

When Will the World End Already?

**Climate Change, Christian Eschatology, and the Hollywood
Blockbuster after 9/11**

by

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Abstract

Christian eschatological thought has had a profound impact on American culture and traditions. This thesis examines the ways in which Christian apocalyptic models and contemporary anxieties around climate change intersect in Hollywood blockbuster cinema in the years after 9/11. With religious fervour stirred up by the U.S. government in the wake of the attacks, films such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, *War of the Worlds*, *Knowing*, *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *Geostorm* reclaim religiously conservative values through their focus on family drama in which the apocalypse acts as a positive force of social change. I argue that these films harmfully conflate climate change with notions of biblically redemptive Armageddon, reinforcing the idea that climate change can be understood within a Christian understanding of the End as cumulative and purposeful.

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Introduction

In a June 2004 interview about his movie *The Day After Tomorrow* (Roland Emmerich, 2004), German director Roland Emmerich was asked whether he had any trepidations about making a disaster movie so soon after the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. Emmerich noted that the attacks did force him to postpone his work on the film temporarily, and further that at one point he considered changing the primary location of the film from New York to some other American city, such as Chicago. Eventually, however, he stuck to his original plan to have the principal drama unfold in Manhattan, because Emmerich realized that there was an opportunity available in reinforcing a sense of unification that could be felt in the post-9/11 atmosphere of American culture. He stated:

[W]e realized that disasters always have this unifying, “do good” things. I think September 11th was a crucial point in American history because the whole world was behind America for a short time. The world really was unified. Our movie is about people who save each other and a scientist with a concern to save as many as he can. It had a good feeling about it. (Chau)

As media scholar Lynn Spigel has observed: “After the attacks of September 11, traditional forms of entertainment had to reinvent their place in U.S. life and culture” (235). The sense of shock and destabilization in the aftermath of 9/11 imbued images of fictional destruction with a new sense of responsibility, particularly with regards to the destruction of cityscapes. While disaster movies of the previous era often openly delighted in the pure spectacle of destruction – what popular video essayist Lindsay Ellis

refers to as depictions of a “fun-pocalypse” – this new era of post-9/11 disaster films became more focused on sentimental stories of family and togetherness, around which the destruction occurred (Ellis). With the so called “death of irony” (Rosenblatt; Hirschorn; Hiaasen and Pollack), disaster films, for a period, were no longer simply about benign spectacle, they had to be about more.

In this thesis I will argue that the effort to speak to a destabilized American public in the wake of 9/11 led to a series of Hollywood disaster films that focused on reasserting “traditional” values rooted in Christian theology, such as the importance of the traditional family structure and strong male leadership in the face of adversity. These films were released in the aftermath of the rise to prominence of what has been dubbed the “Christian Right,” a political coalition that allied themselves with neoconservatives within the Bush White House and who sought specifically to reclaim America as a Christian nation. By focusing on disasters of apocalyptic scale and their power to reassert traditional Christian values, these films adopt a Christian fundamentalist view of apocalypse as the culminating point of human history – a force with the power to affect positive social and historical change. As such, these films reinforce a fundamentalist view that society is in decay, largely due to the disintegrating status of the traditional nuclear family, and that the apocalypse – which is conceived of as inevitable, unstoppable, and preordained – has the power to revert these social structures back to their “proper” state.

This post-9/11 shift toward the traditional ran parallel to an increased sense of anxiety surrounding climate change, an issue which was rising to political prominence at the time, having been granted an international spotlight with the Kyoto Accord of 1992, which came into effect in 2005. Beginning with Emmerich’s 2004 film *The Day After*

Tomorrow, the environment itself quickly became a narrative device of global destruction in Hollywood disaster films, and while that film ostensibly sought to raise awareness about the threat of human-caused global warming, its adoption of a Christian apocalyptic framework had the perhaps unintended consequence of creating a message diametrically opposed to one of environmental responsiveness. Overall, this thesis argues that the adoption of a Christian fundamentalist view of apocalypse has the negative effect of allaying fears of real-world climate change by framing it as inevitable and purposeful. This will be demonstrated through a close analysis of six feature films: *The Day After Tomorrow*, *War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005), *Knowing* (Alex Proyas, 2009), *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009), *San Andreas* (Brad Peyton, 2015), and *Geostorm* (Dean Devlin, 2017).

While elements of this Christian apocalyptic framework can be found in many Hollywood films, I have chosen the six big-budget American blockbusters films in which all of these elements coalesce in a specific way. Each of these films represent environmentally-driven apocalypses as forces of social good, which have the power to teach humanity valuable lessons about the “proper” way to live. In many cases, this involves reuniting a previously fractured nuclear family. By alluding to real-world climate change, these films insinuate that climate change is nothing to fear, because it serves a fundamentally *good* purpose, reinforcing a Christian fundamentalist tendency to view climate change as part of God’s plan. Such an apathetic message, while inextricable from its religious roots, has the potential to resonate much more broadly than simply within conservative religious circles, because it reinforces a popular notion that there is simply nothing that can be done about climate change – it is inevitable.

Chapter 1 outlines a brief history of Christian apocalyptic thought and its influence over American politics and history. I demonstrate the ways in which conservative American politics was infiltrated by the Christian Right, particularly from the 1970s to the late 1990s, and these actors' relationship to a burgeoning climate-denial industry that sought to sow dissent amongst the public over the realities of climate science. This newly politicized wing of American religious conservatism was weaponized by neoconservatives in the Bush White House to garner support for the wars that followed 9/11, often through the use of apocalyptic language. I also trace a brief history of the disaster film, demonstrating how my research relates to and differs from other scholarship on post-9/11 media, particularly focusing on the resurgence of apocalypticism in popular culture.

Chapter 2 argues that Alex Proyas's 2009 film *Knowing*, the most overtly religious film of this cycle, can be used as a case study to illustrate the conventions that will recur in the other, ostensibly more secular films. I will demonstrate how the framework that I have identified utilizes a Christian understanding of apocalypse and the broad implications that this specifically religious understanding has for conceptions of real-world climate change. I will then discuss the linkage between this apocalyptic model and the apocalypse of the film, outlining the ways in which *Knowing* conflates science fiction with religion, using flimsy science to justify a preordained natural apocalypse that draws allusions to real world-climate change.

Chapter 3 demonstrates that the other films of this cycle, while purporting to be secular, are imbued with a distinctly Christian valence owed mostly to their emphasis on family values politics. To illustrate this I conduct close readings of *2012*, *San Andreas*,

and *War of the Worlds*, as these films most strongly emphasize the importance of family values. I will argue that these films adopt basically the same framework for understanding apocalypse and its value as *Knowing*. I will conclude that chapter with a consideration of how this emphasis on family values can be seen as a response to the cultural moment of 9/11.

Chapter 4 ties the arguments of the previous chapters together to demonstrate how the only two films of this cycle to explicitly represent contemporary climate change – *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm* – also conflate climate change with a Christian understanding of apocalypse as meaningful, harmfully insinuating that we do not need to worry about it. Both films, released 13 years apart, frame climate change as apocalyptic but also a force of social good, and bookend the cycle that I have identified. In this way, *The Day After Tomorrow* envisions a future in which climate change is a potential threat which can still be avoided, while *Geostorm* envisions a world in which climate change is conceded as a reality that must be endured. We are left with a world in which the apocalypse is imminent, and it's not that big of a deal.

While the films that I am analysing – generally speaking – have done well at the box office, they are largely critically derided. An unfortunate consequence of this is that, with the exception primarily of *The Day After Tomorrow* and *War of the Worlds*, these films have gone understudied in both academia and the mainstream critical sphere. While an analytical study of these films will not immediately unlock the gateway to an environmentally conscientious future, such a study is useful insofar as it illuminates to what degree climate apathy pervades the popular consciousness. In adopting climate change into this apocalyptic framework, these films simultaneously reflect such an apathy

and also reinforce it. Such a view is perhaps the best illustration of contemporary climate anxiety that we have available, at least with regards to the popular sphere. Climate change is acknowledged, but not feared – perhaps even anticipated.

Chapter 1:

Apocalypse Again and Again, Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Global Warming

Representations of apocalypse in post-9/11 Hollywood disaster films come out of a longer history of apocalypse thinking in the United States. In order to understand why and how the modern disaster epics that I will analyze are imbued with a Christian theological framework, it is first necessary to review the history of Christian apocalypticism, particularly how this phenomenon has shaped and altered American politics and history. As film scholar Stephen Keane asserts, genre cycles undeniably “come and go in waves,” and just as important as understanding what these cycles are is understanding “why” they are (4). Seemingly secular American ideals are infused with an eschatological fervour that makes them impossible to separate fully from their Christian origins. From the belief in Manifest Destiny to faith that neoliberalism represents an apocalyptic end to the pursuit of the ideal economic order, American history is tied to a Christian worldview that is in turn tied to notions of progress and purpose. Such a teleological view holds that time is moving toward an identifiable end – a view that often subsumes real-world phenomena into its narrative of ultimate purpose.

While the Christian underpinning of American culture shapes discourse surrounding any number of issues, it has recently posed a problem in the face of our impending climate catastrophe. Contemporary climatology maintains that if nothing is done to curb rising excess emissions the results will be devastating on a worldwide scale, yet policy makers continue to either do nothing or very little (Klein). As I will outline in this chapter, there are many causes of this climate denialism, but American religious

fundamentalism plays an important role. The actions and language of prominent American politicians and political influencers promote a Christian fundamentalist conception of climate change that suggests that the problem is either not real or is a manifestation of God's divine plan (Vox; Relman; Klein).

While much American popular cinema has contained both overt and subtle Christian messages, I argue in this thesis that in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, a strong Christian rhetoric emerged in Hollywood blockbuster films that were explicitly about large-scale environmental apocalyptic scenarios. These films – which include *The Day After Tomorrow*, *The War of the Worlds*, *Knowing*, *2012* *San Andreas*, and *Geostorm* – implicitly or explicitly recapitulate a Christian fundamentalist framework of climate denial, in which the apocalypse is coded as naturally driven, unstoppable, and a force of social good.

In this chapter I will sketch a brief history of Christian apocalyptic thought as it has influenced American culture and politics. Beginning with the historical work of philosopher John Gray and historian Norman Cohn, I will outline the ways in which progressive modes of thinking are inherently molded by Christian apocalyptic models. Through the work of historian Daniel Williams and legal scholars Doris Buss and Didi Herman I will then outline how Christian theology was politicized in the 1970s with the advent of the coalition known as the “Christian Right,” and using the work of climate sociologists Riley Dunlap and Aaron McCright I will demonstrate the ways in which cooperation between American conservatism and the religious right coincided with a gradual politicization of climate change, which repositioned the issue from one of scientific fact to one of partisan political ideology. I will then trace a brief history of

American disaster films through the work of film scholars such as Stephen Keane, Wheeler Winston Dixon, Despina Kakoudaki, and E. Ann Kaplan, acknowledging the ways in which my chosen films participate in a lineage of American filmmaking while also differentiating themselves through a particular narrative framework – one that combines theological and political influences to construct narratives that work to reinforce religiously-motivated climate denial.

Linear Time and Christian Eschatology

While the contemporary U.S. popular media landscape may reasonably lead one to the assumption that an obsession with the apocalypse is ubiquitous, a fascination with the end of all time is not something that has always existed, nor can it be thought of as consistent across cultures, religions, peoples, or even histories. According to historian Norman Cohn and political philosopher John Gray, a linear conception of time, the idea that events transpire progressively and logically one after another, moving toward some identifiable conclusion or apocalypse – what has famously been referred to by Umberto Eco as “time’s arrow” – is a fairly recent invention, one that can be attributed to early Christianity (Eco et al. 184; Gray; Cohn).

According to Cohn, it was Iranian prophet Zoroaster (also known as Zarathustra) who first conceived of and popularized the notion that all of time is a struggle between good and evil forces, in which good would eventually triumph (28). Gray asserts that Christianity modified Zoroaster’s historical model and “injected the belief that human history is a teleological process” into western culture, a process in which the end of time is identifiable and can “come about only through the will of God” (19). According to Gray, early Christians believed that history “had a pre-determined purpose, and when that

was achieved it would come to a close” (15). Early Christians not only expected the end to eventually come, but also actively anticipated it, for the end of time according to this tradition is the entire reason for human existence. It is in this time that all the suffering, injustice, and mysteries of life will be made sense of, when the ontological concept of evil will be destroyed, when Jesus will return, “and for the Elect this means not catastrophe but salvation” (14).

Zoroaster’s literal conceptualization of the impending end of all time began to fade in Christian thought after the death of Christ, because the end never actually came. Gray notes that it was “not long before an attempt was made to interpret Jesus’ teaching of the end of the world as a metaphor for an inner change,” and this view was adopted by many preeminent Christian figures including Augustine, who “suggested that the end of time should be understood in spiritual terms,” a view eventually adopted officially by the Council of Ephesus in the year 431 (17-18). While this view of Christ’s eschatological teachings held for some time, mainly due to Augustine’s influence, it was nevertheless reversed in the twelfth century through the influence of a few key religious figures, the most prominent being Joachim of Fiore (1132-1202).

Joachim, a Cistercian abbot who experienced a “spiritual illumination” on his journey to the Holy Land, turned “the Christian doctrine of the Trinity into a philosophy of history in which humanity ascended through three stages” (Gray, 19). Joachim’s triptych model of history, which saw humanity moving from “the Age of the Son” to “the Age of the Father” to “the Age of the Holy Spirit” – a time of “universal brotherhood that would continue until the last judgement” – created a worldview that saw history as operating in a telos of culmination and resolution (19). Joachim believed that he himself

lived during the period of transition between the Age of the Father and the Age of the Holy Spirit, and according to literary theorist Frank Kermode, it was Joachim who “formalized [this] idea of transition,” the notion that there were periods in-between these epochs characterized by feelings of impending radical change (Kermode, “Waiting for the End,” 255). Joachim’s model relied on this notion of impending change, the feeling that one epoch was coming to an end and another was beginning.

This division of human history has had a tremendous impact on secular thought. Gray argues that: “Hegel’s view of the evolution of human freedom in three dialectical stages, Marx’s theory of the movement from primitive communism through class society to global communism, Auguste Comte’s Positivist vision of humankind’s evolution...all reproduce [Joachim’s] three-part scheme” (19-20). Even the general conception of history as divided into ancient, medieval, and modern echoes this scheme, as does the most common construction of narrative storytelling—beginning, middle, end (19-20). The tripartite model of history, fully adopted and embraced by the Christian Church, understands time as inextricably linked to human existence. Time ceases to exist when humans are no longer here to witness it. Thus, even though we may understand that literal time will continue without us, in Joachim’s model “Time” as a construct will not. It ends when we do.

The “sense of an ending” that Kermode describes is born from a constant anticipation of this imminent End. To use Kermode’s phrasing: “when we live in the mood of end-dominated crisis, certain now familiar patterns of assumption become evident” (Kermode, “The Sense of an Ending,” 98). These “patterns” imbue not only history but any narrative reliant on “endings” to provide meaning – for instance, much

narrative fiction – with a sense of ultimate culmination and purpose. It is in the end when all will be made clear. As demonstrated by Cohn, Gray, and Kermode, this implicit sense of purposeful culmination inherent within end-focused models can be traced back all the way to Zoroaster, although its current influence on western thought is distinctly Christian.

These end-focused models create meaning through a structuring of otherwise independent ideas and events. By thinking of history in this way, it becomes meaningful because it is causal – each event proceeds from the previous event in a cumulative and progressive manner. This, however, is not how models of history have always been structured, and not all cultures even agree that it is how time itself unfolds. Even a cursory survey of Buddhist thought, for instance, would paint an entirely different picture of history and time. Nevertheless, this model has become ubiquitous in the popular realm of the west under the influence of European Christianity. It informs not only many modern conceptions of history, but also provides the foundations for many of the meta-narratives of modernity.

While the Enlightenment broke from religion and God to provide a sense of meaning, “the radical Enlightenment belief that there can be a sudden break in history, after which the flaws of human society will be forever abolished” is a by-product of this Christian inheritance (Gray, 12). Per Gray, the “very idea of revolution as a transforming event in history is owed to religion” and is tied to a Christian understanding of human time as cumulative and purposeful (12). Many scholars have noted that faith in an end-oriented apocalyptic model has been challenged through modernist and postmodernist approaches that emerged in the wake of the atrocities of the twentieth century – namely the First and Second World Wars, and specifically the Holocaust and the dropping of

atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 (Heffernan; Wojcik). To these scholars, faith in meta-narratives of historical progress lose their meaning in a world that has witnessed mankind's self-destructive capabilities. While important, this era of "post-apocalypse" thinking has not entirely replaced the Christian apocalyptic model that has been so formative in the western cultural tradition. The Christian eschatological current, while challenged, never fully left the western consciousness, particularly in the United States.

The Apocalypse and 20th Century American Conservatism

The relatively recent secularization of the Christian apocalyptic model of progress has not only informed Enlightenment projects like the American and French revolutions, as noted by literary scholar Teresa Heffernan, but also the very foundation of the American colonies themselves (Heffernan; Gray; Boyer; Fitzgerald). There has been a distinctly Christian eschatological undercurrent present within American politics since the country's formation, one that has recently explicitly re-emerged. The Puritans who partook in the colonization of the United States in the seventeenth century viewed their project in apocalyptic terms, envisioning a new society – a "city upon a hill," to use John Winthrop's biblical phrasing – that would "lack the evils of the Old World" (Gray, 117). While not every American colony had this goal, the eschatological fervour of the Puritan project would prove historically potent in the years to come, particularly during the Second Great Awakening after the American Revolution.

As the Christian-inherited notion of progress secularized, it became a religion of its own. As Gray argues: "The belief in Manifest Destiny that was formulated in the mid-nineteenth century was part of this process. The idea of a messianic saviour, which was at

the core of early Christianity, became the idea of a Redeemer Nation – the belief in America as the land of a ‘chosen people[.]’” (Gray, 122). America is not the only nation to have bestowed upon itself such an exceptional cultural and historical role, but American exceptionalism *does* distinguish itself from that of other nations in the extent to which religious belief shapes this doctrine to this day (124).

A new American apocalyptic tradition came to the fore during the Cold War, albeit in a less powerful manifestation than previously (Gray 124). From the mid-twentieth century to the end of the Cold War this notion of American exceptionalism was increasingly bound up in an evolving conception of liberalism, itself based on a teleological model proclaimed by political scientist Francis Fukuyama as “the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution...the final form of human government” (1). As the now de-facto politics of the United States and other western countries, free-market democracy became tied to notions of grassroots Americanism and patriotism, and as such the terms of the Cold War, which ostensibly began as capitalism versus communism, quickly evolved into west versus east, good versus evil. However, the simple framing of this conflict in such eschatological terms does not fully account for the resurgence of Christian apocalypticism in the United States.

A partial explanation for this resurgence can be seen through the rising political power of the “Christian Right” in the 1970s, a group defined by legal scholars Doris Buss and Didi Herman as “a broad range of American organizations that have tended to form coalitions, both domestic and international, around an orthodox Christian vision and a defense of the traditional nuclear family” (xviii). As historian Daniel Williams notes, politically right-leaning Christians had been a force in American culture for decades, but

it wasn't until the 1970s that they began to increase their "level of partisan commitment" and thus acquired the label "Christian Right" (Williams, 2). Organized around a "common belief that America was rapidly losing its Christian moorings," the Christian Right as a political force emerged at this time "committed to the idea of a Christian nation with a Protestant-based moral code" (2).

The Christian Right's rise to overt political engagement was primarily a reaction to progressive movements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, namely the feminist movement, gay rights activism, and the civil rights movement. These movements were seen by the coalition as undermining the (white) nuclear family structure – what members of the Christian Right have referred to as the "natural family" (Buss and Herman, xviii). As historian and Episcopal priest Randall Balmer has shown, "the immediate catalyst" for the coalition's rise was the presidential campaign of Jimmy Carter, a self-proclaimed born-again Christian who fell out of favour with many southern evangelicals "when his administration's Justice Department sought to enforce anti-discrimination laws at Bob Jones University," a fundamentalist school in South Carolina (Balmer, "Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism," 575). Balmer notes that many key figures within the Christian Right have "questionable views on race," and some, including Tony Perkins, head of one of the most influential Christian Right organizations Focus on the Family, have had direct ties to white supremacist organizations (Balmer, "Thy Kingdom Come" 212).

The Christian Right as a coalition broadly believed in "a divinely ordered set of relations within the family, the nation, and the church, with each essential to the other," and the rise of social liberalism threatened to disrupt this fundamental structure (xix). Consequently, a focus on the nuclear family structure became a core political issue for

the Christian Right. The traditional family politics of the films that I will be analyzing, with their emphasis on the re-unification of the “traditional” family and focus on patriarchal structures of leadership, in conjunction with their representation of apocalypse as cumulative and purposeful, are some of their most “Christian” features.

The fight against secular liberalism within right-wing Christian circles was buoyed by a simultaneous shift right within the Republican Party. A minority party in the 1970s, the GOP (Grand Old Party, a traditional nickname for the Republican Party) had to “siphon votes from the Democrats” in order to win elections, and political strategists at the time believed that one way to achieve this goal in the long-term was to shift to the right on social issues, deliberately eyeing religious conservatives (Williams, 7). This decision was made easier by the fact that the Democrats were becoming more secular and embracing culturally liberal stances, alienating a certain percentage of their base (7).

So began the alliance between the Christian Right and the Republican Party, which grew stronger in subsequent political eras, particularly with the election of Ronald Reagan, himself a devout Christian who deliberately allied with the coalition, giving them “the political influence that they needed to increase their control” over the party, especially in the rural South (7). Williams argues that, over the next couple of decades, the Christian Right “exercised a dominating influence” over the GOP, using their position of political importance to “elect socially conservative congressional representatives in the Sunbelt and Midwest,” a process that pulled the party even further to the right (8).

By the late 1990s when George W. Bush took office, Christian evangelicals “accounted for one-third of the Republican vote in presidential elections,” a figure that increased “nearly 40 percent” by the end of his term, a process that would gradually bring

overt Christian orthodoxy – including apocalypticism – to the fore of American politics and culture (8). Gray argues that the rapid growth of the Christian Right’s influence during the Bush years occurred due to the strategic alliance between the Christian Right and neoconservatives, an alliance galvanized by the attacks of September 11, 2001 (128). This alliance did not only extend in one direction, for it was also a goal of the Christian Right to reinstitute a “true” Christian president (Kuo, xii). While neoconservatives sought to export liberal democracy through forceful foreign intervention, the Christian Right sought the same for their religiously conservative values. One of the defining features of the Christian Right is the “shared conviction that conservative Christians must form a bulwark against encroaching liberalism and the chaos it represents,” and as such they too seek the global export of American liberal democratic values, albeit of a distinctly Christian tone (Buss and Herman, xix).

This tactical alliance between neoconservatives and the Christian Right, which first helped Republicans gain control of the White House, soon became a tool to garner support for foreign military intervention, a move that was catalyzed by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. In president George W. Bush’s 2002 State of the Union address, he called Iran, Iraq, and North Korea “an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world,” deliberately invoking biblical language (Bush). The war in Iraq, an internationally illegal invasion based on dubious evidence, was justified in part through its deliberate framing in these eschatological terms – namely, as a war of necessity, a war against “evil,” the type of war that could only really be justified in broad schemas of progress. While “only around a quarter of American voters are born-again Christians,” over three-quarters of such Christians voted for George W. Bush in his 2004 re-election campaign (Gray, 129).

This campaign was only narrowly won, further proof of this voter base's indispensability to his political mission. The resurgence of this apocalyptic tone has not only had disastrous consequences with regard to military intervention, but also on the growing mainstream conservative view on climate change.

While many accounts of the influence of the Christian Right argue that this coalition's strong political influence has waned in recent years – supposedly as evidenced by the double election of Democrat Barack Obama in 2008 and 2012 – Obama's presidencies seem now to be an exception rather than the rule (Buss and Herman, Williams, Fitzgerald). The political cabinet of President Donald Trump is filled with evangelical and fundamentalist Christians who wear their faith on their sleeve, such as his evangelical Christian Vice President, Mike Pence. While the Christian Right as an identifiable and independent coalition may no longer exist as it once did, the currents of Biblical orthodoxy that re-emerged most explicitly during the Bush years have not disappeared, and neither has the influence that conservative Christianity exerts on the GOP. Today, it may be more appropriate to sketch the GOP and the Christian Right as one and the same; the influence over Republican policy and rhetoric is so steeped in Christianity as to make such a distinction irrelevant.

Conservative faith in Christian orthodoxy, American exceptionalism, and economic liberalism has been disastrous in its confrontation with global climate change, the number one issue facing the human species today. This fundamental refusal to deal with encroaching climate catastrophe can be glimpsed in the language used by politicians of the Trump administration, their policies, and their supporters, but also importantly within popular culture, such as in the films that I will be analysing.

Biblical Apocalypse and Climate Change

In a 2010 report, climatologist Lonnie G. Thompson warned:

[T]here is now a very clear pattern in the scientific evidence documenting that the earth is warming, that warming is due largely to human activity, that warming is causing important changes in climate, and that rapid and potentially catastrophic changes in the near future are very possible. (153)

Similarly, a 2012 climate study conducted by the World Bank stated that “it is unequivocal that humans are the cause of global warming, and major changes are already being observed” and that “without further commitments and action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the world is likely to warm by more than 3°C above the preindustrial climate” (The World Bank, ix, xiii), with a twenty percent likelihood that it will warm by 4°C by the year 2100, which would “pose unprecedented challenges to humanity” (The World Bank, 64).

Climate change has already affected daily living on Earth in important ways, including increasing the surface area of Earth affected by extreme drought and heat by tenfold since the 1950s (The World Bank, XIV). If the projections in Global Mean Temperature are allowed to be realized these extreme events are going to get worse. Sea levels are rising due to thermal expansion and the melting of polar ice, which threatens to displace massive populations across the globe. Freshwater contamination threatens the extinction of countless species of fish and affects access to drinking water and agriculture for millions of people, and due to the “high sensitivity of crops to extreme temperatures,” severe losses to agricultural yields have already been observed in Africa, the United States, Australia, and India (The World Bank, 15). No matter the study, the projections

are grim: for much of the population, climate catastrophe will be an epidemic of truly biblical proportions. Mass migration, starvation, extinction, and suffering are inevitable if regulations on emissions are not ratified and enforced globally. For millions, the apocalypse is right around the corner.

While these reports always cause a temporary splash of hysteria within the general public when released (most recently when the IPCC released a report in October 2018), they mostly reconfirm – in increasingly dire language – what has been accepted as fact by climate scientists as far back as the 1970s. Yet broad government action within the United States and abroad against the threat of climate catastrophe remains almost non-existent, and the topic continues to be a contentious subject in U.S. political discourse.

Resistance to climate policy has existed, particularly within U.S. politics, as early as the 1970s, when some of the first research about climate change was being conducted. It is no coincidence that this resistance coincides with the advent of neoliberalism. As environmental sociologists Robert J. Brulle and Robert J. Antonio have argued, “Neoliberals sought to weaken the substantial network of environmental regulations and oversight agencies, created in the 1970s, and to blunt the environmental movement’s effort to strengthen this system and make it more comprehensive” (196). Neoliberal organizations gained political power under President Ronald Reagan, whose deregulatory economic policy “empowered the anti-environmentalist countermovement, and forged the neoliberal Republican strategy of selecting opponents of regulation to lead environmental and other regulatory agencies, deemed to be ‘intrusive’ and ‘antibusiness’” (196). Neoliberal economic policy opposed climate regulations that could

have helped mitigate the effects of global warming early because they curbed rapid liberal economic expansion. Mega-corporations and interest groups who contribute most to excess emissions – such as oil companies and their shareholders – have in the time between the 1970s and the present become some of the largest political donors.

As American neoliberal economic hegemony strengthened in the 1990s, so did anti-environmental rhetoric. As environmental sociologists Aaron McCright and Riley Dunlap have shown, a robust literature emerged in the period from the 1970s until now suggesting that “powerful interests engage in strategic tactics ranging from outright manipulation of information to more subtle ‘diversionary reframing’ to define certain negative environmental conditions as non-problematic” (McCright and Dunlap, “Defeating Kyoto”, 351). These tactics have ranged from simple rhetoric that suggests that the free market itself will adapt to and fix any climate concerns, to documents which demonstrate that oil companies in conjunction with the Nixon government “manipulated information to diffuse local opposition to offshore drilling and delegitimize protest groups” (351).

The influence of these actors over policy making and popular conceptions of climate change has grown. By the 1990s, interest groups such as the Information Council for the Environment (ICE), founded by the Western Fuels Association, National Coal Association and Edison Electric Institute, were being created with the express purpose to “reposition global warming as theory (not fact)” (qtd. in Readfearn). Groups such as ICE specifically targeted demographics that were less educated, less financially secure, and politically right-leaning in their effort to sway public perception of climate reality. While

the effects of these efforts were not immediate, in recent years dissent over the realities of climate change has grown exponentially.

McCright and Dunlap have shown that conservatives (particularly conservative white males), Republicans, and religious people are far more likely to engage in climate change denialism than other demographics (McCright and Dunlap, “Cool Dudes”, 1171). They attribute this to a number of phenomena, ranging from conservatives’ tendency to “defend the current social and economic system,” to the success of “organized climate change denial” spawned by conservative and libertarian think-tanks that “promote free market conservatism” and “front groups promoting industry interests” (1171).

I would add another important contributing factor to climate change denial, that is the Christian eschatological undercurrent that has been present in American politics from the country’s foundations and that has recently been getting stronger. Consistent with McCright and Dunlap’s research into climate change denial, 2015 PEW research data shows that amongst white Christian evangelicals, only 28% believe that climate change is the result of human activity (PEW).

Running parallel to the rise of climate change denialism is the rise of overt Christian influence within the Republican party and American politics. The political movement of the Christian Right began in the late 1970s at much the same time that early climate research was producing grim forecasts for our future. While a faith-like absolute belief in the American neoliberal economic model already imbues it with an ontological infallibility, a tacit belief amongst many Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists that the fate of the world is in otherworldly hands certainly doesn’t help. As Gray writes,

“There is no good reason to be concerned with global warming if you believe Armageddon is around the corner” (125).

We can see how these various Christian currents contribute to climate denial in the ways in which current conservative politicians and members of the Trump administration talk about the issue. When prompted at a town hall meeting in 2017, Republican congressman Tim Walberg said of climate change, “As a Christian, I believe that there is a creator in God who is much bigger than us...And I’m confident that, if there’s a real problem, he can take care of it” (Vox). Speaking in similar terms in January 2019, as a condemnation of congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s push for greater environmental regulation, White House Press Secretary and “devout” Christian fundamentalist Sarah Huckabee Sanders stated: “I don’t think we’re going to listen to her on much of anything, particularly not on matters that we’re going to leave in the hands of a much, much higher authority,” adding that the fate of the Earth is in “the hands of something and someone much more powerful than any of us” (Relman).

Both politicians pass off responsibility to a higher power, i.e. to a Christian God. This suggests that, in the face of hard data, even certain Christian evangelicals who acknowledge the fact of climate change are not necessarily swayed to action. When we consider that a traditionalist view of Christian theology holds that only God has the power to bring about a destructive force of the magnitude that we know climate change to represent, then we can understand why so many Christian evangelicals exhibit apathetic attitudes toward it.

In a “biblicocentric” evangelical worldview, it is not possible for the end of the world to come about without God’s intervention. As a result, Christians that subscribe to

such a strict view are faced with a relatively simple choice: climate change is either a hoax or, if it is real, it must be divinely ordained and fit within the biblical story of divine creation and destruction. Such a view would hold that climate change exists, but there is nothing we as humans can do about it. This is precisely the view that I will argue is being presented in the post-9/11 disaster movies I will be analyzing in the coming chapters.

The Disaster Film

Images of disaster have played a formative role in cinema since its beginning, particularly in the United States. As media scholars Andrea Stulman Dennett and Nina Warnke have demonstrated, spectacles of disaster such as immense fires and military conflicts were the subject of much popular entertainment at the turn of the twentieth century, and because of this many early filmmakers sought to depict these events in their films (101). These films acted as entertainment and catharsis, providing “pleasure-seekers with the probability of confronting their fears and fantasies in theatricalized worlds of destruction” (110). While, like many genres, disaster films have risen and fallen in popularity throughout cinematic history around the world, images of destruction more generally have proven a mainstay of American cinema, and perhaps now more than ever dominate the box office.

In such a cultural reading of this wave of post-9/11 disaster films, I must make clear that I am not asserting that these disaster films exist *only* as a reflection of broader cultural currents. As film scholar Stephen Keane writes, “the more practical, industrial fact [of genre cycles] is that it only takes one commercially successful film to spark an interest in bringing certain long-forgotten and financially obsolete genres back round again” (Keane, 5). Certainly, the international box office success of *The Day After*

Tomorrow was sufficient to launch a series of copycats. Another possible contributing factor to this new wave of apocalypse films is that new, more affordable digital effects technologies render these types of world-ending spectacles increasingly feasible. I am still, however, employing a cultural reading that holds that these films are indicative of palpable sentiments in the immediate 9/11 cultural atmosphere, and that these films contribute to a type of passivity with regards to the pressing realities of climate change. Susan Sontag famously employed such a critical reading in her seminal essay *The Imagination of Disaster*, in which she argued that implicit within the sci-fi cycles of the 1950s was a metaphorical reckoning with nuclear anxiety, and media scholars Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner employ a similar critical stance in their survey of 1970s disaster films.

Ryan and Kellner argue that a wave of American disaster films in the 1970s exhibited “a return to more traditional generic conventions” and depicted “a society in crisis attempting to solve its social and cultural problems through the ritualized legitimization of strong male leadership, the renewal of traditional moral values, and the regeneration of institutions like the patriarchal family” (52). To these scholars, films such as *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillerman, 1974) and *The Concord...Airport '79* (Lowell Rich, 1979) reflected a conservative reaction against the rise of social liberalism, one that would appeal to “a traditionalist middle-class American audience, one that would be distrustful of the power of big business and susceptible to right-wing, religiously based authoritarian solutions” (54). Many of the characteristics of disaster films released at roughly the same time as the birth of the Christian Right, are also found in the post-9/11 apocalypse films that I will be analyzing. This parallel is useful insofar as it illustrates

that such religiously-based conservative currents are not new. However, the films themselves differ in a few important ways.

As E. Ann Kaplan has pointed out, one difference is that many twenty-first century disaster films are set in a recognizable future or near-future, because these films occur on a grander scale than the generally localized disaster films of past eras (26). While exceptions such as the world-ending apocalypse film *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolph Maté, 1951) certainly exist, disaster films on this scale were not as widespread as they are now. Another key difference is that in post-9/11 apocalypse films, the world often actually does end. By this I mean, the apocalyptic event occurs—it is not averted, and characters do not exert narrative agency beyond saving themselves and their families. In many of these films the death toll is in the billions, yet the narrative still figures the ending as positive, because these films are building off a distinctly Christian understanding of culmination and resolution.

Film scholar Wheeler Winston Dixon has described how much of American cinema after 9/11 attempted to reinvigorate senses of American identity and patriotism – in particular focusing on the ways in which many films in the immediate aftermath of the attacks “centered on a desire to replicate the idea of the ‘just war,’ in which military reprisals, and the concomitant escalation of warfare, seem simultaneously inevitable and justified” (Dixon, “Film and Television”, 1). Such an account points to how real political currents – here a neoconservative galvanization of support for war in the Middle East – can be detected within popular culture more broadly. Additionally, some cross-disciplinary scholarship and criticism has described how the consumption of images of destruction in American media has changed – or appeared to change – as a result 9/11.

Many first-hand accounts described the attacks and the images of the towers falling as appearing “like a movie.” In the words of Susan Sontag, after 9/11, ““it felt like a movie’ seems to have displaced the way survivors of a catastrophe used to express the short-term unassimilability of what they had gone through: ‘It felt like a dream”” (Sontag, “Regarding the Pain of Others”, 22). The fact that 9/11 was witnessed and remembered by so many through video footage has created a peculiar situation in which images of fictional destruction now evoke this real catastrophe, and vice versa. After 9/11 films that employed the destruction of sky-scrappers became imbued with new meaning.

Kaplan has argued that films that feature climate disasters that evoke our contemporary moment, such as *Take Shelter* (Jeff Nichols, 2011) and *The Happening* (M. Night Shyamalan, 2008), can be read as “warnings, a kind of ‘memory for the future’” (Kaplan, 13). She contends that these films draw parallels to contemporary climate anxiety deliberately, so as to wake us from our complacency, to call us to action – to tell us that it is not too late to avoid the type of disaster that is figured within the narrative. Kaplan states that this “offers spectators a way to remember what we have now – and may already be losing,” adding that “the invitation may incite viewers to do what they can to avoid such future tragedies or, at least, attend to our desperate reality” (51). This reading of depictions of climate “pre-trauma” is convincing when applied to the types of films that Kaplan discusses in her book: namely fictions that are deeply cynical in their depictions of the End – fictions that imagine anti-climactic apocalypses with no dimension of biblical redemption. This, however, is not the way apocalypse is imagined in any of the films that I have chosen to analyse. The films I will be analysing fit more firmly into a reading that Kaplan partially entertains in her discussion of *Take Shelter*

when she writes “but equally, such devices may make it seem that global warming is beyond our control. It is just happening or already here, and like Curtis [the protagonist of *Take Shelter*] we just wait to be doomed” (38).

Films such as *The Day After Tomorrow*, *War of the Worlds*, *Knowing*, 2012, *San Andreas*, and *Geostorm* imagine unstoppable, preordained apocalypses that media scholar Despina Kakoudaki describes as “non-sentient” (351). This is the primary distinguishing factor between these films and those of the era of “nuclear anxiety” that Sontag wrote about. In that previous era, per Kakoudaki, the “threat of destruction is translated into narratives of political choice,” whereas here the threat of apocalypse does not represent an agent which can be persuaded or reasoned with, or even stopped at all. As a result, these narratives become about little more than survival (351). Despite this, the films are not nihilistic.

Instead, these films rely on a Christian understanding of the end of the world as purposeful and cumulative in order to figure their respective apocalyptic events as forces of social *good*. By figuring the apocalypse as the *absolute* event of human history, to paraphrase Maurice Blanchot, these films adopt a Christian framework that assumes that the apocalypse is an inevitable stepping stone of existence, something that must be endured, and which will give way to a better future. This figuring of the End as positive is reinforced at a formal level in each film through Hollywood conventions of the happy ending – warm colours, triumphant music, reunited families, the promise of a better tomorrow. By imagining unstoppable apocalyptic scenarios of biblical proportions and then drawing implicit or explicit connections to topical anxieties about the real-world

climate situation, these films argue that *if* a climate disaster such as the one featured within the narrative *were* to occur, then it is simply preordained and *meant* to happen.

This thesis demonstrates how an explicitly Christian eschatological current, which has been present in American politics since its foundation and politically re-emerged after 9/11, can be seen in even the most ostensibly secular of mega-budget Hollywood blockbuster films. Most importantly, it is my goal to illuminate the ways in which these films, as a consequence of conflating Christian values and apocalyptic frameworks with contemporary issues of global climate catastrophe, end up reinforcing negative views about climate change and what can or should be done about it. By positing climate apocalypse as inevitable and a force of social good, these films insinuate that climate change is unstoppable, divinely ordained and ultimately perhaps even, in the grand scheme of things, *good*.

Chapter 2:

Knowing's Overt Christian Eschatology

In his review of the 2009 science fiction thriller *Knowing*, critic Roger Ebert sums up what he finds so compelling about the film:

The plot involves the most fundamental of all philosophical debates: Is the universe deterministic or random? Is everything in some way preordained or does it happen by chance? If that questions [*sic*] sounds too abstract, wait until you see this film, which poses it in stark terms: What if we could know in advance when the Earth will end? (Ebert, “*Knowing*”)

Knowing is not the first of the films that I will analyzing to appear after 9/11, nor is it the most financially successful—though it did gross 186 million US dollars on a budget of 50 million. I discuss it first because it is the most overtly biblical. *Knowing* masks a Christian eschatological narrative within a mainstream science fiction thriller, creating a link between science and God rooted in apocalyptic anxiety about modern day climate change. The film provides the clearest example of a post-9/11 disaster film that links impending climate disaster and a redemptive, Christian apocalypse.

Writing in the *Journal of Religion and Film* in April 2009, only a month after the film’s release, Andy Chi Kit Wong asserts that “at its core...[*Knowing*] is actually a retelling of biblical eschatology framed in a modern setting” (17). Chi Kit Wong even advocates for the film’s study to anyone interested in Judeo-Christian conceptions of apocalypse (17). However, Chi Kit Wong’s discussion of the film strikes me as incomplete. I argue that *Knowing* exemplifies a broader popular cultural return to

Christian conceptions of apocalypse, and that the film connects the fatalistic Christian conception of the apocalypse to modern-day anxieties about climate change.

Set primarily in 2009 Massachusetts, *Knowing* follows the story of MIT astrophysicist John Koestler (Nicolas Cage), who has lost his faith in the notion of higher meaning due to the premature death of his wife, who perished in a hotel fire. This event has also strained his relationship with his father, a Christian reverend, as the two cannot reconcile their worldviews. John and his precocious son Caleb (Chandler Canterbury) encounter a page of mysterious numbers in a time capsule that was buried 50 years prior. John eventually discovers that these numbers are not random: they are the dates, latitudes and longitudes, and death tolls of various real-world disasters, including the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In fact, it is the recognizability of this date (9/11/01) that tips John off to the meaning of the sheet of numbers. John shortly thereafter realizes that some of the predictions have not yet occurred and begins to suspect that the final date, which is followed by a mysterious ‘EE’ where the casualty count should be, may signify an extinction-level event – the apocalypse.

John’s theory is confirmed with the help of Diana (Rose Byrne), the daughter of the prophetic girl who inscribed the numbers back in 1959. It is revealed that Diana’s daughter, Abby (Lara Robinson), and Caleb have been chosen by some mysterious higher power to continue human life after the apocalypse occurs. Life on Earth is completely eradicated when a solar flare engulfs the planet. The film concludes with Caleb and Abby, joined by what is implied to be other pairs of humans in the distance, exploring an ethereal new planet complete with a distant “tree of life” – a neo-Garden of Eden that suggests that the destruction of Earth is not truly the end for humanity.

Knowing imagines a preordained apocalypse motivated by natural phenomena that is both unstoppable and, I will argue, figured as ultimately *good*. *Knowing* suggests that inevitable climate catastrophe fits into a larger eschatological narrative of ultimate purpose through its references to Biblical imagery and text, the assertion that history is deterministic, teleological and meaningful, and by reinforcing traditional conservative Christian ideals.

While the natural apocalypse of *Knowing* is out of the control of humans and thus not literally the result of man-made climate change (as it is, for instance, in films like *The Day After Tomorrow*), there are several scenes where characters allude to rising temperatures and uncomfortable climate shifts. For instance, when John visits the museum where he first meets Diana, she fans herself with a museum pamphlet and says to him “I don’t think it’s *ever* been this hot in October.” The topic of climate change and its related symptoms (e.g., erratic weather, anomalous natural disasters, unseasonal warmth/coldness, etc.) has become so ubiquitous today that a line of dialogue such as this carries these connotations. The film eventually reveals that the rising temperatures are due to “increased solar activity,” a scientifically unrealistic explanation. This language nevertheless evokes contemporary discourse on rising global temperatures, and as a result, the film implicitly elicits contemporary anxieties surrounding climate change.

Knowing the Bible

Knowing emphasizes the connection between its depicted natural apocalypse and a purposeful Biblical apocalypse through direct references to Christian eschatology and biblical stories. One example is the characters’ coded names. John, the main character, has a name that is a variation of the Hebrew name Johanan, which means “God is

gracious.” It is also the name of several biblical characters, including John the Apostle and, perhaps more significantly, John the Baptist, who baptized sinners in the River Jordan as a “precursor of Christ himself” (Hanks and Hodges). Caleb, John’s son, shares his name with an early Israelite. According to the book of Numbers, Caleb was one of only two Israelites who set out with Moses from Egypt to survive long enough to see the promised land (*NRSV*, Numbers 26.65). This name fits Caleb’s place within the story – as a representative of the human species as they are transported to a new planet. Abby is a diminutive of Abigail, who is also a Biblical figure in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament – one of the eventual wives of King David (Hanks and Hodges). This connection to the wife of such a divinely chosen biblical figure points to the role Abby will play within the greater plan for humankind, as the conclusion of the film implies that she and Caleb have been chosen as a higher power to repopulate the species.

The two most obvious outliers are Lucinda and Diana, both of whom do not have biblical names; however their names are still of narrative significance. Lucinda, mother of Diana and grandmother of Abby, who prophesized the coming end and whose mystery drives the plot, is a female name of Latin origin that means “light” or “illumination,” a hint at her prophetic abilities. Diana’s name is shared by the Roman goddess of the moon and the hunt, a pagan lineage that, perhaps, hints at her eventual lack of faith in the grand apocalyptic schema. It is even said that in early centuries “some clergymen were reluctant to baptize girls with this pagan name, remembering the riots against St Paul stirred up by worshippers of Diana of the Ephesians” (Hanks and Hodges).

In addition to the characters’ names, *Knowing* reinforces its allusions to Christian theology in directly visual ways. There are four mysterious pale men who stalk Caleb

throughout the narrative. They are at first coded as extraterrestrial and the film ends with them “beaming” Abby and Caleb up to a large spacecraft that transports them to a new realm. These creatures look and behave in an otherworldly fashion. They never speak verbally and rarely physically move. They communicate with Caleb and Abby telepathically, reinforcing their status not only as otherworldly, but also as supernatural beings of some higher power. They are dressed in drab clothing with white gleaming skin and bleached blonde hair and eyebrows. The appearance of these figures evokes a mythically “pure” Aryan lineage and the history of apocalyptic models of racial superiority, such as that of the Third Reich.

Their smooth skin and delicate features also give the figures an androgynous look characteristic of classic portrayals of angels, and their status as agents of prophecy further solidifies this reading. These characters’ status as angels of a divine power is particularly communicated in the scene towards the end of the film when they ferry Abby and Caleb aboard their ship. As John accepts that he cannot join Caleb and Abby on their new journey, he emotionally says goodbye to his son and then steps back and watches as the two children join the four men at the base of their spacecraft where a gyrating shuttle is waiting for them. As Caleb approaches the ship, the four men transform, shedding their human skin and clothes and revealing their true appearance as glowing translucent humanoids with no distinguishable facial features. Light pulsates through them and creates an aura that emanates from their skin. Within their bodies their brains are visible and glowing. One of the figures extends his hand to the children, who accept his gesture timidly and join him directly under the spacecraft, with the other aliens encircling them. Caleb and John share one last goodbye in sign language, and the six figures together

begin to ascend toward the ship as the multi-layered gyrating shuttle-sphere closes around them. The glowing aura that surrounds the aliens begins to transform into the shape of wings flowing from their backs, creating a visual impression of angels ferrying the chosen.

The imagery of the six figures ascending in a beam of light toward the ship is evocative of descriptions of the Christian “rapture,” where it is said that, as a precursor to the apocalypse of Revelations, the believers on Earth will be saved, transported away from Earth where they will be safe from the trials and tribulations that are to come. As written in Thessalonians: “Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air” (*NRSV*, 1 Thess. 4.17). The six are finally enclosed within the sphere and transported to the ship, whose form is uncanny and fluid, and takes a sort of crystal-cone shape of pulsing light and matter. At this moment, the film’s orchestral score crescendos triumphantly; a harmony of horns and heavy strings create an atmosphere of cathartic release, as if this moment is what all of history has been building to. The camera pulls away from earth, tracking the ship that ferries Caleb and Abby, and revealing in the background many other ships that are leaving the planet as well, before all the ships ignite their engines and fly away from the planet, toward an unstated destination.

This scene also evokes imagery from the Book of Ezekiel. According to the Book of Ezekiel in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, God chose Ezekiel, an exile from the tribe of Judah, to warn the Israelites of their impending destruction and to prophecy the eventual rebuilding of a new kingdom and Holy Temple to be ruled over by God for eternity (*NRSV*, Ezek. 36.26-32). The first of Ezekiel’s visions, known as “The Vision of

the Chariot,” outlines Ezekiel’s first interaction with God, who descends on a fiery chariot from Heaven led by four “living creatures.” Ezekiel describes this moment: “Over the heads of the living creatures there was something like a dome, shining like crystal, spread out over their heads. Under the dome their wings stretched out straight, one toward another; and each of the creatures had two wings covering its body” (1.22-23). This imagery seems to directly inform the sequence of Caleb and Abby ascending into the alien ship.

This reading is reinforced by an earlier scene in the film which also explicitly references Ezekiel and his “Vision of the Chariot.” When John and Diana find the prophet Lucinda’s desolate trailer deep within the woods, they discover that she owned a copy of Swiss-born engraver Matthaus Merian’s 1670 depiction of Ezekiel’s “Chariot Vision.” It shows Ezekiel looking toward the heavens and receiving instructions on a scroll directly from the Lord, who is standing within what appears to be the sun, a visual interpretation of the vision Ezekiel described (*NRSV*, Ezek. 1-2).

Due to their apocalyptic tone – describing the impending doom of Israel due to its unwillingness to adhere to God’s will – Ezekiel’s visions are a major text in Judeo-Christian eschatology, particularly because they came (partially) true. Ezekiel lived to see Jerusalem destroyed by the Babylonians, who demolished Solomon’s Temple in 587 BCE. This temple and the city were eventually rebuilt, just as Ezekiel’s visions prophesied. However, the rebuilt temple, often referred to as the Second Temple, was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. The destruction of the Second Temple, in effect, disproves the second part of Ezekiel’s prophecy, which stated that God would oversee the rebuilding and rule of Jerusalem for eternity. As a result, millenarian (and other Zionist

Judeo-Christian sects) often hold that Ezekiel's vision must have been describing the building of a "Third Temple," and that the construction of a Third Jewish temple in Jerusalem is a necessary prerequisite to ushering in the end times.

The film draws connections between Ezekiel and the child Caleb, who throughout the narrative hears sinister voices and is plagued by apocalyptic visions of the world engulfed by fire, both of which we later learn are being telepathically implanted in his brain by the mysterious angel/alien men. However, it is also the engraving of Ezekiel's vision, particularly the image of God within the image of the sun, that prompts John to realize that it is the *sun* – the heavens themselves – that will be the demise of the world.

This revelation comes when John sees that Caleb has been coloring the emblem of Ezekiel's Chariot Vision in with crayons. In particular, he notices that Caleb has focused his attention on coloring the fiery image of the Lord within the sun itself. This moment, coupled with the implications of the language of the Book of Ezekiel, which posits a connection between the "likeness of the glory of the Lord" and the image of the "splendour" of fire, connects the natural, scientifically observable power of the sun and the mythological power of the Lord.

Knowing, in effect, blames the apocalypse on the sun because it is the perfect mediator between God and nature. *Knowing* asserts that, in its awesomeness, the sun is incomprehensible to average human understanding, at least on some higher level beyond scientific observation. John is a professor of astrophysics – a profession that makes him uniquely knowledgeable about the sun – and while it is established that he and his students do in fact possess such knowledge (for instance, they recite its chemical make-up, its surface and core temperatures, etc.), this information proves to be insufficient.

Despite all scientific understanding of the sun, the apocalyptic solar flare that ends life on Earth could not be predicted by practical means – it could only be predicted supernaturally, through the intervention of the prophets of a higher power.

Like God, the sun's scale and power, according to *Knowing*, cannot truly be understood by the average person. This connection is important, because by all accounts, the actual science of the film is basically imaginary; astrophysicist Ian O'Neil even wrote on his popular science blog at the time of release that he “cannot understand how they got solar flares so *wrong*” (O'Neil). The pseudo-scientific explanation of the solar phenomena in *Knowing* is in effect a cover for what is essentially an anti-scientific message, one of divine determination.

Knowing is not interested in the actual science of solar flares, but instead uses solar flares as a manifestation of divine power beyond earthly comprehension. The film positions solar flares as the primary actor in creating the apocalypse, and what better cause than the Sun, source of life and vitality? Just as *Knowing* superimposes science fiction onto a religious story of apocalypse through such things as the aliens also being angels, the film superimposes religion onto natural science itself. It is this connection that allows the film to conflate religious eschatology with real-life concerns about natural phenomena. While the film's apocalyptic solar flare may be quite different than the causes of today's real-life climate change, it nevertheless implants the *idea* of a natural-born apocalypse that is preordained by some higher, mysterious power – one that cannot be stopped, only endured.

What if We Could Know When the World Would End?

As Ebert's quote suggests, *Knowing* pits determinism against chaos and free will. This is a theme that is suggested as early as the opening shot of the film: a static image of the sun overlaid with the sounds of indecipherable, paranoid, whispering voices – voices that we later learn belong to the mysterious pale-skinned aliens – and an ominous monotone drone. This shot cuts to a reverse shot of a little girl, Lucinda, who is staring upward toward the sun as the whispering voices continue, implying that the previous shot was from her point of view, and by extension implying that the voices are diegetic—she can hear them. This sequence of shots positions the sun above Lucinda as an ominous, dominant force—a mysterious entity watching over the characters' lives, suggesting that there may be more to this natural celestial ball of fire than one may initially think, but not yet confirming this theory.

This question of determinism versus randomness is elaborated less than fifteen minutes of screen time later when John, a professor at MIT, gives a lecture on the origins of the universe. John poses this dichotomy as a way of getting his students to think about the topic of their term paper. Using the distance between the sun and Earth as an example, John says:

Now, I want you to think about the perfect set of circumstances that put this celestial ball of fire at *just* the correct distance from our little blue planet for life to evolve...But that's a nice thought, right? Everything has a purpose, an order to it, is *determined*? But then there's the other side of the argument: the theory of randomness, which says its all simply coincidence. The very fact we exist is

nothing but the result of a complex, yet inevitable string of chemical accidents and biological mutations. There is no grand meaning. There's no purpose.

As John recites this speech his tone begins to increasingly somber toward the end, indicating that he believes the world has no purpose—something that is shortly confirmed when he says he thinks “shit just happens.” *Knowing* does not merely pose this existential question—it claims an answer, and that answer is inextricable from the film’s Christian core.

Christian time is inherently deterministic – even if individuals have free will, there are certain events (such as the End) that human beings can have no control over. This is the apocalypse that is figured within *Knowing*, and the predicted and unstoppable catastrophes of Lucinda’s numbers are the proof that the world is beyond human control. Try as he may, John cannot stop these events from happening. One of the best illustrations of this is the sequence in the New York subway station. Shortly after John discovers that the third set of numbers on Lucinda’s inscription are latitude and longitude coordinates of disaster, he realizes that an impending event is set to occur at the intersection of Lafayette and Worth Street in Manhattan. Attempting to alter the events, John calls the authorities and warns them that he believes there will be a terror attack, and then drives to New York himself to intervene. When he arrives, he notices that not only have the police not taken his tip-off seriously enough, failing to close off the intersection, but they are suspicious of *him*. In a panic, he runs into the Lafayette Street subway station and begins to scan for suspicious activity, noticing a man with a conspicuous package who he begins to chase.

It turns out that this man is not a terrorist but a simple shoplifter, and that the real disaster predicted by Lucinda was a train derailment. In a spectacularly violent digital effects sequence, an incoming subway car careens off its tracks and crushes dozens of people on the platform before grinding to a halt, leaving John and the other survivors to exit the station in a daze, covered in dust and debris as firefighters rush past them – a visual evocation of footage from Ground Zero after the 9/11 attacks. Despite knowing exactly when and where the disaster would occur and despite warning the authorities, John was unable to alter the events whatsoever. These events have been *pre*-decided, *pre*-ordained. A higher power is in ultimate control of the world.

John eventually realizes that he cannot save the world. Even though he knows exactly when and how life on Earth will be eradicated, he is powerless to stop it. As Andy Chi Kit Wong points out, many viewers and critics of the film have reacted negatively to this revelation, saying “particularly disturbing is the concept that the world is predetermined for complete annihilation about which humankind can do nothing and are left to the mercy of some otherworldly superpower” (18). Indeed, the unavoidable catastrophe figured in *Knowing* may seem nihilistic; yet the film does not portray it this way. Due to *Knowing*’s Christian theological valence the apocalypse is not imagined as doom but rather as salvation; the beginning of the next chapter for humanity and a necessary stepping stone in human teleology.

When John finally accepts that he is powerless to save humanity himself and gives his son to the alien/angel creatures, he decides to reunite with his father, a Christian preacher from whom he has long been estranged due to differences of opinion regarding religion. *Knowing* manifests its two competing philosophical ideas within these two

characters. John, an atheist, for most of the film represents chaos, however it is implied that he did not always lack faith; rather it was taken from him when his wife was killed in a hotel fire. Unable to reconcile this event within a broader narrative of meaningful existence, John loses faith in the notion of higher purpose. John's adherence to a chaotic worldview is juxtaposed against that of his father, a Christian reverend and, by extension, a believer in higher meaning.

John's father does not appear until the very end of the film, when the two make amends as the apocalypse nears. It is in this final moment that the film reveals its concession: it was never truly about pitting these ideas against one another, but about proving that the answer to life's great question, as posed by John in his lecture in the beginning of the film, was determinism all along. As John reluctantly embraces his father for the first time in many years, his father says to him "This isn't the end, son." John replies: "I know." The End, just as it is written in the bible, is not truly the end; instead it is a new beginning.

Thus, John's character arc is complete: his story is resolved and is given satisfactory narrative meaning within through the "concord" of its beginning and end, through his purposeful arc as a character (Kermode, 8). He has transformed from a cynic, embittered with life because of the premature death of his wife, to a determinist, confident in the notion of greater purpose and meaning, a transformation that is bolstered by his new knowledge that even the most chaotic-seeming of events, such as the death of his wife or even disasters such as 9/11, happened for a reason. This happens despite John's own actions having little effect on the events of the narrative at all – he is not even the one who brings Caleb and Abby to the ship on time, the aliens/angels do. John's

rediscovered sense of meaning comes from the revelation of the knowledge that “The End” is not the end – that some higher power has a cosmic plan for humanity – knowledge that his father and the rest of his family had already gained through their faith in God. Whether or not John understands precisely *what* this plan for humanity is seems to be of little consequence; it is simply enough for him and his family to have faith.

In order to brave the end, then, John chooses to spend his last moments with his mother, father, and sister. The four embrace in silence, with only the sound of a rumbling, incoming cloud of smoke and fire in the distance. There is a cut to the cloud engulfing the street before cutting back to the family as they are engulfed in flames, creating a powerful image of the family together again at the moment of historical termination, awaiting humanity’s next steps. We then see a montage of effects driven-destruction in which New York City is engulfed in a cloud of fire and smoke. This sequence includes images of a few famous landmarks, such as the Empire State building and Times Square being destroyed. Only locations within New York are shown, though the film implies that the rest of the planet is suffering the same fate. Here the audience watches as Earthly civilization and human history is permanently erased in a moment of narrative catharsis. *Knowing* thus uses New York City as a stand-in for this civilization, a detail that may seem minor, but points to the ways in which these films conflate universality with their stories of white middle-class Americans. All of history has been building to this moment – a realization that asserts that human accomplishment is expendable in the face of greater purpose.

The film emphasizes other traditionally conservative Christian notions as well, such as the importance of faith and strong male leadership. While much of the plot

concerns Diana and John uncovering the secrets of Lucinda's numbers together as a team, John makes all major decisions, and is ultimately the one who is right about everything. When Diana loses faith in the apocalyptic prophecy of her mother and attempts to kidnap the children against John's orders (believing they will be safe if they hide in an underground cave network), she is promptly killed because of her reckless driving. Diana is made to suffer because of a lack of faith in both the apocalypse itself and in John's leadership.

The film's final scene, following the immolation of John's family and the rest of Earthly civilization, ultimately frames this apocalypse positively. Abby and Caleb are delivered to their new home: an unnamed majestically pure planet far away from Earth and its suffering – a New Kingdom. The sequence begins with a fade in from the whiteness of the solar flare, transporting the camera to an unspecified location where it slowly cranes vertically to reveal Caleb and Abby amidst an ethereal pastoral field covered in an uncanny CGI wheat, where they deliver two white rabbits that have been given to them by the aliens/angels. While the two were holding these rabbits when they were transported to the ship, it is not clear where they came from nor whether other (unseen) children have ferried pairs of other species to the planet. Nevertheless, the allusion to the biblical story of Noah's ark is still communicated.

Caleb and Abby glance upward and watch as the mysterious crystal-shaped ship leaves them, and then turn and begin to run through the fields, exploring their new home. As Caleb and Abby roam, the camera tracks them and slowly reveals a lone, otherworldly tree in the distance, which seems to signify burgeoning new life.

The camera tilts upward as the two run toward the tree and other ships can be seen leaving the atmosphere in the distance. The non-diegetic musical score crescendos, similarly to the scene in which the two are transported to the ship, however this time the high brass juxtaposed against the deep strings couples with a heavy percussive drum-roll: a sentimental harmony that seems less to impart a feeling of completeness (as before), and more a feeling of endless possibility.



Figure 1: Caleb and Abby await humanity's future at the end of Knowing

Knowing thus constructs a natural apocalypse deliberately parallel to the apocalypse of the Bible. The film mimics Christian models of time through its deterministic story that ends with a new beginning for humankind, and reinforces conservative Christian ideals, such as the importance of the nuclear family unit, the strength and necessity of faith in uncertain times, and the importance of male leadership. Through this complicated conflation of Biblical apocalypse and climate disaster, *Knowing* can be read as insinuating that any apocalypse – including one hypothetically caused by contemporary climate change – is ultimately good and even necessary within the Christian story of redemption and renewal. Furthermore, the film’s conception of apocalypse insinuates that human beings have no control over the coming end, so if

climate disaster *is* real, there is nothing that can be done to prevent it – it is in God's hands.

In the next chapter I will outline how other films in the same generic vein advance this harmful conflation to degrees much more extreme than *Knowing*. While *Knowing* is the most blatantly biblical of these films, other, more apparently secular and financially successful films figure the apocalypse in the same eschatological way. Chapter 3 will examine how *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *War of the Worlds* present similar ideas regarding apocalypse and Christian theology as *Knowing*, and particularly how they reinforce conservative values and the importance of the nuclear family.

Chapter 3: **Family Values and Apocalypse in *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *War of the Worlds***

While *Knowing* provides a model example because it is so overtly religious, masking a theological story within a science fiction one, the other, ostensibly secular films of this cycle also portray a similar message. In this chapter I will demonstrate the ways in which three films of this cycle, *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *War of the Worlds*, reflect and reinforce conservative Christian norms regarding the nuclear family and patriarchal leadership. While on the surface these films are about nothing more than their respective apocalyptic scenarios, serving as vehicles for spectacles of vast destruction, a closer reading demonstrates that at the narrative level these films are about reunifying the traditional family unit. In such a reading, the apocalypse acts merely as an inciting incident that kickstarts the return to traditionalism, reinforcing a Christian notion of apocalypse as cumulative and purposeful. In each of these films, the force of the apocalypse causes an emotionally distant father to win back the affection of his alienated family. The ending of these films are figured as happy, despite the mayhem and mass death that has preceded them. Furthermore, the male protagonists of each film exhibits little agency beyond the plot of reunification. Each character is unable to avert apocalyptic destruction, and as such their narrative arcs are limited to the protection and survival of their families. When coupled with the fact that each of these “apocalypses” is figured as inevitable, unstoppable, and either natural or supernatural in origin, this focus on the power of the apocalypse to “reset” societal norms back to the way they are “supposed to be” is profoundly troubling.

Like *Knowing*, 2012 depicts a preordained Apocalypse caused by the sun. *San Andreas* depicts an earthquake and tsunami on the California coast of “apocalyptic” proportions, and *War of the Worlds* depicts a preordained alien invasion that, I will argue, can be metaphorically read as environmental apocalypse as well. Like *Knowing*, the apocalyptic events of all three films are inevitable and unstoppable, events that must be endured rather than avoided, and all three films use these events as backdrops for their fundamentally conservative Christian stories.

While it is often taken for granted in contemporary political discourse that a focus on traditional family values is simply a conservative position, child and family policy expert Lorraine Fox Harding has shown that surveying conservatives in the U.S. and Britain shows that on issues of parenthood, marriage, and sexuality, conservative politics have historically been mixed and “sometimes in contradiction to family values concerns” (133). Family values issues appeal broadly across strictly partisan lines, and as such while it may be tempting to read an appeal to these issues as targeting a specific demographic (such as conservatives), these issues speak widely to many American audience members as well as those abroad.

Nevertheless, as outlined in the previous chapter, in the United States the explicitly political battle surrounding the traditional nuclear family has been mainly the purview of Christian conservatives – in particular, of the Christian Right, a coalition with the political goal of returning the United States to its roots as a “Christian nation.” Of primary import to these actors is the structure of home life. Members of this political coalition (and their more recent inheritors) largely believe that the nuclear family (e.g., a father, mother, and their children, what the Christian Right refers to as the “natural

family") is a necessary pillar of society and that recent gains in social progressivism, such as women's liberation, racial emancipation, and the gay rights movement, have undermined this structure. Where exactly does this focus on the importance of the traditional family come from? This question is not as easily answered as one may think.

Many passages of the Christian bible provide the blueprints for such a familial ordering, but they do not explicitly make reference to a "natural family" structure. The most direct of these passages comes from Genesis, in which God says to Eve:

I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing;
in pain you shall bring forth children,
yet your desire shall be for your husband,
and he shall rule over you (*NRSV*, Gen. 3.16)

Artist and art critic John Berger has argued that what is striking about this passage is the fact that "the woman is blamed and is punished by being made subservient to the man. In relation to the woman, the man becomes an agent of God" (48). Indeed, such an authoritative creed does give biblical legitimacy to certain *aspects* of the family values politics of these conservative Christians, such as the importance of female subservience to the male patriarch, but it does not actually outline a strict familial structure, nor does it declare that such a structure is of absolute value.

As legal scholars Doris Buss and Didi Herman have pointed out, a lack of specificity regarding familial ordering is the case for all biblical passages that the Christian Right have commonly used as evidence for their interpretation of the "natural" family, including Proverbs 22-23, Ephesians 6, and passages from Deuteronomy. To Buss and Herman, while these various passages do proclaim the importance of childrearing and obeying parental authority, "the idea of the natural family as the basic cornerstone of society is not something easily identified in biblical texts" (3). A

conservative Christian focus on the “traditional” family arose in the late 1970s in reaction to changing societal norms and became a conservative issue more broadly with the tactical allegiance between the Republican party and the Christian Right.

As a result, it is important to recognize the family politics of the films analyzed in this chapter as not simply being conservative, but as also having a distinctly Christian moral undercurrent. Each of these films not only narratively realizes the religious conservative goal of a familial reunification, but also mirrors structures with much stronger biblical connotations, such as the importance of the father figure who acts as an agent of God. The notion of the father figure acting as an agent of God also helps to explain how the apocalyptic events figured within each of these films can be read as accommodating a Christian understanding of The End as purposeful. Each of these films begins with a family in disarray; namely, a working-class father who has lost sight of what is truly important in life, his family. In each case the protagonist’s ex-wife has moved on and is either dating or married to a new man – often one who is wealthier – who has assumed the role of father in his children’s lives. In each case the biological father is aware of this issue and attempts to win his family’s affection, but to no avail, for he has lost the ability to connect with his children. The father is only able to win over his family’s love through his ingenuity in the face of apocalyptic catastrophe. This is key: it is only due to the conflict posed by the apocalyptic event that the father can overcome his familial problems, returning the family to their traditional order. In both *2012* and *San Andreas* this process involves the literal death of the step-father so that the true patriarch can resume his position, whereas in *War of the Worlds* this transformation is more

metaphorical and involves the true father ferrying his children through the apocalypse to their biological mother.

All three films resonate with the Flood narrative in Genesis. In this story God becomes disillusioned with humankind, seeing that “all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth” (*NRSV*, Gen. 6.12). This vague condemnation is elucidated in the New Testament several times, most notably in the Book of Matthew: “For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark” (*NRSV*, Matt. 24.38). As punishment for humankind’s disobedience, God chooses to eradicate all life on earth, except for Noah and his family, who alone had “found favor in the sight of the LORD” (Gen. 6.8), and the animals chosen by them. Noah is given instructions on how to survive the coming catastrophe, which will take the form of a global flood, by building an ark, and is then tasked with preserving a pair of each living creature on Earth with which to repopulate the planet after the flood has subsided.

God’s justification for the eradication of all life on earth – namely that human beings were acting in hedonistic ways – gives insight into the ways in which a Christian fundamentalist might justify divinely-ordained climate catastrophe. As we have seen, many American Christian fundamentalists already believe that social liberalism represents an affront to God’s “natural family” values, and some would indeed describe modern progressive values as hedonistic in their own right. With this in mind, the focus of the narratives of *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *War of the Worlds* on reunifying this traditional family order in the face of apocalypse becomes steeped in biblical tradition. *2012* provides the clearest example of such a narrative, and as such I will begin my

analysis there. I will then demonstrate the ways that *San Andreas* and *War of the Worlds* also exemplify these themes and the significance of their variations.

2012 and the Apocalypse as a Force of Social Good

The film *2012* was inspired by a series of eschatological predictions that the world would end on December 21, 2012. The most common of these predictions was based on the Mesoamerican Long Count Calendar, used by many Mesoamerican cultures including the Maya, which ended on this date, a fact which was interpreted by some as the Mayans having predicted the end of the world (Little). The film utilized the buzz surrounding this prediction as built-in marketing and presented a scenario in which unexplainable solar phenomena caused the earth's core to heat up, leading to increasingly erratic natural disasters that eventually cause a global flood, killing most life on earth.

While this premise was ostensibly a story about global catastrophe in which people the world over would need to band together to survive, *2012* is primarily concerned with one particular white American family who begin the narrative fractured and then reunify in spite (or in fact because of) the power of the apocalypse. While there are many characters, most of the emotional force of the narrative is reserved for this reunification, which coincides with the climax of the apocalyptic disaster. Even the ancillary plotlines of the supporting characters are almost entirely concerned with families either uniting or being torn apart as a consequence of their actions. This narrative focus reinforces beliefs about the importance of family values and the power of the apocalypse as purposeful and cumulative. The primary fractured family allegorically represents disintegrating moral values and it is only because of the apocalypse that these values are reverted back to their “natural” state. The final image of the film displays the

family reunified as the sun rises and harmonious music plays, signaling that an equilibrium has been reached and that humanity can go on to tackle a new day. Thus, despite the incomprehensible chaos – and billions of deaths – that have preceded this moment, the apocalypse is ultimately figured as a positive force that enacts social change for the better.

The film opens with shots of a series of large solar flares which begin to engulf the frame before there is a cut to present-day India (that is, India in 2009). Here, at the Naga Deng copper mine, an American geologist named Adrian Helmsley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) learns from local scientists that these abnormally large solar flares are increasing the number of neutrinos which are causing an unspecified physical reaction within the Earth's core, heating it up, something previously thought impossible. Helmsley and the local scientists believe that this will cause catastrophic climate disaster in the near future. Helmsley relays this information to the U.S. government, and over the course of the next few years the G8 nations, with the addition of China, begin a secretive project to ensure the survival of select members of the human species aboard large high-tech arks.

In Los Angeles in the year 2012, struggling author Jackson Curtis (John Cusack), who daylights as a limo driver for a Russian billionaire, has a difficult relationship with his children and is separated from his wife Kate (Amanda Peet), who is now dating a handsome plastic surgeon named Gordon (Thomas McCarthy). While on a camping trip with his kids, Jackson meets an eccentric conspiracy theorist named Charlie (Woody Harrelson) who tells him that the world will soon end, and that the government has known for years. While Jackson initially does not believe Charlie, soon thereafter cataclysmic disaster begins. Jackson learns of the arks from Charlie, which are located

somewhere in the Himalayas. Fearing it is their only option for survival, he and his family set out to reach this location by any means necessary. The group narrowly escape death many times before they finally reach the arks. Despite not initially being allowed aboard, they manage to sneak in with the help of a local Tibetan monk who was part of the construction team. As a gigantic tsunami wave approaches, the ark that Jackson and his family are aboard malfunctions and cannot close its main door. The group help to unjam the door and are successful, but not without suffering casualties: Gordon is killed, and Jackson is presumed dead. He survives, though, and reunites with his family. After 27 days, Jackson's family and the other survivors gather on the deck of the ark and gaze out upon the rising sun, awaiting the future.

The film's allusions to the flood narrative of the Book of Genesis are immediately apparent: namely, humanity survives aboard a series of large arks which also contain animals (as well as key historical and cultural artifacts), the protagonist's son is named Noah, the film's coda takes place 27 days after the apocalypse, which is the same amount of time that Noah and his family lived aboard the ark (*NSRV*, Gen. 8.14), and there is even an ocean liner featured in one of the film's subplots named "Genesis." However, unlike *Knowing*, which pitted epistemological chaos against theologically motivated determinism, here the biblical references appear to be more superficial. While the apocalypse figured in *2012* is implied to have been predicted long ago, this prediction was not made by Christians, and unlike *Knowing* the narrative does not explicitly argue that every single event in human history has been leading to this moment. Still, these biblical allusions are meaningful.

While *2012* is not an exact retelling of the story of Noah featured in Genesis, a comparison to this story does elucidate the ways in which it can be read as conservatively Christian. Just as God privileges Noah and his family in the biblical story, Jackson's family is given preferential focalization in *2012*. While they are not the only characters whose perspectives guide the narration, Jackson's focalization is given inordinate screen-time, and because of this he assumes the role of main character. Jackson is given narrative preference despite the film ostensibly being about globetrotting world-wide catastrophe, something the marketing focused on. For instance, many posters for the film featured various world landmarks in disarray, such as the *Christ the Redeemer* statue in Brazil being upended, the Himalayan mountains being consumed by a massive tsunami, and Los Angeles in ruin, all with the caption "We Were Warned" emblazoned at the top of the image, implying a collective experience (and perhaps alluding to real world warnings about climate change). Through the narrative focus on Jackson's story amid this world-wide catastrophe, he becomes a kind of agent of God, similar to how Berger describes Adam as an agent of God in the Garden of Eden narrative – he is "chosen" by the narrative in a manner similar to the way that Adam is "chosen" by God.

While a pragmatic explanation for why Jackson and his family are chosen to be the protagonists of *2012* may simply be that their story would appeal most easily and broadly to the average American audience member, it then becomes paramount to examine *who* exactly the film envisions as its surrogate for the average American. Jackson and his family are white, middle-class Americans who live in the suburbs, but even more crucially, they are a fractured family. Such a decision puts their familial issues front and centre – it is these personal issues that become what the film is truly *about*.

When Jackson is first introduced as a character, he is late for a scheduled camping trip with his children. While good-intentioned, Jackson is too focused on his work as an author to make time for his children; this was also the primary reason for the couple's separation. When Jackson arrives to pick his kids up, his ex-wife Kate must specifically remind him not to spend the entire trip on his computer and he isn't even aware that his own daughter still wets the bed, prompting Kate to say to him "maybe that's something you should know."

Jackson has a much more antagonistic relationship with his son Noah than with his daughter Lilly. This theme is also found in *War of the Worlds*; in both films the most damaging consequence of the fractured family is that the future patriarch suffers from lack of a strong male role model. Noah refers to his father by his first name and is reminded by Jackson to call him "dad." He also seems to have a better relationship with Kate's boyfriend Gordon. While on the camping trip, Jackson sees that Noah has a cellphone that Gordon gave him, and when Jackson tells Noah that using such a device should be discussed "as a family," Noah responds defiantly: "What family?"

Despite Jackson's tumultuous relationship with his family, his status as a hardworking middle-class man who must fight for survival makes him relatable to typical American viewers. After all, it is implied that Jackson's wife left *him*, and she is the one who has already ostensibly moved on. That she has effectively "replaced" Jackson with a vain, upper-middle-class plastic surgeon adds to the insult. In this way, Kate's new boyfriend Gordon can be seen as the consequence of Jackson losing sight of his true purpose as head of the family.

Gordon's status as a temporary figure who must be usurped is reinforced within the narrative multiple times, particularly in the scene when he and Kate are grocery shopping. Gordon antagonizes Kate over her previous decisions to stay married to Jackson for as long as she did and insults his work as a writer, calling his book "junk." Gordon also reveals that Kate gave up her acceptance to medical school so that she could be a mother. Kate becomes defensive of both her decision to follow a traditional gendered path and her choice of Jackson as a romantic partner. It seems clear that Kate still has romantic feelings for her ex-husband, and that it would be possible for him to "win" her back if only he focused on their family. Through this family's status as surrogate for the disrupted "natural family," *2012* insinuates that the forces responsible for the disintegration of family values can be overcome.

Kate's lingering feelings for Jackson seem to be something that Gordon is acutely aware of and wants to eliminate. At the exact moment that Gordon tells Kate "I just feel like there's something pulling us apart," the apocalyptic catastrophe begins and a large rift opens in the ground between them. The apocalypse here acts literally as an inciting incident, the moment of change in an otherwise static equilibrium that kickstarts the reunification of the family. While Gordon's characterization does become slightly more nuanced as the plot progresses, he serves mostly a means to an end. He does help the family in their quest for survival – namely because he can fly an airplane, which helps the group escape Los Angeles – but once Jackson returns to rescue Kate and Gordon from their home, Gordon essentially becomes an obstacle in the way of Jackson's quest to win back Kate's love.

Nowhere is this reinforced stronger than towards the end of the film when Gordon is killed. While the family is attempting to sneak aboard one of the arks, Gordon falls and is crushed between two of the large industrial gears that open the main door, despite Jackson attempting to save him – a grisly death that is all but instantly forgotten by the other characters. When Kate learns of his death, she is momentarily shocked and insists that the group must go back for him, but quickly shifts her focus to the safety of her children. Later, when she believes that Jackson has drowned in his effort to unjam the door of the ark, her reaction in stark contrast is deeply emotional, something that is formally highlighted and emphasized. The camera cuts between Kate's face and the other characters in close-up as they plead for Jackson to remerge from the water, and the non-diegetic score, a mixture of heavy stings and percussion, falls to an emotional low before a triumphant crescendo signals that Jackson has in fact survived. In this moment of catharsis the remaining characters are alerted both to the fact that Jackson is alive, and to the fact that he has succeeded in his mission of unjamming the door to the ark. In the following celebration, the family reunites without a single mention of Gordon or his death, for he has both physically and metaphorically been replaced by Jackson.

Even though billions of people on Earth have been killed, this moment is portrayed as triumphant, revealing that beyond the reunification of this particular family and the survival of the few aboard the arks, nothing else matters – the apocalypse has come and gone and fulfilled its purpose – the world is now again at equilibrium. Everyone aboard the ark appears joyous, even though one would expect many – or most – of them to be traumatized. Ancillary plotlines, such as that of scientist Adrian Helmsley, are resolved in similar fashion to that of Jackson's family, with Helmsley forming a new

relationship with Laura (Thandie Newton), the daughter of the now deceased President.

The film ends shortly thereafter with some final narrative loose ends being resolved:

Jackson embraces his family aboard the deck of the ark and tells them that wherever they are together “is home” and Lilly reveals that she no longer wets the bed.

Jackson, Kate, and their two children are framed gazing off into the distance, tinted in warm orange colors as the non-diegetic score once again triumphantly crescendos, reincorporating previous motifs into their most emotionally powerful form. The image cuts to an aerial view of three of the arks travelling in formation and begins to pull backward until it has travelled all the way into outer space, revealing that the arks are headed towards Africa, the only remaining land above water, birthplace of the human species.



Figure 2: Jackson and family await their future at the end of 2012

Just as in *Knowing*, the natural apocalypse of 2012 is figured as unstoppable but ultimately purposeful. In both films the apocalypse is predicted long before it occurs, and the primary narrative culminates in the reunification of a family as they await humanity's next steps. Of course, one fundamental difference is that in *Knowing* the family (with the exception of Caleb) is killed in the apocalypse, whereas in 2012 they survive. While this

is certainly a noteworthy difference, what is most interesting is that these endings are fundamentally not coded as different. In both cases there is a sense of narrative completeness that is reinforced through formal bracketing techniques (e.g., reincorporating musical motifs, warm colours, etc.) that signals a hopeful conclusion. In both films, the plot concludes with the reunification of the family, and their survival or death doesn't radically alter the positivity of this outcome. As humanity sets off for a new tomorrow, they have learned not to take each other for granted, and as such the apocalypse functions as a positive force that has effectively reset family norms to their proper (traditional) status.

In *2012*, the apocalypse, whose symptoms bear similarities to forecasts of real-world climate catastrophe (e.g., flooding, increasingly devastating natural disasters, etc.) is not once figured as something that can be avoided. This in conjunction with its role as positive force of social change should be seen as an alarming conflation of real-world climate change and biblical eschatological redemption. *2012*'s saccharine ending in the face of global genocide reinforces the notion of the apocalypse as an ordained force of good; something that should not be feared but welcomed as a force capable of reverting humankind to its proper state – which means a return to the values espoused by Christian fundamentalism. Almost all of these themes can also be seen in *San Andreas* and *War of the Worlds*, with minor variations. *San Andreas* emphasizes the importance of masculinity and strong male leadership to an even greater degree. This is highlighted in particular through the casting of Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson, a body builder and professional wrestler, in the starring role.

Strong Male Leadership and *San Andreas*

While the bible does not actually describe what the Christian Right refers to as the “natural family,” it does lay out gendered roles. To return to Berger for a moment: from the outset of Genesis – the beginning of the bible’s “narrative” – man is given agency over woman. Whether interpreted literally or as a morality myth, the story of Adam and Eve is profoundly influential in fundamentalist interpretations of Christian theology and provides much of the biblical legitimization of family values politics. *San Andreas* has a particularly strong emphasis on male leadership. While the apocalypse in *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *War of the Worlds* always functions as the inciting incident that kickstarts a return to the traditional family unit, the power to enact this change lies solely in the ability of the father to exhibit his worth, to *prove* that this structure is desirable. In each of these films it is either explicitly stated or implied that the family dynamic has failed *because* of the father’s failure to fulfill his simultaneous role as provider and caregiver; namely, the father has failed to raise his children due to an overemphasis on career.

This is the case in *2012* with Jackson’s pathological need to work on his writing and is even more overt in *San Andreas*. That these films emphasize the importance of the father as nurturer is interesting, because in the Euro-American tradition the father is supposed to focus on work while the mother stays home to raise the children. While the primary reason for these films utilizing the distant father as a narrative device is likely so that the rift between the husband and wife is something that is easily remediable – i.e. it creates a scenario in which it is believable that the wife would still have feelings for her ex-husband and easily accept him back if he proves his commitment to their family – it is worth noting that the family dynamic that all of these films envision as desirable is

actually the result of feminist activism. In many ways Ray Gaines (Dwayne Johnson), the main character of *San Andreas*, is the perfect husband figure in a Euro-American “traditional” family unit – he provides for his family, is strong, trustworthy, intuitive, etc. Ray’s failings come entirely from his drifting away emotionally, and as such his character arc is largely an internal one.

Set almost entirely in the areas surrounding the San Andreas fault line in California, *San Andreas* follows the story of Ray, a helicopter search-and-rescue pilot for the Los Angeles Fire Department. Gaines is committed to his work and as a result his home life has suffered; he and his wife Emma (Carla Gugino) are in the midst of a divorce and she is already dating a successful engineer and businessman named Daniel (Ioan Gruffudd). Ray and Emma have a daughter, Blake (Alexandra Daddario). It is soon revealed that she had a sister who drowned in a rafting accident years prior, a traumatic event that Ray blames himself for and which contributed to he and Emma’s marital problems.

At Cal Tech, a seismologist named Lawrence Hayes (Paul Giamatti) discovers that the San Andreas Fault line is shifting, an event previously thought impossible, which will lead to a series of devastating earthquakes, the likes of which have never been seen. He attempts to warn others but before he can a devastating quake hits Los Angeles. Ray rescues Emma from atop a skyscraper using his helicopter, and the two set out to find Blake, who is in San Francisco with Daniel. Another quake hits San Francisco; in the chaos Daniel abandons Blake but she is rescued by two brothers that she met earlier, Ben Taylor (Hugo Johnstone-Burt) and his younger brother Ollie (Art Parkinson). Ray and Emma reach San Francisco as it is struck by another quake – the largest in human history

– which destroys the entire city. Somewhere on the other side of the city, Daniel is killed as he is crushed by a shipping container. Ray and Emma eventually find Blake trapped in a downtown building which was designed by Daniel. In the ensuing chaos Blake is presumed to have drowned, but almost by miracle Ray heroically saves her and is able to revive her. Blake begins a romantic relationship with Ben, and Ray and Emma rekindle their romance.

Like *2012*, *San Andreas* utilizes the apocalyptic event as an inciting incident for what is essentially a story of family reunification. At the outset of the story Ray is supposed to drive Blake to San Francisco but is unable to because of work – the first of the devastating earthquakes has struck the Hoover Dam in Nevada and he must aid in the rescue and clean up. As such, Daniel offers to take Blake in Ray's stead, further replacing his role as father figure for Blake. When Ray learns this, it coincides with his learning that Daniel and Emma are moving in together, a revelation that clearly hurts him, signaling to the viewer that while the two are separated, Ray still has feelings for his ex-wife. After their meeting Ray returns home and sentimentalizes over pictures and objects from his past that remind him of his family, formally opening the narrative thread of reunification. Like in *2012*, though, this cannot happen until the apocalyptic event begins. At a level of story and narration, *San Andreas* reinforces the notion that, try as he may, Ray is losing his family to this new patriarchal figure and short of a miracle there is nothing he can do about it. While it is implied that the separation was primarily his fault, the viewer's sympathy is meant to belong to Ray, because he is the figure of primary focalization and the agent of the narrative.

Unlike *2012*, however, there is an added dimension to Ray's shortcomings as father figure that he must overcome: his failure to save his other daughter, Mallory, from drowning. This is a fact that haunts Ray and clearly stands between him and Emma, and as such he must redeem himself in the eyes of both himself and his family before he can resume his position as true patriarch of the family unit. Importantly, though, it is implied that Emma does not blame Ray for Mallory's death; the failure to save her is a burden carried only by Ray himself. As a result, the power of the apocalyptic event becomes crucial – it is a necessary catalyst for Ray to demonstrate his value to both himself and his family, and by extension, the value of their family remaining together.

Ray demonstrates this value through sheer superhuman ability in the face of the apocalyptic catastrophe. While Cusack's character in *2012* demonstrates some superhuman driving ability, Ray repeatedly demonstrates spectacular strength, athleticism, adaptability, and ingenuity: he rescues Emma in his helicopter from atop a skyscraper in the middle of a massive earthquake, parachutes with her when the helicopter malfunctions, guides her to their daughter in San Francisco, and utilizes his skills to save Blake from drowning. *San Andreas* contrasts these masculine blue-collar qualities against Daniel's stereotypical white-collar shortcomings – he is a coward, selfish, greedy, etc. – again, like *2012*, reinforcing an appeal to working-class audiences who are inclined to find more worth in a down-to-earth character like Ray than a privileged, wealthy character like Daniel.

This is epitomized in the diametric reactions that Ray and Daniel have when the apocalypse strikes. Daniel, who is with Blake at the moment of catastrophe, immediately abandons her, thinking of only himself, whereas Ray's instantaneous reaction, despite

being miles away, is to immediately seek out his family and save them. Whereas in *2012* there is no definitive moment where Kate decides to rekindle her love with Jackson over Gordon (she simply defaults to Jackson once Gordon has been killed), it is specifically when Emma is saved by Ray and shortly thereafter learns that Blake has been abandoned that she disavows Daniel, going so far as to threaten his life. While she never explicitly learns of his fate, there is an isolated sequence in which the audience witnesses Daniel's death, but not before he is seen killing an innocent person for their shelter – an act that seems to paint Daniel as almost comically villainous, so that his imminently violent death can be cathartic. While *2012* did see to Gordon's gruesome death in an almost malicious manner, here there is a fatalism to Daniel's character that feels baked-in to the narrative fabric; almost as if by virtue of existing and encroaching on another man's "territory" he deserves to be killed.

San Andreas thus ends, much like *2012*, with the apocalypse subsided and the family reunified. Ray has succeeded in saving Blake – in a manner remarkably similar to his past failure to save Mallory – literally bringing her back to life and solidifying the familial reunification, fully winning himself over in the eyes of his ex-wife. The family embrace at an aid station atop a hill and watch as the sun sets on this fateful day, the film once again reasserting with full force that the apocalypse – which has just eradicated countless people – has served an ultimately positive purpose. Unlike *2012*, though, here there is a much stronger emphasis on the role played by the father figure in bringing the family back together. This is reinforced even through the blocking of the family as they gaze over the carnage in Figure 3. As Blake and Ollie approach the others, Ray places his arm around them, literally pulling the family together whilst positioning himself in the

middle, his towering figure quite literally a pillar that the rest of the characters use as support. Whereas in *2012* Jackson was able to save his family through seemingly miraculous luck and teamwork, here Ray has almost singlehandedly brought his family back together through pure masculine power, the apocalyptic event serving as the catalyst he needed to be able to do so.



Figure 3: Ray and his family reunite at the aid station in San Andreas

While not the true apocalypse of *Knowing* or *2012*, the incomprehensible size of the earthquakes figured within *San Andreas* serve a similar narrative function and operate on such a scale that they are certainly apocalyptic. Furthermore, like the apocalypses of *Knowing* and *2012*, these apocalyptic earthquakes are inevitable – predicted by Lawrence Hayes near the outset of the film when he ominously promises “it’s not a matter of *if*, but *when*.” Despite this fatalism and the countless deaths, the apocalyptic event has spurred Ray to bring his family back together, the film thus reasserting that this fatalism should not be feared but anticipated, for it is a force of social good – it reminds us of what is truly important.

As *Knowing*, *2012*, and *San Andreas* all illustrate, a fundamental feature of this apocalyptic disaster narrative is stress on the importance of family values and strong male

leadership, with each film emphasizing different facets of this dynamic in different ways.

I turn now to *War of the Worlds* to show how these themes can be explicitly linked to a post 9/11 America and the uncertainty that permeated its culture and daily life.

Post 9/11 Family Values and *War of the Worlds*

War of the Worlds is a 2005 science fiction thriller directed by Steven Spielberg and adapted from the famous 1898 H.G. Wells novel *The War of the Worlds*. The film's narrative, which differs in many ways from that of the novel, is very similar to the previous two films: at its core it is a story of family values masked in an apocalyptic scenario in which an estranged father figure reunites his broken family by ferrying his children to safety and thus re-earning their trust. Unlike *2012* and *San Andreas*, which are largely derided as being of poor quality and thus neglected by critics, writing on *War of the Worlds* is plentiful. As many scholars and critics have discussed, given its relative temporal proximity to the attacks of September 11, 2001 (it was released in June 2005), and its status as not only a disaster film but an invasion narrative, *War of the Worlds* is often seen as an allegory for domestic terror (Sanchez-Escalona; Breznican; Ellis). The theme of terrorism is referred to in multiple lines of dialogue such as, for instance, Rachel (Dakota Fanning) asking hysterically if it's "the terrorists" who are responsible for the mayhem when the aliens first arrive. While there is certainly much that is interesting in these readings, of primary import to the project at hand is not that *War of the Worlds* can be read as an allegory for terrorism, but that it illustrates the ways in which this cycle of post-9/11 disaster films make explicit reference to that event as a significant historical moment.

Unlike the novel, which follows the story of an unnamed narrator and his wife, the 2005 film focuses intently the relationship between a relatable father and his children. Part of the reason for this is *War of the Worlds*' status as an auteurist text, helmed by Steven Spielberg, famous for his portrayal of family dynamics and Americana. Spielberg said in 2005 in relation to the film: "We live under a veil of fear that we didn't live under before 9/11. There has been a conscious emotional shift in this country," adding that he wanted *War of the Worlds* "to be a very personal story about a family fleeing for its life. And a father trying to protect his two kids — a father who isn't much of a father but has to catch up along the way" (Breznican).

As Spielberg's quote suggests, more than any other film of this cycle, *War of the Worlds* illustrates the connection between conservative anxiety about the decline of the "natural" family and anxiety about the 9/11 attacks. Like *2012* and *San Andreas*, *War of the Worlds* utilizes an unstoppable and preordained apocalypse as a backdrop for its fundamentally human story about social-cultural norms and conventions. As in those films, the apocalypse acts as catalyst for a return to traditional norms, a positive force for enacting social change in spite of its innate chaos and tragedy. Further, the film ultimately insinuates that humanity is privileged in their position on Earth, having staked out an evolutionary claim on the planet that cannot be shaken, no matter the threat. In this way, the apocalyptic alien attack of the film can be read as a metaphor for a number of fears and anxieties percolating within the culture. While terrorism and the threat of invasion are certainly the most obvious, buoyed by the fact that the aliens in the film are unreasonable and mysterious, seemingly bent on bloodlust and enslavement with no consideration of empathy, another issue popular at the time was that of climate change.

Premiering shortly after *The Day After Tomorrow* and shortly before Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, *War of the Worlds* was released into a cultural moment of the early 2000s that Despina Kakoudaki characterizes as demarcated by "environmental danger, political responsibility, and global connectivity" (350). While Kakoudaki was writing in relation to *The Day After Tomorrow* and its warnings of global climate change, the same type of awareness can be said to characterize *War of the Worlds* albeit in a more localized manner.

The film follows the story of longshoreman Ray Ferrier (Tom Cruise), a single father of two who lives in New Jersey and has a significantly stronger relationship with his young daughter Rachel than his older son Robbie (Justin Chatwin). The narrative begins with Ray having custody of his children for a weekend, where it is established that he is forgetful (he is late to pick them up) and irresponsible (his house is in disrepair, he keeps almost no food in the fridge, etc.). Shortly into their weekend an unnatural storm looms over their neighbourhood and is followed by erratic bursts of lightning. Soon thereafter gigantic alien ships rise out of the ground and begin eradicating the local population. Ray and his children escape and attempt to trek cross-country to Boston, where his ex-wife is located. They have several more run-ins with the alien attackers on their way; frustrated that they are running rather than fighting, Robbie joins a military counterattack in defiance of Ray's orders and is presumed killed in the ensuing battle. Ray and Rachel are given shelter by a local man named Harlan (Tim Robbins), who seems to have lost his mind.

Ray is forced to kill Harlan when his incessant screaming nearly alerts the aliens to their location. Shortly thereafter Ray and Rachel are captured by one of the alien ships

and learn that the creatures are harvesting human blood for some unclear terraforming purpose. Ray is able to destroy the alien ship he and Rachel are held captive on with a hand grenade found on one of the other abductees and the two continue their journey, finally arriving in a desolate Boston. While there, Ray points out to a nearby soldier that it appears as though the alien ships' defences have disappeared, and a local military unit promptly begins fighting back, their weapons effective now for the first time. Ray delivers Rachel to his ex-wife, and Robbie appears, having miraculously survived and beaten them there. Ray and Robbie embrace, and a non-diegetic voice over alerts the viewer that the aliens' immune systems were vulnerable to microbes on Earth, a shortcoming that was their ultimate downfall.



Figure 4: Ray and Robbie reunite in War of the Worlds

A reading of the alien invasion as at least partially a metaphor for environmental anxiety seems evident when we take into consideration that the alien invasion of the film is forecasted by mysterious storms and erratic, unexplainable natural phenomena like lightning that strikes the same location in rapid succession and that makes the ground

cold, rather than hot. Furthermore, it is eventually revealed that the alien ships were constructed in the distant past and were waiting below the earth for years. This imbues the film with an anxiety about the very ground we walk on and links the alien invasion inextricably with a sense of uneasiness about our place as humans within the world itself; it reinforces fears that there is much we do not know or understand about the planet on which we live.

This reading is reinforced most strongly through the narration which opens and closes the film, orated by Morgan Freeman in a non-diegetic role. The narrator begins the film by likening human beings to the microbes that multiply within a drop of water and claims that in their hubris humankind believed they were permitted to carry out their lives in isolation, free from external threat. While the ensuing narrative of alien invasion seems to disprove this hubristic axiom, it is telling that the aliens are eventually killed not by human counter-attack but by the planet itself, unable to adapt to its delicate ecosystem. The narrator then closes the film with the following speech:

From the moment the invaders arrived, breathed our air, ate and drank, they were doomed. They were undone, destroyed, after all of man's weapons and devices had failed, by the tiniest creatures that God, in His wisdom, put upon this Earth. By the toll of a billion deaths man had earned his immunity, his right to survive among this planet's infinite organisms. And that right is ours against all challenges. For neither do men live, or die, in vain.

This speech is paraphrased from the original novel, but in the context of the 2005 film, when juxtaposed with the preceding narrative which draws intentional allusions to post 9/11 America, and, like before, ultimately figures the apocalypse as a force of good in

which a father “who isn’t much of a father but has to catch up along the way” ultimately succeeds in reuniting his family, it has the effect of insinuating that the apocalypse is not something to fear. While the narrator’s speech may be similar in tone and sentiment to that of the novel, the addition and importance in the 2005 film of the fatherhood subplot imbues it with new meaning. There is an appeal to higher authority in the speech, not only to God, but also to humankind’s inherent worth. In the context of the plot of reunification that has just preceded this moment, there is the unmistakable sense that the film imbues fatherhood and family as some of the very things that give humanity its essence.

The film further implies that the apocalypse has the strength to unite – in fact it is through the deaths of at least a billion people that mankind “earns” this ability. Thus, more than perhaps any other film in the cycle, *War of the Worlds* deliberately evokes 9/11 as an apocalyptic event in order to assert that such a catastrophe has the power to actually be *good*. By drawing allusions to environmental, political, social, and cultural anxieties of the moment, the film attempts to rediscover American values – particularly those related to the family – as a way of repurposing said anxiety to positive effect. While the environmental dimensions of the apocalypse are not as overt as the other films analyzed, the film nevertheless narratively and formally reinforces the same fundamental principles.

War of the Worlds employs a Christian understanding of apocalypse as purposeful to fulfill an explicitly political goal. While on the surface this goal may be benign or even admirable – attempting to make the most out of a period of fear and anxiety, to repurpose a sense of uncertainty to positive effect – it has the perhaps unintentional consequence of

asserting that *any* such apocalyptic force is survivable and can be thought of as similarly positive. In the following chapter I will finally analyze how this model of apocalypse reinforces unhelpful understandings of climate change through an analysis of both *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm*, in which the same figuring of apocalypse is applied directly to real-world climate change.

Chapter 4:

Where's the Global Warming?

Climate Change in *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm*

While I have shown how post-9/11 disaster films touch climate change through allusion, in this chapter I will analyze the only two films of this cycle that employ a version of real-life climate change as the apocalyptic event itself: *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm*. I argue that these two films are the most harmful of the films I am analyzing because they represent climate change within an implicitly Christian apocalyptic model, which has the effect of transforming it into an apocalyptic force of good. *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm* each present climate change as a solution rather than a threat to the social order, utilizing a climate-driven apocalypse as the inciting incident that kickstarts a plot of familial reunification similar to *2012*, *San Andreas*, and *War of the Worlds*. Both films, in different ways, mythologize climate change and present it as no different than the fictional apocalypses of those other films. By representing existing climate change directly but otherwise employing the same narrative model I have described, these films contribute even more strongly to misleading right-wing discourses on climate change. These films explicitly reinforce the notion that climate change is unpreventable but can be survived and finally, that it ultimately acts as a positive social force. By employing a real-world phenomena as their apocalyptic backdrops for fantastic stories, *The Day After Tomorrow* and *Geostorm* equate real-life climate change with fantasy and science fiction.

Each film achieves this end through different means. *The Day After Tomorrow* is, on some level, a well-intentioned warning about real-world climate change, with some of

the dialogue seemingly written with the express purpose of explaining climate science to uninformed viewers. For instance, Jack (Dennis Quaid), the protagonist of the film, explains to a UN panel: “The Northern Hemisphere owes its temperate climate to the North Atlantic Current. Heat from the sun arrives at the equator and is carried north by the ocean, but global warming is melting the polar ice caps and disrupting this flow. Eventually it will shut down, and when that occurs, there goes our warm climate.” While the film oversimplifies some of this science, a fact that led to much ridicule when it was released, being variously described as “overheated environmentalism,” “profoundly silly,” and “fantastically insincere,” its explanations for climate change are based in reality and may even be more accurate than critics at the time were aware (Orr; Ebert, “The Day After Tomorrow”; Bradshaw; Mack). The problem with *The Day After Tomorrow* and its impact on perceptions of climate change lies not in its scientific accuracy but rather in the cinematic dramatization of climate change as apocalypse. By figuring climate change as fantastic and a force of social good, the film reinforces the same religiously conservative framework as the others but makes the link between a religious conception of apocalypse and climate change even more explicit.

In contrast, *Geostorm*’s narrative begins with apocalyptic climate change having already occurred. The film opens with shots of extreme weather events, such as polar ice caps melting and rising sea levels, accompanied by the voice of a young girl, later revealed to be the protagonist’s daughter Hannah (Talitha Bateman), saying “Everyone was warned, but no one listened.” The implication of *Geostorm* is thus that it is already too late to prevent climate change. The near-future world of the film is one in which humanity lives in a precarious state, able to survive only through an intricate network of

climate-controlling satellites that must be rigorously maintained. Whereas *The Day After Tomorrow* attempts to function as a type of warning – however toothless it may be – *Geostorm* reinforces the neoliberal capitalist fantasy that we can continue living as we are now while also mitigating the effects of global warming, projecting a future in which climate change becomes an accepted reality.

The Day After Tomorrow and *Geostorm*, released 13 years apart, are the first and last of the films that I am analyzing, and as such it is useful to use them as barometers of public perception of climate change. In this way, *The Day After Tomorrow*, released over a decade ago, seems a relic of an idealistic past in which there was still time to curb emissions and prevent a catastrophic future, and *Geostorm* seems a chilling reminder that this time has already run out.

Global Warming as Positive Apocalypse and *The Day After Tomorrow*

Released in May 2004 to great economic success, *The Day After Tomorrow* likely inspired the cycle of natural disaster movies that followed. Shot on a budget of US\$134 million, the film was an international box office hit, grossing over US\$544 million worldwide, despite mediocre critical reception (BoxOfficeMojo). The film quickly became the subject of much critical and scholarly writing, particularly with regards to its unique quality as a high-profile text that explicitly engaged with the topic of global warming (Von Berg; Reusswig et al.; Hansen et al.).

Numerous studies were conducted immediately after the film's release to analyze what effect it would have on public perceptions of climate change (Leiserowitz; Norton and Leaman; Hart and Leiserowitz). Human geographer Anthony Leiserowitz writes that there was anxiety over whether the film would galvanize the public to action over climate

change or whether the plotline would be so “extreme that the public would subsequently dismiss the entire issue of global warming as fantasy” (23). Leiserowitz’s study found that “*The Day After Tomorrow* had a significant impact on the climate change risk perceptions, conceptual models, behavioral intentions, policy priorities, and even voting intentions of moviegoers,” demonstrating that “the representation of environmental risks in popular culture can influence public attitudes and behavior” (34). However, it is my contention that a close reading of the film, particularly within the context of the cycle of films that followed, reveals that *The Day After Tomorrow* can be read to reinforce the opposite, encouraging viewers to view climate change as fantasy, or at the very least, unavoidable reality.

In 2004 the film was unique in its focus on global climate change, and its impact on American entertainment was significant. It was released two years before Al Gore’s 2006 documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006), and helped inspire producer Laurie David to adapt Gore’s live global warming presentations into a feature-length documentary (Kakoudaki, 352). That being said, while the film did cause some shift in public opinion on the importance of climate change, in the years since its release this awareness has been steadily declining, partially as a result of the disinformation campaigns outlined in Chapter 1. As journalist and activist Naomi Klein has demonstrated, global warming at this time was still considered a relatively non-partisan issue, at least in the public sphere. While right-wing think tanks and corporations have steadily tried to politicize this issue since the first research on climate change was conducted in the 1970s, the widespread effects of this effort were not immediate. In 2007, a Harris poll showed that “71 percent of Americans believed that the continued burning

of fossil fuels would alter the climate,” but by 2009 this percentage had dropped to 51 percent, and further to 44 percent in 2011 (Klein, 35).

Today attitudes toward climate change are firmly demarcated along political lines. While a didactic and explicitly political call to action against climate change is ostensibly *The Day After Tomorrow*'s main narrative message, the film can also be read in opposition to this message. As a conventional Hollywood disaster film, *The Day After Tomorrow* simultaneously acts as a warning of impending climate disaster but also figures this disaster as a force of social good and something that, once started, cannot be stopped. It codes global warming as apocalypse in the same manner as any number of Hollywood disaster movies that feature what Kakoudaki calls “non-sentient” disasters (351). Reading this film is thus complicated, because its narrative message and formal construction are at odds with one another. The film seemingly seeks to, in the words of Kakoudaki, “elucidate forms of political, social, and personal responsibility” (350). The film outlines explicitly who is to blame for global warming, yet it also comically exaggerates the onset and effects of global warming, dressing the real-world phenomena in the same cinematic trappings of any number of disaster films that preceded it, and likely solidifying these conventions for the wave of apocalypse films that followed it. Once it has been triggered, global warming in *The Day After Tomorrow* is figured as inevitable, unstoppable, and purposeful. In this way, the film portrays global warming through familiar cinematic and apocalyptic conventions; in other words, it *conventionalizes* global warming. The film undermines its narrative message through this cinematic depiction of global warming as an apocalypse no different than an alien invasion or a meteor from outer space.

In fact, there already seems to be a level of cultural amnesia surrounding the hope that *The Day After Tomorrow* could function as an “environmental film.” In a 2017 article for *The New York Times*, writer Melena Ryzik argues that it is difficult to sway public opinion toward climate action when Hollywood films about climate change characterize it as “dystopian” and “hopeless,” something she says is “precisely” what *The Day After Tomorrow* does (Ryzik). Ryzik’s account is a testament to the consequences of conventionalizing global warming as a cinematic form of apocalypse. Despite the film ostensibly having a clear, politically positive message, it can also reinforce negative assumptions about climate change and what can (or should) be done about it. By figuring climate change as sudden and unstoppable, *The Day After Tomorrow* communicates that there is nothing that can be done about climate change. Its deployment of religiously conservative family politics further buttresses a fundamentalist Christian view of climate change as being part of an ordained “plan” for humanity – if it happens it is because it is willed by some higher power.

The film centres on a climatologist named Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) and his son, Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal). Jack and Sam have a difficult relationship and it is implied that Jack’s marriage with his wife, Lucy, disintegrated because he was an absentee father. While testing ice samples from the Larsen Ice Shelf in Antarctica, Jack and his crew are nearly killed when the shelf fractures. Jack warns a panel of world leaders at the UN of impending global climate shifts as the result of carbon emissions, which are melting polar ice caps and disturbing the North Atlantic current. Jack claims that the effects of this will be rapid and devastating and will lead to a new ice age. However, he claims he does not know when this will occur. The world leaders dismiss his warnings, spearheaded by the

Vice President of the United States Raymond Becker (Kenneth Welsh), so Jack teams up with other scientists to prove his theory. Before he is able to do so, however, a series of extreme weather events devastate the globe, developing first in the northern hemisphere and spreading southward.

The United States finally declares a state of emergency but is unable to save many people who occupy the northern states. Meanwhile, Sam, who was visiting New York City for an academic decathlon, struggles with a group of strangers for survival in the New York Public Library. Jack embarks on foot to save his son, despite the journey being near-suicidal. On the way, Jack's colleague and friend Frank is killed, but he and his other colleague Jason eventually reach Sam and his surviving cohort in Manhattan. The group are promptly rescued by government helicopters. The film ends with President Becker, newly promoted after the death of his predecessor, addressing the nation with remorse for his lack of action.

The basic narrative of *The Day After Tomorrow* is comparable to the apocalypse films that followed in the years after, particularly those analysed in Chapter 3. The stories are very similar: a fractured white American family is reunited in the face of apocalyptic disaster, the force of the apocalypse itself being the driving power behind this reunification. While *The Day After Tomorrow* is ostensibly about the global ramifications of unchecked climate change, the deaths of millions as a result of failure to act take a back seat to the narrative focalization around Jack and Sam and their family drama, with fantastic scenes of destruction and death acting as little more than narrative asides that escalate the stakes of this primary story.

In conjunction with the cartoonish exaggeration of the effects of global warming – both in terms of the size of individual extreme weather events and the rapid pace of their onset – this narrative focus on a family drama renders the cause of the apocalypse irrelevant, especially when the film is analyzed in retrospect and in relation to the films that followed. Global warming becomes a backdrop to tell a human story of family reunification. Apart from identifying carbon emissions as a cause, the global warming of *The Day After Tomorrow* bears little similarity to the real climate change whose effects take decades to escalate – it shares more in common with the apocalypses of countless narrative fictions.

The paradoxical status of *The Day After Tomorrow* as both a warning against global warming and also a representation of global warming as an apocalyptic social good is no better illustrated than in the final scenes of the film, which feature an inspirational speech from the newly appointed President. The sequence begins with US President Raymond Beckett learning that Jack has succeeded in his trip to save his son Sam. Beckett remarks that this is “good news,” and the film cuts to shots of military helicopters taking flight as the President begins his speech: “These past few weeks have left us all with a profound sense of humility in the face of nature’s destructive power. For years, we operated under the belief that we could continue consuming our planet’s natural resources without consequence. We were wrong. I was wrong.” Beckett goes on to thank the nations of the “third world” which have taken up American refugees and finishes with a decree of hope: “Only a few hours ago I received word that a small group of people survived in New York City, against all odds and in the face of tremendous adversity. I’ve ordered an immediate search and rescue mission to bring them home and look for more

survivors.” As Beckett concludes his speech, which privileges the lives of only the characters featured within the narrative and makes no mention of the millions of people who have perished, an ensemble of non-diegetic strings and horns sound as the camera cuts to the military helicopters arriving to rescue Jack, Sam, and their companions. The sentimental music crescendos and the camera cuts to a final close-up of each primary character, before cutting to a shot of astronauts aboard the International Space Station.



Figure 5: Sam and Jack reunited in shot/reverse shot at the end of The Day After Tomorrow

While Beckett’s speech importantly does remind the audience once again that the cause of the preceding chaos was the fault of human hubris, or perhaps even greed, the

messaging is undercut by the film's last lines of dialogue. As two astronauts gaze out the windows of the ISS, they say:

Astronaut 1: Look at that.
 Astronaut 2: What?
 Astronaut 1: Have you ever seen the air so clear?

The camera then cuts to an aerial shot of a pristine Earth; the storm has subsided and North America is now engulfed in a massive glacier. The non-diegetic music tapers as the sound of only a few light strings and a solo horn recapitulate the musical score's motifs in a lighter and more peaceful key than previously. The camera pulls backward and the image fades to black, ending the film on an unmistakable positive tone.

Far from Ryzik's diagnosis of "hopeless," *The Day After Tomorrow* ends with hope to spare. The deaths of millions, many of which occurred on-screen, are forgotten as the film and its characters celebrate the reunification of Jack and Sam. Furthermore, the last line of dialogue "Have you ever seen the air so clear?" suggests that the Earth is actually *better* off than it was before; almost as if the planet has fought off a cold and is now in tip-top shape. Global warming has come and gone in a matter of days, and humanity can enjoy a bright future in which they learn from their mistakes. The apocalypse has literally taught them a lesson.

The Apocalypse is Already Here: *Geostorm*

In a 2017 interview about his newly-released directorial debut *Geostorm*, Dean Devlin claimed that the idea originated when his daughter, then seven, had learned about climate change in school and "naively" asked him "why can't we just build a machine to fix this?" (*Rappler.com*). While in this same interview Devlin likens the premise of his film to a "children's story" or "fable," he goes on to say that the "underlying issue of the

movie has never been more relevant,” claiming that the film’s message of international cooperation is inspired by how “all these countries around the world came together in an unprecedented way” after 9/11. He states: “if we get to the stage where this kind of extreme weather keeps building at the rate it is, it’s a worldwide problem, and the world will have to come together to resolve it.”

Geostorm, like *The Day After Tomorrow*, was made expressly with a message about contemporary climate change. However, while *The Day After Tomorrow* was ostensibly about preventing climate change, *Geostorm* is about dealing with climate change. In a way, the narrative of *Geostorm* begins where that previous film left off, opening with a montage of environmental catastrophes that have already occurred, including heatwaves, droughts, rising oceans, and mass death and displacement. Through Hannah’s voice-over, *Geostorm* begins with a flurry of exposition about the cause of these events. Beginning in the year 2019, the world was ravaged by what is referred to as “extreme weather” due to a rise in temperature, the melting of polar ice caps, and a change in “ocean patterns.”

While *The Day After Tomorrow* attempted to ground its climate-driven apocalypse in real-world science, there is no such pretense here. This “rise in temperature” is non-descript; given its relationship to melting polar ice and shifting oceanic patters it is heavily coded as real-world climate change, but not actually named as such. The film’s conflation of “climate” and “weather” is also harmful – it evokes a tendency amongst climate change deniers to write-off environmental consequences of climate change, such as an increase in the likelihood of natural disasters, as weather anomalies rather than symptoms of a larger problem (Gibbens).

The film also reinforces the problematic view that climate change will eventually take the form of a sudden, identifiable event. In reality the effects of climate change will gradually worsen over long periods of time, while the “extreme weather” of *Geostorm* metastasizes rapidly over the course of one year. In such a fantasy, climate change would be undeniable because it would be impossible to ignore such a rapid onset of global disaster and characterizing climate change in such a way encourages a view that current governmental procrastination with regards to climate action is okay – it isn’t *that* bad yet.

And this is precisely how the fictional depiction of climate change in *Geostorm* should be seen – as pure fantasy. Like *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Geostorm* represents climate change in such a cartoonish register that it becomes simultaneously familiar and unrecognizable – simply a narrative motivation with loose factual grounding rather than a serious call to action. *Geostorm* diminishes the weightiness of real-world climate change through this cinematic dramatization and by focusing on the ways in which such a widespread apocalyptic disaster might actually be good – perhaps one of the only things capable of banding the world together as one.

After the exposition describing apocalyptic “extreme weather,” it is revealed that humanity coalesced to “fight back” through the construction of thousands of weather-controlling satellites. Headed by the United States and China, this network became known as “Dutch Boy,” named after the fable of the “little Dutch Boy” who plugged a leaking dike with his finger. It was designed chiefly by the film’s protagonist, Jake Lawson (Gerard Butler). Dutch Boy is overseen by an international team of scientists who live aboard a central station orbiting the Earth but all major decisions are currently made by the United States. The story proper begins *in medias res* as Jake is reprimanded

for insubordination and control of Dutch Boy is given to his brother, Max (Jim Sturgess), who is Assistant to the Secretary of State. This perceived betrayal causes a rift between Jake and Max, and the film promptly jumps forward three years.

Picking up in the year 2022, control of Dutch Boy is set to be handed over to an international oversight committee in a few weeks time. However, a series of strange malfunctions lead to environmental disasters around the globe, which causes speculation that something is catastrophically wrong with the system. Max is tasked with finding someone who is trustworthy and will answer only to US high command to diagnose the problem. While Jake is the best man for the job, he initially refuses due to lingering resentment over his brother's betrayal. He reluctantly agrees, however, and learns with the help of his brother and a cohort of side characters that Dutch Boy is not malfunctioning, it is being sabotaged. The group initially suspect that the US President Andrew Palma (Andy Garcia) may be responsible. However, they eventually learn that it is actually Secretary of State Leonard Dekkom (Ed Harris), who is attempting to use Dutch Boy to eliminate the line of succession, making himself President so that he can weaponize the system and make the US the most powerful nation on Earth. Max and company have Dekkom arrested, and Jake succeeds in resetting Dutch Boy to rid it of the virus that was used to override its failsafe system. Max and Jake reunite, and Dutch Boy is finally transferred to an international committee to ensure that no single nation can monopolize it in the future.

As in the other films, the importance of family and reunification is immediately apparent, albeit of a slightly different variety. Unlike *2012*, *The War of the Worlds*, *San Andreas*, and *The Day After Tomorrow*, *Geostorm* does not present a father figure who

must journey from one point to another as a means of literally bringing his family back together. While Jake does have a daughter, she plays a minor role in the narrative, serving more as motivation for him to survive than anything else. What's more, unlike all the previous films, here there is very little mention of Hannah's mother. While she is a character who is featured on screen briefly, she plays almost no role in Hannah and Jake's relationship, and there is no attempt by Jake to win back her affection.

The primary family drama is instead about the bond between brothers. Jake and Max begin the narrative splintered, having lost their brotherly bond due to Max's betrayal. Over the course of the narrative the two must learn how to work together to save the world, and it is because of the threat of apocalypse that they rekindle their lost bond. This is perhaps illustrated best through the narrative device of their childhood "code." When Max visits Jake and Hannah to ask for his brother's help, he tells Hannah that the two of them used to be so close that they had their own secret code, to which Jake responds "Really? I don't remember that," emphasizing their current emotional distance. Later in the film, when Jake discovers that Dutch Boy is being sabotaged, he signals this discovery to Max via video communication using their childhood code, which he plants within an imagined story about the two of them fishing with their father when they were younger, indicating that they are now working together again. This plot of reunification culminates in the final moments of the film when Jake, Max and Hannah are seen fishing together off a dock, an allusion to the invented story that began their process of reconciliation.

The film thus ends much like the others. The reunited family – Jake, Hannah, and Max – share a sentimental moment as they make real the story that had previously been a lie. The scene is framed primarily in shot/reverse shot close-ups that are caked in pastel oranges, a palette that reinforces the warm emotional tone and implies either a setting or rising sun – a new day for humanity.



Figure 6: Jake, Hannah, and Max share a sentimental moment at the end of Geostorm

While this model deviates slightly from the more typical family structure of the other films, the fundamental message is the same. It is only through the power of apocalyptic catastrophe that the family is reunited, reminded of what is important in the face of tremendous adversity. As such, from a narrative perspective, the apocalypse itself has served a fundamentally positive role. Like the other films, the negative consequences of the apocalypse (the countless deaths of innocent people) are virtually forgotten, these sequences serving yet again as little more than pure spectacle. That the apocalypse itself had already technically occurred and is now in a state of constant mitigation does complicate this message, and it is this fact that is perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Geostorm*'s politics.

As with *The Day After Tomorrow*, it is in the final moments of *Geostorm* that the dubiousness of its framing of climate change is made most explicit – again through a voice over that wraps up the film’s themes. Hannah again assumes the role of narrator, saying: “You can’t undo the past. All you can do is face what’s ahead. NASA maintained the satellites, while we rebuilt the space station. We made it safer. We made it stronger. It belongs to all of us now. One planet, one people. And as long as we remember that we share one future, we will survive.” In the first and final lines of this speech, *Geostorm* explicitly doubles down on what has been implicit from the outset of its narrative – that what’s done is done. Extrapolated to the real world, the film suggests that we must forget the past and look toward the future. *Geostorm* suggests that climate catastrophe is imminent and cannot be prevented. Instead, the message of the narrative is that humanity must find a way to live with their new reality.

Geostorm’s framing of climate apocalypse as ever-present once again evokes Kermode: “No longer imminent, the End is immanent” – it is constantly with us, permeating every aspect of our lives (Kermode, “The Sense of an Ending” 25). *Geostorm*’s climate mitigation undermines the seriousness and immediacy of climate change and reduces it to a fact of life. Done with the hopeful dream of a bright future inherent within *The Day After Tomorrow*, thirteen years and many films later *Geostorm* envisions a future plagued by constant precariousness in the face of immanent climate disaster as axiomatic.

The ending of *Geostorm* is similar to the films analyzed in the previous chapters – warm colours, sentimental music, familial reunification, and a bright future – but here the spectre of a constant looming threat is unshakable. Running parallel to a real-world

campaign to sow division over the realities of climate change, within popular blockbuster cinema the phenomena has been reduced to a conventional Hollywood disaster scenario.

The use of climate catastrophe in this cycle of films, beginning with *The Day After Tomorrow* and ending with *Geostorm* thus has an unmistakable effect of desensitization. Climate change has somehow paradoxically become just another fantastical apocalyptic scenario, like alien invasions or giant solar flares, while remaining a very pressing threat in the real world.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that contemporary climatology nearly unanimously concludes that catastrophe is imminent, broad dissent over the realities of climate change persist. Be it a faith in the very economic order that has created and exacerbated the problem of runaway emissions to now adapt to and fix said problem, or a faith in a higher power to guide humanity through inevitable disaster, millions believe that the scientific reality of climate change is either a hoax, exaggerated, not man-made, or, perhaps most depressing of all, an inevitable step in an invisible plan that was laid out thousands of years ago. It is my contention that “faith” is the only thing powerful enough to support such cognitive dissonance. Secured by the spirit of Christian apocalyptic models and tied to a historical lineage of Christian hegemony in the west, faith in apocalyptic models of progress have led to a state in which humanity is seemingly incapable of banding together to combat the single most pressing issue facing our survival as a species.

In this thesis I have argued that in the wake of 9/11 there was a concerted effort amongst the religious right in America to co-opt apocalyptic fervour to political gain, and that this resurgence of overt Christian eschatological thought can be seen reflected and reinforced in some of the largest budget Hollywood films released since that time. In particular, a model of environmental disaster-apocalypse film emerged in the wake of 9/11 that adopted this Christian model of apocalypse as a narrative framework, initially as a way of rediscovering a sense of familiar values in the uncertain aftermath, and that continued well into the next decade.

From *The Day After Tomorrow* in 2004 to *Geostorm* in 2017, these films figure an environmentally motivated apocalypse that is understood in Christian terms as

cumulative, positive, inevitable, and *good*. In these films, the apocalypse presents a solution to a crumbling social order, a structure with which modern, uncertain times can be made sense of. By drawing such overt allusions to real-world climate change, these films harmfully reinforce fundamentalist views about climate change, which hold that it can be understood as purposeful. Such a framework has the effect of reducing the realities of climate change, undermining its seriousness and, in the end, cinematically conventionalizing it as a narrative device to such a degree that it becomes no different than any other narrative apocalypse – simply another fantastical scenario which has no bearing on reality.

It is my belief that research into this phenomena is incomplete, and the possibility for future endeavours into understanding climate denial as it pertains to, and is influenced by, popular culture are interdisciplinary and many. As it applies to film and media, I feel the adoption of my framework – with a key emphasis on the religious moral underpinnings of contemporary American entertainment – could be broadened to other audiovisual forms such as television and video games. These forms of entertainment in some cases have even farther-reaching influence than the blockbuster films that I have analysed, and as such, should not be forgotten. Likewise, while I have focused on the obsession with images of destruction in film, the apocalypse and disaster have proven mainstays of these other media as well, and it is possible that the conflation between Christian theological understandings of apocalypse and popular anxieties of climate change have occurred in such texts.

These films and other potentially similar media are not the largest roadblock on the road to radical environmental reform – quite the opposite. In drawing attention to this

cycle of films and the harmful framework of climate apocalypse that they represent, I hope to reveal the degree to which negative attitudes about climate change are engrained within every level of popular consciousness. The adoption of climate change as a cinematic disaster film convention represents another way in which western capitalism has adapted to mitigate its own shortcomings. The very economic order that is responsible for the problem of climate change now sells it back to us as entertainment. At the risk of sounding polemical: If the apocalyptic framing of climate change that is on display in these films, in which it can be understood as a positive force with value to teach humanity lessons about the “proper” state of affairs, is accepted without question, then the answer to the question I posed in my title is obvious. When Will the World End Already? Sooner than you think.

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