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CINEMA, POLITICS AND APOCALYPSE

In film criticism apocalyptic cinema is sometimes described in a broader context of catastrophism¹. However, the close link between contemporary apocalyptic films and science fiction makes it possible, on the one hand, to discuss them with regard to that genre, and on the other, to distinguish them as a separate group in the disaster films category owing to their specificity. Following Krzysztof Loska, I will treat apocalyptic films as a catastrophic variety of science fiction, where the main role is played by the end of the world motif². Thus apocalyptic cinema focuses on presenting the “threat to the continuing existence of humankind as a species or the existence of the Earth as a planet capable of supporting human life”³. Apocalyptic works should be distinguished from post-apocalyptic works, which focus on presenting their protagonists’ effort to rebuild their civilisation after a catastrophe. Of course, there are many films that combine the two motifs⁴, but in the present essay I would like to concentrate on *par excellence* apocalyptic films. Usually, they provide us with only a brief insight into post-apocalyptic reality, without focusing on it; rarely do they end with a complete annihilation of humankind. In my analysis I will be interested in the various plot devices showing individual protagonists and public institutions trying to face the danger. Referring to a relevant socio-political context, I will try to reconstruct the ideological meaning of several apocalyptic films made over a dozen or so years.

¹ M. Yacowar, *The Bug in the Rug. Notes on Disaster Genre*, [w:] *Film Genre Reader III*, ed. B.K. Grant, Austin 2003 (1977), pp. 277–295; K. Stephen, *Disaster Movies. The Cinema of Catastrophe*, London 2001.

² K. Loska, *Zagłada świata* [entry in:] *Encyklopedia filmu science fiction*, Kraków 2004, p. 74.

³ M.P. Michell, *A Guide to Apocalyptic Cinema*, Westport 2001, p. XI.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 279.

Contemporary SF cinema is not a uniform phenomenon. As M. Keith Brooker writes in the introduction to the recently published *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema*

the versatility of *science fiction* film has allowed it to expand into a variety of different markets, appealing to age groups from small children to adults and to filmgoers of a variety of tastes, from those looking for simple, escapist entertainment to those looking to have their minds challenged and expanded⁵.

In this essay I will try to demonstrate that the theme of apocalypse has been approached by cinema in recent years in two ways generally. Some films try to use the apocalyptic myth, the human fear of passing without a trace in order to, using the current political discourse, persuade the audiences to adopt specific attitudes or to consolidate them. The second model of apocalyptic cinema evolving before our very eyes uses the theme of global extermination for the purposes of cultural and existential analyses.

In the beginning I should briefly refer to what the apocalyptic idea was and what it is now. An apocalypse is the end of the world as we know it, but, perhaps even more importantly, the beginning of a different, new and better world. The authors of the earliest apocalyptic prophecies were Jews; the tradition originated in the 8th century BC. The vision of a huge cosmic catastrophe from which a new Eden would emerge initially concerned only the chosen people. A punishment in the form of plagues, famine, wars and slavery was to be a result of turning away from the Creator. After the Day of Wrath, when internal and external enemies have been judged and vanquished, only the truly faithful will remain alive. This righteous people, together with the resurrected righteous, will, under Jehovah's guidance, create a place of harmony and peace in Jerusalem. There will be abundance of food and drink, life will be joyful, free from disease, sorrow and iniquity⁶.

Unique experiences of disasters, persecutions, displacements and other forms of oppression prompted people to interpret them as signs that Jehovah and a new order were near. Thus, in such periods apocalyptic visions would bring comfort, confirm various frustrated groups in their religious convictions, giving a higher meaning to suffering and impermanence. The period of the Jews' struggle against the Romans produced militant apocalyptic visions which drew on messianic inspirations. The end of time was to come through a wise, just and powerful monarch from the house of David, sometimes endowed with miraculous powers. However, the political de-

⁵ M.K. Brooker, *Historical Dictionary of Science Fiction Cinema*, Lanham-Toronto-Plymouth 2010, p. 1.

⁶ N. Cohn, The tradition of apocalyptic prophecy, [in:] *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Milenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*, Oxford University Press, USA 1970, p. 20.

struction of the Jewish nation put an end to their apocalyptic beliefs, and Christians began to be affected by these prophecies instead⁷.

Thanks to Christianity, the apocalypse ceased to apply to just one chosen people and acquired a universal dimension. Among the many apocalyptic writings, only St. John's *Book of Revelation* became part of the biblical canon. The terrifying beast symbolises in it the last power of the world and its moral corruption. The beast is to reign for a millennium, which is to be followed by the resurrection of the dead and the Last Judgement. Those who have not been condemned, will live with the saints in the New Jerusalem.

Despite the fact that when the Church became the dominant religion in the 4th century, it rejected the vision of the revelation as having come true in the order of history and unequivocally supported an allegorical interpretation of St. John's *Revelation*, apocalyptic ideas lost none of their persuasive power, and throughout the Middle Ages led the faithful to crusades and made them rise in arms against their neighbours or rulers⁸. In his book *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, the English philosopher and political thinker John Gray argues that the apocalyptic logic and promises that the utopia was near constituted the ideologic-al core of 17th century revolutionary movements in England, the Enlightenment programme, Nazism and Soviet communism, and were also behind the American invasion of Iraq and the "war on terror"⁹.

APOCALYPSE AT THE CINEMA

Gray stresses that the entire history of the American state and nation is strongly marked by an apocalyptic logic¹⁰. Given its production scale, apocalyptic cinema is the domain of Hollywood studios. Despite the rapid development of cinematography in various parts of the world, Hollywood still has the biggest say when it comes to reflecting and shaping collective ideas, fears and hopes. If a cinematography can be a barometer of global moods and react to the political situation, it is certainly American cinematography, films made mainly in Hollywood. In the present essay the corpus of films representative of the contemporary "imagination of disaster" comprises apocalyptic films from the all-time worldwide box office list (the number before the

⁷ Ibidem, p. 22-23.

⁸ Cohn's book quoted above is devoted in its entirety to various medieval millenarian movements. Save for the Bible and the works of the Church Fathers, the apocalyptic Sibyllines were "probably the most influential writings known to medieval Europe". Ibidem, p. 15. We can assume that today the most popular apocalyptic films to some extent fulfil a role similar to that of such oracles.

⁹ J. Gray, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2008.

¹⁰ Ibidem, pp. 124-333.

title denotes the place on the list) 31. *Independence Day* (1996), 73. *Armageddon* (1998), 89. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), 67. *War of the Worlds* (2005), 38. *2012* (2009)¹¹. In addition, I take into account several films which complement the panorama of contemporary apocalyptic cinema made in Hollywood, first of all *The Core* (2003), as well as *Deep Impact* (1998) and *The Time Machine* (2002). If I exclude some apocalyptic film produced in Hollywood over the last dozen years or so, this means that it is unimportant to my analysis – its objective is not to provide an antiquarian description of motifs and plots. These films are aimed at mass audiences, have been made over the last ten years or so, are known to people who are not ardent film buffs, were premiered in the cinemas and televisions nearly all over the world, all of which is sufficient to label them contemporary. What is perhaps even more important is the fact that a key context for them is provided by political events and the biggest military conflicts which still remain unresolved and shape our world today. They are, of course, the war on terror, successive episodes of the formally finished war in Iraq and other conflicts in the Middle East.

From the perspective of the history of cinema, stressing its immanent development, films with large-scale scenes of destruction as their main attraction can be seen as a kind of continuation of the commercial success of high-budget SF productions which began to appear on the silver screen in the late 1970s. Since then blockbusters larded with special effects have topped all-time film charts. Their success has been possible thanks to the development of digital technology enabling film-makers to create illusions of reality of scenes which transgress well-known laws of physics as well as realistic-looking images of destruction of various objects known from non-cinematic reality. Yet already in the 1950s critics and audiences enthused about the realism of special effects in SF films, which today seem to us pathetic rather than impressive¹². This shows that in the case of special effect realism we are not dealing with a teleological process of achieving perfect *mimesis*; instead, realism and probability are created through aesthetic-ideological relations at a given moment in history. Spectacular images are certainly to provide visual attractiveness, which has been cinema's strength from its very beginning, but a spectacular show also draws the spectators away from the narrative as well as a psychological and moral analysis of the protagonists¹³.

Apocalyptic films – showing mass-scale destruction thanks to digital image processing technologies – are sometimes perceived as representing the world being turned inside out, rapidly being replaced by a computer-generated spectacle¹⁴. However, this view is not confirmed by the fact that such ideas and their artistic rep-

¹¹ <http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross?region=world-wide> (access: 30 May 2012).

¹² E. Vieth, *Screening Science: Contexts, Texts and Science in Fifties Science Fiction Film*, Langham 2001, p. 45.

¹³ M. Lister et al., *Nowe media. Wprowadzenie*, Kraków 2009, p. 218.

¹⁴ C. Cornea, *Science Fiction. Between Fantasy and Reality*, Edinburgh 2007, p. 263.

representations had accompanied humanity long before the first transistor was invented and films with such a subject matter began to appear on the silver screen as soon as cinema was born in the form we know today. They usually accompanied rising social unrest associated with various political events or redefinitions in the collective *psyche*. In most cases political and existential fears were woven in these films into one whole. For example, *Verdens Undergang* (1916), showing the world at risk of collision with a comet, was released six years after Halley's Comet appeared over the Earth; it also reflected the fears connected with the First World War. Classic SF films of the 1950s were shot during the cold war threat of a nuclear conflict, at a time of parallel, rapid social transformations. It was probably in the aftermath of U Thant's report, making the public realise the scale and possible effects of environmental pollution, that in the 1970s films began to be made showing an upcoming global environmental disaster and its socio-political consequences; the 1970s were also a period of profound tensions and cultural transformations.

In recent years there have been many arguments supporting the thesis that one of the main causes of the Cretaceous extinction some 65 million years ago was a collision of some celestial body with Earth. In 1994 for the first time people had an opportunity to watch a collision between two celestial bodies live. Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 broke apart and collided with Jupiter. Photographs and videos of the event were shown all around the world and made the public aware of a similar threat to our own planet¹⁵. I will try to demonstrate that the significance of films like *Armageddon* or *The Core* does not depend greatly on the scientific probability or improbability of the threats described in them, on the adequacy or inadequacy of their representations of mass destruction and its socio-political consequence; on the other hand, their impact will depend on historical transformation taking place in the narrative forms through which various events are presented.

Historical transformations of SF cinema throughout the century have been transformations of its social and ideological functions in response to various historical situations. Therefore, we need to go back to the history of apocalyptic cinema and, through a comparison of contemporary apocalyptic cinema with a certain moment in the history of cinematography, follow the changes in the ideological and narrative structure that determine the new significance of contemporary films. My point of reference in the present analysis of contemporary apocalyptic films and the millenarian ideas they carry comprises mainly high budget apocalyptic SF films from the classic period of Hollywood cinema of the 1950s and 1960s (including *Five* [1951], *When Worlds Collide* [1951], *War of the Worlds* [1951], *The Day the Earth Stood Still* [1951]). Following changes, finding that old elements are absent and new elements are present, that there are differences in narrative forms between the classic American SF cinema and contemporary cinema will make it possible to

¹⁵ <http://www.wiwi.pl/delta/kometa.asp> (access: 30 May 2012).

show the new meaning of contemporary apocalyptic films, which, as I will try to demonstrate, answer the current political situation. For me, a paradigmatic description of the plot of an apocalyptic film from the classic Hollywood era is one from Susan Sontag's essay "The imagination of disaster". Here is the key fragment of the essay:

1. The arrival of the thing. (Emergence of the monsters, landing of the alien space-ship etc.) This is usually witnessed or suspected by just one person, who is a young scientist on a field trip. Nobody, neither his neighbours nor his colleagues, will believe him for some time. The hero is not married, but has a sympathetic though also incredulous girlfriend.

2. Confirmation of the hero's report by a host of witnesses to a great act of destruction. (If the invaders are beings from another planet, a fruitless attempt to parley with them and get them to leave peacefully.) The local police are summoned to deal with the situation and massacred.

3. In the capital of the country, conferences between the scientists and the military take place, with the hero lecturing before a chart, map or blackboard. A national emergency is declared. Reports of further atrocities. Authorities from other countries arrive in black limousines. All international tensions are suspended in view of the planetary emergency. This stage often includes a rapid montage of news broadcasts in various languages, a meeting at the UN and more conferences between the military and the scientists. Plans are made for destroying the enemy.

4. Further atrocities. At some point the hero's girlfriend is in great danger. Massive counter attacks by international forces, with brilliant displays of rocketry, rays and other advanced weapons, are all unsuccessful. Enormous military casualties, usually by incineration. Cities are destroyed and/or evacuated. There is an obligatory scene here of panicked crowds stampeding along a highway or a big bridge [...].

5. More conferences, whose motif is: "They must be vulnerable to something." Throughout, the hero has been experimenting in his lab on this. The final strategy, on which all hopes depend, is drawn up; the ultimate weapon – often a super-powerful, as yet untested, nuclear device – is mounted. Countdown. 3, 2, 1, 0 — now! Final repulse of the monster or invaders. Mutual congratulations, while the hero and girlfriend embrace cheek to cheek and scan the skies sturdily. "But have we seen the last of them?"¹⁶

THE AMERICANS HAVE SAVED THE WORLD AGAIN

Cohn and Gray distinguish five characteristic features of millenarian ideas from Antiquity till the present day in America¹⁷. In narratives based on these ideas (i.e. potentially also in apocalyptic films), an apocalypse and salvation are a:

1. Miraculous reality – it comes by or with the help of supernatural agencies. The supernatural nature of the apocalyptic in films is rendered more plausible by

¹⁶ S. Sontag, *The Imagination of Disaster*, Picador 2001, pp. 209-210.

¹⁷ N. Cohn, op. cit., p. IX; J. Gray, op. cit., p. 29.

pseudo-scientific epistemic elements of a scientific worldview and language. This is a fundamental device of science fiction, so also of apocalyptic films¹⁸.

2. Imminent and inevitable reality – the disaster will come soon and suddenly. In apocalyptic films the protagonists are immediately thrown in the thick of dramatic events or know that the extinction of life on Earth is a matter of days, weeks or months. Often it also turns out that it is closer than they initially thought (for example *When Worlds Collide*, *The Core*, 2012).

3. Terrestrial reality – the apocalypse is to happen on this earth, as part of history. The catastrophe presented in apocalyptic films is certainly global, real and material. A significant difference between classic cinema and contemporary cinema is the fact that today apocalypse is increasingly anthropogenic. Sometimes the narrative of contemporary films includes an additional apocalyptic pattern, a component of guilt; the threat may come from unintentional or intentional, hostile actions of humans (*The Time Machine*, *The Core*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, 2012).

4. Collective reality – salvation is to be enjoyed by the faithful. In apocalyptic films those who will survive the disaster will be chosen in a draw or will be representatives of the intellectual and political elite (for example *When Worlds Collide*, 2012), or people complying with orders issued by the authorities and scientists, having complete trust in their knowledge and competence (*The Day After Tomorrow*). In contemporary films ordinary citizens can be saved from death only thanks to actions taken by the ruling elite (*Armageddon*, *The Core*); only in one contemporary case (which, however, is a remake of a film from the 1950s), are the protagonists saved thanks to divine intervention (*War of the Worlds*, 2005).

Independence Day (1996), a film about an alien invasion, corresponds to Sontag's scenario almost in every detail. Characteristically of the ironic poetics of the 1990s, which is to build realism on a higher level of historical and film self-awareness, at one point we see in that film a fragment of *The Day the Earth Stood Still*; the protagonists fondly remember apocalyptic films from the 1950s, when an alien invasion was possible only at the cinema; and there are also allusions to other SF films about aliens, e.g. to *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) and *E.T.* (1982). With regard to films described by Sontag, recent apocalyptic productions, especially those made after September 11, although generally sticking to her pattern, nevertheless display some differences in the narrative material, differences that can testify to some shifts in the ideological layer.

¹⁸ Here I refer to the terminology introduced by Darko Suvin, the author of one of the most influential definitions of science fiction. According to him, SF is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment". D. Suvin, Poetyka science fiction, [in:] *Spór o SF. Antologia szkiców i esejów o science fiction*, selected by R. Handke, L. Jęczyński, B. Okólska, Poznań 1989, pp. 307. See also A. Roberts, *Science Fiction. The New Critical Idiom*, London-New York 2006, pp. 1-36.

In the films made in the 1950s and 1960s, the main protagonists individually took actions to overcome the threat; they did not entirely identify themselves with the authorities. The threat of global extinction in those films was, after all, a transferred fear that nuclear weapons – controlled by the US government – would be used¹⁹. The scientist was usually a figure turned away from society and common views. His non-conformist conduct, opinions and actions were aimed at protecting humanity against a catastrophe. In contemporary films we see from the very beginning an alliance of scientists, engineers and politicians. The scientist's diagnosis is accepted fairly quickly by the government, which takes relevant action. Sometimes it is the public administration that already has a plan, with the scientists and engineers having just to implement it. Even if some protagonist discovers a sign of an imminent disaster, he or she is not able to carry out the research to confirm it on his or her own. This structure of what is in fact a unanimous collective subject, focused on one goal, expresses an affirmation of America's corporate governance²⁰, a sense of community of the American nation, especially strong after the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in 2001, a sense of unity of the authorities and the nation, and, finally, legitimacy of actions subsequently taken by the government. In contemporary films plans to defend humanity against extinction are made in secret in order not to cause panic on the financial markets and not provoke social unrest. The causes, plans and goals are not transparent to the public, who see only images of destruction and hear contradictory announcements from the media. The form of action is adapted to the form of the enemy. Classic apocalyptic films reflect the threat of nuclear war and conventional invasion; the alien from the 1950s films was a visible threat and familiar threat, like the image of a mushroom cloud from nuclear tests conducted by the Soviet Union. In contemporary films, the destructive activities of the "enemy", who remains unrecognised for a long time, are scattered like a terrorist network.

Scientific reconnaissance and collective action make it possible to prepare a detailed plan of restoring the global order. The United States plays a leading role in preparing this plan and in its implementation. In *Independence Day*²¹, *Armageddon* and *The Core* cooperation with other states, a utopian, pacific motif so characteristic of the SF films from the 1950s, is limited to a minimum. The plan is slowly implemented; of course, there are obstacles, but eventually it brings the expected result.

Cohn and Gray stress – and this is the fifth element characteristic of millenarian ideas – that apocalyptic reality is a total reality: the life of humankind is to be totally transformed. This is the crucial difference between the classic and the contemporary

¹⁹ S. Sontag, op. cit., p. 218.

²⁰ F. Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible*, New York 1990, p. 31.

²¹ The authors removed many fragments stressing the global dimension of the disaster from the cinematic version of the film <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116629/alternateversions> (access: 31 May 2012).

apocalyptic cinema. While classic films contained the idea of a total transformation primarily in the political dimension (e.g. *Five, When Worlds Collide*), in contemporary apocalyptic films a desired form of reality means first of all a restoration of the order that existed before the disaster. In *The Day After Tomorrow* we hear a proposal that, in view of the disaster (deep freeze of the north of the globe), all the debts of the Third World be cancelled, which is a poor reflex of the apocalyptic idea of a total, utopian transformation of relations between people and states.

In this respect of particular importance to apocalyptic cinema in recent years is the film *Armageddon*. An asteroid the size of Texas is on a collision course with Earth. It will hit our planet, causing extinction of humankind, if a group of oil drillers fail to drill a deep shaft inside it and place a nuclear charge that will split the asteroid into two parts that will fly past the Earth.

Particularly important to the apocalyptic variety of SF as a subgenre are two scenes of the film following the idea of restitution of the old order. The first comes at the very beginning of the film and shows a meteor shower falling on Manhattan. Seeing balls of fire hitting the ground and falling sky-scrapers, a taxi driver shouts: "Saddam Hussein!". The catastrophic spectacle ends with a picture of the destroyed towers of the World Trade Center. The second scene, important in my analysis, shows what, in fact, is to be saved on Earth. Before flying towards the asteroid, the protagonists who are to destroy it, get a day off. At this point the director shows us the behaviour and values for which it is worth living and dying. This is an ideal of the world the protagonists are fighting for, an image of the order before the apocalypse and one that should come after it. First, we see one of the protagonists, Rockhound, who borrows money from a loan shark. Second, a pair of lovers, Grace and A.J., against a sports BMW. They are having a conversation in which they wish everybody on Earth such a deep love as theirs. Third, for Chick, who, it seems, wishes he had not abandoned his wife and son, the mission is an opportunity to rebuilt his dysfunctional family. He hopes that by earning glory, he will regain the sympathy of his abandoned wife and son. Fourth, in the longest scene in this sequence Rockhound organises a party with call-girls for his fellow oil drillers. Apart from him, no other party goer will return alive from the mission. The scene opens with an image of the vault of a church that has been turned into a disco. From the vault, the camera zooms in on the box where the protagonists are sitting and where the altar used to be. In this post-religious space we are witnessing a sanctification of self-indulgent loan-fuelled consumption; people buy pleasure and love, make their lascivious fantasies come true and the protagonists give vent to pointless aggression by getting into a fight.

After the successful asteroid campaign, the four threads find their happy ending at the end of the film: Chick's wife returns to him with his son, a prostitute whom Rockhound met in the disco is waiting for him. Grace and A.J. get married and the wedding ceremony opens with an analogous shot of another, this time regular

church vault. The portraits of the participants in the “last supper” who died during the mission are now placed in a row next to the front pew. Thus we see two symbolically merging spaces: a church before the apocalypse (a disco) and a church after the apocalypse. Through the protagonists, who make up a closely-knit collective, whose personal stories overlap in both sequences – these stories can be understood only if the two sequences are combined – the narrative brings the two spaces together and they make up one, mutually determining, pseudo-utopian whole worth living and worth dying for. Consumerism, commodification of feelings, a loan and a wedding – probably the most significant ritual of the West, a guarantor of social and moral order – acquire an eternal sanction. The final wedding scene and then quasi-documentary videos from it are interspersed with the final credits. Through this persuasive rhetorical device, the pseudo-utopia tries to go beyond the framework of fictitious narrative, overlapping with the metatext of the final credits, which is closer to the world of the audience.

The Core (2003) makes an important reference to *Armageddon*. This was pointed out shortly after its premiere by critics from e.g. *Variety*, *USA Today* and *The Washington Post*; the connection was also spotted by the critic from the Polish portal Filmweb²². The Polish reviewer points out that while the authors of *Armageddon* sent their protagonists high up, in *The Core* the protagonists are dragged down. However, I will try to demonstrate that the relations between these two films and the idea of apocalypse are slightly more complex.

In the *Independence Day* and *Armageddon* we can find plenty of allusions to the first Gulf War from 1990-1991. On 20 March 2003 the American troops and their allies (including Poland) launched the second invasion of Iraq. *The Core*, directed by Jon Amiel, was released in American cinemas on 25 March that year (6 June in Poland), a year and a half after the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center. Although Christine Cornea writes in her brilliant book, which I have already quoted, that before 2004 and Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* there were no allusions to September 11 in the apocalyptic cinema made in Hollywood, in *The Core* we can find not only a number of direct and indirect references to this tragedy, but also references to the apocalyptic-utopian anti-Iraq rhetoric of George Bush's cabinet, which was a response to the terrorist threat. The American elites justified the second invasion of Iraq on the grounds that there was a need to find and eliminate the weapons of mass destruction and terrorist bases. The plan was to remove Saddam Hussein's regime, introduce democracy in Iraq and make it a model for the whole region. In addition, people stressed the need to secure oil fields and the country's

²² <http://www.variety.com/index.asp?layout=review&reviewid=VE1117920313&categoryid=31&cs=1>; http://www.usatoday.com/life/movies/reviews/2003-03-27-also-opening_x.htm; <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/the-core/critic-reviews>; <http://www.filmweb.pl/reviews/J%C%85dro+ciemnoty-585> (access: 31 May 2012).

other natural resources, and, consequently, to ensure stability on the global fuel market²³. As Gray and other eminent political scientists argue, Bush's cabinet treated the information provided by the American intelligence services selectively, ignoring analyses of specialists who applied a scientific methodology and, instead, following an apocalyptic logic perfectly attuned to the events of September 11. As it turned out later, Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction. The invasion of that country was a utopian chimera ignoring the social and political reality, an attempt to build democracy and a capitalist order without the necessary socio-cultural foundations. To sum up: it was an unrealistic and utopian enterprise in the worst sense of the term. After a while it became anti-utopian even, because it had the completely opposite effect from what was expected. Hundreds of thousands of people have died, the quality of life of Iraq's civilian population is lower than it was during the dictatorship, the terrorist threat has not diminished and nothing seems to be suggesting that Iraq will soon become a Western-style independent democracy.

Although in various apocalyptic films destruction usually affects New York and Washington, in *The Core* we do not see collapsing architectural objects characteristic of these two cities. This supports Christine Cornea's thesis that Hollywood applied self-censorship after September 11²⁴. However, on the other hand it could be argued that, paradoxically, because of their absence, these cities and their recent history are present even more strongly thanks to genetic memory and places of indeterminacy, which the viewers fill with their knowledge brought into the auditorium (knowledge of e.g. scenes from *Armageddon*). However, there is another scene directly referring to the events of September 11. In the analysed period producers hastily cut scenes that could be referring to September 11 from films designated for distribution, but in *The Core* an unidentified force causes an emergency landing of a space shuttle in the middle of Los Angeles. It seems to be a reminiscence of the heroic Flight 93, but it ends happily.

In Amiel's film, life on Earth can become extinct, if its core stands still and, consequently, our planet loses the magnetic field which protects it against the deadly solar radiation. A slowing down of the core movement causes various natural anomalies, which cause the emergency landing of the space shuttle. When scientists discover the cause of the anomalies, they predict that, if the government fails to intervene, then, as one of the protagonist puts it, a plane will fall from the sky, then another one and..., and the world will end. In order to prevent the catastrophe, a team of "terranauts" must put the Earth's core in motion by means of a nuclear

²³ J. Gray, op. cit., pp. 244-245.

²⁴ According to the American scholar, the period of self-censorship in Hollywood lasted more or less until 2004 and the premiere of *The Day After Tomorrow* directed by Roland Emmerich, when an imminent ice age expressed anxieties associated with the global warming, though the thick layer of ice covering the northern part of the USA was also to be an allegory of the American post-September 11 trauma. C. Cornea, op. cit., pp. 263-264.

explosion. To get inside our planet, the protagonists built a special vessel that would be able to get through the Earth's crust and mantle. In its visual aesthetics, the journey to the core of our planet draws on the motif of tunnels of perception, which appeared for the first time in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). Drawing on the abstract art of the 1960s, the tunnels showed geometric shapes, vivid colours and created a psychedelic effect, thus destroying Hollywood's standards of realism. The tunnel of perception is a motif that indicates the boundary between the real and the imagined world; it represents a kind of liminal sphere. In the 1970s tunnels of perception were associated with a common escapist narcotic experience and counter-culture movement; tunnels and vortexes showed a world totally different from the commercialised reality, but they were also worlds of narcotic phantasmagoria²⁵. In the period of the 1980s blockbusters, this counter-culture motif from an impure Hollywood era was conventionalised and deprived of any subversive meanings. The tunnel of perception in *The Core* has no radical asocial meanings; it is a journey inside a national trauma, although in this film the psychedelic effect is not only neutralised. Trauma is turned into motivation for acting: to restore the threatened order.

The terranauts have control over the vessel and a mission to be accomplished, which changes them from passive spectators into actors who, inspired by the authorities, can intentionally shape reality. During the journey, members of the team die one by one. The first one – accidentally hit by a piece of rock. Another team member is caught in one of the vessel's modules crushed by external pressure. This image brings to mind those crushed by the World Trade Center, also on the formal level, because we watch the scene till the end thanks to a CCTV camera inside the vehicle, which resembles recording from CCTV monitoring and TV broadcasts (it is the only scene styled in this manner in the film). Successive team members consciously sacrifice their lives to restore the order throughout the planet – which is the highest form of service to humanity and enables it to survive in the best of the possible worlds.

A restoration of the threatened order is possible because the very essence of the problem is attacked. Order on the Earth's surface depends on an ordered motion in its core. Similarly, although casualties and sacrifices were inevitable, the attack on Iraq was to have been a revenge for September 11, a solution to the problem of terrorism and a gift to the Iraqis of utopian benefits of a democratic order; the solution was to have been found thanks to a strike at the core of the problem.

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The distance separating us both from the apocalyptic cinema of the later 20th and the early 21st century allows us to formulate historical judgements. Hollywood

²⁵ Tunnels of perception in the 1970s and 1980s are described in detail by C. Cornea, op. cit., pp. 85-100.

cinema keeps delivering new apocalyptic films, the meaning of which is yet to be examined. However, worthy of note is the emergence of pictures which treat the apocalyptic idea in a manner that is radically different from the way it is treated by popular cinema. 2012 was marked by the Polish premieres of two apocalyptic films which leave aside the literal definition of the apocalypse. The first film is Lars von Trier's original *Melancholia*.

It is based on oppositions. Psychological differences between the two main protagonists, Justine and Claire, are emphasised by the division of the film into two parts which have their names as titles. On the formal level, static inserts in the form of images of the universe, celestial bodies and slow-motion pictures showing Justine's prophetic visions in the exposition of the film correspond to hand-filmed scenes and rapid cuts used to present the plot proper. In the first part of the film we watch Justine's wedding, which ends with a separation of the newlyweds. In the second part, only Justine, Claire, her husband John and son Leo remain in the mansion that was the venue for the wedding ceremony. A nomad planet called *Melancholia* is approaching the Earth. Although scientists predict that it will fly past our planet, Justine's prophecy is merciless: life on our planet is about to end.

In the first part of von Trier's film the imminent disaster seems to signify an imminent extinction of the existing forms of relations between humans. All wedding guests try to conceal emptiness with wealth, lavishness, overaestheticisation. Extinction may symbolise changes in the contemporary mentality and their incompatibility with some forms of relations between people as well as time-honoured institutions. The author deconstructs the vision of the social and moral order, presented e.g. in *Armageddon*. The sisters' parents – catty mother and reckless father – are unable to create a lasting relationship; they cannot even maintain a civilised relation and treat each other without bitterness. Justine's boss cares only about getting an advertising slogan out of her. Her fiancé seems not to be noticing the imminent disaster; he wants to live with her, have children, as if he were living in a different time and place. However, the author seems to be more interested in the existential dimension of death, in the face of which everything, including love and marriage, makes no sense.

The second part of the film illustrates the protagonists' individual attitudes to the upcoming catastrophe. Unlike most apocalypses, *Melancholia* does not culminate in a vision of a new Eden or even a restoration of the old social and moral order. Evil is the domain of the inhabitants of the Earth. In von Trier's metaphysical vision it is evil that will eventually conquer even love and will triumph in the Manichean dispute. Humankind will become history and will disappear from the face of the Earth; no one will cry over that loss, the universe will remain unmoved. Pessimism, despair, a sense of pointless passing are all charges levelled by von Trier against the world. However, do they not stem from the limitations of his vision, which by definition is a doomed attempt to find a concrete meaning for abstract monads, locked in

a network of narrow family and social relations, which are separated from history, society and global problems? Those few remarks certainly do not exhaust the problems tackled in von Trier's film, problems that would require a more in-depth analysis and taking into account the author's other films. In the context of apocalypses and science fiction, it will be undoubtedly more interesting to carry out a detailed analysis of *Perfect Sense* directed by David Mackenzie (2011).

In her essay Susan Sontag accuses apocalyptic films of being an "inadequate response" to the problems of today. David Mackenzie has created a less hermetic film than Lars von Trier's *Melancholia*, but he has used the speculative potential of the genre just as brilliantly. With *Perfect Sense* he has shown that an adequate response to the problems of today can be given only after the situation has been diagnosed and the relevant questions have been asked. This seemingly simple, melodramatic story of a budding romance set against a backdrop of an apocalypse is, in fact, an intricate treatise on the present.

The action takes place in Glasgow, with heavy storm clouds hanging over the city. The first cases of a strange illness have been diagnosed there, and Susan, an epidemiologist, is trying to discover its causes. The illness leads to a loss of the sense of smell and is preceded by a brief period of dejection and sadness. Gradually, the loss of smell affects all people on Earth. The authors try to show a gradual loss of sensibility, they want to stress the role played in rapidly passing life by microrelations with people, and by slight pleasures barely noticed in the daily rush. However, in *Perfect Sense* most people quickly accept the irretrievable loss of fragments of their reality and experience. Having lost their sense of smell, they must stimulate their sense of taste more strongly; they need more salt, pepper and chilli in their food. The authors of the film ask whether this state of affairs might not be caused by unbridled consumerism, a lifestyle that is not conducive to contemplation, a search for increasingly strong, one-dimensional, spicy experiences.

Susan meets Michael who functions in this blindly galloping world. The camera can barely keep up with him, following him at work. Desire arises between Susan and Michael (which is illustrated with the sound of a passing train). Quick sex and acrid good-bye in the morning make up a genre scene from a time of dulled taste and easy instant pleasures. The illness enters the second stage – complete loss of taste – which is preceded by an attack of panic fear of dying alone. This is followed by an attack of ravenous hunger. Yet despite the trauma people again fairly quickly adapt to life in a new situation. There is no longer any difference between spirit and brandy, glue and hashish, flour and lard and *coq au vin*. However, in spite of the logic of degeneration something deeper is emerging between Michael and Susan. Out of a fear of death? Loneliness? What brings the protagonists together is something more than just momentary rapture. They spend a night and morning together, and want to see each other more often. They fall passionately in love. The next scene, of a morning together, opens with a brilliant shot of the lovers. The pro-

file of recumbent Susan is obscured by half of Michael's face so that they merge into one. Their relationship flourishes and some sunshine is coming through the cloudy Scottish sky.

The loss of another sense – of hearing – is preceded by an attack of fury. In a burst of hate Michael humiliates Susan and treats her like an object: “eyes, ears, arse and cunt, just flour and lard!” – he shouts. The anger subsides and Michael becomes completely deaf. Acute diegetic silence is emphasised by slightly slower motion. It stresses the feeling of alienation and loneliness in a world where dialogue and communication are impossible; when there is no conversation creating human communities and no voice of reason, where only chaos can reign. Is the loss of the other senses only a matter of time and will it signify total egoism and social fragmentation? Is the loss of senses irreversible? After all, a child “making perfect sense” has been born in Berlin...

The authors of the film have provided an excellent illustration of the consequences of increasing reification and vulgar demystification of the world. Old human relations are replaced with relations similar to those between objects; under the influence of science our perception of reality and of each other is radically changed. Conditions that have not yet been cured by the market and scientific worldview include aesthetic sensibility, empathy, need for closeness, understanding, love and acceptance.

A voice-over narrative and documentary pictures, justified by the plot, snapshots from various parts of the world draw our attention to the global dimension of the problem. The intimate relation between Michael and Susan is one of the particular areas where general processes are manifested. Their love microcosm is plagued by the same problems that plague the whole planet. They block the path to happiness in a heterosexual, monogamous relationship, though Michael and Susan's effort is just one of many possible ways to oppose the devaluing modern tendencies tearing human communities apart.

In addition, the actions of the main protagonists (building a relationship) and the world presented (spreading epidemic) illustrate a dilemma: do we shape reality with our conduct, our attitude to others, our sensibility, or, perhaps, are we formed by nature and the world in which we live? We may disagree with the absolutisation of love in Mackenzie's film. However, as an urge, love is natural, and as a non-accidental relation between humans it is volitional, which is why it is such a good vehicle for the dialectics of will and determination.

The message of the film seems to be pessimistic: moral effort of individuals will not change the direction of revaluing transformations of the world. Perhaps the ultimate horizon of collective happiness we are able to imagine is a happy love life, limited to the private sphere, and this, too, as Mackenzie shows in his film, seems to be disintegrating. The main organ of perception capitulates before what is to come; what is to come – the last shot in the film – is enveloped in darkness. However, it

is not entirely certain whether this is an empty abyss or simply whether in this demystified, individualised world we lack categories through which we could imagine a utopian order that would emerge from this chaos.

CINEMA, POLITICS AND APOCALYPSE

Summary

In his essay the author tries to show that the cinema in recent years has dealt with the topic of apocalypse in basically two different ways. The first group of films uses the apocalyptic myth to persuade people to adopt a particular attitude towards the American foreign policy at the turn of the century. The second, newer trend in apocalyptic cinema makes metaphorical use of the topic of global annihilation and offers an existential and cultural analysis

Summary translated by Tomasz Gaczol