

Introduction

For reasons long forgotten two mighty warrior tribes went to war and touched off a blaze which engulfed them all. Without fuel they were nothing. They'd built a house of straw. The thundering machines sputtered and stopped. Their leaders talked and talked and talked, but nothing could stem the avalanche. Their world crumbled. Cities exploded—a whirlwind of looting, a firestorm of fear.

—*The Road Warrior*



AS FAR REMOVED AS WE are from the beginning of apocalyptic myths, we still cling to these same myths, as evidenced in innumerable films and books containing apocalyptic themes. As Susan Sontag once noted in “The Imagination of Disaster,” many sci-fi films seem preoccupied with depicting mass destruction, becoming apocalyptic or postapocalyptic in nature. In fact, the majority of the general public still believes in these myths, as seen in a survey of religious beliefs done in 1996, in which 42 percent of the American respondents answered in the affirmative when asked if “the world will end in a battle in Armageddon between Jesus and the Antichrist” (Boyer 315). Perhaps a little less surprising is the large number of Southern Baptist Convention ministers that subscribe to these end-time beliefs, at 63 percent (Boyer 315). With millions upon millions of people still believing, these myths have an incredible staying power. But why? Many theorists have speculated

about what makes these myths endure, even though there's hardly any consensus—just as there are a multitude of ways to define “apocalypse.”

Apocalyptic texts, despite religious themes that followers often cling to, have deep political meaning, revealing certain aspects of a respective society's social groups and their relation to one another. It is not just Christian myths that function this way, but virtually all end-time myths in all cultures throughout history.¹ However, the texts need to be viewed in their historical context in order to produce an exegesis that identifies the political forces at work and provides an explanation for their purpose in a given society. Viewed historically, apocalyptic texts are often used by oppressed groups as a response to their own oppression, in an attempt to comfort the adherents and possibly even restructure a hierarchy supporting the subjugation of certain groups. Apocalyptic myths today, however, are used by the dominant culture, as a way of reestablishing dominance in an era of increasing minority rights.

What Is the Apocalypse?

The term *eschatology* is often used to describe apocalypticism, though the two terms are actually distinct. Eschatology is defined by Bernard McGinn as “any form of belief about the nature of history that interprets historical process in the light of final events.” Apocalyptic eschatology refers to a specific pattern in end-time beliefs, a pattern that usually follows a “crisis-judgment-reward” pattern that is revealed in a sacred book like the Bible (McGinn 13). Thus, the apocalypse refers to a pattern and not simply the mass destruction of society, which is but one part of the overarching template. Of the “crisis-judgment-reward” facets of apocalypse, the “crisis” is often the main focus in popular culture, evidenced in both secular and religious works of fiction.

After the “crisis,” judgment comes and brings even more death, as the evil forces are finally extirpated. In most Christian myths, after a large portion of humanity has been eradicated, the Messiah returns to Earth. In addition, most of these myths reserve salvation for only a select few, and thus “planetary cataclysm only ever has a positive net value from the point of view of the small minority who are saved. And

1. Some Hindu texts like the *Bhagavata Purana*, for example, describe the disintegration of the caste system in the Age of Kali as a harbinger of the end times.

salvation, moreover, always comes at a price, that price often involving terror and destruction” (McGinn 10). In many secular versions of the apocalypse, “crisis” and “judgment” are conflated without any explicit spiritual judgment raining down from God and Christ. Visited upon the world are a variety of afflictions and disasters, from nuclear fallout to virulent diseases that affect most of the populace. After the “terror and destruction” have subsided, a reward is experienced by the handful of people that emerge unscathed, often coming in the form of a revelation. In religious depictions of the end times, Christ seems to reward the faithful with an effulgent new kingdom. In the more secular renderings, which are the focus of this book, the reward comes in the form of a changed understanding about the surrounding world.

A changed perspective is, of course, understood to be part of the “revelation,” which is an integral part of any apocalyptic myth. James Berger explains that

apocalypse thus, finally, has an interpretive, explanatory function, which is, of course, its etymological sense: as revelation, unveiling, uncovering. The apocalyptic event, in order to be properly apocalyptic, must in its destructive moment clarify and illuminate the true nature of what has been brought to an end. (Berger 5)

Postapocalyptic media often has a revelation that functions in the sense that Berger outlines. For instance, the moment in *Planet of the Apes* (1968) when the remnants of the Statue of Liberty come into view is a succinct encapsulation of a revelation that occurs in a “destructive moment”—so called because it is unclear until that very moment that the monuments of mankind’s reign over the Earth had been largely wiped out. The Statue of Liberty, as an object, becomes an emblem for the whole of the dominant culture and the revelation is, beyond the obvious, that society was perhaps never quite as evolved as we thought.

Though films like *Planet of the Apes* are Anglocentric, the myths embodied in the films parallel those found across continents and time periods. There is a great similarity in these myths, including a belief in history as a “divinely predetermined totality.” Furthermore, the present day is viewed in a negative light, while hope is held for a coming judgment to punish the wicked and reward the faithful. The reward can be a literal, physical reward, or “other-worldly, individual or collective, temporary or definitive, or a combination of some or all of these elements” (McGinn

10). As McGinn points out, the “reward” can take many forms, comprising a revelation about the world or an actual concrete remuneration.

The reward for believers in Christian myths is sometimes a reshaping of society to allow disenfranchised classes a voice and a way to shape the hierarchies that define human relations. In the world of the myths themselves, the faithful are rewarded with a world without the pain that has characterized their lives. The Bible explicitly promotes the idea that the poor and destitute are to be lifted up, while the rich and powerful are brought down. Much has been written about the New Testament’s attitudes toward the rich and powerful. Luke 18:25 notes that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Furthermore, Christ is quoted as saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. . . . Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. . . . Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (Luke 6:20–21). The Gospel of James uses even stronger language, warning:

You rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. (James 5:1–6)

While these texts are not explicitly apocalyptic, they *do* couch these scenarios in apocalyptic terms, warning of an end-time scenario where power and wealth evaporate, and God finally creates a dramatic reversal for the “laborers,” upon whose backs the victories of the dominant culture have been built. This suggests a complete alteration of the hegemonic system, allowing power to be reappropriated by those who have been previously beholden to the desires of a dominant culture often controlled by a select few. Beyond the actual text, the people actually reading these myths may be given hope that their lack of power will not be eternal—that those at the bottom will soon rise as God’s chosen people. Fuller, quoting David Hellholm, notes that “apocalyptic thought is ‘intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of

divine authority.’” This “divine authority” edifies the faithful, who are asked to view history in a larger, almost transcendental context, where ultimately the poor and meek inherit the Earth. In this “mythic context,” “a victorious outcome is assured” (Fuller 21).

The Apocalyptic Genre

Apocalyptic media, including the films and books discussed in this book, use myths that were part of the apocalyptic genre from its inception. As a genre, apocalyptic writings include mostly early Jewish and Christian texts, the earliest being the Astronomical Book, part of the Book of Enoch, dated to the late third or early second century BCE. Among contemporary scholars, the list of apocalyptic works usually includes the Christian Book of Revelation, and several Jewish works: Daniel, 1 Enoch, 4 Ezra, and 2 Baruch (J. Collins 3). These texts are generally agreed upon as demonstrating the characteristics of the genre, though other works are sometimes included (parts of the Synoptic Gospels, for instance). In keeping with the original Greek meaning of the word, this type of literature involves a prophet’s encounter with an otherworldly intermediary that reveals “a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (A. Collins 62). Apocalyptic texts have certain generally consistent characteristics. Specifically, they contain a Last Judgment and the ultimate destruction of the world, in addition to astrophysical marvels, a heavenly temple, and the punishment of the wicked as the faithful are rewarded. The Book of Daniel was originally assumed to be the oldest example of apocalyptic literature, but several fragments of the Dead Sea Scrolls were published in the 1970s, containing original Aramaic manuscripts of 1 Enoch. Himmelfarb notes that “the manuscripts from the Scrolls make it clear that two of the apocalypses included in 1 Enoch, the Astronomical Book (1 Enoch 72–82) and the Book of the Watchers (1 Enoch 1–36), pre-date Daniel” (2).

These Jewish and Christian apocalypses can be broken down into categories based on the nature of the revelation. There were those texts that involve a revelatory vision and those that take the prophet on a mystical journey (A. Collins 62). Within the “revelatory vision” category, Jacob’s Ladder contains a review of history, while Revelation, the Apocalypse of St. John the Theologian, the Apocalypse of Peter, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Testament of the Lord contain visions

of cosmic destruction. Of these, only Revelation and the Apocalypse of St. John the Theologian illustrate any kind of cosmic renewal after the destruction of the world. Within the category of apocalyptic texts that contain an “otherworldly journey,” some include images of cosmic destruction, including the Ascension of Isaiah, the Apocalypse of Esdras, and the Apocalypse or Vision of the Virgin Mary. Only one mystical journey shows both the destruction of the world and its renewal: the Apocalypse of Paul (J. Collins 22–23).

Beyond Christian and Jewish texts,² there are Greek and Latin texts that display some characteristics of the genre, from the first three centuries of the Roman Empire (founded in 27 BCE). These texts were clearly not as old as 1 Enoch, but they were contemporary to several Christian apocalyptic works and “like their Jewish and Christian counterparts, these texts are narratives of alleged revelatory experiences which disclose a transcendent world and proclaim eschatological doctrine” (Attridge 159). The *Hermetica* were Egyptian-Greek texts written in the second and third centuries CE. Of these, several display characteristics of the genre, including the *Poimandres*, which details the vision of an unnamed prophet who is guided in his desire to understand the world by *Poimandres*, his mystic guide. The prophet is shown “the process of creation . . . accompanied by an explanation of the vision by *Poimandres*.” After a discussion of “creation and [the] nature of man,” there is an “eschatological section which expresses the ultimate aim of Hermetic gnosis as the divinization of the essential element in the human soul.” The text concludes with an exhortation for mankind to awaken from metaphorical dormancy (Attridge 161). In addition to Egyptian-Greek works like *Poimandres*, there are Persian texts that display characteristics of the Christian and Jewish apocalyptic works, but it has been very difficult to date these. These scriptures were transcribed oral accounts written somewhere between 250 BCE and 250 CE, yet were not compiled until 221–642

2. The Sibylline Oracles also had a massive influence on Christian apocalyptic imagery. The Sibylline Oracles, written in Greek hexameters, comprise fourteen books, the fourth of which contains many apocalyptic themes and images. Preserved at Rome, the Sibyllines were supposedly the inspired words of prophetesses, originating in Asia Minor’s Greek colonies between the second and sixth century CE (McGinn 19). Norman Cohn further notes that “indeed save for the Bible and the works of the Fathers they were probably the most influential writings known to medieval Europe. They often dictated the pronouncements of dominant figures in the Church” (Cohn 33).

CE during the Sasanian Empire. Some of the writings supposedly came from Zarathustra himself, while others can't be accurately dated (J. Collins 207). The most important collection of these Persian religious texts is the Avesta, which does not itself directly discuss the end of the world. Apocalyptic imagery only explicitly appears in the Zand, an exegetical commentary on the Avesta. Zands were commentaries, paraphrases, and glosses that sometimes accompanied the actual texts in the Avesta. The Zand, so called because it is the only one to survive intact, illustrates elements of the apocalyptic genre. Zarathustra is granted a vision by Ahura Mazda (the supreme God of the Persians), and sees a tree with four branches, each representing four kingdoms, the fourth being the Greeks. The fourth kingdom, according to the vision, will come "when thy tenth century will be at an end." Zarathustra asks about the signs of the end in the tenth century BCE and is told by Ahura Mazda to expect:

A long series of upheavals and disturbances, both political and cosmic. Chapters 7–9 prophesy what will happen "when the Zarathustian millenium will end and Aûsîtar's will begin" (8^8). Then "near the end of the millenium PêsyÔtan son of Vistâsp will appear" as a savior figure who will destroy the divs. The millennium of Aûsîtarmâh follows, when men will not even die because they "will be so versed in medicine" (9:12). Then at the end of this millennium "Sôsîyôs will make the creatures pure again and resurrection and the final most material existence will occur" (9:23). (J. Collins 209)

The influence of this text on the images in Revelation is apparent, illustrating the profound influence of Zoroastrianism on religions in that part of the world.

Contemporary Apocalypticism

Contemporary American apocalyptic myths can be broken into two categories: those that show the apocalyptic event and those that begin postapocalypse and do not flash back to significant portrayals of the event. The majority of apocalyptic films and books do not show the apocalyptic event, and if they do, it's shown merely in passing. *The Road Warrior*, for example, mentions a nuclear war in the first few moments of the film, but this is merely a few seconds in a ninety-five-minute film. Films that take

place in a world *after* the apocalypse include *Children of Men* (2006), *The Book of Eli* (2010), all of the *Mad Max* films, *The Road* (2009), *Waterworld* (1995), *WALL-E* (2008), *The Quiet Earth* (1985), *Stalker* (1979), *Escape from New York* (1981), *The Planet of the Apes* (1968), and *Oblivion* (2013). In *Children of Men*, the end of the world was precipitated by an infertility crisis that seemed to culminate in a calamitous war between countries, from which only England survived relatively unscathed. Others of these films make no mention of the apocalyptic event at all, like *The Book of Eli*.

Films that actually show the apocalyptic event include *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *12 Monkeys* (1995), *Melancholia* (2011), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009). These films have plots that mainly revolve around the events leading up to the annihilation of the world, and attempts to thwart this destruction. Parts of the apocalyptic event(s) are shown in all of these films, but the only one to truly end with complete obliteration is *Melancholia*; the final image of the film depicts a planet crashing into the Earth. No one is saved, and the screen goes black after the Earth is shattered into pieces. All of the other postapocalyptic films mentioned show parts of the world that have managed to survive catastrophe.

Books that take place in a world *after* the apocalypse include *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Riddley Walker*, *I Am Legend*, *1984*, *The Postman*, *Brave New World*, *The Chrysalids*, and *Fahrenheit 451*. The destructive events vary from virulent epidemics to nuclear war, and in all cases there is some push or a desire to revert back to the world before the apocalypse. The protagonist in *The Postman*, for instance, is quite literally a symbol of the fallen world. What he symbolizes brings hope to the people he encounters, with the promise of civilization embodied in his uniform and in the notion of an organized communication system via the USPS. Not all of these books present the preapocalyptic world as desirable, however. Some of these touch on our longing for this world, while also highlighting its capacity for destruction and oppression of minorities. *Riddley Walker*, for instance, shows a primitive postapocalyptic world on the brink of discovering gunpowder, while illuminating the cataclysmic potential of this discovery. *Riddley Walker*, the main character, realizes this and tries to thwart the attempts at creating a substance that will likely be the foundation for yet another apocalyptic event.

Books that actually show the apocalyptic event or deal with the events leading up to it include *Oryx and Crake*, *On the Beach*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Lucifer's Hammer*, *Alas, Babylon*, and *The Stand*. Of these, only *On the Beach* never actually shows the world after

the worldwide catastrophe: in this case a radiation cloud that envelops the whole planet—the aftermath of nuclear war. *On the Beach* romanticizes the world before the apocalypse, focusing on mundane day-to-day relationships with others. The author seems to be using the threat of apocalypse to call attention to things we perhaps take for granted. The nuclear family and the institution of marriage are important in the novel; it's clearly meant to be tragic that these things will inevitably be lost. *Oryx and Crake* and *A Canticle for Leibowitz* are more critical of society's institutions, implying that the flaws in human society are the problem, not the answer to the apocalyptic tragedy.

None of these films and books show the better, more perfect world described in the Bible. Revelation describes a beautiful, amazing world during the thousand-year reign of Christ, before Satan is thrown into the Lake of Fire and devout followers of Christ are brought to heaven. In the majority of contemporary apocalyptic media, the world after the cataclysm is worse—an empty wasteland. It's a place filled with possibility and hope in most cases, but it's hardly the place of splendor and incandescence that Revelation outlines in detail. The focus in contemporary media is either on stopping the apocalypse or, in the case of those narratives that begin after the apocalypse, on bringing back the civilizations and institutions of the old world. In this way, modern apocalyptic media focuses on moving to the world of the past, instead of the perfect future world in the Bible. In addition, modern myths have no explicit revelation, wherein the protagonist learns something pivotal about human history or man's relation to the cosmos. Instead, we see the idealization of human civilization before the apocalypse, the capitalist world of white male hegemony that must be reestablished to bring the world back from the brink. God can't save us, but the education, government, and marriage institutions of the preapocalyptic world can.

History and Origins of the Christian Myths

The main apocalyptic texts in the Bible are found in Daniel and, of course, Revelation. Most scholars believe that both books were heavily influenced by events happening at the time in which they were written. Daniel, for instance, was influenced by the tyrannical reign of Antiochus IV, whose policies prohibited a number of Jewish practices. At the time of its inception, in the second century BCE, the Jews had been involved in an extended conflict with the king of Syria, Antiochus IV. The trouble

began when, in order to fund a war with Egypt, Antiochus IV had plundered the temple in Jerusalem, and gave one of his own appointed priests authority over the temple. This incited a number of riots among the Jews, though Antiochus IV's punishment for their insubordination went well beyond just plundering their temple. Issuing a number of edicts, he launched an assault on many Jewish practices, forbidding worship on the Sabbath and circumcision. In addition, the sacrifice of lambs, normally done on their own Jewish shrines, was to be replaced with the sacrifice of pigs on the non-Jewish shrines built throughout Judea. Within the context of all these troubling events, the author of Daniel is believed to have written this highly influential apocalyptic text, inspiring followers to join in a literal and spiritual battle with the Antichrist. At the time, Antiochus IV filled the role of Antichrist and inspired a powerful opposition among the Jewish community, though the text would later become of great importance to Christians, even to this day (Fuller 22). Scholars believe now that he is the "ten headed beast" in Daniel, though since his reign, many others have been substituted for Antiochus IV. Indeed, for many centuries, the Papacy was thought to be linked to the "ten headed beast," as the Pope himself occupied the role of "Antichrist." In the twentieth century, many others have claimed the dubious distinction of being the Antichrist, including Henry Kissinger, Communists, and workers' unions. In essence, the goal is to create "religious commitment and strident opposition" to perceived threats to the status quo.

The other great Christian apocalypse—dated toward the end of the first century CE—is Revelation, written by someone named "John," about whom is known very little, only that he is not the same author of the "Gospel of John" or the "Epistles of John." Revelation is believed to reference Nero, whose Antichristian policies marked him as a major enemy to Christians everywhere. Nero placed the blame for the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE on Christians to deflect blame from himself, as many came to believe that he had started the conflagration. Roman historian Tacitus noted that to absolve himself from blame, "Nero falsely blamed the people, detested for their abominable crimes, who were called Christians by the populace and inflicted exquisite tortures on them" (Green 50). In the aftermath of Nero's scapegoating of Christians, they were crucified, while "the name of Christian was vilified, associated with secret abominations, and non-Christian Jews were more likely than ever to distance themselves from a hated and alien group" (Green 52). It's no wonder that John of Patmos cast him as a beast in Revelation then, as Nero made quite a spectacle of persecuting Christians at the time. The

beast in Revelation, inspired by Nero and later used to represent other enemies of Christianity, is often conflated with the beast in Daniel to create the figure of the Antichrist.

Since the writing of these books, many events transpired to further alter the myths and the fervor with which they are followed; consequently, there have been varying degrees of interest in the Christian apocalypse over the years. The Crusades increased apocalyptic speculation, as did certain religious figures, such as Joachim of Fiore. The Christian world became mired in apocalyptic interest after the Muslim occupation of Jerusalem and when Christian pilgrims began to be oppressed and mistreated in the eleventh century. Jerusalem, previously controlled by the Egyptian Fatimids, passed into the hands of the Seljuk Turks—a genuine and nefarious threat to Byzantium. This only increased the Christian fascination with the end of the world. This, of course, all became most salient during the first Crusade, from 1095 to 1099. The purpose of the Crusade, as decreed by Pope Urban II, was to reclaim the Holy Land. The rhetoric associated with the Crusades was rife with apocalyptic imagery “interpreting the protection, or recovery, of Jerusalem from the Muslims as essential to the fulfillment of the Bible’s end-time prophecies.” Joachim of Fiore, a Calabrian monk known as a “medieval prophecy expositor” in the twelfth century, “was much influenced by . . . Muslim leader and warrior Saladin, who recaptured Jerusalem in 1187.” Using the Book of Revelation, Joachim asserted that the fourth head of the seven-headed dragon, outlined within chapters 12 and 17, represented Muhammad. The Muslim leader Saladin was presented as the sixth head of the dragon, directly adjacent to the head of the Antichrist (Boyer 320). In the case of Revelation, apocalyptic imagery was used to vilify perceived threats and create a situation in which good must triumph over evil. The enemy becomes not simply another country or culture; the enemy is an agent of evil that must be destroyed at any cost. The lower classes, in a “Peoples’ Crusade” with more than three hundred thousand participants, were caught up in the religious, apocalyptic fanaticism purveyed by the likes of Walter the Penniless and Peter the Hermit (a prominent priest from Amiens), and sought to extirpate the evil army of Muslims occupying the Holy Land. In this way, the lower classes became involved because of apocalyptic rhetoric and ideologies, and without proper training and equipment they were ultimately massacred by the Turks (Child et al. 16). While the nobility was also very deeply religious, illustrating how Christianity occupied a position of power at the time, the vast majority of Christians at the time were oppressed in a feudal system that perpetuated

harsh living conditions and poor life expectancy. In addition, many of their church leaders found that these apocalyptic myths contained “millenarian expectations that ‘respectable’ members of the clergy must have found distasteful or dangerous in their more extreme manifestations” (Whalen 64). Thus, these myths were not being directly promoted by the people at the top of the hierarchy; they were predominantly used by the oppressed. Apocalyptic rhetoric clearly had an affirmative effect on these impoverished crusaders, who hoped the retaking of Jerusalem would foment the end times, which would ultimately end in rewards for the destitute faithful.

Current apocalyptic myths bear only some semblance of their ancient antecedents. The end of the world is sometimes presented as a vision or otherworldly journey, but more often the audience arrives *after* the apocalypse, seeing the aftermath of a cataclysmic event. Unlike older apocalyptic myths, there is no overt judgment and reward. In addition, the world after the apocalypse is still the world of human inhabitants; there are no angels and religious figures that remake the world into an ethereal paradise. On the contrary, the world is barren and mostly lifeless, and the protagonist is often a catalyst for bringing back the preapocalyptic world, resurrecting institutions like government, marriage, and education. The postapocalyptic world does not mirror the beauty of God’s kingdom as it might in traditional Christian myths but instead most closely resembles the American frontier. In adapting the Christian and Jewish myths, American culture has molded the imagery to mimic something uniquely American, a frontier myth wherein an empty world becomes a place of possibility and renewal—a place where raw individuality claims an uncultivated space in the name of civilization. Beyond frontier mythology, there is, of course, a true Christian influence on American culture, as Oldring notes:

In contemporary America, apocalypse is part of a spectrum of religious beliefs ingrained into the American Way of life. Commercial America has resurrected the apocalypse myth as spectacle commodity. Apocalyptic media today reflect current values of the American hegemon in globalization, and are portrayed as particularly real in order to be effective. (Oldring 8)

The use of religion “by those seeking to maintain White, male, heteronormative hegemony” has a long history in the United States, one that will be discussed more fully in the first chapter (Oldring 11). In essence, religious myths can be used to disseminate patriarchal ideologies

through the media. Apocalyptic myths also connect with the American public when they are “portrayed as particularly real”—when the disaster shown is something distinctly possible: nuclear fallout, global warming, and overpopulation, for instance. The forces behind the adaptation of apocalyptic myths in American society are the corporations and institutions that can maintain power by the proliferation of these myths. These myths are “mediums for hegemony . . . their highest concern is to suppress individual experiences by supplanting them with archetypes of behavior and systems of meaning-making derived from and maintained in civil society” (Oldring 9–10). The capitalist system has assimilated all institutions, bringing religion under its control—yet another instrument to maintain power.

The Science Fiction Genre

Contemporary apocalyptic media is often considered a subgenre of science fiction. There have been a number of different definitions of science fiction as a genre, making it difficult to write a singular one. Margaret Atwood defines science fiction as “fiction in which things happen that are not possible today—that depend, for instance, on advanced space travel, time travel, the discovery of green monsters on other planets or galaxies, or that contain various technologies we have not yet developed” (Atwood 92). However, simply focusing on iconography like spaceships and time machines doesn’t adequately define sci-fi, since these objects and devices can be used in other genres. Spaceships, for instance, could be used in a comedy, or a time machine could find its way into a detective story. A story in which “things happen that are not possible today” could describe any genre. By that definition, *Hot Tub Time Machine* (2010) would be categorized as science fiction. A more apt definition of sci-fi can be found when Judith Merrill, in 1966, wrote that the objective of sci-fi was “to explore, to discover, to *learn* . . . something about the nature of the universe, of man, or ‘reality’”:

[The genre uses] the traditional “scientific method” (observation, hypothesis, experiment) to examine some postulated approximation of reality, by introducing a given set of changes—imaginary or inventive—into the common background of “known facts,” creating an environment in which the responses and perceptions of the characters will reveal something about the inventions, the characters, or both. (Merrill 27)

Science fiction takes existing science and inventions and extrapolates these to create a revelatory future, which, as Merrill notes, “reveal[s] something about the inventions, the characters, or both.” By examining broad questions “about the nature of the universe, or man, or ‘reality,’” sci-fi has philosophical concerns that aren’t explicitly a part of other genres. Vivian Sobchack, in comparing sci-fi to horror films, notes that “the horror film is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the SF film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other” (Sobchack 29–30). For this reason, Sobchack argues, horror films often take place in small towns or an old castle, while sci-fi films involve large cities or the entire planet. The difference between sci-fi and other genres is often a matter of scale; sci-fi goes beyond individual struggles to explore conflicts that affect the entire planet or universe. A film like *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), for instance, has much larger stakes than a film like *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). The latter focuses on a group of teenagers in one suburban town, while the former deals with the fate of the planet. This difference in scale is what separates a film like *Gravity* (2013) from *Moon* (2009). *Gravity* would not qualify as sci-fi since the focus is on Sandra Bullock’s emotional pain and eventual catharsis. *Moon*, however, deals with broader philosophical issues about the nature of identity and the moral quandaries associated with cloning. Sobchack’s definition of sci-fi parallels James Gunn’s, as he writes that “it usually involves matters whose importance is greater than the individual or the community; often civilization or the race itself is in danger” (6).

Another key feature of science fiction is the explicit and overt use of defamiliarization, something implied when Judith Merrill writes that sci-fi “examine[s] some postulated approximation of reality, by introducing a given set of changes—imaginary or inventive—into the common background of ‘known facts’” (27). Sci-fi takes a familiar object or idea and changes it in such a way that it becomes foreign and difficult to fully comprehend. Defamiliarization, as it pertains to art, is a way to break up our unconscious ways of perceiving the world—a way to make us examine things that would normally dissolve in the periphery of our experiences. The problem, according to Viktor Shklovsky, is that “perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconscious automatic.” The way art functions is to make “an object ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shk-

lovsky 778). This is achieved in a variety of ways, each medium having its own readily available tools. The iconography of Westerns, for instance, is easily recognizable—rugged terrain surrounding a small frontier town with a train passing through. Science fiction, on the other hand, uses the iconography of other genres, with subtle differences. For instance, it is possible to have a space Western, and indeed many of those exist, for example *Outland* (1981) and *Serenity* (2005). However, each familiar icon is used in a way that renders it slightly off-kilter. The rocky terrain of the American Southwest is replaced by unexplored planets—a frontier to be explored. The reluctant hero, so common in Westerns like *Shane* (1953), is still present. However, instead of being a former gunslinger in bars with desperadoes, someone like Han Solo spends time in a cantina with an assortment of alien races. For science fiction, then, defamiliarization is key, as creatures enhanced by radiation and aliens are a combination of familiar and unusual body structures and features. Some of the defamiliarization is simply part of the medium of film, as film allows for an altered perception of the world around us via close-ups, dissolves, and other techniques. Walter Benjamin, of the cinema, writes:

By focusing on hidden details of familiar objects, by exploring commonplace milieus under the ingenious guidance of the camera, the film . . . extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; it reveals entirely new structural formations of the subject. (1105)

Defamiliarization is also more generally an inherent part of the way objects are depicted within the diegetic world of film. Our gaze is often held because of the way it is shown, not necessarily because of what it is. There is a potential to create practically limitless new connotations, all contingent on things like context and film techniques like close-ups, lighting, and even the way the object is constructed. Science fiction seems particularly dependent on defamiliarization in the sense that unknown objects and alien creatures often possess uncanny similarities with something the audience actually recognizes. *Godzilla* does call to mind pet lizards; spaceships look an awful lot like hubcaps (and sometimes are); the androids in *Blade Runner* (1982) appear to be human. Fredric Jameson notes that the purpose of “SF . . . [is] not to give us ‘images’ of the future . . . but rather to defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*, and to do so in specific ways distinct from all other forms of defamiliarization” (216). The subgenre of postapocalyptic films

seems especially reliant on defamiliarization, since it's predicated on the assumption that people will compare this "post" world with the one before it, looking for changes in familiar places and things. *The Road Warrior* (1981), for instance, illustrates the extreme, ultimate conclusion to a very familiar issue—a scarcity of fuel. A film like *Planet of the Apes* (1968) depends on such comparisons to achieve the dramatic realization at the end—that we were indeed on Earth all along.

Postapocalyptic film can be categorized as a subgenre of science fiction—including its large-scale events and focus on defamiliarization—displaying many of the same characteristics, including the large scale in which the events take place and the heavy focus on defamiliarization. In addition, sci-fi often uses Christian symbols and ideas, and so the use of the apocalypse in sci-fi film is part of a pattern. Robert Torry writes that "to be at all familiar with science fiction cinema is to observe how commonly the genre rehearses traditional religious themes and motifs," using "what is perhaps the most common religious motif in science fiction film: that of apocalypse" (7). The use of religious symbols, Torry argues, is seen throughout sci-fi film, from E.T. as a Christ figure to the Christ-like alien in *Starman* (1984) (7). The use of the Judeo-Christian apocalypse in sci-fi film is often tied to events transpiring at the time of the film's production. Some of the more obvious examples of this are films produced in the wake of the atomic bomb. After the demonstrations of the destructive power of the bomb in 1944, "Science fiction films quite often deplored the world threatening capacities unleashed by modern science" (Torry 7). In the 1950s, many of the monsters in the ubiquitous "creature features" were the result of atomic radiation that caused horrible mutations: the ants in *Them!* (1954), for instance. Similarly, the 1954 version of *Godzilla* is believed by film scholars to depict either the physical manifestation of the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or retribution for nuclear proliferation.³ Since then, films have depicted many other sources of apocalyptic destruction, touching on both environmental issues and advances in computer technology.

3. For instance, Jason Jones, writing in *The Atomic Bomb in Japanese Cinema*, notes that "Godzilla's presence serv[es] as punishment against human transgression in the form of testing and proliferation of nuclear weapons" (36). See Jason Jones, "Japan Removed: Godzilla Adaptations and Erasure of the Politics of Nuclear Experience," *The Atomic Bomb in Japanese Cinema: Critical Essays*, edited by Matthew Edwards (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2015), 34–54.

The American Frontier and Apocalypticism

The similarities between frontier and apocalyptic myths are striking. They are, first of all, visually quite similar, and “frontier ideology, which has been a part of American world-views since colonization, has found a fertile ground for dissemination in apocalyptic cinema. Most of us recognize the frontier in the image of the Wild West.” The visual images of apocalyptic films—an untamed, wide-open expanse—“promise . . . *rebirth* and *renewal*, the chance to start over, and to do things right” (Oldring 11). The frontier myths and those of the apocalypse provide a new beginning, free from a troubled history of oppressing native peoples, in essence rewriting America. America was treated as though it were a blank slate in the frontier myths, despite the Native Americans that had been living on the land long before American settlers. Contemporary history makes it clear that the American West was fraught with conflict between white settlers and indigenous peoples, often because the settlers wished to take land from the native inhabitants.⁴ Similarly the contemporary apocalyptic myths wipe out everything, allowing for the white male to emerge from the rubble and rebuild civilization, free from the hindrance of a growing minority population. All of the dominant culture’s symbols of oppression “such as the West’s long history of oppression, slavery, and colonialism, and the general malaise of rigid socioeconomic class divisions are simply erased.” Large-scale catastrophes create a blank slate, as the West is freed from “social burdens and responsibilities.” Social hierarchies are “symbolically exalted,” and restored to the level of prominence they had before the apocalypse. This ensures the continuation of a “class based society . . . by disseminating the frontier myth without requiring the ruling class to relinquish any real power” (Oldring 15–16). Beyond erasing a troubled past, the apocalypse allows the dominant white male to create physical space in a world that has none; the frontier had closed long ago, and the world had been not only completely inhabited but overpopulated. There is nothing left to colonize and dominate, but the apocalypse wipes the land clean, as “unpopulated space can only be achieved by destroying what already exists beyond memory or reparation. . . . An apocalypse equates to agentless global destruction, which provides a guilt-free void

4. Between 1850 and 1890, there were 21,586 casualties in the Indian Wars, 14,990 (69 percent) of which were Native Americans (Michno 353). See Gregory Michno, *Encyclopedia of Indian Wars: Western Battles and Skirmishes, 1850–1890* (Missoula: Mountain Press, 2003).

enabling ideological expansion anywhere” (Oldring 12). The world of *The Road Warrior* (1981), for instance, is mostly an empty void, but this creates an opportunity for Max, the white male, to have a fresh start, as he makes the decision to help the virtuous settlers clad in white. His troubled past haunts him, but the postapocalyptic landscape allows for renewal and redemption; he can help guide the “good guys” to safety and be an important catalyst for the rebirth of order and stability.

The Purpose of These Myths

The fact that these myths still endure speaks to their ability to adapt and take on various other texts as influences, in addition to being pliable enough to be applied to whatever enemy is believed most nefarious. Frank Kermode also speaks to this adaptability, noting how “apocalypse can be disconfirmed without being discredited. This is part of its extraordinary resilience. It can also absorb changing interests, rival apocalypses, such as the Sibylline writings. It is patient of change and of historiographical sophistications” (Kermode 8–9). However, beyond demonizing enemies, the myths perform several functions within Christian-influenced culture. Generalizations can be made because, apparently, a certain amount of uniformity exists in patterns of apocalyptic beliefs. Speaking of apocalypticism in the Middle Ages, Norman Cohn discusses how “a bird’s-eye view suggests that the social situations in which outbreaks of revolutionary millenarianism occurred were in fact remarkably uniform.” The ancient end-time prophecies became prevalent in areas that were experiencing issues with overpopulation and dramatic economic changes, essentially creating a class of disenfranchised, impressionable people. For those in the midst of these changes, “life came to differ vastly from the settled agricultural life which was the norm throughout the thousand-year span of the Middle Ages” (Cohn 53–54). Cohn argues that awareness of income disparity facilitated belief in Christian end-time myths, and this awareness was most pronounced in burgeoning urban centers. In this sense, these myths are palliative, a form of consolation for groups that have been financially (or otherwise) mistreated. Fuller further corroborates this, sharing that “apocalyptic thought is ‘intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority.’ Sociological studies indicate that apocalyptic writing commonly originates during times of crisis and tension.” It was a reaction to any number of things, including a threat to a group’s well-being,

extreme persecution, diminished interest in religious ideas, or cognizance of the growing split between “eschatological expectations and current sociopolitical realities.” The comfort in apocalyptic thought is that victory is guaranteed if a religious follower reframes their conflicts within the context of the mythic battle between good and evil (Fuller 21). The “severe persecution” of which Fuller speaks becomes somewhat loosely interpreted in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, where persecution can be something as simple as living in a society with disparate opinions, where communists are terrifying simply because they’re different. But this idea, that apocalyptic myths are linked to a feeling of persecution, seems fairly consistent across time.

Hofstadter and Current Political Myths

Another reason for the endurance of these myths, one that more explicitly ties in with their political underpinnings, connects with Richard Hofstadter’s discussion of paranoia in American politics. Richard Hofstadter, writing about the culture of American politics, points out that

history *is* a conspiracy, set in motion by demonic forces of almost transcendent power, and what is felt to be needed to defeat it is not the usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade. The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human values.

The political pundits using paranoid rhetoric see themselves as “manning the barricades of civilization” and much “like religious millenarians,” articulate the “anxiety of those who are living through the last days” (Hofstadter 29–30). The accusations against Communism, Islam, and countless other factions, reach a kind of fever pitch, invoking the language of “religious millenarians.” Public leaders, including media figures and presidents, even use apocalyptic terminology to describe the struggles against evil forces—Reagan’s use of the term “evil empire,” for example.

There are many postapocalyptic films that illustrate this anxiety, some of them overtly political. A contemporary film like *The Purge: Election Year* (2016) is rife with paranoia about classism and extremist political ideologies, showing upper-class depravity that literally results

in mass murder. “The Purge” is the name of a twelve-hour period in which all crimes are legal, intended as a solution to high crime rates and strife between social classes. The “purge” itself is meant to act as a safety valve, releasing aggression and violence all in a twelve-hour period in order to curb people’s violent tendencies for the rest of the year. In this particular film, the third in the series, an antipurge group is running for election, prompting pushback from the New Founding Fathers of America (NFFA). What follows is a civil war of sorts between two extremist groups: one far-right group and one far-left group. The NFFA is meant to be a far-right conservative group, intent on maintaining class division. Jay Dyer, author of the book *Esoteric Hollywood: Sex, Cults and Symbols in Film*, notes that “there’s no doubt . . . [the NFFA] represents a right-wing political faction on the surface” (Dyer). However, the would-be liberators, the antipurge group, also employ violent methods to achieve revolution. After joining forces with an African American gang, specifically the Crips, the rebels “resemble an amalgam of the George Soros funded *Black Lives Matter* ‘movement,’ as well as other 1960’s radical militant organizations” (Dyer). Dyer’s comment is rife with the repugnant anti-Semitism of various right-wing pundits, who use George Soros as the shadowy figurehead behind perceived left-wing extremism. His comment does, however, serve to highlight the contradictions of the film, which is ostensibly arguing against antiminority violence, while at the same time “explicitly link[ing] immigrants to crime and homicide. Furthermore, it glorifies excessive forms of aestheticized violence, while explicitly denouncing them” (Khader). If nothing else, the extremism in the film is a satirical representation of the rampant partisanship in America, not only in Congress but also among American citizens. It’s a paranoid scenario where partisanship leads to massacres and literal warfare. The decay and chaos of this postapocalyptic world is a direct result of extremist ideologies, and the film uses “the Purge” as a symbol of lower-class oppression. While *The Purge* might not be explicitly characterized as a science fiction film, most modern apocalyptic films and books fall under the umbrella of sci-fi.

A Contemporary, Perpetual Apocalypse

Environmental issues, as they became a pressing concern in the 1970s, increasingly were described in apocalyptic terms. The images of destruction so vividly evoked in the Bible were thought to be presently developing, as rivers became more toxic, air more polluted, and the ozone more fragile.