

DOOMSDAY
Professor Lee Quinby
Macaulay Honors College, CUNY
English 79.7, Fall 2009, Tuesdays, 4:10-6:40 PM

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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 apocalypse 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 to the Tribulation. 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. We will reflect on how the human imagination accentuates anxiety and seeks reassurance in the face of finality.

Required Readings, in order of assignment:

“Book of Revelation” (course website)

Frank Kermode, “The End” from *The Sense of an Ending* (course website)

Lee Quinby, Millennial Seduction

Charles Strozier, “Ultimate Threats” and “The Problem of Endism” in Apocalypse (course website)

Elizabeth K. Rosen, Apocalyptic Transformation

Alan Moore, Watchmen

Tony Kushner, Angels in America

Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, Glorious Appearing

Melani McAlister, "Left Behind and the Politics of Prophecy" (course website)

Rick Moody, "The Albertine Notes" (course website)

Cormac McCarthy, The Road

Required Films: to be shown as indicated on the syllabus in the DaZe of Doom Film Series. If you are unable to attend the scheduled screening, you are responsible for viewing the film prior to the next class.

September 15: "On the Beach"

October 6: "Twelve Monkeys"

November 3: "The Matrix"

December 1: "Children of Men"

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, regularly contribute to class and the course website, and participate in the film series. 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.

Mid-term Exam: This will be an in-class open book essay exam based on your readings and our discussions up to this point in the semester.

Doomsday Project: This is an opportunity for you to craft your "take" on a doomsday theme, explore its history and its contemporary context, and engage viewers in a creative presentation of it. Doomsday Projects will be put on the course website by the final exam meeting. Suggestions include but are not limited to: a documentary interview, graphic doomsday narrative, music video, or short fictional film. Include a 2-page **Project Statement** that indicates your analytic objectives, creative choices, and outside research on your topic. 3-4 outside sources required.

Course Website Entries: By midnight each Monday, you are to post an analytical response of 250-300 words on the reading assignment for Tuesday's class. You are also expected to read each other's entries and comment in response. In addition, the website is a good place to alert us to articles and other information on doomsday themes.

Final Reflections Essay: This 8-10 page essay should focus on your understanding of Doomsday depictions in contemporary American culture, taking into account our readings, the films, and discussions. Be sure the overall essay has a clear thesis and bibliography of references. 3-4 outside sources are required.

Grading

In-class participation (includes film discussion)—10%
 Course website entries—20%
 Midterm examination—20%
 Creative Project (includes Project Statement)—30%
 Final Reflections Essay—20%

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 use the library 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

Fall Calendar

Sept. 1	Introduction to Class John Sorrentino: Introduction to course website
Sept. 8	“The Book of Revelation” (website) Kermode, “The End” (course website) Quinby, Introduction and Chapters 1 and 6
Sept. 15 Cold War Visions	Creative Project Proposal due: 1 page Strozier, Chapters 2 and 7 (website) Watch 9 minute video: http://www.archive.org/details/DuckandC1951 7 PM: DaZe of Doom Film Series: “On the Beach”
Sept. 22	Rosen, Introduction and Chapter 1 Moore, <u>Watchmen</u>
Sept. 29	No class but read Kushner (conversion day)
Oct. 6 Viral Fears and Antidotes	Kushner, both plays due Quinby, Chapter 2 Rosen, Chapter 3 7 PM: DaZe of Doom Film Series: “Twelve Monkeys”
Oct. 13 Fundamentally Left Behind	LaHaye and Jenkins, through Chapter 11
Oct. 20	LaHaye and Jenkins, to end McAlister, “Left Behind and the Politics of Prophecy” (website)
Oct. 27	Open book in-class Mid-term Exam
Nov. 3 Techno-Apocalypses	Return exams and discuss Quinby, Chapter 7 and Epilogue Rosen, Chapter 4 7 PM: DaZe of Doom Film Series: “The Matrix”
Nov. 10	Rick Moody, “The Albertine Notes” (website)
Nov. 17 Post-Apocalypse	McCarthy, first half

Nov. 24	McCarthy, to end Rosen, Epilogue
Dec. 1	Conferences by request 7 PM: DaZe of Doom Film Series: "Children of Men"
Dec. 8	Final Reflections Essay due
Dec. 15	Final Exam Period: Creative Project placed online. 2-page Project Statement due. Be prepared to present your Project to the class

Recommended Readings for Research and Projects

- Boyer, Paul. When Time Shall Be No More, Harvard UP, 1992
- 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 Perrenial, 2007
- Keller, Catherine. Apocalypse Now and Then, Beacon Press, 1996
God and Power, Fortress Press, 2005
- LaHaye, Tim, and Jerry Jenkins. Novels from the Left Behind Series
- Lifton, Robert Jay. Super Power Syndrome, Thunder's Mouth Press/Nation Books, 2003
- Long, Thomas. AIDS and American Apocalypticism, SUNY Press, 2005
- Kirsch, Jonathan, A History of the End of the World, HarperOne, 2007
- Manley, Roger, et al. The End is Near, Dilettante Press, 1999 (artwork and essays)
- MacDonald, Andrew. The Turner Diaries
- 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
- Vaughan, Brian K. Y: The Last Man, Vertigo Series
- Weber, Eugen. Apocalypses, Harvard UP, 1999
- John Wallis, "Celling the End Times"
- 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/>

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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Addendum: CUNY requests that the following information be included with every syllabus:

1. The University's policy on Academic Integrity:

The faculty and administration of Brooklyn College support an environment free from cheating and plagiarism. Each student is responsible for being aware of what constitutes cheating and plagiarism and for avoiding both. The complete text of the CUNY Academic Integrity Policy and the Brooklyn College procedure for implementing that policy can be found at this site: <http://www.brooklyn.cuny.edu/bc/policies>. If a faculty member suspects a violation of academic integrity and, upon investigation, confirms that violation, or if the student admits the violation, the faculty member MUST report the violation.

2. The following statement in reference to the Center for Student Disability Services:

In order to receive disability-related academic accommodations students must first be registered with the Center for Student Disability Services. Students who have a documented disability or suspect they may have a disability are invited to set up an appointment with the Director of the Center for Student Disability Services, Ms. Valerie Stewart-Lovell at 718-951-5538. If you have already registered with the Center for Student Disability Services please provide your professor with the course accommodation form and discuss your specific accommodation with him/her.

3. The state law regarding non-attendance because of religious beliefs (p. 53 in the Bulletin), and your class policies (e.g., attendance, participation, etc).