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Satan's Seductress and the Apocalyptic Hero: The Body in American Apocalyptic Films at the Turn of the Century

Abstract

This paper explores three apocalyptic films, *The Devil's Advocate*, *The Ninth Gate*, and *End of Days*, released before the turn of the twentieth century in America. Focusing on representations of the male and female body as a way to analyze the use of biblical and Christian themes in the films, the essay first introduces biblical apocalyptic themes and then discusses those themes in terms of representations of the female and male body in the films. The female body becomes a tool for satanic temptation of the male hero. The male body, on the other hand, embodies notions of heroic redemptive violence.

Before the dawning of the year 2000, threats of technological breakdown and impending social unrest loomed in American collective culture. The federal government set up a Y2K hotline to ease tensions over the threat of computer failure as a result of shifting the dating system from the 1900s to 2000s.¹ Many of those who flocked to Times Square in New York City for New Year's celebrations in 1999 came in hopes of witnessing some cataclysmic end-of-the-world event. In fact, *End of Days*, as a movie interpreting the final days of the year 1999, contains a scene on the New York subway in which a poster hangs in one of the subway cars asking "NY2K: Where Will You Be?" Religious groups also warned that the time of the apocalypse drew near.² As John Milton (a.k.a. Satan) played by Al Pacino announces in *The Devil's Advocate*, "Millennium's coming, son. Title fight. Round 20. I'm ready for work." American apocalyptic films before the turn of the century reflect this cultural milieu of fear and tension. Three such examples discussed in this essay are *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), *The Ninth Gate* (1999), and *End of Days* (1999).

This essay adapts Heather Clements' proposal of a method for the investigation of biblical themes in American film, which she calls "the biblical hermeneutics of film."³ The method analyzes a film's use of religious sources. The sources in question in this paper are biblical themes and Christian traditions surrounding those biblical themes. To demonstrate such an analysis, this paper

focuses on one aspect in the films—the portrayal of the role of male and female bodies in apocalyptic contexts. The body remains an important locus for an investigation of the biblical hermeneutics of film because the human body functions as one of the most powerful conveyers of religious meaning. Furthermore, representations of the body relate to social, political, and religious interventions and movements. The body, then, can become a metaphor for “both social stability and social instability.”⁴ The apocalyptic films discussed in this essay, released at the turn of the century, capture such concern for stability/instability in their representations of the body, and those representations stem from biblical sources.

Apocalyptic Embodiments: Biblical Sources

A major characteristic of an apocalyptic film in popular American culture includes Satan’s impending reign on earth in a battle between good and evil. Evil comes from one person, usually a male-personified Satan, who attempts a show-down with God, but God rarely takes-up the challenge. Instead, a male hero takes God’s place, vanquishes evil, and averts Satan’s reign on earth for the time being.⁵ Codes and “hidden secrets” that must be deciphered and revealed to the hero of the story also remain inherent in this genre.⁶ In fact, the word apocalypse originates from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which denotes that something hidden becomes revealed for the present situation. The apocalyptic genre usually emerges during times of social unrest and uncertainty. The Apocalypse of John (or Book of Revelation), for

instance, offers warnings and signs about future events to address the present turmoil of its contemporary audience.

American apocalyptic film, as a genre, inherits some gendered understandings of feminine and masculine performance based on the literary text of John's Apocalypse. In John's Apocalypse, earth-bound women make themselves sexually available for evil's destruction of the earth. The Whore of Babylon (Rev 17) personifies a powerful ruling city through which Satan lures people to idolatry through sexual entrapment by the female body.⁷ God's army defeats Babylon, and thus the Lamb and the throne of God replace the throne of Babylon (22:3).⁸ The defeat comes in the form of public humiliation and disembodiment: "they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire" (17:16; NRSV). The apocalyptic brings with it a sense of violence, redemption, and sexuality.

The author of the Book of Revelation engages motifs from Hebrew prophetic literature about the female personified city that acts as a "harlot" or "whore," whose flesh will be exposed and she will be publicly "naked" (Rev 17:16). According to Tina Pippin, "the over-sexed evil, earthly imperial city (the Whore of Babylon) has to be destroyed with sexual violence in order to fulfill the male fantasy of freedom from the female."⁹ The male apocalyptic body, whether in human institutions or in heavenly realms, constructs an active expectation of

masculine behavior. Michael and his angels battle the dragon and his angels in heaven (12:7), while on earth the Son of Man, terrifying and power-wielding, will throw Jezebel on the bed for sexual availability, relating her sexuality and the adultery of men to religious idolatry (2:20-23). The Son of Man with burnished bronze feet and a sash across his chest (1:12-15) commands an ambiguous monstrous image, and, a clear masculine one. The body of God in the Apocalypse is potently male, posing like a body-builder, just as Arnold Schwarzenegger's massive bronzed muscular body sits triumphantly on the throne in the final scene of *Conan the Barbarian*, having won kingship through fighting many battles.¹⁰

The Female Apocalyptic Body in Film

In *Devil's Advocate*, a successful attorney Kevin Lomax (Keanu Reeves) moves to John Milton's New York City law firm, and his wife Mary Ann Lomax (Charlize Theron) accompanies him. Before moving, Kevin speaks to his mother Alice Lomax (Judith Ivey) outside her church where she warns him of the city's snares, comparing New York City to a modern-day Babylon: "Let me tell you about New York. Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great. It has become a dwelling place of demons. Revelation 18. Wouldn't hurt you to look it over." Indeed, Kevin does experience temptation in New York City. He keeps winning his cases while sacrificing his conscience about defending guilty people. He spends more time with John Milton and less time with his wife.

Every woman's body in Kevin's life becomes an instrument of Satan. The first time Mary Ann meets John Milton, he confronts her about her hair, exerting his power over her body at the very beginning. Mary Ann's body juxtaposes with the body of Kevin's co-worker Christabella Andreoli (Connie Nielsen). Satan rapes Kevin's wife to make room for Kevin's possible sexual encounter with Christabella. Mary Ann runs away to the "church of heavenly hope" and stands naked in the church to reveal bloody marks on her body exclaiming, "He did this to me!" Kevin admits her into a mental institution where she eventually kills herself.¹¹ After Mary Ann's death, Alice tells her son that John Milton is his father.

In the final scene, John reveals that Christabella is Kevin's half-sister and asks Kevin to have sex with her to create the antichrist that will herald Satan's reign on earth. Christabella stands before Kevin in John's quarters and states, "Kevin, look at me. Just look at me." She then peels her clothes off before him, revealing her naked body in the position of the crucifixion, asking "Who am I?" In this case, Kevin meets Satan's temptress, the Whore of modern-day Babylon who attempts to entice Kevin to join in Satan's plans. At the end of the film, Christabella dies the same way as the Whore of Babylon - exposed, naked, and burned (Rev 17:16).

In the climactic scene of the movie, Kevin enters John Milton's quarters; the sculpture above John's desk, set-up as an altar for Kevin and Christabella's sexual consummation, begins to move. The eerie sculpture reveals naked human

bodies moving about in sexual positions. The sculpture in the film resonates with Frederick Hart's sculpture, *Ex Nihilo*, which sits above the central portal of the National Cathedral in Washington D.C. (fig. 1). The similarities are so striking that Frederick Hart took Warner Brothers to court for copyright infringement, further claiming that the film distorted the sculpture, twisting its "religious import into an embodiment of things demonic in a climactic scene where the sculpted figures on the wall appear to come alive and 'begin engaging in sexual acts' while the devil encourages his offspring to 'engage in incestuous sexual acts.'"¹² Furthermore, Hart claimed that the movie's depiction of the sculpture would only denigrate visitors' experiences at the National Cathedral and damage Hart's reputation. The case ended in a financial settlement in which Warner Brothers paid Hart an undisclosed amount of money.



Figure 1. *Ex Nihilo* by Frederick Hart, tympanum above the central portal, National Cathedral, Washington D.C. Photo: Katherine Low

When Christabella stands in front of the sculpture, Satan's seductress visually aligns with sexual temptation, like the temptation some Christian traditions assign to Eve in Genesis 3 (see 2 Cor 11:3; 1 Tim 2:14). For Augustine, Eve was the first of a long line of feminine bodies used by Satan to sexually tempt men into doing evil.¹³ Similar visual alignments exist in *The Ninth Gate*, starring Johnny Depp as Dean Corso, a rare-book expert. Boris Balkan (Frank Langella), owner of Balkan Press, hires Corso to seek out some of the rarest books in the world - *Novem Portis de Umbrarum Regni*, or *The Nine Gates of the Kingdom of Shadows*, written in Venice in 1666 by a man named Torchiam, who was burned at the stake in suspicion that he co-authored the book with the Devil. Balkan explains to Corso that one original book exists while two other copies exist. The title page of the book illustrates a tree with a snake wrapped around it; a cloud hangs in the sky above,

zapping out a bolt of lightning and breaking off a branch. Iconographically, the illustration recalls several themes that herald back to the Garden of Eden. The tree and the serpent together symbolize the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17; 3:1-7). Early Christian interpreters connected Satan to the serpent of Gen 3. One such example comes from Theophilus from Antioch, around 100 CE, who states that “the wicked demon, who also is called Satan, who then spoke to her through the serpent, and who works even to this day in those men that are possessed by him, invokes as Eve.”¹⁴ The lightning literally echoes Jesus’ words in Luke: “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning” (Luke 10:18, NRSV).

Throughout the film, Corso compares illustrations and discovers that only one set of engravings carry the inscription “LCF,” the original engravings drawn by Lucifer himself. The original engravings become the tools through which Satan can come to earth to rule. Alongside Corso’s discovery comes a mysterious, anonymous, woman (Emmanuelle Seigner) who helps Corso in his quest.¹⁵ The woman appears in the last authentic engraving to complete the set which comes to Corso at the end of the film - the nude woman with the beast. Her body placement leaning alongside the seven-headed beast, along with her similar arm positions, looks much like Albrecht Dürer’s engraving of the *Whore of Babylon* from his series from the *Apocalypse of St. John* (c. 1496-98). Whereas Dürer’s woman holds the “golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication” and

wears clothes “adorned with gold and jewels and pearls (Rev 17:4),” the woman in the *Novem Portis* is completely nude. Instead of enticing kings of the earth, the nude woman entices Corso to return to a chateau that burned earlier in the film; she points directly to it in the engraving. The chateau burned because Balkan attempted a ritual to raise Satan without the authentic engraving of the woman with the beast. While the chateau burned, Corso engaged in sexual intercourse with the anonymous satanic woman. Her sexuality acts as a satanic tool enticing Corso to complete Satan's mission. In the end of the film, he carries the authentic engraving as he walks toward the burned structure.

The Male Apocalyptic Body in Film

At the climax of the *Devil's Advocate*, Kevin Lomax shoots himself in front of Christabella and John Milton. Clearly, his body brings salvation to the situation, and Satan himself does not win the victory, at least for the time being.¹⁶ Kevin's body represents a popular American fascination with the lone sacrificial male hero who prevails in the end through his strength. *The Ninth Gate* does not offer such hope of redemption, as Corso's complete susceptibility to Satan's snares, in the form of the anonymous woman, remains a great possibility. But, the ending of *Ninth Gate* is not typical. Consistent with the apocalyptic genre, the male hero resists temptation and acts alone by sacrificing himself to thwart Satan's plan of taking over the world. An American form of this myth is discussed by Robert Jewett and

John Shelton Lawrence in *The Myth of the American Superhero*.¹⁷ Nearly always male, a lone and often conflicted hero works outside the auspices of established forms of law enforcement to fight for American freedom and “the world-redemptive view of America’s destiny.”¹⁸ For Jewett and Lawrence, American culture displaces redemption from the powers usually reserved for God into the hands of an ordinary man with a super alter ego. Jewett and Lawrence call this superhero paradigm an American monomyth which assumes masculine heroic behavior, beyond community and companionship, to perform a redemptive task and to destroy the evil that threatens a community.

Jewett and Lawrence’s American superhero mythology appears in another American apocalyptic film, *End of Days*, starring Arnold Schwarzenegger as Jericho Cane, an alcoholic, recently widowed ex-cop. In *End of Days*, Satan comes to earth (entering New York City through the underground subway tunnels) on the eve of the millennium, inhabiting a male body (Gabriel Byrne) in order to have sex with the chosen Christine (Robin Tunney) and thus sire the antichrist. After Jericho saves Christine’s life from the attack by the Knights of the Holy See, Christine asks, “What does that have to do with me?” She happens to be eating an apple, goes for a bite after asking the question, only to find naked shrieking human figures on the apple. The apple, as a traditional symbol of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil,¹⁹ and the humans writhing in agony, implicitly answer Christine’s

question - she, like Eve, can easily be tempted by Satan to bring the downfall of humanity. Her sexual body must be controlled by the male Knights.²⁰ Jericho protects Christine; a lone hero functions externally from traditional institutions as he no longer serves in law enforcement and he thwarts the interventions of the Church, which attempts to kill Christine so she will not bear the antichrist.

Satan eventually kidnaps Christine, somehow makes her change into a sexy black dress, and lays her upon an altar at a satanic temple where he plans to have sex with her. Jericho, crucified to near death by Satan's army of people, musters the strength to track her down. Again, he intervenes just in time and they run, eventually ending up in a church. Satan finds them and enters Jericho's body. Jericho carries Christine to the altar-table at the church in order to rape her but fights Satan's power and throws himself onto a spear held by a statue of the archangel Michael. Jericho's war on earth mirrors Michael's war in heaven. *End of Days* juxtaposes the extreme passivity of Christine with Jericho's active and privileged space as bodybuilder action hero.²¹

Walter Wink's poignant study of the myth of redemptive violence enacts itself for the male body in *End of Days* and *Devil's Advocate*. For Wink, "the dominant myth in contemporary America" centers on the domination of evil through the exercise of violence.²² When the villain receives his or her just rewards, the viewers engage in a cathartic experience, and, they experience a form of

redemption from evil. The male hero withstands satanic lures in favor of redemptively relinquishing his own life in active violence. This kind of violence is hyper-masculinized in popular American apocalyptic film, as masculine strength becomes subject to physical violence. Furthermore, the image of a son of a deity sacrificing himself for the future of the world, as Kevin Lomax does, comes from traditional Christian understandings of Jesus as victorious conqueror of sin through a sacrificial death, although, for Wink, Jesus non-violently carried out his ministry and accepted his sentence of death. But, the American myth of redemptive violence identifies with physical domination as a means of salvation, and, American popular culture expects a physical masculinity that keeps the male body at the center of that salvation. As Yvonne Tasker notes about action films, “When all else fails, the body of the hero, not his voice, or his capacity to make a rational argument, is the place of last resort.”²³ The masculine apocalyptic heroic body in *Devil’s Advocate* and *End of Days* holds no exception.

Summary

None of the women in the above mentioned films sport heroic bodies that command primary action of the film - their bodies either act to seduce men for apocalyptic satanic plans or to present danger and/or temptation for the male hero to allow the end of the world to come. If the gendered apocalyptic body expects a sexualized femininity, it also constructs an expectation of an active and violent masculinity.

For *Devil's Advocate* and *End of Days*, a hero acts alone with his physical body to bring about redemption to the situation, for the time being. The representations of body offer metaphors for the social stability/instability of the turn of the century looming in the minds of Americans - what will happen when the apocalypse comes? Whereas *Devil's Advocate* and *End of Days* cling to ideas of redemptive violence of the superhero that will thwart Satan's plans, *The Ninth Gate* keeps the question open. When Satan decides to embody as a female, as in *The Ninth Gate*, the powerful sexuality remains too tempting, even for the male hero.

¹ The hotline was (888) USA-4-Y2K. See Matt Richtel, "U.S. Opens Hot Line for Year 2000 Queries," *New York Times* (Jan. 14, 1999): G3.

² Alex Heard and Peter Klebnikov, "Apocalypse Now. No, Really," *New York Times* (December 27, 1998): SM40.

³ Heather Clements, "Preacher, Shepherd, Judge: The Role of the Outlaw Prophet in American Film," *Journal of Religion and Film* 12.2 (October, 2008): http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol12no2/Clements_OutlawProphets.htm

⁴ Bryan S. Turner, "The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and Its Perspectives," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 20-39.

⁵ Satan almost comes across as an archetypal buffoon, or an inept villain, as discussed by Kelly J. Wyman, "The Devil We Already Know: Medieval Representations of a Powerless Satan in Modern American Cinema" *Journal of Religion and Film* 8.2 (October, 2004): <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol8No2/wymandevil.htm>

⁶ John Martens, *The End of the World: The Apocalyptic Imagination in Film and Television* (Winnipeg, Canada: J. Gordon Shillingford Publishers, 2003).

⁷ Tina Pippin, "The Heroine and the Whore: Fantasy and the Female in the Apocalypse of John," *Semeia* 60.1 (1992): 67-82.

⁸ Tina Pippin, *Death and Desire: The Rhetoric of Gender in the Apocalypse of John, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

⁹ Tina Pippin, "The Joy of (Apocalyptic) Sex," in *Gender and Apocalyptic Desire*, eds. Brenda E. Brasher and Lee Quinby (London: Equinox, 2006): 66. See also *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image* (London: Routledge, 1999).

¹⁰ This comparison is made by Stephen Moore in *God's Gym: Divine Male Bodies of the Bible* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 121-22.

¹¹ Ironically, the doctor's name, called by the nurse, is Dr. Job, recalling Mary Ann's patient suffering, a common attribute of Job in ancient Christian understanding.

¹² Michael Novak, *Frederick Hart: Changing Tides* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2005), 11-29. An article by Martha Lufkin was also reprinted in the book on pages 86-87 from the International Edition of the *Art Newspaper* from April, 1998, describing the case.

¹³ Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book XI; for a compilation of interpretations of Eve from Augustine and other Christian commentators, see Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Shearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve & Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

¹⁴ Theophilus, "Apology to Autolycus," found in *Eve & Adam*, 129-130.

¹⁵ Kelly Wyman notes that viewers did not overwhelmingly assume that the woman in *The Ninth Gate* could be Satan. Kelly J. Wyman, "The Devil We Already Know."

¹⁶ Satan, disguised as a news reporter at the very end of the film, tries again and succeeds to capitalize on Kevin's vanity.

¹⁷ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002).

¹⁸ See Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 6.

¹⁹ In Latin, the word "malum" means both evil and apple, especially since the word "malum" was used to translate evil in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Latin Vulgate. Early Christian artists conflated the two images in artistic interpretations of Genesis 3.

²⁰ Bryan S. Turner, "The Body in Western Society: Social Theory and Its Perspectives," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 20-39.

²¹ Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (London: Routledge), 77-83.

²² Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Galilee Doubleday, 1998), 48.

²³ Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies*, 151.