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## Seeing Beyond the End of the World in Strange Days and Until the End of the World

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# Seeing Beyond the End of the World in *Strange Days* and *Until the End of the World*

## **Abstract**

Herein we offer a critique of contemporary filmic visions of apocalypse. The problem with many Hollywood-style apocalyptic films is that they expect the end of the world to be a spectacular end of the whole world. Against this, by reviewing two contemporary films (*Strange Days* and *Until the End of the World*) we suggest that apocalypse may take on a greater significance if we understand that there are many worlds, and that rather than expecting the end of the world, we should be more vigilant in our examinations of the endings of a world. With this in mind, apocalyptic predictions given by Jesus in the gospels are reread and we note how these prophecies have already been fulfilled.

## Apocalypse and Vision

Apocalypse literally means a "re-vealing," an "un-covering," an "un-veiling," and is of course otherwise known as a "revelation." And while this term is used in language, the very visual reference contained in the word is oftentimes obscured. Ezekiel, Daniel, and John on Patmos, all these biblical apocalyptic writers wrote out their visions ("Now write what you have seen..." Rev. 1:19); they saw things which no one else saw, they had a privileged sight. Their task was to express their visions in language, to transpose images into verbally recognizable form. The results? A jumbled mess of obfuscating word-images that have been interpreted, re-interpreted, and mis-interpreted throughout history, inciting paranoia, wars, and rumors of wars.

Apocalypse has something to do with the way we see and, we would argue, the way we "see religiously." But apocalypse also tells us something about endings, specifically about endings of worlds. The problem with contemporary apocalyptic visions reared on Hollywood spectacles is that apocalypse is understood as a grand, remainderless, end-of-the-whole-world. By focusing on what physicists have described as the process opposite the Big Bang - in other words, the "Big Crunch"<sup>1</sup> - of a final glorious-and-terrible catastrophe, contemporary western culture has grown effectively blind and paralyzed to the full possibilities of apocalypse. As Charles Levin has stated, "It is as if the sheer ubiquity of the reproduced image has

sapped us of our capacity to see the world with imagination."<sup>2</sup> Waiting for a final end to all - a totalizing apocalypse of grandiose vision - we have missed the apocalypses which are continually taking place all around us.

By contrast, in this article we explore what it might mean to incorporate the notion of survival - that is, living on, living beyond, or over-living<sup>3</sup> - back into apocalyptic vision and discourse. In so doing we mean to interrogate the very structure of apocalyptic eschatology, to rethink the unthinkable thought of a remainderless destruction. We intend to sur-vive the apocalypse and to point to the role of survivors of the apocalypse. To perform such an act, we briefly set up some of the socio-political implications of totalizing visions of apocalypse, and then turn to examine two apocalyptic films: Wim Wenders' 1991, *Until the End of the World*, and Kathryn Bigelow's 1995, *Strange Days*. We point out two key similarities and one key difference between the films. The key difference then becomes our springboard back to review and re-interpret a few passages from the gospels that hint at survival. Finally, we end by referring to a real historical situation in South America that shows how the apocalypse has already occurred; only we have missed it because it was not the grand spectacle we were waiting for.

### **Some socio-political implications of apocalyptic words and images**

Everything is falling into place. It can't be too long now. Ezekiel says that fire and brimstone will be rained upon the enemies of God's people. That

must mean that they'll be destroyed by nuclear weapons. They exist now, and they never did in the past.

-Ronald Reagan<sup>4</sup>

This statement by then California governor Reagan shows that he was right about at least one thing: the fire and brimstone of biblical apocalypses become, in the 1970s and 1980s, the threat of nuclear annihilation. Though Reagan cannot be forgiven for his belief that it is possible for one side to prevail in a nuclear war, he can perhaps be forgiven for understanding the threat of nuclear war in apocalyptic terms. The prophet Ezekiel's (proto) apocalyptic imagery of a final war characterized by "a cloud covering the earth" (Ezek. 38:16), mountains overthrown, cliffs toppling, walls crumbling (38:20), and "sulfurous fire" raining down upon hordes of people (38:22) are not so very different than the images that fed the American imagination through the 1970s and 1980s. Apocalypse then becomes the fabula behind apocalypse now, a major difference being of course that while apocalypse then was available only via the visionaries hyperkinetic imagination, apocalypse now became available precisely via politicians' dearth of imagination. The technological prowess to produce an apocalypse outstripped the discursive schemes and mental structures by which one imagines it.

The fabula of divine apocalypse in the ancient world and the decidedly real threat of nuclear apocalypse in the 1980s, however, both share the essential feature of being "fabulously textual." This phrase is used by Derrida in his 1984 article,

"No Apocalypse, Not Now," to describe the nuclear threat, but it applies equally well to biblical and post-biblical apocalypses. In this article, Derrida gives two instances of the fabulously textual nature of apocalypse. In the first instance of textuality, both nuclear weaponry and eschatological visions of the end times depend upon "structures of information and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding."<sup>5</sup> Apocalypses not only depend upon structures of language, images, and information, but they in fact only exist within such structures. The experience of the nuclear age, while itself very real, is possible only through the textual imaginings of what an all-out nuclear war might be like. And as will be pointed out shortly, visual technologies themselves have furthered the construction of the fabula of war (a "fabula" that cannot finally be separated from the "reality" of war: "For the 'reality' of the nuclear age and the fable of nuclear war are perhaps distinct, but they are not two separate things"<sup>6</sup>

The second and equally important aspect in which apocalypse now and apocalypse then are "fabulously textual" is in the sense that "the terrifying reality of the nuclear conflict can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text." That is, an apocalypse - either nuclear or divinely ordained - has never taken place: "One can only talk and write about it."<sup>7</sup> It could not be otherwise; for this phenomenon of apocalypse that owes such a debt

to language is also the phenomenon that most threatens language. "The right vantage point from which to view a holocaust is that of the corpse," writes Jonathan Schell, "but from that vantage point, of course, there is nothing to report."<sup>8</sup> In other words, in the nuclear age, contra the wisdom of the Reagan administration, it is impossible to live beyond the end of the world and to report on what that end was like. And while the demise of the cold war seems to have quelled the fear of nuclear annihilation, a variety of saleable apocalypses from viral infection to environmental devastation seem to have jumped up in its place. In a sense, the means to apocalypse are not herein important. What is important, however, is that the threat of apocalypse now is nothing less than the destruction of the entire planet ... total apocalypse.

And yet it is just this curious situation, it is just this fabulously textual nature of the end of the world that renders every apocalypse survivable. Having lived through the end of the world, one closes the Bible, or puts down the novel, or strolls out of the movie theater and, behold, the world is still there and life goes on. The end of the world, as we know it, is only ever penultimate. There is always something that remains, that comes after, that goes "beyond the end of the world." By this we do not mean to suggest, a la Reagan, that a nuclear war may be winnable, nor to refer, a la fundamentalist Christianity, to the elect who are snatched out of the tribulation afflicting the rest of the world; rather, in the following we intend to re-

imagine and rethink the structure of apocalyptic eschatology by reasserting the place of the survivor(s).

To survive the apocalypse means we must come to new ways of seeing. Because of this, film becomes an interesting cultural locus from which to analyze apocalyptic tendencies in contemporary culture. With film there is a certain "translation" back from apocalyptic literature into images. What were once fantastic scenes of careful linguistic description have been reformed into images "again." And while the visual arts have long represented (or attempted the representation of) apocalyptic themes, turn-of-the-millennium imaging technologies assertively deliver apocalyptic images into society's imagination. However, such an overabundance of images of apocalypse has inevitably served to once again hide the apocalypse. Rather than a revelation, contemporary western culture has grown blind from too much vision. Rather than eschatological hopes of transparent communication, information technology has imploded.

### **Imaging Apocalypse**

Turning to the images of film, we note again that it is not only nuclear technology which has outstripped and surpassed the imaginations of the ancient visionaries, but that visual technologies have also gone beyond the written and textual nature of apocalypse. Now, rather than imagine the apocalypse, we can

image it through special effects and special filming techniques. From the older, made-for-T.V. movies like *The Day After* to the far-slicker and more contemporary *12 Monkeys*, *Brazil*, *Blade Runner*, *Terminator 2*, *End of Days*, or the horror/adventure-television show *Millenium*, popular consciousness of contemporary North America and Europe has grown increasingly obsessed with the spectacle of apocalypse. Against the spectacular apocalypse, we suggest an apocalyptic vision focused on survival. We briefly analyze Bigelow's *Strange Days* and Wenders' *Until the End of the World*, pointing out two key similarities and one key difference between the films.<sup>9</sup> Through a side-by-side viewing of these two films we begin to articulate a space for a religious visuality that survives the blindness brought on by the contemporary spectacle of apocalypse.

First of all, and most simply, each film begins in the mythic time of December, 1999. While this is a time now past, this setting created a mythic expectation for those on the front side of it. With this setting an anticipatory feeling is enacted in each of these films, there is a sense of expectation and change. This produces a strange fiction within the films, for some fascinating manifestations of technology are apparent, but nothing is shocking; an informed person seeing the films in 1991 or 1995 would have recognized the technologies represented in the films: computer imaging, satellite-guided travel maps, videophones, etc. Indeed, in the midst of making *Until the End of the World* in 1987, Wenders recounted, "When

I look at the old notes I made [on the film] in 1977, I'm bewildered: where's the science fiction? All the technical innovations, the depiction of a futuristic lifestyle, all that seems almost banal, as though reality had caught up with my fantasy."<sup>10</sup> The world, in an altogether frightening and uncanny way, has caught up with its own imagination, in an historical as well as technological sense. Relatedly, as Jean Baudrillard has recently put it, "History ... is no longer able to transcend itself, to envisage its own finality, to dream of its own end; it is being buried beneath its own immediate effect, worn out in special effects, imploding into current events."<sup>11</sup> Here it is precisely the visual technologies that, continuing the "fabulously textual" visions of apocalyptic writers, allow us to image a total apocalypse, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Such a view of exhausted history is of course bound up with technology, which brings us to the second similarity between the two films. Each of these films revolves around a type of "vision machine," a technological device that attaches to the viewer's head and is used to either record or send electric signals directly from or to the brain, stimulating the areas of the brain that create vision. By hooking up the electrical impulses of the brain to the electronic circuits of computer chips, vision is reproduced.

What is revealed in this endlessly reproducible vision in each film are images with the potential for radical change. And not only is the similarity of the

devices used in each film interesting, but of special significance to us here is the already noted relation between vision and apocalyptic thought. That these films should concern themselves with visual technologies (and that they were created with similar technologies) makes them all the more intriguing in their relation to apocalyptic themes. Indeed, vision is a central theme throughout each film and this is displayed in both form and content.

### *Strange Days*

*Strange Days* is a dystopic nightmare. In clichéd, Hollywood style, downtown Los Angeles is displayed as rife with riots, fires, constant crime, and a fascist police force. And while there is no overarching threat like a virus, environmental catastrophe, or nuclear war looming over the scene, everyday existence seems to be a danger, and the world awaits the changing of the calendar.

In the opening scenes, anti-hero/protagonist Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes) drives through L.A. in his protected car while violence occurs "out there" on the streets. (Nero plays the violin while L.A. burns.) Meanwhile, he listens to a radio talk show. The subject is the turn of the millennium, and the three callers who air their views display the possible range of significance for the new millennium, the range of anticipation that the film deals with. The first caller is neutral, quoting an old U2 song, "nothing changes on New Year's Day." The second caller anticipates

revolution and states, "History is gonna start right now." Finally, the third caller gives her truth in the matter, explaining that the end of the world is at hand, that Jesus is coming again, and the rapture is going to take place on New Year's Eve. The question of the apocalypse becomes the question of whether history begins or ends at this point; the turn of the millennium marks either the end of history or the beginning.<sup>12</sup> Later in the film, civil rights leader and rap star, Jeriko One, puts it all together and shows the cosmological transformation of apocalypse: "The day of reckoning is upon us. History ends, and begins again. Right here, right now."

The film revolves around a technological device called a "Super Conducting Quantum Interference Device" ("SCUID") which records the electrical processes of the brain during a particular sequence of events. And while it is said to record all bodily sensations, the nature of the filmic medium is that only the visual can be stressed. The recording that is made can then be played back when a second person (or the same person at a later time) wears the device and consequently has her or his brain manipulated in the equal-but-opposite way the first person recorded it. This supposedly gives the second person the identical total-sensate experience of the first person.<sup>13</sup>

Lenny Nero is a dealer of these SCUID recordings. Illegal in the United States, this sensate-technology was created by the federal government for surveillance purposes and has since gone underground, creating a black-market

superior to drugs because it seems to have no side effects. A client catches up with Lenny, wants to have an experience that would be impossible in real-life, and through these tapes can experience the event "virtually." Lenny claims, "this is pure life ... straight from the cerebral cortex. It's about what you can't have." He then goes on to claim, "I'm your priest. I'm your shrink. I'm your main connection to the switchboard of the soul. I'm the magic man." Biblical apocalypse relied on a "divine mediator," but now through technology and a dealer, apocalypse is directly available for anyone who fronts some cash.

The visual references in this film are crucial. Various self-referential visual signs and verbal references to vision are made throughout the film. For example, there are a few scenes in a club called "Retinal Fetish," one of the key characters of the film is called Iris, and, indeed, the very first image of the film is an extreme close up of a human eye. The *Strange Days* creators have taken the point that apocalypse is about vision, but, as we will see, they have shrewdly twisted it so that images themselves help to bring about the apocalypse. In the film, the viewer is given apocalyptic images, but the viewer is also shown an image that would bring about the (filmed) apocalypse.

In the midst of his dealing, Lenny comes across a recording in which LAPD officers are seen killing the rap star/civil rights leader, Jeriko One. (The tape was recorded by Iris.) The two-dimensional, fascist police characters spend the entirety

of the film tracking down this tape and killing anything in their way. Lenny and his tough female friend, Mace (Angela Basset), realize the potential of this tape, and realize its apocalyptic-incitings. In a post-Rodney King epoch, they realize that displaying this tape on the news for public consumption would make LA light up again. Mace claims, "This tape is a lightning bolt from God. It has the power to change things that need changing." Here, a particular sight, a particular vision, has the possibility for change. It is not an image of the end of the world, but it is an image that has the potential to enact the end of the world. Images themselves become the technology which might threaten the world.

In the end, *Strange Days* fulfills every Hollywood movie-goers dream: as the clock counts down to the new millennium, boy gets girl, the bad guys get killed, and an aging white man, playing the role of transcendental signified/police commissioner, steps in to right the scene of injustice. All that could possibly have escaped the restricting narrative structures of industrial cinema is eliminated and we are left with more reproduced images that serve to reaffirm the late-capitalist symbolic order. The end of the world never arrives (not that it could), nor does apocalypse reveal anything.

Now, we do not know that this ending is not ironic. It could be, but it certainly gives little indication that it is. Indeed, the film is lacking much in the way of self-criticism, and somewhat naïvely delves into voyeuristic tendencies

(including a rape scene through the point-of-view shot of the SCUID that simply should not have been shown). If the ending is ironic - which again would take more of a sympathetic viewing than we are interested in giving--then the first radio show caller was right, "nothing changes on new year's day." The end of the millennium leaves us with the same old structures as before. The threat of apocalypse is staved off, the end of the world is just the same thing: same shit, different millennium.

### *Until the End of the World*

But there are other apocalyptic images, other ways to interrogate the end of the world structures. So, turning to similar themes of vision and history but with less Hollywood-style sex and violence surrounding them, Wim Wenders' film *Until the End of the World* again displays apocalyptic elements, but turns them in interesting ways. The film begins in Venice, Italy, 1999, but moves literally around the world: Berlin, Lisbon, Moscow, Beijing, Tokyo, a small mountain town in Japan, San Francisco, and, finally, the outback of central Australia. There is an eschatological anticipation produced by the calendar date, but even more so, there is an Indian nuclear satellite orbiting the earth out of control, and the whole world is under threat of nuclear annihilation. Here the threat is "accidental" and there are no named antagonists responsible for destroying the world, no evil empires, no conspiracy theories, just everyone and everyday.

Sam Farber (William Hurt) leads the worldly tour, with Claire (who is the real protagonist and main character played by Solveig Donmartin) following. As Wenders claims, it is "the story of Penelope as she follows [Odysseus],"<sup>14</sup> and if, as Jean-Luc Nancy put it, "Our history begins with the departure of Ulysses,"<sup>15</sup> then we are faced here too with the impossible conjoining of the beginning of history and the end of the world. Is this the end or just the beginning? A fresh start, or the same worn-out world?

As Claire follows Sam (and eventually catches up), Claire's old lover Jim (Sam Neill) follows Claire, while a couple bank-robbers and a hired detective follow whoever they can find, and some agent is tracking Sam because he is wanted by the U.S. government for reasons that only later become clear. While the apocalyptic threat exists throughout the film, the character development becomes almost farcical, there really are no bad guys in this film, just as there are no evil empires. And having seen our beginnings in Ulysses' departure, Jean-Luc Nancy turns to the character of Penelope and suggests that she "reweaves the fabric of intimacy without ever managing to complete it."<sup>16</sup> Nancy's words here allow a useful approach to the textual narrative of the film. It is, at times nostalgically so, a film about desire and fear, desire for lost beginnings and fear of tragic endings. But nothing is completed or wrapped up in a tight circle.

Sam has with him a "vision machine" (figure 1) developed by his scientist father Henry Farber (Max von Sydow) that records the biochemical experience of seeing. Like the SCUID device in *Strange Days*, this one too was



fig 1. Claire sees through the vision machine

created for governmental purposes and has consequently been stolen for other reasons. Meanwhile, Sam's mother Edith (Jeanne Moreau) is blind and Sam's world-wide trip, it turns out, is undertaken with the simple hope of collecting images of all of Edith's relatives (who live around the world in a "postmodern diaspora"<sup>17</sup> so she might be able to see them before she dies.

The vision machine is similar to the one in *Strange Days*, but like the difference in films as a whole, this one goes much further. The *Strange Days* device recorded an experience, and feigned that this could simply be transferred to a second person's brain circuits without translation problems. But the device in *Until the End* causes pain. In fact, in what amounts to an important commentary on vision (and having clear Oedipal undertones as this machine is tied up within the familial triad of mother-son-father), Sam is actually going blind as he attempts to make the recordings of relatives for his already blind mother. The physical work required to make these recordings is intense, and even when things go right there are many

problems in the transference of images to another person and a clear picture rarely goes through. The *Strange Days* device represented vision by specific camera angling and framing while the *Until the End* device's images are represented through digital distortion, creating images that, in turn, become mesmerizing for the film viewer.

Even more complicated is the fact that in order to make the final transference of the recorded image to the brain of another person, the original human viewer must watch the initial images again while a computer records the original viewer's memory of the initial sight: the first is an act of seeing, the second an act of remembering. This double vision is then compared and a final image cannot be transferred until both experiences are completed and overlaid. Vision is not a passive experience here as it was in *Strange Days*, but only comes through material, bio-chemical processes juxtaposed with psychic processes such as memory. A new image must enter a relation with images that have already entered and are embedded in the unconscious.<sup>18</sup> As the already existing images of memory are constantly shifting and restructuring themselves within the viewer's unconscious, the double viewing required to transmit images in Wenders' machine must take place between the memory of an image and the image "itself." Between vision and memory, the communication of images between self and other takes a circuitous and entirely active route.

The activity of vision is mirrored in the pace of plot in the film. There is a constant shifting of location just as the images in one's unconscious are constantly shifting. But once the world-wide chase winds down, the characters end up in the outback of Australia. Sam and Claire have become friends and lovers, and they travel in a small plane across the open desert. They are about to reach the end of the trip, a remote cultural center where Sam's parents live with a community of aboriginal people. As they fly they enjoy the scenery and all is at peace. But there is suddenly a flash of light and the plane stalls. They at once realize the nuclear satellite has exploded and they have reached the end of the world. It is a beautifully chilling scene as Sam and Claire glide through the air in silence realizing all of the hopes and fears of the world have culminated in that instant. The blast wipes out all electro-magnetic circuits, in other words, computers, communications systems and engines on cars and planes. We are left with nothing that fueled the film up to this point: no cities, no computers, and no communications. Peter Gabriel's song "The Blood of Eden" plays as the plane drifts back to earth. "So we end as we began," go the lyrics, "with a man and woman." And here, rather than a garden, a desert.

But then something strange happens: the film keeps going. What stranger thing than to continue beyond the end of the world? Strange days indeed! What we think is going to be the end of the film, ends up being only the halfway point. Sam and Claire arrive safely at the Farber's cultural center and an entirely new film

emerges. The "end of the world" seems not to have reached the desert. In fact, the New Year has not even yet arrived.

This remote cultural center just so happens to also house an enormous computer system which allows the transference of vision to occur, and there it is that Sam hooks himself up to the computer and to his mother to transmit images of the world to her, somewhat to her dismay, for what she sees is an ugly and depressing world. So much has changed in the fifty years since she last had sight. Given this final glimpse of the world, she prepares to die, and does so on New Year's Eve, 1999, with the words, "What a chase it has been. What a dance."

New Year's Eve comes and goes, and the new millennium begins in the Australian outback. In their isolation, the characters turn inward and keep progressing with their image-transferring experiments, realizing that with a simple reversal of systems, one can record the images in one's own head, i.e., it is possible to record dreams. They work with the computer system as it learns new ways of processing and gains the ability to play back their dreams. What emerges are fascinating images of the dreamer's childhood, walks on beaches, or people being chased. In contrast to the narrow-focus camera of the *Strange Days* images, the images of this "vision machine" are displayed in a distorted form to the film viewers. There are no clear images, only hazy outlines and strange colors, but enough to be recognizable. The images, for the film viewer, become quite

believable; technology is used in some creative imagistic ways here. As they are able to pin down the recording of dreams, Henry Farber (like Lenny Nero) exclaims, "You are now looking at the human soul, singing to its own god."<sup>19</sup>

Finally, fascination turns to addiction and we find Claire, Sam, and the others at some outback remote setting with hand-held video monitors watching their dreams over and over. In the first half of the film it was the bright lights and big cities of the world that gave a visually-excessive, end-of-the-world feeling; now it is the Australian landscape that mimics the structure of their interior lives: vast, seemingly forever explorable, and labyrinthine. Like heroin junkies, the only thing they care about are more batteries so they can watch their "soul" in motion. They begin to dream of their dreams. Image fascination goes to an extreme and is cut off from all else. Apocalypse implodes. A new threat develops. Wenders' here seems to suggest that it is an obsessive introspection, mixed with images, that might point toward an end of the world. And at one point in the film we even hear the line, "In the beginning was the Word. In the end were the Images."

But just as the fascination of the interior image slides toward destruction Wenders' brings back the relation of the image to the word. Claire's ex-lover Jim has been in the background the whole time writing a book, functioning as "the story's Homer."<sup>20</sup> When Claire's addiction grows too strong Jim goes and rescues her. He locks her in an enclosure, lets her batteries run out, and leaves the

manuscript for his book with her. In contrast to Lenny Nero's and Henry Farber's mystical worlds of images, Jim says, "I believed in the magic and healing power of words." When Claire comes out of her addiction she begins to read and is restored. Meanwhile, Sam is simultaneously rescued by his Aboriginal "brothers" who take him out to the open desert and sleep on either side of him, helping to "steal" his dreams from him. In this case it is silence that plays the important role.

Wenders, as a filmmaker and thus a peddler of images, literally displays the end of the world, but he retains a nostalgia for words. The apocalyptic threat of too much seeing is a concern of Wenders, and in his last few films (including *Until the End*, and *Faraway, so Close*) he seems to struggle with his own contribution to the apocalypse, his own "re-vealing" that is in actuality a concealing.<sup>21</sup> He is here akin to Baudrillard who, in *The Evil Demon of Images*, hyperbolically claims, "There is a kind of primal pleasure, of anthropological joy in images, a kind of brute fascination unencumbered by aesthetic, moral, social or political judgments. It is because of this that I suggest that they are immoral, and that their fundamental power lies in this immorality."<sup>22</sup> Charles Levin follows up on Baudrillard's claim and states that "Wenders explicitly characterizes the unrestrained reproducibility of the image as a troubling division within modern experience."<sup>23</sup> Like *Strange Days*, *Until the End of the World* portrays the possible dual significance of images. Similar to Derrida's consideration of the term *Pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus*,<sup>24</sup>

Wenders translates apocalyptic images as both poison and/or cure. Images have the power to heal, to change, to offer a new way of seeing, but they also carry with them the possibility for addiction and destruction. There are always two sides, and it is always difficult to differentiate.

Wenders complicates vision in this film and begins to point out some instructive guidelines for a religious visuality, particularly as this relates to how we see the end of the world. It is important to stress that Wenders does seem to follow Baudrillard's suggestion that images themselves are somehow immoral, but Wenders is also a film maker and continues to contribute to the "unrestrained reproducibility of the image." What Wenders offers in *Until the End of the World* is a way of seeing that does not solely rely on gimmicks and slick technology, but offers a way of seeing that binds vision to words and to silence, to the body and to memory. Through words, silence, the body and memory, vision then enters the fabric of social and family relations and becomes caught up in social life. Narcissistic image-addiction comes about through the super-reflective visions of selves looking at their own "souls," i.e., endlessly watching their own dreams. A religious visuality, following Wenders, would work toward an exterior, socially-implicated vision, bound to words, images, and others.

After the film, the world continues, same as it was, and the viewer is free to walk out of the theatre and continue on in their world. And of course, in Wenders'

film too there is a happy ending and all the characters find new lives. (Claire, for example, becomes a space shuttle astronaut who orbits the earth as a part of "Greenspace," an organization that polices environmental infractions.) But it is not an ending: there is no end of the world. And here is the key difference we see between *Strange Days* and *Until the End of the World*: the notion of living on, of survival. *Strange Days* ends at the turn of the millennium, and perhaps suggests that life will simply continue as before. There is no end of the world, but there is also nothing instructive about how we should then live and we are given no new possibilities for survival. To the contrary, *Until the End of the World* portrays survival as "overliving" which, as Robert Detweiler defines it, "is a response of excess to the sense that life itself is excessive, a brief explosion of possibility sandwiched between eternities of nothing."<sup>25</sup> Survival is a way of seeing, of excessively seeing as a response to excess. *Until the End of the World* defuses totalized visions of apocalypse, causing the viewer to be attentive to other revelations. Seeing apocalypse is an active, not a passive, performance.

And here it should be pointed out that the general release of *Until the End of the World* in 1991 was a vastly truncated version of the intended version of the film, what Wenders himself called the "*Reader's Digest*" version. At 158 minutes, most critics felt it was already too long, but in reality Wenders had a grander vision for it, and has recently been able to re-release his full five-hour long version. Just

when we were ready to believe that Wenders held a skeptical eye toward images, we find that there are still more images to be seen.<sup>26</sup> With such a lengthy version of a film we are confronted with a challenge to our perceptual limits of duration. In a western world of short attention spans--the result of too many images in too short a period of time--the viewers are told to watch even more. With our short attention spans we want a quick and grand spectacle for our apocalypse, a once-and-for-all explosion, and we thus grow blind in the process. The excessive survival of religious visuality takes on the challenge of duration. Survival is difficult to watch, it is not immediately apparent, and therefore to finally see it (and to live it) means taking time, looking close and looking long.

Within Wenders' film, by progressing beyond the seeming end of the world, beyond the new millennium, beyond self-destructive image addiction, there is a challenge to both the images of apocalypse, and apocalyptic images. Until the end is the until without end. World without end...

### **Apocalypse in the gospels**

Two men walking up a hill, one disappears and one's left standing still.  
I wish we'd all been ready.

-Larry Norman, "I wish we'd all been ready"

This notion of living through the end of the world, of an apocalypse without end, of seeing without totality, leads us back to re-live and re-vive the biblical

notions of apocalypse. In particular, we are drawn to the images and language of Matthew 24, one of Jesus's distinctly apocalyptic-sounding speeches. It is here that Jesus speaks of "wars and rumors of wars," of the parousia (the return of "the son of man") as comparable to "lightning coming from the east and shining as far as the west," and of days when "the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken" (24:6, 27, 29). Much of this speech is a carbon copy of the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13, but the differences bear scrutiny. The Gospel of Mark was written either just before or just after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in 70 CE, and it closely associates this destruction with the imminent end of the world: the cataclysm is just on the horizon. But with the Gospel of Matthew, written perhaps 20 - 30 years after the destruction of Jerusalem, one finds a curious sort of undecidability between the cataclysm represented by the destruction of Jerusalem and that represented by a much more distant eschatological scenario.

There is a sense of having already lived through the end of the world, even as there is an expectation of still another end, taken over from the Gospel of Mark but indefinitely postponed. Via this "already - not yet" structure of catastrophe, Matthew's Gospel introduces the notion of survival into its apocalyptic thought. The implied audience of the Gospel seems to be a community that has "overlived," or "lived beyond," the end of the world as Mark knows it. They have been left

behind. The undecidable nature of the end of the world is reflected in one of the additions to the Markan Gospel that is found in Matthew 24:40 - 41, a text precisely concerned with what is "left" after the apocalypse:

Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left.  
Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left.

The peculiarity of this text - and what sets it apart from a very similar text in Luke 17 - is manifested in the way it pivots around the undecidability of the end of the world. The two-fold repetition of "one is taken, and one is left" carries, in the various gospel traditions, a first-level meaning in which being "taken" is preferable to being "left": those taken are spared the tribulations associated with the end of the world (cf. John 14:3). Indeed, this interpretation is implied by the statement in Matthew 24:30 - 31 that the Son of Man will send out his angels to gather the elect at the time of catastrophe. But Matthew places this image of those left in a directly parallel position to those in the time of Noah who were "taken away" by the flood (kataklysmos; 24:39). By so doing, Matthew does not just leave unclear "which is the better destiny - to be taken or to be left,"<sup>27</sup> but in fact suggests here, in contradistinction to received apocalyptic wisdom, that it is better to be left behind than to be taken, and better to live through the end of the world than to be spared it. In Matthew's transposition of Mark and Luke (or the "Q" source, which was perhaps the basis for both Matthew's and Luke's versions of this text), apocalypse reveals survival. And given that Matthew's implied reading community are those

who had survived the cataclysmic destruction of Jerusalem but still await the parousia - those poised as it were between apocalypse and eschatology - the reader is justified in feeling a nagging concern for the ones "left," rather than the more traditional focus on the ones taken away.

The focus on those left behind, the nagging concern that perhaps it is too easy to overlook them, raises the larger issue of the function of apocalyptic imagery in the contemporary world. Apocalypse then becomes apocalypse now. "Now" and "then" are compared, and we see, via the imagery of the gospel of Matthew and that of Wim Wenders, that an often overlooked element of apocalypse is that of the survival of the end of the world.

In fact, it is not just that the large-scale nuclear war (or other global catastrophe) is survived, it is that worlds are constantly ending and being survived. With the western world's vast technological communications and our global consciousness, we have bought into the threat of Totalized Apocalypse. We believe that the end of the world means the end of the whole planet; if we go, we arrogantly believe it must mean everyone goes. While there may be the technological means now to do so, we remain far too rooted to totalizing visions of the end of the world, and we miss the little apocalypses continually occurring. We want to see too much; vision machines for the blind turn to the addictive stuff of junkies. Like Sam Farber, we have grown blind by trying to see too much.

Our intention here has been to draw a connection between apocalypse then and apocalypse now, and through each, show that a focus on survival shifts the stakes of the apocalypse. Apocalypse "now" and apocalypse "then" turns into apocalypse "now and then." Apocalypses occur now and then. Worlds are being destroyed now and then. It is an occasional occurrence.

### **Some socio-political implications of apocalyptic words and images, re-visited**



Fig 2. Some of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, Buenos Aires

To bring this article to an end, we note one specific image of an ending world, one image of surviving that end, one image of the fulfillment of the scriptures. At about the same time Ronald Reagan was declaring the global apocalypse of nuclear war, a smaller world was being destroyed on a daily basis. Dictatorial regimes in South America came into power and mobilized military forces that sought out and destroyed any opposition. It was not an all-out battle, but rather a constant terrorist action of invading people's homes, abducting people who were thought to be government rebels. North Americans and Europeans came to know about these actions through some of the survivors, the so-called "mothers of the disappeared" (or, "Mothers of Plaza de Mayo"). These women have lost sons, daughters, and husbands to dictatorial regimes. "They came in the night and took

him from the bed," these women confess, mimicking the gospel prediction of the end times. Now these women, "left behind," continue to live, to survive, to march in the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina once the end has come. By surviving, and by revealing images of their loved ones, these women are testimony that apocalypse has occurred/is occurring, but it is not the Total Apocalypse we North Americans and Europeans are all waiting for. Therefore, we have left hidden what had already been uncovered, what was given to our eyes to see.

The "Mothers of Plaza de Mayo" are a group of people who have lived through a catastrophe and who are awaiting a parousia, a return. The catastrophe is not the end of the world, but it is the end of a world, and the hoped-for return is not the Son of Man, but a son nonetheless. Jesus's statement that "you know neither the day nor the hour" no doubt rings hollow for these mothers; the day is everyday, the hour is every hour.

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<sup>1</sup> See Sidney Perkowitz, *Empire of Light* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996), pp. 191-3.

<sup>2</sup> Levin, *Jean Baudrillard* (London: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 18.

<sup>3</sup> This language of survival comes from Derrida, particularly in "Living On/Border Lines," trans. James Hulbert, in Harld Bloom et al., *Deconstruction and Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1979), pp. 75-176; and Robert Detweiler "Overliving," *Semeia* 54 (1992).

<sup>4</sup> See James Mills, "The Serious Implications of a 1971 Conversation with Ronald Reagan." Quoted in Stephen O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 273 n.23.

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<sup>5</sup> "No Apocalypse, Not Now (full speed ahead, seven missiles, seven missives)" *diacritics* 14 no. 2 (1984): p. 23. Similarly, on the "rhetoric" of apocalypse, see Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Response*.

<sup>6</sup> Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> There is a further similarity between the films in that Graeme Revell did the music for each film. This is not in itself terribly important, but when taken with the other similarities it begins to be clear that there were some strong borrowings of *Until the End of the World* by the *Strange Days* makers.

<sup>10</sup> Wenders, *The Logic of Images*, trans. Michael Hofmann (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 108. Emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> Biblical critic Christopher Rowland echoes this question and allows us to connect it with the ancient genre of apocalypse when he states that "An apocalypse offered a basis of hope in a world where God seemed to be restrained, by unmasking the reality of what the past, the present, and the future of human history were actually about" (*Revelation* [London: Epworth, 1993], p. 20).

<sup>13</sup> The desire for immediacy is apparent through this film. Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin begin a recent book with a survey of *Strange Days* and suggest that the device used in the film "bypasses all forms of mediation and transmits directly from one consciousness to another" (*Remediation: Understanding New Media* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999], p. 3).

<sup>14</sup> Wenders, *The Logic of Images*, p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> *The Inoperative Community*, trans., Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), p. 10.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Levin, *Jean Baudrillard*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Kaja Silverman, "To look is to embed an image within a constantly shifting matrix of unconscious memories." In *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> In light of film and literary history, the name "Farber" is significant. *Until the End of the World* was made somewhat in response to Volker Schlöndorff's film, *Voyager*, itself a response to Wenders' earlier, *Paris, Texas*. Schlöndorff disliked the intense isolation of *Paris, Texas* and set his characters off around the world. *Voyager* is loosely based on a German novel published in 1959,

*Homo Faber* by Max Frisch. The main character in the novel and Schlöndorff's film, Walter Faber ("maker"), like the Max von Sydow character, is a scientist who allows his technological interests to take priority over his human relationships. Walter Faber too is a wanderer of sorts and the novel (and film) itself is set on multiple continents. When Wenders sets his characters around the world in *Until the End*, he shows an excessive global chase, almost as if he wanted to "one-up" Schlöndorff. Wenders furthers the "one-upping" by naming his character "Farber," which could quite well be a mixture of the Latin "Faber" (maker) and the German "Farbe" (color), therefore becoming "the color maker," i.e., the "image maker."

<sup>20</sup> Robert Horton, "Wim Wenders: on the road again," *Film Comment* 33 no. 2 (March/April, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Wenders might even be said to be working toward a deconstruction of film (or at least a Hollywood style of film) when certain scenes are embarrassingly poorly acted, directed, and edited. Throughout *Faraway, so Close* (1992) and *Until the End*, there are a number of scenes that are so forced and faked that one begins to think Wenders is simply a poor director. However, given the beauty of his earlier *Wings of Desire* or *Tokyo Ga*, it becomes necessary to re-view the poor scenes. What is found is that the particularly bad scenes are almost always scenes involving Hollywood-style violence and action, especially when guns or fighting (always between men) come into the picture. Wenders simply shows the absurdity of fight scenes, makes the male characters look pathetic rather than the macho hero of Hollywood film.

<sup>22</sup> *The Evil Demon of Images*, trans. P. Patton and P. Foss (Annandale, Australia: Power Institute, 1987), p. 27. Quoted in Charles Levin, Jean Baudrillard, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> *Jean Baudrillard*, p. 18.

<sup>24</sup> See "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, trans., Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

<sup>25</sup> "Overliving," p. 241.

<sup>26</sup> But just as there are more images in this longer version, there are more instances of the power of words. As Robert Horton points out, with the five-hour version "There's more of the Sam Neill character, who is now less an extraneous hanger-on and more an essential representative of the Word" ("Wim Wenders," p. 4).

<sup>27</sup> Francis Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1987), p. 474.