

How will world end? Hollywood says 'take your pick'

Joe Ferullo | Jan. 20, 2010 NCR Today

Hollywood has always had a taste for disaster -- each generation of these films tells us something new about the way we fear our world will end. This year, it seems, random threats that annihilate everything are all the fashion. And they may indeed reflect a dark corner of our national psyche.

This weekend's box office saw Denzel Washington's new apocalyptic movie, "The Book of Eli," finish a strong second (with \$38 million in tickets sold), behind sci-fi juggernaut "Avatar." That follows on the heels of two similarly-themed films this season, "The Road" (from the beyond-bleak Cormac McCarthy novel) and "2012," which plays global destruction as wide-screen spectacle. They all speak to our times in common ways.

In the 1950s, the Cold War and the nuclear age produced a string of monster movies, starring overgrown insects and unknown blobs -- victims of genetic and atomic mutation -- that wreaked havoc on our way of life. In the 1970s, the "disaster movie" genre flourished in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate. Films like "The Towering Inferno" and "The Poseidon Adventure" showed us that authority could not be trusted (architects, builders, boat captains) -- and that the little guy had to fend for himself to survive the mess created all around him.

But today's end-of-the-world movies invoke a significant difference = we don't know where the threat comes from. In both "The Road" and "Book of Eli," the world is already wiped out when the story begins; civilization is gone, the planet coated in ash. The filmmakers and writers don't tell us why. Even in "2012," the threat comes from some ancient Mayan calendar prediction -- no bigger reason is really given.

Today we deal with so many threats that (these movies seem to be saying) no reason for destruction is needed. Let the viewer fill in the blank: rogue nuclear device, fanatic suicide bombers, legions of men setting fire to explosive shoes and shirts on airplanes, a small car in a crowded market that suddenly ignites. Doesn't matter -- the end will come from one of these dangers off the nightly news; we will be left to cope.

It is enough to make you pine for that simpler, bi-polar political world -- where you picked sides and waited for the other guy to make his move. But this is a far more uncertain time, with more shades of gray than the smoke that blankets the "The Road." In the current climate, there is only one thing you can be sure of: Hollywood will find a way to tap into that fear, and turn it into tickets.

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