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Apocalyptic Films: Questions to Ask

Elyse Kuperus

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How will the world end? This is a question that has plagued humankind for centuries, and more recently has caused a proliferation of books and movies that offer different answers. Apocalyptic literature and cinema have become their own distinct genre, and millions of dollars are spent each year making and consuming these productions. It may seem easy to brush aside this genre as not worth deeply considering because it appears at best as fantastical imaginings, or at worst, mere conjecture. However, simply because this genre has captured the hearts and minds of so many, compels us to take notice. As Christians, we are called to examine and evaluate every part of our life and the world we are a part of through the lens of faith. But what does this look like?

Apocalyptic movies strike a nerve. If you've watched the *Hunger Games* series, *I Am Legend*, *Avenger's Endgame*, or any other movie that depicts the end of the world, you know the emotion that is elicited by their stories. In other words, the movies and their messages mean something. Meaning causes resonating or resisting, and these movies produce both actions in different people. The entire apocalyptic genre asks (and attempts to answer) many questions, but the two that are central include "How does this all end?" and more importantly, "How will humanity respond when this all ends?" These questions resound with movie approvers and critics alike, because someday, if we haven't already, we will be faced with the temporality of life and the things around us. Alyssa Ryan, in her chapter in the book *Apocalyptic Chic*, explores this idea, saying, "When we encounter (apocalyptic) depictions in popular media, we are often entranced and horrified by the characteristics of these "new" worlds, but what has escaped examination are the very real, albeit small-scale, apocalypses happening all around us that produce similar landscapes."¹ In some ways, we all will experience mini-apocalypses, whether that be witnessing the decay of our fallen world or experiencing a life-altering event. While the outlook on life and the future offered within apocalyptic cinema is rather grim, it offers a poignant question that should give us pause: when faced with our own world falling down around us, how will we act? Where will we turn? This reality, and the question it forces us to ask ourselves, offers a glimpse into some of the reason why this genre has gained such a hold on the current generation. It also affords purpose in engaging and understanding the many different parts that make up apocalyptic cinema.

If one is to be a conscious consumer and critic of apocalyptic cinema, or any cinema in general, certain questions must be asked about each cultural artifact. Ted Turnau, in his book *Popologetics*, put forth a constructive set of questions to shape the way theology is both

received from and offered to culture. Turnau's questions afford a constructive path to interpreting apocalyptic cinema, but only when their meaning is understood.

Questions to Ask:

1. **1. What's the story?** This question attempts to unpack just what is going on both on and underneath the surface of the plot. We, as humans, are drawn to stories as entertainment because we all are living our own personal stories throughout the duration of our life; we are "story creatures."² Looking at who is telling the story as well as the themes in the movie are important ways to unpack the story.
2. **2. Where am I?** Any good story offers space where one can see themselves within the narrative, and the question "Where am I?" (the world of the text) assists in identifying what spaces we as the viewers are being influenced to occupy and find meaning within. Many different pieces of a film play a part in this, from the music to language to the camera angles and even the lighting. Important things to consider within the world of the text are how good and evil are represented and viewed, what the story does with God, and what the story tells the viewer makes living worthwhile.
3. **3. What is good and true and beautiful about it? What's false and ugly and perverse about it?** While the questions speak for themselves, the order of the questions matters. It is important to look for the good first, before immediately jumping to picking something apart. Often, when time and care are offered to interpreting a cultural artifact, it is quickly discovered that nothing is as black and white as it seems.
4. **4. How does the gospel apply here?** The culmination of evaluating and interpreting a cultural artifact concludes where any other pursuit in life should. This question serves as the linchpin to the entire analysis, as the gospel ultimately directs any response to a cultural artifact, apocalyptic cinema or otherwise.

On your next "apocalyptic genre" film viewing, I'd encourage you to consider engaging questions and discussion of how the film is shaping us and how our worldview helps us make sense of this art form.

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1. Alyssa Ryan, *Apocalyptic Chic*, "Surrounded by Decay: Apocalyptic Fascination in the Modern World" p. 229.
 2. Ted Turnau, *Popologetics*, p. 216