The End of the World as We Know It
– an essay on new dystopian, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films

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The Aesthetics of Modern Film
(Medie- og samfundsteori og medieæstetik 1)
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The front page illustration is a still frame from Roland Emmerich’s 2012 showing the destruction of Las Vegas.
Introduction

What is “the world as we know it”? Modern society and our physical surroundings are changing so rapidly that it is truly hard to tell. Especially the changes due to global warming are high on the agenda, causing much fear and anxiety throughout the world. Is it all truly coming to an end? Quite a few modern films seem to believe so.

Scientists have been aware of, and have been talking about, global warming since the late 1980s, yet it was Al Gore who put the issue on the global agenda once and for all with the Oscar-winning documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). After the tremendous success of this movie, it seemed there was no turning back; the public was finally convinced that global warming was real and that we had to start dealing with it. Furthermore, disasters like hurricane Katrina and the tsunami in 2004 were devastating reminders of the uncontrollable power of nature. Thus, caring for the environment quickly became a key issue for politicians, corporations and others who wanted to make sure that they at least appeared to be concerned about the future of our planet. Indeed, global warming seems to be the defining topic of the first decade of the new millennium.

Humankind’s fears and anxieties have always inspired cultural artefacts such as film and other art forms. Hollywood has a long-standing fascination with destruction, and disaster movies have drawn huge crowds for years. Films have often reflected a widespread fear of losing control over our environment or our technology. These films often fall into the science fiction or horror genres. There have been films about the fear of nuclear war (*Dr. Strangelove*, 1964, *The Abyss*, 1989), about biochemical technology run amok (the * Resident Evil* and *28 Days Later* franchises, both 2002-2007), human cloning (*The Sixth Day*, 2000, *The Island*, 2005, *Moon*, 2009), machines taking over the world (*The Terminator*-franchise, 1984-2009, and *The Matrix*-franchise, 1999-2003) and, most recently, the idea of human ‘avatars’ (*Gamer, Surrogates* and *Avatar*, all from 2009).

It is then only natural that movies such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) have started dealing with global warming and its possible consequences for our future on earth. This is a film that does not just deal with a possible future scenario, but with something that has, partly at least, already started to happen. And as such, it has the potential to be all the more frightening.

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1 [http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=1308](http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/?article=1308)
In this essay I will examine a few of the modern films which in one way or the other deal with our fear of the world ending (or at least changing drastically for the worse). These films don’t deal with global warming directly, yet as I will illustrate, they share themes which are related to concerns for the environment and the climate.

The three main films examined are *Children of Men* (2006), *Wall·E* (2008) and *2012* (2009). One could argue that these films, among others, represent a ‘new wave’ of dystopian, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films, likely inspired by the ever-present threat of global climate change. I have selected these specific films because they represent three very different ways of dealing with similar themes.

Among the topics I will be exploring are how these movies reflect modern culture, which messages (political, moral, ideological, etc.) they convey about the present and the future, and what effect they might have on their audience.

Prior to presenting the movies to be examined, I will comment on the connection between society, culture and cultural artefacts in the following section. This will serve as a theoretical foundation for the essay’s main discussion.

### Culture and Film

“The best science fiction talks about the future to talk about the now...”2 So it says in the L.A. Times’ review of *Children of Men*. And indeed, “moving images have been of increased importance in the construction of culture and society and for the ways in which we interact with reality and with each other.”3 This of course does not only apply for films, but for all cultural artefacts – music, paintings, literature and so on. Yet, it seems as a mass medium, film has an ability to reach more people than most other art forms and therefore film can be said to be of greater cultural significance than most media.

In the academic groundwork “Medier og kultur” (*Media and Culture*), widely used in media studies in Denmark, it is stated that mass media are both discourses about society and resources in society.4 Simultaneously, communication in mass media is a transmission of meanings about society, and a ritual that takes place in, and helps create, society and

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2 [http://www.calendarlive.com/printedition/calendar/cl-et-children22dec22,0,1800835.story](http://www.calendarlive.com/printedition/calendar/cl-et-children22dec22,0,1800835.story)


culture. This is supported by Ib Bondebjerg who states that “we are right now in an expanding and changing culture highly influenced by visual media.” In other words, the way films and other cultural artefacts present various themes in our culture reflects back on that culture, causing it to change or perhaps merely reaffirming existing ideas and values. This makes it interesting to look at how films present themes such as the fear of global warming, war in the middle east, and other current issues.

Sometimes there can be discrepancies between mainstream culture and cultural artefacts. This can for instance be illustrated by the many films that have come out lately about the war in Iraq (In The Valley of Elah, 2007, The Kingdom, 2007, Rendition, 2007, Stop-Loss, 2008, The Hurt Locker, 2009, and more). These are films that show various points of view on the conflict, many of them critical on the US’ involvement in the middle east and the war on terror. Contrary to the recent apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic movies, none of these films have been great financial successes however. The American public, it seems, is not yet ready to confront the consequences of a war many no longer support. Unlike global warming, the war in Iraq is still very much a controversial subject. In many films, the filmmakers openly seek to influence the public’s opinion on a matter (perhaps this is most easily recognised in documentaries – one only needs to see a Michael Moore film to experience how film can be used for straightforward manipulation). Often it seems that for a film to be commercially successful it should not stray too far from the general consensus on the matter at hand. That global warming is a much talked about issue might then partly explain the success of many of the environmentally related films that have been released this past decade.

In this essay I will assume that no matter how “light” or “serious” a film is, it will usually have something of value to say about culture, society and people. The point of this essay is to examine how the analysed films are connected with today’s culture; what do they say about the now and what is their message for the future?

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5 Ibid.
6 Ib Bondebjerg: Moving Images, Culture and the Mind (Luton, UK, University of Luton Press, 2000) p. 1
7 Box office-information found on imdb.com
The New Dystopian, Apocalyptic and Post-Apocalyptic Films

In the following sections I will present the three main films of the essay chronologically after release date, starting with *Children of Men*.

*Children of Men* – The Story

*Children of Men*\(^6\) takes place in the year 2027. For 18 years, humankind have been unable to have children, and the youngest person on earth, “Baby Diego”, has just died, 18 years old. As far as humanity is concerned, the world is coming to an end. As a result, the entire world is in a state of chaos and only Britain “soldiers on”, as it is stated in the government propaganda in busses and on billboards. England has become a bleak, dystopian society where illegal immigrants are hunted down and held captive in concentration camp-like facilities.

The film’s main character is Theo (Clive Owen). A former political activist, Theo now works for the Ministry of Energy and has put his rebellious past aside. However, when Theo is contacted by The Fishes, a rebel group led by his former lover Julian (Julianne Moore), he suddenly finds himself dragged into a violent struggle between the rebels and the military.

Theo is asked to help smuggle a young woman called Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) to the coast in return for money, and he reluctantly agrees. It is not until he discovers that Kee is pregnant that he becomes emotionally involved. He finds out that the Fishes want to keep the baby for themselves to use it for political gain. Thus, with the help of his old friend Jasper (Michael Caine), Theo sets out to transport Kee safely to a refugee camp.

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\(^6\) Directed by Alfonso Cuarón, director of both Spanish and English/American films such as *Great Expectations*, 1998, *Y to mamá también*, 2001, and *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*, 2004.
where she will be picked up by “The Tomorrow”, a hospital boat operated by “The Human Project”.

Structure
The film’s environment and characters are quickly and effectively set up. The exposition is limited; the audience learns only what is necessary about the current state of the world through some television footage and sparse, well-written, expository dialogue. An example: In the very first scene of the movie, the camera follows Theo out of a coffee shop. Moments after he exits the shop, it blows up in a massive explosion. Who is responsible and why the attack was made is never revealed. This short and effective single-take scene gives a good impression of what kind of place London has become at this point in fictional future history.

This first scene is very symptomatic for the way the film is constructed throughout. The camera almost always follows Theo, tracing his steps wherever he goes. This is his story and as such the film’s scope is not that of a typical large-scale Hollywood action movie. It feels more personal and much more emotionally involving. There is no intercutting between Theo’s story and a government perspective or something like that, as you would normally see in this kind of movie (as is the case in 2012 for instance). The audience knows only as much about the situation as Theo does, and this creates an uncertainty and a feeling that anything can happen at any time. This sense of unpredictability increases the feeling of realism in the film, and it illustrates very well how a film’s structure can serve its storytelling.

Tone and Aesthetics
Even though an actual apocalypse has not happened yet, the film has a very post-apocalyptic feel. There is a sense of hopelessness and foreboding doom throughout, as humankind prepares itself for the end. What little humour there is in the film is dark and satirical.

Visually the film matches its story. The sky is grey, the air is thick with pollution. The film has a very realistic, gritty look. Although it employs many special effects, including
CGI⁹, they are never obvious and they blend perfectly with the footage that is filmed on sets and locations.

Furthermore, *Children of Men* contains some meticulously planned and brilliantly executed camera work. Practically the entire film is shot handheld, and many scenes are shot using very long takes (the final action scene in the refugee camp contains a single take more than six minutes long!!⁰). This helps create a sense of raw realism and it has the effect of placing the viewer in the middle of the chaotic action, right next to Theo, thereby giving the scenes much energy.¹¹

Despite its pessimistic themes and bleak visual style, the film does end on a kind of high note. Theo ends up dying, yet he does so rescuing Kee and getting her to The Tomorrow. The audience never knows for certain that The Human Project is real – we have to believe it, just like the characters do. Can the crew of The Tomorrow be trusted? Technically we never know. Yet there is a hint at the very end:

Over the end credits, you hear the voices of children playing, and this ends the movie with a sense of optimism for the future. One deducts that there will be children again. There is even a hint that Kee might be a new Eve – one the many Christian references in the movie (Theo meaning “God”, Kee joking that she is a virgin, etc.).

Nevertheless, the film shows an image of a scary, dystopian future and it has a very pessimistic tone for the most part.

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¹⁰ For a behind-the-scenes look at how some of these sequences were filmed, go to [http://www.videosift.com/video/How-They-Did-The-Long-Takes-In-Children-Of-Men](http://www.videosift.com/video/How-They-Did-The-Long-Takes-In-Children-Of-Men)

Themes

*Children of Men* takes a thorough look at how people would treat each other, and the environment, if we knew the world was ending. In the film most people are selfish, unsympathetic and vicious: It's everyone for themselves. Theo is not this way, however. At the beginning of the film he might seem to have lost all hope, yet he turns out to be the typical reluctant hero who steps up when he realises what is at stake.

The film can definitely be seen as a commentary on today’s state of affairs. It deals with racism (the maltreatment of refugees), militarism, the government’s way of controlling society, the loss of hope for the future and importantly, in accordance with this essay, issues concerning the environment: How would we treat the world if we knew we were the last living humans? Should we not keep protecting the environment, at least for the sake of the creatures who will live on earth after humankind is gone? The film is thought-provoking and encourages people to consider how we treat each other and our planet.

*Wall·E – The Story*

*Wall·E* takes place 800 years into the future. Earth is a barren, trash-filled, highly polluted place, abandoned by humans hundreds of years earlier. The only beings left are a cockroach and its robot buddy, Wall·E. Wall-E’s assignment is to clean up the humans’ mess and help make earth inhabitable again. Through the years Wall-E has developed a personality and a fondness for the trash it is his job to collect. Every day he finds small treasures which he brings back to his home.

One day something out of the ordinary happens, of course, which sets the story in motion. A spaceship arrives, and with it Eve, a futuristic looking robot sent to earth to look for signs of life and thereby to determine if it is time for the humans’ return to their home planet.

Wall-E soon falls in love with Eve, though she does not seem particularly interested in him. When Wall-E shows Eve a plant that he

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12 Directed by Andrew Stanton, director of previous Pixar films *A Bug’s Life*, 1998, and *Finding Nemo*, 2003, and one of the key people at Pixar Animation Studios.
has found, she suddenly shuts down and sends a message into space that life has been found. Soon after Eve is collected by the spaceship and Wall·E follows her. They arrive at the Axiom, a huge vessel where a large part of the remaining humans live. Here, humans have become fat and lazy beings, no longer willing (or able) to walk or do any other physical activities. They are carried in hovering chairs, eating everything from a cup and are constantly being served by different kinds of robots. Aboard the Axiom, Wall·E and Eve must fight the evil Auto Pilot to secure humans’ return to earth. Eventually they succeed and the humans return to earth to start a new life.

Structure

The first half hour of Wall·E (meaning approximately a third of the entire movie) is practically dialogue free; only Wall·E’s humming and single-syllable exchanges with Eve are heard. It’s almost a silent movie, was it not for the wonderful score and the many brilliant sound effects (the film was Oscar-nominated for both music, sound and sound editing – and it won the prize for best animated feature film\(^\text{13}\)).

After Wall·E follows Eve into space, the film’s structure becomes more conventional. There’s a traditional villain (the Auto Pilot – an evil robot inspired by 2001: A Space odyssey’s “HAL 9000” with its ominous red light for an eye), and by overcoming all obstacles, Wall·E becomes a true hero.

Tone and Aesthetics

Even though the earth is depicted as a post-apocalyptic dystopia, there is humour and hope in Wall·E. The fact that Wall·E finds valuable treasures in our garbage shows that even at this terrible state, earth is worth fighting for and taking care of.

Wall·E is a love story, it has a very optimistic tone and it is filled with humorous situations and scenarios. Nevertheless there are darker elements and things to make the

\(^\text{13}\) http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0910970/awards
viewer reflect on the situation of present day. *Wall-E*’s tone and style perhaps make these messages easier to accept for the viewer. One can choose to simply see *Wall-E* as a fun adventure and ignore its more serious messages, or one can reflect on the messages and be inspired by them or reject them. As such, the main story does not suffer on account of the creators preaching about the environment.

The film is both narratively and aesthetically split in two: the part on earth and the part in space, on the Axiom.

On earth the colours are all brownish, grey and washed out. During the 800 years without maintenance all colours have faded, turning the planet into a dismal looking place. A true dystopia, if it were not for Wall-E and his uplifting persona. The fact that Wall-E seems to love this place changes the way the viewer experiences it, and the amount of detail in the animation makes future earth a fascinating place, despite its environmental state.

Once Wall-E journeys into space, the film becomes a much more colourful experience. Everything looks shiny and new, almost sterile and unused. Clearly, on the Axiom everything is designed to be very efficient and to limit the amount of work people have to do as much as possible. It is difficult not to view this as a comment on today’s tendencies regarding the many electronic devices which take over an increasing amount of our day-to-day errands and doings.

Themes

*Wall-E* is an environmental cautionary tale which warns us that this is how it might end if we don’t start taking better care of our planet. Yet the story is highly optimistic: Its message is that it is not too late to start taking responsibility for our actions and save the world.

The film comments on the power of global corporations (and the danger of these taking over the world), excessive consumerism, people’s laziness and our over-reliance on machines.

Furthermore, the film tells us that we need to start not only taking better care of the planet, but of each other. We need to show our true feelings, just like Wall-E himself. In this future world, Wall-E is more human than the humans who have forgotten the true values of life. Ironically, it takes a robot to remind them.
2012 – The Story

In 2012 a group of scientists have discovered that because of some unusual solar eruptions, the earth’s core is rapidly heating up. This will, come the year 2012, cause the earth’s tectonic plates to break apart and flow around freely. In effect, the world as we know it will end. Apparently this event was predicted by the Mayans thousands of years ago.

The film has two main characters and two main story arcs. One part of the story follows Dr. Adrian Helmsley (Chiwetel Ejiofor) who is one of the scientists behind the discovery of the coming Armageddon. Because of his discovery and the timeline he has created (essentially a countdown to earth’s destruction) the world’s most powerful nations have united to build gigantic arks that will save humanity (meaning a tiny portion thereof). Rooms in the arks have been sold to the richest people in the world for 1 billion euros each meaning that only the elite will survive.

The other part of the story centres on writer Jackson Curtis (John Cusack) and his family. Curtis learns by chance of the global threat and he therefore sets upon reaching the arks in China and getting his family to safety. They travel by plane to China and finally reach the site of the arks. They succeed in breaking into one of the arks with the help from a Chinese family, and the family survives the earth-shattering apocalypse.


15 The “science” behind this movie has been rejected by distinguished scientists. Go to http://www.nasa.gov/topics/earth/features/2012.html for more information.
Structure

The film’s structure is made out of approximately half an our of setup, showing the scientists’ discoveries from 2009-2012 and the initial catastrophic incidents around the world. Also Curtis and his family and their situation (he and his wife are separated, she has a new boyfriend) are introduced.

After the setup the film is in essence one action sequence after the other. For instance there are no fewer than three scenes within an hour that show the family taking off in a plane with the ground rapidly crumbling and disappearing beneath them. One does get the feeling that this movie is simply an excuse to show off the capabilities of modern special effects and to create as many spectacular action set-pieces as possible.

Tone and Aesthetics

The film mixes a sense of threat with much humour and thrill, especially in the first hour. There are several very amusing scenes when Curtis and his family are escaping L.A. as the city starts sinking into the ocean. As skyscrapers crash down on all sides, it is hard not to be fascinated and thrilled by the destruction of the world. The first half of the movie also has some comic relief in Woody Harrelson’s character Charlie Frost, a radio talk show host and conspiracy theorist who of course saw the crisis coming all along.

The final half of the movie employs less humour in order to involve the audience more in the family’s struggle to reach China and to survive. This part of the movie focuses on the family bond, and on the moral dilemmas faced by the scientists and the government leaders who have to decide who to save and who to sacrifice.
Because the main characters in 2012 survive, the film’s ending feels like a happy one – despite the fact that most of the world is destroyed and billions have died. As the arks set course for the only surviving continent, Africa, the idea seems to be that humans will now start over in the very place where humanity once sprung into existence. As in Wall·E (and, arguably, Children of Men) we are given a second chance.

Aesthetically 2012 relies heavily on CGI. All the action sequences are enhanced, if not created entirely, digitally. The movie is gigantic in scope as it shows huge landscapes exploding and turning to roaring volcanoes, tsunamis 1500 meters high, crashing skyscrapers, etc. This epic scale is interwoven with some more intimate camera work in scenes where the family is in more confines spaces (in an airplane, in the ark, etc.). Visually these scenes don’t entirely blend with the special effects, and this sometimes creates a sort of visual gap and a sense of incoherence between the animated footage and that which is filmed. This affects the film’s sense of realism and it makes the film a less immersive experience to watch than either Children of Men or Wall-E.

However, the disasters on show remind the audience of the power of nature (and of how fragile and powerless humans can be) and they bring up memories of actual natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami and hurricanes like Katrina.

Themes
Variety wrote in its review of 2012 that “on any level other than as sheer visual sensation, 2012 is a joke, for the simple reason that it has no point of view; the film offers no philosophical, metaphysical, intellectual and certainly no religious perspective on the cataclysm, just the physical frenzy of it all.” Yet the film does deal with various themes, mainly how people treat each other in extreme situations, such as the end of the world (a theme shared with Children of Men). Will we do everything we can to help as many people as possible or will we just try to save ourselves? Should the general public be informed of an imminent worldwide crisis such as this? Or is it reasonable to keep people in the dark so as not to cause global panic and anarchy? Is it fair to only save the elite? How do we determine the value of human lives?

16 http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117941576.html?categoryid=31&cs=1
There are also themes concerning Curtis and his family: What does it mean to be a family? How do you deal with your family being separated and with someone else acting as father for your children?

Furthermore, there are many Christian references in 2012. The parallel to the story of Noah’s Ark is particularly obvious of course, the end of the world here partly presented as a flood that wipes out most of humanity and serves as a fresh start.

Although many of these themes may seem like clichés and are presented in a very formulaic manner, they are nonetheless present, and as such the movie does seem to have something to say about humankind and how we should treat each other.

Reflections on Modern Society – What do These Films Have to Say?

“Only an audience that feels invulnerable can enjoy watching on screen the wholesale destruction of its civilization and not take it as a threat. A cloud has lifted. It’s safe to be happy and brainless again. 2012 may be Hollywood’s first post-post-9/11 movie.”

The quote above is from The San Francisco Chronicle’s review of 2012, and it is quite interesting. The review asks whether a shift within the culture at large is taking place, since we now find it so entertaining to watch our world be destroyed on screen again. For a few years after 9/11 there was a sense of vulnerability in the entire western world, and quite a few films were altered or postponed so as not to stir up memories of the attacks on the World Trade Center. It seems that we have now finally put some of our fears from the terror attacks in 2001 behind us, and that we are once again willing to be entertained by the fictional destruction of famous landmarks and, in the case of 2012, entire continents. Perhaps in a few years, films about the war in the middle east will start becoming profitable as well. Time, it seems, does heal all wounds.

A Message of Hope Disguised as Entertainment?
As I have already commented on, these films share quite a few themes, especially about the environment and about how people tend to treat each other. The overall message


18 For instance the first Spider-man film originally ended with Spider-man spinning a giant web between the Twin Towers – an ending that was omitted from the final film.
seems to be that we should be a lot more responsible if we wish to avoid destroying the only world we have.

It is important noting that in the films I have explored, humans are awarded a second chance. Even *Children of Men*, the most pessimistic of the films in this essay, ends with a sense of hope for the future. As is the case with documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Home* (2009), these films convey the message that there is still hope – that is it not too late to change the world and perhaps avert disaster.

Even though the world “as we know it” actually ends in 2012, the main characters survive to become founders of a new world. And although this movie often feels like spectacle for spectacle’s sake, even Roland Emmerich, master of entertaining and often rather silly blockbusters, states that all films “have to have a certain amount of plot or they don’t work either…”. In between all the action you need “sixty or seventy minutes of a two-hour movie where you explain why we should care about these characters and what they’re going through.”

“No action movie is all action,” David Bordwell states, and just like you need plot, you usually need some kind of message as well. Most of the time at least, you will want to give the audiences some kind of added value – something to take away from the experience other than merely being entertained for a couple of hours. What one should not forget in this case is that “narrative and spectacle aren’t mutually exclusive concepts.” In both 2012, *Wall-E* and *Children of Men*, every action scene is in fact a narrative event that advances characters’ goals and alters their state of knowledge. Still, as Bordwell points out, “the length of some action sequences isn’t warranted by their role in furthering or enriching the main action” and this might explain why many critics find films like 2012 to be too superficial and all spectacle.

Yet, the fact that films can be extremely entertaining is one of the reasons why they works so well presenting larger themes about society and culture. Because, as is the case with all the movies I have examined, it really is up to the viewer how much one wants to read into a movie. If you want to, you can choose to ignore a film’s message and simply

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20 Ibid. p. 107

21 Ibid. p. 104

22 Ibid. p. 105

see the film as nothing more than a few hours of entertainment. Still, chances are you will pick up on at least some of a film’s message and take something of value away from it.

A Comforting Apocalypse

As mentioned initially in this essay, the films I have chosen to examine don’t deal with global warming directly. Neither do many of the other similar themed movies that have come out in the later years (Sunshine, 2007, I Am Legend, 2007, The Happening, 2008, Knowing, 2009, The Road, 2009, etc.). In some of these movies the featured crisis has been caused by humankind (as in The Happening and Wall·E for instance) and in some of them humanity is not to blame (2012, Sunshine). Yet all of these films examine how we would react if our existence was threatened, and this must in some way be connected to the most imminent threat on our world at this point in history: Global warming. It seems obvious that these films all somehow reflect the ever-present fear and anxiety in modern society that it might in fact be too late to save our planet and that some form of apocalypse is near.

How then do these movies affect our fears? Do they simply reaffirm them? Is it the films’ pessimistic tone and bleak aesthetics that affect us the most or are we comforted by these films’ “happy endings” which in some cases convey a message of hope for the future?

First of all, none of these films offer straightforward solutions to our problems. Rather they help create awareness and remind us of our current situation and where it is leading us. Even though the apocalypse in 2012 is brought on by “solar flares” and not global warming, the film advises us to listen to the scientists who of course were right all along. This is a direct parallel to the debate on global warming and whether it was brought on by humans. If the majority of scientists says so, we should pay attention and we should take their warnings seriously.

The cause for humankind ending in Children of Men – female infertility – might not seem as directly relevant as for example the global pollution in Wall·E (though it might be
read as a sort of punishment for the earth’s over-population). But that really is besides the point. What is important is what the film has to say regarding our way of treating each other in the face of crisis. And as such the movie is closely connected to almost all other dystopian, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films. These films carry important messages about traditional human values: In *Children of Men*, Theo must become a family man again, and protect Kee and her child. A very similar storyline can be found in *I Am Legend*, where Will Smith’s character must risk his own life to protect a woman and her foster son. Likewise, *2012* centres on a family that has broken apart and who must find each other again. In other words, these are films about traditional family values, about taking care of loved ones and about how important this is a time of great peril.

The central story in *Wall·E* is a love story between two robots, and the point is to remind us to be open to love and to the emotions and relations that make us human.

Often these films also show how much humans can accomplish if we work together across nations, race and gender. This theme is present in both *2012* and in *Sunshine* where a group of astronauts must journey to the sun and kickstart it with a nuclear bomb to ensure the earth’s survival. The message in these movies is that when confronted with extreme situations, we must stand together and cooperate. If we do that, we can indeed accomplish almost anything. As such, these films are extremely optimistic and positive, and – contrary to the films blaming humans for causing global warming – celebrations of human capabilities.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately it is difficult to say something completely unified about these films. None of them are either completely pessimistic or optimistic. They all contain some uplifting elements and some very frightening, more or less plausible future scenarios. There can be no doubt that these films are inspired by what is currently happening in the world: Wars, climate change, international disagreements concerning how to prioritise resources and so on. Yet it seems that despite the many concerns that dominate the global discourse, and the
serious and relevant fears we have for our future, we are still more than willing to let ourselves play with the idea of the world ending. We rather like to be frightened, as long as that which frightens us also carries some reaffirming message that it’s not too late; that if we all start treating each other a little better, and start taking a little more responsibility for our actions, we just might be okay after all.
Literature and links

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*All websites were visited between November 20 and January 12.*