



APOCALYPTIC FILM

From the Dawn of Apocalyptic Thought to the First One Hundred Years of End-of-the-World Cinema

W. GERALD HAMONIC, PH.D.



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TO THE FIRST ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF
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My heartfelt gratitude to Joseph C. Towey (1933–1989), the host of the horror program *Nightmare Theatre*, who introduced me to the classic horror and science-fiction films of yesteryear. The program, created by Mr. Towey and produced by Seattle-based KIRO-TV, was broadcast Friday nights across the Pacific Northwest over a fifteen-year period. Towey starred as the Count, a vampire with a mock Transylvanian accent and a deep love of horrible puns. The program featured two motion pictures, the usual number of TV commercials, and a short intermission with Mr. Towey after the first film. While the bulk of the motion pictures broadcast were horror films, particularly Universal horrors starring their famous monsters (Dracula, Frankenstein, the wolfman, and the mummy), there were a number of science-fiction films on the program, including a few apocalyptic offerings. These end-of-the-world flicks broadcast on the program were some of my first viewing experiences in the genre (e.g., *It Came From Outer Space* (1953), *Day the World Ended* (1956), *It Conquered the World* (1956), *The Monolith Monsters* (1957), *The Last Man on Earth* (née *L'Ultimo Uomo della Terra*) (1964)).

Having been raised in a Roman Catholic household and later worshipping with evangelical Protestant Christians, I became immersed in biblical end-time Christian apocalyptic thought: the Four Horsemen

of the Apocalypse (Revelation 6:1–6), the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 4:13–17) and the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, the rise of the Antichrist (1 John 2:18, 22; 1 John 4:3; 2 John 1:7), and the Tribulation terrors predicted to occur (e.g., asteroids crashing to Earth, pandemics wiping out swaths of humanity, nuclear bombs falling on large cities causing radioactive nightmares, earthquakes erupting in various regions around the globe) (Matthew 24:21–29; Revelation 7:14). I want to thank and praise Jesus Christ (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18; Hebrews 13:15–16) for leading me in my quest for spiritual insight into revelations about the imminent end of human history. I also want to express my gratitude to a number of priests, pastors, theologians, and fellow Christians in helping me further my understanding of apocalyptic thought. My special thanks to Ross Nelson, Michael Looney, Ken Monroe, Mark Wallin, and the open university staff at Thompson Rivers University who provided the opportunity for me to use this book as a textbook for a film course on apocalyptic film. Finally, my deepest thanks to all of the producers, directors, screenwriters, actors, musicians, and other technical and artistic professionals who helped create the hundreds of apocalyptic films that have entertained me and also provided rich insights into the fascinating world of end-time events.

PART ONE

FROM THE DAWN OF APOCALYPTIC THOUGHT TO THE
BIRTH OF THE APOCALYPTIC FILM GENRE

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Today more than ever before we are living under the shadow of global catastrophic risk, a future event that could cause human extinction or massively cripple modern civilization. The foreboding occurrence is captured by the Doomsday Clock, a symbol first appearing on the cover of the June 1947 edition of *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. The clock is intended to “reflect basic changes in the level of continuous danger in which mankind lives in the nuclear age.”¹ Artist Martyl Langsdorf, wife of Alexander Langsdorf, Jr., a physicist who participated in the Manhattan Project, designed the cover.² Hypothetical global catastrophe is represented as midnight, symbolically evoking the Apocalypse. The clock’s original setting in 1947 was seven minutes before midnight. The clock has been set backward and forward about two dozen times over the ensuing seventy years, anywhere from two to seventeen minutes before midnight.

Despite scientific breakthroughs in medicine and technology, growths in movements for social and environmental change, and reductions in extreme poverty, the number of global mass extinction threats makes our demise seem almost inevitable. Threats to humankind include those from space (e.g., asteroids, gamma-ray bursts, hostile extraterrestrial life, and geomagnetic storms), technology (e.g., pernicious artificial intelligence and destructive bio- or nanotechnology), and the natural environment (e.g., long-term climate change, volcanic eruptions, environmental degradation, water shortages,

pandemics, and loss of biodiversity). Other global catastrophic risks include war (e.g., nuclear holocaust, bioterrorism, and cyberterrorism) and human causes (e.g., overpopulation causing famine and non-equitable resource distribution).

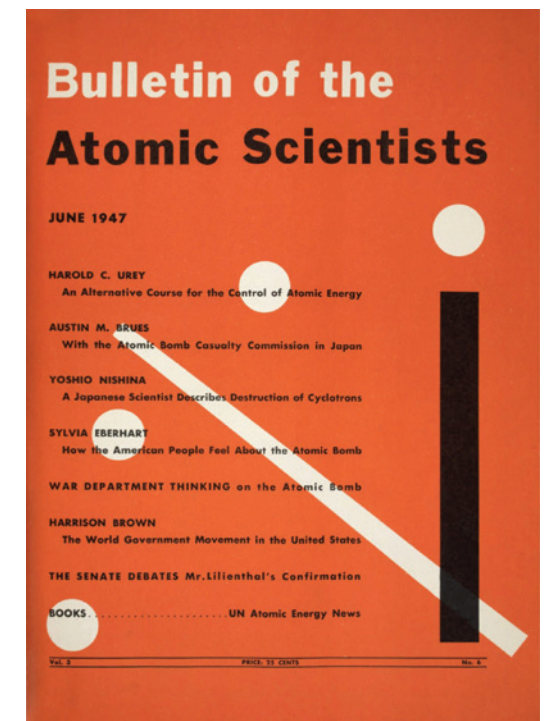


Fig. 1.1 *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, cover (June 1947)

The Enduring Popularity of Apocalyptic Film

For over a century, films featuring apocalyptic themes have been thrilling moviegoers with scenes of global devastation, and terrifying them with the bleak aftermath awaiting

those few who are “lucky” enough to have survived the cataclysm. According to Iain Hollands, creator of the comedy television series *You, Me and the Apocalypse*, the enduring popularity of apocalyptic film can be traced to the way these films permit filmmakers and audiences to explore deep philosophical issues without getting too academic. “Essentially, it’s a way of asking questions about what kind of people we are, what kind of rules we want to live by. What do we value more? Is it just survival? Or is it survival, if you have to give up all that makes you human, all your ethics?”³

Over the last one hundred years, many film genres that were once popular with audiences have lost their appeal or are rarely produced, including westerns, slasher films, “creature feature” or “monster” movies, romantic epics, nature documentaries, Cold War thrillers, musicals, adult-rated animation, film noirs, “found-footage,” and exploitation films. Apocalyptic films, however, are more popular than ever before. Their box office success can be partly explained by the news media’s habit of reporting on the global chaos around us, framing the events in apocalyptic terms. Startling images of wars, famines, pestilence, and natural disasters are seen daily on television, in the newspaper, and on the Internet. These haunting images foster thoughts of whether we are living in the end times and generate appetites and curiosities in the moviegoing public to watch the latest apocalyptic flick to see how the end unfolds on screen.

Another explanation for the persistent popularity of apocalyptic cinema over the last century is inherent in the genre’s narrative adaptability, which allows scriptwriters to fashion doomsday scenarios around the hot-button issues of public concern at the time. In the 1950s, the western world was

gripped by fears of atomic annihilation and the effects of radiation on civilization. Film producers capitalized on this paranoia with *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951) (alien tells world to end wars and live in peace), *Day the World Ended* (1955) (survivors battle mutant monster following an atomic war), and *On the Beach* (1959) (survivors attempt to escape nuclear fallout from the Northern Hemisphere). By the 1960s, news stories on environmental issues and how humans are destroying our planet’s ecosystem gave moviemakers fertile ground to produce *Crack in the World* (1965) (scientists launch a rocket into Earth’s core to research its geothermal energy but cause a catastrophic destruction), *The Day of the Triffids* (1963) (plants fight back, killing their victims and eating their corpses), and *Soylent Green* (1973) (a dystopia of dying oceans and oppressive humidity caused by the greenhouse effect with themes of pollution, overpopulation, euthanasia, poverty, and depleted natural resources).

By the early 1980s, the Cold War was in a deep freeze, and filmmakers did not fail to capitalize on the Western World-Eastern Bloc tensions, producing *The Day After* (1983) (the effects of a nuclear war on residents of Lawrence, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri), *Testament* (1983) (the effect of nuclear war on a San Francisco Bay area town), *Threads* (1984) (the effects of nuclear war on Sheffield, England), and *When the Wind Blows* (1986) (the effects of radioactive fallout on a British couple). After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Cold War faded into the distant background, moving producers into producing movies on threats from space, including *Armageddon* (1998) and *Deep Impact* (1998) (asteroid impact), *The Arrival* (1996), and *Independence Day* (1996)

(aliens). The twenty-first century has been no different, with apocalyptic plots focusing on the global concerns of the time, including climate change (*The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)) and pandemics (*28 Days Later* (2002), *Resident Evil* (2002), *The Invasion* (2007), *The Happening* (2008), *Contagion* (2011), *World War Z* (2013)).

The Benefits of Studying Apocalyptic Film

In an increasingly media-saturated world, the study of motion pictures holds an integral role in the critical understanding of our world. Films don’t simply tell stories and entertain us. Motion pictures also explore characters and their motivations and challenge our perceptions and understanding of the world around us. Films can educate and spread philosophical, political, social, and cultural ideals. Audiences become engaged and develop emotional responses to the onscreen narrative. Films make us laugh, cry, empathize, become inspired, and feel disgusted. The study of apocalyptic film not only provides students with a deeper understanding of our rich legacy of cinematic treasures, they also warn us of future dangers to society, inspire us to seek change, and provide lessons from the past.

Every field of study has a defined set of terms, concepts, categories, and/or activities that comprise the knowledge base for that subject discipline. This ontology assists in limiting complexity and organizing information, facts, and data. The study of apocalyptic film is subsumed into film studies, an academic discipline that explores and analyzes various historical, critical, and theoretical approaches to films in order to understand

the aesthetic, cultural, and social significance of film. Like many academic disciplines, a large component of the body of knowledge in film studies can be found in textual sources, such as books, journals, newspapers, and magazines. However, unlike other academic subjects, it is film that becomes the primary learning tool. Therefore, for critics, scholars, and fans of end-of-the-world cinema, understanding what is and what is not apocalyptic film is the essential first step in studying the art form because it assists in classifying which films form part of the genre and what body of films constitute its history, and deserves study and viewing.

Defining the Apocalyptic Film Genre

Film scholars are not in complete agreement as to the characteristics that define an apocalyptic film. In *A Guide to Apocalyptic Cinema*, Brian Mitchell defines apocalyptic cinema as “a motion picture that depicts 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.”⁴ Like most film historians, he differentiates apocalyptic film from post-apocalyptic film. A post-apocalyptic film, according to a contemporary definition, involves a “period following a large-scale disaster in which civilization has been destroyed or has regressed to a more primitive level.”⁵ Post-apocalyptic films are nearly always set in a dystopia, a world where society is undesirable or frightening. Films set completely in a post-apocalyptic setting include *I Am Legend* (2007) and *The Book of Eli* (2010).

Some authors categorize apocalyptic films by whether or not the world comes to an end and no one survives.⁶ Films such as

Armageddon (1998) feature a threat to the planet, in this case an asteroid, that is eventually eliminated before Earth is destroyed. Other apocalyptic features end with Earth being obliterated. *Melancholia* (2011) stars Kirsten Dunst and Charlotte Gainsbourg as two sisters coping with the approaching doomsday in different ways before a rogue planet ends human civilization, and the credits roll.

However, as Peter Szendy highlights in *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends of the World*, films such as *Blade Runner* (1982) and *They Live* (1985) defy tidy classification. Szendy explains that neither fits comfortably into an apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic film category.⁷ Complicating matters are films that incorporate elements of both apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic settings. The narrative for the television film *The Day After* (1983) is structured as a before-during-after scenario of a nuclear attack. The first section introduces a variety of characters and their stories, the second details the nuclear disaster, and the third the horrifying effects of the radioactive fallout on the populace.

Apocalyptic film plots may be set before the cataclysm and involve attempts by the characters to prevent an apocalypse. Other movies deal with the impact and consequences of the occurrence itself while others may be set after the event. In post-apocalyptic film, the time frame may be right after the cataclysm, focusing on the daily struggles or psychology of survivors, efforts to keep the human race alive and together as a cohesive unit, or significantly later, frequently involving the theme that the existence of the pre-apocalypse civilization has been mythologized or long forgotten.

While most film scholars and fans of the

genre agree that the word “apocalyptic” in a cinematic sense refers to films with storylines involving the “end of the world,” a more precise definition of “apocalyptic film” is required to rule out films that are not truly apocalyptic. Thus, the proposed definition is as follows:

A film that showcases the end of the world, leads up to such an end, and/or has a post-apocalyptic setting.

Inherent in the phrase “leads up to such an end” is a sense of global danger where all life on Earth is threatened with extinction. Therefore, if the end is near then one essential element of the apocalyptic narrative is that the threat must be such that the continued existence of humankind is at stake.

Consequently, disaster films such as *San Andreas* (2015), which involves earthquakes devastating Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area caused by an eruption on the San Andreas Fault, or *Flood* (2007), featuring a devastating flood striking London when the Thames Barrier is overwhelmed by a huge surge of water, are not apocalyptic in nature because the dangers are confined to small regions of the globe. Using the same logic, most giant monster flicks would also be ruled out. This includes flicks like *King Kong* (1933) (giant ape loose in New York City) and *The Valley of Gwangi* (1969) (pre-historic dinosaurs in Mexico). The exception would be gigantic creatures mutated due to atomic testing or thermonuclear radiation, beasts that have the potential to cause global devastation and spread deadly radiation (e.g., *Them!* (1954) (radioactive ants) and *Godzilla* (1954) (giant dinosaur that emits radioactive beam attacks Tokyo)).

Defining the Apocalypse

The term “apocalypse” is commonly applied in association with a globally catastrophic event, or a chain of destructive events to humanity or the environment. However, the word has a very Judaeo-Christian connotation. The term “apocalypse” is derived from the ancient Greek: ἀποκάλυψις *apokálypsis*, from ἀπό and καλύπτω, literally meaning “an uncovering” or a disclosure of knowledge or revelation. These prophetic revelations of eschatology (or final events of history and the fate of humankind) are received through dreams (such as in the biblical Book of Daniel) and visions (such as in the Book of Revelation) and form part of the apocalyptic narrative tradition.

Conrad Ostwalt claims that apocalyptic categories in film studies can be best analyzed by classification into two perspectives: (1) the traditional apocalyptic film arising from and based upon the Jewish-Christian genre, and (2) the secular apocalyptic film.⁸ Ostwalt explains the characteristics of a traditional apocalyptic film:

The traditional apocalyptic film is religious in content and is based on the Jewish and Christian genre with all its characteristics. The traditional apocalyptic story maintains several characteristics that were mentioned earlier: such works are characterized by dreams, visions, and symbols that unveil the events associated with the end of the world. This revelation is supernatural and demonstrates to humankind the sovereignty of a divine being. The consummation of history is accompanied by battles between good and evil, ushers in God’s kingdom, and results in destruction or punishment

of evil and the elevation of the good to righteousness. Sovereign justice is a major component of the drama. Underpinning this dualistic cataclysm is the assertion and promise of God’s ultimate and final sovereignty, and it is divine intervention into the apocalyptic drama that allows the end of history to be meaningful and just.⁹

Using this framework of classification, Ostwalt classifies *Left Behind* (2000), based on a Christian end-times novel series, as a traditional apocalyptic film while *The Matrix* (1999) is a secular apocalyptic film.

Subgenres of Apocalyptic Film

Like Ostwalt, John W. Martens, in *The End of the World: The Apocalyptic Imagination in Film & Television*, lists similar characteristics of the traditional (religious) apocalyptic.¹⁰ Martens classifies apocalyptic film into five categories, giving traditional (religious) apocalypses their own group.¹¹ Similarly, Mitchell categorizes apocalyptic films into eight specific categories, giving traditional religious films their own category. His classification includes: Religious or Supernatural, Celestial Collision, Solar or Orbital Disruption, Nuclear War and Radioactive Fallout, Germ Warfare or Pestilence, Alien Device or Invasion, Scientific Miscalculation, and Miscellaneous (for a few titles outside the regular categories).¹²

After careful and extensive analysis of the body of apocalyptic film, this book divides the apocalyptic film genre into ten discrete categories or subgenres classified either by the global threat or other identifying subject matter.

The ten subgenres are flexible enough to incorporate every apocalyptic and

post-apocalyptic film produced over the last century and avoid the awkward catch-all Miscellaneous category that Mitchell incorporates into his classification system.

The Last Man on Earth (1964), which involves vampirism in a post-apocalyptic setting, is included in Mitchell's Miscellaneous category but would be more tidily classified in the Walking Dead category. Mitchell places *The Night the World Exploded* (1957), a film about a geological disturbance, in the Miscellaneous category, but it is more accurately categorized in the

Environmental Emergencies subgenre along with similar films. The burning Van Allen Radiation belt found in *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1961), as well as the “nature in revolt” movies, Mitchell lists in the Miscellaneous category would also be best categorized in the Environmental Emergencies subgenre. Films with no identifiable apocalyptic causes set in a post-apocalyptic setting, such as *Mad Max 2* (1981), *The Road* (2009), and *The Book of Eli* (2010) are neatly categorized in the Aftermath and Survival subgenre.

SUBGENRE CATEGORY	GLOBAL THREATS
1. Cosmic Catastrophes	Asteroids, meteors, comets, approaching planets, solar flares, and other celestial body threats from outer space
2. Environmental Emergencies	Natural disasters, climate change, orbital disruption, volcanoes, geological anomalies, overpopulation, and nature in revolt
3. Atomic Weapons and Nuclear Dramas	Atomic bombs, nuclear war, and radioactive fallout
4. Alien Invasions	Martians, space beings, and hostile extraterrestrial life
5. Pandemics	Contagions, pestilence, and disease
6. Technology and Scientific Error	Robots, machines, pernicious software, and scientific miscalculation
7. Walking Dead	Zombies, vampires, and the undead
IDENTIFYING SUBJECT MATTER	
8. Religious and Supernatural	Judaeo-Christian eschatology, Far East apocalypticism, Ragnarök, Aboriginal, semi-religious, and supernatural elements
9. Aftermath and Survival	Films with no identifiable threat, usually set completely in a post-apocalyptic dystopia
10. Apocalyptic Comedies	Comedies, spoofs, and humorous dramas

Tab. 1.1 Apocalyptic film subgenres

Apocalyptic-type Terms

While “doomsday” film, “Armageddon” cinema, or an “end-of-the-world” motion picture have been used by film critics and historians to mean the same as an “apocalyptic film,” there are clear differences between the terms. The first two words have religious and biblical etymologies, while the third is a secular term. The word “doomsday” is derived from the Middle English *domes* + *dai*, from Old English *dom* (“judgment”) + *dæg* (“day”),

the day when God is expected to judge the world.¹³ Armageddon is from the Hebrew words *הַר מְגִדּוֹ* \ *הַר מְגִדּוֹ* (*har megiddo*), used in Revelation 16:16, referring to Mount Megiddo, the place of the last battle at the Last Judgment.¹⁴ Conversely, “end-of-the-world” refers to a crippling or destroying of modern civilization, a globally catastrophic event that could cause human extinction.¹⁵ There is no religious subtext embedded within the etymology.



Fig. 1.2 Har Megiddo (Armageddon site)—aerial view

Apocalyptic Film Formats

When one brings to mind an apocalyptic film, usually one’s first thoughts go to blockbuster theatrical features such as *2012* (2009), *War of the Worlds* (2005) or *Cloverfield* (2008). However, apocalyptic films have been produced for a variety of other visual media, including television movies, television series,

and shorts. Apocalyptic films have been released both in live-action and animated formats, with the latter including *When the Wind Blows* (1986), a traditional hand-drawn animated feature about an elderly married couple who live in the English countryside and have their peaceful lives interrupted by an impending nuclear attack. Animated

apocalyptic films would not be considered a subgenre of apocalyptic film because they can be categorized in one of the other ten subgenres. For example, the previously mentioned *When the Wind Blows* (1986) would be categorized in the Atomic Weapons and Nuclear Dramas subgenre, while the animated feature *WALL-E* (or *WALL·E*) (2008) would be classified as an Aftermath and Survival subgenre film.

Film Genres and Their Roots

Film scholar Barry Grant writes: “Put simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations.”¹⁶ Each film genre has its own roots, a genealogy of antecedents, causes, events, and sources that led to its birth. The musical was a direct import from Broadway at the time of the coming of sound in the late 1920s beginning with the release of the *Jazz Singer* (1927). However, the word “musical” was used as an adjective in the film promotional materials (*Rio Rita* (1929) (musical comedy), *Street Girl* (1929) (musical drama), *Sally* (1929) (musical romance)). Not until 1933 when the romantic comedy was merged with the song-and-dance music form was Hollywood “musical” used as a stand-alone term.¹⁷

The Western genre is generally agreed upon by film scholars as a straightforward extension of the nineteenth-century treatment of the “American West as Symbol and Myth,”¹⁸ including late nineteenth-century fiction featuring the life of cowboys in the Old West. As found in many film studies textbooks, film historians claim that the film genre sprang to life beginning with Edwin S. Porter’s *The*

Great Train Robbery (1903). More recent scholarship has taken a different approach. Film historian Charles Musser argues that the film is not the first Western but rather a combination of the travel genre’s railway subgenre and the crime genre.¹⁹ Other early contenders for title of the first Western are *Poker at Dawson City* (1899), *Cripple Creek Bar-Room Scene* (1899), *Kit Carson* (1903), and *Life of a Cowboy* (1906) (which Porter considered the first Western). Yet, as Altman notes, the Western film genre did not take on its characteristic themes and stylistics until well into the first decade of the twentieth century.²⁰

Approaches to the Study of Apocalyptic Film

Each film genre has its own characteristic themes, iconography, and distinctive stylistic traits. The exploration of the roots of a film genre informs on these characteristics and provides students or fans with the necessary tools to better analyze and appreciate the film corpus. If the study of film is primarily concerned with “reading” movies like literary texts, most academicians, particularly those in the humanities, familiar with interpretative approaches, could provide cogent analyses, as could others educated in film analysis. However, if we look at film more broadly, as also art history with its own stylistic practices and the change and stability within this tradition, we can learn much from its predecessors.

Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) was an Italian painter, architect, writer, and historian. His most famous work, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, published in 1550, is a series of artist biographies and considered the ideological foundation of

writing of art history.²¹ Vasari plotted art history as a progressive development from simpler to more complex practices analogous to birth to full maturity. In this schema, the roots of apocalyptic film provide a necessary foundation to understand the growth in style and develop theories and principles on which to analyze the art form.

The apocalyptic film genre has its cinematic roots in the apocalyptic narrative tradition found in the textual works of Judaeo-Christian writers and prophets (300 BC to AD 100), as well as the church leaders and scholars who interpreted these texts over the next seventeen centuries. Another primary influence was the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Both of these topics will be comprehensively explored in subsequent chapters.

However, the study of film can be approached from a number of other interpretive perspectives. Aristotle lectured on approaching any art form by disclosing its most essential and distinctive qualities. This

book will explore a wide range of issues that address these topics. What recurring themes are present within the genre? What familiar plot devices can be traced among the films? What meanings and messages can be found within the art form? Many film historians, like academics in other art and music history disciplines, focus on the masterpieces of the discipline, those that embody the highest qualities and features of the genre. In this respect, this book will list, provide synopses, and explore the key films from each of the subgenres.

This book will also touch on most of the minor films because although not masterpieces many of these films contributed to the genre’s artistic development. When classifying the films into the various subgenres, the issues addressed will include: What films form part of the subgenre? What films are considered to be the greatest apocalyptic films of all time? Why do they stand out as the key works of art? How did they contribute to the artistic growth in the field? The book concludes with a range of special topics.

CHAPTER 8

COSMIC CATASTROPHES: ASTEROIDS, METEORS, COMETS, APPROACHING PLANETS, SOLAR FLARES, A DYING SUN, AND OTHER CELESTIAL BODY THREATS FROM THE SOLAR SYSTEM

Definition of the Subgenre

The apocalyptic film genre can be divided into subgenres or more specific subclasses of films, each with their own distinctive subject matter, themes, narrative elements, style, formulas, and iconography. This book identifies ten discrete subgenres classified either by global threat or other identifying subject matter. The oldest subgenre of apocalyptic films are those that involve threats from celestial bodies,¹ beginning with the Danish classic *Verdens undergang* (*The End of the World*) (1916). The most common peril found in these films is a comet, although meteors and asteroids have also been used extensively by screenwriters as instruments of doom and destruction. This subgenre of apocalyptic film involves any celestial body threat, including asteroids, meteors, comets, approaching planets, solar flares, a dying sun, or other astronomical objects originating from outside our planet that have the potential to cause a mass extinction event.²

Characteristics of the Subgenre

One of the key features of these films is they are usually permeated with a strong sense of impending doom or apocalyptic dread, which intensifies as doomsday draws closer. Further, unlike other apocalyptic film genres, a good portion of the film's narrative features no scenes of human death or destruction. There

are no bloodthirsty zombies feasting on the populace or graphic scenes of citizens vomiting blood as they succumb to a disgusting disease. Rather, the story is imbued with a strong sense of nervous energy as Earth's inhabitants prepare for the celestial impact or other cosmic catastrophe (or become resigned to their fate and go about their usual business) while scientists, the military, or the government work frantically to destroy the incoming menace before it has an opportunity to collide with Earth. By the end credits, the celestial object may never collide with Earth (*Armageddon*, 1998), or it arrives at the end to close out the motion picture (*Melancholia*, 2011; *These Final Hours*, 2013).

Unlike other subgenres of apocalyptic film (with the notable exception being alien invasion films), the threats are not manmade, as the origin comes from outside our planetary ecosystem. Another characteristic of these films is that, unlike the other subgenres, a good deal of philosophizing takes place as the film's characters ponder, reminisce, theorize, and try to make sense of the approaching calamity. As each individual comes to terms with their own mortality, they reflect internally on the meaning and purpose of life and their existence.

Story Structure of the Subgenre

Apocalyptic films involving threats from celestial bodies follow a similar narrative. The typical plot involves the following sequences of events.

1. An astronomer or scientist identifies a threat to Earth from a celestial body.
2. Scientists are summoned to analyze the cosmic peril to determine the extent of the threat posed by the celestial body and ways to eliminate the danger. The scientists conclude that the celestial body will cause a mass extinction event and provide their opinions on whether and how the menace can be eradicated and human life saved.
3. A decision is made by a body of high-ranking scientists, officials, or politicians about whether (and when) to report the approaching menace to the public in order to minimize the effects of any societal collapse.
4. The peril is reported to the public.
5. If the destruction of the planet is inevitable, public panic, riots, and philosophizing result.
6. If the danger can be eliminated or avoided, governments, scientists, the military, and space agencies work cooperatively on solutions to save human life. Either the peril is eliminated and the planet saved, or the efforts fail, and the planet is destroyed, or a mass extinction event occurs.

Preeminent Films of the Subgenre

What qualifies a film as being a preeminent motion picture—those cinematic works that are considered to be the transcendent films in their genre? Is technical and artistic brilliance the meter stick to judge the films? If so,

motion picture awards, such as the Oscars® and Golden Globes, would be a measurement tool. Should box office appeal, as measured by gross ticket sales, be the method by which to rank films in terms of their paramount importance to the motion-picture industry? What about critical appeal as measured by an aggregate score from film critics? Why not consider a film's influence on society, those cinematic works that challenge audiences' morals, transform viewers' opinions, and shape the way films are produced?

To properly assess a film's transcendence requires taking a holistic approach by examining all the listed factors, including its technical and artistic merits, box office appeal, critical reception, and influence on society. In the Cosmic Catastrophes subgenre, four films stand out among the rest as the preeminent works. The first is the previously mentioned Danish classic, *Verdens undergang* (1916), which deserves a place in the pantheon of apocalyptic film classics. Not only is the film the first feature-length apocalyptic motion picture, many film critics also consider it to be August Blom's most impressive achievement. Blom is judged to be Denmark's most talented director from the silent film period, and his volume of work is the largest of any Danish film director. Recklessly blending "science fiction, social melodrama, and suspense, *The End of the World* reverberates with overtones from the Great War being waged in Flanders and northern France."³ Any author writing on the history of apocalyptic film would be remiss without referencing this cinematic gem.

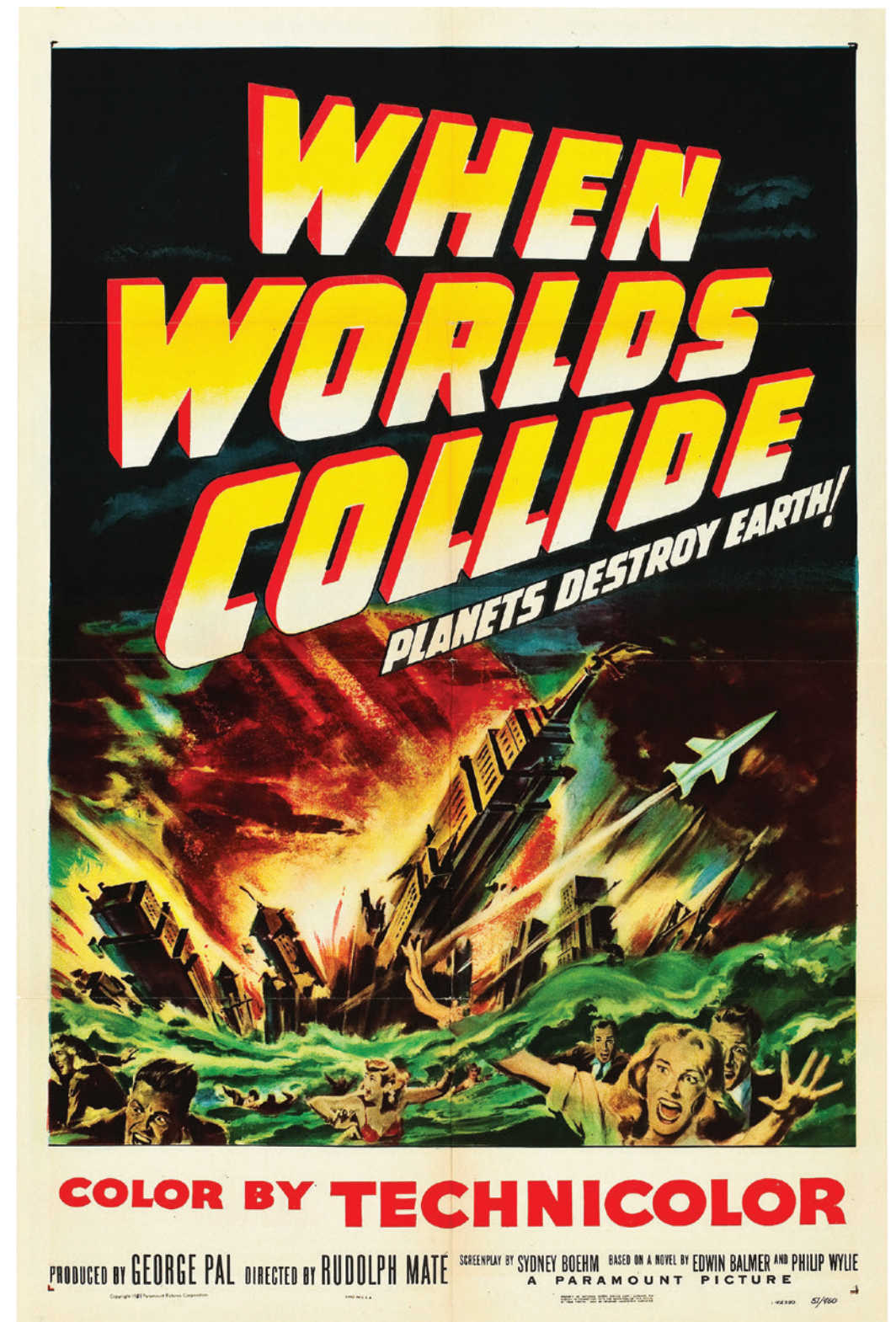


Fig. 8.1 *When Worlds Collide* (1951, Rudolph Maté)

CHAPTER 11

ALIEN INVASIONS: MARTIANS, SPACE BEINGS, AND HOSTILE EXTRATERRESTRIAL LIFE

Definition of the Subgenre

The apocalyptic motion picture subgenre Alien Invasions features storylines involving attacks or unwelcome intrusions on our planet by extraterrestrial life that threaten the existence of humankind. The word “extraterrestrial” means “outside Earth.” Extraterrestrial life is any life form that does not originate on Earth. The first published use of “extraterrestrial” as a noun occurred in 1956, during the Golden Age of Science Fiction, the period from 1938 through the 1950s, an era during which the science-fiction genre gained wide public attention, and numerous classic science-fiction stories were published.¹

A True Story (Ancient Greek: Ἀληθῆ διηγήματα, Alēthē diēgēmata; Latin: Vera Historia or Latin: Verae Historiae) is a novel written by Lucian of Samosata, a Greek-speaking author of Assyrian descent, in the second century AD. The novel is the earliest known work of fiction to include space travel, alien life forms, and interplanetary warfare. *A True Story* has been described as “the first known text that could be called science fiction.”² The seminal alien invasion story is H. G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* (1898), depicting the invasion of Victorian England by Martians equipped with advanced weaponry. Wells is credited with establishing several extraterrestrial themes, including first contact and war between planets and their differing species. These themes were later

greatly expanded by science-fiction writers in the twentieth century.



Fig. 11.1 Voltaire (1694–1778), writer, historian, and philosopher

In science-fiction literature and films, the words “extraterrestrial” and “alien” have been used interchangeably, although “alien” in a narrow definition refers to a foreigner or someone of another family or race. The first alien invasion story is Voltaire’s *Micromégas* (1752), which preceded H. G. Wells’ story by 146 years. The tale concerns two curious and friendly aliens from Saturn and Sirius who are of enormous size. The two aliens believe Earth is uninhabited due to the difference in scale between them and human beings. After discovering the arrogant Earth-centric views

of Earth philosophers, they are amused by how important Earth beings think they are compared to giants such as themselves.³

Six years before Wells published his classic tale, Robert Potter (1831–1908), an Australian clergyman, published *The Germ Growers* (1892) in London, the first tale of a hostile extraterrestrial invasion of Earth. The story, not widely read, details a covert invasion by aliens who take on the appearance of human beings and strive to develop a virulent disease to assist in their plans for global conquest.⁴ These aliens are residents of the interplanetary “ether” capable of teleporting and conducting mind-control on humankind. One of their strongholds is discovered in the Australian outback and, with the assistance of another space dweller, they are defeated.

The apocalyptic film subgenre of Alien Invasions features stories involving aliens, Martians, or extraterrestrial life as threats to humankind’s existence. A typical mass extinction event found in these films involves an extraterrestrial life form wiping out Earth’s population through an attack from space. While using Martians as an apocalyptic threat has been the subject of a number of stories (*War of the Worlds*) and motion pictures (*Invaders from Mars* (1953) (and its 1986 remake), *War of the Worlds* (1953), *Mars Attacks!* (1996)), with the discovery by robotic spacecraft that Mars is devoid of (apparent) life, Hollywood has moved the source of extraterrestrial threats farther away from Earth to those coming from distant galaxies.

In a more expansive definition, the subgenre is defined by any film featuring storylines involving:

1. Aliens attacking humans. The aliens invade Earth either to exterminate and supplant

human life, enslave it under an intense state, harvest people for food, steal the planet’s resources, or destroy the planet altogether. The attack is usually through advanced technology, spacecraft, and weaponry with enormous spacecraft descending from on high and unleashing devastation. The extraterrestrial life may be monsters (one or more creatures) from space rampaging through cities or populated areas, killing humans and inflicting heavy damage. The aliens may be here to kidnap and abduct humans for experimentation and the acquisition of knowledge or as a source of food or body parts.

2. Aliens walk among us. Extraterrestrial life covertly infiltrates the human population through replication, mutation, or infection of humans, commonly by parasitic means or by mind or bodily control, with the goal of the enslavement or elimination of humankind.
3. Extraterrestrial life landing on Earth with no overt display of aggressive behavior but are seen by scientists as potential threats to the existence of humankind. These aliens may be friendly, unsympathetic, or their presence never explained. The movies include first-contact scenarios in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *Star Trek: First Contact* (1996), and *Arrival* (2016).
4. Humans traveling to distant planets or galaxies coming into contact with hostile extraterrestrial life. Humans either are forced to defend themselves from alien life forms or become the aggressors, with the intention of subduing their extraterrestrial foes.

Characteristics of the Subgenre

The Alien Invasions subgenre is noted primarily for a mood of hostility between two life forms, one human and the other alien, and tension and unease caused by the presence of unknown beings in our environment. Unlike the creatures in zombie films, the alien invaders are super-intelligent creatures bent on the extermination of the human race. Dissimilar to other subgenres, the apocalyptic threat may have arrived and infiltrated humankind without humans being aware of the danger around them. The subgenre is unique for the inclusion of films where what appears to be a serious risk to the existence of humankind turns out to be no threat at all (e.g., the alien Klaatu in *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951)) and in fact may be quite the opposite (such as the friendly overtures from extraterrestrial visitors in *Arrival* (2016)).

Finally, the subgenre is notable for using the alien invasion as a metaphor. Prospects of alien invasions varied with the state of current affairs and current perceptions of threat. Alien invasion was a common metaphor in American science fiction during the Cold War, illustrating the fears of foreign (e.g., Soviet Union) occupation and nuclear devastation of the American people (e.g., *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956)). When aliens visit Earth, filmmakers consistently define the life forms by their differences from humans. Alien characters are continually used to provide points of comparison for the human species, Homo sapiens, revealing truths about our behavior and culture by contrast.

Story Structure of the Subgenre

The alien invasion is perhaps the most well-known storyline in science-fiction cinema.

The appeal is based on humankind's longing to know whether there is life in the universe beyond the human race and our wondering what would happen if they came to us first—and weren't friendly. Alien invasions are not always conducted by massive space vessels blasting our famous landmarks to smithereens. Aliens can be insidious and undetectable; they can appear from our past, from seed pods, and from within a mother's womb.

Alien invasion films nearly always feature the "arrival," a time when the aliens make their presence known to humans. Then there may be a period of "threat assessment," a stage when the aliens' intentions are evaluated to determine whether they are friendly or hostile and why they have come to Earth. The aliens may simply attack after arriving or may decide to do so sometime during the threat assessment period. If an attack is carried out, we enter the "conflict" stage of the storyline, which usually involves significant loss of human life, ending in one side, nearly always the humans, emerging victorious in the "resolution" stage, the period when the threat is extinguished. The conflict stage may not involve the use of weapons. The attack could be by means of a parasitic infestation or an undetectable mutation mimicking the human species. If an attack is never consummated, humans and aliens have come to terms to coexist either on friendly terms or on an understanding that conflict is not a means to settle their differences.

In a post-apocalyptic storyline, the invasion or assimilation has already taken place. Humankind may be laboring under a dominant alien presence or completely unaware of the existence of extraterrestrials in their environment. Usually, the post-apocalyptic alien invasion film is set hundreds of years



Fig. 11.2 *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951, Robert Wise)

CHAPTER 14

WALKING DEAD: ZOMBIES AND REANIMATED CORPSES

Definition of the Subgenre

The Walking Dead subgenre focuses the apocalyptic menace on two beings commonly found in horror movies: zombies and vampires. A little etymology is helpful in defining the subgenre. A “zombie” is an undead being created through the reanimation of a corpse. The term originated from Haitian folklore, in which a zombie is a dead body reanimated through various methods, most commonly magic.¹ The derivation of the word comes from the Haitian French “zombi” and the Haitian Creole “zonbi.” The first appearance of the English word “zombie,” in the form of “zombi,” was recorded in 1819 in poet Robert Southey’s three-volume *History of Brazil*, published between 1810 and 1819.²

The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the origin of the word as West African or Haitian and refers to a zombie as a soulless corpse and compares it to the Kongo words *nzambi* (god) and *zumbi* (fetish).³ The related word *nzumbi* is defined in a Kimbundu-to-Portuguese dictionary from 1903 as “soul.”⁴ A later Kimbundu–Portuguese dictionary defines it as being a “spirit that is supposed to wander the earth to torment the living.”⁵ In 1929, occultist, explorer, traveler, cannibal, and journalist William Buehler Seabrook was the first to expose Western culture to the concept of the voodoo zombie in his book, *The Magic Island*, a sensationalized account of a narrator who encounters voodoo cults in Haiti. *Time* magazine claimed that the book “introduced ‘zombi’ into US speech.”⁶

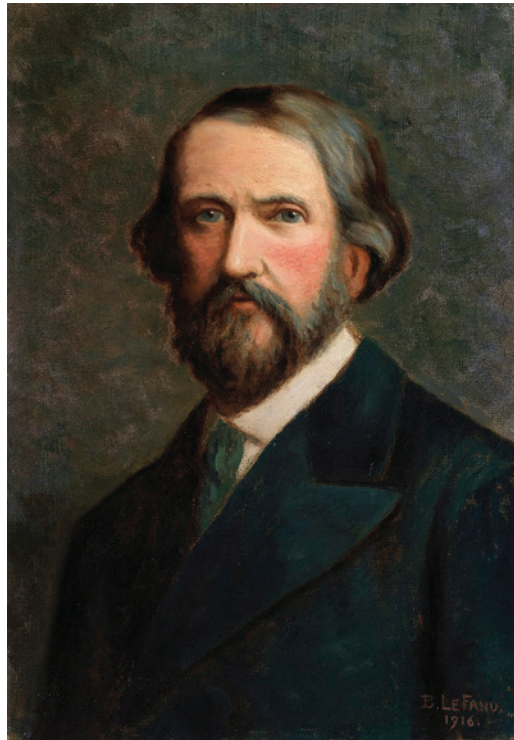


Fig. 14.1 Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873), Irish writer of mystery and gothic tales

A vampire is a creature based on folklore that subsists by feeding on the vital force, usually the blood, of the living. Vampires from European folklore were undead beings, wore shrouds, were bloated and of ruddy or dark complexion, visited loved ones, and caused mischief or deaths in the neighborhoods they inhabited before their deaths. The vampires of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are gaunt, pale creatures of the night. The term “vampire” was popularized in Western Europe after the eighteenth-century mass hysteria of a pre-existing folk belief in the

Balkans and Eastern Europe that resulted in corpses being staked and people being accused of vampirism.

With the publication of the “The Vampyre,” a short work of prose fiction, by John Polidori in 1819, “the first story successfully to fuse the disparate elements of vampirism into a coherent literary genre,”⁷ the charismatic and sophisticated vampire of modern fiction was born. In 1872, Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s 1872 Gothic novella *Carmilla* was published as a serial in *The Dark Blue* (1871–1872).⁸ The story is narrated by a young woman preyed upon by a female vampire named Carmilla, later revealed to be Mircalla, Countess Karnstein (Carmilla is an anagram of Mircalla). Carmilla is the original prototype for a legion of female and lesbian vampires. However, it is Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula* that is remembered as the quintessential vampire novel, providing the basis of the modern vampire legend, even though it was published after, and spawned a distinctive vampire genre.

The subgenre Walking Dead includes apocalyptic films where the threat to human existence arises from the dead coming back to life to prey upon humankind. For a film to be classified as an apocalyptic motion picture from the Walking Dead subgenre, the film generally meets four criteria in a “zombie apocalypse” narrative:

1. The apocalyptic threat is the “walking dead” or undead come back to life, the reanimated human corpse. These walking dead include zombies, vampires, or any human being that was dead, buried, and is now reanimated.
2. There is a process of “zombification” or “vampirification”—the creation of the undead where everyone who dies becomes

one of the undead. Victims of zombies or vampires may become the walking dead themselves if they are bitten by a zombie or vampire. Additionally, a zombie-creating virus may be present that travels by air, water, and/or bodily fluids (i.e., blood, sputum, semen), infecting and killing humans (usually by being bitten) and bringing individuals back to life. Furthermore, a parasitic organism may kill a host and reanimate the corpse.

3. The walking dead are hostile to human life and engage in a general assault on civilization, with the aim of destroying humankind.
4. The outbreak becomes an exponentially growing crisis. The spreading “zombie plague” overwhelms law enforcement organizations, the military, and healthcare services, leading to the panicked collapse of civil society. The outbreak continues until only isolated pockets of survivors remain.

In many of these films, basic services, such as municipal water supplies and electrical power, shut down, mass media cease broadcasting, and the governments of affected countries collapse or go into hiding. In the post-apocalyptic aftermath, the survivors are forced to scavenge for food, weapons, and other supplies. The world is reduced to a primarily pre-industrial hostile wilderness. Some of these films feature a “safe zone,” such as behind a wall, in an armed fortress, or deep underground where the non-infected find refuge and seek to establish a new civilization.

Characteristics of the Subgenre

Unlike the other subgenres of apocalyptic film, the element of the monster or ghoul of aesthetic horror dominates the visuals. In the Walking Dead subgenre, creatures originally created for horror films lurk in the darkness and prey on the innocent. Whether a zombie or a vampire, these creatures are gray-skinned and sometimes bloody. A zombie may be missing a limb or an eyeball as it lurches forward in ragged clothing, shuffling over its own intestines and chattering its decaying teeth. However, there is more to the subgenre than frightening creatures and gruesomely violent behavior.

The zombie apocalypse is a milieu and context to provide social commentary on issues of consumerism, interpersonal cooperation and conflict, and gender and race relations, highlighting that zombie films are about humans. The zombies are not the problems to our planet; rather, the humans are.⁹ The method by which filmmakers unveil these issues is by disorienting the audience through the depiction of extreme violence and depravity (e.g., cannibalism) and then reorienting the audience through the narrative structure to make an “. . . unsettling point, usually a sociological, anthropological, or theological one.”¹⁰ For example, one of the underlying messages is the perilous nature of scientific or government experiments. In *Return of the Living Dead* (1985), *Return of the Living Dead II* (1988), and *Return of the Living Dead III* (1993) zombies are created from an experimental chemical produced by the military and somehow released onto a graveyard.

Another prevalent theme is the zombie as a symbol of our greatest fears. The early zombie movies (e.g., *White Zombie* (1932)) evoked

fears of primitive culture turning voodoo into a horror motif. Following the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 and the first Soviet atomic bomb test in 1949, American fears of nuclear radiation and communism began to manifest in zombies. For example, *Creature With the Atom Brain* (1955) features an ex-Nazi scientist named Wilhelm using radiation to reanimate corpses.



Fig. 14.2 *White Zombie* (1932, Victor Halperin)

The 1960s were turbulent years with political assassinations, the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the counterculture rebellion. The zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was a reflection of these times, a motion picture packed with political undertones that address the nation's turbulent race relations as racially charged interactions are woven throughout the film. *Night of the Living Dead* was the first prominent film to

feature vast hordes of zombies (in the film they are referred to as “ghouls”) as opposed to an isolated few, using those hordes as a symbol of an impending apocalypse.

During the 1970s and 1980s, wealth distribution became increasingly unequal, and films like *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) targeted late-stage American capitalism as fears of capitalism and mindless consumption racked the late 1970s. In the film, zombies invade a shopping mall where we see little difference between a typical holiday weekend shopping crowd and a zombie apocalypse.

By the 1980s a fear of global contagion consumed the minds of Americans, and over the coming decades dozens of zombie films were produced where a zombie-producing virus threatens the future of humankind (e.g., *Resident Evil* (2002), *28 Days Later* (2002)). Contagion soon joined the ranks of voodoo and radiation as an explanation for how zombies are reanimated.

Finally, there is the post-apocalyptic zombie, which represents fear of each other. In these films the post-apocalyptic world is dotted with tribes interested only in their own self-preservation; all other life is considered disposable.¹¹

Another of the thematic subtexts of these films is that civilization is inherently fragile in the face of truly unprecedented threats and that most individuals cannot be relied upon to support the greater good if the personal cost becomes too high. An additional theme of a loss of one's “humanness” is present as characters transform from humans into the walking dead. These films make us question what it means to be human. Sociologists Robert Wonser and David Boyns claim that zombie films express cultural anxieties about selfhood, loss of autonomy, and threats of

deindividuation.¹² “Ultimately, zombie films compel us to make ethical inquiries into what ‘counts’ as human, and how the prejudices that often accompany disease (and disability) express collective and existential fears about selfhood, loss of autonomy, and mortality.”¹³

Zombie films also provide insight into our social world. The epidemiology of zombification is reflective of the inequalities endemic to the stratified access to healthcare in the contemporary world. Survivors embody the privileges that come from social power and prestige. In both our contemporary social world and in the cinematic world threatened by zombie contagion, those most likely to be infected are those in the lower classes (e.g., those in the service sector), individuals who lack the resources necessary to evade and/or treat infection. Those who first become infected are individuals who do not have the privileges necessary to physically and socially separate themselves from potential carriers of disease.

Story Structure of the Subgenre

The story structure of most modern zombie films follows a predictable narrative. The film opens with an outbreak of a zombie plague with extremely traumatic attacks by zombies on humans, usually involving plenty of blood and gore. These attacks are accompanied by shock, panic, disbelief, and possibly denial, hampering survivors' ability to deal with the vicious encounters. There may be initial attempts to seek the aid of authorities.

The outbreak becomes an exponentially growing crisis as the response of government authorities to the threat is slower than the rate of growth of new zombies, giving the zombie plague time to expand beyond

CHAPTER 19

GLOBAL CATASTROPHE IN MOTION PICTURES AS MEANING AND MESSAGE: THE FUNCTIONS OF APOCALYPTIC CINEMA IN AMERICAN FILM¹

Since the early 1950s, the number of apocalyptic films has grown steadily, with an explosion of end-of-the-world motion pictures in the first two decades of the twenty-first century.² Mary Bloodsworth Lugo and Carmen Lugo-Lugo estimate that there were fifty-nine apocalyptic films released between 1980 and 1999, and there were close to ninety in the time span between 2000 and 2013.³ In “Why Are Dystopian Films on the Rise Again?”, while 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?”⁴ The answer to Schmidt’s questions, and the reasons why apocalyptic films have grown to become an extraordinarily popular genre, can be explained by the growing number of diverse functions these films serve in society. There are nine functions commonly found in American apocalyptic cinema expressed in terms of its meaning (its underlying purpose) and its message (the ideas that filmmakers want to convey to audiences).

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*, he 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. To make sense of our lives, we need to discover some “consonance” between the beginning, the middle, and the end.⁵

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 that unite beginning and end and endow the interval between them with meaning.⁶ Kermode cites the works of Homer, Augustine of Hippo, and Plato in support of his claim.⁷ These temporal fictions “humanize the common death” and allow us to coexist with temporal chaos. Kermode writes: “‘Men in the midst’ 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.”⁸

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.” 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 unraveling around us.⁹

People living in the middle often believe that the end is very near and that their own generation is the one responsible for ushering 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.”¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.”¹² 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.¹³

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,”¹⁴ 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, have it as well as a benefaction from the end. Kermode believes

that the world is living in the throes of an immanent apocalypse. The *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 Armageddon: Apocalyptic Themes in Recent Cinematic Presentation*, Conrad Ostwalt proposes the basic themes of apocalyptic films. Echoing the thoughts of Kermode, he says these modern secular cinematic representations have an important function: they provide meaning to a chaotic existence “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 toward the future, as it does in the apocalypse.”¹⁵ Gomel notes that Kermode’s “sense of ending” “seems, perversely to infect sf’s explorations of the open-endedness of the future.”¹⁶ The process of painful purging which needs to be endured to explain the chaos and “crisis” we see unraveling 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 . . .”¹⁷ 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 that successfully splits 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.”¹⁸

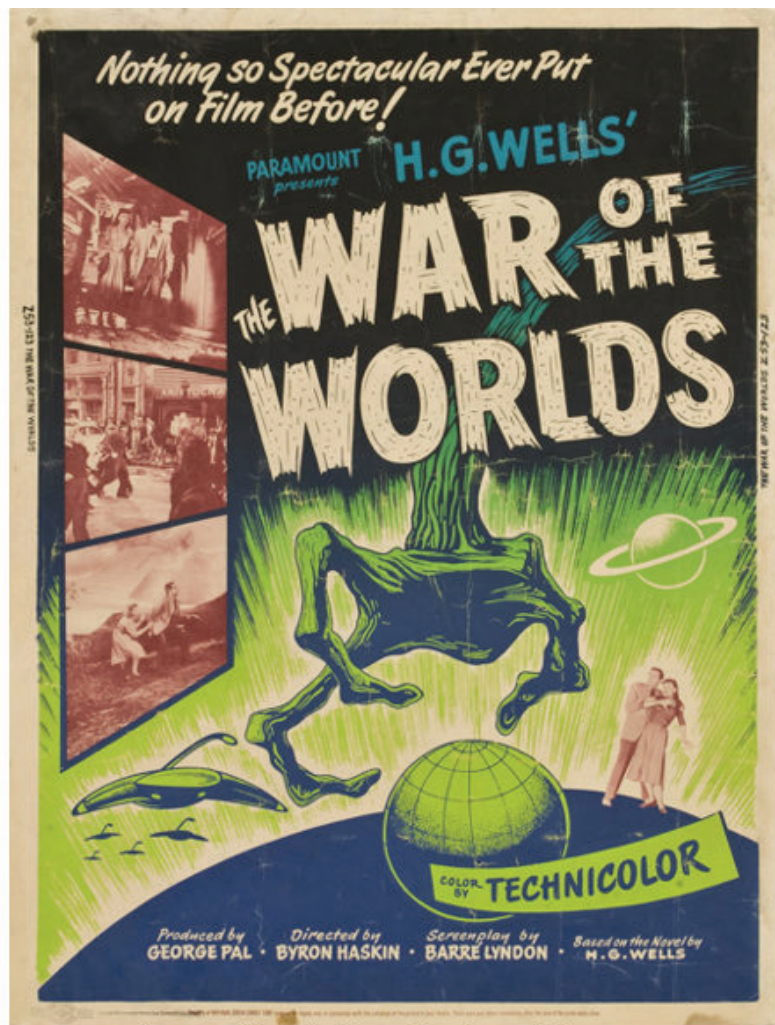


Fig. 19.1 *War of the Worlds* (1953, Byron Haskin)



Fig. 19.2 *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014, Doug Liman)

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