



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 4
Issue 1 April 2000

Article 1

12-16-2016

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Recommended Citation

Martin, Joel W. (2016) "Anti-feminism in Recent Apocalyptic Film," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol4/iss1/1>

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Anti-feminism in Recent Apocalyptic Film

Abstract

As the second millennium winds down, apocalyptic themes inform many Hollywood plots. Several recent popular films and television shows depict epochal threats from space. This essay focuses on the films *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *Contact*, and *The Lion King* and an episode from "Futurama." Extremely popular--"Armageddon" was the highest grossing film released in 1998--, these films and shows beg for attention. Strikingly, three of them give prominence to father-daughter relationships (in *Armageddon*, the oil driller hero dominates his coming of age daughter; in *Deep Impact*, the journalist hero, although estranged from her father, elects to join him on the beach as a fatal tidal wave sweeps the east coast; in *Contact*, the radio astronomer mourns her lost father and miraculously meets him again on a magical beach at the ends of the universe). What is all of this about? Clearly something vital is going on.

This article examines what the social status and fate of these cinematic daughters say about contemporary gender politics, what this focus on father-daughter relationships reveals about the political unconscious. The article highlights the odd mix of initiative and passivity that characterizes the female protagonists of these films. It traces how these works link feminism with the threat from space, showing how these films suggest that the former causes the latter. This leads to a troubling conclusion, repugnant politically and ethically. According to the politics of these films, to avoid the apocalypse, women must be re-subordinated. The article employs theoretical approaches developed in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* and advanced by scholars such as Douglas Kellner, Michael Ryan, and Janice Rushing.

Apocalypses reveal. They envision heaven or deliver a heavenly message.¹

This remains the case in Hollywood.

I want to call attention to an apocalyptic trope present in several recent films. It consists of a long tracking shot that traverses a great expanse of the universe. I call it the cosmic magic carpet ride, because it takes viewers on an intergalactic journey no human could ever experience. The journey may begin or end on earth. It may move centrifugally "outward" to alien spaces or centripetally "inward" to our home planet. In either case, it flows seamlessly from earth to the cosmos or from the cosmos to earth. An exemplary example occurs at the beginning of the film *Contact*. Examining it closely, I will argue that it conveys a religious message worthy of theological reflection. As I will also show, most apocalyptic films, including those that feature a similar shot, are less inspiring.²

They choke the spiritual message with ideological ones. In particular anti-feminism clouds our visions of the stars.

Contact begins with a view of earth from near space. The scene centers on the southeastern United States at night. Close enough to make out the glow of coastal cities in Florida and Texas and the contrastingly dark pool of the Gulf of Mexico, we are, nevertheless, far enough away to see the curvature of the earth set off against the blackness of space. The soundtrack consists of snatches of music

from the era of the movie's production. We hear, among other things, a line from a song by the Spice Girls. As the camera backs out and away, the whole of the earth becomes visible, a sphere surrounded by space. Just as the moon comes into the picture, we hear slightly older songs, including the theme from the late 1970s television show "Dallas." The conceit here is that we are overtaking the soundwaves of radio and television broadcasts that radiated outward years ago from earth. At Mars, we hear the candy bar jingle, "Sometimes you feel like a nut..." The Van Allen asteroid belt brings Nixon defending his honor, "I am not a crook." The Sixties sound off beyond Jupiter: Martin Luther King, Jr. exults "Praise God Almighty, we're free at last," a journalist reports President Kennedy's assassination, and the theme song from the "Twilight Zone" plays. Somewhere in the rings of Saturn we hear Dean Martin singing, "Volare!" And beyond Neptune, we hear the Lone Ranger cry "Hi Ho Silver," FDR declare the attack on Pearl Harbor "a day that will live in infamy," and Hitler rant auf Deutsch, a rare instance when the language spoken on the soundtrack is not English. The last discernible statement belongs to FDR, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." And the last trace of our civilization—some very faint dots and dashes of Morsecode—vibrates just before the camera leaves our galaxy.

The shot does not stop there, but the sound of the soundtrack does. This transition warrants remark. It divides the shot into two distinct parts, a noisy prelude

and a silent feature. The effect is profound, a sonic equivalent of the shift from black and white to color in the *Wizard of Oz*. We have shifted from the mundane familiar to the strange and wondrous. Before this moment, Top 40 songs, American Presidents' speeches, and Madison Avenue slogans crackled on the soundtrack and helped domesticate the novel visual. For media-saturated Americans, this noisy trip through the solar system resembles a drive down a new highway with our favorite tapes along. After we leave the solar system, however, things change. Because the soundtrack no longer anchors us in the familiar detritus of everyday American mass culture, the strangeness of the visions before us shine forth that much more brightly. The silence tells us we are no longer in Kansas. The silence compels us to pay attention.

We are swept along on a grand tour of the universe. We glimpse distant, primordial phenomena like the ones first revealed in the 1990s through spectacular color photos from the Hubble telescope. These sights resemble those described by Carl Sagan in his novel *Contact*. "Everywhere she looked there were stars, not the paltry scattering of a few thousand still occasionally known to naked-eye observers on Earth, but a vast multitude—many almost touching their nearest neighbors it seemed—surrounded her in every direction. The sky was blazing with nearby suns. She could make out an immense spiraling cloud of dust, an accretion disk

apparently flowing into a black hole of staggering proportions, out of which flashes of radiation were coming like heat lightning on a summer's night.³

This entire vision proves most exhilarating and moving. We are truly "flying." But, because of the silent soundtrack, the experience carries deeper meaning. As in some forms of meditation and prayer, the absence of sound here connotes profundity and indicates awareness of mystery. Far from the noise of earth and commerce, we enter a space where the proper human response is awe. Later in the film, the beauty she sees in the depths of far space overwhelms the scientist Ellie Arroway (Jodie Foster). She responds like biblical prophets suddenly brought into God's presence. "No words," she cries, indicating that speech cannot do justice to this revelation.

May we not likewise see in this shot something apocalyptic? When viewed in the manner of a constructionist theologian, the shot's existential effects might be compared to those of the God-concept. Like this concept, the shot indicates our position in a larger grander order that contextualizes without crushing our significance. Because this shot is space-oriented, it relativizes and humbles us and suggests our insignificance in the big banged world. It provides a popular religious vision of the universe revealed by science: 400 billion stars in each of 50 billion galaxies. It evokes an unfathomable, mind-boggling reality whose units of temporal and spatial measurement defy ordinary human comprehension even as its beauty,

power, and inexhaustible mystery draw us. And it invites ethical and spiritual reorientation.

On the other hand, because this visual shot is also earth-anchored, it reminds us of our precious specialness in the vastness of nature. This humanizes. The visual equivalent of the child's game of nesting addresses—my address is such and such a street in such and such a town, state, and country, on planet earth, the Milky Way, in the universe—this shot suggests the earth still counts. This is a traditional function of apocalyptic, according to Eugene Weber. "Self-centered, self-fascinated, humanity is loath to concede that we are not central to the cosmic scheme of things...Apocalypse, however tragic, reassures."⁴ Similarly, although we know earth is no longer central, the visual magic of this shot suggests our home planet is still very important. If for no other reason, this makes the shot supportive of human meaning making and anthropomorphic affirmation in the manner of classic apocalyptic.

Thus this bipolar shot serves a useful iconic role, suggesting the two sides of God that Gordon Kaufman distilled years ago. As he summarized in *An Essay on Theological Method*, "the genius of the word 'God' is that it unites the relativizing and the humanizing motifs and holds them together in one concept? A similarly compelling genius resides in this grand image of the earth in the universe.

Contact's version of the shot is exemplary, most likely to induce this type of reflection, but the shot occurs elsewhere with similar, if subdued, effect. Robust versions show up in some films in the *Star Trek* franchise, *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and others. Attenuated versions color *Apollo 13*, *Independence Day*, and *The Fifth Element*. All imply the same basic theological message: earth, a very small place in a very large universe, still has special value. Banal when written, this truth shines when delivered via the superb special effects of a contemporary film. For moderns long accustomed to earth's decentering, this shot nonetheless reassures, assuaging on a deep level a metaphysical crisis that began hundreds of years ago and has accelerated in the last several decades.

This is not to say that Hollywood directors are systematic theologians, that they worry about contemporary viewers' existential questions or that they attempt to answer them. They certainly do not worry about whether they are doing "first order," "second order" or "third order" theology. They are most concerned with creating entertaining narratives, not touching people spiritually. Not surprisingly, they often employ the shot I am analyzing in predictable plots of social crisis and imminent catastrophe. In most of these films, the vastness of space does not induce awe as in *Contact*, it simply threatens. The threat comes in a literal, concretized, concentrated form: an asteroid, a comet, an evil ball of fire, and big plasma-farting bugs. A spectacle of destruction follows. Indeed, so filled are these space-aware

films with images of imminent and actual disaster, they may seem to deliver, indeed, to be, nothing else.

Why does this pattern seem so strong in recent Hollywood film? Could it be a residual effect of the Cold War? As G. Simon Harak, Ira Chernus, Caron Schwartz Ellis have argued, fear of nuclear war, civil defense drills, and maps featuring ground zeros of instantaneous urban holocausts taught us all to fear the skies as possible "corridors of chaos" and destruction.⁵ Aware of the real possibility that we could die within a few minutes of an ICBM launch, it is not surprising that many of us in the 1970s sought solace in films featuring beneficent alien visitors. These cuddly extraterrestrials helped us view the skies with something other than terror. We needed *E.T.*, *Starman*, *The Brother from Another Planet*, and the kind folks in *Cocoon*. Now that the Cold War and its mad arms race are over, we are free to imagine the sky as truly menacing. It's ironic, but now that our fears of nuclear winter seem more remote, we can tolerate and may on some level actually need visions of chaos and destruction coming from above, viz., fireballs, comets, asteroids and implacably hostile alien invaders. Seeing things blown up provides a post-Cold War catharsis to generations who lived in terror. But here's the rub: the great majority of men and women in the audiences flocking to these films came of age after the depths of the Cold War. What do they know of the Bomb? These films do more than release pent up Cold War fantasies of destruction.

Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan's insights regarding the ideology of disaster and crisis films seem apropos.⁶ In *Camera Politica*, these cultural critics argue that disaster and crisis films invoke and address contemporary social tensions. Moreover, they argue that films do more than mirror these tensions, films teach viewers how to respond to them. According to Kellner and Ryan, one of the essential ways American learn their politics, values, and roles is through exposure to cinematic narratives, stories in film. Films transcode or translate the social order into images and narratives, teaching us through screen representations which boundaries we must honor and which we might be able to transgress. When the social order is stable, the dominant discourses, value-systems and accompanying symbolic representations are also secure. Men are men, and women are women. When the social order is in crisis, a simultaneous crisis occurs in the realm of representation. Disaster films abound.

Following Fredric Jameson, Kellner and Ryan argue that ideology succeeds in maintaining order not through outright domination, but by pacifying, channeling, and neutralizing the forces that challenge the status quo. Since ideology cannot ignore these forces, but has to respond to them, their presence and power will be registered even in those cultural representations that oppose them. Kellner and Ryan's approach, then, suggests that we take very seriously the current apocalyptic films. Rather than see them only as entertainment or the residual cathartic release

of Cold War anxieties, we might interpret them as essential efforts to respond to ongoing social tensions. These reel crises address real ones.

To illustrate and develop this approach, let's interpret a recent apocalyptic film, *The Lion King*. This enormously popular animated film is apocalyptic in both the erudite and popular senses of the term. And, although its action is almost all on earth, the stars do figure in the film. The great king Mufasa tells his son Simba that the stars are all the rulers who ever lived; they watch over earth. Other characters offer differing theories about the nature of stars. Most important, the film depicts at its center a heavenly vision.

The dead king Mufasa appears as a massive apparition in the night sky and chastens Simba for forgetting him. Simba, mistakenly convinced that he was responsible for his father's death, has been guilt-ridden and stagnant. Rather than getting on with his life and fulfilling his duty as the heir to the throne of the Pridelands Kingdom, he has retreated to a multi-racial counter-cultural oasis. While Simba lollygags with his male friends, the Pridelands kingdom has turned into a wasteland. A land that once had color is now ashen. Most horribly, due to the corrupt leadership of the regicide Scar, lions must live alongside hyenas. Thus we have within *Lion King* a doubled apocalypse, one spiritual and one social. Mufasa's heavenly appearance will lead to the reversal of the earthly catastrophe. But that can only happen after another kind of reversal takes place.

A lioness ventures out from the wasteland and attacks one of Simba's frat brothers. Simba defends his brother, but the lioness, clearly stronger, pins him down. Fortunately for the prince, it turns out that this lioness is Nala, his cubhood playmate. One song later, they have fallen in love. Playing one day, they literally tumble down a hillside in the jungle, and he ends up on top of her.⁷ This time, she does not bear her teeth, but instead, shows "bedroom eyes." This reversal of positions establishes male dominance and clarifies the prince's sexual orientation. At last revealed to be heterosexual, Simba returns to the Pridelands and confronts Scar, his evil, impotent, darker hued uncle, the second son born to rebel, the true killer of Mufasa. Scar is a pro-immigration integrationist, and he is animated and voiced in a manner that suggests stereotypes of a gay man's speech patterns, mannerisms, and moods. He lisps, sashays, and broods.' Physically weaker than other male lions, he fights dirty. He deserves and receives defeat.

After Simba sends Scar to a fiery death, Simba expels the hyenas and assumes the throne. He and Nala reproduce and the entire kingdom come to see their cub. The film indicates the cub is male by showing him then interjecting the title the Lion King. Just as this conclusion recapitulates the film's opening scene, we have every reason to expect the future to bring more dynastic struggles, border wars, and gender tensions.

Freud would have a field day with *The Lion King*, but let's stick with Kellner and Ryan. Their Jamesonian notion of ideology explains why *The Lion King*, which seems determined to glorify heterosexual romance and a middle class family pattern, must allude to the possibility of a life outside of heterosexuality and without the nuclear family. Again, in order to undercut feminism, the film must show a female possessing real strength, only to subordinate her to a male. And so on. In the manner of a vaccine, the film exposes us to alternative ways of life in order to inoculate us against them.

Kellner and Ryan further argue that we can speed our decoding by paying attention to the way metonymy, with its reference to the specific, material context, undermines metaphor, with its invocation of some higher transcendent meaning. Take *The Lion King's* mantra of a 'circle of life.' As a metaphor, it provides the comforting knowledge that nothing ever ends, that parents live on in their children, that time is not linear and death not final, that all things cycle around in a great and magical economy of repetition. As a metonymy, the circle of life has a different, because materially based, meaning. It coincides with quite specific, rigidly enforced material borders that divide races and marginalize certain peoples. The circle of life, to put it crudely, refers to a gated community called the Pridelands. Within it one finds happy nuclear families that stick to their own kind. Beyond its borders, however, one finds fields of death and deserts of privation, ghettos and

barrios populated by unruly hordes. Out there leaders speak in dialect (Whoopi Goldberg and Cheech Marin) or slobber to communicate. In the Pridelands, the good king Mufasa sounds like a Shakespearean-trained actor (James Earl Jones). Not surprisingly, when the two realms mix and social classes get out of their proper place, disaster results. Fascism springs up; nature itself declines. The metaphor of the circle of life is not innocent.

Ideology drives other 90s apocalyptic films, including those that focus more resolutely on the stars. Turning these films inside out, we can now argue that the crisis they resolve derives not from space itself, but instead reflects apprehensions about feminism. These films respond negatively to the real and symbolic instability introduced into the gender system by feminism. It is not a coincidence that each of these films' narratives enacts the re-subordination of a woman and connects this process of subordination directly to the struggle to overcome a threat that contact with space, space rocks, and space beings supposedly represents. In *Armageddon*, for example, it is a daughter's sexuality that needs to be contained. Only after the father has transferred his authority over her to her male lover can the father perform the sacrifice that will save the earth.

Anti-feminism percolates in *Deep Impact*. The world's number one journalist earns a spot in a subterranean city where a remnant of earth's population will survive earth's collision with a comet. At the last moment, however, she gives

up her seat on the rescue helicopter and elects to reunite with her father on the beach in what will be a suicide hug beneath a great tidal wave. Metaphorically, her actions signify decency, grace, and forgiveness. Metonymically, however, it may be a different story. She yields her seat to a woman who has a child, to a mother. And it seems important to note that the father she rejoins is the man who left her mother for a much younger woman, an action that we are led to think contributed to her mother's suicide. If these material facts do not change our interpretation, other things in the film suggest it renders a judgment against feminism. A young man, really a kid, leaves the safety of the cave city to save a young woman left on the surface. Thanks to his heroism and against great odds, they reach it to the top of a mountain and escape the deluge. There presumably they will enter into a new covenant with God, marry, and repopulate the earth. Overall, I think we detect a disturbing pattern in this film. Women who are fertile and heterosexually bonded survive. Death comes to highly competent professional women and those who are post-menopausal. One wonders if the film was really about a comet after all. What is really being blasted here?

In *The Fifth Element*, humanity's rescue depends upon the action of a perfect being. Unfortunately, the perfect being is female. At the critical moment when she must act, she becomes too emotional and starts crying. Overwhelmed by the duality of humanity, she hesitates. Only after the Bruce Willis character tells her that he

loves her does she blast the evil ball of fire and save earth. Coincidentally, the only other men present are two celibate white priests and an emasculated African-American man. It takes a white heterosexual male to save the earth even when you have a perfect being on your side.

In *Independence Day*, one of the early casualties is the First Lady. The film implies she would have survived had she followed her husband's admonition to flee L.A. Males, in contrast, not only endure, they prevail, even when they behave recklessly. Late in the film a male pilot and computer hacker fly a captured alien vehicle into orbit, enter the gargantuan alien mother ship, and disable its computers. They escape unscratched, although enemy ships pursue them, a massive explosion engulfs their vessel, and they crash in the desert. When we next see them, they are walking back to their base, puffing cigars. Their women greet them with renewed respect. It seems likely that these women will abandon their careers—one was a stripper and the other the President's press secretary—and assume more traditional, less visible roles.

The anti-feminist pattern dyes this genre so strongly it shows up clearly in a parody of the genre, an episode of the Fox network's animated television show "*Futurama*" (premiere broadcast,⁸ November 1999). Parodies derive their humor by playing with the conventions of well-established genres. Because parodies depend upon viewers consciously recognizing the pertinent conventions, they tend

to exaggerate and foreground these conventions. Think of *Blazing Saddles*, *Spaceballs*, and *Scream*. "*Futurama*," as its title indicates, spoofs science fiction and its images of a technological future. It chronicles the picaresque adventures of a young man named Frye, a slacker frozen in the 1990s, then thawed a millennium later. In this episode, we see Frye in the 1990s hanging out with a friend in the broadcast control room of WNYW, the Manhattan headquarters of the Fox network. A technician, seated in front of a bank of monitors, asks him if he wants to watch the show "*Single Female Lawyer*." Frye responds, "Oh, I don't know. That's a chick show. I prefer shows of the genre 'world's blankety-blank.'" His buddy responds with a sexist comment, "She is wearing the world's shortest skirt." Convinced, Frye says, "I'm in."

A short parody of "*Ally McBeal*" follows. It begins with a close-up of a middle-aged man wearing a judge's black robe hitting on a young woman. "Counselor," the man says, "I remind you that it's unethical to sleep with your client. If you really care about the outcome of the case, you should sleep with me."

"Your Honor," the woman responds, "it's bad enough to proposition a single female lawyer in court, but this is a unisex bathroom." The view expands to show that these characters are standing in a large tiled bathroom, much like that featured regularly on the television show "*Ally McBeal*."

"Overruled counselor," the judge says, kissing the woman on her lips.

She pushes back against him momentarily, then embraces him, moans, and deepens the kiss. One of the stall doors pops open and a stenographer, seated on the toilet and typing on her machine, comes into view. She asks, "Could you repeat that last part?"

The scene shifts back to the control room where Frye and the technician are watching the monitor. Yawning and stretching, Frye spills his "Lobrau Beer" on the control panel, short-circuiting the machinery. Static fills the monitor screen. "Oh my God! You knocked Fox off the air," the technician cries. Unfazed, Frye says, "Pfft, like anyone on earth cares?"

At this point, the scene segues into a letter-perfect copy of the opening scene from *Contact* described above. Looking down on a skyscraper capped with the call letters "WNYW," we ascend, rising high above Manhattan. Red concentric rings pulsing from an antenna atop the building indicate broadcast signals. We move with them through clouds and beyond, passing the moon, Mars, belts of asteroids, Jupiter, Saturn, interstellar dust, and the Voyager space probe. Finally, a green mottled planet comes into view. A label identifies it as "Omicron Persei⁹, 1000 Light Years Away, 1000 Years Later." The television signal reaches the planet. The scene shifts to the interior of a room where two large brown aliens sit watching

"Single Female Lawyer." The aliens are gendered—one of the aliens has horns, the other wears a pink bra. Each looks rather like Alf gone to seed. On their television set the lawyer and the judge from "Single Female Lawyer" kiss in the unisex bathroom.

"Could you repeat that last part?" the stenographer asks again. Then static fills the aliens' screen.

"This is an outrage," the male alien shouts. "I demand to know what happened to the plucky lawyer and her compellingly short garment."

The static disappears, and the Fox icon appears. An announcer states, "Due to technical difficulties, we now bring you eight animated shows in a row."

"Aargh," the alien spits. He lifts a laser and blasts the television. In the remainder of this episode of "*Futurama*," the aliens travel to earth and attack it, reproducing scenes of destruction identical to those in "*Independence Day*." They will stop their devastation only if earthlings show them how the 1000 year old television episode concluded. Accordingly, Fry and his friends stage a courtroom scene. The lawyer is to marry the judge, but the incompetent actors fail to follow the script. The result barely satisfies the aliens' need for narrative closure, but, after giving the performance a mediocre review, they leave earth.

This parody provides a perfect reduction of a whole genre and it clarifies a leitmotif in contemporary apocalyptic film, the tendency to link feminism with catastrophe. The cosmic shot in this episode of "*Futurama*" not only moves seamlessly from earth to space, it shifts directly from a focus on a professional woman and her sexuality to the aliens who will devastate earth. The shot joins her story to theirs. In this parody we have an almost explicit recognition that it is a crisis in the gender system that has produced the genre of 1990s apocalyptic films. If space threatens, it has something to do with a professional woman. The apocalypse comes about because of a single, female lawyer. Once upon a time, "heaven was a screen where signs appeared by which God premonished humankind. Disorderly activity in the heavens anticipated greater or lesser disorder on earth."¹⁰ Now disorder on earth leads to disorder in the heavens, at least in those heavens projected on Hollywood's screens.

Finally, let us look at a more subtle film, one that contests the same conventions "*Futurama*" parodies. Unlike more conventional films in this genre, *Contact* resists equating traffic with space with danger. In fact, it celebrates contact with space. It provides one the best magic carpet rides of all films and features other scenes glorifying the beauty of celestial events. In short, it affirms the apocalypse provided in the new vision of the universe provided by science. And, not coincidentally, it judges anti-feminism negatively rather than enacting it

uncritically or parodically. In this highly cerebral film, those who find space to be a threat are considered pinheads and bureaucrats. Religious fundamentalists—who are portrayed stereotypically—and national security hierarchies fear contact because it undermines their sources of authority, their claims to know what's real and what's not. They want to stop the apocalypse, even though it's a good thing, not a destructive one. Uniting forces, they repress the lead SETI scientist's experience of actual contact with aliens; the film culminates in an interrogation that combines motifs from the trials of Joan of Arc, Galileo, and Anita Hill.¹¹ Ellie Arroway, the scientist played by Jodie Foster, becomes a prophet who speaks truth to small-minded men and she pays a price. The apocalyptic, who gained an awesome perspective on the heavens, a wondrous message for humanity, is partially silenced, but by small-minded people, not the film itself.

And yet, there are two odd scenes that do not fit this generous interpretation. Ellie Arroway risks her life to travel a billion light years to the end of the universe only to land on a beach and have a chat with her Dad. It's not really her Dad, but he looks and talks like him and fits her memories of him perfectly. They hug on the beach. This scene echoes the one featured in *Deep Impact*. Evidently, at the end of time and space, a girl just wants her Dad. I leave this to the Lacanians to explain, but does it not seem out of place or forced in the film *Contact*?

Similarly puzzling is the scene immediately after the trial. Ellie, who has shown no interest whatsoever in teaching, is shown talking enthusiastically about space to a group of children near the radio telescopes in the desert. Why was this scene with children inserted? Does it show she is completing her own circle of life, passing on to the next generation the curiosity her father instilled in her? Or is she opening up to other human beings as the alien advised her to do? Or is she performing some court-mandated sentence of community service? The film leaves this unclear.

In any case, this scene, like so many others that punctuate this genre, functions to return a single, professional, and in this case romance-resistant woman to a traditional role. This may be why this particular film could not stop there but continued on to show the scientist by herself on the rim of Canyon de Chelley contemplating a handful of earth and the majesty of the night sky. That ending fit the spirit of the film more truly, and shows again that *Contact* itself does not conform perfectly to this genre or reproduce its conventions. It resists the anti-feminism that fuels the other films and distorts how they respond to space. *Contact* shows that mystery need not always give way to misogyny. Apocalypse need not always turn into catastrophe.

¹ See the definition of "apocalypse" provided by the SBL Genres group and quoted in Frances Flannery Dailey, "Bruce Willis as the Messiah," in this volume. I thank Flannery-Dailey for

calling this to my attention and sharing a copy of her article with me before its publication in the *Journal of Religion & Film*.

² Lynn Schofield Clark provided helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also want to thank my fellow panelists and the audience at November 1999 session of the AAR where I first presented these ideas.

³ Sagan, *Contact* (New York: Pocket Books, 1985), 341.

⁴ Eugene Weber, "Apocalypse Through History," *The Key Reporter*, Vol. 65, Number One (Autumn 1999), 7. See also Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁵ Gordon D. Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975) p. 56. My comparison is not perfect. In discussing the relativizing side, Kaufman stresses that God is "not subject to our direct investigation" (p.50). The universe is subject to investigation; among other things, scientists theorize its origins, mass, and rate of expansion. However, the point here is to deal with the images before us. It is these that imply infinity and invite awe. Finally, in suggesting this comparison, I may be partly influenced by Kaufman's subsequent work, which dwelt more on integrating scientific visions with theological construction.

⁶ G. Simon Harak, "One Nation, Under God: The Soteriology of SDI," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (Fall 1988); Ira Chernus, *Dr. Strangelove: On the Symbolic Meaning of Nuclear Weapons* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986); Caron Schwartz Ellis, "With Eyes Uplifted: Space Aliens as Sky Gods," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* eds. Joel Martin and Conrad Ostwalt, Jr. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995), 83-93.

⁷ ee Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), esp. pp. 1-16, 49-75.

⁸ Tamara Goeglein called this reversal to my attention.

⁹ Lisa Bellan-Boyer alerted me to this pattern.

¹⁰ Eugene Weber, "Apocalypse Through History," *The Key Reporter*, Vol. 65, Number One (Autumn 1999), 6.

¹¹ See Bryan P. Stone, "Religious Faith and Science in Contact," *Journal of Religion & Film* Vol. 2, No. 2 (1998).