

**Robert Folger** (Un)veiling Extinction:  
Notes on an Apoca-  
lyptic History of Mexico

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### **Introduction**

Already at the beginning of the millennium, scholars of literature, film, and popular culture observed how, as Fredric Jameson put it, “visions of total destruction and of the extinction of life on Earth” (Jameson 2005, 199), or apocalypses, alongside dystopian future scenarios, that is post-apocalypses, were proliferating. The apparent yet seldom reflected-upon paradoxical tension between apocalypse and post-apocalypse will be discussed in the following special feature. The perceived crescendo of the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic in recent times now serves as a prehistory not only to today’s surge of apocalypse in cultural imagination but also as a kind of realization of cultural imagination in the real world, with apocalyptic images, rhetoric, and narratives seeping into societal, political, and, notably, scientific discourses.

A prominent example of said boom is the launch of the adaptation of the first part of Chinese author Cixin Liu’s *Remembrance of Earth’s Past* trilogy: *The Three-Body Problem*, first published as a book in 2008. Cixin’s novel serves as a kind of philosophical thought experiment with a notably scientific underpinning and, particularly in its Netflix series adaptation, incorporating eco-mythical elements. The plot can be summarized as follows: Ye Wenjie, a Chinese astrophysicist whose father was killed during the Cultural Revolution, makes contact with an alien civilization several light years away on a hostile and doomed planet called Trisolaris. She invites the aliens to conquer Earth in order to put an end to the destructive and self-destructive actions of humans inhabiting Earth. The Trisolarians

mobilize a fleet that will eradicate humanity like vermin upon their arrival in 450 years. To halt humanity's technological progress, which would lead to the destruction of their fleet, and thus the salvation of the human race, they send two 11-dimensional supercomputers called sophons to Earth. These sophons not only spy on and manipulate humanity but also make developments in nanotechnology and physics, through the disruption of particle accelerators, impossible. The philosophical problem explored in multiple dimensions is how humans react to certain extinction or how, through desperate efforts within the remaining technological possibilities, humanity can be scientifically armed to win a war against the Trisolarians and escape extinction.

Cixin's trilogy presents the hegemonic form of the apocalypse under the conditions of global modernity in its purest form. The apocalypse is a certainty towards which we approach on a strictly linear timeline toward a "continuously open horizon of finite possibility, an infinity of finite possibilities" (Dillon 2011, 781), yet one that can be prevented through scientific and technological progress. Within this scientific progress, the pre-modern figures of the Anti-Christ and the Katechon (Lienkamp 2001), the withholder who delays the end of a finite world, converge. Modern science is simultaneously the potential cause of life's destruction and the only means by which the end can be further delayed. Modern temporality is not only linear but also inherently a shrinking or expanding end time.

However, "visions of total destruction and of the extinction of life on Earth" (Jameson 2005, 199) are actually the exception, with notable examples such as Lars von Trier's 2011 film *Melancholia* (Elsaesser 2016), as indicated by dystopian visions and scenarios categorized under the term of post-apocalypse. A recent example of the boom of post-apocalypticism, is the 2024 Amazon Prime hit *Fallout*, an adaptation of a role-playing video game franchise, depicting the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse in 2077 where parts of the population sought refuge in fallout bunkers known as vaults. The plot unfolds 219 years later as a vault resident named Lucy embarks on a quest to find her father in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of devastated Los Angeles. The *Fallout* apocalypse illustrates that apocalypse does not necessarily, and usually does not, entail the total destruction of all life and human civilization. The apocalypse followed by a post-apocalypse, and indeed the post-apocalypse itself, are characterized by a more complex temporality than the typical modern apocalypse envisioned by Cixin, intertwining the temporalities of stasis and standstill (Baraitser 2017) within the bunkers with the temporality of regression and the persistence of the past, as well as the collapse of futurity on the surface.

*3-Body Problem* and *Fallout* also demonstrate that apocalypse and post-apocalypse exhibit distinct spatial characteristics. While *3-Body Problem* unfolds in an infinite and incomprehensible yet scientifically manageable geometrically homogeneous space, where Earth and Trisolaris are no more than coordinate points, the post-apocalypse of *Fallout* depicts contrasting and socially as well as ecologically determined spaces in the form of bunkers or vaults and the wasteland, each with their respective social practices, norms and laws (Lefebvre 1984).

*Fallout* further illustrates the existence of a topology of the apocalypse. Even within the broader scope of the global biblical apocalypse, Armageddon stands out as the location where, according to the *Book of Revelation*, the armies of good and evil gather for the final battle. Armageddon is not merely a metonymy of the apocalypse that has become a synonym for the world-ending, but a geographically locatable place: the mount of Megiddo in Israel (Cline 2000). There are not only spaces but also specific places that are more apocalyptic than others. Similarly, the setting of *Fallout*, Los Angeles, is not arbitrary but loaded with apocalyptic significance, partly due to actual potentials for natural existential threats like earthquakes and human-made threats including nuclear weapons, anthropogenic drought, and wildfires. Moreover, this is a cultural process whereby these places are attributed apocalyptic imagery and narratives, as seen in the case of Los Angeles in John Carpenter's 1996 *Escape from L.A.* (in the post-apocalyptic-dystopian variety) or Michael J. Sarna's 2015 *L.A. Apocalypse* (in the katechontic variety).

The apocalyptic topography is often intertwined with a colonial past and postcolonial present, as seen in cases such as Afghanistan, the Congo, and, of course, Palestine, and the violence inherent in the unequal distribution of resources and power on a global scale. This also holds true in relation to the ground zero of globalizing colonialism (Milhou 2003): Latin America and the apocalyptic hotspot which is the actual focus of my article: Mexico. I aim to demonstrate that Mexico's apocalyptic narratives and imagery have a gravitational center rooted in colonial times. I argue that this nexus is capable of organizing apocalyptic impulses and formations that are linked both to pre-colonial times and indigenous visions of the end of the world, as well as to events, real and imagined, belonging to deep history and geological time, which articulate global apocalyptic predicaments of our present. With this approach, I pursue two inter-related goals: to understand the history of the apocalypse in Mexico as an apocalyptic history and, at the same time, to elaborate and deepen some ideas, in particular in relation and opposition to the Anthropocene and the booming notion of extinction, which appear important to me regard-

ing apocalypse and post-apocalypse, and specifically through the lense of Mexico.

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## **1 The Dinosaur Apocalypse**

66 million years ago, an asteroid approximately fourteen kilometers in diameter impacted Earth, first causing a global ice age then followed by extreme global warming. Climate changes led to the so-called Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction event which caused the extermination of 75% of all species on Earth (Jablonski 1994), including dinosaurs, which had dominated the Earth for millions of years. Although some scientists disagree on ascribing the extinction event exclusively onto a cataclysmic impact from outer space (Courillot 1990), the impact scenario is the scientific consensus and the connection between a sudden event and the Cretaceous–Paleogene extinction is firmly anchored in popular imagination. At any rate, the impact event in prehistoric times, what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2021) would refer to as deep history, generates intriguing narratives.

Take, for example, Netflix's 2023 'documentary': *Life on Our Planet*, produced by Steven Spielberg, and narrated by Morgan Freeman, which recapitulates the evolution of life on Earth from its beginnings 3.5 billion years ago to the present, infused with a dystopian, anthropocentric vision towards the future, and the threat of another mass extinction. The first episode begins with the exposition of some updated Darwinian principles (adaptation, competition). However, the evolution of life is not simply a process unfolding in chronological or geological time. The episodes are organized around cycles of 'dynastic' species that 'rule' the planet (invertebrates, reptiles, dinosaurs, mammals), and that are eliminated by mass extinction events. The flow of chronology, strictly linear, is structured by events, namely extinctions. The history of the dinosaurs and their apocalyptic staging complicates the chronology and chronocracy that forms the basis of human history and modern sciences.

This prehistoric story is presented as a tragedy. The site of this tragedy was the Yucatán Peninsula in Mexico, as can be still seen today in the 180 km Chicxulub crater. However, does it make sense to speak in terms of a 'Dinosaur Apocalypse' in relation to these events in Earth's history, and does our way of speaking about the extinction of dinosaurs tell us something about the apocalypse? The apocalypse is not primarily an event but a narrative. A narrative requires protagonists and, in this case, victims or annihilated 'rulers': the dinosaurs. They are clearly conceived in anthropomorphic terms, as seen in the rage, fear, and agonizing suffering

displayed by the dinosaurs in the face of catastrophe and their imminent demise, in many artistic renderings of the Dinosaur Apocalypse, including Spielberg's offering. Documentaries like *Life on Our Planet* suggest that dinosaurs were the rulers of the Earth, much like we are today. Therefore, the Apocalypse needs a human subject or generates a substitute such as our imagined predecessors, the dinosaurs; in the mass extinction, other creatures like ammonites, spiral-shelled cephalopods, also disappeared, but we are unlikely to identify with them. Ammonites simply went extinct a long time ago, excluded from the genealogy of homo sapiens. The end of the dinosaurs is different from the extinction of ammonites because their "tragic" end is imagined as our prehistory and possibly the precondition for the human species.

It is evident that the apocalypse does, again, not signify the end of everything or annihilation: with the end of the dinosaurs, their world ended and the world of mammals began. From this, we can understand that the apocalypse does not occur just once and at a future point in time, and we can see that it operates on different scales: it was 75% annihilation in our dinosaur history, but it could also be more (all human life on Earth) or less (a species, a society, or a culture). Therefore, when we speak about the apocalypse today, we are commonly not referring to biblical history but rather to the end of the world as we know it, meaning how we experience it, or how we project our own history onto prehistory. Hence the apocalypse has a particular temporality in which the present folds onto the past (Folger 2022); in other words, the extinction of the dinosaurs folds onto the beginning of their 'dominion' on Earth, and this fold prefigures our own dominion on Earth.

Before discussing Mexican apocalypses that are appropriately situated within 'our' history, I would briefly like to make another observation about the persistence and historical transcendence of apocalyptic events and narratives. Although a portion of the Chicxulub crater can be found today in the Mexican peninsula Yucatán, geological records show that 66 million years ago the asteroid impacted in the North Atlantic Ocean rather than in Yucatán; which did not exist at that time, at least not as a peninsula of Mexico. Why then speak of apocalypse, and why associate it with Mexico?

The apocalypse as narrative and imagery gives meaning and form to events that are too large and complex for our experience or cognition. Therefore, apocalypses and post-apocalypses can be seen as *realizations* of hyperobjects. Timothy Morton (2013) describes hyperobjects as entities that extend so vastly in space and time that they escape human sense and understanding. According to Morton, encountering hyperobjects brings feelings of powerlessness and fear: although human societies have

developed symbolic systems to analyze and describe hyperobjects, individuals can only experience them from within as a set of forces and constraints beyond their control. In the intellectual and cultural history of the West, there is a semantic and experiential charge to the concept of apocalypse, through which hyperobjects seem real and comprehensible, while, at the same time, the emotions that arise when facing the immense and incomprehensible reality are channeled (Pitetti 2017), in a “paranoiac” (Freud 1958) worldmaking of sorts, through narratives and images that anchor the end of the world as a guiding reference point (Kermode 2000). Although apocalypse, if conflated with annihilation and extinction, is not only paranoiac but also precludes visions of a human (or post- or trans-human) future, as such, it is a coping mechanism. Moreover, apocalypse as a temporal and spatial falling into place of past, present, and future can also bring about an opening, and process of mending and renewal, which I will discuss in the concluding section of this essay.

At any rate, identifying with dinosaurs as our predecessors helps us to cope with fears about our own existential risks, substituting the inconceivable with a terrifying yet ‘satisfying’ vision of an apocalyptic cataclysm, that does, after all, provide the solace of a continuity of world-ruling ‘dynasties.’ An integral part of this process is assigning a particular apocalyptic site (equivalent to the biblical Armageddon) that helps mitigate spatial incompatibility; thus, establishing the apocalyptic topography that is reflected in cultural representations of sites ranging from Armageddon to Los Angeles. Furthermore, identifying Mexico as the site of a (past) apocalypse indicates the temporal overlap between past, present, and future within apocalyptic temporality. I assume the history of the Dinosaur Apocalypse in Yucatán is an integral part of the distorted Eurocentric image of Mexico as an apocalyptic space of chaos and violence today, which turns the imaginary Mexico of the dinosaurs into a perfect place for the apocalypse. However, the anchoring point that organizes Mexican apocalypses in the past, the supposed extinction of the dinosaurs, and apocalypses of the present and future, is the colonial period and the events today labelled—and mislabelled—as *Conquista*.

## **2 The Apocalypse of Tenochtitlán**

On August 13th 2021, Mexico commemorated the 500 years of an occurrence with an importance for world history. This anniversary went largely unnoticed in Europe and the ‘Western World.’ However, the event I’m referring to was critical in the making of this ‘Western World,’ and it was a

milestone for the rise of modernity as well as its darker side. I'm referring to the Fall of the Aztec or, more accurately, Mexica capital Tenochtitlán, 'conquered' by Hernán Cortés on August 13th 1521.

In 1521 the European presence in the Americas dated back nearly three decades. However, the making of the 'New World' took place in Mexico, and it is marked by the Fall of Tenochtitlán. The early focus of Iberian colonialism was the Caribbean, but the exploitation of the island world, which caused, in a brief period of time, the extinction of various indigenous populations—although recent research shows that they did not go extinct, the extinction trope prevails—had no significant impact on European cultures and economies. In Mesoamerica, however, the Spaniards subdued numerous highly developed cultures with millions of inhabitants and began to extract resources; natural as well as human. This led to the establishment of a new world system (Wallerstein 1974), marking the genesis of globalized capitalism, which is the hallmark of our own present. The making of the modern world meant the unmaking of existing indigenous worlds. To simplify matters, this unmaking was the unmaking of the Aztec (or Mexica) Empire. In less than 200 years, the Mexica in their capital Tenochtitlán had established an extensive empire. Its population was far greater than the population of any other European country of the time. Some scholars estimate 25 million.

This empire was 'conquered' by the Spanish adventurer Hernán Cortés who at any given time never commanded more than 3,000 Europeans. The crucial factor for this astounding feat was that the Spaniards mustered the support of large indigenous groups against the hated imperial power of the Mexica. It is with good reason that we can talk about a civil war triggered and instrumentalized by Cortés. The final battle in this campaign took place in the valley of Mexico. To understand the events, it is necessary to take into account the particular nature of the Mexican capital. Tenochtitlán was a metropolis built in a lake; the city was connected by three dams to the mainland. Cortés's final conquest was a campaign of destruction which culminated in the onslaught on the capital in the lakes (Añón 2022). Even from the Spanish sources, we can gather an impression of the eerie, phantasmagoric process of destruction and massacre. Due to the siege, the population were starving and the victims of several raging diseases added to those slaughtered in the battle. The streets and the canals were filled with corpses. The city was not just conquered. In a street fight, the Spaniards and their allies tore down building after building, using the debris to fill the canals. When the last survivors surrendered on August 13th 1521 the city was erased and nearly abandoned. It is close to impossible to calculate the death toll, but the numbers must have been

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staggering. One estimate reckons that about 250,000 people died in the final battle alone (Semo 2021).

### 2.1 European Apocalypticism and the ‘Conquest’

The Fall of Mexico is overdetermined from the perspective of apocalyptic thought, which has both a European and an indigenous dimension. Ten years after the destruction of Tenochtitlán, the city witnessed a very particular spectacle. The representation of one of the earliest known pieces of theatre in Mexico. It was composed, shortly before 1531, by a Franciscan friar Andrés de Olmos, in the indigenous language Náhuatl and preserved in a Spanish transcription with the title *El Juicio final*, [The Final Judgement] (Olmos 2004). This is an allegorical play with the didactic purpose of reminding the neophyte Mexica of the importance of a virtuous life in the face of the impending, or ongoing, apocalypse (López de Mariscal 1999). The content of the apocalyptic play is trivial from a modern perspective, but the emotional impact must have been overwhelming: 800 indigenous people, survivors of the massacres that had happened less than a decade ago, participated in the play. It took place in the postapocalyptic scenery of the erased city, probably on the ruins of the pyramid of Tlatelolco.

The apocalyptic framing of the Fall of Tenochtitlán is by no means gratuitous. It is at the core of Latin American history, that is, history after the *Invention of America*, as historian Edmundo O’Gorman (1961) has called it. Christopher Columbus, the discoverer of the ‘New World,’ is one of the celebrated heroes of modernity (Bennassar and Bennassar 1992). It is well-known that there was another side to this modern man: his insistence of having found a route to Asia, his fervent Christian belief, including the idea that he found the earthly paradise in modern day Venezuela. The two sides of Columbus, the modern and the ‘medieval,’ are no contradiction. They are part and parcel of apocalyptic mentality and thinking at the beginning of the ‘New World’ (Milhou 1983).

Columbus’s last work, composed in the year 1504, was the *Libro de las profecías* [The Book of Prophecies] (Colombo 1993). The text is mainly a miscellany of biblical quotes foretelling, according to Columbus, the discovery of the New World. This discovery is essentially related to the Apocalypse. Among other apocalypics, Columbus was strongly influenced by Joachim of Fiore, who had modified the calculus of the end of the world which was often modeled after the “cosmic week” (Turner 2022), each day corresponding to 1,000 years, which postulates the end of the world after 6,000 or 7,000 years. Joachim divided human history in three periods according to the Holy Trinity: the age or realm of the Father, the



age of the Son, and the age of the Holy Spirit, a Kingdom of freedom, prosperity, and love that precedes the definite end of the world.

The apocalypse was not simply a fatal accident but, rather, God's final plan for humanity, and this plan required the fulfillment of several conditions, among others, the conversion of the Jews, and, most importantly, to quote Columbus, the recuperation of the "Holy City and God's Mount Sion" (Colombo 1993, 16) that is, the reconquest of Jerusalem. Columbus relates all this to his discoveries, by drawing on Isaiah 65 who foretells the transformation of heaven and earth before the end times. Columbus interprets this passage as the discovery of a New World, accomplished by himself, and made possible by the influence of the Holy Spirit on the Spanish Kings. America, the Americas, are the New Jerusalem, which is instrumental in bringing about the apocalypse. Of course, first Mount Sion and Old-World Jerusalem must be recuperated. 'New World' and 'Old World' apocalyptic topography are superimposed. Columbus argues that Divine Providence has made this possible because the Spanish Kings have been given riches of the New World, the gold and silver stolen by the conquistadors, which make the final crusade possible. He urges the Spanish King that time is of the essence because, as his calculation shows, the world will end in the year 1650, when the world reaches the age of 7,000 years.

The allegorical apocalyptic play on the rubbles of Tenochtitlán was staged by the Franciscans. The Friars Minor had a particularly close relation to apocalypticism. As missionaries supported by Hernán Cortés, they played a fundamental role in shaping what is today known as Mexico. They were convinced that the conquest of Mexico was a compensation for the loss of the Holy Land, a New Jerusalem (Phelan 1972, Weckmann 1982; Milhou 1983, West 1989, Roest 2013). They were also convinced that Mexico would be a Millennial Kingdom preceding the Second Coming of Christ and the Final Judgement. The Franciscans had a key role in the shaping of colonial Mexico, which they imagined as a Kingdom of peace and love. Nothing could have been further from reality. They had to witness one of the most horrifying demographic collapses and human catastrophes in history: the population of New Spain diminished in the first century dramatically, with an estimated reach of 95% (Brierley et al. 2019), which can be mostly attributed to diseases and genocidal violence brought by the Europeans. How could God allow that their Millennial Kingdom, and the peoples converted to the true faith, had suffered so horribly? Friar Jerónimo de Mendieta argued that this punishment of apocalyptic dimensions was actually meted out to the Spaniards who depended on the forced labor and tributes by the indigenous peoples, while those indig-

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enous inhabitants who died in good faith were saved by God after the Final Judgement (Phelan 1972).

## 2.2 Mexica Apocalypse

Thus far, I have focused on the apocalypse and the function of the idea of the end of the world to justify the destruction of the Mexica world and the creation of a new world, and, at the same time, to make sense of barely comprehensible historical catastrophes. Those were traditional European notions of the apocalypse. However, apocalypticism was not limited to Christian Europe. In Mesoamerica, the Europeans encountered cultures whose cosmogony was fundamentally determined by the notion of the end of worlds. The Nahua peoples believed in repeated creations and destructions of the world and its inhabitants (Christensen 2022). Each world was governed by a sun, associated with an element, and a dominant deity. By the time of the arrival of the Europeans, they believed to be living under the fifth sun, the sun of the sun, attributed to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered Serpent. The Mexica were the People of the Sun, which had to be ‘nurtured’ by the blood of human sacrifices in order to prevent or postpone the end of this world.

After the conquest and the Fall of Tenochtitlán, the Nahuas produced so called *tetzáhuitl*, prophecies which foretold the catastrophe (Olivier and Ledesma 2019). In this framing, the Fall of Tenochtitlán was an apocalypse which marked the advent of a new sun, a new world, associated with the Christian God with a new human race: the Spaniards. This ex-post-apocalypse was a way of making sense of an unthinkable catastrophe and the end of the world as they knew it. The apocalyptic events more than half a millennium ago are not simply a remote past; they had a profound impact on Mexican history, identity, and the European view of Mexico. Reading and viewing ‘Western’ media outlets, it is hard to imagine a country more apocalyptic than Mexico and a city more fraught with apocalyptic fantasies than Mexico-City, the former Tenochtitlán. In the early colonial period, apocalyptic narratives, both of Europeans and indigenous peoples, were instrumental in shaping a Mexican identity, and, at the same time, constituted conflictive sites of colonial domination and indigenous resistance.

Either way, apocalyptic events and narratives have particular temporality that relates a present to an apocalyptic past, which can be seen in the official commemoration of the Fall of Tenochtitlán in Mexico itself, the motto of which was *500 años de resistencia indígena* [500 years of Indigenous Resistance]. From this point of view, the end of Tenochtitlán was not the end but a beginning that shapes the present. At any rate, the

idea that the creation of the ‘New World’ meant the end of a world, and the awareness of the possibility of an end of a world has proven a factor in Mexican history and politics, not only in the past but also in relation to our current existential threats or imagined existential threats. In Mexico, as elsewhere, culture and art in particular have been a medium to explore the apocalyptic dimension of these very real challenges.

An apocalyptic history of Mexico, then, would require additional chapters on the consolidation of the colonial regime in the seventeenth century, during which Mexican Creoles constructed post-apocalyptic Mexico as an earthly paradise and New Jerusalem (Folger 2019). To remain true to said additional chapters one would need to take a look at the wars of independence that signified both the end and continuity of the colonial world (Folger 2010), and the Mexican Revolution marked by extreme violence and destruction, accompanying Mexico’s entry into modernity and a new form of globalization. Instead, however, I invite you to leap into the present, where these layers of the apocalyptic Mexican past continue to resonate both in everyday life and cultural imagination.

### **3 Imagining the End of Times Today**

*Imagining the End of Times: Stories of Annihilation, Apocalypse and Extinction*, a temporary exhibition at the Museum of Anthropology, organized by CAPAS and its Mexican partners (INAH: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, INBAL: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, and MLN: Museo Nacional de Antropología), and inaugurated in December 2023, focused on the particular temporality of apocalyptic thinking, which relates the present with the past in the view of a possibly catastrophic future (Mantilla Osornio 2024). The exhibition spanned from the early settlement of the Americas approximately 14,000 years ago to the present day, addressing and performing the unique temporality of apocalyptic scenarios. In the remainder of this essay, I want to reflect on four exhibits that illustrate the particularity of apocalyptic temporality against the backdrop of one of today’s grand narratives, the Anthropocene, and its relation to the notion of extinction.



Figure 1. José María Veloso, *Escena del periodo Cuaternario Paleolítico Superior: evolución de la vida continental en el globo terrestre, Estudio geológico* (ca. 1905).

### 3.1 Paleo-Ontology and the Beginning of Human History

The first painting is a work by José María Velasco, one of the most important Mexican painters of his time (Ovando 1998). The work I am interested in was created around 1905. It has the oddly descriptive, elaborate, and ‘scientific’ title: *Scene from the Superior Paleolithic Quaternary Period: Evolution of Continental Life on the Terrestrial Globe. A Geological Study* (figure 1). Set against a rocky formation with a cave entrance and surrounded by a dense forest enveloped in the darkness of night, we see a group of humans, five in total, gathered around a campfire. This group represents a family or clan with a patriarch positioned above.

Velasco’s dating, the Upper Paleolithic period, places this scene roughly 14,000 years ago, at the transition to the Holocene, the current geological period. Although archaeological findings suggest human presence in the Americas long before this date, Velasco’s scene refers to the arrival of the so-called Clovis culture in the Americas, which was considered the beginning of human history in the Americas. Velasco, who labels this scene as the “evolution of continental life on the globe,” evokes an image of the absolute beginning of the human world; namely, the world or globe that is ‘colonized’ by humans. Needless to say, the Americas were the last continent to be populated by homo sapiens and thus completing the global reach of our species. Velasco situates his scene within human history, the Paleolithic or Stone Age, but integrated into the geological time of the Quaternary period. He relates said scene to human evolution, namely the migration of modern humans in a process of globalizing humanity.

The painting is suggestive of this staging in terms of the distinction made by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger between *Sein* (Being) and *Dasein* (existence) (Heidegger 1967). *Sein*, everything that exists or is real, is what makes human life possible and yet is not simply accessible to human experience. It is a kind of darkness that envelops us. Human existence, *Dasein*, requires a place of visibility, a clearing in this darkness, that allows us to discern what exists for us, the world that is created for us and by us. Velasco’s painting illustrates this dualism by showing the beginning of the world as we know it, not just a world where homo sapiens are one species among others, but a world where we position ourselves as a species and as individuals in relation to an environment. This environment is affected and transformed by human activity and creates a reality that we call our world. In this sense, the scene depicted by the Mexican painter is indeed paleo-ontological, referring to the Greek *palaiós*, meaning ancient, and ontology, the ‘science of what exists.’

The scene depicted by Velasco is a primordial scene (*Urszene*) of human existence. It shows the clearing of existence/*Dasein* in the darkness

of Being (*Sein*), the dark natural grounding of the world. The fire creates a place of clarity for human existence, already ‘furnished’ with what will enable and determine existence. Here we can see rudimentary or fundamental technology in the form of fire, and also an important detail that is easily overlooked: the human figure holding the mammoth tusk is likely using a stone tool to carve or work on the tusk. This primordial scene of existence marks the beginning of human culture, as the tusk will possibly be transformed into a work of art like the famous *Sacro de Tequixquiac* (figure 2), an animal sculpture using a bone from an extinct type of camel or “sacred bone” (Stross 2007), included in the exhibition, which was possibly created around 14,000 BCE (the time imagined by Velasco as the beginning of human culture on the American continent).

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Figure 2. *Sacro de Tequixquiac* (20,000–5,500 BCE), Museo Nacional de Antropología. There is no secured dating. I am presenting the time span postulated by Mantilla Osornio (2024).



Figure 3. Juan O'Gorman, *La humanidad: cáncer del mundo orgánico* (1979).

### 3.2 Humanity as the Cancer of the Organic World: Anthropocenic Apocalypticism

Another painting presented at the exhibition was Juan O’Gorman’s 1979 *La humanidad: cáncer del mundo orgánico* [*Humanity: Cancer of the Organic World*] (figure 3) (Rodríguez Parampolini 1983). O’Gorman (1905–1982) presents the Earth depicted as barren, a surface almost devoid of color, resembling the moon, devoid of organic life. We see remnants of human architecture: fortifications, a Greek temple, and castle towers transforming into factory buildings. Detached but literally rooted in the Earth and ancient cultural and technological achievements, a ghostly human world unfolds in the sky. The painter created an image of a technosphere, which the geologist Peter Haff defines as an “interconnected set of communication, transportation, bureaucratic, and other systems that act to metabolize fossil fuels and other energy resources,” analogous to other spheres like the biosphere or atmosphere (Haff 2013, 301–302).

O’Gorman’s technosphere *avant la lettre* is populated by vaguely organic growths and cyborg-like monstrous creatures. Thus, the painting also anticipates the post-humanist or trans-humanist dreams of human evolution through technology. This world, as suggested by the infernal fire in the upper right, will soon face its own end. In an allusion to modern extractivism, the human-posthuman technosphere vampires the Earth. It has destroyed all organic life. Humanity, as the cancer of organic life, has not only exterminated the entire biosphere but also caused its own destruction.

## 4 Anthro-scenes

Some visitors of the exhibition contemplating the two paintings might have related them to one of today’s great narratives of human destiny: the Anthropocene. In 2000, Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer suggested that impact of human activities on earth and atmosphere on a global scale makes it necessary to emphasize the central role of mankind in geology and ecology by postulating a new geological epoch called the Anthropocene. Mankind had become a geological force. The term was not immediately accepted, and Crutzen’s and Stoermer’s proposal to set the late eighteenth Century and the onset of industrialization in Europe has provoked numerous counterproposals regarding the beginning of the Anthropocene, and where to set the Golden Spike (a site that captures the epoch’s novelty) in order to officially proclaim the new geological epoch.



In the light of this narrative, O’Gorman appears as some kind of a visionary who anticipated the idea of the Anthropocene and his painting can be seen as a premonition and warning against the possibly fateful consequences of human interaction with the natural world. Moreover, also Velasco’s vision of human evolution in the Americas and in the world, appears as an anthropo-scene (Lorimer 2017) with somber overtones. The patriarchal setting he depicts has been identified as one of the sources for the destructive forces in human history. His oddly European-looking first settlers of the Americas hint at racialized hierarchies in relation to the claim of evolution. The hand-ax illustrates the interconnection of technology and violence. The mammoth tusk evokes the possible relation of the arrival of humans with the extinction of the American megafauna, and the campfire is the first instant of strictly speaking anthropogenic emission of CO<sub>2</sub>. Thus, the primordial scene of human history foreshadows the predicaments and existential risks of our own period.

However, it must be emphasized that the two paintings do not simply illustrate the narrative of the Anthropocene but rather provide a powerful critique. And indeed, scholarship has also criticized the concept for various reasons (Swyngedouw and Ernstson 2018, Yusoff 2018). It gives another spin not only to anthropocentrism but also to Eurocentrism. It postulates instrumental, scientific rationality, linear temporality, and mechanic causality that created the current predicament in the first place as the only or, at least, principal solution to the problem: We have to find out what went wrong and when things went wrong in order to fix the problem. It has been suggested, as such, that we need what has been called “planetary managers” or “planetary engineers,” or to find strategies of resilience (Rothe 2020).

Although scientific data on global warming and prognosis of its possible devastating impact are now indisputable and largely undisputed, it must be emphasized that the societal and political impact of the Anthropocene is related to its ideological nature. By ideology I mean an imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence (Althusser 1995). Although the Anthropocene is conceived of as an objective scientific notion it functions as an ideologeme in the sense given to the term by Fredric Jameson:

The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself as a pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the ‘collective characters’ which are the classes in opposition.

[...] [T]he ideologeme is already given in advance: as a construct it must be susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation (Jameson 1981, 87).

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Jameson's notion is important because it emphasizes, in relation to the Anthropocene, not only its conceptual and descriptive value but also its narrative nature. Although the debate among geologists and related empirical scientific disciplines is, at first sight, focused on the determination of the beginning of the Anthropocene the notion is essentially narrative in the sense that thinking of the beginning anticipates the end, similar to the visions of Velasco and O'Gorman. In his classic *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode (2000), postulates the essentially eschatological nature of narrative: in order to transform a series of chronological events into a story we must have a sense of ending, organize and connect events, not necessarily in a causal relation, to an end.

What is true for smaller narratives, is also true for the grandest of grand narratives, the History of humankind. "Stretched out over the whole of History, the End is present at every moment," as Kermode (2000, 26) phrases it. Global warming is a hyper object, as Timothy Morton (2013) has described them; entities so vastly distributed in time and space that they cannot be grasped by the human gaze or mind, requiring narrations to make them 'real' by anticipating and presentifying the End. While science provides 'tipping points' and catastrophic scenarios as narrative anchors and narrative points of capture, in public debates anthropo-scenic thinking generates end time visions that are commonly labelled as apocalyptic. Dystopian visions of the Anthropocene increasingly focus not only on catastrophic or cataclysmic consequences of global warming (and also other perceived existential risks) but also on the impact of human activities on the "organic world" as O'Gorman has called it, namely the mass extinction of species, which would be the sixth in deep history. In an even more drastic vision, the endpoint of the Anthropocene narrative is the destruction of the whole biosphere; annihilation of life on Earth.

In public discourse, there is an increasing convergence of the Anthropocene with Jameson's concept of apocalypse, namely as "total destruction and the extinction of life on Earth" (Jameson 2005, 199). As I outlined earlier, however, this notion of apocalypse is distinctly Eurocentric-modern, characterized by a peculiar temporality—that of the linear, irreversible time of progress. The fact that Chixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy can only conceive of the end as either extinction or survival is a result of underlying scientism—where good or bad science alone determine existence—under the dictate of Chronos, the relentless ticking

clock. Although modernity's time is always 'end time,' the postponement of the end ultimately results in its repression (also in the psychoanalytic sense). This displacement prevents modern end time from reaching its end, the time that remains, in Agamben's (2005) formulation for messianic end times, the actual temporality of the 'veiled' apocalypse, which appears not as *Chronos*, but as *Kairos* (Hartog 2021), the time of the event, the emergence of the new, in which the past, present, and future coincide.

While from the perspective of *Chronos*, looking back on an already past past, the question thus should be whether Velasco's and O'Gorman's images are harbingers of the Anthropocene, the question from the perspective of *Kairos*, however, is how images of the past challenge current ideologies and open horizons for a future that is not anti-utopian in Jameson's sense; thus, opening up the possibility of radical change and an open future. Looking back with O'Gorman to the primordial scene of globalized humanity as depicted by Velasco we get a perspective different from the Anthropocene. The apocalyptic thinking and temporality of *Kairos* suggest that the fall from grace was the very beginning of human history, the furnishing of the clearing of being in the first place. The purpose is not placing the Golden Spike on the axis of linear time, but questioning the very mode of human being in the world. And yet, there is more to this apocalyptic logic because the two artists in juxtaposition don't provide evidence but open horizons and provoke thought.

Maybe, I have it all wrong with my anthropo-scenic interpretation of Velasco's painting. At any rate, it is not the only possible interpretation. We can also see in his painting a proto-indigenous community who lives, organically embedded into nature, a form of peaceful sociability, and we may witness nascent human creativity, which would be a call from the past not to forget being for the sake of existence. Ultimately, both paintings are *Denkbilder*, thought-images, as Walter Benjamin (2001) has called them, figurations that explore epistemological problems, which are in our case related to apocalypse and post-apocalypse. In particular, O'Gorman's painting poses intriguing questions, if we don't simply see it as an image from a future that is inevitable.

O'Gorman understands the apocalypse not as the end of all life on Earth, but as a threat to all organic life on Earth. The label 'post-apocalyptic' immediately comes to mind, but this intuition requires further substantiation. This raises the question of the nature of the apocalypse as the end of a world ('*mundo*') and, indeed, the question of the concept of the world itself. Finally, it raises the issue of the meaning and form of the post-apocalypse. If we understand the core meaning of apocalypse—not as a definition but as a semantic rhizome—in a very general sense as the

end of the world, and if we do not conceive of the world, in line with O’Gorman and contrary to the naked apocalypse of modernity as “mere annihilation;” the end of all life without any transcendence, that is to say “Kingdom” (Anders 1986, 207), then it becomes possible to characterize the end of the world as the end of a way of life.

This could mean that ‘world’ does not refer to the entire lifeworld or ‘the reality,’ but rather to a particular reality among others, namely the paramount reality that is “fraglos gegeben [unquestionably given]” (Luckmann and Schütz 2003, 69) and which makes possible our everyday existence. This concept of lifeworld is borrowed from phenomenological sociology, specifically the work of Alfred Schütz and Thomas Luckmann. Radical changes or collapses of the paramount reality resemble world endings or apocalypses, but they do not only, or not necessarily, mean catastrophe and destruction but may rather open the door to transformations of this reality and new forms of “unquestioned givenness.”

Although ‘paramount reality’ encompasses the cognitive and epistemic dimensions of the concept of world, it has the drawback of presenting a disembodied view of world that does not adequately consider the affective dimension of worlding (Steward 2007). This precise aspect is at the center of the considerations of Mexican philosopher Zenia Yébenes Escardó (2023) regarding the concept of life. Yébenes Escardó understands ‘life’ beyond biopolitics and necropolitics as a way of life of a community that involves shared “habitus,” dispositions, and customs extending beyond the realm of the human into the animate and inanimate nature. Unlike theories of the social contract, ‘life’ in Yébenes Escardó’s understanding does not have a contractual basis but is based on an “acuerdo” (Yébenes Escardó 2023, 97), an agreement and consent. The end of ‘life’ does not equate to extinction but rather to a termination of the *acuerdo* of life.

O’Gorman’s painting represents a kind of ruination of the lifeworld, which does not necessarily cease to exist but does, however, signify the end of life as he sees it, namely organic life. Thus, there is an opportunity to understand the post-apocalypse not as a kind of aftermath of the apocalypse, but as an unfinished end of a world that falls short of annihilation, and the end of ‘life,’ or *vida* (Yébenes Escardó 2023, 96–107), that is not synonymous with the end of biological life. The cancer of the organic world transforms it into a world devoid of *vida*, ‘life,’ in the sense of Yébenes Escardó. The post-apocalypse would, then, not simply be the aftermath of a world-ending catastrophe, but a depraved world where, contrary to what is often claimed in research (see McQueen 2018, Kaup 2021), there is not a regression to a state of nature, but rather a termination of the

acuerdo of 'life,' as exemplified in post-apocalyptic imaginings like Netflix's *Fallout* (2024).

O'Gorman allows us to envision various futures and world endings, making them conceivable but offering no certainty except that all things must come to an end. This is the only kind of revelation that apocalypse can offer. Contrary to the linear temporality and the determinism of the Anthropocene, apocalyptic thinking implies a form of revelation different from positive truth and certainty; as such, it takes the shape of a question or mystery. This structure of revelation characterizes the most important source for apocalypticism in the 'Western' world: John's *Book of Revelation* reveals a process of revelation (Landfester 2012). John's vision tells us about how books are opened, but we do not know what's written in them because that is the precondition for a truly new world.

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Figure 4. Nadia Osornio, *Más allá del canto apocalíptico* (2022), Estudio Nadia Osornio, México

## 5 Conclusion: Beyond the Apocalyptic Song

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The notion of revelation or unveiling, which constitutes the etymological meaning of apocalypse (the Greek ἀποκάλυψις), is the epistemic and axiological core of the notion of apocalypse. As noted by the French philosopher Paul Ricœur (1977), revelation does not imply the elucidation or clear vision of a positive truth, which he categorizes and dismisses as dogma and ideology. Instead, with apocalypse, an *epoché* is established: a radical rupture. In a recent study, another French philosopher, Jean Vioulac, asserts: “the concept of apocalypse allows for all the epochal determinations previously brought to light to be gathered: it defines the very *essance* of our epoch” (2021, 53). The apocalypse is the lifting of a veil and a confrontation with a ‘mystery’ that hegemonic instrumental rationality cannot comprehend and control. The ‘veiled’ apocalypse challenges the epistemological regime related to linear temporality, the dictatorship that the present exercises over both the past, which becomes material subject to hermeneutic violence, and the future, which is merely a linear extension of the present because the possible, as Slovenian philosopher Alenka Zupančič (2017–2018) says, is based on what exists. As I pointed out earlier in this essay, apocalypse as a narrative that makes it possible to grasp incomprehensible radical change and overwhelming emotions is a form of paranoid worldmaking and thus also a method: it is an approach to and ordering principle of real-life and imagined events. However, apocalypse may also afford an alternative to the paranoid approach to radical change, which we could call along with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “reparative” (2003). While paranoid apocalypse forecloses futures that are not predicated on annihilation or extinction and “dogmatic” (Ricœur 1977) revelation, and must, as such, necessarily “disappoint” (Blanchot 1997, Zupančič 2017–2018, García Düttmann and Quent 2023), reparative apocalypse assembles and superimposes past, present, and futures that are whole rather than ruined.

I have used examples from this exhibition of images of the end of times in Mexico City, a place where worlds ended and were born, to argue that the apocalypse is not necessarily just the end, but a conclusion that folds towards a beginning, and that this end of a world is not only destructive but possibly opens new possibilities beyond the existing. With this in mind, I want to conclude with a thought on another exhibit that was on display at the Museum of Anthropology in 2023/2024. I am referring to a photomontage from 2022, by Nadia Osornio (figure 4), from the series intriguingly titled *Más allá del canto apocalíptico* [Beyond the Apocalyptic Chant] a plea, perhaps, to overcome or transcend Jacques Derrida’s (1984) “apocalyptic tone.” It illustrates and embodies the particular tem-

porality of apocalypse, the simultaneity of colonial past (ruins of the great pyramid) and present technology (metro trains), of nature (underwater life reminiscent of the lake that surrounded Tenochtitlán) and the technosphere (street life). The future as an open, ‘reparative’ future is paradoxically evoked by the effect of veiling, of overlapping or montage of images. The truth, beyond the apocalyptic song, beyond the swan song of our own world, takes the form of a temporal and spatial blending, effecting “something like a whole—though [...] *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*” (Sedgwick 2003, 128).

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