

# Climate Fiction and its Narratives: (Non) Secularists imaginaries for the environmental collapse

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**Funding:** This publication has been elaborated within the project

*Espacios emocionales: los lugares de la utopía en la Historia Contemporánea* (PGC2018-093778-B-I00).

**Peer review:** This article has been subject to a double-blind peer review process



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## Abstract

*In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the narratives about a possible environmental collapse and its consequences have multiplied. This is due to a growing awareness about issues such as climate change or the energy crisis. The so-called 'climate science fiction' or cli-fi has reflected these concerns in highly successful films, like the two analysed here: *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008), a remake of the 1951 classic. In this paper, I approach both films through an analysis of their plot and narrative structure, focusing mainly on the evolution of their main characters and storylines. I argue that these mainstream productions avoid any examination of the actual causes of the environmental crisis, turning it into a matter of individual responsibility based on Judaeo-Christian values such as guilt and redemption, especially those about the apocalypse.*

**Keywords:** cli-fi; collapse; apocalypse; religion; desacralisation

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The analysis of how entertainment industries configure imaginaries worldwide is essential to understand where our greatest fears and desires lie, especially in our current economic, political, social, and environmental crisis. In this context, apocalyptic narratives are fundamental objects through which we can think about our future, as the ones referred to in this paper

Cultural Industries, mainly through science fiction and above all the so-called 'climate fiction' or cli-fi, have appropriated the environmental crisis narratives and have made them highly successful. Beginning in the 1970s with films such as *Soylent Green* (1973) or *Mad Max* (1979)—both the seed of cli-fi—during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the issue has risen to prominence with films such as *Waterworld* (1995), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *Wall-E* (2008), *The Road* (2009) or the remake of the 1951 classic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008).

Taking this into account, it is undeniable that Hollywood, as one of the main centre of production of cultural goods, still has the role of 'dream factory' to most of the Western world. In this regard, Kalafatoğlu (2019: 73) states that between 2012 and 2017, Hollywood revenue still represented around 11 percent of US annual income. Thus, the 'Mecca of cinema' continues to be one of the main centres of cultural dissemination or, as Kalafatoğlu (Ibid: 65) points out, 'the economic and political power of the USA has been transferred to the field of culture through cinema'.

In this way, dystopian and apocalyptic mainstream cinema—which at first glance could be considered 'critical' towards capitalism—evades censorship of the economic system, cause of the civilisational collapse represented in these productions (Rey Segovia, 2016). Despite its apparent 'progressive' spirit, I endeavour to demonstrate that this genre continues to reproduce the logic that supports the current economic system. Additionally, I also argue that the discussion of these 'uncritical dystopias' (Mirrlees, 2015) cannot be justified exclusively through a structuralist approach that interprets them from an Althusserian perspective—that is, as mere 'ideological apparatuses' of mass control. This means that Cultural Industries should be considered from a perspective that is not limited to the mechanistic matter of deterministic relationships between economic base and superstructure. It is then necessary to take a deeper look at the way in which we understand, represent, and reproduce our reality.

A Cultural Studies perspective is useful to bring new ideas to this debate because I understand that 'the difficulty lies in estimating the final importance of a factor which never, in practice, appears in isolation'. Therefore, 'if we are to understand the cultures, we are committed to what is manifest: the way of life as a whole' (Williams, 1960: 300). This

requires considering the interactions and conflicts between mass culture and the critical expressions of popular culture (Fiske, 2010: 19).

In that respect, we must pay attention to fictitious representations of eventual civilisation collapses in order to understand how these images affect our capacity to act (or not) and transform reality. Through the analysis of two of the most successful films on this topic, *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), I will explore how this issue is approached nowadays by exposing their narrative structure and the conservative perspective they uphold. My aim is to prove how cli-fi mainstream fictions present plots to the audience under a pseudo-scientific veil that obscures their religious orientation. As a result, these films ultimately avoid the debate about the consequences of our economic system.

Cinema is one of the most powerful vehicles for collective imaginaries, therefore film analysis will help us provide new insights to the issues raised above. Paraphrasing Jameson (2003: 76), it is necessary to understand why it is easier for us to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. The following examples may give us some clues.

### **Dystopia, Cli-fi and the Collapse of Western civilisation: An essential clarification of concepts**

A proper delimitation of the sub-genre is necessary before proceeding. Although I intend to maintain a certain flexibility in the categorisation of the films analysed, it becomes essential to narrow this collection of films according to certain criteria.

The term cli-fi is attributed to American journalist Dan Bloom, creator of the online dissemination project *Cli-Fi Report Global* (<http://cli-fi.net/>). Bloom relates it to the eco-fiction genre, popularized in the 1970s through novels such as *The Monkey Wrench Gang* (1975). However, Bloom believes climate fiction has become an independent genre, restricted to those fictions that take into consideration the specific problem of global warming (Sullivan, 2017). The Guardian journalist Rodge Glass points out that, unlike most science fiction, climate fiction focuses on intense and immediate threats. In his opinion, what differentiates climate fiction from traditional science fiction is not so much a concern about discovery but about warning. According to Glass, the horrors described in climate fiction are presented to us as strangely familiar. In this regard, cli-fi closely echoes the definitions of dystopian fiction.

According to Claeys (2017: 4) the term dystopia refers to a 'diseased, bad, faulty, or unfavourable place'. Claeys (*Ibid*: 5) also points out that the expression is normally associated with literature and refers to 'fearful

futures where chaos and ruin prevail'. Other authors such as Hernández-Ranera (2005: 14) emphasise that dystopian societies take place in imminent futures where conditions are based on the social tendencies of the present time. Therefore, dystopias have a strong anchor in the present, inferring the future from the extrapolation of the existing categories in a particular moment (López Keller, 1991: 15).

Consequently, 21st century dystopias have progressively abandoned their traditional clichés—such as the fear of totalitarianism—to introduce new concerns much more rooted in our present reality. In this sense, Claeys (2017: 501) refers to the importance given to climate change and its consequences when it comes to imagining a dystopian drift in our future. As Spratt and Dunlop (2019) have argued, the so called climate crisis 'provides a glimpse into a world of 'outright chaos' on a path to the end of human civilisation and modern society as we have known it'.

This can be linked to the possible 'collapse' described by authors such as Tainter (1995), Diamond (2006) or Taibo (2017). Based on the work of Spanish scholar Carlos Taibo, we can define 'collapse' as

*(...) a strong shock that disrupts many relationships, the consequent irreversibility of the process, deep alterations regarding the satisfaction of basic needs, a significant decrease in human population, a generalized loss of sophistication in all fields, together with a growing fragmentation and retrogression of centralizing flows, the dissolution of pre-existing institutions and, finally, the breakdown of the legitimizing ideologies and many of the communication mechanisms of the previous order (author's translation, Taibo, 2016: 31-32).*

In recent decades, these kinds of narratives have multiplied mostly due to a growing concern about issues such as climate change or the energy crisis. This began, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, with the publication of studies such as *Silent Spring* in 1962 (Carson, 2005) or ten years later with *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows, 2006). Environmentalism—which owes much to the conservationist movements of previous decades—flourished during this period in a way that continues today. It was during those years that concerns such as overpopulation, industrialisation, pollution, the use of natural resources and food sovereignty became more relevant in scientific and academic spheres, spreading to other areas such as Cultural Industries and, more recently, to the corporate discourse. However, as Herrero (2006: 154) notes, the multiplicity of discourses and scientific studies developed over the last fifty years has not succeeded in deflecting the path to collapse.

As such, dystopian fiction provides a useful tool for relaying many of the concerns that environmentalists address to the general public. If we conceive dystopias as depictions of our present fears and anxieties about the future, climate fiction, with its speculative character over the future and its premonitory spirit, might be understood as a peculiar form of dystopia, or even as a sub-genre within it. Therefore, the concept of environmental dystopia is suitable for referring to these narratives. I will consider environmental dystopias those fictional productions that focus on the representation of undesirable futures directly related to ecological collapse. This is, the impact of human activity on the natural environment that can cause irreparable and undesirable changes in human relations.

### **Environmental Dystopia in Mainstream Cinema: The desacralisation of contemporary apocalypse**

I will proceed to establish some examples in order to illustrate and analyse the statements made before. I will examine two of the most famous cli-fi movies of the 21st century: *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) and *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004). The two feature-length films were successful box-office hits. The first film remained in first place worldwide for seven days after its release, while Emmerich's was the sixth most popular film of the year 2004. Both films address the end of days and refer to our responsibility for the fate of our planet. While dystopias normally reveal the world after the apocalypse, these movies provide an account of the days before the final catastrophe. Even if this characteristic might be seen as problematic for the integration of the films into the genre of dystopia, I argue that these films are clear examples of cinematographic depictions of possible collapses—either directly caused by human action on the environment or as 'punishment' for their bad actions.

I will consider not only the formal aspects of the films, but also, and especially, their plot and narrative structure. I seek to establish how the main characters are presented to the audience and which of their qualities are highlighted by the filmmakers, as well as analyse the evolution of the plot and the identification of the main themes. Textual film analysis will be a fundamental tool in this approach, and I will also concentrate on other issues related to the social and cultural dimensions of the stories.

*The Day the Earth Stood Still* and *The Day After Tomorrow* offer an alternative perspective on environmental dystopias, in terms of contingency of a future anchored in our present. This 'attachment' to our present gives us the possibility to draw some clues about our era's philosophy or, in the words of Gramsci (2011: 130), about 'the body of feelings and conceptions of the world that prevail among the "silent" majority' (author's translation). In terms of hegemony, it is interesting to

examine how this 'silent majority'—those outside of direct political participation—interprets environmental problems through an apparently de-ideologized lens, in the same way that these films approach them.

2008's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* tackles the environmental concerns directly associated with the anti-war movement and youth protests of the first decade of the 21st century in the United States of America, unlike the 1951 film, which focused on the post-war and Cold War fears. Although the film softens the messianic aspects of the original one, this analysis will show that this discourse is still present. The apparent secularisation of the original story contributes to mask the politically conservative message that the film still holds.

In Derrickson's film, astrobiologist Helen Benson (Jennifer Connelly) is summoned by the US Government after the arrival of an unidentified object from space. This object, a large sphere, lands in New York's Central Park and an alien in human shape, later known as Klaatu (Keanu Reeves), descends from it along with a giant robot named Gort. Humans will soon discover that similar objects have landed all over the world. Klaatu's mysterious intentions will be revealed shortly: he has come to rescue Earth's biodiversity from being wiped out by mankind. Following biblical fables, US Secretary of Defense Regina Jackson (Kathy Bates) will discover the alien's true purpose: to cause a new Great Flood to exterminate the human race. During the film, Klaatu will join Helen and her son, Jonas, who will eventually convince him of our capacity to rethink our attitude in dealing with the environment.

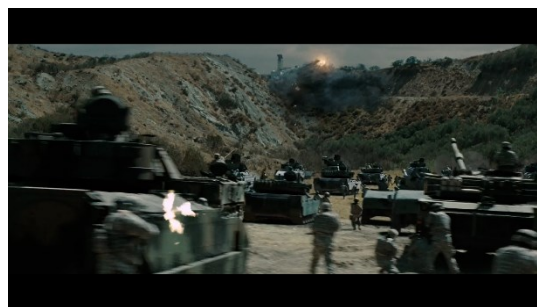
The US government is represented in the figure of Regina Jackson, a strong middle-aged woman whose only concern seems to be the possibility of a global armed conflict not only against the alien visitors but also against other powerful nations of the world. The film shows a clear antimilitarist and pacifist discourse, easily appreciated in the grotesque representation of the US Army and government as institutions conformed by incompetent and irrationally violent people.

Klaatu, who is characterized as a young Anglo-Saxon man, is a cold, hyper-rational being who sticks to that same rationality when disclosing the urgent need to annihilate humanity. He does not let his emotions control him at any time, even when he finally comprehends that emotions are an important part of human 'nature'. Nevertheless, he does seem to be able to appreciate the 'beauty' in art, which he eventually attributes to a sort of 'hidden' but distinctive quality of our humanity that he does not fully understand.

To complement Klaatu's character comes Helen, initially presented as an independent and prominent woman in her professional field. However, the storyline quickly focuses on her role as a long-suffering caregiver, blurring the scientific and rational aspect of her character. This is clearly noticeable in several sequences of the film; e.g. when Helen visits Professor Barnhardt, her mentor and Nobel Prize winner, his advice to her is to persuade Klaatu 'not with reason, but with yourself'. Helen's prominence then becomes relegated to her emotional and sensitive side, characteristics of femininity traditionally represented in Hollywood cinema even in female scientists (Conrad, 2009: 57).

With this brief overview of the different roles played by the main characters of the film we see, at first glance, a certain degree of conservatism. From this perspective, the tale of a creature coming from Heaven to judge us and decide on our future is no less conventional. However, Klaatu is not a legendary figure or a prophet in a traditional manner—although he does depict some of the characteristics that allow us to consider him as one; for example, being capable of healing himself or others, even though it is not through 'magic' or supernatural powers but through advanced medicine.

This is even more obvious if we focus on the form of 'punishment' Klaatu decides to throw over the world: a plague of mechanical locusts. This plague invokes the one inflicted by God on Egypt as a punishment for the enslavement of Hebrews. The parallelism between the two plagues can be noted in the film. While its origin is an artificial organism, Gort's mechanical body, we can observe how it first emerges from a military base situated in the desert and it quickly advances looking for the city. On its way, the plague of locusts wipes out all man-made infrastructures, vehicles, and weapons (Pictures 1 to 4).

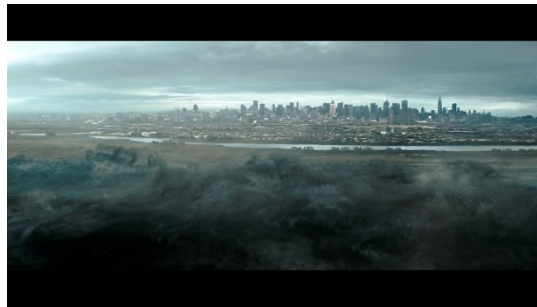


Picture 1: Gort emerges from a military base, shot perspective that of the gathered troops. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

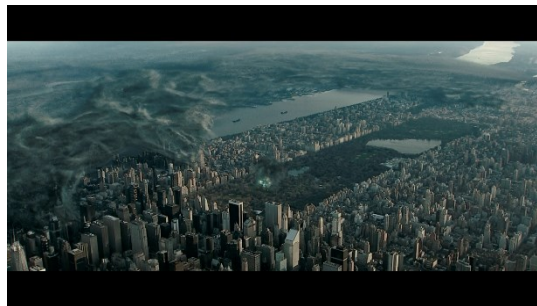




Picture 2: Alien mechanical locust plague attack a fleeing truck. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,



Picture 3: Wide angled shot of alien mechanical locust plague advancing on New York. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,



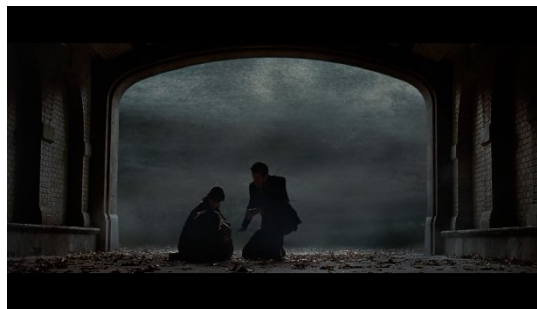
Picture 4: Aerial shot of the alien mechanical locust plague engulfing New York. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

In the final part of the film Klaatu sacrifices himself to save humanity and the calm that follows his act, that is also a clear example of the religious background of the story. The sequence begins with a picture of Helen and Jason who are seeking protection under an arch in Central Park together with Klaatu. As a result of the plague, Jason begins to bleed from his nose and collapses. Helen begs Klaatu to save him, while she also starts bleeding. The image of the woman holding her fallen stepson can easily be compared to Michelangelo's Pietà (Picture 5). Klaatu finally kneels before them and decides to save both using his healing abilities, as Christ did for the sick and leper (Pictures 6 to 8).

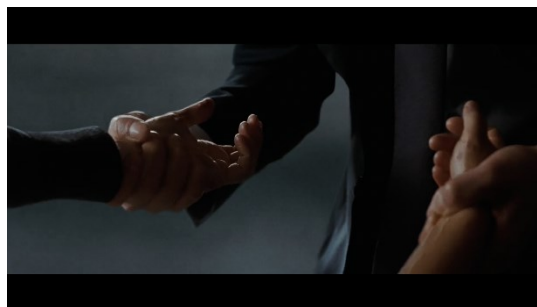




Picture 5: Helen clasps her dying stepson. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,



Picture 6: Wide angled shot, in silhouette, the figures of Klaatu and Helen kneel over Jason, Helen's dying stepson. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,



Picture 7: Close up shot, Klaatu clasps the hands of a human, their point of view perspective. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,



Picture 8: Close up shot, Klaatu clasps the hands of a human, reverse perspective. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Consequently, the film presents an account of religious fables based on the Judeo-Christian tradition, regardless of the apparent secularisation or desacralisation suggested through the figure of Klaatu. It is no longer God, Jesus or the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, but an alien in human form, whose purpose is to alert and 'save' us from ourselves.

At this point it is worthwhile to remember that Klaatu, as a kind of avenging angel sent from Heaven, not only intends to destroy every human creation, but also to save the planet's biodiversity by collecting, like Noah, specimens of the world's flora and fauna. Nature, thus, remains as a permanent and unchanging element during the whole plot. The dichotomy Nature versus Civilisation—one of the recurrent dystopian themes according to scholars as Martorell (2019: 41)—operates here almost as an argument for a necessary refoundation in evolutionary terms: the need to start again, from scratch, on a newly created blank canvas.

This is one of the main reasons why the film is close to the dystopian genre and, more specifically, to the so-called 'negative utopias' (Sargent, 1994: 9): unable to find rational solutions outside the limits imposed by our current economic system—that is, capitalism—the only way to escape our inevitable fate is to trust love and start over. In this setting, our imaginaries about the future end up seeking answers in the past; that is, in the fables and/or traditional narratives that sustain the pillars of Western civilisation.

On that note and according to Wallis (2014: 71-72), we can observe how our greatest fears are reflected in popular culture and the topics addressed by Hollywood cinema. He understands that contemporary apocalyptic films, which could also be referred to as collapse films, are characterized by a desacralisation of the apocalypse, while at the same time they tend to valorise 'the everyday wherein (...) the contemporary social order (understood typically as male and North-American) is reaffirmed and celebrated' (Ibid: 73). Thus, and considering the problem presented in Derrickson's film, the film also adapts perfectly to our definition of environmental dystopia in the description of an eventual collapse caused by our activity on the environment and its consequences.

Wallis states in this respect that many of these apocalyptic films operate, for contemporary audiences, in much the same way as the apocalyptic texts of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance in Europe did (Ibid: 75). In his opinion, however, some differences can be identified. These differences refer mainly to the mitigation of fatalism when compared to biblical texts or to the consideration of the Apocalypse as a 'natural' fact and avoidable through human action. In the film, the most immediate consequence of our actions is the aforementioned punishment by this extra-terrestrial creature who threatens with the apocalypse.

The latter is related to the concept of 'apocalyptic religion' referred to by scholars such as Gray (2008: 3). According to Gray, this type of religiosity is experiencing a sort of rebirth in the new millennium, accompanied by contemporary political conflicts such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (2001) or the Iraq War (2003). Gray (2008: 23-24) points out that utopian narratives (and therefore, I would add, also dystopias) are strongly influenced by the Millenarian movements that impregnated modern social and political movements. Other scholars, most notably Conrad Ostwalt (2016), also refer to this apparent desacralisation. According to Ostwalt (Ibid: 8), the blurring of the boundaries between the sacred and the secular has created a new apocalyptic myth, characterized by a fundamental desacralisation of the traditional forms of the apocalypse.

In Derrickson's film, there is clearly an effort to dissociate religiosity from its 'magic' component, but in the end, it is covered up with a halo of scientism reinforced by the main characters of the film. Klaatu and Helen are both rational beings —modern in the historical sense of the term— who base their decisions on scientific evidence. In this sense, it seems clear that *The Day the Earth Stood Still* offers us a re-issue of the apocalypse in which various Judeo-Christian themes such as the Exodus (specifically, the Seven Plagues of Egypt) or the Great Flood are mixed, with the Ark as the central element and Klaatu as a new Noah.

The movie thus offers some fundamental lessons. On the one hand, it argues that we are unable to realize the problem until a greater, seemingly all-powerful being comes to warn us about it. On the other, it tells us that science and reason will not save us, but love will. Although this message may be arguable, taken it together with the re-packaging of religious discourses, it paradoxically implies a potentially 'unscientific' position.

In the end, the story seems to emphasize faith as one of the most important values we have as individuals. In order to reaffirm this, the film presents us an unresolved ending in which we must trust and believe for everything to work out. That faith is in fact the basis for our salvation. Here is where it lies the conservative approach to the subject. Guilt is equally shared among all planet's inhabitants and redemption does not imply any structural changes but merely moral ones. Although the film raises some questions about our 'way of life', it does not dwell on these issues for long.

The film also perfectly fits within the tradition of conservationist environmentalism, a movement with a long history in the United States. More specifically, the postulates of Christian environmentalism seem to have a clear influence in the plot presented by Derrickson. According to Kearns (1997: 351), this movement 'is rooted in an evangelical interpretation of the biblical mandate for humans to be good stewards and to take care of the earth'. Kearns also states that Noah is a central figure

for these activists, especially when it comes to the moral implications which the story represents. Derrickson's film clearly illustrates this by providing us with an updated portrait of Noah's ark on the big screen.

On top of that, the possibility of a Great Flood has for decades been one of the most debated issues among Christian environmentalists and the so-called 'creationist scientists'. The most influential publication among the latter is, undoubtedly, *The Genesis Flood* (Whitcomb & Morris, 1961), which addresses the issue raised in its title from a pseudo-scientific perspective. As Witske (1984, 60) says, this book 'stirred up a great deal of interest in a group of Christian apologeticists seeking to unite Biblical literalism with evidence from the geological and biological sciences'. An interest that we can link back to the films presented in this paper.

The work of Michael Oard, a prolific American meteorological researcher and member of the Institute for Creationist Research (ICR), is an example of this. Interestingly, his research has focused on the possibility of an Ice Age caused by the Great Flood (Oard, 1990). This issue is conspicuously brought up by the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), which depicts a post-collapse scenario, this time caused by the imminent consequences of global warming. In the film, the global warming has caused a change in ocean flows, which will end up precipitating a flooding and a new glaciation throughout the northern hemisphere.

Here, the protagonists are a dysfunctional father, Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid), and his son Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal). Jack is a paleoclimatologist who specializes in the research of the climatic changes that the Earth has experienced throughout its existence. During the first part of the film, Jack warns on numerous occasions about the risks of climate change, confronting the scientific community and the US Government itself, which maintains a negative attitude until disaster becomes inevitable. As in the previously analysed film, humanity is not aware of the problem and people only awaken when the collapse occurs.

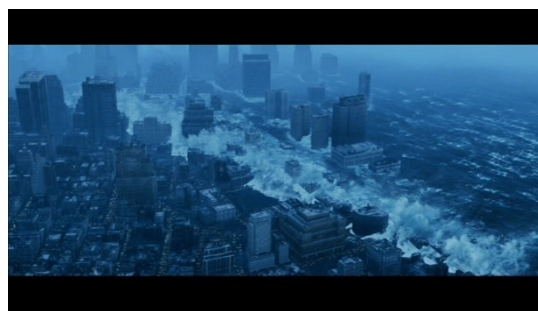
The hero is once again a white heterosexual man, although in Jack's case he is a scientist who puts his reputation at stake by opposing official discourse. As can be seen, it is not 'science' but a scientist or, for that matter, a group of 'enlightened' scientists who warn about the threat. Although their appeal to authority has some weight in the plot, the storyline ends up focusing on Jack's personal life story and his promise to rescue Sam, his son, from certain death.

In *The Day After Tomorrow* collapse comes to our civilisation in the form of a flood (Pictures 9 & 10), making the biblical references even more evident than in the previous example. Like Noah, Jack tries to convince the rest of the mortals of the imminent catastrophe, but he fails. He

continuously depicts a doomsday scenario that is rejected by most of the people who surround him. This is an attitude that easily resembles the one that environmentalism has sustained since its revival in the 1970s. Here, it is perhaps more evident that there is a strong correlation between the film's plot and the positions that the Christian environmental movement has held since its origins.

Mass media plays an important role in the plot. The events are permanently broadcast, so the diegetic space transcends the cinematic screen, making the spectator live them in a much more frenetic and realistic way. This also allows us to witness how the tragedy is impacting the rest of the world. However, the centre of the picture is still located in the United States: the riots, looting, and violence seem to take place beyond its borders; inside, we only notice perplexity and confusion among the people.

Jack's son, Sam, a shy and smart teenager, also ignores his father's warnings and flies from Washington to New York to participate in an academic contest with his friends, Laura, and Brian. While in New York, the dramatic events predicted by Jack unfold and a devastating tsunami strikes the city, leaving it completely flooded (**Picture 11**). After that, temperatures plummet and a snowstorm begins; the city is now under a huge blanket of snow and ice. Survivors take shelter inside New York's buildings, which serve as a refuge while waiting to be rescued. These buildings serve as a resting place, just as the mountains of Ararat did for Noah's Ark. In fact, the characterisation of Sam's girlfriend [Laura] during these incidents reminds us of an icon of a religious nature, almost as a Madonna (**Picture 12 to 14**). Her head is covered with a pashmina while her coat serves as a kind of robe, only leaving her face exposed.



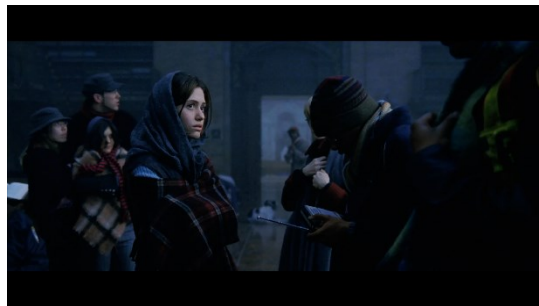
Picture 9: Mega tsunami wave impacts New York, aerial view. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,



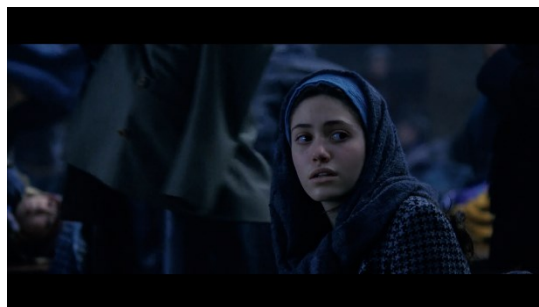
Picture 10: Mega tsunami wave impacts New York, offshore perspective. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,



Picture 11: Mega tsunami wave impacts New York, inundated street level perspective. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,



Picture 12: Tsunami survivors huddle, with Laura Chapman off-centre left. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,



Picture 13: Close up, tsunami survivor Laura Chapman. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,





Picture 14: Wide shot, tsunami survivors in the background, with Laura Chapman the central focus. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

It does not seem casual that the building Sam chose as a shelter for him and his friends is the New York Public Library. The frozen and tired refugees end up burning books to keep warm. The debate over which books are worth saving from burning is also interesting. For instance, Nietzsche is described as a 'chauvinist pig' despite being 'the most important thinker of the 19th century', so his work does not escape from fire, while all the 'tax law' books are dispensable. Perhaps the most significant conversation held in the library is between two minor characters, Helen, and Jeremy. The man holds a Gutenberg Bible tightly against his chest while the woman mocks his attitude: 'Do you think God will save you?', she says. Jeremy, who claims to be an atheist, explains that he is trying to avoid the burning of this particular Bible because, in his opinion, it 'represents the dawn of the age of reason'. 'If Western civilisation is finished, I'm gonna save at least one little piece of it', he adds. The link established between reason, (Western) civilisation, and religion does not seem to leave any room for debate as to which fundamental pillars the film is upholding. In other words, we are offered a defence of modern civilisation as interpreted through American values.

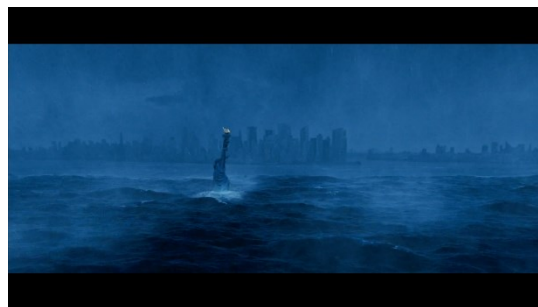
It is not no less significant that this defence comes in the form of a revival of Judaeo-Christian values and biblical postulates, or as I have already pointed out, as a punishment (in this case from Nature) for humans' attitude towards Earth.

Once again, we are initially offered a grotesque representation of the United States government, although this time it is related to a much more 'material' debate: the opposition between capital gain and human life. Although this could be interpreted as an 'anti-system' statement, this argument does not seem to hold up for long. In fact, in the end, the US government itself will accept the necessity to change the way we relate to nature. Thus, the resolution of the conflict does not really focus on a 'revolutionary' way out, but on a 'reform' of the economic system within its limits.

Furthermore, from a moral standpoint, we can recognize that the plot pivots around Judeo-Christian themes such as sin (Jack's neglect as a parent, as well as the government's neglect regarding climate change), guilt (Jack's assuming his responsibility as a father as well as the US President as 'father of the nation', that is, responsible for its citizens) and forgiveness (the friendly 'reconciliation' between Jack and his family, but also between the US and the 'Third World'). Following this framework, we could establish a parallel between the evolution of Jack's character and that of the nation itself. The plot suggests a path of redemption for both, the need to believe that these 'dysfunctional parents' can save us from our sins through their sacrifice.

Again, the similarities with some messianic figures, such as Christ himself, seem quite evident. At this point, it might be worth remembering that Emmerich also directed *Independence Day* (1996), which highlights similar aspects as the ones discussed here.

Once this new Great Flood has passed, one of the only things left is the Statue of Liberty's torch emerging from the water, as a reminder of the lost freedom and of people's ability to rise from ashes (**Picture 15**). In the end, we are again presented with an almost literal image of a blank canvas beyond the city, symbolizing the chance for a fresh start (**Picture 16**).



Picture 15: Wide angle shot, a submerged New York City from the Upper Bay Perspective in the background, with the Statue of Liberty half underwater to the fore. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,



Picture 16: Aerial shot, survivors of New York in the distance, trudging across a frozen, snow-bound, featureless landscape. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

There are clear similarities between both filmic texts. In the first place, both examples revolve around the need to rethink our relationship with Earth, that is, the necessity of taking care of its biodiversity and/or to acknowledge the impact of human activity on our planet. To this end, the plots rely on biblical characters and Judaeo-Christian narratives—especially on fables like the Great Flood or figures like Noah—in order to present a sobering discourse in which moral and ethical values such as love, forgiveness, and sacrifice become fundamental pillars.

As shown, both productions ignore the earthlier causes of the problem. It all ends up being reduced to moral or ethical issues, without delving into any of the economic, social, or political ramifications of their perspectives. One of the main problems with this approach lies not so much in the possible lessons that can be established on an ethical level, but in the blurring of the environmentalists' most radical demands regarding such challenges. For instance, explicit references to the potential impacts of a shift in capitalist production model are clearly scarce, which are essential to curb carbon emissions.

It might be argued that these films deal with a necessary issue and stimulate an important debate. However, as this analysis has shown, they address it in terms of individual responsibility and from an ethnocentric approach. Hence, what is presented to us as an apparently de-ideologized and neutral message becomes a sobering plea when scrutinised. It is nothing but a plea to rebuild civilisation through the restoration of the presumably abandoned Western cultural values.

While a further analysis of these issues is required, the analysis presented in this paper gives us some clues about how environmental collapse is presented in mainstream Hollywood cinema. The issues that have been pointed out might serve as preliminary defining characteristics of a film genre that can also be traced in other examples, such as the famous *Waterworld* (1995). I think this work provides a guideline for the identification of a certain model or recognizable pattern inherent to environmental dystopias. In summary, the cinematographic apocalypse presents a secular —or at least non-religious— story, when related to environmental catastrophes. At the same time, these narratives are actually re-packaging elements present in ancient texts, such as the Book of Revelations.

The updating of sacred texts serves as a form of desacralisation of the apocalypse in the analysed films. On the one hand, the new 'messiahs' are now scientists or, at least, hyper-rational beings, like Klaatu or Jack. On the other, the reasons for the end of the world are intimately related to our actions and can also be avoided or mitigated through them. This desacralisation can be also related to what Partridge (2005) calls

'oculture', a characteristic of our times according to him. As the author states, it is a confluence between secularisation and sacralisation in which old religious forms are replaced by new non-Christian spiritualities. In this case, it would involve everything related to the veneration of nature or life on our planet.

This cinematographic approach to possible collapses might be also linked to the de-ideologisation and cynicism that characterize our times (**Žižek, 2009: 7**). The films focus on the selfish nature of human beings and their destructive capacity, which are worthy of divine punishment. Consequently, they detach the reasons that led to collapse from the current economic system, based on an extractivist, consumerist and productivist logic. Although there are references to this in the films, both end up focusing on moral and ethical conflicts. They also highlight the importance of the family and of institutions in restoring order and a specific lifestyle, that is, the American Way of Life. Thus, the restoration of normality (**Wallis, 2014: 72**) becomes the primary objective of both plots.

It is important to remember that cinema is a language which while often considered as a reflection or duplication of reality, it also serves as an instrument of persuasion. Therefore, as Carmona indicates (**2005: 16**), we must pay attention to the signifying strategies that take place in it. Although in these cases presented, the 'reflection' does not work as an absolute identification of the filmic image with the real world, it does so in terms of contingency. That is, in terms of an apparently deductible future based on the categories and elements that conform the spectator's present, which leads the image to be presented not only as plausible but also as possible.

Therefore, this approach to some of these mainstream dystopias—specifically, to those related to environmental collapse—points out some of the contradictions of our current economic and productive model. It also shows how direct criticism is avoided and turned into individual dilemmas of a Hobbesian human nature. The lack of an assertive solution in the films' endings—always open to interpretation—constitutes a clear commitment to a refoundation based on values.

This, while undoubtedly necessary, is of course insufficient to reverse the accumulative logic of capitalism and its effects upon the environment. It can be argued that this is not the main goal of these films; however, it seems clear that they aim at more than entertainment when addressing problems such as those described. In conclusion, these films' approach—which I might describe in political terms as liberal progressive—seems valuable in some aspects but, in the end, it does not succeed in imagining potential new worlds or, after all, new utopias.

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Picture 1: Gort emerges from a military base, shot perspective that of the gathered troops. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 2: Alien mechanical locust plague attack a fleeing truck. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 3: Wide angled shot of alien mechanical locust plague advancing on New York. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 4: Aerial shot of the alien mechanical locust plague engulfing New York. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 5: Helen clasps her dying stepson. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 6: Wide angled shot, in silhouette, the figures of Klaatu and Helen kneel over Jason, Helen's dying stepson. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 7: Close up shot, Klaatu clasps the hands of a human, their point of view perspective. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 8: Close up shot, Klaatu clasps the hands of a human, reverse perspective. Image source - *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (2008) © Twentieth Century Fox/3 Arts Entertainment et al.,

Picture 9: Mega tsunami wave impacts New York, aerial view. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

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Picture 11: Mega tsunami wave impacts New York, inundated street level perspective. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

Picture 12: Tsunami survivors huddle, with Laura Chapman off-centre left. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

Picture 13: Close up, tsunami survivor Laura Chapman. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

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Picture 15: Wide angle shot, a submerged New York City from the Upper Bay Perspective in the background, with the Statue of Liberty half underwater to the fore. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

Picture 16: Aerial shot, survivors of New York in the distance, trudging across a frozen, snow-bound, featureless landscape. Image source – *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) © Twentieth Century Fox/Centropolis Entertainment et al.,

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**To cite this article:**

Rey Segovia, A., 2021. Climate Fiction and its Narratives: (Non) Secularists imaginaries for the environmental collapse. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 8(2), 47-68. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v8i2.539>.