze the participant's imaginaries on insecurity – which is associated with delinquency – and how they negotiated or appropriated their meanings with different sources of information.

Theoretical Background

Hall[4] defines culture not as a set of things, but as a set of practices, that embodies the production and exchange of meanings within a society. This process implies the interaction between people who actively interpret what surrounds them, and thus, make sense of the world. Considering this, individuals will constantly look for information that explains or updates a phenomenon that is part of their reality.

For Casey *et al*.[5], this leads to the study of 'representation', which is central to media studies. Things become confusing when media presents information in a 'realistic' genre, like journalism or documentaries. Realistic or not, there is always a process of representation involved. This means that every television program chooses how to create representations through their decisions in filming, framing, editing, etc. Therefore, Götz[6] exhorts researchers in media studies to measure gaps between "reality" and "media representations", based on the idea that the representations of certain groups of people or events might be distorted, making way for stereotypes.

> Stereotyping commonly involves the attribution of negative traits to persons who are different from us. This points to the operation of power in the process of stereotyping and to its role in the exclusion of others from the social, symbolic and moral order.[7]

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[4] Stuart Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage in Association with the Open University, 1997), 2.

[5] Bernadette Casey et al., *Television Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[6] Maya Götz, Discussion on Doctoral Dissertation, Telephone interview by author, July 24, 2014.

[7] Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice*. 3rd ed. (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore: SAGE Publications, 2008), 264.

The main assumption in this specific study is that if media is promoting determined representations – hence stereotypes – for crime, most probably the children will develop discriminating attitudes towards certain groups of people and neighborhoods. However, there are more optimistic perspectives that allow suppositions where audiences are considered 'active', meaning that they are not "cultural dopes but are active producers of meaning from within their own cultural context."[8]

In the same line of argument, Orozco[9] reflects on the effects of mass media on so far it triggers identities and memories (collective and individual) of the audiences. This is important because it means that these elements will play a role in the interaction of audiences with media contents and their constructions of meanings, which will allow them to have different interpretations (even with the limitations of their encoded framing).

Hall[10], in his work "Encoding, Decoding", was able to improve the linear process that media studies had been using (sender/message/receiver) by proposing the encoding/decoding cycle, in which the "sender" might determine some meanings within the boundaries set by the hegemonic interests, but their interpretation or *readings* will mainly depend on the audiences as individuals. He identified three hypothetical positions for decoding readings:

- *Dominant-hegemonic position.* This is when the viewer takes the meaning from a program full and straight, and decodes the message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded.
- *Negotiated code.* While it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions, the individuals insert their own rules and operate with exceptions. They make a negotiated application to 'local conditions'.

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[8] Barker, *Cultural Studies,* 326.

[9] Guillermo Orozco, "Los Estudios De Recepción: De Un Modo De Investigar, a Una Moda... Y De Ahí a Muchos Modos," in *¿Y La Recepción? Balance Crítico De Los Estudios Sobre El Público*, ed. Florencia Saintout and Natalia Ferrante (Buenos Aires: La Crujía, 2006), 15-30.

[10] Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During, 2nd ed. (London, New York: Routledge, 1993), 507-17.

- *Oppositional code.* The individual decodes the message in the contrary way, and resignifies it within some alternative framework of reference.

Blackman and Walkerdine[11], throughout their studies of crime representation in media, have found that delinquents are commonly associated with risk, danger, psychological illnesses and death. Also, women are not considered "evil enough" to be considered capable of becoming a criminal. Even in a different cultural context, this representation (or expectations) of women is sustained in Latin America, since they are not frequently shown as delinquents, but as caring mothers, who only commit violence when it is for a "greater good" or "out of love".

According to Brown[12], the marginal groups that are constantly depicted – especially in news – are young people, dark skinned, and syndical members. However, it's not only news that informs people about crime. The same author poses the question of the reality-representation dichotomy because soap operas, films and TV series also represent the world of experts and scientists as fictions, and these are becoming more popular due the interest of the audiences in crime topics. For Brown, there's a strong hybrid between facts and fiction that threatens the credibility in information because it can be exaggerated and imprecise, and that most probably influence the audiences in perceiving reality in terms of Manichaeism and spectacle.

Lemish and Götz[13] leaded a research project with the objective to understand children's perspective on Iraq's War. This study was made in Germany, Austria, Israel, USA, and Netherlands. The diversity on methodologies used in their cases allowed the research of this paper to construct the one that seemed the most appropriate to the context, which were interviews with drawings. Götz[14] reported in her results

[11] Lisa Blackman and Valerie Walkerdine, *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 140.

[12] Sheila Brown, *Crime and Law in Media Culture* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 2003), 30, 40.

[13] Dafna Lamish and Maya Götz, eds., *Children and Media in Times of Conflict and War* (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 2007).

[14] Maya Götz, "'I Know That It Is Bush's Fault' How Children in Germany Perceived the War in Iraq," in *Children and Media in Times of War and Conflict*, eds. Dafna Lemish and Maya Götz (Cresskill: Hampton Press, 2007), 15-35.

with German children that while boys portrayed the spectacular and action parts of the war (shootings, fights, weaponry…), girls talked more about their feelings and fears. Their main source of information was TV, especially news; but it was also a topic discussed at school and at home. Children were involved in the conversations, and they would've liked to see information and explanations with comprehensible words and pictures that were not frightening to them, as well as reports from the perspective of those involved, and alternatives to war. Their drawings were usually scenes of close combat, suffering and destruction, the victims and vulnerable people, Bush and Hussein, and Americans who like killing.

Based on this, it was possible to analyze results within a framework of Reception Studies as a branch from Cultural Studies. The main assumption was that children knew about crime and delinquency in Monterrey, and that they had actively looked for information in sources that they found accessible to make sense of their context of insecurity.

Methodology

The methodological approach chosen for this study was qualitative, through interviews complemented with the drawing technique. There were a total of 44 children interviewed: 22 of lower class families, and 22 of upper middle class[15], from which 23 were girls and 21 boys. All of them attended educational institutions in San Pedro Garza Garcia municipality, which is part of the metropolitan area of the city of Monterrey, in Mexico; and they were either just finishing, just starting or doing 6th grade (depending at the time of the interview since some occurred during summer vacation and some other during school period), which means that ages went from 10 to 13 in the participants.

[15] The criteria that defined their social class was based on the neighborhoods where the interviews were made. Under this context, the attendance to a private school relates directly with their social class, since they are considered within the most expensive ones in the metropolitan area of Monterrey. The neighborhood where the interviews with lower class children were made, is considered amongst the poorest of this municipality, as well as one of the most problematic because of the gangs that live and act there.

The questionnaire was designed so that the topic of insecurity was not going to be suggested by the interviewer, but brought up by the child participant him/herself. The questions that meant to trigger this topic were asked in this order:

- Imagine that you met someone who has never been in Mexico before, what would you tell him/her about your country?
- And if he/she asks you about Monterrey, what would you say?
- If he/she asks you about the situation in Monterrey, what would you tell?
- Do you usually see the news or read the newspapers? What do they usually talk about?
- Is there something that bothers or worries you about what you hear in the news or read in the newspapers? Why?

In the majority of the sessions, the third question would trigger the topic of "insecurity" since the word "situation" is highly associated with crime and unsafe neighborhoods. In the authorization letter given to the children's parents, it was stated that if the participant didn't mention anything about insecurity after these questions, the interview would be over. This never happened, which proved that the topic was present in their minds and easily brought up by a complete stranger to them.

The interview technique is categorized within the participative methodologies because part of the activity was that the children needed to draw two images, which would illustrate the concept of "insecurity" and another one of the "delinquent". This paper will only analyze the results of the first drawing.

The questions that guided the first drawing followed the triggering inquiries showed before. The children were instructed to draw whatever they imagine when they talk about insecurity, which was related to crime in all but one case (where he drew bullying at his schoolyard). We gave a blank paper, pencil and colors for the participants to use freely, although most of them preferred not to use colored pencils in their images. After a couple of minutes of drawing, the interviewers asked questions regarding the place (what neighborhood was it, what kind of place was it, public/private), time, people involved in the situation, and then to narrate the full story of what happened before, during and after the scene of the picture they drew. Afterwards, they were questioned