Between

Apocalyptic Immanence and Anthropocene Time

Florian Mussgnug

Abstract

This article explores the cultural influence of Frank Kermode's description of apocalyptic immanence in *The Sense of an Ending* (1966). I focus on Kermode's claim that human subject formation and human conceptions of cosmic time are mutually constituted through expectations of the End. I claim that a version of this dynamic is at play in the Anthropocene debate, where attention to planetary-scale agency has reoriented social routines and cognitive and affective configurations, and has extended the temporal dimensionality of epistemic practices. I pay specific attention to the positions of the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG) and to the work of historians Dipesh Chakrabarty and François Hartog. I suggest that Kermodian apocalyptic immanence can be effective where it serves to achieve political momentum. Also, at the level of conceptual analysis, it can help us make sense of the juxtaposition of geological, historical, and autobiographical timescales in Anthropocene thinking. However, its humanistic emphasis on the transhistorical self-sameness of the autological subject makes it a problematic conceptual tool.

Keywords

Anthropocene, Apocalypse, Eschatology, Fiction, Posthumanism, Planetary time, Subjectivity, Temporality

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Apocalyptic Immanence and Anthropocene Time

Florian Mussgnug

In his seminal study of the apocalyptic imagination, *The Sense of an Ending* (1966), literary scholar Frank Kermode considers the modern fascination with rectilinear temporal cosmogonies. He explains how narratives of cosmic origin and apocalypse-to-come have provided solace and orientation at the level of individual lived experience, across periods and cultures:

> Men, like poets, rush 'into the middest', *in medias res*, when they are born; they also die *in mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems. The End they imagine will reflect their irreducibly intermediary preoccupations. (Kermode 1966: 7; italics in the original)

Kermode's analysis of the existential significance of eschatological thinking establishes a connection between the comparatively short span of a human life («in the middest») and the belief in a vast but temporarily finite universe. He argues that human subject formation and human conceptions of cosmic time are mutually constituted through expectations of the End. «We project ourselves – a small, humble elect, perhaps – past the End so as to see the structured whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot in the middle» (Kermode 1966: 8). In this article, I wish to suggest that a version of this attitude is at play in contemporary Anthropocene discourse. My claim goes against the widely held belief that all Anthropocene thinking is inherently anti-humanistic and post-anthropocentric, so, in the third part of the article, we are going to encounter some weighty objections. To begin, however, let me pay closer attention to Kermode's argument.[1]

[1] A version of this text was first presented in January 2025 at the University of Heidelberg's Käte Hamburger Centre for Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic

Men in the Middle

Eschatology, for Kermode, is first and foremost an organizing structure and a configuration of affects. He notes that all natural modes of existence are limited and that, for this reason, human lives can only be lived in a syncopated temporality that sets the conscious and self-reflective individual at a remove from the time of the world. As humans, we are finite by virtue of the end that we meet when we perish. Death is the caesura that cuts us off from the great expanses of time that will follow our passing. Similarly, a sense of contingency surrounds the moment of our birth, when our coming into the world interrupts the flow of time that precedes us, splitting it into a before and an after. Between these two moments in time – birth and death – the serendipitous trajectory of our short, contingent lives appears insignificant, unless we succeed in filling it with wider meaning. For Kermode, this struggle to make finite existences meaningful finds expression in plotted stories, and in the idea that every human life has a temporal structure that is consonant with the origins and destiny of the world at large. «Men in the middest», he writes, «make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle» (Kermode 1966: 17).

It is important to note that Kermode is not exclusively concerned with religious belief systems. More accurately, he wishes to describe an organizing structure and affective configuration that apocalyptic Christianity shares with other fictions. From a narratological point of view, the differences between religious and secular versions of apocalyptic immanence weigh less heavily than their rhetorical similarities. «If I am right in my argument», Kermode writes, then the same «paradigmatic fiction ought to be visible in the theologians as well as in other spheres» (Kermode 1966: 24). Kermode points out that «men» [sic] derive satisfaction from imagining the temporal span of the world [*Weltzeit*] as finite, in accordance with the familiar patterns of their individual human lives [*Lebenszeit*].[2] Just as

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[2] I take the concepts of world time [*Weltzeit*] and life time [*Lebenszeit*] from

importantly, the intensity and fullness of each person's lived experience are heightened by their propensity to imagine quotidian occurrences as harbingers («fictive concords») of world time: reverberations of cosmic origin or prefigurations of the end of history. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode illustrates this desire for concordance with examples from Christian apocalypticism. More specifically, he focuses his attention on evangelical millenarian thinkers, who read the Biblical Book of Revelation as a prophetic anticipation of their own circumstances, whether personal or social. Kermode remarks that this particular variant of Christian eschatological thinking has moulded the contours of many contemporary orientations and debates. For the apocalyptic believer, world history, religious prophecy, and personal experience cohere as parts of a single, universal, apocalyptic plan. Present-day experiences and events are regarded, in the words of theologians Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, as *actualizations* of Biblical prophecy: their meaningful alignment with the Book of Revelation affirms the lasting authority of a two-thousand-year-old narrative of end time (Kovacs and Rowland 2004: 7). According to Kermode, the same desire for a meaningful concordance of narratives of the personal and the universal can be found in modern secular and post-secular worldviews.

> It makes little difference – though it makes some – whether you believe the age of the world to be six thousand years or five thousand million years; whether you think time will have a stop or that the world is eternal; there is still a need to speak humanly of a life's importance in relation to it – a need in a moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and an end. (Kermode 1966: 3-4)

Kermode's remark about the age of the world is significant, because it draws attention to the historical emergence of modern conceptions of planetary geological time from older theocentric or anthropocentric cosmogonies. Eschatological longing, Kermode writes, is a peculiarity of the human imagination: we can only «make sense of the past as of a book or a psalm we have read or recited, and of the present as a book the seals of which we shall see opened; the only way to do this is to project fears and guesses and inferences from the past into the future» (Kermode 1966: 96). Kermode's image of the book is important here, since it contains the con-

Blumenberg 2001. For an illuminating discussion of Hans Blumenberg's philosophy of history, see Nicholls 2015.

ceptual core of his argument. When we read a European-language novel (in paper copy, from beginning to end, in the right order, and for the first time), everything to the left of our bookmark is remembered as having taken place in the past. By contrast, everything to the right of our bookmark is already written, but not yet know to us. This creates a productive tension between the reader's own lived experience, the past tense of the fictional narrative, the reader's expectation of a future reading experience, and the reader's awareness of a fictional future that is already written. Narratologist Peter Brooks observes:

> If the past is to be read as present, it is a curious present that we know to be past in relation to a future we know to be already in place, already in wait for us to reach it. Perhaps we would do best to speak of the *anticipation of retrospection*, as our chief tool in making sense of narrative, the master trope of its strange logic. (Brooks 1984: 23; italics in the original text)

Kermode's analysis of apocalyptic immanence is based on a similar understanding of narrative temporality. He claims that our fascination with apocalyptic prophecy and our enjoyment of fiction are equally derived from the expectation of a future that we know is already written. For Kermode, this expectation also informs our thinking about geological time. The history of our planet becomes meaningful to us, like any fictional narrative written in the past tense, only at the moment in which we are able to relate it to our present, in a conscious effort that philosopher Paul Ricœur has called «presentification» (Ricoeur 1988: 66). Similarly, our interest in the (planetary) future is motivated by a desire to give meaningful shape to the present: to *unveil* its definitive form, as we might put it with attention to the etymology of the Greek verb *apokalyptein*. According to Kermode, none of these temporal contexts can escape the human propensity to assume that «one's own time [stands] in an extraordinary relation to it» (Kermode 1966: 94).

Anthropocene Timescales

The Sense of an Ending does not devote much attention to experiences and representations of geological time. Nevertheless, I wish to suggest that Kermode's argument is relevant to contemporary debates about multiscalar temporal thinking in the Anthropocene. As will become evident in the next section of this article, Kermode's description of the formation

of human subjectivity through an imaginative engagement with vast, but finite temporal scales can shed light on the conflation of geological, historical, and autobiographical temporalities in Anthropocene discourse. More specifically, Kermode's definition of apocalyptic immanence can be used to motivate a critique of what geographer Kathryn Yusoff has called the epistemological anthropocentrism of hegemonic geological thinking or, in her words, «life's positioning against a geologic backdrop» and its tendency to narrate itself as «contrapuntal to all that it wilfully puts itself apart from» (Yusoff 2024: 40). In a nutshell: critical engagement with the largely unacknowledged presence, in Anthropocene discourse, of Kermodian strategies of subject formation through apocalyptic immanence, puts us in a better position to expose and challenge the hierarchies of privilege that are constructed and maintained when "man in the middle" is conceptualized as a geological agent. Let me unpack this claim.

For many years, Earth scientists disagreed about how to date the beginning of the Anthropocene. They are now debating whether the term refers to a diachronous geological *event*, or should not be used at all (Walker et al. 2024). Atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen, who coined the word "Anthropocene" in the early months of the symbolically portentous year 2000, argued that the "Age of Man" was the latest epoch in Earth's long history, and believed that it had begun with the Industrial Revolution. Others have argued that the Anthropocene should be dated from the invention of agriculture, the colonial expansion of Europe, or the first testing of the atomic bomb. In 2009, a multidisciplinary team of experts, the Anthropocene Working Group (AWG), was charged with formalising the Anthropocene in the geologic time scale, and concluded, after fifteen years of deliberation, that Earth's most recent geological epoch started in 1952 and that its origins were marked by the presence of radiogenic fall-out (from nuclear warfare, nuclear weapons testing, and radioactive waste) and by a rapid increase in anthropogenic indicators: human population growth, water usage, transportation, technology, greenhouse gases, surface temperature, and so on. For the AWG, the birth of the Anthropocene was therefore coextensive with the Great Acceleration, a mid-century period of unprecedented surge in demographics and global socioeconomic activity[3]. Dismissing all alternative earlier suggested start dates, the members of the AWG thus opted for the hypothesis which fixed the beginning of the "Age of Man" in closest proximity with *their* present. In this way, they established a Kermo-

[3] Cf. McNeill and Engelke 2016.

dian relation of consonance between the temporal scales of planetary deep time and a historical past that remains intimately connected with what Kermode would have called our "intermediary preoccupations". Simply put, the members of the AWG decided to inject debates about planetary time with a sense of political urgency that is characteristic of present-day political, economic, technological, and cultural affairs. In Kermode's terms, they chose to maintain an age-old human habit of «look[ing] at the whole picture from your place in the middest» (Kermode 1966: 74).

Let us consider the consequences of the AWG's decision, at the level of affective orientation. In order to make sense of the world, Kermode writes, we must «experience that concordance of beginning, middle, and end, which is the essence of our explanatory fictions» (Kermode 1966: 35-36). So let me start from my own beginning. I was born in 1974, when the world as we know it, the Holocene, was ending. It had already been ending for twenty-two years, or perhaps for much longer. And it still is. Like you, I am a child of the Anthropocene. On a geological scale, we were all born together, at the same turning point in planetary history, when humans came to dominate the Earth System to such an extent that our collective impact is now comparable to that of large-scale geological forces. We came into this world in the middle of a planetary crisis, and found ourselves surrounded – as political philosopher Antonio Gramsci put it in different context – by the «morbid symptoms» of an age in which «the old is dying and the new cannot be born» (Gramsci 1971: 276). Every person who is alive today has experienced the waning of the mild and relatively stable climatic conditions of the Holocene, an epoch that proved particularly favourable to the growth and proliferation of our species. Similarly, every person who is alive today, if they do not wish to turn a blind eye, may readily observe the advent of a new and different world: an age of tremendous heat and rising sea levels, mass extinctions, extreme weather events, and climatic unpredictability; an era when hotter temperatures, combined with more intense humidity, will make many parts of the globe uninhabitable for future humans. We are already *in* this crisis together, and – whether we choose to call it an ongoing, diachronous geological event, or define it as the beginning of a new geological epoch – the experience of the Anthropocene marks the end of long-lasting and complex social forms that we habitually identify with being human.

In March 2024, the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) rejected the AWG's recommendation to include the Anthropocene as an epoch in the Geologic time scale. This binding vote by the IUGS Union's Subcommission on Quaternary Stratigraphy came as a surprise to many,

and has caused furious disappointment among some members of the AWG. Unless you are a geologist or stratigrapher, however, I suspect that it will have little impact on your thinking, affective orientation, or professional practice. After all, discussions about the "Age of Man" have long moved beyond their original disciplinary context. For more than twenty years, the Anthropocene has enjoyed multiple parallel lives, in the words of historian Dipesh Chakrabarty: «a scientific life involving measurements and debates among qualified scientists, and a more popular life as a moral-political issue» (Chakrabarty 2021: 158). While Earth scientists argued over the proper designation and historical beginning of the Anthropocene, artists, policymakers, activists, and researchers in the humanities and social sciences have focused their attention on questions of individual and collective responsibility, solidarity and care, political action, and environmental justice. As literary scholar Pieter Vermeulen pointed out, Anthropocene discourse is characterised by an «inevitable slippage between painstakingly established scientific facts and deeply-felt value commitments, between patient description and an urgent need to act» (Vermeulen 2020: 6). Beyond their areas of specialist expertise, earth and life scientists have shown a growing interest in political, economic, and cultural processes, in a manner that cuts across established disciplinary boundaries. Critics of the term "Anthropocene" have coined a variety of neologisms – Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chtulucene, Necrocene, Wasteocene, and so on – which, according to them, offer a more accurate and nuanced description of the "human age" and of its destructive political, economic, and social forces. «There are many Anthropocenes out there», writes geologist Jan Zalasiewicz, «used for different purposes along different lines of logic in different disciplines» (Zalasiewicz 2017: 124).

This widening multidisciplinary scope of the Anthropocene debate has heightened its Kermodian mood of apocalyptic immanence. As we have seen, researchers in the Earth Sciences were in disagreement, until the binding vote of March 2024, over how to define the Anthropocene and when to date its beginning. By contrast, Anthropocene thinkers in the arts and humanities and in the social and historical sciences typically see *themselves* at a critically important temporal turning point: not merely at the end of a historical period, but also at a climactic moment in geological deep time. In this way, the Anthropocene debate has fostered a version of the cognitive and affective orientation of which Kermode observes that «it is not merely the remnant of time that has eschatological import; the whole of history, and the progress of the individual life, have it also, as a benefaction from the End, now immanent» (Kermode 1966: 25). Consider, for

example, the intrusion of epochal thought upon quotidian narratives of life and loss. As historian of science Zoltán Boldizsár Simon has pointed out, «epochal thought is emerging today in a way that was simply inconceivable before human capacities came to be perceived in terms of a planetary-scale agency» (Simon 2020: 2). Anthropocene thinking confounds our social routines and cognitive and affective orientations, and has extended the temporal dimensionality of our epistemic practices. Human geographer Andreas Malm, for instance, urges his readers to abandon established categories of temporal thinking and to define the meaning of concepts such as resilience and sustainability on a planetary scale. The global warming that is felt today, he writes, is the result of human actions *in the past*: it is the effect of a particular, ongoing phase in human history – the birth and growth of the fossil economy – whose devastating environmental consequences are becoming deeper, clearer and more frequent over time. Similarly, our growing political awareness of climate change, in the present, is necessarily directed *towards the future*, when the catastrophic impact of our own actions will be more acutely felt, but when the chances for organized, collective resistance will have dwindled. Faced with this temporal discordance, Malm concludes that political activism is best served by *diachronic* conceptual maps that mark out the colliding forces of nature and society across recent human history and in relation to planetary deep time:

> There is no synchronicity in climate change. Now more than ever, we inhabit the diachronic, the discordant, the inchoate. […] History has sprung alive, through a nature that has done likewise. We are only in the very early stages, but already our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural responses, even our politics show signs of being sucked back by planetary forces into the hole of time, the present dissolving into past and future alike. (Malm 2018: 11)

In the same vein, literary scholar Karen Pinkus has suggested that climate change is causing a tectonic shift in values, political beliefs, and personal orientations and that the sheer speed of this process is having a profound impact on our lives. Experiences of temporal disruption, she observes, are turning generations against each other, and are pitting those who existed before climate change against the young, who are born into a world that is already shaped by global heating.

> Whether we experience guilt, anxiety, or no affective response whatsoever, we humans now find ourselves on one side of an ever-

> enlarging crevasse that is opening in the earth and dividing us from our former selves and others who existed before climate change (that is, for my purposes, before circa 2000 when the idea became broadly and widely popularized). What began as a fracture only a few decades ago has now begun to pull apart so rapidly that we are fast losing sight of the other side. (Pinkus 2023: 2)

In literary and cultural studies, Pinkus writes, this budding sense of estrangement from the past has produced an anxious attachment to the contemporary and a lack of attention to older aesthetic forms. At a more general level, we can observe that Malm's description of a temporal vortex and Pinkus's image of an ever-enlarging crevasse in time serve to highlight the violent juxtaposition of geological, anthropological, and autobiographical scales in Anthropocene discourse.

Traces of Kermodian apocalyptic immanence also feature in the works of distinguished historians, who have analyzed the relation between historical and planetary time in the Anthropocene. In *Chronos: The West Confronts Time* (2022) François Hartog suggests that Anthropocene thinking has disrupted a previously hegemonic regime of historicity, presentism, which he claims arose in the second half of the Twentieth Century, and which was characterised by an exclusive attention to urgently pressing crises, at the expense of more complex, temporally protracted forms of progressive transformation. In Hartog's words, «what the present – the omnipresent – needs, it manufactures, appropriating the orders of an available past and future so as to produce its own – first on a daily basis, then each instant, then continuously» (2022: 194-195). By contrast, the advent of the Anthropocene has drawn our collective attention to vertiginous, non-anthropocentric temporal scales – «chronos time, nothing but chronos, that amounts to millions and billions of years» – whose sheer magnitude «burst[s] the presentist bubble» (Hartog 2022: 209). Hartog describes this encounter with the mind-boggling vastness of planetary deep time as an abrupt shift from *kairos* (providential time) to *chronos* (calendar time). From a Kermodian perspective, however, we may observe that the idea of a long, uneventful future-without-us («millions and billions of years») can also be said to function, at an existential level, as an apocalyptic projection of human finitude upon the empty canvass of a purely fictive cosmic temporality. We can relate this claim to an influential argument that has been made by historian Dipesh Chakrabarty in *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021):

> The Anthropocene requires us to think on the two vastly different scales of time that earth history and world history respectively involve: the tens of millions of years that a geological epoch usually encompasses […] versus the five hundred years at most that can be said to constitute the history of capitalism. Yet in most discussions of the Anthropocene, questions of geological time fall out of view, and the time of human world history comes to predominate. (Chakrabarty 2021: 156)

Chakrabarty's verdict underpins his critique of disciplinary norms and political priorities. In part two of his book, Chakrabarty points a finger at the political leaders of affluent democracies in the Global North, whose environmental policies appear to be dominated by what literary scholar Emily Apter has called «small p politics» (Apter 2018: 9): strategies that are focused on adaptation and that seek to protect local and national interests. Where geological time falls out of view, Chakrabarty insists, attention and recourses are focused on short-term futures, and the pursuit of sustainability becomes a political and managerial challenge: a structural condition of twenty-first century societies, which needs to be succumbed or navigated, but cannot overcome.

Chakrabarty's critique of political short-termism is persuasive, but it should not distract us from the Kermodian long-termism that underlies his theoretical understanding of Anthropocene time. A mood of apocalyptic immanence permeates Chakrabarty's thinking, just as much as Hartog's idea of a shift from kairotic time to «chronos time, nothing but chronos». As I hope to have shown, Kermodian attitudes prevail in the Anthropocene debate, even if they are not always overtly acknowledged. In the third and final part of the article, we will discuss what makes these attitudes problematic.

Anthropocene Experience

It is time to consider some important objections to Kermodian apocalyptic immanence. Distinguished scholars in the humanities and social sciences have argued that the advent of Anthropocene thinking marks a powerful challenge to humanistic and anthropocentric conceptions of history and society. The Anthropocene, writes literary historian Jeremy Davies, «is not an anthropocentric concept, nor one that separates humankind from the rest of nature» (Davies 2016: 76). As philosopher Travis Holloway points out, Enlightenment-inspired references to a «common or collective notion of *hu-*

mankind are, for the most part, absent [from the humanities] in our own era», as a result of the growing influence of anti-universalist traditions of thought, for example, in feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies (Holloway 2022: 5). Against this background, the Anthropocene debate has appeared to many like an unwelcome resurgence of universalistic and Eurocentric worldviews. Historian of consciousness Donna Haraway, to name but one influential figure, has argued that the term "Anthropocene" is a misnomer, because of its invocation of a single human collective (Haraway 2016). According to this argument, "Anthropocene" fosters a problematic sense of human superiority and fails to acknowledge inequalities, patterns of structural violence, and socially constructed hierarchies of race, gender, class, and ability. Species thinking and proclamations of human self-sovereignty seem ill suited for an age when, in the words of cultural theorist Ian Baucom, «the situation of the human [is] both collapsing inward and exploding outward, veering simultaneously synaptic and planetary» (Baucom 2020: 43).

In a different, but related context, critics of apocalyptic thinking have pointed out that the eschatological imagination, with its characteristic focus on the cleansing of human guilt, is structurally anthropocentric, and therefore politically ineffective. Literary scholar Greg Garrard, for instance, claims that apocalypse literature is complicit with the imaginative traditions of Eurocentric humanism, and that both worldviews share a tendency to reduce complex issues to a «monocausal crisis involving conflicts between recognizably opposed groups» (Garrard 2011: 105). Literary critic Astrid Bracke elaborates on this idea in her work on British climate fiction, when she reminds her readers that «human minds are best at grasping events and environments on a medium scale» (Bracke 2018: 27). Apocalyptic storytelling, according to Bracke, is hampered by a shortfall of the human imagination, and by our inability to conceive and represent non-anthropocentric geological and climactic timescales. Much environmental damage happens at a scale that cannot be fully expressed by traditional modes of literary representation, including modern, secular apocalypse fiction. As ecocritic Timothy Clark has explained, this relation between individual, observable causes and vast planetary effects marks a stark challenge to anthropocentric narratives: «issues such as global warming or ocean acidification, so overwhelming in scale, can threaten to dwarf any individual or state action, even as both phenomena cannot immediately be seen, localised, or in many cases, even acknowledged» (Clark 2019: 38).

Against this background, the heuristic power and political appeal of Kermodian humanism seem questionable. As we have seen, Kermode's definition of apocalyptic immanence is based on a distinction between

personal and cosmic time. In the context of the unfolding planetary crisis, this distinction seems especially relevant to the experiences of a relatively privileged minority of the human world population: planetary elites, upwardly mobile middle classes, and, more generally, inhabitants of the Global. These groups share a more or less rudimentary understanding of climate science, but may have felt, until now, relatively safe from the most catastrophic effects of planetary heating. Environmental collapse has featured in their lives – in "our lives" – as an inconvenience, a hypothesis about the future, as news from more vulnerable regions of the world, or through the reassuring lens of popular fiction, where narratives of social collapse and mass death go hand in hand with an almost paradoxical optimism about personal futures. (According to a frequently cited *bon mot*, planetary elites ("we") find it easier to fantasise about the end of the world than to imagine new forms of political and social organisation that would strip us of our familiar, quotidian privileges and comforts; Žižek 2010: x.) From this perspective, it makes sense to describe our personal engagement with the climate crisis as a form of apocalyptic immanence: an imaginative investment in a catastrophic planetary future that can be clearly predicted, but which is not, as yet, manifest in our daily lives. The picture changes completely, however, when we consider the experiences of less privileged human communities, particularly in the Global South. Here, the notion of apocalyptic immanence seems largely irrelevant, because global heating is already experienced in the present, as a concrete and urgent practical problem and as an existential challenge.

As we have seen, Kermode defines apocalyptic immanence as a conscious and self-reflective effort to establish a relation of consonance between two different temporal scales: the personal and the cosmic. This effort is described by Kermode, in the language of Christian eschatology, as a desire to make the cosmic scale *visible*. Again, we can note some important similarities between Kermode's approach to apocalyptic thinking and the claims of influential theorists of the Anthropocene, who have insisted that geological time cannot be experienced directly. On a human scale, geological events do not appear as points in time, but are experienced as protracted, agonising periods of unpredictability, fear, and loss. Literary scholar and environmental philosopher Timothy Morton puts this very nicely in his most famous book, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013):

> The spooky thing is, we discover global warming precisely when it's already here. It is like realising that for some time you have been

> conducting your business in the expanding sphere of a slow-motion nuclear bomb. You have a few seconds for amazement as the fantasy that you inhabited a neat, seamless little world melts away. All those apocalyptic narratives of doom about the "end of the world" are, from this point of view, part of the problem, not part of the solution. (Morton 2013: 103)

At one level, it seems to me that Morton is exactly right here. Consider, for example, the speed at which the oceans of the world are warming. This change in temperature is destroying marine biodiversity and speeding up the melting of ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica. But consider also the many direct human experiences that arise from these temporally protracted transformative processes. Warmer oceans are absorbing less heat from the atmosphere, which increases the likelihood of heat waves, wildfires, and droughts. In Earth's most vulnerable regions – the «tropic of chaos», as journalist Christian Parenti (2011) has memorably called them – complex feedback loops are causing natural disasters with increasing frequency. Sea-level rise and floods are destroying farmland and human habitations, and cause crop failure, famine, and violent conflicts. In turn, these negative circumstances force large numbers of climate refugees to abandon their homes and are likely to leave millions displaced before the end of the current century (Vince 2023). Meanwhile, in more affluent communities, lifestyles that would have seemed normal and unproblematic twenty years ago are beginning to look untenable. Social arrangements and economic systems that were taken for granted by earlier generations appear insufficient, inadequate, or unsustainable. The pressures of a rapidly heating planet are forcing us to reconsider the meaning of individual freedom and collective obligation, for example in the context of procreative choices and parental responsibility, meat consumption, and travel. Morton invites us to consider these complex, combined and uneven processes as constituent parts of a single, temporarily protracted geological climax, which remains invisible to us in its entirety. But why would such a perspective help us achieve moral and political clarity? The Anthropocene is patchy and uneven, as anthropologist Anna Tsing has shown in her influential work on the syncopated and juxtaposed temporalities of biological and economic growth and decay (Tsing et al. 2024). So, what do we gain from imagining it as an immanent apocalypse, rather than a vast and growing set of imminent threats and challenges?

Conclusions

We have seen how attention to geological time can serve to decentre humanistic traditions of thought and normative accounts of *anthropos*, of which philosopher Rosi Braidotti has trenchantly remarked that «the allegedly abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied; of his sexuality nothing much can be guessed» (Braidotti 2013: 24). But this is only one side of the story. Just as importantly, Kermodian apocalyptic immanence, with its characteristic emphasis on the fictive consonance of geological, historical, and autobiographical time, may be described as a narcissistic re-framing of liberal subjectivity, which stands in the way of heterogeneous communities of care and collective struggles for transnational and intergenerational climate justice. In this context, it is worth pointing out that Kermode's "man in the middle" bears a striking resemblance with the autological subject: a figure that has been defined by anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli in *The Empire of Love* (2006). As Povinelli explains, theories and narratives of autological subjectivity, in the Anthropocene, aim to naturalise the abstract, interchangeable, and autonomous self and its constitutive dependence on practices of social constraint that are historically vast. For Povinelli, such figurations of self-sameness are actively brought into existence by constitutive acts of chrono-biopolitical violence, for example in settler colonialism. Here, the affirmation of autological subjectivity syncopates the flow of time and thereby constructs (and expels) alterity, both in the past (indigeneity) and in the future (the foreigner as migrant). In order to resists this ideological framework, Povinelli suggests, we must learn to read autological subjectivity critically, as a reverberation of what she calls «the governance of the prior». According to Povinelli, the birth of the Anthropocene is not a lapse from historical, human time, but an «ongoing ancestral catastrophe», a result of historically specific gestures of chrono-biopolitical violence, which, through endless repetition, naturalise hegemonic power (Povinelli 2021: IX). A detailed, comparative analysis of Kermode's and Povinelli's theories of subjectivity would exceed the scope of this contribution. But it seems important to stress, in conclusion, that attention to apocalyptic immanence can only be heuristically enabling, from the perspective of progressive politics and the collective struggle for planetary health, if it remains critically focused on the historically specific patterns of its emergence.

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