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English Summary

In this dissertation I have analyzed the recycling of Biblical images and stories of the Apocalypse, particularly its conceptions of martyrdom and self-sacrifice, in contemporary Hollywood cinema. I examined to what extent representations of martyrs and self-sacrifice are informed by traditional notions, and also how these are transformed and redirected in the process of transmission.

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

Bal takes her cue from T.S. Eliot's 1919 essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." In this essay, Eliot acknowledges the indispensability of tradition; the influence predecessors have on artists. But he also states that new art can alter the meaning, or perception, of the art of the past. In the crucial passage of the essay,

which Bal uses as an epigraph to her book, Eliot states: “Whoever has approved this idea of order [...] will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (50). Each work of art to some extent changes what came earlier, what Eliot describes as “existing monuments”:

“For order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new” (50).

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

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

Quotation encompasses both iconography and intertextuality. Both concepts are relevant for preposterous history. The work of art historian Erwin Panofsky offers a systematic definition of iconography. Panofsky distinguishes between the traditional definition of *iconography*, a pictorial representation of a subject through a figure, and *iconology*, a larger understanding of iconic

representations. Panofsky's theory provides a practical method that moves from description to analysis and finally to interpretation, a progression that presupposes the separateness of these three activities. I use iconography in a somewhat different sense. In Panofsky's model, the historical precedent is viewed as source. This precedent then more or less dictates to the artist what forms can be used. Bal attempts to escape from this passivity inherent in the traditional view of iconography. The work of the later artists should be considered an active intervention in the material that is handed down to them. Furthermore, iconography frequently avoids interpreting the meaning of the borrowed, or quoted, signs in their new context; the reconceptualization of meaning is neglected. Bal proposes to trace the process of meaning-production over time, and crucially in this respect, in both directions: from past to present and from present to past. Finally, Panofsky's model, in particular its most frequently practiced element, iconography, tends to refer back visual motifs to written texts. Bal's methodology not only takes the textual nature of precedents seriously as a visual textuality, but also includes the visuality of the precedent text. By recycling forms taken from earlier works, an artist brings along the text from which the borrowed element has been taken, while at the same time constructing a new text with the debris. The new image-as-"text" is "contaminated" by the discourse of the precedent. (Bal, *Quoting* 8-9)

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

Intertextuality, defined by Jonathan Culler in his book *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction*, is the idea that “works are to be considered not as autonomous entities, “organic wholes,” but as intertextual constructs: sequences which have meaning in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform” (38). Culler asserts that texts can only be read in relation to other texts. He elaborates on intertextuality by highlighting a common misapprehension, namely that the study of intertextuality is the investigation of sources and influences: of the work’s relation to particular prior texts. This would entail that, once the “original source” is located, a definite meaning can be established, closing the process of signification. The opposite is the case with intertextuality. According to Culler, it is inevitably the reader (as a function, not so much as a person), and not the author of a text who inscribes the quotations that make up writing. If one agrees on these two basic traits of intertextuality, the non-autonomous status of the text and the absence or impossibility of origin, another problem arises: how to recognize intertextuality, or claim with some assurance that one is dealing with a case of it? I posit that particular texts can be designated as “pre-texts.” A pre-text is understood as what comes before, but not fully determines, the later text. The pre-text is often used negatively as alibi, or pretext, to submit the later text to a definite source, or to claim the prestige of the source for the later reworking. The pre-text can also be understood in a constructive way. It can function as a source for the later text, because, for instance, there are thematic similarities. In that case, the pre-text will initially signal recognition, but more importantly, this will be followed by the observation of differences between the two texts. The pre-text then functions not so much as a model, but as a, possibly negative, counterpart.

The first major theme of this study is the Apocalypse. In addition to looking at the definition of this theme in terms of biblical

genre and common usage, as well as an entrenched notion in American popular culture, I use narrative theory and philosophy on the topic of the Apocalypse. There is a difference between the academic conception of the notion and the popular idea. A three-fold distinction needs to be observed. There are “apocalypses” (as literature), “apocalyptic eschatology” (as a world view), and “apocalypticism” (as a socio-religious movement). The three are closely related, even though their referents do not necessarily coincide. This interconnectedness, direct or indirect, warrants the genre approach. Thus, the biblical pre-text and its generic traits function as a template against which other manifestations of apocalyptic discourse (biblical, social, theological, and cultural) can be read for their similarities as well as their transformations.

Literary theorists Peter Brooks and Frank Kermode support the idea that the grand narratives of history structure the apparent human need for an ending. However, perhaps the end has already happened or is an illusion altogether. These two assumptions are crucial for Jean Baudrillard’s postmodern, philosophical conception of time and history. Baudrillard’s notion of an ending is a disappointing one: the end might have taken place but, if so, went unnoticed. Not only have we missed out on the experience of “the original chaos, the Big Bang,” but our hopes for experiencing the final moment, “the Big Crumb” are similarly useless (115). Whether or not one chooses to agree with Baudrillard, his analysis of the “demonic temptation to falsify ends and the calculation of ends” (8) resonates with current narratives in popular culture.

Following Baudrillard, apocalyptic narratives are contradictory in nature. On one hand, they thrive on the imminence of the end, which functions as the catalyst for the story. On the other, the expected ending can never be reached. Or, to be more precise, the ending is cancelled, delayed or postponed. I call this the paradox of apocalyptic narrative: the anticipation of an end that will eventually

be forestalled. This, to me, seems a principal narrative structure in apocalyptic cinema. The films I am discussing here, such as *END OF DAYS*, *ARMAGEDDON*, and *ALIEN3*, all thrive on the narrative of impending apocalypse, only to have that end cancelled at the very last minute.

The second theme is martyrdom and the figure of the martyr. I discuss these contested terms in the Judeo-Christian and, to a lesser extent, the Islamic context. The apocalyptic narrative of the Book of Revelation is the key text in this respect. This text figures prominently throughout this study. Though it is generally agreed that the Book of Revelation is not a classical martyr story, its persistent influence can hardly be overestimated. An unambiguous definition of martyrdom cannot be given. However, keeping the historical pre-texts, particularly Revelation, in mind, it is helpful to regard the martyr as a traveling concept. Contemporary notions of martyrdom differ from the classical, canonical interpretation. Nevertheless, any definition of the martyr is somehow rooted in a canonical understanding of the concept. In spite the fact that, there never was one version of martyrdom to begin with. Elizabeth Castelli argues that martyrdom stories have always existed in many, mutually contesting versions. Since it is impossible as well as unproductive to pinpoint the historical moment at which martyrdom came into existence, one should explore the ongoing manifestations of martyrdom. This study follows Castelli's proposition for the sustained investigation of contemporary, popular, and secular representations of martyrdom. The discourse of martyrdom is so powerful precisely because of its adaptability and the transformation of the object that it allows. It is not just the concept of martyrdom that is not fixed; it also causes related discourses to change. In particular, acts of martyrdom are interpreted significantly differently when women instead of men perform them.

Consequently, the two themes of Apocalypse and martyrdom are read through a critical gender approach. I find this approach

indispensable, given the misogynistic nature of both the Book of Revelation and the films I analyze. Apocalyptic stories and their concomitant imagery of martyrdom are underpinned by assumptions about masculinity and femininity, the former's superiority over the latter. A critical gender approach not only signals these suppositions, but also, in combination with my main reading method, preposterous history, allows for these assumptions to be challenged. In the Christian discourse of martyrdom, gender is constructed in conflicting ways. In the ancient context, martyr images frequently entail masculine notions of identity, gaining power over one's opponents, self-mastery, and endurance. However, female martyrs, as I have shown, also stretch assumptions of gender. In their acts, they perform a transgression from femininity to masculinity. From the perspective of film studies, a similar move or transgression in representations of masculinity and femininity can be observed. The discourse on male and female martyrdom, as reconfigured in contemporary Hollywood film, I argued, can critique binary oppositions and undercut normative statements that fixate gender representations. A recurring theme is maternity as a required, yet anxiety-raising feminine characteristic.

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

In the film *ARMAGEDDON*, the focus of the second chapter, the martyr's act of dying is reconfigured. Harry Stamper, played by Bruce Willis, is invested with novel causes and values to die for,

not so much religious but rather masculine, individual, patriotic and, importantly, American. In relation to the construction of the American martyr, I address the specific aesthetics of the film, so-called “High Concept” characteristics such as music, stars, and high speed cutting. *ARMAGEDDON*’s intertextual referencing of religiously inspired discourses of martyrdom is not unproblematic. The use of religion and the preposterous images of martyrdom the film engenders, obscured as these may be by Hollywood aesthetics, result in the abduction of religion for the sake of nationalism.

The first two chapters are explicitly about male and masculine martyrdom. In the third chapter, I turn to a representation of female martyrdom. Female martyrs, exemplified in the heroine of the *ALIEN* saga, suggest a gendered continuum between masculinity and femininity. I address this gender ambiguity through the concept of “musculinity.” The crucial marker of the female, the ability to have children, is a recurring element in classical martyr stories. Ripley’s maternal qualities, her pregnancy and subsequent delivery of the alien, reconceive classical discourse, which presupposes that mothers cannot become martyrs.

The theme of female martyrdom is developed in the fourth chapter. I read *THE RAPTURE* for two particular characteristics: the film’s depiction of an apocalyptic ending and its misogynistic disposition, which can be traced back to Revelation. The feminist critique of apocalyptic discourse underscores the need to counter its misogynistic tendencies. In my reading, I employ the interdisciplinary concept of the sequel (and the affiliated idea of the Final Girl) to argue against the misogynistic fate of the film’s heroine Sharon.

In my fifth and final chapter, I deal with another recurring element in martyrdom discourse: the vision. In the film *THE SEVENTH SIGN*, the heroine Abby, receives visions about the possible end of the world. The visions disrupt notions of linear time, and, consequently, the unfolding of the narrative. In the character of Abby, the intimate

link between motherhood and martyrdom is further articulated.

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 engagement with religious studies has significantly enriched my analysis of the films. 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. Throughout this study, I have emphasized 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. 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. The first aspect, reconciliation, is a more common motivation for 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 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. The films in this study 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. 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.