

Home Alone

Why do we enjoy post-apocalyptic films?

Emma Anne James on how post-apocalyptic films project a dark fantasy of tomorrow.

At the time of writing the newest *Resident Evil* film is about to open in cinemas. One of the official trailers does something rather clever: it begins as if it were a typical phone advert complete with an annoying digitised jingle and a serious voiceover from Patrick Stewart announcing that 'technology is changing our world'. A series of artificial-looking people hold up communication devices and state that 'this is my world'. The image pulls back to a globe which turns as Patrick Stewart asks 'what our world will look like... tomorrow?', the music changes to drumbeats and the American continent is dark except for a series of vast fires. A montage of dragons, zombies and violence follows. The trailer may be inventive and original, but the premise is not. Post-apocalyptic films have frequently tried to answer the problem of what tomorrow will look like.

Often the future in post-apocalyptic films is a bleak reflection of the problems of the present. In the 50s and 60s films like *Five* or *Planet of the Apes* focused on survivors of a nuclear war, which was a very real threat during the Cold War era. During the 80s and 90s there was a shift and post-apocalyptic films were often set after an environmental catastrophe: *Waterworld*, for example. However, it seems unlikely that films that simply reinforce our worst fears about the world would remain popular. Why, then, do we find stories of destruction so appealing?

The attraction of post-apocalyptic films lies in the fact that we, the audience, always imagine ourselves as survivors of the disaster. Post-apocalyptic films function as a type of dark wish fulfilment. The

world cleared of people is like getting the house all to yourself as a child: scary, but also with a thrill of excitement. This is also a large part of why so many video games have a post-apocalyptic narrative. Characters in both art forms can kill the 'others' without difficult issues of morality; there is no sin in using a crossbow to despatch a zombie or a machete to slay a cannibal. There are no jobs, no mortgages, no crowds. Post-apocalyptic films offer a world without the constraints and responsibilities of modern society.

While some films, such as *The Road*, depict a realistic vision of struggling in a devastated world, most offer the fantasy of survival. Good recent examples are *I Am Legend* and *Zombieland*. Though very different, they each have sequences in which the main character enjoys the freedom and power of an empty world. A particularly striking illustration is the opening of *I Am Legend* in which Neville, the last man on earth, races through a deserted New York in a Mustang, and then kills several mutants without regret. The film makes it clear that Neville is very lonely, but at times his existence in a post-apocalyptic world looks disturbingly fun.

Post-apocalyptic films reflect our darkest fears and our darkest fantasies. The sequence in the *Resident Evil* trailer described ends with the main character Alice on a rooftop, in a leather jumpsuit, armed with guns, about to fight zombies. What post-apocalyptic films do is satisfy the small part of us that thinks Alice's daunting world of tomorrow looks more exciting than our world of today. ■

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