



*Decolonial Design reflections
in conversation with Peter Crnokrak*

by Sara Luna Ruiz & Cornelia Lund

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Decolonial Design is a reflection that emerged from a conversation with Peter Crnokrak, professor and head of the design programme at the University of Europe for Applied Sciences (UE).

This conversation arises from the need to reflect on how, in the contemporary world, with the rise of artificial intelligence imposing itself across almost every field of human creation, we must ask about the disposition of this tool in relation to its colonizing or decolonizing power. In practice, AI is trained through particular logics of information processing, while people often revere it almost as if it were a filter of truth and pure reason, stripped of bias by virtue of its synthetic, machinic nature. Technology is a double-edged weapon: while it brings us closer to knowledge and democratizes access to it, it can also be colonizing, in the sense that it is technically limited in its capacity to hold all possible manifestations of non-Western cultures.

“Outside of the constraints of the commercial world. That meant not just expression, but exploration.” — Crnokrak

The Data as Argument

Crnokrak comes to design from science. A geneticist by training, with a doctorate in computational sciences, he spent years inside the world of research and data visualization. After moving to the design field, he continued as he had always done, only now directed toward culture. His work stands out because it seeks to discover and elucidate patterns, trends, and relationships between events and multiple subjects, often political, scientific, and approached through a rigorous anthropological reading of culture. In the present, the use of AI through tools such as Midjourney has allowed him to explore visual possibilities at another level within the field.

His first gesture, before any image, is to dethrone the tool. As he himself points out, anyone can use Midjourney or other AI applications; the difference does not lie in mastery of the programme, but in the intention that governs it. This is why data visualization, for Crnokrak, is a form of knowledge: a way of reading relationships, making tensions visible, and constructing meaning from complex systems. That position inherits something from the speculative spirit of the early years of digital culture, when technology still seemed to open a freer space for breaking scientific, aesthetic, and political paradigms.

Peter's pieces are constructed like scientific publications — with footnotes, correlations, and p-values. The aesthetics of the paper become an argument in themselves about where the authority of evidence resides, while also revealing, in every case, a rigorous investigation and a precise attention to content.

His scientific perspective is genuinely inspiring. The movement he made — from the laboratory to the visual field — recovers something that science rarely does, but does beautifully when it attempts: the capacity to connect with people, to make knowledge accessible, and even to transform data into visual testimony.

The power of design and the visual have a deeply human and political component, and Crnokrak understands this perfectly. We cannot disregard the fact that, in the contemporary world, data is understood as a foundation of truth. At the same time, in data visualization, data becomes malleable according to the perception, organization, and meaning given to it. This is where the political commentary constructed around it becomes crucial.

*Peter's work reveals a forceful gaze on complexity. In *The Luxury of Protest*, visualization stops being an aesthetic resource and becomes a form of relational thought, capable of showing connections between historical, cultural, and material phenomena that would otherwise remain dispersed. In pieces such as *UR*, inspired by countercultural movements such as *Underground Resistance* and its militant, *Afro-diasporic*, and *cosmic techno imaginary*, this logic appears clearly. When Crnokrak states that “the visualisation is a recognition of the reciprocal nature of universal influence,” form does not merely represent data; it places it in relation, while thinking of culture as a force that also travels, resists, and emits signals beyond its own context.*

The Infrastructure of Coloniality

*Crnokrak also warns that the promise of technology can be captured. Something similar happened with the internet: what, in its beginnings, seemed like a more open and democratic territory became increasingly concentrated in private platforms, subject to corporate interests and opaque forms of control. The case he mentions — the disappearance of a feminist platform linked to *My Voice, My Choice*, without a clear explanation or any real possibility of defense — condenses this asymmetry: “It is private companies. They can do whatever they want.” In this sense, coloniality is not exercised only over images, but over the very conditions of appearance: who can circulate, who can be visible, who can sustain a public voice.*

The question that opens, then, is whether something similar will happen with artificial intelligence. For Crnokrak, early AI still preserves something of the initial promise of the internet: “the early internet — which was more free and had more possibilities for democratic space — the early AI chatbots are that.” But precisely for that reason, it is already in dispute. The question is not whether technology designs us — it does — but what forms of agency remain within that design. In the present, that agency becomes concrete in two material dimensions: knowledge as a form of power, and consumption as a tool of pressure against those who concentrate power from above. This is why he insists on the possibility of “personal agency through boycott capabilities in commercial spaces”: an everyday politics in which knowing, choosing, and refusing also become acts of resistance, forcing the redesign — or at least the reconsideration — of our current technological media.

There is, however, a tension Crnokrak does not resolve but exposes. There is a fascination with the idea that AI promises to “strip” the world of mysticism and to announce a new age of reason. This Enlightenment faith rubs uncomfortably against decolonial critique, which is precisely suspicious of universal reason as a device of domination.

The Three Works

Three works show with clarity what kind of questions interest Crnokrak, and why his work matters within a decolonial conversation.

In Objects of War, five hundred years of scientific discoveries and artistic creations are mapped against the incidence of wars, massacres, and genocides in a five-frame lenticular panel that, when tilted, reveals the before and after of each conflict. The finding is uncomfortable: creation flourishes after destruction. There is a positive correlation between violence and creative production, and art clusters closer to conflict than science — as if expression were the immediate response to the cultural disruption of war, while scientific innovation were its slower consequence, tied to an increasingly technologized machinery of warfare.

Visions in Catastrophe sharpens this same gesture through one hundred and twenty-three of the most important works in history, ordered according to their temporal proximity to war and coded through a chromatic refraction scale, where white marks the year of the conflict itself and color moves away as distance increases. More than half of these works were made during a war; the vast majority within the following five years. Picasso's Guernica — painted only months after the 1937 bombing by German and Italian fascist forces — becomes the witness case: art as the metabolization of atrocity.

Apocalypses re-Visioned turns the problem around and carries it into language. It is a study of the word "apocalypse" in twentieth-century literature, both fiction and non-fiction, contrasted with real cataclysms. Against all intuition, its use does not follow catastrophes: during the two most destructive wars of the century, the word falls to its lowest point in non-fiction. The fiction of the end of the world, on the other hand, mobilizes the social imaginary far more than lived disaster, and precedes it — the peak in fiction occurs twenty-seven years before the equivalent peak in non-fiction. The conclusion functions almost as a thesis on ideology: we prefer an apocalypse in which destruction means something to a present too difficult to sustain, and we manufacture an eschatological nostalgia in order not to look at the more probable dystopias that are coming.

Peter's work has spent years revealing the deep relationships between data, design, and culture; a line of research that becomes increasingly relevant in a present where the computational capacity of AI to process, correlate, and visualize information has never been so powerful. Today, it is possible to read large volumes of data, detect invisible patterns, and translate complex systems into visual forms with unprecedented speed. However, that power also opens a critical question: what happens to those cosmogonies, memories, and ways of understanding the world that cannot be transmitted, recognized, or even considered within the logics of an artificial intelligence built, to a large extent, from Western structures of knowledge? If the machine learns from certain archives, languages, categories, and models of truth, it also inherits the limits of that vision. The decolonial question, then, is not only what technology can show, but what forms of world it leaves outside its field of perception, especially regarding the scientific structure through which the West understands knowledge.

Next Steps in Peter's Work: Good and Evil

Perhaps the most human, ethical, and moral question — the most difficult or diffuse to explain through the scientific method — is precisely the question of good and evil: perhaps the answer most likely to slip through our hands when dealing with rationalisms and machines. And yet, in the search for its subtle answer, we may need those same machines to unravel the complex and sublime fabric of what it means to be human. This almost untouchable struggle around good and evil leads Crnokrak toward his next inquiry. His current project takes everything into an unexpected terrain: measuring, with computational tools, the representation of good and evil in painting. “Entropy is a measure of chaos” — from the ethical and aesthetic premise that good tends toward low complexity, while evil tends toward friction.

The Paradox

The paradox or dilemma that I continually feel, especially in decolonial design, is that we must recognize that the choice of data, the approach, and the language through which artificial intelligence is trained are primarily Eurocentric: they replicate and defend Western values and structures of thought. Its algorithm, one could say, is itself a reflection of Western thought, structure, and logic of reasoning, which under that same premise can exclude and dismiss other cosmogonies of thought and other visions of reality.

Therefore, the debate around the ethics of AI is extensive, but also exciting, because of all the possibilities — equally democratic — for access to tools of creation and knowledge that were once reserved for only a few. The design and use of technology are not neutral: they affect, model, and either enable or prevent the development of a culture. For this reason, even if AI and data, as theoretical and justificatory sources, are the foundation of Western science, from fluctuating images we also ask how, or in what ways, these tools could be used or designed so that they might shelter and embrace narratives and cosmovisions — for example Indigenous, Afro-descendant, and others — whose ideas, while not dominant, are no less relevant or valuable, yet remain outside the discourse.

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