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Armageddon at the Millennial Dawn

Abstract

The New Year has come and gone and presents a time for reflection on popular culture's fascination with eschatology and apocalypticism. In the few years leading up to the year 2000, we witnessed a growing interest in end-of-the-world scenarios as they were portrayed in the movies and other forms of popular entertainment. Looking back but a short while, our imaginations were stimulated by such movies as *12 Monkeys*, the critically abused *Waterworld*, the comedic *Independence Day*, and the visionary *Contact*. These promising movies suggested the last couple of years of the millennium would see a crop of creative movies that would be based on the eschatological drama. Movies such as *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* promised to explore the idea of the end of existence by drawing on a culture's rich tradition of symbolic imagery associated with Jewish and Christian apocalyptic upheaval, but they were generally perceived to lack depth and originality. The release of the controversial and dazzling *The Matrix* added a new twist to the various conceptions of the end of civilization. As one looks back at some of these films, a few general characteristics stand out that frame a contemporary and popular millennial imagination as it has been communicated through popular cinema. I will use this paper to explore such themes in four of these films (*Contact*, *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and *The Matrix*) and to discuss what insight this brings to contemporary cultural studies.

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The New Year has come and gone and presents a time for reflection on popular culture's fascination with eschatology and apocalypticism. In the few years leading up to the year 2000, we witnessed a growing interest in end-of-the-world scenarios as they were portrayed in the movies and other forms of popular entertainment. Looking back but a short while, our imaginations were stimulated by such movies as *12 Monkeys*, the critically abused *Waterworld*, the comedic *Independence Day*, and the visionary *Contact*. These promising movies suggested the last couple of years of the millennium would see a crop of creative movies that would be based on the eschatological drama. Movies such as *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* promised to explore the idea of the end of existence by drawing on a culture's rich tradition of symbolic imagery associated with Jewish and Christian apocalyptic upheaval, but they were generally perceived to lack depth and originality. The release of the controversial and dazzling *The Matrix* added a new twist to the various conceptions of the end of civilization. As one looks back at some of these films, a few general characteristics stand out that frame a contemporary and popular millennial imagination as it has been communicated through popular cinema. I will use this paper to explore such themes in four of these films (*Contact*, *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and *The Matrix*) and to discuss what insight this brings to contemporary cultural studies.

This popular eschatological imagination is a secular one that cannot quite let go of traditional imagery and symbol borrowed often from Jewish and Christian apocalyptic drama. But the contemporary cinematic appropriation of these traditions is not apocalyptic as Jewish and Christian apocalyptic texts are--it is not apocalyptic drama in the sense that something is "unveiled" (with the possible exception of *The Matrix*), and there is no revelation of God's sovereignty here. Rather, the cinematic end of the world dramas focus on the eschatological part of apocalyptic texts. Thus, when I refer to a cinematic apocalyptic imagination, I am referring to the popular tendency to view the end of the world through the lens of religious apocalyptic renderings, even if these cinematic dramas ignore some salient features of apocalyptic texts.

The cinematic millennial drama draws as much from contemporary science fiction as it does from apocalyptic texts, attempts to comment on both religious myth and science fantasy, and is characterized by the following emphases: 1) The fatalism that often accompanies western apocalypticism is toned down. While end of the world threats perhaps are not avoidable, the cinematic formulation of millennial doom promotes the notion that the end can be averted through employing human ingenuity, scientific advance, and heroism. 2) The cinematic apocalypse depends on a human messiah who battles nature, aliens, the "other" in a variety of forms, or simply human stupidity to rescue humanity from those elements that

threaten annihilation. 3) The secular film version of the apocalypse removes the divine element from the apocalyptic drama yet not religious symbolism, imagery, or language. Neither does it remove the notion of otherness as a necessary component of humanity's struggle with the end of the world. However, in these films, the divine as "other" is replaced by aliens, disease, meteors, and machines as "other"--an otherness that exists in binary opposition to humankind. So the secular apocalypse of film is postmodern in that it has undermined the binary opposition of God-human. Yet, it retains a sense of opposition ("something-human") that is crucial for understanding threats to existence. 4) Many films allude to the idea that religion has trivialized the apocalyptic threat and that religion itself capitulates to science in the attempt to deal with eschatology. 5) In light of religion's trivialization of apocalyptic thought, popular cultural forms have become significant, if not more effective, purveyors of our culture's eschatological consciousness and thus of a basic religious category. The result is a secular eschatological imagination wherein humanity and the earth itself are threatened by "projections" of the contemporary imagination but are saved by science and heroism.

First, the notion that while the threat of the end is inevitable, hope that the destruction of humanity is avoidable runs through virtually all of the recent films with eschatological emphases or allusions. The idea of human extinction is rejected by these films in favor of imagining humanity's salvation. We see this in films like

12 Monkeys, where there is hope that humanity will be rescued from a killer virus or in *Waterworld* that ends with an "ark" locating dry land, the promised land. But we see this also in the films under question. In *Armageddon*, the sacrifice and heroism of one individual spares the world and humanity entirely. As a huge meteor bears down on the Earth, Harry Stamper (an oil rig driller played by Bruce Willis) and a rag-tag group of misfits (remember *Independence Day*?) are recruited to fly a space ship to land on the meteor, drill a hole, and drop a nuclear bomb into it to destroy it before it destroys the earth. That's it--besides a subplot involving a romance between Stamper's daughter (played by Liv Tyler) and his protégé (played by Ben Affleck), that's as deep as the plot gets. A multinational mission is successful, but only after Stamper, in a final act of selflessness, sacrifices his life to save earth. The movie's plot is weak, but it works well to demonstrate Hollywood's apocalyptic premise--the end is avoidable.

Deep Impact employs a plot that is a bit more complex. In this movie, earth is threatened by a comet. Government officials, led by the U.S. President (played compassionately by Morgan Freeman) scramble to devise a plan to save the earth. The basic plan is the same--fly a spaceship into the comet and blow it up. This time the mission is led by an ex-astronaut (played by Robert Duvall), but the complexity of dealing with a comet makes it clear to our heroes and the government that some fragments will hit the earth with catastrophic effects even if the mission is

successful. Thus, the plot is more complicated, if only slightly so, and raises ethical questions about who will be saved and how. The heroic efforts of government ensure the survival of humanity even if it means great loss of life.

In *Contact*, we are treated to the movie adaptation of Carl Sagan's vision of humanity's first contact with alien intelligence in another world. We are also introduced to the idea that this event could bring mass extinction from the hands of an advanced and hostile civilization (remember again *Independence Day*). Jodie Foster plays Dr. Eleanor Arroway, a young, brilliant scientist who is obsessed with finding evidence of extraterrestrial life. The movie features a strong cast and does allow some debate of theology, even though most of these questions involve the existence of God rather than any serious consideration of eschatology. Nevertheless, the movie offers hope and comfort that humans are not alone to face the horror of extinction. Although not a guarantee, the notion that there exists another intelligence out there comforts us. In this movie, government officials make it clear that they consider alien life a threat whether the aliens would act aggressively or not, thus mirroring popular images of alien forces invading earth. Yet, the alien "other" in *Contact* is benign, fatherly, even divine-like to the secular, scientific mind where God is functionally absent.

Contact as secular apocalypse draws serene comfort from the calming presence of extraterrestrial life and presents a stark contrast to religious apocalypse

that is portrayed through disturbing scenes in the movie where religious fanatics are apocalyptic terrorists. Whereas religious apocalypticists in *Contact* use violence (they destroy the costly machine built to allow contact with an extraterrestrial civilization), in Hollywood's apocalyptic drama, the threat of human extinction breeds harmony, not violence. The threat of the end tends to bring people together in a unified stand against annihilation, evolving out of a deep faith in the powers of scientific ingenuity and human ability. This is also seen clearly in *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* where individuals and government combine forces to save the day. The message is clear: together we can beat this thing. (Note how different this is to the helplessness of humanity in the face of a divinely ordained apocalypse one finds in Jewish and Christian apocalyptic dramas). So, the secular apocalypse moves beyond some of the fatalism we often find in religious apocalypticism.

Second, if the world is to be saved, it must have a savior in these cinematic dramas. While we see this messiah fixation in *12 Monkeys*, *Independence Day*, *Waterworld*, *Deep Impact*, *Armageddon*, and even *Contact*, we see it nowhere more powerfully than in *The Matrix*. In this film, a computer hacker, who takes the name "Neo" (Keanu Reeves) stumbles onto secretive and life-threatening information--Neo learns that his 9-5 world is all an illusion, an elaborate hoax played on his mind to obscure the real world where machines, computers, and artificial intelligence have enslaved humanity. (This "unveiling" reflects the revelatory intent of much

religious apocalypse.) The plot taps into the underlying fear that society is too dependent on the computer (particularly in light of the Y2K scare) and that dependence will lead to humanity's downfall (ie. enslavement). In *The Matrix*, that fear is developed through a scenario where machines breed and sustain humans as power sources. At the same time, the machines construct an elaborate shadow world (a cyber world of illusion), and feed it to the imaginations of the catatonic human bodies.

Neo is initiated into this awareness by an underground movement of humans who are seeking to overthrow the machines and establish a new city, the city of Zion, where hopes of restoration of the human race stay alive. A strong-willed Trinity (Carrie-Anne Moss) leads Neo to the leader of these revolutionaries, Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne), who looks for a "chosen one" to lead them to freedom and is convinced that Neo is the one. Neo gradually emerges as the one who will lead the underground resistance, and the movie ends not with restoration but with hope of such.

Neo, as Messiah, represents one of the strongest messiah figures in contemporary apocalyptic movies because of the religious imagery associated with his status. Religious language and devotion predominates in Morpheus' selection of Neo as "the One." And Neo's initiation to messianic ways becomes highly ritualized. Neo's training involves martial arts expertise and mind control bringing

an eastern religious element into the picture as well. So Keanu Reeves becomes one in a line of macho messiahs (eg. Bruce Willis and Kevin Costner) who use muscle and force to save humanity, but unlike other messiahs, this one must use mind control as well. And his literal "waking up" out of his catatonic state makes Neo as much a bodhisattva as a western-style messiah. (The bodhisattva reference was based on discussion following the presentation of this paper.)

Neo's messianic cause brings to light a third characteristic of the secular, cinematic apocalypse. With the exclusion of the divine from the apocalyptic formula, the cinematic apocalypse seeks new relevance in redefining the end through science and human effort. Angelic armies and beasts no longer suffice to usher in the end. Even though the secular apocalypse uses science and human ingenuity as context and to overcome the fatalism of religious apocalyptic myth, often these secular versions employ religious language and images. In *Armageddon*, the United States, Russia, France, and Japan join in a cooperative effort to save humanity using technology, but the President of the United States refers to the Bible in his effort to create a unified effort to save the world from collision with a massive meteor. When at the end of the film catastrophe has been averted, the movie portrays mass celebration at Christian churches and Islamic Mosques. So while the thanks for salvation should go to science and human sacrifice, the movie cannot quite divorce itself from the divine implications of

global disaster. In a similar vein, the plot of *Deep Impact* also relies on science and secular government to save a remnant of the earth, but these actions are couched in religiously symbolic language. For example, the spaceship carrying the nuclear weapon that eventually destroys the comet that threatens earth is christened "the Messiah" while the operation that selects and transports selected Americans to safe bunkers so they can repopulate the earth is dubbed project "Noah's Ark." The impact of these symbols suggests that the cinematic apocalypse is thoroughly secular in terms of substance--the actors, saviors, and heroes are governments and heroic individuals while the threat comes not from some divine power but from natural forces. Nevertheless, the apocalyptic moment still carries religious imagery and symbolism. This might be the most telling comment on our secular society's appropriation of religion--while our culture is substantively secular, we legitimize it with a facade of religion.

After undermining the God-human dichotomy and rejecting the supernatural as the agency for the apocalypse, the contemporary apocalyptic imagination has been in search of a new apocalyptic cause. The contemporary eschatological movie has redefined the agency of the end several times in the last 20 or so years. At one time, eschatological fears were attached to our fears of nuclear annihilation, so that films as far back as *Dr. Strangelove* could capitalize on the Cold War and the arms race. Yet, by the late 1990s, nuclear weapons become

the agency of salvation as in *Deep Impact*, *Independence Day*, and *Armageddon*. Viruses (*12 Monkeys* and *Outbreak*), aliens (*Independence Day*), and global warming (*Waterworld*) have taken front stage as threats that concern contemporary Americans. And more recently, *The Matrix* has explored the possibility of artificial intelligence giving rise to the end of the civilization that produced it. The theme of humanity against machine is not a new one and recalls the Frankenstein theme of a human creation turning against the human creator. (The Frankenstein connection was suggested to me by Dr. Kelly L. Sears Smith.) *The Matrix* uses fears surrounding technology (eg. Y2K fears were based on nervousness that our culture has created a monster--a computer driven world that would wreck civilization) to continue the "Garden motif" where creation turns against the Creator.

This element of *The Matrix* allows a further refinement of the cinematic apocalyptic myth made possible by the concept of virtual reality. To a greater extent than ever before in human culture, we can use technology to create a virtual reality. *The Matrix* raises an interesting question concerning the capabilities of this technology a couple of hundred years from now. The plot of the movie is based on the premise that computers have constructed an elaborate alternative reality that masks the post-apocalyptic world of "burned skies." To the extent human beings exist in this world, they exist in ignorance of the real, actual state of their world or their lives. They have been duped by a virtual world that to them appears real. This

contemporary revisiting of Plato's famous allegory of the cave and of neo-Platonic dualism of real and ideal adds an interesting twist to the idea of the apocalypse and raises the possibility that the apocalyptic moment has already passed--both in reality and out of human memory. The role of Morpheus (the Greek god of Dreams) as the character who introduces the real versus shadow world in this movie only complicates the matter. How can we be sure Morpheus's version of the Matrix is not the "dream" masquerading as his "reality" that is based on "illusion."

Most 20th-century millennial groups are pre-millennial in their orientation and thus require a destruction scenario to fulfill their apocalyptic expectations. The contemporary cinematic apocalyptic drama capitalizes on this perception and stereotypes apocalyptic groups--this describes a fourth characteristic of contemporary cinematic apocalyptic dramas. Contemporary culture already tends to view apocalyptic groups as marginal, sometimes scary, sometimes dangerous, sometimes as the agents of mass destruction. This image certainly does not describe all religious groups that are millennial in orientation, but it does describe the way contemporary movies have portrayed religious groups focusing on apocalypse. As a result of this and other cultural characterizations, religion has largely forfeited its proprietorship of the apocalypse in our culture. In its place science has stepped in with its fantastic theories about origins and endings in our universe.

The conflict between faith and science in dealing with cosmology is a main theme in *Contact*. In this movie, the protagonist, Dr. Arroway, exhibits unyielding faith in science while religious representatives appear as kooks (the apocalyptic terrorist), as right wing zealots (Rob Lowe's character, Richard Rank), or as compromised and unconvincing (Matthew McConaughey's character, Palmer Joss). In the end, this works against the scientist Arroway when she asks the world to believe her story that cannot be proven or substantiated. In our secular eschatological dramas, science has wrested control of cosmic cataclysm away from religion--perhaps the predictions of secularists who have condemned religion to irrelevance will first be realized over questions of eschatology. We have already witnessed more than a century of debate over Creation--has religion already capitulated concerning the eschaton?

The final characteristic I wish to point out concerning the cinematic apocalypse speaks to popular culture's efficiency in revising religious topics and categories such as the apocalypse. Daniel Wojcik has written an insightful work on popular culture and the apocalypse entitled *The End of the World as We Know It: Faith, Fatalism, and Apocalypse in America*. Although Wojcik's book goes far beyond an examination of apocalyptic movies, his work is relevant for this topic. Wojcik sees apocalypticism as rampant in American society, not only in marginal religious groups, but at every level of society. In his book, Wojcik analyzes secular

apocalyptic visions wherein, he argues, our contemporary hopes and visions receive a serious hearing--this has been a development since the nuclear age, the era when humanity first discovered it could take over control of the apocalypse and annihilate the human race without the help of a supernatural power. Wojcik points out that popular culture is an effective medium for communicating these contemporary apocalyptic visions.

Popular culture has come to dominate the stage when it comes to dealing with the end of time, because traditional American religions have so avoided any meaningful discussion of the topic. By definition, the apocalyptic tradition in western religion has been antiseccular and has viewed the apocalypse in terms of the destruction of an evil secular society and the rising of a righteous remnant. Mainstream religion in America has become so secularized, so identified and dependent on secular culture, that calling for the demise of secular powers would have no other effect than calling for the demise of the powers of religion. Therefore, mainstream religions in America have avoided the apocalyptic version of the eschaton, forfeited jurisdiction, and capitulated to the popular imagination to deal with this persistent urge to imagine the end of things.

Secularization of society allows popular culture to co-opt what was the religious business of apocalyptic thinking. And secularization of the apocalypse is now virtually complete. This is evidenced, if by nothing else, the fact that no

ambitious filmmaker has yet to use Hollywood's dazzling special effects to produce a major film depicting the plagues and horrors of a religious apocalypse like the book of Revelation. In addition, as religious apocalypse has become marginalized, or at least apocalyptic religious groups, something has to take on the role of dealing with issues like human finitude. It might as well be Hollywood, the secular culture icon of our society, for it is Hollywood that can capture our imaginations through all the senses. Particularly with the development of realistic and sophisticated special effects, the ability to portray massive destruction and virtual realities on the screen has grown and added fuel to the creative element of artists who want to revive the apocalyptic form.

Part horror flick, part science fiction, part popular religious imagination, part profit margin, today's cinematic apocalyptic vision places humanity in an all too familiar precarious position, only to offer comfort and hope that human splendor (in most cases American masculine splendor) will rise to defeat dark or dangerous forces that seek to destroy us. In this sense, Hollywood functions like a secular religion espousing a humanistic philosophy full of idealism, violence, sexism, and altruistic heroism. Thus, Hollywood's apocalypse might not spell the end of the world as we know it--only the end of culture and good taste.