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Abstract

The steady rise in production of American apocalyptic films and the genre's enduring popularity over the last seven decades can be explained by the functions the film genre serves. Through an analysis of a broad range of apocalyptic films along with the application of several theoretical and critical approaches to the study of film, the author describes seven functions commonly found in American apocalyptic cinema expressed both in terms of its meaning (the underlying purpose of the film) and its message (the ideas the filmmakers want to convey to the audience). Apocalyptic cinema helps the viewer make sense of the world, offers audiences strategies for managing crises, documents our hopes, fears, discourses, ideologies and socio-political conflicts, critiques the existing social order, warns people to change their ways in order to avert an imminent apocalypse, refutes or ridicules apocalyptic hysteria, and seeks to bring people to a religious renewal, spiritual awakening and salvation message.

Keywords

Apocalyptic Films, Comedy Films, Christian Films, Crisis Management, Film Functions, Ideologies, Social Criticism, Warning

Author Notes

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The Rising Popularity of Apocalyptic Cinema

Films with apocalyptic themes have never been more popular. John Walliss and James Aston report that the 21st Century has seen a significant increase in the number of films having an apocalyptic theme.[1] Mary Bloodsworth Lugo and Carmen Lugo-Lugo estimate that there were 59 apocalyptic films released between 1980 and 1999, and there were close to 90 in the time span between 2000 and 2013.[2] The author's survey of apocalyptic films produced over the last 100 years found that only a handful of end-of-the-world motion pictures were produced in the period before 1950[3], and with each passing decade after 1950 until the 1980s the number of films released to audiences steadily increased. During the 1980s and 1990s the number of apocalyptic films released remained steady before an explosion of apocalyptic films in the 21st Century.[4] In "Why Are Dystopian Films on the Rise Again?," in addressing the recent popularity of apocalyptic films, Christopher Schmidt posits two questions: "Why, then, do we shell out 12, 13, 14 dollars for films that seem designed only to frighten and depress us? What species of entertainment, much less relief, do these nightmare scenarios offer?"[5] In this article, in finding answers to the questions posed by Schmidt the author argues that the steady rise in production of apocalyptic cinema over the last seven decades, those films that depict "a credible threat to the continuing existence of humankind as a species or the existence of Earth as a planet capable of supporting human life,"[6]

can be explained by the growing number of diverse functions these films serve in society. The author will describe seven functions commonly found in American apocalyptic cinema expressed both in terms of its meaning (the underlying purpose of the film) and its message (the ideas the filmmakers want to convey to the audience).

The Functions of Apocalyptic Cinema

1. To Make Sense of the World and to Order Chaos

In Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, the author claims that humans are profoundly uncomfortable with the idea that our lives form only a microscopically short period of time in world history. We feel trapped in the middle. So much has transpired before we were born and so much will take place after we die. To make sense of this disconcerting fact we look for a 'coherent pattern', and invest in the thought that we find ourselves in the middle of a story. In order to make sense of our lives we need to discover some 'consonance' between the beginning, the middle, and the end.[7]

Kermode's coherent patterns are "fictions" to impose structure and order on the idea of eternity. We need fictions of beginnings and fictions of ends, fictions which unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning.[8] The author cites the works of Homer, Augustine of Hippo and Plato in

support of his claim.[9] These temporal fictions "humanize the common death" and allow us to coexist with temporal chaos. Kermode writes: "'Men in the middest' make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle."[10]

Drawing upon a tradition of Christian apocalyptic thought dating back to the birth of Christianity, Kermode argues we have adopted the belief that the beginning was a time of prosperity and advancement. The middle period is the age in which we now live, and is distinguished by 'decadence', where what was good has declined and is in need of 'renovation'. In order to usher in a new age, a process of painful purging (or 'terrors') needs to be endured. This allows us to explain the chaos and 'crisis' we see unravelling around us.[11]

People living in the middle often believe that the end is very near, and that their own generation is the one with responsibility to usher in a new world. Kermode writes: "It seems to be a condition attaching to the exercise of thinking about the future that one should assume one's own time to stand in extraordinary relation to it."[12] To Kermode, these 'fictions' are not dangerous in themselves, but they should not be given the status of 'myth' and cause us to take unwarranted actions.[13] Fictions degenerate into myths or hypotheses when they are not held to be fictive, when people attempt to "live by that which was designed only to know

by."[14] Indeed, some people do approach apocalyptic fictions with a 'naive acceptance'. Others have a 'clerkly scepticism' and deny that it is possible to accurately predict the world's end date.[15]

Stories of the end also allow individuals to reflect on their own death, and to make sense of their lives, their place in time, and their relationship to the beginning and the end. This gives rise to Kermode's memorable phrase: 'No longer imminent, the end is immanent'[16] meaning that not only do the last remnants of time have an eschatological import but the whole of history and the progress of human life are characterized by the End. Kermode believes that the world is living in the throes of an *immanent* apocalypse. The three *Terminator* movies dramatize a pre-apocalyptic state of affairs in which the technological apocalypse is already immanent, already implicit in the immediate environment, where the explosion has already occurred. Having laid down this theoretical position, Kermode tracks the creation of new attempts to 'make sense of life' through literature. He focuses on modern literature but covers a range of authors including William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, William Butler Yeats, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, the French 'new novelists', William S. Burroughs, Samuel Beckett and Jean-Paul Sartre.

In *Hollywood and Armaggedon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation*, Conrad Ostwalt proposes the basic themes of apocalyptic films. In his opinion, echoing the thoughts of Kermode, these modern, secular and cinematic

representations have an important function: they provide meaning to a chaotic existence in that "by placing life drama in relation to a beginning, a middle, and an end, the apocalypse provides coherence and consonance-it makes time trustworthy, especially when plot points towards the future, as it does in the apocalypse."[17] Gomel notes that Kermode's "sense of ending" "seems, perversely to infect sf's explorations of the open-endedness of the future."[18] The process of painful purging which needs to be endured to explain the chaos and 'crisis' we see unravelling around us is at the core of apocalyptic cinema, whether it be a collision with a celestial body, a deadly virus that decimates the population, or a plague of zombies that feed on the living.

J. David Velleman notes that Kermode's text leads us to speculating about our "inability to keep our balance without horizons; or for our desire for endings that we can outlive..."[19] These endings which we survive and which give 'consonance' to our lives are present in films such as *Armageddon* (1998), as Harry Stamper (Bruce Willis) presses the button that sets off the bomb successfully splitting the asteroid thereby avoiding the collision with Earth; with the Martians succumbing to microbes present on Earth in Byron Haskin's *War of the Worlds* (1953), later remade in 2005 by Steven Spielberg; and with the destruction of the alien destroyer ships in *Independence Day* (1996). In *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), director Doug Liman reinforces our need and struggle for 'coherence' by having Major William "Bill" Cage (Tom Cruise) endure multiple deaths until he is finally

able to drop a belt of grenades into the Omega's core thereby neutralizing a race of extraterrestrials called Mimics that had taken over continental Europe. As Elizabeth K. Rosen notes: "Apocalypse is a means by which to understand the world and one's place in it. It is an organizing principle imposed on an overwhelming, seemingly disordered universe."[20]

2. To Attempt to Work through Historical Traumas or to Negotiate Our Way Around Human Horrors

In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke proposes that form, or underlying patterns of experience in creative works, can function as "equipment for living" because they offer audiences possible strategies for managing recurring situations in their lives.[21] Stephen Dine Young applies Burke's concept to the role of movies as "equipment for living" in the context of several scholarly traditions (i.e., textual analysis, viewer-effects research, cultural studies, and gratifications research) in the analysis of the relationship of the viewer to film. Young analyzed whether audience members can distinguish between the actions in the films and the actions in their lives and, if so, whether they interpret the film as having a specific function in their lives.[22]

Young found that films such as *The Shining* (1980), *Thelma and Louise* (1991), *The Godfather* (1972) and *Crimes and Misdemeanors* (1989) all had

specific influences on behavior, while films like *Schindler's List* (1993), *Don Juan DeMarco* (1995), and *Animal House* (1978) had specific influences on thinking.[23] Brummett applied the "equipment for living" concept to movies and other forms of popular discourse, by arguing "Stories do not merely pose problems, they suggest ways and means to resolve the problems insofar as they follow discursively a pattern that people might follow in reality."[24] He exemplified this position by systematically analyzing a series of haunted house films and concluding that these films allow viewers to "overcome feelings of anomie and disorientation" by paradoxically exposing them to narrative and cinematic devices that alter normal experiences of time and space.[25]

Cinema with plots of global devastation is ideally suited for "equipment for living" messages. Many apocalyptic films provide audiences with the message: "You can survive the impending cataclysm, and here's how" then cast characters in situations where they are faced with life and death choices. Viewers can then learn from the characters' responses to these decisions. In apocalyptic films, characters are either trying to prevent an oncoming cataclysm from occurring or preparing to survive an inevitable catastrophe. Examples of characters working out problems in the face of impending calamity include Dr. Cole Hendron's desperate efforts to build a space ark that will save and transport a small portion of humanity to the star's single orbiting planet, Zyra in *When Worlds Collide* (1951); the Baldwin family's attempts to flee Los Angeles, find refuge in a cave, and fend off thugs and

murderers in *Panic in Year Zero* (1962); and James and Hilda Bloggs' unsuccessful attempts to follow government-issued Protect and Survive pamphlets in advance of a Soviet nuclear attack in the animated feature *When the Wind Blows* (1986).

In post-apocalyptic films, characters who have survived the cataclysm are forced to struggle to survive in a dystopian landscape. These efforts are exemplified in the struggles of Man (Viggo Mortensen) and Boy (Kodi Smit-McPhee) as they scavenge for food and avoid roaming gangs in a post-apocalyptic world in *The Road* (2009) and the efforts of Eli (Denzel Washington) as he demonstrates uncanny survival and fighting skills, hunts wildlife and swiftly defeats a group of desert bandits who try to ambush him to eventually reach Alcatraz in *The Book of Eli* (2010). James Berger writes that: "Post-apocalyptic representations are simultaneously symptoms of historical traumas and attempts to work through them."[26] Berger sees post-apocalyptic film functioning as problem-solving exercises for characters trying to find solutions to the aftermath of an apocalyptic event. Jerome Shapiro, whose book *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* traces the history of atomic bomb cinema since the 1950s, argues that "convincing audiences that they can survive is the most important function of the apocalyptic genre, and very important to filmgoers of the 1950s and 1960s."[27]

In "Early Disaster Cinema as Dysfunctional “Equipment for Living”: or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kenneth Burke," Carlnita P. Greene and Christopher A. Greene argue that films can provide dysfunctional "equipment for living."[28] By examining film form (content) from three disaster films from the 1970s (*Airport* (1970), *Poseidon Adventure* (1972), and *Towering Inferno* (1974)), the authors claim that these films can lead viewers to a "trained incapacity." Audiences begin to trivialize their own problems when comparing their struggles to the life and death events on screen and become less motivated to make the necessary changes in their own lives. Audiences may consider their lives as parallel to the experiences of those on screen when they are not homologous, and that a “naturalization” of plights (disasters which seem inevitable and natural) may deflect audiences away from considering that the circumstances of the time were caused by ineffective governmental and societal systems. The solutions from these films were sought from authority figures bringing the message that they should continue to rely on the current governmental, social, religious, economic, and political systems, a way of thinking which does not encourage them to seek out their own solutions to problems, and does not encourage resistance to and/or questioning of the society as it stands.

3. To Document our Hopes, Fears, Discourses, Ideologies and Socio-Political Conflicts

Apocalyptic films, as Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo rightly point out, function to document our fears and our responses to these anxieties.[29] Following Douglas Kellner's claim that "Hollywood films provide cinematic visions concerning the psychological, sociopolitical and ideological makeup of U.S. society at a given point in history,"[30] the authors argue that the increase in apocalyptic films can be traced to specific anxieties generated by the September 11, 2001 events, exacerbated by official government rhetoric that created an "us and them" dynamic that reactivated old ideologies and created new ones.[31] Susan Sontag adds that science fiction films "serve to allay" as well as "reflect world-wide anxieties."[32] At the core of most apocalyptic film plots is a crisis event which causes the characters in the film to respond to the threat in attempts to eliminate or reduce the impact of the menace. These crisis situations are products of the psychological, sociopolitical and ideological makeup of U.S. society at given points in history. Despina Kakoudaki claims that the racial tensions that followed the Rodney King events and trial were transformed into thematics of interracial collaboration in *Independence Day* (1996), that the intensified sense of environmental danger, political responsibility and global connectivity of the early 2000s, especially after the events of September 11, were reflected by the warnings about climate change in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and that the troubled political relationships that affected

the scale of disaster in the Gulf and in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina were echoed in the depiction of massive floods, tsunamis and cities washing away in *2012* (2009).[33]

Apocalyptic cinema has a long history dating back to the first end-of-the-world feature, the Danish film *Verdens Undergang* (1916). Over the last century filmmakers have made use of then-contemporary concerns as plot devices for their apocalyptic films to generate audience interest. The apocalyptic event in *Verdens Undergang* is the devastation caused by a comet as it passes by the Earth. In producing this popular feature, the filmmakers were capitalizing upon the fears and media interest generated by the recent passing of Halley's Comet in 1910. At the time there were fears that the deadly cyanogen gas found in the tail of the comet by the Yerkes Observatory just prior to its passing would snuff out all life on Earth.[34] For Abel Gance's feature *End of the World* (1931), a stock market collapse is used as a central plot point in the drama echoing the then recent October 1929 Wall Street crash and catastrophic levels of unemployment across all the industrialized countries.

Following the demonstrations in 1944 of the devastating potential of atomic weaponry and the heightened tension with the testing of nuclear weapons in the Soviet Union, apocalyptic films began to appear with the atomic bomb as a threat to humanity's survival. *The Lost Missile* (1958) carried a Cold War-era message of

the importance of the work done by scientists and the military in protecting the nation from external threats.[35] *On the Beach* (1959) features characters played by Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner struggling to survive from nuclear fallout caused by World War III. *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959) concerns the post-apocalyptic struggles of the last few survivors on Earth after global annihilation caused by atomic poisoning. The harmful effects of radiation unleashed a series of films featuring giant mutant monsters (*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (1953), *Godzilla* (1954), *Them!* (1954), *Tarantula* (1955), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957)). Sontag refers to representations of the monster and the Martian as indirect references to the nuclear war (bomb) and Communism.[36] As the Cold war intensified, nuclear themes and radioactive fallout as plot device in apocalyptic films would carry through the 1960s (*Panic in Year Zero!* (1962), *Fail Safe* (1964), *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964)), 1970s (*A Boy and His Dog* (1975), *Holocaust 2000* (1977)), and the 1980s (*The Day After* (1983), *Threads* (1984), *When the Wind Blows* (1986)).

Three major influenza pandemics sparked intense media attention over a twenty year span beginning in 1957 (Asian Flu (1957-1958), Hong Kong Flu (1969), and Russian Flu (1977-1978)) which killed millions.[37] During this same time period, films featuring deadly viruses and plagues began to appear which played upon our pandemic fears (*No Blade of Grass* (1970), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971)). *Soylent Green* (1973) is set in a dystopian future suffering from pollution,

overpopulation, depleted resources, poverty, dying oceans, and year-round humidity due to the greenhouse effect; it was based on *Make Room! Make Room!*, a 1966 science fiction novel written by Harry Harrison. The film was a direct reaction to the environmental movement at the time as was *Omega Man* (1971). [38] As Halley's Comet made its return in 1985, the cheap exploitation film *Night of the Comet* (1984) was released to theaters grossing a respectable $14 million in the United States on a budget of $700,000.[39] With the collapse of the Soviet Union, apocalyptic film producers in the 1990s found other plot devices to keep audiences tense and on the edge of their seats, moving from earthly threats to menaces from space, both aliens and celestial bodies (*Solar Crisis* (1990), *The Arrival* (1996), *Independence Day* (1996), *Invasion* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), and *Armageddon* (1998)).

After the events of September 11, 2001, producers of apocalyptic cinema turned towards faith-based films in ways of making meaning of disaster (*Signs* (2002), *The Road* (2009), *Knowing* (2009), *The Book of Eli* (2010)).[40] *Signs* (2002) exploited the growing fascination with unexplained crop circles. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) played on the rising concerns about climate change. Walliss and Aston claim that after 9/11, apocalyptic films became much more pessimistic, where science, technology, and the government are powerless against apocalyptic forces and humanity receives its just deserts (*Flood* (2007), *Day after Tomorrow* (2004)). The cynical view of the military is found in the ineffectiveness of guns and

bullets in *Cloverfield* (2008) unlike in *Godzilla* (1998).[41] *2012* (2012) channels the fears and anxieties existing at the time over the 2012 phenomenon, the range of eschatological beliefs that cataclysmic or otherwise transformative events would occur on or around 21 December 2012. What fears, ideologies and socio-political conflicts will future apocalyptic films channel? Challenges for global humanity include transnational organized crime, terrorism, climate change, and ever present deadly pandemics all offer interesting possibilities for screenwriters of apocalyptic film.

4. To Critique the Existing Social Order

In her seminal essay "Imagination of Disaster," Susan Sontag asserts: "There is absolutely no social criticism, of even the most implicit kind, in science fiction films."[42] While Sontag has laid the groundwork in her essay on some of the fundamental characteristics of science fiction film and apocalyptic cinema, on this point she has it wrong. In contrast, Rosen claims that the apocalyptic genre "offers more than this sense of ultimate order. It is also a vehicle of social criticism, and has always been so."[43] The apocalyptic event, at least in its religious incarnation, is God's ultimate judgment of mankind, a punishment for the ills of society and a corrective response for a people who have failed unpardonably and are unable to right their own wrongs.

Apocalyptic text can function as a political critique of the established order which is denounced as an incarnation of evil. The predicted future order of that which ought to be, as Bruce Lincoln notes, calls for "cataclysmic change: the humbling of the mighty and the exaltation of the meek." Hope for this new order is a remedy to anxiety and frustration, conveying a sense of confidence and one's own righteousness.[44]

Walliss and Aston assert that apocalyptic movies critique the existing social structures in efforts to respond to current social crises. They point to the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) which subverts an affirmative representation of the status quo by highlighting an ineffectual government that is initially resistant to expert scientific evidence on climate change. Later with a deep freeze descending on the globe, Vice-President Becker (played by Kenneth Walsh with an uncanny similarity to then Vice-President Dick Cheney) admits that he was wrong and that we cannot continue to consume our planet's resources without consequences.[45] Shapiro also asserts that "many popular bomb films challenge the status quo, provide alternative visions of the future, and offer hope."

One of the first apocalyptic films to criticize the growing atomic threat was *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). In the film a humanoid from outer space, Klaatu, arrives with a message for all world leaders. Klaatu, which Krin Gabbard claims is an allegorical Christ-like figure,[46] explains that the people of the other

planets have safety concerns now that humanity has developed rockets and a rudimentary form of atomic power. Klaatu declares that if his message is ignored "Earth will be eliminated." The message of peace and non-violence offered by Robert Wise's film is still relevant today. Krin Gabbard claims that the film "unlike almost all science fiction films of the 1950s, ...takes a stand against the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy era."[47] For example, in one scene a radio can be seen broadcasting the sensationalized account of the landing of the spaceship, an editorial cartoon grossly exploits the frightening aspects of Klaatu and his servant Gort, and a woman implies that the Russians are behind the menace.[48] This is the world in which McCarthy thrived, yet clearly the aliens are there to help the citizens of Earth.

Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), later remade in 1978, depicts an extraterrestrial invasion that begins in Santa Mira, California. Alien plant spores have fallen from space and grown into large seed pods, each one capable of reproducing a duplicate replacement copy of a human. As Ernesto Laura first pointed out, these pod-people, who will stop at nothing to carry out world domination, are allegorical figures representing Communists who are outwardly unchanged but transformed within.[49]

As the decades passed, film producers have become more explicit and less allegorical in their attacks on social institutions. In *Escape from New York* (1981),

the entire island of Manhattan is turned into a large maximum security prison. No one enters. No one leaves. New York has at last been turned over to the criminals. But this does not render America safe. The country is ruled by a phony Democracy, a fascistic national police force, and threatened by uncontrollable terrorist groups and international nuclear flash points.

In George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005) a zombie assault on Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, takes place where a feudal-like government exists. The survivors in the film have fled to the Golden Triangle area of downtown Pittsburgh. The region is protected on two sides by rivers and on the other by an electric barricade that survivors term "the Throat." The zombies are portrayed in a sympathetic light almost with human actions while the government refuge is directly condemned. The existing societal order is seen as corrupt, selfish, avaricious, egomaniacal and not worth preserving or continuing with.[50] As Shapiro argues, apocalyptic films "exhort the righteous and condemn the heretical, they criticize oppressive conditions, and, lastly, they promise rebirth following a future crisis."[51]

5. To Respond to Social Crisis, Warning People to Change their Ways in Order to Avert an Imminent Apocalypse

Elizabeth Rosen sees apocalypse not as optimistic narrative where God intervenes to make it right by restoring order to a disordered world and rewarding the faithful but rather as God expressing an all-consuming punishing anger on a degenerate world.[52] She calls this fundamentally pessimistic literature the neo-apocalyptic; "it functions largely as a cautionary tale, positing means of extinction and predicting the gloomy probabilities of such ends. If these tales exhibit judgment, it is of the sort that assumes that no one deserves saving and that everyone should be punished."[53] Tales of the neo-apocalypse involve collapse of the social order, the punishment of human sin and error, and pessimism about humanity's capacity to rehabilitate itself. Unlike apocalyptic tales, neo-apocalyptic stories posit no happy ending. There's no *Deus ex machina*, no hope for the rehabilitation of humankind: "This degeneracy is so complete that the Ending can only be so, too. There is nothing beyond this Ending, no hope of a new heaven on Earth, precisely because there is nothing worth saving."[54] The message of these movies is clear: if mankind does not change their ways, the events on screen will occur bringing about the extinction of the human race.

The Day After Tomorrow, with the entire northern hemisphere covered in snow and ice by the end of the motion picture, serves as a cautionary tale about

global warming. Another environmentally themed disaster, *4:44 Last Day on Earth* (2011), focuses on the relationship between two people in New York City as they await the end of all life on Earth the next morning at 4:44 a.m. Eastern Standard Time, when deadly solar and cosmic radiation will destroy the Earth's protective ozone layer, and along with it, all life on the planet. In *On the Beach* (1959), nuclear fallout and radiation have decimated the world's population, leaving a handful of people with no hope of survival. The film is filled with speeches of warning that in a nuclear war there are no winners. Change your ways (e.g., reduce carbon dioxide emissions, eliminate nuclear weapons) or prepare for what has transpired on screen.

In some films, the apocalyptic event is not directly brought about by human error, indifference, or fault. *Melancholia* (2011) ends with the rogue planet coming into collision with Earth to the sound of Wagner's prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*. Melancholia is a bold, uneven, unruly and completely unforgettable film. Justine knows: "The Earth is evil, we don't need to grieve for it. Nobody would miss it." *Knowing* (2009) features a time capsule containing a cryptic message about the coming apocalypse sending a concerned father, John (Nicolas Cage), a professor of astrophysics at MIT, on a race to prevent the horrific events, a solar flare, from destroying the Earth. In *Knowing*, we didn't bring about our own demise; it was inevitable and planned by nature in an unchanging way before the first human ever stood upright. In *Last Night* (1998) a group of very different individuals with different ideas of how to face the end come together as the world is expected to end

in six hours at the turn of the century. The apocalyptic event is never revealed but we sense that it is unavoidable and not manmade. If there is a cautionary message with hope to mankind in these films, it is that although the end is inevitable it is only so in the film, and there may be solutions in the not-so-distant future to our problems if humans work together.

6. To Argue that the End of the World is Not Near and to Refute or Ridicule Apocalyptic Hysteria

All doomsday predictions over the last few millennia share one thing in common; they all never came to pass. Some of these failed predictions include the philosopher Seneca (A.D. 65), European Christians (1666), Prophet Hen of Leeds (1806), Millerites (April 23, 1843), Mormons (1891), Halley's Comet (1910), Jehovah's Witnesses (1914), Heaven's Gate (1997), Nostradamus (August 1999), Y2K (January 1, 2000), and God's Church Ministry (2008).[55] One of the first films to poke fun at an apocalyptic event is *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), a film which satirizes the Cold War fears of a nuclear conflict between the USSR and the USA. Within the last decade there has been an increase in the number of apocalyptic film comedies refuting or ridiculing apocalyptic hysteria, some of which directly parody the spate of apocalyptic films in the 21st century. In the satire flick *Disaster Movie* (2008), a film which parodies

numerous recent disaster flicks, the world does not end on August 29, 2008 (the film's release date), but rather with the characters involved in an extensive musical number. In *Fish Story* (2009), the world is preparing for the seemingly inevitable asteroid collision that will wipe out civilization. In a still-open record shop in the middle of the city, however, a music fan holds up hope that an obscure punk single from 1975 will save the world. And, in a series of seemingly unrelated stories that trace the song's history over the years, we see how it does just that.

With predictions of global catastrophe not materializing on December 21, 2012, the end date of the Mesoamerican Long Count calendar, a series of comedies with end of the world themes were released poking fun at apocalyptic hysteria. *The World's End* (2013), starring Simon Pegg and Nick Frost, features a group of friends who discover an alien invasion during an epic pub crawl in their home town, Newton Haven. The film ends with the destruction of Newton Haven triggering a worldwide chain reaction that does not end civilization but wipes out modern technology, sending humanity back to the Dark Ages. In *This is the End* (2013) starring James Franco, Emma Watson, Jonah Hill, Seth Rogen, Craig Robinson, and Jay Baruchel, the story centers around a group of real life actors playing fictionalized versions of themselves, in the aftermath of a global biblical apocalypse. The end is not so bad with the Devil being split in two and the actors ending up in Heaven where every dream can come true.

While these black comedies were designed to entertain audiences by ridiculing those who are so quickly willing to believe in doomsday scenarios playing out in their lifetimes, they also carry a deeper message, that although the end of the world is inevitable in about five billion years with the death of the sun there is no rational or scientific basis to believe the end is imminent. By offering alternate apocalypses, apocalyptic comedy seeks to affect our vital, comprehensive view of human history, the apocalyptic vision. There is a subversive power to comedy, its ability to ridicule, debunk and ultimately destroy a system of beliefs.

Drawing upon theorist Mathew Winston, Robert Lamm in *Can We Laugh at God?": Apocalyptic Comedy in Film* argues that the black comedy in apocalyptic films performs a very important prime millenarian function of assuaging fear: "'comedy in black humor helps us overcome our fears' by providing the invulnerability of the ego, which walks away from the blackness unscathed."[56] He also notes that, "the blackest humor in *Dr. Strangelove* shows that the noblest human virtues may be misdirected against us. Religion, altruism, and logic, in the service of an inhumane cause, are more insidious than a legion of madmen."[57] While referencing such science fiction film comedies such as *Whoops, Apocalypse* (1982), *A Boy and His Dog* (1975), *Zardoz* (1974), *Atomic Cafe* (1982), *Dark Star* (1974), and *Sleeper* (1973), Lamm argues that we cannot laugh at God without laughing at ourselves.[58] As Michael Foucault notes: "No society is in good health

without laughing at itself quietly and privately; no character is sound without self-scrutiny, without turning inward to see where it may have overreached itself."[59]

7. To Bring People to a Religious Renewal, Spiritual Awakening and Salvation Message

While Bible stories on film have a long history stretching back to director Henry Vincent's *Passion Play of Oberammergau* (1898) followed by Sidney Olcott's *From the Manger to the Cross* (1912), it was not until the 1930s when the Christian community began to seriously consider using the medium of film to spread the Christian message.[60] In 1935, Lutheran lawyer and journalist Milton Anderson echoed the observation of Dr. Franz Kordac, archbishop of Prague, that "if St. Paul were alive at this hour he would use talking pictures to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ."[61] Lindvall and Quicke in *Celluloid Sermons* excavate the lost histories of non-theatrical religious films made outside the corporate Hollywood industry, specifically for Christian churches, and chart the highways and byways that Christian groups chose to follow in adapting movies for religious purposes while chronicling the involvement of Protestants in the production, distribution, and exhibition of films from the onset of sound motion pictures up through "box-office Christianity," where Christian films have crossed over into mainline distribution and exhibition.

Lindvall and Quicke classify five categories of religious films that emerged during the 1930s: (1) Biblical films (to illustrate familiar Biblical stories); (2) missionary films (to explain the cultures and needs of designated mission fields and to use in mission fields); (3) historical and (4) biographical films (to document events and people); and (5) dramatic films ("life situation" films to teach Christian living focusing on personal, social and economic issues).[62] It is the last genre that would dominate after World War II with numerous subgenres in melodrama and apocalyptic films.

Around 1830, a New England sect led by John Newton Darby, a former member of the Plymouth Brethren, published the idea that the church would escape the tribulation (a relatively short period of time where everyone will experience worldwide hardships, disasters, famine, war, pain, and suffering, which will wipe out more than 75% of all life on the earth before the Second Coming of Jesus Christ takes place) by literally being plucked out of the world; believing Christians would be raptured (abruptly transported from earth to heaven with the second coming of Christ). Soon visual apocalyptic tracts and charts were published and distributed throughout fundamentalist churches in the 19th century.[63]

A key part of apocalyptic Christian narrative involves the rise of the Anti-Christ, whose government will mark those left behind with the numbers 666 on their forehead or hand. These riveting plot devices provided screenwriters with a

fertile field for the dramatic invention of terror and suspense. While the birth of film occurred in the 1890s, it was not until Carlos Baptista had produced *The Rapture* (1941) and *Blessed Hope* (1943) that apocalyptic end-time events had been explored on celluloid. However, the first Christian filmmaker to effectively employ such shock-and-awe narrative techniques was Russell S. Doughten, Jr. After forming Heartland Pictures to produce low-budget B-movies, Doughten teamed up with Don Thompson to form Mark IV Pictures to produce Christian dramatic films.[64] The central theme of their most successful films dealt with overt end-times narratives, stories rooted in dispensational perspectives, namely, "the Rapture" and "the Tribulation."

Mark IV Pictures seminal apocalyptic classic *A Thief in the Night* (1972) concerns the intense fear of a young woman named Patty who has been "left behind" after the Rapture. The concept was so powerful that it became the most publicized, most watched, and most rented Christian film in the thirty-five year history of the industry, with an estimate that more than two million people converted immediately after watching the film.[65] The film, designed to scare spectators into the Kingdom of God, was criticized for traumatizing younger viewers, manipulating them into altar call conversions.[66] The film launched the Christian apocalyptic film genre and was followed by *A Distant Thunder* (1978), *Image of the Beast* (1981), and *Prodigal Planet* (1983). The companies' commitment to high-quality production hampered growth, and by the year 2000,

Heartland and Mark IV reduced their filmmaking operations after having produced twenty films.

Other ministries affiliated with Doughten sought to expand the field of apocalyptic Christian films with *The Return* (1987) by Mark Evans Ministry Productions, a fast-paced drama about the Tribulation and the Advent of the Lord, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1979), a pseudo-documentary dramatizing Lindsey's best-selling book, and Fred Carpenter's *Without Reservations* (1989) combining surrealism and evangelism.[67] The success of Mark IV/Heartland augured a boom in the 1990s with the heavily funded Cloud Ten Productions and the Trinity Broadcasting Network entering the field with both theatrical and video releases. Hollywood exploited the genre around the turn of the millennium (e.g., Peter Hyam's *End of Days*, 1999). Three Prophecy Partners films (from Jack Van Impe and John Hagee Ministries), *Apocalypse* (1998), *Revelation* (1999), and *Tribulation* (2000), were marketed with stunning professionalism by Peter and Paul Lalonde of Cloud Ten Pictures. In *Revelation*, actor Jeff Fahey stood in the eye of the Tribulation storm being confronted by the Antichrist (played by Nick Mancuso) with the choice of taking the mark of the beast or facing the guillotine and losing his head.[68]

Apocalyptic Christian films were produced in ever more abundance during the first two decades of the 21st Century with the *Left Behind* series starring Kirk

Cameron (2000-2005) and the Hollywood produced *Left Behind* (2014) starring Nicholas Cage. Other entries include *Gone* (2002), *The Moment After II: The Awakening* (2006), *The Mark* (2012), and *New World Order: The End Has Come* (2013). These films all spend less time in exegesis and interpretation of the sacred texts and more reading the cinematic signs of the times. Echoing and exploiting Darby's 19th-century notion of the Rapture, this apocalyptic genre attracted an anxious and gullible audience, spreading a message of repent or perish. At the same time, these apocalyptic films can be seen functioning to comfort the faithful in times of persecution where the current ill-treatments are viewed as part of the tribulation which must precede the final judgment and restoration of the faithful. The faithful are told of their future reward to encourage them to remain steadfast and not give in to the powers of evil or the temptation to forsake their faith.[69]

Summation

The author has identified seven functions of apocalyptic cinema which assist in explaining the enduring popularity of these films over the last seven decades. Apocalyptic films provide emotional comfort to audiences by helping us understand the world around us, explaining the chaos unravelling around us, and providing structure and order on the idea of eternity. These films function as

"equipment for living" because they offer anxious audiences possible strategies for surviving an apocalyptic event.

Plots with end-of-the-world themes are fertile ground for filmmakers to espouse ideologies and critique the existing sociopolitical order. By serving as cautionary tales filmmakers use apocalyptic film plots as a means to warn people to change their ways before what has transpired on screen becomes reality. Some end-of-the-world films are designed to entertain audiences by ridiculing those who are so quickly willing to believe in doomsday scenarios playing out in their lifetimes, while carrying a deeper message, that although the end of the world is inevitable in about five billion years with the death of the sun there is no rational or scientific basis to believe the end is imminent. Finally, beginning in the 1970s Christian filmmakers began adding to the growing number of end-of-the-world films by producing apocalyptic-themed films to play on audience fears and spread a message of repent or perish.

Is mankind approaching a time of global upheaval and catastrophe when an accumulation of events decimates the planet's population, leaving the remaining survivors fighting each other for what is left of Earth's precious resources? Are we near the end of civilization where those events we envisioned in films such as *Soylent Green* (1973) and *Logan's Run* (1976) (overpopulation), *The Andromeda Strain* (1971) and *Contagion* (2011) (pandemics), *Waterworld* (1995) and *The Day*

After Tomorrow (2004) (climate change), and *On the Beach* (1959) and *Panic in Year Zero!* (1962) (nuclear war) will soon transpire? While the answers to these questions are subject to much debate among scientists and academics, what is certain is that the diverse number of functions served by end-of-the-world narratives has made apocalyptic motion pictures one of the most popular and enduring film genres over the last seventy years.

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[1] John Walliss and James Aston, "Doomsday America: The Pessimistic Turn of Post-9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Apr. 2011): 54.

[2] Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, *Projecting 9/11: Race, Gender, and Citizenship in Recent Hollywood Films* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 159.

[3] These films include *The End of the World* (1916), *End of the World* (*La Fin du Monde*, 1931), *Deluge* (1933), and *Things to Come* (1936).

[4] The number of apocalyptic films produced by decade as listed on Wikipedia support the author's findings: 12 (1950-1959), 23 (1960-1969), 35 (1970-1979), 34 (1980-1989), 35 (1990-1999). "List of Apocalyptic Films," Wikipedia, accessed August 22, 2016, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_apocalyptic_films.

[5] Christopher Schmidt, "Why Are Dystopian Films on the Rise Again?," *JSTOR Daily*, November 19, 2014, accessed August 20, 2016, http://daily.jstor.org/why-are-dystopian-films-on-the-rise-again/.

[6] The definition of "apocalyptic cinema" as found in: Charles P. Mitchell, *A Guide to Apocalyptic Cinema* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001), xi. Mitchell categorizes these films into seven specific categories: Religious or Supernatural; Celestial Collision; Solar or Orbital Disruption; Nuclear War and Radioactive Fallout; Germ Warfare or Pestilence; Alien Device or Invasion; and Scientific Miscalculation.

[7] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 17.

[8] Kermode, *Sense of Ending*, 190.

[9] Ibid., 58-62.

[10] Ibid., 17.

[11] Ibid., 99-100.

[12] Ibid., 94.

[13] Ibid., 39.

[14] Ibid., 112.

[15] Ibid., 9-10.

[16] Ibid., 25.

[17] Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., "Hollywood and Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation," in *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film*, ed. Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt, Jr. (Boulder: Westview, 1995), 61.

[18] Elana Gomel, "Mystery, Apocalypse and Utopia: The Case of the Ontological Detective Story," *Science Fiction Studies*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Nov., 1995): 343.

[19] J. David Velleman, "Narrative Explanation," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 112, No. 1 (Jan. 2003): 11.

[20] Elizabeth K. Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation: Apocalypse and the Postmodern Imagination* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2008), xi.

[21] Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 293-304.

[22] Stephen Dine Young, "Movies as Equipment for Living: A Developmental Analysis of the Importance of Film in Everyday Life," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, Vol. 17, no. 4 (2000): 447-468.

[23] Young, "Movies as Equipment for Living," 459-460.

[24] Barry Brummett. "Burke's Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 1, Issue 2 (1984): 164.

[25] Barry Brummett, "Electric Literature as Equipment for Living: Haunted House Films," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 2, Issue 3 (1985): 258-259.

[26] James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19. To Berger, a "trauma" is the psychoanalytic term for an apocalypse. Trauma produces symptoms in its wake, after the event, and we reconstruct trauma by interpreting its symptoms, reading back in time. Apocalypse is preceded by signs and portents whose interpretation defines the event in the future. The apocalyptic sign is the mirror image of the traumatic symptom (20-21).

[27] Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema: The Apocalyptic Imagination on Film* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 138.

[28] Carlnita P. Greene and Christopher A. Greene, "Early Disaster Cinema as Dysfunctional "Equipment for Living": or How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Kenneth Burke," *The Journal of the Kenneth Burke Society*, Volume 5, Issue 2, Spring 2009.

[29] Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo, *Projecting 9/11*, 175.

[30] Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Films and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 18.

[31] Bloodsworth-Lugo and Lugo-Lugo, *Projecting 9/11*, 159. Matthew Leggatt argues that these anxieties and pessimism are not reactions to the 9/11 event itself as much as a reaction to the lack of political change which followed in the wake of September 11, 2001. Matthew Leggatt, "Melancholic and Hungry Games: Post-9/11 Cinema and the Culture of Apocalypse," in *Popping Culture: Seventh Edition*, ed. Murray Pomerance and John Sakeris (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 325-333.

[32] Susan Sontag, "Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), 225.

[33] Despina Kakoudaki, "Representing Politics in Disaster Films," *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 7(3) (2011): 349-350.

[34] For a comprehensive history of the panic caused by the event please refer to Chapter 2 ('We're All Going to Die!' The Halley's Comet Scare of 1910") in: Robert E. Bartholomew and Hilary Evans, *Panic Attacks: The History of Mass Delusion* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: History Press, 2013).

[35] The concept of the atomic-powered cruise missile doomsday weapon was similar to that of the U.S. Air Force's 1957 Project Pluto.

[36] Sontag, "Imagination of Disaster," 218-223.

[37] J.N. Hays, *Epidemics and Pandemics: Their Impacts on Human History* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC Clio, 2005).

[38] Robin L. Murray and Joseph K. Heumann, *Ecology and Popular Film: Cinema on the Edge* (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 92.

[39] Sherilynn Connolly, "In Honor of Night of the Comet, a Cult Time Capsule of '80s America," *The Village Voice*, November 19, 2013.

[40] Matthew Leggatt, "You Gotta Keep the Faith: Making Sense of Disaster in Post 9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema," *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol. 19, Issue 2 (Fall 2015), Article 6.

[41] Walliss and Aston, *Doomsday America*, 57.

[42] Sontag, "Imagination of Disaster," 223.

[43] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xii.

[44] Bruce Lincoln, "Apocalyptic Temporality and Politics in the Ancient World," in *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1, ed. John J. Collins (New York: Continuum, 1998), 467.

[45] Walliss and Aston, *Doomsday America*, 59-60.

[46] Krin Gabbard, "Religious and Political Allegory in Robert Wise's The Day the Earth Stood Still," *Literature Film Quarterly*, Vol. 10 Issue 3 (1982): 152. More recent scholarship has criticized Gabbard's interpretation of the film as Christian allegory. While Douglas Cowan argues that Gabbard can "interpret Klaatu as a Christ-figure and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* as a gospel allegory," the author should not do so at the expense of restricting other readings. (Douglas E. Cowan, Seeing the Saviour in the Stars: Religion, Conformity, and the Day the Earth Stood Still, *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Vol. 21, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 21).

[47] Gabbard, "Religious and Political Allegory," 150.

[48] Ibid., 153.

[49] Ernesto G. Laura, "Invasione degli Ultracorpi," *Bianco e Nero* 18, no. 2 (December 1957): 69.

[50] Walliss and Aston, *Doomsday America*, 60.

[51] Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, 139.

[52] Rosen, *Apocalyptic Transformation*, xiv.

[53] Ibid., xv.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Eugene Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Toronto: Random House, 1999).

[56] Robert Lamm, ""Can We Laugh at God?": Apocalyptic Comedy in Film," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* vol. 19, no. 2 (Summer 1991): 87.

[57] Lamm,""Can We Laugh at God?"", 89

[58] Ibid., 90.

[59] Michael Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973), 343.

[60] For a deep exploration of the history of the Christian film industry: Terry Lindvall and Andrew Quicke. *Celluloid Sermons. The Emergence of the Christian Film Industry, 1930-1986* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

[61] Milton Anderson, *The Modern Goliath* (Los Angeles, California: David Press, 1935), 17.

[62] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons*, 15-23.

[63] Mal Couch, ed., *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1996), 82-85.

[64] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons*, 172-174.

[65] Russ Doughten, interview by Tom Jennings, Spring 1986, Regent University Religious Film Archives.

[66] Russ Doughten and Don Thompson, interview by Andrew Quicke, November 8, 2010, Regent University Religious Film Archives.

[67] Lindvall and Quicke, *Celluloid Sermons*, 180.

[68] Ibid., 181.

[69] Willi Marxsen, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 273.

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