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Chapter Five

Female Visionary: Apocalyptic Anticipation in *THE SEVENTH SIGN*

For this reason, I now speak through a person who is not eloquent in the Scriptures or taught by an earthly teacher; I Who Am speak through her of new secrets and mystical truths, heretofore hidden in the books, like one who mixes clay and then shapes it to any form he wishes.

Hildegard von Bingen (Book 3, vision 11)

Introduction

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) was an abbess and mystical visionary whose writings are pervaded with apocalyptic imagery. Her book *Scivias* is a report of twenty-five visions that sum up Christian doctrine on the history of salvation. The notion of the vision is a recurring element in the present study. It forms the primary characteristic of Revelation, which is generally understood as the written account of the vision that John receives. The vision also figures prominently in secular, popular manifestations of the Apocalypse. In the films I have discussed so far, *END OF DAYS*, *ARMAGEDDON*, *ALIEN3*, and *THE RAPTURE*, the visions are of crucial importance to the martyrdom discourse, both past and present. The visionary segments of *THE SEVENTH SIGN* (USA: Carl Schultz, 1988), the film under scrutiny in this chapter, hint at the notion of a “double reality,” evoking a certain past in the present, a common trait of apocalyptic narrative. The anti-linearity of the vision can be connected to a preposterous perspective.

In this chapter, I focus on visions in relation to gender. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the main character Abby, a self-confessed nonbeliever, receives a series of mysterious and prophetic visions.

This resonates with Hildegard's epigraph, in which she positions herself as "a person who is not eloquent in the Scriptures." I address the work of another female visionary, Anne Catherine Emmerich, in relation to Abby. Abby's visions are a central aspect of the narrative of *THE SEVENTH SIGN*. Her vision not only recurs several times, increasing in both length and significance with each occurrence, but is also emphatically marked as vision. This labels Abby's visions as instances of self-conscious and self-reflexive cinematic narration. The concept of vision resonates in a religious as well as cinematic sense. Both discourses incorporate it, though in diverging ways. Understood in a religious context, vision refers to the abstract: a thought, a religious belief, which is nevertheless rendered visually. Cinema *is* vision; its discourse centers on the visual, the image, the act of seeing and the power this act entails. In the martyr's vision, I will show, both discourses come together. In this chapter, then, vision functions as an interdisciplinary element that connects religion and film.

Cinematic vision unpacks a number of related issues. It adds another layer to the representation of female martyrdom, the female martyr as visionary. Abby's martyrdom resonates with the other examples of female martyrdom discussed so far, both religious and secular. In addition, the uncertainty of the temporal reality experienced during a vision provokes questions with regard to the status of the beginning and the end, a recurring issue in the apocalyptic discourse. The vision disrupts notions of linear time and, consequently, the unfolding of narrative. Time can be imagined as a loop, moving from past to present to future but, as *THE SEVENTH SIGN* illustrates, not necessarily in that order. A detailed analysis of the opening sequence of the film shows how the ending is already located in the beginning. Furthermore, the ending of the film, I argue, is emphatically an open ending. It refers back to the beginning. The film itself creates a perennial temporal loop. Finally, the film

exemplifies the intimate link between motherhood and martyrdom, which I have signaled in the previous two chapters.

The film opens with several signs that forecast the Apocalypse. These are loose adaptations of the seven seals, signs, and bowls of judgment from the Book of Revelation. The messenger who unleashes them is the mysterious David (Jurgen Prochnow), an incarnation of the returned Jesus. Before long, David moves in as a lodger with pregnant Los Angeles housewife Abby (Demi Moore) and her lawyer husband, Michael (Michael Biehn).¹ The apocalyptic end, so David tells Abby, is set in motion and cannot be stopped. THE SEVENTH SIGN's notion of the Apocalypse is informed by the ancient Jewish legend of the Guf, the hall of souls. It is the place where a finite number of souls are stored until they will inhabit the bodies of newborn babies. According to this legend, the Messiah will not arrive until the hall of souls is empty, that is to say, until the first child is born without a soul. Abby quickly realizes that her unborn child will be the first child born without a soul, and that his birth will usher in the Apocalypse.²

Abby questions David about possible ways of preventing this. He responds that the chain of signs can be broken, but that

¹ Many films represent Los Angeles as the place where the Apocalypse, or any other form of general mayhem and destruction, will unfold. For an overview of literary as well as cinematic examples of the annihilation of LA, see Mike Davis (1998) *Ecology of Fear: Los Angeles and the Imagination of Disaster*. King notes that, "favourite targets [of natural disaster and destruction] are the metropolises of New York and Los Angeles, [...] it is less common for the target to be rural" (2000: 146). Los Angeles, King remarks, "stands as the ultimate signifier of decadence and 'unreality.'" As such, he argues, "onto Los Angeles can be projected what are perceived to be the most decadent and deplored tendencies of modern American life, in an act of ritual sacrifice and displacement that implies, reassuringly, that much of the rest of the country remains essentially untainted" (2000: 148).

² The film's representation of hope, symbolized in the Hebrew legend of the Guf is addressed in detail by Conrad Ostwalt's reading of the film. As Ostwalt argues, the film "provides the most explicit example [...] of contemporary apocalyptic vision through a creative combination of Christian and Jewish apocalyptic imagery and folk tradition" (1995: 59). I return to Ostwalt's analysis of THE SEVENTH SIGN below.

it would require hope, and that hope is what mankind has lost. Initially, Abby seems to have found an ally in the figure of father Lucci (Peter Friedman), a priest. However, his plans turn out to be diametrically opposed to those of Abby. One of the clients of Abby's husband, Jimmy (John Taylor), sentenced to death for killing his incestuous parents, plays a decisive role in father Lucci's schemes. For Jimmy's death is one of the seven signs that must occur before the Apocalypse can unfold. Amidst the chaos of the impending Apocalypse, Abby attempts to interrupt the sequence of apocalyptic signs. She is rushed to hospital where she gives birth to a son. The child, it appears, is stillborn. In an act of self-sacrifice, Abby gives her life so that her child can live. This act restores hope for humankind and the Apocalypse is forestalled.

I begin with the cinematic question of whether Abby suffers from dreams, flashbacks, or flashforwards. Whichever they are, these disruptions of causal temporality provide clues to Abby's destiny. This, I argue, can already be observed in the opening sequence of the film. My analysis of this sequence focuses on the enigma it invokes. The relationships among the three main characters are crucial for solving the film's enigma. Subsequently, I analyze the main characters as referential characters, part of an established frame of reference, adhering or deviating from it. In the next section, I analyze the maternal aspect of the martyrdom of Abby. I analyze the parallels and contrasts between Abby and the previous female martyrs. Finally, I return to the film's beginning through its ending and argue that the beginning and the ending of the narrative are preposterously condensed.

Glimpsing the Future Through the Past

The flashbacks or dreams that Abby experiences are the narratological and aesthetic entry point for my interpretation of the film. Their status is initially unclear. Are they recurring dreams?

What is their temporal status? Do they pertain to the past, to the future, or maybe to both? The dreams or flashbacks are familiar and ambivalent at the same time. Their familiarity lies in the way they are presented to the viewer, namely through conventional cinematic signs that signal the appearance of a dream or flashback. The first appearance of a dream or flashback is crucial in this respect, since it breaks



[SeventhSign2]

the established diegetic world and introduces a different temporal and subjective register, establishing a template for the interruptions that follow. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the first one is explicitly presented as Abby's *dream*. We recognize the school she visited earlier that day. Via a dark corridor, supposedly in the school, Abby ends up in a dark cave, where one man is beating another. Abby overhears the question, "Will you die for him?" The signals that mark Abby's perceptions as dream are obvious: on the soundtrack, eerie music is heard, diegetic sound is deformed, and the action is shown in slow motion. The latter two characteristics are clear indications of her perception's subjective status. Then, Abby awakens startled and is comforted by Russell, who tells her that it was "just a dream."

[SeventhSign2] Yet, the most obvious and ambivalent aspect of the dream—which also hints at its status as a flashback—is the divergent temporal dimension in which it is staged. For it constitutes an abrupt break with the temporal setting of the diegesis, Los Angeles in the present time, and offers instead a nonspecific place in a distant past. The presence of Abby in both those time-worlds

³ On the basis of the first vision, emphatically represented as a dream where we see Abby in a different historical period, it can be interpreted as a flashback. To be more precise, it could be an external flashback since it displays events that occur prior to the first event represented in the plot (Bordwell 1985: 78).

suggests a possible causal and temporal connection.³

The status of the first dream becomes more ambivalent after Abby follows David inside a synagogue. There, she recognizes a corridor as the one she has seen before in her dream, while she has never actually visited that synagogue before. The second occurrence of the dream takes place after David has revealed his true identity to Abby. After a whiteout of the screen, during which an unspecified amount of time transpires, Abby finds herself in hospital. In shock, she is administered a heavy sedative. As she loses consciousness, flashes of the earlier dream appear before her eyes. This time, however, the identity of the man who is beaten is revealed: David. The third time the dream occurs, Abby has not lost consciousness. This time, the identity of father Lucci is revealed. In addition, the dream shows Abby for the first time as part of a larger group of onlookers at the scene of the beating. In the final occurrence of the vision, Abby is fully conscious again, and she answers the persistent question, "Will you die for him?" affirmatively. After that, she loses consciousness and dies.

On the basis of this pattern, I argue that Abby suffers neither from dreams nor experiences flashbacks. I propose to label them visions. Initially, the vision manifests itself while she is asleep, and can thus be coded as "just a dream." The other three times her perception takes place in front of her eyes, while she is, at least partially, conscious. This invalidates the category of the dream. The revelatory third vision comes to Abby when she is fully conscious. As Bal argues, "memory is an act of 'vision' of the past but, as an act, situated in the present of the memory" (*Narratology* 147). Elements of the past and the present are tangled and present themselves in an incongruent, associative fashion. Parts of the incident are revealed to her, but initially she is unable to make sense of them. Following Bal, I argue that what Abby suffers from can be compared to trauma, insofar as her memory of a certain event is disrupted. The kernel of

the trauma is situated in the recollection of the question, “Will you die for him?” Abby’s engagement with, or her act of working-through, this question in the present makes closure possible.

Bal writes, “memory is also the joint between time and space” (147). Bal discusses this aspect of memory with respect to postcolonial literature, where it is deployed as a means of countering the effects of colonizing acts such as mapping. Yet, her argument can pertain to other cases of time and space convergence as well (147-148). Abby’s vision, shaped by a traumatic and faulty memory, uncovers the joint between first-century Jerusalem and present-day Los Angeles. Abby’s vision is precisely a vision since it discloses secret knowledge about an event that took place in the past, which will be restaged in the imminent future. Time and place may be transposed and changeable, but the characters are not. In that sense, Abby is the receiver of a revelation as well as of a prophecy: her visions reveal something that happened in the past, while they also pertain to and prophesize the future.

This suggests the possibility that the visions are a kind of flashforward which, according to Bordwell, provides a glimpse of the outcome before all causal chains are understood. Flashforwards, understood within the context of classical narrative film, are generally problematic and uncommon. Narratologically, they exceed the set time span of the story. Stylistically, they are “very hard to motivate realistically” (*Narration* 79). In rare cases, they are motivated as self-conscious acts of authorial intrusion, a characteristic of art cinema, not Hollywood cinema. The obvious reason why Abby’s visions cannot be examples of flashforwards is the change in time and place between the present-day diegesis and the earlier, ancient setting of her visions. Abby’s visions could have been flashforwards only, if they were also set in a hospital room in present-day Los Angeles.

Perhaps it is more productive to avoid the terms flashforward and flashback altogether, and focus on the tension between time and

place in the visions as the key to understanding them. Abby's visions constitute a deviation of time and place. Though the visions are set in the past, the messages they convey are crucial for the future. Abby's visions provide glimpses of the future by way of the past. Bal has labeled this deviation of time "anticipation within retroversion," a referring forward within a back-reference (*Narratology* 98). When this notion of temporality is applied to Abby's visions, their significance becomes understandable. Retroversion means that the event present in the anachrony, here taken as the vision, lies in the past. This is the case in Abby's visions. Anticipation, Bal claims, often suggests "a sense of fatalism, or predestination: nothing can be done, we can only watch the progression towards the final result" (95). Thus, anticipation within retroversion uncovers the importance of an act located in the past for another act located in the future. The visions imply that past and future are not only intricately bound to one another, as the latter replays, restages the former, but also are seemingly unalterable. This, then, is the significance of Abby's vision: it gives her privileged information on past and future events and her role in those events; yet, the outcome is already determined, or at least that seems to be the case.

However, a crucial aspect challenges this fatalistic, apocalyptic characteristic of the visions: the characters and their present incarnations. For, in order to alter her fixed destiny and those of the other characters, Abby and the spectator must understand what her destiny has been in the past. The opening sequence of

the film offers clues about the past and future of Abby and the other main characters. An analysis of the sequence reveals repetitions and variations in time, place, and character development.

Beginnings: The Enigma as Catalyst

Unlike previous cases in this study, I will focus on the construction of the narrative and on the ways in which the narrative is presented through the plot.⁴ To this end, I have divided the film into large narrative units or segments.⁵ According to Stephen Heath, the segmentation of a film “operates at the level of the narrative signified according to the simple criteria of unity of action, unity of characters, unity of place; it has no analytic status other than that of allowing reference to the film as narrative” (Heath in Bellour, “To Analyze, To Segment” 335).

The segmentation of a film into units serves a practical and analytical function. A segment, Bordwell notes, is not a sealed entity: “spatially and temporally it is closed, but causally it is open” (*Narration* 158). This characteristic results in the forward thrust of the narrative, as each segment continues or sets off development. This progression is eventually terminated when a state of stasis is reached. Often, segments can be grouped together. In that case, they constitute what Bellour calls a “sequence” (a suprasegment or macrosegment). Like a segment, a sequence often adheres to the classic rules of unity of time, place, and action.

⁴ I follow Bordwell and Thompson’s differentiation between plot and story. In a narrative film, plot is “all the events that are directly presented to us, including their causal relations, chronological order, duration, frequency, and spatial locations.” This is opposed to story, which they define as “the viewer’s imaginary construction of all the events in the narrative” (1997: 481).

⁵ The film adheres to the classic three-act structure common in Hollywood storytelling. In this chapter, I analyze the opening, or exposition, in detail. As mentioned, this opening sequence takes place in the first ten segments of the film. The second act, the complication, takes place between segments eleven and twenty-eight. The third act, the climax, runs from segment twenty-nine to forty-one. It is clear that the three-act structure distributes and balances the number of segments dedicated to each act. The middle section takes up most of the film (nearly twenty segments), whereas the beginning and ending are balanced, with roughly ten segments each.

The parallel and alternating storylines of *THE SEVENTH SIGN* are presented in the plot through crosscutting. This is a common type of editing, which emphasizes action in separate places and times.⁶ The technique of crosscutting is the governing principle of the first large and expository sequence of the film, consisting of ten segments. Apart from introducing the main characters and locations, the editing suggests a connection between characters. The film is thus an example of the “converging fates” device, which connects the several protagonists of a film. Bordwell remarks: “When a multiple-protagonist plot brings strangers together, the more the narration emphasizes their separate lives, the more we expect significant encounters among them” (*Way Hollywood Tells It* 99). The link between Abby, David, and father Lucci is not disclosed in the first sequence of the film. Instead, the enigma serves as a catalyst for the narrative.

In this sense, *THE SEVENTH SIGN* adheres to the classic rule. As Elsaesser and Buckland argue, the opening should be regarded as a manual or meta-text for the film. The “opening-as-a-manual” idea is strengthened by the initial sequences’ divergence at the level of style as well as content in relation to the rest of the film. The opening, Elsaesser and Buckland state, is “separate from and yet part of the narrative, in that it usually establishes setting, place, and time, as well as introducing the main protagonist(s).” In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the stylistic difference of the opening sequence is signaled by the use of crosscutting. Hence, the opening points to a possible reading of the film, or introduces “the rules of the game” (47). These rules become clear when the opening sequence is analyzed.

My delineation of the segments that constitute the opening sequence, segment one to ten, needs to be motivated first. The main reason for imposing an end to the opening of the film after segment ten is the fact that the main characters have been introduced by then. The function of the opening lies in its creation of the enigma

that fuels the film. The use of crosscutting between different locations and characters prompts the viewer to look for a possible connection. Immediately, one can observe formal repetitions between the segments. These repetitions set up an alternating rhythm among the segments.

The obvious repetition is found in the first three segments, which alternate between different locations and calendar dates. **[SeventhSign1]** However, segment three, which functions as the introduction of Abby, displays a striking alteration. Though repetition is continued in the date and location information given to the viewer, variation is now added. For segment three opens with a prolonged close up of Abby. Dialogue reveals a major theme of the film: the character's troubled history of pregnancy. The following segment breaks with the previous pattern, since it does not return to the characters or the locations of the previous two segments. Instead, Abby's privileged position is stressed. Segment four opens with a subjective tracking shot that is attributed to Abby's point of view. The appearance of this subjective shot is unexpected and confusing but, as it turns out, crucial for the remainder of the film. Segments five and six continue to privilege Abby to the extent that a separate character-based sequence can be isolated within the larger opening sequence. Segments five and six provide more information about Abby's life. The extreme close-up of the scars on Abby's wrists, the result of a failed suicide attempt, is followed by the first of a series of subjective segments.

Segment seven, the first appearance of the vision, is crucial. I discuss this segment, as well as its repetitions throughout the film, in greater detail below. Segment eight closes off what can be called the "Abby sequence," and returns to the previously established



[SeventhSign1]

pattern. However, segment nine once again shows a shift. Here, the minor character of Russell, Abby's husband, is presented. A client of Russell, Jimmy, is foregrounded. This segment is not only a disruption of the previous pattern, but also initially appears to be superfluous. Nevertheless, within the system of Hollywood narration, any information given, redundant as it may seem, will turn out to be essential to the story. The storyline of Russell and Jimmy is key to the unraveling of the mystery. The opening is closed in segment ten, the moment when David's identity is revealed and, more importantly, where the two central characters of the film, Abby being the other one, converge. This meeting will cause a disturbance of balance, a disturbance that pushes the narrative to the next level.

Thus, the opening sequence of the film functions in a number of ways. It introduces the main characters and provides their backgrounds. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, Abby takes center stage. The opening sets up a specific configuration among characters. Their relationship is, however, deliberately left patchy: some links are obvious, while others remain opaque. For instance, the character of Father Lucci is featured just once in the opening. His function in the narrative is purposely withheld. The configurative opening thus operates as enigma and catalyst for the film.

This obvious patchiness also points to a possible reading of the film. It can be interpreted as a rather impromptu dissemination of, literally, signs. The sign that takes on prime importance is the sealed letter, recurring in segments one, two, and eight. The letter with the broken seal functions as what Elsaesser and Buckland call "a privileged image," or "emblematic cluster": "a condensation of the various narrative motifs," which implies "a temporal structure of anticipation and foreshadowing" (51). Additionally, the sealed letters can also be read as a "circulating object" among the main characters (Bordwell, *Way Hollywood Tells It* 97). David sets the circulation of

the letters in motion, Father Lucci finds them along his journey, and Abby breaks one of the seals, unintentionally speeding up their circulation and thus the countdown to the Apocalypse, which will result in the confrontation among the three main characters.

The material letter itself is more than a sign: the letters literally release the apocalyptic signs. **[SeventhSign3]** Their scattering initially appears to be devoid of system or structure, just as the locations at which the signs are released seem random.⁷ Gradually, however, the system is revealed and the narrative is thrust forward by anticipation, more precisely by the countdown. Since each letter corresponds to one of Revelation's apocalyptic signs, the breaking of each seal brings the Apocalypse nearer. Time is running out. Abby's frantic attempts at bringing the signs to a halt will be futile, as David already explained to her early in the film. Desperate, Abby attempts to reverse the thrust by going back one sign in the chain. This is Revelation's fifth seal, which speaks of "the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God" (Revelation 6:9). As I will argue below, the film translates this seal as the death of the last martyr, Jimmy. However, Jimmy's death—he is sentenced to the gas chamber—cannot be averted. Unsurprisingly, the countdown is brought to a standstill at the last moment and by means of the greatest possible effort, the sacrifice of Abby. The unstoppable sequence of signs needs to be completed; its function in narrative terms needs to be exhausted, as it were. Only then, when there are



[SeventhSign3]

⁷ As Phil Hardy (1993) points out in his review of *THE SEVENTH SIGN* in the *Encyclopedia of Horror*, the film seems to suggest that God has pretty much the same foreign policy as, at the time of the film's release, US president Ronald Reagan. In short order, the film shows catastrophe strike Haiti, Iran, Iraq, and Nicaragua.

no more signs that can be stopped or averted, the true destiny of Abby's character can be unveiled. The concluding act should close the causal openness of the narrative. Whether this is actually the case in *THE SEVENTH SIGN* is debatable.

The film's initial enigma of the sealed letters is solved, yet replaced by another one, revolving on the relationship among the three main characters, David, Abby, and Father Lucci. The revelation of the purpose of each character as well as their shared historical connection, a culmination of their past, present, and possible future, takes place in Abby's recurring visions. The visions provide access to a different time and place, where the contemporary characters become visible in their previous incarnations.

Referential Characters and Critical Re-Incarnations

Abby's visions are the key to unlocking the enigma of the film. One can argue that the film deals with the threat of the possible end of the world and with the ways in which the main character attempts to avert that end, an argument I will address when I discuss the nature of Abby's sacrifice and martyrdom. However, I argue that the film's narrative is driven by the constellation of the four main characters of the film. Each main character is a representation, or better, *incarnation* of another, historically older, (quasi-) biblical figure. Incarnation refers to the visual presence of imagery that is derived from religious tradition in a culture that defines itself as secular, and to the imagery of Christianity's central concept of (re-)incarnation. The (re)incarnation of predominantly Christian imagery in popular culture is structured by resemblance, resonance, and difference. Resemblance and resonance are deployed in a visual and thematic sense. The third, difference, is the potential analytical outcome of the first two terms and is, in itself, crucial in positioning and clarifying the incarnation in the present context.

As a contemporary visual production, the film reconfigures

images, in this case characters, of a past biblical tradition. These contemporary reworkings of the characters could be labeled “referential characters” (Bal, *Narratology*). They are part of an already established frame of reference and “act according to the pattern that we are familiar with from other sources” (Ball, *Narratology* 121). Or, as Bal is quick to add, they do *not* act according to expectation. Precisely the tension between expectation and realization is fascinating. The faithfulness or accuracy of the characters to their original source is only part of my analysis. Their deviation, hence re-incarnation, is what my analysis seeks to uncover.

The first two characters, Jimmy and David, are marked explicitly as re-incarnations of biblical characters. The latter two, Father Lucci and Abby, are amalgamates of several biblical and extrabiblical traits. Contrary to Jimmy and David, Father Lucci’s and Abby’s possible biblical intertext is not explicitly acknowledged in the film. Even though he is not a main character, Jimmy plays a pivotal role in the conflict of the film. He is explicitly positioned within the context of Revelation, albeit with an essential deviation. In her quest for the advancement of the seven signs, Abby quickly discovers, or rather interprets, that Jimmy’s death represents the fifth seal of Revelation. In Abby’s exegesis, Jimmy stands for the souls under the altar: “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” (Revelation 6:9). The link between Bible

⁸ The film seems to waver between painting this character with respect and ridicule. What to make of the fact that Jimmy suffers from Down’s syndrome? One could read this as an implicit debunking of religious people; that is to say, being a believer equals having a lower than average intelligence. Alternatively, one can read this character as possessing a kind of innocence: he is forthright in his acts and motivations.

and film is explicit in that Jimmy is repeatedly called the “Word of God” killer. Jimmy finds justification for killing his incestuous parents in the Bible (in verses from Leviticus, to be precise).⁸ However, the film also invests another meaning into this character. Abby, again based on her own exegesis, calls him “the last martyr,” which could adhere to the source text in that it signals the completion of a particular, yet unspecified, number of souls that will have to be martyred before the return of Christ: “until the number would be complete” (Revelation 6:11). Yet, Revelation makes no mention of a particular, individual last martyr. The deviation can thus be located in the marked individuality of Jimmy against Revelation’s unspecified “number,” a faceless group of martyrs.⁹ In addition, the emphasis on Jimmy being the last martyr serves the deadline structure of the film. Unlike Revelation, which often couches its prophecy in shrouded terms, *THE SEVENTH SIGN* drives home the idea that the apocalyptic signs are unambiguous in their meaning and relentless in their unfolding.

David is the personification of a returned Christ. However, it takes well into the second act of the film before this is revealed. Until then, the narrative knowingly represents David as a character with dubious intentions. In the opening sequence of the film, the spectator is to infer that his character is in some way connected to the death and destruction he encounters everywhere he goes. Moreover, he has no dialogue, and the nondiegetic soundtrack provides his character with an eerie musical theme. In a crucial scene, he reveals his identity and divine mission to Abby. He cryptically refers

⁹ The complete reference to the martyrs is as follows: “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 each 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” (Rev.6:9-11).

to himself as “the messenger,” who was on earth before and now has returned. But an unequivocal statement follows: “I came as the Lamb and I return a Lion.” This is a direct reference to Revelation: “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals” (Revelation 5:5). The final part of this reference stresses David’s



[SeventhSign4]

connection to his biblical counterpart, as it is only David who can open the seals of the letters he disperses on earth. After David has revealed his identity, a panicked Abby tries to stab him but, instead of blood, David’s body releases a bright light. **[SeventhSign4]** He then proclaims: “Now I am His wrath,” which refers to Revelation 6:16: “fall on us and hide us from the face of the one seated on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb.”

At that moment, a reversal takes place. Whereas in Revelation, the fierce lion turns out to be a lamb, in *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the benevolent lamb is turned into a wrathful lion. In his earlier incarnation, witnessed by Abby in her vision, David functioned as the sacrificial lamb. In the present-day re-incarnation, he sheds his sacrificial cloak to reveal an enraged Christ persona. Crucially, David/Christ refuses to sacrifice his life for a second time and grant humankind another chance. In this resides the re-incarnation of his character: from a sacrificial to a non-sacrificial Christ. Given the fact that David is so emphatically represented as a referential character, Christ, the fact that in the end he does not act accordingly is one of the film’s greatest upsets. The implications of this deviation become apparent in my discussion of Abby’s martyrdom below.

The character of Father Lucci is another referential character, derived from the legend of the Wandering Jew, as well

as a reworking of a biblical character, Cartaphilus, Pontius Pilate's gatekeeper. As Hasan-Rokem and Dundes explain, in the legend Jesus curses the Wandering Jew for his unwillingness to allow a weary, cross-bearing Jesus a moment's temporary respite. He will remain ageless which is why, in some versions of the legend, his name is Longinus, and he will walk the earth until the Second Coming, the return of Jesus (vii). Hasan-Rokem and Dundes also list the reasons for the sustained popularity and countless interpretations of the Wandering Jew legend. They argue that the legend is a "pivotal reflection of the Jewish-Christian relationships" (vii). Though the story is not common in Jewish tradition, the legend holds an enduring appeal for Christians since it portrays the confrontation between Judaism and Christianity, a confrontation that, according to the Christian interpretation of the legend, results in Judaism voluntarily yielding to Christianity. The legend's apocalyptic undercurrent is important: the Second Coming, Jesus' triumphant return to earth, is the moment when the Wandering Jew's curse will

¹⁰ The Lucci character is emphatically represented as the antagonist to the film's two protagonists, Abby and David. By extension, the Roman Catholic Church, to which Lucci belongs, is also pictured as a power-hungry organization, eagerly awaiting the Apocalypse. The representation of the Roman Catholic Church as an evil institution is a recurring trait of apocalyptic blockbuster cinema (for instance, *END OF DAYS* which features a malevolent, obscure cult of Roman Catholic origin) as well as many interpretations of Revelation which attempt to read it as a blueprint for possible papal plots aimed at world domination. Or, even more bluntly, in common Protestant historicist interpretation, Revelation's Rome is read as a thinly veiled allusion to the Roman Catholic Church and/or the Pope, both of which are regarded as the Antichrist (Newport 2000: 10).

¹¹ For several more detailed versions of the story, see George K. Anderson, *The Legend of the Wandering Jew*, particularly pages 16-21.

¹² "Then the high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and about his teaching. Jesus answered, 'I have spoken openly to the world; I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all the Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said to them; they know what I said.' When he had said this, one of the police standing nearby struck Jesus on the face saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?'" Jesus answered, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify to the wrong. But if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?' Then Annas sent him bound to Caiaphas the high priest."

be lifted.

This aspect of the legend is deftly deployed in the plot of *THE SEVENTH SIGN*: Father Lucci eagerly awaits the Apocalypse in order to be freed from his plight, and will therefore thwart Abby's attempts to stop the apocalyptic signs.¹⁰ Lucci's earlier incarnation as a Roman officer of Pilate, revealed in Abby's visions, is derived from one particular version of the legend.¹¹ This version has a biblical source, namely the New Testament Gospel of John (18:19-24). It relates that one of the officers of the High Priest struck Jesus with the palm of his hand.¹² **[SeventhSign5]** In the film, this particular scene is the climax of Abby's vision, as it reveals father Lucci's true identity by the ring he wears on his hand, as the officer who strikes Jesus/David.



[SeventhSign5]

Father Lucci acts as the antagonist, whose objectives are opposed to those of the protagonist, Abby. The question of whether the figure of the Wandering Jew in general should be perceived as “a villain or a victim,” as Hasan-Rokem and Dundes put it (viii), is not an issue in the film's deployment of this character. After the initial ambiguity of his character is cleared up, he represents the antagonistic force of the narrative. For a long time, the spectator expects father Lucci to be some kind of helper to Abby. That is the impression he gives her when they meet for the first time: “A priest has come to help you and your baby.” But soon his intentions become clear. Abby merely functions as his deliverance: the birth of her son is the seventh and final sign necessary to bring about the Apocalypse. In his guise as consultant on apocalyptic affairs for the Vatican, a position that allows him to travel all over the world, Lucci deliberately lies to the Pontiff and his counsel about the nature of the occurring signs. Moreover, when an older priest recognizes father

Lucci, he has no qualms about killing the man who might reveal his identity.

In this lies the important change the character of the Wandering Jew has undergone. Whereas several versions of the legend emphasize his meekness and his search for peace, patiently awaiting the Second Coming, father Lucci is an active agent in bringing about the return of Christ. This reversal from passive to active character is brought about by the specific context in which the re-incarnation of the Wandering Jew is resituated, namely Hollywood film. A central feature of classical Hollywood storytelling is the presence of protagonistic and antagonistic characters, good guys and bad guys, whose battle shapes the narrative. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the spectator's attempt at character definition is constantly thwarted. Already in the opening sequence, the film deliberately suggests that David is the antagonist and father Lucci the helper for the protagonist. This proves to be wrong. Part of the appeal of father Lucci's character lies in this twist from helper to opponent.

The center around which the conflict between Father Lucci, the antagonist, and David, the protagonist, revolves is Abby. Her character is the most difficult one to read as a referential character, or as an incarnation of an earlier figure. In contrast to the other characters in the film, she is never explicitly marked as a biblical or extra-biblical figure. Nevertheless, I do think Abby's character is referential in nature; it is just that Abby's referential frame (or context) is less apparent. My assumption is that Abby is a contemporary manifestation of the extrabiblical character of Seraphia or, by another name, Veronica. This can only be inferred on the basis of the more clear-cut incarnations of the other main characters. The puzzle of Abby's character can only be solved once the other pieces of the puzzle, the other characters, are identified and brought together.

In order to understand the background and plausible inspiration for the Abby character, I turn to the work of the female

stigmatic, visionary, and mystic Anne Catherine Emmerich (1774-1824). In his book on the practices of beatification by the Roman Catholic Church, Kenneth Woodward describes the case of Emmerich as particularly notorious. Initially, Woodward explains, Emmerich's life story displays the "familiar pattern" of a number of female stigmatics. Already at an early age, Catherine experienced visions. After entering a convent, she also began to bleed from the head, hands, feet, and side. Bedridden, she passed much of her time in a state of ecstasy. It was during her ecstasies, however, that Catherine "*traveled back in time* to become a contemporary of Jesus [...], experiencing the life and the passion of Jesus as if she were a participant-observer, filling in details not recorded in Sacred Scripture" (180, emphasis added). The similarities between Catherine's visions and Abby's are striking: the element of time travel, their presence as observer during the passion of Jesus, and the additional details of their visions which are absent from canonical sources.

This last aspect requires elaboration. A German poet, Clemens Brentano, recorded Catherine's visions in a book entitled

¹³ In Zev Garber's book on *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*, almost all essays address the malevolent influence of Emmerich's visions on Mel Gibson's film. Emmerich herself is described as "a teacher of contempt" (2006: 8), whose visions are "demented ravings" (125). In general, her work is judged as "mean-spirited" (2).

¹⁴ The number of books and articles on the film is already enormous. For a good overview of the divergent critical responses the film evoked within an American context, see the article by Caroline Vander Stichele and Todd Penner (2006). Zev Garber's (2006) edited volume of articles on the film also has a useful bibliography. In this volume, Penny Wheeler's contribution, "Gibson at the Crossroads" (13-20), focuses specifically on Gibson's use of Emmerich's Passion. In Timothy K. Beal and Tod Linafelt's edited volume (2006), Mark D. Jordan and Kent L. Brintnall note that Gibson's decision to take Emmerich's work as the basis for his film was a good one: "Emmerich's visions of the Passion are cinematic" (81).

¹⁵ In fact, screenwriters Clifford and Ellen Green were unhappy with the treatment of their work by director Schultz and had their credits replaced with in-joke names taken from *NORTH BY NORTHWEST* and *HOW TO SUCCEED IN BUSINESS WITHOUT REALLY TRYING*. Kim Newman (1988) in *Monthly Film Bulletin*.

The Dolorous Passion of Our Lord Jesus Christ after the Meditations of Anne Catherine Emmerich. Brentano's work consisted of embellishing the visions, stylistically, which makes the visions highly readable to this day, as well as factually, by enhancing them with material taken from other sources such as maps and travel books of the Holy Land (183). The notoriety of the visions stems not only from the obvious doctoring of the texts, resulting in, according to Woodward, "bogus visions" (184), but also from their fiercely anti-Semitic tenor.¹³ Recently, Emmerich's work was the focal point of controversy again, as it was one of the principal sources, in addition to the four Gospels, for Mel Gibson's 2004 film *THE PASSION OF THE CHRIST*.¹⁴ While the influence of Emmerich's visions on Gibson's film is widely known. In the case of *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, it is more difficult to find support for the thesis that Emmerich's work has been an influence on the screenplay.¹⁵ At best, I argue, its influence is circumstantial.

I focus on two short passages from Emmerich's work which, in my opinion, constitute a link with Abby's character in *THE SEVENTH SIGN*. The passages are taken from the thirty-fourth chapter of the *Dolorous Passion* entitled "The Veil of Veronica."¹⁶ In this chapter, the character of Seraphia, who is later christened Veronica, makes her appearance. In the first passage, Seraphia approaches Jesus during his cross carrying procession through the streets of Jerusalem: "Seraphia had prepared some excellent aromatic wine, which she piously intended to present to our Lord to refresh him on his dolorous way to Calvary" (Emmerich 162).

The film incorporates Seraphia's offering of wine into Abby's story. The first two visions Abby experiences end abruptly with the sound and image of a jug falling to the floor. The third vision

¹⁶ There are numerous editions of *The Dolorous Passion of the Christ* available. I have consulted the 2003 edition. All editions are based on the original work in German, transcribed and edited by Clemens Maria Brentano.

discloses what happens before the jug is dropped. Abby is standing among a crowd of people, who appear to mock her, as she holds the jug. **[SeventhSign6]** It is unclear what makes her drop the jug and, in the end, flee from the crowd. The following passage is crucial, since its cinematic reworking leads to the junction of the Seraphia story with the legend of the Wandering Jew: “Both the Pharisees and the guards were greatly exasperated, not only by the sudden halt, but much more by the public testimony of veneration which was thus paid to Jesus, and they revenged themselves by striking and abusing him, while Seraphia returned in haste to her house” (163).



[SeventhSign6]

The film foregrounds the beating of Jesus and positions Cartaphilus/Father Lucci as the one who strikes Jesus. In this scene, the two characters and the two different stories coalesce. By striking Jesus/David, in response to the momentary halt of the procession caused by Seraphia/Abby's offering of wine, Cartaphilus/Lucci will be cursed to walk the earth forever. The actual enunciation of the curse, the decisive element in all versions of the Wandering Jew legend, is missing from this scene. The film adds a crucial line of dialogue. It is uttered by Cartaphilus as he addresses Seraphia, “Will you die for him?” It can be interpreted as a threatening proposal: if Seraphia/Abby takes pity on Jesus, she might just as well take his place. The exchange suggests the possibility of Abby replacing Jesus as the one whose voluntary death will save humanity. The question bolsters the relationship between present-day Abby and Father Lucci. It also forms the impetus for the present-day conflict, as the question remained unanswered in the past. This threat, question, or proposition is not fully resolved, and functions as the reason for her traumatic vision of the past, until the present-day Abby decides to

respond affirmatively and die to save humankind.

With Abby's self-sacrifice, the preordained future is averted. Her act of martyrdom gives her the agency that she was lacking throughout the film. Abby's initial dependency on the other characters, particularly David and Father Lucci, robbed her character of the agency with which a main character is typically endowed. Rather than actively setting the events in motion, Abby was caught in them. It takes her (and the viewer) some time to figure out what role she is intended to play. This lack of agency points to a paradox or tension between the narrative and the strategies of plot and visual style. As I pointed out in my analysis of the opening of the film, Abby is persistently visually marked as the main protagonist. Not only is she emphatically introduced via a prolonged close-up; she is also the only character to which the viewer has deep subjective access. This leads to the assumption that she will be a driving force in the narrative. Yet, as it turns out, her character is dependant on the other characters, particularly David and Father Lucci. Only at the last moment is she capable of bringing about the decisive turn of events.

17 Ostwalt singles out three films for consideration. First, *PALE RIDER* (USA: Clint Eastwood, 1985), representing the genre of the Western, is read as an apocalyptic film dominated by character and character development. Second, the Vietnam War film *APOCALYPSE NOW* (USA: Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), Ostwalt argues, uses the apocalyptic setting of the Vietnamese jungle as a kind of Armageddon. Finally, Ostwalt singles out *THE SEVENTH SIGN* as an example of an apocalyptic film that emphasizes plot. This willfully separatist reading method, focusing on one particular aspect of a film, character, setting, or plot, strikes me as insufficient. Ostwalt espouses covert assumptions on genre, particularly the Western as the epitome of the conflict between good and evil, and the war film (and the nuclear disaster film) as representations of apocalyptic settings. These are faulty, because they fail to take into account the fact that the good versus evil theme is played out in most Hollywood films and in every genre. Most Hollywood films are mixtures of genres. This is where Ostwalt's categorization becomes problematic. A film such as *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, which determinedly eludes straightforward genre classification, is reduced to plot. More problematic is Ostwalt's self-imposed tunnel vision. The analysis of film as a visual medium involves strict attention not only to characters or plot, but also the relationship of characters to their setting. This type of analysis, *mise-en-scene* analysis, reads the tension or congruence between characters, setting, and the technologies of the filmic image. By intentionally separating the two, no more than a one-dimensional reading can be made.

Her martyr death may not alter the past, but it does change the prophesized future.

Maternal Martyrdom Once More

In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the savior of humanity is not only fully human, but also female. Since Christ will not die a second time, fate rests with Abby, who is pregnant. The convergence of female martyrdom and maternity is a recurring theme in this study. *THE SEVENTH SIGN* offers a final case in point, illustrating the intimate, yet complicated connection between the two. Before I discuss Abby's act that saves the world in more detail, her status as savior of humanity warrants more explanation.

¹⁸ In an article in the *Journal of Religion and Film*, Mary Ann Beavis analyses and classifies the ways in which the Bible has been used in horror film. The use of the Bible, specifically in horror films, she argues, should not surprise anyone, since the Bible is "one of the great repositories of supernatural lore" (2003). Yet, the connection between horror film and the Bible has not been subject to systematic study. The work of Adele Reinhartz is one of the few explorations of the role of biblical narrative in the plot structure of Hollywood film (2003). Beavis distinguishes five recurring manifestations of the Bible in horror film. The most important one is the use of the Bible as the source of apocalyptic plots. Beavis calls this the representation of the "Bible as Horror" and states that, in the vast majority of this type of film, the Bible is "the alleged source of lurid and horrific storylines." Despite her own evident disapproval of apocalyptic film, mainly on the grounds of those films' incorrect or distorted use of scripture, she accurately observes the ways in which "apocalyptic timetables derived from the prophetic and apocalyptic books of the Bible structure the plot." *THE SEVENTH SIGN* is singled out by Beavis as a positive example of the apocalyptic genre. The film is "creative and original in its use of the Bible, which is interpreted through the lens of Jewish folklore regarding the pre-existence of souls." Unfortunately, Beavis' vital remark that the Bible structures this type of film is not taken up in the remainder of her analysis. Perhaps part of the problem is the vagueness of the word "structure" itself, which could pertain to thematic structure, as in the set of themes the film develops, narrative structure exemplified in, for instance, a three act structure, or even the aesthetic, visual structure of the film, which could be editing.

¹⁹ Hal Hartley's film *THE BOOK OF LIFE* (1998) presents Jesus as the human agent who has to bring about, rather than prevent, the Apocalypse. He displays a mixture of divine and human agency. He is sent to Earth by his father to perform the final judgment. However, Jesus has strong doubts about unleashing the Apocalypse. Finally, he decides to go against his father's divine will and grant humanity one more chance. God the father is relentless, whereas His son, the human representative Jesus, is all too human and, therefore, the film seems to suggest, unable and unwilling to judge mankind according to God's divine scheme.

In “Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Representation,” Conrad Ostwalt suggests the “existence of a popular, apocalyptic imagination in contemporary society” (55). To tackle this imagination in contemporary film, Ostwalt proposes to read a larger, yet unspecified, body of apocalyptic film along three separate strands: “films that emphasize character, setting, or plot” (56). On the basis of this reading, it is possible to isolate a number of basic *themes* of apocalyptic presentation in popular films.¹⁷

The fundamental theme Ostwalt unveils in *THE SEVENTH SIGN* is “renewal of the world, yet avoidance of the apocalyptic cataclysm” (59). This, Ostwalt argues, amounts to a rigorous rewriting of the traditional Jewish and Christian apocalyptic script, which favors annihilation rather than renewal.¹⁸ In the Hollywood appropriation, the apocalypse is still characterized by the destruction of evil forces; yet, the destruction of the world and the ensuing materialization of a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1) are preempted. As a result, the suspense of those films lies not so much in the impending end of the world itself as in the expectation that the end can be avoided. Another characteristic of this theme is that the power to deflect the end does not rest with God, but with an unlikely human agent.¹⁹ As Ostwalt argues: “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”

²⁰ Here it is useful to call to mind the relationship between childbirth and martyrdom in the story of Perpetua and Felicitas. First, according to Roman law, pregnant women could not be sentenced to death, hence to martyrdom. Both women gave birth to their children before they were martyred. Even more so, both women explicitly expressed their relief and gratitude for having given birth before their martyrdom. After this, nothing stood in their way to attaining martyrdom. As Castelli puts it: “Her [Perpetua] relief when the baby is gone from the prison is double-edged—no longer required to claim the maternal role nor to worry over the well-being of the infant, she experiences the prison transformed for her into a palace [...]. Eventually, the renunciation of motherhood will liberate her, not only emotionally, but also physically from the ties that have bound her to her family, society, and the world” (2004: 87).

(63).

In the case of *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, a pregnant housewife from California represents humanity. It is up to her to stop the final countdown. In Abby's hands rests the responsibility to overcome the chaos of the Apocalypse and to ultimately stop the end. The transfer of divine power into human hands is, Ostwalt claims, what "allows the apocalyptic message to remain meaningful for modern and secular society" (63). To this I would add the importance of martyrdom to the contemporary reconfiguration of apocalyptic discourse. The shift of power from a celestial authority to a human agent is not enough; with that power comes the martyrlife commitment to die. The former is dependent on or even a condition of the latter. As all my cases make clear, saving the world comes at the cost of losing a life. One cannot save the world and get away with it unscathed, Hollywood seems to imply.



[SeventhSign7]

Abby's moment of martyrdom takes place in hospital, where she is not only suffering from a nearly lethal gunshot wound, but is also on the verge of giving birth to her much anticipated child. Here, contrary to *ALIEN3* and *THE RAPTURE*, motherhood is fully and emphatically embraced. Abby giving birth to her son under extreme circumstances is the *condition sine qua non* for her martyrdom.²⁰ Her determination to fulfill the motherly task of giving birth to a healthy and living child at all cost, even if it means she herself will not survive, constitutes her as a martyr. [SeventhSign7]

Abby's maternal martyrdom displays parallels with the other cases in this study, while adding new characteristics to female martyrdom. The figure of Revelation's woman clothed with the sun is the most evident source for Abby. Revelation 12:2 describes the physical state of the woman clothed with the sun: "She was pregnant

and was crying out in birthpangs, in the agony of giving birth.” Abby’s troubled history of pregnancy and the pain she has to suffer during childbirth echoes the woman clothed with the sun’s physical predicament. Revelation 12:5-6 speaks of the fate of both the child and its mother: “And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne; and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand and two hundred sixty days.”

In the previous chapter, I gave several interpretations of the woman clothed with the sun and read her through *THE RAPTURE’S* Sharon. I concluded that both female figures share a number of characteristics. They give birth to a child who is taken away from them, their role in the narrative decreases after they have given birth to their children, and both are denied access to the realm of the chosen ones, yet ultimately, Sharon’s fate, being denied an afterlife with God, is worse than that of the woman clothed with the sun. Similar to Sharon, I want to read Abby through the woman clothed with the sun. The similarities and differences between the two indicate Abby’s specific maternal martyrdom.

I begin with the status of Abby’s newborn son. Unlike its counterpart in Revelation, the boy is not “snatched away” and taken to heaven. He is alive and well, and is handed over to his earthly father, Russell. This leads me to conclude that, again, unlike the child in Revelation, this child has no celestial status. Abby’s son is not a Jesus figure reincarnated. As I argue below, this has consequences for Abby’s role as a martyr. For Abby to become a martyr, she must sacrifice her life. This is the main difference between her and the woman clothed with the sun. Although the latter is literally chased from the text of Revelation, she does survive. Abby does not survive the agony of childbirth. Yet, it is death that grants her the status of a

martyr. Moreover, as I will argue in the final section of this chapter, Abby's death is explicitly commemorated in a written text, which solidifies her martyrdom. This brief comparison between the woman clothed with the sun and Abby leads me to conclude that Abby's death during childbirth makes her a martyr, whereas the woman clothed with the sun's survival of a painful childbirth and persecution by Satan renders her powerless, relegated to the margins of the story.

The woman clothed with the sun is the template for Sharon as well as Abby; yet, where the woman clothed with the sun is relegated to the sidelines of Revelation and Sharon's ill-conceived martyrdom fails, Abby's martyrdom succeeds. Abby gives the world her only son. Significantly, his life signals a new hope. The film's inverted play on the divine Father and Son figures cannot be misread. Whereas Christ's *death* signals hope, in *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, it is the nameless boy's *life* that constitutes a new beginning. As I noted above, Christ, in the re-incarnation of David, refuses his sacrificial undertaking, a role that is taken over by Abby. The full implications of his refusal and her acceptance are now clear. Abby replaces Christ in his sacrificial death. She does not give birth to the new Christ, she herself is the new Christ. As such, she is a remarkable example of the classic martyr's ideal of *imitatio mortis Christi*.

Moreover, the sacrifice does not stop there: her martyrdom consists of giving up a life and giving (birth to) a life at the same time. Abby's death and her son's life are indivisible. In this sense, Abby's martyrdom is twofold. Not only does it constitute a selfless

21 For a detailed account of the several degrees of closure in Hollywood cinema, see Richard Neupert's *The End: Narration and Closure in the Cinema*. According to Neupert's classification, *THE SEVENTH SIGN* is an example of the classical closed text film (1995: 35-74), since it displays a secure ending and also satisfies conventional demands for unity and resolution. Moreover, the closed text film is characterized by an emphasis on character action and carefully limited time and space. Finally, the ending

act of motherly love, but also the result of this act is beneficial to all mankind. It harbors no negative implications, contrary to both Ripley's act in *ALIEN3*, which results in the extermination of both human and alien, and Sharon's cruelly misguided infanticide in *THE RAPTURE*. In this lies the purity and simplicity of Abby's act: it is a gift that keeps giving. Not only have the signs of the end been stopped, but also Abby's death has resulted in the filling up of the Hall of Souls, bringing about a second chance for humanity. In this respect, *THE SEVENTH SIGN* improves on its source text Revelation not unlike Jericho's martyrdom in *END OF DAYS*, by granting the mother figure the status of martyr. Abby's death is not the end of the film. In a final twist, the film's ending refers back to the beginning.

Endings: The Suspension of The End

Ending a film, like beginning one, is an essential part of constructing a narrative. Simple as this may seem, when dealing with films influenced by apocalyptic imagery and end-of-the-world scenarios such as *ARMAGEDDON*, *THE RAPTURE*, *END OF DAYS*, and *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, an ending is never just an ending.²¹ One of the major characteristics of Hollywood's reworking of apocalypse is the paradoxical desire to bring about the end while, at the same time, that apocalyptic end must be deferred at all cost. Abby saves mankind from extinction with a sacrificial act, which gives new hope. As such, *THE SEVENTH SIGN* is an excellent example of modern apocalypse, which removes the end of time from the holy realm of the gods and "places the apocalypse firmly in the grasp and control of humanity" (Ostwalt, *Hollywood* 63).

However, there is something more to be said about the ending of the film. The self-reflexivity of the film is apparent in the final dialogue between David and Avi. The character of Avi has, by and large, gone unnoticed. Abby meets him when she visits a rabbi for help. Avi volunteers to help Abby with the translation of several of

David's writings that she has stolen from his desk. It is possible that this character, similar to the others, stands for another, older character. Indeed, Avi can be read as an incarnation of John, the narrator/ writer who has witnessed the Apocalypse and is urged by God to give witness and write it down. In the closing dialogue of the film, God, personified by David, tells Avi:

"Remember it all, write it down. Tell it. So people will use the chance she has given them."



[SeventhSign8]

[SeventhSign8]

Avi must provide the world with a record, which will function as a cautionary tale for future generations. Although David and Avi were witnesses to Abby's act of martyrdom, Avi is given the divine task of giving testimony to this act of self-sacrifice. In this sense, the film is self-conscious as a film text, as well as of its biblical source text, Revelation, which ends in a similar self-reflexive manner: "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true" (Revelation 21:5).

With this ending of the film in mind, I want to take one more look at the opening of the film and put forward the following hypothesis. The opening of the film can be interpreted as Avi's narration of the story. By positioning Avi in the role of narrator, the incongruous opening sequence can be explained. My analysis of the opening uncovered an emphasis placed on Abby. I argued that this emphasis is remarkable since, up to the final sequence of the film, this character has a limited amount of agency. Abby's actions and motivations are dependant on other characters, namely, David and Father Lucci. However, if we conceive Avi as the narrator, Abby's special status in the narration, via deep, subjective access, notably through her visions, can be interpreted differently. The narrator is "omniscient": he knows of Abby's pivotal role in the narrative well before the spectator does. This knowledge is withheld;

yet, the narration already hints at Abby's special status. The use of crosscutting and the superimposed markers of time and place exemplify omniscient, because retrospective, narration. If we imagine Avi to be the narrator, the opening sequence is cast in a different light. The film's perspective can be attributed to a concealed narrator, whose acts of structuring the narrative only become apparent at the end of the film. In this sense, the opening sequence shows that the ending of the film is already located in the beginning. Or, to understand the beginning, it must be seen in light of the end. The end influences the beginning, but this influence only becomes clear retrospectively. This element of *THE SEVENTH SIGN* as a retrospective narrative deserves more elaboration.

In his book, *Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation after Christendom*, Harry O. Maier discusses the narrative voice of Revelation. He argues that Revelation is a retrospective narrative: "John stands at the end of his Apocalypse looking back" (18). This narration seems impossible, since it is retrospective; it is performed after the Apocalypse. The narrator tells the story from outside history. This retrospective stance gives the narrator complete mastery over the story. The narration can be slowed down, sped up, and it can leap forward and backward into time. This is what Maier calls "John's games with time" (18). The retrospective perspective is, Maier emphasizes, not nostalgic or a "trip down memory lane" (19). The narrative is driven by a sense of urgency; the recollection of the past not only invests this past with new significance and relevance, but also strives to make the past part of the present.

Avi, like John, tells the story retrospectively. As an omniscient narrator, he is able to play games with time—and this is what the film adds—with place. The visions of Abby, gradually presented, are the most intricate examples of this play on time and place. Here, similar to John's account of past events in Revelation, the emphasis is on the relevance of the past to the present. At the

end, the narrator is revealed. The spectator catches up with him in a time closer to the present, when the narrator is given his divine task. This task, to remember the events and write them down, leads the story and its significance into the future, as a warning to future generations.

Ultimately, Maier argues, Revelation is not so much “a tale of inevitable ending,” but an account that situates both itself and its addressees in the present. The apocalyptic game played with the past and the future strives to invest the present with renewed significance. This optimistic assessment of apocalyptic narratives is preposterously foregrounded in *THE SEVENTH SIGN* which, in the end, propagates the notion of the restoration of hope, the new beginning, and the second chance mankind has been given.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have taken the visions of Abby as the starting point of my analysis. The concept of the vision resonates in both a religious sense and a cinematic sense. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the religious and the cinematic meaning of the vision come together. When viewed from a cinematic point of view, the visions are not straightforward, so I began my analysis with the question of how to label these disruptions of causal temporality. Initially, the vision manifests itself as a dream. Yet, this hypothesis turns out to be untenable, since Abby experiences a number of visions and several of them present themselves to her while she is fully conscious. Moreover, the content of the visions supersedes the dream: they are set in a time and a place in the distant past, while the message of the vision pertains to an unknown future.

An important aspect of Abby's visions is the presence of the film's other characters in them. In the second section of the chapter, I looked at the opening sequence of the film and to the way in which it introduces the characters and sets out the relationships among

them. The purposely puzzling relationships and connections among the characters, stylistically conveyed through the use of crosscutting, provide the film with an enigma that sets the narrative in motion. The enigma of the film, I argued in the third section, is solved once we become aware of the fact that each character is an incarnation of a historically older, (quasi-) biblical figure. I deployed Bal's notion of the referential character to read Jimmy, David, Father Lucci, and Abby. My analyses focused on evaluating to what extent the characters are faithful to their original source or, in contrast, re-envision this source. The ways in which they deviate from their established frame of reference, and are thus reworkings or re-incarnations, of the earlier source, leads to a more productive reading. In the case of Abby, a referential reading was the most difficult one to perform. Once I established that she can be considered a reworking of Seraphia, I inquired into the way in which Abby deviates from her template. The difference between Seraphia and Abby—the former was a bystander at the beating of Jesus, while Abby actively replaces Jesus—is played out in the final act of the film, where Abby's martyrdom takes place.

THE SEVENTH SIGN offers the final case of the connection between female martyrdom and maternity. I outlined Ostwalt's analysis of contemporary apocalyptic narratives, which postulates that the end of the world can be deflected by the sacrificial intervention of a human agent. Crucially, Abby can be the savior of humanity by virtue of, not despite, her femininity. Abby giving birth to her son constitutes the essence of her martyrdom. The motif of pregnancy exposed an obvious parallel between Abby and Revelation's woman clothed with sun. My reading of the woman clothed with the sun through her successor Abby confirmed this character's tragic fate. She gives birth to the savior, but is forgotten. Her contemporary reincarnation, Abby, conversely, succeeds where the precedent fails. Abby's act of childbirth saves humanity,

but entails a heavy price. Remarkably, her death solidifies her commemoration as a martyr. Abby replaces Jesus, constituting a perfect *imitatio mortis Christi*. Moreover, the maternal facet of her martyrdom offers an additional benefit: she gives her own life while she gives a new life. This is a feat even Jesus was not able to pull off.

Finally, I addressed the ending of the film. *THE SEVENTH SIGN* adheres to the paradoxical paradigm established in Hollywood cinema, which dictates the advent of an ostensibly inevitable Apocalypse, only to have that Apocalypse averted at the last minute. I ventured a reading that posits the character of Avi as a reincarnation of John of Patmos, the assumed recipient of the revelation who wrote down his vision in the Book of Revelation. Reading the film as an act of retrospective narration sheds new light on the puzzling opening sequence of the film. Moreover, the shared narrative structure connects the film to its biblical predecessor. In the end, the film's message supersedes Revelation's tale of horror. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the averted Apocalypse results in a restoration of hope. The birth of Abby's son signals renewal by the sacrificial act of giving, in both senses, instead of taking a life.