

Introduction

Not only does religion seldom take center stage in the apocalyptic films of the 1990s, when it does, as in Peter Hyams' 1999 film *End of Days*, it is a kind of schlock religion. In *End of Days* the indestructible Arnold Schwarzenegger plays Jericho Cane, an ex-cop who has turned his back on God after his wife and daughter were murdered. When Lucifer (Gabriel Byrne) comes to New York in order to bring about "the end of days," Jericho finds himself with the Herculean task of protecting Christine York (Robin Tunney), a young woman who has been unwittingly chosen to carry Lucifer's child. This is a film filled with millennial paranoia. Much of the action takes place on New Year's Eve 1999 and we are told by a priest that this date is particularly significant since,

"Every thousand years, on the eve of the millennium, the Dark Angel comes and takes a body, and then he walks the Earth, looking for a woman who will bear his child. It all has to happen in that unholy hour before midnight on New Year's Eve. If he consummates your flesh with this human body then he unlocks the gate of hell and everything as we know it ceases to exist."

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Jericho, in response, is understandably cynical asking, “So the Prince of Darkness wants to conquer the Earth but has to wait until an hour before midnight on New Year’s Eve? Is this Eastern time?”

Clearly, *End of Days* is a film with a confused religious message. Jericho, the atheist, is eventually converted and makes the supreme sacrifice, laying down his weapon before taking the devil into his body and through sheer force of will impaling himself and thus vanquishing the unstoppable evil. However, the film is certainly far more concerned with generating action than it is with debating the nature of Jericho’s faith and, in one important exchange, seems to sum up the attitude of 90s apocalyptic film:

JERICHO: If the devil does exist, why doesn’t your God do anything?

PRIEST: It’s not *my* God. It’s *our* God, and He doesn’t say that He will save us. He says that we will save ourselves.

CHRISTINE: Save myself? What am I supposed to do? Get a restraining order?

PRIEST: We have to have faith. [...]

JERICHO: Between your faith and my Glock nine-millimeter, I take my Glock.

And so it is the gun that takes priority over faith. But this was to change in the decade following 9/11 with faith returning from the shadows, reconfiguring the Hollywood version of the apocalyptic film.

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In their article, “Doomsday America: the pessimistic turn of post-9/11 apocalyptic cinema,” John Walliss and James Aston identify a trend towards passivity and pessimism in post 9/11 depictions of the apocalypse in Hollywood film.¹ Further to this, in my article “Melancholic and Hungry Games: Post-9/11 Cinema and the Culture of Apocalypse,” I posit that this pessimism is not a reaction to the event itself as much as it is a reaction to the *lack* of political change which followed in the wake of September 11 2001.² Whereas Walliss and Aston view post 9/11 cinema as a continuation of what Conrad Ostwalt has termed the “desacralization” of the apocalypse, by which he is referring to the tendency of these films to move away from biblical themes in order to pursue a more secular agenda, this does not mean that messages relating to faith have become less prominent.³ In fact, this article proposes that these films are far more concerned with issues surrounding faith than those which directly preceded them, charting the reintroduction of faith-based narratives into a filmic genre which has its origins firmly rooted in the religious architecture of US Christian stories of fiery revelation. Here I analyze the different structures of that faith to reveal their complexity and to demonstrate that the post 9/11 apocalypse, in Hollywood at least, has been marked by a use of such faith to make sense of disaster. By examining first the absence of faith in the secularized wave of Hollywood apocalyptic movies, such as *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich, 1996), *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), and *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998) which flooded the screens at the end of the

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1990s, through to the religious iconography and coded messages of post 9/11 apocalyptic movies like *Signs* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2002), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), and *The Book of Eli* (Albert Hughes & Allen Hughes, 2010), I uncover an increased investment in the power of faith in popular American disaster movies after 9/11. Such films, I argue, interrogate the role that faith plays in making meaning from disaster in ways rarely seen in their immediate precursors. Finally, in light of a more recent return to the positivist attitude towards apocalypse seen in the 90s, this article concludes by offering a brief insight into the possible future of the genre.

The 90s

Jericho's conversion and subsequent sacrifice at the climax of *End of Days* attempts to deliver the schlocky sentimental message that, it is not just the size of your 'guns', but the size of your heart that really matters. This message, although a staple of the action film genre, seems confused, becoming lost in between the explosions. What we really feel having watched *End of Days* is not that the priest was right all along, but that the film would have been rather boring had Jericho simply laid down his gun and started praying from the outset. As John Walliss determines, "[*End of Days*] ultimately conforms to the standard narrative of the apocalypse film genre whereby human agency— albeit with spiritual strength— is able to triumph over

the forces that seek to wreak destruction on humanity.”⁴ The spiritual strength mentioned here is, therefore, frequently a component but not usually the determining factor in humankind’s salvation in apocalyptic movies. Ultimately, as Satan demonstrates during a scene in which he wreaks havoc in the church, despite the protestations of a group of priests and cardinals, the power of faith alone would not have saved Christine and thus prevented the End of Days. Jericho, however, is not fooled by their talk, claiming that at least he can fight Lucifer with something “real.” He is impatient with the priest, demanding that he stops all his “church talk” and tells them “what the hell is going on.”

At its core, *End of Days* values contemporary society and seeks only a return to the status-quo after the *threat* of destruction since “Jericho’s death *restores* normal life [emphasis own].”⁵ The threat of a biblical apocalypse, brought about by Satan’s return, and its subsequent avoidance does not beg the question, as perhaps it ought to, why *should* we be saved? Whilst we are relieved by the triumph of Jericho over the ultimate evil, the film glosses over an essential point: nothing has changed. In *Millennium Movies*, Kim Newman writes that the box-office successes of the 90s apocalyptic films were those that “imagine the most fantastical threats [...] and then have these paper tigers blown away by traditional American movie heroism and knowhow.”⁶ These 90s films, then, prefer to place the tension of the narrative on the inherent likeability of the fictional characters they present and in the desire of the audience to see those characters, and with them the world, survive,

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hence the casting of popular ‘good guys’ Arnold Schwarzenegger, Bruce Willis/Ben Affleck (*Armageddon*), Will Smith (*Independence Day*), Tommy Lee Jones (*Volcano*, Mick Jackson, 1997) and Piers Brosnan (*Dante’s Peak*, Roger Donaldson, 1997).

Marcus O’Donnell suggests that, “[t]he apocalyptic in its fullest sense always includes [the] tension between catastrophe and renewal,” but in the 90s this “renewal” only served to re-invigorate the present rather than to revise or critique.⁷ As Max Page concludes: “New York disaster fantasies suggested [...] [if] the city survives, the best we can hope for is a utopia of the normal.”⁸ This represents a broader trend in 90s apocalyptic films. Rarely is humanity the architect of its own destruction in these cases. Instead the heroes of these films must defend their way of life against an external threat: however lax the US may have been on issues of climate change they cannot be blamed for an alien invasion (*Independence Day*), a volcano (*Volcano* and *Dante’s Peak*), a rogue meteor (*Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*, Mimi Leder, 1998), French nuclear testing (*Godzilla*) or even Satan’s return (after all, the priest tells us that this happens “every thousand years” regardless). Similarly, in these films what we are left with, aside from the certainty of some high reconstruction costs and insurance claims, is an America whose government, and governing principles, remain intact. Therefore, these films, which Walliss notes are “characterized by an explicit valorization of the contemporary

social order,” run contrary to the nature of more traditional apocalyptic texts which use biblical references as a mode of social critique.⁹

With the Cold War won and with Francis Fukuyama’s fateful proclamation of the *End of History* still echoing, these films seem to respond to a period of relative confidence about the direction and spread of globalization and US power.¹⁰ Although Clinton, as Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier argue, had failed to fully articulate a coherent new direction for US foreign policy, there remained the perception that these were less dangerous times.¹¹ At the end of the 90s many people entered the new millennium not with a sense of fear but of unbridled optimism. What would the new millennium bring? It seems fair to suggest that most did not anticipate the end of the world. In fact much of the fear was centered on the mythical millennium bug that would strike down all the world’s computers, hardly the most chilling of thoughts for most of those who work on them. Whilst Conrad Ostwalt is correct in observing a “fin de siècle society” that arose in this moment, the kitsch nature of cultural productions like *End of Days*, *Independence Day*, *Godzilla*, and *Armageddon*, which tended to focus on action, comedy, and renewal, rather than the more complex themes of faith and making meaning from disaster, imply a largely playful mode of apocalyptic thinking which reveled in the redemption of the American way of life rather than its destruction.¹²

The re-emergence of a cycle of apocalyptic films is often equated with moments of cultural crisis. The same is true of the cycle which I would argue

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occurred in the mid to late first decade of the twenty-first century.¹³ However, as has been demonstrated, such assertions can be limiting. For example, 90s apocalyptic movies were far more celebratory than they were warnings of an impending future catastrophe. Thus, any discussion of what these films may respond to demands that we consider their appearance on the level of form rather than mere quantity. Whilst post 9/11 films may share a generic label with their 90s counterparts, reading the two waves of films in relation to the concept of their utopian impulse reveals just how deep their differences lie. Whereas 90s apocalyptic movies position their contemporary US society as a multicultural utopia to be protected, post 9/11 films can be interpreted as critical dystopias; texts which “maintain a utopian impulse,” only “*outside* their pages.”¹⁴ Critical dystopias place the emphasis on the reader/spectator, offering warnings rather than solutions. In these films, which most commonly present post-apocalyptic scenarios, the emphasis switches to the survivor rather than the savior and how, in a post 9/11 and hence post-disaster world, faith and community can provide hope for possible futures.

9/11/2001

In Marco Brambilla’s light-hearted science-fiction action adventure feature *Demolition Man* (1993), a film starring rival Sylvester Stallone, the idea of a future

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president Arnold Schwarzenegger is played for laughs. In the context of a post 9/11 world, however, Schwarzenegger's entry into politics as Governor of California in 2003 should not be considered the least bit unthinkable; representing, as it did, a nostalgic desire to return to the heroism and sanctuary of the indestructible America of the 1990s action movie after the very real destruction of such prominent American landmarks. In the aftermath of the attacks Jean Baudrillard described the event *as* a "Manhattan disaster movie," in so doing completely collapsing the distinction between reality and the image.¹⁵ For Baudrillard the attacks were not *like* a disaster movie, they *were* a disaster movie and perhaps Schwarzenegger's election can be seen as a similarly literal response; what better way to fight the mythical terror and evil spread by those who would dare attack America, than with the elevation of the equally mythical Hollywood force of good, embodied by its muscle-bound purveyor, to such a significant political role?

After the attacks, it seemed as if the White House, too, had been Hollywoodized. In his address to the nation following the September 11 attacks, in a speech lasting only as many minutes, President George W. Bush used the term "evil" to characterize the 'new' terrorist threat no less than four times, appealing to a long established Hollywood duality which reduced and closed-off debate around the motivation behind anti-US sentiment. But whilst such a rhetoric seems to be supportive of a similar worldview to that seen in 90s apocalyptic cinema, it also brought about an increased concern and awareness of faith's role, not just in the

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face of disaster but in terms of its broader social impact. In his book *Black Mass*, John Gray argues that, “It was only when [Bush] became president that religion began to move into the center of American politics, and only after 9/11 that it informed policies on a broad front,”¹⁶ further identifying an apocalyptic tone to such policies.¹⁷ This pre-occupation with Revelations and the biblical apocalypse was not unique to Bush however, the Bible having always been influential in US policy formation. O’Donnell,¹⁸ and Lawrence and Jewett, highlight that Reagan (himself a Hollywood actor) shared a similar belief that the end times were near.¹⁹ It is worth noting the similarities between Bush’s use of the term “evil” and Reagan’s famous description of the Soviet Union as the “Evil Empire.” Bush, however, seemed to go further. Driven by what O’Donnell argues to be his belief that both his presidency and the War on Terror were part of a divine mission,²⁰ he used this inner faith to ramp up the post 9/11 rhetoric of the duality, exposed by Richard Bernstein in his book *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion since 9/11*,²¹ between America and its allies, and the far more amorphous group of anti-Americans for which Bush used the umbrella “terrorists.”

The centrality of faith to post 9/11 apocalyptic films, therefore, mirrors the role of the religio-eschatological thinking which underpinned the politics of the War on Terror itself. Taking this further, the bleakness of the subsequent films suggests that 9/11 may have in fact whetted the appetite for disaster films, or at least created a thirst for disaster films which attempt to represent the pain and

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suffering caused by real disasters. This is a fundamental shift; not just that directors have gone on to produce a much more grim and bleak picture of future possible apocalypses, but that even those which seem light-hearted are tempered with serious themes seeking to both blame humanity and also present the apocalypse as now *unavoidable*. Page seems skeptical that apocalyptic films (featuring New York at least) have changed much at all in the wake of 9/11, arguing that; “In many ways American culture returned very rapidly after 9/11 to ‘normal,’ which is defined in part by a return to the popular fun of New York disaster movies.”²² Instead, he sees the difference rather in an underlying sense of unease which is brought to bear not in disaster films but in, “works that confronted 9/11 directly.” But perhaps, in his eagerness to proclaim our passion for destruction unabated by 9/11, Page overlooks what are, in effect, more subtle changes to films which, only in part, maintain their appeal through vast set-pieces of destruction. The impact of 9/11 was not to prevent these kinds of films from being made, nor does their popularity seem to have waned in subsequent years, rather it is their style, tone, and, crucially, the way in which these films deal with issues of faith and the construction of meaning from destruction, that have been altered.

The post 9/11 apocalyptic films that will be discussed in the following sections, such as *Signs*, *The Book of Eli*, *The Road*, *Knowing* (Alex Proyas, 2009), and *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuarón, 2006), treat matters of faith in a far more complex way when compared to those films immediately preceding the turn of the

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millennium. Indeed, these films can be seen as representative of what Neil Gerlach describes as an “ongoing blurring of religious faith and humanist values in American culture.”²³ The difference is not necessarily that apocalyptic films prior to 9/11 did not attempt to present a religious angle, as references can be found in films like *Deep Impact* in which the space shuttle sent to destroy the meteor is named the “Messiah” and *Armageddon* in which Harry Stamper’s sacrifice is *coded* as messianic. Nor is it that films post 9/11 have represented a specifically Christian backlash, perhaps befitting of an age characterized by Samuel P. Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations,” to an event which many have read as a religiously motivated attack on Christian America (if anything, Christian messages are often more subtly presented in films post 9/11 than they were prior to it).²⁴ The difference is in the willingness to analyze and debate the meaning and purpose of faith in a world that has been turned upside down. These are films which challenge the value of faith in a world which is either threatened with annihilation or which has already experienced a global catastrophe. They open up a space to debate the usefulness of such acts of faith, which appear at the very heart of the films rather than as a peripheral concern as in the period leading up to 9/11.

A Prototype

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Filming for M. Night Shyamalan's 2002 film *Signs* began just two days after September 11th 2001. Although the film was clearly written prior to 9/11 there can be no doubt that filming during such a highly charged moment influenced the eventual outcome. Indeed the first scene filmed records ex-reverend Graham Hess' (Mel Gibson) last conversation with his dying wife and the film crew held a candle-lit vigil in honor of the victims of 9/11 before they began. This tragic scene is at the heart of a film essentially concerned with Hess' loss and regaining of faith. To begin filming with such a scene, which so resonates with the events of two days previous, ties the film up with the complex emotions and debates which were being formed in the early days after the attacks. In many ways, *Signs* became a prototypical post 9/11 apocalyptic film.

Although on paper a film about an alien invasion and its eventual defeat, *Signs* is about as far removed from *Independence Day* as seems possible. The film has very few action sequences and relies little on special effects. What sounds like the makings of either a horror or action narrative is actually a character driven film about the way in which people might respond to the end of the world and the regaining of faith in the face of apocalypse. In many respects *Signs* is representative of a post 9/11 trend in which the apocalyptic narrative is actually a cover for a film whose central concern is that of the faith of its protagonist (often a faith which is threatened or which has been lost and must be re-established). In *Signs*, Graham's abandonment of the church, his denomination is not specified, is repeatedly

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emphasized in his reminder to various characters that, “I’m not Father anymore.” It is made clear that, in such a time of crisis as the alien invasion precipitates, the community look towards Graham as a kind of spiritual guide. In one scene he enters a shop and the girl over the counter pleads with him to listen to her confessions despite his assertion that he is no longer with the church.

Signs opens with the discovery of huge and elaborate crop-circles which appear on the Hess family farm. It is these crop-circles, later discovered to be used for navigation purposes by the aliens, which become associated with the title of the film. They were indeed used heavily in the film’s promotion, emphasizing their apocalyptic nature (they are, in effect, signs of the oncoming end of humankind). And yet, while this may be the way in which the film was marketed, the true signs of the film are not the crop-circles, but signs from God which eventually help to save Graham and the rest of his family.

In what seems to be the key speech of the film, Graham questions the way in which people see signs. When his brother, Merrill (Joaquin Phoenix), seeking some form of comfort, asks Graham if he thinks the crop-circles and the subsequent lights which have appeared over major cities could indicate the end of the world, Graham gives us this lengthy diagnosis:

“People break down into two groups. When they experience something lucky, group number one sees it as more than luck, more than coincidence; they see it as

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a sign, evidence that there is someone up there, watching out for them. Group number two sees it as just pure luck, a happy turn of chance. I'm sure that people in group number two are looking at those fourteen lights in a very suspicious way; for them, this situation is a 50/50. Could be bad, could be good. But deep down, they feel that whatever happens, they're on their own, and that, fills them with fear. Yeah, there are those people. But there're a lot of people in the group number one, and when they see those fourteen lights, they're looking at a miracle. And deep down they feel, with whatever's going to happen, there'll be someone there to help them. And that fills them with hope. So what you have to ask yourself is what kind of person are you? Are you the kind that sees signs, sees miracles? Or do you believe that people just get lucky? Or, look at the question this way: is it possible that there are no coincidences?"

Despite what would appear to be an attack on the faithless, Graham then immediately denounces faith. When Merrill asks him what group he falls into, he replies: "There is no-one watching out for us Merrill, we're all on our own." The film then sets about dismantling this idea through an elaborate set of coincidences which inevitably conclude with the saving of Graham's son, Morgan. This reversal is completed with the final line of the film. As Morgan regains consciousness in his father's arms he asks, "Did someone save me?" to which the emotional Graham replies: "Yeah baby. I think someone did."

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Whilst the particular religious connotations of Hess being referred to as Father and the dog collar which we see him wearing at the end of the film mark him out as Christian (and not ignoring Mel Gibson's own widely known Catholicism), the central speech referred to could easily be applied to any form of faith and whilst *Signs* is certainly a Christian coded narrative, many apocalyptic films since have been less faith specific. Therefore, whilst religion does not always play a specific role in post 9/11 apocalyptic cinema, acts of faith do. O'Donnell argues that "[t]he most significant shift between the biblical idea of apocalypse and contemporary popular culture iterations is the shift from divine agency to human agency,"²⁵ and this is largely the case across the body of works, but, post 9/11 agency seems also dependent, at least in part, on divine agency as we see at the end of *Signs* with Morgan's protection from the gas. Furthermore, films such as *Children of Men*, *I am Legend* (Francis Lawrence, 2007), *Sunshine* (Danny Boyle, 2007), *The Road*, *Knowing*, and *The Book of Eli* all feature endings in which the central protagonist dies, implying that the individual in these films is only really a torch bearer for humanity's continued survival and that faith in the power of both something higher and a collective unity is needed in order to navigate the harsh realities of a post-disaster world.

Alex Proyas' *Knowing* is a more crystallized example of this kind of film in action. In *Knowing* John Koestler (Nicolas Cage), an astrophysicist, discovers a list of dates, co-ordinates, and death tolls, charting every major catastrophe over the

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last fifty years. The list continues into the near future and ends with “EE” which he later discovers means “Everybody Else.” This prophecy certainly recalls biblical conceptions of the end of days and, indeed, John begins to believe that he has been given the list for the purpose of saving the world. The film intertwines the concepts of faith, catastrophe, and pre-determinism, and whilst the spectacular disaster scenes mark this out as an action blockbuster, the film also delivers an interesting message.

Like *Signs*, *Knowing* condenses many of its fundamental ideas about determinism into a single passage of dialogue. John, who has also recently lost his wife, although this time in a fire, is giving a class on determinism when he announces his loss of faith:

JOHN: I want you to think about the perfect set of circumstances that put this celestial ball of fire at just the correct distance from our little blue planet for life to evolve. [...] That’s a nice thought right? Everything has a purpose, an order to it, it is determined? But then there’s the other side of the argument, the theory of randomness, which says it’s all simply coincidence. The very fact we exist is nothing but the result of a complex, yet inevitable string of chemical accidents and biological mutations. There is no grand meaning. There’s no purpose.

STUDENT: What about you Professor Koestler, well what do you believe?

JOHN: I think shit just happens.

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The similarities between this speech and that given by Graham Hess in *Signs* are startling and again, like *Signs*, the conclusion of the narrative eventually endows the onscreen events with meaning. The film asks a string of confusing questions about pre-determinism. Even in Koestler's speech his position seems in flux since, in comparing the idea of fate to that of randomness he describes randomness as an "inevitable string of chemical accidents [emphasis own]." There is certainly an inevitability about the disasters on the list which Koestler attempts to prevent. Even when John arrives at the scene of a plane crash, reminiscent of Shanksville, and helps to save burning victims the number of eventual casualties matches the number on the list implying that he cannot change fate.²⁶

The film's message with regards to religious faith is not wholly coherent either. In many respects *Knowing* establishes an old dichotomy between John Koestler, the scientist, and his father, who we are told is a pastor. Clearly the onscreen events cause John to question his belief that "shit just happens," and there are some religious overtones from the fiery Book of Revelations style apocalypse to the final scene in which we see John's son Caleb (Chandler Canterbury) and Diana's daughter Abby (Lara Robinson) on another planet running through a field towards a huge tree evoking the Garden of Eden. Nevertheless, that the apocalypse is initiated by aliens who descend on Earth in a spaceship in order to whisk the children away in a presumed attempt to preserve human life places the narrative at

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odds with any explicitly Christian understanding of religion. Thus, although *Knowing* begins by implying, as John's science friend Phil (Ben Mendelsohn) points out when confronted with the prophetic list of numbers, that people see what they want to see, it ultimately discards the possibility of the randomness of disaster. The film, perhaps then, represents the desire to give meaning to catastrophe, but whether it succeeds or not in this instance is open to debate since, whilst randomness is disproved, the Earth is nonetheless destroyed.

In an even more recent incarnation, Jeff Nichols' *Take Shelter* (2011) too deals with ideas around pre-determinism and faith. Plagued by apocalyptic visions focused on a coming storm, protagonist Curtis LaForche (Michael Shannon) begins to question his sanity whilst simultaneously deciding to risk both his family and job in renovating his home's storm shelter in preparation. Through its entirety the film leaves open the possibility that the visions are mere delusions brought on by paranoid schizophrenia which has a history in Curtis' family. The ending of the film, however, underlines the complexity of its position on faith since in the closing scene, having taken a vacation in advance of undergoing treatment for his supposed mental illness, Curtis' visions are realized.

Take Shelter leaves its audience somewhat suspended. The fulfillment of Curtis' visions implies the hand of fate, and yet his preparations for the end (presumably the purpose of the visions) are to no avail since the storm's occurrence during his family's trip means that they cannot make use of the shelter he has spent

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much of the movie elaborately crafting. The ending leaves interpretation open; is the storm in fact the end of the world; will Curtis and his family survive; what, ultimately, was the purpose of Curtis' visions? While *Signs*, *Knowing*, and *Take Shelter*, then, all deal with prophecies which are ultimately fulfilled, only in *Signs* does that prophecy result in salvation. All three films, however, leave the audience to question the purpose of faith in the face of disaster, in doing so articulating the complexities involved in any attempt to make meaning from apocalyptic events.

“I Kept the Faith”

“This has been a long time coming,” croaks the nameless central character of *The Road*, played by Viggo Mortensen, moments before his long and drawn out death is realized, leaving his son (Kodi Smit-McPhee) in a god-forsaken wasteland populated by cannibals. Arguably the bleakest of the post 9/11 apocalyptic films, *The Road* offers only glimpses of hope to the audience. The man and his son lack a purpose, travelling through a bleached post-apocalyptic landscape with only a dwindling motivation to live, the boy even contemplating suicide. Whilst Mortensen's character does carry a gun, it functions as a tool for such a suicide should they be captured, more than for protection. Perhaps the driving force behind *The Road's* narrative is the man's slim grasp on his faith. It is the mere existence of his child which forces him to carry on and in which he has placed the last of

that faith: “All I know is the child is my warrant, and if he is not the word of God, then God never spoke.” The idea that such a faith is misplaced is left open here, not only in the tantalizing possibility that “God never spoke,” but also in the film’s ending which leaves the child’s fate in the hands of an unknown family of strangers. Whilst Terence McSweeney notes the, “quasi-messianic” nature of the role of the son in the narrative, who “carries the fire,” and questions whether or not he and his father are “the good guys,” the film is indebted far more to struggle than survival.²⁷ The faith of the protagonists is not resolute, nor is it above question, rather the role of faith in such an apocalyptic wasteland is placed on trial.

Like *The Road*, *Children of Men* presents spectators with an aesthetic of desolation, characterized in post 9/11 apocalyptic film through bleached coloration and repeated longshots of isolated survivors; tropes which emphasize the hopelessness of a new life in an unrecognizable world, offering what Marcus O’Donnell terms an “ambient apocalypse” that seeps into the very fabric of every frame of the film.²⁸ A similarly complex messianic role is also adopted by the film’s protagonist, Theo (Clive Owen), whose death in the very last frame of the film may or may not bring about hope that humanity will find a cure for the infertility which has caused this future dystopia (a hope implied by the overlying sound of children laughing and playing, but left crucially unrealized by the events on-screen).²⁹ O’Donnell terms Theo a “reluctant hero,” who is “as much midwife as he is protector, [...] an accidental guide through these multiple apocalyptic

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worlds: worlds of hope, resistance, and agency [which] coexist with worlds of passivity, anomie, and powerlessness.”³⁰ But for O’Donnell, who highlights the complexity of *Children of Men*’s encounters with hope and agency, this dual role is essential as it allows director, Alfonso Cuarón, to construct a film which “shows a point or possibility of resistance, the seeding of a new world, not the sudden apocalyptic descent of a fully made new world [...] therefore problematiz[ing] both catastrophe and survival”.³¹ Theo’s role as messiah and his subsequent death, therefore, only begins the job of restoration rather than completing it, leaving the rest of the work in the hands of a largely unidentified community (The Human Project). In the same way, *The Book of Eli* ends with its protagonist passing on the flame to a community with a printing press looking to restart humanity and *The Road* ends with the boy being taken on by a new family unit who could also be part of a larger community since they appear to be well stocked. Finally, in *I Am Legend*, Doctor Robert Neville (Will Smith), who also plays messiah after he eventually sees the value of faith, sacrifices himself to protect the cure he has developed for a virus which has turned the world’s population into zombies, and this is eventually delivered to a gated community of survivors.

Unlike the 90s films, in which *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, and *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997) all figure heroic messiahs, *The Road*, *Children of Men*, and *I Am Legend*’s messiah narratives depend on faith and divine intervention as much as action and heroism. Whilst the protagonists do act, largely

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in a bid to protect themselves, this action is complicated by their “reluctance.” The refusal of the ending of these films to offer their spectators the glimpse of a promised new world, leaves hope in the balance, already dependent upon a fragmented society coming together, a renewal of faith, and fragile hero figures who barely endure the two-hours it takes for the movie’s completion.

It is, perhaps, easiest to track the shift in trends which occurred between the 90s and post 9/11 waves of apocalypse movies across the films of director Roland Emmerich. Noted for his light-hearted take on the epic disaster film, Emmerich has met with considerable commercial success since *Independence Day* topped the US Box Office highest grossers list in 1996. Whilst subsequent films have failed to match the success of *Independence Day*, *Godzilla* (1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2010) were all profitable and the director seems to have used a similar formula throughout. Despite the similarities between the four films, however, there persists a number of fundamental differences which coincide with the cultural shift taking place in the post 9/11 period. The central difference can be seen in the attitude of those behind the films’ writing and direction. In summarizing the style of *Independence Day*, Michele Pierson argues that the film, “fused the make-do aesthetic of B-grade SF to the scale and scope of the 1970s’ disaster film to produce a cornball pastiche of science fiction cinema in all its many phases of wonder.” She continues, stating that co-writer Dean Devlin and director Emmerich “wanted to have fun and play with the notion of science-fiction in general.”³² In

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this they succeed through the film's scripting, its comedy set-pieces, its likable characters, and its over-the-top spectacular destruction sequences. However, although this same epic nature, as well as moments of human warmth (in an otherwise frozen America), are also present in *The Day After Tomorrow*, the latter takes an altogether more serious approach to issues such as climate change and survival. This is something Emmerich himself has admitted, saying that, "We didn't want to go over the edge and have people laughing."³³ The difference here is made explicit; one film in which the intention is to have fun and the other in which laughing off destruction is certainly not the intention.

More recently still, in *2012* a biblical metaphor is evoked in the finale when survivors of a worldwide catastrophe are carried away on huge metallic arks. Whilst this ending seems similar to many 90s apocalyptic films which focus on those who are saved from impending disaster, the fact that this film relies upon the establishment of a *tabula rasa* in order to restart humankind is far more in-line with the post 9/11 narratives which, in contrast, have tended to concentrate on the fate of survivors of apocalypse rather than saviors. The film ends with a moral debate about who they should let aboard the arks, again leaving the narrative in an unresolved future in which a community must learn to trust each other in order to survive, having faith that the catastrophic flood the film envisions will not smash their ships upon the rocks.³⁴ It is certainly indicative of the change in tone between the films that, in *Independence Day* and *Godzilla*, although the audience is treated

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to gratuitous collateral damage, particularly of America's landmarks, we see very little of the human cost of such destruction. In comparison, *The Day After Tomorrow* and *2012* both envisage casualties on a spectacular scale that thus instigate a restarting of society rather than its re-instatement.

However, the text to most overtly utilize religious faith as a narrative driver is *The Book of Eli*. Eli, played by Denzel Washington, embarks on a mission to protect and transport the last copy of the King James Bible. The film attempts to have it both ways, keeping at its center a strong action hero (the film clearly having been conceived around its impressive action sequences), whilst at the same time emphasizing that it is Eli's *faith* rather than his fighting skills which allow his eventual triumph. Eli's reliance on divine intervention undercuts his position as active hero. We see this in evidence throughout the film, in particular during a showdown in which Eli is fired at by a group of mercenaries tasked to find the book. Their shots miraculously miss and when Eli is finally captured and shot at point blank range, he is still found minutes later wounded, but walking along the same path.

When Eli reaches the sanctuary of a community of people with a printing press, it is revealed to the audience that he is blind, but that the bible he carried throughout the movie was written in Braille and he is able to dictate its entirety, dying in happiness knowing he has completed his mission. The film leaves us with a summary of his actions as Eli says: "I kept the faith." Returning to the Priest's

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statement in *End of Days* we see explicitly how the humanism of the 90s compares with a post 9/11 reliance on faith and community. The Priest tells the audience that, “He doesn’t say that He will save us. He says that we will save ourselves.” At which point Jericho takes it upon himself to become the savior. But in *The Book of Eli*, a film with a much more active protagonist than many post 9/11, we see that these characters alone are not the sole architects of salvation. In these stubborn wastelands, faith and community is the only option and the film’s relatively satisfying ending is reliant on the interventions of Eli’s God and a community of like-minded survivors.

Conclusions: Coming to an End

It is tempting to see the reappearance of narratives driven by faith in recent apocalyptic films as a kind of backlash against the events of 9/11, a reaffirmation of Christianity, or even as further evidence of the clash of civilizations. However, it would seem that, through an analysis of the representation of faith in these films, something more complex has been revealed. Such themes appear more diverse, critical, and reflexive in the decade post 9/11. If the optimism of the interwar period between the end of the Cold War and 9/11 can be exemplified through Fukuyama’s famous thesis, perhaps astronomer royal Martin Rees’ assessment of the odds of humanity surviving the next century as being “fifty-fifty” best characterizes the

more cautious nature of subsequent films.³⁵ According to the title of his book, this is, “*a scientist’s warning*,” a claim which appears to strip away the religious dimension of predictions about the end of the world. Such an eschatological prediction is interesting because it goes beyond religion, suggesting that the apocalyptic imagination is not solely the domain of religious fervor or extremism but that we are *all* reliant on faith regardless of our beliefs.

The continued popularity of eschatological systems of belief suggests that a new apocalypse is always likely impending. As Frank Kermode highlights, “The great majority of interpretations of Apocalypse assume that the End is pretty near [...but] Apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited.”³⁶ Perhaps the most famous recent examples of this can be seen in Harold Camping’s prediction that the world would end in 2011, and the popular cultural phenomenon which sprung from ideas that the ending of a cycle of the Mayan calendar in 2012 would usher in the end times. Whilst these predictions can be trivialized, at times, the apocalyptic mentality they generate can provoke short-termism. Issues surrounding the climate, consumption and poverty, effective government and financial stability, and the future more generally can be dropped in favor of immediate but inadequate fixes.

Maria Manuel Lisboa, in her book *The End of the World*, suggests that depictions of apocalypse are more about beginning than ending. And going even further, she asserts that: “The establishment of utopia [...], almost without

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exception demands a prior radical purge.”³⁷ But the complex ways in which post 9/11 films attempt to make meaning from disaster do not always result in films offering utopian possibilities. What, for example, do we make of a film like Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* (2011), which projects clearly the failure of science to prevent the end of the world? Or *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009), a superhero movie in which the team of heroes must ultimately accept the deaths of millions through nuclear destruction in order to avoid a potential global wipeout? This feeling of inevitability could stifle forward thinking. However defeatist it may seem to have Bruce Willis or Arnold Schwarzenegger save the world again in the 90s at least as protagonists they could claim a certain agency.

Jewett and Lawrence lament “the proliferation of mutually antagonistic apocalyptic movements – Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and Hindu – offering roads to Heaven that are paved with the corpses of those they detest,” further arguing that, “our future may depend on finding models of faith and reasons that will lead such movements beyond their current apocalyptic pessimism.”³⁸ Perhaps the more cautious optimism of the majority of post 9/11 apocalyptic movies, with their emphasis on community building and faith, represents an attempt to offer such an alternative, less violent, solution to the growing apocalyptic mentality of such movements; something particularly important considering Constance Penley’s observation in 1991 that, “We can imagine the future but we cannot conceive the kind of collective political strategies necessary to change or ensure that future.”³⁹

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Nevertheless, now, more than a decade on from the visitation of catastrophe on the American people, there have been hints that this cycle of films is coming to an end, as we have seen the beginnings of a recycling back towards trends seen in the 90s.

The release of two films in particular, *White House Down* (Roland Emmerich, 2013) and *Pacific Rim* (Guillermo del Toro, 2013) in which Idris Elba's character Stacker Pentecost bullishly declares the cancellation of the apocalypse, are worth noting for their appeal to the kind of light-hearted entertainment and heroism of 90s apocalyptic film. Then there is Seth Rogan and Evan Goldberg's spoof biblical apocalypse in *This is the End* (2013), a film in which the apocalypse is used as a comedy fantasy in order to punish a group of over-indulgent film stars. Or finally, *San Andreas* (2015), a Dwayne Johnson vehicle which is little more than a rehash of the playful 90s apocalypse but with a surface aesthetic which makes continual reference to 9/11; a film in which Johnson's character, Ray, (chief of the LA Fire and Rescue Department) overcomes the kind of helplessness of those who responded to the 9/11 attacks and is able instead to repeatedly save members of his family along with half of San Francisco. In a direct citation of the heroic 90s apocalyptic action movies, not only does Ray ultimately succeed in reuniting his broken family through patriarchal strength, daring, and resolve, he also offers up, in the last line of the film, the idea that America must "rebuild" moments after an enormous American flag is unfurled before a backdrop of the wrecked Golden Gate Bridge. Whilst for the first decade of the 21st century, Hollywood films seemed to

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be coming to terms with a world which seemed far more difficult to save, a post-disaster world in which the value of faith, whilst necessary for survival, was also brought into question by the sheer brutality of life on the other side of apocalypse, perhaps the last few years have shown that the film industry is beginning to move on from its 9/11 complex. Essentially, whilst post 9/11 apocalyptic movies have tended to ask their audiences to trust each other and keep the faith in order to make sense of disaster, it would seem that we are now poised for a return to the fun and *non-sense* of the big budget 90s disaster extravaganzas; movies seeking to restore mythical America as the cultural center, rather than question potential American apocalyptic futures.

¹ John Walliss and James Aston, "Doomsday America: The Pessimistic Turn of Post-9/11 Apocalyptic Cinema," *The Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 23 (2011): 53-64, accessed October 5, 2014, doi:10.3138/jrpc.23.1.53.

² 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.

³ Walliss and Aston, "Doomsday America," 55.

⁴ John Walliss, "Apocalypse at the Millennium," in *Millennialism and Society: End All Around Us: The Apocalypse and Popular Culture*, ed. Kenneth Newport and John Walliss (London: Equinox Publishing Ltd., 2009), 79.

⁵ Walliss, "Apocalypse at the Millennium," 85.

⁶ Kim Newman, *Millennium Movies: End of the World Cinema* (London: Titan Books, 1999), 258.

⁷ Marcus O'Donnell, "Children of Men's Ambient Apocalyptic Visions," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27.1 (2015): 19.

⁸ Max Page, *The City's End: Two Centuries of Fantasies, Fears, and Premonitions of New York's Destruction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 147.

⁹ Walliss, "Apocalypse at the Millennium," 85.

¹⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹¹ Derek Chollet and James Goldgeier, *America Between the Wars: The Misunderstood Years Between the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the Start of the War on Terror, From 11/9 to 9/11* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

¹² Conrad Ostwalt, "The End of Days." in *Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. William Blizek (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2009), 290.

¹³ Mathias Nilges does just this in "The Aesthetics of Destruction: Contemporary US Cinema and TV Culture," in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"* ed. Birkenstein, et al. (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 23.

¹⁴ Baccolini, R. and Moylan, T. "Introduction: Dystopia and Histories." *Dark Horizons*. Ed. R. Baccolini and T. Moylan (London: Routledge, 2003), 7.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (New York: Verso, 2002), 29.

¹⁶ John Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia* (London: Penguin Books, 2008), 161.

¹⁷ Gray, *Black Mass*, 4.

¹⁸ Marcus O'Donnell, "'Bring it on': The Apocalypse of George W. Bush," *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, 113 (2004): 10-22.

¹⁹ Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence, *Captain America and the Crusade against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 131.

²⁰ Marcus O'Donnell, "Bring it on," 15.

²¹ Richard J. Bernstein, *The Abuse of Evil: The Corruption of Politics and Religion Since 9/11* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

²² Page, *The City's End*, 201.

²³ Neil Gerlach, "Narrating Armageddon: Antichrist Films and the Critique of Late Modernity," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 24, 2 (2012), 219.

²⁴ Samuel Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72 (1993): 22-49.

²⁵ Marcus O'Donnell, "Children of Men's Ambient Apocalyptic Visions," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27.1 (2015): 19.

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- ²⁶ Shanksville was the site of the crashed United Airlines 93 flight on September 11th, which was famously brought down, experts think, by the passengers en masse in order to prevent terrorists from flying the plane into a third target, thought probably to be the White House.
- ²⁷ Terence McSweeney, “‘Each Night is Darker – Beyond Darkness’: The Environmental and Spiritual Apocalypse of *The Road* (2009),” *Journal of Film and Video* 65 (2013): 52.
- ²⁸ Marcus O’Donnell, “*Children of Men*’s Ambient Apocalyptic Visions,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27.1 (2015): 16-30.
- ²⁹ Caesar Montevecchio, “Framing Salvation: Biblical Apocalyptic, Cinematic Dystopia, and Contextualizing the Narrative of Salvation,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 16 (2012): 1-18, accessed January 12 2015, <http://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss2/7>.
- ³⁰ O’Donnell, “*Children of Men*” 23-24.
- ³¹ O’Donnell, “*Children of Men*,” 28.
- ³² Michele Pierson, *Special Effects: Still in Search of Wonder* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 146.
- ³³ Pierson, *Special Effects*, 223.
- ³⁴ Darren Aronofsky’s adaptation of the story of *Noah* (2014) shares this biblical premise, again preferring the *tabula rasa* as the means to re-write the future.
- ³⁵ Martin Rees, *Our Final Hour: A Scientist’s Warning: How Terror, Error, and Environmental Disaster Threaten Humankind’s Future in this Century – on Earth and Beyond* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 8.
- ³⁶ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 8.
- ³⁷ Maria Manuel Lisboa, *The End of the World: Apocalypse and its Aftermath in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011), 15.
- ³⁸ Jewett and Lawrence, *Captain America*, 131.
- ³⁹ Penley, Constance. 1991. “Time Travel, Primal Scene, and the Critical Dystopia.” In *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*, ed. C. Penley, E. Lyon, L. Spigal, and J. Bergstrom, 63–80. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 63.

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