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How It Ends

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Abstract

This is a film review of *How It Ends* (2021), directed by Daryl Wein and Zoe Lister-Jones.

Keywords

Apocalyptic, End of World

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Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



How It Ends (2021), dir. Daryl Wein and Zoe Lister-Jones

I am always interested in End of the World films, providing as they do interesting perspectives on how Hollywood reprocesses ideas of religious apocalyptic and eschatology. Sometimes the biblical view is deliberately parodied, as in *This is The End* (2013), complete with hellfire and damnation for the well-known actors playing themselves. Often this takes a science fiction form, as in the classic *When Worlds Collide* (1951), which focuses on how humans can escape a start a new world, or more recent films like *Armageddon* or *Deep Impact* (both 1998), in which an asteroid or comet is diverted from hitting the Earth by brilliant and self-sacrificing teams of soldiers or engineers, suggesting that some combination of scientific know-how and courage can stave off disaster.

In *How It Ends*, however, there is no escaping the asteroid which will hit the Earth at 2:00 AM that night, and everyone knows this. But there is no panic in Los Angeles, in which the streets appear oddly deserted—of course, this was filmed during the pandemic lockdown, but that fits

with the story in which the residents all seem resigned to the end, and have largely retreated to their own homes to be by themselves. Unlike *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (2012), in which Steve Carell does just that, in *How It Ends* the characters are almost entirely self-absorbed. Liza (Zoe Lister-Jones) has decided to use her final day to wrap up unfinished business with ex-boyfriends, estranged friends, and her neglectful parents, achieving reconciliation or at least confrontation in being able to express regrets, pain, or anger to them—but they are largely lost in their own worlds, as are the random characters she encounters walking across Los Angeles. One man claims that the asteroid is “fake” (does this sound familiar?) and insists that his neighbor prepare his trash for the next day pickup; a schoolteacher practices stand-up comedy on a street corner by herself; some clearly take too many drugs. Few of them are choosing to be with anyone on this final night, instead opting for isolation.

This is a fine parody of L.A. self-absorption, with well-known actors clearly enjoying playing to the exaggerated versions of themselves—but it never feels mean or judgmental. Liza accepts these characters as they are, but her bigger task is to be reconciled to herself. Her younger self (Cailee Spaeny) travels with her, and strangely enough is not only a figment of her imagination, as other people can see her as well. In their encounter, Liza realizes that being with herself is enough, as that she should stop judging herself for what has happened in her other relationships. In the end, our relationship to our self is the most important relationship any of us can have, and this need not lead to narcissism. After all, it was Rabbi Hillel who said, “If I am not for myself, who will be for me?” Of course, he also said, “If I am only for myself, what am I?” but all ethics starts with self-care.

There is little explicit religion in the movie, although a number of characters frankly hope for an afterlife and seem confident of it, in a L.A. New-Agey sort of way. The lack of anxiety about

the end is played for comedy, but it also suggests the ability to make peace with life and whatever it brings. As a pandemic comedy, this is appropriate, for it has sometimes felt like the end of the world as we know it this year, as we struggle to connect through the isolation and stress of a time that has also featured significant political and social upheaval. This film never gets political, but its “optimistic nihilism” (as the Sundance programmers classified it) provides a respite from fear and anger, and maybe even a bit of hope.