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Contemporary Apocalyptic Cinema

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JAMES ASTON AND JOHN WALLISS, JUN 20 2013

Warning: This article contains minor and major spoilers for some post-apocalyptic movies, including 'The Day After Tomorrow', 'Cloverfield', 'Children of Men', and 'The Book of Eli'.

Contemporary cinematic representations of the apocalypse have steadily increased in numbers, popularity and even critical acclaim since the mid to late 1990s. The epic apocalyptic scenarios rendered in full widescreen glory in films such as *Independence Day* (Emmerich 1996) and *Armageddon* (Bay, 1998) have expanded into best selling apocalyptic franchises (*Resident Evil*) and numerous stand alone box office successes such as *War of the Worlds* (Spielberg, 2005) and *Cloverfield* (Reeves, 2008). In fact, audiences predilection for global disaster shows no sign of abating as four major Hollywood releases are planned for summer 2013 (*After Earth* (Shyamalan); *Pacific Rim* (del Toro); *Robopocalypse* (Spielberg); *World War Z* (Forster). The current interest in and success of the cinematic apocalypse can be traced back to popular culture's fascination with end of world narratives and how these cultural forms provided an entertaining spectacle alongside a commentary on contemporary events.

In the 1950s, in the first big explosion of apocalypse cinema, the films tacitly connected the threat of Earth's destruction to fears over atomic weapons and the menace of communism. In the 1970s and the 1980s, the apocalyptic film resurfaced providing clear allegories surrounding, respectively, the anxieties of the rise of the cult and dystopian worlds engendered by multinational corporations and unchecked capitalism. The apocalypse film has become ever more popular as society navigated the unsure terrain of the Millennium and the cataclysmic physical and psychic events of 9/11, the ensuing War on Terror and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this respect, pre- and post millennium representations of the apocalypse, have via the cinema, continued the symbiotic relationship initiated during the 1950s in providing spectacular narratives alongside insightful social commentary. What is more, the resurgence of cinematic representations of the apocalypse has spilled over into other popular cultural forms such as television (*Lost* by ABC 2004 – 2010, *Falling Skies* by TNT 2011 -), comics (*The Walking Dead* by Image 2003 -, *Final Crisis* by DC, 2008) literature (*Left Behind* series by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins 1995 – 2007) as well as being utilised in real world catastrophic events such as the Australian bushfires in 2009.[1] Due to the continued popularity of contemporary cinematic representations of the apocalypse, the article will address the main continuities and ruptures of the apocalyptic imagination over the last two decades to elucidate its key features, how it has changed over time and thus how the films have reflected the times in which they were made so that possibilities of its future direction can be mapped out.

What a Difference a Decade Makes: Continuities and Discontinuities in Pre-and Post-millennium Apocalyptic Films

Conrad Ostwalt and others have argued that pre-millennium apocalypse films were characterized by a 'desacralization of the apocalypse.' That is, cinematic representations of the apocalypse both jettisoned overt references to Biblical sources and shifted the cause of the destruction away from supernatural forces towards natural phenomena and/or the consequences of human action, such as giant meteors, environmental disaster or geopolitical meltdown. Moreover, within the 1990s apocalypse movies there was also a toning down of the fatalism found within the Biblical apocalypse and an emphasis on how destruction could actually be averted through the actions of a human messianic figure. For example, the Book of Revelation presents an account of the apocalypse as both supernatural in origin and essentially unavoidable for either the living, or, indeed, the dead. The 1990s apocalypse

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films rejected this and posited an end that was both natural and, crucially, avoidable through human agency. Indeed, a defining characteristic of the 1990s cycle was a view of cataclysm—whether that be alien invaders, super-viruses, rampaging monsters, approaching asteroids or other forms of “natural” disaster—as merely a problem that could be overcome through human courage and ingenuity allied with science and technology.

Similar to pre-millennium apocalyptic films, their counterparts in the new millennium apocalyptic films have continued the focus on secular apocalypses such as environmental disaster (*The Core*, 2003; *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Flood*, 2004; *Sunshine*, 2007) or the impact of infectious diseases (*I am Legend*, 2007; *28 Weeks Later*, 2007). Yet, within this post-millennium cycle of apocalyptic films, the events of 9/11 have had a profound effect on how apocalyptic representations have been realised, primarily through radically inverting the faith in human ability and science and technology in several ways, which has introduced an overriding sense of pessimism. At the end of a typical movie from the 1990s apocalypse cycle, the viewer could expect that, although major destruction would occur, humanity (and particularly North America) would largely be saved. In the post-9/11 movies, this can no longer be assumed. Instead, for example, in *The Day after Tomorrow*, *28 Weeks Later*, the original ending of *I am Legend*, and *Cloverfield*, destruction is not averted and there is the sense that, particularly in *I am Legend* and *28 Weeks Later*, events are likely going to become a lot worse. Indeed, the post-9/11 movies posit scenarios where science, technology and the government are, at best, powerless against the apocalyptic forces, and at worse willingly complicit with them. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, mainstream scientific predictions regarding a global freeze are shown to be completely inaccurate with only the theories of rogue scientists being shown to have any validity. The military are also shown to be ineffective. Indeed, it is interesting to compare *Godzilla* (1998) with *Cloverfield*. In both cases, a giant creature runs amok in Manhattan, destroying landmarks and buildings and trampling humans in its path. Yet, in *Godzilla* the military ultimately vanquish its opponent. In *Cloverfield* the military instigate the Hammerdown bombing protocol on what is one of the most densely populated places in the world. The outcome is ambiguous with the very real possibility that the monster survives the destruction and the implication that it will continue to run amok across the rest of the continent.

More pessimistically, a recurring theme found in the post-9/11 cycle is that, like some form of Old Testament punishment, the apocalyptic scenario that humanity faces is both deserved and, indeed, something that we would be better off not surviving. As the final voice-over on *Diary of the Dead* (Romero, 2007) asks; “are we worth saving?” This theme of humanity receiving its “just deserts” is found in *The Day After Tomorrow*, where the northern hemisphere (chiefly North America) is shown facing the brunt of the destruction and, in a reversal of current geopolitical realities, consequently having to go “cap in hand” to the southern hemisphere for food and shelter. However, it is perhaps most fully explored in the British movie *Sunshine*, directed by Danny Boyle (2007). While its basic plot (a space shuttle payload of nuclear warheads must be launched into the dying sun in order to reignite it) clearly draws parallels with *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, the film introduces the question of whether, indeed, the mission should succeed and possibly subvert God’s plan for the universe.

Although the 1990s apocalypse movie cycle effectively removed the supernatural as an agent of either destruction or salvation, this is not to suggest that religion was entirely absent from them. However, the religion that was portrayed was highly sentimentalized; a form of “social crutch” or civil religion typically invoked at a moment of grave crisis and then at a point where disaster is averted. That said, however, the 1990s movies, while seemingly comfortable to raid apocalyptic texts for tropes, imagery and quotations, sought to hold the beliefs themselves at arm’s length, portraying them almost exclusively as the province of “the end is nigh” preachers and other social misfits. The post-9/11 cycle continued in this vein, with religion either absent or presented in an overly sentimentalized form. Both *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006) and *War of the Worlds*, for example, excise the religious themes found in the novels on which they are based, with, in the former example, there being no overt explanation given in the diegesis why the political opponents of the regime are termed “the Fishes.” The critique of religion found in H.G. Wells’ novel or the prevalence of religious themes found in the 1953 adaptation (George Pal) are also conspicuous by their absence in the 2005 adaptation. Although some examples of the post-9/11 cycle of apocalyptic films are sympathetic to religion most go further than their predecessors in critiquing religion or using religion to critique the social order. However, the religion that is typically under fire within these movies is the (Christian) fundamentalism of George Bush rather than that of Osama Bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Indeed, an engagement with Islam—either critical or otherwise—is completely absent from the cycle.

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Movies in the 1990s apocalyptic cycle also tended to valorize the status quo, either by showing it under threat from disaster, but ultimately being saved, or by showing humanity in a post-apocalyptic setting where there was the chance to wipe the slate clean and start over. The majority of these movies posited little or no overt social critique or commentary, opting instead to simply reaffirm existing socio-political structures or their recreation with the more debased, corrupt and brutal forces excised. Post-9/11 apocalyptic films highlighted a turn towards the political that served as a discontinuity with the 1990s cycle, and in large part was shaped by the events of 9/11. They jettisoned a return to the pre-existing social order, and instead either overtly criticized contemporary socio-political configurations or posited a new world order whereby humanity (and America) could start over anew, removing the burden of the past. *The Day After Tomorrow* explicitly subverts an affirmative representation of the status quo by showing an ineffectual government that is initially resistant to expert scientific testimony on climate change and later performs a humiliating U-turn on national television where Vice President Becker (who bears a striking visual similarity to then-Vice-President Dick Cheney), declares “for years we operated under the belief that we could continue consuming our planet’s natural resources without consequence. We were wrong. I was wrong.” The fact that the address takes place, not in the White House, but on Mexican soil attests to the fact that much of the Western world is now uninhabitable. However, *Children of Men* best exemplifies the theme of renewal and the break from the previous socio-political systems. The plot features a dystopian future where humans are infertile, terroristic activity is commonplace and a draconian and oppressive military force terrorizes its own citizens. The child/baby literally becomes the symbol of hope and of the future as a young woman is discovered who is pregnant. The movie implicitly suggests that the pregnancy has not been conceived through human union, thus renouncing any literal connection with the past. The movie also ends with the woman being taken to safety on a boat that once again symbolizes the rootless nature of the future and its lack of physical ties with both the past and the present.

Conclusion: The Obama Optimism Effect?

Contemporary apocalyptic movies can be marked with a move toward a pessimistic representation that reflected a shift in the popular imagination post-9/11. However, recently, there has been a subtle shift in narrative resolution toward one of hope and optimism. For example, in *2012* (Emmerich, 2009) the estranged father is allowed to reconnect with his family (something that was denied in *War of the Worlds*) who safely make it to make shift ‘arcs’ housed in the Himalayas. Yet, it is with *The Book of Eli* (Hughes brothers, 2010) that the theme of starting over forms the clearest connection with both a critique of the Bush-Cheney administration and of the hope engendered by the inauguration of Obama. Set thirty years after an apparent religious war destroyed North America, it tells the story of a lone African-American man, Eli (Denzel Washington), who has apparently been charged by God to take the only surviving copy of the Bible westward to a safe haven. Another man, however, wishes to possess this Bible, Carnegie (Gary Oldman), the despotic ruler of a small town. Eli and Carnegie exist within the movie’s narrative in a binary opposition, with the latter man, arguably representing a critique of George Bush’s use of religious rhetoric, wishing to use the Bible as a means to control others. Although Carnegie ultimately gains possession of the Bible, he discovers to his dismay that it is printed in Braille and is therefore useless to him. At the finale, Eli reaches a group of survivors based on Alcatraz Island who are gathering together elements of the lost culture in order to “start again,” where he dictates from memory the contents of the Biblical text so that copies may be produced via a printing press.

It might be too soon to map on an ‘Obama effect’ to the subtle changes in post-millennium apocalyptic movies and whether Obama’s social liberalism has defeated the politics of the Bush administration that manifest itself as a bleak, uncompromising dystopia in post-millennium apocalyptic cinema. Perhaps the apocalyptic blockbusters of 2013 will provide some answers as to whether optimistic resolutions will continue or whether post-the 2007 financial crash, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, the use of drones, torture and facilities such as Guantanamo will instead signal a return to the pessimistic narratives of post-9/11 cinematic representations of the apocalypse.

Dr. James Aston is Director of Studies for the Film Studies Degree at the University of Hull, UK and teaches extensively on the programme including *American Alternative Cinema*, *East Asian Cinema* and *Global Nightmares: Horror From Around the World*. His principal research interests lie in the field of horror and apocalyptic cinema, especially post 9/11 texts. He has published numerous articles in both research areas and is co-editor of *Small*

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Screen Revelations: Apocalypse in Contemporary Television and To See the Saw Movies: Essays on Torture Porn and Post-9/11 Horror. Currently, he is writing a chapter entitled, 'Nightmares outside the mainstream: August Underground and reel/real horror' to be published in a forthcoming Digital Horror anthology.

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Note

[i] The influence of apocalyptic themes, motifs and imagery across a range of popular cultural forms are explored in a series of edited collections overseen by one of the authors and published by Sheffield Phoenix Press. See John Walliss & Lee Quinby, *Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film* (eds. 2010); Crawford Gribben & Mark S. Sweetnam, *Left Behind and the Evangelical Imagination* (eds. 2011); Robert Glenn Howard, *Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media* (ed. 2011); Christopher Partridge, *Anthems of Apocalypse: Popular Music and Apocalyptic Thought* (ed. 2012); Dan W. Clanton, Jr., *The End Will be Graphic: Apocalyptic in Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (ed. 2012); James Aston & John Walliss, *Small Screen Revelations: Apocalypse in Contemporary Television* (eds. 2013)

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