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Apocalypse Now? Towards a Cinematic Realized Eschatology

Christopher Deacy

Introduction

Although the last century has, arguably, “generated more eschatological discussion than any other”¹, Andrew Chester makes the instructive point that – paradoxical though it may seem to be – there has been a relative scarcity of eschatological thinking within Christian theology. Chester’s thinking, here, is that, from the Patristic period onward, eschatology was never as fully developed, profoundly reflected upon, or given as rigorous and imaginative intellectual probing, as were such other areas of Christian theology as Christology (Christian doctrine about the person of Christ) and soteriology. The specific context of Chester’s argument does not revolve around debates in the field of theology and film, but there is an important sense in which what he is arguing in his article finds a certain resonance in film and theology circles. When he writes that “There is still a need for a rigorous and intellectually sustainable account of Christian eschatology”², the case could equally be made that when filmmakers draw on traditional images and representations of eschatology in their works – and there is little doubt that themes of death and the afterlife comprise perennial themes in cinema, as evinced by the likes of A Matter of Life and Death (Michael Powell & Emeric Pressburger, 1945), Heaven Can Wait (Warren Beatty & Buck Henry, 1978), Made in Heaven (Alan Rudolph, 1987), Ghost (Jerry Zucker, 1990), Defending Your Life (Albert Brooks, 1991) and What Dreams May Come (Vincent Ward, 1998) – there is a need for serious, critical dialogue with theology. Indeed, there have been no major attempts to bring these areas together, so that we have the somewhat bizarre scenario whereby theologians will commonly write on such issues as the resurrection of the body, the immortality of the soul, Heaven, Hell, purgatory and mind-dependent worlds, but there has been too little work to date in facilitating reflection and discussion between the filmmaker and the theologian on issues where they, ostensibly at least, share important common ground. Of course, there are many differences between how theologians and filmmakers approach the topic of the afterlife. Popular films tend to bear witness to representations of the likes of God, the Devil, angels and demons in a literalistic and supernatural manner, as shown by such films as It’s a Wonderful Life (Frank Capra, 1946), Wings of Desire (Wim Wenders, 1987), Fallen (Gregory Hoblit, 1998) and Bedazzled (Harold Ramis, 2000), while theologians are more inclined to spiritualize such manifestations, along the lines of the programme of ‘demythologization’ advanced earlier in the twentieth century by the New Testament scholar Rudolf Bultmann (in which Bultmann re-interpreted the mythical teachings of the Gospels through the categories of existentialism – the philosophy of human existence and encounter). Psychical researchers often go even further, and categorically deny that there is any link between so-called Near-Death or Out-of-Body

¹ Andrew Chester: Eschatology. In: Gareth Jones: *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology*. Oxford 2004, p. 255

² Chester, p. 255

Experiences – a common staple of films such as *Flatliners* (Joel Schumacher, 1990) and *The Frighteners* (Peter Jackson, 1996) – and the idea that such experiences (about which there is much literature, such as by Susan Blackmore in *Beyond the Body: An Investigation of Out-of-the-Body Experiences*, which was first published in 1982, and *Dying to Live: Science and the Near-Death Experience*, published in 1993) comprise a prelude to any sort of resurrection, immortality or eternal life. It was with such considerations in mind that the *Film und Theologie* group met at the Katholische Akademie, Schwerte, in June 2009 with a view to studying exactly how there is scope for fostering dialogue between film and Christian ideas about eschatology.

From the outset, it is clear that filmmakers and theologians are inevitably involved in comparable practices, even if their respective disciplines are assumed to be discrete and autonomous. Clive Marsh, for example, who is one of the few theologians to date to have written specifically on eschatology and film (by way of a chapter in his 2007 publication *Theology Goes to the Movies*) wrote in 2004 that as “a major component (binding commitment) in a person’s life... cinema-going is functioning as a religious practice for some”³, and that going to the movies often accomplishes a key theological purpose since it is “not possible to be moved to the core of one’s being, or to ask questions about ultimate meaning and value without raising theological questions”⁴. Accordingly, Marsh continues, at “a time of considerable uncertainty as to whether there is, or can be, any overarching way of making sense of human life”⁵, it is participation in such practices that go some way towards addressing the question of life’s meaning or *telos* for many people today. In short, rather than simply go to the cinema for entertainment purposes, Marsh attests that “much more happens to them” when they are sitting in the auditorium, which is, or can be, “cognitively satisfying, ethically stretching” and “intellectually stimulating”, and which is no less than “how theological reflection occurs” – that is, “in response to the business of living”⁶. A similar claim is advanced by Rob Johnston, for whom, at their best, “movies engage with their viewers in ways that can productively transform our attitudes, actions, and horizons, even our interpersonal, communal, and spiritual possibilities”⁷. In light of such considerations, it is not surprising that, as the branch of theology which is concerned with questions of ultimate meaning and value, eschatology should be anything but peripheral to any work that takes place at the theology-film interface. Even in films, moreover, which are not specifically concerned with questions of resurrection, immortality or eternal life, a strong eschatological dimension can nevertheless be located. After all, there is invariably going to be a link between our lives on earth and any form of future existence, to the point that Marsh is surely correct that if one holds to belief in “some notion of continued, or resurrected, existence beyond physical death – be that immediately on death, or at some future point – then questions arise not only about the form of that existence, but also the nature of the continuity with our present lives”⁸. John Hick, one of the pioneers of looking at death and

³ Clive Marsh: *Cinema and Sentiment*. Carlisle 2004, p. 1

⁴ Marsh 2004, p. 10

⁵ Clive Marsh: *Theology Goes to the Movies*. Oxford 2007, p. 16

⁶ Marsh 2007, p. 17

⁷ Robert Johnston: Transformative Viewing. In: Robert Johnston (ed.) *Reframing Theology and Film*. Grand Rapids 2007, p. 318

⁸ Marsh 2007, p. 147

the afterlife in modern theology and philosophy of religion, has similarly indicated that we can no more refrain from speculating about death than we can refrain from speculating about life – “the one is inseparable from the other”⁹.

If Chester’s opening claim is correct, that eschatology is an area that warrants further theological probing and scrutiny, then it is not inconceivable that it may be filmmakers who can initiate a debate which, to date, has never been wholly clear-cut or definitive even within theology. Paul Badham, for example, finds it extraordinary that so many Christians today believe that we will be re-embodied or resurrected in heaven, but “that the question of the whereabouts of heaven is either totally ignored, or answered with the assertion that heaven has no location”¹⁰. He notes, further, that the cosmological discoveries of the seventeenth century and the subsequent gradual change in the meaning of ‘heaven’ “has caused heaven to be spiritualised into describing a state of being, rather than a future dwelling place”¹¹, but that the writers concerned have overlooked the fact that these two currents of thought are incompatible with one another. For, an “immortal soul can be thought of as existing without location in a non-located heaven. But a resurrected body requires to live somewhere”¹², such that one cannot hold both that heaven is ‘nowhere’ or a state of being while at the same time affirming belief in resurrection. None of this is to say that films which address the issue of an afterlife offer anything remotely homogeneous or consistent – neither with respect to other afterlife-themed films nor with any particular school of theology – as this chapter will show, but the fascinating array of representations of the afterlife that can be gleaned from film says something important about the way in which, at a popular level, theological beliefs and values are being disseminated and appropriated, and which can only help the theologian to re-visit, and indeed freshen up, the way in which such questions are tackled within the academy. Even where the theological debate appears to be settled, there is still considerable room for manoeuvre, as when St. Paul, in his first letter to the Christian community at Corinth, is emphatic that the resurrection body will be our own body and not merely a strange or new body. As Ray Anderson puts it, though, Paul “does not answer the question as to precisely what this resurrection body will look like or how the embodied existence of the resurrection can be understood in terms of our present embodied state”¹³. Such ambivalence is surely sufficient to scotch any suggestions that theologians alone control the contours of the debate and that there is nothing new that filmmakers can offer on the theme of the afterlife.

Querying the exclusivity of eschatology within theology

Though writing in the context of the dialogue between science and eschatology, in a volume co-edited by John Polkinghorne, Fraser Watts makes the instructive point that in a century which has seen many areas of secular thought taking over religious themes and giving them new life – the specific example Watts gives is that of Marxism – it “is

⁹ John Hick: *Death and Eternal Life*. London 1976, p. 21

¹⁰ Paul Badham: *Christian Beliefs about Life after Death*. Basingstoke 1976, p. 92

¹¹ Badham 1976, p. 92

¹² Badham 1976, p. 92

¹³ Ray Anderson: *Theology, Death and Dying*. Oxford 1986, p. 120

important for theologians to realize that eschatology is no longer a theological preserve”¹⁴. Just as Christian eschatology cannot reasonably “continue oblivious of this recent wave of secularized eschatology; it is necessary at least to engage with it”¹⁵, so it is my contention that theologians cannot ignore the eschatological dimension of the likes of What Dreams May Come and The Shawshank Redemption (Frank Darabont, 1994). In his Blackwell article, Chester proposes that eschatology should be integrally related to other areas of Christian theology, such as Christology, soteriology and ethics¹⁶, and so it is my claim, here, that the medium of film should also be allowed to play a legitimate role in any theological conversation. As Marsh puts it, “As a medium, film has proved a fertile ground for the development of stories and visions about the end and ‘what lies beyond’”, such that “Theology cannot but be interested in such speculations”¹⁷. How can it not be of concern to the theologian, for instance, that, as Peter French writes in the context of the western genre, death is the central element of the world view of the western¹⁸, in the respect that in westerns are displayed

the conflicts that occur when those who care about the existence of God, the immortality of the human soul, obedience to divine moral commands, familial human relationships and the like confront those who could not give a damn about the existence of God, deny the immortality of man, have no interest in whether or how they will get on in a future eternal life, have invested themselves in a moral code that regards the commands of Judeo-Christian ethics as senseless, and care more about friendship relationships than marriage or familial relations¹⁹?

Whether we are talking about Clint Eastwood’s tortured and three-dimensional protagonist William Munny, in the revisionist western Unforgiven (Clint Eastwood, 1992), or John Wayne’s gunfighter J.B. Books in the final film he made, The Shootist (Don Siegel, 1976), who is (like Wayne in real life) dying of cancer, and who we see committed to making one last stand against three enemies of Carson City, French is correct that “All westerners have something inside that has to do with death, and it is not just because they live and die by the gun”²⁰. Rather, it is “because the westerner cares about death, his own death. It is extremely important to him. It focuses and frames his world view and the ethics to which he is committed. Death, in no small measure, is what his life is all about”²¹. Crucially, the western hero may not be holding out hope for an afterlife – indeed, as the above quotation from French signifies, he (for it invariably is a he, notwithstanding Sam Raimi’s humorous homage to the genre, The Quick and the Dead [1995], in which Sharon Stone is cast as a female gunslinger who outshoots all of her male adversaries) categorically rejects all hope of salvation. In The Shootist, indeed,

¹⁴ Fraser Watts: Subjective and Objective Hope. In: John Polkinghorne & Michael Welker (eds.): *The End of the World and the Ends of God*. Pennsylvania 2000, p. 49

¹⁵ Watts 2000, p. 50

¹⁶ Chester 2004, p. 255

¹⁷ Marsh 2007, p. 141

¹⁸ See Peter A. French: *Cowboy Metaphysics*. Oxford 1997, p. 3

¹⁹ French 1997, p. 11

²⁰ French 1997, p. 47

²¹ French 1997, p. 47

Books tells Mrs. Rogers (Lauren Bacall), who runs the lodging house where he has come to spend his final days, that he will not accept her invitation to accompany her to church because his church has always been the wilderness²². In French's words, "The wilderness is the one thing with which the westerner seeks identity. And, of course, in the end he generally achieves it"²³.

This failure to delineate in the form of the western hero anything approximating a traditional Christian picture of the afterlife does not, however, mean that such films are thereby theologically redundant. On the contrary, whereas St. Paul was certain that there would be a future life, as shown by his claim in his letter to the Galatians that "the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life"²⁴, there are all sorts of ambiguities concerning the nature of the next life. Even if one is certain that it lies in the future, it is unclear as to whether it could be said to lie beyond the grave, at the point of death, or in an indeterminate future during which Christ will return in glory on the clouds of heaven and establish his kingdom, whereupon the dead will be raised. On the other hand, in keeping with the this-worldly dynamics of the western genre, some theologians have espoused what is known as a realized eschatology, in which it is believed that eternal life refers to the quality of life in present existence. Since the Enlightenment in particular, there has been a re-orientation of eschatological beliefs away from a traditional emphasis on a future judgement, heaven and hell, and towards a reading which understands that a person can undergo a transformative experience in the here and now, within the present dimensions of space and time. Don Cupitt summed it up well when he wrote in 1984 that "in the modern period we have come more and more to explain events in this world in this-worldly terms" and that we "no longer seem to require the old idea that there is an invisible world of supernatural beings lying behind this world"²⁵. It is, rather, in the present moment that the believer has passed through judgement and entered upon eternal life. Such perspectives have also been taken seriously within the Church of England (the Anglican Communion in England), whose Doctrine Commission reported in the mid-1990s that "in the twentieth-century West, across a whole spectrum of types of Christianity, there seems to be a fairly consistent emphasis on salvation here and now rather than after death"²⁶. This is no bad thing from Cupitt's point of view, as, in terms which would not be an anathema to the likes of Marx or Richard Dawkins, he thinks that to offer solutions to this-worldly problems, such as injustice and poverty, by promising the consolation of another life in another world has no real integrity or value, and merely confirms our "state of impotence and illusion"²⁷. Similar ideas are expressed in Peter French's point that "When one's daily activities are routine and boring and seem, to all intents and purposes, to be without any real point, the appeal of a Kingdom of Heaven and a salvation from the ordinary is persuasive", but that "once one's this-worldly projects begin to absorb one's attention and energies, the concern about finding the meaning of life in some other worldly or afterlife existence drifts far into the background

²² See French 1997, p. 136

²³ French 1997, p. 136

²⁴ Galatians 6: 8

²⁵ Don Cupitt: *The Sea of Faith*. London 1984, p. 34

²⁶ Church of England Doctrine Commission: *The Mystery of Salvation*. London 1995, p. 29.

²⁷ Cupitt 1984, p. 272

of one's mind”²⁸. It may have been the case in early Christianity that Jesus’ second coming was imminent – and that it would even come within the lifetime of the community of those who had met and worshipped with him – but with the passage of time, and the failure of the *parousia* to materialize, Jane Smith is right when she argues that the “passage of time moderated this expectation, and new theories had to be developed to account for the state of the soul in what came to be seen as a waiting period before the messianic age”²⁹. Even in St. Paul’s own epistles, there is a tension between the ‘now’ and the ‘not yet’, to the point that, in McGrath’s words, it is “very difficult to sustain the simple idea of heaven as something that will not come into being until the future, or that cannot be experienced in the present”³⁰. Indeed, whereas it is apparent from reading 1 Corinthians 15 that Paul expected God would, in the future, bring about a final resurrection of the dead as a precursor to final judgement, and that it would take place “in a moment, at the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet”³¹, there is a present and realized dimension to what he says in chapter 1 of the same letter where he writes that “the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”³².

Taking the debate to another level, the philosopher D.Z. Phillips held that belief in the survival of death was not a necessary condition of belief in immortality. Rather, for Phillips, language relating to the soul, to immortality or to eternity referred not to a life beyond this one but should be understood more as a moral matter of what we value here and now. To talk about the soul was thus, for Phillips, to be seen in terms of the kind of life a person is believed to be living³³. Of course, none of this is surprising if the cosmological discoveries of the Enlightenment could no longer entertain the idea of heaven as a future, literal, dwelling place, but there has been a genuinely seismic shift in the way in which eschatology has been articulated in the modern world. Within Roman Catholic circles, indeed, Karl Rahner has written that the environment of which a departed spirit is conscious and in relation to which it lives is still *this-worldly*, as there is no other sphere of operation than this physical universe. The departed remain, quite simply, earth-bound³⁴. In Judaism, also, outside of the Orthodox tradition Eliezer Segal points out that discussions of the afterlife are “almost entirely absent” from religious discourse “which has focused on the absolute commitment to this world as the setting for the encounter with the divine, the covenant between God and Israel, and the obligation to serve humanity”³⁵, and she notes that, following the Holocaust, theologians such as Emil Fackenheim and Richard Rubenstein have been discernibly reluctant to appeal to a trans-worldly, supernatural retribution after death. Rubenstein, indeed, saw the Death of God movement in the 1960s not as something which was happening with respect to God, but, rather, as something which was bound up solely with human experience, to the point that

²⁸ French 1997, p. 38.

²⁹ Jane I. Smith: The Afterlife. In: Lawrence E. Sullivan: *Death, Life, and the Soul*, London 1989, p. 91

³⁰ Alister McGrath: *A Brief History of Heaven*. Oxford 2003, p. 165

³¹ 1 Corinthians 15: 52

³² 1 Corinthians 1: 18

³³ See Paul & Linda Badham: *Immortality or Extinction?* London 1984, p. 27

³⁴ See Hick 1976, p. 231

³⁵ Eliezer Segal: Judaism. In: Harold Coward (ed.): *Life after Death in World Religions*. Maryknoll, 2000, p. 27

the ‘Death of God’ was a cultural and anthropological, as opposed to a theistic, event. For Rubenstein, it is preferable to say that “we live in the time of the death of God” than that “God is dead”³⁶.

Eschatology and film

To this end, it is not, perhaps, surprising, that when Marsh draws upon a case study of three films in his section on eschatology and ‘The End’ in his aforementioned *Theology Goes to the Movies*, he notes that none of these pictures – Jesus of Montreal (Denys Arcand, 1989), Field of Dreams (Phil Alden Robinson, 1989) and Truly Madly Deeply (Anthony Minghella, 1990) – “necessitates any clear, single conviction about life beyond physical death”³⁷. In so doing, they could thus be seen to “reflect contemporary caution about believing anything concerning what lies beyond death”³⁸, even though these films do, nevertheless, address the meaning of resurrection and the impact of death upon life in the here and now – questions, in other words, with which Christian theology has historically dealt. It may be the case that none of the three films concerned “provides a convincing, clear-cut case for considering that any belief in existence beyond physical death should be maintained”³⁹, but this is completely congruent with contemporary trends in eschatology where the transcendent is often interpreted through the lens of this-worldly phenomena. This is not, of course, to say that films do not delineate an afterlife as construed in traditional eschatological terms. In Ghost, Flatliners and White Noise (Geoffrey Sax, 2005), for example, a permeable, and breachable, realm is depicted between life and death. In White Noise, Michael Keaton plays an architect who endeavours to communicate with his wife from beyond the grave, while in Flatliners a group of medical students find themselves (unwittingly) inducing something akin to Near-Death Experiences. In Ghost, Sam Wheat (Patrick Swayze) is caught in the intersection between heaven and earth in a film which bears witness to a traditional dualistic framework whereby the just ascend to a tunnel of light that reaches into the sky while the unjust are quite literally dragged off to hell by packs of mauling demons. However, this is not the full picture. In all these instances, earthly realities are being used as the point of departure – Sam Wheat can only ascend to heaven once he has rescued his fiancée, Molly (Demi Moore), whose life is in danger, from the clutches of his treacherous best friend, Carl (Tony Goldwyn). Only after Sam has witnessed Carl’s descent into hell is Sam ready to embark on the next stage of his journey into the hereafter – none of which is documented in the film. The film ends with the emotional scene between Sam and Molly as Sam departs the earthly plane ahead of the next, unknown stage of his post-mortem journey. Similarly, Flatliners is not really about the afterlife at all. What the medical students “undergo is not the sense of an impending new life (reassuringly full of light and welcome, to judge from published case histories) but a form of self-analysis stemming from unresolved events in their past”⁴⁰, such as childhood

³⁶ See L. Miller & Stanley J. Grenz: *Fortress Introduction to Contemporary Theologies*. Minneapolis 1998, p. 81.

³⁷ Marsh 2007, p. 145

³⁸ Marsh 2007, p. 145

³⁹ Marsh 2007, p. 148

⁴⁰ Philip Strick: Review of Flatliners. In: *Monthly Film Bulletin* 57/682, November 1990, p. 321

bullying and, in the case of one character, a series of infidelities. Rather than a journey per se into the afterlife, the characters are forced to confront what Tom Ruffles calls “their failings and past traumas, so that flatlining becomes a kind of extreme therapy”⁴¹. It is this life, rather than the afterlife, which is being affirmed, with death nothing more than a portal or conduit for providing ethical lessons about how to behave *on earth*.

There is, therefore, an inescapably reductionistic dimension to these ostensibly ‘afterlife’ pictures, in which the supernatural becomes a means of resolving problems that have been engendered on earth – for the medical students in *Flatliners* and Sam in *Ghost*, the implication is that they are not yet ready to leave their friends and loved ones behind. Life after death is more a means to an end than the end itself. Even in *What Dreams May Come*, where Chris Nielson (Robin Williams) finds himself in a heavenly environment following his death in a car crash and later makes a trip, Orpheus-like, to the depths of hell to rescue his damned, suicide-stricken soul mate, Annie (Annabella Sciorra), the film’s reincarnationist denouement suggests that the ultimate goal in life is not the beatific vision but a thorough-going physical and corporeal life on earth where the two soul mates will meet again, albeit in a different bodily form. The continuation of this-worldly relationships is deemed far superior to an endless paradise in heaven. In this schema, heaven and hell are but means to a reincarnationist end, and where, once experienced, heaven is portrayed as better than hell (from which Annie is ultimately rescued) but grossly inferior to the pleasures of falling in love all over again as children. Salvation is thus equated with personal fulfilment and where human agency is paramount – the divine is nowhere in view. The closest *What Dreams May Come* comes to delineating the transcendent is when God is referred to by Nielson’s spirit guide as being “up there. Somewhere... shouting down that He loves us, wondering why we can’t hear Him”. It is not surprising, therefore, that, despite its Academy Award win for Best Visual Effects, the film disappointed many critics for putting “sheer spectacle”⁴² ahead of characterization and narrative. So jumbled and unfocused is the film’s theology, indeed, that Peter Matthews – admittedly, not the greatest advocate within film studies of those more popular, contemporary attempts to bring together theology and film⁴³ – wrote in his review of *What Dreams May Come* in *Sight and Sound* in January 1999 that the film’s theology amounts to “So you can take it with you after all, and there’s no pesky God around to horn in on your personalised nirvana”⁴⁴, not to mention “the interesting heresy that souls may choose to be reincarnated – as Chris and Annie do, just in time for one of the ickest fade-outs in cinema history”⁴⁵.

A theological mishmash though the film may be, however, its underlying teaching that the here and now frames – and, indeed, provides the *telos* of – the eschatological imagination is quite in keeping with a realized eschatology. Indeed, it is not all that far removed from the ending of *Cool Hand Luke* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1967), which is one of

⁴¹ Tom Ruffles: *Ghost Images*. London 2004, p. 129

⁴² Peter Matthews: Review of *What Dreams May Come*. In: *Sight and Sound* 9/1 January 1999, p. 61

⁴³ See Christopher Deacy: Theology and Film. In: Christopher Deacy & Gaye Ortiz: *Theology and Film*. Oxford 2008, p. 43

⁴⁴ Matthews 1999, p. 61.

⁴⁵ Matthews 1999, p. 61.

the most commonly cited movies in literature on cinematic Christ-figures. As Carl Skrade wrote in 1970, the protagonist, Lucas Jackson – a non-conformist inmate in a Florida prison camp – is “the filmic Christ-figure par excellence”⁴⁶, and John May followed this up in 2001 by referring to the scene in which Luke “lies exhausted on a tabletop with arms out-stretched, his body a classic image of the pose of the crucified”⁴⁷ as having evident Christological provenance. At the end of the film, the director, Stuart Rosenberg, superimposes the image of a crossroad, as seen from a heavenly viewpoint, with the image of the film’s protagonist right in the centre of the cross, in a none too subtle attempt at crucifixion symbolism. The fact that we have just witnessed Luke’s unwarranted death at the hands of the prison authorities for his failure to comply with the rules, and for breaching the status quo, also adds to the Christ-figure referent. In Garrett’s words, “Luke has been wounded unto death, shot down like a dog, but in his shameful death, he has achieved a sort of victory over blind justice... It is a victory that leads to immortality and to a cult of believers who tell and retell his story, the good news of this unlikely savior”⁴⁸. What Garrett is referring to here is the scene that immediately precedes the image of the crossroads, when we see Luke’s fellow inmates – who are inspired by his indomitable spirit to rise above their captivity and incarceration, to the point of being brought to the verge of confronting themselves as authentic human individuals, and for seeing in their disenfranchised lives some reason for being⁴⁹ – clearly transformed by their encounter with him. They may still be physically incarcerated – indeed, we see the other inmates shackled and chained on the prison work farm, to prevent any one else escaping – but, the film appears to be telling us, in a spiritual sense they are now free. This is quite similar to Robert Jewett’s assertion that when St. Paul talks about the term ‘redemption’ in his letter to the Romans, there is no assumption that those who have been redeemed are thereby freed from adversity in any physical or literal sense. In Romans 8:24-5, for example, there is a presupposition of a situation of ongoing vulnerability for those who have been redeemed inasmuch as the “slaves and former slaves who made up the bulk of the Roman Churches could not entirely overcome exploitation by their masters and patrons”⁵⁰. Slaves are still slaves, even though, spiritually, something emancipating in a non-physical sense has occurred. Jewett’s thesis, indeed, is that redemption is not about escaping from present situations of imprisonment or adversity, but is all about the surmounting of shame “in the present moment by God’s love poured into the heart in the context of the new community”⁵¹. A realized eschatology, no less!

Re-visiting theology on the afterlife

This raises broader questions, of course, concerning theology’s very ability to delineate the afterlife. Critical though one may be of Vincent Ward’s somewhat hotchpotch

⁴⁶ Carl Skrade: Theology and Films. In: John C. Cooper & Carl Skrade: *Celluloid and Symbols*. Philadelphia 1970, p. 21

⁴⁷ Quoted in Anton Karl Kozlovic: The Structural Characteristics of the Cinematic Christ-Figure. In: *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* VIII, Fall 2004, p. 53

⁴⁸ Greg Garrett: *The Gospel According to Hollywood*. London 2007, pp. 38-9

⁴⁹ Christopher Deacy: *Faith in Film*. Aldershot 2005, p. 93

⁵⁰ Robert Jewett: *Saint Paul Returns to the Movies*. Cambridge 1999, p. 164

⁵¹ Jewett 1999, p. 165

depiction of an afterlife in What Dreams May Come, one aspect of the film for which the filmmakers cannot be criticized is the authenticity or realism of their artistic imagination. As Jeffrey Burton Russell puts it, “Heaven is not a place in space and time like Japan or the Roman Empire”, but is, rather, experienced as something “ineffable” which, if it is to be discussed at all, must be through the use of human language and concepts⁵². Writing in 1970, Terence Penelhum took much the same line, in his claim that “references to the Next World cannot be intelligible for us unless it is possible to use the language of our world of things and persons to describe it”⁵³. In other words, the only way in which we can articulate the form that life after death will take is by using the vocabulary and imagery with which we are familiar in our present experience, to the point, indeed, that, in Chester’s words, eschatological visions tend to be “rooted in present reality, however much they represent a transformation of this, or a Utopian resolution of inherent problems”⁵⁴. In this respect, what Ward has done in What Dreams May Come is no more far-fetched or implausible than any other attempts throughout human history to fashion the next world. Moreover, credit is warranted for what amounts to a rich visual palette, which draws on, among other representations, Hieronymus Bosch’s *Triptych of the Garden of Earthly Delights* (c.1504), which is referenced at one point in the film (it appears in the scene where Annie is contemplating killing herself). In an interview for *Sight and Sound* in December 1998, Ward is quoted as saying that he “tried to create a sense of transcendence... partly by referencing artists who had worked with a similar intent”, thereby allowing him to “reference a period when they still had visions of heaven and hell”⁵⁵. Accordingly, for Ward, the film “uses nineteenth-century language to describe heaven and hell, but with a contemporary commentary”, as well as exploring “transcendental ideas and debates that have been going on forever in a contemporary language”⁵⁶.

Irrespective, then, of whether What Dreams May Come is theologically or aesthetically rich, it falls within a long tradition within theology and culture of seeing the afterlife as an extension of human hopes, fears and aspirations. Within early Christianity, there were a number of Church fathers, particularly in the eastern tradition, for whom paradise was so much the epitome and fulfilment of earthly delights that heaven was, quite literally, seen as a place on earth. In the second century, Theophilus of Antioch held that, with reference to the Genesis creation narrative, “By the expressions ‘out of this ground’ and ‘eastwards,’ the holy writing clearly teaches us that Paradise is under this heaven, under which the east and the earth are”⁵⁷. For Hippolytus, also, “Some persons claim that paradise is in heaven and is not a created thing. But when one sees with one’s eyes the rivers that flow from it and that can still be seen today, one must conclude that paradise is not heavenly but part of creation. It is a place in the east and a favored region”⁵⁸. This ‘geographicalization’ of heaven as an earthly paradise – the quintessence of all that is considered excellent on earth – was, no doubt, a factor in the quest for paradisal islands

⁵² Jeffrey Burton Russell: *Paradise Mislaid*. Oxford 2006, p. 2

⁵³ Terence Penelhum: *Survival and Disembodied Existence*. London 1970, p. 46

⁵⁴ Chester 2004, p. 246

⁵⁵ Quoted in *Sight and Sound* 8/12, December 1998, pp. 18-19

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 21

⁵⁷ Quoted in Jean Delumeau: *History of Paradise*. Chicago 2000, p. 16

⁵⁸ Quoted in Delumeau, p. 16

that took place from the fourteenth through to the nineteenth centuries. For Christopher Columbus, indeed, the New Indies were believed to be located close to the earthly paradise – in Delumeau’s words, “Deeply impressed by the beauty of Haiti, he declared this island to be unmatched in all the world because it was covered with all sorts of trees that seemed to touch the sky and never lost their leaves”⁵⁹.

Prosaic and paradoxical though it may appear to be speaking of the celestial heavens in inextricably this-worldly terms, the case could even be made that this ultimately reinforces rather than undermines the hope of a future life. Indeed, it is not necessarily inevitable that the two different approaches to eschatological thinking are diametrically opposed. As Michael Grosso sees it, the “best way to ‘prove’ life after death is to bring paradise down to earth”⁶⁰, on the grounds that, in his words, “Every life saved, liberated, enhanced adds to the building of the new earth and the new heaven”⁶¹. Grosso’s thinking, here, is that only by creating paradise on earth, and what he calls “restoring the beauty of the planet and liberating the splendor of individual life forms”⁶², can we even begin to overcome the dualism between earth and heaven, the human and the divine, and between time and eternity. There is an advantage in such a line of thinking. In answer to the Marxist critique that, as expounded by Engels, religion “is nothing but the fantastic reflection in people’s minds of those external forces which control their daily life, a reflection in which the terrestrial forces assume the form of supernatural forces”⁶³ – in other words, that religion is an illusion which, like opium, deadens the pain and discourages us from reacting against the status quo – Grosso appears to be saying that the *telos*, or goal, is to use the Christian vision of the hereafter as a template for making the earth a better place. So, rather than see religious teachings as impediments which alienate us from our highest ideals and aspirations (by projecting them on to an abstract Deity), the object, here, is to liberate and transform the present life in the light of Christian eschatological teachings. There may be a re-appropriation of traditional Christian terminology going on, here, but, rather than diluting or watering down the transcendental splendour of traditional afterlife expectations, the suggestion is that salvation can be apprehended at what I have previously referred to as “the very cusp, and at the very fulfillment, of a distinctly human process of transformation, enlightenment, and evolution”⁶⁴. Whereas, then, in *The Shawshank Redemption*, the achievement of ‘redemption’ is correlated not with a future celestial realm but with the vision of paradise on earth – specifically, the Mexican beach resort of Zihuatanejo with its “new world of sun, beach, and water”⁶⁵, where two institutionalized prison inmates manage, after experiencing decades of abuse in a corrupt prison, to live out the rest of their lives – this is not to say that eschatology is absent or redundant. The language has simply evolved to encompass more than a (‘mere’) celestial paradise.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Delumeau, p. 109

⁶⁰ Michael Grosso: Fear of Life after Death. In: Gary Doore (ed.), *What Survives?* Los Angeles 1990, p. 253

⁶¹ Grosso, p. 253

⁶² Grosso, p. 254

⁶³ Quoted in Peter Clarke & Peter Byrne: *Religion Defined and Explained*. Basingstoke 1993, p. 142

⁶⁴ Deacy 2008, p. 198

⁶⁵ Adele Reinhartz: *Scripture on the Silver Screen*. Louisville 2003, p. 141

Conclusion

Of course, the debate is far from over. As Hick wrote back in 1973, it is a moot point as to whether it is “a responsible use of language to speak of eternal life, immortality, the life to come, heaven and hell, and then to add that this language carries no implications whatever regarding the continuation or otherwise of human personality beyond the grave”⁶⁶. Hick’s concern, here, is that we may be evacuating all theological language of its meaning if heaven and hell are spoken of in anything other than future eschatological terms, and there is certainly a danger that, as Polkinghorne and Welker see it, too much ‘here and now’ eschatology runs the risk of reducing the “complexity of eschatological symbols to ciphers of inner self-consciousness”⁶⁷. Penelhum similarly fears that, if we excise belief in the hereafter, then “all the Christian language about salvation, eternal life, cleansing, and the rest would be utopian and false”⁶⁸. However, the advantage with the position I am advancing, here, is that the debate does not have to be simply an ‘either/or’ one – that is, ‘realized’ and ‘future’ do not have to be the only two, discrete and diametrically opposed, options available. Why should a full and proper distinction have to be made between eternal life now and a post-mortem existence? Russell Aldwinckle may well speak for many when he wrote in 1972 that the “transformation of institutions and social life in this world, important as this is as an essential part of the Christian hope, cannot be a substitute for the hope of the Christian for a real personal and corporate existence in Christ after death and when history has reached its divinely appointed End”⁶⁹. But, it is not obvious that eschatological language is only viable when it specifically pertains to life *after* death. In traditional terms, Paul Badham is completely right when he maintains that “the language of resurrection and immortality has no clear meaning or agreed usage outside the context of belief in life after death, and that language of eternal life although referring in part to present experience nevertheless... always conveys a further connotation of future destiny”⁷⁰. However, theologians cannot ignore the fact that, both in modern theology and in popular culture, there have been some very notable (if, as the case of What Dreams May Come has shown, at times muddled) instances in which the line of demarcation between the present and the future has proven to be a very permeable one indeed. These films may not always overly burden the imagination of most theologians (and nor should they – they are often quite clichéd and unimaginative films), but they do say something significant about the blurring of the conceptual boundaries that has long taken place between different varieties of eschatological language, and thereby warrant further critical, scholarly attention.

⁶⁶ John Hick: Towards a Christian Theology of Death. In: Terence Penelhum (ed.): *Immortality*. Belmont 1973, p. 147

⁶⁷ John Polkinghorne & Michael Welker: Science and Theology on the End of the World and the Ends of God. In: Polkinghorne & Welker, p. 3

⁶⁸ Terence Penelhum: Christianity. In: Coward (ed.), p. 41

⁶⁹ Russell Aldwinckle: *Death in the Secular City*. London 1972, p. 167

⁷⁰ Badham & Badham 1984, p. 36