

Doomsday Thinking: Imagining End Times

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On Halloween Eve in 1938, a flood of terror swept the United States. Some people, believing that the world was coming to an end, tried flight or suicide, or just cringed in their homes as “aliens” from Mars attacked New Jersey, then New York and the world.

But it was just a prank, tapping a deep national well of pre-war anxiety, and produced for radio by Orson Welles and his Mercury Players.

Times have changed so radically since then that, in the face of real disasters like the Three Mile Island “partial meltdown” in 1979, the explosion and fire at Chernobyl in 1986, the 2011 earthquake and Tsunami-sparked disaster in Japan or, the election of Donald Trump, or even a deadly virus, many people are deceptively calm. Some simply refuse to believe it.

Are we really so confident about our ability to cope and recover, or have we given in to an overarching pessimism about the future of the planet and fate of humanity?

According to a survey by the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in 1980 nearly half of all US junior high school students believed that World War III would begin by the year 2000. If you consider the last decade, it looks like the youth of that period - in their 50s today - were only off by a few years.

Many futurologists, an academic specialty that emerged about 40 years ago, continue to warn that the environment is critically damaged. Yet this sounds positively cautious when compared to the diverse images of social calamity projected through films, books and the news media. Long before Covid 19, pandemics and outbreaks were at the center of dozens of novel and films. Of course, there have always been such predictions. But in the last few decades they have proliferated almost as rapidly as nuclear weapons during a Cold War. Some dramatize a “big bang” theory -global devastation caused by some extinction level event.

Fortunately, a few do chart a slightly hopeful future, one in which humanity either smartens up in time to save itself or manages to survive.

Rather than a desire to be scared out of our wits, the attraction to such stories and predictions may reflect a widespread interest in confronting the likely future. The mass media may, in fact, be producing training guides for the coming Dark Age — if we’re lucky.

Variations on a Theme

Sometimes humanity - or California - is saved in the nick of time by an individual sacrifice or collective action. Sometimes, as in the classics *On the Beach*, *Dr. Strangelove* or *The Omega Man* (remade as *I am Legend*), we are basically wiped out. Occasionally there are long-term possibilities for survival, but technology breaks down and the environment takes strange

revenge. In some cases the future is so dismal that it is hardly worth going on, as in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.

In a few cases the end of humanity is just a piece of cosmic black humor.

All of these are speculative visions, many adapted from ideas originally developed in pulp science fiction or from prophetic statements by figures like Edgar Cayce. The films usually offer a way out (audiences generally favor hopeful endings), while deep doom and gloom tend to gain more traction in print. But both scenarios share the assumption that the track we are on leads to a dangerous dead end.

We seem to keep asking the same basic questions: How do we get to catastrophe? And what happens afterward? One obvious way to get pretty close is to misuse technology, especially when the mistakes are made as a result of greed – for power, knowledge or cold cash.

The classic anti-nuclear film *The China Syndrome* presents a textbook example: greedy corporations ignoring public health and shoddy construction in pursuit of profit. It was a powerful statement in its day, especially given the Three Mile accident just weeks after the film's release, yet predictable in a way and inconclusive on the prospects for health or quality survival in a nuclear-powered world. We are just beginning to have this discussion again.

An earlier "close call" film, *The Andromeda Strain*, had a more inventive story and placed the blame on a lust for knowledge (the old *Frankenstein* theme). But this early techno-thriller provided no real solution to the problem of disease or disaster created by scientific discovery. In Michael Crichton's *Andromeda Strain* the threat was a deadly organism brought back from outer space, the same kind of self-inflicted biological warfare that heavy doses of radioactive fallout can become. But in the book and film the blood of victims coagulated almost instantly, avoiding the prolonged agony of dying from a plague or the long-term effects of radiation.

Fear of nuclear power is by no means new. Radiation created many movie monsters in the 1950s, from the incredible 50-foot man and woman to giant mantises, crabs and spiders. But the threat was usually related to the testing or detonation of weapons, not the ongoing use of what was then called "the peaceful atom." That mythical atom was going to be our good friend in a cheap, safe, long-term relationship.

Since then, and especially since the nuclear accidents of the 1970s and 80s, nuclear plants have provided a basis for various bleak scenarios. Not even Vermont has been spared, though it sometimes appears as a post-disaster oasis. In the 1970s novel *The Orange R*, however, Middlebury College teacher John Clagett extended nuclear terror into a future where the Green Mountains is inhabited by radioactive people called Roberts. They are dying off rapidly in a country where apartheid has become a device to keep the Roberts away from the Normals.

Using a pulp novel style Clagett lays out the overall situation about halfway through:

"For many years every nuclear plant built had been placed in Robert country, ever since, in fact, the dreadful month in which three plants had ruptured cooling systems, spreading radioactive vapor over much of Vermont, New Hampshire and West Massachusetts. After that no more plants had been built

near populated areas; before long, the requirement that the plants should be located on running fresh water and in lightly populated country had brought about the present situation. Norm country was surviving and living high on the power generated in Robert country, where radiation grew worse, year by year.”

In *The Orange R* Normal people who live in radioactive areas wear airtight suits and laugh hysterically when anyone mentions solar power. All of Vermont’s major streams and bodies of water have heated up, and the deer have mutated into killer Wolverdeer. Still, the book offers a hopeful vision at the end: the Roberts rise up and take over Vermont’s nukes and successfully dismantle the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, as well as a corporate state that is only vaguely described. Most Vermonters have terminal radiation sickness, but for humanity it turns out to be another close call.

Prophecies Go Mainstream

There are simply too many novels about the end of the current civilization, too many to list and perhaps too many for our psychological health. It could become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Only a few decades ago people who accepted the prophecies of Nostradamus or Edgar Cayce were mocked by mainstream society and even some of their close friends. Cayce predicted that the western part of the US would be broken up, that most of Japan would be covered by water, and that New York would be destroyed in 1998 (perhaps he meant Mayor Giuliani’s remake of Times Square). Nearly 400 years earlier Nostradamus, whose benefactor was Henry II of France, said that western civilization would be under heavy attack from the East in 1999, with possible cataclysmic repercussions. Not far off, it turns out.

But what is “lunatic fringe” in one era can become mainstream, perhaps even commercially viable, in another.

The destruction of the West Coast has been featured in numerous books and movies. Hollywood has of course excelled in creating doomsday myths, from the antichrist’s continuing saga in countless unmemorable installments, to total destruction in the *Planet of the Apes* franchise, *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2012 and many more.



Japanese filmmakers have been equally and famously preoccupied with mass destruction. Decades before the current disaster, they even turned Cayce’s prophecy about their country into a 1975 disaster movie called *Tidal Wave*. Starring Lorne Greene and Japanese cast, it

was imported to the US by Roger Corman. Internet Movie Data Base (IMDB) describes it this way:

“Racked by earthquakes and volcanoes, Japan is slowly sinking into the sea. A race against time and tide begins as Americans and Japanese work together to salvage some fraction of the disappearing Japan.” Close, but they missed the nuclear angle.

Predictions to the contrary, Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove* remains one of the most memorable doomsday movies. Its black humor and naturalistic performances by Peter Sellers, George C. Scott and Sterling Hayden combine with a devastating premise – that The End may come through a mixture of human error (a demented general) and flawed technology (an extinction level bomb that can’t be disarmed).



There haven’t been many stories based on Nostradamus’ Eastern siege prophecy, although there certainly could be. But a number of films have adapted Cayce’s visions of environmental upheaval. Oddly enough Charlton Heston appears in several, usually as Cassandra or savior. In *Planet of the Apes* he is an astronaut who returns to Earth only to find his civilization in ruins, apes in charge, and humans living below ground as scarred mutants who worship the bomb. In *The Omega Man* he is a disillusioned scientist who has survived bio-chemical war and spends his days exterminating book-burning mutants. He discovers an antidote to the plague, but only a handful of people are left to give humanity another chance. The same basic story is told in *I am Legend*, the book and Will Smith movie. In the latter, Bethel, Vermont serves at the end as a gated refuge from the Zombie apocalypse.

And then there is *Soylent Green*, a film that presents the slow road to environmental pollution and starvation. This time Heston is a policeman who eventually discovers that the masses have been hoodwinked into cannibalism. They are also so depressed that suicide parlors are big business.

Most of the Heston vehicles were big budget B-movies, exploiting popular anxiety but much less affecting than *Dr. Strangelove* or Nevil Shute’s *On the Beach*. On the other hand, they deftly tapped into growing doubts about the future with a Dirty Harry-style response.

After The End

Ecologist George Stewart wrote his novel *Earth Abides* in 1949, before the Atom bomb scare took hold or the environment seemed like something to worry about. But his story of civilization destroyed by an airborne disease took the idea of rebuilding afterward about as

far as anyone. In this prescient book the breakdown of man-made systems is traced in convincing detail, in counterpoint with a story of survival without machines, mass production and, ultimately, most of what residents of developed countries take for granted.

Not many recent books or films are as optimistic about our prospects once humanity has gone through either its Big Bang or Long Wheeze end game. In Margaret Atwood's multi-volume science fiction saga, for example, man-made environmental catastrophe and mass extinction in *Oryx and Crake* is followed, in *The Year of the Flood*, by marginal survival in a strange mutated world.

The optimism of *Earth Abides* about the ability of human beings to adapt may be a reason why it did not develop the cult following of more dystopian tales. The more dismal the forecast, it seems, the more enthusiastic the following. Apropos, one of the most popular science fiction books downloaded in recent years was *The Passage*, Justin Cronin's compelling mixture of vampires run amuck, government conspiracy, and post-apocalypse survivalism.

What most of these stories and films have in common is a basic idea: the inevitability of radical, cataclysmic change. Should we manage to get beyond annihilation, apocalypse, Armageddon or whatever, they predict that we are very likely to enter a new Dark Age. Like most things, this too isn't a new idea. At the end of his life J. B. Priestley, the British novelist who founded the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, contemplated such a future. Calling it a "slithering down" he forecast that industrial civilization would one day come to an end.

But even in a Dark Age there is some hope. The life of the planet will likely continue and equilibrium can be reestablished in time. At least many of us continue to hope so. If the devastation is not total, perhaps a new culture can emerge. The main question thus becomes not whether the Earth will survive but how human beings fit in.

Near the end of his life H. G. Wells, the master of science fiction who produced optimistic visions in *The Shape of Things to Come* and *The Time Machine*, turned pessimist and wrote *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. "There is no way out or round or through," he concluded. Life on Earth may not be ending, Wells believed, but humans aren't going anywhere. Well, for at least the next few months, for most of us that will literally be true.

Yet compared with the darkest forecasts, the prospect of a post-modern Dark Age starts to sound more hopeful. Maybe it will just be a long Time Out.

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