Apocalyptic Dread, Kierkegaard, and the Cultural Landscape of the Millennium

A HUGE METEOR IS ON A COLLISION course with earth. A giant radioactive creature threatens Manhattan as Godzilla goes on a rampage. Volcanoes spew lava and huge tidal waves threaten cities. Outbreaks of the Ebola virus spread through the United States. The devil has come to town and it is the end of days. In the last decade of the twentieth century, a new cycle of Hollywood disaster movies from *Independence Day* to *Godzilla*, and from *Deep Impact* to *Volcano*, depicted crisis on a global scale. Survivalist groups began stockpiling supplies, businesses anxiously evaluated their computer systems in light of the Millennium (or Y2K) bug,[1] and unknown to the public, the Clinton administration arrested a series of individuals who had been plotting to blow up Los Angeles and New York in the "Millennium plot." As the marker of a new year, decade, and millennium drew closer, long-standing apocalyptic anxieties about the overdetermined year 2000 became evident in American popular culture, public policy, and journalism. This anxiety about the future and about the end of the world drew upon long-standing eschatological prophecies about Armageddon drawn from Revelations, Daniel, and other Christian and Jewish apocalyptic texts.

I will argue that these social anxieties, fears, and ambivalence about global catastrophe, which I call *apocalyptic dread*, took explicit narrative form in American cinema of the late nineties and continued into the first

years of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, this dread was a new manifestation of a long-standing American apocalyptic tradition. A blend of providential and messianic elements in Puritan Calvinism, this tradition first became apparent in the science-fiction cinema of the cold war, reemerged in the seventies with separate cycles of science-fiction and demonic films, gained further prominence under a turn to social conservatism under Reagan in the eighties, and reached a hysterical peak in the nineties in a cycle of horror, disaster, and science-fiction films explicitly focused on the approaching millennium. After 9/11, this dread took new forms with anxieties about the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism from within.

From the demonic dread in the family emblematized by the seventies' horror films *Carrie*, *The Omen*, and *The Exorcist*, to more recent science fiction like *Strange Days* and *End of Days*, in which the turn of the millennium became an explicit narrative focus, Hollywood repeatedly creates fantasies about the end of the world. Fredric Jameson suggests that science-fiction's affinity for the dystopian is symptomatic of the genre's "deepest vocation . . . to demonstrate and dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future," *and* that this failure of imagination is not individual but rather collective and ideological (246–7). Constance Penley suggests "we *can* imagine the future, but we *cannot* conceive the kind of collective political strategies necessary to change or ensure that future," and that, as a result, science-fiction films repeatedly replay resistance to alien invasions in the form of romanticized messiahs or small guerilla groups, rather than through systemic political change (64). Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska suggest that this failure of imagination leads to representations of "the present or future [that] are sometimes shaped in the mould of supernatural terrors from the past" and that bring "the millenial fear of Judgement Day into the hi-tech present." (53)

Although apocalyptic dread is most explicitly evident in the science-fiction and disaster films of the last decade (1995–2005), this dread permeates well beyond these traditional genres. An unexamined component of dread that my book seizes on can be found in nineties' cinema within the horror/crime hybrid. Unlike science fiction or the disaster film, the horror hybrid turns to the family under threat—not (merely) from asteroids, aliens, or replicants, but rather from the internal conflicts and traumas that my case studies explore. *Apocalyptic Dread* examines a particular and historically situated set of horror relations within the family, in both its past and present formations, and between the family and workplace, and family and society. In particular, I suggest that in the nineties, hybrid crime/horror films are consumed with apocalyptic dread, or a free-floating anxiety and ambivalence about the future that is displaced onto the specific

dread embodied by each film's monster, and that dramatizes a compulsive eschatological need to perceive and decode signs. This wider mood of dread pervades many genres, and the case studies that follow this chapter will include a melodrama-thriller (*Cape Fear*), a psychological horror film (*Candyman*), a melodrama (*Dolores Claiborne*), a serial-killer film (*Se7en*), a science-fiction thriller (*Signs*), and a science-fiction disaster film (*War of the Worlds*). In these case studies, a monstrous figure, the uncanny double of what the family has repressed, emerges and threatens apocalyptic vengeance because of the specific crimes for which the family are responsible. Produced by the repression of specific traumas, yet disavowed, these narrative monsters continue to repeat themselves as pathological symptoms, figured through the uncanny. These traumas are of rape (*Cape Fear*), lynching and miscegenation (*Candyman)*, domestic violence and incest (*Dolores Claiborne*), serial murder (*Se7en*), a husband's loss of his wife and faith (*Signs*), and paternal failure (*War of the Worlds)*. But apocalyptic dread's guiding tropes of cataclysmic violence, prophetic revelation, and radical transformation do not exhaust themselves in the familial narratives evident in my case studies; they also link the familial to the public sphere by pointing to broader historical fragmentation and change.

Through my readings of *Cape Fear* (Martin Scorsese, 1991*)*, *Candyman* (Bernard Rose, 1992), *Dolores Claiborne* (Taylor Hackford, 1995*)*, *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), *Sign*s (M. Night Shyamalan, 2002), and *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), I will consider the ways in which apocalyptic dread maps the demonic, the eschatological, and the uncanny across the family. I also use these films as indicators of how popular culture negotiates anxieties about the subject, family, and future at this point of historical transition. But before doing so, I want to take a closer look at apocalypticism as a religious, historical, and sociocultural fear formation, as well as at a particular subgenre or fear formation of apocalyptic dread that I call *millennial dread*, and that appeared in the last decade of the old millennium.

Apocalypse Now

Apocalyptic dread can be defined as that fear and anxiety about the future and about the anticipated end of the world. A transliteration of the Greek word *apokalypsi*s, apocalypse broadly means to "uncover or disclose." As Mick Broderick has observed, the apocalypse is commonly confused with doomsday, disaster, catastrophe, and terminus. These popular misconceptions overlook what Lois Parkinson Zamora calls the apocalypse's other dialectical meanings—those of revelation, triumph, order, and the millennium (qtd. in Broderick 252)—and it is these other connotations of

apocalypse that emerge as prominent components of apocalyptic dread's 1990s twin, *millennial dread*. They ultimately converge in the belief, visualized in many doomsday scenarios, that the average apocalypse isn't all bad—at the very least, it can teach us a lesson, so long as we're able to read the signs . . . In this sense, the millennial and the apocalyptic shall be discussed in close conjunction with one another.

Apocalyptic literature consists of those parts of the Bible and other Jewish and Christian books that embody an apocalypse, or revelation, given through a prophetic vision of the future.[2] Apocalyptic literature such as Ezekiel and Daniel in the Old Testament and the last book in the New Testament, Revelations, concerns itself with the end of world and the final confrontation between God and the powers of evil. In these narratives, the conflict frequently culminates in a world catastrophe, and with a messianic figure triumphing over evil.[3] Nineteenth-century American fundamentalism understood history as marked by discrete stages, between which there were abrupt transitions marked by violence, such as the expulsion from the Garden, the Flood, and so on (Strozier 9). Similarly the *eschatos*, or end of the world prophesized in Revelations also has discrete stages, with the Rapture (the time at which saved souls are suddenly lifted up to heaven), followed by the Time of Tribulation (the seven years when the Antichrist will rule over the world through an international body) and the battle of Armageddon (the Antichrist fights Christ on the Plains of Jezreel near modern-day Megiddo in Israel). All of them culminate in the Final Day of Judgment and the end of the world, when God triumphs over the Antichrist and rules for a thousand years. In this framework the apocalyptic encompasses the following meanings: the revelatory (prophecy), the destructive (cataclysm/disaster), the grandiose (wild predictions), and the climactic (decisive).

Millennialism refers to a specific form of eschatological belief that draws from Judeo-Christian apocalyptic literature and that understands that the end of the world has been both preordained by God and prophesied in the Bible. Its followers believe one must spiritually and psychologically prepare for it. As a specifically Protestant fundamentalist philosophy, premillennialism (also called dispensationialism) understands history in terms of the past (original sin, the first coming of Christ) *and* the future end-time (the Second Coming, the battle of Armageddon) before the day of Final Judgment. It understands time as measured from the birth of Christ and believes that the year 2000 (or 2001) is the beginning of the third millennium. American millennialism has deep roots in the belief systems of the Puritans who, through the sermons of Increase Mather and John Cotton, understood themselves as God's chosen people, establishing their New World settlements in anticipation of the Second

Coming. In Christopher Sharrett's terms, they understood the nation's future as "a divinely ordained historical destiny which, when violated or ignored, will cause a cataclysmic retribution" (221). Emerging from the Judeo-Christian apocalyptic tradition and Puritan Providentialism, millennialism was a more specific manifestation of a broader cultural context of dread, and as millennial dread awaited the overdetermined year 2000 in the last decade of the twentieth century.

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> What shall be the sign of your coming and the end of the world?
>
> —Matthew 24.3

As a consciousness of the end of the world, apocalyptic or millennial thinking reflects and depends upon *hermeneutics*, or the interpretation of signs to predict and prepare for the future. Repeatedly when disaster struck, eschatological thought understood political, social or physical disruption as portents of the beginning of the end of the world; the enormous devastation wrought by the bubonic plague in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and the threat of Islamic invasion in the sixteenth century prompted the return of these anxieties. Similarly, at the end of the second millennium, many fundamentalist, evangelical, or Pentecostal[4] groups interpreted geopolitical events (particularly war and unrest in the Middle East) as signs of the coming of the end of the world. Natural disasters (storms, floods, volcanic eruptions, global warming) and man-made crises (monetary collapses, scandals, coups, and revolutions) were the second staple source for eschatological interpretation.[5] As Charles Strozier's research into the psychology of American fundamentalism has demonstrated, its social appeal is closely linked to anxieties about global threats; he says, "I would argue that our historical moment is fraught with a new kind of dread, for we live with the real scientific possibility that either through nuclear warfare, or choking pollution, or vastly increased rates of disease, especially cancer, we could actually end human existence" (158). Biblical prophecy thus offers an overdetermined narrative in which political and cultural change, together with violence, crime, and natural disasters, is retrospectively understood within the comforting terms of God's plan.

In this way then, history is understood as a series of signs (or portents) of the end-time, which those who have been given the gifts of prophecy by God can decode. According to Hal Lindsay, author of *The*

Late, *Great Planet Earth* (1970), there will be seven signs signaling the
end-time: war, revolution, plague, famine, earthquake, religious decep-
tion, and "strange occurrences in space." The twentieth century has cer-
tainly seen no shortage of occurrences that, from a millenarian perspective,
fit into these seven sign groups. Political events from the formation of the
United Nations and the state of Israel (1948) to more recent battles in the
Middle East with the two Gulf Wars (1991, 2003) have been read as signs
of the coming of the Antichrist, who it is believed will appear in a time
of geopolitical chaos before the second coming of Christ. Religious au-
thors such as Lindsay, Pat Robertson (*The New World Order*), Salem Kirban
(*666 and 1000*), and Larry Burkett (*The Illuminati*) have offered them-
selves as hermeneutic prophets, connecting cryptic passages of apocalyp-
tic literature to contemporary events, and warning believers that the
end-time is at hand (Melling 88). Robertson's *New World Order* (1992),
which sold 500,000 copies on its release and spent weeks on the *New York
Times* best-seller list, was but a part of a commercial spike in sales of
prophecy literature, which together with popular sermons and calls to
religious hotlines reflected a belief that the first Gulf War was a fulfillment
of prophetic literature and a sign that the end-time approached.[6] This
fascination with overdetermined narratives, paranoid conspiracies, and
hermeneutic decoding continues with the enormous financial success of
a more recent novel, Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), which is now
a Hollywood movie (Ron Howard, 2006). After all, as Peter and Paul
Lalonde suggest in *The Mark of the Beast*, "If you're not paranoid, it's
because you're not paying close enough attention to the imminence of
evil in the last days" (qtd. in Melling 91). For fundamentalist Christians,
September 11, 2001, seemed to augur the end of days, and sales of proph-
ecy literature increased by 71% in the weeks immediately following the
disaster, including huge sales for the apocalyptic Left Behind series, whose
authors, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, had already displaced John
Grisham as the top adult-fiction writers of the nineties.[7] But again, the
reason these apocalyptic fantasies emerged was not that they filled a vacuum
left by world history. They have supplemented—and consistently alluded
to or explicitly drawn on—the real-life history of the world, peppered as
it is with all kinds of disasters and apocalyptic moments.

Historical Context of Apocalyptic Dread

Rupturing the first half of the twentieth century, the two World Wars and
the Holocaust were cataclysmic events; indeed as Nancy Ammerman has
noted, World War I prompted an increase in interest in all things apoca-
lyptic, giving rise to three international prophecy conferences between

1914 and 1918 (77). The Second World War and especially the Holocaust have also been described as "the revelatory, traumatic, apocalyptic fulcrum of the twentieth century" (Berger 391). After 1945, decolonization in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific began, as the world divided into two poles during the cold war, and in the United States rising paranoia about Communism and fears about atomic power and the H-bomb took displaced form in the invasion narratives of science-fiction cinema. In the second half of the century, the battle for civil rights in the United States intensified, and American cities began to burn after the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. In the seventies the trauma of Watergate and the Vietnam War, together with the energy crisis and recession, split the country and gave rise to a culture of paranoia that was acted out on television, in tabloids, and on movie screens.[8]

In response to rapid sociocultural changes over the last forty years, an increased cultural conservatism and (re)turn to fundamentalist religions (which could be termed another "New Awakening" in American history) has become increasingly prominent, and is a key dimension of what I call apocalyptic dread. In 1976, which *Time* declared to be "The Year of the Evangelical," Jimmy Carter became the first Southern Baptist to be elected president, and three years later Jerry Falwell formed the Moral Majority. Although membership in mainline churches has fallen in the last thirty years, membership in fundamentalist and evangelical churches (Jehovah's Witnesses, Church of God in Christ, and Assemblies of God, among others) continued to grow exponentially through the eighties and nineties. Anxieties about the changing role of women in the wake of the feminist movement of the seventies, and about the gay-rights movement after Stonewall, led to conservative political campaigns that decried sexual promiscuity, pornography, any form of birth control, premarital sex, and public "immorality." By the eighties, Christian conservatism was now flexing its political muscle as a voting bloc. Under Reagan it became an increasingly important part of the Republican base, with the political wing of the conservative movement led by organizations like Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, James Dobson's Focus on the Family, Ralph Reed's Christian Coalition, and Gary Bauer's American Values. A "religion gap" or political difference in voting patterns between the secular and the faithful first became evident with Nixon's election in 1972. This gap widened under Reagan and both Bushes and largely favored the Republican Party, which has attracted the fundamentalist religious voter (with certain exceptions) (Page 2004). Today it is estimated that there are more than 60 million born-again Christians (Hendershot 177).

In 1992 at the Republican National Convention, Pat Buchanan's keynote address decried social changes relating to sexuality, the family,

and society, declaring that America was now in a "culture war" over social values. Divorce rates of 50%, the rise of single-parent families, extended family parenting, and gay civil partnerships and adoptions are all examples of challenges to traditional notions of the nuclear family. In fact, the conventional understanding of the nuclear family as consisting of a male breadwinner, female homemaker, and several children is based on a historical model of relatively brief duration, beginning in the 1920s and reaching its highpoint in the 1950s (Mintz 352–62). In the 1980s, the reassertion of "family values" as a political slogan by the Republican Party was a marker of conservative anxiety about these social changes. The principal targets of this conservative reaction were feminists, liberals, and homosexuals. In 1989, Jerry Falwell claimed that American society was corrupted from within by an unholy trinity of Communists, feminists, and homosexuals. From Pat Robertson's prediction in 1998 that a meteor and tornadoes would destroy Orlando and Disneyland for holding an unofficial "Gay Day," to Stan Craig, a pastor at the Choice Hills Baptist Church in Greenville, South Carolina, who described gays "as a stench in the nostrils of God," incremental victories in gay civil rights have mobilized increased right-wing political and social activism. Much of the language of opposition of the religious Right was expressed in apocalyptic terms, as when Robertson made a series of prophecies on May 27, 1998, on *The 700 Club*, the Christian Broadcasting Network talk show, in which he urged, "I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you." Robertson also warned that the widespread practice of homosexuality "will bring about terrorist bombs, it'll bring earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor" and that his warning "is not a message of hate. This is a message of redemption" (Robertson, *700 Club*). Indeed, after the fall of Communism in 1991 and the rise of "postfeminism," it became the third leg of Falwell's unholy triad—homosexuals—who increasingly bore the burden of millennial meaning. More recently, Stephen Bennett, an evangelical writer for the American Family Association, described May 17, 2004, when gay same-sex marriage licenses began to be issued in Massachusetts, in telling terms as "the day the earth stood still." Speaking in characteristically apocalyptic terms, he said America was "a nation awaiting the Almighty's response. We know the days are short and evil, so let us redeem the time doing what we were called to do—winning the lost to Christ."

With the election of George W. Bush, whose political father is the culturally conservative Ronald Reagan rather than the former president George H. W. Bush (1988–92), the relationship between Christian conservatives and the Republican Party became ever closer. Continuing

Reagan's focus on social values, and taking up a phrase by the equally conservative pope John Paul II (1978–2005), the Christian wing of the Republican Party argued that their policies were part of a "culture of life." Policy struggles between the Republican administration, the judiciary, and local and state governments were central in debates about abortion, stem cell technology, gay marriage (in 2004), and euthanasia and medical technology in end-of-life issues, the latter foregrounded in 2005 by the Terri Schiavo case.[9] Echoing the Scopes trial of 1925, battles over the teaching of evolution in schools returned through the late nineties in local school-board elections in Ohio, Oklahoma, and Kansas, as conservative Christian groups were increasingly successful in arguing that so-called intelligent design (a fictive cover for creationism) should be given equal time with evolution in science classrooms.[10] Most recently, Christian conservative activism has even led to a dozen IMAX theaters in the South (a number of which were in science museums) refusing to show the film *Volcanoes* in 2005, because of its brief references to evolution.[11] The defeat of John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election and the public debate over exit polls, in which self-identified "morals" voters referred to social issues as a compelling factor in their election of George W. Bush continue to foreground the social significance of the close alliance between the religious Right and the Republican Party.

In this sense, those who were puzzled by Bush's victory, and in their minds kept going over the previous six months in search of early signs of their own doomsday, may want to consider that the writing was, in fact, on the wall by April 2004. However, the proverbial wall that is of interest here is not the primaries or any state or national poll, but the American movie box-office. Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, an eschatological tale of the first order, had by then become the box-office sensation of the year. But the film's gargantuan success was hardly due to any crossover appeal—quite the opposite. The movie, whose dark sectarian revisionism fueled its violent spectacle to brutalizing effect, would surely have withered on the vine, had it not been for the droves of religious fundamentalists who worshiped at this movie's altar. Meanwhile, evangelical Christian–produced media broke out of its market niche and began to influence popular culture and mainstream thinking. In the seventies, evangelical cinema like Donald W. Thompson's prophecy series *A Thief in the Night* (1972), *Distant Thunder* (1978), *Image of the Beast* (1981), and *The Prodigal Planet* (1983) were produced and distributed on 16 mm to a specialty market of church audiences. By the turn of the new millennium, evangelical cinema adopted a new approach, using stars and high production values in *The Omega Code* (Robert Marcarelli, 1999) and its sequel *Megiddo: The Omega Code 2* (Brian Trenchard-Smith, 2001). Funded by

the Trinity Broadcasting Network, these films became the first evangelically produced films to receive a wide theatrical release to general audiences. As part of their strategy of mainstream appeal, they appropriated the generic conventions of the horror, science-fiction, and Hollywood action blockbuster, blending them with an apocalyptic narrative.[12] *The Omega Code* and its sequel integrated conservative and isolationist anxieties about the United Nations into narratives by showing the Antichrist character, Stone Alexander (Michael York), becoming a political leader of a UN-like body. Just as Damien Thorn's global corporation provided political cover for his secret identity as the Antichrist in *Omen 3: The Final Conflict* (Graham Baker, 1981), so *The Omega Code*'s narrative fictionalized contemporary geopolitical events in the Middle East and reflected conservative hostility to the United Nations, by depicting it as instrumental to the rule of the Antichrist. In fact, *The Omega Code* suggests that the Antichrist *is* the United Nations, and not only threatens American sovereignty, but—literally—signifies the end of the world.

Heather Hendershot's important recent study *Shaking the World for Jesus* traces the enormous productivity of the evangelical media industry, which in recent decades has expanded its market, selling everything from Christian rock music to rapture videos and feature films (179–80). Religious broadcasting on television and radio have also increased, as have sales of religious paraphernalia (from $1 billion in 1980 to $4 billion in 1996). From book publishing to direct-to-video productions, religious media is a multimillion-dollar industry (Shorto 60–61). Shrewdly adopting mainstream genres and aesthetic conventions, whether in publishing, cinema, videos, or rock music, Christian media's representational strategies made Jesus the new action hero. Timothy Weber, president of the Memphis Theological Seminary, explained the enormous commercial popularity of the Left Behind apocalyptic fiction series (which has since been adapted to film) in these terms: "The culture war fits into the premillennialists' expectation of the end of history—the decline of civilization, the breakdown of morality, a general breakdown of order. The warrior Jesus returns to set everything right again" (qtd. in Kirkpatrick, "Return" A6). The commercial success of apocalyptic literature and films were echoed in the enormous grosses of *The Passion of the Christ*, which led ABC to broadcast a previously shelved film, *Judas*, in March 2004, and it has already led Hollywood to reevaluate theological themes as an important untapped market (Waxman, "Hollywood" B5). The release of C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Andrew Adamson, 2005), together with accompanying Christian and secular soundtracks, continues this trend. Unsurprisingly, Mel Gibson's new film *Apocalypto* (2006) frames its story of Mayan decline in eschatological

terms. More recently, Hollywood has hired "faith and family" consultants to examine scripts for objectionable content and to assist in promoting their films to Christian markets; and Sony studios has now partnered with the Christian production company Cloud Ten to make the third installment of the Left Behind series (Waxman, "Passion of the Marketers" C3). In the same way that Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* blended horror conventions with Christian eschatology, LaHaye and Jenkin's novel *Glorious Appearing* described Jesus's triumphant and violent second coming as if it were a version of *Dawn of the Dead*: "Men and women soldiers and horses seemed to explode where they stood. It was as if the very words of the Lord had superheated their blood, causing it to burst through their veins and skin. Even as they struggled, their own flesh dissolved, their eyes melted and their tongues disintegrated" (Kirkpatrick, "Return" A1).

Just as Christian media has appropriated the generic conventions of horror, the action film, and science fiction, so Hollywood has found itself turning to theological subject matter, and this reorientation also underscores the generic hybridity of apocalyptic dread. Beginning in the eighties, the increased political power of Christian conservatism in the Republican Party, together with the increasingly high-profile debate over the "culture wars," "family values," and the "culture of life" began to infiltrate commercial American cinema. It is worth taking a closer look at some of the ways in which Christian millennialism and apocalyptic eschatology have become prominent themes in Hollywood films.

Apocalypticism and Cinema

Apocalypticism has long had a close connection to the science-fiction genre, for both are concerned with a fantasy about the future and a dread that the world will end. Early films taking such theories ranged from *The Comet* (1916) and *End of the World* (1916) to *Metropolis* (1926) and *Things to Come* (1936). Scholars from Kim Newman to Sean Cubitt have suggested that in science-fiction films of the fifties, fears of the cold war and Communism became displaced into narratives about public invasion and private contamination. Classic invasion narratives such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), and *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) constructed visions about malevolent invaders from outer space descending on American cities, while *I Married a Communist* (1950), *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956), and *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* (1958) singled out the family as the main target. The cycle took a realist turn with the apocalyptic fear of nuclear annihilation in *On the Beach* (1959), *Fail-Safe* (1964), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), and *Crack in the World* (1965). In the seventies, low-budget exploitation films like *No Blade*

of Grass (1970), *Ultimate Warrior* (1975), and *Death Race 2000* (1975), and higher-budget films like Franklin J. Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (1968–73) and George Miller's *Mad Max* (1980–85) series continued the dystopian postapocalyptic cycle, even influencing the western (the protagonist of *High Plains Drifter* [1973], turns out literally to be the devil). (Broderick 269). In the eighties under the Reagan administration, which itself merged public policy and science fiction in its Strategic Defense Initiative (Star Wars), the science-fiction genre returned with commercial profligacy. Increasingly sophisticated computer-generated imagery (CGI) enabled new spectacles in the extraterrestrial or supernatural subgenres, from *Star Wars* (1977) to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), *Poltergeist* (1982), *E.T.* (1982), and the sequel-fertile ur-narratives, Ridley Scott's *Alien* (1979) and James Cameron's *The Terminator* (1984). Not a few of them had millennial components or undertones.

The nineties saw an explosion of apocalyptic dread as Hollywood used fears about the year 2000 as fodder for its story lines, commodifying contemporary anxieties about global warming and climate change into quasi-plausible doomsday plots, with a cycle of disaster movies that continues into the more recent era with *The Core* (2003) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). Whereas the disaster cycle of the seventies had a rather localized focus on individual ships, buildings, or cities—consider *Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *Earthquake* (1974), and *The Towering Inferno* (1974)—disaster movies of the nineties were global in scope. Developments in special effects enabled new visual spectacles and obviated expensive location shooting and casts of thousands in *Twister* (1996), *Independence Day* (1996), *Volcano* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Armageddon* (1998).

Further, this cycle included films that blended action, disaster, and horror genres with an explicit or implicit dystopian narrative focus on the end of the world and/or the approach of the year 2000, bringing what Geoff King calls "the millennial fear of Judgment Day into the high-tech present." They were typified by *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1991), *Nostradamus* (1994), *Strange Days* (1995), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *The Prophecy* (1995), *End of Days* (1999), and *The Matrix* (1999) (King and Krzywinska 53). In fact, the disaster movie had never entirely gone away; twenty-five disaster movies appeared throughout the eighties. But in the nineties fifty-six disaster movies were released, with fourteen films released in the peak year 1997 (Keane 73). In the post–cold war era, nuclear weaponry had renewed purpose, and in disaster films like *Armageddon* protected us against giant comets or asteroids plummeting to earth, or was a shield against terrorist states or individuals on earth.

Beginning in the late sixties and accelerating in the eighties, Hollywood studios, network stations, and cable television became divisions of

global media conglomerates like General Electric, Viacom, Matsushita, News Corp, and AOL TimeWarner. In the mid-nineties, the magazine divisions of conglomerates like TimeWarner began to target a perceived rise in readers' socially conservative values and religious interests, and it devoted cover issues to themes relating to religion, God, heaven, and spirituality.[13] In part reflecting the increasing cultural conservatism of the recent era and the conservative commercial imperatives of their conglomerate parent companies, Hollywood's second major cinematic cycle took an explicitly theological turn, with stories about messianic figures, angels, ghosts, or devils.[14] From *Stigmata* (1999), with its high production values and the presence of stars, to the low-budget *Eye of God* (Tim Blake Nelson, 1997) and *The Eighteenth Angel* (William Bindley, 1997), Manichaean oppositions of good and evil had renewed character functions in hybrid genres that blended the supernatural, theological, and quasi-scientific (Fowkes; Martin and Ostwalt; Lyden). Geoff King has shown how films like *Demon Seed* and TV shows such as *The X-Files* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* recycled medieval notions of the demonic or supernatural, using technology to explain the resurrection of vampires and demons, as they came to haunt contemporary settings.[15] Hollywood's turn to the Bible for inspiration fetishized the theological as narratively exotic, using the devil and the diabolical as a compelling and seductive spectacle in *The Devil's Advocate* (1997), *Fallen* (1998), *End of Days* (1999), and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005). Television shows also capitalized on stories with supernatural and, more specifically, theological narrative components.[16] The NBC miniseries *Revelations* (2005) featured Natasha McElhone as a nun investigating signs of the end of days, and debating faith with the scientist Bill Pullman. *Revelations* is one of the most explicit ways in which apocalyptic dread continues to pervade American culture, five years after the turn of the millennium. As Kevin Rafferty, the president for entertainment of NBC who gave the green light to *Revelations* and *Medium*, observed recently, "In the tumultuous times we live in, apocalyptic theory and big existential questions tend to be on the rise" (qtd. in Poniewozik 56).

    Fusing apocalyptic themes with the disaster and science-fiction genres, the demonic cycle of the late nineties epitomized by *End of Days* was closely connected to the theological cycle, if not a subgenre of it, but also drew from a similar cycle in the seventies, in which key films like *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), *Carrie* (Brian DePalma, 1976), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), and the *Omen* (sequels 1976–91, remake 2006), brought together evil and horror in the family in the form of a child possessed by the devil.[17] Whether possessing the firstborn or only child (*The Omen*, *The Exorcist*, *The Good Son*, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*), or the home itself (*Amityville Horror*, *Poltergeist*), the devil was the new

dramatis persona.[18] Initiating this cycle, *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) suggested that the principal site of threat was the family and the home. These demonic figures represented threats to social and institutional normality figured through the state, church, and family, and these films' narratives of struggle with the devil offered clarity and meaning in social contexts of chaos and uncertainty. As Paul Wells has noted, "The horror film in the post-*Psycho* era has also seen the symptomatic collapse of assurance in, and promotion of, the family and conservative family values. Children, once the epitome of innocence, become configured as the monster, partly to illustrate the proliferation of evil as a natural phenomenon" (85).

Related to the demonic cycle were those films which featured children or young adolescents with strange psychic or telekinetic powers, such as *Carrie* (Brian DePalma, 1976), *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), and *The Fury* (Brian DePalma, 1978), or children who have a special relationship with the extraterrestrial or supernatural, as we will see in *Signs*, as well as *The Sixth Sense* (M. Night Shyamalan, 1999) and *The Children of the Corn* cycle (1984–2004). Because these supernaturally gifted adolescents were often abused, usually by a monstrous parent, as in *The Shining* (1980) and *Carrie* (1976), this cycle also suggested that horror's threat was no longer just external but could be *internally* located in the family. For example, in *Carrie* the eponymous heroine is provoked into acts of homicidal rage after the repeated abuses of her repressive mother and sadistic classmates. Carrie's mother is a fanatical Christian who has repressed her own sexuality since the "sin" of her daughter's conception. In this way, demonic vengeance transformed tales of teenage angst about sexuality, desire, and the transition to adulthood into domestic melodramas, and suggested that violent horror was the consequence of psychosexual repression. As Paul Wells suggests, "domestic space had become the locality for the worst of horror" (17) and as Robin Wood has shown, horror became specifically American and familial ("Hollywood" 87). Whether in the form of the psychotic father of *The Shining* or the diabolical children of *The Exorcist* and *The Good Son*, the relationship between normality and monstrosity was profoundly unsettled. These tales of demonic children dramatized a personalized and familial evil, and they did so through parables with a theological trajectory and an eschatological outcome; that is, horror not only threatened the family from within, but also was preordained to triumph over it.

The demonic horror cycle also adopted an eschatological trajectory, linking the diabolical to prophecies about the end of the world. As the prologue to *The Omen* ominously suggests, "Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast, for it is the

number of a man, and his number is 666" (Rev. RSV 13, 16). The child Damian Thorn is the Antichrist foretold in Revelations. In a sequel, *The Final Conflict* (1981), a now adult Damian muses in exasperation, "[O]ne thing these pedantic Christians believe in is sticking to the letter of their prophecies." As I have suggested, eschatological prophecy is a central component of apocalyptic dread, in which the interpretation of signs becomes a central narrative issue. The nineties' cycle of diabolical horror fuses the emphasis of seventies' horror on the interpretation of signs with the apocalyptic dread of the fin-de-siècle. In *End of Days* (Peter Hyams, 1999), the devil (Gabriel Byrne) has just a few days before the turn of the new millennium to find a young woman, Christine, who is destined to be his bride. Based on a celestial alignment calculated by Gregorian monks, the last hour of the old millennium has been prophesied as the time "when a thousand years have ended, [and] Satan shall be loosed from his prison," and if the consummation occurs, Satan will triumph and the end of days begin. Alluding to *The Omen*, a priest (Rod Steiger) rejects the common understanding that 666 is the mark of the beast, claiming that it is really its mirror image, or 999, and thus refers to 1999, or the eve of the millennium. Merging the action conventions of *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* and other key films in Arnold Schwarzenegger's career, the final conflict between the devil and Jericho (Schwarzenegger) requires extensive shoot-outs and an arsenal of heavy weaponry. As with *Terminator 2*, Arnold must rescue a young woman from her murderous attacker in order to prevent the end of the world. However, as the pope intones at the beginning of the story, "the prophecy calls for faith," and it is ultimately the restoration of Jericho's faith (which he had lost because his wife and daughter had been murdered) rather than his heavy weaponry that enables him to sacrifice his life and triumph over the devil.

This issue of sacrifice and the importance of faith as a weapon is shared by an earlier film: *The Seventh Sign* (Carl Schultz, 1988), a thriller-horror about the Second Coming and the fulfillment of Revelations. In it many natural disasters—from hailstorms to solar eclipses and seas full of dead fish—are signs of the *eschatos*. Demi Moore plays Abby, a pregnant woman who becomes convinced that a strange man named David who boards with her is determined to kill her unborn baby. A biblical prophecy found in the book of Joel describes seven signs that prefigure the end of the world. A mixture of Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, the story is centrally concerned with the interpretation of seven seals, which reveal the imminence of the world's end. The narrative also alludes to the notion of the Guf, described in the Talmud as the place where unborn souls first stay in heaven, and which when empty becomes the seventh and final sign that the world will end. Ultimately, in order to save

her unborn child, Abby sacrifices her own life, and breaks the cycle of signs that is leading to the apocalypse. Here Abby becomes a Christological savior figure whose sacrifice saves the world again, but unlike the original Christian story, Abby's identity as a mother is central to her messianic function. Like *The Forgotten* (Joseph Cohen, 2004), in which a mother's primal bond with her son triumphs over a strange alien experiment, *The Seventh Sign* reveals many of the key tropes of apocalyptic dread in the last decade: the importance of prophecy and the decoding of signs; the role of political and natural disasters as signs of the *eschatos*; the fearful anticipation of the future and the turn to faith as a defense; and finally, the narrative centrality of the family in the ultimate conflict between good and evil.

These dimensions are further echoed in *Stigmata* (Rupert Wainwright, 1999), which like *End of Days* stars Gabriel Byrne, this time playing Andrew Kiernan, a scientist-priest who "has not prayed for a very long time" and whose job is to investigate apparent miracles on behalf of a division of the Vatican called the Congregation of the Causes of the Saints. Kiernan becomes involved in the case of a young atheist named Frankie Page (Patricia Arquette), who has developed inexplicable stigmatic bleeding and who suffers from supernatural scourging. Puzzled by Frankie's atheism, because, in his words, stigmatics are deeply religious people "with no exceptions," Frankie's supernatural powers and visions ultimately restore Kiernan's faith. The film borrows liberally from *The Exorcist* in its scenes of physical possession and levitation, and replays the crisis of faith faced by Father Damien Karras in *The Exorcist*. Not unlike the *DaVinci Code*, *Stigmata* is also a conspiracy thriller with the Vatican deeply invested in preventing the publication of a long lost Gospel scroll, the Gospel of Thomas, which purports to reveal Christ's own words. Like a similar Vatican group in *End of Days* who try to kill Christine, the Congregation is determined to kill Frankie in order to keep the Gospel from the public. Thus, in *End of Days*, *Stigmata*, and *The Seventh Sign*, we see the return of the demonic cycle from 1988–99, foregrounding female characters whose bodies are central to theological prophecy. Whether through pregnancy, motherhood, or masochistic suffering, these women restore the faith of male characters, in order to save the world for Christianity.

These films suggest that the nineties only intensified a trend which began over the preceding thirty years, in which the family became front and center in the horror genre, and in which social anxieties about change become figured through narratives in which the family was under attack, whether from monsters, aliens, or diabolical children. As the century clicked over from 1999 to 2000 (or 2001), the new millennium was greeted variously, with theological fervor, social apprehension, or bored indiffer-

ence. Although the transition into the new century passed uneventfully, since 9/11 dread and fear have regained prominence in the public sphere and become politically instrumental tools for a messianic Bush administration.[19] With American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the creation of the Department of Homeland Security, aggressive public surveillance, and the open-ended nature of the administration's war on terror, public dread about future occurrences of terror became so pronounced that the government had to construct a color coding alert system in order to quantify and manage dread; that is to say, dread was both politically instrumental and potentially chaotic. In the next section, I suggest that the anxieties and ambivalences attached to the family and the tensions and social conflicts that transform it from without and within manifest themselves in a form of dread that emerged in the nineteenth century as a product of particular sociocultural and philosophical factors. In order to understand these formations and the dread that they produced, I now turn to the work of the man who first conceptualized and explained them, taking up the concept of dread from philosopher often overlooked in film studies: Søren Kierkegaard.[20]

Kierkegaard and Dread

> The indefiniteness of what we dread is not just lack of definition: it represents the essential impossibility of defining the "what." This withdrawal of what-is-in-totality, which then crowds around us in dread, this is what oppresses us.
>
> —Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" Lecture (1929)

> Therefore I must point out that it is altogether different from fear and similar concepts that refer to something definite, whereas anxiety [dread] is freedom's actuality as the possibility of possibility.
>
> —Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*

Kierkegaard's philosophy emerged from the Enlightenment turn to parliamentary democracy and (since the Renaissance) the de-privileging of theology in an increasingly secular world. Often described as the first existentialist, Kierkegaard understood individual existence as the primary ground for knowledge and, following Descartes, understood truth as subjectivity. His assault on traditional Western philosophy (and specifically that of Plato and Hegel) and on the religious complacency that arose from centuries of established Christianity led to a new form of philosophy that understood that reality was subjective and that only through radical,

self-conscious choice could an authentic, ethical (and ultimately Christian) existence be reached. My turn to Kierkegaard is partly prompted by the contradictions presented by a secular, modern, knowledge-based society in which millennial and apocalyptic beliefs not only have a continuing presence in American culture, but indeed have proliferated in recent decades. Anxiety about the future and about the radical implications of free will in contemporary society lead us to Kierkegaard, because his theorizations about the paradoxical and ambivalent dimensions of anxiety (dread) suggest that the implications of knowledge and freedom of choice are not just liberating, but also deeply terrifying.

Colloquial meanings of dread refer usually to (a) a great fear, especially in the face of impending evil, or (b) extreme uneasiness in the face of a disagreeable prospect; a third, more archaic meaning suggests something causing awe or fear. By contrast, rather than being a straightforward fear *of* something, Kierkegaardian dread differs from fear in that its object is indeterminate. It has three principal components, which we shall look at in turn: first, radical freedom (or the moral dread occasioned by absolute choice), which gives rise to a fear of the future and which is mediated by past actions; second, a paradoxical ambivalence that is connected to the uncanny; and third, a connection to the cataclysmic qualities of trauma.

❧

> When we consider the dialectical determinations of anxiety, it appears that exactly these have psychological ambivalence. Anxiety (dread) is a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy.
>
> —Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*

In *Fear and Trembling* (1843) and *The Concept of Dread* (1844), Kierkegaard understood dread (or more accurately translated, "anxiety/anguish") as the epistemological condition of existence, defining it as a "sympathetic antipathy or antipathetic sympathy" or the state in which "we desire what we fear, but fear what we desire" (*Concept of Dread* 38); that is, it is a paradoxical form of desire *and* fear. We love our desire, and our desire prompts dread, so in a sense we also desire our dread. Because Kierkegaard's understanding of dread was paradoxical, I see important linkages to the ambivalent dimensions of horror spectatorship. I use "dread" firstly to suggest the ways in which my case studies foreground the paradoxical qualities of attraction and repulsion—to a monster, to a fear, to an urban legend. These qualities are a significant, yet undertheorized, experiential and intellectual dimension of horror spectatorship. Consequently, I suggest that cinematic dread is pro-

foundly ambivalent and is about the conflicting desire to know and yet not know, to see and yet want to look away.

Dread, Radical Freedom, and the Future

> When it is assumed that the prohibition awakens the desire, one acquires knowledge instead of ignorance, and in that case Adam must have had a knowledge of freedom, because the desire was to use it. The prohibition induces in him anxiety, for the prohibition awakens in him freedom's possibility.
>
> —Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*

Because the subject lives between possibility and the next possibility, subjectivity is essentially temporal. For Augustine, "we fear to fear" but cannot do otherwise, because in Kierkegaard's words "anxiety is always anxiety about one's self" (qtd. in Anz 47). As part of this notion of radical freedom, Kierkegaard also understood dread to be an expression of the *consciousness of the future*; as Sartre would say, "I await myself in the future. Anguish is the fear of not finding myself there." In *The Concept of Dread*, Kierkegaard writes that "anxiety [dread] is about tomorrow," because the future is fraught with possibility (80). For Kierkegaard, human beings face a future that is a tabula rasa of unknown choices, and yet at the same time always already mediated by Adam's original sin. In this sense, and like trauma, dread is open-ended, yet historically mediated by what has *already happened*.

Kierkegaard argues that dread resides in absolute "freedom," that is, in an invocation of existential choice that is *not* related to fear, but rather to the radical embrace of *possibility* as a necessary and intimate part of one's own existence, and therefore as terrifying and tempting as a yawning abyss. Consequently, dread is rooted in the *voluntary* nature of one's freedom—whether to sin, to kill oneself, or to kill others—and to the intense and ambivalent feelings that are aroused by that radical freedom. Kierkegaard tells us the story of Adam, whom God warns not to eat the apple hanging on the Tree of Knowledge. Adam dreads this freedom, which is not the eating of the apple per se, but rather the *possibility* to do so that is produced by the taboo. For as soon as God announces his prohibition, he awakens in Adam the possibility of the prohibition's transgression, and so prohibition prompts desire (cf. Romans 7:7 RSV "I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said 'You shall not covet.'"). When Adam then takes an apple from the tree and eats it, he breaks God's prohibition and commits the first (original) sin. For Kierkegaard, Adam's dread (absolute freedom) and Adam's sin (eating of

the Tree of Knowledge) were identical, and therefore dread is *the ground of all knowledge*, because Adam's voluntary act implies an understanding of the epistemological nature of his choice.

Before Adam's sin, man is in what Kierkegaard calls "a dreaming state" (38). In this state of innocence, dread was a dread of "nothing," of mere possibility. Then after original sin's transgression, the nothing of dread becomes a fear of something (objective dread). After the Fall, there are two kinds of sinners: those who dread the good and those who dread sin. Yet hidden in each is a desire for the other; that is to say, hidden in the dread of sin, is a desire to sin, and hidden in the dread of good is a desire for the good. Further, the form in which dread is encountered is determined by culture, and for Kierkegaard sensuousness or sexuality becomes associated with sin as the object of dread.[21] We are always condemned to choose (like Adam before the tree) and the burden of that radical freedom is the production and magnification of dread. As a result, dread plays a key role in producing a consciousness of sin, and by extension makes possible the role of faith. Without absolute freedom, there is no dread, and without sin, there can be no faith. Despair or "the sickness unto death" is the flight from radical freedom, or the resistance or unwillingness to exercise this choice. At the same time, radical freedom fills one with horror and makes one tremble, because the future stretches before one, completely unwritten and absolutely dependant on one's own choices, which is what I will later call *moral dread*. Dread's ambivalent admixture of desire and fear—whether to see, to know, or to choose—produces a vertiginous effect, which Kierkegaard likens to the dizziness we feel when we approach a precipice and are consumed with the irrational impulse to jump off it: "One may liken dread to dizziness. He whose eye chances to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy" (*Concept of Dread* 55). This vertiginous impulse bears remarkable similarities to some of the things that Edgar Allan Poe explores. He writes in his short story "The Imp of the Perverse,"

> But out of this our cloud on the precipice's edge, there grows into palpability a shape far more terrible than any Genius or any Demon of a tale. And yet it is but a Thought, although one which chills the very marrow of our bones with the fierceness of the delight of its horror. It is merely the idea of what would be our sensations during the sweeping precipitancy of a fall from such a height. And this fall—this rushing annihilation—for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome to all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination—for this very cause do we now the most impetuously desire it. And because our reason most strenuously deters us from the brink, therefore do we the more unhesitatingly approach it.

In the story the narrator speaks of having committed the perfect crime. Triumphantly delighted in getting away with his crime, suddenly the very fact of his unsuspected guilt gives rise to an irresistible urge for the narrator to confess. Poe likens this to peering over a precipice. Tormented by the impulse to confess, and by the knowledge that only he has the absolute freedom to do so, Poe's narrator eventually does confess. If he had not confessed he would never have been punished, but the thought of confessing produces such a powerful urge to reveal his secret guilt that the narrator is impelled to do so and ultimately does condemn himself by his own words. Radical freedom (to confess, to jump) always produces a concomitant dread, which is a compelling mixture of attraction *and* repulsion, of desire *and* revulsion, for in Kierkegaard's words "it alarms and fascinates us with its sweet anxiety" (*Concept of Dread* 55).

Dread is also connected to a presentiment about the future, or an inchoate feeling that the future is in some way foreordained; it is "a certain presentiment [*anelse*][that] seems to precede everything that is to happen, but just as it can have a strong determining effect, it can also bring a person to think that he is as it were predestined" (Kierkegaard, *Journals*, 1, 38). Kierkegaard insisted that even though we have a predisposition to sin, we nonetheless always have a (terrifying) choice. In other words, the anxiety produced by radical freedom in which our future depends only on our own choices and actions can also produce a compensatory response of predetermination, a feeling that the future is not frighteningly open after all, but reassuringly preordained by God. In a similar way, I will use apocalyptic dread to refer to that fear of the future that past events always already mediate, and that defends against existential dread (or the fear of freedom) with a compulsive desire for prophetic signs. Thus far we have discussed two key elements in Kierkegaardian dread: (1) the radical freedom of choosing or not choosing, and (2) the fear of the future. These elements are also operative in another theoretical paradigm of anxiety to whose connections with dread I will now turn.

Dread's Link with the Uncanny

> Anxiety is when, in this frame, something appears that was already there, much closer to the house, the *heim*: the host.
>
> —Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in The Modern Unhomely*

Freud understood the uncanny as "that which arouses dread and horror," or "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old