

## Paper Abstract

### Revelations: The Phenomenology of the Spirit in the Post-Apocalyptic Capitalism of “The Book of Eli.”

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Generally, I propose to discuss the ways in which the recent film, “The Book of Eli,” revises our understanding of the genre of post-apocalyptic films, from “Mad Max” to the animated “Wall-e,” in its portrayal of a post-apocalyptic consumer-capitalist American society defined by scarcity, a “state of nature,” as well as a crude Lockean notion of the social contract. In the film, America is reduced to a post-industrial capitalist society where old products, such as KFC wetnaps and shoes, are stolen or bartered by people who otherwise live by hunting and scavenging. I will specifically argue that the themes of post-apocalyptic scarcity, the reversion to a state of nature, and the formation of social contracts is not, however, what makes “The Book of Eli” most interesting and significant within the genre. Rather, its vision of a man, Eli, driven by a word of God to safeguard and deliver the last extant King James Bible to the secret archives at Alcatraz drives the plot and is the basis of its social critique. The movie suggests that neither a society of abundance nor one of scarcity provides the motive or means to create the values and relationships (grounded in a concept of love) for humanity to survive its own internal contradictions. The movie provides us a way to think about how the loss of the life of the spirit (*Geist*)—that puzzling concept that has all but disappeared from the vocabulary of modern and contemporary diagnoses of social decay—reduces humans to slavery and barbarism. The destruction of the material

landscape and of the body (the latter represented as blinded, wounded, violated, filthy, and scarred) reveals all the more profoundly the vacuity of modern inner life or interiority. Yet, only Eli's inner voice, vision, and internalization of the word of God—he is blind and not dependent upon the visible or material manifestations of the Spirit in the Bible or elsewhere—makes him the epitome of the man who may have lost the world to gain his soul. Moreover, Eli comes to resolve the contradiction between a spiritual life and social commitment by realizing that the spirit of love must be manifested in human relationship and against the forces of negation such as self-interest, hedonism, and tyranny. From a Hegelian perspective, “The Book of Eli,” in short, places emphasis on the spirit as what makes human beings most human (in contrast to an unreflective or de-spiritualized existence). The movie also suggests that the contraction of spiritual consciousness in the post-apocalyptic world is a symptom (or the phenomenology) of a period in history in which the human being has become mainly identified with and dependent upon the body (libidinal desires, pain, hunger, etc.) and the capitalist object-world for its *raison d'être* and social relationships.