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Alexander D. Ornella (ed.)

# **Apocalyptic Imaginings**

**SCHÜREN**

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# Editorial

The UK Parliament prorogued, a UK Supreme Court judgement declaring that Parliament is not prorogued, a political (far) right-wing shift sweeping across Europe, the Amazon rainforest on fire, heatwaves across the world and predictions that climate change is reaching the point of no return, the United States on the brink of a trade war with China, speculations about a recession in Europe, ongoing protests in Hong Kong: the events of 2019 so far seem to suggest that the social fabrics of societies are rupturing and what we have seen in 2019 might merely be a taste of what is to come in 2020.

At the time of writing this editorial, for the author, the immediate day of reckoning seems to be 31 October 2019 when the United Kingdom will leave the European Union (or not) with a deal (or without one). And a day of reckoning 31 October became when Boris Johnson had Brexit countdown clocks installed in 10 Downing Street and the Tory Headquarters (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> Waiting for this day of reckoning feels, at least for me as an EU

citizen living and working in the United Kingdom, a bit like being stuck in limbo, where eternal salvation, prosperity and imperial glory (if Johnson's fantasies become true) and eternal doom and a plunge into insignificance are competing narratives on the horizon of contemporary UK political and popular culture.

1 Cf. Clark 2019a; Clark 2019b.



Fig. 1: The Conservatives, BREXIT Countdown Clock, tweeted 31 July 2019, <https://twitter.com/>



Fig. 2: The Conservatives, Out of the EU Facebook Event, tweeted 23 August 2019, <https://twitter.com/Conservatives/status/1164825101608607744> [accessed 30 August 2019].

The narrative horizon of imperial glory and doom has also driven parliamentary debate ever since the Brexit referendum. So strong was that narrative horizon, that as an observer, I have been puzzled by the unwillingness of (some) politicians to go beyond their ideological frame just so they can continue to reassure themselves of their individual power and importance while holding the entire country hostage and taking it on a path of destruction. And I am referring not to any economic impacts of whatever Brexit scenario might become reality, but to the destabilization of the social fabric. More so as since the Brexit referendum, UK politicians seem to have developed a certain fetish for destruction. That Theresa May had to resign and Boris Johnson ascended to power appears to have been the ultimate indulgence for a number of Brexiteers, who celebrated May's failure to get her deal approved by Parliament with champagne parties (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup>

That parts of the electorate continue to put their trust into politicians who use stories from fantasyland as their narrative frame is on the one hand part of an attempt to redefine political practice and political norms, as Jonathan White

2 Cf. Syal 2019.



Fig. 3: National Picture Theatre, Beverley Road, Hull, 2019. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

argues,<sup>3</sup> and on the other hand connects the current socio-political climate in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world to themes addressed in this issue: the apocalyptic and social anxieties it connects to.

To express apocalyptic (and indeed utopian) ideas, the visual can sometimes excel where words might fail: in the forms of images, figures of speech, verbal depictions, symbolic action. After all, social actors often draw on strong and powerful visual language and imagery to convey emotions, stir up angst, instill hope, garner support, or cause division. Such images and emotions can be powerful contributors to swaying public opinion, something that the political right has craftfully mastered. Yet, Steven Joyce argues that “The power of apocalyptic rhetoric cannot be reduced to the socio-economic status of marginalised groups. Something about the rhetorical structure itself creates an appeal that works across classes, ideologies, ethnicities, and age groups. [...] If we are to understand why it is so widespread, we must understand the narrative’s intrinsic merits.”<sup>4</sup>

Immersing ourselves in the visuals of apocalyptic and utopian ideas, then, might help us better understand the appeal apocalyptic narratives might hold. Brexit offers us such an opportunity in particular when we pay closer attention to cities in the United Kingdom with a pro-Brexit majority, their look and feel,

3 Cf. White 2019.

4 Joyce 2018, 45.



Fig. 4: British Extracting Company Silo, Hull. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

and their aesthetics. Kingston-upon-Hull, the city I live in, has a total population of roughly 260,000 people and had a BREXIT referendum turnout of 62.9% (113,355 valid votes) and voted 67.6% leave.<sup>5</sup>

With unemployment rates of 7.54% (age cohort 16–64),<sup>6</sup> a below-the-national-average average salary, and geographically located at the end of the trainline, the city has seen brighter days. As a North Sea port city, Hull was one of the most bombed cities during Second World War, leaving 95% of houses damaged. Traces of the bombings can still be seen to this date, as for example with the remaining façade of the National Picture Theatre on Beverley Road (fig. 3).<sup>7</sup>

Economically, too, the city is struggling as it relied for a long time on its fisheries industry. Yet, following the Cod Wars that stretched from the late 1950s into the mid 1970s, the fisheries industry slowly declined and eventually collapsed. Moving from the continent to Hull as an outsider, I believe it is this experience of almost absolute destruction and economic decline that – in a way – shapes the character of the city to this date (though those who grew up in Hull might disagree with me!).

For the purposes of this editorial, I walked and cycled through Hull to find traces not only of past glories but also of sites that manifest, materialize, and

5 Electoral Commission 2019.

6 Hull Data Observatory 2019.

7 BBC 2007.



Fig. 5: Skips, Wincolmllee, Hull. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

visualize apocalyptic and utopian elements and connect the city to what holds the country hostage at the moment: the narratives around Brexit. Throughout the city, one can encounter a number of abandoned or desolate buildings that remind me – as someone who is and still feels foreign in the city and indeed the country – of the harsh experiences and realities Hull and its people had to endure: from a lively port city (and the city’s Streetlife Museum still bears witness to Hull’s vibrant life a century or so ago) to the Hull Blitz to the money the fisheries industry brought in to its collapse.<sup>8</sup> There certainly seems to be an apocalyptic dimension to it: not only the confrontation with destruction, decline, and uncertainty, but – in a sense deeply apocalyptic – the hope that at some point things will turn for the better.

On my journey through the city, I came across the listed building of the former British Extracting Company silo (fig. 4).<sup>9</sup> I found the appearance of the building with its large letters “BRITISH EXTRACTING CO” striking because aesthetically and on the level of language, it visualizes Brexit debates: the building can be taken to stand for the former British Empire that tries to extract itself from its social and political environment. Like the oil extracting process that happened at the site long ago, Brexit, so the promise goes, will extract the cherries and

8 Fishing News 2015.

9 Historic England 2019a; Historic England 2019b.



Fig. 6: Excavators, Headland Plant, Wincolmllee, Hull. Photo: Alexander D. Ornella.

leave other responsibilities behind, to help restore the Empire to its former glory. The fading colors on the building have a romantic touch, bearing witness to a former glory that just waits rediscovery and resurrection.

The cover image shows a storage site for skips (fig. 5). The yellowish colour of the skips, the number of skips stored there, the debris they stand for, and the impending storms the clouds herald, made me wonder about the city – or civilization – the skip storage site could possibly bear witness to. The emptiness of the skips could be traces of a society that has given up or ceased to exist. They can also stand for a society that is ready to leave behind the storms of difficult times. In a way the skips sit in a liminal state, much like the entire country: in between remainers and brexiteers in a tug of war, neither here nor there, no movement on either side, with all outcomes equally possible. Uncertainty.

The image of the excavators set in front of an industrial building I came across has a more hopeful feel to it (see fig. 6) – but again is linked to Brexit fantasies. Britain, once at the forefront of industrialization, hopes to revive its historic glory and – by leaving the shackles of the European Union behind – enter a new age of economic prosperity. At least, these are the narratives and the mental imagery created and disseminated by Brexiteers.

At the point of writing this editorial, it is unclear whether Brexit will happen at all or what variant of it will be pursued. Immersing oneself in towns, their aesthetics, their history, and linking them with the narratives of Brexit, however,

can help us understand how everyday images of destruction or decline might contribute to a sense of disempowerment, disillusion, and a hope that change – whatever that change actually is – will bring about change.

In a certain sense, all these images communicate the – often shattered – hopes for a better life. They communicate a desire for change, a shared agreement that things must change, and the shared disappointment in past promises of change. I mean here not necessarily unfulfilled promises by the EU, but the disappointment of pro-Brexit voters in the political system and political elites. “What they wanted”, Nick Westcott argues in an LSE blog post, “was to be noticed.”<sup>10</sup>

## APOCALYPTIC IMAGININGS – WHAT THIS ISSUE IS ABOUT

The articles in the thematic section of this issue of the JRFM address a number of issues that can help us better understand not only the films, TV series, or texts the authors are looking at, but also broader socio-political and psychological issues linked to an apocalyptic mood we can trace throughout a number of societies today. John Lynch’s article on *MR ROBOT* (TV series, US 2015–2019) discusses questions of authority, reality, and belief. Stephanie Bender in her article on Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2003, 2009, 2013) is interested in how apocalyptic imagery can help social actors think about and imagine brighter futures.

We can use Jennifer Woodward’s discussion of J. J. Connington’s 1923 apocalyptic novel, *Nordenholt’s Million* as a starting point to explore and better understand socio-political narratives of salvation. Javier Campos Calvo-Sotelo looks at the idea of critical dystopia in music and the importance of art. It will be fascinating to see how critical dystopia in art, or more specifically music in the case of Campos Calvo-Sotelos’ article, will continue to react to and transform with current forms of activism, such as the FridaysForFuture or the protests in Hong Kong at the time of writing of this editorial. Bina Nir concludes the thematic section with a reflection on the perception of time and Western ideas of weather and to what extent the future can be influenced. Again, this is quite a timely reflection in the context of Brexit where the promise of Brexiteers is “to take back control”.

## OPEN SECTION

The Open Section starts with Teemu Taira’s analysis of James Bond films with a religious studies perspective. He argues that religion is often used to label and single out the other, non-Western, or exotic. David Dalton provides us with an

<sup>10</sup> Westcott 2019.

important contribution to better understand the director Jared Hess's body of work. Dalton argues that in order to more fully appreciate Hess's oeuvre, in particular the film *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (US 2004), we need to pay more attention to the film's and Hess' own rootedness in Mormon culture. Russell C. Powell concludes this issue with a discussion of the political vision in Terrence Malick's *THE TREE OF LIFE* (US 2011). He attributes the lack of attention the film's political dimension has received thus far to a broader ignorance of the social and political nature of theology.

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# MR ROBOT: Hacking the Apocalypse

## ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the American TV series MR ROBOT (US 2015–2019) and its imaginative articulation of key theological and philosophical questions pertaining to authority, reality, and belief. MR ROBOT is subject to an analysis that reflects its intellectual sophistication, visual and philosophical density, and operationalizing of an active and reflective audience. The article will investigate the philosophical disposition of the series protagonist and those questions of transcendence, truth, and existence, he raises, to interrogate something of the ontological disruptions initiated by digital media technologies and the theological questions formulated within this process. The article considers the apocalyptic event around which the drama revolves as a system re-set and new beginning that is revealing of a certain kind of truth alongside the subject who speaks to this truth. It draws on theory from Gilles Deleuze and Pierre-Félix Guattari, Bernard Stiegler, Alain Badiou, and Catherine Keller.

## KEYWORDS

MR ROBOT, Apocalypse, Computer Hacking, The Event, Cryptography, Habit, Hope

## BIOGRAPHY

John Lynch is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Karlstad University, Sweden. He has a forthcoming monograph to be published by Routledge on theological and philosophical themes in contemporary TV serial drama.

## INTRODUCTION

“I’m only supposed to be your prophet. You’re supposed to be my god!”<sup>1</sup>

This article is concerned with the American TV series MR ROBOT (US 2015–2019) and its imaginative articulation of key theological and philosophical questions pertaining to authority, reality, and belief.<sup>2</sup> MR ROBOT is a well-received and

1 Mr Robot to Elliot, MR ROBOT 1.10 (00:38:19).

2 At the time of writing three seasons have been broadcast.



Fig. 1. MR ROBOT 2.03 (00:45:50)<sup>3</sup>.

popular drama that is unusual in that it is a complex and challenging show, yet it consistently undermines its assertions of truth, both visually and textually. Such a show gives support to the argument for the rise of what is described within television studies as “quality television”,<sup>4</sup> which is characterized by, amongst other things, dramatic ambiguity, narrative complexity, and sharp social criticism, all of which is coupled with eloquent allusions to popular culture. MR ROBOT certainly exhibits these qualities and, I would argue, is indeed a quality television production. Such quality has been driven, to a significant degree, by shifts in media platform technologies such as cable and streaming that allow for greater economic investment supporting long-term series development, rather than the limitations of the traditional broadcast model with its brutal popularity index that could see shows cancelled before they had a chance to establish an economically sustainable audience. Arguably, this shift in investment has elevated the role of the series showrunner to a level comparable to the film auteur which posits a singularizing authorial vision as a key creative force, what could be described as a transcendent creator figure for the series universe.<sup>5</sup> As evidence of this, there is a growing number of high-caliber film directors who have moved across to television, bringing with them some of the best acting and technical talent currently available.

3 The numbering refers to Season 2, Episode 3, and the episode timecode. This may vary slightly depending on which platform it is viewed.

4 McCabe/Akass 2007.

5 See Molloy 2010; Redvall 2013, Chapter 5.

What all this points to in the case of MR ROBOT is a belief that it can, and should, be subject to an analysis that reflects its intellectual sophistication, visual and philosophical density, and operationalizing of an active and reflective audience. As a work of imagination and cultural critique it provides engaging and useful insights into the process of attempting to challenge the technological systems that have infiltrated all personal and social relations today and does so by drawing upon a range of key religious ideas and concepts. The analysis offered here will work with the philosophical disposition of the series protagonist and those questions of transcendence, truth, and existence, he raises, to interrogate something of the ontological disruptions initiated by digital media technologies and the theological questions formulated within this process. Within the drama itself, we follow the perspective of the central character Elliot Alderson, a cyber-security engineer who moonlights as a computer hacker and leader of an Anonymous-type collective operating under the name of *f*society.<sup>6</sup> Their target is a global tech corporation, *E Corp*, which is responsible for maintaining the vast majority of personal debt records across the globe. Hacking this system and erasing *E Corp*'s electronic archives is the motivation across Season One; Season Two deals with the consequences of this attack, and Season Three sees the attempt to reverse it.<sup>7</sup> The character of Elliot has a problematic relationship with another character named Mr Robot,<sup>8</sup> with whom he engages in an ongoing dialogue over the ethics of the intended hack and who is revealed by the end of Season One to be an hallucinatory manifestation of his deceased father. His father died of leukemia when Elliot was a child, an event attributed to the calculated negligence of an *E Corp* subsidiary.

Given this issue's theme of apocalypse and authenticity, the article will, first, locate the series within a frame defined by the concepts of habit and hope, as a way of engaging with its form and content. Secondly, it will consider the apocalyptic event around which the drama revolves as an intended system re-set and new beginning, that is revealing of a certain kind of truth alongside the subject who speaks to this truth. Thirdly, Elliot's extraordinary ability for computer coding and encryption links to certain ideas about secrets and their role in a notion of authority as that which is sustained by the possession of a key that can unlock and, by extension, also lock the sanctified data. Finally, the article addresses perhaps the most powerful aspect of the drama: Elliot's paranoia and psychological fragmentation as he occupies this place on the edge of the system, where his mental and perceptual breakdown is the cost of his commitment to this act of erasure. The voice-of-the-Father that forcefully interjects into his stream of consciousness demanding that he "act" is understood here as a manifestation of

6 Anonymous is a loosely associated international network of activist and hacktivist entities.

7 Season one was broadcast first in June 2015, season two in July 2016 and season three in October-November 2017.

8 When referring to the character, standard type is used, when the series, italics.

what Catherine Keller describes as a crypto-apocalypse, something that emerges out of the amorphous realm at the subliminal margins of the mind, driven by a compulsive desire to fix meaning yet unable to ever fully escape the indeterminable nature of the psychosocial zone out of which selfhood is composed.<sup>9</sup>

## REPETITION AS DIFFERENCE: BETWEEN HABIT AND HOPE

What, then, does it mean to frame the analysis of the series between the concepts of habit and hope? Fundamentally, such an approach addresses the essential nature of the series as a series, that is, a repetition of an imagined world that the viewer returns to in a process of captivation and familiarity. It is possible to trace this conception back to the founding consciousness of human existence in myth, narrative, and the first visualizations of the world marked onto the walls and surfaces of the landscape. However, we can more recently locate the emergence of this process in the rise of the printed serial form in the nineteenth century, before it shifted into the media of cinema, radio, and then television.

One aspect of contemporary TV series much commented upon, is how this longer narrative form allows for deeper character development and more complex structures to be established, something that is more limited by the typical ninety minutes of a conventional feature film.<sup>10</sup> This follows a tradition within cinema of seeking to extend the audience engagement, something we can see in the feature-length film. This format emerged around 1912 as, in part, a struggle against the limitations of the ten-minute “one-reeler”, a duration that was deemed by industry organizations such as the Movie Trust to be the maximum length of time an audience could be expected to maintain their attention.<sup>11</sup> The introduction of the feature became an essential element in the development of a more sophisticated and middle-class audience for cinema throughout this period.<sup>12</sup> In a broader sense, such qualities point to how film and television function with an increasing level of creative crossover. For instance, one of the most highly regarded films of recent decades, the complex and challenging *MULLHOLLAND DRIVE*, from 2001, written and directed by David Lynch, was originally written and shot as a pilot for a TV series before Lynch adapted it into a feature film after rejection from appalled television executives.<sup>13</sup> In contrast, Sam Esmail, the writer and director of *MR ROBOT*, originally envisaged the pilot

9 Keller 1997, 8.

10 see Mittell 2015.

11 The Movie Trust or Motion Picture Patents Company, was a trust of ten film producers and distributors who attempted to gain control of the motion-picture industry in the United States between 1908 to 1912. See Izod 1988.

12 Butsch 2000.

13 <http://www.lynchnet.com/mdrive/dffm.html> [accessed 12.09.2019].

episode of the series as a feature film but then opted for a serial form and has stated: “We’re making the show as if we were making a feature. Every episode is kind of a short film.”<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, the contemporary serial form is arguably more than just a longer and more complex narrative, even if enabled by the “catch-up” technology of streaming or box-set, which allows for a more complete viewer engagement. It also points to a kind of acceleration of the ritualized experience that defined the traditional format of the weekly show that was universal up until only a few years ago. Sitting down as a family to watch a scheduled TV show, or the earlier listening together to the radio, has, much like weekly attendance at church, largely passed out of Western culture. Its departure came with the vastly expanded technology of fragmented and privatized consumption, now further engineered by the algorithmic engines of platforms such as Netflix.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, we can look for traces that remain of the habitual practice of repetition and routine that enabled this process of engagement.

In recent years there has been an increasing interest in the dynamics of habit as a mechanism of consciousness and the question as to whether it should be considered as a limitation on thinking or, conversely, as the ground from which creativity itself springs forth.<sup>16</sup> It is useful to briefly consider this discussion in relation to recent neuroscience research that shows the powerful effects of the complex range of cerebral processes at work when watching something like TV serial drama.<sup>17</sup> Complex dramas stimulate multiple parts of the brain simultaneously to produce an exhilarating sense of being immersed in a fictional world.<sup>18</sup> In her book *What Shall We Do with Our Brains?*, Catherine Malabou provides a powerful critique of the ideological forces at work in the emergent network society, where neuronal functioning and social function become increasingly indeterminable. Today, there is a concerted struggle over the dynamic and creative aspects of the human mind, driven by its profound adaptability, to capture this potential and divert it exclusively to the needs of capital. On one side, Malabou proposes that capitalism seeks to define this redirecting as a personal responsibility for flexibility and adaptability, whilst on the other, she offers the concept of plasticity, with a transformative power able to generate a liberating pathway. As she says:

14 Barr 2015.

15 The map of contemporary viewing habits is a complex one with traditional broadcast of national events still significant whilst streaming platforms have a mix of staggered weekly release of shows, often on a provider such as HBO, even as others, such as Netflix, release entire seasons at once to foster a practice of ‘binge’ watching. There is no doubt, however, the traditional model of consumption has been superseded.

16 Grosz 2013.

17 Ellison 2015.

18 Gaines Lewis 2014.

Repetition and habit play a considerable role, and this reveals that the response of a nervous circuit is never fixed. Plasticity thus adds the functions of artist and instructor in freedom and autonomy to its role as sculptor.<sup>19</sup>

In the same way that the creativity of the worker is harnessed to the productive needs of capital through flexible working and “neural teams”,<sup>20</sup> the imaginative potential of the brain is being locked into a new pattern of consumption defined by streaming platforms. But this interpretation is not a simple argument against the technology as a new form of enslavement or the emergence of what Bernard Stiegler describes as “spiraling stupidity”,<sup>21</sup> for I believe that, at their best, such cultural productions can stimulate thoughts beyond a banal repetition of the same and, at the very least, they carry traces of past formations of socially transformative thinking about the future. The viewers’ habitual engagement with such creative work is also driven by a sense of hope, a belief in the possibility of developing a different existence within *this* world, and although no longer explicitly defined in religious terms, this desire echoes religion’s patterns and structures. MR ROBOT, a fictional work, positions the central character, Elliot, as essentially dynamic, someone whom we see oscillating between hope and despair, something articulated most clearly in his hallucinatory dialogue with the imaginary manifestation of his dead father. The strength of the show, as an exploration of the pressures exerted on the subject by technological transformation, comes from its staging of the instability of the relational self, an on-screen unfolding of a different and challenging type of subjectivity, one driven to the edge by the parallel forces of escalating hyperconnection and intensifying isolation. It draws attention to the necessity for habit as a strategy for navigating the increasingly complex world whilst simultaneously undermining the ontological and epistemological foundations that emerge, as these coping strategies become yet opportunities for further exploitation.

At this point we can consider whether the defining event for the series, the system re-set initiated by the data wipe, is more an act of wishful thinking than an authentic expression of hope. As Ola Sigurdson writes:

For hope to be hope, however, and not only wishful thinking, it is imperative that the discontinuity with what has come before is acknowledged, or in other words, that the darkness and despair of our current situation is acknowledged.<sup>22</sup>

Elliot is clear about the alienated and degraded nature of the contemporary world and is seemingly offered the chance to be involved in an act that will be “the biggest incident of wealth distribution in history ... the largest revolution

19 Malabou 2008, 24.

20 Malabou 2008, 43.

21 Stiegler 2015.

22 Sigurdson 2012, 196.

the world will ever see” (MR ROBOT 1.01, 00:46:44). How he responds to the appeals to the authority of transcendent figures throughout this process provides an insight into his own internal struggle and the implications of acting out such convictions in the wider social realm. Whether there is, in fact, any sense of discontinuity between the before and after of the system re-set draws attention to the fundamental weakness of the particular conceptualization of this event.

## THE SYSTEM RE-SET AS APOCALYPTIC EVENT

The opening scene of a television series is important in initiating the thematic core of the drama that will unfold over the course of the show.<sup>23</sup> Functionally, it works to quickly bring the viewer up to speed on what is at stake and to hopefully engage them enough to attract their continuing attention. With MR ROBOT, the voiceover device of addressing the audience as an imaginary “friend” immediately connects us to the world of the character and the fact that his communication is necessary yet also a sign of his mental instability. The premise of the drama is then laid out as we open to visuals of a group of businessmen silhouetted against the Manhattan skyline and a reversing rack focus that pulls the group into focus in the foreground (fig. 2):

(V.O.) What I am about to tell you is top secret, a conspiracy bigger than all of us. There’s a powerful group of people out there that are secretly running the world. I’m talking about the guys no one knows about, the guys that are invisible, the top 1% of the top 1%, the guys that play God without permission. And now I think they’re following me.



Fig 2. MR ROBOT: 1.01 (00:00:21).

<sup>23</sup> Mittel 55–85.

For Elliot, the computer hacker, there is a necessity to counter this conspiracy with a similarly secret cabal, *f*society, who can engineer a data wipe that will herald a new beginning. Traditionally, the apocalypse unveils and uncovers the hidden truth, and the narrative of *MR ROBOT* revolves around this world-altering event designed to both liberate us from the burden of debt and as such to reveal the reality of the world that is clouded by this. As stated, however, effecting this event produces increasing levels of psychological conflict for Elliot: initiating the system hack initiates his cognitive fragmentation into antagonistic personalities. The apocalypse will make a new world possible, but to whom or to what, can Elliot appeal as an authority that can validate his actions? The lack of such an authority threatens to undermine the entire process as he systematically retracts from trusting a smaller and smaller circle of people until finally in the last moments of the Season Two finale he cries out: “I am the only one that exists!”, at which point, unfortunately, he is shot by another character whom, in his uncertainty he has deemed be imaginary.<sup>24</sup>

Pressingly, he has bigger problems to address in relation to his apocalyptic hack of *E Corp* and its financial records. Predictably, the outcome of the data loss is a generalized state of economic chaos. Whilst the government struggles to achieve order and reassure a frightened public that it can resolve the situation, a return to a small-scale cash economy is put into effect. Rather than this leading to the expected collapse of *E Corp*, however, the CEO Philip Price actually uses the crisis to maneuver the company into a position of even greater dominance through the introduction of its own electronic bit-coin currency. The drama usefully stages the potential within any revolutionary event for forces of reaction to mobilize at the moment of radical reconfiguration, potentially ‘every bit as innovative’, as the Marxist philosopher Alain Badiou puts in his work *Ethics*, and further raises the question whether all of this ‘subversive’ activity is not potentially another level of manipulation by rogue capitalists.<sup>25</sup>

By the end of Season Two, Elliot and his alter ego Mr Robot are about to blow up the building that contains the, by now, reassembled paper records of the world’s debt, a sign that Elliot/Mr Robot seem condemned to an endless repetition of their actions. Evidently, at this point in the narrative, Elliot has so systematically exposed the falsity of the truth claims that have been used to justify the measures taken by *E Corp*, the government, and everyone around him, that he is effectively left without any stable position from which to secure his own sense of reality, there is no authority left to which he can appeal as guarantor of meaning. Whilst he is the singular mastermind behind the hack, even if his underlings provide labor for the task, Elliot is trapped within an unstable relationship with his dead father who appears in hallucinatory form, driving him to ever more destructive actions

24 *MR ROBOT* 2.12 (00:39:20).

25 Badiou 2000, lvii.

in an effort to secure final closure. Here (fig. 1), he rages at attempts to naively appeal to a transcendent power, expressed in a sort of Karamozovian moment,<sup>26</sup> in a group therapy session, as they are sat underneath a figure of Jesus on the cross:

Is that what God does? He helps? Tell me, why didn't God help my innocent friend who died for no reason while the guilty roam free?

Okay. Fine. Forget the one-offs. How about the countless wars declared in His name?

Okay. Fine. Let's skip the random, meaningless murder for a second, shall we? How about the racist, sexist, phobia soup we've all been drowning in because of Him?

And I'm not just talking about Jesus. I'm talking about *all* organized religion. Exclusive groups created to manage control. A dealer getting people hooked on the drug of hope. His followers, nothing but addicts who want their hit of bullshit to keep their dopamine of ignorance. Addicts. Afraid to believe the truth. That there's no order. There's no power. That all religions are just metastasizing mind worms, meant to divide us so it's easier to rule us by the charlatans that wanna run us. All we are to them are paying fanboys of their poorly written sci-fi franchise.

If I don't listen to my imaginary friend, why the fuck should I listen to yours? People think their worship is some key to happiness. That's just how He owns you. Even I'm not crazy enough to believe that distortion of reality.

So fuck God! He's not a good enough scapegoat for me.<sup>27</sup>

Elliot can rail against the absurdity of a caring, purposeful God, but at the same time he never ceases to search for the truth in what is an increasingly feverish drive to establish something foundational. Yet this merely sees him wracked by doubt and perpetually tormented due to this irresolvable spiral of distrust. Likewise, the 5/9 hack, as the event is named, has apparently produced not a new world, but simply a degraded old one that is materially worse for the ordinary people it was meant to liberate. The primary outcome of all of this is that *E Corp* emerges stronger and takes even greater economic control by establishing its own crypto-currency.<sup>28</sup> Elliot can denounce God but the issue is whether he constantly shifts his appeal to authority elsewhere, never able to finally settle.

So how has philosophy addressed such questions as they relate to an explicitly resistant and political project of radical transformation? At this point, I want to turn again to Alain Badiou and his work *Being and Event* to unpack some of these issues and think through the relationship between event and subjectivi-

26 See Dostoevsky 1992, 237–246.

27 MR ROBOT 2.03 (00:45:04–00:47:39).

28 This raises the intriguing idea that, ultimately, Elliot himself is merely a manifestation of the abstract machine that is capitalism. Don DeLillo makes reference to the idea that protest plays a key role in the continuation of capital in his allegorical novel *Cosmopolis*, where the main character speculates on an anti-capitalist protest as a functioning as a form of 'systemic hygiene' that is revealed by 'shadow of transaction between the demonstrators and the state', DeLillo 2003, 99.



Fig. 3. MR Robot: 1.10 (00:45:12).

ty.<sup>29</sup> In this text, Badiou locates the human in an infinite universe, lacking any inherent meaning or value, where all we can say ontologically about the world is that it consists of what he describes as “multiplicities of multiplicities” that never finally resolve but, rather, operate as a fractal pattern, rejecting the assertion of any metaphysical moment of “One”. Badiou, therefore, posits mathematics as ontology, as this is what gives us our only access to being, for it allows a modeling of human situations via Cantor’s set theory. Into this realm erupts the event as that which is more than the sum of its individual actions, its emergence unpredicted and unforeseen by the instituted knowledges.

The void, a realm of pure multiplicity and a kind of sublime abyss that haunts all that can be counted in the Badiouan sense, is figuratively where Elliot is placed on the edge of as he brings into existence this particular event. This action, however, precipitates within him a fragmentation, as a result of the sheer scale of what he is attempting, and, in what can be seen as a compensatory gesture, generates the nostalgic hallucination of Mr Robot (fig. 3).

As he rails against the inauthenticity of contemporary life, “Is any of it real? I mean, look at this, look at it! A world built on fantasy! Synthetic emotions in the form of pills, Psychological warfare in the form of advertising! Mind altering chemicals in the form of food! Brainwashing seminars in the form of media!”,<sup>30</sup> Elliot seeks to elevate himself into what Badiou defines as a subject, one who is driven by a fidelity, a faith, to the event as a truth procedure that is found at “the junction of an intervention and a rule of faithful connection”.<sup>31</sup>

29 Badiou 2011.

30 MR ROBOT 1.10 (00:43:12).

31 Badiou 2011, 239.

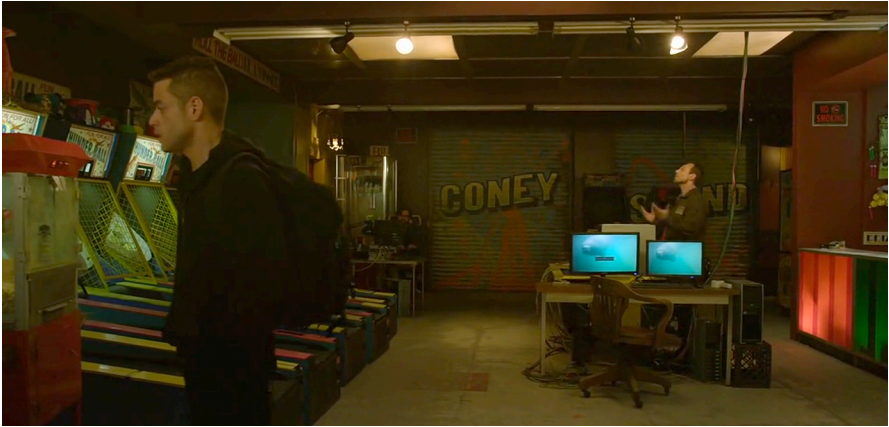


Fig. 4. MR ROBOT: 1.02 (00:24:25).

Elliot lives in a world of code, connections, and the digital traces of human weakness through which he is able to manipulate reality, yet he can only do this by putting on a mask. The apocalyptic event that becomes the driving force to finally and completely reveal the actuality of the world to him and everyone else, ultimately fails to reveal its truth. The discursive oscillation between the characters of Elliot and Mr Robot plays out the tensions inherent in the militant-becoming that demands fidelity to the event, as the father-figure challenges Elliot to step up and act; to paraphrase Badiou, Mr Robot defies Elliot to “become the immortal you are capable of becoming”.<sup>32</sup> At the heart of this process is the paradox of commitment to an event, something that will change the world, but which requires for its initiation a certain kind of objectification, a process the event is paradoxically designed to counter. What the drama here plays out, I would argue, is a version of a Christian existential dilemma, or existential theatre, described by Gabriel Marcel as creative fidelity, where the slipping into dogma, seen in the figure of Mr Robot, is a loss of the response to the presence of the Other to which the cause is supposedly directed.<sup>33</sup> Elliot recognizes in Mr Robot what Marcel would call a kind of idolatry as he relentlessly pursues the effective destruction of the data and the effects on individual lives that go with that action. Here, Elliot is confronted with the binary thinking of the militant, Mr Robot, who in his fervor demands of him: “Tell me one thing Elliot! Are you a one or a zero? That’s the question you have to ask yourself. Are you a yes or a no? Are you going to act or not?” (fig. 4).

In response, Elliot expresses the doubts of those who ask: precisely why we should commit ourselves to this life of fidelity? By what or whom are we called?

<sup>32</sup> Badiou 2000, 51.

<sup>33</sup> Marcel 2002.

The rejection of an external transcendent agency plays out in MR ROBOT as an interior dialogue that fragments into endless, fractal digressions, unable to resolve into a final authoritative voice. This fits with both a contemporary cultural mood and the serial form itself, which operates with an open and deferred, never-finally-resolved, character motivation. Elliot and Mr Robot appear trapped in a zero-sum game where one seeks to initiate a radical change in the world with all its attendant violence, and the other shows signs of the exhaustion that hovers over any shift between event and void.<sup>34</sup>

At this point, we can ask the question of whether, in fact, this is an event? Stripped of any engagement with a wider collective, it is the action of a single mind, with the small group of *f*society hackers functioning as subdivisions of Elliot's personality. Waking up one morning to find that, without warning, the global records of debt have been wiped out, would propel us not into a new world of freedom or a fresh start but rather into a materially worse one, stuck in a state of limbo whilst the same powerful forces regroup, ready to emerge with even tighter economic and political control. An action concomitant with exactly how the State responds to any acts of terrorism that aim to destabilize it. To this extent, MR ROBOT fundamentally offers a liberal critique of the wish-fulfillment fantasies of this techno-anarchist idea of change that has nothing to with imagining revolution as a collective process of radical social transformation out of which something truly new could emerge.

## CRYPTOGRAPHY

In this section, I address an aspect of the series that resonates greatly with religious notions of apocalypse, namely, the encryption process at the heart of the 5/9 hack. What we find in MR ROBOT is not an attempt at destruction *per se*, such as an attempt to simply delete the records, but rather the encryption of all the data using a highly secure 256AES key.<sup>35</sup> This key is then set to self-destruct, making it impossible for *E Corp* to retrieve the data through any later decryption. Therefore, to *encrypt* is to make hidden or secret. The word *crypt* derives etymologically from the same source and refers to ritual rooms found beneath religious buildings. This sense of descending rather than ascending is a useful way of characterizing Elliot's journey as he goes from the light of the cathedral into the gloom of the vault. In modern terms, a crypt is also a burial vault where family members are interred, hence the appearance of the ghost of his father.

Creatively, all of these associations become manifest in MR ROBOT, a series that is nominally about living in an advanced computer technological world of

34 S2:04 Elliot and Mr Robot play several games of chess to resolve the question of who is dominant. All end in stalemate.

35 Advanced Encryption Standard.

surveillance and control. Visually within the drama, this opposition between such spaces can be seen in the light and order of the official and sanctified spaces of All Safe and *E Corp*, with their corporate design and brightly lit offices, in comparison to the hacker collective *f*society, which operates out of a disused Coney Island arcade, a kind of crypt where Elliot's dead father is alive and, in his mind at least, acts as the leader of the project.

In an encryption process, the key is what allows the data to be de-ciphered; otherwise it remains meaningless. In the show, the key itself is destroyed, but Elliot remains as the agent of deciphering, the only one who can engineer a possible decoding. Being in possession of the key is therefore to have absolute power as a mediator. Partly, then, this is a process for establishing secure communication between parties who are aware of the presence of adversaries whose role is to hack into the conversations. In cryptography, this agent is given the designation "Eve", the one who accesses forbidden knowledge. For Elliot, possession of this key gives him power as he is able to intervene in a person's life and make changes that will affect them profoundly, as we see throughout the show, whether a coffeeshop owner exposed as a child-porn profiteer or the secretly-married boyfriend of his therapist. Each one is confronted by Elliot and presented with the hacked information, rendering them stripped of their authority and subsequently rendered powerless. But such dominance drives Elliot to ever-greater isolation as he draws away from social interactions and retreats into loneliness, paranoia, and hallucination, highlighting the social cost of such a process.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, by Season Two, Elliot is literally in a prison of his own making, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot's words in "The Wasteland", a poem centrally concerned with the degradation of daily life because of technology:

... I have heard the key  
Turn in the door once and turn once only  
We think of the key, each in his prison Thinking of the key, each  
confirms a prison...<sup>37</sup>

## A CRYPTO-APOCALYPSE

At the heart of *MR ROBOT* is the idea of a secret and the role of the apocalypse in revealing it to the world, a revelation. Elliot is the decoder of the conspiracy that seeks to continue to hide this truth from the world, those powerful agents who

36 Dave Boothroyd writes of this process and the ontological uncertainties unleashed by it: "It is because the very idea of full and open disclosure is a logical impossibility that not only will conspiracy theorising dog those who claim to practise such a policy, but, may one not also ask in all seriousness: can anyone ever really know entirely whether or not by disclosing anything at all they have acted as someone else's stooge?" Boothroyd 2013, 120.

37 Eliot 1922, lines 410–416.

continue to “con people into believing something” as Philip Price puts it in response to the state of panic after the 5/9 hack.<sup>38</sup> But by seeking out and confronting this conspiracy, Elliot slips into paranoia – “I think they are following me” – because the machine that he confronts is already paranoid, it is what Deleuze and Guattari describe as the “paranoid social machine”.<sup>39</sup> Elliot channels the persecuting voices into the voice of his father, as the antagonist against his self. Paranoia is never straightforward, however, for it always asks: What does this mean? Similarly, Elliot constantly searches for the authority behind the signs he encounters in his pursuit of the event. Whilst his psychoanalyst attempts to map Elliot’s thoughts onto a concealed cause, an origin, a traumatic moment that is grounded on a One, he simply censors his spoken words and hacks her life, reads her secrets, identifies her sadness, and finds her point of vulnerability to manipulate her.

The apocalypse functions here in the way it has traditionally worked: as singularizing reaction against the sense of ever-multiplying states of being, as resistance against empire, a kind of counter-universality.<sup>40</sup> Sam Esmail, whose family is Egyptian, has stated that the show was inspired by the Arab Spring as well as Occupy Wall Street and public awareness of the reach of big data.<sup>41</sup> Whilst such social movements provide useful dramatic form for the series and its characterizations, there remains the question of the nature of the vision articulated through the series’ explicit formulations of something like the fictional 5/9 hack. The essential emptiness of the event – by necessity its secret and singular nature makes it devoid of any collective force – can be interpreted as a cynical response to the belief in radical change as its failures are revealed.

As we have seen, on many levels, MR ROBOT is concerned with secrets and it is precisely here that the notion of apocalypse as revelation gains its purchase. However, I would argue that the series has such wide resonance not so much because of the naïve idea of a conspiracy driven by the “1% of the 1%” but rather because of a growing awareness that the relatively slower unfolding technological apocalypse of contemporary society reveals that today there are actually no longer *any* secrets.<sup>42</sup> If there is a conspiracy, it is one organized around the storage of secrets as data for potential manipulation by subversive agencies.

38 MR ROBOT: 2.02 (00:08:09).

39 Deleuze/Guattari 1983.

40 Portier-Young 2011.

41 McAlone 2016.

42 Jacques Derrida writes in a text dated 1994, later published in the book, *A Taste for the Secret*, “I have a taste for the secret, it clearly has to do with not-belonging; I have an impulse of fear or terror in the face of a political space, for example, a public space that makes no room for the secret. For me, the demand that everything be paraded in the public square and that there be no internal forum is a glaring sign of the totalitarianization of democracy. I can rephrase this in terms of political ethics: if a right to the secret is not maintained, we are in a totalitarian space. Derrida 2001, 59.

This age is one where everything you think is private can be made public and whose mood is increasingly defined by a growing sense of widespread paranoia, as the absolute level of surveillance becomes apparent. This gives Elliot a God-like power, but as he pushes at the limits of human ability, in this context, he continuously breaks down. If there is a reality to MR ROBOT, it is this piling up of a compounded irreality where even perception itself is disrupted. Elliot might hate the world, try to turn away from it, but he is ultimately unable to escape it. The vision on offer here is not a utopian one but, rather, one of darkness, to the point where Season Two literally ends on a black out. As a cryptographer, Elliot prefers the dark seclusion of the crypt to the light of the chapel.

Finally, in this sense the apocalyptic script of MR ROBOT can be read as akin to Catherine Keller's "crypto-apocalypse", a counter-apocalypse as she describes it, which recognizes itself as an apocalypse but attempts to interrupt the interpretative habit through a shift from the sense fear to one of hope, one that remains open and ongoing rather than final and absolute. What holds the attention for a show such as MR ROBOT is precisely the oscillation between fear and hope that the creator of the series has so far consistently repeated and is similar to the functioning of the Book of Revelation, which in Keller's words, acts as "a counter-cultural code for dissent" as it moves from "secrecy into public forecasting and open defiance".<sup>43</sup> MR ROBOT is a contemporary manifestation of the impulse for thinking a possible revolution, yet, through its very dramatic staging as a consumable product of the culture industry, potentially functions to contain the movement for change it presents on screen. In this regard, this operative ambiguity that we see in MR ROBOT of 'presenting the unrepresentable' is thoroughly apocalyptic, an "apocalypse habit", as Keller describes it, one whose spiral of violence starts with a self-destruction, a destruction of self in the case of Elliot, yet requires possibilities for action beyond the attraction of a messianic solution.<sup>44</sup>

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43 Keller 1997, 10.

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# Just Popular Entertainment or Longing for a Posthuman Eden?

## The Apocalypse in Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*

### ABSTRACT

In the context of the ecological crisis, tales of the apocalypse have become a regular feature of the contemporary cultural imaginary, be it in popular feature films, non-fictional texts, or dystopian novels. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2004 [2003], 2010 [2009], 2014 [2013]) investigates this curious form of entertainment both by employing the template of the apocalypse itself and by reflecting on its cause and effect at the same time. The novels reveal how worlds and their respective compasses of good and evil are constructed through storytelling and that the apocalypse is also a story which functions either as a moral structuring device or as an anaesthetic for the estranged subjects of late capitalism. Assuming a meta-perspective, the *MaddAddam Trilogy* engenders ethical reflections on possible futures, incorporating recent philosophical strands like transhumanism and posthumanism.

### KEYWORDS

(Post-) Apocalyptic Fiction, Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy*, Narrative World-making, Ethics, Posthumanism, Ecology

### BIOGRAPHY

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AVATAR (James Cameron, US 2009), the world's most popular film ever,<sup>1</sup> depicts a future humanity on the quest for new resources having plundered planet Earth to unviability; INTERSTELLAR (Christopher Nolan, US 2014), another block-

1 Cf. <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/alltime/world/> [accessed 20 September 2018].

buster, likewise pictures the end of Earth's capability to host human life; *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW* (Roland Emmerich, US 2004) imagines the worst possible results of climate change that makes large parts of the planet uninhabitable – so does *SNOWPIERCER* (Bong Joon Ho, KR/CZ 2014), only here the whole world is affected; in the Disney film *WALL-E* (Andrew Stanton, US 2008) humanity has already abandoned earth and left the cleaning of its mess to robots. The list of popular 21<sup>st</sup>-century future fictions portraying end-time scenarios as a result of anthropogenic ecological destruction could readily be continued – there is even a name for the newly emerging genre of science fiction dealing with the devastating legacy of climate change: cli-fi.<sup>2</sup>

Against the backdrop of doomsday prognoses of ecological degradation and numerous other problematic future-related tendencies, it seems to be immensely appealing these days to imagine the end of the world as we know it, or at least the end of humanity. Many of the films and novels which feature the end times are also tagged as apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic, which refers back to the biblical story of the apocalypse yet has come to mean something very different today. Often oblivious of the original story conveying hope and revelation, the apocalypse in popular fiction has become a synonym for catastrophe. Andrew Tate argues that “[a]pocalypse is widely understood in the shared, popular imagination as a kind of classy synonym for spectacular destruction, death on a vast scale and the collapse of all that a society might hold dear (families, cars, the comforts of home)”.<sup>3</sup>

Some contemporary works, however, still exhibit parallels to the Book of Revelation, adapted and playfully twisted to fit the ethical challenges of the contemporary historical circumstances. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam Trilogy* (2004 [2003], 2010 [2009], 2014 [2013]) is a case in point which depicts the demise of human civilisation resulting from a bio-engineered plague. It differs from other popular “apocalyptic” or “post-apocalyptic” future fictions in so far as it functions as a meta-narrative on apocalyptic tales and worldmaking through storytelling. Atwood's novels use the template of the apocalypse and at the same time foreground its story-ness while imagining possible futures derived from present developments. By simulating these future worlds and pointing to their narrative constructedness, the novels further allow the reader to assess their ethical potential.

In representing competing worldviews, the apocalypse and its aftermath become catalysers of the distinct maps of morality upheld and constructed by different social groups through the stories they tell. In this sense, as in the original biblical tale, the apocalypse works as a moral structuring device. However,

2 Mayer 2014, 23.

3 Tate 2017, 11.

Atwood's depiction of the apocalypse in the *MaddAddam Trilogy* does not offer a fixed moral universe but remains ambiguous, leaving the final judgement of good and evil to the reader. The aesthetic projections merely offer opportunities for reflection which, as I see it, is the essence of ethics. At the same time, the trilogy is very unambiguous, with references to global capitalism and its future consequences revealing how, in order to soothe its alienated subjects, late modernity brings forth anaesthetic forms of popular entertainment. Representations of the apocalypse in popular literature and film can therefore also be read as an expression of the self-alienation of late capitalist societies, whose members flee into the aesthetics of their own destruction for the apparent lack of any pragmatic alternative to the depressing status quo. *The MaddAddam Trilogy* offers a playful meta-comment on these two readings in its address of the ecological crisis of the present.

## IMAGINARIES OF HUMAN EXTINCTION – NEW UTOPIA OR COLLECTIVE DEPRESSION?

In the light of hard evidence of the anthropogenic destruction of the world ecology, manifest in climate change and its effects, the sixth great wave of species extinction, soil degradation, enormous amounts of micro-plastics in the sea and elsewhere, it is not surprising that the frustration with our own species has grown to the point where one might hope for its extinction for the sake of all other life forms. Mark Jendrysik notes: “Reflecting this vision, a new genre of popular films and books asks us to consider how the Earth and the natural world might fare in the total absence of human beings. In doing so, they foresee a new sort of posthuman future, one in which nature survives the extinction of the human race.”<sup>4</sup> According to Jendrysik, the possibility of our own extinction has become a new utopia – one in which nature manages to survive us and flourishes in a “world without us”.<sup>5</sup> The phenomenon is comparable to a depression on a large social scale: the self-esteem of the human species is so low that it considers itself worthless and dreams of its own suicidal death. At the end of the last century, the “Voluntary Human Extinction Movement” was formed, proposing that we should “live long and die out” peacefully, simply by refraining from reproduction.<sup>6</sup> The prerequisite for such self-hate is a profound alienation of human beings from themselves and from the natural and material

4 Jendrysik 2011, 35.

5 Cf. Alan Weisman's non-fictional book *The World without Us* (2007), in which he imagines nature reclaiming the Earth after humankind has vanished. There is also a novel with the same title by Mireille Juchau (2015) that belongs to the previously discussed end-times/cli-fi genre.

6 This is the slogan of the movement as proposed on its official website: <http://vhem.org/> [accessed 15 October 2018].

world surrounding them, which is brought about by the hegemony of neo-liberal capitalism and its concurrent forms of civilisation.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, but with regard to the rise of fascism, Walter Benjamin concluded his famous *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936) as follows: “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”<sup>8</sup> The proliferation of apocalyptic tales in contemporary future fictions also allows for the conclusion that once again humanity has reached a point at which there is a certain aesthetic pleasure involved in contemplating its own destruction: “Catastrophe on a global scale remains a curiously popular form of screen entertainment.[... ] Such narratives not only seem strange visual companions to popcorn and ice cream, but also are highly marketable.”<sup>9</sup> In an attempt to explain this odd phenomenon of taking pleasure in contemplating the end of the world as we know it, Elizabeth Rosen follows a similar interpretation: “No doubt, we do love apocalypses too much. But given that the world sometimes appears to be coming apart at its economic, political, and social seams and that there is ‘more and more information, and less and less meaning’ (Beaudrillard *Simulation and Simulacra*), our fascination with the apocalyptic myth is certainly understandable.”<sup>10</sup> The contemporary human subject under late capitalist conditions is thus not only fundamentally estranged but also irredeemably overcharged with the complexities of this world and the proliferating information that circulates within it without creating much viable meaning for individuals and local communities, as Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* also illustrates.

## “APOCALYPSE” NOW AND THEN

Margaret Atwood’s future fictions *Oryx and Crake*, *The Year of the Flood*, and *MaddAddam* are all written around an apocalyptic event which wipes out almost the entire human civilisation on Earth and which would therefore certainly be seen as catastrophic by ordinary standards. Here it becomes evident that the meaning of “apocalypse”, originally derived from the biblical Story of Revelation, has undergone a profound semantic shift up to the present. While in popular fiction today, “apocalyptic” is often understood as catastrophic and thus

7 Cf. Critical theory on capitalism and alienation ranging from Karl Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (1932), via Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (1944), to contemporary works like Hartmut Rosa’s *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity* (2013).

8 Benjamin 2008, 42.

9 Tate 2017, 13.

10 Rosen 2008, xi.

entails a thoroughly negative evaluation of the event(s) described, in traditional mythology, as well as in the Bible, it has very positive connotations and is meant to convey hope and truth.

The traditional narrative that has come to be known as apocalypse was fully formed only with the advent of Christianity. It has narrative antecedents in the Old Testament, and individual components of the apocalyptic story can be traced even further back to the ancient civilizations of the Vedic Indians, Egyptians, Persians, Mesopotamians, and Greeks. The etymological root of the word *apocalypse* is the Greek *apokalypsis*, meaning ‘unveiling’ or ‘uncovering,’ but the word, as it denotes cosmic events, is not used before it appears specifically attached to the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, where it refers to the divine revelation experienced by St. John of Patmos, who is shown the coming struggle between good and evil and God’s ultimate judgement upon the world.<sup>11</sup>

The semantic change of the term “apocalypse” has its roots in the Romantic period around 1800, with the appearance of the figure of “the last man” in the cultural imaginary. Examples of this literary and artistic figure of a lonely survivor amid the ruins of civilisation can be found in Mary Shelley’s novel *The Last Man* (1826) or John Martin’s oil painting by the same title (1849). In this cultural and artistic trope, Eva Horn sees a departure from the original apocalyptic vision as divine intervention towards the secular catastrophe of a godforsaken humanity.<sup>12</sup> As a result of Enlightenment philosophy, with its emphasis on reason, humans as individuals, and the natural sciences, the belief in God as the sole omnipotent ruler has become radically undermined. Instead, humankind is thrown back upon itself, as expressed by depictions of “the last man”.

In continuation of the developments that had started in the Romantic era, “Last Man narrative became popular in literature, and, increasingly in the twentieth century, the cinema”.<sup>13</sup> In the process, the apocalypse almost completely lost its original meaning of revelation and hope and has come to signify disaster or the end of humanity instead: “The result is that a story which was grounded in hope about the future has become instead a reflection of fears and disillusionment about the present, a bleak shift in emphasis from the belief in an ordered universe with a cogent history to one in which the overriding sense is of a chaotic, indifferent, and possibly meaningless universe.”<sup>14</sup> Atwood’s *MaddAddam Trilogy* partially mirrors this shift, yet it is also ambiguous and very self-conscious about its treatment of the apocalypse, both as a plot element and as a discourse.

11 Rosen 2008, xiii.

12 Horn 2014, 47.

13 Korte 2008, 152.

14 Rosen 2008, xiv.

## MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM TRILOGY

Assuming a meta-perspective, Atwood's trilogy takes up the phenomenon of the apocalyptic cultural imaginary, both on the story level and on the level of genre. The first novel, *Oryx and Crake* (2004 [2003]), begins in the chronological middle of the story with a description of a post-apocalyptic scenery: "On the eastern horizon there's a greyish haze, lit now with a rosy, deadly, glow. Strange how that colour still seems tender. The offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette [...] the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble sound almost like holiday traffic".<sup>15</sup> The typical description of a post-apocalyptic landscape filled with absence is rendered through the eyes and mind of Jimmy/Snowman, who, as a typical "last man figure", functions as the perceiving character or focaliser<sup>16</sup> of the first novel. Like most of the central characters, he has two names: Jimmy in the pre-apocalyptic world, and the name he has given himself to assume a new identity, Snowman, in the post-apocalyptic present, alluding to the mysterious Abominable Snowman. In his mind, he constantly shifts back and forth between his reconstructed past and the post-apocalyptic present. Mediated by his memories and judgements, the reader learns about the state of the pre-apocalyptic society and about the why and how of the apocalyptic event, which has been caused by the scientist Glenn/Crake, who wilfully engineered a deadly virus killing almost the entire human population on earth.

In the second novel, *The Year of the Flood* (2010 [2009]), two narrators provide different perspectives mainly on the unfolding of the plague itself. While Ren's account is rendered in the first person, Toby's perspective is mediated by an external narrator, assuming her point of view. The doubling of narrative perspective highlights the narrative construction of pasts and realities, or of collective worlds that constitute realities. Before the breakdown, Toby and Ren were at some point in their lives both part of the eco-religious group the God's Gardeners, and through their narrative point of view, the world of the Gardeners as a space of difference in pre-apocalyptic society is represented very intensely in the second book.

The final part of the trilogy, *MaddAddam* (2014 [2013]), focuses on narrative world building in the post-apocalyptic world, in which there are only very few human beings left, together with a new biotechnologically enhanced humanoid species created by Crake, the so-called Crakers. Again, it is told by an external narrator and Toby is the main perceiving character, this time however with several others co-creating and shaping the narrative. Here, even more than in the

15 Atwood 2004, 5.

16 A focaliser character is the character from whose perspective the story is told, although that character is not necessarily the narrator.

two prequels, storytelling is foregrounded and examined as a collective process and as the basic means of world-construction. From this perspective, the apocalypse is also exposed as what it is – a story. It is a tale with a certain function, or, as I will argue, different functions for different groups of people and the respective worlds they inhabit and construct.

#### THE APOCALYPSE AS POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN LATE CAPITALISM

Seen from the outside, the three novels are a piece of art and popular entertainment aesthetically depicting the erasure of human society through an apocalyptic event. Hence, they could well be sorted into the genre of (post)-apocalyptic fiction. What distinguishes them from other works of the genre is the meta-perspective they assume, for in their story-world too, before the actual event, apocalyptic visions have become

a queasy form of popular entertainment. There had been online TV shows about it: computer-generated landscape pictures with deer grazing in Times Square, serves-us-right finger-wagging, earnest experts lecturing about all the wrong turns taken by the human race.

There was only so much of that people could stand, judging from the rating, which spiked and then plummeted as viewers voted with their thumbs, switching from imminent wipeout to real-time contests about hotdog-swallowing if they liked nostalgia, or to sassy-best-girlfriends comedies if they liked stuffed animals, or to Mixed Martial Art Felony Fights if they liked bitten-off ears, or to Nitee-Nite live streamed suicides or HottTotts kinky porn or Hedsoff real-time executions if they were truly jaded. All of it so much more palatable than the truth.<sup>17</sup>

From the quote it becomes clear that the immense popular interest in apocalyptic tales and images in the pre-apocalyptic story-world does not represent a conscious reflection or an actual moral standpoint on the part of the viewers as perhaps in the case of “The Voluntary Human Extinction Movement”. Instead, it has to be seen as an extreme piece of entertainment for enormously bored and alienated subjects that could easily be replaced by any of the other horrific shows mentioned. The doubling of the apocalyptic imaginary the *MaddAddam Trilogy* represents endows the novels with a reflective angle on the function of apocalyptic tales and, indeed, of storytelling as part of worldmaking in and outside fiction as such.

The pre-apocalyptic hegemonic world of the trilogy, depicted mainly in the first book, *Oryx and Crake*, is a future version of the contemporary neo-liberal late-capitalist world: “In Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, [...] we find a near-future world that both approximates and projects forward from the political, socio-eco-

17 Atwood 2014, 32.

nomical, technological, and climatological givens of our present moment.”<sup>18</sup> This future simulation in which the large corporations have replaced the state as an institution clearly entails a critique of the neo-liberal capitalist world of today. Some critics like J. Brooks Bouson reduce the phenomenon to an “ever-spreading and deadly ‘virus’ of Americanism”,<sup>19</sup> whereas I want to argue that “Americanism” is only the most obvious symptom of a global capitalist system that has its roots in European colonial trade and the debt-based economy.

The link between its creeds and practices, on one hand, and ecological degradation, on the other, is made explicit in the novels through descriptions of the devastated state of the natural world as a backdrop. As Sybille Machat proposes, “Margaret Atwood spins current environmental concerns of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century into the future and bases the physical world of the novel on their continuation.”<sup>20</sup> In *Oryx and Crake* this is expressed as follows: “the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and the vast tundra bubbled with methane, and the drought in the midcontinental plains regions went on and on, and the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes.”<sup>21</sup> For the inhabitants of this near-future world, suppression thus becomes an important survival strategy, as Toby, one of the two focaliser characters of the second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, remembers:

[She thinks:] I knew there were things wrong in the world, they were referred to, I’d seen them in the onscreen news. But the wrong things were wrong somewhere else. By the time she’d reached college, the wrongness had moved closer. [...] Everybody knew. Nobody admitted to knowing. If other people began to discuss it, you tuned them out, because what they were saying was both so obvious and so unthinkable. *We’re using up the Earth. It’s almost gone.* You can’t live with such fears and keep on whistling. The waiting builds up in you like a tide. You start wanting it to be done with. You find yourself saying to the sky, *Just do it. Do your worst. Get it over with.*<sup>22</sup>

At the time, before joining the eco-religious sect the God’s Gardeners, Toby is an ordinary citizen of the near-future version of the United States, exemplifying the state of consciousness that is normal or necessary for its profoundly estranged subjects.

Spatially, this world is segregated into the compounds, where the corporation’s employees live in gated communities, and the pleeblands, which are ghetto-like, quasi-anarchistic places. Life in the compounds as described retrospectively by Snowman/Jimmy is furthermore characterised by artificiality and a

18 Snyder 2011, 471.

19 Bouson 2011, 17.

20 Machat 2013, 107.

21 Atwood 2004, 29.

22 Atwood 2010, 284–5.

high degree of mediation:<sup>23</sup> “Jimmy’s mother said it was all artificial, it was just a theme park and you could never bring the old ways back.”<sup>24</sup> The rich people’s compounds are full of fake replicas and would-be authentic architecture and furniture, such as the family’s Cape Cod-style frame house. In an account of his childhood memories Jimmy recalls: “The furniture in it was called *reproduction*. Jimmy was quite old before he realized what this word meant – that for each reproduction item, there was supposed to be an original somewhere. Or there had been once. Or something.”<sup>25</sup> As Jimmy’s comment expresses, the situation is reminiscent of Beaudrillard’s perfect simulacrum, meaning a copy without an original and nothing but signs referring back to each other – floods of information, but nothing “real” or actually meaningful.<sup>26</sup> This feeling of inauthenticity of compounder lifestyle is shared by the second narrator and focaliser of *The Year of the Flood*, Ren, who moves into the compounds as a child: “nothing felt right. All that faux marble, and the reproduction antique furniture, and the carpets in our house – none of it seemed real. It smelled funny too – like disinfectant.”<sup>27</sup>

The children in the compounds grow up immersed in digital technologies and the virtual realities of internet-based computer games: “[Jimmy/Snowman] lets himself drift back to those after-school times with Crake. [...] They might play Extinctathon or one of the others. Three-Dimensional Waco, Barbarian Stomp, Kwiktime Osama.”<sup>28</sup> Confined to the relatively narrow space of their compound, young people have very little else to do that is considered “safe”, which diminishes the range of unmediated physical experiences for them and in the long run produces feelings of alienation. As a result of this very artificial lifestyle, depression seems to be frequent among the compounders. To keep up the toxic status quo, the problems of this future society are individualised and psychologised. Hence, the solution Jimmy’s dad proposes to his mother who, as a result of seeing through all of these problems is constantly in a low, trance-like mood, is: “Take some pills if you’re so fucking depressed!”<sup>29</sup> To ensure its socio-economic stabilisation, the compounder society furthermore requires collective anaesthetisation of its citizens through entertainment that can hardly ever be extreme enough, be it in aforementioned apocalyptic TV shows or live executions and child pornography.

23 I use “mediated” here as a kind of antipode to “authentic/natural”, referring to the gradual alienation from unmediated physical/corporeal experience to more and more mediated forms of experience, ranging from simple representation in language to experiences that are several times removed, for example in the consumption of digital media or copies of copies.

24 Atwood 2004, 34.

25 Atwood 2004, 33.

26 Beaudrillard 1994, 6.

27 Atwood 2010, 248.

28 Atwood 2004, 47.

29 Atwood 2004, 68.

On the whole, *Oryx and Crake* and the second novel, *The Year of the Flood*, point out the major shortcomings of the pre-apocalyptic world ruled by global capital: it is a world in which monetary profit and efficacy determine all values, including the value of human and non-human life. Owing to a lack of spirituality in this world of big business, nothing can be sacred (apart from monetary value perhaps). Instead, an overruling positivism justifies the supremacy of the natural sciences that work towards fantasies of complete mastery over nature, and whose findings can be turned into profit. In an argument with her husband on genetic engineering, Jimmy's mother declares: "You're interfering with the building blocks of life. It's immoral. It's... sacrilegious."<sup>30</sup> The lack of sacredness here stands in harsh opposition to other worldviews and world versions of the novels, such as that of the eco-religious sect the God's Gardeners, whose world is depicted very prominently in *The Year of the Flood*. Tate even goes so far as to argue that "[a] debate on what might be considered to be 'sacred' – life, community, art or a shared history of the planet – is fundamental to Atwood's trilogy."<sup>31</sup> The trilogy certainly seeks to explore how human beings and collectives create values in their attempt at meaning-making via discourse and storytelling, which results in the production of different coexisting worlds with their respective maps of morality and values. In parallel to its biblical original, the apocalypse also functions as a moral structuring device, expressing their differences in worldmaking and morality.

#### THE APOCALYPSE AS A MORAL STRUCTURING DEVICE

In total, there are at least four different but partly overlapping belief systems with their respective moral compasses in *The MaddAddam Trilogy*: neoliberal capitalism, the natural sciences, the eco-religion of the God's Gardeners, and what can be summed up under "the arts", represented mainly by the "words person" Jimmy and on a metafictional level by the novels themselves. The apocalypse and what follows makes them and their narrative strategies of worldmaking visible and functions as an ethical testing ground for their maps of morality. It is fairly obvious that Crake's plans to re-create a "better" humanity have failed in certain respects, not least owing to inconsistencies in his worldview, which oscillates between a critique of techno-scientific capitalism and a deep alliance and indebtedness to it.<sup>32</sup> However, it is impossible to simply depict him as the villain of the novels, owing to the ambiguous portrayal of the post-apocalyptic setting in the last novel, *MaddAddam*.<sup>33</sup> Despite some critics arguing that Atwood's novel, like most other (post-)apocalyptic fictions, is not very subtle in conveying

30 Atwood 2004, 67.

31 Tate 2017, 63.

32 Cf. Korte 2008, 157.

33 Criticism written before the publication of *MaddAddam* therefore often condemns Crake and the God's Gardeners for their fundamentalism and inhumanism.

its moral message,<sup>34</sup> I believe that the trilogy is very ambiguous as to its moral stance. The aesthetic simulation of possible future worlds merely provides opportunities for reflection for the reader rather than a fixed moral universe or even simple solutions for the ecological crisis at hand. Instead, *The MaddAddam Trilogy* lays bare the mechanics of world construction through storytelling and discourse and portrays its moral consequences. For example, for Crake and the God's Gardeners the apocalypse clearly represents something positive. From a post-anthropocentric or eco-centric point of view, it is difficult to totally oppose the take that "nature"<sup>35</sup> and its non-human creatures would be better off without the kind of human civilisation represented in the novels' pre-apocalyptic world. This idea is reinforced through the extensive portrayal of the God's Gardeners and their means of narrative worldmaking in *The Year of the Flood*.

The God's Gardeners' belief system is based on a post-anthropocentrism in which animals and other non-human creatures have souls and rights to life similar to those of human beings. They express this value system in hymns titled "Oh Let Me Not Be Proud", "Oh Sing We Now the Holy Weeds" or "We Praise the Tiny Perfect Moles", and sermons held by their leader, Adam One, on their feast days, such as "The Feast of Adam and All Primates", in which he discusses the close kinship between humans and "the other Animals" as well as the moral obligations that follow from that.<sup>36</sup> Instead of justifying eco-centrism scientifically or "rationally" only, Adam One connects the Gardeners' values and lifestyle to God and God's creation: "By covering such barren rooftops with greenery we are doing our small part in the redemption of God's Creation from the decay and sterility that lies around us, and feeding ourselves with its unpolluted food into the bargain. Some would term our efforts futile, but if all were to follow our example, what a change would be wrought on our beloved Planet!"<sup>37</sup> Many of Adam One's sermons incorporate scientific findings, yet he clearly points out that the purely scientific paradigm (as represented by Crake) is foolish in its denial of metaphysics and spirituality: "God is pure Spirit; so how can anyone reason that the failure to measure the Immeasurable proves its non-existence?"<sup>38</sup>

In the Gardeners' world, the stories that Adam One tells in his sermons, the songs, and the rhymes all connect a spiritual and religious belief system to a certain mode of material living and especially of interacting with the natural environment in a sustainable manner, for example through community-based rooftop gardening as a form of non-capitalist production. Even though the

34 Bouson 2004, 140–1; Tate 2017, 66.

35 The framing of all that is non-human, or not human-made as "nature" is problematic from certain eco-critical perspectives, like Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*.

36 Atwood 2010, 63.

37 Atwood 2010, 13.

38 Atwood 2010, 62.

Gardeners hardly partake in the capitalist world, they still sell some of their products at “the tree of life market”, which shows how all worlds are interconnected and overlap at their margins. In opposition to the inauthenticity of the compounds, the Gardeners’ lifestyle and their products are seen as “authentic” by their contemporaries living in the compounds: “the Gardener produce was the real thing. It stank of authenticity: the Gardeners might be fanatical and amusingly bizarre, but at least they were ethical.”<sup>39</sup> The God’s Gardeners also attribute “being ethical” to themselves and their way of living – a belief which is reinforced by their awaiting the apocalypse. For them, the story of the apocalypse functions as a moral structuring device par excellence, and furthermore mirrors the original meaning of the term as hopeful revelation:

We God’s Gardeners are a plural Noah: we too have been called, we too forewarned. We can feel the symptoms of coming disaster as a doctor feels a sick man’s pulse. We must be ready for the time when those who have broken trust with the Animals – yes, wiped them from the face of the Earth where God placed them – will be swept away by the waterless Flood which will be carried on the wings of God’s dark Angels that fly by night, and in airplanes and helicopters and bullet trains, and on transport trucks and other such conveyances.<sup>40</sup>

It remains open whether Crake is the sole initiator of the plan to rid the planet of its human malady, or whether some of the God’s Gardeners are complicit in his plan, as they also aspire towards an apocalypse they call “the waterless flood”, which would cleanse the earth from a destructive human culture. Like its biblical precursor, the worldview represented by Crake and the Gardeners entails a moral map in which the pre-apocalyptic world is found evil and untenable and hope is directed towards a post-apocalyptic New Jerusalem, or Eden in the Gardeners’ jargon, as this sermon held by Adam One shortly after the plague indicates:

What a cause for rejoicing is this rearranged world in which we find ourselves! True, there is a certain – let us not say *disappointment*. The debris left by the Waterless Flood, like that left by any receding flood, is not attractive. It will take time for our longed-for Eden to appear, my Friends. But how privileged are we to witness these first precious moments of Rebirth! How much clearer the air is, now that man-made pollution has ceased!<sup>41</sup>

In opposition to Crake, however, the Gardeners see the root of evil not in the human genetic make-up, as the term Anthropocene (the age of human) implies, but in the toxic lifestyle of late capitalism.

39 Atwood 2010, 170.

40 Atwood 2010, 110.

41 Atwood 2010, 443.

Following Roger Moore, the contemporary geologic era should rather be called “Capitalocene”, as the ecological degradation stems not from human life in general but from a very distinct system of economic production and its concurrent belief systems and lifestyles.<sup>42</sup> Hence, a different human world and culture is possible, in which the ecology is not wrecked. In the novels, this alternative world is represented by the God’s Gardeners, who accordingly believe in their surviving the flood as a result of their better lifestyle: “A massive die-off of the human race was impending, due to overpopulation and wickedness, but the Gardeners exempted themselves: they intended to float above the Waterless Flood, with the aid of the food they were stashing away in the hidden storeplaces they called Ararats.”<sup>43</sup> Apocalypticism from this point of view functions as an ordering device in an otherwise chaotic world, as it constructs a fixed moral compass of good and evil.<sup>44</sup> The example in the *MaddAdam Trilogy* demonstrates, however, that this moral compass only pertains to a certain group and their strategies of worldmaking through storytelling and discourse. The Gardeners live in an oral culture; in hymns, verses and sermons, they construct a belief system which is fundamentally different from the hegemonic system around them that they, in allusion to “hell”, call “the exfernal world”.

With respect to the God’s Gardeners and their eco-religion, Atwood’s trilogy also assumes a meta-perspective by depicting in detail the process whereby Toby becomes a Gardener, which allows for a deconstructive look behind the scenes. When Toby is asked to join the Gardeners’ leadership ranks by becoming an “Eve”, she fears that it would be hypocritical: “‘I’m not sure I believe in all of it.’ ‘In some religions, faith precedes action,’ said Adam One. ‘In ours, action precedes faith. You’ve been acting as if you believe, dear Toby. As if – those two words are very important to us. Continue to live according to them, and belief will follow in time’.”<sup>45</sup> Having accepted the position, Toby finds out that in spite of the Gardeners’ apparent technophobia, each of the leaders secretly owns a laptop and that Adam One sometimes deliberately “invents” certain stories to make the members believe and do what he thinks is right: “‘Forgive me, dear Toby,’ he said when the rest had gone. ‘I apologize for my excursion into fiction. I must sometimes say things that are not transparently honest. But it is for the greater good.’”<sup>46</sup>

With regard to the often comic representation of the Gardeners, and also Toby and Ren’s sometimes critically distanced narrative perspectives, Hope Jennings argues that the Gardeners are criticised by the novels for their “inhuman-

42 Cf. Moore 2015.

43 Atwood 2010, 47.

44 Cf. Tate 2017, 17.

45 Tate 2017, 201.

46 Tate 2017, 219.

ism” and that therefore *The Year of the Flood* should be understood as a “cautionary tale about cautionary tales” in ecocritical movements.<sup>47</sup> I would question this reading by arguing that the Gardeners represent not “inhumanism” but a step towards “posthumanism”, and that their portrayal and especially Toby’s immersion into their creed are depicted very positively by the novels.<sup>48</sup> By foregrounding the narrative constructedness of the Gardeners’ belief system, Atwood emphasises that it is the stories that determine the action, in this case the distinctive behaviour of Gardeners towards the natural world. Even though Toby is emotionally distanced from the Gardeners’ world in the beginning, she becomes a real Gardener by first acting “as if” she believes, before fully internalising the Gardeners’ creed and habits. She even keeps them up throughout her isolation during plague and carries them over into the post-apocalyptic setting. The last part of the trilogy, *MaddAddam*, consequently ends with the teachings of the Gardeners being successfully passed on to the Crakers.

Similar to the Gardeners’ teachings and beliefs, Crake’s map of morality stands in opposition to the capitalist map, yet is heavily indebted to a purely scientific worldview and its essentialism. While it is typical of (post-)apocalyptic fiction in recent years that the catastrophe is of anthropogenic origin (e. g. a nuclear incident in Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, climate change in *THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW*), the *MaddAddam Trilogy*’s apocalyptic event is still an exception, as it is caused *deliberately* by Crake to solve the problem of human-made ecological destruction. It is therefore fuelled by good intentions, echoing the idea of human extinction as a new utopia. As Crake furthermore bioengineers the Crakers, who are meant to survive the plague, the parallels to the Biblical apocalyptic story become more obvious: the end of humankind and its late modern form of civilisation, which is rendered as morally debauched in the novels, becomes the beginning of a better posthuman world – at least from Crake’s point of view. Instead of God, however, it is Crake as an ordinary human being who has put himself into a God-like position by bringing on the apocalypse, self-righteously reigning over life and death: “Sitting in judgement of the world, thought Jimmy; but why had that been his right?”<sup>49</sup> The consequences of not asking about rights is often thematised in representations of the scientific belief in “progress” and mastery in science fiction, starting with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*.<sup>50</sup> In this early science-fiction novel, a scientific experiment to arti-

47 Jennings 2010, 11;14.

48 Again, reading the last part of the trilogy leads to conclusions than are not that same as when one looks at *The Year of the Flood* alone.

49 Atwood 2004, 406.

50 Some scholars define *Frankenstein* as an important forerunner of science fiction in the form of scientific romance (e. g. Parrinder 2015, 40), while others follow Brian Aldiss’s claim (see Aldiss 1973) that *Frankenstein* is actually the ur-text of all science fiction (e. g. Alkon 1994).

ficially create a human being goes off the rails, confronting the scientist and his contemporaries with unforeseen moral problems. In a similar manner, Crake engineers a new humanoid race which is genetically freed from the human flaws he primarily sees in symbolic thinking and representation. According to him, these human traits have led to the will to dominate others and nature in a violent manner – ironically, this is exactly what he does himself through his act. In the end, however, Crake’s plans fail, as his creatures breed with the humans that have survived in spite of the plague; the Crakers even start to develop artistic and symbolic forms of representation, as well as a quasi-religious creed, in which – all the more ironically – he functions as a god-like figure, even though “Crake was against the notion of God, or of gods of any kind, and would surely be disgusted by the spectacle of his own gradual deification”.<sup>51</sup> However, in dialogue with one of the Gardeners, Crake’s wish to assume god-like power under the guise of scientific feasibility is foreshadowed: “‘Illness is a design fault,’ said the boy. ‘It could be corrected.’ [...] ‘So, if you were making the world, you’d make it better?’ [Ren] said. Better than God, was what [she] meant. [...] ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘As a matter of fact, I would.’”<sup>52</sup> Here it becomes evident that the unfettered belief in a world which is fully explainable and controllable through the paradigm of the natural sciences is comparable to a religious creed, yet without metaphysics or a god. The centre of this belief system is instead occupied by humanity.

Therefore, Crake and his worldview symbolise a form of humanism that transcends the biological boundaries of the human through science and technology, and therefore becomes a kind of transhumanism. Francesca Ferrando states that “philosophically, transhumanism roots itself in the Enlightenment, and so it does not expropriate rational humanism. By taking humanism further, transhumanism can be defined as ‘ultra-humanism’”.<sup>53</sup> Instead of aspiring for more conventional transhumanist goals such as radical life expansion and enhancement of intellectual capabilities,<sup>54</sup> which he only uses as dummy “carriers” for his real designs,<sup>55</sup> Crake’s transhumanism runs in the opposite direction: back to what is conventionally thought of as a more “primitive” stage of evolution because the Crakers’ intellectual capabilities are somewhat limited, they have a very short lifespan, and their physiology is fit for eating nothing but leaves. Hence, Crake’s redefinition of what is “good” and what progress means for the

51 Atwood 2004, 126.

52 Atwood 2010, 176–177.

53 Ferrando 2013, 27.

54 As depicted on the website of the transhumanist movement <https://humanityplus.org/> [accessed 12 October 2018].

55 Crake uses a pill he calls “BlyssPluss” as a carrier for his deadly disease and advertises it as prolonging youth, among other effects.

planet and its ecology is engrained in his apocalyptic deed, mirroring a fundamentally different map of morality which has common ground with the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement and human extinction as the new eco-utopia, as well as with the God's Gardeners' belief. The future world turns out to be quite different from how Crake had intended it to be, as the Crakers could not be rid of artistic production, storytelling and myth creation, and share their world with the surviving human and non-human creatures, as well as with other hybrids. The post-apocalyptic world can thus be interpreted as coming close to a posthumanist utopia – or in Gardener terms, a posthumanist Eden.

## A POSTHUMANIST EDEN

The post-apocalyptic setting of the *MaddAddam Trilogy* has already been discussed against the philosophical backdrop of posthumanism by critics like Valeria Mosca, who argues that Atwood stages not the end of humanity but “the end of ‘the human’ as it is traditionally conceived”.<sup>56</sup> Posthumanism in this sense has to be distinguished radically from transhumanism as it provides an attempt to overcome humanist anthropocentrism in favour of non-human agents and subjectivities, as well as systemic ways of thinking and relationality. According to Francesca Ferrando, “[p]osthumanism is a philosophy which provides a suitable way of departure to think in relational and multi-layered ways, expanding the focus to the non-human realm in post-dualistic, post-hierarchical modes, thus allowing one to envision post-human futures which will radically stretch the boundaries of human imagination.”<sup>57</sup>

Posthumanist themes such as animal personhood and hybridity are taken up especially in *MaddAddam*, which depicts the post-apocalyptic scenery in more detail. The pigeons, as pigs with human brain tissue, provide a good example for posthumanist subjects and relations in the last novel: being a product of technological alteration and a hybrid between human and animal, they become fully accepted members of the post-apocalyptic society and are granted subjectivity and agency. Instead of talking and writing about them in an objectified manner, as is usually the case with animals, Toby for instance corrects her narrative about Snowman-Jimmy clinging to a pigeon: “clinging to its back. Her back. The Pigeons were not objects. She had to get that straight. It was only respectful.”<sup>58</sup> The pigeons are also given a voice, as the Crakers are able to communicate with them. The final book of the trilogy ends on a very positive note with a funeral in which different species take part and mourn their dead together: “The Pigeons wished to carry Adam and Jimmy to the site for us, as a sign of friendship and

56 Mosca 2013, 47.

57 Ferrando 2013, 30.

58 Atwood 2014, 350–351.

interspecies co-operations. [...] The Crakers sang all the way.”<sup>59</sup> The postapocalyptic mixed-species society can thus be seen in the light of a posthumanist utopia, which furthermore makes it difficult to simply condemn either Crake’s apocalyptic deed or the creed of the Gardeners.

## STORIES MAKE WORLDS AND VALUES

In its meta-textual approach, the *MaddAddam Trilogy* not only imagines the practical and non-hierarchical coexistence and co-habitation and even cross-breeding of humans, technologically modified creatures, and animals, but also reflects on the role of stories in shaping worlds and their systems of thought and moral judgement. Like many posthumanist philosophers, Cary Wolfe points out the importance of language for posthumanist theory: “What I am suggesting here is that your theory of language matters, and it matters not just epistemologically [...] or methodologically [...] because all sort of consequences, both ontological and ethical, follow in its wake – consequences that I have tried to draw out on the terrain of the question of specific differences and the question of subjectivity.”<sup>60</sup> Language and storytelling are therefore a major theme in all three novels, referred to by metatextual comments such as: “There’s the story, then there’s the real story, then there’s the story of how the story came to be told. Then there’s what you leave out of the story. Which is part of the story too.”<sup>61</sup> What furthermore contributes extensively to the theme of story-telling are the Crakers and their need for stories to give them an identity and a history. Despite the fact that Crake did his best to rid his newly created human race of art, symbolic thinking and myth creation, every night “[a] story is what they want”.<sup>62</sup>

On a formal level, the theme of storytelling as world construction is represented mainly by the different narrative situations of the three novels that draw attention to the act of narration itself. In *The Year of the Flood*, for example, this happens through a doubling of narrative perspectives, featuring both Ren’s account of the years just before and after the flood and Toby’s perspective on exactly the same events. Narrative construction becomes most explicit in *MaddAddam*, in which Toby is the main focaliser character. Her own story is however interwoven with the stories she tells to the Crakers and the stories her partner Zeb tells her. This makes the point that storytelling is a collective phenomenon; it is not just the narrator who creates and shapes the story, but also her audience and the stories she is told by others. One might even go so far as to con-

59 Atwood 2014, 373.

60 Wolfe 2010, 47.

61 Atwood 2014, 56.

62 Atwood 2004, 124.

clude that the whole physical book the reader is holding in her hands is actually the result of Toby's writing down the story, owing to metatextual comments like Toby telling the young Craker Blackbeard: "'I am writing the story,' [...] 'The story of you and me, and the Pigoons, and everyone.'"<sup>63</sup> In spite of Crake's efforts, the Crakers furthermore learn how to write and tell stories themselves, so that in the end, the narrative is taken over by Blackbeard: "This is the end of the Story of Toby. I have written it in this Book. And I have put my name here – Blackbeard – the way Toby first showed me when I was a child. It says that I was the one who set down these words."<sup>64</sup> Through the sometimes deliberately invented stories which first Snowman and later Toby tell the Crakers, as well as Toby's and Blackbeard's writing, the Crakers build up something like a common history or foundational myth, reminiscent of other foundational cultural and religious texts like the Bible. They decide that this book must also be copied and continued: "another Book should be made, with the same writing as the first one. And each time a person came into the knowledge of the writing [...] that one also was to make the same Book, [...] at the end of the Book we should put some pages, and attach them to the Book, and write down the things that might happen after Toby was gone."<sup>65</sup> This marks the Crakers' transition from an oral culture to a written culture and proposes that storytelling and symbolising practices are basically what makes human beings human, and that these cannot be genetically "edited out".

Again, this represents a metafictional comment on the importance of narrative and literature as a means to make sense of the world, or rather to make a world at all. It matters who tells the story, how it is told, with what intentions, who listens, what features in the story and what is left out for the kind of world that is created thusly, and the maps of morality it will entail. Crake's problematic worldview and the dystopian depiction of the pre-apocalyptic capitalist world furthermore mirror what happens if the arts and humanities are almost eliminated or are at least "no longer central to anything".<sup>66</sup> By letting the Crakers turn into a book culture, Atwood emphasises the value of art and literature for any future or (post)human society. In this sense, the trilogy can itself be seen as contributing largely to an ethics for the future in the age of the Anthropocene or Capitalocene.

Rather than being only "a cautionary tale" about possible future developments, as the *MaddAddam Trilogy* is often referred to, the story is, I want to suggest, about storytelling and how stories make both (future) worlds and eth-

63 Atwood 2004, 374.

64 Atwood 2004, 390.

65 Atwood 2004, 386.

66 Atwood 2004, 227.

ics. In this sense, the apocalypse must also primarily be seen as a story that can make sense of an otherwise chaotic and possibly hopeless present. It can function both as a moral structuring device for testing or promoting the values and alternative interpretations of good and evil of a given group, or it can simply be reduced to a piece of mass entertainment for the alienated subjects of late capitalism. The difference between the two functions or readings of the apocalypse amounts to the degree of consciousness and reflection involved in the telling and listening to of the apocalyptic tales. By reflecting on these different readings and foregrounding narrative forms of worldmaking with their respective maps of morality, Atwood's trilogy allows the reader to come to their own ethical conclusions about the ecological crisis through aesthetic simulations, without foreclosing any definite answers. This distinguishes her speculative fiction fundamentally from other tales of the contemporary apocalyptic imaginary and provides a link back to the original meaning of the apocalypse as revelation. *The MaddAddam Trilogy* uncovers that it is through stories that we make worlds and that there is a need for new and different stories to create better futures.

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# Totalitarian Opportunism

## Cataclysm, Nietzschean Thought and Cultural Transformation in J. J. Connington's *Nordenholt's Million* (1923)

### ABSTRACT

This article considers J. J. Connington's 1923 British disaster novel *Nordenholt's Million* as a response to its British inter-war context by examining the novel's presentation of cataclysm as an opportunity for social change. *Nordenholt's Million* utilises an apocalyptic scenario involving soil denitrification as a means of offering an uncompromising critique of conventional government systems and its wider social context. Drawing upon the appeal of extreme politics and displaying affinities with Nietzschean philosophy throughout, *Nordenholt's Million* emphasises the necessity of dictatorship during periods of social and economic difficulty. It uses such circumstances to champion social transformation from what it presents as a state of contemporary decline towards a highly efficient, eugenically constructed post-apocalyptic utopian society.

### KEYWORDS

Disaster Fiction, Apocalypse, Literature, Nietzsche, Inter-war Britain, Eschatology, Utopia, Science Fiction

### BIOGRAPHY

Jennifer Woodward is a senior lecturer in Film Studies and English Literature at Edge Hill University, UK. Her PhD examined British Disaster Science Fiction before the Second World War and alongside her interests in speculative fiction and adaptation studies, she has published work examining disaster novels by authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle and R. C. Sherriff. She is also on the editorial committee for Glyphi Press's SF Story Worlds series.

J. J. Connington's 1923 apocalyptic novel *Nordenholt's Million* is one of several British catastrophe narratives written prior to the Second World War that use disaster as a means to envision social transfiguration and political wish-fulfilment fantasy. Such narratives form a body of secular-eschatology that use disaster narratives to address contemporary social concerns and model social change. Specifically, *Nordenholt's Million* uses a global cataclysm to champion

proto-fascist dictatorship as a solution to weak government and contemporary social and political crises. Displaying affinities with Nietzschean philosophy throughout, it argues that under certain conditions, dictatorship, brutality and population control may be necessary, even advantageous, for the construction of a highly efficient, eugenically shaped utopia. Thus the text offers an invaluable insight into the ways that eschatological narrative structures – dealing with endings and new beginnings – have been adopted by secular writers to present issues around morality, social transformation and “human nature”.

The novel opens with the significantly named narrator, Flint, visiting Wotherspoon, a scientific “dabbler” and writer for the popular press.<sup>1</sup> In contrast to the protagonist the highly competent multi-millionaire businessman Stanley Nordenholt, Wotherspoon is inept, focussed more on his writing than on being a proficient experimenter in his studies of nitrifying and denitrifying bacteria. When an unexplained fireball mutates the denitrifying bacteria, Wotherspoon is too inattentive to notice.<sup>2</sup> In short order, the mutated bacteria cause massive crop failure and widespread starvation. Five million English (rather than “Nordenholt’s Million”, which is Nordenholt’s recruiting slogan) are saved only by Nordenholt’s foresight and dynamic response, as he secures resources from America and embraces the calamity as an opportunity to take control of the situation in Britain.<sup>3</sup> After overthrowing the failing British government, Nordenholt establishes himself as dictator, selecting those who are to survive and relocating them to a “Nitrogen Area” in the Clyde Valley.

Nordenholt’s character is significant. In *The Pattern of Expectation*, I. F. Clarke reads *Nordenholt’s Million* as the source of a particular “variant on the disaster story”, the “salvation myth”, which relates “how a man of genius, usually a scientist, saves a remnant of humanity and lays the foundation for a better order of existence”.<sup>4</sup> Although not a scientist, Nordenholt becomes “the architect” of a future civilisation planned and executed by Flint, his friend, and Elsa, his niece.<sup>5</sup> As the narrative progresses, the blight not only precipitates mass starvation but also exposes the degenerative path on which the pre-cataclysmic society had embarked. Hence, Nordenholt’s actions in the Clyde Valley provide a remedy both for the blight and for what are presented as the regressive tendencies of the English. At the novel’s conclusion, a new civilisation emerges and overcomes what the text has framed as the social, political and economic problems of post-war Britain.

1 Connington 1923, 8.

2 Connington 1923, 27.

3 Connington 1923, 45–66.

4 Clarke 1979, 229.

5 Connington 1923, 146.

The anti-democratic ideology actioned by Nordenholt and implemented throughout *Nordenholt's Million* aligns it with what Dan Stone defines as “extremes of Englishness” thought.<sup>6</sup> Exemplified in works by writers and scholars including Oscar Levy, Anthony Ludovici and Karl Sanderson, the “extremes of Englishness” mindset is seen in their works’ embracing of radicalism and illiberalism in relation to British concerns. Although not individually fascist, they come, Stone notes, “very close to satisfying the criteria regarded by scholars as constituting fascism”.<sup>7</sup> They embrace militarism, the defence of Empire, the call for a “masculine renaissance” and eugenics, and demonstrate an engagement with Nietzschean philosophy.<sup>8</sup> Such thematic concerns indicate channels of reasoning that highlight what Stone identifies as a “provenance of proto-fascist ideas in Britain” before the Second World War.<sup>9</sup> Comparably, the response to the inter-war context evidenced in *Nordenholt's Million* asserts that failing democratic governments and a lack of National Efficiency can only be remedied by fascist politics, a solution it presents without irony or satire as wholly desirable. The political content of the novel, which champions autocracy, appears grounded in Nietzschean thought and promotes National Efficiency and eugenics, clearly aligns it with an “extremes of Englishness” ideology. It addresses contemporary British anxieties regarding political systems, industry and industrial relations, and race and degeneration through a proto-fascist lens that sees dictatorship as the only viable response to catastrophe.

## ANTI-DEMOCRATIC THOUGHT IN THE NOVEL

What is clear from the European movement towards anti-democratic political ideologies between the wars is that forceful, decisive leadership was considered by many an appealing alternative to what were popularly perceived as ineffective modes of government.<sup>10</sup> Richard Thurlow explains that many people saw democracy as a “fair weather system” not best suited to times of social or economic difficulty.<sup>11</sup> There was an increased sense that democratic government pandered to the physically weakest and least intellectual in society.<sup>12</sup> In

6 Stone 2002, 2–3.

7 Stone 2002, 3.

8 Stone (2002, *passim*) outlines how works by popular authors arose out of fears of decline in Edwardian Britain. They represent trends in thinking prior to the Second World War that resulted in the popularity of extreme views in British society more broadly.

9 Stone 2002, 2–3.

10 Thurlow 1987, 8.

11 Thurlow 1987, 25.

12 Schapiro 1972, 8.

Britain, the appeal of such ideas emerged in the context of post-war political instability and social unrest and the economic crisis that would eventually lead to the Great Depression of the 1930s. Although living conditions improved after the war, largely due to advances in technology, it was a period of industrial discontent and economic decline arising from demobilisation and the return to a peacetime economy.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as Thurlow notes, Britain's "political system had been unable to check the sharp decline in British power in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras".<sup>14</sup> In *Nordenholt's Million* that decline is averted by the rise of a totalitarian demagogue.

The novel is overtly critical of democratic government, representing it as weak, self-serving and corrupt – a criticism of the political turmoil seen in successive post-war British governments. Overt criticism of democracy begins when Flint is called to a meeting with Nordenholt and the government about the impending catastrophe. The Prime Minister, looking "worn and agitated" but endeavouring "to assume a cheerful and confident air", is revealed to be preoccupied with preserving and consolidating his political position.<sup>15</sup> Without irony, the Prime Minister states that "nothing could be more fatal than a general election".<sup>16</sup> The satire is not lost on the reader. Conscious of the electorate's growing unease as the blight spreads, he sees the crisis requiring a public relations exercise to pacify them. At no point does the Prime Minister comprehend the apocalyptic effects of the mass starvation that will arise from denitrifying the soil. His strategy is reactive rather than proactive, with no priority given to addressing the cause of the growing catastrophe. Furthermore, none of his measures can be implemented quickly, since his cabinet is dispersed, with many members abroad and unable to return. Nordenholt's condemnations of the government's reaction are overt. Describing their plans to address the effects of the ensuing cataclysm as "window dressing [...] to pacify the public", he recognises that politics is placed before action in their plans.<sup>17</sup> Midway through the meeting, Flint is also critical of the government response. He admits that "I had become more and more uneasy. Through it all ran the governing thought that something must be done, which was true enough; but the thing which he proposed to do [...] was to persuade the country that all was well, whereas I felt that the essential matter was to prepare against a practical calamity."<sup>18</sup> This practical perspective allies Flint with Nordenholt, a man of decisive action and foresight who has already secured emergency food stocks and surrounded him-

13 Hamilton 1971, xxii; Thurlow 1987, 8; Smith 1995, 169.

14 Thurlow 1987, 8.

15 Connington 1923, 45.

16 Connington 1923, 46.

17 Connington 1923, 52.

18 Connington 1923, 47.

self by those most able to manage the crisis.<sup>19</sup> As such, Nordenholt fulfils – in fiction at least – what Alastair Hamilton describes as the 1920s’ “craving for decisiveness” by overthrowing the parliamentary system in favour of what is presented as necessary (for human survival) and advantageous authoritarian rule.<sup>20</sup>

In its distinction between governmental prevarication and individual action, the novel differentiates sharply between feigned and genuine authority. As Flint observes Nordenholt, he notes that “while the Premier counterfeited power in his appearance, this unknown [Nordenholt] embodied it”.<sup>21</sup> His determination overwhelms the Prime Minister, who “had been brought face to face with reality; and it had broken him”.<sup>22</sup> Accordingly, his dynamism and greater intellect mean that he has already secured a plan for how to deal with the crisis and he gains complete control of the country by leaving the politicians little choice but to conform to his plans. Flint remarks:

I realised what he had done. By sheer force of personality and a clear mind, he had carried us along with him and secured our assent to a scheme which, wildcat though it might appear, seemed the only possible way out of the crisis. He had constituted himself a kind of dictator, though without any of the trappings of the office; and no one dared oppose him. The cold brutality with which he had treated the politicians was apparently justified; for I now saw whither their procrastination would have led us.<sup>23</sup>

Flint’s perspective, as he contrasts Nordenholt with the politicians, echoes the call for a “masculine renaissance” associated with “extremes of Englishness” ideas and connotes fascist ideas of authoritarian leadership. Nordenholt is depicted as an unopposable and necessary force. He is a fictional antidote to the real British politicians who, as Thurlow notes, had failed “to create a society that had adequately compensated for the horror and trauma of the war [and who] produced a mood of frustrated anger which tainted the utopian cravings of many attracted to Fascism”.<sup>24</sup> In positioning Nordenholt as a saviour-figure, the novel acknowledges an increasingly popular contemporary conviction that strong leadership was necessary if the nation was to survive its post-war crises. Once Nordenholt has established his survivors in the Clyde Valley, the novel’s rejection of democracy is explicit: he sends the politicians back to their constituencies to starve.<sup>25</sup>

19 Connington 1923, 52–65.

20 Hamilton 1971, 259.

21 Connington 1923, 50.

22 Connington 1923, 59.

23 Connington 1923, 65.

24 Thurlow 1987, 25.

25 Connington 1923, 72; 106–107.

When he declares himself dictator, Nordenholt clearly has a long-term vision that goes far beyond the immediate crisis. In contrast to the novel's self-serving politicians, Nordenholt works for the survival and control of a minority of the population: a eugenic selection of Britain's most talented and hard-working people. The remainder are sacrificed to the blight. Without Nordenholt's dictatorship, the novel suggests, there can be no effective action, survival or progress; the country, and the population, requires a guiding, driving force, an architect and overseer, embodied by Nordenholt himself.

## THE NIETZSCHEAN IDEA OF THE ÜBERMENSCH AND NORDENHOLT'S MILLION

The “extremes of Englishness” ideology found within *Nordenholt's Million* is embodied to a significant degree by Nordenholt himself. His characterisation draws upon a number of Nietzsche-derived ideas that were in the popular cultural consciousness in the first part of the twentieth century. Anti-democratic political ideologies gained increasing popularity in the inter-war years, a fact reflected in the rise of fascism across Europe following the First World War. What is clear from this movement towards autocracy is that forceful, decisive leadership was considered an appealing alternative to what were increasingly perceived as ineffective modes of government. Both in Europe and in Britain fascism came to be regarded as a positive force that would allow for the creation of a new society following the experience of the First World War.<sup>26</sup> In Britain, a growing number of thinkers were echoing the anti-democratic sentiments emerging across Europe.<sup>27</sup> By adopting a “history of ideas” approach, Stone demonstrates that such disillusionment with democracy was evident in fascist impulses in Britain. These fascist impulses are readily observable in *Nordenholt's Million*. Indeed, an intellectual recourse to extreme responses as means of resolving problems was not uncommon, making *Nordenholt's Million's* depiction of extreme measures to achieve wish fulfilment perhaps appealing to contemporary readers.

Presented as an ideal leader, Nordenholt has much in common with the idea of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, whose popularity had grown through this period of post-war instability. Within the text, society is presented as something to be driven and shaped, to be managed and, at times of crisis, manipulated for its long-term benefit by such a leader. Richard Overy explains that the idea of a “New Order” based on authoritarian rule and active, decisive government in which a dictatorship is better suited to representing a nation was influenced by

26 Thurlow 1987, 25.

27 Thurlow 1987, 8.

“fashionable ideas of personality and charisma, derived from a misreading of Nietzsche’s idea of the ‘superman’ as a political phenomenon”.<sup>28</sup> Fundamental to this is the fact that in *Nordenholt’s Million* clear distinctions are made between “types” of people: the sacrificed majority, workers for the Nitrogen Area, Nordenholt’s “gang” and Nordenholt himself. Such distinctions can be read in Nietzschean terms. As Richard Schacht explains, Nietzsche “takes human beings to fall into one or other of two radically different and widely disparate groups, one very numerous and occupying ‘the human lowlands,’ and the other, ‘very small in number,’ constituting ‘a higher, brighter humanity’ standing far ‘above’ the rest”.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, although Nietzsche states in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* that “mankind is a rope, tied between animal and Overman”,<sup>30</sup> indicating a spectrum of human development, he broadly distinguishes between “higher” and “lower” types of individuals in terms of their power and ability.<sup>31</sup>

In *Nordenholt’s Million* the creation of the Nitrogen Area facilitates the separation of the “higher” and “lower” types. While the workers have been subject to eugenically intended selection – they are those deemed “most fitted to survive” out of the “human lowlands” – those who work directly for Nordenholt are distinguished by their exceptional abilities.<sup>32</sup> They represent, in Nietzschean terms, “higher” types “in relation to the general run of mankind”.<sup>33</sup> Schacht notes that in Nietzsche’s writings the *Übermensch* is the apotheosis of these “higher” types.<sup>34</sup> While the *Übermensch* is only prophesied in Nietzsche’s work, he is realised in Nordenholt himself. He is described as “Jagannatha” and a “Titan” worshipped by his “gang”.<sup>35</sup> He is established as “above” the rest of the population. Furthermore, while “Nordenholt’s gang” represent “higher” men who have the potential to develop into the *Übermensch*, Nordenholt is a fully realised “higher man”: an exceptional individual guided by his own will and mastery over himself.<sup>36</sup> His characterisation as the apotheosis of the “higher type” of man ensures that he is a formidable dictator. As Flint remarks, while work progresses in the Nitrogen Area:

behind us, seated at the nucleus of that complex web of activities, there was Nordenholt ... the presence of that cool intelligence behind us had a moral effect upon our minds. He never lessened our initiative, never showed any sign of vexation when

28 Overy 2007, 68.

29 Nietzsche 1968, 4:1053–4:1067.

30 Nietzsche 2006, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, 1:4.

31 Schacht 2002, 381.

32 Connington 1923, 61

33 See Schacht 2002, 340.

34 Schacht 2002, 349.

35 Connington 1923, 259; 199; 237.

36 See Nietzsche 2002, 1:19 and Diethe 2007, 128.

things began to go wrong. He treated us as colleagues though we knew that he was our master. And under his examination, difficulties seemed to fade away in our hands.<sup>37</sup>

At the centre of his web of plans, Nordenholt's detached "cool intelligence behind" them is a driving force. He is both architect and overseer of the new society he is shaping. Without his dictatorship, the text suggests, there will be no effective action, survival or progress. Thus, his role is to achieve a transfigurative vision in society, which culminates in his founding of a Nietzschean-type aristocracy at the wish-fulfilment conclusion of the novel. As a result of his legacy, the book concludes with the prospect of humanity progressing toward something analogous to the *Übermensch*, and the alternate possibility of human decline if Nordenholt's legacy is not preserved.

In his assumption and articulation of power, Nordenholt displays what Nietzsche identifies as a "master morality" that is above the "herd instinct" that characterises conventional morality. Accordingly, in his reshaping of economic, political and financial landscapes, his execution of this "master morality" associates him with the "higher" type of man who, like "the noble type of man, regards *himself* as a determiner of values; he does not require to be approved of".<sup>38</sup> His intolerance of those he recognises as lazy or inadequate is essential to his capacity to drive the population according to his will – to achieve a wish-fulfilment society – after the cataclysm. In his ruthless manipulation of others and his outright rejection of democracy, Nordenholt stands in opposition to Judeo-Christian morality. This Judeo-Christian morality is attributed by Nietzsche to the general population and sustains what he calls "slave morality" and its "[q]ualities that serve to alleviate existence for suffering people [...]; pity, the obliging, helpful hand, the warm heart, patience, industriousness, humility, and friendliness [...]. Here we have the point of origin for that famous opposition between 'good' and 'evil'."<sup>39</sup> According to Nietzsche, those living under "slave morality" view the powerful with dread and assume them to be evil. Conversely, according to "master morality", it is the "good" man who arouses fear and seeks to do what may conventionally be perceived as evil.<sup>40</sup> As Abir Taha confirms, Nietzschean philosophy was a "revolt against the entire humanist tradition of the West: Judeo-Christianity".<sup>41</sup> For Nietzsche, the "slave morality" creates a "herd animal" whose position is perpetuated not only by religion but also by the democratic movement, which he sees as "the inheritance of the Christian movement."<sup>42</sup>

37 Connington 1923, 95–96.

38 Nietzsche 2002, 9:260.

39 Nietzsche 2002, 9:260.

40 Nietzsche 2002, 9:260.

41 Taha 2005, 68.

42 Nietzsche 2002, 5:202.

Aligning himself with a comparably Nietzschean view of democracy “not only as a degenerating form of political organisation, but as equivalent to a degenerating, a waning, type of man, as involving his mediocritizing and deprecation”, Nordenholt champions the rebellion against a morality that promotes the “herding instinct”. He does so by elevating himself and those who work directly under him above the societal “herd”.<sup>43</sup> Nietzsche contends that equality stifles the most capable – those who are potentially “higher types”. Schacht summarises this perspective in Nietzsche’s work, stating that Nietzsche “discerns an order of rank amongst human beings” and “acknowledges their different capabilities”.<sup>44</sup> Hence, Nietzsche contends that for humankind to develop it is essential to “maintain the order of rank in the world”, and to even widen the differences between the strata.<sup>45</sup> Thus “higher types” can only be fostered when their “separation from the herd is sufficiently great to establish a ‘pathos of distance’, a ‘disdain for the concerns of the herd’.”<sup>46</sup>

Whereas for Nietzsche “higher types” are usually overcome by the mediocrity of the herd, Nordenholt facilitates their elevation. Both prior to the blight (by sponsoring those he included in his “gang”) and during the catastrophe, his primary role involves cultivating “the greatest possibilities among the few who have it in them to be exceptions to the rule”.<sup>47</sup> In the future that Nordenholt is creating, there is no place for the “mediocre” man. The union leaders Nordenholt identifies as unwelcome in the Clyde Valley, the religious zealot that distracts the population from work by offering them false hopes and whom Nordenholt has killed and the government officials who offer platitudes to gain popularity with the masses are all identified with the “slave morality” associated with the “herding animal”.<sup>48</sup> Their removal from the Nitrogen Area reflects the end of what the novel presents as the perpetuation of the “mediocre man”, and is essential to the way the book achieves its wish-fulfilment transfiguration.

Nietzsche argued that a morality that endorsed the herding instinct encouraged a false sense of universalism, tending to promote pity for the weak rather than respect for the strong. That is, it endorses the morality that praises mediocre men and says, “be like them! Become mediocre!”<sup>49</sup> For Nietzsche, the only hope for future progress comes instead from a will to power:

To teach man the future of humanity as his WILL, as depending on human will, and to make preparation for vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempt to put an

43 Nietzsche 2002, 5:203.

44 Schacht 2002, 327.

45 Nietzsche 2002, 7:219. Also see Schacht 2002, 327.

46 Schacht 2002, 338.

47 Schacht 2002, 386.

48 Connington 1923, 92; 258; 51.

49 Nietzsche 2002, 9:262.

end to the rightful rule of folly and chance which has hitherto gone by the name of “history”.<sup>50</sup>

Nordenholt’s characterisation echoes such a will to power. Reflecting on his drive, he echoes Nietzsche when he remarks, “There’s that element of risk at the back of all real enjoyment, to my mind.”<sup>51</sup> Establishing himself “above” the “mediocre man”, Nordenholt stands ready for the “vast hazardous enterprises and collective attempt” that will ensure civilisation endures and evolves post-catastrophe according to his “WILL”.

Strength of will is fundamental to Nordenholt’s leadership and echoes Nietzsche’s conception of the “freedom of will” in which “a person who wills [...] commands something inside himself that obeys” and as such is an exceptional individual.<sup>52</sup> The Nietzschean will to power is characterised by an individual’s mastery over oneself, which also “gives him mastery over circumstances, over nature” and elevates him above “all more short-willed and unreliable creatures”.<sup>53</sup> While Nietzsche’s writings are largely existentialist, in *Nordenholt’s Million* such will to power is used, in crisis at least, for mastery over others. Consciously overcoming his own self-doubts by pushing himself as far as possible to establish mastery over himself, Nordenholt’s self-mastery extends to a fascination with an individual’s “breaking strain”, a philosophy which enables him to gauge the commitment, tendencies and abilities of others.<sup>54</sup> Through Nordenholt’s psychological understanding and manipulation, the novel links the wish-fulfilment achieved at its conclusion with the ability to mould and develop other people. Accordingly, Nordenholt’s ability to recognise the “breaking strain” of those around him enables him to designate some “human beings as ‘higher’ in relation to the general run of mankind”.<sup>55</sup> As a result, through Nordenholt, the cataclysm will not only be survived; it will also be employed as a means of eradicating contemporary socio-cultural and political systems, of facilitating eugenic selection and establishing social restructuring. The distinctions of rank between “higher” and “lower” peoples, established by Nordenholt and maintained by Flint after Nordenholt’s death, while based on Nietzschean classifications are, however, un-Nietzschean in terms of their delivery (via Nordenholt’s decision to let 45 million die). Indeed, Nordenholt’s position as manipulator and decision maker has more in common with the interpretation of Nietzsche’s work that would famously be associated with Nazism.

50 Nietzsche 2002, 5:203.

51 Connington 1923, 70.

52 Nietzsche 2002, 1:19.

53 Nietzsche 2006, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II:2.

54 Connington 1923, 72–75.

55 Schacht 2002, 340.

In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Nietzsche argues that the main lesson of history is that at exceptional times a man of destiny would use his will to rise above the herd of ordinary men.<sup>56</sup> Clearly, Nordenholt is drawn as such a man, emerging at an exceptional time of crisis to found a dictatorship driven by a “master morality”, which is presented as essential to progress. As Clarke points out, in post-First World War Britain, the “old faith in humanity had given way to a belief in the powers of an exceptional individual, a saviour far above the rest of the community in determination and intelligence, who is the only conciliate means of achieving the ‘ideal state’”.<sup>57</sup> In its advocacy of dictatorship as a means of efficient government, *Nordenholt’s Million* indicates that survival and cultural transformation can only be achieved through a drive towards National Efficiency untrammelled by conventional morality. The appeal for the reader comes from identification not with the starving millions or even with the Clyde workers suffering to fulfil Nordenholt’s plans, but with the survivors enjoying new, post-catastrophe luxuries. Thus, the text offers an exaggeration of the wish-fulfilment fantasies found in many “cosy catastrophe” science-fiction disaster novels which focus on survival and rebuilding over the tragedy of cataclysm, by presenting the case for selection and efficiency to enable social change.<sup>58</sup>

## THE NATIONAL EFFICIENCY MOVEMENT

Stone argues that the National Efficiency movement influenced many “extremes of Englishness” texts, which sought to respond to fears of degeneration.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, National Efficiency and eugenics were both offered as popular solutions to contemporary political and social crises.<sup>60</sup> In accordance with the movement, *Nordenholt’s Million* emphasises the importance of reinvigorating industrial production, creating new housing and rejecting the capitalist system existing before the blight. Freed from capitalist ideology, survivors are no longer compelled to consider loss of profits over mass starvation and thus work collectively towards social responsibility.

Once the crisis has passed, industrial production is maintained in a rebuilding programme that ensures full employment. The emphasis on National Efficiency contrasts directly with the situation in the Britain of the early 1920s, which was defined by industrial decline, economic downturn and increased unemploy-

56 Eatwell 1995, 8.

57 Clarke 1979, 230.

58 Aldiss/Wingrove 2001, 279.

59 Stone 2002, 10; 116.

60 Stone 2002, 6–7.

ment.<sup>61</sup> Labour strikes led to the loss of 85 million working days in 1921 alone.<sup>62</sup> These strikes had started in 1919 on the Clyde, where mass demonstrations were held in favour of a 40-hour week. In response, the government mobilised the military and civilian volunteers to break up demonstrations.<sup>63</sup> This oppressive response to strikers is significant to *Nordenholt's Million*, which utilises such contemporary events to make its case for political and cultural transformation. Alluding positively to actions taken against Clyde Valley strikers under the Defence of the Realm Act and overtly critical of the strike's context, in which post-war rebuilding was occurring only slowly, the novel justifies action against anyone refusing to work hard. Nordenholt allows no unionisation in his Nitrogen Area and to achieve a suitable level of efficiency continues his manipulation of the population.<sup>64</sup>

Using a rhetoric of fear and fairness Nordenholt manoeuvres the population towards policing itself for maximum efficiency. He asks the workers, "Is it right that a man who will not strain himself in the common service should reap what he has not sown? [...] Or do you believe this community should rid itself of parasites? I leave myself entirely in your hands in the matter."<sup>65</sup> Behind the rhetoric, Nordenholt's motives are clear: "I shall deal with them – and I shall do it by the hand of their own fellows", he admits. By this strategy, Nordenholt quashes disputes over pay and ruthlessly enforced long working hours, and terror becomes a means of securing National Efficiency. As Flint observes, "For the first time, fear in more than one form had entered the Nitrogen Area."<sup>66</sup> Nordenholt's strategy ensures that the Clyde Valley population has no sympathy for the condemned while at the same time it exonerates him from blame. At no point in its description of Nordenholt's tyrannical behaviour does the novel hint at irony: his actions are presented as entirely pragmatic, a "higher morality" that emphasises the necessity of terror as a strategy in the control of population and the securing of National Efficiency.

Any objections the reader may have regarding the means by which Nordenholt secures his achievements are mitigated by the novel's framing his actions as necessary and rational, and by its treatment of his niece Elsa's opposition to his selection of 5 million survivors. In a key argument between Elsa and Flint, the emotional and logical implications of Nordenholt's actions are evaluated.<sup>67</sup> Drawing on conventional gender binaries of the emotional, empathetic female

61 Taylor 2001, 145.

62 Taylor 2001, 163.

63 Rubinstein 2003, 110.

64 Connington 1923, 92.

65 Connington 1923, 111.

66 Connington 1923, 112.

67 Connington 1923, 220–230.

versus the logical, pragmatic male, the text dramatizes their oppositional interpretations of events. While Elsa can only see starving millions and think of dying children, Flint explains that allowing most of the population to die ensures some can be saved.<sup>68</sup> During their debate, Elsa is shown as illogical and emotional, unsuited to making what are presented as rational choices in a time of crisis. In this way, the text associates opposition to Nordenholt's actions with a naïve, illogical and emotional response rather than reasoned thought. Elsa's standpoint, whilst ostensibly appealing, actually serves to strengthen the pragmatic position taken by Nordenholt and Flint.

Nordenholt's banishment of the unskilled and the unwilling from his Clyde area is a social Darwinist strategy that accelerates the natural winnowing of the population begun by the disaster and extended by the virulent influenza that follows the blight. Early in the novel Nordenholt remarks that it was nature that passed sentence on humanity and in this context his own extreme responses are necessary in an extreme situation and are no worse than the ruthlessness of nature itself.<sup>69</sup> With such justifications Nordenholt does not shy away from utilising violence and manipulation to achieve his aims. His propaganda campaign, for example, is designed to raise and then shatter the hopes of the population in order to crush dissent and render the population fractured and frightened. The novel presents the use of propaganda for the purposes of terror as necessary – a manifestation of his “master morality” – rather than cruel. Once the immediate danger has passed, the anti-democratic ideology of the novel is maintained and naturalised: democracy is not restored. Nordenholt tells Flint that in the Nitrogen Area there is “no gabble about democracy, no laws a man can't understand”.<sup>70</sup> Thus, *Nordenholt's Million* promotes autocratic leadership as essential for, and central to, its own form of social progress. As is common amongst pre-war secular disaster novels, catastrophe facilitates what is presented as positive social change.<sup>71</sup> Following the cataclysm, Nordenholt's direction of the “collective attempts in rearing and educating” results in “children who throng [the streets of the newly built cities] happier and more intelligent than their fathers in their day”. These children “are also part of our work”, Flint explains, “taught and trained in the ideals that inspired us”.<sup>72</sup> Their education signals the ongoing social aims of Nordenholt's legacy.

68 Connington 1923, 220–223.

69 Connington 1923, 62.

70 Connington 1923, 138.

71 Woodward 2017, 43–47, provides an overview of how pre-war science fiction disaster novels used imagined cataclysms to realise wish-fulfilment fantasies.

72 Connington 1923, 198.

## DEGENERATION AND EUGENICS AS THEMES WITHIN NORDENHOLT'S MILLION

Contemporaneous fears of degeneration are central to the novel's advocacy of population selection and the necessity for control of that population by "higher men".<sup>73</sup> Importantly, the threat to human survival and development is not only external, in the form of the blight, but also internal, arising from what the text presents as the nature of humanity. Nordenholt sends Flint to London to understand human nature deprived of the veneer of civilisation. This insight is invaluable for developing Flint's recognition of the need for controlling the surviving population until it can be shaped into a less-base people. Nordenholt tells him, "I want you to see what it [human nature] amounts to when you take off the leash. Of course the brute is the basis."<sup>74</sup> Accordingly, an entire chapter of *Nordenholt's Million* is dedicated to educating Flint by emphasising the fragility of civilisation. As Nicholas Ruddick notes, this chapter – "Nuit Blanche", with its sense of a night that is never fully dark – is a "phantasmagoria of embodied anxieties", chief among which is the vision of humanity consumed in crisis by its baser instincts.<sup>75</sup> "Nuit Blanche" charts Flint's journey amongst a starving population turning to cannibalism, ritualism and barbarism and, as such, comments critically on human nature and the tenuous façade of civilisation. Flint's passage into the Thanatotic burning landscape of London highlights the horrors "at the roots of humanity" and draws attention to humanity's links to its animal ancestry. Flint laments that the "trail of the brute's over everything" and on his return, Nordenholt emphasises that this must be taken into account as plans are made for the future development of civilisation.<sup>76</sup>

Cumulatively the encounters during "Nuit Blanche" emphasise that the catastrophe has exposed people's hidden natures. The collapse of law and the onset of mass starvation outside the Nitrogen Area create unrepressed, animalistic individuals. As a result of his experiences of barbarity during his long night in London, Flint understands that "the old civilisation went its way, healthy on the surface, full of life and vigour [...] yet all the while, at the back of it there lurked in the odd corners the brutal instincts, darting into view at times for a moment and then returning into the darkness which was their home".<sup>77</sup> While these traits are associated with the entire population (just as they had been in H. G. Wells's 1898 disaster novel *The War of the Worlds* in its subtler treatment of the same ideas), here they are linked directly with foreigners (a Jew stere-

73 See Stone 2002, *passim* and MacKenzie 1990, 150.

74 Connington 1923, 149.

75 Ruddick 1994, 117.

76 Connington 1923, 182.

77 Connington 1923, 181.

otypically obsessed with gold, a German “colony” that has crucified a victim, and a “gigantic Negro” practising Voodoo) and a decadent aristocracy (Lady Angela, a degenerate aristocrat described as “rotten to the core”).<sup>78</sup> As Ruddick notes, London is populated by those who “have been masquerading as civilised human beings”, suggesting that “For Connington [...] the new urgency for survival in the moral ruins of the post-war necessitates a hunt for scapegoats, rather than a period of introspection that might locate and confront the source of the catastrophe within.”<sup>79</sup> However, it is in its introspection, its attempt to “locate and confront the source of the catastrophe within”, that *Nordenholt’s Million* provides scapegoats in order to justify its eugenic agenda and achieve its wish-fulfilment conclusion.

The implicit eugenic objective of Nordenholt’s strategy is the elimination of those judged to be degenerate: the lazy, the weak, foreigners and the upper class. However, as “Nuit Blanche” makes clear, another form of selection is crucial to Nordenholt’s plans: selection based upon efficiency is also fundamental. Eugenics is not associated solely with selecting the best people as progenitors of future generations; it also informs how different vocations are classified as worthy or unworthy.

## VOCATION, EFFICIENCY AND ELITISM

The vocations *Nordenholt’s Million* presents as most valuable are practical, particularly relating to industry and science. Although Nordenholt is a businessman rather than a scientist, his decisions and actions are predicated on National Efficiency and scientific rationalism and he gathers scientists around him in order to facilitate his actions as saviour, and initiator, of the novel’s overall wish-fulfilment rebirth fantasy. Indeed, the catastrophe is overcome by scientific innovation and the sacrifice of selfless scientists. The “better order” offered by *Nordenholt’s Million* is based on a society governed by a dictator whose policies are implemented by a scientific and industrial elite composed of the most committed and productive in society. In this respect, the text is a departure from Nietzschean thinking. Where for Nietzsche great importance is placed on artistic creativity in relation to “higher men”, here scientific discovery and efficiency are central to the creation of “higher types”. Progress, the novel affirms, is secured by the elevation of the competent in order to shape an efficiency-based society. As Martin Pugh notes, champions of National Efficiency complained of the decay of parliamentary systems and the incompetence of mature party politicians in tackling complex issues. They sought to reduce the role of parliament

78 Connington 1923, 159–178.

79 Ruddick 1994, 117.

by replacing elected authorities with experts and successful entrepreneurs “capable of promoting the national interest”.<sup>80</sup> This strategy is precisely that adopted by Nordenholt. The key quality of those he enlists into his elite “was efficiency”, resulting in an aristocracy formed from the “super-excellence of the human material in which he [Nordenholt] had dealt”.<sup>81</sup>

Unconcerned with egalitarianism, the novel offers a clear distinction between an emergent aristocracy and the general population. The leaders and masses do not mix.<sup>82</sup> As in Nietzsche’s works, both the “herd” and the “higher” types are necessary elements of society, but their separation – a “pathos of distance” – is essential. If the “higher” is sufficiently distanced from the “herd”, they may bring about the enhancement of life.<sup>83</sup> This Nietzschean aristocratic division is akin to the separation at the conclusion of *Nordenholt’s Million*. Nordenholt’s aristocracy resides in the new city of Asgard, named after the realm of the Norse gods, where the elite design the cities of the future. These cities are built with the skill and sweat of the labouring class, whose attention and energy are syphoned into their construction.<sup>84</sup> They are utopian places, combining practicality with beauty. Flint refers to the “faint and perfumed breezes bringing their subtropical warmth as they blow across the valley; and [he says] I hear, faint and afar, the sounds of music mingling with the rustling of trees”.<sup>85</sup> The suggestion of warmth, beauty and sweet-smelling air in these final descriptions creates from an eschatological perspective a perversion of the idea of a New Jerusalem. More secularly, it is a utopian vision that forms a further justification for the novel’s advocacy of totalitarianism.

The new cities of *Nordenholt’s Million* constitute a wish-fulfilment fantasy of urban efficiency and hygiene for the survivors involved in Nordenholt’s remaking of Britain. The city of the inter-war years, as Thomas Linehan reveals, was a place of “squalor, deprivation and disease, poisoned environments which brutalised the inhabitants, destroyed their health and invariably imperilled the survival of the race”.<sup>86</sup> This was hardly the country fit “for heroes to live in” promoted by Lloyd George in 1918, and by 1923, and the publication of *Nordenholt’s Million*, there was no sign that his vision was going to be achieved.<sup>87</sup> Accordingly, informed by post-war zeitgeist, *Nordenholt’s Million* advocates pro-

80 Pugh 2006, 15.

81 Connington 1923, 236–237.

82 Connington 1923, 112.

83 Schacht 2002, 338.

84 Connington 1923, 283.

85 Connington 1923, 286.

86 Linehan 2000, 248.

87 Pugh 2009, 60.

to-fascist ideas while drawing on eugenic perspectives for the improvement of humanity. Although it finds radically different expression, the post-First World War disenchantment evident in *Nordenholt's Million* would also permeate Sydney Fowler Wright's inter-war disaster novels *Deluge* (1927) and *Dawn* (1929), although, unlike *Nordenholt's Million*, they advocate a complete rejection of modernity in favour of a re-assertive middle-class patriarchy controlling the land, working classes and women. *Nordenholt's Million's* non-democratic, highly efficient utopia built on the subjugation of the few and the sacrifice of the many is informed by a desire to overcome and where necessary oppress what it perceives as "human nature". In keeping with its "extremes of Englishness" themes, strong leadership is shown as necessary in the novel's emphasis on the benefits of dictatorial rule. Such a positive representation of dictatorship, even one apparently justified by catastrophe, could only have been written before the Second World War. Nevertheless, it reveals how it is possible for some to accept an isolationist, anti-democratic and anti-liberal environment as a desirable means of overcoming contemporary social and economic anxieties.

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# Apocalypse as Critical Dystopia in Modern Popular Music

## ABSTRACT

The last book of the New Testament has inspired countless narratives and cultural productions. In the realm of popular music, the Apocalypse has been embraced as synonymous with imminent catastrophe, generating a dystopian discourse. As a tool for analysis, the concept of “critical dystopia” has built a useful means of connecting apocalyptic menaces, re-enchantment of the world, and social protest. At the same time, “authenticity” is a sacred dimension within rock, an antidote to commercialism and a key notion of doomsday scenarios. This article has two parts: first, a conceptual review of the state of the questions and debate involved; and second, an exposition of selected songs, followed by a summary of their main traits.

## KEYWORDS

Apocalypse, Popular Music, Critical Dystopia, Authenticity

## BIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION

The last book of the New Testament has inspired countless narratives and cultural productions, most of them unaware of its complex and metaphorical contents.<sup>1</sup> Apocalypse/apocalyptic has thus become a self-referential category in the collective imagination, a fascinating icon no matter its distance from the

1 I am grateful to Alejandro Campos Presas, anthropologist and a drummer in a metal band, for his valuable help in the study of heavy metal music and religious traits involved.

original. In the realm of popular music and especially after the two world wars, the Apocalypse was passionately embraced as synonymous with imminent catastrophe, generating a mainly dystopian discourse. As a tool for analysis, the concept of “critical dystopia”<sup>2</sup> has provided a useful connection between apocalyptic menaces, re-enchantment of the world, and social protest. Yet “authenticity” is a sacred dimension within rock, an antidote to commercialism and “mainstream” as musical prostitution, very much in biblical style; for this reason, authenticity constitutes a key notion for doomsday scenarios. The connection between apocalypse and authenticity is therefore immediate and natural, with the former the desired and eschatological consummation of the latter’s victory against evil or the forces of falsehood and part of both an aesthetic and a moral universe of personal engagement, highly respected by rock fans. Authenticity becomes revelation of the divine to worshippers and a cathartic projection into the future/salvation.

The volume *The Attraction of Religion*, edited by Jason Slone and James Van Slyke, is founded on the question of why so many people are attracted to religion, which seems to be an evolutionary puzzle dependent on functional adaptations.<sup>3</sup> Since the Enlightenment era, massive secularization and high technology have triggered the abandonment of conventional monotheistic religions, but the human spiritual principle probably remains in new formulas and neo-pagan tendencies to re-significate reality. Currently almost any cultural space can host spontaneous reactions that reify the inherent religious ontology of individuals. Media are constantly circulating the tropes and narratives of popular religion in ways that serve to “deepen an association rather than to comment on religion per se”.<sup>4</sup> Instead of religious language disappearing, it has been diffused, re-appropriated, and heightened through the blending and borrowing of various traditions and practices.<sup>5</sup>

Em McAvan describes the postmodern sacred as never directed toward one religious truth but instead “pasted together from the fragments of spiritual traditions that do have that ontological foundation”.<sup>6</sup> In everyday life there are transformations of a spiritual nature outside the religious sphere: “salvation, or analogues of salvation, are sought, found, or unconsciously implied in the everyday, in the vernacular”.<sup>7</sup> The suggestion that religious forms may belong to ordinary life has already been explored in terms of “implicit religion”, (E. Bailey),

2 Moylan 2000; Swanson 2016.

3 Slone/Van Slyke 2016.

4 Clark 2007, 72–73.

5 Swanson 2016. See Campos 2016.

6 McAvan 2010; emphasis original.

7 Bacon/Dossett/Knowles 2015b, 5.

“invisible religion” (T. Luckmann), “surrogate religion” (R. Robertson), “quasi-religion” (A. Griel and T. Robbins), and “hidden religiosity” (H. Kommers).

In 1516 Thomas More published in Latin his celebrated *Utopia*,<sup>8</sup> which was in fact a socio-political satire. However, the notion of a perfect society is much older, starting with the myth of Eden. In classical Greece the legend of Arcadia was broadly exploited in arts and literature, and Plato wrote the *Republic* as an expression of his social philosophy. Christian theology was extremely dualistic, separating body from soul, with a similar polarity between the human community and the City of God (Augustine of Hippo). The Latin hymn *Dies Irae*, attributed to Thomas of Celano in the thirteenth century and partially inspired by the book of Revelation, described the Last Judgment, with the trumpets summoning souls to the throne of God, where the righteous will be saved and the sinners cast into eternal flames; like many other medieval apocalyptic images, it involved the eschatology of a failed society and its annihilation. The sequels of *Dies Irae* spread over the centuries incorporated into requiem masses (by Mozart, Berlioz, or Verdi), contemporary music by composers like Wagner (*Twilight of the Gods*), Scriabin (*Mysterium*), Ligeti (*Lux Aeterna*), Messiaen (*Quartet for the End of Time*), and Penderecki (*Auschwitz Oratorio*), and other cultured works describing doomsday either in biblical terms or in worldly holocausts.

“Dystopia”, the concept coined by John Stuart Mill in 1868, is omnipresent in current media, where it has become a popular locus for varied cultural formulas and parallel academic interest. *Utopia*, *anti-utopia*, *dystopia*, *eutopia*, *critical dystopia*, and other related terms are generally associated with literature, film, TV series, science fiction, and video games, but are associated much less with music, which is surprising because there are countless musical-dystopian recreations: “[t]he sounds of the Bible are all over popular music, and its influence on that art form is inestimable.”<sup>9</sup>

The fact is that religion seems to return in our times (if it was ever absent), shrouded either in declared neo-pagan rites/beliefs or in unconscious formulas of de-secularization.

[T]he media are nowadays suffused with content that may prime (especially young) people for New Age spirituality – “glossy” spiritual magazines, shows like OPRAH or DR. PHIL, television series like the X-FILES or BUFFY THE VAMPIRE SLAYER, and films like STAR WARS, LORD OF THE RINGS and HARRY POTTER may play a major role in opening teenagers up to spirituality, preparing a first introduction to the spiritual milieu.<sup>10</sup>

TV series like DOCTOR WHO (UK 1963–) and GAME OF THRONES (US 2011–2019) somehow build modern polytheistic cosmologies that the audience demand

8 *Dē Optimo Rēpūblicaē Statu dēque Nova Insula Ūtopia*.

9 Gilmour 2017, 76.

10 Van Otterloo/Aupers/Houtman 2012, 253.

to cover their lack of divinities. Something similar could be said of the cinematographic sagas of *THE LORD OF THE RINGS I–III* (Peter Jackson, US/UK/NZ 2001–2003), *STAR WARS I–VI* (George Lucas, US 1977–2005), *HARRY POTTER I–VIII* (Various Directors, UK 2001–2011), *SUPERMAN* (Richard Donner, US 1978), *BATMAN* (Tim Burton, US 1989), and *TARZAN* (Kevin Lima and Chris Buck, US 1999). Comparable narratives can be found within graphic novels, computer games, and other media; the *homo religiosus* is still alive and very active.<sup>11</sup>

This article revolves around three key notions: critical dystopia, authenticity, and apocalypse, putting forward their significance and main content within the realm of modern popular music. Especial attention is given to “critical dystopia” because of its relevance for the research.

## APOCALYPSE

*Apocalypse* means “revelation”, not destruction/devastation/catastrophe.<sup>12</sup> Despite this fact, there is no doubt about the weight of biblical-based mythology at present, visible in the “current American enthusiasm for apocalyptic literature.”<sup>13</sup> Robert Geraci puts forward a positive assumption of the apocalypse as an agent of transformation and virtual immortality; believers will expect a catharsis leading to a new and perfect existence.<sup>14</sup> The book of Revelation also involves martyrdom and salvation: “Martyrdom is a prominent feature of the Apocalypse. In fact, *Revelation* contains the earliest depiction of martyrs in a post-mortem state.”<sup>15</sup> The pain-to-glory metamorphosis could be interpreted as a liminal transition in rock musicians who sacrifice themselves (e. g., via drugs) to gain sacred status even if their life is the price, in line with the well-known motto “live fast, die young and leave a pretty corpse”.

Martyrs in Revelation “follow the Lamb wherever he goes” (14:4), and this includes his martyrological [sic] pattern of death, resurrection and glorification. ... The martyrs are also presented as faithful witnesses ... they are redeemed from the dead (14:3) and sit on Christ’s throne (3:22) to reign (20:6) and judge the nations (2:26). In other words, the martyrs do what Christ does. ... As Jesus’ death became a paradigmatic model of discipleship, those who followed his path of suffering and martyrdom came themselves to function in some way as “second Christs”.<sup>16</sup>

11 Campos 2020.

12 Chang 2011.

13 Bendle 2005.

14 Geraci 2010. See Heim 2017.

15 Middleton 2015, 113.

16 Middleton 2015, 114.

The sacrifice of one's life is an irrefutable proof of *authenticity*, as it implies the abandonment of any material power or richness. After dying in full youth under mythicized circumstances, Jimi Hendrix, Janice Joplin, Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, and Amy Winehouse became automatically heroes-saints-subjects of adoration, as the remarkable pilgrimages of followers to their graves evince.

A term related to apocalypse is *apocalypticism*: “the belief that God has revealed the imminent end of the ongoing struggle between good and evil in history”.<sup>17</sup> Sklower approaches apocalypticism as part of the counterculture and integrated by three elements, all of them present in rock music: aesthetic vanguardism, the belief in the capacity of art to change society, and a specific relationship to modern life;<sup>18</sup> the second of these features is crucial to this study. Since the 2000s so-called critical dystopia have actively renewed the production and perception of the modern apocalypse and its surrounding semiological universe.<sup>19</sup>

## CRITICAL DYSTOPIA

“Dystopia” is a two-part term, formed by *dys* (bad) and *topos* (place). Generally, it involves a society that is undesirable and/or frightening, the antonym of *Utopia* (the no-place coined by More as a too-perfect community). “Critical dystopia” is characterized by the possibility of improving the real world and avoiding a material disaster. It is opposed to “classical dystopia”, which describes and criticises – but mostly accepts – a sad fate for humanity. Andrew Feenberg studied dystopia and apocalypse in light of the emergence of “critical consciousness”, addressing “the rise of new doomsday myths inspired by the invention of the atom bomb”.<sup>20</sup> Feenberg was aware of the restrictions of conventional dystopia: “[t]he concept of dystopia implies the impossibility of escape.”<sup>21</sup> Drawing upon the work of political scientist Lyman T. Sargent, Thomas Moylan provided a definition of critical dystopia that is the foundational axis of the notion:

[A] textual mutation that self-reflexively takes on the present system and offers not only astute critiques of the order of things but also explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration.<sup>22</sup>

17 Geraci 2010, 4.

18 Sklower 2014.

19 More nuances on the different dimensions and definitions of apocalypse and dystopia can be found in Ania 2007.

20 Feenberg 1995, 41.

21 Feenberg 1995, 43.

22 Moylan 2000, 15.

In challenging capitalist power and conservative rules Moylan sees hope and not resignation. Common dystopia is characterised by its creative capacity, but it renounces changing the world: “Formally and politically ... the dystopian text refuses a functionalist or reformist perspective.”<sup>23</sup> Moylan establishes a clear separation between the optimism of the 1960s and 1970s, which gave rise to a utopian wave, and the 1980s and 1990s (the Reagan Era), when globalist capitalism flooded the world with inequality and pessimism, causing the return to dystopian narratives. Lorna Jowett assumes critical dystopia as “active hope”; within her perspective the TV series *ANGEL* (US 1999–2004) was not intended “as helping the helpless but as helping the hopeless”.<sup>24</sup> Why did dystopia grow especially in the twentieth century? Two world wars, the arms race, technologies considered as alienating and threatening human freedom, and capitalist excesses had an influence. But especially in the modern apocalyptic discourse, the motive of a third world war is constant, as many protest and rock songs reflect. Hence utopias turned into dystopias, “the product of the terrors of the twentieth century”.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the concepts of utopia and dystopia are inextricably connected: “Utopia functions as *warning* to humankind ... which deliberately reminds us that what is at stake is nothing less than our future itself ... [T]here can be no deliberations on dystopia without regarding utopia”.<sup>26</sup>

Some social and intellectual reactions to the universal threats of humankind are close to critical dystopia, although they take a different perspective, encompassing interrelated meanings and formulas around the fear of massive destruction, with or without biblical reminiscences. *Alternative Salvations*, edited by Hannah Bacon, Wendy Dossett, and Steve Knowles,<sup>27</sup> deals with that trope, distinct from conventional salvation in orthodox religions; this volume stresses – in a theoretical framework of post-Christian spirituality – the opposition between *religious* and *secular* salvation, affirming that the latter is achievable independently of the former. Thomas Coleman and Robert Arrowood also advocate for a secular salvation;<sup>28</sup> their guiding principle is atheistic, relying on the well-known assertion by Paul Kurtz and Edwin Wilson in their 1973 second *Humanist Manifesto*: “no deity will save us; we must save ourselves. We are responsible for what we are and for what we will be.”<sup>29</sup> There is a tight connection between the concepts of secular salvation and critical dystopia, because both

23 Moylan 2000, xii.

24 Jowett 2007, 76.

25 Moylan 2000, xi; Bendle 2005.

26 Farca and Ladevèze 2016, 2–3. Emphasis original.

27 Bacon/Dossett/Knowles 2015a.

28 Coleman/Arrowood 2015.

29 Generic Manifesto of the American Humanist Association, 1973, <https://americanhumanist.org/what-is-humanism/manifesto2/> [accessed 14 September 2019].

struggle for a better world, intending to positively renew social structures and human relationships. But the advocates of secular salvation strongly criticize Christians for their subjugation to the Almighty God, just expecting him to save them. Instead, these authors prefer to focus on the here-and-now: “Does ‘salvation’ denote something that falls into some inherently religious realm? Can it be understood apart from its traditionally theological and vertically transcendent cynosure? The answer, we argue, is: ‘absolutely.’”<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, they assess that forgetting about God would increase the implementation of real solutions to humans’ troubles and injustices; some religious frameworks, they propose, provide an excuse for not taking action to make the world a better place. Caesar Montevecchio separates “biblical apocalyptic” and “secularized apocalyptic”,<sup>31</sup> while Lyman Sargent points out with irony: “[g]iven our real world, who needs dystopias?”<sup>32</sup>. Sargent concludes that “[w]e need the dystopia to remind us that our dystopia could get worse, but we need the eutopia even more to remind us that better, while difficult, is possible”.<sup>33</sup> Modern dystopias are, therefore, revulsive catalysts for societies where protest songs became rather outdated: “the New Left was born from the mood of anti-dystopian resistance”.<sup>34</sup> If critical dystopia presupposes that people should not limit themselves to resignation but instead confront the capitalist system and its excesses, then it constitutes a call to civic activism.

## AUTHENTICITY

In the confusion of values of our times, “authenticity” becomes a moral mandate for many rock followers. Authenticity rests “on two key concepts: originality and trueness”, entailing a quasi-religious faith. Relying upon Walter Benjamin’s notion of “aura” in the contemporary work of art, Bernardo Attias theorizes authenticity as a “spiritual concept”, associated with “cult value”<sup>35</sup> in terms of an overall “mystique of authenticity”.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly we live a time with “thirst for the authentic”.<sup>37</sup> Authenticity within rock is tied to a vague, nondenominational human spirituality, not unlike the transcendent qualities

30 Coleman/Arrowood 2015, 12. Around the notion of “secular salvation” several works by Dutch historian Jan N. Bremmer are worth consulting.

31 Montevecchio 2012, 6.

32 Sargent 2013, 10.

33 Sargent 2013, 12. “Eutopia” (from the Greek eu [good] and topos [place]) means the fair, desirable, and good community, as a real aspiration (in comparison with “utopia” as an unattainable concept).

34 Feenberg 1995, 43.

35 Attias 2016, 133–134.

36 Attias 2016, 136.

37 McCoy 2013, 188.

associated with Western classical music in the nineteenth century. In militant followers it involves a holistic cosmology of life and music and a deep sense of discipline, including hypercritical issues about society as a great lie stemming from globalizing and commercial interests. For this reason, rockers look back to the past (recent as it may be) in search of “lost” authenticity. That is why authenticity is closely related to nostalgia and revival, as well as to the modern reading of the apocalypse that implies a radical metamorphosis of the mechanisms of power, institutions, collective mentality, systems of government, and the like. As stated in the call for papers for the Apocalypse and Authenticity conference held at the University of Hull in July 2017:

A number of media and film narratives propagate a sense of nostalgia and the idea that society needs to return to an (idealized) past if it wants to rediscover its authentic self and renew an authentic way of life. The popularity of such narratives seems to suggest that we long for things we experience as lost, and this experience might indeed drive apocalyptic imaginations: a desire for renewal and return to a nostalgic past that can only be achieved through an apocalyptic event and the collapse of established power structures and economic forces of oppression.<sup>38</sup>

Some celebrated rockers have empowered themselves as Messiahs by elevating their real or imagined authenticity to a transcendent dimension. That is the case for Cliff Richard,<sup>39</sup> comparable to the massive adoration spectacle around Michael Jackson,<sup>40</sup> and the promise land myth in the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen.<sup>41</sup> The Velvet Underground portrayed themselves as “the paragon of authenticity in rock music”,<sup>42</sup> and “their nihilism and despair were coupled with a moralism that sought transcendence”, as can be appreciated in the Velvet’s most controversial song, “Heroin”.<sup>43</sup> Neil Young’s “This Note’s for You” (*This Note’s for You*, 1988) is one of the most openly anti-consumer and pro-authenticity rock songs by such a celebrity, with direct critical allusions to Michael Jackson, Madonna, and several international brands. Young starts by claiming: “Ain’t singing for Pepsi / Ain’t singing for Coke... / This note’s for you”; and in the last verses states: “Don’t want no cash / Don’t need no money / ... I’ve got the real thing / I got the

38 *Apocalypse and Authenticity International Conference*. 11–13 July 2017, University of Hull. Conference of the Theology, Religion and Popular Culture Network.

39 Löbert 2012.

40 Carby 2001.

41 McCarthy 2001.

42 Attias 2016, 131. See Burns 2014.

43 Attias 2016, 142, 138. As it frequently happens, personal life was reportedly different from the public discourse; Attias 2016, 136: “The 1980s saw [Lou Reed] selling scooters for Honda while ‘Walk on the Wild Side’ played; the 1990s saw ‘Venus in Furs’ used somewhat absurdly as the soundtrack for a Dunlop tire commercial; and the 2000s saw him designing a smart-phone app (Dombal).”

real thing, baby.” Within this amalgam of critical, affective, and spiritual proclamations, fans as “believers” will develop a corresponding faith investment, depositing their spiritual disquiet on the singer-as-god that provides the “real” alternative, freeing the follower from the tyranny of consumer society. As stated above, authenticity is the cornerstone of rock culture, a sacred magnitude and the answer to the mainstream as musical corruption, very much in a biblical style.

The contemporary combination of these complex and cross-cultural categories (apocalypse; critical dystopia; authenticity) demands specific study as it has triggered important cultural productions and social resistance concerning the universal fear of a nuclear holocaust. Dystopian popular music plays a notable role in the development and spread of the corresponding narratives calling for civic rebellion, making possible by these means the articulation of a transformed protest song language and promoting a renewed engagement with the spiritual.

## DYSTOPIAN POPULAR MUSIC

Apocalypse actually fits with rock: U2, The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, Bob Dylan, Iron Maiden, REM, The Doors, and Busta Rhymes, among many others, have created relevant songs involving the apocalypse-as-dystopia rhetoric. It is definitely a creative locus for composers and a stable territory for the collective imagination of their followers. The cultural context helps, as nowadays there is a strong scepticism about dogma and priestly hierarchy and the opposite tendency for religious personal ecstasy and new spiritual cultures. Starting in the 1960s “The Beatles replaced (or at least accompanied) baptisms, confirmations and bar-mitzvahs. Discos and dancing were more enticing than devotions.”<sup>44</sup> With the arrival of rap and hip hop in the 1980s, it was clear that “the church’s exclusive rights on the rhetoric of ritual, sacred or otherwise, were over”.<sup>45</sup>

Probably the boomers’ rejection originated as a part of their generational rebellion against their parents’ inherited culture. There are many songs opposed to Christian beliefs and dogmas; others attack the church or the figure of Jesus. Trash metal members burnt churches in Norway in the 1990s. *Aqualung* (Jethro Tull, 1971) inverted the initial terms of *Genesis*: “In the beginning Man created God; and in the image of Man created he him”. The song “Cathedral” by Crosby, Stills and Nash (CSN, 1977) ran: “Open up the gates of the church and let me out of here / ... So many people have died in the name of Christ / That I can’t believe it all”. And so on. Lennon’s rejection of formal religion had an enormous echo; for him:

44 Marsh 2017, 234.

45 Peddie 2017, 41.

[R]eligion is part of the establishment and its abuses, and he is characteristically blunt when asserting freedom from its control, as heard on John Lennon / *Plastic Ono Band* (1970): “There ain’t no Jesus gonna come/from the sky...” (“I Found Out”); “[They] Keep you doped with religion” (“Working Class Hero”); “I don’t believe in Bible/.../I don’t believe in Jesus” (“God”).<sup>46</sup>

In some cases, the objective was to provoke the audience with irreverence, without greater depth. In others, it was part of marketing strategies, for the menace of doomsday sells well. Importantly, in dystopian rock, devastation is anticipated in present life; hence the urgency of its apocalyptic assertions, together with the countercultural pressure that the realm of rock usually conveys. The goal of demonic rockers was and is to “break on through” regardless of what exists on the other side; hence, “sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll” remains the battle cry for many rockers – from Alice Cooper to Marilyn Manson – who assault Judeo-Christian theology, value-free science, and Western institutions more for the sake of rebellion than anything else.<sup>47</sup>

However, rock has also provided quite a few pro-Christ songs and gestures with positive religious meaning, as can be seen in “Jesus” by the feared underground leader Lou Reed (*The Velvet Underground*, 1969). In the movie *EASY RIDER* (Dennis Hopper, US 1969), an icon of the hippie era, there is a scene of a mass in the commune, completely reverential despite unusual details. In 1970 Larry Norman released *Upon This Rock*, now viewed as the world’s first Christian rock album. Kris Kristofferson’s “Why Me Lord” (*Jesus Was a Capricorn*, 1972) sang: “Help me Jesus, my soul’s in your hand”. Those years also witnessed musicals like *JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR* (Norman Jewison, US 1973) and *GODSPELL* (David Greene, US 1973), which attempted to de-officialise Christianity for youth, building a bridge between the church and counterculture in the figure of a rock-adapted Jesus. “The King of Carrot Flowers Pts. Two & Three” is a love song to Jesus by Neutral Milk Hotel (*In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*, 1998). In 2001 Mick Jagger released the song of gratitude “God Gave Me Everything I Want”. The so-called *U2charist* phenomenon (a Eucharist ceremony based on the music of U2) deserves attention. On 27 August 2014, I attended a metal mass (i.e. a Lutheran mass with heavy metal arrangements) at the Temple Square Church, Helsinki. There are “more semiotically complex or directly challenging pop,” such as:

Madonna’s “Like a Prayer” (*Like a Prayer*, 1989) or Lady Gaga’s “Born This Way” (*Born This Way*, 2011), alongside sometimes darker, if equally contagious and compelling,

46 Gilmour 2017, 67. More nuances on the religious orientation of John Lennon and the countercultural era can be found in Campos 2020.

47 Dunbar 2002.

pop such as Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" (*Talking Book*, 1972), Michael Jackson's "Billie Jean" (*Thriller*, 1982), Donna Summer's "I Feel Love" (*I Remember Yesterday*, 1977) or Abba's mysterious, even melancholic, "The Day Before You Came" (*The Singles: The First Ten Years*, 1982).<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, despite oppositional stances, rock's underlying interest in religion is pervasive: "music of the last fifty or so years constantly draws on language, themes and imagery from the Christian bible".<sup>49</sup> With respect to the Apocalypse, the confluence of the sacred and the profane is captivating for the audience: "Biblical apocalypticism continued to function as an important source of inspiration for many pioneering thrash metal bands, although arguably mostly as a rhetorical device."<sup>50</sup> Marcus Moberg even describes "theatrically 'Satanic' bands such as Venom, Bathory and Mercyful Fate".<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, the wide-ranging genre of heavy metal music can be assumed to a large extent to be a culture of critical dystopia: "[T]he dystopian elements in metal music are not merely or necessarily a sonic celebration of disaster. Rather, metal music's fascination with dystopian imagery is often critical in intent."<sup>52</sup>

The combination of thrash metal and dystopia configures an educational language in its "abrasive tone and dystopian language" that "attacks norms, religion, the economic and political status quo, and social injustice".<sup>53</sup> The correlation is automatic: "heavy metal's association with religion ... has developed into a defining characteristic of the genre as a whole".<sup>54</sup> However, metal is prone to a message of hope: "what seems like rejection, alienation, or nihilism" may be more productively viewed as "an attempt to create an alternative identity".<sup>55</sup> In metal music, dystopia prevails over nihilism. In fact, nihilism is the opposite pole of critical dystopia, just as metal dismisses utopia.

## DYSTOPIAN SONGS SELECTION

This section considers a selection of 18 songs of interest for this study, which are presented in chronological order. There is a huge amount of other music that deserves attention from the perspective of popular culture and apoca-

48 Marsh 2017, 235.

49 Gilmour 2017, 67.

50 Moberg 2017, 225.

51 Moberg 2017, 226. The names of some thrash metal main bands are expressive: Anthrax, Annihilator, Artillery, Carnivore, Celtic Frost, Death, Deicide, Angel, Destruction, Exodus, Havok, Megadeth, Metal Church, Nuclear Assault, Overkill, Powermad, Savatage, Sepultura, Sodom, and Suicidal Tendencies.

52 Taylor 2006, i.

53 Buckland 2016, 145.

54 Moberg 2017, 223.

55 Walser 1993, xvii.

lypse research, but that selected conveys a special meaning or formal traits. The relevance of the artist(s) has been also taken into account, as well some equitable chronological distribution. Two broad musical-literary categories can be identified: songs that specifically mention the Apocalypse (or biblical images of destruction) and songs with no explicit religious/apocalyptic references but that depict catastrophes like a nuclear war. In the latter the religious dimension can be uncertain. With respect to critical dystopia, some songs clearly belong to the category; a few do not, which makes them of interest as contrasting repertoire. In a third group the boundaries between classical and critical dystopia are blurred, as the conceptual differences exist alongside coincidences.

Bob Dylan has been constantly attached to religious themes, particularly biblical. His conversion process, his visit to Pope John Paul II, his gospel albums, and some of his songs are undeniable proofs of a personal approach to (Christian) religion. “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall” (A-1)<sup>56</sup> was published shortly before the Cuban Missile Crisis; the lyrics are concerned with the tension of those years. It is a metaphorical and poetic song, where the “rain” is an allusion to a world war. However, the meaning beyond the words has remained a hymn against injustice and war. Some verses contain accusations in typically Dylanesque language: “I saw ten thousand talkers whose tongues were all broken / I saw guns and sharp swords in the hands of young children... / Heard one person starve, I heard many people laughin”. Other famous dystopian and authenticity-committed songs by Dylan are “All Along the Watchtower” (later covered by Jimi Hendrix), and “Masters of War”, and even more so, “The Groom’s Still Waiting at the Altar” (*Shot of Love*, 1981), perhaps the scariest of all Dylan apocalypse songs. The lyrics include: “seen the massacre of the innocent... / They’re killing nuns and soldiers”. In *Tempest* (2012) Dylan devoted the homonymous song to the Titanic shipwreck, with notable apocalyptic connotations. Nonetheless, Dylan’s dystopia usually leaves a margin for salvation:

*Tempest* is full of violence and bloodshed but there is possibly a hint of optimism in Dylan’s *Titanic* song as well. Humanity bobs along the chaotic sea often unmindful of the prophets’ warnings but not all is lost. Revelation anticipates a time when the sea, John’s symbol of chaos, will be no more (21.1).<sup>57</sup>

“The End” (A-2) by The Doors was conceived as the farewell to a girlfriend of Jim Morrison’s, but because of its use at the beginning of the film *APOCALYPSE NOW* (Francis Ford Coppola, US 1979)<sup>58</sup> it became an icon of dystopian rock. The music is disturbing, in oriental style; just when the voice starts to sing, the screen shows a

56 Hereafter the indication (A-x) means Annex and the number of the song there, with its main data.

57 Gilmour 2017, 71.

58 Initial scene on: <https://bit.ly/2LU6fGr> [accessed 12 June 2018].

series of napalm explosions in the jungle of Vietnam. The contrast between Morrison's melancholic voice and the sudden violence of the bombs is daunting. The lyrics fit perfectly with the dystopian motifs that Coppola was looking for in his complex examination of the Vietnam War. In the scene an anguished existentialism prevails: "This is the end, beautiful friend / ... I'll never look into your eyes, again".

David Bowie has been an assiduous composer of apocalyptic-themed music like "Five Years" (*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*, 1972). "As the World Falls Down" (from the film *LABYRINTH*, Jim Henson, UK/US 1986), and the late "Black Star" (*Black Star*, 2015) are other interesting creations. "Future Legend" (*Diamond dogs*, 1974. A-3) lasts barely one minute; it begins with a distorted howl and features Bowie's spoken-word vision of a post-apocalyptic Manhattan, now renamed Hunger City, comparing the humanoid inhabitants to "packs of dogs". "Future Legend / 1984" is based on Orwell's *1984*, a true paradigm of dystopian literature. The two-part song opens the album, and although lacking specifically apocalyptic content, it evinces the dystopian denunciation and positioning of Bowie. Some verses reveal a recreation of the aesthetics of horror: "And in the death, as the last few corpses lay rotting on the slimy thoroughfare... Fleas the size of rats sucked on rats the size of cats, ..." In the following "1984" Bowie sings: "Beware the savage jaw / Of 1984 ... / They'll split your pretty cranium / ... tomorrow's never there". With these early songs Bowie enlarged the list of classical dystopias, incisive in their complaints about chaos and anarchy, but rather resigned to their effects.

"London Calling" (A-4) is the opening song of the homonymous double LP released by The Clash in 1979. The list of horrors in the song is outstanding, describing awful man-made destruction and societal breakdown in marching beat: "London calling upon the zombies of death / ... A nuclear era... London is drowning". With its stomping rhythm and reiterative ostinato bassline, "London Calling" embodies the bleakest outlook upon the future. The official video clip emphasizes a dark and rainy atmosphere. Lyrics attack the Beatles popularity echoed by sound-alike bands in late 1970s ("that phoney Beatlemania") in an implicit declaration of authenticity, as the Beatles belonged to mainstream in the punk territory. Punk is dystopian and nihilistic in essence; caustic statements stem from the particular aesthetics of the genre, intended to express horror and nausea, not to change the world. As Cyrus Shahan stated in his study of this genre in Germany: "German punk positioned itself in opposition to '1968'", thus creating a "third space" in the generational struggle against the establishment. Punk's "no future" mantra, "was not about resignation but rejection, rejection of the future promised by failures of the past at the violent moment of punk's birth".<sup>59</sup> However, the "subversive, counter-discursive, and

59 Shahan 2011: 371.

anti-institutional” character of punk music knew “only one activity: the erasure of all traces of our times... calling only for destruction (including its own)”.<sup>60</sup> Hence, “London Calling” – as well as many other analogous punk songs – is a clear representative of pre-critical dystopia.

In the 1980s videos routinely showed the images and sounds of bombs and people screaming. In R. E. M.’s “It’s the End of the World as We Know It” (A-5), the band tackles typical apocalyptic imagery, with vibrating juxtaposition of the upbeat melody and Michael Stipe’s sharp irony: “It’s the end of the world... / And I feel fine”. The joyful tone of the song together with the visual narration of a devastated boy who visits the ruins of his parental home and cries as he hugs the portrait of his father completes the contrast, emotionally burdening the spectator. Irony is used effectively from the first verse: “That’s great, it starts with an earthquake”. But above all there is the warning: “Save yourself... / It’s the end of the world as we know it”.

Morrissey released “Everyday is like Sunday” (A-6) as the story of a survivor of a nuclear holocaust who even desires to have died: “How I dearly wish I was not here / In the seaside town / that they forgot to bomb / ... Come – nuclear bomb!”. The lyrics are inspired by Nevil Shute’s post-apocalyptic novel *On the Beach* (1957), which describes a group of people waiting for deadly radiation in Melbourne, Australia, in the aftermath of a nuclear war. Morrissey uses a surprisingly light-spirited orchestral arrangement, perhaps to lend a layer of causticness to the bleak scenario. Despite the apparent renunciation of living, this song – and its official video clip – is one of the first representatives of critical dystopia within popular music: the main character (a young girl) does not accept the de-humanized culture that surrounds her and sends critical explicit messages, like the ecological poster she writes: “Meat is murder”. She also attacks two old canting women. It is a militant-protest song, calling for rebellion and action, in search of a different society and future.

Very different is the case of “The Earth Died Screaming”, by Tom Waits (A-7). The official video clip was shot in black-and-white, perhaps to stress the two opposite-colour extremes as symbols of life and death, of good and evil. The refrain is also based in the opposition of destruction and love, in a combination comparable to the final scene of 1964 Kubrick’s film *DR. STRANGELOVE* (UK/US), one of the greatest icons of dystopian films;<sup>61</sup> “Well, the earth died screaming / While I lay dreaming / Dreaming of you”. However, the outstanding feature of Waits’ performance is his guttural and deep voice tone, violently distorted, accompanied by mechanical and disquieting percussion. From a formal point of view, this is one of the songs that pays more attention to the sound parameters of the apocalypse, at least as a musician may imagine them.

60 Shahan 2011: 374–375. See Frith 1995.

61 Another dystopian film directed by Kubrick, *A CLOCKWORK ORANGE* (UK/US 1971), after Anthony Burgess’ 1962 novel of the same title, is a foremost representative of dystopian cinema. Its soundtrack, by Wendy Carlos, includes striking electronic arrangements of classical pieces.

Despite the end of the Cold War with the meaningful demolition of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the 1990s witnessed an increase of the “millennial effect”, which triggered a renewal in the audio-visual language of dystopian cultures.<sup>62</sup> 1998 disaster movies *ARMAGEDDON* (Michael Bay, US) and *DEEP IMPACT* (Mimi Leder, US) had an influence on the audience. Heavy metal participation on this topic became assiduous, with interesting creations and a controversial presence in certain narratives and actions. Trash metal, black metal, dead metal, and other heavy genres challenged modern societies and ways of life, devoting significant attention to apocalyptic matters in their oppositional and unromantic style, focusing on imminent nuclear war and human extermination. Authenticity was by far their most worshipped dogma. The Finnish band *Apocalyptica*, created in 1992, is an interesting example. It consists of four cellists with solid classical formation, a striking ensemble for a metal band. In their record *Inquisition Symphony* (1998), the first track, entitled “Harmageddon” (A-8), describes the battle of the end of history. Because the music is purely instrumental, the piece is full of contrasts and sonic effects, keeping the listener constantly alert; the timbral resources of such a low-pitched instrument as the cello is particularly hypnotic. In the official video, a gigantic pendulum together with the image of the four performers at different ages recall periodically the inexorable passage of time.

Busta Rhymes has performed lively fast-rapping that is fixated on the apocalypse. The front cover of his album *Extinction Level Event: The Final World Front* (1998) shows New York City in flames, the impact of an asteroid. However, its main song is “Extinction Level Event (The Song of Salvation)” (A-9), whose refrain repeats: “Bomb threat to the whole world... / Check it out yo... / I be the closest thing to the next / Like the pain and sufferin’ of about a million deaths”. War is the real threat and the song a means of warning people when there is still time to join forces. The second title is meaningful: “song of salvation”, an argument that the singer repeats as a call to action, to override the “extinction level event”. The most hopeful and unifying verses are at the end, very much in critical-dystopia style: “now sing the song of salvation... / the dawn of global emergency... / the moment where we all come together as one unison... / and completely dominate all global events”. For these reasons, this “song of salvation” is one of the most outstanding creations within the category of popular music critical dystopia. It was enthusiastically received by Rhymes’ followers. As is usual in rap music, all the weight of the song relies upon the lyrics, as the musical structure is straightforward.

The third song selected from the dystopian year of 1998 is “Millennium” (A-10), by Robbie Williams, which tackles the expected end of the world at the turn of the millennium. The cover of the album is similar to that of Busta Rhymes dis-

62 Berger 2000; Knickerbocker 2010.

cussed above; in this case Williams is surrounded by flames as he flees the bomb blast terrified. Without any doubt the new millennium was a good pretext for apocalyptic discourse. Williams sings of a superficial society that “lives for liposuction” and will “overdose for Christmas” but “give it up for Lent”, warning of our demise due to moral collapse. However, he lampoons the lux culture that some have proposed helped make him into an international music star. So, he might fall within what he attacks, evidence of the opportunistic dimension of dystopian producers. The song is a well-constructed piece from mainstream pop-rock, with a catchy refrain and Williams himself playing the character of a wealthy banal womaniser.

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, social fears expanded on renewed grounds, frequently turning back to the desolation of the Cold War years. Blackalicious’ rap duet “Sky is Falling” (A-11) took the emblematic title of three films (two of them released in 2000), several novels and two music albums. It is a dystopian rap, with some racial allusions, lamenting the state of a world morally corrupt from top to bottom. The song unambiguously invokes the book of Revelation, but above all warns of a pervasive ethical breakdown that is preparing the way for worse times to come. The refrain sounds cheerful and almost naive while the lyrics are gloomy, in a typical contrast of the biblical-dystopian genre. Some verses run: “The sky is falling, life is appalling / And death is lurking, niggaz killing each other”. “Stay strong” is the final verse and contains the only support given to the listener. The recommended video clip (see A-11) fuses uninterruptedly natural and human violence, suggesting a full chaos. It is not an official Blackalicious release, but a montage by the YouTuber SilentRockProduction (in 2010), which I have chosen because it reveals the tensions and fears experienced by the audience in their assumption and re-elaboration of dystopian songs.

Mr. Lif’s “Earthcrusher” (A-12) was released both in *I Phantom* (Definitive Jux, 2002) and as a live version in *Live at the Middle East* (Ozone music, same year). It is a bitterly mocking song: “At last / the day of the blast / disaster / welcome to the hereafter”, as if the destruction of the world was a festive event. Mr. Lif tackles humans’ headlong demise within a political context, lamenting nuclear proliferation. After 3’15” (studio recording) we hear people crying, bombs and shots, and a devastated female voice crying, “Oh my God”. This song is another hypercritical prophecy possibly influenced by the 2001 terrorist attacks; the message conveyed becomes highly pessimistic and it has an emphasis on determined sound effects but, for the same reasons, is destined to trigger social reactions.

One year later, the rock band Muse published “Apocalypse Please” (A-13), which included grim registers of an organ, a symbol of the final judgment. As in previous songs cited in this list, some elements were ironical and therefore provocative, like the title itself. Frontman Matthew Bellamy announced, “this is

the end of the world”, surrounded by powerful low-pitched drums, piano, and guitars/bass. The sonority is dramatic, in F sharp minor, with intense dynamics, an anguished character, and sounding as a farewell. At the beginning of the third millennium, popular music performers were singing the final destruction of the world more than ever, almost demanding it. In “Apocalypse Please” the lyrics are expressive and crystal clear, with a desolated refrain: “Declare this an emergency / Come on and spread a sense of urgency / And pull us through / ... / This is the end / Of the world”.

U2 were able to bring some light to this overwhelmed scenario.<sup>63</sup> “Yahweh” (A–14) is the last song of *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004). It constitutes an open call to Jews, Arabs and Christians to build dialogue in peace, to look for solutions, and to love each other in evangelical terms; it must be located within the specific context of those years. The refrain directly addresses God, with the Hebrew – Old Testament – name (universal for several religions): “Yahweh, Yahweh / Always pain before a child is born / ... Still, I’m waiting for the dawn”. Thus, there is faith in God and hope, although the song wonders why suffering is an unavoidable stage before salvation. The response involves the fact that humans cannot just wait and hope; action is demanded: “Take these hands / Teach them what to carry / Take these hands / Don’t make a fist” (similar lyrics for “mouth” and “soul”). Importantly, the song completes an album that belongs in essence to critical dystopia. U2 had composed a number of apocalyptic songs (end-of-the-world focused) over three decades, like “Until the End of the World” (*Achtung Baby*, 1991), “The Wanderer” (*Zooropa*, 1993), and “Last Night on Earth” (*Pop*, 1997). However, *How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb* (2004) and *No Line on the Horizon* (2009) evinced a turn towards the here-and-now, challenging the audience to fight for a better world.

Iron Maiden included “Brighter than a Thousand Suns” in the meaningful album *A Matter of Life and Death* (2006. A–15). As is typical of metal, the lyrics are both explicit and full of tragic resonances: “Minute warning of the missile fall / Take a look at your last day”. The contradiction that Michael Gilmour locates in this song evinces the crossroads of critical values and religious tensions that many people experience in extreme rock: Iron Maiden’s “Brighter than a Thousand Suns” ... opens with a first-person plural confession (“We are not the sons of God”) and closes with the sinners’ prayer (“Holy Father we have sinned”).<sup>64</sup>

The song is also relevant because of its treatment of the apocalyptic ethos, showing how heavy rock tends to adopt biblical motifs, but gravitated towards a present reality. Human nuclear war more than any divine punishment hangs

63 The religious path of U2 cannot be summarized here, despite its importance. About their deeply religious contents see Calhoun (2018) and Roberts (2018). E. g., such a popular song as “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” (1987) is a true Christian anthem.

64 Gilmour 2017, 74.

like the sword of Damocles over humanity. Thus, the need to react becomes imperative, besides all biblical connotations:

We also find in “Brighter than a Thousand Suns” a possible connection between the image of nations rising (Jesus) and the powers of darkness described in Revelation when the songwriters introduce the terms “hate”, “fury” and “Satan”. The latter (Rev. 12.9) comes to the earth full of rage. ... It also comes as no surprise to those reading Revelation (or listening to Maiden’s “Number of the Beast”, for that matter) that the Devil’s “time is short” (Rev. 12.12), so once again we find the songwriters aligning present-day enemies.<sup>65</sup>

By these means, heavy music may be aligned, surprisingly, with conventional morality and point toward positive solutions:

[E]ven with its carnivalesque reversal of values, heavy metal is often a conservative art form, relying on a clear demarcation of good and evil, God and the Devil. ... the stress on dark elements in biblical apocalyptic contribute to a forceful and emotively charged call for peace.<sup>66</sup>

One of the most purely classical-apocalyptic songs ever composed is “My Apocalypse” (Metallica, 2008. A–16). Metallica musically recreates the aesthetics of destruction and horror, with violent drums and guitars, crushing beat, and an aggressive voice singing: “Hard explosive / ... Feel thy name extermination / Desecrating, hail of fire”. Once more an unofficial video clip is recommended as a visual reference for the song (elaborated by Jankler TV in 2014) as it shows the iconography and fears that the audience were associating with dystopian music. It consists of brutal sequences from the Second World War. In general, music in the years after the terrorist attacks in 2001 evinces a strong concern, e. g., Jay Sean’s “2012 (It Ain’t The End)” (*So High*, Japan Edition, 2012) displayed a resigned desolation and hopelessness with no option for escape, advocating for a hedonistic night before the disaster. This music was to some extent a regression to older stages of dystopia, warning the audience of a nuclear end but seemingly impotent, unable to impede it. Quite possibly the economic decline of the Great Recession, in the late 2000s and onwards, also exerted an influence in this relapse into pessimism: “The economic downturn commencing in late 2008 generated predictions that ranged from the apocalyptic to the sanguine, across all sectors”.<sup>67</sup>

“Apocalypse Dreams” by Tame Impala (2012. A–17) somehow re-categorised dystopia in critical-constructive terms, fostering a sense of shared group mem-

65 Gilmour 2017, 75.

66 Gilmour 2017, 75.

67 Felton et al 2010, 619.

bership and identity. The Australian psychedelic rock band straightforwardly appealed to the audience's capacity to react, encouraging a collective response: "Are you too terrified to try your best? ... / Do you really live without the fear? ... / On and on we all go / Into another morning". The message of hopefulness is clear in the initial words: "This could be the day that we push through / It could be the day that all our dreams come true", like daydreams that are more real than real life, very much in the style of a psychedelic song.

This selection ends with "Sky's Grey" (A-18), from 2017, by the Canadian band Destroyer. It proves that the apocalyptic narrative is still very present in Western culture. Lyrics are both accusing and warning but, interestingly, they address the self – and by extension the listener – more than abstract social systems and established orders: "Bombs in the city, plays in the sticks / Should've seen it coming / Should've taken care / Should've tried pretending that anything was there". The voice is a disturbing whisper, bass frequencies prevail, and a dark acoustic atmosphere pervades the whole performance. The return to acoustic instruments, following a simple harmonic cycle in D major (I-VI-IV), is interesting.

Many other songs could increase the list, including several by The Rolling Stones:

The Stones, with raucous voice and syncopated beats, employed Dionysian shock to expose the dark side of nearly everything. They pronounced the inevitability of nuclear destruction in "Gimme Shelter" and the pleasure and power of drug addiction in "Sister Morphine." They solicited unbounded hedonism in "Some Girls," conveyed the inevitability of alienation in human relations ("Angie"), pronounced the impossibility of cosmic identity ("2,000 Light Years from Home"), vindicated Lucifer ("Sympathy for the Devil"), and promoted violent revolution ("Street Fighting Man").<sup>68</sup>

"Bad Moon Rising" (Creedence Clearwater Revival, 1969) embodied the principle of contrast between happy music and pessimistic lyrics. The verse "I hope you're quite prepared to die" revealed the acceptance of the outcome. However, it was also a call to reaction, as in classical dystopia the appeal to fight is always present. Peter Gabriel's "Here Comes the Flood" (*Peter Gabriel*, 1977) lamented the end of days: "Drink up, dreamers, you're running dry / ... We'll say goodbye to flesh and blood". Prince ("1999", 1982); Johnny Cash ("The Man Comes Around", 2002); and Alice Cooper ("The Last Man on Earth", 2011) also composed dystopian music. Critical dystopia is visible in songs like "Microphones in the Trees" by Silver Mt. Zion (*Pretty Little Lightning Paw*, 2004), which begins by poetically detailing the oppressive regimes of surveillance to which we are subjected, before opening up into a refrain of utopian hope that, when

68 Dunbar 2002.

played live, precedes an ecstatic instrumental climax: “Don’t! Give! Up! / Don’t! Give! In! / Our time will come / ’cause we are the flood”. The song is in E-Flat minor, following a well-known harmonic ostinato led by the violin. Its sound atmosphere is oppressive. Non-anglophone countries also participate in the production of dystopian music. For example, Spanish heavy metal bands have contributed doomsday songs and records, as in the case of Obús’ “Va a estallar el obús” (The obus is going to explode. *Prepárate*, 1981), Omission’s “Eve of an end” (*The Unholiest of Them*, 2016), and El Mago de Oz’s album *Ira Dei* (2019).

Currently, dystopia still works and sells within the music industry. To cite but a few more examples, St Vincent’s “The Apocalypse Song” (*Marry Me*, 2007) sings, “All your praying moments amount to just one breath”, in a direct biblical reference to the brevity of life in the grand scheme. The song “Radioactive” by Imagine Dragons (*Night Visions*, 2012) is completely apocalyptic. American progressive metal band Dream Theatre released *The Astonishing* in 2016, focusing explicitly on dystopia; it consists of a science-fiction narration structured as a “rock opera”.

## TRAITS OF DYSTOPIAN SONGS

There are certain features that arise repeatedly in either the verbal or the formal narratives of the songs analysed. Most of them can be categorised within the broad concept of “dystopia”, while some belong specifically to the realm of “critical dystopia”.

Contextual oscillations are frequent, as in the case of “millennialism”: there is a concentration of apocalyptic songs in the last years of the twentieth century, when the millennium effect became fascinating. Another watershed was provided by the 2001 attacks in New York City, indirectly echoed in popular music; as a consequence, critical dystopia might have lost strength with the sense of universal vulnerability. A third negative wave stems from the recent Great Recession, which has had a deep economic and sociological impact worldwide. In all cases it is an *urban* apocalypse, or an apocalypse in the city: in dystopian rock the city is the epicentre of disaster, and sometimes salvation consists of sheltering in nature, in a well-known exercise of contemporary pastoralism. And it takes place in the present, it is an apocalypse now, which stresses the urgency of the call: in rock culture, devastation happens in this life; most songs warn of *immediate* disaster (or disaster already accomplished).

The accompanying iconography is expressive, visible on album images and video clips, as with the example of Busta Rhymes’ cover of his 1998 release *Extinction Level Event*, and Robbie Williams’ cover of *Millennium* the same year. The film-making quality in the videos is uneven, with some of them consisting of a simple and uncritical accumulation of disaster images, while others constitute a well-assembled short that develops an interesting plot in worthwhile

audio-visual combinations. These videos become powerful educational resources because of their popularity and dissemination capacity. Often aesthetic vanguardism focuses on eschatology/devastation, recreating (fascinated by?) terror/sinister images (for example, David Bowie, in the gloomy video composition, music, and lyrics of “Future Legend”). A key visual-literary element that permeates all this music is darkness, normally preceded by the blinding light of missiles (like in Iron Maiden’s “Brighter than a Thousand Suns”). Afterwards, darkness and silence dominate the scenario, sealing the triumph of death. Darkness is comparable to a visual silence, implying the end of colours, music, and life; it is described in the book of Revelation as a powerful weapon that releases the forces of evil.

Contrast is one of the main narrative resources within dystopia. In some songs, horror, death, hatred, devastation, bombs, and screaming are combined with love/nostalgic evocations of life, as happens in Tom Waits’ refrain from “The Earth Died Screaming”. Sometimes contrast turns into bitter irony, like in REM’s “This Is the End of the World”, where a happy melody sings, “And I feel fine”. Or even mockery: “welcome to the hereafter” (Mr. Lif, “Earthcrusher”) and the album *Smile, It’s the End of the World*, by Hawk Nelson (2006). An extreme case is the celebration of war, as in Morrissey’s refrain “Come—nuclear bomb!”. Irony becomes provocation, to galvanize the listener’s conscience and incite action, very much in the spirit of critical dystopia.

Striking titles are used to attract attention: “1984”, “Sky is Falling”, and “Earthcrusher” are clear examples (see Annex). Some words recur in titles and lyrics of apocalyptic orientation, for example, “End”, “Sky”, “Doom”, and “Apocalypse”; but surprisingly the most common is “World”, involving the destruction of the whole earth in the catastrophe. This obsession may reveal in addition a call for universal twinning, which is logical because the life of everyone is at stake. The outcome is somehow an ideological unison regardless of the musical genre (punk, rap, pop, rock, heavy metal, and psychedelia) and associated aesthetics, as a fundamental agreement about peace prevails. Another key locution is “The end”, which becomes an absolute in itself, entailing the annihilation of the world. “Authenticity” is a moral imperative but rarely uttered; the mere fact a menace such as the end of the world is addressed elevates the singer and the song to a committed dimension, above normal music. Moreover, the ordinary treatment of the notion focuses to a larger extent on criticising “inauthenticity”, understood as a sacrilege due to spurious grounds and leading to a fatal destiny.

Some verses are especially sharp/accusing, like those by Bob Dylan in “A Hard Rain’s A-gonna Fall”: “the executioner’s face is always well hidden”. An imperative tone is another common feature, with many direct orders to the listener that are reminiscent of military discipline: “do”, “go”, “hide”, “beware”, “stay

strong”, “check it out”, and others. The sense of alarm is overwhelming, transmitting fear, anxiety, and horror (in lyrics, sounds, and images), aiming by these means to trigger a critical reaction from the listeners.

Interestingly, it is rare to hear mention of an afterlife; affection and religious/hopeful emotions disappear in this music. The promise of redemption (liberation from slavery) is, nonetheless, implicit within critical dystopia as the last stage, after action. In dystopian music God is barely mentioned; “religious” rock is rare. Rock takes the semiology from the apocalypse but discards spiritual and theological dogmas. Within neo-apocalyptic cultures there is no resident theology that might challenge others as contradictory or false, and they lack a corpus of doctrinal contents, rites, and obligations.

The musical parameters of many of the songs commented upon above have parallels with standard rock songs, emphasizing lyrics via diverse resources. Broadly speaking the acoustic effects available for dystopian songs are similar to those used in terror and war movie soundtracks: voices screaming, the thunder of bombs, and sudden outbreaks. Other recurring means are minor and diminished seventh chords and also gloomy melodies. The leading voice may whisper or roar, transmitting a specific emotion. Dissonances appear occasionally, shocking the listener, generally in combination with visual effects in the video. Powerful low-pitched sounds dominate, in an interesting association between this sound parameter and devastation. Perhaps this is why it is difficult to find apocalyptic music in female voices. A clear example is the Finnish band *Apocalyptica*, which we met above; it is integrated by four violoncellos, without a single violin or any other lighter instrument.

Most of these traits stem from the apocalyptic narrative that spread massively throughout the Cold War, but they come also from rock music’s need to reinvent itself periodically and find new aesthetic channels of expression that maintain or increase its social impact. The coalescence of both causal scenarios has resulted in a fertile production, as we have seen in this study.

## CONCLUSIONS

Critical dystopia in music is a catalyst for social awareness and cohesive progress in the face of a worrying future. It endorses activist citizenship and political resistance against destruction-apocalypse, in place of passive capitulation. Its foothold is collective fear, which is re-negotiated as a social force that then counters passive dystopia.

The conventional opposition between classical and critical dystopia has been called into question because almost all dystopias can be assumed to be critical dystopias, as they encompass strong allegations about the potential dangers of war/abuses of human rights. The formulation alone can call for a reaction by

the audience, no matter the resignation that the message may convey. However, critical dystopia, as analysed in this article, goes a step further by emphasising the need for active rebellion and faith in a better future (salvation). An additional hypothesis of this article is that *critical dystopia* in popular music may have taken over from *protest song*, a genre that had decayed considerably after the countercultural era. The educational slant of dystopian songs must be emphasised, intended to alert their audience and make people “learn” what they should think and how they should act, including even who to vote for. They form pedagogical narrations shrouded by the attractive language of popular music.

Dystopian rock is neither a religion nor the result of a formal theological system. It lacks a corpus of unified dogmas and objectives. The apocalypse in rock is the fear of a nuclear war (or comparable environmental disaster), but not of a fatal destiny executed by God. However, from a religious perspective, rock music plays a key sociological function in this contemporary dialectic, re-enchanting and de-secularising the world by means of the semiological recreation of Apocalypse and other fantastic realms. In this interpretive context devastation acts as a metaphor for punishment for social sins, generating a cultural destiny. Apocalypse also involves revelation-as-salvation, the final struggle between good and evil, the end of history, and the last rite of passage of humanity.

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- TARZAN (Kevin Lima and Chris Buck, US 1999).
- THE LORD OF THE RINGS I–III (Peter Jackson, US/UK/NZ 2001–2003).
- X-FILES (Created by: Chris Carter, Fox, US 1993–2018).

# ANNEX

Ref.	Title	Performer(s)	Album	Record label	Year	Video website
A-1	A hard rain's a-gonna fall	Bob Dylan	The Freewheelin'	Columbia (CL 1986)	1963	<a href="https://bit.ly/2CGmsqx">https://bit.ly/2CGmsqx</a>
A-2	The end	The Doors	The Doors	Elektra (EKS-74007)	1967	<a href="https://bit.ly/2n4Rdir">https://bit.ly/2n4Rdir</a>
A-3	Future legend/1984	David Bowie	Diamond Dogs	RCA (APL1-0576)	1974	<a href="https://bit.ly/22VYfo1">https://bit.ly/22VYfo1</a>
A-4	London calling	The Clash	London Calling	CBS (CBS 88478)	1979	<a href="https://bit.ly/1kFur7I">https://bit.ly/1kFur7I</a>
A-5	It's the end of the world as we know it	REM	Document	I.R.S. Records (IRS-42059)	1987	<a href="https://bit.ly/2k8AqaG">https://bit.ly/2k8AqaG</a>
A-6	Everyday is like Sunday	Morrissey	Viva Hate	His Master's Voice (CSD 3787)	1988	<a href="https://bit.ly/YOPagI">https://bit.ly/YOPagI</a>
A-7	The earth died screaming	Tom Waits	Bone Machine	Island Records (314-512 580-2)	1992	<a href="https://bit.ly/2v9SfOz">https://bit.ly/2v9SfOz</a>
A-8	Harmageddon	Apocalyptica	Inquisition Symphony	Mercury (558 300-2)	1998	<a href="https://bit.ly/1UDbzx">https://bit.ly/1UDbzx</a>
A-9	The song of salvation	Busta Rhymes	Extinction Level Event	Elektra (62211-2)	1998	<a href="https://bit.ly/2LUvPui">https://bit.ly/2LUvPui</a>
A-10	Millennium	Robbie Williams	I've Been Expecting You	Chrysalis (497 8372)	1998	<a href="https://bit.ly/1nLHnIQ">https://bit.ly/1nLHnIQ</a>
A-11	Sky is falling	Blackalicious	Blazing Arrow	MCA Records (088 112 806-2)	2002	<a href="https://bit.ly/2KkrO5a">https://bit.ly/2KkrO5a</a>
A-12	Earthcrusher	Mr. Lif	I Phantom	Definitive Jux (DUX37)	2002	<a href="https://bit.ly/2OzAHU9">https://bit.ly/2OzAHU9</a>
A-13	Apocalypse please	Muse	Absolution	EastWest (5050466-8587-2-6)	2003	<a href="https://bit.ly/1A9V4h1">https://bit.ly/1A9V4h1</a>
A-14	Yahweh	U2	How to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb	Island Records (9867829)	2004	<a href="https://bit.ly/2LSXjky">https://bit.ly/2LSXjky</a>
A-15	Brighter than a thousand suns	Iron Maiden	A Matter of Life and Death	EMI (0946 372321 2 5)	2006	<a href="https://bit.ly/28TCvY">https://bit.ly/28TCvY</a>
A-16	My apocalypse	Metallica	Death Magnetic	Warner Bros (508732-2)	2008	<a href="https://bit.ly/2M6M47k">https://bit.ly/2M6M47k</a>
A-17	Apocalypse dreams	Tame Impala	Lonerism	Modular Recordings (MODCD157)	2012	<a href="https://bit.ly/1voKqeS">https://bit.ly/1voKqeS</a>
A-18	Sky's grey	Destroyer	Ken	Merge Records (MRG599-DLX)	2017	<a href="https://bit.ly/2LWuDX1">https://bit.ly/2LWuDX1</a>

Fig. 1: Dystopian Songs Selection

# Western Apocalyptic Time and Personal Authentic Time

## ABSTRACT

The concept of time is culturally dependent. During different periods in the history of Western culture, differing conceptions of times competed for primacy, sometimes contradicting one another, sometimes complementing each other. Modern Westerners, I will claim, live on two timelines – a linear, historical and cultural timeline directed to the “end of days” and a personal, authentic timeline.

The Bible is a central cultural source for the linear conception of time: in the entrenched Judeo-Christian Western conception, time has a beginning, “In the beginning,” and an end, “in the end of days”. Time is directed in its entirety to this final event, to the establishment of God’s kingdom. In our modern consumer society, which is wholly concerned with personal time, collective time has lost its purpose and its reason for being preserved. The relationship to time started to gradually change from the general conceptions of linear, collective time which is external to us to a more subjective, personal conception of time. In consumerist capitalism, time becomes personal. I demonstrate the representations of these two concepts of time in the paintings of Chaya Agur.

## KEYWORDS

Authentic timeline, Biblical timeline, “End of Days”, Western Culture

## BIOGRAPHY

Bina Nir completed her doctoral thesis in the Faculty of Humanities at Tel Aviv University. Since 2000, she is a lecturer at the Yezreel Valley College and the Department Head of the Honors B.A. Program. Her research focuses on the interface of Western religions and contemporary cultures, specifically the genealogies of cultural constructs rooted in the Western religions, in areas such as the perceptions of time, judgement, leadership, and success and failure. Her book *Failure of Success* [in Hebrew] was published by Resling Press in 2016.

## INTRODUCTION

Time is a culture-dependent concept. Throughout the various periods of Western civilization, different concepts of time – some contradictory, some complementary – have been in competition. Westerners today, at least those inhabiting secular cultures, I shall argue, live generally along two axes of time. The first of these is a linear historical and cultural timeline which strives towards the “end of days”, a timeline that is based on a foundational religious narrative that has been transformed by the culture. The second is a personal and authentic timeline which characterizes capitalism and the culture of individualism. This cultural perception of time manifests itself in the cultural discourse, as well as in literature and in the arts.

In this article, we will look at these two axes of cultural time and examine their religious roots. Religion is an explicit marker of culture. The religious doctrines of any given culture reflect its thought systems and cultural values. The Christian religion and culture of the West were based on the Jewish scriptures that were transmitted throughout the different regions of the Roman Empire. Christianity preserved and diffused the books of the Old Testament canon.<sup>1</sup> Both religions view the Old Testament as a holy text, as the absolute truth, the product of divine revelation. While the Catholic Church mitigated the authority of the text with the authority of tradition, the Lutheran Reformation magnified the importance of the written word. Luther rejected the authority of tradition and established the doctrine of “Sola Scriptura” – one had to read the scriptures. By doing so, the Reformation placed the Jewish holy books at the heart of European identity.<sup>2</sup> Therefore I will look for the roots of the Western cultural perception of apocalyptic time in the texts of the Bible and the Christian scriptures, all while examining the development of personal, authentic time. I will also analyse artistic concepts of time that do not necessarily represent the dominant perceptions presented in culture, as will be explained in the article, and even criticize present conventional concepts of time. I will demonstrate and analyse such approaches in the paintings of Chaya Agur.<sup>3</sup> My explanations will be based on a personal interview with the painter in which she explained her paintings.

1 Malkin 2003, 44.

2 Hachohen 2006, 23; Eliav-Feldon 1997, 30.

3 The painter Chaya Agur, who was born in Israel and has lived in the Netherlands for 35 years, has since 1978 exhibited her paintings regularly in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague and Rosendale) and throughout Europe (Paris: The World Center for Contemporary Art, Nancy: Galerie Poirel, Barcelona: Marlborough Art Gallery). In Israel, Agur exhibited in 2009 at the Municipal Gallery in Afula and in 2010 at the Jerusalem Theater for the Performing Arts. Between 2002 and 2007, she ran a private gallery in central Amsterdam, “The Crane”. Agur uses mixed techniques, oil paints, watercolours and drawing. Her art is influenced by Dali and Chagall and her style can be called surrealist-symbolic.

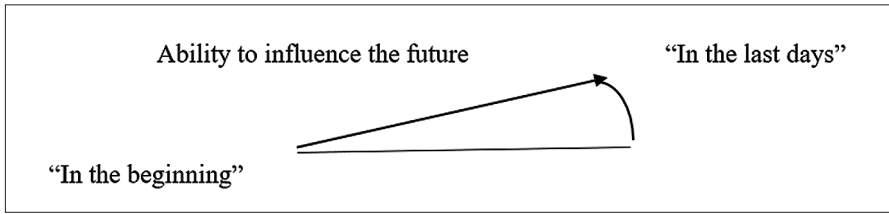


Fig. 1: Biblical time narrative graph.

## THE LINEAR TIMELINE

In Western Judeo-Christian thought, time has a beginning: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1, KJV), and an end: “And it shall come to pass in the last days” (Isa. 2:2). Linear biblical time is irreversible and strives wholly towards the final event, the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>4</sup> The prophets promise us that we have a deciding influence on this end, which is not a predetermined future: “For if ye thoroughly amend your ways and your doings ... then will I cause you to dwell in this place, in the land that I gave to your fathers, forever and ever” (Jer. 7:5–7). Man, in the Bible, finds himself within the stream of time, at any moment of which he may be subjected to the test of whether or not he succeeds or fails to live up to God’s will.<sup>5</sup>

This perception of time as an arrow leading from Genesis to Apocalypse lies at the foundations of Western culture and can be described as a vector. This vector has an ascending trajectory, as opposed to a horizontal one, similar to the vector of physical time. Since there is hope for future success, the undetermined future is always perceived as a higher, more perfect point in time. In other words, the upward pointing vector represents our concept of time as having upward momentum (see fig. 1).

Earthly time in the Bible is linear, and this fact is evident not only in the cosmology of the creation story. For example, the task assigned to Moses has a linear timeline with upward momentum in that there is an expectation of future success. This looking forward towards the future, which appears for the first time in the Old Testament as opposed to the predetermined future commonly accepted in the ancient world, brings about a new idea of faith. Time is not circular, but unidirectional and irreversible. The recognition of God’s will in the present contains the hope for a better future, a future in which one can be rewarded. This perception is manifested when God says to Abraham: “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless

<sup>4</sup> Leibowitz 2002.

<sup>5</sup> Rauch 1978, 10–11.

thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing” (Gen. 12:1–2) and “I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore” (Gen. 22:17).

“In the beginning God created” – marks the beginning of time. In the argument over the question of whether the universe had a beginning, and if so what that beginning was, there are two main schools of thought. The first, which includes Judaic, Christian and Muslim thought, claims that the universe was created *ex nihilo*, out of nothing, and that humanity must constantly make progress, as that is its essence. Saint Augustine recorded, “But there was nothing corporeal before heaven and earth... For whatsoever that were of which such a voice was made, unless it was made by thee, it could not be at all.”<sup>6</sup> The second school is the one expressed by Plato and Aristotle’s conception of God, according to which God is a designer and an architect, but not a creator. The material world is perceived as eternal rather than created. “If now this universe is fair and its Artificer good, it is plain that he looked to the eternal”;<sup>7</sup> “God ... having received all that is visible not in a state of rest, but moving without harmony or measure, brought it from its disorder into order”;<sup>8</sup> “So the universal design of the ever-living God ... and he made it a sphere in a circle revolving, a universe one and alone”;<sup>9</sup> “For the pattern is existent for all eternity; but the copy has been and is and shall be throughout all time continually.”<sup>10</sup>

“The last days” marks the end of time. The first verse of Genesis also lays the foundation for the end, possibly even for the Apocalypse. If there is a genesis, there must be an apocalypse. The Bible’s linear perception of time leads from the creation to the end of days, and it is along this timeline that history runs its course.<sup>11</sup> The arrow of time presents generation after generation, event after event, up until the present moment, from which there stretches a direct, continuous line towards the end point – the last days, the Apocalypse.<sup>12</sup> The prophets of Israel had much to say about the end of days, and about its dependence on the conduct of the community and the nation: “But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established in the top of the mountains; it shall be exalted above the hills, and people shall flow unto it” (Mic. 4:1); “Thus saith the Lord: Refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears: for thy work will be rewarded, saith the Lord; and they shall come again from the land of the enemy” (Jer. 31:16).

6 Augustine 1950, 238.

7 Plato 1888, 89.

8 Plato 1888, 93.

9 Plato 1888, 103–105.

10 Plato 1888, 123.

11 Dan 2000, 19.

12 Zeligman 1992, 102–103.

This belief in the end of days penetrated Christianity mainly through the book of Revelation, the Revelation of John. This book was heavily influenced by the apocalyptic revelations of Daniel, which became a kind of model for all the visionary revelations that came after it: “And he said, Behold, I will make thee know what shall be in the last end of the indignation: for at the time appointed the end shall be” (Dan. 8:19). The things described in Daniel’s vision became a cornerstone of historical perception in Western culture. Empires come and empires go, colliding with one another and replacing each other in turn, but this essential structure is the singular purpose that binds this process in an inevitable movement towards the end. The Revelation of John consists of a series of visions composed sometime around the end of the first century CE and attributed to John of Patmos, Jesus’s beloved apostle. It was a call for Christians to persevere in their faith and to look forward to the final triumph over their enemies. According to Christian dogma, the history of mankind begins with the Fall, the original sin in the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve’s subsequent exile, and continues through to the final salvation.

The foundations laid in the book of Daniel were elaborated upon towards the end of the Second Temple period, just before the Temple’s destruction.<sup>13</sup> There are those who maintain that this literature was written out of despair and loss of faith in daily religious worship as having an influence on the salvation of the individual and of the nation.<sup>14</sup> The idea of the apocalypse in the New Testament is rooted in the Old Testament,<sup>15</sup> and this fact raises two somewhat contradictory points: the Christian conception of apocalyptic time is not possible without the basic assumption of biblical time, but at the same time it requires a sharp deviation from the way time is perceived in the Old Testament, perhaps even a rupture.<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew Bible, unlike many ancient eastern cultures, ignores the supernatural and places the human experience within one-dimensional, earthly time. In such a view of time, the end of days is included as part of historical reality. The Old Testament sources put forth not a coherent vision of salvation but rather a series of apocalyptic motifs which place an emphasis on the momentum towards salvation and redemption in the last days. Joseph Klausner stressed that the Israelites were the only ancient people who had a messianic outlook, and this legacy, he claims, was passed on to the Western world by way of Christianity.<sup>17</sup>

13 Flusser identifies a link between ancient Christianity and certain schools of thought in Second Temple era Judaism. His overall conclusion is that Jesus himself associated with the sages and that there is a common denominator between Jesus’s philosophy and different factions of Judaism at the end of the Second Temple period, including patterns of belief concerning the end of days. See Flusser 2009, 131–132.

14 Dan 2000, 38.

15 Efron 2004, 269–270.

16 Dan 2009.

17 Klausner 1926.

Saint Augustine is the one to adjust the Judaic model of history and time to fit Christianity.<sup>18</sup> Augustine defines internal, experiential time, and identifies the past with historic memory, while the future is identified with expectation. According to him, human civilization is consistently advancing and developing. Yet, in parallel to this time, Augustine talks about the eternal time inhabited by God; mystical time. “In the Eternal nothing passeth away, but that the whole is present.”<sup>19</sup> Augustine attempts to find a solution and bridge the gaps between two contradictory concepts: eternal mystical time and linear earthly time. In his view, there is no conflict between the two. In the Christian West, these two dimensions of time coexist, the extra-natural mystical time occurs alongside the historical, earthly time. History in the Christian-Augustine conception is linear.

Western history, at least in Western liturgical writings, has a beginning and an end.<sup>20</sup> All of Christian philosophy takes place within the sequence of time and thus within history. The story of humanity’s origins, as it is told in the West, assumes the existence of progress<sup>21</sup> and development or, in other words, an upwards trajectory, as expressed by the arrow of biblical time. This linear conception of history and its division into segments, which follow one another as they get closer and closer to the end, has become dominant in all the cultural spaces that rely on the Bible as the cornerstone of their worldview.<sup>22</sup> The foundation for this is laid out as early as the book of Genesis.

Genesis, which is a “book of origins”, tells us of the “origin of heaven and earth” as well as the genealogy of families, tribes and nations. The book describes acts that denote either progress or regression as far as the fulfilment of mankind’s mission – as mandated by God – is concerned. In other words, acts that express loyalty to the mission or rebellion against it. The book then goes on to report on the successes and failures of the chosen ones to advance the great promise inherent in their mission. This is the same principle according to which the stories of the Israelites’ origins had been selected throughout the first five books of the Old Testament. The Hebrew Bible is characterized by a historiographical approach, that is to say, the writing is influenced by the experience of history, the impressions made by historical events and hope for the future. The biblical story is composed of the history of ideas and of ideals, written down with linear uniformity that did not exist in the first place.<sup>23</sup> This biblical underpinning has had an influence on cultural domains that are marked by modernity, capitalism and democracy. They are founded on a Christian worldview which

18 Russell 1945, 353–354.

19 Augustine 1950, 231–232.

20 Bloch 1964, 5–6.

21 Carr 1987, 109–113.

22 Dan 2000, 265–308.

23 Zeligman 1992, 102–103.

had inherited the Judaic conception of time and history through the Old Testament.<sup>24</sup> However, while the Hebrew Bible's framework sees history as a process separate from the divine, the inclusion of God in the course of history was an innovation brought about by Christianity.

The writing of history, generation after generation, was influenced by the way the biblical stories were told. The three historical religions had imprinted our consciousness with a perception of history as a succession of patriarchs.<sup>25</sup> Such a historical approach evaluates people and epochs by their contribution to humanity's success. Even the terms "Renaissance" and "The New Era", which succeeded the so-called "Dark Ages", express a belief in historical forces of renewal and redemption. This belief is Judeo-Christian in its essence – the belief that we are moving towards a new era, an era of successes and accomplishments, as opposed to the failures of the past.

A created world must make room for history because only under this assumption can one reject the theory of the eternal return of past events: the sequence of generations, without beginning or end, would transform time into a cyclical phenomenon without hope or meaning. Christianity is a historian's religion – the Christian holy books are history books and Christian worship commemorates episodes from the life of God on earth, alongside church liturgy and the Acts of Saints. There is another, even deeper sense in which Christianity is fundamentally historical. The fate of humanity, which unfolds between the Fall and Judgment Day, stands before the eyes of Christianity as a continuous adventure. In Christianity, nevertheless, theology is not derived from the future but from the promise, even though human existence is as a matter of fact an encounter with time and man's actions within time. Western civilization, unlike many other cultures, has great expectations of time. People of action, in the West, have to constantly learn lessons from the past if they wish to succeed in the future.<sup>26</sup> History has a style and an order, which grow more perfect over time.

## THE RIFT BETWEEN MYSTICAL TIME AND EARTHLY TIME

It is a commonly accepted basic assumption today that the Bible perceives time as being linear, as opposed to other cultures which think of time as being cyclical.<sup>27</sup> There are, however, those who oppose this generalizing notion and the

24 Russell 1945, 363–364.

25 It is telling that the chroniclers of the Middle Ages could not help but begin their accounts of the present generation by relating back to Adam, the first man (Sand 2004, 24).

26 Bloch 1964, 5–6.

27 Cultures which maintain circular time generally speaking see no point in planning for the future or anticipating it, for the future is nothing but a repetition of what has already happened in the

assumption that unlike the Greek concept of time, which is mainly spatial, the biblical concept of time is temporal and rhythmical, as manifested by its division into fixed periods. These approaches claim that both the Bible and the Greek texts contain examples of these two concepts of time simultaneously. There are even some who claim that the Bible also espouses the cyclical view of time,<sup>28</sup> alongside the linear view, as exemplified in the calendar, which is the cyclical time of the seasons in the Land of Israel;<sup>29</sup> however, we would be wise to note that the condition for maintaining this schedule is the linear, historical memory.

The belief in one, extra-natural, creator God took control away from the wheel of fortune, the forces of nature and the deterministic fate that make up the foundation of the cyclical time paradigm. Linear biblical time places the biblical Israelite within specific time; the biblical Israelite is driven through time by God's will towards a better future at the end of days. The Bible sees linear history, however, as a process separate from God.

Nevertheless, there are two kinds of time in the Bible: the eternal, mystical time relegated to God and the historical, linear time which courses from Genesis to Apocalypse – earthly time. For biblical man, earthly time is unmistakably linear and dependent on obedience to God's will; God exists, however, outside of this time, as an eternal being. The Bible paints time as a resource belonging to God,<sup>30</sup> which he then dispenses willingly to man. As the composer of the Psalms puts it: "The day is thine, the night also is thine: thou hast prepared the light and the sun ... thou hast made summer and winter" (Ps. 74:16–17). Partaking in the experience of mystical, divine time, which is holy, is given to men on special occasions, instances when man retires from linear, earthly time to experience another kind of time. The creator, who is the master of time, plucks the Sabbath out of ordinary time, out of the linear sequence, makes it holy and relegates it to divine time. Linear time is the time of toil, effort and work towards a purpose. The Sabbath thus becomes a holy day, differentiated from ordinary days and their sequentiality. It is outside of the realm of human activity, for man is not allowed to do as he pleases on the Sabbath and the day is marked by a prohibition of work. This tangible distinction of the Sabbath, which is essentially

past. In the Indian Hopi language there are no terms that represent the past, the present or the future. In Western culture, where time is an independent dimension, it is independent of the type of activity that takes place in it. A culture of time and fate like that of the Chaldeans, by contrast, has given rise to astrology, because in their perception, time, which is the course of the stars, determines fate. See Zakay 1998, 90–93.

28 Gelernder believes that Isaiah presents a cyclical concept of time in his promise that at the end of days when people internalize their faith, the universe will be recreated, with a more perfect world order. "For, behold, I create new heavens and a new earth: and the former shall not be remembered, nor come into mind" (Isa. 65:17). Gelernder 2001, Book 2, 124.

29 Schweid 1984, 14–15.

30 As Judah Halevi (1075–1141) expressed it: "The slaves of time – slaves of slaves are they." Time is a slave – it is subjugated to God.

different from all other days, generates the experience of another kind of time, divine-mystical time:<sup>31</sup> “But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work ... the Lord ... rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exod. 20:10–11).

In Jewish culture, holy time is differentiated from mundane, ordinary time. Eternal time belongs to God and so do the heavenly bodies which dictate the human calendar year – the sun and the moon are also subject to God’s will. When he wants to, God can change their course and stop time: “Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon; and thou, Moon, in the valley of Ajalon. And the sun stood still, and the moon stayed ... So the sun stood still in the midst of heaven, and hasted not to go down about a whole day” (Josh. 10:12–13). Man had experienced holy, mystical time, that eternal present, in the Garden of Eden.<sup>32</sup> From the moment humanity was cast out of Eden, God, the master of eternal time, has been granting them special occasions on which they can partake of this time.

The Hebrew monotheism is the first to come up with the idea of God which exists outside of nature while controlling its forces. God reveals himself to man through his actions in history, by appearing in earthly, human time. It is through the transference of God from the realm of nature to the realm of history that Judaism has allowed God to be distanced from mankind. Unlike the pagan religions, in which the cyclical powers of nature are ever-present and man inhabits the same mystical time as them,<sup>33</sup> the God of the Old Testament exists outside of nature in an eternal present and reveals himself to humans periodically, conducting his relationship with them linearly in the course of human time. This he does through miracles, revelations and the envoy of angels.

The authors of the Old Testament share the idea that the divine real is scary and awful; a glimpse into mystical time is therefore a powerful experience. In the first chapters of the Bible, mystical time is very close to human time, which is still in the process of becoming. God is very much involved in the lives of the first humans: he breathes life into the first man, creates woman, and allows people to hear his voice. The first humans and God stroll around the Garden of Eden together; it is planted firmly within mystical time (even though it already contains the Tree of Life, forbidden to the humans). The guarding of the Tree of Life begins with the expulsion, with the beginning of human time: “So he drove

31 Schweid 1984.

32 Agur 1997, 213–215.

33 In Greek mythology the mystical, eternal time is the time of the gods, but sometimes human beings could experience it too. During the Golden Age, when gods and humans coexisted, the gods had not yet retreated to the summit of Mount Olympus, but rather shared the land with mankind, specifically in the Macona valley. Humans lived alongside the immortals and remained forever young. See Vernant 2002, 47–48.

out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24). The exile of man out of Eden brings about the initial rift between divine time and earthly, linear time, reserved for humans.

In the cultures of the East, mystical time is generally contained within earthly time. In Mesopotamia, human actions are a reproduction of a mythical model, a repetition of the actions of the gods or of the ancient ancestors.<sup>34</sup> In cultures where the concept of time is cyclical, earthly time is not disconnected from mystical time. Every creation recreates the explicit cosmogenous act of creating the universe. To ensure the continued existence of reality, one must ritually re-enact the divine act of creation, which means reverting to cosmic time. In these cultures, secular time has no meaning. Rituals combine the two kinds of time and make it so that during them man does not exist in meaningless secular time, since he is emulating a divine archetype.<sup>35</sup>

In Catholicism, mystical time is linked to the religious experience.<sup>36</sup> The Church promised unconditional love to all those who took refuge under its wing and offered humanity a way to believe that God loves us and has forgiven us. The universe was a simple place to understand: man stood at its centre with heaven or hell as his future destination, in the promised mystical time. The theological notion of time is not derived only from a fixed future, but comes also from the promise of salvation as the Christian “Realized Eschatology”<sup>37</sup> largely explains. With the acceleration of secularization processes in Europe at the end of the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance,<sup>38</sup> humanity’s longing for mystical time diminished, whereas linear, earthly time became more and more significant.

The loss of connection to this mystical, religious time happened gradually. In the agrarian, pre-industrial society, people lived according to the calm and regular rhythm of the seasons and the calendar of agricultural work. The belief that beyond these time-marking events there was a realm of eternal time provided a

34 Eliade 1959, 22.

35 Funkenstein, 1991.

36 Christians believe in the end of days, when humanity will join the eternal, mystical time. The prophecy about the King of the end of days first appeared in the letter “On the Time and Place of the Appearance of the Antichrist”, sent by Adso, the abbot of Emperor Louis IV’s widow, in 954. The letter says that at the end of days the King of the Franks will rise up and unite the East and the West by conquering the Holy Land. As the end of miracles approaches, Gog and Magog will burst forth from the north but they will be defeated by the Christian King. After the victory, the King will ascend to the Mount of Olives, spread out his hands, lay down his crown and return his soul to the Creator. Then, after every authority and jurisdiction in Israel has been destroyed, Antichrist will be revealed and the events of the Apocalypse will begin. See Yali Haran 2005, 129.

37 “The salvation of individuals is the principal focus of the earlier New Testament writings. In Paul this salvation is both present and future; the two are closely linked” (Metzger/Coogan 1993, 670).

38 Arbel 2002, 87–88.

measure of confidence in time. The process of secularization and the transition to life according to the clock in the earthly realm, as opposed to the calendar in conjunction with eternal time, gave people living in Western cultures new norms and worldviews regarding time: the secular man had been exiled out of Eden for good, tossed into earthly time, and this new freedom imbued him with fear and a fierce appetite for competition, success and glory.

We can demonstrate the loss of connection to eternal, mystical time by referring to the painting “Crossing Nature” by Chaya Agur (fig. 2). In an interview with the painter, she explains that the title “Crossing Nature” has a double meaning in relation to the painting – it refers to the crucifixion of nature as well as the act of angering nature, or going against its laws. The painting depicts the paradox of the eternal time that Jesus represents as the son of God and the linear time of the ever-changing natural phenomena represented by his human form. She explained that the crucifixion represents Jesus’s transition from a human existence in linear time to an eternal divine existence, as well as the opportunity given to mankind via the crucifixion to free themselves from the burden of linear time. At the same time, the crucifixion also describes what is happening to Jesus’s body, which is a coherent part of nature and subject to its physical laws just like any other creature in the material world. The subject of the crucifixion is very common in pictorial art and there have been countless interpretations and depictions of it by different artists. However, the emphasis always tends to be on Jesus’s suffering and/or on the suffering of those around him. Here, by contrast, the figure of Jesus on the cross is positioned in the midst of beautiful and indifferent nature which carries on unperturbed in the face of the crucifixion. The dove above Jesus’s head is an example of this dualism – on the one hand, it is the Christian symbol of the holy spirit hovering over him, but on the other hand, it is also an animal which uses its environment for its own needs, and as such is busy building a nest for its chicks out of Jesus’s long hair. The figure of Maria on the distant horizon was painted as the grieving mother, based on the model of Michelangelo’s “Pieta”. However, yet again, unlike the customary depictions of Jesus’ mother, she is not by his side. Instead, she is distant and symbolically representative of the two kinds of time – as the eternal mother of God and as a human body painted in the shape of an hourglass whose time is running out. Instead of a halo, her head is crowned by a clock-face.

The two kinds of time present in the painting are not separate – eternal time contains linear time, and vice versa. This is the painter’s attempt to illustrate the paradox of time in the human experience. Man as a creature of nature, made from the dust and destined to return to it, and Man as a creature made in the image of God conduct a shared existence within the human frame. In my opinion, the painting emphasizes the indifference of nature to the human history and its events within time. The painting contains other elements from the paint-

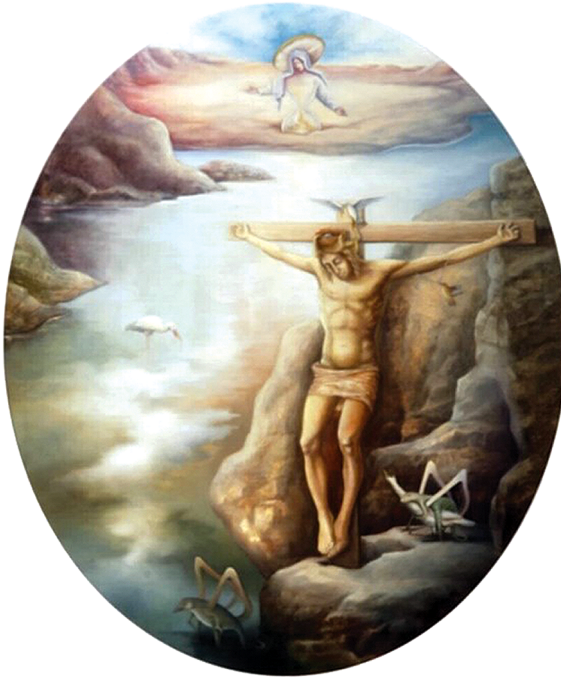


Fig. 2: Chaya Agur, *Crossing Nature*, oil on canvas, 40 x 50 cm.

er's symbolic world which amplify the paradox of time within existence: the lyre bird is the eternal soul being raped (at Jesus's feet) by a lizard-like creature which symbolizes a connection to the earth. Inside the water, we see the hybrid creature born from this coupling – a lizard with lyre wings hesitantly walking on stilts.

I shall also demonstrate the loss of the connection to mystical, eternal time belonging to God and the angels, and the entrenchment within earthly time which provokes the appetite for material success and earthly glory, through the painting “Falling Angel” by Chaya Agur (fig 3). The analysis of the painting's symbols and meanings is based partly on the interview with the painter. While in the painting “Crossing Nature” the painter showed that eternal time and linear time are not separated, in the painting “Falling Angel” we observe a slightly different angle on the same concept. This painting, painted with mixed techniques, depicts an angel falling from mystical time down to earthly time as he crumbles into the treasures of which he is composed. Diamonds and gems scatter everywhere. His broken wing is trapped within the “fake” light of the “cow” which overflows with the milk of success and earthly riches. On the right side of the painting, we see a heavenly chicken laying golden eggs and casting the diamonds out as bait – an image of wealth and fleeting success. Humanity



Fig. 3: Chaya Agur, *Falling Angel*, mixed techniques, 50 x 60 cm.

is represented by masks (the fake self that acts according to the convention of its historical time). The masks have gaping mouths, ready to swallow the wealth pouring down into them. One of them, at the front of the painting, is reaching out a hand to grab the fleeting wealth that is raining down before it. The artist criticizes here, in my opinion, the capitalistic pursuit of abundance and success within a linear time and represents it as an alienated, 'false pursuit' which distances the human being from an authentic inner search.

## PERSONAL AUTHENTIC TIME

The Renaissance is regularly presented as the period that saw the birth of the individual, in the modern sense of the word. However, the discovery of the Human during the Renaissance is not a complete innovation, but rather a new version of a phenomenon whose roots are firmly planted in the foundations of Western culture. Individualism is tightly bound up with the birth of the self-awareness necessary for the development of the individual. While this self-awareness had

already developed all the way back in the classical era and in the ancient Jewish tradition,<sup>39</sup> the rise of individualism in its modern reincarnation was made possible by secularization:<sup>40</sup> individualism allowed man to abandon his ties to the moral structure of God's universe in order to accept any "truth" he discovered.

Somewhat paradoxically, individualism developed within Christianity despite the lack of freedom Christians experienced under the yoke of the Catholic Church. Christianity teaches the individual to distinguish between good and evil and allows him to "fulfil himself". In Judaism and in the classical Greek tradition, the individual actually has less responsibility than in Christianity: the Christian doctrine emphasizes the power of spiritual activity and the potential of the individual to increase his divine capacities through spiritual labour. By doing so, Christianity contributed to the development of self-awareness, and this self, the one who wields this authority, is perfected during the Renaissance.<sup>41</sup>

The process of secularization also influenced the way the West approached history. Up until the thirteenth century, historiography was decisively Christian and dependent on theology, i.e. the religious establishment, which determined categorically which sources were worthy of historical attentions and which were forbidden.<sup>42</sup> The people of the Renaissance, by contrast, adopted the approach of Cicero, who called history "the teacher of life" and focused on human drama, human relationships, human weaknesses and successes.<sup>43</sup> History too went through a process of secularization, based on the arrow of earthly time, as it is characterized in the Bible. That is to say, it is informed by the idea that understanding human experiences of the past is helpful in understanding the present and can even be used to predict the future.

These combined phenomena of secular individualism and the return to earthly time can be witnessed in Renaissance art.<sup>44</sup> The link between art and cultural moods is rather complex. The study of art history is based on the nature of the connection between works of art and cultural trends or the zeitgeist in different fields of human culture.<sup>45</sup> We can agree that Renaissance art celebrates the em-

39 The God of the Old Testament allows man to be free. Although God is a legislator, a reward giver and a punisher, reward and punishment are not arbitrary acts, such as Calvin's God's decisions about human destiny. The God of the Bible reveals to man the purpose of his life and how he must go about achieving said purpose, but he does not force him in any particular direction. While idolatry demands servitude, the monotheistic worship of God enables self-consciousness by experiencing life as a problem. See Fromm 1966, 47.

40 Shanahan 1992, 56.

41 Shanahan 1992, 53.

42 Arbel 2002, 87–88.

43 Arbel 2002, 90.

44 We must keep in mind that Renaissance culture as we know it was the culture of the upper classes, those with power and money, and not of the merchants and the petite bourgeoisie. See Fromm 1941, 47.

45 Arbel 2002, 105; Huizinga 1955, 244–245.

powered individual, the self as a source of truth and thus, through a process of self-discovery, the creation of the unique self. An example of this can be found in the biographies of the Renaissance. Biography provides a study of the individualistic marks of distinction attributed to important persons.<sup>46</sup>

The race towards the future inside earthly time has led to, among other things, the development of the modern conception of time,<sup>47</sup> along with the growing importance of competition. Through this process, minutes became valuable and time became such a precious resource that humans feel they must not waste it on worthless pursuits.<sup>48</sup> For example, the Renaissance artist Alberti Batista,<sup>49</sup> in order to make the most of his time, began each day by making a precise schedule. Man became master of his fate and time became a personal resource.

As we mentioned, this appearance of the individual along with his unique perception of time is reflected in Renaissance art in many ways, including in the technique of perspective drawing. Perspective captures an individualistic view of the world since it depicts the observer's personal point of view within earthly time. The retreat of mystical time is the retreat of the simultaneous point of view,<sup>50</sup> which is a way of looking from the standpoint of divine eternal time, bearing no perspective geometrical considerations.

The practice of perspective,<sup>51</sup> which was developed in the Renaissance, attests to a change in the conception of time: the estimation of perspective is chronological and causal. As the observer moves through time and space, his personal perspective changes. Therefore the reality seems to change with every passing unit of time. This is a shift from the perception of eternal time and mystic symbolism to a perception of time influenced by, among other things, new scientific thought governed by logic and the observer's individual experience within a system. Perspective is a graphic representation of objects in three-dimensional space, according to the individual's optical perception of reality.<sup>52</sup> When the observer moves through time, at any point in time the objects in the depicted space are drawn from his personal, individual perspective. Man is then placed at the centre of the act of observation as an investigator of reality, as

46 Burckhardt 1944, 171–172.

47 Levine 2006, 51–67.

48 Fromm 1941, 58.

49 Bluedom 2002, 227.

50 The simultaneous point of view, typical of the Middle-Ages, was not subdued by the limits of time and space or cause and effect as observed in reality. It was an unindividual, eternal point of view. See Huizinga, 1955.

51 Arbel 2002, 113–114.

52 The laws of perspective are based on lines that meet at one point – the focal point in the eyes of the observer. The artist and architect Leon Battista Alberti established perspective as a theory for painters and architects. See Backet 1994, 88.

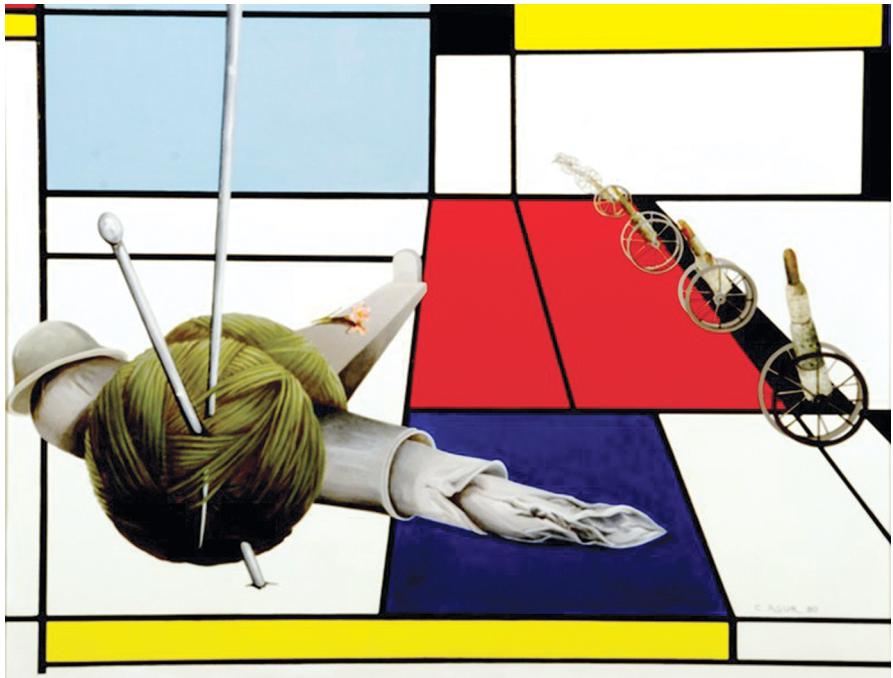


Fig 4: Chaya Agur, *Death of a Soldier on a Mondrian Battlefield*, oil on canvas, 80 x 60 cm.

opposed to the eternal, divine point of view which dominated art over the previous centuries. The description of the world through the light entering the lens of the observer's eye turns the discrete observer – the artist – into the focal point of the world.

The painting “Death of a Soldier on a Mondrian Battlefield” by Chaya Agur (fig. 4) is a good demonstration of the perspective technique. The painter said that she was reacting to the theory of painting of Pieter Cornelis Mondrian. Mondrian, a Dutch painter and one of the founders of Modernism, painted in primary colours and in accordance with the golden ratio in an attempt to simplify the components of aesthetics. According to Mondrian, these elements are the basic foundation of his “reality”, there is no representation of “time” in this reality. In the painting “Death of a Soldier on a Mondrian Battlefield”, Chaya Agur inserts the linear time of perspective into Mondrian's timeless world. Linear time contains the tenses – past, present and future – and thus Agur represents death as belonging to the non-eternal time of perspective. The soldier's grave, the canons and the fields of colour converge on a single point, the vanishing point of the perspective. Perspective is limited: it cannot see space or time beyond the vanishing point, and death in the painting represents temporality.

Agur's painting also expresses a critique of male logic, expressed by linear time, while female time is represented as cyclical, thus the male symbols in the painting are the ones painted in perspective.

The painter's claim to change Mondrian's timelessness into a linear time in her painting is, in my opinion, not totally successful. The two "Times" are not entirely separated. The painting is divided into two parts – at the top, Mondrian's geometric forms and the basic colours appear in his own style and at the bottom, the painter introduces the linear time by the laws of perspective. Again we see, as in her other paintings, that those two times exist simultaneously.

Today, Westerners live along two parallel axes of time. On the communal and cultural level, the linear time axis is manifested in the grand narratives of history, democracy and capitalism. On the personal and authentic level, Western man is caught up in the race towards future success, which is also founded on linear thought and anticipation of the future, albeit on an individual scale. In terms of the religious underpinning of the linear timeline, there is a distinction to be made between approaches that see God as responsible for salvation and approaches that see man as capable of influencing his fate and driving the wheel of fortune. When humans believe they can affect their future, because it is not yet determined, they develop the motivation to launch into a pursuit through time of future personal and authentic success. This motivation may be religious in its origins, but it has undergone a process of secularization.

Nevertheless, the axis of personal time is also based on religious patterns of thought. The belief that man can influence his future stems from the biblical conception of time. In the second half of the second century, the Greek philosopher Galen was the first to point out the difference between the biblical and Greek cultures and claims that the fundamental divergence between the two is the result of two different cosmologies.<sup>53</sup> Galen maintains that the principle of God's free will could only arise against the backdrop of biblical cosmology, according to which God has the power to bring matter into a state of order. God's will designs a different future and contains the possibility of creation, change, renewal, exchange, irreversibility and improvement. Galen adds that the lack of free will in classical Greek culture is also a result of its proper cosmology. In an eternal and deterministic world, free will cannot exist – everything is in the hands of fate and necessity. The Old Testament, which posits a world created *ex nihilo*, pre-supposes the existence of free will.<sup>54</sup> This free will is at the basis of the personal authentic axis of time.

In today's technological, consumer capitalist society, time has become a valuable personal resource linked to success and achievement and perceived as

53 Dihle 1982.

54 Kaufman 1972, 244.

an authentic form of capital. Social and economic success today is measured in terms of efficacy and optimal results within a limited frame of time. Whoever cannot meet the deadline or perform according to schedule is considered unfit or a failure. It was in 1748 that Benjamin Franklin uttered his famous maxim “Time is money.”<sup>55</sup> This attitude towards time in the West has produced an economic metaphor of time known as “temponomics” – the combination of time and economics. Temponomics assumes that time is a resource that ought to be considered in the same way we consider money, which therefore makes it possible to “earn time”, “save time” and even “sell time”.<sup>56</sup>

Time “passes”, time “goes”, time “flies” and time “runs out”. Western man feels as if time itself is in motion. Time is experienced as a central resource that is constantly depleting. It is a unit of value, a form of tender, capital to be invested and consumed and most importantly an important resource for success.<sup>57</sup> Some have even proclaimed modern man “drunk on time”.<sup>58</sup> Our current Western myth is a chronic lack of time. Secular life in the West, which is devoid of faith or the belief in the everlasting soul, is imbued with the feeling that time in general is a linear progression towards extinction. In the personal dimension, Westerners live with the temporal biological feeling of our lives rushing by us and of ever-nearing death and personal decimation. Time-based expressions such as the “ticking biological clock” express life as a kind of organic clock whose time is limited and allotted in advance.

## EPILOGUE

As this article shows, the biblical arrow of time which underpins the foundation of Western culture and leads us from Genesis to Apocalypse is also present in the grand narratives of the modern age. The concept of progress as it relates to history cannot exist without the assumption of a beginning and an end, similarly to the way Marx’s predictions assumed that the proletariat revolution would achieve the final goal of the classless society. The axis of historical time is presented as having a definite end. In parallel, the rise of consumer society, whose interest lies in the personal authentic axis of time, has led to the development of a more individualistic and subjective perception of time.

However, while the overall perception of time in the West is linear, today, in the digital age and in the New Age era, we are witnessing the emergence of new, different and alternative ideas of time. We can also identify a return

55 Levine 2006, 90.

56 Zakay 1998, 93–94.

57 Nir 2016.

58 Eyal 1996, 141.



Fig. 5: Chaya Agur, *The Two Madonnas*, oil on canvas, 60 x 50 cm.

to mystical simultaneous time – to observation from the “divine” viewpoint. It is possible nowadays to see or experience the whole world simultaneously, thanks to an immense capacity of memory, which is not unlike the complete memory that is possible on the level of a higher power such as God.<sup>59</sup> The creation of a virtual environment can also be likened to world creation.<sup>60</sup> A virtual reality is not necessarily similar to everyday reality. The virtual world can be very different from the real world, even in its most fundamental principles. Such an environment takes us back to the dream time characteristic of surrealist art. The dream does not follow the laws of reality or of any particular style – every artist has their own personal, subjective environment.

To sum up, let us examine this surrealist dream time in the painting “*The Two Madonnas*” by Chaya Agur (fig. 5), which depicts several realities existing simultaneously, side by side. This is a time that contains everything – the past, the present and the future (as it appears nowadays in the digital augmented

<sup>59</sup> Rosen 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Friedman 2006.

reality). The painter claims that we can see how every single thing in the painting stems from the same source, the same figure – Mary. Mary personifies creativity and the energy of the world on the abstract, non-religious plain. Everything arises from the shape elements of her dress and crown – the source is singular while the shapes are infinite. The spaces in the painting seem isolated from one another, which is what linearity feels like; however, in fact, all times coexist simultaneously. The poet (represented by the harp) drowning in the sea, Laocoön and his sons battling reality, they are all struggling against something which is not stable or real, which flows out of the dress and comes back to it – this is dream time and cyclical, feminine time. Everything stems from the same figure and makes its way back to it. Mary’s hands are crossed and she is depicted in a stable position which is symbolic of the Platonic ideal reality. Her eyes look with compassion upon the entirety of creation, while the second Madonna, her American counterpart in the bottom right corner, is the Madonna of materialism.

Agur’s painting “The Two Madonnas” presents, in my opinion, a critical point of view upon the linear time concept of the capitalist culture. This is why I chose to include it in the summary of the article. Maria looks on with compassion at humanity’s Sisyphean struggle in and with time. Her compassion stems from the broader perspective from which she observes reality. In the painting Maria herself is the source of all the seemingly changing forms that come from her and return to her.

This cyclical conception of time presented by the artist, so different from the dominant narrative in the West, appears already in Ecclesiastes: “The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun” (1:9), and resonates in the words of Shakespeare in Sonnet 123:

Our dates are brief, and therefore we admire  
What thou dost foist upon us that is old,  
And rather make them born to our desire  
Than think that we before have heard them told.<sup>61</sup>

According to Shakespeare the quick aging and changing of everything “new” is actually an illusion that conceals the cyclical truth.

61 Booth 1977, 107.

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**Open Section**



# Reading Bond Films through the Lens of “Religion”

## Discourse of “the West and the Rest”

### ABSTRACT

“Religion” has been absent from the study of James Bond films. Similarly, James Bond has been absent from studies on religion and popular culture. This article aims to fill the gap by examining 25 Bond films through the lens of “religion”. The analysis suggests that there are a number of references to “religion” in Bond films, although “religion” is typically not a main topic of the films. Furthermore, there is a detectable pattern in the films: “religion” belongs primarily to what is regarded as not belonging to “the West” and “the West” is considered modern, developed and rational as opposed to the backward, exotic and “religious” “Rest”. When “religion” appears in “the West”, it is seen positively if it is related to Christianity and confined to the private sphere and to the rites of passage. In this sense, representations of “religion” in Bond films contribute to what Stuart Hall named the discourse of “the West and the Rest”, thus playing a role in the maintenance of the idea of “the West”. This will be demonstrated by focusing on four thematic examples from the films: mythical villains, imperialist attitude to “religion” outside “the West”, “religion” central in the plot (voodoo and tarot), Christianity in “the West”. This article also provides grounds for suggesting that reading Bond films through the lens of “religion” contributes to both Bond studies and studies on religion and popular culture.

### KEYWORDS

Religion, Film, James Bond, Popular Culture, the West, Discourse, Representation, Myth, Colonialism, Imperialism, Christianity, Secular, Rationality

### BIOGRAPHY

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## THE DOUBLE ABSENCE

James Bond is one of the best-known fictional secret agents in the world. Therefore, it is not surprising that Bond films and novels have received a lot of attention from scholars. There are many interesting takes on the popular figure of Bond, focusing, for example, on narrative structures, imperial ideologies, sexism, Britishness and reading formations.<sup>1</sup> For some reason, “religion”<sup>2</sup> has not been much written about in Bond studies, although it is not completely absent.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is expected, because Bond films are not seen as “religious” or as commentaries on “religion”.

The relative absence of “religion” in Bond scholarship is one thing; the other notable absence is the lack of Bond references in studies on religion and popular culture. There is a lively research industry in religion and popular culture, and scholars have been keen to study popular films whenever some “religious” and mythical themes occur, but Bond films, as far as I am aware, have not been addressed. They have not received as much attention as, for example, *STAR WARS* (George Lukas, US 1977–2005; J.J. Abrams, US 2015; Rian Johnson, US 2017; J.J. Abrams, US 2019) or *STAR TREK* (Gene Roddenberry, US 1966–69), to name just a few popular examples.<sup>4</sup>

- 1 The most famous earlier readings are Kingsley Amis’s entertaining, less scholarly defence of Bond (Amis 1965), Umberto Eco’s classic analysis of Bond novels (Eco 1992) and a co-authored study by Tony Bennett and Janet Woollacott (Bennett/Woollacott 1987). Both Eco and Bennett and Woollacott aim to explain why Bond is popular. Eco’s originality is in detecting a key semiotic structure that explains the popularity of Bond novels. Eco argues that the stories are organized in binary oppositions and repeat patterns common to myths and fairy tales. Eco’s reading is complicated by Bennett and Woollacott, who carve out a theoretical space for thinking about Bond’s popularity through the variety and complexity of “reading formations”, focusing not only on the novels but also on the broader Bond phenomenon. These readings have become standard examples in popular culture and cultural studies textbooks (Strinati 1995; Harris 1996; Turner 2003). They describe the Bond world as right-of-centre, sexist, racist, imperialist, capitalist, individualist, escapist, nostalgic (for the lost British empire) and intertextual, but not reducible to any of these; it is capable of articulating many different and even contradictory values and discourses, and the constellation has changed over time. These classic studies are worth mentioning here to point out that they are a resource for thinking about the complexity of the Bond phenomenon (and avoiding reductive claims about Bond) and to emphasize that even critical analysis does not mean that the audience cannot (or should not) be entertained by Bond by making use of the variety of opportunities for flexible signification of the Bond phenomenon.
- 2 When I put “religion” in quotation marks it is to indicate the contested, constructed and heuristic nature of the category. When I write about discourse on religion, category of religion or study areas (religion and popular culture, religion and film), quotation marks are not needed.
- 3 See Black 2005; Daas 2011; Smith 2011.
- 4 Brode/Deyneka 2012; Gordon 1995; Jindra 2005; Kraemer/Cassidy/Schwartz 2003; McDowell 2007; Porter/McLaren 1999. When films attract dedicated followers who create activities around the film, they tend to get more attention from scholars of religion and popular culture. They are seen as expressions of popular or lived religiosity outside the typical institutional contexts (Clark 2007, 13–15). The lack of such dedicated followers distinguishes Bond films from films such as *STAR WARS* and *STAR TREK*, but it should be emphasized that such expressions do not mark out a boundary of what might be relevant objects of study in religion and popular culture.

The argument here is not that “religion” is a forgotten but necessary or privileged lens for understanding Bond films compared to readings focusing on, for example, geopolitics, nationalism, or gender. Furthermore, the argument is not that Bond should be key material for studying religion and popular culture. The task here is much more modest: it is to explore what Bond films look like when “religion” is used as the lens for examining them. Thus, this article asks: Does reading Bond films through “religion” bring to the fore anything new, interesting and relevant to thinking about the Bond phenomenon, as well as to the study of religion and popular culture?<sup>5</sup>

The answer to both elements will be affirmative: there is something relevant “religion” brings to studying Bond and there is something scholars of religion and popular culture might learn from the Bond phenomenon. This article explores “religion” in Bond films in detail and argues that if there is anything that ties portrayals of “religion” in Bond films together, it is what Stuart Hall has called the discourse of “the West and the Rest”.<sup>6</sup> “The West” is primarily a historical and conceptual, rather than a geographical construct, although its geographical anchors are in Europe (but not really in Eastern Europe) and in North America. “The West” refers to an imagined modern society that is developed, industrialized, urbanized, capitalist and, I would add, predominantly secular.<sup>7</sup> Discourse refers here to a particular way of representing and organizing knowledge of the West, the Rest and their relations through an interlinked group of statements. This discourse operates by dividing the world into two separate blocks and representing the other as inferior in all respects. It “became a very common and influential discourse, helping to shape public perceptions and attitudes down to the present”.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the idea of “the West” has had real effects as it has produced and organized knowledge and power relations. While it is interesting to explore the variety of representations of “religion” in Bond films and to comment on them in detail, the analysis presented here sug-

5 Religion and popular culture as well as religion and film are broad and multifaceted areas of research. I therefore cannot claim that a single study of Bond films would be equally relevant for all possible approaches in the field. In religion and film, the field is often divided into two types, religious film and film as religion (Plate 2005, 3099–3101). Although Bond films contain “religious” images, representations and themes, I cannot think of anyone approaching them as “religious films” (Grace 2009) (or films where you find “God” [Detweiler and Taylor 2004]). Further, this article does not deal with “film as religion” approaches (Lyden 2003). If anything, I would like to challenge the relevance of such typology. Another typology divides the approaches into to theological, mythological and ideological (Martin 1995). This article does not follow approaches in which selected theological ideas are explored and sometimes developed (Johnston 2000; Marsh 2004); however, the relations between films and wider social discourses are explored, meaning that this study has some affinity with mythological and particularly ideological approaches.

6 Hall 1992.

7 Hall 1992, 277.

8 Hall 1992, 279.

gests that the portrayals come together to support and reproduce the existing discourse of “the West and the Rest”.

This article proceeds by describing and justifying the data and clarifying how “religion” is operationalized for the purposes of this study. After that, four religion-related themes in Bond films will be analysed in detail. These themes highlight how representations of “religion” play an integral part in the discourse of “the West and the Rest”. Finally, the concluding section ties the four themes together and reflects on why reading Bond through “religion” might matter for both Bond studies and studies concerning religion and popular culture.

## DATA: 25 BOND FILMS

This article analyses James Bond films, not the James Bond novels, although the origin of the figure is in the novels. There are several reasons for this focus. First, the films have been more popular. There are plenty of people who have seen many Bond films but have not read a single Bond book, and the film series as a whole has been more profitable than any comparable series.<sup>9</sup> In fact, the books started to sell well only after the release of films, and many of us have read the books only after watching the films.<sup>10</sup> Popularity is an important criterion here, because in order to become popular, fictional forms have to relate to and connect with popular experience, and while the Bond phenomenon is “complexly ambiguous”,<sup>11</sup> there are certain aspects pertaining to the typical plot structure, values and ideologies that make Bond’s popularity understandable. Portrayals of “religion” are among these.

Secondly, although the first three Bond films “all bear a close enough resemblance to their literary originals”,<sup>12</sup> *ON HER MAJESTY’S SECRET SERVICE* (Peter R. Hunt, GB 1969) being the closest of all Bond films to the original novel,<sup>13</sup> the majority of Bond movies “abandon any fidelity to Fleming’s originals, opting instead for screen stories which used only Fleming’s titles and character names”.<sup>14</sup> One of the key differences is that “the films were deliberately de-politicised and detached from the Cold War background of the novels”,<sup>15</sup> or at least they shifted more towards the climate of détente.<sup>16</sup> In addition, “Bondian” became the term used by the production team to mean “the spirit of James

9 Black 2005, xi.

10 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 26–27; 31.

11 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 4.

12 Chapman 2007, 49.

13 Chapman 2007, 113.

14 Chapman 2007, 124.

15 Chapman 2007, 60.

16 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 33.

Bond” and a separate film genre, and the novels were seen as only one of the sources for the films.<sup>17</sup>

Thirdly, the films, but not the novels, offer quite a unique time frame for studying a popular phenomenon. The first Bond film was released in 1962. Since then Bond films have been produced at a regular pace, the longest break between releases being the six years between *LICENCE TO KILL* (John Glen, GB/US 1989) and *GOLDENEYE* (Martin Campbell, GB/US 1995). The most recent, *SPECTRE* (Sam Mendes, GB/US 2015), makes for a total number of 25 films, if *NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN* (Irvin Kershner, GB/US 1983), an “unofficial” Bond film because it was not produced by EON Productions, is counted. The series of films covers almost 55 years, from the Cold War to the present day.

I watched all the Bond films, including *NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN*, a remake of *THUNDERBALL* (Terence Young, GB 1965) that saw the return of Sean Connery as Bond. I also watched the spy comedy *CASINO ROYALE* (Ken Hughes, GB/US 1967), starring David Niven as Bond, but as it is so different from the rest, I decided not to include it here. I made notes on every film whenever there was something that related to “religion”. Then I grouped the notes into various classes and themes to see whether any patterns would emerge – as is common in qualitative and ethnographic content analysis of media materials.<sup>18</sup> This initial phase in organizing the material is followed by detailed discursive analysis of the patterns and the representations they include.<sup>19</sup> The analysis here gives an overview of selected typical patterns related to “religion” in Bond films and, on that basis, proceeds to examine the more theoretically driven question about the relation between “religion” in Bond films and the wider social context.

## BOND AND “RELIGION”

One of the first problems to resolve is the question of what counts as a reference to “religion”. Solely for the heuristic purposes of this study, I utilize Benson Saler’s suggestion that “religion” can be conceived on the basis of Wittgensteinian “family resemblance”, combined with the prototype theory, when used as a concept to select relevant data for a study.<sup>20</sup> This means that there is no essence of “religion”, but our prototype of the category provides a starting point for deciding how close or far particular examples are from it. The prototype of “religion” we have is based on Judeo-Christian heritage, but “religion” is not confined to any single, commonly shared criterion. When the material is

17 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 8; 174; 179.

18 Altheide/Schneider 2013, 23–39; Bryman 2004, 392–393.

19 Taira 2013a; see also Hall 1992.

20 Saler 2000.

relatively close to the prototype, as in the case of myths and rituals that include references to supernatural forces, it is likely to be included; when the material is far enough from the prototype, such as nationalism, it is more likely to be left out. The benefit of this approach is that it guides the selection but leaves it up to scholarly judgement to decide where exactly the line of relevance lies for the purposes of the analysis. As a result, the material that gets selected for detailed analysis is very close to what usually gets called “religion” in academic contexts, although it may be a bit wider – Saler lists 15 typical features – than the everyday (predominantly Western) understanding of what counts as “religion”.<sup>21</sup> For instance, the themes highlighted in this article utilizing Saler’s ideas are often about ritual practices, worship, buildings, “religious” language or traditions referring to supernatural agents and powers, but this approach allows the inclusion of mythical narratives or characters that can also be recognized as being close to the prototype of “religion”.

With this starting point that guides the viewing of the films, we can examine how “religion” is part of the production of meaning, thereby tapping into wider (particularly, but not exclusively, British) discourses of what it means to be modern. Bond films and their representations are seen as articulated within the wider modern discourse of religion and within what Stuart Hall calls the discourse of “the West and the Rest”. It may well be that the ways in which films circulate stereotypes and, in some cases, play with them are at least partly intentional. However, particularly when “religion” and “religious” imagery are not central to plots or part of the most important characters in Bond films, it is likely that the wider cultural discourses are a source of meaning making in a not-so-well-reflected form. Although “religion” is rarely central to Bond films, there are so many references to “religion” that this article cannot provide a detailed analysis of all of them. Rather, I have selected themes that highlight most clearly how “religion” relates to what it means to be modern in the imagery of Bond films.

21 Saler 2008, 222. In some of my studies I have used an approach that analyses the discourse on “religion” rather than seeks to define it. This approach focuses on how various parties negotiate what counts as “religion” and how societies in general and various institutions and groups in particular organize themselves through such debates (e.g., Taira 2013a; 2013b; 2016). In this approach, “religion” is not defined because the aim is to study how others define and use it. Sometimes this has been seen to support views that suggest dropping the category of religion altogether from our analytical vocabulary, but I am not suggesting that scholars should never use “religion” for heuristic purposes in their research if they find it useful. On the contrary, I have used “religion” analytically for heuristic purposes previously (see Knott/Poole/Taira 2013), but I would argue that there is a need for greater reflexivity in using the category of religion.

## MEGALOMANIAC VILLAINS IN A COSMIC DRAMA

Villains are a good place to start, partly because they receive a great deal of attention in Bond scholarship and fandom in general and partly because they are defined as what threatens the world that Bond defends. The villains are typically, depending on the point of view, God-like or Satanic figures who play a part in a mythical, cosmic battle between good and evil.<sup>22</sup>

When Dr. No, the villain in the first Bond film (*DR. NO*, Terence Young, GB 1962), talks about his plan, Bond comments that his dream of world domination is the “same old”, that asylums are full of such people who dream of being Napoleon or God. Likewise, in *TOMORROW NEVER DIES* (Roger Spottiswoode, GB 1997) the media mogul Elliot Carver claims that he “will reach an influence bigger than any human on this planet, save God himself”, after which Bond comments that Carver is totally crazy. These are examples of a typical pattern in the Bond world: people who pretend to be God-like in changing the status quo and bringing about the order s/he has designed can only be irrational. They are players in a cosmic drama in which the rational, modern world (“the West”) is under threat.

Although there are references to cosmic drama typical of myths in several films, including *DR. NO* and *TOMORROW NEVER DIES*, many villains have more mundane goals: money and power. However, there are two villains whose aims are not reducible to material self-interest. While they would get all the riches imaginable if they succeeded in their plans, their motivation is different, as they plan to destroy the known civilization and start a new one. These are Hugo Drax in *MOONRAKER* (Lewis Gilbert, GB/FR/US 1979) and Karl Stromberg in *THE SPY WHO LOVED ME* (Lewis Gilbert, GB 1977).

The aim of Drax is “to create a master race in space based on his space station and to destroy the rest of the species by firing nerve gas back at the earth”.<sup>23</sup> In the words of Drax, the future will see “a rebirth, a new world” with “a new super race, a race of perfect physical specimens”. The mythical dimension of the project is made obvious, as there is an explicit reference to Noah’s Ark when Bond realizes that there are selected couples chosen for the spaceship. Furthermore, Drax compares the physically perfect couples chosen for the spaceship to gods whose descendants will return to earth after the world’s population has been wiped out. In the novel Bond describes Drax as “almighty – the man in the padded cell who is God”, and in the same context he uses words and expressions such as “paranoia”, “delusion of grandeur” and “maniac” in reference to Drax.<sup>24</sup>

22 For instance, Max Zorin, the villain in *A VIEW TO A KILL* (John Glen, GB 1985), has been labelled a Satanic figure (Black 2005, 172–173).

23 Black 2005, 139.

24 Fleming 2012, 104.

In *THE SPY WHO LOVED ME* the villain is Karl Stromberg, whose ocean research laboratory, which rises from beneath the sea on spider-like legs, is called Atlantis. “Atlantis” refers to a mythical, pre-historic submerged island. It is an allegory for the hubris of nations in Plato’s works and, in later retellings, the inhabitants of Atlantis survive to found new civilizations. In fact, Atlantis has been a constant utopian resource for the mythical imagination in European history, referring to an ideal lost world and also to a forthcoming world (including the Americas and other unknown areas) where desires and fantasies are to be fulfilled.<sup>25</sup> Although the myth of Atlantis has not been part of any established “religious” cosmography as Ellis argues,<sup>26</sup> it has certainly been a myth that has been utilized in many “religious” formations. For instance, the Theosophists, Helena Petrova Blavatsky in particular, considered Atlanteans as cultural heroes who preceded Blavatsky’s own Aryan race,<sup>27</sup> and one of the great New Age figures, Edgar Cayce, suggested that Atlantis was the centre of human civilization and that one of the five key races – the red race – was developed there.<sup>28</sup>

To name the tanker Atlantis is not simply a superficial reference to add a sense of significance; the myth of Atlantis fits perfectly with the villain’s plan to start a new civilization by making doomsday happen to the human race. Stromberg hijacks both British and Russian ballistic missile submarines and plans to trigger mutual nuclear annihilation between the superpowers. The reason for this is that the villain considers modern civilization corrupt and decadent. City-like Atlantis has the capacity to support life above and below water, and it is meant to be the cradle of a new civilization, indifferent to human idiosyncrasies of the contemporary social order. The mythical and cosmic nature of Stromberg’s mission is emphasized when he calls nuclear weapons “instruments of Armageddon”, a biblical reference to the location of the final battle between good and evil.

The apocalyptic theme that downplays the role of ordinary humans on earth is heightened by repeatedly showing how human beings are “dwarfed by the physical environment around them”.<sup>29</sup> This is evident in shooting locations such as the Pyramids, the Temple of Karnak and the Valley of Kings. Such locations also emphasize how civilization moves from Ancient Egypt’s crumbling edifices to the metallic future of Atlantis.<sup>30</sup>

25 Sprague de Camp 1970.

26 Ellis 1999, 5.

27 Ellis 1999, 58.

28 Hanegraaff 1998, 309–312. There are more references to (mainly Greek) mythology in Bond films. For instance, the Greek woman Melina, whose parents have been killed, in *FOR YOUR EYES ONLY* (John Glen, GB/US 1981) is compared with Elektra: “Greek women, like Elektra, always avenge their loved ones” (Chapman 2007, 177). Only some of them, such as the reference to Atlantis, are relevant to my study.

29 Chapman 2007, 153.

30 Chapman 2007, 153.

Although it has been suggested that “the villain is usually motivated by a compound of avarice and a utopian altruism”,<sup>31</sup> most Bond villains do not fit this description. For instance, the purpose of SPECTRE – the main enemy of Bond throughout the series – has always been extortion and blackmail.<sup>32</sup> I find it relevant for my reading that Drax and Stromberg are not members of SPECTRE; they are megalomaniac players in a cosmic drama trying to create a new civilization, not just criminals attempting to get more money. The right to use the SPECTRE acronym was legally disputed.<sup>33</sup> This complication may explain why some villains do not belong to SPECTRE, and it shows how meanings can be produced rather accidentally.

Drax and Stromberg qualify as mythical, near-god characters who are about to bring something new into existence.<sup>34</sup> Their activities are supposed to be the mythic origin of the new civilization, but in the end Bond thwarts them.<sup>35</sup> In that sense, their activities are located in “the fabled time of the ‘beginnings’”.<sup>36</sup> Further, what is typical of myths is that they are considered separate from *logos*. The West has imagined itself as belonging to *logos*, rather than *mythos*. Myths, like Atlantis, refer to “the Rest”. It is not that “the West” is really devoid of myths, but that myths are not part of its self-conceptualization; they belong to others. In this sense, Bond is the guardian of an empire who tries to ensure that the myths of others – and the aims of mythical villains – will not take place.

This reading gets further support when the ethnicities and nationalities of the main villains of the films are explored. Most of them are not British or American, although many are European. Not all villains originate outside “the West” in geographical terms, but the rarity of purely British (or even American) villains is notable. Francisco Scaramanga is Cuban/British, Elektra King is English, although the most villainous character in *THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH* (Michael Apter, GB 1999) is the Russian Renard. Brad Whitaker – one of the two main villains in *THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS* (John Glen, GB 1987) – is American, and Auric

31 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 289.

32 Chapman 2007, 156, 191.

33 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 192.

34 The narrow academic definition of myth is that it is a creation story, a sacred story of origins with gods, semidivine beings or culture heroes as key actors (Eliade 1968, 5–6; 1987, 95). Myth does not have to be defined so (Segal 2004, 5), but even with that definition some Bond villains can be called mythical.

35 By focusing on selected villains I demonstrate the construction of difference between a certain kind of West and a certain kind of Rest. It does not rule out the possibility of seeing Bond as a mythical character as well. For example, he might qualify as an example of one of the Jungian archetypes, *puer aeternus* – the eternal child in psychology and child-god in Greek mythology – who fails to secure a partnership (Bond’s relationships are doomed to fail) or a job (Bond’s job status is often under threat). A classic examination of such a figure is von Franz (2000). This, however, is not a very relevant route for my analysis.

36 Eliade 1968, 5.

Goldfinger, from *GOLDFINGER* (Guy Hamilton, GB 1964), has British citizenship, but he is played by a German actor and in the novel he is Latvian. Elliot Carver, from *TOMORROW NEVER DIES*, has an English name and he is played by a British actor, but he is from Hong Kong and he is also the illegitimate son of a German woman. Other villains are less related to Britain and the United States. The nationalities and ethnicities of the remaining principal villains are other than British or North American.<sup>37</sup> Kingsley Amis noted in the 1960s that “throughout Bond’s adventures, no Englishman does anything bad”.<sup>38</sup> Some commentators have also noted that many villains are physically disfigured in addition to having names and ethnicities that largely diverge from “the West”, and from Britain in particular, suggesting that a certain racism is at play in Bond films.<sup>39</sup>

In sum, the examination of villains suggests that “religion” in the Bond world is part of how the difference between rational (Anglo-American) modernity and that which lies beyond modernity is constructed. This is further evidenced in the examination of the location of “religion” in Bond films, to which this analysis turns next.

## IMPERIALIST ATTITUDE TO THE EXOTIC

A conscious marketing strategy for Bond films, deployed into order to reach an international audience, has been to use locations (almost) throughout the world, both by shooting in tourist attractions and by including exotic ceremonies and events.<sup>40</sup> For instance, when Bond is in Turkey, the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sophia are seen on the screen, and for India the Taj Mahal appears, although it has no role in the plot. In many films, rituals and celebrations are part of the story, such as the Junkanoo parade (*THUNDERBALL*), the Sumo wrestling ritual (*YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE*, Lewis Gilbert, GB/JP 1967), bull fighting (*ON HER MAJESTY’S SECRET SERVICE*) and the Day of the Dead (*SPECTRE*).

In many ways “religion” is an unhelpful category. For instance, Bond chases a villain in Mexico on the Day of the Dead, but the film does not deal with the event itself, which entails honouring the deceased, creating altars for them and visiting their graves. It is a syncretic pagan-Catholic celebration, but none of

37 Le Chiffre (Albanian, Jewish background), Rosa Kleb (Russian), Dr. No (Chinese-German), Ernesto Stavro Blofeld (Slav), Hugo Drax (German, although strong connections to France in the film), Karl Stromberg (Swedish in the novel), Alec Trevelyan (Russo-Austrian descent), Dominic Greene (French), Raoul Silva (presumably Hispanic), Gustav Graves / Tan-Sun Moon (North Korean), Franz Sanchez (Mexican), Kamal Khan (Afghan), Dr. Kananga / Mr. Big (Caribbean, fictive San Monique), Emilio Largo (Italian), Aris Kristatos (Greek) and Max Zorin (German).

38 Amis 1965, 86.

39 Black 2005, 19. On the basis of physically disfigured villains, it could be argued that disability is part of “the Rest”, differentiated from the nearly perfect physique of Bond himself.

40 Bennett/Woollacott 1987, 206–207.

that is made explicit to the viewer. It is rather just another example of exotic events taking place in the world, usually outside “the West”.

“Religion” is more explicit, however, in many other shots. What is typical for Bond films is that “religion” is more prominent when the events in the film take place outside “the West”. There are plenty of passing (predominantly non-Christian) “religious” references in the films in non-Western locations. In Beirut, a belly dancer has a golden bullet in her belly button as a charm (*THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN*, Guy Hamilton, GB 1974). In Bangkok, a group of Buddhist monks walk in the background in a village where Bond chases Scaramanga, and there is a statue of Buddha in a temple (*THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN*). Islamic minarets and calls to prayer are visible and audible on many occasions, in Egypt, Turkey and Morocco, particularly in establishing shots or when one shot changes into another (*THE SPY WHO LOVED ME*, *FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE* [Terence Young, GB 1963], *THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH*, *SKYFALL* [Sam Mendes, GB/US 2012] and *THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS*). In Azerbaijan, an Orthodox priest takes part in a demonstration against the construction of an oil pipeline, and he receives guarantees that the church building will not be demolished because of the pipeline (*THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH*). In *YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE*, to protect his cover Bond even goes through a Shinto wedding ceremony in which the married couple drink sake. Soon after we see a procession which, we are told, is part of the funeral tradition. The same film contains long shots in which Shinto temples can be seen.

Michael Denning has argued that imperialist and racist ideologies in the Bond phenomenon are constructed through a narrative code of tourism.<sup>41</sup> He does not deal with “religion”, but it plays a role in this. Namely, it is not simply that “religion” happens to be more prominent outside “the West”; “religion” is there to constitute the qualitative difference between “the West and the Rest”. For the most part, “religion” is something that “the West” is not, although there are exceptions to this when “religion” is seen as compatible with the (presumably) rational “West”, as will be shown later. For instance, the very first Bond movie, *DR. NO*, associates “religion” with irrational black superstition. The boatman Quarrel hesitates when Bond wants to be taken to Crab Key and comments, because of the dragon, that one should not test providence, to which Felix Leiter responds: “native superstition”. When Bond realizes that “the dragon” is a tank with a flamethrower, he says: “You can forget the spooks, Quarrel”. James Chapman suggests that the film is explicitly racist and colonialist as it aims to reaffirm white and British superiority in the time of a declining empire.<sup>42</sup> This agenda is epitomized by the film’s characters, including Quarrel. If so, then Quarrel’s

41 Denning 2015, 102.

42 Chapman 2007, 62.

“religiosity” is part of the production of such discourse, in which whiteness, rationality and “the West” are articulated as different from the black superstition of “the Rest”. Black superstition is even more prominent in *LIVE AND LET DIE* (Guy Hamilton, GB 1973), a film I will deal with later in this article. Despite these examples, what is typical for Bond films is that “religion” is not highlighted: the films mostly avoid repeating and utilizing explicit negative stereotypes of Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Islam and indigenous religions, but they do not avoid having “imperial attitudes to the exotic”.<sup>43</sup>

An imperial attitude to the exotic is perhaps most prominent in *OCTOPUSSY* (John Glen, GB 1983). It provides a tourist’s view of India, with colourful bazaars and luxurious hotels but no indication of the poverty or social disharmony, of ethnic or “religious” conflicts. The same gaze is applied for “religion”. In Udaipur, where Octopussy’s palace is located, one can see Hindu temples in the background, Hindu processions, people walking on hot coals, holy men (saddhus) sitting on spiked mats, holy cows walking in the street and people swallowing swords. This is the Indian “religious” heritage Bond films offer, something that Bond is amused by but not attracted to. *OCTOPUSSY* is also the only Bond film with a significant Sikh character: Gobinda, a henchman of one of the main villains, Kamal Khan. Gobinda is a quiet, strong and tall man with fierce eyes, a dark beard and a turban. His Sikh identity is not mentioned in the film, but the turban and his character contribute to the overall othering and exoticism of “religion” and India, thus placing them as markedly different from “the West”. The film utilizes at least one more stereotype about India: Octopussy tells Bond that she has revived the old octopus cult – a sort of by-product of her main business, which is the smuggling of diamonds – and the adherents, her loyal female warriors, are women throughout South East Asia who are looking for a guru or spiritual discipline. This is a modern version of the orientalist stereotype of deeply “religious” India, “the mystic east”, where alienated people can find spiritual peace.<sup>44</sup>

While part of the landscape in many locations, Islam does not play a big role in Bond films, although two examples are worth mentioning. In *NEVER SAY NEVER AGAIN*, the *SPECTRE* operation is called “The Tears of Allah”. After the villain, Largo, gives a necklace with the same name as the operation to his girlfriend, he explains that the name refers to the myth in which the Prophet Muhammad cried so much that an oasis was formed. It also refers to the location where the final fight between Bond’s team and Largo’s men takes place. In *THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS*, Bond teams up in Afghanistan with mujaheddin and their leader, Kamran Shah, who turns out to have been educated at Oxford. When we first

43 Black 2005, 205.

44 King 1999.

see Shah, he is being held in a Russian prison. He is unshaven and his hair is untrimmed, and when he claims that he has stolen nothing, the jailer responds: “You can tell Allah. When you see him.” At this point Shah is depicted as a rather mentally unstable Muslim, but when he escapes from the prison and teams up with Bond, he changes into a civilized (Muslim) leader of the Afghan resistance movement. When Bond visits Shah’s village, there are veiled women. Because Shah’s people fight alongside Bond, the film takes the side of the Afghan resistance against the Red Army, but at the same time the film presents Afghans as a “mounted horde” who fight with horses against the Russians, although in reality the CIA was distributing missiles to the fighters at that time.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, by portraying Afghan Muslim fighters dealing drugs, the film offers a morally ambivalent image, but it does not portray raging the Islamic fundamentalists so common in representations of Islam in Western popular culture. More than anything else, Islam is represented as exotic.

Although many Bond films have followed, and sometimes anticipated, political conflicts, Islam has not been in focus since 9/11. Many other global political trends have been referred to, as in the case of North Korea in *DIE ANOTHER DAY* (Lee Tamahori, GB/US 2002) – North Korea was defined as a rogue state and part of the “axis of evil” by George W. Bush. So while terrorist networks have been part of the plot of several films, Islamic terrorism has not.

In sum, for the most part, “religion” in Bond films belongs to the exotic “Rest” and not to the modern, rational “West”. “Religion” is not usually an overtly negative issue but happens not to be part of “our” world. This strengthens the plausibility of racist and imperialist interpretations of Bond films, partially those constructed through “religion”, but more significantly, this pattern highlights what “the West”, in its own imagination, is not.

## VOODOO AND TAROT

*LIVE AND LET DIE* is the only Bond film in which “religion” plays a more central role. The plot revolves around heroin farming and selling controlled by Dr. Kananga, the president of the fictive Caribbean state of San Monique and known as Mr. Big in New York. Bond’s early visit to Harlem gives a taster of what is to come. Bond goes to a voodoo shop run by Mr. Big’s gang. On the shelf are skulls on sale “for rituals” and Bond buys a fake snake, a hint that snakes will have a role to play in the film. The signs of the occult in the shops in Harlem mark the difference between rational white civilization and Harlem’s black superstition, although the geographical location is in the United States.<sup>46</sup>

45 Black 2005, 151; Chapman 2007, 200.

46 See Black 2005, 13.

In San Monique, where the heroin is farmed, those who practise voodoo are black. Voodoo is depicted in scenes of ritual sacrifice, led by Mr. Big's voodoo priest Baron Samedi. The villains use voodoo to ensure that people do not go into the poppy fields. Thus voodoo is simply a tool of manipulation.

Mr. Big gets help from a virgin tarot card reader, Solitaire,<sup>47</sup> who is able to see future events in the cards and who is said to have the power of the Obeah.<sup>48</sup> The power of tarot cards and Solitaire's clairvoyance are undermined when Bond ensures the pack is composed of "The Lovers" cards only, thus deceiving Solitaire into having sex with him. As a consequence of losing her virginity, Solitaire loses her supernatural powers and becomes useless to Mr. Big. This marks her positional change from "religious" villain to part of Western rationality. In other words, Bond strips Solitaire of all that is not appropriate for "the West" and as a result she is able to be on his side. While I am not interested in whether this is Bond's intent,<sup>49</sup> the event fits very well with my general argument about the relevance of (particularly non-Christian) "religion" in constructing what does not belong to "the West".

When Solitaire has become useless to him, Mr. Big leaves her to be sacrificed in a voodoo ritual. Bond saves her at the last minute and throws the voodoo priest Baron Samedi into a coffin full of poisonous snakes. Many of those who are under the influence of Mr. Big are voodoo believers, whereas Bond, representative of the West, is not. This setting supports the racist and imperialist interpretations we have noted in which the other is seen as something that threatens us and therefore needs to be controlled. As Jeremy Black argues, the film "linked black power in the cities with crime and implied that a failure to control both black neighbourhoods and small Caribbean islands could undermine America. Dr Kananga is a harsh depiction of Caribbean independence."<sup>50</sup>

The final scene of the film is arguably the only supernatural moment in the whole Bond series. Bond and Solitaire are on a train and a laughing Samedi is perched on the front of the train. Yet by the standards of the Bond world, Samedi should be dead. This, however, has no bearing on the plot.<sup>51</sup> For the most

47 Solitaire is without doubt the main religion-related female figure in the Bond film series. Octopussy's women are living in a spiritual retreat and the character played by Halle Berry in *DIE ANOTHER DAY* is named Jinx, but these references play a minor role in the plot. This raises the question of why women do not have a more prominent representation among "the Rest". The answer could be that women are generally not conceptualized as threatening in Bond films, especially in early ones, and "the Rest" should be threatening to a certain extent to mark its difference from "the West".

48 "Obeah" refers to a system of sorcery in the West Indies and the Caribbean. The term is mentioned in the film but not explained.

49 See Daas 2011, 165.

50 Black 2005, 134.

51 Chapman 2007, 138–141.

part Bond films have sequences and plots that are implausible, but in them everything takes place in the natural world. In addition to the Samedi episode, perhaps the closest moment to a break with realism appears when Bond is able to feign a cardiac arrest in *DIE ANOTHER DAY* – something that is left unexplained in the film. In comparison with relatively similar adventure films such as the *INDIANA JONES* series (Steven Spielberg, US 1981–2008), Bond films take place in a much more naturalized framework.<sup>52</sup> Voodoo, tarot and other supernatural settings are reserved for the villains and/or superstitious non-moderns located outside “the West”, thus contributing to the construction of the difference between rational (predominantly white) moderns and non-rational “religious” others.<sup>53</sup> The exception to this rule is a certain kind of Christianity.

## WRONG AND RIGHT KINDS OF “RELIGIOSITY” IN THE WEST: EVANGELICALISM AND CONFINED CHRISTIANITY

I have suggested that “religion” is much more prominent in Bond films when the events take place outside “the West”. Thus in *GOLDFINGER*, which takes place in Europe and the United States, “religion” is reduced to Bond’s comment made after Goldfinger has died that the villain is playing his golden harp. However, “religion” is not fully absent from the West: it is present in both “wrong” and “right” ways.

In *LICENCE TO KILL* “religion” is present in the United States, but in the “wrong” way. The villain sets the prices for drugs through his employee Professor Joe Butcher, who operates as a televangelist preacher. While seeking pledges on television, he also sets prices for drugs. His preaching is largely a front for the illegal drug business. The portrayal of fake “religiosity” is enhanced by Butcher’s running the Olympatec Meditation Institute as a cover for the drug trade. In addition, in one scene Professor Joe shows his own private meditation chamber, constructed from the sacred rocks, to a woman; it is clearly a place of seduction.<sup>54</sup> Through these depictions, the film frames evangelical Christianity as hypocritical and laughable and strips it of all sincerity. This is the only substantial description of evangelicalism in the history of Bond films, and it suggests that there is little to appreciate in this kind of “religiosity”. It is the wrong kind of Christianity as it emphasizes intense emotions and experiences (as opposed to rational reflection), requires personal conversion (as opposed to taking “reli-

52 Black 2005, 177.

53 There is a long history of juxtaposing “our” approved lifestyle with voodoo in American cinema (Weisenfeld 2007). The key difference is that the elevated side of the binary used to be explicitly Christianity, rather than “our” modern and rational lifestyle (that can be Christian at least implicitly), but racial difference applies to both binaries.

54 See Black 2005, 155.

gion” as part of the cultural heritage) and does not confine itself to the private sphere (but is visible in public life).

There is also a “right” kind of Christianity portrayed in Bond films. It is present in the background of the Western lifestyle, in the landscape and in rites of passage. In many films church buildings can be seen and church bells heard, both in Britain and elsewhere in Europe, such as in Venice, Italy (MOONRAKER) and in France (THUNDERBALL), indicating that Christianity is part of the ordinary cultural landscape.

More importantly, Christian rites of passage are common in Bond films. Funerals and church weddings are repeatedly depicted. Christian funerals are held in London (SKYFALL), Scotland (THE WORLD IS NOT ENOUGH), Rome (SPECTRE) and France (THUNDERBALL). A church wedding can be seen in LIVE AND LET DIE, in which a boat chase that takes place in the United States involves one of the boats returning to the river across dry land where a wedding ceremony is taking place, adding a comic aspect to the chase. In FOR YOUR EYES ONLY, Bond attends a wedding party in Greece where the viewer sees a Greek Orthodox chapel and Bond meets Q in a confessional box. Soon after the opening scene in THE LIVING DAYLIGHTS, Felix Leiter’s church wedding ceremony takes place in the United States.

On the basis of these recurrent depictions I would argue that the proper place of “religion” in “the West” as portrayed in Bond films is exemplified by CASINO ROYALE (Martin Campbell, GB/US/CZ/DE 2006), where Vesper Lynd says that because of her family’s strict Catholic background, she cannot share a suite with Bond. Bond replies: “I do hate it when religion comes between us.” “Religion” is subordinate to Bond’s preferences and values, but it is not viewed negatively. In general, when Christianity is confined to its proper place, subordinate to public life – separate from politics, the law and science – it is accepted as part of what it is to be modern. This is what Talal Asad regards as part of a strategy of confinement by secular liberals and the defence of “religion” by liberal Christians, both emblematic of modernity.<sup>55</sup> Crossing the boundary between public and private, as exemplified by the evangelical Christianity of Professor Joe Butcher, turns the right kind of Christianity into the wrong kind of Christianity.

So far I have avoided the question of the “religiosity” of James Bond’s character. There are references in some films. For example, when Bond gets married in ON HER MAJESTY’S SECRET SERVICE, the ceremony takes place in a church. At the beginning of FOR YOUR EYES ONLY, Bond visits his wife’s grave in a Christian cemetery, where a priest or monk makes the sign of the cross and delivers information about the forthcoming mission. In Bond’s fake funeral in YOU ONLY LIVE TWICE, he receives a military funeral and speeches include Christian refer-

55 Asad 1993, 28.

ences to, for example, the Resurrection. This suggests that Bond is at least a cultural Christian – someone who does not reject the tradition. There is further evidence that a certain kind of Christianity has been part of Bond’s upbringing. At Bond’s family estate in Scotland, *Skyfall* (also the name of the 2012 film), there is a “priest hole” from the time of the Reformation, a hiding place with a tunnel leading to the moors. M and Kincaide use it and head to the chapel. The tombstone for Bond’s foster parents stands next to the chapel. These details do not tell us anything substantial about Bond’s personal convictions, about which the films say very little. In *SPECTRE*, however, Bond responds to Dr. Madeleine Swann’s question about his becoming an assassin by saying that he had two options: that or priesthood. The film contains no further explanation; whether this is a serious comment is perhaps deliberately left unclear.

Finally, while some authors have speculated about Bond’s “religiosity”, no consensus has been reached. Some label him a nonconformist Protestant; some state that he had a Calvinist upbringing; and some suggest that Bond is modelled after real-life Catholics.<sup>56</sup> Frank Smith sees Bond as a carrier of Christian culture and morality, but it has also been suggested that a reading of Bond novels “reveals no obvious religious belief”.<sup>57</sup> These speculations take us relatively far from the films and are best noted but not given great weight. Suffice it to say that while Bond does not comment on his “religious” or “non-religious” standpoint in any explicit manner, he is content with Christian culture and its rites of passage as long as they are compatible with the (presumably) rational modern life of “the West”.

## WHY READING BOND FILMS THROUGH THE LENS OF “RELIGION” MATTERS

This article provides an overview of religion-related issues in Bond films but with some deliberate omissions. For instance, this analysis has not addressed the unintentional or metaphorical “religious” language that exists in Bond films as in mediated public discourse in general.<sup>58</sup> Rather, the discussion has principally focussed on a key pattern identified in Bond films: portrayals of “religion” in Bond films are strongly supportive of what has been called the discourse of “the West and the Rest”. Stuart Hall’s conceptualization of this discourse does not pay much attention to “religion”, but I have argued here that on the basis of Bond films at least, “religion” is an integral part of it. For the most part, “religion” is placed on the side of “the Rest”, as something exotic and/or irrational

56 Chattaway 2012.

57 Contessa 2010; Smith 2011.

58 For an analysis of metaphorical and unintentional “religious” language and “religious” expressions in British media, see Knott/Poole/Taira 2013.

that needs to be overcome by the rational West, or must be put in its proper place if it is part of “the West”. Acceptable “religion” is found in “the West”, portrayed as a familiar part of life. It is contained within the private sphere, taking a supportive role in rites of passage (particularly marriages and funerals) but not interfering with the relatively secular public sphere of politics and the economy. If it does play a public role, it is portrayed negatively, as in the case of evangelical Christianity. This pattern connects Bond films to the hegemonic discourse about the proper place of “religion” in Western modernity.

Reading Bond through the lens of “religion” adds to existing Bond studies – “religion” has not previously been examined extensively in Bond studies – and, more importantly, it shows the significant contribution made by “religion” to the discourse of “the West and the Rest” that is prominent in Bond films generally. Reading Bond through “religion” does not replace other readings, but it offers support for some aspects highlighted earlier. For example, Michael Denning argues that British spy thrillers, including Bond, provide a “compensatory myth of the crisis of imperialism”,<sup>59</sup> and my analysis supports that interpretation in recognizing that portrayals of “religion” in Bond films associate exotic “religion” with “the Rest”, distinct from the rational, imperial and modern West. Taking “religion” into account does not fundamentally alter existing interpretations of Bond, but it does give due prominence to an important dimension of the construction of the Bond world.

It is not only Bond studies that matter. The task was also to explore whether reading Bond through “religion” might contribute to the study of religion and popular culture more generally. When my students present their research ideas about religion and popular culture, often with the aim of examining “religious” figures, narratives and representations in a particular film or television series, I usually ask the “So what?” question: What do we know when we know it? Is it a more general example of something? For me, one of the reasons for reading Bond through “religion” is to suggest that popular films in which “religion” is not a dominant theme may offer insight into how we think about the aims of religion and popular culture studies in general and may challenge some typical focuses of the field. The analysis shows how portrayals of “religion” can contribute to the more general functioning of popular products; they maintain, reproduce, circulate and rearticulate powerful, often hegemonic cultural discourses. Bond films do many things, one of which is to contribute to the powerful discourse of “the West and the Rest”, and “religion” is an integral part of that discourse. In other words, popular representations of “religion” play an important role in the maintenance of the idea of “the West” and what it is to be modern.

59 Denning 2015, 148.

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# On (Dang) Quesadillas and Nachos

## Mexican Identity and a Mormon Imaginary in the Films of Jared Hess

### ABSTRACT

Mormon director Jared Hess has produced several films, but none have achieved the popularity of *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (US 2004) and *NACHO LIBRE* (US 2006). These movies share several similarities: an interest in characters who do not fit the societal mold, low-brow humor, and – crucially for the current study – a fascination with characters of Mexican and Latin American descent. Hess’s representation of Mexican and Latin American people is difficult to place within current US discourses on race and ethnicity because it upholds racist divisions within humanity even as it decries racist acts against societal Others. As Hess affirms the humanity of the US’s southern neighbors, for example, he denounces xenophobic and anti-immigrant points of view. At the same time, however, he signals his Mexican characters as irreconcilably different from – and perhaps simpler than – their North American counterparts. In this article, I argue that Hess’s ambiguous representation of Mexican peoples and cultures reflects a type of “benevolent racism” that is common within white, North American Mormon communities who paradoxically view people of Mexican descent both as Others and as the physical and spiritual heirs of the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

### KEYWORDS

Book of Mormon, Immigration, Lamanite, *NACHO LIBRE*, *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*, Mormon studies, Race and Religion

### BIOGRAPHY

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One of the most memorable lines of the Mormon director Jared Hess's 2004 smash-hit comedy *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* (US 2004) occurs as the titular character's grandmother leaves to go four wheeling in the Idaho sand dunes. When Napoleon (Jon Heder) asks her what he should eat while she is gone, she replies, "make yourself a dang quesadilla!" The comedic aspect of this statement is difficult to communicate through writing because Hess highlights an ironic pronunciation – the grandmother pronounces the *ll* as one would in English rather than Spanish – that evinces her total ignorance of even the simplest forms of Mexican pronunciation and cuisine. This is one of many scenes within the film where white, implicitly Mormon, characters engage with Mexican culture in ignorant and/or offensive ways. Many of Hess's representations of the relationship between rural (white) Americans and Mexican immigrants could be read as paternalistic. At the same time, the director depicts the immigrants of Preston, Idaho in a generally positive light. Across his cinema, Hess has represented the Mexican Other in ambiguous ways that affirm the humanity of the United States' southern neighbors while at the same time signaling them as irreconcilably different from – and perhaps simpler than – their North American counterparts.<sup>1</sup> This holds especially true in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* and *NACHO LIBRE* (US 2006), his two most commercially successful films. The Mexican protagonists of both movies win the audience's affection in part by playing to stereotypes that rigidly separate them from US culture at large. Mexico's oversized role in Hess's aesthetic is obvious even to the casual viewer; however, few critics have attempted to reconcile the director's combination of paternalism and solidarity with people from south of the US border. In this article, I argue that Hess's ambiguous representation of Mexican peoples and cultures reflects a type of "benevolent racism" that is common within white North American Mormon communities that paradoxically view people of Mexican descent both as Others and as the physical and spiritual heirs of the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

None of the current scholarship has situated Hess's representations of Mexican people within the context of his faith. While there are many reasons for this, it mostly reflects the difficulty critics face when ascribing elements of directors' films to their faiths, particularly when the directors do not explicitly make the connections themselves. Nevertheless, there are several reasons why this approach feels justified and fruitful when viewing both *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* and *NACHO LIBRE*. Firstly, Hess studied film at Brigham Young University (BYU), which is owned and operated by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church), the largest Mormon denomination in the world. Much of

1 In this article I use the term North American to refer to people and cultures from the US and Canada.

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE's cast studied with Hess; indeed, the film grew out of a short production, PELUCA (Jared Hess, US 2003), that Hess directed for a class at BYU. What is more, Hess said during publicity tours for NAPOLEON DYNAMITE that his experience as an LDS missionary – which he served in both Chicago and Venezuela<sup>2</sup> – influenced many aspects of his first feature film.<sup>3</sup> More recently, he has discussed the importance of religion in his films in general with the release of DON VERDEAN (Jared Hess, US 2018).<sup>4</sup> Indeed, critics and fans alike have noted the special attention he gives to religion throughout his filmography. Viewed in this context, it would make sense that his understanding of Mormon theology would influence his depictions of Mexican and Mexican-American characters. This holds especially true when we consider the fact that he served part of his mission in Venezuela. As Rebeca van Uitert argues, missionaries who serve abroad “are exposed to different cultures and traditions. They return to the United States with a broadened perspective, and as a result, are more open to accepting immigrants and strangers within their communities.”<sup>5</sup> There is a great deal of truth to her statement; at the same time, there is much to be made about the fact that many Mormon missionaries develop a paternalistic relationship with the people in the countries where they serve. This can lead to essentialist racist beliefs that become especially poignant in the case of Latin America owing to the region's ties to the Book of Mormon.

Latin America – particularly Mesoamerica and the Andean Region – holds a special, mythic position within official and popular Mormon theology. This infatuation is especially obvious with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the branch of Mormonism to which Hess belongs.<sup>6</sup> Latin America's privileged position within the religion is directly tied to popular and official readings of the Book of Mormon that hold that present-day Native Americans descend at least partially from the Lamanites, a group of people who came to the Americas from Jerusalem immediately prior to the Babylonian conquest. According to the Book of Mormon, the Lamanites were a “degenerate” people who abandoned God and became a scourge to the more righteous Nephites; however, after nearly one thousand years, the Nephites turned against the Lord and the Lamanites destroyed them. Despite the Lamanites' wickedness, the Book of Mormon asserts – or prophesies – that God has plans to redeem this choice nation. The Book of Mormon, for example, tells of the arrival of Europeans to the Americas,

2 For an allusion to how Hess's missionary experience in Venezuela has shaped his career, see Means 2006. For a discussion of how his mission in Chicago contributed to NAPOLEON DYNAMITE, see Napoleon Dynamite Director 2004.

3 Napoleon Dynamite Director 2004.

4 See Toone 2015.

5 See van Uitert 2007, 301–302.

6 In this article I use the terms Mormon and LDS interchangeably.

and it views the subsequent colonization of the continent by white “Gentiles” as a necessary event that allowed for the restoration of the gospel.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Mormon theology holds that while devastating to the original inhabitants of the continent, European colonial projects were necessary for the eventual redemption of the Lamanites. The Book of Mormon itself states that the Gentiles will bring the gospel back to the Lamanites (read: Native Americans) prior to the Second Coming through missionary work.<sup>8</sup>

From the nineteenth until the mid-twentieth centuries, Mormons ascribed the Lamanite prophecies most directly to First Nations peoples of the United States. Even during these early years, however, most Mormons believed that all of the original inhabitants of North and South America descended from this Book of Mormon race.<sup>9</sup> Bruce R. McConkey, an apostle of the Church, canonized this view in 1981 when he wrote an introduction to the book that stated that the Lamanites “are the principal ancestors of the American Indians”.<sup>10</sup> During much of the twentieth century, Church attempts to build up the Lamanites dealt primarily with engaging Amerindian populations in the United States. One especially clear example of this was the Lamanite Placement Program (1954–1996), where the Church identified well-to-do (almost exclusively white) families as possible foster parents for baptized Amerindians – mostly Navajo – so that these could attend majority-white US public schools.<sup>11</sup> The principal goal of the initiative was to train Lamanite children to eventually become church leaders. The controversial program was most active during the 1960s and 1970s,

7 Although Joseph Smith published the Book of Mormon in 1830, adherents to the faith believe it was written by the original inhabitants of the Americas. According to Church doctrines, Smith served as a translator of this long-lost work. As such, prophecies surrounding the arrival of Columbus to the Americas are, according to believers, ancient prophecies that truly came to pass millennia later. See 1 Nephi 13 in *The Book of Mormon* 2013.

8 In the Book of Mormon, the prophet Nephi states, “then shall the fullness of the gospel of the Messiah come unto the Gentiles, and from the Gentiles unto the remnant of our seed [the Lamanites, or indigenous peoples of the Americas]”. See 1 Nephi 15:13–16. See also D. Smith 2003, 32.

9 John-Charles Duffy discusses two principal approaches to Lamanite identity in the LDS Church: Hemispheric Lamanite Identity, which suggests that everyone of indigenous descent in the Americas and Polynesia is a literal descendant of the Lamanites, and Limited Lamanite Identity, which holds that the Lamanites belonged to a small group that was ultimately completely engulfed by neighboring civilizations. The way that individual members interpret Lamanite identity generally reflects the stakes that Lamanite identity has (or does not have) in their own personal and spiritual relationship with the Church. Duffy’s entire article provides an excellent analysis of the fluidity of Lamanite identity in LDS teachings over the years. See Duffy 2008, 121–122.

10 See McConkey 1990. In 2006, after DNA evidence placed this assertion in question, the Church softened its stance and amended this foreword to the Book of Mormon, claiming that the Lamanites “are among the ancestors of the American Indians”.

11 For an in-depth discussion of the LDS Indian Student Placement Program, see Garrett 2016; see also Brandon Morgan 2009, 191–217.

but it eventually fell apart after facing severe political and legal pressure.<sup>12</sup> One contributing factor to the Church's weakened focus on Native American populations in the United States was that LDS missionaries began to have significant success while proselyting in Latin America during the 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Because church members and leaders understood this region also to be Lamanite in origin, LDS people began to proactively ascribe the Lamanite prophecies to Latin America.<sup>14</sup>

The problematic conflation of certain regions of the world with indigeneity (and by extension, with Lamanite identity) ironically racializes all people from these countries as indigenous regardless of an individual's actual ancestry. LDS people tend to conceive Latin America through US paradigms of race such as the "one drop policy", where a single drop of indigenous blood makes a person – or an entire nation – Lamanite.<sup>15</sup> Spencer W. Kimball, who served as an apostle and, later, prophet of the Church from 1943 to 1985, contributed to this understanding through racist assertions that people of (even partial) indigenous descent carried the blood of the heroes of the Book of Mormon in their veins.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, John-Charles Duffy notes that Kimball spearheaded a concerted effort by the Church to instill a "Hemispheric Lamanite Identity" that would unite people of indigenous descent throughout the United States, Latin America, and the South Pacific.<sup>17</sup> These projects were largely successful, especially with those people for whom Lamanite identity provided spiritual strength and inspiration. The Church was largely able to foster a sense of community between people from different countries and cultures based on the appeal of Hemispheric Lamanite Identity.

As a result of Kimball's efforts, most Mormons do not equate Latin American countries with indigeneity to demean them. Rather, the Church's emphasis on Hemispheric Lamanite identity has led many – if not most – Mesoamerican and

12 The principal critique of the Lamanite Placement Program was that, at its core, it was assimilationist. See Duffy 2008, 140; J. B. Allen 1998, 85; Garrett 2016, 180–182. Beyond the political challenges, Garrett notes that there were also controversies and disagreements between the First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles; see Garrett 2016, 204–234. What is more, at least four students have sued the church more recently because they claim that they were sexually abused while staying with white foster families and that the Church did not do enough to protect them. See Fowler 2016.

13 Grover 2005, 85–88.

14 In recent years, influential Mormons like Bruce H. Porter and Rod L. Meldrum have argued that the term Lamanites refers solely to the Amerindian peoples that populated the US heartland; see Porter/Meldrum 2009. Nevertheless, theirs remains a minority view whose very title "The 'Heartland' Model" tends to emphasize nationalistic tendencies in the North American Church while ignoring much of the doctrine itself. Indeed, Matthew Roper provides a stinging rebuke of their book in Roper 2010.

15 For a discussion of the legal ramifications of the "one drop policy", see Hickman 1997, 1161–1265.

16 Kimball 1959, 57–58.

17 Duffy 2008, 143–144.

Andean Mormons to wear their Lamanite heritage as a badge of honor.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the introduction of the Book of Mormon distinguishes the role of the Gentiles from that of the Lamanites (and the Jews, for that matter). Because of this, white US Mormons tend to view their Latin American counterparts as both brothers/sisters and Others.<sup>19</sup> They certainly view Latin Americans – and indeed, anyone descended even partially from Amerindian lines – as a covenant people who will play a special role prior to the Second Coming. However, LDS doctrines also hold that people from these countries must receive tutelage from the Gentiles until they become self-sufficient in the gospel.<sup>20</sup> This imaginary understandably results in an essentialist approach to the citizens of countries such as Mexico. Many white North American Mormons view people of Mexican descent as individuals whose closeness to the Spirit allows them to have great, childlike faith. Kimball expressed this view best when he stated, “the Indians have faith – a rather simple, pure, and unadulterated faith”. The subtext of this assertion is that Lamanites have a deeper faith than do their white North American counterparts.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, however, he asserted two times in that same talk that the Lamanites’ righteousness was making them “white and delightful”. As such, while Lamanites may have greater faith, they must ultimately become like their (white) brothers and sisters to reach their full potential.<sup>22</sup>

## VOTING FOR PEDRO AND THE LAMANITE BIRTHRIGHT

NAPOLEON DYNAMITE reflects this (North American, white) Mormon imaginary in its treatment of Mexicans and Chicanos by asserting a special role for both in the rural Mormon communities of the West and in the United States at large.

18 For example, the Mexican author, historian, and Mormon ecclesiastical leader Agrícola Lozano Herrera fused Mexican nationalism with the Lamanite prophecies in his book *Historia del mormonismo en México* (Lozano Herrera 1984), which argues that the people of Mexico have a special role in God’s kingdom because they are members of the House of Israel.

19 Duffy 2008, 141–143.

20 Just as the Church used the Lamanite Placement Program to prepare future leaders for Native Americans in the United States, it installed El Benemerito de las Américas, a Church-sponsored high school, in Mexico with a similar mission. A recent newspaper article highlighted the fact that 25% of Mexico’s stake presidents – lay leaders charged with leading clusters of local congregations consisting of approximately 5,000 individuals – were alumni of the institution. Given that only a tiny fraction of Mormons actually attended that school, it becomes clear that Church leadership viewed this preparation of Lamanites as important in calling leaders within the Church. See Barbara Morgan 2013.

21 Kimball 1960.

22 Kimball was referencing 2 Nephi 30:6, a scripture in the Book of Mormon that states that Lamanites who accept the Book of Mormon teachings will become “white and delightful.” See the Book of Mormon 1830, 117. In more recent publications, the Church has changed the language to “pure and delightful” with the explanation that this verbiage more closely reflects the original meaning of the translated text.

Characters of Mexican descent are kind and wholesome, but they also come off as simplistic and unintelligent. The director asserts a type of Anglo normativity through his comical representations of Mexicans, yet he also undermines outspoken proponents of border security by emphasizing that his foreign characters pose no threat to US culture or way of life. Numerous critics have discussed how *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*'s style makes it difficult to place both aesthetically and ideologically; indeed, the movie's bizarre aesthetics and political discourse have caused even computer algorithms to struggle to determine viewers' entertainment preferences based on their reaction to the film.<sup>23</sup> Hess's surprising success at the box office, where he leveraged a \$400,000 production budget into a \$46 million profit, has led many scholars to discuss the film's business model.<sup>24</sup> In these cases, *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* becomes the posterchild for independent directors who dream of one day making it big in Hollywood. Perhaps owing to its almost complete lack of plot, few critics have attempted to find ideological consistency within the film. However, *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*'s ties to Mormon culture – particularly as it relates to the “Lamanite” peoples – lie at the heart of its appeal. Any critic who wishes to discuss how the movie diverges from Hollywood must take this religious backdrop into consideration. This Mormon influence is especially visible with Pedro's arc, which both provides a new look at Mexican and Chicano identity in the United States and serves as an allegory for the ultimate union between white North American Mormons and the descendants of the peoples of the Book of Mormon.

Hess uses his main protagonists' friendship to emphasize the relationship between Mormon “Gentiles” and Mexican “Lamanites”. Interestingly, scholars like Bill Jenkins assert that Pedro is the only explicitly religious character (Catholic) in the film;<sup>25</sup> indeed, Jenkins claims that while Hess's Mormonism “may account for the lack of profanity and explicit teenage sexuality in the movie, *Napoleon Dynamite* evinces no propagandistic intention”.<sup>26</sup> The movie may not strive to convert its audience,<sup>27</sup> but both Napoleon and his brother, Kip (Aaron Ruell), give off clues throughout the film that performatively signal them as Mormon. Hess never explicitly mentions his characters' religion, a fact that leaves the LDS element invisible to uninitiated viewers. Eric Samuelson refers to the movie as a

23 Golbandi/Koren/Lempel 2011. See also Mackey/Weiss/Jordan 2010, 713; 717–718; Read/Robertson 2009, 3–5.

24 Young/Gong/Van der Stede 2008, 30.

25 Jenkins 2005, 2.

26 Jenkins 2005, 4.

27 Nicolaas Mink reports that many residents of Preston, Idaho, were uncomfortable with the film's representation of their lives, where, “rather than viewing hard work or a vibrant religious culture, Americans witnessed a comedy about a frontier community sitting a few decades back in the Turnerian evolutionary social progression that was struggling to come to grips with modernity”. See Mink 2008, 156.

Mormon “cross-over” because it combines an LDS cast, crew, and family-friendliness with an “indie” feel.<sup>28</sup>

The aforementioned fusion of styles played a pivotal role in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*’s financial success in expanding its audience beyond that of the more explicitly Mormon films that came out around the same time.<sup>29</sup> However, as Nicolaas Mink notes, this expansion of the film’s audience created a degree of double signification that caused the film to resonate differently outside Idaho and the Mormon Belt than it did within.<sup>30</sup> Napoleon’s singular vocabulary, for example, includes his overuse of words like “gosh”, “dang”, “flip”, and “freaking”. His speech serves as one of the distinctive elements of the film by setting the protagonist apart from characters of more typical Hollywood productions. Far from representing a mere character quirk, Napoleon’s obvious substitution of vulgar terms with ridiculous expletives also codes him as a practicing Mormon. The titular character performs his religion through more than just speech; at one point he wears a Ricks College (now BYU Idaho) shirt. One of the most interesting indicators of Napoleon’s religion centers on an old farmer who appears only two times in the film. During this man’s first appearance, Hess shows him approach a cow with a shotgun. He then cuts to a school bus that Napoleon boards. At this moment a gunshot fires, and several children scream. In the post-credits section, this same man officiates at the marriage of Kip and his sweetheart, LaFawnduh. To the uninitiated viewer, the farmer’s role at the wedding seems like a hilarious gag, and perhaps a commentary on small-town America. Mormon viewers, however, immediately recognize that the shotgun-toting farmer is also Kip’s bishop.<sup>31</sup>

I am ultimately less interested in proving Napoleon’s Mormonism than I am in discussing how his faith colors his relationship with Pedro. Mink categorizes *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* as a school film and coming-of-age movie, but he notes that the aforementioned characters “fail to fit into the typical generic teenage categories constructed by scholars in cinema studies”.<sup>32</sup> Numerous critics have observed that one of the aspects that separates *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* from other school films is the fact that the film’s protagonists – particularly Napoleon – deviate from conventional articulations of gender.<sup>33</sup> I wish to add to the conversation by pointing out that both Napoleon and Pedro play important allegorical roles within a racialized cosmology where white Mormon Gentiles

28 Samuelson 2007, 226.

29 Two particularly noteworthy films that came out in the years prior to the release of *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* are *THE SINGLES WARD* (Kurt Hale, US 2002) and *THE R. M.* (Kurt Hale, US 2003).

30 Mink 2008, 164.

31 Mink 2008, 166.

32 Mink 2008, 157–158.

33 Russo 2006, 7–11; Buchbinder 2008, 237; Quail 2011, 466–467.

must teach (Mexican) Lamanites the gospel. Mink argues that Hess included a Mexican character to highlight the migrant community's almost invisible contributions to Preston and other rural towns in Idaho and throughout the western United States.<sup>34</sup> He provides an excellent discussion about the discrimination and marginality that migrant workers have historically faced in Preston, but he ignores the implicit Lamanite identity that the town's LDS majority ascribes to migrant communities. Perhaps by accident, then, Mink highlights the fact that despite – or perhaps as a result of – doctrinally signaling Amerindians and Latin Americans as a chosen people separate from white Gentiles, Lamanite identity also extends an irreparable Otherness to people from these communities.

As Hess emphasizes the contributions of Mexican people like Pedro to Preston and similar communities, he reminds his LDS viewers of the Lamanites' special role in building a New Jerusalem – which the faith's founder, Joseph Smith, prophesied would be built in Jackson County, Missouri – prior to the Second Coming.<sup>35</sup> As the film shows, many North American Mormons have ignored certain aspects of the Lamanite prophecies as they have minimized the contributions of Mexican and Chicano actors in their communities. Hess critiques this (white) Mormon ambivalence to immigrant communities through Napoleon and Pedro's friendship, which represents the communion of Lamanites and Gentiles in the Promised Land. My reading calls for a reevaluation of Joseph M. Spencer's assertion that *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* has “not a word to say about scripture”.<sup>36</sup> While the film never explicitly mentions any sacred texts, it definitely operates within an LDS imaginary based on scripture. Indeed, Hess alludes to the teachings of Mormon scripture to critique the racist elements of small-town Mormon communities. Napoleon allegorically preaches Pedro “the gospel” by showing him how to navigate a small-town US high school. The pair meets shortly after Pedro arrives in the country. The migrant goes to school, where his new principal – who seems to take no interest in his foreign student – constantly humiliates him. Napoleon intervenes on Pedro's behalf, and the principal asks him to show Pedro to his locker. It does not take long for Napoleon's pupil to become the master, a fact that becomes especially clear when Pedro announces that he will run for student body president.<sup>37</sup> Napoleon has never taken such a step despite years of experience at the institution. This inversion of master and pupil resonates especially well with Mormon doctrines, which hold that the Lamanites will one day assume the principal role in building the Kingdom, after the Gentiles have shared the gospel with them.

34 Mink 2008, 163.

35 See 3 Nephi 21:23 in *The Book of Mormon* 2013.

36 Spencer 2012, 171.

37 Several activists have cited this aspect of the film when advocating for a more liberal border policy. For example, see Hoyt 2009, 21–24.

Given that most Mormons – including the leadership of the LDS Church – understand the Lamanite prophecies to apply particularly to people of Latin American descent, it becomes literally impossible for the Second Coming to occur without immigration to the United States. Certainly, not all US Mormons – or even most – favor undocumented immigration or immigrants;<sup>38</sup> nevertheless, the LDS leadership (and many members) favor a liberalized approach to US-Mexican border policies that will keep families together and allow people to work in the country if they are not committing major crimes.<sup>39</sup> *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* clearly communicates a pro-immigrant discourse even as it signals Mexican people as Other. The film never overtly clamors for immigrant rights, but it is important to note that there is no reference to *La Migra* (immigration enforcement), nor does anyone question Pedro’s right to be in the town. *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*’s ambiguous representation of immigrants and immigration makes it difficult to place in relation to other examples of popular culture. Some of Hess’s illegibility to a broader US audience almost certainly results from a complex racial determinism that he has inherited from his faith in which Mexicans are on the one hand foreign Others and on the other hand a chosen people destined to (re)populate North America. Hess’s eccentric representation of Mexican and Mexican-American culture makes it difficult to categorize his work as a social justice film, but his use of a charismatic immigrant for a major protagonist places him at odds with films focused on national security and/or securing the border.

The movie reverberates with a rarely taught, though canonical, aspect of Mormon doctrine that holds that the Lamanites will “return” to the land of the Gentiles (read: the United States) after the Gentiles have drifted away from the faith. One of the most interesting events of the Book of Mormon details the arrival of Christ to the Americas following his crucifixion and resurrection. At one point, Jesus himself prophesies,

It shall come to pass that whosoever will not believe in my words, who am Jesus Christ, which the Father shall cause him to bring forth unto the Gentiles, and shall give unto him power that he shall bring them forth unto the Gentiles, (it shall be done even as Moses said) they shall be cut off from among my people who are of

38 Indeed, Arizona’s infamous HB 1070 was championed by the Mormon state senator Russell Pearce. What is more, *The Salt Lake Tribune* reported that “a little less than half of Mormons in the state agree with the Utah Compact, despite the church leaders’ support of the document that seeks to keep local police from enforcing federal immigration laws”. See Montero 2011.

39 The Church’s most recent public declaration about immigration focused primarily on keeping families together; however, it also recognized the right of sovereign states to “enforce [their] laws and secure [their] borders”. See Immigration 2011. The Church’s relaxed policy toward illegal immigration is especially visible with regard to policies surrounding membership. The Church will not allow investigators to be baptized if they are currently breaking the law or serving a prison or probation sentence. That said, undocumented immigrants can be baptized despite being in the country illegally. See van Uiter 2007, 309.

the covenant. And my people who are a remnant of Jacob [the Lamanites] shall be among the Gentiles, yea, in the midst of them as a lion among the beasts of the forest, as a young lion among the flocks of sheep, who, if he go through both treadeth down and teareth in pieces, and none can deliver.<sup>40</sup>

The LDS Church does not have an official interpretation of this passage, but many of the Church's General Authorities and lay members – particularly in Latin America – believe that it refers to Mexican, Central American, and perhaps even Andean immigration to the United States that will occur prior to the Second Coming.<sup>41</sup> This interpretation provides a useful angle from which to view Pedro in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*; he is a foreign Other, but his presence in Preston, Idaho, is also God's will. Local residents like Napoleon teach him how to operate in this new land, but in the end Pedro's birthright is to attain a position of prominence in the town. He fulfills his potential by winning the student body election and normalizing his place in the community at large.

Given that one of the prerequisites for the Lamanite "reconquest" of North America is Gentile apostasy, it is not surprising that Hess shows a student body administration that has lost touch with its roots. The favored candidate, Summer (Haylie Duff), is a popular cheerleader whose boyfriend, Don (Trevor Snarr), bullies students like Napoleon. In associating with Don, Summer has adopted a self-centered worldview and distanced herself from her peers. In so doing, she has created the framework from which a new order may emerge. William C. Sewell views Napoleon, Pedro, and indeed most of the student body as "deviant" because popular students and even administrators have normalized the position of people like Summer and Don.<sup>42</sup> Pedro's winning coalition consists of numerous quirky or, in the words of Hope W. Levin and Steven Schlozman, "peculiar" people.<sup>43</sup> The discourse of peculiarity takes on a deeper meaning when applied to LDS circles, where the term signifies both a people's differentiation from the "world" and their great worth.<sup>44</sup> Pedro's victory normalizes peculiarity, as the student body elects someone who, like them, does not fit a generally understood rubric of normal. Beyond serving as a "revenge of the nerds" tale, Pedro's victory also validates a Mexican presence in Preston, Idaho. Certainly,

40 See 3 Nephi 21:11–12 in *The Book of Mormon* 2013.

41 According to van Uitert 2007, the Church has never made any official statements in favor of (or against) illegal immigration, but she notes that "a compassionate stance toward immigrants may be extrapolated from various statements made by Church leaders" (306). She also notes that LDS doctrines allude to the "special role" that the Lamanites will play prior to the Second Coming as key to understanding the Church's institutional approach to – and permissiveness toward – immigration (305).

42 Sewell 2008, 12–13.

43 Levin/Schlozman 2006, 431–433.

44 Mormons build on the term peculiar as used in the Old Testament to refer to a "covenant" people. See W. E. Smith 1992.

Pedro remains culturally different from his peers, but he is also very much welcome to stay. The story of Pedro's victory reverberates with the Mormon idea that the Lamanites – aided by worthy Gentiles – will establish a New Jerusalem in the United States while leaving unworthy Mormon Gentiles (allegorically coded as Don and Summer) behind.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout the campaign, Napoleon and Pedro emphasize the racialized “skills” that Pedro brings to the table. After witnessing a student get bullied, Napoleon approaches the victim and says, “Pedro offers you his protection.” Hess cuts to another scene, where the same bully attempts to steal the student's bicycle. Pedro's cousins – who look like stereotypical Latino gangsters from Hollywood films – show up in a hydraulic lowrider with loud music and look at the bully. They shake their heads disapprovingly and the bully flees. Hess certainly filmed the aforementioned scene for comedic effect; nevertheless, in asserting an alliance between the bullied student and these “dangerous” Mexican immigrants, Hess deconstructs the idea that whites of all stripes must join forces against threatening people of color. Instead, he suggests that oppressed whites and people of color should focus on their common interests. Pedro's cousins appear dangerous to white characters – and perhaps even audiences – throughout the film, but Hess emphasizes their kindness. These characters never speak English, but they constantly help people whether or not they know them. In one scene, Napoleon is forced to walk to his prom date's home after his uncle refuses to give him a ride. Luckily, Pedro's cousins find him and offer to take him and his date to the dance. Hess's shots in this sequence once again produce a comedic effect, as they subvert common filmic tropes that equate Latino youths with criminality. Viewed allegorically, this episode has Hess remind faithful Gentiles and Lamanites to work together in building the “Kingdom”.

Napoleon has to help Pedro navigate a new culture also so that he can avoid committing major faux pas. At one point, for example, Pedro makes a piñata of Summer that his supporters beat with a stick. Afterwards, Hess cuts to the principal's office, where the school's top administrator says, “I don't know how they do things down in Juarez, but here in Idaho we have a little something called pride.” A bit flustered, Pedro tells Napoleon, “we do that in Mexico all the time!” Pedro's innocence – or at least his lack of familiarity with the student election process – remains clear throughout the film. Given Napoleon's own eccentricities, which have led many critics to suggest he may have Asperger's syndrome,<sup>46</sup> it is surprising that he would be the one to show Pedro how to properly act in the United States. Nevertheless, his desire to help his friend despite his own social challenges reverberates within the racialized imaginary that

45 Mink 2008, 158.

46 Levin/Schlozman 2006, 430.

the film promotes. Together the duo is much stronger than it would be if each character were left to his own devices.

The duo wins the support of the majority of the students by emphasizing a shared marginality, a fact that Hess emphasizes when Summer and Pedro square off in a presidential debate of sorts. Summer does a dance with the cheerleading squad, while Pedro simply says, “If you vote for me, all your dreams will come true.” He walks dejectedly off the stage, and then Napoleon comes to his aid by dancing to LaFawnduh’s brother’s audition tapes. Easily one of the most memorable scenes from the movie, it finishes as students jump to their feet and cheer. Richard J. Allen questions the reigning interpretation that holds that Napoleon’s dance wins Pedro supporters, but he also argues that this scene emphasizes that “the majority of [Napoleon’s] classmates ... are more in tune with his eccentricity than the bullies and mean girls who taunt him”.<sup>47</sup> As Pedro positions himself as an Everyman for the student body, he assures his victory and undermines the position not only of Summer but also of the racist principal. Hess emphasizes the allegorical union between the Gentile and the Lamanite by crosscutting between the film’s several protagonists, showing them reconcile the problems they were facing throughout the film. When he depicts Pedro’s election party, he shows a diverse group of people, all of whom celebrate this major achievement. The religious discourse in this film remains hidden from the casual viewer, but the relationship between Napoleon and Pedro holds deep significance within Mormon thought.

## FAITH, CELIBACY, AND CHILDLIKE ADULTS IN *NACHO LIBRE*

Hess emphasizes the religious element of his representations of Mexican people and cultures more explicitly in *NACHO LIBRE* than in *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE*, but the Mormon backdrop is less obvious. The film stars Ignacio (aka “Nacho”) (Jack Black), who is the child of a Mexican Catholic and a European missionary. After growing up in a monastery following his parents’ deaths, he chooses to become a friar and dedicate his life to the Lord. Hess’s ironic take on Catholicism in general – and Mexican practices of the religion in particular – acquires a deeper meaning as we consider his own Mormon upbringing. *NACHO LIBRE* builds on a common imaginary within Mormon thought in which God has apparently blessed the people of Mexico with an especially acute ability to feel the Spirit.<sup>48</sup> While laudable, this quality at times leads them to make childish

47 R. J. Allen 2013, 9–22.

48 Most academic discussions of Mormonism in Mexico center on the North American immigrants who arrived in the northern state of Chihuahua after the United States passed anti-polygamy laws. See Janzen 2018. Nevertheless, the majority of Mormons in Mexico are ethnic Mexicans who have converted to the faith as a result of aggressive proselytization.

mistakes when practicing their faith. This imaginary helps Mormons to explain why people from Mexico (and throughout Latin America) are more likely than those from other countries to listen to Mormon missionaries. This ability to feel the Spirit leads to caricatures that depict Mexicans – and people purportedly of Lamanite descent generally – in a simplistic light. Within this view, Lamanites may have a predisposition to accept the gospel, but they also often struggle with superstition.<sup>49</sup> Throughout the film, Nacho, the orphans, the clergy, and even the atheist, Steven, exhibit a simple borderline-superstitious faith in their cosmologies of choice. As a result, *NACHO LIBRE* pokes fun at what it frames as sincere yet simplistic Mexican belief systems while viewing the practitioners themselves as generally good.

Despite working at the orphanage, Nacho never earns the respect of the other friars, all of whom ridicule him. He takes solace in the fact that the children love him, but he still feels ostracized. He begins to pursue a clandestine career as a masked *luchador* (wrestler) who participates in local *lucha libre* (professional wrestling) events in order to secure more funds for himself and the orphans. When a new nun named Encarnación (Ana de la Reguera) moves to the orphanage, Nacho immediately falls in love with her. However, their chastity vows interfere with any budding romance. Nacho begins to question his faith, particularly a supposed clause that holds *lucha libre* to be sinful. He befriends the atheist Steven (aka Esqueleto) (Héctor Jiménez), and together the duo starts to fight independent battles on the weekends. They lack any skill in their trade, but they soon learn that they can make good money even when they lose because the audiences enjoy their performances. At the end of the movie, Nacho earns the opportunity to fight Ramses, a wrestler whose golden mask is a combination of those of El Santo and Blue Demon, the two most popular *luchadores* – or professional wrestlers – in Mexican history. Nacho receives divine intervention that helps him defeat Ramses and win enough money to buy a bus for the orphans.

The film builds on several genres, but its most obvious influence is the Mexploitation cinema of the mid-twentieth century.<sup>50</sup> Heather Levi places *NACHO LIBRE* within an emerging tradition of US film and television that appropriates Mexican wrestling also known as *lucha libre* into the US context.<sup>51</sup> While such

49 In his talk “The Day of the Lamanites,” given during the October 1960 LDS General Conference, Spencer W. Kimball validated such views when he stated that in a recent visit to the Lamanites, he had “found evidence of waning superstition and growing faith in the gospel”. Even as he distances these new members of the Church from their “superstitious” forebears, Kimball also establishes superstition as a persistent element of Lamanite subjectivity.

50 Carlos Losilla notes certain similarities between *Nacho Libre* and the Spaghetti Western because it is a foreign (US) imitation of a Mexican style of cinema. See Losilla 2007, 122. For an in-depth discussion of Mexploitation, see Greene 2005.

51 Levi 2008, 222.

films give the sport greater visibility, she laments that “ripped from its historical and social context, these representations of *lucha libre* tend to emphasize its ‘wacky’ qualities”.<sup>52</sup> Ilán Stavans, however, provides a different perspective when he states that the film’s “apparent bad taste in popular Mexican artifacts” imbues it with “subversive power”.<sup>53</sup> Both critics make crucial observations, and I extend their work by showing how Hess’s kitschy representations of Mexican culture reflect North American Mormon imaginaries. While the movie deals heavily with notions of religion and faith in Mexico, any references to Mormonism remain hidden in the negative space. Nacho is a devout Catholic, yet he must repress his dreams because of religious inhibitions that would not exist were he Mormon (or Protestant). The film never comes across as anti-religious even as it criticizes certain aspects of Catholicism.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, Nacho’s spiritual struggles come from two principal sources that would be nonissues were he LDS. First, he wishes to pursue a romantic relationship with the nun Encarnación, but he cannot because of his (and her) chastity vows. Secondly, he wishes to be a *luchador*, but Encarnación and other religious leaders claim that the wrestling lifestyle is sinful because it creates false idols who seek only the glory of the world.

Given that Hess bases his film loosely on the story of Fray Tormenta [The Storming Friar], a Catholic priest who moonlighted as a masked wrestler for 23 years, the historical veracity of the tension between *lucha libre* and the Catholic Church in Mexico is certainly suspect.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, the tension between Nacho’s love of the sport and his affiliation with a church that views it as immoral sits at the heart of Hess’s story.<sup>56</sup> In one iconic scene, Chanco – an overweight orphan who serves as a character foil of sorts for the film’s protagonist – walks in on Nacho while he dresses in his bedroom for an upcoming match. In an attempt to cover up his secret life, Nacho says “Chanco, when you are a man, sometimes you wear stretchy pants in your room. It’s for fun.” Donald Moss interprets Nacho’s use of stretchy pants as a “flirt[ation] with the marker of a once-repudiated femininity”.<sup>57</sup> The critic correctly notes that the less-than-ath-

52 Levi 2008, 222.

53 Stavans 2013, 111–112.

54 The US Conference of Catholic Bishops came out strongly against the film owing to its blasphemous and supposedly anti-clerical nature. See McDannell 2008, 29.

55 Interestingly, Fray Tormenta was forced into early retirement after his true identity became known. This was not because the Church opposed his wrestling, but because other wrestlers did not want to hurt their own popularity by fighting a priest. See Barberena 2009, 159.

56 It is possible that Hess conflated statist postures with those of the Church in making this film. Unlike the Church, which took a generally laissez-faire approach to *lucha libre*, state officials labeled it as immoral and even took the extraordinary step of banning it from television because they feared that it would contaminate the masses. See Levi 2008, 181; Dalton 2018, 147–149.

57 Moss 2012, 2.

letic Jack Black undermines many ideals of masculinity throughout the film. Nevertheless, Moss's lack of familiarity with Mexican professional wrestling (and the costumes that these *luchadores* wear) leads him to overstate the significance of Nacho's stretchy pants in undermining constructs of masculinity. Indeed, El Santo, Blue Demon, and Mil Máscaras articulated an idealized hyper-masculinity on the Mexican silver screen while wearing stretchy pants of their own.<sup>58</sup> Far from showing Nacho deviate from traditional articulations of masculinity, this scene shows that the friar has decided to enter into a hyper-masculine world of violence that is supposedly unbecoming of his ecclesiastical position. When Chancho promises to keep Nacho's secret, he is referring to the fact that he will never tell anyone else that the orphanage's cook moonlights as a professional wrestler because such a revelation would destroy Nacho's career as a friar.

While working at the orphanage, Nacho has to maintain the illusion that he opposes *lucha libre*. In one scene, for example, he breaks up a wrestling match between Chancho and another orphan. He hypocritically tells the children that they should stop wrestling "because it is in the Bible not to wrestle your neighbor". When Chancho asks Nacho if he has ever wrestled, the friar replies that he has not; Chancho shows his loyalty when he decides not to publicly call Nacho out on this lie. Nacho proceeds to tell the children of the wonders of life for those who do not wrestle. This scene is especially interesting because it interweaves Nacho's desire to wrestle with his love for Encarnación; as such, it shows how the two great stumbling blocks of his faith converge. In the nun's presence he tells the children that because he does not wrestle, "I get to lay [sic] in a bed by myself all of my life. It's fantastic!" Hess crosscuts between Nacho and Encarnación during this monologue; Encarnación's physical reaction shows mild surprise, but she says nothing. Nacho shares a flirtatious smile with her after the children decide that they will not wrestle in the monastery.

Hess's Mormonism influences how he approaches Nacho's infatuation with Encarnación. The LDS Church posits heterosexual marriage as a saving ordinance that people must undertake if they wish to achieve the highest degree of exaltation in the afterlife.<sup>59</sup> Beyond playing a pivotal role in Mormon theology, marriage is prerequisite for most positions of leadership within the LDS hierarchy. Nacho's desire for Encarnación reflects a quintessentially Mormon ideal in which personal – and even ecclesiastical – growth depends on marriage. His desire for Encarnación may subvert Catholic teachings, but it does not undermine his ability to be a religious leader from an LDS perspective. This Mormon approach to marriage and sexuality lies in the background of many of the scenes in which Nacho attempts to woo his muse. In one case, Nacho takes

58 Dalton 2018, 154; Rubenstein 2002, 577.

59 The Doctrine and Covenants 2013, 131:2.

Encarnación out at night, supposedly so that they can “preach the gospel” – itself an act more commonly associated with Mormonism than (contemporary) Catholicism – to some “bums” he found on the street. In a wink at the fixed nature of *lucha libre* matches,<sup>60</sup> Nacho has actually asked Steven to bring a threatening, though fake, mob so that he can appear to bravely protect Encarnación and thus win her love. Nacho, ostensibly in an attempt to find the men they will teach, moves ahead and leans on a corner building. In reality, he wants an excuse to model for her. He awkwardly points his butt in Encarnación’s direction, and when she tells him that his clothes look expensive, he replies, “underneath the clothes you find the man”. He tries to save face when he realizes what he has said by continuing nonsensically: “underneath the man you find the ... nucleus”. Shortly afterwards, Nacho erroneously identifies two men as the people that Steven has agreed to bring. He picks a fight with them, but they beat him to the ground. This scene produced comedy gold for both Jack Black and Jared Hess, but beyond getting a laugh from the audience, it also explicitly ties Nacho’s frustrations and marginalization to his religion. His vows of celibacy have created what the film frames as an unreasonable hurdle for finding true love.

Because he is a friar, most of the women that he meets are nuns who have also made vows of celibacy. Thus, his religious circumstances have created an environment of sexual frustration, but they have also made it so he only interacts with women who will not appreciate his advances. Nacho eventually realizes that he should not put Encarnación in uncomfortable situations, but his infatuation continues. During one of the most popular scenes in the film, Nacho spontaneously breaks into song about his love for Encarnación while in the locker room awaiting his match with Ramses. One verse is especially interesting: “To kiss your mouth/ I’d break my vow/ no, no, no/ no, no, no way, José/ unless you want to/ then we’d break our vows together.” Nacho has decided that he would leave his life in the ministry to pursue a relationship with Encarnación; however, he will also respect her own commitment to her vows. He now hopes to win her love and convince her to abandon life in the convent for the chance to marry – and presumably raise a family – with him. At no point does the director explicitly denounce Catholic teachings regarding celibacy and religious leadership, but his satirical approach reverberates within Mormon thought. Much of the film’s success among Mormons reflects the fact that Nacho’s (thwarted) love life resonated with LDS viewers who believe that this particular problem could not occur within their own religious tradition.<sup>61</sup>

60 Levi 2008, xvi.

61 Much of Hess’s success with Mormon audiences comes from the fact that the community upholds his work as some of the best ever produced by someone of their ilk. In the days leading up to *NACHO LIBRE*’s release, for example, the local Utah radio station KSL published a story about *NACHO LIBRE*’s BYU and Mormon ties. See *High Expectations* 2006. Over a decade after

The film does not set out to reject Catholicism outright. Despite prominent voices to the contrary, most Mormons view Catholicism as a positive “preparatory gospel” that (re)introduced Christianity in the Americas.<sup>62</sup> Certainly, a folk Catholicism based more on tradition than on readings of the Bible probably lies at the heart of what Mormons tend to refer to as a “simplistic” Lamanite faith. It is problematic to call Nacho a Lamanite; Jack Black is hardly Native American, and while his character lives in the especially indigenous Mexican state of Oaxaca, Nacho himself is probably *criollo* (creole) or possibly *mestizo* (or mixed race). Alejandro Hermosilla Sánchez argues that *NACHO LIBRE* is symptomatic of a US cinematic tradition that caricatures – rather than comprehends – *mestizo* identity.<sup>63</sup> Hermosilla Sánchez correctly identifies the fact that Nacho’s character largely diverges from Mexican understandings of *mestizaje*, but he does not mention how Hess’s religious referent leads him to present the titular character as Lamanite regardless of the degree of indigenous blood he may (or may not) have. The fact that Nacho lives in an indigenous space marks him as Lamanite regardless of his genetic ancestry. In stark contrast to Mexican racial discourses that posit *mestizaje* as a strategy for “de-Indianizing” a population with genetic ties to indigeneity,<sup>64</sup> notions of Hemispheric Lamanite Identity tend to emphasize the fact that racially hybrid individuals maintain an Amerindian (and thus Lamanite) essence. Whether or not Nacho can truly claim ties to Lamanite progenitors, he certainly has received his spiritual upbringing in a Catholic orphanage in a highly indigenous state. As a result, he has acquired the “childlike” faith that Mormon leaders like Kimball saw in the Church’s Lamanite members. As such, Nacho must eventually temper this faith with greater knowledge and (spiritual) maturity.

Hess highlights Nacho’s immature faith through his relationship with his teammate, Steven. At one point, Nacho advises Steven to “pray to the Lord for strength” as he prepares for his first fight. Steven replies, “I don’t believe in God;

the film’s release, *BYU Magazine* continues to publish stories on Hess and his productions, a practice that certainly keeps films like *NACHO LIBRE* in Mormons’ collective memory. See Rogers 2018a; Rogers 2018b.

62 Bruce R. McConkey popularized the notion that the Catholic Church was the Great and Abominable Church mentioned in the Book of Mormon with the publication of the *Mormon Doctrine* in 1958. Here he stated that “it is also in the Book of Mormon to which we turn for the plainest description of the Catholic Church as the great and abominable church”. See McConkey 1958, 130. However, the First Presidency of the Church demanded that he amend his assertion. In the second edition, he walked back the claim to a degree, asserting instead that “the titles church of the devil and great and abominable church are used to identify all churches or organizations of whatever nature – whether political, philosophical, educational, economic social, fraternal, civic, or religious – which are designed to take men on a course that leads away from God and his laws and thus from salvation in the Kingdom of God.” See McConkey 1966, 100.

63 Hermosilla Sánchez 2015, 17.

64 Bonfil Batalla 1987, 41–42.

I believe in science.” In a later scene, the director crosscuts between Steven, who eats vegetables, and Nacho, who flushes a toilet and stands in the doorway between the locker room and the bathroom. He asks Steven why he never chose to be baptized, and his partner expresses outrage at being “judged” for a personal decision. This conversation is especially noteworthy because Catholic babies do not have a say in whether they will be baptized. Rather, Hess’s focus on Steven’s ability to choose reverberates within a Mormon paradigm where people must be at least eight years old to be baptized. Catholicism serves as a mask that makes the discussion legible to non-LDS viewers, but the scene is, at its core, one of Mormon teachings and practices. Indeed, Hess presents Nacho as a Lamanite whose eagerness and childlike faith lead him to commit procedural errors in his efforts to build up the Church. The aspiring *luchador* fills a bowl with water and dunks Steven’s face in it before saying “felicidades” (congratulations) and informing Steven that he has been baptized. Nacho’s justification that the duo can only win that night’s match if both men are baptized evinces a serious lack of understanding of basic doctrines of baptism. Nacho sees no problem with the validity of this sacrament despite the fact that he never received Steven’s consent. Nacho’s enthusiasm causes him to ignore the Church’s – both LDS and Catholic – established modes of decorum, as he has apparently baptized a man against his will.

Steven also exhibits an immature faith in a discourse that he does not fully understand. He almost certainly uses the term “science” as a euphemism for Darwinian evolution theory. His rejection of religion, then, comes from his acceptance of a different version of the Creation from that taught in a literal rendition of the Bible. Steven’s assertion mischaracterizes the nature of scientific discourse by trying to make it commensurate with religious knowledge. Science is not – nor should it be understood as – an ideological counterweight to religion. Where the former attempts to provide clear-cut answers about the nature of the world, life, and the afterlife through inductive means, the latter is, at its core, a system of knowledge based on falsification.<sup>65</sup> Many people trust the findings of scientific inquiry over the teachings of a religious text, but this does not constitute faith in science. Rather, it reflects a deeper trust in the observational rigor of scientific inquiry. Scientists rarely describe their findings as truth; instead, they frame scientific knowledge as the most correct representation currently available about a given reality. Rather than refer to existential or cosmological truths, science exists as a process for acquiring and organizing knowledge. In asserting a belief in “science”, Steven ironically alludes to the fact that he probably knows very little about scientific discourse in general. As such, Steven accepts Darwinism on the basis of faith rather than in-depth understanding.

65 Kuhn, 1996, 10–11.

This purported faith in science is especially interesting when viewed through a Mormon or Catholic lens because neither church views the Darwinist notion of human evolution as blasphemous.<sup>66</sup> Lay members from both faiths often hold outspoken views against Darwinism and human evolution, but this possibility for the origin of humanity does not pose a doctrinal threat in either case.

Hess shows that these characters' eccentric faith borders on superstition when, after suffering a particularly crushing defeat, Steven tells Nacho that he can become a better wrestler if he consumes eagle eggs. Steven's certainty that these eggs will imbue his friend with strength makes it clear that while he may profess a belief in science, he espouses certain mystical worldviews as well. The following scene ironically parodies the tropes of the Campbellian hero's quest as Nacho travels by boat to a cliff hanging over the ocean.<sup>67</sup> Hess captures the characters with a high-angle longshot that emphasizes their insignificance, while supposedly mystical, vaguely Native American instruments play in the background. Hess undermines the indigenous element to the scene when the shaman turns out to be a white, European conman.<sup>68</sup> The director shifts to a soundtrack of holy Catholic music as Nacho scales the rock wall. After consuming the yolk, Nacho attempts to dive off the cliff; however, he both farts and belly flops. Once again, Hess undermines familiar tropes of cinema and mythology to emphasize the titular character's flawed faith. After losing yet again, Nacho realizes he was tricked and angrily tells Steven, "the eggs were a lie". He decides that he should not continue fighting because his place is with the orphans at the monastery. This scene both shows Nacho's growing maturity – he realizes that he has duties that he must attend to – and sets up the circumstances under which he can finally fight "for the Lord".

Hess posits Nacho's faith and his resulting closeness with deity as key contributors to his ultimate decision to continue fighting. In a last-ditch attempt to save his wrestling career, he angrily reproaches God for creating him with a desire to wrestle despite the fact that he is no good. Shortly thereafter, he suggests that he will abandon his dreams unless God sends him a sign showing that "you bless my mission and want me to be a wrestling servant of you". Hess employs deceptive film strategies here, particularly low-angle close-ups that frame Nacho against the ceiling mural; however, he later cuts to a side shot where we

66 In 2002, LDS prophet Gordon B. Hinckley stated that "what the church requires is only belief 'that Adam was the first man of what we would call the human race.' Scientists can speculate on the rest." See Jarvik 2006. The Catholic Church has recognized no intrinsic tension between evolution and Church doctrines since the reforms of Pope Pius XII. See Pius XII 1950, 1:36.

67 Campbell identified a basic, mythic structure to hero tales in which "a hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." See Campbell 1973, 30; Jung 1964.

68 Criollo/Nava/Aviña 2011, 241.

realize that Nacho's robe has caught on fire. The audience never knows whether the candles fell on Nacho with God's aid or if the protagonist's incompetence has created yet another comical scene. These plausible interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and it ultimately does not matter which is correct. Nacho's robe burns off and reveals the *lucha libre* costume he wears underneath. The monks expel him from the monastery, and Nacho turns to wrestling out of necessity. He interprets his banishment as a form of punishment, and he claims that he will atone for his sins by beating Ramses in the ring and using the proceeds to buy the orphans a bus. Despite its simplistic flaws, Nacho's faith helps him to be a selfless individual who works tirelessly in the service of others.

Nacho's belief, coupled with his love for the orphans (and Encarnación), ultimately makes him into the champion he always wished to become. His fight with Ramses goes very badly until the children arrive along with his beloved nun. As Carlos Cesar Domingos do Amaral notes, Nacho finds success as he fights for a cause greater than himself.<sup>69</sup> In an especially bizarre moment, he apparently conjures eagle powers that allow him to jump 50 feet into the stands to tackle a fleeing Ramses. The film never fully explains Nacho's leap, but it is possible that the superstition that led Nacho to consume the eagle eggs may not have been unfounded after all. At the very least, Nacho has become a champion through divine (and mystical) intervention. This scene elucidates Hess's take on Mexican spirituality perhaps more than any other part of the film. Nacho's childlike faith has helped him to be kind and caring, two traits that the film – and Mormon theology – view in a positive light. His faith becomes a powerful force when he chooses to fight for an appropriate cause. Nacho's religion has helped him organize and better leverage his faith, but Hess emphasizes that Catholicism does not offer him the best path because it will force him to abide by his vow of celibacy. As the film ends, Nacho and Encarnación share several sidelong glances, and the titular character nods his head in satisfaction. Clearly he believes that she will, perhaps, decide to break her vows as well. Nacho's faith appears as a great redeeming quality, even as his Catholicism seems to impede his continued personal and spiritual development. As he cuts to the credits, Hess implicitly posits Mormonism as a better spiritual path both for Nacho and for Mexican Lamanites in general. If Nacho and Encarnación were LDS, they could marry with no problem. Hess's critique lies in the background, visible only to those familiar with Mormon doctrines and theology.

In conclusion, a major draw for both *NACHO LIBRE* and *NAPOLEON DYNAMITE* is Jared Hess's unique characterization of Mexican characters and cultures. The director's problematic representations of Mexican and Mexican-American identity reflect his subject position as an LDS filmmaker. As this study has shown,

69 Domingos do Amaral 2016.

Latin American countries – particularly those with large indigenous populations – hold a special place within Mormon thought owing to the belief that the inhabitants of these countries descend from the peoples of the Book of Mormon. Most Mormons view Lamanite identity as an honor, but white North American adherents of the faith also signal the descendants of the Book of Mormon as Other. This quintessentially (white, North American) Mormon approach to Mexican and Mexican-American identity lies at the heart of Hess's cinema. Characters like Pedro and Nacho certainly affirm the humanity of Mexican subjects to a greater degree than do their counterparts in Hollywood. Nevertheless, these films' comedic representations of Mexican peoples and cultures create a clear division between North American and Mexican cultures. The fact that Hess's cinema highlights cultural and linguistic distinctions between white America and Mexico does not make him unique. What distinguishes his work is the way that he so effectively posits white (particularly Mormon) and Mexican subjects as both brothers/sisters and Others. This interracial and interethnic union, predicated as it is on division, both highlights his religious referent and creates fertile ground for excellent comedy.

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# Narrative and Experiment, Religion and Politics in Terrence Malick's *THE TREE OF LIFE*

## ABSTRACT

While Terrence Malick's 2011 film *THE TREE OF LIFE* is ordinarily analyzed in light of its Christian—and implicitly Augustinian—theological rationale, I argue here for the importance of analyzing *THE TREE OF LIFE* for its connection to the Emersonian artistic heritage. In so doing, I elucidate the film's unique political vision, a vision that emphasizes experimentalism and is allied with American avant-garde cinema. That vision, furthermore, carries with it an awareness of the differences and historical conflicts between the Augustinian and Emersonian traditions in American politics, as well as insights into these two political strains' prospects for rapprochement, particularly in regard to how avowed religionists and secularists might cooperate on contemporary environmental concerns

## KEYWORDS

Terrence Malick, *THE TREE OF LIFE*, Religion, Politics, Augustinian Theology, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emersonianism

## BIOGRAPHY

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## INTRODUCTION

Whereas many heretofore have considered the import and implications of the Christian theological resonances of Terrence Malick's *THE TREE OF LIFE* (US 2011), I want to consider the political vision of Malick's film.<sup>1</sup> Malick, I will demon-

1 See, e. g., Leary 2011, Leithard 2013, Barnett/Elliston 2016, Handley 2016, and Larsen 2017.

strate, leverages the tension between two strands of American religio-political thought to illuminate a politics not typically associated with traditional Christian theology. The two strands to which I am referring are Augustinianism and Emersonianism. By eschewing narrative in favor of an experimental approach to his filmmaking – an approach grounded in the American avant-garde cinematic tradition – Malick envisages a radical politics much as Ralph Waldo Emerson does in his best-known essays. Yet Malick does this while still centering *THE TREE OF LIFE* on traditional Christian theological inquiries. The result, I argue, is a cinema of religio-political possibility that contains meaningful insights for contemporary American environmental politics, which up to now has struggled to bring religionists and secularists together on shared projects and goals.

## AUGUSTINE, EMERSON, POLITICS

For all the theological attention *THE TREE OF LIFE* has received since its release, the film's politics has received rather short shrift. This is attributable to two main reasons. The first is related to what Mark Lewis Taylor has called theology's normative "imperio-colonial sense", by which he means the ways theology (insofar as it is taken up in academic discourse) is assessed without consideration of its extradiscursive effects – that is, its cognizance of power arrangements in society.<sup>2</sup> The discursive focus of professional theology is doctrinal. Analyses of topics like the nature of God, creation, sin, the Holy Spirit, the church, and eschatology serve to structure orthodox belief. Theologians' interests in transcendental knowledge, Taylor argues, tend to swamp their concerns within the imminent, political frame. The second is the habit of interpreting Malick's films through the lens of, as Hannah Patterson has called it, an "Edenic yearning to recapture a lost wholeness", which means Malick is often assumed to be more interested in retrospective reflection than in considering present-day political possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

Beginning with *THE TREE OF LIFE*, all of Malick's recent films – except *THE VOYAGE OF TIME* (US 2015), a two-part documentary examining the birth and death of the known universe – have been set in the present day. So while visions of nostalgic recovery may still be read in Malick's work since 2011, perceived conceptions of a romanticized past in Malick's films are not the hindrance they once were. That the political vision of *THE TREE OF LIFE* has not elicited more attention from theologians is more difficult to fathom, however, for it is not so easy to separate the political from the theological. To put this point in terms of a phrase made popular by second-wave feminism, it is not just the *personal*

2 Taylor 2011, 53.

3 Patterson 2007, 15.

that is political, but the *theological* is inherently political too. The fact that the theological significance of THE TREE OF LIFE seems to have overwhelmed theologians' awareness of its political resonance serves to bolster Taylor's criticism of professional theology's inattentiveness to extradiscursive interpretive factors.

Interpreting THE TREE OF LIFE in relation to two cornerstone traditions in the history of the American debate over religion, ethics, and political community – Augustinianism and Emersonianism – can give a start to acknowledging the film's political vision. Jeffrey Stout, in his book *Democracy and Tradition*, provides a helpful conceptual framework for understanding these traditions and the sticking points of their disagreement. The first strand, Augustinianism, “is that of orthodox Christianity from the Puritanism of Plymouth Rock to the denominational soup of our own day”, Stout says.<sup>4</sup> This strand emphasizes the efficacy of institutional authority to chasten human nature, which, Augustinians believe, has been vitiated by the effects of original sin. The second strand, Emersonianism, takes most seriously the question of character as a pre-requisite for considering the conditions and arrangements of society. In the history of American politics, says Stout, these two strands have butted heads more often than not:

[Emerson] and his followers have been engaged in a tug of war with orthodox Christians over the future of American piety. Christians, ever mindful of Augustine's great work, *The City of God*, have never been reluctant to condemn the Emersonians for underestimating the human spirit's need for unsettled institutional and communal forms, including a structure of church authority to rein in spiritual excess. The Emersonians, for their part, would rather quit the church than grant that some holder of church office or even a democratically organized congregation has the authority to administer the distinctions between saved and damned, saint and sinner, true and false prophet, scripture and apocrypha. Above all, they have been persuaded from the beginning that the idea of original sin is blight on the human spirit. Orthodox Christians sense in all this the errors of ancient heresies – Montanist and Pelagian, to be precise – and have never tired of prophesying against them.<sup>5</sup>

The conflict between Augustinians and Emersonians maps well onto the traditional divide that persists between secular environmentalists and Christians, namely evangelicals. Ideological tensions have long frustrated Christian and secular groups' collaboration on ecological concerns. Evangelical Christians, for one, worry that environmentalist politics supplant theocentric values. Their concern is with idolatry to the extent that environmentalists can be interpreted as reframing devotion to God as devotion to the earth. The inclination to, as

4 Stout 2004, 19.

5 Stout 2004, 20.

Augustine says in his *Confessions*, “abandon the higher and supreme goods ... that is ... God, [God’s] truth, and [God’s] law” in pursuit of inferior goods, which no doubt have their delights but “are not comparable to ... God”, is a mark of humans’ sinful nature.<sup>6</sup> Better to check one’s commitment to earthly goods against a more thoroughgoing commitment to God, the *summum bonum*. Environmentalists have the opposite concern. Environmentalists worry Christians’ faith commitments distract from addressing today’s most pressing ecological problems. When one good is enshrined above all, other goods worthy of moral consideration inevitably get curtailed – or so secular environmentalist thinking tends to go.

All this plays out in the distrust we see between environmentalists and evangelicals today. Many Christians have come to regard environmentalists’ political efforts on issues like climate change with suspicion, some going so far as to adopt a line of argument famously articulated by the novelist Michael Crichton, who, in 2003, criticized environmentalism as a kind of new religion.<sup>7</sup> Environmentalists, though, who are cognizant of how Christians’ political influence has been co-opted by free-market neo-liberal ideologues reciprocate evangelicals’ distrust by remaining cautious about engaging too much with evangelical organizations. Recent instances like evangelicals’ coordinated resistance to the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency’s attempts to regulate coal mining in Appalachia only serve to reinforce environmentalists’ circumspection.<sup>8</sup>

## NARRATIVE AND VISIONARY FILMMAKING

Where does *THE TREE OF LIFE* fit in all of this? My argument is that while the basic content of Malick’s film is Augustinian, *THE TREE OF LIFE* is thoroughly Emersonian in form. I will demonstrate this by considering the role narrative plays in *THE TREE OF LIFE* – in how Malick’s propensity to dispense with traditional narrative form in favor of a more experimental approach to his filmmaking reveals a radical vision of politics more aligned with American avant-garde cinema than with Christian orthodoxy. This is not to say that *THE TREE OF LIFE*’s politics is divorced from its theology, just that the film’s politics has as much to do with its cinematic construction as with its theological interests.

Not many non-documentary films from the last ten years deal as explicitly with the theme of humanity’s relationship with nature as does *THE TREE OF LIFE*. This theme is standard fare for Malick’s larger oeuvre, but *THE TREE OF LIFE* marks a distinctive turn in Malick’s willingness to explore the particular Christian

6 Augustine 1998, 30.

7 See Nelson 2012.

8 See, e.g., Weaver 2014.



Figs. 1a–b: The dead emerge from their resting places in *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s finale (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:05:02; 02:05:16.

frameworks which bolster his philosophical inquiries.<sup>9</sup> For instance, *THE TREE OF LIFE* opens with an epigraph from the Book of Job (“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? ... When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” [Job 38:4,7]). Malick also utilizes Christian conceptual conventions like “nature” and “grace” to frame the relational dynamics between characters and the film’s overall structural organization. And finally, *THE TREE OF LIFE* is chock full of allusions to traditional Christian theological tropes (e. g., the film concludes with a rousing rendition of corporeal resurrection, set to the score of Hector Berlioz’s 1837 Requiem Mass; see figs. 1a–b). Given the frequency of such referential touch points, it is not surprising that most theological interpretations of *THE TREE OF LIFE* are patently Augustinian.

9 Films like *BADLANDS* (US 1973), *DAYS OF HEAVEN* (US 1978), *THE THIN RED LINE* (US 1998), and *THE NEW WORLD* (US 2005) each deal with human-nature relationality without overt reference to Christian theological concepts. In these films, Malick is especially interested in the ways human malfeasances are reflected in humans’ connection to nature. In *BADLANDS*, for instance, the film’s two main characters, Kit and Holly, recover to an Eden of their making in the woods of South Dakota but are forced to leave it behind when marshals come looking for Kit, who murdered Holly’s father in a fit of passion. In another example, *THE THIN RED LINE*, a film about the pivotal battle of Guadalcanal during the Second World War, examines the violence inherent to the natural world as it is reflected in human conflict.

Often emphasized in these interpretations is the condition of alienation in which humans abide as a result of their misguided loves – a sure indication of a given interpretation’s Augustinian slant. Whether it is due to one’s failing to treat God as the highest good or otherwise some perversion of the will, *THE TREE OF LIFE* treats experiences of isolation and estrangement – the consequences of human sin – as dramatic fodder. Nowhere is this more evident than in the film’s depiction of Jack, the eldest son of the O’Brien family, who is the film’s main character.

Yet for all this, there is something decidedly *un-Augustinian* about *THE TREE OF LIFE*’s cinematic complexion. I take this “something” – which I identify with the Emersonian artistic heritage – to be what makes the politics of Malick’s film so interesting. Consider the role (or lack of a role) narrative plays in *THE TREE OF LIFE*. The film plays out like a series of recountings from Jack’s formative years, tacking back and forth from the present to the past. On the anniversary of his brother R. L.’s death, Jack, played by Sean Penn and depicted in adulthood as an architect working in Houston, thinks back on his time growing up in mid-century suburban Texas (where the lion’s share of the film is set). A segment of the film is also devoted to imaging the birth and chronological development of the cosmos. Malick juxtaposes the progress of the physical universe with the progress of the O’Brien’s familial universe, where adolescent maturation and the dynamics of a marriage under duress are as complex as the dawn and emergence of all existence (figs. 2a–b). Aside from the basic progress of time, however, *THE TREE OF LIFE* is much less reliant on traditional narrative logic than Malick’s other films.

Unlike *DAYS OF HEAVEN* (US 1978), *THE NEW WORLD* (US 2005), *TO THE WONDER* (US 2012), and *SONG TO SONG* (US 2017), there is no love triangle impelling *THE TREE OF LIFE*’s plot forward. *THE TREE OF LIFE* instead is far more attuned to quotidian experience than to narrative convention. And while the mystery imbuing the everyday – what Stanley Cavell termed “the uncanniness of the ordinary” – undoubtedly has a place in all of Malick’s filmography (most will attribute this to his Heideggerian philosophical bent), nowhere is Malick as attentive to the phenomena of common experience as in *THE TREE OF LIFE*.<sup>10</sup>

Eschewing traditional narrative as he does, Malick assumes the primacy of the visual. The result is similar to what the film scholar William Wees calls a “cinema of exemplarity”, or a cinema that involves the filmmaker offering their work as an example of how one might begin to see, and ultimately think, for oneself in novel ways.<sup>11</sup> Narrative filmmaking and, more generally, representational film require conventions and norms of movement such as chronological relations

10 Cavell 1988, 153–181.

11 Wees 1992, 80.



Fig. 2a-b: THE TREE OF LIFE juxtaposes the birth and progress of the physical universe with the more modest (but no less complicated) universe of the O'Brien family (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 00:23:03; 01:20:56.



between images. Narrative-based films, then, legitimate a necessary order of causality. Politically speaking, they often work within the realm of established forms, reinforcing the perceived necessity of certain social arrangements and institutions. Yet the political upshot of Malick's visionary cinema is the *denial* of such a necessary order. Any object, event, or feeling is rather the occasion for a surprising, undetermined effect. Sometimes that effect is to challenge the social order and the political norms that ground it. Sometimes that effect is to throw society's present arrangements into doubt, and even into crisis. For the viewer of the kind of cinema of exemplarity I am identifying with THE TREE OF LIFE, any reaction to Malick's film can become the occasion for any outcome at all. Any instant may become for the viewer an occasion for transformation, whether that be personal, social, or both.<sup>12</sup>

It is a fundamental quality of the Augustinian tradition to be bound up by narrative logic and structuring, a fact which has been noted by myriad scholars of religion and culture. Paul Ricoeur, for instance, argued Augustine, in his

12 I borrow the language of "occasionalism" from Tyrus Miller (Miller 2005), whose analysis of the cinema of Stan Brakhage and romantic politics is of a similar mind to my analysis of Malick here. My highlighting the Emersonian vision as undergirding Malick's THE TREE OF LIFE could just as well serve to highlight that which undergirds Brakhage's films.

*Confessions*, engaged in “emplotment”, or the synthesis of heterogeneous and seemingly discordant elements, incidents, and events into a concordant unity.<sup>13</sup> Augustine’s transformation from pagan sinner to Christian convert coincides with the operation to gather the disparate factors of his life into a totality – a story, in other words. The story Augustine tells, Ricoeur says, presents time as characterized by integration, culmination, and closure: integration because, as I have just noted, narrative blends elements and events whose connection may seem accidental or arbitrary into a unified whole; culmination because time, at the conclusion of a given narrative, is revealed to possess meaning and ultimacy in retrospect; and closure in that time is understood to have passed and flowed away, having left an indelible mark on the present. The politics of the narrated story serve to either justify the way things are or point toward some concrete direction the future should take as a result of things having happened the way they have. For Augustine, more often than not the discordance of the past necessitates the concordance that institutions like government and the church bring to bear on human history. As staples of social organization, these institutions mitigate the most consequential effects of human sin, so thus promote unity now and in the future.

The Emersonian tradition I have been contrasting with that of Augustinianism takes a different approach to constructing meaning, at least inasmuch as the Emersonian artistic heritage is taken up in American filmmaking. Narrative is an exclusionary device – “plots”, as Don DeLillo has said, “reduce the world”.<sup>14</sup> To emplot a story is to construct an intelligible whole from the innumerable facets of history, highlighting certain elements, incidents, and events and diminishing the significance of whatever else. Most films, and nearly all films produced by Hollywood since the middle of the last century, operate in this fashion, employing narrative to make and structure meaning. It is not that Emersonianism jettisons narrative entirely, just that it emplots story in a different way. For Emerson, time is not the stage upon which story is configured from chronological succession but is rather a series of incidents with no discernible organization. As such, time is open and indefinite. Time, as the avowed Emersonian Henry David Thoreau put it in *Walden*, “is but the stream I go a-fishing in”.<sup>15</sup>

With this alternative conception of time, the Emersonian tradition is much less concerned with constructing linear narratives so as to identify meaning in history than with plumbing the possibilities inherent in the present. “With the past I have nothing to do; nor with the future”, Emerson wrote in his journal – “I

13 Ricoeur 1990.

14 DeLillo 2001.

15 Thoreau 2008, 70.

live now.”<sup>16</sup> In his best-known essays Emerson imbued his prose with invitations and provocations to his readers to fulfill their untapped potential, to follow their genius wherever it may lead. What matters most is being oneself and seeing the world as only you might, institutions or traditions be damned. “What have I to do with the sacredness of traditions, if I live wholly from within?” Emerson asks in “Self-Reliance”. He goes on, “My friend suggested, – ‘But these impulses may be from below, not from above.’ I replied, ‘They do not seem to me to be such; but if I am the Devil’s child, I will live then from the Devil.’ No law can be sacred to me but that of my nature.”<sup>17</sup> History is affirmed not in hindsight, but in the ways it is embodied in humanity’s potential today.

P. Adams Sitney identifies American avant-garde filmmaking with Emersonianism in the ways it employs cinema as an instrument of self-discovery.<sup>18</sup> This connects with Wees’s concept of cinematic exemplarity mentioned earlier. American filmmakers like Stan Brakhage, Jonas Mekas, Marie Menken, and Su Friedrich, Sitney shows, work in interrelated modes of camera movement, superimposition, associative editing, and the disjunctions of language and image to link the exhilarations of their cinematic inventions to the eccentricities of their personality and experience. Like Augustine in his *Confessions*, the most visionary American avant-garde filmmakers center their art on their personal lives and the project to elucidate the unconscious. Yet unlike Augustine – and this is what allies these filmmakers with Emerson, to Sitney’s mind – visionary avant-garde filmmakers consider the measure of a work of art not its capacity to emplot narrative, but the degree to which it can surprise and thereby exhilarate its maker. “The one thing which we seek with insatiable desire”, Emerson writes at the conclusion of his essay “Circles”, “is to forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our propriety, to lose our sempiternal memory, and to do something without knowing how or why.”<sup>19</sup> In the address Emerson delivered in 1837 to the graduating class at Harvard Divinity School, he identified this capacity for transformative experience and self-possession as the very means of incarnating God in the world. In this way, the creative exhilaration inhering in avant-garde film possesses Emerson’s call to en flesh divinity in the here and now.

## PERFECT EXHILARATION AS POLITICAL VISION

What makes Malick’s *THE TREE OF LIFE* interesting as far as its politics are concerned is that it draws from both the Emersonian and Augustinian traditions in order to address questions like: What is the appropriate relationship between

16 Emerson 1912, 255.

17 Emerson 1983, 262.

18 Sitney 2008.

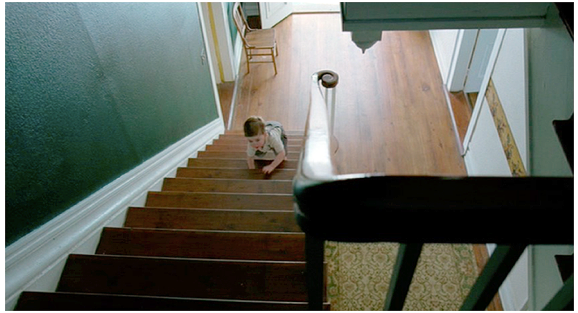
19 Emerson 1983, 414.



Figs. 3a-b: Father-son relational dynamics and the built environment of downtown Houston serve to invoke a sense of modern alienation in *THE TREE OF LIFE* (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 01:43:54; 00:15:34.

humans and nature, and what vision of politics should order that relationship? I have already noted that a kind of Augustinian soul-searching compels much of the film's progress. A combination of humans' disordered loves and the alienation which results therefrom has led to our fractured relationships with each other and with nature. This is imaged in the strained interpersonal dynamics between characters like Jack and his father, Mr. O'Brien (played by Brad Pitt). Similarly, the built environment of downtown Houston, with its impersonal symmetry, dramatizes Jack's overall sense of estrangement (see figs. 3a–b). As both a child and a grown man Jack is a stranger in a strange land. All this grounds *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s Augustinian theological rationale.

But the means whereby Malick suggests individuals might overcome their alienation are expressly Emersonian. Malick reveals American avant-garde cinema's influence on his work – and similarly, the Emersonianism that grounds the American avant-garde tradition – by instantiating the sort of politics of exemplarity I have been pointing up. The autobiographical nature of *THE TREE OF LIFE* (Malick, like Jack, grew up in small-town Texas in the middle of the twentieth century, and he too lost his younger brother when he was a young man), paired with Malick's habit of shooting without a script, using only a Steadicam to follow his actors to catch the truth of their condition and circumstances, indicate



Figs. 4a-d: THE TREE OF LIFE is dotted with numerous means of physical ascent, suggesting spiritual progress and self-transformation (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:05:11; 00:41:13; 00:15:24; 02:04:55.

a similar deployment of cinema as a tool for introspective discovery. The surprise and exhilaration Jack undergoes when realizing the potential for his reconciliation with the world at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion are suggestive of the surprise and exhilaration we can only imagine Malick has felt in his realization that the conditions of overcoming his own alienation abide in the possibility of seeing things in a new light. The many modes of ascent portrayed in the film (ladders, stairs, elevators, etc.) presume the infinite possibility of self-reckoning and transformation (figs. 4a–d).

Nevertheless, it is tempting to interpret in the resurrection imagery at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s denouement a full-throated avowal of Augustinian salvation history's ultimate trajectory. This imagery calls to mind the vision of a new heaven and earth advanced in the book of Revelation, wherein suffering yields to solace, wrongs are righted, and death is annulled (21:1–8; see figs. 5a–d). According to Revelation, earthly circumstances, no matter how indissoluble they may seem, possess no real finality.

Only God's deliverance in the age to come will satisfy the demands for a perfect justice. It was owing to the imperfection with which justice is realized in worldly politics, in fact, that Augustine felt deeply ambivalent toward temporal projects aimed at establishing an ideal society. Christians, he believed, need not chance too much on accomplishing what only God can bring about at the eschaton. Augustine's affirmation of providence and divine order works to counteract the suspicion that forces like contingency, luck, and blind fate, which inhabit projects to realize a true justice on earth, will have the final say.<sup>20</sup> From this, William Connolly concludes that political Augustinianism is governed by its need to defend the vision of an intrinsic moral order.<sup>21</sup> This vision of a mysterious but nevertheless organized universe, always being shepherded to its ultimate fruition, demands that all forms of deviance, queerness, or the unexpected be curbed, lest the order of things be upset and thrown into disarray.

Yet deviance, strangeness, even absurdity – all these things Emersonianism embraces as potential results of exhilarating experience. Hence Emerson's own absurd experience of becoming a transparent, all-seeing eyeball while, as he says in *Nature*, “[c]rossing a bare New England common, in snowpuddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky”.<sup>22</sup> And hence Emersonians like Walt Whitman promoted Emerson's method of privileging moments of creative exhilaration. Whitman, like the avant-garde filmmakers Sitney treats, believed any variation of the shared world is possible if glimpsed with the insight borne of ecstatic fancy. What this entails is a radical rejection of the conventions of time, tradition,

20 See Book 19 in Augustine 2003. For a standard interpretation of Book 19 of the *City of God*, see O'Donovan 2003.

21 Connolly 2002.

22 Emerson 1983, 10.



Fig. 5a-d: The pain of old age is removed, families are reunited, and reality's veneer is stripped away in the apocalypse depicted at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:08:52; 02:08:53; 02:08:44; 02:09:48.



Fig. 6-b: Outside, Jack delights in the renewal of his vision (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:12:05; 02:12:12.

and history. Any instant, according to Emerson and his progeny, can transform the perceiver so as to help them see beyond established patterns of custom and habit. Exhilaration makes the familiar strange, instilling in the seer a vision of a new heaven and earth; heaven indeed has been realized in the seer's eyes. Furthermore, all sense of one's alienation from the world is removed at the moment of unitive epiphany. Emerson himself attests to this, noting in *Nature* how he sensed an "occult relation" begin to abide between him and other beings, so powerful was his own experience of ecstatic reverie. "I am not alone and unacknowledged", Emerson writes. The trees, the grass, and all other lifeforms constitutive of the biome "nod to me, and I to them".<sup>23</sup>

Seen in this light, *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion can come to seem more like the sort of ecstatic revelation Emerson first promulgated in *Nature* than an attestation to the truth of Christian eschatological orthodoxy. The film's ending with Jack ambling among the grounds around his office building, as if in a daze, only bolsters the point – he might as well be crossing a bare New England common. Jack's epiphanic realization has opened his eyes. The very conditions of his union with the world, and, moreover, his and the world's resulting transfor-

23 Emerson 1983, 11.

mation, persist in the possibility of his finally *seeing* ontological oneness. The occasion for this sort of sight is always available, waiting to be actualized, and when it is, such experiences give rise to intense sensations of rapture. Not only is this the first time we see Jack appear to express a feeling resembling something like joy in the film, but at the moment of his euphoria, Jack also is outside. No longer is he cloistered in the built environment, which until then had been symbolic of his estrangement from the world (figs. 6a–b).

Such experiences of exhilaration are politically disruptive since they stake nothing on causal consequence, and therefore nothing on traditional and historical narrative-based methods of meaning-making. The individual and their access to ecstatic revelation is the prime locus of concern, not social institutions which often function to curb individualism to secure more favorable prospects for social order. There is good reason governments feel hostile toward charismatic visionaries, which is the same reason the established church has historically distrusted mystics who linger on the margins of the faith – to receive exhilarating insight is to receive an unsettling power, strong enough to surprise us out of our propriety and traditional commitments. This force, if left unchecked, is strong enough even to upset institutionalized conventions whose ways have become so culturally engrained that the chances of their ever changing almost *require* the radical inbreaking of transhistorical political vision. For this reason, George Kateb identifies in Emerson’s politics a kind of anarchist “wildness”.<sup>24</sup> It is not just that a politics of ecstatic vision fails to conform to the norms and habits of public reason, but that such a politics often will call the foundations of public order themselves into question.

## CONCLUSION

Though society’s most powerful institutions and overall organization may appear immutable, such appearances are not indicative of society’s – and no less the world’s – true nature. This is Connolly’s argument in his book *The Fragility of Things*.<sup>25</sup> Myriad self-organizing ecologies constitute our world, including geological, biological, and climate systems, as well as cultural and economic systems with multiform relations and complex entanglements. Because these many systems harbor their own creative capacities – from tectonic shifts on the earth’s surface to the so-called “logic” of the market – which, in turn, ramify in the larger ecosystems in which they participate, the world, Connolly concludes, is doubtless a fragile place, easily spun round by the slightest change in human and nonhuman fields.

24 Kateb 2006, 245–271.

25 Connolly 2013.

An awareness of the world's fragility undergirds Emerson's thinking on the outsized role individuals of visionary genius play in social transformations. "There are no fixtures in nature", Emerson writes in the essay "Circles". "The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees."<sup>26</sup> This being the case, revelation derived from exhilarating, ecstatic experience, Emerson contends, should set the course of history, not traditions of the past nor the dictates of institutional authority. To receive revelation is to receive a kind of divine power, much as Christ did millennia ago. For it was Christ, Emerson writes, who fully realized "that God incarnates himself in man, and evermore goes forth anew to take possession of his world".<sup>27</sup> The implication is that those who profess a belief in Christ should do the same. Historically Augustinians have found an idea like this contemptuous, fearing the chaos that would result from a society composed of individuals believing themselves capable of all that Christ was and accomplished. Conversely, Emersonians respond by charging Christians of acting, in Emerson's words, "as if God were dead".<sup>28</sup>

Augustinians and Emersonians will both assent to the idea that God still deigns to reveal Godself to human beings, despite their disagreements over how the politics of that revelation should be chastened by the church or civil authority. That Malick so integrates an Emersonian cinematic experimentalism into a traditional Christian framework for theological inquiry is what makes *THE TREE OF LIFE* so politically remarkable. For a film so attuned to the fundamental questions of Christian theology – What is the character of God, as well as of the natural world? And what is the nature of humans' relationship to both? Whence are suffering and death derived? Will they be overcome in this life or the next? – Malick is not satisfied to give his audience many answers. Jack, at the culmination of his euphoric vision during *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s finale, may be said to have come upon a few answers himself, but our own perception of Jack's exhilaration only bolsters what I take to be the heart of Malick's rather Emersonian point – that it is the *audience's* task, not the filmmaker's, to see their way through the process of overcoming their alienation from the world. Like Emerson, the most Malick is willing to do is detail the ways in which he has conceived of a perfect exhilaration wrought by revelatory insight. It is up to us, however, to seek out whatever it is we eventually might find through whatever means revelation (and its attendant exhilaration) finds us.

Perhaps in the end visions like that which Malick portrays Jack undergoing at *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s conclusion will lead individuals away from the church, as was the case for Emerson in the late 1830s, after he experienced his own exhilaration.

26 Emerson 1983, 403.

27 Emerson 1983, 80.

28 Emerson 1983, 83.

Fig. 7: The bridge in *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s final shot (Terrence Malick, US 2011), 02:12:26.



arating vision. “Whenever a mind ... receives a divine wisdom”, Emerson wrote at this point in his life, “old things pass away, – means, teachers, texts, temples fall; it lives now, and absorbs past and future into the present hour.”<sup>29</sup> Yet such experiences of revelation need not always lead one away from established forms of religious authority. They also can just as easily serve to affirm one’s commitment to institutional establishments, albeit with a renewed sense of an institution’s place and function in the world. Something like this occurred when John of Patmos received the vision that eventually became the book of Revelation, a text that has gone far in buttressing the church’s worldly significance. The prospective ends of revelatory vision, then, are not to be prioritized in experiences wherein exhilarating insight is acquired. Such ends are never predetermined; we rarely are able to tell exactly where revelation will lead. Instead, the simple willingness to remain open and available to ecstatic vision wherever it might find us – be it on a New England common, a remote Aegean island, or in a Houston business park – should be prized above all. This, I submit, is the basic religio-political vision Malick casts with *THE TREE OF LIFE*.

Inherent in this vision is also the prospect of religious-secular rapprochement. Augustinians and Emersonians stand to benefit from collaborating over their shared appreciation of the natural world as a site of potential revelation, and thus as a locus of extraordinary value that is worthy of protection. This lends a new significance to *THE TREE OF LIFE*'s final image – a bridge connecting two discreet land masses across a wide body of water (fig. 7). While much will continue to separate Augustinians from Emersonians on the nature of their political commitments, to view *THE TREE OF LIFE* is nevertheless to acknowledge a vision of radical possibility, not just of reconciliation but of political promise and, ultimately, of hope. An important facet of this hope is that individuals, whatever their politics, might be restored to a meaningful relationship with the earth, and experiencing this, might also finally come together to protect it.

29 Emerson 1983, 270.

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# Media Reviews



Adam Bajan

## Book Review

# Marcus Moberg: Church, Market, and Media A Discursive Approach to Institutional Religious Change

London: Bloomsbury, 2017, 202 pp., ISBN 978-1-4742-8057-0

In an era of apathetic secularism, Marcus Moberg offers up a finely tuned discursive analysis of mainline Protestant efforts to increase relevance through marketization that is as original as it is thought provoking. As a socio-cultural practice, marketization involves a combination of free-market ideas and the continuous development of new media technologies to communicate these ideas (6). Accordingly, Moberg's principal thesis is that these ideas and developments have infiltrated religious organizations, where they quickly become part of discursive structures within these organizations and are reflected in official church communication. It is these discursive structures which Moberg focuses on in his engaging and lively analysis.

Following a detailed introduction to the study of religion, markets, and media in the first chapter, Moberg aptly notes that previous studies in this field have largely focused on the effects of mediatisation on religious groups while ignoring how these effects may be rooted in free-market ideas and neoliberal culture, thus giving the book its *raison d'être*. The book's second and third chapters provide a detailed review of canonical literature on critical discourse analysis and the various theoretical approaches used in the study of religion and media. While these early chapters are by no means uninteresting, they are quite typical of contemporary scholarship focusing on the intersection of religion and media.

However, the book's fourth and fifth chapters are given over entirely to a very detailed analysis of official church documents at seven mainline Protestant churches in five countries. These are, in order of appearance: the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Church of England, and the national churches of Denmark, Sweden, and Finland. Specifically, Moberg's analysis involves a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of 79 publicly available documents from these churches including an additional reading of a further 47 documents, 33 of which are used in this volume.

Throughout his analysis, Moberg argues for the influence of marketization on religious organizations, noting that these influences become reified in “the promotion and circulation of certain clusters of [religious] discourses” that are deeply rooted in neoliberalism (48). This is to say that a CDA of publicly available church documents reveals the presence of neoliberal ideologies, specifically in the rationale for the adoption of new public management (NPM) techniques as instruments of organizational change. It must be emphasized, however, that while cultural context is a factor in Moberg’s analysis (namely in how cultural differences have affected the historical development of religiosity in the study’s chosen countries), this is not the focus of the book.

Instead, Moberg chooses to focus on the neoliberal underpinnings of NPM techniques and how these techniques impact the communication strategies of mainline churches where they are used to increase public visibility and therefore market share. As Moberg defines them, NPM techniques are “premised on the idea that the public sector will benefit from adopting the organizational cultures, routines, and practices of the private sector” (49). The significance of this to Moberg’s study is that churches are no exception to this idea. Indeed, Moberg is quick to point out that the sharp decline in social and cultural importance and influence of mainline Protestant churches since the 1960s has been met in recent years by neoliberal efforts to maintain social relevance via NPM; which is to say that these churches desire to increase their public visibility and therefore their market share.

Exactly how this occurs is an aspect of the book that Moberg fails to fully address, however. For example, while he is quick to point out that marketization serves as an “agent” of institutional religious change, he candidly admits that it does not actually exercise any agency in and of itself (54). As he sees it, the display of marketization discourses by religious organizations signifies the influence of larger forces of neoliberalism for the simple reason that church documents display a deliberate, self-reflective understanding of the need to adopt strategies which are implicitly neoliberal. Essentially then, Moberg pulls a sleight of hand in that he implicitly argues that neoliberal forces, dressed up as NPM practices, have crept into religious spheres of influence but that these forces and practices are by no means a direct influence and as such should not be viewed from a reductionist, deterministic standpoint producing agency or causality.

Such a deficiency presents a problem. On one hand, Moberg offers up an explanation of how mainline Protestant churches suffering from declining social relevance hope to regain some of this relevance by the adoption of neoliberal ideologies and NPM practices, yet on the other, his analysis does not initially account for where the impetus for this change stems from. Moberg, however, believes he has found his way out of the trap of causality by invoking mediatiza-

tion theory. Broadly speaking, mediatization describes a process in which “the influence of media [...] has gradually expanded within virtually every domain of society and culture and public and private everyday life” (58). Notably, mediatization is itself a dual process in which media “have simultaneously also attained the position of social institutions in their own right” (58).

The significance of this in regard to Moberg’s study is that he effectively argues that the marketization discourses within mainline Protestant institutions are themselves discursive elements of neoliberalism which Moberg links to processes of mediatization. Citing David Harvey, Moberg argues that the neoliberal push toward maximization of efficiency in society requires the development of increasingly efficient information and communication technologies (ICTs) necessary for the “accumulation, transfer, storage, and dissemination of ever more massive loads of information” (58). Within this neoliberal worldview, the mediatization of society is inevitable, owing to the widespread presence of ICTs, which are necessary for the rapid development of neoliberalism to occur.

As Moberg argues, mediatization is said to occur as either a direct or an indirect process; the former occurring when un-mediated activity becomes mediated and the latter, when an activity, organization, or context becomes gradually influenced by media over time (58). The significance of this to Moberg’s study is that indirect mediatization is seen as being intertwined with so-called “media logics” or metaphorical frames of reference underpinning the subjugation and subsumption of un-mediated activities by media.

For Moberg, the gradual adoption of new media and NPM techniques by religious organizations qualifies as an indirect form of mediatization, one which sidesteps the recurring issue of causality by invoking media logics not as causal determinants but rather as one of many socio-cultural pressures inducing change. Admittedly, mediatization theory is much debated by scholars who see the theory as convenient albeit difficult to demonstrate empirically. Yet Moberg more than does the theory justice in his use of it to frame the study at hand.

Moberg accomplishes this by bringing a unique perspective to mediatization, one that is perhaps not so obvious at first glance. Citing Heidi Campbell, Moberg argues that the culture of the internet and ICTs has led to the appearance of so-called “religious digital creatives”, or RDCs. As Moberg notes, it is RDCs who have the necessary skills and expertise to lend their services to religious organizations, helping these organizations to develop their structures and adapt to the “new technological realities” of contemporary digitally mediated life and in so doing bridge the knowledge gap between neoliberal NPM techniques and religious tradition (69).

Moberg’s implication of RDCs as a driving force for discursive religious change which itself is representative of religious structural change via neoliberalism and marketization is a valiant attempt to resolve the issue of causality

in mediatization. However, it is not clear whether he is entirely successful in doing so. This is because although RDCs provide a potent source of legitimation for pressuring religious organizations to adapt or perish, the force of their influence remains empirically vague, even if its end result is visible in the publicly available church documents that Moberg analyzed in his study.

Taken together then, Moberg's highly original combination of neoliberalism, mediatization, and NPM discourse aptly demonstrates that while they may have arrived late at the game, mainline Protestant churches are certainly no strangers to changing with the times. As Moberg notes in the conclusion of his book, "practical changes in the organizational structure, communication practices, and modus operandi of social institutions and organizations tend to be preceded by changes in discursive practices" (153). Moberg demonstrates this with wit and zeal and his book serves as a much-needed and engaging contribution to the study of religion, media, and society.

Grace Chiou

## Book Review

# Anthony Hatcher: Religion and Media in America

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ISBN 978-1498514446

By considering cultural phenomena including protest, politics, production, pilgrimage, publishing, and parody, Anthony Hatcher establishes how the medi- atization of religion furthers a religious thread in public life and what he calls the “Christian effect” (xiv) in the United States. He examines how “Christianity both adapts to and is affected by new media forms” (ix) by investigating the individuals and organizations that subsidize, create, and distribute content related to religion and spirituality, particularly to Protestant Christianity. Actors and audiences reinforce certain ideologies and resist and confront church practices. Hatcher’s three genres of inquiry are civil religion, religion and entertainment, and sacred and profane media. The book covers how both liberal and conservative political movements pursue and receive mainstream news coverage; how religious actors enter the entertainment field and author content; and when the topic of religion is a subject of inquiry and surveillance.

Hatcher constructs why some might call the United States a Christian nation by tracing the cultural, political, and faith-based motivations of various actors in politics and popular culture. Citing Lynn Schofield Clark’s “Protestantization” argument regarding the culturally dominant set of values derived from the Protestant Reformation and William D. Romanowski’s discussion that some Christians view themselves as God’s co-creators of culture, Hatcher demonstrates how Christianity has a prominent presence in the public sphere. Hatcher articulates that evangelicalism in particular has a desire to *publicly* demonstrate faith and cultural transformation, to “Christianize” public secular culture despite pluralism (ix), and has proactively utilized media technologies.

Throughout the text, Hatcher reinforces the myriad interconnections between politics, rituals, and news and entertainment rhetoric. As politics is newsworthy, the Christian Right has strategically employed press coverage and used media to gain political and cultural power. From the left, Reverend William Barber II’s engagement of social media and subsequent media coverage amplified

his profile and the North Carolina Moral Monday protests. Politics is not the only staged arena in which to influence the public. Christian organizations note the entertainment industry's significance as a source of role models and purposely funnel people into the sector to influence secular culture (69).

A former journalist and current Professor of Journalism at Elon University, Hatcher appears to engage Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding and content analysis.<sup>1</sup> Most chapters of the book focus on the active agents behind the encoding process: activist Reverend Barber's voice and the impetus behind Moral Mondays (chap. 1); the Christian Socialist clergyman who wrote the Pledge of Allegiance and those who employed it for marketing and political purposes (chap. 2); the female founder and contestants of *Actors, Models, and Talent for Christ* (chap. 3); Emilio Estevez and Martin Sheen's work on the independent film *THE WAY* (Emilio Estevez, US 2010; chap. 4); religious societies and Bible translation (chap. 5); and authors behind religious satire (chap. 6). While Hatcher mainly focuses on religious actors, religion engages non-believers through its moral tenets or its national and cultural relevance, providing an animating force for civil religion. The encoding/decoding model considers the frameworks of knowledge, relations of production, and mediated technical infrastructure. Similarly, Hatcher's work examines the religious perspectives of the participants as well as the economic and political systems related to production and reception. Thus, readers gain insights into religious motivations but also learn, for instance, how capitalism and marketing provided the impetus in the dissemination of the pledge and American flag for promoting a children's publication in 1892. In 1951, as anti-communist sentiment spread in the country, the Knights of Columbus, the world's largest Catholic fraternal society, proposed the inclusion of the words "under God" in the pledge. Of all the religious symbolism officially added to public life in the 1950s, this move, Hatcher claims, caused the most controversy and litigation (51). Hatcher proposes, "One could argue the nation moved from seeing itself united by a common humanity to a fearful one seeking the protection of God" (50).

Chapter three, on *Actors, Models, and Talent for Christ* (AMTC), and chapter five, on the Bible-publication industry, demonstrate how meaning making is a profitable growth industry. The chapter on AMTC presents the viewpoint of entertainment as evangelistic outreach (80) and how religious impulses are never divorced from economic systems. Although some religious groups oppose popular culture, this chapter demonstrates an active Christian pursuit of success in the entertainment industry. AMTC, a "talent development ministry" (68), has fostered figures such as *The Voice* contestant country singer Brendon Chase and *American Idol* singer Tim Urban. AMTC believes that "through the movement of

1 Hall 1973.

actors, models and talent for Christ, millions upon millions of lost and prodigal children will enter the Kingdom of God” (81). Individuals pay up to \$5,245 to participate in an entertainment training bootcamp and receive coaching and competition opportunities. AMTC has been criticized online for its high fees and suggested outcomes. Interestingly, Hatcher suggests, “If AMTC succeeds in its stated goals, faith-based entertainment and entertainers will become the mainstream” (81). It should be noted that the organization closed in January 2018, prior to the book’s publication.

In chapter four the author offers his decoding of the film *THE WAY* (2010). Hatcher presents his personal appreciation for the film, stating that its “subtle spiritual and religious messages more genuinely reflect the lived human experience than those of overtly Christian movies, or tangentially Biblically-based Hollywood blockbusters” (85). With its narrative featuring the ancient religious route the Camino de Santiago in Europe, this film appears to Hatcher as a bridge between the rituals of institutional religion and a spiritual journey associated with being “spiritual but not religious”. By selecting a film involving the religious theme of pilgrimage but not a religious protagonist, Hatcher contends that institutional religion offers the framework upon which spirituality resides. He cites Leonard Norman Primiano, who states, “This spirituality of seeking is characterized by a deeply personal but transient religiosity with roots in traditional religious beliefs and practices; an interest in noninstitutionalized religious contexts and an eclectic, idiosyncratic and at times isolated spirituality fascinated with the supernatural” (xxvii). Indeed, the film features visions of a dead character and the crew knows of miracles that enabled the film’s production process. While the film is not a Hollywood blockbuster, Hatcher appreciates its slow unfolding, its mystery and message of forgiveness and redemption. He invokes Martin Sheen’s own reaction to a culminating scene when a Dutchman falls on his knees before a statue of St James. Hatcher quotes Sheen saying in the film, “Boom I’m gone... That moment, you fall to your knees in thanksgiving and praise. You fall to your knees for help, for mercy. [...] It’s our own personal hymn. And this film just rings with it. It’s just so deeply personal” (110).

Chapter five expands on the material production of the Bible, including details of the crowd-funded Kickstarter Bibliotheca project. This reader-friendly redesign of the Bible was printed in Germany on fine opaque paper with sewn rather than glued binding (163). At the time of its launch in 2014, the project became the ninth most popular Kickstarter project in the world and in just a day reached its goal of \$37,000. This case study considers the Bible as a commodity, one that can be owned and copyrighted, is likely manufactured in China and is high in sales and profitability.

Chapter six illuminates satire’s role in critiquing religion, including televangelists and the prosperity gospel. It features the work of niche publications *The*

*Wittenburg Door* and *Ship of Fools* as well as comedians Stephen Colbert and John Oliver, who have mocked “‘what people do in the name of religion’ rather than religion itself” (203). Humor facilitates the recognition of shortcomings and speaks to a desire to reform.

Hatcher highlights how religious and non-religious ownership of “old” media (radio, newspapers, magazines, and TV) supported the circulation of religion in public discourse. He cites how the Knights of Columbus’s newsletters and Hearst’s newspaper editorials supported adding “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance and urged the public to write letters to their local politicians. These letters played a role in the approval of the legislation, emblematic of how individuals have contributed to social history. Furthermore, the Christian Right disseminated its messages via rallies, roundtables, and James Dobson’s *Focus on the Family* broadcasting and publishing vehicles which reached millions well into the George W. Bush administration (7).

The book also discusses the role of social media as a part of today’s technical infrastructure. Both positive and negative commentary on social media spread the message of Moral Monday and garnered attention in mainstream publications. Stephen Colbert’s testimony in support of undocumented field workers went viral. Hatcher adds that “social media is often the friend of satire, and the enemy of satirical targets” (205).

I especially appreciated the areas where Hatcher reminds readers that religious messages have socializing and uniting capacities whether in person on the Raleigh capital steps or in film action. He connects the prior fusion movements with the unifying Moral Monday movement. He also highlights instances where religion has been unafraid to confront itself or stand up against injustice. Reverend Barber, *THE WAY*, *The Wittenburg Door*, *Ship of Fools*, and Colbert offer an alternate testimony regarding faith instead of crafting a self-protective or triumphant message regarding Christianity. In mentioning *THE WAY*’s multi-faith cast and the film’s more spiritual than religious narrative, Hatcher emphasizes a focus on journey, not destination. The book suggests that an active religious life does not only mean being a Christian witness at work or participating actively in civic life, it should also mean engaging in institutional and individual self-reflection.

Some issues with the text begin early on. The title of the book on the cover and its references to itself are inconsistent. The book title is *Religion and Media in America* whereas at times it is called “Religion and Media in the Digital Age”. This issue and its rather broad title highlight that no book can comprehensively cover all aspects of religion and media in America.

In addition, I found some of the writing stilted and more of a recitation of facts and prior scholarship. While Hatcher does cite the consolidation and conglomeration of Christian publishing ownership, I was surprised that the relationship between Fox News and Donald Trump was neglected.

Overall, Hatcher effectively reinforces how religious narratives touch upon our social experience as Christian voices engage media industries in a world of technological innovation and commodification. One is also reminded of how substantially religion is embedded in American politics. This book could be used to introduce students to specific cases of the various Christian actors whose voices shape America and its social history. I would especially recommend the first chapter on Barber and the last chapter on religious satire.

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## Book Review

# Christopher B. Barnett / Clark J. Elliston (eds.): Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick

London / New York: Routledge, 2017, xxvii + 289 pp., ISBN  
978-1-138-82169-9

The pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come,  
delivered under the similitude of a dream,  
wherein is discovered the manner of his setting out,  
his dangerous journey and safe arrival at the desired country.

After this voice-over at the opening of *KNIGHT OF CUPS* (Terrence Malick, US 2015), a camera pans on a landscape with a sea and desert below mountains, with a sole male moving downwards. Three cuts show his back and hands, his front with a small pool in the background, and him walking before a black car passes along a road. Ralph Vaughan Williams's musical prologue sets the tone. The viewer is led into an allegorical world, an unknown destination, while Terrence Malick's previous films, particularly *TREE OF LIFE* (US 2011) and *TO THE WONDER* (US 2014), were explorations in the life of the filmmaker (the former of his childhood and the latter of his marriage and divorce, in the sense of Proust's *Bildungsroman* on film). The voice-over continues to describe this pilgrimage in the words of John Bunyan:

As I walked through the wilderness of this world, I lighted on a certain place where  
was a den and I laid me down in that place to sleep. And as I slept I dreamed a dream.  
I saw a man clothed with rags standing in a certain place with his face from his own  
house, book in his hand and a great burden on his back.

To say that Malick's own journey has been an allegory of this kind is to overinterpret the film. That being said, the release of three films in five years, all seemingly autobiographic, is a record. And with *SONG TO SONG* (US 2017) as well as the Criterion Collection release of *TREE OF LIFE* in 2018 with 50 additional minutes added to the film, and *A HIDDEN LIFE* (US/DE 2019) to be shown at Cannes Film Festival, Malick fans are well satiated if productivity represents quality. The lone character at the beginning of *KNIGHT OF CUPS* speaks: "All those years [...] living the life of someone I didn't even know."

In her contribution to this volume, M. Gail Hamner writes,

The camera cuts sharply to a brightly lit highway tunnel and tracks down the tunnel in rapid motion, as if the camera is bolted to the hood of the car. The flooding light we are barreling toward at the end of the tunnel cuts to the back of a toddler's head with the beach stretching out before him or her, and this image of a small head and body then sequence to a number of quickly shifting images of sky, trees, and children. (262)

Her analysis of this film puts into words what is difficult to express about these films, and what is most entrancing: nature, identity, spiritual journey. Each of these aspects of the Bunyan passage as well as Hamner's description of the camera are simultaneously the macrocosmic journey of the universe, the personal struggle, and a religious or theological search for meaning.

*Theology and the Films of Terrence Malick* is a welcome edited volume introducing various themes in Malick's filmography, which at the time this work was published included eight feature-length films and one IMAX documentary film, *VOYAGE OF TIME* (US 2016). Besides the documentary film and Malick's most recent *SONG TO SONG* and *A HIDDEN LIFE*, all of the films are given theological treatment from a variety of perspectives that cannot be easily unified. With thirteen contributors, including three chapters from the editors themselves, this makes for a dizzying array of theologies and readings of Malick's own quite broad-ranging oeuvre from early 17th-century Virginia (*THE NEW WORLD*, US 2005) to the 1920s Texas panhandle (*DAYS OF HEAVEN*, US 1978) or East Asia during the Second World War (*THE THIN RED LINE*, US 1998). For those familiar with his films, this book will deepen their knowledge of various theological interpretations. For those unfamiliar, it might be worthwhile to watch the film before reading the chapter devoted to that film. But since watching a Malick film is rather like entering a thicket of philosophical, religious, moral, and filmic themes, this book is no different: "Infamous difficulty", to use the words of one author from the volume, Jonathan Brant (146), who takes up an earlier interpretation by Marc Furstenau and Leslie MacAvoy.<sup>1</sup> This book, then, does for Malick's films what Rowan Williams says about scripture and tradition: "They need to be made more *difficult* before we can accurately grasp their simplicities" (147).

In order to give a sense of the structure and arguments of this book, we will choose four contributions on which to focus, which is not to say that these are any more profound or important than the others. In "The Divine Reticence of

1 Compare, however, with Leithart 2013 (Peter Leithart also contributes to this volume), for a monograph interpretation of one of Malick's films with themes such as "water", "flame", "music", "hands", and "memory", in which a single Malick film is analyzed and made easier to understand.

Terrence Malick”, Peter Leithart describes Malick’s palette as polyphonic, following Dostoyevsky and Bakhtin (as well as in conversation with Alter and Auerbach) – that is, nature provides its own symbolic system, the trees and grass, birds, animals, water and light, Homer and Genesis. In *THE THIN RED LINE* most explicitly, grass becomes a kind of character: “All flesh is grass, but flesh at war is the grassiest of grass, mown down at a moment’s notice by a strafing of machine gun fire. Grass is not only a sign of the vulnerability and brevity of human life but of its glory” (53). Leithart uncovers this palette in each of Malick’s films, displaying a visual equivalent to dialogism where the nihilist anthropology (i.e. the state of nature) is put on par with a theist one (i.e. the way of grace) without proving, but rather being reticent to prove, either one over the other. More than in *THE THIN RED LINE*, these options are starker through Anna’s voice and Fr. Quintana’s in *TO THE WONDER*, where the latter is exemplified in St. Patrick’s *Lorica*. If “Malick’s world is the world of Job, where suffering takes place before a beautiful but implacable heaven” (57), is this really reticence, then?

In “Who Has Eyes to See, Let Him See: Terrence Malick as Natural Theologian”, David Calhoun compares filmmakers who are anti-theology (such as Stanley Kubrick, Brian De Palma, Ridley Scott, Lars von Trier, or Woody Allen) to Malick’s natural theology. “Where natural theology uses observation of nature and rational inference to make a case for the reality of the supernatural, contemporary naturalist films employ imaginatively constructed naturalist explanatory accounts of the natural world to question, discount, or even reject theism” (67–68). As Leithart did with Dostoyevsky’s dialogism, Calhoun does with Tolkien’s fairy stories and their power to enchant. Malick’s way of telling is more of a fairy story than a traditional religious or “providential” film such as *THE TEN COMMANDMENTS* (Cecil B. DeMille, US 1956), *IT’S A WONDERFUL LIFE* (Frank Capra, US 1946), or *HEAVEN IS FOR REAL* (Randall Wallace, US 2013). Calhoun contrasts the polysemic character<sup>2</sup> of Malick’s films with what Leithart would call dialogism. Both David Davies and Calhoun are interested in the problem of interpretation and while Davies supports a Merleau-Pontian reading of Malick,<sup>3</sup> Calhoun appears to be holding a Kierkegaardian view (90). This book as a whole is thus challenging the anti-theology interpretations of Malick’s films such as the Heideggerian or Nietzschean interpretation.<sup>4</sup> This Kierkegaardian interpretation is also seen in Christopher Barnett’s, Paul Martens’s, and Paul Camacho’s contributions to this volume. As in Tolkien’s fairy stories or Stanley Cavell’s writings on film, “Malick replicates the fundamental human representation of the world as involving a wonder for being” (91).

2 Davies 2009a.

3 Davies 2009b.

4 See Batcho 2018 for a Deleuzian interpretation, which would also be anti-theology.

Whereas these two chapters come from part II of the book (“Terrence Malick as Theological Auteur”), the next two come from Part III (“The Films of Terrence Malick: Theological Readings”). In “The Unique Difficulty of DAYS OF HEAVEN”, Jonathan Brant combines an empirical methodology, in which 500 non-professional reviews were taken into account, with professional readers’ criticism. The viewers’ frustration with watching a Malick film is expressed best by this online review quoted by Brant: “It’s a blah story but it’s fucking beautiful” (146). One of the terms that comes up for many of the non-professional viewers was the recognition of the “difficulty” of watching a Malick film, since it expects the viewer to perform the act of interpretation. The key to Brant’s reading of Malick is Rowan Williams’s book on Dostoyevsky, arguing that “open, complex narratives are more Christian than closed, tidy fables” (147). Brant focuses on how the difficulty in Malick’s method provides us with a God’s eye view into the lives and experiences of the characters in DAYS OF HEAVEN. Brant’s using Williams reminds viewers who are critical of the film that, “The Spirit is at work in any constructive puzzlement” (150). Furthermore, his use of empirical data to evaluate DAYS OF HEAVEN calls to mind how unsettling finding an easy superficial solution can be for us and that even though the film offers “no neat theological explanation of the events it portrays”, it may “in its very difficulty [...] hint at its object more in the moment of frustration, alienation, and distance than in satisfaction, resolution, and clarity” (154).

In Clark J. Elliston’s contribution, “Reaching Toward the Light: Loving the (New) World”, he explores worlds colliding. Elliston says that Malick is doing neither metaphysics nor history, so what genre is THE NEW WORLD? While Elliston does not use this term and may even disagree with it, his exploration seems to revolve around Rousseau’s concept of the “noble savage”. The English colonists come to the new world of Virginia, and Pocahontas comes to the new world of England. Elliston’s claim, however, is that the spiritual world is rather the new world and that Pocahontas represents a christological figure, with redemption the theological strand that runs through the film. Utilizing the term “worldliness”, he suggests there are two options: escape from the world or an Augustinian attitude in which “friendship with the world, despite its hostility, should be attempted” (192). Drawing on Bonhoeffer and Weil, Elliston adds to this the fact that “kenotic giving” requires a love of the world and that Pocahontas fully exists between these worlds, “far from making her a mystic set apart from worldly realities,” (193) and that her “distinctiveness” and “otherness [...] does not earn her respect or acclaim” (194–195). Most interestingly, her openness to the world is explored by Elliston in terms of what Weil calls “attention”. Every image of the film reveals this vulnerability or receptiveness: “as a Native American princess wedded to an English tobacco farmer, she is unto herself a new world”, especially if “she was raped during her capture” (196) and

this is an emblem of the treatment of Native Americans by a colonizing power. Elliston sees Malick as more of a theologian than a philosopher and argues that the female protagonist of this film embodies that perspective: “Human love stands at the center of *THE NEW WORLD*, but the figure of Pocahontas is the narrative lens which refracts that love. She loves the world (and the people in it) and even in rejection reaches toward the light present within it. Consequently, she emerges as a Christological figure – a figure who in suffering invites others into the light” (199).

While each essay in this book deserves treatment, two points of criticism are in order. First, there is certainly description of both the aesthetics and the beauty of film in this book, but the book as a whole neglects to focus on the particularly *filmic* ways in which theology can be done.<sup>5</sup> The editors point in their preface to how they are framing this book in terms of “Malick as a theological *auteur*” (the title of part II), but insofar as the book does not deepen that meaning in visual or technical terms (like camera movement), Bazin’s critique of *auteur* theory still stands. Much more could be done in deepening this point of what makes Malick a theological *auteur* and to convince a viewer of this. Film is not the same as text or even music. There are certainly hints, such as Barnett’s examination of wind (104–105) or Candler’s discussion of Smetana’s symphonic poems *Má vlast* and Zbigniew Preisner’s “*Lacrimosa*” (211), but more could be said.

The second criticism furthers the point of the first one. In Paul Martens contribution, he mentions in a footnote the “contest” between Simon Critchley’s thesis of “film as philosophy” and Robert Sinnerbrink’s Heideggerian Cinema<sup>6</sup> (170). This contest points to an underlying claim about whether Malick is theological or not, without rather pointing out that the films are theological. This is a crucial distinction, undervalued throughout the book. Reading the biographical Malick into the films, as Part I of this book does (“An Introduction to Terrence Malick – Scholar, Filmmaker”), does not make him a theologian (or a philosopher). This relation to the film as philosophy thesis, whether Heideggerian or Deleuzian or Kierkegaardian, or to a new *film as theology* thesis as this book seems to support should have been a claim all of the authors of this volume struggle with instead of taking it for granted.

Strangely enough, while writing this review, one of the authors went on a pilgrimage to the Black Forest in Germany to see Heidegger’s hut in Todtnauberg, where he wrote *Being and Time*. The frames of the landscape mirrored in some ways that of the beginning of *KNIGHT OF CUPS*. I stepped into unknown territory, where an author had lived and composed a work. After days of cloudy and foggy travails, the sun shone at the moment we were on the right path. At the

5 As do, for example, Hamner 2014 and Rothman 2016.

6 Critchley 2009; Sinnerbrink 2006; see also Furstenau/MacAvoy 2007.

beginning of *KNIGHT OF CUPS*, however, Malick has silently changed Bunyan's actual words from "their dangerous journey" to "his dangerous journey". This book is an exploration of each author's own dangerous journey, in all of its polyvocality, through the mire of Malick's theology if it is to be interpreted as such. As in *Pilgrim's Progress*, here too we find pitfalls and over-allegorizing, just as I experienced wrong turns and misinterpretation in the Black Forest, whether of maps, the German language, or the awful weather, while finding my way to Heidegger's hut. But one thing is for certain: it is not a lone journey.

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Joel Mayward

# Festival Review

## 72nd Festival de Cannes

### Finding Faith in Film

While standing in the lengthy queues at the 2019 Festival de Cannes, I would strike up conversations with fellow film critics from around the world to discuss the films we had experienced. During the dialogue, I would express my interests and background: I am both a film critic and a theologian, and thus intrigued by the rich connections between theology and cinema. To which my interlocutor would inevitably raise an eyebrow and reply, “How are those two subjects even related?” Yet every film I saw at Cannes somehow addressed the question of God, religion or spirituality. Indeed, I was struck by how the most famous and most glamorous film festival in the Western world was a God-haunted environment where religion was present both on- and off-screen. As I viewed films in competition for the Palme d’Or, as well as from the Un Certain Regard, Directors’ Fortnight and Critics’ Week selections, I offer brief reviews and reflections on the religious dimension of Cannes 2019.<sup>1</sup>

### SUBTLE AND SUPERFLUOUS SPIRITUALITY

Sometimes the presence of religion was subtle or superfluous. For example, in the perfectly bonkers Palme d’Or winner, *GISAENGCHUNG* (*PARASITE*, Bong Joon-Ho, KR 2019), characters joke about delivering pizzas to a megachurch in Seoul. Or there’s Bill Murray’s world-weary police officer crossing himself and exclaiming (praying?), “Holy fuck, God help us” as zombie hordes bear down on him and Adam Driver in *THE DEAD DON’T DIE* (Jim Jarmusch, US 2019). In contrast to these more gratuitous examples, in the brilliantly funny and tender *THE CLIMB* (Michael Angelo Covino, US 2019), the friendship between two men, Kyle and Mike, is told through a series of seven vignettes exploring adult relationships and romances for the millennial generation. The film displays a remarkable

1 My full film coverage from Cannes 2019 can be found at my website, Cinemayward, [www.cinemayward.com](http://www.cinemayward.com), and at Fuller Studio, <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/contributor/joel-mayward/>. Some film descriptions have been adapted and re-published in the present review. Special thanks to Stefanie Knauss at *JRFM* for her encouragement and advocacy, and to Elijah Davidson at Fuller Studio for helping me gain press accreditation for Cannes.

Fig. 1: *THE CLIMB* (Michael Angelo Covino, US 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



awareness of, if not respect for, biblical texts and Christian traditions. In a brief tangential scene, the cemetery workers at a funeral sing a fourth-wall-breaking hymn, “I Shall Not Be Moved”, as they use a backhoe to dig a grave. In another scene during their bike conversation in the first vignette, as Mike confesses that he had sex with Kyle’s fiancée, Kyle declares, “You’re a real-life Judas.” “Well, I guess that makes you like Jesus”, replies Mike with deadpan sincerity. In a late vignette at Kyle’s wedding to a new beau, Kyle’s sisters choose to read certain verses from the books of Ephesians and Revelation, such as “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord” and descriptions of the whore of Babylon. All of this is comical even as it demonstrates awareness of biblical content, at least enough to make an effective joke.

*THE LIGHTHOUSE* (Robert Eggers, US 2019) is Eggers’s masterful follow-up to his remarkable religious horror film *THE WITCH* (Robert Eggers, US 2016) and won the FIPRESCI (film critics) prize. It is a poetic and nightmarish supernatural thriller imbued with psychological horror. Set in a late-19th century coastal lighthouse in the northern Atlantic, *THE LIGHTHOUSE* centers on two men, the grizzled and gruff lightkeeper Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe) and his aloof second-in-command Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson). As the isolated and storm-swept environment takes its toll on their psyches, visions of mermaids and mythological gods plague Winslow’s mind. Indeed, Wake’s former helper



Fig. 2: *THE LIGHTHOUSE* (Robert Eggers, US 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.

went mad and killed himself, believing there was “salvation in the light”. By the coda, we know exactly what he means – both characters (and possibly some audiences) tip over the brink from sanity to madness. The question of God (or gods), myths and the spiritual realm is of significance here via the presence of sirens and ghosts, mermaids and manifestations. Both Winslow and Wake worship the light with fundamentalist devotion as the island’s foghorn blares with a liturgical rhythm. “I’m God fearin’, if that’s what yer askin”, quips Ephraim when questioned as to whether he is a praying man. A lone seagull acts as a sort of demonic spirit – the Black Philip of *THE LIGHTHOUSE* – in its incessant pestering of Winslow. Gulls contain the souls of dead sailors, says Wake; it’s bad luck to kill a seabird. Could the gull in fact be the deceased former caretaker? Or is it the soul of the man Winslow allowed to perish in his previous employment in the Canadian north? When the bloody confrontation between man and bird finally arrives, it leads to a changing of the winds and the coming of a relentless apocalyptic storm. Akin to the alluring conch-like staircase of the lighthouse, the men’s minds and souls begin to spiral during the storm until they are sucked into oblivion by the maelstrom of mental anguish and metaphysical dread. Indeed, *THE LIGHTHOUSE* would pair well with any Bergman, Tarkovsky or Kubrick film as a fellow hallucinatory masterpiece.

## CINEMATIC ISLAM AND THE CONFLICT OF INTERPRETATIONS

The Muslim faith was prominent in three of the films I viewed at Cannes, with each film specifically exploring the tension between conservative/literal and liberal/metaphorical interpretations of the Qur’an. Based on an Algerian novel, the animated film *LES HIRONDELLES DE KABOUL* (*THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL*, Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec, FR 2019) competed in the Un Certain Regard section. The story features a young couple, Mohsen and Zunaira, attempting to keep hope and love alive in the midst of the Taliban-controlled ruins of Kabul. Zunaira is a vivacious artist and former teacher, and her marriage to Mohsen is



Fig. 3: *THE SWALLOWS OF KABUL* (Zabou Breitman and Eléa Gobbé-Mévellec, FR 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.

Fig 4. LE JEUNE AHMED (Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, BE 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



remarkably progressive. Yet despite his resistance to Taliban rule, Mohsen finds himself caught up in a mob mentality as a crowd publicly executes a woman by stoning her to death in the market. In a parallel story, Atiq is a prison warden for a women's prison; his wife, Musarrat, is slowly dying of cancer, causing Atiq much anguish. When a fatal accident occurs, the lives and fates of the two couples become intertwined, inevitably leading to a confrontation of interpretations regarding the true Muslim faith – will Atiq remain faithful to the Taliban or his conscience?

This conflict between divergent Qur'anic interpretations is also clearly present in the Dardenne brothers' in-competition film, *LE JEUNE AHMED* (*YOUNG AHMED*, Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne, BE 2019), for which they won Best Director. While their previous films have elicited religious and theological interpretations,<sup>2</sup> this is the Dardennes' most direct portrayal and analysis of religion through their cinematic post-secular parables. In fact, *LE JEUNE AHMED* is likely to be the brothers' most divisive and controversial film in its empathetic-yet-opaque exploration of Islamic extremism via the radicalization of 13-year-old Ahmed (Idir Ben Addi), who plots to kill his teacher based on his interpretation of his local imam's fundamentalist teachings. Myriem Akheddiou gives a wonderful performance as Ahmed's teacher-turned-victim, Inès. Ahmed attends Inès's after-school classes, but he has recently become quietly antagonistic towards her due to the influence of the imam (Othmane Moumen), whose extremist views coincide with Ahmed's idolized cousin, a jihadist terrorist. The imam declares Inès an apostate "bitch" who is trying to destroy their religious traditions. Yet Inès is also a faithful Muslim and embodies the Islamic pillar of charity via her generous actions towards educating young people. In this, the

2 See, for instance, *Journal of Religion, Film, Media* 2, 2 (2016) on the Dardennes' cinema, [https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs\\_jrfm/issue/view/3](https://jrfm.eu/index.php/ojs_jrfm/issue/view/3) [accessed 3 June 2019].



Fig. 5: Cannes Press Conference LE JEUNE AHMED. Personal photo: Joel Mayward, 21 May 2019.

Dardennes offer a rich mosaic of Muslim faith as various skin tones and national backgrounds come together for a parent meeting about a new Arabic class Inès wants to teach the youth. For the Dardennes, the 21st-century face of Islam cannot be reduced to stereotypes of Middle Eastern terrorists, but rather must be viewed via the Levinasian transcendent face of the Other.

In the Cannes press conference, I was able to ask the Dardennes about their motivation for finally addressing religion in one of their films.<sup>3</sup> Luc responded that it felt timely in a post-9/11 world, and that such fanaticism is not restricted to Europe or religion – we see evidence in Sri Lanka, America, Israel, etc., as well as throughout religious history. The brothers were interested in *how* and *why* religion – what Luc called a work of “imagination” – could lead to such violence, and how the imagination might be reformed and redeemed. The Dardennes do not presume to be experts about Islam, so they did extensive research and sought lots of input for their portrayal of religion, offering various viewpoints within the film itself. In this, *LE JEUNE AHMED* boldly and effectively raises complex ethical, religious and political questions without giving simple answers, inspiring hope for fruitful conversations about religion in the public sphere.

*ATLANTIQUE* (*ATLANTICS*, Mati Diop, FR/SN 2019) also shares in this conflict of interpretations, albeit without the strict extremist perspective. Diop was the first black woman to have a film in competition at Cannes, and *ATLANTIQUE* (winner of the Grand Prix) is a fever dream of a ghost story, combining magical realism with conventional romance. The film is set in the Senegalese city of Dakar, and the environment is a bricolage of traditions and modernity, urban decay and natural beauty. A group of young construction workers decide to depart for a better life in Spain, quietly slipping away in the night to navigate the ocean currents. One of

3 The Cannes press conference with the Dardennes is available online: <https://youtu.be/VWUzrfnm1ll> [accessed 3 June 2019]. My question for the Dardennes begins at 20:30.

Fig. 6: ATLANTIQUE (Mati Diop, France/Senegal 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



these workers, Souleiman (Ibrahima Traoré), is reluctant to leave his lover, Ada (Mama Sané). Yet the 17-year-old Ada is betrothed to another man, Omar (Babacar Sylla), a person of wealth and local prestige; their Muslim faith might be the only thing they have in common. Ada's traditionally minded religious friends view Ada's promiscuity with Souleiman disparagingly, while her liberal friends are simply excited about Omar's big house and Ada's new chic bedroom.

ATLANTIQUE takes a turn towards the fantastical during Ada and Omar's wedding night, when a mysterious fire spontaneously appears on the new couple's mattress, prompting a police investigation and plenty of unease. Has Souleiman somehow returned from his ocean voyage, enacting revenge upon his lost love? It appears the souls of the boys lost at sea have returned in a spiritual somnambulist form as *djinn*, possessing the bodies of their former lovers when night falls. There are some parallels to the Senegalese film TOUKI BOUKI (Djibril Diop Mambéty, SN 1973), which follows two young lovers on their journey out of Dakar to a new life in France, only to have the love of homeland cause a rift between them. Indeed, ATLANTIQUE's Mati Diop is the niece of Mambéty; it as if she is possessed by the spirits of her relatives within her own exquisite film.

While space does not permit me to offer a deeper analysis, I should mention that the Islamic faith is also significant in the following critically acclaimed films from Cannes: THE UNKNOWN SAINT (Alaa Eddine Aljem, MA 2019), FOR SAMA (Waad al-Kateab and Edward Watts, UK/US 2019) and IT MUST BE HEAVEN (Elia Suleiman, FR/CA 2019).

## UNLIKELY CATHOLIC MARTYRS AND SAINTS

Films like the painterly masterpiece PORTRAIT DE LA JEUNE FILLE EN FEU (PORTRAIT OF A LADY ON FIRE, Céline Sciamma, FR 2019), the wistful yet inert FRANKIE (Ira Sachs, US 2019) and the genre-defying mindfuck BACURAU (Kleber Mendonça Filho and Juliano Dornelles, BR 2019) each made subtle nods to Roman Ca-



Fig. 7: A HIDDEN LIFE (Terrence Malick, US 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.

tholicism's influence in their respective nations. Yet two films were quite explicit in their biographical depiction of Christian faith. Debuting in competition at Cannes, visionary filmmaker Terrence Malick has crafted his most explicitly Christian film with *A HIDDEN LIFE* (Terrence Malick, US 2019), a long-awaited project focusing on the life of Second World War Austrian conscientious objector Franz Jägerstätter (August Diehl). The film was originally titled “Radegund”, the name of the idyllic mountain hamlet where Franz and his beloved wife, Fani (Valerie Pachner), reside with their three young daughters. When the Nazis demand allegiance to Hitler, Franz quietly refuses, an act of defiance motivated by his deep Catholic convictions and his troubled conscience.

*A HIDDEN LIFE* presents its Christian heritage unashamedly even as it exhorts and critiques both the Second World War era and contemporary institutional church. The film is infused with biblical references through Franz's and Fani's prayers, as well as visual symbols and narrative themes. Churches and priests play active roles in the narrative as mentors and guides, and God is often directly addressed in the Malickian voice-over narrations. For instance, Franz prays a version of Psalm 23 aloud while waiting for his trial in a German prison; as the camera hovers through the hallways like a wandering spirit, the biblical words offer hope in the midst of apparent despair, the Good Shepherd restoring the prisoner's soul. Yet critical questions remain. Will the spirit of Antichrist (the term is mentioned multiple times) reign in Europe? Is God the author of such suffering? Can faithfulness to God make a genuine difference in this world? These questions of theodicy in the context of a historical narrative are striking in their contemporary relevance, particularly regarding the political allegiances of Christian churches in present-day America. Even as he is memorializing the tragic experiences of World War II, Malick is also raising crucial prophetic questions as to whether the church will wed itself to bigoted political powers who commit injustices and perpetuate lies, or rather, act in resistance and solidarity with the oppressed. In this, *A HIDDEN LIFE* won the Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, awarded by a jury of Christian filmmakers and critics.

Fig. 8: JEANNE (Bruno Dumont, France 2019). Press Still: Cannes Film Festival.



Similar to *A HIDDEN LIFE* in its exploration of a Christian martyr's biography but strikingly different in aesthetic and tone is Bruno Dumont's *JEANNE* (*JOAN OF ARC*, FR 2019), his follow-up to *JEANNETTE, L'ENFANCE DE JEANNE D'ARC* (*JEANNETTE: THE CHILDHOOD OF JOAN OF ARC*, Bruno Dumont, FR 2017). Where the earlier film was a mashup of mystical theology and heavy metal music as it focused on the early years of Joan's life and her visions of saints and angels, *JEANNE* is centered on the battles and trials of the teenage Joan, culminating in her martyrdom. Based on the writings of Charles Péguy, Dumont's post-secular approach appropriates religious writings and hagiography, transposing Christian tradition and history for a postmodern context. Where the first film featured head-banging punk and metal music to accompany Joan's visions, *JEANNE* instead features French pop singer/composer Christophe (Daniel Bevilacqua), who makes an appearance late in the film as one of the robe-covered clergy at Joan's trial. Christophe's songs support the visuals as a kind of narration. Young actress Lise Leplat Prudhomme never sings in this film; instead, the cinematography is often strikingly beautiful still frames or slow zooms on Prudhomme's defiant face, her visage both captivating and confrontational. The effect of the synth music, the repeated lyrics and the frame of Prudhomme creates a hypnotic effect, perhaps akin to meditating before a Christian icon. *JEANNE* won a Special Jury Mention in the Un Certain Regard competition.

## WORSHIPPING THE STARS

Beyond the films themselves, I was struck by the religious dynamic of Cannes bystanders' and tourists' worshipful treatment of the films' stars. It seems not much has changed since 1955, when film critic André Bazin described Cannes as a "religious order" marked by its own daily offices (matinees and premieres)

and religious habits (tuxedos and gowns).<sup>4</sup> Eager mobs of onlookers – many who would likely never see a single film during the festival – would wait for hours outside the Palais or the Hotel Martinez on the Croisette, craning their necks (and their phones) for a possible glimpse of a celebrity. The red carpet served as a sort of sacred site; only the most faithful and penitent (and properly attired) were allowed to make the brief pilgrimage up the red steps into the massive Grand Théâtre Lumière (and no selfies allowed!). Indeed, there was a liturgy for the in-competition film premieres and galas: only formal evening wear allowed, with the filmmaking team arriving via black vehicles at the bottom of the steps in order to be photographed and adored by the teeming worshipers. The stars would wait patiently for the right moment in the liturgy, then they would ascend the steps to be greeted by festival director Thierry Frémaux before entering the Grand Théâtre Lumière to a standing ovation. I confess, seeing Tilda Swinton, Isabelle Huppert and Willem Dafoe in the flesh does bring with it a frisson of reverence, as if one has suddenly encountered a sacred or angelic figure. Richard Dyer’s description of celebrities as “heavenly bodies” comes to mind, as does his paradox of the star: these celebrity idols are both ordinary and extraordinary, present yet absent, a tri-fold manifestation of ideology, social construction and marketed commodity.<sup>5</sup> Such is also the paradox of the Festival de Cannes, a gathering which is at-once inclusive and exclusive, high art and consumer entertainment, secular and religious – it is the temple where the pilgrims have put their faith in film itself.

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4 Bazin 2009. Thanks to Stefanie Knauss for directing me to this essay.

5 See Dyer 1998; Dyer 2004.

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# JRFM 2020, 7/1 CALL FOR PAPERS

## The Materiality of Writing Books in Religious Traditions

Since its invention, writing is a prominent technique that has shaped religious traditions profoundly. Books are precious repositories, they preserve religious messages and enable their transmission through time and space. Written texts are at the core of religious world views, orientations, practices and rituals. Their letters keep revelations alive and materialise transcendent messages. Books have been cultivated, illuminated, printed, bound, restored, reproduced, stored, filed, transformed, and nowadays digitised. They have been read, sung, played, danced, represented, and sometimes eaten, sometimes burned, banned and destroyed.

As material and visual objects, books perform an active role in communities and for individuals in academic studies, liturgies, private spaces, or therapies. Religious books are autonomous agents in religious transmission processes that challenge and are challenged by society. While, on the one hand, they can inspire innovations and creative processes, on the other hand, they can hamper progress. Adapting to new technologies, books experience profound transformation, and, respectively, transform their recipients.

In this issue of **JRFM**, the religious role and significance of writing, books and scripture are discussed by focusing on their materiality and visibility. We welcome contributions dealing with writing as a material activity and books as objects. The articles published in this issue will contribute to the reflection on questions like:

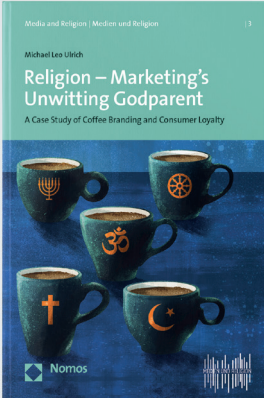
- How can the materiality of religious books be interpreted?
- How does the materiality of writing and books shape religious traditions and practices, communities and individuals?
- How does the materiality of books and scriptures affect the act of writing?
- What practices are linked to the production, transmission and preservation of books?
- How does the materiality of scripture influence reception and conservation processes?

- What is the symbolic significance of books as material things?
- How does the invention of new technologies transform the materiality of the books? How do they transform the passage of messages from the materiality of letters into the performance of speech?
- The symbolism of the destruction of books: How and in what circumstances have they been destroyed, and to what end?

The issue also has an open section for articles on other topics linked to the profile of **JRFM**. The deadline for submissions is 31 August 2020. Contributions of 25,000–30,000 characters (including spaces) should be submitted online for peer review through the journal homepage [www.jrfm.eu](http://www.jrfm.eu). We kindly ask authors to register and consider the instructions for posting contributions. Publication is scheduled for May 2021. For questions regarding this call for papers or the submission and publication process, please contact the editors of the issue, Christian Wessely ([christian.wessely@uni-graz.at](mailto:christian.wessely@uni-graz.at)) and Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati ([pezzoli@lmu.de](mailto:pezzoli@lmu.de)).

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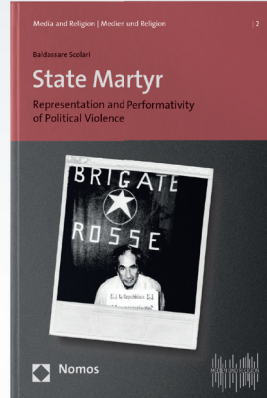
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