The image of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse which looms up from the book of Revelation (6:1-8) is one of the most powerful symbols and metaphors in Christian culture. It is a metaphor which contains a direct reference to life (or Salvation) and death, and to the threatened destruction of humanity, or at least a part thereof. It is chiefly for that reason that it has long been a favourite theme among biblical scholars, expositors, seers, visionaries and artists. The Horsemen who appear in the apocalypse have therefore been visualised in art down through the centuries in various ways, some more precise and some freer, from Albrecht Dürer, who in 1498 laid the basis for the classic apocalypse iconography with the Horsemen as medieval knights, through the expressionistic, stylised canvass of Tinus van Doorn, and on to the Nazgul, the black-mantled riders without faces in the Lord of the Rings, and the American servicemen who in Coppola’s anti-war film rained down bombs on the Vietnamese countryside from helicopter formations.
to the accompaniment of the Wagnerian waterfall of the *Ritt der Walküren*.

The description of the End Times is familiar chiefly through the book of Revelation, from the first century after Christ, ascribed to John the Evangelist - what has come to be termed the ‘last’ book of the Bible. In a literal sense it is an unveiling of the acts of God in what will soon take place. It tells of the last things, the end of mankind and the world: the final judgement. Christ (the Lamb of God) is charged with the opening of the book with seven seals (5:1-14), and with that the announcement of the plan of salvation: the Second Coming of Christ and the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. With the breaking of each of the first four seals a horseman appears, the symbols of conquest, war, hunger and death (6:1-8). The first horseman, on a white horse, represents Christ, who as the conqueror bears with him a bow and a crown. The second horseman rides a red horse, and with his sword symbolises war. The third horseman is a symbol of hunger and is seated upon a black horse, with a balance in his hand. The fourth horseman, usually depicted as a skeleton, symbolises death. He is seated on a pale horse and with his scythe sows death and pestilence on earth. They race over mankind like a tidal wave, and the elect and reprobate are subject to them. After this Jesus pronounces judgement, for which the souls of the living and of the dead awakened to life are placed in the balance. In this weighing up of lives, the question of whether they have practised the seven acts of mercy is definitive. The gates of heaven stand wide open for the good, the fires of hell await the evildoers.

In its original setting ‘apocalypse’ thus does not refer to an unambiguous end of the world taking place in dramatic and ominous visions. The apocalyptic horsemen are in fact a double image: to be sure,
of the threat of death and pestilence, but at the same time also the divine perspective of hope and Salvation.

In any case, the Bible passages involved contain divine mysteries and decrees with regard to the End Times and the history of mankind. Within this, the Horsemen are one element in the dizzying and overwhelming visions that John the Evangelist experienced. These visions comprise a well-nigh inexhaustible series of images and symbols with saints, angels, monstrous animal forms, stars and such, embedded in cosmic numerical sequences, which are all part of an apocalyptic conflict between good and evil in which Christ obtains the victory over Satanic forces, resulting in the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom.

The divergent representations of the apocalypse noted above however indicate the semantic shifts which have taken place through history with regard to the meaning of the term and the depiction of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse in visual media and written texts. Until the 16th century the original mystical meaning remained intact; thereafter, strongly influenced by Luther’s interpretation, a shift took place toward a less Christocentric significance for the account. More general interpretations and associations arose which, responding to the unforgettable imagery and metaphors, increasingly often pointed toward a catastrophic end. Rather than the double perspective of salvation and doom, the apocalypse and its horsemen have been ever more reduced to purely the destruction of civilisation accomplished by a single-minded death squad. For instance, the ‘single-player action game’ Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse is available for Playstation 2, in which the gamer takes the role of the archangel Abaddon in a battle against the apocalyptic Horsemen, purely Satanic personifications of plague, war, hunger and death, with the goal of preventing these horsemen from realising the destruction of the world. The divine horseman of deliverance
is exchanged for one who spreads the plague, and the player must save himself, winning his or her own victory; there is no benevolent God to help in this, as the player himself is God.

The powerful and evocative images of the apocalypse have also been popular in conservative Catholic circles and with the devotional circles around religious visionaries. They are intended as a warning for all those who have not chosen for the true faith and the lifestyle and attitude it requires. They are convinced that anyone who continues to wander lost in this atheistic, wicked world will be overtaken by these agents of wrath. It is all or nothing: an opposition that is precisely characteristic of religious sects and movements that champion a form of fundamentalism. Eternal life or eternal damnation? That is the fundamental, existential question posed by an approaching end time, Apocalypse Now. This will be about such themes, placed in the context of modern unofficial devotions. With reference to the event ‘The Eternal Body’, Ennio Bertrand and Peter Jan Margry want to connect contemporary Marian icons with the universal fear of death and apocalypticism, and on the basis of a painting and their work, suggest a new understanding of this.

**A Painting and Madonnina**

It was a 1932 painting of apocalyptic horsemen hidden away in the storerooms of the Catharijneconvent Museum, Utrecht, that caught our attention and alerted us to the relation between our work. Images of Mary which weep blood - *Madonninas* in Italian - are a material form in which the ideas of the modern, deviant devotions become visible in society. The work each of us has done, touches on these images. Ennio
Bertrand became aware of them as part of the iconographic waterfall that the media spews out daily through the screen and was inspired to manipulate them. I myself visited the owners of such weeping images, photographed them and tried to determine what the significance of this phenomenon was, both for these persons themselves and for society. Mary often appears in these unofficial devotions, giving the visionaries involved messages with dire warnings for all who live in error in this world, and regarding its approaching doom. These messages are the reason for various Marian images beginning to weep blood, expressing her sorrow at the actions of man today and the sombre prospects that he is calling down upon himself.

1 The painting by Tinus van Doorn measures 120 x 130 cm and bears catalogue number ABM S429.
The painting of the horsemen of the apocalypse by Tinus van Doorn also reflects a sombre message. The canvass must actually even be seen as a prefiguration of the apocalypse of 20th century warfare. It was painted in the 1930s, at the time of the rise of National Socialism. Hence, there are no images of hope to be seen any more in the painting, and - by the central placement of the skeleton - only those of destruction and death. Some years later it became clear just how much of a sign or foreshadowing of a dark, anticipated threat to life this was when Van Doorn and his wife, living in Brussels as a NRC correspondent, watched the German army march into the city on May 17, 1940, decided not to await a further assault by this apocalyptic cannon-fodder, and took their last judgement into their own hands.

Deviant Devotions

The year 2000 is already several years behind us now, but for years when that magical date still lay ahead of us it functioned as a marker, a turning point in history, a projected plane of fracture in time, indeed for many as the endpoint. For many fanatical believers, those whom scholars in the field refer to as devotees, this round date could mean nothing other than the beginning of a new era - and not in sublunar time, but in a new, divine time that at least for the elect could only dawn with the separation of the good and evil which would took place when the final conflict broke out.

Great religious systems such as Islam, Protestant and Roman Catholic Christianity all have more or less coherent systems which prescribe a code of conduct on earth, but also offer a perspective on what believers can expect after death. Particularly the latter two, the Christian
traditions, have been confronted with frequent schisms and heretical movements, alternative religious forms which contest and undermine the institutional church’s monopoly on salvation. As we said, conservative, fundamentalist and eccentric adherents of unofficial devotions and religious movements have appropriated various conceptions and metaphors related to the last judgement to function as support in realising their objectives. In that respect these movements and groups are simply reflections of particular social and cultural expressions consisting of complicated power configurations.

From time immemorial the Roman Catholic church has assigned an important role to the devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. Within this Church the Marian devotion is indeed the most important saint’s cult. At certain times Mary has (and does) revealed herself to some Catholics by means of appearances and messages. This is a phenomenological tradition which reaches back into the Middle Ages. Until the 1930s almost all of the places where these appearances took place were acknowledged by the Church and sometimes grew into shrines of international stature, such as Guadeloupe in Mexico, Knock in Ireland and Fatima in Portugal. These devotions must be placed within the general, mainstream Marian cult of the Catholic Church.

Since 1945 Europe has however witnessed an exponential rise in the number of Marian apparitions and messages, in which Mary’s intermediation can also take the form of crying, bleeding or moving statues or pictures of the Mother of our Lord. These exist primarily in the context of a peculiar genre of modern religious movements, namely the unofficial devotions. These are cults that have arisen all over the world in recent decades, which find their adherents among those who are preoccupied with the moral and theological erosion of the Roman Catholic Church, or at least of its priests and administrators. In their view
the Church has become corrupted, decadent, libertine, and lost its roots - in short, is infiltrated by the Devil. For them, such a church can no longer offer any prospect of deliverance, and they see continued allegiance to the church as it is now as a potential danger to their own salvation. This brings them around to themes such as illness and death and mortality, and ultimately also to the End of Time. Stimulated by something that appears to be a personal existential protection mechanism, they go in search of an alternative, a better religious concept, and consequently turn away, wholly or in part, from the church as a universal institution.

Because in terms of form and function their religious praxis strongly resembles that of the official Church, devotees often appear insufficiently aware of their deviant content. This grey area is often strengthened because of the presence of priests - some still in good standing, some suspended - who have stepped outside of Church discipline to support these cults. As a rule, the devotional cultus has an ideology that is oriented in practical and concrete ways to solving problems in daily life. This is an aspect which convinces many of the devotees that they are a place where the real ‘truth’ can be found. For the rest, the devotees - to a large extent middle-aged or older, a majority of whom are female - are far from all being fanatic and extremely conservative zealots. Often they are traditionally oriented Catholics who have difficulty with the church renewal of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), who seek to continue to experience the mystique and ritualty of such devotions from pre-conciliar times.

The adherents are characterised by an existential doubt about their own identity and their position in society, as well as fear of the future. The modern devotions make it possible for people to design their own religious life in a more individual manner and make use of an individualised ritualty, ‘invented traditions’ and the familiar/traditional
religiosity and liturgy from before the second Vatican Council. The thought in the back of the minds of many devotees is that by creating their own religious structure, they will be able to find personal salvation better than they could elsewhere. This is in contrast to the ordinary church, which in their view insufficiently appreciates the diabolical threat to mankind. The need for devotions surrounding such manifestations is thus fed by the massive changes in post-war society. Since the close of World War II mankind has been witness to radical changes in social and cultural paradigms; the apparent guiding principles for life have been lost. This has meant that the problem of finding meaning in life has only been intensified since then, through changes in the plausibility structure of belief. On the one hand, modern devotions offer the promise that the devotees can give shape to and understand their lives, and within them their religious feelings, in a more individual manner, and on the other hand allow a return to ‘traditional’ liturgy and religiosity. Because things which previously were not formally recognised as even existing are now often accepted - one can think of legalised abortion, married priests, acceptance of homosexuality, new approaches in theology such as the introduction of historical/critical methods - for many Catholics the basis of their faith has been eroded, and they are in search of simple criteria for truth. In all the uncertainty and perplexity that the Church has had a hand in creating, one of the primary sources of support to which its people look is the Roman Catholic Marian tradition: the helpful Mother who appears as a rescuer, who will not fail to intercede, and, more than all else, who speaks the truth. Many of the devotees have to deal with painful personal situations or health problems, and seek support from like-minded individuals. As an extension of all this, they often suffer from existential doubt about their identity and anxiety about the future, about illness, death, or the end of the world. We are often dealing here with persons
who have little or no capacity to participate in the freedoms and possibilities of the current liberated and liberal-thinking society, and therefore find themselves in a certain social and cultural isolation.

It is true that deviant devotions arise within the boundaries of the ecclesiastical culture of Catholicism, but they manifest themselves as a rigid religious alternative. Because of the great success of some of these private devotional activities, groups and organisations - Medjugorje, for example - the Catholic Church has become increasingly cautious, chiefly because the number of people who can be reached by modern communications techniques has become much larger, and because of that can influence the position of the Church, its doctrines and religious practices more deeply.

The renewal in the Catholic Church initiated by the Second Vatican Council thus meant an extra stimulus for the rise of heterodox and orthodox views, which again are often articulated through messages from Mary. For example, in the years after Vatican II the self-appointed French anti-pope Clement XV was one of the most important representatives of traditionalist (or neo-traditionalist) ideas. He began a media crusade in Europe against the then Pope, Paul VI, who led in carrying through the renewal of the Church, but in the opinion of Clement was nothing less than a literal ‘devil in disguise’. Clement’s view, and that of the schismatic and suspended integralist bishop Marcel Lefèbvre, found ready acceptance among visionaries and their cultic advisors.

Since the Vatican Council, interpretations of the Fatima messages have also begun to lead an uncontrollable life of their own and are increasingly functioning as a conservative paradigm for the new cults surrounding apparitions of Mary. It is true that after the fall of atheistic communism these had to be understood in a new way, but new enemies such as apostasy, moral decline, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia and
decay in the Church and among its priests were quickly internalised and became part of the ‘classic’ picture of the thought and belief of devotees. The larger unofficial or controversial private shrines such as Medjugorje, Amsterdam, Montichiari or San Damiano generate a spiritual paradigm of their own, a framework which also influences other, smaller shrines.

At present, one can identify distinct devotional circuits involving, on the one hand, cults surrounding acknowledged, traditional sites of Marian appearances, and on the other the modern devotions connected with unofficial, deviant devotional circuits, most of which as a rule are not acknowledged, or have even been rejected by the Church. In general the cultus shrines come into being at the location where the Virgin Mary chose a lay person to reveal herself to or appear to, conveying to the person a message about what she thinks of the world, the Church, the state of mankind, etc. The messages are regularly negative with regard to the Roman Catholic Church itself and the society, but positive and affirmative regarding the person receiving the vision and his or her cultus and shrine.

The deviant devotions thus do not receive their support from official Church structures, but take their spiritual and devotional-ritual shape and are positioned and propagated informally, from below, with the input of visionaries, their own cult leadership, and groups of devotees. A large percentage of the individual devotees take part in one or more private prayer groups in their local communities. Intensive sharing of information regarding existing and new cults takes place within such prayer groups. The large number of prayer groups in Europe is an important structuring element in this. It is true that the cults surrounding the manifestations are independent of one another, but they have a common factor in the type of visitors they attract: religiously conservative
and traditionally oriented believers, sometimes with an inclination toward fundamentalism. Collectively these independent devotions and shrines are parts of a global network that to a great extent is ‘managed’ by the devotees and their prayer groups themselves. As an entity, the network that exists in this way has no formal status. It has no actual ‘home site’ and it is therefore extremely difficult to get a hold on it for research. It functions in the same manner as the World Wide Web: it exists and functions in a completely open manner. Hundreds of thousands, even millions of devotees are linked with each other in a loose manner, finding and communicating with one another at every changing sacred sites, in this way creating a religious system of their own, with its peculiar spirituality and rituality.

The rise of new devotional circuits and religious movements is also related to the weakening of the position of churches in society and the altered significance of the classic Catholic devotions and shrines since the late 1960s and early 1970s. These changes have contributed considerably to the crumbling of the traditional ecclesiastical domain in Western society, a disintegration that was also initiated or stimulated by the development and processes of secularisation and desecularisation. While it is true that religious institutions have now lost their monopoly on defining the holy or a sacred cosmos, the powerful process of globalisation in no way implied a homogenisation of, or the creation of a monolithic culture. Together with the growing individualisation in Western society, the loss of the churches’ monopoly has encouraged the break-up of cultural boundaries, generating a proliferation and mixing of languages, ethnicities, religions and religious currents. The cosmopolitan-religious forms which are the product of cultural globalisation and individual appropriation of local or regional rituals and symbolic practices have created expanded possibilities for personalised and
privatised religious praxis. The German sociologist Thomas Luckmann had already in the 1960s noted the discrepancy between the subjective autonomy of the individual and the objective autonomy of the primary ecclesiastical institutions in the public realm. He asked to what degree the modern sacred ‘cosmos’ serves as a legitimisation for or is even a cause of the fact that the individual increasingly withdraws into the private sphere, to an increasing extent seeking to sanctify his or her subjective autonomy in this way. This development takes diverse forms. For instance, the increasing frequency with which personal altars are being set up in homes is one example, and a characteristic expression of individualised and privatised religiosity. In setting up private altars people seek to draw religious or sacred dimensions or divine immanence into their private sphere, and acquire a certain control over them. At a higher, institutional level the growth in the number of private or extra-ecclesiastical organisations around shrines which have been built outside of the control of the Church performs a similar function, a process that takes its pre-eminent form within the unofficial devotions.

The year 2000

In the second half of the 20th century what has been termed the ‘Third Secret of Fatima’ (taking its name from one of the secret messages that Mary entrusted to the Portuguese visionary Lucia in 1917) has consistently been an ideological source of inspiration within the new devotions. The public and secret Fatima messages provided the religious content for a foundation upon which they could continue to build as they pleased on the basis of newly received messages from Mary. The themes which emerge from the Fatima messages include penance, prayer, the
conversion of all sinners, war, natural disasters, anti-communism and anti-atheism. This is the reason why, according to them, the unceasing activity of the devil in the world must necessarily lead to still greater disasters, which are predicted in the secret messages: eschatological prophecies and a description of the apocalypse. Because of the fall of the communist regimes in 1989 and the great concern about a possible end of the world in 2000, Pope John Paul II decided to reveal the secret during that Jubilee Year. The content was ultimately much less spectacular - let alone apocalyptic - than many devotees had assumed. The year 2000 subsequently passed off without any notable incidents. To revise their expectations of the End Times, those in Catholic fundamentalist circles then fell back on a cabalistic chronology which enabled them to conclude that the Fatima message still had not been fully revealed and that the Final Judgement was still to be patiently awaited.

All over the world visionaries were reporting new messages from Mary. Since the visionaries are also the ones who receive the Marian messages and must communicate them, they pass them on and, through their own interpretations of the texts and visions received, are in fact a supplement to them, or from an alternative for the official revelation of the Church. The visionary often sees himself or herself as a messiah or prophet for modern times. With these private revelations they hope to support the devotees in their struggles with their own existential problems and the uncertainties of faith in these perilous times. In Oirsbeek, in Limburg, for instance, there are two visionaries active. In their home they have in a most exuberant manner created the material expression of one of the most controversial unofficial devotions in The Netherlands. Over the past years they have transformed the rooms of their home into mini-chapels full of devotionalia and religious material culture. They each also appear to provide a sacralised place for the dozens of bleeding Hosts
which have descended from heaven. Hosts coming down from heaven can be compared with the rains of blood which are attested to in antiquity and the Middle Ages, which were considered to be harbingers of great disasters; the visionaries specify the phenomenon more narrowly as a reference to the clots of blood which Jesus sweated in the Garden of Gethsemane and His death throes. These Hosts and the diverse statues of Mary and other saints which have begun to shed tears of blood in this house are a sign of divine dismay at the state of the Roman Catholic Church, now in its own death throes, following as it does a doctrine that ‘has broken away from the pure doctrine of her Founder and the original Biblical texts’ and been watered down to ‘humanism’. Here too, in messages delivered by Mary weekly, and sometimes daily, she lets it be known that there are disasters, wars, droughts, floods, lies and hate in store for the world. In connection with this, on April 26, 2001, Mary provided a description of an approaching apocalypse. But however energetically these visionaries - against the will of the bishop - seek to attract adherents, the superabundance of preternatural phenomenon and the social unrest which has been created in the town by the cultus frightens off even the most fanatic of devotees.

The year 2000 is now safely in the past, having passed without incident. As we have said, those in Catholic fundamentalist circles then fell back on a cabalistic chronology for a revision of the end time expectations. But later, in 2001, on September 11, apocalyptic elements were suddenly focused sharply, and once again new speculations saw the light of day. For example, examination of photographs of the swirling dust from the collapsed Twin Towers revealed the contours of the Anti-Christ - sometimes in the person of Bin Ladin himself - in full action.
These independent interpretations of dramatic (and less dramatic) events impinging on everyday life fit perfectly with a ritual practice that fanatical adherents to modern devotions have been engaged in for years, which might be called ‘photo divination’. Photo divination as a ritual is focused on one’s own surroundings, or those of the cultic site, and in particularly the sky, which are recorded on photographic material and then interpreted according to unusual ‘additions’ or changes found there. For the diviners this process involves a figurative and literal discovery and recording of heaven or of hell, or at least of the Devil. After photographing the clouds in the sky and sunlight, the prints are examined for more or less hidden indications or signs of the divine or preternatural. Cloud formations are particularly favoured by these photographers for their capricious shapes, which lend themselves particularly well for discovering people and things. An important factor in this for the
devotees is the fact that the camera and film, in both a metaphysical and technical sense, can record more aspects better than can the human eye. There is further the phenomenon of a negative of persons or a situation which might appear to be double-exposed, but which is regarded as a single exposure with a ‘manifestation’, and therefore seen and interpreted as a preternatural intervention. One of the most famous and successful places for photo divination is the sky above the pear tree where Mary has been appearing regularly in San Damiano, Italy, since 1961. Devotees prefer to use Polaroid cameras in order to evaluate and interpret the results almost instantly, so that they can respond while still present at the shrine. The whole ritual serves only one primary purpose: supporting and confirming the cult and the messages it spreads. It is designed to underscore the presence of the holy, the sacred, at that place, but also emphasise the reality of hell, the constant presence of the Devil, and the closeness of the End Times.

The camera is a sort of liturgical instrument for this photographic ritual, so that on the basis of its products new or invisible signs or symbols can be found (or recognised), and then assigned a certain religious significance. One tries to discover where one stands in life, and what dangers lie in wait.

**Madonnas and Eternity**

From the very inception of life there are also mechanisms which begin to function to protect that new life. These are biologically and physiologically controlled processes that are supposed to assure that the body which supports that life is preserved and continues to function. Among these, instinctive reactions play a large role in protecting the
living being and averting danger. But in addition, man is capable of rational thought processes that provide an entirely independent contribution with regard to maintaining life and assuring the safety of the body. These can be, for instance, living ‘wisely’, in a rational and practical manner, in order to avoid accidental death and try to postpone or minimise physical deterioration. But humankind is distinguished not only by a capacity for reason; man is also the only creature to believe that he has a ‘soul’. A ‘soul’ is often involved with forms of religiosity, religious consciousness or feelings, and religiously inspired behaviours and patterns of actions, products which arise from the cultural processes of production which are set in motion by each individual. Ideas regarding the Last Judgement, the End Times, and the function of modern devotions are a part of this.

What the modern devotions and bleeding Madonnas which we have discussed here are essentially all about - as is so often the case in relation to religiosity - is the exercise of control over basic anxieties, and answering existential questions. Constant existential doubt and perceived threats to existence - personal and global - are peculiar to mankind, and profoundly influence our thinking and acting. Depending on the situation, someone is more or less responsive to those who by means of symbols and messages seek to give direction to or steer the way in which others ought to be living or believing. This explains the continual presence and success of religious sects and movements throughout history, cults surrounding apparitions or alternative forms of belief which present themselves as the truth, and offer their own perspective on eternal life. It appears to be still better to take things entirely into one’s own hands and, for instance, on the basis of photographs one has made oneself, go in search of signs and messages that are directed to you, to learn lessons from them for your own life, and draw the appropriate conclusions, as
Tinus van Doorn and his wife did in a very personal and ultimate way in 1940.

The apocalyptic threat and the salvation which will accompany it thus remain an important factor in human thinking and acting. By creating their own religious context, people try to exert an influence on the conditions, for instance by choosing for a religious alternative or themselves functioning as an intermediary for the appearances and messages of Mary. That it really makes no difference what sort of image, picture or icon one comes up with is made clear to us by Ennio Bertrand in his photographic work, because as he says, a picture of a weeping Madonna is by definition sacred, irrespective of its context. For him the generic depiction of a ‘Madonna’ is independent of its source, and upon viewing is in fact immediately filled in with general representations from faith and the supernatural, and is at the same time the vehicle for preternatural signs and symbols. As a result of the flood of television images viewers automatically place a depiction of a Marian image that is shown - particularly if in combination with blood and tears - into the category of sacred images, even if it is a photograph taken from television, of what was possibly a hoax, from another place, from another region.

With my academic passion I hoped to be able to discover which Marian image Ennio in fact has used in his installation, and also when and where it had wept. But in this connection that too, a fortiori, made little sense. It is actually just a good thing that I did not succeed.\(^2\) It does not matter for us viewers, and in fact matters just as little for the devotees involved; they apparently merely want to seen a icon, an icon that just confirms what to a great extent they themselves know or think. Such

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\(^2\) Later it turned out to have taken place in the village of Dasà, in the southern Italian province of Catanzaro, in February, 1999.
icons are, by their nature, essentially interchangeable. Nevertheless for different audiences the different but evident functions of such an image continue to exist. For the media is it once again a new scoop; the believers and devotees must once again take a good look at the calculations of the predicted end - even if it later turns out to have been a hoax; and for non-believers it is an item which can generate humorous or irritable commentary.