Reel Revelations

REEL REVELATIONS
APOCALYPSE AND FILM

edited by

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INTRODUCTION

Lee Quinby and John Walliss

Since the earliest days of moviemaking, the Bible has functioned as a deep well of inspiration. From a 1912 silent film on *Adam and Eve*, to four versions of *The Ten Commandments* made over the course of eight decades, to myriad depictions of the life and death of Jesus Christ spanning from the opening years of the twentieth century to the beginning decade of the twenty-first, the film industry has drawn on biblical stories from both the Old and New Testaments for their intense drama, heroism, and moral vision—or to put it more directly, for their emphasis on adultery, political intrigue, and spectacular special effects. The appeal of worldwide obliteration was clear early on, too, with *The Deluge* (1933) as an example of the Flood in modern times; notable too was that the wake of its force first swamped New York City, which has since become a favourite media site of destruction. Most of these efforts were produced by the secular film industry seeking to capture largely Christian audiences by relaying pious themes of struggle and triumph (though the lines between secularity and religion surely blur when a well-known sex symbol such as Gina Lollobrigida is cast as the Queen of Sheba, as in the 1959 film of that title). For the first half of the twentieth century, the Old Testament far outranked the New as a profitable source of characters and conflict, especially for hugely successful epic films like *David and Bathsheba* (1951), starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward, which was nominated for five Academy Awards.

During the last half of the twentieth century, however, a new trend began to occur, as writers and directors increasingly found the *Book of Revelation*, the final book of the New Testament, to be a more fitting cinematic muse for an age beset by possibilities of human-made world destruction. As the Cold War took hold, both religious and secular film industries tapped a widening fear of nuclear devastation to produce a slew of end-of-the-world films ranging in focus from social critique (*On the Beach*, 1959) to satire (*Dr. Strangelove*, 1964) to hope for salvation (*The Late, Great Planet Earth*, 1979). More recently, other fears of global catastrophe have eclipsed the nuclear threat. Asteroids, aliens, and viruses have been joined by terrorism and technologies run amok for adrenalin pumping action thrillers. While many of these films are at best only loosely based on images or ideas of

destruction from *Revelation*, what they borrow from it is the idea that the world as we have known it is coming to an end, bringing in its wake a total upheaval of the social and natural order. They are, in short, apocalyptic.

Cinematic apocalypse thus extends the traditional meaning of apocalypse as an 'unveiling' or disclosure of the future to focus on any large-scale destruction of the world or most of humanity. In many cases, then, apocalyptic films so blend with science fiction, action, or horror genres as to be virtually indistinguishable from them. And yet, a surprising number of apocalyptic films from the past twenty-five years stay remarkably close to the traditional designation of apocalypse as a revelation about the future. Furthermore, many of them explicitly quote or use imagery from the *Book of Revelation*, as well as its Old Testament antecedents in Daniel, Ezekiel and Isaiah. Those films are of special interest to this collection of essays precisely because they have more than a weak link to apocalypticism, incorporating key elements of *Revelation* for plot, character, and concept. In so doing, some use the apocalyptic vision of *Revelation* to criticize certain social practices and power structures. Others do so in order to explore alternatives to the traditional apocalyptic paradigm and still others to rewrite it for a world already transformed, either through innovations in technology or post-apocalyptic wreckage.

Our volume opens with three essays that emphasize the myriad ways in which the apocalyptic paradigm instigates social criticism. Challenges to dominant systems of thought and power have been part of religious apocalypse from the outset, and this also holds true for many secular films. In his chapter, Kim Paffenroth examines how the ostensibly secular genre of zombie films frequently deploys apocalyptic language and motifs to critique oppressive values within American culture. Focusing in particular on the work of George A. Romero, the director behind such films as *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), Paffenroth argues that zombie films are apocalyptic in the sense of both focusing on the end of human civilization and also, more importantly, because they hold a mirror up to the society that produced them. The figure of the zombie thus, he suggests, reveals terrible truths about human nature; their barbaric, murderous and destructive natures mirroring the worst human excesses.

Lee Quinby argues that Richard Kelly's film *Southland Tales* (2006) provides scathing critiques of not only the produced social and economic crises in the United States today but also the *Book of Revelation's* depictions of Good versus Evil as absolute oppositions. In her analysis of Kelly's send-up of apocalypticism, she shows how the film links these critiques together through its satirical incorporation of *Revelation* to cinematically mirror that work's simultaneous impulses against and toward empire. By exploring the film's thematic use of a space/time rift, she illuminates its portrayal of clashes between several leading ideological camps, all of which have a

damaging apocalyptic thrust. In so doing, she highlights its focus on several key interconnected concerns, such as the US war against Iraq and the extent of trauma that veterans of the war undergo with inadequate care, exploitation of natural resources to sustain advanced capitalism's way of life, and corrupt election processes. Despite poor box office showings, harsh reviews, and some confusion in Kelly's own objectives, Quinby argues that *Southland Tales* is too perceptive a film to be ignored.

In her exploration of the film *Serenity*, Frances Flannery shows how Josh Whedon's film deconstructs the apocalypse precisely by using elements of it. The dualism of good and evil that is so integral to apocalypse is thus rendered in terms relevant for contemporary audiences as totalitarian government versus individualism. But rather than retaining the grand dualism as such, she indicates how the film complicates both extremes of the moral spectrum. She further points out that the film illuminates current ways that global terrorism has been simplistically represented in concert with the traditional apocalyptic paradigm. In place of the customary we versus a monstrous other, usually from a supernatural realm, the film shows human beings to be their own created monsters, capable of extraordinary cruelty and domination. Through what she calls its 'postmodern turn', she posits that *Serenity* castigates the oppressive evils of this world.

Just as apocalyptic themes have been drawn on to undo oppressive social practices, so too the genre of apocalypse is often used to envision alternative ethical practices. This begins with a better grasp of the genre itself. In his chapter, Jon Stone seeks to move beyond popular notions of the apocalypse as synonymous with disaster and doomsday scenarios, and focuses instead on a stricter understanding of apocalypse as a form of revelatory literature. Drawing on a range of post-war films that he terms *apocalyptic fictions*, he highlights the ways in which they may be seen as apocalyptic, not because they depict 'the end of the world', but, rather, because they reveal to their audiences a variety of potentially catastrophic futures. Surveying a number of films produced over the last half-century, Stone suggests that four fears in particular have exercised filmmakers and audiences: cold war fears of nuclear destruction; concerns about environmental disaster brought about by human negligence and/or misuse of natural resources; loss of personal autonomy through an over-reliance on technology; and, finally, fears about natural and manufactured plagues and viruses. Nevertheless, he argues, although they focus on nightmare scenarios, such apocalyptic fictions are invariably optimistic, showing how human ingenuity (often manifested through science and technology) can respond to these potential disasters, either averting them completely or, at the very least, limiting their consequences.

In her chapter, Mary Ann Beavis examines what she terms 'apocalyptic horror movies', especially those that use the device of invented scriptures

(pseudapocrypha), such as the *Omen* trilogy (1976, 1978, 1981), *The Prophecy I–III* (1995, 1998, 2000), *End of Days* (1999) and *Constantine* (2005). Making a distinction between, on the one hand, such films and, on the other, secular apocalypse films and 'Christian horror' films, she argues that while all three subgenres exploit ambient apocalyptic anxiety, within the former, pseudapocrypha is deployed within as a narrative trope as a means of holding back the final cataclysm. In doing do, they preserve the popular Christian grand narrative of a heroic saviour while tapping into contemporary religious scepticism.

The relationship between the apocalyptic genre and the forging of an apocalyptic identity is hardly static, even within fundamentalist Christianity. In his chapter, John Walliss focuses on films produced by evangelical Christians to depict how, based on their reading of apocalyptic texts, the endtime scenario will unfold. In particular, Walliss argues that the films may be read as cultural documents that re-read and re-present apocalyptic texts in order to reflect the particular religio-political worldviews of their producers, and more broadly of the evangelical Christian/premillennialist milieu in which they are produced and consumed. In doing so, he suggests, the films may be seen to operate on several levels simultaneously. On one level they seek to educate their viewers in the specifics of a premillennial interpretation of key apocalyptic texts in an entertaining manner and encourage those who have not yet done so to undergo a born again experience. However, on another, equally important level, they also serve to articulate and possibly even redefine a sense of evangelical identity within the context of a late modern, increasingly globalised world through the language and imagery of the apocalypse.

Such transformations—not only of apocalyptic themes themselves but also of the identity of viewers of apocalyptic films—are further developed in the final section of the volume. Richard Walsh revisits his previous analysis of the Arnold Schwarzenegger film, *End of Days* (1999) to ask whether it is possible to read *Revelation*, with the help of the film, without focusing on calculations of the end, sectarianism, and righteous violence, all themes prominent in American readings of Revelation. In doing so, he analyses the surreptitious sanctification of empire which occurs in both *Revelation* and *End of Days* under the cover of a blatant struggle with and resistance of another 'evil' empire. Both film and text, he shows, also sanctify violence or, more accurately, they withdraw from critical engagement with the issue of violence by concentrating respectively on the spiritual transformation of the subjective individual or on the bliss of sectarian worship. Ironically, he concludes, the prospect of avoiding the imperial 'final solutions' of apocalyptic may lie in 'apocalypsia', the inherent reiterations of apocalyptic and of the struggle with (a never finally defeated or safely externalized) evil.

The figure of the messianic hero is particularly crucial to both the entertainment and the education propensities of apocalyptic films. In his chapter, Greg Garrett examines the way in which the eschatological figure of 'The Son of Man' is presented in several recent films; the *Matrix* trilogy (1999–2003), the *Terminator* tetralogy (1984–2009), and *Signs* (2002). In each, he shows a hero who draws parallels with that of the messianic figure, whether through his death and resurrection, the way in which they act as a saviour figure, and triumph over evil. He also asks what it is about such messianic figures that leads them to be produced and consumed so avidly, suggesting that the answer lies in some combination of existential dread about life in the contemporary world, a spiritual need that the world can be made better, and, last but by no means least, a reflection of the American sense of optimism in the future.

The twentieth century has seen secular authors and filmmakers morph the traditional narrative of the apocalypse in some extreme ways. As Elizabeth Rosen shows, however, a group of postmodern writers have retained the classic apocalyptic story in their work, despite the fact that the very structure and intent of the story of apocalypse are the antithesis of the indeterminacy, ambiguity, and resistance to the grand narrative which defines postmodernism. She argues that, over the past several years, this postmodern apocalyptic trend has been working its way into children's fiction and film, where, in addition to challenging the traditionally rigid binary paradigm of the apocalyptic story, it is also challenging the traditionally rigid depictions of good and evil found in many children's stories. Using several recent children's films, and focusing most particularly on the hit film *The Transformers*, her essay examines how the postmodern leanings of these films effects the apocalyptic underpinnings at the heart of their stories, ultimately offering child viewers a more complex view of traditionally simplistic either/or apocalyptic structures such as good and evil, heaven and hell, and the Saved and the Damned. Finally, Rosen postulates reasons for why postmodern apocalyptic stories have been found more frequently in children's fiction and film in recent years, and what the presence of these stories may suggest about the current political and cultural climate.

1. Apocalyptic Images and Prophetic Function in Zombie Films

Kim Paffenroth

This essay will examine how current zombie films—although they depict the apocalypse in outwardly secular terms as a mass plague, usually with no explicit mention of God—nonetheless frequently use that apocalypse to pass judgment on current American society and sinfulness, often sounding much like Old Testament prophets in their decrying of sins and announcement of judgment.[1] The essay will focus on the films of George Romero, whose *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) defined the current zombie genre, taking the monster from its roots in magic and transforming it into a peculiarly modern scourge. As will be shown, the resulting films are recognizably biblical in their apocalyptic imagery, and their prophetic denunciation of the society in which their creator and audience lives.

First, one should probably note the sheer ubiquity of the humble zombie today. Until Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series (2006 and following), it was as though vampires had disappeared from popular culture, and only the zombie remained as the chief representative of the undead. The zombie had always appeared in films, at least as far back as *White Zombie* (1932), but the new millennium saw many more of these than previous decades. It also saw a diversification among the various films, from the straightforwardly horrific depictions of George Romero (*Land of the Dead* [2005] and *Diary of the Dead* [2007]) and his followers like Zack Snyder (*Dawn of the Dead* [2004]) and Danny Boyle (*28 Days Later* [2002]), to comedies like *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), *Fido* (2006), and *Zombie Strippers* (2008). Zombies are favorite targets in video games, led by the *Resident Evil* franchise, which spun off into films (2002, 2004, and 2007). They have also increasingly shambled on to the printed page, either in comic book or graphic novel form, as with the immensely popular *Walking Dead* series (2003 and following), or in novels and short stories, most notably with the hugely successful *World War Z* (2006) by Max Brooks. Though Brooks is the best

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1. The discussion is taken with some revisions and expansion from my book, *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006). All biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

known author in this genre, many other writers now exploit the narrative possibilities of the zombie, including Brian Keene (e.g. *The Rising* [2003] and *City of the Dead* [2005]), David Wellington (the *Monster Island* trilogy [2004–2006]), and even the author of this essay (*Dying to Live* [2007] and *Dying to Live: Life Sentence* [2008]). As with the films, the literary world of zombies has expanded and diversified, and now includes such highbrow parody as Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009), and the romantic comedy of S.G. Browne's *Breathers* (2009).

The 'rules' of zombies have been fairly consistent throughout all these works, building on the depiction first put forward by Romero in his movie *Night of the Living Dead* (1968).[2] These are not Haitian or voodoo zombies, animated by magic and under the control of a summoner's will.[3] Instead, they are a recognizably modern monster, their magical or supernatural elements rationalized to fit contemporary sensibilities. Zombies in these current depictions are either living people infected with some virus (*28 Days Later*), or people killed by a virus that then causes their bodies to reanimate (Romero's more 'traditional' zombie). They are not afraid of garlic, holy water, crucifixes, or any other talisman. They cannot be killed by running water or sunlight or a stake through the heart, but only with the very brutal act of destroying their brains, usually with a spectacular head-shot or decapitation. They cannot fly or turn into a bat; they have average strength and way below-average intelligence, speed, and coordination. When pursuing live humans, they are as likely to stumble off a cliff or stagger into a whirling blade or electrified fence, as they are to succumb to the counterattacks of the living. So weak are they, zombies only pose a threat when attacking as a mob. Zombies are overwhelmingly ordinary, which is to say, they are terribly and fully human. This ultimately, I think, is their appeal, for they seem so much more 'real' to us than the more superhuman monsters like vampires and werewolves.

It should be noted, however, that the 'scientific' explanation is so mysterious as to function almost as 'magic': the disease works with a speed

2.   Romero's depiction of zombies or 'ghouls' has some precedent in the vampires of Richard Matheson's novel, *I Am Legend*, adapted several times into films. See Gregory A. Waller, *The Living and the Undead: From Stoker's* Dracula *to Romero's* Dawn of the Dead (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1986), p. 275: 'But by far the most important antecedent for *Night of the Living Dead* is *I Am Legend*. On various occasions Romero has acknowledged that the original idea for his film was "inspired" by Richard Matheson's novel, and the resemblance between the two works is striking'. David Pirie, *The Vampire Cinema* (New York: Crescent Books, 1977), p. 141, also notes *I Am Legend* as the inspiration for Romero.

3.   Though these too may have a 'rational' explanation: see Wade Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985); and *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

unknown among any terrestrial disease ever before seen, killing in seconds in some films, and it is not only 100% fatal, but also has the power to reanimate a human body with at least limited motor skills and memory, and apparently, also to keep the body from noticeably decaying way past its normal 'shelf life', as some of the stories take place years or even decades after the initial devastation. The virus is pretty clearly functioning to serve the narrative needs of the story, which is to fill the world with walking corpses, and watch how the characters react.[4] The characters themselves strain against the 'scientific' framework that is imposed on them, and sometimes give what almost seems the more plausible explanation—that this is a curse or judgment from an angry God (*Dawn of the Dead* [both 1978 and 2004]), something akin to many of God's statements in the book of Ezekiel: 'Thus says the Lord God: Disaster after disaster! See, it comes. An end has come, the end has come… My eye will not spare; I will have no pity… The sword is outside, pestilence and famine are inside; those in the field die by the sword; those in the city—famine and pestilence devour them' (Ezek. 7.5, 9, 15).

However the process got started, zombies rapidly increase their numbers by attacking and killing uninfected people, who then die and become zombies themselves. The particularly horrible addition made by Romero is that zombies partially eat their victims. This not only enables the film-maker or author to create scenes of grotesque cannibalism and dismemberment, but it also raises the symbolic stakes of the zombie. Unlike the seductive vampire, who bites his/her victim on the neck in a very sexualized gesture, the zombie tears other people limb from limb and flings their intestines into a steaming pile on the ground. There is nothing attractive or sensual about a zombie attack—it is animalistic and sickening. But since zombies look exactly like living human beings, their cannibalism also brings out the image of humanity preying on itself—the self-destructive and sadistic elements of all people, which have been seen on killing fields all across the 'real' world even without a zombie virus to excuse the behaviour. One of the more artful uses of this parallelism is perhaps to note the framing in *Land of the Dead*, which begins with a brutal massacre of zombies by gleefully laughing humans, and ends with a zombie feeding frenzy on the human population. Human violence reaps what it sows; the fiction of zombies just makes this more graphic.

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4.   On the uselessness of explanations, cf. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, pp. 275-76: 'To assert that "mysterious radiation" in some unexplained way causes the dead to roam the land in search of human flesh is finally little better than no explanation at all (especially since this is a quasi-official explanation and therefore likely in *Night of the Living Dead* to be a lie, distortion, or cover-up)… Ben and the other people trapped in the isolated house do not have the time to search for explanations, which would make little difference in any case'.

Because the zombie hordes multiply so rapidly, the outcome in most all zombie fiction and films is an apocalypse, an end of the world as we know it—an end of 'civilized' life and the ushering in of an indeterminately long age of barbarism, terror, and violence. Also, in the original meaning of 'apocalyptic', the cataclysm of murderous corpses also 'reveals' terrible truths about human nature, existence, and sin, since the zombies are themselves only human. This apocalyptic aspect of zombies is made perhaps the most explicit in the *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) remake, which uses the haunting, apocalyptic Johnny Cash song, 'The Man Comes Around', for the opening credits.[5] On the one hand, it is the most brutally and universally hopeless song imaginable: it ends with death and hellfire engulfing the entire earth at God's instigation. In that sense, it is the perfect choice for the movie, as ultimately all the characters are horribly killed. But in apocalyptic—whether it is the Bible's or Cash's or *Dawn of the Dead*'s interpretation of it—there is always some sense that choices still matter, that how we live our lives is important, even if the same horrible, inevitable, and equalizing death awaits each of us. In the song this is expressed in several lines, especially in the assurance that, 'Everybody won't be treated all the same'. Such reestablishment of righteousness is seriously undermined in much current horror, which is often nihilistic, and depicts everything as ultimately meaningless and random. Such a dismal evaluation is seen in Romero's earlier films, especially *Night of the Living Dead*, but here in the *Dawn* remake a sense of justice reappears, not just in the song, but in how the characters behave and how they die.[6] The ignoble characters die without any pity from us, even with a sense of our approval. And though the noble characters are also dead by the end, they die with our compassion and admiration. Exactly as in Revelation, where many of the elect die, this film shows that biological death (or life) should not be our only focus and is not the source of value in our lives.

Whether or not zombie films have a full sense of apocalypse—both as end of the world and as vindication of the just—and despite their eschewing a supernatural cause for the outbreak, one way in which they consistently resemble the Biblical prophets is the strong sense of moral outrage and

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5. In an otherwise negative evaluation of the film, Jamie Russell, *Book of the Dead: The Complete History of Zombie Cinema* (Godalming, Surrey: FAB Press, 2005), p. 185, notes the aptness of this choice of music.

6. In this sense, the film returns to a more classical, pre-Romero vision of horror movies, as described by J. Fraser, 'Watching Horror Movies', *Michigan Quarterly Review* 24.1 (1990), pp. 39-54 (47): 'And once the possibility of splatter effects had been opened up, an interesting tension was established wherein one partly *wanted* horrible things to happen, for their shock effect, and yet at the same time did not want them to happen to everyone. So that one stayed alert for possible clues as to who in some sense "deserved" to become victims'.

condemnation of the society in which the film-maker or prophet lives. This has been a visible, even blatant component of Romero's work throughout his career; it is what distinguishes his work from many of the lesser luminaries working in the horror genre.[7] The Hebrew prophets are known for railing against the moral deficiencies and sinful excesses they saw in contemporary Israel and Judah. The prophet Amos is particularly well-known for his denunciation of the economic disparity between rich and poor: 'Therefore because you trample on the poor and take from them levies of grain, you have built houses of hewn stone, but you shall not live in them; you have planted pleasant vineyards, but you shall not drink their wine' (Amos 5.11). Another favourite target of the prophets' ire was the smug complacency and reliance on the people's 'chosenness' as somehow insulating them from possible misfortune, rather than demanding a higher level of ethical commitment and devotion to justice: 'Its [Israel's] rulers give judgment for a bribe, its priests teach for a price, its prophets give oracles for money; yet they lean upon the Lord and say "Surely the Lord is with us! No harm shall come upon us" ' (Mic. 3.11; cf. Mt. 3.9; Lk. 3.8). Romero repeatedly returns to the current versions of those sins in modern America,[8] usually presented as consumerism (not just the hoarding of wealth, but the definition and valuation of oneself as a consumer of goods), and racism (which may well include nationalism, similar to Israel's discounting of other peoples in God's eyes, but with the added animosity and oppression of racial minorities within the United States). I will consider these two elements of social criticism in three of the five Romero zombie films, produced between 1968 and 2005.[9]

7.   This may be true of 'great' horror movies in general: see Andrew Britton, 'The Devil, Probably: The Symbolism of Evil', in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film* (ed. Andrew Britton, Richard Lippe, Tony Williams and Robin Wood; Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), pp. 34-42 (41): 'The great American horror movies…seem to me to be characterized not so much by ambivalence—a phenomenon discernible in such eminently mediocre and objectionable works as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—as by the use of the monster as the focus, or the catalyst, for the critical analysis of everything that "normality" represents'.

8.   On American society in zombie movies, cf. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 280: 'Perhaps the monstrous creatures in *Night of the Living Dead*, the "things" that are somehow still men, are the projection of our desire to destroy, to challenge the fundamental values of America, and to bring the institutions of our modern society to a halt'.

9.   *Day of the Dead* (1985) takes quite a different approach than the other films, returning us to the claustrophobia of the first film, but not making the sweeping social criticism of the second, focusing instead on more general observations of human nature, rather than society. And though I was not as disappointed with *Diary of the Dead* (2007) as some fans, the main target of its satire is our media culture (a self-referential target already at the periphery in *Night* and *Dawn*). While certainly timely in a world where

Romero's first zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), which has virtually defined the depiction of the undead since, also established—albeit in a muted and indirect manner—the films' tradition of critiquing a society they believe is lost and unfaithful to its calling as a force for justice in the world. Romero's critique is perhaps most similar to that of the prophet Jeremiah, who depicted his people as faithlessly turning from the higher purposes they had been given by God: 'How can you say, "We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us," when, in fact, the false pen of the scribes has made it into a lie? The wise shall be put to shame, they shall be dismayed and taken; since they have rejected the word of the Lord, what wisdom is in them?' (Jer. 8.8-9). Given its time, the appearance of a black protagonist in the film could not help but be remarked on by many viewers and critics, even though the race of the protagonist, Ben, is never noted or mentioned by the characters in the movie.[10] It is hard for viewers sometimes not to 'read' back into the film a reaction that is not there, and even critics have asserted that the antagonist, Harry Cooper, is a racist or bigot,[11] but there is no real hint of this in the film itself. But even though the posse that kills Ben at the end makes no remark about his race (they may not even be able to tell it in the dark window at that distance), Romero seems to go out of his way to surround the posse with imagery that makes it nearly impossible to overlook their similarity to an American lynch mob—a crowd of exclusively white men, only loosely governed by governmental authorities, with guns and barking dogs, killing everything in their path.[12] Moreover, in their role

the apocalypse will not just be televised, but will be blogged and tweeted and podcast every moment, it is harder to tie it in to broader critiques in the other films, or to the biblical critiques of similarly bad habits. As for non-Romero zombie films, they have tended to dilute his message (as with Snyder's remake, though it is an exciting action film), or simply take over the brains and intestines for shock value.

10. See Peter Hutchings, *The Horror Film* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2004), p. 112: 'the hero's racial identity is never referred to by any of the characters in the film'; R. Wood, 'Apocalypse Now: Notes on the Living Dead', in *American Nightmare* (ed. Britton, *et al.*), p. 93: 'The film has often been praised for never making an issue of its black hero's colour (it is nowhere alluded to, even implicitly)'. and R.H.W. Dillard, '*Night of the Living Dead*: It's Not like Just a Wind That's Passing Through', in Gregory A. Waller (ed.), *American Horrors: Essays on the Modern American Horror Film* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 14-29, gives an optimistic interpretation of this, esp. p. 19: 'Perhaps the only unusual thing about them is that no one of them ever comments about one of their numbers being black, especially in the light of his assuming a natural leadership. But even that lack of race prejudice in a tight situation may be more ordinarily American than we might suspect'.

11. Pirie, *Vampire Cinema*, p. 143, calls Cooper a 'bigot'.

12. Cf. Hutchings, *Horror Film*, p. 112: 'More than one critic has seen references here to lynching'; Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 295, who to some extent must rely on the second film: 'Though the posse cannot see that Ben is a black man, this murder

as protectors and re-establishers of societal order—which is to say, white, American, capitalist order—against the zombie's chaos, the posse's killing of a black man may be meant to connect him to the zombies as a perceived threat to that order.[13] If racism is not explicitly raised by the film, many of the trappings of it are used as background, subtly hinting at its presence in contemporary American society—and with the film's violent, nihilistic ending, hinting at racism's catastrophic results to the health of our country.

Romero's second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), begins with a much more blatant and explicit depiction of racism in the United States. At the very beginning of the film, a SWAT team storms a zombie-infested apartment building, inhabited by blacks and Latinos. Before the siege begins, one police officer expresses the stereotypical, white American rant against government aid to minorities, by claiming that the housing project is an unfair handout and waste: 'Shit, man, this is better than I got!' He then begins gleefully and indiscriminately shooting both living and undead people in the head. The transition from a fairly commonly-heard rant against government assistance, immediately into a murderous rampage, seems a pretty pointed criticism of those who use such rhetoric: if societal rules and restraints were to break down, Romero implies, some in the United States would quickly escalate from racist rhetoric to racist violence. Comments made by a United States congressman after hurricane Katrina would tend to make one believe Romero's cynicism was not misplaced or overstated: the congressman joked that the storm—whose official death toll was 1844— had 'finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans'.[14] In this sense, the congressman is following what seems one of the less helpful tendencies of apocalyptic—its tendency toward sectarianism and an 'us versus them' mentality (in this case, 'us' as the wealthy, white, and in power; 'them' as the unruly minorities and poor),[15] while Romero's vision is closer to Old

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evokes American racism at its deadliest and most virulent, a topic Romero will return to in the opening sequences of *Dawn of the Dead*'.

13. The analysis of Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 93: 'It is the function of the posse to restore the social order that has been destroyed; the zombies represent the suppressed tensions and conflicts—the legacy of the past, of the patriarchal structuring of relationships, dead yet automatically continuing—which that order creates and on which it precariously rests'.

14. Source for the death toll is the website of the National Weather Service—http://www.hpc.ncep.noaa.gov/tropical/rain/katrina2005.html (accessed June 26, 2009). The comments were made by Representative Richard Baker (R—La.), as reported in the *Washington Post*, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/09/AR2005090901930.html (accessed 26 June, 2009).

15. The sectarianism of Jewish apocalypticism reaches a highpoint with the Qumran community: see Eyal Regev, *Sectarianism in Qumran: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Religion and Society, 45; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2007), which also includes consideration of later movements such as the Anabaptists and the Shakers.

Testament prophecy with its warnings against self-righteousness and a feeling of moral or ethnic superiority.

But *Dawn of the Dead* moves on to consider more positive relations between the races. The most endearing and frequent image is that of a deep friendship between Roger (white) and Peter (African-American).[16] Their rapport begins under fire, highlighting how the shared experience of suffering and horror brings people together and transcends their differences. Like other famous film and literary couples or trios, they are complementary, completing each other's thoughts and actions.[17] Roger spends a good deal of the movie on his deathbed after a zombie attack; the scenes between them are touching, as two very macho and laconic characters try not to express their feelings. Peter is also entrusted with shooting his friend before he can return as a zombie. Again, enacting what rites seem appropriate to his macho demeanor, Peter drinks a toast at his friend's grave. The whole relationship seems quite believable, and their differing races are never mentioned: they are simply and sincerely friends, because fate has brought them together under the horrible circumstances that it has.

Dawn of the Dead goes further, however, than the relatively safe subject of an interracial friendship, daring to tread into what is still mostly taboo in mainstream films—an interracial, heterosexual couple of Peter, a black man, and Fran, a white woman. The film's end is utterly ambiguous as to the couple's ultimate fate, but what is clear is that the future of humanity—whether it is measured in minutes of centuries—will be based on this interracial couple.[18] Whether their life together will be happy—leaving aside the problems of the undead for a moment—is unknown, but how they might relate to each other with a new and better respect, overcoming racial and sexual tensions and expectations, is hinted at earlier in the film. Of all the male characters, Peter is the most polite and respectful towards Fran. He expresses this at their first meeting, even though Fran has just insulted him by objecting to

16. See Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 96, for the possible homosexual overtones of the friendship.

17. On their relationship, cf. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 304: 'Peter and Roger are a confident, effective team who speak the same language, share ideas, and perfectly complement each other'.

18. On the failure of traditional relationships and the formation of a new, see Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 96: 'In place of *Night*'s dissection of the family, *Dawn* explores (and explodes) the two dominant couple-relationships of our culture and its cinema: the heterosexual couple (moving inevitably towards marriage and its traditional male/female roles) and the male "buddy" relationship with its evasive denial of sexuality'; and Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 321: 'The couple that survives in *Dawn of the Dead*—a black man and a pregnant white woman—is not the traditional heterosexual couple (Fran and Stephen come closest to filling the role of the new Adam and Eve) or the pair of male buddies (like the team of Roger and Peter), but potentially a new type of partnership'.

his escaping with them in a helicopter. This is made more awkward, with the two sitting next to each other, but Peter effectively defuses it in the following exchange.

> Peter (nodding toward Steve): 'He your man?'
> Fran (laughing nervously): 'Most of the time'.
> Peter (smiling): 'I just like to know who everybody is'.
> Fran (smiling): 'Me too'.

Besides doing the socially graceful thing of overlooking her rudeness and 'breaking the ice', Peter also phrases the relationship between Fran and Steve in a revealing way. He seems to show her respect, by implying that Steve might belong to Fran, rather than her belonging to him. Fran welcomes this rapport, just as Roger had responded to Peter's friendly camaraderie earlier. Fran and Peter show here and throughout the film that they have better skills in dealing with people and relationships than do Roger or Steve—Roger being stubborn and headstrong, Steve being envious and insecure. It may not be too farfetched to posit that such a rapport between Peter and Fran stems in part from their similar experiences of being belittled and pushed aside in a racist, sexist America.

Peter subsequently is the first one to agree with Fran that she should have a say in their plans, and should be armed and able to protect herself from now on.[19] Peter is also the only one who welcomes and encourages Fran to learn to fly the helicopter, and her newly acquired skill is the only thing that saves them at the end of the film. When they fly off, he is much more beholden to her and reliant on her than she on him. She has saved Peter from Steve's foolish attempt to defend the mall, and she is now literally in the driver's seat. Given their personalities, we have some reason to think that Peter is more comfortable with this situation vis-à-vis a woman, than Steve could have been.[20] Perhaps even more importantly, we have to remember that Fran is pregnant with Steve's (white) child, not Peter's. Whatever their relationship may develop into, Peter's first role will be as a stepfather to another man's child, the very un-stereotypical situation of a child of one race, born to an interracial couple. It is a strange permutation of the Adam

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19. Cf. Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 96: 'But in the course of the film she progressively assumes a genuine autonomy, asserting herself against the men, insisting on possession of a gun, demanding to learn to pilot the machine'.

20. On their possible future relationship, see Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 96: 'Instead of the restoration of conventional relationship-patterns, we have the woman piloting the helicopter as the man relinquishes his rifle to the zombies'; and Waller, *Living and the Undead*, pp. 321-22: 'Fran—carrying within her the prospect of new life—has been the most perceptive of the group, and Peter has been the most skillful and the most inclined to regard her as an equal… Perhaps since Fran is piloting the helicopter and Peter has left behind his rifle, this couple is also escaping from the limiting roles fostered by a racist and sexist society that has now been destroyed'.

and Eve roles that we might expect at the end of such a movie, but oddly hopeful in its own way. Given Peter's kind, generous, and respectful attitude throughout the story, we have some confidence that he will fulfill such an awkward and demanding role better than most men. It also presents us with a potential future in which the significance of race is seriously undermined, if not totally abolished. But Romero implies that more hopeful future will only be realized when the mindless zombie hordes devour the old, corrupt, racist regime under which we now live.

Besides continuing and making more explicit the theme of American racism, the second film adds what would become perhaps Romero's best-known image: zombies stampeding through a mall as a parody of rampant, American consumer culture. The image has become so much a part of the modern definition of the zombie that there are now mass zombie walks in malls all over, often to gather blood for blood drives, or food for local charities, and usually staged around Halloween or (more blasphemously) Easter.[21] The final image in *Dawn of the Dead*—in which zombies stagger around the mall, mesmerized by the products there, while an absurd tune called 'The Gonk' plays on the Muzak system—is perhaps its most iconic, and later films can evoke and pay homage to the whole Romero corpus just by playing Muzak as their characters flee the living dead.[22] Romero's prophetic use of the image is to show that it is not the zombie's bite that turns us into monsters, but materialism and consumerism that turn us into zombies, addicted to things that satisfy only the basest, most animal or mechanical urges of our being.[23] This is repeatedly shown throughout *Dawn of the Dead* in the behavior of both the zombies and the human characters.

With the zombies, it is shown by their monomaniacal obsession with getting into the mall, even if it means their destruction. Sheer, unthinking tenacity or the search for prey cannot explain why the zombies pick *this* place as the one they feel they must occupy, over any other, and at any cost or risk. Though we will never know for sure, one can reasonably infer, based on Romero's depiction, that in a zombie-infested world, the former

21. 'Zombie walk' now has its own Wikipedia page, as well as a website at zombiewalk.com, which offers a forum for enthusiasts to keep informed of upcoming events. Though most are in the USA, the site lists walks in Canada, the UK, Europe, and South America.

22. Romero does this himself in *Day of the Dead*. It is also done in *Shaun of the Dead*.

23. For a scholarly analysis of consumerism in the film, see A. Loudermilk, 'Eating *Dawn* in the Dark: Zombie Desire and Commodified Identity in George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 3.1 (2003), pp. 83-108. For a sociological application of the image of 'living dead', but without reference to the film, see G. Ritzer, 'Islands of the Living Dead: The Social Geography of McDonaldization', *American Behavioral Scientist* 47.2 (2003), pp. 119-36.

churches, libraries, and classrooms are not nearly as crowded with the undead as are the malls. (Even, one could reasonably suspect, conventionally sinful places like casinos, bars, and brothels would not be as crowded with the eager undead as the shopping malls, for materialism and constant, mindless consumption are not just tolerated, but enthusiastically encouraged in our society, while these other sinful behaviors are still regarded as slightly embarrassing and furtive.) Steve interprets the zombies' behavior very accurately when they first land on the roof of the mall: to Fran's question of, 'Why do they come here?' he answers, 'Some kind of instinct. Memory. What they used to do. This was an important place in their lives'. This raises and complicates the horror of the living dead: not just that one will be torn to pieces and eaten alive—bad enough, surely—but that one will join the undead as an eternal mall-goer, never again able to conceive of anything higher or more interesting to do than wander about with a vacuous look of contentment, punctuated by longing, lustful stares at racks and displays full of useless, worthless stuff.

Peter will infer this eternal judgment of the zombies and themselves later in the film, as the human survivors again ponder the zombie hordes that are so eagerly and tenaciously trying to break in to their fortified mall, even though the humans have just finished slaughtering hundreds of them to secure it: 'They don't know why, they just remember they want to be in here', to which Fran asks, 'What the hell are they?' and Peter replies, 'They're us, that's all… When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth'. It is the most chilling line in a chilling movie, repeated in the remake in a cameo appearance by Ken Foree, who played Peter in the original. With this statement, Peter rightly judges both zombies and humans as damned to repeat their trivialities and mistakes for all eternity, never again with the possibility of learning from them or improving, because such education and improvement were so consistently spurned in life, and such trivial sinfulness was so enthusiastically embraced. Though people usually use the word 'Dantean' to describe the horrible grotesquery and torture in a movie like *Dawn of the Dead*, it is really more applicable to a vision like this. For Dante's depiction of sin is that it is exactly like an addiction, as depicted here—one that is willingly embarked on in life, and hopelessly and eternally repeated in death: 'I learned that to this place of punishment all those who sin in lust have been condemned, those who make reason slave to appetite'.[24] When they had reason and could think of better things to do than go to the mall, the people who would become mall zombies did not. Instead, they enslaved and finally killed their reason with their mundane and trivial appetites, thereby dooming themselves to repeat their sinful actions forever, never able to correct or extricate themselves from their sinful mistake.

24. Dante, *Inferno* (trans. Mark Musa; New York: Penguin, 1984), 5.37-39.

If you 'shop till you drop', you will drop very far indeed, and will be con-demned to shop forever.[25]

Romero has increased the relevance and discomfort of his prophetic cri-tique by showing how the live humans are no less obsessed with getting into and staying in the mall than are the zombies. The plot of the movie is consistently driven by the survivors' lust to acquire and possess, especially predominant in the male characters. Roger, Steve, and many of the bikers who attack their mall/fortress are killed for their mad, foolish lust for pos-sessions, but all the characters succumb to it at one point or another. The bikers, comically portrayed as the least thoughtful among the characters, are even more obsessed with possessions and indiscriminate in acquiring them than our protagonists, killing and dying just to grab any old thing in sight.[26] Steve and Peter steal paper money and then play poker with it, even though it's completely worthless now. Steve also epitomizes the attitude that pos-session is nine tenths of the law, and nine tenths of the value he puts on his life, apparently, when he snarls, 'It's ours! We took it!' and madly sacri-fices his life to die in his consumerist prison rather than give it up without a fight. Earlier, his only consolation to Fran when she was attacked and nearly killed by a zombie was to reassure her, 'You should see all the great stuff we got… This place is terrific, it really is. It's perfect!' Roger, in his final, dying delirium, must be comforted by Peter that his sacrifice was worth it, but we know that this is simply and pathetically not so. When the four of them sur-vey their 'victory' over the undead for which Roger has sacrificed himself, Romero dresses them up in enormous, poofy fur coats, in what can only be described as the fashion choice of a pimp—gaudy, tasteless, flamboy-ant, androgynous, and utterly unnecessary in their climate-controlled for-tress/prison.[27] Even Peter, who seems the most enlightened and thoughtful of the men, is in fact the first to utter a cry of delight at what they variously

25. The consumer motto is invoked similarly in David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: A Cultural History of Horror* (rev. edn; London: Faber & Faber: 2001), p. 376: 'Ellis' world of blood-soaked designer labels recognizably upgrades the voracious mall zom-bies in *Dawn of the Dead*: they shop till they drop, eat your brains, then shop some more'.

26. On the comparison of the bikers with our protagonists, see Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 96: 'The motorcycle gang's mindless delight in violence and slaughter is anticipated in the development of Roger; all three groups are contaminated and moti-vated by consumer-greed (which the zombies simply carry to its logical conclusion by consuming *people*)'; and Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 317, who notes that 'their looting of the mall is a parodic repetition of Fran, Stephen, Peter, and Roger's shop-ping spree'.

27. The fur coats are also other corpses with which they surround themselves: cf. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p.311: 'The mall—refuge or promised land or prison—belongs to the living. However, in making it safe and habitable, they have, figuratively at least, closed themselves in and surrounded themselves with corpses'.

call their newfound 'kingdom' and 'gold mine': to Roger's objection that they are now cut off from Fran and Steve and trapped inside JC Penney's, Peter shouts, 'Who the hell cares?! Let's go shopping!' From beginning to end, the film is full of men killing themselves and others to get and hold on to things that they do not really need, and which do not even make them happy. It is one of the saddest and most damning critiques of consumerism imaginable.

After Roger's death, the survivors' consumerist glee turns even more sour. As the saying goes, they no longer own their possessions, their possessions own them. The especially poignant aspect of this is how corrosive it is to their relationships, especially the romantic and sexual relation between Fran and Steve. The scene of Steve's marriage proposal is the most obvious example of this.[28] Although I strongly suspect that it is another ploy of our consumerist society to persuade men that they *have* to spend two months' salary on an engagement ring, it would also seem true that all of the romance and attraction is lost if one could just walk into a jewelry store and grab anything one wanted for free, as Steve has done with Fran's ring. Such a 'gift' is not real, for it costs the giver nothing in a world where everything is simply lying around, worthless and unappreciated (even as it is ironically grabbed and pursued with such murderous zeal). Indeed, after their initial slaughter to take over the mall, our protagonists need make no effort for anything, and they settle into a smothering ennui, disinterested in everything, even sex. At one point, Steve is shown in his fancy bed and silk sheets, sullen and bored, and the camera pulls back to reveal Fran right next to him: they could be making love or cuddling or talking or even just playing checkers, but instead they are utterly miserable and alone together in their gilded prison.

Even Fran, although she seems ten times more perceptive and resistant to the mall's supposed charms than her male companions, is shown briefly succumbing to some kind of consumerist fantasy late in the movie. She sits at an enormous vanity mirror, made up with so much make-up that it is clownish and grotesque, not sexy or attractive. She tries to strike seductive or suggestive poses with a pearl handled pistol, like Bonnie in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), though it all seems quite unnecessary and absurd, for Fran is a very pretty woman, allowing for the clothes and hairstyles of the 70s, and this hideous posturing is clearly no improvement. Whatever the reasons for or content of her fantasy, it is already going badly enough, when the mall loudspeakers issue a call, 'Attention shoppers!' The illusion

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28. On the scene, see Wood, 'Apocalypse Now', p. 96: 'The pivotal scene is the parody of a romantic dinner, the white couple, in evening dress, cooked for and waited on by the black, with flowers and candlelight, the scene building to the man's offer and the woman's refusal of the rings that signify traditional union'.

of glamour and beauty is completely shattered by the loudspeakers' offer of a free bag of cheap candy with every purchase—when now every purchase is free. Following this wakeup, Fran seems more disgusted than ever, this time with herself as well.[29] She realizes the mall is hypnotizing them and making them as fake as it is, with its faux foliage in planter boxes, one of which now unceremoniously serves as a tomb for Roger; its hollow, toy-land-like clock tower, chiming hours in a land where time certainly does not matter anymore;[30] and its mannequins with painted tans and grins, in a world where there is no sun, and very little at which to smile. The mall is also making them as dead and numb as the other zombies that ravenously and impotently paw and slobber at its outside doors: they are trapped out-side, and our three survivors are trapped inside.

As with biblical prophecy, however, the point of the movie is not sim-ply to announce doom and judgment, but to issue a warning that its audi-ence might actually act upon: 'Hear the word of the Lord, O nations, and declare it in the coastlands far away; say, "He who scattered Israel will gather him, and will keep him as a shepherd a flock."… Indeed, I heard Ephraim pleading: "You disciplined me, and I took the discipline; I was like a calf untrained. Bring me back, let me come back, for you are the Lord my God" ' (Jer. 31.10, 18). Right up until the death rattle or disembowelment that will make one permanently and irrevocably a zombie, one can make choices that matter. Fran takes responsibility for herself, not blaming the situation or others, when she confronts the men: 'What have we done to ourselves?'[31] That question is really the fundamental one from a Christian perspective, much more so than the question of theodicy (i.e. 'Why is God doing this to us?') that one usually expects in an apocalyptic scenario.

Land of the Dead (2005) returns to these themes of racism and consum-erism with less humor and more action. The zombie hordes are not the real villains of this installment. That role is fulfilled by a power-hungry and power-mad capitalist, Kaufman, providing another pointed and memorable

29. Cf. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 314: 'Striking "provocative" poses with a six-gun, Fran resembles a painted mannequin or a poor imitation of a gangster's moll or a child costumed as an adult. Over the mall's loud-speakers, a voice calls all "shop-pers" to pay attention, and Fran looks up as if she realizes the extent to which she has become the willing, predictable "shopper"—the prisoner who can no longer see the bars of her prison'.

30. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, p. 320, observes this of the very end of the movie: 'Ironically, the mall's clock chimes over and over, marking the hour for a crowd of shoppers who will never again worry about the passage of time'.

31. Cf. Waller, *Living and the Undead*, pp. 314-15: 'For unlike the automatistic zombies who still fill the parking lot and press against the entrances of the mall, the well-fed, safe, comfortable human beings inside this fortress have the freedom to choose'.

part of Romero's critique of current society. Kaufman seems to be a combination of capitalist robber-baron, mad Roman emperor, and organized crime king-pin.[32] His name means 'trader' or 'merchant', as though that were the essence of his character. To have the new ruler of the only remaining human society be named 'merchant', shows how Romero believes that commerce is the highest form of power in the old, pre-zombie human society. In this chilling, cynical, but uncomfortably realistic view, it is not the military, government, or church that exercises real power, but the wealthy, who may use these other institutions as proxies or fronts for their selfish machinations. According to Romero, the White House, the Pentagon, and the Vatican do not run or exploit the world—Wall Street does.

Played by Dennis Hopper with more restraint than he often exercises, and therefore much more effectively, Kaufman is positively Satanic in the absurd and sadistic lengths to which he will go in order to perpetuate his reign, as the reviewer for the *New York Times* noted: 'With this new movie, we jump straight to the ninth circle, where Satan is a guy in a suit and tie who feasts on the misery of others, much as the dead feast on the living'.[33] Kaufman is one of the few, perhaps the only one of the characters in any of the films, to note how the zombie menace fundamentally changes all human interactions, and does so to his advantage: when informed that he's in 'trouble', Kaufman quite correctly responds that, 'In a world where the dead are returning to life, the word "trouble" loses much of its meaning'. Only the raiders in *Dawn of the Dead* would perhaps share Kaufman's preference for life in a world overrun by zombies, but the raiders were crude, disorganized, and comical amateurs compared to Kaufman. Again, *Land of the Dead* teases us with the idea that it is not the leather-clad, tattooed biker, or the big, scary black man who will do us harm, but the well-dressed, well-mannered, sinister, and well-organized banker and businessman who is the real threat to our well-being.

While others in the movie long to return to 'normal' life, Kaufman sees how 'good' life can be in a zombie-infested world, for it not only removes all restraints on him, it even lets him set up a hellish society based on his values of greed, envy, vice, and cruelty.[34] We see this when he explains his

32. Cf. S. Klawans, 'Alien Nation', *Nation* 281.4 (August 1, 2005), pp. 41-44 (44), where he calls Kaufman 'an all-purpose realtor, corporate czar and crime boss'. Russell, *Book of the Dead*, p. 190, makes the reference much more specific and historically contextualized: 'Presenting Kaufman as a composite of George W. Bush and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Romero makes his criticism of the regime more than transparent'.

33. Manohla Dargis, 'Not Just Roaming, Zombies Rise Up', *New York Times*, 24 June, 2005; online at http://movies.nytimes.com/2005/06/24/movies/24rome.html (accessed 28 June, 2009).

34. Cf. Russell, *Book of the Dead*, p. 186: 'What was threatened before in Romero's

own version of 'civic duty' at one point: according to him, he has a great and noble 'responsibility' for his fellow citizens, because he 'kept people off the streets by giving them games and vices'. Like Milton's (1608–1674) Satan more than Dante's, Kaufman believes that it is, 'Better to reign in Hell, than serve in Heav'n'.[35] And while he's mixing in various classic depictions of Satan, Romero is, of course, not above the burlesque version of Goethe's (1749–1832) Mephistopheles, having Kaufman say, as probably only Hopper could pull it off, while picking his nose(!), 'Zombies, man, creep me out!'

The fantasy of what Satan/Kaufman tempts us with is graphically shown in the advertisements and reality of Fiddler's Green, the safe tower in the middle of Kaufman's city. It is a place where 'Life goes on!' as before, undisturbed by the miseries of others, or by the inevitable specter of (un)death. The ground floor of Fiddler's Green resembles a much more upscale mall than that depicted in the original *Dawn of the Dead*,[36] now made more horrible and wretched by its opulence, and by the fact that it is not just zombies and biker gangs that are being kept out, but sick and starving children. All attempts to dress the fantasy up as anything other than crass and cannibalistic consumption has finally been stripped away by the exigencies of a zombie-infested world. The inner sanctum of consumption and exclusion is not named something bellicose like The Citadel, or patriotic, like Freedom Tower: instead, it's got one of those generically happy-sounding names like the $1.5 million condos with 24-hour fitness centers, climate control, and security, cocooned in shining glass and steel towers and advertised in the back of in-flight magazines. It is an image of privileged irresponsibility in the face of suffering, like 'fiddling while Rome burns'.[37] Apparently the name even comes from an old Irish legend of where happy fishermen go when they die, a place where, 'There's pubs and there's clubs and there's lassies there too. And the girls are all pretty and the beer is all free. And there's bottles of rum growing on every tree'.[38] It is an adult version of Pleasure Island in *Pinocchio* or Neverland

series has finally come to pass: the living are now more like monsters than the living dead'.

35. John Milton, *Paradise Lost* (ed. C. Ricks; Signet, 1968), 1.263.

36. Cf. Russell, *Book of the Dead*, p. 189: 'With the apartments of Fiddler's Green a more luxurious take on the shopping mall enclave from *Dawn of the Dead*, it's obvious that Romero has lost none of his anti-consumerist fervour even when taking a major Hollywood studio's dollar'.

37. The connection suggested by Russell, *Book of the Dead*, p. 189.

38. I was first alerted to this by the 'Trivia' section for *Land of the Dead* on the Internet Movie Database site: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0418819/ (site visited 14 November, 2005). The lyrics are from 'Brobdingnagian Bards', http://www.thebards.net/music/lyrics/Fiddlers_Green.shtml (accessed 28 June, 2009).

in *Peter Pan*, but it is no more mature, and no more real. The cut scene of a suicide (now available on the DVD version) makes the fantastical and unsatisfying aspect of such an existence painfully clear: surrounded by comfort and ease, some people find their life so empty and meaningless that they kill themselves and become zombies, who at least have a lot more drive and ambition. And even if they don't avail themselves of suicide, zombie-hood is where they are all headed anyway, but before they get there, they have the added damnation of being the docile and cooperating thralls of Kaufman/Satan.

The reality of the hellish kingdom over which Kaufman rules is indelibly impressed on our imaginations by the view from his office, which is as Dantean and apocalyptic as anything else presented in the films. As far as the eye can see is a grey, blighted, lifeless urban moonscape that might as well be Hiroshima or Auschwitz, it is so dead and demoralizing, yet it represents the best view in Fiddler's Green, one for which Kaufman is eager to kill, protecting it and keeping it away from the 'common' folk who dwell below, or from the hungry undead outside the walls. Twice as the zombies are attacking his kingdom, he cries out, 'You have no right!' when, of course, Kaufman based his kingdom on ignoring others' rights and acting like a terrorist and a criminal. His evil reign is not based on any 'right' other than 'might makes right'—and if the zombie hordes now possess more might, then they are the rightful rulers.

Besides making a capitalist robber-baron the villain, Romero increases the social criticism of this film with his choice of who leads the zombie army against Kaufman. The smartest zombie in this film, the one who thinks to launch a counterattack against the sadistic humans, and who thinks of various ways around the obstacles in getting there, is a black gas station attendant whose name tag reads 'Big Daddy'. One reviewer rightly noted that Big Daddy and Riley (the main human protagonist) are the only two sympathetic characters in the film, and even went as far as to say that Big Daddy is Riley's 'zombie alter ego'.[39] At the end of the movie, with Kaufman killed and his city in ruins, Big Daddy and Riley look at one another from a distance and seem to declare some truce—Big Daddy shambling off without further attacks, as the intelligent zombie Bub had done at the end of *Day of the Dead*. The films had begun with a black man lying dead at the hands of a white posse sent out to impose order on society; *Land of the Dead* ends with a black zombie bringing about the end of a corrupt, violent human society and then seemingly ceasing his own rampage. If the former was a potent and uncomfortable indictment of 1960s America with its racism and pointless overseas wars in places like Vietnam, the new instalment is a sobering implication of how it might end—with an army of those

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39. Dargis, 'Not Just Roaming'.

exploited rising up against the oppressors who have based their affluent and wasteful lifestyle on the toil and suffering of others.[40]

Modern Christians in the West often seem as smug as any caricature of the ancient Israelites to whom Amos prophesied. We too often assume our way of life will continue as it is now, maintaining our level of affluence and consumption indefinitely, even though such extravagance is at the expense of other people and the environment and will inevitably run out. Further, whether or not we espouse something as explicit as a 'prosperity gospel', many seem to take it for granted that our material well-being is a good thing, ordained and approved by a God whom we have pleased through our behavior. Zombie movies stand as a stark, sobering, even terrifying counterbalance to such a vision of modern Christianity. They instead offer us Amos' bitter, disillusioned criticism of our wealth and skewed values, couched in the horrifying, monstrous terms of Ezekiel, and leading to the ultimate destruction and judgment of Revelation. The compatibility between zombie films and the biblical tradition seems to me irrefutable and compelling, and therefore their relevance to Christians—or, indeed, any religious or humanist person who seeks to expose the sinful, misguided excesses of the modern world—seems equally certain.

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2. *SOUTHLAND TALES*, THE FILM OF REVELATION: RICHARD KELLY'S SATIRE OF AMERICAN APOCALYPSE

Lee Quinby

I've watched a fair number of apocalyptic films over the years, most on DVD within the comfort of my own home, but only one—Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2007)—has prompted me to view it with Bible in hand.[1] Although the book of Revelation has long been a vital source of inspiration for cinema, there has also been a striking divide between religious and secular films in relation to this particularly enigmatic biblical text. Religious films regularly draw explicitly from Revelation, often citing specific passages for didactic purposes or portraying the End Times in accordance with a Fundamentalist perspective, as with the *Left Behind* films from the popular book series of the same name. Watching such films, I tend to take for granted that any quotations from Revelation will already have been cite-checked for accuracy. Secular films, by contrast, typically draw on the drama and spectacle of apocalyptic catastrophe, convert its beasts to the likes of Godzilla and Cloverfield, humanize its messianic warrior, and revel in its graphic gore and utopian hopes, but have little interest in turning viewers directly to Revelation itself.

   Kelly's film is a notable exception to this customary split. Indeed, he has indicated that *Southland Tales* is a loose interpretation of the book of Revelation, updated to the contemporary world, even saying that it was an effort to get 'this whole apocalypse thing out of my system once and for all' (DVD). But such claims are as cryptic as the film itself. In this essay, I show that his use of Revelation to frame and shape the film, along with significant literary and film allusions and other biblical references throughout, is a satirically ironic but fitting way to represent collective and individual responses to national trauma. Although secular in its focus on a highly

contentious 2008 presidential election, *Southland Tales* is in many ways
faithful to selected verses as well as thematic complexities of Revelation.
Yet the film also challenges Revelation's main thrusts of transcendent truth
and absolute oppositions of good versus evil. This conjunction of mirroring
and critique is precisely what makes the film so apt a reflection of and on
this time of social and economic crisis in the United States.

In rhetorical terms, Kelly's film is an example of catachresis in the way
that Stephen Moore (drawing upon Gayatri Spivak) has defined it in *Empire
and Apocalypse*: 'a practice of resistance through an act of creative appro-
priation, a retooling of the rhetorical or institutional instruments of imperial
oppression that turns those instruments back against their official owners'.[2]
As Moore explains, Revelation employs catachresis in its appropriation of
empire. Its attack on the Roman Empire as corrupt and deserving of destruc-
tion is its way of declaring the truly worthy and eternal empire of the King
of Kings. He further indicates, however, that Revelation's retooling of the
term empire can—and has—run the risk of re-inscribing the hierarchy and
authoritarian rule of the Roman empire.

In this light, I see *Southland Tales* as a 'creative appropriation' of the
book of Revelation as it has come to be understood in the American context.
From the outset of Puritan colonization, America was construed as a future
New Jerusalem, and this has been carried on subsequently through the
American Revolution and into recent times, with empire building increas-
ingly being conducted on an earthly level that has indeed fed the authori-
tarian impulses of U.S. imperialism. Kelly's satirical version of Revelation
takes this one step further. His film mirrors Revelation just enough to insure
recognition of its key elements. But by making his film a satire of apoca-
lypse, he mocks the call to empire, showing instead how that impulse has
for too long traumatized the body politic.

Throughout the film, Revelation is quoted at key moments by a narrator
called Pilot Abilene (Justin Timberlake), a returning Iraq war veteran who
has been wounded by 'friendly fire'. According to Kelly, Abilene's voi-
ceovers are meant to 'mimic Martin Sheen' in *Apocalypse Now* (Crocker
interview). In the first of such instances, Abilene appears toward the end of
the film's opening segment, perched in a gun turret on a building top over-
looking Venice Beach, holding an opened Bible as he intones the words of
Revelation 1.1-3: 'The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto
him, to show unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass;
and he sent and signified it by his angel unto his servant John: Who bare
record of the word of God, and of the testimony of Jesus Christ, and of all
things that he saw. Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words

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2. Stephen Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testa-
ment* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), p. 106.

of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein: for the time is at hand'.[3]

What follows is a film that is by turns sophisticated and naïve, almost always confusing, often hilarious, and a genuinely weird mix of cosmic time rifts, music videos, and conspiracies run amok. For the most part, upon its 2007 release in the United States, critics rendered harsh judgment of the film. Even those who praised it gave it a mixed assessment, as with Manohla Dargis' *New York Times* review that deemed it 'neither disaster nor master-piece'. A year earlier, in a three-hour version that was not a final cut, it was booed at Cannes. Nevertheless, Kelly got a distribution contract, went back to the cutting board, and released the current version that he had shortened and presumably tightened. It was a box-office flop. Unlike his earlier expe-rience with *Donnie Darko*, a box office failure that subsequently became enormously popular as a cult film and DVD success, *Southland Tales* seems to have been largely neglected or forgotten altogether, except for a hand-ful of insightful treatments available on the Internet. Notable among these is Steven Shaviro's commentary, in which he asserts that the film is 'one of those rare works that is "as radical as reality itself," and that reflects upon our real situation while at the same time inserting itself within that situation, rather than taking a pretended distance from it'. On Salon.com, Thomas Rogers has provided a valuable exegesis of the film, entitled 'Everything You Were Afraid to Ask About *Southland Tales*'. Of course, it is probably a bad sign as far as sheer entertainment is concerned for a film to require a blow-by-blow account of its plot, and it is not an exaggeration to say that its disjointed sequences, bizarre cast of characters, and speculations on fourth dimension reality make it almost impossible to follow, especially on first viewing.

And yet, despite (and as I will argue because of) its cinematic chaos, *Southland Tales* deserves serious attention precisely because of the way the book of Revelation is deployed throughout. Kelly's unique blend of scriptural fidelity and secular focus provides an intriguing depiction of cul-tural and personal trauma stemming from uncomfortably familiar forms of calamity that have debilitated both the United States and its citizenry since 9/11. As he has stated in an interview, 'the subject of this film was the end of civilization as we know it: it had to be this big and elaborate and puz-zle-like. Because that's the dilemma we're in right now as a country, as a species or as a planet, whether it's Iraq or global warming or health care'.[4] Simultaneously a tribute to the powerful images and words of Revelation

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3. Unless otherwise designated, all quotes from Revelation are Abilene's wording, which on a few occasions vary slightly from the King James Bible version.

4. Jonathan Crocker, 'Richard Kelly: Interview', *TimeOut New York*, http://www.timeout.com/film/newyork/features/show-feature/3842/richard-kelly-interview

and a cavalier upending of it, *Southland Tales* is a satirical film that strives to clear away the film of apocalyptic longings.

Trauma as a Space/Time Rift

A terrorist attack opens Kelly's film to mark the beginning of the end. Yet, as Kelly' remark above indicates, a 9/11 like assault is not the only form of trauma seen to beset the United States of *Southland Tales*. Other shocks to the national system are highlighted throughout its intricate plot, which I elaborate on in the section to follow. The war in Iraq is paramount among these, both as deep injury to the nation's standing worldwide and through the post-traumatic stress disorder that several of the main characters suffer. So too, the film depicts a traumatized earth, with global warming sparking fires and earthquakes. Oil dependence and the pollution caused by its over-use provoke and prolong wounds to the environment. Strident ideological clashes parallel the militarism of the war itself, with extremism on the right and the left of the political spectrum becoming so rigid as to make compromise impossible. Furthermore, extremists on both sides resort to criminality and violence against their declared enemies. Amidst all this damage is a corrupt and criminal election process traumatizing the body politic.

As Vamik Volkan has explained, such instances of profound shared trauma often go unresolved in a society, and 'can leave members of a group dazed, helpless, and too afraid, humiliated, and angry to complete or even initiate a mourning process'.[5] Victims of this kind of traumatic experience tend to 'relive the trauma in daydreams and dreams, suffer amnesia, or may become hypervigilant or completely dissociated from the idea of danger. Their responses to others are often contaminated with their reactions to their victimizers; they interchange their own identities with those of the aggressors, and they merge aspects of different events'.[6] To put this in terms of Kelly's vision, America is a traumatized society undergoing a split so deep that reality itself has been split asunder. As Charles Strozier observed about traumatized social experience after 9/11, it seemed 'frozen in time and place'.[7] Kelly's tying together of apocalypse and the space/time rift of trauma cogently displays the way that catastrophic events kill time. With the book of Revelation, the apocalyptic event is the longed for turn from earthly time to the timeless space of the New Jerusalem. For Kelly, however, the death of time and history is the

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5. Vamik Volkan, *Bloodlines: From Ethnic Pride to Ethnic Terrorism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), p. 40.

6. Ibid., p. 42.

7. Charles B. Strozier, 'The World Trade Center Disaster and the Apocalyptic', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2002, p. 371.

result of living on after trauma overtakes a culture. The apocalyptic desire to supplant human temporality with utopian space is what Elana Gomel has called 'the perverse dynamics of temporal self-negation whose political twin is violent self-destruction'.[8] Kelly's film unrelentingly shows us how chaotic and perverse that dynamic can be. In this regard, watching the film is like being traumatized, since it mirrors these traumatic symptoms of confusion of time and space.

Throughout *Southland Tales*, collective trauma is expressed through symptoms that combine shock, amnesia, hysteria, fear, paranoia, and aggression. Yet, in the film, the characters manifesting these symptoms have little interiority; their inner self-suffering is largely externalized through gesture and action. Kelly thus seems more intent on showing us cultural and collective trauma as an effect on the nation as a whole, symbolized by the various characters that populate the film, rather than the suffering of any given individual. In *Southland Tales*, the unity of the nation has been split apart into warring factions. Loss of reality is accentuated by the vast, ensemble cast made up of well-known actors like Miranda Richardson as well as highly recognizable members of the cast of the television show *Saturday Night Live*. So too, as the lead played by Dwayne 'the Rock' Johnson suggests, celebrity worship functions throughout the film as both cause and effect of the collective trauma of the nation. Johnson plays an action hero who is married to the daughter of the vice presidential nominee for the Republican Party, is exploited by both opposing political sides, and has lost his memory. One *of Southland Tales*' cautionary tales is that adoration of celebrity replaces the ability to remember history, which in turn weakens insights necessary to foster a democratic present and future.

In keeping with the focus of national trauma, both loss and recovery of memory are central themes throughout the film. In addition to the Rock's character, the film portrays a soldier returned from Iraq in the throes of amnesia resulting from the violence he inflicted and endured. As with 9/11 and the wars then waged against Afghanistan and Iraq, the film indicates the links between that initial assault and subsequent ongoing assaults suffered by those who are sent to retaliate. Again, both cause and effect are blurred here, which is consistent with what analysts have observed about the 'site of trauma', arguing that it 'seems impossible to define trauma by external, objective criteria. Rather, as observers have long claimed for the clinical realm, trauma turns out to be not an event per se but rather the *experiencing*

8.   Elana Gomel, 'Everyday Apocalypse: J.G. Ballard and the Ethics and Aesthetics of the End of Time', Forum on the Ethics of Temporality, *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* (guest editor Amit Yahav), 8.1 (January 2010), pp. 185-208 (189).

or *remembering* of an event in the mind of an individual or the life of the community'.[9] Much of the film focuses on this kind of traumatic memory in the soldiers' minds that disallows a healing process to take place. The media's constant replaying of traumatic events like 9/11 in reality and the terrorist attack in the film are thus brought under scrutiny as questionable, since they re-enact and reignite the traumatic event and thwart healing. The film further suggests that this exacerbation of trauma is part of a vast power struggle waged by the media and political and corporate leaders. Conspiracies run rampant as each side sees the attack as an opportunity to gain control. Using the rhetoric of fear and hatred, each side induces cultural paranoia and then uses those emotions to justify installing surveillance over all citizens.

Given Kelly's expressed and presumably shared concern with our current dilemma as a country, species, and planet—and given his success with *Donnie Darko*—it is worth asking why *Southland Tales*' depiction of national trauma, corruption, and apocalyptic chaos did not find a more receptive audience. Several possibilities come to mind. It is indeed chaotic and thus hard to follow. It is still too long. What Steven Shaviro praised as 'post-cinematic' and 'videocentric' innovation may produce more annoyance than satisfaction in viewers who want a more typical apocalyptic blockbuster. But I think what most blocked its reception was also its greatest insight—the use of the book of Revelation as the key text to comprehending that, as a society, America is mired in apocalyptic belief, perceiving itself as both victim and victor in a dynamic bent on destruction.

'The Future is Just Like You Imagined'

Watching *Southland Tales* is actually a lot like reading the book of Revelation because, in each case, one is disoriented not only by inexplicable narrative shifts and the sudden appearance and disappearance of a host of unidentified characters, but also by complex evil conspiracies threatening to destroy the earth as well as mystifying pledges promising to save it. Like John of Patmos, narrator Pilot Abilene takes us along for a unruly ride, sometimes channeling his vision from Revelation, at other times commenting from his own line of vision. Like Melville's Ahab, Abilene has been disfigured—a jagged purple scar runs around one side of his face, subtly forming a ? shape. His mark may suggest the one dictated by Revelation's beast (13.16), but this is only one of many ambiguities challenging an effort

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9.   Paul Lerner and Mark S. Micale, 'Trauma, Psychiatry, and History: A Conceptual and Historiographical Introduction', in *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 20.

to assign a case by case match between characters in the film and in Revelation. As with Revelation itself, in the film it is a mistake to take people, actions, or things at face value. The link to Melville, another writer for whom the Bible served as point and counterpoint, seems clearer in the sense that Abilene's scar is the result of the war in Iraq, the white whale of U.S. foreign policy. Yet actually more Ishmael than Ahab, and like John of Patmos, Abilene has survived to tell the tale, or more precisely, as the title of the film indicates, tales. Four cinematic tales make up the film, consisting of a brief pre-title segment and 3 subsequent chapters, numbered IV, V and VI. In other words, the film occurs *in medias res*, thus rejecting the traditional narrative form of beginning, middle and end, although it does start with a momentous event and ends with an even bigger one.

The pre-title segment of the film opens in the year 2005 with a beguiling background scene filled with family revelry at a 4th of July backyard picnic in Abilene, Texas. Two boys with a video camera give viewers a live action perspective as they move between living room and backyard, zooming in on objects from water pistols to Uncle Sam paraphernalia. Suddenly the setting turns from balloons, buddies, and barbeque to the Big Bang of nuclear destruction. Stunned Independence Day partiers gaze skyward as a huge mushroom cloud hangs heavy over the horizon. The screen next fills with a dazzling and dizzying array of electronic media to relay through multiple images and digital text the ensuing story. Two terrorist assaults, the Abilene nuclear blast and one more in El Paso, annihilated Texas and inaugurated World War III.

How are viewers to understand this sequence, since it is clear that Texas was not bombed off the face of the earth in the year 2005? On the satiric political front, of course, it points to the Presidency of George W. Bush of Texas as catastrophic for the nation and the world. But it also introduces the key conceit of the film—a rift in the 4th dimension. Although this is not explained until the very end of the film, it seems that the events that unfold before us on the screen are taking place in another dimension that parallels reality as we have known it. Or something like that. The scientific logic may be doubtful, even bogus, but I read it as a satirical take on the way that Revelation depicts time interrupted, with the future appearing in the present as a kind of alternate reality.

Now, three years later, America has become a wasteland at war, battling Iraq and Afghanistan as well as Iran, Syria, and North Korea. The nation is wracked internally by power mongers, including a band of cutthroat neo-Marxists, a conniving Republican candidate and his surveillance-manic wife, and a 'renegade scientist' touting 'fluid karma', an electromagnetic energy field that he promises will replace badly needed oil supplies. During the summer of 2008, the timeframe in which the film proper takes place, this motley cast of characters has gathered in California, the Southland of the

title, because the outcome of the November election hinges on its electoral votes. More to the point at hand, they are in Los Angeles, clearly the Babylon of the story, the site of debauchery, political corruption, and rampantly exploitive commerce. The campaign being fought is between the Democratic ticket, Clinton-Lieberman (in post-election retrospect, one of the more fanciful elements of the film) and the Republican ticket, Eliot-Frost, the names of which correspond to those renowned poets whose works, along with Revelation are quoted sporadically in the film.

More background information is provided through Pilot Abilene's voiceover, accompanied by a montage of graphic and photographic images that introduce a key character in the saga to unfold: Boxer Santaros (Dwayne Johnson, the 'Rock'). Santaros, whose name suggests 'Saint Eros', is an action hero movie star; he is married to the daughter of vice-presidential candidate, Bobby Frost (Holmes Osborne), who is given to quoting lines from his namesake, Robert Frost, apparently in an effort to establish gravitas. On June 27, Abilene informs us, Santaros disappeared, only to be found again by government trackers in the desert three days later. But following this 'resurrection', government officials lose him while we see him wake up, though with his memory erased, near the Santa Monica pier, under the watchful eyes of Abilene, who, introducing himself, indicates that he is 'going to tell [us] the story of Boxer Santaros and his journey down the road not taken'. Following his initial quote of prophecy from Revelation, and this allusion to Robert Frost, Abilene delivers lines from T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Hollow Men': 'This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends', and then, appropriately in this case, reverses Eliot's final line: 'not with a whimper but with a bang'. The screen returns to a multi-image newscast that comes across as a media-blitz of images from the 'American Hiroshima' and subsequent scenes of war, announcing a Code Red Terror Alert in the buildup to the third anniversary of the nuclear attack as Independence Day 2008 approaches.

This is the way the opening segment ends. There is a break, the film title appears and then an announced first chapter begins: 'IV: Temptation Waits'. As with the seven churches in John's vision which have 'left thy first love' (Rev. 2.4), some disciples of democracy have succumbed to temptation in various ways, following false prophets and subscribing to heretical practices. Following the nuclear assault on the nation, for example, Republican Party efforts to prevent further terrorist attacks have escalated into full-scale surveillance programs over cyberspace and all U.S. citizens under the imprimatur of the Patriot Act. Nana Mae Frost (Miranda Richardson), the wife of the Vice Presidential candidate is seen cutting the ribbon on the inaugural USIDent headquarters in Los Angeles. Boxer Santaros has fallen under the sway of a Jezebel-like temptress known as Krysta Now

(Sarah Michelle Gellar), a porn star with her own television talk show and energy drink. Like Jezebel of Thyatira, she hawks both sex and food and 'calls herself a prophetess' (Rev. 2.20).[10] War continues to be waged, over-extending the nation's capacities to govern. False hope for endless energy is being stirred up by the eccentric scientist, Baron Von Westphalen (Wallace Shawn), who runs a multinational company called Treer while preaching 'quantum entanglement' as the source of cosmic truth. And the neo-Marxist underground conspires to stage a double murder meant to frame Boxer and thwart a Republican victory.

As these mini-revelations unfold, Abilene's voiceover returns to the book of Revelation, saying: 'and behold a pale horse and he who sat on it, his name was death' (6.8). Unstated here is that this is the part of John of Patmos' vision that comes with the opening of the fourth seal and is a comment that is uttered by the fourth beast. Moreover, the rest of the verse is a further evocation of the number four and a key to the film as a whole, which begins and ends on fourths of July: 'And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth'. As with the Four Horses of the Apocalypse, the destructions threatening the earth in Kelly's film are war, an environment that can no longer sustain the earth's people, death wrought by unleashed forces, and the human beasts of the earth who traffic in corruption and evil. Can these traumas to the earth and humankind be healed? The film's enigmatic and ambiguous answer to this question is where the invocation of the number four emerges as key, involving the space/time rift in the fourth dimension that threatens a final Endtime. But, as I said previously, this revelation does not come until near the end of the film, and in the meantime, a number of climactic threats foreshadow the final showdown between forces of good and evil.

Two key intertwining plot lines emerge at this point to fill in Kelly's 'puzzle-like' story, both drawn from Revelation and signaled by quotations from it.[11] It seems that Boxer Santaros and Krysta Now have written a screenplay together, *The Power*, which features a 'paranoid schizophrenic' cop called Jericho Cane, a nod to the ex-cop character played by Arnold Swarzennegger in *End of Days* (1999), another apocalyptic film that is equally jumbled in its biblical references but far less rewarding in its use of them. *The Power*'s Jericho Cane is a seer, the only one who knows about the imminent apocalypse caused by 'global de-celeration', a slow-down of the earth's

10. Also see my chapter 'Feeling Jezebel', in *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 99-116.

11. See Marcus O'Donnell's insightful discussion of the 'forensic' nature of apocalyptic knowledge in 'Something Smart Going On: The Apocalyptic Aesthetics of Surveillance'.

rotation that causes a disruption in human brain activity that brings on 'irrational criminal behavior'. Boxer and Krysta's screenplay, as it turns out, is like John's own Book of prophecy, a writing down of 'the things which shall be hereafter' (Rev. 1.19), or as the character Serpentine (Bai Ling) later remarks to him, 'The future is just like you imagined', thus raising the perpetual problem of whether one merely sees or actually makes the future by predicting it.

   In an effort to further research his character, Jericho Cane, Boxer Santaros sets up a drive-along with an L.A. police officer, Roland Taverner (Seann William Scott). Unbeknownst to Boxer, however, Roland has been kidnapped by the neo-Marxists as part of their scheme to ruin the Republicans. His 'twin' brother, Ronald Taverner (also played by Scott) has been coerced into agreeing to pretend to be Roland, who is supposed to be a virulent racist, and take Boxer on the drive along, while actually implementing the staged murder of two more of the neo-Marxists, Veronica 'Dream' Mung (Amy Poehler) and Dion Element (Wood Harris), an 'actual' married interracial couple who are both performance artists who are to portray the newly married interracial couple who will be fake-murdered.

   This blurring of the real and the performative is a theme that runs throughout *Southland Tales*.[12] It is paralleled by the constancy of video cameras, ranging from the video camera held by the two boys in the beginning segment of the film to the surveillance cameras that fill USIDent's headquarters to the hand-held camera that Boxer takes with him on the drive-along. It is also manifest in the proliferation of mini-screens filling up a single screen on the 24/7 newscasts that disrupt narrative flow throughout the film. Further narrative interruption occurs via interspersed advertisements that seem to have no logic in placement or content, although they share themes of sexual intercourse, one with elephants copulating, another with Hummers doing so, with the ad tag that they are 'coming soon'. The suggestion here is that reality has become so pervasively imaged and distractingly sexualized, what is sometimes referred to as the porning of American culture, that it has altered our ability to perceive the vital truths necessary for human survival in this age of crisis. One of those truths is the link between SUV proliferation and oil exploitation in the Middle East. The Baron's promise of an alternative source of endless energy is a thinly veiled version of the way oil companies cover over the price in human suffering that their ventures

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12. Shaviro comments on this by saying that a 'continual sense of performing for an audience that one desperately invokes, but that one cannot actually see are all parts of the model of subjectivity that *Southland Tales* presents to us', linking it to the theoretical positions of various postmodernists, Delueze/Guatarri and Baudrillard among them. He argues that '*Southland Tales* does not expound such a theory, so much as it takes it for granted and explores its consequences'.

bring about.[13] Paradoxically, as represented through Boxer and Krysta's film within the film, the revelation that this is the case comes from *Southland*'s own set of dispersed images so intense that they disrupt the film's coherence. At the same time, Boxer's video footage provides temporal grounding, registering that the day of the drive-along is July 3, 2008.

During their drive-along, Boxer tells Ronald more about *The Power*. In it, a baby is born that has no bowel movements. For him, this is a sign that the baby is 'very special', processing energy differently as a result of a 'top-secret experiment'. Ronald reveals that he has had no bowel movements, and has not 'taken a piss either', for six days himself, whereupon Pilot Abilene returns to tell of Revelation 11, the tale of 'two witnesses who appear in Jerusalem to speak out against the sins of mankind. They are eventually killed by those tormented by their prophecies'. At this point, the implication is that Dream and Dion are akin to Revelation's two witnesses because the story line turns to their response to Ronald's bodily condition as other than entirely human. Back at the neo-Marxist headquarters, where Roland remains captive and Ronald was earlier wired for sound, Dream and Dion debate about whether it is 'unnatural' not to have a bowel movement. This underscores Ronald's exceptionality because when we first encounter him, he is looking into a mirror in which his image is a few moments in time slower than his movements. In contrast to the story of *Revelation*'s two witnesses, comic relief pervades this episode. Kelly engages in an irreverent play on the eschatological as a kind of scatological humor reminiscent of Melville's *Confidence Man*, which ends with an old man being duped into believing a toilet seat is a floating life saver that will help him in the event that he falls (or is pushed) overboard from the novel's ship of fools called the *Fidele*. (Perhaps it is also significant in respect to Melville allusions that Moby composed the music for the film.) As these two witnesses give their testimony to what is natural and what is not, behind them is an oversized toilet, set in the middle of the room. A third neo-Marxist member arrives, who is also an undercover spy at USIDent, and declares that 'the shit is literally hitting the fan'.

Indeed it is. In short order, a USIDent raid on the neo-Marxist hangout succeeds in killing several members, one sitting on a toilet while a second lands on top of the giant toilet as he is shot. From USIDent headquarters, Nana Mae Frost watches the death scene with Whore of Babylon-like pleasure. A half-drugged Roland, however, manages to escape. Meanwhile, the staged murder goes awry when a 'real' racist cop (Jon Lovitz) joins Boxer and Ronald and accompanies them to the fake house call to take care of the

13. Abdelrahman Munif's novel *Cities of Salt* (1987) provides a compelling view of the ruination of a desert people as the price of American oil companies' creation of petro-dynasties.

couple engaged in a shouting match. His solution to domestic violence is to shoot them, thus the two witnesses, Dream and Dion, actually die from real bullets. Whether they, like Revelation's two witnesses, will be filled with life again in three and a half days to ascend into heaven, remains unknown. A second July 4th apocalypse is too imminent.

This intricate death scene is part of the second section of the film, called 'V: Memory Gospel'. The term 'memory gospel' is one that Boxer earlier uses in conversation with Ronald to describe the 'glue' for how he contains all the voices inside his head. As an amnesiac, he has no memory of his past life. In this respect, his experience is closer to the eternal present of Revelation, and, like John of Patmos who hears 'a great voice as a trumpet' (1.10) as well as the voices of various angels, he too experiences interior messages that have no earthly sense of time. 'Maybe in the end', Boxer reflects, 'that's all we have, the memory gospel'. Ronald in turn discloses that he has been dreaming about Boxer, prompting consideration that the two of them may be the Two Witnesses, or perhaps, at least one of them the Messiah whose coming is envisioned in Revelation. Amidst the frenzy of confusing disclosures that certain characters are not who they have seemed to be and mounting conspiracies on top of conspiracies, it is made clear that the ostensibly fake murder gone awry was actually planned, and that the appearance of the racist cop was no accident; he is, it turns out, not a real police officer but rather the lover of the neo-Marxist ringleader.

Further ambiguity of meaning and identity regarding several of the characters come into play as Roland, recently escaped from the neo-Marxists, rises up, Christ-like, from within a tomb-like garbage dumpster, gazing upon his forefinger, which has begun to glow with incandescent blue light. As if to clarify this phenomenon, Abilene returns to cite the book of Revelation, this time announcing Chapter 22 and closely paraphrasing verse 5 as follows: 'For it will never be night again and they will not need candles or sunlight because the Lord God will be shining on them. They will reign forever and ever'. In short order, Ablilene also alerts us to Revelation 12 and 13, which as he states, 'tell the tale of a pregnant woman, a dragon, and two beasts' who are the 'puppets of the Anti-Christ'. As he speaks, the scene opens to several possible contemporary versions of these figures, including candidate Bobby Frost, his chief aide, another assistant, the Baron, and Boxer's wife Madeleine, who is with child, and Boxer himself, though he is not the father of Madeleine's child (her father's assistant is said to be). It is further revealed that Krysta now has, in Judas-like fashion, accepted money to betray Boxer to the Baron.

Although it makes for an extremely confusing sequence of characters and events, the kaleidoscopic nature of which character most parallels various figures from Revelation (or the New Testament in general) serves to remind us of the ambiguities involved in grappling with both morality and

identity. This insight, in my view, is one of the most important of the film and stems from the way that Kelly also uses Revelation against itself to emphasize that there is no single truth or morality to be had. There is more than one betrayal at work, more than one plot to wield power over others, more than one person or group seeking to eradicate evil. The neo-Marxists may be cutthroat, but some of their intentions are just, as with their efforts to combat USIDent's incursions on civil liberty. The Republicans are as much fooled as foolishly conniving. The suggestion here is that extremism within any belief system undermines its message and that morality can never be as black and white as is often claimed, or as the book of Revelation would have it.

Perhaps only the Baron remains a steadfast figure of evil, most closely and consistently matching the Anti-Christ in his goal of world domination. Symbolically, either a fascist leader or a nation bent on global empire, he gains power through beguiling messages of salvation while he goes about altering the very fabric of existence and what it means to be human. His evocation of the ocean as 'our mother' from which he is extracting his new energy source suggests that the ocean itself may be seen as Revelation's Woman Clothed with the Sun, who must escape from the beast. A stark revelation of the Baron's true nature occurs at the close of the second chapter when he contacts Simon Theory (Kevin Smith), telling him to 'remove the body from Utopia Three'. What that means at this point and whose body it refers to remains a mystery, though it has implications of an actual death and a staged resurrection, thus implicating the foundational miracle of Christianity as well.

What is made clear by way of Pilot Abilene's voiceover is that the Baron has been injecting fluid karma, which Abilene calls the 'Elixir of God', into the soldiers in Iraq, an experiment that included Abilene himself. As a result of these experiments, Abilene became addicted and is now both user and seller of fluid karma, a drug that produces psychic ability among users and induces hallucinatory experience akin to a cosmic vision. What does such a vision look like? A music video, of course. What else in this world of Hollywood celebrity, global war, and corrupt science would better gloss the media fusions and moral confusions of our time in the way that John of Patmos's broken seals, wars between heaven and earth, and astrological arts did in his?

Injecting fluid karma into his neck, Pilot Abilene becomes Justin Timberlake playing Abilene lip-synching to the song 'All These Things I've Done', as he drunkenly lurches about a Venice Beach Arcade called 'Fire'. Behind him in a row of bowling alleys, eight women in skimpy nurse outfits and Marilyn Monroe wigs lay back, kicking their legs high, Busby Berkeley style, at later moments writhing up and down his body. Abilene's t-shirt is blood soaked over his chest and back, and he swigs from a can or beer or

pours it over his head as he robotically repeats the refrain, 'I've got soul, but I'm not a soldier'. Of course, he has been a soldier and more accurately feels he has lost his soul precisely because of 'all these things I've done'.

Southland's comedic mode is at high intensity here, at the same time that it captures the horrors of war and the trauma endured by soldiers who return haunted by their experiences. This blend of comedy—at times ironic and other times slapstick—and poignant critique is likely what has confused so many viewers about the merit of the film, but it is also what distinguishes it as such an exceptional work, simultaneously entertaining and thought-provoking. Again, Melville as a parallel comes to mind—upon publication, there were ample complaints about *Moby-Dick* that he should have stayed with the whale story and foregone the metaphysical ponderings. This was even more the case with his final novel, *The Confidence-Man*, so ridiculed for its unique and ambitious blend of entertainment and philosophical musing that it basically ended his writing career. *Southland Tales* is that kind of intensely ironic work; it is entertaining yet laced with serious social and political criticism, and has borne the brunt of derision for it. Throughout the film, the Baron functions as a supreme Confidence-Man, a contemporary Anti-Christ. Making these works both supremely complicated and worth our time is the way they simultaneously build on apocalyptic belief and blast it.

This uneasy mix is in full force for *Southland*'s final chapter, 'VI: Wave of Mutilation', in which a battle of Armageddon takes place, not on the plains of Megiddo and the heavens above, but between the Baron's very own ship of fools, a 900 foot long mega-zeppelin hovering over Los Angeles, and a shooter atop an ice-cream truck that is levitating upward toward it. On the streets of Los Angeles below, full-scale riots have broken out, earthquakes pummel the city, and raging fires encircle it. But before the final moment takes place, a frenzied set of events come into play over the course of the earth's final day, Independence Day 2008.

Martin Kefauver (Lou Pucci) is a key player in the calamities that bring on the endtime. He was introduced in the previous chapter when he sought out Abilene to exchange some pot for fluid karma, introducing himself as the son of the plastic surgeon who has worked on Abilene's scarred face. We see him again at the beginning of the final chapter, filled with despair about being drafted to the war in Iraq and with a gun to his head as he sits inside his SUV. Suicide as a theme pervades this final segment, repeatedly being used by several characters as a threat in an effort to thwart some action. This is particularly relevant in regard to the United States' wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Soldier suicides have steadily increased over the past several years, by 2008 reaching the highest incidence in the past thirty, surpassing civilian rates for the first time since the war in Vietnam. The suicide rate among veterans of (all US) wars has likewise risen to alarming

proportions.[14] Suicide thus operates in the film as a symbol of untreated trauma, the death of hope for recovery.

In Kefauver's case, officer Ronald Taverner appears just in time to prevent his suicide and asks Kefauver to take him in search of his twin brother Roland. Ronald indicates to Kefauver that he served in Fallujah, itself a 'clue' in Kelly's big puzzle about the end of the world as one knows it. Dating from Babylonian times, Fallujah has repeatedly been the site of immeasurable suffering and altered way of life, a place of recurrent endings. In recent history, huge civilian casualties in the Gulf War and the current war in Iraq are contemporary enactments of apocalyptic destruction. After the majority of homes were destroyed, American forces allowed residents to return to the city only if they agreed to wear biometric IDs, a point which thus also links the film's USIDent surveillance program to the Iraq War.[15] In the film, Fallujah is the site of the friendly fire that scarred Abilene's face. The puzzle pieces begin to fit into place as Ronald seeks to find his twin. Roland's whereabouts become psychically clear to Ronald when he injects himself in the neck with Kefauver's fluid karma. From that point on, several clashes of opposing camps bring on the final moment.

In contrast to the book of Revelation, the oppositional forces that bring about the endtime are not Good versus Evil so much as Evil versus Evil, each convinced that its side is Good. The basic polarity occurs between the Far Left, represented by the neo-Marxists, who have fallen far from their namesake's analysis, and the Far Right, led by Bobby and Nana Mae Frost, a conglomerate of fundamentalist and surveillance enthusiasts. These opposing forces are manifest in the media outlets each uses to inundate the airwaves with their message: the Frosts' USIDent versus the neo-Marxists' USIDeath, which manages to break into official broadcasts. At their respective ideological extremes, both camps are apocalyptic and millennial, expecting and seeking an end to the world as we have known it, in full belief that what will follow is a utopian paradise for the Elect, the true followers of their ideology. A possible alternative to both these murderous camps of belief emerges at the very end with the announcement of a new messiah.

Before that final revelation, however, as the media war wages and paranoia grows amidst mounting violence in the streets, a number of disclosures of identity and a key one about the space/time of reality itself unfold. It turns out that even though the Baron has been courting favor with the

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14. Alvarez goes on to indicate that mental health advocates have sharply criticized the Army for being 'too slow to recognize and treat the tide of soldiers struggling with mental health problems after returning from Iraq or Afghanistan', and they also argue that 'a warrior culture that discourages treatment persists'. Kelly's film underscores the way in which apocalyptic belief fuels this warrior culture.

15. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fallujah

Republicans, he has also had the neo-Marxists on his payroll to carry out his mission to 'destroy capitalism and dethrone God'. They have brought Boxer Santaros to him aboard the mega-zeppelin, which is named the Jenny Von Westphalen, after Karl Marx's wife, who in the film is said to be the Baron's great-grandmother; his mother, Dr Inga Von Westphalen, is the designer of the mega-zeppelin.[16] Simon Theory, the Baron's right-hand man or the Anti-Christ's beastly ally, reveals to Boxer what transpired in the desert. The mystery revolves around a rift in the 4th dimension. When the Baron discovered that this rift had occurred, he chose Boxer Santaros to be the first human to travel through it—because of his movie star status. Further, he selected Roland Taverner—who following his friendly fire error in Iraq became a police officer—to kidnap Boxer and drive him through the time/space opening. When the two men entered the rift, they were both duplicated. One of Boxer's doubled selves was burned to death by an explosion. Roland and Ronald, it turns out, are not twins, but the two selves that survived traveling through the space/time aperture.

The pseudo-scientific physics of these split selves parallel the dual metaphysics of Christ in Revelation as both Son of God and son of Man by being Son of the Future and Son of the Present. In Boxer Santaros's case, this is incomplete, since one of his selves is dead and only his future self is alive. For Roland/Ronald, even though he is not the one intended by the Baron, his doubling is manifest by 'two souls in one body'. The question emerges: What would happen if they were to shake hands? Simon Theory explains that if the two were to touch, the end of the world would occur by way of the 4th dimension collapsing in on itself. As a prophet, a voice literally of the future, Boxer Santaros at this point becomes a voice crying in the wilderness, or rather in the mega-zeppelin, trying to keep it from being destroyed. On the chaotic streets below, the Taverners have been brought together through a collison of the ice cream truck and Kefauver's SUV. Roland is shot in the left eye, a symbol of partial vision, and Ronald appears to be wounded in the side by neo-Marxist street fire, aligning him with Christ's wound on the cross. Again, suicide comes to the fore as he holds a gun to his head, death the only way he sees to escape his torment for having wounded his friend Pilot Abilene in Fallujah.

But he is instead saved from self-inflicted death. Though slight at best, the film does suggest here that it may be possible for the profound traumas of the day to be healed. The Taverners join hands, and as they do, their reunited self is sparked. Hands aglow, they finally achieve self-forgiveness for the friendly fire incident that has haunted them both thus far. Ronald utters, 'it wasn't our fault'. Roland replies, 'I forgive you'. As they repeat

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16. Thomas Rogers' discussion in Salon.com is excellent in putting these connections together.

these words back and forth, the ice cream truck, with Martin Kefauver astride it *Dr. Strangelove* style, begins to levitate. And, at this point, 'this is the way the world ends, not with a whimper but with a bang'. Kefauver launches a missile that blows the mega-zeppelin into a fiery ball and then, with arms outstretched, he falls back to earth, an act that is both suicidal and self-sacrificial. Pilot Abilene's voice-over speaks the final words, announcing Revelation 21: 'God wiped away the tears from his eyes so the New Messiah could see out to the New Jerusalem'. And then adds, 'His name is Officer Roland Taverner of Hermosa Beach, California, my best friend. He is a pimp, and pimps don't commit suicide'.

What is to be made of the claim that the new messiah is a pimp? Abilene's assertion pushes the film's satire to its most irreverent point. Yet, it is not the first time that the pimp line has been uttered. Boxer Santaros had previously said the same thing about himself, though it proved to be less true for him in the end. Once he understood that the mega-zeppelin was under threat, he tried to get everyone to evacuate, warning that it was soon to be a 'tower of fire', and threatening to shoot himself as a means of persuading them. More John the Baptist than messiah, he dies when the zeppelin explodes.

A satirical take on the pimp line is to see it as an explicit rejection of Revelation's heralding of the king of kings. Instead we have the pimp of pimps. In slang terms, this may simply be the equivalent of saying the messiah is 'badass'. But since it is so closely tied to a rejection of suicide, pimping seems to serve as shorthand for one who survives despair. In contrast to Taverner, Kefauver's final acts combine destruction of others and of himself, and are not heralded by Abilene at the end. Since pimps are also notably ones who exploit others, a pimp messiah casts a new light on the issue of sacrifice and the ways that stories of Christ's sacrifice have been used to exploit so many others over the centuries. This judgment is explicit in the case of the soldiers throughout the film. They have had their 'sacrifice' foisted upon them by the governing 'fathers' who send soldiers to kill others. By implication, such judgment may also extend to Revelation's messiah, whose father has his son suffer the guilt of humanity's fall. In reference to incidents like 9/11, it clearly implicates the ways in which suicide terrorism employs the rhetoric of salvation that is integral to Revelation and any sacred text that interlocks warrior heroism with sacrifice of earthly life.

Pimping also thematically rejects the kind of guilt that leads to self-punishment. Instead, the film's new messiah stands for forgiveness and reconciliation, including self-forgiveness, as well as fortitude in the face of adversity. The film implies that these are the acts that re-unify what has been split asunder through violence and violation; the Taverners reunion is simultaneously a remembrance of the past and a release from its traumatic grip. These are the means by which paralyzing events lose their

hold on individuals and over the society that has suffered their damage. Symbolically, the collapse of the fourth dimension means the end of the world as we have known it, a world overridden with desire for apocalyptic destruction in order to achieve utopian destiny of final conquest. *Southland Tales* indicates that this is precisely the dream that has brought on so much of the trauma that the film depicts.

As the one who has travelled through the space/time rift of the 4th dimension, the new pimp messiah represents a rejection of apocalyptic values of moral absolutism, the neglect of the earth's resources, and the warrior syndrome of conquest in the name of righteousness. The closing song that begins as the film ends and the credits roll reinforces this theme. Blur's 'Tender' declares that 'tender is the day/the demons go away/Lord I need to find someone who can heal my mind', and then urges, 'come on, come on, come on/get through it'. For those who regard demons in the way the book of Revelation portrays them, such a message will surely fall short. But for those who see war and poverty and neglect as human-made demons, then *Southland Tales* has a message worth attending to: we need to seek a portal of new possibility, a new dimension of imagination beyond militarism, empire, and indifference to the earth, a time and space beyond apocalypse.

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3. Post-modern Apocalypse and Terrorism in Joss Whedon's *Serenity*

Frances Flannery

Derrida wishes for '*apocalypse sans apocalypse*', so that the only distillation of the event, the unfolding, would be '*Viens*', the beckoning 'Come'.[1] In his vision, there is no Judgment made, no Message revealed, no particular Truth defended; there is only invitation. Like Derrida, and like many less impressive examples of contemporary film, Joss Whedon's *Serenity* deconstructs the apocalypse. This is a film for those who have lost faith in the false god of modernity, Certainty. It invites audience members who shun fundamentalism as well as those who reject the tradition of violent apocalypse to consider a new, ambiguous vision of the rupture and repair of history. And oddly enough, the film does so in the language of apocalypse.

It is axiomatic that the basic worldview of apocalypticism is one of dualism, in which good and evil battle for supremacy. Apocalypticism is not possible in radical monotheism—there must be an evil adversary of sufficient power to render ultimate good temporarily powerless. In the broadest outlines of its plot, *Serenity* retains the essential dualistic core of apocalypticism. There are clearly two struggling sides which oppose one another with often equal ferocity. The crew of a ship named *Serenity* is led by a likable, good-hearted Captain Mal and brave female Co-Captain Zoë, who once fought on the side of the Independents, a rebel force which unsuccessfully and courageously waged a revolution against a tyrannical government, The Alliance. This regime enforces the 'Comfort and Enlightenment of True Civilization', and from the start of the film it seems suspiciously cruel and fascist.

The dualistic opposition of governmental tyranny versus individualism is one of the most pervasive dualisms in the film's worldview. At the onset of the film, a government scientist coldly and clinically tortures a young girl named River with 'neural stripping' to make her into a human weapon.

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1. Jacques Derrida, 'On a Newly Arisen Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy', in *Raising the Tone of Philosophy: Late Essays by Immanuel Kant, Transformative Critique by Jacques Derrida* (ed. Peter Fenves; trans. J. Leavey, Jr; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 167.

The government desires uniformity and compliance, a world in which individuals can and will be sacrificed for the good of the Alliance. In the film's early scenes, River's brother Simon bravely and lovingly comes to her rescue, which erupts in a flurry of activity just after he gazes on the agony of his sister while saying 'she always loved to dance'. The evocation of such a gentle familial remembrance clashes harshly with the portrait of a girl with electrodes and needles protruding from her restrained body. Thus, the film opens with a strong claim: the tender bond of siblings can triumph over the powerful, systematic, and technological tyranny of a powerful institution. After their escape, Simon and River subsequently join the rebels, represented by Serenity's crew, and we immediately notice the 'Independent' nature of each crew member, whose differences in gender, ethnicity, manners, and accents are readily apparent. Hence, as the value lines of the film begin to be drawn, the Alliance is clearly Evil and representative of institutionalized totalitarianism, while the crew members of Serenity are obviously symbolic of Good and individualistic resistance.

But this is a smart film, and neither end of the moral spectrum is portrayed simplistically. On the one end, the side of Evil is drawn at times in positive, even sacred terms. The figure who will represent the Alliance government most consistently, the Operative, is deeply dedicated to his faith. Speaking of the Operative, Inara the Companion explains that 'We have every reason to be afraid…because he's a believer'. He is utterly convinced in the goodness of the Alliance, which has ordered him to retrieve River from the ship Serenity, regardless of how many die in the process. It is the rightness of his cause that motivates him: 'I believe in something better—a better world, a world without sin'. Thus it is a world of purity, the promised apocalyptic paradise, which deeply motivates him. In his view, he imparts to his necessary victims 'a good death', a death in which 'there is no shame'. The fact that his victims do not wish to die is irrelevant; choice is not a factor in this good death, expediency for the Alliance is the only criterion of goodness. This is the logical extreme of apocalyptic fundamentalism.

Indeed, this figure of the Operative, 'the believer', is a complex and realistic antagonist for our present era of global terrorism. As terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman succinctly explains, 'the religious imperative for terrorism is the most important defining characteristic of terrorist activity today'.[2] This particular situation has arisen only since the 1990s. In 1980 only two of sixty-four active 'terrorist groups', as defined by the State Department, had primarily religious motives. By 2004, the motivation of nearly half of these groups could be classified as religious,[3] and probably well over half fit

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2. Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (revised and expanded edition; New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 82.

3. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, pp. 84-86.

this category by now. As with all believers spurred on to public violence, it is internal conviction, certainty, and a strong sense of piety that are vital to the Operative's worldview.[4] This point deserves elaboration.

Erroneously, the spy film genre paints a portrait of an evil villain out to destroy the world, drumming his fingers as he treacherously hatches his schemes to sounds of malicious laughter. Some in the popular media and the public-at-large actually adopt (whether consciously or unconsciously) this ridiculous portrait as they ponder the figure of the modern day terrorist. In fact, *Serenity*'s portrait of the assassin who is assured that his fight is on the side of Good is far closer to the religious fundamentalism of modern-day terrorists, who conduct symbolic acts of violence with a deep sense of piety, certain that their performative violence points to the larger reality of their religious framework—punishment of the enemies of the Good. Arguably, *Serenity*'s portrayal of the assassin is even a bit soft, since the Operative shows a sliver of cognitive dissonance about his violent means, acknowledging, 'I'm a monster—what I do is evil', although he is convinced that the ends justify the means. Real terrorists often do not even have such qualms over violent means; rather, *piety is their key motivation* and thus violence is considered redemptive.[5] The film is also correct in contextualizing the villain as only one player in a much larger framework of state-sponsored terrorism and torture, which still represents a small but significant portion of modern day terrorism.[6]

Against the Operative and the Alliance stands the crew of Serenity, an equally complex symbol for those on the side of 'ultimate Good'. These crew members are the film's clear protagonists, willing to sacrifice their lives for the good of the universe. Yet Captain 'Mal' (short for Malcolm and ironic French for 'bad') is a cynical former freedom fighter who no longer runs on idealism, but on hard-eyed practical thievery. At times the piracy of the crew of Serenity reads like a tale from Robin Hood, at times like base criminal activity. Mal himself alternates between idealism and heartlessness in the film, as well as in *Firefly*, the television series that preceded *Serenity*. Crew members also have palpable defects in character. Jayne is a lawless mercenary with few aspirations save for women and money. Inara the Companion is really a highly paid prostitute. Even the pastor, Shepherd Book, has some undisclosed and violent past, which audience members eventually glean involved work much like that of the Operative.

The appearance of the crew and the towns they rob (both in the film and in the TV series *Firefly*, which the film concludes), is sketched in cinematic

4.   Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (revised and updated; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 221-28.

5.   Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, pp. 164-65, 198-219.

6.   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, pp. 17, 71-80.

codes that underscore a feeling of the crew's delinquency. The flavor of the sets and costumes is something like a Western film, complete with its outlaws, prostitutes and gun battles, mixed together with techno elements of *mise-en-scène* drawn from steam punk. In one iconic Western scene, the crew members rob a bank, holding hostages at gunpoint, after which they escape on a Mad Max-like, hobbled together ship. Both film genres, the Western and steam punk, generate an atmosphere of rebellion and rag-tag violence.

Thus, although the protagonist crew members of Serenity clearly provide point of view in the film, as the title makes clear, they are not cowboys in white hats. In the scene of the Western styled bank robbery, they are both villains and heroes. During the hold-up, the psychic River reveals that the real enemies, the Reevers, are on their way to the Western town. As Mal holds the hostages at gunpoint, he deeply fears for the safety of the townspeople and orders that as many as possible be locked in the bank's vault. A news broadcast later in the film confirms that the hostages were the only townsfolk to survive. Thus, the crew is sketched in ambiguous moral terms, robbing and saving. Another poignant example of this ethical ambiguity drawn from this same scene occurs as the crew escapes from the Reevers on their tiny hover craft. Terrified, a young man grabs the ship's edge and pleads for them to take him with them. Mal shoves him off and then shoots him just as the Reevers grab him. When Zoë later expresses regret and confusion after the incident, Captain Mal defends his choices, saying the hover craft probably couldn't handle the weight and that killing him was a mercy, compared to his fate under the Reevers. Thus, in this film's vision, both 'Good' and 'Evil' are poly-sided and no simple choices emerge.

The Greek for 'Apocalypse' (*apokalypsis*) actually means 'revelation', as in the famous book by that name. The endtime or *eschaton* is only one of many cosmic secrets revealed in ancient apocalypses such as Daniel 7–12, the Book of Revelation, or *1 Enoch*.[7] The heart of *Serenity* is a revelation, only partially eschatological in nature, learned by the prophet-like character named River. Like Daniel or John of Patmos, River sees dreams and visions of monsters and destruction,[8] but she is tormented since she does not understand their significance. Perhaps this was the case for the ancient seers as

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7. Cf. Christopher Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1982) and Michael E. Stone, 'Lists of Revealed Things in the Apocalyptic Literature', in *Magnalia Dei: G.E. Wright Memorial* (ed. F.M. Cross, W.E. Lemke and P.D. Miller; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1979), pp. 414-54.

8. Frances Flannery, 'Lessons on Early Jewish Apocalypticism and Mysticism from Dream Literature', in *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (ed. April D. DeConick; Symposium, 11; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), pp. 231-48 (238-44).

well, but in the film there is no angelic interpreter standing nearby to offer an explanation (cf. Dan. 7.16; 8.16; Rev. 7.14). In fact, there is no 'otherworldly figure' dispensing the revelation; tellingly, the government takes on this role. For most of the film we assume that the images were purposefully instilled in River by government scientists through 'neural stripping' that 'does tend to fragment [the subject's] own reality matrix' as some necessary part of the creation of human weapons. However, it turns out that River possesses an accidental revelation, the full meaning of which is only made clear by the unfolding of events in the film.

The Alliance, through the Operative, engages in the kind of violence that is characteristic of *terrorism*, which means to *terrify* through a theater of public spectacle.[9] Yet as the government kills vast numbers of the crew's friends and acquaintances in order to force them into handing over River, the crew of *Serenity* only becomes more outraged and emboldened to discover the reason why River is being hunted by the Alliance. She herself does not know the reason, and she is often afraid of being persecuted by the Operative. However, River suffers most of all because of her frightening visions. As Heschel has pointed out, a breach in mundane reality is the core experience of the ancient prophets, who are often tormented by their glimpses into truth. This truth is at such odds with the mundane appearance of the world that prophets are sometimes accused of madness, as is River.[10] She knows the visions have something to do with someone named 'Miranda', which turns out to be a terra-formed planet 'on the edge of space' that does not appear on any government maps. The crew's visit to the planet Miranda is itself an 'apocalypse', a revelation of the identity of that important name.

The journey to Miranda is even an 'apocalypse' in its conventionally accepted academic definition. The Society of Biblical Literature Genres Project names several constituent parts of the ancient Jewish and Christian genre 'apocalypse', including a narrative containing a revelation that discloses a *two-tiered reality* that is both *temporal*, envisioning *eschatological* or endtime salvation, and *spatial*, assuming a supernatural or otherworldly realm. The *revelation* is imparted by an *otherworldly figure* to a *human recipient*.[11] Every part of this rather technical definition is functionally present, with a twist, in the visit to the surface of Miranda.

The 'two-tiered reality' is immediately apparent in the stark contrast between the mundane reality of the terra-formed planets featured in the film

9. Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, pp. 121-47.

10. Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Prophets*, I (New York: Harper, 1962), pp. 16, 23-26.

11. John J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia, 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), p. 9.

and the otherworldliness of the planet Miranda.[12] 'Spatially', Miranda is described as lying 'at the edge of the universe', a kind of liminal, supernal world. What forms this spatial boundary is 'Reever Space', akin to the chaotic abyss of ancient myths. The two-tiered 'temporal' nature of the universe is also made clear on otherworldly Miranda. Elsewhere in space there is the present, being lived out by humans. On Miranda there is only a post-eschatological setting: the end has already come.[13] Everywhere on this planet sit corpses and deserted streets in an otherwise wholly normal-looking urban setting. In other words, there has been a complete rupture of living history on Miranda.

The revelation that explains this endtime is not imparted, however, by an 'otherworldly figure', as in the standard scholarly definition of 'apocalypse'. Rather, the crew witnesses a holographic record on Miranda made by an Alliance military officer, and this record itself replaces the usual role that revealing angels typically play in ancient apocalypses. This hologram imparts the meaning of the secret images that River has carried. Miranda has suffered the effects of a gas—the 'PAX', an ironic trope on 'Peace'—secretly released by the Alliance on the population. As its name suggests, it was intended to calm the population. Instead, it calmed most of them into subservient death through their complete and utter passivity. They simply allowed themselves to die. For a tiny fraction of the population, the officer in the recording explains, it had the opposite effect, increasing their aggressive response to the point of unspeakable horror. The recording plays through to the point when the officer is eaten alive by Reevers.

The Reevers are thus the apocalyptic monsters of the film,[14] the Wholly Other, malformed creatures which attack humans and eat them while alive. Every human in the film, even the Operative, is utterly terrified by them. However, with the playing of the holographic record of the events on Miranda, the full meaning of River's secret knowledge is now revealed to her, as well as to the film's audience. Throughout this sci-fi film, viewers assume that there are aliens, as in other representatives of the genre. There are, after all, spaceships, travel to other planets, and those monstrous Reevers. Miranda reveals that there are no aliens or monsters in this film—only humans.[15] We are the monsters, we are the 'wholly other',

12. Technically, this is accomplished by a change in the metonymic use of white with tints of blue and strong overhead and ambient lighting.

13. The film opens with a post-eschatological feel, since the 'earth that was' is no longer inhabitable due to population pressures that necessitates terra-forming of other planets in other solar systems. This is yet another example of the multiplication of apocalypse in this film.

14. Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 71-88.

15. In fact, the Reevers have historical precedent in the very human Tafurs of the

and in fact we are their creator. And no angel from on high revealed to River this secret that tormented her in half remembrances. Rather, it was imparted accidentally, when she, a psychic, happened to come into proximity to certain high-ranking members of Congress who came to oversee her production as a secret human weapon. As Mal comments, 'half of history is hiding the truth', and of course the whole of apocalyptic is revealing it.

In its political vision, *Serenity* follows in the footsteps of that science-fiction icon *Star Wars* (at least the early trilogy, 1977, 1980, 1983), in portraying a group of desperate freedom fighters rebelling against a grand totalistic empire across the sweeping panorama of space and various worlds. But unlike that epic series, *Serenity* envisions no certain 'force' to tap into, no ancient tradition of religion to which the heroes adhere. This film is far closer in sensibility to several apocalyptic films of the late 1980s and 1990s that likewise focus on breaking free from an all-controlling governmental mechanism, particularly *Brazil* (1985), *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), and the *Matrix* trilogy (1999, 2003). Each of these films revolves around an unfolding revelation, set in a cosmically-proportioned battle that is rife with postmodern sensibilities of uncertainty.

Although these films may draw on certain established religious traditions,[16] none of these films offers a single, coherent religious worldview over and against the ethics of their totalistic controlling regimes. The same is true of *Serenity.* As the preacher Shepherd Book, the most explicitly religious figure in *Serenity* would say to Captain Mal, 'I don't care what you believe, just believe it'. Organized religion, in this case Christianity,[17] definitely has a place on the side of 'Good', but only so long as it is an all inclusive variety. This is a zealous post-modern relativism that rejects exclusivist versions of religion.

Serenity may also be distinguished in another way from earlier apocalyptic sci-fi films resisting totalitarianism, namely, in the scope of its apocalyptic vision through the *multiplication of the endtime*. The fact that the Alliance kept the events on Miranda secret implies that the eschaton here

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Crusades, who ran into battle gnashing their teeth and who feasted on the corpses of their victims. Cohn remarks that Muslim armies that faced Crusader knights with bravery would flee in terror before the Tafurs (Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* [rev. and expanded edition; New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 66-67, 72, 89.

16. See Frances Flannery-Dailey and Rachel Wagner's 'Wake Up! Worlds of Illusion in Gnosticism, Buddhism, and *The Matrix* Project', in *Philosophers Explore The Matrix* (ed. Christopher Grau; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 258-88, for references on *The Matrix*, Buddhism, and Gnosticism.

17. Buddhism also makes a cameo appearance when Inara lights candles and says a prayer in front of a statue of the Buddha.

could happen on every terra-formed planet. It is this realization that makes prophets of the entire crew of Serenity, since as Captain Mal contends, 'they will try again'. Thus, the fight for Good becomes a fight for *world after world* to rise up against fundamentalist belief and government imposed conformity in favor of independence, and all the regular flaws of individualized humanity. The apocalypse or revelation of Miranda must be spread to avert multiple ends of history.

Willingly taking on their prophetic mantle of revelation, the crew fights the Operative, the armies of the Alliance, and the Reevers. To spread their newly found worldview, they seek out a character appropriately named 'Mr. Universe' who possesses the technological means to deliver Miranda's hologram to all populations across the terra-formed worlds. Even though the Operative kills Mr. Universe, Mal is still able to deliver the hologram through Mr. Universe's media apparatus, since, as he himself had said, 'You can't stop the signal'. Through technology and the courage of Serenity's crew, the power of the secret revealed in Miranda's holographic historical record resounds throughout the worlds. Media is revelation.

That is, in this post-modern apocalyptic turn, Baudrillard's simulacra are indeed synonymous with reality: the dissemination of the hologram is 'truth', rewriting history by toppling the moral certitude of the Alliance. The Operative—once sure of his pious goal—completely loses his faith, *as media saves the universe by completely secularizing it through the revelation of true history*. There are no aliens, no monsters—there is only us. There is no divinely inspired prophet, only us. The Alliance, made of humans, is neither all-knowing nor Good. And revelation saves not through the prediction of the future, but by honest re-telling of the past.

The sociologist James Aho clearly articulates a view held by many scholars, namely, that we have experienced the collapse of modernity such that all that is left is fundamentalism on the one hand, and post-modern relativism on the other.[18] Certainly, *Serenity* comes down on the side of postmodernism, as the motley, multi-ethnic, multi-faceted crew of Serenity successfully challenges the monolithic worldview of the Alliance. I would amend Aho's thesis only slightly but significantly, maintaining that we are currently still experiencing the collapse of modernity, which is, after all, a subjective collapse. Many today continue to have faith in a grand, salvific paradigm, whether it be religion, democracy, communism, totalitarianism, capitalism, technology, or globalism. Challenges to these ideologies push some towards entrenched fundamentalist responses, some towards relativized post-modern ones.

18. James Aho, 'The Apocalypse of Modernity', in *Millennium, Messiahs and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements* (ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan Palmer; New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 63-70.

I take this film to be a remarkably clear example of popular culture's sec-ular reworking of 'apocalypse' in favour of the post-modern turn. *Serenity* retains many of the conventional elements of the genre apocalypse, includ-ing its moral compass of an ultimate struggle against evil. Yet unlike many modern adherents of religious apocalypticism, the film appropriates an apocalyptic worldview in order to fight against the evils of fundamentalism, totalitarianism, conformity, and blind worship.[19] At the end of the film, what remains is only the Goodness of this fight, conveyed through the media signal. While it may seem a small piece of ground to stake out religiously, the film's affirmations of individuality, ambiguity, and un-idealized history are especially relevant to the audience, as we consider our current struggle against terrorism and conformist ideology.

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19. The way in which this film came into being speaks volumes about the resonance of its message with fans of popular culture. When Joss Whedon's *Firefly* television series was cancelled, fans spoke out in such numbers through letters and email that the film, which summed up the storyline of the series, was able to secure production. See the introductory explanation by Whedon on the *Serenity* DVD (Universal Studios, 2005).

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Twelve Monkeys (Universal City Studios, 1995).

4. Apocalyptic Fiction: Revelatory Elements within Post-war American Films*

Jon R. Stone

The wildly evocative image at the conclusion of Stanley Kubrick's 1964 movie, *Dr. Strangelove*, of Slim Pickens riding the 'Bomb' downward through the sky, as if he were trying to tame a raging bull, points out, in perhaps the most perverse way, the irony of a society living in fear of the very weapon it sees as its salvation from fear. As we know from the film, an insanely paranoid United States Air Force general (Sterling Hayden) has sent a flight of bombers on a pre-emptive nuclear airstrike against the Soviet Union. By the final scene of the movie, with the threat of Soviet retaliation looming over them, the U.S. authorities have succeeded in their frantic attempts to recall or have the bombers shot down. All of the planes and their crews have been neutralised except one: *Leper Colony*, the renegade B-52 Stratofortress piloted by Pickens' character, Major T.J. 'King' Kong. Over the drop site *Leper Colony*'s bomb-bay doors jam. But when they do open, a new complication arises. The bomb will not deploy. Without a second thought, Pickens throws himself atop its steely back. With a bump and a yelp, he releases the 'bull' from its pen. Both beast and rider plummet earthward: mission accomplished.

The message of *Dr. Strangelove*'s comically dark conclusion seems clear enough: a society can no more safely hold the destructive power contained in a nuclear warhead than it can control the unbridled spirit of a wild and wilful beast. In fact, this beast has a way of controlling those who think themselves its master. Tragically, modern society's predicament becomes an inescapable dilemma: our future is as much in our hands as it is out of our hands. Once it is been unleashed by human science, the destructive power of nuclear weapons is no longer ours to control. The bomb becomes

as much a demon as it is a god. In the end, the only logical response to this Damoclesian dilemma, as *Dr. Strangelove*'s subtitle wryly puts it, is to learn 'to stop worrying and love the bomb'.

The twisted humour of the closing scene—the Soviets' swift and devastating nuclear retaliation that destroys the world, with the final burlesque of A-bomb explosions mushrooming high into the earth's atmosphere—is not meant to frighten the moviegoer as much as it is to accustom the viewer to the sight, the sound, and the grand drama and pageantry of the end of humankind. There is, as it were, an exaggerated vaudevillian quality that takes away the sting even as it stings: actors and audience laugh at the absurdity of each other and at the senseless circumstance into which they have together fallen. That is, actors and audience see themselves and their situation in the reflection of the other. Both are doomed. The unfortunate fact about the bomb that stays with the audience even after the house lights have gone up is the realisation that the images on the screen and the precarious circumstances of modern life are really no laughing matter.

Postwar American Angst

Living in the shadow of the mushroom cloud was an inescapable fact of life for Americans who came of age soon after the end of World War II. Ironically, though a remarkably resourceful and resilient generation of Americans had defeated one fascist regime after another, it could not evade the truth that, in doing so, it had resorted to military technologies possessing a destructive force that could not be imagined or described except in biblical—that is, 'apocalyptic'—terms. Now, for the first time in human history, human beings had the power to annihilate whole civilisations, the power to incinerate their own planet, the power, indeed, to destroy themselves and even the memory of themselves. The atomic exclamation point that ended the Second World War became a looming question mark over the future of world civilisation. For the immediate post-war generation, then, who saw the newsreel footage of the war's thunderous conclusion, the destructive power that it had unleashed to save the free world from the nightmare of fascist totalitarianism became an even greater power to fear.

Notwithstanding its menacing presence, the atomic bomb represented but one of a number of inescapable existential facts with which Americans living during the post-war period and into the present have had to grapple. Threats to the natural environment, as predicted by Rachel Carson in her 1962 exposé, *Silent Spring*, about the consequences of the unchecked use of pesticides, were likewise couched in 'apocalyptic', end-of-the-world, language. As a result of the unprecedented growth of industrial civilisation in

the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, human society had created the conditions under which, by the latter half of the twentieth century, ecological meltdown became not only possible but almost inevitable. While humankind had made significant advances in science and technology—advances that lengthened and improved the lives of people throughout the world—those same humans were contaminating their environment through the unregulated dumping of toxic waste and other pollutants into the sky, the land, and the sea. Even as humanity was attempting to escape the nightmare of a nuclear holocaust through diplomacy and détente, it was poisoning itself through careless management of the environment. An environmental holocaust was in the making, one in which humankind would slowly choke itself by its own polluted hands.

The blame, many believed, lay entirely at the feet of the twin gods of science and technology. Science and technology, heralded as the champions of modern civilisation, had proven instead to be its betrayers. The promise that human science and technology held out of a greater tomorrow did not come without serious problems. Their supposed benefits had unpredictable, and sometimes deadly, consequences for human society. In fact, as some would claim, the very advances that science and technology offered as solutions to one urgent problem oftentimes gave rise to a series of new problems which, in turn, demanded even more urgent solutions. For instance, the ability of human science to eradicate infectious diseases, thus lowering infant mortality and greatly prolonging human life, had an unintended consequence of increasing human population—from two billion in 1930 to four billion in 1975, and to over six billion by the year 2000—and therefore adding greater strain on the earth's diminishing resources. As another instance, while the automation of factory assembly lines sped production of and provided less expensive products for middle-class homes, it inadvertently led to factory layoffs of large populations of unskilled labourers as well as the downsizing of many skilled labourers. What is more, technology, especially in the computer field, advanced beyond the capacity of a work force it was intended to aid, making many 'virtual' slaves of the machines that had been created to serve them. The Y2K computer scare, in which some experts predicted widespread economic disaster, illustrates yet another instance of human subservience to technology.

So, as with the atomic bomb and with industrial pollution, by the latter half of the twentieth century, technology itself, the idea of human progress through the application of scientific discovery, had likewise threatened to destroy humanity even as it sought to save it. It is not surprising, then, that such fears found expression in the film and print media of the post-war period, especially in science fiction films, a genre well-suited to 'apocalyptic' themes. It is upon this genre of film that this essay focuses.

'Apocalypse' and 'Apocalyptic'

It has become commonplace to speak of any cataclysmic event as an 'apocalypse' or as 'apocalyptic'. Such colloquial misuse of these potent terms, though widespread, stems from a conceptual and definitional misunderstanding. By definition, apocalypses are revelatory texts whose sources of knowledge are otherworldly or divine. As such, an apocalypse reveals a reality not previously known to the apocalypt, the recipient of the revelation, or to its intended audience. As a literary genre, an apocalypse has two common elements: its revelatory narrative framework and its eschatological orientation, an orientation that anticipates final judgment and punishment of the wicked. Apocalypses sometimes include other elements, such as belief in the supernatural control or divine predetermination of human history, in the inevitable triumph of good over evil, in divine judgment of all persons living and dead, and in the renewal of the cosmos or in the eventual restoration of a golden age. To be sure, while what is usually revealed to the apocalypt is sometimes pandemic in its scope and often cataclysmic in its effect, one should not confuse the *source* of the apocalypse with its eschatological (end of the world) *content*, especially if one seeks to draw analytical distinctions among genre of literature or, in this case, film.[1]

Put differently, while a common motif of an apocalypse is the 'destruction of the wicked', the mere triumph of good over evil, or even a world-ending conflagration, does not an apocalypse make. The prediction of imminent and utter destruction may very well be part of an apocalypse, but such content

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1. An apocalypse (or 'revelation') is a genre of visionary literature that emerged during the Hellenistic period of Western antiquity (c. 200 BCE–200 CE) and is characterised by the revelation of heavenly knowledge through means of a heavenly journey or through the visitation of a heavenly messenger. The use of 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic' as metaphorical synonyms for 'cataclysmic end of the world' is derived from the *Apocalypse of John*, the Greek title of *The Revelation to St John the Divine*, the final book of the Christian Bible. The Book of Revelation (always singular) recounts the heavenly vision that the Apostle John received concerning God's destructive judgment upon a sinful unbelieving world. While the book, traditionally dated about 96 CE, is more than likely a veiled critique of the Roman Empire's anti-Christian policies, its revelatory content has inspired countless predictions of 'imminent destruction' and 'kingdom come' by overly zealous biblical interpreters—both learned and unlearned—throughout the past nineteen centuries (for specific and numerous examples, see Cohn 1970; Barkun 1986; Weber 1987; Boyer 1992; Stone 1993; Bull 1995; Robbins and Palmer 1997; O'Leary 1998; Landes 2000; Stone 2000; Walliss 2004; Walls 2008 and Wessinger 2011). It should be stated that while the Book of Revelation is the model apocalypse for Christian theologians, it is not *the* model for this essay on revelatory elements in post-war American films. Unless otherwise stated, references to *apocalypse* and *apocalyptic* in this essay should be taken as references to a genre of which the Book of Revelation is simply one example.

does not define this genre as a whole. An apocalypse has a deeper and more intentioned meaning that goes far beyond fire and brimstone.[2]

Interestingly, as a worldview or as a way of making sense of human events, the elements that typify apocalyptic literature are found in other cultural media, media that likewise make claims of 'otherworldly' sources.

2.   In addition to defining an *apocalypse* as revelatory literature, there are five identifying features common to all apocalypses. First, apocalypses typically feature a supernatural source from which a secret knowledge comes. These sources of special knowledge often come through visions, dreams, angelic visitations, heavenly journeys, and the opening of a heavenly book or sealed scroll. A second identifying feature of apocalypses is their interest in otherworldly forces, usually angelic and demonic. The angels and the demons have material or quasi-material form—usually human—as well as cosmic names or titles. These titles include such descriptive words as Lightbearer, Destroyer, Morning Star, Accuser, and the like. A third characteristic feature of apocalypses is the firm belief in divine intervention in human history, usually culminating in the end of an evil person or power, or sometimes the end of time itself. Also characteristic of apocalyptic literature is the restoration of paradise on Earth. The scenario of this fourth feature includes the termination of the old world and its transformation into a new world order. A final feature of an apocalypse is the dispensing of rewards and punishments to men and women in the afterlife. The reward or punishment is determined by the degree of faithfulness to God that a person showed in this life, especially in the face of trial and persecution. For examples see John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), pp. 1-32, and *Apocalypticism in the Dead Sea Scrolls* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-8; see also selected essays in David Hellholm's *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1983). Moreover, apocalyptic literature differs from eschatological literature in that the knowledge provided by means of the heavenly journey or by the heavenly messenger does not always speak of the future in end-of-the-world imagery. An apocalypse may or may not be grounded in millennial expectation and may or may not speak of the dawning of the millennium, the golden age of peace. Also, though the message of the apocalypt may anticipate the coming of a messianic figure who emerges to rescue those in distress, messianic intervention is likewise not a defining feature of an apocalypse. With this in mind, it is therefore not surprising that the *metaphorical* use of 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic' have led to flawed and confusing analyses, even by scholars who claim a measure of expertise regarding things apocalyptic. For examples of the metaphorical use of apocalypse and apocalyptic in the analysis and interpretation of American films, see Conrad Ostwalt, 'Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation', in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 55-63; Margaret R. Miles, *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Kim Newman, *Apocalypse Movies: End of the World Cinema* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000); Jerome Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2001); Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Visions of the Apocalypse: Spectacles of Destruction in American Cinema* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2003); and Kirsten Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2007).

Indeed, one can discern the apocalyptic or revelatory worldview in a variety of cultural artifacts of modern American society, from popular fiction to popular films. This revelatory element is especially evident within films broadly classed as science fiction.

'Apocalyptic Fiction'

Movies function both as a reflection and as a critique of society. Most, however, while pointing to perilous flaws in modern life, do not point to otherworldly sources as the basis for their critique of culture. But, over the past several decades, a more specialised genre of science fiction film has developed that presents a vision of what the future may hold for those living in the modern scientific age. We might call this revelatory genre of film *apocalyptic fiction*, not because its subject is cataclysmic *per se* but because its generic form is similar to that of an apocalypse and its underlying function is that of a warning of imminent danger and of a way to avert impending doom.[3]

Indeed, the medium through which apocalyptic fiction conveys its revelatory material—the motion picture—is well suited as a channel of divine or otherworldly warning in that, like ancient apocalypses, its dramatic message is also broadcast through the immediacy of words and a parade of vivid images. The pictures cast upon the movie screen not only project images that are intended to shock and awaken the audience, but these images also reflect back to society something of its own fears and concerns. As a mediator between the revealed message and its intended audience, the 'silver screen' fulfils two purposes: it is at once a *medium* that displays images of interest and concern to the audience and at the same time a *mirror* that reflects back upon its viewers. In the latter instance, much like a mirror that reveals what stands before it as it really appears, the movie screen becomes a device that shows us ourselves—warts and all. As before, it is this revelatory aspect

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3. While films such as *Dr. Strangelove* certainly communicate to their audiences the sense of impending doom that awaits human society if it does not act to avert disaster, these films are not apocalyptic in form. There is no otherworldly source, *per se*, or mediator that reveals impending doom or that recommends a course of action that will avert disaster. By definition, then, what we are calling 'apocalyptic fiction' does not include films about nuclear build-up, Cold War tensions, or the aftermath of nuclear holocaust, such as *On the Beach* (1959), *Fail-Safe* (1964), or the then-shocking TV movie *The Day After* (1983). It also does not include pseudo-religious films about the coming of an anti-Christ or a prophesied end of the world, such as *The Omen* theatre trilogy (1976–1981), *The Seventh Sign* (1988), *The Rapture* (1991), or *End of Days* (1999). This essay, then, is not merely a survey of movie titles lumped haphazardly under a catch-all metaphorical category called 'apocalypse', but an attempt to approach the subject of religion and film more critically by applying religious typologies and literary genres with greater analytical precision.

of the movie screen and what it reflects that interest us in this essay, for it is in this genre, 'apocalyptic fiction', that the latent uneasiness of post-war American society dramatically reveals itself.[4]

If an apocalypse is a revelation of esoteric or previously inaccessible knowledge, then it is fair to ask what specific kind of knowledge does apocalyptic fiction reveal. In essence, the revelation is of a reality not previously known to the apocalypt, such as the revelation of a heavenly realm, of coming destruction, or of cosmic regeneration. For instance, while in the case of the film *Blade Runner* (1982), the revelation may be of a bleaker tomorrow, the revelation may also be of a brighter tomorrow; such is the case with the one-time popular futuristic movie, *Logan's Run* (1976).[5] In addition to the revelation of either a pessimistic or optimistic future for humankind, we might add that apocalyptic fiction also contains a number of elements that may or may not be present in other types of popular science fiction films. These include: (1) the tyranny of science and technology; (2) human helplessness in the face of an evil system or corrupt world order; (3) heightened Cold War antagonisms, usually resulting in a nuclear holocaust; (4) a messianic component in which an anointed person will rescue humanity; (5) the inescapable fact that the protagonist must embrace his or her destiny or calling; (6) the expectation of the eventual destruction of the world through some humanly engineered disaster; and (7) the need for outside or otherworldly intervention to remedy hopeless circumstances.

Additionally, there seem to be two key differences between literary apocalypses and what here I am calling American *apocalyptic fiction* films, one having to do with the *message* and the other with the *messenger*. The first difference is that in every case it is assumed that the predicted cataclysmic event can be averted by human action. The second difference is that, in most, though not all, cases, the messenger of the apocalypse or the one to whom the message is given becomes the agent of salvation, that is, the saviour of humanity. In American apocalyptic fiction films—and perhaps in American films more generally—there appears to be an underlying optimism that defies the bleak outlook these films initially portray.[6] There is, in

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4. A criticism of this scheme might come in the fact that all movies 'reveal' something to the viewer, that is, they all have a point their writers and directors are trying to make. This critical aspect is understood. However, in keeping with the proper meaning of the word 'apocalyptic' as 'revelatory', the distinction this essay seeks to make is between movies that are apocalyptic in form, not simply revelatory in content or in intention. Otherwise, it would make little sense to speak of apocalypse as a distinct genre of literature or film.

5. David Harvey provides an interesting postmodernist 'reading' of the film *Blade Runner* in his well-known study, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990).

6. As Cordell Strug has noted in 'Apocalypse Now What?: Apocalyptic Themes in Modern Movies', *Word and World* 15 (1995), pp. 159-65, '[t]he very fact that dramas

short, an underlying belief that circumstances need not be as they are and that acquiescence in the face of doom is not the proper heroic response. Indeed, despite the dictates of destiny, when faced with trouble or looming disaster, Americans are wont to take matters into their own hands.

At the same time, the narrative *pattern* we find in most apocalyptic fiction films differs somewhat from the standard science fiction tales that typically feature a male hero who ventures forth to seek his fortune, or to rescue a captive maiden, or to discover his true identity and fulfil his cosmic destiny.[7] By contrast, the most pervasive thematic structure in apocalyptic fiction films, which frames its plot, is that of revelation and rescue: society will be saved, and this despite its disbelief in or disregard for the message of warning that the hero or heroine brings. In this instance, the hero or heroine plays a dual role, serving as both messenger and saviour. This apocalyptic pattern, then, is three-fold: first, the hero or heroine receives a special message or revelation, usually from outside the present circumstances; second, the civil authorities (or so-called experts of society) reject the warning or refuse to act to avert catastrophe (instead, their energies are absorbed harassing the hero); third, the hero or heroine, along with a ragtag collection of compatriots, rescues society from near disaster, destroys the menacing force, and makes the world safe once more.[8]

In the sections to follow, this essay will examine apocalyptic fiction in terms of the four conditions of post-war American society that seemed to point toward inevitable doom. What is revealed to post-war society through the steady production of apocalyptic fiction films is a culture on the brink of nuclear, environmental, technological, and biological destruction. In addition, the films within this genre tend to follow the same narrative pattern discussed above, that of revelation of coming disaster, of resistance from society and its authorities, and of eventual rescue by the heroic efforts of the recipient of the revelation. I will return briefly to the discussion of this recurring pattern in the conclusion of this essay. But first, let us consider these four main types of apocalyptic fiction.

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are being conceived as post-apocalyptic implies that we think we—or someone—will survive' (161). It is quite possible that, deep down, humankind knows that civilised society is merely one global disaster away from a return to the Hobbesian state of nature. And yet, humanity seems ever hopeful that a disaster of such magnitude can be averted.

7.   See, for instance, Andrew Gordon's 'Star Wars: A Myth for our Time', in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 73-82, whose analysis centres on the movie *Star Wars* (1977).

8.   This comment is not meant to suggest that an apocalypse involves revelation and rescue, only that many, if not most, American apocalyptic fiction films combine the apocalypt and the saviour into one character.

Nuclear Apocalyptic Fiction

Since the very first atomic bombs were detonated over Japan at the end of the Second World War, the potential for another nuclear conflagration and its frightening aftermath of sickness and suffering have remained fearfully fresh in the mind of post-war American society. With the heightening of Cold War tensions during the late 1940s and early 1950s, punctuated by news that the Soviet Union and then Red China had the bomb, it is not surprising to find the silhouette of mushroom clouds rising above the fictional cityscapes in numerous science fiction films of the period. The escalation of hostilities between East and West that led to the Korean crisis and armed conflict between China and the United States in their rival vassal states gave rise to fears that a nuclear exchange between the superpowers was inevitable.

During this period, some science fiction films also took a turn toward the apocalyptic, not in their portrayal of the coming nuclear nightmare but in their collective message that such a war could not be won and therefore must not be contemplated, let alone fought. One such film, still considered a cult classic among science fiction devotees, is the 1951 full-length feature *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, directed by Robert Wise. Released during the 'hot' period of the Korean War, this mysteriously gripping film used aliens from a near-distant planet as its messengers. These aliens, led by Klaatu (Michael Rennie), had travelled to Earth with a special mission of warning: human aggression and nuclear terror must not expand into the solar system. 'Man', they explained, was not only a threat to his own kind, but he and his growing nuclear arsenals were a threat to all intelligent life. Resistance to the alien mission by the U.S. military only confirmed their message: humans were hell-bent on destroying themselves and thus were in need of extraterrestrial mediation.[9] More recent examples of nuclear apocalyptic elements in popular films include the Mad Max *Road Warrior* series, particularly *Beyond Thunderdome* (1985), and the youth-oriented nuclear suspense thriller, *WarGames* (1983). While both movies concern the use of nuclear warheads, the first, starring Mel Gibson as Mad Max, reveals a post-nuclear-holocaust world that thrives, and for the most part survives, on the production of methane gas from pig excrement. Though what remains of human civilisation has sunk to a crude subsistence level in a place called

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9. In December 2008, a remake of *The Day the Earth Stood Still* was released. In this version, starring Keanu Reeves as Klaatu, the threat that triggers extraterrestrial intervention is no longer nuclear proliferation but global warming, an issue made popular by former Vice President Al Gore in his controversial eco-documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). In the remake, Klaatu believes that the only way to save earth's environment is to exterminate all of its human inhabitants.

'Bartertown', run by a bosomy no-nonsense matriarch, Aunty Entity (Tina Turner), the story actually concerns a troupe of children who were in-flight during the bombings and thus escaped annihilation. In hiding among the desert caves beyond the reach of Bartertown, the children anxiously wait for the coming of a prophesied saviour, whom they come to believe is the unassuming but handsome hero, Gibson. In the movie's climactic battle scene, Gibson unwittingly fulfils his destiny first by destroying the evildo-ers and then by freeing society from its *lex talionis* structure, a structure in which every offense is punished either by a duel to the death or by banish-ment to the outer desert.

The latter film, *WarGames*, starring Matthew Broderick as a computer whiz-kid who accidentally hacks his way into the U.S. nuclear defence sys-tem, focuses instead on contemporary American society whose serenity is about to be disrupted through a chain of events that, it seems, will inevitably lead toward thermonuclear world war. As a result of Broderick's hacking, 'Joshua' (Hebrew for Jesus, meaning 'saviour'), the gigantic mainframe computer that controls the U.S. nuclear arsenal, has decided to launch a pre-emptive strike on the Soviet Union. All safeguard measures fail; a com-puter-initiated nuclear war is inescapable. Interestingly, while in the *Mad Max* saga the main character is hailed by the children he rescues as the mes-siah—a mantle Gibson's character reluctantly accepts—Broderick's fresh-faced character employs his computer expertise to save the planet. Seconds before the destructive launch, Broderick's character breaks the security code and convinces the renegade mainframe computer, who thinks Broder-ick is its long-lost creator, not to initiate its planned nuclear attack.

While *Beyond Thunderdome* seems aimed at quelling Reagan-era arms race bravado through its grim portrayal of a post-nuclear-holocaust world, the message *WarGames* communicates is the futility of waging nuclear war in the first place. Since all parties involved would be utterly destroyed, there can be no real winner in such a contest. Or, as the computer Joshua announces at the end of the movie, the only real way to win the nuclear war game is not to play it.

What is common to these two examples of nuclear apocalyptic fiction is that they reveal a humanity pitted against itself through mistrust and fear, tragically unable to accept its cultural and political differences. What is like-wise revealed in these films is that civilised life is really no more than a thin veneer masking human savageness and incivility. The response to the threat of nuclear destruction does not arise from humanity's collective uncon-scious fear of death but its unspoken fear of returning to its cave-dwelling barbarous past. As we are reminded, whether it results in the deaths of mil-lions or in the death of civilised life, nuclear terror is an inescapable fact of modern life, a radioactive cloud that will continue to cast a large shadow of uncertainty over the future of humanity. Apocalyptic fiction is meant to

convey the message that it does not have to be this way. Human civilisation need not live in fear of such weapons of mass destruction but should work instead to avert this deadly man-made threat.

Environmental Apocalyptic Fiction

During the post-war period, active concern in environmental issues by interest groups and government agencies heightened. As many scientists and activists began to warn of imminent environmental disaster, the civil authorities responded with legislation aimed at reversing the effects of decades of environmental negligence. In 1956, for instance, the Water Pollution Control Act, which mandated waste water treatment, was passed. Soon after, other environmentally-sensitive measures were put into place, ones that sought (1) to ban above-ground testing of nuclear weapons (the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty), (2) to address the problems of acid rain and airbourne pollutants (the 1970 Clean Air Act), and (3) to phase out the use of harmful pesticides, such as DDT (passed in 1972). In 1970, the year the United States held the world's first Earth Day observance, President Nixon established the Environmental Protection Agency. The country seemed to be right on track toward putting its environmental house back into order.

But all this public awareness and all these governmental initiatives did not prevent environmental disasters from happening. Oil spills off the California coast in the early 1970s left once pristine beaches and shorelines forever marred. But this only spelled the beginning of a series of environmental mishaps that marked the years to follow. In 1978, Love Canal, New York, was evacuated after it was discovered that it had been the site of a major chemical dump, creating concerns over the health of its residents and their children. The very next year, in March 1979, a near reactor-core meltdown occurred on Three-Mile Island, Pennsylvania, when its nuclear power plants malfunctioned. And in 1986, a reactor meltdown and explosion at the nuclear power plant in Chernobyl, Ukraine, killed workers and some residents and caused widespread contamination of the air and soil throughout the old Soviet Union and much of Northern Europe. As if that were not enough, about that same time, a release of highly lethal chemical gases in Bhopal, India, killed thousands of people and raised questions about the effectiveness of existing industrial safeguards in preventing such deadly disasters. With each environmental mishap, the peoples of the earth were repeatedly reminded of the fragility of the natural world and of their own negligent stewardship of it.

Environmental concerns such as these did not escape the notice of filmmakers, who began producing a host of movies depicting the destructive consequences of human mismanagement of the natural world.[10] Among a

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10. Disaster movies of all kinds were in popular demand during the decade of the

number of environmentally-oriented sci-fi films produced during this period, two stand out as examples of this genre. The first, *Logan's Run* (1976), reveals a hopeful future for humankind and its relation to the natural world, while the second, *Soylent Green* (1973) presents a very bleak picture of human life to come.[11] The resilience of nature, despite the poisoning of its rivers and oceans, the contamination of its soil, and the decimation of its bird and fish populations by human nuclear and industrial waste, is at the heart of *Logan's Run*'s futuristic (and hedonistic) Edenic setting. Human society lives underground, presumably having been forced centuries earlier to seek safety from mounting environmental disasters. Generations have passed and the memory of life above ground has faded into legend. Since this new Eden can be sustained only through rigorous control of human population, all persons are compelled to die at age thirty. The passing of time is marked by a luminous flower-shaped disk implanted in the palm of each person's left hand. When one's time has expired, the disk begins flashing. Death takes place daily through an elaborate communal 'renewal' ritual in which masked participants wearing flame-emblazoned white robes revolve in a special chamber known as 'Carousel'. As the crowds of people chant 'renew', the participants are drawn up into the sky by a magnetic force and then electrocuted by a flash of artificial lightning. All die. No one is ever renewed. Indeed, those who try to escape the ritual—called 'runners'—are hunted down by a special security force—called the 'Sandmen'—and summarily eliminated.

The revelatory element of *Logan's Run*, comes when the state decides to investigate and root out rumours of a 'sanctuary' where runners are said to be hiding. The main character, Logan, a 'hunter' played by Michael York, though sent to infiltrate this sanctuary, discovers instead that the world above has 'renewed' itself and can once more sustain human life. The human channel of this revelation is the Old Man, played by Peter Ustinov, who lives with dozens of cats in the wrecked chambers of the U.S. Senate in Washington, D.C. The Old Man becomes the link between the old and new worlds, and serves as a human repository for society's treasured knowledge, presumed to be lost when the previous world died. After his encounter with the Old Man, Logan himself returns to the world below as an apocalypt. Through his heroic efforts, Logan breaks the hold of the

1970s. Such notable films produced during this period include *Airport* (1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Earthquake* (1974), *Tidal Wave* (1975), *The Swarm* (1978), and *Meteor* (1979). Though depicting catastrophic events, none of these films is *apocalyptic* in the true sense of the word.

11. It should be noted that, while many of the films in the post-war period call attention to the destructive consequences of environmental negligence by human society—to the extent that in some cases nature begin to fight back, as in M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008)—not all environmentally-interested sci-fi films, including *Silent Running* (1971), can be typed as apocalypses.

central authority—appropriately, a computer—and leads the people out of their underground prison and into a true Edenic paradise.

In the movie *Soylent Green*, the audience is presented with the bleak image of a future world irreparably polluted by chemical and industrial waste, a world with scarce resources, little fresh food, and far too many people for its polluted surface and meagre resources to sustain. Human society has become a police state in which panic and near chaos are the order of the day and the misery of human life is exacerbated by totalitarian controls on population growth and life-sustaining resources. The human diet has been reduced to the eating of protein-enriched soy and lentil crackers of differing colours called 'soylent'. Even this bland diet is not enough to promote or sustain healthy life, as evidenced by the piles of dead and dying bodies that line the streets—presumably overcome by the combined effects of malnutrition and air and water pollution—only to be scooped up and hauled away like garbage by the city's sanitation trucks.

The main character in *Soylent Green*, Officer Thorn (Charlton Heston), is a twenty-first century metropolitan New York cop investigating a high-profile murder. His attention is diverted after a death-by-euthanasia-bed conversation with Sol Roth, an elderly friend and retired police researcher played by Edward G. Robinson (in his last screen role), who tells Thorn what human life was like before the world was overrun by people and pollution. Roth, like Ustinov's character, serves as a mediator between old and new worlds, and opens Thorn's eyes to a reality that he had not previously known, or even considered: the sea is dying, and all earthly life with it. Though the plot sometimes verges on camp—the movie is clearly a child of the 1970s—the depressing backdrop of the film sets the stage for the hero's great discovery, which, in horrifying disbelief, he proclaims to the aimless hoards of human cattle at the movie's dramatic final scene: 'Soylent green…is people!' Having destroyed its environment, humanity, he learns, is reduced to feeding off its dead.

Technological Apocalyptic Fiction

Dehumanisation and the loss of personal autonomy and self-worth that has resulted from society's over-reliance on technology have become inescapable facts of modern life. Machines not only rule people's lives but also make much of human labour virtually unnecessary. What is more, human thought and ingenuity are slowly being replaced by artificial intelligence. In fact, some critics of modern technology fear that machines designed to think for humans will slowly become machines that act independently of them, eventually coming to control their lives.

The revelatory element of 'techno' apocalyptic fiction is one in which humans are seen as inadequate before machines and are therefore insignificant

to the workings of the modern world. Three themes characterise these films. First, we find the recurring message that technology can be cruel and dehumanising. People who live in technologically-controlled societies live cold and emotionally-detached lives, devoid of existential meaning or purpose. Second, while technology is meant to provide greater freedom for humanity, in truth, it has enslaved humankind—individually as well as collectively—and controls its future. Because of their over-reliance on technology and a naïve willingness to surrender control over all aspects of their lives, humans have become subservient to their own machines. Third, in 'techno' apocalyptic fiction, science and technology are clearly the villains, with humanity pitted against machines in a life-or-death struggle. In many cases, the techno-villain is itself a personification of technology: cold, calculating, brutal, the very face of mechanised evil.

With perhaps the exception of the bad-to-the-bone Darth Vader in the *Star Wars* Trilogy (which, incidentally, is *not* an apocalypse in form or content),[12] there are probably no better examples of this personification of technological evil than in the film *The Terminator* (1984) and its highly popular sequel, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), both directed by James Cameron of *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009) fame.

In the first *Terminator* film, we learn from Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn), a visitor from the future, that by the year 2029, the world will be under the ruthless domination of machines, which have turned on their human creators and subdued them by computer-initiated warfare. No match for the technological and military superiority of the machines, humans have become a hunted breed. There exists, however, a small but strong underground resistance movement led by John Connor, a resourceful and charismatic leader. In order to root out the resistance, the machines concoct a plan to kill Connor's mother, Sarah (Linda Hamilton), before he is born. To carry out this deed, the machines send back in time—to the year 1984—a Terminator cyborg unit (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a relentless and virtually unstoppable killing machine. Having learned of the plan, Connor sends Reese, his most loyal lieutenant, back in time to warn and protect his not-yet-pregnant mother. (In a strange, mind-bending twist, we learn that Reese, who does not survive the movie, is in fact Connor's father, in essence both

12. As an aside, though it may appear to have apocalyptic (revelatory) features, the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977–1983) and its 'prequelogy', *The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), do not properly fit the apocalypt-*cum*-redeemer pattern. This series of films more closely resembles the so-called American monomyth. See Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The American Monomyth* (New York: Doubleday, 1977), and Andrew Gordon, 'Star Wars: A Myth for our Time', in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), pp. 73-82.

siring a son—during a brief lull in the action, Reese and Sarah Connor have a steamy carnal romp—and then dying nearly two decades before he himself is born.)

Programmed to kill, the Terminator does not deviate from its pursuit of Sarah Connor. As it moves through the streets of suburban Los Angeles, it literally kills or maims everyone in its way. In the end, human ingenuity—and a lot of luck—triumphs over this symbol of runaway scientific technology. Though the now-pregnant Hamilton is safe—at least for the time being—the future of humankind remains in doubt. Before the credits roll, Hamilton drives south into the Mexican desert to hide out until her son is born, matures, and takes his place in the fight against technology.

In the sequel, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (or simply *T2*), the pre-teen John Connor (Edward Furlong) is living in a foster home, his mother having been committed to a mental institution because of her obsession over the future rebellion of the machines. In *T2*, Sarah Connor is more wild-eyed doomsday prophetess and anti-technology militant than the helpless and harried mother-to-be in *T1*. Interestingly, while she is haunted by the grim vision of a future high-tech world, her son, who is of the generation not frightened by rapid technological advances, becomes a mediator—a messiah of sorts—between present and future worlds.

The premise of *T2* is simple: the machines that rule the future world send a more advanced T-1000 Terminator unit (Robert Patrick) back to the present, this time to assassinate the young Connor. Learning of this mission, the Connor of the future world sends a rival but weaker T-800 Terminator, played once more by Arnold Schwarzenegger, to protect his present-day self. To his mother's initial discomfort, her old nemesis is now one of the good guys. While the boy and his Terminator are running from the marvellously protean T-1000, the mother is bent on finding and killing Miles Dyson (Joe Morton), the scientist responsible for designing the computer chip that sets the entire end-time scenario into motion. (Part-way through the film, in a chilling dreamlike playground scene, Sarah envisions the fiery nuclear destruction of civilisation. Rather than continue to brood over the fate of humanity, she decides to join the others in their efforts to change the course of the future.) At the climax of the movie, both Terminators and the special chip are destroyed in a vat of molten steel and the Connors—mother and son—save human civilisation. (Dyson dies earlier in an explosive hail of fire and bullets.)

Aside from the conceptual difficulties and implausible premises of the *Terminator* films, of which two more have been made,[13] we discover

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13. *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), directed by Jonathan Mostow, was a 109-minute afterthought meant to revive box office interest in the *Terminator* franchise. It starred Nick Stahl as a late-adolescent John Connor, and once more featured Arnold Schwarzenegger as a Terminator unit, in his last starring role before becoming

a number of things about the ambivalence of modern society in the face of technological advance. (Ironically, the films themselves are technological marvels.) While in one breath we praise the boundless genius of the human mind to create, at the same time we are struck dumb by the realisation that humans are often unable to see beyond what appear to be the immediate benefits of their creative ideas. Humans, we learn, rarely consider the unforeseen and unintended consequences of their ideas or their actions. But, additionally, we learn that the fruits of human ingenuity need not be destructive. The warning that the American apocalypt issues has an underlying message of hopefulness: Men and machines can work together for the benefit and advance of humankind.

Viral-Pandemic Apocalyptic Fiction

At the same time that computer science and robotic technology were making human labour, if not human persons, obsolete—and calling into question the nature and very idea of humanity— remarkable advances in biotechnology, bioengineering, genetics, virology, immunology, and other related fields, were presenting ethical challenges to modern society. Is it right or even prudent to play God? Could not this prying into the essence of animal and human life open a Pandora's box of evil with even more dire consequences for humankind? While films captured post-war apprehensions over dramatic developments in computer technology, artificial intelligence, and robotics, other types of technological apocalyptic fiction films were inspired by biotechnological, biogenetic, and biomedical advances. The most notable of these are films that feature plagues and pandemics caused by careless scientific experimentation, or by the deliberate acts of crazed bio- and eco-terrorists. Though still *technically* under the rubric of techno apocalyptic fiction, viral-pandemic films represent a type of apocalyptic fiction that seems to be attracting greater interest among filmgoers.

Among the numerous films—American and non-American—that depict the terrifying consequences of plagues and pandemics, films such as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964) and its remake *The Omega Man* (1971), *The Satan Bug* (1965), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971), *Outbreak* (1995), *Ever Since the Earth Ended* (2001), *28 Days Later* (2002), *28 Weeks Later* (2007),

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governor of California. The twist in *T3* is that 'Judgment Day', set for year 2004, is not averted. Instead, John Conner and a suitable young female heroine are unwittingly led to a civil defence command bunker deep within a Montana mountain, there not to stop 'Judgment Day' but to survive it. It is from this shelter that a new Adam and Eve will emerge. In the final instalment of the Terminator tetralogy, *Terminator Salvation* or *T4* (2009), set in the year 2018, John Connor, played by Christian Bale, develops the command skills necessary to lead the human resistance against Skynet (the machines) and its menacing army of cyborgs.

Resident Evil (2007), *The Reaping* (2007), and *Doomsday* (2008), do not appropriately fall within the genre of film I am identifying as *apocalypse* or *apocalyptic*.[14] Most of these are simply horror or suspense films. Even so, two exceptions worth noting are *Twelve Monkeys* (1995) and *I Am Legend* (2007).

Twelve Monkeys, directed by Terry Gilliam and starring Bruce Willis, Brad Pitt, and Madeleine Stowe, is a futuristic suspense film in which the authorities send a convicted criminal, James Cole (Willis), back in time to locate the source of the pandemic outbreak and retrieve a sample of the deadly virus that had killed billions of people and driven the rest of humanity underground to escape the contagion. Travelling back and forth between *circa* 1996 and *circa* 2035, Willis plays the part of the mediator between two worlds. But his task is made difficult because the would-be recipient of his message, psychologist Dr Kathryn Railly (Stowe), strongly doubts Cole's mental stability. Though, in the end, she comes to believe that he is sane and is telling the truth about the coming viral pandemic, all of this comes too late for her to save the world. Doomsday is not averted. However, given the added element of time travel, it is conceivable that scientists in the future world will send other individuals back in time, over and over, until they finally succeed in stopping the plague.

I Am Legend, starring Will Smith, is the closest of its predecessors—*The Last Man on Earth*, starring Vincent Price, and *The Omega Man*, starring Charlton Heston—to being an *apocalypse*, especially the DVD version with the director's alternate ending, released in March 2008. The main story takes place in 2012, only a few years after a supposed miracle cure for cancer has instead mutated and spread outward from New York City as an airbourne virus. All have been infected, except Lt. Col. Robert Neville (Smith), a virologist who is inexplicably immune to the virus. Although the pandemic has taken billions of lives, not all who are infected die. Many have mutated into vampire-like creatures that roam the city at night. By contrast, Neville, who stands between both worlds, divides his time between working on a cure for the virus and fending off virus-infected mutants. It is his hope not

14. Because of its resemblance to the ten plagues of Moses in the Book of Exodus, scholars might consider *The Reaping* as an apocalyptic fiction film. But in this film, there is actually no revelatory element or mediating agent, only allusions to the supernatural. Hilary Swank plays Professor Katherine Winter, a former missionary and theologian who has lost her faith. She now spends her time disproving reports of supposed miracles throughout the world. Professor Winter's biggest challenge comes when she is called upon to investigate strange occurrences that literally *plague* the town of Haven, Louisiana. These unexplained occurrences—a river running with blood, swarms of insects, an overabundance of frogs, dying cattle, lice and boils—all appear to be the hand of God. But, as Professor Winter soon learns, the Devil also works in mysterious ways.

simply to prevent civilised society from sliding completely into the mutant abyss, but to restore humanity back to its pre-pandemic state.

In the original theatrical version, the climactic scene of the film finds Neville, who has discovered a cure, cornered by mutants in his laboratory. They are there to rescue a mutant woman whom Neville had abducted to attempt his experimental cure. Before they break through the protective glass wall behind which Neville was working, he detonates a high-powered hand grenade, killing himself and the hell-bent horde and its alpha-male leader with him.

In the alternate ending, however, which more closely follows Richard Matheson's 1954 novel of the same title, Neville comes to realise that these mutants have indeed retained certain human traits, the most poignant of which is love. In this post-epidemic world, a world now dominated by this new type of human race, it dawns on Neville that he is the true mutant. His one-man crusade to rid the world of this new race reveals his own loss of humanity. It is he, in fact, who has become a monster by stalking and ter-rorising the mutants. Having realised this, Neville puts down his weapons, frees the mutant leader's wife, and drives away, presumably to seek out his own kind living beyond the island of Manhattan.

Concluding Comments

The main point of the foregoing discussion of apocalyptic fiction is that in an analysis of contemporary films, it is not enough to say that movies that depict the end of the world or scenes of cataclysmic destruction of human civilisation are *apocalyptic*. As a genre of film, apocalyptic fiction possesses several common elements that distinguish it as *apocalyptic*, the most tell-ing of which is its revelatory framework. This is not to say that apocalypses differ from other film genres because they *reveal* something. All films have a reflective quality. That is, all films naturally reflect their times and reveal something about the cultures in which they are produced. But in the case of what I am calling *apocalyptic fiction*, the revelatory characteristic refers to a message whose *source* comes from elsewhere—that is, outside the pres-ent conditions or circumstances—and is mediated through an agent who stands between these worlds. Whether the agent or the recipient of the mes-sage becomes the hero is irrelevant to classifying a film as apocalyptic fic-tion. The revelatory framework, the otherworldly source of the message, its mediated character, and its inherent call to change destiny are what differ-entiate apocalyptic fiction from other genres of film.

At the same time, what we have discovered in the above discussion is that the source of the revelation need not come from another world *per se*. While in one of the examples of nuclear apocalyptic fiction—*The Day the Earth Stood Still*—the apocalypt did come from outer space, in other

examples the apocalypt came from the world of the future or was connected to the world of the past. In other words, the apocalypt is someone (or some-thing) not altogether belonging to the society in danger, that is, someone (or something) from the outside.

What is more, not only is the source of the revelation otherworldly but the message that the apocalypt brings contains a warning, usually of impending doom or of cataclysmic destruction of the world *in toto*. It is this unforeseen threat that inspires the apocalypt and this same threat that frames the con-tent of his or her message.[15]

But the apocalypt is not, in all cases, simply an appointed messenger. In some cases, he or she becomes the saviour as well. In these instances, not only does the apocalypt deliver a message of warning but he or she also delivers society from the imminent danger, either by providing the neces-sary information to save society or, in many cases, the necessary fire-power. Indeed, this apocalypt-*cum*-redeemer plot device in apocalyptic fiction films tends to follow a similar pattern in which the messenger or the person to whom the message is directed must likewise act on the revelation him-or herself. The pattern, again, is threefold: (1) after receiving the revelation, (2) the hero(ine) warns society of its precarious circumstances. After being rejected by the civil authorities, (3) the hero(ine) determines to save soci-ety through his or her own actions. As before, while most action and sus-pense movies tend to follow a similar plotline, what makes this *apocalyptic* is the revelatory framework of the film, that is, the *otherworldly* source of its revelation.

We see an example of this apocalypt-*cum*-redeemer in *Logan's Run*. After he discovers that the renewed world above is a greater paradise than the world below, to save his fellow humans from death at age thirty, Logan must fight against and defeat the system. We see another example of this in *Terminator 2* in that the T-800 Terminator is the messenger and, for the most part, a heavily-armed saviour. This apocalypt-*cum*-redeemer device is also evident, but to a lesser extent, in some of the other films highlighted in this essay, such as *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome* and *WarGames*. One can also see evidence of this plot device in films not touched on above, such as *The Sacrifice* (1986), *Waterworld* (1995), and, perhaps, *Contact* (1997).

15. Incidentally, the recently-released film, *Knowing* (2009), starring Nicholas Cage, provides a near-perfect example of an *apocalypse* in the true sense of the word. In this film, MIT astrophysics professor, John Koestler (Cage), uncovers a code that serves as the key to determining when doomsday will occur. But, in this case, nothing can be done to avert the end of all life on earth. Shortly before the earth is seared by a colossal solar flare, quasi-angelic aliens arrive in spaceships to transport the chosen children of earth to an extraterrestrial home—a new heaven and a new earth—reminis-cent of the Garden of Eden.

A final observation that one can make from the foregoing discussion is that while apocalyptic fiction films tend to demonise technology as destructive and dehumanising, it is interesting to note that these same films also hold out the hope that technology, if properly applied, can likewise be salutary. The defining difference is in the ways technology is used and in the intentions of those who use it. In other words, whether technology is used as a tool or a weapon rests squarely in the hands of those who possess it. Accordingly, in the epic struggle against the deleterious effects of modernity that apocalyptic fiction films seek to portray, the tale these films likewise tell is one of caution: take care, lest the knowledge and wisdom of modern science be rooted out as well.

But, as these films also reveal, the faith that people have in science, technology, medicine, and the like, may very well be a misplaced faith that, like faith in politics or religion, leaves them vulnerable to visionary promises of utopia. In a touch of irony, apocalyptic fiction films point out that our faith in these technologies, and the beguiling promise they hold out of heaven on earth, may very well damn us to a hell of our own making. In the end, they may condemn humanity to living in a cold and inhospitable future world, one defined—in truly biblical proportions—by warfare, disease, starvation, totalitarian governments, savage barbarism, and death.

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5. PSEUDAPOCRYPHA:
INVENTED SCRIPTURE IN APOCALYPTIC HORROR FILMS

Mary Ann Beavis

Apocalyptic horror films can be classified into several broad subgenres: the 'Christian horror film', epitomized by the *Left Behind* series, 'made for the purpose of publicizing "Christian truth"', specifically premillennial dispensationalism;[1] the secular doomsday movie, presenting apocalyptic-like scenarios of human, natural or extraterrestrial origin (nuclear holocaust, ecological devastation, giant asteroids, alien invasion, killer viruses);[2] and films that use the bible, loosely interpreted, as a source of apocalyptically-themed horror entertainment.[3] Of these subgenres of 'apocalyptic' movies, the third has received the least scholarly attention. The *Left Behind* phenomenon, in both its literary and filmic forms, has been the object of substantial academic analysis,[4] as have the doomsday

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1. Mary Ann Beavis, ' "Angels Carrying Savage Weapons": Uses of the Bible in Contemporary Horror Films', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 7/2 (2003), p. 10.

2. See, e.g., Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), pp. 109-12.

3. Beavis, ' "Angels" ', pp. 10-14.

4. E.g., Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation and End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture: Left Behind in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Glenn Shuck, *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Sheryll Mleynek, 'The Rhetoric of the "Jewish Problem" in the Left Behind Novels', *Literature and Theology* 19 (2005), pp. 367-83; Wesley J. Bergen, 'The New Apocalyptic: Modern American Apocalyptic Fiction and its Ancient and Modern Cousins', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 20 (Fall 2008), http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art20-newapocalyptic.html (accessed 22 March, 2009); John Walliss, 'Celling the End Times: The Contours of Contemporary Rapture Films', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 19 (Summer 2008), http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art19-endtimes.html (accessed 22 March, 2009); J. Vincent, 'Left Behind in America: Rapture Culture and the Army of One in the GWOT', paper presented at the American Studies Association, 4 February, 2009; Melanie J. Wright, ' "Every eye

movies.[5] Both are usually interpreted as reflecting contemporary social movements and preoccupations. As such, the evangelical rapture movies (e.g., the *Left Behind* films, *A Thief in the Night*, *Apocalypse*, *Revelation*, *The Omega Code I* and *II*) and the doomsday films (e.g., *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *Independence Day*, *The Day after Tomorrow*, *I Am Legend*, *The Day the Earth Stood Still*) are similar to ancient apocalyptic writings which, according to John J. Collins, provide:

> a lens through which any crisis can be viewed. By evoking a sense of awe and instilling conviction in its revelation of a transcendent world and the coming judgment, the apocalypse enables the faithful to cope with the crises of the present and so creates the preconditions for righteous action in the face of adversity.[6]

The evangelical apocalyptic movies, especially the *Left Behind* series, are considered to be 'realistic' by the radical Christian right—as reflecting an historical crisis that will unfold in the near future, and which can be dealt with by repentance and belief in the doctrine of the rapture.[7] Similarly, the doomsday films evoke 'believable' cataclysms that *could* happen in the near future (e.g., nuclear war, ecological breakdown, asteroid collision, viral outbreak, even alien attack), and instill hope that human (especially American) ingenuity will ensure the salvation of the earth. Both subgenres ostensibly have the salutary aim of warning against near-future

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shall see him": Revelation and Film', in William John Lyons and Jorunn Økland (eds.), *The Way the World Ends? The Apocalypse of John in Culture and Ideology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), pp. 79-86.

    5.   E.g., Wojcik, *End of the World*, 109-18; Frederick A. Kreuzinger, *Apocalypse and Science Fiction: A Dialectic of Religious and Secular Soteriologies* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); see also Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York/ London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 159-71; Conrad E. Ostwald, 'Movies and the Apocalypse', *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2003), pp. 157-88, and his 'Visions of the End: Secular Apocalypses in Recent Hollywood Film', *Journal of Religion and Film* 2/1 (April 1998), http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/OstwaltC.htm (accessed 6 April, 2009); Kenneth Newport and Crawford Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006); Tina Pippin, 'Warrior Women of the Apocalypse: The Role of the Female in Some Apocalyptic Films', *Biblical Interpretation* 14 (2006), pp. 164-66 and in Newport and Gribben's *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context*, pp. 97-112. Christopher Moreman, Review of *I Am Legend*, *Journal of Religion and Film* 12,1 (2008), http://www.unomaha.edu/~jrf/vol12no1/reviews/ILegen.htm (accessed 22 March, 2009). See also the Millennialism Project homepage, http://trinitymillennialismproject.wordpress.com/ (accessed 22 March, 2009).

    6.   John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature* (Grand Rapids, Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1984, repr. 1998), p. 59.

    7.   Pippin, 'Warrior Women', pp. 166-67.

perils, while reassuring the audience that the coming catastrophe can be survived by taking decisive action.

The apocalyptic horror movies, which use the bible as a fund of frightening storylines likely to attract audiences and make profits, have been largely overlooked by scholars, perhaps because of the prevailing attitude that horror film is 'emotionally juvenile, ignorant, supremely non-intellectual and dumb'.[8] To this category belong films like *The Omen* series (1976, 1978, 1981, 2006), *The Seventh Sign* (1988), *Lost Souls* (2000) and *End of Days* (1999) that portray the book of Revelation—usually dubbed 'Revelations'—as scripting horrific end time events surrounding the appearance of the antichrist. A steady stream of such films has appeared since the last third of the twentieth century, beginning with the first of the Omen movies, followed shortly afterward by *Holocaust 2000* (1977). In western culture, the bible is one of the great repositories of frightful themes, so it is not surprising that it has been mined by popular filmmakers for raw material.[9] As Tina Pippin has observed, the Apocalypse is best described as 'a text of horror' in which even the 'happy-ever-after ending' of the Lamb and his Bride enthroned in the New Jerusalem 'continues to chill'.[10] The eschatological woes unleashed on its pages (Rev. 8.13; 9.12; 11.4; 12.2) constitute an anti-gospel of dread for the inhabitants of the earth, where monstrous beings and extravagant punishments are unleashed upon a corrupt world so that an elite minority can live forever in static perfection. As such, Revelation, loosely construed, is a promising source of horror for contemporary filmmakers.

As noted above, both the evangelical apocalyptic genre and, at least ostensibly, the secular doomsday films, have been interpreted as embodying messages that transcend popular entertainment: for the former, the aim is the repentance and salvation of the viewer; for the latter, the aim is the valorization and preservation of life on earth. The relatively few scholarly analyses of secular horror films make similar claims. Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, writing on the non-apocalyptic *The Wolf Man* (1941), argues against the elitist construction of popular horror movies as a location of 'ideological manipulation among the subaltern sectors of society'.[11] Rather, horror 'confronts us with the 'other' who challenges rigid hegemonic constructs, imposed boundaries, and easy Manichean perspectives'.[12] For

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8. David Cronenberg, quoted in the abstract of Mario DeGiglio-Bellemare, ' "Even a Man Who is Pure in Heart": Filmic Horror, Popular Religion and the Spectral Underside of History', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 10 (Summer 2005), http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art10-filmichorror-print.html (accessed 29 March, 2009).

9. See Beal, *Religion and its Monsters*, pp. 23-34.

10. Pippin, 'Warrior Women', p. 159.

11. DeGiglio-Bellemare, 'Filmic Horror', abstract.

12. DeGiglio-Bellemare, 'Filmic Horror', p. 44.

DeGiglio-Bellemare, *The Wolf Man* presents a multitude of challenges to constructions of class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality:

> Does the werewolf's curse represent a potential for shape-shifting monstrosity so abnormal that it must be punished by patriarchal structures? Does the curse represent the marginalized and hunted European Jew? Or does it represent an anxiety about the role of women in the public sphere during the war? What about the wolf-like terror of the Nazis? …Is the werewolf the object of compassionate empathy or the object of fearful loathing?[13]

In her analysis of six American films, *Cape Fear* (1991), *Candyman* (1992), *Delores Claiborne* (1995), *Se7en* (1995), *Signs* (2002) and *War of the Worlds* (2005), Kirsten Moana Thompson finds a common theme of 'apocalyptic dread' concerning threats to the nuclear family.[14] As Thompson's selection of films illustrates,[15] her definition of 'apocalyptic' does not conform to popular usage; rather, it evokes Kierkegaardian *Angst*: 'a presentiment about the future, or an inchoate feeling that the future is in some way foreordained; it is "a certain presentiment [*anelse*] [that] seems to precede everything that is to happen, but just as it can have a strong determining effect, it can also bring a person to think that he is as it were predestined" (Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 1, 38)'.[16] In these films, she argues, depictions of family breakdown through tropes of the demonic and monstrous merely displace anxiety by reifying and externalizing it, rather than, with Kierkegaard, accepting 'dread as the price of absolute freedom'.[17] Thus, the anxieties embodied in 'the demonic, the eschatological, and the supernatural are mapped out across the family and projected across the monstrous body of each horror story only to suggest an apocalyptic return to an idealized fantasy of family values, and to a deeply conservative notion of history that can only understand the future in theological and eschatological terms'.[18] Melanie J. Wright's brief examination of diverse filmic evocations of the book of Revelation (*The Seventh Seal*, 1957; *Pale Rider*, 1985; *The Seventh Sign*, 1988) as a 'cultural reference point' warns against oversimplifying the relation between the Apocalypse and film: 'Revelation at the cinema is unstable and unpredictable, it operates and is operated upon in fashions too complex to be subjected to the pressures of binary logic, described as the "effect" or "influence" of one discrete phenomenon on another'.[19] Apocalyptic films

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13. DeGiglio-Bellemare, 'Filmic Horror', p. 44.

14. Kirsten Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).

15. The storylines of the first four films listed do not depend on end-time scenarios.

16. Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, p. 21.

17. Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, p. 152.

18. Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, p. 152.

19. Wright, ' "Every Eye" ', p. 91.

not only relate to Revelation but to each other, and use themes, symbols and motifs in creative and shifting ways, in much the same way as apocalyptic texts both evoke and diverge from each other kaleidoscopically.

Unlike most of the works surveyed above, this paper will discuss non-evangelical apocalyptic horror films that portray end-time events in supernatural terms inspired by biblical texts, especially the book of Revelation. More particularly, I will approach the topic through the lens of a subset of such movies, beginning with *Omen III: The Final Conflict* (1981), that use the device of supplementing biblical apocalyptic texts with invented scriptures, or 'pseudapocrypha', as I have dubbed them elsewhere,[20] in order to locate these works within the spectrum of cinematic apocalypses.

Pseudapocrypha and Apocalyptic Film

Although the evangelical and non-evangelical apocalyptic horror movies are superficially similar in that both genres derive from biblical apocalyptic, they differ in several ways. Most obviously, there is a difference in the intent of the filmmakers; the evangelical films are meant to strengthen the convictions of the faithful and to persuade non-believers, while the non-evangelical movies are produced as purely commercial entertainment. The evangelical movies are scripted to portray the end-time doctrines of premillennial dispensationalism,[21] whereas the non-evangelical films are not limited by any shared doctrinal perspective or apocalyptic timetable. As such, the latter are free to invent supernatural conspiracies, eschatological actors and theological loopholes in ingenious and unorthodox ways that the religiously motivated films are not. In *End of Days* (1999), for example, the famous 'number of the beast', 666, is turned upside down so that it reads 999, the last three digits of the year in which the movie was made. Biblical passages can be made up, as in *Lost Souls*, which attributes the spurious prophecy that 'a man born of incest will become Satan and the world as we know it will be no more' to Deuteronomy 17. The plot of *The Seventh Sign* hinges on an obscure Jewish tradition that when the storehouse of preexistent righteous souls is emptied, the messiah will appear (Syriac *Apoc. Bar*. 30.12; *Yeb*. 62a). The epilogue to the Rupert Wainwright film *Stigmata* (1999) asserts that the non-canonical *Gospel of Thomas* is the most reliable source of the truth about Jesus, suppressed by centuries by self-serving

20. Beavis, ' "Angels" ', pp. 24-25. The term is not a complete neologism, as there is a species of beetle by that name. A Google search revealed that the term Pseudapocrypha is sometimes used erroneously used to mean Pseudepigrapha.

21. On premillennial dispensationalism, see Jeanne Halgren Kilde, 'How Did Left Behind's Particular Vision of the End Times Develop? A Historical Look at Millenarian Thought', *Rapture*, pp. 33-70.

Catholic authorities. These kinds of plot devices would be regarded as heretical and spiritually perilous by the proponents of the evangelical films, but they enable the filmmakers to vary the otherwise stereotyped plots of movies that attempt to reflect the last things in a 'biblical' way.

Of the liberties taken by secular filmmakers with the canonical apocalypses, the most audacious is the invention of 'pseudapocrypha', non-existent scriptures containing otherwise unknown insights into the divine plan. An early example of this plot device is found in the non-apocalyptic horror movie *Carrie* (1976), where the teenaged heroine's mother, a religious fanatic, quotes from a bogus scripture called *The Sins of Women* to intimidate her daughter: 'And God made Eve from the rib of Adam, and Eve was weak and loosed the raven upon the world, and the raven was called sin, and the first sin was intercourse. And Eve was weak, and the Lord visited Eve with the curse, and the curse was the curse of blood'. Here, the mother's use of an invented scripture to bolster her hatred of sexuality, an antipathy that the title character does not share, may simply reflect her mental illness. However, the citation of imaginary scriptures that are taken as seriously as the canonical bible is most prevalent in the kinds of apocalyptic movies under consideration here.

As noted above, the first apocalyptic horror film to resort to a pseudapocryphon is the third and final offering in *The Omen* franchise (1981). Damien Thorne, the antichrist figure of the series, becomes aware of a Latin text called the *Book of Hebron*, 'one of the more obscure backwaters of the Septuagint bible', which prophesies that the messiah of the second coming will come from England:

> And it shall come to pass that in the end days the Beast shall reign one hundred score and thirty days and nights, and the faithful shall cry unto the Lord, 'Wherefore art thou in the day of evil?' And the Lord shall hear their prayers, and out of the Angel Isle he shall bring forth a deliverer, and the holy Lamb of God shall do battle with the Beast and destroy him.

Damien interprets the prophecy to mean that Christ will be reborn as an infant, as he, the antichrist, was. He plots, Herod-like, to murder all the babies born on the day calculated to be the date of the rebirth, but his evil designs are foiled when the messiah returns as a full-grown supernatural hero to initiate the millennium: 'Behold the Lion of Judah, the Messiah, who came first as a child but returns not as a child, but now as the King of Kings, to rule in power and glory forever!'[22] A fourth *Omen* movie (*The Omen IV: The Awakening*, 1991), made for TV, ignores the clear implication of its predecessor (subtitled 'The Final Conflict') that the end of history had arrived, and introduces the new twist of a female antichrist.

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22. This quotation, presumably from the *Book of Hebron*, appears on the screen as an epilogue to the movie, casting serious doubt on Damien's interpretive ability!

Another series of apocalyptic horror films, *The Prophecy I–V*, makes more extensive and creative uses of both actual pseudepigraphical and imaginary pseudapocryphal writings, although the quality of the series declines sharply after the initial offering (1995). The hero of the first movie, Thomas Daggett, is a former seminarian and angelologist-turned-cop who unravels the cosmic mysteries behind a series of mysterious deaths. One remembrance from Daggett's seminary days is a haunting 'gospel' from 'St. Paul': 'Even now in heaven there were angels carrying savage weapons' (actually, a paraphrase of 2 *Enoch* 10.3). He goes on to discover an ancient manuscript of the bible that includes a lost 'twenty-third chapter of St. John's Revelations' which discloses that the primeval rebellion of the fallen angels has re-erupted, but that this time the ringleader is not Lucifer, but Gabriel, who resents God's favouritism toward human beings (or 'talking monkeys', as he calls them). The salient prophecy reads: 'And there were angels who could not accept the lifting of man above them, and like Lucifer rebelled against the armies of the loyal archangel Michael, and there rose a second war in heaven… And there shall be a dark soul, and this soul will eat other dark souls, and so become their inheritor. This soul will not rest in an angel but in a man, and he shall be a warrior'. Daggett manages to trace the identity of the evil soul, save a little girl who has been possessed by it, and, with the help of a cooperative Lucifer, to thwart Gabriel's revolt for the time being.

The saga continues with *The Prophecy II* (1998), after Daggett has retired to a monastery, where he prophesies that an angel will mate with a human woman who will bear a son. Daggett's oracle is obviously based on Gen. 6.1-4, where the angelic 'sons of God' mate with the 'daughters of men', generating a race of giants (*Nephilim*). This biblical legend was luridly elaborated in Hellenistic Jewish literature, most prominently in 1 *Enoch* 1–36, the 'Book of the Watchers', which

> Portrays the eschatological era and the final judgment of the righteous and the wicked, and a narrative…which concerns the fallen angels, their intercourse with women…their corruption of all men, Enoch's unsuccessful intercession on their behalf, a prediction of their doom, and various visions of Enoch during a tour of the earth.[23]

In *The Prophecy III: The Ascent* (2000), after Daggett has been murdered, the boy Danyael, born of the union of an angel (also called Danyael) and a young Hispanic woman, grows up to join the battle between good and

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23. E. Isaac, '1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch', in James H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, I (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), p. 5. Other biblical and pseudepigraphical references to this legend are found in e.g., *Jub.* 7.21-25; Jdt. 16.7; 2 *Baruch* 56; Wisd. 14.6; Sir. 16.7; the DSS 'Book of the Giants' (4Q203, 1Q23, 2Q26, 4Q530–532, 6Q8), 3 *Macc.* 2.4; Jude 6; 1 Pet. 3.20; 2 Pet. 2.4.

evil, assisted by Gabriel, now demoted to human status. At the end of the movie, the young 'Nephalim' (as the Hebrew name of his species is misspelled in the subtitles) engages in a final showdown with the angel of genocide, Pyriel, in the desert. Although this movie is billed as 'The Final, Most Thrilling Chapter!', it was followed in 2005 by two sequels, *The Prophecy IV: Uprising* and *The Prophecy V: Forsaken*, ungraced by the redeeming presence of Christopher Walken as Gabriel. The young woman who is the hero of both is guided by a mysterious new pseudapocryphon, the *Lexicon*, which, like the series, mysteriously writes itself, promising to reveal the identity of the antichrist.

Unlike the last two in the series, the first three *Prophecy* movies show a fair modicum of biblical and extra-biblical knowledge. Thomas Daggett, albeit inaccurately, quotes 2 *Enoch*, an apocalyptic midrash on Gen. 5.21-32, which relates the heavenly visions of Enoch up to the time of the Flood:

> The first and larger part, chapters 1–68, describes how Enoch was taken up to the Lord through the seven heavens and then returned to report to his family what he had learned. The second part, chapters 69–73, deals more briefly with the life of Enoch's successors, Methuselah and Nir, and ends with the story of the birth and ascension of Melchizedek, just prior to the Flood.[24]

As noted above, the legend of the Nephilim is well attested in the bible and Jewish pseudepigrapha. The angel characters in parts one to three have names harvested from ancient Jewish and Christian documents, and medieval esoteric writings: Danyael, a fallen angel mentioned in 1 *Enoch* 6.7; Samayel (2 *Enoch* 33.7), often regarded as the angel of death;[25] Zophael, 'a spirit invoked in the prayer of the Master of the Art in Solomonic conjuration rites',[26] and Pyriel, a 'fiery and pitiless' angel who tests the works of humanity (*Test. Abr.* 13.11). The scriptwriters' use of angelological lore is consistent with the hero Daggett's authorship of a 'Thesis on Angels in Religious Scripture' in his seminary days. It also reflects the growing cultural fascination with 'lost scriptures' in past sixty years sparked by the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library and the Dead Sea Scrolls, publicized by the media and popular scholarship, now widely available in translation on the internet.

A film that deserves brief mention for creative use (or abuse) of scripture is the lengthy and overwrought thriller *End of Days* (1999), which,

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24. See F.I. Andersen, '2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch', in *Pseudepigrapha*, p. 91.

25. See Gustav Davidson, *A Dictionary of Angels* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 255.

26. Davidson, *Dictionary*, p. 330.

as mentioned earlier, depends on the device of turning the 'number of the beast', 666, upside down, thus revealing the last three digits in year before the millennium. According to the movie, at the end of every thousand years, Satan has a one-hour window of opportunity between eleven p.m. and midnight to impregnate a young woman chosen to become the mother of the antichrist. As the excitement and dread surrounding the arrival of Y2K mount, Arnold Schwarzenegger plays the cynical yet heroic New York cop destined to save the innocent girl, Christine, from being raped in a satanic ritual. Presumably, the prophecy of the satanic plot to sire the Antichrist is featured in a pseudapocryphal tome called *Regressus Lucifer*,[27] briefly glimpsed halfway through the story, although never quoted. The DVD version of *End of Days* contains a summary of the Book of Revelation as one of its 'special features' that ends with 'An angel…chained up the dragon for 1000 years, then threw him into the abyss for another 1000 years. After this 2000 year period, the dragon was to be unleashed again against the world' (cf. Rev. 20.3). That is, rather than adding an extra chapter to the Apocalypse, as in *The Prophecy*, *End of Days* removes the bulk of the last three chapters, thus enabling Satan ('the dragon') to be disabled permanently by Schwarzenegger's Jericho Cane (whose initials, J.C., brand him as a Christ figure).[28]

Another apocalyptic film whose unlikely hero is another J.C. is *Constantine* (2005), based on the DC comic *Hellblazer*. John Constantine is a demon-hunter and exorcist who, as a teen-ager driven to suicide by his prophetic visions, was damned to hell for his mortal sin, but sent back to earth to redeem himself by fighting evil. Like Cane, Constantine's mission is to rescue a young woman, the psychic Angela, from bearing a demonic being, in this case the son of Satan, born before Lucifer's fall, who wants to be manifested in the world so that he can transform it into a state of hellish chaos. In the cosmology of the film, the angelic and demonic beings that inhabit the earth are actually 'half-breeds', presumably *Nephilim*. Real angels and demons are pure spirits who can only reside in heaven or hell, and God and Satan have arrived at a bargain to maintain a balance between their respective realms. The key to preventing the demonic nativity is another lost scripture, the *Bible of Hell*, which contains a version of 'Corinthians' (presumably 2 Corinthians, which ends at chapter 13, although 1 Cor. 17.1 is inscribed on a window in one pivotal scene) with seven additional chapters (14–21), that, according to a Renfield-like character called the Beeman,

27. Ironically, the phrase *regressus Lucifer* appears in the Easter prayer the *Exultet*, where the 'morning star' who 'returns' *ab infero* ('from hell') is Christ.

28. See Anton Karl Koslovic, 'The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ Figure', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 8 (Fall 2004), p. 68; http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art8-cinematicchrist.html (accessed 27 April, 2009).

'paint a different view of Revelations'. Summarized, these pseudapocry-phal chapters reveal that:

> The world will not end by God's hand, but be reborn in the embrace of the damned, and that the sins of the father would only be exceeded by the sins of the son [of the Devil]… This is the sign of Mammon…the son of the Devil… Mammon has no patience for his father's rule…and yearns to forge his own kingdom of fire and blood… [but] first Mammon would have to possess a very powerful psychic… To cross over, Mammon would need divine assistance… Mammon would need the help of God.[29]

Furthermore, the Spear of Destiny, the weapon that actually killed Christ on the cross (cf. Jn 19.34), will be used to bring Satan's son into the world by the demented half-breed angel Gabriel, who resents humankind's flagrant disregard of the divine will. In his final confrontation with Gabriel, who is ready to hand the world over to Mammon in the belief that 'only those who survive hell on earth will be worthy of salvation', Constantine prays to save the world from the terrors of hell, kills himself for a second time (complete with self-inflicted stigmata and a cruciform post under a cross-shaped door-way), and dies at 5:19 pm (17:19), alluding to 2 (Pseudopcryphal) Corin-thians 17.19, thus stopping the apocalyptic clock before Mammon can be born. Lucifer himself arrives to save Angela from being given a c-section with the Spear of Destiny, defeats Gabriel, and takes his son back to hell, thus restoring the balance between the heavenly and infernal realms. Con-stantine's salvation is assured when he asks Lucifer for the soul of Angela's twin sister Isabel—a teen suicide, like himself, consigned to hell, in return for his own, which has been redeemed by his efforts to restore the cosmic equilibrium.

As with many scriptures, canonical and otherwise, there are many inter-textual resonances between these apocalyptic horror movies, especially *Constantine* and the *Prophecy* series. Apart from the shared device of using an invented scripture to advance the storyline, *Constantine* and *Prophecy*, in particular, feature angelic-human hybrids, a crazed and angry Gabriel who is eventually transformed into a human (*Prophecy III*), and an audi-ence between the hero and Satan (also found in *End of Days*). Like *The Prophecy I–III*, *Constantine* takes some pains to use 'authentic' names for its angelic and demonic characters: Mammon, the son of Satan: 'in occult lore, a fallen angel now ruling in Hell as one of the arch-demons and prince of tempters' (cf. Mt. 6.24; Lk. 16.9, 11, 13);[30] and Baltazar, 'a spirit invoked in Solomonic magic for procuring a lady's garter'.[31] With the exception of

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29. See the transcript of the film at http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Constantine.html (accessed 27 April, 2009).
   30. Davidson, *Dictionary*, p. 182.
   31. Davidson, *Dictionary*, p. 69.

The Omen III, where a supernatural Christ does return to foil the Beast, these movies interpret the last things not as a prelude to eschatological bliss, but as a hellish state of satanic rule that will inevitably come to pass, but that can be postponed by heroic human action. The heroes of these films—Thomas Daggett, Jericho Cane, John Constantine—are flawed and cynical Christ-figures who need redemption themselves, and who achieve it through their efforts to save the world from demonic devastation. While the cosmology of the films is highly supernatural, their soteriology is demythologized: the saviour figures are fallible humans, and salvation consists in allowing the world to continue in more or less its present state into the indefinite future—until the next inevitable threat of cataclysm.

An Alternative View from the UK:
Second Coming

Part of the research for this chapter involved the viewing of a two-part, movie-length British mini-series *Second Coming* (2004) that belongs to the apocalyptic horror genre, and that turns on humanity's need for a new scripture, in this case, a completely new Testament. The hero of the film is Steve, a working class man who believes that he is the Second Coming of Christ, and after performing several highly publicized miracles, he convinces humanity that if they don't produce a Third Testament within five days, the last judgment will ensue. Pandemonium follows, and Steve, Christ-like, voluntarily sacrifices himself. Thanks to videotape technology, his salvific death is witnessed by the world. This time, however, there is no resurrection, and the Third Testament turns out to be No Testament, as Steve's associates witness to in a set of interviews broadcast after the ultimate media event:

> Everyone saw it and everyone heard it, that was the Testament; that was judgment day—the death of God. Even without the tape, everyone felt it—I mean, like everyone. In that second, all of his creations felt his death. Everyone believed, everyone. And people were terrified in the first few days after his death, 'cos it looked like he'd died and gone and left us with nothing, but he left us with *everything*—and yeah, sometimes it looks like nothing, 'cos we can't turn to a book anymore, or to a church, or to some man in a dog collar—we've got to look at each other. And the devils have gone. They still do the most terrible things not because they're devils but because they're people. That's our problem now.

Obviously, the mini-series, with its supernatural premise, suspicion of traditional religion, and promise of yet another pseudapocryphon, shows considerable overlap with the American movies. However, its embrace of death of God theology and ultimate rejection of scripture is a thought-provoking and original plot twist that reflects the more profound secularization of the

UK audience, and which manages to be both anti-apocalyptic and respect-
ful of a receding religious past.

Situating Apocalyptic Horror Films and their Scriptures

The worldview of apocalyptic horror films in general takes a mediating
position between the evangelical and secular doomsday genres. The evan-
gelical films presuppose that the end of the world is inevitable; human
beings must prepare themselves by accepting Christian truth, and so
achieve salvation. Much like many popular documentaries,[32] the dooms-
day movies represent the world-as-we-know-it as in danger of immi-
nent destruction by human-made or external forces that can be thwarted
through human willpower, ingenuity and cooperation, often assisted by
modern technology. Their message is that ecological breakdown, nuclear
war, global pandemic, etc., can only be averted if human beings 'repent'
in some way, e.g., become more environmentally responsible, pursue
nuclear disarmament, or curb genetic research. The non-evangelical apoc-
alyptic films, like the evangelical ones, affirm the biblical account of the
end-times, but new and esoteric information is introduced that can, at least
temporarily, avert the end, e.g., a new interpretation, an ancient tradition,
an extra-canonical gospel, a non-existent scripture. In apocalyptic hor-
ror, similarly to the doomsday genre, the end of days is not a temporary
period of tribulation that will be followed by endless bliss for the faithful,
but simply an eternity of 'hell on earth'; salvation is the restoration of the
status quo for the time being.

   With specific reference to the films that use pseudapocrypha to advance
their plots, again, apocalyptic horror takes a mediating position between
evangelical 'literalism' and secular demythologization. Although the evan-
gelical movies take considerable liberties with eschatological doctrine,[33]
they purport to depict the end-times in a biblically faithful way. The dooms-
day films, in contrast, portray strictly 'secular' threats to the world, with-
out explicit reference to supernatural revelation or divine intervention. The
apocalyptic horror movies evidence some respect for the bible, but posit
that the traditional canon is incomplete and must be supplemented by hith-
erto unknown scriptures that contain vital information about the last days;
the pseudapocryphal scriptures are used in a way analogous to the role of

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32. E.g., *Eight Minutes to Midnight*, 1971; *If You Love This Planet*, 1982; *Strange
Days on Planet Earth*, 2005; *An Inconvenient Truth*, 2006; *A Crude Awakening*, 2007;
The 11th Hour, 2008; *Life after People*, 2008.

33. The *Left Behind* books and films introduce the notion that those who remain on
earth after the Rapture may repent and ultimately share in salvation; *The Omega Code*
invents a mathematical 'bible code' embedded in the Hebrew scriptures that can only
be deciphered by computer.

technology in the doomsday films, as a tool in the human arsenal for thwarting cosmic dissolution.

In his analysis of three doomsday films (*The Matrix*, *Twelve Monkeys*, *Waterworld*), Conrad Ostwald explains the genre with reference to secularization:

> With a sacred worldview, one that dichotomizes the transcendent realm and the world, cosmic cataclysm initiated from another realm to destroy the world makes sense and is almost inevitable. However, in a secular world, where our worldview no longer dichotomizes the transcendent and this world, where we view reality through a secular lens rather than through a sacred one, we have difficulty conceptualizing world destruction from the hands of a sovereign ruler. Part of the process of secularization involves raising humanity to the sovereign level so that humans control their own destiny, and this has even spilled over into our ideas of the apocalypse… Popular movies have…created an alternative secular apocalyptic imagination in which the end is less threatening and can even be avoided.[34]

Ostwald further asserts that popular culture, in the form of doomsday cinema, has generated a postmodern apocalyptic consciousness that 'functions religiously' to sacralize the secular by providing a source of meaning in 'the problem of the end of existence'.[35] Like the doomsday films, apocalyptic horror movies are produced as popular entertainment by filmmakers purely for profit, but unlike the doomsday films, they retain and even intensify the supernatural worldview with all the trappings of biblical apocalyptic: prophecies, angels and demons, heaven and hell, salvation and damnation. However, the apocalyptic horror and doomsday films have in common the conviction that human beings have the power to turn back the hands of the eschatological clock, and thus to fill the role of saviour, individually or collectively.[36]

According to Ostwalt, despite the apparent secularization of society, 'the apocalyptic imagination is alive and well, because the human imagination (at least the Western imagination) must incorporate the end point in order to make sense out of time and death'.[37] However, Ostwalt may be confusing the 'Western imagination' with the 'American imagination'. As noted above, the UK-produced *Second Coming*, which ultimately rejects scriptural

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34. Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, p. 186. See also Ostwalt's earlier essay, 'Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation', in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), pp. 55-63.

35. Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, p. 186.

36. Ostwalt also finds this theme in other films 'projecting apocalyptic imagery', notably *Pale Rider* (1985), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and *The Seventh Sign* (1988) ('Hollywood and Armageddon', pp. 56-59).

37. Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, p. 186.

narratives of fall and redemption in favour of assuming full responsibility for life in the here-and-now, illustrates a non-heroic, and ultimately anti-apocalyptic, alternative to dealing with the specter of the end of existence, geared to a popular audience. The persistence of the apocalyptic horror and doomsday genres suggests that movie audiences, especially in the U.S., continue to crave the grand narratives and heroic saviours of popular Christianity. If, as Ostwalt asserts, these films sacralize the secular to provide a meaningful context for contemporary anxieties about the future of humanity, this sacralization includes the imposition of a biblical eschatological framework that resonates culturally with their target (American) audience.

As noted above, in the doomsday and apocalyptic horror movies, the conviction that the end of the world is nigh is accompanied by the notion that catastrophe can be averted by applying the right kind of 'know-how', either scientific/technological or religious. Academics have tended to explain the fascination with apocalyptically themed cinema with reference to non-religious explanations: anxieties about threats to the American family (Thompson), the status of the Apocalypse as a 'cultural reference point' in the western world (Wright, Pippin), secularization (Ostwalt). Hover, the combination of respect and scepticism towards the bible in apocalyptic horror films, where scripture is assumed to be a valid source of revelation but imaginary scriptures can be invoked to supplement and even correct them, suggests that specifically religious factors are at work. First, as Charles Strozier observes, 'Christian fundamentalism, energized by the apocalyptic, has moved the endist impulse into the center of our [U.S.] culture, where it works directly on large numbers of Christians and spills over in unpredictable ways into other cultural forms'.[38] Especially in the U.S., the fundamentalist Christian right and its apocalyptic preoccupations influence the broader culture by fuelling a pervasive millennial anxiety kept alive by post-9/11 angst.[39] Second, public disillusionment with official Christianity arising out of, e.g., sexual abuse cover-ups, the waves of inquisitions and excommunications during the reigns of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and the many scandals that have dogged popular evangelists, is mirrored by the dubiety of apocalyptic horror films about the canonical scriptures, which, like official religion, are seen as only partially reliable. The immense popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* and its many spinoffs has contributed to the suspicion that the church is not telling the whole story about Christianity, and that the contents of the bible have been manipulated by religious authorities to conceal the truth. Widely available popular academic

38. Charles Strozier, *Apocalypse: On the Psychology of Fundamentalism in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 159, quoted in Pippin, 'Warrior Women', p. 167.

39. See Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, pp. 2, 12, 17, 25, 27, 140, 146-50, 173 n. 3.

works like Bart Ehrman's *Lost Christianities*[40] and Elaine Pagels's *Beyond Belief*[41] lend scholarly sanction to this view, as do even more broadly disseminated TV documentaries like *Banned from the Bible I–II* (2003, 2007), adding to the impression that important revelations have been and continue to be suppressed by the church. Among these suppressed revelations is the truth that humanity has the ability to turn back, if not permanently to stop, the apocalyptic clock; as Ostwalt observes, 'instead of providing hope for an eschatological kingdom, the cinematic apocalypse attempts to provide hope for this world'.[42] The makers of apocalyptic horror films tap into the stream of religious scepticism, and as purveyors of fiction they are free to create new scriptures much as the ancient sages forged the pseudepigrapha (some of which made it into the bible) to advance their own agendas. Like the *Lexicon* of the last two *Prophecy* movies, the canon of movie pseudapocrypha will, in good postmodern fashion, keep writing itself as long as there is a market, especially in the United States, for apocalyptic anxiety and eschatological hope.

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40. Bart D. Ehrman, *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

41. Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Vintage, 2004).

42. Ostwalt, 'Hollywood and Armageddon', p. 62.

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6. CELLING THE END TIMES:
THE CONTOURS OF CONTEMPORARY RAPTURE FILMS*

John Walliss

Introduction

Over the course of the last decade or so a small but growing literature has developed which focuses on various aspects of premillennial 'rapture fiction', specifically the *Left Behind* series of novels produced by leading Dispensationalist author Tim LaHaye along with Jerry Jenkins. To date, however, relatively little attention has been paid to the related genre of 'rapture films', that is films produced by evangelical Christian filmmakers in order to present popularized premillennial/Dispensationalist understandings of the End Times. Paul Boyer, for example, in his magisterial analysis of American premillennialism *When Time Shall be No More* gives only a cursory mention to the *A Thief in the Night* series of films, while Timothy Weber in his *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming* ignores it completely, despite the films having been seen by a reported three hundred million people.[1] Similarly, the volumes on the *Left Behind* series by Forbes and Kilde, Frykholm, and Gribben focus almost exclusively on the books themselves, typically mentioning the three *Left Behind* films (*Left Behind: The Movie*; *Left Behind: Tribulation Force*; and *Left Behind: World at War*) only in the context of the broader *Left Behind* franchise.[2] Discussions of rapture films are also surprisingly few

    1.   See Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1992); and Timothy Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875–1982* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
    2.   A.J. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture:* Left Behind *in Evangelical America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); B.D. Forbes and J.H. Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); C. Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2006).

and far between within the literature on religion and film,[3] with debates focusing instead almost exclusively on secular apocalyptic films such as *Armageddon*, *Twelve Monkeys* and *End of Days*.

In this chapter, I aim to go some way to filling this lacunae within the literature by discussing the contours of contemporary rapture films; focusing on the ways in which the films read a variety of apocalyptic texts through both Dispensationalist theology and, most importantly, through the fears, hopes and concerns of the evangelical Christian/premillennialist milieu in which they are produced and consumed. In doing so, I will argue—following McAllister's and Frykholm's analysis of rapture literature[4]—that although the films are ostensibly concerned with depicting a prophetic future, they are also very much about, and indeed, responses to, the present.[5] Without wanting to suggest crudely that a variety of evangelical fears and bugbears may be 'read off' from the films, I will argue that, in a similar way to rapture fiction, the films utilize and adapt apocalyptic texts to convey a series of messages about a variety of religious and geopolitical issues that exercise their producers and audience, ranging from fears of a one-world global order and a resurgence of 'old Europe', questions about the nature and certainty of salvation, an ambivalence towards technology and the mass media, and last but no means least, beliefs about the nature of 'true Christianity' and the place of evangelical Christians in the contemporary world.

More broadly, drawing together Heather Hendershot's[6] work on rapture films and Amy Johnson Frykholm and Glenn W. Shuck's analysis of the *Left Behind* novels, I will argue that rapture films may be seen to operate on several levels simultaneously. On one level, as Hendershot suggests, rapture films seek to educate their viewers in the specifics of a premillennial/Dispensationalist understanding of apocalyptic texts in an entertaining manner and encourage those who have not yet done so to undergo a born again experience. However, on another, equally important level, following Frykholm and Shuck I will argue that they also serve to articulate

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3.   See, however, C. Oswalt's *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (London: Trinity Press International, 2003).

4.   M. McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics and the Popular: The Left Behind Series and Christian Fundamentalism's New World Order', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102 (2003), pp. 773-98, and Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*.

5.   See also Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, p. 270; and also H.J. Urban, 'America, Left Behind: Bush, the Neoconservatives, and Evangelical Christian Fiction', *Journal of Religion and Society*, 8 (2006), p. 7 (http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/pdf/2006-2.pdf.

6.   H. Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

and possibly even redefine a sense of evangelical identity within the context of a late modern, increasingly globalized world through the language and imagery of the apocalypse. The films thus, in a manner akin to science fiction,[7] allow both their producers and audiences to explore their present concerns and issues by projecting them into a near future where they will all be brought into stark relief.

To this end, the chapter will be structured in three main parts. In the first, I will set the context for the subsequent discussion by sketching a brief overview of the contemporary rapture film 'industry', highlighting both the main films and key trends within the genre. Following on from this, I will then discuss several key recurring tropes found across a range of rapture films, highlighting the ways in which they draw on apocalyptic texts to reflect both the present and future concerns of their producers and audience.

Dispensationalism

Before doing so, however, it is necessary to sketch briefly the contours and development of the premillennialist/dispensationalist belief system from which the films emerge. Dispensationalism is a form of premillennial belief (believing in the physical return of Jesus before the Millennium) that was initially developed in the nineteenth century by John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), and later promulgated in the twentieth century by Cyrus I. Scofield (1843–1921) through the Scofield Reference Bible (1909) and the Dallas Theological Seminary (founded 1924). Central to Dispensationalist theology is, as its name suggests, the notion that human history is divided into a series of seven distinct epochs, or dispensations, wherein God tests humanity, humanity fails the test and God brings about a catastrophic incident in judgement. So, for example, the dispensation of 'Innocence' ended with the expulsion from Eden, the dispensation of 'Promise' ended with the Israelites captivity in Egypt, while the dispensation of 'Law' ended with the crucifixion of Jesus. According to the Dispensationalist system, five of the seven dispensations have occurred and humanity currently exists in the penultimate dispensation, that of 'Grace' (or the Church Age), after which is the 'millennium'; the literal thousand year reign of Christ on earth. Between these, however, are a series of events which provide the central, recurring plot motif for 'rapture films'; the 'coming of Jesus in the clouds' in the rapture of the saints and the seven-year Tribulation period.

The doctrine of the rapture is based on a particular reading of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, where he writes how

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7. See, for example, M.K. Booker, *Alternate Americas: Science Fiction Film and American Culture* (Westport, CT: Preager, 2006).

> the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of
> the archangel, and with the trump of God: and the dead in Christ shall rise
> first. Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with
> them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with
> the Lord (1 Thess. 4.16-17).

For Darby and subsequent Dispensationalists, this passage was understood
to refer to the physical catching up into the clouds of the True Church into
heaven where they would wait out the seven-year period of the Tribula-
tion on earth before returning with Christ in the Parousia (Rev. 19). Dur-
ing the Tribulation period (Mk 13), those who remain will endure both the
earthly reign of the Beast at the head of a restored ten-nation Roman Empire
(Dan. 7; Rev. 13.1), as well as the wrath of God being poured out onto the
earth (Rev. 6; 8–10; 15–16). All these events will have their culmination
in the Second Coming and the Battle of Armageddon, where Satan will be
defeated and cast into a bottomless pit for a thousand years (Rev. 19.11-21;
20.7-10).

    Another significant feature of the Tribulation period concerns the fate of
the Jews. For Darby, the Church Age acted as a form of 'great parenthesis',
or pause in Gods prophetic plan, where God turned His attention away from
the Jews after they rejected Jesus as the messiah and towards the Christians.
Now, following the rapture of Church, He can turn His attention back to the
Jewish people and both fulfil His Abrahamic covenant to bestow material
blessings on them (Gen. 12.1-3) and prepare them to receive Jesus as their
messiah at His return. They will then join with all other believers in living
with Jesus for eternity.

    Over the course of the twentieth century, the Dispensationalist system has
been popularized in a number of novels such as *Scarlet and Purple* (1913)
and *The Mark of the Beast* (1915) by Sydney Watson, *The Clock Strikes*
(1971) by Frederick A. Tatford, *666* (1970) and *1000* (1973) by Salem Kir-
ban and *The Horsemen Are Coming* (1974) by Gary M. Cohen.[8] However,
it is Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1973) which, until the *Left
Behind* series two decades later, served more than any other text to popu-
larize dispensationalist belief and move it into the mainstream of American
culture. Lindsay's success lay undoubtedly in his ability to both repack-
age dispensationalist ideas within in the argot of the day and, perhaps more
importantly, to link End Time prophecies to contemporary geopolitical and
cultural issues. So, for example, in Lindsay's hands the rapture becomes
'The Ultimate Trip', The Parousia becomes 'The Main Event', the Whore
of Babylon (Rev. 17) becomes 'Scarlet O'Harlot', and 'the kings of the
East' (Rev. 16.12) become 'The Yellow Peril'. Likewise, Lindsay claims,

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    8. C. Gribben, *Writing the Rapture: Prophecy Fiction in Evangelical America*
(Oxford:Oxford University Press, 2009).

Biblical accounts of 'fire and brimstone' are attempts by their authors to describe nuclear weapons (the sores of Revelation 16 being, in turn, radiation sickness), while descriptions in Revelation of frightening 'locusts' whose 'torment was as the torment of a scorpion, when he striketh a man' (Rev. 9.5) are attack helicopters. Similarly, Lindsay claimed, the beast rising from the sea 'having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy' (Rev. 13.1) represents the European Common Market.

This process of repackaging dispensationalism for mainstream culture continued in the wake of Lindsay, but most attempts to repeat his huge success failed until the publication in 1995 of the first in the *Left Behind* series of novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. Like Lindsay two decades before, the *Left Behind* series has brought a dramatized account of the End Times to mainstream culture. Using the medium of the political thriller (*a la* John Grisham or Jeffrey Archer), the twelve books in the series chart the rise of the Beast/antichrist, Nicolae Carpathia, his demonic rule during the Tribulation period, and, ultimately, his defeat at the hand of the returning Christ at the battle of Armageddon. The novels also chart the relative fortunes of a small group of post-Rapture Christian converts ('the Tribulation Force') in resisting Carpathia and bringing more 'left behind' souls back to Christ prior to his return.

The Rapture Film Industry

The emergence of the contemporary rapture film industry may be traced back to the release of *A Thief in the Night* in *1972*. While the production of films by evangelical Christians dealing with the End Times goes back further to at least 1941 with the release of *The Rapture*, it was this film that has single-handedly defined the rapture film genre (see Walliss, 2009 for a more detailed history). Indeed, as one commentator notes, 'it is only a slight exaggeration to say that *A Thief in the Night* affected the evangelical film industry the way that sound or colour affected Hollywood'.[9] Despite being seen by an estimated three hundred million people worldwide, *Thief* did not receive a theatrical release, but rather was shown on 16 mm film in churches and at Christian youth camps, where it was typically followed by an 'altar call'; the relatively gruesome content of the film, it was hoped, providing the necessary impetus for lost souls to 'give their heart to Jesus'.[10]

9. See R. Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* (4th edn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 64.

10. See Balmer, *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory*, and Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus.* The film's Executive Producer Russ Doughton on the director and

One person among the many millions who saw and was affected by *Thief* and its sequels was the Canadian Peter Lalonde, who, with his brother Paul, formed Cloud Ten Productions in the late-1990s. Since its inception Cloud Ten has been at the forefront of the rapture film industry, producing a string of films between 1998 and 2005. In 1998 it produced *Apocalypse*: *Caught in the Eye of the Storm*, in cooperation with Jack Van Impe Ministries, which was followed by three sequels, *Revelation* (1999), *Tribulation* (1999),[11] and *Judgement* (2000). In the same year that *Judgement* was released, it also released an adaptation of the first Left Behind novel, *Left Behind: The Movie* (2000), which was, in turn, followed by two sequels, *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* (2002) and *Left Behind: World at War* (2005), with a fourth film in development.[12]

While clearly influenced by *A Thief in the Night*, the Cloud Ten films differ from it in a number of ways. Primarily, its films are produced on significantly larger budgets and, in contrast to *Thief*'s use of willing amateurs, feature casts of 'name' actors, such as Jeff Fahey (*The Lawnmower Man*), Gary Busey (*The Buddy Holly Story*, *Lethal Weapon*), Corbin Bernsen (*LA Law*), and Lou Gossett, Jr (*An Officer and a Gentleman*).[13] More importantly, in contrast to the explicit evangelism and scare-tactics of *Thief*, Cloud Ten has attempted to market its films as 'supernatural thrillers' which could appeal to mainstream audiences and 'send a message to Hollywood'. The majority of its films, however, do not receive theatrical release—*Left Behind: The Movie* being the exception—but are instead released straight to DVD and video. When they are exhibited publicly, they are typically shown not in multiplexes but, rather, like *Thief*, in churches; the films receiving what are referred to as a 'Church Theatrical Release'.[14]

The most commercially successful rapture film to date, however, was not produced by Cloud Ten, but rather Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN).

producers' commentary accompanying the DVD release of *A Thief in the Night* provides this estimate. One young man who saw the film and was not affected in the way the filmmakers would have perhaps liked was Brian Warner, who would later take the name Marilyn Manson.

11. As well as citing the involvement of Van Impe, *Tribulation* was also produced in association with John Hagee Ministries and T.D. Jakes Ministries.

12. For details on Cloud Ten and its films, see its webpage, http://www.cloudtenpictures.com/.

13. The four films in Cloud Ten's *Apocalypse* series cost between $1,000,000 (*Apocalypse: Caught in the Eye of the Storm*) and $11,000,000 (*Judgement*) to produce, while *Left Behind: The Movie* cost $17.4 million. In contrast, the production costs for *Thief* were just $68,000 (Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*).

14. See Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, and J. Walliss, 'From The Rapture to Left Behind: The Movie and Beyond: Evangelical Christian End Times Films from 1941 to the Present', *Journal of Religion and Film* 13(2) (2009), http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol13.no2/Wallis_Rapture.html for discussions.

Theatrically released in 1999, *The Omega Code* grossed over $12.6 million at the box office; three times the amount earned by *Left Behind: The Movie*. Nevertheless, its sequel (*Omega Code II: Megiddo*) did not fare as well and it would appear that its success represents the high water mark commercially-speaking for rapture films. Indeed, subsequent rapture films seem to owe more to the low budget aesthetic of *Thief* than to *The Omega Code* and the big budget releases of Cloud Ten. *The Moment After*, for example, cost just $90,000 to produce, and in the tradition of *Thief*, features friends of the producers/actors in acting and producing roles. A number of sets used in the film are also properties belonging to the producers of the film, or to their friends.[15] Such low budgets do not necessarily, however, mean that the desire to produce high production value product *à la* Cloud Ten is no longer a strong motivation for the producers of these films. The producers of *Gone*, for example, are keen to point out on their webpage that, despite its apparent low budget, the film was shot on the same Sony High Definition camera that 'Mr George Lucas used on his latest instalment of "Star Wars" [*Episode III: Attack of the Clones*]'.[16]

The Contours of Contemporary Rapture Films

The last decade, then, has witnessed several attempts, most notably by Cloud Ten and by those behind *The Omega Code*, to produce rapture films that can reach a broader audience outside of the evangelical Christian community. However, despite this growing emphasis on the potential entertainment value of rapture films for mainstream audiences, they remain nevertheless fundamentally niche market products. Indeed, in many ways their producers' desire to communicate to a wider audience and achieve some level of mainstream success is itself motivated more by the desire to propagate Biblical/apocalyptic 'truth' to audiences outside of churches, and hopefully 'win souls for Christ', than to achieve success for its own sake.[17]

   As a genre of filmmaking, rapture films attempt to depict to their audiences what their producers believe, based on a premillennial/Dispensationalist reading of apocalyptic texts, will be the horrors of the End Times. Thus, the films catalogue the awful state of affairs that those 'left behind' after the rapture of the faithful will have to endure during the Tribulation period; the rise to power and earthly rule of the Antichrist through a reborn

15. The film's director, Wes Llewellyn, on the 'Behind the Scenes' DVD extra on *The Moment After 2*.

16. Quoted at http://www.gonethefilm.com/GONE%20WEBSITE%209.8.05/home.htm.

17. Schultze, 'Evangelicals' Uneasy Alliance wth the Media', in D.A. Stout and J.M. Buddenbaum (eds.), *Religion and Mass Media: Audiences and Adaptations* (London: Sage Publications, 1996), pp. 61-73 (63-64).

Roman Empire (Dan. 7; Rev. 13.1), God's wrath being poured out onto the earth (Rev. 6; 8–10; 15–16), the (possibly forced) establishment of the 'Mark of the Beast' (Rev. 13.16-18), the emergence of the 'False Prophet' and a One World Religion (Rev. 13.1-15), and the organized persecution of all those who refuse to worship the new, satanic world order (Rev. 6.9-11; 20.4). Indeed, in many ways rapture films present almost identical *dramatis personae* and plot motifs, with each film often only differing in the actors that play them and the way in which particular motifs are emphasized and presented.[18]

The Horrors of the Tribulation

Without doubt the most important character found across rapture films is the Beast/Antichrist.[19] Whether alluded to or portrayed on screen, the Antichrist and his seven-year rule during the Tribulation forms the central geo-political backdrop within rapture films against which their respective narratives unfold. Drawing on a tradition within Dispensationalist exegesis stretching back to at least Hal Lindsey (1971) in the 1970s and echoing the profound unease among American premillennialists concerning growing internationalism in the post-war era and America's place in an age of increasing globalization, rapture films explicitly link the Antichrist and the Reborn Roman Empire with the United Nations and with the forces of globalization.[20] In *A Thief in the Night*, the *Apocalypse* and *Left Behind* series, and *The Omega Code* and its sequel, for example, the Antichrist is portrayed as a charismatic European man, who comes to power as the leader of the United Nations (or functionally similar body) promising peace and security, global unity, an end to famine, and other seemingly desirable geopolitical aims. In some films he even offers answers to why people across the world have suddenly disappeared, and to bring order back to the chaos of the post-Rapture world. To this end, he

18. That said, however, looking across the genre there are marked differences, largely reflecting budgetary constraints, among rapture films in terms of how they approach their subject matter. Thus, while all rapture films are very much narrative driven, those with a larger budget (such as, for example, the *Left Behind*, *Omega Code* and *Apocalypse* series of films) are able to portray the larger global, geo-political context of the Antichrist's rule, while those produced on a smaller budget (such as, for example, *The Moment After* series or *Gone*) focus instead more on the personal dimension and on depicting conversion narratives.

19. Within the genre, the terms 'Antichrist' and 'Beast' are used interchangeably, although the former is typically used more often. For the sake of consistency, I will use this term.

20. See Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*; O. Lindermayer, 'Europe as Antichrist: North American Pre-Millenarianism', in S. Hunt (ed.), *Christian Millenarianism: From the Early Church to Waco* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), pp. 39-49, and Gribben, *Rapture Fiction and the Evangelical Crisis*.

proposes that nations adopt a common world currency, cede their sovereignty to a UN-led world super-state, and adopt him, as head of the UN, as the leader of the world, if not the messiah himself.

Thus, the *Apocalypse* series depicts the rise to power of the 'European Union President' Franco Macalusso in the chaotic aftermath of the Rapture. Claiming to be none other than 'the God of your fathers' (2 Thess. 2.3-4; Mt. 24.15), Macalusso promises humanity 'a new age of peace and prosperity…[and]…human enlightenment!… Heaven on earth!' and establishes a unified global order, O.N.E. (One Nation Earth; motto *Mundus vult decipi— The World Wants to Be Deceived*), with himself at its head. Similarly, in the *Left Behind* series, the Antichrist emerges to world power in the form a charismatic young Romanian politician, Nicolae Carpathia, who, at the behest of the world's leaders, becomes Secretary General of the United Nations. Claiming, like Macalusso, to want only to bring the world peace and security in the chaos of the post-Rapture world, the Carpathia-led UN quickly subsumes nation states under its control, establishes a one world currency, and takes control of the world's media. Finally, in *The Omega Code*, veteran British actor Michael York plays Stone Alexander, a 'beloved media mogul turned political dynamo' who becomes 'Chairman of the European Union'. In this role, he quickly brokers a seven-year peace treaty between the Palestinians and the Israelis (Dan. 9.27), and reorganizes geopolitical affairs into a one world union of ten zones (Dan. 7.7). After coming back to life from a fatal head wound (Rev. 13.3), he has the Temple in Jerusalem rebuilt and from there declares himself, like Macalusso, to be none other than God himself.

Having gained control of the world at the geopolitical and economic levels, the Antichrist/UN's attention then turns to gaining control over other spheres of life. As several commentators have noted, within rapture fiction generally, the Antichrist's totalitarian control over the world and individual souls is portrayed as multidimensional; combining political power through the UN, economic/financial power through a common currency, as well as cultural and religious power.[21]

In their portrayals of the Antichrist's control over the cultural domain, rapture films again draw on established trends in popularized dispensational exegesis by focusing on technology and the mass media as the methods by which the Antichrist will win power over the hearts and minds of individuals. At least since the 1960s, numerous popularizes of prophecy have weaved computers into their depictions of the End Times, with some going so far as to claim that the Antichrist may itself be a computer.[22] Nevertheless, when compared to these earlier negative accounts, rapture films appear

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21. See McAlister, 'Prophecy, Politics, and the Popular', and Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*.

22. For example, M.S. Relfe, *When your Money Fails: The '666 System' Is Here* (Montgomery, AL: Ministries, Inc., 1981), pp. 45-48.

much more ambivalent in how they portray technology.[23] While, on the one hand, they draw on these earlier ideas of technology being a tool of the Antichrist, they also portray his opponents using it both to resist and battle against him.

Without question the most important technological means within rapture films by which the Antichrist attempts to win control over individuals is 'The Mark of the Beast'; a form of barcode or chip that is implanted into the body in order to mark an individual as a follower of the Antichrist and, in some cases, allow him to control their actions. In *A Thief in the Night*, for example, a spokesman for the UN-established body UNITE (or *United Nations Imperium of Total Emergency*) is shown on a TV broadcast requesting that citizens 'show [themselves] a true citizen of the world', by reporting to their 'local UNITE identification centre'. The film then shows individuals queuing at a centre to have an electronic barcode tattooed on either their forehead or hand, with one old man telling the UNITE official: 'put it right there [points to his forehead]. I'm not afraid to be a good citizen!' The film's heroine, Patty, however, declines to do so and the viewer sees her walking around with a despondent air being turned away from various shops displaying 'Citizens Only' signs for not having the Mark (cf. Rev. 13. 17). Likewise, *The Moment After* and its sequel draws on contemporary fears of the satellite tracking of individuals by referring to the Mark as the 'B' or 'BEAST Chip', an acronym for Biological Encoding And Satellite Tracking. In both cases, individuals have little or no choice over whether they take the mark; they must, the films show, take the mark or face what the UNITE spokesman refers to in *Thief* as 'arrest and prolonged inconvenience' [*sic*].

In contrast, in the *Apocalypse* series the decision is based more on seduction (at least initially) than on coercion and, indeed, features a much more complex technological scenario involving virtual reality headsets. Thus, during what is billed as 'The Day of Wonders', Macalusso enjoins the whole population of the world to don headsets and enter a virtual world. Once in this world, Macalusso offers each individual their heart's desire in exchange for taking his Mark (which is portrayed as a form of tattoo 666). While the majority accept the exchange, and thereby give their souls over to the Antichrist, a few who recognize him for who he is are shown refusing and as a punishment are executed in the VR world by guillotine, their bodies also somehow dying in reality as well.[24]

23. Cf. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*.

24. The image of the guillotine as the primary means whereby those who refuse to take the Mark are dispatched is a recurring theme in *A Thief in the Night* and the *Apocalypse* series; seemingly taking its influence from the King James translation of Rev. 20.4, where its author describes seeing 'the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God'.

However, it is also through the use of technology that those 'left behind' are able to resist the Antichrist. Arguably reflecting evangelical Christians' increased use of a variety of technology and media forms over recent decades,[25] technology—and as we shall see below, the media—is portrayed as a neutral medium that may be co-opted or subverted by the enemies of the Antichrist. So, for example, a number of rapture films show their heroes producing fake Marks that allow them to resist the Antichrist (in some cases allowing them to access his strongholds to subvert his plans), while in the *Apocalypse* series the 'Day of Wonders' software is hacked into and eventually destroyed by the films' heroes. Similarly, the central plotline in the final instalment in the *Thief* series, *The Prodigal Planet*, revolves around the film's heroes attempting to construct a 'computerized radio transmitter' that will link together the disparate underground Christian groups resisting the Antichrist. At the film's, finale the transmission—a choir singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'—is broadcast worldwide, the melody of which destabilizes the Antichrist's computer system, causing it to meltdown.

A similar ambivalence is also found within rapture films in their portrayal of the media. Again, as with technology, the media is frequently shown as the obvious means by which the Antichrist disseminates his deceptive message to the world. So, for example, in the *Thief*, *Apocalypse* and *Left Behind* series, the Antichrist is shown frequently addressing the world via global telecasts. Indeed, one of the Antichrist's first actions after assuming power in all three series is to take control of the media, thereby turning them into propaganda tools. However, again, it is also portrayed as a site of resistance; a site whereby the Antichrist's message may be either subverted or replaced by a Christian counter-discourse. In both the *Apocalypse* and *Left Behind* series, for example, the lead Christian heroes are broadcast journalists who use their positions in order to subvert the Antichrist's message, and where possible promote a Christian one. Indeed, in the latter films in the *Apocalypse* series, one of the Christian journalists, Helen Hannah, goes on the run and begins to broadcast contemporary evangelical Christian videos about the Endtimes from a mobile transmission van in order to spread a Christian message.

25. See, for example, S.M. Hoover, *Mass Media Religion: The Social Significance of the Electronic Church* (London: Sage Publications, 1988); S. Bruce, *Pray TV: Telvangelism in America* (London: Routledge, 1990); Q.J. Schultze, 'Keeping the Faith: American Evangelicals and the Media', in Q.J. Schultze (ed.), *American Evangelicals and the Mass Media: Perspectives on the Relationship between American Evangelicals and the Mass Media* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), pp. 23-45; J. Peck, *The Gods of Televangelism: The Crisis of Meaning and the Appeal of Religious Television* (Cresskill, NY: Hampton Press, 1993); and L. Kintz and J. Lesage (eds.), *Media Culture and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

    In this way, contemporary rapture films differ markedly from earlier forms of rapture fiction that saw technology and the media as inherently evil and resistance to the Antichrist as impossible.[26] In contrast, both are presented as morally neutral domains which, although under the power of anti-Christian forces, can be subverted and 'won over for Christ'; a perspective which arguably reflects the contemporary evangelical logic of political involvement.[27] As Shuck (2005) observes, whereas earlier generations of evangelicals avoided the mainstream media and the political domain, seeing both as inherently evil, contemporary evangelicals believe that they must become involved in order to defend themselves and their beliefs against what Tim LaHaye refers to as the 'pretribulation tribulation' of secular humanism.[28]

    This theme of evangelical Christians being a marginalized and under threat minority within a hostile religio-political culture is another recurring theme within rapture films. As Gribben (2006a) notes, a central theme within dispensationalist and evangelical Christian self-identity is a sense of being an acutely marginal and marginalized subculture, despite strong evidence to the contrary, particularly in America. Indeed, such is the pessimistic view of the future found within dispensationalism, that often the world is seen to progress;

> …in a way decidedly hostile to the interest of these Christians, and within the narrative, true Christianity must become increasingly isolated and marginalized. Christians must face discrimination and persecution, the world must become increasingly dominated by evil, and true believers must seem increasingly scarce.[29]

Rapture films echo—if not exploit—this fear by portraying the persecution that those who convert to Christianity after the Rapture will have to endure at the hands of the Antichrist. Painting a clear trajectory from contemporary perceived marginalization to future genocide, they portray a world where to quote the prayer of one of the main Christian protagonists in *Left Behind: World at War*;

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    26. See Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*; Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*; cf. also Schueltze, 'Evangelicals' Uneasy Alliance with the Media', pp. 65-67. on evangelical perceptions of the media.

    27. See Schultze, 'Keeping the Faith'; N.T. Ammerman, 'North American Protestant Fundamentalism', in L. Kintz and J. Lesage (eds.), *Media, Culture and the Religious Right* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 55-113; and see especially Tim LaHaye, *You Are Engaged in the Battle for the Mind: A Subtle Warfare* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1984), on the necessity of evangelicals reclaiming the media.

    28. LaHaye, *Battle for the Mind*, p. 170; see also R.J. Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

    29. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, p. 106.

> Father, if we do nothing but admit to knowing you and loving you they send us for re-education. If we lift a finger to spread your word they sentence us as terrorists. Even if we make it to court, it's a dark and fearful world…

Or, put more bluntly by the same character earlier in the series; 'admitting you're a Christian during the Tribulation is just like marking yourself for death'.

A perennial theme within rapture films is thus the choice that individual Christians must face during the tribulation; whether they should take the Mark and thereby give their souls over to Antichrist or should they refuse and, if caught, be executed. *A Distant Thunder*, for example, draws clear parallels between the born again 'altar call' by showing a group of individuals held captive in a church by UNITE who are given the option of taking the Mark or being executed by guillotine. Indeed, the scene makes this link explicit by cutting to a scene showing an evangelist in the pre-Rapture world inviting members of a congregation to come forward and accept Jesus. Going further, the finale of the first film in the *Apocalypse* series echoes the Nazi treatment of the Jews by showing Christians being round up as enemies of the state and placed in cattle trucks to be sent to concentration camps.

Such images continue across both the *Apocalypse* series and, in a subtler way, across the *Left Behind* series. The *Apocalypse* series in particular portrays Christians (who are referred to as 'Haters' due to their opposition to the new order) almost like hunted animals because of their refusal to take the Mark. They are also accused of terrorist activities such as blowing up school buses, orphanages and old peoples' homes; crimes which are in fact covert attempts by O.N.E. to discredit them in the eyes of the world. Indeed, in the final film in the series—which centres around the leader of the Christian underground's show trail for 'crimes against humanity—we see that O.N.E. has gone so as to establish a 'Haters Hotline', where concerned citizens can report those they suspect of being 'Haters' to the authorities. The *Left Behind* series, in contrast, while referring to the persecution that Christians will have to endure during the tribulation, does nor portray it as explicitly on screen, leaving it more to the imagination of the viewer. That said, however, the Antichrist in the series arguably develops the most ingenious method of dispatching Christians when, in *Left Behind: World at War*, he has Bibles sprayed with chemical agents which kill their readers as they read and handle them.

Linked to this marginalization and persecution of Christians during the Tribulation is the concomitant emergence of 'the False Prophet' and a One World Religion; an emergence which, again, is portrayed as the culmination of existent perceived counter-Christian trends. Thus, for example, in the later films in the *Thief* series, the 'World Church' is portrayed as

pro-Corporation and anti-Israel; more concerned with secular matters—particularly making profit from war—than with the spirit. In more recent films, however, it is the New Age Movement and 'self spirituality' (Heelas 1996) more generally which are linked with the Antichrist, a shift arguably reflecting a growing critique of such spiritualities among contemporary evangelical Christians.[30] Franco Macalusso, in particular, is portrayed as a form of New Age guru, offering humanity the key to unlocking their hidden potential. In one of his first telecasts, for example, after announcing that he is God, for example, he declares to the world in a speech replete with New Age buzzwords that 'we are ready to take the next great step of evolution':

> I will show you the wonderful powers that lie within you, waiting to be unleashed; powers that have been your birthright from the very beginning. What has held you back until now were those who refused to believe in the power of the human mind. Those who believed that our true power came from outside ourselves, I tell you today that the power is not outside yourself. It is within yourself. It always has been! (cf. 2 Thess. 2.9-12).

In order for humanity to unleash these powers, however, he claims that 'cancer cells in our collective body' have first to be 'removed'. The following scene then shows scenes of mobs attacking Christians and burning down churches while a news broadcast voiceover declares that 'the world is united in a common hatred of Christianity and Jesus Christ'.

Similarly, in *Tribulation Force*, Nicolae Carpathia announces that humanity must put aside their differences—'the deadliest of all' being their religious ones and look for answers within themselves; his call being expressed through a clear inversion of the Lord's Prayer:

> There is no heaven or hell, there is just us, here, now. Let us not look beyond ourselves, let us look *to* ourselves. Together we need not fear temptation or evil for *ours* is the kingdom, the *power* and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

Later in the film, Carpathia's ambitions are made explicit when he proposes to 'to give [humanity] faith…by creating spiritual unity…a one world religion [of] tolerance, harmony and peace'. Again, the New Age credentials

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30. See Hal Lindsey with C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), chapter 10 and J.A. Saliba, *Christian Responses to the New Age Movement: A Critical Assessment* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999); and for further examples see J. Cumbey, *The Hidden Dangers of the Rainbow*: *The New Age Movement and our Coming Age of Barbarism* (Lafeyette, LA: Huntington House, 1982); D. Groothuis, *Confronting the New Age* (Downers Grove, IL.: InverVarsity, 1988); R. Baer, *Inside the New Age Nightmare* (Lafeyette, LA: Huntington House, 1989); and M. Noonan, *Ransomed from Darkness: The New Age, Christian Faith, and the Battle for Souls* (El Sobrante, CA: North Bay Books, 2005).

of this Anti-Christian religion are clear from its logo which is a bright New Age-like Mandala, complete with mystical symbols such as Yin-Yang, surrounded by a red border containing the words 'God is in us. God is us. We are God'.

The message of both films is thus unambiguous: the New Age quest for divinity within is, if not Satanic itself, clearly inimical to Christianity. This theme is also explored, albeit in a much more subtle way, through the character of Gillen Lane in *The Omega Code*. At the beginning of the film, Lane is shown as motivational speaker who, although raised a Christian, rejected it after his mother died in a tragic car accident when he was a child. Thus, echoing words which could have come from Macalusso or Carpathia, he tells an interviewer of how 'I've seen too many held back waiting on some higher power', adding that 'not until we grasp that we *are* the higher power can we take the *next* step in our evolution, and finally become *whole*!' However, over the course of the film this cynicism is replaced by his former faith and, after undergoing a born again experience, he confronts and attempts to kill his former employer, the Antichrist. Lane's journey within the film is thus one from (New Age) deception/weakness to belief/strength; his newly (re)found belief giving him the strength to attempt to kill the Antichrist.

'Save Me, Jesus'

Moving from the geo-political to the personal, another recurring motif across rapture films—but particularly in the more low-budget offerings—is a focus on individuals' born again conversion after the rapture. On one level at least, as Hendershot (2004) point out, rapture films are conceived by their producers as didactic tools for those wishing to convert either now or after the rapture, it is therefore of no surprise that the films contain many exemplar portrayals of conversion formula (specifically the so-called 'Sinner's Prayer') and experiences. It is equally of no surprise that many rapture films—the *Thief* series being the notable example—deploy numerous scare tactics in order to jolt their viewers into wanting to 'open their heart to Jesus' before it is too late. The recurring musical theme of *Thief*, for example, is the Larry Norman song 'I Wish We'd All Been Ready', which features lines such as 'A man and wife asleep in bed/She hears a noise and turns her head he's gone/I wish we'd all been ready' and 'There's no time to change your mind/The Son has come and you've been left behind'. Its sequels are also replete with images of individuals who waited until after the rapture before undergoing conversion experiences being executed by guillotine; a motif that, as noted earlier, is reprised across a number of subsequent films.

However, on another level, the films may also be read, again following Shuck (2005), as articulations—or perhaps even redefinitions—of both

a certain form of Dispensationalist spiritual economy and a sense of evangelical identity. Numerous commentators, for example, both from within academic and theological quarters, have raised concerns about how the *Left Behind* novels introduce what they consider to be new and novel elements into the dispensationalist salvational scheme.[31] Gribben, in particular, in his recent critique of *Left Behind* has highlighted how the novels introduce several elements into the dispensationalist salvational scheme which, he argues, not only lack biblical foundations, but are also at odds with the beliefs of earlier dispensationalist writers. Most notable among these, he claims, are the notions of that the unborn and those before puberty will automatically be taken up in the rapture, that individuals may have a 'second chance' to be saved during the Tribulation, and that this salvation is achieved through the recitation of the 'Sinner's Prayer'.

Both the *Left Behind* and *Apocalypse* series, for example, refer to children being taken up in the rapture; the latter series in particular showing news footage of a distraught woman pushing an empty pram screaming that someone has taken her baby. Moreover, as a rule rapture films invariably feature at least one individual undergoing a born again conversion after the rapture, often by them reciting some variation of the Sinner's Prayer. Thus, while, as discussed above in the *Apocalypse* series there is a larger plot focusing on the rule of the Antichrist and his plans to gain the souls of humanity, this in some ways merely provides a context for each films central plot, which revolves around their respective leading characters and undergoing a born again conversion. Likewise, *The Moment After* films focus on two FBI agents, Adam Riley and Charles Baker; the former undergoing a born again conversion at the end of the first film, while the latter undergoes one in the second while hunting for his fugitive former partner.

In this way, then, rapture films are as much concerned with reinforcing and redefining the beliefs of their viewers, as they are with winning new souls. In particular, the portrayal of born again conversions may, aside from potentially providing a sense of *Schadenfreude* at the thought of what awaits non-believers who realize the error of their ways after the rapture,[32] serve to reinforce viewers' convictions that they are themselves indeed saved—particularly if they too have used the 'Sinner's Prayer'.[33] More broadly, by

31. See, for example, A.L. Barry, 'The "Left Behind" View is out of Left Field', http://www.lifeoftheworld.com/believe/statements/leftbehind.pdf, 2000; Gribben, *Rapture Fiction*; Mark Sweetnam, 'Tensions in Dispensational Eschatology', in K.G.C. Newport and C. Gribben (eds.), *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press (2006), pp. 173-92.

32. Shuck, *Marks of the Beast*.

33. J. Cordero, 'The Production of Christian Fiction', *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 4 (2004), http://www.usask.ca/relst/jrpc/art6-xianfiction.html, and Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*.

portraying characters moving from a position of often militant non-belief to confirmed belief (even in the face of death), the films also provide characters who evangelical audiences can not only root for, but who also, again, confirm the validity of their beliefs.[34] In other words, in the absence of any firm guarantees that they are indeed saved, rapture films provide for their viewers cinematic signs of election similar to that described by Max Weber in his classic *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*; signs that while not guaranteeing that they are indeed saved, do offer them some degree of self-assurance in their position in the salvational economy.[35]

A similar phenomenon may be observed in rapture films' portrayal of mainline Christians; all of whom, as non-evangelicals, are *ipso facto* portrayed as being left behind after the rapture. A recurring *dramatis personae* from *A Thief in the Night* through to the *Left Behind* series is the Christian—particularly the Christian minister—who, although believing themselves to be a 'good person' and a pious Christian nevertheless finds themselves left behind. So, for example, in *A Thief in the Night* there is the figure of Pastor Turner (played with relish by the film's producer, Russ Doughton), who is painted as an archetypal mainline Christian; a man who criticizes evangelicals and rejects literal interpretations of the Bible as merely 'the poetic expression of those greater principles by which man lives with man'. After he is left behind, he comes to realize that not only has he been living a lie but, arguably more importantly, that he has been leading his flock astray. Faced with this terrible realization, Turner goes out of his mind before, in the final two films in the series, seemingly repenting and becoming a fervent dispensationalist; spending most of his screen time in front of a giant tribulation map interpreting the 'signs of the times' for the chief protagonists. Turner's conversion journey is thus, again, one from a position of being diametrically opposed theologically to that of his audience to one of accepting (albeit too late) their beliefs. Similarly, in the *Left Behind* series, Pastor Bruce Barnes is portrayed as a pastor who also comes to realize the error of his ways when his congregation are taken up in the rapture, leaving him behind. Thus, in the scene where he is introduced, he is shown in a distraught in his empty church praying:

> Oh boy, oh god, what a fraud I am…and everybody bought it [laughs] except you. I knew your message, I knew your word, I stood right here and preached it and I was good, but they're gone, they're gone and…but knowing and believing are two different things. I'm living a lie, I'm living a lie…

34. M. Goldberg, 'Fundamentally Unsound', *Salon* (29 July, 2002), http://dir.salon.com/story/books/feature/2002/07/29/left_behind/index.html.

35. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Routledge, 2001).

Again like Turner, he comes to embrace a dispensationalist position and, indeed, becomes a key member of the so-called Tribulation Force of newly-converted Christians who seek to resist the Antichrist.

   As Frykholm observes, figures such as Barnes and Turner raise questions and anxieties among evangelical audiences concerning their own salvation. Both, after all, look and act and, indeed, believe themselves to be Christians, but they are in fact, at best, deluded, and at worst hypocrites.[36] The films, however, potentially resolve this tension by showing that only non-evangelical Christians will be left behind; all genuine 'Bible Believing' Christians in contrast are always taken up in the rapture. In addition they show how those left behind 'Christians', such as Turner and Barnes, ultimately come to reject their former position and accept a premillennial-ist theodicy. The films thus provide their evangelical viewers with potential tools to both reaffirm their own identity and place in the salvational scheme and challenge the mainline.

Conclusions

Rapture films, then, may be seen to operate on two levels. Primarily, following Hendershot, they may be seen to operate as didactic tools; educating their audiences in the specifics of premillennial/dispensationalist visions of the Endtimes and enjoining them to undergo a born again experience now before it is too late. However, on an arguably more important level, rapture films may also be seen to provide sites whereby a contemporary form of evangelical identity may be articulated and redefined through the language and imagery provided by a premillennial reading of apocalyptic texts. As I have argued above, rapture films take the contemporary concerns of evangelicals regarding, for example, growing internationalism, the role of technology and media in their lives and their perceived marginalization, and give voice to them by projecting them into a near future where they are shown to be manifested in their most extreme form. So, for example, a clear trajectory is portrayed between contemporary internationalism and, in particular the role of the UN in contemporary geopolitical affairs, and the future rise of the Antichrist and the one world state. Similarly, the films also portray a future genocide against Christians at the hands of the Antichrist and the emergence of a New Age One/ecumenical One World Religion as the radicalization of perceived contemporary trends within the public sphere that marginalize them and their beliefs. However, in doing so, the films do not simply encourage passivity. Rather, while still accepting that the prophetic framework is set, they show their viewers how both now and in the future they can resist these trends. Thus, in contrast to earlier portrayals in both

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   36. Frykholm, *Rapture Culture*, p. 147.

rapture fiction and prophecy literature that saw technology and the media as inherently evil, rapture films portray them as potential sites of resistance and struggle. The media may be in the hands of antichristian forces, they show their viewers, but this control may be resisted and subverted.

More broadly, the films may be seen to articulate a contemporary form of evangelical identity; giving voice, in particular, to the anxieties faced by evangelicals regarding their place in the salvational economy. Whether by showing the young and unborn being taken in the rapture, holding out the possibility of a post-rapture 'second chance', valorising the 'Sinner's Prayer', or showing how mainline Christians will be left behind alongside non-believers, rapture films speak directly to these anxieties, offering their audiences confirmation of their place in the spiritual economy.

Whether or not the films succeed in these aims is open to speculation. While the producers of the *A Thief in the Night* series, for example, make claims regarding the number of souls that have been 'saved' as a consequence of watching the films, and there are a number of reviews of several of the films by Christian viewers available on the internet, this evidence is at best anecdotal and selective.[37] Further research is needed, along the lines adopted by Frykholm (2004) and Gutjahr (2002) in their analysis of the *Left Behind* series' readership, into the dynamics of rapture films audiences, focusing on their responses to the films.[38] Do they, for example, watch them simply as Christian equivalents of mainstream horror films or supernatural thrillers purely for escapist fantasies, or are they also seeking to the theologically informed (perhaps even uplifted)? Further research could also examine how evangelicals' perceived sense of cultural marginalization is influenced by the Obama Presidency, and how this is expressed within evangelical popular culture. More broadly, given the paucity of academic discussions of the rapture films phenomenon *vis-à-vis* rapture fiction, research is needed generally on the dynamics of the rapture film industry and the role that it plays within the Evangelical Christian community in the ongoing maintenance and (re)construction of both contemporary premillennialist visions of the Endtimes and contemporary evangelical identities.

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37. For reviews of the various films, see for example, www.amazon.com, www.imdb.com, and www.hollywoodjesus.com.

38. See also the religious audience research of L.S. Clark, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), and S.M. Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006).

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7. Sanctifying Empire:
The Hopeful Paradox of Apocalypsia

Richard Walsh

> Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And when you look long into an abyss, the abyss also looks into you.[1]

> Several times I have been asked…why (with a view to what, to what ends, and so on) I have or have taken on an apocalyptic tone and proposed apocalyptic themes… That I have multiplied the distinctions between closure and the end, that I was aware of speaking of discourses on the end rather than announcing the end, that I intended to analyze a genre rather than practice it, and even when I would practice it, to do so with this ironic kind [genre] of clause wherein I tried to show that this clause never belonged to the genre itself; nevertheless, for the reasons I said a few minutes ago, every language on the apocalypse is also apocalyptic and cannot be excluded from its object.[2]

In an earlier article, I asked whether one could read Revelation, with the help of *End of Days*, without focusing on calculations of the end, sectarianism, and righteous violence—all themes prominent in American readings of Revelation.[3] I had only limited success. Here, I try to tease out the surreptitious sanctification of empire which occurs in both Revelation and *End of Days* under the cover of a blatant struggle with and resistance of another 'evil' empire. First, I first read *End of Days* as the story of Jericho Cane's spiritual resurrection, a focus that turns one's attention from

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1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (trans. Walter Kaufmann; New York: Vintage, 1966), §146.

2. Jacques Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy', in Robert Detweiler (ed.), *Derrida and Biblical Studies* (trans. John P. Leavey, Jr; Semeia, 23; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1982), p. 90.

3. Richard Walsh, 'On Finding a Non-American Revelation: *End of Days* and the Book of Revelation', in George Aichele and Richard Walsh (eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), pp. 1-23. I would like to thank John Walliss and the Hope Centre for Millennialism Studies, of which he is the director, at Liverpool Hope University for the opportunity to revisit this topic through a week of study at the Centre and a lecture under the auspices of the Hope Theological Society.

empire and violence to subjective individualism. Then, I read Revelation from the perspective of *End of Days* as a never-ending story, as the pursuit of a sexy beast, and as a violent, heavenly theophany. These forays return to the questions of the calculable end and religious violence and allow me to call attention to the sanctification of empire in text and film and to suggest, quite tentatively, a different path, one which revels in non-finality or in apocalypsia.[4]

End of Days *and Jericho's Resurrection*

The 1999 Peter Hyams's film, *End of Days*, capitalized on popular anxieties about the arrival of the new millennium with a story in which Satan escapes from hell to inaugurate a millennial demonic kingdom upon earth. Taking over a human body (Gabriel Byrne), Satan strives to impregnate his bride-elect, Christine (Robin Tunney), and thereby sire the Antichrist before the deadline of midnight which ushers in the New Year. Occult scriptures and astrology provide the Vatican with advance knowledge of this crisis. One group within the Vatican, led by the Pope, tries to protect Christine from Satan. A rival group tries to assassinate Christine. Jericho Cane (Arnold Schwarzenegger), a suicidal, washed-out ex-cop, becomes unwittingly involved in this millennial scenario when he stops yet another renegade priest from assassinating the human-Satan (Gabriel Byrne) for whom Jericho has been hired to provide security. Mysterious clues about the assassin lead Jericho to Christine whom he protects from militant priests and from Satan and his minions. A wise-cracking buddy (Kevin Pollock) and a reluctant mentor-priest (Rod Steiger) assist Jericho. The latter explains the film's apocalyptic premise to Jericho and for the audience and catalyses Jericho's three-stage, spiritual transformation: (1) temptation; (2) descent into the depths; and (3) 'resurrection'.

  In the temptation scene in Jericho's apartment, Satan offers to restore Jericho's tragically murdered wife and daughter, the cause of Jericho's suicidal despair, in return for Jericho's betrayal of Christine. When Jericho resists, Satan tortures Jericho by replaying the murder of his family and, then, flatteringly compares Jericho to himself. Both have rejected God out of anger. Claiming that God failed Jericho and that God's undeserved reputation depends entirely on 'that overblown press-kit they call the Bible', Satan offers Jericho a ground-floor position in the new end-of-days management. While Jericho does resist this temptation, the scene establishes the

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4. 'Apocalypsia', a term coined by Dieter Lenzen, refers to the never-ending, repetitious nature of apocalyptic. I owe this notion to Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London and New York: Routledge: 1999), p. 87, who cites Lenzen on this point.

crucial, fateful similarity between hero and villain. Jericho's anger aligns him with Satan and, thereafter, provides the film's *leitmotif*.

The descent sequence begins with Satan snatching Christine from the priest-mentor's church and from Jericho's protection. Satan further humiliates Jericho by crucifying him in a dark alley and, then, letting him live so that Jericho will capitulate completely to his anger and to Satan and so that Jericho will witness Satan's spectacular, apocalyptic triumph. After Jericho's priest-mentor rescues him from the cross, however, Jericho arms himself and sets out for Satan's lair in the subterranean depths of a derelict movie theater to rescue Christine. Jericho's anger allows him to pass uncontested into the satanic depths, where he interrupts Satan's ritualistic rape of Christine. Then, the sacrificial act of Jericho's sidekick allows the duo to escape through the city's subway system as the dragon-Satan pursues them.

'Resurrected' from the depths, Jericho and Christine enter an ornate church as the midnight hour approaches. Again, the church provides no refuge, and the dragon-Satan wreaks havoc upon it. Meanwhile, Satan's minions clamor outside and the unwitting populace celebrates the arriving New Year in Times Square. Huddling at the altar, Jericho contemplates the religious iconography of Michael and his conquering sword (cf. Rev. 12.7) and Christ crucified (cf. Rev. 12.11). As Jericho's gaze increasingly identifies with Christ crucified, Jericho throws down his huge, automatic weapon in order to resist Satan with prayer and faith.[5] Apparently, Jericho remembers an early conversation with his mentor who had lectured him on the necessity of faith in the struggle with evil. Naively, Jericho had opted there for his Glock. The film's apocalyptic mysteries and action have, however, initiated Jericho, and he rejects not just the Glock but, far more importantly, the anger that had aligned him with Satan.

Unfortunately, Satan is not so easily defeated, and the great dragon erupts terrifyingly from the depths into the church and possesses Jericho in order to consummate the ritualistic rape. Throwing Christine upon the devastated altar, Satan-Jericho pauses to contemplate the religious iconography and to taunt the crucified Christ by claiming that he died for nothing other than a little time for miserable humans. As the helpless Christine begs Jericho to resist Satan, Jericho visibly struggles, again looking back and forth between Christ crucified and Michael's sword. Now, Jericho's gaze fastens on Michael's sword, and Jericho throws himself on that sword as the year ends. Frustrated, the dragon Satan is sucked howling back into hell; and Jericho dies smiling with a vision of his wife and daughter. Outside, the

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5. Laura Copier, 'Preposterous Revelations: Visions of Apocalypse and Martyrdom in Hollywood Cinema 1980–2000' (dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 2008), pp. 54-61, 67-74, provides a careful shot-by-shot description of this identification.

ball drops in Times Square and the populace, unaware of their brush with destruction, welcomes the New Year.

End of Days' *Redux of Revelation:*
the Release of Satan, the Sequel (Rev. 20.7)

End of Days is an unremarkable, boilerplate film, weaving popular mythology, previous films,[6] and different cinematic genres together; nonetheless, the result translates Revelation intriguingly.[7] The film's most obvious biblical precursor is the millennial loosing of Satan in Rev. 20.7. Revelation's loosing is itself already a strange revival of evil, following evil's apparently decisive, rather protracted, apocalyptic defeat in the wrath of the Lamb and God (Rev. 14–20).[8] If Revelation were a film, however, no one would be surprised by evil's return. That evil dies hard, if at all, is a Hollywood trope. If evil died with true finality, it would forestall commercially lucrative sequels—some of which, like those of Jason and Freddy, proliferate quite promiscuously.[9] If Revelation were a film, then, we would expect *The Release of Satan: the Sequel*.

  Scholars know that ancient apocalypses were also sequels and re-releases.[10] Some scholars, for example, think that the references to the

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6. *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Omen* are important precursors as are religious horror generally and the action films of Arnold Schwarzenegger. On the last, see Copier, 'Preposterous Revelations', pp. 61-67. One might also compare the film to other '1999' films, including *Strange Days*, which was produced in 1995, but is about 1999. One reviewer referred to *End of Days* succinctly as *Rosemary's Baby* with heavy artillery (Steve Schneider, 'Full Devil Jackass' [cited 13 November 2000]; from http://orlandoweeklycom/movies/review.asp?movie=521). The most immediate connections are, however, with *The Omen*. That film also contains astrological portents, clues from a subterranean room of a priest, and a climactic altar scene. In *The Omen*, however, evil succeeds. Various sequels eventually redressed this 'injustice'.

7. Revelation is itself a hybrid genre. See, for example, Gregory L. Linton, 'Reading the Apocalypse as Apocalypse: The Limits of Genre', in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (SBL Symposium Series, 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), pp. 9-41.

8. Incidentally, the release of Satan in Rev. 20.7 allows this protracted defeat to be prolonged further. The narrator clearly relishes the story of evil's defeat.

9. I vividly remember the last scene, although I no longer remember the film's title or plot, of the very first horror film I saw as a child at a Saturday matinee. In that scene, the foot of a monster with regenerative powers sank slowly to the bottom of the sea after the military had destroyed the monster with nuclear devices in the film's climax. Incidentally, filmmakers only gradually realized the lucrative possibilities of 'sequel-ing' evil. for example, in James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein*, produced by Universal, the monster dies decisively. The film's economic success, however, demanded his revival. The subsequent production simply made no mention of the monster's previous demise.

10. Apocalyptic and apocalypse are modern scholarly constructions of worldview

temple in Rev. 11 suggest that Revelation is the sequel to an earlier, now lost Jewish apocalypse. Revelation's redux (e.g., 11.1-3; 13.5) of the final seven exilic years (or half of that seven) raised to attention by Daniel, which had already concentrated on those years after isolating them from an alleged seventy weeks of exilic years of exile (e.g., Dan. 9.2, 24-27), which was itself Daniel's redux of Jeremiah's seventy years of exile (Jer. 25.11, 12; 29.10), is more well known, but, of course, still not as well known as the constant recalculations of Revelation's timing of the end by later readers. In fact, even a cursory knowledge of Revelation's popular interpretation would actually prepare us for *The Release of Satan 3*, *4*, and so forth.

In fact, apocalyptic is so given to sequels that apocalyptic is more the end's indefinite postponement than its imminent prediction.[11] When one looks at the text of Revelation itself, the notion of an end becomes equally problematic. Put simply, the apparent finale of the New Jerusalem is not the end of Revelation. The warning words of a confusing montage of messengers follows. Clearly, the issues at hand in Rev. 22.6-21 are the authority of the preceding visions and a desire to entrap the audience; however, the consequence is a text that does not quite find closure. The repeated 'come' in this section only intensifies the book's non-finality.[12]

Not surprisingly, the narrator worries that someone else will continue the story: 'I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book' (Rev. 22.18-19, NRSV). Clearly, then, the question is not whether there will be a sequel, but whether it will be one that the original production team approves (see Rev. 1.3).[13] These

and genre respectively. Typically, scholars include visions of the end and visions of the heavens in these categories. I use the terms here to refer to worldviews and texts containing visions of the end. Most recent discussions of the genre begin with John J. Collins (ed.), *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre* (Semeia, 14; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976); and, then, add discussions of function, social context, and readers' involvement. See, for example, Linton, 'Reading the Apocalypse'; and David L. Barr, 'Beyond Genre: The Expectations of Apocalypse', in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (SBL Symposium Series, 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), pp. 71-89.

11. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, p. 1, observes that every apocalypse is a sequel playing out a never-ending story.

12. See Derrida's reflections on this 'Come' ('Of an Apocalyptic Tone', pp. 85, 90-95). For Derrida, of course, 'the coming is always to come' and, thus, his reading of apocalypse coheres with his general rejection of metaphysics.

13. Is the sealed scroll, eaten by John, which a heavenly voice demands go unpublished (see Rev. 10), evidence of a planned sequel within the text? Is that sequel still to come? Because of the echoes of Ezek. 2.8–3.3, in which an eaten scroll becomes

threats have, of course, gone largely unheeded and unapproved sequels have proliferated.[14]

As already indicated, Revelation itself is hardly original or foundational. It reprises the Exodus—as the recent *The Reaping* nicely reminds us—as well as previous apocalypses.[15] Revelation's own 'finale' also clearly reprises and rehabilitates Genesis 1–3, the beginning of the Christian Bible.[16] Mythologists and historical critics deny Jewish and Christian apocalypses' originality as well, arguing that these apocalypses reprise and postpone to the future the ancient creation myths of the Ancient Near East, which featured a creator god's decisive defeat of a chaos monster (e.g. the *Enuma elish*).[17] Rituals re-enacted these myths every year at New Year's Festivals ushering in the new fertile year and likely constituting thereby, without adding the continuation of this myth-ritual in apocalyptic, the most successful run of sequels ever.

a prophet's message, and because of Rev. 10.11, some see the rest of Revelation as the matter of the sealed little scroll. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 64-77, reflects on another lack of finality in Revelation: the continuing presence of the abyss (Rev. 20.3) just outside the New Jerusalem's walls. The abyss resembles the deep (*tehom*) that the creator god tames in Gen. 1 which itself resembles the chaos monster Tiamat defeated by the creator god Marduk in the *Enuma elish*. The abyss, then, suggests the continuing threat of the chaos dragon.

14. A text of Revelation with 23 chapters provides the premise of *The Prophecy* (1995). When a character objects to the additional chapter, another character wonders if they have found the Teacher's Version. The chapter reveals a second war in heaven led by Gabriel, caused because the angels have become jealous of God's attention to humans. In the film's main action, this war comes to earth (cf. Rev. 12.9, 13-18) as rival angels try to gain control of the Dark Soul as a weapon for the heavenly war. *The Prophecy* generated several sequels of its own.

15. One could easily read Exodus as a 'historical' version of the conflict between the creator god (Yhwh) and the chaos monster (Pharaoh). See below.

16. John A.T. Robinson once succinctly remarked that the essential message of early Christian eschatology was 'In the end, God'. Robinson's phrase deliberately mirrors the 'In the beginning, God' of Gen. 1.1. Revelation's restoration of the Garden of Eden (Rev. 22.1-5) provides similar mirroring. The New Jerusalem of Rev. 21, of course, has no precursor in Genesis, which has a rather hostile attitude toward cities.

17. Apocalypses, like Revelation, shift this creative conflict to the future. Some see Zoroastrianism as precursor here. On Revelation and this conflict mythology, see Adela Yarbro Collins, *The Combat Myth in the Book of Revelation* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976). On Revelation and this conflict mythology with particular reference to Roman imperial cults, see Steven J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jan Willem van Henten, 'Dragon Myth and Imperial Ideology in Revelation 12–13', in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (SBL Symposium Series, 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), pp. 181-203; and Stephen D. Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism in the New Testament* (The Bible in the Modern World, 12; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), pp. 97-121.

End of Days' *Translation of Revelation: Sexy Beast (Rev. 12.1-9)*

Perhaps, then, neither the release of the dragon in Rev. 20.7 nor its re-release in *End of Days*—is this finally the director's cut?—should surprise careful readers of Revelation. Nonetheless, *End of Days* employs Satan's re-release innovatively. Revelation's loosing of Satan does not threaten God's order. It is a divine ruse drawing secret, recalcitrant opponents into the open for their destruction by heavenly fire. This final theophany, which ushers in the throne judgment and the New Jerusalem, is as destructive as it is creative.[18] No ancient would expect any less, for theophanies always blister the earth.[19] The divine is the terrifying, as well as the fascinating, wholly Other,[20] and, accordingly, always carries with it the stench of human mortality.[21]

 End of Days has no real interest in this theophany or in its implications about human mortality.[22] *End of Days* looses Satan for sexual procreation, not for destruction (although that is a corollary of Satan's evil in the film). Ancient New Year rites often included sacred sex or marriage, but the sex/marriage was part of the creation of the new, fertile year by the culture's creator god or representative, not the acts of some sexy chaos beast (cf. Rev. 21). *End of Days* reverses this ritual story. Here, Satan, the ultimate chaos

18. Cf. the discussion of the destructive creativity of apocalyptic in Richard Walsh, *Finding St Paul in Film* (New York and London: T. & T. Clark, 2005), pp. 27-37.

19. Has the heavenly fire dried up the sea (Rev. 21.1)? Probably not, as the sea gives up its dead in Rev. 20.13 after the heavenly fire. Incidentally, the absence of the sea does not mean the end of the threat of chaos.

20. The classic treatment is Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (trans. John W. Harvey; New York: Oxford University Press, 1958 [original, 1928]). In a short novel, Laurence Cossé plays amusingly with what might happen to secular modernity if God's presence became unavoidable (*A Corner of the Veil* [New York: Scribner's, 1999]).

21. Cf. Oswald Spengler who claims that death always stands behind myth (cited in Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* [New York: Delta, 1991], p. 217). On apocalyptic and horror, see Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*. Using the work of Slajov Žižek (*The Plague of Fantasies* [New York: Verso, 1997], pp. 60ff.), she connects apocalyptic fantasy and genocide. More specifically, she worries that such fantasies may foist mass lynching onto God.

22. Despite its fascination with violence, American popular culture has little interest in death. Thus, Rollo May observes that the culture of the United States provides little help for dealing with loss (defeat) or mortality (*Cry for Myth*). Incidentally, my students always believe that they have an immortal soul, while many of the same students are unsure about the existence of God. Such peculiarities have led some observers to designate American popular culture as gnostic. See Harold Bloom, *American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992); Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and Richard Walsh, *Reading the Gospels in the Dark: Portrayals of Jesus in Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 162-65, 173-85.

beast, is a sexy beast striving to sire the Antichrist and his millennial king-
dom. Thus, while *End of Days* takes Rev. 20.7 loosely as its premise, the
film's plot differs thereafter from the heavenly violence/war come to earth
in Revelation 19–20. *End of Days* does, however, parody the marriage of
the Lamb that follows in Revelation 21.

Twice in the film, dragon-enthused humans near the ritualized rape that
will spawn the Antichrist. Despite its rather extended foreplay, however, the
film finally fails to deliver any procreative sex. But, Revelation also fails
to deliver a sexual consummation or, even, the Lamb's announced mar-
riage. The bride arrives replete with 'the glory of God' (Rev. 21.11), but no
marriage follows. Instead, Revelation carefully measures and describes the
Lamb's 'property'.[23] Moreover, this description explicitly prohibits certain
kinds of sex (Rev. 21.8), and one wonders if all (heterosexual) sex is absent
from Revelation's New Jerusalem.[24] Perhaps, the end of death makes sex-
ual procreation unnecessary (Rev. 21.4), and recreational sex hardly seems
likely. Instead, the eros envisioned in Revelation is the worshipful adora-
tion of God and the Lamb. Even here, while the worship of Revelation's
churches anticipates this heavenly delight, this consummation is also finally
lacking. Revelation's heavenly worship remains a fantasy (or a ritualized,
visionary experience). Desire remains rampant.

Thus, one might read Revelation after *End of Days* as the frustrated story
of the Lamb's pursuit of his heavenly bride. As noted, *End of Days* is also a
frustrated story of a sexy beast's pursuit of his 'bride', but the film focuses
on the sexy chaos monster, not the Lamb. Accordingly, the film's focus and
plot is rather closer to events in Rev. 12 than to those in Rev. 20–22:

> A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with
> the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was
> pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.
> Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven
> heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads. His tail swept down
> a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon
> stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might
> devour her child as soon as it was born. And she gave birth to a son, a male
> child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was
> snatched away and taken to God … And war broke out in heaven; Michael
> and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels…were

23. The description also offers careful notes about the property's secure protection,
including oversight of its constantly open gates. The emphasis on property and pro-
tection probably reflect pre-modern, non-romantic notions of marriage as primarily an
economic matter.

24. The negative description of heterosexual sex in Rev. 14.4 and the text's general
animus toward women may imply further sexual prohibitions. See the nasty focus on the
violation of women in Rev. 17–19. Does this suggest that the Lamb's 'sexual' desires are
more similar to those of the dragon in *End of Days* than one might first think?

> defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world (Rev. 12.1-9, NRSV).

Defeated in heaven by Michael, Satan prowls the earth, pursuing a woman and her children. *End of Days'* similar story is entirely of this earth.[25] While the film's Satan does come from hell, the camera never visits those regions. Moreover, on earth, the film's action is human. Clearly, the film prefers its supernatural characters at a distance,[26] and even the dragon Satan becomes incarnate (twice) in order to carry out the film's plot.

As *End of Days* brings the heavenly portents and supernatural actions of Rev. 12.1-9 down to earth, the film's opening sequence includes a woman giving birth to a girl in a New York hospital. Unlike the child in Revelation, this baby has no protection. Instead, Satan's minions snatch her and take her to the depths of the hospital where they dedicate her to Satan with demonic rituals. Thereafter, they eliminate her birth parents and become her guardians, faithfully waiting the appointed time of her rape by Satan and the advent of the new millennium.

Nonetheless, while the film secularizes Revelation 12 quite thoroughly, it does offer one heavenly portent. The film's opening scene features the eye-of-God-sign in the heavens, which an astronomer priest decodes, with the help of interpretations of Revelation, as the warning of the impending loosing of Satan. The birth of the girl, described above, follows immediately. Given the secular focus of the film, this opening scene is surprising testimony to a watchful, warning divine absence. The scene is as close as the film comes to a theophany, and it is not altogether unlike the opening vision of heaven in Revelation 4–5, which also features an absent, but watchful sovereignty.[27] Of course, the film's sign also differs from Revelation's vision, because it foretells the threat of Satan's millennial kingdom, not heavenly sovereignty come to earth. The prospect of Satan's kingdom come to earth, however, returns one to Rev. 12.1-9, where the dragon comes to earth to oppress God's children after his heavenly defeat (Rev. 12.13-18; 13).[28]

25. Numerous differences in detail exist. Revelation's woman is already pregnant and bears a male child, which the dragon pursues and which is protected by God and the earth itself. *End of Days'* Satan pursues a woman in order to impregnate her.

26. E.g., the allusions to or rumors of providence (the astrological signs, the textual warnings, Jericho's altar conversion, and the mysterious force that sucks Satan back into hell), which never quite become a matter of focus for the film. See below.

27. Such divine watchfulness might not comfort. See the discussion of the Panopticon in Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison* (trans. Alan Sheridan; New York: Vintage, 1979). For an application to Revelation, see Stephen D. Moore, *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

28. If historical critical readings of Revelation are to be believed, this oppression was in the form of demands for emperor worship made by the local elites of Asia

As noted above, the film's dragon is more blatantly sexual than that of Revelation. Why, one wonders, does *End of Days* translate Revelation 12 so erotically?[29] First, as noted above, the translation brings the action down to earth quite literally. Second, this maneuver enacts one of the most basic of Hollywood tropes, the damsel in distress and her protection/salvation by her fearless knight. In religious horror, as here, the typical version of this trope is the story of the siring or the birth of the Antichrist (see, e.g., *Rosemary's Baby*, and *The Omen* [1976, 2006]).[30] Third, and most importantly, this erotic turn flirts with a modern fear. Sex is not only more illicit and titillating than violence in the United States. It articulates the fundamental fear of individualism far more vividly than violence does.[31] That horror, expressed quite commonly in religious horror films, is the prospect that some supernatural presence—whether it is demonic or divine is inconsequential—might overwhelm the fragile individual's identity (see the next section and the conclusion).[32] *End of Days* ostensibly purges that fear with

Minor. See p. 117 n. 17 above. Many critics, however, have noted that evidence for Roman oppression of 'Christians' is sporadic, and others have noted that only one member of John's communities has clearly died at the time of Revelation's writing (see Rev. 2.13).

29. Or, is the translation pornographic? See Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 92-97, 117-25.

30. Both the damsel in distress and the siring of the Antichrist motifs reflect the patriarchal perspective of Hollywood film, which, particularly in action and horror films, caters to predominantly male, adolescent audiences. Such film often offers thinly disguised fantasies of control of and violence against women. Of course, *End of Days* does not pervert Revelation here. Revelation, too, projects troubling sexual violence against Jezebel (Rev. 2.20-23) and the Great Whore of Babylon (Rev. 17–18). See p. 119 n. 24. While many interpreters ignore this feature of Revelation, feminist criticism does not. See, e.g., Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. 32-42, 92-97, 117-25; Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Babylon the Great: A Rhetorical-Political Reading of Revelation 17–18', in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (SBL Symposium Series, 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), pp. 243-69.

31. On the basic fears of individualism—absorption and ostracism—see May, *The Cry for Myth*. The siring of the Antichrist is a form of the possession story, which is so popular in religious horror. The classic is *The Exorcist* (1973) which spawned several sequels and more imitators. Of course, various Dracula films and stories antedate *The Exorcist* and articulate similar fears. See Tina Pippin, 'Of Gods and Demons: Blood Sacrifice and Eternal Life in *Dracula* and the Apocalypse of John', in George Aichele and Richard Walsh (eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), pp. 24-41.

32. *Stigmata* (1999) provides an excellent example of this point because its possessing spirit is human, not supernatural. The modern fear of possession/absorption resembles the anxieties of the closed traditional societies (which produced so much of biblical literature) which obsessed about anything that crossed the boundaries of the

the conquering blood of Jericho, a motif that recalls the conquering blood of the Lamb in Revelation (Rev. 12.11).

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End of Days' *Translation of Revelation:*
The Conquering Blood of Jericho (Rev. 12.11)

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In Revelation 12, Michael's heavenly victory casts Satan and his angels to earth, where Satan persecutes the woman's children (12.17) with the help of two monstrous beasts (13). In this sequence, heaven is the site of God's violent victory through Michael (12.7-9) while earth and Revelation's present is the time of suffering, the time of the Lamb's (and his martyrs') blood (12.10-12).[33] The motif of the Lamb's conquering blood first occurs in Revelation 5 in a vision of the heavenly throne. In fact, that blood makes the Lamb the heavenly figure worthy to open the seals of God's apocalyptic judgment (5.9-13). Later, the martyrs' prayers and blood similarly call out for and catalyze God's apocalyptic acts (e.g., 6.9-11). The supernatural violence that comes to earth in Rev. 6–10 and 14–20 is the divine response to this blood.[34] Thus, if Revelation is the vision of God's heavenly sovereignty (Rev. 4–5) come to earth (Rev. 20–22), it is also the story of heavenly violence (Rev. 5; 12.1-9) come to earth, both demonically (Rev. 12.10-18; 13) and divinely (Rev. 18–20).

As the Lamb does not figure prominently after Revelation 14 (a section on the Lamb's army and God's wrath), it is actually supernatural violence that ends the oppression of the Lamb's people.[35] If the blood of the Lamb conquers, it is only with the assist of powerful, divine patronage and violence. The Lamb needs the assist of the cyborg-Savior, with sword in his mouth,

body—food, waste, blood, etc. (cf. the concerns about food and fornication in Rev. 2.6, 14-15, 20-21). The body, of course, is symbolic of the body politic.

33. Revelation's 'good' characters are clearly martyrs, whether its earliest audiences suffered persecution or not. See p. 120 n. 28. For discussion of Revelation's construction of this martyr-identity, see Christopher A. Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the Book of Revelation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

34. Revelation 12.7-9 suggests that divine violence precedes earthly oppression and may, in some way, cause it. As a result, divine violence does not just come at the end. It envelops the present and the earth and the oppression of the Lamb's people. Is God or heaven, then, the ultimate cause of the oppression of his people (cf. Job 1–2)? Further, if earthly oppression requiring heavenly redress is the result of original heavenly violence, what might the earthly divine violence generate?

35. For a reading which claims the Lamb undercuts the motif of divine violence, see David L. Barr, 'The Lamb Who Looks like a Dragon? Characterizing Jesus in John's Apocalypse', in David L. Barr (ed.), *The Reality of Apocalypse: Rhetoric and Politics in the Book of Revelation* (SBL Symposium Series, 39; Atlanta: SBL, 2006), pp. 205-21.

who, not incidentally, thoroughly envelops the Lamb (Rev. 1.16; 19.11-16).[36] Thus, Revelation moves from the cyborg-Savior through the bloody Lamb to the cyborg-Savior and heavenly fire. While the Lamb returns thereafter for his marriage, it is the Lamb's bride, the New Jerusalem, upon which the text lavishes attention. And, in fact, the cyborg-Savior makes one last appearance after the finale of the property assessment of the New Jerusalem in order to threaten apocalyptic plagues on those who fail to behave (Rev. 22.12-19).[37] God's new world order, then, could not be bloodier. Everyone bleeds—the Lamb, God's people, God's opponents—everyone, that is, except for God.

Despite its action-horror genre(s), *End of Days* differs dramatically. The film has no interest in Revelation's supernatural, celestial violence or in the violent oppression of the people of God on earth. People do suffer, and Satan does take delight in evil, but most of the film's violence surrounds Satan's pursuit and Jericho's defense of the damsel. Even here, nothing compares to Revelation's bloody imagination; nonetheless, the film's violence is important. It is what ultimately re-kidnaps Christine, destroys the human body of Satan, and 'gets' the romantic duo 'to the church on time'. The violence, however, is entirely earthly and human and, more importantly, ultimately futile against the dragon.

Moreover, in the ruins of the church in *End of Days*, everything changes. There, *End of Days* fixates upon Rev. 12.11, including, of course, that text's echoes of Rev. 5. The film remains, that is, entirely within the world of the blood of the Lamb. In fact, at the crucial altar scene, Jericho's contemplation re-enacts the move in Revelation 12 from Michael's violence to the Lamb's blood. As noted earlier, when Jericho throws down his gun, he turns from Michael to identify with the bloody, suffering Christ. Moreover, as this 'conversion' occurs, the film offers one brief shot from heaven. As Laura Copier says, the visuals make it seem as if the altar—or some hidden providence—assists Jericho's prayerful conversion.[38] But, the film is not quite done with Michael's sword and with violence, for in what amounts to a visual footnote to Rev. 12.7-9, the film finally fixes Jericho upon Michael's sword. Nonetheless, unlike Revelation, *End of Days* imagines a martyr who conquers without the assist of a cyborg-Savior or heavenly fire.[39] This imag-

36. Perhaps, one should see Revelation as the text with the sword in its maw, as the cyborg-Savior is the text's revelatory figure (Rev. 1.1, 12-20).

37. The language of Jesus in 22.12-19 echoes the language of Jesus in Rev. 1–2 and the description of the cyborg-Savior in Rev. 1.13-20, although there is no additional mention of the sword in the mouth.

38. See Copier, 'Preposterous Revelations', pp. 71-74.

39. Jericho may have a divine assist. Rumors of providence are present in the film from the opening eye-of-God-sign. See p. 120 n. 26. Something limits Satan's loosing. Further, some mysterious force sucks Satan into the depths after Jericho's sacrifice. Something also provides Jericho his final smiling vision.

ination, encapsulated in Jericho's contemplation of the altar iconography and his identification with the bloody Christ, constitutes the revelation of *End of Days*,[40] a revelation which differs from that of Revelation in several ways.

First, as detailed above, *End of Days* focuses relentlessly on Jericho's conquering sacrifice. Only traces of an assisting divine providence appear. By contrast, Revelation simply does not focus upon the blood of the Lamb. The text takes that blood (and that of the martyrs) as its premise; nevertheless, it does not explicate this blood. Instead, Revelation focuses on the Lamb's wrath (Rev. 6.16; cf. 14.10; 17.14). Here, then, is Revelation's revelation; it is the Lamb's wrath and sovereignty (Rev. 5, 21) that the audience is instructed to contemplate. Accordingly, one thinks even today of apocalypse as catastrophe, not as revelation. By contrast, *End of Days'* contemplation of conquering blood is a striking revelation in the context of an action-horror film.

Second, then, the film's contemplation means that *End of Days* does not lead up to a theophany like that of Revelation. Heavenly and hellish actions devolve to earth and to human actors as the film contemplates the modern, heroic individual. In an important article, Conrad Ostwalt argues that Hollywood apocalypses differ from ancient precursors by depicting end-of-world scenarios that have human or natural causes and human solutions.[41] Ostwalt's observation is generally true, but a subgenre of Hollywood apocalypses, like *End of Days* or *The Omen*, which mix apocalyptic and religious horror, does feature supernatural scenarios. Nonetheless, in *End of Days*, human effort thwarts the supernaturally engendered apocalypse.[42] But, then, how human is Jericho? Surely, he is not merely human. After all, he stands, however desperately, alone against Satan. Moreover, his altar contemplation and ultimate sacrifice identify him with the suffering Christ of that altar. Further, after his sacrifice, the film grants him a vision of his dead wife and daughter who await him 'on the other side'. Not surprisingly, he dies smilingly. This smiling vision is as close as *End of Days* comes to

40. See Derrida's reflections on apocalypse as contemplation in 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', p. 64. The climactic altar scene in *End of Days* does remind one of Revelation's worship location (see Rev. 1–3; 22.8-21) and fixation on worship in its content (e.g. Rev. 4–5). The message of Revelation might be nicely summarized in the angel's penultimate words to John: 'Worship God!' (Rev. 22.9).

41. Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr., 'Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation', in Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr (eds.), *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1995), pp. 55-63. Cf. Bernard B. Scott, *Hollywood Dreams and Biblical Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), pp. 193-217.

42. *The Omen* is a different, scarier matter, as are films like *Rosemary's Baby*, *The Reaping*, and, to a certain extent, *The Exorcist*. See above.

Revelation 20–22, but this vision also allows the film to replace Revelation's theophany with the apotheosis of the modern, heroic individual.

The martyrs of Revelation will share the Lamb's exaltation to heaven, but Jericho stands alone. Even his sidekick, who dies not once, but twice, does not share his deification. The last time we see that sidekick, he is writhing in hellfire. Further, Jericho replaces the suffering Christ in a way that the martyrs of Revelation do not. In fact, *End of Days* profanes Christ's sacrifice in several ways. The film's satanic crucifixion of Jericho is arguably as important to the film as the altar's crucifix. Further, Satan-Jericho says to the altar crucifix that Christ's sacrifice simply granted humans a little time. While the speaker is evil and unreliable, one should not forget that the film's action agrees. Loosed on the eve of the millennium, Satan will usher in the kingdom if someone does not stop him. The traditional divine figures—God, Christ, Michael—do not appear interested. On the eve of the new millennium, then, a new Christ is necessary. Matters fall to Jericho. At the very least, then, Jericho's success adds him to the list of apocalyptic heroes. Perhaps, other additions will follow.

But, probably, Jericho is not truly a Christ figure. More likely, Christ is simply one image utilized by the film to illustrate the more basic, modern, individualistic, divine hero.[43] Jericho is not the supernatural Christ, but the modern, messianic individual. While Ostwalt's observation about Hollywood apocalypses is understandable and generally accurate, one should refine it slightly. His analysis rightly recognizes the importance of the human in creating and stopping modern cinematic apocalypses. But, in light of modern mythologies, one should probably see this human action as 'supernatural'. At least, it is sacred, because individual humans are the modern form of the sacred.

43. Consider, for example, the syncretistic mix of philosophical and religious imagery portraying Neo as the free, heroic individual in *The Matrix*. In fact, even modern depictions of Jesus seem to owe more to modern culture and its notion of the individual than to traditional Christ imagery. See Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003); and Richard Wightman Fox, *Jesus in America: Personal Savior, Cultural Hero, National Obsession* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004). With respect to film, one might also observe that most films, except for 'historical' Jesus films have, until recently, borrowed cyborg-Savior, not bloody Lamb, imagery for their heroes. See Robert Jewett, *The Captain America Complex* (2nd edn; Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1984). The martyr hero has now, however, become a trope worthy of discussion in film. See Fred Burnett, 'The Characterization of Martin Riggs in Lethal Weapon 1: An Archetypal Hero', in George Aichele and Richard Walsh (eds.), *Screening Scripture: Intertextual Connections between Scripture and Film* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002), pp. 251-27; Richard Walsh, 'Wrestling with *The Passion of the Christ*: At the Movies with Roland Barthes and Mel Gibson', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1/2 (2005), available at http://publications. epress.monash.edu/doi/full/10.2104/bc050002; and Copier, 'Preposterous Revelations'.

Third, and finally, *End of Days'* revelation differs from Revelation because it focuses upon Jericho's spiritual transformation—the move from his Glock to his faith (his anger management training)—rather than upon the wrath of the Lamb. Modern novels and films are often about the hero's conversion. Although some apocalypses include stories of the conversion of the opposition (cf. Dan. 1–6), Revelation clearly freezes people where they are: 'Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy' (Rev. 22.11, NRSV). Revelation wants, that is, to distribute appropriate judgments now. Spiritually and ethically, Revelation is conservative. Thus, it calls for the saints to endure. The right people are already converted. Modernity and *End of Days* are more plastic and optimistic. Conversions, even of suicidal alcoholics like Jericho, are possible.

Revelation externalizes evil. The problem is Satan and his beasts. The evil within various churches in Revelation 2–3 and the possibility of apostasy is a corollary of this more basic, external evil. While *End of Days* also features dramatic, external evil, the film's concentration on Jericho's spiritual transformation internalizes evil. Jericho's satanically-inspired vision allows the audience to share his suicidal anger; Jericho's contemplation allows the audience to see the film's revelation about the conquering blood of the Lamb; and, most importantly, the film's final battle is fought within Jericho, not between Jericho and the dragon. To thwart the evil apocalypse, Jericho has to defeat the evil demon within him. The film handles this serious threat to modern individualism (see above) by subtly transubstantiating the problem of the possessing demon into Jericho's film-long struggle with his anger (and despair), which climax at this altar. The anger, as already noted, threatens to join Jericho to Satan, to identify the hero and the villain. Instead of *End of Days*, then, perhaps one should rename the film *Anger Management* or, even better, *Operation Faith*.[44]

While Jericho's climactic actions are not clearly 'faith', his mentor did instruct him previously to choose faith rather than the gun. The dropped gun, then, along with the contemplation of religious icons, probably visually represents faith.[45] However, despite Jericho's visual identification with

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44. When Jericho first appears in the film, he contemplates suicide. His sidekick prevents this, as he apparently has before. Ironically, Jericho's faith/transformation does not prevent his suicide. Jericho's self-impalement ushers him out of a world he was all too ready to leave days before. Jericho's transformation does, however, transfigure this suicide. Now, it is an act of heroism, rather than despair; self-sacrifice, rather than a suicide.

45. The opening scene supports this reading. There, the pope chastises religious leaders who want to thwart Satan violently. He argues, instead, that only faith can defeat Satan. Although Jericho never meets the pope, the film charts Jericho's move from one like that of the pope's opposition to that of the pope.

Christ, Jericho's faith differs from that of the people of the Lamb in Revelation. Their blood cries out to God, but their sacrifice does not immediately defeat Satan. The world and Satan's evil empire continues. Their faith, then, is endurance to death and beyond and a hope that the heavenly sovereign who is their patron will someday come to earth. Jericho's faith has more internal, as we have seen, and more immediate consequences. It, along with whatever mysterious force provided warning signs of Satan's loosing and ultimately sucks Satan back into hell, defeats Satan. More importantly, Jericho's faith is self-reliance. It defeats the threat of possessing deities. Through his renunciation of the gun, he comes to terms with himself, foregoes his anger and resentment, and finds peace within. This faith is thoroughly modern, thoroughly subjective. In many respects, as befits a Hollywood hero (and the governor of California), it is American. Revelation, of course, is not.

Sanctifying Empire

In my earlier essay,[46] I compared *End of Days* and Revelation in order to find a non-American Revelation. As a citizen of the United States, I was seeking a certain amount of self-criticism in my reading of apocalyptic texts and films. As noted above, I focused that comparison on three issues common to popular American interpretations of Revelation: the calculable end; sectarianism (and/or individualism); and the fantasy of innocent, vindictive violence.

In both film and text, the calculable end is a rhetorical ploy, a means to an end. *End of Days* uses it to capitalize on millennial fears common in 1999. Revelation employs the device to enhance its call to 'Worship God' (Rev. 22.9). Revelation, that is, strives to realize the heavenly sovereignty of Revelation 4–5 in the community's worship, not the future.[47] The more detailed comparison of *End of Days* and Revelation here corroborates the rhetorical nature of the calculable end by pointing out apocalypse's tendency to sequels. Quite simply, 'apocalypsia' defers the end.[48] Cinematic apocalypses function similarly, warning audiences of paths that they should avoid (e.g., nuclear war; ecological disaster) and massaging their fears about

46. Walsh, 'On Finding a Non-American Revelation'.

47. Obviously—although academics may sometimes ignore it—Revelation read in worship functions religiously. In particular, it realizes its worshipers' symbol system. See Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), pp. 87-125. In Revelation's case, the basic symbol realized would be the heavenly sovereignty of Rev. 4–5. See Walsh, 'On Finding a Non-American Revelation'. This religious reality is certainly a fantastic or alternate reality. Neither its fantastic nor its religious character, however, exempts it from ethical critique.

48. See p. 113 n. 4 and p. 116 n. 11.

those problems simultaneously. One may read Revelation, then, as primarily about living in the present, rather than about the calculation of the end.

Sectarianism is more difficult to avoid. *End of Days'* employment of the Hollywood trope of the lone individual's conflict with corrupt groups or institutions revels in American sectarianism. Scholars also typically see ancient apocalyptic as the viewpoint of oppressed sects, representing either colonials' reactionary natural religion desires or failed utopian frustrations. To read Revelation differently, one would have to see Revelation as something other than a 'final' solution.[49] Such a reading would first have to reject calculable end-readings (as above) and, then, contend that the text's visions afford its readers a temporary escape, whether worshipful or fantastic, which reinvigorates them for renewed life in the world.[50] Such a reading would be more postmillennial than premillennial. In my earlier essay, I tentatively suggested such a possibility, but now I must retreat significantly. After all, the apocalyptic twentieth century effectively demolished the nineteenth-century liberalism which was the basis of postmillennialism. If hope remains for rejuvenating, non-sectarian readings of Revelation, perhaps it is after the fashion of the small acts of Havel, the small, repeated contestations of power of Foucault, or the postcolonial drive to theorize agency on the part of colonials.[51] Each of these theorists, of course, is aware of the problematic nature of such attempts. Moreover, I find little in Revelation—other than the text's own failure to achieve closure—to support such maneuvers.[52] Revelation 22.11 is a particularly daunting roadblock. The reference to the permanently open gates of the New Jerusalem might seem to offer some hope (Rev. 21.25), but those gates are not open to all. Either the 'undesirables' have been thoroughly eliminated or the open gates magically

49. See, for example, the argument for a comic (non-final) eschatology in John D. Crossan, *Raid on the Articulate: Comic Eschatology in Jesus and Borges* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1976).

50. P.D. Hanson reads apocalyptic so in 'Apocalypticism', in Keith Crim (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 33-34. Cf. Adela Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis: The Power of the Apocalypse* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), for the claim that Revelation pursues a catharsis of fear and resentment (cf. Aristotle's notion that tragedy purged pity and fear). Cf. Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life* (2nd edn; London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 14-15, who argue that such escapes are necessary to modern individualism.

51. Intriguingly, at the end of the twentieth century, the scholarly construction of the historical Jesus that most commonly contested the dominant construct of the apocalyptic Jesus was some form of social critic or activist Jesus (e.g., hypotheses of a Cynic Jesus or of a village reformer).

52. The recent turn to apocalyptic biblical texts by Marxist philosophers trying to theorize resistance to the dominant is primarily a turn to Paul, not to Revelation. See Walsh, *Finding St Paul*, pp. 41 n. 50, 104 n. 3, 142 n. 66.

prevent their entry (Rev. 21.27). The gates do, however, allow 'the nations', those (the converted?) who miraculously persist despite heavenly fire and the passing of heaven and earth,[53] to traffic with the New Jerusalem:

> The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations (Rev. 21.24-26, NRSV; cf. 22.2).

While the passage echoes the Abrahamic blessing for the nations (Gen. 12.3) utilized by various prophets, every empire since Rome has seen itself as such a blessing. Moreover, the New Jerusalem's trafficking eerily resembles that of the Babylon (cf. Rev. 18) it replaces. In short, Revelation's open gates are those of an uncontested empire, reaping the fruits of its colonies and basking in the people's adoration.

In reading apocalyptic, fantasies of innocent revenge are as hard to avoid as sectarianism. In my earlier essay, I argued that *End of Days'* commitment to the conquering blood of the lamb Jericho helpfully exposed the resentment at the heart of Revelation and the text's facile externalization of evil.[54] I still think that is true, but I have overstated the case on both sides.

On one hand, Revelation does externalize evil, but it does so in order to preserve internal purity or to prevent internalizing external evil (see Rev. 21.27). Apocalyptic is essentially covenant maintenance in what is perceived as a hostile world. It reflects the purity regulations of a closed, traditional society. It is the ancient equivalent of a Patriot Act.[55] Gibson's recent *Apocalypto* reenacts similar themes cinematically. Accordingly, he prefaces the film with a title from Will Durant: 'A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within'. Revelation's externalization of evil reveals similar internal anxieties.

On the other hand, *End of Days* does avoid Revelation's cyborg-Savior and heavenly fire, but the film uses violence to get the romantic duo to the church for Jericho's altar contemplation and transformation. Jericho's victory also relies on the traces of a providence that warns of, but apparently cannot prevent, Satan's millennial loosing and that sucks Satan back into hell. More importantly, *End of Days* avoids ethical reflections on violence

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53. Some interpreters caution against taking the cosmic symbolism of apocalyptic too literally. Perhaps, the cosmic judgments destroy only the evil empire, not the entire earth and its people. Do passages, like Rev. 21.24-27, suggest 'limits' to the divine judgments and violence? Are there un-destroyed deviants who must be prohibited entry? Is the empire not complete? Is there hope here of non-finality?

54. For an argument that Revelation purges resentment, see Yarbro Collins, *Crisis and Catharsis*.

55. One of my first biblical literature teachers termed Daniel 'the manifesto of the Maccabean Revolt'.

because it withdraws from the social-political world to Jericho's subjective depths. The real fight in the film is Jericho's struggle with his despair and his anger. Thus, while I used *End of Days* previously to reflect on Revelation's complicity with violence, I would now also note the film's own complicity with violence (and providence).

Neither the film nor Revelation is a helpful site to address the problem of violence. Both avoid the issue. *End of Days* avoids it by withdrawing into subjective depths, which disregard the inherent messiness and violence of social-political reality, and Revelation avoids it by withdrawing in order to await God's violence on its behalf. Both leave the world mired in violence. In both cases, the retreat from the world (and from ethical reflection on violence) becomes a καλύπτω, rather than an ἀποκαλύπτω. The deferrals and externalizations of violence in Revelation and *End of Days* resemble the mystifying maneuvers which René Girard has charted of religion[56] or which Roland Barthes has revealed in myth.[57] This obfuscation effectively sanctifies important, unspoken concerns. In this case, the ostensible turn from violence effectively sanctifies violence. In *End of Days*, Jericho's suicide and that which sucks Satan into hell both become holy. In Revelation, it is, of course, heavenly violence that is sacred.

In order to escape this spiral of sacred violence, one would have to pay more attention to apocalypse's non-finality. In 'apocalypsia' lies a difficult twofold lesson that Revelation and *End of Days* do not quite articulate: (1) the warning against the illusion that evil can be defeated with violence; and (2) its absolutely necessary corollary: the warning that evil can be defeated without violence. The result of this difficult lesson might be suicidal fatalism, or it might lead one to struggle for the good without claiming that one's struggle (violence) or goal is innocent or sacred and without believing that one's actions will have any finality vis-à-vis evil.[58] It is difficult, however, to

56. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (trans. Patrick Gregory; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972). Cf. the characterization of Batman as the non-hero—the one capable of sacrificial violence—which Gotham City needs in the recent *The Dark Knight* (2008). Such maneuvers foist our deadly desires and designs upon our gods.

57. See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (trans. Annette Levers; New York: Hill & Wang, 1972).

58. One can read the detective's voiceover at the end of the film *Seven* so: 'Hemingway said that the world is a fine place and worth fighting for. I agree with the second part'. Cf. Catherine Keller's twofold argument that one must acknowledge one's participation in an apocalyptic unconscious—a tendency to Manichaeism and to righteous violence—and that one must counter apocalyptic without foregoing its critical vantage point vis-à-vis institutions and empires. See Catherine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); and *God and Power: Counter-Apocalyptic Journeys* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005). Crossan has something similar in view when he argues for comic eschatology—an

read Revelation—and *End of Days* for that matter—as something other than a final solution or as something other than a justification for some Operation Freedom or Operation Faith. One fixates too easily on the calculable end, on acceptable losses, and on the justice, if not sanctity, of one's own struggles. Revelation and *End of Days* too easily become, that is, justifications for messianic exceptionalism.[59]

Readings of Revelation (and *End of Days*) justifying final solutions are, of course, effectively sanctifications of the last empire standing.[60] Surely, that assertion sounds counter-intuitive, for every reader of the New Testament knows that Revelation—in contrast to Romans or 1 Peter—is the New Testament text most antithetical to the Roman Empire.[61] While that is true, it is so only because of the *Roman* in Roman Empire. Put bluntly, Revelation imagines a change of the imperial sovereign, not a change in the nature of socio-political structures.62 It is not empire that is wrong for Revelation, but the identity of the empire. It is not oppression that is wrong, but the

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awareness of the limits of all human endeavors and institutions—but against the finality of apocalyptic eschatology. See his *Raid on the Articulate*.

59. See, for example, Jewett, *The Captain America Complex*; Erin Runions, 'Desiring War: Apocalypse, Commodity Fetish, and the End of History', *The Bible and Critical Theory* 1/1 (December 2004), available at http://publications.epress.monash.edu/doi/full/10.2104/bc040004; and 'Biblical Promise and Threat in U.S. Imperialist Rhetoric, before and after September 11, 2001', *The Scholar and Feminist Online* 2/2 (2004), available at http://www.barnard.edu/sfonline/reverb/runions1.htm.

60. To combat this tendency, Keller focuses on God as metaphor, rather than as an idol of (the theologian's own) omnipotence (*God and Power*, p. 151); and Moore calls for something other than an imperial theology (*Empire and Apocalypse*, pp. 120-21). The film *Frailty* (2001) nicely illustrates the compelling, seductive, and imperial power of the last vision standing. For discussion, see Walsh, *Finding St Paul*, pp. 59-66; and ' "Realizing" Paul's Visions: The New Testament, Caravaggio, and Paxton's *Frailty*', *Biblical Interpretation* 18.1 (2010): 28-51.

61. For Revelation's complicity with empire, see Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, pp. 97-121; and Frilingos, *Spectacles of Empire*. For readings that contend that Revelation is anti-empire, not merely anti-Rome, see Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); Friesen, *Imperial Cults*; and Harry O. Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002). Maier, for example, argues that Revelation is a prophetic call to contest empire. The occasion for Revelation is not persecution but the fact that John's audience has not been different enough from Rome to create 'apocalyptic trouble' or witness. He argues that Revelation's use of imperial language is parody and irony (pp. 164-207). Postcolonial interpreters sometimes read Revelation similarly. Maier does not rely on such interpreters. He prefers ethicists like Yoder.

62. See Moore, *Empire and Apocalypse*, pp. 106-108, for a concise comparison of Rev. 4–5 to Rome's imperial cult in Asia Minor. The result is an imperial conception of the deity.

identity of the oppressed. It is not violence that is wrong, but the identity of those who suffer it. Like the Roman Empire, Revelation's heavenly sovereignty ultimately rests on violence and uses violence to expand its imperial sway. Like the Roman Empire, the heavenly sovereignty controls and profits from all commercial and intellectual traffic. Like the Roman Empire, the heavenly sovereignty violently imposes its religious-ethical perspective and demonizes all others. Like the Roman Empire, the heavenly sovereignty rules by fear. In fact, Revelation's imagined heavenly sovereignty is a more absolute power and authority than that of Rome.[63] It has to be to defeat and replace Rome.

While (feminist and postcolonial) critics have begun to notice Revelation's complicity with empire, some still defend Revelation as the imagination of the oppressed.[64] Dreams of heavenly violence, that is, are apparently acceptable, then, as a last resort. The notion seems self-refuting to me, but I probably should not speak on the point because I live and work in the imperial United States.[65] Moreover, I cannot help remembering Fanon saying that European (and American) pacifism or distaste with (colonial) violence was nothing other than a liberal's complicity with his/her empire. Accordingly, it seems self-evidently wrong to place any further handicaps in the way of what postcolonials now call the agency of the oppressed. Nevertheless, I cannot help remembering Fanon also saying that the reversal of colonial Manichaeism by colonials would be the revolution's failure; or Said reflecting about the difficulties, if not impossibility, of avoiding binary thinking; or Bhaba's musings on mimicry.

Following Bhaba, some interpreters have tried to redeem Revelation's imagination by claiming that its imperial visions are mimicry become mockery or are a parody of Rome's imperial cult and theology.[66] If so, it would be more helpful if the tone were more obviously ironic or tinged with some humor.[67] If so, however, the focus of the parody-reading would

63. Only the dystopian visions of recent science fiction might truly match the level of control imagined of Revelation's heavenly sovereignty.

64. See Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, pp. ix-xiii, for a concise rejection of this ploy. Incidentally, it is worth noting that many in the religious right in the United States, despite all evidence to the contrary, see themselves as a persecuted minority like the martyrs of Revelation. One should also remember that many critics doubt that Revelation's early audiences were themselves martyrs. See p. 120 n. 28, p. 122 n. 33.

65. For an attempt to see Revelation from various cultural perspectives, see David M. Rhoads (ed.), *From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

66. Moore, *Apocalypse and Empire*, pp. 106-21, offers such an interpretation, but only to dismantle it. Most importantly, he notes that such an interpretation leaves Rome in ultimate authority and power. Even mocked, imperial Rome remains the model for desire.

67. Following Crossan, *Raid on the Articulate*, it would probably be better to

become the demythologizing of Rome, not the mythologizing of Revelation's God. If that is the case, then most readers have misread Revelation horribly for centuries. In fact, for most readers, the parody works differently.[68] For them, Revelation's bestial empire is a parody of the previously existing (not merely future) sovereignty of their God, not vice versa. Of course, if one places both the imperial cult and Revelation in the context of the 'apocalypsia' of the ancient creation by conflict myth, the notion of an original (and its parody) becomes ridiculous. The question of origin and parody is, then, itself a capitulation to an apocalyptic unconscious, to a desire for some sacred finale, to a Manichaeism that values one imperial sovereignty (or desire for such) as good and another as evil. The question of whether imperial sovereignty, particularly uncontested imperial sovereignty, is itself good or evil does not arise.

In short, the imperial imagination of apocalyptic is endlessly seductive, and, as Derrida says, 'every language on the apocalypse is also apocalyptic'.[69] One, that is, easily adopts the revelatory, final, and imperial tone of apocalyptic as one reads and speaks of it, even as one claims to do so critically. Instead of trying to redeem or disparage Revelation or *End of Days*, then, perhaps one should simply acknowledge responsibility for one's own reading and imagination.[70] Accordingly, I will leave the question of the ethics of the use of Revelation by the oppressed and the possibility of liberationist readings of Revelation and turn to Revelation's blatantly imperial use. After all, I am a citizen of the imperial United States, and Revelation is arguably the most popular biblical text in the United States.

In *End of Days*, Jericho dies to thwart Satan and to preserve a world order that he has until quite recently been despairingly ready to leave. His spiritual education has taught him—and the audience—to value this present social-political world, and his death redeems that world far more literally than the death of Revelation's Lamb redeems its world. In fact, the blood of Revelation's Lamb imaginatively undoes a present world order or, at least, deems it evil. Given this contrast, Jericho is not Revelation's Lamb;

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abandon apocalyptic altogether in favor of comic eschatology, an awareness of the finitude of all human constructions. For an attempt to find irony and even humor in Revelation, however, see Maier, *Apocalypse Recalled*, pp. 164-207.

68. Rome's imperial cult precedes the writing of Revelation but, in the text of Revelation, the heavenly sovereignty precedes that of the beasts. Moreover, the Lamb precedes the beast who seems to have surmounted death (Rev. 13.3), parodying the Lamb, and the beast who has two horns (Rev. 13.11), also parodying the Lamb.

69. Derrida, 'Of an Apocalyptic Tone', p. 90. Derrida imagines the seductiveness of this tone in this way: everyone dies; the claim to apocalyptic truth calls a sect to be for 'an instant before the end the sole survivors, the only ones to stay awake' (p. 84).

70. Traditional readings of Revelation, and those of the religious right in the United States, fail this ethical test as they foist their desires and imaginations off on God.

he is the victorious god/king from the ancient creation myths whose (symbolic) death ushers in the new fertile year. Accordingly, the camera moves from Jericho's sacrifice out to a New Year's celebration in Times Square.[71] These visuals indicate that the world that Jericho dies to save is clearly an American world. *End of Days* is not merely comfortable with that world; it sanctifies it (as do, for that matter, most Hollywood films). Such a world is, simply by being placed in contrast with the evil empire thwarted by Jericho's sacrifice, good (and even worth dying for). Moreover, as the only world left standing, it is implicitly imperial.[72] The rumors of providence—the warning eye-of-God-sign, Jericho's altar-inspired conversion, and the mysterious force that limits Satan's time and sucks him back into the hell from which he came—further bathe this empire in sanctity. Finally, as *End of Days*' redeeming martyr stands in for Christ or, at least, has Christ imagery applied to him, this empire becomes virtually Christian.

By externalizing an *evil empire*, the imperial apocalyptic of *End of Days* allows its audience to think that they 'do empire right'.[73] Or, more likely, the imperial apocalyptic of *End of Days* allows its audience to ignore their imperial status by concentrating on themselves, on their subjective depths and expressive individualism. After all, *End of Days* effectively reduces Jericho's struggle with Satan to Jericho's internal struggle with his anger. Thus, Jericho ultimately defeats the possessing Satan, not the monstrous dragon, by his sacrifice. This subjective focus allows the empire which *End of Days* affirms to ebb from view. This (sacred) mystification allows imperial audiences to ignore (their complicity with) empire or to live with it.[74]

71. An opening montage in *The Omen* (2006) works similarly. There, one 'sign' of the arrival of the Antichrist is the crumbling Twin Towers.

72. Others films are more blatantly imperial. Consider, for example, the climax of *Independence Day*, in which the entire world celebrates its freedom from alien invasion on July 4th, the date of the United States' celebration of its freedom from the 'evil' British Empire.

73. Here, *End of Days* functions quite similarly to the biblical epics and religious spectaculars of the Cold War era. DeMille presented his *The Ten Commandments* (1956) as the story of the birth of freedom and pitched the lesson of that religious story as the question of whether humans would be governed by a tyrant (Egypt, USSR, etc.) or by the rule of law (Israel, USA, etc.). At the end of the epic, Moses tells his followers to proclaim the law of liberty everywhere as he poses in a fashion reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty. Cf. Bruce Babington and Peter William Evans, *Biblical Epics: Sacred Narrative in Hollywood Cinema* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993).

74. See Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 12-15, for a critique of Western appropriations of Buddhism on precisely this point. In *The Fragile Absolute: Or, Why Is the Christian Legacy Worth Fighting For?* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), pp. 143-60, he argues that Christianity's love commandment is a call to create community that exempts it from his critique of Western Buddhism.

Imperial readings of Revelation work quite similarly. First, such readings also often concentrate on personal or, at least, sectarian matters and avoid larger, social-political issues.[75] At least, it is very hard not to see the reading of Revelation by the religious right in the United States functioning in this way. It is not only that they read Revelation as evidence of their own oppression by corrupt rulers—despite all evidence to the contrary—but also that their focus on imminent supernatural apocalypses diverts attention from the nuclear or environmental apocalypses already lying in wait as a result of the excesses of the empire within which they live. Even as such readings ostensibly long for some other world, they make their authors complicit with empire.[76] Second, and perhaps more importantly, the imperial use of apocalyptic lets Revelation's own fearful dreams of omnipotence, of theocracy, go unchecked. The result is a desire that cinematic horror and science fiction has the good grace to pillory as dystopian.[77]

One can find a close analogy to Revelation's unrealistic, inhuman desires for absolute security—for the end of tears, death, and the sea, as well as for eternally open city gates through which the world's wealth flows into the empire—in Thomas Hobbes' nightmarish *Leviathan*.[78] Ironically, Hob-

75. See Tat-Siong Benny Liew, *Politics of Parousia: Reading Mark Inter(con) textually* (Biblical Interpretation Series, 42; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1999), pp. 48-63, for a critique of the separation of apocalyptic and politics in scholarly discussions of apocalypse. Of course, that separation may be one of the generative causes of the modern development of apocalyptic. It is very hard not to suspect that the apocalyptic Jesus, which still dominates historical Jesus studies, is not simply a mystic or religious substitute for Reimarus's zealot Jesus. As apocalyptic also distances religion from secular modernity, it is hard not to suspect that the construction of apocalyptic is simply the work of modern mythology. See Ward Blanton's insightful discussion of Albert Schweitzer's work on this point in *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 129-64.

76. Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies*, p. 98. The imperial use of apocalyptic conforms its audience to imperial standards. It manages internal affairs by imagining external threats. It manages resentment when imperial claims to exceptionality do not match reality. It demands martyrdoms to support the empire's exceptionality or purges the recalcitrant as evil threats. It can even offer its audiences the fantasy or illusion of (temporary) escape from or resistance to the empire. Thereby, imperial apocalyptic may actually domesticate revolt. Think of the horrible moment near the end of *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003) when the Architect tells Neo that rebellion is part of and actually maintains the system. Fortunately for the *Matrix* franchise, Neo simply ignores this revelation.

77. Carlos Fuentes once said that 'perfect order is the forerunner of perfect horror' (in *Terra Nostra* [trans. Margaret Sayers Peden; Urbana–Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2003], p. 253).

78. See Timothy K. Beal, *Religion and its Monsters* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 89-101, for a discussion of *Leviathan* in the context of religion and

bes uses a biblical chaos monster as the symbol for his desires for a king-dom in which the ruler has absolute, uncontested power and, thus, provides maximum security. Fear of incessant war and the unruly mob motivates Hobbes' nightmare. Similar fears and desires clearly motivate Revelation's visions of heavenly sovereignty. It is difficult, then, not to see Revelation's visions as a similar deification of fear and of the chaos monster that threat-ens to consume everything in its path, until it is the last perspective/view-point/power left standing.[79] Revelation, it seems, has become monstrously imperial in its struggle with an evil empire. All readings of apocalyptic, including cinematic and academic ones, face the same peril. Ironically, an awareness of apocalypsia may be one of the few weapons at one's disposal if one wishes to gainsay the finality of imperial apocalyptic. Perhaps, then, *End of Days*' Satan is right: the sacrifice of the Lamb and of Jericho gains only a limited time and space. More horribly, perhaps such sacrifices always sanctify empire.

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horror. Beale, pp. 71-85, also discusses Revelation as horror as does Pippin, *Apoca-lyptic Bodies*, pp. 78-116. Not incidentally, the horror of one empire's final success is equivalent to the horror of possession or absorption. See p. 121 nn. 31-32.

    79. To put it simply, uncontested empire writes the individual's fears of possession or absorption at the level of the body politic.

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8. 'I SAW ONE LIKE A SON OF MAN': THE ESCHATOLOGICAL SAVIOR IN CONTEMPORARY FILM

Greg Garrett

'I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him.

And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an ever-lasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed'.

<div align="right">Daniel 7.13-14 (KJV)</div>

'We've had our eye on you for some time, Mr Anderson'.

<div align="right">Agent Smith (Hugo Weaving), The Matrix (1999)</div>

Tracking the Biblical Son of Man

In his recent study of the spread of religious impulses through secular cultural forms, Conrad Ostwalt describes the no-longer controversial theory that in many circumstances, popular culture may be performing some of the same functions as institutionalized religion, since 'popular culture provides a context for understanding values, belief systems, and myths'.[1] Of these values, belief systems, and myths, one particular archetypal narrative, that of the apocalypse, has been told and retold in the media of television, films, comics and graphic novels, and video games, particularly in America, where it has long been a formative narrative. Daniel Wojcik notes that 'ideas and images about the end of the world permeate American popular culture', and Lee Quinby would concur, arguing more specifically that while relatively few Americans read the Bible, 'the metaphors of biblical apocalypse guide

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1. Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003), p. 154. Ostwalt's work is largely sociological; many theologians would speak of the reverse: that instead of religion being secularized, culture is being sacralized (and indeed, Ostwalt uses this term as well). However you view this process, the end result is that many people outside of the confines of traditional religious institutions are telling stories of the end of the world which traditionally were told inside those confines.

perceptions of everyday events for most people in the United States'.[2] So it is that American popular culture narratives of the apocalypse, drawing particularly from images in and folk interpretations of the Hebrew Testament's Daniel and the Christian Testament's Book of Revelation, frequently depict the human race facing an imminent doom—and oftentimes, relying on salvation through the intervention of a particular hero: a world-saving 'chosen one' derived from the Biblical Son of Man.

The Son of Man character is a notable figure in later Jewish writings like the books of Daniel and 1 Enoch, as well as in the Gospels, where we find 82 of the 85 incidences of the phrase in the Christian Testament. It is also strongly associated with the Book of Revelation, although it appears there only twice.[3] Commentary on the meaning of the phrase 'Son of Man' in the Hebrew and Christian traditions has been ongoing and frequent, although subject to regular and often virulent disagreement. While Delbert Burkett diplomatically comes to the conclusion that 'nineteen centuries of "Son of Man" study have led to no consensus concerning the meaning or origin of the expression', Eugene Boring describes the field more succinctly and colorfully: it is a 'minefield'.[4]

The most frequent understandings of the Son of Man figure described in Daniel 7, however, have centered around three interpretations: a reading identifying the figure with the people of Israel; a reading identifying the Son of Man figure as an angelic being; and a reading identifying him with the promised Messiah (in Jewish interpretation) and with Jesus of Nazareth (in Christian interpretation). Contemporary understandings of the uses of the 'Son of Man' phrase in the canonical gospels are likewise multitudinous, but they also—like the later uses of the term in Acts and the Revelation—seem to revolve around the patterns of imagery and the archetypal narrative imagined in Daniel 7. Mahlon H. Smith, a member of the Jesus Seminar, summarizes three current academic understandings of the Son of Man tradition: (1) Jesus, influenced by Jewish apocalyptic tradition growing out of

2.   Lee Quinby, *Anti-Apocalypse: Exercises in Genealogical Criticism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), p. ii.

3.   The phrase 'Son of Man' appears 30 times in Matthew, 14 in Mark, 25 in Luke, and 13 times in John. It appears once in Acts and twice in the Revelation of John, although of course its presence there is part of the continuing influence Revelation has had on apocalyptic thought; as Kenneth G.C. Newport notes, 'it is this book more than any other in the Bible that has enlivened the interpretative imagination' (*Apocalypse and Millennium: Studies in Biblical Eisegesis* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], p. 4).

4.   Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5; M. Eugene Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 2.

Daniel, was predicting the appearance of 'an exalted anthropoid who would play a decisive role in the ultimate cosmic order', a prophecy later attached to Jesus himself; (2) Jesus was using an everyday idiomatic term to describe himself that became, after the events of his crucifixion, identified with the Daniel verses and, thus, with apocalyptic understandings; (3) Jesus proclaimed the Kingdom of God without using Son of Man language, but after the Crucifixion, his followers connected their understandings of his Resurrection to the Son of Man tradition in Daniel and appended these references as an apologetic to understand who and what Jesus was.[5] But while these may be common high-scholarly exegeses of these passages, they are far from the most accepted in the larger culture outside the academy. There, a Christological and eschatological reading of the Daniel passage has been the most prominent for most of the history of the Christian Church.

Among the Ante-Nicene fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, and Tertullian each linked Daniel 7 with their understanding of the second coming of the Christ at the end of time; Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers following this line of exegesis included Chrysostom, Jerome, and Augustine. Later figures, including Thomas Aquinas, John Wycliffe, and John Calvin likewise read the Son of Man figure as messianic and apocalyptic, and although this is not, as we noted, the current understanding of many scholars, Arthur J. Ferch concludes that this interpretation—'that Christ was the S[on of] M[an] of Dan 7.13'—has gained wide circulation in American culture.[6]

This is also the conclusion of Roger Olson, my Baylor University colleague, a writer and thinker of some reputation in evangelical intellectual circles. He summarized the majority position among this large and influential American religious group in this way: 'Most evangelical biblical scholars believe "Son of Man" refers to a messianic figure [when used] in the OT, and to himself in Jesus' uses of the term in the NT gospels. Systematic theologians tend to regard this as a cipher for the returning Christ'.[7] Thus, the longstanding interpretation of the Christian Church matches the understanding of many Americans, who are comfortable—in their churches as well as in cultural manifestations of the apocalyptic narrative—with the image of a Christological and eschatological figure who will figure prominently in the setting right of all things at the end of time.[8] This longstanding

5.   Mahlon H. Smith, 'Judging the Son of Man: The Synoptic Sayings', *Jesus Seminar Forum*, accessed at http://virtualreligion.net/forum/judging.html.

6.   Arthur J. Ferch, *The Son of Man in Daniel Seven* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1979), p. 9.

7.   Personal e-mail, 2 February, 2009.

8.   Some would argue that the cultural appropriations of this narrative becomes more and more important as the Church in America gains political and economic power and respectability. Since apocalyptic literature tends to be subversive—that is, it postulates an overthrow of the status quo for some more perfect world—it is rarely

tradition of connecting Daniel's prophesied Son of Man to an apocalyptic understanding of Jesus is dominant in the American psyche, and has shaped American religious faith and American culture for centuries, an ongoing belief that shows little sign of changing anytime soon.

Lee Quinby has charged in several books that America has a love affair with the Apocalypse, and calls our concern for the End of Things an imprecise but overwhelming belief system, arguing that 'Americans have been taught to reside in apocalyptic terror and count on millennial perfection'.[9] How fervently we have received our lessons may be seen in the many ways the apocalypse has entered into cultural discourse. In *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*, Kirsten Moana Thompson notes how the cycles of apocalyptic film emerging from Hollywood in the past half century reflect American attempts to understand or to defuse threatening events in the world around them:

> A blend of providential and messianic elements in Puritan Calvinism, [the apocalyptic] first became apparent in the science-fiction cinema of the cold war, reemerged in the seventies with separate cycles of science-fiction and demonic films, gained further prominence under a turn to social conservatism under Reagan in the eighties, and reached a hysterical peak in the nineties in a cycle of horror, disaster, and science-fiction films explicitly focused on the approaching millennium. After 9/11, this dread took new forms with anxieties about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism from within.[10]

Cultural criticism suggests that when narratives and ideas achieve a great currency within a culture, it is because they are serving deep emotional, psychological, societal, or spiritual needs; that must mean that these omnipresent retellings of the end of the world (and the underlying understandings of them, including the idea of a messianic savior who will set things right) are somehow useful to Americans. In fact, in its ongoing obsession with apocalyptic narrative, played out in novels, comics, video games, and movies, America has clearly cast its vote: In the midst of dread and confusion, they are hoping for (if simultaneously afraid that they may have

favored by those who feel that they are already achieving a more perfect world through their efforts. As Conrad Ostwalt puts it, 'Secular apocalypses have supplemented religion in establishing an apocalyptic imagination in popular culture because a secularized church (because of its investment in the world) often avoids the topic' (*Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* [Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003], p. 159).

9. Lee Quinby, *Millennial Seduction: A Skeptic Confronts Apocalyptic Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 5.

10. Kirsten Moana Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), p. 2.

to witness) a messianic figure who will usher them into a new age.[11] This figure has captivated and comforted them in a range of movies including the *Matrix* films and the *Terminator* films. We also find an interesting variation on this figure in the apocalyptic narrative of M. Night Shyamalan's phenomenally popular movie *Signs*.

So it is to three versions of this character who, in one way or another, represents what Thompson describes as the apocalyptic tradition's 'messianic figure triumphing over evil' that we will turn: Neo, John Connor, and Father Graham Hess.[12]

Something like a Son of Man

In the Wachowski Brothers' Matrix trilogy, that messianic figure is consciously shaped and identified, the character growing out of the filmmakers' own obsessions as well as the culture's. The films posit a world where machines have rebelled against and enslaved humanity, using them as power sources, and keeping them quiet and docile by forcing them into a virtual reality world—*The Matrix*—that is largely indistinguishable from the world we currently occupy. As in many contemporary popular apocalypses, the frightening world of the Matrix films is ultimately a world of humankind's own making (which, as Conrad Ostwalt observes, secularizes and familiarizes the Apocalypse by making it not a supernatural event but a scientific one), and it is a world in which human intervention—if it is the right intervention, led by a powerful and awaited savior—can turn the tide and save the day, another narrative shift we observe when the apocalyptic story moves from religious to pop culture narrative. As Ostwalt points out, unlike the religious apocalypses, which may simultaneously fear but look for the coming end, the emphasis in these films 'is not on the end itself but on avoiding or surviving the end'.[13] With the help of a larger than life figure, a chosen One, paradoxically, we might just survive the end of the world.

In the *Matrix* films, the Wachowski Brothers' One, Neo (Keanu Reeves) ultimately becomes, as we will see, Jesus the cosmic Christ, but before he ends the world as they know it and saves his people, Neo begins simply as Mr Anderson. 'Ander' comes from the Greek root '*andro*', meaning 'man', so Neo, is, literally, the Son of Man. The appropriation of the Son of Man tradition begins here, but Neo's name scarcely scratches the surface. To

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11. While outside the scope of this narrow reading of American popular film, I would suggest that perhaps the messianic fervor some Americans (and others around the globe) attached to the presidential candidacy of Sen. Barack Obama was a further reflection of this tendency.

12. Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread*, p. 4.

13. Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, pp. 170-71.

track the theological underpinnings of this character is an exercise in post-modernity, requiring choice among a multitude of narratives, some of them in competition.[14] The Wachowski Brothers have consciously referred to a number of different traditions—Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, and Gnostic among them—to build their Son of Man who will usher in a new age for humankind. Certainly these films are allusive to the extreme, and this inter-textuality is intentional. Larry Wachowski said, 'The Bible seeks to answer a lot of relevant questions for man. Then there's the whole idea of a mes-siah. It's not just a Judeo-Christian myth; it also plays into the search for the reincarnation of the Buddha'.[15]

Let's touch first on the Buddhist borrowings that might seem to be perti-nent to an apocalyptic savior. Neo is, as with many important spiritual fig-ures in the Buddhist tradition, part of a lineage. He is said to be the sixth person who might be 'The One'. Likewise, the films' seer, the Oracle (Glo-ria Foster), tells him, 'Maybe in your next life', reinforces the idea of rein-carnation, the Buddhist cycle called *samsara* that can only be escaped by those who achieve enlightenment, and which—in eschatological terms—cannot be realized for most in their current existence. (Enlightenment, thus, in Buddhist terms as well as Christian, comes after the end of the world.)

When, like the Gautama Buddha, one achieves enlightenment, then one gains control over one's physical environment. One well-known story relates that Buddha was attacked by the demon Mara while sitting under the Bodhi Tree; Mara shot a burning disc at him that turned into harmless flowers, an action echoed at the end of the first Matrix film and elsewhere in the tril-ogy when bullets fired at Neo freeze in mid-air, becoming shining objects of beauty rather than instruments of death. Neo's enlightenment is presented dramatically in other terms—after his rebirth, Neo has the power to read the raw data that makes up the Matrix, and his power over that reality is absolute, or so nearly absolute that he can fly, possesses uncanny strength, and can fight dozens of enemies at a time. However, while Neo, like the Buddha, achieves enlightenment, he chooses to renounce the final stage of enlightenment to remain and work on behalf of all creation; although pulled out of the artificial world of the Matrix, he returns time and time again to rescue those still trapped in their chains and to confront the system that chains them.

14. Because of this multitude of meanings, scholarship and speculation on *The Matrix* and its sequels is abundant. I have written on *The Matrix* at length in *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in The Matrix* (co-written with Chris Seay; Colorado Springs: Piñon Press, 2003) and done a Trinitarian reading of it in *The Gospel according to Hollywood* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007).

15. Richard Corliss, 'Popular Metaphysics', *Time*, April 19, 1999, accessed at www.time.com.

The Jewish and Christian messianic traditions are also well represented in the *Matrix* films, as Larry Wachowski suggested. Thomas A. Anderson is said to be The One, the long-predicted savior, and the tradition of Messiah is clearly referenced here. As David E. Aune records, in Jewish thought, the concept of Messiah develops in two ways, restoration and eschatological utopianism: '*Restorative messianism* anticipates the restoration of the Davidic kingdom, while *utopian messianism* expects the creation of a new and perfect world after the destruction of the present evil world'.[16] So some Jewish exegetes expected a Davidic successor who would overthrow oppressors and rule temporally (an apocalypse without the end of the world, if you will), others a Davidic figure who would usher in the end of one world, wiping the slate clean for the next. Both ideas have helped shape cultural understandings of the messianic figure, although as Ostwalt observed, secular apocalypses tend toward the first.[17]

Although Trinity (Carrie Anne Moss) says early in the first film (*The Matrix*, 1999) that he may be the Chosen One, Neo (or Thomas Anderson, as we also know him) seems, at first glance, an unlikely messiah. He does not seem an obvious subject of adulation; inside of the Matrix, Anderson works in a large cubicle-filled room, an average drone in a soul-killing corporation. Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) sees something in Anderson/Neo, but that potential requires arduous physical and spiritual training—Neo's own time in the desert, as it were. Likewise, the casting—Keanu Reeves, hardly regarded then or now as a serious actor—reinforces the unlikeliness of Neo's ascension (although it certainly reminds us of the miracle of incarnation, divine power entering into the unlikely human form). But all the elements do ultimately coalesce to convince us that this son of the earth is a true cosmic Son of Man.

First, this Messiah is preceded by a prophet, Morpheus, who is described by critic Richard Corliss, perhaps overwhelmed by the exuberant spirit of the film, as 'a morphing Orpheus, a black White Rabbit, an R-and-B Obi-Wan Kenobi, a big bad John the Baptist, a Gandalf who grooves; every wise guide from literature, religion, movies, and comics'.[18] While some of those descriptions are, unfortunately, outside the purview of this study, the John the Baptist reference is important and apposite; Morpheus is, as John was, himself powerful and impressive, a person who some confused followers

16. D.E. Aune, 'Eschatology: Early Christian Eschatology', *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, electronic version.

17. A third option, represented by the Qumran scrolls (e.g. 1QS 9.11-12), suggests a system of belief in two messiahs, one priestly and one a lay messiah. This interpretation may in fact be used in some narratives of the end times that do not rely on a single messianic savior; EVE and WALL•E are the unlikely saviors who fit this model in the recent Pixar film *WALL•E* (2008).

18. Corliss, 'Popular Metaphysics'.

might mistake for the One. But he knows he is only there to prepare the way; when introduced to the awestruck Neo for the first time, Morpheus returns, 'The honor is mine'. Fishburne remarked that this dialogue could be compared with the gospel narrative, 'to John the Baptist['s] "No, I would rather be baptized by you"'.[19] And as in the story of John the Baptist, it isn't until Morpheus is imprisoned that Neo begins his ministry, so to speak. (Since this is an American action film, that ministry consists of storming the skyscraper where Morpheus is being held hostage and rescuing him; we should think of *The Matrix* as an action/science fiction film with spiritual components, not vice versa.)[20] In any case, prophets who open the way and who then recede precede both saviors. As John the Baptist says in the Gospel of John,

> You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him'. He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. For this reason my joy has been fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease (Jn 3.28-30, NRSV).

Other Christological indicators amass during the course of the three *Matrix* films; at the end of the first film, he dies bodily and is resurrected, now with power over the world of the Matrix. 'He *is* The One', Morpheus breathes as Neo gets to his feet. Neo demonstrates power over the world of the Matrix and outside of that reality in the second film, *The Matrix Reloaded* (2003), and he gathers and empowers some disciples, seeking them out and setting them free of the Matrix, much as Jesus sought out disciples and set them free from their spiritual and sometimes physical bonds. At the end of the final film, *The Matrix Revolutions* (2003), Neo voluntarily sacrifices himself to unite human and machine—saving the worlds of humans and machines alike so that neither has to suffer an apocalypse. In doing so, Neo frees all the 'programs' that had been assimilated by Agent Smith, all those humans connected to the Matrix, and the small community

19. *Starlog* 261 (March 1999) accessed at www.starlog.com/tpages/morpheus_arc.html. Fishburne's reference is to Mt. 3.14.

20. In the years since *The Matrix* was released, I have often spoken and done media interviews about the film, and a common question or problem area has to do with *The Matrix*'s use of violence. How can one impute spiritual meanings to a film that seems to solve every problem with weapons, fists, and high explosives? I like to point out first the genre markers I just suggested; in an action film, conflict is mediated through scenes of violence. My more particular concern is with an idea which seems, in the first two films and much of the third to be very much in tune with the fallacious idea of 'redemptive violence' postulated by Walter Wink and others. But I also like to point out that at the conclusion of the trilogy, Neo seems to recognize the futility of violence as a solution, and surrenders to a peaceful and faithful belief that his destiny can be fulfilled without it.

of free humans as well. As the film ends, we are greeted by the image of a sunrise, as a new world dawns for all its inhabitants, machine and human, thanks to the actions of this Son of Man. Among contemporary pop culture messiahs, few are as consciously—or successfully—rendered as the character of Neo in *The Matrix* films.

Another messianic figure in contemporary film apocalypses is John Connor, who emerges from the *Terminator* saga bearing Jesus Christ's initials. In the four (to date) *Terminator* films, John is said to be the future leader of the human resistance to the machines that took over when a computer network, Skynet, became sentient and launched missiles at Russia, triggering an event known throughout the series of films as 'Judgment Day'. In this event, billions of humans were killed, and those who survived were left the task of resisting the machines, which now wanted all human life exterminated as obsolescent. Like the *Matrix* films, this is a contemporary secular apocalypse, caused by humans and potentially preventable by humans, but not without the future leadership—and, in the second, third, and fourth films, the actual intervention—of John Connor.

In this, it becomes clear that, like Neo, Connor also has definite messianic functions, although these vary from film to film. In the terms we borrowed from Jewish messianic thought, these functions are, at the same time, restorative (to stop Judgment Day and the War with the Machines from ever happening in Terminator II (1991) and *Terminator III* (2003), and/or to defeat the machines in the future if it does happen, as it clearly has in *Terminator: Salvation* (*IV*, 2009)*, in either case restoring human beings to ascendancy) and utopian or millennial (like Neo, in his melding of human biology and understanding of machines, John Connor is the figure most likely to help make possible a new world where the two 'species' can co-exist). His alliance and even friendship with the Terminator played by Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator II* and *III* presages the possibility of peaceful coexistence. In *Terminator: Salvation* Connor reacts with great hostility toward the cyborg Marcus Wright (Sam Worthington), first ordering his destruction before allowing him to escape—and ultimately, bringing him back to life.

Connor is also given clear messianic identifiers. He is recognized in each film, from the very beginning of the *Terminator* saga, as the savior of humankind, and his mother clearly sets him aside and begins to prepare him for this destiny. In the first film (*The Terminator*, 1984), his conception—and protection—is mediated by a supernatural figure—Kyle Reese (Michael Biehn), the soldier from the post-Judgment Day future who an adult Connor himself sends back in time (and if this seems to suggest the idea of a Father God dispatching an angelic Gabriel to announce and engender His Son, you would not be the first to note this parallel). The mission in this first film is not to change the future, but simply to preserve it; a future without John Connor is a future without any possibility of human redemption.

After the events of that film, John is born and grows into childhood, where we meet him in *Terminator II*: *Judgment Day*. The teenaged John Connor (Edward Furlong) sets out to change history, to redeem humankind by preventing their destruction at the hands of the machines from ever happening. In what we have noted is a movement away from most religious understandings of Judgment Day, John Connor's mission in *Terminator II* is not to participate in the Day of Judgment, but to prevent it. The understanding of the future enshrined in the first two films can be seen in the words, 'There is no fate but what we make'. The shape of history is thus seen as malleable, and the end of the world avoidable, with decisive action and a powerful leader.

In *Terminator III: The Rise of the Machines*, John Connor has grown into a young adult (Nick Stahl), a man on the run from the events that took place in *Terminator II*—and from his own messianic destiny. In this film, it becomes increasingly clear that despite the heroic sacrifices of the first two films, Judgment Day cannot be prevented; it is (as many Americans continue to believe) destined. While the events of *Terminator II* were supposed to have stopped that future from ever taking place, deadly machines continue to materialize in the past, searching for Connor and his allies. At one point, Connor acknowledges the increasingly complicated and unspeakable future that again looms ahead, and his long-foretold destiny, which he thought he had put aside: 'Imagine you are the only one who can stop it. But before you do, something terrible has to happen'. At the end of the film, when Connor finds himself and his future wife (Claire Danes) in a hidden bunker riding out the nuclear holocaust instead of preventing it, he realizes that there was never any possibility of restoration; there was only the end of the world. It was, indeed, destiny.

Terminator Salvation, the fourth *Terminator* film, starring Christian Bale as the post-holocaust John Connor, was released in 2009. In the film, Connor seems to have accepted that this is not the future his mother prepared him for; time is malleable, and perhaps there is a fate other than the one we make. 'In this future', Connor says, 'I don't know if we can win this war'.

In such a world, how does a messiah save his people? What does the title's salvation look like?

It comes, perhaps, from preventing another Doomsday. Perhaps the machines have human beings on the brink of extinction, but if Bale can rescue Kyle Reese (Anton Yelchin), his father, then he can continue to serve as the leader of the Resistance, an inspiration to all those who listen to his radio broadcasts, and very definitely still a messiah figure. Perhaps all this will result in the prophecy coming true, as the early films suggested; perhaps it will simply mean that Connor stands between the humans and complete destruction. But in any case, many of the reviews of the film noted the messianic identity of John Connor.[21]

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21. Among the many reviewers noting Connor's messianic identity are Mary Pols,

In *Terminator: Salvation*, Connor undergoes suffering and a figurative (and almost literal) death, a strong parallel to the Christian narrative that the films have consistently employed to connect Connor and Christ. In *Terminator II* and *III*, we find Connor entering tombs he will ultimately climb out of (a weapons cache and the command bunker, respectively); in *Terminator III*, John also hides inside a coffin and makes his escape inside a hearse. *Terminator: Salvation* continues this symbolic trend, with John Connor descending into the earth at both the beginning and end of the film, and the second occasion, his invasion of Skynet's base in San Francisco, is very clearly a Harrowing of Hell; Connor descends to the depths, defeats the ancient evil, and frees all the prisoners. Like the consciously chosen Christological elements in the *Matrix* films, these images of death and rebirth seem consciously chosen to give Connor the messianic heft he needs to carry out his narrative function. So let us not be surprised if future films in the franchise don't return to this motif—and offer us the spectacle of John Connor, like Neo, offering up his life (again, literally or figuratively) to save the world.

Many apocalyptic film narratives offer engaging variations on this well-trod road where we meet the messianic apocalyptic savior. Usually these films are big-budget action films filled with spectacle, but I would like to briefly consider one, *Signs* (2003), written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan, an apocalyptic film in which the end of the world is both off-the-charts cosmic—an invasion from outer space—and small-scale domestic—the simultaneous destruction of the faith and family of a former Episcopal priest, Graham Hess (Mel Gibson). Graham's wife was killed in a freak car accident some months before the action of the film, and, unable to make sense out of this disaster, he has lost his faith and given up his role as priest. And now, suddenly, his family discovers mysterious crop circles in his corn fields (and, indeed, around the world), and then, their television news tells of strange lights in the sky, and finally, an all-out invasion of earth by some powerful alien race.

Yet, as in all of Shyamalan's best films, while *Signs* employs distinct genre elements, they are, in Hitchcockian terms, merely a MacGuffin for the exploration of the character at the heart of his story.[22] This film is oriented not

'Sensory Overload', *Time*, 1 June, 2009, p. 59; Owen Glieberman, 'Terminator Salvation', *Entertainment Weekly*, 29 May, 2009, p. 45; John Neumaier, 'Terminator Salvation', *New York Daily News*, 19 May, 2009, accessed at http://www.nydailynews.com/entertainment/movies/2009/05/19/2009-05-19_bale_machines_knock_em_dead_in_new_terminator.html.

  22. 'MacGuffin' is a narrative term for a plot device in cinema (or, presumably in other media) that drives the action but is not central to the plot. Examples in Hitchcock's films would include the microfilm being smuggled out of the country in *North by Northwest* and the stolen money in *Psycho*. Neither turns out to be of any importance except as it motivates character action and interaction.

around a hero organizing an all-out defense of the planet (a perfectly valid and, as we noted, frequent activity of messianic apocalyptic heroes in film), but around a hero organizing an all-out defense of his home, and, amazingly in a commercial Hollywood film, around Graham's rediscovery of a divine order in all things. 'Stop calling me "Father" ', Graham tells more than one character who needs him to be a hero, although it is only in his twin roles as father and Father that Graham will become capable of saving his world. While this movie offers some small scenes of conflict between aliens and humans, and audiences have largely known Mel Gibson as an action hero (including his role as a more typical eschatological messiah in the *Mad Max* films), the primary action in *Signs* is not external but internal, not physical but spiritual. The climax of the film features Mel Gibson not faced off against the alien invader of his home, but against his own lack of faith.

Can one make such statements about a top-grossing Hollywood film without being guilty of egregious eisegesis? With other films, perhaps not. But writer/director Shyamalan himself has gone on record that he and cinematographer Tak Fujimoto conceived of the entire movie as a metaphor, 'a conversation between God and this one man'. Shyamalan also commented on the multi-valenced nature of the movie's title. It refers first, of course, to the elaborate crop circles created as navigation devices by the invading aliens descending from outer space. But it also refers to what New Testament Greek refers to as *semeia* (σημεια) and what Shyamalan calls 'the existence of signs from above in a kind of heavenly manner' for this good man who has lost his faith and desperately needs to rediscover that 'there's somebody out there' still watching over him.[23]

In the Gospel of John, the miracles of Jesus are performed explicitly as signs pointing toward God and designed to induce belief, and the author of John tells a story about a Roman official who asks Jesus to heal his son, who is near death, and evokes this response: 'Then Jesus said to him, "Unless you see signs and wonders you will not believe" ' (Jn 4.48, NRSV). The word translated as 'wonders' in this verse is *terata* (τέρατα), and refers to an omen, particularly a sign from the heavens, much as Shyamalan speaks of in referring to what Graham receives. Graham Hess interprets the signs; he does what his wife asked him to do in her final moments: 'See'. And as he sees how, miraculously, every seemingly random detail including the tragedy of his wife's death and this cataclysmic invasion fit together, Graham becomes again the savior the people who make up his world need. This world is preserved, if it can never be fully restored—and in the final shot of the movie, we see Graham donning his clericals as Father Graham and walking out of the frame, again, to do God's work.[24]

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23. 'Making Signs', *Signs* DVD (Touchstone Films, 2003).

24. All three narratives, intriguingly, meld religious and secular apocalyptic

These are just a few permutations of the recent flood of popular culture apocalypses referenced by Quinby, Thompson, and Ostwalt. American popular culture has embraced so many versions of this story of the end of the world—or, at least, its potential end, should its messianic hero fail in her or his duties—that it begs the question: Why? While much more might be written on this topic, I'd suggest three perhaps mutually-exclusive reasons these popular culture artifacts continue to be produced and consumed so avidly: existential dread, spiritual need, and American optimism.

First, these stories of the potential end of the world provide an artistic bulwark against the daunting crises of daily life in the 21st century. A citizen of a developed nation, over morning tea or coffee, may hear news of wars, and rumors of wars; hear further details of impending and present economic crisis; hear of environmental degradation and potential environmental disasters. During the Cold War, as the new millennium approached, and particularly since 9/11, Americans have been in a constant state of dread (and in recent years manipulated into a fever pitch of anxiety). Aristotle spoke of the power of catharsis for those who witnessed classical tragedy; the three tales we've considered here confront nuclear holocaust, war with an implacable Other, and invasion from outside, and thus allow us to confront—and perhaps even, dramatically, stare down—the impending dooms that confront us.

Secondly, we must remember that even these secular tales of apocalypse confronted and overcome emerge from and employ religious narratives and images of apocalypse. Traditional apocalyptic literature was a vehicle for those on the margins, intended to express a radical hope that all will be well, that the faithful will be saved, even if the present world is lost in the process. Contemporary Americans can scarcely view themselves as on the margins without some effort and imagination, but nonetheless we find examples of this doomsday rhetoric from the jeremiad sermons of the Puritans to the speeches of politicians: however flawed the world may be, whatever mistakes we have made, if we will only turn (or return), if we can remain faithful, we can still be saved. Contemporary popular apocalypses like the *Matrix* films, the *Terminator* films, and *Signs* retell stories of how heroes remain faithful and, by story's end, reap understanding, and, in some cases, even a new world marked by peace and justice.

Finally, while many Americans understand that the world suffers from pervasive problems and challenges, Americans in general paradoxically

narratives; while the dramatic action may seem to be devoted to attempting to preserve the world (saving Zion for Neo, stopping Judgment Day for John Connor, barricading his family inside the house for Graham Hess), on the other side of the apocalyptic events in each film or series we find the signs traditionally associated with rebirth and renewal—a sense of cosmic order, a new beginning for the survivors, a world with a brighter outlook than the one they left behind.

suffer from a pervasive sense of optimism; the medieval Julian of Norwich's faithful 'all shall be well' has nothing on the sacred and secular optimism of some of my fellow citizens. When the pursuit of happiness is enshrined in one of your formative documents, perhaps it is not ridiculous to expect that happiness is attainable, even inevitable. A parallel American myth is that of rags-to-riches success, and it too suggests that even though happiness may require hard work, intelligence, and perseverance, it is distinctly possible. Pop culture apocalypses that end happily (as most of these films do) suggest that these qualities may also be applied to any present and future problems we may face—even those that seem insurmountable. Didn't the Great Depression seem insurmountable? Didn't World War Two? Didn't the Nuclear Arms Race? In hope, as at the end of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (the title character himself a prototypical American hero), we are borne inexorably toward a future where all shall somehow be well, even if only in a story.

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9. 'MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE': APOCALYPSE TRANSFORMED IN *TRANSFORMERS*

Elizabeth Rosen

In her book, *Negotiating with the Dead*, Margaret Atwood suggests that if we believe that stories actually can have an effect on the real world, then authors must by necessity also 'begin talking about ethics and responsibilities' (97). Perhaps no story is more worthy of being examined both for its consequences in the real world, and for the ethics of telling it than the story of apocalypse. This is, in part, because the myth of apocalypse, particularly as it has been described in the New Testament's Book of Revelation, is a multi-purposed work. It is a story that has always had practical aims, as well as theological ones.

Because apocalypse is a story about the overthrow of the corrupt status quo and the return of the chosen people to their rightful place in the Kingdom of God, it has been a favorite myth for persecuted and dispossessed peoples. It is a story told in order to comfort communities that are experiencing (real or perceived) social or historical upheaval and is an attempt to make sense of that upheaval.[1] The apocalyptic myth's promise is undeniable and unequivocal: the experienced disruption is part of God's ultimate plan, and He will make things right again by punishing the sinners and rewarding the believers with the New Heaven on Earth when He brings time to a close. One of the practical purposes of the apocalyptic myth, then, is to reassure the persecuted that their suffering is purposeful and to exhort them to maintain their faith in the face of enormous pressures. Because it

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1. While the argument that the apocalyptic genre is born of socio-political crises is widely accepted among scholars, and literary critics in particular seem to have taken it for granted, religious scholars John J. Collins and Leonard L. Thompson have both offered alternative explanations. Collins rejects this theory outright, and Thompson, claiming the consensus view is reductive, suggests that 'perceived crisis' more accurately describes the motivation for writing apocalyptic stories. Collins bases his rejection on an examination of the social and political contexts surrounding the creation of certain well known apocalyptic literature. See John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), and Leonard L.Thompson, *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

is a sense-making myth, it is a message of hope for a people confounded by historical events.

Apocalyptic narrative serves another purpose, as well. Because it is the story of God rendering judgment on his creation, it simultaneously acts as a literature of social critique. It clearly differentiates between those who walk in the ways of the Lord and will thereby inherit the New Jerusalem, and those evil-doers who will be consigned to keep the vanquished Satan company for eternity. Because judgment is its central action, the traditional myth of apocalypse is a vehicle for social criticism, allowing its writer to enumerate the faults of a people who are about to experience God's wrath. In this way, then, apocalypse is also a didactic tool, a more severe cousin of the jeremiad which laments the bad behavior of its listeners.[2] By enumerating the ways in which a society has gone wrong, the apocalyptic narrative encourages people to be faithful to God in order to be among the inheritors of the New Jerusalem. As Bruce Milne notes, eschatology is 'always moral teaching. It is concerned with the way we are to live in light of [the coming End]' (46).

Until the modern era, the genre of apocalyptic literature was, if not relatively fixed, at least largely recognizable. In its most basic form, it is composed of an angry God who, outdone with his unredeemable people, determines to end time, weeding out in the process those who deserve to be eternally punished and rewarded. In the most famous of the Western apocalypses, the New Testament's Book of Revelation, the Messiah is the vehicle for this series of events, returning to Earth to fight and vanquish Satan in the battle of Armageddon, and then presiding over the Last Judgment and the engendering of the New Heaven on Earth where He will rule with the Saved.[3] The traditional apocalyptic myth, therefore, has four essential pieces: a God, judgment, New Jerusalem, and the end of time. Indeed, one might argue that the whole purpose of the apocalyptic genre is the idea of New Jerusalem, without which there would be no comfort at all for the listener.[4]

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2. The two genres differ in that a jeremiad exhorts its listeners to change their behavior to influence God's future behavior. Apocalypse, on the other hand, assumes that God's future behavior is fixed and cannot be influenced by any action of man: God *will* end time and punish the wicked.

3. As Norman Cohn has documented, many of the elements of these Western apocalypses have their roots in the apocalyptic tales of ancient non-Western cultures. See his *Chaos, Cosmos and the World to Come* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

4. Some scholars, such as Zbigniew Lewicki, Douglas Robinson, John R. May and James Berger, argue that stories which lack the New Jerusalem element should still be considered apocalyptic, while others, such as Joel W. Martin, Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr, David Ketterer and Marlene Goldman, argue for a re-interpretation of the New Jerusalem element of the story.

But as Frank Kermode points out, the apocalyptic myth is 'patient of change and of historiographical sophistications' (8-9). Kermode argued in his seminal lectures on the topic in the late 1960s that the apocalyptic genre had taken on a different and distinctive form under Modernism, and that, as he read it, that distinctive form and era seemed to be drawing to a close. As numerous scholars since have noted, in late twentieth century versions of the story, particularly secular versions, the traditional elements of the apocalyptic myth have been mutated, even jettisoned altogether. In fact, twentieth century secular versions of the myth seem to have 'emancipated [themselves] from [their] historical and biblical roots' so that 'there is no common agreement on the form, content, or function of apocalyptic thinking and writing' at all (Broeck 94).[5]

Yet there is a secular literary group that is still using the template of the traditional apocalyptic myth as the basis of its narratives. They are, improbably, a group of postmodern writers and filmmakers. I say 'improbable' because the very structure and intents of the apocalyptic narrative are the antithesis of the indeterminacy, ambiguity, and resistance to grand narratives which define postmodernism.[6] No more rigidly binary, rigidly moral myth exists than Apocalypse. It is difficult at first to reconcile the fact that writers whose stories are defined by uncertainty, plurality,

I differentiate between the traditional apocalyptic paradigm and the newer eschatological tales which leave out the element of New Jerusalem and instead depict an end to the world in which no one survives. The newer tales are so different in both content and purpose that they form a new sub-branch of eschatological stories which I call 'neo-apocalyptic'. Where the traditional myth of apocalypse emphasizes hope and an intervening deity who restores power to the believer, the neo-apocalyptic version emphasizes despair and disillusionment and features a deity whose main purpose is to be the vehicle of utter destruction. For a more detailed explanation of this sub-branch of apocalyptic literature, see Elizabeth Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008).

5. Different scholars have accounted for this change in apocalyptic tenor in different ways. Most scholars point to increasing secularization as a contributing factor, an explanation about which I am skeptical. John R. May provides a good example of secularization argument. For other competing explanations, see Zbigniew Lewicki, Joseph Dewey, W. Warren Wagar and Frances Carey.

6. In spite of the continuing debate over the existence of a category of art called 'postmodernism', I am satisfied by the claim that a text which exhibits several of the traits we've now come to identify as elements of postmodernism—irony, playfulness, self-reflexivity, indeterminacy, a mixing of high and low culture, pastiche, relativism, multiplicity and plurality, the challenging of grand narratives—is sufficient to deem that text 'postmodern'. The texts on which I base the argument of a postmodern version of apocalypse, as with the films discussed in this essay, all fall within the historic time period of the last quarter of the 20th century, a period which we've culturally come to mark as 'postmodern', as well, because so many of its cultural texts reflect the trait I previously mentioned.

indeterminacy and a deep suspicion of meta-narratives would be drawn to such a myth. Yet, authors and filmmakers such as Don DeLillo and Terry Gilliam have repeatedly used the apocalyptic myth as the basis of their works, even as they apply a postmodern sensibility to it. More recently, postmodern versions of apocalypse have begun to spring up in children's film and literature.

The result is a body of work that acknowledges the value of the apocalyptic myth as a means of social critique, and simultaneously works against the assumptions at the heart of the overall grand narrative. As a means of trumpeting what is wrong with one's society, the apocalyptic myth is useful since it allows a recitation of all that makes mankind so unredeemable that the world must be ended. At the same time, the apocalyptic myth insists on a strictly binary structure in which there are only either/ors: God or the Devil, the Saved or the Damned, Good or Evil, Heaven or Hell. There is nothing shaded in between. Such a rigid structure allows no room for ambiguity and indeterminacy. The apocalyptic story also insists on linearity; it is a story about the End of the world, about a *final* judgment. It brings time to a close, putting evil-doers in their deserved place, and elevating the faithful to their rightful place in God's New Heaven on Earth. Yet postmodernism, with its multiplicity of perspectives and rejection of absolutism, looks at the apocalyptic myth and sees a grand narrative which purports to tell us a definitive truth that cannot be.

The result, then, when postmodernists adapt the apocalyptic myth, is a collision of views that fundamentally shake the foundations of the original myth while simultaneously preserving one of the myth's primary functions of highlighting the ills in a society. These postmodern apocalypses challenge all the binary or definitive structures of the original myth. Where traditional apocalypse has only one God, postmodern apocalypse, in accordance with its beliefs in plurality and multiplicity, often has multiple gods. In some cases, a person or object is elevated to the position of the deity in postmodern apocalypse. In others, the benevolent creator and wrathful destroyer facets of the biblical God are fragmented into two separate deity characters, and in still others, we find postmodernists using a pantheon of gods who come from a range of religions. Because of its focus on identity politics and ambiguity, postmodern apocalypse might conflate apocalyptic characters, as well as fracture them, so, for instance, one might find a deity character who simultaneously appears to be deity, devil, and prophet combined. In accordance with postmodernism's emphasis on uncertainty, the deity of postmodern apocalyptic stories is unlikely to be the authoritative and omniscient God of the Bible. Instead, the deity character may seem uncertain of what to do, or even that he is a god.[7]

7.   Neo from *The Matrix* trilogy is an example of an uncertain deity figure. Not only

Judgment, naturally, is either suspended or difficult to achieve in post-modern apocalypse. The privileging of ambiguity means that characters and actions cannot be read simply as either good or bad. Even deity characters are subject to this ambiguity and are subsequently difficult to 'read'; a character might seem godlike in one moment and Satanic in the next, an action or event might seem 'good' in one instance and 'bad' in another.

Finally, the concept of New Jerusalem undergoes a tremendous transformation in postmodern apocalypses. Since postmodernism is in general suspicious of the singularity or uniqueness of events, it tends to reject the depiction of the end of all time and history as final, favoring instead a depiction of time as cyclical rather than linear. Thus, the 'End' in postmodern apocalypse becomes one of many ends, with one particular time drawing to a close and a new time beginning. As a consequence, New Jerusalem becomes less an actual place and more a way of seeing things anew. In postmodern apocalypse, it is not the world which ends so much as it is a way of seeing the world which ends. This new 'seeing' is the New Heaven on Earth of the postmodern apocalyptic myth.

In spite of this significant transformation of the apocalyptic narrative, postmodernists who adapt the apocalyptic myth as the basis of their own narratives are, in fact, engaging in a useful and constructive activity, even as the result of their adaptation is to tear down the grand narrative of apocalypse. This is because, as church fathers and political leaders have long known, the apocalyptic myth is an incredibly dangerous one with real world consequences:

> …the terms *good* and *evil* are absolutes that rarely apply in a world where motives are sometimes mixed or multiple, and the effects of ideas and actions are frequently neither obvious nor clear-cut. Such terms are an easy way to 'paint' a situation in order to manipulate responses—to arouse fear and blind hatred on one hand, martyr-complexes on the other. Apocalypse is not only a comforting story about righteous inheritance for the dispossessed, nor a benign fairy tale of good besting evil. It is a potentially dangerous way by which to regard and act in the world (Rosen, pp. 176-77).

The unforgiving rhetorical stance of the apocalyptic myth forces us into opposing camps; either we are one of the Saved or one of the Damned. If a person sees himself as one of the elite chosen, then he is virtually obligated to fight those who are not, to do whatever it takes to bring the apocalypse to fruition.[8]

does he refuse to believe he is the One, but even when he finally comes to believe it, he still suffers greatly from not knowing how to proceed at any one time, a far cry from the authoritative biblical God. One consequence of this lack of authority is that these postmodern versions of gods function as queries about the nature of God, even what it means to be a god.

  8. See Lee Quinby's *Anti-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,

St Augustine recognized the danger of such rhetoric, as did many of his peers, which is why the Catholic Church has always had an uneasy relationship with The Revelation of John. Postmodern authors who adapt the myth, only to upend its monotheism, smudge its Manichean view of good and evil, or suggest that for every world which 'ends' there is another which comes into being, are doing constructive work in writing narratives which alert us to the rigid and dangerous assumptions which underlie our foundational myth of the End.

Both because of the apocalyptic genre's horrific content and because the ambiguity of postmodern narratives is antithetical to the often simplistic worldview at the heart of most children's stories, I have been surprised and interested to see this trend unexpectedly manifest itself in children's literature and film. It used to be that what was at stake in a children's story was the loss of home, or of a parent. Fairy tales, particularly the bowdlerized versions of the Victorians or Walt Disney, were didactic tales, with pat morals lessons for children about avoiding gluttony, or learning to think of others before they think of themselves, but what was at stake in these stories was the individual's well-being, and nothing more.

What is often at stake now in children's films and books is the world or human existence itself. We have only to think of poor Harry Potter or Lyra Belacqua to see that everything is at stake for these young heroes and heroines.[9] These apocalyptically-themed stories have even entered the realm of the once-sunny Disney pantheon of animated films. Think of *Meet the Robinsons* or *WALL•E*. Though largely a rollicking time travel story, *Meet the Robinsons* (2007) includes a view of a hellish future which will come to exist should Doris, a robotic hat and one of the hero's inventions, come to power. In the dark, polluted, and bleak future, humans exist only as slaves to the mechanized villains, and several scenes depict these robotic hat creatures as demonic punishers, chasing, harrying, even harming the humans in this potential future world.

Granted that this is a film which is more obviously read as a story about dystopian vs. utopian ideals, an apocalyptic subtext is also detectable since

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1994) and Michael Barkun's 'Politics and Apocalypticism', in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. III. *Apocalypticism in the Modern Period and the Contemporary Age* (ed. Stephen J. Stein; New York: Continuum, 1998), for more on the political ramifications of apocalyptic rhetoric.

9. It is worth remembering that the very first best-seller in American literature, Michael Wigglesworth's apocalyptic poem 'Day of Doom', was read to children, so that while the Harry Potter novels or Pullman's Dark Material series may not be the first to have the world at stake, there is a striking difference in the audience in that today's children are exposed to the frightening ideas about good and evil and the End, but without the comforting idea included that they may be among the Elect who will survive the terrible End.

it has at its center a creator, the boy inventor, Lewis, from whom worlds emerge (through the inventions he makes which shape his society) and who is faced off against the demonic and hell-producing Doris that he, himself, created. Judgment, such as it is, does in fact issue from this creator; it is Lewis who makes the decision to go back in time and wipe out his own creation so that the vision he has seen of the future under it will never come to pass. He therefore makes the New Jerusalem of this re-telling possible, and what a place it is: sunny and upbeat, populated by helpful and amusing machines, and, most importantly to this story, containing the family for which he has longed. That is, the loving, non-judgmental, and inclusive community which is associated with New Heaven on Earth is here represented in the form of extended family.[10] Moreover, the creator figure of this story fits the postmodern template in several ways. First of all, he is not the aloof, incomprehensible biblical God. He is a emotive god, a lonely orphan who is abandoned by his mother and feels distress that he cannot get another family to adopt him. He also exhibits the hesitancy and uncertainty of a postmodern god since his omniscience is incomplete: he does not know that he is the god-like creator of the future world which he inhabits for most of the film. He neither 'knows' the future, nor understands that he can act to influence it. In fact, it is his future family who teaches him the lessons he will need in order to act authoritatively, as one would expect a god to act. The postmodern god is therefore also defined by the fact that he is both teachable (i.e. flawed and approachable) and in need of help at times. Finally, while the film only shows us two possible futures and is more obviously read as a dystopian warning, one of the consequences of using a time traveling context is that if you change something in the past, a new future will emerge. Thus, one way to understand this context within the apocalyptic allusion is through the postmodern lens: that there are a multiplicity of 'New Jerusalems' (as well as 'Hells') which are possible, though the films only deals with two of them.

   Disney/Pixar's *WALL•E* (2008) appears at first to fall into the 'post-apocalyptic' subgenre of stories since it opens with a desolate and polluted Earth which humans have long ago abandoned for space, leaving behind an army of waste removal robots to clean up the mess they've left behind.[11] As

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10. Indeed, this extended family is so non-judgmental that when Lewis fails with one of his inventions, they all cheer and celebrate his failure. In the context of the story, this is a lesson about how prior failures are part of ultimately succeeding in creating something new, but in the apocalyptic subtext, this lack of friction and criticism, this loving support in spite of everything, makes for the kind of non-confrontational, non-critical and loving atmosphere which one would expect in the Kingdom of God.

11. Outside of the postmodern context, the term 'post-apocalyptic' is oxymoronic, since to be apocalyptic means to come to a final and conclusive end. Because, however, apocalypse ends with a new heaven on Earth, Lois Zamora has noted the paradox

the film opens, 700 years after this escape, only one of these robots is still operating, the WALL•E of the title. Ironically, WALL•E (Waste Allocation Load Lifter Earth Class) is both the last 'human' and the last robot on this world. Why do I say 'human'? Because Wall•E is not a mere machine; he feels. He compulsively collects artifacts of the dead world, watches *Hello, Dolly!*, and yearns to share his 'life' with someone, a trope repeated *ad nauseam* in the form of Wall•E imitating the locked fingers of a couple holding hands. He knows loneliness, fear, excitement, hope. He exhibits tenacity, tenderness, courage, anxiety, and finally love.

Wall•E is a film filled with biblical allusions, whether it is to the Adam and Eve story (the female robot sent to Earth is an Extraterrestrial Vegetation Evaluator or EVE), or to Noah's Ark. These allusions to the creation stories of Genesis are wholly appropriate to a film which is about a new beginning for the human race. But, within the logic of apocalypse, where there is a beginning, there must also have been an end. *Wall•E* begins *after* this end, but it is still possible to read an apocalyptic footprint in the story, and this footprint has more in common with postmodern apocalypse than traditional apocalypse. Read in this light, the small, adorable Wall•E is an example of a conflated apocalyptic character. He (and EVE) are prophets bringing word of the renewed viability of Earth to the humans who have been adrift in space for 700 years, but it is also through Wall•E's efforts that the humans are able to return to Earth at all and thus inherit the New Heaven on Earth, and so one might also see in Wall•E some signs of the apocalyptic deity who makes the New Heaven on Earth possible and defeats the Antichrist in order to achieve it (the Antichrist role here being played by the devilish shipboard computer which is trying to keep the bovine and benumbed humans in space). We might also consider that Wall•E is at least a partial creator of this world in that, through his efforts of compacting trash and building weirdly beautiful pyramids out of this garbage, he has literally shaped the world which these humans will finally return to and inherit.

One is immediately struck by how cleverly the filmmakers have simultaneously written both apocalyptic and Edenic allusions into the scene when

inherent in the narrative, pointing out that apocalypse is a story which 'mocks the notion of conclusive ends and endings even as it proposes just that—the conclusive narration of history's end' in *Writing the Apocalypse: Historical Vision in Contemporary U.S. and Latin American Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 17. It is perhaps an extension of this realization that has inspired postmodernists to interpret the New Jerusalem as a new way of seeing the old world, and to read the End as only the ending of one way of living or understanding the world and its replacement by a new way. Nonetheless, the 'post-apocalyptic' story is in vogue now, particularly in Hollywood, where, as of this writing, at least seven projects set in 'post-apocalyptic' worlds are currently in development or about to be released. See John Jurgensen and Jamin Brophy-Warren's *Wall Street Journal* article 'Hollywood Destroys the World'.

humans first step back onto Earth. The edifices which Wall•E has built immediately call to mind the pyramids of the Aztec people, a culture which has recently been on our own cultural radar because of its 2012 apocalyptic predictions. At the same time, the humans return because they have been given a seedling which proves that life is now viable again on Earth, an allusion to the Tree of Life which begins the biblical story of humans. Still, the ironic sensibilities of postmodernism are in play here: the edifices are made of trash, a double signifier which speaks on the one hand to the postmodern understanding of time as cyclical (the end of something made into beginning and vice versa), and on the other, as a judgment on human life, or even on the movie itself, as 'trashy'. As for the Tree of Life motif, humans have literally been removed from their roots for so long in the film that the Captain tells his passengers that the seedlings they will plant will produce pizza. The playfulness of these gestures is indicative of the postmodern mode.

The meta-level of this apocalyptic reading is the human element, for, after all, it is actually the humans who are the literal creators of their worlds, both the old and the new. Humans are the ones who trashed their world and forced their own evacuation. Humans created the robots who ultimately act out the apocalyptic and Genesis scripts. The devious and malicious shipboard computer, while having clearly acquired human-like qualities which make it seem to be acting of its own accord, is actually only following its last order from its human creators, albeit to a devilish degree. This shared deitific responsibility is one which is often at work in postmodern renditions of apocalypse, for instance, in *The Matrix* where the question of who is creating whom is unclear.[12]

These two films have what I would call apocalyptic subtexts at best. *Transformers* (2007), on the other hand, is outright apocalyptic. Before I begin that more detailed discussion, however, I want to point out that these three films all have the same element in common: the problematic machine. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the apocalyptic genre is one which generally comes to the forefront when a society senses a historical disruption. In these three children's films, then, I believe we are seeing the expression of a current anxiety about our computer technology.

Fear of technology and science is nothing new, of course. There's a distinct parallel between our leaps forward in technology and our cultural expressions of anxiety about it. We need only think back to *Frankenstein* in literature and *Metropolis* in film to see early examples of it.[13] The mani-

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12. While humans created A.I. in *The Matrix*, it is, as the movie opens, now the machines which breed and create new human life, and since they are symbiotic, the question of who is the creator figure (as well as the Antichrist figure) is blurred. See my chapter on *The Matrix* for more on this conundrum.

13. Nor is it new to children's literature. When we think back to the original *Spider-*

festations of these anxieties change, from the Cold War nuclear missile of
Dr. Strangelove to the reproductive and genetic technologies at the center
of the dystopian thriller *Gattaca* to the virtual reality of gaming systems
expressed in *eXistenZ* and *The 13th Floor*. In this newest incarnation, our
anxiety seems to stem from our sense that we are perhaps at a juncture in
our history when our machines are not only about to look like us, but may
be able to think like us, or maybe even better. This fear was terrifyingly
imagined early on in *The Terminator* films, but is perhaps most eloquently
expressed through the Borg, a cybernetic 'collective' in *Star Trek: the Next
Generation* that assimilates and then destroys other cultures, and through
the reality-bending artificial intelligence at the heart of *The Matrix* trilogy.
Like our fear of nuclear war, biological pandemic or other 'apocalyptic'
catalysts, our fear of computer technology is a rational one. It is a distinct
possibility that because of exponentially larger leaps in computer advance-
ment, we are about to experience Singularity, a paradigm shift so immense
that those living after it occurs cannot imagine the world which preceded
it.[14] P.W. Singer explains:

> In astrophysics, a 'singularity' is a state in which things become so radically
> different that the old rules break down and we know virtually nothing… The
> historical parallel to singularities is 'paradigm shifts', when some concept
> of new technology comes along that wipes out the old way of understand-
> ing things… The key is that someone living in a time before a paradigm
> shift would be unable to understand the world that follows (102-103).

Computer scientists anticipate (some happily, others anxiously) that we are
participating in our own extinction as a race.[15] Says George Dyson, author
of *Darwin Among the Machines*, 'In the game of life and evolution there are
three players at the table: human beings, nature, and machines. I am firmly
on the side of nature. But nature, I suspect, is on the side of the machines'
(quoted in Joy). Given this particular moment in history, then, it should
come as no surprise to find an apocalyptic re-telling with the cybernetic
Transformers at the heart of it.

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man comics, for instance, we realize that the villains are almost all scientists who have
literally let their technology get the best of them. My thanks to Michael Hanson for
reminding me of this.

    14. Computer scientist Vernor Vinge's essay 'The Coming Technological Singular-
ity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era' (Paper presented at VISION-21 Sympo-
sium, 30-21 March, 1993. http://www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/vinge/misc/singularity.
html. 12 August, 2009), was the first to posit a singularity regarding our advancing
computer technology. Singularities suggest the kind of real-world apocalypse that is
exactly what postmodernists imagine: the ending of one world and the replacement of
it with a new one.

    15. See Ray Kurzweil for an example of the first, and Bill Joy for an example of the
second.

Though *Transformers* by director Michael Bay was a popular hit, grossing roughly $70.5 million its opening and weekend, and $319 million in its domestic release, it was almost universally reviled by critics as a loud robotic demolition-fest with a completely incomprehensible plot.[16] While it is no doubt exactly these demolition-fests which the child and adolescent audience come to see, we must consider the fact that the apocalyptic subtext of such a film could influence them without their conscious knowledge. Even the critics who reviled the film noted its ties to apocalyptic ideas, writing that the teenagers at the center of the action are 'fated to save the world' and that 'Michael Bay never met a rhetorical apocalypse he didn't love' (Turan; Lee). While, like *The Matrix* trilogy*, Transformers* is guilty of playing fast and loose with its plot and logic, the exposition which we are given and the subsequent action of the film loan themselves perfectly to a postmodern apocalyptic interpretation. So what I want to do now is a more detailed reading of this film to discuss, first, how the apocalyptic narrative is being influenced by postmodern sensibilities, second, the implications of that choice, and, third, why it is important that it is occurring in the genre of children's film. Since I have claimed that the fundamentals of the apocalyptic narrative are deity, judgment, New Jerusalem, and the end of time, let us take each of these in turn.

Transformers begins visually and verbally with what could not be any clearer reference to a deity. Over a dark screen, a sonorous voice-over tells us, 'Before time began, there was the Cube. We know not where it comes from, only that it holds the power to create worlds and fill them with life. That is how our race was born'. Immediately, the viewer knows that the Cube, with its power to create life and worlds, can be read as a deity figure. This information is given over a black screen which will not show an image until two sentences further into this exposition, an image which at first appears to be a planet's surface, but turns out instead to be the surface of the Cube itself, and instantly calls to mind the biblical story of creation in which God, out of the black emptiness of space, creates first light, then the world, then man.

The voice-over goes on to explain that a war broke out on this planet between those that wanted the Cube for good (the Autobots) and those who wanted it for evil (the Decepticons), that the war decimated this planet 'until it was consumed by death and the Cube was lost to the far reaches of space', and that the remaining Transformers 'scattered across the galaxy, hoping to find [the Cube] and rebuild our home'. During this voice-over, which goes on for several sentences, the camera is pulling back and away from the Cube to show it rolling through space and eventually entering Earth's atmosphere,

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16. Transformers, *Box Office Mojo*, http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id= transformers06.htm.

but as the voice-over's ominous final line, 'But we were already too late' is spoken, the screen goes completely black again and the title 'Transformers' comes up on it.

I wanted to go into detail about this opening sequence because it encapsulates much of what I see as the postmodern stance of this apocalyptic story, and particularly sheds light on how the deity is going to be constructed. First of all, we are presented with a single deity figure, the Cube, which is lost, but which is then subjected to a postmodern 'fracturing' which yields the kind of split into the benevolent and punishing facets of the biblical God, with the Autobots, led by Optimus Prime, representing the Messianic force, and the Decepticons, led by Megatron, representing the Antichrist forces. These Transformers are quite clearly extensions of the initial Cube-god, and we know it from several things.

First, there is no ignoring the name of the Autobots' leader which signals the ultimate Number One. Second, these cybertronic organisms can (and do) literally *join* with the original deity figure. Prime's plan, if he cannot defeat Megatron, is to have the human teenage hero, Sam, push the recovered Cube into Prime's chest where he will meld with it and 'sacrifice himself' in order to destroy it so that Megatron cannot use it for ill. In this sacrifice, we hear echoes of Christ's sacrifice for mankind, and a more complex postmodern idea of the deity being disseminated across multiple entities: the Transformers, all of them, and the Cube are one. The fact that it is Megatron, not Prime, who ultimately melds with the Cube is a good example of how the apocalyptic roles are blurred and ambiguous: this is a 'sacrifice' which Prime is supposed to make, but Megatron, though unwillingly, makes instead. Third, the Transformers are searching for the Cube in order to rebuild their world. This line from the prologue suggests that the individual 'bots are as equally implicated in creation activities as the Cube itself.

There are two other things which come from outside the prologue that confirm for us that the Transformers are deity figures of the story. Both of them suggest the postmodern sensibility behind the re-telling. The first is that when Sam's Transformer guardian, an Autobot called Bumblebee, is asked what he is, the answer, cobbled together from radio transmissions, is 'Throughout the vastness of space… Angels will rain down like visitors from heaven! Hallelujah!' So here the Transformers become the angel hoards who fight in Armageddon and we see the slippage of roles that is so common in postmodern theories about identity: they are both the angel army *and* the deities of the story. We can be sure of the latter because, without fail, every time a Transformer reveals itself to an awe-struck human, the response is 'Oh, God!'[17] This phrase, and variations on it such as 'Dear

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17. Indeed, the very first revelation of a Transformer, when Sam's car transforms into Bumblebee, happens in a blinding blaze of white light, followed by Sam's stunned

God!' or 'Holy God!' is the single most repeated line of the film, occurring some ten to fifteen times and always in conjunction with the appearance of a Transformer.

The split of the Transformers into deity and Antichrist figures is also made pretty clear in the film. Megatron announces himself as 'the harbinger of death'; a soldier points out the Decepticons's technology and declares emphatically, 'This stuff is wicked!'; a miniature Decepticon is referred to as 'kind of like an itty bitty Energizer bunny from hell'; and Barricade, the Decepticon who takes the shape of a police car, is emblazoned not with the usual 'to protect and serve', but with 'to punish and enslave' instead. Even their appearances signal that they are evil. While the Autobots are clearly depicted as traditional robots made of square and rectangular parts, albeit with humanized features, the Decepticons' faces are depicted as demon-like, constructed of all sharp, dangerous-looking angles, with suggested horns and the uneven, pointed fangs stereotypically used to depict devils. Moreover, the Decepticons make terrifying animal growls, while the Autobots never do.

Once again, however, in postmodern versions of apocalypse, ambiguity and slippage in identity are emphasized. So even while the Decepticons are obviously evil, they, too, are identified as 'god' by the humans who first see them. Perhaps a better example is that Sam at one point, before he knows that Bumblebee is his protector, refers to him as 'Satan's Camaro'. And there is one other telling detail which suggests the apocalyptic deity role which all the Transformers are playing in the film, and this is the ending of the prologue when the screen goes black again only to be emblazoned with the title 'Transformers'. If the opening use of the black screen and the voice-over about creating life is suggestive of the opening of Genesis, so should this closing use of a black screen. The difference is that in the second instance we are given a clue as to the vehicle of creation: the Transformers, all of them. Moreover, the *return* to black screen suggests the ending of what has preceded it while simultaneously suggesting that the Transformers will be responsible either for instigating this ending, for ushering in whatever world comes next, or both. Thus, there is a play here on the name Transformer: yes, these creatures transform themselves, but they are also, as I hope to show, vehicles to transforming the world, as well.

The postmodern refusal of absolutes are clear in these details. The postmodern depiction of God as less than authoritative and more of a cipher is also at work in the film. After all, how does God manage to be 'lost to the far reaches of the galaxy' as the deified Cube is? How does God arrive 'too late' as Optimus Prime claims they did in the prologue? Certainly the God

'Oh my God' and Bumblebee shining a brilliant beam of light into the heavens above him.

of traditional Apocalypse is neither late or lost. He cannot be: he is omniscient and omnipotent. But not so these postmodern gods. They can make mistakes, as they do by arriving late. They can be bumbling, as the comical scene of the Autobots unintentionally destroying Sam's backyard and falling into power lines shows. They can, as one Pentagon official points out, 'be hurt', even killed, a point poignantly depicted through the capture and treatment of Bumblebee. We might especially take note of the fact that Optimus Prime is *defeated* by Megatron, and that it is Sam, the human, who actually defeats Megatron by shoving the Cube into his chest, thus bringing to fruition Optimus Prime's earlier prophecy that Sam '[holds] the key to earth's survival'. The postmodern apocalyptic god sometimes needs a helping hand.

If judgment is the definitive action of the apocalyptic narrative, we get that here, as well. Three times at least, the Decepticons render a judgment on the human species. Their choice of analogy is telling: they compare humans to bugs. The manic little Decepticon Frenzy contemptuously tells fellow Decepticon Barricade that the 'Stupid insects tried to shoot me'. Later, when a human comes close to the fallen Megatron, Megatron utters 'Disgusting!' under his breath, and flicks the human away as if it were what he later calls Sam: 'Maggot!' If humans are bugs, then the implication is that Earth is infested and should rightfully be deloused. But it is not just the Decepticons who see things this way. Twice, the Autobot Ironside, the gung-ho 'weapons specialist', threatens to 'take out' humans before being warned by Optimus Prime that Autobots don't hurt humans. One of these times, Ironhide is referring to Sam's parents, who he deems 'very irritating'! Reprimanded by Prime, Ironhide sheepishly says, 'It was just an option'.

But that is the point in a postmodern version of apocalypse: being good or bad is 'just an option' and alternative options exist. Thus, we get the 'good' 'bots querying Optimus Prime about why the humans should be saved at all as they are 'a primitive and violent race'.[18] Optimus's answer is tinged by American jingoism, but he nonetheless acknowledges that humans aren't necessarily worthy of being seen as a 'chosen' people. Optimus replies: 'Were we so different? They are a young species. They have much to learn, but I've seen goodness in them. Freedom is the right of all sentient beings'.

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18. I probably need not point out the irony of the Transformers, who are constantly engaged, as one human puts it, in 'giant droid death matches', calling the humans violent. But what interests me about this comment is that while at first glance it seems to be another of those lack of consistencies in plot and exposition for which reviewers criticized the film, it exhibits both the ironic sensibility of postmodernism and is rooted in a basic but undiscussed feature of the film: that all of the human technology on display and juxtaposed against the Transformers themselves is war technology: military hardware, combat jets and Apache helicopters, high-tech guns and death technologies.

When Megatron adamantly claims 'Humans don't deserve to live!', Optimus just as emphatically adopts the Christian doctrine of free choice, replying, 'They deserve to choose'. Presumably, Optimus doesn't mean that humans have a right to choose whether to live or die, but whether to be good or evil. Thus Optimus, one of the 'Judges' in this apocalyptic saga, makes manifest the difficulty of determining whether one is good or bad, asserting instead that morality is an ongoing process. In his statement that he has seen goodness in humans is implied the converse, that he has seen evil, too. The human species should be saved, not for what they are, but because of their potential to be something else. A more ambivalent judgment would be hard to find.

As for New Jerusalem, *Transformers*, like other postmodern versions of apocalypse, does not depict the New Heaven on Earth as a completely new place. It is, instead, a new way of seeing and knowing the old world. It is the lifting of the veil which the word *apokalypsis* promises, but it is also the 'unveiling' which postmodernism promises with its challenges to expose (and undermine) grand narratives. With the Decepticons defeated, the remaining Autobots are left to stay on Earth, hiding amongst its inhabitants. But listen to Optimus's final speech:

> With the AllSpark [Cube] gone we cannot return life to our planet. And fate has yielded its reward: a new world to call home. We live among its people now, hiding in plain sight but watching over them in secret, waiting, protecting. I have witnessed their capacity for courage. And though we are worlds apart, like us, there's more to them than meets the eye. I am Optimus Prime, and I send this message to any surviving Autobots taking refuge among the stars. We are here. We are waiting.[19]

The play here is in the phrase 'More than meets the eye'—the original tag line for the Hasbro line of toys and incorporated playfully into the film both into the final speech of Optimus and into Sam's awkward, smarmy response to his dream girl when she asks if he thinks she's shallow. One of the basic tenets of postmodernism is the move to uncover that which we are normally blind to, the meta-narratives that we unquestioningly use to organize our societies.

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19. It seems to me that we are supposed to hear the voice of god in the lead Autobot's self-important declaration, 'I am Optimus Prime'. Even the most checked-out viewer knows this already, so why declare it again unless its meaning has altered? I would argue that this declaration playfully refers back to the final *mano-a-mano* between Megatron and Prime which starts with this pithy bit of dialogue: Optimus— 'It's just you and me now, Megatron'. Megatron confidently corrects Optimus, 'No, it's just me, Prime'. Given the postmodern penchant for playfulness, I'd like to argue there's a pun here in that if that final line of Megatron dialogue were to come out of Optimus's mouth instead, it would, in fact, be asserting the same thing that his declaration in the epilogue does: that only he is left standing, as indeed he is last pictured in the film, standing over the other Autobots disguised in their car forms.

While one might argue that the Autobots and the humans have, through the course of events, created a 'new world', to the average eye, it looks a lot like the old one. In fact, unless you are one of the few humans who are in the know, it looks exactly like the old one. But it isn't, and the few sentient beings who are aware of it now 'see' an underlying structure which was invisible to them before, a 'new world', if you will, one in which any machine may be a living organism that might stand up and act against us for good or ill. And of course, this is the political promise of postmodernism: to reveal the hidden, invisible assumptions and narratives which guide us through our lives.

Thus we hear our current anxiety over our computers being played out, and this is, in part, the point of the apocalyptic genre: to give voice to the fears of a society, to try to make decisions about what constitutes moral and immoral behavior, and to simplify its depiction and the instructions for coping with it. Yet, postmodernism rejects this sort of simplification and reductionism.[20]

This brings me finally to the topic of why the apocalyptic narrative and especially the postmodern version of it has made its way into the realm of children's film (and literature), as well as why it is noteworthy. Since children don't write the films and literature they are exposed to, we need to re-phrase the question to ask why the adults who write this genre have begun to incorporate a story which is not only terrifying but also deeply complex in its implications and potentially dangerous in its consequences into their work. What follows is only a hypothesis on my part, but one which I think is based on common sense awareness of political and historical events and cultural trends of the past decade.

First, let me suggest some reasons why the apocalyptic narrative in general has made its way into children's film and literature. I believe that the original reasons for this trend are different from the reasons why we are currently finding it in children's film, and I base this on the fact that different parts of the apocalyptic myth are being emphasized now than were when these stories began to include apocalyptic motifs.

If the end of the world seems a sophisticated and frightening topic for children, one would potentially look to the change of the cultural environment in which children have grown up in over the past several decades. There was a time, not so long ago, when adults protected children from explicit content of any kind. Certain topics were kept from children's ears, much less from the entertainment to which they were exposed. This is by

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20. New 'isms' such as post-humanism and particularly transhumanism are making inroads into the apocalyptic genre through works such as *The Matrix* and *Neuromancer* in which the cyborg becomes the central trope. See my chapter on *The Matrix* trilogy for a larger discussion of this idea.

and large no longer true. Children are exposed to violence, sex, and adult concerns more frequently than ever before. At least in the past decade, one of those concerns has been the 'end of the world'. An open cultural discussion in which children have been included has been taking place on the news and in the classrooms for some time now, one which talks about the effects of global warming on the human race, or about the seasonal dangers of new flu strains. Kids not only hear this, but they are regularly discussing what they can do to prevent the spread of communicable diseases and to recycle and do their part in protecting the environment. They may even be exposed to debates and conversations about nuclear, biological, or chemical warfare, or about potentially fatal pandemics of diseases we can't fight such as Ebola. In short, the 'end of the world' is very much a topic of discussion today. It should come as no surprise that children's authors and filmmakers would address this concern in their work, whether consciously or not, nor that the child heroes and heroines of their stories should successfully save the world. That is, after all, what we are teaching them in their classrooms: that they can make a difference.

But it seems to me that the emphasis of these apocalyptic children's works has begun to change. Where the trend may have started in order to address the fear about the End, it appears to have moved instead to focus on the Good vs. Evil motif of the apocalyptic narrative. An apocalyptic storytelling trend that has its first impulse in end-of-the-world ideas has morphed into one which emphasizes the Armageddon motif, the Us vs. Them, the Good vs. the Evil. Thus, with each passing installment, J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels or Phillip Pullman's Dark Materials novels get darker and darker, the evil grows stronger, the heroes and heroines grow more despairing. Why?

Consider that, for American children in particular, the effects of September 11th and the ensuing wars have made tangible the earlier theoretical idea that the world might end. For many children in this country, 9/11 was the end of their sense of safety and the 'War on Terror' has reinforced this sense of peril, rocking thousands of families by taking away a family member, either temporarily or permanently. A generation of soldiers has returned to their children, horribly disfigured in some cases, suffering posttraumatic stress disorder in others, but certainly not the person who first left. How do we explain this to children? We talk about good and bad people. We talk about fighting for our noble way of life, versus the evil intents and motives of the Other. Unlike with global warming, children seem to get tangible proof of what we are talking about when a family member returns home gravely injured, or doesn't return at all. Since 2001, then, what was a difficult to show idea—the end of the world via climate change—has become a readily demonstrated idea—the end of the world via the bad people. Children, in some ways, are the perfect audience for a story based on traditional

apocalypse because, until they develop sufficiently, they often see the world in black and white terms. It's why fairy tales have such unequivocally good heroes and such unequivocally evil villains. It should also be mentioned that there are political reasons to encourage such story-telling: rendering a war in black and white terms like this is helpful propaganda.

This is why the fact that strict apocalyptic children's entertainment is now morphing into postmodern apocalyptic versions seems noteworthy. As I hope I've shown in this essay, what postmodern versions of apocalypse do is wipe away the black and white worldview on which traditional apocalypse insists. It teaches that there are no such things as absolutes. No definitive Us or Them. No absolute good or evil. While seeing the world in absolutes is appealing because it makes decisions about how to act and who to act against easier, it is clearly a simplistic and reductionist way to act in the extremely complex real world. It undoubtedly makes fighting a war much more palatable: We are fighting Them because They are 'bad', and not because of the much more complex reasons which are harder to explain and/or solve.[21]

Postmodern apocalypse deconstructs the strictly and simplistically binary traditional narrative to show that the world, even one which seems near some catastrophic ending, is a far more morally complex one than traditional apocalypse makes it out to be. Since we've decided as a culture that children are old enough to be exposed to apocalyptic ideas, the postmodernist's push against the fairy tale reading of the story might be seen as hoping, perhaps, that a child exposed to a postmodern version of apocalypse will learn that the world is not so easily described and proscribed. A child who can learn this is less likely to be dogmatic. And since our children will certainly be inheriting our world, if not the new heavenly world of Revelation, this lesson is surely one worth trying to teach.

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21. Neither should we discount the more practical explanation of a counter-political push by Hollywood to both undercut the organized Christian right reading of historical events, nor the politically motivated propaganda of the Bush government which has propagated the War on Terror with such rhetoric. My thanks to Joel Shnier for pointing this out to me.

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