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## Seeing and Interpreting Visions of the Next Age in Interstellar

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### Keywords

apocalypse, apocalyptic, cinematography, convention, documentary, Dust Bowl, Ken Burns, eschatology, expressionism, genre, history, IMAX, interpretation, *Interstellar*, last things, Christopher Nolan, next age, science fiction, spectatorship, verisimilitude, VFX, vision.

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### Author Notes

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## Introduction

*Interstellar* directs attention to Vivian Sobchak's argument that science fiction, as a film genre, "emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of . . . religion."<sup>1</sup> As I will explain, *Interstellar* uses multiple styles of cinematography to visualize conventions of the apocalypse genre, as defined by scholars of religion and film criticism. Although *Interstellar*, like apocalyptic films discussed by Justin Heinzekehr and Conrad E. Ostwalt, does not refer to divinely ordained destruction,<sup>2</sup> it adapts and visualizes conventions of the apocalypse genre identified by scholars of religion. In particular, Nolan's science fiction film creates visual analogies to apocalyptic conventions such as a narrative framework set at a particular historical moment that recounts revelations, represented as journeys and visions that an "otherworldly" mediator interprets to provide a hopeful consolation. *Interstellar*, like apocalypses discussed by Eugene Weber, interprets historical events in relation to eschatology, that is, "the last things": death, resurrection, judgment, reward and punishment, the closing of the present age and the beginning of the next.<sup>3</sup> The narrative of *Interstellar*, like ancient and modern apocalypses studied by Mitchell D. Reddich and Paul Boyer,<sup>4</sup> reviews history in order to reveal the meaning not only of the present but also of the future. The epilogue of *Interstellar* offers a vision of the next age typical of the apocalypse genre that, Andrew M. Greeley argues, "is more a reconstruction than destruction,

more of a beginning than an ending of the old, more of a vision of hope than a vision of dissolution.”<sup>5</sup> *Interstellar’s* visual representation of conventions of the apocalypse genre guides spectators’ interpretation of the film’s narrative, a review of history represented by characters’ journeys and visions. Throughout *Interstellar*, changing styles of cinematography act as self-reflexive cues for interpretation.

In order to discuss how cinematography in *Interstellar* guides spectators’ interpretation, I direct attention first to the narrative film’s use of clips from Ken Burns’s documentary *The Dust Bowl* (2012). The clips are not examples of historical film footage but instead interviews with elderly people who survived the ecological catastrophe during the 1930s. The interviews, originally filmed for Burns’s documentary, appear primarily in the prologue and epilogue that frame the three acts of Nolan’s narrative film. The painterly style of the interviews is just one of a number of styles of cinematography used in both documentary and science fiction films. Shifts among painterly, documentary and expressionistic styles in the prologue to *Interstellar* prepare spectators to engage in interpretation of visions and journeys, two conventions of the apocalypse genre. In the prologue and epilogue of *Interstellar* Murph acts like an otherworldly mediator in an apocalypse who interprets visions for others. Her ability, like that of her father, to interpret visual experience not only as a review of history but also as an eschatological vision develops during the tesseract sequence in the third act of the narrative. Enigmatic visions, including realistic dust storms on Earth, expressionistic messages viewed

on the Endurance space station, and the fantastic tesseract within the black hole named Gargantua, represent the experience of spectatorship and the problem of interpretation shared by those outside and inside the *mise-en-scène*. In each act of the narrative the literal and metaphoric meanings of vision, including one's "line of sight," reveal the difference of the activities of seeing and interpreting prophetic visions.

*Interstellar* structures its review of history into three acts framed by a prologue and epilogue. The first act reviews the history of an ecological disaster called "the blight" that has grounded Cooper, a former astronaut, on Earth where daily life is a struggle to produce corn, the one remaining crop that sustains Earth's population. Advanced technology is suspect and limited; space travel is dismissed as wasteful, MRIs are no longer available to diagnose illnesses, and sophisticated defence drones are recycled as farm machinery. In this context where the practical science of horticulture is the only measure of a productive adult life, Cooper relies on science as the key to interpreting daily life, including both mundane and miraculous visual experiences. When a fierce dust storm miraculously reveals navigational coordinates that lead him to a hidden NASA base, Cooper gains an opportunity to pilot the Endurance space station through a wormhole on a journey to another galaxy. Cooper and a crew of three scientists will travel to join surviving members of the Lazarus mission, a previous space mission that has identified three planets for human colonization. The Endurance mission aspires to implement two

plans to sustain human life. Plan A to transport the population of Earth to another planet in the future depends upon Professor Brand, the head of NASA, who affirms theoretical science can reconcile relativity and quantum mechanics; the solution is an ongoing project that, he tells Cooper, will be accomplished before members of the Endurance mission return to Earth. The journey of the Endurance in the meantime will implement Plan B by transporting 5,000 fertilized human eggs as a population bomb to establish a colony. Cooper's faith that the science and technology of the mission are "solid" guides him to pilot the journey while his young daughter and son remain with their grandfather on Earth.

The second act traces the erosion of Cooper's confidence that with science alone he can interpret his visual experience in another galaxy. His journeys to two planets, a water planet and an ice planet, do not identify habitable environments to establish a colony using the population bomb. More importantly, while on the ice planet Cooper learns he and the crew have been deceived by Professor Brand, who abandoned Plan A, and by Dr. Mann, a leader of the Lazarus mission who in order to be rescued falsified data to indicate the ice planet was suitable for colonization. Cooper's own near-death experience on the ice planet as well as the deaths of members of his family on Earth and members of his crew change his understanding of his journey and human mortality; he condemns Professor Brand's and Dr. Mann's scientific justifications for abandoning people on Earth to die. As a result of a vision that he has of his daughter Murph, Cooper determines not only to enable

his remaining crew member, Dr. Brand (the daughter of Professor Brand), to reach another planet to implement Plan B but also to journey into the black hole Gargantua to find data needed to reconcile relativity and quantum mechanics, and thereby save people on Earth.

In the third act Cooper struggles within Gargantua to interpret his visual experience of the tesseract, a three-dimensional space where intersecting lines of time, space and gravity reveal an infinite number of scenes of his daughter, literally every moment of her life within a room in their farmhouse on Earth. Using his scientific understanding of the tesseract, Cooper uses gravity to send quantum data to his daughter who then solves the equation to reconcile relativity and quantum mechanics. After she has resolved the equation, Cooper experiences an eschatological vision of his journey and a prophetic vision of the next age confirmed in the epilogue set on Cooper Station. The epilogue reveals the challenge of interpreting visual representations of history and their relevance to the next age. When Cooper awakens on Cooper Station, the relativity of time means he has aged little more than a decade since he left Earth but his daughter is now an elderly woman on her deathbed. The future represented by Cooper Station, however, is not the terminus of Cooper's journey. His daughter encourages him to undertake another journey to humankind's "new home" on the desert planet where Dr. Brand has established a colony. Changing styles of cinematography in the film's three acts not only represent Cooper's and Murph's changing interpretations of their

visual experience and journeys but also guide spectators' interpretation of the narrative as a prophetic vision.

### **Interpreting Reviews of History**

Christopher Nolan states that he included clips of interviews from Burns's documentary *The Dust Bowl* in his science fiction film *Interstellar* in order to impress upon the spectator "the feeling of dread, the feeling of the imbalance between the human race and the planet to be real and credible."<sup>6</sup> Many of the interviews in *The Dust Bowl* specifically address dread and other emotions caused by the dust storms that Burns documents. Floyd Coen from Morton County, KS, explains when a dust storm occurred, "as far as you could see it was coming right towards you, this giant wall just coming towards you. And you still had the feeling, whether you would admit it that something was going to run over you and just crush you."<sup>7</sup> His feeling of life-threatening menace is explained further by Dorothy Williamson of Prowers County, CO: "The dust, there is nowhere you can run. You can try to get out of it but it's as if it follows you, follows you, follows you. You can't escape it. Looking back on it, I think it carried with it a feeling of, I don't know the word exactly, of being unreal but almost being evil." The affect of these and other interviews in Burns's documentary engage spectators' sympathy and guide spectators' interpretation of montages of black and white images from the

1930s, including found footage and FarmSecurity Administration still photography, that create a review of history.<sup>8</sup>

The interviews that punctuate the exposition of Ken Burns's documentary focus spectators on the historical past. Throughout the documentary, twenty-six elderly people or "survivors" speak about their experience as children living in the 1930s. The spectator listens to their words during voice overs and on-camera interviews that identify them by their names and the locations where they lived as children. The interview with Don Wells that introduces "The Great Plow Up," the first episode of *The Dust Bowl*, exemplifies the documentary's presentation of the survivors as witnesses and their words as testimony about a period of history. In the opening sequence of the documentary, spectators first hear the sound of the wind while viewing a montage of black and white photographs<sup>9</sup> of a dust storm and film clips of extreme winds sweeping soil from the land, blowing trees and worrying cattle. Then, as spectators view clips of found footage from the 1930s in which men, women and children seek shelter from dust storms, a voice offers to explain the truth of these historical events: "Let me tell you how it was." The speaker anticipates spectators may dismiss his statements as exaggerations. He objects to this potential response to his words and those of others interviewed when he states: "I don't care who describes that to you, nobody can tell it any worse than what it was. It was that bad." His voice speaks with authority about truth telling while spectators view images of dust storms driving people indoors to shelter. The

documentary's exposition then abruptly transitions to a sequence filmed in color, an interview which in a second tier lower-third identifies the speaker by name and the location where he lived as a child. He is photographed in a close up, seated in a domestic interior, a setting that contrasts the extreme suffering that he experienced in the past. In this interview and those of other survivors in *The Dust Bowl* filmed by Buddy Squires<sup>10</sup> color marks a transition to the present from the past, represented in the preceding black and white photos and film footage. The warm colors and soft lighting create a painterly portrait of the survivor. The first survivor interview establishes both the style of the cinematography and setting used in the subsequent interviews. Like Don Wells, the survivor in the first interview, each person speaks with authority as a living witness of the past to defy anyone to suggest that they exaggerate the extraordinary suffering caused by the Dust Bowl, a specific period of history. The identification of the survivors anchors the documentary's visual exposition of *The Dust Bowl* in one historical source, oral history based on the memories of elderly adults.

In contrast, when interpolated into *Interstellar* the interview clips present unnamed elderly characters who speak retrospectively about the blight represented in the narrative's three acts. The interviews within the prologue and the first act of *Interstellar*<sup>11</sup> prepare spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* to engage in eschatological interpretation of the film's review of history. (Only in the film's epilogue, as I will discuss subsequently, will spectators outside the *mise-en-scène*

learn the temporal and physical context of the interviews – each recurring on a monitor within a museum on Cooper Station.) Within *Interstellar* the interviews do not only serve as a means to affirm the truth of incredible facts of a period of history as in Burns’s documentary. Instead, the interviews in *Interstellar* provide interpretative cues for spectators about the representation of history in the narrative film. First, the prologue, which begins and ends with a voice over, positions the three acts of the narrative in time. The prologue begins with a general and idealized image of a cornfield. The voice over of a woman (Ellen Burstyn) explaining that her “Dad was a farmer . . . like everybody else back then”<sup>12</sup> contextualizes the image in relation not only to time but also to her family. Her words “back then” refer to the past, a period of time that can also be measured by generations of her family. In contrast, the concluding three interviews in the prologue literally connect different periods of time, the present and the past. Their voice overs describing how they lived with “the dust” in their childhood are activities that spectators see performed by a man (later identified as Grandpa in the first act). In the concluding sequence of the prologue, he enacts activities described by three survivors in voice overs, such as setting the table; the merging of their words and his actions bridges the transition from the prologue to the first act of the narrative set in the past. The four interviews introduce the past represented in the three acts of the narrative as a vision of history that requires interpretation.

The first interview also establishes a pattern followed in the three interviews at the conclusion of the prologue. While viewing an image of a cornfield, the exterior or interior of a farmhouse, spectators listen to the voice of each survivor before seeing a close up of the face of the speaker seated in front of a bookcase. The style of cinematography used in the interviews – a painterly style of portrait against a bookcase, a familiar image of a domestic setting – is one cue for spectators; the prologue repeatedly transitions among different styles of cinematography, including a documentary-like sequence of a space flight and dark, expressionistic images of an early morning sequence that contrast the soft focus and warm colors revealed by high key lighting in the interviews. These transitions among styles in the prologue identify cinematography as a self-reflexive cue for interpretation of visual experience in *Interstellar*.

The initial interview highlights the function of subsequent interview clips in the prologue. The words of the survivors interpret general images for spectators in voice overs; their statements do not simply describe the experience of living during the time of an environmental disaster but, more importantly, guide spectators' understanding of visual images. The first interview guides spectators' interpretation of the vision of a cornfield, a generalized visual image of everyday life at a time when her father, like most people, was a farmer. Spectators see beautiful images of extensive, flourishing cornfields at the beginning and end of her interview; their customary meaning, however, changes because of her short, factual

statements in voice overs. For example, the grandeur of the concluding panorama of cornfields extending to distant foothills at dawn takes on unexpected significance when she states: “The wheat had died. We had to burn it. We had corn, but mostly we had dust.” Although the heightened beauty and verisimilitude of the cinematography of the cornfield create a generalized vision of agricultural abundance and fertility, the survivor explains paradoxically the vision of the abundant corn is a product of a dearth of other crops capable of surviving the blight during a particular period of history.

The first interview also introduces the tropes of visions and journeys, conventions of the apocalypse genre. Her interview about her family’s history includes an inset narrative about her father’s first journey as an astronaut. Throughout the inset narrative, spectators’ attention is directed to Cooper’s visual experience more than to realistic documentation of the flight of the spacecraft across the stratosphere. The inset narrative is a brightly lighted IMAX sequence that repeatedly presents detailed close ups of the pilot’s eyes as he intently focuses while steering the spacecraft. The sequence establishes the iconography of vision and visual experience as much as documentary verisimilitude; five of nine shots within the spacecraft are close ups of his eyes taken from different angles. The abrupt transition to a sequence in a dark, expressionistic style identifies the previous sequence not only as a dream but also as a vision. The pilot when he awakens from this terrifying dream about the crash of the spacecraft lies in a dark bedroom

illuminated only by light from a window. The expressionistic style in this sequence uses low key lighting and high contrast to illuminate his profile, particularly his eye, and the metal of his wrist watch in the dark bedroom. Similarly, low key lighting and high contrast reveal his daughter standing in the dark doorway looking towards him before she leaves while looking back over her shoulder. The camera follows her father as he walks across the room where spectators see a profile shot of him looking out of the window before a long shot from over his shoulder reveals what he sees: dawn outlining distant foothills across a farm field. A voice over by the survivor, who spectators now identify as “Murph,” explains how to interpret what we actually see: “the blight came, the wheat had died.” As her voice over explains, “Corn, we still had corn,” another shot over her father’s shoulder allows spectators to share his vision of the cornfield through the window before the sequence abruptly cuts back to the close up of the survivor’s face. She looks straight toward the camera in a close up before she explains, “But mostly we had dust.” When spectators hear her concluding statement, their understanding of the inspiring, beautiful panorama changes; a stereotyped image of natural grandeur and agricultural abundance becomes a vision of history, in this instance, the history of a past environmental crisis that endangered the lives of people on Earth. The different styles of cinematography created by Hoyt van Hoytema in the prologue do not simply foster documentary-like verisimilitude.<sup>13</sup> In addition to detailed, realistic images of the space flight, Hoytema creates a dark expressionist sequence,

a painterly landscape and symbolic images of cornfields that prompt and require interpretation. Images of human vision in Murph's interview and its inset journey sequence, for example, guide the spectator to recognize the problem of interpreting visual experience. The interviews in the prologue represent the problematic task of interpreting a vision of history.

The only interviews of survivors within the narrative of *Interstellar* rather than in its prologue and epilogue occur in the first act. Clips of three interviews about Black Sunday on April 14, 1935 from Burns's documentary create a short introduction to two consecutive sequences affected by a duststorm, namely the baseball game and the journey of Cooper, his kids (Timothée Chalamet and Mackenzie Foy) and their grandfather (John Lithgow) returning home. Each of the three consecutive interviews presents an anonymous character photographed in color, seated in a domestic interior before a photographic backdrop, and speaking directly to camera about memories of a particular event. A woman states: "You didn't expect this dirt that was making you this food to turn on you like that and destroy you." Then a man suggests a date for the extraordinary dust storm: "In April, I believe, 15<sup>th</sup> of April, I think." And another elderly man speaks as an eye witness to the storm's time and location: "Yes, this happened about 1:30 when this thing came down off the top of the canyon." The composition of each portrait is interpretative; the first interview is over-exposed whereas the two following interviews have dark, balanced lighting that reflects each survivor's words and

emotions. Together the interviews create an introduction that prompts spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* to interpret the storm in the following sequences as a phenomenon not only caused by the environmental disaster occurring in the film's narrative but also similar to a well-known historical event that occurred on April 14, 1935. As Jess C. Porter explains, "the quintessential Dust Bowl event, the epic Black Sunday dust storm" is the most widely known event in terms of 21<sup>st</sup> century "popular knowledge and perceptions of the American Dust Bowl."<sup>14</sup> As a result, for spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* who know about Black Sunday or who have seen Burns's documentary, the dust storm during the baseball game in *Interstellar* functions as a trope of a life-threatening catastrophe that draws together the historical Dust Bowl and the fictional blight. The interview clips about the dust storm provide *only* spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* with this historical framework for the sequence. The visual perceptions and interpretation of spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* are privileged; the interview clips guide their interpretation of the two sequences that follow.

The dust storm sequences represent spectatorship, particularly spectators' problem of interpreting visions and visual experience. The baseball game necessarily involves spectators, a crowd that watches players within the *mise-en-scène*. Attention focuses on the game only when a high angle shot reveals a baseball that rolls unattended by a player's feet. The camera rises to show the player removing his sunglasses as he looks into the distance beyond the stadium with

astonishment. From over his shoulder, a long shot reveals to spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* what he sees: a huge and growing dark cloud above the stadium. Repeatedly the sequence aligns the vision of spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène*; just as we first see the storm over the shoulder of the player, we subsequently share Cooper's vision revealed by a similar shot as his hand shields his eyes to look toward the blackening cloud. After the camera rises to show a long shot of the increasing size of the vast dust cloud, the sequence cuts abruptly to an image of the dust storm seen by Cooper and spectators in a close up shot of the rear-view mirror of his truck as the family drives home wearing goggles and masks. As the sequence moves repeatedly from internal shots of characters within the truck struggling to see the road to realistic external shots of the storm, dust obscures both characters' and spectators' vision. Throughout the sequences at the ball game and the drive home, spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène* share the same visual experience: literally struggling to see through the dust, which is a vision of an environmental threat to human life. Although their visual experience aligns during the baseball and driving sequences, the characters and spectators interpret the event differently because only spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* who have seen the survivor interviews understand the experience as an event not only in the narrative but also similar to another in 20<sup>th</sup> century American history.

### **Scientific and Eschatological Interpretation**

Within the first act of the narrative, characters interpret their experiences literally; to Cooper and his family the journey home through the dust storm is not a revelation but instead an experience typical of their daily lives. At this point in the narrative, characters assume that science and not eschatology is the key to understanding their visual experience. Like other journeys taken in the truck by Cooper and his family such as their earlier journey to school, the drive home from the stadium begins with a vision, a black cloud that characters interpret in scientific, factual terms. Their assumption about how to interpret what they see in a valid and meaningful way was explained earlier to Murph by Cooper: he instructs her not to assume “a ghost” knocked a model and books from the shelves in her bedroom but instead to use “scientific” method to understand these seemingly inexplicable events. He instructs her to “record the facts, analyze the how and the why, and present your conclusions.” This is the method that he will use, after the dust storm, to interpret the dust pattern on the floor of her bedroom as binary code identifying coordinates that guide their journey in the truck to the NORAD base where he learns about the Endurance mission. Although the creation of binary code by a dust storm seems not only an unlikely phenomenon but also a miraculous revelation, Cooper’s interpretation is limited to the code’s established scientific meaning as navigational coordinates. The characters’ interpretation of what they see and their journeys remain restricted to literal and scientific meanings throughout the first act; the

journey home from the baseball game to them literally represents their daily struggle to endure, and the vision of the dark cloud represents scientific evidence of the environmental disaster.

Although many of Professor Brand's statements about the Lazarus and Endurance missions evoke apocalyptic themes about the last things and the end of times, Cooper and the crew members, Dr. Brand (Anne Hathaway), Romilly (David Gyasi) and Doyle (Wes Bentley), understand their mission only in terms of scientific theory. While at the NORAD base Professor Brand (Michael Caine) tells Cooper, "Your daughter's generation will be the last to survive on earth" based on his belief, "We're not meant to save the world . . . we're meant to leave it." During their dialogue about the blight, spectators' vision is aligned with that of Professor Brand and Cooper who look through lab windows at technicians examining dying corn and other crops, scientific evidence that the atmosphere will suffocate both crops and people in the near future. Professor Brand compares the effect of the blight on crops to two historical catastrophes, the Irish potato famine and the Dust Bowl. Professor Brand, however, also refers to the last things – death, resurrection and the next age – when he explains the Lazarus mission required twelve astronauts willingly to sacrifice their lives because only those who found a "new home" to colonize could hope to be resurrected from cryo-sleep within a maximum period of twelve years. While Professor Brand defends the name of the Lazarus mission as hopeful by stating, "Lazarus came back from the dead," Cooper pessimistically

insists that to be resurrected Lazarus “had to die in the first place.” But Cooper understands Professor Brand “sent people out there looking for a new home” to which people on earth can be transported in the future. This depends upon Professor Brand solving an equation that reconciles relativity with quantum mechanics. Cooper agrees to pilot the crew’s journey on the Endurance mission based on Professor Brand’s assurance that scientific theory will enable him to solve the equation to implement Plan A, the transportation of Earth’s population to a new home, as well as Plan B, the transportation of 5,000 fertilized human embryos to colonize a habitable planet.

Scientific knowledge as a basis to interpret visual experience during the journey in a new galaxy repeatedly fails. The crew learns the limits of both human vision and scientific interpretation as they journey through the wormhole and in the new galaxy. As they travel through the wormhole “the bulk” of space is beyond the three dimensions known and perceived by humans. In Doyle’s words, the ship’s instruments can “record and observe” but the crew cannot interpret the information to control how they travel through or exit the wormhole. The new galaxy that they reach is represented by visual effects in documentary-like detail as a panorama of stars, nebulae and Gargantua, a black hole that initially appears only as a black sphere absorbing light. Doyle describes the black hole as “a literal heart of darkness”; he regrets how limited their understanding of gravity is despite their proximity to the black hole. Their scientific knowledge like their visual perception

is limited to the external appearance of the collapsed star. Romilly acknowledges, “If we could see the collapsed star inside, the singularity, we’d solve gravity . . . The answer’s there, just no way to see it.” Human vision and understanding are also barriers to their ability to interpret correctly what they see on the water planet; what they believe is water reaching to a distant mountain range is, in fact, a tsunami-like wave bearing down on them and the Ranger.

Cooper and Brand, the only survivors of this journey, evaluate the mission in terms of human mortality; the relativity of time means that in little more than two hours on the water planet, where Miller, a Lazarus astronaut, and Doyle died, more than two decades of their loved ones’ lives passed on earth. Increasingly human mortality requires interpretation to understand the crew’s journey as meaningful. After Doyle’s death, the characters struggle to believe they can fulfil the mission’s goal, the preservation of human life. Death without the promise of resurrection seems to be confirmed by the final painterly scene on the water planet, where the lifeless body of Doyle lies in the shallow water about to be carried away by an approaching wave. Romilly’s appearance when he meets Cooper and Brand on their return to the Endurance also symbolizes human mortality; Dr. Brand’s hands touching his face frame a closeup portrait of Romilly who has obviously aged while struggling for more than twenty-three years to maintain his hope that they would return.

Cooper's son and daughter also struggle to remain hopeful as revealed by audiovisual messages that Cooper watches when he returns to the Endurance. Cooper is a spectator within the *mise-en-scène* who watches the messages on a small console screen onboard the station. The message sequence cuts between reaction shots of Cooper's emotions and Tom's and Murph's messages that we hear as voice overs and see as shots of the console screen. High resolution IMAX cinematography of Cooper in balanced, high key lighting creates a detailed, realistic portrait revealing his changing emotions as he views the messages. Repeatedly during the message sequence, a bright, external light from the rotating Endurance station passes across Cooper and reflects on the faces of Tom and Murph projected on the console. The expressionistic style of the messages spanning twenty-three years represents Cooper's journey and his family's lives as a vision of human mortality: in the messages Tom tells his father about his high school graduation and meeting Lois, his future wife, the birth and death of their infant son Jesse, the death of Grandpa and finally the death of Tom's "hope" for his father's return. The resolution of the images and their color diminish as the messages progress; as a teenager, Tom (Timothée Chalamet) appears seated in the kitchen of his family's home photographed with high key lighting. Despite the message's low resolution, Cooper and spectators can identify the faces of Tom and Lois in a creased photograph that he holds up to the camera. The lighting creates a duller image with subdued flesh tones subsequently when Tom (Casey Affleck) as a happy father

holds up the newborn Jesse to the camera to show Cooper, now a grandfather. A dimly lit shot in this message that composes a family portrait with Jesse held by both Tom and Lois foreshadows tragedy. Tom's final message is photographed to be black with low key lighting as he speaks about the deaths of Jesse and his grandfather, and says farewell to his father whom he believes to be dead. The chiaroscuro effect created by the bright, external light periodically reflecting on the console and the dark close up image of Tom's face visualizes his despair caused by his assumption that all his messages "are just out there, drifting in the darkness," unheard and unseen.

The grief and empathy of Cooper, who embraces the screen in an effort to reach out to his son, change to astonishment when a message from Murph (Jessica Chastain) appears. Her face appears in close up with high key lighting and low resolution as she tells her father that she recorded the message on her fortieth birthday, the age Cooper had been when he departed on his journey. The reflection of the external light rising and falling on her face highlights her changing emotions of anger and despair. Shifts in lighting, created by the external light periodically reflecting on Cooper and the messages, increase the expressiveness of the compressed sequence that in less than four minutes represents more than twenty-three years in the family's life. The low resolution of Tom's and Murph's recorded messages differs starkly from the high resolution of IMAX sequences of the bright internal space of the Endurance. Paradoxically, it is the low resolution of the

expressionistic message sequence that develops Cooper's ability to interpret what he sees as symbolic visions of the last things: death, judgment, reward and punishment.

Spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* witness both the production and reception of Murph's second message that the crew struggles to believe and interpret. The fragmentation of the message across sequences on Earth and in space differentiates the experiences of seeing and interpreting. Spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* witness Murph's message twice. First, we watch her record the message in the communication booth at the NORAD base before we see a section of it projected on a console onboard the *Endurance*. Second, on the ice planet we observe the conclusion of the message relayed to TARS's data screen and witness the responses of Dr. Brand, Cooper, and Dr. Mann (Matt Damon). The sequence set in the communication booth represents Murph's struggle to console rather than accuse Dr. Brand of knowing what Professor Brand confessed on his deathbed: Plan A to transport the population of Earth to another planet could not be implemented. Spectators first hear Murph speaking the message as the camera moves slowly around her beginning with a rear shot over her shoulder that reveals to spectators only a coded transcript on a screen; we do not see her expression as she speaks conventional words of consolation before reaching but hesitating to shut off the recording. Spectators as well as the robot CASE respond to the closeup of her face on the *Endurance* console as she continues the message to accuse Dr. Brand of

leaving “us here to suffocate, to starve.” Only after the crew lands on the ice planet and resurrects Dr. Mann from a cryo-chamber do spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* view the conclusion of Murph’s message with Cooper and Dr. Brand. In the crypt-like setting of the “life pod” on the ice planet, Murph’s face appears on TARS’s small data screen where spectators, like the crew, first hear the conclusion of the message: “Brand, did you know? He told you, right? You knew this was all a sham. You left us here to suffocate, to starve. Did my father know, too? Dad, I just want to know if you left me here to die. I just have to know.” The message shocks both Cooper and Dr. Brand who were unaware Professor Brand had lost hope of implementing Plan A. Dr. Mann, however, confirms Professor Brand, before the Lazarus mission launched, believed there was no means to “reconcile relativity with quantum mechanics” without more data from within a singularity, which is hidden from their sight inside a black hole behind its horizon.

The crew and Dr. Mann debate the judgment merited by Professor Brand, whose deception alters their understanding of him as well as the Lazarus and Endurance missions. In effect, their debate in this scene addresses the question that Grandpa advised Cooper to determine before undertaking the journey, namely “the why of the thing – that’s the foundation.” At that time, Cooper assumed the foundation of the mission in science was “solid.” Now he shares Grandpa’s belief that he can’t “trust the right thing done for the wrong reason.” Cooper interprets Professor Brand’s deception in moral rather than scientific terms. Cooper believes

Professor Brand was wrong to abandon hope of saving Earth's population. Whereas Cooper believes there must be some means to gather data about gravity from within the black hole in order to save the people on Earth, Dr. Mann asserts that is impossible. Dr. Mann bases his justification of Professor Brand's decision on the scientific facts that you need "to see" the singularity within a black hole to gain the data but "the laws of nature prohibit a naked singularity," a scientific statement that Romilly confirms. In addition, Dr. Mann argues, "Some things aren't meant to be known," a fatalistic rather than a scientific assertion. Presuming that the data is prohibited from both human sight and knowledge, Dr. Mann defends Professor Brand's deception. Dr. Mann argues Professor Brand's deception was courageous because the Professor chose to save the human race as a species knowing he must sacrifice hope of being forgiven. Professor Brand deceived the crew to ensure they undertook the journey to implement Plan B to colonize a planet by transporting fertilized embryos as a "population bomb." Dr. Mann agrees with Professor Brand that the crew could not be trusted to act selflessly by sacrificing the lives of their loved ones on Earth in order to fulfil Plan B that provides a means to "save the species." Dr. Mann judges the mission with what he defines as the scientific facts of evolution expressed in his question to Cooper: "Would you have left if you hadn't believed you were trying to save them [i.e., your children]? Evolution has yet to transcend that simple barrier – we can care deeply, selflessly about those we know, but our empathy rarely extends beyond our line of sight," meaning one's own

family, friends and community. In contrast, Cooper condemns Professor Brand for presuming to decide a journey to implement Plan A was “hopeless” and for sacrificing the lives of people on Earth. Cooper’s response to the revelation that Professor Brand did not plan to save people on Earth is less concerned with scientific theory than the possible deaths of billions of people. Their interpretation of Professor Brand’s betrayal of their trust juxtaposes its scientific justification to eschatological themes of death and judgment.

### **The Symbolism of Vision and Eschatological Interpretation**

Flashbacks of Murph as a child during Murph’s and Cooper’s parallel, desperate journeys on Earth and on the ice planet in the narrative’s second act represent both the literal and metaphoric meanings of Dr.Mann’s phrase “line of sight.” During two sequences while she drives with Getty (Topher Grace), Murph’s line of sight as a spectator within the *mise-en-scène* moves away from the problem of theoretical science to the reality of children living with the blight. Flashbacks occur during her conversation explaining to Getty a “feeling” related to her memory of what she calls a “ghost” knocking objects off her bookshelves in her childhood bedroom. While she describes her childhood memory, a dust storm prevents her from driving and obscures everything outside of the truck. The memory reveals Murph as a child sitting on her bed looking directly at the camera before it moves in for a close up that reveals her line of sight. The editing of the sequence creates an eyeline match

that cuts to the objects that she looks directly toward, the bookcases in front of which lie a broken lunar lander model and books. The sequence continues with an extreme close up of young Murph looking directly ahead before cutting to a shot of some empty spaces on her bookshelf that she records in a notebook in a following medium shot. The flashback concludes with a close up of her eyes again looking directly forward at the bookshelves. This flashback sequence that connects her past memory with her present willingness to trust her “feeling” as a better guide to interpretation than science concludes just as the storm recedes so that spectators, like Murph, see across the road two children, one a young girl who wipes the dust from her eyes. The young girl’s physical gesture of wiping the dust from her eyes so that she can see symbolizes the change of perception that now guides Murph’s interpretation; Murph discards scientific interpretation that obscured her understanding of the ghost’s messages.

It is the visual experience of seeing the same children again after she quarrels with her brother Tom that determines Murph to return to her childhood bedroom where, in the past, she saw the ghost’s messages. As Murph accelerates to pass a line of trucks, spectators see on the roof of a truck the same two children who gaze directly at the camera. A close up of Murph looking at the children and reciprocating their gaze reveals both her identification and empathy with them. Not only Murph but spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* look into the eyes of the girl and boy, refugees on top of a vehicle fleeing the blight and hoping to survive. The

triangulation of the gaze of the children, Murph, and spectators in this scene emphasizes not only the mutuality but also the symbolism of looking. This is a moment representing her belief that what she saw in the past is a revelation that will save them all. The children reciprocating her gaze inspire her to reject the despair of Professor Brand and determine to save people by reinterpreting what she saw in the past.

The mutuality of looking also identifies the climax of the sequence with which it is crosscut that represents her father's struggle on the ice planet to survive Dr. Mann's murderous attack. Dr. Mann asserts the "last thing" that Cooper will see before he dies is a vision of his children. In fact, Cooper has a vision of Murph as he struggles to survive and calls for Dr. Brand's help; a flashback visualizes Cooper's memory of explaining relativity to Murph before leaving on the Endurance mission. The flashback sequence representing his memory begins with an overhead, close up shot from an extreme angle that reveals his and Murph's hands, each holding a watch before cutting to a shot of her turning and looking up directly into her father's face with an expression of shock and despair as she realizes he does not know when he will return from the mission. The watches, symbols of time, represent measurement not only in scientific terms as seconds, minutes and hours but also in terms of human life and death. Cooper now on the ice planet remembers this past moment when Murph reciprocated his gaze but rejected his belief that he must go because he had been the one chosen for the Endurance

mission. Motivated by his memory of Murph being held in his arms and in his line of sight, Cooper determines to survive in order to fulfil his promise to return to her, a commitment to the future of his daughter and humankind. His flashback, like Murph's, reveals his new eschatological understanding of his life and those of his daughter and others on Earth.

Crosscuts in the tesseract sequence repeatedly create eyeline shots that represent the literal and metaphoric meanings of Dr. Mann's reference to "line of sight." The tesseract sequence incorporates two narratives, one representing Cooper within the infinite time and three-dimensional space of the tesseract, and a second representing an infinite number of scenes with Murph in her bedroom when she was ten years old. These two narratives crosscut nineteen times with another representing forty-year-old Murph on Earth in her childhood bedroom remembering and re-enacting past events that correspond to actions of her childhood self and responding to her father's actions inside the tesseract. Only spectators see the adult Murph remembering and re-enacting memories of her "ghost" when she was ten years old. Cooper, within the tesseract, sees his young daughter who tells him, "go. If you're leaving – just go." In response Cooper, within the tesseract, pushes books off the shelves to represent "STAY" in Morse code, a message the child Murph correctly transcribed in a notebook that the adult Murph now interprets as a revelation that her father was her ghost. The crosscuts represent the characters' line of sight literally as a visual process that differs from, but is

necessary for, interpretation. Metaphorically, the characters' line of sight, that is their empathy and love, is what makes the revelation across space-time credible to Murph whose empathy like her father's extends to others on Earth, a bond that neither Professor Brand nor Dr. Mann trusted.

Cooper's journey into Gargantua where he enters the tesseract and his subsequent journey out through black hole and the wormhole visualize its eschatological significance. His journey in the third act of the narrative is not simply a review of *his* history but, more importantly, a symbolic review of history extending from the blight on Earth to a prophecy of the next age. In this sequence, visual effects frame the unfamiliar image of a black hole, based on theoretical astrophysics, with light rays that make its blackness and its form visible to spectators. Visual effects transform mundane, familiar images of bookshelves in Murph's bedroom into a fantastic abstract image of intersecting lines representing time, gravity, and light crossing space-time. Cooper's very different responses to the black hole and the tesseract model for spectators the difference of interpreting these visual experiences. While looking at Gargantua, Cooper readily interprets the black hole in scientific terms to explain to Dr. Brand how its gravitational pull will power the journey of the *Endurance* station to Edmunds's planet in order to implement Plan B. Even as he journeys into Gargantua and passes across its horizon, Cooper continues to use scientific terms to describe phenomena that he sees until he ejects from the *Ranger*. In contrast, the tesseract initially is

inexplicable to Cooper; he weeps with despair because although from within the tesseract he recognizes his daughter as a child within multiple visions of her bedroom, he does not know how to interpret what he sees. It is TARS who identifies in scientific terms what Cooper has learned from being within the tesseract where it is possible to use gravity to communicate quantum data to Murph across time-space. Cooper also cannot interpret his visual experience as the tesseract closes. Instead he asks, “What happens now?” before a bright, white light fills the entire frame as he journeys again into the wormhole through which the *Endurance* first entered the new galaxy.

In the second act the wormhole initially appeared to be a black spherical shape that reflected flashes of light without illuminating space. Now, in the third act Cooper within the wormhole sees within a bright, moving space of white light and grey shadows, distorted images of the *Endurance* during the crew’s journey into the wormhole in the second act. The bright, painterly images represent a review of the history of the *Endurance* mission; Cooper moves through space-time where he “reviews” the *Endurance* traversing the wormhole for the first time and reaches out to Dr. Brand who, although unable to interpret what she sees, extends her own hand to his. The meaning of the enigmatic vision seen by all members of the crew during the journey through the wormhole in the second act is now revealed to have been created by Cooper at this moment in the third act. Spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* recognize the past event and its new scientific meaning as an event

crossing space-time. Spectators outside the *mise-en-scène* also recognise the eschatological meaning of the hand gestures of both Cooper and Dr. Brand that allude to the representation of “The Creation of Adam” in Michelangelo’s fresco on the Sistine Chapel ceiling depicting God’s hand reaching towards Adam’s.<sup>15</sup> The vision of their “handshake” created by the intersection of Cooper’s journey out of the tesseract with the journey of the Endurance when it first emerged from the wormhole answers his question, “What happens now?” The painterly image created by visual effects reveals the connection of their different journeys that will save humankind by means of both Plan A and Plan B. Cooper’s journey out of the black hole and through the wormhole is a review of the history of the Endurance mission and a prophetic vision of the next age.

### **Interpreting Visions of the Next Age**

Documentary, revisionist, and eschatological visions of history in the epilogue set on Cooper Station reveal the challenge of interpretation that characters and spectators experience. Whereas survivor interviews guided spectators’ eschatological interpretation of the prologue’s review of history, those same interviews fail to fulfil that purpose in the epilogue. Spectators outside the epilogue’s *mise-en-scène* recognize three survivor interviews from the prologue playing on a monitor outside the entrance to the social history museum on Cooper Station. Cooper, however, walks past them without a glance as he enters the

grounds of the museum that recreates his farmhouse on Earth. Spectators (rather than Cooper) recognize that the film format of the interviews has changed. What in the prologue were painterly portraits of individuals – close ups that filled the entire screen – in the epilogue are small format documentary films, framed by monitors, outside and within the museum.

When Cooper enters the farmhouse with an administrator, not only three interviews from the prologue but also four other survivor interviews from Burns's documentary activate simultaneously on monitors throughout the kitchen and living room in the reproduction of the Cooper farmhouse. What Cooper, as a museum visitor, and spectators experience is a babel of unintelligible voices. A panning shot that represents Cooper's startled gaze as he looks across the rooms suggests the problem of interpreting the meaning of the exhibition's representation of history. The museum and its use of technology obscure the meaning of the survivor interviews about the experience of living on Earth during the blight (just as the dust-free environment inside the farmhouse misrepresents that lived experience). The museum, which is intended to review and explain life on Earth before humankind's exodus<sup>16</sup> not only to Cooper Station but also to other space stations, fails to guide spectators' interpretation. In fact, the impression of verisimilitude fostered by the museum is deceptive and directs attention away from its problematic recreation of the past. The retrospective vision of history on Cooper Station not only commemorates the past, but, in Cooper's words, "[pretends] we're back where we

started.” After he speaks these words, the sequence cuts to a cross section of the cylindrical station and its gravity-generating technology that highlights questions about how to interpret a vision that simulates the past; the bright spherical image of the advanced technology that supports life on Cooper Station is divided by an anachronism, a replica of a telephone pole and communication equipment from almost a century before positioned at the centre in the foreground. The image literally foregrounds the problem of the museum’s visual representation of history. Its anachronistic physical reconstruction of the Cooper farm obstructs rather than facilitates interpretation of the relation of the present to the past and, more importantly, to the next age.

The monument in honor of the Lazarus and Endurance missions on Cooper Station, in contrast, is a revisionist interpretation of history. This monument is inscribed with the names of sixteen astronauts and a dedication, “To the brave men and women who gave their lives so we could begin again.” The monument in itself is an inaccurate review of the history of these missions. The monument mistakenly indicates all the astronauts on these missions died. More important, however, is its omission of any record of Dr. Mann’s betrayal of his duty, an event lost to history. While under the circumstances these factual errors are understandable, they pose an impediment to interpreting history, that is, not simply the fact of people’s deaths but also judgment of their meaning. The monument is also inscribed with the words: “Do not go gentle into the night. Old age should burn and rave at close of day; Rage,

rage, against the dying of the light.” This quotation of lines from a poem by Dylan Thomas engraved on the monument also begs for interpretation; ironically, these lines were spoken only by Professor Brand and Dr. Mann, the two people who betrayed the trust not only of the astronauts but also of people on Earth.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, the monument represents an erroneous review of history, like that taught by school teachers who in the first act, to the disbelief of Murph and Cooper, denied the moon landing occurred. Whereas the social history museum simulates the past, the monument literally rewrites it. Overall, the revisionist review of history on the station obscures not only events but their interpretation.

The conclusion of the epilogue, in contrast, represents a prophetic vision that interprets the present eschatologically. The concluding reunion of Cooper and Murph emphasizes the last things: death, resurrection, and the next age. Now an elderly woman, Murph has been resurrected from cryo-sleep after being transported to Cooper Station for their reunion. When they meet in a hospital, she is on her deathbed surrounded by generations of her family. The closeups of Cooper and Murph in the hospital sequence direct attention to their mutual recognition – in the past and the present. She reassures her father that in the past she recognized what he confides to her now: “It was me. I was your ghost.” Although they both recognize how their relationship changed history in the past, Murph must reveal to her father a vision of the next age. When Cooper says, “I’m here now,” she insists that he should not stay to watch her die. Instead, she urges him to go on another journey to

the planet that Dr. Brand has established as a colony. The conclusion of the epilogue recreates Murph's role in the prologue in which her voice overs interpreted images and narrative sequences for spectators. Murph, now on her deathbed, speaks as an "otherworldly" mediator who reveals to both her father and spectators a hopeful, prophetic vision of history in which he must again undertake a journey. Her voice overs explain and justify her father's action of leaving to join Dr. Brand rather than witnessing Murph's death.

More importantly, Murph's words interpret the meaning of painterly IMAX images, including a series of close ups that create portraits of Dr. Brand "alone in a strange galaxy" where she kneels on the ground before the grave of Edmunds, a Lazarus astronaut, and prepares to settle "in for the long nap" in cryo-sleep. These portraits that reveal Dr. Brand's isolation on the desert planet transition to others revealing her progress from grief caused by the death of Edmunds to hope as she smiles and walks towards the base for the colony "under the light of our new sun." Murph's voice overs during crosscut sequences of her father departing from Cooper Station and Dr. Brand on the desert planet focus on the eschatological meaning of that journey and its destination, "our new home." Murph's voice overs interpret the present in relation to the future; specifically, her words indicate the eschatological meaning of her father's journey and Dr. Brand's actions in these sequences as a vision of the coming of the next age. Her voice overs referring to "our new sun" and "our new home" give allegorical and hopeful meanings to IMAX images of a

seemingly barren, desert landscape captured at dusk. In the concluding vision of the desert planet, IMAX cinematography does not produce detailed, realistic images simply to foster verisimilitude but instead painterly images of a landscape and nuanced portraits of Dr. Brand's emotions; the effect of optimism and hope created by the images reveals the consolation the desert planet offers to humankind. Murph's words in the voice over also interpret the planet as the new home for humankind in the next age.

In the epilogue, different styles of cinematography guide the response of spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène* to two reviews of history: a brightly lighted, colorful and inaccurate recreation of the past on Cooper Station and a softly lighted, earth-toned desert landscape, which is a prophetic vision of the future. Cooper Station orbiting Saturn in its entirety recreates life as lived on Earth before Cooper left – cornfields, baseball games and farmhouses – all simulated and supported by technology. The brilliant colors and brightly lighted outdoor spaces of the baseball field and cornfield differentiate Cooper Station from the desert-like planet where Dr. Brand is setting up a base for a colony to be established using “the population bomb.” Cinematography of the desert planet does not imitate NASA's realistic, detailed documentation of space travel; instead IMAX sequences in the epilogue, as in many other sequences in *Interstellar*, create painterly images, both portraits and landscapes of the desert planet that represent it as a new home and a hopeful future for humankind. Murph's voice overs in the prologue that guided

spectator's understanding of the narrative confirm her role in the epilogue as an otherworldly mediator who interprets for spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène* the vision of the desert planet as a prophetic revelation of the next age.

*Interstellar* suspends closure of its meaning by ending with two contrasting visions of humankind's survival: on Cooper Station in the present and on the desert planet in the next age. Spectators within and outside the *mise-en-scène* depend upon mediators to interpret the meaning of the two visions. Spectators are guided by Cooper's blunt criticism of Cooper Station for "pretending we're back where we started;" that is, Cooper Station uncritically celebrates the past by recreating, with the assistance of technology, life as it was lived on Earth. This vision, he recognizes, is an anachronistic illusion that obstructs not simply the facts of history but, more importantly, understanding of the journeys of the *Lazarus* and *Endurance* astronauts. The words of Murph reveal to both her father and spectators an eschatological interpretation of the present and the future. Her voice over that concludes the epilogue explains to her father and to spectators the meaning of images of her father's next journey to the desert planet where Dr. Brand has set up a base for colonization as a vision of the next age. On her deathbed in the epilogue, as in her interview in the prologue, Murph is a mediator whose words interpret the meaning of images and transform spectators' visual experience into revelations.

Within the framework of the prologue and epilogue, interviews from Burns's documentary *The Dust Bowl* as well as that of Murph create a fold in time,

like a wormhole, that not only encloses the three acts of the narrative but also guides spectators' interpretation. The transformation of the interviews from full-screen, painterly portraits in the prologue to small format documentary films framed on museum monitors in the epilogue is one of many cues for interpretation presented to spectators. In the prologue, each survivor interview puts a face to a voice that accurately reveals not only facts about the past but also their meaning. In the epilogue the interviews invite questions about whether cinematography, including documentary cinematography, can make "facts" visually accessible without interpretation. The epilogue emphasizes the irony that the small-format documentary films on Cooper Station do not communicate the facts of history accurately. Similarly, throughout the three acts of the narrative characters often fail to interpret accurately the deceptively clear, detailed, realistic images created by visual effects and IMAX cinematography. Instead, painterly images and dark, expressionistic audiovisual messages with low resolution provide a more effective means of guiding Cooper and spectators to interpret what they see as visions of the last things, not only death and judgement but also the meaning of the present and future. By using multiple styles of cinematography, *Interstellar* reveals to spectators the process of eschatological interpretation.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Vivian Sobchak, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film* (1980; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Ungar, 1987), 140.

<sup>2</sup> Justin Heinzekehr, “The Reenchantment of Eschatology: Religious Secular Apocalypse in Akira Kurosawa’s *Dreams*,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 16, no.2 (2012): Article 3, 1, and Conrad E. Ostwalt, “‘Visions of the End’: Secular Apocalypse in Recent Hollywood Film,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 2, no. 1 (1998): Article 4. Cf. Marcus O’Donnell, “‘If you can hold on. . .’: counter-apocalyptic play in Richard Kelly’s *Southland Tales*,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 18, no. 2 (2014): Article 10, 5-7, and Wynn Gerald Hamonic, “Global Catastrophe in Motion Pictures as Meaning and Message: The Functions of Apocalyptic Cinema in America,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 21, no. 1 (2017): Article 36.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Toronto: Random House, 1999), 31.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1992) and Mitchell G. Reddish, “Introduction” in *Apocalyptic Literature: A Reader*, ed. Mitchell G. Reddish (San Francisco: Hendrickson Publishers, 1995), 21-22. Among scholars of religion whose work discusses the conventions of the apocalypse genre see also John J. Collins, “Introduction,” in *Apocalypse: The Morphology of the Genre*, *Semeia* 14 (1979): 9, and John B. Gabel and Charles B. Wheeler, *The Bible As Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 132-43.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew M. Greeley, “Varieties of Apocalypse in Science Fiction,” *Journal of American Culture* 2, no.2 (1979): 282.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Nolan is quoted in Edward Davis, “Watch: Christopher Nolan On the Colbert Report; Says *Interstellar* Borrows Clips From Ken Burns’ *Dust Bowl* Documentary,” *IndieWire* (Dec. 6, 2014): 1.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations transcribed from *The Dust Bowl*, directed by Ken Burns (2012; PBS Distribution, DVD 2017). Information about the survivor interviews is included in Dayton Duncan, *The Dust Bowl An Illustrated History* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> For information about Farm Security Administration (FSA) still photography see James R. Swensen, *Picturing Migrants: The Grapes of Wrath and New Deal Documentary Photography* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015), 11-52.

<sup>9</sup> On the process of photographing and animating still photographs in the documentary see “Interview Buddy Squires Cinematographer,” <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/newyork/series/filmmakers/squires.html>

<sup>10</sup> On Squires’s cinematography see Brian Hallett, “Art of the Shot: Buddy Squires, ASC Talks About Shooting Ken Burns’ and Lynn Novick’s *The Vietnam War*,” *ProVideo Coalition* (Dec. 26, 2017), <https://www.providecoalition.com/buddy/>, and Bob Fisher, “Outstanding Documentary Achievement in Cinematography Award: The Visual Poet: Buddy Squires,” *International Documentary Association* (Dec. 27, 2007).

<sup>11</sup> Vivian Sobchak describes *Interstellar*'s structure that brackets "three acts (as they're called in the trade)," between "a temporally ambiguous prologue and a heart-breaking epilogue," in "Time Passages," *Film Comment* 50, no. 6 (Nov/ Dec 2014): 23.

<sup>12</sup> Quotations transcribed from *Interstellar*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2014; Paramount Pictures Home Entertainment, Blu-Ray 2015). Murph's interview, filmed in 35mm, simulates the design of the setting used in survivor interviews in Burns's documentary filmed in 16 mm Vista Vision.

<sup>13</sup> See Hoyt van Hoytema's discussion of his cinematography using custom lenses and 65mm IMAX, 35mm anamorphic and Vista Vision film for *Interstellar* in Iain Stuasukevich, "Cosmic Odyssey," *American Cinematographer* (December 2014): 40-42.

<sup>14</sup> Jess C. Porter, "What was the Dust Bowl? Assessing contemporary popular knowledge," *Popular Environment* 35 (2014): 391, 404.

<sup>15</sup> Michelangelo, "Sistine Chapel: ceiling frescos: *Creation of Adam*," Rome, Vatican City, 1508-1512, *Musei Vaticani*, <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/cappella-sistina/volta/storie-centrali/creazione-di-adamo.html>.

<sup>16</sup> On biblical allusions in *Interstellar* see Bina Nir, "Biblical Narratives in *Interstellar* (Christopher Nolan, US/GB2014)," *Journal of Religion, Film and Media* 6, no. 1 (2020): 53-69.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion of the quotation from Dylan Thomas's poem in Tod McGowan, "Anti-gravity: *Interstellar* and the fictional betrayal of place," *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media* 57 (Fall 2016): 6.

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