

'EVERY EYE SHALL SEE HIM': REVELATION AND FILM

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'... it deranges in and of itself, and sets the parameters, marshals the props, for all the excessive playlets to come [...].the text is a guignol of tedium, a portentous horror film' (Will Self).¹

1. Introduction

Biblical scholarship has of late been rushing to plant its flag on the terrain of cinema. Meanwhile, some of the most heavily theorized of film genres – amongst them horror and the Western – regularly invoke the bible, and the book of Revelation in particular. Yet few works have explored precisely how film has featured and re-presented the Apocalypse.² This reticence at once reflects the formative influence of Marxism and psychoanalysis (each of which regards secularity as a given) on film studies *and* the limitations of many current endeavours in bible and film, in which energies are too frequently consumed by a preoccupation with taxonomy and description, or are dissipated into allegory and typology.³ For the most part, films engaging Revelation are not amenable to these approaches. In the majority of instances, the book is not a film's sole inter-text, but part of a dizzying pastiche of scriptural and other references: in all the examples discussed here an appeal to Revelation stands alongside ideas about verses linked with belief in the future physical rapture⁴ of

1. Will Self, 'Introduction', *Revelation: Authorised King James Version* (London: Canongate Books, 1998), pp. xii-xiii.

2. I use 'Revelation' and 'Apocalypse' as synonyms, following Judith Kovacs and Christopher Rowland, *Revelation: The Apocalypse of Jesus Christ* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2004).

Conrad E. Ostwalt is currently the most prolific writer in this area, but his work offers a broad consideration of apocalyptic impulses in the cinema, rather than a specific study of the representation of Revelation.

3. Melanie J. Wright, *Religion and Film: An Introduction* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 11-22.

4. Some beliefs about the rapture, including the 'proof-texts' with which it is most commonly associated, are described in this essay. See also Jeanne Halgren Kilde, 'How Did *Left Behind's* Particular Vision of the End Times Develop? A Historical

the Christian faithful, the book of Daniel (itself widely understood to be influential on Revelation⁵) and/or other postbiblical religious phenomena such as a (generally ill-defined, in these contexts) 'kabbalah' or 'rabbinic tradition'. At the same time, the mobilization of Revelation in film transcends any one genre or single ideological position, frustrating the cataloguer's efforts. Yet the distinctive inflections of each of its usages reveal both the ubiquitousness of the bible in (western) cultures, and the particular concerns of specific cultural moments. Moreover, amongst these productions are some of the clearest examples of contemporary filmmakers' attempts to move from depicting religion to *doing* it. Many of those involved in the making of films like *The Rapture* (Charles O. Baptista, 1941), *The Omega Code* (Rob Marcarelli, 1999) or *Left Behind* (Victor Sarin, 2000) regard their task as standing in continuity with the religious experience and ministry of the first century seer. Analysis and comprehension of such works are then necessary tasks for those in the field of religion and film.

A short essay on Revelation and film can only be indicative. Since Hollywood is the dominant force in world cinema – other film cultures are impacted by the desire to emulate or repudiate its practices – and beliefs about the (A)apocalypse are 'even more than baseball, America's favourite pastime'⁶ the focus here is primarily on North American features. Ingmar Bergman's 1957 *The Seventh Seal* [*Det Sjunde Inseplet*], the only film to be noted in the Blackwell Bible Commentary on the reception history of the Apocalypse, is also discussed briefly.⁷ Finally, some suggestions will be offered as to what insights the study of Revelation and film might shed on the enterprise of reception studies and on the Apocalypse itself. It is perhaps worth noting at this point that this essay's reference to 'reception studies' or 'reception history' rather than 'effective history' (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) is a deliberate one. Whilst complete neutrality in scholarship is not possible (nor, indeed is it necessarily always desirable) attempts to articulate effective history take us farther into the realms of individual subjectivities, which are at best viewable

Look at Millenarian Thought', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 51-55.

5. Scott M. Lewis, *What Are They Saying About New Testament Apocalyptic?* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), pp. 56-57, and Christopher Rowland, 'Apocalyptic', in John Bowden (ed.), *Christianity: A Complete Guide* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 53-54, summarize Daniel's influence on New Testament imagery for the non-specialist.

6. Leonard Sweet, quoted in Daniel Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism and Apocalypse in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), p. 6.

7. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 50, 108.

(albeit tantalizingly) only opaquely through written texts and visual media. Arguably, they are also *inescapably* ideological, insofar as they refract P(p)rotestant Christian ideas about the authority or sufficiency of the scriptural text. On occasion, attempts in this field also succumb too readily to the temptation to enthrone or legitimate as 'effects' those invocations of Revelation (or other biblical books) that the scholar finds attractive, and to de-legitimate as mere exploitative 'uses' of Revelation those invocations that she or he considers to be morally or politically abhorrent.

2. *The 'Dangerous' Reception of Revelation*

Typically, the cinema constructs Revelation as a text that describes, more or less cryptically, the end times: it is a blueprint both for those who wish to actualize the final cataclysm and for others who seek to avert it. A few films have resisted the notion that the book's potency is coterminous with its textual organization, preferring instead to emphasize readerly activity and the psychology of those whose worldview is dominated by the Apocalypse's eschatological interpretation. Thus the reception of Revelation is a core focus of interest in *The Rapture* (Michael Tolkin, 1991). The film's protagonist, Sharon, is a telephone operator who assuages boredom by cruising bars and picking up strangers for group sex. Depressed, she contemplates suicide but instead turns to a motel room bible, and undergoes a religious conversion. Convinced by a mysterious boy prophet that she has a role to play in the actualization of Rev. 12.6 ('the woman fled into the wilderness') Sharon goes to the desert with her daughter Mary, to wait for God. The pair's disappointment builds, as neither the rapture nor the food that they expect God to provide (compare Rev. 12.6) materializes: in a scene redolent of the *akedah* (the action is set at the top of a hill, at daybreak) Sharon kills her child. The film adopts a deliberately ambiguous stance, leaving open the question of whether Sharon's experience is a religious or a psychotic one. (Shaped by quite different production values, in this respect it prefigures π (Darren Aronofsky, 1998), in which it is unclear whether Max really has uncovered the numerical principle underpinning the universe, or is delusional.) After the murder, Sharon is arrested, but the events she has awaited soon begin to unfold on the prison's television screen: angelic trumpets herald the arrival of the four horsemen (Rev. 6.1-8) and the prison bars disintegrate. Sharon is raptured, and on the banks of a 'river that washes away all your sins' (an evocation of Rev. 22.1) meets Mary's spirit (Rev. 20.4), who reveals that God will allow the disillusioned Sharon the chance to reunite with her family in heaven in exchange for her unconditional love. She refuses, and is left alone in darkness. For the

purposes of this essay, it matters little whether this final scene depicts either the encounter with a cruel deity who will not help our unbelief, or the end-stages of Sharon's psychological disintegration (or both of these, as suggested by Greiner⁸). In *The Rapture* Revelation is, as Will Self has it, 'a sick text';⁹ its treatment here at once reflects and reinforces liberal fears about its associations with a murderous – possibly insanely so – fundamentalism.¹⁰

3. Revelation as Explanation of the End Times

Whilst Tolkin's film is circumspect in its handling of a Revelation-oriented faith, it does not directly challenge either Sharon and her community's futurist interpretation of the Apocalypse, or its invocation as the basis for a belief in the rapture or 'snatching up' of the saints to heaven. Although texts like Rev. 3.10, ('I will keep you from the hour of trial') and the "'Come up here'" of Rev. 4.1-2 are regarded by adherents as evidencing the rapture (John, the addressee of Rev. 4, is here seen as a symbol of the church), other passages like 1 Thess. 4.17 ('we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds [...] to meet the Lord in the air') or Mt. 24.40-41 ('Then two will be in the field; one will be taken, and one will be left') are more frequently invoked demonstrations of its truth. The assumption in *The Rapture* is, however, that these things are also clearly taught in Revelation, a position the film shares with the *Left Behind* franchise. Just as cinema requires a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of its audiences, so for the most part, film treatments of Revelation set aside hermeneutical challenges and invite viewers to accept the text as structuring and explaining the terrors of the end-time. They may do so on the basis of Christian faith, or from a secularizing position, which uses the Apocalypse as a convenient source for the grammar of the unfolding tribulations, but not their solution.

The rise of cinema has coincided with a growing trend towards the radically futurist (end-time) historical interpretation of the Apocalypse.¹¹ Understandably, then, a significant number of films reflects this approach, weaving together diverse New Testament texts that are regarded as relating the details of the last few years of history, including not just

8. Carl Greiner, 'The Rapture: A Challenging Vision of Horror', *Journal of Religion and Film* 1.1 (April 1997), paragraph 24, online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/greiner.htm>, no pages, current on 1 September 2006.

9. Self, 'Introduction', p. xii.

10. Margaret Miles criticizes *The Rapture's* caricature of fundamentalism in *Seeing and Believing: Religion and Values in the Movies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 103-11.

11. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 24-25.

the rapture but the character of the antichrist (referred to in 1 Jn 2.18; popularly identified with the beast of Rev. 13) and his (in these films, always 'his') reign, and the ultimate battle associated with the glorious return of Christ (Rev. 16.16). In theological terms, they advocate a pre-tribulationist, pre-millennial dispensationalism.¹² Current events confirm both the nearness of the end as predicted by Revelation and the character of the world, which is regarded as inherently sinful and incapable of redemption by anything other than catastrophe and supernatural intervention. Before the catastrophe, faithful Christians will be raptured, and meet Jesus in heaven.

For scholars like Ostwalt, such imagining of the apocalypse is predominantly the preserve of groups on Christianity's margins,¹³ and it is relevant to note that many screen productions in this category – the *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises, and their predecessors, *The Rapture* (Charles O. Baptista, 1941) and *A Thief in The Night* (Donald W. Thompson, 1972) – have been produced and distributed through Christian media companies, rather than by mainstream industrial channels.¹⁴ But a necessary association of apocalypticism and marginality is hard to sustain. Produced in 1941 for church and mission work in North America, Baptista's *The Rapture* perhaps unsurprisingly saw foreign military conflict as heralding the traumas (successively visualized on screen) of Revelation 16. Yet it also speaks to peculiarly middle class fears: 'housework will be left undone', the narrator advises viewers, 'because Christian maids have been promoted to higher realms.' More recently, surveys suggest that around 44% of American Christians believe in the rapture and a battle of Armageddon, slightly more than this (49%) in the Antichrist, and around 60% in a biblically predicted Judgment Day.¹⁵ The most widely known articulation of these beliefs, Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*, was the best-selling non-fiction title in the United States in the 1970s, and the *Left Behind* books by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins (fictional narratives which imagine what life might be like when these events come to pass;

12. Pre-tribulationist, pre-millennial dispensationalism: Pre-millennialism is the belief in a literal reign of Christ at his second coming; dispensationalism is a form of pre-millennialism, which understands the *whole* of history as a series of dispensations or eras, each defined by a different covenant or revelation given by God. Pre-tribulationists believe that faithful Christians will be raptured (taken up bodily into heaven) before the period of suffering and chaos (tribulation) that will precede Christ's second coming and the end of the world. See further the introductory essay in this volume.

13. Conrad Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (New York: Trinity Press International, 2003), p. 158.

14. On the importance of distribution see Wright, *Religion and Film*, p. 79.

15. Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, pp. 8, 42.

the inspiration since 2000 of an ongoing series of films¹⁶) have sold over 60 million copies, regularly occupying the number one position in the fiction best-seller charts in the United States, even though these rankings exclude sales in specifically Christian outlets.¹⁷

Futurist interpretations of Biblical texts inspire much of the detail of the drama in the *Left Behind* films released to date—*Left Behind*, *Left Behind II: Tribulation Force* (Bill Corcoran, 2002) and *Left Behind III: World at War* (Craig R. Baxley, 2005). Within these narrative-driven films, reading Revelation also provides the lead characters (journalist Buck Williams; pilot Rayford Steele and his daughter Chloe; pastor Bruce Barnes) with the ability to understand and respond to world events. The action of *Left Behind* opens against a context of international food shortages, inflation (Rev. 6.5-6) and conflict (Rev. 6.4) in the Middle East. Amidst the upheaval, the rapture occurs. Children and Christian adults are taken up, but few of those left behind appreciate what has occurred; most prefer the explanations offered by United Nations Secretary General Nicolae Carpathia, who promises a solution to the world's problems, heads a new ten-member (evoking the 'ten crowns' of Rev. 13.2) Security Council, and brokers a peace deal for Israel. Carpathia is hailed as a great leader and replaces the United Nations with a totalitarian Global Community, as nations seeking peace and security willingly surrender their sovereignty (Rev. 13). *Left Behind II* and *Left Behind III* chart the consolidation and extension of Carpathia's power, and his revengeful destruction of opponents. Like the beast of Rev. 13.3, Carpathia receives a 'mortal wound' in an assassination attempt, but revives, his body now possessed by Satan. He rebuilds Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, only to desecrate it immediately, by declaring himself divine (evoking futurist readings of Rev. 11.1-2 and 13.1-6, Mt. 24.15, Dan. 9.27¹⁸). Meanwhile, a small band of those who were left behind at the rapture, but who have come to faith through prayer and bible study, form an underground Tribulation Force opposed to Nicolae's project. Reading Revelation

16. The dynamics of adaptation and the distinctiveness of the cinema as a medium (on which see Wright, *Religion and Film*, pp. 21-22, 36) require that the *Left Behind* films are studied in their own right. Notable innovations in *Left Behind III: The World at War* include the Global Community's poisoning of the Tribulation Force's Bibles with anthrax, and the prominence accorded to previously minor characters (for example, President Fitzhugh) and plotlines. In 2000, La Haye sued the production company over its handling of the *Left Behind* project (Michael R. Smith, 'Author LaHaye Sues *Left Behind* Film Producers', *Christianity Today*, 45.6 [April, 2001], p. 20).

17. Wojcik, *The End of the World*, p. 8; Jeanne Halgren Kilde and Bruce David Forbes, 'Introduction', in *Rapture, Revelation and the End Times*, pp. 1, 10.

18. For example, for Hal Lindsey, Rev. 11.1-2 can only refer to 'a yet-to-be-built structure!'; *There's A New World Coming: A Prophetic Odyssey* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1973), p. 160.

allows them to recognize him as the antichrist and remain confident in God's ultimate victory.

For the makers and consumers of the *Left Behind* films these narrative details, reflecting the prophecies discerned in Revelation by pre-tribulationist theologians, are of primary import. But for the purposes of this essay, the cultural preoccupations that underpin them are of greater interest. Ostensibly about the future, the *Left Behind* films are firmly of the present moment. The sins that prevent Rayford and Chloe Steele from being raptured are personal-sexual, rather than structural-systemic: again, this seems to challenge an easy linkage of apocalyptic sensibility and radical social critique. Conversion impacts most clearly on the pair's private lives, as each enters into marriage with a fellow believer. For Chloe, the abandonment of alternative fashion is another, visual marker of her altered identity. At the macro level, the films are interventions in support of United States isolationism. The Steeles, Barnes and Williams are North Americans, whilst the antichrist, Carpathia, is a Romanian (one 'of Roman descent', according to LaHaye and Jenkins), a label evoking both the feared Otherness of the formerly Communist East in some popular apocalyptic prophecy¹⁹ and a longstanding association of the beast of Rev. 13 with Rome, whether ancient, ecclesiastical or eschatological.²⁰ Although the Global Community (the name here evokes a range of present-day organizations that advocate notions of the interconnectedness—of human societies and/or the natural world—including the Foundation for Global Community, Global Community Initiatives, and One Global Community) displaces the United Nations as Carpathia's tool, the blending of organizations actual and fictional has strong implications: the films construct images of future scenarios, but offer reasons to fear present-day participation in international partnerships and agencies, even (or especially) those which defuse conflict and feed the hungry.²¹

Intertwined with this attitude is a suggestion that Israel and the United States of America will play a special role in the end times. In relation to Israel (the films do not differentiate between Israel as land/people/modern state) the *Left Behind* films are somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, the post-rapture absence of the church on earth sees God's attentions refocussing on Israel and the preparation of Jews to receive the returning Christ. The final scenes of *Left Behind II* hint that this process is

19. Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, pp. 151-53.

20. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 148.

21. See further Amy Johnson Frykholm, 'What Social and Political Messages Appear in the Left Behind Books? A Literary Discussion of Millenarian Fiction', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation, and The End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 167-95.

underway; garment-rending *haredim* (carefully observant Jews) are the first to charge Carpathia with blasphemy. The two mysterious figures who appear on the Temple Mount (compare Rev. 11.3) are named Moshe and Eli, in recognition both of the roles that the biblical Moses and Elijah played (in fighting idolatry and, for [evangelical] Christians, as forerunners of the Messiah) and of the powers that the witnesses in Rev. 11.6 share with these *Tanakh* characters (1 Kgs 17.1; Exod. 7.17–15.25).

At the same time, Israel is, to borrow Hal Lindsey's terminology, *Left Behind's* 'fuse of Armageddon'²² and the attempt to broker peace with her neighbours, diabolic. Those Jews who fail to accept the gospel, like Chaim Rosenzweig, an Israeli scientist who unwittingly aids Carpathia's rise by handing him a formula enabling cereals to be grown in drought conditions, are clever but weak, at best the ineffectual opponents of evil. Whilst (in keeping with a dispensationist perspective) the *Left Behind* films are not straightforwardly supersessionist, their Jewish characters are valued not on their own terms but as characters in a Christian story. They reflect different dimensions of evangelical understandings of Jews – their merits as a witness people, and their failings.²³ In particular, the films struggle to comprehend secular Jewish identity. Although Rosenzweig is secular, he supports Carpathia because he wants to hasten the rebuilding of Solomon's Temple: what is primarily an evangelical Christian interest in a necessary step towards the messianic age becomes in *Left Behind* a cause that binds and blinds Jews, both secular and observant.

Conversely, the United States functions in these films as the centre of Christian faithfulness; it provides the Tribulation Force's key-workers, its bunker-home, and its values. In a departure from LaHaye and Jenkins's novels, *Left Behind III* underscores the message that North Americans are the world's natural leaders by heightening the role of President Gerald Fitzhugh. As in the novels, he concedes rapidly to Carpathia's demands, but in the film this error is a very temporary one, counterbalanced by his subsequent assassination attempt on the dictator. Crucially, this happens *after* Fitzhugh and the federal government have ceded their powers to the Global Community. In this way, *Left Behind III*, reflecting Conservative Christian disappointment at the separation of church from state, hints Western-style (on which, more later) at a lack of fit between the America represented by political leaders and institutions and the true American

22. Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, p. 34.

23. For a fuller study of this topic see Yaakov Ariel, 'How Are Jews and Israel Portrayed in the Left Behind Series? A Historical Discussion of Jewish-Christian Relations', in Bruce David Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde (eds.), *Rapture, Revelation, and The End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), pp. 131–66.

spirit, which is embodied in the principled individual's willingness to stand alone, unfettered by the institutions of mainstream society.

Although it does not focus on the rapture, similar concerns pervade the *The Omega Code* and *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 2001). Before the opening scene proper of the latter work, Hal Lindsey appears on screen to address audiences directly: he recommends the film because it communicates the fact that the antichrist is 'alive and well in the world today' and 'we're very, very near the return of Jesus Christ.' As in the *Left Behind* films, *The Omega Code* and *Megiddo* posit present day alliances as sites of cosmic danger: Stone Alexander, born in America but raised and educated in Italy, is the feted head of the European Union before his rise to the Chancellorship of the World Union. He rules from Rome (whereas Carpathia's seat is New Babylon), reflecting an assimilation of biblical types one to another that is common in pre-millennialism and begins in the Apocalypse itself (Rome is the Babylon of Rev. 17 and 14.8).²⁴ Also common to the *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises are images of muscular, Christian America, and limited Israel. Stone's brother David becomes President of the United States and is Stone's chief human opponent, telling him, *à la* George W. Bush, 'the people of this nation will not be at the beck and call of foreign leaders'. Conversely, Jerusalem kabbalist Aaron Rostenberg discovers, but is powerless to protect, the key to a code that is embedded within the *Tanakh* and reveals events foretold in Revelation. Other Jews are ineffectual when Stone Alexander proclaims himself 'King and God' in a rebuilt Temple (Rev. 13.1-6).

The *Omega Code* films are, however, distinguished from the *Left Behind* franchise by their more explicit invocation of Revelation's text. *The Omega Code* opens with a title card bearing the words, 'it has been foretold in the apocalyptic books of Daniel and Revelation that he who controls Jerusalem in the last days will control the world...'. *Megiddo* puts a paraphrase of Revelation on screen: 'The beast shall ascent out of the bottomless pit and they that dwell on the earth shall wonder when they behold the beast that was [...] and is not [...] and is' (Rev. 17.8), and closes with the text of Rev. 11.15. Moreover, as the name of the franchise suggests, the Apocalypse is here understood as expressing cryptically a precise end-times scenario, *and* the ability to set it in motion. To echo Kovacs' and Rowland's terminology, Stone Alexander's actions might be regarded as the ultimate in Revelation's 'actualizing' interpretation.²⁵

24. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 182.

25. 'Actualizing means reading the Apocalypse in relation to new circumstances, seeking to convey the spirit of the text, rather than being preoccupied with the plethora of detail. Such interpretation tends to regard the text as multivalent' (Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 8).

Like the *Left Behind's* antichrist, he shares similarities with the beast of the Apocalypse. But he also deliberately seeks to act out details of the text, or rather, details of the text as they are interpreted in popular premillennialism. His theft of the Code, a (rather ill-defined) method of reading the bible three dimensionally, allows him to orchestrate world events, seize power, and hasten the arrival of Satan, who eventually possesses Stone on his revival from a mortal wound (Rev. 13.3).

Once Stone's power is confirmed, he bombs the El-Aksa Mosque to make way for a rebuilt Temple of Solomon. Interestingly, this does not reflect Lindsey's current reading of the Apocalypse (otherwise authoritative for the film), which interprets the phrase, 'the court outside the Temple' (Rev. 11.1-2) as an indication that the two structures will stand alongside one another on the Temple Mount. Seemingly paramount here are the opportunities the incident affords for visual effect, and/or its resonances for filmmakers and viewers who remember the burning of the Mosque by premillennialist Michael Rohan in 1969, or failed plots like that of Yehuda Cohen in 1984.²⁶

Megiddo: The Omega Code II's ending is indicative of the problems facing those who would seek to bring radically futurist interpretations to the screen. (To date, this is not a problem that the still growing *Left Behind* franchise has needed to address). The final images of a redeemed world are flat, banal: a blue rainbow-crossed sky, and a waterfall surrounded by flowering plants and songbirds. Unlike some of the differently motivated productions discussed later (for example, *The End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999) or *The Seventh Seal* (Carl Schultz, 1988)) conservative Christian films from the beginning reflect a sure knowledge about the identity of the one who will triumph over evil. At the start of *Megiddo*, producer Paul Crouch advises viewers that 'Jesus Christ returns and yes, he is victorious'. Even the film's title flags the expected conclusion; in Rev. 1.8, 11; 21.6 and 22.13 'omega' is Jesus's self-designation, the code that bears his name can only point towards one inexorable conclusion. At the same time, in contrast to screen presentations of the earthly ministry of Jesus, depicting the returned Christ has to date been considered either too difficult or blasphemous.

For those who seek to translate a conservative Christian reading of Revelation to the screen, then, what might otherwise be obvious avenues for creativity and narrative tension or intrigue—the question of whether the impending tragedy may be averted, and if so, by what means—are

26. Rohan was not a member of the Worldwide Church of God but claimed he was inspired by its newspaper, *The Plain Truth*. The interest of some Orthodox Jews in removing the El-Aksa mosque was depicted in the Israeli cinema in *Time of Favour [ha-Hesder]* (Joseph Cedar, 2000).

a priori closed off. Ideological commitment to biblical inerrancy and/or literalism tends to lock such projects into a largely mimetic approach, creating features that (to those who do not share such a worldview) may seem dully predictable. More specifically, these parameters, coupled with the theological requirement to show human opposition to the antichrist as ineffectual, mean that ironically, the most compelling character in the *Omega Code* films (and the *Left Behind* films) is Stone Alexander (or Nicolae Carpathia) and the final chapters in his career constitute the dramatic climax of the action. In scenes utilizing computer generated imagery, a plague of locusts pours forth from his mouth, and later, as the battle of Armageddon (Rev. 16.16) rages between Stone and his few remaining opponents beneath a blood red sun, he is finally and unambiguously revealed as a monstrous Satan. But just as Stone-Satan appears triumphant, a shaft of light from the skies halts the battle; he is thrown into a lake of fire (Rev. 19.20) and bound there, in chains (Rev. 20.1-3).

4. *Revelation as a Cultural Reference Point*

The *Left Behind* and *Omega Code* franchises make direct appeals to and for the message of Christian faith. However, whilst other films may similarly see Revelation as a code, or as a guide that has bearing on the understanding of contemporary persons and events, they are animated by quite different spirits, as made plain by the necessarily brief and suggestive survey that follows.

Positioned between Christian horror and the association of Apocalypse with 'sick' faith are diverse films in which the text is exploited as a cultural reference point. If the unfolding sequence of events prophesied in Revelation is paramount to the premillennialists, narrative is of little import for Ingmar Bergman's *Seventh Seal*. Here, Rev. 8.1 and 6 ('When the lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for almost half an hour [...]. Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.') form an *inclusio*²⁷ around the exploration of existential questions predicated on the efforts of Antonius Block, a fourteenth-century crusader recently returned to plague-ridden Sweden, to identify 'one meaningful act' in the face of imminent Death, who has come, chalky-faced and clothed in a black cape, to claim him. By exegetical consensus, the silence of Revelation 8 is not doom-laden, but a ritual prelude to prayer.²⁸ Bergman differs, and juxtaposes the text with

27. In the film's penultimate scene, Block's wife continues the scripture reading, to verses 7-11.

28. Kovacs and Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 107-108. For the consensus in historical criticism see Richard Bauckham, 'Revelation', in John Barton and John Muddiman

an impressive piece of expressionist noir photography: a Johannic eagle hovers in otherwise empty morning skies, as below, waves break on the sea-shore, two horses taste the ocean and a squire lies exhausted on the rocky beach. The sound of the sea and the wind is cut, and the knight, who has tried to pray but cannot, looks up, to find himself confronted by Death. The technique is deceptively simple, but arresting. For Bergman, as for others in the second half of the twentieth century, the Apocalypse's sense of an ending speaks to Cold War fears of nuclear annihilation.²⁹ But this apart, *Seventh Seal* secured Bergman's reputation as a director and its images have assumed a near-iconographic status, bolstered in the film itself by the quotation from Revelation, but now breaking free of that text in popular cultural imagination. The characters and visual style of *Seventh Seal* have been variously parodied in later productions such as Woody Allen's *Love and Death* (1975), *Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (Peter Hewitt, 1991) in which the eponymous heroes play Death at Cluedo, Twister, and Battleships, and *Last Action Hero* (John McTiernan, 1993) which sees a hit-man accidentally liberate the character of Death from Bergman's film into the real world, where he inadvertently begins killing people.

Pale Rider (Clint Eastwood, 1985) like Bergman's film, uses the Apocalypse to comment on character and setting. Most obviously, the title invokes the pale horse whose rider is Death in Rev. 6.8. Eastwood's rider is a man of unknown origin, known only as Preacher, who arrives on a grey horse as teenager Megan—who has previously prayed to God, asking him to defend her small community from the economic and environmental ravages inflicted by a big mining corporation—is reading aloud from Revelation 6. Seemingly, Preacher is a quasi-supernatural instrument of judgment: a ring of bullet-holes on his back indicates that he has previously been the victim of Sheriff Stockburn and his deputies, who now work for the mining corporation. Yet he has survived miraculously (or is a ghost) and his mission is to impose justice. At the end of the film, Stockburn and the corporation have been defeated, and Preacher once again rides off into the distance, having spurned the advances of both Megan and her mother, Sarah. In many respects *Pale Rider* is a remake of *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953³⁰) with elements of Eastwood's *High Plains*

(eds.), *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 1294; David E. Aune, *Revelation 6-16* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), pp. 507-508.

29. See Ingmar Bergman in Birgitta Steene (ed.), *Focus on The Seventh Seal* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 70, and more generally Wojcik, *The End of the World as We Know It*, pp. 97-132. Melvyn Bragg's *The Seventh Seal [Det Sjunde Inseglet]* (London: British Film Institute, 1993) offers a guide to Bergman's film which is personal, almost to the point of self-indulgence.

30. *Shane* has with some justification been interpreted as a Christ film, see, for

Drifter (Clint Eastwood, 1973; in this film, too, the words of Rev. 6.8 are juxtaposed with images of a pale horse-riding 'Stranger') thrown in for good measure. The tradition was continued in 1993 by Kevin Jarre's *Tombstone*, in which gunslinger Johnny Ringo recites Rev. 6.8 as a prelude to Wyatt Earp's arrival on the railroad (the 'iron horse' of the West) and in a visual complement to the allusion, Earp and his associates defeat a criminal gang while riding four horses side-by-side with matching saddles and bridles. With their images of men endowed with near-divine powers who briefly stand in the midst of and forever transform a beleaguered community, but are unable to belong or remain part of it, *Pale Rider* and *Tombstone* are firmly rooted in genre conventions. In particular, the invocation of Rev. 6 here adds to Preacher's Otherness, underscoring his identity as a hero who 'is of a different order and cannot remain with the righteous remnant'³¹ and perhaps offering comment also—Eastwood is a knowing, 'New Hollywood' director³²—on the mythical images of frontier and masculinity for which the Western film has so long served as a vehicle.³³

The Seventh Sign (Carl Schulz, 1988) differs immediately from *Pale Rider* in its handling both of (gender) politics and the biblical text.³⁴ In the context of this study, the film might be categorized as a return to futurist interpretation. Unlike both Eastwood's and Bergman's films, Schulz's presentation centres on efforts to avert a cataclysm that threatens the survival of the world. Once more the Apocalypse simultaneously provides the grammar for the unfolding end-times, and the clues that allow Abby Quinn and *yeshiva bucher* (student) Avi to discern the true import of the mysterious world events that they witness either directly or in Abby's case, on television: fish die in the waters off Haiti (Rev. 8.9 and 16.3); an Arab village on the site of the biblical Sodom is inexplicably destroyed; fire breaks out; freak extremes of weather are experienced around the globe (Rev. 8.5, 8); a boy who cited biblical justification for the murder of his incestuous biological parents is executed (possibly an evocation of Rev. 6.9); and the sun is eclipsed (Rev. 8.12).

example, Lloyd Baugh, *Imaging the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Franklin: Sheed and Ward, 1997), pp. 57-171.

31. Ostwalt, *Secular Steeples*, p. 180.

32. Wright, *Religion and Film*, pp. 131-33.

33. For an excellent exploration of these themes, see Patrick McGee, *From Shane to Kill Bill: Rethinking the Western* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007).

34. Mary Ann Beavis offers a brief discussion of this film in "'Angels Carrying Savage Weapons": Uses of the Bible in Contemporary Horror Films', *Journal of Religion and Film* 7.2 (October 2003), online: <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol7No2/angels.htm>, no pages, current on 1st September 2006.

Interestingly, a range of approaches to the biblical text are addressed within the film's diegetic world. Naturalizing, rationalizing explanations of the unusual meteorological phenomena are explicitly rejected, being the obfuscations of Father Lucci, a priest who is ultimately revealed as the malign Cartaphilus—not the similarly named wandering Jew³⁵ of Christian folklore, but in this instance a Roman official condemned to eternal life for his role in the scourging of Jesus. In another scene, Avi discusses the New Testament with a Catholic priest who tells him that the events described in the Apocalypse are not, as pre-millennialists would have it, to be decoded and 'checked off like a list', but should be understood symbolically. This position is also refuted by the film's narrative, in which resolution is only achieved through individual characters' 'performance' of elements of the text.

However, in contrast to *Left Behind* and *Omega Code*, which are believed by their creators to be partly fictionalizing accounts of imminent actualities, *The Seventh Sign* does not claim to be other than a fictional narrative, and it is distinguished from the conservative Christian productions in two key respects. Firstly, it depicts the second coming of Christ, in the character of David Bannon, who does not arrive as a reconciling presence, but as a kind of frustrated drifter who successively initiates the signs of the end times, by breaking open a succession of sealed prophecies. Secondly, the film rejects the pessimism of pre-millennial dispensationalism and posits human will as sufficient to effect world redemption. In a *bricolage* of New Testament and Talmudic ideas, Abby, who is pregnant, learns from David and Avi that she is the 'seventh seal' of Rev. 8.1. Moreover, the repository of pre-existent souls, the *guf*,³⁶ is rapidly emptying (linked in the film to the biblical reference to 'silence in heaven'); the end of the world will be heralded by the birth of her child, the first to be born without a soul. During labour, Abby finally realizes that only she can prevent the final cataclysm and cause God to grant the earth another chance, by revealing her hope for the future through the commission of a selfless act: she brings about the replenishment of the *guf* and averts the apocalypse by sacrificing her own life for that of her newborn son.

35. Although the Wandering Jew's name is most commonly Ahasuerus, but the name Cartaphilus appears in the writings of Roger of Wendover and Matthew Paris. See also Melanie J. Wright, 'Wandering Jew', in Edward Kessler and Neil Wenborn (eds.), *A Dictionary of Jewish-Christian Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 443.

36. For Talmudic references to the *guf* ('body') as the repository of souls see *Avodah Zarah* 5a and *Yevamot* 62, which teach that the Messiah will come only after the *guf* has been emptied. The film develops the concept in a manner that departs significantly from Jewish religious tradition.

The Seventh Sign is unusual in its emphasis on a female character as effective agent. Arguably, however, it has strong conservative overtones; the film's resolution suggests to audiences that wonderful things can happen—even the healing of a fractured, traumatized world—if only woman is prepared to sacrifice herself. Persistent, too, in *Seventh Sign* are constructions of 'the Jew' as a mysterious Other. When Abby first discovers a Hebrew text in David Banner's apartment, she seeks help from the elderly Rabbi Ornstein, but he is *haredi* and cannot keep company with a woman who is not his wife—Judaism is the obstacle to his recognition of the solution to the world's fate. The young Avi is privy to a special kind of knowledge (Jewish folklore about the *guf*) but he, too, must rely on the arrival of a non-Jewish (in an early scene, Abby says she has no religious denomination; her name hints at Irish Catholic ethnicity) child to effect his redemption. In this way, *Seventh Sign*, perhaps unwittingly, inserts the narrative of Christian beginnings into its vision of the end.

5. Concluding Remarks

The diverse films considered in this essay provide cumulative evidence of what John Riches terms the bible's 'sheer fecundity'.³⁷ But they also proffer a challenge to the Commentary as a vehicle for the articulation of reception history. On the screen as elsewhere, biblical books—and perhaps this is especially true of Revelation—are rarely experienced as discrete entities, separated off from other texts and impulses. At the same time, as the discussion here has hinted, an examination of Revelation can reveal only a small part of the meanings of a film such as *Pale Rider* or even *Megiddo: Omega Code II*. This is not, however, to say that film offers nothing to the attempt to map what Revelation is.

The striking insistence on the miraculous that characterizes many of the films discussed in this essay directs attention back towards elements of the Apocalypse lost in some intellectualizing exegeses. The approach of films like *Seventh Seal*, *Left Behind* and *Omega Code*, each of which attempts in its own way to 'put the bible on screen', may appear unpalatable to some, but in many respects the visual economies of these films resonate with the scriptural emphasis on 'signs and wonders' (Deut. 34.11). In their very abundance lies a potential to capture something of religion's historic connection of seeing with belief—an association which is central to the Apocalypse, with its injunctions to 'come and see' (Rev. 6.1, 3, 5), to 'show his servants what must soon take place' (Rev. 1.1), and, after seeing, 'to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me' (Rev. 22.8).

37. John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 116.

Of equal import is the recognition that the cinema's engagement with the book of Revelation is always partial, characterized by *lacunae*, discrepancies, 'mis-readings'. For much of the twentieth century, mainstream biblical scholarship has seen in these qualities confirmation of the inconsequentiality of the film medium. Yet they might just as well be seen as shedding light on the nature of Apocalypse itself. Commenting on cult literature, Umberto Eco has suggested that a such a text's vulnerability to dismemberment and reassembly is a vital aspect of its extraordinary appeal: 'one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it, so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship to the whole'.³⁸ It must also provide excesses, superfluities, and inconsistencies, if it is to allow scope for fan creativity. Considered in this light, the perennially capricious invocation of Revelation in the cinema offers insight onto the character of the text itself. The Apocalypse is a living text not just because it (at times) appears to offer answers to the need for a sense of an ending, but precisely because of its gaps, its opacity.

Partial (in both sense/s of the word) screen engagements with Revelation also caution against any simplistic effort to describe how 'the paradigms of apocalypse [and of biblical themes and motifs more generally] continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world'.³⁹ Here, surely, are arguments against any view that readily positions the biblical text as either a root or mine to be tapped or plundered, or that regards its meanings and significance as being delineated by the activities of any single interpretive community. Revelation at the cinema is unstable and unpredictable, it operates and is operated upon in fashions too complex to be subjected to the pressures of binary logic, described as the 'effect' or 'influence' of one discrete phenomenon on another. Perhaps, then, Deleuze and Guattari's figure of the rhizome is a more helpful prompt for the activity of reception history: In botanical terms, a rhizome is a horizontal, usually subterranean, plant stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. Used figuratively, it refers to,

an a-centred, non-hierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states [...] to be rhizomorphic is to produce stems and filaments that seem to be roots, or better yet connect with them by penetrating the trunk, but put them to strange new uses.⁴⁰

38. Quoted in Wright, *Religion and Film*, p. 102.

39. Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction. With a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 28.

40. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 15, 21.

Thinking rhizomorphously helps conceptualize film and Revelation, separately and in relation: in the cinema, themes, symbols, motifs simultaneously depend upon and operate independently of the text of the Apocalypse. Thus in *The Omen* (Richard Donner, 1976) a '666' birthmark on the scalp of Damien Thorn signified that he was the antichrist. 20th Century Fox highlighted this by releasing the film on 6th June 1976, a strategy it repeated when releasing the remake (*The Omen*, John Moore, 2006) at 6.06 am on 6th June 2006 (06.06.06). But the number '666' functions quite differently in *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999) when Christine York's dreams of '666' points towards the world's end in 1999 (explained by a theory that in dreams, numbers appear upside down or backwards). Relating each of these productions mechanically to Rev. 13.18 ultimately reveals little aside from the preoccupations of the scholar, whether s/he emphasizes the notion of the bible as culture's 'source' text, or strives to reverse the hermeneutical flow, projecting later concerns onto the first century text. The rhizome reminds us instead to attend to the vibrancy, movement, and heterogeneity of phenomena – their here-and-now-ness. It emphasizes that what was once periphery may at other times be centre, that the threads of connection are multiple and if broken at one point, may start up again along the old lines, or on a new one, that what Revelation is, remains to be seen.⁴¹

Filmography

- Bill and Ted's Bogus Journey* (Peter Hewitt, 1991)
End of Days, The (Peter Hyams, 1999)
High Plains Drifter (Clint Eastwood, 1973)
Last Action Hero (John McTiernan, 1993)
Left Behind (Victor Sarin, 2000)
Left Behind II: Tribulation Force (Bill Corcoran, 2002)
Left Behind III: World at War (Craig R. Baxley, 2005)
Love and Death (Woody Allen, 1975)
Megiddo: The Omega Code 2 (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 2001)
Omega Code, The (Rob Marcarelli, 1999)
Omen, The (John Moore, 2006)
Pale Rider (Clint Eastwood, 1985)
 π (Darren Aronofsky, 1998)
Rapture, The (Charles O. Baptista, 1941)
Rapture, The (Michael Tolkin, 1991)

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- Seventh Seal, The [Det Sjunde Inseplet]* (Ingmar Bergman, 1957)
Seventh Sign, The (Carl Schultz, 1988)
Shane (George Stevens, 1953)
Thief in the Night, A (Donald W. Thompson, 1972)
Time of Favour [ha-Hesder] (Joseph Cedar, 2000).
Tombstone (Kevin Jarre, 1993)

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