AFTER THE EARTHQUAKE: LITERARY RESPONSES TO CATASTROPHE IN
MEXICO CITY, 1985-2000

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INTRODUCTION

In my dissertation I study science fiction representations of catastrophe in Mexican novels published after the 1985 earthquake through the upheaval of the nineties to show how these representations, with their deconstruction of temporality, permit a critical perspective on the present conditions of Mexican society and politics. My dissertation focuses on the fantastical conjoining of distinct temporalities and the fragmented narrative structures of novels of catastrophe by Carlos Fuentes, Ignacio Solares, Homero Aridjis and Carmen Boullosa. These Mexican novels of catastrophe fit within the conceptual framework of contemporary science fiction, and two theorists of the genre, Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, have provided support for my line of analysis. I examine the way science fiction time in these novels creates connections between historical periods through time travel, dystopian futurescapes, alternative realities that issue forth from a single moment of time, and historical or mythical elements that are de-contextualized. Since they are not constrained by the relationship of cause and effect, these works resemble the free associations of the imaginary of Mexico City as the site of catastrophe and they draw on Mexico’s unique template for disaster through myth and the conquest. In contrast to the testimonial and journalistic accounts of disaster, these novels exaggerate reality and weave together the “before” and “after” of a present catastrophe to compel the reader to think about whether Mexico’s trajectory could have been otherwise.

1 I am not referring here to the genre of science fiction in its narrowest sense, as a literature that explores the impact of science on society, but instead to a broader body of speculative writing that frees the play of time.
I.1. Landscapes of Catastrophe

At 7:19am on the morning of September 19, 1985 an earthquake measuring 7.8 on the Richter scale devastated Mexico City’s downtown just as many *capitalinos* were commuting to work and school. Estimates of the fatalities range between 5,000 and 20,000\(^2\), and the property and infrastructural damage in the areas in and around the Zócalo is calculated at $4 billion (Gilbert 579). In the worst affected areas entire buildings collapsed, trapping residents, dead and alive, in the rubble. Popular opinion maintained that President de la Madrid’s government was not only slow to respond but also negligent and even abusive in its handling of the crisis. While the authorities delayed rescue operations and in some cases even impeded access to the disaster zones, residents and volunteers spontaneously organized rescue brigades to pull people out of the ruins and provide food and shelter for the victims. Despite the tragic nature of the event, this moment has been hailed as the emergence of civil society in Mexico\(^3\). Abandoned by the government for the crucial first couple of days, citizens demonstrated an outpouring of solidarity and a spirit of collaboration and initiative in the immediate aftermath of the catastrophe that were unprecedented in the city’s history.

At the same time that this catastrophe represents a watershed in Mexican history because it significantly strengthened civil society, it brought to light the failures of the *priista* state and the single-party system that had governed the country for nearly all of the twentieth century. The earthquake revealed cases of corruption in contracting, a

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\(^2\) Estimates range from under 5,000 to 20,000, with 10,000 being the most commonly accepted figure. See Sergio Puente’s article “Social vulnerability to disasters in Mexico City: An assessment method” in *Crucibles of Hazard: Mega-Cities and Disasters in Transition* (306); and Alan Gilbert’s *The Latin American City* (139).

\(^3\) This view is held by the renowned social critic Carlos Monsiváis (*No sin nosotros* 9).
disregard for construction codes, the terrible state of disrepair of some government buildings, and unsafe factory conditions\textsuperscript{4}, all of which exacerbated the damage and loss of life wreaked by the natural disaster. The victims were largely working-class people, who the party had an ideological commitment to and who were supposed to be the main beneficiaries of the policies of the PRI. The mismanagement of the 1985 earthquake exposed the flaws and unfulfilled promises of the priista government and deepened the disillusionment that began with the massacre of student protestors at Tlatelolco in 1968; it confirmed doubts about the state’s capacity to guarantee a democratic system that would raise the well-being of poorer sectors.

After the earthquake, disappointment in the government’s ability to deliver an equitable and just society continued through the late eighties and nineties with a prolonged crisis that shook the foundations of modern Mexico. This turbulent political, social and economic period began with the contested presidential elections of 1988 in which Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas lost to the PRI’s candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari in what were widely believed to be fraudulent and fixed elections. In the next decade Salinas implemented a series of neoliberal economic policies, such as the privatization of state-owned banks and companies as well as the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992. Salinas greatly reduced social welfare programs and repealed the ejido system of communally-owned farmland that had been in existence since the Mexican Revolution. In the impoverished state of Chiapas, on January 1, 1994 the

\textsuperscript{4} The earthquake uncovered the dangerous and exploitative labor conditions in the garment industry in the city’s downtown. After the earthquake, bribes were paid to government officials that allowed the clothing manufacturer to extract their machinery from the factories, in some cases before their employees were rescued from the ruins (Kandell 572).
Zapatista guerrilla movement took control of the southeastern part of the state in an armed uprising, denouncing the miserable conditions of Mexico’s poor and forcing the government to negotiate with the rebels. The once all-powerful and monolithic PRI had lost its grip on the uncontested exercise of power. This threat to authority was compounded by the shooting of Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta, President Salinas’s chosen successor, during a campaign speech in Tijuana. The murder, suspected to have been carried out by opposing factions within the PRI, unveiled the schism in the party that had controlled Mexican politics and stifled opposition for decades. Salinas left his successor, Ernesto Zedillo, with the job of devaluing the peso, a move that had a calamitous effect for many Mexicans and for the national economy. Carlos Monsiváis stated in an interview in 1996, “Nothing can compare to this. The fall of the peso was . . . the most severe social earthquake I can remember” (qtd. in Brewster 193). Furthermore, the economic crisis was accompanied by an increase in crime and violence. The environmental problems plaguing the city reached a breaking point in March of 1992, when the mayor of Mexico City declared a 28-day state of emergency due to high levels of pollution and instructed children under 14 years of age to stay home because of record-breaking levels of air contamination. In 2000, the PAN candidate Vicente Fox was elected, bringing to a close seventy years of PRI rule, but by no means alleviating many of Mexico’s social, political and economic problems.

These events, imprinted in the memories of capitalinos and affecting their everyday lives, engendered an imaginary of urban catastrophe that marked the last decades of the twentieth century. Though many of these changes were felt on a national level, the city became the locus of disaster. There was a collective feeling that Mexico
City was a doomed space where unexpected dangers and risks complicated the daily struggle for survival. The city that had once symbolized the promise of Mexico’s entry into a prosperous modernity had become the emblem of the massive challenges to creating a decent life for its citizens; daily life in the megalopolis revealed that the ideal of national unity and civic conduct that had been projected onto the urban space was increasingly untenable. Instead, the city became the trope of disorder, a place governed by spontaneity, chance encounters, infinite transformations and vertiginous movement. The sense of uncertainty imbued the city with a suspenseful energy, however the layers of problems caused by overcrowding, the lack of resources, poverty and pollution, made the potential for disaster all too real. Once the city of palaces and the celebrated “región más transparente del aire” (Reyes 13), it became known as la mancha negra and was the setting for predictions about imminent cataclysms. Boris Muñoz explains the way in which the different types of disaster had fused into one overwhelming sense of anticipated trauma: “La imaginación del desastre no se dispara únicamente por un evento de baja frecuencia y alta intensidad, como un terremoto o una inundación, sino también en gran medida por estrategias de modernización y desarrollo antiecológicas o corruptas, o, agregaría yo, por un acto represivo como Tlatelolco en el cual la desproporción de la violencia se transforma en frustración e impotencia, en trauma” (85). For chroniclers of the city, such as José Joaquín Blanco, the very thought of a brighter future was impossible, since in this urban environment “el futuro mismo es un fracaso” (qtd. in Muñoz 85).
I.2. Journalism and the Testimonial

What responses did intellectuals and writers provide to these urban catastrophes and how are the disasters from that period represented in literature? On the one hand, catastrophe has produced a body of testimonial and journalistic literature that conveys the real and immediate experience of suffering. As Jean Franco comments, the testimonial has become an effective genre for denouncing injustice: “for critics on the left the explicitly political and ethical aspects of literature seem to have emigrated elsewhere, for example, into the ‘testimonial’” (Critical 204). Similarly, the outpouring of journalistic writing on the earthquake showed that the modern media can offer a platform, an intersection between orality and print culture, where writer, investigator and witness are engaged in a common effort. In the context of the new visual urban culture, literature has seen its privileged position contested, however the press still offers a space for the public intellectual: “Journalism, formerly relegated to a position below the literary, in however a limited manner, offers a place where the arms of the enemy can be turned against him” (Franco, The Decline 200). The testimonial and journalistic works about the earthquake, which grow out of the collaboration between writers and survivors, are compelling because they give the reader access to the direct and true collective experience of the disaster.

Elena Poniatowska’s Nada, nadie: las voces del temblor (1988) is a polyphonic testimonial, not focused on the experience of one individual but instead on a broad spectrum of participants and victims in the 1985 earthquake. As survivors tried to grapple with emotional and physical challenges, Poniatowska, aided by some of her students,
tirelessly recorded the voices of the dispossessed. *Nada, nadie* compiles\(^5\) the transcriptions of the recorded testimonies of people whose homes were destroyed, family members who rescued loved ones from the rubble, student volunteers who rushed to the disaster zones, citizens who suffered abuses by the police and the army, and victims involved in the slow process of negotiating fair compensation. The public intellectual and her testimonial subject give evidence of the victims’ pain and resilience, making claims to empiricism, truth and reality\(^6\). The sheer volume of individual and collective voices that tell their stories of the earthquake is convincing, but it is the honesty and intimacy of the witnesses speaking in the first-person that moves the reader. One woman, for example, tells the heart-wrenching story of identifying the cadavers of her family members:

_Cuando bajaron las camillas de los niños, uno de los trabajadores corrió a decirme que eran los míos, que fuera; en ese momento dije que no iba, que no iba a ir, que no me iba a presentar, que no quería . . . Yo tenía pavor de ver sus caras destrozadas, sus cuerpos rotos cuando el jueves en la mañana los había visto reír y estar conmigo. El primero de los cuerpos que bajó fue el de mi hijo Álvaro Darío, que el 17 de octubre hubiera cumplido 4 años . . . Yo me puse muy mal, empecé a pelearme con todo mundo, con los voluntarios, absolutamente con toda la gente, en la accesoria en que estaban custodiando los cadáveres yo reclamaba porque en el momento de la identificación nadie estuvo conmigo . . . Me peleé con los soldados, me cruzaron los rifles, los aventé, y a partir de ese momento, a mis gentes las metieron en bolsas de plástico, los amarraron. (87-88)_{87-88}\)

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\(^5\) Poniatowska and her team produced an initial 1,700 pages of testimonies, but for the purpose of the publication of the book with Ediciones Era the length was reduced to 310 pages (Brewster 109).

\(^6\) There has been much debate over the genre of the testimonial and whether its contribution is an essentially literary one or whether it is valuable as an authentic, documentary narrative that serves as the vehicle for truth. This polemic over truth and fiction is relevant to testimonials that focus on the life story of one individual, but is perhaps less pertinent in the case of the journalistic, polyphonic testimonial style that emerges from the 1985 earthquake.
The entire work is punctuated with headings that effectively convey the sense of urgency and the extent of the human tragedy: “El sismo reveló la explotación de las trabajadoras de la costura” (145); “Todo mi comportamiento cambió después de meterme al túnel” (133); “Yo estaba conforme con morir” (214). These eyewitness accounts are put alongside the articles that Poniatowska published in Novedades and La Jornada about what she herself observed in the disaster zones. The result is a monumental work that reveals the vulnerability and courage of poor Mexicans after this natural disaster and at the same time offers a forceful denunciation of the criminal mismanagement of the catastrophe by the authorities.

Like Nada, nadie, Carlos Monsiváis’s “Los días del terremoto”7, a long chapter of a book titled Entrada libre (1987), exposes not only the human suffering but also the spirit of solidarity in the aftermath of the disaster. “Los días del terremoto” praises the emergence of civil society, “el esfuerzo comunitario de autogestión y solidaridad” (79), in the days following the earthquake, a focus that is addressed in the content of the narrative and in the creation of a collective voice. Monsiváis includes both the testimonies of the dispossessed and his own writings, filled with direct quotes, which are seamlessly interwoven. As he states at the beginning of the work, his intention is to create a “collage de voces, impresiones, sensaciones de un largo día” (17). Monsiváis mixes first and third person narration of the events, with the eyewitness accounts often appearing in italics. Much of the text is comprised of Monsiváis’s observations about the destruction caused by the earthquake, based on what he witnessed when he arrived on the 7 In 2005, on the twentieth anniversary of the earthquake, “Los días del terremoto” was reprinted as a separate book with a new chapter by Monsiváis about the participation of civil society in Mexico since 1985. It was published by Ediciones Era under the title “No sin nosotros”: Los días del terremoto, 1985-2005.
scene only hours after the disaster. These descriptions are related in an
uncharacteristically serious tone, devoid of the humor and sarcasm that usually mark
Monsiváis’s narrative voice. In addition to the moving testimony of the rescue brigades
and the victims, Monsiváis details the exploitative working conditions of women
employed in the garment industry, brought to light when the factory collapsed; the
formation of unions and resident associations to defend themselves against the loss of
housing and work; the construction deficiencies and the faulty contracts granted to
developers during the frenzied period of growth and modernization of the center; the
reluctance on the part of the housing authorities to assume responsibility for fair
compensation and relocation; the evidence of torture of prisoners in police custody when
their bodies were unearthed from the rubble; and the deplorable conditions for refugees
of the quake. Most entries include the date of publication of the original article and a
brief title in a different print, for instance “2 de octubre. La conversación con el
Presidente” (83) or “NOTICIERO V. EL PLAN DN-III” (104). This work, like
Poniatowska’s, is an excellent example of the journalist’s goal of providing citizens with
much needed information about specific issues and the general state of affairs in the
immediate aftermath of a catastrophe. These writers, however, downplay their role
through the creation of a collective voice. As Claire Brewster affirms, “By using others’
voices, however, he emphasizes the collective experience” (104). Monsiváis articulates a
pointed condemnation of the abuses from this collective perspective, celebrating the
initiative of civil society and the sacrifice and solidarity demonstrated by volunteers.

Cristina Pacheco’s work about the earthquake, Zona de desastre (1986), is
comprised of short pieces that she published in Siempre, El Día and La Jornada.
Although these reports from the disaster zone are based on interviews and investigative journalism, Pacheco’s work has a distinctively narrative quality, embedding quotes by the survivors in a poetic and literary prose. Pacheco states in the author’s note that it is her intention to “colaborar en recoger la voz de quienes más sufrieron con el desastre” (11), however this text has less of the unmediated feel of the works by Poniatowska and Monsiváis. Pacheco deploys narrative strategies to tell the story of the earthquake, and the emotional pieces are testament to the collaboration between the writer-intellectual and his/her subject, who often belongs to a lower social class. Pacheco begins the work by addressing the difficulty of the journalist’s task: “Escribir nos vuelve protagonistas de una pugna interminable entre la realidad y las palabras que empleamos para intentar describirla. Nunca he sentido esta angustia como en mi tentativa de narrar algo de lo sucedido en México el 19 de septiembre de 1985 y después” (11). Her response to this stated challenge is to take on the role of a participant-narrator, as in the piece titled “La búsqueda”, which relates her interaction with a man who is desperately searching for his son:

-Busco a mi hijo Marcos. A lo mejor usted lo vio. Vino aquí, de voluntario, el día 20. Es pasante de medicina. Por el radio se enteró de que se necesitaban doctores. Aquí lo sorprendió el segundo temblor. El hombre estaba enfrente de mí, impidiéndome el paso. No pude huir de su relato, de su angustia que compartí imaginando el muchacho víctima del derrumbe . . . No me atrevía a decirle que lo he visto llamando cada tarde. Ahora sé que le habla a su mujer. Supongo que entre lágrimas ella le exige que busque bien, le recrimina lo mucho que se tarde en darle noticias de su hijo. (24)

*Zone de desastre* is written in a literary-narrative style, giving the reader something beyond a sequence of chronologically ordered events while remaining faithful to the lived experience. Like Poniatowska and Monsiváis, Pacheco is engaged in a joint effort with
the survivors to bear witness to the experience of the earthquake in a way that will convey the long-lasting impact of the catastrophe.

I.3. Science Fiction Time

Whereas writers such as Poniatowska, Pacheco and Monsiváis left written accounts of the disaster in the form of testimonials and chronicles, other writers have turned to fiction, and specifically the genre of science fiction, to depict catastrophe. In contrast to the first-hand experiences of the witnesses quoted in the testimonial and journalistic works, the novel of fiction explores the residues of catastrophe in the imagination, the fears and hopes that become infused with myth and transcend the temporal boundaries of the real catastrophe. The genre of science fiction captures the feelings, thoughts and sensations produced by the real event as they take on a visual and narrative quality in peoples’ minds. Writers such as Carlos Fuentes, Ignacio Solares, Homero Adirjis and Carmen Boullosa have given expression to these feelings by coupling science fiction and myth in predictive plots that envision the aftermath of disaster in Mexico City. As Carlos Fuentes states:

Creo que la literatura testimonial tiene su lugar, pero finalmente la imaginación no es sustituible por el documento, de ninguna manera. Usted use todos los documentos que quiera y va a haber un hueco, un hueco del corazón y de la cabeza, que se llama la imaginación . . . porque hay las otras dimensiones que hacen visible lo invisible, las que afectan el sueño, las que afectan la vida erótica secreta, las razones del corazón que la razón desconoce, como diría Pascal, y esto sólo lo da la novela. 

(Territorios 194)

This body of literature not only seeks to express the feelings and thoughts produced by this period of upheaval; it also addresses the very question of the role of fiction and the
genre of the novel in discourse about catastrophe and the future of Mexico. The
dystopian narratives, the fantastical conjoining of distinct temporalities and the
fragmented narrative structures of these Mexican novels of catastrophe fit within the
conceptual framework of contemporary science fiction. Two theorists of the science
fiction genre, Jean Baudrillard and Frederic Jameson, shape the theoretical framework of
my analysis of the novels by Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and Boullosa.

Mexican authors turn to the genre of science fiction\(^8\) to depict the catastrophes of
the last decades of the 20\(^{th}\) century because it allows a transcendence of the here and now.
In contrast to testimonial works that document, with a sense of urgency, evidence about
the present or the immediate past, maintaining a logical, coherent and causal connection
between recent events, science fiction frees the writer from the constraints of time.
Science fiction writers are not bound to the rules of evidence that insist on concrete and
more immediately apparent relationships of cause and effect. Flexible and malleable,
science fiction time creates free-flowing connections between historical moments through
temporal leaps, destabilizing conventional time by reaching into the past and projecting
into the future. Whereas literature that privileges a close relationship to the “real” must
maintain some coherence in the linkages it creates in the reader’s mind between distinct
time periods and historical moments, science fiction narratives can include a longer, more
associative causal chain of events. This is achieved through science fiction narrative
devices such as time travel, apocalyptic or utopian futurescapes, the existence of parallel
universes in which alternative realities unfold from a single moment of time, and the

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\(^8\) For an overview of Mexican science fiction, see Miguel Ángel Fernández Delgado’s
anthology *Visiones periféricas* (2001); Gonzalo Martre’s *La ciencia ficción en México*
(2004); and Miguel López’s *Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares: Globalization in
displacement of historical or mythical elements. Ironically, these fantastical associations that defy normal time, though detached from an empirical or logical manner of representation, give a comprehensive depiction of the complexity of the disaster, since they are close to the free associations that form the imaginary of Mexico City as the site of disaster. The extreme and absurd aesthetic that characterizes science fiction is complemented by the freedom from the limits of chronological and conventional time.

By rendering an exaggerated version of the possible and by interweaving the “before” and “after” of a present catastrophe, these novels prompt the reader to contemplate whether Mexico’s trajectory could have been otherwise. During times of uncertainty, science fiction can imagine the consequences of historical processes of change projected onto the future and it can communicate trenchant social commentary through this indirect approach. Subsuming past, present and looming-imagined disasters, these novels interrogate Mexican modernity and the country’s future at a critical moment of social and political turmoil. It is through the multifaceted representation of time and the dystopian future in these novels that the writers reveal their political engagement by suggesting the present as the only space and time where fulfillment can happen. Instead of a romanticized past or a utopian future, the present holds the potential for social change.

The deployment of the genre of science fiction allows writers to consider the origins of catastrophe and comprehend the upheaval of the present as a result of processes of historical change. In Archaeologies of the Future (2005), Frederic Jameson examines the historicism at work in science fiction novels and the way in which they prompt a reflection on present and past structures. In order to elucidate this point, Jameson
compares science fiction and the genre of Fantasy, both of which respond to the inadequacies of our present with imaginary alternatives but these hypothetical worlds have different characteristics. According to Jameson, the magical elements of the Fantasy genre come from religion and a belief in human creativity and individual talent. Science fiction, by contrast, envisions alternative social forms to “reinforce the components of an essentially historical situation, rather than serving as vehicles for the fantasies of power” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 59). Power, in the case of Fantasy, is represented as part of an ethical dynamic between individuals, and there is “displacement from politics to ethics and an essentially non-historical perspective on social life” (Jameson, *Archaeologies* 61).

The science fiction novel, on the other hand, is concerned with modes of production and historical processes, and the concrete dilemmas that each writer chooses to explore depend on the historical moment from which they are writing. Applying Jameson’s distinction between fantasy and science fiction, it becomes clear that Mexican novels about catastrophe may draw on ancient cosmology and the history of the conquest, but they do not fall into the category of Fantasy, since they are not fantasies about religion or individual creative power. Rather, these Mexican authors free their imagination to consider the political and historical dynamics of power: elite rule, neo-liberalism, the PRI, and a society structured in racial dominance as a lasting effect of the conquest.

Time-travel, ecological disaster and futuristic societies are all elements of the strategy of

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9 Fantasy, Jameson contends, maintains a fundamentally medieval view of the world in so far as the plot and characters play out in some fashion the battle of good and evil; these works present a nostalgic vision of the past and imagine a society that is structured around religious values and magic. As an example, Jameson references the novels of J.R.R. Tolkein and the *Harry Potter* series as manifestations of an essentially Christian worldview. By contrast, science fiction is steeped in Enlightenment thinking and committed to upholding a system based on scientific reason (*Archaeologies* 58).
de-familiarization that these contemporary Mexican writers employ to engage in a profoundly historical critique of modernization and the notion of progress in twentieth century Mexico.

In these novels that critique Mexico’s history, the past is often portrayed by means of a carnivalesque, grotesque and hyperbolic aesthetic juxtaposed with futuristic elements. Although a major preoccupation of these writers is Mexico’s past, because they do not attempt to reproduce the past with fidelity their works do not fit the category of the historical novel. The historical novel gains prominence at the same time as 19th century capitalism, industrialization and the notion of progress, and reflects the prevailing ideology that sought to view the present as both issuing forth from history and as different from the past. According to Jameson, the emergence of science fiction occurs at a moment when the historical novel ceases to be functional (Archaeologies 285) because history has been replaced with a stylized notion of the past; it is a time in which the historical national narratives are emptied of their meaning and reduced to pretexts for surface images (Postmodernism 308-309). The sense of the historical past that had once been privileged has now been replaced with a new sense of the future in science fiction. This yet-to-come is infused with the past, but it appears in a fantastical, deconstructed

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10 Just a few of the titles from their oeuvres that reflect this thematic focus are: Fuentes’s La región más trasparente (1958) and La muerte de Artemio Cruz (1962); Solares’s Madero, el otro (1989) and La invasión (2004); Aridjis’s Memorias del Nuevo Mundo (1988); Boullosa’s Llanto (1992).
11 The historical novel, a genre within the tradition of realism, reflects the forces at work during great historical moments. The novel takes its setting, characters and events from a particular period and attempts to give a faithful portrayal of turning points in history. It could be argued, however, that the novels included in this study manifest some of the tendencies of the New Historical Novel, as defined by Seymour Menton in his book Latin America’s New Historical Novel (1993), a definition that he applies to a broad body of works from the second half of the twentieth century that reflect on Latin American history.
and fragmented manner. In the novels of the present study, the future is a kind of re-imagined past, mixing history, myth and projection.

Jean Baudrillard identifies this characteristic of the new direction of science fiction in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981). In the chapter titled “Simulacra and Science Fiction”, Baudrillard identifies three different types of fiction of the imaginary: utopian writing, science fiction of high modernity, and the third order of “hyperreal” science fiction. Baudrillard argues that the first of these, utopia, implies transcendence of a real space and the formation of a naturalistic yet different universe that is separate. In other words, the utopian island stands apart from a real space. The second type, the 20th century mainstream of science fiction, is defined by the projection and multiplication of the mechanical possibilities of the real world. In this kind of writing, the imagined world maintains some resemblance to the technological capabilities of the present, but these are expanded, multiplied and maximized. Both utopia and science fiction of high modernity exist in relation to the real, whether in opposition or as projection. By contrast, the “hyperreal” type of science fiction erases the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Science fiction of the third order, according to Baudrillard, will no longer be situated in a separate utopian universe nor will it be a mirror held up to the future, but rather it will be formed by the fusion of past, present and future re-imagined. These narratives reinvent the past as fiction:

> It is no longer possible to fabricate the unreal from the real, the imaginary from the givens of the real. The process will, rather, be the opposite: it will be to put decentered situations, models of simulation in place and to contrive to give them the feeling of real, of the banal, of the lived experience, to reinvent the real as fiction, precisely because it has disappeared from our life. Hallucination of the real, of lived experience, of the quotidian, but reconstituted . . . (124)
Third-order science fiction enacts an “artificial resurrection of ‘historical’ worlds, can only try to reconstruct in vitro, down to the smallest details, the perimeters of a prior world, the events, the people, the ideologies of the past, emptied of meaning, of their original process, but hallucinatory with retrospective truth” (123). Baudrillard believes that this type of narrative supplants claims that genuine historicity is possible, since the past is reinterpreted in a stylistic and fantastical way that collapses the real and the imaginary.

Ultimately, Baudrillard’s three-fold typology is associated with a postmodern and deconstructionist discourse in which everything we call “history” is asserted to be constituted by contending narratives. Hayden White, the theorist of *Metahistory* (1973), argues that despite claims to objectivity and a scientific approach based on evidence, historical narratives are really verbal fictions that seek to validate particular philosophies/ideologies of history through a selection of events and a plot structure that render a comprehensible story. Since there is no deep, underlying “truth” within these historical narratives, White proposes studying historical narratives for their literary and aesthetic characteristics: as an ordering of events into a plot, as pertaining to a particular genre (romance, comedy, tragedy, satire) and for their literary tropes (metaphor, metonym). Third-order “hyperreal” simulacra are created by re-imagining and retelling the narratives of past, present, and future—blended, rearranged, and collapsed with great liberty because all accounts are only texts whose truth value is not established by a direct match with empirical evidence. Their textuality frees them from the conventional chronological order and causal sequences that are imposed when an author claims to be “realistically” and “objectively” constructing a narrative. In these third-order simulacra,
the copies of “reality” are texts that are produced by selecting and intensifying fragments within a pastiche-like ensemble. The fantastic and fictional is seen as already existing within the surface appearance that is ordinarily designated as “the real”. By shifting emphasis from conventional understandings, the hyperreal text offers a different kind of insight into our world than the text that is constrained by the norms of realistic or naturalistic representation. It allows the reader or viewer to recognize that past, present, and future and both the fantastic and the empirically real are all “present” in the present. The reader finds himself/herself to be in one temporally-dislocated version of the “here and now”, but the “here and now” narrative is an intensified, partial, fragmented, and re-compiled text about “reality” in which the boundaries between the real, the fictional, and the fantastic are shifted or even erased. Although these postmodern theories have often been associated with a less political perspective, the destabilization of the concepts of chronological time, history and reality in these contemporary Mexican novels is intended to generate criticism and not compliance.

The novels written in the last decades of the twentieth century that depict natural and man-made catastrophes are at their core a reflection of the time during which they were written, but this present is deflected onto the past and the imagined future. Jameson explains that since we can’t bear the unmediated experience of daily life, “the present is inaccessible directly”, so science fiction has the reader experience his/her present through a process that Jameson terms “indirection” (Archaeologies 287). “Indirection”

13 Jameson explores an analogous process in another popular, mass-cultural genre: the detective story. He uses the example of Raymond Chandler’s novels, in which by focusing the reader’s attention on the creation of suspense and the resolution of the mystery plot, the writer can slip in the content that really interests him: the description of
transforms our present into the past of the mock future, which enables the reader to apprehend it as history. The strategy of indirection makes the intolerable present reality more palatable and consequently available for contemplation. In the novels by Fuentes, Solares, Aridjas and Boullosa, the process of indirection is an integral aspect of the multifaceted representation of time and the incisive social critique. These Mexican authors are not really concerned with acid rain, cyborgs or the destruction of the planet, but by situating their stories in this oblique future, the critique of present-day Mexico can, in the words of Jameson, “enter the eye laterally” (*Archaeologies* 287).

I.4. Mexican Disaster Fiction

The way people think about contemporary disaster in Mexico City is inseparable from the catastrophes of the past, linking in the imaginary a series of cataclysmic events that are not immediately and simply causally related in order to wrestle with the trauma of a great misfortune in the present. In the Mexican novels of disaster, science fiction mixes with pre-Columbian myths, conjoining the future with the symbols and imagery of older, non-realistic forms of representation. A polysemic interplay between the real and the imaginary in these novels has its roots in ancient cultures, in which fantasy and reality were believed to coexist. These myths have a two-fold function in the narratives; on the one hand, they provide a vivid repertoire of narrative elements, images, and devices for imagining disaster; on the other hand, they also serve to evoke the indigenous world, thereby inducing the reader to link the disasters of the present with the disaster of the

the “present” of the L.A. of the forties and fifties. The “entertainment” aspect of the genre functions to distract the reader enough so that he/she will let down their defense mechanisms against the lonely and fractured reality of southern California. (*Archaeologies* 287)
Conquest. This second function illustrates Baudrillard’s contention that third-order science fiction collapses time, locates the future and the past in the present, and uncovers present realities in imaginary narratives. The ancient and mythical elements underlying science fiction in Mexico distinguish the genre from its manifestations elsewhere, for example in the representation of Los Angeles as the locus of disaster in fiction and film from the 1950s through the 1990s, a theme examined by Mike Davis in *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (2000). One myth in particular that gives contemporary catastrophe a specifically Mexican character is the Aztec legend of the Five Suns. The legend has it that each sun represents an epoch doomed for catastrophe: at the end of the first sun, the people are devoured by wildcats; the time of the second sun is devastated by wind; fiery rain and earthquakes destroy the era of the third sun; and the fourth sun concludes with massive floods. With the end of each sun, a new era dawned, in a cycle of destruction and renewal. At the time that the Spanish arrived on the continent and unleashed the horrors of the conquest, the Aztecs believed that they were in the era of the Fifth Sun, which was prophesied by the ancients to end as the result of a terrible earthquake. Since the Aztec cosmology established a cyclical sense of time and each period was supposed to conclude with an environmental disaster, the writers of catastrophe at the end of the twentieth century look to the symbolic world of pre-Columbian civilizations as a source of inspiration to depict a period of great upheaval and the end of an era. Of course, to evoke the Aztec worldview in a narrative is to almost automatically call to the mind of the contemporary reader the thought of the Conquest as well, because every reader knows how and why the Aztec world came to an end.
Thus, in addition to the pre-Columbian myths, the history of the conquest serves as a template for disaster that writers can draw on as a source of otherness and apocalyptic nightmares. For the Spanish, the exploration and colonization of the Americas was imbued with apocalyptic significance, believed to be the fulfillment of biblical prophecies. Biblical apocalypse is not merely a vision of doom but also the hope for the salvation of God’s chosen people, and it was this utopian vision that was projected onto the New World during the Age of Discovery. As Lois Parkinson Zamora analyzes in her book *Writing the Apocalypse* (1989), Christopher Columbus began the “imaginative association of America with the promise of apocalyptic historical renewal” (7). Another link between biblical prophecy and the new geography stemmed from the native population, whom the explorers believed to be the lost tribes described in Revelation. Moreover, the Spanish projected a Jewish identity onto the Indians and believed that their conversion signaled the approaching end of the world (Zamora 8). These interpretations of the exoticized, virginal space were also infused with fiction, myth and the imagination, such as the stories of the lost kingdom of Atlantis and the fantastical worlds of the *Amadis de Gaula* (1508). Once conquered, this geographic space was conceived by the Spanish as a tabula rasa upon which they would build their imperial cities according to the Renaissance episteme of Order and Concert (Merrim 50). The contemporary Mexican novels included in the present study draw on this New World apocalyptic tradition but often in a critical, ironic, exaggerated or parodic way that transforms promise into dystopia.

In contrast to the references to Spain’s messianic historical mission that appear throughout the literature of exploration and colonization, embedded in the national
consciousness and the sense of *mexicanidad* is an understanding of the conquest that emphasizes trauma. What was an apocalyptic prophecy of renewal for the Spanish meant death, subjugation and destruction for the native population, with Mexico City as the center of this maelstrom. In his book *The Mestizo Mind* (2002), Serge Gruzinski refers to the accounts by the Franciscan monk Motolinía of the apocalyptic suffering of the Indians; disease and epidemics were so “virulent that entire regions lost half of their inhabitants” (34). The bodies of the sick were ghastly and “corpses cluttered the water of lakes like rotting fish, poisoning air and food” (34), the stench of death pervading the air. The murderous re-construction of the city caused spatial disorder, and the confrontation of different time systems (Christian and pre-Hispanic) produced utter confusion in temporal frameworks and perturbed spiritual, cosmic and imaginative constructs (Gruzinski 38). The shock wave of conquest as it exists in the Mexican imaginary provides images for visions of tragic endings and traumatic beginnings. Octavio Paz postulates in *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) that Mexican identity is conceived as tragedy and violation, since *mestizaje* is the result of the symbolic rape of the indigenous mother, La Malinche or la *chingada*, by the Spanish father, Cortés. By revisiting Mexico’s painful history, contemporary writers can readily create a sense of the catastrophic in order to convey the consequences of present-day disasters. Though the conquest has been a central theme in Mexican cultural production throughout the twentieth century, its representation in recent years has acquired a fantastical and

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14 In *Mexico, From Mestizo to Multicultural* (2007) Carrie Chorba suggests that the violence of the conquest is oversimplified in Paz’s “Cortés-Malinche” paradigm, and that this singularly negative interpretation of Mexican identity has led to the traumatization of the country’s mestizo origins (37).

15 See, for example, Carrie Chorba’s analysis of political cartoons from the 1990s.
absurdist quality. By tying together the disasters of the present and the traumatic origins of the conquest, the history of Mexico is portrayed as an endlessly repeating catastrophe.

The interweaving of past, present and future also reflects the attitude that the worst has already occurred, that Mexico has passed from an apocalyptic to a post-apocalyptic condition. In his essay “What Photos Would You Take of the Endless City?” Carlos Monsiváis posits the defining characteristic of Mexico City’s inhabitants as the transcendence of an apocalyptic mindset; rather than flee from the site of pollution, violence and chaos, more people arrive daily (53). Juan Villoro summarizes the post-apocalyptic attitude in this way: “Somos el resultado de una catástrofe, pero suponemos que lo peor ya pasó . . . Lo decisivo es que estamos del otro lado de la desgracia” (“La ciudad” 140). In their study of the imaginary of apocalypse in contemporary Latin American literature, Genvieve Fabry and Ilse Logie define a typology of the re-figuration of the myth of apocalypse in which they propose four key categories: refiguración mítica explícita, refiguración mítica implícita, refiguración estereotipada, refiguración postapocalíptica. The last of these, the post-apocalyptic re-figuration, enacts a temporal jump:

Esta catástrofe, amén de coincidir con muchas de las mitologías indoamericanas y de la experiencia de la Conquista como trauma colectivo, se concibe como apocalipsis por el salto cualitativo radical que impone. Este salto en sí no resulta pensable; en consecuencia, el énfasis cambia de lugar y lo que una serie significativa de obras narrativas de las últimas décadas se dedican a imaginar es lo que pasa después del fin (457).

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16 The first category applies to texts that have a biblical intertextuality, with references to the structure, symbols and imagery of Revelation. The second grouping refers to texts that maintain or challenge a teleological narrative core in a story of catastrophe (what Fabry and Logie term “syntactical” references), but without the citing the symbols (the “lexical” content) of the biblical apocalyptic tradition. Literary works pertaining to the third category have syntactical and/or lexical apocalyptic references, however with some distance, and a greater tendency towards the absurd or ridiculous (Fabry 454).
Unable to envision the precise moment of upheaval, the writer often depicts what comes after the catastrophe to convey its magnitude. But what follows the catastrophe is not the renewal and new beginning that is promised by biblical apocalypse; indeed, as Julio Ortega suggests, there is evidence of a “Crisis de la idea del fin como promesa de recomienzo” (“La alegoría” 53). I would add to this that even the novels that anticipate a catastrophe in a predictive plot are really post-apocalyptic because the inspiration for the disaster fiction may come from a lived experience or the zeitgeist from the time of its writing. The novels by Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and Boullosa are post-apocalyptic in the sense that a real disaster has already befallen Mexico City and they write from that perspective, but also in so far as they imagine the aftermath of the catastrophe.

If the worst has already come to pass, it is the writer’s job to pick up the pieces and craft them into an expression of that experience, yet far from adopting a resigned or acquiescent stance towards catastrophe, the post-apocalyptic representational mode is both critical and pointed. These are profoundly political texts that arise in a space opened by trauma to interrogate the project of Mexican modernity. Latin American versions of the Apocalypse, according to Julio Ortega in his article “La alegoría del Apocalipsis en la literatura latinoamericana”, are “contra-apocalípticas porque son representaciones políticas” (53); the post-apocalyptic mode of representation “convierte a la naturaleza y la historia en figura culturalmente situada y políticamente proyectada” (55). These representations forge an alternative to the dominant logic and destabilize the normative discourse by means of an ironic, satirical and gratuitous textuality (55). Linguistically and thematically, these novels present a dissenting perspective that is critical of present social and political practices.
The terms used to describe this imaginary contain in their very definitions and etymologies a temporal sense. According to Merriam-Webster, the words catastrophe and disaster are virtually synonymous, since they both refer to a sudden destructive (often natural) event. Although disaster and catastrophe can be used essentially interchangeably, their etymologies bring out different aspects of this semantic field. Astro, the Old Italian etymology of disaster, denotes the great misfortune of such a calamity and is related to the observation of the stars and the element of luck, as in astrology; thus, the disaster is seen as inevitable, yet neither “our fault” nor teleological. Like disaster, catastrophe, from the Greek katastrophé, meaning to “overturn”, evokes ruin; however, the word catastrophe communicates not only tragedy but also the resolution to the trauma, since it signifies the dénouement, end, or resolution of the plot in Greek tragedy. As the final event in dramatic action, the word catastrophe possesses a teleological temporal sense that relates it to the linear finality of the apocalyptic tradition. Apocalypse refers more specifically to the biblical tradition, replete with symbolic imagery, of an imminent cosmic cataclysm in which God destroys the powers of evil and raises the virtuous to life in a messianic kingdom. Apocalypse comes from the Greek apokalypsis, to uncover, and signifies revelation. In the contemporary Mexican novels about catastrophe, and in particular the works about the 1985 earthquake, the experience of disaster may produce a prophetic revelation that marks a division between what came before and the future; it is as though a great fault line has opened up, revealing under the surface Mexico’s problems, the failures of modernity and consumerism. Indeed, Lois Parkinson Zamora recognizes the historical critique rather than the religious meaning at work in our modern sense of apocalypse: “The word is used again and again to refer to
the events of recent history, whether nuclear or ecological or demographic, which suggest all too clearly our ample capacities for self-destruction” (1). These definitions bring out the multiple meanings within the discursive formations that accompany catastrophe in the novel.

The exploration of catastrophe through the lens of science fiction reveals the writer’s profound disappointment about the process of Mexican modernization. The free-flowing and flexible representation of time in these novels problematizes the way that Mexico has modernized and critiques the idea of progress as the conceptual basis for modern Mexico. The authors question whether a Western model of progress necessarily produces forward motion and improvement, at the same time that they interrogate to what extent the “progress” that was promised to the Mexican people was actually delivered in the twentieth century. Similarly, the critic Miguel López studies the way in which Mexican and Chicano dystopian novels from the turn-of-the-Millennium register the theme of globalization and show the negative effects of the signing of NAFTA on the culture and environment of the borderland (*Utopian Dreams* 4). Since this model of development has led to the dystopian present and future, the novels reject a nostalgic vision of the past. By using science fiction techniques in these stories of catastrophe, writers can examine distinct historical periods simultaneously and explore the starting point of the present-day disasters. For Carlos Fuentes and Ignacio Solares the starting point is the adoption of a development model in the forties and fifties that betrayed the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. While industrialists and the wealthiest Mexicans profited from a U.S.-modeled modernization, the country continued to be divided along class and racial lines. But the malaise about the modern condition is also nourished with
the myths that grow out of the discontinuities in the Aztec and Spanish pasts, and for Homero Aridjis and Carmen Boullosa, the catastrophes of modernity have their roots as far back as the Conquest. The present and future-imagined catastrophes seen through this historical perspective uncover a deep sense of disillusionment with Mexican modernity.

Though the novels appear on first glance to be despairing, their narrative structure highlights the present as the time for action. Since the causes of catastrophe are uncovered in the country’s past and the promise of a better world in the future is called into question, action in the present becomes the only possibility for change. The elaborate play of time leads to a greater understanding of the past, however since it can’t be undone, it exists as something that must be confronted and reckoned with in order to free oneself from the traumas of history. Nostalgia for a mythical past, the authors suggest, is as useless as waiting for salvation in the future. The notion that the future will inevitably improve upon the present is deconstructed in these novels, as is the naïve hope in some distant utopia. The time travel, flash-forward, flashbacks, and condensation of different historical periods have an estrangement effect that serves to draw the reader’s attention to the realities of the present. This is the messianic moment that reveals the potential in catastrophe, the turning point that negates the need to wait for fulfillment. The present, not the future or the past, is the moment for transcendence, as fraught with disasters as it is. It is here that the tropes of science fiction narrative seem to complement an existentialist tone that calls for action now. This dialectic of the present reflects the way in which the survivors of the 1985 earthquake, amidst their suffering, empowered themselves and gave birth to civil society.
I.5. The Novels

The novels in the present study were published between 1987 and 1997 and together they give a sense of the political, social and environmental dimensions of urban catastrophe in the last decades of the twentieth century. This group of novels is exemplary of the imaginary of catastrophe in Mexico City that grew out of the devastating 1985 earthquake and the crises of the nineties. Some of the novels refer explicitly to the earthquake, while others explore an imagined landscape of natural disasters, but in all of these works the environment becomes a metaphor for the weakening of political and social structures; the natural disasters expose injustices that are buried deep within the country’s history. Although Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and Boullosa belong to different generations and their oeuvre exhibit an impressive diversity of themes and genres, when writing about fin-de-siècle catastrophe, all of these writers deploy elements from the genre of science fiction to free themselves from the representation of conventional time. Science fiction techniques allow these writers to include a disturbing and destabilizing mix of the present, future and past. By collapsing time through futuristic fantasies, time travel and historical pastiche, these works interrogate the causes of catastrophe in contemporary Mexico City. The mix of time heightens causality at the same time that it creates freer causal associations with traumas of the past that reach as far back as the conquest. Ultimately, to write about catastrophe for these writers is to engage in a critique of the process of modernization in Mexico.

In addition to the thematic commonalities found across these works, these authors reflect on the creative task of the writer in the aftermath of catastrophe through meta-literary and self-reflexive narratives. These writers break with the major tendencies of
the Mexican novel from 1968 to 1986, which the critic Cynthia Steele identifies as largely related to an aesthetic of representation that privileges the real, a narrative grounded in the experiences of the generations of the sixties, seventies and eighties: testimonial and documentary narrative, the total novel, neorealism and Onda narrative (25). The decaying cities and bodies that post-68 writers depicted are substituted with futuristic cities and dismembered cyborgs. The novels about catastrophe at the end of the twentieth century abandon a realist style, and focus instead on the unsettling feelings and sensations brought on by the real events. This is achieved through an interweaving of different narrative voices and styles in fragmented, jumbled texts whose very structures produce an alienating effect on the reader. For instance, the novels by Fuentes, Solares and Aridjis include passages about rescuing victims of earthquakes from the rubble that closely resemble the testimonial works about the tragic events of September 1985, but these are embedded within a narrative of word-play and pastiche. Lastly, all of the novels include characters that are writers, as though to fictionalize catastrophe is also necessarily to interrogate the very language and discursive modes used to talk about disaster.

This dissertation traces the themes and narrative strategies outlined above through the novels, with a chapter dedicated to each author. Chapter one discusses the way Fuentes commemorates the earthquake and echoes the accusations of corruption against the government in his 1987 novel Cristóbal Nonato. Fuentes uses a predictive perspective, imagining various social, political and environmental calamities in Mexico’s future by the symbolic date of 1992. In Cristóbal Nonato, Fuentes rejects both the utopian escape and a fatalistic vision; instead, he combines two paradigms of time,
cyclical, mythical time and linear, progress-driven time, to produce the metaphorical time of the spiral. Chapter 2 examines Ignacio Solares’s deployment of backwards time travel and futuristic dreamscapes to comment on the construction of the modern Mexico City that crumbled in the earthquake. In his novel *Casas de encantamiento* (1987), apocalyptic visions of the writer-protagonist mix with historical references to show the ebbing of the revolutionary impulse through the spatial dimension of urban catastrophe. Chapter 3 illustrates the ways in which Homero Aridjis uses myth and pre-Columbian imagery to destabilize the futuristic societies he depicts in his novels *La leyenda de los soles* (1993) and *¿En quién piensas cuando haces el amor?* (1995). Grotesque mythical creatures unleash a series of disasters that signal the end of the era of the Fifth Sun, with its environmental degradation and political corruption in Aridjis’s invented Ciudad Moctezuma. The anachronistic elements of Aridjis’s novels diffuse the cause of disaster by reaching far back into history, but the vast perspective holds out the possibility of regeneration through redemptive literature and the creation of a Sixth Sun. I conclude in chapter 4 with a study of Carmen Boullosa’s *Cielos de la Tierra* (1997), in which the notion of utopia is questioned through three juxtaposed stories: the demise of a distant futuristic society called Atlántide; the disasters that plague the contemporary Mexico City of the nineties; and the end to the Franciscans’ dream of creating an educated class of Indians during the colonial period. These temporal leaps serve to undermine the utopian future or the dystopian past, and enable us to understand the present, despite all of its problems, to be the place and time for change.

Recent scholarship has addressed apocalyptic and utopian themes in Mexican literature, but I propose to analyze catastrophe in contemporary novels by tracing the
narrative deconstruction of time produced by third-order science fiction techniques. All of the novels in this dissertation portray a futuristic Mexico City fractured by earthquakes and environmental devastation, and invaded by some haunting aspect of the past. Underlying this project is the contrast between fictional works and testimonials or chronicles of catastrophe, and an interrogation of the narrative form used to represent disaster. I propose that novels of catastrophe deploy science fiction techniques for the purpose of deconstructing time and reconfiguring historical processes, turning natural disaster into a metaphor for the social and political problems of the present. This dissertation will show that the narrative strategies of these authors ultimately compel the reader to focus on the present as the only time in which fulfillment and change are possible.
CHAPTER 1

Conquest, Catastrophe and Civil Society: Alternative Structures of Time in Carlos Fuentes’s Cristóbal Nonato

For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.

Walter Benjamin
Theses on the Philosophy of History

Although Carlos Fuentes affirms that “Lo que pasa con la literatura latinoamericana es que al poco tiempo las fantasías más extravagantes se nos convierten en realidad cotidiana” (Territorios 25), the landscape of disaster that he portrays in Cristóbal Nonato (1987) remains outrageously hyperbolic. In what Seymour Menton has called a “futuristic novel” (27), Fuentes imagines for the symbolic date of 1992, environmental, political and social cataclysms throughout the republic and especially acute in Mexico City. By the Quincentennial of the conquest, the near future vis-à-vis the date of publication, vast tracts of land will have been annexed to the U.S. and its corporations, while the capital is engulfed in fires, acid rain and grey clouds of pollution. Amid these fantastic catastrophes, a deeply moving account of the 1985 earthquake emerges as the only moment devoid of the dark, satirical, jocular resignation that characterizes most of the novel, set apart not only because it depicts a real historical disaster, but also because it is narrated without the corrosive humor and wordplay of the rest of the text. In this chapter I will examine how in Cristóbal Nonato the depiction of catastrophes reaching as far back as the conquest suggest two temporal paradigms for Mexico: the cyclical return of carnival and the teleology of apocalyptic endings. I propose, however, that through the representation of the 1985 earthquake and the anti-
utopian decision of the protagonists to stay in Mexico despite its myriad disasters, a third alternative arises: the metaphorical time of the spiral that emphasizes an ongoing struggle in the present. Though critics generally maintain that Fuentes is more hopeful about civil society and social change as an essayist than as a novelist, my reading of Cristóbal Nonato that centers on the key moment of the earthquake and the narrative strategies of the author finds optimism and resilience in the novel itself.

1.1. The 1985 Earthquake and its Impact

During the early eighties Mexico City faced crises resulting from continued urban growth and a volatile economy; however, it was a natural disaster that truly tested the social and political fabric of Mexican society. On September 19, 1985 Mexico City was devastated by the most terrible earthquake in the country’s history. The first tremors were felt at 7:18 a.m., as the busses, subway lines, and bustling avenues of the downtown filled with capitalinos. Shock waves shot through the city’s muddy sediment, sending its foundations undulating and the buildings teetering. Many structures crumbled completely, burying thousands in their ruins. Thirty-six hours later the city was hit by a second quake, which proved fatal for many rescue workers and for victims of the first one who hadn’t been extracted from the disaster zones.

While death-toll figures vary considerably, it is estimated that 10,000 people died in the disaster\(^{17}\), over 40,000 were injured, and around 80,000 were rendered homeless (Puente 306). Some of the zones hardest hit were the streets surrounding the Alameda and the neighborhoods north of the Zócalo. Many of the structures that were reduced to

\(^{17}\) See footnote 2 of the Introduction.
rubble were not the oldest buildings in the area but those that were built between 1940
and 1970, during the boom in government-led construction. Medical assistance was
complicated by the devastation suffered by the hospitals in The National Medical Center,
where doctors, nurses, and patients were fatally crushed.

Many observers concluded that matters were made much worse by the
government’s inept and negligent handling of rescue operations. President de la
Madrid’s government was supposedly prepared to handle a disaster of this magnitude,
however, the sluggish response, poor training of personnel and inadequate tools caused
the death of many victims who were not reached in time. In an effort to appear
competent and in control of the situation, the government initially turned down
international aid and downplayed the fatality count as well as the extent of the damage.

*Capitalinos* were instructed to remain at home and stay clear of the disaster areas, and
officials prevented volunteer rescue workers from accessing the critical zones. Police
were accused of intercepting food and clothing supplies, and even of engaging in looting
of the damaged edifices. The authorities were also blamed for permitting the
construction of buildings in violation of safety codes and for allowing government
structures to fall into a state of disrepair that exacerbated the earthquake’s impact\(^{18}\). As
one victim explains in Elena Poniatowska’s testimonial work about the earthquake, *Nada,*
*nadie: Las voces del temblor,* “A mi familia no la mató el sismo, la mató el fraude y la

\(^{18}\) Residents of the Tlatelolco housing project had protested over the government’s failure
to repair the weakening foundations of the complex’s buildings just months before the
earthquake toppled the entire Nuevo León building. Likewise, many of the garment
factories in the downtown, as well as the National Medical Center, were structurally
unsound because corrupt bureaucratic officials had not held contractors to the new
regulations intended to increase safety and make buildings more earthquake resistant
(Kandell 572).
corrupción que auspicia el gobierno” (83). Though President de la Madrid himself acknowledged that mistakes were made in the rescue effort and tried to provide the services that were lacking at the onset, many victims felt it was too little too late.

Confronted with the failures of the government, civilians spontaneously organized into brigades to carry out the rescue efforts in the immediate aftermath of the temblors. Ordinary citizens from all over the city volunteered to dig victims out of the collapsed buildings and oversaw the distribution of food and shelter for those left homeless. Many anonymous heroes, referred to as topos (moles), tirelessly worked to pull people out of the ruined buildings. Citizens expressed outrage at the government’s neglect, responding instead with an astounding outpouring of civic spirit, solidarity, and determination to assist those in need.

For this reason, the earthquake is considered a watershed in recent Mexican history and many people see this tragic event marked by death as the birth of civil society in Mexico. In No sin nosotros: Los días del terremoto, 1985-2005, Carlos Monsiváis states:

El miedo, el terror por lo acontecido a los seres queridos y las propiedades, la pérdida de familias y amigos, los rumores, la desinformación y los sentimientos de impotencia, todo- al parecer de manera súbita- da paso a la mentalidad que hace creíble (consecuente) una idea hasta ese momento distante o desconocida: la sociedad civil, que encabeza, convoca, distribuye la solidaridad. (9)

The civic spirit and sense of solidarity that came out of the 1985 earthquake spurred the formation of various grassroots organizations and the political mobilization of the urban middle and working classes. The most significant of these was the CUD (Coordinación Única de Damnificados), which organized marches of tens of thousands of people to demanded that the government rebuild housing for the victims of the quake in the worst
hit areas of the city center. The government eventually met the protesters’ demands and undertook housing reconstruction for victims in the downtown through the Popular Housing Renovation program, giving former renters the chance to buy attractive units at substantially subsidized prices. The earthquake also sparked labor unions and popular movements that saw the participation of women in unprecedented numbers. The Nineteenth of September Garment Worker’s Union, for instance, came about as a result of the terrible human losses suffered by this sector during the earthquake, and it sought to redress the abuses of an industry characterized by exploitation and corruption. The urban activism that grew out of the earthquake also played a decisive role in the 1988 presidential elections, in which for the first time an opposition candidate, Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, posed a formidable challenge to the monolithic PRI. In fact, many people believe that had it not been for election fraud in the form of a mysterious computer crash, Cárdenas would have defeated Carlos Salinas de Gortari. In 1997, Cárdenas became the first non-priista mayor of Mexico City, a position traditionally appointed by the president, in large part thanks to the mobilized urban population. Though the momentum of these grassroots, popular movements born of the earthquake dwindled somewhat when no longer faced with an emergency, the cooperation, courage and organizational ability

19 While many praised the HRP’s reconstruction projects, critics have shown how the record on housing reconstruction was mixed at best. For a detailed account of housing reconstruction policies, see Diane E. Davis’s article “Mexico City’s 1985 Earthquake and the Transformation of the Capital” in *The Resilient City* (2005); and José de la Cruz’s *Disaster and Society: The 1985 Mexican Earthquakes* (1993). In *Mexico City*, Peter Ward documents how social inequality was created by the arbitrary nature in which people previously of the same socio-economic status benefited from the earthquake reconstruction. The heavily subsidized HRP program developed attractive, affordable housing on the sites where buildings had been completely destroyed or irreparably damaged during the earthquake, however those not included in the group to be owner-occupiers were at a terrible disadvantage, and thus “a broadly homogeneous social class was split irrevocably” (248-249).
that civil society demonstrated in the face of the tragedy remains a powerful memory for
many Mexico City inhabitants.

1.2. Cristóbal Nonato: Real and Imagined Catastrophes

Published two years after the earthquake, Carlos Fuentes’s novel Cristóbal Nonato depicts a fractured Mexico that is besieged by multiple catastrophes. Narrated from the womb by a fetus to be born on the anniversary of the discovery of the New World, the novel spans the nine months from conception to birth. The first child born on October 12, 1992 will win the contest of the Cristobalitos, which will bestow honor and power on the newly proclaimed son of the fatherland. As the novel narrates the gestation and growth of Cristóbal, it depicts the disintegration and mutilation of Mexico. Hence Cristóbal’s question, “Vale la pena nacer en México en 1992?” (557). It is

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20 Throughout Latin America the Quincentennial was marked by debates over how to commemorate, interpret, and understand this historical date and the legacy of Columbus. The disaccord over how to refer to the anniversary sums up the controversy, as Carlos Fuentes shows in Valiente Mundo Nuevo (1990): “aquí en las Américas, la otra fecha que se nos impone es la de 1992, el Quinto Centenario de algo que, antiguo y actual a la vez, ni siquiera sabemos nombrar. ¿Descubrimiento de América, como la tradición más eurocentrista nos indica? ¿Encuentro de dos mundos, como una nueva tradición, más esclarecida, nos propone? ¿Conquista de América, que simplemente condena como un gigantesco crimen todo lo ocurrido a partir de 1492? ¿Re-encuentro de Iberia e Iberoamérica, programa político más generoso, que nos propone calibrar el pasado, no hacer caso omiso de errores y crímenes, pero entender que somos lo que somos porque tenemos un pasado común y sólo seremos algo en el futuro si actuamos unidos para el porvenir? ¿Involución de América, deseo europeo de un nuevo espacio que diese cabida a la energía excedente del Renacimiento?” (12).

21 This aspect of the plot resembles Salman Rushdie’s postcolonial magnum opus, Midnight’s Children (1981), in which the protagonist, as well as other characters born at the exact moment of India’s independence, possess special telepathic powers. In both Fuentes’s and Rushdie’s novels, the fictional life of an individual born at a symbolic moment is used to reflect upon the entire history of a country.

22 This questions recalls the famous opening line of Mario Vargas Llosa’s Conversación en la catedral: “¿En qué momento se jodió el Perú?".
indeed a hopeless and dismal landscape that Fuentes forecasts, the origin of which he traces as far back as the conquest, and more recently to the PRI’s betrayal of the ideals of the Mexican Revolution and to US imperialism.

*Cristóbal Nonato* represents both real disasters, such as the 1985 earthquake, and a series of fictional catastrophes that Fuentes anticipates in his novel for the year 1992\(^2\). By this date, the federal government has sold off the Yucatan to the exclusive Club Med vacation resort in order to pay the foreign debt that has climbed to the symbolic figure of $1492 million. For the same reason, the Chitacam Trusteeship was created, granting U.S. oil companies control of the petroleum-rich southern states of Chiapas, Tabasco and Campeche. Re-enacting historical incursions into Mexican territory, U.S. Marines have invaded Veracruz, while the northern states have been annexed to a new independent country called Mexamerica. US imperialism is thus at the center of Mexico’s catastrophes:

los destructores de nuestra imagen fiel y nuestro modesto destino: dice mi padre, los gringos en primer lugar, los más grandes revolucionarios de México, los que todo lo han trastornado, los que realmente nos lanzaron en pos del espejismo del futuro, los que mutilaron nuestro territorio y convirtieron la plata en plástico y llenaron de humo las panaderías y rompieron todos los espejos, a los revolucionarios yanquis que nos hicieron soñar con el progreso pero nos invadieron, nos humillaron, nos persiguieron y nos golpearon cada vez que nos movimos para progresar siendo nosotros mismos; a su hipocresía puritana militante; a la gigantesca corrupción agónica y pentagónica que se permite señalarlos con el dedo de una mano y taparse las narices con dos dedos de la otra. (554)

\(^{23}\) In *Latin America’s New Historical Novel* (1993), Seymour Menton examines the outpouring of novels in anticipation of the Quincentennial of the discovery of America that feature the character of Christopher Columbus, retell the story of the conquest or allude to the symbolic date (27-29).
Not only is U.S. dominance unmasked as the new colonialism; the gringos also supplant the country’s own heroes, the leaders of the Revolution, as the true agents of change in Mexico.

In Cristóbal Nonato, in addition to the foreign threat, the nation has been crippled by the corruption and the machinations of Mexican politicians. Criticism is directed at the PRI in the form of a new national slogan: “LOS SEXENIOS PASAN LAS DESGRACIAS QUEDAN” (261). The political maneuverings of the party and its status as “el único partido, el poder único, al cual por imperativo patriótico deben unirse todos los demás grupúsculos políticos” (484) make manifest the shortcomings of the institutionalization of the Revolution. In the words of the character of Uncle Fernando Benítez24, “El único derecho del hombre ganado por la Revolución Mexicana fue el derecho a la corrupción” (342). The opposition party, the PAN, is not portrayed in any more favorable terms.

The capital is the main theater of catastrophe in the novel and the space in which political tensions are played out, which reflects the centralized nature of the country. Referred to as “Make Sicko City” and the “capital del subdesarrollo” (305), it is plagued by overcrowding and violence, and various ecological disasters, such as acid rain and a dense grey cloud of smog that hangs over the megalopolis, which threaten its very existence:

--Qué esperaban, cabrones?
--Matamos el agua.
--Matamos el aire.
--Matamos los bosques.

24 The character takes the name of a real person and friend of Carlos Fuentes. Fernando Benítez contributed greatly to cultural journalism in Mexico and led the cultural supplement Sábado for the daily newspaper Unomásuno.
--Muere, pinche ciudad!
--Muere ya: qué esperas, ciudad jodida? (330)

Yet millions of people continue to migrate to the city in search of a better life, lured by the illusion of opportunity and prosperity: “nosotros les inventamos la ilusión de una ciudad de oportunidades y ascensos, una ciudad igual a sus pantallas de televisión . . . ellos prefirieron la ilusión de la ciudad a los campos yermos de su origen; quién puede culparlos?: ahora quieren entrar a la ciudad tan yerma, tan violenta, tan represiva como el campo que dejaron” (304). The city as illusion is also represented architecturally by the two-dimensional replicas of world-class monuments that greet Cristóbal’s parents, Ángel and Ángeles, as they enter the federal district. Intended to imbue the visitor or city-dweller with a sense of pride, these images are really only facades or fakes:

este prólogo de cartón unidimensional a la ciudad era idéntico a la ciudad misma, no una caricatura sino una advertencia: Ciudad Potemkin, País Potemkin en el que el señor presidente Jesús María y José Paredes preside un gobierno en el que nada de lo que se dice que se hace, se hizo o se hará: presas centrales eléctricas, carreteras, cooperativas agrícolas: nada, sólo anunciadas y prometidas, puras fachadas y el Señor Presidente cumple ritualmente una serie de actos sin contenido que son la sustancia misma de los noticieros de televisión: el Señor Presidente reparte ritualmente tierras que no existen; inaugura monumentos efímeros como estos mismos telones pintados; rinde homenajes a héroes inexistentes: usted ha oído hablar de don Nazario Naranjo, héroe de la batalla de Frigorífico de Coatzacoalcos? . . . El Señor Presidente le ha declarado la guerra a naciones ilusorias y ha celebrado fechas fantásticas. (301)

Thus, the illusory and ephemeral quality of the cardboard monuments becomes a metaphor for the city itself: a space of empty, meaningless ritual ceremony and farce.

Fuentes accentuates the fatalism of the modern city by juxtaposing it with an idealized vision of the ancient Aztec city. The Huerfano Huerta has a dream of the lush
and fertile ancient landscape, only to wake up to the putrid and barren environment of the present:

la ciudad vuelve a flotar sobre su laguna, las barcas navegan plácidas por los canales, cargadas de flores, geranios y zempazúchiles y rosas silvestres, los alhuehuetes, árboles abuelos, prestan su sombra al caminante y los sauces mojan sus pañuelos verdes en los limpios lechos de los ríos: abre los ojos el Huérfano Huerta y mira el muro blanco, sin destino, frente a sus ojos abandonados: los lagos muertos, eso ve, los canales convertidos en sepulturas industriales, los ríos tatemados, una coraza ardiente de cemento y chapopote devorando lo que iba a proteger: el corazón de México. (451)

This staggering contrast between the idyllic pre-Columbian city and the catastrophic present recalls a mirage seen by one of the protagonists in Casas de encantamiento, the novel I discuss in the next chapter. Just as in the novels by Ignacio Solares, Homero Aridjis and Carmen Boullosa, in Cristóbal Nonato capitalist industrial development and the spatial-demographic changes that it brings are directly connected to the environmental calamities. When the vast garbage dumps in the periphery of the megalopolis catch on fire, Ángel and Ángeles must flee from the doomed city whose oxygen supply will be consumed by the flames. Here, as with the novels treated in the following chapters, an environmental catastrophe becomes a metaphor for contemporary social and political disasters because of the convergence of natural and man-made factors.

Amidst the absurd, exaggerated, fantastical and future-imagined disasters that Fuentes predicts for Mexico, he chooses to include a description of the 1985 earthquake that stands out for its seriousness and its direct language. Though only a few pages are dedicated to this real catastrophe, it describes in vivid detail the tragic loss and acts of courage of that fateful September day. It narrates the way Ángel joined the rescue efforts
together with other middle class students (though undoubtedly working-class people were
the worst hit by the quake and also the most active in the rescue brigades):

Giró mi padre joven sobre sus talones en la acera inquieta del Paseo de la
Reforma; no sabía qué hacer pero sí que se necesitaba hacer algo, pasó una
combi repleta de muchachos, de su edad, mayores que él, pero todos
jóvenes, gritando por encima del eco estruendoso de la tierra y los
derrumbe concatenados; un hombre joven, moreno, con lentes de aviador
y chamarra beige le tendió la mano, Ángel mi padre saltó, se agarró de esa
mano fuerte: iban al hospital, era el peor derrumbe y no te angusties, Fede,
seguro que tu mamacita está bien, le dijo otro muchacho abrazando
fugazmente al líder de esta cuadrilla de auxilio, que no era la única y a
medida que avanzaban velozmente esta mañana por la Reforma, Ejido,
Juárez, los camiones, las camionetas, las combis, los autos llenos de
jóvenes armados al instante con picas, palas, lo que fuera: las manos.
Organizados por su cuenta, con un instinto feroz y lúcido de
supervivencia, un abanico espontáneo abriéndose por toda la ciudad a la
media hora, a la hora, a las dos horas de la catástrofe. Mi padre miró los
ojos de sus compañeros inmediatos. Como a él, nadie los había
organizado, se habían organizado solos y sabían perfectamente qué cosa
había que hacer, sin instrucciones de gobierno o partido o jefe. (49)

In addition to snippets of conversations about missing loved ones and descriptions of
digging through the rubble of fallen structures, this section also alludes to the schemes of
the business elite to make a profit off of new building projects in the destroyed areas and
the thousands left homeless and displaced by the disaster. These critical passages are
compelling because they bring to mind for any Mexican reader the real scenes of
suffering from 1985 through a language that is devoid of the puns and humor of the rest
of the novel, as I will explore further in the section on alternative structures of time.

Fuentes praises civil society in the novel but does not suggest that civil society
can replace the State. The position of civil society vis-à-vis the State is highlighted when
Federico Robles Chacón, the Secretary of State reflects on his participation in the
earthquake rescue:
Hace casi siete años yo fui un joven voluntario durante el temblor del 19 de septiembre. No hubo necesidad del PRI o Presidente o lo que fuera. Nos organizamos casi instintivamente, quiero decir, todos lo jóvenes del barrio, de varias zonas . . . Qué nos movió ese día? El sentido de solidaridad, lo humanitario, la necesidad de salvar a los nuestros. Darnos cuenta de que los demás eran nuestros . . . La sociedad civil rebasó al Estado. Pero fue el Estado el que creó a la sociedad civil . . . quiero decirle que lo único bueno que hice en mi vida lo hice aquella mañana del terremoto. Cambiaría todo mi poder de hoy por la satisfacción de escarbar en una montaña de escombros y rescatar a una niña enterrada allí, viva después de una semana de nacer. (469-470)

In this passage, Chacón describes civil society as arising both from within and in spite of the Mexican State. The outpouring of civic activity after the earthquake is a reaction to the fatal shortcomings of a corrupt and unjust State, but it is also made possible by that very system. The unfulfilled promises of the Mexican Revolution surface at the moment of crisis; however, the PRI state, for all its corruption, preserved something of this spirit of solidarity.

This speaks to the question of whether the ideals of the Revolution were completed, betrayed, or are still in the process of being carried out. In Cristóbal Nonato, these multiple interpretations of the Revolution are held simultaneously by the last survivor of the Revolution, Rigoberto Palomar, Ángel’s grandfather: “Todo ello contribuyó a que don Rigo, un hombre cuerdo en todo lo demás, enloqueciera respecto al tema de la Revolución Mexicana, convenciéndose de dos cosas simultáneamente y contradictoriamente: 1) la Revolución no había terminado y 2) la Revolución había triunfado y cumplido todas sus promesas” (77). The implicit number three here is that the Revolution is over, but was betrayed or lost, and failed to fulfill its promise.²⁵

²⁵ Fuentes himself goes back and forth on this subject, at times portraying the Revolution as a decaying body, as in La muerte de Artemio Cruz (1962), while in his essays
Faced with a homeland mired in these catastrophes, Ángeles and Ángel contemplate leaving Mexico and setting off for a new land of utopian promise. The couple is invited to board the ships bound for Pacífica, the New World (a new one), and abandon “su viejo mundo de corrupción, injusticia, estupidez, egoísmo, arrogancia, desprecio y hambre” (544). By escaping, the couple would choose the hope for salvation and the opportunity to save Cristóbal, leaving behind the muck and debris of history and starting over with a clean slate. It represents a paradigm shift to the East that would challenge the tradition of adopting Western, Atlantic models: “den la espalda al tiránico Atlántico que los fascinó y dominó durante cinco siglos” (544). Not only that, Pacífica also holds out the possibility of liberation from US domination: “Pacífica es nuestra carta, obvio: entramos por la puerta grande al comercio y a la tecnología, sin deberles nada a los gringos!” (549). However, Ángel and Ángeles turn down the enticing invitation to set off for Pacífica and, despite the dismal environmental, social and political landscape, they decide to stay in Mexico: “tampoco quiero un mundo pacífico que no mereceremos mientras no resolvamos lo que ocurre acá adentro, nos dice mi padre, con todo lo que somos, bueno y malo, malo y bueno, pero irresuelto aún; mujer, hijo, llegaremos a Pacífica un día si antes dejamos de ser Norte o Este para ser nosotros mismos con todo y Occidente” (555). The young couple’s decision finally gives an affirmative answer to the question that Cristóbal repeats as his mother goes into labor: “Vale la pena nacer en México en 1992?” (557). As his parents watch the ships sailing to Pacifica disappear in the distance, Cristóbal is born in Mexico on the anniversary of the conquest and crowned the winner of the Cristobalitos contest.

expressing hope in the institutionalization of the Revolution and placing support behind the State.
1.3. Alternative Structures of Time

As the examples from the text suggest, Mexico’s present and future are inextricably tied to its past, and specifically to the history of the conquest. The concept of time is central to Carlos Fuentes’s work as a whole. In fact, he groups all of his fiction under the title “La edad del tiempo”, which begins with Aura (1962) (“El mal del tiempo”), and then passes through foundational, revolutionary, and political times, to name only a few of the organizing thematic categories of his novels and collections of short stories. Time, according to the Mexican writer, “es el eje mayor, digamos. Bajtín nos hacer ver que no hay novela sin tiempo y espacio, sin cronotropía. Yo iría más allá para decir que aunque quizás ha habido tiempo sin novela nunca ha habido una novela sin tiempo” (“Carlos Fuentes” 407). Whereas journalistic writing about catastrophe represents time as we understand and experience it, fictional accounts of catastrophe can manipulate temporal structures and explore the textures of time through science fiction techniques and the fantastic. Time organizes the treatment of Mexico’s disasters in Cristóbal Nonato by emphasizing both continuity and rupture; real and imagined catastrophes unveil linkages across time and also signal a break in time.

In Cristóbal Nonato, Fuentes elaborates his representation of catastrophe by weaving together cyclical and linear forms of time. The novel includes apocalyptic notions of time that are teleological and focused on an end-point, as well as carnival time, characterized by its cyclical nature and eternal return. By using imagery, language, and narrative structures that accentuate a one-way flow towards disaster or the cyclic return to a history marked by catastrophes, the novel at a first glance seems to present a negative
and pessimistic vision of Mexico. I contend, however, that Fuentes deploys the metaphors of apocalypse and carnival without giving in to their fatalism. Ultimately, he undermines their temporal structures and the paired visions of doom or eternal stagnation that they imply, thereby giving vitality to a third alternative: the prospect of an ongoing struggle with no guaranteed outcome.

In this way, instead of a trajectory whose ending is predetermined, time becomes a kind of human praxis. In the chapter “Tiempo”, Ángeles explains that the new concept of time in the modern urban culture of Mexico City is not only faster-paced; it also places responsibility for the past and future in the hands of the people, stressing that time and history are man’s work and not divine providence:

todos sentimos que el tiempo era distinto: estábamos dentro de la ciudad capital de la República Mexicana donde por definición todo es más veloz, sobre todo el tiempo: el tiempo vuela, se nos va; pero al mismo tiempo el tiempo pesa, se arrastra, porque como le dice mi papá a mi mamá, quién nos manda ser modernos: antes el tiempo no era nuestro, era providencial; insistimos en hacerlo nuestro para decir que la historia es obra del hombre: y mi madre admite con una mezcla de orgullo y responsabilidad fatales, que entonces tenemos que hacernos responsables del tiempo, del pasado y del porvenir, porque ya no hay providencia que le haga de nana a los tiempos: ahora son responsabilidad nuestra: mantener el pasado; inventar el futuro. (307)

Ángeles affirms that Mexicans cannot give up on the struggle of everyday life, and that people must remember the past but work in the present to forge a future. Thus, the representation of time reveals a less pessimistic note about Mexico’s experience of disaster.

In this chapter I will show that time is treated in two fundamentally opposed ways in Cristóbal Nonato: as carnivalesque cycle (circular, irreverent, but ultimately dismissive of the masses and the popular) and apocalyptic. A critical perspective emerges
out of the tension and inconsistency of these two treatments of time and eventually moves to a dialectical resolution beyond these two opposites. As I will discuss in the conclusion to this chapter, it is through the representation of time that the reader may catch a glimpse of Carlos Fuentes’s more hopeful ideas about civil society, the state, history, and culture that he presents in his essays. Carlos Fuentes qua essayist asserts himself against the pessimism of Fuentes qua novelist\textsuperscript{26} at key moments in the novel that question apocalyptic and cyclical temporal structures.

1.3.1. \textit{Popular Culture and the Cycles of Carnival}

Carlos Fuentes has explored the relationship between cyclical time and myth, carnival, and language in many of his novels. In \textit{El naranjo} (1993), for instance, Fuentes uses the concept of cyclical time to dispute the interpretations of history and to undermine the traumas of Mexico’s colonial myths. Cyclical time structures the rewriting of the history of the conquest in the story “Las dos orillas” from \textit{El naranjo} (1993) in the form of numerical headings in descending order, the first and last of which tell the story of the conquest of the New World by the Spanish and then the conquest of the Iberian peninsula by the Maya; and the short story “Apolo y las putas” concludes with the subheading “Al día siguiente, todos los días” (\textit{El naranjo} 222). In \textit{Cristóbal Nonato}, recurring disasters in Mexico’s history suggest that the country is trapped in a cyclical notion of time. By the year 1992 in the novel, the Quincentennial of the conquest, history seems to be repeating itself; this time, the invading force is the United States.

\textsuperscript{26} This distinction is made, for example, by the critic Martin Van Delden in \textit{Carlos Fuentes, Mexico, and Modernity} (1998).
With its origins in ancient Greco-Roman and Pre-Columbian cultures, cosmogony, harvest seasons, and popular festivities, cyclical time is intimately linked to myth and carnival. Whereas Apocalypse predicts a definitive moment of disaster and renewal, Carnival enacts a dualistic and ambivalent ritual act of crowning and de-crowning, the symbolic destruction and renewal of the established order, which repeats itself with each calendar. Thus, Carnival always contains a cycle of negation; birth is fraught with death, and death with new birth. This festival creates a space and time during which the distance between people is suspended, the world is turned upside down and social hierarchies are undermined. As Mikhail Bakhtin affirms, “Carnival brings together, unifies, weds, and combines the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Carnival 251). However, this subversive reversal is only temporary, since society returns to the status quo ante to begin the cycle once more.

In Rabelais and His World (1968), Mikhail Bakhtin traces the influence of this popular festivity on literary language and shows the destabilizing humor of writing that draws from the energies of carnival practices. According to Bakhtin, ritual laughter, linked to death, rebirth, and the reproductive act, was a reaction to crisis. As Bakhtin has shown, parody is an integral part of carnivalized literature and its two-leveled world. Just

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27 While traditional notions of carnival are based on the very cyclical nature of the festival, Bakhtin’s notion of carnival as a time of freedom idealizes the values of carnival perhaps to the point of overlooking that the destabilizing reversal is only possible if it acts as a counterpoint. As Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist assert, “The question raised by Bakhtin’s carnival [...] is whether such a horizontally ordered world can be maintained for any length of time without introducing some kind of hierarchy” (310). Thus, the carnival spirit that challenges repression and authority relies on the cyclical nature of the festival; on the fact that it cannot exist as a permanent state, lest it succumb to the very hierarchical ordering it seeks to debunk.
as carnival laughter is often directed at something higher (authorities, truths, orders), so too carnivalized genres parody sacred texts and sayings, mobilizing one form of discourse against another. Bakhtin posits the carnivalesque novel as a fundamentally dialogic and polyphonic genre, since it addresses the other and integrates a plurality of voices that present different perspectives. Polyphony and the carnivalesque are at the center of Fuentes’s literary production, as he explains in his collection of essays *Valiente Mundo Nuevo* (1990). In the second essay in the collection, “Tiempo y espacio de la novela”, Fuentes summarizes some of Bakhtin’s ideas that resonate with his own writing: “La novela es instrumento del diálogo en el sentido más amplio: no sólo diálogo entre personajes, sino entre lenguajes, géneros, fuerzas sociales, períodos históricos distantes y contiguos” (*Valiente* 37). Fuentes’s affinities with the Bakhtinian concept of the carnivalesque are visible in the language of *Cristóbal Nonato*, however the cyclical time of carnival is challenged by the description of the earthquake.

In *Cristóbal Nonato*, cyclical time and carnivalized language are the representational modes used to address popular culture, civil society, and history. Fuentes’s novel contains many carnivalesque elements, such as the language of parody as a way to introduce humor in the text, the theme of a world turned upside down in which

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28 Raymond Williams’s article “Carlos Fuentes: The Reader and the Critic” examines Fuentes’s interest in Bakhtin’s writings. Williams states, “Bakhtin’s concept of the novel is basically parallel to Fuentes’s interests in the novel, as critic and novelist, since the 1960s” (230).

29 In an interview with Julio Ortega, Fuentes explains his interest in Bakhtin and connects the Russian writer’s ideas to the tradition of Cervantes: “Nuestra visión es más bien de una novela de humor, y en eso coincidimos con Bajtín, que al hablar de la carnavalización literaria de Rabelais, incluye también el Quijote, que pertenece a esta categoría del carnaval, que se basa en la diferenciación del discurso social, ya que hace notorios los distintos discursos en lugar de un discurso homogéneo y único” (“Carlos Fuentes” 399).
traditional symbols and concepts are constantly being subverted, the representation of popular culture as a destabilizing force, and paired images chosen for their contrast. The interplay between the language of carnival and the depiction of popular classes and civil society reveals tensions in the novel, tensions that are present in much of Fuentes’s work. On the one hand, Fuentes deploys carnivalesque language because of his commitment to writing experimental fiction and as a means to celebrate popular culture and civil society; on the other hand, he sees the ambiguities of popular culture’s vital but not always coherent and unified resistance.

In Cristóbal Nonato, parody and satire become protagonists, with word-play mockery spilling over each page. Whereas La región más transparente (1958), Fuentes’s first novel that centers on the urban space of Mexico City, explores the polyphonic nature of the megalopolis, in Cristóbal Nonato the language of the city has been utterly transformed. The author himself has said, “Yo sólo quise escribir una novela cómica de acuerdo con los más estrictos cánones del formalismo ruso: procesar y reprocesar todos los niveles del lenguaje, hasta convertir el lenguaje en imagen de otro lenguaje. De allí que la mitad de las palabras de esta novela sean corrupciones de idiomas extranjeros y, sobre todo, invenciones, neologismos” (Territorios 25). The outpouring of humorous critical language and self-referentiality undermines the sacred texts of the Spanish language, canonical works of literature and art, and the official rhetoric of the nation-state. For instance, Uncle Homero gives a “Lengua Clásica” pill and a grammar lesson to the Huerfano Huerta in a scene that brings to mind Antonio de Nebrija’s assertion that language is a companion to empire. This passage is made ridiculous not only by the mere idea of forcing the boy to literally swallow the fine points of Spanish grammar, but also
through the sexual innuendos and linguistic fastidiousness of the academic during a time of national catastrophes:

el tío Homero se lame los labios imaginando el destino del Huérfano Huerta si el niño sólo le entregara su lengua al viejo, le permitiese educarla, frasearla, diptonguizarla, bocalizarla, hiperbatonizarla . . . Pero el tío Homero era en ese instante el magister que no el nalgister: -O como escribiese en fausta ocasión esa cima de la gramática española que fue el ilustre venezolano don Andrés Bello, la conjunción copulativa vuelvese e antes de la vocal i, como en españoles e italianos, pero no antes del diptongo ie, ni antes de la consonante y: corta y hiere, niño, tú y yo. (88)

Phonetic and orthographic rules are exploded and used to a comedic effect throughout the entire novel, as in this cacophonous conversation between the two uncles:

- La Sirena!
- La Serena!
- Lazareno!
- Lazarillo!
- Nazareno!
- La cerilla!
- La ciruela!
- El ciruelo!
- El sir huelo?
- No, el sir Welles!
- Orson Hueles?
- All’s hueles that ends hueles! (289)

Word play is also used to level a political critique when, for example, Ángel and Ángeles, see the faded slogan “miúnicareligiónesméxico” (305) on the walls of the city. Fuentes incessantly mocks political rhetoric and popular discourse through puns and neologisms, unraveling the language that upholds the country’s institutions, political parties, and social movements.
In Cristóbal Nonato humor derives from the mixing of languages, especially English and Nahuatl, and the neologisms that ensue. El Huérfano Huerta and the members of the rock band the “Four jodiditos” speak an invented language called Anglatl, a hybrid of Spanish, English, and Nahuatl:

No los mataron en Aka?
Níxalo; nos draftearon mejor para el clinup de Aka

. . .
Los barracos de los Baboso Brothers gonna teikover el calpulli
Disisdapits! (335)

Even the place names of the city have been transformed by the Americanization of the language, leading to phonetic spellings and puns such as “COLONIA WHATAMOCK, AVENIDA WAREHZ, JADINES FLOTANTES DE SUCHAMILKSHAKE, CALLES DE BUCK O’REILLY” (104), examples of the carnivalization of Mexico’s landmarks and national heroes.

The destabilizing humor of the novel is drawn from popular culture and its penchant for gruesome hilarity and the albur. In El laberinto de la soledad (1950) Octavio Paz explains the Mexican tradition of the albur, or double entendres: “Cada uno de los interlocutores, a través de trampas verbales y de ingeniosas combinaciones lingüísticas, procura anonadar a su adversario; el vencido es el que no puede contestar, el que se traga las palabras de su enemigo” (43). In the tradition of the albur and through a parody of popular language, humor invades most of the dialogue and descriptive passages of the novel. As Uncle Benítez advises Huérfano, “la broma mejor que el crimen, no? tienes (tenemos) derecho a reír, huerfanito, por lo menos a eso tendrían derecho todos
ustedes, a una carcajada, aunque hasta su risa sea mortal” (94). But to what effect is humorous, satirical, and playful language used in *Cristóbal Nonato*

Some critics maintain that the decomposition of the language in *Cristóbal Nonato* expresses the disintegration of Mexico itself (Helmuth 100), while other scholars understand the language of humor and parody as enacting a kind of regeneration within the text. For instance, Julio Ortega states, “between the political crisis and the social cataclysms, this novel is born as a festive and corrosive metaphor that entails reading as the radical proposition of remaking the future with language—with rage and laughter” (“Christopher Unborn” 290). Here Ortega refers to the task of the reader to parse the meaning of the word play and, in some cases, to complete the text through their reading. Carlos Monsiváis writes: “Even the world of *Christopher Unborn* (one of ecological, political, social and linguistic desolation) is invaded by fun.” (“What photos” 311), though this kind of revelry in the text may be born of a sense of resignation rather than of hope.

And yet the notion that language is the last bastion of resistance when portraying the tragedy of catastrophe is somewhat unsatisfying and made problematic by the kind of reader to whom the text is directed. As Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat asserts, “the question persists as to whether the novel goes far enough in the direction of political resistance

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30 The play on words and the long string of puns recall another novel that drew extensively on popular language to ridicule official culture: *Tres Tristes Tigres* (1964). In the Cuban novel, which like *Cristóbal Nonato* narrates a sexual odyssey connected to the space of the city, orality and neobaroque satire are employed to defend “un orden abierto, dinámico, frente a un orden cerrado” (José Ortega 50).
31 Juan Villoro similarly points to this tendency in Mexican humor in his essay “Group photo”, in which he asks, “In light of all the problems, why does the Mexican laugh? The answer is simple: Because there’s nothing else he can do” (16).
through language or whether it is always going back to some inner circle of power lodged in the literary tradition and supervised by the authority of the literary intellectual” (90).

The carnivalesque language momentarily subverts the discourse of power but the novel is ultimately directed at an erudite, intellectual reader since the puns are often drawn from works of literature and require an in-depth knowledge of history, science and philosophy. For instance, in a passage that describes a meeting of the Mexican Academia de la Lengua, puns that only an educated reader would understand are used to mock the idea that Mexico should reject all foreign literary influence: “el que lee a Proust se proustituye!, el que lee Ulises se hulifica!, quien lee a Gide se jode!, Valery vale risa!, Mallarmé mama mal!, no comas cummings!” (138). In response, Ángel interrupts the meeting to declare that Mexican literature should be good for its literary quality and not simply for being Mexican, an idea in keeping with Fuentes’s interest in world literature and the influence of European and U.S. writers on his own work. The educated “Elector” is called on throughout the novel, even to the extreme of leaving a page blank and asking the reader to imagine what should be printed on it. However, this complicity between text and reader ultimately excludes Mexico’s plurality that Carlos Fuentes has so often celebrated.

The more inaccessible a novel about catastrophe becomes, the less likely it is to move people to action or, at the very least, to question the conditions of their present.

This also points to the problematic, temporary nature of carnival, which enacts a momentary subversion of power but ultimately works to reaffirm authority. In the following passage, carnival is associated with the manipulating, mind-numbing slogan of “Unión y olvido”:

Unión y Olvido y otro de los mensajes sublimados que de tarde en tarde parpadeaban en todos los aparatos de televisión decía redundantemente:
**CIRCO Y CIRCO**

trascendencia de la romana demagogia que prometía, además, los maderos de sanjuán, quieren pan y no les dan, el santo olor de la panadería, pan con pan no sabe, pero qué tal circo con circo? Ah, suspiró don Homero, el sentido del carnaval católico era cancelar el terror, aunque nuestro pariente Benítez diría que entre nuestros inditos es el diablo quien organiza el carnaval. (316)

Carnival is necessary for its entertainment value and to give people a taste of transgression and upheaval, but it ultimately serves to maintain the status quo. Therein lies the cyclical nature of the festival, its duality, and eternal cycles of birth and death.

For the most part, in Cristóbal Nonato the popular classes are not portrayed as enlightened enough to challenge the power lodged in authority. On the contrary, the masses are often depicted as lacking any sense of solidarity, as in this description of city:

La gente se empuja por la Taxqueña, órale pendejo mire por dónde camina/ pinche viejita pa qué necesitas ese bastón dámelo a mí pa jugar al golf con la cabeza de tu perrito/ mira empuja el cojo nuréyef ese/ por qué quiere pasar antes que yo señora chinguese vieja pedorra/ ándale pinche ciego regálame tus antojos tíralo al in-vi-den-te contra ese camión ándale jijos parece gargajo aplastado. (331)

The language of the popular is not represented as the language of redemption or liberation, nor does the guarded hope expressed through the emergence of civil society following the earthquake translate into a general optimism about the popular classes.

This is evident in the character of Mamadoc, the secretary who undergoes a pygmalian transformation into a mix of Mae West, Coatlicue and the Virgin of Guadalupe, conceived of by the government strategist Federico Robles Chacón. Mamadoc is also a play on “Papa Doc”, the Haitian dictator who used the Tontons Macoutes security forces to spread fear among his opponents and become president for life. Papa Doc played to
the popular masses firing mulattoes from the national bureaucracy, advocating a policy of
noirisme, and by associating himself with the figure of Baron Samedi, the earthly keeper
of vodum tombs. In the novel, Mamadoc becomes an iconic, symbolic spectacle intended
to create national unity and obedience through the strategic use of popular culture and the
dissemination of the message “Unión y olvido” (314). Her figure reveals how easily the
people are manipulated and distracted from the poverty and injustice they suffer.
Mamadoc, and the reference to Papa Doc, stand as a warning that populist figures can be
problematic and even dangerous. This idea is also manifested in the character of
Matamoros Moreno, who personifies the manipulation of the popular classes. A self-
serving populist, Matamoros Moreno misguides the masses and provokes the government
into carrying out a massacre of protestors. Fuentes certainly condemns the politicians as
corrupt, but the novel shows the language of the popular as containing elements of both
contestation and acquiescence.

Fuentes maintains in both his essays and fiction that culture, understood in its
historical complexity and diversity, is central to the struggle for social justice. Since,
according to Fuentes, “la cultura precede a la nación” (Nuevo tiempo 81), the nation must
recognize and celebrate Mexico’s plural, hybrid, and diverse cultures. In his essays,
Fuentes insists that culture plays an integral role in the democratic processes that will
lead to greater social justice (Valiente 12). In Cristóbal Nonato Fuentes presents a more
ambiguous vision of popular culture’s potential to contribute to positive change, since it
contains both regressive and recuperative tendencies. Fuentes condemns the former and
celebrates the latter, as in this statement by the narrator Cristóbal, “sólo la cultura
sobrevivía a los vaivenes de la política, y la cultura era baile, carnaval” (191).
1.3.2. *The Moment of the Earthquake*

Fuentes couples cyclical time and carnivalesque language to represent the course of Mexican history as a series of disasters, however there are pure moments that suggest that it is possible to break the cycle. The representation of the popular exists as a tension in the text; while Fuentes is critical of a manipulated, misguided, and false popular that he describes through playful language, he finds hope in the popular activism that arises in the aftermath of the earthquake. The cyclical elements in the novel constitute the muck and debris of Mexico’s history, interrupted by the description of the 1985 earthquake, which despite the tragic human loss and suffering is a moment of solidarity and the emergence of civil society in Mexico. Similarly, optimism about greater equality and social justice for the country’s poor emerged during the Mexican Revolution but were later abandoned or exploited by the discourse of the PRI. The Mexico of civil activism is the true Mexico but it is buried under the rubble of colonial and U.S. oppression, as well as government corruption. The “true” Mexico is uncovered for a brief moment in the novel, but that instant is extremely powerful, and Fuentes highlights its pureness through the careful use of language.

The contrast between the unadorned language used to describe the disaster and the parodic, carnivalesque language of the rest of the text underscores the singular quality of the earthquake episode. The language of the text as a whole values creativity and experimentation over a mimetic relationship to reality, but the direct language deployed to narrate the real catastrophe in Mexico’s history sets this episode apart from the cataclysms of the rest of the novel. The four pages that pay tribute to the spontaneous civilian rescue efforts are exceptional within the text because it is the only passage in the
novel devoid of irony, humor, and puns. The serious tone that approaches a more realist style evokes not only the sorrow but also the resilience surrounding the disaster in a way that deeply moves the reader. One passage describes digging through the wreckage of the hospital:

No se resignó a abandonar a los recién nacidos que fueron salvados, uno por uno, a lo largo de una semana, dos semanas, niñas nacidas una hora o una noche antes del terremoto que sobrevivieron en las ruinas siete o nueve días después de nacer: imágenes terribles de la supervivencia de la ciudad, del país entero: una niña acogotada por una barra de fierro: salió viva, una niña amamantada por su madre moribunda: salió viva. (50)

Another paragraph tells in an equally somber tone of the plight of the displaced victims:

Los sin techo, treinta mil, cuarenta, cincuenta, cien mil? Hicieron algunas manifestaciones pidiendo morada, algunos las obtuvieron, la mayor parte pasaron una temporada en un bodegón, un hangar, una escuela, luego tuvieron que desalojar, se fueron a sus lugares de origen o se quedaron a vivir con parientes o se desparramaron por las glorietas y los camellos de las avenidas y allí instalaron sus tiendas y covachas . . otros regresaron a los lugares vacíos donde tuvieron una casa, un empleo, un estanquillo. (51)

In Cristóbal Nonato, it is the realistic, faithful and convincing description of the solidarity and resilience surrounding the 1985 earthquake that reveals a glimmer of hope and the spirit of collective action.

The linguistic playfulness of Cristóbal Nonato points to infinite readings, rewritings, and reformulations of the literary imagination; by contrast, the earthquake episode does not partake in this festive corrosion and reconstitution of the language. Fuentes has stated that the word-play, neologisms, and reprocessed language “permite variar infinitamente las versiones de la realidad, como lo hacen Cervantes, Sterne, o Diderot” (Territorios 25). The linguistic games, with each new permutation of a word or concept, give the reader a sense of the endless possibilities of interpretation, whereas the language purged of this word-play presents a reality that is less multi-layered and lacks
the playfulness ad infinitum. There is no ambiguity or relativism surrounding this event; in the aftermath of the earthquake what stands out is an “authentic” and “pure” popular that spontaneously organizes itself with courage, compassion, and determination to aid fellow citizens, not misguided by populist rhetoric or the mind-dulling strategies of the PRI. However bleak the outlook for Mexico appears to be in the novel, the hopefulness and resilience that emerges during the earthquake rescue effort outweighs the muck and debris of the crumbling nation. Throughout most of the novel there is a squandering of humor, and the reader has the sense that an effervescent energy is wasted, decadent and undirected, whereas the scenes that deal with the earthquake possess clarity and directness-- a moment of recognition of necessity rather than jocular resignation. I believe, however, that the author has deliberately created an inconsistent novel, part carnivalesque with its appearance of fun and its undertone of despair; and part apocalyptic with its sense of disaster and its essence of redemption; this is in keeping with a dialectical movement to a view of time that transcends both of these partial frameworks and which is represented in the passage about the 1985 earthquake.

1.3.3. Apocalypse Then and Now

In Cristóbal Nonato apocalypse is both a central theme and the very discourse for encompassing Mexico’s history. Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat defines Cristóbal Nonato as an “apocalyptic novel” (88) and Chalene Helmuth states that the title’s denial of “the birth of the savior anticipates the apocalyptic tone of the novel” (87). Julio Ortega maintains that the “enthusiasm with which Fuentes traverses the Mexican pantheon reveals, once again, his cultivation of apocalyptic metaphor as a historical paradigm”
I contend that although the novel contains many apocalyptic elements, the representation of time in this novel ultimately defies the fatalism and utopianism of the millenary tradition.

Since millenarianism has historically arisen during times of upheaval, it is no surprise that Carlos Fuentes draws on the metaphor of the Apocalypse to represent the Mexico of the moment in which he is writing, devastated by natural disasters and wrought with political and economic turmoil. Novelists deploy the images, themes, and metaphors of the apocalypse to level criticism at and express discontent over the existing conditions of a society. The narrator of an apocalyptic text may denounce the political and social practices of his present, or may be particularly concerned with historical processes. Discontent over past and present lead the apocalyptist to predict a cataclysmic end to the present order of things. As Lois Parkinson Zamora explains in her book *Writing the Apocalypse*, in both the Hebrew apocalyptic texts and the Christian apocalypses, the narrator who describes the end of the world presents “a subversive vision” (2), condemning and rejecting the present order and anticipating a miraculous redemption in a new age.

Apocalyptic images and themes, as well as direct references to the apocalypse, imbue the catastrophes of *Cristóbal Nonato* with a symbolic quality. Ferocious coyotes devour cadavers in a devastated Acapulco; an angry earth unleashes storms of acid rain; fires and massacres consume the capital. The characters themselves are conscious of their apocalyptic fate, as uncle Fernando Benítez explains when he flees from the ruins of the city to live with the Huichol Indians: “Ojalá que todos salgamos bien de este remedo de apocalipsis” (452). Cristóbal internalizes the apocalyptic events that he witnesses
from the safety of the womb, as his mother goes into labor: “Cuánto tiempo pasa entre cada temblor apocalíptico en el vientre de mamma mia?” (555). By interjecting this reference to the apocalypse on the anniversary of the conquest of the New World, Cristóbal’s auspicious birthday, Fuentes links the disasters of past and present.

The conquest of the New World was itself an apocalyptic millenary moment, an association that Fuentes draws on when connecting the catastrophic present to the centennial of this critical historical moment. Apocalyptic optimism pervaded the Age of Discovery in Spain, and the New World was envisioned as a Utopia. As Zamora explains, by referring to passages from Revelation and Isaiah in his letters and diary, Columbus contributed to the projection of apocalyptic renewal upon the American continent (7). In The Millennial Kingdom of the Franciscans in the New World (1970), John Leddy Phelan argues that the conquest of the Aztec empire took on apocalyptic significance because the Indians were seen by the Spaniards as the lost tribes of Israel, and Quetzalcóatl, the awaited ancient Toltec god, was believed to be a kind of Messiah (26). Moctezuma thought that the Spaniards were emissaries of Quetzalcóatl, coming to reclaim his dominion of earth and begin a new cycle. Millenarian interpretations of the New World were influenced by Thomas More’s Utopia (1516), as Fuentes observes in Cervantes o la crítica de la lectura (1976):

La tercera posibilidad de América era la Utopía, la construcción de una sociedad humana armónica, igualmente exclusiva de la fatalidad opresiva de la teocracia azteca y del culto maquiavélico del poder de los reyes católicos y sus sucesores: Utopía significa que los valores de la comunidad son puestos por encima de los valores del poder. Muchos frailes humanistas viajaron al Nuevo Mundo con las obras de Moro. (89)

Fuentes is undoubtedly in dialogue with these figurations of the New World when he depicts Mexico’s dystopian present.
In addition to the biblical apocalyptic tradition and the European myths of foundations and endings, Fuentes draws on indigenous, pre-Columbian forms of apocalypse. These rich New World strains of apocalypse, deeply rooted in myth, provide the writer with the language and symbols of ancient cosmology to depict cataclysmic moments in Mexico’s contemporary history. For example, Fuentes makes reference to the “Quinto Sol” at the beginning of the passage that describes the 1985 earthquake (Cristóbal 48), thus linking the real catastrophe to the mythic earthquake\(^ {32} \) that was predicted to end the era of the Fifth Sun, our current epoch. In the Aztec myth of the Five Suns each sun represents an era doomed by means of some kind of catastrophe. As Burr Cartwright Brundage explains in his book *The Fifth Sun* (1979),

\[
\text{There were five of these suns or ages. They were not cyclic, each}\]
\[
\text{repeating the other, but were unique and unrepeatable. They were limited}\]
\[
in number—five was the maximum number. There will be no more. They}\]
\[
\text{have been alike only in that each was an imperfect cosmic experiment}\]
\[
\text{ending in collapse. The first four were past aeons; the fifth is the present}\]
\[
\text{one. Taken together they make up the complete history of time, of gods,}\]
\[
\text{and of man. (27)}\]

In contrast to the Aztec cycles of renewal every 52 years, the Five Suns were not cyclical and would eventually come to a final catastrophic end. The myth of the Five Suns also

\(^ {32} \) The theme of catastrophe and its linkages with the apocalyptic tradition and the myth of the five suns is also explored in poetry from the years following the earthquake. José Emilio Pacheco’s five-part poem “Las ruinas de México (Elegia del retorno)” describes many horror-filled moments from that fateful morning. Pacheco praises the civic spirit of the anonymous hands that overcame fear and anguish in order to rescue people trapped beneath the rubble, and denounces the officials who profited from the contracts for the faulty construction. Though the tone of much of the poem is one of despair and doom, the ending would seem to suggest that a new beginning is possible. It concludes on a positive note, with a call to look forward without forgetting the past: “With stones from the ruins, we must forge/ another city, another country, another life” (159). The poem enacts a burial and a period of mourning, followed by a rebuilding of the ruins. In the introduction to the English translation, *City of Memory and Other Poems* (1997), David Lauer explains that the numbers twelve and five give the poem its structure and evoke the pre-Columbian worldview.
appears in the novels by Homero Aridjis, which I will examine in chapter three, to augur the complete collapse of an epoch.

Although Fuentes draws on the apocalyptic tradition, he in fact undermines this representation of Mexico by challenging apocalyptic notions of time. The mythic corpus of a particular culture-- the mixing of pre-Columbian and European traditions in Mexico-- determines to a great extent its concept of time, past, present and future. Essentially teleological, Apocalyptic time moves in a linear fashion toward a projected ending. Apocalyptic time is based on the idea of a definite end-time, a point after which the old world will cease to exist and, in the case of biblical eschatology, a new age will begin. Instead of presenting the reader with the definitive and anticipated apocalyptic ending in which the old world is destroyed and replaced by a new, utopian society, Fuentes’s novel ultimately diverges from the expected finale.

Apocalyptic time resembles narrative plot in its structure and movement towards a single end-point. In Sense of an Ending (1966), Frank Kermode studies the ways in which apocalyptic narrative structures are concerned with ends and endings. In theater, for example, characters advance towards their individual future, the Fate that was handed down to them by the Gods. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, apocalypse means revelation, which shows the connection between the apocalyptic tradition and the idea that something is uncovered or brought to light at a concluding point in time. Likewise, the word catastrophe signifies the dénouement, end, or resolution of the plot in Greek tragedy, a definition that relates catastrophe to the ruin of apocalypse and millenarian foreboding.
In addition to providing literature with the images and metaphors to express criticism of society and to reflect on historical processes, Apocalypse serves as a template for the act of writing. According to Zamora, Biblical apocalypse “embodies two parallel quests, one for an understanding of history, the other for the means to narrate that understanding” (14). Thus, for writers such as Carlos Fuentes, who are not only concerned with the social and political problems of their present but also with the craft of novel-writing, the language of apocalypse is especially compelling. Revelation is to a great extent about the process of writing, the communication of a message and its interpretation. Throughout Revelation, John is instructed to write down what he witnesses, and when the seven seals are broken, the words written on the scroll unleash the devastation and horrors of apocalypse. Thus, emphasis is placed both on the cataclysms themselves and the power of the written transmission of the message. In a similar way, Cristóbal Nonato explores the disasters that Mexico faces as well as the written language with which to communicate this vision of the future. The language of the text, which is mostly carnivalesque but also contains moments of sincerity and clarity, invites the reader to reflect on the role of literature and language in the aftermath of a disaster, a preoccupation that is central to the novels discussed in the following chapters as well.

In Cristóbal Nonato, Fuentes sets up an apocalyptic plot structure based on the gestation of Cristóbal, a kind of Messiah, amidst Mexico’s various catastrophes. The novel is structured chronologically by the nine months of Ángeles’s pregnancy, which prepare the reader for the momentous occasion of the birth of the savior. According to linear, apocalyptic Jewish Messianism, there will be immense suffering on earth, both in
the form of natural disasters and man-made cataclysms, before the Messiah appears to usher in a new period of happiness. However, there is some ambiguity between the need to live in the world and an anticipated and profoundly altering end-time in the New Testament, where Jesus Christ as the Messiah is born, yet the world goes on with his birth and life. In Christian Apocalypticism, Christ appears but guides his people towards the future in a humble way, acting with discretion, piety, and forgiveness—without the rage, fire, sweeping destruction, and miracles that tradition predicted. Christians then decided that such calamities would occur upon Christ’s return, which is depicted in Revelation. 

*Cristóbal Nonato* centers on the arrival of Cristóbal as such a figure, and the text indeed seems to move in a steady progression towards its anticipated ending, however, the end of the novel does not bring about a radical transformation in society. The notion that the winner of the *Cristobalitos* contest will be the great long-awaited leader of the Nation is further called into question by the humorous indifference of the bureaucrat that Ángel and Ángeles encounter when they go to register for the competition.

There is no ending of total destruction nor do Ángel and Ángeles embark for the New, New World, in an act of millenary faith. Instead, Cristóbal’s parents decide to stay in Mexico to work out the problems of the existing society. Pacífica, recalling colonial aspirations, holds out the promise of utopia in both its spatial form (an ideal place in a remote part of the world) and its temporal paradigm (as a future in the making). Ángel and Ángeles reject this idea of utopia by passing up the opportunity to go to Pacifica and opting to remain in Mexico. In an interview with Julio Ortega, Fuentes states that the Mexico City of *Cristóbal Nonato* “sí tiene futuro. Y el final lo dice. Cuando Ángel y Ángeles se niegan a acompañar al Huérfano y su hermano a la nueva utopía, que es
Pacífica, optan por la ciudad . . . Ángel y Ángeles prefieren quedarse en México. Se dicen vamos a terminar lo que hay que hacer aquí, vamos a hacer no la utopía, sino la posibilidad, simplemente” (“Carlos Fuentes” 403). The narrative structure of the text sets the reader up for a conclusive ending of tumultuous destruction and utopian, Messianic promise, but all that the characters are left with are unresolved, persistent problems.

1.3.4. The Spiral of Open-Ended Struggle

Fuentes’s literary response to Mexico’s contemporary catastrophe does not present a teleological trajectory, pushing forward along a straight path, but instead a process that moves forward at a slow pace marked by a constant circling back. In this way, Cristóbal Nonato emphasizes a constant struggle that advances in a spiral-like movement. Cristóbal uses this geometric metaphor at the end of the novel in a comment to the “Elector”: “nada es lineal, gracias a Dios todos somos observadores circulares y espirales” (560). Less hopeless that the cyclical return and less definitive than the end-time of apocalypse, the form of the spiral suggests the open-ended challenges of everyday life that many Mexicans face.

The metaphor of the spiral comes from Fuentes’s interest in Giambattista Vico, the 18th century Italian philosopher. In Valiente Mundo Nuevo Fuentes explains that Vico rejected a linear concept of history in favor of a theory of history as the movement of corsi and recorsi. Vico believed, for example, that the historical phases through which Western civilization had passed had counterparts in the antecedent Greco-Roman civilization. However, the concept of ricorsi that Vico presents in his New Science (1744) is not merely a cyclical recurrence of cultural stages; although they contain the
memories of preceding civilizations’ achievements, failures and unresolved problems, no
two phases are identical. Instead, as Fuentes highlights, Vico’s “corsi y ricorsi (cursos y
recursos) ascienden en forma de espiral. No son, propiamente, parte de un tiempo
circular como el imaginado por Borges, ni el eterno retorno evocado por Carpentier, sino
el presente constante” (Valiente 33). Vico’s concept of history contains both
retrogressive and progressive elements, looking back at the past while also considering
forms that may come in the future.

It is clear that Fuentes was thinking of Vico while writing Cristóbal Nonato, since
the novel dates roughly from the same period as Valiente Mundo Nuevo and there are
direct references to Vico in the novel. The exclamation “Para vico me voy!” appears
twice (491, 304) and Fuentes specifically mentions the shape of Vico’s spiral in the
context of the conception of Cristóbal. He even prints a spiral-like graphic in the center
of the page to represent the “sierpe de espermas espirales, el vículo de la historia,
estrecha vía de vicogénesis” (150). While in Terra Nostra (1975) Vico’s ricorsi
constitute the philosphical and ideological basis of the novel, in Cristóbal Nonato these
ideas are transformed into word-play.

The spiral movement closely resembles Carlos Monsiváis’s concept of “post-
Apocalypse”, which he uses to describe the predominant feeling among people living in
Mexico City at the end of the twentieth century. In the essay “What Photos Would You
Take of the Endless City?” Monsiváis distinguishes between catastrophe, a real and
devastating event, and “catastrophism”, which is more of a mindset or attitude: “The
celebration of the incredulous in which irresponsibility mixes with resignation and hope”

33 See Lois Parkinson Zamora’s Writing the Apocalypse, in which she identifies a similar
spiral pattern in Terra Nostra.
Monsiváis seems to be suggesting that Mexico City’s inhabitants have transcended the melancholy fatalism that anticipates an impending catastrophe, nor are they enjoying the dawning of a new age that follows apocalypse. Without the decisive moments of radical transformation, they continue to cope with their daily existence in the chaotic metropolis with hope, endurance and tenacity. Though it may be difficult to find an optimistic note in Cristóbal Nonato, the novel urges the reader to move beyond both carnivalesque cycles and apocalyptic thinking to concentrate on a constant, ongoing struggle. The post-end-time understanding of time challenges the linear, European idea of progress. As Dragan Klaic explains in his study of utopia and dystopia in modern drama, *The Plot of the Future* (1991), satire uses a predictive perspective “not only to mock the seemingly bad present and a probable, worse future, but also to debunk the idea of the future that the present society nourishes” (155). The ideology of progress is based on the assumption that the future will be superior to the present, therefore by setting the novel in 1992 and presenting a negative vision of what that future holds, Fuentes is questioning the prevailing idea of progress. He is critical of any simple notion of progress that imports ideas of development without considering Mexico’s history.

In *Valiente Mundo Nuevo*, Fuentes states: “En contra de las grandes ilusiones de los fabricantes de milagros económicos en las décadas que siguieron a la Segunda Guerra Mundial, ni la modernidad nos aseguró la felicidad [...] los gobernantes de nuestros *booms* económicos creyeron que el proceso dialéctico de la historia hacía la perfección y el progreso nos daría, por partes iguales, libertad, bienestar y felicidad. Sus políticas—crecimiento por el crecimiento, concentración de la riqueza hasta arriba con la esperanza infundada de que tarde o temprano, gota por gota, llegaría hasta abajo; reagonismo de nopal—nos condenaron, a pesar de las apariencias [...] a prolongar el drama de la dependencia” (14-15).
1.4. Carlos Fuentes: Novelist and Social Critic

Writing in the wake of a tragic catastrophe that was a watershed for the participation of civil society and a cause for polemics, Carlos Fuentes plays out these tensions in the novel, revealing his ambiguous and dualistic position as a writer and social critic. Throughout his literary career, Carlos Fuentes has maintained a commitment to writing experimental novels, moving away from referentiality and the tradition of bourgeois realism, but his interest in literary innovation has not detracted from the Mexican writer’s engagement with political and social issues.

Critics and the author himself seek to draw a distinction between his role as experimental novelist and the essayistic production of the engaged intellectual. As Maarten van Delden documents in his book *Carlos Fuentes, Mexico, and Modernity* (1998), Fuentes maintains that he bifurcates, that he channels his political concerns into his journalism and his aesthetic interests into his novels, and that the two should not be confused. In the early seventies these two offices are clear, since at no other time was Fuentes more involved in politics and aligned with the state than during the Echeverría presidency; those were also the years in which he wrote *Terra Nostra*, one of his most complex and experimental novels. As Van Delden asserts, during this period Fuentes’s literature could not eschew his political concerns:

> it proved impossible for Fuentes to keep the two aspects of his role separate. This is utterly clear from *Terra Nostra*: a formally innovative novel that verges on the unreadable but at the same time contains a diagnosis of the ills of Hispanic culture, as well as recommendations for remedying these ills. (146)
Fuentes’s fiction from the seventies contained a utopianism that his political views had abandoned in favor of a more pragmatic approach through collaboration with the state\(^{35}\), but his literary production from that period belies the illusion that the work of the journalist, public intellectual and novelist can be kept separate.

By the mid-eighties, however, according to Van Delden, the political visions of the journalist and the novelist had become irreconcilable. Van Delden describes the “disjunction between Fuentes’s political vision and his literary imagination” in *Cristóbal Nonato*:

In his political statements, Fuentes tends to offer concrete proposals for bringing about a better future for Mexico and Latin America. In addition, he presents a positive view of the role of the writer in the construction of such a future. Yet his literary imagination is often drawn towards satire, in particular the negative, destructive dimension of satire. The novel becomes a device for exploding Mexico’s social and political illusions, rather than for exploring the possibilities of social and political transformation. (179)

Van Delden contends that Fuentes’s essays from the mid-eighties are generally hopeful about Mexico’s present and future, the role of culture and civil society, in contrast to his novels, which present a destructive and bleak outlook for the country, and consequently a less optimistic vision of the writer’s contribution to bringing about positive change in the country.

I would argue, however, that although it appears that in *Cristóbal Nonato* the darker and more satirical vision of the novelist prevails, the more optimistic ideas of

\(^{35}\) In essays such as “La disyuntiva mexicana”, Fuentes is critical of the centralist tradition that stifled the localist and pluralist energies of the Revolution, but he sees the state as the possible guarantor of greater social justice. Civil society can be a force outside the centrist state, but not in opposition to it, that will contribute to realizing the ideals of the Revolution.
Fuentes qua essayist come through in the representation of the 1985 earthquake, the anti-utopian ending of the novel, and in the alternative structures of time discussed earlier in this chapter. To borrow the metaphor of *Cristóbal Nonato*, it is as though the essayist hides in the womb of the novelist and emerges at certain key points in the narrative. How, then, are central issues in Fuentes’s fiction and non-fiction—specific political issues such as democracy, the role of the state, civil society, and culture as a means to social justice—represented in *Cristóbal Nonato*?

In his essays, Fuentes emphasizes the need to understand Mexico’s complex history in order to forge a future for the country, and he is critical of an idea of progress that imports models of development without considering the country’s past. Fuentes believes that Mexico’s history is a living past that figures prominently in the present and will influence the country’s future: “cada país debe hurgar en su experiencia histórica para encontrar su propio camino” (*El espejo* 343). The collection of essays titled *Nuevo tiempo mexicano* (1994) begins with a piece on the myth of the Five Suns and ends with multiple entries about the turbulent events of the year 1994. By making the pre-Columbian myth and the events of 1994 the bookends of his text, Fuentes links the two in an effort to understand the way in which Mexico’s mythic past impacts the present.

Nor can the future be limited to a strictly forward-looking concept of progress, since “El engaño del progreso”, according to the Mexican writer, is to think that we can “dejar atrás lo que fuimos” (*Nuevo tiempo* 208). Fuentes believes that development must occur in consonance with the socio-political realities of Mexico’s past and present: “¿Acaso no poseíamos la tradición, la información, las capacidades intelectuales y organizativas para crear nuestros propios modelos de desarrollo, verdaderamente
consonantes con lo que hemos sido, con lo que somos y con lo que queremos ser? (El espejo 355). Though Fuentes condemns the uneven development that resulted from foreign models that disregarded Mexico’s traditions, he concedes that the economic boom of the forties and fifties propelled Mexico into industrial modernity. The impoverished masses were excluded from the prosperity but “sólo gracias a sus sacrificios México se ha convertido en una nación parcialmente industrializada” (Tiempo 142). In his characteristically dialectical fashion, Fuentes prescribes economic development, but one that glances at the past, understands history’s mark on the present, and looks toward the future. Mexico must move forward without abandoning the promises of the Revolution or ignoring the vestiges of colonialism.

This dialectical understanding of the influence of the past upon the present that Fuentes proposes in his articles comes out as well in Cristóbal Nonato through the representation of time. On the one hand, the novel presents a cyclical notion of time by linking the imagined contemporary catastrophes with the anniversary of the conquest and the failures of the institutionalization of the Revolution. In this way, the text suggests the interconnectedness of Mexico’s disasters; the unresolved problems that date as far back as the conquest reappear in the present. The idea of carnival, to which the notion of cyclical time is inherent, appears as an integral part of the text in the form of a parodic language of puns and humor drawn from both high and popular cultures. By contrast, apocalyptic, linear time is introduced through images of disaster that appear to progress toward an end-time, but apocalyptic time is undermined by the anti-utopian conclusion in which Ángel and Ángeles do not emerge from the catastrophes in the idyllic Pacífica. Instead, the couple stays in Mexico with the hope of improving life there, thus defying
the notion of end-time. Having debunked the cyclical and the apocalyptic, Fuentes presents the reader with the dialectical spiral of continued struggle and the constant present. We are not caught in an eternal return, nor are we progressing along a linear trajectory towards a moment of total, qualitative, rapturous, or messianic discontinuity; rather, as the shape of the spiral suggests, the move forward occurs at a slow pace, marked by many returns and a constant negotiation between past and future. Although some critics argue that there is a pessimistic tone in Fuentes’s novels that is absent from his essayistic work, the metaphor of the spiral reveals perseverance and dedication to positive change and action in the present.

As an essayist, Fuentes expresses hope that civil society will champion culture as political agency in its struggle for social justice and political democracy. In his essays from the nineties, Fuentes envisions a new relationship between civil society, culture and the state, which can no longer exist as separate entities (Nuevo tiempo 79-80). Fuentes explains that the institutionalization and creation of a strong state following the Revolution was necessary, however civil society was excluded from democratic processes and even violently suppressed, as in October 1968. Following the 1985 earthquake, Fuentes believes that civil society will be decisive in creating democracy in Mexico, as this culminating note of the book El espejo enterrado states: “A medida que la sociedad civil, portadora de la continuidad cultural, incrementa su actividad política y económica, desde la periferia hacia el centro y desde abajo hacia arriba, los viejos sistemas, centralizados, verticales y autoritarios del mundo hipánico, serán sustituidos por la horizontalidad democrática” (387). In El espejo enterrado Fuentes lauds civil society’s rapid response during the earthquake, as well as many “iniciativas nacidas de la
crisis” (388). In contrast to his earlier writing, these essays convey a greater hope in the autonomy and agency of civil society.

The description in Cristóbal Nonato of the mobilization of civil society in the aftermath of the earthquake is a singular moment, one that stands out for its resilience and its uncorrupted ideal of social justice. Amid the ruins of the project of modernity, the ideals of the Revolution, and the physical space of the city, the depiction of the emergence of civil society following the earthquake conveys a guarded hopefulness. Fuentes’s use of realist language in the earthquake episode shows how he is constantly moving between experimental novelist and social critic, concerned with the political reality of his country, which challenges the idea that Fuentes as novelist diverges from the viewpoints of the essayist. Written in mimetic language, the moment that describes a real catastrophe breaks through the experimental wordplay of the rest of novel. Despite Fuentes’s contention that he was primarily interested in reprocessing language in Cristóbal Nonato, which would be in line with his aspiration as an experimental novelist, Julio Ortega maintains that it is “his most political novel” (“Christopher Unborn” 287). Fuentes uses a realistic narrative style at a key moment in Cristóbal Nonato to punctuate the 1985 earthquake and add a critical dimension that is sometimes lost in the linguistic arabesques, however politicized they may be. Cyclical time is disrupted by the earthquake rescue description, which represents a moment when

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36 Crisis and catastrophe can be productive in that they mobilize civil society to seek greater social justice and solidarity, which is clear in the response to the devastating 1985 earthquake. Similarly, Mary Tyler remarks in her article “The Crack in the Facade: Social Aftershocks of Mexico’s 1985 Earthquake”, that the increase in political participation and the defense of civil rights and social justice occurred through a process of “democracy by disaster” (90).

37 See the section Popular Culture and the Cycles of Carnival of this chapter.
something new and empowering arises from the ruins of disaster.

The representation of catastrophe and civil society in *Cristóbal Nonato* raises an issue that is central to the novels discussed in the following chapters. What role does the novelist have in the assimilation of a catastrophe and the birth of civil society? Fuentes is clearly interested in engaging with and even influencing civil society and popular movements for social justice as a writer. The critic Claire Brewster, for example, explains that Fuentes addressed the 1985 earthquake as a public intellectual, but with a response that was more literary than essayistic or journalistic. Fuentes has stated in an interview that the imagination and the inventiveness of language are critical to maintaining a vocal civil society: “se ha mantenido un vigor del lenguaje y un vigor de la imaginación a través de todo el siglo en nuestra literatura, hecho que explica, en buena parte, el vigor de la sociedad civil” (*Territorios* 192). This seems to confirm two of his objectives in *Cristóbal Nonato*. Fuentes also considers the task of the writer to be that of a “visionario en un doble sentido: visionario no sólo hacia el futuro sino hacia el pasado. Descubrir la novedad del pasado es uno de los desafíos más grandes que tiene una sociedad y un escritor cumple ese desafío mejor que nadie” (*Territorios* 192). But is the novel limited in its capacity to represent catastrophe and the response of civil society because it is lodged in the voice of authority? How does the novel compare with genres such as the testimonial, which are closer to the victims of such catastrophes, in conveying the experiences and sensations of disaster and upheaval? What insight can the unbound representation of time in fiction provide into the political, social, and emotional

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38 As Claire Brewster observes, “Although horrified and saddened by the tragedy, neither Paz nor Fuentes addressed it in their articles . . . Fuentes commemorates the episode in his novel *Cristóbal Nonato*” (103).
dimensions of a catastrophe? These questions will be addressed in the next chapter, which examines the spatial representation of a dystopian Mexico City, the critical use of time travel and prophecy, and the existential crisis of the writer-protagonist in Ignacio Solares’s novel *Casas de encantamiento*. 
CHAPTER 2

The Ruins of Modernization: Collapsing Structures in
Ignacio Solares’s *Casas de encantamiento*

*Casas de encantamiento* (1987), by Igancio Solares, develops the relationship between urban catastrophe and the textures of time and space by creating a nesting and intertwined series of narratives that connect the process of building the modern city to the devastating effects of the 1985 earthquake. In addition to highlighting critical moments in the history of the megalopolis, Solares explores the challenges of writing about the city in the face of disaster. In chapter one I showed how in *Cristóbal Nonato* the alternative structures of time produced by the juxtaposition of the fantastical representation of

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Novelist, journalist, playwright and professor, Ignacio Solares was born in Chihuahua in 1945. He has served as editor of various magazines and journals, including *Plural, Revista de Revistas*, the *Revista de la Universidad de México* and the cultural supplements for *Excélsior* and *Siempre*. Solares was also chair of the Department of Theater and Dance at the UNAM and director of the Literature program at the UNAM. He is known for writing literature that deals with parapsychology, religion, spirituality, dreams, and metamorphosis.
Mexico’s disasters and the 1985 earthquake support a critical perspective on Mexico’s development. In this chapter I will study the play of time in *Casas de encantamiento*, and specifically Solares’s use of the science fiction narrative device of time travel, as a means to unearthing the causes of the catastrophe. The representation of the 1985 earthquake prompts a reexamining of earlier periods, revealing how Mexico’s uneven progress would turn a natural disaster into a political and social catastrophe decades later. Thus, while the metaphor of the spiral in chapter one conveys the constant struggle in the present, in this chapter the earthquake opens a metaphorical chasm through the clean spatial plane of modern Mexico City that renders more visible the deep city, fraught with injustices through time.

The framing story of *Casas* is a conversation between a professor who runs a guesthouse and one of his boarders, who acts as narrator. The conversation centers on another lodger, Javier Lezama, an enigmatic and reclusive man who was recently killed in a car accident and whose diary the narrator interprets in an effort to piece together his life. As the narrator recounts, Javier arrived in Mexico City in 1965 to study literature at the UNAM and in his first year he wrote several articles about the city that, oddly, he never chose to publish. Between 1966 and 1985 there is a mysterious gap in Javier’s entries, but he is inspired to resume writing when he reads an intriguing newspaper article about a man named Luis Enrique who committed suicide by jumping from the ninth floor of the Nuevo León building in the Tlatelolco housing project. Javier pays a visit to Luis Enrique’s widow and discovers that he was tormented by the premonition that something

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40 During the 1985 earthquake, one fourth of the structures in the Tlatelolco housing complex were seriously damaged, among them the Nuevo León building, which completely collapsed with residents, dead and alive, trapped beneath.
cataclysmic would befall the city. The widow gives Javier the manuscript that her late husband had obsessed over in the months before his death, a text replete with apocalyptic prophecies. Fascinated by this manuscript, Javier returns to his work as a journalist, intertwining his own work with Luis Enrique’s. While writing an article about the renovation of a movie theater (soon to be destroyed in the 1985 earthquake) Javier finds under a seat the 1945 identification card of a young woman. A few days later, Javier is transported in time to 1945 and has an affair with the young woman of the ID card; he also takes the opportunity to conduct investigative reporting about the capital during the forties. When Javier returns to the present from the temporal wormhole, he writes about the terrible devastation caused by the 1985 earthquake and joins the spontaneously organized rescue brigades in the aftermath of the catastrophe, only to be killed in a fatal car accident shortly thereafter. If the structure of temporal leaps and interpenetrating nested stories with three different narrators (the narrator of the framing story, Javier, and Luis Enrique) seems confusing, it is because the multiple narrative layers are indeed meant to confound the reader.

In a purposively jumbled way, the text weaves together the narrator’s retelling of the story, excerpts from Javier’s diary, and passages quoted from Luis Enrique’s manuscript. The device of journalism allows the author to put together these different pieces, however the novel is episodic and the different fragments often seem disconnected. The Chinese boxes are not clearly delimited and often seem to interpenetrate; there are blurred shifts from writing to dreams to fantasy to reality, as well as ambiguous jumps between Javier and Luis Enrique’s work. By deploying the science fiction technique of time travel and sending Javier back to the 1940s, Solares adds a
temporal layer to the levels of textual, narrative and mental disorder. The “enchantment” derives from both the fragmentary form and the blurred boundaries among people, historical periods, and the state of consciousness of dreams, writing, and reality.

In *Casas* the author seems to suggest that understanding catastrophe requires a revisiting of key moments in Mexico’s history that contributed to the urban condition of the present. Science fiction time travel enables the characters and the reader to look critically at the period of the nineteen forties, when urban capitalism, planners, and developers began to build over the city of the masses so that the poor became increasingly invisible. This retrospective gaze is juxtaposed with Javier’s terrifying dream about a dystopian future plagued by a more divisive social inequality and a repressive state.

Solares explores not only the social, political, and historical context of the earthquake itself, but also the existential crisis that the protagonists suffer as a result of the catastrophe. The emotional effect of the disaster on Javier is translated into the tension in the text regarding the representation of urban catastrophe. Brought out by the self-referentiality of the novel, the personal crisis of the writer-protagonist becomes as fundamental to the novel as the socio-political themes. Central to this work is a reflection on the act of writing and a questioning of the role of literature in the aftermath of a catastrophe. Moreover, the metaliterary remarks by the narrator as well as the protagonist’s musings on his own writing are a rephrasing, in the terms of literary form, of the socio-political divisions within the space of the city. The novel explores the challenges that the writer-intellectual faces when representing the subaltern and the city beneath the modern surface, made all the more difficult when attempting to express the
suffering resulting from an urban catastrophe. The journalist-writer-protagonists of this novel interrogate the genre, style, and form that should be used to depict the city’s victims and its anonymous heroes, weighing the advantages of a clear, transparent linear text against a narrative that unleashes the inexplicable and convoluted fantasies and nightmares of the imagination. Engaging these themes ultimately allows Solares to choose a hybrid and fragmented form to convey the physical, emotional and representational crisis. The author suggests a homology or “mapping” among the destabilization and collapse of four structures: the disruption expressed by the organization of the narrative; the wrenching of time that allows the reader to experience past, present, and future together; the physical tearing apart of modern buildings --the structure of modernity in the literal sense-- caused by the quake; and the yawning class and power gaps that persisted in Mexico’s social structure and widened once again as the revolutionary project faded. Each disruption, cracking open or collapse of the structure (whether textual, temporal, physical, or social) makes visible that which was hidden from view.
2.1. The Deep City and the City of the Planners

In *Casas*, Solares portrays a fractured Mexico City, divided between the modern city of skyscrapers and the capital of miserable living conditions in which the poor live a daily struggle for survival. This dichotomy is found in twentieth century Mexican artistic and literary expression, with both hopeful and pessimistic depictions. The divided Mexico City is often represented spatially, consistently so in *Casas* in which Solares repeats the theme of skyscrapers and high floors in opposition to depths and dark streets.

Another fascinating image of the city’s skyline, and one that contrasts with the spatial dichotomies of *Casas*, is the painting “La ciudad de México” (1947), by the architect and artist Juan O’Gorman, which presents many of the themes that I will develop in this chapter. The painting shows a view of Mexico City’s modern downtown from the perspective of an architect standing atop a building under construction. Only the white hands of the architect are visible in the foreground of the painting, while on the same rooftop stands in full view a dark-skinned laborer dressed in overalls and holding a blueprint. By placing both subjects on the same plane, the composition celebrates the contribution of the ennobled, skilled worker to the construction of the modern capital. O’Gorman also joins the idea of “deep” Mexico with the plans for modernization and economic and technological progress of the post-revolutionary state; in the hands of the architect is a map of the ancient city of Tenochtitlán, and floating in the sky above the modern city are a plumed serpent, an eagle clutching a scroll, and two women, one dark and one light-skinned. Along the bottom of the painting another scroll reads, “Aquí se representa el corazón de la ciudad de México tal y como se ve desde arriba del monumento de la Revolución en dirección al oriente”. In this way, the temporal and
spatial dimensions of the city come together to express pride in the country’s pre-Columbian past, affirm the ideals of the Revolution, and look hopefully towards the future of Mexico. Whereas O’Gorman’s 1947 painting represents a harmonious Mexico City, Solares’s novel published forty years later exposes the tensions of a divided city.

The distinction between the city of the planners and street-level everyday life in Casas recalls the essay “Walking in the City” by the French semiologist Michel de Certeau, in which he identifies the “concept-city” in contrast to the city of experience and practice. De Certeau posits the “panorama-city” as a concept, a theoretical simulacrum, a representation, and optical artifact produced by the urban planner, architect or cartographer. With his celestial gaze, the planner views the city from on high in order to transform the landscape before his eyes into a comprehensible, readable, and “transparent” text. According to de Certeau, the city qua concept is the “machinery of modernity”: progress-driven, rationally organized, totalizing and panoptic. Thus, in this urban geography, time and space are conjoined; the planner’s project seeks to resolve spatially the difficult past and uncertain future. The perspective vision is “the projection of an opaque past and uncertain future onto a surface that can be dealt with” (93-94).

However, this urbanistic project of the planners reveals a misunderstanding of the experiences of what de Certeau calls the “ordinary practitioners”. The ordinary practitioners walk through the city, creating their own trajectories that elude the disciplining drive of the planners; their everyday practices of the city turn the concept into a lived space. This lived space, in contrast to the concept-city, is mythic, migratory, fragmentary, opaque, and labyrinthine. The illegible movements of the ordinary
pedestrians belie the transparent text that the planner wants to inscribe on the urban landscape.

Javier is caught in between these two cities, fascinated by both the panorama viewed from on high and the details of everyday life down below. Shortly after arriving in Mexico City in 1965, Javier writes an article about the breathtaking views of the megalopolis from the top floor of the Torre latinoamericana, an imposing blue and grey skyscraper located at the corner of the Alameda park. From that vantage point Javier can take in the vastness of the downtown before him and apprehend the totality of the cityscape with his eyes, an act that he describes as “dominándola” (15), thus equating an elevated perspective with a position of power. After admiring the urban landscape for a while, Javier uses a telescope to focus on a single point of activity in the real city below. The scenes that Javier witnesses through the lens of the telescope reveal a city bereft of solidarity and plagued by crime; a man is robbed and beaten while passersby do nothing to apprehend his assailants, and a woman is pushed out of the line where she was waiting to board a bus. From his privileged perspective atop the Torre latinoamericana, Javier can see both the panorama and the vicissitudes of daily life in the capital, a position that gives him the illusion of being able to predict crimes and intercede on behalf of the victim. Ultimately, however, he stands at a great distance from the site of the suffering and is therefore unable to warn, prevent, or help people escape danger. This spatial divide between high and low, between the panorama and the lived experience, is indicative not only of the disconnect between the gaze of the powerful planner and the trajectories of capitalinos, but also of Javier’s split between an inclination to action and a more passive, fanciful attitude.
By juxtaposing interviews with architects and developers, with pieces about poverty, misfortune, and injustice, Solares’s character exposes the gravity of the division between the two cities and the disjunctive between theory and practice. Javier’s interstitial position vis-à-vis the concept-city and the city of the practitioners is manifest in his investigative reporting about the spatial configuration of the downtown. On the one hand, his exposés point to the shortcomings of the project of modernization begun in the forties. Solares develops this critique through the time travel sequence, in which Javier interviews the engineer José Cuevas about his plans for a new, modern Mexico of skyscrapers. Standing on the top floor of the edificio de la Lotería, the engineer explains to Javier the complicated system of “geoflotation” that makes it possible to build on the city’s soft subsoil. According to the engineer, in the event of an earthquake, “caería el resto de la ciudad, pero aquí continuaría el edificio de la Lotería” (107). Though clearly it is good that buildings in an area of seismic activity be built to withstand an earthquake, Javier feels the engineer’s comments are insensitive to the human aspect of development, since the modern cityscape is forecast to outlive the human inhabitants of this space: “El hombre ha hecho nacer otro gigante que le sobreviva” (107). The edificio de la Lotería is emblematic of the project of modernization, which is presented here as a dehumanizing force primarily concerned with its own technological survival.

Javier’s critical perspective reiterates the writing of Luis Enrique, the man who committed suicide by throwing himself off a high floor of a building in the Tlatelolco housing project. In 1984 Luis Enrique interviewed Manuel Suárez, the owner of the towering Hotel de México who attempts to legitimize his privileged, elevated perspective by appealing to the ideals of the Mexican Revolution. After fighting in the Revolution,
Suárez rose to be the most important private constructor in Mexico, with landholdings and businesses throughout the country. The interview takes place on the 34th floor of his costly project in downtown Mexico City, and Suárez takes great pride in viewing the city from that height. Suárez presents the hotel as “la culminación, el símbolo de la Revolución Mexicana” and he expresses his desire to “dejar a esta ciudad, para el año 2000 o 3000 una prueba de la grandeza de los revolucionarios mexicanos” (111). When Luis Enrique questions the symbolic link between the glass and steel edifice and the Revolution, Suárez replies:

Porque fue limpia y grande. Ninguno de los que entramos a la Revolución Mexicana robamos nada. Al contrario: dejamos lo mejor que teníamos para construir este país de que ahora disfrutamos. Cuando planeé el Hotel de México no pensé en el dinero. A mí no me interesa el dinero, me interesa la creación por sí misma. Por eso gozo viendo desde aquí la ciudad. Y por eso digo que quienes hicimos la Revolución Mexicana-incluidos Pancho Villa y Zapata- antes que soldados éramos filósofos. (112)

In this sweeping statement, Suárez conflates the ideals of the Revolution with urban development, concluding that these are the philosophies that produced the capital’s cityscape. That a revolutionary like Zapata, who fought for campesino land rights, would consider this privately owned structure to be the symbol of the Revolution is made to seem absurd. Suárez also attributes the Hotel de México and the city he surveys to the philosophies of Hegel, Nietzsche and Shopenhauer that he read avidly in his youth, an idea that again reveals that he is detached from the real city, caught up in his lofty theories of progress and self-justification.

Ironically, the building discussed in the novel, though real, never functioned as a hotel, but instead stood unfinished for years before it became Mexico City’s stock market. Due to budgetary problems the building wasn’t completed until its
transformation into a business center in 1995, and it was later converted into the World Trade Center of Mexico. In *El espejo enterrado* (1992), Carlos Fuentes cites the unfinished Hotel de México as a symbol of Latin America’s incomplete development:

Hay un edificio altísimo en el antiguo parque de la Lama en la Ciudad de México que nunca ha sido terminado. Año con año, su estatura crece pero siempre podemos mirar el aire a través de su colmena de cemento. ¿Cuándo, si es que alguna vez, recibirá este hotel a sus hipotéticos huéspedes?

Este edificio es, acaso, un símbolo apropiado para la América Latina, creciendo pero inacabada, enérgica pero llena de problemas en apariencia irresolubles. Tres décadas de desarrollo económico a partir de la segunda Guerra Mundial, en las que la producción aumentó 200%, se han detenido abruptamente, seguidas por una década de desarrollo perdido, en la cual el ingreso por cabeza descendió todos los años desde 1980 hasta alcanzar una pérdida acumulativa de 20%, en tanto que los salarios reales regresaron a los niveles de 1960. Las consecuencias sociales de la actual crisis están a la vista de todos: escasez de alimentos, descensos en la educación, el alojamiento, la salud y los demás servicios públicos; crimen, clases medias desilusionadas y millones de subproletarios a la deriva en las ciudades perdidas. (*El espejo* 337-339)

In the novel, Suárez maintains that Villa, Madero and Zapata would have praised his construction, but it becomes apparent to the reader that it is an instance of appropriating the Revolution to legitimize private gain and another example of the disconnect between the planners and Mexico’s social reality. This episode represents a critique of the idea, explored by Angel Rama in his influential *La ciudad letrada* (1984), of imposing an imagined concept on the urban space.

Though fascinated by the city of the planners, Javier really wants to write about “la otra ciudad” (13), which he explores on his nocturnal walks through the downtown. While still entrenched in the concepts of language and writing, Javier finds inspiration for his representations of the “other” city in perception. The engineers, architects and businessmen stand atop their edifices and theorize about the panorama of the city, matters
of urban planning, and development, while the “everyday practitioners” down below are faced with many hardships. Javier, however, does not portray in a sympathetic light the “opaque city” that de Certeau seems to validate in his essay. Instead, for Javier the city down below resembles an ominous labyrinth: “Se metió en esos callejones del centro que al atardecer parecen angostarse; en los que apenas cae la noche, un gato vuelca un bote copeteado de basura, como el principio de un rito macabro: ahí, detrás de una puerta cualquiera, hay alguien que nos ha estado esperando desde siempre para apuñalarnos” (13). Not only is the space of the opaque city sinister and sordid, so are the people that Javier encounters there. The character that epitomizes the dark city is the prostitute, since she inhabits hidden corners, walks the streets at night, and her livelihood depends on the body. Scatological and grotesque, Javier’s experience with a prostitute represents the underbelly of the city as repulsive.

This poor, dirty, and chaotic city evokes a third region, which is the periphery. Javier himself comes from this periphery, and it is a space that irrupts onto the divided urban setting with migration. The move from the periphery to the city is represented in Casas when Javier interviews a boy from the provinces who comes to the city in search of work.

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41 Though Guillermo Bonfil Batalla’s concept of “México profundo” and “México imaginario” refers primarily to the divide that exists between an indigenous, rural culture and a European, modern way of life, he extends this idea to encompass the specificities of urban life. Bonfil writes: “We must reverse many urban policies which have happily accumulated during administration after administration, that have made Mexico City one of the worst megalopolises of the world. We must repair the damages produced by a savage capitalism, which has made uninhabitable its own lair, where so many inhabitants of the México profundo are obligated to remain. We must think and rebuild our cities, without forgetting that they are the creation and the bastion of the imaginary Mexico. Their problems are not simply deviations, anomalies that can be repaired without rejecting the project of which they are the inevitable result. The city expresses, in its own way and with its own cancer, the unresolved contradiction of Mexican society and history” (156).
of his father. The absent father in this episode is reminiscent of the abandoned boy from
the countryside in Luis Buñuel’s 1951 movie *Los olvidados*. Most of Buñuel’s film is set
in the squalor of an outlying slum, so the space of Mexico City, and specifically of the
depressed areas inhabited by migrants, is an integral feature of the film. As the
architectural critic Keith L. Egggener states, the movie depicts the experience of:

a group of boys, abandoned by their families and society, struggling to
survive in the city’s streets. Modern architecture is a distinct feature of the
film, and it is used in a most peculiar way. Almost every scene of violence,
real or implied— a threat, an argument, a mugging, a murder, or a police
shooting— takes place before an otherwise vacant building site. The
skeletons of modern steel and reinforced-concrete frame buildings bear
silent witness to these events, and they evoke the remains of the three boys
murdered during the course of the film. These dead boys and their
associates are the forgotten ones, the ones the revolution failed most
cruelly, left to rot while the city rises around them. Buñuel’s use of
Mexican modern architecture as a backdrop for brutality was prophetic.

(237)

In fact, it is often unclear if the landscape in the background of the movie is composed of
ruins of already existing buildings or unfinished construction. In either case, these
physical structures are the haunting reminder of the emptiness and abandonment felt by
much of the capital’s population, while a modernizing, clean, and planned city springs
up, though the viewer catches only a glimpse of the sparkling store-fronts and well-
dressed bourgeoisie of the affluent city. Like *Los olvidados*, Solares’s novel employs a
spatial approach to the divisions between the modern city and the “other”, peripheral city;
through this geographic representation Solares explores the unresolved contradictions of
the city, which also clearly invite a reflection on Mexican history.
2.2. Time Travel: A Critical Look at The Past

The spatial contrasts in the novel of above-and-below, lofty and hidden are also placed in a temporal perspective. Timescapes are central to all of the novels that I analyze in light of the social and political concerns of the city in the aftermath of catastrophe. Whereas Fuentes, Aridjis and Boullosa invent a future setting to level a critique at the contemporary political and social climate, Solares achieves this through the use of backwards time travel. When Javier finds the lost 1945 identification card of a young woman, he is mysteriously transported back to that year, a pivotal moment in Mexican history. In Casas, the time travel sequence, a trope in science-fiction literature, does not express nostalgia for a lost past, nor does it provide an opportunity within the framework of the story to change the course of history (with the exception of a few inconsequential objects displaced in time). Rather, by using the technique of time travel Solares is able to explore freely the relationships between past and present, cause and effect through a retrospective gaze. The manipulation of time extends the causal chain beyond the immediate circumstances of the 1985 earthquake, thereby emphasizing the broader human, political and historical context of the natural disaster.

The time travel sequence highlights the nineteen forties as the period when the division between the modern city of the planners and the social reality of the everyday practitioners widens. Solares exposes how many of the problems plaguing the capital, and especially its poorer inhabitants, at that time persist in present. The narrator explains that the article that Javier wrote about infant malnutrition during his time travel experience to 1945 is almost identical to a piece he wrote in the sixties:

complementaba otra que había hecho recién llegado a México en un hospital del Seguro Social de Nezahualcóyotl (donde la mortalidad
With these mirroring exposés, Javier reveals the continuing challenges to public health and, implicit in the last sentence, the terrible conditions that the city’s poor must withstand as a result of urban overcrowding. Indeed, shantytowns erected in the eastern part of the city had grown into cities onto themselves, with Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl reaching over one million by 1974 (Kandell 556).

Time travel takes the reader back to that earlier time to investigate why the situation had not improved by the sixties. In his biography of Mexico City, Jonathan Kandell explains that the nineteen forties brought prosperity and optimism about the country’s future, and it was during that period that the capital gave its first steps towards developing into a metropolis of international importance. However, what has come to be known as Mexico’s “economic miracle” was, in actuality, a decade of urban growth that benefited primarily entrepreneurs and industrialists who made deals with politicians. While the upper class was discovering its consumer capabilities, the disadvantaged majority was neglected and abandoned. In contrast to its miraculous image, the nineteen forties was marked by unbalanced growth that caused a widening in the economic gap between the city and the countryside that the earlier Cárdenas presidency had sought to close (485). Javier’s reporting during his visit to the year 1945 exposes the poverty that many Mexicans were living in at the very moment that the planners were creating the modern facade of the “economic miracle”.

infantil alcanzó uno de los índices más altos del mundo: 30 por ciento), y que, dice, se le empalmaban como dos imágenes casi idénticas. Podían haberse fundido en una sola nota y hasta podría tratarse del mismo niño una y otra vez, victimado por la ciudad voraz. (133)
Could Mexico’s path have been otherwise? Could human suffering have been averted by addressing some of the unresolved contradictions of life in Mexico City? These questions that confront the reader of Casas emerge from the play of time that presents the earthquake as the culminating tragedy of decades of ill omens for the city. In the book The Fragmented Novel in Mexico: The Politics of Form (1997), Carol Clark D’Lugo says of Casas that, “Solares joins others who have demonstrated that there were warning signs that were not heeded” (D’Lugo 229). The reader can at times feel overwhelmed by the lists of problems that are embedded in the narrative as fragments of conversations, like these jumbled snippets that Javier overhears in a crowded bar on his trip back to 1945:

Que treinta y cuatro millones de pesos nomás por obras públicas en el Distrito Federal/ Que la dejaron morirse afuera del Hospital Juárez, llegó a consulta y nunca le permitieron entrar, dizque por el cupo/ Que están construyendo un edificio monstruoso frente al Caballito/ Que un día se nos va a hundir la ciudad/ Que Madrazo propone una ley que grave los espectáculos para ayudar a la niñez desnutrida/ Que Madrazo estuvo hace poco en la cárcel, ¿no? (62-63)

By pointing to impending crises related to the mismanagement of funds for the public sector and social welfare, it is clear that time travel passages such as this one function to evaluate Mexico’s path towards development. Although these issues are not always directly related in a clear cause-effect relationship to the 1985 earthquake represented at the end of the novel, they provide a deeper context for the catastrophe and link it to the imaginary of disaster in Mexico City.
2.3. Tlatelolco and the Layers of History

While the time travel to 1945 further underscores the capital’s deep divisions, catastrophe brings about the collapse of the city of the planners and problematizes the clean dichotomies of the concept-city and the practices of everyday reality. The earthquake represents a moment when the two cities converge, exposing the profound linkages between them. Javier’s experience during the 1985 earthquake, as well as Luis Enrique’s dreams related to the horrific event, are narrated in Tlatelolco, the site of many real catastrophes that imbue it with both a mythic and real, sacred and cursed quality. Alluded to in Luis Enrique’s suicide early on in the novel, and explicitly made a crucial setting for the last three chapters, Tlatelolco brings together the city’s mythic past, the catastrophic present and a dismal outlook for the future. By situating the last three chapters of the novel in Tlatelolco, connecting the spatial representation of catastrophe to critical moments in the city’s history, Solares has chosen to highlight a space of unhealed conflict. The earthquake rescue operation is described as a moment of hope and solidarity, but its juxtaposition with a vision of the Aztec city and a dream about a futuristic Mexico City governed by a police state conclude the novel on a note that the reader can interpret as pessimistic or as a desperate call for action to change the present trajectory of history.

The transitional spaces in Casas resemble Foucault’s concept of heterotopias as spaces that differ from utopias, sites with no real place, because they are both real and unreal, both locatable in reality and mythic. Foucault identifies heterotopias of crisis, which can be both sacred and cursed spaces, and heterotopias of deviation, which are places for people who do not conform to the norm, such as psychiatric hospitals or prisons. These heterotopias in the novel possess a temporal quality in addition to the Foucauldian spatial dimension.
The Tlatelolco public-housing project was built in the early sixties on the site of the Aztec’s last stand against the conquistadores. Housing thousands of people in apartment towers, including educational, medical, athletic, and recreational facilities, this was to be, as the architectural critic Keith L. Eggener explains, “a self-contained city of the future, one also that made an attraction of its local past. At the development’s center was the Plaza de las Tres Culturas where could be seen, along with Pani’s modern tower blocks, the ruins of an Aztec ceremonial site and a sixteenth-century Spanish-colonial church” (237). The building complex was another instance of the controlled, planned, and modernizing project of the state, however, rather than hold out promise for Mexico City’s future, it was to be the site of two traumatic events in the country’s history: the 1968 massacre of student protesters and thousands of fatalities in the 1985 earthquake. As Boris Muñoz affirms in his article “La ciudad de México en la imaginación apocalíptica”, the Olympic plazas, stadiums, and the games themselves were meant to symbolize Mexico’s inscription into modernity, however, the Tlatelolco massacre shows the city advancing in a direction contrary to its ideological and spatial design (Muñoz 86). These two watersheds in Mexico’s recent history exposed the failure of the dream of a modern and democratic nation under the single-party state. Rather than a celebration of the three cultures that make up the mestizo nation (Pre-Columbian, Spanish-colonial and Modern),

43 The Ciudad Satélite, built in the late fifties, is another example of the drive to create cities and neighborhoods of the future in and around Mexico City. Located about 10 miles northwest of the capital in the Naucalpan municipality, this area was modeled after U.S.-style suburban enclaves, functioning as an autonomous neighborhood with the amenities of a North American suburb and connected to the metropolis via highways. Initially, middle-class Mexicans flocked to this area to escape the pollution, poverty and crowded streets of the city center. Although its iconic satellite towers still mark architecturally the entrance to the “modern” Ciudad Satélite, many areas have fallen into disrepair.
this space has come to be an eerie reminder of the unhealed nature of the three cultures. These linkages between Mexico’s colonial past and the failures of the modern state recall Octavio Paz’ *Posdata*, the 1970 appendix to *The Labyrinth of Solitude*. In this text, Paz connects the Tlatelolco massacre to the site of the ruins of an Aztec pyramid devoted to ritualistic sacrifice on which the bloodshed of 1968 took place. In its red stone and cracked cement we see the bloody conquest, the violent repression of student protesters, and the neglect that exacerbated the fatal quake of 1985. For the reader, the references in the novel to Tlatelolco conjure up the architectural and temporal dimensions of a place of unresolved, recurrent problems.

Thus, Tlatelolco is a real space of catastrophe that takes on a mythic quality, and as such becomes the site where a character may feel the apocalyptic future rush in. Borrowing a term from Serge Gruzinski’s book *The Mestizo Mind* (2002), Tlatelolco becomes a “strange zone”, which Gruzinski describes as “those intermediate worlds that arise in the aftermath of catastrophe” (24). Gruzinski is speaking of the transitional borders and indistinct thresholds of the *mestizaje* that followed the catastrophe of the conquest. As depicted in Solares’s novel, Tlatelolco is a “strange zone” where

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44 Though Paz clearly denounces the Díaz Ordaz government for the Tlatelolco massacre, *Posdata* was polemical because some critics maintain that the historical perspective diverts attention away from the specificity of the student massacre, calling just as much for a rethinking of Mexico’s mythic past as it does for a questioning of current injustice or the future of Mexican political power.

45 The apocalyptic tone of the text is linked to Solares’s own interest in religion. Solares received a catholic education that marked him profoundly and has influenced his writing. In his article “La materia de los sueños”, Carlos Rojas writes of Solares: “De niño, se encerraba en el sótano de su casa a ejercer ese íntimo trabajo que es la literatura, y se cuestionaba a sí mismo sobre la existencia de Dios. Sus lecturas preferidas eran las de autores como G. K. Chesterton, Graham Greene y François Mauriac, cuyos personajes se debatían entre su fe, las instituciones religiosas y el misticismo”. 

<<http://www.literaturainba.com/diccionarios/notas_more.php?id=800_0_4_18_C>>
temporality and the relationship between the real and the fantastic are ambiguous and shifting as a result of the various catastrophes that occurred on that site. Uncertain and stressful, but coherent and realistic, the modern world has a more stable and consistent texture, and therefore contains fewer apocalyptic visions; by contrast, the pre- as well as the post-modern are filled with dreams of apocalypse. Javier and Luis Enrique’s prophetic impulses imbue the text with a millenarian tone and give urban disasters such as the earthquake a mythic feel. Javier studies the manuscript that Luis Enrique had in his pocket when he jumped from the balcony to his death, but it is only after Javier experiences the earthquake that Luis Enrique’s suicide acquires prophetic meaning:

¿Por qué se suicidó Luis Enrique Bautista? ¿A qué se refiere con “pronto vendrá lo inevitable”? ¿Es precisamente la destrucción de que habla en su artículo? Pero entonces, si tanta fe tenía en la renovación, ¿por qué no se esperó a terminar junto con la ciudad? Recuerde, profesor, que estas preguntas se las hacía Javier antes del terremoto. Lo verdaderamente trágico del suicidio de Luis Enrique Bautista es que de todas formas iba a morir unos meses después . . . Javier anotó al día siguiente del temblor: tuvo miedo, tuvo miedo a esto, no soportó el miedo, no eran los problemas económicos o los matrimoniales, era esto: tanto invocó la destrucción que terminó por adivinarla a su lado. (35)

Luis Enrique’s terrible premonitions about the disaster that will befall the city and Javier’s experience as a reporter during the earthquake combine the real and the imaginary in an ominous way. Mexico City as a trope of disaster is further accentuated by the juxtaposition of a pre-Columbian vision, the realistic description of the earthquake, and a terrifying dream about a futuristic city in the final chapter of the novel.

At the site of Tlatelolco, Luis Enrique has a vision of pre-Columbian society that romanticizes a time of abundance predating the chaos of the modern megalopolis. He evokes the scene of the Aztec city from the fateful balcony of his apartment in the
Tlatelolco housing block. As though in a trance, Luis Enrique sees the canals leading to the distant city and can make out the ordered bustle of a market:

Los indios iban y venían entre puestos y tenderetes . . . Era un mercado en el que imperaba el orden, con amplios corredores en donde los vendedores ofrecían su mercancía sobre mesas o lienzos. Alcé a distinguir secciones con frutas y verduras, con aves, changos y perros, con metales y piedras preciosas, con cerámica y trastos de cobre, con ropa y pieles. En una ristra de locales abiertos, los indios se lavaban y rapaban la cabeza y en otros comían y bebían. Un aura de mansedumbre y dicha envolvía el lugar. Pero la visión duró un instante, porque apenas me repetía: “montón de tierra”, el mercado se esfumaba y volvía a quedar la plaza vacía y al fondo el puro batallar del amanecer. (171)

This image of Tlatelolco appears to be an idyllic backdrop for the catastrophes of the contemporary city, however the nostalgic mode is undermined by the language that evokes the chronicles of the conquistadores upon their arrival in Tenochtitlán. The dream reminds the reader of the ruins of conquest and underscores to the temporally layered texture of the city, piling onto the ancient site the rubble of the earthquake. The urban palimpsest of ruins in Tlatelolco is both a spatial and temporal representation of the unhealed wounds that date back to the conquest.

In the second to last chapter of the novel Javier recounts in detail the devastating effect of the 1985 earthquake on the Tlatelolco complex, the moment when the physical manifestation of the lofty theories of the planners literally collapses. The earthquake toppled many buildings that sprang up during the frenzied construction of the modern city, with the Tlatelolco buildings among the most severely damaged. When the modern city crumbles, it becomes clear that it is an illusion for the divided city to continue on its course; the modern city of the planners must take into account the ordinary citizens that inhabit that space.
In *Casas*, the earthquake not only destabilizes the urban dichotomy, it also
describes a real moment of solidarity and action on the symbolic site of Tlatelolco. As in
*Cristóbal Nonato*, the human experience of the earthquake is described in a vivid,
moving way that contrasts with the rest of the novel. This part of the narrative represents
the only moment when Javier actually takes action, as opposed to dreaming or writing the
world around him, and the narrator believes that this experience has finally made Javier
feel in the “mero hondo de la ciudad” (176). While covering the disaster for the
newspaper *El Universal*, Javier is nearly trapped as a result of the second quake, but he
frees himself and then joins the rescue brigades. He tells the moving story of saving a
couple from underneath the rubble of the *Edificio Nuevo León* in the Tlatelolco complex
and, in the words of the narrator, Javier “continúa el reportaje con entrevistas con los
familiares que esperaban afuera y luego otros rescatados de otros edificios y cifras y el
reflejo de esa solidaridad que de pronto unió y humanizó -¿por qué sólo entonces? – a
esta ciudad tan injusta y adormecida” (176). Whereas other parts of the novel seem
driven by spatial or literary theories, the passage about the earthquake stands out for its
deep human emotions, not only the fear and suffering that people endured during the
disaster but also the great display of resilience that marked this tragedy. Despite the
horrific destruction wreaked by the earthquake, this is the only passage in the novel that
possesses a faint glimmer of hope. The messianic moment of the rescue operation in
*Casas* is similar to the passage describing the earthquake in Fuentes’s *Cristóbal Nonato*
and Aridjis’s *La leyenda de los soles*; in otherwise fragmented, jumbled, fantastic,
science fiction narratives, the earthquake is highlighted by a pure, true, messianic feeling.
In the final chapter, however, Tlatelolco is the setting for a dream that predicts a terrifying and bleak future\textsuperscript{46} in which the city of the planners, having collapsed, reasserts itself as a police state. The science fiction-like sequence is Javier’s rewriting of Luis Enrique’s dream set near his apartment block in Tlatelolco, which recalls in an uncanny and haunting way the student massacre of 1968 in that very same location. The implicit and explicit dates that Solares juxtaposes in the novel are crucial for understanding the author’s critique of Mexico’s path towards development, as John S. Brushwood states:

The 1960s, of course, led up to the demonstrations of 1968, a period that may be regarded, from the vantage point of 1988, as the beginning of analysis, and of questions about the route Mexico had taken. The mid-eighties find the country in full awareness of its economic decline, and as if to intensify the problems, in the aftermath of an earthquake that permanently changed the capital city. The look backward to the sixties has been very frequent among novelists of the eighties. (14-15)

Here Brushwood refers to the fact that the novel covers briefly Javier’s arrival in Mexico City in the sixties, to which I would add that the student massacre is referenced in the novel in a more subtle way, with the use of images that recall the bloody events of October 2, 1968. Luis Enrique sees “varios camiones con soldados – inmóviles, fantasmal, las bayonetas atrapando la luz de la luna- y al final los tanques, rodando morosamente”, and then hears shots (179). He escapes from the police and observes from his hiding place the futuristic society surrounding him: a place of uniformity and rampant violence on the part of both criminals and security forces that goes entirely unnoticed by the passersby. Two young muggers are killed by the police, then “pasaron los tanques y los camiones con sus soldados fatasmales, y una ambulancia que iba al final

\textsuperscript{46} Solares has stated that he is a great admirer of the English writer Aldous Huxley, whose novels predict an anti-utopian future. See “La material de los sueños”, by Carlos Rojas Urrutia.
se detuvo y recogió los cadáveres. Todo realizado en silencio y con gran rapidez, dentro de la esfera de la neblina” (182). Eventually, the police find and corner Luis Enrique, pushing him to his death. By using images of pursuit by soldiers and tanks in Tlatelolco, coupled with the quick and quiet carting off of dead bodies, Solares brings to mind the events of 1968 to forecast a dark future under a police state for Mexico City. Solares takes the divided city to its two extremes and shows that they are inextricably linked in the dystopian future: the negative social control form of the city of the planners and the criminal city. Thus, Solares not only deploys a temporal leap back to 1945 to examine the causes of the present disaster; he also uses a predictive perspective to critique the course that contemporary society is on.

Of the novels included in this dissertation, Casas is the least hopeful, due to a sense of doom that seems to overwhelm man’s capacity to change his circumstances. In his last writings, Luis Enrique refers to “lo inevitable” (35), which Javier understands as a premonition of the horrific earthquake. The narrator, likewise, believes that the city goes through cycles of destruction and renewal: “Este es el destino recurrente de nuestra capital: La destrucción antes de resurgir esplendorosa, habitable otra vez, amasada en una nueva forma con los huesos de sus antepasados. Aceleremos el proceso” (32). The setting of Tlatelolco for the last three chapters conveys ambivalence as to the possibility of change and action in the face of the abuse of power. The earthquake episode reveals the potential of civil society to empower itself and there is some hope in regeneration, however the tragic history of the site of the three cultures is a constant reminder of the cycles of catastrophe.
2.4. Writing Crisis

Narrative form parallels the temporal and spatial representation of the city, with its mix of distinct historical periods and structural layers. As in the novels by Fuentes, Aridjis and Bolllosa, in Casas narrative form becomes a metaphor for the chaos of the city. The different texts are woven together in a jumbled way, constantly rewritten, glossed and retold. The Chinese boxes, which are deliberately allowed to penetrate each other and confuse boundaries, (dis)order the narrative and focus the reader’s attention on the question of form. In addition to the description of the effects of the earthquake, modernization and poverty, Casas centers on the existential malaise of the writer in the face of urban catastrophe. Primarily caught up in a self-referential reflection on how to write about such disasters, the novel mirrors the social, political and historical critique of life in Mexico City with a sense of crisis in the lives of the writer-protagonists. The personal and professional crises of the protagonists stem from what they perceive as the diminished importance of fiction in contemporary society, which leads them to incessantly interrogate the genre and style that they choose for their stories.

Writing is part and parcel to the characters’ identity and their relationship to the city that they find both fascinating and repulsive. Javier and Luis Enrique write to escape from their dismal reality, but often their writing becomes an extension of their unsettling and disorienting experiences in the metropolis. Luis Enrique wanted to write a book about Mexico City, and this project came to consume his existence. His widow 47 thinks

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47 Linked to gender principles in the novel, writing also mediates the romantic relationships of the protagonists. Female characters are only developed insofar as they motivate or complicate the protagonist’s literary production. Javier’s ex-wife, whose body is described as a text read many times over, stifled his literary production and prompted him to abandon writing for a long period. Margarita, his lover in the 1945
that writing led to her husband’s suicide: “Todo estaba bien aparentemente hasta que empezó a obsesionarse por la escritura, no pensaba en otra cosa apenas nacía el día” (31).

Javier also believes that writing provoked Luis Enrique’s downfall in some way: “las letras parecían haber contribuido de una manera determinante” (30). Ultimately, what prompted Luis Enrique to commit suicide was his despair over the deplorable status of literature in contemporary society: “Pero ver hoy que la imaginación y las letras son mercancía despreciada, mal pagada, cuando sólo ellas me quedan, resulta como la pluma que rompe el cuello del camello: no podía más” (30).

The reader is often unsure of who the “author” is, which is in part due to the fact that Javier feels he has fused with his subject. The theme of doubling, which is a manifestation of the crisis of the self, is played out in the process of Javier’s rewriting of Luis Enrique’s texts. One of these rewritings that develops the leitmotif of doubling is a piece about hypnosis and telepathy between two patients in a psychiatric hospital, a case sequence, serves as a pretext for Javier to pursue his writing. The narrator suspects that Javier “estaba allí no sólo para conquistar a Margarita. ¿Para qué? Digámoslo de una vez: para realizar mejor su reportaje sobre la ciudad de México . . . ¿La aventura amorosa era un pretexto para el reportaje o éste no tenía más fin que aquella?” (56). The narrator even casts doubt on the existence of Margarita: “Fue el personaje que requería Javier para hacer (hacerse) creíble todo lo demás . . . Javier estuvo allá, de acuerdo, pero exclusivamente para escribir” (126). Though Javier may have been alone in his room, only dreaming his visit to Margarita’s house instead of experiencing it, stimulated by the ideal woman of his imagination, 1945 becomes his most prolific period before he is suddenly transported in time back to 1985.

Both Javier and Luis Enrique feel compelled to fail as fathers and husbands in order to realize themselves as writers. Javier is too preoccupied with his writing to make time for his daughter; Luis Enrique’s writing is connected to his suicide that leaves his wife and daughters to die alone in the earthquake. Another novel from the same period, José Agustín’s Cerca del fuego (1986), explores the political crisis through gendered representations, as the critic Cynthia Steele analyzes. According to Steele, in Agustín’s novel the male spiritual crisis, along with the country’s, is solved by a restoration of the patriarchal unit. By contrast, in Casas there is no restoration of any kind and the women in the novel are abandoned by the male characters, which contributes to the unresolved, unsettling feeling of the narrative.
that fascinates Javier and Luis Enrique. The mental patient’s confusion about his sense of self and the blurring of the boundary between Javier and Luis Enrique reveal the modern subject itself to be a fiction. Madness and parapsychology, like an earthquake, threaten the coherent, modern order.

The theme of madness is underlined by the references to a literary tradition that combines fantasy and reality. Perhaps influenced by medieval, baroque, and Indian models, if not specific works, the fantastic parts of the novel follow patterns in Spanish and Latin American literature concerned with dreams, houses of enchantment, invisible realms, and an episodic series of encounters that leads to the death of the protagonist. The most obvious literary precedents are La vida es sueño (1635), echoed in the leitmotif of dreams, and the apocalyptic tradition found in Amadís de Gaula, which is explicitly referenced in the epigraph by Bernal Díaz del Castillo: “Parecía a las casas de encantamiento que cuentan en el libro de Amadís...”. As with the other novels included

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48 For further discussion of parapsychology in Solares’s work, see John S. Brushwood’s “Narrating Parapsychology: The Novels of Ignacio Solares”.

49 Another novel from roughly the same period, Roberto Bolaño’s Los detectives salvajes (1998), also connects madness and the natural disaster. In Bolaño’s novel, the only mention of the earthquake is related as the hallucination of a character in a psychiatric hospital, which gives the earthquake a millenary, apocalyptic feel. The novel combines fictional testimonies and diary entries in an attempt to piece together the lives of two elusive young poets, the founders of the neo-avant-garde movement called “real visceralismo”, Ulises Lima and Arturo Belano. The earthquake is mentioned in only one testimony from 1985, by the character of the madman, Joaquín Font, interned in a psychiatric clinic. Perhaps due to tranquilizers, at the very moment Joaquín Font feels the seismic tremors he has a vision of a young, dead female poet, a hallucination that reassures him. As in Casas, the disaster is connected to the space of a mental hospital, and the sensations of that horrific day are represented through fantasy and the absurd.
in this dissertation, in Casas the science fiction elements mix with older traditions that explore the fantastic\textsuperscript{50}, and, in doing so, evoke the conquest as a template for catastrophe.

For both characters, writing becomes an obsession and appears to precede, or in some cases substitute, their lived experience in the city. Their writing is intertwined with dreams and fantasy, thus bringing together the three levels that make up the narrative: the real, the symbolic/written, and the dreamed or imagined. During the time travel sequence Javier writes his own destiny, transforming his lived experience in the present into a fulfillment of his diary: “atenerse a su propio diario como a un mapa. Estudiarlo como un libreto” (90). Thus, for Javier, writing can communicate something deep and intense about our lived experience: “suponía un poder mágico a la escritura: sólo ella penetraba en el misterio, mostraba la sombra” (12). Javier is inscribed in the tradition of literary characters that blur the line between reality and fantasy; in his case, the confusion reveals the way in which fiction can bring to light the essence of lived experience: “es la imaginación que vuelve real a la realidad” (13). The same is true of the young male protagonist of Luis Enrique’s short story, who longs to discover the reality of the city but is so petrified of leaving his colonia on the outskirts of the capital that he settles for the city of his imagination, inspired by the maps and postcards that he collects. Words, then, hold a supreme power since they can, in some cases, substitute lived experience, and they can convey the ineffable aspects of existence by liberating the imagination.

The meta-literary interjections consider the question of the most compelling genre and language to employ when writing about the city. Despite their praise of the

\textsuperscript{50} Another possible allusion here is to the houses of enchantment of the lords of Xibalba in the \textit{Popul Vuh}.\n
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imagination, both Javier and Luis Enrique seem more at ease and prolific in their work as journalists than in their attempts at writing fiction. Many sections of the novel resemble a detective story, in which a journalist reasons and seeks answers to the city’s problems. Nevertheless, journalistic writing often seems inadequate to the protagonists, leaving them frustrated and confused about how best to represent the city:

Creo que el cuento influyó en Javier mucho más de lo que confiesa, profesor. Por lo pronto, dice, fue el cuento el que lo motivó a escribir un libro sobre la ciudad de México como si lo escribiera el personaje al abandonar, por fin, su colonia . . . Buscaba, agrega, la excitación de lo largamente deseado, el resguardo de lo secreto, de lo prohibido, y de pronto – como cuando él corría al telescopio a afocar un punto en particular - el deslumbramiento ante lo no concebido. ¿Podía dar esa visión de la ciudad con unos cuantos reportajes? El mismo no lo creyó y por eso incluyó en el proyecto las notas que hacía en el margen de sus trabajos Luis Enrique Bautista. (109, my italics)

The journalistic works limit Javier’s expression, his ability to delve into the mysterious and affecting experience of urban life. Thus, the characters, along with the narrator, don’t seek to make sense of the city or decipher it, but rather to write it, imagine it and envelop oneself in its complexities.

Likewise, in the framing story, the narrator debates the virtues of different narrative styles, but the characters often contradict their stated preferences about narrative form and genre, creating greater uncertainty for the reader. The critic Alfonso González has studied the rhetorical use of questions in Casas: “Otra estrategia estilística que contribuye a la configuración de la incertidumbre son las preguntas retóricas. La novela empieza con una: “¿Cómo podríamos empezar, profesor?” Hay un total de once preguntas hipotéticas en las primeras tres páginas. Su función no es iluminar la narrativa ni guiarlos, sino sumergirnos más en la incertidumbre de la novela” (116). The narrator explains that it would be preferable to create a free-flowing, intuitive text instead of a
transparent, linear one: “Sí, profesor, lo digo porque su obsesión por lo lineal me reprime y frustra. Prefiero hacer de nuestro relato un amasijo de ideas e intuiciones a una transparente exposición” (Solares 56). By contrast, the character of the professor fears giving in to the imagination and values a linear text, which the narrator dismisses:

No le tema usted tanto a la imaginación, a perder contacto con lo tangible. Hay ocasiones en que sólo la imaginación suple las deficiencias de la realidad. De acuerdo: un trabajo sería atenernos al diario de Javier y a partir de él extraer las conclusiones, y otro muy distinto agregar nosotros lo que suponemos que sucedió. ¿Pero y si eso que imaginamos, que agregamos, es ya la mejor conclusión a la que podemos llegar? (87)

Despite this declaration, the narrator contradicts himself by attempting to piece together the information from Javier’s diary in order to craft a coherent, true story. He tries to clarify and make more transparent the story of the deceased journalist: “El problema es que en el diario hay puntos oscuros que usted y yo debemos aclarar” (78). Ultimately, however, Solares does not lend credibility to the professor’s argument about a linear and transparent text. The reader never hears the voice of the professor and only learns his thoughts and opinions through the filter of the narrator, his interlocutor. By not revealing the authoritative voice of the professor, Solares calls on the reader to imagine this character and the reader is meant to sympathize more with the narrator’s imaginative, though sometimes contradictory, approach to crafting the story.

The difference between the professor and the narrator’s ideal narrative form echoes the division between the city of the planners that values clear, pragmatic, coherent, structured, visible, and sharply defined urban development, and the “deep city”, with its dark, invisible, convoluted, blurry and opaque associations. The characters’ trajectories through the two cities resemble the tensions in Casas between the transparent, linear writing that the professor values and a more episodic, fantastical literary form.
When catastrophe topples the structures that symbolize the state’s project of modernization, what is the role of the letrado? Since the victims of the 1985 earthquake were from a more humble background than the authors writing the catastrophe, the moral responsibility of the writer demands reflection. Mexican writers, like the character of Javier, are often caught in between the two cities; on the one hand, part of the educated elite and, on the other hand, interested in writing about society as a whole. The narrative form and genre of a work becomes a space where this divide between the writer and his subject is negotiated, all the more so during a time of political and social upheaval.

The challenge of writing about catastrophe in Mexico City, which consumes the characters in Casas, questions notions of what constitutes the literary and reveals the politics of representation. What drives Casas is a discussion of the interplay between fiction, journalism, and the genre of the testimonial. Solares’s text consciously complicates the privileged position of the novel vis-à-vis other literary genres by integrating journalistic accounts and passages resembling testimonials of volunteers who participated in the rescue operation of the Nuevo León building. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, the journalistic and testimonial works by writers such as Carlos Monsiváis, Elena Poniatowska and Cristina Pacheco were essential for communicating the tragic and resilient stories of the victims of the earthquake and for

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51 The genre of the testimonial has gained a prominent place in Mexican letters and has documented periods of social and political turmoil from the sixties on. Seminal ethnographic works published in the fifties, including Oscar Lewis’s *The Children of Sánchez* (1961) and Ricardo Pozas’s *Juan Pérez Jolote: biografía de un tzotzil* (1948), inspired the cultivation of the genre of the testimonial in Mexico and works such as Elena Poniatowska’s *Hasta no verte Jesús mío* (1969) and *La noche de Tlatelolco: testimonios de la historia oral* (1971).
denouncing the injustices committed by the authorities\textsuperscript{52}. Solares, like Fuentes and Aridjis, feels compelled to include passages in the style of these testimonial and journalistic accounts because they have an honest, straightforward and simple quality that is deeply moving in a way that a fantastical narrative may not be. Also, by imitating a style that lets the victims speak for themselves and upsets the inequality between representatives of dominant and subaltern cultures, these writers hope in some way to distance themselves from the hegemony of the novel and “high art” produced by intellectuals, especially given the subject matter of their works.

Just as the participants in the rescue operations didn’t want to be singled out for their contributions or acts of anonymous heroism, in the polyphonic journalistic works, Poniatowska and Monsiváis downplay their role as author. This differs from the convoluted narrative style of Casas that results from the characters’ obsession with the idea of authorship. Jean Franco explains the way the testimonial upset these definitions and categories of the literary:

The genre that best claimed privileged access to the underclass was the testimonio, although in doing so it upset genre boundaries and hence the secure place of the literary. Initially facilitated by the invention of the tape recorder, the testimonio opened the way to registering orality beyond the controlling mechanisms of the literary as well as to upsetting the idea of authorship. In his preface to The Children of Sánchez, Oscar Lewis made the claim that recorded testimonies of the underclass had superseded the realist novel. (The Decline 211)

Another distinguishing characteristic of the testimonial is what Doris Sommer calls the “plural subject”, a kind of collective voice, in contrast to the personal identity, albeit fragmented, of the individual subject of Solares’s novel.

\textsuperscript{52} See Carlos Monsivais’s “No sin nosotros”: los días del terremoto, 1985-2005 (2005); Elena Poniatowska’s Nada, nadie: las voces del temblor (1988); and Cristina Pacheco’s Zona de desastre (1986).
The personal identity of the male protagonists in *Casas*, closely related to the idea of authorship, becomes absolutely integral to the novel, and clearly distinguishes its aims from those of a testimonial work. The reader is to believe that most of what is included in the novel are parts of Javier’s diary: an intimate, reflexive, subjective autobiography of sorts. In his article “Testimonio and Posmodernism”, George Yúdice analyzes the idea of the individual and professional writer that George Lukács presents in *The Historical Novel* (1937) over and against the subject of the testimonial:

Georg Lukács’s idea that the professional writer who attempts to represent the “whole people”—he has the historical novelist Walter Scott in mind—is the best spokesperson for the popular. The true “popular portrayer of history” is not a person of the people but rather a mediator who “bring[s] to life those objective poetic principles which really underlie the poetry of popular life and history . . .” (Yúdice 43)

Lukács believes that the historical novelist should be a “mediator between ‘below’ and ‘above’, between the immediacy of reaction to events and the highest possible consciousness” (Yúdice 43) and this mediator is the “world-historical individual”. The writer-protagonists of *Casas* are in this tradition, since they are quite literally mediators between below and above in social and spatial terms, however Solares deploys a hybrid genre that patches together many different styles, including a reference to the testimonial. Solares’s use of science fiction and fantastical elements breaks with the conventions of the realist historical novel as defined by Lukács.

Yet, the power of the novel lies precisely in the perspective of this individual and the contextualization, both social and historical, which is achieved through his character.

While the testimonial presents the reader with the moving, immediate experiences of the

53 However, *Casas de encantamiento* exhibits many of the characteristics of the New Historical Novel, as defined by Seymour Menton. See pp. 22-24 of *Latin America’s New Historical Novel* (1993). This is a genre that I will explore further in chapter 4.
victims, the “here and now” of the event, the novel looks back in time and projects forward to expand our understanding of the implications of the disaster. Whereas the testimonies document directly\textsuperscript{54} the voice of the victims, the writer of novels has an obligation to address this aspect of human suffering while at the same time enriching the language. In addition, the author of science fiction forcibly disrupts reality as we know it, which the reader experiences through the perspective of the protagonist, in order to question whether things could be otherwise. The novel thus adds a literary sensibility to this dimension of human experience and conveys to the reader the anguish and uncertainty of the late eighties through the play of time and narrative form.

I will elaborate on the way in which the genre of the novel expands the temporal parameters of catastrophe in the next chapter, whose object of study is two novels by Homero Aridjis, which, like Casas, use a fragmented narrative form to mirror the divided, cut up and disjointed urban space. Both Solares and Aridjis transport the reader in time to prompt a reflection about the prior moment at which Mexico’s social, political, and environmental problems emerge. But while Solares’s writing is somber and introspective, deploying the trope or metaphor of houses and interior closed spaces, Aridjis’ is fantastical, playful, flamboyant and extraverted. I maintain that this less constrained and stifling atmosphere results from the greater distance from the actual moment of disaster; Aridjis’ novels end with an earthquake and include passages that echo the 1985 scenes from Cristóbal Nonato and Casas, but they are set in 2027 and they

\textsuperscript{54} As Francesca Dennegri summarizes so astutely in “Testimonio and its discontents”, the editor/transcriber of testimonies is in fact faced with a series of choices, such as to what extent they want to make grammatical changes to the language of the source or reorganize the sequences according to a master narrative.
reach as far back as the conquest as the source of Mexico’s problems in the 1990s. Once
the real disaster becomes rarified and increasingly intangible, and conjoined with the
environmental problems of Mexico City in the nineties, the sense of catastrophe is
conveyed through the alien phantasmagoria displayed in the text. The structurally
fragmented and fractured megalopolis in Casas recalls the jarring contrasts of the
conquered city, as Serge Gruzinski describes them: “Around 1530, had we viewed
Mexico City from the top of the still superb ruins of the pyramid of Templo Mayor, we
would have seen a kind of freak city, a composite architecture composed of crumbling
remains and newly erected buildings” (37, my italics). In Aridjis’ novels, the
juxtaposition of ancient ruins and modern structures, visions of a past that irrupts onto the
future, create a decidedly freakish, strange and grotesque urban space. The author is less
inclined to include the realistic details of the earthquake and the concrete historical
circumstances of the disaster that produced a feeling of despair in the protagonists and the
reader of Casas.
CHAPTER 3

Environmental Disasters and the Myth of the Five Suns in Two Novels by Homero Aridjis

While the previous chapter analyzed the collapsing structures of downtown Mexico City in a historical perspective, this chapter will examine the collapsing of time in two novels by Homero Aridjis that recreate simultaneously the mythical past, the socio-political concerns of the present and a future setting of 2027. The future of Mexico is portrayed as a world of environmental degradation into which irrupt pre-Columbian deities, gruesome creatures and grotesque Aztec imagery. As one character in ¿En quién piensas cuando haces el amor? states, “Mañana es ayer grotescamente” (271). Whereas in Cristóbal Nonato the metaphor of the spiral points to the slow movement forward, defying both cyclical and linear time; and in Casas de encantamiento a chasm opens up to the past, in Aridjis’s novels time caves in, resulting in the confusion of distinct time periods. Just as in the other works, the barriers between future, present and past break down, but in Aridjis’s narratives the past exists in the future, or “el futuro se ha ido, el pasado está aquí” (La leyenda 166). Aridjis’s novels reach further back and project further into the future than those of Fuentes and Solares, but they too are ultimately reflections on the present. The two novels of Aridjis represent a new form of science fiction, which Jean Baudrillard terms the “hyperreal” type of science fiction; in it the past is reinvented, and the imaginary implodes into the real. Unlike the first order of simulacra, it is not based on an imaginary place, nor on a new technological reality, as in the second order. In the third order it is time that folds in on itself. Drawing on the
popular imaginary, ancient phantasmagoria and myth represent a city that will end with a
catastrophic earthquake, but the redemptive potential found in art and literature leaves
open the possibility of change and serves as a warning to the reader.

3.1. The Crises of the Nineties

The decade of the nineties was marked by political, social and economic
upheaval. The disasters of the nineties began in 1988, with the controversial presidential
elections in which Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, who had been in the lead, lost the election to
the PRI’s candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari. The PRI was accused of electoral fraud in
connection with the alleged breakdown of the computer system used for tallying votes.
As president, Salinas set about his plan for neoliberal reform, privatizing state-owned
companies and banks, and signing the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1992,
thereby putting an end to the longstanding PRI policies of economic protectionism. The
free trade agreement reduced tariffs on foreign goods, leading to a flood of cheap imports
on the Mexican market, which had detrimental effects on domestic manufacturers.
Salinas also broke with the tradition of social welfare and repealed the ejido system, the
communally owned farmlands that were instituted after the Mexican Revolution. In
addition to the economic hardships, the Salinas presidency coincided with an increase in
the drug trade and rumors circulated about government ties to the traffic.

The critical year of 1994 brought profound changes to Mexican politics and the
daily lives of many Mexicans. On January 1, 1994 the Zapatista National Liberation
Army, a guerrilla movement in Chiapas, one of Mexico’s poorest regions, rose up in arms
and took control of the southeastern part of the state. Salinas agreed to negotiate with the
EZLN instead of using force, a wise decision but one that revealed the PRI’s faltering
grip on the monopoly of power. This threat to authority was followed by the March 23rd shooting of President Salinas’s chosen successor, Luis Donaldo Colosio Murrieta, during a campaign speech in Tijuana. Suspicion fell on factions within the PRI party that were in opposition to the Salinas presidency and his chosen successor, exposing a rift in the party that had controlled Mexican politics for decades. As the journalist Alma Guillermoprieto succinctly explains:

The PRI’s vaunted *unidad monolítica*- the discipline that has kept it in power for such an astonishing number of decades- exists no longer. On Wednesday night, the all-powerful president was revealed as simply a mediator between opposing and potentially explosive forces. Among the factions are the military and the right wing of the PRI, which want to crush the guerrilla movement by force and put an end to a cautious *apertura democrática*; the booming business sector, which has been Salinas’s most influential source of support for both economic and political reforms but now wants him to rule with an old-fashioned iron fist; the technocrat prophets of modernization, led by Salinas himself, who have no real political base of their own, and no source of support, other than what appeared until last year to be their unlimited success in pushing through a program of drastic economic reform; a previously feeble opposition, which owed its relative freedom to operate to Salinas but certainly owes him no fealty (particularly since Salinas came to power in elections that are widely believed to have been fixed); and, last, a citizenry that constantly veers from rage at its own poverty and political helplessness to apathy and then to fear of a different future. (183)

Ernesto Zedillo, Salinas’s successor, was then faced with task of devaluing the peso, the calamity that had perhaps the most devastating effect on the populace in those years, since the currency lost nearly fifty percent of its value. Foreign investors pulled out of Mexico at an alarming rate and the country’s federal reserves shrank drastically. Rubén Gallo summarizes the economic crisis as follows:

Inflation and interest rates skyrocketed, borrowers defaulted on their loans, businesses went bankrupt, the banking system nearly collapsed, and millions lost their jobs. Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Zedillo drastically reduced government spending and cut
social programs, a move that compounded the crisis’s disastrous effects on poor Mexicans. Violent crime soared and Mexico—especially the capital—became one of the most dangerous places in the world. (4)

The PRI’s uncontested hold on government finally came to an end in 2000, with the election of the PAN party candidate Vicente Fox.

Environmental problems rendered a city mired in political and economic crises even more unstable. In March of 1992, pollution levels reached such alarming rates that the mayor of Mexico City had to declare a state of emergency; record-breaking air contamination was such that children under 14 years of age were instructed to stay home from school. Industries and overcrowding contributed greatly to the pollution, since the land surrounding the city was heavily developed and the growing population and manufacturing sector generated both car fumes and waste. Millions of people in the metropolitan area currently suffer from diseases that are caused or aggravated by air pollution (Gilbert 119). Though Salinas attempted to implement measures to regulate emissions, such as laws limiting automobile circulation, stricter enforcement of emissions controls, and even closing down some refineries and plants, these efforts have only been moderately effective (Puente 310). Another serious environmental challenge that the city faces is the possibility of water shortages in the not too distant future, since the demographic expansion and demand for water far exceeds the supply that the city can draw on (Kandell 574). In his article “Social Vulnerability to Disasters in Mexico City”, Sergio Puente states that environmental pollution and industrial explosions are “the kinds

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55 Alan Gilbert describes the action taken by the Salinas administration to reduce pollution in *The Latin American City* (119-120). Sergio Puente maintains that efforts such as the “Hoy no circula” program, which barred each vehicle from use one day a week, had little effect and that pollution controls have been extremely difficult to enforce (310).
of problems that are all too common in Mexico’s large urban centers, especially Mexico City, and which make living there an experience of chaos that is permanently on the verge of catastrophe” (311).

Environmental causes and their political linkages are central to Homero Aridjis’s literature and his work as an activist. In 1985, Aridjis and his wife founded the “Grupo de los Cien”, a group of one hundred renowned intellectuals and artists that came together to sign a declaration against the contamination in Mexico City, identifying political issues and corruption as major impediments to finding solutions to pollution problems (Russel 66). The group has continued to draw international attention to environmental dangers, and it has formed alliances with environmental organizations. The “Grupo de los Cien” has been particularly vocal in support of protecting the migrating Monarch Butterflies by protesting against the illegal logging that is destroying their habitat. Another important cause championed by Aridjis and his supporters is ending the practice of killing marine turtles; as a result of his exposés about poaching, the author became the target of death threats. He has also defended the gray whales that give birth in the lagoon of San Ignacio in Baja California against encroaching industrial and commercial development. With the aid of foreign environmental protection groups,

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56 Homero Aridjis was born on April 6, 1940, in Conteypec, Michoacán, to a Mexican mother and Greek father. He studied journalism in Mexico City and showed an early interest in poetry. As a diplomat and professor, he has lived abroad in Europe and the United States, holding such prestigious posts as ambassador to Switzerland and the Netherlands, Guggenheim Fellow, and poet in residence at Colombia University’s Translation Center. In 1964 he won the Xavier Villaurrutia Prize for his work of poetic prose, *Mirándola dormir*. His poetry is known for encompassing erotic and amorous themes as well as the horrors of apocalypse and destruction. His novels deal with similar themes, as well as an exploration of history in works such as *1492: Vida y tiempo de Juan Cabezón de Castilla* (1985). He writes a weekly column in the newspaper *La Reforma* in which he frequently addresses environmental issues, which have become central to his work as an activist and writer.
Aridjis was able to stop the plans for a salt mine in the lagoon, however there continue to be large-scale construction projects--tourist installations, gas and energy plants, and airports--planned for the coast of Baja. Although Aridjis is pessimistic about the future of the planet, he believes “que no importa lo difíciles que sean los problemas, los seres humanos debemos luchar por la vida” (Russell 80-81).

The attitude of the activist, that against all odds we must commit to a struggle for change, is the driving force of Aridjis’s novels. Like Carlos Fuentes’s purpose, the representation of Mexico City on the brink of total destruction is not intended as a cry of despair about an unalterable fate. Instead, Aridjis warns the reader that change must occur now in order to elude catastrophe.

3.2. Disaster Fiction and the Future of Mexico City

Drawing on the social, political, and environmental catastrophes of the times, La leyenda de los soles (1993) and its sequel ¿En quién piensas cuando haces el amor? (1995), by Homero Aridjis, explore many of the same themes as the works by Carlos Fuentes and Ignacio Solares. Environmental disasters, including the 1985 earthquake, are exacerbated by human factors and profoundly shape the characters’ urban experience. Political corruption and social disintegration are mirrored in the physical decay of a city in ruins, images of corporal dismemberment and the characters’ sense of orphanhood. Like the novels discussed in the first two chapters, La leyenda and En quién piensas address contemporary problems through a multifaceted play of time that ultimately calls on the reader to reflect on the present. Miguel López interprets the dystopias of Aridjis’s novels as “un marco propicio para cuestionar el valor de la globalización neoliberal y sus
repercusiones en el ámbito político, cultural y ecológico” (175). The critique of the profound changes that Mexico experienced in the nineties is elaborated through the melding of past, present and future. Images, myths, and figures from Mexico’s pre-Columbian history invade a futuristic setting, producing an even more freely associative causal chain than the novels of chapters one and two.

Both novels are set in 2027, a year forecast by Aridjis to bring devastation to Mexico City and the surrounding areas, but this future is permeated by ancient beliefs and traditions; the Aztec nomenclature and the pre-Columbian myth that structures the plot give the narratives a fantastic and phantasmagoric feeling. *La leyenda* is the story of a young painter, Juan de Góngora, whose task it is to recover the missing page of an ancient codex that predicts the exact date of the final destructive earthquake that will mark the end of the era of the Fifth Sun. The reader experiences the cataclysms of the last days of the city from the perspective of Juan and his girlfriend, Bernarda Ramírez, as their lives intersect with sinister neo-Aztec characters such as the President Huitzilopochtli Urbina, the terrifying General Carlos Tezcatlipoca and El Tláloc, the leader of the urban underworld. The urban environment in *En quién piensas* is similarly fateful and threatening and there is some overlap in the characters, a compelling reason for reading the novels together. Narrated by a female giant named Yo who is traversing the city with a group of friends, *En quién piensas* is a fragmentary account of cultural decline, violence and love in the last days of the city before it is destroyed by a massive earthquake.
In both novels, however, the plot is secondary to the hyperbolic snapshots of urban life and the description of the deplorable conditions in the megalopolis, exaggerated and multiplied versions of the real disasters facing the city at the time Aridjis is writing. Seismic tremors are a regular occurrence in both works and *La leyenda* narrates the scene of an earthquake that resembles the tragedy of 1985 in the details of the location, time of day, structural devastation and the rescue operation. Juan de Góngora finds himself trapped in the rubble of his building and he joins the urgent mission of locating and extracting other victims. The complete institutional and infrastructural breakdown recalls the events of 1985; the major hospital has collapsed, communication lines are down, and the government has closed the airport and cordoned off the disaster areas, complicating the work of the spontaneously organized volunteers. Just as in 1985, the Hotel Maximiliano topples, and makeshift morgues are set up in public areas to manage the overwhelming death toll. Additionally, in both cities the air pollution has destroyed all signs of nature, the smog so dense that it conceals the surrounding atmosphere.

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57 I concur with Seymour Menton’s assessment of Aridjis’s appeal as a writer, in his study of the Mexican author’s historical novel *1492: Vida y tiempos de Juan Cabezón de Castilla*. Plot and characterization are subordinated to the interweaving of a broad tapestry of spaces, atmospheres and registers: “The relative weakness both of the plot and of the characterization of the protagonist is offset by the author’s re-creation of fifteenth-century Spain ( . . . ) and above all, the variety of discourses (heteroglossia), including the official announcements of the town criers, the salacious slang of the prostitutes and their friends, the archaic dialect of the Jews and *conversos*” (Menton 156). Menton’s observations about the story of Juan Cabezón apply to the novels of the present study.

58 In *La leyenda*, the megalopolis is referred to as Mexico City, whereas in *En quién piensas* it is named “Ciudad Moctezuma”. The made-up “Ciudad Moctezuma” can be interpreted as the capital itself or a gigantic outlying settlement similar to Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl.
volcanoes. Terrible water shortages have caused mass demonstrations\(^{59}\), and the boulevards and parks of the futuristic city are lined with artificial trees: “En el centro de la plaza surgió un árbol de metal. En sus ramas tubulares estaban cantando pájaros autómatas, que abrían y cerraban el pico y las alas a cada trino. Flores artificiales, iluminadas por dentro, fosforescían” (En quién piensas 48). In both novels, the female characters, whom Aridjis associates with earth, birth, nature and conservation, struggle to save the animal and plant species in danger of extinction.

These environmental catastrophes are compounded by a breakdown in the social and political fabric of the city. Urban life has become so threatening that “mucho de la nueva ropa era antibalas y anticuerpos y lo protegían de violencias y enfermedades callejeras” (La leyenda 34). Inhabitants of the city live under the constant threat of attack by vicious gangs; kidnapping is rampant; and violence is often mixed with sexual abuse and exploitation. Walking through the city, the characters in En quién piensas observe a “robachicos, esa plaga viva que arrebata el niño pequeño de la mano de la madre para surtir el mercado de órganos humanos y los prostíbulos de menores” (39). In addition to dismemberment and mutilation, organ smuggling is a common theme in works from the 1990s, serving as a metaphor for U.S. dominance over Mexico’s culture and economy\(^{60}\).
The economic crisis of the nineteen nineties is mentioned explicitly in *En quién piensas* (228), its long-lasting effects on the populace condemning many to a life of squalor, crime or prostitution.

Like *Cristóbal Nonato*, Aridjis’s novels depict the degradation not only of the poorer sectors and the urban underworld, but also of the state and its corrupt officials. The lack of transparency in Mexican politics and the precariousness of democracy are clear from the very names of the political parties in the two novels: the “Partido Único de la Corrupción” and the “Partido Único de la Revolución”. Corrupt, violent and perverted, the President of the Republic in both novels, José Huitzilopochtli Urbina, is guilty of pedophilia and ritual sacrifices, and in *En quién piensas* he threatens to extend his presidency beyond his *sexenio* when the opposition candidate turns up murdered, an obvious reference to the Colosio murder. The president is aided by General Tezcatlipoca, the chief of police who terrorizes the population with his death squads that “operaban al amanecer, sorprendiendo a las víctimas dormidas, los venadeaban y los abandonaban torturados, violados, desmembrados, desfigurados en la vía pública, para intimidación y escarmiento de los vivos” (*En quién piensas* 202). Whereas Fuentes used absurd and comical names to complement the hyperbolic decomposition of the nation and its institutions, Aridjis assigns his characters names of violent Aztec gods, associated with physical agony, sorcery and the power of the emperor, to imbue the present and the future

*cabeza*”, described in Rubén Gallo’s *New Tendencies in Mexican Art* (2004). This parody of a radio broadcast addresses the topic of organ trafficking and violence in Mexico City by mixing gore with humor in an audio collage, playing tropical, up-beat musical melodies in the background of extremely violent scenes, as well as including humorous conversations between a headless woman and a radio talk show host.
of Mexican politics with an ominous feeling, the imminent threat of catastrophe and death.

3.3. Contemporary Science Fiction and a Rehallucinated Past

Popular during times of upheaval, the genre of science fiction is especially well suited to Aridjis’s assault on Mexico’s contemporary environmental and political crises. Science fiction literature is often a vehicle for communicating trenchant social commentary and its future setting may function as an allegory of the present. Time travel and displaced objects in time are ways to address processes of historical change; future settings, alternative societies, and utopian or dystopian visions are fantastic re-figurations of current social, ethical and political concerns. During the Cold War, for instance, many North American science fiction novels were rife with paranoia and politically induced fears. More recently, in the book *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster* (1998), Mike Davis studies the way a vast corpus of science fiction films and novels that represent Los Angeles as the locus of social, political, and natural disaster reflect contemporary demographic changes and race relations in the city. According to Davis, the fusion of the science fiction genre and the imaginary of disaster in L.A. generated a literature that was steeped in racial anxiety, in which the tensions among whites, African Americans and the growing Asian community in the city were projected onto a future setting. This temporal quality has led some critics to identify the affinity between science fiction and the historical novel, positing science fiction as a kind of “future history”, “projecting into the near future such actual historical tendencies as intensifying urbanization, the decay of the autonomy of the nation-state, the globalization
of capital”, as well as the increasing sophistication of technology (Freedman 128-129). As an author of historical novels, it is no surprise that Aridjis would understand science fiction’s potential for unleashing the play of time, choosing for both of his disaster novels a dismal 2027 landscape to depict the catastrophes plaguing the contemporary megalopolis.

Science fiction utopias and dystopias presuppose that the world could be radically different from the way it actually is. Though the realist text may offer incisive criticism of the status quo, it ultimately accepts the world as it is, whereas science fiction begins with the decisive rejection of mundane reality. As the critic Eric Rabkin states, “Alternate histories are not science fiction because they have ray guns or cancer cures but because, like utopias, they ask us to consider social forces with both intellectual discipline and imaginative freedom” (22). The novels by Aridjis warn the reader of the possible consequences if Mexico continues on its current path towards development, thus prompting a reflection on the urgent need for change and for an alternative to the environmental degradation of the present.

The themes and narrative techniques of *La leyenda* and *En quién piensas* exemplify many characteristics of science fiction stated above, however the particular play of time in these novels points to a new direction within this genre. Jean Baudrillard identifies in his book *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981) a new trend in science fiction that is distinct from the utopian and technological character of traditional science fiction. In the chapter titled “Simulacra and Science Fiction”, Baudrillard presents three orders of simulacra. The first is that of utopia, in which a universe that is natural takes form; this universe is naturalistic but it is located on an island or in some place that is physically
separate from the real. The modern period sought to delimit the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, distinguishing between utopia and the real world. The second order is that of science fiction, in which the mechanical possibilities of the real world are projected, extended, and multiplied. In the third order, which Baudrillard terms the “hyperreal” type of science fiction, the distance between the real and the imaginary disappears; without the transcendence of utopia or the scientific projection of high modernism, the distinction between the real and the imaginary becomes tenuous.

Baudrillard maintains that science fiction from the hyperreal era can only try to reinvent the past as fiction but in a context in which the distinction between the real and the fictional has collapsed. Authors of this hyperreal type of science fiction will “reconstruct a prior world, the events, the people, the ideologies of the past, emptied of meaning, but hallucinatory with retrospective truth” (Baudrillard 123). This third type of science fiction is not a place apart from the real, nor is it a projection of the real, but instead the (con)fusion of the real and the imaginary in a highly stylized and playful kind of historicity. When it is no longer possible to imagine any other universe, “Fiction will never again be a mirror held toward the future, but a desperate rehallucination of the past” (123), according to Baudrillard.

This new form of science fiction, this “rehallucination of the past”, proves especially incisive to examine works set in a megalopolis like Mexico City, in which ancient and modern cultures coexist on a shared spatial plane. In the novels, too, futuristic and technological advances such as the “videófonos” exist alongside Aztec temples and myth. Far from the type of science fiction that presents a sparkling, metallic technological utopia, the Mexico City of Aridjís’s novels, like the L.A. described in the
works that Mike Davis analyzes, is a dark and dreary place, besieged by scarcity and imminent disaster. The images that come to mind while reading Aridjis’s novels recall the sordid underworld of *Blade Runner*, another L.A. story whose racial subtext in the depiction of an Asian cityscape is supposed to give the (white) reader a feeling of doom. In Aridjis’s novels, the resurgent “Other” is Mexico’s Aztec past, which appears throughout the novel as the harbinger of disaster.

The characters in these novels don’t explore distant planets, a parallel universe, or other worlds; instead, the spaces of the real are transformed by ghosts, figures from Aztec cosmology and gruesome mythological creatures. There is an abolition of the distance between the real and the imaginary; the imaginary permeates and absorbs the real, becoming indistinguishable from it. In fact, the Aztecs themselves didn’t conceive of the real and the imaginary as separate but rather as interrelated; the human, natural, mythological and spiritual worlds were intimately linked and interdependent.

The rehallucinated past in Aridjis’s narrative transforms history from an object of analysis into spectacle. This representation of the past brings to mind what Frederic Jameson explains about the new conception of history in the postmodern aesthetic in his essay “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”. According to Jameson, in the postmodern, historicism becomes the “random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion” (308). Pastiche is omnipresent and the world is transformed into sheer images of itself, pseudoevents and “spectacles”. Rather than concern ourselves with the original, we are in the realm of the “simulacrum”, says Jameson, in which

the past is thereby itself modified: what was once, in the historical novel as Lukács defines it, the organic genealogy of the bourgeois collective
project ( . . . ) has meanwhile itself become a vast collection of images, a multitudinous photographic simulacrum . . . the past as “referent” finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us with nothing but texts. (309)

The trend that Jameson identifies in postmodern architecture of randomly cannibalizing architectural styles of the past and combining them in “overstimulating ensembles” (309), has its corresponding artistic expression in literature. This postmodern artistic language is incompatible with genuine historicity; instead of the representation of historical content, the reader gets the “past” though a stylistic connotation.

Whereas the novels discussed in the first two chapters interrogate precise moments in Mexico’s history that contributed to the disasters in the present, Aridjis’s works conflate time periods in a pastiche of ancient myths. In Casas de encantamiento Javier travels back in time to a specific period, the 1940s, to discover the origin of the problems that plague the contemporary city; the play of time in Ignacio Solares’s novel has a pointedly socio-political motivation since there is an attempt to hold accountable the individuals and institutions whose actions exacerbated the natural disaster of 1985. By contrast, Aridjis’s novels deal with recent, concrete historical events in a much less explicit fashion. By weaving together ancient myths and legends with the catastrophic present, Aridjis undermines temporal logic and represents time with a kitschy playfulness that draws on the popular imaginary. In Aridjis’s novels, the insertion of mythic, pre-Columbian elements into the narrative leads to a representation of the abstract visual elements that make up the Mexican imaginary of catastrophe rather than an exploration of the historical causes of the disasters. In La leyenda, all historical epochs with the exception of the Aztec and colonial periods fall away; the critical historical moment
drops further back and becomes more diffuse. There is no real past that we can refer to; rather, an imaginary past has irrupted into the future.

By choosing the Aztec past as the principal historical reference, Aridjis not only makes the catastrophe more diffuse and the recent historical causes less relevant; he also appears to be suggesting a degree of structural determinism that is not present in *Cristóbal Nonato* or *Casas de encantamiento*. In those two novels, there is some sense of agency and responsibility, a complex treatment of the specific twentieth century historical factors that contributed to catastrophe, an effort to identify and hold accountable (at least in the reader’s mind) those who precipitated Mexico’s problems, and a guarded hopefulness about the power of civil society to achieve a more just and humane order. In apparent contradiction to the writer’s activism and his urgent calls for environmental justice, in Aridjis’s novels there is a treatment of history as a process without a subject, one without identifiable agents and therefore no obvious calls for accountability. This does not mean that Aridjis is indifferent to agency and responsibility in the present, but he offers a vast spectacle of Mexico City’s doom under the prophecies of the Fifth Sun. *La leyenda* and *En quién piensas* represent a present/future of Mexico City in which people are still immersed in the experience of the Aztecs and the author draws on the Aztec imaginary as a template for (mis)recognizing disaster and an imminent apocalypse. Ultimately, Aridjis would like to jar the reader into a commitment to environmental activism and sustainability, and to do so he utilizes a subtext that we must not allow ourselves to be destroyed as the Aztecs were when they ascribed their fate to the Gods and failed to take action to defend themselves. The apparent contradiction between the vast mythical panorama of ineluctable destruction and the public position of the author as
an activist creates a deconstructive tension at the heart of the novels. Far from hailing the Aztec past as a golden age of environmental and social harmony, he reveals that it—just like the modern age—was an age of terrors and misrecognition, in which a harmonious potential was lost in a phantasmagoria of destructive and self-defeating beliefs. Unlike Fuentes and Solares, Aridjis is not pointing to a specific period or moment in the relatively recent past as a forked path when the wrong route was taken, but is suggesting that all moments of history contain positive and negative potentials.

In studying the Aztec referent in these novels, critics affirm that it functions as a critique of the excesses of the modern way of life and the lack of historical or ethical consciousness. James López terms this recurring theme in Aridjis’s work the “cronotopía presentista”, which he defines as “el poder del lenguaje poético de abolir el transcurso temporal mediante la convergencia simultánea de referencialidades cronotópicamente dispares” (148). J. López correctly highlights the juxtaposition of historical, mythological, political and literary elements in the novels. He also posits the utopian-millenary character of the works, which fuses archetypal figures from different periods in order to reveal transhistorical essences and warn us against the apocalyptic future that may await Mexico. J. López traces this leitmotif in several texts and relates it to the second recurring theme that he identifies in Aridjis’s work: the mystical search for love. According to J. López, love is the only thing that can overcome the fatalism of the apocalyptic vision of history and the future in Aridjis’s novels:

El milenarismo aridjiano busca reconciliar las preocupaciones históricas, políticas y sociales del autor por un lado, y sus meditaciones sobre el amor como el espacio sagrado de revelación epifánica por otro. De alguna manera esto es lo que le permite mantener un compromiso activo con su momento histórico sin abandonar una cosmovisión esencialmente mística, que insiste en la primacía del amor como vía de acceso a la verdad. (154)
J. López concludes his article by saying that Aridjis’s entire oeuvre can be understood as an allegory about love’s capacity to transcend time and as a meditation on the ways in which we inhabit time—past, future, and present. J. López’s assertions are well-founded, however he stops short of exploring the implications of the simultaneity of spatial-temporal references. What kind of meditation on time results from the juxtaposition of the specific temporal references that Aridjis has chosen, and what do these references bring to bear on the cataclysms of Aridjis’s present?

In her book *Galería de ecos*[^61], Carmen Vidaurre maintains that Aridjis’s deployment of pre-Columbian mythology serves as a challenge to the contemporary scientific world. Citing Mircea Eliade’s idea that the transformation of historical events into mythic categories represents an ideological rebellion against historical circumstances that are difficult or impossible to overcome, Vidaurre states that the Aztec myths and pantheon depicted in the novel function as a vindication of national culture in the face of Anglo-Saxon imperialism[^62], which values progress and Cartesian logic. She links the challenge to imperialism with gender principles in the novel, suggesting that Aridjis proposes ecological feminism in the place of male domination:

> La mediación ideológica dominante que se puede localizar en los procesos de desconstrucción apunta, así, hacia: una postura ecologista, huellas de una posición antiimperialista que también involucra diversos elementos de un feminismo que involucra la recuperación de una visión mítica y religiosa, mágica, arcaica del mundo; opuesta a una visión científica que

[^61]: The chapter on *La leyenda de los soles* in Vidaurre’s book explains in great detail the references to Aztec mythology in the novel. Vidaurre relates both the Aztec myths as documented by anthropologists, historians, and archaeologists, and their fictional transformation within the novel. See the section titled “La leyenda y la mitología prehispánica”.

[^62]: In *En quién piensas* the topic of U.S. imperialism is made explicit when American troops invade northern Mexico, which recalls similar plot elements in *Cristóbal Nonato*.
Similarly, Miguel López, states that Aridjis negatives the western mentality that values industrialization and consumerism by presenting the ecoapocalypse as part of the pre-Columbian paradigm of creation and recreation at precisely the time when Mexico is debating globalization. According to Miguel López, the use of the pre-Columbian myths, calls for a new beginning that will bring a greater respect for the environment (184-85).

The interpretations of Aridjis’s work as a neo-Aztec defense against economic imperialism and globalization are partially in tune with the political ideas of the author and the environmental campaigns of the activist, however the texts themselves convey a more ambivalent feeling about Mexico’s past. The interpretations by Vidaurre and M. López would suggest a greater degree of nostalgia for an idyllic, environmentally sustainable past than is evidenced in the texts. It’s true that, on the one hand, the environmental catastrophes in *En quién piensas* and *La leyenda* are juxtaposed with the idyllic and lush landscape of Tenochtitlán, the abundant lakes and floating gardens, just as in *Cristóbal Nonato* and *Casas de encantamiento*. In *La leyenda* Juan de Góngora’s father finds a map of the ancient capital that offers a startling contrast to the environmental degradation of Mexico in 2027:

> colgó de la pared del comedor una reproducción del primer mapa de la capital de la Nueva España, obra de un cartógrafo indio, y por él supo que ésta no siempre había sido esa inmensidad irrespirable que hacía llorar los ojos y raspaba la garganta, sino un valle luminoso cubierto de lagos resplandecientes y verdes inmarcesibles. (15)

The once lush and abundant canals and waterways have dried up and the spectral modern pipelines stand as a reminder of man’s destruction of nature: “La ciudad de los lagos, los ríos y las calles líquidas ya no tenía agua y se moría de sed . . . Las tuberías y los túneles
de concreto que recorrían subterráneamente cientos de kilómetros parecían ahora los intestinos abandonados de un animal fantástico del subsuelo” (La leyenda 17). The new landscape is not only devoid of natural resources; it has a fantastic, superhuman and monstrous quality about it.

The theme of ruins also posits the lasting nature of Mexico City’s ancient buildings against the contemporary ruins. As in Casas de encantamiento, the modern cityscape strewn with ruins is a symbol of a deeply fractured society and it negates the utopian promise of the buildings that were intended to convey a sense of the new modern nation under a sign of the future. The structural decomposition of the modern edifices is the result of various disasters, including the devastating earthquake described at the end of the novel, which closely resembles the events of 198563. As one character observes: “Aquellas obras arquitectónicas que se habían erigido como permanentes, no habían durado más que un parpadeo en la era del Quinto Sol” (La leyenda 187). Since the modern buildings are in a more advanced stage of decay than the ancient constructions, the juxtaposition of ruins from the past and future/present has the same effect as the comparison of the natural landscape explained above.

However, despite the moments in which Aridjis describes the ancient world as more sustainable than the modern, he highlights the destructive and sinister qualities of Mexico’s ancient civilizations. Aridjis portrays solely the dark and negative incarnation of Aztec Gods who, in Aztec iconography, are characterized by a duality. As Carmen Vidaurre points out, the Aztec god Tláloc was, on the one hand, traditionally associated

63 Indeed, the 1985 earthquake completely destroyed some of the 20th century buildings, whereas the Pre-Columbian ruins and colonial constructions survived the catastrophe with only minor damage.
with the vital rains that gave water, sustenance and life to the crops; but Tláloc was also depicted as terrible and nefarious, capable of punishing man with long periods of droughts, floods, hail, and lightning, and he was connected to the underworld through his relationship with Tlaltecuhtli, a female deity identified with death and sacrifice. Carmen Vidaurre states that Aridjis emphasizes solely Tláloc’s negative traits: “Tlaloc se ha convertido en un dios de la muerte” (178). Indeed, in _La leyenda_, Tláloc is the double of general Tezcatlipoca, the violent and sanguinary leader who kidnaps and rapes young women, and who is also a god of war, associated with the color black, hurricanes and sorcery.

Thus, the mythological figures and the anachronistic characters are associated with death and the grotesque. Cristóbal, the character who travels through time from the past to the future to guide José de Góngora through the final earthquake, says he is the son of Coatlicue, the goddess of life and death who is often depicted with a skirt of serpents and a necklace of skulls. At the end of the novel, the city is invaded by the freakish _tzitzimime_, mythological creatures with a voracious appetite for sex and violence that were predicted to appear with the end of the Fifth Sun. Similarly, José de Góngora’s girlfriend witnesses in the final days of the city the ghosts of gods from ancient Mexico processing through the Zócalo in ruins, resurrected by the human sacrifices of their followers (_La leyenda_ 181).

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64 In like manner, President Huitzilopochtli Urbina stands for the god of war and the god of women who died in childbirth. The Aztec myths tell that he killed and dismembered his sister the moon, Coyolxauhqui.
65 This novel includes various tropes and hallmarks of science fiction, including time travel and supernatural powers such as Juan de Góngora’s ability to walk through walls and become invisible.
The nomenclature of the urban space, which draws on pre-Columbian myths and pantheons, is another use of historical references to accentuate the catastrophic and ominous future. In *En quién piensas*, Ciudad Moctezuma’s streets and plazas have names like “Paseo de la Malinche”, “La Plaza de la Diosa Toci” and “Plaza del Cacique Gordo” (114). In *La leyenda*, general Carlos Tezcatlipoca’s mansion is surrounded by a garden with statues of Mexican gods, and the inner chambers of the mansion hold the general’s vast collection of archeological pieces from the tombs at Monte Albán, El Tajín, Uxmal, Teotihuacan, Tenochtitlán. Here, the Aztec iconography is meant to give the general’s compound a dark and gloomy feeling. Likewise, Aridjis describes the metro as a moving coffin, plunging into the dark subterranean tunnels with occasional stops at stations bearing pre-Columbian names. At the Mictlán station, Bernarda Ramírez sees “En el andén desierto estaba Mictlantecuhtli, el Señor de los Muertos, con el cuerpo cubierto de huesos humanos, la cara calavérica, el pelo hirsuto, los ojos estelares” (*La leyenda* 33). Aridjis only includes in his novels pre-Hispanic station names when, in

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66 The importance that urban place names take on in Aridjis’s narrative and poetry transforms the ideology behind much of the city’s nomenclature. As Rubén Gallo explains in his essay “La Ciudad de México en la poesía de Homero Aridjis”, the naming of the streets was one of the pastimes of PRI functionaries, who projected their lofty ideals onto the city map. Street names such as “Justicia” and “Igualdad” are far removed from the reality faced by many inhabitants of the city, as Gallo notes: “¿Acaso los urbanistas mexicanos decidieron remediar todos los males de la ciudad poniéndole a las calles los nombres de las virtudes que tanto le faltan a la ciudad?” (145). Aridjis’s poetry invents and changes the names of the city streets to reflect the painful reality of the megalopolis instead of the wishful thinking of some urban planner or party functionary (Gallo 146).

67 The Mexico City metro is itself an interesting comment on Mexican history and the symbols that represent the Nation. Inaugurated after the Tlatelolco massacre of 1968, the metro uses history and national symbols to create a space of simultaneous temporalities that conveys “lo típico”, “lo nuestro”. In his essay “La ciudad es el cielo del metro”, Juan Villoro explains the temporal confusion in the metro. At the same time that the names and pictograms depict crucial moments in Mexico’s history, the trains and some of the
reality, the metro stops in the capital are named after Mexico’s historically important
dates, events and places from pre-Columbian times up to the later twentieth century. The
temporal mix in Aridjis’s novels takes a step further Juan Villoro’s comment about the
pre-Hispanic station names in the Mexico City’s metro: “Estamos en la inconcebible
modernidad prehispánica” (“La ciudad” 144). This gives the underground system,
undoubtedly one of Mexico’s great technological accomplishments, a fantastic and
gruesome feeling, as though it were inhabited by specters of the ancient gods.

Ghosts and skeletal figures suggest that the barriers between the past and the
present have collapsed, mixing time periods and popular images to convey the sense of
doom. The ghostly figures in *La leyenda* are a reference to Mexico’s popular imaginary
and the tradition of deathly iconography, which have contributed to the celebrated and
exoticized image of Mexican attitudes towards death. Aridjis cites the lithographs by
José Guadalupe Posada, etched in the Mexican imaginary, depicting death as an impish
skeleton dressed in Victorian clothing: “seis albañiles esqueléticos que cruzaban la
carretera con palas y picos. Parecían salidos de un grabado de calaveras de José
Guadalupe Posada. Ellos estaban ciegos, en las concavidades no tenían ojos” (103).
Phantasmagoria is omnipresent, since the city seems to be populated by multitudes that
look more like “fantasmas del presente que como seres reales” (46). The artist Bernarda
Ramírez, Juan de Góngora’s girlfriend, photographs the ghosts that she spots in the city
crowds: “Experta úlimamente en retratar espectros en las calles y en las casas viejas de
la ciudad de México . . . ella siempre llevaba al alcance de la mano su cámara compacta

stations are examples of technologically advanced and “futuristic” design, which explains
why some apocalyptic scenes of the science fiction film *Total Recall* were filmed at the
Insurgentes and Chabacano stops (144).
Utsuru, capaz de tomar a la velocidad de la luz (o del silencio) el cuerpo translúcido de los fantasmas” (La leyenda 29). The figure of the ghost frequently signals the mark of a crime, which is certainly the case with the evil nacotecas described with skeletal faces (146). Lastly, in La leyenda, ghosts of Spanish soldiers appear in the city center during the moment of final destruction, connecting the catastrophes of the present to Mexico’s colonial past:

venían soldados españoles, remedos fantasmales de aquellos que participaron en la conquista de México. Venían viejos, cojos, mancos, con las armaduras melladas, las espadas rotas, las caras calavéricas. En la noche se arremetían unos a otros, se hendían el corpazo espectral, se recomponían y tornaban a herirse, víctimas de una violencia recurrente. (169)

The ubiquitous ghosts and the specters of the conquest imply that Mexico is still haunted by the disasters of the past.

3.4. Representation and Redemption

Popular culture vacillates between visions of doom and the aesthetic of the absurd, transformed into spectacle as a metaphorical antidote for the real crisis. Can the fatalism of the imaginary of catastrophe be assuaged with the activism and sardonic humor of Mexican popular culture? As Rubén Gallo explains, by converting disaster into an occasion for popular humor to enact a symbolic exorcism, the gravity of the situation is tempered with a new expression of political activism (México 28). According to the Mexican critic, performances such as the wrestling match between Superbarrio68 and El

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68 The popular hero Superbarrio, dressed in a lucha libre suit, emerged during the aftermath of the earthquake and acted as an intermediary between the people and the authorities (Standish 80).
Sida or the representation of Salinas de Gortari as the *chupacabras*\(^69\) who sucked the blood of the Mexican economy,

> no es un acontecimiento aislado, sino un ejemplo típico de cómo los habitantes de la ciudad de México tienden a transformar sus catástrofes en obras literarias. ¿El sida transformado en luchador? Ni a García Márquez se le hubiera ocurrido. Parece haber una correspondencia entre la intensidad del trauma y la complejidad de la narrativa que éste genera: entre más traumático el evento, más elaborada será su narrativa. (*México* 27)

Narrative, here, is not limited to text; rather, it refers to the propensity to create a story out of our experience. And yet, according to Gallo, the kinds of narratives that popular culture forms out of its trauma possess a literary quality; to inscribe the tragedy of catastrophe on the popular imaginary requires an intricate narrative that we associate with fiction.

Through Aridjis’s novels conjoin ancient and modern times in order to accentuate the feeling of doom, they express a great faith in the power of literature and art (high and low) to assuage the trauma of catastrophe. If the representation of the past is not historical but rather a rehallucinated past (Baudrillard) or a stylized pastiche (Jameson), history is indistinguishable from fiction. Literature, then, may allow us to manipulate elements of the imagined past and extract from it those aspects that can be used to transform the “text” of the present. Just as with the novels in the preceding chapters, there is a persistent exploration of literary form, the theme of writing and self-

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\(^69\) The 1995 economic crisis coincided with the death of dozens of goats with mysterious tooth marks on their necks, found on farms in northern Mexico. The popular imagination invented the myth of a blood-sucking animal called the *chupacabras* that roamed around the Mexican countryside. The two cataclysms were collapsed and images of President Salinas as the chupacabras that sucked the life-blood out of the Mexican economy began appearing throughout Mexico City, a powerful visual representation of the mismanagement and corruption of his presidency (Gallo, *México* 27-28).
referentiality in both La leyenda and En quién piensas. The freeing of time from the
constraints of chrono(logical) temporality permeates the novels with a sense of doom but
it also allows Aridjis to recreate the ancient myth of the Five Suns and conclude the
works with the promise of regeneration and renewal, thereby affirming the importance of
literature in the aftermath of catastrophe and the ability of writers to guide us towards the
positive potential to be found in our own moment in time.

In La leyenda, the search for the lost manuscript of the “Códice de los Soles”
grants language and writing a decisive influence on the course of history and, like in
Cristóbal Nonato, uses the myth of the Quinto Sol to explore the disasters of the present.
In the Aztec myth of the Five Suns, each sun represented an era that would come to a
close as the result of a natural disaster (massive floods, ferocious beasts, torrential rains,
and fierce winds)⁷⁰, and the final and current sun was prophesied to end with an
earthquake. Cristóbal Cuauhtli, a messenger from the past, appears before Juan de
Góngora to urge him to search for a lost codex that lays out the Aztec cosmology,
predicts the precise date of the end of the fifth sun and serves as a guide to the future:
“Los antiguos mexicanos representaron en el Códice de los Soles lo que sucedería en
estas tierras y con signos señalaron las fechas del nacimiento y muerte del Quinto Sol,
nuestro Sol, el Sol del sacrificio humano” (La leyenda 102). The codex was found in the
pyramid of the Sun in Teotihuacan and taken to King Nezahualcóyotl’s library, from
where it was rescued by an ancestor of Cristóbal’s when fray Juan de Zumárraga
condemned all the volumes to the Inquisition’s pyre. It was then passed down from

⁷⁰ See Gordon Brotherston’s article “America and the Colonizer Question: Two
Formative Statements from Early Mexico”, in which he describes each era of the Sun
Stone (36-37).
generation to generation in Cristóbal’s family and finally hidden in the Templo Mayor, where an archeologist found it during excavations, only for it to be stolen by the ruthless general Tezcatlipoca. Juan de Góngora must rescue the codex from the spectral palace of the general to discover the last day of the Fifth Sun and the name of the god that will form the Sixth Sun, written in signs that only Cristóbal can decipher. As in Cielos de la tierra and Casas de encantamiento, the manuscript in La leyenda holds a key to understanding the city’s catastrophes. Here, writing and text are given a preeminent role in destruction, salvation, and apocalyptic predictions, an idea pronounced by Cristóbal Cuauhtli’s father in the novel: “Si los libros desaparecen, ¿cómo vamos a saber lo que está pasando en la Tierra, lo que están diciendo los dioses?” (La leyenda 99).

The fateful moment occurs in both novels by Aridjis, each one ending with a devastating earthquake that recalls the disaster of 1985. In Cristóbal Nonato and Casas de encantamiento the sections that resemble accounts of the rescue operations in the aftermath of the real earthquake have a different narrative style and, in like manner, in La leyenda those passages contrast with the popular mythology and science fiction elements of the rest of the novel. The following sentence echoes Fuentes’s and Solares’s novels, as well as journalistic works about the catastrophe: “Los movimientos afanosos de los rescatistas, de procedencia humilde en su mayoría, que extraían de entre las ruinas lo mismo una persiana que una taza de excusado, unas mallas de alambre que a una señora criandera” (La leyenda 187). Perhaps the single most human moment in Aridjis’s novel, the line that describes Juan de Góngora’s rescue from a collapsed building stands out for its affecting quality and ends with a reference to the anonymous topos: “Su salvador, un muchacho de facciones indígenas, lo abrazó en silencio y se perdió en la noche” (184).
As in *Casas de encantamiento* and *Cristóbal Nonato*, the language and style of this section is stripped of the mythological references, vulgarities, and fantasy that dominate the rest of the novel. These passages deepen and enhance the reader’s emotional response to the catastrophic future because it conjures up images of the disasters in the present, but Aridjis’s use of fiction to transform Mexico City’s fate is what gives the reader hope for the future.

Aridjis creates the possibility of salvation by inventing the Sixth Sun and he gives it credibility by locating it in the authority of a written text. In *La leyenda* and *En quién piensas*, Aridjis transforms the pre-Columbian myth of the Five Suns to include a sixth sun and thus to express hope for regeneration and to extend the promise of redemption. After the destruction of the fifth sun in *La leyenda*, Juan de Góngora and Bernarda Ramírez observe “El cielo se despejaba arriba de ellos, los rayos solares doraban el aire y la superficie de las ruinas, una luz novísima descubría el mundo una vez más” (197).

This ethereal light exterminates the *tzitzimime*, the fantastic creatures that were harbingers of the destruction of the Fifth Sun and spoke in Nahuatl to the confused *capitalinos*71: “seguros de la muerte del Quinto Sol y de que nunca más iba a haber otro Sol alumbrando la Tierra, no volvieron a sus escondites y la luz de la aurora los sorprendió y los quemó enteros” (197). The new era of the sixth sun begins with the volcanoes Popocatépetl and Iztac Cihuatl finally visible in the distance72, concluding both

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71 The mixing of Nahuatl, Spanish and English in this text is another instance of the convergence of Mexico’s ancient past and imagined future as well as a representation of the conflicting cultural influences on the country.

72 The positive ending may pick up on a trend in science fiction films from Mexico, identified in the book *El futuro más acá*: “Un futuro radical en una comunidad como la norteamericana sería acercarse a las clásicas tramas postapocalípticas, el caos total, el retorno a la barbarie. Cuando se vive en la ciudad de México, estas imágenes únicamente
novels on a positive note, with the possibility of ecological salvation. At the end of *En quién piensas*, despite the earth-shattering quake, the reader finds a glimmer of hope in animal life: “Lo más curiosos de todo es que en ese momento de destrucción masiva, de ar alas general, de estremecimientos, y estruendos, animados por las luces confundidas, todos los pájaros se pusieron a cantar, creyendo que era el alba” (273). Here, then, it is the rewriting of ancient myths to include a new beginning in the era of the sixth sun that makes this rebirth possible.

Thus, hyperreal science fiction gives the author complete liberty to transform and collapse past, present and future, imbuing the reader with fear as well as offering some solace. However absurd and fantastical reality is, writers and storytellers have found the need to embellish that reality, as Aridjis describes in *La leyenda*. Amidst the cataclysms, two individuals:

se contaban historias imaginarias. Para ellos, la realidad no era bastante rica en sucesos y personajes fantásticos, tenían que inventarla. Flacos, canosos y coetáneos, semejantes a aquellos confabuladores nocturnos del pasado que solían ser vistos por el vulgo durante las plagas, las hambrunas, las guerras y los cataclismos, ajenos a los temblores y los apagones, a la luz de una vela hablaban de ficción. (146)

This passage explores the role of literature during times of upheaval and celebrates the use of fantastic narratives to describe those periods and to help us grasp them in their complexity, a self-reflexive commentary on Aridjis’s own stylistic choice to fictionalize disaster by writing fantasy during the prolonged crises of the nineties.

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representan la sobrevivencia de un cataclismo cotidiano. Partiendo de este punto, el abanico de posibilidades para imaginar el futuro es mucho mayor hacia la prosperidad que hacia la miseria” (Yehya 200).
With regards to the particular narrative style, form and language that the novel of disaster should adopt, Aridjis’s works manifest the influence of popular genres such as pulp fiction, science fiction, hard-boiled detective stories and even comic strips. On the one hand, the novels are critical of the degeneration of language brought about by the mass media. As in Cristóbal Nonato, the decomposition of the nation is part and parcel to the transformation of language. The pollution of the environment is juxtaposed to the “contaminación del idioma” (La leyenda 133) through the use of English and the insipid messages of consumer culture. Billboards throughout the city exhibit the way Spanish has degenerated into Spanglish, announcing stores such as “El New Hippy, La Bunnie, El Nursery, La Nymphet, Los Unhappy Many, El Pasaje de las Boutiques, Hacia el Lobby, Solo Women, Tienda de Ready Made, El Edificio Blue” (La leyenda 133). Likewise, the narrator of En quién piensas is critical of the mind-numbing, offensive and degrading images that are broadcast on the Circe de la Comunicación:

En este paraíso de imágenes fugitivas, el prójimo desrostrado desperdiciaba sus años, vivía entregado a un realismo más irreal que el de su vida . . . Una lujuria teledirigida entraba gratuitamente por las paredes apantalladas a millones de ojos, fomentando la masturbación visual y el sadismo. Infantes pintarrajeados, putas africanas, busconas piramidales, rusas emigrantes, starlets californianas, vikingas nórdicas, enanos españoles y travestidos neoyorquinos y brasileños, 141ar ala nunca soñadas por Suetonio, Giovanni Boccaccio, Francisco de Quevedo, Giacomo Casanova, Charles Baudelaire, Marcel Proust, ni Vladimir Nabokov. (178)

The fact that the linguistic degeneration occurs in advertisement and business is yet another dimension of the critique of globalization and consumption, as Miguel López explores in Utopian Dreams, Apocalyptic Nightmares (2007)(198).

Nevertheless, despite the novels’ pronounced critique of the media and the language of materialism, as well as a certain degree of nostalgia for an artistic and literary
tradition of high culture that is lost, the narratives themselves undermine this notion by incorporating elements from popular genres and embracing mass culture. In the novels by Fuentes and Solares, the metaliterary elements express concern, uneasiness and ambivalence as to the language to best represent catastrophe, whereas Aridjis’s works move further and unequivocally in the direction of popular genres such as science fiction. While the novels by Fuentes and Solares are caught up in the place of high literature and in the difference between the novel and genres such as the testimonial and journalism, the works by Aridjis include varied artistic expression in a fluid way, and there is greater acceptance of a mix of different mediums, styles, and genres to portray the catastrophe. His texts ultimately suggest that art, whatever the medium, can express a guarded optimism about human resilience, thereby affirming the role of literature in the aftermath of catastrophe. The novels by Fuentes and Solares parodied popular language and genres, and represented the corresponding milieus from the perspective of the educated writer, but in the works by Aridjis the line between parody and non-parodic representation is blurred.

The graphic sex and violence, the sordid urban backdrop and fast-paced slangy dialogue give the reader the impression of descending into the depths of a fantasy underworld. In *La leyenda* this is meant to give the text a gritty, urban feel, as in the following passage in which one of the thugs of the general is driving Juan de Góngora through the city in a taxi; the driver is talking on the radio with one of his colleagues when a truck cuts off his path:

> De inmediateo sacó la pistola, encañonó al camionero, quien salió huyendo, abandonando su vehí culo.
> -¿Qué pasó, mano? — preguntó la voz.
> -Un hijo de su puta madre se me 142ar encima.
This dialogue includes street language to portray a city in which violence is rampant and little value is placed on human life, an inhumane reality that the author obviously condemns. The passages that use an excessive amount of slang represent a conscious decision on the part of Aridjis to integrate dialogue and narration in the style of pulp fiction or urban detective novels. *En quién piensas* is a fragmentary text, since the narrative style and the topics addressed differ greatly from one section to the next. In contrast with the more “literary” parts, there are passages that read as though taken from a sensationalistic news source. Take, for instance, the description of the sordid and dreaded gang “Las Navajas Negras”, which targets innocent and defenseless secretaries:

“In sus delitos, los miembros de la banda usaban armas negras, delgadas como agujas. En sus alas eran teatralmente desalmados y obtenían placer en desfigurar a las personas, rasgándoles el ombligo y los pechos. Los desfiguros, a veces bastante originales, eran sus firmas” (189). The description of the members of the gang evokes images of comic book villains: “Por sus chamarras negras de cuero, con hombreras bultosas y cinturones sueltos, decoradas en la espalda y los brazos con alacranes rojos, sus botas con clavos en la punto 143ar alas patadas, sus cadenas, sus cortes de pelo y sus tatuajes en el antebrazo, se veía que pertenecían a la Banda de las Navajas Negras” (188).

Other parts of *En quién piensas* are influenced by the language and tropes of sentimental
literature and romance novels. The title of the novel comes from a popular love ballad that Yo hears in a dance hall, whose trite lyrics are written out for the reader (147). Compared to the novels by Solares and Fuentes, the works by Aridjis are closer to popular forms of literature and entertainment.

Even what appears to be a lamentation of the loss of artistic forms such as Medieval and Golden Age Spanish literature in *En quién piensas*, is also an affirmation of the popular in urban literature. Despite the novel’s futuristic setting, the characters are immersed in an artistic world that focuses on canonical Spanish literature. The protagonist, Yo, works the lights in a theater whose leading actress, Arira, gained fame as the old matchmaker in Fernando de Rojas’s *La Celestina* (1499). Arira’s career, like the theater itself, is in decline as the novel opens, since her classical training seems out of place in the futuristic culture she inhabits:

> En el siglo XX, Artaud y Grotowski exaltaron las manifestaciones no verbales del teatro; Arira, siguiendo un camino clásico, enfatizó la palabra. Cada sílaba fue enunciada por ella con el énfasis correcto, comunicando en su actuación hasta la última sombra de sentido. Arira produjo su voz como un acto, integrando respiración, fonética, resonancia y articulación, sabedora de que los griegos y los romanos relacionaron respiración y habla. (60)

Arira’s final revival of *La Celestina* in 2025 with the Compañía Nacional de Teatro is a complete disaster with the contemporary audience and the President decides to withdraw financial support for theater altogether, representative of the defunding of the arts that Aridjis criticizes. Already in a state of decadence and decay, the theater building suffers a seismic tremor during the final performance, prompting Arira to retire and dedicate her time to “ordenar el pasado, a la nostalgia” (71). The entire chapter about *La Celestina* and the references to the literary canon appear to strike a jarring note in a novel about the
future. However, La Celestina addresses some of the same themes that are present in Aridjis’ novels. Fernando de Rojas’s play is an itinerant text that takes the reader/spectator through the spaces of the city and, as with Aridjis’s works, La Celestina moves between reality and magic/the supernatural, and tragedy and comedy. The urban setting is central to presenting the dualities of high and low, noble and popular cultures, just as Aridjis attempts to include two similar registers. Whereas the Modern period sought to mark the distinction between high and low culture, the postmodern period fuses them, as did Medieval and Renaissance culture. Aridjis’s novels might convey a sense of loss, however they also recognize that more popular literary and artistic expression, as well as the influence of mass communications, are an undeniable reality.

Aridjis’s imaginative approach to disaster fiction privileges the visual as well as the verbal. In the novels by Fuentes, Solares and Boullosa the protagonists are writers, whereas the protagonist of La leyenda is a painter who in the last days of the Fifth Sun dedicates himself feverishly to completing his painting of a lush and clean image of Mexico City. Artistic and creative, Juan de Góngora’s childhood was idyllic and comforting: “Adentro del apartamento se le había creado un mundo ideal, poblado por personajes literarios y por artistas de todos los tiempos. Ese acuario de palabras y de imágenes se le defendía del hombre de carne y hueso” (15). Thus, the imagination serves as a defense against the brutality of reality, an idea that is echoed in Juan de Góngora’s painting of a lofty landscape of the Valley of Mexico that contradicts the environmental degradation of reality. As the disaster rages and the city is consumed by various catastrophes in anticipation of the end of the Fifth Sun, Juan de Góngora, despite the tremors, “se puso a pintar. No pensó en otra cosa que en terminar su cuadro. Con frenesí
colocó en la tela mujeres, caminos, árboles, volcanes, la luz corporea de una figura azul” (181). Juan de Góngora’s hopeful painting depicts both a utopian vision and a representation of the way the Valley of Mexico once was, saving the past and prefiguring the optimistic ending of the novel. After the earthquake topples the building that housed his studio, Juan de Góngora extracts his painting from the rubble, miraculously intact. In this way, the artist’s creation brings about redemption; as the air clears, it appears that the painting has anticipated the environmental miracle that ushers in the Sixth Sun, with the limpid volcanoes visible in the distance.

Just as in En quién piensas, the ending of La leyenda presents the image of a bird to symbolize a new phase in which nature will be restored. Bernarda and Juan de Góngora see “la figura azul de una mujer que tenía los brazos extendidos hacia el Sol, como si quisiera tomar de él el calor y el esplendor de la mañana. En su mano se posaba un pájaro dorado de plumas luminosas” (198). The ethereal woman, which Aridjis associates with preservation and a harmonious relationship with nature, with her arms outstretched and bird in hand conjures up images from popular calendars and the tradition of Mexican murals, both of which are artistic expressions linked to popular culture and Aztec imagery. The painter predicts the salvation of Mexico through his creation influenced by popular art forms in the way that writing augurs the fate of the city in the novels discussed in the other chapters.

There is a curious twist at the end of La leyenda whose self-referentiality again grants literature an important role in the experience and assimilation of catastrophe. Amid the rubble of the earthquake, Juan de Góngora comes upon a manuscript titled “La leyenda”, an ancient text that was translated from “mexicano” to Spanish by a scribe who
died in the epidemic of 1576. The earlier Códice de los Soles is thus confused with another manuscript, “La leyenda”, that bears the same title as Aridjis’s novel and which also explains the suns:

El Sol también muere. Hay un lugar en el espacio para los soles muertos. El Sol también nace, hay un lugar en el espacio para los soles que se están gestando. Mientras nuestro Sol se acaba, hay otros soles en el vientre de la noche, envueltos en la placenta cósmica del polvo y el gas moleculares. El espacio está lleno de soles, unos más viejos, otros más jóvenes que nuestro Sol. El Sol que nacerá mañana de los soles muertos será baboso y chillará, será calvo y endeble. Pero este Sol crecerá y un día tendrá manchas y humores, sufrirá cambios en tamaño y luminosidad, será el rey de nuestro firmamento. (195)

Juan de Góngora remarks, “esas palabras parecían provenir de una historia de ciencia ficción o de una mitología” (195). While the codex contains ancient myths, the manuscript includes both mythological and scientific or science fictional elements. The manuscript refers to Mexico’s pre-Columbian past at the same time that science fiction conveys a sense of futurism. This self-referential manuscript appears after the catastrophe of the earthquake that marked the end of the fifth sun and seems to give the protagonist some solace amid the destruction. The redemptive role that text, language, art, imagination and fiction can play in the aftermath of a catastrophe is thus equated with the mix of myth and the genre of science fiction.

Aridjis’s novels are prime examples of a distinctively Mexican strain of science fiction, which refuses to imagine a technologically advanced future without also incorporating elements from the country’s ancient civilizations. In his study of Latin American science fiction, Roberto de Sousa Causo explains that science fiction is “linked to the process of investigating modernization by magnifying and extrapolating modernization itself. The genre also describes the pockets of magic and wonder that
constitute the detritus of the modernization process” (144). Fuentes and Solares employ a malleable and flexible science fiction time in order to explore Mexico’s process of modernization and the city’s contemporary disasters; Aridjis describes the urban wasteland as a conflation of time, which reflects the popular imaginary and allows for the mixing of the modern, the mythical and the fantastical. Here, the neo-Aztec future presents the reader with an amusing pastiche and it also re-imagines ancient myths to create the possibility of renewal and regeneration. Aridjis’s work serves as a warning, stimulating the reader to seek greater social justice and environmental sustainability. Like Aridjis, in her novel Cielos de la Tierra Carmen Boullosa reaches far back into the past and imagines a more distant future in order to reflect on the crises of the nineties, which will be taken up in the next chapter.
4.1. Alienating Narratives

Carmen Boullosa’s *Cielos de la Tierra* (1997), like Aridjis’s novels, pertains to a post-utopian and less technological form of science fiction in which the imagining of an alternative future society prompts a revisiting of the history of the conquest and the early period in Spanish colonial rule. For both its fragmentary juxtaposition of different genres and time periods as well as its critique of utopian visions, scholars such as Claire Taylor and Gloria M. Prado G. have labeled *Cielos* a postmodern work of fiction. As such, it shares many of the characteristics of the post-apocalyptic narratives that represent the 1985 earthquake although the real disaster does not figure directly in Carmen Boullosa’s novel. The novel’s form, language and worldview grow out of the experience of the earthquake because the disaster had a profound effect on the imaginary of Mexico City, politics and civil society. As Julio Ortega cogently affirms, Boullosa writes “desde su propio tiempo marcado ya no por la saga de 1968 (que fractura la articulación de estado y sociedad), sino por el sismo de 1985 (que instaura la desterritorialización de la vida civil). Esto es, por el fin de los discursos nacionales globalizadores y la irrupción de los relatos parciales y las versiones fragmentarias” (“La identidad” 32).

Like the catastrophes in the novels I discuss in earlier chapters, the catastrophes of the fin-de-siècle in which Carmen Boullosa is writing call for fantastic representations and offer an occasion to re-vision Mexico’s pre-Columbian and colonial past. Boullosa’s novel interweaves futuristic, science fiction elements with history and myth, creating a
The mixing of distinct temporalities is central to another novel by Boullosa, *Llanto* (1992), in which Moctezuma appears in the *Parque hundido*. This impossible scenario is exploited to accentuate changes in Mexico City’s urban landscape in the last decades of the twentieth century.
violencia destructiva que percibi en el aire, en mi ciudad y en otros sitios . . . Cada línea sabe atrás de sí a la destrucción” (note to the reader by Carmen Boullosa).

However, for all the multiple layers of authors and textual palimpsests, Cielos is a work of fiction penned by a single author, and the novel’s particular triptych form is a narrative strategy employed by none other than Boullosa. Critics have either focused on a single story line or arrived at the same conclusions for all three of the narratives. For example, in her article “Cielos de la Tierra: ¿Utopía o Apocalipsis?” Anna Reid traces the way utopia degenerates into apocalypse in Hernando and Lear’s narratives, but she almost entirely overlooks Estela’s account. Christopher Domínguez Michael is dismissive of all of the narratives except Hernando’s, whereas Claire Taylor recovers Lear’s text from the marginal position occupied by science fiction in her article “Cities, Codes and Cyborgs in Carmen Boullosa’s Cielos de la tierra”. Jean Franco concludes that all three narratives are marked by the destruction of alternative projects, and Alejandro Morales groups all of the stories under the category of dystopian apocalyptic literature.

Although the three stories are a critique of utopian projects in the abstract, a detailed examination of the curious interweaving of the three narratives reveals buried within the narrative structure a less defeatist perspective about the catastrophes of the present. Instead of isolating one of the three plot lines or focusing on the common thread between them, it is essential to understand their differences and the way in which Boullosa juxtaposes them. This chapter will explore three levels of alienation within the narrative structure: firstly, Boullosa creates characters in the future and the past that experience a fragmented and dissociated state, and contrasts them with a character in the
present who is in touch with her family history; secondly, she employs the genre of
science fiction for its estrangement effect on the reader; lastly, the jumps from one genre
and time to another also produce a feeling of alienation in the reader from which he/she
can respond critically to the catastrophes represented in the novel. Ultimately, this critical
distance serves to draw the reader’s attention to the present as the time and place for
change and to impress upon him/her the importance of the kind of historical memory
present in Estela’s passages.

The repeated themes of family, utopia, apocalypse, race, language and
dismemberment show the way in which the alternative projects in the past and future fail
because of a lack of understanding of history, producing an alienated and dissociated
state in the characters. The story set in the present, however, exhibits a different
treatment of these themes, especially the representation of family. Hernando and Lear
inhabit societies that are marked by a rift with the past, while Estela is born of a sense of
continuity with history and family. Although her family history reveals the racism
present in Mexican society, Estela recognizes and assumes in a critical way the past that
belongs to her. By contrast, Hernando is cut off from his parents and his native Indian
culture, and Lear is born in a laboratory in a society that seeks to erase all traces of Man.
It is through Estela’s retelling of her family history that the reader can see some gradual,
generational shifts in attitudes away from the racial prejudice that continued to exist in
Mexican society after the revolution. Estela’s connection to her family history suggests
that although there are problems in the Mexico City of the 1990s, it is in the present that
we are in touch with history and can learn from it. This chapter will trace the repeated
themes related to an alienated subject in the past and the future, and contrast the treatment of those themes in Estela’s present.

In addition to a discussion of the alienation experienced by the characters in the novel, this chapter will explore the feeling of estrangement produced by Boullosa’s deployment of the genre of science fiction. Instead of writing a story about an unfamiliar yet convincing futuristic society in which the reader might become immersed, Boullosa makes Lear’s narrative so rarefied and grotesque that the reader is unable to identify on any level with the futuristic setting. The reader’s inability to feel empathy towards the post-human subjects of Atlántide situates him/her at a critical distance from the representations of disaster. In his book *Archaeologies of the Future: the Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* Frederic Jameson explains that with science fiction we “want to be able to think about ‘real’ politics here and not merely about its convincing or unconvincing ‘representation’ in these episodes, which dramatize our ideological objections and resistances to Utopia fully as much as they satisfy our impulses toward it” (410). To exemplify the way science fiction can prompt a reader to think about “real” politics, Jameson cites Darko Suvin, a critic of science fiction who has coupled science fiction and the utopian critical tradition with the Brechtian V-effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*), centering on alienation. Suvin, as summarized by Jameson, insists not only on the function of SF [science fiction] and Utopia to “estrange”, to produce a V-effect for the reader from a normal “everyday” common-sense reality, but also to do so “cognitively” (a no less Brechtian component of the definition). The reassertion of the cognitive means, as we said at the outset, a refusal to allow the (obvious) aesthetic and artistic status of the SF or utopian work to neutralize its realistic and referential implications. (410)
In *Cielos*, the V-effect achieved by the increasingly bizarre story of Atlántide has the cognitive function of making the reader more acutely aware of the relevancy of Estela’s story in the present.

Lastly, the narrative form of the novel produces an alienation effect in the reader by juxtaposing in abrupt and jarring ways three extremely different narratives. The fragmentary form of *Cielos* recalls Brecht’s description of the tradition of the epic, out of which grows his theater of estrangement: “one can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces” (327). Brecht contrasts the epic with the dramatic tradition, which emphasizes empathy by showing the world as it is, with a “strong centralization of the story, a momentum that drew the separate parts into a common relationship” (327). Brecht believed that the alienation effect in large part came from the play’s structure, the ordering of the scenes and the language. The defamiliarization of the reader is produced by a montage effect, by the interruption of action and the fragmentation of events and attitudes. In *Cielos*, the reader undergoes radical leaps in time, as well as unsettling jumps from one genre to another. Language also serves to detach the reader, since each of the narrative fragments begins and ends with a phrase in Esperanto. Some of the temporally disparate narrative segments are as short as two or three pages, and as the novel progresses Estela’s story becomes increasingly overshadowed by the bizarre account of Atlántide’s demise and Hernando’s experience of estrangement. Finally, the self-referential aspects of the text, the constant mention of the palimpsest of translation and transcription, draw attention to the montage-style of the novel.

The deliberate use of fragmentation, temporal dissonance and self-referentiality distance the reader from the stories contained in the narrative in a way that invites a
critical perspective on the disasters of the present. According to Brecht, episodes need to be knotted together in a way that will be easily noticed so that the audience has a chance to interpose its judgment. Jameson also contends that the novel’s narrative form is one of the key ways in which the writer of science fiction can bring the reader back to “real politics”. The juxtaposition of the past, present and future catastrophes with their often grotesque, dissociated aspects and unsettling jumps in genre, maintains the reader at a critical distance from the text. I will discuss the alienation effect on the reader that grows out of the juxtaposition of different genres and the way this heightens awareness of the present. It is from this distanced perspective that the reader becomes conscious of the past/present/future structure’s referential implications to a recognizable reality as well as the potential that the present holds as the time and place for change.

What, then, are the “real politics” that Estela’s sections convey to the reader? Echoing Aridjis, Boullosa depicts a Mexico City on the brink of destruction because of the political turmoil, environmental devastation and social violence. Boullosa’s novel is representative of narrative from the 1990s on a thematic level, since it paints a landscape of disaster, but also in so far as her work is reflective of a period during which writers no longer felt the political vocation of the generation of the sixties and seventies. Nevertheless, conclusions about the novel that limit the space of meaningful action to the printed page (the idea that in the end literature is all we have) don’t do justice to the work’s complexity. Though liberating herself from the mold of the engaged writer, Boullosa doesn’t depict catastrophe simply to utter a cry of despair and doom and take

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74 This recalls Ricardo Gutiérrez Mouat’s comment quoted in chapter one, which questions whether Cristóbal Nonato goes far enough in the direction of political resistance through its carnivalesque language.
refuge in the word. The solution to the “real politics” is neither nostalgic nor utopian. The future is now, not a dream of reaching a state of perfection on the distant horizon; a dream of perfection that characterizes both Atlántide and the Franciscan utopia. In contrast to modernity’s concept of progress, the gradual change that Estela sees in her family’s history doesn’t suggest a definite path, or the certainty that the future will be better. There is undoubtedly a critique of the present but there is also a sense that it is the only alternative to utopia or dystopia, the only place where change can occur. Estela’s present is all we have, or as Jean Franco aptly puts it, “el mundo que tenemos forzosamente que habitarn.” El cielo ha bajado a la tierra” (”Piratas” 30). Here the meaning of Bernardo Balbuena’s phrase is no longer that Mexico City is heaven on earth; instead, there is no heaven other than earth itself and we must save ourselves in the present. The novel’s form allows the reader to gain a critical distance that makes it possible to see, despite proclamations of destruction, the present’s potential. In chapter one, I discussed the way in which the metaphor of the spiral emerges in Cristóbal Nonato as an alternative to linear and cyclical notions of time in order to express faith in the open-ended struggle of the present. Similarly, in Cielos it is only by considering all three sections in their differences and commonalities that the “political purpose” buried within the narrative structure surfaces.

75 “Cielos de la tierra” is a reference to Bernardo Balbuena’s La grandeza Mexicana (1604), in which he praises the marvels and abundance of the capital of New Spain: “templo de la beldad, alma del gusto/ Indias del mundo, cielo de la tierra/todo esto es sombra tuya, oh pueblo augusto,/ y si hay más que esto, aun más en ti se encierra” (73). Boullosa quotes one verse of Balbuena’s poem as an epigraph to her novel, which is clearly meant to be ironic since the present is one of destruction.
4.2. Present: Family History and Mestizaje

While Hernando and Lear are both orphaned subjects, estranged from their families or to the very concept of kinship, Estela’s story is born of the generations that preceded her. Contrary to the worlds in which Hernando and Lear live, Estela’s vision does not seek erasure of the past in favor of an ideal future. Estela sees her genealogy and her own gestation as the result of centuries of racial discourse whose origins stretch all the way back to the conquest, tracing in this way national history through the personal and familial. Estela understands her own life and her family’s trajectory to be inextricably linked to Hernando’s period, which explains her interest in the translation of his manuscript and the story of his suffering: “Quiero decir por qué demonios me importó tanto lo que por casualidad vino a dar a mí, y por qué me dispuse a reescribirlo . . . Me importa sobremanera. A su modo es mío, pertenece a mi propia historia, está en mi génesis, en mi nacimiento” (33). Constituted by a sense of continuity with the past, this modern subject of the present is endowed with the ability to understand the mistakes of previous generations. Estela’s identity is inseparable from the family trajectory that she recounts in her narrative, however marked by racism and prejudice it may be: “Es cierto que vivo en la ciudad de México, que comparto la fantasía de un posrevolucionario país mestizo, pero es verdad también que tengo muy cerca a mi abuela, y que ella habitó un pasado diferente, un pasado que es colectivo y que, además, tiene bastante de presente” (48). Indeed, it is her acceptance of her family history as her own coupled with a critical retelling of it that allows her to see some progress in the discourse of race and class in Mexico.
Whereas in the narratives set in the past and the future the theme of race reveals the characters’ state of alienation, Estela recognizes, assumes and critiques the discourse of race in Mexico. Hernando is forced to distance himself from his racial identity and abandon his native culture but he continues to be the victim of prejudice in a society that is founded on the conquest of his people. In Lear’s Atlántide, every member of the society is of a different race, which reflects their genetically modified origins, the lack of a lineage and the rupture with the past. By contrast, Estela is in touch with her family history, retold by her in the form of memories, anecdotes and images that give the reader a clear sense of the class, race and mentality into which she is born. Boullosa introduces the character of Estela through the first person account of her paternal and maternal lineages, which are both marked by racist attitudes that Estela exposes and attacks. Furthermore, through Estela’s family history the reader can glimpse a generational change, albeit incremental, in racial discourse.

Instead of masking the ideas of racial superiority held by her grandparents, Estela interposes her critique through imagined intercut scenes that accentuate the inhumane treatment of indigenous people. The generation of Estela’s grandparents prospered in and reinforced a stratified Mexico premised on racial hierarchies. Obsessed with racial purity, both Estela’s maternal and paternal grandparents went to great lengths to maintain the family as white and European as possible. Estela recalls her maternal grandmother’s warning against Nivea cream’s skin-darkening properties, her paternal grandparents’ futile treatments to keep her fair hair from growing dark, and the family’s disappointment at her deep brown eyes. In a montage style similar to a “videoclip, de lenguaje inconexo de imágenes, al que en la televisión y el mal cine, nos hemos ido acostumbrando” (33),
Estela inserts an imagined scene inspired by her grandmother’s remark about *Nivea*, a scene of a bustling city street in which Indians walk barefoot in the middle of the dirt road while the *criollos* occupy the paved sidewalks. When a torrential downpour begins, the *criollos* are rushed off on the shoulders of their Indian servants, transformed into cargo donkeys, to avoid being splashed. This image projects onto the city street the deep divisions along racial lines in Mexican society around the turn of the nineteenth century, a society that Estela’s family approved of and helped to perpetuate. This scene reveals the grave social implications of the grandmother’s apparently trivial comment.

Estela demonstrates a deep understanding of history through her ability to both contextualize her grandmother’s comment and denounce her family’s racial privilege. Instead of demonizing her, Estela explains that her grandmother would never have considered herself racist: “En cuanto al racismo...ése era un pecado horrendo de los alemanes. Digamos que si los indios no trabajaban en la casa de la finca, era porque olían muy feo y eran sucios, y mentían, pero no porque fueran indios. Eso no lo habría aceptado” (43). Estela doesn’t condone or justify her grandmother’s attitude; on the contrary, she finds it so objectionable that she feels she can’t ignore or deny it. By means of the montage effect mentioned above, Estela interjects a fantasy in which her grandmother realizes the shame and burden that such prejudice brings upon the entire country. She imagines that the herbs collected by Indians in her grandmother’s laboratory shake with rage, prompting the grandmother to show regret for her racist comment:

Y sé que la abuela, si hubiera visto su enojo, se habría avergonzado de su comentario: la luz oscura proveniente de los extractos de los garrafones la habrían iluminado, le habrían abierto los ojos, diciéndole, explicándole,
que aquel orden era perversión pura, desorden del alma colectiva, una de las sogas al cuello de nuestras tierras. (42)

Ultimately, her fantasy cannot change reality, but unlike the societies in which Lear and Hernando live, Elena’s circumstances force her to assume responsibility for this past.

When retelling her family history, Estela also interposes contradictory information to challenge the accepted version of the events and uncover the family’s stake in a racist hierarchy. When the Mexican Revolution threatened to disrupt the social stratification from which Estela’s family had benefitted, it was precisely their race that assured them continued status and opportunity. After the family was dispossessed of its land and wealth, they were able to reestablish themselves quickly because, “supieron echar mano de las ventajas que les daba su raza”(45). Though family lore accounts for the financial recovery by their exceptional entrepreneurial spirit, Estela belies this version-- “en honor a la verdad hay que agregar . . . ” (45)-- by attributing her family’s resurgence to society’s deeply ingrained racism.

Estela’s parents’ generation still held attitudes of superiority towards Mexico’s indigenous population, however there were signs to suggest a gradual change in mentality. Estela’s parents led a mission in a small town in the jungle dedicated to converting Indians to Catholicism, echoing the evangelizing enterprise of the Spanish during the colonial period. On the one hand, this mission exposes the unhealed wounds of the conquest; on the other hand, Estela’s parents chose to perform the mass in the indigenous language Otomi, despite the Vatican’s insistence on conducting mass in Latin. Her parents ultimately contribute to the disintegration of Indian culture, traditions and quality of life, which haunts Estela in the form of a recurring dream set in a Roman town in which belief in one God is imposed on the worshippers of a pagan pantheon. The
dream always ends in apocalyptic destruction (62), an ill omen that reflects the current reality of the town:

No diré su nombre, porque el lugar ya no se parece en nada a sí mismo, ya no es un pueblo indio sino un conglomerado de gente apiñada en desorden, imitando en lo peor el modo de vida occidental, guardada la obligatoria distancia que impone la pobreza. Ha cambiado tanto en las últimas dos décadas, que se podría decir que ese lugar ha desaparecido, que se ha vuelto niebla, y que en su lugar ha nacido con su mismo nombre un pueblo espurio. (58)

Estela takes responsibility for her family’s role in the eventual abandonment of native ways, which has reduced the local population to poverty and begging on the margins of modernity.

Estela’s narrative warns of the dangers of modernizing without first recognizing Mexico’s complex racial history; her profound understanding of the past is necessary if Mexico is to achieve a just and prosperous future. By including a quote by José Emilio Pacheco, Estela makes explicit the perils of looking towards the future without understanding the past:

México se soñaba moderno y modernizante y quería verse ya entrando en el impensable Siglo veintiuno sin haber resuelto aún los problemas del Siglo dieciséis...El Chac Mool sigue viviendo en el sótano de la casa de Filiberto y de la nuestra. Para él, nosotros somos los fantasmas. (67-68)

Tucked away in a forgotten basement and yet impossible to ignore, Carlos Fuentes’s fantastical Chac Mool, from his collection of short stories Los días enmascarados (1954), embodies the way in which the modern country’s relationship to Mexico’s indigenous past and cultural heritage remains unresolved. Estela seeks to link Mexico’s present

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76 Carmen Boullosa’s interest in this topic is not limited to a literary sphere, since she attended the Zapatista’s (EZLN) forum, the Convención Nacional Democrática (CND) in the Lacandon jungle in August 1994 (Brewster 188) to support the movement’s denunciation of indigenous people’s suffering in Chiapas. The participation of
with the past and to write her own genealogy into the national history. While she cannot pretend to “resolve”, as Pacheco says above, the questions of the sixteenth century through her transcription of the manuscript, she does attempt a kind of reconciliation that is only possible through an understanding of the past.

The Boom writers of the sixties and seventies, Carlos Fuentes among them, inspired Estela’s generation by forging a literature that addressed Latin America’s history of social injustice and by engaging in the leftist political movements of the period. Nevertheless, Estela is critical of their utopian vision because it ultimately excluded the indigenous population from the foundational project. Estela recounts how her generation, decked out in embroidered blouses and huaraches, championed sexual liberation and socialist politics but saw their dream of the Cuban Revolution end in disappointment. For her, Cien años de soledad (1967) is emblematic of the shortcomings of the utopian vision of the sixties, since despite its critical retelling of Latin American history, “en el Edén garcíamarquiano los indios no son ‘actores’ de este re-nacimiento de la realidad. El tataranieto del criollo se casa con la tataranieta del aragonés para fundar la estirpe de los Buendía. Los indios no participan en la recreación del mundo” (203). The political engagement of the sixties brought about progress in gender and class politics, however the novels of that period were produced by and for an educated middle-class. According to Estela, these political movements, like the literature that accompanied them, didn’t include indigenous peoples in their fight, relying on the sons and daughters of the criollos as the protagonists of the novels and the class-based social movements.

intellectuals in this summit brought international attention to the Zapatista’s rebellion against racial discrimination and the trickle-down politics of neoliberalism, which had failed to improve conditions for Mexico’s poverty-stricken indigenous communities.
It is this very critique of the political and artistic project of the sixties and seventies that shows the way in which each generation experiences a change in attitude that grows out of an awareness of history. Estela’s historical perspective allows the reader to glimpse the way society can move towards transcendence of the racist discourse of previous generations. In her youth, despite the popularization of indigenous cultures and artesanías, the question of indigenous rights remained secondary to other struggles for justice and freedom: “el ‘asunto indio’ no era una verdadera preocupación, o no lo era tanto como el ‘asunto negro’, Black is beautiful, pero no ‘Lo indio es lo bello’” (198).

Estela, however, declares that although she is generally uninterested in marriage, the only man she would consider marrying is Toledo77, the painter-activist from Oaxaca: “Toledo, además de tener la virtud de ser indio, tiene el don de la belleza, inteligencia, obra, conciencia, generosidad e imaginación” (49, my italics). Thus, she redeems her generation through the act of transcribing Hernando’s manuscript and by uniting “lo indio” with beauty and intelligence.

Estela’s subjectivity grows out of her family history, a past that she recognizes as her own, and it is this quality that rescues her from the state of alienation suffered by Lear and Hernando. She confronts the injustices of Mexico’s history, feels a sense of responsibility for the racism that her own family propagated and is able to critique her generation’s mistakes and misguided idealism. Whereas Lear and Hernando experience a physical and cultural fragmentation, Estela is a subject made whole by her understanding

77 Francisco Toledo is a painter, sculptor and printmaker from Oaxaca, Mexico, whose work has been exhibited in the United States, Europe, Asia and Latin America. His art in imbibed with mythology and his Zapotec culture, combining natural, animal and human subjects. Toledo is also known for his work as a cultural and social activist in his native state, where he has spearheaded several initiatives to preserve and develop Oaxacan traditions, indigenous cultures, visual art and handicrafts.
of the past and its relevance to her present. Disillusioned about the past and apprehensive about the future, Estela represents the potential of the present. In Cielos, it is in the present that Mexico is in touch with history, conscious of the legacy of the conquest and centuries of racism and exclusion.

4.3. Past: The Failed Franciscan Project

As with the novels by Fuentes, Solares and Aridjis, in Cielos catastrophe prompts not only a predictive perspective but also a return to Mexico’s colonial past, indicative of the tendency to look for the root of contemporary or future-imagined disasters in the conquest. In Cielos, the future setting and the historical narrative share the theme of the orphaned subject, which is produced both by the memory-erasing Atlántide as well as the denial of native culture in late-sixteenth century New Spain. Centuries apart, both Hernando and Lear’s societies are founded on a break with family bonds, and Boullosa is critical of the utopian ideal that is premised on this rupture with the past.

Hernando’s narrative account is subjective and personal but its depiction of the failure of the Franciscans’ utopian project to create an educated class of Indians is historical. Considered separately, Hernando’s narrative inscribes itself in the tradition of the historical novel, as it re-creates more or less faithfully the Franciscans’ experiment in

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78 Of course, the most famous examples of the theme of la orfandad in twentieth century Mexican literature are Juan Preciado’s search in Juan Rulfo’s Pedro Páramo (1955) and Octavio Paz’s El laberinto de la soledad, in which he states, “La historia de México es la del hombre que busca su filiación, su origen . . . Va tras su catástrofe: quiere volver a ser sol, volver al centro de la vida de donde un día-- ¿en la Conquista o en la Independencia?-- fue desprendido . . . Es [nuestra soledad] una orfandad, una oscura conciencia de que hemos sido arrancados del Todo y un ardiente búsqueda: una fuga y un regreso, tentativa por restablecer los lazos que nos unían a la creación” (23).
Indian education, including many of the relevant historical names and places\textsuperscript{79}. In addition to the creation of utopian Indian Christian villages under missionary guidance in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, sons of Indian aristocrats were kidnapped from their families and enrolled in convent schools for religious instruction (Kandell 164). Under the tutelage of progressive clergymen, elite Indian youths were trained in Latin, theology, and philosophy, and were encouraged to betray Indians who continued to practice their traditional beliefs. One such school, the most famous, was the Colegio de Santiago in Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco, founded in 1536, which is the setting for Hernando’s narrative. Boullosa fictionalizes the historical accounts of how the school was abandoned by the Franciscans because many Spaniards were opposed to attempts to “overeducate” the natives, after which it was turned over to the students who ran it until it eventually closed (Aizpuru 116). Franciscan Bishop fray Juan Zumárraga had been a founder of the college, known for his benevolent treatment of the Indians and tolerance of the cult of Guadalupe, but he felt under attack by Spanish who believed the school was producing an Indian elite. It was for this reason that Zumárraga gave up on the project of educating the Indians and made an example of Carlos of Texcoco, an early Christian convert and a student at the Colegio de Santa Cruz, by sentencing him to death for rebelling against church doctrine (Kandell 167-172). This history is available through the writings of the Spanish who chronicled the conquest, such as fray Bernardino de Sahagún and Father Zumárraga, but the novel presents the reader with the imagined first hand account of one of the Indian schoolboys.

\textsuperscript{79} Hernando’s section grows out of the tradition of the historical novel, but its juxtaposition with a futuristic setting and Estela’s present place it in the realm of the New Historical Novel, as defined by Seymour Menton, or as a kind of subaltern and postcolonial re-writing of historical discourse.
Hernando’s manuscript reads as an autobiographical confession that, like Estela and Lear’s narratives, begins with an account of his family and his birth. Hernando explains that he is a native of Tlatelolco, born of a noble line, however from his birth his life is marked by death and a gradual loss of family. Accused of conspiring against the Spanish, Hernando’s father, Temilo, absconded in a Spanish galleon, not realizing until it was too late that the ship had set sail for Europe. Aboard the ship Temilo began to imagine the faraway lands as inhabited by monsters and in an act of desperation he threw himself overboard on the very day that his son was born. Thus, Hernando comes into the world as his family begins its decline, circumstances that will lead the young boy to feel out of place and abandoned. As in Cristóbal Nonato, the author relates the foundation of the Spanish empire with the birth of an individual, imbuing his life with symbolic meaning. In Cristóbal Nonato and Cielos, the retelling of an individual’s life extends the discourse of disaster so that it reaches all the way back to the history of the conquest. Boullosa implies through the play of time that Hernando’s story of disaster is the source of the catastrophes of the present.

Fatherless and vulnerable, Hernando becomes the victim of a series of substitutions and estrangements that will distance him from his family and culture. Hernando’s manuscript uncovers the trauma suffered by his family as a result of the conquest, as well as the upheaval in other Indian families of social standing. Suddenly replaced by the Spanish colonial government, the Indian notables lost their status and function in society, no longer able to bequeath any rank or profession to their children:

pero si el [oficio] del padre había sido ser juez, gobernador, racabador de impuestos, sacerdote y maestro, guerrero, o propietario de grandes extensiones de tierra, que me digan qué oficio podía enseñar a sus hijos, si los jueces no eran ya los jueces, ni los gobernadores los que gobernaban,
While all of Hernando’s noble class experiences the loss of traditions, orientation and family patrimony, his own situation is made more unbearable because of his father’s death. Forced to take refuge with a distant relative in Tezcoco, Hernando and his mother are dispossessed of their noble standing and their host uses Hernando as a surrogate son when the Franciscans require that the leading families entrust their eldest child to the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco. Stripped of his rank and denied his culture, Hernando becomes a false son: “el señor de la casa, señor principal, hijo y nieto de señores de principales, hizo entrega solemne de mí a los frailes, diciendo que en mí entregaba a su hijo para que lo cristianizasen . . . Me volvieron a usar para suplir a su hijo” (134). This identity as the substitute, the stand-in, the adopted son who is never truly accepted applies to both his immediate family relations and to the broader cultural context of the conquest, since he is an outsider in his own home and his own land.

Hernando’s subjectivity is thus shaped by a feeling of alienation vis-à-vis his family and culture, and his entire life is marked by the experience of not belonging. At the inauguration of the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco “A medio comer, nos piden levantarnos para decir nuestro nombre y linaje en voz alta, y yo estoy a punto de equivocar cuál es “mi” familia. Pero una mirada, como punzón, de mi falso padre, me hace rectificar” (161). Not only the priests but also Hernando’s own people deny him his true family and identity. Hernando’s false parents eventually forget him, and the priests prohibit his biological mother (who poses as his aunt) from visitations: “Me habían
robado de mi mama, de la villa que yo veía como propia, aunque la habitara en casa
ajena, y de mis amigos. ¿Qué más podía a mí importarme?” (140). Hernando’s existence
is thus defined in negative terms, a non-identity dislocated from a place of origin and
family:

Mi fiesta de mi nacimiento no fue para mí. Mi padre no fue mío . . . Mi Tezcoco no era mío, porque yo era tlatelolca. Tlatelolco, mi tierra, no me perteneció. Pasé a formar parte de los alumnos del Colegio con un nombre que no era mío; otro que no era yo había sido elegido para ocupar el lugar, y yo ocupaba el lugar de uno que nada tenía que ver conmigo. Mi mamá fue quitada de toda mi compañía sin saber que la que ellos creían mi madre no era la mía. (268)

These negative affirmations reveal the way in which Hernando’s story is different from
Estela’s, whose subjectivity grows out of a sense of identification with her past and a
depth connection to her family.

Cut off from his family, Hernando begins to lose touch with his native traditions,
a cultural transformation that he feels on a cognitive level as well as through a profound
change in his senses. The shift in his identity occurs through a series of substitutions;
writing supplants oral culture, and the harmonious relationship between mind and body
of his native culture is replaced with a Christian denial of the flesh.

Alienated from his family and culture, Hernando also experiences a symbolic
dismemberment. The written, Spanish and Catholic culture that Hernando becomes
immersed in requires a repression of the body that is foreign to his Indian upbringing, and
the vow of chastity that Hernando takes when he joins the Franciscans further estranges
and detaches him from his native culture. Hernando experiences the adoption of this new
culture as a metaphorical fragmentation of his body, his own flesh becoming unfamiliar
to him:
el día que me llevaron a Tlatelolco, a mí me mocharon las manos. Me las amputaron. Me las separaron del cuerpo. Quedé sin con qué rascarme la cabeza, sin con qué llevarme comida a la boca, inválido, incompleto.

Alimentado con los cuidados de los frailes, en mis muñones brotaron otras manos, unas manos nuevas, éstas con que escribo y sostengo el papel. Porque las manos son aquello con que el cuerpo le habla al cuerpo, con que se deja tocar y toca. Sin manos, el cuerpo se queda sin tocar el mundo, también sin que pueda tocarlo reconociéndolo.

Yo me quedé sin manos. A falta de manos, toqué y aprendí a palpar y reconocer con la lengua. (143)

Here, language supplants the sense of touch and represents a new kind of knowledge that will guide Hernando through the world. The theme of dismemberment is also present in the Catholic imagery and stories that eclipse the physical affections that he enjoyed when he was still immersed in his native culture and in contact with his family. These images are grotesque and violent corporal depictions that seem deeply disconcerting to the young boy: “Cambiaba los abrazos de mamá, y sus mimos y cuidados, por el niño degollado, por la Virgen a quien arrancan los ojos, por los cuerpos insensibles al dolor” (247).

Symbolically dismembered and mutilated, Hernando’s experience of the world becomes increasingly filtered through language, which will also prove alienating. As with Lear and the people of Atlántide, a linguistic transformation fundamentally changes Hernando’s worldview. The European and Catholic culture at the Colegio de Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco privileges the written word, in contrast to his family history, which had been passed down through the oral tradition:

estábamos con ella, mi mamá. Cuando me despertaba, mamá estaba siempre ya de pie cerca de mí, velando mi sueño, esperando a que yo recordara. Era entonces que hablaba sin cesar, explicándome cómo había sido la vida antes de que yo naciera, cómo era ser niño cuando ella lo fue, cómo fue mi padre, cómo mis abuelos y mis tíos, cuál era nuestro linaje, qué señores principales eran de nuestra familia, cuáles habían muerto, qué habían perdido, y me explicaba con pelos y señales todo lo que habíamos tenido y debiéramos volver a tener. (194)
While mother and son were still united, storytelling is her means for sharing with him the memory of their people, traditions and family. Once he enters the Colegio de Santa Cruz, not only is he denied this part of his past; also, the very mode of expression and communication changes. At the Colegio de Santa Cruz, the priests imposed silence among the students, forbidding them from speaking to each other or sharing laughter:

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\text{echaba yo de menos la plática. Estaba acostumbrado a pasar gran parte del día en Tezcoco escuchando historias por aquí y por allá, participando de los chismes y las habladurías de mi pueblo, pero en el Colegio no había palabras superfluas. Para evitarlas, los franciscanos impusieron un juego. Había que contar cuántas palabras se decían durante el día. (189)}
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Thus, Hernando’s detachment from his family and culture are accompanied by a shift from an oral to a written culture.

Language, however, is also deployed to exclude the “frailecillos indios”, keeping them on the margins of the new culture. The students of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz acquire a knowledge and mastery of Latin that arouses jealousy in the Spanish, who believe them incapable of learning, as stated by Fray Mateo: “no hay indio bueno siquiera para deprender bien la gramática, que el latín exige de la mente un refinamiento y un tino que no tienen de dónde extraer los naturales” (300). Nahuatl, by contrast, is a language full of wonder and excesses, as Hernando himself says about translations: “en lengua náhuatl las palabras acostumbran ir de sobra causando admiración y encantamiento” (138). Spanish resistance to the Indians’ erudition becomes clear when dignitaries visiting the school humiliate the young Hernando because they feel threatened by his superior level of studies. Rather then accept the Indians’ intelligence and learning, the Spanish reduce them to children: “andaban diciendo que estaba muy mal que el latín nos enseñasen, que a los indios esto les podía muy mal, que hereticaríamos, que hacíamos
mal uso de todo. Que los indios no éramos sino niños, y que como a tales debieran tratarnos, manteniéndonos fuera del latín conocimiento” (304). The metaphor of children suggests yet another substitution; here the metaphorical, patriarchal family is one in which the Indians are the obedient, ignorant children.  

Hernando’s act of transgression restores his native culture, to which the other details of his text are precuratory. The themes of writing, the body and family coalesce when Hernando finally addresses the reason for his confessional text, the secret that spurs his manuscript. Through his sin of the flesh, a kind of spiritual and corporal awakening that reconnects him with his own body, Hernando is momentarily reunited with his past and his native culture. After violating the vow of chastity and having sexual relations with a young Indian woman, Hernando goes down to the river to wash himself of the smell of sex that has permeated his clothing. Refraining from bathing was part of the new Catholic Spanish culture to which Hernando has assimilated, and the Indians even refer to the Franciscans as “apestosos”:

El olor formaba parte de todo lo demás, de un modo de vida, y le era inseparable . . . Era (como la toga, el libro, la tinta, el pequeño baúl que a mis pies me hacía compañía) la vida a la que me habían llevado. Cuando dejé de bañarme, lo que me dolió perder no fue la limpieza . . . sino algo que traía consigo el baño. (344)

Hernando’s act of purification, not in the sense of ridding himself of sin but of a literal cleansing when he descends to the river, is indicative of a change in his identity, a return to something that he had lost. He is reminded of his mother who, while bathing him

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80 In fact, accounts from the sixteenth century suggest that the Spanish viewed the Indians as children that could be ordered about, manipulated and who required supervision. (Kandell 163)

81 Daily bathing among Indians, unheard of in Europe at the time, was a practice that the Spanish tried to eradicate because they believed it to be a contributing factor in the high
“me tocaba el cuerpo no para despertar al pecado o a la concupiscencia, y me tallaba aquí y me frotaba acá para avivar solamente la chispa de su luminoso cariño” (345). The act of washing takes him back to a time when he felt the warmth and love of his family in the purest form.

At the banks of the river, Hernando feels content and full of life instead of riddled with guilt over his sexual transgression. His relations with the young woman and his bathing awaken many senses long dormant: “Qué felicidad sentí. Vivir en el mundo de los frailes me había engañado con una vejez que no era la mía. El toque del agua me purificaba de ellos . . . Acosté mi cuerpo en las aguas y volví a nadar como cuando era niño” (348). The very smell of sex, “un olor desconocido, pero familiar” (345) reminds him of his mother and the trauma of the conquest that his people found comfort for in each other’s arms:

Por un momento mis ojos se detuvieron, y vi al niño y a su madre en el momento del baño y percibi sobre mí el peso de sus manos, y mi corazón cayó en mil pedazos a la tierra. Rompí a llorar. Hasta ese momento no pude reconciliarme con ella . . . Y más que perdonarle nada, volví a sentir lo que era estar con ella y el dolor de perderla. El olor seguía en mí, o los dos olores (el hedor de los apestosos, el olor de la cópula) . . . mis ojos visitaron aquello que me hacia familiar el olor de la cópula. Ahí estaban los hombre y las mujeres a quienes conoci ungidos por ese olor cuando yo era niño . . . Mejor gozarse ciegos que mirarse esclavos. Y ahí estaban los frailes, llamando a su consuelo pecado . . . Y ahí seguían los indios, en fornicio desesperado, buscando así la venda, el momentáneo olvido, la quemazón que acabara de una vez por todas. (346-347)

This awakening of his body, family and history restores his sense of identity, his sense of belonging. Even though his people have been violated, enslaved and conquered, he recognizes himself in them and he understands the insurmountable distance between the death tolls among Indians. However, once they reduced hygiene to European levels the epidemics become more rampant (Kandell 156).
culture of the Indians and the Franciscans: “Ya no era uno de ellos, ni de la piel hacia adentro. Y había vuelto a lo mío, a los míos, a aquellos con los que había pasado los primeros años de mi vida. Sólo que ellos ya se habían ido. Mamá había muerto” (347). Sadly, this realization comes too late for Hernando since he can’t hope to be reunited with the dead. Hernando is able to overcome momentarily his cultural and corporal alienation but his act of transgression occurs in secret and remains something buried and hidden deep within him until his death. Concealed inside a chair, the manuscript that tells Hernando’s story of alienation surfaces nearly four centuries later. Like Lear, he understands the dangers of the utopia of language, but he is helpless to effect any change in behavior or perception.

4.4. Translation

The reader is meant to believe that Hernando’s sections are Estela’s translations of a lost manuscript, a narrative trope that draws attention to the challenges that face a writer of catastrophe. Estela’s intention is to document Hernando’s experience directly through translation, giving the future reader the impression of hearing in an immediate way the voice of disaster. As a kind of penance for the mistakes of her generation, Estela pronounces her own silence and undertakes the task of translating the manuscript of a sixteenth century Indian:

No voy a contar más mi historia. Me contento con traducir los fragmentos de Hernando. Me siento culpable ante él, y ante mi presente de mayor manera. Me siento culpable porque pequé al soñar. No soñé, ni yo, ni mi generación, con un sueño que borrara la estructura suicida de nuestro pasado colonial. Yo reparo mi pena de la mejor manera: me aplico a traducir del latín al español el texto de un indio que mejor quedara de ser traducido al náhuatl, si éste se enseñara en las escuelas. No recibimos esa lección porque nosotros nos contentamos con vestirnos y con poner ante
nuestros ojos sus artesanías, incluso diré que huarache al piso nos volvimos más ciegos, más sordos, más culpables. Merezco el silencio. El autor de Cien años tuvo derecho a la palabra porque habló en lugar de los miles de cadáveres, además él era escritor, tenía su oficio. Yo callo. No soy escritora y no gané con mi generación el lugar para hablar. Sigo con mi traducción de Hernando, y a lo que más me atrevo es a reparar lo que es ilegable en el original, y a mentir un poco aquí y otro poco allá, para hacer más posible su historia. (204-205)

By means of the manuscript Hernando recovers his sense of self and becomes the author of his own subjectivity after his experience of loss and abandonment. The trope of the manuscript gives the reader a perspective on the demise of the dream of Indian education that is virtually absent from the annals of history; Hernando’s (fictional) first-person account exposes the victimization of the Indians at the hands of the Franciscans and the colonial authorities from the point of view of the vencidos. By creating a writing-subject in Hernando, Boullosa also challenges the simple equation of lo indio with the body, a status of victim that excludes him from lettered culture. A fictional first-person historical narrative cannot be confused with a testimonial account, however it too attempts to convey the experience of the victims of disaster.

Yet, as much as Estela intends to let the subject of the past speak for himself, through the translation process she begins to transform Hernando’s text. Translation often entails a creative process that can add on layers of authorship, which Estela emphasizes by making explicit her own interventions in the text: “Me he ido tomando, incluso, la libertad de acompletar también las partes que aluden a su propia persona, echando mano de lo que mi imaginación me regale, y así he de seguirlo haciendo. Por qué no? Es mi lectura, exageradamente personal, de un manuscrito que me pertenece, que me habla a mí desde el siglo XVI, que me explica mi presente” (67). Estela’s approach to the literary project of translation reveals the dilemmas of the writer who
represents a traumatic historical event for which there are first hand testimonies. Of course, in the case of Cielos, this is a fictional historical account, but the questions that it raises are relevant to the broader issue of the representation of catastrophe. Should the writer-translator try to reproduce in a realistic and faithful manner the experience of catastrophe? If the writer-translator diverges from the real and immediate, what form and style should he/she deploy?

Cielos, like the works that I discuss in the previous chapters, not only represents invented and real disasters but also interrogates the form that is most compelling for the representation of catastrophe and the end of utopian alternatives. Although Estela is critical of the revolutionary idealism of the sixties and seventies, her reflections on Cien años de soledad demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between content and form, since García Márquez was part of a generation of Latin American intellectuals who believed that experimentation in narrative style went hand in hand with literature’s role in social and political change. Boullosa’s work could be considered part of the postmodern shift away from the “master narratives” of previous generations, but this is not a postmodern reluctance to tackle the profound issues at the heart of political and social discourse. Instead, Boullosa’s critical perspective on the upheaval of the 1990s is achieved through an extremely fragmented and alienating narrative form that distances the reader from the text.

Although the reader identifies with Hernando and the text appears to give a more direct account of his suffering, the narrative form that Boullosa has chosen ultimately disrupts the process of empathy. Whereas testimonial writing and fictional first-person narratives are meant to move the reader through immediate accounts of suffering,
Boullosa’s use of alienation techniques has the opposite effect, going into the obscure genre of science-fiction instead of the “real” experience of the disaster. In each of the novels discussed in the earlier chapters there are competing registers, tones and genres; in Cielos, the self-reflexive trope of the manuscript, translation and transcription produce a fragmented text in which the experience of disaster is interrupted with a rarefied science fiction story. Ultimately, as with the other novels, the weaving together of fantasy, science fiction, history and flashbacks are narrative devices used by the contemporary writer to depict the crisis of the age they are living. Moreover, these fragmented texts use an alienation effect to force the reader to reject a compliant, fatalistic, or complicit stance towards the conditions of the present.

4.5. Future: Dis-re-memberment in Atlántide

While the reader may feel some degree of empathy towards Estela and Hernando, the narrative set in the future is strange and abstract, even within the context of the genre of science fiction. The feeling of alienation permeates Lear’s sections of the novel, extending to the temporal, social and bodily existence of the inhabitants of Atlántide. Lear proves unable to convince her fellow citizens of the value of understanding history, and consequently there is a break with the past in Atlántide that echoes many of the themes in Hernando’s narrative. Lear rebelliously explores the eerie remains of Earth’s destruction and transcribes Estela’s translation of Hernando’s manuscript, while the other atlántidos degenerate into deformed and grotesque beings. In addition to representing the theme of alienation, these narrative sections have an estrangement effect on the reader, in contrast to the moving stories about Estela and Hernando. The deployment of the genre
of science fiction and the extremely rarefied story of these post-human beings produces a
dissociated and distant feeling in the reader. Here, the use of science fiction has a
Brechtian purpose much like the one that Jameson and Darko Suvin attribute to the genre
as a whole. Brecht believed that by confronting the reader/spectator with something
beyond the realm of the real he/she would become more conscious of the real changes
that were needed in society: "Only those who have learned to think dialectically will hold
it possible that a technique derived from the realm of illusion can be used as a weapon in
the struggle against illusion." (qtd. in J. White 93). Lear’s narrative doesn’t produce a
visceral and empathic response in the reader but rather a distanced, abstract and cerebral
critique of the notion of utopia and the hope for salvation in the future.

Set temporally and spatially apart, Lear’s society has a utopian vision that draws
on the biblical, mythological and futuristic traditions of foundational fictions. As a result
of earth’s environmental devastation, the inhabitants of the future have settled
atmospheric lands and named their colony “L’Atlántide”. The future is set in an “año sin
nombre o número, más de cien años después de la desaparición de la vida natural
terrestre” (32) and their location remains vague and nebulous: “Vivimos suspensos en la
atmósfera de la Tierra, alejados de la superficie, evitando las radiaciones, las ruinas, la
destrucción, las tolvaneras y nubes tóxicas de las tormentas” (16). References to Atlantis
and to the “Paraíso Terrenal” (18) suspended in the sky link Lear’s narrative to biblical
and mythical notions of a lost, secret, incipient place. These ideas also pervaded the
conquest and the colonization of the New World, a space onto which the conquerors
projected their preconceived myths of paradise on earth. Christopher Columbus refracted
the reality of the New World through the biblical imagery of the Garden of Eden (Pastor
As Beatriz Pastor explains in *The Armature of Conquest* (1992), both Bartolomé de las Casas and Ferdinand Columbus wrote about the mythic and elusive Atlantis, an island of great natural beauty and advanced civilization that, following a period of imperial expansion in the Mediterranean and then a defeat by the Athenians, suffered a terrible earthquake and was submerged underwater. Plato first mentions Atlantis in his dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*, from which Las Casas gleans the information for the summary of the legendary island in his *Historia de la Indias*:

Plato speaks of this island’s fertility, happiness, and abundance of resources; its rivers, springs, plains, countryside, woodlands, hills, glades, orchards, fruits, cities, buildings, ports, temples, royal households, politics, organizations and government, livestock, horses, elephants, precious metals of all types except for gold; its immense power, strength, and authority on land and at sea . . . but after their corrupt habits and ambitions made them forget the careful practice of virtue, this great and prosperous happy island, with all its kingdoms, cities, and people, was swallowed up by a flood and a dreadful earthquake in a single day and night (qtd. in Pastor 11)

By naming the new society Atlántide, Boullosa is creating a future that harkens back to the fantastic narrative discourses of the conquest, and thus to the utopianism in Hernando’s narrative.

The fictional Atlántide, like the utopia of the Franciscans, is founded on an alienating process of negations and substitutions. Rejecting the past in favor of a utopian future, the inhabitants of Atlántide seek to obliterate all earthly traces. Atlántide stands in stark contrast to Earth, which is strewn with garbage and ravaged by natural catastrophes: “El mismo elemento, domesticado por nosotros, salvaje corre inmundo por superficie de la Tierra. Trombas, huracanes, ciclones, tornados cargados de polvo y de desechos sueltan su ira incontenible sobre el planeta vacío” (17). From the seed of memory the atlántidos have cultivated a nature that is simulacrum, a copy so indistinguishable from
the original that it denies the very need for Earth.\textsuperscript{82} The inhabitants of Atlántide are dedicated to reconstructing the devastation wreaked by man: “lo que los hombres de la Historia se empeñaron en destruir, la sublime Naturaleza” (16). Set spatially and temporally apart, Atlántide has engineered a nature that is a replica of what came before the great disaster:

Existen los jardines que los sobrevivientes hemos cultivado con las semillas o la memoria de los despojos que cosechamos de la destrucción . . . Dicen que es sólo necedad innecesaria batir mis pies entre ruinas cuando hemos conseguido alzar de la yerma tierra paraísos ‘donde parece no haber llegado la mano del hombre’, recintos artificiales que imitan lo que un día fue Naturaleza. (24-25)

The ideal of the atlántidos, however, is a utopia built of air, where transparency is the ultimate form of beauty, undoubtedly an ironic twist on the well-known epigraph to Alfonso Reyes’s essay “Visión de Anáhuac”, “Viajero: has llegado a la región más transparente del aire”, and the 1958 novel by Carlos Fuentes whose title, \textit{La región más transparente}, was inspired by Reyes’s essay. Founded on air, Atlántide will prove to be as ephemeral as the material it is built of, since by eliminating all record of the past the community will degenerate into chaos.

The atlántidos’ complete amnesia for all things earthly and human is possible because of the absence of any kind of family unit, a characteristic of the futuristic society that resembles Hernando’s experience but stands in contrast to Estela’s. In their temporally and spatially removed utopia, instead of possessing a family heritage, the inhabitants of Atlántide are born in a laboratory: “Porque no sé quién fue mi padre ni

\textsuperscript{82} The idea of nature reproduced artificially is common to the genre of science fiction. For example, in his 1968 novel \textit{Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep}, Philip Dick describes how, having killed off practically all animals, humans have become very sentimental about them and keep synthetic and electric pets.
who is my mother, because I was gestated in an engendraor and passed the years of growth in La Conformación (the first stage in La Cuna, the second in El Receptor de Imágenes)" (15). "La Cuna" is a kind of simulacrum, meant to imitate parental nurturing and awaken all of the senses that are stimulated through contact between infant and mother:

Era un lugar para sentir, una cuna, como dice su nombre, tibia y móvil, aunque no se desplazaba de lugar, y nos abrazaba, nos envolvía, nos deglutía casi en su masa de falsa carne, meciéndonos, arrullándonos incansable... No sólo tenía olor, también hacía sonidos, repetía sílabas, tarareaba, reía, hipaba, lloraba, silbaba melodías y hablaba. (164)

Here a machine replaces the human bond at its most basic level, and sets the development of the person on a path of fabricated selfhood. As Claire Taylor asserts, this process of gestation of the subject in Atlántide is not only significant as a technological futuristic fantasy, but also for the "undoing of the ontological integrity of the subject under postmodernism" (481). The experience in the Receptor resembles the shift from a profound sense of self, understood in psychological terms, to the abundance of images and surface intensities that characterize postmodernism.

Their memories are also simulacra, since they don’t represent a lived experience but rather a series of transmitted images that are recorded as having taken place in their minds. While in the phase of gestation, the atlántidos are projected virtual experiences that give them a false sense of security in the lush landscapes of what was once Earth. This "Receptor de Imágenes" serves as a surrogate parent, the history and past from which they believe they originate:

Estas imágenes fueron fijas y móviles, planas y de tres dimensiones. En ellas se nos vio junto a los más dispare paisajes, visitando lugares de la Tierra con la apariencia que tuvieron antes de ser destrozados por el

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83 See Frederic Jameson’s article “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”.
hombre de la Historia. En las imágenes, escalamos montañas, nos bañamos en el mar, nadamos en ríos turbulentos, esquivamos la caída de una cascada, exploramos grutas, caminamos por senderos variadísimos, sembramos árboles, cosechamos cerezas y naranjas, cortamos girasoles en campos inmensos cubiertos de ellos. (108-09)

Whereas a real family might pass these stories down from one generation to the next to preserve a memory of the kind of natural harmony and abundance that once existed, the orphaned atlántidos assume this collective past through false memories that are indistinguishable from a lived experience because “nadie en L’Atlántide querrá reconocer en los hombres de la Historia a nuestros padres, ni fincar en ellos nuestros orígenes” (15).

The projected images omit humans from the bank of false memory and deny the devastating environmental mistakes made by man:

vi la Tierra sin huella de destrucción cuando ella no era ya sino un páramo devastado, poblado solamente por los desechos y el viento iracundo y sucio . . . En las imágenes no había huella de la Humanidad ni de su voracidad y su deseo de destrucción, ni de la tontería que terminó por conducirla a su aniquilación y al desastre que azotó la Tierra. En ellas no se sabía que el hombre había maltratado a la Naturaleza, ni que un día había ardido la atmósfera. (110)

The atlántidos have succeeded in eliminating images of mankind’s catastrophe and have implanted the notion that a society can exist independently of the history of the human beings that preceded them. However much the atlántidos believe it is possible to return to a time before the great destruction, their erasure of the human responsibility in the disaster will blind them to their own destructive fate. Hernando’s adoption of a written culture in place of an oral culture also represented a false memory construction, but the inhabitants of Atlántide acquire this fabricated memory from an early age.

Their laboratory origins also enable the foundation of a society that has transcended the idea of race because every member has been engineered to be different,
an ideal of biodiversity that is common in many science fictions and which initially appears to offer an attractive alternative to the racist society of Estela’s contemporary Mexico. This racial model is functionally identical to José Vasconcelos’s utopian vision of the “cosmic race”, since both extinguish racial identity. In his controversial essay “La raza cósmica” (1925) 84, Vasconcelos imagines the cosmic race emerging from the lost continent of Atlantis, which he connects to Latin America’s ancient history of hidden, buried myths and great civilizations: “As research advances, more support is found for the hypothesis of Atlantis as the cradle of a civilization that flourished millions of years ago in the vanished continent and in parts of what is today America” (7). This ancient past together with the experience of mestizaje during Spanish colonial rule will, according to Vasconcelos, position Latin America to be a leader in what he terms the Aesthetic Age. This new age will see the prominence of the universal cosmic race, a synthesis of the best characteristics of each race, which will issue forth out of what was once Atlantis. Vasconcelos envisions the foundation of this future utopia upon the historical experience of racial mixing during the conquest, whereas Boullosa’s Atlántide seeks to detach the future from the past. Vasconcelos’s argument is utopian-philosophical but also profoundly historical; by contrast, the racial makeup of the orphaned atlántidos does not tie them to the history of a people, geographic space or time period.

Alienated from the past, the inhabitants of Atlántide are incapable of creating family bonds. When Lear witnesses Caspa rocking a human baby and behaving towards

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84 See Didier Tisdel Jaén’s introduction to the bilingual edition of “La raza cósmica”, in which he explains that Vasconcelos’s essey was dismissed by some critics as a racist theory directed at a people with a deep sense of inferiority (x).
it in a mother-like fashion, the reader expects this behavior to be an indication of the human potential in the inhabitants of Atlántide. Instead, the feigned or misunderstood mothering reveals something dreadful and monstrous that accentuates the way in which the concept of family is foreign to the futuristic society. Lear secretly examines Caspa’s hiding place, whose vaulted depths occult the terrible evidence of infanticide. Neat rows of babies’ cadavers line the cavernous enclosure, transforming the spiritual, religious place into a giant tomb: “una bodega de recién nacidos muertos” (167). Lear is not only aghast at Caspa’s ability to bear children; she is also horrified that Caspa can kill her offspring after nursing and holding them lovingly in her arms. Although Estela condemns some of her grandmother’s beliefs, she has a sense of identity that stems from her family history for which she feels a sense of responsibility. Hernando, by contrast, is torn from his mother and his family. The sickening episode involving Caspa, however, manifests the notion of motherhood as something completely alien to the atlántidos. In the utopias of past and future children are separated from their parents in order to deny the connection between the generations.

In the final push to eradicate any trace of human history, the inhabitants of Atlántide resolve to outlaw conversation in favor of a corporal language. In the reversal of the use of language as an arm of the conquest by the Spanish, the elimination of spoken and written language in Atlántide reveals nevertheless the importance of language to the foundation of a utopia. Whereas Hernando is forced to give up a culture that conceives of a harmonious relationship with the body for a culture that is centered on the written word, Lear’s society undergoes a transition from oral and written language to corporal communication. Hernando learns a new idiom, culture and worldview at the
expense of the denial of his body, which leads to his estrangement from his native

culture. The atlántidos, however, believe that language, potentially dangerous, only leads
to misunderstandings and unpleasantness. Moreover, by carrying out what they call the

Language Reform, they hope to destroy the remaining vestiges of memory and of the

people of the past who caused the destruction of nature. Following the gradual phasing

out of spoken language, the atlántidos participate in an inaugural ceremony for the new

language of signs and gestures, celebrating the abolition of the spoken and written word

through a “baño de olvido” (254).

Without language they degenerate into vulgar, grotesque beings, more like

monsters or animals then humans. Human interaction becomes increasingly detached and

incomprehensible to the point that they lose the ability to communicate with each other:
“Los atlántidos no son ya hijos del hombre y de la mujer. Ahora son lo que desearon, los

hijos de sí mismos. Los seres sin dioses, sin padres, sin lenguaje, sin tierra, sin Natura,

sin tiempo, sin dolor, sin sentido” (306). This passage echoes Hernando’s lamentation

about how everything that was once his (father, mother, name, land) was taken away

from him. At the beginning of the novel the atlántidos were orphaned subjects, lacking

continuity with the past, family and sense of place, but by the end they no longer possess

the fundamental qualities that make one human.

With the abolition of language and the general degradation of the society, time

itself begins to lose coherence and logic. The atlántidos mutate back and forth from adult
to child: “varias veces alguno de ellos ha aparecido en su formación de niño. Al día

siguiente, el mismo puede tener la forma del adulto” (321). They have escaped

completely from time and consequences:
No podemos comunicarnos, porque no pertenecemos a los mismos tiempos. La malla tensa de la realidad de que gozaron los hombres de la historia, y sobre la que emprendieron diálogos y malentendidos, así como acciones y hechos, se ha roto, se ha abierto. Lo que yo haga no puede ser percibido por otro de mi comunidad sino fuera del tiempo en que yo vivo. Perdimos ya el tiempo común. Creo que nos hemos perdido por completo. Su reforma del lenguaje, la insistencia en el olvido, nos ha borrado. No somos nada ya. He perdido toda esperanza de que volvamos al tiempo del Tiempo. (322)

It is precisely the denial of time that leads Atlántide to repeat many of the errors of the past; as in Hernando’s story, a constructed world is caught in the utopia of language.

In Atlántide, the loss of language coupled with the rejection of memory provokes the disintegration of the subject in both physical and social terms. As with Hernando, the acquisition of a new form of communication is closely tied to the body. Without a sense of linguistic, bodily, familial and historical continuity and wholeness, the subjects of Atlántide slowly decompose along with their society:

Esto pasó. Carson se desarticuló a sí misma un brazo, lo separó del resto de su cuerpo... Antes de que yo hubiera podido poner pies en polvorosa para no presenciar la sangre y la carne abierta, sin que surtiera sangre alguna, Carson volteó su brazo, lo sacudió, lo acercó a sus ojos. Alcancé a ver sus huesos huecos. De inmediato, lo reintrodujo en su persona, metió el brazo en su tronco poniendo la mano en la coyuntura del brazo con el hombro. De pronto, vi uno de sus dedos saliendo por su oreja, y la punta de otro saliéndosele por la nariz. Carson abrió la boca: atrás de la lengua estaba el resto de la mano. (352)

The disarticulation of language and communication as the basis of human interaction provokes a corporal castration: “Otros han caído a tal grado en el abandono que no portan un miembro u otro. Sobre las escalinatas del Punto Calpe me encontré la otra tarde, cuando volvía hacia mi habitación, una verga abandonada, tirada como por descuido” (362). By first denying parenthood, then revealing its monstrous product in the character of Caspa, the utopia finally ends with a symbolic dismemberment, echoing the bodiless
utopia of the Franciscans described by Hernando. Cut off from themselves, from their bodies, from history, the atlántidos are left with a decaying body politic.

Both New Spain and the new New World are revealed to be dystopias in so far as they are false utopias. Boullosa is critical of utopian thinking, the belief in a place-apart, because it is premised on the notion of rupture with what came before. In Estela’s narrative there is a sense of continuity with the past, but in Atlántide the connecting thread is missing: “Para nada hay un hilo conductor. Las cosas suceden, pero no quedan, no se fijan, no permanecen” (322). Lear’s narrative documents how a community that seeks to define itself as idyllic and eternal ends by destroying the species because it cuts itself off from the past. Detached from nature (which only exists as a simulacrum), isolated in time, history-less, and disconnected from language, Atlántide becomes a place of disintegration. In so far as it recollects the destruction wrought by the Conquest, Lear’s narrative asserts that a society without history and a sense of continuity with the past cannot survive. Lear’s narrative affirms, by negation and a dystopian imaginary, the positive message of Estela’s narrative: to accept responsibility, to act in the present, to gather and thereby redeem (even if not fully repair) the scattered fragments of history and language.

4.6. The Politics of Form

Alienation, as a leitmotif and as an experience produced by Boullosa’s choice of genre and narrative form, heightens the reader’s awareness of the potential of the present. As explored above, the repeated themes of utopia, apocalypse, race, dismemberment and language, reveal Hernando and Lear’s sense of estrangement in contrast to Estela’s
ability to connect the past to her present. Moreover, the deployment of the genre of science fiction in the segments set in the future creates a distance between text and reader, as the story of Atlántide becomes increasingly rarefied and grotesque. The fragmented juxtaposition of the three stories serves to further accentuate the alienating effect of the themes and the use of science fiction, thus producing estrangement through the narrative form itself.

The V-effect experienced by the reader is the result of the temporal dissonance and a mix of genres that characterize the triptych nature of the novel. The reader jumps from the world of Franciscan friars in New Spain to part-human space-age beings, with some sections being as short as three pages. The fragmented and choppy form makes it difficult for the reader to become immersed in any of the storylines. A lapidary phrase in Esperanto begins and ends each narrative section, further contributing to the distancing effect of the language and form. As Cielos progresses, Estela’s intercalations become less frequent to the point that her voice is virtually absent from much of the second half of the novel, a silence that is surprising given that her narrative is the most recognizable and familiar to the contemporary reader. The end result is an extremely unsettling text that produces a dissociated state in the reader.

A form that produces such a V-effect, according to Brecht, is meant to enable the spectator to criticize constructively, and the dramaturge instructed his actors not to give in fully to the character they were playing by instead remaining detached, which in turn prevented the spectator from becoming immersed in or submitting to the vicarious experiences of the characters. Brecht also sought to destroy the illusion of theater by using sets that interrupted, contradicted and destabilized the dialogue of the characters on
stage. In this way, simple and obvious empathy was replaced with something startling so as to “expose the laws of cause and effect” (Brecht 328).

As the reader experiences the distancing effect of Cielos’s form, he/she has a more critical response, in the Brechtian sense, to the catastrophes of the past, present and imagined future. It is from this critical distance that the reader comprehends that the future is trapped in the utopia of a society without language or memory, while the past is caught in the utopia of the language of the conquerors. Neither of these projects will last; Atlántide is doomed for destruction and the ideal of an educated class of Indians with equal status was replaced with a racist hierarchy. In the present, however, the representation of family history leaves open the possibility of change. Despite the terrible problems of Mexico City in the nineties, the reader learns through Estela’s account that it is in the present that we are in touch with history and can learn from it.

The leaps back in time draw attention to the unhealed wounds of the conquest as a contributing factor to the problems of the present. This aspect of the text brings out the particular New World, and specifically Mexican, characteristics of narratives about catastrophe. All disasters have a potentially disintegrating effect on culture, nature, the body, language, but the novels by Aridjis and Boullosa demonstrate that there is a New World template for catastrophe. The experience, understanding and representation of catastrophe is different in the New World because of the conquest, which always functions a source to draw on for otherness and disintegration.

Through the juxtaposition of different time periods, the reader becomes more acutely sensitive to the challenges of the present. It is these ills, and not the abstract crisis of communication in the post-terrestrial age, which the reader is meant to reflect on.
In addition to the deeply ingrained racial prejudice, Estela identifies aspects of the crisis of the 1990s that echo those mentioned in Aridjis’ works. A wave of violence has descended on Mexico: “se ha deslizado hasta formar parte de una cotidianeidad que no pertenece a los tabloides y las páginas de periodiquillos sanguinolentos, sino que es ingrediente de la charla más inmediata” (146). Running parallel to the rampant crime that permeates all of the urban spaces, is the problem of corruption: “¿Quién defraudó de peor manera, quién echo mano de los bienes del país, quién usurpó las recaudaciones de los ciudadanos, aprovechó su situación de poder?” (146). As though predicting the current crisis of the drug wars, Estela explains that the rise in political crime has unleashed more violence among armed gangs and desperate people: “Estas dos violencias no pueden ser comprendidas solamente como criminalidad. Son fenómenos políticos, el espejo del hurto no castigado de los poderosos. Los demonios andan sueltos, porque no tiene ya nadie el control de este desmadre” (147). And to this she adds, “La pobreza creciente ( . . . ) la sobrepoblación, la carencia total de oportunidades para las nuevas generaciones, la suspensión de crecimiento económico y el decrecimiento productivo, etcétera, etcétera...” (148). If a narrative is filled with a deliberate barrage of present-day catastrophes, the reader may become desensitized to the degree of physical, social and political violence. While not optimistic about political and social change, the novel’s aesthetic of alienation produces a less defeatist text than critics have concluded. In Cielos the V-effect derived from the repulsive nature of both the Franciscan and the Atlantidean dystopias/utopias spurs the reader, upon contemplating these alienating conditions, to feel himself/herself more committed to action in the present.
CONCLUSION

The novels included in this dissertation span the years between 1987 and 1997, roughly the decade following the Mexico City earthquake, fraught with various political, social and environmental crises. Precisely because the writers belong to different generations and their oeuvre manifest distinct styles and concerns, the fact that the novels discussed in the previous chapters have in common the representation of a dystopian Mexico City through the fantastical is indicative of a discursive and literary trend. The purpose of this study is not to categorize Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and Boullosa as science fiction writers, but rather to show how they cultivate techniques from this genre to deconstruct temporalities in their novels of catastrophe. Seen together, Cristóbal Nonato, Casas de encantamiento, La leyenda de los soles, ¿En quién piensas cuando haces el amor? and Cielos de la Tierra exhibit similar narrative strategies and imaginary constructs to depict this period of upheaval in Mexico’s recent history.

The 1985 earthquake was a tragedy that left an indelible mark on the space of the city, Mexican history and, most importantly, the lives of the victims and their families. In addition to the homes that were destroyed, the livelihoods upended and the communities that were fractured by the earthquake, the natural disaster raised many questions about human actions, disrupting roles and hierarchies that had been in place and tolerated for decades. The environmental calamity revealed the inadequacies, neglect and injustices of the monolithic PRI government and its institutions; to fill that void, spontaneous rescue brigades, largely made up of the popular sectors most affected by the disaster, mobilized to meet victims’ urgent needs in the aftermath of the catastrophe,
empowering civil society and giving rise to effervescent grassroots organizations. It is
the human contributions, both positive and negative, to the natural disaster that
transformed this event into a metaphor for Mexico’s changing social and political
landscape in narrative from the late eighties through the nineties, producing multivalent
modes of representing crisis.

At few times in Latin American history was Nature the model of Culture as in this
unique articulation of crisis and discourse, dispossession and protest, chaos and
organization. The social and political narratives that grew out of this period of upheaval
extend the temporal dimensions of the catastrophe beyond the immediacies of the
present, employing a far-reaching gaze that draws on the imaginary of catastrophe of pre-
Columbian cultures and the conquest, and stimulating the public of the present to take a
critical look at recent history. The narratives take the reader to a projection into the
future to compel them to consider the implications of Mexico’s trajectory. The novels
discussed in this dissertation re-imagine a spatial and social phenomenon, the physical
destruction of the capital’s downtown and the abandonment of the victims, into a
temporally focused discourse that rewrites historical narratives, draws on Mexico’s
mythic substrata, and presents the reader with the possibility of renewal.

Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and Boullosa deploy science fiction narrative devices in
their novels in order to examine the distinct temporalities that contribute to the
atmosphere of disaster and apocalypse. These authors use science fiction techniques in
order to create a flexible and free play of time through chronologically displaced objects,
time travel, future settings and the collapse of time. Moreover, the works discussed in
this dissertation exhibit a recent trend in science fiction, identified by Jean Baudrillard,
which conjoins the real and the imaginary in a future that is concomitantly a
rehallucination of the past. This points to the characteristically Mexican form of science
fiction that draws on the conquest as a constant template for narrating disaster, a feature
that distinguishes it from conventional science fiction or the tradition of this genre in the
United States.

The play of time in these novels prompts the reader to think critically about the
historical dimension of Mexico City’s disasters and to contemplate whether the country’s
trajectory could have been otherwise. The manipulation of time presents Mexico’s
history as a series of forking paths, leading the country in different directions at precise
moments in the past. As we saw, Cristóbal Nonato and Casas de encantamiento explore
recent historical events: the postrevolutionary period and models of development that
contributed to the inequities and injustices that were exposed during the earthquake.

Cristóbal Nonato and Cielos de la Tierra reach as far back as the conquest and the
colonial period in search of the initial, original point of Mexico’s contemporary
catastrophes. Lastly, as evidenced in Aridjis’s novels, the mixing of past, present and
future in a less (chrono)logical causal chain provides the author with a vast repertoire of
visual and symbolic historical references that make up the imaginary of catastrophe in
Mexico City. Whatever the specific moment in time, the irruption of the past onto the
present paints a haunting, disconcerting, grotesque and at times darkly humorous picture
of Mexico’s present and future.

An interesting contrast is the focus of the recent publication Cyborgs in Latin America
(2010), by James Brown. In this book, Brown studies the appearance of cyborgs and
posthuman bodies in postdictatorial novels from Argentina as narrative devices to deny
the culture of oblivion, explore the persistence of trauma and examine the links between
dictatorship and neoliberalism.
These metaphorical and fantastical reflections on Mexico’s history and the futuristic aspects of the novels distinguish this body of literature from the chronicles, journalistic accounts and testimonial works about the earthquake that address the “here” and “now” of the catastrophe and whose purpose is to present a truth-bearing text. The works by Carlos Monsiváis, Cristina Pacheco and Elena Poniatowska are moving for their vividness and immediacy, as well as the fact that the reader knows he/she is accessing the real and true episode in the life of a victim of catastrophe. In contrast, the science fiction novels conjure up the images of real disasters and the environmental degradation of the nineties in the reader’s mind, but they embellish the atmosphere and break down or extend the temporal boundaries, recreating the feelings and sensations caused by catastrophe in a more freely associative manner. Here, the intention is not to document but to reenact the feelings produced by catastrophe and to exploit the imaginary of disaster in Mexico City.

Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and Boullosa show a deep interest in the differences in representation between non-fiction and novels of urban catastrophe, since their novels engage in a reflection on the question of genre, mixing not only time periods but also varied narrative styles in a fragmented and hybrid form. Thus, a number of these novels contain passages that evoke the testimonial works about the 1985 earthquake, but these are often embedded within a text that is otherwise characterized by a grotesque, hyperbolic or carnivalesque aesthetic. The writers interrogate the language and genre suited to representing catastrophe, not in search of a single answer, but rather to explore different registers, tones and impacts on the reader. In a self-referential gesture, all of these works have protagonists that are writers or artists who have experienced the
catastrophe and then must search for the language or artistic mode to represent the disaster. Does the deployment of fantastical, playful or grotesque linguistic and narrative techniques reproduce the fleeting impermanence of the life-affirming Bakhtinian carnival or does a certain mix of high and popular registers in contemporary art, as Néstor García Canclini suggests, “allow us to think that the theme of utopias and historical projects is not closed” (249)? I maintain that the very narrative form of the disaster novels holds within it a possibility that defies three dominant and conventional representations of time: apocalyptic linear time; the eternal return of catastrophe; and a postponement of redemption into a distant, ever-receding utopian dream.

Ultimately, the reader is supposed to reflect on Mexico City’s present, thereby underscoring the social and political engagement of the writer. The deconstruction of temporality achieved through science fiction techniques is intended to warn the reader to take a critical look at the present and demand change in the “now”. In this way, the genre of science fiction mixes futuristic elements with myth and history to focus the reader’s attention on the dialectical present. The question of genre and form finds its purpose in the call to action that the authors convey, asserting the role of the writer in the process of renewal and regeneration that civil society must exact in the present.

The unconventional temporal relationships between past, present and future brought out by the science fiction techniques employed by these Mexican authors undermine the ordinary “historical” notion of time. Some readers may find that this perspective on time resonates with the work of the contemporary philosopher Slavoj

\[86\] This quote is preceded by: “Stripped of any totalizing or messianic illusion, these artists maintain a tense, interrogative relationship with societies, or fragments of them, where they think they see living sociocultural movements and practicable utopias” (Canclini 248-249).
Žižek, whose oeuvre includes the topics of science fiction and apocalypse. Žižek proposes an alternative to the ordinary notion of time as a linear progression with a multiplicity of possibilities, in which once a path has been chosen, the others cease to exist and there is no turning back. Instead, Žižek conceives of historicity in a way that allows a revisiting of the past, imbuing it with retroactive meaning that might challenge the evolutionary account of the victors (The sublime 143). Recalling the metaphor of the spiral in Carlos Fuentes’s *Cristóbal Nonato*, Žižek’s conception of historicity seems to loop back around instead of continuing on a straight line. Žižek addresses the greater implications of this conception of history in his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), which grows out of his readings of Walter Benjamin:

> By confining itself to ‘the way it really was,’ by conceiving history as a closed, homogeneous, rectilinear, continuous course of events, the traditional historiographic gaze is a priori, formally, the gaze of ‘those who have won’: it sees history as a closed continuity of ‘progression’ leading to the reign of those who rule today. (138)

Thus, by disrupting this notion of history as a closed progression, by deconstructing, collapsing and moving freely between distinct temporalities, Fuentes, Solares, Aridjis and

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87 This, again, comes from his reading of Benjamin: “This is why, for Benjamin, revolution is not part of continuous historical evolution but, on the contrary, a moment of ‘stasis’ when the continuity is broken, when the texture of previous history, that of the winners, is annihilated, and when, retroactively, through the success of the revolution, each abortive act, each slip, each past failed attempt which functioned in the reigning Text as an empty and meaningless trove, will be ‘redeemed’, will receive its signification” (*The sublime* 143). Rejecting all linear, teleological historical narratives, Žižek in his critique of Stalinist as well as non-Marxist views of time admonishes us to revisit history and “this time, make the right choices.” (*Living* 88). In Benjamin’s phrasing, “For every second of time [is] the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter” (Benjamin 264).

This notion of the past shared by Žižek and Benjamin can be interpreted in two ways: either in a mystical sense or, in a more realistic vein, as the idea that historical situations have underlying structures that resurface and can be responded to anew. Both interpretations could be relevant to the reemerging past in fantastical science fiction narratives that address social and political problems.
Boullosa are able to question Mexico’s “reigning” history; instead of accepting the past as closed and inaccessible, they question whether things couldn’t be different. These writers must reappropriate the past because it holds within it the future, and to achieve this, says Žižek, (referencing Benjamin) it is necessary to: “cut through the continuous flow of historical development and make a ‘tiger’s leap into the past’” (*The sublime* 143). This symbolic settling of accounts through the “text” of history entails understanding the interconnectedness of events in such a way that there can be a disruption of ineluctable time, “to arrest, to immobilize historical movement and to isolate the detail from its historical totality” (*The sublime* 139). This moment of stasis, not linear change, provides the opportunity to achieve a just and humane society. This recalls the irruption of Aztec imagery onto Mexico’s future in Aridjis’s *La leyenda de los soles*, breaking the continuity of neoliberal globalization and erasing the “reigning text” through ancient myth. Finally, in *Living in the End Times*, Žižek explains that it is possible to make the right choice the second time around\(^8\) (88), which is what the Mexican authors seem to be urging through their science fiction aesthetic and their critique of the present.

These ideas about time encompass the spirit that animates the books I have examined in this dissertation, which I believe points to an emerging tendency in the cultural “dominant”. Frederic Jameson states that distinct periods have their own cultural dominant, understood as a pattern of representation that appears across different media and art forms (“Postmodernism” 299). The novels I study in this dissertation are a

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\(^8\) In *Living in the End Times*, Žižek writes: “our first choice was necessarily the wrong one, and for a very precise reason: the “right choice” is only possible the second time, after the wrong one; that is, it is only the first wrong choice which literally creates the conditions for the right choice” (88).
sampling from a larger *zeitgeist* and there is evidence to suggest a recurrence of these patterns of representation.\(^9\)

Fascinatingly, it is not only Mexican writers\(^9\) but also other Latin American authors writing about Mexico City that represent the capital as the locus of disaster through fantastical plots and a mix of time. Rodrigo Fresán deploys many of the elements that I’ve examined in the previous chapters throughout his novel *Mantra* (2001), part of the Mondadori series Año 0, which asked several Latin American authors to choose an important global city for the inspiration for a novel. Set in Mexico City, Fresán’s *Mantra* includes constant references to catastrophe, disasters and earthquakes, some of them historical and others part of the futuristic, posthuman plot. Like the city and the lives he describes, the novel is fragmentary, with one section amounting to an encyclopedia of things Mexican; under T, there are multiple entries dedicated to *terremoto*. First, he describes the tension in the air before an earthquake, then the

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9\(^9\) Indeed, one might almost see a resurgence of the marvelous to address periods of upheaval, however, the science fiction elements are used to a different effect than the now familiar magical realism during its heyday. As Carpentier conceived of the marvelous in his prologue to *El reino de este mundo* (1949), it is concomitant with the real, an essential part of it, inseparable from the landscape and history of Latin America. By contrast, the hyperreal elements within the fragmented structures of the novels discussed in this dissertation are meant to provoke estrangement in the reader, as we saw in *Cielos de la Tierra*. But these novels don’t fall into the category of the Fantastic either, because the science fiction elements don’t issue forth from the obsessions of an individual but instead from processes of historical change. Thus, these novels point to a style that is fitting for a critique of natural and man-made ecocatastrophe, urban disaster and globalization.

9\(^0\) For example, José Agustín, one of the leading writers of Mexico’s *Onda* generation of the seventies, published in 1986 a novel titled *Cerca del fuego*, in which a man wakes up to find that he has lost all recollection of the last six years of his life. Bewildered, he wanders through the streets of an apocalyptic Mexico City of the close future to discover that the country has been invaded by the United States. For further discussion of the science fiction techniques used in this novel, see Gabriel Trujillo Muñoz’s *Biografías del futuro* (2000) (187-191).
moment of the earthquake, “Yo tiemblo. Tú tiemblas. Él tiembla. Nosotros temblamos. Vosotros tembláis. Ellos tiemblan. Todo tiembla.”, followed by the aftermath: “Este terremoto no tiene después. Este terremoto es un Gran Terremoto. Este terremoto rompe los relojes, detiene el tiempo” (468-469). The novel also recounts Mexico City’s history through its disasters, but it does so in “rewind”, resurrecting the dead:

1985. Ocho puntos Richter. Entre diez mil y veinte mil personas (no hay cifras exactas, no hay datos oficiales) que vuelven a la vida. Salen de debajo de los escombros. Edificios que se alzan de sus propias ruinas bajo el cielo gris del D.F. (242)

This process of making whole what was shattered and torn apart continues as far back as the conquest (“Cortés vuela a España.”, 241) and the wars among the Mexicas, Chichimecas and Toltecs, concluding with the reversed eruptions of the volcanoes.

Having given expression to historical disasters through the reversal of time, Fresán turns to science fiction, both in the plot and in meta-literary observations that connect Mexico City qua catastrophe with the question of genre. Indeed, Fresán suggests that Mexico City is an ideal setting for the science fiction writer: “Me gusta pensar en [Philip] Dick\(^{91}\) en Tenochtitlan (a.k.a.) México D.F. . . . La pasaría bien. Se sentiría comprendido, feliz. Haría bien su trabajo y se le ocurrirían y escribiría tres o cuatro novelas por mes.” (217). By the end of the novel, N.T.T. (Nueva Tenochtitlan del Temblor) is truly a science fiction city, discovered in a future time by an android searching amidst the rubble for traces of Mantrax, a mythic and spiritual deity of sorts. In this future, the inhabitants of N.T.T. live horizontally, since they are unable to stand up due to the constant seismic

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91 Philip Dick was a prolific science fiction writer and a classic author of the genre. His novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* was the inspiration for Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*; the motion pictures *Total Recall* and *The Minority Report* were also adaptations of his works.
tremors that have plagued them for generations. But even in this scientific dystopia the ancient past resurfaces, since the android discovers in this desolate and solitary future that “Mantrax implantó un nuevo orden, mandó construir una nueva pirámide con piedra y restos de su nave lo suficientemente fuerte como para soportar el temblor que no se iba a ir nunca” (521). Fresán’s novel may be less critical of the hyper-technological world and globalized culture than the novels by the Mexican writers\(^9\), however it is remarkable that an Argentine author not readily identified as a science fiction writer would turn to this genre, mixing it with Mexico’s ancient cultures, to represent the city in the new millennium.

Does the bifurcation of the narrative responses to the catastrophe into the chronicle and the testimonial, on the one hand, and the fantastical, science fiction genre on the other hand, point to two directions in contemporary literature? Though still existent, there seems to be a dropping out of the realist novel and an accumulation of works at the two ends of the literary spectrum: non-fiction and the fantastical. Seymour Menton has identified a parallel trend within the historical novel, since many of the examples that he studies are filled with surreal and impossible re-imaginings of historical moments, one of the central characteristics that distinguishes the new historical novel from the historical novel of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, still deeply entrenched in the realist tradition.

\(^9\) This may be due, in part, to Fresán’s inclusion in the collection of short stories edited by Alberto Fuguet’s and published under the title *McOndo* (1996). *McOndo* rebelled against literary representations of Latin America as rural and magical, and called on writers to move on from the politically engaged narratives about the dictatorships in the Southern Cone. Instead, these young authors embraced the realities of neoliberal Latin America, globalized culture and new technology.
We also find this tendency in recent film by Mexican directors, with Guillermo Del Toro’s *Pan’s Labyrinth* and Alejandro González Iñárritu’s *Biutiful* receiving international acclaim for their magical, ludic, fantastical and grotesque refraction of the gritty reality of globalized, contemporary Barcelona and post-Civil War Spain. These same trends are apparent in visual art, thanks to the way conceptual modern art has expanded the parameters of what is acceptable in representation. For instance, on the one hand, the rather morbid art of Teresa Margolles is alarmingly similar to the work of a crime photographer, since she finds material for her art in the Mexico City morgue. In his book *New Tendencies in Mexican Art: the 1990s* (2004), Rubén Gallo introduces the readers to Margolles’ gruesome photographic aesthetic of corpses and mangled bodies, which recalls the character of the photographer, Juan de Góngora’s girlfriend, in Aridjis’s *La leyenda de los soles*. On the other hand, an artistic poster campaign titled “*Pecados capitales*” promoted civic awareness and spread consciousness about urban violence and environmental pollution through fantastical, phantasmagoric and futuristic images that were exhibited in 2004 at 300 bus stops throughout the city. One poster declared, “Otra ciudad es posible”, calling for a strengthening of civil associations and new spaces for artistic expression and participation.

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93 Daniel Zalewski’s article from the February 2011 issue of the *New Yorker* profiles del Toro’s horror, science fiction and fantasy obsessions, his outlandish film projects and the collection of iconography that he has amassed in a house outside Los Angeles.

94 These posters are still viewable on the website maintained by the artists of the project: [http://pecadoscapitales.com/grafica.htm](http://pecadoscapitales.com/grafica.htm). See, for example the graphic art of Gerardo Yépez, Héctor Pacheco, Bethsabé Vázquez and Fran Ilich.
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