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Conrad E. Ostwalt

Appalachian State University, ostwaltce@appstate.edu

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Visions of the End: Secular Apocalypse in Recent Hollywood Film

Abstract

In response to John Lyden's paper, "To Commend or Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies," (*JR & F* vol. 1, no. 2) this paper explores how contemporary popular culture and traditional religion interact. I argue that films and other popular cultural forms can both commend and critique social and religious norms when they themselves function religiously. To illustrate this, I turn to the apocalyptic imagination as it is appropriated in two popular, American films, *Waterworld* and *Twelve Monkeys*. With these two films, we can see that popular culture has taken a traditional religious concept (the apocalypse) and secularized it for a contemporary, popular audience. That these films find the idea of the apocalypse somehow meaningful suggests that they are functioning religiously.

The 1997 American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting included a group entitled "Religion, Film, and Visual Culture." One of the sections of that group was organized around a presentation by Professor John Lyden. His paper, "To Commend or Critique? The Question of Religion and Film Studies," appeared in the *Journal of Religion & Film* (vol. 1, no. 2). Professor Lyden raises the question, "to commend or critique" and argues that method in religion and film studies can balance two extremes common in such studies. Lyden's recognition that criticism often takes place from the extremes extends to a challenge that method need not be an "either-or" proposition, that criticism can both "commend and critique." While Professor Lyden directs his inquiry to the problem of critics upholding or supporting values through method, I also find in his analysis a suggestion that films have the potential to either commend or critique societal values. It is at this point that my paper takes its point of departure to examine how films either commend or critique contemporary culture and traditional religion.

It is not only the interpreters of films who commend or critique, but the films themselves. Popular culture need not celebrate or uphold religion and societal values and commend them. Popular culture can critique itself as Professor Lyden notes near the end of his article, and it is something akin to this that I attempt to draw out in my own religion and film studies. I will illustrate this by focusing on what a contemporary, popular culture has done with a traditional religious category

- the idea of the apocalypse. My thesis, in response to Professor Lyden's work, is that film and popular culture can function religiously and in the process can commend or critique cultural values or traditional religions. Locating myself in response to Professor Lyden's question, I commend the ability of film to critique both cultural values and traditional religions.

Secularization

It seems to me that a discussion on the religious role of a popular cultural form like film must take place in the context of the notion of secularization. Much modern scholarship has operated with the thesis that secularization will eventually release humanity from the appeal of religion, that the Enlightenment, science, or simply progress will replace religion.¹ The thesis also suggests that in a secular society, which is how we understand contemporary society, religion should not be taken seriously by rational people.² This assumption is based on the notion that the importance of religion will decrease as society becomes more secularized. Even if one could argue that traditional religious expressions are becoming less relevant, this does not necessitate religion becoming less significant. So, while secularization might blur the boundaries between the sacred and secular, secularization does not necessarily destroy religion. In fact, cultural forms perceived to be secular might very well address religious questions and tap the religious sensibility outside of recognizable religious institutions. We might even entertain the suggestion that

such activity is in some cases more relevant to a secularized society than religious activity in traditional religious institutions, and we can also note that some traditional religious institutions are making use of secular culture to carry religious messages.³

A Cinematic Secular Apocalyptic Imagination

When films function religiously, they both commend and critique religion: they commend it by affirming the basic religious import of culture and they critique it by functioning religiously outside of traditional religious institutions. We can see this phenomenon by examining the cinematic portrayal of the apocalypse, the cataclysmic end of the world. It seems that Hollywood has tapped into a growing popular apocalyptic consciousness in American culture and is perhaps carrying on a dialogue with contemporary audiences. This dialogue presents apocalyptic scenarios that give some sense of meaning to the idea of world destruction. I argued in *Screening the Sacred*⁴ that apocalyptic themes are prevalent in contemporary films and form the basis of a growing number of popular American movies. In addition, I suggested that certain common characteristics of many of these films revise the traditional, western concept of the apocalypse and focus on human ingenuity in avoiding the end rather than on the inevitability of cosmic cataclysm. In these contemporary, cinematic apocalyptic scenarios, human action (often based on stupidity or greed) directly or indirectly leads to an apocalyptic disaster;

therefore, human beings supplant cosmic forces as the initiators of the apocalypse and must take the role of saving the planet from apocalyptic destruction. Finally, we might note that popular film apocalypses reinterpret the cataclysmic threat in terms of contemporary fears and projections. Thus, rather than depicting a cosmic battle between God and the forces of darkness, popular cinematic apocalypses often focus on environmental catastrophes and alien invasions.

The following analysis demonstrates how some of these themes arise in popular films. By examining *Waterworld* and *Twelve Monkeys*, I suggest that these films function religiously in that they present an apocalyptic myth. In this sense, my treatment of them commends film's ability to help viewers come to grips with human contingency. This also suggests a critique of traditional religion's ability to meaningfully appropriate the concept of the apocalypse to contemporary audiences. In this case, perhaps a popular cultural form has provided an alternative vision where traditional religion has become less relevant and responsive.

Waterworld

The highly publicized and critically abused film, *Waterworld*, provides for us a good example of an apocalyptic film based on a contemporary dilemma. *Waterworld* takes the warnings of global warming and, like any good science fiction work, asks the question, "What if ...?" Then the film extrapolates a possible

future scenario based upon the idea of melted polar caps from a runaway greenhouse effect. The film is thus based on an earth largely covered by water, a new flood requiring, like in Noah's day, adaptation to life entirely on water.

The film itself follows a straightforward plot with predictable developments. The setting is a future-inundated earth where survivors of the great ecodisaster exist on floating cities, atolls, or floating barges (mini-societies). Mariner (played by Kevin Costner) is a loner, a mutant with gills and webbed feet who lives on his trimaran and has adapted to life on the sea. Mariner is eventually saved by two citizens of an atoll - a beautiful woman Helen (played by Jeanne Tripplehorn) and a little girl Enola (played by Tina Marjorino). The three escape when the atoll is attacked by a band of Smokers (pirates) who are led by Deacon (played by Dennis Hopper).

The point of the story is revealed when we learn is pursuing Enola because of a taboo on her back that is a map leading to the mythical dry land. Obviously, in *Waterworld*, if someone could find and master dry land, that person could enjoy unimaginable riches and pleasure. Deacon eventually captures Enola and Mariner must search for her. He locates and infiltrates Deacon's floating colony, a huge oil tanker. In great feats of daring, he saves Enola, destroys the tanker, and defeats Deacon and his evil minions. Once evil has been destroyed, Helen and Mariner employ the help of Gregor, an old inventor from Helen's atoll (played by Michael

Jeter), and decipher the tattoo on Enola's back. In the end, they find dry land, complete with fresh water and vegetation, and populate it with the survivors of the atoll where Helen and Enola began. The righteous community, as opposed to Deacon's evil society, occupies dry land, paradise.

As a secular apocalypse, *Waterworld* reflects current secular concerns rather than sacred ones in its depiction of the apocalyptic disaster. In this case, it is very clear the apocalypse occurred as an ecodisaster, which came about as a direct consequence of human actions. In reference to *Waterworld*, director Kevin Reynolds commented that ecological factors could "result in our own self-destruction. But while there have been a lot of post-apocalyptic films, they have all had a nuclear scenario. What was different about this one was that it had to do with an ecological conflagration, a whole world covered in water because of human stupidity and greed."⁵ Note the emphasis on the apocalypse being self-induced - our secular apocalypse in this case will be self-destruction, not divine destruction.

The environmental theme is carried out in two major symbols of the movie. First, Deacon's tanker, the evil freighter in the story, turns out to be the ancient Exxon Valdez, the infamous tanker that polluted Alaskan waters and is now a contemporary symbol of ecological disaster. And near the point when Mariner triumphs over Deacon, we learn that the patron saint of Deacon and his evil empire is none other than Captain Joe Hazelwood, the doomed captain of the Valdez.⁶ So

in this movie of eco-apocalypse, the predominant symbol of evil turns out to be a contemporary symbol of ecological and environmental disaster.

The second apocalyptic and environmental symbol here is Enola, whose name brings to mind the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and that has been a symbol of that apocalyptic beast in the last half of this century. In this movie, Enola delivers not the apocalypse, but escape from it; not nuclear annihilation, but the key to paradise. These two symbols draw upon contemporary ecological, environmental, and apocalyptic imagery to construct a modern, secular apocalypse set on the watery world of our future.

Twelve Monkeys

From *Waterworld*, which is straightforward in terms of plot, we move to an examination of *Twelve Monkeys*, Terry Gilliam's convoluted story that jumps from future to past to past-future and back again. Gilliam, who also directed *The Fisher King* and the cult favorite, *Brazil*, is known for his "singular vision and inventively convoluted design."⁷ The convoluted inspiration for this movie came from Chris Marker's 1962, *La Jetee*, a short work of stills that chronicles time travel after the apocalyptic nuclear destruction of Paris, and one would assume, the world. Yet, Gilliam Americanizes Marker's classic,⁸ and in the process produces a challenging

secular apocalyptic image for the twenty-first century by replacing the nuclear fear with one more current in the minds of contemporary Americans: a super virus.

The film is set in Philadelphia in 2035. Ninety-nine percent of the world's population has been destroyed by a killer virus that was released in 1996. The survivors of the virus have retreated underground, to a subterranean hell beneath the city. Scientists in this underground world send criminals to the surface periodically to monitor conditions. They decide to send one such subject, James Cole (played by Bruce Willis), on a time-travelling mission to 1996 to locate the source of the virus, thus allowing them to plot a strategy to defeat the bug and once again populate the earth's surface. The scientists believe a group called the "Army of the 12 Monkeys" was responsible for the outbreak. Cole is selected partly because of his keen powers of observation and memory (he is haunted by a childhood memory of a man shot down in an airport).

Cole's first foray into the past lands him by mistake in Baltimore in 1990, where his mad apocalyptic rantings lead to his commitment in a mental hospital as a schizophrenic. There he meets Dr. Kathryn Raily (played by Madeleine Stowe), his psychiatrist, and Jeffrey Goines (played by Brad Pitt), a mental patient he befriends. Cole's attempts to contact the future fail, but he is finally returned to 2035, where his scientist interrogators make a second attempt and land him in 1917, in the middle of World War I. There, Coles is shot in the leg before landing in

Baltimore in 1996. The time travel sequences confuse past, present, and future so that not only the viewer but Cole himself begins to doubt the veracity of the quest. When Cole locates Dr. Raily in 1996, she is giving a lecture about a doomsday scenario based upon a great plague. Her lecture is complete with references from John's revelation, apocalyptic prophecies, and art work symbolizing the end. Cole and Raily begin an adventure that leads them to the Army of the Twelve Monkeys, which is headed by none other than Goines. Nevertheless, the Army of the Twelve Monkeys had nothing to do with the virus. Instead, Dr. Peter's, a lab assistant to Goines's father and an "apocalypse nut" (in the words of Dr. Raily) plans to scatter the virus.

Cole encounters Dr. Peters at an airport, realizes he is the one planning to release the virus, and tries to stop him. In the process, Cole himself is shot down by a security guard as a younger James Cole watches (hence the vivid memory of the adult Cole who saw or imagined his own death). The movie ends aboard a plane with a scientist from the future seated next to the plotting Dr. Peters.⁹ Various meanings of this ambiguous ending might be offered: the viewer might assume the scientist will take appropriate action that will allow humanity to repopulate the earth's surface or that the scientists themselves have manipulated events all along with unknown motives.

One of the most remarkable characteristics of this secular apocalypse is the time travel element. With this tool, the viewer is allowed to see that human initiative both created the apocalypse and perhaps averted it; therefore, the confusion of time (which could also be considered a characteristic of postmodernism based on relativity theory) is the central element driving this plot. Jeffrey Beecroft, production designer for the movie comments, "For me, the central image of *Twelve Monkeys* is a mouse in a maze ... you have pieces of the past and the future and the present in all scenes ... You don't want to know where reality stops and starts in this film.... [The closing scene] circles back to the nightmare imagery of the opening," so that the maze continues with Coles's past memory of his future death.¹⁰

Beecroft's comments bring to mind an interesting possibility in terms of interpreting this film. In Marker's classic, *La Jetee*, time travel seems to be imaginative mind extension,¹¹ so the possibility exists that the same is true in *Twelve Monkeys*. Since the story is told from Cole's point of view, it is not at all clear whether the story depicts reality or the distorted view of a real schizophrenic. In other words, the viewer has no way of knowing whether the story is based in 2035 with time travel and mad scientists or in 1990 in the mind of mental patient. Depending on the above settings, this apocalyptic scenario could present "the last gasp of civilization as we know it. It could also be the distorted, 'mentally divergent' vision of James Cole, a violence-prone lunatic being held for psychiatric evaluation

at a Baltimore institution in 1990.¹² The movie could be about an apocalypse that is human-caused with the help of a virus and human-averted with the help of futuristic ingenuity. This option fits well our paradigm of modern secular apocalypses, because it places world destruction at the feet of humanity and it reinterprets the apocalypse in light of a modern fear, mutated viruses.

Summary

These two films represent a small portion of many contemporary apocalyptic films. From *Apocalypse Now* to post nuclear disaster films to *Independence Day* and other films that set the apocalyptic drama in the scenario of alien invasions, Hollywood has discovered and tapped into a secular, popular apocalyptic imagination that is prevalent in our contemporary culture. We are inundated with this sense of an impending doom as we approach the year 2000, and popular culture (films, tabloids, predictions, science, apocalyptic religious groups, etc.) offers ways to appropriate this fascination with the end. In this sense, popular culture is functioning religiously.

My contention here is that secularization itself has affected some of our traditional religious categories, one of them being the idea of the apocalypse. But secularization has not done away with the apocalyptic consciousness. Rather it has assisted in creating a new apocalyptic myth, one that is more palatable to

contemporary, popular culture. 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 - it is almost inevitable. However, in a secular, contemporary world, we have difficulty conceptualizing world destruction from the hands of a sovereign God. Part of the process of secularization involves raising humanity to the sovereign level - we are in charge of our own destiny - and this has even spilled over into our ideas of the apocalypse. Perhaps because traditional religions hold onto a sacred view of the apocalypse or perhaps because traditional religions downplay the apocalyptic scenario, popular culture has taken up the charge and created an alternative secular apocalyptic imagination where the end is less threatening and can even be avoided.

Isn't it nice finally to have that monkey off our backs?

¹ This understanding of the relationship between religion and secularization exists throughout the scholarly literature. For a good articulation of the predominant attitude, see Bernard Eugene Meland, *The Secularization of Modern Cultures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966). See Conrad Ostwalt, "Conclusion: Religion, Film, and Cultural Analysis," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, edited by Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995, p. 157.

² Stephen L. Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), p. 15-16.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 17. See also Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney, *American Mainline Religion: Its Chanting Shape and Future* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

⁴ See Conrad Ostwalt, "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation," in *Screening the Sacred*, pp. 55-63.

⁵ Kevin Reynolds quoted in Donald E. Williams, "A Oceanic Odyssey," *American Cinematographer* vol. 76, no. 8 (August 1995), pp. 40-41.

⁶ See Williams, "A Oceanic Odyssey," p. 41, and Jose Arroyo, "Waterworld," *Sight and Sound* vol. 5, no. 9 (September 1995).

⁷ John Calhoun, "12 Monkeys," *TCI* (March 1996), p. 35.

⁸ See Thomas Delapa, "Deja vu...again," *Boulder Weekly* (January 11, 1996), p. 24.

⁹ For a detailed plot analysis of the movie, see Philip Strick, "12 Monkeys," *Sight and Sound* vol. 6, issue 4 (April 1996), pp. 56ff.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Beecroft quoted in Calhoun, "12 Monkeys," p. 36.

¹¹ See Strick, p. 56.

¹² David Morgan, "Extremities," *Sight and Sound* vol. 6, no. 1 (January 1996), pp. 18-20.