

SPECIAL TOPIC: **MEDIA, CULTURE, AND “THE END OF THE WORLD”**



Summer of Doom, 2013

SUMMARY

Philadelphia Inquirer film critic Stephen Rea labeled 2013’s summer films as the “Summer of Doom.” Apocalyptic films included *Oblivion* (with Tom Cruise), *After Earth* (Will Smith), *World War Z* (Brad Pitt), and *Elysium* (Jodie Foster, Matt Damon). The doom continued in 2014 with *Noah* (Russell Crowe), *Godzilla*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, *Snowpiercer*, *Transformers: Age of Extinction*, among many others.

On TV, there is *The Walking Dead* and *Doomsday Preppers*. In the news, there is pollution, global warming, and “Hurricane Sandy,” a tropical storm hyped to destroy the East Coast. And Stephen Hawking says visiting aliens will wipe out humanity. Why so much doom in our media and culture?



The zombie apocalypse starts in Philly.

This is your world, your future in these films, shows, and news stories. All of this raises a profoundly serious question for media criticism: **why does “the end of the world” meme keep replicating in our media saturated culture?** From Hollywood’s “Summer of Doom” to the History Channel’s annual “Armageddon Week” to The Weather Channel’s endless weather catastrophes, there is an insatiable thirst for visions of doom and apocalypse. The apocalyptic meme spans pop culture and high culture, taking many forms:

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|---|--|
| Nuclear: the atomic bomb | Ecological: ecosystems are destroyed. |
| Technological: machines destroy the world | Cultural: social-economic meltdowns |
| Biological: viruses-zombies wipe out humans | Cosmic: meteors-supernovas wipe out life on Earth. |

Are these apocalypses mere escapist entertainment or do these memes suggest deep dissatisfactions with the destinies of the world: cultural, ecological, technological? Are the films and shows providing warnings about human hubris or merely pessimistic visions of the future? Is doomsday coming soon or do we have an optimistic, sustainable, long-term future?

GOALS AND OUTCOMES

The essential goal of this innovative course is for students to critically understand how and why media and culture create and replicate various apocalyptic, end of the world scenarios. Students will:

- understand why “the end of the world” meme has evolved, from ancient times to contemporary times, especially since the 1960s to 2014 and beyond.
- be empowered to decode the apocalyptic memes that underlie many of this era’s prevailing cultural worldviews.
- critique and comprehend the doomsday, apocalyptic, and “the end of the world” memes.

The goal is not to agree or disagree with any particular apocalyptic meme or worldview, but to understand what these memes say about media culture, human civilization, and our ability to chart a sustainable and humane future.

INSTRUCTOR

Barry Vacker, Associate Professor

Office: Annenberg 224 Office Hours — 10:30 – 12:00 on T-TH; or by appointment.

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Preferred methods of contact — interpersonal: 1) come up to me before or after class; 2) drop by during office hours.

electronic: 1) send an email; 2) call on the office telephone.

Email response time: Please give me 24 hours to respond to your email.

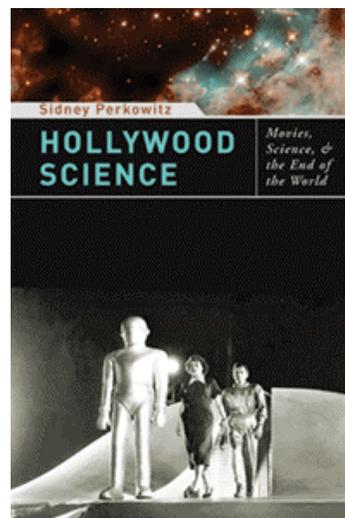
HONORS PROGRAM PEER ASSISTANT

Christina Betz

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REQUIRED READING

1. Sidney Perkowitz (2010), *Hollywood Science: Movies, Science, and the End of the World*, Columbia University Press. ISBN: 978-0231142816.
2. Craig Childs, (2012), *Apocalyptic Planet: Field Guide to the Future of the Earth*, Vintage Books, ISBN: 978-0-307-47681-4.
— Both books are available in the Temple bookstore or via Amazon.
3. Reading Packet with 12 articles, available online from University Readers.
— The link to purchase will sent to the class via email.



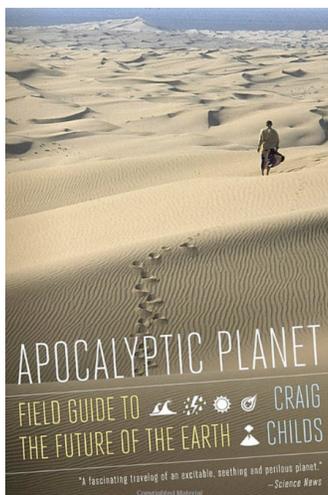
GRADING, EXAMS, PAPERS, VIDEO PROJECTS

There will be one reading summary/presentation, five video summaries, one film critique/presentation, one video project, the mid-term exam and final exam. The percentage breakdown is:

Reading Presentation	= 10%	(Due Throughout the Semester)
Video Summaries	= 15%	(Due Throughout Semester)
Exam 1	= 15%	(Due: September 18)
Film Critique/Pres	= 15%	(Due: November 4)
Critical Video Project	= 15%	(Due: December 4)
Final Exam	= 20%	(Date: December 16)
Attendance	= <u>10%</u>	All Projects and Exams = 100%

The mid-term exam and final exam may contain three kinds of questions — essay, short answer, and multiple choice. The difficulty of the questions will vary, but they are designed to test student reading and comprehension of class materials — readings, class discussion, and films/videos. Exam questions will stress the “big picture” rather than trivial details. The final exam is comprehensive and mandatory.

Note: If you have any questions about your grades, you have one week (7 days) from when the grades are returned to contact Professor Vacker to arrange a meeting to discuss your questions. If you have a question about your final exam or total grade, you must contact Professor Vacker within 24 hours of the grade being posted in Blackboard. After December 3, all project grades are final (except for final exam). **All grades are final** once the grades are submitted to OwlNet.



Make Up Exams and Late Projects

NO makeup exams are permitted for tests, unless you miss class for Temple-approved academic events or sports activities. If you need to miss an exam for one of these reasons, then you need to provide the professor with written and signed (by appropriate school representative) documentation prior to the exam. NO other reasons are acceptable. This is only fair to those fellow students who take the exam as scheduled. All projects are due on the dates listed; if the project is late, your grade will be zero.

Final Grades

As required by Temple University, final grades will be assigned according to the criteria of:

100-93 = A	89-86 = B+	79-76 = C+	69-66 = D+	59-0 = F
92-90 = A-	85-83 = B	75-73 = C	65-63 = D	
	82-80 = B-	72-70 = C-	62-60 = D-	

Attendance — 10% of your grade

This class relies on class discussion and student participation. To encourage attendance, we have created an attendance plan. Simply put, the more classes you attend, the more points you earn toward your final grade. *If you miss class or film screening, it is your responsibility to get notes from a classmate and watch the film on your own time. Films and videos will not be loaned out for private viewing.* Excluding the first week, there will be a total of 26 class meetings. Attend 25 and get the full 10 points. You get one free miss!

Classes Attended	Points Earned	Classes Attended	Points Earned	Classes Attended	Points Earned
25	10	23	7	21	3
24	9	22	5	20 or less	0

THE FUTURE'S A THING OF THE PAST

Note 1: It is your responsibility to ensure you are in your assigned seat, otherwise you will be counted absent. If you need to miss class for a religious holiday, please let the professor-TA know in writing and verbally (before or after class, or in office hours).

Note 2: If you have any questions about your absences and attendance records for the semester, it is *your* responsibility to contact the professor clarify your questions or any issues. You must meet with the professor by *Tuesday, December 3*. After December 3, all attendance and exam grades are final. Once we enter the final exam week, there will be no time to clarify any issues. All grades are final once the grades are totaled and submitted to OwlNet.



Projects: Papers, Summaries, Presentations, and Critical Video

For all your projects, you will receive handouts during the semester. For the Critical Video, you and your partner will produce a 3-5 minute video based on theories and themes from this course. *Due: Thursday, December 4.*

Academic Dishonesty

Regarding academic dishonesty, this class will abide by the rules of Temple University. Cheating on exams or projects will get you dropped from the class — NO EXCEPTIONS. The Temple Student Handbook states: *Temple University strongly believes in academic honesty and integrity. Plagiarism and academic cheating are, therefore, prohibited.*

There is nothing wrong with citing the works of others, just make sure you give them credit. In return, you get credit for doing so, and citing them can enhance your learning. If you are not certain that you are using or citing materials properly, then please check with the TAs or Dr. Vacker. It is your responsibility to know the Temple policies on these matters, as provided below.

Academic honesty and plagiarism

Adapted from the Temple University policy statement on academic integrity, passed by the Academic Senate on April 19, 1989. Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of another person's labor: another person's ideas, words, or assistance.

There are many forms of plagiarism: repeating another person's sentence as your own, adopting a particularly apt phrase as your own, paraphrasing someone else's argument as your own, or even presenting someone else's line of thinking in the development of an idea as though it were your own. Academic writing is built upon the use of other people's ideas and words — this is how ideas are developed — but appropriate credit must always be given to the originator.

In general, all sources must be identified as clearly, accurately, and thoroughly as possible. When in doubt about whether to identify a source, either cite the source or consult your instructor. Here are some specific guidelines to follow:

- a. Quotations.** *Whenever you use a phrase, sentence, or longer passage written (or spoken) by someone else, you must enclose the words in quotation marks and indicate the exact source of the material, including the page number of written sources.*
- b. Paraphrasing.** *Avoid closely paraphrasing another's words. Substituting an occasional synonym, leaving out or adding an occasional modifier, rearranging the grammar slightly, or changing the tenses of verbs simply looks like sloppy copying. Good paraphrasing indicates that you have absorbed the material and are restating it in a way that contributes to your overall argument. It is best to either quote material directly, using quotation marks, or put ideas completely in your own words. In either case, acknowledgment is necessary. Remember: expressing someone else's ideas in your own way does not make them yours.*
- c. Facts.** *In a paper, you will often use facts that you have gotten from a lecture, a written work, or some other source. If the facts are well known, it is usually not necessary to provide a source. (In a paper on American history, for example, it would not ordinarily be necessary to give a source for the statement that the Civil War began in 1861 after the inauguration of Abraham Lincoln.) But if the facts are not widely known or if the facts were developed or presented by a specific source, then you should identify that source.*
- d. Ideas.** *If you use an idea or ideas that you learned from a lecture, written work, or some other source, then you should identify the source. You should identify the source for an idea whether or not you agree with the idea. It does not become your original idea just because you agree with it.*

Penalties for violation of Temple University's academic honesty policies can range from a failing grade for the assignment or the entire course to referral to the university disciplinary committee.

Your professor stands by this policy.

Slackers

If you miss many classes or an exam, then you will have difficulty passing this course. You are expected to actively participate in this course, just like you do with media in your everyday life! Any topic discussed in class will be assumed to have been heard by everyone. If you miss a class, please feel free to ask questions of the professor; however, do not expect him to recite the class lecture for you.

TEXT MESSAGING AND WEB SURFING DURING CLASS

Your mediated world will still exist after 3:20 every day! Instant access to everything online is a permanent feature of digital media in our life, especially on college campuses. Obviously, there are many advantages and benefits to these technologies. However, text messaging, emailing, and web surfing in class are far too often a *detriment to concentrating and learning in a college classroom*. First, you cannot concentrate on class material when you are texting and surfing online; this will hinder your understanding of complex ideas and reduce your performance on the exams and projects. Second, the glowing imagery on your laptop or cell phone screen is a distraction and discourteous to others around you, especially when we are screening film clips. So, do yourself and your classmates a favor: avoid texting, emailing, and surfing during class. Your mediated world and friends will still exist when the class is over at 3:20.

EMAIL PROTOCOL

Since your professor is teaching 250+ students this semester, your professor receive a huge volume of emails. To insure efficient responses and clear communication, he has two requests:

- Please provide me *at least* 24 hours to reply to your email; it is much better for all concerned that when you get an email response, I have had time to think about it and gather additional information, if necessary.
- Please compose your emails in clear, concise sentences, keeping the length of the email as brief as needed.

It should go without saying that you should use proper grammar and form in composing your email and addressing the professor. Emails should be written as a brief letter, not a text message. Short, clear emails make for clear communication and help everything to run smoother!

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS

Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Professor Vacker privately to discuss the specific situation as soon as possible. Contact Disability Resources and Services at 215.204.1280 in 100 Ritter Annex to coordinate reasonable accommodations for students with documented disabilities.

ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Temple University has requested that the following information be included on all course syllabi:

Freedom to teach and freedom to learn are inseparable facets of academic freedom. The University has a policy on Student and Faculty and Academic Rights and Responsibilities (Policy #03.70.02) which can be accessed through the following link: http://policies.temple.edu/getdoc.asp?policy_no=03.70.02.



Photo at left: Two students presenting from Fall 2012, when this course and photo were featured in front page story in the Philadelphia Inquirer.

HOW TO DO WELL IN THIS COURSE

The best way to do well in this course is simple: come to class, pay attention during class, avoid texting and web surfing in class, stay up on the readings, study hard, and have an open mind. Also, let your professor know if you have any questions!

CLASS PROTOCOL

In general, I am an easy-going guy and prefer my classes to be open forums for ideas and discourse related to the class topics. However, a few rules are needed:

- Please arrive on time; screenings and discussion begin promptly. Timely arrivals to class are not only courteous to classmates, but many of these films and shows have very important openings, which are important to understanding the meanings and messages to be discussed in class and in your papers.^a
- You are encouraged to silence or turn off all cell phones and PDAs.
- Show respect and courtesy to fellow students at all times; Eloquence is the most persuasive form of discourse.
- I want all of you to do well in this class, so feel free to ask questions before or after class, or during office hours.

COURSE OUTLINE

This list include all readings and films; we will also view several TED Talks.

PART 1 • INTRODUCTION

Week 1 THE END IS COMING! THE END OF WHAT?

Aug 26, 28 The human and media fascination with the end of the world. Why?
Film clips — *When Worlds Collide* (Rudolph Mate 1951), *Melancholia* (Lars Von Trier 2011).
Packet 1 — Weightman, “The End of the World as a Professor Knows It;” Packet 2 — Cree, “The Final Countdown.”
Hollywood Science — Chapter 1, “Looking for Science in the Movies?”

PART 2 • THE EVOLUTION OF EARTH AND APOCALYPSES

Week 2 SCIENCE AND EXTINCTIONS

Sept 2, 4 Let’s look at the science of “origins” and “extinctions” — a recurring feature of planet Earth.
Video clips — *Cosmos: A Spacetime Odyssey* (2014); “The Immortals” and “Lost Worlds of Planet Earth.”
Packet 3 — Newitz, “Are We All Going to Die?”
Apocalyptic Planet — Chapter 1, “Deserts Consume.”

Week 3 “PROPHECY” AND DOOMSDAY: FROM Y2K TO NOAH

Sept 9, 11 What do people see in so-called “prophecies” and doomsday scenarios?
Film clips — *It Could Happen Tomorrow* (The Weather Channel 2006).
Packet 4 — Gross and Gilles, “The Apocalyptic Decade.”
Packet 5 — Vacker, “Memes & Apocalypse.”

Week 4 SEVEN REASONS WHY THE APOCALYPSE MEME REPLICATES

Sept 16, 18 Why the apocalypse meme replicates in the media and popular culture.
Film Clips — *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (Robert Wise 1951) and others.
Apocalyptic Planet — Chapter 4, “Civilizations Fall.”
Packet 6 — Vacker, “The End of the World Will Happen;” “The End of the World Will Not Happen” (pp. 29-32).
September 18 — Exam 1

PART 3 • APOCALYPSES VIA IDEOLOGY + TECHNOLOGY

Week 5 NUCLEAR APOCALYPSE: THE END OF CIVILIZATION?

Sept 23, 25 The Cold War and nuclear standoffs; the first “Ground Zero.” 007, media, satellites, and atomic war.
Film clips — *L’Eclisse* (M. Antonioni, 1962), *Fail-Safe* (Sidney Lumet 1964); *Goldfinger* (Guy Hamilton 1964).
Hollywood Science — Chapter 5, “Atoms Unleashed.”
September 23: Video Summary 1 due — *Atomic Café* (Jayne Loader and Kevin Rafferty 1982).

Week 6 TECHNO-APOCALYPSE: THE END VIA ERROR OR TERROR?

Sept 30, Oct. 2 Could machines really get out of our control? Y2K to A.I. to Nuclear Terror.
Film clips — *Alphaville* (Jean-Luc Godard 1965), *Colossus* (Joseph Sargent 1970), *The Matrix* (Wachowski Bros. 1999).
Hollywood Science — Chapter 7, “The Computers Take Over.”
Packet 7 — Casti, “Digital Darkness.”
September 30: Video Summary 2 due — *Countdown to Zero* (Lucy Walker 2010).

PART 4 • APOCALYPSES VIA BIOLOGY

Week 7 BIOLOGICAL APOCALYPSE: THE END OF HUMANS?

Oct 7, 9 Viruses, Germs, and Pandemics; could We Really Die Off or is Something Else Dying?
Film clips — *Children of Men* (Alfonso Cuaron 2006); *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh 2011).
Packet 8 — Rees, “Post 2000 Threats.”
Packet 9 — Casti, “I’m Sick of It.”

Week 8 ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE: THE END OF HUMANS?

Oct 14, 16 Pod People and Zombies; the First Human, Last Human, or the Future Human? The Meanings of Zombies.
Film clips — *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel 1956); *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2011); *World War Z* (2013).
Hollywood Science — Chapter 6, “Genes and Germs Gone Bad.”
Packet 10 — Impey, “The Future of Humanity.”

PART 5 • APOCALYPSES VIA ECOLOGY

Week 9 RESOURCE APOCALYPSE: CONSUMER SOCIETY

Oct 21, 23 Straining the Ecosystem, Advertising, Consumerism, and Resource Depletion.
Film clips — *Week-End* (Jean-Luc Godard 1967), *Soylent Green* (Richard Fleischer 1973); *Elysium* (N. Blomkamp 2013).
Hollywood Science — Chapter 4, “Our Violent Planet.”
Apocalyptic Planet — Chapter 6, “Species Vanish.”
October 21: Video Summary 3 due — *Trashed* (Candida Brady 2012).

Week 10 ENVIRONMENTAL APOCALYPSE: DESTRUCTION OF ECOSYSTEM

Oct 28, 30 Pollution on Land, in the Sea, in the Air; Deforestation, Over-fishing, Climate Change.
Film clips: *Avatar* (James Cameron 2009), *After Earth* (M. Night Shyamalan 2013).
Apocalyptic Planet — Chapter 2, “Ice Collapses;” Chapter 3, “Seas Rise.”
October 28: Video Summary 4 due — *An Inconvenient Truth* (David Guggenheim 2006).

FILM CRITIQUE — PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

Week 11
Nov 4, 6 This week is devoted to your papers and presentations
All papers are due: Nov. 4; All presentations are due Nov 4 — but will happen over Nov 4 and Nov 6.

PART 6 • APOCALYPSES VIA THE COSMOS

Week 12 EXTRATERRESTRIAL APOCALYPSE: THE END OF HUMANS?

Nov 11, 13 Extraterrestrials; Technological and biological means of mass destruction; Should we be scared?
Film clips — *War of the Worlds* (Byron Haskin 1953); *Oblivion* (Joseph Kosinski 2013).
Hollywood Science — Chapter 2, “Alien Encounters.”
Packet 11 — Plait, “Alien Attack.”

November 12: Video Summary 5 due — “Are We Alone?” Morgan Freeman’s *Through the Wormhole* (2010).

Week 13 COSMIC APOCALYPSE: METEORS, COMETS, ASTEROIDS, SUPERNOVAS, AND BLACK HOLES

Nov 18, 20 Could our civilization or species be destroyed by a rock from space? Should we be doing anything to prevent it?
Film clips — *Armageddon* (Michael Bay 1998); *The Universe* (2009); “Destiny,” *Wonders of the Universe* (BBC 2011).
Hollywood Science — Chapter 3, “Devastating Collisions.”
Packet 12 — Cox, “Destiny.”

Nov 24-30, Fall Break, Thanksgiving Holiday

CONCLUSION

Week 14 OVERCOMING THE APOCALYPSE

Dec 2, 4 If you had to save civilization, what would you save? Can we build a unified global civilization?
Film clips — *2012* (Roland Emmerich 2009); *Star Trek Into Darkness* (JJ Abrams 2013).
So which explanations best explain the apocalypse memes in the media?
Video Critique Due: Thursday, December 4.

FINAL EXAM Tuesday, December 16, 1:00 – 3:00. The Final Exam is comprehensive and mandatory — No exceptions.