

## The political ecology of images: Energy cultures and decolonial ecologies

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The link between artistic/cultural practices and ecology is nothing new, in historical terms. If we look back, we realise that landscape painting has long been one of contemporary art's most significant contributions to the forming of a certain subjectivity in the aesthetic experience that we make of the world. The landscape has been shunted around, out of ideological ambivalence: it has served as an aesthetic screen in order to disguise the expropriation of the rural common assets (dissociating, in a picturesque way, the bourgeois activity of contemplation from the hands-on work of the rural *campesino* class), and it has also been used for the romantic revival of a lost (and idealised) sensibility, that which connected humans to the rhythms of nature as a whole, as opposed to the tyranny of industrial progress and the commodification of all that exists. Somewhat closer to us, here, the proposals from land art, environmental art and ecological art have redefined this link with nature, in terms that go beyond representation (although it must be noted that the representations of nature were *always* established as cultural devices of the gaze, rather than necessarily being faithful depictions of reality), as is clear in their defence of physical, bodily or symbolic intervention, either in an aggressive or restorative sense, there in the natural surroundings.<sup>2</sup>

However, these kinds of approach to nature are being redefined in the present, due to the current ecological crisis. The most striking feature of this historical shift in the syntax between nature and culture is probably the questioning itself of the idea of "world". We no longer see nature as a macro-entity external to us, placed before our eyes so that we can take advantage of it in the name of human progress, or so that we can fight for its conservation in line with the principles of classical environmentalism. On the contrary, nature has since been revealed (rebelliously) as the most problematic aspect of advanced modernity's world-system, a kind of hyperobject (as Timothy Morton put it) which, due to the consequences of

phenomena such as global warming, threatens the future survival of our post-Industrial-Revolution civilisation.

Unlike the materialist evidence for the protracted catastrophe that is industrialism, the great profusion of images in the digital universe have more subjective effects, and so we tend to think of them as being potentially infinite and dematerialised. The critical focus on the “e-image”, within visual studies, has often lauded the accounts of immaterial work within post-Fordist capitalism. Despite the immense value of this research, which has helped transport the analysis of images to less shaky ground (and, therefore, more relevant from the social, cultural and political viewpoint) than that of the formalist, art history analyses, visual studies have shown, in that sense, a certain lack of any ecological sensibility. Visual studies identified that there was fetishism in the interpretation of the artwork as an autonomous entity, a fetishism which has since become an exaltation of the power of the digital (for example, regarding how digital images can lead to new political links and life communities), but it is still fetishism. This fetishism has played down the fact that our technological surroundings require extractivist policies to be further perpetuated, and it has overstated the role of digital images in the forming of those social movements that oppose the suicidal trajectory of advanced capitalism.

Other approaches, such as those developed within the geology of media,<sup>3</sup> have shattered this illusion. Today, we know that the technological circulation of images and information in cyberspace implies the greater and greater hoarding of materials and energy. Data centres encompass, materially, the power relations that situate the great monopolistic companies of cognitive capitalism right at the top of the socioeconomic pyramid. Silicon Valley is not the peak of a General Intellect, stolen from all our shared knowledge, but rather the geographical headquarters for the whole political and brutal silicon economy. Narrowing the gulf between, on the one hand, the materialist bleakness of the ecological outlook of phenomena such as climate change, the continued use of fossil fuels, the voracious extraction of minerals or the fall in biodiversity, and, on the other hand, the abstraction of our sensibility, caused by the digitalisation of social relations, is one of the main political and aesthetic challenges of our time.

This edition of *Re-visiones* explores the relationship between image, ecology and politics, from multiple angles. It considers that the modern history of images is also a device that has mediated socio-environmental relations by means of both the creation of imaginaries of “nature” (imaginaries with a shifting, productivist and androcentric character that now contradicts the biophysical limits of nature itself) and the creation of alternative worldviews that aim for human communities to live in greater harmony with Earth’s ecosystems. With this in mind, the present edition brings together a diverse

range of critical voices who reconstruct, with a focus on ecology, the image-based critique of modern power relations. They refer to different kinds of knowledges and methodologies, from the contributions of ecological Marxism and new materialisms, to the perspectives opened up by decolonial ecologies.

One of the key arguments we address is the deconstruction of the concept of energy that we have inherited from the birth of fossil modernity.<sup>4</sup> The extractivist imaginaries of colonial modernity were, in time, reinterpreted due to fossil fuels being used as a way of ramping up both the exploitation of labour power and the hoarding of natural resources. The formation of a new system for production, based on industrial capitalism, entailed a double movement, by which the wages of paid work were formally regulated (and masculinised), emphasising exploitation as measured by time, and there was great expansion in the expropriation of lands and unpaid work, in the colonies, and in homes. From this perspective, the birth of fossil modernity would ultimately bring about disastrous phenomena such as global warming (in that regard, as Andreas Malm has demonstrated,<sup>5</sup> coal soon became indispensable, since the ten-hour working day was incompatible with the intermittency of other primary energy sources, such as river currents), as well as the social devaluation of the kind of production and caregiving work that is traditionally carried out by women. This would also include the racial gulf, caused by the differences in subordination to capital between the industrial workers who were exploited in accordance with the wage relation, in the world system's metropolis, and the workers expropriated from their own means of survival in the colonies, as suggested by authors such as Nancy Fraser.<sup>6</sup>

The essays compiled here map out the need to recompose our ecosocial subjectivity, based on a critical analysis of the imaginaries that have accompanied the fossil becoming of modernity. This means accepting two things. Firstly, that these imaginaries entail both the aesthetic (sensorial) experience that we make of reality, and also the ideological discourses that have been ever-present in the development of capitalism, initially colonial-mercantile capitalism, and subsequently colonial-industrial (the latter form is still very much in force today, even if the theoreticians of immaterial work would deny this). Secondly, we must accept that the emergence of these imaginaries did not always come *after* the implementation of the ecosocial transformations as briefly described above, but rather they emerged alongside them, decisively, and so these imaginaries can be said to have played an entirely foundational role (and not merely representational).

From both of these statements, we can infer a conclusion that is also implied in the essays gathered in this edition of *Re-visiones*: any given project of ecosocial transition that rejects fossil industrialism (something

which should be proposed, in the immediate future, as a requirement for survival, even in terms of species, rather than as the sum of individual preferences) must assume the cultural task, essential and vast as it is, of reviving those cosmological imaginaries that have since been blocked by the rise of colonial modernity. They must also help create a new shared political imagination, based on our sociometabolic relations with ecosystems, which has to contain hegemonic potential (and which might therefore become the majority view) and which must inevitably take on board the radical politicisation of the mental illnesses and material inequalities that are so prevalent in societies of neoliberal capitalism.

Therefore, two core elements of this editorial work have been, on the one hand, as Arturo Escobar proposes in his essay 'Feeling-Thinking with the Land', to try and build transatlantic bridges that might help us recognise the new brutal versions of plundering and ecosocial violence in Latin America, whilst we reciprocally learn processes of intercultural translation that allow us to plot collective schemes between different Souths, between Souths and Norths, as a way of expanding the possibility of political rebuttal, to understand what it means to place the sustainability of life right at the heart of different geo-corpo-political contexts. On the other hand, given this journal's own particular form, visual essays have been vitally important in helping us imagine the political responses that might address the controversies around meaning that define today's culture wars, even more so in these present times of the pandemic and the lockdowns.

Our aim, for this edition, has been to make it a place, a habitat to provide us with the necessary means to get out of the canonical pantheon with which university knowledge is often associated. As such, we have used various different visual manoeuvres, i.e. orality and listening, writing and the image, the palpable and the figurative, to imagine the visible by means of experience, and the other way round. We have always sought to use an incisive gaze that shines through in the vivid narration of particular lived situations, coming from local knowledges, independent (or otherwise) intellectual projects, academia and activism in the streets, the parks and the fields. They study current socio-natural relations, based on what is happening at the forefront of the struggles to safeguard the material and symbolic production of a dignified life for all. This is the root of our determination to understand, record, support and partake in all of these struggles, including all their ambiguities and paradoxes.

This is why, even if we seem to be suggesting a hierarchically-ordered reading, the idea is in fact to encourage *movement* between doing, thinking and feeling, so that the articles are read in a circular, transversal way, crossing over each other. So that the images in the *Focus* section are listened to, i.e. the section titled *Calypso-Collapse-Fossil* and made up of

the three visual essays 'Fossil landscape: Affective cartographic excavation of the Asturian coal transition', by Bárbara Fluxà, 'Apocalypse-Calipso' by the collective O.R.G.I.A, and 'Notes on a graphic journey' by Vanessa Cárdenas Roa. These essays take us on three visual adventures around the Asturian coalfields, the Mediterranean, and the Ecuadorian Amazon, and they resound throughout the whole issue because of their mobilising quality and also how they stand up for 'place' itself, which in turn calls for both the resistance and the transformative politics thereof.

Our aim to encourage a circular reading is echoed in the interview with Yayo Herrero, who told us, having contemplated one of the images put forward by Vanessa Cárdenas: "[...] the representational frameworks of biology itself, in order to explain something that is inherently interconnected and cyclical, instead of using circularity, instead resort to the pyramid, to the hierarchy [...] working in terms of circularity, not only within artistic representation, but also in a textbook in which food chains are explained, takes your head somewhere completely different."

By taking ourselves out of the pyramids of conventional academia, and delving into interpretive, reversible circularities, which are perhaps chaotic for the spatial and temporal linearity that has been drilled into us, is how we exhibit, synthetically, the articles/essays that make up this edition. As such, the stories narrated herein, explorations in a wide range of settings, go beyond mere theoretical speculation, and they fit together with practices and experiences that, despite being very different, flirt with each other to encourage processes of decolonialisation and ecosocial resistance.

This might help us visualise the scenarios situated in Mexico and Colombia, as denounced by Oswaldo Ruiz and Ariadna Ramonetti, in 'All that is Solid (Melts into Air)', or Gabriela de Castro in 'The "End" of the *Tierra Caliente*', both of which discuss the long-term and short-term memories of territories and lives overturned by colonial plundering, extractivism and coloniality itself. There is also a reflection on the cinematic imaginary of different dystopian futures, set in Europe and the United States, as analysed by Paula Bruna Pérez, from Barcelona, in her essay 'Ecofictions'. These issues lead us to think about the need, as posited by Emilio Santiago Muíño in 'Surrealism, Situationists, City and Great Acceleration', for a 21<sup>st</sup>-century psychogeography that assumes, as its starting point, industrial civilisation's consummation of the neoliberal city and the ecological crisis.

We also want to include in this debate 'Commons, Cosmopolitics and Aesthetics of Sustainability' by Bernardo Gutiérrez, which looks into the how the commons were defended, from 2013, via protests that built up a whole social ecosystem of resistance, as concentrated in various different green spaces, both urban and natural, in Brazil and Turkey. This cycle of revolts

and revolutions is also discussed by the Colombian environmental activist Tatiana Roa Avendaño, in 'The Age of Resistance against Extractivism'. The author talks about the resistance movements of indigenous, Afro-descendant and *campesino* communities, to fight back against the mining and oil projects that are destroying their lands. These communities' practices of re-existence contrast greatly with *For Forest* by Klaus Littman, a work that Miguel Errazu and Alejandro Pedregal confront critically in 'For Forest, or when you can't see the trees for the wood'. Among other matters, they look into how this particular piece fed into the hegemonic economic/political stances from which it emerged.

Errazu and Pedregal's materialist approach overlaps with Jeff Diamanti's questions about the field of energy humanities. He focuses on the urgent issues and challenges for cultural criticism, namely the most serious ongoing events such as global warming. Cara Daggett's article, 'Putting the World to Work', also in the field of energy studies, plots a genealogy, from 19<sup>th</sup>-century thermodynamic science onwards, to challenge the underlying logic that influences current energy uses.

Similarly, we can complement these pieces with 'Producing the Commons: Community frameworks and forms of the political', by Raquel Gutiérrez Aguilar, in which she maps out the works and lines of research that were opened up during years of the Permanent Research Seminar for Graduate Studies in Sociology, at the Social Science Institute of the Universidad Autónoma de Puebla. She investigates the heterogenous community-based forms of the commons, and the regeneration of links and ideas being cultivated across the Latin American continent. Upon this same frame we might also weave the magical-animist knowledges that Claudia Rodríguez Ponga defends in 'Do you believe in what exists?', conceptualised in the practices of different women artists.

Other circulations blossom forth in our heads, connected to 'Inclined bodies that imagine', by Ixiar Rozas Elizalde, as she traces the career of the choreographer Steve Paxton in relation with specific aspects of the philosophy of Adriana Cavarero and Donna Haraway, in order to reveal more about the human body by walking, by studying gravity and by making organic compost.

To close the circle, we can take a moment with the essays by Sergio Martínez Luna and Luis San Gregorio. The former explores, in 'Ecologies of digital image', based on Karen Barad's concept of intra-action, the continuities between individuals, artifacts, materials and surroundings, questioning the discourses which claim that representation is a reflection, and he considers the relationship between human beings and images as one of interactivity. Finally, 'The Energy-Image' by Luis San Gregorio is



presented as a new way of thinking about the digital image and its effects on ecosystems, instead of analysing it as an incorporeal element that has no specific material consequences on the environment.

This edition of *Re-visiones* is proposed, therefore, as an invitation to continue probing the political ecology of images. It seeks to encourage further investigation into a wide range of approaches that encompass images' physical materiality and the epistemic, cultural, political and economic consequences of how they are used in the socio-environmental ecosystems of advanced capitalism. And it does so with a sense of urgency, noticing that the period of danger still looms large, to the point that it is becoming mixed up with the whole of history itself. We are living at a time when the state of emergency, more than just being permanent, has become chronic. We are left with the political task of inhabiting, with care and dignity, the chronic becoming of an ecosocial crisis and all its consequences. We must face this reality with determination, and, perhaps, some modest degree of happiness at having thus far survived. As Walter Benjamin might have suggested, we have to imagine our own state of emergency in order to confront the ecosocial emergency. It is time for artistic and cultural theory to take responsibility, in all seriousness, for this diagnosis, and accept that the micropolitical reinvention of everyday life, or indeed the spiritual reconnection with nature, will only ever come if there is social revolution.

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## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> For a general overview, that historicises the concept of ecology, where it comes from and what its aims are, via both theory and artistic and curatorial practice, as well as the evolution of different perspectives and postures that artists and collectives have gradually adopted over the last forty years, see Belén Romero, 'Prácticas artísticas ecológicas. Un estado de la cuestión', in *Arte y políticas de la identidad*, Vol. 10-11, 2014, pp. 11-34. Available online: <https://revistas.um.es/reapi/article/view/219151> (consulted: 04/12/2020).

<sup>3</sup> Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Jaime Vindel, *Estética fósil. Imágenes de la energía y estética ecosocial* (Barcelona: Arcadia, 2020).

<sup>5</sup> Andreas Malm, *Capital Fósil* (Madrid, Barcelona: Capitán Swing, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Los talleres ocultos del capital. Un mapa para la izquierda* (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2020).