

Imagining the End of the World
MHC 356.01 (0985) or ENG 463.01 (2806)
(Register via Lehman College, class held at Macaulay Honors College)

Professor Lee Quinby
Fall 2011, Tuesdays, 3 to 5:30 PM

Professor Quinby	Contact: 212-729-2936 (O) 646-602-6062 (H) leequinby@aol.com Office hours: T/W 2-3 PM
John Sorrentino – ITF	Contact: jsorrentino@gc.cuny.edu Office hours: T/W Afternoons (by appt)

Apocalyptic destruction has long been a mainstay of Hollywood, and television has increasingly joined this trend that blends doomsday with entertainment. A significant number of works of American literature also reflect fascination with the idea of an end to the world—or the world as we know it. Often, the threat of an apocalyptic day of doom serves as a warning about the immorality of American life. The Left Behind series, for example, charts a Fundamentalist Christian view of the Endtime, from the Rapture and Tribulation to Armageddon and New Jerusalem. From a secular stance, some American apocalyptic writers and filmmakers use the threat of doomsday to launch an ironic critique of American gullibility and superficiality. And many these days see December 21, 2012 as either a portent of total catastrophe or one that ushers in a new age of supreme consciousness.

Clearly, America has apocalyptic gusto.

But why has American culture been so receptive to doomsday belief? In this course, we will explore the antecedents of contemporary American doomsday belief in order to grasp the history, structure, imagery, and drama of apocalyptic narrative and to analyze its effects on individuals and society. By learning to recognize its narrative logic as manifest variously in religious, literary, and cinematic texts, we will gain an understanding of the ways in which doomsday belief shapes everyday perceptions in our

own time, including impulses toward moral certitude and violence. We will investigate the ways in which apocalyptic narratives are produced by and further produce gender and sexual oppositions and states of paranoia. We will reflect on how the human imagination accentuates anxiety and seeks reassurance in the face of finality.

Required Books, in order of assignment (plus additional website entries)

Jonathan Kirsch, A History of the End of the World, Harper One, ISBN-978-0-06-134987-4 (includes “Book of Revelation”)
 Frank Kermode, “The End” from The Sense of an Ending (course website)
 Andrew Macdonald, The Turner Diaries, Barricade Books, ISBN-10: 9781569800867
 Elizabeth K. Rosen, excerpts from Apocalyptic Transformation (course website)
 Alan Moore, Watchmen, DC Comics, ISBN-978-0613919647
 Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, Glorious Appearing, Tyndale, ISBN-978-1414335018
 Cormac McCarthy, The Road, Vintage, ISBN-978-0307387899
 Charles Strozier, Essays from The Fundamentalist Mindset (course website)
 Rick Moody, “The Albertine Notes” (course website)

Participation: This seminar places emphasis on active and thoughtful discussion, both in class and on the course website. Students are expected to attend each class, arrive on time, and contribute to class and the course website. Your participation grade will be judged on the basis of your grasp of the key arguments of the assigned texts, including the films, your respect for other class members’ and my points of view (as shown in the way you respond to others’ ideas in class and on the website), and your attentiveness to the discussions.

Course Website Entries: By midnight each Sunday, you are to post an analytical response of at least 250-300 words (equals 1 typed double-spaced page) on the reading assignment for Tuesday’s class. You are also required to read each other’s entries and comment in response to some of them prior to class. In addition, the website is a good place to alert us to articles and other information on doomsday themes.

Formal Essay: This 12 to 14 page analytical essay is to focus on the 2012 Doomsday phenomenon in American culture, taking into account our texts and discussions while also conducting further research into the topic. Your specific focus might include analysis of 2012 films (dramatic and/or documentary), literature, non-fiction texts, or websites. Be sure that the overall essay has a clear thesis and bibliography of references, including 3-4 course sources and 3-4 outside sources. Please see the recommended reading list for the latter and this website: <http://www.december212012.com/>

Creative Project: Suggestions include but are not limited to: a documentary interview, short story, or work of visual art. Include a 1-page **Project Statement** that indicates your analytic objectives and creative choices.

Grading

In-class participation—20%
Course website entries—30%
Formal Essay—25%
Creative Project—25%

Course objectives

Knowledge Bases

Students should:

1. develop ability to understand and analyze texts with doomsday themes and images
2. develop understanding of apocalyptic texts in their interdisciplinary contexts (e.g., cultural, social, historical, scientific, psychological, and political)
3. understand rhetorical strategies and gendered elements of apocalyptic discourse
4. learn to appreciate textual and imagistic complexity, ambiguity, and paradox
5. learn to identify apocalyptic styles
6. develop ability to use websites as a learning/teaching tool
7. develop understanding of interrelation of discourse, culture, and society

Academic Skills

Students should:

1. be able to reason, think critically, evaluate, use evidence, and make judgments
2. be able to write clearly and imaginatively, in a variety of forms and for a variety of purposes and audiences
3. be able to revise written work and creative project
4. be able to find appropriate print and electronic sources
5. develop a sense of fairness, objectivity, and accuracy in reporting
6. understand the ethics of research and writing, including the proper citation, and integration, of source materials into their work and the meaning and consequences of plagiarism
7. develop listening skills; develop ability to speak effectively

Social and Personal Skills

Students should:

1. learn to be self-reflecting
2. develop ability to work cooperatively and engage in civil debate
3. develop respect for both intellectual and cultural diversity

Recommended Readings for Research Essay and Final Projects

- Boyer, Paul. When Time Shall Be No More, Harvard UP, 1992
- Brasher, Brenda, and Lee Quinby. Gender and Apocalyptic Desire, Equinox, 2006
- Cohn, Norman. Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come
The Pursuit of the Millennium, 1957
- Frykholm, Amy Johnson. Rapture Culture, Oxford UP 2004 (on Left Behind Series)
- Fuller, Robert. Naming the Anti-Christ, Oxford UP 1995
- Gould, Stephen Jay. Questioning the Millennium, Harmony books, 1997
- Guyatt, Nicholas. Have a Nice Doomsday. Harper Perennial, 2007
- Jackson, Gregory. The Word and its Witness, U of Chicago Press, 2009
- Juergensmeyer, Mark. Terror in the Mind of God, U of California Press, 2003
- Keller, Catherine. Apocalypse Now and Then, Beacon Press, 1996
God and Power, Fortress Press, 2005
- Kermode, Frank. The Sense of An Ending, Oxford UP, 1967 (reissued 2000)
- LaHaye, Tim, and Jerry Jenkins. Novels from the Left Behind Series
- Lawrence, D. H. Apocalypse (1931), Penguin Press, 1995
- Lifton, Robert Jay. Super Power Syndrome, Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003
- Long, Thomas. AIDS and American Apocalypticism, SUNY Press, 2005
- Manley, Roger, et al. The End is Near, Dilettante Press, 1999 (artwork and essays)
- MacDonald, Andrew. The Turner Diaries, Barricade Books, 1980
- McGinn, Bernard, et al, eds. The Continuum History of Apocalypticism, 2003
- O'Leary, Stephen. Arguing the Apocalypse, Oxford UP 1994
- Pippin, Tina. Apocalyptic Bodies, Routledge, NYC, 1999
- Pinchbeck, Daniel. 2012: The Return of Quetzalcoatl. Penguin, 2007.
- Quinby, Lee. Anti-Apocalypse, Minnesota UP, 1994
Millennial Seduction, Cornell UP 1999
- Rosen, Elizabeth. Apocalyptic Transformation, Lexington Books, 2008
- Vaughan, Brian K. Y: The Last Man, Vertigo Series
- Weber, Eugen. Apocalypses, Harvard UP, 1999
- Walliss, John, and Lee Quinby. Reel Revelations, Phoenix-Sheffield, 2010
- Weissman, Alan. The World Without Us. St. Martin's Press, 2007
- Wojcik, Daniel. The End of the World as We Know It, New York UP

Selected Online Sites:

Countdown to Armageddon, <http://www.countdown.org/>

Journal of Millennial Studies (Special Issue)

<http://www.mille.org/publications/summer99.html>

New Internationalist Magazine, issue on Anti-Semitism and Conspiracism

<http://www.publiceye.org/antisemitism/newint.html>

PBS Frontline on Apocalypse,

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/apocalypse/>

Rapture Ready, <http://www.raptureready.com/>

Vice Magazine Survival Guide,

http://www.viceland.com/int/guide_apocalypse/htdocs/survivalism_az.php?country=us

Journal of Religion and Film, <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/>

Official Website of December212012, <http://www.december212012.com/>

Appendix

Evaluation criteria for written work:

From a list by Lewis Hyde, edited by Sue Lonoff, with thanks to Richard Marius's writing handbook.

The following remarks are intended to give you a sense of criteria for grading papers. Note that four topics recur: thesis, use of evidence, design (organization), and basic writing skills (grammar, mechanics, spelling).

The Unsatisfactory Paper.

The D or F paper either has no thesis or else it has one that is strikingly vague, broad, or uninteresting. There is little indication that the writer understands the material being presented. The paragraphs do not hold together; ideas do not develop from sentence to sentence. This paper usually repeats the same thoughts again and again, perhaps in slightly different language but often in the same words. The D or F paper is filled with mechanical faults, errors in grammar, and errors in spelling.

The C Paper.

The C paper has a thesis, but it is vague and broad, or else it is uninteresting or obvious. It does not advance an argument that anyone might care to debate. "Henry James wrote some interesting novels." "Modern cities are interesting places."

The thesis in the C paper often hangs on some personal opinion. If the writer is a recognized authority, such an expression of personal taste may be noteworthy, but writers gain authority not merely by expressing their tastes but by justifying them. Personal opinion is often the engine that drives an argument, but opinion by itself is never sufficient. It must be defended.

The C paper rarely uses evidence well; sometimes it does not use evidence at all. Even if it has a clear and interesting thesis, a paper with insufficient supporting evidence is a C paper.

The C paper often has mechanical faults, errors in grammar and spelling, but please note: a paper without such flaws may still be a C paper.

The B Paper.

The reader of a B paper knows exactly what the author wants to say. It is well organized, it presents a worthwhile and interesting idea, and the idea is supported by sound evidence presented in a neat and orderly way. Some of the sentences may not be elegant, but they are clear, and in them thought follows naturally on thought. The paragraphs may be unwieldy now and then, but they are organized around one main idea. The reader does not have to read a paragraph two or three times to get the thought that the writer is trying to convey.

The B paper is always mechanically correct. The spelling is good, and the punctuation is accurate. Above all, the paper makes sense throughout. It has a thesis that is limited and worth arguing. It does not contain unexpected digressions, and it ends by keeping the promise to argue and inform that the writer makes in the beginning.

The A Paper.

The A paper has all the good qualities of the B paper, but in addition it is lively, well paced, interesting, even exciting. The paper has style. Everything in it seems to fit the thesis exactly. It may have a proofreading error or two, or even a misspelled word, but the reader feels that these errors are the consequence of the normal accidents all good writers encounter. Reading the paper, we can feel a mind at work. We are convinced that the writer cares for his or her ideas, and about the language that carries them.

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