

TRTR6002: RELIGION IN FILM

Apocalypse in Film

As an event found in religious writing, an apocalypse is, strictly speaking, a revelation. Usually, apocalyptic writing follows a similar pattern. It describes a final battle between good and evil where a period of destruction precedes the establishment of a utopia, or a new creation. However, its purpose is not primarily to warn the faithful of future, eschatological events. Instead, apocalyptic is thought to have been written while believers suffered persecution in order to encourage them to remain faithful, to endure until the end. Apocalyptic encourages them that if they do endure, they will finally be vindicated.

Apocalyptic has become a category associated with certain kinds of modern film. Usually it is associated with disaster. Interestingly disaster movies became particularly popular in the 1990s as apocalyptic speculation grew regarding the approaching millennium. These included films about natural disaster, such as *Water World* (1995), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Armageddon* (1998); or about alien invasion, such as *Independence Day* (1996); or strictly about religious images of 'the end', such as *End of Days* (1999).

In one sense, apocalyptic film only follows one aspect of apocalyptic literature, namely cataclysmic destruction. However, it may be possible to see in apocalyptic film (1) a secular message regarding the need to endure suffering and (2) a revelation about the nature of reality.

In an article on the web-based *Journal of Religion and Film* (2/1), Conrad Ostwalt has outlined an argument expounding the nature of apocalyptic film. He concludes that it is the specifically religious aspect that is missing from these films. The disaster is sometimes the result of human action; it is always averted by human ingenuity. Ostwalt suggests that the presence of the sacred within the religious apocalypse – or even the fact that religions tend to downplay their apocalyptic elements – has enabled the genre to move from the religious realm to the secular.

Two things can be said in response to this.

- First, religious apocalyptic used mythological language in order to encourage people living under hardship and persecution. In this way

- apocalyptic films may do something similar in secular imagery for a secular age.
- Second, biblical apocalyptic suggests that however powerful the forces of destruction are, there remains a power beyond them which will redeem and transform the situation, namely God. Human beings analogously occupy this position in apocalyptic films. Is this convincing? Would human beings, if faced in reality with the events contained in apocalyptic film, be able to redeem the situation?

These films are only meaningful as expressions of apocalypse if we recognise a transfer from a religious to a secular framework.