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Apocalypse Now What? Apocalyptic Themes in Modern Movies

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I.

THIS IS A TIME AND PLACE THAT HAS NOT COME UPON US YET, BUT YOU ARE already familiar with it. You know it the way you know so much about the world—you have seen it at the movies. Picture it:

The air is dark and smoky, the streets are wet, the buildings are ruined and grimy, and wreckage is everywhere. Fires are burning, motors are roaring. This was once a city. Now it is a nightmare. Or:

There is nothing but desert, ornamented with the blackened parts of unimaginable machines. Sand has worn away the veneer of what was once civilization and eaten its way into the souls of anyone left living.

In either setting, robots, mutants, and human animals act according to no order but the passions of destruction and revenge. They are doomed to half-naked, merciless combat with one another and with the weak.

There is a name for this time and place, used casually as a neutral description now in the ordinary movie review and television listing: "post-apocalyptic."

Through this physical and spiritual landscape of desolation walks—or limps—a man. Clad in black leather, he looks as deadly as anyone else, yet at the same time vulnerable. Far, far back in his eyes, buried in his heart, there is kindness, kindness that can be awakened. This man kills not for pleasure, but to defend

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the weak. And yet you must not underestimate him: he is a killer. That is why the weak need him.

They may not know he is their savior, but you do. You are at the movies, watching, say, *The Road Warrior*, and you know a hero when you see one.

Call him, generically, Mad Max. By now, he is an icon and exists in many incarnations, male and female. By now, he is as familiar as the cross of Christ.

He is an icon of salvation. He is what will pass for a savior, when the End has come...and gone.

This is the lesson of the movies.

II.

When the darkness drops at the movies, our excitement stirs. What we have come to *see* is beginning. This is an ordinary experience, but it wears the garments of revelation. We have gathered in the darkness with strangers to stare into a light. Hearts will beat, voices cry out. At times, the silence will be tense with terror and fascination.

Movies have shown us the wonders of the world, wonders beyond the world. But they have begun to show us a world shattered, all its wonders gone. Instead of rebuilding the pyramids, movie magic is dismantling the very neighborhoods. One might debate whether this is an advance in realism or in fantasy. Nevertheless, it is significant that mainstream movies have transformed apocalyptic themes into post-apocalyptic themes. This transformation has something of the force of the sequel to a successful hit. After all, we saw *Apocalypse Now*. The revelation we await is: now what?

A movie like *The Road Warrior* presumes the End has come and gone. It was itself a sequel to *Mad Max*, which might be called an apocalypse-on-the-way movie, and it showed Max wandering in one of the definitive post-apocalyptic landscapes. *The Road Warrior* also established the financial viability of the genre, itself a cultural revelation.

It must always be remembered, when pondering any issue connected with movies, that they are made by people with access to large amounts of money in order to make even larger amounts of money. Theologians obsessed by the millennium are not behind mainstream movies.

But this economic reality of movies amounts to the shadow of a cultural presence. A guess on what will sell is a guess on what people are thinking and feeling.

Personally, I am more horrified by *Cocoon*, *Field of Dreams*, and *Driving Miss Daisy* than by *The Road Warrior*. Yet one expects such escapism from the dream factory of Hollywood. Why is it giving us the aftermath of doom?

III.

We seem to be preparing ourselves imaginatively for the other side of what is now a given. Or, to put it another way, we are already living imaginally in a

post-apocalyptic world. It is difficult to decide if this means we have become so hopeless that the End might as well have come or we are simply tired of thinking about it and want to move on.

The very fact that dramas are being conceived as *post-apocalyptic* implies that we think we—or someone—will survive. Again, the Mad Max films are the defining series here: they straddle the End. *Mad Max* is set in a world, recognizably ours, which is coming apart, *The Road Warrior* in the aftermath of its destruction, and *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* in a world further along, with Max himself looking run-down, though there are rudimentary communities forming.

In a sense, however, all these worlds are recognizably ours. They look much like Beirut, Belfast, or Los Angeles—places familiar to us from television news. It is also significant that futuristic movies that do not presume an apocalyptic event have much the same post-apocalyptic mood and decor: e.g., *Blade Runner* or the *Alien* series. In other words, the End itself has moved to the periphery of this strand of the popular imagination. Whatever it might be, we think we know what the next day will look like: the worst of today. (As though to underline this, many post-apocalyptic movies are now shot on location, in blasted areas of our present cities.)

This might suggest an essential weakness of the human imagination, a veil of the kind Kant might have traced as a limit to the contemplation of ultimates, something that always folds us back on ourselves. At this limit, buoyant optimism and stupidity might be indistinguishable.

On the other hand, movies have usually conceived the End without a divine dimension, as brought about by human agency—typically, nuclear war; in which case, we—or someone—*might* survive it.

But there is a stranger point to be made. We should never underestimate the dynamics of popular culture. In some dim corner of the popular mind, the End *has* come and gone. We saw it, if not at the movies, then on television.

IV.

We may be as incapable of imagining the End of all things as we are of imagining our own deaths. When we do the latter, we see ourselves at our own funerals. The world we watch is not completely empty of us: we are there as *spectators*. Death means we can watch without being interrupted. This is how television conquered us: through the weakness of the soul for spectacle. By removing the necessity for our bodies to be there, it has perfected the spirituality of the spectator.

Television is where most of us see most of the movies we see. Thus placed, they acquire the immortal presence of television: life is always there, waiting for us to tune in. Changing channels or tapes, we approach what a timeless god can do with history: channel surfing is event surfing. One of the events we surf across is the End of the world, in any one of its manifestations. (The children in *Beyond Thunderdome* tell their tribe's story through a make-believe television set, while they chant "video-o-o.")

These images find their home on television, with its illusions of immortality,

and they establish a history of their own. We have seen the world end. We are still watching. The End has come and gone. We can see it come and go. And as realism and fantasy merge in the wreckage of our life and art, it becomes difficult to tell—at any given moment—whether the End is coming or already behind us.

There is thus now a curious coexistence of apocalypse-on-the-way movies with post-apocalyptic movies. I want to mention a spectacular recent example of the former: *Natural Born Killers*. Significantly, television is a strong presence in it. It is the source of the killers' motivations, and one of the most savagely satirical scenes is shot as a sit-com, complete with laugh track. Television's images and rituals (from commercials to shows like *Geraldo*) are part of the movie's nightmare vision.

Again, the End itself has moved to the periphery. Its coming and its aftermath, which look more and more alike, are what draw us. Without divinity, there is no finality. The coexistence of coming and aftermath on the screens of our contemplative life, along with news footage of our real disintegration, suggest that the terms of our post-apocalyptic visions are present now: a helplessness amid wreckage, threatened by marauding maniacs.

V.

The human communities of post-apocalyptic movies are, like us, simply people that something has happened to. Insofar as they are good, they are helpless. Their helplessness extends at times—as in *Terminator* or the *Alien* series—to complete ignorance of what is happening around them. They live in fear. All they want to do is survive.

Terminator is interesting, for our purposes, because it portrays an assassin and a hero who return from a post-apocalyptic future to battle for the terms of that future in the present. (Again, the End is peripheral.) The interesting point is that, if the hero succeeds, there will be no End.

This is implicit in *Terminator* but explicit in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, when the mother and son turn into something like a Maoist guerrilla and a juvenile delinquent to avert the (possible, future) victory of the robots.

There is an authentic issue here: possible futures are always present in the minds of reformers and terrorists. However, the people of *Terminator 2* are not breaking eggs to make an omelet; they are breaking eggs to *prevent* the apocalyptic omelet. They become terrorists to fight for *no* future, or for life-as-we-know-it to continue. This is a curious psychic somersault, but it is also a sign that, for pop culture, not only is there no finality to the End, there is no redemptive necessity for it either.

There is another interesting twist to *Terminator 2*: when ordinary people take over the role of hero, they become so repellent no one could possibly be drawn to them. The needs of the post-apocalyptic world dictate a different hero. There is an aspect of Mad Max we have not touched upon yet.

VI.

Max is a police officer. When society collapses, he becomes an ex-police officer with his ideals intact. In fact, post-apocalyptic movies are filled with heroes who are either ex- or compromised police officers or soldiers. In apocalypse-on-the-way movies, it is the absence of such figures that signifies the End *is* on the way.

Thus, the image of salvation in these movies is one of *human guardians* establishing *order*. This suggests what an impressive comeback the police have made in the popular mind. (In the movies, they now have an erotic-romantic charge I am only able to explain by romanticism's linkage of sex and death.) But it is the ordinary officers, often those most disgusted, who are the saviors. *The Road Warrior*, *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, *Terminator*, and every imitation of them all have such a figure at their center.

They are little more than Dirty Harry extended into the future. Indeed, for many of us, urban police dramas are now only another form of this genre, or vice versa, which is again a cultural revelation in itself. (The actor Mel Gibson, who plays Max, also plays Riggs in the *Lethal Weapon* police series. Max and Riggs are not so different, except that Riggs is more fun.) At worst, this is a chilling faith in a harsh social order. At best, it is the endurance of a generic stereotype beyond the imagined end of the civilization that spawned it.

Perhaps there was an apocalyptic sense always sleeping within adventure stories, waiting to awaken when there was no longer anything normal to return to. The warfare, in another flattening of apocalyptic thought, becomes not eternal, but endless. The post-apocalyptic world is one in which a dedicated (ex-)police officer battles sadists and serial killers forever.

VII.

There is a disturbing sense in apocalypse-on-the-way movies that the community is only getting what it deserves. So, for example, in *Natural Born Killers*, there are not only no decent police but no—or few—decent people. But in post-apocalyptic movies, the human community, though weak and helpless, makes a comeback in character along with the police. The community provides one pole of the polarized world Mad Max and his avatars defend. Without the weak, there would be no one to kill *for*.

Polarization, of course, is essential to all apocalyptic, but the polarization here is not so much good versus evil as helplessness versus senselessness. This is something we already live with as Americans. In fact, this is what we think morality *is*: a hopeless contest of helpless purity versus senseless slime, with only a thin blue line between us and chaos.

But, without some helpless community to defend, Mad Max would be indistinguishable from the villains. To them, he must already appear as the Angel of Death. (And the lower a movie's budget the closer we approach the zero point.) But now he is bereft of official status. Without a community that will claim him or

that he can claim, Mad Max simply *is* an Angel of Death, like Mickey and Mallory in *Natural Born Killers*.

This is already an abyss that lies one moral blink of the soul away in every violent movie: the shrinking distance between cops and criminals. This is exactly what crosses the emotional wires in *Terminator 2*.

The very helplessness of the community redeems the hero. This is another curious revelation of the popular imagination. In our post-apocalyptic visions, the savior *preserves* the community, but the community *redeems*. The truly redemptive figure is the weak and helpless community—people, like us, to whom something has happened, who only want to survive, who need not redemption but preservation from maniacs. Faith, finality, and divinity have not so much been jettisoned in these popular visions as relocated in ourselves.

VIII.

We see in these movies an old enemy, the human assumption of the divine prerogative. I have been using terms like "apocalypse" and "the End" in their popular sense of "really bad, strange, pointless, chaotic, and catastrophic." Certainly, "apocalypse" itself no longer carries the sense of "revelation." The term has degenerated along with the faith that uttered it.

The term is like a crucifix hanging from a pierced ear or "charity" used as an insult or "martyr" applied to any death or loss whatsoever. It has undergone a kind of reductive, popular exegesis, which is not without something to teach us.

It is clear that, in these visions of the End and its aftermath, anything that the Christian community would name as God has vanished, along with the last judgment. Since we are dealing with ultimates, it is no surprise that the reversal becomes complete and the human community virtually deifies itself, in value if not in power. If we see the post-apocalyptic future as one in which things simply go on as they are, at a lower level of affluence and social cohesion, there has obviously not been much of a revelation.

But it is in the nature of the community that the most subtle and crucial distortion resides. These movies are addressed to the churches of nowhere. There are no disciples waiting for anything. There has been no revelation of anything to wait for. Without a community of faith, the vision of the End suffers the same fate that Jesus Christ suffers in natural theology: it becomes a memory and a mask for feeble pretenders.

It would be tempting simply to decry the dreary state of American culture, with no deeper hope than the arrival of someone bigger than we are who will destroy our enemies. But can we say that some of the psalms see much further than that? To address these movies with any profundity, we must address them from the standpoint of Christian apocalyptic. We must speak from the event of Christ, out of the Christian community.

IX.

When we argue about the End, we are arguing about the present, our time, the terms of our life now. And, in this life now, we display the modern fragments: catastrophe without faith, faith without catastrophe.

These ultimate visions bear on the particulars of life before the End. Is it Mad Max or Jesus that our hearts yearn to see walking down our desolate streets? Unfortunately, there is no shortage of Christian voices in America calling for law and order.

We in the Christian community can recognize the driven heroism of Mad Max, killing to preserve the weak. Can we recognize, as vibrantly and immediately, the obedient heroism of Jesus, dying to redeem all? What future inhabits *our* minds, animating our lives?

The weak sense of the church in the Christian community, fractured by individualism and reductive moralism, is accompanied by an historical and cosmic vacuum. Our churches, our theatres of revelation, are reconceiving themselves as arenas of entertainment and platitudes: "Jesus loves you. Be nice." But it is we who alone can proclaim the cosmic drama of Christ, rising from the events of Holy Week, climaxing in the eucharistic banquet.

Christ is risen: *now* what? Christ will come again: *still* now what?