

# Social apocalypse in contemporary Hollywood film

## *O apocalipse social no cinema contemporâneo de Hollywood*

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### ABSTRACT

Films provide important insights into the psychological, socio-political, and ideological make-up of a society and culture. Reading film diagnostically allows one to gain insights into social problems and conflicts and to appraise the dominant socio-political problems and crises of the contemporary moment. This article engages Hollywood films that contain allegories of catastrophe within the context of the Bush-Cheney era. As I attempt to show, horror, fantasy and other popular film genres articulate fears of the present moment concerning the state and the military, ecological and social crisis, and other phenomena, and can thus provide critical images and provide experiences that raise questions about the existing society.

**Keywords:** Social apocalypse, Hollywood film, allegories of catastrophe, diagnostic critique

### RESUMO

Os filmes proporcionam importantes *insights* sobre o caráter psicológico, sociopolítico e ideológico de uma sociedade e de uma cultura. Analisar o cinema diagnosticamente permite-nos obter esclarecimentos sobre problemas e conflitos sociais e avaliar crises e problemas sociopolíticos dominantes da atualidade. Este artigo aborda filmes de Hollywood que contêm alegorias de catástrofe no contexto da era Bush-Cheney. Como pretendo mostrar, filmes de horror, fantasia e outros gêneros populares expressam temores do momento atual relacionados ao Estado e aos militares, crises ecológica e social, e outros fenômenos, e podem, portanto, oferecer imagens críticas e experiências que levantem questões sobre a sociedade vigente.

**Palavras-chave:** Apocalipse social, cinema de Hollywood, alegorias de catástrofe, diagnóstico crítico

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### INTRODUCTION

**H**OLLYWOOD FILMS HAVE often provided scenarios of catastrophe, with natural disasters, wars, alien invasions and other natural and fictional forces wreaking catastrophic destruction<sup>1</sup>. In the 2000s, a series of Hollywood films have portrayed apocalyptic catastrophe ranging from environmental disasters to socio-political cataclysms in the forms of genre entertainment and popular films. Global warming, climate change, an unrestrained corporate globalization and neoliberalism that put profit and the marketplace above all other issues, escalating political conflicts and wars, and growing inequality between the 1% and 99% of global population, have arguably endangered the fate of the Earth and the socio-political order. Contemporary Hollywood social apocalypse films have thus addressed a wide range of environmental and socio-political issues concerning threats to the survival of humanity, nature, and civilization.

In general, Hollywood films in the contemporary era put on display historically specific fears, hopes, conflicts and political ideologies within the contested terrain of 2000s U.S. society. In the 2000s, a cycle of social apocalypse films appeared across traditional Hollywood genres, in which one can distinguish between social apocalypse films that portray social chaos as a product of existing society and technology, those that present forces of nature as perpetrators of catastrophe, and those that present supernatural or alien forces as the agents of apocalypse. One can also differentiate between social apocalypse films that portray potential or unfolding social apocalypse, and films that portray post-apocalyptic conditions, both of which are evident in Hollywood cinema of the 2000s.

In this article, I shall suggest how social apocalypse films represent existing political fears and discourses and are grounded in historically specific sociopolitical contexts. In particular, I shall suggest how a cycle of Hollywood films from the early 2000s through 2008 ground their fears in anxieties over the Bush-Cheney administration and offer specific critique of how their policies could lead to catastrophe<sup>2</sup>. I argue that contemporary Hollywood films transcode fears of apocalyptic crisis and collapse in areas ranging from the environment to the political, economic, and societal order. I deploy a method of diagnostic critique that uses cinema to gain critical historical knowledge of the past and present, constructing readings that tell us what films indicate about the historical period they represent and the period in which they are produced and distributed<sup>3</sup>. From my diagnostic perspective, films provide important insights into the psychological, socio-political, and ideological make-up of a society and culture at a given point in history. Reading film diagnostically allows

1. See my discussion of social apocalypse films in *Cinema Wars* (Kellner, 2010, Chapter 1, p. 80ff), upon which this article draws and expands.

2. The cycle of catastrophe and social apocalypse films continue during the Obama administration, and my forthcoming book, tentatively titled *Cinema Wars 2: Hollywood Film in the Age of Obama*, will critically engage social apocalypse films appearing during the Obama era.

3. On films transcoding social discourses and diagnostic critique, see Kellner and Ryan (1988); Kellner (1995 and 2010).

one to gain insights into social problems and conflicts and to appraise the dominant socio-political problems and crises, fears and hopes, and ideological and political conflicts of the contemporary moment<sup>4</sup>. This approach involves a dialectic of text and context, using texts to read social realities and context to help situate and interpret key films of the epoch. Accordingly, I will engage Hollywood films that contain allegories of catastrophe within the context of the Bush-Cheney era.

### THE CINEMA OF CRISIS AND APOCALYPSE IN THE BUSH/CHENEY ERA

The Bush/Cheney years were arguably an epoch of unparalleled social and economic crisis. It was a time of crisis in the real estate industry, financial industry, and job market where millions of people lost their homes, savings, jobs, and family, culminating in the economic crisis of 2008 that had global dimensions. The administration pursued wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, declaring a war on terror that has not ceased. Their policies of deregulation privileged oil, gas, energy, weapons and related industries that pose a serious threat to environment, while rolling back environmental protections and policies put in place by previous administrations. Media and popular culture promoted images of violence, social chaos, terrorism, and war that arguably heightened social anxiety, a claim that I shall argue in this article is evident in Hollywood films of the era<sup>5</sup>.

Since proliferating catastrophes of everyday life are difficult to face in the mode of realist cinematic representations, many of these extreme experiences of crisis and environmental and societal collapse were represented allegorically in contemporary Hollywood cinema in horror, fantasy, and science fiction genres. Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) uses the conventions of the disaster film to dramatize the dangers of climate change and global warming, ignored by the Bush/Cheney administration, providing a vision of ecological catastrophe mutating into social apocalypse<sup>6</sup>. In an eco-disaster extravaganza featuring tornados devastating Los Angeles, a massive tidal surge sweeping through Manhattan, and the freezing of the northern hemisphere, Emmerich takes the disaster film to new extremes. The film opens in Antarctica where Professor Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) and other scientists confront a polar ice shelf cracking. At a New Delhi environmental conference, Hall warns that a change in the Gulf Stream caused by global warming could bring about a dramatic decrease in temperature. The Dick Cheney look-alike Vice President (Kenneth Welsh) is skeptical and notes adverse effects of the Kyoto Protocol – an international treaty that sets binding obligations on industrialized

4. See Kellner (1995: 116-117).

5. On the Bush-Cheney era, see my trilogy of books Kellner (2001, 2003, and 2005).

6. On the disaster film, see Kellner and Ryan (1988). *The Day After Tomorrow* grossed an astonishing \$544,272,402 worldwide (see <<http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=dayaftertomorrow.htm>>; accessed January 2, 2009).

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countries to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases – on the economy. Yet a Scottish scientist (Ian Holm) tells Hall that his studies of plummeting ocean temperatures in the North Atlantic support the hypothesis that sudden climate change could produce another Ice Age.

Highlighting the global nature of ecological crisis, *The Day After Tomorrow* portrays extreme weather events in India, giant hailstones in Japan, and a Tsunami tidal wave inundating New York, followed by a hard freeze of the entire Northern Hemisphere, with international astronauts viewing the murderous storm systems wreaking havoc in their wake. In an ironic reversal, the film shows people from the northern hemisphere desperately trying to cross the border into Mexico, with Mexican police trying to turn them away.

Climatologist Jack Hall warns the U.S. government that: “in seven to ten days, we’ll be in a new Ice Age”. When the clueless President (Perry King) in a baseball hat is confronted with the magnitude of the cataclysm, he asks his now-chastened Vice President, “What do you think we should do?” Furthermore, when the disaster hits, the President cowardly flees, reversing images of strong Presidents in previous disaster and catastrophe films<sup>7</sup>. Such images transcode popular perceptions of Bush as incompetent and disengaged, of Cheney running the presidency, and highlight the dangers of having an administration that ignores serious problems like global warming and climate change.

*The Day After Tomorrow* puts on display the potentially devastating effects of failing to take ecological crisis seriously and not having plans to deal with environmental problems. Resonant images of a wall of water crashing down on Fifth Avenue in New York, the Empire State Building and New York skyscrapers cracking apart, the Statue of Liberty half-buried in a frozen ice block, and tornadoes ripping the letters off of the Hollywood sign produce an imagination of disaster that provides cautionary warnings that current problems like climate change, if not addressed, could bring environmental breakdown. While the disaster films of the 1970s presented specific disasters in airplanes, high rise towers, tour ships, or other sites of modern transportation and life, the social apocalypse films often present the specter of global catastrophe, including apocalyptic scenarios that would end human life on earth.

*The Day After Tomorrow* can be seen as a socially critical film in that it puts climate change and environmental devastation in a political context related to dangerous effects of human beings on the environment and incompetent political regimes<sup>8</sup>. On the other hand, a catastrophe film like Danny Boyle’s *Sunshine* (2007) is politically ambiguous, as in its science fiction scenario, a *Q-ball* that entered the sun’s sphere of gravitation caused a cooling of the sun,

7. In an article on “The Depiction of the US President in Apocalyptic Cinema”, Araceli Rodriguez Mateos and Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla

(2014) document changes in representations of U.S. Presidents from 1990s to 2000s social apocalypse films from positive representations during the Clinton years to strongly negative or absent Presidents during the Bush administration, reflecting increasing disaffection and anger with their policies.

8. For alternative readings of *The Day after Tomorrow* see Murray and Heumann (2009).

requiring a dangerous mission to re-ignite it, with a crew flying close to the sun and launching a super-bomb. This scenario calls attention to the fragility of the galaxy and need to take care of the Earth, but it does not focus on human practices that cause environmental catastrophe and proposes destructive nuclear technology as the solution to the problem.

Indie auteur Larry Fessenden's *The Last Winter* (2006) provides a cautionary eco-horror/disaster film about the consequences of global warming. Set in the high Arctic circle, the film opens with a PR documentary discussing how a corporation (North Industries) has just received a government contract to begin Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) exploration in an area previously denominated a wild-life preserve, geared to discover new oil supplies to make the U.S. more energy independent. The microcosm of oil explorers and scientists already stationed in the wilderness is beginning to suffer stress, with one young worker Maxwell (Zach Gilford) taken to roaming the empty tundra on his own at night and mumbling about what he sees out there. Project manager Ed Pollack (Ron Perlman) returns to discover that Hoffman (James Le Gros), an environmental activist who has been hired to monitor the project, has become convinced that the ANWR ecosystem is melting down and that with winter temperatures well above normal, the permafrost is melting, making the building of *ice roads* needed to bring in heavy equipment for the project impossible. Further, Hoffman is sleeping with Abby (Connie Britton), Pollack's second in command and previous lover, leading to conflicts between the corporate oil officials that want to "drill, baby, drill," to cite Sarah Palin's famous solution to the energy problem, and the ecologists in the film who are worried about effects on the environment.

As it quickly turns out, Maxwell is getting weirder, mumbling about the revenge of nature against human meddling and exploitation, and that oil, which consists of dead fossils and animals, is emanating strange phenomena after centuries of resting undisturbed. Indeed, the cracking ice and wind are emitting mysterious sounds and a *sour gas* may be, one scientist theorizes, driving Maxwell crazy (while a Native employee mentions Wendigo, or native spirits in the area). After Maxwell's death from freezing and increasingly bizarre sights the macho Pollock and the ecologist Hoffman leave for help after a plane that has flown into rescue them inexplicably crashes into their station. The ending is not a cheerful one and the film closes with chirpy and brightly lit newscasts reporting strange weather occurrences throughout the earth, thus suggesting that climate change and global warming could be producing extreme weather events that could plague the earth for decades to come, leading to cycles of eco-catastrophe and perhaps collapse.

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In addition to eco-disaster films, Hollywood has many other genre films portraying social apocalypse in the 2000s.

### **SOCIAL APOCALYPSE IN HORROR AND FANTASY FILM**

Crises of the 1960s and 1970s were often represented allegorically in horror, fantasy, disaster, and other popular genre films (Kellner and Ryan, 1988). Social crises and horrors of the Bush-Cheney regime were represented as well in a cycle of horror and fantasy genre films that help generate a social apocalypse genre of the era, as the horrors often suggest societal crisis and potential collapse. One of the first of the horror/social apocalypse films in the 2000s, *Resident Evil* (2002), was based on a popular Japanese video game and inspired a cycle of succeeding films. Directed by Paul W.S. Anderson, *Resident Evil* has a strong corporate conspiracy subtext and opens with a detailed description of how a mega-corporation has taken over the U.S.:

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Umbrella Corporation had become the largest commercial entity in the United States. Nine out of every ten homes contain its products. Its political and financial influence is felt everywhere. In public, it is the world's leading supplier of computer technology, medical products, and healthcare. Unknown, even to its own employees, its massive profits are generated by military technology, genetic experimentation and viral weaponry.

*Resident Evil* opens with the release of a deadly gas in a secret underground corporate research facility called *The Hive*, which turns the staff into murderous zombies who release mutated Lab *Animals* that they were studying, setting off a biohazard warning. An elite crew is sent to contain the infestation, but as it gets out of control the Red Queen computer that manages the underground facility orders a shutdown so that the crew must struggle against zombies, infected animals, corporate henchmen, and a malevolent computer to escape. The crew led by two super-empowered women, Alice (Milla Jovovich) and Rain (Michelle Rodriguez), appears to shut down the Queen, but countless zombies escape, giving rise to sequels in the franchise.

*Resident Evil* articulates fears of evil corporations and biotechnology getting out of control, as well as technology coming to dominate human beings and outbreaks of deadly biochemical plagues, a fear inflamed in the aftermath of the anthrax attacks, never explained, following the 9/11 terror attacks whose representation and impact on Hollywood cinema and U.S. culture was a major force of the era (see Kellner, 2010, and Faludi, 2007).

At the end of *Resident Evil*, the main character, who we will learn in sequels is Alice, survives, but observes that the city above the underground research facility has been overrun by zombies and she faces a desperate future. While the first *Resident Evil* film took place largely underground in a claustrophobic environment, where new evils and challenges appeared around every corner, *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Witt, 2004) takes place in a situation of urban apocalypse in which Alice, endowed with genetic superpowers, fights zombies, monsters, and corporate thugs, teaming up with some other survivors, including two strong women, to escape before the quarantined city is nuked by the evil corporation. Alice and a couple of her companions make it out for the sequel, but *Apocalypse* ends with the nuclear attack covered over by the Umbrella corporation as the malfunction of a nuclear power plant, playing on fears of out of control nuclear technology and government cover-ups. Further, news reports claimed that earlier stories of corporate malfeasance were false and that the people should be grateful to the Umbrella Corporation for preserving their way of life, a barely disguised allegory of lying by corporations and the state during the Bush-Cheney era.

In *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007), urban life has been destroyed globally and Alice and a small band of survivors try to survive amidst the zombie hordes in a mostly desert environment. Directed by Australian Russell Mulcahy, this zombie gore film shamelessly rips off *Mad Max* (Miller, 1979) and *Mad Max 2: The Road Warrior* (Miller, 1981) with endless battle scenes, highlighted in an attack by a flock of virally infected birds, who make Hitchcock's flock tame and harmless by comparison. Superpower-endowed Alice kills scores of birds, and hooks up with Claire Redfield and her band of uninfected survivors, who are falling fast to the zombies who are taking over the world. Las Vegas is in ruins and the only hope for the group is to make it to Alaska, where reports say there are survivors.

The ultra-violent and nihilistic *Resident Evil: Extinction* can be read as a rightwing survivalist fantasy, where after the collapse of civilization only the most violent can survive in a dog-eat-dog and zombie-eat-the-few-humans universe. Cumulatively, the *Resident Evil* films fall into subgenre cycles of a rebirth of zombie films, all derivative of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* cycle (1968, 1978 and 1985), who returns, as we shall shortly see, to pastiche himself and resume his *Living Dead* cycle in the 2000s.

A series of other mutant vampire and zombie films focuses on the dangers of science and technology careening out of control and producing catastrophic consequences. Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) opens in a research lab in which monkeys have been injected with a pure aggression virus to study vi-

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olence and its control. Animal rights activists inadvertently *liberate* the monkeys, who begin a murderous rampage, infecting the entire population with a rage virus that turns people into murderous zombie-like killers. Produced during 2000-2001 at a time when hoof and mouth disease in England was causing epidemics in the countryside, forcing the slaughter of hordes of cattle and the anthrax attacks after September 11, 2001 were creating anxiety, the film appeared during the year of the outbreak of the SARS epidemic in 2003, hence the pandemic shown in the film had all too real resonance in the real world.

The DVD commentary and a documentary *The Making of 28 Days Later* dramatize the dangers of global pandemics that have emerged as an anxiety of the present moment. Yet fear of an out of control military is another subtext of the film, as a small group of survivors of the aggression virus outbreak flees to a military camp in the north of England, responding to a broadcast message that survivors associated with the military are seeking a cure to the virus. The small group finds the military encampment, but the survivors include a young black woman (Naomie Harris) and a teenage girl (Megan Burns), and it is soon evident that the military running the camp seek to make the two females sex slaves in a scheme to repopulate the earth (and satisfy their sexual desires), thus positioning the audience against male predatory militarism.

A sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007), directed by Spanish filmmaker Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, articulates specific fears of the U.S. military as out of control. A continuation of the previous story, with new characters, the film envisages a U.S.-led NATO occupation of England to deal with the dangers of another outbreak of the aggression virus after the initial hosts appeared to have all died. Predictably the virus and monster rampage reappear and U.S.-led troops, some of whom were complaining about the lack of *action*, begin shooting the zombies, with some troops exulting in the kills. In the context of the U.S. occupation of Iraq, the *Code Red* order to exterminate survivors of the first virus wave along with the newly infected, and the protracted slaughter and eventual fire-bombing of a rehabilitation camp produce resonances with real-world horrors.

Both films have a survivalist and Darwinian subtext, but also express fears of societal breakdown and resultant unrestrained aggression. The hand-held jittering camera and quick editing in the action sequences of, especially, *28 Weeks Later*, creates a sense of existence careening out of control, of being thrown into an unbearable chaos, vividly evoking fears of catastrophe and social collapse. A refrain through both films express-

es the ultimate anxiety, *it's all fucked*, suggesting that everything is so fucked up there is not fuck all to do to improve things or provide any hope for the future.

Yet it is perhaps Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) that is the most complex and thought-provoking meditation on the breakdown of the contemporary political system in its allegory of a world careening into apocalyptic collapse and Orwellian fascism. In its science fiction premise, based on a novel by P.D. James, the story presents a world fallen into terror and hopelessness when global infertility (mysteriously) erupts after a flu pandemic in 2009. Set in 2027 London, the truly frightening scenario shows political tendencies of the present leading to chaos and collapse. Cutting from long shots to close-ups and medium takes, Cuarón's camera forces the audience to explore an environment that looks very much like present-day reality, only more drab, dangerous, and frightening. Opening television images present a montage of a world in collapse where "only Britain soldiers on":

NEWSREADER: DAY 1,000 OF THE SIEGE OF SEATTLE

Newsreader: The Muslim community demands an end to the Army's occupation of mosques.

Newsreader: The Homeland Security Bill is ratified. After eight years, British borders will remain closed. The deportation of illegal immigrants will continue. Good morning. Our lead story.

Since the economy and social order have disintegrated everywhere except England, streams of refugees flood into the country where they are welcomed with internment and concentration camps. A revolutionary group, the Fishes, fights for immigrant rights and the end of the police state and plans a violent uprising. All hope has been drained from a world without children and a future after the death of the world's youngest human, *Baby Diego*, throws the world in despair. A government bureaucrat Theo (Clive Owen) leaves a café that is bombed by terrorists and is kidnapped by them. His ex-wife Julian (Julianne Moore) is a member of the group and she helps persuade him to get exit visas for a refugee pregnant woman Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) to take her to the Human Project, where attempts are being made to regenerate human life. Observing the horrors of state repression, Theo becomes an active participant in the quest to smuggle Kee and her baby out of

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the country and this plot-line provides the occasion for a stunning montage of a police state, terrorism, refugee internment camps, and accelerating social disintegration, intensifying tendencies of the present moment and providing a cautionary warning tale that if things are not dramatically changed we are sliding into social apocalypse and the collapse of civilization.

While Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* calls attention to tendencies toward growing fascism and the collapse of democracy and civilization in the present age, it has a conservative subtext. The disintegration of civilization makes one yearn for the good old days and it celebrates childbirth as the key to humanity. The revolutionaries are shown to be brutal terrorists, who gratuitously shoot Theo's lovable friend Jasper (Michael Caine) and who plan a quixotic *Uprising* that appears to be leading to more destruction and the rebels' probable extinction. While the film valorizes political activism and charts Theo's transformation from a depressed cynic into a committed activist, hope is projected onto a nebulous Human Project and the birth of a lone child, who becomes an object of religious adoration. Throughout *Children of Men* there are media images of Islamic terrorism, and one long scene near the end in which Theo and Kee seek to escape and deliver the child to a boat that will take it to the Human Project, features a menacing demonstration of what appears to be an Islamic radical group, thus reproducing tendencies to fear Jihadist Islamists in the contemporary moment, replicating a dominant trope of rightwing and media discourse. Yet on many levels, the film provides prescient critical visions of the present era, evoking the horrors of militarism and a fascist police state. The images of social decay and faded and saturated colors in *Children of Men* provide a gloomy vision of where contemporary trends may be leading if action is not taken and change embraced.

Another allegory of apocalypse, Francis Lawrence's *I am Legend* (2007), is also highly politically ambiguous, as in its sci-fi scenario a vaccination seeking to cure cancer mutates into a virus that kills scores of humans and creates monstrous murderous killers, encompassing humans and animals. Based on Richard Matheson's 1954 novel with the same title, the story features a surviving scientist Robert Neville (Will Smith) immune from the virus staying in a New York deserted by humans, searching for a cure, and battling the vampirish/zombisque mutants in his forages out of his apartment for food. He eventually finds a cure for the virus, but must sacrifice his life to battle the mutants so that a young woman who found

her way to his abode can take the cure to a colony of survivors in Vermont and presumably eliminate the scourge. Since the film presents science as causing the problem and producing the cure, it is ambiguous in targeting the cause of the evil.

Another category of more socially critical horror films, however, sees monstrosity as a product of the existing society. Films like the 2006 and 2007 remakes of *The Hills Have Eyes* and *The Hills Have Eyes 2* presented genetic mutations resulting from nuclear testing as producing a monster family, as previous horror films featured nuclear fall-out creating monsters like *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Arnold, 1954), *Godzilla* (Honda, 1954, remade in 1998 and 2014), and a large number of low budget films including *Night of the Lepus* (Claxton, 1972), *Frogs* (McCowan, 1972), or *Day of the Animals* (Girdler, 1977). While Wes Craven's 1977 version of *The Hills Have Eyes* was valorized as providing radical critique of the bourgeois family<sup>9</sup>, the 2006 remake, produced by Craven and directed by Alexandre Aja, highlighted the theme of the mutant monsters emerging from genetic mutations caused by U.S. nuclear testing in the desert. An opening montage mixes images of nuclear bomb tests with a spectacle of radioactive sand blasts, explosions, dropping of Agent Orange in Vietnam, and quick flashes of the mutants in the earlier *Hills Have Eyes*, exposed to nuclear radiation.

The 2006 *Hills Have Eyes* highlights the theme of the dangers of nuclear radiation as a middle-class family discovers itself stranded in the desert, and learns that the area was the site of nuclear tests, and that the families who lived in the surrounding desert, now mutant cannibals who prey on tourists, were exposed to radiation and suffered genetic mutations. In one encounter with the monsters, a mutant tells the family that "You made us what we are, Boom! Booom! Boooooom!" While the middle-class family is initially portrayed as petty and bickering, under assault from the mutants they become savage killers themselves, deconstructing the line between civilization and barbarism, and showing that a society that produces extreme violence engenders reactive violence as a response. The extremely gory and ultraviolet spectacle of rape, cannibalism, and brutal murder thus puts on display behavior that a violent society engenders when those under assault fight for their survival.

A quickie sequel, *The Hills Have Eyes 2* (2007), written and produced by Jonathan and Wes Craven and directed by Martin Weisz, depicts National Guard troops undergoing training for deployment in Afghanistan in the desert, when they learn that scientists and a military team have sent distress

9. Critic Robin Wood (2003) and other associates at the journal *Movie* and later *Cine-Action* valorized the radical potential of the horror genre in the 1970s and 1980s (see also Murray and Heumann). Generally, for much of the post-1980s, the horror genre has not taken progressive directions and engaged in social critique, but as I attempt to show in this article, horror, fantasy and other popular film genres articulate fears of the present moment concerning the state and the military, technology, corporations and the economy, ecological and social crisis, and other phenomena, and can thus provide critical images and provide experiences that raise questions about the existing society.

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signals and have gone missing in the surrounding desert. The mutants then go to war with the young National Guard unit, with the narrative coding the mutants as terrorists, as they live underground in caves and emerge to kill the young troops in grisly fashion. The extreme gore, torture scenes, and deadly violence of the film evoke the horrors of Terror War in Afghanistan and Iraq, creating a troubling view of apocalyptic horror returning from these wars to the U.S. itself.

Hence, while conservative social apocalypse films show evil coming from sources external to the existing system, or more supernatural sources, a socially critical tradition, exhibited in some of the 2000s social apocalypse films under discussion here, shows evil and monstrosity emerging from out of control aspects of the existing society. Master horror film impresario George Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009) provide updated constructions of his zombies-returning-to-life series that provide critical allegories of the present moment. If the zombies in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) could be read as the silent majorities threatening a young counter-culture in the 1960s, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) could be read as an allegory of how consumerism makes zombies out of people, then *Day of the Dead* (1985) could be seen as a satire on the greed and violence of the Reagan era, and *Land of the Dead* can stand as an allegory of the deterioration of life in the Bush-Cheney era.

In *Land of the Dead*, after years of zombie attacks on one of the few urban sites of safety, society is divided in Romero's critical vision between those living in a high-rise luxury apartment, a fitting figure for gated communities, while the lower classes live in squalor in deteriorating urban conditions, and a small cadre of police try to protect them from the zombies and to scavenge supplies from the countryside. The class division represents the growing discrepancy between rich and poor during the Bush-Cheney years, which by 2011 was defined by the Occupy movement as a chasm in the U.S. between the 1% and the 99% (see Kellner, 2012).

The zombies in *Land of the Dead* initially appear as working class types who have had the life sucked out of them and are distracted by firework displays that keep them entertained. In Romero's vision, however, the zombies are becoming more intelligent, learning to communicate, use weapons, and organize their forces to assault the city of the living. The high-rise city is ruled by Kaufman (Dennis Hopper), an impervious dictator who is resonant of Donald Trump and Donald Rums-

feld (in a DVD video accompanying the film, Hopper said he intended to play the character like Rumsfeld). In a scene where a rogue policeman (played over-the-top by John Leguizamo) threatens to use stolen weapons against the compound, Kaufman snaps “We don’t negotiate with terrorists”, an obvious jab at the Bush-Cheney administration, which popularized such discourse.

Led by an African American zombie called Big Daddy (Eugene Clark), who has learned to use weapons, the zombies attack the gated high-rise, an image of revolutionary insurrection against the ruling elites. A fireworks display fails to distract the rampaging zombies, a symbol of growing revolutionary class consciousness, and the zombies continue to systematically assault the ruling class refuge in Romero’s fantasy of class revenge.

Romero’s *Diary of the Dead* goes back to the beginnings of his *Dead* mythology to show the emergence of the Living Dead zombies. In the film’s narrative conceit, a student filmmaking crew from the University of Pittsburgh is filming a horror film in the woods when media reports of a strange eruption of people returning from the dead to feast on the living occur. When the students observe the phenomenon themselves, a young filmmaker, Jason, resolves to capture the horrors on video, to produce a document of the event in which *everything changed*. The cineastes get media footage from Internet video and discern that the government is lying, covering up the enormity of the horror, and the young crew resolves to shoot footage of what is really happening and upload it on the video. This sequence points to an era of new media and sources of news and information, in which *viral video* can be shot across the world and used to critique existing media and society.

Of course, the theme of a lying media evokes U.S. corporate media in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war and during large stretches of the Bush-Cheney administration. *Diary of the Dead* is full of such topical commentary, as when a radio talk show speaker announces that “the real immigration problem” is now about people crossing the line between life and death, a dig at conservative commentators who hysterize immigration problems. In a larger sense, in the current environment, the very notion of Dead returning to life points to the cycle of death and vengeance, endemic for centuries in the Middle East and other parts of the world that the U.S. has stirred up with the Pandora’s Box of its Afghanistan and Iraq intervention and drone wars during the Obama era. Compared to real-life horrors, Romero’s zombie films seem relatively tame and subdued by comparison.

**CONCLUSION**

As this study indicates, the number of post-apocalyptic films in the Bush-Cheney years dramatically proliferated, as conditions of life worsened for many and crises intensified. Yet the cycle of post-apocalypse films continued during the Obama years including *9* (Acker, 2009), *The Road* (Hillcoat, 2009), *2012* (Emmerich, 2009), *Knowing* (Proyas, 2009), *Zombieland* (Fleischer, 2009), *The Book of Eli* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2010), *Oblivion* (Kosinski, 2013), *Pacific Rim* (del Toro, 2013), *Elysium* (Blomkamp, 2013), *Godzilla* (Edwards, 2014), and *World War Z* (Forster, 2013), among many others.

Questions arise as to why at this point in history Hollywood is churning out so many social and eco-apocalypse films, in several genres and in the form of both marginal horror and sci-fi films and big-budget blockbusters. Obviously, post-9/11, there was an imagination of disaster as images of terror bombings and violent destruction were nightly appearances on television news and other media. Further, as the ongoing Terror War, rooted in two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and continuing in violent conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere, provided nightly images of horror, punctuated by frequent incidents of terrorism all over the world, audiences could feel that the familiar world around them was collapsing. Perhaps fears of social apocalypse and collapse were intensified by the 2008 global financial and mortgage crisis, in which millions lost, and continue to lose, homes and jobs. With the Gulf deep-water BP oil blowout in the summer of 2010, dread concerning eco-catastrophe is all too real, and different religious sects were seeing all these disasters as signifying the End of Days.

In fact, surveys and scholarly analysis have indicated growing belief in religious versions of apocalypse (Stroup and Shuck 2007), which have perhaps contributed to Hollywood creating a seemingly proliferating cycle of apocalypse films in the 2000s. I have argued that a cycle of contemporary Hollywood social apocalypse films discussed in this article offer allegories of social crisis and catastrophe, dystopias that provide cautionary warnings that trends of the present age can spiral out of control and produce catastrophic disaster on a grand scale. While on one hand, allegories of social apocalypse may reproduce the politics of fear exploited by rightwing politicians, they also provide warnings that an era of conservative politics may produce catastrophe, providing representations of social crisis and catastrophe suggesting subliminally that the Bush-Cheney era of war and militarism, social Darwinism, growing inequality, and the politics of fear may pro-

duce the sort of societal collapse evident in *Land of the Dead*, *28 Days Later*, *Children of Men*, and other films discussed in this article. These films can also be read as allegories of the disintegration of the social infrastructure and the emergence of a Darwinian nightmare under a conservative regime where the struggle for mere survival occurs in a Hobbesian world where life is nasty, brutish, and short. In this register, the zombies and monsters in the cycle of horror films of the era represent not only conservative nightmares, but visions of where the ultra-right Bush-Cheney regime took the U.S. and put on display the nightmares it has produced and from which we have not yet awakened, as evidenced by the continuation of apocalypse films in the Obama era. ■

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