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

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## Chapter Two

### American Martyr: High Concept Visions in ARMAGEDDON

The pursuit of making money is the only reason to make movies. We have no obligation to make history. We have no obligation to make art. [...] Our obligation is to make money, and to make money it may be necessary to make history, [...] art or [...] some significant statement.

#### Introduction

The epigraph of this chapter is the opening statement taken from the “Paramount Corporate Philosophy” memo, written by top Hollywood producer Don Simpson in 1980.<sup>1</sup> The memo encapsulates a conception of film as primarily an economical device, a product, not an artistic expression, that should generate as much money as possible. This idea, embodied in so-called “high concept” films, of which Simpson together with Jerry Bruckheimer produced many, ruled the film business in the 1980s and 1990s. The films echo the machismo of Simpson’s bold mission statement in his corporate memo. High concept films are fast, loud, and, most of all, masculine. They present the spectator with a male, emphatically macho hero, who eventually prevails, but not before he has gone through the standard three-act plot structure summarized as incident, crisis, and triumph. The film I analyze in this chapter, *ARMAGEDDON* (USA: Michael Bay, 1998), is an example of high concept film. What interests me about this film is its representation of the hero’s masculinity in combination with the martyrlike act of dying. In this sense, the present chapter follows up on the previous one, as both explore the

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<sup>1</sup> An elaborate account of this memo, and its subsequent implications for Hollywood film in the 1980s and 1990s, can be found in Charles Fleming, *High Concept: Don Simpson and the Hollywood Culture of Excess*, pp. 191-193.

representation of male, masculine martyrdom.

The story of *ARMAGEDDON* is uncomplicated. After New York City is damaged by hundreds of small meteorites, NASA discovers that an asteroid the size of Texas is on a collision course with Earth. NASA recruits the best deep core driller in the world, Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis), to train astronauts who will travel to the asteroid, drill into its center, and detonate a nuclear warhead. With only eighteen days left to destroy the asteroid, a race against time begins to save creation and prevent Armageddon.

*ARMAGEDDON* became the most profitable film of 1998. With an estimated budget of over \$140 million, it took over \$200 million at the American box office and another \$300 million outside the US. Additional profits were garnered from DVD rentals and sales. With figures such as these, *ARMAGEDDON* epitomizes the mixture of economics and aesthetics of which post-classical Hollywood cinema is generally accused by its critics and, consequently, dismissed. To accept the first point and reject the second, and develop a constructive way of looking at this film, a way that takes it seriously as an aesthetic object, though with important economic ramifications, departs precisely from taking into account its commercial context.

*ARMAGEDDON* gives new meaning to the concept of martyrdom. On one hand, it does so by means of the evocation of the earlier, canonical discourse on martyrdom. A reading of the film will reveal such instances of a historical echoing. On the other, *ARMAGEDDON* invests this precursory discourse with new and additional significance. To be more precise, I will argue that *ARMAGEDDON* articulates the martyr's act of dying as performative, which echoes earlier discourses on martyrdom. In addition, the film invests the figure of the martyr with novel causes and values for self-sacrifice, which are not so much religious as they are individual, patriotic, masculine and, most notably, American. In my analysis, I look at three separate moments, before, during, and after death that,

taken together, amount to the martyrdom of Harry Stamper. Even though martyrdom is effectively achieved after death, I argue that the moments before and during the martyr's death are equally important for the contemporary making of a martyr.

To address the ways in which *ARMAGEDDON* is a representation of a new type of male martyrdom, I focus on the film's mode of production, the so-called "high concept" film. Defining *ARMAGEDDON* as a case of high concept cinema enables me to take into account the economic as well as the aesthetic context of this film. It is of crucial importance to address both high concept style and the influence that style exerts on the substance of the film. High concept style, I argue, is an intricate blend of economic and aesthetic powers that must be addressed. I begin with a short historical sketch of the factors responsible for the advent of high concept cinema, followed by its essential characteristics in narrative and characters. High concept cinema depicts in its style and substance a particular kind of masculinity, which has several implications for the type of martyrdom that is constructed in *ARMAGEDDON*. Subsequently, I highlight one particular aspect of high concept style, the visceral combination of sound and image through rapid montage. This type of editing, known as the "MTV aesthetic," governs the key sequence in relation to *ARMAGEDDON*'s thematic of martyrdom. My argument will be built on the close analysis of this sequence and supported by the critical evaluation of divergent readings of the film. Finally, the type of close analysis I perform exposes a problematical issue in film analysis, namely, the pause of the moving image in order to be able to read that image. Raymond Bellour has addressed this issue at length; therefore I refer to his work to tackle this paradox.

## Characteristics of High Concept in ARMAGEDDON

The simplest definition of high concept is a film of which the narrative can be described in a single sentence, making it obvious and highly marketable. High concept is often regarded as the dominant style of Hollywood film production in the 1980s and 1990s. As Justin Wyatt suggests in his study *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, this style of filmmaking can be considered the central development within post-classical cinema (8). Wyatt's argument points to the fact that modes of film production, the industrial aspect, and styles of filmmaking, together resulting in the cultural product of film, are all subject to historical change. As film historians Robert Allen and Douglas Gomery contend, "each mode of production produces its own set of production practices: normative conceptions of how a particular film 'should' look and sound" (86). So, mode of production and film style are both intricately linked to a particular period of time. In this respect, high concept cinema is a mirror of its time: the outcome of far-reaching economic and institutional changes in Hollywood after the 1960s. Wyatt outlines some notable factors in the creation of high concept: the conglomeration of the film industry, the rise of television, and new marketing methods (16).

As I have indicated, the defining characteristic of high concept is the fact that its content can be captured in a single sentence. This is a key factor in the two distinct valuations high concept cinema evokes. From a film industry point of view, the single-sentence description, known as the pitch, spells out a movie's marketability: its specific narrative can be conveyed and sold easily.<sup>2</sup> Its content is straightforward, easily communicated and readily

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<sup>2</sup> The act of pitching a movie is effectively parodied in Robert Altman's 1992 film *THE PLAYER*. The film shows some hilarious examples of how screenwriters attempt to sell their stories to producers. In order to gain the producer's interest and time, the story needs to be pitched in less than 25 words. Moreover, writers often refer to their proposed projects in shorthand. The story is thus often pitched as a combination of several previous successful films, for instance, the incredible amalgamate of *GHOST* and *THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE*.

comprehensible. Film critics stress the other side of the equation. To them, high concept represents the zero point of creativity, and signals the creative bankruptcy of Hollywood in the 1980s and 1990s. Specifically, they condemn the collapse of classical narrative cinema and Hollywood storytelling in favor of superficial spectacle and style. Moreover, these critics evaluate high concept as sensationalist, tasteless, and aesthetically suspect (*High Concept* 13-14). I do not intend to take sides with either of these two positions in my analysis.

According to Wyatt, high concept is based on two main components. First, narrative and characters are predictable and uncomplicated. The story consists of stock situations and is “firmly set within the bounds of genre and viewer expectation” (16). Secondly, the style of high concept film is instrumental to the functioning of its characters and the development of the narrative. Another attribute of high concept style is the strong match between powerful, stylized images and a dominant musical soundtrack (16-17). This match is commonly expressed through montage sequences that summarize a topic or compress a passage of time in symbolic or stereotypical images. The driving force behind the montage sequence is music, specifically rock music. These sequences are aesthetically similar to music videos shown on MTV and other music stations. The abundance of such sequences entails a further reduction of both narrative and character development which, in the latter case, results in character typing.

One important consequence of character typing is that high concept relies strongly on star persona. The film star, as my analysis of Arnold Schwarzenegger in the preceding chapter elaborates, comes with a particular star text that consists of a constellation of images and knowledge. Ideally, the high concept movie creates a strong connection between the star text and the new project; Wyatt gives the example of Clint Eastwood in a crime

thriller (10-11). However, high concept may also create the exact opposite: the familiar element of the star can be placed in a different context. In this case, stars are consciously working against their well-established and commercially viable image. Illustrative of the latter approach is Arnold Schwarzenegger's comic turn as the first man capable of having a baby in the film *JUNIOR* (USA: Ivan Reitman, 1994). Here the effect is based on the uneasy fit between Schwarzenegger's Mr. Universe physique and preconceived notions of pregnancy, femininity, and vulnerability. This indicates an important aspect of the star: his or her physical characteristics. As Wyatt argues: "Stars are [...] a particular set of physical characteristics, demeanor, and attitude. This emphasis often overwhelms the character being portrayed so that the character is identified more strongly with the star than as an integral part of a unique story (53-55). In this sense, stars and their particular qualities might even hinder the viewer in constructing a particular diegetic character. Moreover, stars encourage the viewer's recognition of character types.<sup>3</sup>

In *ARMAGEDDON*, Bruce Willis is the star. The rest of the cast supports and accommodates his character and presence. By casting Willis, the producers secured one of the biggest action stars of the 1980s and 1990s. Particularly his *DIE HARD* series (1988, 1990, 1995, and 2007), which is considered as paradigmatic of the new Hollywood action-adventure movie, also known as the male-rampage film, cemented Willis' status as one of Hollywood's popular male heroes, among the ranks of Sylvester Stallone and Arnold

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<sup>3</sup> David Bordwell contends that film stars do not play a crucial role in high concept film. He claims, based on what one screenplay manual prescribes, that high concept "denotes a movie sold on the strength of an unusual plot idea that will work without stars" (2006: 6-7). This claim seems incorrect. Bordwell almost immediately retracts it, stating that stars have embraced high concept projects and that a report showed that high concept films without stars had trouble gaining publicity or even release. On the basis of this, I think it is safe to claim that stars are an indispensable feature of high concept film.

Schwarzenegger. The casting of the all American hunk Ben Affleck (playing AJ) and of his love interest played by Liv Tyler (playing Grace, Stamper's daughter) appealed to the female demographic of spectators. In this respect, the film works to secure what Geoff King in his study on blockbuster film calls "the potential to achieve the useful economic status of a 'date movie,' offering something at least to meet dominant expectations associated with male and female viewers" (173).

The significance of the formation of the diegetic couple, AJ and Grace, lies not merely in its means to draw a larger viewer demographic. It also has consequences for *ARMAGEDDON*'s narrative, as I will elaborate below. Interestingly, the supporting cast of *ARMAGEDDON* consists of "serious" actors, that is to say, actors who often work outside Hollywood's blockbuster system, such as Billy Bob Thornton, Peter Stormare, and indie favorite Steve Buscemi. The film has a remarkable combination of *bona fide* stars and actors.<sup>4</sup> However, the characters they play are restricted to and reminiscent of characters they have portrayed in some of their previous films. Therefore, the Southern-type tough guy plays tough (Thornton), the heartthrob (Affleck) is just that, and the freaky guy (Buscemi) is still freaky, albeit in a blockbuster production.

The reduced narrative and characters of high concept film imply its dependency on generic conventions and iconography. As Wyatt states, "generic iconography has been utilized increasingly as an 'economical' means of transmitting information" (55). High concept film assumes a genre-aware audience and refers to genre conventions and iconography to address it. *ARMAGEDDON* is a mixture of action-adventure, science fiction, and thriller genres, and is also firmly located in the series of disaster films released

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<sup>4</sup> For an exploration of the differences and overlap between stars and actors in relation to the diegetic characters they can play, see Richard Dyer (1979).

in the second part of the 1990s. With respect to iconography, *ARMAGEDDON* is predominantly situated in the science-fiction genre. Apart from allusions to well-known classics of that genre, such as *FANTASTIC VOYAGE* (USA: Richard Fleischer, 1966), *STAR WARS* (USA: George Lucas, 1977) and *APOLLO 13* (USA: Ron Howard, 1995), *ARMAGEDDON*'s sleek technological look, particularly its blue, metallic color schemes, is clearly based on a lesser-known film in the genre, *THE RIGHT STUFF* (USA: Philip Kaufman, 1983).

Such referencing is not only limited to other genres, or to mixtures of genres, as is often the case in post-classical cinema, but also extends to television shows and other forms of mass media. This pervasive practice of referencing is what Noël Carroll calls allusion, which covers "practices of quotations, the memorialization of past genres, [...] *homages*, and the recreation of 'classic' scenes, shots, plot motifs, lines of dialogue, themes, gestures, and so forth" (241).

The intertextual field of meaning evoked in high concept film functions as a way to convey information by establishing an already familiar context. The practice of allusion presupposes a group of informed viewers, who are able to recall past films. At the same time, these viewers do not take allusion as a form of plagiarism. Allusion, ideally, results in the reciprocal recognition between film and audience of an "iconographical code": a code which, through its evocation of the past, comments on and influences the present. The knowledgeable audience is able to "fill in the blanks" or "connect the dots" easily.

In the case of *ARMAGEDDON*, another and unusual type of intertextuality, which stems from its authorial source, is brought into play. Usually, the *oeuvre* of a particular director provides an intertext. This approach is exemplified by the auteurism approach in cinema studies, which postulates the director as the source of a film's intentionality, value, and meaning. However, in the case

of high concept films such as *ARMAGEDDON*, the director is not the auteur. Rather, the producer has a decisive role in the narrative, aesthetic, and economic choices that are being made. Even though it is contested who actually invented the term high concept, there is no disagreement about naming the two producers responsible for bringing it to life, resulting in a string of trademark high concept films over the last two decades.<sup>5</sup> Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer were the creative team behind many blockbusters of the 1980s and 1990s. In a sense, their films, such as *TOP GUN* (USA: Tony Scott, 1986), *BEVERLY HILLS COP* (USA: Martin Brest, 1984), *FLASHDANCE* (USA: Adrian Lyne, 1983), and later films such as *BAD BOYS* (USA: Michael Bay, 1995) and *CRIMSON TIDE* (USA: Tony Scott, 1995) have had a decisive influence on contemporary pop culture. The Simpson and Bruckheimer films are instantly recognizable though their use of popular music, montage sequences and male stars. *ARMAGEDDON* is another example of a Simpson and Bruckheimer production, even though Bruckheimer produced the film without Simpson, who died of heart failure in 1996.

To sum up: the reduction of narrative and character in high concept results in three particular aesthetic strategies: the use of stars, the referencing of many different genres, and the broad intertextual allusions. As a consequence of these aesthetic strategies, high concept is often charged with being a cinema of visual excess, a cinema that chooses style over substance.<sup>6</sup> Even Wyatt, whose book is one of the few studies available giving a thorough analysis of the genre, proposes a critical evaluation of high concept that is reminiscent of the viewpoint of cultural critics alluded to above: “The modularity of the films’ units, added to the

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<sup>5</sup> See Wyatt, 1994: 8 for a short history of the genesis of the term.

<sup>6</sup> For a convincing refutation of this still dominant assumption, see Bordwell’s study on contemporary Hollywood narration (2006).

one-dimensional quality of the characters, distances the viewer from the traditional task of reading the films' narrative. In place of this identification with narrative, the viewer becomes sewn into the "surface" of the film, contemplating the style of the narrative and the production" (60).

Wyatt argues that high concept aesthetics disengage the viewer from the narrative to such an extent that it becomes subservient to the surface qualities—stars, music, and production design—of the film.<sup>7</sup> One may argue that the viewer of high concept cinema is not fully engaged on a narrative level, although what constitutes total narrative engagement to begin with is difficult to assess. High concept's intertextual strategies of referencing, allusion, and iconography certainly result in a diminished importance of the narrative. Instead, high concept tells the story in shorthand by means of generic characters, images, and situations.

However, what I consider to be high concept's most important solution to, or means to overcome, its recognizable narrative is its emphasis on the visual. High concept movies create excess, or visceral impact, with their overall look and sound. Or, to put it more constructively, the viewer is engaged, or "sewn into the film," as Wyatt phrases it, by the effective combination of sound and image (60). I will elaborate on this specific stylistic trait of high concept in detail. My analysis of one scene in *ARMAGEDDON* will attempt to demonstrate how style and substance coalesce to make meaning.

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<sup>7</sup> In this sense, high concept is akin to early cinema or what Tom Gunning has labeled "cinema of attractions." The concept relates the development of cinema to forces other than storytelling. For an exhaustive overview of the concept, see Wanda Strauven (2006).

## **The high-speed climax of ARMAGEDDON**

In the sequence I analyze first, I focus on the stylistic peculiarity of ARMAGEDDON: its high speed editing. This rapid editing, which is maintained through the entire film, produces a kind of kinetic energy. This is a central characteristic of high concept movies. Sound and image are combined to create maximum effect which, as I mentioned above, is known as the MTV aesthetic. The MTV aesthetic is defined by the visual motifs that originated in music video and now also appear in motion pictures. Its most important characteristic, Kay Dickinson argues is, “the submission of editing to the customary tempi of popular music.” Moreover, and this particular trait can be observed in ARMAGEDDON, the MTV aesthetic presents, according to Dickinson, “shots which defy the standard broadcast rhythm of around three seconds minimum each.” I return to ARMAGEDDON’s average shot length below. The effect of this type of editing on the viewer may be unsettling. As Michel Chion has pointed out, there is a temporal difference between the human senses:

The ear analyzes, processes and synthesizes faster than the eye. Take a rapid visual movement—a hand gesture—and compare it to an abrupt sound trajectory of the same duration. That fast visual movement will not form a distinct figure; its trajectory will not enter the memory in a precise picture. In the same length of time the sound trajectory will succeed in out-lining a clear and definite form, individuated, recognizable, distinguishable from others ... the eye is more spatially adept and the ear is more temporally adept. (10-11)

Thus, according to Chion, the viewer, when viewing a sequence for the first time or when viewing it just one time, fails to grasp it. The rapid visual movement will not enter memory as a precise picture. The combination of visual and musical motifs

combined with a breakneck speed of editing will leave the viewer numb.

The sequence I focus on is where the narrative climax of the film occurs: Harry Stamper is about to push the button that will detonate the explosives and destroy the asteroid and, importantly, will kill Stamper himself. Prior to the act of pushing the button, Stamper has a vision of his daughter. This sequence is significant for two reasons.

First, it combines the eventual event of dying with a simultaneously formed mystical rapport between Stamper and his daughter Grace. The mystical rapport or, as I would call it, the vision of Stamper, is a recurring aspect of martyr stories. Therefore, I will treat it as an instance of preposterous history. The vision can be motivated through the troubled father-daughter relationship that *ARMAGEDDON* addresses. This father-daughter relationship and, more generally, the male-female dichotomy represented in *ARMAGEDDON* and similar films in the catastrophe genre, is subject to criticism. As I will argue on the basis of my analysis of this sequence, the supposedly anti-feminist content of *ARMAGEDDON* can be deflected to a certain extent. Nevertheless, a certain anti-feminist streak can be observed in most of the films I analyze in this study. This apocalyptic misogyny will feature prominently in the three subsequent chapters of this study, in which I focus on female martyrdom.

Second, Stamper's death is shown as a performative act: he actively and knowingly decides to sacrifice his life. Rather than accepting the danger of the job and coming to terms with a possible fortuitous death, Stamper actively seeks his death. The flaunting performance of choosing to die is an important aspect of claiming the role of a martyr and of eventually becoming a martyr in the eyes of other people. This constitutes Stamper as an American hero and martyr. Moreover, the performance of Stamper suggests a connection to an earlier discourse on martyrdom, namely the case of

Ignatius. Both Ignatius and Stamper are good examples of the active dimension of martyrdom. The full extent of Stamper's actively willed martyrdom becomes clear in the climax of *ARMAGEDDON*.

### **The quotable climax: shot list of *ARMAGEDDON***

As the shot list indicates, the editing of this scene alternates shots of Stamper's vision with shots of the countdown mechanism of the NASA clock, which displays the estimated time before the impact of the asteroid. The climax sequence takes only 19 seconds to unfold. In these 19 seconds, I have counted 36 shots. Hence, the average shot length (ASL) in this sequence comes to precisely 0.5 seconds (half a second per shot). The average shot length in the cinema of the 1940s is around nine to ten seconds.<sup>8</sup> The average shot length of contemporary Hollywood cinema is around three seconds. In *ARMAGEDDON*, the average shot length in the entire film is, according to Bordwell (*Way Hollywood Tells It*), 2.3 seconds, substantially shorter than most other Hollywood films.<sup>9</sup> A below-average shot length, an indication of high-speed cutting, characterizes *ARMAGEDDON*.

The modern technology of the DVD player enables me to dissect the sequence into its constituting shots. Moreover, through DVD technology, one can establish the exact number of frames and

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<sup>8</sup> See Bordwell for a short historical sketch of the accelerated speed of editing (2006: 121-123). In his book *Film Style and Technology: History and Analysis*, Barry Salt has done extensive research on what is now called statistical style analysis. Calculating average shot length is a key component of Salt's method of analysis (1992). For an introduction and overview of statistical style analysis, see: Elsaesser and Buckland.

<sup>9</sup> Several critics, such as *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy, mention the editing of *ARMAGEDDON* as a reason for its lack of character development. McCarthy states that the editing "resembles a machine gun stuck in the firing position for two and a half hours," and that "perhaps someone will someday reveal how many separate shots make up *ARMAGEDDON*, but the count has to be one of the highest in Hollywood history." *Variety* 371:8, June 29-July 12, 1998. <http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=review&reviewid=VE1117477644&categoryid=31&cs=1>. Consulted: February 2, 2006.

the duration of each single shot. In this sense, I am able to overlook the fundamental and most confusing, or blinding, element of this particular sequence: its speed. Once the images have been drained of their speed, I can open my eyes and begin to see. By compiling a shot list, I make the frozen image the condition of my discussion, ignoring or violating the law of continuity that is cinema's primary principle.

The French film analyst Raymond Bellour struggled with this problem. In his essay "The Unattainable Text", Bellour engages the key paradox in which film analysis is trapped. If one agrees, following Roland Barthes, that the film is a text, Bellour argues, the film text should receive the same kind of attention that the literary text receives. However, the problem of equating a filmic text with a literary text arises when the analyst attempts, like the literary analyst, to quote (a part of) the text. Here, film discloses its "fatal flaw": the text of the film is beyond the film analyst's reach because it is an unquotable text. It is extremely difficult to translate verbally even one stopped image. According to Bellour, following the work of Christian Metz, the filmic text consists of a mixture of materials: phonetic sound, written titles, musical sound, noises, and the moving photographic image. The first four elements are quotable to a certain extent. The image, Bellour posits, cannot be quoted. The moving image, Bellour argues, has a twofold effect: "on the one hand it spreads in space like a picture; on the other it plunges into time" (25). The attempt to quote a moving image results in the loss of its defining characteristic, its movement: "the written text cannot restore to it what only the projector can produce: a movement, the illusion of which guarantees the reality" (25). Bellour concludes, "the written text is the only one that can be quoted unimpededly and unreservedly" (22).

Although Bellour has no solution for the impossibility of quoting the image, the use of film stills, preferably as many as

possible, is one possible yet inadequate tool. As he states, “stills are essential, they represent an equivalent, arranged each time according to the needs of the reading” (26).<sup>10</sup> His work of the 1960s and 1970s reflects his preference for freezing the image on the editing table: “I have seen what happens to film writing when one writes from memory or with the help of a few notes taken in the theater—when one wants to avoid the very costly, perhaps too costly penalty for freezing the image” (5).

For a remotely accurate analysis of film, the image has to be frozen, though this disrupts the fundamental element of the image, its movement. Simply trying to write from one’s memory of a film, as Bellour endeavored before the advent of the VCR and the DVD, does not suffice. Bellour resolves the paradox by accepting the fact that analysis originates from the interruption of the moving image. As he argues with reference to Thierry Kuntzel, “we” [as film analysts] “must situate ourselves neither on the side of the motion nor on the side of the stillness, but *between* them, in the generation of the projected film by the film-strip, in the negation of this film-strip by the projected film” (16, note 55).

Kuntzel signals the double bind in which every film analyst

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<sup>10</sup> Bellour’s use of the word “still” is somewhat problematic and confusing, since the word “still” is often used to denote so-called “production stills.” These are photographs taken during filming by a “still photographer.” Usually, these stills are not taken from the position of the motion picture camera and, as a result they do not correspond to any image in the finished film. Naturally, any analysis on the basis of production stills would prove to be fruitless, since there is no indexical relation with the actual moving image. Bellour continues his analysis and uses the word freeze frame, a more apt term since it exactly describes the nature of the image: that of the frame that is temporarily frozen in its movement. However, he needlessly complicates the matter again by referring to the “frozen frame and the still that reproduces it” (26). For matters of clarity, I call what Bellour calls the frozen frame a screen shot, since I take the shot and the transition between the shots as the key element for my analysis. My definition of the shot is derived from Bordwell and Thompson. They describe the shot as follows: “in the finished film, one uninterrupted image with a single static or mobile framing” (1997: 481).

is involuntarily caught. Analysis of film is always determined by the distinctiveness of the medium, particularly with its dual characteristics of movement and stillness. The proposed way out is to be attentive to both of these features.

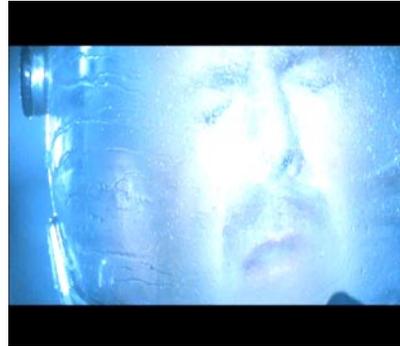
In my shot list, I have attempted to demonstrate the separateness of each individual shot while, at the same time, looking at the relationship between the shots and at the sum of the shots that constitute this sequence.<sup>11</sup> The shot list is as follows:

- 1) Extreme long shot representing the point of view from the asteroid toward planet Earth. The movement of the asteroid toward Earth enhances this shot
- 2) Insert of a computer screen, located at Kennedy Space Centre, indicating the “zero barrier.” This is the critical point in space and time before which the asteroid must be destroyed. Once the asteroid passes the zero barrier, it cannot be destroyed without also destroying Earth
- 3) In profile close-up of Grace, positioned on the right side of the frame. She turns her head to the right, looking at the clock ticking down the seconds to the zero barrier. The clock is brought into focus through the device of pulling focus, again constituting a movement within an otherwise static shot
- 4) Close-up of Stamper, screaming, “We win Gracie”
- 5) Extreme close-up of Stamper’s hand on the verge of setting off the detonation device that will destroy the asteroid
- 6) Insert of digital clock in extreme close-up, counting down
- 7) In profile close-up of NASA’s executive director, positioned to the left side of the frame

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<sup>11</sup> For technical definitions of framing distances, see the previous chapter.

- 8) Frontal close-up of Stamper, positioned to the right side of the frame. This is also not a static shot; there is a short zoom toward his face
- 9) Extreme frontal close-up of Grace, particularly on her eyes. Again, the camera zooms in as Grace closes her eyes
- 10) Extreme close-up of Stamper's hand as he flips the switch on the detonating device



[A1]

Shots 1 to 10 are the introductory shots, leading up to the central event of the film: the exploding of the asteroid and the sacrificial death of Harry Stamper.

- 11) Frontal close-up of Stamper's face, blinded by the blast of the explosion<sup>12</sup> [A1]
- 12) Insert of an empty, white frame<sup>13</sup>

Shots 11 and 12 represent the actual explosion. These two shots have a bracketing function within the sequence. This will become clear when I continue to break down the sequence into separate shots.

- 13) Extreme close-up of Grace's still closed left eye (see shot 9), again the camera zooms in toward the eye. Grace opens her eyes. The camera continues its movement, entering through the now open eye. In this transitional moment, there is a graphic match between

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<sup>12</sup> The transition between shots 10 and 11 is extremely quick. The freeze-frame function of the DVD player occasionally could not capture shot 11. The extreme editing pace creates a strobing effect.

<sup>13</sup> The inserts of white frames are a stylistic trademark of director Michael Bay.



[A2]

the dark pupil of Grace's eye and the darkness of outer space, surrounding the Earth, the image of which emerges on the left side of the frame

This is the key shot of the sequence. It represents the literal disappearing of the spectator into the eye of a character, Grace. It is reasonable to assume, at least for the moment, that the following sequence can be attributed to Grace's point of view.

14) Medium shot of a little girl sitting on a swing

The coloring of this shot differs dramatically from the rest of the sequence (as well as the rest of the film). The shot has an overexposed look, with bleached-out colors. According to Hollywood conventions, this particular coloring signifies that the image is a dream, vision, or memory. Furthermore, the viewer will assume that the little girl in the image is Grace. Although, at this moment, it is not certain whose dream or memory is represented, the spectator will, following the logic of the preceding shot, assume it to be Grace's memory. Another possibility is that this shot represents the beginning of a vision that can be attributed to Stamper.

15) Insert of an "empty" frame, that is to say, an entirely white image

16) Plan américain of the girl sitting on the swing. A very slight tilting of the camera again creates movement in the shot

17) Close-up of the girl, looking directly into the camera or turning her gaze toward a diegetic character over her right shoulder [A2]

18) Insert of another white frame

19) Extreme long shot of a hill with a tree. Attached to the tree is a swing with the girl sitting on it. The blue sky

above her head is rapidly filling with dark, menacing clouds. This shot functions as a belated and purposely withheld establishing shot

- 20) Long shot of the girl, running toward the camera or another diegetic character
- 21) Extreme long shot of the girl running toward the camera. A pair of hands belonging to a diegetic character emerge on the left side of the frame **[A3]**



**[A3]**



**[A4]**

Now, the uncertainty of shots 17 and 20 is resolved. She is running toward a diegetic character, probably Stamper. This shot gains the status of belonging to Stamper's point of view, as do shots 17 and 20 in retrospect.

Since point of view is now assigned to Stamper, it is essential to analyze what the diegetic status of shots 14 to 21 signifies.

- 22) Frontal medium close-up of Grace (not the little girl Grace) combined with a zoom toward her face
- 23) Insert of an empty, white frame
- 24) Close-up of Grace, dressed as a bride, looking over her right shoulder **[A4]**

Here one should notice the parallel with shot 17, which points to the possibility that this is another instance of a point of view shot belonging to Stamper. Furthermore, note the mirroring in shots 17 and 24. In this instance, years have passed in the blink of an eye.

This shot, 24, is the key shot in answering my question about the status of the sequence. A casual observer may call the

sequence, and particularly shot 24, an example of a flash-forward. This hypothesis can be strengthened by the simple fact that the final sequence of *ARMAGEDDON* shows the marriage of Grace to AJ. Shot 24 is subject to further scrutiny in the following section. For now, I want to conclude by emphasizing that, by using Bellour's mode of analysis, which focuses on the distinction between a series of shots recorded in a numbered shot list, one can achieve a restricted quotability of the image. The image can be quoted, provided that two restrictive conditions are taken into account. First, despite the inherent limitations of freezing the moving image, the stilled image is necessarily the source for the quotation. Second, the visual quotation needs to be augmented by a written description. On these conditions, the moving image yields to analysis.

### **Final vision**

I propose to read the sequence, culminating in the crucial shot 24, as an instance of a vision, as "something seen in a state of trance or ecstasy" and an "unusual discernment or even foresight," rather than a dream, memory, or flashforward emanating from Stamper's mind.<sup>14</sup> The main reason for this lies in shot 24. Shots 14 up to 23 can be defined as a dream, since a vision can also be experienced in a dream or memory, or in a combination of the two. My reading of shot 14 points to both possibilities. However, shot 24 is of a different nature than the preceding ones. Here, the spectator shares Stamper's vision of the future, which he will not experience. This also dispenses with the possibility of the shot being a flashforward, as it is tied to Stamper's perspective.

As David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson point out in *Film Art*, film is capable of manipulating the temporal relations through

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<sup>14</sup> These definitions are taken from the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. Consulted: March 8, 2006.

the basic distinction between story and plot. A flashforward is an instance where plot shuffles story order. As Bordwell and Thompson remark, flashforwards are used to “tease the viewer with glimpses of the eventual outcome of the story action” (283). In the case of the flashforward, the authority that orders the organization of the relation story and plot resides with a non-diegetic agent, say the director or editor of a film. Unlike flashbacks, flashforwards cannot be easily attributed to a character. As I have already emphasized the dominance of Stamper’s point of view in this sequence, the shot cannot be defined as a flashforward. All this, I believe, points to the fact that shot 24 represents the vision of Stamper.

David Bordwell gives one plausible motivation for the attribution of subjectivity to a flashforward: “One might argue that a film could plausibly motivate a flashforward as subjectivity by making the character *prophetic*, as in *DON’T LOOK NOW*. But this is still not parallel to the psychological flashback, since we can never be sure of a character’s premonitions as we can be of a character’s powers of memory” (*Narration* 79, emphasis added).

Bordwell’s distinction between, on one hand, premonition as subjectively uncertain and unreliable and, on the other, memory tied to the psychological flashback as subjectively clear-cut and trustworthy, strikes me as rather naïve. Numerous films capitalize on the viewer’s expectation, the convention of the reliable flashback from a character.<sup>15</sup> Even though Bordwell may have a point when he claims that classical narrative cinema has hardly used the subjective flashforward (contrary to art cinema), *ARMAGEDDON* is the exception. Stamper’s vision should be regarded as highly prophetic.

The prophetic, visionary dimension of the sequence ties this moment to a preposterous approach. A recurring element in

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<sup>15</sup> A film like *THE USUAL SUSPECTS* (USA: Bryan Singer, 1995) thoroughly tricks the viewer into believing the elaborate confession, presented in voice-over and flashback, by its main character.

martyr stories is the martyr's vision shortly before his or her death. The vision arrives at the moment he or she is on the brink of leaving the painful reality of this world and about to enter the next one, envisioned as the afterlife. In the martyr's transcendent state of being, caught between two parallel realities, a vision of immense clarity and truth is revealed. An example of this can be found in Acts. Stephen has a vision of God and Jesus in heaven; he gazes into heaven shortly before he is stoned to death.<sup>16</sup> Another well known example can be found in the story of Perpetua, who has no less than four visions before she is martyred in the arena (Castelli, *Martyrdom* 85-92). The case of Perpetua takes center stage in the next chapter.

This motif of the martyr scenario is unambiguously quoted but also altered in Hollywood cinema. In the previous chapter, I discussed the scene in *END OF DAYS* in which Jericho Cane sacrifices his life. In the final moment of his life, he experiences a vision of his murdered wife and daughter. They appear to be waiting for him in the afterlife. A similar scene can be found in *GLADIATOR* (USA: Ridley Scott, 2000). Again, the dying protagonist Maximus, caught between two realities, the physical here and now in which he is dying and the afterlife, will be reconciled with his murdered wife and son, similar to *END OF DAYS*. The transition between the two realities is expressed in a medium close-up shot of Maximus' body, lying in the arena, being lifted off the ground and moved. The shot suggests that Maximus' body, as well as his mind, journey in the direction of the afterlife. The reward of the afterlife is foreshadowed earlier in the film, when one of the characters consoles Maximus by saying, "Your family will meet you in the afterlife."

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<sup>16</sup> Acts 7: 54-58, "When they heard these things, they became enraged and ground their teeth at Stephen. But filled with the Holy Spirit, he gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. 'Look,' he said, 'I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' But they covered their ears, and with a loud shout all rushed together against him. Then they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him."

An obvious interpretation of these two examples would be that the prospect of a happy reunion in the afterlife provides a postponed happy ending to the non-Hollywood ending. The protagonist is redeemed and will receive his reward, despite the fact that he is no longer alive. Hollywood thus quotes an aspect of canonical martyrdom, but invests it with a different meaning. In both cases, *END OF DAYS* and *GLADIATOR*, the vision discloses the truth about the afterlife, similar to classic examples but, crucially, Hollywood's representation of it is dominated by family. The classic depiction would stress an afterlife in the presence of God in heaven. The idea of what constitutes a reward for martyrdom has significantly changed. Bellour has remarked that American cinema is "powerfully obsessed by the ideology of the family and of marriage, which constitutes its imaginary and symbolic base" (*Analysis of Film* 14). This American obsession with family relations is further developed below, when I discuss several recurring thematic traits of the contemporary disaster film.

Hence, the vision of Stamper in *ARMAGEDDON* can be considered another instance of the "dying-hero-who-will-be-rewarded-in-the-afterlife" scenario. However, Stamper's vision is dissimilar to the visions of Jericho Cane and Maximus, as well as to the visions of the "classic" martyrs, such as Stephen and Perpetua. The visions of Jericho Cane and Maximus adhere to the classic paradigm that postulates a reward for the martyr in the hereafter. Importantly, the vision itself refers to, and is positioned in, the next world, a different reality than the present one. Stamper's vision, however, is linked to present reality, the present world, of which he will no longer be part. The vision functions not so much as a reward for Stamper, although the vision may well give him feelings of joy or pride. It transforms his sacrificial act into a less egoistical, more benevolent act. His reward is the gift of the future he bestows upon Grace and AJ. As such, *ARMAGEDDON* offers an elaboration of the

classic paradigm. It invests the older form of the martyr story with new, additional meaning. This new meaning, reflecting back on the older cases, makes Stamper's vision in *ARMAGEDDON* "preposterous." My reading uncovers the visionary quality of Stamper and connects this trait to an earlier discourse on martyrdom. I argued that Stamper's act might be labeled as benevolent with regard to Grace and AJ's future. However, several readings of *ARMAGEDDON* exactly critique this act of Stamper as paternalistic.

### **Containment and Catastrophe**

An example of this reading of *ARMAGEDDON*, closely connected to the sequence, criticizes the ideological content of recent apocalyptic cinema. Joel W. Martin (Anti-feminism) contends that films such as *INDEPENDENCE DAY* (USA: Roland Emmerich, 1996), *DEEP IMPACT* (USA: Mimi Leder, 1998), *CONTACT* (USA: Robert Zemeckis, 1997) and particularly *ARMAGEDDON* thrive on narratives that "enact the re-subordination of a woman and that these films connect this process of subordination directly to the struggle to overcome a threat that contact with space, space rocks, and space beings supposedly represent."

Implicitly, these films display "the tendency to link feminism with catastrophe," Martin claims "it is a crisis in the gender system that has produced the genre of 1990s apocalyptic films. If space threatens, it has something to do with a professional woman".<sup>17</sup> In *ARMAGEDDON*, Martin argues: "It is the sexuality of the daughter that needs to be contained. Only after the father has transferred his authority over her to her male lover can the father perform the sacrifice that will save the earth."

Though Martin does not perform a close analysis of the film, his assertion about the misogynistic tendencies of these films

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<sup>17</sup> For a similar argument, see: John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett (2002: 327-328).

appears convincing. His claim that the sexuality of women, in this case of the daughter, needs to be contained is in agreement with Stephen Heath's critique of the representation of women in Hollywood film. His reading of *TOUCH OF EVIL* (USA: Orson Welles, 1958) centers on the role of the woman as both a good, yet missing or otherwise lacking object, and as a bad object that needs to be restored to its proper function. Woman is the impetus for male action, yet she herself is absent or at least a passive factor: "the woman [is] set aside: expelled from the main action until she can be brought back into place" (139).

*ARMAGEDDON* is a textbook example of this containment thesis.<sup>18</sup> The film needs woman-as-trouble to function, yet male-female relations remain marginal. The strained relationship between Stamper and AJ is fueled by AJ's attempt to gain Stamper's permission to have a relationship with Grace. Furthermore, Stamper acts as a surrogate or even stepfather to AJ. After AJ's father died in an accident on Stamper's oilrig, he made Stamper promise him to raise AJ. Like the son Stamper never had, one might add. When Stamper finally approves, the film arrives at an ideologically acceptable form of closure: the marriage of Grace and AJ. In his evaluation of the disaster film genre, Keane summarizes *ARMAGEDDON* as follows: "go to work, save the world, get married, populate the species" (95). King phrases it differently; he observes a tendency to "square its foregrounding of action-adventure with ideologically potent domestic concerns" (170).

A potent domestic concern in *ARMAGEDDON* is the absence

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<sup>18</sup> Bellour (1975, reprinted in 2000), in his renowned article "Symbolic Blockage" on Alfred Hitchcock's 1959 film *NORTH BY NORTHWEST*, argues that the heroine Eve has a double function, symbolically tied to two different bodies. On one hand she represents the threatening body of the forbidden mother. On the other, in the climax of the film, that body, represented as a statue, is literally broken and Eve is reborn as a non-threatening body for the hero to claim and possess. She then comes to function as the reward for the hero's journey throughout the film (2000: 191).

of the mother of Grace, the wife of Stamper. In the beginning of the film, Grace alludes to the fact that her mother “split” at a particular moment. From that moment on, Stamper was forced to raise his daughter by himself. The troubled, fractured family is a recurring motif in the action films of the 1990s. In an article entitled “With Violence If Necessary,” Karen Schneider argues that the action-thriller film consists of three related components: “family fracture, confrontation with various perceived threats to the family, and family recovery” (4). Her analysis is based on three distinctive subgenres of the action film, of which the category of the apocalypse film is most relevant here.

As Schneider argues, in the apocalypse film an imminent danger threatens the family as well as mankind in its totality. These threats are intricately related, and are to be solved by the same agent, namely a father. Schneider considers the films *VOLCANO (USA: Mick Jackson, 1997)* and *JURASSIC PARK: THE LOST WORLD (USA: Steven Spielberg, 1997)* as prime examples of the apocalyptic action film, in which “fathers alienated from their adolescent daughters salvage their relationships through decisive heroic action that simultaneously quells a catastrophic threat to the community” (5).

This synopsis is also perfectly applicable to *ARMAGEDDON*. Following both Keane and Schneider, one can argue that disaster films are also emphatically “family values” films. I would, however, propose a further specification of both these readings on the basis of my close analysis of the remainder of the sequence. For this purpose, I continue my analysis with shot 25 of the sequence.

- 25) Dynamic medium close-up of the girl: the zoom changes the shot from a medium close-up to a close-up
- 26) Repetition of shot 22 (frontal medium close up of Grace)
- 27) Frontal medium close-up of Stamper. The change in background lighting, from dark to light, provides the dynamic in this otherwise static shot

- 28) Close-up of Grace, zoom to extreme close-up
- 29) Medium close-up of Grace, a repetition of shots 22 and 26
- 30) Close-up of Stamper, with a slight zoom
- 31) Close-up of Grace
- 32) Close-up of Stamper, with a slight zoom
- 33) Close-up of Grace [A5]
- 34) Close-up of Stamper [A6]
- 35) Close-up of Grace
- 36) Long shot of the explosion of the asteroid



[A5]



[A6]

The final shot of the sequence functions as the return to the diegetic world. The blast that was initiated in shots 11 and 12 is continued. This shot functions as the closure, by means of bracketing, of the sequence.

The that is created between Grace and Stamper through the climactic exchanges of close-ups is expressed in shots 29 to 35. Joel Martin speaks of the plot as revolving on the transfer of authority over a woman between two men. Stamper can only make his sacrifice and save the world after he has made sure that his daughter will be married to the man he considers to be the right one for her. However, Martin's contention that Grace is simply an object of exchange between the two men leads to an incomplete reading of ARMAGEDDON.

As the entire sequence, and particularly this final part consisting of shots 25 to 36, demonstrates, Grace and her father share an intense relationship. At the moment of the explosion and Stamper's death, the two characters' thoughts, memories, and

feelings are “in sync.” The exchange of close-ups between Stamper and Grace profoundly visualizes the union of the two characters. The most convincing aspect of their rapport rests in the uncertainty in assigning point of view. The crucial part of the sequence is launched by the elaborate shot of Grace’s eye, shot 13, constituting her point of view. However, this initial assumption proves to be wrong: it turns out to be Stamper’s vision of the future, which he is about to safeguard by dying, that is expressed in the sequence.

Grace is not just an object that needs to be handed over to another male; instead the father-daughter dynamic itself is expressed. At the moment of his death, they find they are in each other’s minds, as equals, and they find peace in this union. Crucially, by ending the sequence with a close-up of Grace, authority and approval are transferred from Stamper onto Grace. Stamper grants Grace permission to marry the man she loves, AJ. Stamper’s death is his ultimate act of approval of the marriage bond. Through his death, Stamper will safeguard the future, in which the marriage can take place.

What is striking in this sequence, and at odds with the containment thesis, is that the father grants permission to the daughter. In a standard containment scenario, the woman would be a passive object of exchange between two men. In this case, however, the woman is an active receiver of the paternal gift of permission, while the third party, AJ, is noticeably missing during this transfer of approval.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, in line with the containment thesis, one can still argue that Grace functions as a reward for the hero’s successful journey. This is made very clear in the final scene on the runway of Kennedy Space Center, where Grace eagerly awaits AJ’s return. In *ARMAGEDDON*, the motif of the successful journey has

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<sup>19</sup> The transfer of authority takes place in the final conversation between Stamper and Grace, with Grace in the control seat of Mission Control in Houston. In this conversation, Stamper tells Grace to take care of AJ.

a double meaning. First, AJ has survived the mission, only with the help of Stamper, of course. Moreover, Stamper's death inaugurates the exchange of power from Stamper to AJ. The film constantly plays with the notion that AJ is the natural successor to Stamper; being his adopted son is one aspect of this. Stamper and AJ share a unique characteristic: they are "naturals" at the art of drilling oil, meaning that rather than relying exclusively on technology, they drill on instinct. This unique, individual quality, common to all high concept protagonists, sets them apart from all other oil drillers. Stamper's death promotes AJ to the position of heir, together with Grace, of the Stamper Oil kingdom. But he bestows this legacy through Grace, with whom he mystically bonds as he dies.

Though Stamper's act may have the undertone of paternalism and female containment, rightfully observed by Martin, Keane, and Schneider, I contend that Stamper is transcending mere paternalism. The effect of his voluntary death extends beyond the realms of an approved marriage to the survival of the whole of humankind, exemplified by the love and marriage of Grace and AJ.

### **Overtures to Martyrdom**

The mystical aspect of the dying seconds of Stamper's life, underscored by a host of short, fleeting images that are presented through high-speed cutting, divert attention from two vital events of the film: the destruction of the asteroid and the death of Harry Stamper. I would suggest that Stamper's death itself is of minor relevance to both the spectator and the diegesis. Saliently, the sequence does not strive to create audience apprehension about his death. The sequence is, on one hand, dominated by the spiritual bond between father and daughter and, on the other, by the combination of fast cutting with a classic action film deadline structure: the NASA clock steadily counting down to zero. Unlike canonical martyr stories, which often focus in detail on the actual

death of a martyr, in *ARMAGEDDON* the significance of dying is relegated to the sideline. The act itself seems of minor importance.

I contend that the kind of contemporary martyrdom constructed in *ARMAGEDDON* does not merely originate through death, but rather through the acts of the protagonist that are performed before his death and by the way he secures his commemoration as a martyr after his death. Both these aspects need to be addressed through the mode of high concept cinema. I want to focus on the sequence in which Stamper actively takes on the role of martyr, which precedes the sequence analyzed above. The pivotal scene shows the drawing of straws to decide who has to stay behind to detonate the bomb. Before the straws are drawn, Stamper volunteers to take responsibility and stay behind. His crewmates appear to talk him out of this idea, and the straws are drawn. AJ is the unlucky one. Stamper volunteers to escort AJ outside to the surface of the asteroid. Once outside, Stamper quickly sabotages the air supply of AJ's astronaut suit, leaving him temporarily paralyzed. He rips the NASA badge of his own uniform and stuffs it in AJ's pocket, saying, "Make sure Truman gets that." Now Stamper, no longer under the badge, that is to say, under orders of NASA, is able to do things his way, without anyone being able to stop him. At this moment, Stamper's defiance of the system, partly responsible for bringing him into this situation, is complete. Since the system obviously failed (the technology of NASA turns out to be defective, leaving the team no option than manual detonation), Stamper has no one to rely on. Tearing off his badge, he chooses an actively willed death to prove his point to the system, NASA as personified by Truman. Stamper reverses his passive dependency on technology, and invests it with the active component of individual will power, even in sacrifice.

This act echoes the path that was chosen by one of the classic martyrs, Ignatius. In *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity*, Droge and Tabor discuss

the example of the second century bishop of Antioch, who was sentenced to death by the Roman authorities. In a letter to the Christians of Rome, Ignatius stresses the fact that he actively desires his imminent death and implores his fellow Christians not to take any action to prevent the death sentence from being executed. Ignatius' letter expresses in explicit and visual language his desire to die for God: "Let there come on me fire, and cross, and struggle with wild beasts, cutting, and tearing asunder, rackings of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil, may I but attain to Jesus Christ!" (130). As Droge and Tabor conclude, Ignatius was inspired by the crucifixion of Christ, which resulted in an *imitatio mortis Christi*.

Like Ignatius, Stamper reverses the situation and takes active control over his own life and subsequent death. This control may render his dying as suicide. However, this is not the case with Ignatius and Stamper. Droge and Tabor remark that there is a fine line between what is considered to be suicide, a pejorative term, and what constitutes martyrdom, a positive term. The perspective depends on the position one takes within a given situation.<sup>20</sup> To overcome the distinction, they propose the morally neutral term "voluntary death," indicating "the act resulting from an individual's intentional decision to die, either by his own agency, by another's, or by *contriving* the circumstances in which death is the known, ineluctable result" (4, emphasis added).

The use of the verb "to contrive" is of interest in this definition. It means "to trick a particular situation" and, in a more negative vein, implies "to do something stupid." Stamper can be said to contrive the circumstances in *ARMAGEDDON*. His character possesses a lethal combination of bravery and stupidity. Stupidity is

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<sup>20</sup> The example of the violence in the Middle East and the evaluation of these acts immediately comes to mind: "the western press speaks of Islamic 'suicide squads'; the Arab side speaks of 'holy martyrs'" (1992: 4).

characterized in his decision to replace AJ; bravery is exemplified in his decision to renounce Mission Control in Houston. Equal parts of bravery and stupidity constitute the contours of the American male martyr.

The creation of the Harry Stamper character through the mold of high concept production is of crucial significance here. I return once more to a crucial feature of high concept, the lack of character development. This is what Wyatt calls a form of “one-dimensional stylish characterization.” To which he adds “major characters exist in a void, with little motivation or background” (57). One-dimensional characterization leads to greater emphasis on physicality, and on the appearance and demeanor of a character. The introduction of Stamper is a case in point.

In his introductory scene, he is caught in the act of teeing off golf balls from the platform of his own oilrig, located somewhere in the South China Sea. The significance of this seemingly innocent activity becomes clear: a Greenpeace ship, protesting against the Stamper Oil drilling activities, is Stamper’s target. He is instantly typed as self-made man who does not play by the rules. Moreover, his remark that “I give you [Greenpeace] 50.000 a year in donations,” emphasizes his individualistic and egoistic worldview. Since he donates money to Greenpeace, apparently to buy off his guilty conscience, Stamper assumes he should have free reign of the seas he is polluting. Stamper’s redeeming quality is his exceptional skill for oil drilling, a skill called upon to save the world. The main character of *ARMAGEDDON* is a good example of the values a typical protagonist in high concept cinema incarnates: individualistic, abrasive, defiant, yet special.

The specific character of Stamper’s ardent martyrdom lies precisely in the individualistic approach to the task he is chosen to perform. Being the only person capable of saving the world does not have a paralyzing effect on him. Quite to the contrary, if he is called

to do it, he will do it, and do it the way he wants. The technological surface appearance of *ARMAGEDDON*, its generic science fiction and action film characteristics, cannot disguise that the film deals with the theme of the stubborn individual, Stamper, who defies the system of the majority, the rocket scientists as personified in the figure of the executive director of NASA, Dan Truman. In many disaster films, the failure or arrogant misuse of technology results in catastrophe. As King argues, the inadequacy of technology presents “the opening through which can be asserted the importance of frontier-style heroics at the individual level” (155).

In this sense, *ARMAGEDDON*'s narrative resembles the Western, typified by the appearance of the outsider, Stamper, chosen to save a community (in this case, the entire world). The outsider is able to save the community because he is not a member of the system that was supposed to protect the community in the first place. NASA is supposed to protect mankind but, since it proves unable to do this, the intervention of an outsider is necessary. At first, Stamper is reluctant to take on the job. What is more, the NASA experts make the mistake of not taking him seriously, as they are unaware of Stamper's unique qualities. The outcome of the taunting of the outsider—the stubborn, individualist, “won't-take-no-for-an-answer” man Stamper personifies—is his willingness to die in order to prove his point and beat the established system of experts. In this sense, Stamper's act echoes the core definition of a martyr, namely, a person who sacrifices life for the sake of principle.

What makes Stamper a contemporary, American martyr is the combination of his individualism with the cause for which he chooses to die. As Jan Willem van Henten argues, contemporary martyrs do not exclusively die for religious causes, or a particular religious identity (“De Openbaring” 195). Instead, Stamper sacrifices his life for a kind of collective ideology, which could be called liberalism or Americanism. Stamper's act preserves the continuation

not only of his own oil drilling business, but also of the American way of life, exemplified by the future marriage between Grace and AJ. This aspect is linked to another characteristic of the modern martyr, his or her status as representative of a group identity that is religious, political, ethnic or other (201). Stamper is the personification of American values: liberalism, individualism, capitalism, free enterprise, belief in yourself, the American Dream, and family.

*ARMAGEDDON* indicates its Americanism not just in its protagonist. Although the whole world is in danger, it is America's job to save the world. The technological dominance of the US is underscored by the fact that the other space traveling nation, Russia, can only offer its MIR space station as a refuel station for the American shuttles on their way to the asteroid. *ARMAGEDDON* reduces Russian space technology to an outer space gas station. Apart from technological leadership, overall American leadership is repeatedly stressed in the film. A telling sequence is the crisis speech delivered by the American president—the natural leader of the world *ARMAGEDDON* seems to suggest—intercut with shots from a worldwide audience.<sup>21</sup> Somewhat subtler is the appearance of the Stars and Stripes in the *mise en scène*, with Stamper strategically positioned in front of it. *ARMAGEDDON* never fails to emphasize the fact that an American makes the ultimate sacrifice.

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<sup>21</sup> As Todd McCarthy of *Variety* puts it: "In a lame attempt to globalize the drama, insert shots show thousands of natives praying in front of the Blue Mosque in Istanbul and the Taj Mahal (not a religious site) in India, which somehow increases the jingoistic, thank-you-America-for-saving-the-world message."

## Patch of commemoration

A final aspect of classical martyrdom that is echoed in *ARMAGEDDON* needs to be addressed. After the hero's sacrifice, those who were saved must maintain its significance. It would lose its value if it were forgotten. Commemoration is of crucial importance in the narrative of martyrdom. As Castelli puts it, "martyrdom is not simply an action but rather the product of interpretation and retelling." It is, she continues, "rhetorically constituted and discursively sustained" (*Martyrdom* 173). The constitution of a martyr's story can be done verbally, by telling and retelling, and writing and rewriting. The story can also be augmented by material or visual components. Stamper's NASA mission patch functions as the material remnant of his martyrdom and takes on special significance. After the safe return home of the remaining crew, AJ hands Truman the patch, which reads: "freedom—for all mankind." The message commemorates the spectacular dimension of Stamper's martyrdom. Its meaning is clear: Stamper's martyrdom has liberated mankind. Though Truman and Stamper were each other's adversaries throughout the film, now Truman admits his defeat. Stamper's moral victory is underscored. The patch gives Stamper the last word. AJ's responsibility is increased: not only is he Stamper's son-in-law and business heir, but also the sole witness to Stamper's martyrdom. His task is to give witness and sustain Stamper's martyrdom.

Earlier in the film, the importance of remembrance is accentuated. Shortly before the launch of the two space shuttles, the viewer is presented with a shot of the plaque at NASA headquarters that reads: "In memory of those who made the ultimate sacrifice so others could reach for the stars  
ad astra per aspera (a rough road leads to the stars) God speed to the crew of Apollo 1."

The plaque makes martyrs of the deceased astronauts of NASA. This signals what Castelli describes as the martyr's

function as a “placeholder for a touted virtue or ideal.” The astronauts become the objects of “shared memory in the service of a contemporary institutional or ideological interest” (*Martyrdom* 136). The institutional interest the astronauts serve is NASA, and the larger ideological concern is the status of the US as a space traveling nation. The commemorative inscription opens up a field of intertextual meaning. The Latin proverb is more commonly translated as, “To the stars through thorns.” “Thorns” evokes the connotation of suffering, as in the crown of thorns Jesus wore during his crucifixion. The “stars” are not merely astral bodies; they are part of heaven. They signify not just a higher point literally, but also a higher state of being, detachment from earth. The connection can be observed in one of the key apocalyptic texts of the Old Testament. Daniel 12:1-3 speaks of “Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever.” The phrase could be read as follows: Those who make a sacrifice will gain transcendence through their suffering.

Unlike the crew of the Apollo 1 space ship, who died collectively in their quest for the stars, however, *ARMAGEDDON* emphasizes the individuality of Stamper, who can and will make a difference. The scene where the crew draws straws is the first indication that the individual will perform the task at hand. Initially, the draw emphasizes the arbitrary, individual nature of the sacrificial act. The possibility of a collective detonation is never seriously considered. Instead, each of the crew members expresses the wish for the others to be able to return home. An awkward discussion ensues about which crew member has the least valid reason for living, which is quickly resolved by drawing straws. However, by sabotaging the draw, Stamper invests the sacrifice with individual motivation. He emphatically claims the right to save the world.

The straw-drawing scene stands in contrast to the rest of the film, where Stamper’s team of oil drillers is repeatedly

presented as a team. As Keane suggests, Stamper's "leadership principle is tempered with the value of teamwork: 'I'm only the best because I work with the best'" (93). In this light, the film can also be read through the metaphor of sport. The two shuttles are the two opposing teams, the military, represented by NASA, the Pentagon and the American President versus the workers, Stamper and his crew. There is a red and a blue team, with different types of players and different tactics. Both, however, have the same objective, the destruction of the asteroid. When one of the teams scores, the rest of world, depicted as a global crowd of sports fans, cheers. The sports metaphor uncovers another principal subject of disaster movies, which is, according to Keane, class (difference) (93-94). *ARMAGEDDON* represents the clash between Stamper's blue-collar workers, who value physical labor above technology, and the scientists of NASA and the military, who value technology above everything else.

NASA director Truman functions as the link between the two opposing groups. Even though his background is in the military, a war injury has prevented him from becoming an astronaut. He decided to become an engineer for NASA. Keane claims that Truman is "the decent worker made group leader" (94). Though I agree with Keane's assertion of class being of major importance for the genre, his reading of Truman is limited. I propose to read Truman as a man torn apart between the two groups. His loyalty remains firmly with the military for most of the film. Only at the last minute does Truman have a change of heart. Giving Stamper the chance to perform his sacrifice, he ignores a military order. Truman is a non-believer; he prefers to believe in protocol and systems, not in the power of the individual, Stamper. When the magnitude and single-mindedness of Stamper's sacrifice finally dawns on him, he is, at least temporarily, converted and moves against the system.

The interaction between Truman and Stamper is based on a clash of perspective and class. Truman is well aware of the

fact that the system sometimes needs individual sacrifice in order to survive.<sup>22</sup> With no other options left, Truman realizes that the sacrifice of Stamper is the only chance of preserving the system. Truman's initial reluctance can be explained through the fate of the astronauts of Apollo 1. Unlike them, Stamper does not bow before a collective institutional or ideological interest. His rogue methods go directly against NASA policy. Truman, though, is a pragmatist, who adheres to the credo that it is better to "have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed." Truman's decision to allow Stamper to blow up the asteroid resonates with the pivotal discussion between Caiaphas and the council about what measures to take against the agitator Jesus. Caiaphas exclaims: "You know nothing at all! You do not understand that it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed" (John 11:47-50). Stamper's death not only saves an entire nation; it also resolves class conflict. His individual sacrifice transcends class and ideology.

### **Individually Defined Martyrdom**

As I have argued in this chapter, *ARMAGEDDON*'s representation of male martyrdom functions as an instance of preposterous history. The film's recasting of past images affects the original source of images which, in their turn, shape the historically preceding images. We have seen that a recurring element in martyr stories is the fact that the martyr has a vision shortly before his or her death. This trait of the martyr scenario is quoted, but also altered, in Hollywood cinema. The prophetic, visionary dimension

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<sup>22</sup> As is often the case, the name of a character can be telling: in the end, Truman finally lives up to his name and acts like a "true man." That is to say, a "true man" would not merely rely on technology or put his faith in the abstract instance of a system. A "true man" would value both physicality and individuality. An even more obvious association of the name is the reference to former US President Harry S. Truman which, in its turn, points to the leadership qualities associated with this president.

of the sequence thus ties into a preposterous approach: Hollywood quotes an aspect of canonical martyrdom, but invests it with a different meaning. Similar to classic examples, Stamper's vision in *ARMAGEDDON* discloses a truth about the future, namely the marriage between his daughter Grace and AJ. However, classic martyrs, such as Stephen and Perpetua, envisioned the afterlife as a reconciliation with God. Family and loved ones, their relations and futures, dominate Hollywood's representation of the afterlife. Hollywood's preposterous turn resides in the substitution of a religious context for a familial and secular one. Moreover, in classic visions, the vision refers to, and is positioned in, the next world, a reality different from the present one. Stamper's vision in *ARMAGEDDON*, however, is linked to present and future reality, of which he will no longer be part. The vision conveys to a dying Stamper that his paternal wish will be carried out in the future through the marriage of Grace and AJ.

A second recurring element in martyrdom discourse is the emphasis on the act of dying as performative. *ARMAGEDDON* represents Stamper's death as a deliberate performance. The actively willed death of Stamper suggests a connection to an earlier discourse on martyrdom, namely the case of Ignatius. However, unlike canonical martyr stories, which focus in prolonged detail on the actual death of a martyr, in *ARMAGEDDON* the representation of Stamper's moment of death is short. The moment, expressed through high speed editing, is of minor importance.

The contemporary martyrdom constructed in *ARMAGEDDON* does not merely originate through death itself but, on one hand, through the acts of the protagonist *before* his death and, on the other, through the way he secures his commemoration as a martyr *after* his death. The construction and commemoration of the contemporary martyr are both addressed through the mode of high concept cinema. The particular character of Stamper's martyrdom lies in his individualistic approach to the task he is chosen to

perform. What makes Stamper a contemporary, American martyr is the combination of his individualism with the cause he dies for. First, he dies for the continuation of the family. Second, he dies for the safeguarding of freedom for all mankind which, throughout the film, is typified as an American value. Finally, his death readjusts the relationship between individual and collective, favoring the former over the latter.

In conclusion, *ARMAGEDDON*'s intertextual referencing of religious discourses of martyrdom is by no means unproblematic. Obscured as it may be by Hollywood aesthetics, the martyrdom of Stamper is motivated by the will to preserve a severe Americanism. *ARMAGEDDON* grants Stamper a martyr's death, commemorating him as a true man, a true American, and an American martyr. Stamper may die, so that the spirit of American beliefs and values can live on.