

### Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Films

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Elizabeth A. Ford and Deborah C. Mitchell. *Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Films*. McFarland, 2018. Paperback. 237 pp. \$49.95. ISBN 9781476672731.

INTRODUCING *Apocalyptic Visions in 21st Century Film*, Elizabeth Ford and Deborah Mitchell contextualize their study by hypothesizing that the "American bedrock shifted" (2) after September 11, 2001 and that human beings process reality, fear and angst through art. The central premise is that 9/11 introduced new apocalyptic themes into filmmaking. This cultural contextualization offers potential as a unifying theme within the volume, but, disappointingly, its application is uneven across the chapters that follow.

The first chapter, "Envisioning the Apocalypse," states it will address some of the texts that do not fit in the remainder of the volume. It describes apocalyptic film as grounded in a climate change-induced fear of tsunamis, zombie-infected cities, and the contrast between the loveliness of ordinary life and the desolation of post-apocalyptic landscapes. It reads as an attempt to use filmic features, like special effects, setting, and light and color, to lay the book's groundwork, though it never explicitly says so.

Another organizing chapter, "Hollywood's Doomsday-Prepper Backpacks" suggests that apocalyptic film produces character types such as the Apocalyptic Denier, the Unselfish Pragmatist, the Romantic Moralizer, the Lotus Eater, and the Fetishist, by drawing from Neville Shute's 1953 *On the Beach* and its 1959 film adaptation. The reader expects these to serve as models for 21st century apocalyptic film, but is instead offered additional types, which leaves one wondering the purpose of establishing the *On the Beach* reference.

The bulk of the book's remaining chapters chronicle the post 9/11 effect on subgenres of apocalyptic narrative. Young adult film is rife with apocalyptic imagery, and the analysis of *WALL-E*'s (2008) social commentary and warning is insightful as it focuses on narrative, in the chapter "Coming of Age in Post-Apocalyptic Worlds." The post-apocalyptic landscape of *WALL-E* contrasts with the optimism and joy

that *WALL-E* extracts from his work and encounter with Eve, producing a film that suggests it's not too late to reconnect with each other and prevent apocalypse by environmental disaster.

"Speaking to *Them*, Speaking to Us" traces the changing social context for two iconic apocalyptic films: *War of the Worlds* (2003) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008). The authors argue that the isolationist, survivalist approach of Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise) in Spielberg's *War of the Worlds* is an analog for the fearful response post 9/11 to arm oneself and only worry about oneself and one's family. This contrasts with the final chapter of the volume, "The New Superhero Dynamic," which suggests that the upsurge of superhero movies in the last two decades reflects a turn to community and cooperation as a means of saving us from irresponsible leadership, fragmented communities, and social problems like poverty, racism, and crime in a post-911 landscape. It's difficult to reconcile these two approaches to apocalypse, and the fantastical nature of the superhero genre would suggest it is idealistic while the isolationist approach is the more realistically viable one.

The answer to why "Why *Super 8* Can't be *E.T.*" lies firmly in the thesis of the book: that 9/11 changed the collective American imagination of apocalypse and our attitudes towards aliens (and alien encounters). A friendly and harmless E.T. is replaced in *Super 8* (2011) by an alien treated by the military like a high-value terrorist. The introduction of "terrorist" into the American lexicon after 9/11 transforms the alien from curious lost traveller to threat. This chapter does lead nicely into the next, "The Difficulty of Framing a Real Apocalypse," though the exploration of film that directly references 9/11 oddly pairs Stephen Daldry's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2011) with Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011), using trauma to link the fatherless children at the center of each narrative. The parallels between the texts are numerous (as critics have already noted), though the traumatic connection is about parental loss rather than experience of apocalypse per se and thus is limited in its contribution.

The brief discussion of *Warm Bodies* (2013) at the end of "The Apocalyptic Landscape of Love" explores the hope inherent in R's gradually reawakening heart, suggesting that a zombie apocalypse does not need to be the end. The hopeful ending of the other texts analyzed in the chapter, the *Twilight* films and *Beautiful Creatures* (2013), however, is a result of individual triumph over evil, which creates an apocalypse of two, which is more limited than the usual conception of apocalypse as an event that destroys whole civilizations.

This liberal reimagination of apocalypse continues in the next chapter. While the authors admit that the films discussed in "Emmerich's Apocalyptic Visions of Shakespeare" may not be obviously apocalyptic, they explain that Emmerich's *Anonymous* (2011), which suggests that Shakespeare didn't write the plays and poems credited to him, reflects the dystopian ethos of the 21st century, an age of questioning everything. They draw parallels between the contested identity of Shakespeare as presented in *Anonymous* and the birther movement in the U.S. that sought to discredit Barack Obama's presidency by contesting his nationality, though how either fictional or real contested identity is apocalyptic is not made clear.

There are some excellent insights into 21st century American films in this volume that make it worth reading. However, the connection of these texts to each other and to apocalypse is often tenuous. The challenge with linking 9/11 and apocalypse is that together they inscribe only a small slice of an overlapping Venn diagram whose totality is much larger. Additionally, the repeated references to the home state of the authors (Ohio) and their country provide local examples for a global thesis about 21<sup>st</sup> century apocalypse. The nature of this relationship between the local and the global is never clear, and one gets the sense that many of the chapters may have stood better on their own than forced into a book with a theme of apocalyptic film.