APOCALYPTIC COMMUNICATIONS: RECONFIGURING LITERACIES OF POWER IN *THE BOOK OF ELI* AND *THE MATRIX*

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ABSTRACT

Events beginning with the *Trinity* tests on July 16, 1945 that were followed by the horrific bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki decisively reconfigured the meaning of the apocalypse. Arguably for the first time in human history, the apocalypse was recast from its etymological origins in Greek (*apokalypsis*) signifying an *uncovering* or *unveiling* to a technological catastrophe emphasizing destruction instead of revelation. Consequently, the potential of aggressive nuclearization to end human civilization seems to have irrevocably altered our eschatological tradition: from an imaginative practice of predicting and organizing futurity to a cataclysmic neo-apocalyptic vision of complete global annihilation brought about and through atomic weapons. Through critical discourse analysis of two contemporary American apocalyptic artifacts, *The Book of Eli* (2010) and *The Matrix* (1999), I suggest in this paper that the current nuclear landscape— one of the most volatile periods since the end of the Cold War— warrants the need to critically engage with the imagined landscapes of neo-apocalyptic films and popular culture. My intervention here focuses on *The Book of Eli* (2010) and *The Matrix* (1999), to illustrate that these post-nuclear apocalyptic spaces are in fact inherently pedagogical sites, which are directly linked to an epistemic excess. I demonstrate that need to communicate this surfeit of knowledge—that unparalleled destruction, death of human bodies and indeed the

erasure of all human archives could be achieved through nuclear technology—results in tropes of *literacy* becoming the key motifs within the (neo)-apocalyptic tradition, which is always already influenced by nuclearization. Through examining representations of literacy and power in these representative neo-apocalyptic texts I show that these artifacts politicize our understanding: of knowledge within specialized domains as well as the individuals who colonize it, in order to reclaim the value of literacy as a humanizing enterprise. Further, by using non-traditional subjectivities as the repositories of redeeming and indeed revelatory knowledge they reconfigure the neo-apocalyptic tradition, steeped in catastrophe and nihilism, and recover apocalypse's originary connotations.

INTRODUCTION

[…] the catastrophe story, whoever may tell it, represents a constructive and positive act by the imagination rather than a negative one, an attempt to confront the terrifying void of a patently meaningless universe by challenging it at its own game, to remake zero by provoking it in every conceivable way[1]

In the run-up to the 2016 US Presidential Elections, the popular online news publication, *Slate.com,* started a daily news-feature called the *Trump Apocalypse Watch:* "a subjective daily estimate, using a scale of one to four horsemen, of how likely it is that Donald Trump will be elected president, thus triggering an apocalypse in which we *all die*"[2]. This hyperbolic rhetoric—also reflected in various social media memes and posts after the 2016 election—has without doubt been influenced by Trump's volatile yet consistently aggressive approach to policy-making, especially with reference to nuclear weapons. More notably it highlights how a singular technological artifact, the nuclear bomb, continues to generate apocalyptic dread even within the contemporary social imaginary. Unlocking the path to nuclearization—beginning with the *Trinity* tests on July 16, 1945 and to be followed by the horrific bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9 of the same year—decisively reconfigured the meaning of the apocalypse. Arguably for the first time in human history, the apocalypse was recast from its etymological origins in Greek (*apokalypsis*) signifying an *uncovering* or *unveiling* to a technological catastrophe, emphasizing destruction instead of revelation. Consequently, the potential of aggressive nuclearization to end human civilization seems to have irrevocably altered our eschatological tradition: from an imaginative practice of predicting and organizing futurity to a cataclysmic vision of complete global annihilation brought about and through atomic weapons. This "pessimism" that lies at the core of this transformed "neo-apocalyptic"

genre foregoes "traditional optimistic conclusion" in favor of "imaginative but definitive end-scenarios"[3] and leads us to one of the key questions that this *ASAP* special issue looks to address: what is at stake in imagining our world as ending, or as ended?

To examine this query, this article emphasizes that since the Cold War, the global nuclear landscape has rarely been more unstable. Increasing animosity amongst Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) like USA and North Korea or India and Pakistan as well as the recent nuclear disaster at Fukushima have prompted the *Bulletin of Atomic Scientists* to move the Doomsday Clock to two and a half minutes from midnight, which has been accompanied by a laconic yet terrifying warning: "[T]he probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon"[4]. Turbulent times such as these, I suggest, warrant the need to critically engage with the imagined landscapes of post-nuclear apocalyptic[5] films and popular culture. In contesting Susan Sontag's assertion that fantasies of the apocalypse are a rather "*inadequate response* [to]...the most profound dilemmas of the contemporary situation,"[6] I gravitate toward the introductory quote from Ballard and point out that any act of artistically representing/articulating the disaster is always an act of recovery, which needs to be contextualized. Particularly in the case of cultural productions that deal with post-nuclear apocalyptic landscapes, this is the recovery of the "knowledge of the [imminent] disaster... [which] saves it from being this disaster"[7]. In other words, I argue that a key tactic for challenging the juggernaut of aggressive nuclearization rampant across the world is through a critical consumption of apocalyptic artistic productions, which allow us to acknowledge as well as learn from these imagined landscapes.

Indeed, the instructive potential of apocalyptic tales is not new since they have been consistently looked upon (at least within the theological tradition) as distinctly edifying spaces.

Narratives that adopt the traditional (and etymological) notions of the apocalypse are sites where "the damned are educated by their own punishments"[8] and are self-contained artifacts: retribution is followed by salvation (in most cases) since it is predicated under a world/theological order that perceives apocalypse as redemptive. On the other hand scholars like Elizabeth Rosen point out that the inherently nihilistic tones of the neo-apocalyptic tradition— emerging in the post-1945 world order and exacerbated after 9/11—make it extremely difficult to locate educational potential in "cautionary tales, positing potential means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends"[9]. In reevaluating Rosen's assessment my intervention here focuses on contemporary American neo-apocalyptic films and illustrates that these imagined spaces, shown to emerge from a nuclear holocaust or the perils of nuclearization, are in fact inherently pedagogical sites, which are directly linked to an epistemic excess. I demonstrate that need to express this surfeit of knowledge—that unparalleled destruction, death of human bodies and indeed the erasure of all human archives could be achieved through nuclear technology—results in tropes of *literacy* becoming the key motifs within the (neo)-apocalyptic tradition, which is always already influenced by nuclearization.

Motifs of literacy, while seldom discussed, hold particular significance in reference to discussions on the nuclear. Derrida notes that:

> In our techno-scientifico-militaro-diplomatic incompetence, we may consider ourselves…as competent as others to deal with a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*…Nuclear weaponry depends, more than any weaponry in the past…upon structures of information, and communication, structures of language, including non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding…the

phenomenon is also fabulously textual also to the extent that, for the moment, a nuclear war has not taken place.[10]

Derrida's assertion underscores that the specialized nature of such discourses transform them into signifiers of power: cultural capital that needs to be acquired and put into practice to function effectively, in this context, within the nuclear complex. Arising from this framework this article, divided into two sections, examines representations of literacy and power in two contemporary cinematic renderings of post-nuclear apocalyptic spaces: *The Book of Eli* (2010) and *The Matrix* (1999). Separated by a little more than a decade, both films seem to apparently belong to the nihilistic tradition of the neo-apocalyptic genre as they deal with decidedly non-redemptive spaces, which arise in the wake of a nuclear holocaust. Films in the genre of "apocalypse-cinema"[11] are bound to have thematic similarities and *The Book of Eli* (2010)[12] as well as *The Matrix* (1999)[13] share multiple such intersecting points, including an emphasis on religiosity, a denial of modernist grand narratives and an attempt "not merely to represent apocalypse...nor just to tell about it, but to enact it, with as great an immediacy as is possible"[14]. But most importantly the imagined sites in both these cinematic texts use the finality of an apocalyptic setting to highlight the key connection between specialized discourses and the complete abstraction of human subjectivities, which leads to the rise of such catastrophic circumstances in the first place. Interestingly, the crucial connection between these representative artistic interpretations of post-apocalyptic spaces and the fact-based speculations of nuclear discourses is this element of literacy. In both domains literacy—in its various manifestations—moves beyond being a theoretical notion to become a form of interchangeable capital that can be used towards achieving social, cultural and political ends.

Through extending Derrida's conceptualization of the nuclear bomb as a "fabulously textual" phenomenon, the first section of this article traces the role of *Technostrategic Discourse*—a term coined by Carol Cohn to describe the specialized linguistic paradigm which combines strategic thinking with nuclear technology—in abstracting the catastrophic potential of nuclear weapons on human lives and bodies. Portrayals of dehumanization in the texts examined here, I argue later on in this essay, highlight this abstraction and attempt to recover the value of human bodies, which have been rendered obscure by such specialized discourses. The second section of this article demonstrates how *The Book of Eli* and *The Matrix* question dehumanizing epistemes by using non-traditional subjectivities, within post-apocalyptic nuclear landscapes, as the repositories of redeeming and indeed revelatory knowledge.

DEHUMANIZATION AND TECHNOSTRATEGIC DISCOURSES

> Language is the essential matrix of action and policy. Every decision to pursue power, wealth, pleasure, or any other goal is shaped from the very beginning within the nexus of language.[15]

Language and nuclear weapons are inextricably linked. This phenomenon became especially pronounced following the successful testing of Soviet Russia's first nuclear bomb *First Lightning* in 1949 and the effective declaration of Soviet Russia as a nuclear superpower. Latent fear of a nuclear conflict and the consequent holocaust that had been embedded within the American national imaginary (since 1945) were suddenly catalyzed within the general populace. The situation was not helped by US governmental discursive models like *apocalypse management*[16] that construed the Cold war as an Augustinian struggle between good and evil and increasingly suggested that "communism, nuclear war and economic mismanagement all threatened to destroy the nation utterly"[17]. The declaration of Soviet Russia's nuclear

capabilities, within this context, became a watershed moment in the history of nuclearization as for the first time in human history nuclear deterrence had been established. It becomes vital to explore here how deterrence is an *entirely* discursive phenomenon: "deterrence depends not so much on possessing military capability and the willingness to use it, as on the *communication of messages* about that capability and that willingness"[18]. In the period preceding the Soviet nuclear test the American military industrial complex had been unwilling to share (secret) nuclear knowledge into the public domain, due to the sole presence of America in the nuclear club. This approach undertaken between the years 1945 and 1949, due to the lack of a competitive or threatening adversary in the global nuclear landscape, implied that American nuclear policy was under no pressure to declare itself as either a benign or a malevolent power. The entry of Soviet Russia into the nuclear arms race, however, ensured that the American government could no longer maintain their non-committal status quo. Confronted with a nuclear adversary "communication of messages" suddenly became vital not only for conveying constant information about nuclear weapons within the American military-industrial complex but also for addressing rising public fears about America's sovereignty and prospective nuclear annihilation.

On the other hand, the fear of retaliation from each other and possible global annihilation made the USSR and the US understandably cautious in the public exhibition of their nuclear capabilities.[19] Paradoxically, since the "physical power [of nuclear weapons] exerts no force until it is textualized,"[20] purveyors of nuclear weapons systems "to compensate for its incapacity to enter the domain of human semiosis and thereby directly communicate its threatening message"[21] sought lack-fulfillment in the verbalizations of Technostrategic Discourse. The power of nuclear weapons which unlike conventional weapons cannot be displayed through "the palpably visible pageant of cavalry, infantry, artillery, and impedimenta moving across the

countryside, usurping the routing peasants and poultry, approaching the watchtowers"[22] made the USA and USSR forcibly adopt discursive signifiers to communicate both their strength to their adversaries as well as abstract the bomb's catastrophic potential from the public sphere. Even in the current volatile nuclear landscape such an ideological background implies that testimonials of nuclear threat are confined to linguistic spaces such as "the verbal texts of dispatches, diplomatic missions, treaties and ultimatums…understood as tissues of verbal signifiers referring beyond themselves to the 'real' power that gives these whatever force they claim"[23]. Since the destructive capacity of nuclear power is ensconced within these specialized discourses, users of this language (defense intellectuals, nuclear analysts) by virtue of their familiarity with this language of power are culturally and socially constructed as empowered *hyperliterate* entities.

The term Technostrategic Discourse which is central to our discussions of the nuclear, was coined by Carol Cohn:

> to represent the intertwined, inextricable nature of technological and nuclear strategic thinking…to indicate the degree to which nuclear strategic language and thinking are imbued with, indeed constructed out of modes of thinking that are associated with technology[24]

Technostrategic Discourses formulate "*rationa*l systems for dealing with the problems created by nuclear weapons" (author's emphases; Cohn 690) and not only codify the threats of nuclear war but also reconfigure human bodies in reference to nuclear war scenarios. Humans in Technostrategic Discourses are understood as logistics or *standing reserve* that merely facilitate the production and sustenance of strategic and technological discourses, meant to serve the elite within and beyond the military-industrial complex. Cohn discusses this aspect of human beings being abstracted, implicit in Technostrategic Discourse, by pointing out that:

What hit me first was the elaborate use of abstraction and euphemism, of words so bland that they never forced the speaker or enabled the listener to touch the realities of nuclear holocaust that lay behind the words…This language has enormous destructive power, but *without emotional fallout*; without the emotional fallout that would result if it were clear one was talking about plans for mass murder, mangled bodies, and unspeakable human suffering. Defense analysts talk about 'countervalue attacks' rather than about incinerating cities. Human death, in nuclear parlance, is most often referred to as 'collateral damage'; for, as one defense analyst said wryly, "The Air Force doesn't target people, it targets shoe factories.[25]

Neo-apocalyptic culture, which is substantially influenced by the ideologies of the military industrial complex as well as by the global anxieties it engenders, naturally reflects the nuclear scenarios constructed in Technostrategic Discourses. Pertinently, current depictions of nihilism in neo-apocalyptic culture can be directly linked to the unstable status quo existing amongst antagonistic Nuclear Weapons States (NWS) that were and are still being forced by the theory of mutual survival into nuclear deterrence. Neo-apocalyptic texts reflect the dread implicit in nuclear deterrence that a first strike by any NWS would probably connote world annihilation. Post- nuclear apocalyptic landscapes, therefore, become opportune sites for manifesting dehumanization as the landscape itself emerges from an ideology (of nuclearization) that has scant regard for humanity. Subsequently, these texts translate the premonitions of catastrophe implicit in Technostrategic Discourse into the non-redemptive spaces of post-nuclear apocalyptic settings.

These dehumanized post-nuclear apocalyptic landscapes, I emphasize here, recover what is abstracted and denied within the aggressive domain of nuclearization and Technostrategic Discourses; namely, an acknowledgement of the immediate as well as long-term physical and psychological fallout of nuclear weapons on human beings. Such imagined settings illustrate how the use of nuclear weapons must naturally be accompanied by bodies stripped of their values, ethics, morals and the sense of an identity: indeed qualities that make them human. Dehumanization literally meaning "removing the human-ness"[26] is not expressed in these post-nuclear apocalyptic landscapes by the absence of human beings but rather through the presence of bodies "that seemed human—had a human-looking form, walked on two legs, spoke human language, and acted in more-or-less human ways—but which was nonetheless *not human*"[27]. As David Livingstone Smith notes in his seminal treatise, *Less Than Human,* ideologies/individuals which perform such dehumanization literally believe in the sub-human status of the populations they abhor. Using the example of the Nazis during WW II, Smith mentions how the Nazis were "convinced that, although Jews looked every bit as human as the average Aryan, this was a facade and that, concealed behind it, Jews were really filthy, parasitic vermin"[28]. This mode of thought that creates a clear "conceptual distinction between *appearing* human and *being* human (author's emphasis; ibid) is what structures the discourses governing nuclearization as well. Carol Cohn highlights that Technostrategic Discourse "almost seems a willful distorting process, a playful, perverse refusal of accountability-because to be accountable to reality is to be unable to do this work"[29]. The dehumanized settings in the neo-apocalyptic productions discussed here therefore serve as an effective reminder of the cruelty and potential for mass genocide implicit in the nuclear bomb and weaponized nuclear technology. The cultural productions analyzed in the

following section use depictions of dehumanization to challenge the abstraction of human bodies as well as promote a new literacy based in community-based humane practices.

RESISTING LITERACIES OF POWER IN *THE BOOK OF ELI* AND *THE MATRIX*

Threatening texts originate from arms, whose threatening power originates in threatening texts[30].

The potential for salvation that had been considered synonymous with the earlier conceptualizations of the apocalypse had been replaced, after 1945, by the "nuclear referent": a signified that cannot have a material existence since the presence of nuclear apocalypse must be synonymous with the absence of all signifying systems[31]. Unsurprisingly, many artistic productions in the neo-apocalyptic tradition have further consolidated this sense of an irrevocable ending, through representative examples that locate the apocalypse as an "adjective now understood to be a synonym for the catastrophic or devastating"[32]. Peter Szendy takes this argument forward in his topical treatise *Apocalypse-Cinema* and notes that the affinity between the apocalypse and the cinema is due to the contingence between "anticipations, intimations, representations of the end of the world and...*The finitude of the film* as a structure delimited in time"[33]. This sense of urgency that results from the finiteness of film-as-a-medium also makes it a particularly potent political site since they can choose to deliver content which provokes conversation/action and in effect extends the life-span of cinema, beyond its viewing duration.

The films from the neo-apocalyptic tradition examined here choose that praxis and politicize our understanding of specialized knowledge and the individuals who colonize it, to reclaim the value of literacy as a humanizing enterprise. Further, they promote a neo-apocalyptic tradition that recovers the etymological origin of the apocalypse as an *uncovering* instead of

being steeped in catastrophe and nihilism. In doing so, these cultural productions become allegories for a renewed understanding of the relationship between literacy and power. By decrying the position of individuals considered *hyperliterate* in our current socio-political milieu: such as defense intellectuals within the military-industrial complex who represent "an exaggerated investment in the power of [specific forms of] literacy to the detriment of attention to how life is lived"[34], this article emphasizes that "any concern about language must point eventually to a concern about human relationships - a concern for how we have come to be organized and structured as a human community"[35] Models of hyperliteracy in *The Book of Eli* and *The Matrix*, in contrast to the specialized literacy paradigms, focus on a pluralistic understanding of literacy that eschews traditional print-based frameworks to cater to definitions of multi-modal literacy, which seek to be more inclusive and support the "integration of multiple modes of communication and expression"[36].

Erasure and elision of minority subjectivities are symptomatic of specialized domains such as Technostrategic Discourses, which only allow and legitimize the participation of privileged and normative bodies. Donaldo Macedo terms such knowledge systems as *literacies of power*: an "ideology that systematically negates the cultural experiences of many members of society—not only minorities but also anyone who is poor or disenfranchised"[37]. The neo-apocalyptic texts discussed here are distinguished by their attempts to question such literacies of power that abstract the value of human bodies, to service dominant ideologies. While there are multiple texts that perform similar tactical subversions of strategic knowledge systems, this article chooses to focus on *The Book of Eli* and *The Matrix* for two specific reasons. Firstly, both neo-apocalyptic texts, though thematically divergent, become primers for understanding how literacy is fundamentally a social process and deeply intertwined within its context. Secondly,

the specific setting—post-nuclear apocalyptic spaces—within which these texts choose to challenge literacies of power make them powerful allegories for understanding that dehumanizing practices based in Anglo-American models of progress must be challenged through an inclusive multimodal praxis of literacy. Derrida's emphasis on nuclear weaponry depending upon "non-vocalizable language, structures of codes and graphic decoding" implies that Technostrategic Discourse and Anglo-American conceptualizations of literacy emerge from the same episteme, where "subject manner or meaning is privileged over form"[38]. Therefore, countering hegemonic knowledge systems, such as Technostrategic Discourses, can only be achieved by developing counter models of multimodal literacy: a tactic that becomes coterminous with challenging Anglo-American epistemes of modernity based largely within a print-paradigm. Inclusive models of multimodal literacy that acknowledge linguistic, aural, spatial, verbal and even tactile methods of acquiring knowledge become the primary motif in *The Book of Eli* and *The Matrix*, which allows both neo-apocalyptic productions to recover the "non-vocalizable" humanity, suppressed by hegemonic knowledge paradigms.

In *The Book of Eli* the protagonist Eli (Denzel Washington) is one of the few survivors in a post-apocalyptic world, which has been ravaged by a nuclear war. He has become a *walker* who moves from one place to another in search of subsistence and shelter and has been doing so for thirty years. While he wears tattered clothes, scavenges for attire from dead bodies and eats only animals that he has himself hunted, Eli has remained on a righteous path and refused to revert to any unethical act to fulfill his material needs. In this bleak post-nuclear apocalyptic setting where there has been a complete breakdown of social order leading large sections of humans to cannibalism, Eli is distinguished by his actions: he is empathetic to the plight of stray animals, even reformed robbers and seeks solace through listening to classical music on his

prized possession, a battered iPod. Eli's adversary in the movie Carnegie (Gary Oldman) is

introduced as a "cultured" individual who is nattily dressed and groomed, within a setting where

most individuals cannot be bothered about cosmetic looks and hygiene. When the audience first

encounters Carnegie he is reading the biography of Mussolini, as his henchmen bring forward a

consignment of books. It soon becomes clear that Carnegie is a tyrant, much like the subject of

the autobiography he is reading, and is the ruler of a small town with plans for world domination.

He seeks to achieve this ambition by appropriating the 'power' invested in a particular (initially

unknown) book and hence sends out his henchmen regularly in search of textual artifacts.

However, unlike Eli, Carnegie is bereft of a moral compass as is made clear in the first few

scenes. He rules over the inhabitants of the town he stays in and also exploits, physically and

sexually, a blind woman Claudia (Jennifer Beals) and her daughter Solara (Mila Kunis), who are

forced to live with him for food and shelter.

In sharp contrast to Carnegie, the Bible quoting-but heavily-armed Eli has the undertones

of being a humanist and an idealist. Eli has unmatchable combat skills but he refrains from

violence until forced into and believes in helping his fellow survivors. As the movie progresses the viewer is made aware that Eli's apparently invincible status resides in the faith that he derives from a first edition *King James' Bible*, which he carries in his backpack. The audience soon comes to know that it is this *very* book that Carnegie sees as a "weapon aimed right at the heart and minds of the weak and desperate" (*The Book of Eli*) Carnegie's desperate attempts to acquire this book from Eli is fundamentally in conflict with the purpose of Eli's journey: to reach a destination on the West Coast of US where his faith and a "voice in his head" has asked him to take the Bible. Carnegie asks Eli "Do you read" at their first meeting in the bar-cum-brothel Carnegie owns, to which Eli responds "Every day," underlining that conventional textual literacy is a rare commodity in this uncivilized world. Within an otherwise textually illiterate world, where the only forms are "literacy" required are the skills that allow an individual to survive— often through looting, mutilating and plundering—Carnegie and Eli's ability to critically engage with printed material underscore their evolved and consequently "hyperliterate" status. Carnegie remarks to Eli that "people like you and me (read: literate and educated) are the future" (*The Book of Eli)* since Carnegie believes they own the cultural capital required to control the world.

Carnegie in abusing his literate status to exploit his fellow human beings and using his personalized interpretations of religion for social and political domination, epitomizes not only the Western tradition of logocentric literacy but also all specialized linguistic frameworks (such as Technostrategic Discourses) that use language towards non-altruistic purposes. Carnegie exemplifies the "modernist modus against which postmodernists identify themselves," that create referential models of epistemology as opposed to the postmodernist conception "that the meaning of any word, concept, or idea is *not* anchorable in any definitive sense"[39]. These models, criticized by deconstructionists as being "driven by a desire to establish human meaning

through an anchoring of it in constructs and categories, which can then be taken to "represent" an original reality"[40], is exactly what Eli stands in opposition to in the film. The parallel between the setting of *The Book of* Eli and the contemporary world is explicit: Eli and Carnegie represent two opposite ends of the same epistemic spectrum, in which knowledge of specialized discourses produces valued hyperliterate bodies. Eli mirrors the position of skilled experts such as doctors and teachers who are understood to contribute positively toward human society while in contrast Carnegie represents individuals like defense analysts and politicians, who strive within a grey realm of profiteering and exploitation[41]. Eli, therefore, actively resists the literacy of power that Carnegie represents and believes in a democratic and pluralistic model of knowledge dissemination. Hence he refuses to hand over the Bible, which he knows will be exploited for Carnegie's personal benefit**.** On the contrary, as the audience later comes to know, Eli's intended destination in the West is a place from where multiple physical manifestations of the Bible (literally meaning "The Book") can be produced and circulated for individualized interpretations.

As the plot progresses Eli is violently forced by Carnegie and his troops to forsake possession of the Bible when they hold Solara hostage, but in a significant twist it turns out that the book is in *Braille* revealing Eli's visually challenged status. Significantly, the Bible that Eli carries with him performs a critical role since it is a text that predicts both the disaster/apocalypse and the resultant revelation. It functions as a semiotic marker indicating both the apocalypse and the consequent potential of a (neo) revelation through a non-traditional model of literacy. The power of the Bible is therefore indeed the power of the sign and the persistence of semiotics. However Eli's inability to see and engage with the printed text is not a detriment, since he has memorized the entire book enabling him to physically narrate the content to the librarian at his final destination: Alcatraz Island (that has been now transformed into a makeshift

library and press). Carnegie's inability to decipher the Braille (as a visually able person he is unversed in Braille) is a striking reversal of the "deep politics of exclusion that resides…within the logocentric tradition" of literacy[42], which constructs interpretations from print-based texts as the dominant discourse. In contrast Eli's physical proximity to the text and his very ability to engage in a tactile conversation with the Bible (and metaphorically all books as the Bible etymologically connotes "book) reinserts the humanizing potential of literacy with a dehumanized space. Eli's intimate narrative performance wherein he lies down beside the librarian at Alacatraz Island shows a community-based model of literacy that directly challenges super-specialized epistemic models—like Technostrategic Discourses—that only cater to the interests of a few elite subjectivities.

Eli's final act of narration before his death, also emphasizes the unreliable (yet humanistic) tradition of oral narration as a legitimate act of knowledge production, which is often denied within hegemonic print-based literacy models. This act of deconstructing the first printed artifact[43] through the unreliable memory and narration of a traditionally minority subjectivity, metaphorically represents the Derridean logic that meaning cannot be grounded into a singular model since the "meaning of something cannot be "defined, only derived referentially"[44]. Eli's verbal performance underscores that "what is lost continues to 'play'…within the present interpretations as a 'trace', which can itself be archaeologically recovered through the process of "deconstruction"[45]. Distinguished from the "extraordinary abstraction and removal from… reality"[46] that characterizes the mechanized modes of specialized discourses, knowledge is produced in *The Book of Eli* through human interaction and aimed towards an inclusive community-based dialogic model of social progress. Further, verbally eliciting an unstable narrative in a post-apocalyptic space and from a racially

marginalized literate body undercuts the hegemonic tradition of literacy implicit in Anglo-American epistemes. It establishes the importance of recognizing non-traditional processes of literacy that exist within "women, aboriginals, or once-colonized peoples of the Third World" who are "marginalized within the reigning dispensations of knowledge and control"[47]. Eli's racially marginalized persona as the initiator of a humane literacy in a post-nuclear apocalyptic space not only counters "the literate abuses of power (that) are the result of long-standing projects, like European imperialism"[48] but also reverses the destructive tradition of the neo-apocalyptic genre by representing a renewed beginning through decentered knowledge production. Critically, this is an alternate mode of literacy that has not been stripped of its humanistic connotations and it is not a source of capital to be used for personal benefit—rather it embodies 'revelation' through the "the hopes, the promises and pleasures, that come of working language's possibilities"[49].

Unlike *The Book of Eli,* the post-nuclear apocalyptic setting in *The Matrix* is not made immediately apparent. The setting seems to be in 90's America where Thomas Anderson, a gifted computer programmer is stuck in a dead-end coding job by the day and transforms into Neo, the hacker, during the night. He is fascinated by the mysterious group of anti-establishment hackers led by Morpheus and Trinity who are continuously on the run from the government and its black-suited agents. Neo has an inkling that there is something beyond what meets the eye in this world, a suspicion that is solidified when black-suited agents arrest him from a workplace and literally "melt" his mouth shut during a hostile interrogation. It is only later when Trinity arranges for a meeting between Neo and Morpheus, that Neo (and in effect the audience) becomes aware that the normalized world circa 1999 in which he apparently exists is a "neural interactive simulation," The Matrix. As Neo is "plugged-out" of The Matrix, through taking the

red pill, he is made aware that the actual temporal setting is circa 2199 and the current physical world has been rendered uninhabitable by a nuclear war amongst the humans and sentient machines, which happened a hundred years ago. The current post-nuclear apocalyptic world or the "desert of the real," as Morpheus terms it, emerged from a war between humans and these artificially intelligent machines. Humans had sought to end the war by nuking the atmosphere and stopping the machines' access to solar energy, their energy source. However, in a twist of fate, the machines decided to replace their dependence on solar power by harvesting humans for their bio-electricity.

Critical scholarship on *The Matrix* has focused heavily on either the concept of *simulacra* and Baudrillard's influence on the movie or the conflation of destructive apocalyptic technology, world religions as well as its esoteric use of philosophical concepts. In a significant departure from such streams of scholarship, I discuss here how *The Matrix* uses the post-nuclear apocalyptic setting to challenge the "decontextualized, culturally insensitive and often ethnocentric view of literacy"[50]. In doing so, it initiates a critique of self-identifying "progressive" models of literacy, emerging from developed contexts, which abstract the value of minority literacy practices. Within this context, Neo's "plugging out" of the computer generated matrix is critical in more ways than one: Neo's liberation emphasizes the importance of understanding The Matrix as an unstable signifier. Neo is made aware that The Matrix he inhabited is sixth iteration of a simulated world, which the machines had created to enslave human kind. However, only those who manage to escape The Matrix are able to access this knowledge. The concordance with hegemonic knowledge systems in our everyday world are distinct here: each matrix represents an evolved surface of signs that are utilized by the transcendental signifying system i.e. the machines, for their own gain. As within specialized

paradigms like Technostrategic Discourses, where human bodies are abstracted into "collateral damage"[51] to further hegemonic interests, The Matrix has been created by an artificial computer consciousness to literally deny human subjectivity and "keep humans pacified while being used as a power source" (Rosen 102).

Further the motif of *dehumanization* that emerges within such specialized knowledge systems is also made explicit. In a scene from the movie where Morpheus has been captured and is being interrogated by Agent Smith, a powerful program that eliminates threats against The Matrix, the agent comments "Human beings are a disease, a cancer of this planet. You're a plague and we are the cure" (*The Matrix*). As in *The Book of Eli* where Carnegie uses his knowledge of literacy's power to create distinctions between rulers and the subjects, the Agent symbolizes institutions and practices which develop create rigid binaries between dominant bodies and minority others. Although, it might be argued that the progressing models of the matrix represent an evolution and hence a pluralistic paradigm, these multiple models of The Matrix are unified by the singular goal of the machines—to defeat human resistance. Neo's potential to be the "One" will be and is only realized when he manages to perceive The Matrix in its "real form"—not as a tangible physical human world but as specialized domain or computer simulation that abstracts human bodies into "batteries" to support binary systems constituted of binary 0's and 1's.

While configurations of literacy in *The Book of Eli* undercut hegemonic discourses in favor of legitimizing "the right to speak of all voices that are suppressed within the dominant dispensation of things"[52], *The Matrix* explores another facet of literacy namely, "the continuation of literacy by other means… (that) has given the written word much greater a power to proliferate" (Willinsky 16). Interestingly, the simulated world created by machines to enslave

human consciousness is still primarily a print-based culture. Even though computers are present in this artificial world, there is a reliance on information that has been physically documented as is portrayed in representative scenes where Neo's hacking records are shown to be gathered by Agent Smith in a bulky dossier. However, this apparent existence of a print-based literacy is a façade that has been maintained by the machines to create a simulation of a human culture (circa 1999) within The Matrix. It may not be stretch to decipher that the failure of pre-Matrix human beings (circa 1999) to anticipate and expect issues with machine sentience could be due to their reliance on print capitalism[53], which has historically focused on profiteering and legitimizing dominant interests through the medium of print. Pertinently for Neo and his fellow human survivors who have taken the *red pill* to gain epiphany, there is a recognition that to simultaneously shuttle between The Matrix and the Zion (the only human subterranean city) they cannot rely on any one form of literacy, either digital or print. Survival within this difficult post-nuclear apocalyptic space requires an expertise in multiple "semiotic resources, (e.g. language, gesture, images) co-deployed across various modalities (e.g. visual, aural, somatic)[54]

Neo's ability to unearth and literally deconstruct the dehumanizing matrix lies latent in his pre-enlightened position not only as a software programmer cum hacker but also a discerning reader of Jean Baudrillard (*Simulacra and Simulations*), Kevin Kelly (*Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World*) and Dylan Evans (*Introducing Evolutionary Psychology*). Such eclectic reading habits typify that Neo, the Chosen One, needs to be the repository of multiple knowledge systems since monolithic models, focused on either print or digitality, are destined to fail in this post-nuclear apocalyptic world. In fact as highlighted in *World Record* (one of the movies in *The Animatrix*[55] series) an awareness of The Matrix requires "a rare degree of intuition and sensitivity and a questioning nature"[56] qualities

that can be mapped onto postmodern conceptions of literacy that need "an ability to decipher beyond what is represented"[57]. Specifically Neo and the other human survivors in order to negotiate with the sentient machine consciousness need to have a level of multimodal literacy that unlike "textual literacy…requires one to possess increasing layers of literacy" (Liu 9). Neo's journey towards achieving this multimodal literacy, which is concurrent to becoming 'the one' achieves finality when The Matrix can be perceived as "a world without rules and control, without borders and boundaries" (*The Matrix*). Again this realization is finalized in the movie through tactile human contact as the apparently-deceased Neo receives a kiss from Trinity— leading to Neo's revival and his physical deconstruction of Agent Smith through appropriating Smith's body.

Neo's destruction of the omniscient computer program Agent Smith (who is able to assume anyone's body/identity) essentially underscores the deconstruction of a singular signifying system in favor of a pluralistic "world (where) anything is possible" (*The Matrix)*. Neo's actions find verisimilitude in the tenets of postmodern literacy that similarly decry monolithic knowledge systems, instead recognizing continuously evolving and dynamic modes of literacy. While some scholars have exhorted Neo's character as a messianic figure, the movie highlights that to deconstruct entire knowledge systems, a cohesive and consolidated effort is required. Not surprisingly, in the last scene of the film Neo makes a telephone call to presumably the sentient machine consciousness running The Matrix, promising it that he is "going to show the people what you don't want them to see" (*The Matrix*) implying that the deconstruction of this monolithic model will be a community effort and not based in a single body or subjectivity The delegitimization of the dominant discourse in the film also happens through the deconstruction of Neo's own ideological assumptions. Before his 'death', Neo had been

disbelieving of his status as 'the one' who embodied the hopes of human salvation but his resurrection critically underscores that in order to conceive a pluralistic world, it is necessary to transgress any rigid thought systems, even if they are one's own.

CONCLUSION: RECONCILING THE NUCLEAR AGE IN NEO-APOCALYPTIC CULTURE

> Events themselves only become meaningful as either the consequences of previous texts or the causes of still further interpretive texts[58].

The fear of global annihilation through nuclear war remains a threat that has loomed large over human civilization for the past several decades; paradoxically it is a threat that cannot be quantified because unlike conventional wars, the nuclear war until now has only been the "signified referent, never the real referent"[59]. Beyond the domain of nuclear bomb testing, which occurs (mostly) under controlled circumstances—the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain the single referential point for linguistically constructing the nuclear phenomenon. Significantly, this implies that both the real spaces of nuclear strategic thinking and the imagined spaces of post-nuclear apocalyptic culture exist in a dialectical relationship as they collectively anticipate the nuclear catastrophe.

Due to the large scale advancements in the field of nuclear technology, especially after the Cold War, destructive capabilities of nuclear weapons have indeed multiplied to "levels of such grotesque dimensions as to defy rational understanding"[60]. Through specialized discourses,

terms such as "clean bombs", "countervalue attack" and "collateral damage"[61] manage to

abstract the destructive capacity of nuclear bombs by completely masking the element of human

suffering. It is exactly these possibilities of human suffering that are expressed in neo-

apocalyptic texts, unmasking the terrible realities of nuclear war which are left unsaid in

sophisticated linguistic paradigms. Beyond the surface dissimilarities, the parallel between *The*

Book of Eli and *The Matrix* exist at multiple levels; hope of human redemption in both films lies

invested in the human body and the mode of redemption is significantly a humane community-

oriented literacy. While in the case of Eli, it is a graphical, material form of literacy that is the

redemptive source, Neo symbolizes that either print or digital literacy is useless unless it is

grounded in empathetic human practices. Critically in both cinematic texts there is a deliberate

detachment from the associations of devastation and catastrophe found within the neo-

apocalyptic genre. *The Book of Eli* and *The Matrix* construct post-nuclear apocalyptic spaces as

terrains for the retrieval of social order and significantly this unveiling is to be attained through

dynamic multimodal forms of literacy.

    In both texts there is a disavowal of a singular book/signifying system/world order,

which can be directly linked to a critique of monolithic Eurocentric epistemes and the

assumptions as well as practices that arise out of these discourses. The motif of journeys

manifested in the both films lead to the realization that in both our pre-nuclear 'real' spaces as

well as post-nuclear 'imagined' spaces literacy is empowering, but only when we refuse to

stagnate within preconceived notions and move continually forward. For Eli, his literate status in

the pre-apocalyptic world had allowed him to access value systems that have been rendered

obsolete in the post-nuclear world. Even though Eli is exceptionally literate, his model of

empathetic literacy is underlined through his realization at the film's conclusion that it is the

book's signified values he wants to proliferate rather than the signifier (the book) itself. This proliferation is exemplified by Solara, the female protagonist in *The Book of Eli* who picks up Eli's baton. Having appropriated the attire of the deceased Eli, she is shown as the movie concludes, embarking on a journey to spread the message of civilization (presumably through community oriented knowledge.) Similarly for Neo his status as the catalyst for change is fully externalized through his telephonic clarion call to The Matrix, which simultaneously anticipates the rise of multiple 'Neos' who would break free from the darkness of the Matrix into an enlightened revelation. Both Eli and Neo underline that a mere awareness of epistemes is dangerous unless we interrogate the function and role of such knowledge systems. Because they are able to realize the intention of specialized discourses and the privileged bodies who sponsor it, Eli and Neo perform a multimodal literacy that moves beyond limiting notions of text, power and identity. This is indeed an advanced model of acquiring and disseminating knowledge —a literacy that does not stagnate in specialized discourses but is in constant movement towards recognizing protean modes of knowledge circulation.

NOTES:

[1] J.G. Ballard, qtd. in Parfrey, 1990, p.8

[2] Mathis-Lilley, Ben. "Trump Apocalypse Watch." Slate Magazine. November 9, 2016. Accessed November 11, 2017. http://www.slate.com/topics/t/trump_apocalypsewatch.html.

[3] Rosen, Elizabeth K. *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination.* Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2008, p.xv.

[4] "Doomsday Clock Timeline." January 25, 2017. Accessed November 10, 2017. https://thebulletin.org/timeline.

[5] I use the term "post-nuclear apocalyptic landscapes" to specifically denote post-apocalyptic settings that arise from a nuclear holocaust/a scenario where nuclear weapons bring about the destruction of human civilization, as we know it.

[6] (my emphasis) Sontag, Susan. "The Imagination of Disaster." October 1, 1965. Accessed October 11, 2017. https://www.commentarymagazine.com/articles/the-imagination-of-disaster/.http://www.jstor.org/stable/40644741.

[7] Blanchot, Maurice. *The Writing of the Disaster*. Translated by Ann Smock. Lincoln: UNP - Nebraska, 2015. (First Published 1980), p. ix

[8] Henning, Meghan. *Educating early Christians through the rhetoric of hell: "weeping and gnashing of teeth" as "Paideia" in Matthew and the early Church*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014. p.213.

[9]Rosen, 2009, p. xv

[10](Author's emphasis) Derrida, Jacques, Catherine Porter, and Philip Lewis. "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)." *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 20-31. doi:10.2307/464756, p. 23)

[11] Szendy, Peter. *Apocalypse-cinema: 2012 and other ends of the world*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, *Foreword*, Weber, p. x

[12] *The Book of Eli*. Directed by Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes. Produced by Joel Silver and Denzel Washington. Performed by Denzel Washington, Gary Oldman, and Mila Kunis.

[13] *The Matrix*. Directed by Larry Wachowski and Andy Wachowski. Performed by Carrie-Anne Moss, Keanu Reeves and Laurence Fishburne.

[14] Weber in Szendy, 2012, p.xiv

[15]Chernus, Ira. *Apocalypse Management: Eisenhower and the Discourse of National Insecurity*. California: Stanford University Press, 2008

[16] ibid

[17] Chernus, 2008, p. 7

[18] (my emphasis) McCanles, Michael. "Machiavelli and the Paradoxes of Deterrence." *Diacritics*14, no. 2 (1984): 11-19. doi:10.2307/464755.p.11

[19] The forms of testing the capacity of nuclear bombs through underground, atmospheric, exo-atmospheric and underwater testing undertaken by countries that have nuclear capability are essentially non-full scale tests that do not provide actual data about the destructive capabilities of fission or fusion bombs (Sublette)

[20] McCanles, 1984, p.13

[21] Ibid

[22] ibid

[23] Ibid

[24] Cohn, Carol. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*12, no. 4 (1987): 687-718. doi:10.1086/494362, p.690

[25] Ibid, p. 691

[26] Smith, David Livingstone. *Less than human: why we demean, enslave, and exterminate others.* New York: St. Martins Griffin, 2012, p.1

[27] (my emphasis; ibid)

[28] Ibid, p.2

[29] Cohn, 1987, p. 698

[30] McCanles, 1984, p.16

[31] Derrida, 1984, p.20

[32] Rosen, 2008, p. xiv

[33] Szendy, Peter. *Apocalypse-cinema: 2012 and other ends of the world*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2015, *Foreword*, Weber, p. x)

[34] Smith, David G. "Modernism, Hyperliteracy, and the Colonization of the Word." *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 17, no. 2 (1992), p. 248

[35] Smith, 1992, p. 250

[36] "Multimodal Literacies - NCTE." November 17, 2005. Accessed November 18, 2017. http://www2.ncte.org/statement/multimodalliteracies/.

[37] "Foreword," Macedo, Donaldo P. *Literacies of power: what Americans are not allowed to Know* Boulder: Westview Press, 2006,

[38] Wang, Jae Min. "Literacy." Theories of Media: Key words Glossary. Accessed November 05, 2017. https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/literacy/, para 4.

[39] (author's emphasis) Smith, 1992, p. 252

[40] Ibid

[41] Obeidallah, Dean. "We're the ones who are unethical." *CNN*. December 09, 2012. Accessed November 9, 2017. http://edition.cnn.com/2012/12/07/opinion/obeidallah-congress-ethics/index.html.

[42] Ibid, P. 253

[43] Bibles published by Gutenberg's Press are understood popularly to be amongst the first printed artifacts known to human civilization

[44] Smith, 1992, p. 250

[45] Ibid, p. 253

[46] Cohn, 1987, p. 686

[47] Smith, 1992, p. 253

[48] Willinsky, John. *After Literacy*. New York: Peter Lang, 2001, p.7

[49] Ibid, p. 3

[50] Collins, James, and Richard K. Blot. *Literacy and Literacies: Texts, Power and Identity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. xi

[51] Cohn, 1987, p.692

[52] Smith, 1992, p. 253

[53] Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*. London: Verso, 2016.

[54] "What is Multimodal Literacy?" *Multimodal Literacy*. January 23, 2015. Accessed November 09, 2017. https://multimodalstudies.wordpress.com/what-is-multimodal-literacy/.

[55] *The Animatrix* is a collection of nine short animated films set in the world of the motion picture *The Matrix*. These movies deal with interconnected and often independent storylines that contribute to the trilogy of motion pictures.

[56] ibid

[57] Wang, para 4

[58] McCanles, 1984, p.16

[59] Derrida, 1984,p. 23

[60] (Keenan qtd. in Cohn, 1987, p.688

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[61]'Clean Bombs' are nuclear devices that are largely fusion rather than fission and that therefore release a higher quantity of energy, not as radiation, but as blast, as destructive explosive power" (Cohn 691). Countervalue Attacks is the military term used for describing the process of attacking cities with the aim of inflicting maximum damage to the cities while "Human Death in nuclear parlance, is most often referred to as "collateral damage" (Cohn, 1987, p.691).