

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN  
BIBLE AND FILM

# SEMEIA STUDIES

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CLOSE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN  
BIBLE AND FILM

An Interdisciplinary Engagement

*Edited by*

Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele



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## ABBREVIATIONS

AUSS	<i>Andrews University Seminary Studies</i>
BibSem	The Biblical Seminar
<i>BibInt</i>	<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CGI	Computer-generated images
ConBNT	Coniectanea Biblica: New Testament Series
CTC	<i>Culture, Theory and Critique</i>
EHS	Europäische Hochschulschriften
<i>ExpTim</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>FiHi</i>	<i>Fides et Historia</i>
FilTh	Film und Theologie
fps	frames per second
HAR	<i>Hebrew Annual Review</i>
<i>Haer.</i>	Irenaeus, <i>Adversus haereses</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JNSL	<i>Journal of Northwest Semitic Language</i>
JRF	<i>Journal of Religion and Film</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
<i>LitTh</i>	<i>Literature and Theology</i>
LSTS	The Library of Second Temple Studies
NA <sup>26</sup>	<i>Novum Testamentum Graece</i> , Nestle-Aland, 26th ed.
NIB	<i>The New Interpreter's Bible</i> . 1994–2004. Edited by Leander E. Keck. 12 vols. Nashville: Abingdon.
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIV	New International Version

NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
P	Priestly writers, one of four hypothetical source-writers of the Pentateuch
<i>PastSc</i>	<i>Pastoral Sciences / Sciences Pastorales</i>
POV	Point-of-View
QG	Philo, <i>Questions and Answers on Genesis</i>
RBS	Resources for Biblical Studies
SBB	Stuttgarter biblische Beiträge
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SR	<i>Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses</i>
ST	<i>Studia Theologica</i>
SymS	Symposium Series
T1	Cameron, James, dir. 1985. <i>The Terminator</i> . Orion Pictures.
T2	Cameron, James, dir. 1991. <i>Terminator 2: Judgment Day</i> . TriStar Pictures.
T3	Mostow, Jonathan, dir. 2003. <i>Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines</i> . Warner Brothers Pictures.
T4	McG [McGinty, Joseph], dir. 2009. <i>Terminator Salvation</i> . Warner Brothers Pictures.
TANZ	Texte und Arbeiten zum neutestamentlichen Zeitalter
<i>Trans</i>	<i>Trans: Internet-Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften</i>
<i>TvT</i>	<i>Tijdschrift voor Theologie</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
World of Man	World of Man: A Library of Theory and Research in the Human Sciences
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZKPR	<i>ZeitSchrift für Kultur, Politik, Religion</i>

## INTRODUCTION

*Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele*

The present collection of essays is a sequel to the groundbreaking *Semeia* 74 issue, published in 1996, entitled *Biblical Glamour and Hollywood Glitz*. In that issue, editor Alice Bach signals the changes that have taken place within the field of biblical studies. As she notes,

Living in a borderland between the old and the new, as biblical scholars do, creates a sense of “betweenness,” an uncertain search for transitions and methods that include the contours of the historical ages that have risen and fallen since biblical epochs and the cultural repetitions of the biblical landscapes and figures that are found in our contemporary cultural productions. (Bach 1996, 2)

Twenty years later, the study of film (and television to a lesser extent) has become an accepted topic within biblical and religious studies. As Bach already points out back in 1996, when film and cultural theories are applied to biblical literature, the results can be “ephemeral and surprising” (6). However, it is precisely film as an object of analysis and film theory as a means to engage with that topic within this type of reluctant interdisciplinary scholarship that deserves more attention. In the years after the publication of *Semeia* 74, there have been several notable contributions to the field of Bible and film (see, for instance, Aichele and Walsh 2002, Reinhartz 2003, Runions 2003, Exum 2006, Shepherd 2008, Hallbäck and Hvithamar 2008). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the scholarship of Bible and film has come to full bloom in a methodological sense. Despite the fact that over the last years biblical scholars have become more aware of film history, style and techniques, much is still to be gained from a more sustained engagement with film, an engagement that goes beyond the study of the narrative and themes of a film.

The contributors to the present volume are attentive to both biblical literature as well as film theory and analysis. The emphasis in the selected essays lies on the importance of visual analysis in the encounter between Bible and film. The contributors seek to address this through a diverse range of methodological approaches. What these contributions all have in common, though, is an understanding of film as first and foremost a visual medium, which requires not only attention to that characteristic of film, but also commands its own set of methods.

This volume's contributions to the field of Bible and film lie in their sustained attention to the visual nature of film and its particular technical aspects, as well as in the authors' moving beyond merely paying lip service to an ideal of presumed interdisciplinary analysis. The essays demonstrate the actual work that goes into such an analysis. They also set out to not only apply, but also clarify the method. By doing so, each essay functions as an example and starting point for other scholars, who wish to engage in a similar kind of analysis, but lack the particular analytical and methodological tools or background to do so. This collection provides concrete tools and methods in order to facilitate such an analysis. In this respect, the essays demonstrate the development of the field in the past twenty years. The "uncertain search for methods" Bach noted in 1996 has transitioned into a field where rich and diverse methodological approaches have deepened the reading, analysis, and understanding of the multiple encounters between Bible and film (even popular culture at large; see, e.g., Culbertson and Wainwright 2010), of which the essays in this volume testify.

In the essay designed to provide theoretical orientation to the volume, George Aichele discusses five topics that relate to any scholarly analysis of both biblical and cinematic texts. First of all, he argues that the best approach is a semiotic one, which offers a common critical arena in which the various texts may be brought together, because a semiotic analysis approaches both texts as systems of signs that have meaning. The popular compare-and-contrast approach alone is almost always insufficient from a critical standpoint, and allegorical or symbolic approaches often are theologically biased. These approaches look for the hidden, symbolic, and often theological meaning in both biblical and cinematic texts. Second, in his view the radical semiotic difference between the written texts of the Bible and the moving images of the motion picture, which are often supplemented by sound and color, cannot be overstated. No movie can ever be the same as any written text. Bringing these two types of texts together



requires an extreme act of translation. Third, the biblical text should not be privileged over against the cinematic text. Any notion of holy Scripture should be suspended. Each of the two (or more) texts deserves to be considered in its own right and not as explaining the other. This opens the way for a genuinely intertextual dialogue or mutual interrogation between the texts. Fourth, with the advent of digital electronic media, movies are no longer (simply) “films.” Digitization leads to a merging of formerly separate media (print, sound, video, photography, etc.) to the extent that the concept of medium itself may need rethinking. This technology may also have considerable consequences for the future of the Bible and of biblical studies. Finally, most movies are inherently mass-produced works of art: many identical copies that are consumed by many people. As for the Bible, its transformation from unique manuscripts to printed and now electronic texts has transformed its semiotic potential as well. The influence of the consumer market (for both movies and Bibles), Aichele states, has become an important factor in the production of each of them.

The essays by Larry J. Kreitzer, Richard Walsh, and Reinhold Zwick in the first part of this volume, focus on film technique and how that shapes the interpretation of both film and biblical texts. They also reverse the hermeneutical flow in interpreting biblical texts, one way or another, through film.

In his contribution, Kreitzer notes that Mark 14:51–52 has long been a text that has puzzled New Testament specialists. Who is the unnamed naked young man mentioned in these verses, and how is it that he comes to be following Jesus and his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane? The fact that these verses have no parallel in the other gospels has led many commentators to suggest that the secret of these verses has something to do with the authorship of the Gospel of Mark itself. Could it be that the naked young man was, in fact, the author of the Gospel of Mark and that he was deliberately injecting himself into the account of the arrest of Jesus? If so, to what purpose does he do so? Similar questions about intentionality have been raised about the film-maker Alfred Hitchcock who famously included brief cameos of himself in thirty-nine of his films. The glimpses of himself that Hitchcock offered to his audiences remain one of the defining features of his films and are arguably one means whereby his creative vision was conveyed. Kreitzer explores how the Gospel of Mark and the films of Hitchcock may be usefully compared as examples of art in which their creator influences the meaning and interpretation of the work by inserting themselves suggestively into it.

Walsh in turn looks at the composition of Mark's Gospel as a whole from the perspective of D. W. Griffith's film *Intolerance*. He notes that biblical film scholars have mostly been interested in Griffith's depiction of the fall of Babylon and his Jesus fragments in *Intolerance*. However, the film is, in fact, most famous for its crosscutting (parallel montage) of four stories. Moreover, Griffith's use of crosscutting within individual stories is meant to build suspense. Mark's paratactic style and its intercalations are similar crosscuts. While Griffith's more famous crosscutting between his four stories functions similarly to his crosscutting within stories, it also serves to create an idea or motif that rises above material diversity. According to Walsh, harmony readings of the gospels similarly create (the idea of) the one gospel. In both Griffith and Mark, harmony, the creation of the one, the idea(l), has important byproducts, including notions of "providence, revelation, empire, and spirituality" (45). Walsh concludes that this unifying vision "is profoundly asocial" (62).

Taking literary studies as his starting point, Zwick notes that leading scholars of literary studies have developed a media-transcending view on narratives that (among others) covers both fiction and film. Particularly on the level of plot or discourse both media share many common features in structuring their narratives. This transmedial character of narrative structure encourages a reading of suitable literary texts with cinematic eyes—that is, "a look that is informed by the pluriform possibilities of filmic narration" (80)—in order to explore their narrative texture, especially concerning point of view and the organization of time and space. Zwick suggests that "viewing biblical narratives with cinematic eyes reveals anew their artistry in shaping a narration that is as dense as it is dynamic in its fabric of time, space and point of view" (100). Zwick applies this approach to the Matthean version of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1–13), followed by a comparison with Pier Paolo Pasolini's draft of this scene in his film script for *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1964).

The essays in the second section, by Michelle Fletcher, David Shepherd, Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele, and Tarja Laine, focus more squarely on specific films and biblical texts. They work from the assumption that shared concepts and methods, crucially, a willingness to be attentive to both, provide the starting point for a flow between the biblical and the cinematic.

In her essay Fletcher moves back and forth between the *Terminator* films and the book of Revelation. As she notes, through thirty years of change, *Terminator's* apocalyptic visions of the future end of the world,

good versus evil, and ultimate battles for survival have continued to draw in audiences. Also, a range of scholarship is available examining how *The Terminator* and *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* use biblical material, but focus on the two later installments is lacking. Her own work builds on this previous *Terminator* scholarship in two ways. First, it focuses on the repeated use of themes and images from the book of Revelation within all four *Terminator* films in order to examine how they have developed since *The Terminator*'s 1984 inception. This discussion highlights how the blurring of categories, dialogue with the past, and confusion of good versus evil have heightened as the franchise has progressed. Secondly, it uses this exploration of apocalyptic themes in the *Terminator* films in order to reread the text of Revelation itself. This rereading suggests fresh interpretations for the text of Revelation, demonstrating how its use of images and motifs is more akin to *Terminator* sequels than *The Terminator* itself. Ultimately, she argues, the enduring appeal of *Terminator* films and the book of Revelation may not be their presentations of the future after all, but rather their dialogue with the past.

Shepherd starts his essay with the observation that in the wake of a rising tide of interest in the literary qualities of biblical texts, the horizons of biblical studies have been expanded by scholarship that has explored the extent to which biblical traditions intersect with classical dramatic categories such as comedy and tragedy. What has not yet been explored in any (even preliminary) way is how our understanding of biblical traditions might be enhanced by considering them through the lens of melodrama, a genre not unconnected to the theatrical tradition, but primarily associated with and theorized by critical discourse in film studies. Following a brief survey of critical approaches to melodrama within film studies, Shepherd explores the ways in which filmic conceptions of melodrama may offer new insights into the narrative traditions we find in the biblical text. He does so by focusing on Henri Andréani's exploration of the David-Saul cycle in his films *David et Goliath* (1911), *David et Saül* (1911), *La Mort de Saül* (1912), and *Absalon* (1912).

Also dealing with genre issues is the essay by Copier and Vander Stichele. They make a comparative analysis of Roland Emmerich's film *2012* and Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* using Rick Altman's work on genre in film as a theoretical lens. The use of genre in both film theory and biblical studies is explored, more specifically the genre of the disaster film and that of apocalyptic literature. They are put in tandem in an analysis of *2012*. The same approach is also applied to *Noah*, thus allowing a reading that

moves away from the interpretation of *Noah* as Bible epic. To substantiate this point, Copier and Vander Stichele offer a comparative reading of *2012* and *Noah*, focusing on the way the issues of death and disaster feature in both films.

In her essay, Laine takes a different approach to *Noah*. She argues that Aronofsky's film displays an understanding of God that is only "accessible through affectively toned perception" (173), here understood as an intentional state whose function is to "attribute salience to the world" (174). A responsiveness to God that is affectively toned relates not only to matters of importance but also of what must be (ethically) true about such matters if they are to bear (religious) importance. Laine's essay shows how *Noah* induces affectively toned experiences through which the spectator has access to a "truthful" image of God that encompasses not only God's creative but also God's destructive powers. This evokes the Christian notions of death and resurrection as well as those of death and renewal more generally.

The essays in the third part of this volume are more theoretically oriented and bring the Bible in conversation with film in a number of ways. Daria Pezolli-Olgiati shifts the focus to the reception of film, while Robert Paul Seesengood uses insights from affect theory to analyze the works of Lars von Trier. Jeffrey L. Staley and Matthew S. Rindge discuss gender issues in their analysis of *Aviator* and *American Beauty* respectively and Abigail Pelham and Jeremy Punt focus on the subject positioning of characters in *Moonrise Kingdom* and *The Hunger Games*.

In her contribution, Pezolli-Olgiati offers a triangulation between film analysis, the study of religion, and film theory on the basis of a case study. In *Je vous salue, Marie!* (1985), Jean-Luc Godard revisits the gospel narrative of annunciation and nativity, including the issue of virginity, in a contemporary, secular, everyday French context. When the film was released in several European countries, the film was received in different and extreme ways. Cinemas were put on fire in some cities, and the film was condemned officially by Roman Catholic institutions as a public offence to central contents of the faith and for being blasphemous. Others within and outside the Christian churches, however, outlined the high theological and artistic value of the film. Beyond these conflicts caused by a provocative approach to the figure of Mary lie different interpretations and ideas about the function and place of art and religion in a modern secular state. On the one hand, the film as work of art stimulates audiences to consider provocative perspectives on biblical narratives and symbol-

ism and to actively engage in open interpretation processes. On the other hand, Pezolli-Olgiati argues, the recurrent term of blasphemy outlines the complexity of reception as a social phenomenon.

Seesengood combines affect theory and an auteur approach to the work of Lars von Trier read against the canonical Apocalypse of John. According to Seesengood, “while von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009), *Dogville* (2003), and *Melancholia* (2011) explore themes that intersect with biblical apocalyptic in obvious, theological and cosmological ways, other films—such as *The Idiots* (1998), *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which all explore social organization, and *The Kingdom* (1994), which probes the limits of technology—engage themes also central to biblical apocalyptic ” (209). Both the visions of Revelation and the films of von Trier trigger positive and negative emotions in the reader. As Seesengood argues, the sense of shock, terror, passion, lust, et cetera awakened in the viewer/reader is, in itself, the core meaning. The universe and human society are affective agents. Any cognitive engagement of them without the sensual and the affective is partial, is occluded. Seesengood concludes that the apocalyptic scenarios offered by von Trier and John “work to reveal this affective quality to the world” (210).

According to Staley, Martin Scorsese’s award-winning 2004 film, *The Aviator*, could not seem further removed from the central themes of *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Scorsese’s representation of Jesus is a troubling image for many viewers. His Jesus is “a man haunted by internal voices that call him to a destiny seemingly beyond his capacity to fulfill” (233)—to bear and die for the sins of the world. In the end, the Jesus of Scorsese dies as the obedient son of an invisible (divine) Father. *Aviator*’s main character, Howard Hughes, is a twentieth century American, a multimillionaire engineer, who designs airplanes. He is only interested in smooth machines or perfectly shaped female bodies. However, there are images in *The Aviator* that recall *The Last Temptation of Christ*, and there are motifs in the film that hint at a provocative connection to the latter. Starting with these intertwined images, Staley explores the latter film as an exploration of the invisible Mother, in conversation with the invisible Father of *The Last Temptation*.

Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s seminal work, Rindge examines the depiction of Angela Hayes in Sam Mendes’s 1999 film *American Beauty*. He argues that the film both conforms to and departs from Mulvey’s critique of the cinematic depiction of women as objects of sexual pleasure. Whereas Lester Burnham’s four fantasies illustrate Mulvey’s critique, the

film itself (through a variety of technological devices) subverts and finds fault with the portrayal of Angela as an object of sexual desire. The essay concludes by offering some reflections on the ways in which biblical texts similarly “conform to and resist prevailing patriarchal norms” (264).

In her essay, Pelham notes that director Wes Anderson, in all his films, “creates characters through the deliberate deployment of specific objects, each of which serves as a kind of totem for the character to which it is attached” (271). No character, though, seems as defined by the objects that accompany her as Suzy Bishop, the young protagonist of his most recent film, 2012’s *Moonrise Kingdom*. In the field of consumer behavior psychology, the term *extended self* refers to the self, created at the intersection of a person and the objects that he or she views as possessions. In this essay, Pelham brings the film’s use of objects to create extended selves for its characters into conversation with the Bible’s account of the giving of instructions for the building of the tabernacle by YHWH in Exod 25–31 and of the construction of the golden calf by the Israelites in Exod 32. In these texts, as in the film, objects are used to give physical reality to what, otherwise, would be invisible. In addition, the fact that the term *extended self* comes from the field of consumer behavior research raises questions about YHWH’s role as consumer. If YHWH has an extended self, a self both reflected and created by objects, what does this say about YHWH as consumer? What kind of a consumer is YHWH and how can YHWH’s actions be understood as the actions of a consumer intent on the creation of self through the acquisition of objects?

In his contribution, Punt argues that the problem of subject positioning (or the debate on the ideology of realism) in films is an extension of discussions about the provenance of the cinematographic image and still attracts much attention among film theorists. Punt combines the consideration of subject positioning in *The Hunger Games* films—films devoid of ostensible biblical or even religious references if not motifs—with postcolonial concerns about mimical identities. The emphasis is on how these films project individual and group identities as well as interrelational networks that are constitutive of life in empire, whether in Panem or in first-century Roman Empire as reflected in the New Testament.

As the essays in this volume demonstrate, the uncertain landscapes of biblical studies signaled in Bach’s introduction twenty years ago have been remapped into a burgeoning field where scholars of biblical literature and film theory can converse with each other through a number of different approaches and methodologies. The interdisciplinary engagement

that the contributors to this volume advocate shows that the boundaries between biblical studies and film studies are not as clearly drawn as is often presumed (by practitioners on both sides). Rather, the close encounter between Bible and film opens up new routes into territories where there is still much more to explore.

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## FILM THEORY AND BIBLICAL STUDIES

*George Aichele*

The determining conditions of the cinema are the following: [1] not merely the photo, but the snapshot ...; [2] the equidistance of snapshots; [3] the transfer of this equidistance on to a framework which constitutes the “film” (it was Edison and Dickson who perforated the film in the camera); [and 4] a mechanism for moving on images (Lumière’s claws). It is in this sense that the cinema is the system which reproduces movement as a function of any-instant-whatever ... selected so as to create an impression of continuity. (Deleuze 1986, 5, bracketed material added)

### Method and Theory

Many movies or characters in them reference or allude to the Bible, and other movies purport to depict some part of the Bible. However, this alone does not entail that there is a connection between the cinematic and biblical texts<sup>1</sup> that calls for critical study, and simply to note this connection is not criticism. To be sure, if the reference, allusion, or depiction is not significant, then that lack of significance may be worthy of critical comment instead. In contrast, there are many movies that appear to have nothing at all to do with any biblical text that nevertheless may be placed in significant intertextual relations with such texts, and these relations deserve to be critically explored.

Serious study of intertextual relations between biblical texts and movies requires that the student pay close attention not only to biblical scholarship and film theory but also to the methods by which the two inevitably diverse texts might be brought together and to the theoretical and even philosophical presuppositions that underlie those methods.

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1. In this essay I use *text* to refer to any object that someone regards as significant. This includes not only writings but speech, images, music, etc.

However, as a frequent reader of Bible and film criticism, it seems to me that often this criticism has not been critical enough in this regard.

In my experience as a writer of Bible and film criticism, the most significant analytical and critical bridge today between film studies and biblical studies, and thus between cinematic and biblical texts, is provided by the theory and methods of semiotic analysis. I do not want to belittle or ignore the many explorations of relations between the Bible and film that arise from and support specific critical-theoretical approaches, such as feminism, postcolonialism, queer theory, or Marxism, among others. I often find these approaches to be insightful. However, even when they are rich in other theories, such studies inevitably draw upon semiotics or some other method in order to bring the objects of investigation together in some way, and if they fail to pay attention to this question then they are seriously weakened.

By *semiotics* I refer to the study of signs and sign-systems.<sup>2</sup> Modern semiotics emerged in the late nineteenth century in the significantly different theories of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959) and Charles S. Peirce (1992), and it has been developed much further since then and in a variety of ways by scholars such as Emile Benveniste, Algirdas Julien Greimas, Julia Kristeva, Umberto Eco, Tzvetan Todorov, and Roland Barthes among many others. Semiotic analyses have proven relevant to a wide variety of fields, including architecture, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and linguistics, as well as film studies.

The only alternatives to semiotic analysis that I am aware of for this task are those of compare-and-contrast and allegory. What I call the compare-and-contrast approach places biblical and cinematic texts side by side and notes points of superficial similarity and difference. This method is lacking in any theoretical grounding, and it is therefore the most uncritical one. Some conclusion, often a theological one, is usually drawn, but because the approach lacks any theoretical base, analysis of the texts remains generally uncritical unless supplemented by semiotics or allegory.

The theoretical foundations of allegory were well developed nearly two thousand years ago, and people still sometimes read the Bible allegorically. An allegorical approach treats films as collections of symbols that add up to a hidden message or conclusion—a message that biblical texts also address. However, the philosophical and theological roots of allegory are

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2. *Semiotics* derives from the Greek word for “signs,” that is, *semeia*.

often forgotten or overlooked, and they are generally unacceptable today. Allegorical approaches to film and Bible can be quite critical, but they too often boil down to the relevance of the film to religious dogma, and that dogma almost always seems to be some form of Christian theology. One might say that allegory begins with theology, and simple comparison ends with it.

All Bible and film scholars draw upon both comparative and allegorical analysis in their studies of film and Bible and often for good reason. Many films that are worth thinking about are richly symbolic, and many films have details of plot, character, or language that echo those of biblical texts. However, if we restrict ourselves to either of these two approaches, then our analyses are condemned in advance to little more than theological apologetic.<sup>3</sup> Only semiotics, as far as I can tell, establishes a common field of critique in which analysis of significant tensions between biblical and cinematic texts can be pursued *without privileging the Bible in advance*. I will say more about this as I proceed in this essay.

In the essay I explore further selected aspects of a semiotic approach to film and the Bible. This exploration is by no means a comprehensive survey. Although semiotic analysis has been an essential component of film studies for a great many years now, beginning perhaps with the work of Jean Mitry (“Jean Mitry” 2016) and Christian Metz (“Christian Metz” 2016), semiotics still plays at best a marginal role in critical biblical studies, thanks in large part to that field’s origins in and continuing entanglements with theology, once again mainly Christian theology, despite considerable efforts from within the field to free it. Historical critics, who are the dominant party in biblical scholarship and often the most openly hostile to critical discussion of theory, are frequently willing to import unquestioned theological assumptions into their work.<sup>4</sup> As a result, no critical, nontheological approach to biblical studies has a wide hold among scholars today.

As long as biblical studies remains willfully blind to theory of any sort and also to its own continuing theological roots and investments, it will remain a seriously flawed discipline. One consequence of this deficiency

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3. Perhaps for this reason, most Bible and film studies focus either on explicit Bible movies or else on movies of recognized aesthetic merit in which theological or ethical issues are foregrounded.

4. This despite the crucial role played by historical criticism in the struggle to free biblical studies from theology.

is that any biblical scholar who wants to engage critically with film apart from theological allegory is going to have to remove those theoretical blinders and study semiotics, both in relation to film and in relation to the Bible.

### Film versus Bible

The importance of semiotics to joint study of cinematic and biblical texts is my first and perhaps my only significant point to make in this discussion. Each of my remaining points elaborates on this first one in various ways. My second point is self-evident, but it needs to be said anyway: film is not Bible, and Bible is not film. In other words, strictly speaking there are no Bible movies! Semiotic study requires close attention to the signifier, and that includes both its form and the physical stuff of it: the medium (see further Aichele 1997). We must recognize not only that cinema and the Bible are two different semiotic phenomena but that they are two different *kinds* of semiotic phenomena. As semiotic mechanisms, biblical texts and cinematic texts do not function in entirely the same ways.

On one hand, the Bible is a signifying mechanism assembled from a wide array of written texts, all of them originally hand-written in ancient and arcane languages. In part because of this, *the Bible* is a rather fuzzy concept. The Bible as known today is an after-the-fact collection of many of these ancient manuscripts. Furthermore, no two of the remaining ancient biblical manuscripts are identical to one another; in other words, *every one* of them is a variant. In addition, there are numerous different collections of these texts that are called the Bible and recognized as authoritative ("Scripture") by various religious communities.<sup>5</sup> Finally, the global distribution of Bibles in many different translations and versions also contributes to the vagueness and multiplicity of the Bible.

Despite the various translations, versions, and even collections of biblical books and regardless of its evident multiplicity, the Bible is regarded by most and perhaps all of the religious communities that venerate it as a canonical unity, a single thing, which is often called the word of God. This ideological mechanism of the Bible as an intertextual unity is significantly different from the semiotic mechanisms required by its various texts (see

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5. In this essay, my discussion is concerned primarily with the Christian Bible (which is still a fuzzy concept), although much of it may also be relevant to the Jewish Tanak.

further Aichele 2001). The various texts and the canonical assemblage of them are quite different things, and critical investigation of any one of these mechanisms does not necessarily apply to the others. The complexities of semiotic interplay within and between biblical texts have been matters of discussion and controversy for many hundreds of years.

On the other hand, *film* refers to motion pictures and by extension to other cinematic products that have appeared during the last century and a half. Film has its own distinctive mechanisms, beginning with the camera and the projector, and movies are perhaps the quintessential mechanically-reproduced works of art (see Benjamin 1968). As Gilles Deleuze notes in the epigraph to this essay, a movie requires a sequence of snapshots, distributed along a perforated strip of film, which has been advanced through a mechanism of sprockets, at first in a camera where it is exposed, and then after it has been developed, through a projector. Deleuze's description omits or glosses a great deal, such as: (1) the framing of the shots, both inclusion and exclusion of material to be seen, (2) the use of light from natural or artificial sources, (3) matters of focus and exposure, (4) the movement of the camera itself, (5) the developing and augmentation of the image, and much more, as Deleuze himself shows in great detail in his two books on cinema (1986, 1989).

Film is a medium of communication, and many different texts (movies) have by now been produced in that medium. In contrast, the Bible is a relatively small, canonically-fixed collection of texts that have been produced in a different medium, that of writing. Because of the great differences between these two media, an extreme sort of translation is required in order to bring together the disparate semiotic phenomena of a film and a biblical text. However, just as biblical scholars have only in recent years begun to take seriously the problem of translating biblical texts from one language to another, so likewise Bible and film scholars are still not taking seriously the significant changes that are inevitable when one translates a text from writing into film, even if the language remains the same.

The difference between written and cinematic media is comparable in some ways to that between human languages, but in other ways it is quite different. Both writing and film create reality, but they do so by manipulating their respective signifying materials in different ways. Even if they come from two different cultures, two human beings have at least comparable sensory and motor organs and comparable nervous systems, and they both live to some degree in the same reality. Any two human languages will have to deal with that commonality. In contrast,

by its nature cinema controls and transforms the human sensorium, augmenting but also reducing it and making possible wholly different experiences of wholly different realities. Not even raw film footage can ever reproduce what really happened. Writing also affects the perception of reality but in different ways. Writing separates the signified, the mental concept or meaning aspect of the sign, from the material signifier or “body” of the sign, suspending or deferring reality and thereby opening spaces for the imagination in which the reader has a greater degree of freedom (but also feels a greater need for interpretation) than the viewer of a film would.

Precisely because there is a difference in the signifiers of texts in the two media, there is always a difference in the signified meanings. A movie that derives from a written text will inevitably not convey the same meaning as its source text, no matter how close the translation is, whether of dialog, sequence of events, or the appearance of characters or locations. For example, so-called Bible movies usually purport to depict some contents of written texts of the Bible in the medium of film. However, filming the written words or sentences of a biblical text by replacing them with images or sounds substantially transforms the semiosis or potential for meaning of the text itself. At the least, it gives to those contents a concreteness and specificity that no written text (no matter how detailed or vivid) can ever produce; the film is in effect a reading of the writing that far exceeds any literal translation. Other semiotic transformations come into play in relations between biblical texts and non-Bible movies. It is these semiotic transformations that require close critical examination.

In other words, biblical texts and movies do not simply signify differently; instead, what counts as signifying for each of them is quite a different thing. Thus the focus of film and Bible studies should not be on questions of equivalency in meaning between the biblical and cinematic texts but rather on semiotic tensions between them. Once again, this point applies both to the analysis of Bible movies and whenever biblical texts are juxtaposed to images, themes, or characters in movies, even if those movies do not have any evident relation to biblical material.

Indeed, the translation difficulties presented by biblical texts are both more complex and more evident in relation to films that do not represent biblical texts in a more-or-less explicit way. Especially when seemingly obvious links to a biblical text, such as the apple-eating scene in Gary Ross's *Pleasantville* (1998) or the crucifixion scene in John Milius's *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), are entirely absent from a movie, the

intertextual task of juxtaposing film and written text and then tracing semiotic flows back and forth between the two may be quite daunting. Close attention must then be paid not only to the biblical text and the cinematic one, but also to a host of matters including cultural or sociopolitical implications and conceptual issues ranging far beyond the narrow confines of biblical studies.

This may be why Bible and film scholars seem to be more interested in Bible movies—which admittedly play an important role in cinema history—than in the far greater number of non-Bible movies. However, the benefits of critical analysis of biblical texts in relation to movies that are not Bible movies are great. I think that nothing would benefit Bible and film studies more than if biblical scholars were to spend more time studying films that display no evident traces of the Bible.

### No Privilege

I have already hinted at my third point, but I want to elaborate on it here: from a semiotic point of view, there is no privileged member in the film-Bible relationship. Earlier I also mentioned the troubled relation between theology and biblical studies. In far too many Bible and film studies—which are nearly all, it seems, written by biblical scholars or theologians and far less often by film or other scholars<sup>6</sup>—the Bible-film relation provides just another way to talk about the Bible. The focus is almost entirely on the signified meaning of the film in relation to the Bible and not nearly enough on cinematic or biblical signifiers. The movie is treated as though it offers (or should offer) an exegetical depiction of a biblical text, and it is then often criticized for failing to respect that text's meaning in ways that a careful theologian or biblical scholar would. In far too few of these studies is the exegetical flow reversed, as Larry Kreitzer (2002) recommends, so that the movie also deconstructs the biblical text, "reading" it and exposing mechanisms of its semiosis.

The Bible (as it is understood in such studies) is allowed to critique the movie, but the movie is not allowed to critique the Bible. In other words, the biblical text is always placed in a position superior to the film—that is, the Bible is privileged. As a result, these studies may be acceptable as

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6. Film scholars have written about Bible movies, but they usually restrict their analysis to critique of the film as film and avoid any critique of the Bible.

biblical scholarship, but as cinematic scholarship they remain strongly apologetic, as I said earlier. It appears that no matter how secular, unbiased, or atheological biblical scholars may consider themselves to be, they cannot free themselves entirely from at least a residual biblicism. Bible and film scholarship then remains hampered by the same theological constraints that impede nearly all biblical scholarship.

In addition to reading the movie as an interpretation of the biblical text, that text should also be read as an interpretation of the movie. This means that Bible and film scholars must stop privileging history, which serves as a screen—a smoke screen, not a movie screen—behind which the older text that is the Bible is regarded as an original in relation to which the film must be secondary and derivative. In biblical studies at least, *derivative* often means inferior, and implicit in this judgment is a theological bias that favors the more “authoritative” source.

The alternative is to read the two texts as though they trace lines (of narrative, dialog, or image) that intersect at one or more points, like the Tarot card sequences that generate stories in Italo Calvino’s novel, *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1977, see pp. 40, 98, and *passim*). Each story in Calvino’s book corresponds to a sequence of cards, and these sequences are distributed in horizontal and vertical lines that intersect one another. If the cards are rearranged, they correspond to still other stories. If we think of a cinematic text and a biblical text as such lines, then the potential intersections between them mark what I described earlier as semiotic tensions. In this way the larger fields of biblical studies and film studies might also intersect in substantial and mutually beneficial ways. However, this intersection is not an allegorical one, for neither the biblical text nor the film elaborates the “true meaning” of the other. Instead, the critical exchange is a reciprocal one, with each text both illuminating and contesting the other. Furthermore, these intersections may be (and often are) quite accidental and entirely unintentional—purely aleatory or serendipitous.

This third point is more a matter of ideology and power than of theory as such—a product of the continuing presence of the Bible in a culture that no longer knows what to do with it—but in a field such as biblical studies, ideology is never far from theory. This much is evident in conflicts between maximalists and minimalists in Hebrew Bible studies or between supporters and opponents of the Q hypothesis in New Testament studies. Here also what seem to be disagreements about historical matters often mask other concerns, and often these are again theological concerns—



concerns about the truth-value of these ancient writings, among others.<sup>7</sup> Another such conflict may exist already within Bible and film scholarship, between those whose interest in film is primarily or even only due to their interest in the Bible, and those who are interested in popular mass media in their own right, apart from their relation to biblical texts.

### The Digital Age

My fourth point may seem to be a quibble, but I think it deserves serious attention. This point also concerns the question of the signifier and in some ways extends and modifies my second point. Film is not film any more, or at least, it is not *only* film. The medium itself is changing radically. In recent years, new movies have been made using combinations of the older analog and new digital technologies, and “films” (as they are still called) are now increasingly produced using digital technology from start to finish. No photographic film is used.

In addition, although many older films have now been digitally reprocessed, this once again involves a translation not unlike that between printed text and digital text. The semiotics of a film changes when its medium changes, for the physical signifiers are different, even if the signified—the viewed film—seems identical. Indeed, the viewer may even be aware of this change, at least in the form of elimination of screen flicker or augmentation of image or sound. Just as some people prefer to listen to analog music recordings, and many people still prefer to read printed books, so there are those who choose to watch older movies using film and projector. Although the reasons given for these choices do not generally include concerns about translation, that may nevertheless be a factor.

I suspect that the digitizing of cinema, and especially the deconstruction of the image into pixels, will prove to have caused more important changes to the cinematic medium in the long run than did the earlier additions of sound and color to moving images. The technology of cinema is important to Deleuze, but he wrote his two books on cinema in the early 1980s. This was before the use of digital imaging devices to decompose images and recorded sounds into millions of tiny bits and

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7. Similar disagreements are also evident on a larger scale between historical critics and postmodernists throughout biblical studies, and on a still larger scale between the fields of biblical studies, religious studies, and theology.

recompose them in extremely high-resolution forms had much if any impact on movies.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, given Deleuze's almost-digital understanding of human thought and experience as assemblages of machines that process molecular bits of perception and cognition (Deleuze and Guattari 1983), a Deleuzian analysis of these digital cinematic processes and their products might not be inappropriate.

As the physical stuff of the cinematic medium, celluloid film (along with its perforations and the need for "Lumière's claws") is going the way of papyrus, and increasingly even paper, in the realm of writing. To be sure, the media revolution ranges far more widely than the cinema. We are only beginning to appreciate the important semiotic differences between digital and printed writing, and in biblical studies, where the difference between oral and scribal cultures is often regarded as of great importance, many scholars still have not taken seriously the equally important differences between manuscript and print cultures and the texts that they produced. In each case there were radical changes in the signifiers, but such changes could not have occurred without producing corresponding changes in the signifieds.

Even though the collection of writings within the biblical canon has not changed, the "mode of presentation" (Frege 1952) of its texts has changed a great deal as they have been transferred from manuscript to printed to digitized forms. As a result, both the significance and the status of the Bible have changed substantially, and they continue to change thanks to digitization. The same is true for a wide array of other written texts as availability and ease of access to electronic books of many sorts has become widespread.<sup>9</sup> Scholars, and especially biblical scholars, have not paid enough attention to these changes.

While the implications of all of this for Bible and film studies are still unclear, I suspect that they are considerable. We never really see *film* any more in meetings of Bible and film scholars, and often we are not even talking about films! Furthermore, I would guess that most university classes on Bible and film today (or for that matter, "X and film" where X is almost any subject) never watch celluloid film running through a traditional

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8. Digital cameras were developed in the 1970s but did not become commercially available until the 1980s. Digital cinematography emerged somewhat later. According to *Wikipedia* ("Digital Cinematography" 2016), James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009) was the first major motion picture made and projected using digital processes throughout.

9. The digital revolution has occurred also in the field of music, with similar effects.

analog projector. Far more important, for those who live as I do in places that are relatively distant from major cinema markets, movies are less and less something to be watched in a public theater (where they too are now usually disks spinning in digital projectors). Netflix and Redbox, supplemented by Amazon, Hulu, and a rapidly growing number of other streaming video sources, have become the primary means of access to movies, especially those movies that for economic or local cultural reasons will never be shown in theaters within easy reach of Adrian, Michigan, where I live, or countless other small towns.

As I suggested above, shifts in the technology of written texts, such as those between manuscript and print, involve translation even when the language does not change. At the same time, the shift to digital technology across media tends to erase distinctions that used to be significant between the media themselves, so that talk about the convergence of cinema, television, and other audio-visual media (including still photographs, video games, and music) in streaming digital networks is already common. It remains to be seen whether a different but related convergence will occur between written and audio-visual texts, but I think there is reason to believe that this convergence is indeed already happening, at precisely the points where the respective media have all become digital. I watch nearly all of my movies on the same monitors that I use to watch television or browse the Internet—the same monitors that I also use to write or, increasingly, to read the writings of others.

The concept of medium may need rethinking. To be sure, the differences between a written text and a movie, when they are both displayed side by side on computer screens, are obvious: one of them is silent and static, and usually monochromatic, while the other makes noise (often), moves continually (Deleuze's "impression of continuity"), and is usually colorful. However, at the level of digital signifiers in a local computer or streamed from a Web server, the differences are much less evident. Use your Kindle to read a book or to watch a movie: what difference does it make? Digitization tends to blur the differences between written text and cinema, even as it makes the mediated nature of writing more evident, just as that of cinema has always been evident (for example, in the cuts of the montage and the movements of the camera).

Despite this, important differences remain between written texts and film. By its very nature written text, whether analog or digital, requires the reader to work harder to understand it than the viewer of nearly any film does. Written text does not move by itself or decipher itself. We overlook

this difficulty because we mastered the skill of reading long ago (which is why the mediation of writing becomes invisible to us), but that effort is still evident in relation to what Roland Barthes (1974) called “writerly texts,” and it is by no means absent from encounters with even the most “readerly texts.” It is easy (and tempting) to forget that reading is hard work! This brings me back to the material differences between writing and film that were noted above. Written words cannot speak for themselves, whereas many films seem to, thanks in large part to their moving and talking images.

Watching a movie can also sometimes be hard work, but it is almost always less so than reading a book, and many movies even seem to encourage a simple passivity in the viewer, a tendency to just drift along and let the film lead the way. Even the most writerly films do not require the sort of reader effort that texts such as Ecclesiastes or the Revelation of John do. Pier Paolo Pasolini’s movie, *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (*The Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, 1964), as demanding on the viewer as that film is, is still less demanding than the written Gospel of Matthew. This has important implications in regard to Bible movies, many of which seem designed to satisfy the viewer’s ideological desires and to avoid the hard work of reading, or of thinking.

Just as the digitization of books and popular media transforms the semiotic processes involved, so widespread network availability of digital books, music, and films also presents tremendous challenges to concepts and control of intellectual property rights. Both the publishing and the popular media industries are hastening to climb aboard the digital media express, but they are also hastening to safeguard their copyrights in view of the challenges presented by the new technology, and copyright protection has become fragile in the digital world. It is quite easy to make copies of electronic books, even books protected by digital rights management software such as that of Amazon’s Kindle, and bittorrent trackers such as The Pirate Bay make unprotected digital copies of movies, music, and TV shows freely available. Neither Kindle nor The Pirate Bay would be conceivable apart from digitization.

This is another topic that biblical scholars rarely touch, and its implications for Bible and film studies have yet to be explored, as far as I know. Canon traditionally secured the Bible for the churches, and copyright has protected both the Bible and films during the modern (predigital) period. What will secure or protect them in a world that respects neither canon nor copyright?

### Commodification and the Spectacle

Semiotics studies the flows of meaning, and meaning cannot flow unless signifieds are produced—or in this case, unless books are read or movies are viewed, for it is readers and viewers who produce meaning. This brings me to my final point, which I also noted earlier. From almost its beginnings to the present day, the cinema has been a mass-produced work of art (Benjamin 1968). Unlike books, or at least manuscripts, movies are commodities that cannot exist apart from their consumption by large groups of individuals. Not only are they produced in large numbers of identical copies, but they are marketed to large numbers of consumers. Movies often cost a lot to make, and many of them would not be made if there was no chance of recouping the cost.

In contrast, it is only in its printed and now digital forms that the Bible and its texts have gone down a similar road. To be sure, earlier ecclesiastical efforts at standardization resulted in the canonization of the Bible, gathering and binding together its various texts, and among those efforts was a sort of ancient mass-production of texts in scriptoria, which were basically factories for the hand-copying of books. Nevertheless, those manuscript Bibles were inevitably unique creations. Bible codices were produced primarily for distribution to churches or other religious communities where they were usually read aloud in public settings, not unlike the screening of movies in large theaters.<sup>10</sup> Few individuals could afford to buy one or had the ability to read its texts.

Prior to their adoption into the canon, the separate biblical texts were read, copied, and distributed in what were probably a variety of different circumstances. It seems likely that for some of these texts, the status that they acquired within the canon contributed significantly to their use and popularity in a church that had itself, thanks to Constantine, acquired imperial power. (Would anyone still read the book of Nahum or the letter of Jude if either of them were not in the church's canon?)

However, once the Bible could be printed in thousands of identical copies, it became a truly mass-produced commodity. The Protestant

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10. This was the primary way that most people watched movies prior to the screening of movies on commercial television stations, which began in the 1940s. However, TV sets were not found in many private homes before the 1950s, and it was not until the advent of privately-owned videotape players, which became popular in the 1970s, that movie theater attendance was seriously challenged by private viewing.

Reformation, with its belief in the priesthood of all believers, and the rise of an increasingly-literate middle class were both under way at the time that the movable-type printing press was invented. Printed books were relatively cheap, and one could usually buy a printed copy of a book more easily than copying it out by hand. Thanks to this combination of factors,<sup>11</sup> there emerged a growing population of readers, who could then each have her own copy in her own language and read it privately. This increasingly widespread private ownership and reading of Bibles by individuals corroded the power of the canon. Equally important, control over the Bible's publication passed into the hands of commercial publishing houses, who may or may not have had theological interests but who definitely wanted to make a profit. Canonical status was not enough.

Prior to the print revolution, not only was private copying, ownership, or distribution of written texts not a concern, but the making and distributing of private copies was even encouraged. However, the expense of printing and marketing had to be recovered, and publishers and book sellers wanted profits. Copyright laws were created not long after commercial book printing began in order to restrict the making of copies and guarantee those profits. It is the enforcement of these copyright laws that is now threatened by the new digital technologies, for it has now become easier and cheaper to copy a book (or movie) than to buy it. In other words, modern outrage over book or video pirating is among other things a symptom of the transformation from print to electronic cultures. We cling to the previous age's values (and the laws are still enforced) long after they—and the technology that gave rise to them—have become outmoded.

One consequence of the printing of Bibles has been the desire of publishers to maintain or increase their sales by developing increasingly reader-friendly and therefore loosely translated Bibles, including versions in the form of comic books, movies, or videos that further confuse any distinction between written text and cinema. These versions also bear such dubious resemblance to the written texts that one might well question whether people who read the Bible in the form of these popular products have read the Bible in any sense at all.

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11. Other important factors included importation (from China) of the technology of paper-making and growing acceptance during the Renaissance of vernacular translation.

Today the power of the Bible is measured in terms of book sales, not unlike the box office receipts of newly-released movies. Like the movies, the Bible now lives and dies in the marketplace, and indeed, the huge popularity of many Bible movies is now a significant vehicle for the marketing of the Bible. Thus by separate routes, both cinema and the Bible have entered postmodern spaces of the spectacle. They have both become big business. The business end of cinema is well known, but what that all has to do with the Bible has yet to be thoroughly explored.

Nevertheless, the mechanisms of semiosis are shifting continually as the technology continues to develop (high definition, 3-D, what's next? perhaps holograms or even direct streaming into the brain), and those shifts cannot be undone. We are already used to reading movies in ways that we read the Bible. Now it is time to read the Bible in ways that we read a movie, or the hypertext of Web pages, and perhaps eventually to read it in ways that we can barely imagine now. Perhaps such readings would revolutionize biblical studies, and the Bible itself, far more than the introduction of the codex did two millennia ago, or than that of printed Bibles did a few hundred years ago.

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PART 1

FILM TECHNIQUE AS INTERPRETIVE LENS



THE OBTRUSIVE GLIMPSE:  
ALFRED HITCHCOCK AND THE NAKED YOUNG MAN  
(MARK 14:51–52)

*Larry J. Kreitzer*

A certain young man was following him, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him, but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked. (Mark 14:51–52, NRSV)

These two verses from the story of the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemane are among the most enigmatic in the Gospel of Mark. In the eyes of many, the verses interrupt the narrative flow of the story, and there is no obvious reason for their insertion between 14:50 and 14:53. In addition, the fact that the verses are found only in Mark, without any parallels to either the other Synoptics or to John, makes them all the more mysterious. As William Telford (1995, 56) noted: “Few verses in the New Testament reveal more the hermeneutical orientation of scholars (either historical or literary) than their attempts to interpret 14:51–52.”

The Interpretation of Mark 14:51–52:  
A Conundrum for Scholarship

Although Mark 14:51–52 attracted the attention of a wide range of scholars over the years, assessments of the verses vary considerably. Dennis Nineham (1963, 396) notes that they are “puzzling verses,” whereas Morna D. Hooker (1991, 352) says that they are “a total enigma.” Donald English (1992, 222) says that they are “wonderfully inexplicable.” Hugh Anderson (1976, 324) describes them as an “extraordinary vignette,” while Paul J. Achtemeier (1986, 126) takes them to be a “seemingly pointless reference to the young man.” Harry Fleddermann (1979, 412) states that their presence

in Mark is “a continuing embarrassment,” while James R. Edwards (2002, 440) somewhat humorously describes them as “the curious reminiscence of the first recorded streaker in history.”

While critical discussion of the verses has been extensive, there have been two main lines of interpretation that have occupied scholars over the years. The first has focused on the historical issues raised by the passage, notably the identity of the naked young man and whether he was meant to be taken as a real or representative figure. The second has concentrated on the symbolism contained within the verses: what is the significance of the linen cloth in the story, and what is to be made of the young man’s fleeing away naked?<sup>1</sup>

For our purposes here we shall concentrate on the first of these questions and seek to add some new weight to the long-standing suggestion that 14:51–52 is in fact a veiled reference to the writer of the Gospel of Mark himself. Some scholars have gone a step further and identified that person as the John Mark of Acts 12:12. Adapting an artistic analogy, Theodor Zahn (1909, 2:252) first proposed over a century ago that it was John Mark, who by means of 14:51–52 “painted a small self-portrait in the corner of his work in the way that others used a monogram to announce that he himself made it.” Other commentators are not as certain about the identification with John Mark and are content to allow the young man to remain unidentified, taking him to be an important, but anonymous, eye-witness to the arrest of Jesus in Gethsemane who is responsible for writing the Gospel of Mark. One of the most recent advocates of this approach is Richard Bauckham (2007, 197–201), who suggests that the Gospel of Mark adopts a “protective anonymity” with regard to the young man of 14:51–52.<sup>2</sup> Whether the author of the gospel is John Mark or an anonymous disciple matters little for our argument here; the point is that he includes 14:51–52 in the gospel as a deliberate self-reference.

### The Author of Mark and Alfred Hitchcock as Imposing Artists

As best as I can determine, the first person to suggest a connection between the author of the Gospel of Mark and Alfred Hitchcock was the English literary critic Frank Kermode in *The Genesis of Secrecy* (1979). In

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1. Two of the most helpful summaries of critical scholarship on the verses are Brown (1994, 1:294–304) and Collins (2007).

2. Bauckham is building on the work of Theissen (1991, 184–89).

his discussion of Mark 14:51–52, which Kermode describes as the story of “the Boy in the Shirt,” a number of possible interpretations are discussed. Included among these is the possibility that “it refers to Mark’s own presence at the arrest he is describing. Thus it is a sort of reticent signature, like Alfred Hitchcock’s appearances in his own films, or Joyce’s as MacIntosh” (56). Kermode dismisses this possibility as not really credible. His suggestion has, however, since been noted by a number of New Testament commentators, including Ernest Best in his *Mark: The Gospel as Story*. Best similarly said that 14:51–52 has often been taken as Mark’s signature, “just as Alfred Hitchcock always appeared, if only briefly, in all the films he directed” (1983, 26).<sup>3</sup>

A comparable comment is found in Bas van Iersel’s *Reading Mark* (1989, 186): “Others suspect that the author of the book himself appears on the stage for a moment through the character of this young man, just as Hitchcock used to pop up in his own films.” Richard Thomas France (2002, 596–97) makes a similar comment about 14:51–52, noting the suggestion that “it was Mark writing himself anonymously into his own story in a minor role in the manner of Alfred Hitchcock.”

Occasionally, the Hitchcock connection is even enlarged to apply to the Gospel of Mark as a whole. Thus, David Rhoads and Donald Michie (1982, 51) suggest real parallels can be drawn between Mark’s narrative style and Hitchcock’s way of film directing: “Hearing Mark’s story for the first time is like watching a Hitchcock film in which the viewer is aware of a threatening situation at the opening of the film, then nervously watches the unsuspecting characters in the story become aware for themselves.” Somewhat ironically, the possibility that 14:51–52 could be likened to a cameo appearance by Hitchcock within a film is never made by Rhoads and Michie, although it would have contributed usefully to their analogy.

In short, there have been a handful of New Testament scholars who have considered the association of 14:51–52 with Hitchcock’s trademark of making cameo appearances in his films an attractive prospect. That is not to say that everyone has accepted this idea. John Painter (1997, 186), for example, notes the connection with Hitchcock but summarily dismisses it without further elaboration when he says, “There is no reason to

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3. Best himself dismisses the identification of the young man with John Mark, stating that this idea only became popular in the second half of the nineteenth century.

think that the scene is the author's signature, like the fleeting appearance of Alfred Hitchcock in his films."<sup>4</sup>

For some scholars of the Gospel of Mark, the Hitchcock parallel seems to have been a convenient peg upon which to hang the discussion about the relationship between 14:51–52 and the identity of the author of the gospel as a whole. This is acceptable as far as it goes, but it does not really get us very far. The *idea* of Hitchcock's cameo appearances is rightly registered by these Markan specialists, but there is no critical awareness of the cameos' significance for Hitchcock's cinematic purposes. The fact that none of the Markan scholars mentions the title of any of Hitchcock's films or discusses a cameo appearance within any of those films in any way shows the shallowness of their analysis.

As a director, Hitchcock was renowned for his mastery of every facet of filmmaking. He controlled everything from camera angles, to the placement of studio lights, to the writing and reworking of scripts, to editing the final cut, to shameless promotion and publicity of the finished product. He harangued and bullied his actors and actresses so as to get what he wanted out of them for the sake of the film. This obsessive attention to detail applied to every scene in the film, including the cameos, which means that *how* and *why* and *when* the cameos appear in Hitchcock's films are all important factors to keep in mind. These things may alert us to new understandings of the significance of Mark 14:51–52 within the overall narrative of the gospel as a whole. Let us turn now to consider in more detail Hitchcock's cameos.

### Hitchcock's Cameo Appearances in His Films

Hitchcock (1899–1980) was born in Leytonstone in London and died in Los Angeles, California, having moved to the United States in 1939 and become an American citizen in 1955. During the course of a career spanning more than fifty years, he directed fifty-three films. He was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Director five times but never won the Oscar, although his film *Rebecca* was awarded Best Picture in 1940. He is widely regarded as one of the most influential film directors of the twentieth century and is frequently described as the "Master of

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4. Bauckham (2007, 199) cites Painter's reference to Hitchcock's film appearances.

Suspense.” Six of his films are listed by [www.filmsite.org](http://www.filmsite.org) as among the “100 Greatest Films.”<sup>5</sup>

One of Hitchcock’s best-known cinematic techniques was his use of the cameo appearance in which he incorporated a short scene of himself within the film. It is generally agreed that there are around thirty-nine Hitchcock films that include a cameo appearance. Hitchcock does not appear in all of his films, although cameos do appear in *every* picture Hitchcock made after relocating to California in 1939. The gimmick quickly captured the public imagination, and audiences began to expect to find him embedded somewhere within his films. Indeed, discussion of Hitchcock’s use of cameo appearances in his films has now become a standard feature in most books and articles about him.<sup>6</sup> A number of web sites are dedicated to exploring Hitchcock’s cameo appearances within his films.<sup>7</sup> The influential film critic Roger Ebert has even compiled a helpful montage of the various appearances of Hitchcock, with visual highlighting to help identify him in several of the cameos that take place either in crowd scenes or are long-range distance shots.<sup>8</sup> So captivating was Hitchcock’s cameo trademark that when Gus Van Sant directed a remake of Hitchcock’s thriller *Psycho* in 1998 he even reproduced the cameo appearance. Van Sant inserted a cameo appearance of himself at precisely the same point in the film where Hitchcock made his appearance in the original. To complete the cameo homage to Hitchcock, the scene has a portly actor, who looks remarkably like Hitchcock, berating Van Sant while wearing a large cowboy hat, just like the one Hitchcock wore in his 1960 *Psycho*. In short, this becomes a cameo within a cameo of Hitchcock (or his likeness). Not surprisingly the *Psycho* remake was dedicated “In Memory of Alfred Hitchcock.”

Commonly, the cameo appearances are described as incidental interjections into the story line of the film with little bearing on the overall plot

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5. The six are *Rebecca* (1940); *Notorious* (1946); *Rear Window* (1954); *Vertigo* (1958); *North by Northwest* (1959); and *Psycho* (1960).

6. The literature about Hitchcock and his films is vast. Among the best biographies are Taylor (1978), Spoto (1983), and McGilligan (2003). A helpful reference guide to his films is Sloan (1993).

7. See, for example, Skramstad (n.d.), which lists the thirty-nine films and contains still photographs from fifteen of them. Also see “List of Alfred Hitchcock Cameo Appearances” (n.d.); “The Hitchcock Cameos” (n.d.); “Alfred Hitchcock Cameos” (n.d.); “Alfred Hitchcock’s Movie Cameos” (n.d.); and Kankku (2010).

8. The film clip, which lasts 3:52 minutes, can be accessed at Ebert (2011).

or the development of the characters. Thomas M. Leitch (1991, 8) suggests that through the cameos Hitchcock was simply indulging himself in a playful game of “spot the director” with his audience. However, it is not unusual to find Hitchcock enthusiasts who argue that the cameos are far from trivial interruptions to the story line and often have crucial contributions to make to what Hitchcock was attempting to convey within his films. A case in point is the cameo in *Vertigo* (1958), which Murray Pomerance (2004, 224, 258–60) investigates in detail, concentrating on the symbolism and meaning of the trumpet case carried by Hitchcock as he walks from left to right across the screen through the cameo. Raymond Bellour (2000, 223–32) similarly argues that the cameo appearance in *Marnie* (1964) is crucial for understanding what Hitchcock wanted to communicate about sexual fantasy and the portrayal of women as sexual objects within the film.<sup>9</sup> Another good example is the cameo appearance in *Strangers on a Train* (1951), where Hitchcock is seen boarding the train on which the two male protagonists have been planning a murder, struggling to get a large double-bass case through the narrow carriage doorway. Bellour comments perceptively on this scene:

[Hitchcock] gets into a train with a cello [*sic*] in his hand. What you have here is condensation: the young woman who will be the victim of the murder works in a music store, and the exchange of murders between the two heroes takes place in the train. Hitchcock puts himself at the heart of the metaphorical circuit between the sexes. (Bellour and Rosolato 1990, 201)

Michael Walker (2005, 90) also picks up on the importance of this cameo scene as an indicator of the plot of *Strangers on a Train*, noting that the musical instrument Hitchcock was here wrestling with was a double-bass and that this is a “film about the hero and his double, the instrument is also a visual double of the director.”

Finally, we note that John Fawell (2001, 99–101) makes a compelling case about the cameo in *Rear Window* (1954), of all of Hitchcock’s films the one that is the most revealing when it comes to demonstrating his artistry as a film-maker. The cameo itself has Hitchcock appear in the apartment of the unnamed composer who is under the attentive gaze of the voyeuristic main character Jeff (Jimmy Stewart) from across the courtyard. Fawell

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9. Kapsis (1992, 133) also discusses the cameo along these lines.



argues that through the cameo Hitchcock is establishing a parallel between himself as the creator of the film and the composer who is struggling to write a new piece of music throughout the film. The composer is a cipher for Hitchcock as the artist responsible for the production of the film.

Hitchcock as Auteur: Applying Insights  
to Mark's Obtrusive Glimpse of 14:51–52

In 1962, Hitchcock agreed to be interviewed by another celebrated figure from the cinematic world, the French director François Truffaut. Truffaut was a prime mover in the French New Wave movement, which dominated film theory during the 1950s, primarily through the influential film journal *Cahiers du Cinéma*. As such, he became a leading advocate of the auteur theory of film-making and identified Hitchcock as one of its most important examples. The central idea of this approach to cinema was the belief that cinema was a legitimate art form and that the artist of a film was the director, who brought his or her vision to the project, gave it life, and impressed a distinctive authorial hand on the finished project.<sup>10</sup> Truffaut conducted a twenty-five-hour long interview with Hitchcock, which covered a wide range of topics, including his early life, his views about cinematic theory and the nature of suspense, as well as a systematic discussion of most of his films.<sup>11</sup> At one point in the interview, the matter of Hitchcock's cameo appearances was raised. Hitchcock explained that his first cameo appearance was in *The Lodger* (1927) and that it was originally done because there were not enough extras and he needed to fill the screen. He continues: "Later on it became a superstition and eventually a gag. But by now it's a rather troublesome gag, and I'm very careful to show up in the first five minutes so as to let the people look at the rest of the movie with no further distraction" (Truffaut 1986, 54). In short, Hitchcock soon became aware that the cameo appearances could easily become a distraction from the story of the film itself and that the attention of the audience was unnecessarily diverted to them. His solution was not to stop including these obtrusive glimpses within his films, but rather to move them to an earlier point in the story.

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10. Fabe (2004, 120–34) has a good discussion of this.

11. The interview was later edited and published. See Truffaut (1986). Audio files of the interviews can be found at [http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Alfred\\_Hitchcock\\_and\\_Fran%C3%A7ois\\_Truffaut\\_\(Aug/1962\)](http://the.hitchcock.zone/wiki/Alfred_Hitchcock_and_Fran%C3%A7ois_Truffaut_(Aug/1962)).

I would like to suggest four ways in which the study of Hitchcock's cameo appearances might shed light on how Mark 14:51–52 serves as a focal point to better understand how and why the author of the gospel inserted a brief glimpse of himself into his narrative.

(1) An Identification with His Intended Audience. The majority of Hitchcock's cameos can be divided into two types: he is either walking through the scene as a casual passer-by or standing in a crowd watching some event along with a host of other people.<sup>12</sup> In both types, he is the archetypal common man, doing ordinary things in an unremarkable way. In some respects, this can be viewed as Hitchcock's attempt to identify with his wider audience and to portray himself as one with them. As Richard Allen (2007, 21) put it, noting that the cameos often take place in a public space: "In this way Hitchcock announces his allegiance with his audience as an ordinary member of the public."

This is not unlike the attempt by the writer of Mark 14:51–52 to identify himself with the wider group of Christian disciples who "followed" after Jesus and were his intended literary audience. Indeed, this may help explain his use in verse 51 of the unusual compound verb *συνηκολούθει* ("he was accompanying *with*"), used elsewhere in Mark only in 5:37 where Jesus allows no one to accompany him except Peter, James, and John.

(2) The Retention of Authorial Anonymity. The fact that the identity of the young man in Mark 14:51–52 is never stated in the text and that no readily recognizable clues are provided to help establish who he is remains one of the most puzzling features of the story. It means, of course, that there have been countless attempts to identify him over the years. It is also significant that the naked young man flees away from his pursuers without ever having uttered a word.

There is a striking parallel here to Hitchcock's cameo appearances, for in only one of them is Hitchcock ever heard to speak.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, with the

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12. Examples of the first type include *Easy Virtue* (1927), *Murder!* (1930), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *Rebecca* (1940), *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), *Mr. and Mrs. Smith* (1941), *Suspicion* (1941), *Spellbound* (1945), *Rope* (1948), *I Confess* (1953), *The Trouble with Harry* (1955), *Vertigo* (1958), and *The Birds* (1963). Examples of the second include *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1956) and *Frenzy* (1972).

13. The exception that proves the rule is the cameo in *The Wrong Man* (1956). This film opens with a long-range shot of a silhouetted Hitchcock walking towards the camera as he says: "This is Alfred Hitchcock speaking. In the past I have given you many kinds of suspense pictures, but this time I would like you to see a different one. The difference lies in the fact that this is a true story, every word of it. And yet it

exception of the cameo in *Lifeboat* (1944) (discussed below), there is nothing that identifies Hitchcock by name within the cameo sequences, and he is never credited within any of his films as one of the actors. It is as if he is deliberately anonymous, although we as the cinematic audience are (for the most part) perfectly aware who he is and what his hand has been in the production of the film.

Perhaps this is not all that different from the situation faced by the first couple of generations of Christians who encountered the Gospel of Mark. They may have heard Mark 14:51–52, with its story of the unnamed, naked (and silent!) young man, and yet were perfectly aware of his identity. This accords nicely with Bauckham's recent work on the principle of "protective anonymity" within the gospels noted above.

(3) The Establishment of a Point of Narrative Transition. It is important to pay attention to the placement of the cameos in Hitchcock's films. When Hitchcock's cameos appear within the narrative flow of the films is crucial for appreciating their significance. Walker (2005, 89) argues that the cameos generally "signal a geographical—or narrative—shift" as the action moves from one point to the next. More particularly, he argues,

the cameo marks the moment when the protagonist goes to the location where he/she will make the fateful decision which leads him/her into the chaos world.... Hitchcock's cameo is like a coded signal: what is about to occur is a certain sort of scene. It may begin innocently or even seem innocent throughout, but in fact it marks a—distinctly Hitchcockian—turning point. As a result of this scene, the protagonist will be precipitated into the chaos world. The literal intrusion of the director into the diegesis could thus be seen as a mark of Hitchcock's self-conscious control over the narrative. (91–92)

It is easy to see how this idea could be readily applied to Mark 14:51–52, for immediately after the story of the flight of the naked young man Jesus is put on trial for his life and descends into the chaotic world of hatred and abuse that ended on a Roman cross (14:53–15:25).

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contains elements that are stranger than all the fiction that has gone into many of the thrillers that I have made before." It seems that the claims made about the truth of the story here necessitated a different kind of cameo. Aulier (1999, 474) shows a still photograph from the cameo, which was originally shot for the film but later cut in favor of the pretitle monologue.

(4) The Injection of an Element of Comedy. Finally, it perhaps should be noted that Mark 14:51–52 could be read as an injection of an element of light relief or humor into the otherwise unrelentingly depressing story of Jesus's arrest, trial, and execution. Having a well-intentioned, would-be disciple lose his clothes and be forced to flee the scene flashing to his pursuers (and to us as readers!) nothing but his bare butt cheeks is the stuff of comedy. Commentators have struggled to come to grips with this element of the story and are forced to speculate about parallels to Joseph's flight from Potiphar's wife in Gen 39:12 (the amorous woman tries to persuade her servant Joseph to sleep with her, but he pulls out of her grasp and runs away, leaving his coat behind). It may be true to say that there was a great aversion to nakedness in first-century Judaism that is being reflected in the story here, but the fear of being exposed, of "being caught with your pants down," as it were, is something of a universal trope and is filled with tremendous comedic value.

It has often been noted that many of Hitchcock's cameo appearances also have a humorous quality about them. A case in point is the cameo appearance at the beginning of *North by Northwest* (1959), where Hitchcock narrowly misses catching a bus and has the door of the bus shut unceremoniously in his face. Audiences giggle when they see this; it is not something we ever want to have happen to us, but we find it amusing when it happens to others. Another example is the cameo in *Lifeboat*, which presented considerable difficulties given the restricted storyline that concentrated on survivors aboard a lifeboat following the sinking of a ship by a German submarine in the Atlantic during World War II. How was Hitchcock to insert a cameo of himself into this scenario? His solution was to have an old newspaper aboard the lifeboat, which one of the survivors, Gus Smith (William Bendix), picks up and reads, allowing us as the audience to see an advertisement for a weight-reducing programme ("Reduco Obesity Slayer") complete with before and after photographs of Hitchcock as one of the successful slimmers (fig. 1).

Unusually, this is the only cameo appearance that specifically identifies Hitchcock in any way; his name appears in a text-box at the lower left corner of the ad. Hitchcock was clearly poking fun at himself, having just undergone one of his periodic dieting regimes.<sup>14</sup> He later described the

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14. Smith (2000, 100–104) offers an interpretation of the cameo, which stresses its seriousness as well as its humor.



Figure 1. Still photograph from Alfred Hitchcock's *Lifeboat*

cameo as his favorite and said that as a result of it he was inundated by letters from overweight people wanting to know where they could get hold of some Reduco (Truffaut 1986, 226).

Perhaps the finest example of humor being used is found in the cameo appearance in *To Catch a Thief* (1955), one of the best loved of all of Hitchcock's cameos. Here we see the jewel thief John Robie (Cary Grant) fleeing from pursuing French police authorities. He boards a local bus and makes his way to the last seat where he sits between a woman with her birds in a birdcage on his right and the motionless, forward-looking Hitchcock on his left. When Robie/Grant looks momentarily toward Hitchcock, a rather quizzical expression crosses his face. Commenting on this cameo scene, the film critic David Thomson (1999) offers a tantalizing explanation:

Sometimes there was a ghost of humour to it all—not just that he should be riding, in his black suit, at the back of a French country bus ... but that Cary Grant should sit down beside him, look at him just a little oddly and superciliously, as if ... ? Well, why not? Can't a lonely man pass a quiet fart at the back of a country bus without being humiliated?

I challenge anyone to have a look at this scene in *To Catch a Thief* and not come away thinking that Thomson may be on to something here. I like to think that Hitchcock himself would have chuckled at the suggestion.

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## ON THE HARMONY OF THE (ASOCIAL) GOSPEL: *INTOLERANCE'S* CROSSCUT STORIES

*Richard Walsh*

D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) contains a story about Babylon's fall and fragments of a Jesus story, which biblical film critics easily compare to their biblical precursors (see Runions 2010; Walsh 2016). For film critics, however, *Intolerance* is more important (1) as a response to the critics of Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), critics whom Griffith caricatures as intolerant of free speech and art; (2) for its expensive Babylonian set and spectacle; and (3) as one of the premier examples of crosscutting.

Theorists from Sergei Eisenstein (1949) to Gilles Deleuze (1997) see Griffith as a pioneer in crosscutting, which is an editing technique typically alternating "shots of events in one location with shots of events in other places" (Bordwell and Thompson 2013, 246).<sup>1</sup> Bordwell and Thompson go on to say that such crosscutting creates "a sense of cause and effect and simultaneous time" and that it may also "create tension, parallels, and analogies" (246). *Intolerance* is replete with this type of intrastory crosscutting, but it also innovatively crosscuts its four stories, which occur at widely different times, thus creating a unity of theme, rather than one of story/plot (see below).

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1. For specific discussions of Griffith's crosscutting editing and claims about his historical significance, see Eisenstein (1949, 201–5); Deleuze (1997, 30–32). Gunning challenges the legend of Griffith's forerunner status in crosscutting and the close-up by tracing the claims to Griffith's self-advertising newspaper ads when he left Biograph and to Jacobs's (1967) treatment of Griffith; nonetheless, Gunning (1994, 6, 10–33) acknowledges Griffith's pioneering status in developing the camera and editing to create film's narration. Bordwell and Thompson (2013, 246) also credit Griffith with being one of the first to have "extensively explored" crosscutting.

*Intolerance's* four stories are, in the order of their first appearance in the film, (1) "The Mother and the Law," a romance about a modern couple who suffer because of the reforms of the "Uplifters"; (2) fragments of gospel stories, focusing on Jesus as an enemy of and victim of (the Pharisee's) intolerance; (3) the Medici massacre of the Huguenots; and (4) "The Fall of Babylon" to Cyrus because of the treason of jealous priests of Bel.<sup>2</sup> The fall occurs during a spectacularly filmed orgy celebrating what appears to be Babylon's victory over Persia and Belshazzar's engagement to a priestess of Ishtar. This spectacle begins near the end of act one and continues throughout act two. Griffith humanizes Babylon's destruction and the Huguenot massacre by focusing respectively on the unhappy romances and fates of the (Babylonian) Mountain Girl and (Huguenot) Brown Eyes. Nefarious forces larger than the stories' romantic couples doom the couples and illustrate the film's theme of love's struggle against intolerance.<sup>3</sup> While the Jesus fragments lack romance,<sup>4</sup> they supply the film's most clearly defined, intolerant villains—certain hypocrites among the Pharisees.<sup>5</sup>

This essay explores the interpretative implications of the crosscuts between these four stories. Before that, however, it examines (the more common) intrastory uses of crosscutting in Griffith's films and a similar kind of intrastory crosscutting in the Gospel of Mark. Then, the essay compares Griffith's crosscutting between his four stories to the creation of gospel harmonies through crosscutting between (the four) gospels, as well as to the creation of the Christian Bible through crosscutting between Hebrew Scriptures and the gospel. This essay argues that in the case of

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2. The first and last stories have titles because they were later released as independent features. Griffith was working on "The Mother and the Law" when he decided to make the four-story *Intolerance* because of the competition of other multi-reel epics.

3. Scholars find the dominant motif of Griffith's oeuvre in the notion of innocence despoiled (Schickel 1996, 233) or of the threatened family (O'Dell 1970, 50–52; Gunning 1994, 65–66).

4. The Jesus fragments consist of brief suggestions (less than two minutes) of the passion in the film's second act and a longer period of time (about eight and a half minutes) devoted to the wedding at Cana, the woman taken in adultery, and Jesus among the children in the first act. One might see the scenes in act one as an embryonic form of Griffith's threatened family (see Walsh 2016).

5. Critics claim that only the two least-developed stories (Jesus and the Huguenot massacre) actually display "intolerance" (Schickel 1996, 332). Is that the reason for their inclusion?

both Griffith's crosscutting and the gospel harmony, "the one"—a theme, idea, or the gospel—rises above (and out of) material difference. More specifically, this editing creates or suggests an overarching, and religious, idea through its rhetorical and/or aesthetic effects, which include providence, revelation, empire, and spirituality.

### Crosscutting in *Intolerance*

As noted above, in its simplest intrastory form, crosscutting alternates scenes between actions occurring at the same time in different locations and ultimately merges these separate sequences into one story.<sup>6</sup> The earliest examples are chase scenes and nick of time rescues. The crosscuts between threatening burglars and a father who races home to save his family in *The Lonely Villa* (1909) is an early Griffith example. The break-neck end of *The Birth of a Nation*, in which not one but two rescues are accomplished, is another example as are (1) scenes in *Intolerance's* "The Mother and the Law" that cut between the innocent Boy's near-execution and those who finally accomplish his miraculous deliverance, (2) scenes that cut between the Mountain Girl's futile race to warn Belshazzar of the arriving Persian enemy and the Babylonian feast, and (3) scenes that cut between Prosper Latour's failed attempt to fight through soldiers and crowds to his Huguenot fiancée Brown Eyes and her death and that of her family at the hands of mercenaries. This type of crosscutting creates suspense and develops the plot. Only *Intolerance's* Jesus material lacks such crosscutting, but then no one attempts to rescue Jesus at the last minute.

Griffith also uses crosscutting to characterize comparatively in his early *A Corner in Wheat* (1909) as he cuts back and forth between the activities of a wealthy grain speculator and the bread line to which the speculations have reduced poor farmers.<sup>7</sup> The cuts in *Intolerance* between the reforming actions of the Uplifters and the unsuspecting workers that their reforms devastate and whose leisure the Uplifters criticize is similar.

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6. Film critic Gunning (1994, 103) calls this "staggered simultaneity." Gunning also claims that crosscutting breaks the narrative's linear flow, which suggests a narrative space (or world) behind the separate shots on which the shots provide a limited perspective (66), or, one might say that the gap entices the viewer (into the work) to supply meaning.

7. Eisenstein (1949, 231–36) criticizes Griffith for merely paralleling the rich and the poor without offering a Marxist analysis and solution of these economic disparities.

Each of the four stories in *Intolerance* is replete with such comparative editing. In the Jesus fragments, *Intolerance* cuts between hypocrites among the Pharisees and the people whose labors they interrupt and whose revelleries they criticize. In the Huguenot story, *Intolerance* cuts between the intrigues of Catherine de Medici and the unsuspecting Huguenots' happy wedding plans. In "The Fall of Babylon," Griffith's editing alternates shots between the orgy, the treason of the angry priests of Bel that ends Belshazzar's new cult of Ishtar and Babylon, and the Mountain Girl's frantic attempts to save her heroic king. This editing goes quite far toward molding each separate story into *Intolerance's* overarching pattern of the struggles of the people (often romantic couples) at the hands of the intolerant oppression of the economic, religious, or political powers that be. In short, Griffith uses intrastory crosscutting to create suspense and to characterize. The gospels (and/or their readers) crosscut similarly. The paratactic style and intercalations of the Gospel of Mark are examples.<sup>8</sup>

#### Gospel Crosscutting: Mark's Parataxis and Intercalation

*Parataxis* identifies a syntactical style lacking subordinate conjunctions. Among the canonical gospels, Mark is particularly famous for this style.<sup>9</sup> Mark connects sentence after sentence with "and" (Greek *καί*) or "and immediately" (Greek *καὶ εὐθύς*). By most counts, more than sixty percent of Mark's verses begin in this fashion.<sup>10</sup> The consequence of this in Mark is a restless, forward-moving narrative. Mark's tendency to favor the historical present also contributes to this pacing. It is as if the action (history?) hurtles before one's eyes. Speaking of Griffith's crosscutting between stories in *Intolerance's* climax, Iris Barry (2002, 25) describes Griffith's style similarly: "history itself seems to pour like a cataract from the screen." Despite Griffith's artistic aspirations, his chase scenes reflect cinema's popular style and location, and Mary Ann Tolbert (1989) has claimed a similar, popular location for Mark because of its break-neck style.

8. On Mark's style, see Taylor (1966, 44–54), Neirynck (1988), and Elliott (1993).

9. Scholars, who believe that the authors of Matthew and Luke relied on Mark as a source, often argue that these authors improved Mark's style by moving from Mark's typical parataxis to a subordinating style.

10. Taylor (1966, 49) says that eighty of the eighty-eight sections in the Westcott-Hort text of Mark begin with *καί*. Others claim that 410 of 678 Markan verses begin with *καί*. Mark uses *καί* over a thousand times and *εὐθύς* over forty times.

While parataxis refers technically to sentence structure, it might also refer more broadly to the placing (juxtaposing) of scenes alongside one another without clear explanatory guidance as to their connection.<sup>11</sup> Mark's notoriously difficult opening juxtaposes scenes in this way:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (1:1–4, NRSV)

Mark 1:1 ("The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God") is a (titular?) fragment. Mark 1:2–3 is a subordinate clause ("As it is written in the prophet Isaiah"). Mark 1:4 ("John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness") provides the first independent clause in Mark, but it has no explicit connection to the proceeding material.<sup>12</sup>

The paratactic avalanche of scenes continues with John's preaching and its aftermath: "He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan" (Mark 1:7–9, NRSV). After John's initial preaching, which includes a(nother) prophecy about the coming stronger one (1:7–8), Jesus comes from Galilee to be baptized (1:9). Unlike Matthew in particular (contrast Matt 3:1–3 with Mark 1:2–3; and Matt 3:11–15 with Mark 1:7–9), Mark does not connect these disparate scenes (or storylines) of gospel, prophecy, John the Baptist, and Jesus explicitly.

Nonetheless, readers generally move easily enough from gospel (Mark 1:1) to the Isaiah citation (Mark 1:2–3), which is then seen to refer to John the Baptist (1:4),<sup>13</sup> and from John's prophecy (1:7–8) on to Jesus, as the fulfillment of John's prophecy (1:9). The canon (the influence of the other gospels and creeds) supplies the interpretative background that enables

11. While film audiences have come to expect the different storylines of crosscutting to merge, the onset of such an editing sequence is quite paratactic.

12. For a survey of possible arrangements of this syntax, see Croy (2003, 113–36).

13. As Croy (2003, 118–19) points out, however, "just as it is written" clauses typically follow the item that they are said to fulfill.

this reading. Most readers of Mark easily merge these scenes and subsequently read John's fate as prophetic of Jesus's (6:14–29) and Jesus's fate as following various other prophecies or scripts, including quotations and allusions to Hebrew Scriptures, Jesus's words about the Son of Man (8:31; 9:30–32; 10:33–34), and even Mark itself (see particularly 14:21; see Elliott 2011). Filmgoers since Griffith would likely make similar connections, seeing the scenes as three (or four) different storylines—Hebrew prophecy; John who is also a prophet; and Jesus—and as temporarily juxtaposed but ultimately destined to merge into one story.

A slightly different kind of crosscutting occurs in Mark's passion narrative. That narrative juxtaposes Jesus's sayings/story about the Son of Man (8:31; 9:31; 10:33–34, 45; 14:21) and Mark's story about Jesus. The two storylines are never quite completely united, as Jesus speaks about the Son of Man in the third person and as the Markan narrator never speaks directly of the Son of Man. If there is a merger of Jesus and the Son of Man in the passion narrative, it occurs at 14:41–42 (see Aichele 2006, 132–51). If so, these juxtaposed storylines finally merge in Mark's climax in a manner similar to the cinematic crosscut.<sup>14</sup>

Markan intercalations, the sandwiching of a second scene inside the beginning and end of a previous scene, are another type of crosscut. Two examples include the healing of Jairus's daughter (5:21–24, 35–43), which bookends the healing of the hemorrhaging woman (5:25–34), and the cursing of the fig tree (11:12–14, 20–25), which bookends the temple event (11:15–19).<sup>15</sup> The first builds suspense. Will Jesus arrive in time to help Jairus's daughter or not? In the second case, Mark's cursed fig tree signifies the temple (and its fate).

Griffith's crosscutting in turn creates Manichean characterizations: for example, the (evil) rich speculator and (suffering) poor farmers in *A Corner in Wheat*; and the intolerant (Pharisees, Uplifters, priests of Bel, and Medici) and the innocent victims of intolerance (Jesus, the Boy, Mountain Girl, and Brown Eyes) in *Intolerance*. The four Jesus fragments in the first act of *Intolerance* establish this ethical dualism.

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14. Malbon (2009, 195–202) argues that the reader merges the juxtaposed Jesus and Son of Man in 2:10–11, 27–28.

15. In addition to these two examples, Neiryneck (1988, 133) lists 3:20–21, 31–35, and 3:22–30; 6:7–13, 30, and 6:14–29; 14:1–2, 10–11, and 14:3–9; 14:53–54, 66–72, and 14:55–65; and 15:6–15, 21–32, and 15:16–20.

The first fragment defines Jesus as the greatest enemy of intolerance but does not show him. It focuses instead on the prayer of a hypocritical Pharisee that interrupts the people's work and daily activities.<sup>16</sup> The second Jesus fragment contrasts the Pharisees' contempt for the people's celebrations with Jesus's participation at the Wedding in Cana.<sup>17</sup> The third Jesus fragment shows the contrasting attitudes of the Pharisees and Jesus to the woman taken at adultery.<sup>18</sup> The fourth Jesus fragment is Jesus among the children.<sup>19</sup>

By themselves, the Jesus fragments draw a consistent ethical contrast between him and the hypocritical Pharisees. While Jesus and the Pharisees do appear in the same frame, they are also frequently crosscut. The crosscuts between the Jesus story and the modern story of "The Mother and the Law" merge the modern Uplifters with the Pharisees as well as modern victims of intolerance with Jesus. Just after the first Jesus fragment, the Uplifters' reform movement puts modern people out of work. These modern Uplifters also look down on the people's pleasures. After a title describing the ancient Pharisees as meddlers like the modern Uplifters, Griffith cuts to the second Jesus fragment. Also, after the third Jesus fragment, a subsequent title asks how Jesus's example is followed today before segueing to the arrest of modern prostitutes and to a series of scenes in which the Boy's wife, the Dear One, loses her child because of the Uplifters. Both types of crosscutting, that within the Jesus fragments and that between the Jesus fragments and the modern story, juxtapose characters and contrast them ethically.

The intercalation, as the Markan passion narrative begins, inserting the anointing of Jesus (14:3–9) between the priests' plot and Judas's betrayal (14:1–2, 10–11), creates a comparable ethical dualism. The crosscut from Jesus's confession in his trial before the high priest (14:53–65) to Peter's three-fold denial in the courtyard outside (14:66–72) is yet another

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16. 8:40–11:39; DVD 3. DVD 3 refers to the third chapter of the Kino DVD version of *Intolerance*. Subsequent references follow the same pattern, and all comments here refer to the Kino version of *Intolerance*. Various versions of *Intolerance* of different lengths, scenes, and crosscuts exist. The Triad DVD, e.g., has two cuts to Calvary, rather than one, and has the Dear One holding her baby in a scene after the Boy is saved from the gallows.

17. 1:01:56–1:06:20; DVD 11.

18. 1:13:28–1:16:15; DVD 13.

19. 1:36:58–1:37:19; DVD 16.

ethically dualistic characterization created by crosscut editing.<sup>20</sup> Mark, like Griffith, has multiple examples of this technique.

The Idea Emerges:  
Harmony Overrides Diversity in *Intolerance* and the Gospel

Griffith films since *The Lonely Villa* have similar intrastory crosscuts. It is, however, the fifty-plus transitions between its four different stories that make *Intolerance* famous (see appendix 1). Griffith segues between these stories, like crosscuts within stories, to characterize and to create suspense while moving the plot(s) to its (their) climax(es). As noted above, crosscuts between “The Mother and the Law” and the Jesus fragments merge modern Uplifters and ancient, hypocritical Pharisees into identical, intolerant villains.<sup>21</sup> The same transitions establish the people of both stories as innocent victims of these nefarious powers.

The crosscuts between the very brief Jesus fragments and the modern story in *Intolerance*’s second part identify the Boy as a Christ-figure. After the Boy is wrongly convicted of the Musketeer’s murder, a title announces Pilate’s verdict, but Jesus’s trial never appears. The Boy’s has replaced it. Instead, one sees Jesus on the Via Dolorosa. The Boy is then (also) sentenced to hang. Some twenty minutes later, as the Boy prepares to take his last communion, the film moves from the Boy’s last sacrament to Jesus on the Via Dolorosa and then back to the Boy (through Belshazzar’s last feast) as he finally takes the wafer. As the Boy walks to his gallows, the film presents another Jesus fragment, Calvary’s three crosses seen from afar. Not incidentally, three hangmen, echoing the three crosses and the three fates behind the oft-repeated cradle, wait to cut the rope that will hang the Boy.

While this Christ-characterizing transpires, the film is also racing toward its stories’ climaxes. The film moves rapidly back and forth between the Mountain Girl’s futile race to warn Belshazzar of the Persian approach, Prosper Latour’s tragic attempt to reach his fiancée’s family’s house and save them from the massacre, Jesus’s passion, and the Boy’s friends’ race to obtain a last minute pardon for him. In a whirlwind fourteen minutes,

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20. While not intercalations, Mark’s crosscutting between two storylines throughout the passion—the plot of the opponents and Jesus’s Son of Man story—also ethically characterizes the opposing sides (see as well the effect of the dualist ethical statements in 8:33; 10:42–45).

21. Catherine de Medici and the priests of Bel are crosscut as similar villains.



Brown Eyes and the Mountain Girl both die, the Huguenots are massacred, evil Catherine de Medici exults, and Babylon falls. Only the story of the Boy and the Dear One ends happily.<sup>22</sup> The steadily decreasing shot length, as the film nears its end, builds suspense (O'Dell 1970, 86).<sup>23</sup> Further, the Babylonian, Christian, and Huguenot tragedies cast the Boy's *deus ex machina* deliverance into high relief.

The crosscuts between these various stories create one story out of many. The transitions do not alternate from one story to another chronologically or in any other recognizable pattern.<sup>24</sup> Instead, the crosscutting develops the stories' common theme of love's struggle versus intolerance, as the opening title cards say,

Our play is made up of four separate stories, laid in different periods of history, each with its own set of characters. Each story shows how hatred and intolerance, through all the ages, have battled against love and charity. Therefore, you will find our play turning from one of the four stories to another, as the common theme unfolds in each. "Out of the cradle endlessly rocking."

In the film's first visual, Lillian Gish rocks this cradle. The film repeats this visual almost thirty times, with twelve occurring in the rapid fire climax. After the first cradle visual, the title cards continue: "Today as yesterday, endlessly rocking, ever bringing the same human passions, the same joys and sorrows." A book titled *Intolerance* is then opened for the first time, and "The Mother and the Law" begins with another title card set against the backdrop of this open book as if the film reads this story (and its other stories) from this book.

This opening sequence serves as an extended title for the film. Repeated shots of the rocking cradle, repeated *Intolerance* book backdrops, the repeated use of the word *intolerance* (and even *intolerate*), and rather blatant interpretive titular comments tie the stories together thematically, even though the four stories never come together in time as do

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22. Jesus's resurrection is not shown although an apocalyptic coda does show heaven and a peaceful world united by a cloudy cross.

23. The crosscut chart in appendix 1 does not do justice to the rapidity of the film's climax because Griffith also crosscuts within stories.

24. Frequently, the action of one episode is not over before Griffith shifts to one of the other stories. Gunning (1994, 114–15) traces Griffith's development of this cut away technique in his Biograph period.

intrastory crosscuts to build suspense in last-minute rescues. These four stories merge only at the level of idea or in the film's book of *Intolerance* or in the film of the same name.<sup>25</sup> The program for the film's New York opening acknowledges as much:

The purpose of the production is to trace a universal theme through various periods of the race's history. Ancient, sacred, medieval, and modern times are considered. Events are not set forth in their historical sequence, or according to the accepted forms of dramatic construction, but as they might flash across a mind seeking to parallel the life of the different ages ... switching from one to the other as the mind might do while contemplating such a theme.<sup>26</sup>

As a result, *Intolerance* is not so much history or even its four stories. Instead, *Intolerance* is a commentary on its stories or a philosophy of history:<sup>27</sup>

D.W. Griffith's film is the scene of a *tension* between the heterogeneity of its fictional material and the rationality which fuses and unifies it. That is why the unity of the work is not to be found in the four episodes by themselves, but in that which presides over their union: one may say that *Intolerance* is a film *on* history: the principal effect of the intertwining is to attribute to each of the episodes a partial stamp of which the totality of the film is none other than the commentary. (Baudry 1972, 32)<sup>28</sup>

One might consider Augustine's *City of God*, various biblical histories, and the gospels similarly as books on history. That assessment applies even more obviously to harmonies or synopses of the gospels.<sup>29</sup> In fact, it is harmonizing reading or crosscutting that creates the idea of the one gospel,

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25. Deleuze (1997, 29–55) claims that montage reveals a film's idea. Griffith's (and US cinema's) montage is organic, deriving unity from diversity through convergent actions. Eisenstein's confrontational style or oppositional montage is dramatically different (Deleuze 1997, 30–37). Deleuze also asserts that *Intolerance's* montage reveals the fundamentally American view of history in which everything prefigures America (148–59). The harmony between *Intolerance's* four stories may then be more assumed by US viewers than demonstrated.

26. Quoted from the *New York Times* (10 September 1916) by Schickel (1996, 331).

27. Opening titles describe the film as a "drama of comparisons."

28. Cited in Drew (1986, 18); emphasis in Drew.

29. Gospel harmonies merge the four canonical gospels into one integrated narrative (like Tatian's *Diatessaron*) or print the four gospels in parallel columns in order to display their similarities (and differences). Scholars refer to the latter as synopses.

which then overrides the material heterogeneity of the four canonical gospels. Not incidentally, the union defuses critics' claims about gospel error or fiction (cf. Schildgen 1999, 45–47).

This one gospel exists only as an idea (or interpretation), although the second century title, "The Gospel according to ...," attempts to visualize the one book from which all four gospels come. The title, however, only gestures at an unseen (or absent?) book. By contrast, Griffith's film actually displays its (unifying) imaginary text. Moreover, *Intolerance* offers its shot of the unifying book repeatedly, particularly if one sees the twenty to thirty shots of the mother rocking a cradle with the three fates in the background as another version of that same unifying book (or idea). Nonetheless, the gospel harmony shares a fundamental similarity in style (crosscutting) and rhetorical effect (the creation of unity) with Griffith's crosscutting.<sup>30</sup> One can point to this similarity simply by restating *Intolerance*'s program slightly:

The purpose of the harmony is to trace the divine revelation through various periods of the race's history. Prophecies and typologies are considered [Irenaeus, e.g., speaks of the four covenants that in some way parallel the four gospel canon, as well as of the unity of the Christian Bible's testaments]. Individual gospels are not set forth in their historical differences, or according to their different literary styles and theologies, but as they might flash across a mind seeking to parallel the different witnesses ... switching from one to the other as the mind might do while contemplating the revealed truth of the one gospel.<sup>31</sup>

Crosscutting is absolutely essential to this unifying process.

The integrated or narrative harmony, like Tatian's *Diatessaron*, hides the editing style. The synopsis or parallel harmony exposes the process to

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30. Critics use musical terms to identify both forms of crosscuttings. *Harmony* is a musical term, as is *Diatessaron*, Tatian's name for his integrated harmony. Similarly, film critics have compared *Intolerance*'s crosscutting to a fugue (Williams 1980, 79; Drew 1986, 64–65; Schickel 1996, 309), a compositional technique that introduces a theme, repeated by different voices in different pitches, which recurs throughout the composition.

31. Deleuze (1997, 141–50) compares *Intolerance*'s crosscut history to Nietzsche's notion of monumental history, which assumes that history communicates analogically through peak moments. Biblical scholars call this *Heilsgeschichte* and use it to elide differences like law and gospel.

view.<sup>32</sup> Nonetheless, even if the synopsis format recognizes more diversity than the integrated harmony, the parallel printing of the four gospels in a synopsis still presumes their fundamental harmony,<sup>33</sup> encouraging the reader to think of them simply as four versions of one story (and possibly of them as if they were drawn from one heavenly book). Not incidentally, the notion of different versions of one is probably the major point of Augustine's famous *On the Harmony of the Gospels*. The overriding evidence of the harmonizing tendency, however, is the notion that each of these texts points to one Jesus (as opposed to the idea that they offer four different Jesus characters). It is not coincidental then that the synopsis developed in concert with the quest for the earliest gospel and the historical Jesus—both of which are modern substitutes for the idea of the one gospel.

As some argue that synopsis leads to diversity, not harmony, one example of synopsis harmonizing might be apropos. Here then is a discussion of the crosscutting opening of the United Bible Societies' *Synopsis of the Four Gospels* with a chart similar to that tracing Griffith's crosscutting (see appendix 2). The idea of the one gospel is evident not only in the overall arrangement—the parallel structure and the attempt to apportion sections thereafter correctly chronologically, rather than according to their different literary contexts—but also in the presence of Mark and John even when they have nothing to contribute. The treatment of some individual sections also reveals a “rage to unity.” Surely, John 1:1–18 is not really comparable to Matt 1:1; Mark 1:1; or Luke 1:1–4. In fact, if one did not need to save Matthew's genealogy (1:1–17) as a later parallel for Luke (3:23–38), it would provide a better parallel to John 1:1–18 than Matt 1:1 does. Again, the titles “genealogy” and “adoration” suggest greater parallels between the respective sections in Matthew and Luke than actually exist. All these features contribute to a tendency to elide or explain (away) difference. In sum, the format's undergirding assumption is Augustinian: one reality or idea (whether it is the gospel or the historical Jesus hardly

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32. Gunning (1994, 18–24, 291–92) claims that classical Hollywood editing hides the techniques used to create its harmonious narrative, while Griffith's crosscutting exposes the cinematic techniques creating its narrative discourse. Should one compare these cinemas respectively to integrated harmony and synopsis?

33. Relying heavily on Griesbach and on her thesis that the interpretation of Mark moves from a(n ancient) desire for unity to a (modern) desire for diversity, Schildgen (1999, 119–25) argues that the synopsis promotes greater recognition of diversity than the harmony.

matters) lies behind and is discoverable in the seeming diversity of these (different) versions (of the one).

The creation of the gospel-according-to-canon through collecting and distributing (and ultimately binding and printing) the four gospels together and through interpreters (e.g., Irenaeus and Augustine) who argued versus various dissenters that these were the necessary four and that they harmonized theologically has effectively entrenched the idea of the one gospel. The rise of the parallel synopsis has not changed the dominance of harmony readings. The accepted, common sense way to read the gospels remains to crosscut between them, assuming they are the one gospel or creating them ever anew as such.

Jesus films almost always read this one gospel. Thus, it is different readings, like Pier Paolo Pasolini's in *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1964), not the commonplace harmony, that requires scholarly comment (see Aichele 2013, 206–16). Griffith's Jesus material certainly reflects this one gospel or, at least, *Intolerance* moves freely from Luke's Pharisee to John's Wedding at Cana. The Scripture titles range freely through the gospels, on occasion without troubling with citations. *Intolerance's* passion is a collage reprising the gospel tradition already inscribed in the Stations of the Cross, passion pageants, commentaries, art, and film. While Jesus film scholars make a living tracking these crosscuts and are, in effect, so many Griffiths "after-the-fact" trying to recover lost gospels from the cutting-room floor of the cinematic gospel harmony, most viewers hardly notice the harmonizing editing.<sup>34</sup>

### Crosscutting's Aesthetic Effects

The similar editing styles of Griffith's crosscutting and gospel harmonies share rhetorical and/or aesthetic effects (notably, the creation of the one out of many). The phrase *aesthetic effects* is significant, because the discussion here does not assume that some theological reality, Neoplatonic idea (the One), or recoverable history stands behind *Intolerance* or the crosscut gospel. Perhaps, an interpretative contrast will help. Rudolph Otto (1958) famously argued for religious (studies and) theological realities by tracing the psychological effects of the holy, which he dubbed the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. For Otto, the psychological effects of "creature

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34. For an overview of the gospel materials in *Intolerance*, see appendix 3.

consciousness,” terror, and fascination pointed to a mysterious, numinous (theological) reality (or realities), which could only be described through these psychological effects and *via negativa*. Crosscutting’s rhetorical and/or aesthetic effects—providence, revelation (truth), empire (entrapment) and deification, and spirituality—are similar to Otto’s psychological markers, but it is only these effects that are under consideration here, not any theological reality.

### Providence

*Intolerance*’s program claims that the film reflects its four stories “as they might flash across a mind.” The unity then is not merely that of theme or idea but also that of a creative mind. In an important work on Griffith’s place in film history, Tom Gunning (1994, 22, 80, 291–92) claims Griffith played a major role in developing cinema’s “narrator system” and that this system’s lynch-pin is crosscutting. According to Gunning, such editing “creates the filmic equivalent of an omniscient and omnipresent narrator who selects and shapes the information conveyed to the spectator, playing with expectations through effects of irony and suspense” (206).<sup>35</sup> Speaking about an early Biograph film in which Griffith crosscuts between separated lovers, Gunning says, “The editing creates a nearly supernatural link between the characters, to which the *Biograph Bulletin* seems to refer when it describes the prayers of the separated lovers as ‘ascending at the same time to the Father Almighty.’ This *theological guarantee* of the simultaneity of their fidelity is embodied in the film’s cutting pattern” (113, emphasis added). Finally, Gunning says that in *Intolerance*, Griffith christened this narrator system with Walt Whitman’s line, “the uniter of here and hereafter” (113).

The line comes from Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking” (1883), and some version of the poem’s title appears at least six different times in *Intolerance* in a title card and is visualized about thirty times by shots of a rocking cradle. The poem describes the poet’s childhood memory of seeing nesting birds on a summer beach. After the death of the female, the male’s song of lonely, lost love (or its memory) awakened the

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35. Rogin (1989, 547) claims to the contrary that Griffith’s “dynamic” montage shatters the illusion of a single all-encompassing perspective. Eisenstein (1949, 234–45) claimed Griffith tried but failed to create a unifying trope, arguing that the repeated cradle shot was too “realistic” to be such a trope. See also Merritt (1979, 19–20).

boy's desire to sing, to fuse the song of this lovesick bird, his brother and demon, with his own songs. When he asks for a revelation to incite this art, he hears the sea lisping repeatedly, like some old crone rocking the cradle: death, death, death. Poem and film align almost uncannily. Both focus on the fragility of love at the mercy of superior, adverse forces and on art's role in articulating love's voice vis-à-vis death. In fact, Whitman's uniter is the poet's art, which is born of both memory and desire and thus unites past and future against the backdrop of the revelation of death. For Griffith, too, it is art (crosscutting) that merges various times (stories) against the backdrop of death (the fates or crones).<sup>36</sup>

Individual biblical narrators also speak across immortal ages and about the divine realm and purposes (obvious examples are Gen 1–3; Job 1–2; John 1:1–18). However, the real corollary of Griffith's omniscient crosscutting narrator lies in the cross-story juxtapositions that create the idea of the Old and New Testaments out of strange splices between Hebrew Bible texts and early Christian writings—juxtapositions of prophecy and fulfillment like those considered above in Mark—and the cross-story readings that create the idea of the one gospel out of four materially separate gospel husks quickly left behind.<sup>37</sup>

Here, too, the implication is not merely the presence of one theme/idea in different stories over time or from different witnesses in the same time (as Irenaeus and Augustine say of the evangelists) but that some overarching (divine) eye and voice unites these different times, places, people, and texts into a patterned or plotted history. Crosscutting then establishes a sense of providence. Writing against gnostic polytheism, the second-century bishop Irenaeus reifies this harmonizing effect: the harmony of the four gospels reflects the world (its four zones and winds; *Haer.* 3.9; 3.11.8), and, far more importantly, the different *Heilsgeschichte* acts of the one God and Author of all (3.1.2). While this God is clearly yet another form of Griffith and Whitman's "uniter of here and hereafter," Griffith and Whitman foreground the art that accomplishes this task, while *Heilsgeschichte* and gospel harmonies hide the art (interpretative work) to glorify the sacred Other.

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36. In his pamphlet on free speech, Griffith speaks of film as education, press, and art. On his view of film as agent of salvation, see Rogin (1989, 547).

37. Not incidentally, Irenaeus equates the harmony of the gospel with the unity of that gospel and the law (or the Christian canon). See 3.11.8 and the whole of book 4 of *Adversus haereses*.



## Revelation (Truth) of the Way of the World

*Intolerance's* crosscuts, which occur more and more rapidly as the movie approaches its climax, leave little room for the spectator to demur. As noted above, Barry (2002, 25) opines that it is as if history itself cascades from the screen. The effect is of a revelation of the way of the world, and *Intolerance's* world is harsh. Three fates loom behind the cradle. Most of the Stoneman and Cameron sons die in *The Birth of a Nation*, and the Little Colonel's near-rescue of Flora Cameron fails before the KKK manages to save Elsie Stoneman and the Cameron family in that film's finale. In all three developed stories in *Intolerance*, aptly subtitled *Love's Struggle through the Ages*, powers far beyond their control adversely impact romantic duos (O'Dell 1970, 50–52). In fact, as Griffith provides no resurrection scene for Jesus, three of the film's four stories end with deaths. Only the Boy is saved in the nick of time. But, even the rescued Boy will also soon die, for all Griffith's characters are children of the rocking woman, who is attended by the fates (85, 91), and his history is a treadmill.<sup>38</sup>

The Old/New Testament and the gospel established by crosscutting seem far more providential. Fulfilled prophecies and resurrections are happier tales. But biblical providence leaves hundreds of corpses behind that Israel may continue and calls the hero's execution good news. To be other than Griffith's loom of fate, biblical providence relies upon eschatological verification, upon Israel's *deus ex machina* salvation or upon an apocalyptic finale that delivers the righteous and damns the evil. Obviously, both are akin to cinematic near-escapes.

Of course, *Intolerance* ends with its own apocalyptic coda, even though it hardly seems required aesthetically by anything that comes before it. It weakly reprises the finale of *The Birth of a Nation*. It does, however, flow from a Christian vision.<sup>39</sup> *Intolerance* shares then with the gospel a view of history in which insignificant humans come to bad ends unless there is a *deus ex machina* and in which only the favored few find such deliverance: "And if the Lord had not cut short those days, no one would be saved;

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38. Griffith worked on a history of humanity, which he cynically titled *The Treadmill* (Williams 1980, 155).

39. While Griffith's Biograph films suggest a Christian ideology, he was also attracted to Naturalism, which points to human insignificance (Gunning 1994, 217). *Intolerance's* cross-apocalypse suggests the former and the use of Whitman and the fates the latter.



but for the sake of the elect, whom he chose, he has cut short those days” (Mark 13:20, NRSV). In *Intolerance*, only the Boy is so blessed.

### Imperial Entrapment and Deification

Actually, *Intolerance*’s apocalyptic ending should not surprise the viewer. After all, imperial visions drift toward apocalyptic visions. As Derrida (1982, 84) aptly observes, the appeal of apocalypse—and the appeal of the idea behind the crosscut gospel—is to be in the right in the moment before the end. Such visions redeem only a minority from a tragic history. Only *deus ex machina* redemptions, like the Christ-like KKK’s ride to deliverance in the finale of *The Birth of a Nation* or the Boy’s last-minute pardon in *Intolerance*, can lift one above (common/profane) tragedy to (sacred) immortality. Such an elitist or radically individualistic dream is profoundly asocial. It wipes out all opposition. It redeems only the lucky, the great artists (Whitman/Griffith), or the apocalyptic sect. This kingdom is not of the earth. It comes from above.

Imperial revelations override material differences. As all Griffith’s stories become one, all the characters become reproductions of one another. Most do not even require names. As the one gospel rises above the gospels, the Jesuses of the gospels become equally interchangeable and dismissible. Sameness (unity of theme) overrides difference (the heterogeneity of the four stories). Such revelations are not history; they are a view on history.<sup>40</sup>

Irenaeus and Augustine value sameness over difference in their defense of the four-in-one gospel against heresy. *Heresy* comes from a Greek root meaning choice and implies difference. The imperial bishops see no room for such diversity. While Griffith’s *Intolerance* is ostensibly a defense of freedom of artistic expression, his crosscutting and his apocalyptic coda tell a different, more imperial truth (cf. Runions 2010).

One accepts this imperial tale (or empire) because it promises the reader/viewer’s deification. The revelation, the idea on history, lifts the spectator up to the narrator’s god’s-eye view, to the divine realm. It ensnares one in its (sacred) narrative (cf. Gunning 1994, 77).<sup>41</sup> Situated

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40. So Pierre Baudry, cited in Drew (1986, 18).

41. Griffith attacks imperialism in both *The Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, but his own imperialism is evident in both films’ denouements and in the vitriolic pamphlet he wrote between the two films. Accordingly, Runions (2010, 159) claims that Griffith demands tolerance but does not grant it.

voyeuristically above the tragic history that enfolds all humanity, the spectator looks on in godlike impassivity. One need not do anything, other than watch.

### Spirituality

Paul Schrader (1972) castigates similar mechanics in the biblical epics as cheap sentimentality. He claims it brings the saint down to the level of the ordinary viewers for their temporary consumption, rather than elevating or transforming the viewers. Schrader prefers the “austere style” of directors like Bresson, Dreyer, and Ozu, which depicts human limits that suggest transcendence. Building upon Schrader, Vivian Sobchack (2008, 194–203) enumerates three cinematic styles for depicting the sacred (or transcendence): (1) Symbolic transcendence mimetically represents the sacred other that it asserts transcends the material world; (2) Transcendence in immanence locates the sacred in the material world; (3) Negative transcendence imagines a sacred other wholly beyond human ken and semiotics, which is therefore inexpressible materially, except for the awareness of an opening in the material world.<sup>42</sup> The first is the abundant style Schrader castigates in the biblical epics. The third is his preferred style. The second type, the material sacred, is arguably cinema’s typical style, as befits a modern, technological, industrialized, and commercialized art.

Griffith’s crosscutting style might be an example of the third style. It certainly suggests the one which it does not and cannot portray, the idea that rises above the material. The repeated shot of the *Intolerance* book and of the mother rocking the cradle, however, point to something more like the (first) symbolic style. Griffith’s use of the fragments of the Jesus story point in this same direction, to a transcendent Other; however, as Jesus ultimately becomes the symbol of all suffering innocents from the fall of Babylon to the apocalypse, Jesus is not unique.<sup>43</sup>

Accordingly, Jesus is only briefly present in the film. The Jesus fragments take up less than two minutes of the film’s second act, and these fragments are effectively reducible to the victorious cross (or to the

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42. This discussion abbreviates Sobchack’s discussion of cinema’s material presentation of transcendence through (1) figural literalism, (2) transcendence in immanence, and (3) figural gap.

43. Drew (1986, 35) points out the heterodoxy of comparing Jesus’s life and suffering with that of other historical figures.

gospel). While Jesus is present in order to suggest some ultimate spiritual climax (see the film's apocalyptic coda), his more important function is to diffuse the sacred—which is suggested by both his cultural influence and by Griffith's crosscutting—throughout Griffith's entire film. Jesus serves to hallow the Boy and the (threatened) family (as his cross does in *The Birth of a Nation*).

As the use of Jesus in the film's first act displays, Jesus is simply another Griffith character (almost a family man), except for his use to help demarcate the film's Manichean ethic. Arraying Jesus and other victims of intolerance over against the intolerant Pharisees and Uplifters hallows Griffith's protagonists and Griffith's (innocent) films, which have themselves suffered "intolerant" censorship, and rebukes these "intolerant" critics.<sup>44</sup> After all, it is Griffith's film—his new crosscut gospel—that leads on to the apocalyptic finale through the Boy's deliverance (not Jesus's sacrifice). Despite the crosscutting (and Jesus), then, *Intolerance's* spirituality is finally quite material—and middle-class. As Eisenstein says (1949, 234), (the structure of) Griffith's film reflects (and supports) "the structure of bourgeois society."

The harmony of the gospel functions similarly. It loses the diversity of the Jesuses of the canonical gospels (and of history?) in order to create the spiritual idea of the one Christ of the imperial church. What one may not notice, however, is that this spiritual idea—like Griffith's—also diffuses its spirituality, hallowing a decidedly material institution—the canonical church. Somewhat surprisingly, the result of this Christian hallowing is eerily like that of Griffith and as materialistic.

### Conclusion: Asocial Visions

The crosscuttings of both *Intolerance* and the gospel imply the divinity of their voices and spectators. The editing claims to reveal the truth of things and to deify its audience. The result, however, imperially values the spiritual idea over material difference and history, while using this idea(l) to hallow a particular cinematic or ecclesial institution. Strips of film, gospel differences, and others of all kinds are left behind, wasted on the cutting

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44. Griffith's *The Rise and Fall of Free Speech in America* makes these connections blatantly. For a fuller discussion of Griffith's hallowing use of Jesus, see Walsh (2016). Spectacular Babylon in "The Fall of Babylon" also hallows film (Babylon = Hollywood). See Runions (2010).

room floor. This is not history on the screen, not truth, and not revelation. It is art, editing, interpretation. It does not deify. It appears as spirituality, but it diffuses that hallowing throughout a material world it does not transform (see Eisenstein 1949, 231–45).

Despite the social critique implied by some of Griffith's films (e.g., *A Corner in Wheat*; *Broken Blossoms* [1919]; *The Birth of a Nation*), the passivity of the *deus ex machina* salvation(s) in *Intolerance* (and *The Birth of a Nation*) and the use of the spiritual idea(l) to hallow the present bespeak the conservative social dreams of apocalypse.<sup>45</sup> In contrast to the social engineering notions of the Enlightenment, the progressive ideas of nineteenth-century liberalism, and the social gospel of early twentieth-century US history, apocalyptic revelations redeem only the poet/artist (Whitman/Griffith) (compare the "great [wo]man" beliefs so typical of US individualism) or the few who heed his/her apocalyptic dreams.<sup>46</sup> Only the Boy escapes the tragic history of *Intolerance*, and he only temporarily. These dreams, like those of the imperial gospel, are profoundly asocial. The kingdom will not be established on earth. Only the few, the lucky, will triumph hereafter.<sup>47</sup>

In this, *Intolerance* portends the increasingly apocalyptic nature of film and of popular religiosity in the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. How different is *Intolerance*'s asocial spiritual ideal from that of Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes's *The Book of Eli* (2010), with its talismanic savior, and that of Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009), with its salvation of the favored few? Perhaps, one should add Griffith's pioneering cinematic use of the apocalyptic vision of the salvation of the favored few to his pioneering use of crosscutting (and the close-up) in creating the techniques of (US) narrative film. His crosscutting and his Jesus hallow much, almost everything—except for key exceptions, the intolerant who oppose Griffith and his film (heroes). Fortunately, this is not truly a

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45. Eisenstein (1949, 234–35) claims that Griffith's films evince a sentimental Victorian humanism that nowhere rises to the level of a protest against social injustice.

46. For a reading of *Intolerance* as an example of progressivism—a radical defense of individualism in the face of empire, bureaucracy, and economic corporations—see Drew (1986).

47. These notions have some affinity with the rags-to-riches stories of Horatio Alger. In them, success depends not merely on the hard work of the hero but also upon the beneficence of some patron. Deleuze's (1997, 148–59) notion that US film continually retells the story of the birth of America and makes everything prefigure the United States also uncovers the apocalyptic nature of US cinema.

spiritual ideal; it is only editing, or crosscut editing's rhetorical and aesthetic effects, as this essay's comparison of the crosscutting of Griffith's *Intolerance* and of the gospel harmony has tried to demonstrate.

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Appendix 1: Crosscuts between Stories in *Intolerance*

Act 1

Kino DVD	Cradle	Modern	Jesus	Huguenot	Babylonian
1	Cradle Out of the cradle + cradle shot				
2		Uplifters' reform + mill workers + Dear One/Boy			
3	Cradle of past + cradle shot		Man of men vs. intolerance and hypocrisy of Phari- sees		
4				Catherine vs. Huguenots at effete court; Brown Eyes and Prosper; leering mercenary	
5		Uplifters critique worker's pleasure			
	Cradle shot				



Kino DVD 6	Cradle	Modern	Jesus	Huguenot	Babylonian Bel Priest jealous of Ishtar worship; Belshazzar, apostle of religious toler- ance, and Princess; Mountain Girl rejects Rhapsode;
7	Cradles + uniter	Labor war put down violently; people move to city; Boy a thief			
8-9	Cradle shot	Cradle shot			Belshazzar saves Mountain Girl from marriage market; shots of Love Temple; Belshazzar promises temple for Princess
	Cradle shot				

Kino DVD	Cradle	Modern	Jesus	Huguenot	Babylonian
10		Boy works for Musketeer; Dear One imitates women of street; Father corrects her			
	Cradle shot	Father dies; Boy comforts Dear One			
11	Cradle title		Wedding at Cana; Pharisees critique	Prosper courts Brown Eyes; she refuses mercenary	
	Cradle shot				
12		Wedding proposal; powerful Jenkins Foundation			
13			Drinking with Jesus; woman in adultery		

Kino DVD 14	Cradle	Modern Women arrested; black market; Mus- keteer frames Boy who is jailed	Jesus	Huguenot	Babylonian
15	Cradle shot				Winds of War: Bel Priest plots with Cyrus
16	Cradle title	Uplifters take baby from “unfit” Dear One	Suffer the children		
17	Cradle shot	Baby in Jenkins Foundation		Holy Wars: Cath- erine emphasizes Huguenot threat	Siege of Babylon; Belshazzar repulses Cyrus
17–18					

Act 2				
Kino DVD	Cradle	Modern	Jesus	Huguenot
19	Cradle shot	Musketeer promises to get baby; Boy home from prison		Babylonian
20	Cradle shot			Erotic, exotic feast; priests plan to go to Cyrus
21				Catherine convinces king to sign order for St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre; Prosper and Brown Eyes plan to wed; Huguenot homes marked
22				Sacred dance to Tammuz; priests leave city to go to Cyrus; Mountain Girl follows
	Cradle shot			

Kino DVD 23	Cradle	Modern Musqueteer tries to force Dear One; jealous Friendless One shoots him; Boy convicted falsely	Jesus          Falls on Via Dolo- rosa; another carries cross	Huguenot	Babylonian
24		Boy sentenced; policeman sees Friendless One at crime scene			Priests to Cyrus; Mountain Girl pursues
		Policeman thinks Boy innocent but gets no pardon from governor on day before execution			
	Cradle shot				

<i>Kino DVD</i>	<i>Cradle</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Huguenot</i>	<i>Babylonian</i>
25	Cradle shot	Last dawn; three hangmen; Dear One to governor			At Cyrus's camp, priests conspire
26		Appeal denied; Friendless One confesses; chase governor in car		Massacre begins	
	Cradle shot				Mountain Girl races to warn Belshazzar; Persian army advances
	Cradle shot	Last Sacrament; race car after train			Mountain Girl and Persians race to Babylon

<i>Kino DVD</i>	<i>Cradle</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Huguenot</i>	<i>Babylonian</i>
27	Cradle shot + title about intolerance slaying	Boy's last confession; car chases governor's train			
				The massacre; priest hides one girl	Belshazzar plans wedding and new city
				Prosper races to save fiancée's family; her father killed	
	Cradle shot		With placard on Via Dolorosa		Last Feast; Persians still advancing
		Car chases train; Boy takes wafer and swoons			

<i>Kino DVD</i>	<i>Cradle</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Jesus</i>	<i>Huguenot</i>	<i>Babylonian</i>
	Cradle shot			Mercenary rapes Brown Eyes	
	Cradle shot	Car stops train		Rape continues; Brown Eyes dies; Catherine exults; Prosper holds Brown Eyes; Pros- per shot and killed	Gates opened for Mountain Girl; revelers delay her warning
	Cradle shot	Successful appeal to governor on train; Boy ecstatic with priest			
	Cradle shot				



Kino DVD 28	Cradle	Modern	Jesus	Huguenot	Babylonian Hordes invade; Belshazzar and Princess commit suicide; Mountain Girl dies in battle; Persians have city
29	Cradle shot	Race to jail with pardon; Boy's last mile; priest swoons	Three crosses from afar		
30	Cradle shot	Car races; Boy mounts gallows; phone call delays; noose affixed; pardon arrives; wedding	Apocalypse/cloudy cross		

Appendix 2: Crosscutting in the UBS Synopsis

The Gospel*	Matthew	Mark	Luke	John
Preface	1:1	1:1	1:1-4	1:1-18
Promise of John			1:5-25	
Annunciation			1:26-38	
Visit to Elizabeth			1:39-56	
Birth of John			1:57-80	
Genealogy	1:2-17		3:23-38	
Birth of Jesus	1:18-25		2:1-17	
Adoration	2:1-12		2:8-20	
Circumcision			2:21-38	
Flight into Egypt	2:13-21			
Nazareth Child	2:22-23		2:39-40	
In the Temple			2:41-52	

\* The titles in this column are those of the UBS synopsis (or abbreviations of the same for formatting reasons).

Appendix 3: Gospel Materials in *Intolerance*

Hypocritical Pharisees	DVD 7	8:40–11:39	Luke 18:11–12 Cf. Matt 6:5–6	Public piety
Wedding	DVD 11	1:01:56–1:06:20	John 2:1–11	Wedding at Cana
Adultery	DVD 13	1:13:28–1:16:15	Matt 11:19	Winebibber
			John 8:1–11	Woman caught
Children	DVD 16	1:36:58–1:37:19	Mark 10:14	Suffer children
Via Dolorosa	DVD 24	2:34:13–2:34:49	Matt 27:22	Let him be crucified
			Stations of the Cross	First fall
				Simon
Via Dolorosa	DVD 27	2:56:37–2:57:00	Stations	Women
			Luke 23:26–32	
Three Crosses	DVD 29	3:11:2–03:12:00	Gospel	



## READING BIBLICAL STORIES WITH CINEMATIC EYES: A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF TRANSMEDIAL NARRATOLOGY

*Reinhold Zwick*

Narrating for the inner eye is as prominent a feature in ancient rhetoric as the appraisal of the visuality and scenic liveliness of many biblical stories—most notably in the Synoptic Gospels, the book of Genesis, or the narrations about King David. But where Aristotle or Quintilian (among many others) focused on *ekphrasis* (Lat. *descriptio*) as main technique to lend vividness (*enargeia*; *evidentia* in Latin) and visuality to a spoken or written speech and narration in order to captivate the inner eye of the recipient (see Webb 1999; 2009; Bundy 1927, 50–116), such descriptions are mostly missing in the dense biblical stories, with the book of Revelation being one of only a few almost graphic exceptions.

As Erich Auerbach (1994, 5–27) pointed out in his famous comparison of biblical narration and the literary art of Homer through an analysis of the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22:1–19), the special quality and artistry of the biblical narration seemingly paradoxically is based on its numerous omissions (*Leerstellen*), on the absence of all the grandiose details and descriptions that Homer offers. For the omissions in biblical narration accomplish several things: they speed up the story and in combination with often rapidly shifting points of view result in an extremely dynamic texture; additionally, the lack of almost all introspection beyond the level of a character's mere perception restricts the recipient to the position of an outside observer. At the same time, this observer is constantly kept in action: all the gaps in combination with the rapidly evolving path of the dramatic and scenic impulses given by a narration with a high frequency of events stimulate one's imagination and induce one to fill these gaps in order to complete the narration before one's inner eye. The observer is

guided and controlled by a minimalistic narration that is distilled to its essence, which for this reason causes a maximum of creative participation on the part of the recipient.

Looking for a heuristic model and for narratological tools to come to grips with this distinctive, not to say unique character of the many biblical stories, art history, particularly the pictorial reception of biblical narratives, proves to be most fruitful. Two examples may suffice to lead to the central thesis of this essay: On the level of structuring the discourse, many biblical narratives share a lot of features with cinematic narration—despite their different media manifestations, one as literature, the other as film. Using the concept of transmedial narratology, the discourse structure of such biblical narratives can be analyzed through methods and categories borrowed from film studies. In short, we can read these stories with “cinematic eyes,” that is, with a look that is informed by the pluriform possibilities of filmic narration.

The first example is from the so called *Morgan Picture Bible* (ca. 1240). In this Bible, the story of the Levite and his concubine (Judg 19:21–27) is segmented and presented in seven individual images, which represent the story’s shifts in time, place, and point of view and together form a kind of storyboard, which is often used as a preliminary step in filmmaking (see Zwick 2012, 32–35). Hence, this medieval sequence of images or “shots” belongs to the history of precinema narration and via its discourse structure the biblical text it builds on as well. Beyond the different media surfaces, many features of narrating a story and structuring a discourse that became obvious and prominent with cinema are in fact much older and can be traced back to ancient narrative arts, especially in painting and writing (see Hecht 1993). The segmentation of biblical stories into several shots, for example, already made its first appearance with the murals at the Dura Europos synagogue. Later examples are the illustrations of the famous Sarajevo Haggada or—much more elaborate—the splitting up of Jesus’s parables into sequences of scenes in the glass windows of Chartres, such as the storyboard of the Parable of the Lost Son (Luke 15:11–32), which comprises thirty shots.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the narrative organization of this window and its equivalent in the Cathedral of Bourges, the art historian Wolfgang Kemp (1987, 41) observes a “cinematographic segmentation into phases” and a “straightforward, almost cinematographic sequence”

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1. See the illustrations in Halfen (2007, 582–83, ill. no. 282f; description, 556–61).

(34). Kemp names the typical shifts between the frames of a narrative medieval stained-glass window “harte Fügung” (“hard assemblage”; 53); again a technique similar to distinctive cuts between two shots in cinema.

The second example is much closer to the present day and directly linked with cinematic art. When the Italian writer and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini after many years of “biblical abstinence” incidentally started rereading Matthew’s Gospel, he was almost electrified by the power of the text and immediately decided to adapt it for the big screen. Moreover, he did not feel obliged to prepare a film script, because it seemed to him that with the gospel itself he almost had this script in his hands (see Pasolini 1986, 74–76). With his adaption, he tried to follow Matthew as closely as possible and to reconstruct through cinematic means the mental images produced by the text. In an article for the Italian newspaper *Il Giorno* (dated March 6, 1963), he explained this project as follows:

I have just read—for the fifth or sixth time in these last weeks—the Gospel of Matthew again, for professional reasons. Because I have to start to transpose the text—without the intermediation of a film script, but just so as it is, as if it were already a complete script—into a text that is verbally unaltered, but adjusted to film technique. An example [Matt 1:18–20; R.Z.]:

1. Mary semi close-up, on the verge of giving birth to a child.
2. Tight shot or close-up of Mary, looking humble and shamefacedly.
3. Tight shot and close-up of Joseph, who responds to her humble gaze, but stern and strict.
4. Joseph semi close-up, removing himself (zoom) from the chamber.
5. Joseph semi close-up, walking along (still zoom) a vegetable garden (or a little flower garden or a vineyard) and lying down under a tree.
6. Joseph tight shot, closing his eyes tired, sad and falling asleep.
7. Angel semi close-up, appearing to him, saying: “Joseph, Son of David, don’t be afraid to take to yourself Mary, your wife.”

*This is the best way of reading one can do with a text.* An analysis which a stylist never could perform: this exploring of the “muscle functions,” of the visualizing power both of the “flesh” and the “fascia,” of the “accelerating” and “decelerating” elements.” (Pasolini 1964, 13)<sup>2</sup>

Pasolini’s experience and practice coincide with the experimental model of analyzing a narrative with cinematic eyes, which I previously developed

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2. Italics and translation are my own.

and exemplified in my doctoral thesis *Montage im Markusevangelium* (1989) and labeled there “Analyse im Filmblick” (Zwick 1992; 1998; see also Fischer 2000, 78–80). In this essay I present only a brief outline of the theoretical foundations of cinematic eyes and apply it to the Matthean version of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1–13), followed by a comparison with Pasolini’s (1964) draft of this scene in his film script for *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*. The comparative analysis proves to be instructive despite the fact that this scene is not realized or at least not integrated into the final editing of the film.

### Outline of the Theoretical Foundations

Analyzing biblical stories with cinematic eyes is a facet of transmedial narratology, which became increasingly important recently (Nünning and Nünning 2002; Ryan 2004; 2005; Wolf 2011). This branch of narratology explores the structures that are not confined to a certain medium but function as well in literature as in film, painting or other media suitable for narration. As Seymour Chatman (1979) has shown in his pioneering work *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, despite the obvious differences regarding their manifestation in concrete media, universal features of organizing time and space, of structuring events and characters and of perspectivation,<sup>3</sup> to name just the most important, exist on the level of story and discourse respectively plot.

Just as many categories of analyzing literary narrations are commonly extended to film narratology (Lothe 2000). So, in the scope of a transmedial approach, reversely it is possible to use cinematic terminology for their equivalents in literary texts. This is a kind of “reversing the methodological flow,” in line with Larry Kreitzer’s (1993) program of “reversing the hermeneutical flow” regarding the dialog between the Bible and the arts. Kreitzer insists that this dialog is not only fruitful for a more comprehensive understanding of works of art related to the Bible, but also that interpretations of biblical narratives in literature and film provide fresh insights into the Bible itself and thus can become a tool for biblical exegesis. This option is also endorsed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s important document “The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church” (1993, ch. C.3)

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3. A discussion of what *perspectivation* means is provided in the section “Guiding Questions for the Delineation of Spatial Order” in this essay.



and has already been followed up by many practical examples, such as the extended commentaries on Matthew by Ulrich Luz (2001–2007) or on Romans by Robert Jewett (2006).

Reversing the methodological flow, in an analogous way, applies the categories and methods of narratological analysis that were developed in the critical reflection on a “new” medium such as cinema to study an “older” literary medium. This by no means implies that literary narration has to be influenced by cinematic storytelling. Rather, adopting a transmedia perspective with a focus on modes of organizing discourse structures allows us to scrutinize the cinematic narration with more discriminatory power to find certain *universal features of narrating* that existed for a much longer time than cinematography. To explore—as in our case—literary texts with eyes that are informed by the possibilities offered by cinematic narration and to apply terms of film studies to them is a valuable heuristic tool. This tool uses instruments for analyzing a medium where certain features of narrating are most transparent and—influenced by iconic and pictorial turns taking place in our society—quite suitable and communicable, yet not at all restricted to this medium but transmedial and of almost timeless importance.

The transmedial character of certain narrative features can probably be most clearly exemplified by the cinematic concepts of “shot” and “shot size.” These concepts not only constitute key features of film narration but are also present in literary narrations from ancient times, including the biblical period. Jurij Lotman (1981, 370; see also 1977), the leading Russian theorist of both literature and film, has pointed out that different shot sizes “not only exist in film” but are “also clearly palpable in literary narration, when successive segments of texts are filled with content, which varies to a large extent in quantitative respects: E.g. with a different amount of characters, with something whole or with its parts, with the description of large or small objects.” Franz-Josef Albersmeier, a German scholar of literature and film, to name just another, is convinced of the existence of equivalents to shot sizes in literary texts. In his view, a narrator

can—only to suggest two extreme positions—approach an object from a short distance (detailed description) or he can draw it from afar in only broad outlines (panoramic view). The film medium features analogue possibilities. The close-up can take the function of a detailed description (e.g. of a face); the portrait of a landscape in broad outlines can find its equivalent in a panorama panning. (1973, 166)

In the same vein Ursula Reidel-Schrewe wrote in her study on the structure of space in narrative texts:

The proximity or distance of the speaker to its object of narration regulates the narrowness or width of his viewing angle towards the narrated world and therewith also the imagination of the reader. The process of narrational technique to make space imaginable is analogous to film technique, where it is taken for granted that the perception of space is guided by the distance of the camera to the filmed object. (1992, 32)<sup>4</sup>

Of course the mere binary opposition “close/distant” curtails the much more dynamic and multivariant spectrum of what is present in literary texts, too, concerning image section in spatial imagination. Basically this spectrum resembles that of the shot sizes in cinema.

Some basic criteria for the determination of shot sizes in segments of literary narrations are the following:

1. the distance between narrator and narrated object,
2. the degree of precision in the depiction of the object,
3. the quantitative filling of segments of the text, for example, the extent of the envisioned object or the space that is required by an event (see Zwick 1989, 100–101).

Lotman (1981, 373) suggests to imagine the text in question “as instructions in a film script” respectively “as single frames of a movie.” Following Chatman (1979, 101), doing this in the end is nothing else than a concretization of the process of visualization and imagination that reading always involves.

Analyzing a literary narration with cinematic eyes, we, first, try to isolate the segments of the text that are governed by a consistent spatial point of view; second, we try to describe the “montage” or assemblage of these segments to a larger whole—on the level of scene, sequence and eventually the text as a whole; and third, we try to draw conclusions from the organization of the narration as regards the formation of meaning.

A segmentation of the text related to its spatial organization not only considers changing shot sizes but independently of this also the positions and movements of the (open or covert) narrator in relation to the narrated

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4. Italics and translation are my own.

space and his viewing direction. Shifts in the chronological sequence are important as well: be it a smaller or larger leap in time, be it a flashback (analepsis) or a flash forward (prolepsis). Shifts of any significance to the chronological framework are important for segmentation, even if they are not at all combined with a change in the spatial organization.

In the following example of the transfiguration of Jesus, we analyze both the spatial and the chronological organization. The guiding questions regarding the *spatial* structure of the imagination intended or evoked by the text shall be exposed more precisely. They can be summarized under three topics:

1. the location (or position) of the narrator's eye,
2. the viewing direction, and
3. the shot size of the image that is proposed by the textual coordinates to the inner eye of the recipient.<sup>5</sup>

### Guiding Questions for the Delineation of the Spatial Organization

The following set of guiding questions should be kept in mind and checked while reading a text with cinematic eyes (as in our following example), but these questions cannot always be spelled out in detail. The questions rather deploy a kind of matrix or grid of thorough observation, where only the results and their main indicator(s) can be presented in most cases.

#### Location of the Narrator's Eye

1. With whose eyes does the reader see an event or an object and with whose spatial point of view is he associated? In short: "Whose sense of space is being depicted?" (Chatman 1979, 102). To locate these eyes we have to ask:
  - ♦ Does the reader see with the eyes of an *overt* or *covert* narrator?<sup>6</sup> In the latter case, it often remains uncertain from which position an event or object is perceived. A covert nar-

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5. The next paragraph is an adaptation of my earlier catalogue of questions (see Zwick 1989, 108–12).

6. For the distinction between overt and covert narrators, see Chatman (1979, 196–262).

rator often operates with the so-called camera-eye-technique (Stanzel 1982, 160): a “convention (an ‘illusion of mimesis’) which pretends that the events just ‘happened’ in the presence of a neutral recorder” (Chatman 1979, 154). Because of the pluriform but inconspicuous narrative devices, this covert narrator, disguised as neutral recorder, is, of course, far from being neutral.

- ♦ Does the reader see through the eyes of a *narrated character*? If so, does one take up an interior position or remain exterior to that character? According to the classical theorist of narration Franz K. Stanzel (1982, 245), an important hint to suggest to the reader an interior position is the “substitution of the name with the personal pronoun.” For Stanzel, this substitution is “more effective in placing the reader within the consciousness of the such denoted character resp. evoking empathy with his situation than using his name” (245). According to Stanzel, another indication for seeing from the perspective of a narrated character can also be the personalization of the deixis of time and space, for example, that “there” or “then” are substituted with “here” or “now,” that is, with deictics that correspond to the narrated character’s orientation in space and time (257).
- 2. Is it possible to locate the position of the character who perceives the events and existents (overt or covert narrator, character) by means of explicit indications in the text?
- 3. If explicit indications are missing, can hints be found in the text for a localization of this position?
- 4. Is the position located on the same spatial level as the envisioned event or existent or on a higher (in extreme: bird’s eye view) or lower level?
- 5. Has the location changed in comparison to the preceding segment?<sup>7</sup>

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7. For an example, see Chatman 1979, 104–5.

## Viewing Direction

The most important preliminary question for an exploration of the perspectives employed is: which modus of depiction does the author choose? The further a narration is inclined towards the mimetic pole, the more a pronounced perspective is to be expected, since the modus of showing basically has more affinities to the dimension of space.

1. Is it possible to discern “optical alignments of viewing or describing a scene from a fixed location” (Stanzel 1982, 151)?
2. From which character’s viewpoint is a scene focalized? How distinctive is this focalization?
3. How are the “relations of characters and objects in space” configured (ibid.)? Does this allow conclusions concerning the optical alignments?
4. Does the text provide explicit indications of relations and alignments?
5. Which other data may be relevant?

## Shot Size

1. What is the distance between the position of the observer and the observed event or object? Or, more generally: what kind of spatial distance exists between narrator and narrated?
2. Can explicit information be found regarding the proximity or distance of the viewer’s location?
3. If not, what other items of the text could be utilized for such a determination of distance?
4. Is the narrator’s respectively reader’s field of view limited to that of a character?
5. What does the reader see with the eyes of a character or of the narrator?
6. What can the reader *not* see? What is beyond his field of view? What is off-screen? Do explicit indications for this exist?
7. What space is required from what the reader sees (see Lotman 1981, 98–99)? More precisely, which and how many objects or characters does the image section that is present to the reader contain?

8. How large does the “imagined visual frame have to be, to ‘accommodate’ the events and existents of the segment shown” (Chatman 1979, 104)?

Answers to questions concerning shot size are always profitable by reflecting on what readers would know if the text would end at this point. Would any item of the adjoining segments become productive in delineating the shot size of the segment currently being viewed?

Finally, following Lotman’s (1981, 273) suggestion to imagine a text passage as section of a film script or as cinematic shot, it can be asked: what shot size would film directors have to choose, if they wanted to transfer the content of this segment as adequately as possible from literature to the film medium? Would they focus the viewer’s attention on this content to the same degree as the literary original does?

The following analysis of the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1–13) with cinematic eyes concentrates on the scenic formation of this episode in space and time and has to leave aside the complex intertextual network of allusions and references, foremost to the Old Testament.<sup>8</sup> These allusions and references charge its theological semantics to a maximum. The questions listed above guide the analysis, even though they are not spelled out in detail. Why the episode is delimited to 17:1–13, and not as mostly argued to 17:1–9 or even 17:1–8, appears in the course of the discussion.

#### The Transfiguration of Jesus (Matt 17:1–13) Read with Cinematic Eyes

The analysis is based on the Greek Text (NA<sup>26</sup>), but an English translation such as the NRSV can still illustrate my essential point:

<sup>1</sup> Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. <sup>2</sup> And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. <sup>3</sup> Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him. <sup>4</sup> Then Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.” <sup>5</sup> While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!” <sup>6</sup>

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8. See for instance the discussion in Wypadlo (2013).

When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear.<sup>7</sup> But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid."<sup>8</sup> And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone.<sup>9</sup> As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead."<sup>10</sup> And the disciples asked him, "Why, then, do the scribes say that Elijah must come first?"<sup>11</sup> He replied, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things;<sup>12</sup> but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands."<sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.

The notion in Matt 17:1 of the six days having passed, clearly demarcating the beginning of the episode, would be expressed by a slow fade-in, eventually combined with an appropriate text insert. The first shot (S1) shows Jesus taking Peter, Jacob, and John with him. Since all other disciples are off screen, a medium long shot would be sufficient. The next shot (S2) depicts Jesus leading them on their ascent to the mountain, whose altitude could be conveyed by a pan (tilt) to the peak. "Leading them" envisions not the individuals but the group as a whole and therefore, together with the indication of the local destination ("high mountain"), insinuates the more detached view of a long shot. Finally, the note "for them alone," associated with the situation after reaching the mountaintop, would best be transferred into another shot (S3), showing all four having reached their destination and subsequent events. To demonstrate that they are by themselves up there another long shot would be best, leaving enough empty space around them.

The "before them" (Matt 17:2) suggests that the viewer is sharing the disciple's point of view when the transfiguration starts. Thus, in an expository shot (S4), the camera of the narrator looks in a medium long over shoulder shot with the disciples in the foreground towards the transfiguring Jesus. As quite often in Mark's Gospel a connecting *kai* ("and") can function as signal for a cut in Matthew as well. This cut can function as an opening of a new segment with an altered spatial perspective (see Zwick 1989, 571–75). Here, after "before them," the *kai* indicates a new image (S5) in a closer frame (medium shot), which—seen from the point of view of the disciples—singles out the transfigured Christ and shows him unmoved and radiant, like a shining icon figure in a mandorla. His facial features cannot be seen anymore but are superimposed by a blinding light,

radiating from the face. As long as there is no movement of Christ in this sequence, one could use a body-sized rack to wear the luminous gowns and replace the head by a spotlight that is directed to the camera and thus generate exactly the blinding sun-effect of Matthew's *mise-en-scène*, which is actually a veritable special effects scene.

The opening *kai idou* ("and look"; Matt 17:3) not only functions as a general appeal for enhanced awareness but also spurs the inner eye of the recipient to visualize the following sensation. With "appeared to them," the disciples again come into view and the recipient shares their view on the transfigured Christ with Moses and Elijah in a new shot (S6) corresponding to S4 (over shoulder, medium long). In a reverse shot, emphasized by the contrasting power of the Greek *de* ("but"; Matt 17:4), only Peter is to be seen in a medium shot (S7) talking in Jesus's direction. This orientation can be indicated by letting him address his speech on the same visual axis as in S6, where the three heavenly figures were envisioned, but in the opposite direction.

With a short delay the lighting direction of the narrator opens the next sentence (Matt 17:5) with the following hint: the recipient has to imagine Peter and the previously mentioned other two disciples now gradually being covered (see Exod 40:35) by a bright cloud, starting with Peter's words. The following purely scenic comment reveals Peter's proposal as devoid of meaning, through opening the view towards a medium long shot (S8), including the three men and the cloud enshrouding them—once more accompanied by an impulse with *idou* to stimulate the recipient's imagination. The following *kai idou* enhances the awareness of the purely auditive revelation, spoken off-screen, out of the blazing numinous cloud that now alone fills the field of view (S9). As long as the all dominating cloud has no distinctive contour and extension but stretches out to the off-screen space, this shot exceeds the categories of shot sizes and thus becomes something special, not only in terms of spatial ordering. Due to the lack of any clearer vision beyond "cloud and bright," the power of the spoken words is greatly reinforced: hearing is the only mode of perception, since the eyes are blinded by the light.

Viewing the cloud in the subjective perspective of the disciples (in S9), the direction of the view reverses (reverse shot), as their falling to the ground (Matt 17:6) is shown (S10). This effect is best achieved in a medium shot, which is tilted toward the heads on the ground, close enough to depict their great fear. To be able to watch the disciples' immediate, almost simultaneous reaction to the off-screen words, the cloud



must already have partially lifted, if not completely vanished. To be able to notice the strong emotions of the men, the narrator does not need to move to an internal perspective, because these emotions are most likely inscribed on their faces and trembling bodies and thus already perceptible from an external point of view.

With the approach of Jesus (Matt 17:7), the image frame opens up towards a medium long shot (S11) in which the camera-eye of the narrator has returned to the normal visual axis. Whether the depiction of Jesus's coming with *proserchomai* (i.e., "come;" "approach") insinuates more of a viewer's position behind him or behind the disciples on the ground remains a matter of dispute. Immediately after Jesus's encouraging words, in a further shift of perspective the narrator shows a medium close shot (S12) of the disciples opening their eyes (Matt 17:8). With another reverse shot (S13), he then switches to the content of their gaze, presented in a point-of-view (POV) shot of their perception. Although Jesus—again in his pretransfigured shape—is the only thing the disciples are seeing, the view has to be wide enough to make clear that nobody else is present besides Jesus. To clarify that Moses and Elijah have disappeared, it would be best to repeat the (medium long) spatial organization of S6 (Jesus with the prophets) and S4 (Jesus at the beginning of his metamorphosis), not over the shoulders as before, but this time displayed in a POV shot, with a snippet of the viewing characters remaining.

After the disillusioning view on Jesus alone, ultimately proving Peter's plan to prolong the heavenly constellation to be flawed, the narrator leaps in time and immediately switches to the descent of the mountain (Matt 17:9–13). Unlike most commentaries that separate the ensuing dialogue from the mountain scene (opening a new pericope with Matt 17:10 or even Matt 17:9), this descent continues until the arrival of Jesus and his three privileged disciples at a crowd of people (Matt 17:14), from which a man separates and approaches Jesus with his query in favor of his epileptic son. Because the father mentions that Jesus's disciples have tried to cure his son in vain, this healing effort can only have taken place during the events recorded in Matt 17:1–8 and could only have been performed by the disciples who stayed at the foot of the mountain. Thus, the arrival at the crowd at the same time functions as the reunion with the main group of disciples from which Jesus has selected the three.

In an actual film adaption, the scene of the descent (from Matt 17:9–13) could of course be split up in manifold shots, for example, in a series of close-ups of the respective speakers, combined in a montage of shot

and reverse shot. However, this analysis takes as its point of departure the minimum of shots, prompted by changes in the spatial organization of the written text. Thus, the dialogue during the descent can be visualized in a single medium shot (S14)—close enough to follow the words precisely. In cinema it would be best realized by means of a camera movement in parallel to the walking group of the four men—either with a camera on a dolly (on rails) or by using a steadicam, that is, a camera fixed on a special carrying frame, that smoothens the shaking of a walking cameraman.

As long as there is a leap in time between the ending of the dialogue speaking about John the Baptist (Matt 17:10–13) and the following long shot showing the arrival at the crowd (Matt 17:14), the dialogue of the descent and with this dialogue the whole transfiguration sequence would best close with a fade-out. This corresponds to the fade-in at the beginning in Matt 17:1 and thus constitutes a scenic *inclusio*. The arrival at the crowd in Matt 17:14a is also a counterpart to the separation in Matt 17:1a and therefore not only an opening shot of the new episode but at the same time a kind of closing shot: Now the group of four men, who were not only spatially removed but also moved to a higher dimension, is back from the mountain and on mundane grounds again.

To conclude, the exploration of the changes in the spatial organization of perspectives, with each time demanding a new segment with another field of view (in short, shots), resulted in at least fourteen shots basically required by the thirteen verses of the Matthean text. There are thirteen shots for Matt 17:1–8 and just one for the dialogue during the descent in Matt 17:9–13. Of course, this disproportionality signals a significant shift in the narrative mode: with respect to the scenic and spatial logic, the dialogue remains part of the Transfiguration episode. Naturally, in an actual filming of Matt 17:1–13, the text could be transferred to many more individual shots and hypothetically even be transposed into a feature film of its own. However, reading with cinematic eyes only seeks to detect the basic stock of segments representing different spatial perspectives.

#### List of Shots in Matthew 17:1–13

The following list collects and systematizes the results of the above analysis. For each of the biblical verses, the shot(s) are depicted as they were identified by the previous close reading with cinematic eyes. Each shot

is marked with a reference to its content and—of course, these are only approximations—on its shot size. The column that records the opening *kai* underlines its quality as a signal for a cut from one shot to another. In addition, italics are used to indicate over shoulder shots and small capitals for POV shots.

Verse	Shot-No.	Shot-Size	Opening <i>kai</i>	Content
1	S1	medium long	x	Selection of the three disciples
	S2	long	x	Ascent to the mountain
	S3	long		Alone on the top
2	S4	<i>medium long</i>	x	The transfiguration starts
	S5	MEDIUM	x	The transfigured Christ
3	S6	<i>medium long</i>	x	Moses and Elijah with Christ
4	S7	medium ( <i>reverse</i> )	<i>de</i>	Peter's intervention
5	S8	medium long		Overshadowing of the three disciples
	S9	—— (POV)	x	The voice out of the cloud
6	S10	medium ( <i>reverse</i> )	x	Falling down of the disciples
7	S11	medium long	x	Consolation by Jesus
8	S12	medium close	<i>de</i>	The disciples raise their eyes
	S13	MEDIUM LONG ( <i>reverse</i> )		Jesus alone
9–13	S14	medium	x	Descent from the mountain

As the list of shots shows, nine out of thirteen segments open with a *kai* (“and”), which can be understood as a signal for a cut between two shots. Two further segments open with a *de* indicating a reverse axis of view, a reverse shot. Both the opening *kai* and the *de* indicate the rapid sequence of shots at the beginning, slowing down with the dialogue during the descent.

Regarding its scenic and spatial organization the narration of the transfiguration is not only dynamic, but also well calculated. The fast exposition is condensed to a minimum of three shots (S1–3), fitting in only one single verse. Soon after, without further delay or preparation, the highly charged sequence of the top-events on the mountains starts. These are singled out in six shots (S4–9) with a great variety regarding the location of the narrator’s eye, the size of its field of view (shot size) and its viewing direction: over shoulder in S4 and S6; reverse shot in S7, 10, 13; POV shot in S5, 9, 13; and a view inclined downwards in S10. The climactic proclamation out of the cloud is underlined by a vanishing of all contoured images and their substitution by only glowing mist. With the intermission of a scenic imagination in S9, the double structure of “vision and audition,” well known from prophetic literature, is expressed with great clarity and pureness: The (not to forget) entirely *silent* vision starting in S4/Matt 17:2a, is disturbed by Peter’s intervention in S7/Matt 17:4 and at the same time moved off screen.

Finally, in S8/Matt 17:5a, akin to a wipe in cinema, the vision-nexus is overlaid and ends with the lowering of the cloud. This obstruction of sight prepares the audition in S9, now in inversion to the silent vision entirely without contoured images. Then, parallel to the disciples falling to the ground in S10, the dyad of vision and audition breaks and the eye of the narrator is focused downward, back to earth—corresponding to Jesus being back on earth in his human stature. Jesus’s consolation helps the terrified disciples to look up again. The “Jesus alone,” whom the narrator presents as content of their disilluminated POV gaze (S13), is no longer the transfigured Christ but the same, who before had selected and led them up the mountain. Jesus leads the descent, and in the coda scene, presented as a snippet of the walk, again instructs the disciples as they are used to. Interestingly, in Matthew the disciples show a little more comprehension than in Mark’s Gospel. Curiously enough, only the beginning of the dialogue, where Jesus urges them to keep silent about what just has happened, is related to the events that just occurred on the top of the mountain. Soon Jesus switches to more convenient teacher-pupil-talk. This switch prepares the ground for the quite exceptional fact that the mountain experience is

never mentioned again explicitly in the remaining narration, neither by the narrator, nor by its selected witnesses. When the disciples immediately change the topic to Elijah's return, the narrator underlines their inability to cope with the transfiguration.

As far as its time structure is concerned, the perspectives employed by the author of the transfiguration show a balanced and purposeful scenic composition reinforced by a well-designed arrangement. The exposition with three opening shots goes hand in hand with a distinctive compression of time. The selection of the disciples and the journey all the way up to the mountaintop are contracted to the narration time of only one verse. After their arrival, the narration time slows down at once and significantly converges more and more with the narrated time. With Peter's intervention (S7)—as always in the form of a dialogue—the two timeframes coincide for the first time. Subsequent to the slight time compression during the lowering of the cloud, the narrated and the narration time once again run synchronically during the heavenly proclamation out of the cloud (S9). Parallel to the dissolution of sight, this time feature highlights the exact moment of the audition as the most crucial one. Since the appearance of the cloud is connected to Peter's words with a participle construction/*genitivus absolutus* (*eti autou lalountos*, "while he was still speaking") the actions coalesce and shape a little plateau of synchronicity from S7 to S9, in which the last, almost purely auditively structured shot with the words out of the cloud (S9) gains the strongest impact.

The following falling to the ground of the disciples ties closely to the event of the heavenly voice speaking by means of a participial construction (*akousantes*). However, as this time in Greek an aorist tense is used, the events are not as intensely fused with the lowering cloud as are Peter's words, but are joined a little bit more in chronological succession. At the beginning of the top events, the vision of the transfiguration (S4–6/Matt 17:2–3a) is narrated only with modest time compression. This narration runs parallel to the moment after the audition, when the relation of narration time to narrated time remains quite close. Therefore, the transition to the lengthy dialogue during the descent is smooth as regards time structure: The convergence of the time frames creates a lively presence, but the intensity of the pure synchronicity, that emphasizes the enthusiasm of Peter (enthusiastic, but misguided) and the elevated moment of God's proclamation, cannot be surpassed.

### Comparison with Pasolini's Scripted Reading

The foregoing analysis was carried out independently from Pasolini's reading of Matthew's version of the transfiguration with cinematic eyes, which he fleshed out in his film script, without, however, incorporating it in the final movie *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo* (1964). This omission occurred either due to the sequence never being filmed or falling victim to the need to shortening the material to a reasonable screening length of 137 minutes.<sup>9</sup> Since Pasolini certainly was aware of the crucial character of the episode it is also conceivable that he was not completely satisfied with the results of the shooting.

### Pasolini's Scenic Imagination

A detailed discussion of Pasolini's cinematic reading is not possible here. Instead we have to confine ourselves, first, to a brief examination of his scenic imagination and, second, to significant aspects of his way of dealing with the *Leerstellen*, the gaps in the biblical narration, that have to be filled because of the demands of the film medium.

Pasolini does not single out every shot he has in mind. Several times, he only sketches a situation that should be realized in several takes and arranged in a cumulative montage to create a setting or atmosphere. More often he gives short, concrete descriptions of the intended shots together with specifications of the shot sizes.

He introduces the selection of the disciples with a panorama of a wide landscape and then cuts to close-ups of the remains of a meal of Jesus and his followers and finally enlarges the view to the apostles, spread out in the close surroundings, silent and concentrated in prayer.

The more detailed draft, now close to the gospel narration, as regards the segmentation and spatial structure, evolves as follows:<sup>10</sup>

P1: Close-ups of Peter, Jacob and John praying.

P2: Reverse close-up: Christ, watching them.

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9. Pasolini shot about 70,000 meter of film, and the final movie comprises only 3749 meter (see Hanisch 1994, 72).

10. In addition to the script, the shots are numbered and the abbreviation P stands for "Pasolini"; the mentioned shot sizes are given by Pasolini; others, which are reconstructed according to his ideas of mise-en-scène, are shown in square brackets.

P3: Medium close: Christ calling them by their names and commanding “come with me.”

P4: Panorama of Jesus in the distance walking ahead.

P5: Long shot: the disciples following him.

P6: Panorama on the slopes of the mountain with a tilted pan to the peak.

P7: Long shot: Christ and the three apostles behind him on the mountaintop.

P8: Close-up of the three disciples looking before them, “trembling, terrified, blissfully” (Pasolini 1964, 160).

P9: “A luminous cloud in front of them, of such a white that it harms the eyes, lowers on Christ, standing far off ..., clothed in gold and silk” (161). —Because of the distant location of the transfigured Christ this image would require a long shot, filmed over the shoulder of the disciples in the foreground.

P10: Long shot: While the light is decreasing Moses and Elijah approach Christ and talk with him.

P11: Close-up (reverse shot) of the disciples “with the reflection of this great light on their faces” (161) looking with fascination.

P12: Long shot (POV): The three heavenly figures “talking together there in the light clothed in the splendor of their paradisiac robes” (161).

P13: Close-up (reverse shot): The three apostles—Peter’s intervention (as every dialog exactly following Matt 17:4)—But blinded by the light he has to cover his eyes with his fingers.

P14: Long shot (reverse, POV): “In front of them—the light has dissolved everything—now is a great, luminous cloud that pulsates” (161).—The voice from the cloud.

P15: Long shot (reverse): “The disciples fall down to the ground, blinded, numbed in reverence and remain as such for a long time. Until a voice sounds above them.” Christ (off screen): “Get up, don’t be afraid!”—Frightened, the disciples raise their heads (161).

P16: POV shot [best: long shot]: Christ on the mountaintop, as always, smiling to the disciples. Christ moves and starts descending the mountain.

P17: Long shot: the others follow behind him, all four seen from behind. Christ speaking the words of Matt 17:9.

—fast FADE OUT—

Like most commentaries, Pasolini separates the dialogue between Christ and the disciples (Matt 17:9–13) that ends with meeting the father of the epileptic child, from the transfiguration and takes it as a kind of interlude before the healing miracle. But Pasolini still locates this dialogue in the “surroundings of Tabor” and shows Jesus speaking while walking. In this dialogue, Peter is the only one of the disciples speaking, but all of the others are present again. The scene is only sketched roughly and should comprise about five shots.

If one leaves aside the opening, which is not biblically based, but introduced for dramaturgic reasons—to let the action pause, to create an atmospheric setting for the selection of the three privileged disciples—Pasolini’s scripted reconstruction of the scenic parcours in Matt 17:1–9 is surprisingly close to our foregoing reading with cinematic eyes. Following his impression of the gospel text as being already a kind of film script, which only needs to be transposed into the vocabulary of film technique (as mentioned above), Pasolini employs only three shots more than we did before. Besides some variations in shot sizes, he (1) perceives the same changes regarding the location of the viewing (camera-)eye between close and detached; (2) imagines similar combinations of shot-reverse-shot (P2, 11, 13–15; cf. S7, 10, 13); and (3) even introduces the special features of over shoulder shot (P9; cf. S6) and POV shots in P14, 16, directly parallel to our S9, 13.

All in all the many congruities between Pasolini’s and our reading testify that, despite its brevity, the scenic structure and spatial organization of Matthew’s text is remarkably clear cut in respect of its potential to motivate and prestructure a dense sequence of mental images on the



recipient's inner screen. This well calculated flow of images not only draws the reader into the action but also highlights the two crucial moments, both presented in POV shots: The radiant bright *vision* of the transfigured Christ in his glory (S5/Matt 17:2b) and the almost imageless *audition* of God's words (P14; cf. S9/Matt 17:5b).

### Pasolini's Way of Filling the Gaps

The inevitable completion of the images evoked by a biblical text in, for instance, film or painting always sharpens the awareness of the gaps and uncertainties in the written source. Sometimes such an adaptation even reveals previously unnoticed blind spots. The same holds true for Pasolini's scripted reading with cinematic eyes. Two examples shall suffice: sound and light.

Concerning sound, Pasolini recognized as well the utter silence during the vision of the transfiguration and the mysterious appearance of Moses and Elijah (P9–10; cf. S5–6/Matt 17:2–3). To reinforce the silence and its impact on the recipient he carefully designs the noises that precede this decisive moment. Silence starts as early as the scenic exposition of the selection: In the first shot (P1), one should hear solely “dogs barking in a great distance, breathless, an inarticulate lament, the animals of the night in the air” (160). The walk up to the mountain is supposed to be accompanied by the “singing of nightingales” (sound direction between P6 and P7) and after the arrival at the mountaintop “nocturnal cantos” (*canti notturni*, after P7)—maybe, as more often in the finished film, the chirping of cicadas. Immediately following this, right when the transfiguration starts, the sound direction reads: “Then, completely unexpected, everything is quiet” (160). While we look into the disciple's trembling faces (P8), the complete silence is kept for a moment, then sublime nondiegetic music by Johann Sebastian Bach starts (Pasolini calls it “Altissima”) and accompanies the vision, then pauses during Peter's intervention, returning “stronger and mighty” right before the audition (sound direction after P8) fading out in P15, right before the consolation by Jesus. With his sequence of natural sounds, Pasolini obtains a more impressive and significant silence than the one already indicated in Matthew's depiction of the vision, but he soon goes further and emphasizes the ongoing mystery with Bach's “heavenly” music.

Even more interesting, more surprising than the sound design is Pasolini's localization of the episode from Matt 17:1–9 during nighttime. The

gospel text does not state whether it is day or night when Jesus selects his disciples and is transfigured. But unconsciously all commentaries (to my knowledge) readily fill this gap with the idea of an event in daylight. Of course, a night setting—as in Pasolini’s scripted imagination—would increase the impact of the sunlike face, the glowing gowns, and the luminous cloud to a maximum and likewise the switch from ordinary night-light to celestial brightness (and reverse). Inspired by Pasolini’s night setting, the unconscious bias favoring daylight becomes flawed, and one has to remember that—to a lesser extent than in Mark—even in Matthew’s Gospel some events with particular Christological charging explicitly take place during nighttime or at dusk or dawn: the epiphany of Jesus walking on water (Matt 14:22–33), the death on the cross in a miraculous darkness, and the resurrection. Thus a filming or film script can help to rethink ingrained patterns of imagination and open new narrative and semantic links, even ones with theological valence.

### Concluding Remarks

Viewing biblical narratives with cinematic eyes reveals anew their artistry in shaping a narration that is as dense as dynamic in its fabric of time, space, and point of view—much more dynamic than (e.g., regarding the parables) a theory relying on the model of drama with acts and scenes can realize. Furthermore, this kind of reading discloses the high ratio of gaps stimulating the creative participation of the recipient. Thus, a cinematic reading provides an inspiring approach to the narrative formation of meaning and proves that it is fruitful not only for exegesis but also for classroom discussions, since it allows students to activate their often quite pronounced media literacy and turns it into a valid tool for the narrative analysis of biblical stories.

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## PART 2

### CLOSE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN TEXTS AND FILMS



“BEHOLD, I’LL BE BACK”:  
*TERMINATOR*, THE BOOK OF REVELATION,  
AND THE POWER OF THE PAST\*

*Michelle Fletcher*

“The future through the remembrance of things past.” (Maier 2002, 129)

Ever since James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984; *T1* in what follows) and its sequel Cameron’s *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991; *T2*) arrived in cinemas, their similarities to biblical themes, and particularly “apocalyptic” ones associated with the book of Revelation, have been noticed.<sup>1</sup> However, as the franchise has continued, scholarly attention has waned, with Jonathan Mostow’s *Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines* (2003; *T3*) and McG’s *Terminator Salvation* (2009; *T4*) barely registering in discussions.<sup>2</sup> This may seem unsurprising, given their poor critical reception.<sup>3</sup> However, this chapter argues that these later installments offer a far richer fabric to facilitate discussions about the book of Revelation than has been believed, and it does this in a symbiotic way. First, it looks at how key apocalyptic themes attributed to Revelation appear in *T1* and how these progress with each installment. This exploration shows that by *T4* similarities to these themes appear all but lost and instead a confused, pointless, rehash of past films exists. However, the chapter then uses this criticism of *T4* to reapproach the text of Revelation, arguing that this

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1. Christological motifs are particularly noted: Ortiz and Roux (1997); Boer (1995); Paulien (2003); Pippin (1999); Maier (2002).

2. Greg Garrett (2010) traces John Connor’s character through all four films.

3. Laura Copier (2012, 17–18) points out the tendency in biblical studies to shun films considered poor taste or as blockbuster/capitalistic cinema.

fourth installment can tell us more about how Revelation functions than any of its predecessors.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the chapter rereads *T4* alongside Revelation in order to reassess their relationship with the future, ultimately arguing that for all their supposed future focus, it is in fact the past that is never out of sight.

### Revelation Allusions

Images from Revelation seem to ooze from *T1*: Beasts which look like one thing but sound like another (Rev 13: the terminator's mimicking voices); the mark of the beast (Rev 13: Reese's barcode); monsters chasing the mother of the future warrior (Rev 12: the terminator's mission to kill Sarah). This continues in the sequels as enemies are put into lakes of fire (Rev 20: *T2*); a man appears with a sword coming out of his mouth (Rev 1: *T2*); a woman dressed in scarlet drinks blood (Rev 17: *T3*); and destroyed cities are viewed from afar (Rev 18: *T4*). However, interviews with the films' creators, including writers, directors, and crew, provide no indications that such allusions were conscious, and so it is easy to claim such similarities are merely "in the mind of the beholder."<sup>5</sup> Yet there is a clear relationship between *T1* and Revelation's apocalyptic nature at a deeper level, as themes argued to be key to Revelation are also central to *T1*: the portrayal of a world where dualism reigns, a known end that is nigh, an ultimate battle, warrior messiahs fighting for victory, and all importantly, the future breaking into the present.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, our next section embeds

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4. I focus only on the four Hollywood films, not bonus material or *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*. For a discussion on use of the Bible in this material, see Myles (2011).

5. For the interviews, see all of the extra DVD material and *Terminator* publications such as Nathan (2013). Jon Paulien (2001) discusses Rev 12 imagery in *T1* and *T2*, but admits that there is no evidence that Revelation is providing the backdrop. Richard Blake (2008, 196) observes religious scholarship's over-reading tendencies: "Identifying 'symbols' became a kind of academic game ... but it could lead enthusiasts to capricious couplings that existed merely in the mind of the beholder and added little to the understanding of the film. Sometimes, as Freud said, a cigar is only a cigar. And sometimes bread is only bread; not Eucharist, only lunch."

6. Dualism: Ian Boxall (2006): "The slaughtered Lamb is proclaimed as victor in the decisive battle for the heart of the world" and "Revelation shares with the apocalyptic tradition a dualistic perspective on the world" (2006, 2). James Cameron mentions dualism when discussing *T2*'s alternative ending: "That it's the dualism, the dynamic between good and evil that is eternal" (Hoffman, 2009). Known end: "Revelation, tells



the tracing of these themes within brief plot summaries of each film in order to explore how they transform and develop as the four sequels progress. The films’ openings and closings are particularly focused on in order to facilitate our understanding of how each film builds on what has gone before.<sup>7</sup>

### Terminator Slipping

James Cameron’s *The Terminator* (1984)

*T1* is classic apocalyptic cinema, providing glimpses of a future where the world has been destroyed. Set in Los Angeles in 1984, it opens with the following text: “The machines rose from the ashes of the nuclear fire. Their war to exterminate mankind had raged for decades, but the final battle would not be fought in the future. It would be fought here, in our present. Tonight.”<sup>8</sup> As the film progresses Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn) appears as a lone warrior from this future to protect Sarah Connor (Linda Hamilton) from another time traveler, a cyborg “terminator” (Arnold Schwarzenegger) programmed to kill her. Reese foretells that on August 29, 1997 a computer defense program called Skynet will launch the United States’ nuclear arsenal, causing the Russians to fire back. This will kill three billion people, and Skynet will then rule the earth, wiping out all remaining human life.

However, in 2029 Sarah’s unborn son John Connor will lead the humans to victory against the machines, but only if Sarah and Reese can

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the tale of the end” (Copier 2012, 26); “John’s apocalypse, however, is exclusively concerned with eschatology” (Bauckham 1993b, 6); Catherine Keller (1996) sees Revelation as epitomizing “the End” in western thought. Warrior messiah: See Richard Walsh (2002; 2010) and Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence (2003) on Revelation’s warrior messiah. Future breaking into the present: “Revelation ... more than any other biblical book, deals with the future” (Walsh 2002, 2). Bauckham (1993b, 7) notes the end and the future/present: “He [John] is also transported in vision into the final future of the world, so that he can see the present from the perspective of what its final outcome must be.” Gaye Ortiz and Maggie Roux (1997, 143) also note “the future as apocalypse” and “the savior/hero figure.”

7. The correct terminology for these films—*quadrilogy*, *sequels*, *series*—is unclear. I refer to them as sequels because they “follow on” from what has previously been seen, the Latin root of sequel—*sequi*.

8. All script and screen quotations are my own transcriptions.

destroy the terminator before it destroys them. In the final battle, Reese is killed but Sarah pulverizes the terminator, allowing future events to continue. The closing scenes show Sarah driving off into a storm which represents this known future, pregnant with the warrior who will lead humanity to ultimate victory (fig. 1).



Figure 1. Closing of *T1*

James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991)

*T2* opens with images of *T1*'s postjudgment day world and a voice-over from Sarah Connor (again played by Hamilton) speaking of the destruction in the past tense. She tells how not one but two terminators were sent back in time. The second was to target young John Connor (Edward Furlong), and so the film's events are set in 1990s Los Angeles when John Connor is now a boy, and Sarah is in a psychiatric hospital haunted by visions of judgment day.<sup>9</sup> A T-800 Model 101 terminator (again played by Schwarzenegger) again appears from the future but this time to protect John from a more advanced T-1000. With this oppositional set-up, the human versus machine, good versus evil boundaries begin to be blurred and what is good about humans is examined (Ortiz and Roux 1997). This examination of humanity's own dualism continues as Miles Dyson (Joe Morton), the creator of Skynet, is introduced, and Sarah sets out to kill him becoming terminator-like herself.<sup>10</sup> How different humans are from their future enemies is therefore being questioned. However, John prevents Sarah from killing Dyson who then joins forces with Sarah, John, and the T-800 to destroy Skynet's manufacturer Cyberdyne Systems.

9. Although released in 1991, the film is set a few years later. The precise year is not stated, but the police database showing John's birthdate as February 28, 1985 says he is ten years old, indicating 1995 as the year.

10. Widely noted for example by Telotte (1992) and Ortiz and Roux (1997, 148).

Therefore, a battle of good and evil is again set up, but with different lines drawn. Dyson is killed, and a final battle happens between the T-800 and the T-1000. In these final scenes, the terminator takes on messianic characteristics, as examined by Roland Boer (1995), fighting to save others and eventually sacrificing himself in order to prevent judgment day. Therefore, *T2*’s characterization is far more complex than in *T1* as terminators become saviors and Sarah becomes that which she fears. The film closes with the displacement of the known end, as an open road is shown and a world is introduced which finally faces an unset future, its end averted (fig. 2).<sup>11</sup>



Figure 2. Closing of *T2*

Jonathan Mostow’s *Terminator 3: The Rise of the Machines* (2003)

*T3* starts where *T2* left off: with an open road. However, this time it is 2004. John Connor (Nick Stahl) is now a man who, despite previous events, is still haunted by visions of the future ruled by machines. When a T-101<sup>12</sup> arrives (again played by Schwarzenegger), these fears are realized as he tells John that, despite his previous attempts, “judgment day is inevitable.” As in *T2*, the good/evil lines are again more complex than a simple human versus machine dichotomy. This is particularly manifest in the character of Schwarzenegger’s terminator who faces an internalized battle between killing and saving after he is programmed to both protect and to destroy John. What is more, although in the film he ultimately saves John’s life, we are told that this same terminator will eventually kill him in 2032.

John’s messianic status also becomes dubious as his ability to fight, stay alive, and lead is often second to Katherine Brewster (Claire Danes) and

11. See Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr. (2000) for discussions of this averted apocalypse.

12. The terminator is a T-850, a slightly more updated version of the T-800. See Ian Nathan (2013, 40) for more on terminator models throughout the films.

the terminator. His enemy is also unclear, as Skynet is discovered to be a worldwide computer virus, unable to be shut down or defeated. However, in *T3* what is undeniable is the return of the known end, with a dramatic finale showing the launch of nuclear arsenals, as the future, which before had only been prophesied, actually breaks into the present (fig. 3).

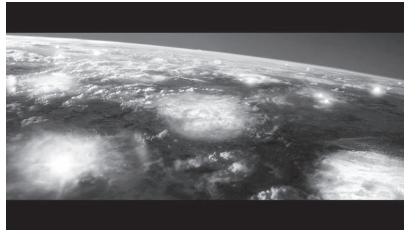


Figure 3. Judgment Day 25 July 2004  
in *T3*

#### McG's *Terminator Salvation* (2009)

In *T4*, we face a scenario far removed from *T1*'s clearly demarcated battle of good and evil, humans against machines, and the future breaking into the present. Set in 2018 after the 2004 judgment day, *T4* follows the story of Marcus Wright (Sam Worthington), a death-row inmate who had donated his body to Cyberdyne Systems prior to judgment day. This sequel also tells the story of John Connor (Christian Bale), as he rises up through the ranks and battles to save the life of his father Kyle Reese (Anton Yelchin). Whether John or Marcus is the true savior is unclear as the heroic acts, self-sacrifice, and good winning over evil move away from Connor and onto the hybrid terminator Marcus.

What they are fighting against in their constant battles is also unclear. There is no system core of Skynet, no particularly dangerous terminator, and an enemy which is diffuse and diverse. Indeed, humans often present the biggest immediate threat, wanting to steal from, rape, and even kill each other. For example, Resistance HQ, the leaders of the human's fight for survival, want to bomb Skynet Central, which is "filled with human prisoners," in order to defeat the machines. What is more, although battles are fought, they do not lead to victory—only to survival. Indeed, the film concludes with helicopters flying into the distance as Connor states, "there is a storm on the horizon. A time of hardship and pain. This battle has been won, but the war against the machines rages on." Rather than a sense

of closure or finality, we are returned to *T1*’s ending, to a storm on the horizon, and to a situation where we yet again await an end to this ongoing saga (fig. 4).



Figure 4. The closing scene of *T4*

### Apocalypse Terminated

In these brief overviews, we have seen how with the introduction of each new *Terminator* film the central apocalyptic themes of *T1* have become increasingly diffused. Whilst clear struggles between good and evil, warrior messiahs, known ends, and ultimate battles are present in Cameron’s cold-war inspired films, created at a time when Revelation was in the air (Jewett and Lawrence 2003), we have seen that by *T4* these themes are far more nebulous. Dualistic categories have bled, characters’ roles have become more confused, victory evades as the final battle has been replayed again and again, and the known end has been delayed, perhaps indefinitely. What is more, the idea of the future breaking into the present has been lost. Whilst the weakening of these Revelation related themes is not a priori a negative movement within the franchise, *T4* was critically slammed, with the critics particularly disliking what we have been exploring above: the lack of clearly demarcated character roles and enemies, and seemingly pointless action leading to nonclosure.<sup>13</sup> Most essentially, the

13. See, for example, *IMDB* ratings for the films: 8.1, 8.5, 6.4, 6.7. See, on *Rotten Tomatoes*, the audience ratings: 88 percent, 94 percent, 47 percent, 55 percent; critics ratings: 100 percent, 92 percent, 70 percent, 33 percent. Figures as of 24 December 2014. Ryan Stewart (2009) believes that by *T4* “the Terminator film series is finished.” See also reviews concerning characterization: “[On Marcus] A curiously ineffective character, and he’s the linchpin for the whole story” (Orndorf 2009); “fundamentally, Connor and Wright utterly cancel each other out” (Bradshaw 2009). See also reviews concerning the action: “Silly, obtuse, and pointless” (Legel 2009); “Scenes and

*Terminator* franchise, famed for its future focus, had in *T4* become preoccupied with the past, as the text's fabric was awash with replay and allusions to the already seen.<sup>14</sup>

Based on what we have seen above, it is hardly surprising that neither film nor biblical scholars have paid much attention to *T4*, as its lack of critical acclaim and distance from its apocalyptic roots seem to leave little worthy of exploring. However, we will now see how this critical oversight has missed the potential that *T4* offers as a lens through which to re-view Revelation's textual fabric and as a depiction of the power of the past infusing the here and now.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we now turn to examine how the criticisms levelled at *T4* can offer ways to reconsider Revelation's supposed key themes.

### Good and Bad Bleed in Confused Characters

*T4* confounded critics through its confused portrayal of characters and its lack of clear enemies and heroes, and our own thematic exploration revealed that who/what was good and who/what should be fought against was elusive, as character traits bled and humans were often as threatening as terminators.<sup>16</sup> This seemed far removed from the dualistic good/bad

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incidents slam into one another with no logical context or motivation" (Huddleston 2009), "Just as it's building up a head of steam, it ends. Not satisfyingly, not dramatically, and not in a cliffhanger fashion; it just feels like they've run out of film and must wrap it all up" (Faraci 2009); "The biggest problem with *T4* is the fact that nothing happens" (Legel 2009).

14. For example, Brian Orndorf (2009) described it as "unappetizing Hollywood recycling" where "the shining moments of 'Salvation' are the sequences that reference the past Terminator features," and these sentiments were echoed by Anthony Lane (2009), "There is a nice warm glow at the climax, when a Terminator gets engulfed in molten metal, but, sadly, the same thing happened to the T-1000 in 'T2,' and, to be frank, that liquid-orange look is *so* last century." Indeed, James Cameron accused it of an over-reliance on previous installments: "I think he was almost *too* referential to the mythos of the first and second film.... It didn't feel to me to be enough of a reinvention" (Hoffman 2009).

15. Due to the lack of publications on *T4*, this essay draws primarily on interviews from those involved in making the film and film critics' reactions to the film. This material is sometimes sidelined in Bible and film analyses but is viewed as crucial in film studies because it provides a rich insight into creative motivations and audience reception.

16. E.g., "[Connor] a doom-prophet and military wannabe" (Stewart 2009);

worldview Revelation is renowned for. However, *T4*’s slippery presentation of characters presents a challenge to perceived ideas of Revelation’s own construction, for as Ian Boxall (2006, 2) points out: “this dualistic description is much more subtle than at first appears.” This is because, despite its reputation for clearly signaled goodies and baddies, when examined more closely Revelation’s characters are revealed as rather complex and slippery. The four horsemen of Rev 6 and the white rider of Rev 19 are excellent examples. The four horsemen appear on white, red, black, and pale green horses and bring war, death, plagues, and famine to the earth. However, whether the riders are angelic or demonic is a matter for scholarly debate as the text is unclear.<sup>17</sup> Then in Rev 19:11 heaven opens and a rider on a white horse appears again, who is “the word of God” (Rev 19:13) raising the question if this is the same war-causing rider from Rev 6.<sup>18</sup> What is more, this rider’s cloak is dipped in blood, but whether it is his blood or the blood of others is not clear. This leads to scholarly disagreements regarding whether this figure represents a sacrificial lamb or violent warrior.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, these riders show that the characters we encounter in Revelation are not always easy to categorize and are often able to confound and confuse.

### A Pointless Narrative

Critics labelled *T4*’s plot as pointless and inconclusive because battles occurred but none showed a seminal victory, and there was no sense of

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“Though we’ve been waiting for John Connor, it is Marcus Wright who turns out to be the warrior the film needs and the salvation it seeks” (Sharkey 2009). “Christian Bale, playing resistance saviour John Connor, is a stubble-bearded face as anonymous as an Identikit sketch” (Andrews 2009).

17. For a comprehensive discussion, see David Aune (1998a, 389–403). Boxall (2006, 103–9) argues they are demonic.

18. For example, Aune (1998b, 1053) argues it does, whereas Gregory Beale (1999, 950) sees it as a parody.

19. Beale (1999, 436; 957) argues for enemies’ blood, Boxall (2006, 274) for his own. Walsh (2002, 4) sees a warrior messiah, like Captain America: “the ‘Captain Americas’ and Revelation’s warrior impose suffering; they do not suffer,” as does Pierre Prigent (2004, 544): “The Messiah who appears here is not described as the slain Lamb, but as a warrior who carries out vengeful judgment.” David Barr (2004) argues for a combined figure: “John’s portrayal of Jesus-as-victim and Jesus-as-victor are both inadequate until the two images permeate each other.”

finality.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, we saw that at the close of the film John points out this is but one battle in an on-going war. Therefore, at first glance this seems far from the ultimate battle and known end associated with Revelation. However, bringing *T4*'s plot into dialogue with Revelation's reveals that the biblical book does not march towards an end point, but instead, as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1998, 5, 171) points out, spirals around one. For example, Rev 11:15 announces victory as "the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever." An end appears in sight. However, the war with the dragon rages on for another ten chapters.

Revelation 12 tells how war breaks out in heaven and the dragon is cast down, resulting in his pursuing of the woman clothed like the sun and her children. Revelation 16 describes the kings of the earth being brought together at Harmagedon (Armageddon) "for battle on the great day of God the Almighty" (Rev 16:14). However, there is no further "battle action" until Rev 19 where the beasts who follow the dragon are captured and thrown into the lake of fire. The dragon, however, is not. Instead, in Rev 20 the dragon is chained (20:2), put into the pit (20:3) and then released again after a thousand years (20:3).<sup>21</sup> After this he assembles Gog and Magog for battle, but this battle is not fought; instead fire comes down from heaven and destroys those assembled (Rev 20:9). Then, finally, the dragon is cast into the lake of fire.

Even after all this, the sense of closure in Revelation is still not complete, as Lynn Huber (2009) explains. She draws attention to the fact that the New Jerusalem, the bride of Christ, never actually arrives: "Whilst the wedding of the Lamb 'has come,' John fails to mention an explicit conclusion to this wedding. Revelation 21 describes the bride again as she 'descends' from heaven, using a present participle *καταβαίνουσιν* (21:2, 10). In some sense, Revelation encourages the audience to envision the wife of the Lamb, his bride, in a state of perpetual *deductio* [marriage procession]" (173). Therefore, the end of Revelation is far less consummated

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20. For example, if Skynet wanted to kill Kyle Reese why not do it right away? Why take him to Skynet Central and keep him prisoner? As he is John Connor's father, killing him would win the war and quickly. The leaked original *T4* script focused on Marcus and is argued to have more substance (Brancato and Ferris 2005).

21. Why? The text does not answer this question but only says "After that he must be let out for a little while" (Rev 20:3).



than is believed, left in a state of suspended completion more akin to *T4*’s indefinite struggles.<sup>22</sup>

### The Return of the Past

As already mentioned, not only is *T4* the only *Terminator* film set entirely in the future, it is also the most heavily reliant on material from past films. This includes dialogue, locations, acting styles, props, scenes, soundtrack, and costuming.<sup>23</sup> This led to accusations that it was lacking anything new,<sup>24</sup> as the future breaking into the present was replaced with a future formed by replaying the past (fig. 5).

Such a past-heavy presentation seems far from Revelation’s nigh-on infamous reputation for a future focused gaze. However, this reputation obfuscates Revelation’s textual fabric: it is awash with images, language, characters, themes, and events from the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, as Steve Moyise (1995, 31) points out: “Revelation contains more Old Testament allusions than any other New Testament book.”<sup>25</sup> These are drawn from across the Hebrew Bible, including allusions from Ezekiel, Zechariah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, Genesis, and Exodus.<sup>26</sup> For example, the beasts of Rev 13 look remarkably like those from Dan 10 and 12, whilst the four horsemen gallop out of Zechariah, and the whore of Babylon resembles not only texts about her namesake in Jer 51, but also those about other

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22. Northrop Frye (2006, 157): “whilst the Book of Revelation seems to be emphatically the end of the Bible, it is a remarkably open end.” See Maier (2002) for an excellent discussion of endings and time in Revelation.

23. Dialogue: e.g., Kyle Reese says when first meeting Marcus: “Come with me if you want to live.” Locations: e.g., Griffith Park in Los Angeles, used for the opening scenes of *T1*. Acting Styles: e.g., Anton Yelchin supposedly studied Michael Biehn’s acting to recreate the character. Props: e.g., John listens to the tapes Sarah creates in *T1*. Scenes: e.g., the moto-terminator riding over the lorry from *T2*. Soundtrack: e.g., Guns and Roses played by John in *T2*. Costuming: e.g., Kyle wears similar Nike trainers to those in *T1*.

24. “It’s stripped of new ideas. It feels tired and redundant” (Sandhu 2009); “Recycled lines” (Travers 2009); “It’s rife with the dumbest callbacks imaginable” (Stewart 2009).

25. Debates rage regarding how many, but all scholars agree the numbers are in the hundreds.

26. See Paulien (2001); Beale (1998; 2001); Moyise (1995); Ruiz (1989); Fekkes (1994).

cities such as Ezek 16 and 23.<sup>27</sup> Also, John of Patmos is clear to show himself as standing in a line of prophets as he eats a scroll and measures the temple like Ezekiel (Rev 10; Ezek 3). Therefore, Revelation is built at all levels around texts from the Hebrew Bible, and as a result it moves into a realm similar to *T4*, as the “not yet” of the future is constructed from the “already seen.” This is aptly described by Harry Maier (2002, 129) as “the future through the remembrance of things past.”

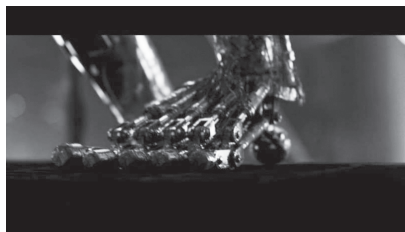


Figure 5. The T-800's foot on the stairs, echoing the same scene in *T1*

This reassessment of Revelation in light of *T4* allows us to re-view Revelation through the lens of a film criticized for its pointless plot, confused characterization, and over-reliance on the past. *T4*'s supposed failings have actually facilitated a reappraisal of themes that epitomize Revelation, revealing that the text is more complex than it first appears as dualism bleeds, known ends and ultimate battles delay, and most significantly its renowned future focus becomes distinctly past flavored. It is this final point, the idea of replay ruling over the “yet to come” and the sense of the familiar infusing the future that we now turn our attention to, reassessing both Revelation and *T4*'s relationships with their textual pasts and in doing so reconsidering the effect of texts with heavy reliance on the already seen.

### The Weight of the Past

We have seen how *T4*'s reliance on past texts was deemed less worthy than its predecessors. However, this assessment overlooks the effect that constant

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27. See, for example, Prigent (2004); Aune (1998b); Boxall (2006); Fletcher (2014); Jauhiainen (2005).

signaling to previous textual experiences can have on the viewer, as watching the familiar can facilitate an awareness of inheritance and continuance.<sup>28</sup> For example, when John fights the T-800 at the top of a metal walkway, the location re-creates the same situation that both his father (*T1*) and mother (*T2*) had faced (a fleshless T-800 on a metal walkway) and in which his father was killed. Rather than just recycling past thrills, this can be seen to produce a powerful picture of a man finally stepping into the battle-scene which has faced his family for three decades, confronting not only a T-800, but his own past and that of his mother and father all at the same time as he declares: “You and me, we’ve been at war since before either of us even existed. You tried killing my mother, Sarah Connor. You killed my father, Kyle Reese. You will not kill me” (fig. 6).

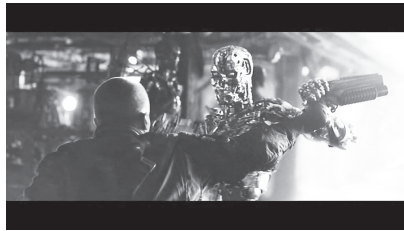


Figure 6. John, just like his mother and father, battling the fleshless T-800

When viewing such a scene knowledge of filmic repertoire can bring a viewer into contact with past viewing experiences, and this can create a sense of pleasure as the past is recalled or disappointment as a realization of distance from the past is discovered, something we will discuss more below.<sup>29</sup> Either way, the viewing experience is entwined with what has already been seen and so brings a viewer into encounters with past increments of terminator history.

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28. Obviously prior knowledge of previous films is necessary to have this sense of replay, and I use *viewer* in the broadest sense, focusing on the idealised viewer who is aware of previous instalments. Having previously directed *Charlie’s Angels: Full Throttle* (2003), McG’s interviews have not been regarded as the musings of a great auteur. However, they reveal that *T4* has an extreme awareness of the filmic past it was inheriting.

29. On this complex sense of pleasure and loss when reviewing past filmic experiences see Berliner (2001).

These observations can allow us to reconsider the impact of Revelation on its reader/audience.<sup>30</sup> As already seen, despite its perceived future focus, Revelation is awash with allusions to Hebrew Bible texts which describe Israel's history. Indeed, a number of scenes recall seminal experiences of Israel, for example, the fall of Babylon (Rev 17; Jer 51), the destruction of Tyre (Rev 18; Ezek 26–28), and the plagues of Egypt (Rev 16; Exod 7–16). Through presenting scenes which recall the experiences of their ancestors, the weight of the past is loaded upon those encountering the text, even though the future is being shown. A sense of continuance can be realised as images of evil cities and empires that recall those of the past are encountered. This sense of replay can remind the audience that whilst past foes may have been defeated, similar enemies appear again, still having to be faced as they always have been in an ongoing saga of struggle.

### The Altered Picture

However, although a sense of continuance may be felt as *T4* infuses scenes of the filmic future with the filmic past, difference creeps in indicating that this is not the future predicted by previous *Terminator* installments. The dialogue of the film points to this as John states “I thought I knew our enemy. Something has changed.” Indeed, he later states as he searches Sarah's tapes to understand his current situation “this is not the future my mother warned me about.” Yet, this signaled alteration acts as a reminder that this 2018 postjudgment-day future cannot be the same as the one depicted in earlier increments because judgment day did not happen on August 29, 1997, but on July 24, 2004 and Skynet was not created by Miles Dyson but was instead a virus unleashed by General Brewster. The world in which John Connor is operating has changed from what was previously predicted as each new filmic installment has contributed to and effected the original known future presented by Reese in *T1*.

Similarly, however much Revelation resembles past texts, it is not *the same* as them, never exactly quoting or completely replicating images. It is not a text which simply replays the past, despite frequent scholarly

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30. I use *reader/audience* in the broadest sense, referring to a potential group of listeners in the first century CE. However, it assumes little about the group beyond the fact that for Revelation's audience they were Jewish-Christians (or Christian-Jews) who would have had some level of familiarity with Hebrew Bible texts and would have heard Revelation under the rule of the Roman Empire.

attempts to pinpoint exactly replicated pretexts.<sup>31</sup> For example, the four horsemen resonate strongly with those in Zechariah, but in Zechariah they go out and find peace, whereas Revelation’s riders remove peace. Whilst the whore of Babylon resembles Hebrew Bible harlot-cities, she is seated on the beast, which none of her predecessors are. This signals that these texts from the past cannot wholly speak for the current situation because something has changed: the enemies faced now are not the enemies of the past and the struggles of the audience are not the ones of their ancestors, despite the overwhelming similarity to past events. As a result, a past/present tension subtly infuses the text.

### The Disappointment of Now

As already mentioned, replaying the past in new situations can bring about a sense of viewing pleasure as textual events are relived. However, it can also bring about a sense of loss as viewers are reminded of what once was but is no longer, and scholarly studies on sequels indicate that this is nearly always the case.<sup>32</sup> Critics’ reviews of *T4* attest to this sense of lacking, particularly regarding the absence of Schwarzenegger and light-hearted humor.<sup>33</sup> This is perhaps most poignantly felt when Katherine asks John what she should tell his men when they realize he is gone, and he says sadly “I’ll be back” (fig. 7). This delivery lacks so much compared to

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31. This, particularly in the form of allusion spotting, has become somewhat of a speciality within Revelation scholarship, with studies seeking to find the most exacting similarities to Hebrew Bible texts. For example see Beale (1998); Paulien (2001); Kowalski (2004); and Jauhiainen (2005).

32. Sequel studies pay particular attention to the fact that follow-ons nearly always disappoint viewers, as they crave their original experiences in new films. Todd Berliner (2001, 108) summarises this as the “sense of loss that sequels traditionally generate in their viewers,” and he pinpoints this as the key theme running through the articles in the first major sequels publication (Budra and Schellenberg, 1998) as “the theme common to the essays is that sequels consistently let their audiences down.” Further sequels and franchise examinations can be found in Jess-Cooke (2009) and Jess-Cooke and Verevis (2010).

33. “The trouble is, every reference to one of the previous Terminator films, including an archival cameo, is a reminder of when the Terminator movies were less visually and emotionally single-minded and a hell of a lot more fun” (Lacey 2009); “In Arnold’s absence, an important ingredient of the ‘Terminator’ iconography—namely, the fun factor—is in short supply” (Rechtshaffen 2009).

previous versions: the black humor, the Austrian accent, and the sense of definite return. However, just because something is lacking does not mean that the film is essentially flawed. Rather, the film can bring about realization of the current situation being faced. In *T4*, it can show that if you want to see the future after three billion people have died in nuclear annihilation, then what do you expect? Sunglasses and smirks? If the story is to depict postjudgment day then the light-hearted levity of previous installments has little place in such a landscape of suffering and struggle.

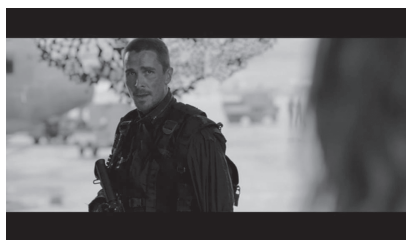


Figure 7. "I'll be back."

This scene can shed light on the impact of Revelation's reuse of Hebrew Bible texts. For example, in Rev 18:4, after the announcement that Babylon is fallen (Rev 18:2), there is a command "come out of her my people." This summons to flee stands in line with previous commands to leave cities which are about to be destroyed such as Babylon in Jer 50:8; 51:6; and 51:45. Yet scholars point out that, unlike its dialogue partners, Revelation cannot present a literal summons to flee because the Roman Empire was simply too vast to leave.<sup>34</sup> Instead, it must be a metaphorical/spiritual flight.<sup>35</sup> However, based on our above reading of *T4*, we can proffer another perspective. The recurrence of this summons can signal the distance between the past and present and in doing so evoke a sense of loss as the audience realizes that they cannot flee their present day "Babylon" because they are under the all-pervasive Roman Empire, and therefore the triumphal texts of the past cannot fully sum up their situation. The sense of inheritance and alteration already mentioned come together, causing the audience to reflect on how they are to deal with their own situation, in a world which has changed since the texts of the Hebrew Bible. Therefore,

34. For a summary of arguments, see Rossing (1999, 120) and Caird (1971, 223–24).

35. E.g., Boxall (2006, 257), Schüssler Fiorenza (1991, 100), and Bauckham (1993a, 377).

rather than portraying a future focus in order to escape present troubles, the text of Revelation can be read as heightening an awareness of present realities as it replays the past in the altered world of the here and now.

### Conclusion: Past-ing the Future Together

At first glance, Revelation and *T4* are seemingly unconnected texts, with little to offer each other in terms of critical insight. Yet, this essay has shown that by rereading Revelation alongside this critically panned film and through unpicking the inherited presuppositions about both texts, what lies beneath is heavily entwined. Plotting quintessentially apocalyptic themes through *Terminator* films led to questioning assumptions about Revelation, revealing a tension between what is assumed to be inherent, and what actually is present. Rather than clear-cut characterization, future focus, and known ends, we discovered a text which bled, delayed, and always had one eye on texts from the past. This led to reevaluating *T4*’s derided reliance on previous *Terminator* installments, uncovering a rich fabric of textual replay which signalled to a viewer what was and also what had changed. This revealed that although *T4* may form the future from images of the past, this does not mean it fails. Rather, in both Revelation and *T4*, reuse of previous textual encounters can signal to viewers what they have inherited and also what has been lost, as these texts seemingly about the future actually become imbued with a tension between the past and present. We have seen that through this signalled loss something is gained.

Presenting a text that is similar to past textual encounters and yet undeniably altered indicates that the past is just that, past and unable to be found again. In such a situation, a heightened awareness of the present can occur. In *T4*, this leaves viewers to meditate on the fact that Schwarzenegger has been replaced with CGI, Stan Winston is dead, and the raw pleasure of the first films can never be reencountered.<sup>36</sup> We have seen how Revelation also presents a world that is not the same as Hebrew Bible texts,

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36. Cameron cited Schwarzenegger’s absence as part of the sense of lacking inherent in the film: “It also lacked a certain stamp of authenticity because Arnold wasn’t in it. I mean, he was in it briefly, digitally, but that’s not the same thing” (Hoffman 2009). See Jason Sperb (2012) for a discussion of the use of CGI to keep Arnold “coming back” indefinitely. The film closes with this reminder: “In loving memory of Stan Winston.”

a world where it is impossible to flee ruling empires, where struggles of the past continue in an ongoing saga, and where the solutions of previous situations are not quite enough. Therefore, rather than showing a future fantastic, these texts show the future constructed from the past, and this provides a way to come to terms with the present. However, this may prove unsettling as we realise the present is not the future our forebears told us about: it is a little more confusing than that.

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“DAVID’S ANGER WAS GREATLY KINDLED”:  
MELODRAMA, THE SILENT CINEMA, AND THE  
BOOKS OF SAMUEL

*David Shepherd*

Melodrama from Stage to Screen

An exploration of the characteristics of melodrama within the cultural history of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries offers an important insight into the genesis and early evolution of the melodramatic in its theatrical form.<sup>1</sup> In considering the melodramatic impulse in film and television, however, it was the mid-twentieth century films of Douglas Sirk which were to prove pivotal, thanks in large part to an important essay by Thomas Elsaesser (1972). Elsaesser argued that the critical interrogation of the social institution of the family, sexual ambivalence, and peculiar style of films such as Sirk’s *Written on the Wind* (1956), Vincente Minelli’s *Home from the Hill* (1960), and Nicholas Ray’s earlier *Bigger than Life* (1956) reflected a far more sophisticated subversion of the family values of the Eisenhower era than had been previously recognized.

Subsequent scholarship on the melodramatic in Sirk, and especially the woman’s film, illustrates the influence of Elsaesser’s analysis on the deployment of melodrama in cinema studies of the sound era.<sup>2</sup> Yet Elsaesser’s attention to the silent era also eventually heralded—along with for instance, the work of John Fell (1980)—the beginning of a serious

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1. See, among others, Hays and Nikolopoulou (1996).

2. See, for instance, Gledhill including especially her own essay (1987, 5–39) and Klinger (1994), whose revision of previous estimates of Sirk’s work seeks to historicize the relationship between auteur, genre, and ideology. Note also the helpful discussion of recent theoretical developments in the study of cinematic melodrama in Stewart (2014, 1–26).

interest in the melodramatic impulse within the early cinema. Already in his pioneering work on the transition from theatre to the cinema, Nicholas Vardac (1949) recognized that while melodrama's genesis was on the theatrical stage, its subsequent development continued especially on cinema screens of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recently, the efforts of Ben Singer (2001, 37–58) to characterize this impulse in the early cinema encourages him to delineate five basic features of sensational melodrama, emerging from discourse and reflection within the industry itself during the early silent era.

First, melodrama's pathos seeks to elicit in the viewer or audience a strong sense of sympathy or pity. Such pity or sympathy is reflected in the viewer's sense of identification with the cinematic situation and, often, a character's victimization. This identification facilitates the impression that the cinematic drama is not merely real drama but the viewer's own drama, however far removed in period or setting the melodramatic scene may be from their own.<sup>3</sup>

Distinct from melodrama's pathos, but often instrumental in facilitating it, is the genre's tendency toward intense expressions of emotion. Such emotions are especially manifest in the full range of dramatic gestures and poses displayed by the cinematic actor particularly before the advent of the true close-up in the early cinema. A third feature of melodrama, mentioned by critics and commentators of the early twentieth century, is its penchant for moral polarization of good and evil.<sup>4</sup> Whether or not the genre's tendency toward moral simplification is a symptom of anxiety at the perceived erosion and complication of moral and social values,<sup>5</sup> there can be little doubt that early critics of cinematic melodrama strongly associated it with a moral universe in which the good are exceedingly good and the wicked are irredeemably evil. Fourth, the widespread consensus of early critics was that cinematic melodrama was especially concerned with and characterized by sensational action, often of a particularly violent sort (Singer 2001, 49). Such violence is often realized with great relish, but might also be merely threatened (i.e., the woman tied to the train tracks) in order to build suspense and render an escape or deliver-

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3. For discussion of realism in the early cinema see Vardac (1949, 199–210) and Gledhill (1987, 26–28).

4. This polarization of good and evil is sometimes referred to rather fancifully in the literature as "Manichean" (see Gledhill 1987, 20).

5. See especially Brooks (1976).

ance all the more (melo)dramatic. Finally, it is worth noting that early film melodrama's sensationalism is often wedded, perhaps unsurprisingly, to a mode of representation in which narrative elements including character and plot development are subordinated to a structure that is episodic and focused on wonder and spectacle in a manner akin to the early "cinema of attractions."<sup>6</sup>

For Singer, none of the above features, taken on their own, suffices to qualify a given film as melodramatic. By the same token, the qualification of a film as melodramatic need not require the presence of all five features in a single film nor that they be present to an equal degree. Rather, the clustering of the features outlined above in various films—and always in varying degrees and configurations—is what contributes to the correspondingly variable impression of melodrama, which may be traced in films of differing traditions and periods in the silent era.<sup>7</sup>

While by no means the only approach to characterizing melodrama, Singer's cluster of features offers greater flexibility than other more narrow and essentialist definitions. Indeed, Singer is happy to see any film displaying even two of his five features qualified as melodrama. Admittedly, his positioning of the melodramatic bar at two seems somewhat arbitrary, and the cluster of features Singer arrives at cannot claim to describe the melodramatic beyond the cultural and historical particularities of the early cinema. However, given the exceptional popularity of films depicting biblical narratives in their ancient contexts in the cinema of this period, Singer's approach offers a useful entry point into an exploration of the melodramatic resonances of the biblical narrative via its reception in early moving pictures.

### Melodrama and the Silents of Saul and David

The eventual strength of the melodramatic impulse in the biblical film of the silent period is perhaps best illustrated by the work of the most prolific maker of biblical films in the silent period, Henri Andréani. Born Gustave Sarrus in La Garde-Freinet in the vicinity of St. Tropez (France) in 1877,

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6. See, for instance, Gaudreault and Gunning (1989), Gunning (1990), and for reprints (and translations) of these and other seminal articles and a reevaluation of the concepts associated with the "cinema of attractions," see Strauven (2007).

7. For further discussion of the advantages of such an approach over previous efforts at defining the genre of melodrama, see Singer (2001, 44).

Andréani eventually went to Paris and found himself working with Ferdinand Zecca at Pathé, beginning around 1910. Having shared directorial responsibilities with Zecca on historical films, Andréani soon turned his hand to the biblical films that would become the hallmark of his directorial work for Pathé and subsequently, his own production company: *Moïse sauvé des eaux*, *Caïn et Abel*, and *Jaël et Sisera* in 1911, *Le Martyre de Saint Étienne*, *Le Sacrifice d'Abraham*, and *Le Sacrifice d'Ismaël* in 1912; and *La Fille de Jephté*, *Rebecca*, *Esther*, and *Joseph fils de Jacob* in 1913.

Recent study of these films by Shepherd (2013, 123–56) suggests that Andréani's thoroughgoing exploration of biblical melodrama allowed him to capture on screen a depth of human emotion that was often only hinted at, or even omitted entirely, by the ancient biblical narratives with which audiences were familiar. Indeed, the films themselves confirm what some of their titles suggest: that one of Andréani's favorite catalysts for overwrought emotionalism in his earlier films (1911–1912) was sensational violence or the threat of it—a type of spectacle found often in early cinematic melodrama and easily supplied from ancient biblical texts. Yet, if this is where Andréani's melodramatic imagination began, his biblical films of 1913 demonstrate an increasing attentiveness to the potential of biblical narratives to satisfy his audience's appetite for domestic melodrama of a different, more romantic sort. The fact that that it was the books of 1 and 2 Samuel that supplied more grist for Andréani's moving picture mill in this period than any others invites reflection on what it was that attracted him (and his audiences) to these films.<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly encouraged by the release of Sidney Olcott's *David and Goliath* (1908), Andréani announced his own *David et Goliath* in the pages of the *Ciné-Journal's* first issue of 1911.<sup>9</sup> While the film itself hews rather closer to the biblical narrative than Olcott's earlier effort, at various points it gently hints at the melodrama of Andréani's subsequent exploration of the David-Saul cycle. Unlike the biblical narrative, the film offers up a scene in which Jesse's three eldest sons are recruited to Saul's

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8. Andréani's interest in 1 and 2 Samuel led him to shoot *David et Goliath* (1911), *David et Saül* (1911), *La Mort de Saül* (1912), and *Absalon* (1912), while *Le Jugement de Salomon* (1912) and *La Reine de Saba* (1913) were drawn from 1 Kings.

9. The British release of the film on January 28, 1911, was announced in the *Bioscope* (January 12, 1911), while the premiere in France appears to have come the following month, judging from the advertisements in the February 25 and March 4 issues of *Ciné-Journal*.



cause against the Philistines. While the biblical text (1 Sam 17:15) simply suggests that David had to remain in Bethlehem with his father’s sheep, Andréani’s David (Berthe Bovy) visibly displays his disappointment at not being able to depart for the front with his brothers and is consoled with a fatherly embrace from Jesse. Then, when David is eventually commissioned to take foodstuff to the front, he beams with pride, and his father tenderly kisses his head.

Andréani foreshadows the violence of David’s combat with Goliath by having the former ambushed on his way to the front lines by robbers, one of whom David fells with his sling—an incident unknown to the biblical tradition, but one which satisfies melodrama’s taste for both the threat and the thwarting of villainry. Andréani moves swiftly from David’s arrival at the Israelite camp to his audience with Saul, avoiding any complication of David’s motivations by largely passing over his brother Eliab’s anger at what he perceives to be David’s presumption in asking about Goliath (1 Sam 17:28). Andréani’s interpolation of Saul’s emotion has the king seated on his throne, head in hands, as visibly despondent about Goliath as David is joyful when the king grants his request to fight Goliath. So glad is he that he throws his hands in the air and then rushes over to kiss the hem of Saul’s royal robe. The climactic clash with the giant is surprisingly brief, though in keeping with the acting conventions of melodrama, Louis Ravet’s Goliath does not die easily or quickly, even after David’s stone finds its mark.

Not content with the biblical tradition that the Philistines fled (1 Sam 17:51), Andréani has one of them throw up his hands in horror and fear at the sight of their fallen champion, before the director offers the viewer the spectacle of the Philistines in full retreat; meanwhile, David’s hands and eyes are lifted to the heavens in praise for his victory. The moment of most sensational and graphic violence—the severing of Goliath’s head—appears not to have been dramatized at all, though the summary provided in the Pathé catalogue<sup>10</sup> and the final seconds of the imperfect print preserved at the BFI suggest that the giant’s head may well have been displayed by David as he offers it to Saul in the final scene. While the scale of Andréani’s embellishment of *David et Goliath* is modest when compared with Olcott’s earlier effort, its emotionalism, its interest in graphic violence,

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10. From the summary published in the Pathé catalogues by Henri Bousquet (1994–2004): “Alone, young David, armed with a simple sling, agrees to fight, killing the giant with a stone to the forehead and carrying his head to king Saul” (author’s translation).

and its moral simplification point toward the fuller exercise of Andréani's melodramatic imagination in the films that were to follow.

If Olcott's *David and Goliath* probably prompted Andréani's first biblical film, it seems likely that his second, *David et Saül*, which appeared later in 1911 was at least partly inspired by Stuart Blackton's *Saul and David* (1909), which was itself an apparently unauthorized adaptation of the Wright Lorimer and Arnold Reeves stageplay, *The Shepherd King* (1904).<sup>11</sup> Both the stageplay and Blackton's adaptation of it range widely across the books of Samuel and depart dramatically from the biblical tradition in concocting a romantic melodrama revolving around the affections (biblical and imagined) of David, Michal, Doeg, Merab, and a fictional maid-servant Adora. By contrast, Andréani's *David et Saül* focuses on a rather more limited set of passages drawn from the latter chapters of 1 Samuel in which Saul seeks the demise of David. Presumed to be lost, the film is known to us from the review offered in the *Moving Picture World* after the film's American release in April of 1912<sup>12</sup> and from the catalogue summary furnished by Pathé:

The public enthusiasm lavished on David, the conqueror of Goliath, arouses Saul's anger toward him. David loves Michal, the second daughter of the king. For her part, Michal has tender feelings for David. Saul, disguising his criminal designs, promises to give Michal to the young man in marriage, if he will bring back proof that he has killed a hundred Philistines with his own hands. When David kills two hundred, Saul is required to fulfil his promise. The marriage and the regret he feels serves only to increase the anger of the king. He gives the order to Jonathan, his son, to kill the one who has caused such umbrage. Jonathan, filled with horror, seeks in vain to divert his father from such an odious attack. The persecuted David seeks refuge in the temple of the high priest Ahimelech. But the king commands his archers to massacre Ahimelech and David takes cover in the cave of En Gedi, on the banks of the Dead Sea. Saul goes out to search for him again, with 3000 troops in tow. Separating himself from his small army, Saul enters a dark cave where David and his companions are hidden. Suddenly, the outlaw has the opportunity to be rid of his mortal enemy. The temptation is great and his supporters are about to fall upon Saul but David stops them, and stealing up to the

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11. For more on this film, see Shepherd (2013, 66–68).

12. *Moving Picture World* (April 13, 1912). The review appears as part of "The Moving Picture Educator" column, which regularly appeared in the trade journal.

king, contents himself with cutting a corner of his cloak. When he learns of David’s mercy, Saul is moved to tears and abandons his pursuit.<sup>13</sup>

Apparently, *David et Saül* resumed where the director’s earlier *David et Goliath* left off, taking up Saul’s gift of Michal to David (1 Sam 18). The catalogue summary notes the film’s portrayal of the affection of Michal for David (so 1 Sam 18:28), but also that “David loves Michal, the second daughter of the king”—a fact found nowhere in the biblical tradition but in keeping with the modern romantic requirement of reciprocated love, which would feature in Andréani’s later biblical films (see for instance *La Reine de Saba* [1913]). How this affection may or may not have been actually depicted is unanswerable and indeed the film’s review in *Moving Picture World* (1912) suggests that the film actually begins with a moment of visceral emotion: when David returns to claim the prize of Michal, Saul is not fearful (1 Sam 18:29) but rather, angry.

Unsurprisingly, *David et Saül* passes over the extended dialogue of Jonathan’s covenant with David and protection of him (1 Sam 20), preferring instead to portray David’s flight to Ahimelek (1 Sam 21) and subsequent seeking of refuge in the cave at En Gedi (1 Sam 24). That Andréani selected the first of these episodes may be explained by the film’s interest in the massacre of Ahimelek (1 Sam 22:18). Likewise, the appeal of having Saul at the mercy of David’s sword presumably lay in the impending threat of violence—a staple of the sensational melodrama—and evidently in the opportunity to portray a moment override with emotion when Saul “lifted up his voice and wept” (1 Sam 24:16).<sup>14</sup>

If Saul’s expression of remorse at the recognition that David is more righteous than him (1 Sam 24:17) ironically undermines the impression of Saul’s own wickedness, the film’s summary nevertheless generally satisfies silent melodrama’s preference for moral polarization—with David as innocent victim and Saul as (virtually) inveterate villain. Indeed, this impression is reinforced by the third installment in Andréani’s cycle, *La Mort de Saül* (1912)—a film that fortunately has been preserved for posterity and offers fuller evidence of the quickening melodramatic pulse in Andréani’s work.

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13. From the summary published in the Pathé catalogues by Bousquet (1994–2004) (author’s translation).

14. Unless otherwise stated, all biblical translations are taken from the NRSV.

Cowritten with Eugène Creissel, *La Mort de Saül* in fact begins with the spectacle of further violence—of Saul’s wanton destruction of the priests and inhabitants of Nob (1 Sam 22) apparently only adumbrated in *David et Saül* but now shown here with particular interest in the priest’s pious but fruitless prayer for deliverance and in the violent “attraction” of Saul’s crazed blood-thirstiness as he and his men put the city and its inhabitants to the sword. The contrivance of a letter from David notifying Saul that the Philistines are attacking introduces the second half of the film, in which Saul (as per 1 Sam 28) seeks out the medium of Endor in order to summon the ghost of Samuel. Andréani makes the most of Saul’s journey with his two companions through the rocky landscape of Endor (traversing much the same type of territory seen in *Caïn et Abel* as Richard Abel [1994, 319] has observed), but the scene of Saul’s encounter with the medium offers Andréani the opportunity to depict the spectacle of Samuel’s ghost, appearing out of thin air, conjured up by the medium’s tracing of Samuel’s face on the stone. Saul’s increasingly overwrought expressions of emotion are clearly prompted by Samuel’s message (conveyed by means of an intertitle) that Saul and his sons will fall by the sword. Such is the anxiety and alarm which exercises the medium and nearly asphyxiates Saul (fig. 1) that the king’s two companions, waiting until then outside the the medium’s grotto,



Figure 1. Saul asphyxiated by anxiety at the news of his sons’ impending death, *La Mort de Saül*

immediately rush in and are required to assist the king to rise from where he has collapsed—immobilized by anxiety and dread.

Saul eventually returns to the battle with the Philistines by means of a bridging shot in which he crawls through a narrow crevasse in the stone. Immediately upon arriving at the front line, Saul is presented with his son, who, wounded in battle, collapses on the ground in front of him, much to his father’s alarm. Dropping to aid his son, Saul succeeds only in raising him to a seated position, before the son’s delayed but inevitable demise sends Saul into further paroxysms of grief. While a need for narrative economy means that the death of only one of the three sons of Saul (1 Sam 31:6) is depicted, Andréani also abandons the biblical account’s testimony that Saul’s suicide was induced by a fear of being taken by the enemy. Instead, Andréani’s Saul, in keeping with the canons of melodrama, takes his own life when he spies another unseen horror (presumably the death of the second son) and compelled by his bereavement, falls on his own sword (fig. 2) in a scene designed to prolong the spectacle of the king’s death. As in Feuillade’s earlier *L’Exode* (1910),<sup>15</sup> a father’s evil thus brings about the



Figure 2. Saul preparing to take his own life, having witnessed the death of his son, *La Mort de Saül*

15. For more on the biblical films of Feuillade, see Shepherd 2013, 108–22.

loss of his son, yet Saul's protracted taking of his own life is emblematic of the overwrought emotionalism characteristic of both Andréani's treatment of Saul throughout this film and indeed his fourth, still longer film, *Absalom* (1912), which focuses not on Saul's son, but David's.

In *Absalom*, Andréani omits the biblical account of Absalom's fall from grace following the murder of his brother Amnon (2 Sam 13–14) preferring to focus on Absalom's courting of the people's favor in the city gate (2 Sam 15:1–4) and kissing their hands (15:5). News of Absalom's rebellion leads to David walking to the window of his palace at which point the viewer is offered a shot of troops on horseback in the fields with Absalom arriving at their head. While certainly unsophisticated by later cinematic standards, there can be little doubting Andréani's intent to construct a point of view shot here, for the following shot depicts David retreating from the window and preparing to leave the palace. The scenes of war between the troops of Absalom and David are staged on a scale which far outstrips Andréani's earlier efforts in *Jaël et Sisera*, with the drama of the clash here enhanced by a series of shots (including a pan) in which one army and then the other charge toward each other. Defeated in battle, Andréani's Absalom dies his biblical death, wrenched from his mount and left dangling by his head in a tree until Joab and others dispatch him (2 Sam 18:14–15).

The scene of David's emotional and traumatic reaction to the news of his son's death is of course not without biblical warrant (2 Sam 18:32; 19:1–4), but Andréani's decision to end the film with David's grief rather than the acknowledgment of the victory (19:8) suggests his interest in the causes and emotional consequences of the domestic trauma. That this indeed is his primary concern is confirmed both by the appearance of Bathsheba and her young son Solomon in the final scene to observe the arrival of Absalom's body, but also by the ensuing grief of David. The fact that Bathsheba and Solomon are less emotionally affected than the grieving king is hardly a surprise to the viewer, given that the opening scene of the film includes the narrative novelty of Absalom's jealous rage at David's favoring of Bathsheba's son.

While Andréani's depiction of the house of David extends into the books of Kings (*Le Jugement de Salomon* [1912]; *La Reine de Saba* [1913]), the director's treatment of the Saul-David cycle well illustrates its resonance with the melodramatic impulse of cinema's silent era. As we have seen above, Andréani's visualization of these stories offers the viewer an abundance of overwrought emotion, expressed by the actors in response to the traumas suggested by the ancient narrative. That this emotional

expressiveness is more muted in the initial films, *David et Goliath* and *David et Saül*, and more fully expressed in *La Mort de Saül* and *Absalon*, is likely to reflect at least in part, the latter two films’ evocation of the parental anxieties of both Saul and David at the deaths of their sons—a theme which lay at the heart of the domestic melodramas of the early cinema—not least in France. Such concerns regarding the vulnerability of children were widely reflected in the cinematic output of the era and well-attested too in the biblical film of this period, including Andréani’s other efforts (see Shepherd 2013, 123–56).

Indeed, it is presumably the evoking of such concerns which will have allowed films like *La Mort de Saül* and *Absalon* to elicit the sympathies of contemporary viewers so coveted by the melodramatic imagination. Crucial to the creation of such anxieties in these films (and so many others in this period) is, as we have seen above, the threat or enactment of sensational violence. In some cases, such as David’s killing of Goliath and Saul’s killing of Ahimelek and the other priests, this sensational violence seems to serve melodrama’s traditional interests of reinforcing the moral polarization of innocent victim and evil villain. However, it is worth noting that such a schema may be seen to be complicated by, for instance, the willing portrayal of Saul’s villainy prior to his suicide and Andréani’s acknowledgment of Absalom’s rebellion and culpability for his own gruesome death which so grieves his father, David. Finally, the analysis above seems to illustrate well Singer’s observation of early cinematic melodrama’s preference for an episodic structure driven by spectacle at the expense of story, though this may be as much a function of the genre of the biblical film as its melodramatic inflection, given the centrality of spectacle in the genesis and evolution of the biblical genre in the silent era (see Shepherd 2013).

### Melodrama and the Books of Samuel

The resonance of the Saul and David cycles with the melodramatic sensibilities of the early cinema invites reflection on the extent to which the ancient texts are themselves imbued with some sense of the melodramatic or at least certain aspects of it. While it is safe to say that melodrama has thus far not attracted the interest of biblical scholarship in any sustained way,<sup>16</sup> one notable exception to this rule is an article penned more than

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16. While attention has been given to the relationship of biblical narrative to both



three decades ago by Stuart Lasine (1984) who invokes the category of melodrama in his analysis of the prophetic “parable of the ewe lamb” told by Nathan to David after the latter commits adultery with Bathsheba (2 Sam 14:1–4). Lasine argues that the properly melodramatic qualities of both Nathan’s story and David’s reaction to it are intended by the author to afford the reader an insight into the limits of David’s own insight and emotional self-awareness and self-control.<sup>17</sup> That these capacities in David remain ultimately limited, despite his repentance regarding Uriah, is proven for Lasine by David’s persistent emotionalism and lack of discernment in the chapters which follow (2 Sam 13–18; e.g., 2 Sam 18:33), where they will eventually combine to bring catastrophe on his family. For Lasine, 2 Samuel’s portrait of a David who is emotionally incontinent and alarmingly unaware of himself offers an important counterpoint to that other, untarnished memory of David found in the books of Kings (Lasine 1984, 118–21).<sup>18</sup>

Even though subsequent scholarship has unfortunately shown little interest in following Lasine’s melodramatic lead, the category has been invoked more recently, apparently independently, but again in relation to the books of Samuel, by Francesca Aran Murphy (2010). In her theological commentary on 1 Samuel, Murphy (2010, 279–82) finds much to confirm Northrop Frye’s (1981, 181) reading of Saul as the sole truly tragic figure of the Hebrew canon. For Murphy, the Saul narrative’s character is properly tragic because it offers readers both a Saul in possession of genuine freedom and an accompanying moral responsibility for his actions as well as a good and transcendent God who has not predestined Saul to fall. Accordingly, Murphy takes issue with recent readings of the Saul narrative which find “tragedy” in a God whose dark side has pitted him against Saul from the beginning, leaving Saul with few meaningful options. For Murphy, to read 1 Samuel’s truly tragic story of Saul in this

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tragedy (e.g., Exum 1996) and comedy (e.g., Whedbee 1998), interest in melodrama has been passing at best and largely restricted to the representation of the biblical in the dramatic arts. See for instance, Feffer 2007, Mork 2004.

17. Lasine (1984, 114) builds on the earlier identification of certain “melodramatic elements in the narrative” by Hagan (1979, 305–6), for whom these melodramatic elements prevent the narrative from constituting full-blown tragedy.

18. Though it should be noted that David’s reputation is not left entirely untarnished by 1 Kgs 15:5, where David’s righteousness is qualified with “except in the matter of Uriah the Hittite.”



fashion is to misread it as melodrama, a functionally secular genre which replaces the transcendent good God with cosmic forces of good and evil depriving human agents of any absolute value.<sup>19</sup> For Murphy (2010, 282), any reading which makes the God of 1 Samuel the arch-villain and Saul entirely innocent fails “to assign the mystery of evil to creaturely freedom and hence effectively trivializes Saul’s tragedy by making it melodrama in which all the pieces neatly fit.”

Our purpose at this juncture is not to fully evaluate the arguments of Lasine or Murphy *per se*, but rather to reflect on the ways in which they conceptualize the melodramatic and relate it to the biblical text and its interpretation. Lasine (1984, 103) finds Nathan’s parable melodramatic because it reflects melodrama’s “one-dimensional, emotionally charged portrayals of helpless innocents exploited by ruthless villains”—an understanding of melodrama which Murphy shares but finds lacking in 1 Samuel. Similarly, while Murphy finds no evidence of it in Saul’s story, she notes melodrama’s insistence on “making all the pieces neatly fit”—a notion which Lasine (drawing upon Cawelti 1976, 45) does see in David’s indignant reaction to the parable of the ewe lamb:

It is crucial to melodrama that “the right things will ultimately happen,” no matter how much the helpless victim must suffer first. The villain must ultimately be punished, so that the story can “show forth the essential ‘rightness’ of the world order.” (Lasine 1984, 112)

While Lasine’s understanding of the melodramatic clearly overlaps with Murphy’s, they do not coincide entirely. For Lasine (1984, 103, 106), a crucial—indeed, perhaps *the* crucial—feature of melodrama is its penchant for depicting and aiming to produce exaggerated emotional responses—a trait which he identifies both in the overly sentimental portrayal of the relationship between the poor man and his lamb (2 Sam 12:3) and in the

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19. While Murphy’s distinction between the melodramatic and tragic is unreferenced, the terminology of “the melodramatic imagination” may suggest the influence of the work of Brooks (1976), whose exploration of melodrama has been influential. For Heilman (1968, 79), the tragic is concerned with the conflict within man, whereas melodrama focuses on man’s conflict with others or things. Yet as Felski (2008, 7–8) illustrates, the distinction between melodrama and tragedy is not easily maintained on formal grounds and may instead be a reflection of social presuppositions and ideological criteria.

exaggerated depiction of David's indignation. While Murphy's conceptualization of melodrama does not reference this exaggerated emotionalism, neither does Lasine's reflect the distinction between a theological melodrama and sacred tragedy which stands at the heart of Murphy's understanding of the genre.

In seeking here to test the utility and applicability of the notion of melodrama in relation to the cycle of ancient stories associated with David, we do not propose to argue for the biblical text as melodrama *per se*, but rather to assess by means of Singer's criteria discussed above, both the extent to which the stories found in the books of Samuel are more or less melodramatic than narratives we find elsewhere in the Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1–2 Kings) and also the extent to which David is portrayed as more or less melodramatic than other characters in the books of Samuel.

The extending of such an assessment to include all five of Singer's features would be interesting and useful but would require a far fuller treatment than may be offered here. Instead, in view of its importance in both scholarly and popular notions of the melodramatic, our exploration of the melodramatic will focus on the frequency and intensity of emotional expression in the narratives associated with David and Saul. That our interest will be in these narratives and the characters within them—rather than merely the characterization of David (as in Lasine)—reflects the narrative reality that David is but one character in a cycle populated by others, even if his characterization is more fully-orbed than some others.<sup>20</sup> Because a full analysis of the narrative representation of emotion in the David and Saul narratives would require a study far beyond the scope of what may be offered here, what is attempted here is but a beginning—in archaeological terms, little more than the digging of a test site on the very large—and largely unexcavated—mound of emotions narrated and represented within the David and Saul stories.

### Expressions of Human Anger in the Books of Samuel

Our starting point is furnished by Lasine's (1984, 103) suggestion that David's angry response to the parable of the ewe lamb is intended to be

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20. For a recent noting of this fact and a literary reading that attends to it, see Morrison 2013.

understood as melodramatic in the sense of expressing an excess of emotion. Any assessment of the depiction of David’s anger and its emotional intensity must of course attend to the immediate context (2 Sam 11–12) as Lasine seeks to do. Yet such an assessment must also be set within the context of the depiction of anger in the wider narrative context of the books of Samuel and indeed the Former Prophets as a whole. Moreover, instead of taking merely a core sample, we must also lift our eyes to the wider semantic field of *anger* and consider not only how often anger appears in these narratives, but also who gets angry and how angry they get. In answering these questions, we limit ourselves to expressions of human anger rather than its divine manifestations, primarily because while God’s wrath features prominently in the Former Prophets generally,<sup>21</sup> in the books of Samuel it is human anger which predominates, as Matthew Schlimm (2011) has found to be the case also in Genesis. If the paucity of divine anger in 1–2 Samuel is perhaps not entirely surprising given the largely favorable disposition of the narratives toward David (though this can hardly be said of Saul to the same degree),<sup>22</sup> what is perhaps slightly

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21. In the book of Joshua, all six mentions of anger (Josh 7:1, 26; 9:20; 22:18, 20; 23:6) are associated with the expression or threat of divine rage. Of the eight appearances of anger in Judges, six relate to the expression or threat of divine anger (Judg 2:12, 14, 20; 3:8; 6:39, and 10:7) while only two (9:30 and 14:9) relate to human anger. Also interesting is the fact that the first significant character to become angry, and the only judge to do so is Samson (14:19), whom the narrator notes “was angry” (וִיחַר אִפּוֹ) at having to settle his debt with the residents of Timnah after they had used his wife to extract the answer to his riddle from him. This prevalence of divine anger is resumed in the books of 1–2 Kings, where twenty-six of the thirty-two occurrences of anger relate to the expression or threat of divine anger: 1 Kgs 8:46; 11:9; 14:9, 15; 15:30; 16:2, 7, 13, 26, 33; 21:22; 22:54; 2 Kgs 13:3; 17:11, 17, 18; 21:6, 15; 22:13, 17; 23:19, 26 (2x); 24:20. The wrath which comes upon Israel after Mesha’s sacrifice of his son on the wall (2 Kgs 3:27) should almost certainly be understood as divine wrath (originally at least) given both the context and the use here of קִצֹּף, which is elsewhere used overwhelmingly in association with divine anger (see Montgomery and Gehman 1951, 364).

22. Indeed, of the dozen mentions of anger in 1 Samuel, the only one which relates to divine anger is found in 28:18, where Samuel explains to Saul that he has forfeited the kingship because “you did not carry out his [i.e., the deity’s] fierce wrath [חֲרוֹן־אַפּוֹ] against Amalek.” While there can be little doubting the association of this anger with the divine, it is worth noting that even here, it is an anger (or an expression thereof) that is intended to be visited by one human agent upon another. In 2 Samuel, only three of the nine mentions of anger are related to divine rage: in 6:7 wrath breaks

less anticipated is the abundance of human anger in 1–2 Samuel—especially given the virtual absence of it in the rest of the Former Prophets. Indeed, in statistical terms, human anger is mentioned clearly only six times in the ninety-two chapters of Joshua, Judges, and 1–2 Kings (about once every fifteen chapters), whereas there are twenty-three mentions of human anger in a mere fifty-five chapters of 1–2 Samuel (about once every 2.4 chapters);<sup>23</sup> in other words, human anger is mentioned six times more often in 1–2 Samuel than in the rest of the Former Prophets.

The observation that human anger is more prevalent in 1 and 2 Samuel than divine anger begs the questions: who specifically becomes angry within these books, and how angry do they become? While the books are of course chiefly occupied with Saul and David and the fortunes of their families, it has been observed that the tone of the books is set long before the arrival of either on the scene—indeed from the outset—by the opening episode concerning Hannah and the birth of Samuel (See, e.g., Polzin 1993, 24–35). For our purposes, it is worth noting that the episode may in some sense not only foreshadow the themes of the books but also their emotional tone—at least insofar as anger is concerned. In the case of 1 Sam 1, it is of course Hannah’s anger with which the narrative is concerned—an anger expressed by means of the nominal (1:16) and verbal forms of the root **בָּעַס**, as in 1 Sam 1:6–7, where they are typically rendered as “provoke”:

<sup>6</sup> Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. <sup>7</sup> So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.

That it is not merely provoke but specifically “provoke to anger” (as rendered by for instance, McCarter 1980, 49) would seem to be required by the Hebrew (1 Sam 1:6, 7, 16) and fits comfortably with the retributive

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out against Uzzah for touching the ark, in 22:8 it is recounted in David’s “song,” while in 24:1 divine wrath is kindled toward Israel as a means of explaining the divine incitement of David to take a census of the people. While 2 Sam 22 is not narrative and the mention of anger in it might therefore be excluded from our calculations, such an exclusion would not be statistically significant given the general predominance of narrative in the Former Prophets (see note below).

23. A more precise analysis might exclude chapters that do not contain any (or much) narrative, but this is unlikely to alter significantly the picture reflected here.

tone of Hannah’s song in the subsequent chapter (see esp. 2:5). Indeed, perhaps the translation of Graeme Auld (2011, 21) is best of all: “And her enemy would vex her with utter vexation in order to enrage her.” It is this especially intense feeling of anger which the narrator associates with Hannah—an anger so intense that it causes an audible outburst (see her weeping in 1 Sam 1:7).<sup>24</sup> That it is this anger rather than mere sadness which Hannah experiences is finally confirmed when Elkanah asks Hannah in 1:8—not “why are you sad?” (so NRSV) but—“why are you resentful?” which is the connotation of the idiom (רַע לְבָבָךְ) in the only other text where it appears (Deut 15:10).<sup>25</sup> When in 1 Sam 1:16, Hannah finally explains to Eli that she was praying out of כַּעַס it can hardly be merely “my grief” (so NIV) nor even the quaintly archaic “my vexation” (so NRSV) but should be rendered simply “my anger.” Thus freed from the assumption of translators that nice girls do not get mad, the intensity of Hannah’s anger effectively foreshadows the eruption of this same emotion in the narratives of Saul and David to which 1 Samuel turns.

Apart from Saul (for which see below), it is Samuel who is the first within these narratives to become angry (1 Sam 15:11), doing so in response to a divine speech:

“I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands.” Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the LORD all night. (1 Sam 15:11)

Despite the unambiguousness of the Hebrew (וַיִּחַר לְשִׁמוּאֵל) “and it angered Samuel” and the narrative plausibility of Samuel’s rage (see Bodner 2008, 154), various translations again seem reluctant to acknowledge Samuel’s anger, preferring instead to construe him as “troubled” or “grieved.”<sup>26</sup> Here too, as in 1 Sam 1, the narratorial description of the emotional state gives way to the expression (“crying out”) of what may or may not be the same emotion. It is not clear what it is precisely about God’s rejection of Saul

24. This audible outpouring then constitutes a vivid narrative contrast with the silence of Hannah’s distress within the temple (see 1 Sam 1:13).

25. As is recognized by more recent translations of 1 Sam 15:10 (so NRSV) where giving freely is contrasted with giving grudgingly or resentfully.

26. The NIV’s rendering, “troubled,” incorrectly softens the emotion, perhaps to protect Samuel’s reputation. See also in this connection, LXX’s ἡττύμησεν, for which see McCarter (1980, 262).

that has prompted Samuel's anger—though whether he is angry toward God or Saul, the reader may be invited to assume that Samuel is crying out for God to change his mind about Saul. Given the increasing scholarly tendency to implicate Samuel in Saul's fall from grace (so Gunn 1980), it is interesting that it is not Saul's rise that prompts Samuel's anger but rather his imminent demise.

Turning to Saul himself, it is worth noting that anger is the first emotion explicitly associated with him by the narrator in 1 Samuel—when Saul hears the people weeping at the threat posed to Jabesh Gilead by Nahash the Ammonite. It is not entirely clear whether the coming of the spirit of God upon Saul (narrated in 1 Sam 11:6a) is causally bound up with Saul's anger (וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ מְאֹד), but there can be little doubting the righteousness of his indignation at the prospect of the people's suffering or its intimate association with his calling of the Israelites to arms.<sup>27</sup> The Hebrew also makes it clear that Saul is not merely "angered" but "greatly angered," an indication that the heightened intensity of emotion narrated at the opening of 1 Samuel in relation to Hannah is not limited to her alone.

This intensity of emotion, and of rage specifically, resurfaces in 1 Sam 18. When the women come out to meet Saul and serenade David at his expense (1 Sam 18:7: "Saul has killed his thousands, David his ten thousands"), the narrator notes immediately: "Saul was very angry [וַיַּחַר לְשָׂאוֹל מְאֹד] for this saying displeased him." The consequences of this anger are also spelled out explicitly by the narrator not only in the note that Saul kept his eye on David (18:9), but also in the description of Saul's spirit-fueled attempts to kill David with a spear. Unsurprisingly then, David himself associates Saul with anger, as may be seen in 1 Sam 20:7, when he asks Jonathan to gauge Saul's response to David's absence: "if he is angry [וְאִם יַחַרָּה לוֹ], then know that evil has been determined by him" (1 Sam 20:7). Though one might assume that Saul's anger will be directed at David in absentia, when Jonathan explains David's absence, it is in fact Jonathan who is the object of his father's anger (וַיַּחַרְאֵף שָׂאוֹל בִּיהֻנָּתָן): "then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan"—and it is he who is accused of having "chosen the son of Jesse to your own shame" (1 Sam 20:30). This accusation and Saul's attempt to kill Jonathan with the spear as he had tried to kill David leads in turn to the narrator's characterization of

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27. As Auld (2011, 122) notes, Saul's anger at the mistreatment of his people anticipates David's (e.g., 2 Sam 6:8; 12:5; 13:21).

Jonathan’s response in comparably emotional terms: “Jonathan rose from the table in fierce anger [בַּחֲרֵי־אַף]” (1 Sam 20:34).<sup>28</sup> Of course, such intensity of emotion on the part of Jonathan in defense of David fits admirably with the intensity of his affection for David, which the narrator has no qualms about signaling in the most explicit terms (e.g., 1 Sam 19:1).

That it is not merely Saul who is capable of intense anger, but also those whom the narrator associates with Saul, is made clear not only by Jonathan’s hot rage, but also by Abner’s response to Ish-bosheth’s challenging of his authority in 2 Sam 3. By noting that Abner was “making himself strong in the house of Saul” (2 Sam 3:6), the narrator invites the reader to give serious consideration to the possibility that Ish-bosheth’s accusation against Abner (2 Sam 3:7: “Why have you gone in to my father’s concubine?”) is indeed well-founded.<sup>29</sup> Instead of a confession, however, the narrator characterizes Abner’s response in terms of pure unbridled aggression: “The words of Ishbaal made Abner very angry; he said, ‘Am I a dog’s head for Judah?’” (2 Sam 3:8). Moved by this great anger, Abner immediately signals his defection to David and the effective end of Ishbaal’s aspirations to retain his father’s throne.

If the narrator makes it clear that Israel’s first king and those associated with him are hot-tempered, by the time David has slain Goliath at the end of 1 Sam 17, it is evident that they do not have a monopoly on anger. While “fear” (and the lack thereof) is clearly the operative emotion in this chapter (1 Sam 17:11, 24, 32, see also 51), the narrator notes the response of Eliab, to David’s queries regarding Goliath:

<sup>28</sup> His eldest brother Eliab heard him talking to the men; and Eliab’s anger was kindled [וַיַּחֲרֵ־אַף] against David. He said, “Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle.” (1 Sam 17:28)

In Eliab’s anger toward David, we find the only hint within these narratives of the sort of fraternal tension evident between Joseph and his broth-

<sup>28</sup> Auld (2011, 244) notes that the rage of the son (1 Sam 20:34) is perfectly matched to that of the father (1 Sam 20:30).

<sup>29</sup> The only real question, which is not addressed by Abner in his retort, is whether his motives for taking Rizpah were political or otherwise. See Anderson (1989, 57).

ers (Gen 37:4; McCarter 1980, 304), though here too an elder brother is angered by either the ambition or presumption of the younger.<sup>30</sup> Curiously, even when David leaves the Israelite ranks and escapes to the Philistines, his presence is still a cause for concern and indeed anger. Thus Achish faces a revolt in the Philistine ranks when his proposal that David join them in battle against his fellow Israelites is met with unbridled rage: “But the commanders of the Philistines were angry with him [וִיקָצְפוּ עָלָיו שָׂרֵי פְלִשְׁתִּים]; and the commanders of the Philistines said to him, ‘Send the man back’” (1 Sam 29:4). While their suspicion that David cannot be trusted is made clear (1 Sam 29:4–5), their anger is prompted by what they perceive to be the dangerous naivety of Achish, who is persuaded by their rage and/or their reason to banish David from the front, despite his protests.

### The Anger of David

Against this backdrop of regular and, at times, intense rage on the part of various characters within the books of 1 and 2 Samuel, what may we say about David’s anger? That David himself has a temper which might lead to undesirable actions is at least implied by the episode in 1 Sam 25 where David is offended by Nabal, whose life is saved thanks only to the intervention of his wife, Abigail. However, David’s anger is first noted explicitly by the narrator in 2 Samuel in connection with Uzzah’s touching of the ark. In response to the anger of God breaking out against Uzzah (וַיַּחַר־אַף יְהוָה), resulting in his death (2 Sam 6:7), the narrator notes David’s own anger (וַיַּחַר לְדָוִד; 6:8). As was seen in the case of Samuel (1 Sam 15), David’s anger arises from a divine action, which here (unlike 1 Sam 15) results in a death. Yet, it is not clear that Yahweh is the actual object of David’s anger (contra Anderson 1989, 104), which remains unspecified. For the first time but not for the last, David is angered by a threat, imagined or realized, against someone for whom he sees himself to be responsible (so Auld 2011, 412); however, the note of his fear (2 Sam 6:8; see Hertzberg 1964, 279) and temporary abandonment of the ark (2 Sam 6:10) suggests that his anger may at least partly be prompted by concern for his own safety and the complication of his plans to bring the ark to Jerusalem.

In 2 Sam 11:20, Joab’s instructions to the messenger who will relay news of the military setback notes the possibility of David’s anger:

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30. For more on anger in the Joseph cycle, see Schlimm 2011.



“When you have finished telling the king all the news about the fighting, then, if the king’s anger rises, and if he says to you, ‘Why did you go so near the city to fight? Did you not know that they would shoot from the wall?... Why did you go so near the wall?’ then you shall say, ‘Your servant Uriah the Hittite is dead too.’” (2 Sam 11:19–21)

Evidently Joab anticipates David’s ire being raised by the loss of life which might appear to have been caused by Joab’s incompetence, but the mere fact that Joab anticipates David’s anger confirms the reader’s growing suspicion that David has a short fuse. It is perhaps for this reason that the messenger delivers the news of Uriah’s death without delay—preempting David’s expected anger and at the same time confirming Joab’s intuition regarding how it might be assuaged.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, David’s cavalier encouragement to Joab to press the attack despite “collateral damages” confirms that the indignation which might normally be expected of David upon hearing of the loss of his men has been short circuited by news of the success of his murderous plot.

When Nathan arrives at court with a tale specifically calculated to evoke David’s sympathy and outrage, David’s response—unburdened by any sense of self-recrimination—is one of great anger:

<sup>5</sup> Then David’s anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, “As the LORD lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.” (2 Sam 12:5–6)

While Lasine is surely right that the parable itself possesses undeniably melodramatic qualities, is David’s own response to it equally melodramatic as Lasine also suggests? On one hand, there is no denying the strength of David’s reaction; he is not merely angry but “very angry” and is quick to specify how the injustice which angers him should be remedied. Yet, if David understands the situation to be a real one requiring his judicial intervention, is the emotional intensity of his response—the heat of his indignation—really excessive, given that the David encountered by readers of 2 Samuel is, as we have seen, no stranger to anger,

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31. McCarter’s (1980, 282) reservations regarding the plausibility of Joab’s detailed anticipation of David’s angry analysis 2 Sam 11:20–21 seem unfounded. See Barthélemy (1980, 13–15).

especially when he senses the threat of injustice to others? Indeed, in the next chapter (2 Sam 13:21), David is not merely angry again<sup>32</sup> but “very angry” (וַיִּחַר לוֹ מְאֹד), this time at the news of another injustice, his son Amnon’s rape of his daughter Tamar. In this case, unlike that of the ewe lamb, the narrator notes that David’s will to act on his anger is undermined by another emotion—love—which he feels for Amnon, his son.<sup>33</sup> While this paralysis is initial evidence of David’s Achilles’s heel—his inability to discipline his children—the intensity of his anger here also confirms what his response to Nathan’s parable has suggested: that David is a character capable of (or susceptible to) not merely anger, but great anger especially when confronted with injustice. If the intensity of David’s anger in 2 Sam 11–13 is not therefore atypical of the character we meet in 2 Samuel and therefore not especially melodramatic by his own standards, might we then argue that David himself is on the whole a melodramatic character, more prone to excesses of emotion, than others in 1–2 Samuel? Even this is difficult to sustain, given that, as we have seen, various others within these narratives, including Jonathan, Abner, and especially Saul, are reported as becoming not merely angry, but very angry (see above) along with Hannah who shares a similar intensity of anger (1 Sam 1). This then points toward a locating of a melodramatic intensity of emotion, not in any one character within the narratives, but rather in the narratives themselves.

### Concluding Reflections

The anecdotal impressions of the representation of emotions other than anger encourages the suggestion that emotions in general are represented more deeply and with greater intensity in the narratives of 1–2 Samuel than elsewhere in the Former Prophets. Thus while Andréani’s decision to end *La Mort de Saül* with David’s grief at the death of his son Absalom (2 Sam 19:8) reflects early cinematic interest in the causes and emotional consequences of domestic trauma, the biblical narrative itself goes to extraordinary lengths to represent David’s mourning. This may be seen not only

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32. Contra Anderson (1989, 171), who renders merely “angry” thereby failing to capture the emotional intensity of the Hebrew.

33. The plus in the LXX and 4QSam<sup>a</sup> which plausibly attributes David’s lack of action against Amnon to his love for him may well have been lost in the MT (see Auld 2011, 476–77).

in the repeated narratorial representation of emotion first in 18:33 (Hb. [19:1] וִירָגַז “and he trembled”; וִיבֵךְ “and he wept”), then in 19:1 ([Hb. 19:2] הַמֶּלֶךְ בָּכָה וַיֵּתְאֵבֶל עַל־אַבְשָׁלֹם “The king is weeping and he mourns over Absalom”), and then again in 19:2 ([Hb. 19:3] נֶעְצֵב הַמֶּלֶךְ עַל־בְּנוֹ “The king is grieved over his son”), but also in the extraordinarily repetitive quality of David’s verbal lament in 2 Sam 18:33 (“my son” 5x; “Absalom” 3x) and then again in 2 Sam 19:4 (“my son” 3x; “Absalom” 2x). Leaving aside questions of cultural expectation and narrative motivation for the expression of grief, there can be little doubt that the David of the books of Samuel is not only “acquainted with grief” but seemingly given to intense expressions of it (1 Sam 20:41; 30:4; 2 Sam 1:11–12; etc.). So too while fear is a common enough emotion in the Hebrew Bible, various characters in 1–2 Samuel are described as having a particularly intense sensation of fear: David (1 Sam 21:13), the people (1 Sam 12:18; 17:24), Saul’s armor bearer (1 Sam 31:4), and especially Saul himself (1 Sam 17:11; 18:29; 28:5, 20). While the hypothesis that the books of Samuel offer especially and unusually intense expressions of emotion (in addition to anger) remains to be properly tested, such a hypothesis would explain, at least in part, why the narratives of David and Saul appealed so strongly to early silent filmmakers such as Andréani. In these narratives and others (e.g., the Joseph cycle), Andréani found characters possessing the kind of emotional intensity required by a cinema deeply infused with the melodramatic sensibility of its theatrical past.

Indeed, if this heightened emotional intensity is characteristic of the narratives of David and Saul (and others within the Hebrew Bible), it may also be worth considering whether other aspects of this early cinematic melodramatic imagination (Singer 2001, 44–49) might be discernible in these ancient narratives. Andréani’s own admittedly limited concessions to moral ambiguity in his films (noted above) suggest that the narratives of Samuel themselves are perhaps less susceptible to the kind of easy moral polarization of good and evil so characteristic of early cinematic melodrama. Given the blood that is shed in the books of Samuel, melodrama’s penchant for sensationalism including especially the spectacle of violence might offer happier hunting grounds for this aspect of early cinematic melodrama.

But perhaps most promising of all is melodrama’s interest in *pathos* (i.e., the evoking of a strong sense of pity). While Andréani’s depiction of the grief-stricken David and Saul at the loss of their sons is calculated to evoke sympathy by playing on the parental anxieties of early film-goers,

the culpability of both fathers and sons in the demise of the latter would seem to compromise or complicate the pure *pathos* characteristic of early cinematic melodrama, in which pity is evoked by an utterly innocent victim and a stark injustice. The relevance of this becomes clear when it is recalled that on more than one occasion, as we have seen, the expression of David's ire is represented as being invoked by pity for a victim of perceived injustice (i.e., Uzzah, the poor man, Tamar).<sup>34</sup> This in turn suggests the value of reflecting finally on the melodramatic qualities of the parable of the ewe lamb to which David responds. As Lasine notes (1984, 102–4), the parable succeeds in establishing the moral polarities of the rich evil man and the poor innocent victim in part by evoking the pity of the hearer at the profound injustice perpetrated by the former on the latter. Nathan enhances the emotional purchase of this injustice by devoting the bulk of 2 Sam 12:3 to the configuring of the “ewe lamb” as the poor man's own daughter—a sleight of hand calculated not only to trigger (and foreshadow) David's parental anxiety relating to the loss of a child, but also to freight the “killing” of the lamb as not merely food preparation but murder, itself one of the staples of early cinematic melodrama. It is all the more striking then that what is conspicuous by its absence from Nathan's parable is precisely the hyper-emotional response seen to be typical of characters within the books of Samuel. Yet if this is no more than we should expect of parables/fables in the Hebrew Bible (see 2 Sam 14:1, Judg 9:7–15), it is a reminder that as in the early cinema, so too in the biblical tradition, the qualities which cluster around the notion of the melodramatic may be present or absent to varying degrees in a given story/genre. That the quality of emotional hyper-intensity, which we suspect to be characteristic of the stories of Saul and David, would particularly attract early film-makers such as Andréani is perhaps understandable given the depiction of emotion in the Victorian theatre and the early cinema. That it was not the towering rage of Saul and David, but their extraordinary grief which finally shaped Andréani's portraits of them reflects the early

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34. Lasine's (1984, 103) suggestion that David's response confirms that he does not view Nathan's parable as a melodrama reflects his dichotomization of the melodramatic and the realistic. For a more nuanced view of the relationship see Singer (2001, 49–53). In fact, it seems clear that David's response should be understood as a typical response (in the books of Samuel at least) to the melodramatic qualities of Nathan's parable.

cinema's great interest in parental anxieties, which are, of course, far older even than the ancient books of Samuel.

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## DEATH AND DISASTER: 2012 MEETS NOAH

*Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Stichele*

In his review of Darren Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014), *New York Times* critic A. O. Scott (2014) labels the film an "ambitious fusion of Old Testament awe with modern blockbuster spectacle" and a bit further "less an epic than a horror movie." *Variety*'s chief critic Scott Foundas (2014), however, calls *Noah* a biblical epic. As the subtitle of his article states: "Man builds ark, survives flood, then wonders what it was all for in Darren Aronofsky's long-awaited, hotly debated biblical epic." What is striking in this quick comparison between two leading American film critics is the way in which they use genre qualifications in their reviews or, more specifically, how their classification of *Noah* within certain genres is so radically different. Whereas according to Scott, "blockbuster," "spectacle," "epic," and "horror" are genres to which the film (possibly) belongs, Foundas is unequivocal in calling *Noah* a biblical epic. By thus comparing the reviews of Scott and Foundas, one particular function of genre is revealed: it helps the viewer decide what type of film one should (or should not) go out and see, thereby shaping viewer expectations. However, as the two reviews also point out, the way genres are assigned to certain films is anything but a clear-cut or unambiguous process.

In this essay we first discuss the use of genre in film studies. Having thus introduced the conceptual tools that are relevant for the analysis of genre, we analyze two films, Roland Emmerich's *2012* (2009) and Aronofsky's *Noah* (2014). What these films have in common is that they draw on the biblical story about the flood (Gen 6:11–9:28). Moreover, as we will argue, they do so in the context of a disaster film.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Part of this essay was published earlier in Dutch. See Copier and Vander Stichele 2012.

## The Use of Genre in Film Studies

Within film studies, the concept of genre is generally understood to have three functions. The first one can be seen at work in the reviews of Scott and Foundas. Genre qualifications are used by filmmakers, critics, and audiences as shorthand, a way to describe and categorize a film. Amongst the three groups, there is a rough, one might even say intuitive, conception of what a genre might mean. In a sense, it is presumed knowledge about genres. The second way film genre is understood and deployed is within the context of Hollywood as an industry. Here, genre can be compared to a blueprint, used in the mass production of Hollywood cinema. As Rick Altman (1999, 16) remarks, this approach treats genre as a “quasi-magical correspondence between industry purpose and audience responses.” Quite a number of influential studies of film genre assume that industrial action defines what genre is (see, e.g., Schatz 1981, Feuer 1982). Finally, and most importantly for the argument that we wish to make in this essay, genre is a conceptual object of study within the academic discipline of film studies.<sup>2</sup>

Historically speaking, modern genre theory coincided with the rise of structuralism in the 1950s, which is not surprising since both seek to uncover the rules and structures of a work of art. Genre as it is understood within film studies consists of three major paradigms: the aesthetic, the ritualistic, and the ideological approach. The aesthetic approach is more specifically concerned with the question of recurring narrative structures and iconographical elements within a genre. Here, the work of the already mentioned film theorist Altman has proven to be influential. In the appendix to his book *Film/Genre* (1999), Altman expands on the aesthetic analysis of genres, which he had proposed some fifteen years earlier. Strictly speaking, Altman’s approach was not new. There was already a broad division between genre historians who looked at films from a semantic point of view, and those who looked at it from a syntactic point of view. Altman’s most important argument is that the two are complimentary and need to be combined (220–21).

According to Altman, the semantic elements of a genre are iconographic and as such pertaining to the visual, the look of the film. Films

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2. See, for instance, Barry Keith Grant’s *Film Genre Reader* series (1986–2012) and Neale (2000). The study of genre as a conceptual object analyses divergent aspects of genre such as narrative structure, aesthetics, iconography, and cultural meaning.

such as *2012* and *Noah*, for instance, are characterized by long sequences showing the overwhelming force of nature, presented through the use of computer-generated images. Semantic elements thus provide the analyst with a set of relatively easy to recognize formal, visual elements (mood, characters, use of certain cinematographic techniques), which can be applied to a broad set of films. Here, generic definitions depend on a list of common traits, which can be seen as the building blocks of a genre. As a way of analyzing genre, this approach is not sophisticated; it is useful to draw up lists of traits that can be applied to many films. As such it is broadly applicable but has “little explanatory power” (Altman 1999, 220). For example, the semantic elements of the western can be summarized as follows: it is set in the American West; there are cowboys, outlaws, settlers, and tribes of Native Americans. These groups live among railroads, horses, schools, saloons, and churches. Their clothes range from starched dresses and Sunday suits to tribal garb and Stetsons (Bordwell and Thompson 1997, 56). For film critics and a movie-going audience, these elements are instantly recognizable but do not offer more than a superficial set of visual markers delineating genre.

Different from semantic elements are syntactic elements, which are found at the level of the narrative. Here, genres are studied for their repetitive narrative structure, characters (beyond simple categories such as cowboys and Indians), and plot elements. This analysis focuses on the particular structure into which these syntactic elements are arranged. These are the deeper meaning-bearing structures of a film. For instance, the depiction, valuation, and possible abolishment of poverty in society in gangster films is different from the way poverty is represented in the musical genre. In the gangster genre, poverty is not ennobling or romantic but is often used as a pretext for criminal behavior, whereas in musicals poverty is often depicted as romantic and unproblematic. Such an approach then is particularly useful in analyzing individual films, but the results of it may not be as broadly applicable as is the case with a semantic analysis.

As noted earlier, Altman propagates an analysis of genre that takes seriously the multiple connections and developments between semantics and syntax. As he points out, genres such as the western and the musical have developed a coherent syntax. The disaster/catastrophic/apocalyptic genre, however, Altman (1999, 225) argues, “depend[s] entirely on recurring semantic elements, never developing a stable syntax.” This observation will be dealt with in more detail in our comparative analysis of *2012* and *Noah*.

Apart from the aesthetic approach, which Altman retools into his semantic/syntactic approach to genre, there are two other ways of analyzing genres: the ritualistic approach and the ideological approach. The ritualistic approach is inspired by the work of Claude Levi-Strauss and Vladimir Propp and is concerned with the mythical aspects of Hollywood genres.<sup>3</sup> Genres are seen as modern myths that reflect a society's (un)conscious fears, problems, and desires.<sup>4</sup> The underlying assumption here is that Hollywood produces these types of recurring, mythical narratives because there is a strong demand for them by its audience. In this way, theorists of the ritual approach attribute authorship of its ultimate meaning to the audience, with, as Altman (1999, 218) puts it, "the studios simply serving, for a price, the national will."

Conversely, the ideological approach, which is inspired by the work of Louis Althusser, proposes to analyze genres and generic conventions as structures that lead its audience into accepting a certain ideology, propagated by the ruling power systems of a society. This type of critique most often takes up a negative view of the role of genres as vehicles by which "audiences are lured into false assumptions of societal happiness and future happiness" (Altman 1999, 27). Here, the audience is not in control (as the ritualistic approach assumes) but instead is constantly manipulated by Hollywood. In this approach, a genre is regarded as "a specific type of lie, an untruth whose most characteristic feature is its ability to masquerade as truth" (218).

This distinction between the ritual and ideological paradigm is, however, not as straightforward as this discussion may lead to believe. Rather, the successful genre film is capable of disguising its ritualistic and ideological tenets. As Altman argues,

because the public doesn't want to know that it is being manipulated, the successful ritual/ideological "fit" is almost always one that disguises Hollywood's potential for manipulation while playing up its capacity for entertainment. (223)

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3. History of film scholar Thomas Schatz (1981) applies ideas of Claude Lévi-Strauss about myths to film genres.

4. For the interpretation of contemporary apocalyptic film as valorization of the everyday and the affirmation of the existing social order, see Wallis 2010.

In other words, a successful genre is able to serve both purposes at the same time. It provides its audience the pleasure or predictability of genre entertainment, while at the same time its ideological message is accepted without protest. This “lasting fit” as Altman calls it, is dependent on whether a semantic genre can actually develop into a syntactic one (223). This remark shows that Altman understands syntactic elements to be the most important part of the construction of genre. In what follows, *2012* and *Noah* will be analyzed through the proposed semantic/syntactic model. By doing so, the different elements that make up the genre of the disaster film can be explored. Our focus on genre theory in this essay shows that using Altman’s model enables us to address not only the issue of recurring thematic and narrative traits in film, but also to pay attention to the important technical and visual aspects of film. We argue that such an understanding of genre as a method is a valuable addition to the study and analysis of the intersections between Bible and film. As we demonstrate in the last section of this essay, a comparative analysis based on Altman’s definition of genre between *2012* and *Noah*, the former predominantly secular in its treatment of the flood story and the latter explicitly biblical, shows how cinematic (re)interpretations of a biblical text put that text into a new perspective.

### Disaster and the End in *2012*

Emmerich’s film *2012*, which came out in 2009, was inspired by the hype about the Mayan calendar predicting that the end of the world would take place on December 21, 2012.<sup>5</sup> In the film, this end more specifically takes the form of a natural disaster. Due to eruptions on the surface of the sun, the earth’s core starts to melt. As a result, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic outbursts take place all over the world. The North and South Poles shift, leading to major climatological changes. The film is dominated by hallucinating images of death and destruction all over the world. The world as we know it is destroyed. Millions of people die. The prophets of doom happen to be right. In the film, one such prophet is Charlie Frost, who looks like a lunatic but is in fact one of the few people who seems to know what is going on. He spreads his message through his own radio station and wants to be there when it all happens.

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5. See, for instance, Rossi (2010). On the role of the media in the popular representation of end time scenarios, see Hart and Holba (2009), and Howard (2011).

Apart from the Mayan calendar with its focus on the year 2012, the biblical story about the flood served as a major source of inspiration for the film, more specifically when it comes to the issue of surviving the end. In secret, ships have been built in China to rescue the happy few who could afford to buy a ticket and board one of them. These high-tech “arks” are meant to protect their passengers from the heavy floods that will wash over the earth.<sup>6</sup> As a result, although most people perish, a remnant survives the disaster and can start a new life, not accidentally in Africa, the presumed cradle of humanity.

The unusual combination of these two stories or myths, the Mayan calendar and the story about the flood, makes *2012* an interesting example of how the genre of the disaster movie continues to develop.<sup>7</sup> A semantic analysis of the film shows that *2012* is firmly rooted in the genre of the disaster movie. Clearly semantic are the elaborate scenes in which major parts of the earth are destroyed by a combination of earthquakes, cracks in the crust of the earth, followed by floods and tsunamis. The display of such natural disasters is the most important characteristic of this film. CGI is used to enhance the credibility of these scenes. From a genre theoretical perspective, this semantic aspect of the film is related to other work of the same director. In his film *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), Emmerich equally focuses on natural disasters, in this case related to the sudden start of the ice age. Here too scenes of mass destruction take central stage.

A syntactical analysis focuses on returning narrative structures and characters. Often these are historically defined. In the genre of disaster films, a fixed order can be noted in their narrative structure. Thus, a number of inexplicable, strange phenomena take place, which seem unrelated, until one person discovers a pattern. This person is often one of the important characters, if not necessarily the main character of the film. The opposition between those who know and those who do not (and therefore need to be convinced of the impending catastrophe), is also a fixed part of the disaster narrative. In the case of *2012*, those in the know are the “crazy” prophet, Charlie Frost, and the scientists who discover that the core of the earth is melting, one of them being geologist Adrian Helmsley, the scientific advisor of the American president.

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6. The image of the ark as refuge also appears in a few other apocalyptic films, notably Mimi Leder's *Deep Impact* (1998) and Val Guest's *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1961), albeit not as literally as is the case in *2012*. See further Wallis (2010).

7. For a discussion on the genre of disaster films, see Keane (2006).

Two other important syntactical elements of the contemporary disaster film are the cause and solution of the disaster. Other than, for instance, the disaster films of the fifties and seventies of the previous century, where the atomic bomb and the Cold War (e.g., Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951]) or the human factor in combination with nature (e.g., John Guillermin's *Towering Inferno* [1974]) feature prominently, in *2012* a new cause is added to the genre: nature gets out of control. If the source of the disaster in *2012* is not that far removed from that in *The Day after Tomorrow*, the apocalyptic element of the Mayan calendar makes the cruelty of nature even more relentless. The Mayan prediction can no longer be reversed by human intervention. In this sense, the Mayan calendar has the same type of relentlessness as the biblical Apocalypse of John and Genesis's flood story. Once the events are set in motion, there is no going back.

The solution to the catastrophe in *2012* conforms to the syntactical characteristic of the disaster genre: someone finds a solution and way out of a seemingly hopeless situation. In *2012*, the solution is technological: the building of a number of super-arcs makes it possible for humanity to survive. There is, however, quite literally a price tag attached to it: there is only room for those who can afford it. In this way, *2012* can be read as a contemporary, but cynical interpretation of the idea that technology offers humanity the means to solve all kinds of problems.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as long as you can pay for it.

This leads us to a final observation with respect to the syntactical characteristics of *2012*: who are the people who survive and who die? We come back to this issue in the final section of this essay.

### *Noah* as Disaster Film

Aronofsky's *Noah* was already surrounded by controversy long before its release in the spring of 2014. Given the director's penchant for making films with difficult topics (e.g., addiction, death, and excessive violence in *Requiem for a Dream* [2000]) and his disturbing and explicit visual style, critics and fans were equally curious to see what Aronofsky would make of a biblical story. As the reviews mentioned at the start of this essay demonstrate, *Noah* seems to display the characteristics of a number of genres,

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8. The idea that science and especially technology makes it possible to save humanity is a recurrent theme in apocalyptic films. See Yergensen (2009).

including the spectacular blockbuster, (biblical) epic, and the disaster film. Here, the traits of the latter genre will be dealt with in more detail, using Altman's semantic/syntactic distinction and Stephen Keane's (2006) observations on the difficulty of assigning the disaster label to films.

In his monograph on disaster movies, Keane argues that despite the fact that "scenes of mass destruction have proven to be a longstanding and pervasive feature of the cinema of spectacle," these types of films have been mostly neglected within film studies (1). What is more, the often-heard assertion that scenes of death and destruction are solely responsible for the definition of any disaster type of film shows how limited the analytical and conceptual work on this genre has been. Keane sets out to delineate the main characteristics of the disaster genre, both on the level of the narrative as well as on the level of aesthetics and technology. Even though Keane does not explicitly deploy Altman's semantic/syntactic distinction, his analysis of the recurring traits of the genre can certainly be connected to and phrased in accordance with Altman's system.

Even a superficial semantic analysis of *Noah* shows that it belongs to the genre of the disaster movie: it contains a long, spectacular sequence in which the earth is violently punished by God by means of the flood, killing every human being and animal, save for Noah's family and the animals contained in the ark. The visualization of this flood is greatly enhanced by the use of CGI, which is another recurring feature of the disaster movie. As Keane remarks, this aspect is often mentioned as a critique on the disaster film, namely, that it basically is a "string of spectacular sequences rather than refined character development or coherent narrative drive" (78). The presence of CGI enhanced sequences of death and destruction in disaster movies is often mentioned by its critics when they discuss (or condemn) what is absent in these disaster films: narrative and character development. Here, Altman's observation on the lack of a recurring, stable syntax in disaster films becomes more pertinent.

However, contrary to Altman's observation, Keane posits that key disaster sequences actually significantly contribute to the narrative structure of a disaster film. Rather than momentarily interrupting the flow of the narrative, these sequences provide anchor points for the development of both characters and narrative. Indeed, one can argue that the flood is crucial in the development (both before and after the flood) of the character of Noah. This stands in marked contrast to disaster films that show how a disaster alters the lifestyle and behavior of its protagonist (as is the case in *2012*), making it an event that is responded to, rather than anticipated.



The psychological development of Noah's character, his moral apprehension of what is about to happen to humankind and his role as the head of the sole family that is to be spared, originates from his knowledge of impending doom (and, of course, the audience also knows this).

In light of the previous observations, it might be useful to understand *Noah* as an example of what Keane calls a historical disaster film, instead of *just* a disaster film. The best example of a historical disaster film is probably James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), which Keane discusses at length. *Noah* and *Titanic* are similar in the sense that they both rely on the "historically predetermined" (and both stories coincidentally involve a large ship), that is, most (Western) audiences know how the story will unfold and climax. In order to overcome this narrative weakness, these films need to be as "absorbing as possible, drawing audiences into the absolute certainty of disaster and following a variety of characters towards either death or survival" (Keane 2006, 73). Development of character therefore becomes essential, rather than expendable (a common critique of disaster films). However, contrary to many disaster films, *Noah* does not thrive on the thrill of seeing which characters perish and which ones are saved.

The syntactical notions of cause and solution are of relatively minor importance in *Noah*, since the same character, God, controls both. Early on, in his discussion with Methuselah (played by Anthony Hopkins), Noah is convinced that disaster cannot be averted. Noah knows he is not in any position to change God's plan, and therefore he does not take on the conventional role of the hero (compared to the character of Jackson Curtis in *2012*). Also, unlike Jackson, Noah will not be able to save any other human beings, besides his immediate family. He is allowed to save the innocent, the animals, though.<sup>9</sup> As a hero in the conventional sense, Noah therefore only has a minor role to play, yet his character development throughout the film is evident (whether one agrees with Noah's behavior and attitudes or not). In light of these observations, *Noah* thus displays key characteristics of the disaster film, particularly on a semantic level. However, at the same time the film also downplays its central premise of disaster, represented in the scene that depicts the actual flood, which will be analyzed below. A comparison between *Noah*'s reworking of the flood story and

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9. Animals, especially exotic species, are also rescued and brought on board of the arks in *2012*. A similar motive also appears in Scott Derrickson's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008). In this film, the animals are saved from an impending ecological catastrophe by alien forces.

*2012*, which is a clear example of a disaster movie that also heavily references the same biblical text, shows how the interaction between filmic and biblical interpretations informs different reworkings of the flood story.

### Death and Disaster: A Comparative Analysis

Death takes on many forms in disaster films. First of all, a distinction can be made between the death of anonymous people and that of individual characters. In the former case, it takes the form of the meaningless death of the victims who perish in catastrophes, caused by nature or other causes. This form of death is often spectacular but in a sense also random. Those who were in the wrong place at the wrong time are the ones that simply had bad luck. Different is the death of particular individuals, especially those that play an important role in the film. On the one hand, there are the bad guys and girls. Their death is not presented as problematic, because their death can easily be interpreted as something that they deserve for their morally despicable and often egoistic behavior. In that case, their death is morally acceptable. It is an example of what John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett (2002, 314–15) call the retribution principle. This type of punishment is also present in *2012* and *Noah*. The selection and punishment of bad characters is even a crucial aspect of the dramatic conventions of the story.

In *2012*, the most prominent example is the character of Yuri, who apart from being Russian, embodies capitalism, although it should be noted that he ends up sacrificing his life in order to save that of his two sons and in doing so redeems himself.<sup>10</sup> However, the other two Russian characters who manage to escape equally die: Sasha, the pilot, and Tamara, Yuri's girlfriend. Apart from being Russian, they are presented as sexually loose characters. Yuri is married but has an affair with Tamara, and Tamara appears to have an affair with Sasha. Their death can thus be understood as a punishment for their sexually loose behavior, another recurring element in apocalyptic disaster films, as Lawrence and Jewett noted (2002, 314–15). In *Noah*, the bad guy par excellence is clearly Tubalcain, who survives the flood by climbing on board of the ark but is killed

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10. The character of Yuri is a classic, but at the same time contemporary version of a bad guy. Classic is the fact that he is Russian, yet he is not a communist, but a capitalist. Implicitly the film seems to suggest that in the wrong hands capitalism leads to heartlessness.

in a battle with Ham. In his case, violence, especially against animals, is the reason why he should die. In contrast, throughout the film, the animals are presented as the innocent, who deserve to be saved, while Noah and his family are depicted as devoted vegetarians.

The death of good characters is explained differently in disaster films. Their death is depicted as something regrettable and tragic. A separate category is the death that is chosen willingly by one of the characters in order to save the world. This is the death of the hero who often is also the main character in the film. That is, for instance, the case with Jericho Cane (Arnold Schwarzenegger) in Peter Hyams's *End of Days* (1999) and with Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis) in Michael Bay's *Armageddon* (1998).<sup>11</sup> Hardly accidentally, the initials of the protagonists in *End of Days* and *2012* are J. C.<sup>12</sup>

In *2012*, Jackson Curtis risks his life but manages to escape death several times. It is Gordon, the new friend of his ex-wife, who ends up dying. Gordon's death makes it possible for Jackson to reunite with his family, a returning element in the plot of many apocalyptic disaster films. Another feature of apocalyptic films is that the end does not take place, not so much because the danger is averted, but because humanity manages to escape.<sup>13</sup> In *2012*, water in the form of tsunamis, caused by underwater earthquakes, is what threatens humanity. Death by drowning is also what *2012* has in common with *Noah* and is informed by the fact that both films are a reconfiguration of the flood story.

Death by water is an important event in both *2012* and *Noah*, on the level of syntax as well as on the level of semantics. Drowning takes prominence in both films, and in this respect it is important to note that these cinematic renditions of the flood story emphasize this aspect repeatedly, especially compared to the biblical story, which hardly gives pause to the terrifying drowning of all creatures "in whose nostrils was the breath of life" on the entire earth (Gen 7:22). In both films, the destructive forces of

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11. For a more detailed analysis of these films and the idea of martyrdom, see Copier (2012).

12. This also the case in the Terminator series, where the hero is called John Connor. For a discussion of the messianic features of this character, see Garrett (2010) and the essay by Fletcher in this volume.

13. There are different views on what makes a film apocalyptic. For a broad definition of the genre, see Newman (2000). A more narrow definition is advocated by Stone (2010).

water and the associated dangers of drowning are shown early in the film by scenes that have an ominous prophetic meaning. Early in *2012*, Adrian Helmsley arrives at the Naga Deng copper mine in India. Ajit, the son of his friend Satnam, is playing outside in the pouring rain with a small boat, which collapses when Adrian's taxi drives by. This scene anticipates a later scene in the film, in which Satnam and his family perish by a huge tidal wave caused by a tsunami flooding India. It also anticipates other such scenes later in the film, notably of a Buddhist monk in the Himalayas, and especially of the collapsing of the cruise ship, called "The Genesis," with Adrian's father on board. Finally, there is also the drowning of Tamara, Yuri's girlfriend, on board of the ark.

Similarly, the act of flooding and hence of drowning is not just the climax of *Noah*. As a recurring narrative theme, it is first introduced in Noah's dream (or vision), a mere ten minutes into the film. The second time Noah has a vision (when he drinks the tea served by Methuselah), the contours of the ark become apparent, and he realizes that the storm may not be stopped, but that it can be survived. When the flood is unleashed (around the seventy-six minute mark), the film fulfills its promise of disaster and death. With Noah and his family (and the film's antagonist Tubalcain, played by Ray Winstone) in the ark, the contrast between the survivors inside the ark and those drowning outside is represented through a straightforward opposition in *mise-en-scène*.

Inside the ark, the survivors are in the darkness with only sparse light coming from a small fire. This is contrasted with only one shot of the situation outside of the ark. This shot literally shows a pile of people climbing on, holding on, and trampling on one another, in order to escape the water (see fig. 1). The scene recalls one of the woodcuts that Gustave Doré made to illustrate the flood.<sup>14</sup>

The interior shots are all close-ups of Noah and his family, while the contrasting exterior shot is a long shot, showing a huge, but undefined mass of human beings. From this, one can sense the film's outlook on the opposition between those who survive and those who perish: only the survivors matter. The victims of the flood are faceless.<sup>15</sup> Apart from this contrast between inside and outside, darkness and light, and proximity and

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14. More specifically, "The world destroyed by water." See *The Doré Bible Illustrations* (1974, 6). Also available online at The Doré Bible Gallery (n.d.).

15. This is not unlike the lack of concern in Genesis with those who perish in the flood by never introducing any other character in those chapters than Noah's family.



Figure 1. People drowning during the flood in *Noah*

distance, the film unequivocally downplays the moment of mass drowning, with only one shot depicting the struggle of those outside the ark.

The film does not show the death struggle on a visual level, but instead the film's soundtrack foregrounds the drowning.<sup>16</sup> The viewer hears the screams of the people drowning, but this is off-screen sound, and it quickly diminishes into the aural background of the soundtrack. Amidst the disaster and destruction of the flood, Noah tells his family the story of the creation of the earth. The visualization of Noah's rendition of the creation story breaks with the previously established confined space of the ark and allows the viewer to travel through time and space and witness the renewal of the earth. Interestingly enough then, in *Noah* the promise of renewal intersects with the moment of destruction as they are played out simultaneously, or as Erin Runions (2015, 838) puts it: "Noah tells the story of creation to explain why the world must be destroyed."

In a sense, the way *Noah* deals with destruction is almost discrete (on a visual and aural level) and does not meet the conventions of the disaster genre, that is to say, from a semantical point of view. The film downplays its central premise of disaster, especially when compared to *2012* (or an even more recent example, Brad Peyton's *San Andreas* [2015]). Syntactically, however, *Noah's* reworking of the flood story points to an interesting

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16. In *2012*, the drowning of people, in this case Satnam's family and Tony's son, is also suggested by aural means. In both cases, the phone signal goes dead.

development within the larger structure of the disaster film. If we apply the category of the historical disaster film to *Noah*, it helps us understand that even if the outcome may be known, the way this ending is presented to the spectator, its syntactic structure, uncovers the film's ideology. Disaster cannot be averted or stopped, and what is more important, Noah as a character cannot be blamed for it.

The recurring visions, which constitute an essential recurring syntactical element in the first act of the film, are meant to convey that powerlessness, thereby freeing the character of Noah from any obligation to try and stop the flood from taking place, let alone attempting to try and save as many as possible. The visions of drowning that haunt Noah thus serve to underline his submission to God's greater plan, in which he only has a smaller part to play. So, while *Noah's* narrative dynamic irreversibly leads to disaster, emphasized by the syntactical element of mass drowning, the film also strongly implies that no one is to blame but God, who is conspicuously absent.

To return to Altman's (1999, 225) comment on the weak syntactic structure of most disaster films, claiming that this film genre depends "entirely on recurring semantic elements, never developing a stable syntax," *Noah* proves to be an interesting case. Since *Noah* can be regarded as a historical disaster film, the argument that its syntax is known to most viewers, and therefore predictable, is true. However, by reading *Noah* in relation to the biblical story, the repeated syntactical element of Noah's prophetic dream (or nightmare) puts the biblical source text in a different light. The film emphasizes Noah's powerlessness while at the same time highlighting his deep knowledge of the events that will take place. The repeated visions give Noah's character an emotional depth that is absent in the biblical text. The moral dilemmas that he faces as a result turn him into a tormented character that the viewers can relate to (or not).

### To Conclude

In this essay we have looked at the ways in which the study of genre can provide insight into the semantic and syntactic elements of two films that seem to belong to the same genre, in particular, the ways in which syntactic elements are arranged. These are the deeper meaning-bearing structures of a film. By doing so, the different elements that make up the genre of the disaster film are explored. Our focus on genre theory in this essay shows that using the semantic/syntactic model enables the analyst to address not only the issue of recurring thematic and narrative traits in film, but also

to pay attention to the important technical and visual aspects of film. We argue that such an understanding of genre as a method is a valuable addition to the study and analysis of the intersections between Bible and film.

More concretely, our comparative analysis of *2012* and *Noah* shows an interesting development on the level of syntax in both films. What they share is that they draw on the biblical flood story. This common source also informs specific similarities between the two films, notably death by drowning and the fact that the innocent are saved. But, whereas *Noah*'s predictable narrative structure places the film within the category of the historical disaster film, *2012* has much stronger apocalyptic overtones in its narrative.<sup>17</sup> The two films can thus be understood as variations on the same theme within the broader genre of the disaster film.

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17. Since the cause of the disaster is attributed to an ancient Mayan belief in the end times, *2012* can easily be regarded as another example of Hollywood cinema that uses apocalyptic myth and imagery as its source. Other examples, such as Hyams's *End of Days* (1999), Carl Schultz's *The Seventh Sign* (1988), and Michael Tolkin's *The Rapture* (1991) are discussed in Copier 2012.



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## RELIGION AS ENVIRONMENTAL ETHICS: DARREN ARONOFSKY'S *NOAH*

*Tarja Laine*

Darren Aronofsky's biblically inspired blockbuster *Noah* (2014), loosely based on the book of Genesis, features Russell Crowe as a prophet who experiences hallucinations of an impending apocalyptic flood as messages from God. The film, which some critics have described as an encounter between George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979) and Kevin Reynolds's *Waterworld* (1995), attracted controversy for its interpretation of the character of Noah as the first environmentalist, instead of being faithful to the biblical story. The film is best described as a disaster film that functions according to what John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett (2002, 315) term the retribution principle, in which violations of sexual morals "provoke natural disasters, from which only the pure and faithful will escape."<sup>1</sup> But instead of sexual improprieties, in Aronofsky's *Noah* it is the destruction of nature and the killing of animals for food that brings disaster as violation of the laws of God.

Drawing on Mark Wynn's (2005) notion of the internal relationship between affective experience and religious understanding, this essay argues that *Noah* communicates a vision of responsibility before God as responsibility towards nature, which becomes accessible through affectively toned perception. It is through affectively toned perception that we engage with cinema from within our own sensory perception and intelligent deliberation, appropriating the meaningful vision embodied in a film. This is not a question of merely imposing interpretation on the film, but rather a relation that emerges in and through an affective, embodied,

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1. See also the analysis of this movie from the perspective of genre theory in Copier and Vander Stichele in this volume.

sensorial, and intellectual engagement with the aesthetic specificity of the film. This essay shows that what *Noah* embodies in meaning becomes accessible through affectively toned perception and that this potentially calls for the acknowledgement of human embodied interdependence with the natural order from the perspective of environmental ethics in general.

Affectively toned perception can be understood as an intentional state, through which an individual can attribute salience to the world. According to Wynn (2005), in the context of religion this means that one can have an affectively toned relationship with God insofar as it is grounded in awareness of what is salient in the world. This means that affectively toned perception directs our attention to patterns of salience in the disorderly flow of the world, supporting our continuous and dynamic exchange with the world, through which a relationship with God can emerge. Aronofsky's *Noah* attributes salience to what Henri Bergson (1998, 132) called *élan vital*, the "vital force" or the "current of life," which Bergson described as "the tremendous internal push" of nature that "thrusters life into the world." Thus, the film invites the affectively toned perception of the sacredness and interconnectedness of all life. It is through this perception that a vision of God emerges, not only as a source of creation, but also of destruction. This juxtaposes the Christian theme of death and resurrection with the wider pattern of mortality and renewal, inextricably intertwined with the rhythm of natural life.

The film opens with an insert, which is a paraphrase from Genesis that unfolds on top of a black screen: "In the beginning there was nothing." The insert is cut to a shot of an emerald-green serpent, slithering forward as if attempting to break through the "fourth wall" and emerge on the other side of the cinema screen. Of course, this is the effect one experiences when watching a 3D version of the film. The serpent is a symbol of human's first act of disobedience known as the fall, when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree of knowledge. This is an act depicted in the film's second shot, in which a hand grasps an apple from a tree with a golden glow. With this act Adam and Eve asserted their independence from God and were punished and separated from God, with a variety of consequences among which may be death. Furthermore, Adam and Eve lost their innocence and were reduced by God to the level of mere suffering earthly mortals. But in *Noah*, the form of this piece of fruit resembles a heart rather than an apple (see figure 1 below), perhaps referring to (heavenly) love that had to give way to (earthly) hatred and destruction resulting from the original

sin. This is made clear by graphically juxtaposing the second shot with an image of another hand that now holds a rock, with which Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, slays Abel, his brother. In Aronofsky's interpretation, Cain then fled to the east, where he was sheltered by a band of fallen angels, the Watchers. Cain's descendants built a great industrial civilization, which devoured the earth, while the descendants of Adam and Eve's third son Seth, Noah among them, were the only ones defending and protecting what was left of God's creation.

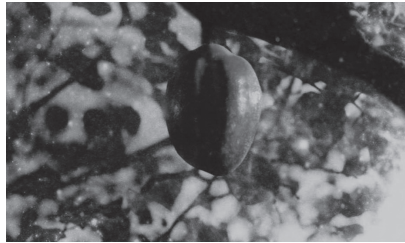


Figure 1. The apple as the assertion of independence in *Noah*

In *Noah*, the earth itself is seen as a destroyed garden of Eden, with a landscape ravaged by years of human viciousness and warfare. Earth's destruction is depicted in a scene with a cosmic zoom, a digitally effected camera movement that races at tremendous speed out from one of Cain's cities into outer space, as simultaneously a pernicious black pollution rapidly spreads all around the planet. An association with the concept of a global ecological crisis is hard to avoid, and Aronofsky himself has said at a panel hosted by the Center for American Progress that the ecocentric message in *Noah* is intended to bring together the people of faith and people who are environmental activists (Markoe 2014).

That the pristine earth as a whole is considered the garden of Eden is evident from the scene in which the voice-over of Noah explains the story of the six-day creation to his children, while afloat during the flood. In this sequence, the voice-over forms the accompaniment to a series of shots of extremely short duration, creating a dizzying time-lapse effect. But the images that unfold throughout the scene do not represent the biblical story of creation. Instead, they present the story of evolution, starting with the beginning of the universe and its expansion after the Big Bang. After the initial stage of expansion, the white areas in the image start to condense, forming galaxies, stars, and planets. Finally the image settles to the formation of the earth, first molten due to extreme volcanism and

vulnerable to collisions with other celestial bodies. As the visual narration gets closer to the earth's surface, we witness the planet cooling down, the birth of the moon, the atmosphere, the seas, the crust and the vegetation, until the image dives to the bottom of the ocean. Here we witness the birth of simple life forms, unicellular organisms such as amoeba, and their development into more complex forms: invertebrates, vertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals.

This sequence could be seen as an evolutionary-creationist interpretation of the biblical story of creation, which includes a reconciliation of religious beliefs and scientific findings. The sequence presents a view in which the universe, the earth, and all living organisms originate from an act of divine creation or intelligent design. But more importantly, the sequence communicates a vision of the earth that together with the variety of living organisms forms a heavenly paradise, unspoiled by humans. That is, until the creation of Adam and Eve and the subsequent event of what Christian theologians later refer to as original sin. As Noah explains to his family in the film:

And all was in balance. It was paradise. A jewel in the Creator's palm. Then the Creator made Man. And by his side, Woman. Father and mother of us all. He gave them a choice. Follow the temptation of darkness or hold on to the blessing of light. But they ate from the forbidden fruit. Their innocence was extinguished. And so for the ten generations since Adam, sin has walked with us. Brother against brother. Nation against nation. Man against creation.

Thus the status of the earth is established as a paradise long before humans were created, a jewel in God's palm. This religious, or rather holistic theme, argues that the natural world has inherent, spiritual value much beyond its instrumental utility to human needs and that by showing respect for the divine creation one shows respect for God (DesJardins 2005, 41). Furthermore, while in the biblical story Adam and Eve's disobeying God's command involves their presumed equality with God (being "like God" in knowledge), in Aronofsky's version the subversive act becomes a much more general question of disregarding creation. In other words, the original sin is associated with the lack of acknowledgment that humans are as much "attached to the ground" as the flower young Ham picks up early in the film. The flower grows in scorched, rugged, barren ground, too inhospitable for much of life on earth. But then a drop of water falls from the sky

onto the same spot the flower grew in, where then a new flower blooms in an instant.

Fire and water are two central, conflicting elements in the film, the former associated with the dominion, and the latter with the stewardship of the earth. Furthermore, fire is associated with death and destruction, while water functions not only as an environment for death, but also as a source of redemption and (re)birth. This is an insight given to Noah in a hallucination, after drinking a cup of tea prepared for him by Methuselah:

Fire consumes all. Water cleanses. It separates the foul from the pure. The wicked from the innocent. And that which sinks from that which rises. He destroys all, but only to start again.

This conflict between dominion and stewardship is visually presented to us through the setting, as we follow Noah and his family struggling their way toward the mountain of Methuselah. The larger surrounding landscape through which they labor their way was once full of life but now burnt black and destroyed. In this landscape, burnt tree trunks rise like withered giants under the grey sky, around them nothing but scorched land as far as the eye can see. Piles of skulls lie scattered along their path as they pass poison-green, polluted rivers. These desolate images are contrasted with Noah's hallucinations that are directly shared with the spectator by means of the sheer film aesthetics.

In one central hallucination, prompted by Methuselah's medicine, Noah is drowning with the rest of humanity carrying a seedpod from the first garden in his hand. He lets go of the seedpod, and it rises to the surface that is glimmering with light, at the same time as he envisions his ark descending towards him from this brightness. The hallucination ends with heaps of animals boarding the ark along an ascending path from amongst the doomed humans. The heavenly vision that is depicted here is that water is the element of both death and resurrection. It communicates not a vision of God but an affectively toned awareness of God experienced by Noah as the source of both wrath and mercy, from which death and resurrection originates. Cinematographically this is realized by alternating between subjective close-ups from Noah's point of view (of the tea cup, of the seedpod) and objective long shots of him amidst the animals ascending towards the light. This kind of alteration of subjective and objective, close-up and long shot, is a recurrent technique for this filmmaker by the way. It epitomizes the way in which all his films plunge deeply into

the subjectivity of their characters, who are often as emotionally isolated unto themselves as Noah, but they do not necessarily invite identification. Rather, it is the aesthetics of his films that directly engage the spectators, thereby producing affectively toned perceptions (Laine 2015, 2).

Referring to John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent* (completed in 1870), Wynn argues that it is possible to have an affectively toned awareness of God, the content of which cannot be specified solely in semantic terms. Affectively toned awareness of God is distinct from having knowledge of God, which alone is insufficient to generate the act of faith. But, for instance, through recognition that one has acted wrongly, one may have a sense of oneself as accountable before God and therefore experience an image of God. Thus we are capable of affectively toned responsiveness to God, and it is this capacity that underlies our awareness of ourselves as morally responsible (2005, 124–25). In *Noah*, it is the serpent skin that fulfils the function of being the memento of this awareness, a hereditary symbol for the descendants of Seth. It was kept as a reminder of the original sin, but also as an inspiration to cultivate virtue. In the film, this virtue indicates protecting the earth as God's creation, which Seth's line considers their birthright. The serpent skin is a ribbon that attaches itself onto the skin of whoever carries it, like a second membrane, emitting a golden glow, which is associated with what is holy to God. But in the beginning of the film, Tubal-cain kills Noah's father, steals the serpent skin, and attaches it onto his own arm. The symbol that for Seth's line of descent inspired attributing salience to the natural world thus becomes an icon for dominion over the earth that is not exercised in harmony with creation.

Indeed, in the Bible the right of dominion over the earth was given to humans through obedience to God. Environmentalist thinkers such as Lynn White Jr. (1967) have vigorously criticized this anthropocentric aspect of Christianity. But there are also views that consider the Bible as a mandate for a radically nonanthropocentric environmental ethics, in the spirit of deep ecology. Deep ecology is a holistic theory coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1978, which advocates the inherent worth and interconnectedness of all systems of life on earth regardless of their instrumental value, proposing that the whole earth is a single, sacred organism (Taylor and Zimmerman 2008, 456).

Aronofsky's interpretation of Genesis clearly and explicitly depicts the earth as sacred, making an appeal for sustainable stewardship, stressing the responsibility that follows from the awareness of good and evil after the fall, which bestowed humans with free will, enabling them to knowingly



cause the destruction of the creation for their own convenience. This is why at the end of the film *Noah* twists the serpent skin onto his own arm and proceeds to bless his grandchildren with the following words:

The Creator made Adam in his image and placed the world in his care. That birthright was passed down to us. To my father, then to me, and to my sons Shem, Japheth, and Ham. That birthright is now passed to you, our grandchildren. This will be your work, and your responsibility. So I say to you, be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth.

After this blessing the sky lights up with a glorious rainbow, and the film ends with a panoramic circular crane shot over the flourishing scenery. Thus “replenish the earth” does not only refer to the assignment to repopulate the earth after the flood, but also to the renewal of humanity’s relationship with the creation that was destroyed as a result of their disobedience to God. The shot of the rainbow strikes us not only for its splendor, but also due to the rainbow’s role in Genesis, prompting an affectively toned perception that evokes the biblical significance of this physical phenomenon. This significance is God’s mercy and the covenant made with humankind, providing the basis for a responsible commitment to earth’s sustainability.

According to Wynn, the development of spiritual awareness progresses through three phases that begins with purgatory, continues with enlightenment, and culminates in a union with God. This last phase is a matter of affectively toned experience, through which a person can gain an understanding of God that rests on direct acquaintance with God, which is distinct from discursive knowledge of God (2005, 143–44). In *Noah*, these three phases could be seen to correspond with the periods before (purgatory), during (enlightenment), and after the flood (union). The purgatory phase in the film is dominated by burnt landscapes, and it culminates in the scene in which Noah visits Tubal-cain’s military site. The site blazes with campfires in the glow of which animals are tortured and killed, while women and children are traded for meat. It is in this place that Noah sees a man crouched over raw meat, who then turns to face him, blood dripping from his mouth as he whizzes like a barbarian. This shot is cut to an image of Noah’s vision of the serpent moving quickly forward as if preparing to attack, while shedding its skin and changing color from green to black. This vision startles Noah (and us) so forcefully that he has to take a step back, and the hallucination ends with Noah staring at his feet, sunken in a

pool of blood. Noah's encounter with the barbarian is actually a confrontation with his own self, a reminder of the fact that by the line of his descent, he too is an accomplice to what has caused the destruction of earth. This realization is symbolized by the flames that rain from the skies at the end of the scene. As a result, he decides to sacrifice his family so that the earth once more can become the garden of Eden, as it belongs to the innocent only—the animals.

But even the purgatorial scenes in Noah always contain a promise for a union with God, epitomized by the overwhelming CGI scenes of the arrival of animals at the ark in huge volumes.<sup>2</sup> The promise for union is also prominent in the thriving forest that blooms from nothing and in the fountain of water that bursts from the ground, spreading small streams to all points of the compass. A time lapse tracking shot follows one stream of water as it rapidly makes its way through the destroyed landscapes, until many years later it reaches a spot where two white doves dwell. Then a sweeping—"awe-inspiring" as Ed Tan and Nico Frijda (1999, 60) call this technique—camera ride follows, soaring high over the stony hills and rugged wastelands as we follow the two doves make their way towards the forest in which the ark waits for its completion. The stream of water and the forest represent the reformatory power of nature by eliciting in the spectator awe that potentially inspires reverence for that power. Thus, these elements also contain an affectively toned, life-affirming perception of (a union with) God. Yet in *Noah*, before such a life-affirming perception can be fully achieved, a phase of enlightenment must take place, which establishes a deeper understanding of God as a source of creation and destruction.

This phase begins approximately at the one hour mark of the film, right after the building of the ark has been completed. We are shown a shot of the skies closing in with gloomy clouds from every direction. The image turns dark, and rain starts falling, a dramatic moment which is emphasized by a special effect that emulates the rapid descent of a raindrop from a bird-eye perspective onto Noah's forehead. Quickly heavy rain develops, triggering a violent battle between the Watchers, who protect the ark, and Tubal-cain's men. During this battle, the Watchers who die are reunited with their Creator, ascending to heaven as glorious torches of light to the

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2. These scenes were challenging to create for the animators, as they had to deal with up to eight thousand different animals in one shot, while ensuring they would not run into or walk on top of each other (Failes 2014).

sounds of a heavenly choir. Thus these scenes of darkness and destruction also contain elements of lightness and resurrection, a promise of ascension and union with God after the original descent and exile from the Garden of Eden. But this promise is only available to those who devour the earth, which is evident in the shot that directly follows the death of the final Watcher. His ascent to heaven is presented to us as if we witnessed it from a bird-eye perspective, his fiery glow approaching us until it fills the entire frame. This is cut to an image of earth seen from outer space, but instead of the “blue marble” that we are accustomed to see in space photography, the earth is now shown entirely enclosed in turbulent white cloud cover. Then violent geysers surge from the ground, creating a flood that sweeps away everything in its path except those life forms sheltered by the ark. The affective quality of these images of violent destruction is effectively enhanced by the vivid, resolute score by Clint Mansell, and the human cries stifled by the mass of water.

The period with the ark drifting through the flood is an inconsolable phase, characterized by darkness inside the ark, surrounded by screams and terrified cries from outside its walls. The interior shots are cut to exterior ones, depicting the rapidly rising water surface, which people try to flee by climbing all to the top of a hill, thus creating a mountain of human flesh. In this phase Noah's confused state of mind is merged with the material outside world, as the images of rain and drowning reflect his spiritual crisis characterized by loss of faith in humanity as created in the image of God. It is only after his decision to spare the lives of Ila's daughters—for love is all he feels towards them—that Noah is able to leave this liminal phase of enlightenment behind and reestablish a union with God, albeit only after a lengthy period of permanent drunkenness.

Noah's state of intoxication has been discussed extensively among the commentators of Genesis, as it conveys the spiritual conflict he finds himself in: the desire to be righteous and innocent, but forever drawn towards the shadow of the original sin. For instance, the Hellenistic philosopher Philo interprets Noah's drunkenness in terms of (original) sin (excessive drinking) and righteousness (moderate partaking of wine): “Accordingly, it is in the second signification that the virtuous and wise man is said to be drunken, not by drinking wine to excess, but merely by partaking of wine” (QG 2.68 [Marcus]). Similarly, O. Palmer Robertson (1998, 178) argues that Noah's drunkenness of wine may signify a sinful abuse of the good things God had created, while modesty was expected from people after the covenant with him. Whereas in the Bible Noah's drunkenness

and the ensuing embarrassment—Ham seeing his father naked—leads to the (much debated) curse of Ham's son Canaan, in the film it results in the desire to be righteous. This is depicted in the montage sequence showing different animals affectively tending for their offspring in a paradise-like setting. What is achieved in these images is a new relationship to the goal of spiritual life. This goal is born from the threat of ecological destruction, from which escape is only possible through a renewal of responsibility for the natural world. This is the message that the film embodies. Furthermore, it is an insight that emerges through an affectively toned perception of nature's inherent sacredness, which in turn could give rise to its sustainable stewardship.

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PART 3  
INTERDISCIPLINARY CONVERSATIONS





CONTROVERSIAL MARY:  
RELIGIOUS MOTIFS AND CONFLICTING RECEPTIONS  
OF GODARD'S *JE VOUS SALUE, MARIE*

*Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati*

The strength of the Bible lies in the fact  
that it is a good screenplay.<sup>1</sup>

Since the beginning of film, religion has been a central issue on many levels in the development of this technical innovation. While religious traditions offered good stories to be told by means of motion pictures, religious communities provided potential audiences and were interested in promoting edifying films that could reach a broad range of people, beyond the circles of the educated (Jump 2007; Plate 2005). The entanglement of film and religion has continued in the dual contexts of the development of film and the transformation of religion over the course of the twentieth century and up until today.<sup>2</sup> Many issues can be analyzed in studying the interaction of religion and film: the emergence of science fiction, the role of religious values in film regulation and censorship, film as religious criticism, religion as a regulator of film, and cinema as a myth-making machine. The list of topics is long and continues to grow, which makes for a field of research that is, on the one hand, rich and relevant but, on the other hand, challenging, not least because of the need for theoretical and methodological approaches that encompass all such facets.

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1. This quotation is taken from an interview with Jean-Luc Godard by Dominique Paini and Guy Scarpetta (1985), published in the press presentation of *Je vous salue, Marie* at the Berlinale. Translation from German by the author.

2. For an overview of changes in religion through media, see Hoover (2011).

This contribution to the study of the Bible and film outlines the crucial role of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity for film and religion as a field of research, with particular attention paid to the overlap of the study of religion (my field), cultural studies, and film analysis. First, the chapter provides a discussion on the interaction between film and religion in light of contemporary approaches to religion in pluralized societies. Secondly, a proposal on a possible approach to the analysis of the interaction between film and religion follows. Finally, the particular case, Jean-Luc Godard's *Je vous salue, Marie* (*Hail Mary*, 1985), offers space to consider these issues.

### Film and the Negotiation of Religion in Public Space

For the study of religion, engagement with cultural studies has resulted in a wider definition of religious symbol systems as the crucial role of communication and meaning-making processes has been stressed. This step proved fundamental to discovering the relevance of film as a rich field of research. The focus on the interaction between religion and film, with each considered a distinct sphere within society, is a common feature of a number of approaches.

One significant contribution, made at the outset of research on film and religion, was presented by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt (1995). Their motivation for combining the study of religion and film runs as follows:

Religion and film constitute two, but certainly not all, of those forms of life that define society and thereby constitute valid sources of investigation for the search for meaning in culture. Religion is "a descriptive category that names the process of creating meaning" and discovering value systems. Religion describes the process of human beings "living and responding to the world." This study demonstrates that films also participate in the process of creating and searching for order. Thus, these two cultural forms, religion and film, at times participate in the same activity and aid in discovering human understanding. (153)

Margaret R. Miles's (1996) influential work on film and religion, similarly based on the parallels between and the interaction of religion and film as cultural products, is concerned in particular with the cohesive social function of religion. Fundamental to Miles's analysis is "the contention that religion has centrally to do with the articulation of a sense of relatedness—among individuals, within families, communities, and societies, and with

the natural world. Religions provide a picture of the greater whole in which all living beings are related" (14). Miles focuses on film as a public sphere, as a social space within which values are negotiated:

The development of popular film coincided historically and geographically with the emancipation of public life from church control and patronage. "Congregations" became "audiences" as film created a new public sphere in which, under the guise of "entertainment," values are formulated, circulated, resisted, and negotiated. The public sphere is an arena in which various overlapping minorities can converse, contest, and negotiate, forming temporary coalitions. (25)

John C. Lyden (2003) describes the link between film and religion by considering the functional equivalence of these two cultural products:

If film does operate as a religion according to Geertz's definition, as I contend, then like religion it offers a connection between this world and the 'other' world imagined in offering both models of and models for reality. These two aspects—worldview or mythology, and ethos—together express a vision of what the world really is, and what it should be. (53–54)

S. Brent Plate (2003) conceives the interaction between religion and film as similarity but stresses the "*mediated* nature of each.... As mediations, the framing and projecting activities of religion-making and filmmaking take the world 'out there' and bring it 'in here', to our temple, to our table, to our theatre" (3).

These positions on film and religion as cultural products that interact within society have been important to establish the new interest in film as a subject matter for the study of religion. They highlight the opportunities that accompanied the reception of cultural studies by this discipline.<sup>3</sup> This debate was (and remains) principally discipline specific, as the participants seek to identify theoretical and methodological tools that are appropriate for an examination of film and cinema. In the last few years, however, reconsideration of secularization has made it possible to transpose the results of this reflection into a more interdisciplinary conversation. In descriptions of the growing influence of religion within complex con-

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3. For a more detailed reconstruction of the research on film and religion, see Pezzoli-Olgati (2008) and Mäder (2012).

temporary societies, attention has increasingly been drawn to processes of mediatization (Herbert 2011; Hjarvard 2011).

The presence and dissemination of religion within contemporary societies can be recognized in a range of phenomena, for instance, in the role played by religion within politics as well as within global conflicts, in public debates about religion in relation to migration, and in the increasing presence of religious organizations and communities within the public sphere (see, e.g., Casanova 1994; Habermas 2008). Many of these processes interact substantially with the media. The media is producing and affecting images of society and of the ways humans live (or could live) together. The media greatly enables the diffusion of religious worldviews and values (Hoover 2011; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2015). In this context, film is considered an important medium for the transportation and production of social imaginaries:

The larger context of entertainment media, particularly the screen media, instantiate another, wider set of functions, although what we think of as news still resides somewhere at the center. These functions have to do with imagination and the way the media are situated to provide particularly salient imaginaries.... In cultural negotiation about religion today, this media imaginary is moving increasingly to the center. (Hoover 2011, 615; see also Taylor 2004, 22–23)

Film—and, of course, other media too—is therefore understood as crucial in the circulation of ideas, worldviews, attitudes, and emotions about religion in contemporary societies. Film interacts with the cultural imaginary, the common ground that enables meaning-making processes within a collectivity. This perspective encourages us to understand the interaction of film and religion as a central issue within the public space. Film can be considered one dimension of religious transmission processes and a public space for the negotiation of religion (Pezzoli-Olgiati 2014; 2015).

### Analyzing the Interaction of Film and Religion

With the identification of film as a space for public debate about religion comes the possibility of analyzing both the influence of film on religion and the use of religion in film. While this approach brings together perspectives drawn from the study of religion and from sociology, it provides no instruction in how to engage film as a source. Not only in terms of

a general theoretical framework, but also in terms of methodology, such analysis of film can draw on interdisciplinary practices. Melanie Wright (2007, 28) has made a strong argument for a cultural studies approach in analyzing films' interaction with religion, an approach in which religion is conceived as a sphere of culture "embedded and enacted in material culture and artefacts." (Religious) meaning-making processes are understood as dynamic interactions that take place and are realized within culture. Thus, analysis of a film cannot focus on the cinematic work alone but should also consider aspects of film production and reception. This broader engagement is particularly necessary when dealing with religious communities and traditions, for the interaction of film as a public space with religion is multifaceted and takes place on many different levels of filmic production of meaning.

For both distinguishing and linking relevant aspects of film analysis in the study of religion, the concept of the *circuit of culture* developed by Paul Du Gay (1997) and Stuart Hall (2013) appears to be useful. This approach considers the multiple layers of production and the exchange of meaning and was conceived as a general methodology for dealing with various aspects of culture; it is not specific to film. Fundamentally, it assumes culture to be the product of different practices of meaning production:

Thus, culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and "making sense" of the word, in broadly similar ways.... The emphasis on cultural practices is important. It is participants in a culture who give meaning to people, objects, events. Things "in themselves" rarely, if ever, have any one, single, fixed and unchanging meaning. (Hall 2013, xix)

To approach this process, Du Gay and Hall distinguish between representation (in our case the film itself), production, consumption, regulation, and identity. All these elements continually interact; only on a heuristic, theoretical level is it possible to distinguish between them.

By using this heuristic tool in our analysis of the interaction between film and religion, we not only access the complexity and dynamism of communication processes within culture, but also combine varied perspectives. Therefore, on the level of representation, film analysis is essential, while the relationship between production and reception can be conceived on the basis of a communication theory. Regulation and identity processes are associated with the fields of religion, politics, and economy.

To explore film as a public space for the negotiation of religion, I have chosen to discuss a controversial art-house film dealing with Mary and the Holy Family.<sup>4</sup> Godard's rereading of this Christian narrative will be analyzed with a focus on selected aspects of the circuit of culture: its filmic representation and its controversial receptions, which is closely tied to issues of identity and regulation.

### What Is *Je vous salue, Marie* About? A Film Analysis

At first glance, *Je vous salue, Marie* deals with an actualization of the annunciation as suggested by the title which contains references both to the beginning of the prayer *Ave Maria* and to the greeting of the angel Gabriel to Mary according to Luke 1:28: "And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you'" (NRSV). The story is situated in the 1980s. Marie is a girl who plays basketball living with her family in a Swiss town. Her father owns a gas station, where the family lives and works. Marie receives news from Gabriel that she will give birth to a child. However, Marie's boyfriend, Joseph, a taxi driver, struggles with her attitude toward sexuality and desires to have an intimate, sexual relationship with her, which she has been denying him. After Gabriel's announcement, the pregnant Marie struggles with the strange and incomprehensible situation that confronts her and tries to make sense of it. Jesus is born on a winter's night, and for some years the modern Holy Family raises this somewhat difficult child, who soon leaves, however, promising to return at Easter.

The film presents, through the use of crosscutting, the second story line that is not directly linked with the narration of Marie and Joseph on a narrative level. Still, the two stories belong to the same spatial and temporal setting of the general diegesis: Switzerland in the eighties. In this second story, a professor from Czechoslovakia teaches some students classes in physics. Eva, one of the students, has a short love affair with the teacher.

A closer reading of the film brings to the fore many other topics addressed by the film, which has been much analyzed since its first screening, in 1984. The film is challenging, ambiguous, and dense and can be interpreted on many levels. With the concerns of this anthology in mind, I first focus my analysis of the film on the constellation of figures and on its

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4. For an overview of the figure of Mary in film, see O'Brien (2011).

style, then situate the manifold references to the Christian tradition, and finally examine the conflicting ways in which this film has been received.

Focusing on the characters, I first outline the relationship between Marie and Juliette, who are basketball mates and both have a relationship with Joseph. Then I look at the couple Eva and the physics professor. Finally, the analysis focuses on the couple of the protagonists, Joseph and Marie.

### Juliette and Marie

The first part of the film introduces the two female characters, Marie and Juliette. Juliette, who plays basketball with Marie, would like to marry Joseph, but he does not love her. At the beginning of the film, in a halting dialogue with Joseph, Juliette introduces the leitmotif: "All women want something unique" (00:02:00).<sup>5</sup> We first meet Marie as she is playing basketball. Within the noise of the gym hall, in a voiceover that superimposes Marie's inner voice onto Bach's Prelude No. 1 in C major from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Marie reflects retrospectively on her life: "I wondered if some event would happen in my life" (00:03:30). The audience's expectations for this figure are raised: is it Marie who will experience something unique? Juliette and Marie—both related in some way to Joseph—represent contrasting destinies: While Juliette lives the ordinary life of a girl who plays basketball and looks for a partner, Marie, who has also led an ordinary life, has been chosen for an extraordinary experience. The film begins with her encounter with Gabriel and ends with the angel's departure. Gabriel leaves her saying: "Hail, Mary!" These words, pronounced in the crude manner that is typical of Godard's angel, mark the return of Mary to the ordinary life of an adult woman who uses lipstick and smokes (figs. 1 and 2).

The pregnancy as a physical transformation of the body and the birth of Jesus are not at all important in this film and are mentioned only incidentally (Vollmer 2007, 148–49). The focus is clearly on Marie's experience of having been chosen to carry a child while a virgin. The chastity of the pregnant Marie falls into the category of the incommensurable, of a miracle that cannot be explained by natural laws. The tension between

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5. Translation of the dialogues from French is taken from Locke and Warren (1993, 146–83); the original is also reprinted (197–228). Film references are to the version on DVD (Gaumont Vidéo EDV 1504, 2010).



Figures 1 and 2. Marie before and after her encounter with the angel Gabriel, which marks her transformation from a young virgin to a woman (00:03:30; 01:15:13)

the materiality of the human being and the impossibility of explaining and understanding what is happening is correlated with the tension between body and soul. “Does the soul have a body?” Marie asks the doctor who is screening her. “What do you mean, young lady, the body has a soul,” he answers, and Marie responds: “I thought it was the opposite, Doctor!” (00:23:42–50).

#### Eva and the Professor

Eva and the professor are the protagonists of the second story line. This secondary narration introduces a tension between the biblical figures of



Eva and Mary. Eva, a student of a Czechoslovakian physics professor, is examining a Rubik's cube when introduced. She is attending a class with other students and debating the origins of the universe. Is life the product of chance, or is the universe the result of an intelligent design? In a dialogue, the tension between chance and creation is highlighted:

Professor (the spectator only hears his voice, he is off screen): We are extraterrestrials. We weren't born on an amino-acid soup, suddenly, by chance. No deal. The figures say "no."

Pascal (a student): What if it wasn't chance?

Professor (idem): Exactly. The astonishing truth is that life was willed, desired, anticipated, organized, programmed by a determined intelligence. (00:06:08–39)

In this second story line, the tension between body and soul, between the physical world and the miraculous, is projected onto the topic of creation. The professor, who has just escaped from a communist regime, is convinced that life has a divine origin and presents his view as a matter of belief, not a law of nature.

### Marie and Joseph

In the film, the opposition between Eva and Marie is crucial. Eva is a seductive woman who engages in a short sexual relationship with the physicist who believes in the religious origins of the world. For the couple Marie-Joseph, sexual intercourse is at the core of Joseph's desire but inconceivable for Marie who is going through an extraordinary experience.<sup>6</sup>

The dynamics of the relationship between Joseph and Marie provide a further dominant topic in *Je vous salue, Marie*. Although Marie's perspective is vital to the construction of the film, Joseph assumes an important function in this cinematic representation of the contrast between bodily desire and virginity. He loves Marie; he wants to marry her and to share everything with her, including her body. For Marie, to be chaste is "to know every possibility without ever straying" (00:48:56–00:49:00). Such moments of acceptance and love are interlaced with moments of crisis where the character struggles with her own condition, with her life as a

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6. For a more extensive discussion of the representation of women in this film, see Mulvey (1993). See also Petric and Bard (1993).

pregnant virgin waiting for the soul to become flesh. Here the motif of incarnation appears as a key subject in the film.<sup>7</sup>

### Exploring Incarnation in Bodily and Natural Landscapes

The analysis of the characters highlights the narrative strategy of the film: Marie and Joseph are at the core of the central plot; Eva and the professor are the protagonists of a secondary plot. The two story lines correspond to central theological themes in Christianity: the incarnation of Christ and creation as a divine act. These concepts are associated with the juxtaposition of Marie and Eva. On the visual level, Marie's body plays a crucial role. The camera explores this female body, which is presented from different and unusual perspectives, in a way that is similar to the film's exploration of nature.



Figure 3. Marie exploring her body (00:48:56)

In addition to the stories of Mary and Eva, images of nature form a third exclusively visually based story line, with poetic shots of phenomena like the full moon, a sunset, fields of flowers, and storms. In the context of this film, such images can be read as contemplative pictures: combined with the debate between the professor, Eva, and the students, these images focus on the beauty of creation; combined with Marie and Joseph, they

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7. See also Vancheri (2011, 201–8).

focus on the Earth and the material world as the place where the mystery of incarnation takes place.

The editing alternates shots of Marie's body with images of nature (see, e.g., 00:59:29–01:03:15, figs. 4–12). Both appear as landscapes, and thus nature becomes a reflection of Marie's fluctuating feelings, with her

Figures 4–12. Series of screen shots where the succession of gazes on the body and on nature produces an effect of visual abstraction (00:59:29; 00:59:44; 01:01:01; 01:01:10; 01:01:25; 01:02:01; 01:02:21; 01:02:43; 01:03:15)









body as the landscape where incarnation takes place.<sup>8</sup> From this perspective the film can be understood as an attempt to show what is not visible by means of abstraction through a combination of images: we see a female body and not the mystery in which it is involved (see also Petric and Bard 1993, 101).

Additionally, on a visual level Marie is associated with the circle as a geometrical form throughout the film: we see that form in the guise of a ball, moon, sun, and lamp. This association suggests a link between the protagonist and the ideas of fulfillment and perfection (Dieckmann 1985–1986, 4; see figs. 13 and 14).

The editing gives this art-house production a strong narrative and visual coherence and allows intertwining the three story lines (the story of Marie and Joseph, the story of the professor and Eva, and the contemplative images of nature) with a sophisticated sound design. A broad selection of pieces by Bach is blended with nondiegetic fragments from Dvořák's *Cello Concerto*. Also present are diegetic sounds from the natural world (birds whistling, wind, thunder), on the one hand, and from everyday life (traffic noise, for example), on the other. The handling of the sound follows a similar aesthetic strategy to the use of images: the noise of life on earth is combined with references to transcendence through the music selected.<sup>9</sup> Particularly meaningful is the quotation of the first and last measures of

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8. For a more extensive analysis, see Cohen (1996).

9. Godard stated that the editing and selection of shots in this film can be understood as a comment to the music since they are following the rhythmic structure of the selected compositions. See Paini and Scarpetta (1985).





Figures 13 and 14. Examples of the visual association of Mary with the circle (00:04:03; 01:05:49)



Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* at the beginning (00:04:30, with the introduction of Eva) and at the end of the film, a framing in the sound track that underlines the motif of incarnation.

#### Multilayered References to the Christian Tradition

As we have seen, this multifaceted film sustains varied interpretative approaches: it can be analyzed in and of itself, as an independent statement, but it can also be read following the references to Christianity within the narrative structure as well as within the visual and sound style.<sup>10</sup>

10. Godard himself stressed this aspect of his film in an interview: "What we

The references to the New Testament and apocryphal texts are explicit. The beginning of the Gospel of Luke and the Protevangelium of James (with the motif of the virgin birth) can be cited as sources for the principal narrative line. The figure of Eva and the topic of creation can be seen as more general references to Genesis.

The film can also be read against the background of the reception history of those biblical sources and of Marian piety through the centuries. Indeed, the film is itself a piece of reception history. When the film is considered in light of this wider and less well-defined horizon of intertextual, mainly religious references, the history of visual arts and music offers a deep pool of inspiration, as we have already seen above with the use of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. For instance, the representation of Mary as *Alter Eva* (figs. 15 and 16) has a long tradition in Christian art. A second example: the shots of Marie's horizontal body from her feet (see, e.g., fig. 4) seem to be an explicit allusion to Mantegna's *Dead Christ*.<sup>11</sup>

The challenging style of Godard's work is also suggested by a technique that is a reminder of the silent era of cinema. Insistently—ten times in total—the white-on-black intertitle “En ce temps là” (“at that time”) is shown. Two opposing readings are possible: on one hand, the phrase “once upon a time” can be interpreted as a reference to fable, to a myth that makes a truth claim beyond historical contextualization;<sup>12</sup> on the other hand, “at that time” or “in those days” can be understood as wording found in Luke 1:39 and 2:1, which would refer—in the perspective of the gospel—to the historicity of incarnation.

### Controversial Reception Processes: Film, Regulation and Identity

The varied angles we have explored in this analysis make evident the polyvalence of this film, which challenged audiences in the 1980s and continues to challenge audiences today.<sup>13</sup> I have discussed this film in a class entitled *Love, Eros, and Religion in Cinema*, and none of the students could

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wanted to show in *Hail, Mary* was signs in the beginning. Signs in the sense of signals, the beginning of signs, when signs are beginning to grow. Before they have signification of meaning. Immaculate signs in a way” (Dieckmann 1985–1986, 4).

11. See also the analyses of this parallel by Cohen (1996, 113).

12. The reading by Warren (1993, esp. 11) is illuminating on this point.

13. On the interpretative openness of this film, see also the essay by Bühler, Fehr, and Schneider (1985).





Figures 15 and 16. Marie and Eva visually paralleled in the act of eating an apple (00:29:35; 00:31:54)



understand why in 1985, now thirty years ago, responses to the movie were so heated and impassioned, encompassing even violent attacks and arson in cinemas. The film was the subject of legal proceedings in France, where it was banned after its first screening, at Versailles in 1984, but then reallocated when the court decided that it was neither pornographic nor obscene (Locke 1993, 2–3).

The film received a positive reception at the *Berlinale* in 1985, where it was presented in the main competition, as well as an honorable mention by the *International Catholic Organization for Cinema and Audiovisual* (OCIC), and the award of the protestant film organization *Interfilm*. In

many countries, however, including France, Spain, Greece, Germany, and the United States, the film was denounced and became the focus of protest in a range of locations (Locke 1993, 3).

In Italy, the polemic was aired publically, with numerous Catholic organizations and prominent representatives of the Catholic Church, including Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini and the pope himself, opposed to the film. John Paul II expressed his disapproval on the front page of *L'Osservatore Romano* (April 30, 1985):

The Sovereign Pontiff joins in the unanimous tribulation of the faithful of the Diocese of Rome concerning the programming of a film that insults and deforms the fundamental tenets of Christian faith, and desecrates the spiritual significance and historic value, and deeply injures the religious feeling of believers and the respect for the sacred and the Virgin Mary, venerated with so much love by Catholics and so dear to Christians.<sup>14</sup>

Believers gathered in front of cinemas to pray the rosary and display statues of Mary.<sup>15</sup>

However, the response was not uniformly condemnatory. Intellectuals, writers, artists, and film directors among other people spoke out in support of the film in the media and in public debates. In May 1985, however, Godard asked the Italian distributor to withdraw the film from cinemas in Rome. Even then, the controversy surrounding the work continued, with cinemas vandalized and the film banned in some cities. Many people who vehemently opposed the film were likely unfamiliar with its specific content and style. Their opposition could well have been generated by the topics—Mary, the annunciation, the virgin birth, the nativity—chosen for presentation in the public forum of the cinema. Undeniably, the exhibiting of the naked body of Mary and the coarseness of the language of the dialogue may have also given ammunition to opponents of the film.

The controversial reception of *Je vous salue, Marie* provides evidence of the multifaceted ways meaning is produced, as illuminated by Stuart Hall's (2013) approach to the production of meaning in culture. The reception processes within which the film becomes embedded can even adopt meanings that run counter to the intentions not only of the director but

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14. English translation by Locke (1993, 4).

15. For a picture, see "Je vous salue marie di j l godard 1985" (n.d.).

also of the filmic representation as analytically reconstructed. Regulation and identity are also integral to the meaning-making processes of this film.

For Catholics who demanded that the film be censored and banned from public space, religious piety and spiritual engagement of Mary should be performed within religious praxis and not treated independently in film. For Catholics who admired the film's theology and poetical engagement, however, Mary should not belong solely to the domain of liturgy and institutional control. Other individuals were not part of this religious polemic but held that film was covered by freedom of expression and must therefore be independent of restrictions, ecclesiastical or otherwise. M. Pierre Drey, the presiding judge at the superior court in Paris in 1985 who rejected the request that the film should be banned, adopted this position. For Drey, the viewer, "who takes the initiative, by paying for the entrance-ticket, of engaging in a singular dialogue with said work," is responsible for the critical response to the film.<sup>16</sup> Ambros Eichenberger, President of OCIC in 1985, who conferred on the audience responsibility for a critical reading of the film, took a similar public position. Representing an official Catholic commission, Eichenberger invited Christians to watch Godard's film and to be open to its "quest for the holiness of life in our modern world where orientation gets lost."<sup>17</sup>

The controversy that characterized the reception of this puzzling, multifaceted, and challenging auteur's film provides an illuminating example of the dynamics of meaning-making processes at the intersection of film and religion. This film not only challenged religious piety and theology within the artistic sphere but also transformed religion itself by interacting with both religious motifs and religious practices and communities. It formed a public space of negotiation of religion. Its explicitly religious narratives, its filmic style and editing, and the possible close readings of the film as a freestanding work of art, or as a vehicle for the reception and transmission of key Christian ideas, or as a reflection of contrasting positions on religion and faith legitimize interdisciplinary approaches, or, indeed, make such interdisciplinary approaches essential.

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16. For a more complete quotation of the judge's decision, see Locke (1993, 2–3).

17. Eichenberger (1985). Translation from German by the author.

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A WORLD OF FEELING:  
THE AFFECT OF LARS VON TRIER AND/AS  
BIBLICAL APOCALYPTIC

*Robert Paul Seesengood*

According to John Collins (1979, 9; 1998, 14), the sine qua non of biblical apocalyptic is not eschatology; instead, apocalyptic is the mediated creation/revelation of an alternative, “real” world. Seers’ visions construct a spectacle of another world or unveil the true way that the cosmos functions. In his *Religion and Film*, an attempt to describe a “critical religious film theory,” S. Brent Plate (2008, 10–13, 15) has argued that religion and film both exist for the creation of alternate, alternative worlds. These new worlds are revealed/created in order to stir the reader/viewer to the affectual—not merely intellectual—embrace of new truth or perception.

This essay combines an affect reading of the Apocalypse of John and an affect/auteur approach to the work of Lars von Trier. While von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009), *Dogville* (2003), and *Melancholia* (2011) explore themes that intersect with biblical apocalyptic in obvious theological and cosmological ways, other films—such as *The Idiots* (1998), *Breaking the Waves* (1996), and *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), which all explore social organization, and *The Kingdom* (1994), which probes the limits of technology—engage themes also central to biblical apocalyptic. Perhaps von Trier’s most apocalyptic work, however, is his Depression Trilogy of *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (2013). The Revelation to John describes the coming erasure of the present world because of its decaying social, economic, and technological structures, all of which are rotting from human selfishness and moral vacancy. Revelation’s visions—and von Trier’s films—provoke instant affective responses in the reader—revulsion, terror, anger, and in resolution, joy and release. These sensory responses are not devices to supplement meaning, but are themselves the critical,

central point. They are prevolitional, precognitive instances of meaning—of meaning as it is becoming or arriving. The interstitiality, the moment of comprehension before cognition or even conscious perception, the affect laden sense (revulsion, wonder, shock, awe) is the meaning of apocalyptic. Both von Trier and John of Patmos work to reveal this affective quality to the world by means of their apocalyptic spectacles.<sup>1</sup>

### Lars von Trier

Danish filmmaker von Trier is known internationally for his often controversial presence at Cannes, for his highly artistic films that explore (or exploit) brutality and sex, and for his collaboration with Thomas Vinterberg.<sup>2</sup> Von Trier the auteur is seen in the shape of his general interest in the development of multifilm themes.<sup>3</sup> Von Trier's films share a distinct visual and directorial style, but they also coalesce around broader general, thematic questions. His work frequently explores the intersection of violence and sexuality. For von Trier, the body is incarnate psyche and motivation, and the treatment of bodies performs the psychodrama of his

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1. On *affect* and *affect theory* in film and literary criticism, with a particular eye toward the implications for biblical studies, see further under the heading "Feeling Apocalyptic" below.

2. Von Trier and Vinterberg collaborated in 1995 to develop Dogme 95, an experimental agreement to limit attention to director as auteur and return attention to storytelling; apart from a general manifesto outlining their ideas about good filmmaking, they established a "vow of chastity" that they both advocated and urged others to follow. A Dogme 95 film agreed to ten basic rules including shooting entirely on location (no contrived sets), no produced sound (and using only diegetic music), reliance upon hand held cameras, color photography only (without contrived lighting), no special camera effects (including filtration), stories set in the here and now, no superficial action or violence, no reliance upon genre convention, all films shot with Academy 35 mm, and no director credits. Ironically, neither von Trier nor Vinterberg have produced a purely Dogme 95 film. For von Trier, his most successful (largely) Dogme 95 films are (arguably) *Breaking the Waves* (1996) and *The Idiots* (1998). The Dogme 95 manifesto was largely experimental constraint; in fact, few to no films adhered exclusively to its mandate. It remains, however, as a clear example of von Trier's professed interest in story and verisimilitude in film.

3. On my use of *auteur* and *auteur critique*, I am reliant upon general approaches, best outlined in introductory format by Naremore 2004. In general, I am using auteur to establish a coherent structure—the views or themes of the director, here von Trier—to examine the development of these themes across a multifilm format.



characters. In a von Trier film, sex frequently becomes violent, and the intimacy of violence is unveiled. Both are manifestations of inner turmoil or psychological disruption and visually shocking, simultaneously articulating a character's inner state and producing a similar inner state (rage, disgust, arousal) in the viewer. Von Trier tends to work in trilogies exploring a common theme or question creating triads of films further linked via citation, music, cast, dialog, and in some cases even reused footage. He has, so far, produced four trilogies (one remains incomplete).<sup>4</sup>

His most recent trilogy is one of his more controversial. Following a depressive episode, von Trier began a series of films in 2009 that explores grief, mania, madness, and addiction. The films each portray a self-loathing and self-destructive individual (always a woman). The so-called Depression Trilogy consists of *Antichrist* (2009), *Melancholia* (2011), and *Nymphomaniac* (released in 2013 and, in the United States, in two installments in early 2014).<sup>5</sup> All three are lushly shot and notable for striking, arresting, graphic, and still more often simply beautiful photography. All three also violate nearly every element of Dogme 95's manifesto, usually in the first sequence or scene.<sup>6</sup> They combine to construct alternate worlds,

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4. Von Trier's trilogies include his Europa Trilogy exploring the traumas of European history and present culture (*The Element of Crime*, 1984; *Epidemic*, 1987; and *Europa*, 1991); the Golden Heart Trilogy, which examines female protagonists who preserve innocence despite damaging experiences (*Breaking the Waves*, 1996; *The Idiots*, 1998; and *Dancer in the Dark*, 2000); USA: Land of Opportunities, which examines key aspects of American pop culture and religion (*Dogville*, 2003; *Manderlay*, 2005; and *Washington*, which is not yet shot), and the Depression Trilogy, which is explored in detail in this essay and which examines the psychic impact of mania, depression, and grief. For a review of these other trilogies—and also of von Trier's work with Dogme 95—see Bainbridge 2007.

5. Von Trier has released dual copies of both *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, in the former case, designated as the "Catholic" and "Protestant" editions, perhaps an allusion to the broader, longer biblical canon of Roman Catholicism, which includes apocryphal/deuterocanonical books such as Maccabees, Tobit, and others. (Porno)graphic sections of *Antichrist* are removed from the Protestant edition. *Nymphomaniac* runs at five hours with an interlude. Von Trier released it in two volumes at two different dates. In the US edition, again, some of the most graphic sex scenes are elided.

6. See n. 2 above. *Antichrist*, for example, begins with a dialog-free, stylized, artfully lit prologue accompanied by opera and shot in black, high resolution film. *Melancholia*, likewise begins with an absurdist, other-worldly series of film scenes, accompanied by opera, and incorporating a huge array of advanced lighting, sophisticated camera work and digital effects.

near-but-not-quite this present one, which offer glimpses into the (super) natural, stellar, and hidden psychological worlds around us.

All three films reflect von Trier's interest in Deleuzian emotion and embodiment, as well as Deleuzian suspicion of psychotherapy.<sup>7</sup> Von Trier cites as influence Deleuze's (1978) "Nietzsche et St. Paul, Lawrence et John of Patmos" and also heavy dependence on Nietzsche's *The Antichrist* (1895), a volume von Trier purportedly kept at his bedside during his convalescence from an episode of clinical depression. Psychology becomes spiritual psyche in all three films; as a demi-spiritual malaise, psychotherapy is useless. The only cure von Trier's characters discover is the release of psychic trauma via the destruction—the opening up, the eviscerating—of the body of the sufferer. To ease or release the psyche requires the dissection and dissolution of the body; like martyrologies, suffering is both testimony and means of redemption, but only via the destruction of embodiment. The trilogy has been challenged for its explicit sex scenes (normally shot via body doubles from pornographic film), its celebration of sadomasochism (focused on BDSM aggression toward women) and the way both cohere to produce a Dionysian environment where women's sexuality is dangerous physically and psychologically and must be controlled (alas, by men). Sex in a von Trier film is rarely ever disassociated from violence or objectification or issues of control. Women are beaten, bloodied, and tortured; women are often cyphers for madness and excess; consumed by the Dionysian, the feminine in a von Trier film needs (and often craves) masculine Apollonian control. In *Antichrist* and *Nymphomaniac*, these themes are most evident, though they occur in *Melancholia* as well. All three films incorporate significant visual surrealism; the third is (on the whole) the most realist,<sup>8</sup> although it certainly has surreal moments—such

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7. One could readily argue that all three demonstrate an internalization of the viewer-centric affect described in Deleuze (1986a, 1986c).

8. Each of the films has difficulty with its realism. In all three films, a central character is insane or psychologically unstable (perhaps both are in *Antichrist*. The film is often read as a contrast between the unnamed characters; ultimately it is a triumph of He's reason as She grows increasingly unstable). Yet He is the one who sees visions in the woods. Perhaps He is equally, if not solely, insane. Von Trier's use of fantasy and magical realism destabilize the viewer's confidence in narrative coherence. To make matters more acute, the narratives of all three films include flashback, undefined jumps in the passage of time, and unrealistic compression of time. One is never, in the end, much like von Trier's characters, entirely sure if one can trust the narrative, diegetic sense of time and reality.

as a vision of the virgin Mary and the Whore of Babylon and reused footage from *Melancholia*'s destruction of the earth.

### *Antichrist*

Von Trier began work on *Antichrist* intending it to be a horror film.<sup>9</sup> The film unfolds in six movements, a prologue, four named chapters,<sup>10</sup> and an epilogue; each section is preceded with a named title page. In the film, an unnamed couple, She and He (Willem Defoe and Charlotte Gainsbourg) have lost their toddler son, Nic, in a tragic accident depicted in the film's prologue; while He and She are making love, Nic climbed from his crib and fell to his death from a third floor window. She, crippled with grief, is institutionalized. Fearing She is not improving, He, a psychotherapist, takes her to a cabin in the woods (named "Eden") where the couple once knew happier days.<sup>11</sup> He plans to use exposure therapy to help her confront her grief and heal. Once at Eden, after initial positive-seeming progress, He begins to have a series of strange visions. He sees a trio of spirit messengers / familiars: a deer with a stillborn faun, an eviscerated fox, and a crow. She, meanwhile, descends into increasingly pathological, sadistic sexual activity. At the apex of violent obsession, She crushes her husband's testicles and pins a millstone through his leg (vaguely biblical indications

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9. As horror, the film is in some ways benign—it has much less actual death, for example, than the typical stalker film—but still retains key components of the genre, a focus upon the supernatural (witchcraft, visions) and the fundamental engagement of deep fear (the loss of a child, the dissolution of a marriage, the violence inherent in any sexual relationship), and reflects a general trend in contemporary horror films toward realism (see Dixon 2010). I would argue that, despite von Trier's assertions that he abandoned the idea of a horror film, he nevertheless produced one.

10. The four chapters are titled: "Grief," "Pain (Chaos Reigns)," "Despair (Gynocide)," and "The Three Beggars." The opening of the film begins with title headings of "Lars von Trier" then "Antichrist," leaving the viewer to wonder briefly if the juxtaposition is von Trier self-identifying. In actual honesty, it is difficult at times, because of von Trier's excess, to determine if he has difficulty editing images and ideas out of his script or if he is, at least in moments, intentionally satarizing the genre. Both options, of course, are possible.

11. The cabin was used the previous summer by the couple as she wrote her thesis on the history of gynocide in/and witchcraft trials. Drafts of the thesis reappear later in the film, darkly foreshadowing the denouement and offering a frame for understanding the supernatural events that unfold around the couple. In the film's epilogue, He is consumed by the Dionysian.

of his unsuitableness as intercessor and parent: Lev 21:16–20; Mark 9:42).<sup>12</sup> Nature, She tells us, is “Satan’s Church”; this world is evil. As her madness increases, She self-mutilates, cutting off her clitoris with a pair of scissors (an inversion of biblical circumcision rituals) and stabs her husband. He strangles her. In the film’s epilogue, He wanders the woods, followed by the three messengers. In the last scene, He sees a mysterious mass of faceless Maenads approaching.

*Antichrist*’s prologue is two juxtaposed narratives. The scene is accompanied only by the soprano aria “Lascia ch’io pianga” from Handel’s early sixteenth century opera *Rinaldo*.<sup>13</sup> The prologue revels in sharp juxtapositions resonating with the title of the film (*Antichrist*) and introducing the viewer to von Trier’s world of binaries.<sup>14</sup> Though focused throughout on bodies, we rarely-to-never see whole figures of the adults; physical fragmentation of He and She begins from the very first scenes. The intercut narratives interinform: the warm safety of the home parallels a snowy, deserted street; marital love entwines with parental horror. Faces writhing in pleasure, via the juxtaposition, weep in agony. The entire prologue is lush and beautiful, an effect heightened by the rapturous aria, yet it is ultimately a scene of pure horror.<sup>15</sup>

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12. According to the first biblical text, crushed, damaged (or absent) testicles rendered priests liturgically unfit to serve and disqualified animals from sacrifice. Jesus asserts in the second text that those who harm children face dire punishments so that it is “better that a millstone” be attached to them than that they face what God will do to them.

13. *Rinaldo* is set in Jerusalem during the crusades and features a pair of star crossed lovers beset by sorcery in an enchanted garden. The lyrics roughly translate: “Let me weep my cruel fate, and that I should have freedom. The struggle intrudes within these twisted places; in my sufferings I pray for mercy.”

14. Juxtaposition continues through the film: She is obsessed with the history of gynocide and her own desire for erasure; He clings to rationality, even as He sees visions. The juxtaposition, grounded on Nietzsche’s Apollonian / Dionysian, masculine / feminine binary, also carries over into inversions of biblical images used by von Trier. For example, the husband’s visions of an eviscerated fox parallel John’s slaughtered lamb, taking John’s pascal imagery of triumph and deliverance and replacing it with the Megiloth: Song of Song’s imagery of connubial bliss, the “little foxes” (2:13, etc.), symbols of the heart, are eviscerated and destroyed.

15. Von Trier opens his horror movie in a shower. The couple begins a sexual encounter in the shower amid falling water and moves into an adjoining laundry room. Throughout the prologue’s narrative, various mis-en-scene and foregrounded images of circular or spherical objects (a shower head, a shower vent, a bottle top, the door

*Melancholia*

Not content with a near-martyrological self-effacement of individual life (or, since the characters in *Antichrist* are tropic, of a gender), in *Melancholia* von Trier destroys the entire planet. *Melancholia* opens with a prologue, again accompanied by opera, this time the overture to Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*—an opera von Trier takes, along with Proust, as the finest music ever composed. Unlike the narratively stable prologue of *Antichrist*, *Melancholia*'s prologue is surrealist, a montage of fantastic scenes from later in the (much more narratively stable) film.

Following the prologue, *Melancholia* proceeds in two main acts, each featuring one of two sisters, Justine (Kirsten Dunst) and Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg). Set in the near-but-not-distant future, Justine, the title character of the first act, and her new husband arrive late at their wedding reception hosted by her sister Claire at the estate of Claire's wealthy husband John (Keifer Sutherland). The evening goes badly. Justine is insulted by her mother, her (divorced) parents quarrel, and her boss criticizes her work. There are clear intimations Justine has had problems in the past. Increasingly alienated, Justine engages in a furtive sexual encounter with a guest and sends away her confused new husband.

In chapter two, "Claire," we have moved ahead a few years. Following her failed marriage, Justine was institutionalized for a depressive episode. She is now living with Claire and her family. We also learn that a planet, much larger than our own and named Melancholia by Claire's husband John, is on a collision course with Earth; astronomers and scientists have assured everyone nothing can be done. Despite environmental portents (static electricity, ocean upheaval, disoriented and dying animals) leaders and experts on television and the internet—and Claire's husband—assure

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to the washing machine) are shown. The entire sequence ends with a center-focus shot of the washing machine door as it ends cycle, the (white) clothes in the interior seen through the black rimmed circular door, turning clockwise, then stopping. For a horror movie to begin with a death scene that begins in a shower, includes several complex, disassociated shots of partial bodies, and concludes with a woman's open eye and a final shot of a circular drain cannot help but allude to the shower scene of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). Analysis of Hitchcock, with a particular eye toward viewer affect and the shower scene, see Brinkema (2014). For particular interest to the themes invoked in this essay, particularly the embodiment of affect and film (via images of terror and disgust), see pp. 27–30, 76–114 (on grief), 152–82 (on revulsion and disgust).

everyone will be fine.<sup>16</sup> Justine is not convinced; the earth is doomed because “the Earth is evil.” As *Melancholia* approaches, it does seem at first that the Earth will be spared, but these hopes prove false. John commits suicide, and Claire is overcome with grief. Justine, now calm, quiets her frightened nephew and sister and builds a bower of sticks on the lawn. Together, the three sit underneath as *Melancholia* strikes.

Clinically depressed, Justine is the only character who engages the coming tragedy rationally. Her depression becomes seer’s vision. *Melancholia* is a realist science fiction thriller, to a point,<sup>17</sup> yet one without any hope of human triumph. Our ruin is certain; whatever love we feel or wonders we may discover, certain death is our collective and individual future. As *Antichrist* explores Apollonian versus Dionysian visionary dualism, *Melancholia* questions the definition of rational engagement itself. *Melancholia*’s prelude furthers this intertwining with *Antichrist*. Unlike the latter, in *Melancholia*, the prelude is surreal and without clear narrative while the balance of the film is persistently realist and relentlessly eschatological.<sup>18</sup> As with *Antichrist*, the scenes are accompanied by opera again contrasting beauty and destruction.<sup>19</sup>

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16. The parallel to global warming, with its natural harbingers and public policy debates, is overt.

17. Certainly, the scenario is possible: a large planet approaching earth masked for eons by being opposite us around the Sun. But the planet (1) passes near to earth without the near passage, itself, essentially ripping away all our atmosphere or pulling us or the moon out of orbit; (2) indeed, passes so near to earth that its own trajectory is altered by Earth’s gravity and not, as one might expect, where the larger planet draws earth out of orbit and into a collision. This disruption in physics in an otherwise relentlessly realist narrative leaves one to wonder, again, if von Trier is presenting us with skewed reality through the perception of his mentally unstable characters.

18. We see the effects of static charges resulting from gravitational and magnetic disruption, the effect on animals (falling birds, horses, etc.), the global, god’s eye view of the collision itself, characters from the wedding, characters in dark forests (suggesting Dante).

19. Von Trier intentionally chose to use Wagner to invoke Nazi preoccupation with *Tristan* (and famously made this connection offensively central in his post-Cannes press conference) as means of examining both the borders of beauty and ruin, hope and hopelessness. *Tristan* also resonates with Proust, suggesting social dislocation, depression and the beautiful vacancy of art.

## Prologues

Comparing the preludes to *Antichrist* and *Melancholia* illustrates the integration of the films of the trilogy and how the intricate construction of a von Trier film is designed with a fixed eye upon the psychological and emotional affect within the viewer. The black-and-white prologue to *Antichrist* is strictly structured and paced and highly narrative-driven, particularly so when the movie to follow is so stylized and excessive that it clearly becomes abstract metaphor. The (high color) prologue to *Melancholia*, in contrast, contains images from later in the film's hyper-realist narrative, but which lack any narrative context and become surreal. Von Trier also opts in both *Melancholia* and *Antichrist* to use extreme slow-motion photography. This choice disrupts a normal sense of time for the viewer, somewhat detaching the images from the narrative (a series of meaningful events unfolding in time) and, so, rendering them more conceptual and affective. Both prologues use the context of image and structure to achieve a particular viewer experience.

*Antichrist's* prologue consists of fifty-one shots in the 5:26-long sequence. Most are a somewhat standard 3 to 6 seconds long, with transitions roughly timed to the 3/4 waltz tempo of the accompanying aria. The vast majority are high angle (though shots of Nic are almost always either low angle or head on). Human bodies remain fragmented throughout and generally off-center. The only whole body shots are those of Nic. Visually, Nic becomes an idealized, almost demi-divine figure. Layered into the mis-en-scene are visual cues foreshadowing what is to come; for example, a child's puzzle with three pieces—a deer, a fox, and a crow—lies on the ground of the laundry room; celestial images—the moon and stars—adorn Nic's pajamas and hang over his bed; toy figurines with the words *pain*, *grief*, and *despair* written on their base sit on the study desk.

Von Trier makes effective use of high resolution and high contrast photography, slow motion, and precise editing to establish narrative clarity and pacing. The viewer has more than sufficient time to take in the gist of the shot's content and reflect upon its implication, even though the speed of transitions and the highly composed nature of the shots becomes somewhat story-board like. Von Trier anticipates Nic's fall (shot 31) with over eighteen anticipatory shots: a falling toy in Nic's room, an unheeded baby monitor, the open window, overturned laundry bottles, Nic testing then breaching the child-safety gate, Nic passing his parents unnoticed. In this shot, von Trier shifts focus from unheeding parents to Nic via rack-



ing focus. As the shot concludes, Nic turns to gaze into the camera and smiles even as stray snowflakes ominously float by from off-camera right. This is the only shot in the film where all three principle characters are in-frame. Five shots of Nic by-or-in the open window and three more shots of window and street outside.

The effect of this editing is not only establishment of the narrative, but also an increasing viewer-anxiety arising from anticipation matched with a sense of inevitability. To dramatize the height (and anticipate the terror of the fall), von Trier uses “divine perspective,” withheld (re) establishing shots from outside the home and above the window to look down toward the street, then upon Nic standing in the window, to show Nic’s impact after falling (the latter having center focus the disturbed snow on the window ledge). Nic’s fall begins with shots from exterior looking inward at Nic from level, moves through forward shots as he free-falls, then transitions to shots from the street looking up as he nears the ground, and concludes with a divine-perspective downward shot as Nic strikes (leaving a puff of snow). The entire fall sequence ends with a ground-level shot of Nic’s toy bear, as if we are sharing Nic’s last, dying image. The shots of the fall and death are juxtaposed with (often low angle shots of) the sexual climax between He and She, particularly with facial close-ups. He and She (but with a particular interest in She) seem to groan in both pleasure and deep sadness, their faces nearly always turning downward with closed eyes; she opens her eyes, at last, with the death of Nic.

*Melancholia*, by contrast, is shot in rich, lush color. Though also shot in slow motion, the pacing of the prelude is much more elongated and drawn, in keeping with the different pacing of Wagner’s overture. In contrast to *Antichrist*, in the first 5:10 of *Melancholia* consists of a mere ten shots; most shots in the prologue are more than 30 seconds long. Most images appear highly posed with figures standing center-camera (contrasting, again, with *Antichrist* where nearly every figure is off-center, normally camera left). Several images are highly stylized (Kirsten Dunst running in a wedding dress with trailing black strands of goo; Dunst, also in wedding dress, floating down a river with a bouquet). Most refer to later moments within the film (Dunst gazing in surprise at static charges coming from her fingers as dying birds fall in the background; a black horse in full tack rolling forward onto the ground, apparently dying). In isolation and without narrative context, these images appear surreal and meaningless, even though they refer to specific and clear moments later revealed in the film’s



narrative (the static charge and dying birds, for example, are harbingers of atmospheric disturbances as the two planets near one another).

Von Trier parallels these interior shots (i.e., of life upon earth) with the most exterior of shots possible—a view of the two approaching planets and their eventual collision as seen from space (the location of the viewer is not clear). From these “extreme deep perspective” shots,<sup>20</sup> the collision of the two worlds, an act that eliminates all life on earth (and potentially any life on Melancholia, though we have no information at all if it is or is not inhabited) are stunningly beautiful. And, so, the horror: the end of all life has a deep beauty and appeal.

Von Trier incorporates explicit visual references to Pieter Breughel's 1565 *Hunters in the Snow* and John Everett Millias's 1852 *Ophelia*. For the former, he simply replicates the image with the inclusion of falling, dying birds. In the latter, he has a repeating shot from above looking down on Dunst in wedding dress, holding a bouquet, floating on her back down a river. Images by both Millias and Breughel appear later in the film (for example, in open art books in the library). Von Trier also frequently uses three point lighting for his outdoor shots (narratively, the characters lit from above in two directions—the sun/moon and Melancholia) particularly in evening/night shots, recalling a common Renaissance figure technique and separating characters from their background. In all, the surreality of the images, the deliberate poses, and the clear anticipation of common visual art techniques establish (particularly when partnered with Wagner) a high art sense. Von Trier's slow motion produces, again, a sense of a series of still images. Here, however, with their intentional artfulness and the longer duration of image, one has time to fully study the image. Unlike in *Antichrist*, construction of any narrative is more difficult. The images themselves become affectual. One is given time to pause and interpret each image. The distortion of time is equally a distortion of narrative, rendering the images even more conceptual. There is enough repetition, reference, and allusion to produce the orienting effect that one has seen this before, yet the strange and startling content of other images produces a disorientation. The process of (un)familiarity and discovery reoccurs in the actual film as viewers see (and presumably now understand) several of the images again. The viewer becomes seer and prophet. The prophetic

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20. The viewer's perspective is from some point millions of miles from Earth in outer space.

exposition of the narrative that follows makes sense out of the striking and startling initial images, yet these initial visions prime the viewer for a sense of *déjà vu* as the narrative unfolds. The result is a destabilization of time (already signaled by the use of slow motion) and time's progression and the creation of a sense of repetition of events and order.

This sense of timelessness, circularity and order is not trivial in a prologue that so clearly engages the divine perspective. Viewers glimpse the earth from some point out in space—a perspective denied for the balance of the film—and the full collision and its aftermath—events impossible to see from the perspective of the characters within the narrative. Further, the inevitable destruction of the earth is fixed from the beginning of the film. Viewers have the most omniscient of perspectives—literally, that of a distant, omniscient divine being. The result is both detachment and compassion.

### *Nymphomaniac*

If *Antichrist* is horror and *Melancholia* science fiction, *Nymphomaniac* is von Trier's exploration of porn. The majority of its five hours are sex scenes, which, as the film progresses, become increasingly violent (and remarkably wearying to watch);<sup>21</sup> the movie moves from innocent first encounter to youthful (though dangerous) sexual play to violent and destructive sadomasochism. All the sex is explicitly portrayed; body doubles of pornography actors are employed for the most graphic shots; the film revels in pornography's insistence upon "the real thing" being shot

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21. Though hardly a scientific or critically informed survey, the most common complaints among negative reviewers of *Nymphomaniac* on the IMDB website are the films' graphic sexuality and its surprising monotony. Many critics complain of both at once. Surely, this is von Trier's goal. The sexual hunger of Joe causes her to seek sexual extremes yet also results in deepening sexual apathy. To my eye, von Trier achieves his effect by taking scenes or actions just slightly too long and by relying upon unmoving cameras and long shots with repetitive (if any) soundtrack. Like most bodily functions, removed of its culturally defined taboo (and so deviant) status, sex is, one realizes, really fundamentally uninteresting to watch after a certain point. One may go further: von Trier is demonstrating that it is actually the absence of sex—the prohibition, the taboo, the deviance, the *denial* of sex—that is interesting. What is unseen and not experienced produces fantasy, which results in desire. Desire, not sex, is what is interesting to both experience and watch.

and shown, again blurring the question of real verses filmic for the viewer. One is never really sure if what one is watching is “really happening.”

*Nymphomaniac* is arranged in a prologue and eight chapters (the total number of sections in the previous films combined) with no epilogue. The narrative of the film largely unfolds in back-flash. Notably, in all three films of the trilogy, there is an absence of clear focus upon the present; the one which has most, *Antichrist*, blends in vision and magic. In the prologue, an old and solitary bachelor, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), discovers a brutally beaten women, Joe (Charlotte Gainsburg), in an alleyway. He invites her in, cares for her, and asks about her situation. Seeing items in the room that remind her of her childhood, Joe tells Seligman her story in eight vignettes. A scene in the filmic present where Joe and Seligman discuss an item in Seligman’s apartment, which serves as an anchor for her story, introduces each vignette.

Joe’s growing obsession with sex has driven her to more and more aggressive and dangerous sexual escapades, eventually into self-torture and sadomasochism as she struggles to find feeling. Joe has been unable to emotionally connect with any sexual partner and unable to sexually connect with those whom she loves. Her addiction has unraveled the marriage of her close friends and cost her own chance at a home and family. It has led her to increasingly self-destructive behavior. We learn in the last vignette that a sadomasochistic lover beat and raped her and left her in the alleyway. Psychotherapy has proven fruitless. The only release for her obsession is destructive expression of her desires and the erasure of her body as her own. Her self-loathing is as acute as it is unexplained; she challenges Seligman’s assertion that no person is completely hopeless with a Christ-like “I am.”

Seligman becomes Joe’s confessor. When she senses something unusual in him, he reveals that, despite his age, he is a virgin. Seligman’s confession, and an icon on his wall of the virgin Mary, inspires Joe to reveal a highly private story of a rapturous fantasy—perhaps her only full orgasm—she once had while alone in an art museum, inspired by images of the Virgin Mary and Rev 17’s Whore of Babylon. Throughout their conversation, like the chorus from Greek tragedy, Seligman voices the inner thoughts of the viewer. His connection with the protagonist urges her toward exposure and revelation. She reveals because he asks; she reveals because viewers watch. The conclusion of *Nymphomaniac* exploits this connection to indict the viewer. After telling her final story, the film’s most brutal, Joe drifts to sleep. Seligman removes his clothes and climbs into bed with her. She takes

a gun from her purse, shoots him, and leaves without comment. Seligman, like the viewer of pornography, is aroused. Joe kills him because, in his arousal, he failed to see her as Other. To make the point more acute, Seligman is confused at her anger. The viewer, like Seligman, is indicted here for having spent five hours of titillation, failing to see the character as real.

### Von Trier's Obsession

Distinct to all three films is von Trier's obsession with the location of the viewer, spectator engagement and with affect. Drawing from Deleuze (1986b), he focuses upon faces and fragmented bodies, psychological tension, and viewer-affect.<sup>22</sup> Psychoanalytic or viewer-centric criticism of film, many derived from Deleuze, argue that, in film (much like in classical or biblical narrative), emotional discovery is not achieved by narration but via empathic connection with characters, music, lighting, and narrative elements that elicit sympathetic emotion (Plantinga 2009; Pribram 2004; Watkins 1999). An able disciple, von Trier focuses upon faces and bodies to articulate suffering and pain. In a perverse antimartyrology, his "fucking saints" (to borrow Halpern's description of Michel Foucault) perform their inner pain and suffering via penetration and the erasure of their bodies. The films, despite (indeed, often because of) their realism, construct an unstable alternative reality. Viewers often do not know what is real in these films (narratively or filmically).<sup>23</sup> Each film, then, is

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22. The face provides the moment of encounter in film. Film has, again and again, been likened to mythology and ancient literature. In his review of biblical literature, Robert Alter, influenced by Erich Auerbach, has noted the "reticence" of biblical narrative (Alter 1981, 76, 114–15). Emotion must be inferred from (sparse) narrative. Film, similarly, has a reticence of inner life to address. Emotion must be conferred by music, shot, editing and acting—with particular attention to the face. Film, by media restriction, must show, not tell.

23. The notion of *reality* in film is a trying one, indeed. In the 1950s, Étienne Souriau offered a seven level model of reality in film. As frequently summarized, they are: (1) a-filmic reality (the reality that exists independently of filmic reality); (2) profilmic reality (the reality photographed by the camera); (3) filmographic reality (the film as physical object, structured by techniques such as editing); (4) screenic (or filmophanic) reality (the film as projected on the screen); (5) diegetic reality (the functional story world created by the film; the type of reality supposed by the signification of the film); (6) spectatorial reality (the spectator's perception and comprehension of a film); (7) creational reality (the filmmaker's intentions) (see Plate 2008, 12). Von

experienced affectually more than rationally. The images produce disgust and desire, fear and compassion, revulsion and beauty, psychic pain. For von Trier, pain is release and the segue toward intimacy. Pain and its *affect* upon the viewer, for von Trier, is revelatory. Through the three films, we move from the dissolution of the individual (with emphasis on gender), to the dissolution of the world, to indictment of the viewer-film engagement; von Trier blends film genres, using horror to erase our confidence in love or reason, science fiction to show our technological powerlessness and ultimate doom, and porn to indict us for our dulling pursuit of distraction and the consumption of others.

Each movie in the Depression Trilogy cites biblical apocalyptic. The first film does so in its title (admittedly influenced equally-if-not-more by Nietzsche), the second in its eschatology and surrealist images, and the third in its citation of Rev 12 and 17. One wonders with some justification if there might be more to both the apocalyptic influence and insight of von Trier.

### Feeling Apocalyptic

Despite popular association of finality with the word *apocalypse*, ironically, of the making of (and interpreting of) an apocalypse, there seems no end. Apocalyptic oozes through the pages of extant Second Temple Jewish literature, particularly the New Testament, to drip into viscous pools of post-postmodern malaise and popular culture. An obsession with the idea (but not actuality) of endings, of juxtapositions, and duality has become the epigenetic makeup of our modern world. Film is a particularly ready vehicle for the would-be modern apocalypticist. With its inherent emphasis upon the visual, its celebration of the graphic, its giant screen, all laced with the real but sobering truth that destruction is inherently interesting to watch, apocalyptic is becoming a critical category for film description.

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Trier opts for a number of production techniques (a-filmic, profilmic, filmographic, creational) of editing, using body doubles, lighting, cinematography, and more, that bleeds into his storyboard / scripted film world (diegetic), which is inundated with flashbacks, hallucinations, insane and unstable characters, and magical realism—all producing affective responses (disorientation, disgust, fear, shock, etc.) in the viewer (spectatorial). The results are films that are inherently unstable in terms of reality and that (through this instability) melt from screen and intrude upon the real experience of the viewer in the theater (screenic).

In the popular mind, and in more than a few film reviews, apocalyptic is shorthand for eschatology or disaster, but within the disciplines of biblical studies and Second Temple Jewish literature, apocalyptic has (well, at least, had) a nuanced meaning. The term is further subdividable into the categories of apocalypse (a literary genre), apocalyptic eschatology, and apocalypticism (the themes or trends of apocalyptic ideas occurring in a variety of texts and social movements).<sup>24</sup> While what one means by apocalyptic in popular terms needs clarification because of over-use, the same holds true in academic discourse because of (over?) nuance.

By genre, an apocalypse is a form of prophetic encounter transmitted via written text where a prophet sees a series of often uncanny visions where the universe, the true cosmos, is unveiled and unmasked, revealed (Carey 2005; Collins 1979, 9; 1998, 15). These vivid, confusing visions are mediated to the prophet—and through the words of the written apocalypse to us—by an angelic or divine figure. Apocalyptic has two sub-genres: a narrative, often war-based, prophetic vision of events to come (often, but not always, including the end of the Earth); and “ascent” literature where an individual takes a tour of the cosmos, seeing alternate realms (Collins 1998).

As a genre, apocalyptic contains, of course, additional characteristics. Apocalyptic revels in juxtaposition arising from a pervasive dualism. The dualism of apocalyptic drives its narrative and frames its interests; indeed, dualistic conflict may be the only coherent plot to the work. Apocalyptic asserts that history has a meaning and a telos—an end, both as goal and cessation of the present. Ultimately, apocalyptic is a narrative of agency, pitting the all-too-human against deep and powerful divine and psychological forces and exploring the means through which identity, agency, and self—both divine and human, individual and communal—are formed. Apocalypse is fundamentally a revealing or unveiling; often, that unveiling is an argument of agency and identity.

An apocalypse is fundamentally the creation of an alternative world. Greg Carey (2005, 6) observes: “Perhaps the most distinctive trait of apocalyptic discourse is its interest in *alternative worlds*, whether in terms of *time* (such as the age to come) or *space* (as in the heavenly realms).” He continues: “apocalypse inhabits the realms of imagination, of comparison,

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24. I am grateful to Carey 2005 for this division, a summary largely of Collins 1998.

symbol and vision” (6). George Aichele, Tina Pippin, and Richard Walsh (2013) have explored this connection to film, noting the overlaps between apocalyptic, fantasy, horror, and science fiction (see, as well, Aichele and Pippin 1998).

In another provocative analogy, Carey (2005, 13) likens apocalyptic to the poetic. Carey’s analogy dismantles hard category distinctions between apocalypse as genre and apocalyptic discourse more broadly, as well as capturing the way in which the images and symbols of both poetry and apocalyptic function. “By looking beyond the everyday world, ... apocalyptic discourse seeks to reshape the imagination. It portrays a world where chaos seems to reign” (16). But, more nuanced and perhaps more intriguing, his analogy further reveals the fundamentally affective nature of apocalyptic. Carey writes, “Like poetry, apocalyptic discourse often aims at affect rather than data, at moving its audience rather than informing them” (13).

The affect of biblical text, particularly theology, has become a real interest among biblical critics (Koosed and Moore 2014), and apocalyptic is particularly fertile soil. The spectacle nature of apocalyptic—its wonder and its horror—are fundamentally vehicles for affect (Kotrosits 2014). The emotional freight of apocalyptic text, declaration, surreal imagery, and accusation provoke anger, fear, disgust, and loathing or, alternately, longing, desire, and awe (Moore 2014). The emotive is central to the meaning of apocalyptic; affect is integral to its effect; the affectual cannot be separated from meaningful content. Apocalyptic, as a genre, creates alternative worlds but does so via a pseudepigraphic voice. Apocalyptic is affectual, but affect is collaborative. Reader and text must conspire to produce emotion. Apocalyptic is also a highly viewer-centric literature, leaving open questions about how a text affects, that is, emotionally engages or challenges, its readership. Spectacle, like affect, blurs lines between author and viewer.

Though the visual nature of John’s Apocalypse has been clearly a staple of its readerly and ecclesiastical critique for centuries, recent work has focused more explicitly upon John’s “spectacle” (Frilingos 2004; Moore 2014). John’s text not only mounts a series of show-stopping scenes—the heavens open (4:1–2); dragons soar (12:1–17); monsters climb up from the seas (13:1–18); there are wars (19:1–21; 20:7–11), graphic nudity, sexual violence, and scenes of amazing destruction (6:1–9:21; 17:1–18)—it is a text brimming with eyes of its own. The protagonist Lamb has seven eyes (5:6); God’s companion creatures are grossly multiocular (4:6–8);



the antagonist dragon is multicephalic and in command of multicephalic monsters from land and sea (12:1–3; 13:1–3, 11–12).<sup>25</sup> Monsters bear multiple heads, divine spirits are covered with eyes, the slaughtered lamb grotesquely blinks back at the reader with a perfect, and prime, number of eyeballs. Revelation watches us watching it; its images are terrible, but there is perhaps a deeper terror when looking up to see its eye-engorged face, blurred and furtive, outside the text's darkened window. The effect of being watched back unnerves. As Kotrosits (2014, 474–75) observes regarding Revelation's famous, grotesque protagonist Lamb:

seven-eyed and seven-horned, this complex creature arrives at its heralded place ... as a woolly bundle of mixed metaphors. Deeply human but fully animal, a son with breasts, a victor in battle yet mortally wounded,

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25. Writing on the intersection of film and religion, specifically upon the way film is/uses/expresses (embodied) rituals, Plate turns briefly to explore the physical nature, the embodied sense, of spectatorship. He writes: "Film is never 'merely' image and/or sound but always multi-medial, impacting the various senses of the human body and causing it to shudder or sob, laugh or leap" (2008, 60). He notes that this is "a movement of the body that is pre-conscious, before rational awareness" (60). The embodied "eye that sees is an eye in motion" (64). Plate is interested in constructing an awareness of how both film spectatorship (and film) and ritual engagement (and religion) are fundamentally embodied activities; this unification (or interanimation) between embodiment and perception, indeed, is what empowers each. Film, like religious ritual, constructs alternate world(s) and reality (3–5). Both are means of "recreation." Plate's book is an essay arguing for this moment of unification between film and religion, a "critical religious film theory" (14–17). Therefore, his interest in embodiment of viewer is to "assert that *sense perception is the medium of the body*, and if we want to understand aesthetics (meaning everything from theories of art, to judgments on beauty, to cultural tastes), we have to start off with the body and its senses" (63).

I would note, however, how the structures he traces here are also elements of not only viewer response (and aspects which both transcend and precede psychoanalytic analyses) to film, but also of affect. Affect is not only prerational; it is precognitive. Film has a particularly powerful potential through its filmic and spectatorial reality (which result in the perception) to create a diegetic reality that is fundamentally affectual—really, it seems, in ways that other forms of storytelling (prose literature, say) cannot quite achieve (perhaps because of the viscosity and universality—the pre-literacy—of engagement with image). Film, in its (overt and intentional) creation of alternate worlds (Plate 2008, 3–9) seems to share uniquely in apocalyptic literature. It also captures much of what apocalyptic—with its emphasis upon visions, signs, seers, and seeing—is attempting to create, affectually, in prose.



'the lamb' is, John tells us, the only suitable creature capable of opening the scroll that will unleash chaos and fury.

Stephen Moore's (2014) review of John's images also foregrounds both their affectual horror (and disgust) and their fixation on juxtaposition. Principally, Moore points out how John sets off Jesus against Rome by depicting one as a slaughtered lamb and the other as, well, a whore. Particularly in the feminization, and sexualization, of Rome (and Jezebel, and others), John's Apocalypse intends to not only suggest profligacy but to illicit disgust. John's goal is both terror and revulsion. Drawing upon Sarah Ahmed and Jacques Derrida, Moore points out that John's images first objectify his enemies (whores), then dehumanizes them (beasts) before slaughtering them to great, and gory, celebration.<sup>26</sup> Moore points out that John focuses on bodies—bodies in torture, bodies in pain, bodies under duress, bodies in rapture, pure bodies, unspoiled bodies, monstrous bodies—bodies often depicted as partial, filled with fluids waiting to be unleashed, bodies that allure at first, but ultimately disgust, bodies that rot and feed carrion, bodies that are torn to pieces, burned in fire. By their affectual engagement, these images also revolt, repel, and terrify, making us complicit in John's ghastly thesis. In the end, John turns toward us, panting and dripping in blood and gore amid the corpses, and with a ghastly smile, John calls us to worship. We might as well; we have watched this much.

The Apocalypse of John blends the affects of horror, science fiction, fantasy, and pornography into a canonical snuff film. Consider, for example, the amount of sheer gore found in the Apocalypse of John. Blood, feces, semen, and other fluids drip from its pages (1:5; 3:4; 5:9; 7:14; 8:9; 14:8, 20; 16:4, 8; 17:4, 6; 18:3; 19:13); scenes of torture and imprisonment of various types are common (2:10, 13; 6:11). Between the scenes of blood-letting, there are more than a few (near pornographic) images of female bodies in full-frontal-nude display, often the victim of violent and vivid sexual assault (2:20–23; 17:1–18; 18:7–8, 9). The special effects of John's text are stunning and vivid: monsters and dragons live in heaven and walk the earth (4:2–11; 6:3–8; 9:1–11, 14–19; 12:1–6; 20:1–6), and its cities are subject to an array of disasters (6:12–17; 8:5, 7–13; 11:4–13; 13:1–18;

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26. The affectual road toward Moore and Kotrosits's readings has been paved by recent reattendance to John's emotional and visual significance. See, for example, Kotrosits (2014, 475, n.4), where she surveys prior work on spectrality and affect in Revelation.

14:16, 17–19; 16:3–7, 8–11, 12–16, 17–21; 19:1–4) and warfare (12:7–16; 19:11–21; 20:7–15), each of which bestrew the land with rotting, festering corpses. Even Jesus’s humanity is burned away by his glorification, leaving behind a steel-tongued monster (1:13–16), an eviscerated deformed lamb (5:6), who incites fear and wailing (1:7, 17). I leave aside the anti-Semitism and pledges of assault upon those unwilling to serve God (3:9; 21:8).

What Has Patmos to Do with Denmark (Or: Slouching toward  
Copenhagen)<sup>27</sup>

I pause here, as I often did when composing this piece. It is not easy to write. It is not easy to live with the visions of von Trier or John. Writing on film requires watching and rewatching. In scenes like those of von Trier, in the violence, blood, and anger that war over bodies—often women’s bodies—one is left spent as a viewer. Watching von Trier closely is not pleasant, despite, indeed often because, of the lush and beautiful framing of his vicious images and narratives. Watching von Trier has become a furtive act. The images are, in the vernacular of modern internet, “not safe for work.” Still, I keep them there, in my office, not wanting them, for a variety of reasons, in my home. I watch with my office door closed, so that the graphic images are quarantined. I must, time and again, walk off what I have seen, take a break from my viewing to stroll campus on a bright, warm, fall afternoon. But Revelation? I read it openly. I teach a seminar on Apocalyptic. Its scenes and images adorn church windows and walls. Its lines are strewn through hymns of praise and adoration to God.

In thinking of von Trier as auteur, in thinking of von Trier as apocalyptic, in thinking of von Trier and affect, there are many moments of intersection.<sup>28</sup> There are direct invocations of biblical scenes, terms, characters, and tropes. There is eschatology. There is dualism. There is surreal-

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27. I am indebted to Castelli (2009) for this wonderful title.

28. Von Trier has been the subject of several essays on religion—and Bible—in film: Faber (2006); Pyper (2010); Yeoh (2011). The majority of work to date has been interested in analysis of his *Breaking the Waves*: Doehring (2004); DeWeese-Boyd (2008); Fernandez (2011); Gudmundsdottir (2002); Heath (1998); MacLeod (2002); Mandolfo (2010); Martig (2000); Shivers (1997); Wall (1997). Of the Depression Trilogy, *Antichrist* has been the subject of some critique by religion/biblical scholars, many concerned with the films portrayal of masculinity and misogyny: Buch-Hansen (2011); Castelli (2009); Elwell (2012).

ity. There is symbolism. But, ultimately, the focus, the purpose of Revelation is revealing, is exposure. What is revealed in von Trier? What do we learn from his reconstructed world, from touring his vision of things that are, that were and that are to come? Spectacle is inherent in film, and with it an undeniable affectual nature, particularly von Trier's. In von Trier, we find alternate worlds stocked with terrifying visions and struggles against chaos. Film is inherently apocalypse and apocalyptic, particularly so von Trier's.

Von Trier, quite simply reveals the affect of Revelation itself. In von Trier's ghastly images, in his violence, in his outbursts of rage, pain and viscosity, we as viewers are drawn into the film's affecting moment and mood. In von Trier, lines of vision and reality become blurred and the barrier between viewer and film becomes thinner in a perverse, cinematic *Samhein*. The images reach inside the viewer affectually and alter mood and inculcate emotion causing often unwilling complicity with their auteur in the construction of von Trier's argument.

So also with John. Indeed, one wonders, if John of Patmos were alive today and directing European arthouse films, whether his films would be much different than von Trier's. To an extent, the canonical condom we have pulled over John's images seems hopeful to prevent us from being impregnated by John's violence. Yet that sense of security is a slight one. Von Trier's apocalyptic vision reminds us: only a thin, easily rent fabric separates us from John's horror, written on ghostly, crinkly pages of a book thought sacred. We are, nevertheless, infected by John's affect; we are infected by John's celebration of divine violence and misogyny. The (anti) social disease of tolerance for violence seeps into the reader of John. Von Trier can reacclimate us to the horror inherent in the apocalyptic vision.

John's Apocalypse is affectual. John intends to illicit fear, revulsion, disgust, and rage. He intends to inculcate such anger and disgust at this world that we, too, long for its erasure and ruin. John wants us to also want the end, to also desire the dissolution and disintegration of bodies, of the created cosmos. John wants us to slit ourselves open, like the lamb, and bleed out our impurity. John's meaning is not surrounded by visceral emotion; John's meaning is the viscosity and emotionalism itself. In viewing von Trier's work, we see the same energies, the same affect. Von Trier reveals Revelation, and the experience leaves both reader and viewer spent and empty, fearing the chaos both outside and in.

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## MARTIN SCORSESE'S *AVIATOR* AS THEOLOGICAL COMPLEMENT TO HIS *LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST*

*Jeffrey L. Staley*

His life has become surrounded by so many myths, mysteries, mystifications, fabrications, and lies that we will probably never be able confidently to separate fact from fiction. (Cantor 2009, 171)

As if the image of Christ could not withstand interpretation. If Christ were to walk the earth today, He would be nothing more or nothing less than one of us. He is one of us. (Scorsese 2007, 268)

### Introduction

Many Christian viewers find Martin Scorsese's tormented, self-doubting Jesus character in his 1988 film *The Last Temptation of Christ* troubling. Scorsese's Jesus is a man haunted by internal voices that call him to a destiny seemingly beyond his capacity to fulfill: to bear the sins of the world and then die as God's willing sacrifice. Ultimately, Scorsese's Jesus accepts the challenge. Having rejected the love of women, he dies "like a man," as the obedient son of an invisible but ever-present (divine) Father.

On the surface, Scorsese's award-winning 2004 film, *The Aviator*, could not seem further removed from *The Last Temptation of Christ*. Its main character, Howard Hughes, is a twentieth century American, a brilliant engineer and movie producer worth a billion dollars—not some ancient Galilean beggar prophet. Hughes can have any woman he wants—and indeed, he takes whomever he wishes without even a twinge of guilt and without considering what that might do to his long-term relationships with Katharine Hepburn, Ava Gardner, or Faith Domergue.

Unlike Scorsese's Jesus, Hughes is not a coward. He faces death fearlessly on more than one occasion, and he suffers grievously as a result of

multiple plane crashes. Finally, unlike Scorsese's Jesus, Hughes does not seem to have a spiritual bone in his body. If Scorsese's Jesus is motivated by the perfecting of his (human? divine?) inner spirit, Hughes is all about the surface—either the perfectly designed plane or the perfectly formed female body. This is most clearly evident in what is perhaps the film's most evocative hard cut—one that moves from Hughes's hand on the back of Hepburn's metallic-like dress (fig. 1), to his hand running along the belly and side of his newest, chrome-colored test plane (fig. 2). The soundtrack underscores the connection between Hepburn's body and the plane's fuselage as a woman sings "Gee, I'd like to see you looking swell, baby" (*I Can't Give You Anything But Love*). The subsequent hard cut to a biplane's broken wing (fig. 3) seamlessly matches the copper color of Hepburn's dress from the preceding scene (42:36; fig.1).

Despite the notable differences between these two Scorsese films, there are two particular images in *The Aviator* that reinscribe *The Last Temptation of Christ*: a footwashing scene early in the film, and a scene toward the end of the film where Hughes sits naked in a screening room chair. But beyond these brief visual connections, there are also deep resonances in the films' portrayals of their central characters. Both characters seem to have only tenuous holds on reality. Scorsese's Jesus hears strange voices and has peculiar visions. They could be from God, his (absent) Father—or from Satan—and he is unsure to whom he should attribute them, until the end of the film. Likewise, Scorsese's Hughes sees things that are not there. But for Hughes, his shaky hold on reality is linked to his relationship to his absent (apparently deceased) mother, who instilled in him a fear and loathing of germs.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely these two central characters' struggle to grasp reality—filtered through *The Aviator*'s echoes of the Jesus story—that suggests productive points of theological conversation. "If," as Scorsese (2007, 268) suggests in the opening quote above, "Christ were to walk the earth today, He would be nothing more or nothing less than one of us," then ironically, *The Aviator* could be Scorsese's ultimate exemplar for understanding how Jesus is "nothing less than one of us."

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1. In the film's opening scene, Hughes's mother is shown bathing her young son. She teaches him how to spell the word *quarantine*, then intones, "You are not safe." The adult Hughes spells the word quarantine two more times in the film (1:40:31; 2:10:29), and then, in the film's final scene, he looks into a bathroom mirror and sees his mother again. Once more Hughes hears her say, "You are not safe."





Figure 1. Hughes slips off Hepburn's copper-colored dress as they make love for the first time.



Figure 2. Hughes's hand on his test plane's fuselage mimics his hand on Hepburn's back.



Figure 3. The copper color of the biplane's wing echoes the color of Hepburn's dress.

### A Critical Framework 1: Auteur Criticism

I knew nothing about 1950s French auteur criticism when Richard Walsh and I wrote *Jesus, the Gospels, and Cinematic Imagination* in 2007. My concept for that project was simply to produce a book about Jesus movies

available on DVD and then to invent a “Gospels Harmony” of those films for use in college classrooms. But early on in our conversations Walsh proposed that we devote a section of each chapter in our book to comparing the director’s Jesus film to another film in his *oeuvre*. Since I was unfamiliar with the wider range of films represented by our Jesus film directors, I invited Walsh to write most of those chapter segments. Two years later, as I was designing a new college course called Catholic Imagination and Film, I began to read more widely in film theory. There I came across the language of auteur criticism for the first time (Stam 2000, 83–92; Johnston 2006, 194–201; see also Cantor 2009, 170), and realized Walsh had been arguing for a simplified form of that approach when we were writing our Jesus on DVD book.

My purpose in this essay is not to summarize or analyze the theoretical claims of auteur criticism with respect to Scorsese’s films. Nevertheless, the basic idea of auteur criticism seems self-evident. I grew up long after the era of the classic studio-generated movie and came of age toward the end of the period of film censorship, when directors were beginning to assert their independent artistry. So the idea that certain directors (auteurs) “have come to signify not only persons but also [film] traditions, theories, and genres” (Naremore 2004, 9) and could be studied from the perspective of distinctive *oeuvres*, came naturally to me—despite whatever postmodern proclivities I might otherwise have. As a result, the *nom* signification of auteur criticism (here, “Scorsese”) provides a fruitful framework for developing a narrower dialogical question: Namely, how do these two Scorsese films speak to one another theologically—or better—“ideologically and psychologically” (22–23)?<sup>2</sup>

However, neither auteur criticism nor any broader theory of intertextuality<sup>3</sup> was in my purview when I first watched *The Aviator* for my proposed college course. I only picked up the film because I was reading

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2. Of course, Naremore’s (2004, 22) statement that “within the institutional context of the classic studios..., the name ‘Hitchcock’ points to a different nexus of ideological and psychological concerns from the name ‘Capra’” holds for Scorsese too, as well as for any number of other directors.

3. Here, I am thinking of intertextuality as “operati[ons] within ‘the institution of film criticism’ [which] are likely to ‘produce implicit and symptomatic meanings, regardless of the filmmaker’s intent’” (Bhaskar 2004, 393, quoting David Bordwell; emphasis mine). See my intertextual analysis of the films *Godspell* and *Son of Man* (Staley 2013).

about the 1930 “Hays Code” (The Motion Picture Production Code) in Christopher Deacy and Gaye W. Ortiz (2007, 17), where I came across a reference to *The Aviator*. Deacy and Ortiz mention the film in passing because of its depiction of Hughes’s conflict with Joseph Breen, the chief censor of the *Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association*. Since I planned to lecture on the history of film—particularly in relation to Catholic thought—it occurred to me that a brief film clip of the Catholic Breen interrogating Hughes would add an entertaining element to my classroom presentation. I certainly had no intention of showing the entire 170-minute film to my students. A three-minute film clip of Breen was the extent of my interest in Scorsese’s *Aviator*, that is, until I actually sat down and watched the film.

### A Critical Framework 2: Kyriosities in *The Aviator*

In a previously published essay, I coined the term *kyriosities* (a pun on the Greek word *kyrios*, or “Lord”) to describe the kinds of seemingly throwaway profanities (e.g., “Jesus!” “Christ!”) that one often finds in Hollywood films, profanities that, upon deeper reflection, often function as lexical keys for viewers to connect a film’s hero or heroine with the broader Jesus story (Staley 2002). In that essay, I argued that Hollywood’s *kyriosities* are not unlike the *kyrios* of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John of the New Testament, a word which also often plays a dual role: that of denoting both earthly honor (“sir”) and christological affirmation (“Lord,” e.g., Mark 7:28; 10:51; 11:3; 12:9; Luke 7:6). Thus, when Jesus is the addressee, the gospel reader is never quite sure if the word *kyrie* means “sir,” “master,” or “Lord”—or perhaps all three. But unlike the New Testament gospels, cinematic *kyriosities* are just that: simple, profane curiosities—unless accompanied by additional elements that frame a film’s larger mythic (Christian?) narrative.

Because I am first and foremost a New Testament scholar—one who has come to film studies through the history of Jesus movies—I am especially attuned to biblical allusions in film—even if they seem to be nothing more than throwaway (*kyrios*) profanities. So my ears perked up immediately when, just seven minutes into *The Aviator*, Louis B. Mayer says to Hughes, “Jesus Christ, sonny”—to which Hughes responds, “Howard.” A minute later Johnny Meyer is describing Cecil B. DeMille’s work on the unfinished film, *The King of Kings* (8:18). Notably, these remarks are made in the context of Hughes directing a film on the Great War, with the

apocalyptically inspired title, *Hell's Angels*. I wondered if the close clustering of these three biblical allusions was merely coincidental. The fact that the profanity is directed at the film's protagonist (who humorously pretends Mayer has confused him with Jesus) and that the profanity occurs so close to the beginning of the film primed me to look for additional biblical allusions.

The next three profanities are spoken in the context of Hughes's dream transport plane named the Hercules: "Christ!" What are you getting us into?" (Odie to Hughes) "Well, it's a big plane, so I'm calling it the Hercules" (Hughes to Odie, 1:04:27); "For Chrissakes we can't make the Hercules if we don't have any aluminum" (Hughes to Odie, 1:10:44); "Christ, I don't know" (Hughes, talking about the Hercules, 1:11:07; the metaphorical [divine mothering] significance of the Hercules myth will be discussed below in the context of other visual motifs).

Another intriguing cluster of throwaway profanities occurs at roughly the film's midpoint, shortly before Hughes's most horrific plane crash. The first is directed at Hughes's prospective sexual liaison, Faith Domergue. When he finds out the girl has had no surgeries, has no scars or blemishes, and is only fifteen years old (close to the traditional age of the Virgin Mary at her betrothal), Hughes exclaims, "Holy Mother of God!" (1:22:55). Then, a bit later, Hughes uses the word "Jesus" or "Christ" three times in conversation with Gardner ("for Chrissakes Ava, it's just a present!" [1:34:14]; "Jesus, Ava!" [1:34:25]; and "Jesus Christ, how would that look?" [1:34:57]).

Gardner had been introduced earlier in the film as "a new star in the MGM galaxy" (55:40), and her name is a Latinized form of the Hebrew "Eve." Do "Mother of God"/"Ava" (Eve?)/"Gardner" (gardener?) plus "Jesus" connote intentional biblical/theological allusions?<sup>4</sup> On first viewing I was not sure if the names had any significance. But I stored them away in the back of my mind—along with the profanities—and continued to watch the film. The fact that the film's remaining profanities were either directed at Hughes or at his planes (see, for example, "Jesus, God!" [Noah Dietrich, 1:48:10]; "Jesus!" [Dietrich, 1:53:02]; "Oh Christ, Howard!" [Gardner, 1:55:12]) suggested to me there could possibly be a covert cinematic theology connecting Hughes, women, and planes.

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4. I am reminded of the words of wisdom from Jesus's "guardian angel" during the final temptation scene in *The Last Temptation of Christ*: "There is only one woman in the world" (2:17:21). See Humphries-Brooks (2006, 87–90).

So I watched *The Aviator* to the end, wondering if there might be additional connections to the Jesus story. In fact, there were. As mentioned in my introduction, there are two particular scenes in the film that evoke *The Last Temptation of Christ*. The most obvious scene occurs at the 2:09:53 mark of the film—where Hughes obsessively, compulsively repeats the phrase, “Come in with the milk.”

Anyone who has seen Scorsese's *Last Temptation of Christ* will immediately recognize the medium shot of Hughes's twisted, bent-knee posture in a screening room director's chair (*The Aviator* 2:09:53; fig. 4) as a sly parody of Jesus's nontraditional, contorted, medium shot crucifixion from *The Last Temptation of Christ* (2:04:11; fig. 5)—complete with the light from the projector lens casting a perfect, saintly penumbra around Hughes's head.<sup>5</sup> “He looked like a martyred saint of some sort, ... an ancient god, ... like Zeus,” says Scorsese (Scorsese, Schoonmaker, and Mann 2005, 2:09:19).<sup>6</sup> Thelma Schoonmaker adds, “He looks either like Jesus Christ or Che Guevara, or a combination of the two” (2:10:09). Strangely, for the two commentators, the Jesus story seems secondary to any broader mythic elements in the film.

As if the viewer needed additional confirmation of Hughes's metaphoric, Christ-figurish “descent into hell,” Scorsese adds a montage of desert shots reminiscent of the wilderness temptation scenes from *The Last Temptation of Christ* (53:09), with a pulsating red light bulb that throbs like the sacred heart of Jesus once did (2:05:44, 2:11:15; *The Last Temptation of Christ* 1:07:59). Then, three days after Hughes tells Juan Trippe twice that he has “a hell of a cold” (2:11:55), he emerges from the screening room (his tomb). A medium camera shot catches Hughes clothed in an unbuttoned shirt, standing next to a poster of his first film. Just the word “*Hell's*” is visible in the camera frame (2:17:36; fig. 6). Recalling an earlier footwashing

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5. See also Charlesworth (1973, 149–50). Abrams (2009, 88–89) describes the scene in terms of an “analogy to Scorsese's Jesus ... coming into view.”

6. Bordwell correctly argues that a filmmaker cannot control “all the semantic fields, schemata and heuristics which the perceiver may bring to bear on the film” (quoted in Bhaskar 2004, 393). Nevertheless, a filmmaker's commentary often represents the only available scene-by-scene interpretation of a given film. My purpose in quoting the director's commentary is thus not to suggest that the director has the “final word” on what his or her film means, but rather to acknowledge that the director's words are often the only critical interpretation of a particular scene. This is the case with *The Aviator*.



Figure 4. Hughes's nightmarish "descent into hell" begins.



Figure 5. Jesus's seductive last temptation begins.

scene in the film, Hughes's first words to his assistant upon emerging are, "I don't have any shoes" (2:17:50; cf. 48:20).

Whereas *The Last Temptation of Christ's* passion narrative dwells on Jesus's hallucinatory dream sequence of sexual temptation—viewed as a realistic settling down into marriage and fatherhood—Scorsese's *Aviator* explores the emotional depth of Hughes's passion-like estrangement from this world through a disorienting montage of film clips from *Hell's Angels*



Figure 6. Hughes emerges from his editing room after his "descent into hell."

(dueling airplanes) and *The Outlaw* (Jane Russell's cleavage and lips) overlain with Hughes's obsessive-compulsive behaviors.

Later, as Gardner helps Hughes dress for a Senate hearing, Hughes speaks words that could have been lifted straight from *The Last Temptation of Christ*. "I see things," he says to Gardner, after washing his hands (2:20:25). Then a bit later, he asks Gardner to marry him. "You're too crazy for me," she laughs (2:21:29). Likewise, earlier in the film, after surviving a test plane crash landing in a beet field, Hughes surprises Hepburn by wandering into the house in beet-stained shoes. "Good Lord, what happened to you?" Hepburn says when she sees him (47:40). "Oh nothing," Hughes says. "A hard landing. I cut my foot." Hepburn responds, "Good God! You're covered in blood!" (48:24). As Hepburn begins to wash Hughes's feet, he confesses, "I get these ideas—these crazy ideas—about things. Things that may not really be there" (51:36).

On first viewing, *The Aviator's* footwashing scene does not seem evocative of any particular biblical story. However, multiple viewings reveal it is clearly connected to the more obvious, secularized passion narrative that



Figure 7. Hepburn washes Hughes's bloody feet



Figure 8. Jesus wipes Mary Magdalene's blood-red feet.



unfolds in Hughes's screening room director's chair (2:09:53). The link is made obvious through the following verbal and visual parallels between the two scenes: (1) Hughes's visionary statements ("I see things"/"I get these ideas ... about things ... that may not really be there" (51:30/2:20:25); (2) The appearances of Gardner and Hepburn in quick succession (Gardner first appears in the film at 55:30 just after Hepburn leaves Hughes's side; Hepburn appears outside the screening room door [2:05:55], and later Gardner appears at the screening room door [2:18:16]); (3) Women-aided, body-washing scenes (Hepburn washes Hughes's feet in the first scene [49:10]; Gardner helps Hughes wash his hands and face in the later scene [2:20:43]); (4) "Inside" language ("Kate, they can't get in here, we're safe" [50:11] and "We're not like everyone else.... We have to be very careful not to let people in, or they'll make us into freaks" [Hepburn to Hughes, 55:29]; "You—you let me in" [Hepburn to Hughes, 2:06:47]); and (5) References to shoes (48:20/2:17:50).

This fivefold repetition of elements in the footwashing and nude screening room scenes serves to connect them and overdetermine their meaning. Moreover, the explicit biblical echo of the crucified Christ in the later, hellish screening room scene, helps solidify the earlier extreme close-up scene of Hepburn washing Hughes's feet (51:00; fig. 7) as a traditional Christian allusion: that of Luke's anointing woman (Luke 7:36–50). Ironically, *The Aviator* version reverses the extreme close-up scene from *The Last Temptation of Christ*, where it is Jesus who wipes Mary Magdalene's blood-red, dirt-stained feet (41:48; fig. 8).

When viewed from a limited context of Scorsese as auteur, *The Aviator*'s seemingly inconsequential kyriosities combined with the two powerfully revelatory biblical images provoke a theological dialogue between Scorsese's secular, biopic *Aviator* and his spiritual, otherworldly biopic *Last Temptation*. But how does this dialogue work? In what ways does it move beyond a mere literalistic cataloguing of similarities between scenes and conversation topics? To answer these questions, we must explore these scenes' connection to *The Aviator*'s complex motifs of mothers, women and planes, milk and urine, and starry skies, clouds, breasts, and Hercules.

### Toward a Theological Dialogue

As I showed in the introduction, the physical connection between the female body and airplanes in *The Aviator* is initially made covertly, through



the editor's hard cut that moves immediately from Hughes's left hand on Hepburn's metallic dress and bare back to his left hand on the fuselage of a test plane (41:58). Women are thus connected to the sky early in the film. But do women and sky have a deeper symbolic significance? I believe they do, but that symbolism is similarly covert and will have to be teased out through a careful analysis of multiple scenes.

Unlike Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*, we do not share Hughes's mad visionary experiences in ways that might connect his physical world to a spiritual one. We rarely hear the voices Hughes hears in his head; we do not see his demons or angels. Except for Hughes's personal hell in his screening room, we only see his torment from the outside.<sup>7</sup> So we are left to our own devices, forced to make our own connections between *The Aviator's* sky and earth, its heaven and hell.

In describing the scene where Hughes takes Hepburn flying for the first time and offers her a drink from his own sterilized milk bottle, Scorsese says, "the mother, the mother's milk, the clouds, breasts [are] hidden—sometimes maybe not so hidden elements in the film" (Scorsese, Schoonmaker, and Mann 2005, 40:26). The first scene that "maybe not so hiddenly" (ibid) draws planes and women's bodies together comes over an hour into the film. It is precisely that: a combination of two drawings that Hughes shows his chief engineer, Odie, during an early screening of *The Outlaw*. The scene demands careful attention, as it is a complex interweaving of visual and verbal symbols.

Intercutting clips from *The Outlaw* (where Jane Russell's breasts hover precariously over a bedridden Billy the Kid) with two-shots of Hughes and Odie seated on opposite sides of a lamp table (with a half-empty milk bottle on it), Hughes tells Odie, "Now the Army needs a new airplane" (1:03:50). Then, handing Odie a photograph of Russell, Hughes says to Odie, "Here, take a look" (1:04:07; fig. 9). "No, the other side." Odie turns the photo over and sees a rough sketch of an airplane. "Christ! What are you getting us into?" Odie exclaims. "Well, it's a big plane," Hughes says, "So I'm calling it the Hercules."

Odie continues to look at the drawing on the back of the Russell photograph, while Hughes sketches something else. "All right boys, I want you to rig up something like this." Hughes moves in front of the projector to

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7. Abrams (2009, 88) argues, "What is real and what is unreal are unknown to us or him [i.e., Hughes]."



Figure 9. Odie examines a photograph of Jane Russell before turning it over to find Hughes's sketch of an airplane.

show everyone his sketch. It looks like the fuselage of an airplane, but it is super-imposed on a screenshot of Russell's breasts (1:04:46). In fact, the drawing is Hughes's design of a brassiere for Russell, one that will accentuate her cleavage. Using technical language drawn from his experience as an engineer, Hughes explains to his viewers:

"[It] should give the proper uplift ratios while reducing the need for additional torque support on the front. We are not getting enough production out of Jane Russell's breasts. All right? I want smooth titties, gentlemen. Smooth titties."

"It's all in engineering, isn't it Odie?" (1:05:2).

"Howard, do you really think they're gonna let you put out a whole movie just about tits?"

"Sure. Who doesn't like tits?"

The film then hard cuts to a lengthy scene before the Motion Picture Association Censorship Board, where Hughes justifies *The Outlaw's* obsessive fixation with Russell's "mammaries" (1:05:12–1:08:15). An elderly professor whom Hughes introduces as "Dr. Ludlow Branson of Columbia University ... a mathematician of some note," uses calipers to measure the cleavage of various movie stars from earlier MPA-approved films. Immediately following is a transitional scene of Hollywood scandal sheets, overdubbed with a radio announcer's voice that lists Hughes's numerous female companions. It ends with the unveiling of a mock-up of the Hercules (1:08:27).

The elderly professor who measures breast cleavage for the MPA Censorship Board is, in fact, Professor Fitz, a UCLA meteorologist whom Hughes had originally hired to find him clouds for the aerial scenes in *Hell's Angels*. By bringing the character back at this juncture, Scorsese

evokes that earlier scene (13:08). There, Fitz had begun to describe cumulonimbus cloud formations, when Hughes interrupted him. "Giant breasts full of milk," Hughes finishes. "I want clouds, damn it." "Yes, clouds, that look like giant breasts full of milk," Fitz repeats. "Cannot exactly be guaranteed for any particular occasion."

Thus milk—bottled with the cap on—or boxed, as ice cream (7:45; 35:12; 38:43; 1:10:09; 1:24:30) becomes an image particularly associated with Hughes—one that only makes sense in the context of its broader, metaphorical connections to the sky and flying, to purity, lack of safety, and his quarantining mother (0:43). Pure milk symbolizes Hughes's deepest longings and sufferings (2:09:17). Clouds. Flying. Airplanes. Women. Breasts. Milk. Scorsese says the flying scenes in *The Aviator* evoke the ancient myths of Icarus, Midas, and the Labyrinth (Scorsese, Schoonmaker, and Mann 2005, 1:43:15). Strangely, however, Scorsese fails to mention the myth of Hercules (Greek Heracles) when commenting on Hughes's fascination with flying—this, despite the fact it is precisely that god after whom Hughes names his most famous engineering feat.

According to ancient Greek mythology, Athena fools Hera, wife of Zeus, into breastfeeding Heracles. When Hera discovers the trickery, she yanks Heracles from her breast, spewing droplets of milk across the sky—thereby creating the Milky Way (cf. Jacopo Tintoretto's ca. 1575 painting *The Origin of the Milky Way*). Not coincidentally, Gardner, one of Hughes's three primary girlfriends in *The Aviator*, is introduced as "a new star in the MGM galaxy" (55:40). Later on, if the viewer has somehow missed the connection between women, sky, clouds, breasts, and flying, Gardner makes the point explicit by saying to Hughes: "I'm not some damn airplane" (1:54:35).

In an article entitled "Divine Milk from a Human Mother? Pagan Religions as Part of the Cultural Background of a Christian Icon of Mother Mary," Joachim Kuegler (2013, 7) states that in the eleventh century, the heavenly role of Mary's milk begins to appear in Christian art—as evidenced in the mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux (ca. 1090–1153) and the iconography surrounding the miracle of the lactating statue of the Virgin (see, for instance, Alonso Cano's *The Vision of St Bernard*). Kuegler goes on to argue that since pagan religions no longer existed in Europe, their myths were now in religious competition with Christianity. "The deeper mythical structures underlying the adopted mythical patterns early Christian theology had accepted to express Mary's importance gained influence more and more and led back to the old idea of divine milk." Thus, "Mary

... become[s] a superhuman, heavenly mother” (10; see also Traina 2011, 49–51). I believe it is precisely this complex feminine mythic imagery that makes best sense of Scorsese’s scene where Hughes introduces the Hercules on the back of a Russell photograph, with a half-full milk bottle on the lamp table. Moreover, the complex feminine metaphor is the only thing that makes sense of the film’s recurring motif of milk bottles and ice cream associated with airplanes and women.

The early scene of Hughes offering Hepburn a drink of milk during their night sky flyover of Los Angeles (38:43) is thus a sort of transcendent Holy Communion, one that is juxtaposed near the end of the film with Hughes drinking milk alone in agony (“Come in with the milk,” 2:09:17), followed by a scene of him urinating into scores of empty milk bottles (see fig. 10). Not insignificantly, Cano’s 1650 painting of St. Bernard drinking the Virgin Mary’s breast milk (mentioned above) portrays Mary’s milk powerfully spurting in an arc that suggests a urinating male.

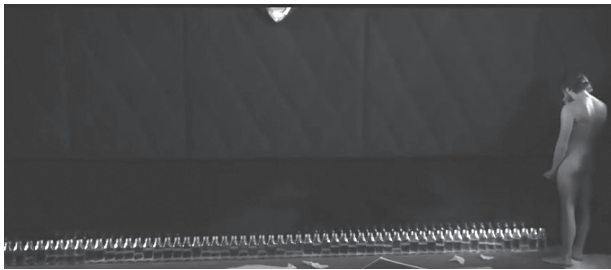


Figure 10. Hughes urinates into empty milk bottles.

In his suffering and agony, has the urinating Hughes become the authentic son of the absent divine invisible Mother just as Jesus, in *The Last Temptation of Christ* finally becomes the authentic son of the absent divine invisible Father who crawls, baby-like, back upon his cross? The intersection of verbal and visual images in the closing scene of *The Last Temptation of Christ* leaves little doubt as to its interpretation: Jesus “want[s] to be the messiah,” who “die[s] for the sins of the world,” as “the son” of his divine Father (2:38:00). Whether *The Aviator*’s “Christ walk[ing] the earth today” (Scorsese 2007, 268) has risen victorious over anything more than his own obsessions and hallucinations is not nearly so clear. But the film’s iconography is tantalizing and suggestive. As the (Christ)-son of an absent (divine) mother, Hughes stands; he urinates into an unending row of milk bottles (2:10:50); his Hercules finally flies—despite the fact that it is not

finished until years after the end of the war it was supposed to help win. He is, as he mumbles incessantly at the end of the film, "The Way of the future" (capitalization mine; 2.39:00).

### Conclusion

Bringing these two Scorsese biopics into dialogue with one another reveals at least three ways in which auteur criticism and discussions of Christ-figures in film can deepen cinematic theological reflection.

First, our analysis shows it is not the Jesus story as told in the New Testament's gospels that informs the Christ-like construction of Hughes in *The Aviator*. Rather, the cinematic Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ* (with its bent-kneed, cruciform body) is *The Aviator's* true exemplar. In thinking of Scorsese as auteur, my argument has been that his Hughes is in dialogue with his Jesus of *The Last Temptation of Christ*, rather than in dialogue with the New Testament gospels. In fact, it is probably a failure of imagination on the part of Bible film scholars, generally, who look first to the New Testament gospels as the source of cinematic Jesuses rather than to Jesus movies, that contributes to this obsession with written biblical texts.

Secondly, it is not simply that the Jesus of Scorsese's *Last Temptation* "speaks to" *The Aviator's* Hughes or that the Jesus of *The Last Temptation* casts its "shadow" forward (Baugh 1997, 112) over *The Aviator*. Rather, Hughes and his absent Mother speak back to Jesus and the absent Father of *The Last Temptation*, casting their shadows upon its Jesus, and thereby complicating that Jesus/"Christ-figure" (Walsh 2003, 32; see also 79–83). In so doing, Scorsese's Hughes exposes the Jesus of *The Last Temptation* all the more emphatically as "a cipher-sign, trailing behind it the divine or iconic Christ ...; a cipher for the depth, resonance, and authority of Christ" (32).

Thirdly, the juxtaposition of these two Scorsese films reveals how *The Aviator's* divine feminine speaks to and challenges the masculine divine image—the sacrificially demanding Father-figure of *The Last Temptation*—by placing *The Aviator's* absent (divine) Mother on an equal metaphorical playing field with *The Last Temptation's* absent (divine) Father.

Thusly conjoined, Scorsese's theology as auteur—(evidenced in the duality of his cinematic christologies) is much richer and more intriguing than it would be if the biblical scholar and/or theologian were to limit himself or herself simply to the mesmerizing images and incongruous lan-

guage of Jesus in *The Last Temptation of Christ*—or to simply compare those images to the Christs of the New Testament gospels. In the words of Richard Walsh, Scorsese's two films “pluralize (or deform and reform) the meaning of ‘christ,’” and in so doing, challenge the “christ figuring” of the New Testament itself (Walsh 2013, 97).

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LUSTING AFTER LESTER'S LOLITA:  
PERPETUATING AND RESISTING THE  
MALE GAZE IN *AMERICAN BEAUTY*

*Matthew S. Rindge*

Biblical texts offer diverse and contradictory perspectives on women. Phyllis Trible (1984) aptly describes the horrific subjugation of women that pervades far too many texts in the Jewish and Christian canons. On the other hand, some texts—while not free from gender problems—have the potential to empower women in meaningful ways. Many biblical texts (e.g., Song of Songs, Gospel of Luke) elicit contradictory interpretations regarding whether they are pro- or antiwomen. Does Song of Songs, for example, unabashedly approve of women speaking on their own terms about their sexual desires, or does it warn women that they will be punished violently for acting out sexually? This essay examines the role of the male gaze in Sam Mendes's *American Beauty* (1999) and suggests that this film's conflicting attitudes toward women might offer a helpful model for thinking about the complicated role of women in biblical texts.

At the heart of *American Beauty* is the spiritual development of its main character Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey).<sup>1</sup> The controversial catalyst for Lester's growth is an erotic fantasy of his daughter's high-school friend, Angela Hayes (Mena Suvari). A halftime cheerleading routine at a basketball game becomes a fantasy that arouses and awakens Lester from a self-described sedation, a twenty-year coma in which—although technically alive—he is “dead already.”<sup>2</sup> Eroticism liberates him in his exodus

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1. For a more comprehensive analysis of *American Beauty*, see Rindge (2016). Some material in this essay appears there in a modified form.

2. All film quotes are from the DVD version of *American Beauty* (DreamWorks, 2000).

from spiritual death. This, the first of four sexual fantasies featuring Angela, propels Lester to pursue a newfound honesty, to enjoy life and his physicality, and to rediscover a long dormant joy and gratitude.

### Perpetuating the Male Gaze

In many ways, Lester's four fantasies of Angela conform to Laura Mulvey's critique of the primary function of women in cinema as objects of sexual pleasure for the male gaze.<sup>3</sup> Angela's primary purpose in the fantasies is to satisfy Lester's sexual pleasure; in his fantasies, she performs for him, flirts with him, desires him. As with anonymous film spectators, Lester's fantasies give him "an *illusion* of looking in on a private world" (Mulvey 1975, 9; emphasis mine). This anonymity is most overt in his first fantasy when everyone in the basketball gym disappears, leaving Lester the sole viewer of Angela's seductive performance.

Lester experiences active scopophilia, which "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey 1975, 10). Her personality and character are reduced to a seductive siren; all that remains is her (hyper)sexuality.<sup>4</sup> In his fantasies, Angela is constructed *imago Lester*. Created in Lester's image, she is fashioned into a manufactured version of herself, one that bears little resemblance to her reality. Moreover, Lester displaces responsibility for his own sexual desires onto her, and the immense sexual appetite he imputes to her gives him license to indulge in his own sexual longing.<sup>5</sup>

Lester's fantasies thus perpetuate a pervasive cinematic pattern of subjection of women as sexual objects. In many ways—and to be more

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3. Focusing on the "erotic pleasure in film," Mulvey (1975, 7–8) argues that woman is depicted in film as a "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning." Lester personifies the "determining male gaze [which] projects its phantasy on to the female figure" (11).

4. Lester's fantasies illustrate Mulvey's (1975, 17) argument that "cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an *illusion cut to the measure of desire*" (emphasis mine). The fanciful texture of Lester's fantasies are a type of fetishistic scopophilia, an experience that "builds up the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself" (14).

5. In Mulvey's (1975, 9) words, Lester adopts "the position of the spectators in the cinema," which "is blatantly one of repression of their exhibitionism and projection of the repressed desire on to the performer."

specific—the film presents Angela as a Lolita-like nymphet.<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Rowe Karlyn notes:

The nymphet—a highly ambivalent term—is part of a tradition of idealized American femininity rooted in Victorian culture and heightened with the development of the cinema nearly a century ago. *Lolita* helped put the word “nymphet” in the popular vocabulary of the sexually liberating 1960s. Similarly, Mena Suvari in *American Beauty* combines all-American girlishness with a disconcerting sexual ripeness suggested by the red rose petals that coyly cover her body in Lester Burnham's fantasies. (2004, 72)

Echoing Mulvey, Karlyn contends that Lester's fantasies reveal “the degree to which the nymphet exists as a projection of male desire” (86). Tracy Lemaster (2006) argues that *American Beauty* not only reissues Nabokov's nymphet, but also borrows specific themes (e.g., rose petals, cheerleading performance, film) directly from the novel.

Similarities between the film and *Lolita* have evoked charges that *American Beauty* promotes pedophilia. This is the argument of Lemaster, who also faults critics who fail to see the film as a defense of pedophilia.<sup>7</sup> Karlyn contends that Lester's sexual interest in Angela is rather a result of displaced incestuous desire that Lester has for his daughter Jane.<sup>8</sup> The only evidence Karlyn (2004, 78) cites from the film, however, is when Ricky, Jane's new neighbor and fellow high-school student, asks if Jane would prefer that her dad be interested in her rather than Angela. Indeed, the respective arguments of Lemaster and Karlyn fail to consider the entire film, which, I propose, undermines and counters its own scopophilic tendencies. In what follows, I seek to demonstrate how *American Beauty*

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6. See Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1997), which was originally published in 1955. The novel's narrator, Humbert Humbert, describes detailed sexual fantasies he has of a young girl, Dolores Haze (Lolita), with whom he eventually develops an ongoing sexual relationship.

7. “*American Beauty*, at its core, is trying to valorize and legitimize a pedophile” (Lemaster, 2006).

8. “Incest drives *American Beauty* in ways that are typical of contemporary cinema.” The film, Karlyn argues, “downplays the impact of Lester's transgression by displacing the object of his desire from his daughter, Jane, to Angela.” Carolyn, Lester's wife, is “coded as the ‘collusive mother’ who is ultimately responsible for her husband's incestuous desires because of her various inadequacies” (2004, 78).

resists ingrained cinematic and cultural habits of using young girls for the sexual pleasure of the male gaze.<sup>9</sup>

### Resisting the Male Gaze

A central motif in *American Beauty* is “look closer,” a line displayed subtly in Lester’s cubicle, and overtly on the DVD cover where it appears over a bare torso of a nubile young woman who holds a single red rose.

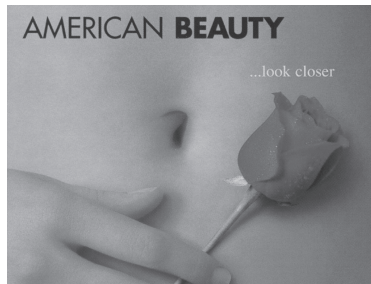


Figure 1. *American Beauty*. DVD Cover. © 1999 by Dreamworks LLC.

Both elements in this promotional image (youthful female body and rose) symbolize what American culture deems beautiful.<sup>10</sup> Both images are also regularly associated with each other in the film. Red roses figure prominently in Lester’s four fantasies of Angela,<sup>11</sup> signaling (on one level) erotic stimulation and sexual enticement.<sup>12</sup> Looking closer reveals that these roses also signify the illusionary and deceptive nature of Lester’s fantasies.

9. On the sexualizing of young girls, see Walkerdine (1997); see also Churchill (2003).

10. The whiteness of the body also belongs to a specific cultural script regarding beauty, but the film does not interrogate or explicitly reflect on this specific racialized aspect of beauty.

11. In his first fantasy, Angela unzips her cheerleading top to reveal a flood of rose petals emanating from her bosom. In the second, a naked Angela is conspicuously covered in red rose petals, which fill up the entire ceiling and slowly descend upon Lester. After he kisses Angela in the third fantasy, he puts his fingers to his lips and slowly removes a single red rose petal from his mouth. In his fourth fantasy, Lester finds Angela in a bathtub with red rose petals covering the top of the water, again conspicuously hiding her genitals.

12. So Karlyn (2004, 72). Willis (2012, 16) notes that the rose petals “simultane-

The only CGI techniques employed in the film are for Lester's fantasy sequences involving roses. In these scenes, the method *is* the meaning; form is function. The *how* is an illusion, and not only because of using CGI. The fantasies were filmed and edited in ways that heighten their illusive quality. Director Sam Mendes and cinematographer Conrad Hall use a jump cutting technique in which a camera shot rapidly replays the previous shot but from a different angle and at a different speed. Although some form of the jump cut had been used since Georges Méliès, Jean-Luc Godard (*Breathless*, 1960) is often credited with popularizing the form (Fischer 2004, 77–78; Bordwell and Thompson 2006, 254). Mendes and Hall employ traditional jump cuts in Lester's fantasies, but they also reconfigure them by replaying the shot in question.

In the first fantasy, the camera jump cuts on Angela's hands caressing her body during her cheerleading routine. The same technique is used in the third fantasy when Angela reaches her hand toward the refrigerator, brushing up against Lester. The brushing of her hand on Lester's arm and shoulder is replayed three times (at three different frames per second: 24fps, 48fps, and 72fps). The rapid jump cuts enhance the scene's erotic quality by making it a performance, for Lester and the audience. By zeroing in on—and repeating—her body's flirtatious movements (caressing her body, touching Lester), these scenes accent Angela's function as a sensual aphrodisiac. Moreover, her striptease-esque presentation is staged solely for Lester and the viewing audience.



Figure 2. An example of the use of CGI in Lester's first fantasy of Angela

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ously represent eroticism and femininity. As such, they connote what they 'purport to conceal': Angela's budding sexuality."

Contributing to the hypnotic quality of the fantasies are the jazzy syncopated rhythms playing during these speed-increasing jump cuts. As with the CGI, these jump-cutting techniques and music are only used during Lester's fantasy sequences. They enrich the depiction of Angela as an incarnate hallucinogenic who awakens and seduces Lester from his sedated stupor. In light of Mulvey's critique, such fantasies also encourage male viewers of the film to, along with—and through—Lester, reduce Angela to a sexual plaything.

The film acknowledges, however, and even underscores the illusionary and deceptive nature of these fantasies. Their delusory character is highlighted not only by the music, CGI, and jump cuts, but also by their abrupt end and transition to entirely routine matters. Mendes intentionally shot the basketball scenes preceding Lester's first fantasy "underwhelmingly" in order to convey a sense of the mundane.<sup>13</sup> Lester's fantasy of kissing Angela shifts to his "real mundane point of view" of Angela and Jane standing in the kitchen (Ball and Mendes 2000). The fantasy of Angela in the bathtub ends by cutting to Lester masturbating in bed. These rapid shifts originate in Alan Ball's (1999, 16, 35, 41) screenplay; three of the four fantasies conclude with his note, "SMASH CUT TO."

What the abrupt camera shifts *to* immediately after the fantasies also sharpens the contrast between the real Angela and the representation of her that Lester constructs. The vision of Angela on the ceiling of Lester's bedroom cuts to Jane and Angela giggling and laughing in a car. This Angela—a somewhat goofy adolescent—destabilizes the viewer who might be caught up in Lester's intoxicating reverie. Lester's fantasy of kissing Angela in the kitchen cuts to Angela who is drinking root beer. This child-like activity is another stark departure from the adult-rated Angela of the fantasy.

Juxtaposing the fantasy with the adolescent reality undercuts Lester's objectification and distortion of Angela. Shifting to these scenes of the genuine Angela underscores the highly subjective—and subjugating—nature of Lester's fantasies. The film rejects Lester's view of Angela as a source of sexual pleasure, and it refuses to grant the viewer the ease of indulging in Lester's fantasy by forcing the audience to face Angela the adolescent. The film compels viewers—more so than Lester at this point

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13. "Out of each fantasy I cut to the most mundane shot—here, in the kitchen, after the bathroom fantasy" (Ball and Mendes 2000).

in the narrative—to examine the reductive and distorted nature of their subjective view of Angela. Susan Bordo (2003, 149) finds the film's presentation of Angela's body refreshing precisely because it does not conform to conventional films in which images of young girls "do not jar us into moral wakefulness; rather, they lull us into comfort with the eroticization of immature bodies."<sup>14</sup>

*American Beauty* thereby hinders its male (and possibly women) viewers from partaking in scopophilia.<sup>15</sup> Identification with Lester (and participating "in his power") would typically enable male spectators to "indirectly possess" Angela (Mulvey 1975, 13). Indeed, the social isolation Lester experiences from others in his fantasies—most explicit in the basketball scene when all other spectators vanish, and he is left alone—is akin to the "voyeuristic separation" Mulvey notes that the theater's darkness provides for film viewers (8). Yet through various strategies (e.g., Jane's disgust at her father's lascivious obsession and her apologies to Angela for his behavior), the film seeks to prevent male viewers from controlling Angela as one who exists solely for their sexual pleasure. Like Richard Kelly's *Donnie Darko* (2001) and Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's *Little Miss Sunshine* (2006), *American Beauty* critiques the American habit of sexualizing young girls.

Unlike these other films, *American Beauty* first allows (male) viewers to revel in Lester's fantasies and then proceeds to undermine this indulgence. As Bordo (2003, 148) notes, "It's very rare that popular culture exposes or interrogates (rather than simply reproduces) our fantasies about Lolita-like girls. I believe that this is one reason *American Beauty* seemed fresh and innovative."<sup>16</sup> *American Beauty's* critique of sexualizing young girls is critical, she remarks, for a real world "where nasty things do indeed happen to little girls" (149).

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14. "Unlike Nabokov," she writes, "we are not much inclined to tunnel deep into the content and meaning of the images that obsess us, whether as sexual fantasies or as blueprints for girls' bodies (and souls)" (Bordo 2003, 148).

15. In a subsequent article, Mulvey (2004, 71) suggests that even films that are "structured around masculine pleasure" may "allow a woman spectator to rediscover that lost aspect of her sexual identity, the never fully repressed bed-rock of feminine neurosis."

16. Bordo makes a similar claim for Kubrick's presentation of Leelee Sobieski's two scenes in *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999).

Reconfiguring *Lolita*

*American Beauty* also disrupts spectator ownership of Angela as a sexual plaything by reconfiguring the film's appropriation of the *Lolita* narrative. Nabokov's novel and *American Beauty* both feature a forty-two-year-old man who falls in lust with a *much* younger girl, and Angela Hayes is a likely reference to Dolores (Lolita) Haze, the twelve year-old fetish of Humbert Humbert's compulsion. Such similarities suggest that the film intentionally appropriates elements of Nabokov's novel.

Viewing Lester as a pedophile in the mold of Humbert (Karlyn 2004; cf. Willis 2012) clashes with the film's perspective, especially since Lester chooses not to consummate his relationship with his nymphet. It is with this latter choice that the film most significantly departs from Nabokov's novel.<sup>17</sup>

Lester's fantasies approach an actual climax near the end of the film when he is about to have intercourse with Angela. Yet after she reveals that she is a virgin, Lester makes his most crucial choice of the film, declining an opportunity to have sex with Angela. In doing so, he halts the entire trajectory of actualizing his sexual desires and decides (for the first time) to put another's needs before his own.<sup>18</sup> Lester succeeds in letting go of controlling his image of Angela, allowing her reality to loom larger than his fantasy. Choosing not to sleep with her is a choice not to seize, control, or take. Unlike Lester's wife Carolyn or Colonel Fitts (Ricky's father, who terrorizes and physically abuses his wife and son), but like the plastic bag that floats in the wind, Lester opts to abandon control. The climax of the film is an anticlimax.

Foregoing sex with Angela represents a rejection of the example in *Lolita*. Especially significant is that "Lester Burnham" is an anagram for "Humbert *learns*," and this reconfiguration highlights Lester's ability to look closer and see Angela as an insecure virgin rather than the sultry

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17. It is not entirely clear to what degree consummating a relationship with Angela constitutes a central component to Lester's fantasies. His fantasies include a flirtatious and suggestive Angela, but they never progress to a point of sexual intercourse. Such uncertainty highlights, among other things, the difficulty of clearly delineating between Lester's fantasy and reality.

18. Contrary to Sigmund Freud's (1962, 48) contention, Lester demonstrates that the sexual drive is not the ultimate and "central point" of his life.



siren of his fantasies.<sup>19</sup> The chimera becomes a person, and he sees Angela as a child.<sup>20</sup> Her revelation of her sexual inexperience prompts him to adopt a posture of parental nurture: he wraps her in a blanket, gives her a hug, affirms her value and worth, and makes her a meal.<sup>21</sup> His paternal bearing is also manifest in questions he asks about Jane's wellbeing. Looking closer saves him and Angela from the kind of predatory encounter that Ball depicted in *Towelhead* (2007).<sup>22</sup>

In an insightful analysis of the respective cinematic versions of *Lolita* (Kubrick 1962 and Lyne 1997), Bordo (2003, 146) finds *American Beauty* to be "more the moral descendant of Nabokov's *Lolita*" than Lyne's film version. Her claim is significant given her argument that Nabokov "wants us to remember that the power difference between adult and child is the essence of the pedophile's pleasure—and of the violence done to the child" (145). Bordo emphasizes that Nabokov invites readers to attend to *Lolita* as a "twelve year-old child," noting that he includes details such as Lolita crying herself to sleep every night (135).<sup>23</sup> "And Nabokov refuses to allow the reader to share Humbert's mythical view of Lolita's sexual power. For Nabokov—as for Lester Burnham—the sobering fact is that Lolita is a child" (147). It is distinctly *as a child* that *American Beauty* ultimately positions its viewers to see Angela.

Despite declining to have sex with Angela, Lester's relationship with her remains troubling for many viewers. During the first test screening,

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19. On "nymphets" in cinema, see Sinclair 1988.

20. Ball (1999, 93) notes that this Angela "is not the mythically carnal creature of Lester's fantasies; this is a nervous child."

21. So Mendes: "Suddenly you see that this woman who you thought was knowing, is an innocent child, and she reveals herself to him as a virgin. This is a big turning point for Lester. And in these moments he becomes a father again ... he just wants to give her a hug ... he wraps her up, and he becomes a father again. It's the most satisfying end to his journey that there could have been. And a very moving one" (Ball and Mendes 2000).

22. Johnston (2004, 70) claims that Lester "discovers enjoyment and contentment within himself" once he declines to have sex with Angela. This decision, Johnston asserts, enables Lester's subsequent "recovery of love for" Jane and Carolyn.

23. Bordo (2003, 135) notes that Nabokov wants the reader of *Lolita* to see Humbert's violation of her as a victim and as a child: "Over and over, he calls on us to look squarely, consciously, clearly at the violations Humbert causes in the service of his created dream world, as we are made aware of the disjunction between Humbert's engorged fantasies and the child-life of the youngster he's screwing, who'd rather be (and should be) eating a hot fudge sundae."

this scene elicited, according to Ball, “a lot of shifting in the seats.” Mendes thinks that at this point in the film viewers “have to be fighting with themselves: do I like Lester enough?” (Ball and Mendes 2000). That is certainly not the question asked by those who (like Lemaster) see Lester as a pedophile and Angela as his victim. For Lemaster, Lester’s failure to consummate his relationship with Angela does not alter in any way his pedophilia.<sup>24</sup> Bordo could not disagree more, for she condemns Humbert *because* of his physical acts with Lolita:

[His] moral failing (a failing that many of us share, although perhaps to a lesser degree of self-abandon) consists in his trying to realize the fantasies of imagination, memory, and desire—in themselves beautiful and soul feeding—in the body of an actual human being.... For although finding a child achingly beautiful, being sexually shaken by that beauty, even enshrining it in words and images, is not monstrous, forgetting that she *is* a child—not a sexual equal, whatever her precocity—is. (2003, 127)<sup>25</sup>

Angela’s vulnerable confession of her virginity liberates Lester from slavery to his fantasies, enabling him to look closely and see her more realistically. Viewers can similarly see Angela anew and reinterpret much of her previous behavior in light of this revelation of her sexual inexperience and insecurity.<sup>26</sup> Matching the vulnerability of her nudity, Angela’s revelation is a striking shift from her previous habit of presenting an image of a sexually experienced seductress.<sup>27</sup> Angela’s confession marks a turning point as

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24. Lemaster (2006) maintains: “While *American Beauty*’s principal male character, Lester, does not have intercourse with the child ... he is more idealized and less criticized than ... Humbert Humbert. Lester’s pedophilic desires are portrayed as the harmless, quirky result of a mid-life crisis, not a lascivious, carefully fabricated plot by a repeat offender, thus diffusing the stereotypical pedophile image and prompting viewer support. Although Humbert Humbert is an active pedophile and Lester only a vicarious visionary, Lester’s approving depiction is more detrimental.”

25. Film critic Roger Ebert (1999) is also forgiving—and accepting—of Lester.

26. Mendes notes, for example, that Angela asks Jane about her sexual relationship with Ricky because she is genuinely curious (Ball and Mendes 2000).

27. Bordo (2003, 147) notes that Angela’s revelation of her virginity reconfigures everything. Nudity as vulnerability is a motif throughout the film. Mendes’s phrase (“an expression of nudity as extreme vulnerability”) applies to Angela in this scene, Jane’s undressing for Ricky at her window, and Jane and Ricky in the bedroom (Ball and Mendes 2000).

she abandons her façade for the sake of a vulnerable truth. In contrast to Carolyn and the Colonel, she risks looking closer at her own mirage and unveiling a more authentic self.

Giving Angela her own voice at the film's end—and allowing this voice to reflect her authentic self—signals growth on her part.<sup>28</sup> For most of the film, Angela conforms to a certain patriarchal script by presenting herself to others as sexually experienced, believing this is *the* key to pleasing—and receiving acceptance from—men. Playing the seductive siren is her means of escaping her worst fate imaginable, that of being ordinary. Allowing Angela to speak in her own voice and on her own terms removes the film from the realm of male fantasy, in which Angela would have remained the sultry seductress.<sup>29</sup>

Another way in which the film invites viewers to (re)consider women is through the filming by Ricky Fitts (Wes Bentley). Ricky embodies the film's charge to look closer, and he does so literally through a video camera, which he carries like an appendage. Ricky films Jane (Thora Birch) seven times, and in four of these scenes he opts to focus (literally) on her rather than Angela. His preference for Jane over Angela becomes increasingly explicit. In consistently preferring Jane to Angela, Ricky rejects a dominant American aesthetic script.<sup>30</sup> As the blond and blue-eyed cheerleader, Angela typifies an American beauty ideal.<sup>31</sup> She is an ultimate object of desire and appears as such in Lester's four fantasies. The beauty ideal to which Angela aspires is reflected in the magazine cut outs of female celebrities that adorn every inch of her bedroom walls.

Jane, by contrast, is a prototypical ordinary girl who does not conform to the American cultural script for feminine adolescent beauty. Her displeasure with her appearance is the first thing we learn about her, as she peruses a website for breast augmentation and—immediately afterward—disapprovingly examines her body in a full-length mirror. Lester introduces Jane by noting that she is “a pretty typical teenager: angry, insecure,

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28. Switching at this point of the film to Angela's own visual point of view would have augmented her speaking in her own voice. Befitting Lester's role as the narrator, however, the camera primarily remains with his perspective.

29. I therefore disagree with Karlyn (2004, 86), who claims that “the film silences Angela as it does Jane in order to make Lester a hero.”

30. Karlyn (2004, 81) argues that Ricky's actions reveal that the film “romanticizes the stalking of women,” and she accuses Ricky of seducing Jane.

31. She is, as Ball (1999, 15) notes, “the archetypal American dream girl.”



Figure 3. Ricky zooms past a dancing Angela, preferring Jane's reflection instead.

confused." Her insecurity is viciously reinforced by her mother Carolyn's exacting standards. Given Jane's insecurity, it is significant that three of the four times Ricky prefers Jane over Angela immediately follows a scene where Angela flaunts her sexual prowess to Jane. Ricky's counter-cultural preference for Jane rejects prevailing American aesthetic norms. By looking closer, he gives Jane attention that she fails to get from her culture and even from her own father.

Ricky's filming of Jane thus provides a counter example to the scopophilic texture of Lester's fantasies. Whereas the latter reduce Angela to an object of sexual pleasure, Ricky's videotaping of Jane more faithfully captures and reveals who Jane is. Jane does not, in other words, become a false image in Ricky's filming. His camera depicts the genuine Jane. Jane can be sexual while Ricky films her, but this is a sexuality of her own choosing, and one in which she retains agency. If there is a gulf between the real Angela and the one who stars in Lester's fantasies, the line between the real Jane and the Jane in Ricky's camera is thin indeed. In this way, *American Beauty* offers a glimpse into the potential ability of film to counteract prevailing and pervasive tendencies in media to reduce women to objects of sexual pleasure. Film has the capacity, *American Beauty* suggests (and illustrates), to redefine women *as women*, who can exist entirely apart from the male gaze.

Ricky's filming of Jane reveals and facilitates a growing relational intimacy and vulnerability between these two. In one scene, Jane removes her top while Ricky films her. Ball refers to Jane here as "achingly vulnerable," and Ball (1999, 64) describes her undressing as an act of "vulnerability" in which "she's giving herself to him." Clarifying the kind of connection Ricky has with Jane here, Mendes notes, "When we cut to the image he's

not shooting her breasts, he's shooting her face" (Ball and Mendes 2000).<sup>32</sup> His defense of Ricky is perhaps due to his conviction that Ricky "is the film's conscience, its soul. At first, you think he is a voyeur, but you realise that Ricky is using his camera to reach out and touch people, not just to record ... it's his way of reaching out" (Fanshawe, 2000).

Ricky's filming offers a stark contrast to Lester's fantasies. Jane's consensual act of removing her clothing is a stark contrast to the disrobing of Angela that Lester controls and orchestrates in his fantasies. Unlike Lester, Ricky does not engage in any fantasies. He prefers the real Jane not only to Angela, but also to any illusionary fantasy of Jane. Whereas Lester's fantasies move him away from the genuine Angela, Ricky's filming of Jane moves him closer to her. Symbolizing (and underscoring) the developing relational intimacy between Ricky and Jane is the reduction in physical space between them when we view her through Ricky's camera. Each cut from the "normal" film view of Ricky and Jane to the view through his camera makes it appear as though they are physically closer to each other.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

In the same way that the film gives voice to homophobia (through Colonel Fitts's outbursts) yet also critiques homophobia (in its normalization of Jim and Jim's relationship), the film also gives voice to—and critiques—misogyny.<sup>34</sup> In *American Beauty*, looking closer encourages awareness of how objectification dehumanizes women by stripping them—sometimes literally—of their unique character and personality, and projecting a foreign persona upon them.

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32. Mendes elaborates elsewhere, noting that the scene was important psychologically. It "seemed to be a microcosm of their relationship; the longing in their relationship was articulated so clearly by this sequence." Her nudity is—again—a sign that "she is giving herself to Ricky." Her face was shot from "nobody's" POV so that we can "get inside her head, so we realize this is a choice she is making" (Ball and Mendes 2000).

33. As Mendes remarks, Ricky is "bringing her closer to him—she's actually brought closer to him—he's using the camera to reach out and touch her; it's not a voyeur kind of thing" (Ball and Mendes 2000).

34. The Colonel is disgusted when he realizes his neighbors (Jim and Jim) are gay: "How come these faggots have to rub it in your face?! How can they be so shameless?" When he sees Lester jogging with Jim and Jim, he remarks, "Now what is this? The fucking gay pride parade?"

Lester's fantasies play a paradoxical role; they are deceptive and illusionary but also catalytic for his spiritual development.<sup>35</sup> For Lester to continue progressing spiritually and existentially he must reject the very element that sparked and facilitated his initial growth. At the film's outset, Lester dwells in a zombiesque, sedated stupor. He epitomizes the living dead. Sleeping in the backseat of the van while Carolyn drives exemplifies his passivity and internal deadness. Angela is the first spark that awakens—and arouses—Lester from his twenty-year coma. While acknowledging that Angela is the catalyst for Lester regaining his passion for living, Ball clarifies: "But he thinks she's the goal and she's really just the knock on the door. At the risk of sounding incredibly lofty and pretentious, he needs to get back in touch with his spiritual connection to living."<sup>36</sup>

Given Lester's pursuit of honesty in his personal development, it is fitting that he would eventually see Angela for who she is. His spiritual growth coincides with a realization of the illusionary nature of his fantasy and a relinquishing of it. In doing so, he succeeds—thanks to Angela's own vulnerability and embrace of honesty—in avoiding the threat W. H. Auden (1947, 105) identifies: "We would rather be ruined than changed. We would rather die in our dread than climb the cross of the moment and let our illusions die."

*American Beauty's* simultaneous perpetuation and resistance of the male gaze mirrors a dual tension in many biblical texts regarding the portrayal of women. Scholarly debates about whether certain biblical texts either empower or subjugate women might suffer from a dualism that fails to recognize that biblical texts can do both concurrently. *American Beauty* invites us to read stories such as Bathsheba's encounter with David (2 Sam 11:1–5) or Jesus's encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24–29) as texts that both conform to and resist prevailing patriarchal norms. The film thus offers a potentially helpful lens for understanding certain biblical texts in a more nuanced manner that recognizes their ability to degrade and uplift women.

*American Beauty* also illustrates the (illusionary) power that the male gaze can exert in the act of reading and interpreting biblical texts. The tendency of male readers to sexualize women is evident in the persistent (and erroneous) assumptions that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute,

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35. McKittrick (2001) argues that Lester's fantasies do not aid his growth.

36. Amazon.com interview with Alan Ball (n.d.).

despite the fact that this is never once mentioned as such in any of the twenty-seven New Testament texts. Gail O'Day (1995) has demonstrated that male interpreters of John 4 tend to assume that the Samaritan woman whom Jesus meets at a well is sexually promiscuous or immoral simply because of her multiple marriages. O'Day points out, however, that this woman may likely be the victim of a series of (possibly abusive) men who have divorced her. Bathsheba is silenced in the description of her sexual encounter with David (2 Sam 11:2–4), and nothing is mentioned about her own thoughts or feelings. When male interpreters describe her liaison with David as consensual, they fill in this textual silence by projecting their own sexual gaze upon her. Casting Bathsheba as the seductive initiator in the sexual encounter with David (because she bathes on the roof) is similar to the kind of illusionary fabrication that Lester engages in with Angela. In each case, the woman's reality is erased by the man's constructed fantasy of her. Such erasure often happens twice: both within the text and by readers of the text. *American Beauty* cautions biblical interpreters to recognize and resist the facile assumptions about women characters that result when the male gaze distorts them into caricatures of illusionary fantasies.

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OBJECTS AND THE “EXTENDED SELF”:  
THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN *MOONRISE*  
*KINGDOM* AND THE TABERNACLE NARRATIVES

*Abigail Pelham*

Writer and director Wes Anderson’s 2012 film *Moonrise Kingdom* tells the story of two twelve-year-olds, Suzy Bishop and Sam Shakusky, who fall in love at first sight, become pen pals, plan a secret ten-day camping escape from their homes, and set out on this trip. Suzy lives with her family on New Penzance Island. Sam is in foster care and spends his summers on New Penzance as part of a Khaki Scout troupe. At first glance, this story seems to have nothing in common with narratives that recount the instructions given by YHWH to Moses for the building of a portable tent shrine (Exod 25–31) and its subsequent construction (Exod 35–40). Yet, despite the apparent dissimilarities between Anderson’s film and the biblical text, something else resonates between them that urges the viewer/reader to take a closer look. As we watch and read, we find our vision crammed with objects that are portrayed as somehow essential to the characters to whom they belong.

When Suzy goes camping with Sam, she brings what seems like far too many things: her binoculars, her cat, a case of kitten food, her left-handed scissors, a battery-operated record player, and a suitcase full of fantasy books. The images of Suzy so burdened down with objects as she journeys through the wooded wilderness on her way to Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet, the place Sam has chosen for their secret sojourn, are not unlike the mental images one might construct of the Israelites carrying the dismantled tabernacle and its furnishings through the wilderness on their way to the promised land of Canaan.<sup>1</sup> In both cases, the objects carried are too extensive

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1. The precise instructions for the transport of the tabernacle are given in Num 4,

to be portable, one might think, and yet, as will be discussed below, in the film and in the biblical narratives, the fact that these objects are, nevertheless, transported—that they go where their owners go—is essential to their meaning and significance.

There is also the matter of the similarity between the suitcase of fantasy books carried by Suzy and the first item YHWH describes in his tabernacle instructions: a box with attached rings and matching poles for carrying the box, which “are to remain in the rings” (Exod 25:10–15), making the box permanently portable, like a kind of suitcase, in fact. This portable box will contain “the covenant that I shall give you,” YHWH says (Exod 25:16). The surface similarity between these two portable boxes, each containing written documents, creates a moment of intense resonance, which will be explored later in this essay.

It is in the importance they accord to objects that *Moonrise Kingdom* and the tabernacle narratives can be seen as similar. In *Moonrise Kingdom*, as in all his films, Anderson’s mise-en-scène—that is, his way of “staging the [filmic] event for the camera” (Bordwell and Thompson 2010, 118, emphasis original)—is marked by a focus on objects, with his shots “dominated by carefully curated clutter” (Kredell 2012, 91). The centrality of objects to Anderson’s mise-en-scène serves to indicate an interrelation between the particular objects appertaining to each character and the character’s identity, such that object-assignment can be seen as crucial to Anderson’s strategy of character creation. In *Moonrise Kingdom*, this strategy is particularly evident with regard to Suzy. Here, research from the field of consumer behavior, which indicates a correlation between possessions and identity,<sup>2</sup> provides a useful way of reflecting on Anderson’s creation of character. Examining the tabernacle narratives in the light of this aspect of *Moonrise Kingdom*, it becomes possible to see the Priestly writers (P)<sup>3</sup> as engaged in

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but YHWH’s instructions to Moses for the building of the tabernacle in Exod 35–40 include the fact of its portability.

2. As consumer behavior researcher Russell Belk (2000, 85) writes, “Our accumulation of possessions ... tells us who we are, where we have come from, and perhaps where we are going.” Making the connection between possession of objects and construction of identity even more explicit, anthropologist of material culture Daniel Miller (2010, 59–60) writes, “Objects make us ... as part of the very same process by which we make them.... Ultimately there is no separation of subjects and objects.”

3. In the classic documentary hypothesis, P—an individual or group of persons with priestly concerns—was posited as one of the four source-writers of the material now collected in the Pentateuch, with material having to do with priestly functions

a similar kind of character creation, through their presentation of the tabernacle and its furnishings as integral to YHWH’s self.

### Suzy’s Possessions in *Moonrise Kingdom*

Anderson, in all his films, creates characters through the deliberate deployment of specific objects, each of which serves as a kind of totem for the character to which it belongs. Although all filmic worlds and characters are made up of an accumulation of objects to some extent, Anderson makes his creative reliance on objects explicit, with the effect that viewers know they are watching such an attempt. That Anderson’s overt use of objects in character and world creation is unique is indicated by Stefano Baschiera’s (2012, 118) observation that “his attitude to objects contributes to Anderson’s consecration as an auteur,” an insight corroborated, with tongue-in-cheek, by a headline from the satirical news-outlet The Onion: “Wes Anderson Reteams with Favorite Objects for ‘Grand Budapest Hotel’” (2014). The joke, of course, is that we expect to hear of reteamings between directors and actors, rather than directors and objects, and while Anderson does often reteam with a set group of actors, The Onion’s headline is an accurate reflection of Anderson’s unusual use of objects. Indeed, as Baschiera (2012, 123) points out, in Anderson’s films “there is no opposition between the subject and the object, the character and the thing, the animate and the inanimate,” an effect further indicated by Donna Perbely’s (2012, 50) observation that in Anderson’s films “actors [often] become objects in the *mise-en scène*.”<sup>4</sup>

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and settings assigned to this writer, including these tabernacle texts. Discussion of the ins-and-outs of source criticism is not pertinent here. In this essay, I am simply using P as shorthand for “the writer of the biblical texts under discussion,” and presuming that this writer wrote with intentionality, even if the P source as a whole is, in reality, a collection of documents written by different authors.

4. According to Thomas Elsaesser and Warren Buckland, *mise-en-scène* critics often use what Bordwell has called a “bull’s eye schema.” They write, “Bordwell calls this a bull’s eye schema because for *mise-en-scène* critics, characters are central to narrative films (the centre or bull’s eye of a ‘target’), followed by the setting (the second ring of a target) and then film discourse (the outer ring of a target). There is a hierarchy between the all-important centre (the characters) and the less important periphery (film discourse)” (2002, 87). The importance Anderson accords to objects, however, would seem to subvert this schema, for what constitutes the character is not

In *Moonrise Kingdom*, the importance of objects to our understanding of characters is highlighted in the opening credit sequence, which introduces us to Suzy by first introducing her possessions. The sequence begins with a close-up of a cross-stitch of the Bishop family house hanging on a wall. On one side of the cross-stitch hangs a pair of scissors, which we later learn belong to Suzy; on the other side hangs a plaid satchel, also belonging to Suzy. The camera pans past a bookshelf, stocked with books, with a battery-operated record player perched in front of them. When we get our first glimpse of Suzy herself, she is at the back of the shot, descending a flight of stairs. In the center front of the shot are her binoculars, sitting on a table.



Figure 1. Suzy's characteristic binoculars are featured front and center as she makes her first appearance in the film, entering from the back of the shot.

Suzy reaches the bottom of the stairs and walks to the front of the shot, toward her binoculars. The camera remains at a level that keeps the binoculars front and center, even though this means Suzy's face is not visible in the shot, which serves to imbue them with the force of character (see fig. 1). Indeed, although on several occasions we are shown a screen bounded by the rounded edges of the binocular eyepieces, as if we, like Suzy, are viewing the events of the film through them, in this introductory shot it is as if the binoculars are looking at Suzy: the object shows us the character. Suzy picks up the binoculars and puts the strap around her neck, then crosses to a window seat, sits down, picks up a book, and opens it. It is only now that the camera shows us a close-up of her face, in profile,

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limited to the person on the screen, but includes the objects that appear with—and sometimes instead of—that person.

which is simultaneously a close-up of the cover of the book she is reading: *Shelly and the Secret Universe*.

Later, when Suzy leaves home with Sam, we see her burdened down with these objects, which are, practically speaking, unnecessary to the camping trip at hand. Anderson focuses on the difficulty of transporting these objects through the woods, showing them not only carried by Suzy but hoisted across rivers and up and down rocky cliffs on ropes rigged up by Sam. When they stop for dinner, Sam asks her, “What else did you bring?” and suggests, “Maybe we can make an inventory.” Suzy talks Sam through the objects she has brought, and as she talks the camera shows each item in close-up, sometimes with Suzy’s hands in the shot, sometimes with her face and more of her body included. Through being introduced to her objects, Sam gets to know Suzy; he knows who she is because of what she has brought with her. The next day, Suzy and Sam arrive at Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet, their destination. In our first view of this place—later to be renamed “Moonrise Kingdom”—their objects fill the foreground, and the beach and the water of a cove fill the background, as if the objects are looking out at the view from the beach; the things belonging to Sam and Suzy stand in for the characters themselves and indicate their presence (see fig. 2).



Figure 2. The objects Sam and Suzy have brought with them to Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet are shown as stand-ins for the characters themselves, as if looking out at the water from the beach.

When Sam asks Suzy why she always wears binoculars, she tells him that she likes to pretend that seeing things up close is her magic power. Later, when the fugitive Sam and Suzy are making their escape from Camp Lebanon, Sam runs back into the camp to find Suzy’s left-behind binocu-

lars, even though this threatens—and ends up preventing—their escape.<sup>5</sup> When a fellow scout warns Sam not to go back, Sam replies that he has to, because the binoculars are Suzy's magic power. Suzy believes the binoculars to be integral to her existence, and we believe it, too, because this is not only how the film has *presented* her, but how she has been *created*. The magic power granted Suzy by the binoculars is not seeing things closer as she believes, but the power of *existence* itself. This is why Suzy must carry such a lot of objects, which seem so unnecessary to a ten-day camping trip, why they must be transported even though they are not really portable, and why they must be recovered even if recovering them leads to Suzy's capture; if the objects are not there, neither is Suzy, for she is defined by her possession of these objects.

### Possessions and the Self

Research from the field of consumer behavior, which indicates a correlation between possessions and identity, provides a useful way of reflecting on Anderson's use of objects in his creation of characters. Drawing on an observation made by William James that "a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his ... his clothes and his house ... his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account," in the 1980s Russell W. Belk (1988, 139, 160) coined the term *extended self* to refer to the self created at the intersection of an individual and the objects he or she possesses: "Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities.... We learn, define, and remind ourselves of who we are by our possessions."

Although Belk's original concept of the extended self presupposed a core self that could reach out to annex objects that the self perceived as already related to this core, more recent research has suggested that, instead of the core self preceding the extended self, it is the extended self that comes first; particularly in postmodern contexts, objects are understood to create the self that appropriates those objects. Aaron C. Ahuvia (2005, 172) points out that "[The] general orientation, in which ... consumption is a process of identity construction, gives rise to ... [the

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5. The binoculars can be seen to function as a prop, in the traditional sense of the term: "When an object in the setting has a function within the ongoing action, we can call it a prop" (Bordwell and Thompson 2010, 123). At the same time, although the binoculars function to move along the action of the film, the primary purpose of their presence is to help define Suzy's identity.



discourse of postmodernist] research [which] explores the ways people use consumption to cobble together a coherent identity." Indeed, even prior to Belk, sociologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton (1981, 16) had argued that "The things that surround us are inseparable from who we are," not because a core self has appropriated these objects, but because possessing an object creates a distinct identity for the self-in-possession. "There are no 'people' in the abstract," Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton claim, "people are what they attend to, what they cherish and use."

As discussed above in relation to Suzy, Anderson's character creation is marked by his attention to the objects possessed by that character and by their apparent inalienability. In Anderson's films, there are "no 'people' in the abstract," but only people-in-possession-of-particular-objects. Yet, at the same time, Anderson's approach to characters-with-objects would seem to straddle a line between being postmodern, as understood by Ahuvia, quoted above, and more traditional, as in Belk's model of the core and extended selves.<sup>6</sup>

In the findings of contemporary consumer behavior research, objects precede any core self and present themselves as potential selves, from which an individual may choose to construct identity. As Kenneth J. Gergen (1991, 139) writes, "In the postmodern world there is no individual essence to which one remains true or committed. One's identity is continuously emergent, reformed, and redirected." While it is true that, in Anderson's filmic worlds, object-possession can be seen as essential to identity, it is not simultaneously true that characters' identity is "continuously emergent, reformed, and redirected" with regard to their possessed objects. Rather, a character's particular objects are not easily discarded nor are new objects easily appropriated; characters and objects are, instead, nearly fused: Suzy cannot leave her binoculars, for without them she would not be Suzy. In the same way, the appropriation of a new object or the discarding of an old one is a significant moment in Anderson's films. It

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6. There has been debate as to whether Anderson's films qualify as postmodern, or whether they evidence a "new sincerity" that rejects postmodernism's prevailing ironic mode of expression. As Warren Buckland (2012, 4) writes, "Wes Anderson ... does not fit neatly into the postmodern irony of the smart film. His films incorporate (and thereby transform) the postmodern through a new sincerity that articulates the structure of feeling of the present moment." This tension is borne out in Anderson's use of objects.

indicates a change in identity, but not a change easily made. For example, when Sam changes from the Khaki Scout uniform he has worn throughout the film to a junior-policeman's uniform after policeman Captain Sharp adopted him, it is evident that his identity has undergone a transformation, but change in identity is *signalled* by the costume change and not *caused* by it.

Yet, although Anderson's characters' relation to their objects would seem to be more traditional, even if in a heightened sense, Anderson's method of character creation seems to participate in the postmodern idea that possessed objects create identity.<sup>7</sup> That it can be said that certain possessions define a character<sup>8</sup> is testament to the way in which Anderson uses objects to delineate characters, in both the sense of "describing" and "drawing a border or boundary around." The character is an agglomeration of the objects he or she possesses, and he or she comes into being once these objects have been collected. Describing the process of his creation of Suzy, Anderson says, "I thought this girl, maybe, is a big reader," a characterization idea, but one that is fairly vague. It is only with the decision to "give her a suitcase full of ... books" (Seitz 2013, 280) that her character starts to become more focused; possession of this object not only brings Suzy into more concrete being, but, in fact, brings the film itself into being: "somewhere along the way I started thinking, maybe the movie should be as if it were one of her books ... that she could open that suitcase and take out *Moonrise Kingdom*" (281).

This object, once Anderson has created it, in turn works to create the character of Suzy and the film itself. Suzy's other defining object—her binoculars—was applied to the space that became Suzy in the same way. These came to Suzy from a character in Satyajit Ray's film *Charulata* (1964), in which "the main character ... is always looking out the windows with her binoculars" (Seitz 2013, 281). Anderson, having seen another character with binoculars, took those binoculars and used them to create Suzy. The object preexisted the character, and it was only when Anderson had appropriated that object to give to Suzy that Suzy began to exist. Anderson's

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7. Indeed, Anderson's turn at directing commercials demonstrates this postmodernist element more unambiguously than his films. In the commercials, the viewer is invited to become the character whose identity will be formed through possession of the advertised object (Gooch 2014, 181–98).

8. Matt Zoller Seitz (2013, 279) writes that Suzy's pair of "binoculars ... [is] the possession, apart from her book collection, that most defines her."

characters have no core self aside from the objects they possess; their identity is constructed through consumption, even if it is Anderson and not they themselves—and who would “they” be, anyway, apart from Anderson?—who is doing the consuming. Once so constructed, these characters must retain their identifying objects, for losing one of these objects would result in a loss of self, as almost happens to Suzy when she forgets her binoculars at Camp Lebanon, or, to state it more positively, a transformation of self, as happens to Sam when he changes costume.

### The Tabernacle as YHWH’s Extended Self

In Exod 19, the Israelites, having journeyed out of Egypt, arrive at Mount Sinai, in front of which they set up camp and from which YHWH calls to Moses to ascend (19:1–3). In the chapters that follow, Moses ascends and descends the mountain several times, each time bringing laws to the people as YHWH instructs him. In 24:16, “The glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it,” and Moses ascends the mountain and enters the cloud, where he remains for forty days and nights (24:18). During these forty days, YHWH gives Moses instructions for the building of a tabernacle—a portable tent shrine—in which YHWH proposes to dwell and the various objects that will furnish it. These instructions are recounted in Exod 25–31, with YHWH speaking throughout, culminating with YHWH’s presentation of “the two tablets of the covenant ... written with the finger of God” to Moses (31:18). A related narrative, which details the construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings in accordance with YHWH’s instructions, appears in Exod 35–40.

Like Anderson, as he carefully collects the objects from which he will create his characters, YHWH is precise in his description of the objects he requires. What the structure looks like and what it is made of are matters of deep concern to YHWH, who begins by laying out the color palette and the materials which must be employed (Exod 25:3–7) and by commanding Moses, “In accordance with all that I show you ... so you shall make it” (Exod 25:9). YHWH continues his description, down to the detail of who is to be the master craftsman and who his assistant. The purpose of all this planning is, YHWH says, “so that I may dwell among [the Israelites]” (Exod 25:8). Yet, as Mark K. George (2009, 4) points out, YHWH’s expression of this desire is puzzling, for “the deity is present at the top of Mount Sinai.... The people already are in the presence of the deity.” The tabernacle, then, must serve a purpose different from or additional to

this stated desire. Moreover, YHWH's particularity about the tabernacle's design and materials also demonstrates that his agenda is more complex. This peculiarity can be explained by focusing on the relation between the tabernacle as possessed object and YHWH's identity.

Benjamin D. Sommer (2009) argues that the writers of the P texts understood God to have a single body—the *kabod*—which could occupy only one place at a time. Furthermore, Sommer insists, “God’s body reflects God’s self” (76). When in Exod 40:34 the *kabod* fills the tabernacle, this means that YHWH’s body has literally entered it, and the dwelling of YHWH’s body in the tabernacle is indicative of YHWH’s identity. The self which dwells in the tabernacle cannot be viewed as identical to the self which dwelt on the mountain, if there is any truth to the idea that “we are the sum of our possessions” (Belk 1988, 139), for the sum of YHWH’s possessions has dramatically changed. That the tabernacle is, in some way, part of YHWH’s self, is further suggested by Sommer’s (2009, 21, 75) likening of the book of Exodus to a Mesopotamian *mis pi*, “a ceremonial process that allowed for divine immanence,” and of the tabernacle to a Mesopotamian *salmu*, a statue into which “the divine presence entered ... [making] the *salmu* ... [an incarnation of] the god.” Sommer does not go so far as to say outright that the tabernacle incarnates YHWH, but he outlines other similarities between the *salmu* and the tabernacle, such as correlation between an earthly structure and a “heavenly prototype,” and the deity’s ability to both reside in the structure and to abandon the residence at some later date (75).

Yet, even though the deity may abandon the *salmu*, as long as the deity remains in the *salmu*, the object is an incarnation of the deity’s self. The incarnational quality of the tabernacle is highlighted by Gary A. Anderson’s (2009, 167) assessment that the biblical “materials give witness to a deeply held view in ancient Israel that God really dwelt in the Tabernacle and that all the pieces of that structure shared ... in his tangible and visible presence.” This belief is evidenced, Anderson writes, by “the priestly fascination with the architectural details of the Tabernacle ... [which] leads the biblical author to repeat the lists of its appurtenances whenever the narrative allows” (192–93), above and beyond the demands of the story itself.

Just as the carefully curated objects in Anderson’s films work to describe the characters—the presentation of Suzy’s objects shows us Suzy—so, when YHWH gives the tabernacle instructions, they not only describe a building, they describe the divine self. It is for this reason

that the instructions are so particular: no other structure represents—indeed *is*—this YHWH. Without the construction of the tabernacle to these exact specifications, YHWH cannot dwell among the people, for the YHWH-who-dwells-among-the-people does not exist. Just as Anderson collects and arranges particular objects and so creates Suzy, in the tabernacle instructions, YHWH commands the creation and the precise arrangement of the objects which comprise the tabernacle, and, in so doing, creates YHWH-who-dwells-among-the-people, a YHWH distinct from the YHWH who dwelt on Sinai and could not be looked upon or approached.

### The Holiness of Objects as Related to YHWH’s Extended Self

Although YHWH provides in-depth instructions for the tabernacle, there is an important difference between Exod 25–31, in which YHWH gives the instructions, and Exod 35–40, in which the tabernacle is constructed: the construction order does not mirror the instruction order. As Carol Meyers (2008, 14) explains, “The organizing principle [in YHWH’s instructions] is the degree of holiness.... The most holy features are described first.... In the descriptive texts ... the structure comes first, followed by the furnishings and then the surrounding court.” George (2009, 111) points out that “proximity to the deity” is the explanation for what makes some objects holier than others. That is to say, the objects YHWH describes first—the ark of the covenant, the cover, the cherubim (Exod 25:10–22)—are holiest because they are the objects that will be in closest proximity to YHWH’s body once YHWH has entered the tabernacle.

Yet, although a degree of holiness seems to make sense of the order in which YHWH gives the instructions, there remains something curious about it. If proximity to the deity marks the degree of an object’s holiness, it must be wondered when this proximity-created-holiness comes into being. When YHWH gives the instructions for the tabernacle, it has not yet been built, and so YHWH does not yet inhabit the most holy place, in proximity to the ark, cover, and cherubim. If the holiness of this space and these objects comes from their proximity to the deity, it would seem that they are not yet proximate. YHWH still resides on Sinai. As this is the case, should YHWH not begin the instructions with what must be built first, which would seem more logical? J. W. Wevers (1993, 123) writes of the instruction order, “There is no obvious reason for the order; they seem to be given in higgelty-piggelty fashion,” and insists, “The ...

[construction] order is much more rational.” Since the criterion of holiness would not seem to come into play until the tabernacle has been built and YHWH has taken up residence there, the order in which the instructions are given does seem to lack rationale.

A way to make sense of YHWH’s instruction order would be to understand that, even though it has not yet been built, the tabernacle, in some way, already exists for YHWH. YHWH already views certain objects as proximate to the divine self, but, because these objects do not already actually exist as distinct from YHWH, it must be understood that they are not just proximate to YHWH, but that they *are* aspects of YHWH’s identity. Even before the tabernacle is built—and its proximity to YHWH actualized—YHWH expresses a belief that some of its objects are more proximate to the self than others, though all are more proximate than nontabernacle objects. To use consumer researcher Ahuvia’s (2005, 180) language about objects and identity, the tabernacle and its furnishings are “more salient aspects of ... [YHWH’s] identity,” when compared with nontabernacle objects, and part of the tabernacle and its furnishings are the most “salient aspects of ... [YHWH’s] identity.” The most holy place is already most holy, even before it is built and inhabited by YHWH, because YHWH already conceives of it and its furnishings as representing the most “salient aspects of ... [his] identity.”

### The Priestly Writers as Creators of YHWH’s Extended Self

Both YHWH, in speaking the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle, and Anderson, as he carefully collects, arranges, and allocates objects to construct the *mise-en-scène* of each of his films, through these actions seem cognizant of the defining role played by objects in the revelation of identity. Because of the relation between objects and identity, both insist that only particular objects—and not others—will do. For YHWH, this is evidenced by the rejection of Mount Sinai as a suitable dwelling when entering into covenant with the people of Israel and also by the rejection of the golden calf, constructed by Aaron concurrent with YHWH’s giving of the tabernacle instructions to Moses, as a suitable object to represent the divine self (Exod 32:1–10).<sup>9</sup> For Anderson, this is evidenced by the curated

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9. That the calf is intended to represent YHWH is clear from Aaron’s instructions to the people to bring sacrifices to the calf as part of “a festival to the LORD [YHWH]” (Exod 32:4–5; NRSV).

quality of his *mise-en-scène*, a curation which notably excludes references to contemporary pop culture and technologies, even in films set in the present-day (see Scott 2014, 77–88).

Despite these similarities, one must wonder whether YHWH’s role in Exod 25–31 corresponds to Anderson’s in relation to his films or whether YHWH’s role actually corresponds to that of one of Anderson’s characters, Suzy, for example. In *Moonrise Kingdom*, although Suzy exists as a viable character, we do not forget—nor are we intended to—that these objects have been given her by Anderson, who is carefully controlling the *mise-en-scène*, and that she, like them, is a created artifact, an object in Anderson’s film world. YHWH, in the tabernacle narratives, is not presented as the same sort of created artifact, but as the creator: YHWH is Anderson, not Suzy. If the tabernacle is part of YHWH’s self, it is a part that originates with YHWH’s self-concept.

Yet, it is common for scholars to read YHWH out of the power position in Exod 25–31 and to give the narrative-creating power to P. Debate over P’s role centers around whether the tabernacle is a complete fiction or is based on an earlier source, a “temple legend” (Haran 1978, 198). Menahem Haran writes that this “legend invests a particular house of God with a halo of extraordinary sanctity ... linking its construction to ... Sinai” (198). The details of what this temple looked like, however, were provided by P. Haran explains that, although the tabernacle narrative “has a ... substratum of ... authentic tradition ... later details are particularly recognizable in the descriptions of great magnificence—the gold, silver, bronze, the dyed wools—and these are, in truth, nothing more than ‘a fiction’” (195).

However, the relevant question in connection with *Moonrise Kingdom* is not whether there is an authentic source for the tabernacle narratives, but whether it is YHWH who provides the description of the divine extended self in Exod 25–31 or whether that description is P’s. The answer would seem to be that if P has provided these particular details about the tabernacle, then P has, in fact, created the description of YHWH’s extended self, precisely because it is the details that matter in the creation of identity through possessed objects. A generic tabernacle does not provide YHWH with the same extended self as the particular tabernacle that appears in Exod 25–31 and 35–40.

Although in the narrative itself, YHWH preexists P, in the matter of the writing-of-the-narrative the Priestly writers precede the description of the tabernacle, which they write down, imagining its details as they deem



necessary. Since P precedes the writing-of-the-tabernacle-narratives, P must also precede YHWH's giving of the instructions for the tabernacle, because this is part of P's narrative. If the writers precede YHWH's tabernacle instructions, and if, here, YHWH is a character whose self is defined by the tabernacle, as is indicated by the way the instructions begin with those objects that are the "most salient aspects of ... [his] identity," then it would seem that the writers preexist YHWH. Like Anderson, who amasses objects around characters in order to make them visible to viewers, so P has amassed these objects around YHWH in order to make YHWH visible. Inasmuch as Anderson creates his characters through the arrangement of objects, so P can be said to have created YHWH—not YHWH as a deity who might exist elsewhere—but this YHWH, the deity who appears in the tabernacle. P arranges particular objects and YHWH fills the space these objects outline, just as Anderson arranges objects and a given character fills that space.

P brings the tabernacle into being, and pulled into being with it is YHWH-who-inhabits-the-tabernacle. If the tabernacle preexists this deity, it seems, moreover, possible to suggest that this deity is divine as a result of inhabiting the divine dwelling, rather than the dwelling drawing its divinity from the deity within. Supporting this possibility is George's argument that, as P tells the story, the tablets contained in the ark of the covenant—that object "most salient to ... [YHWH's] identity"—are engraved with the tabernacle narratives themselves. George's (2009, 157) argument is based on ancient Near Eastern "archaeological evidence [which] indicates that ... inscriptions [detailing the building process] were placed inside stone boxes and the boxes then placed in the ... building," and on what can be deduced from Exodus itself, specifically that the tablets are given to Moses immediately after YHWH has finished speaking the tabernacle instructions, not after the giving of the Decalogue or any other set of laws (167–70).

In the present analysis, it makes sense that the ark should contain the tabernacle narratives, because if the tabernacle creates YHWH—or YHWH-who-dwells-in-the-tabernacle, a particular character defined by the tabernacle's particular objects—then it is fitting that what is to be found in the most holy place, enclosed within the most holy object, are the details about the tabernacle itself. These objects—the tabernacle and its appurtenances—bring YHWH into being, because they represent a collection of the most "salient objects of ... [his] identity," arranged in such a way as to invite him to fill the space at their center.



## Material Implausibility and the Identity of Loss

So far, I have focused on the use of objects to both portray and create the identities of Suzy in *Moonrise Kingdom* and YHWH in the tabernacle narratives, drawing on research from the field of consumer behavior about the relationship between possessions and identity. There is another related point of overlap between Anderson’s use of objects in *Moonrise Kingdom* and P’s use of objects in the tabernacle narratives, and this has to do with the way in which each uses objects to signify what cannot, in fact, be possessed. Baschiera (2012, 119) argues that “objects in [Anderson’s] cinema fill the space left empty by the failings of the family and by the disruption of the most important object in people’s lives: the house.” The profusion of objects possessed by Anderson’s characters is not about possession, but about lack.

Suzy’s suitcase of fantasy books describe both who she is and what she wants to be, but cannot: a “girl hero” who inhabits these “stories with magic powers in them, either in kingdoms on earth or on foreign planets,” which is the way she describes the kind of books she likes. Also, the books are stolen from the library. They do not really belong to Suzy at all. What belongs to Suzy is, rather, the fact of having stolen them, the desire to possess them.<sup>10</sup> In this light, even Suzy’s ever-present binoculars can be seen to represent a failure-in-being. She insists that she cannot travel without the binoculars, but even she knows, at heart, that the magic power they give her is only pretend. In this way, the identity the binoculars create for her is not simply Suzy-with-binoculars, but Suzy-with-binoculars-which-represent-what-she-would-like-to-be-but-is-not. Her identity is an identity of what is wished for but cannot be.

As quoted above, Anderson, in his imagining of Suzy and her suitcase full of books, imagined *Moonrise Kingdom* itself as the kind of book Suzy might carry in her suitcase; the entire film, then, might be read as a fantasy book, one, perhaps, written by Suzy, and in which she stars. She is Shelly and *Moonrise Kingdom* is her Secret Universe. It is in this light that the significance of the surface similarity between Suzy’s portable box of texts—her suitcase of fantasy books—and the portable box of texts in P’s tabernacle narratives—the ark of the covenant—can be understood.

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10. Her record player, too, actually belongs to her younger brother, and it is the fact of her having taken it (and left a note) that first alerts her family to her absence.

Both boxes contain world-making texts—*Moonrise Kingdom* in the case of Suzy's box, and a world in which YHWH dwells on earth, in the midst of the people of Israel in the other—but these worlds are similarly fantasies, as is shown by their inclusion of fantastical objects.

If the film is a fantasy book, it is no surprise that the objects its world contains are both "materially plausible," which is to say "consistent with other real objects" (George 2009, 13), and *materially implausible*. For example, *Moonrise Kingdom* features a tree house, which, perched atop a tall, skinny tree, and apparently capable of housing the entire troupe of Khaki Scouts, is materially implausible. This material implausibility is clearly deliberate and serves to highlight the fictional nature of the film's world, even as the materially plausible objects work to establish it as real enough to engage viewers' interest and involvement.

The tabernacle, too, in the midst of its glut of materially plausible objects also contains the materially implausible. The rich materials can only be a "fiction" (Haran 1978, 193). Moreover, Haran notes that "in spite of P's minute and repetitious descriptions, some architectural details ... are not stated explicitly.... We are faced with a unique combination of long-winded description ... and total omission of various particulars" (149–50). George (2009, 78), furthermore, points out about the burnt offering altar, "A wooden core and bronze plating do not make for a durable altar capable of withstanding ... prolonged heat." Reading the tabernacle narratives alongside *Moonrise Kingdom*, we must wonder whether these material implausibilities, rather than representing authorial failure or oversight, are similarly deliberate.

Tidal Inlet 3.25 is the *Moonrise Kingdom* of the film's title, but it does not receive this name until it has been destroyed in the storm that hits the island in the course of the film. Sam names it in a painting he paints at the film's end, a close-up of which comprises the film's final shot. Because Tidal Inlet 3.25 becomes the *Moonrise Kingdom* only after it has ceased to exist, the fact that it no longer exists is essential to its identity. It seems possible that something similar is going on in the tabernacle narratives. P borrows authentic details from ancient tent shrines and mixes them with details from Solomon's temple and others of his own imagining, not so that the tabernacle will seem realistic, but so that it will seem fantastical, in order to highlight its irrevocable lostness. By presenting these lost worlds—the *Moonrise Kingdom* and the tabernacle—as both materially plausible and implausible, real but not quite real, to begin with—the film and P's narratives portray the loss of these spaces as not only irrevocable

but inevitable. Sommer’s interpretation of the catastrophe that happens at the tabernacle’s dedication in Lev 10:1–3—the incineration of two priests—aligns with this reading of the tabernacle’s material implausibility. Sommer (2009, 120, 122) writes, “Precisely at the moment in which the domestication of the *kabod* climaxes ... it becomes brutally clear that holiness cannot be contained.... The disaster at its dedication suggests that the God who belongs in the tabernacle does not really belong there at all.”

### Conclusion

In *Moonrise Kingdom*, as in his other films, Anderson’s mise-en-scène is “dense with ... objects” (Gooch 2014, 188), which serve, as is consistent with the findings of consumer behavior research, to create identities for the characters who populate the film. Suzy’s objects appear on screen before Suzy does herself, and at times appear on screen as stand-ins for Suzy, a technique that emphasizes the strong link between these objects and Suzy’s identity, creating the impression that Suzy’s identity cannot be separated from the objects that accompany her. In the same way, in the tabernacle narratives P presents YHWH’s character through a description of the physical objects that will permit YHWH to dwell among the Israelites. Just as Suzy requires her binoculars and other objects in order to be present as Suzy, so YHWH requires the tabernacle and its furnishings in order to be present as YHWH-who-dwells-among-the-people.

Yet, as noted above, even as Anderson uses objects to create Suzy, the same objects are used to create her as a character who lacks the real thing toward which those objects gesture. In this way, her objects both create and uncreate her: she exists, but she does not exist, or, she exists only as something wished for by the self that is defined by not-being-the-wished-for-thing. Something similar, it seems, is going on in the tabernacle narratives. In his presentation of the tabernacle as materially plausible, P gives us the tabernacle and YHWH-who-dwells-there, but, in his inclusion of materially implausible objects and in his depiction of the disaster at its dedication, P indicates that its undoing is essential to its identity: the tabernacle we are given is a tabernacle that is essentially lost.

However, we are still given it, just as Anderson’s film gives us Suzy and even the *Moonrise Kingdom*. *Moonrise Kingdom* has a happy ending, despite the loss of the *Moonrise Kingdom* itself. Sam’s painting, with which the film ends, does not represent a yearning for the lost past, but the

making use of what has been lost to move forward and create something new. Like the Moonrise Kingdom, P's tabernacle was impossible from the beginning: its materials unobtainable by the desert wanderers, its altar merely a stage prop—there to set the scene, but not to function as a real altar. God is absent, as God has always been by and large, but absence is part of his identity, and so not having God or the tabernacle must be part of what it means to have them.

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THE ODDS ARE *EVER* IN THE EMPIRE'S FAVOR:  
POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECT POSITIONING IN  
*THE HUNGER GAMES*

Jeremy Punt

Following in the wake of popular teen or young adult series like the *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007) and *The Twilight Saga* (2005–2008), Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games* trilogy has led to much discussion and debate.<sup>1</sup> With the three books originally published in 2008, 2009, and 2010, the movies of the *Hunger Games* trilogy were released a few years later in 2012, 2013, and 2014/2015 respectively, carrying the same titles as the books. Due to space restrictions in a volume like this one, the discussion here focuses on the first movie.<sup>2</sup>

At first glance, *The Hunger Games* is an elaborate romance-action type narrative centering on the sixteen year-old Katniss Everdeen in a post-war, futuristic, and apocalyptic Panem, as a state that is the rebuilt remains after the apocalyptic demise of the United States of America. Having grown up amidst trying circumstances especially after her coal-mining-father's death in an underground explosion and her mother's subsequent psychological withdrawal, Katniss had to fend for herself and her beloved little

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1. Unlike the *Harry Potter* series, which affirms traditional values (justice, peace, common decency, and the like), and the *Twilight* series with its reactionary affirmation of traditional American values, *The Hunger Games* is more cynical and ironic and shows disillusionment with justice and freedom. Henthorne (2012, 2) attributes the difference (in part) to *The Hunger Games* being written after the economic crisis of 2008. In fact, ironic ambivalence is suggested already in the title of the trilogy (*The Hunger Games*) set in a land called *Panem* (bread).

2. The unavoidable intertextuality of book(s) and film means that although my discussion focuses on *The Hunger Games* movie, references to the larger narrative are important in some places. *Mockingjay* has been released in two parts, as two movies.

sister, Prim, from an early age. During her illegal hunting trips to secure food for her sister and mother, she became skilled with bow and arrow and also met Gale Hawthorne with whom she developed a close connection. She volunteers in her sister's place to participate in the Capitol's Hunger Games, an annual, bloodthirsty event aimed essentially at the continued submissiveness of the remaining twelve districts after their (together with an erstwhile thirteenth district's) historical revolt against the Capitol. As coparticipants (tributes) from the same District 12, Katniss forms a strategic pact with Peeta Mellark in a move well suited to a media-frenzied context. In him Katniss finds an unlikely ally whose public declarations more than his private intimations of his love for her help them to cement their joint victory in the Games, not without some last-minute cunning by Katniss. The movie ends with the celebration of their victory.

*The Hunger Games* movie has attracted mixed reactions. On the one hand, it received much criticism for its violence and even cruelty, which sees young people fight to the death amidst the regime's ironic and propagandistic slogan, "may the odds *ever* be in your favour"—a slogan already mocked by Katniss and Gale early in the movie, the morning before the reaping (or, the selection of participants in the Hunger Games). This movie, in fact, may appear to be a strange choice for discussions on film theory and biblical studies, since it contains no overt biblical reference and shows little concern even with developing a sense of moral right and wrong. Indeed, the film has no visible signs of Christian materiality so often present in movies from the United States. The debate and concern in Christian circles about *The Hunger Games* may, however, not be the result only of the strong violence but perhaps also of the plotline's less than conventional treatment of various topics such as morality, gender and agency, and so forth.<sup>3</sup> The movie offers no clear or distinctive lines for its villains and heroes, nor does it offer uncomplicated notions of justice, love, and other central themes, and its intricate characterizations defy their easy appropriation in common conventions.

On the other hand, the positive appeal of *The Hunger Games* to a wide spectrum of audiences is probably primarily related to aspects like its fast-paced action, complex and flamboyant characters, a futuristic yet human setting, as well as an intriguing plot—and, important to our focus, the

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3. Online sources attest to various positive responses to the movie from a pronounced Christian perspective, see Schuster (2013) and Snider (2013)—such responses are the exception, however, as these commentators also suggest.



audiences' ability to relate to the overall setting. *The Hunger Games* has been popular among audiences notwithstanding its unapologetic stance towards violence and its nonmoralist (but neither antimoralist nor moral-less) tenor. The movie portrays an all too familiar hegemonic context, where the struggle for survival of the majority stands in shrill contrast to the excesses of the elite and where scrounging out a daily living is offset only by a media-induced and manipulated reality. In fact, *The Hunger Games* is probably the best recent popular presentation of the relationship between political hegemony and people along the lines identified in post-colonial theory—the experience of concurrent attraction to and revulsion against empire by all those affected by it, in short, the push and pull of empire, forms the basis of my discussion here.

Rather than comparing motifs, themes, or characters of the Bible and of films with each other,<sup>4</sup> my contribution, then, investigates another kind of common ground or type of comparison. The birthplace setting of the New Testament and here especially the Pauline letters, for better or for worse, was the ubiquitous Roman Empire which engulfed all and everyone, with traces in these documents of the imperial context and its impact—the latter in its different forms as determined spatially, temporally, and otherwise. Roman rule existed through a “web of legitimating practices entangling Roman subjects within an imperial ideology” (Perkins 2009, 1–15). Not only the Roman Empire was invested heavily in the ideological construction of a new world, but the Pauline texts, too, were involved in scripting a new creation (see, e.g., Rom 8)—constructing through redefining what constitutes reality. Reversing the hermeneutical flow (e.g., Kreitzer 1999), *The Hunger Games* movie emulates the complex interwoven nature of identities and lives formatted within an imperial context, shot through with hybridity,<sup>5</sup> characterized by mimicry, and set

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4. Notwithstanding the absence of explicit biblical links in *The Hunger Games*, themes such as sacrifice, justice, love, compassion, and so on pervade and actually constitute the plot.

5. A concept popularized by Bhabha (1994b, 117), hybridity refers to “a doubling, dissembling image of being in at least two places at once.” Colonial otherness is situated in a separateness—between the colonialist Self and colonized Other—and not in a particular (essentialist) identity of either colonizer or colonized. Hybridity is even more than “what happens to a person living in the cross section between countries and cultures” (Runesson 2011, 20), as it invokes deep concerns with identity formation and mutuality. See also below.

in ambivalence.<sup>6</sup> Reversing the hermeneutical flow entails that investigating biblical narratives or themes used in films is matched by the heuristic values of films for interpreting biblical texts—both of these flows, from the Bible to films and from films to the Bible, are often present at the same time. In the movie, it is especially the portrayal of Katniss's dissenting deference towards empire that is on par with the mimicking challenge to the Roman Empire implicit in the Pauline letters (and in 1 Thessalonians in particular). Paul, on the one hand, created the impression that he was intent on subtly subverting imperialist propaganda. On the other hand, Paul appears to have internalized and replicated imperial culture, in his employment and deployment of the ambivalence of hegemonic discourse to his own advantage.<sup>7</sup>

Our discussion here is informed by the film theoretical notion of subject positioning, investigating the ideological fissures of *The Hunger Games* in relation to the Pauline letters' embeddedness in an imperialist discursive environment. Such intersection assists in identifying the intricate interwovenness of identity formation, especially with regard to the hybridity and mimicry so characteristic of identity in imperial contexts.

### Film Theory: Subject Positioning and the Ideology of Realism

Amidst an interesting range of theoretical topics coming up for consideration in *The Hunger Games* movie and story itself (see, e.g., Dunn and Michaud 2012; Henthorne 2012; Pharr and Clark 2012), our focus will be on subject positioning. As will be explained below, film theory's subject positioning, at least in its more recent deployment, offers a viable angle with which to explore the push and pull of empire as a central motif in the movie and its exploratory value for biblical texts that originated in a time of imperial hegemony. Unfortunately, enthusiasm for the study and analysis of films is not always matched by eagerness to reflect on and include film theory in such discussions—to the contrary, it has been argued that “film needs theory like it needs a scratch on the negative” (Lapsley and

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6. Bhabha (1994a, 85–92) coined *colonial mimicry* to refer to the imposition of a compelling cultural framework on the colonized to coerce and entice them into the colonizer's culture. The replication however is never perfect, can erase the boundaries of power, and can even lead to mockery and thus become subversive.

7. See also Punt (2008) for a more sustained discussion on Pauline mimicry in 2 Cor 10–13, and Punt (2012) for mimicry in 1 Thessalonians.

Westlake 1988, quoted in Miller 2004, 3). On the other side of the spectrum, David Bordwell and Noël Carroll's *Post-Theory* (1996) is a good example of acknowledging many different film theories even when arguing against the post-1970's trend to search for a unified theory of film.<sup>8</sup> The point is that the absence of theoretical considerations can become detrimental in the long run, also in the case of biblical studies, where a spate of publications on the intersection between the Bible and film has appeared over the last decade or two.<sup>9</sup> In the ever expanding field of film theory and film studies, suffice it to note that our focus will be on subject positioning as a heuristic approach to *The Hunger Games*.<sup>10</sup> The explicit reference to film theory and, especially, to subject positioning requires some further comment.

For starters, film theoretical considerations are not to be taken as self-evident, although the last decade has seen a growing inclination to define the nature of film theory, as Martin Lefebvre (2013, 247, emphasis in the original) puts it, "to inquire into the *being* of theories and, perhaps even more importantly, to question what they *ought* to be or even *whether* they ought to be." Film theory like other media-specific theories can become "totalising" (Carroll 1996, 257) but is at times not easily distinguishable from various cognate practices in other disciplinary fields (Knight 1997, 38), which probably means that film theory is progressing beyond its earlier impasses. Film theory no longer consists of reviewing classical film theorists such as Siegfried Kracauer or André Bazin,<sup>11</sup> but presents itself as "an inventory of historical issues, such as authorship, narrative, realism, and the avant-garde, or an inventory of contemporary issues, such as spectatorship, power, and the representation of gender" (Knight 1997, 38). However, while film theory of late has extended the boundaries and

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8. Bennett disagrees strongly, also with Bordwell and Carroll's "piecemeal theory approach," and sees the Laurel and Hardy cover image as much as the book itself as an attempt "to imply that film theorists are institutionalized morons." In fact, he argues, "These [essays] are collected together to mount a challenge against a Film Studies shot through with psychoanalysis" (Bennett 2000).

9. Earlier publications include books by Jewett (1993; 1999) and Kreitzer (1999) on film and Paul, and also a range of other volumes on film and Bible in general.

10. Excellent introductory and often comprehensive volumes include Miller and Stam (2004); Rushton and Bettinson (2010); Simpson, Utterson, and Shepherdson (2004).

11. For this more traditional approach to film theory, see e.g. Mast, Cohen, and Brady (1992).

direction of its inquiries, amidst the jostling among theorists and anti-theorists, a fundamental question remains: is theory useful for engaging films? In the words of theorist Jo Smith (1998), "I believe the primary function of theory is to develop ways for understanding the world and to invent strategies that can trace the production of knowledge to reveal the terms of that production."<sup>12</sup> So, when not over-claiming the importance and usefulness of theory in film and taking care not to get too embroiled in metatheoretical questions, film theory can in fact contribute much to discussions on film.<sup>13</sup> As for subject positioning, and in fact the contested notions of subject and subjectivity, these are interwoven in the humanist debate as much as in challenges issued by the Marxist, feminist, and various other traditions (see Weedon 2001, 610–17).

Subject positioning developed within film theory in the sixties, when the passion for film and for radical politics found expression also in film theory. Subject position theory concerns cinema's ideological holds, essentially cinema constructs subject positions defined by ideology and social formation (Bordwell 1996, 8). Stimulated by the widely held notion that politics is all pervasive, that everything is politics, film too is believed to be ideologically laden. In a somewhat circular way, ideological analysis with a strong injection of feminist scrutiny and using psychoanalytical categories treated film as inherently ideological.<sup>14</sup>

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12. More profoundly, and with reference to the importance of the process of research or analytical work beyond mere outcomes, Smith (1998) argues that "theory ensures that the journey continues by mapping the world as a feed-back loop endlessly short circuiting." Therefore, "theory is also a tool-box for working within the world." Not blind to the possible limitations of applying theory to films or the resultant endless deferral of meaning, Smith also warns about the cognitivist approach's reliance on "common sense" and "universal regularities" and their potential both to reinscribe conventionalized hegemonies as well as a vaunted sense of objectivity.

13. Various scholars have commented on the dense and at times obfuscating language used in film theory. Knight (1997, 39) refers to the "complexification" of among others subject positioning in film theory.

14. The first use of Lacanian psychoanalytical categories in film theory is often credited to Mulvey (1975), while the cognitive approach in film theory has been advanced particularly strongly by Bordwell and Carroll (1996; see also Rushton and Bettinson 2010, 156). As someone "who has never been a friend of subject-positioning," Carroll (1996, 257) tends to exaggerate through emphasizing its particular theoretical framing: "Film theory becomes a matter of showing the way in which each cinematic device or structure exemplifies the laws or universal pattern of subject positioning."

Notwithstanding criticism leveled at subject-positioning theory, ideology in film need not be restricted to the level where the Cartesian ideal of the self-made, autonomous subject is threatened through so-called misrecognition (see Althusser 1971, 172). Ideology can also refer to “epistemically defective” beliefs used to legitimize inappropriate or hegemonic structures: “either false beliefs or distorting categorical schemes that function to support some system of social domination” (Carroll 1996, 279).<sup>15</sup> For our purposes here, films are deemed frequently but not inherently related to “the dissemination of ideology.” Moreover, “explaining the ways in which films, indeed many films, can play this role is a legitimate theoretical ambition” (258).<sup>16</sup> That is, without reducing films to being essentially ideological or claiming the ideological positioning of a subject as its central (read, only) function, ideological aspects are prominent even if covertly so, in some movies. *The Hunger Games* is suffused in the ideology of empire, portraying characters on different places in the power spectrum and showing how they are diversely affected by and acting out the ever-shifting push and pull of empire. In such ideological positioning, the audiences’ subjectivities are created where audiences are confronted with the aversion and attraction to imperial power; and the point here is that this is the case in a not altogether dissimilar fashion from what happens in (the reading of) the Pauline letters.<sup>17</sup>

A word of caution is advised, since, however closely aligned subject positioning and narrative comprehension are in some movies, they are not

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15. In short, “where those beliefs are epistemically defective and where instilling them contributes to a system of social domination, they are ideological” (Carroll 1996, 280).

16. By the turn of the millennium, “the leading hypothesis amongst contemporary film theorists is that film is an instrument of ideology,” according to Carroll (1996, 275). For the interrelationship between the narrativity or narrative plot and ideology of films, see Browne (1997, 9–19).

17. The debate about the ideology of realism is an extrapolation of the provenance debate. Where in the former case, provenance or the illusion of provenance of the cinematographic image is at stake, the ideology of realism “assumed that there is a pre-existing general cultural condition (or “ideology”) which cinematic realism captures, reproduces, and communicates to a basically uncritical, passive audience” (Knight 1997, 41). See also Carroll’s (1996, 224–52) discussion about the relationship between film and fiction, and his skeptical references to a spectrum of positions, which, on the one hand, see all film as fiction given the medium’s “inescapability of choice” and, on the other hand, holds all fiction to be documentary, nonfiction as fiction.

to be confused. The dogma of the camera-eye, which posits that viewers construe themselves in the same position that the camera took, along with the notion that spectatorship entails some unconscious or ideologically driven identification with the camera, need to be denounced in favor of “alienated vision”: “We are within the film’s space without being part of its world, and observe from a viewpoint at which we are not situated” (Sparshott 1978, cited in Knight 1997, 42).

In short, then, focusing on subject positioning with its strong ideological sensitivities in *The Hunger Games* shows us the push and pull of empire in hegemonic contexts but also provides a vantage point from where audiences can come to terms with the ideology of empire and the complexity of their own necessary involvement with and in it, and in the spirit of reverse hermeneutical flow, creates an intertext for making sense of the New Testament documents’ imperial setting.

### Subjectivity, Illusion, and Reality in *The Hunger Games*

Enquiring about subject positioning or the ideology of realism in a science-fiction movie as *The Hunger Games* with such a decidedly apocalyptic tenor (and, admittedly, at times also down-to-earth feel to it) may lead to some raised eyebrows about the extent to which modern audiences can relate to this dystopian setting. My focus, though, is on subjectivity rather than on the subject(s).<sup>18</sup> Disentangling the content and method of the observer’s gaze from the observer’s psychological involvement in the film’s world, obviates the need to exclusively use phenomenological, Marxist, or psychoanalytical theory to account for claims about spectator involvement in film; or that the idealization of the camera generates a “cinematic subject”; or that the subject is the interpellation of the cinematic apparatus. A spectator’s eye sees further and differently than a camera lens (Knight 1997, 41–42, building on Sparshott’s insights).<sup>19</sup> Amidst the dystopia of

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18. Mine is not an attempt at Lacanian psychoanalytic theory of the subject. This not to deny the influence of Lacan’s and Marxist (read Althusser’s) ideas on the notion of subject position, which is helpful in places; but, the humanist (and at times positivist and empiricist) trend is unhelpful baggage for my purpose, as outlined below.

19. With the increasing recognition of how notions of self and the world function reciprocally since the time of Berger and Luckman (1966), more effort has been expended on attempts to understand and describe the individual’s and the group’s involvement in the construction of reality (cf. Morgan 1998, 1–17, 203–8).

postwar future reality without human rights and dignity or accountable rule and amidst political injustice and cruel oppression, all that remains are deprivation and depravity, famine and decadence.

In *The Hunger Games*, events initially flow in rather sequential and even linear fashion for Katniss, unlike the messier course of events in the following two parts of the narrative's trilogy (Henthorne 2012, 5). In the movie, Katniss's energies are directed at her own, her family's, and her new friend, Peeta's, situation. Her position largely represents a struggle for survival, whereas in the next two parts of the trilogy she is increasingly forced to also consider the wider community and even the country as well as the world she inhabits. However, the disparity of life in a hegemonic context characterized by mimicry and hybridity is present in the movie *The Hunger Games* already, whose setting is scripted through both the overt but also more subtle ideological setting of a hegemonic context of empire.

On the one hand, *The Hunger Games* helps to dispel the notion that a movie's ideological tenor can be grasped in any simple way through its rhetorical structures and commonplaces and presuppositions in particular (so Carroll 1996, 275–89). The movie itself avoids commonplaces, in fact, challenges commonplaces. To expand on one: it is not the (ostensible) love between Katniss and Peeta that conquers all, as it is actually false and deceptive. For as much as Peeta may be infatuated by Katniss, she is not in love with Peeta. For the sake of the games, she participates in the love charade but with mixed feelings and mostly because she realizes that it is necessary for their survival in courting the audiences' favor and the sponsors' support. In that sense, their apparent love for each other prolongs their lives through sponsors' gifts and in the end even saves their lives when first an opportune change in rules leaves them standing as sole survivors and whose reversal they then circumvent.<sup>20</sup> However, it is made quite clear that the president, Snow, is as unconvinced about their love story as he keenly uses it as an excuse to protect imperial interests (read, the goodwill of the elite of the Capitol). Their love becomes the subterfuge for empire to maintain the status quo also in this event where empire stood to lose the battle. Not love, but empire conquers, because the odds are always in the empire's favor.

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20. The usefulness of romantic relationship in the furtherance of celebrity status is, of course, well known in our day and age, too, with the Kardashians probably some of the best examples.



The movie itself, on the other hand, foregrounds media and play, reality and illusion, and the ideology of the constructed nature of life through its emphasis on the games as a televised, live reality show. The spectacle of the games is both the chilly reminder of past conflict and dreadful deterrent against insurrection. This tension is channeled through televised media, as reality television in the extension of *Survivor* and similar programs. Both the elite of the Capitol as well as the people barely surviving in the districts watch the games live on television, but the audiences' experiences are understandably different: anguished concern versus uncommitted, sensation-hunger delight. But more than TV reflecting the appearance of reality, the screened appearance now constitutes reality, both in the sense of what transpires in the arena as it is constantly manipulated by the makers of the game (also under pressure to retain their audiences' interest and therefore not to prolong events unnecessarily) but also in the sense that the televised games function as political control and manipulation, appeasing the Capitolians and terrifying the people in the districts.

Not unlike today's reality TV, in *The Hunger Games* the powers-that-be use direct manipulation, literally controlling the tributes in the arena through changing the landscape and even controlling the climate—and in the process also control the audiences throughout Panem. The push of a button or the creation of another holographic adventure has life and death consequences for those in the games. At the media level, the tributes have hardly any other function besides their ability to generate good viewing statistics. The makers of the game effectively control the game by altering the materiality of the arena as well as changing the rules at their own whims. The Capitol and the president, in particular, sit behind the manipulation by and in the media, underscoring the tributes' vulnerability.<sup>21</sup>

But the manipulation of televised media, in as far as access to it is possible, of course, cuts both ways and in the process shows up the mimicry typically found in hegemonic contexts. By using the media and influencing public (read, the Capitol's) opinion, Katniss and Peeta can ensure that they are both declared victors by threatening to jointly commit suicide, which would seriously affect the Capitol's elite audience's infatuation with

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21. Before the forty-seventh games start, President Snow quips to Seneca Crane, the head game maker, that next to fear, hope is the most powerful motivation for people. At the end of the movie, Snow ominously stares out ahead of him, with the celebrations of Katniss and Peeta's welcoming upon their return to District 12 still ringing out.



the artificial romance between the two. In the end, the movie propagates not the contrast of illusion versus reality but rather the notion of illusion as reality; or stronger still, that reality is always scripted and therefore is open to manipulation by the powerful, by empire.

### Life in Empire: *The Hunger Games* and the Pauline Letters

Subject positioning is neither used here to argue for the movie as direct ideological criticism of a specific past or present political regime,<sup>22</sup> nor to show how various aspects of film apparatus trigger “a series of psychological processes that culminate in the positioning of viewers as subjects for the purpose of oppressive social systems like capitalism and patriarchy” (Carroll 1996, 257). The significance of using subject positioning with regard to *The Hunger Games* is that it assists in identifying the intricate interwovenness of identity, and the hybridity and mimicry typical of imperial contexts<sup>23</sup>—three interrelated aspects that are pointed out briefly here.

The movie recounts the grim situation of an annual deadly competition that allows (at best) only one victor, a competition that serves as celebration of the Capitol's victory for its elite over the districts' rebellion as well as a grim reminder of the districts' subsequent and ongoing subservience. The even harsher reality for both Peeta and Katniss, but especially for Katniss, is not only the physical pain they endure but especially the psychological torture that leave their emotional and physical impact long after the games are over. The nightmares, humiliation, and isolation that set in towards the end of the movie increase in the subsequent parts of the trilogy (see Snider 2013). Psychological and emotional afflictions endure

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22. In popular discourse, some resemblances have been pointed out between the movie and contemporary United States. The Founding Fathers' admiration of the Roman Empire may be a subtext for the ancient Roman nomenclature and the gladiatorial games, but the intertextuality could even extend to the discrepancy between the wealthy elite and poor majority, and the ludicrous response of the powerful through *panem et circenses*, bread and games (see, e.g., Buijs 2012, 16, in a Dutch daily newspaper).

23. Here suture is probably at work, which as a concept is taken from psychoanalytic theory and “refers to the ‘sealing’ or ‘completing’ of an identity through discourse. The psychic process that forms subjectivity is reproduced between the subject-spectator and the chain of filmic discourse. The shot/reverse shot structure is the technical process by which the spectator is positioned to make a film coherent *and* produced as a subject” (Chakravartty 2001, 618).

beyond the worst possible physical consequences of empire, especially in how people conduct their lives in relation to hegemonic contexts—hinted at in the movie and the Pauline letters.

### Hybridity and Mimicry

The games are a reminder of major armed conflict and intend to celebrate Panem's postwar freedom. One male and one female child of each of the twelve districts that constitute Panem are taken for the games at a reaping or selection event.<sup>24</sup> Soon afterwards, in a discussion with Katniss, Peeta says that he does not want to lose himself to the Capitol but wants to stay true to who he is, even when he dies during the games. Katniss's reply, that she cannot allow herself to think like that, is already indicative of her hybrid identity formed in empire. Every encounter between cultures involves an in-between space, which refers to the site of conflict, interaction, and mutual assimilation in such encounters from which hybridity results. In the words of Homi Bhabha (1994a, 5), "cultures can never be defined independently because of this continual exchange that produces mutual representation of cultural difference." Those involved do not stay the same, neither in identity nor in agency. For all her independency *and* vulnerability, and notwithstanding (or, because of) her strong sense of being, Katniss realizes that her position in the games requires of her to kill others in order to survive. She realizes that her life is characterized by mimicry since she lives in the push and pull of empire: as much as she fights back against the regime, her survival at times depends on her ability to think and act like the imperialists. Mimicry is used to describe the nature of culture in a colonial, imperialist context: never "pure, prior, original, unified or self-contained; it is always infected by mimicry, self-splitting, and alterity. In a word, it is always already infected by hybridity" (85–92). As much as hybridity plays on mimicry, hybridity is also molded by mimicry, which functions as colonial domination and coercion, but hybridity goes beyond mimicry as it also redefines and reconstructs agency.

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24. Audiences—and readers—will remember *The Hunger Games* trilogy more readily for notions borrowed from ancient times such as Greek mythology (e.g., the myth of the Minotaur, Asterion, of Crete who regularly received a sacrificial complement of Athenian tributes of boys and girls to feast upon) and Roman gladiatorial games, and from contemporary (live) reality television shows, rather than for biblical motifs. In the words of Buijs (2012, 19), the story is about Rome without Jerusalem.

While Julie Clawson (2012c) is at one level correct in finding connections between the movie and the New Testament under the heading “Life under Empire,” the connections extend beyond the notion of an alternative life proclaimed by Jesus in a setting dominated by Roman rule. The real connections lie in the hybrid and mimical identities and relationships. The contrast between “living in fear and trusting Rome for their daily bread” or taking up Jesus’s call “to live into God’s reign on earth as it is in heaven and trust in God’s provision”<sup>25</sup> notwithstanding, life in imperial times entails more, in the sense of living beyond (and in the process, breaking through) such binaries.<sup>26</sup> The complexity and ambivalence of living in empire and experiencing its push and pull allows for comparing the movie and the Pauline letters—beyond possible connections in resisting empire only. One is reminded of the tension-filled juxtaposition of peace and violence that informs the normalization of domination in the New Testament.<sup>27</sup> This tension is evident for example in Paul’s alignment of God with peace (“God of peace”) in 1 Thess 5:23, while he earlier invoked God’s wrath for the destruction of “your [the Thessalonians’] own countrymen” (1 Thess 2:14). A contrast is created between an in-group whom “God has not destined for wrath” (1 Thess 5:9) and those implicitly destined for such a fate—in shrill contrast to the apostle’s own appeal not to repay evil with evil (1 Thess 5:15).<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, Paul introduces a

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25. In the words of Clawson (2012c), “[Jesus] called those living in luxury at the expense of others to give it back to the poor. While discouraging violent resistance, he encouraged his followers to expose Rome’s oppression through creative acts of non-violent resistance (such as turning the other cheek or going the extra mile). In the face of injustice, his followers are encouraged to release the chains of oppression and love their neighbor as themselves—commands that led them to sacrificially share all things in common so no one hungered.”

26. The first part of the claim is correct: “The ‘Hunger Games’ trilogy is less the story of which boy Katniss will pick, and more about whether she will choose the way of violence and revenge or the way of love and life” (Clawson 2012b). As for the second part, Katniss’s choice is not either violence and revenge, or love and life, but rather how to love and live amidst hegemony and violence.

27. A postcolonial reading is cognizant of the widespread implicit acceptance and sometimes even active pursuance of imperial or colonizing influence, by both authors and interpreters (see Gooder 2008, 182–83), even if for different reasons and goals. Some scholars argue that it was his focus on the cross (see 1 Cor 2:2), as the symbol of ultimate violence in the first century CE, that informed Paul’s “penchant for violence” (Gager and Gibson 2005, 19).

28. Translations of biblical texts are my own.

new, different set of binaries, while, on the other hand, he breaks through a simple contrast which associates empire with violence and the faithful with nonviolence.

Katniss's hybridity is best expressed in the symbol with which she is associated, the mockingjay. Prim returns Katniss's early favor before the reaping by giving her the mockingjay pin as a lucky charm as she leaves for the games.<sup>29</sup> The symbol of the mockingjay entails hybridity, in the sense that it was a hybrid bird that was created by the empire but later abandoned when, in true mimicry style, the rebels used it against the Capitol during the revolt. Although the mockingjay symbol is forced on her initially by her sister as well as her games' stylists, Katniss already embodies this hybrid identity. In the beginning of the movie, when Gale is ready to take on the fight, at least by running away and therefore not allowing the empire to involve him in their games, Katniss raises concerns about the potential success of such a venture and about the consequences for those they would leave behind. After Katniss's life is more directly swallowed up by empire by having to participate in the games, she can only fight for her life by playing according to empire's rules. But she also pushes back against the pull of empire, not least of which when she shoots an apple from the pig's mouth on a food-laden table around which the game makers converge.<sup>30</sup> Life in empire, characterized by contrasts, divisions, and boundaries, is lived out in the push and pull of empire, where the mimicking of hegemony as one strategic mode of survival contributes to a hybrid identity.

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29. Katniss is given a pin in the image of a mockingjay at the market, which she gives to Prim shortly before departing for the reaping, saying that it will bring her good luck. After Katniss volunteers in the place of Prim for the games, Prim returns the mockingjay pin to Katniss with the same wishes of good luck.

30. Early signs hinting at things to come is when, rather than applauding Katniss for volunteering at the reaping, even at the request of Effie Trinket (the District 12 escort), the audience rather raises a three-finger salute silently. Similarly, after Rue is killed in the games and in disregard of her own well-being, Katniss says her farewells in a moving scene where she arranges wild flowers all around Rue's body, denying the Capitol control over Rue in her death. When Katniss leaves in search of Peeta, wiping tears of mourning over Rue from her eyes, District 11 inhabitants who watch these scenes on communal big screen TV's, also raise the three-finger salute, and they then proceed to attack the symbols of their oppression by the Capitol, only to be violently engaged by the peacekeepers, of course!

Center and Margins: Strategy, Conflict,  
Sacrifice in *The Hunger Games* and Paul

The extreme contrast between the haves and have-nots in Panem probably is illustrated best in food, clothing, and leisure. Political motifs and propaganda are prominent, and that the seat of empire is called the Capitol is not incidental.<sup>31</sup> Contrasts between center and margins are many: from the extreme of people struggling to stave off starvation to opulence and the over-abundance of food (especially in the catering for the selected tributes who are showered under by food and pampering); from the at best pragmatic rags worn by those in the districts to the fashionable, costume-made wayward clothes worn by those in the Capitol; and, from the work-focused districts to the sensation-seeking boredom of the Capitol, the extremity of the contrast between districts and Capitol is almost beyond description—the mise-en-scène of the film hammers home the contrast between the Capitol and the districts. The harshest contrast, though, is found in the districts that annually part with their children to be slaughtered in what is merely a reality TV-show for the Capitol's games. This contrast notwithstanding, it appears that, like the Romans of old<sup>32</sup> and typical of ambivalence in imperial times, even in the districts people crave both “bread and games”<sup>33</sup>—empire thus pushes away as much as it attracts, also among its victims.

The Capitol in *The Hunger Games* applies the tried and tested method of *divide and rule*, pitting people against each other within districts and also

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31. The author of the narrative, Suzanne Collins, has publicly voiced her criticism of (especially) US foreign policy, which makes the resemblances between the Capital of the movie and of Washington DC more than superficial (Blasingame and Collins 2009, 726–27).

32. Roman imperial motifs abound: the reinvented gladiatorial games in what has now become a virtual arena, linking up Juvenal's *panem et circenses* (bread and circuses/games), which referred to imperial strategies to appease the population. The movie is set in the fictive state of Panem but various characters' names remind of the empire: e.g., Caesar Flickerman and Claudius Templesmith as TV presenters; Seneca Crane, the head game maker; Flavius, as one of Katniss's stylists; Cinna, Katniss's dressmaker; Octavia, part of Cinna's team.

33. In fact, in some districts, namely, those slightly better off than the others, children are trained from a young age in fighting skills in order to participate in the games one day in what appears to be more than temporary reward or status or even glory for the district. The games have become, in fact, part of normal life in Panem.

district against district so as to curtail any serious political threat against its real hegemony. Material barriers between districts include fences and even watchtowers, limiting and monitoring interaction between them. With the televised propaganda and the annual games, the Capitol controls the available information about others in Panem, almost ruling out any combined protest and even possible mutual empathy or support between districts. Various factors inform the divisions between people, with social and economic status<sup>34</sup> as well as gender being most prominent (see Henthorne 2012, 46–47). In the movie, it gradually becomes clear, in the opulence shown to the tributes after the reaping before the games and in the decadence, which is life in the Capitol, that the impoverishment of the districts is policy and no accident. It is not a general lack of resources that creates Panem's problems, but the Capitol's power over the districts and the resultant inequality that creates both hunger and need for hunger games as control mechanism.<sup>35</sup>

Polarization and ambivalence inform also the Pauline letters. In a setting far removed from reality TV-shows but not without some sense of living in a dystopian era, keeping his opinions about the state of the world in Rom 8 and 1 Cor 1 in mind, Paul was a Jew on the margins (Roetzel 2003) in more than one sense of the word. Living between center and margins, his reference to the deceptive impropriety of "peace and security" claims (1 Thess 5:3) was probably an overt discursive challenge to the ongoing normalization of the Roman Empire, particularly in light of inter-textual references such as Jer 6:14's caution against false peace (Schotroff 1992, 157).<sup>36</sup> Paul's contrast between light and darkness in reference to

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34. The relatively prosperous districts (which includes 1, 2, and 4) are "universally, solidly hated," whereas District 12 where Katniss also hails from is "the poorest" region, the "least prestigious" and therefore also "most ridiculed." Within districts the tesserae system, which provides food in turn for running a higher risk of their children being selected for the games, sets up poor and wealthy against each other (Henthorne 2012, 47).

35. A question that remains unanswered is, besides the official commemoration-propaganda, are the games primarily entertainment for the elite seeing that the masses are voiceless after all, or are the games in the first instance about imperial control, exertion of power both as punishment for past revolts and deterrent against future rebellion?

36. On Paul's use of the Scriptures of Israel in his larger discourse of power, see Punt (2008)—discourse of power in the sense meant by Foucault (1972, 55): "not the majestically unfolding manifestation of a thinking, knowing, speaking subject, but, on

in-group and imperial authorities respectively (1 Thess 5:5–6) is indicative of both the polarization but also the complex ambivalence typical of situations of imperialist oppression.<sup>37</sup> Polarization and ambivalence can also and did also lead to conflict.

While different genres are present in film and book, it is the theme of conflict and violence that dominates *The Hunger Games*. It is precisely because dystopia is not the subject but the setting of the story (Henthorne 2012, 108–11) that viewers through their association with Katniss can also experience the effects of empire and that they can relate to empire and experience its push and pull.<sup>38</sup> Conflict is not separated from family, friendship, and love, but they are all intertwined: “in order to understand war ... we need to understand what it is to be human since war is a very human thing” (6). But conflict is, of course, the unavoidable consequence of the film’s other preoccupation and basic setting: empire, which is equally a human endeavor. In fact, imperial configurations in all their diversity are typically characterized by people’s attraction to and loathing of empire.

For all Paul’s emphasis on peace and love (see 1 Cor 13:13), implicit and even overt conflict and violence in the letters are difficult to deny. The use of weaponry imagery in Paul to explain the virtues of Jesus’s followers is a good example of standing in the push and pull-tension of empire. The imperial context enveloping his first Thessalonian letter frames also the constant references to a context of suffering, involving both the Thessalonians (e.g., 1 Thess 1:6; 2:14; 3:3) and Paul (1 Thess 2:2; 2:9; 3:4; 3:7), even if these instances probably did not mean state-authored persecution. It is remarkable that when Paul explains the ethical alertness he expects of the community, he nevertheless uses weaponry images: the breastplate of faith and love and the helmet as hope of salvation (1 Thess 5:8). In an imperial context complete with military enforcement, Paul deems mili-

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the contrary, a totality, in which the dispersion of the subject and his continuity with himself [sic] may be determined.”

37. Clawson admits the ambivalence of life in empire, “the series’ themes of resistance to oppression and hope for a better world, portrayed honestly as messy and difficult endeavors,” but she also insists that the acts of resistance “echo the transformative way of life Jesus offered his followers” (Clawson 2012a).

38. Is not part of the American dream the irony that it is the 99 percent of the population who do not get to live it that ensures the dream’s continued existence which justifies both the top 1 percent’s untouchable position as well as the actual regression of the majority through the unrealistic hope that they too may one day be part of the 1 percent?



tary gear as suitable metaphors for central concepts in his gospel: faith, love, and hope (e.g., 1 Cor 13:13). Using military imagery to express the core values of Jesus's followers underlines the extent to which ambivalence characterizes the way in which Paul related to the ubiquitous imperial context of his time.

Without any overt biblical notions in *The Hunger Games*, the *sacrificial* element nevertheless prevails. Katniss taking Prim's place at the reaping; Haymitch changing his lifestyle for Peeta and Katniss's sake; Katniss and Rue's short-lived but vital relationship reaching beyond reciprocal help; Peeta's willingness to die so that Katniss can be the victor: all are incidents framed by voluntary self-disadvantage. However, to see Peeta's childhood compassion for a half-starved Katniss or his willingness to die in the arena as ground enough to compare Peeta with Jesus (see Schuster 2013; Snider 2013)<sup>39</sup> overlooks both the other more likely candidate (Katniss) but also, more importantly, the broader tenor of the movie. It is empire that forces life and death decisions on people, which some folks are capable of rising above by not opting for mere self-interest.

Attempts to explain the gripping narrative of *The Hunger Games* along conventional lines of good versus evil or one person's sacrifice for another are too partial. Snider's (2013) attempt to explain Katniss as "a young girl who endures a traumatic event, who has every excuse to crumble inside, yet finds courage to do the right thing, and sacrifices everything she has for a cause that's greater than herself" tells only part of the story. Katniss's narrative is not exemplified by "the battle between good and evil, between the Creator and the Destroyer" but rather by how to manage evil and, seeing that it cannot be avoided altogether, how to find a way not to be overwhelmed by it. Katniss does not succeed by her weakness, and the reference to 2 Cor 12:10 is therefore not appropriate (see Snider 2013), as much as Paul's appeal to weakness amounted to a different framing of power in his discourse on power (see Punt 2008). At any rate, neither the movie nor Paul's letters amount to framing life in empire as the rather

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39. See the following claims: "When I read about Peeta, I feel Christ—not because Peeta is divine nor has any special power to save the world, but because he exemplifies sacrificial love" (Snider 2013; see Clawson 2012b). And, "In both the original and the sequel, the teenage boy offers his female protagonist Katniss bread, just as Jesus might, while he boasts superhuman strength to throw large objects. He also seems to have a sacrificial heart willing to suffer unknown pain and torture, even to die, to save the woman he loves" (Schuster 2013).



simple choice between good or evil or between strength or weakness—not even when it comes to gender, which is also construed in the push and pull of empire.

### Gender and the Role of Women: Ambivalence in Empire

*The Hunger Games'* stereotypical gender lines of men in powerful positions and women as caretakers, that is, conventional positions, at times are shaken up, such as when tributes are selected as boys and girls per district who all end up fighting against each other during the games. Katniss has the most transgressive gender role whose counter-conventionality eventually impacts on the Capitol-regime too and which culminates in her subversion of empire by forcing a tie in the final moments of *The Hunger Games* to the utter discontent of the President. Katniss is not simply the reluctant heroine, who will later as the mockingjay become the symbol of anti-imperial resistance, but she is a more complex character in a more complex situation.

Already as a young eleven-year old girl, following her father's death and her mother's incapacitating sorrow, Katniss reaches out and transgresses the conventional roles accorded to women generally and young girls in particular (Henthorne 2012, 44–62). Katniss takes charge of their fatherless household, looking out for her mother and younger sister, hunting in the woods, and trading illegally and in the process assumes a typical or conventional male role. The later romantic undertones, between Katniss and Gale and Katniss and Peeta (both of which are portrayed much more effectively through the eyes of Katniss in the books) are difficult to deny. However, it is evident in *The Hunger Games* (and even more so in *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*) that Katniss's happiness and success is not dependent on male companionship and is in fact consistently—in her relationship with Gale and even more so later with Peeta—threatened by them. In her role, patriarchy is challenged, not (only) as social institution but as the fabric of society.<sup>40</sup>

In the movie, Katniss finds herself in a hegemonic space, which is a matter of social relations, their embodiment, enactment, and affirmation (Mills 2005, 158). Gender is one important aspect of such embodi-

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40. Is Katniss's role an indication that *The Hunger Games* is maybe one of those new forms of film in which a nonpatriarchal female subjectivity (for which Mulvey argued in 1975 already) can become possible?

ment and negotiation, and in the context Katniss frequently goes beyond gender stereotypes. By way of analogy, Paul engaged in a similarly ambivalent structuring of gender in his particular hegemonic context. On the one hand, Paul's male gaze in 1 Thessalonians is apparent throughout the letter. The community is continuously addressed as "brothers,"<sup>41</sup> and Paul claims to be the "father" of the community (2:11).<sup>42</sup> However, when Paul speaks of his engagement with and longing for them, he refers to himself in the role of a "nurse" or "nanny" (2:7). He can do so without losing his (masculine) authority since the members of the community are cast in the role of "her [own] children" (2:7)<sup>43</sup> (see Punt 2012). In short, relations such as gender impact on imperial designs as much as configurations of gender are intertwined with the hybrid identities of people living in empire—or as postcolonial theory would have it, hegemonic space is construed relationally.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, the focus was on the reverse hermeneutical flow between *The Hunger Games* and the Pauline letters, particularly in terms of how identity is hybridically and mimically formed in hegemonic contexts. The film-theoretical insights developed through the notion of subject positioning with its emphasis on how films construe and manage ideological positions proved helpful for analyzing the movie, which in turn assists in providing a lens for understanding embeddedness of the Pauline letters in empire and their predisposition to the push and pull of empire. The theory of films that allows both for epistemological work and for formulating general claims about the cinema and films concerns all film scholars and—historians (Lefebvre 2013, 247–48). Notwithstanding the fact that "film

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41. Apart from other references to the "brother(s)," Paul addressed the community as "brothers" in 1 Thess 1:4; 2:1, 9, 14, 17; 3:7; 4:13; 5:1, 4, 12, 14, 25.

42. The other three times that "father" is used, the reference is to God (1 Thess 1:1; 3:11, 13). The father metaphor could indicate authority (see Castelli 1991, 101) or intimacy (Holmberg 1978, 77–79), and it does not necessarily mean that these connotations were mutually exclusive in the first century CE (so also Frilingos, 2000, 103 n. 60), as the case seems to be in the context of 1 Thessalonians, which maintains a tense balance between authority and closeness (see 1 Thess 2:7).

43. While the meaning here could be that of a wet-nurse employed to look after children, there is a possibility that Paul may have assumed the role of the mother—given the gender configurations of the day, a compromising position either way.

theory is extremely resistant to dispelling conceptual murkiness" (Knight 1997, 38), its absence is not necessarily an improvement for making sense of films. Employing subject positioning in the analysis of *The Hunger Games* provides a handle on the ideological setting of the movie, as its rich context exemplifies the simultaneous attraction and revulsion people have towards empire and through reverse hermeneutical flow becomes an ideal intertext for making sense of the imperial setting of the Pauline letters. It is the eponymous *games* in the movie that best portrays the underlying motifs of political injustice, oppression, the depravity of humankind, and the alarming inattentiveness to the ongoing devastation of life. As for the playfulness implied in games, unlike the postmodern emphasis on creative freedom, *The Hunger Games* shows another version: the uncommitted carelessness of political hegemonies that both emulates past and present experience, a hegemony which resonates with people's experiences today<sup>44</sup>—the odds clearly are ever in empire's favor! But the movie like the Pauline letters resists reduction to simple binaries, largely because they are both not only situated in but coconstitutive of a hegemonic or imperial context, prompting questions about the nature and agency of the odds. In the end, *The Hunger Games* and its ideology cannot be reduced to a simple plotline or commonplaces with good overcoming evil or love triumphing all; by the same token, the Pauline letters and their theology cannot be condensed to one-liners such as justification by faith or the law versus the gospel—contrast as imperial contexts entail and are characterized by ambivalence in the lives of every single group and person.

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44. In the words of Clawson (2012a): "The tale of Katniss Everdeen's journey of survival in the post-apocalyptic country of Panem, where bread and circuses distract the privileged and allow a totalitarian regime to oppress the masses, parallels situations in our world today. Our culture's hyper-consumerism and obsession with constant entertainment as well as the worldwide economic and political systems that prey upon the weak and the poor are evidence that the imbalances and injustices described in Panem don't just exist in speculative fiction."

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