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THE END IS A PRIVATE MATTER

BY CLAUDIA DURASTANTI | MARCH 8, 2016

In the nineties, Italian TV stations used to show natural disaster movies in an attempt to stem the annual haemorrhage of viewers during the summer. Mostly set in the United States but with occasional odd concession to Mexico and Australia, they would involve devastating volcanic eruptions, the sudden onset of an ice age, or the emergence of a mutant species that would eventually be destroyed by biblical fires rather than by the appliance of science.

A decade later, the Kyoto protocol, Al Gore and the end of the Mayan calendar saw plots change: the visible effects of *climate change* and paranoia that led people to build bunkers in the desert – not, this time, from fear of a nuclear holocaust but rather belief in an imminent, cataclysmic alignment of the stars that would, predictably, turn out to be false – inspired Hollywood and independent film makers alike to give disaster movies an existential subtext at best, and a religious message at worst.



First generation disaster movies were based on an implicit but basic premise: everything you're watching is terrifying but it isn't happening to you and, in any case, it isn't even possible. They played on a mixture of *schadenfreude*, self-satisfaction at your distance from the ice storms, earthquakes and volcanoes, and a sense of immunity. The make-believe of these films was spectacular yet predictable and innocuous.

From 2004's *The Day After Tomorrow* onwards, the moralising, doom-laden message of disaster movies becomes endemic: the idea of the world ending is now not only possible but loaded with behavioural and environmental implications. What's more, the innocent tone is replaced by a gloomy and conflict-ridden depiction of salvation.

The final scenes of early disaster movies were formulaic: following the sacrifice of part of humanity, the survivors would stoically wipe the mud from their faces or emerge heroically from the flames. In more recent apocalyptic cinema, when they survive, characters tend to be despondent about mankind's inability to mend their ways, and the solution is just temporary: the imminent threat of annihilation is gone, but so is the hero's confident stride.

The entire genre has been re-imagined: a film like *San Andreas* has nothing in common with **Jeff Nichols'** *Take Shelter* other than the impotence of man in the face of mother nature. While the former knocks a few dollars off Californian real estate prices at most, the latter redefines our understanding of disaster, where the apocalypse becomes a private affair, a permanent condition without climax. The latest *cli-fi* films give us first-person accounts of events: it's no coincidence that survival memoirs and films in which individuals overcome incredible odds to escape natural disaster or space catastrophe continue to rake in the cash.



TAKE SHELTER, 2011

Art and the Internet have taken this new idea of apocalypse in different directions. On Tumblr, disaster has become synonymous with *ruin porn* and the *detroitisation* of the world, while at the cinema it has come to mean depletion of the Earth's resources, as in **George Miller's** *Mad Max: Fury Road*. This film, in common with the first disaster movies, has no underlying moral message and, as a result, lies somewhere between avant-garde and obvious. Not once in its two-hour running time does it consider what oil has done to us, which is quite an achievement given that the film is only about one thing: oil.

Old blockbusters were inherently magniloquent and based on this expressive risk to the point of neutralizing it, making for easy and complicit viewing. On the other hand, movies like **Inarritu's** *The Revenant* devote such a vast budget and huge amount of post production work to depicting nature's uncontrollability that the result is a sort of National Geographic for nihilists, a beautiful yet empty man-nature dichotomy that ends up being even less likely than Pierce Brosnan's struggle against molten lava *Dante's Peak*.



Perhaps the best examination of disaster's intimacy and existential retreat is *Such Mean Estate*, a book of photographs created by **Ryan Spencer** for powerHouse Books in 2015 with an accompanying essay by **Leslie Jamison** – the author of *The Empathy Exams*.

Spencer spent two years watching some seventy apocalypse and climate disaster movies, pausing them at carefully chosen moments and capturing the images with a Polaroid Land Camera. The result is a series of black and white snapshots, often focused on a specific detail and with no close-ups of faces, which makes it difficult to tell if they are from say *Children of Men* or *The Road*. They are economical

photographs, serious yet subtle, which bring together the two fundamental features of disaster movies: passive viewing and first-person point of view, distance from events but the knowledge that they are always possible – if not already happened.

It is an ambiguous work, showing the beauty of ruin freed from a sense of guilt; it has more in common with the negative space of dreams than the rationality of everyday decisions. Isolated and without captions or accompanying text, these images run counter to the dogma that says better human behaviour will create a better world, an environmental position that inevitably informs much recent cinema and literature.

But the pleasure of venturing into the post-apocalyptic *wasteland* is always tempered by something else, and *Such Mean Estate* brings us back to the connection between individual fate and collective behaviour. It doesn't give us a prescriptive vision of what is right and what is wrong, but neither does it deny the existence of a problem. We are no longer talking about unlikely events, and artistic perspectives change when apocalypse is a permanent and stable part of the present, **where visions of how the world might end are replaced by visions of how the world is actually ending.**



Spencer says he drew inspiration from a cult book by Japanese photographer **Masahisa Fukase**, *The Solitude of Ravens*, especially the way it creates tension between nature and industry. But the photos in *Such Mean Estate* seem closer to the work of **Kikuji Kawada**, who in *The Last Cosmology* created catastrophic images (in turn influenced by the painting of Emil Nolde) radically charged with empathy.



THE LAST COSMOLOGY

Amidst the succession of bunker psychoses and political negotiations over climate change, between tsunamis, exploding nuclear reactors and humanity's desperate scramble for ever scarcer resources, there lingers a question that perhaps tomorrow's disaster movies will answer: *what happens to doomsday cults when the world doesn't end after all?*

It's something I pondered on a December day in London when the air was so warm and humid that it seemed frogs would rain down from the sky and my colleagues talked of flowers blossoming to the bafflement of botanists. There was a sense that everything could end in the next five minutes, and forever. It was a strange feeling

felt by all – a climate anomaly confirmed by the media and meteorologists – but which for some reason turned into an ever more resigned and lonely sense of bleakness.



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