Knowing the Time, Knowing of a Time
3rd Annual Conference of the Center for Millennial Studies
Boston University, December 6-8, 1998
Conference Proceedings

The Dynamics of Apocalyptic Rhetoric

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I'd like to begin with a little survey. How many of you have ever been in, or been witness to, a car accident? How many of you who have been in accidents told the police officer or the insurance company that you were at fault? Be honest.

If you,ve been in an accident, you know that a wreck happens, and after a while a police officer shows up to interview the people involved and write a report which explains who is at fault. Jan Vansina, an expert in oral history, studied accident reports and he noticed two interesting trends. First, nobody is ever at fault in a car wreck. Accident stories almost always follow the plot, "I am innocent, they are guilty." This is understandable because accidents are expensive and embarrassing. But the second thing Vansina noticed is harder to explain. He found that witnesses to an accident, even when they have no personal stake in the findings of the police report, tend to remember more than they actually saw. It's apparently very rare for witnesses of an accident to actually see everything that happened. Normally you hear screeching tires and glass breaking, and you look over and see two cars stuck together in a certain position. But the police officer will invariably hear a story like this: "OK, that blue car didn't have a turn signal on, and he turned the corner all of a sudden, OK?, while the Mercedes was trying to get through the light on yellow," whether the witness actually saw a turn signal or a yellow light or not. In fact, I could probably show you a bunch of still photographs of accidents and you could tell me what happened in every one of them.

Vansina's observations about accidents illustrate a phenomenon which I call "scripting." "Scripting" occurs when I use a preconceived narrative to interpret events or to predict what kinds of events will occur in the future. Scripting takes the myths that I already have in place and projects the plot of those myths onto my world. Once I have made this projection, the scripted narrative will control how I understand and respond to certain situations. For example, I may have a belief that accidents at stop lights generally involve someone's failure to use a turn signal or someone trying to speed through a yellow light. If I believe that accident situations generally happen that way, I will describe an actual accident to the police officer in those terms regardless of what actually happened. I will, in other words, inscribe my myth about car wrecks onto the specific situation which confronts me.

Apocalyptic rhetoric, the subject of my remarks today, is powerful just because it is all about scripting. Apocalyptic rhetoric is tailored to infiltrate our personal myths and narratives at the deepest level. Once this rhetoric has intertwined with the stories we have developed to

understand our world, it redefines us and creates a powerful motivation for even the most radical forms of social action.

Now, if you are thinking that this thesis makes apocalyptic rhetoric sound insidious and unattractive you are hearing me correctly. So why would anyone want to buy into something that so dominates and controls your thoughts and actions? That is the very question which is always raised by the news media covering millenarian movements. I live in Cincinnati, and it so happens that one of the members of the Heaven's Gate Movement was from Cincinnati. Now most of you know that not much exciting happens in Cincinnati, so every day for about a week after the Heaven's Gate suicide the local news gave a lot of time to this woman's story. They interviewed her family, friends, co-workers, people she went to High School with, anybody they could find who knew her. Always the question was, Why would an intelligent woman get involved in something like that? Was she emotionally unstable or what? That line of inquiry didn't get too far because this particular woman had a pretty decent family, was educated, and had had a successful career. So then the reporter turns to, Well, what was missing in her personal life? This lady had been divorced, so they would ask, Was it her divorce or something? And then when that type of question ran out it was, Did she have bad judgement? Did she generally make foolish decisions? Couldn't she see where this was going? I would suggest that she had a very clear view of where her life was going, probably much clearer than the view you and I have of where our lives are going. Apocalyptic rhetoric is appealing to certain people because it offers them a place in a coherent story, a salvation-history, which adequately explains the world for them when other means of explaining the world have failed. It gives people a handle on their present experience and allows them to script an adequate response to the future.

My basic thesis, then, is that millenarian rhetoric engages the worldview of its audience at the deepest mythological level, altering the foundational meta-narratives by which people organize their experience, and consequently restating the criteria by which we script our future.

What I hope to show you in the time that remains is that this technique originates from the foundational documents of Western Millennarianism, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. Due to time limits, I will focus most particularly on the NT Book of Revelation. Everyone knows that most Western millenarian movements (I want to say "all" but I don't know about all of them) are somehow related to the book of Revelation, either directly or because many of the themes and motifs in that book have become cliche. But aside from these general citations, modern millenarian rhetors have absorbed the broader rhetorical techniques of this book into their discourse, sometimes unconsciously. The most notable of these rhetorical techniques is the "empty metaphor" and the related "empty narrative."

My discussion of the empty metaphor is based on the linguistic theory of I. A. Richards. Richards describes the relationship between words, thoughts and things with a device which he calls the "semantic triangle." The semantic triangle would describe a use of the word "exam" this way:

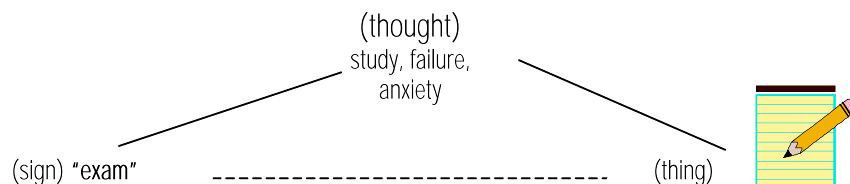


Diagram I

Notice that the line at the bottom of the triangle is dashed, suggesting that the connection between the word "exam" and the physical object in question is indirect, dependent on one's ideas about the exam.[1] Every use of language thus involves a sign (the word), a referent (a physical or non-physical entity or concept to which the words refer), and the conceptual matrix that connects them in the language user's mind.[2]

The semantic triangle can be extended to describe the operation of metaphors.

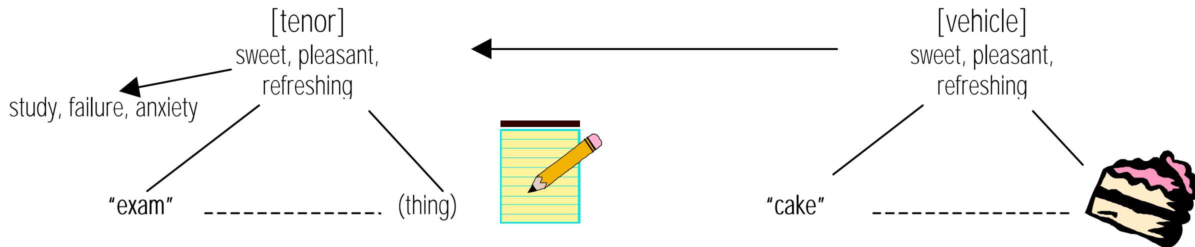


Diagram II

This diagram illustrates the operation of the metaphor, "That exam was a piece of cake," now often truncated to, "That exam was cake." As the diagram shows, the metaphor, "that exam was cake" does not change the relationship between the words and things under discussion; it simply shifts the ideas a person has about one thing to another thing. In this case, it changes negative ideas about the exam to positive ideas via analogy with the cake.

Some metaphors, however, are empty, and this is the type with which we are interested here. Consider the metaphor "the Great City" from the "two witnesses" passage in Revelation 1. I use this passage, incidentally, because anyone who reads the newspaper regularly knows that millenarian prophets frequently claim to be one of the two witnesses.

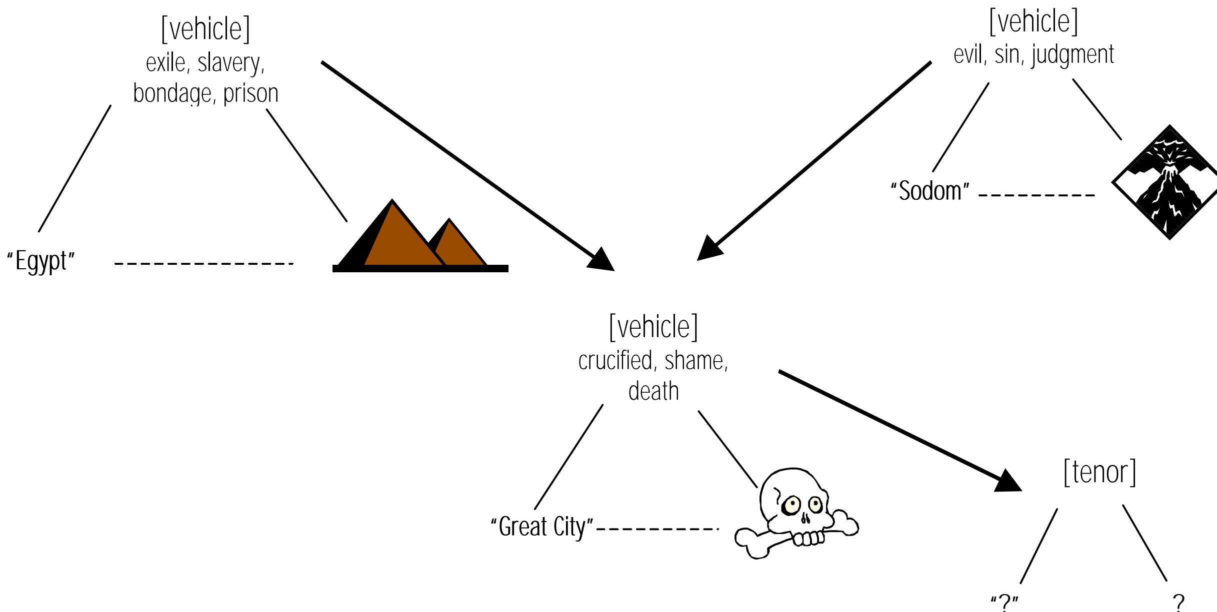
> When they [the two witnesses] have finished their testimony, the beast that comes up from the bottomless pit will make war on them and conquer them and kill them, and their bodies will lie in the street of the Great City that is prophetically called Sodom and Egypt, where also their Lord was crucified. (11:7-8; NRSV)

Here the author, let's call this person "John," stacks up the psychological contexts of several metaphors to create a stronger rhetorical impact. All these dark images portray the "Great City" as a place of shame, bondage, and suffering. This of course raises the question, Which "great city" is John talking about? The same metaphor is used at Revelation 17:18 to describe "the city which rules over the kings of the earth," obviously at that time Rome. But Jerusalem, not Rome, is the place where "their Lord was crucified." Before we determine that this is an "inconsistency," it is important to note that "Great City" is not the name of a place, but

[1] "Between the symbol and the referent there is no relevant relation other than the indirect one" (I. A. Richards and C. K. Ogden, The Meaning of Meaning [8th ed; New York: Harcourt-Brace, 1956] 1).

[2] (Richards and Ogden:21).

rather another metaphor for something the text never names. Consequently, the metaphors in this text generate a powerful matrix of associations that is transferred to nothing.



Intertext: ????????

Diagram III

It doesn't take much to guess that John left this metaphor open so that his first-century audience could make a personal connection between "the Great City" and Rome. This rhetorical strategy, however, makes it impossible for the text to close itself on one referent. In other words, the metaphor is still empty and still invites anyone who reads it to make a personal connection between "the Great City" and their own experience. So any later apocalyptic prophet can identify their own culture as the "Great City," and themselves as one of the persecuted witnesses crying out against its evil ways. Nothing in this text prevents someone like David Koresh, for example, from naming the two witnesses as people from contemporary America; in fact, the text has been carefully designed to invite him to do so.

Apocalyptic texts often string together a series of real metaphors and empty metaphors to create an "empty narrative." The "empty narrative" is a mythical story in which several episodes are empty metaphors rather than real events. The "historical" reference points which undergird the story are generally clear at the beginning, "historical" meaning those events which the audience believes to have actually happened in the past. In modern Western millennarianism, this history usually begins somewhere in the Christian Bible or other sacred texts and moves through more recent historical developments to contemporary experience. But as the story progresses its connection with reality begins to dissolve as the plot moves toward an eschatological climax somewhere just beyond the audience's present experience. The audience, caught between the past and the approaching end of time, is asked to make themselves the

in prescribed forms of social action which are appropriate to the
This technique not only utilizes the Christian Bible but is in fact derived from the

an influential empty narrative from the Christian canon. As the chapter opens, John is carried to the wilderness by an angel, where he sees a woman sitting on a scarlet beast with seven heads.

sports the dubious title "Babylon the Great: Mother of Harlots and of the Abominations of the

> But the angel said to me, "Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. The beast that
>
> destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast,
> This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven
>
> he comes, he must remain only a little while. As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the
> saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. These are united in yielding their power
>
> them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and
> earth." (NRSV)

The angel's explanation indicates that the Whore of Babylon is actually a timeline, a
beast she rides are
that city's kings. Five of these kings have fallen, one is presently ruling, the seventh has not yet

plot motion ⟶

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	G	H: Messiah
Vehicle: Allegorical Sequence	**A**	**B**	**C**	**D**	**E**	**F**	**G**	**G**	**H: Messiah**
	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	
Absent Tenor	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	⊠	**?**
	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	
Supplied Tenor	**A'**	**B'**	**C'**	**D'**	**E'**	**F'**	**?**	**G'**	**?**
Intertext:	Recent Roman History (Kings 1-6)							Audience Action	**?**

Diagram IV

John's original audience is invited to appeal to recent political history to identify the first five kings as deceased Roman emperors, and the "one who is" would represent the current ruler, probably Domitian. As the diagram indicates, event A in the Whore of Babylon passage is a metaphor for King A in Roman history, event B is a metaphor for King B, etc. In segments A-F the narrative is thus a commentary on recent Roman political history, giving John's audience a reference point for the bizarre imagery.

At this point, however, the apocalyptic timeline extends itself into an eschatological future. In this final stage of history, the last king will "wage war against the Lamb" and be defeated, initiating the millennium. This episode is scripted from the same mythological framework which organized John's interpretation of the six kings. But because this scripted episode does not refer to anything which has actually occurred or any person who has actually existed, the final "beast" and its "war against the Lamb" are empty metaphors in the sense that they do not refer to any specific thing within the reader's knowledge or experience.

It is at point G on the diagram, the point at which the millennial timeline becomes a purely scripted, empty narrative, that the apocalyptic audience must make a choice. They may choose to leave the empty metaphors empty; i.e., to leave them unattached to any specific content. This reading strategy leads to the conclusion that the text is "strange," "mystifying," "incomprehensible," or, more commonly, "meaningless nonsense." Most people will choose this strategy for interpreting apocalyptic texts.

The second option is to attach the unidentified event to something in the real world which would fit the movement of the story. The author of Revelation, like his modern millenarian descendants, clearly hopes that this "something else" will be the audience's own experience. When a sufficient number of people are willing to follow this second interpretive strategy and script their world according to the apocalyptic myth, a millenarian community is born. The first century C.E. Johannine community was one such community; a great many others exist today in the same spirit.

Of course, participation in this community has an ideological price tag. The faithful always live in a City on the Edge of Eternity, but the rent there is not cheap. To live in this city, you must strive to make your own world correspond to the apocalyptic timeline so that the plot can continue to its eschatological climax. This generally means that you must participate in certain forms of social action. For example, many Dispensational Christians, addicted to the writings of Hal Lindsey and Jack van Impe and the music of Carmen, associate the 10 kings of Revelation 17:12 with the rise of the European common market. This script requires such people to vote for candidates who oppose the Euro-dollar and many times to burn their ATM cards. This same script leads many people from this same group to believe that if Bill Clinton is not impeached American society will move one step closer to the total collapse of morals which they see as the precursor to the Tribulation.

This takes us back to the subject of this paper, which may now be restated as, Why do some people choose interpretive strategy #2 when they encounter apocalyptic discourse? Social solutions--that millennarianism appeals to the outcast and disenfranchised, those in need of money and a job and a sense of community and someone like Marshall Applegate to give them all the movies and popcorn and Nike shoes they could ever want--are easy to state in 30 second newsbytes and easy to write up in FBI reports and but very hard to identify consistently in actual cases. A person like myself, who is certainly no expert on millenarian movements, discovers very quickly upon entering this field that Western millenarian movements in the last century or

so have come out of a very diverse range of social situations, and in many cases individual millenarian movements have appealed to people from a wide range of social situations.

With my limited knowledge, I would suggest that the common denominator in these groups is that a millenarian rhetor was able to appeal to people whose personal myths and meta-narratives no longer worked, and who consequently did not know how to script their present experience or organize a plan for the future. The apocalyptic vision offered an empty narrative which could easily integrate with their personal experience and which gave them a sense of order and direction.

For lack of time, I will briefly cite a variety of well known examples. Wovoka's 1890 Ghost Dance, which led ultimately to the Sioux massacre at Wounded Knee, could be, and has been, attributed to the sudden decay of Native American culture in the second half of the 19th century. But not all Native American groups, and not even all Sioux, were drawn to the Ghost Dance. It appealed only to those whose meta-narratives could not organize the new world confronting them. Others created a new myth which advocated accommodation and negotiation with white American culture. Similarly, it is often noted that the "Cargo Cults" arose from the colonial suppression of Filipino native culture early in this century. But the people who were drawn to these groups had no previous eschatological expectation; their millennial views were generated entirely through contact with European culture and Christian missionaries. The "Cargo Cults" were appealing because they offered a vision for bringing the world back into a tolerable state, and recommended specific social and military actions which could achieve that state.

A number of more recent examples highlight the fact that even those who are well established socially may subscribe to an apocalyptic worldview. Several of David Koresh's supporters were extremely wealthy. One couple wired $68,000 from their home in Hawaii to pay the tax bill on the Mt. Carmel property when Koresh came to power. Rich and poor, some Seventh Day Adventists were attracted to Koresh's vision of a purified church. The desire to become part of a "pure church" in a "decent world" is a powerful motivation for the many established Christians who accept popular Dispensational Theology. In fact, many of those who are drawn to Dispensational Christianity also embrace the "prosperity Gospel" and have a strong voice and representation in the political right. Most also have secure jobs in the middle or upper middle classes. Very few of these people fit the media stereotype of the unemployed, illiterate dupe or emotionally unstable person who falls victim to a cult leader.

Apocalyptic rhetoric can appeal to anyone whose meta-narrative, whose story about the world, seems incongruous with reality. It appeals to those who are suffering the cognitive dissonance created by failed expectations. Hence, if I am poor and on drugs but my personal myth accounts for this in a satisfactory way, I probably will not respond to apocalyptic discourse. But if I am wealthy and educated and established and yet my myth cannot organize critical aspects of my world and experience, I may be open to a new myth which does. The millenarian vision gives me that new myth and thereby explains my situation and guides my future. The myth comforts me by placing me at the climax of salvation history. This comfort is open to anyone who chooses to appropriate the text as her own.