

Hollywood Destroys the World

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The new wave of disaster movies and TV shows isn't about staving off the apocalypse. It's what happens afterwards that counts. Viggo Mortensen versus the cannibals.

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Alcon Entertainment

Denzel Washington stars in 'The Book of Eli.'

Director Roland Emmerich has nearly destroyed the world three times already. This time, he means to finish the job.

In his next movie, "2012," which comes out in November, the earth will rip apart, fulfilling an ancient prophecy. The director previously leveled civilization with an alien attack in the 1996 movie "Independence Day," unleashed Godzilla a couple years later and orchestrated a climate disaster in 2004's "The Day After Tomorrow." His new film, he says, reflects a darker world view. "I'm really very pessimistic these days," he says.

A flood of postapocalyptic stories is now headed toward movie theaters and TV screens: Expect to see characters fending off cannibals, picking up day-to-day survival techniques and struggling to maintain their humanity amid the ruins. Previous waves of pop-culture disaster, from the Atomic Age paranoia of "War of the Worlds" to Watergate-era flicks such as "The Towering Inferno," have depicted calamity in stunning detail. Many of the new projects, however, actually skip the spectacle of doomsday. Instead, they're more fixed on what goes down in the aftermath.

In "The Book of Eli," a movie scheduled for January, Denzel Washington plays the fierce protector of a book that holds the key to mankind's redemption in an American wasteland created by a war 30 years earlier. "Day One," a series coming to NBC in March, follows a handful of neighbors trying to survive and understand a calamity that erased the world's infrastructure. "The Colony," now airing on Discovery Channel, is a reality show set in an imagined end-times period in which contestants hunt for food, water and shelter after a presumed disaster.

No humans at all survive in the blighted world of "9," an animated film produced by Tim Burton in which mechanical dolls learn from the mistakes of their extinct creators (release date: 09/09/2009). Strong buzz has been building since last year for "The Road," this October's film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's best-selling novel, about a boy and his father trudging through the scorched remnants of an unspecified cataclysm.

Most of the storytellers say they are reacting to anxiety over real threats in uncertain times: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, two U.S. wars abroad, multiple pandemics, a global financial crisis and new attention to environmental perils. "The Road" even weaves in footage

shot during recent disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina, into its scenes of destruction.

"For me, I feel like I live in an apocalyptic world with global warfare, a recession, and resource scarcity," says Jesse Alexander, writer and executive producer of NBC's "Day One."

Studios have scored with the formula before. In 1981, when fear of nuclear war predominated, the post-holocaust action movie "The Road Warrior" became a hit and made Mel Gibson a star. The run-up to the millennium saw a boomlet of effects-driven disaster epics, including "Armageddon" and "Deep Impact." "Independence Day" was the highest-grossing movie of 1996, taking in \$300 million in the U.S.

The escapism factor, always a driver at the box office, plays a role in the latest post-disaster trend, says Rob Kutner, a writer for "The Tonight Show with Conan O'Brien" and author of the satirical "Apocalypse How: Turn the End-Times into the Best of Times!" published last year. "People are less concerned about their house being foreclosed when it's being taken over by mutant appliances."

Some are taking a lighter approach to calamity. Seth Rogen, star of "The 40-Year-Old Virgin" and "Knocked Up," is developing a feature film based on a parody trailer he co-starred in entitled "Jay and Seth vs. the Apocalypse." In the short, two roommates bicker about whether to venture into the wasteland outside their ruined bachelor pad. In "Zombieland," a movie opening in October, actor Woody Harrelson plays a zombie killer named Tallahassee, one of the last survivors in a future overrun by the undead.

"Zombieland" director Ruben Fleischer says there's room for everyone's view of society's afterlife: "Roland [Emmerich] can have the megadisaster. 'The Road' can be the most brutal. And ours is fun times in the post apocalypse. Let's look for Twinkies and shoot zombies!"

The storyline of what happens after an inevitable disaster permeates nearly all the new projects, in contrast to movies like "Armageddon," which showed humanity warding off an impending threat. The Lionsgate film studio recently acquired rights to "The Hunger Games," a young-adult novel set in a ruined America.

The flash-forward motif launched a surprise best seller two years ago in Alan Weisman's book "The World Without Us," which took a scientific approach to explaining how the framework of civilization would decompose as nature took back its turf after humans disappeared. The book is in development as both a fictional feature from Twentieth Century Fox and a documentary film. In the book, Mr. Weisman presented an optimistic view of what a world without humans would look like. "Maybe we're in danger, but the world itself is not in danger," he says. "In fact the world itself recovers rather beautifully."

In the film version of "The Road," as in the novel, the apocalypse that blackened the landscape and set the narrative in motion isn't described. Director John Hillcoat says he pressed author Cormac McCarthy for an answer about what happened. Mr. McCarthy "said it didn't matter whether it was nuclear war or mini volcanoes or a comet," Mr. Hillcoat says. What mattered was the backdrop for the intimate relationship between a father and son.

Though the calamity remained ambiguous, the filmmakers used real disaster footage to render their setting. A panoramic scene in the movie includes the improbable sight of ships marooned on a highway. The image was shot in New Orleans in the days after Hurricane Katrina hit, captured on 70mm IMAX film by a crew that had been in the area to shoot a documentary about the bayou.

Rather than use computers to create massive smoke plumes, the filmmakers patched in news footage of the billows that erupted from the World Trade Center as it burned. Other images came from Mount St. Helens and volcanic devastation in the Philippines. The collage technique was both allegorical and practical (and helped keep the budget to a lean \$20 million), despite the fact that most viewers won't recognize the source material. "Our logic is if you're within that place, whether it's Katrina or the Twin Towers, it would be the same as a global apocalypse to you," Mr. Hillcoat says.

Much of the acting (by Viggo Mortensen as the father and 13-year-old Kodi Smit-McPhee as his son) was shot in the Pittsburgh area in winter, when trees were bare and skies dark. Location scouts targeted remnants of the region's faded industries, including terrain scarred by coal mining and an eight-mile length of highway that had been closed since 1969.

To see how life after the apocalypse might actually play out, the Discovery Channel decided to launch a human experiment. "The Colony" was filmed over 10 weeks in an abandoned Los Angeles warehouse with 10 participants with a variety of backgrounds attempting to emulate a life without electricity, running water or communication with the outside world. They must create their own power generators and fend off marauders who try to steal their supplies. Unlike other reality shows, there are no prize money, contests or votes for which contestants can stay.

Discovery recruited experts like Adam Montella, a private homeland security adviser who's worked on disaster sites after Hurricane Hugo and the Oklahoma City bombings. "Most of the country didn't experience Katrina or 9/11, but they did virtually on television," Mr. Montella says. "There's nothing different about the disaster that caused the colony to come together and another incident which most people can't fathom."

For his animated film "9," Shane Acker imagined a postapocalyptic landscape of grotesque beauty, marked by a burning cathedral, swaying dead grasses and drifting ashes that resemble snow. "The sunsets in this toxic environment are gorgeous," Mr. Acker says.

He embarked on the film in 2005 as the Iraq conflict was dominating the news. "I was constantly being bombarded with images of the war and

questions about our motivation for being there,” Mr. Acker says.

In the story, which he expanded from his Oscar-nominated short film, nine doll-like characters fight sentient machines that were invented to wage war but eventually turned on humans. A scientist modeled on J. Robert Oppenheimer set loose the machines, but also sparked life in the numbered doll heroes (including 9, voiced by Elijah Wood).

Even when they tackle serious issues, most of the new disaster movies and TV shows take pains to avoid moralizing, which can be toxic at the box office. Issue-oriented films, such as “In the Valley of Elah,” starring Tommy Lee Jones, and Tom Cruise’s “Lions For Lambs,” have tended to fare poorly with audiences. “2012” may be an outlet for Mr. Emmerich’s own pessimism about the state of the world, but the director also calls it a “popcorn movie.”

The arms race in digital effects has contributed to the ratcheting up of apocalyptic scenarios. Roger Smith, an executive editor at the research firm Global Media Intelligence and a former film executive who oversaw “Terminator 2,” calls this competition “the film version of the Cuban Missile Crisis—we have to get the edge of extinction each time.”

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