You Broke It, You Bought It

by Nathan Schneider

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We inhabit only one world, but there are any number of possibilities for how it will end -- plenty enough so that people like Roland Emmerich, director of the new movie 2012, can make a whole career out of imagining one apocalypse after another on the big screen, ad infinitum. For one looking for a doomsday to believe in, the options can seem dizzying.

Take your pick. Religion provides the classics: Judgment Day, Rapture, and Armageddon -- thieves that come in the night, the New Testament warns, and fire rolling down from heaven. Only a little less far-fetched are the science fiction favorites, a robot takeover and an alien invasion. These usually come in tandem with geopolitical ones like nuclear immolation and economic collapse. Mother Nature has a mighty arsenal to use against her children, too, from solar flares, to meteors, to cataclysmic volcanos, not to mention swine flu and other looming epidemics. If Nature doesn’t destroy us first by her own means, we’ll almost certainly lend a hand with anthropogenic climate change. Some scenarios are more decisive than others; rather than simply bringing an end, the apocalypse can become a new beginning in disguise. Many New Agers, for instance, anticipate a new era of “spiritual evolution,” an end not of the world but of banal worldliness.

Though the word “apocalypse” now is usually taken to mean a world-ending calamity, the original Greek word strictly translates as “revelation.” This meaning is as relevant today as when the New Testament’s last book was promulgated with the word as its title. The havoc wrought matters less than what it reveals. Because there’s only our one world, predicting its end is the ultimate jackpot in the contest for Truth. Whoever is right about how the world ends is probably right about other important things as well. Foretelling the apocalypse is an audacious attempt to assert the universality of a particular tradition and its beliefs.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists, operating as maligned and proselytizing minorities, made a habit of predicting Christ’s return, the harbinger of the world’s end: in 1850, 1914, 1975, 1994, and many more years in between. Before that, the year 1000 was a popular choice in medieval Europe. Countless religious movements, from the time of the apostle Paul to Heaven’s Gate, have seen the end as near and bet their lives that they were right. It is a particularly alluring gambit if one's teachings are not otherwise being listened to, for the end of the world isn't easy to ignore. Religions of the majority usually don't need to predict it with such exactitude -- they already have people's attention.

Modern times have given us secular apocalypses as well. Each serves as both prophecy and revelation -- promising, by predicting, to explain the real nature of reality. The Y2K scare, which came and went with little more incident than a handful of broken slot machines, nevertheless instilled in us the frightful capriciousness of our dependence on technology. And longtime environmentalists aren't shy to admit that the imminent threat of catastrophic climate change has popularized their movement in ways endangered owls and oil spills never could. Enclosed in each era's apocalypses are its most urgent messages to itself.
There is much more to 2012 than an excruciating movie; for years now, thinkers from all around the fringes of culture have been insisting on the significance of that year. What, then, is the 2012 craze poised to reveal?

The ancient Mayan sources don't specify what will happen at the end of the "long count" calendar in 2012, so modern imaginations go wild: Some theorists say it will mark the return of our alien-god creators, while pseudo-cosmologists anticipate a "consciousness"-inducing "galactic alignment." Hollywood, however, decided to go with a tried-and-true computer-generated apocalypse.

Modern Mayans are not terribly concerned about the date, notwithstanding their mass suicide depicted in Emmerich's movie. The idea that the cycle of their ancestors' calendar will end or transform the world comes not from them, but from excitable outsiders. The people who most eagerly assert it are those -- allied with the New Age movement or other alternative spiritualities -- who have rejected their own ancestors' Christianity or Judaism and turned to new interpretations of traditions from other parts of the world. In the process, they transpose the Abrahamic faiths' familiar end-times promises into foreign contexts. 2012 theories represent a creative fusion of Mesoamerican timekeeping and Biblical storyboards.

At least since the 19th-century Anglo-American seances that conjured Native American spirits and African slaves, such alternative spiritual communities have sought to assuage the guilt of past atrocities. Similarly, 2012 strikes back against the legacy of European colonialism in Central America. If the year 2012 proves decisive, it will show once and for all that the Conquistadors were not the superiors they claimed to be over the conquered.

Roland Emmerich's movie, despite offering every appearance of vacuous mayhem, can't help but encode messages of its own into doomsday. One might compare it, for instance, to Emmerich's 1996 Independence Day, in which the near-extinction of the human race begins and ends with the United States. In a magnificent speech at its climax, the American president played by Bill Pullman reflects the country's confidence in the mid-1990s as sole superpower. "Perhaps it is fate that today is the 4th of July," he muses to those about to fight in the final battle against invading aliens. "And should we win the day, the 4th of July will no longer be known as an American holiday," but as that of the whole world. It is a bald assertion that, on Judgment Day, the American Way will point the path for all.

The movie 2012, too, features an American president (plot spoiler!), though he perishes halfway through. Once again, we follow a group of Americans as they struggle to survive global cataclysm. But salvation ultimately comes -- true to our mid-recession mood -- from none other than China. The last scenes suggest that humanity's future lies not in the New World, but in the oldest of all: Africa. (Both the president and his lead scientist, not incidentally, are African American.) If in no other way, the movie is true to the larger 2012 phenomenon in its dim prognosis for Caucasian hegemony.

Predicting the world's end has been a popular guessing game for as long as history can remember, yet the world marches on. People have always thought that their age was a pretty good candidate for the last. The apocalyptic habit continues today, and for ostensibly good reasons. Look around: hurricanes, rogue states with nukes, best-selling Rapture novels, and the specter of climate change.

Which -- and who -- among them is going to win?

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