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

Copier, L.T.

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Conclusion

Understanding our past determines actively our ability to understand the present.

THE DA VINCI CODE (USA: Ron Howard, 2006)

The central word in the epigraph of this conclusion is “actively.” It points to the reciprocal relationship between the past and the present, and it demonstrates that to be an inexorable process. Because the present is in constant flux, the past is never stable either. To a certain extent, the quote illustrates the leading notion of my study, preposterous history. Yet here, the emphasis is still on the dominating influence of the past over the present, a notion that preposterous history seeks to undercut. I took this quote from a lecture by Professor Langdon, a fictional character. Tom Hanks plays the professor of religious symbology, who unwillingly becomes a hero in the blockbuster *THE DA VINCI CODE*, the film adaptation of Dan Brown’s 2003 bestseller about the uncovering of Western culture’s greatest mystery, the secret of the Holy Grail.

The film opens with Langdon’s lecture on the language of symbols and how to read an image. Standing in front of a huge screen, which projects pictures of seemingly familiar symbols, Langdon quizzes his rapt audience, daring them to interpret them. He presents a detail, a close-up of a larger image, of a white mask and robe, which triggers the immediate response of “racism” and “Ku Klux Klan.” Zooming out, he reveals the men wearing the garments to be Spanish priests.

In this opening scene, the film conveys a number of issues that figure prominently in this study. In just under two minutes, Langdon’s lecture teaches the audience a number of lessons. The interpretation of the symbol, the reading of the image, is dependent on many factors. The symbol is always situated in a particular

context, often dependent on the person looking at the symbol. By zooming in or out, particular details are either revealed or obscured. Time plays a vital role in interpreting the image. Hence, one must trace back the influence of the past on the present. Most of all, Langdon impresses on us spectators that one should never be so arrogant as to assume that one knows for sure what one is looking at. The meaning of an image, the story it tells, is ever constructed and re-constructed. As Langdon puts it, "As the saying goes, a picture says a thousand words, but which words?"

I subscribe to Langdon's observation. As I hope to have demonstrated, the powerful images that this study takes as its subject certainly cannot be conveyed in a mere thousand words. After four years of working on them, I am still not certain what these images signify. I do know that the context in which these images appear, Hollywood film, plays an important part in reading them. In what follows, I will briefly outline the most significant findings of this study.

Preposterous history seeks to escape the dominating influence of the past over the present. The past only partially determines our interpretation of an image or object. The present text is always an intervention in the earlier material and, hence, changes the preceding text. My reading of *END OF DAYS* demonstrates history's ability to change the perception of the antecedent text. Revelation is the historical source for the film. However, the film transcends its status as a cinematic adaptation of Revelation. It actively affects Revelation as well. This reversal of influence is brought about by the presence of Arnold Schwarzenegger, whose character I have interpreted as a reincarnation of archangel Michael on one hand, and as a manifestation of Christ on the other. Whereas the juxtapositioning of the images of Michael and Schwarzenegger results in an augmentation of the biblical figure, the preposterous collision between Schwarzenegger and Christ uncovers the

uncompromising nature of the Christ figure in Revelation. The film improves on its source text by emphasizing the sacrificial nature of Schwarzenegger's martyrdom in favor of Revelation's vengeful violence.

The interpretive range of a preposterous approach to history is suggested by the two final chapters of this study. In these chapters, I understand their female protagonists, Sharon and Abby, in relation to the same biblical predecessor, the woman clothed with the sun. The results of both readings, though, differ dramatically. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, Abby emerges triumphant. Though she dies during childbirth, her death grants her the status of martyr. She will be actively commemorated, contrary to the woman clothed with the sun, who is relegated to the sidelines of the biblical text, and whose fate is uncertain. Sharon's fate, however, is even worse than that of the woman clothed with the sun. She is denied an afterlife with her loved ones in heaven. Using the same template, these two cases result in different contemporary reincarnations. Reading and viewing from the present back to the past not only uncovers numerous connections, but also indicates the influence of the present on our interpretation of the past. With regard to *THE RAPTURE*, I argued that reading Sharon in tandem with the woman clothed with the sun resulted in a radical interpretation of Revelation. Whereas Revelation leaves open a possible afterlife for its female figure, the film closes the book indefinitely on a possible afterlife for Sharon.

My study attempted to be interdisciplinary in nature. I have emphasized that a mere encounter between two disciplines, film studies and religious studies, does not automatically turn this meeting into an interdisciplinary project. It takes more than the expansion of a certain topic or analytical tool to a neighboring discipline. At several points in this study, I have criticized existing studies that situate themselves between film and religion. From my position as a film scholar, I have critically assessed several studies

by scholars of the Bible and religion into the field of film. My main contention was that these studies lack an engagement with the medium of film. Since, as a film studies specialist, I ventured into the field of religion studies, I was careful not to make the same mistake. I have tried to the best of my ability to engage with the biblical and extra-biblical sources that influence the images of this study. This engagement is expressed by taking them seriously as predecessors; yet, as preposterous history suggests, they should not be taken for granted as unchangeable sources. Given my background, the analysis of film has taken center stage. Yet, as I hoped to have shown, my engagement with religious studies has significantly enriched my analysis of the films. Conversely, I hope that my readings of the films, specifically in their themes of Apocalypse and martyrdom, add to the existing interpretations of these themes in religious studies. Before I deal with those themes in more detail, I want to point out the importance of shared concepts, which resonate in the encounter between film studies and religious studies.

The recurring concept of the vision interconnects the religious and cinematic discourses. The two come together in the vision of the martyr. Classic martyr stories almost invariably mention the occurrence of a vision before the death of the martyr. This detail is also consistently deployed in contemporary and secular representations of martyrdom. Jericho Cane in *END OF DAYS* has a vision of his family in his moment of death. Harry Stamper's particular vision was the focal point of my analysis of the finale of *ARMAGEDDON*. In the case of Ripley, the occurrence of a vision is more difficult to determine. However, I have argued that the eventual death of Ripley was already foreshadowed in a vision or nightmare she had in the second part of the trilogy. In *THE RAPTURE*, Sharon has a crucial vision, in which she sees her deceased husband Randy. This vision leads her and her daughter into the desert. Finally, the recurring visions of Abby in *THE SEVENTH SIGN* reveal the core of her martyrdom.

The crucial difference between classic and contemporary martyr visions is that the classic vision usually pertains to the idea that the martyr will be united with God in heaven, as part of his or her reward. The contemporary vision concerns the reunion of the martyr with his or her family, not with God in heaven. The earthly family is favored over the divine, celestial one.

The Hollywood appropriation of martyrdom situates it in the larger context of the redemption of humankind. Rather than attest to his or her faith through death, the Hollywood martyr sacrifices his or her life in order to save the whole of humanity. However, if one looks more carefully, saving mankind only serves as a pretext for the redemption of the martyr's nearest family. Contrary to classical conceptions of martyrdom, which confine the act within the limited definition of a willingness to die for one's belief, Hollywood's reworking of martyrdom is connected to the reconciliation and continuation of the family.¹ The first aspect, reconciliation, is a more common motivation for martyrdom. As I have shown in my analysis of *END OF DAYS*, the impetus as well as reward for Jericho Cane's death is the reunion with his deceased wife and daughter in the afterlife. For Harry Stamper's martyrdom in *ARMAGEDDON*, the continuation of the family is also an important feature of secular representations of martyrdom. The continuation of the family in the here and now, as opposed to the notion of reconciliation in the afterlife, figures prominently. Stamper takes on the role of a martyr to exempt his future son-in-law from this mission. As a result, the future of his daughter (and mankind, of course) is safeguarded. In *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, a similar motif comes to the fore: Abby dies so her child may live. Her death can be read as another example within

¹ Perhaps not surprisingly, this motif can be read back to classical Greek literature, where it is an important theme. Van Henten gives the example of the Heracleidae, in which Euripides recounts how Heracles' daughter Macaria saves the lives of her brothers and sisters by her own death (Maccabean 158).

this diverse arrangement of motivations for martyrdom. Her death seems close to Stamper's act in *ARMAGEDDON* in that it secures the future of her family. The bloodline of Abby is secured through the son. Moreover, it is not difficult to see Abby's sacrifice in relation to Ripley's fate, albeit with the opposite intention and result. Ripley's martyrdom in *ALIEN3* has the reverse objective: her death certifies that there is no survival of the alien to which she has given birth. This effectively cuts the bloodline and a potentially lethal miscegenation between human and non-human, alien other. The monstrous and lethal birth of the alien leads up to Ripley's self-sacrifice. The female function of pregnancy and childbirth uncovered a decisive difference between male and female martyrdom.

In addition, the act of the martyr leads to the redemption and confirmation of his or her individualism. Rather than demonstrating his loyalty to a particular group or collective, the Hollywood martyr is predominantly a heroic individual. The would-be martyrs are initially represented as improbable heroes, ranging from an alcoholic ex-cop to a pregnant housewife. Eventually, though, they overcome their assorted weaknesses and save the world. The crucial exception to this is Sharon. *THE RAPTURE* offers a more extreme variation on the motif of dying for one's family. Sharon's, and more specifically Mary's, desire to join Randy in heaven lead to Mary's death. Unfortunately, the reunion of the family is an incomplete one, since Sharon's sacrificial act results in her own apostasy. In the end, the film presents the viewer a bleak picture: Sharon stubbornly refuses to become a martyr, to surrender herself to God in order to be raptured and thus saved. What is more, Sharon refuses to save herself, let alone do what Hollywood expects its martyrs to do: save the world.

The films in this study deal with the martyr's act of self-sacrifice through which the Apocalypse is averted and the world is saved. The individual act of martyrdom prevents the Apocalypse. This is perhaps the most paradoxical result of this study, which

so emphatically concerns itself with the representations of the Apocalypse: the end does not take place and remains unrepresented. As my choice of films suggests, the Apocalypse can come in many shapes and sizes. In the first film, *END OF DAYS*, the potential reign of Satan will inaugurate the Apocalypse. In the following two films, *ARMAGEDDON* and *ALIEN3*, the Apocalypse takes on the shape of a natural threat in the guise of meteorite and the biological disaster of miscegenation. The final two films, *THE RAPTURE* and *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, come closest to a representation of the apocalyptic signs and the Apocalypse as described in the Book of Revelation. But eventually, these films also refuse to render the ultimate end. Part of the reluctance to represent the Apocalypse, I suggest, lies in the impossibility of imagining such an event, let alone represent it cinematographically. Revelation speaks of the horrors of the Apocalypse in cryptic and elaborate language. *THE RAPTURE* bravely attempts to offer a biblically accurate representation which is, paradoxically, hampered by a technical flaw in cinematography. This led me to conclude that the most technologically advanced medium of the visual arts is incongruously incompetent for representing the end of time.

Instead, these films use the narrative structure of Revelation, with its repetitive, serial structure of “countdown” signs, as the catalyst and accelerator of their narratives. This is expressed in the deadline structure of these narratives. The films all thrive on the narrative of impending apocalypse, the dread that the end is near, only to have that end cancelled at the very last minute. I called this the paradox of apocalyptic anticipation followed by cancellation. The films desire and prophesize an end, but thrive on the postponement of that end. Hence, this study’s central theme of the end can best be described as an evaded end, however eagerly anticipated it may be.

I want to end my conclusion with some remarks on the aspect of gender. In the introduction, I claimed I would deploy a

critical gender approach as an analytical tool, as a lens through which the two themes would be read. Along the way, it became obvious to me that gender was more than an analytical or ideological stance; it became more and more prominent as a theme in its own right. The notion of female martyrdom, discussed in relation to *ALIEN3*, *THE RAPTURE*, and *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, signaled the emergence of gender as a crucial theme in this study. Female martyrdom was distinguished from male martyrdom from the beginning of this study. I wanted to deal with male and female martyrs separately though, initially, I had no obvious reason to do so. Doing so, however, I was confronted with the effect of gender on discourses on martyrdom. Classic discourse suggests that men and women can both be martyrs; yet, the act of martyrdom is often described in masculine terms of physical and mental strength. It is no coincidence that the first two chapters on male martyrdom feature films in which arguably, Hollywood's most masculine men are the stars. As I argued, the representation of male martyrdom in the shape of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Bruce Willis, echoes the classic martyr stories of pain, strength, self-sacrifice, and endurance. Only when the focus is shifted toward female martyrdom, the discourse becomes unstable. The case of Ripley served as the turning point in my discussion. Her "musculinity" actively questions and undercuts a straightforward dichotomy between masculinity and femininity.

The connection between gender and martyrdom is further expressed through the notion of motherly love. The three cases of female martyrdom in this study are intricately related to one another in their representation of motherly love. *THE SEVENTH SIGN* displays the purest representation of motherly love as a form of martyrdom. When compared to Ripley and Sharon, Abby's martyrdom holds no negative implications. The mother becomes a martyr precisely because she makes the ultimate maternal sacrifice: she dies so that her newborn child may live. This act constitutes the pinnacle

of motherly love. Contrary to Ripley and Sharon, Abby is capable of embracing *both* motherhood and self-sacrificial martyrdom. Her martyrdom connects childbirth with hope. Instead of taking a life, Abby gives a life. This has implications for the larger martyrdom discourse. Martyrdom originates from the negative consequence of the act of giving, giving a life, sacrificing a life, meaning death. Yet here, the act is invested with positive connotations: Abby's death enables the emergence of a life and the forestalling of the Apocalypse.

My reading of Ripley in *ALIEN3* focused on the connection of this cinematic heroine to the early Christian martyr Perpetua. The link between these two figures is situated in their negation of motherhood. Their repudiation of the female reproductive function comes to serve as a condition for martyrdom. Their cases both point to the impossibility of taking on the role of the mother and the martyr simultaneously. Their martyrdom entails a decision: one can either be a mother or a martyr, but combining the two roles is impossible. Ripley also reaches the status of martyr by renouncing her motherly function, and thus effectively transcends her gender-based position.

Finally, Sharon's case in *THE RAPTURE* is, again, more complicated. Her murder of her daughter should also be interpreted as an act of supreme motherly love, though it does not grant her the status of martyr, at least not in the eyes of God. Quite to the contrary, she becomes a failed martyr in that her act is not recognized as one of love and sacrifice. She, it could be argued, is neither a good mother nor a successful martyr. Infanticide is in no case a characteristic trait of motherhood and Sharon's subsequent desertion of her belief in God makes her unfit for martyrdom, despite her initial best intentions.

THE RAPTURE has proven to be the exceptional case in my study. It consistently resisted the categories of Apocalypse and martyrdom I drew up. Sharon is a failed martyr precisely because

she steadfastly refuses to surrender her belief. Her refusal would be a prime example of the martyr's will power. Unfortunately, her will power does not grant her access to the realm of the chosen ones. Her act goes unnoticed, she is left all alone, and her act goes unrewarded. THE RAPTURE also breaks the rule of apocalyptic unrepresentability. Doing so, it not only shows the limits of a cinematic representation of the Apocalypse, but also it reveals, in a more general sense that, for the Apocalypse to enjoy enduring power, it must remain shrouded in the uncertainty of whether or not it will take place. In this sense, the film is an Apocalypse in itself: it unveils and reveals something that was hidden, or at least shrouded in mystery before. However, the effect of this *apokalyptein* is disappointing, the Apocalypse turns out to be little more than eternal darkness.