



Screening the Judgement Day: Prediction of the End of the World in Hollywood Science Fiction Films

Dr. Santosh L. Karwande

Dept. of English, MSS Arts College
Tirthpuri, Dist. Jalna (MS)

This article exclusively deals with the apocalyptic SF movies that predict a threat to the world. Natural disasters like earthquakes, Tsunamis, volcano, great floods, and cyclones take place each year in all parts of the world. To a greater extent, climate change due to pollution can be counted for this. Such calamities have killed millions of people all over the world. In 1974, in the worst tornado superstorm in U.S. history, 150 twisters killed more than 300 people in thirteen states. In 2004, four hurricanes pelted Caribbean islands and Florida killing 1700 people. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina battered the U.S. Gulf Coast leading and killing 1800 people in New Orleans. Even greater is the damage caused by earthquakes. The great Lisbon earthquake of 1755 killed 100000 people and was felt throughout Europe and beyond. The enormous tsunami of 2004 caused by an undersea earthquake off Sumatra caused 300000 deaths in the Indian Ocean. Isaac Asimov, Frederick Pohl, Michael Crichton and other SF writers have written SF novels on subjects like Global Warming and Climate Change to warn the readers about the impending disasters arising out of our playing with nature. As per their thesis, it is the result of carrying science and technology to an extreme end.

Man is probably the most intelligent animal on this planet of ours. But he exploits his intelligence rather recklessly to make his life more comfortable without considering the dire threat to Mother Nature. Today's ultra-modern world is devoid of any sympathy for the bountiful nature and is busy exploiting the natural resources to such an extent that they are on the verge of complete exhaustion. Considering the grim reality, Michael Crichton delivered a speech entitled *Aliens Cause Global Warming*. In this speech, Crichton speaks of the evils of exploitation of science and the consequences resulting from it. Though the title of the speech, as he states in the beginning, appears humorous, he professes that he is serious. He is hopeful about the marvels of science and technology for the benefit of mankind. Science has already



bestowed the material boons on us, but Crichton expects science to improve the human lot not only on material, but on spiritual and ethical ground as well.

Like tsunamis, tornadoes, floods and earthquakes, Volcanoes can also affect the whole world. An eruption can spew enough ash and gas in the atmosphere to reduce the sunlight reaching the earth. Global warming is another terrific temperature and climate change which is unfolding more slowly but steadily. Though it is difficult show global warming in a two and half hour film, the Hollywood directors have effectively tried to show its aftermath and effects on our world. However, some of our planetary violence is so cinematic that it becomes a fitting subject for our movies on silver screen. *Twister* (1996), for example, features killer storms that cause great devastation. Dr. JoAnne “Jo” Thornton-Harding (Helen Hunt), whose father was killed by a tornado when she was a child, “thrives on an intense cocktail of adrenaline and science as she chases these killer storms across Oklahoma.” (*Hollywood Science*, 70) Dr. JoAnne and her crew try their level best to get near the tornados so that they can analyze them. The tornado chaser team prepares hundreds of instrument globes of a size of a Christmas tree ornaments the sound of which can be reported by the sensors as a warning of approaching tornado. The film portrays goose bumping scenes in which trucks, trees and cattle fly high above due to enormous winds.

Films like *Krakatoa, East of Java* (1969), *Dante’s Peak* (1997) and *Volcano* (1997) also use dramatic cinematic moments while conveying something about volcanoes. In *Volcano*, Mike Roark, who runs the Los Angeles Office of Emergency Management, has dealt with disasters from mudslides to earthquakes. But he comes across a different type of emergency. Some workers are found dead in a storm drain. It is noticed that the victim’s clothes are charred as if by flame. Mike finds cracks in the drain and feels extreme heat there. Something unusual is certainly happening. He shouts “Find me a scientist.” Dr. Amy Barnes, a geologist, finds that the temperature of a nearby lake has risen six degrees Fahrenheit in just twelve hours – a sign of a major geological crisis.

Amy suspects that a major volcano may be forming. To confirm her suspicion, and despite the danger, Amy climbs down the storm drain with Rachael. A chasm opens up in the drain, and although Amy tries to save her, Rachael falls in. Roark, with his thirteen year old daughter Kelly, sees a huge glowing plume erupt. Hot chunks of debris shoot out like meteors that threaten people and wreck buildings and vehicles. Hot and red lava flows down a main thoroughfare frying and melting everything it touches. The succeeding scenes of the film



show complete devastation and the efforts of the team to prevent the lava reach the main city. In a series of adventures, they are successful in turning the path of lava towards the sea. Thus, they avert a tragedy caused by volcano.

Dante's Peak also tells the story of volcanic eruption in a precarious manner. Dr. Harry Dalton of the U.S. Geological Survey is to check on signs of volcanic unrest. Attractive single mom Rachael Wando, mayor and coffee shop proprietor also tags along with her two kids. Harry soon spots dead trees and squirrels and measures high acidity in the local lake. Worst of all, the group comes upon two bathers scalded to death in a previously safe hot spring. All this points to one fact – the volcano is about to blow. Harry wants to evacuate the town but the council is reluctant to upset the newly settled people. Soon they come to know that the town's water has turned brown with a smell of sulfur. The building starts shaking and the volcano emits a huge cloud. Panic sets in and people start running in order to escape. Vehicles smash into one another and roads are jammed due to crowd. The film is full of sensational scenes with hot lava running and people dying. We find all these volcano films full of run amok situations with thrilling scenes.

Despite the efforts taken by the governments of all countries of the world, we find that environmental imbalance is causing innumerable natural disasters. Man has grown so selfish that he is exploiting the nature without considering its dire consequences. Isaac Asimov and Frederick Pohl's non-fiction *Our Angry Earth* (1991) discusses this issue in great detail. This book suggests that monumental disasters are threatening to destroy the humankind and argues that "it is too late to save our planet from harm." Some Hollywood SF has also dealt with this issue as a warning that Global Warming is causing a great threat to our Mother Earth. *Soylent Green* (1973) shows directly what can happen as a result of disregard for the environment and population growth. The film is set in a distant future of the year 2222, with humanity in a bad way. Along with population growth, the Earth's capacity to support people has actually been reduced. Through war and nasty industrial byproducts, humanity has poisoned the water, soil and air and destroyed plant and animal life. This abuse has also accelerated global warming and it is hot. As one of the characters Robert Thorn says, only with air-conditioning, does it ever get as cold as winter used to be.

The best recent film worth discussing in this connection is *2012* (2009) directed by Roland Emmerich. Dr. Adrian Helmsley, part of a worldwide geophysical team investigating the effect on the earth of radiation from unprecedented solar storms, learns that the earth's



core is heating up. He warns U.S. President Thomas Wilson that the crust of the earth is becoming unstable and that without proper preparations for saving a fraction of the world's population, the entire race is doomed. Meanwhile, writer Jackson Curtis stumbles on the same information. While the world's leaders race to build "arks" to escape the impending cataclysm, Curtis struggles to find a way to save his family. Meanwhile, volcanic eruptions and earthquakes of unprecedented strength wreak havoc around the world. We find that the locations of places and cities of the world have changed due "Earth Crust Displacement." In the end, we are told that the North Pole becomes the South Pole. The film vividly discusses the bizarre social and political prejudices even in the midst of precarious situations. We also get a fine picture of how the disaster brings the whole humanity together despite their different race, color and religious faith. There remains no discrimination between the rich and the poor, the young and the old, the man and the woman and so on. On the whole, *2012* is a serious attempt to make us realize the grim realities associated with man's recklessness with respect to nature.

To conclude, the different levels of speculation in these films arise partly because we don't fully grasp the complex natural processes of our planet, from the formation of tornadoes to climate variation. But the science still remains somewhat hostile to the humanity though mostly humans are responsible for the deadly wreckages in all these cases. Hollywood disaster SF movies are essentially fables and it can rightly be said that these films play with our fear in order to teach us a moral or a thesis that science is both a boon and a bane.

References

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