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**Dreams, Visions, Imaginations**

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Jewish, Christian and Gnostic Views  
of the World to Come

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**DE GRUYTER**

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Lourdes García Ureña

## The Book of Revelation and Visual Culture

**Abstract** Das 21. Jahrhundert erlebt eine 'visuelle Kultur.' Diese ist in den 90er Jahren des 20. Jahrhunderts im akademischen Milieu entstanden. Das Bild hat sich zum vorherrschenden Medium der Übermittlung von Sachwissen, von Gefühlen und Emotionen entwickelt. Zwei Elemente sind es, die diese Entwicklung begünstigt haben: die Tendenz, jede Erfahrung zu visualisieren, sowie die immense Rolle, die die Farbe in diesem Prozess spielt. Bemerkenswerterweise sind genau dies auch die literarischen Merkmale, die die neutestamentliche Apokalypse des Johannes charakterisieren. Dies zeigt sich an der Verwendung des homodiegetischen Erzählens und der selektiven Verwendung von βλέπω und ὁράω, dem häufigen Gebrauch von Beschreibungsformen, die den Lesenden die Visualisierung der Visionen des Johannes erleichtern (hauptsächlich die mit καὶ εἶδov eingeleiteten Schilderungen), schließlich der Verwendung 'farbiger' Sprache als darstellendes und symbolisches Element. Lektüren der Johannesapokalypse im 21. Jahrhundert richten den Fokus oftmals auf die Siebener-Katastrophen, die das imaginäre Universum der Schrift prägen und häufig in 'kinematografischer' Sprache dargestellt werden. Dadurch wird der programmatisch am Beginn stehende Begriff 'Apokalypse' jedoch seines ursprünglichen Inhalts entleert, weil er vor allem auf die Ansage des 'Endes der Welt' bezogen wird. Die Leser/innen der Schrift sind bei einer solchen Lektüre jedoch gefangen in ihrer eigenen Gegenwart und versäumen es, danach zu fragen, was nach dem Tod folgt. Genau darum jedoch geht es in der Apokalypse des Johannes.

**Keywords:** apocalyptic literature; book of revelation; visual culture; visualizing; color; homodiegetic narrator; end of world; cinema

### 1 Introduction

The human of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ready to take on the great challenges of the cosmos, still finds itself unable to answer the important questions of his origin and his destiny: Where do we come from? Where are we going? The second of these is particularly disturbing, as our future –and present– depends on it. In the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Spanish dramatist José Zorilla would voice these concerns through his famous character Don Juan, who gave the only two responses possible to death and the human attitude towards them:

Que se aniquila/  
 el alma con el cuerpo cuando muere/  
 creí... mas hoy mi corazón vacila  
 [...]  
 ¿Conque hay otra vida más/  
 y otro mundo que el de aquí?<sup>1</sup>  
 That the soul is destroyed /  
 when the body dies /  
 this I believed... but today my heart wavers  
 [...]  
 And so is there another life more /  
 and a world other than this one here?

The solution of annihilation brings with it, to paraphrase Zorrilla, hesitation, and reflects an uncertainty, even a feeling of senseless despair, as the idea of annihilation fails to satisfy the thirst for the infinite that beats within our hearts. Perhaps for this reason, there are some who, when contemplating the nearness of death, like Don Juan wonder if there is indeed “another life more.” In the early days of Christianity, however, such questions were definitively answered, in a work whose impact was such that its influence is still felt today in literature, art, and cinema. I am referring to the book of Revelation. In it, the author who identifies himself as John of Patmos responds to the question of the hereafter not as “an answer” but rather as “*the answer*,” as it does not originate from him, but from the revelation of Jesus Christ (Rev 1:1); that is, it is not John, but ὁ πρωτότοκος τῶν νεκρῶν, “the firstborn of the dead” (Rev 1:5), who reveals the final destiny of humankind. It should be remembered that John of Patmos was addressing a specific audience, the early Christian community, whose faith was being tried by the circumstances that surrounded them. This response, therefore, is framed by a faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for all human beings (Rev 1:5), but was resurrected and lives for all time (Rev 1:18). The individual of the 21<sup>st</sup> century lives outside this hermeneutic framework; and although he may know something about Jesus of Nazareth, this context is now an unfamiliar one. Even so, he continues to cast his gaze back to the book of Revelation, and it is logical to wonder why such a cryptic, enigmatic book still generates such a lasting interest.

1 J. Zorrilla, *Don Juan Tenorio*, 2nd section, 3rd act, fol. 90r and fol. 92r (Biblioteca virtual Miguel de Cervantes, URL: [http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/don-juan-tenorio-drama-religiosofantastico-en-dos-partes-0/html/ff68b298-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064\\_5.html#I\\_16](http://www.cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/don-juan-tenorio-drama-religiosofantastico-en-dos-partes-0/html/ff68b298-82b1-11df-acc7-002185ce6064_5.html#I_16) [accessed 2 February 2020]).

## 2 Visual culture and its presence in the book of Revelation

We are currently immersed in a culture dominated by the image; indeed, images are the principal means of expression in advertising and, at times, in our written communication as well, as when words are replaced by emoticons or photographs in our mobile telephone messages. The visual image is one of the new tools in teaching, from early childhood all the way to higher education. At the same time, it is one of our principal forms of entertainment. It is a fact that, on even the shortest of airline flights, many passengers no longer read but watch a TV series or film on their phones or tablets; the same is true of how we spend our time on the commuter trains, on buses, in our doctors' waiting rooms, and so on. The image has invaded our surroundings and our manner of seeing and understanding the world to the extent that in the 1990s the term “visual culture” began to be applied to this phenomenon, and the subject became the focus of serious academic studies,<sup>2</sup> in which it was considered to be “the locus of cultural and historical change.”<sup>3</sup>

A diversity of elements have contributed to the development of this visual culture. The most relevant for our study are the current tendency “to picture or visualize”<sup>4</sup> and the re-valuation of color as both a form of expression<sup>5</sup> and a subject of study.<sup>6</sup> Color has been seen as an essential element for attracting the viewer, creating the sublime and keeping memory alive.<sup>7</sup>

2 N. Mirzoeff, *Cómo ver el mundo: Una nueva introducción a la cultura visual*, trans. P. Hermida Lazcano (Barcelona, Buenos Aires, México: Paidós, 2016). Among the pioneers in the study of visual culture we might also include W.J.T. Mitchell, (with works such as: *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986]; *The Last Dinosaur Book: The Life and Times of a Cultural Icon* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998]; *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994] and the essay collection: *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* [Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005]), G. Pollock and R. Parker, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1981); G. Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge; New York, NY: Methuen, 1987); etc.

3 N. Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 31.

4 *Ibidem*, 5.

5 In the words of the Cubist painter F. Léger, “Sur la peinture,” *Europe* 508–509 (1971): 68–86, here 68, color “becomes a social and human necessity.”

6 Color is currently studied within a variety of disciplines (optics, architecture, design, anthropology, art, psychology, philology) which have been the focus of conferences organized by the International Colour Association. An extensive bibliography may be found in R. Osborne, *Books*

However, unlike in other periods of history, images today no longer have a character which is fixed and determinate, but rather undergo constant changes, modifications due to the continuous flow of social media, as well as the ease with which images can be obtained and manipulated. Along with this ephemerality, the image is no longer confined within its own sphere but diffused into a wider arena where, thanks to its evocative power, its influence is even more strongly felt. In the observer this may arouse feelings of fear, desire, admiration or compassion. Nicholas Mirzoeff synthesizes all of this into one word: the sublime: “the pleasure experience in representation of that which would be painful or terrifying in reality, leading to a realization of the limits of the human and of the power of nature.”<sup>8</sup>

Surprisingly, the book of Revelation, a work written almost two millennia ago, includes many of the characteristics of this visual culture, and this is perhaps one of the reasons that it continues to fascinate us today.

## 2.1 Seeing

The book of Revelation is the first work of early Christian literature to confront the subject of the hereafter by using a narrative as its vehicle of communication. It is in fact a tale in which the image is the principal protagonist. As John Collins refers to it, Revelation is a “visual book”,<sup>9</sup> while Robit J. Whitaker describes it as ‘a visual feast.’<sup>10</sup> The use of the image is justified by the author himself at the outset of the work, where he insists that his intention is not only to transmit the words of Jesus Christ (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ τὴν μαρτυρίαν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, “the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ,” Rev 1:2a), but what he himself “saw” (ὅσα εἶδεν, Rev 1:2b). He reiterates this at the end of the narrative, when in the process of authenticating the text he affirms that he is the auditory and visual witness of the revelation, that it was he who heard

on *Colour 1495–2015: History and Bibliography* by Roy Osborne [2015–12–05] (Raleigh, NC: Thalesius Books, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (see n. 3), 50 and 81.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, 15.

<sup>9</sup> J.J. Collins, “Revelation as Apocalypse,” in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, ed. A. Yarbro Collins (Leuven, Paris, Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017), 33–48, here 42.

<sup>10</sup> R.J. Whitaker, *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation*, WUNT 2/410 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 4.

and saw the events described<sup>11</sup> (Καγὼ Ἰωάννης ὁ ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων ταῦτα, “it was I, John, in person, who heard and saw these things,” Rev 22:8). The image, then, becomes the ideal medium for transmitting the revelation. This also explains why John chose the device of the homodiegetic narrator to tell the story, as this enables him to act both as its protagonist and the witness to the visions.<sup>12</sup>

This protagonism is exercised at the beginning of the narrative in autobiographical form. The narrator speaks in the first person, employing not only verbal forms but also the first person singular pronoun with a clearly emphatic value: Ἐγὼ Ἰωάννης, [...] ἐγενόμην ἐν τῇ νήσῳ τῇ καλουμένῃ Πάτμῳ, “I, John, [...] was on an island called Patmos” (Rev 1:9). Immediately after this, he announces that he is the person chosen to receive the revelation; indeed, the voice he hears tells him: ὁ βλέπεις γράψον, “what you see, begin to write it down” (Rev 1:11) and he answers: Καὶ ἐπέστρεψα βλέπειν τὴν φωνήν, “and I turned to see the voice” (Rev 1:12). Once the narrative has concluded, John again takes up his role as protagonist, turning again to the first person pronoun and insisting that he saw and heard the revelation in person (Rev 22:8). It cannot be overlooked that on three occasions John of Patmos chooses the verb βλέπω instead of ὁράω, which is what appears in the rest of his account. Βλέπω has a specific meaning that emphasizes the physical organs of sight, as it denotes the ability to see through the eyes.<sup>13</sup> Thus, by using βλέπω at the beginning and the end of the narrative, John makes it clear that his experience, while arising from the action of the spirit (ἐγενόμην ἐν πνεύματι, Rev 1:10), is a visual experience.

Once the narrative is under way, however, John becomes a witness who is in effect testifying to the visions. For this he uses the verb ὁράω, whose meaning accords with this role of witness as it denotes “to see, to look, to observe,” but with a certain passivity;<sup>14</sup> that is to say, one sees because he witnesses an event that happens suddenly. This explains why the form εἶδον, the third person

<sup>11</sup> This would certainly refer to the content of the book of Revelation (D.E. Aune, *Revelation 17–22*, WBC 52C, Accordance electronic ed., version 2.3 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998]).

<sup>12</sup> G. Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 252–253.

<sup>13</sup> J.H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm's Wilke's Clavis Novi Testamenti* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889) [Electronic resource: Accordance], s.v. βλέπω. For a detailed study of the use of the verb βλέπω in the book of Revelation: L. García Ureña, *Narrative and Drama in the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 52–53.

<sup>14</sup> Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (see n. 13), s.v. ὁράω; E. Delebecque, “Je vis’ dans l’Apocalypse,” *RevThom* 3 (1998): 460–466, here 460.

singular of the aorist indicative is repeated again and again in the story, to the point that it becomes a formulaic expression for introducing the visions (45x), whether preceded by the conjunction καί (32x)<sup>15</sup> or μετὰ ταῦτα (5x)<sup>16</sup> or reinforced with the interjection καὶ ἰδοὺ (7x).<sup>17</sup> It serves to involve the community listening to it so that they visualize what they hear. The result is that this device of the narrator-witness makes it possible for the image to dominate the story.

## 2.2 Visualization

The author of the book is conscious, then, of having received a revelation to be transmitted (δεῖξαι τοῖς δούλοις αὐτοῦ, Rev 1:1), and in fact of being commanded to put what he has seen into writing (Rev 1:11), as we have mentioned earlier. It is thus essential for him not only to show what he saw, but for the community who hears the story to “see” it with him, to visualize ὅσα εἶδεν, “all that he saw” (Rev 1:2b), and so John chooses the only literary strategy that allows him *omnia ante oculos ponere*, “to place everything before the eyes” (Cicero, *Inv.*, 1. 55. 107) of his listeners, and this strategy is one of description. In this way, *qui audit, uidere*, “he who hears, sees,” and is thus moved by what he contemplates.<sup>18</sup>

John utilizes a variety of descriptive techniques, but there is one in particular that for its unique characteristics would have enabled the community to visualize the message that they heard. I am referring here to the καὶ εἶδον descriptions.<sup>19</sup> These represent with words not only the subject of the vision, but also the narrator’s own visual action. The technique that John employs makes it seem as though he is transcribing his vision step-by-step at the moment it is occurring. He first announces that the vision is beginning by introducing the formula of visual perception καὶ εἶδον. After this, he mentions the place where the image appears, and then identifies what he sees as best he can. At times, he does this with ease, as in his vision of the twenty-four elders; at others, the

<sup>15</sup> Rev 5:1, 2, 6, 11; 6:1, 2, 5, 8, 12; 7:2; 8:2, 13; 9:1, 17; 10:1; 13:1, 11; 14:1, 6, 14; 15:1, 2; 16:13; 17:3, 6; 19:11, 17, 19; 20:1, 4, 11, 12; 21:1.

<sup>16</sup> Rev 4:1; 7:1 (μετὰ τοῦτο), 9; 15:5; 18:1.

<sup>17</sup> Rev 4:1, 6:2, 5, 8; 7:9; 14:1, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Cicero, *On Invention. The Best Kind of Orator. Topics*, ed. H.M. Hubbell, vol. II, Loeb Classical Library 386 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1949), 1. 55. 107: *omnia ante oculos singillatim incommoda ponuntur, ut uideatur is qui audit uidere et re quoque ipsa quasi adsit non uerbis solum ad misericordiam ducatur.*

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed study: García Ureña, *Narrative and Drama in the Book of Revelation* (see n. 13), 66–125.

identification is more difficult, as in the case of God seated on his throne. Finally, he describes the image by enumerating the aspects that are the most striking to him, something that would have aroused a range of emotions in his listeners. One of the most representative examples of this is the great theophany in chapter four, in which John sees three different figures or groups of figures: God on his throne; the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures.<sup>20</sup>

First of all the formula of visual perception appears, in this case, μετὰ ταῦτα εἶδον (Rev 4:1), reinforced by the interjection καὶ ἰδοὺ (Rev 4:2b). Its presence is not accidental but essential, as the narrative is interrupted to address the community of listeners directly and involve them in the description so that they contemplate the vision together with John.<sup>21</sup> After this, the setting where the action in the vision occurs is established.

καὶ ἰδοὺ θρόνος ἔκειτο ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ  
Look! A throne in heaven (Rev 4:2b)

Immediately afterwards, he identifies the character or characters within this setting, giving the impression that he is at pains to do so, as he simply refers to the figure he sees as καθήμενος, “someone seated.”

καὶ ἐπὶ τὸν θρόνον, καθήμενος  
and upon the throne someone seated (Rev 4:2c)

After this comes the description, with its references to various precious stones that reflect the dazzling light emanating from this figure and infuse the vision with color.

καὶ ὁ καθήμενος ὅμοιος ὄρασει λίθῳ ἰάσπιδι καὶ σαρδίῳ, καὶ ἴρις κυκλόθεν τοῦ θρόνου ὅμοιος ὄρασει σμαραγδίνῳ (Rev 4:3)

<sup>20</sup> R.J. Whitaker has proposed that John relies particularly on ekphrasis (a device used in ancient rhetoric to describe something vividly in order to emotionally influence the audience). She considers, then, that both the theophany (Rev 4) and the vision of the Lamb (Rev 5) are examples of ekphrasis, whose purpose is to create a visible experience of the invisible God: *Ekphrasis, Vision, and Persuasion in the Book of Revelation* (see n. 30), 105–168; eadem, “The Poetics of Ekphrasis. Vivid Description and Rhetoric in the Apocalypse,” in *Poetik und Intertextualität der Johannesapokalypse*, ed. S. Alkier, T. Hieke, and T. Nicklas, WUNT 346 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 227–240.

<sup>21</sup> García Ureña, *Narrative and Drama* (see n. 13), 70–71, 178–179.

And he who was seated was like a stone of jasper and carnelian and a halo<sup>22</sup> surrounded the throne that was like the emerald

When the description has concluded, both John and the community are able to identify the figure because the image connects with the image of God that we find in the Psalms<sup>23</sup> and in other OT texts. In the book of Ezekiel, for example, the prophet describes his first vision of God and the splendor that emanates from his person (Ezek 1:16). To express this, Ezekiel turns to the language of precious stones, as we also find in Exod 24:10, and of fire, as in Exod 24:17.<sup>24</sup>

After the vision of God, John remains in heaven and describes what he sees there: the twenty-four elders and then the four living creatures. The descriptive technique is the same, mentioning first the place where the characters are seen:

Καὶ κυκλόθεν τοῦ θρόνου θρόνους εἴκοσι τέσσαρες, καὶ ἐπὶ τοὺς θρόνους (Rev 4:4a)  
Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones

Καὶ ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ θρόνου καὶ κύκλῳ τοῦ θρόνου  
In the midst of the throne and around the throne (Rev 4:6b)

And later identifying the seated figures:

εἴκοσι τέσσαρας πρεσβυτέρους καθήμενους (Rev 4:4b)  
twenty-four elders seated,

τέσσαρα ζῶα (Rev 4:6c)  
four living creatures

<sup>22</sup> This is usually translated as “rainbow.” The interpretation lies in the parallel between the apocalyptic vision and that described in Ezek 1:26–28. The term ἵρις is not used with this meaning in LXX, in the biblical texts found in Qumran, or in the pseudo-epigraphic literature. Moreover, the use of ἵρις as “rainbow” was unusual in the Jewish world since, as D.E. Aune (*Revelation 1–5*, WBC 52 A, Accordance electronic ed., version 2.3 [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997], 286) has mentioned, Flavius Josephus had to explain its meaning when he used this term (*A.J.* 1.103). Since emerald cannot reflect the colors of the rainbow, it would be more coherent to translate it as “halo” or “nimbus,” which was also used to represent supernatural beings in the ancient world (R.H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John. Introduction, Notes and Indices also the Greek Text and English Translation*, vol. 1 [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1920], 115).

<sup>23</sup> Ps 2:4; 9:8; 55:20; 80:2.

<sup>24</sup> In the same way, the author of the book of Revelation was inspired by the book of Ezekiel: G.K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999), 319–320.

Finally, he describes them by pointing out the visual features that characterize each of them: the garments and posture of the elders on the one hand, and the monstrous aspect of the four living creatures on the other:

περιβεβημένους ἐν ἱματίοις λευκοῖς καὶ ἐπὶ τὰς κεφαλὰς αὐτῶν στεφάνους χρυσοῦς. (Rev 4:4c)

dressed in white robes, on their heads golden crowns

<sup>6d</sup> γέμοντα ὀφθαλμῶν ἔμπροσθεν καὶ ὀπίσθεν. <sup>7</sup>καὶ τὸ ζῶον τὸ πρῶτον ὅμοιον λέοντι καὶ τὸ δεῦτερον ζῶον ὅμοιον μόσχῳ καὶ τὸ τρίτον ζῶον ἔχων τὸ πρόσωπον ὡς ἀνθρώπου καὶ τὸ τέταρτον ζῶον ὅμοιον ἀετῷ πετομένῳ (Rev 4:6d–7)

full of eyes in front and behind: <sup>7</sup> and the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle

The καὶ εἶδον descriptions put into words the ocular process of the witness, much as a video camera would do today, moving from a wide-angle view to a series of medium shots and close-ups. The narrator is thus able to make the community visualize what he himself is seeing and how he is seeing it, giving the text a great effect of realism. In this way, the community shares with John the epiphanic experience of the invisible God.<sup>25</sup> This logically affects the listeners, as it awakens in them a variety of emotions in accordance with what is being visualized: awe before the figure on the throne; piety with regard to the elders about to celebrate the liturgy (Rev 4:9); terror on beholding the four living creatures. Through this vivid imagery, John manages to reveal “the limits of the human and of the power of nature,” and to inspire the community with a sense of the sublime<sup>26</sup>.

Lastly, it must be noted that this descriptive technique enables the community to visualize what is being told at a given moment; that is, as it is being read.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, once a vision has concluded, it is not repeated, and this endows the images in the book of Revelation with the same sort of ephemerality that we find in today’s social media. If the durability of such images depends on how

<sup>25</sup> Whitaker, “The Poetics of Ekphrasis” (see n. 20), 239.

<sup>26</sup> R.J. Whitaker considers Rev 4 to be an ekphrasis, a resource used in ancient times to make a description vivid. However, the book of Revelation is not a written speech to be read aloud, but rather a narrative, in this sense the book of Revelation has been studied paying attention to the rhetorical effect of the text, that is, how it affects readers.

<sup>27</sup> The book of Revelation was conceived to be read aloud; L. García Ureña, “The Book of Revelation: A Written Text Towards the Oral Performance,” in *Between Orality and Literacy: Communication and Adaptation in Antiquity, Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World*, ed. R. Scodel, *Orality and Literacy in the Ancient World 10* (Leiden, Boston, PA: Brill, 2014), 309–330.

long it takes before an image is altered or modified, in the book of Revelation it depends on how long it takes to read the description.

### 2.3 The language of color

Nor is the language of color foreign to the book of Revelation, being an essential part of its literary universe,<sup>28</sup> one which permits the community to visualize the scene by heightening its realism. In the text cited here from the theophany, color is expressed through indirect designations<sup>29</sup> such as precious stones (Rev 4:3) or by adjectives of color like λευκός 'white' and χρυσοῦς 'golden' (4:4c)<sup>30</sup> which appear in the vision and serve to differentiate the characters: God appears surrounded by the various hues of precious stones (the bluish-green of amazonite, the intense green of emerald and the red of carnelian, Rev 4:3), while the elders are characterized by the whiteness of their robes and the gold of their crowns (Rev 4:4c).

However, the most relevant aspect of this color language is the fact that its denotative or descriptive function is intrinsically linked to a symbolic one. This symbolism is suggested by the repeated use of a particular color adjective or indirect designation in a specific context. Among such adjectives we might note the following

Λευκός is both the first color adjective (Rev 1:14) and the last (Rev 20:11) to appear in the narrative. It is first used to describe the color of the hair of the son of Man, emphasizing this hue with two similes: λευκαὶ ὡς ἔριον λευκὸν ὡς χιῶν, 'white as white wool, white as snow.' At the end of the story it is used to describe the throne of God, after the Devil has been banished to the lake of fire. Its repeated use throughout the narrative<sup>31</sup> makes it clear to the community listening to it

28 L. García Ureña, "The Book of Revelation: A Chromatic Story," in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, ed. A. Yarbro Collins (Leuven, Paris, Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017), 393–419.

29 Words used to denote color, such as those for precious stones, pigments, metals, etc: A. Guillaumont, "La désignation et description des couleurs en hébreu et en araméen" in I. Meyerson, *Problèmes de la Couleur* (Paris: S.E.V.P.E.N., 1957), 339–348, here 217. Kuschel and Monberg refer to them as "contextualized colour lexemes"; that is to say, "terms that are ineludibly linked to a specific natural or cultural object": R. Kuschel and T. Monberg, "'We Don't Talk Much About Colour Here': A Study of Colour Semantics on Bellona Island," *Man New Series* 9.2 (1974): 213–242, here 217.

30 On the use of the adjective χρυσοῦς in the book of Revelation: L. García Ureña, *El oro. Metal y color en el Nuevo Testamento*, in I. Muñoz and D. Romero, *Nova et Vetera. Philological Studies in Honor of Professor Antonio Piñero* (Córdoba: El Almendro, 2015), 279–292.

31 It appears 16x: Rev 1:14; 2:17; 3:4–5, 18; 4:4; 6:2, 11; 7:9, 13; 14:14; 19:11, 14; 20:11.

that λευκός is the color of the Lamb, his followers, and the victory over devil. Its appearance in the narrative relieves the moments of tension produced by its scenes of punishment, as it suggests the presence of God, of Christ, and of those who follow him.

Πυρρός (Rev 6:4), μέλας (Rev 6:5), and χλωρός (Rev 6:8) are the colors of three of the four horses that appear during the opening of the first four seals. Curiously, these three colors will reappear in the narrative with the next seven as well, at times by repeating the terms and at others through indirect designations that denote black, red and the spectrum comprised by χλωρός. Thus, at the opening of the sixth seal, the sun becomes μέλας ὡς σάκκος τρίχινος, "black as sackcloth," the moon turns red ὡς αἷμα, "like blood" (Rev 6:12) and the stars fall ὡς συκῆ βάλλει τοὺς ὀλύνθους αὐτῆς, "like the fig tree drops its winter fruit" (Rev 6:13). Something similar occurs during the seven trumpet blasts. At the first, the scene is infused with πῦρ μεμιγμένα ἐν αἵματι, "fire mixed with blood" (Rev 8:7a), leaving the vegetation scorched (ὃ τρίτον τῶν δένδρων κατεκάη καὶ πᾶς χόρτος χλωρὸς κατεκάη, Rev 8:7c). At the sounding of the second trumpet, the fire reappears (ὡς ὄρος μέγα πυρὶ καιόμενον, "like a great mountain, burning with fire") along with the blood, αἷμα (Rev 8:8). This happens again at the third trumpet blast (ἀστὴρ μέγας καιόμενος ὡς λαμπάς, "a great star burning like a torch," Rev 8:10), although this time together with ἄψινθον, "wormwood" (Rev 8:11) which for its color is associated with χλωρός.<sup>32</sup> The color changes with the fourth and fifth blasts as the earth becomes dark (σκοτίζω, Rev 8:12) and καπνὸς ἐκ τοῦ φρέατος, "smoke from the abyss" (Rev 9:2) begins to rise. At the sixth trumpet, the fire returns with the color adjective πύρινος, "fiery red" (Rev 9:17) and the element of nature πῦρ, "fire," which is mentioned twice (Rev 9:17, 18).<sup>33</sup>

The chromatic triad μέλας, πυρρός and χλωρός will reappear later, during the seven plagues. First, there is an allusion to the color red through αἷμα, "blood-red" when the second and thirds cups are poured out (Rev 16:3–4) and to fire with the fourth cup, its devastating power illustrated with the repeated use of καυματίζω (Rev 16:8–9). After this, black appears, first in the form of smoke (with the fourth cup), and later darkness (the fifth cup, Rev 16:10). Finally, with the pouring of the sixth cup there is an indirect allusion to χλωρός in the

32 Wormwood seems to have been a variety of *Artemisia*: H.N. Moldenke and A.L. Moldenke, *Plants of the Bible* (Waltham, MA: Chronica Botanica, 1952), 48. Its leaves are silvery green in colour: L.J. Musselman, *Figs, Dates, Laurel and Myrrh. Plants of the Bible and the Qu'ran* (Portland, OR: Timber Press, 2007), 313.

33 In this vision, other colors appear as well, such as: ὑακίνθινος, "blue like sapphire" and θειώδης, "yellow like sulphur" (Rev 9:17).

simile ὡς βάτραχοι, “like frogs” (Rev 16:13). The community hearing the revelation would thus have identified the presence of μέλας, πυρρός and χλωρός as the colors of evil, of destruction, and of divine punishment.

As for the indirect designations, precious stones play an important role in the book of Revelation. Their chromatism is made visible in the text not by the generic λίθος τίμιος, “precious stone” (Rev 17:4; 18:12, 16), but rather when these are enumerated. This occurs in two specific contexts: the theophany (Rev 4:3) and the vision of the New Jerusalem (Rev 21:19–20). As was mentioned before, the seer, with quick, deft strokes describes the presence of God as being immersed in a flood of greenish hues (the bluish-green of amazonite and the intense green of the emerald) and the red of the carnelian. He does something similar to this in his description of the New Jerusalem, although more leisurely and rhythmically. The listener/reader is thus able not only to contemplate these precious stones, but to perceive the splendor they exude and the rich chromatic spectrum that emanates from them: the bluish-green of ἴασπις, the intense blue of σάπφειρος, the cloudy green of χαλκηδών, the emerald green of σμάραγδος, the white and red of σαρδόνυξ, the red of σάρδιον, the yellow of χρυσόλιθος, the sea-green or greenish-blue of βήρυλλος, the yellowish-green of τοπάζιον, the golden green of χρυσόπρασος, the dark blue of ὑάκινθος and, finally, the violet of ἀμέθυστος.<sup>34</sup> With this wide array of colors, these stones create a language that makes accessible the inaccessible; that is, the transcendence of God and the joy of dwelling in the New Jerusalem.

It can be concluded that the language of color in the book of Revelation, whether this is expressed through adjectives of color or indirect designations, “interweaves the drama and the victory, the caducity of the story and the eternity of the final destiny,”<sup>35</sup> facilitating the reception of the message and the perception of the sublime in the community that hears it read.

### 3 Revelation, the book of the end of the world

Once the characteristics that make up the book of Revelation (the realism of its images, their colors, their successive appearance and disappearance in the narrative, their visualization) have been analyzed, it is easy to understand why this enigmatic book from the dawn of the Christian era is still able to capture the

<sup>34</sup> On precious stones in the book of Revelation: U. Jart, “Precious Stones in the Revelation of St John 21:18–21,” *ST* 24 (1970): 150–181.

<sup>35</sup> García Ureña, “The Book of Revelation: A Chromatic Story” (see n. 28), 419.

imagination of the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader, immersed in a culture where the image is the space in which its meanings are created and defined.

Despite the book’s wide range of images, which have been a source of artistic inspiration since the Middle Ages (the Pantocrator, the Final Judgment, the Tetramorph, the Immaculate Conception), the 21<sup>st</sup>-century man/woman fixes his/her attention on those sections which narrate, dramatically and in great detail, the destruction of nature, of animals, and of people; that is to say, the seven seals, the seven trumpet blasts, and the seven plagues (the “septenaries”).<sup>36</sup> In effect, the episode of the seven seals, with its three horses in an unstoppable gallop and a devastating earthquake, seems to be saying that war, famine and death are unavoidable realities that ravage humanity and nature alike. If this were not enough, the seven trumpets announce a series of other natural disasters that bring still more suffering to the world and its inhabitants: raging fires that reduce the earth to ashes (Rev 8:7); the contamination of the waters (Rev 8:8–11); the darkening of the sun and a perpetual twilight (Rev 8:12); afflictions caused by external agents such as the locusts (Rev 9:3–6); and attacks from Hell itself (9:16–19). With the seven plagues come even more disasters: disease (Rev 16:2); the death of living beings caused by the contamination of seas (Rev 16:3) and rivers (Rev 16:4); the absence of light (Rev 16:10), as well as a blazing sun that scorches those exposed to it. Such catastrophes become the sole focus of the modern reader, who reproduces them in his own language, the language of the cinema, one of the principal exponents of today’s visual culture. Thus arose in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries a series of filmic representations of what occurs in one way or another in the “septenaries” of the book of Revelation. They are called apocalyptic movies<sup>37</sup>: *The Seventh Seal* (I. Bergman, 1957) is presided over by the plague, with the figure of Death (the fourth horseman of the Apocalypse) as protagonist; *Apocalypse Now* (F. Coppola, 1979) shows humans transformed by their contact with the war and the jungle; *Armageddon* (M. Bay, 1998) tells of a cosmic cataclysm produced by an asteroid; *Southland Tales* (R. Kelly, 2006) depicts the chaos that results from a shortage of electrical

<sup>36</sup> On the presence of violence in the book of Revelation: J.W. van Henten, “Violence in Revelation,” in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, ed. A. Yarbro Collins (Leuven, Paris, Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017), 49–77; J.D. Crossan, “Divine Violence in the Christian Bible,” in *The Bible and the American Future*, ed. R.L. Jewett, W.L. Alloway and J.G. Lacy (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 208–236.

<sup>37</sup> C.P. Mitchell, *A Guide to Apocalyptic Cinema* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2001), 11, defines an apocalyptic movie as “a motion picture that depicts a credible threat to the continuing existence of humankind as a species or the existence of Earth as a planet capable of supporting human life.”



power; *I Am Legend* (F. Lawrence, 2007) and *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008) focus, respectively, on a deadly virus and an epidemic; while *2012* (R. Emmerich, 2009)<sup>38</sup> brings to the screen some of the very cataclysms that appear in the septenaries: a solar eruption, a warming of the earth's crust, seismic disturbances, and a host of other catastrophes.<sup>39</sup>

In this new cinematic reinterpretation, the human of today has in fact changed the meaning of the term "apocalypse" so that it no longer expresses "revelation," but instead "destruction" or "the end of the world." The apocalyptic is presented as something negative, something destructive to the modern world. It would seem, then, to reflect Don Juan Tenorio's first thought, "that the soul is destroyed / when the body dies," and to pass over the book of Revelation's final pages, in which John opens the doors of eternity to reveal only two settings: the lake of fire and sulphur for the Devil, the beast and the false prophet (Rev 20:10), and the New Jerusalem for those who triumph: ὁ νικῶν (Rev 21:7). However, John is obviously not interested in exploring the first of these, as he mentions it but with hardly any description at all,<sup>40</sup> in contrast to later authors, from Colin Chadelve, the illuminator of *The Apocalypse of 1313*, who felt the necessity to specify the ruthless punishments inflicted on those condemned to Hell,<sup>41</sup> to the sculptor of the Final Judgment Portico of the Cathedral of Tudela,<sup>42</sup> or Dante, who in *The Divine Comedy* described the nine circles in which sinners receive their punishment. This is not the case of the New Jerusalem. The seer of Patmos describes the city in great detail, employing two superimposed images: the bride of the Lamb and the New Jerusalem itself.<sup>43</sup> The nuptial imagery that it

<sup>38</sup> Another film in the apocalyptic genre by the same director, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) deals especially with the phenomenon of global warming.

<sup>39</sup> For a more detailed study: K.A. Ritzenhoff and A. Krewani, *The Apocalypse in Film Dystopias, Disasters, and other Visions About the End of the World* (New York, NY, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); J. Walliss and L. Quinby, eds., *Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film* (Milton Keynes, UK: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010); I. Rojas, *Qué se sabe de... Los símbolos del Apocalipsis* (Estella: Verbo Divino, 2013), 188–201; A. Reinhartz, *Bible and Cinema: An Introduction* (Milton Park: Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 203–229.

<sup>40</sup> John uses the expression ἡ λίμνη τοῦ πυρός καὶ θείου (Rev 20:10). The fact that λίμνη is preceded by the article is an indication that the setting was perhaps known to the Johannine community. Swete suggests that it may be a regional expression for the γέεννα τοῦ πυρός (Matt 5:22; Mark 9:43); *The Apocalypse of St. John. The Greek Text with Introd., Notes and Indices* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1906 [rep. 1998]), 258.

<sup>41</sup> *Apocalipsis 1313* (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France): f. 87r, The Hell of trades; f. 87v, The Hell of trades (continuation), Portrait of the commentary's author or translator.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ea/Puerta\\_juicio224.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ea/Puerta_juicio224.jpg)

<sup>43</sup> See F. Tavo, *Woman, Mother, and Bride: An Exegetical Investigation into the "ecclesial" Notions of the Apocalypse* (Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2007), 341–344.

has been prepared earlier (Rev 19:7, 9) comes now to the foreground, once the heavens and the earth have been renewed (Rev 21:1). It is then that the simplicity and concision of the description achieves its full evocative power: ἡτοιμασμένην ὡς νύμφην κεκοσμημένην τῷ ἀνδρὶ αὐτῆς, "dressed like a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2). After this, we are given a vision of the city, for which John uses a certain type of description, that of ekphrasis,<sup>44</sup> which enables him to present a detailed view that moves the reader emotionally. Unhurriedly, he examines the image in three phases: the city in movement, as it descends from heaven (Rev 21:10b–11); its exterior, once it has become established (Rev 21:12–22); and then its interior (Rev 22:1–2). In this way, the New Jerusalem dazzles us with its colors and brilliance. However, although these are the book's most beautiful pages, the modern reader is incapable of truly reading them.

In terms of visual impact and evocative power, the vision of the New Jerusalem reaches the same level as the septenaries: the seer invites the listener to visualize, insisting that this is what he saw himself, while the description becomes enveloped in color through the enumeration of precious stones. We might wonder, then, why the modern reader reduces the apocalypse to catastrophe when the original message in fact goes far beyond this. It is perhaps because the modern listener perceives it only through the senses, that is to say, is only capable of βλέπειν, to use the lexis of the book itself. Meanwhile, in the world around him he sees much of what the septenaries describe, as unfortunately there is always some place in our world which is experiencing terrible moments of suffering and destruction, whether from natural disasters, disease, hunger or war. The difference is that John of Patmos saw and then took a step further; he believed, while the man of today, immersed in the immediate present and dominated by his fears, seems incapable of transcendence, of venturing into the beyond, of believing and thus opening himself to hope. At the same time, he connects with the septenaries because he is able to visualize the realities of the present in which he exists.

## 4 Conclusion

John of Patmos would begin his book by opening the gate to heaven and end it by opening the gate to eternity, responding unequivocally to the question of the

<sup>44</sup> On the function of ekphrasis: M.V. Pineda González, "La invención de la ékphrasis," in *Homenaje a la profesora Carmen Pérez Romero* (Cáceres: Universidad de Extremadura, 2000), 251–262. For a detailed study of this question: García Ureña, *Narrative and Drama* (see n. 13), 84–98.

hereafter; i.e., with the lake of fire and the New Jerusalem. Despite the distance in time and without the author being aware of it, this work that would give its name to the genre of apocalyptic literature is composed in such a way as to connect directly with the visual culture of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the importance of seeing, the need to visualize events, the power of color, the quest for the sublime and the protagonism of the individual. These are the reasons that the book of Revelation holds such a unique attraction for us today.

However, although one may be captivated by the magic of its images and its color, the 21<sup>st</sup>-century reader tends to focus exclusively on the catastrophes that occur during the septenaries. These become a sort of mirror that reflects in images the world of today, a world whose dramaticity and violence is such that it makes one think of the end of the world. Hence, the Greek word ἀποκάλυψις has lost its original sense and has instead come to express the terrifying, the destructive, that which brings extermination and devastation. This is precisely how our cinematic language of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries has interpreted it.

The modern individual sees, but unlike John, does not believe. Submerged in the immediate present in which one lives, one is not even capable of wondering about such things as eternal reward and punishment or the final victory of justice. One's thought, then, would appear to be locked within that initial impression of Don Juan's, "that the soul is destroyed / when the body dies."

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