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### Preposterous revelations: Visions of Apocalypse and martyrdom in Hollywood cinema 1980-2000

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## Introduction

Don't wait for the last judgment—it takes place every day.

Albert Camus, *The Fall* (111)<sup>1</sup>

As the twentieth century's secularism hypothesis sits irrelevantly in the wings, "religion" returns to center stage. The martyr, meanwhile, is one of this drama's most contentious yet riveting stars, the one who packs the house for every performance.

Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory* (9)

This project focuses on the recycling of Biblical images and stories of the Apocalypse, particularly its conceptions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, in contemporary Hollywood cinema. I examine to what extent representations of martyrs and self-sacrifice are informed by traditional notions, and also how these are transformed and redirected in the process of transmission. Hollywood cinema can be regarded as a site of re-interpretation of Christian and non-Christian visual and discursive traditions. However, these adaptations are performed by a secular, not (explicitly) religious system.

Hollywood may recycle only certain elements of the original texts; yet, the discourse of the precedent text still exerts its power in the new one. Once the historical source is traced, I analyze in what ways the new text is also an active intervention in the earlier material. Finally, I attempt to define the transfer of meaning from past to present and from present to past. This implies a rethinking of Hollywood as a mere duplicator or recycler of original images and narratives. Instead of that standard view, one can perceive

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<sup>1</sup> "N'attendez pas le jugement dernier. Il a lieu tous les jours," Albert Camus, *La Chute*.

the original to function as an aftereffect caused by the images of Hollywood cinema. Thus, the leading notion of this study is the reconfiguration of the relationship of the present to the past and vice versa.

In what follows, I elaborate on the key concepts and themes that figure throughout this study. Mieke Bal's notion of preposterous history and the concept of quotation are outlined first. This study attempts to be interdisciplinary. Therefore, my two fields of interest, religion and cinema, are addressed even though, given my corpus, cinema will certainly be more prominent. The idea of genre as a means to cross the divide between religion and film is persistent in my study. I address genre in Hollywood cinema, specifically the genre of the disaster film, and in both biblical and cinematic narratives of the Apocalypse.

The first major theme of this study is the Apocalypse. In addition to looking at the definition of this theme in terms of biblical genre and common usage, as well as an entrenched notion in American popular culture, I use narrative theory and philosophy on the topic of the Apocalypse. The second theme is martyrdom and the figure of the martyr. I discuss these contested terms in the Judeo-Christian and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic context. The apocalyptic narrative of the Book of Revelation is the key text in this respect. Finally, the two themes of Apocalypse and martyrdom are read through a critical gender approach. I find this approach indispensable, given the misogynistic nature of both the Book of Revelation and the films I analyze. Apocalyptic stories and their concomitant imagery of martyrdom are underpinned by assumptions about masculinity and femininity, the former's superiority over the latter. A critical gender approach not only signals these suppositions, but also, in combination with my main reading method, preposterous history, allows for these assumptions to be challenged.

## **Preposterous History**

In *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Mieke Bal addresses a key question with regard to representation in art. She states that art is inevitably engaged with what came before it, and that that engagement is an active reworking. The question is, “Who illuminates—helps us understand—whom?” (3). One may adopt the traditional view, which regards ancient art as the source, a foundational influence on everything that follows in its wake. However, as Bal contends, “The problem with this view is that we can only see what we already know, or think we know” (3). This conception of the relationship between source and adaptation is based on recognition. To escape this deadlock between past and present, specifically the dominating influence of the past (what came first) over the present (what came later or after), Bal proposes the term “preposterous history.” Preposterous history is “the reversal of what came chronologically first (“pre-”) as an aftereffect behind (“post”) its later recycling” (7).

Bal takes her cue from T.S. Eliot’s 1919 essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In this essay, Eliot acknowledges the indispensability of tradition; the influence predecessors have on artists. But he also states that new art can alter the meaning, or perception, of the art of the past. In the crucial passage of the essay, which Bal uses as an epigraph to her book, Eliot states: “Whoever has approved this idea of order [...] will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (50). Each work of art to some extent changes what came earlier, what Eliot describes as “existing monuments”: “For order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (50).

In Eliot's conception, past and present art form a simultaneous order. This order is in constant flux or tension, since it incorporates both order and change. The simultaneity or synchronicity of Eliot's notion of tradition suggests a new way of thinking about the relation between the past and present. The past should not be understood as a bound, coherent point of departure or origin, against which all later forms are to be evaluated. Rather, past and present engage in a dialogue, which brings about transformations between them.

### Quotation

To set up such a dialogue between contemporary culture, in this case Hollywood cinema, and the art of the past, biblical images and stories, quotation can function as a mediator. Quotation can be defined as the recasting of past images, which is not only important to contemporary art, but in turn also affects the original source of the images for which it, in turn, becomes a source. In the practice of quotation we see preposterous history at work.

Quotation encompasses both iconography and intertextuality. Both concepts are relevant for preposterous history. The work of art historian Erwin Panofsky offers a systematic definition of iconography. Panofsky distinguishes between the traditional definition of *iconography*, a pictorial representation of a subject through a figure, and *iconology*, a larger understanding of iconic representations. Within iconology, Panofsky outlines three specific levels. The first level is the *pre-iconological* level of description. This concerns the natural subject matter, the "motifs" or "pure forms" that are carriers of primary and natural meanings (5). These motifs define for Panofsky a "history of style," a controlling principle of interpretation. The history of style gives "insight into the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, objects and events were expressed by forms" (15). The second is the *iconographic* level

that recognizes the conventionality of images and their themes, demanding certain knowledge of the literary and textual sources. This defines for Panofsky a “history of types,” which concerns itself with the expression of themes and concepts by certain objects and events (15-16). Finally, Panofsky distinguishes the *iconological* level, defined by a “history of cultural symptoms or ‘symbols.’” This level discloses what he considers the “intrinsic meaning” or symbolical values of a work, and should give the art historian insight into essential tendencies of the human mind and into the ways in which these tendencies are expressed by specific themes and concepts.

Panofsky’s theory provides a practical method that moves from description to analysis and finally to interpretation, a progression that presupposes the separateness of these three activities. I use iconography in a somewhat different sense. As is clear from Panofsky’s model, the historical precedent is viewed as source. This precedent then more or less dictates to the artist what forms can be used. Bal attempts to escape from this passivity inherent in the traditional view of iconography. The work of the later artists should be considered an active intervention in the material that is handed down to them. Furthermore, iconography frequently avoids interpreting the meaning of the borrowed, or quoted, signs in their new context; the reconceptualization of meaning is neglected. Bal proposes to trace the process of meaning-production over time, and crucially in this respect, in both directions: from past to present and from present to past. Finally, Panofsky’s model, in particular its most frequently practiced element, iconography, tends to refer back visual motifs to written texts. Bal’s methodology not only takes the textual nature of precedents seriously as a visual textuality, but also includes the visuality of the precedent text. By recycling forms taken from earlier works, an artist brings along the text from which the borrowed element has been taken, while at the same time constructing a new text with the debris. The new image-as-“text” is

“contaminated” by the discourse of the precedent. (Bal, *Quoting* 8-9)  
This is the concept of quotation I will employ in this study.

The second concept is a complicated one, since it is as often used as it is misused. Julia Kristeva originally introduced the concept of intertextuality. Her reading of the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin inspired her to elaborate on his concepts of dialogism and interaction. Kristeva refers to texts in terms of two axes: a horizontal axis connecting the author and reader of a text (what Bakhtin calls dialogism), and a vertical axis, which connects the text to other texts (what Bakhtin calls interaction). From this, Kristeva posits that texts engender texts: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (*Desire* 66).

Intertextuality, defined by Jonathan Culler in his book *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, is the idea that “works are to be considered not as autonomous entities, “organic wholes,” but as intertextual constructs: sequences which have meaning in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform” (38). Culler asserts that texts can only be read in relation to other texts. He elaborates on intertextuality by highlighting a common misapprehension, namely that the study of intertextuality is the investigation of sources and influences: of the work’s relation to particular prior texts. This would entail that, once the “original source” is located, a definite meaning can be established, closing the process of signification. The opposite is the case with intertextuality. In its nature lies the paradox of discursivity:

If one attempts to identify an utterance or text as a moment of origin, one finds that they depend upon prior codes. A codification, one might say, can only originate or be originated if it is already encoded in a prior code; more simply, it is the nature of codes to be always already in existence, to have lost origins.” (Culler, *Pursuit* 103)

As a consequence, Culler writes in his earlier *On Deconstruction*, “texts are multi-dimensional spaces in which a large range of different writings blend and clash” (32-33). Who then is to make or assign meaning to them? According to Culler, following Roland Barthes, it is inevitably the reader (as a function, not so much as a person), and not the author of a text who inscribes the quotations that make up writing. As Barthes puts it, “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (146-148).

If one agrees on these two basic traits of intertextuality, the non-autonomous status of the text and the absence or impossibility of origin, another problem arises: how to recognize intertextuality, or claim with some assurance that one is dealing with a case of it? Culler speaks of the “dangers that beset the notion of intertextuality.” One of those lies in the assumption of the intractability of possible sources of origin: there is a “vast and undefined discursive space it designates” (*Pursuit* 109). A possible solution is to narrow this vast space, which runs the risk of falling into a positivistic approach. Alternatively, for convenience’s sake, particular texts can be designated as “pre-texts.” A pre-text is understood as what comes before, but not fully determines, the later text. The pre-text is often used negatively as alibi, or pretext, to submit the later text to a definite source, or to claim the prestige of the source for the later reworking. The pre-text can also be understood in a constructive way. It can function as a source for the later text, because, for instance, there are thematic similarities. In that case, the pre-text will initially signal recognition, but more importantly, this will be followed by the observation of differences between the two texts. The pre-text then functions not so much as a model, but as a, possibly negative, counterpart.

Another possible way to limit intertextuality analytically is to concentrate on genre. Culler suggests relating a work of art to a whole series of other works, treating them not as sources,

but as constituents of a genre. The next step, then, is to infer the conventions of that genre. The focus should be on the conventions that, for instance, direct the production and interpretation of character, plot structure, and thematic synthesis.

The issue of genre is at stake in both the cinematic texts and the Bible text I have selected. Hollywood cinema and the apocalyptically themed films in this study consist of a mixture of genres. In Bible and religious studies, much attention has been paid to the delineation of an apocalyptic genre. The traits of this genre are significant for my analysis of cinematic renderings of the Apocalypse, since the Bible functions as a pre-text for Hollywood films. The interconnectedness of these two fields, Bible and film, calls for an interdisciplinary approach.

### **Interdisciplinarity: Religion and Film**

This study endeavors to set up a dialogue between past and present through secular cinematic representations as well as religious biblical representations of apocalypse and martyrdom. Hence, it is interdisciplinary by nature. Interdisciplinarity is not a simple encounter between two disciplines. It involves more than the extension of the subject matter of the respective fields or the use of tools and concepts of the other discipline. In my initial survey of the encounter between religion and film, I came across a number of recurrent issues that thwart a productive dialogue between film studies and religious studies.<sup>2</sup>

In their introduction to *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, Joel Martin and Conrad

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<sup>2</sup> The long overdue estimation of the relevance of the study of religion and film is signaled by the publication of the first anthology on the subject. *The Religion and Film Reader* (2007), edited by Jolyon Mitchell and S.Brent Plate, is the first book that attempts to address the depth and width of the field. For an older survey of the theological engagement with film, see Steve Nolan "The Books of the Films: Trends in Religious Film Analysis."

Ostwalt examine film and religion as independent, yet connected objects of study. As Martin remarks, the relationship between religion and film is largely overlooked in the work of film scholars. Film studies has gained immensely from interdisciplinary encounters with disciplines such as literary studies, linguistics, and psychology; yet, religion studies remains absent. It appears, Martin argues, that “film studies has little to learn from religious studies” (*Screening 2*). Religious scholars feel that film scholars do not take them seriously. Vice versa, religion scholars have largely neglected the effect of film and film studies. Martin’s critique points to the mutual misrecognition between film studies and religious studies.

Some religion scholars have begun to venture into the field of film. These ventures, Martin argues, are not unproblematic. Much work of religion scholars reveals a politics of taste and prejudice with regard to film, namely that “only a highbrow film can be truly religious” (3). Only the films of established artists or auteurs have been the subject of interest in religious studies.<sup>3</sup> This assumption is confirmed by Melanie Wright’s observation that religion scholars “regard the study of mass cultural forms as simply the hors d’oeuvre before the ‘real work’ of theology and religious studies begins” (439).<sup>4</sup> Since religion itself is just as much a mass-culture phenomenon, this attitude is unproductive for a sustained encounter between the two disciplines.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example, Joseph Cunneen’s article “Film and the Sacred,” or his book on the work of director Robert Bresson (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately, also within film studies itself, a certain kind of condescension persists with regard to contemporary, commercial cinema. As José Arroyo (2000) argues in the introduction to *Action/Spectacle: A Sight and Sound Reader*, the contemporary blockbuster is often critically evaluated as “mass culture at its most crudely capitalistic” (2000: ix). This “contempt for the contemporary” (2000: viii), as Arroyo phrases it, is also the subject of Yvonne Tasker’s (1993) monograph of action cinema, to which I will refer several times in this study. Tasker’s study underscores film studies’ previous neglect of the aesthetic and political credibility of action cinema. Too often, the premise is accepted that there is nothing to be said about this type of cinema “other than to signal the genre’s ideological complicity with the operations of patriarchal capitalism” (1993: 8). Questions of “bad” ideology put aside, the issue of “taste” and what

Most encounters between religion and film are characterized by a lack of engagement, not just with the larger field of film studies, but also with the *medium* of film. The analysis of film as an audio-visual entity is absent, resulting, as Wright puts it, in the “tendency to elide film meaning into narrative” (438). Contrary to that neglect of the medium, I use the kind of film analysis that extends beyond themes and motifs. Instead, the visual aspect of film is given prominence. Each of my chapters consists of a detailed shot analysis of one or several sequences of the film under discussion. The analysis offers the possibility of examining the shot-by-shot dynamics of a given sequence. Moreover, in each chapter, I engage closely with aspects of film studies, ranging from the notion of the star text to the influence of DVD technology on film analysis.

### **Hollywood cinema and the question of genre**

This study analyzes contemporary Hollywood blockbuster cinema. Above, I have proposed that genre, as a field of intertextuality, can function as mediator between biblical and cinematic representations. Genre functions as a mediator between

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constitutes “good” or “bad” taste seems always implicitly present in the discussion and reviews of the types of films I am discussing here. It seems as though one has to apologize for their choice of topic, or even dismiss it all together. For instance, in an article published in the online *Journal of Religion and Film* entitled “Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn,” Conrad Ostwalt, who has written extensively on apocalyptically themed films, is negative about the cinematic representations of the Apocalypse as produced by Hollywood. He concludes his article by stating: “Thus, Hollywood’s apocalypse might not spell the end of the world as we know it—only the end of culture and good taste.” I am not arguing for an uncritical stance toward the ideology blockbuster film, as my chapter on ARMAGEDDON will show. Yet, I think the least analysts can do is engage with their chosen object, without dismissing it, either in advance or afterward. *Journal of Religion and Film* entitled “*Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn*,” Conrad Ostwalt, who has written extensively on apocalyptically themed films, is negative about the cinematic representations of the Apocalypse as produced by Hollywood. He concludes his article by stating: “Thus, Hollywood’s apocalypse might not spell the end of the world as we know it—only the end of culture and good taste.” I am not arguing for an uncritical stance toward the ideology blockbuster film, as my chapter on ARMAGEDDON will show. Yet, I think the least analysts can do is engage with their chosen object, without dismissing it, either in advance or afterward.

producers and audiences, and is a device that works to contain possibilities of reading. Genre guides the reader in the direction of a preferred reading and blocks other, non-preferred readings. Its rules constitute a necessary code for a “correct” (preferred) interpretation of a work. The ability to identify a text as belonging to a particular genre enables the viewer to see that text in the frame of a group of similar texts. Understanding the approximation of a text to a particular genre is an intertextual process. It involves experience with other texts; from that experience emerges expectation. Genre limits the number of readings that are possible, and provides a border in which intertextuality is captured; it sacrifices an infinite number of readings in favor of one, or at least to a limited number of readings.

Within film theory, much work has been dedicated to the question of film genre. Genre is an important marketing tool of popular cinema. Both audiences and filmmakers categorize films by genre. The act of designating genre may seem fairly unproblematic, since most viewers have sufficient knowledge of dominant genres. However, once one attempts to produce a definition of a particular genre, one encounters problems. As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson in *Film Art* put it, “A genre is easier to recognize than to define” (51). Stumbling blocks are manifold. For instance, an attempt to define genre by subject matter and theme produces confusion rather than clarity, as Bordwell effectively shows:

A Western seems identified primarily by its setting, a science-fiction film by its technology, a musical by its manner of presentation (song and dance). Thus one could have a science-fiction musical, in which Martians visit Billy the Kid and everyone puts on a show. (Of course, this could also turn out to be a comedy, but how is *that* genre defined?) (*Making Meaning* 147)

An historical approach to genre, Bordwell continues, also has its

shortcomings, “since many currently accepted genres, such as melodrama and film noir, did not exist as categories for audiences or filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s” (147).

Despite many efforts, attempts to construct a coherent map of genres have been unsuccessful. Genre is nevertheless important for this study. Genre serves as way to limit the potentially unlimited semiosis of intertextual relations. Because genres cross media borders, they serve as a guiding principle through which interdisciplinary studies can be undertaken.

The film *END OF DAYS* (USA: Peter Hyams, 1999) introduces the generic status of the group of films in this study. Following Bordwell’s line of argument, it is easy to recognize the genres at work in *END OF DAYS*. The film is an example of the hybridity of contemporary Hollywood cinema in that it carefully mixes several genres. I can easily identify a handful of genres, or subgenres, in *END OF DAYS*: the action genre, the disaster genre, the horror genre, and perhaps, the apocalyptic genre. There is a particular strategy to Hollywood’s genre mixing. As Rick Altman argues, the designation of genre is a practice mostly carried out by film critics. The Hollywood studios, on the other hand, try to draw the largest possible audiences. Declaring a film to belong to a particular genre, Altman continues, “always risks alienating potential spectators who avoid that genre, Hollywood studios prefer instead to imply generic affiliation rather than actually to name any specific genre” (*Film/Genre* 128).

Hollywood targets its films at the widest possible audience groups (differentiated by age, sex, race, ethnicity, class, education, preferred activities, geographical location and income), which results in making films that consist of “a mix of as many genres as called for by the targeted audience” (129). Altman also argues that genre mixing is not a postmodern practice. Instead, he claims, genre mixing has long been a standard Hollywood practice. Contemporary forms

of genre mixing have become much more advanced due to the huge amount of audience research.

*END OF DAYS* should be called an action film. The main reason for this is the presence of the star of *END OF DAYS*, Arnold Schwarzenegger, who has been called the “most representative star” of the action film (Arroyo v). The two other possible generic components of the film, the disaster genre and the apocalyptic genre, need elaboration.

### **Disaster, Catastrophe, or Apocalypse?**

In his book *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe*, Stephen Keane formulates a definition of the genre of disaster films. He looks at the historical development of the genre in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Keane observes a cyclical movement in the release of disaster films. In his opinion, one should speak of cycles of disaster films, such as the cycle of films released in the 1970s.<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Keane differs from what Maurice Yacowar has argued. Yacowar claimed that, “disaster films constitute a sufficiently numerous, old and conventionalized group to be considered a genre, rather than a popular cycle that comes and goes” (90). Yacowar considers the disaster film a solid historical genre, independent from particular periods and trends. In Keane’s estimation, however, disaster films adhere to a specific socio-cultural trend.

Keane’s chapter on films produced in the late 1990s is particularly useful. He asserts that disaster films address “issues pertinent to the time they were made” (73). The disaster films of the 1970s, such as *AIRPORT* (dir. George Seaton, USA, 1970), *EARTHQUAKE* (dir. Mark Robson, USA, 1974) and *THE POSEIDON ADVENTURE* (dir.

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<sup>5</sup> The conception that disaster films appear in cycles is shared by Geoff King (2000). In his book on the Hollywood blockbuster, he compares the cycle of the 1970s to the cycle of the late 1990s and concludes that a good deal of thematic continuity can be identified between the two cycles.

Ronald Neame, USA, 1972) are all analyzed with identifiable social and political factors in mind. The disaster films of the 1990s, Keane argues, cannot be read and understood without “reference to previous disaster cycles or, conversely, the altogether hyperbolic prospect of imminent doom” (73). This leads to two important characteristics of the disaster film of the 1990s. Contrary to the disaster cycle of the 1970s, when disaster films spanned the entire decade, the 1990s cycle comprises a wave of films nearly exclusively restricted to the later years of the decade. The release of disaster films reached its peak in 1997; in that year, fourteen disaster films were released. The second characteristic results from the first: since most films were released by the end of the decade, this cycle of disaster films was labeled “millennial movies” (73).

The success of the disaster films of the late 1990s can be explained by several factors, according to Keane. First, these films “tapped into, and further energised, the ‘pop millenarianism’ of the time; the tabloid storied, television documentaries and best-selling books which effectively worked in turning ‘anxiety’ into ‘interest’” (74). In addition, thanks to the developments in the area of computer-generated special effects of the 1980s and 1990s, scenes of mass destruction could now be shown to audiences in a way never seen before. Viewers had effectively forgotten what disaster films were all about, so “the time was ripe for bringing disaster movies back round again” (74).

In a similar vein, John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett connect the comeback of the disaster film to the revolution in special effects over the past two decades. The possibilities of creating believable images of natural annihilation, Lawrence and Jewett argue, have given the disaster genre a new impetus. In a chapter of their book on the American monomyth, they focus on

what they call the catastrophe genre.<sup>6</sup> Comparing the generic cycles of the 1970s and 1990s, characteristics of contemporary disaster films can be pointed out. Two features of recent disaster films are absent in the earlier films. Lawrence and Jewett assert that the scale of redemption has increased considerably: “all human life is at stake in the movies *ARMAGEDDON*, *DEEP IMPACT*, and *LEFT BEHIND: THE MOVIE*” (326). Moreover, these films are characterized by the blatant glorification of the United States. As Lawrence and Jewett sarcastically put it, “A grateful world lifts its eyes to the heavens and expresses relief at being saved by the heroes from the United States” (328).

Apart from these observations, Lawrence and Jewett consider another trait of recent disaster films, which has gone unnoticed by most other theorists of the genre: the “retribution principle.” There is a relationship between the violation of sexual mores and punishment by the forces of nature: “The contemporary images of disaster parallel those biblical stories in which the pattern of retribution for sexual infidelity and frivolity is deeply embedded” (314).

The first example of this principle can be found in the flood story in Genesis. Lawrence and Jewett conclude that “the paradigm was thus established for posterity: sexual improprieties provoke natural disasters, from which only the pure and faithful will escape. The retributive principle is Deuteronomic: sin brings disaster, while virtue brings success and escape from disaster” (315).

The retribution principle at work in recent disaster films is paradoxical. On one hand, disaster cinema “struggles so hard for the modern illusion of visual realism”; on the other, it retains

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<sup>6</sup> The term “monomyth” refers to Joseph Campbell’s (1949) classic definition of the basic narrative pattern of the hero’s journey in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Lawrence and Jewett argue that the superhero is the antidemocratic counterpart of this monomyth.

“archaic biblical conventions of retribution.” This paradox is worth investigating. Lawrence and Jewett conclude that “while the high-budget special effects provide the believability of the modern disaster film, the archaic biblical fantasy of selective and moralistic destruction remains as the central dramatic convention” (315).

These biblical moral conventions are even more prominent in the genre of the apocalyptic film. Conrad Ostwalt has written extensively on the apocalyptic genre, or what he also calls the cinematic millennial drama, or secular apocalypse. In “Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation,” Ostwalt proposes the basic themes of apocalyptic films. In his opinion, these modern, secular, and cinematic representations of apocalyptic themes have an important function: they provide meaning to a chaotic existence. Ostwalt quotes from *The Sense of an Ending* by English literary critic Frank Kermode, suggesting that “by placing life drama in relation to a beginning, a middle, and an end, the apocalypse provides coherence and consonance—it makes time trustworthy, especially when plot points towards the future, as it does in the apocalypse” (61).

Ostwalt’s examination of recurring apocalyptic characters, settings, themes, and plots is hampered by his erratic method of analysis. He claims that, in some films, the emphasis is on setting, in others on character development, and in still others, on plot. Ideally, however, a film should be analyzed for the interaction between these aspects. However, Ostwalt is on to something when he looks at the difference between traditional apocalyptic literature and the contemporary Hollywood reworking of that literature:

Hollywood has captured and fostered the secularization of the apocalyptic tradition. The traditional apocalyptic model presented the end of time and history as an immanent, or at least an imminent, reality from God. The contemporary

model of the apocalypse offers the notion that end is avoidable altogether. In other words, the modern apocalyptic imagination removes the end of time from the sacred realm of the gods and places the apocalypse firmly in the grasp and control of humanity. (63)

Hence, he continues, the modern apocalyptic is characterized by a human, “messianic figure who prevents the dawning of the new age and the eschatological kingdom” (62). This human agent plays a key part in all the films I analyze in this study. In addition, the idea of self-sacrifice is related to this savior figure: to save the world, the redeemer must give up his or her own life.

By focusing so extensively on genre, I have followed Culler’s suggestion to limit potential intertextual space. Through this conception of intertextuality, questions of authority and origin are suspended. Yet, *END OF DAYS* and the other films I discuss belong to several genres at the same time, the disaster genre as well as the horror and action genres. Consequently, despite my emphasis on genre, this study does not attempt to define the parameters for an apocalyptic film genre. This is not a genre study in the classic sense of the term. I am not interested in uncovering a possible master narrative for the genre. Though the films I discuss comprise two guiding themes, apocalypse and martyrdom, they do not display fixed generic building blocks such as character type, plot line, or setting. Genre helps me focus on thematic trends in the entanglement of past texts. The notion of genre returns in my selection of biblical, apocalyptic texts.

## Apocalypse

The last book of the New Testament, Revelation, tells the tale of the end. Revelation or The Apocalypse of John is a late first century CE text. It is believed to offer the scenario of God's final judgment on humanity. Apocalypse means "revelation, a revealing" (in Greek, *apokalyptein*, to uncover, take the lid or veil off). Revelation is not the only apocalyptic narrative in the Bible. There are other examples to be found, such as parts of Daniel (7-12), 4 Ezra, I Enoch and the apocryphal book of I Baruch (the latter three are so-called Pseudepigraphical Books). This has led to the general supposition among biblical scholars that an apocalyptic genre exists.

The definition of the genre is dealt with in two issues of *Semeia* (no.14, 1979 and no.36, 1986). In the introduction to *Semeia* 14, John J. Collins states that the purpose is to "identify and define a literary genre 'apocalypse'" (1). The genre, Collins continues, can be identified by the "recognizable similarity among a number of texts" (1). This similarity is expressed through recurring elements, which function as the "firm basis for generic classification" (2). The elements make up a master paradigm, divided into two sections: the framework and the content of the apocalypse. The paradigm consists of thirteen returning elements, often divided into smaller subsets (6-8).

I elaborate on three elements that are identifiable in Hollywood films as well. First, the revelation is visual, in the form of a vision. This element figures prominently in the films I discuss in this study. The second element is salvation. Salvation may take the form of either "exaltation to the heavens or renewal of the earth" (Collins, "Introduction" 10). Third, exaltation, or rapture, can take the form of a personal afterlife, where "all the constraints of the human condition, including death, are transcended" (10). This feature, Collins explains, is the "most consistent aspect of the eschatology of the apocalypses" (9). Taken together, these features result in

a revelatory vision of an afterlife. This, I will argue, is a recurring element in apocalyptic film as well. A final element is the presence of otherworldly beings, often in the guise of Satan. This affirms the transcendent nature of apocalypses, and points to the existence of another world.

On the basis of this paradigm, a comprehensive definition of the apocalyptic genre can be formulated. Collins proposes:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.  
("Introduction")

This definition, which emphasizes the revelatory nature of apocalypses, is far removed from the contemporary popular and predominantly secular conception. In the popular conception, Apocalypse has become a synonym for doomsday, disaster, and the end. Although the academic, biblical definition and the popular notion of apocalypse are divergent, the apocalyptic is, according to Jon Paulien, "very much alive and well in popular culture today" (158). It is particularly in American society and popular culture.<sup>7</sup>

There is a difference, however, between the academic conception of the notion and the popular idea. A three-fold distinction needs to be observed. As David E. Aune argues in *Semeia* 36, there are "apocalypses" (as literature), "apocalyptic eschatology" (as a world view), and "apocalypticism" (as a socio-religious movement) (67). The three are closely related; however, their referents do not necessarily coincide. As Collins states in *Semeia* 14: "if apocalypticism is assumed to be at all related to apocalypses, then

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis on apocalypticism in American culture and mentality, see: Harold Bloom (1992), Paul Boyer (1992), and Robert Fuller (1995).

the analysis of the literary genre must cast some light on the social phenomenon, even if they cannot be directly correlated” (4).

This interconnectedness, direct or indirect, warrants the genre approach. Thus, the biblical pre-text and its generic traits function as a template against which other manifestations of apocalyptic discourse (biblical, social, theological, and cultural) can be read for their similarities as well as their transformations. The other two conceptions, worldview and socio-religious movement, are addressed in the next section.

### **American Apocalypticism**

In *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and the Apocalypse in America*, Daniel Wojcik outlines the historical development of apocalyptic belief in the US. Wojcik sketches a historical picture starting with Columbus’ landing, an event that the explorer himself interpreted as part of a divine plan, to the present.<sup>8</sup> The US is often historically conceptualized as the “new Eden,” an exceptional terrestrial paradise. This idea, exemplified in the writings of the Puritans, Wojcik demonstrates, entails the religious belief that the foundation of the US was not only part of God’s divine plan, but also instrumental in bringing about God’s kingdom on earth (21-24). In short, from its Puritan foundation to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, culminating in the 1960s and 1970s of the last century, American religions are characterized by a fascination with apocalyptic prophecy. One could use the term American apocalypse, since there exists, Wojcik argues, a thorough convergence of general apocalyptic attitudes and a belief in the United States as the culmination of history.

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<sup>8</sup> Columbus imbued his role as explorer with divine qualities. In his journal, he writes: “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the apocalypse of St. John... and he showed me the spot where to find it” (1997: 21). For a thorough study on Columbus’ apocalyptic mindset, see Pauline Moffitt Watts (1985).

The enduring apocalyptic streak in American culture may be connected to its “syncretic” nature. Syncretism is understood as the combination of different forms of religious belief.<sup>9</sup> Wojcik argues that the apocalyptic beliefs of fundamentalist Christians and those of secular groups, ranging from survivalist groups (such as white supremacist, neo-Nazi groups) and youth subcultures (the Punk and Generation X subcultures of the 1980s and 1990s), offer many points of convergence (10-11).<sup>10</sup> Wojcik does not develop this notion, but the syncretic nature of apocalyptic belief and its attendant scenarios can supply one explanation for its enduring appeal in American culture.<sup>11</sup> There is something in it for everyone. Hollywood, eager to tap into elements of the *Zeitgeist*, uses these scenarios to its own benefit. Because apocalyptic stories are syncretic, they can take on many different shapes. Their potential use by Hollywood, to tell those stories, across different genres, is nearly limitless.

### **Narrative Theory and a Philosophy of The End**

The need to make sense of time and history are not exclusive to religious tradition or American culture. I briefly address two disciplinary traditions, narrative theory and postmodern philosophy, that engage with notions of time, temporality, and the

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<sup>9</sup> The best example of this apocalyptic syncretism is the belief in UFOs, which is a synthesis of “Christianity, Theosophy, Spiritualism, Eastern religions, New Age notions, and ideas inspired by science fiction literature and popular films” (Wojcik, 1997: 10).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Barkun (1994) has written extensively on the apocalyptic tendencies in several American far Right groups, in *Religion and the Racist Right: The Origins of the Christian Identity movement*. See also his article “Racist Apocalypse: Millennialism on the Far Right” in *The Year 2000: Essays on The End*, Charles B. Strozier and Michael Flynn (editors). New York: New York University Press (1997: 190-205). For a discussion on terrorism and religiously motivated acts of war, see Mark Juergensmeyer (2003) *Terror in the Mind of God*.

<sup>11</sup> The pervasiveness of apocalyptic thinking can be interpreted as alarming. Feminist theologian Catherine Keller (1992) claims that it is impossible to escape apocalyptic thinking: we are “*already* involved in apocalypse” (1992: 184, emphasis in text). She contends that one should be attentive to the apocalyptic pattern that is dominant in Western history and to the cultural and ideological stretch between biblical and

question of the end. Although these traditions are assumed to be secular in character, their imagery and vocabulary have a distinct religious quality.

In his discussion on the importance of narrative, literary theorist Peter Brooks speaks of a “sacred masterplot that organizes and explains the world” (6). In his influential study on plot and narrative, *Reading for the Plot*, Brooks suggests the human need for “an explanatory narrative that seeks its authority in a return to origins and the tracing of a coherent story forward from origin to present” (6).

In Brooks’ conception, plot is the dynamic logic of narrative, which in turn is a form of understanding and explanation (10). Narratives function as a way of coming to terms with death, since every story presumes an ending. Following Walter Benjamin, Brooks argues, “only the end can finally determine meaning” (22, 52). The end might take up an even more imperative position if one observes the principle that the end is instrumental in shaping the beginning and the middle of a narrative (22).

This estimation of the end is also crucial for Frank Kermode’s classic study on the relationship between fiction and apocalypse, *The Sense of an Ending*. By imagining an end for the world, apocalyptic discourse imposes “coherent patterns” on history. These patterns “make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and the middle” (17). Kermode thus argues for the recognition of apocalyptic patterns in literary fictions; at the same time, he acknowledges that

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contemporary materializations of the theme. Keller observes the intricate link and, at the same time, considerable distance between biblical and modern and secular forms of apocalypticism. She warns explicitly about the present form of apocalypticism, particularly as expressed by Christian fundamentalists. Their right-wing apocalyptic thinking is pervasive within American society and has gained access to the power of the state. Academics, Keller argues, should rid themselves of their “ignorance about the conservative Christian movement and to work to expose right-wing apocalypse, with its massive grip on the American populations, as a demonic distortion of the biblical apocalypse” (1992: 187). Keller takes a political stance against the exploitation of biblical apocalyptic texts to support the agenda of the new religious right, an ideology she characterizes as “bare-faced sexism and militarism” (1992: idem).

this pattern also functions as one of “our ways of making sense of the world” (28). The human need for an “imaginatively predicted future” often results in the calculation of a certain end. As it turns out, these prophesized ends have never come to pass. This, Kermode points out, is an important characteristic of apocalyptic discourse:

The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near. Consequently the historical allegory is always having to be revised; time discredits it. And this is important. Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience. (8)

Despite numerous miscalculations in the past, the idea of an impending end remains in place. In relation to this apocalyptic resilience, I would add another narrative mechanism. The historical abundance of failed prophesized endings leads to the assumption that predicted endings never come to pass. This logic is driven by a desire to imagine the end in the certainty that this end will never happen. I return to this below in relation to contemporary Hollywood apocalyptic films.

Whereas Brooks and Kermode support the idea that the grand narratives of history structure the apparent human need for an ending, perhaps the end has already happened or is an illusion altogether.<sup>12</sup> These two assumptions are crucial for Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern, philosophical conception of time and history. In the aptly titled *The Illusion of the End*, the human need for an end is characterized by Baudrillard as a “fatal exigency, a false strategy of time which wants to shoot straight ahead to a point beyond the end” (8). Understandable as this desire may be, it is futile, according to Baudrillard, since “hyperreality rules out the very occurrence of the

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<sup>12</sup> Or, it could be argued that the major, or any, narrative of the end has become redundant altogether. Naturally, the first example of such an analysis of the end of history that comes to mind is Francis Fukuyama’s (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*.

Last Judgement or the Apocalypse or the Revolution” (8).<sup>13</sup> There are no longer any events, there is only the endless circulation of consumer goods. Baudrillard’s main argument entails the idea that history is already finished: “All the ends we have envisaged elude our grasp and history has no chance of bringing them about, since it will, in the interim, have come to an end” (8).

Baudrillard’s notion of an ending is a disappointing one: the end might have taken place but, if so, went unnoticed. Not only have we missed out on the experience of “the original chaos, the Big Bang,” but our hopes for experiencing the final moment, “the Big Crumb” are similarly useless (115). Whether or not one chooses to agree with Baudrillard, his analysis of the “demonic temptation to falsify ends and the calculation of ends” (8) resonates with current narratives in popular culture.

Following Baudrillard, apocalyptic narratives are contradictory in nature. On one hand, they thrive on the imminence of the end, which functions as the catalyst for the story. On the other, the expected ending can never be reached. Or, to be more precise, the ending is cancelled, delayed or postponed. As literary critic Northrop Frye comments, “We notice that while the book of Revelation seems emphatically the end of the Bible, it is a remarkable open end” (137). I call this the paradox of apocalyptic narrative: the anticipation of an end that will eventually be forestalled. This, to me, seems a principal narrative structure in apocalyptic cinema. The films I am discussing here, such as *END OF DAYS*,

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<sup>13</sup> According to Baudrillard in *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), postmodern societies, or the postmodern condition at large, are organized around simulation and the play of images and signs. To such an extent that simulation is perceived to be more real than the real itself, hence the name hyperreality. Linked to this is Baudrillard’s conception of time. Postmodernity differs from modernity’s conception of time as linear and developing in a revolutionary, forward moving manner. Instead, the postmodern is characterized by the discourse of the end: the end of labor, the end of the “signifier/signified dialectic, which facilitates the accumulation of knowledge and meaning” (1993: 8).

ARMAGEDDON, and ALIEN3, all thrive on the narrative of impending apocalypse, only to have that end cancelled at the very last minute.

In my discussion of various interpretations of the end, ranging from religious to secular, post-modern perceptions, the similarity between these modes of thought is striking. The distinction between secular forms of narrative and history and religious apocalypticism is not clear-cut. These resemblances, once more, point to the syncretic nature of Apocalypse as a concept.<sup>14</sup> As Marcos Becquer and José Gatti argue, syncretism “entails the ‘formal’ coexistence of components whose precarious identities are mutually modified in their encounter, yet whose distinguishing differences, as such, are not dissolved or elided in these modifications, but strategically reconstituted” (447).

In apocalyptic discourse as a syncretic practice, religious and secular discourse come together; reciprocally alter each other, yet without losing their particular characteristics. This encounter results in something that is more than the sum of its particular parts.

## **Martyrdom**

The Apocalypse demands a subject: the martyr. The figure of the martyr, whether one looks at it from a classical or contemporary standpoint, provokes reactions ranging from admiration to disgust. Because martyrdom is a spectacular performance with the martyr’s body as an important medium, martyr stories never fail to fascinate.

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, Lee Quinby proposes to understand apocalypticism in all its divergent manifestations in a “Foucauldian sense as a regime of truth that operates within a field of power relations and prescribes a particular moral behavior” (1994: xv). This apocalyptic regime of truth has had a persistent appeal, in ancient as well as modern times. Its discourse—understood as a “system of dispersion of statements that define, designate, circumscribe, and sometimes eliminate certain objects of its authority”—claims to have access to “revealed and absolute truth” (1994: xv) about the fate of humanity. Quinby stresses that contemporary types of apocalyptic discourse function as a regime of truth.

Martyr figures provoke a wealth of multiple and often conflicting meanings, texts, interpretations, and images. Martyrdom forms one of the founding myths of at least two of the three monotheistic religions. Yet, an exploration of the classical Jewish, Christian, and Muslim sources does not yield an unequivocal understanding of the figure. Instead, it exposes the instability and changeability of the concept. In what follows, I will not attempt to offer an overview of the history and interpretation of martyrdom in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Instead, I sketch the open nature of martyrdom.<sup>15</sup>

The starting point for this inquiry is the Book of Revelation, the key text for martyrdom in a Christian context, a text that figures prominently throughout this study.<sup>16</sup> Though it is generally agreed that the Book of Revelation is not a classical martyr story, its persistent influence can hardly be overestimated. Elizabeth Castelli

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Boyarin's book *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* supports my argument. Boyarin analyzes the discourse of martyrdom in both (rabbinic) Judaism and Christianity. His main thesis opposes the traditional emphasis on a dichotomy between Judaic and Christian discourses on martyrdom, and the way this dichotomy functions in "the process of making Judaism and Christianity as distinct entities" (1999: 93). Rather, Boyarin proposes to read Judaism and Christianity not as two separate entities, but as "complexly related subsystems of one religious polysystem" (92). Through breaking down the dichotomy and showing its instability, Boyarin argues, the discourse on martyrdom is opened up and demonstrates its development and change. The question of a historic point of origin—which religion invented martyrdom in the first place?—is rendered futile. Instead, Boyarin proposes to be attentive to the circulating and recirculating motifs, themes, and religious ideas in the making of martyrdom, a recirculation between Christians and Jews that allows for no simple litany of origins and influence (118). Indeed, Boyarin's call to forsake a "simple litany of origins" reverberates within this study.

<sup>16</sup> As Leonard L. Thompson argues in *The Book of Revelation: Apocalypse and Empire*, although commentators on Revelation differ greatly in their interpretations of the exact historical period in which the book was written and, moreover, by whom it was written, it is commonly accepted that Revelation was written by a man who calls himself John in the reigning period of the Roman emperor Domitian, 81-96 CE. In this period the Christian minority in Asia Minor often came into conflict with the Roman authorities and particularly the imperial cult the Romans forced on its people. The imperial cult imposed by Domitian, who is generally regarded by Roman historians as a tyrant and megalomaniac, demanded the emperor to be worshipped as a deity. Christians who did not act in accordance with Roman law in this respect were harassed and persecuted (1990: 11-17).

summarizes her view of Revelation's effect on early Christians as follows: "The gruesome portraits of righteous suffering and vindication in the book of Revelation wrote the story of Christian suffering within the broadest framework imaginable with a driving apocalyptic beat establishing the rhythms for understanding historical experience in cosmic terms" (*Martyrdom* 36).

Revelation is rife with examples of horrible suffering and exoneration. In Revelation 6:9-11, the martyrs appear for the first time in some detail:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, "Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?" They were given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number would be complete both of their fellow servants and of their brothers and sisters, who were soon to be killed, as they themselves had been killed.

This passage is a good example of the language and imagery that the Book of Revelation employs. The key phrase is "those who had been slaughtered for the word of God", which denotes the martyrs. The second part of this phrase, "and for the testimony they had given," is important, yet problematic. I return to the aspect of testimony later. The imagery of slaughter and blood is a recurring one. Initially, it refers to the blood of the Lamb (5:9-10), and later it refers to the blood of the martyrs (19:2, where John speaks of "the blood of his servants"). This shedding of blood invokes the need for judgment and vengeance; the latter is, in part, also carried out by means of blood (16:4-7). Yet, retribution does not come swiftly, and those who expect it are asked to be patient, or to "rest a little longer."

With regard to the verses quoted above, Richard Bauckham writes,

When the fifth seal is opened, the Christian martyrs of the past cry out for their blood to be avenged, but they are told they must wait until the rest of the full complement of Christian martyrs is complete. In other words, the final judgment on the wicked, which will avenge the martyrs, is delayed until the rest of the Lamb's followers also suffer martyrdom. (*Theology*, 79)

He argues that the “rest of the Lamb’s followers”, i.e., all Christians, will have to suffer martyrdom. Bauckham argues that Revelation portrays a future that envisages the martyrdom of all Christians: “The message of the book is that if Christians are faithful to their calling to bear witness to the truth against the claims of the beast, they will provoke a conflict with the beast so critical as to be a struggle to the death” (93).

Jesus sets the example of martyrdom through his sacrificial death on the cross. Those who voluntarily chose to mimic the death of Christ giving witness to their faith were called martyrs. Being sentenced to death, which renders the victim passive, becomes invested with an active component. Through the mimesis of Christ, the imposed death sentence becomes a way for the martyr to express his or her desire for a willed death. The martyr gains power over those who have sentenced him to death, actively expressing his joy over his impending death.

The connection between the act of witnessing and martyrdom is a recurring one in the literature. It is based on the supposed etymological connection between the two notions. The assumption is that the Greek noun “*martyrs*” (“witness”) and its related verb “*martyrein*” transformed into the early Christian title “martyr” and into the meaning “to die a martyr’s death.” This

hypothesis is, however, no longer valid. As Jan Willem van Henten states, the “technical terminology referring to martyrdom in the Jewish and Christian contexts appears considerably later than the phenomenon itself” (“Jewish” 164-165). The title of martyr was bestowed upon persons in hindsight.<sup>17</sup>

The relationship between witness and martyr becomes more problematic in the Islamic context. In “The Revaluation of Martyrdom in Early Islam,” Keith Lewinsein shows how a small “philological observation,” namely that the Arabic words for martyr and witness are identical, reveals a crucial unease in the concept of martyrdom. In Islamic martyrdom, the merging of witnessing and suffering into the concept of the martyr is completed, revealing the Christian influence on Islamic martyrdom. However, as Lewinsein argues, the Islamic understanding of martyrdom differs significantly from its Christian counterpart. The major difference lies in the fact that “for Muslims, one earns the title of martyr (*shahid*; pl. *shuhada'*) without any apparent act of witnessing. The martyr's sacrifice does not generally attest to anything specific, nor does it symbolize much beyond the obvious sense of death in the service of God's plan” (78).

Lewinsein argues that *shahid* derives its meaning strictly from the Christian roots of the term martyr, and not from “any intrinsic connection in Muslim minds between witnessing and martyrdom” (78). He considers several “strained attempts” by Muslim authorities

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<sup>17</sup> In his discussion on the symbolic motif of witness in Revelation, Richard Bauckham also critiques the incorporation of the act of giving witness within the martyr's act of dying. According to Bauckham, the title of witness “refers primarily to the witness Jesus bore to God during his life on earth and to his faithfulness in maintaining his witness even at the cost of his life.” As Bauckham continues, “the word ‘witness’ (*Martyrs*) does not yet, in Revelation, carry the technical Christian meaning of ‘martyr’ (one who bears witness by dying for the faith). It does not refer to death itself as a witness, but to the verbal witness to the truth of God.” Nevertheless, Bauckham adds, “it is strongly implied that faithful witness will incur opposition and lead to death” (1993: 72). The two concepts have merged over time and have gained significance in “technical Christian” discourse. Yet, the relationship as such, Bauckham observes, is not unproblematic or etymologically rooted in the word “witness,” as is often suggested by other authors.

to make sense of the word. What becomes clear is that “the Muslim tradition had to invent for itself a connection between witnessing and martyrdom, since none was immediately apparent.” Unlike in the Christian tradition, “the religious value of suffering and death was never the obvious lesson to draw from the career of the Prophet or from the experience of the early Muslim community” (79-80).<sup>18</sup>

An unambiguous definition of martyrdom cannot be given. However, keeping the historical pre-texts, particularly Revelation, in mind, it is helpful to regard the martyr as a traveling concept. As Bal remarks, concepts are indispensable, particularly for an interdisciplinary topic such as this, since “they facilitate discussion on the basis of a common language.” The common language, here, is largely derived from the biblical pre-text. Yet, at the same time, concepts are “flexible: each is part of a framework, a systematic set of distinctions.” In this sense, Bal argues, one can only use a particular concept if one important characteristic of the concept is kept in mind: its provisional nature (*Travelling* 22).

Contemporary notions of martyrdom differ from the classical, canonical interpretation. Nevertheless, any definition of the martyr is somehow rooted in a canonical understanding of the concept. Jan Willem van Henten and Friedrich Avemarie propose a functional definition of the concept of the martyr. They contend that the term

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<sup>18</sup> To complicate matters further, Islam defines several types of martyrs. The two main types are “battlefield martyrs” and so-called “martyrs in the next world only.” The battlefield martyr is comparable to the Christian martyr: this martyr goes into battle in order to spread God’s religion. It is considered to be the noblest and bravest way to die. The “martyrs in the next world only” are divided into three subcategories, namely, persons who die violently or prematurely (murdered, through disease or accident), persons who die a natural death (while engaged in a praiseworthy act, that is to say, prayer, or after a virtuous life), and the “living martyrs,” those who have joined the “greater jihad,” yet are still alive. This final category could be labeled as battlefield martyrs in waiting. The discussion of the several types of Muslim martyrs points to a blurring and expanding conception of the martyr, which has moved out of the confines of the Christian definition of the term. For a more detailed classification, see E. Kohlberg’s entry on “Shahid” in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, C.E. Bosworth *et al.* (editors). Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995: 203-207.

has become an established expression for persons who die a specific kind of heroic death. They extend the definition as follows: “A martyr is a person who in an extremely hostile situation prefers a violent death to compliance with a demand of the (usually pagan) authorities. This definition implies that the death of such a person is a structural element in the writing about this martyr” (2-3). Hence, the execution and death of the martyr should represent the final stage, the narrative climax, in a recurring sequence of events that constitute Jewish, Christian, and Muslim martyr stories.<sup>19</sup>

In *A Noble Death*, Arthur J. Droge and James D. Tabor list five characteristics of martyrs, which they distill from biblical as well classical sources. They also attempt to outline a more general notion of martyrs, which might be applicable outside a strictly theological context. Droge and Tabor’s five characteristics are:

1. [Martyrs] reflect situations of opposition and persecution;
2. The choice to die, which these individuals make, is viewed by the authors as necessary, noble, and heroic;

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<sup>19</sup> In a recent article, Van Henten takes up the general definition suggested above—of the martyr being a person who dies a violent death—and searches the Internet to explore shifting contemporary meanings. Unsurprisingly, the results of Van Henten’s search in cyberspace call for an extension of the definition. Particularly the connection between ‘violence’ and ‘martyr,’ as presupposed in canonical texts, gains new significance. The martyr’s voluntary decision to die for his or her faith, taken as an essential part of the martyr’s motivational script in the classical sense, is destabilized in contemporary discourses on what constitutes a martyr. The example of the victims of the Holocaust being marked as martyrs, shows that the “voluntary dimension of martyrdom is not self-evident any longer” (2003: 199). In other cases, the religious connotation of martyrdom is lost: “being a victim while fighting for a justified cause seems enough reason to be called a martyr” (2003: 207). Finally, Van Henten signals another important departure from the classical interpretation of martyrdom, namely the martyr’s presumed peacefulness, or the passive and peaceful intentions of the martyr. Van Henten gives the example of the “Muslim martyrs,” a group whose violent, performative acts of retaliation confound the supposedly clear demarcation between victim and perpetrator: martyrs are in many contemporary cases not only victims of violence, but also—by the very act of martyrdom—initiators, or perpetrators of violence (2003: 207).

3. These individuals are often eager to die; indeed, in several cases they end up directly *killing themselves*;
4. There is often the idea of vicarious benefit resulting from their suffering and death.
5. The expectation of vindication and reward beyond death, more often than not, is a prime motivation for their choice of death. (75)

This list serves as the template against which the contemporary cinematic texts of martyrdom are read.

In her work on early Christian martyrs,<sup>20</sup> Castelli characterizes the discourse on martyrdom as ambivalent, yet powerful to this day. She argues that there were competing theories of religion, power, and violence at work in the first centuries, the time when the early Christians came into conflict with their surroundings. The numerous conflicts between the Christians and the Romans were recorded in many different sources, Roman as well as Christian. Each side attempted to make its perspective the true and righteous one. Castelli claims that these “different versions of the past (and its relationship to the present and future) became critical resources for rendering present circumstances meaningful” (*Martyrdom* 34). It is precisely this variety of different versions, Castelli observes, which makes past discourses on martyrdom a

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<sup>20</sup> A contemporary example of a conflict of power and identity, fueled by notions of martyrdom can be found in Galit Hasan-Rokem’s essay entitled “Martyr vs. Martyr: The Sacred Language of Violence,” which analyzes the semiotics of the term ‘martyr.’ Hasan-Rokem demonstrates that a historical analysis of the word “points at its contingent changes in various situations.” Her argument focuses on the “lethal dialogue” between Israelis and Palestinians, in which the word ‘martyr’ refers, on one hand, to Palestinian victims or suicide bombers and, on the other, to Israeli victims. Both groups appropriate the word ‘martyr’ to legitimize violence and to attach powerful collective emotions to it. Following both Boyarin as well as Castelli, Hasan-Rokem argues that the concept of the martyr “has always served in the generation of mutual relationships of entities contesting their legitimacy over a specific legacy, be it sacred texts of sacred territories” (2003: 99).

critical resource for the present. Put differently, there never was one version of martyrdom to begin with. Martyrdom stories have always existed in many, mutually contesting versions. She continues, “It is precisely because of this tendency to refract the present through recourse to the past that it becomes impossible to generate a stable originary narrative concerning Christian martyrdom” (34).

Central to Castelli’s thesis is the connection between the past and the present, and the ways in which memory works to turn martyr stories into a crucial aspect of Christian collective memory and identity. Moreover, Castelli evaluates martyrdom as “an idea without a precise origin” (35). Since it is impossible as well as unproductive to pinpoint the historical moment at which martyrdom came into existence, Castelli proposes to explore the ongoing manifestations of martyrdom in “narratives, social formations, practices, and representations” (33). This study follows Castelli’s proposition for the sustained investigation of contemporary, popular, and secular representations of martyrdom. Her conception of this history as changing, as it “oscillates and adapts itself over time” resonates with preposterous history’s conception of (historical) time as changeable and simultaneous (137). The discourse of martyrdom is so powerful precisely because of its adaptability and the transformation of the object that it allows. It is not just the concept of martyrdom that is not fixed; it also causes related discourses to change. In particular, acts of martyrdom are interpreted significantly differently when women instead of men perform them. As a consequence, gender is a central theme in this study.

## Gender

The two major themes of this study, apocalypse and martyrdom, are analyzed through a gendered lens. In my study, Apocalypse and martyrdom and the stories and representations they construct are problematic from a feminist point of view.<sup>21</sup> According to feminist theologians, a defining characteristic of apocalyptic discourse is its malignant representation of women. There are three main female figures in Revelation: Jezebel, the Whore of Babylon, and the Woman clothed with the sun.<sup>22</sup> The first two are sexually impure, since they are no (longer) virgins.<sup>23</sup> Their unchecked sexuality is perceived as dangerous and, hence, needs to be constrained through the use of violence. The Woman clothed with the sun is a stereotypical representation of feminine purity and virginity, despite the fact that she is pregnant. None of the three women,

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<sup>21</sup> Catherine Keller stresses the multi-interpretable character of the Apocalypse. Its key text, the Book of Revelation, can be construed and used in different ways and applied to support conservative (Christian right-wing) as well as progressive (ecological, feminist, and socialist) political agendas. The force of this text is undeniable and the numerous uses and abuses of it should not be underestimated. Keller endorses the progressive readings of Revelation. She proposes to read back into scripture, to “locate the biblical burnmarks in the present” (1996: 20). Keller’s engagement with scripture—despite her assertion that she is unimpressed by the “patriarchal authority of scripture” (25)—is worth exploring. Feminist theology has, according to Keller, an ambivalent and “fairly abstract relation” to the Bible, in that it tends to “leave biblical interpretation to feminist exegetical and historical scholars” (25). Keller, instead, proposes a sustained encounter with the biblical text. Her conception of the biblical apocalyptic text is predominantly intertextual. The apocalyptic narrative is “intertwined with endless other ones, and therefore intertextually absorbing but also absorbed and absorbable in them, internally contested and externally relativized” (27). Keller thus proposes to unravel the threads of this seemingly coherent text. In order to do so, she deploys the tool of a midrashic reading of Revelation. Midrash refers to the ancient tradition of rabbinic commentaries on scripture, in which multiple readings, developing and disputing each other, would literally surround the scriptural text on the printed page (1996: 31). In such an analysis, interpretations are manifold and are not characterized by a single, coherent theological or other meaning. Furthermore, each reading of the text becomes part of the text, adding yet another layer of meaning to it. Through intertextual reading, meaning becomes multiplied and the closure of the Apocalypse is postponed. A deconstructivist, midrashic reading opens up the text or rather acknowledges its open-endedness.

however, escapes physical or mental punishment in Revelation.<sup>24</sup>

In the Christian discourse of martyrdom, gender is constructed in conflicting ways. Although one can claim martyrdom to be what one commentator has called an “equal opportunity employer,” martyrdom nevertheless draws on and generates ideals of masculinity (Corrington Streete 349). In the ancient context, martyr images frequently entail masculine notions of identity, gaining power over one’s opponents, self-mastery, and endurance (Penner and

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<sup>22</sup> All three figures are symbolic. Jezebel, however, is probably based on an actual historical figure, most likely a false prophet. See, Van Henten “De Openbaring van Johannes” (2003: 745-759).

<sup>23</sup>The key word in the judgment of both female figures is “porneia,” meaning “fornication.” As Van Henten (2008) argues, “the accusation of fornication [...] can be interpreted in a literal as well as a symbolical way”, [...] “the basic message of the charge of fornication in Revelation seems to be quite clear, despite its poly-interpretability: it calls for a radical abstention of foreign culture, whether this is exemplified by sexual relationships with foreign women, veneration of foreign deities, corruption through foreign political power or foreign economic transactions, or all of these.” In this interpretation, the nature of the offense is taken out of a strictly sexual context. Bal has commented extensively on the ideological use of metaphors of infidelity, particularly in relation to female sexuality. As she argues, “first, plurality is correlated with the absence of morality; next, religious plurality with sexual plurality” (1988: 43).

<sup>24</sup> For a close analysis of the basic female archetypes in Revelation, see Tina Pippin (1992). Susan R. Garrett argues similarly in *The Women’s Bible Commentary*: “The stereotyped feminine images in the book do not represent the full spectrum of authentic womanhood, either in John’s day or in our own.” And she concludes, “the dehumanizing way in which he [John] phrased his message will remain deeply troubling” (1992). Catherine Keller formulates it as follows: “Here is the paradox for feminist meditation on “the end of the world”: while innumerable women have found means of private resistance and public voice in the symbols of the Apocalypse, overt or subvert, the toxic misogyny of much of its imagery cannot [...] be flushed out of the text or its tradition” (1996: 29, emphasis added). The crucial exception to this feminist interpretation of Revelation is Elizabeth Schüssler-Fiorenza, whose work is characterized by attempts to redeem the text and (re)interpret it positively from a feminist perspective. This takes the form of a socio-historical reading of biblical texts, coupled with an attempt to undermine the patriarchal stance of the Bible. Schüssler-Fiorenza seeks to read biblical texts as useful guides for dealing with present, often political, situations involving inequality and injustice. Interestingly, Pippin’s dissertation follows Schüssler-Fiorenza’s proposed liberation hermeneutic. Pippin applies a Marxist hermeneutic to reveal the narrative of Revelation to be “resistance literature.” As she states: “The Apocalypse was the literary equivalent to a book burning or a food riot or a violent revolutionary takeover” (1987: 158). In Pippin’s subsequent work she has abandoned the revolutionary and liberating notions of her dissertation altogether.

Vander Stichele 177). As Castelli remarks, “The martyr’s death is a masculine death, even when (or perhaps especially when) it is suffered by a woman” (*Martyrdom* 62). However, female martyrs, as I will show, also stretch assumptions of gender. In their acts, they perform a transgression from femininity to masculinity.

From the perspective of film studies, a similar move or transgression in representations of masculinity and femininity can be observed. The heroine of *ALIEN3*, Ripley, is the prime example of a character who destabilizes conventional imagery of gender. The representation of masculine martyrdom in films as *ARMAGEDDON* and *END OF DAYS* is read alongside the transgressive gender of Ripley. Her female masculinity, combined with the act of martyrdom she performs, not only destabilizes male and female representations in film, but also endows classic representations of female martyrdom with new significance. The discourse on male and female martyrdom, as reconfigured in contemporary Hollywood film, I argue, can critique binary oppositions and undercut normative statements that fixate gender representations. A recurring theme is maternity as a required, yet anxiety-raising feminine characteristic. In the final three chapters of this study, the emphatic combination of maternity and a martyr-like death are discussed at length.

In their book on the politics and ideology of contemporary Hollywood cinema, *Camera Politica*, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner argue that apocalyptic films address contemporary social tensions. They argue that films do more than mirror these tensions. Films teach viewers how to respond

are men and women are women. When the social order is in crisis, a simultaneous crisis occurs in the realm of representation. The films discussed in this study all thrive on an ideology that attempts to resolve a crisis in the gender system. A film such as *ARMAGEDDON* (chapter two) enacts the re-subordination of a woman. This process is directly connected to the struggle to overcome

a threat imposed by contact with space and alien creatures that threaten Earth. To put it bluntly, in contemporary apocalyptic film one can observe the tendency to link feminism with catastrophe.<sup>25</sup> The conclusion is politically repugnant: to avoid the apocalypse, women must be re-subordinated. However, the correctional shift these films display, from transgression back to re-subordination, should not be understood as negative only. Every female film character I discuss in this study seemingly falls victim to this correctional shift, yet, as my analyses will show, their re-subordination only succeeds to a certain extent. The transgressions of these women have a more lasting impression than their eventual re-subordination.

In the first chapter, I lay out my historically preposterous approach as a way to read the film *END OF DAYS*. The central concept of preposterous history, quotation, is applied to the final sequence of the film. The self-sacrificial death of Jericho Cane, played by Arnold Schwarzenegger, is, on one hand, grounded in the Book of Revelation and its concomitant iconographical tradition and, on the other, imported in the new context of Hollywood cinema, the Schwarzenegger/action film. The effect of the finale of *END OF DAYS* originates not only from its employ of the source text, but also from the secular context of Hollywood cinema.

In the film *ARMAGEDDON*, the focus of the second chapter, the martyr's act of dying is reconfigured. Harry Stamper, played by Bruce Willis, is invested with novel causes and values to die for, not so much religious but rather masculine, individual, patriotic and, importantly, American. In relation to the construction of the American martyr, I address the specific aesthetics of the film, so-called "High Concept" characteristics such as music, stars, and high speed cutting. *ARMAGEDDON*'s intertextual referencing of religiously inspired

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<sup>25</sup> Or, as Joel Martin remarks in an online article on the anti-feminist tendencies in apocalyptic film: "if space threatens, it has something to do with a professional woman" (2000).

discourses of martyrdom is not unproblematic. The use of religion and the preposterous images of martyrdom the film engenders, obscured as these may be by Hollywood aesthetics, result in the abduction of religion for the sake of nationalism.

The first two chapters are explicitly about male and masculine martyrdom. In the third chapter, I turn to a representation of female martyrdom. Female martyrs, exemplified in the heroine of the ALIEN saga, Ellen Ripley, played by Sigourney Weaver, suggest a gendered continuum between masculinity and femininity. I address this gender ambiguity through the concept of “musculinity.” The crucial marker of the female, the ability to have children, is a recurring element in classical martyr stories. Ripley’s maternal qualities, her pregnancy and subsequent delivery of the alien, reconceive classical discourse, which presupposes that mothers cannot become martyrs. My analysis of ALIEN3’s climax is medium-specific: the technology of the DVD provides the analyst with the possibility of endless repeat/rewind and, crucially, offers alternate versions of Ripley’s martyrdom.

The theme of female martyrdom is developed in the fourth chapter. I read THE RAPTURE for two particular characteristics: the film’s depiction of an apocalyptic ending and its misogynistic disposition, which can be traced back to Revelation. The feminist critique of apocalyptic discourse underscores the need to counter its misogynistic tendencies. In my reading, I employ the interdisciplinary concept of the sequel (and the affiliated idea of the Final Girl) to argue against the misogynistic fate of the film’s heroine Sharon, played by Mimi Rogers. Finally, I add a preposterous reading of THE RAPTURE’s female protagonist. This analysis focuses on the notion of light and lighting as an instance of interdisciplinarity between religion and film studies.

In my fifth and final chapter, I deal with another recurring element in martyrdom discourse: the vision. In the film THE SEVENTH

SIGN, the heroine Abby, played by Demi Moore, receives visions about the possible end of the world. The visions disrupt notions of linear time, and, consequently, the unfolding of the narrative. In the character of Abby, the intimate link between motherhood and martyrdom is further articulated. Finally, through a detailed analysis of the opening sequence, I argue that the ending of the film is already located in the beginning.