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Apocalyptic Visions

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Apocalyptic Visions

Abstract

On November 20, 1999, I was privileged to chair a session of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR). The session was entitled "Film and the Apocalypse", and consisted of the five papers that are collected in this volume. The word "apocalypse" comes from a Greek root meaning to reveal or uncover, which is precisely what I understand films to do, reveal something about the world. In these five papers, much is revealed about the apocalyptic visions of a number of contemporary Hollywood films. This essay will be a summary of and reflection on those five papers.

On November 20, 1999, I was privileged to chair a session of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture group at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion (AAR)¹. The session was entitled "Film and the Apocalypse", and consisted of the five papers that are collected in this volume. The word "apocalypse" comes from a Greek root meaning to reveal or uncover, which is precisely what I understand films to do, reveal something about the world. In these five papers, much is revealed about the apocalyptic visions of a number of contemporary Hollywood films. This essay will be a summary of and reflection on those five papers.

Susan Schwartz writes about one film, *What Dreams May Come*, directed by Vincent Ward and released in 1998, starring Robin Williams. She begins her paper with the story of Orpheus, and sees the film as "yet another Orphic trope." However, she believes that South Asian traditions, most notably, Hinduism, have a strong influence in this film. While she does not make the comparison in her paper, I immediately thought of the new novel by Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, which also combines Greek and Indian myth, putting the "Indo" back squarely in "Indo-European." Rushdie begins the novel with an epigraph from Rilke's Sonnets to Orpheus, and names one of the main characters Ormus Cama. In the text, the character is a Parsi (a member of the Zoroastrian community living in India), and is named after Ahura Mazda². However, one also hears a blending of

the names "Orpheus", "Kama" and even "Camus" (who was himself a blend of North African and French) in this delightful name.

On the surface, Schwartz argues, the film is of course "western". It gets its title from the western author, William Shakespeare, in the following line from Hamlet: "For in that sleep of death what dreams may come." And the stunning visuals in the film are all based on western paintings. However, beneath this western surface lie the eastern traditions of the world as illusory and the play of the divine. Schwartz sums this up beautifully (and playfully) in my favourite sentence from her article: "*What Dreams May Come* is therefore a work of the imagination (a film) about a work of imagination (life and death), which constructs a western illusion about an eastern illusion, all the while addressing western apocalyptic paranoia at the end of the millennium, which is, of course, irrelevant in the east." It is this point that needs to be emphasized, that the end of the millennium is irrelevant to those of us that follow different calendars.

There are other films discussed in this collection of papers that incorporate western and eastern motifs in their portrayals of the apocalyptic. One of these films is *The Matrix*, which will be discussed later. The other is the *Star Wars* series.

In his paper, John Lyden analyses the apocalypticism in perhaps the most popular of film series, the *Star Wars* tetralogy directed by George Lucas. At this

point I must remark that those who did not have the privilege of hearing Lyden read his paper at the AAR missed an opportunity to hear a gifted mimic. He recited many of the lines in the voices of the characters, adding something to his presentation that is unfortunately lost when one only has a written text.

Lyden begins with the observation that Lucas was influenced by the work of Joseph Campbell, the popular mythologist. He gives an excellent, succinct summary of some of the problems that the scholar of religion has with the work of Campbell. For this summary alone, Lyden is to be commended.

Campbell interpreted the *Star Wars* films in his own way, but Lucas had a different interpretation of the films. In an interview, Lucas stated that he "...wanted to make it so that young people would begin to ask questions about the mystery." Lyden discusses the term "apocalypse", and connects the films to Jewish and Christian ideas of apocalypse, particularly their emphasis on a saviour/messiah figure. He also introduces Zoroastrian notions of a battle between good and evil.

The ideas that Schwartz raises about eastern and western influences coming together are immediately relevant to the *Star Wars* films. They contain not just the western motifs that Lyden discusses, but eastern themes as well. One thinks immediately of comparisons to Taoism, and the Force in the films as being analogous to the Tao. It would be very easy to put Yoda in the role of a Taoist

master, with lines such as "Do or not do. There is no try." In the first film of the series, *The Phantom Menace* (released in 1999), one of the main characters is a Jedi knight named Qui-Gon Jinn (played by Liam Neeson). While this name immediately brings to my mind the terms "ch'i" (energy) and "ch'i-kung" (energy work)³, it also makes me think of Central Asia, and the traditions of Taoism, as well as Buddhism and Islam, (not to mention Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and various "folk" religions) that are found there. Lyden does bring in ideas from Hinduism, connecting Luke Skywalker to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita⁴. However, while Arjuna fights his enemies, Luke does not fight Vader.

Frances Flannery-Dailey discusses the apocalypticism in the 1995 film *Twelve Monkeys*, directed by Terry Gilliam. She focuses on the messianic role played by the star of the film, Bruce Willis. In the film, Willis' character, the time traveler James Cole, says "I know some things you don't know, and it's going to be very difficult for you to understand." In this way, the character reveals to the people of 1990 what will happen to them in the future, when a virus will kill five billion people. In reading this quote, I was reminded of another film, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (originally released in 1982, and re-released as a "director's cut" in 1992). In that film, the android Roy Batty (played by Rutger Hauer) says as his dying words "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe...All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to die." Michel Desjardins has discussed the

gnostic themes in *Blade Runner*, as well as in the writings of Philip K. Dick, on whose 1968 novel, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* the film was based⁵.

Flannery-Dailey situates *Twelve Monkeys* in ancient Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature. However, the film is also connected to the literature of modern science fiction. As Flannery-Dailey mentions, the notion in the film is that apocalyptic seers are time-travelers. In a lengthy footnote, she discusses another film starring Bruce Willis, *Armageddon*.

Armageddon (1998, directed by Michael Bay), along with *Contact* (1997, directed by Robert Zemeckis), *Deep Impact* (1998, directed by Mimi Leder), and *The Matrix* (1998, directed by Larry and Andy Wachowski) are discussed by Conrad Ostwalt. He begins with the assertion that these "...cinematic end of the world dramas focus on the eschatological part of apocalyptic texts", and not on the "...revelation of God's sovereignty..." Ostwalt explicitly connects these films to contemporary science fiction as well as ancient apocalyptic texts. In these films, humans are able to change their future, and are not simply spectators to the divine unfolding. Again, the gnostic filter that Desjardins provides for *Blade Runner* helps us to understand these films as well.

In his discussion of *The Matrix*, Ostwalt also introduces eastern as well as western themes. Neo, the main character in the film (played by Keanu Reeves), is

certainly a western messiah. However, Ostwalt reminds us that Neo literally "wakes up" to the true nature of reality. In this way, he emulates the act of the historical Buddha. The Greek element is also present, with another main character named Morpheus, after the god of dreams (although one suspects that most teenagers watching the film know Morpheus not through Greek myth, but through the stories in Neil Gaiman's masterpiece of comics, *The Sandman*). Of course, there is a connection here with *What Dreams May Come*. In both of these films, the relationships between "the real" and "the dream" are explored⁶, and both incorporate eastern as well as western elements into the exploration of what it is that is truly real⁷.

In his discussion of *Contact*, Ostwalt brings up the relationship between science and religion. He writes that "In our secular eschatological dramas, science has wrested control of cosmic cataclysm away from religion..." This really is an important point, particularly when one remembers that *Contact* was based on a novel by Carl Sagan, whose last book, *The Demon Haunted World*, reflected Sagan's hopes for the role of science at the end of the millennium⁸.

Joel W. Martin takes a different approach in his paper. He examines a number of apocalyptic films for what they tell us about the role of women. Unfortunately, the picture that emerges is not often a positive one. After an excellent analysis of the opening sequence of *Contact*, Martin examines the

American perceptions of reality after the Cold War. He mentions the shift that took place, from Cold War films in which we had to be shown how to live by aliens, to post Cold War films, where aliens become the new enemy.

Martin begins his analysis of the social reality in films with a discussion of *The Lion King* (released by Disney in 1994), a film that involves not aliens but animals. He examines the gender roles in the film, and how the young hero, Simba, is first overpowered by the lioness Nala, his playmate from happier days. However, once Simba can establish his masculinity by ending up literally on top of her, only then can he go on to defeat his nemesis, Scar. Martin presents a compelling case for Scar being a stereotypical homosexual, thus adding to his "villainy". With the female subdued and the homosexual defeated, the heterosexual male is once again on top.

Martin also has a clever interpretation of the "circle of life". The Pridelands, where Simba lives, is a gated community. Within the borders, all is well, but outside, the ethnic barbarian hordes prevail. This is a wonderful observation, particularly for those of us who live in a world where gated communities are becoming more and more popular.

Martin notes the anti-feminism in films such as *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *The Fifth Element* (1997, directed by Luc Besson), and *Independence Day* (1996,

directed by Roland Emmerich). In all of these films, there are disturbing plots about women. In the first two films, the message is that "Women who are fertile and heterosexually bonded survive." In *The Fifth Element*, one would hope for something different. After all, in this film, the perfect being (played by Milla Jovovich) is female. However, she needs the white heterosexual male (played yet again by Bruce Willis) to rouse her (from her crying, no less) to action and save the earth. And in *Independence Day*, the First Lady might have avoided her death by following her husband's wishes.

The anti-feminism that Martin describes is not of course limited to the movies. He mentions an episode of the animated Fox television show *Futurama*⁹ where a single professional female (a self-parody¹⁰ in turn of another Fox show, *Ally McBeal*) is yet again linked to the possible destruction of the earth. Martin concludes his paper with a discussion of *Contact*, where at the end of the film, the heroine (played by Jodie Foster) ends up on the beach talking to her "father". As Martin wryly remarks, "Evidently, at the end of time and space, a girl just wants her Dad."

The male, heterosexual nature of apocalyptic traditions, both textual and celluloid, is insightfully addressed by Tina Pippin, especially in regards to the biblical book of Revelation. She writes: "I am more interested in what happens to the body of the female in [Revelation] the Bride is made into polis, city, the Whore

gang raped and burned and eaten, the Woman Clothed with the Sun is a reproductive vessel who is exiled subsequent to giving birth, and Jezebel is destroyed. What is positive about this vision? ...This message is still not liberating for our late twentieth-century feminist and pro-gay liberation movements¹¹."

In fact, the book of Revelation, regardless of one's understanding of it, remains the "mother of the book" in western thinking about apocalypticism. Movies based on this book have often pointed to the themes noted by Schwartz, Lyden, Flannery-Dailey, Ostwalt, and Martin particularly the "eastern" flavour (e.g., Ingmar Bergman's 1956 classic *The Seventh Seal*, which one now needs to see in the context of the writings of Edward Said, particularly Orientalism) and the shifts in time (e.g., *The Last Wave*, directed by Peter Weir and released in 1977, which nicely weaves in Australian aboriginal beliefs). And of note are *The Seventh Sign* (1988, directed by Carl Schultz) in which the main character, played by Demi Moore, stops the divine end-time clock at the eleventh hour and saves the world and *The Rapture* (1991, directed by Michael Tolkin), in which the Mimi Rogers character at the end defies a perverse God. Both films make significant steps in adding strong female leads. "Perhaps only the Hare Krishnas will be saved in the end," quips a priest sarcastically in *The Seventh Sign*. Perhaps it is not too late to convert!

It was a great pleasure for me to have first heard these presentations at the AAR. Those reading them here for the first time will find an excellent collection of papers, each of which stands on its own merit. Together, they provide some interesting revelations about how Hollywood views the end of the world in the latter days of the twentieth century.

¹ This group was organized by Bill Blizek and Rubina Ramji, who are to be commended for their choice of papers.

² Salman Rushdie, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*, New York: Henry Holt, 1999, p. 26.

³ The comparison is even more obvious if one uses the Pinyin system of transliteration as opposed to the older Wade-Giles system. The relevant terms become, respectively, "q" and "qigong."

⁴ Lyden writes of "...the ethic of the Bhagavad Gita in which the Hindu notion of ahimsa is developed." This is the only line in his paper with which I would disagree, as my reading of the Gita doesn't support a notion of ahimsa in the way that the term was understood at the time of the Epics.

⁵ Michel Desjardins, "Retrofitting Gnosticism: Philip K. Dick and Christian Origins," in *Violence, Utopia and the Kingdom of God*, ed. Tina Pippin and George Aichele, London: Routledge, 1998, pp. 122-33.

⁶ One of the characters in *What Dreams May Come* says "thought is real...physical is the illusion...ironic, huh?"

⁷ I am indebted to Tony S. L. Michael for his help and insights on this point.

⁸ These hopes are made explicit in the subtitle of the book. Carl Sagan, *The Demon Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, New York: Random House, 1995.

⁹ I am compelled to comment on the timeliness of this in Martin's presentation. This episode aired on November 7, 1999, and he was able to incorporate it into his presentation on November 20. Cutting edge indeed!

¹⁰ Or perhaps it is simply an example of product placement." One is never quite sure

¹¹ Tina Pippin, *Apocalyptic Bodies: The Biblical End of the World in Text and Image*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 119.