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Apocalypse Too Soon:

Wheeler Winston Dixon's Visions of the Apocalypse

Wheeler Winston Dixon

Visions of the Apocalypse: Spectacles of Destruction in American Culture

London: Wallflower Press, 2003

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169 pp.

Rarely have cinema scholars treated the metaphysical issue of 'apocalypse', despite its importance in films as seminal as Friedrich Murnau's Nosferatu (1922) and Ingmar Bergman's The Seventh Seal (1956), or in mass market attractions such as Michael Bay's Armageddon (1998), so, as a scholar of the relation between 'time' and 'film', I welcomed the learned perspective promised by Wheeler Winston Dixon's new book, entitled, hopefully enough, Visions of the Apocalypse: Spectacles of Destruction in American Cinema. Neither the title nor the subtitle, however, aptly describes the true concern of Dixon's work. The book, while ostensibly narrating the history of apocalyptic films in the 20th century (more or less American, but including -- for no apparently logical reason -- sidebars on Japanese, French, and British film), is actually not about either apocalypse nor film, *per se*. It is about how a hyper-conglomerated media industry is destroying popular American culture, and about how American culture is in turn destroying the world -- inscribing us spectators in a culture of death.

'Apocalypse' is certainly too strong a word to fit what the author describes as

imminent global destruction through digital cinema and DVD distribution. Nevertheless, Dixon insists on the apocalypse, jumping on the bandwagon of the very 'culture of death' he criticizes. He engages readers in his argument about the media by alarming them with the idea that 'weapons of mass destruction' are everywhere, and so is terrorism. We have left the East-West cold war mentality, he says in one jeremiad, to now be faced with terrorism worldwide, 'while war rages unchecked in the middle east' and 'rogue states are rising everywhere' (8). This alarmist political commentary (which is only the prelude to a book about commercialism) promotes a vision that certainly needs no refueling at the moment -- and can even, according to the author himself, be dangerous. As Dixon says: 'The policy of perpetual alarmism creates a self-fulfilling prophesy' (129).

The first sentence of his book warns us how loosely the terms will be used: 'This is a book about the end of cinema, the end of the world, and the end of civilization as we know it' (1). The good news is that, as mentioned above, this is not what the book is about at all. *Visions of the Apocalypse* is divided into three chapters, and an Introduction and a Coda, each with titles suggesting apocalyptic themes (such as 'The Limits of Time'), and each instead offering a plethora of facts about how distribution works in the media industry. Chapter One, 'Freedom From Choice', details the commercialization of cinema: through DVD zoning, sequels, publicity, internet downloading, and Sony Bono's copyright law, which makes literary adaptation harder, hence the new independent film art of 'mash-ups'. Chapter Two, 'Invasion USA', talks about the post-Sept 11th climate, and discusses war films in the US, from 1940 to today. Chapter Three, 'The Limits of Time', is the most interesting; it discusses hyper-conglomerates such as Disney, Clear Channel, and Cosmopolitan, as well as notable media personalities such as George Lucas, Oprah Winfrey, and Jean-Luc Godard -- who seems totally gratuitous in this chapter until one learns that Dixon had previously written a book entirely devoted to this French cineaste.

As a source-book of information about the way the media market works in the US and, to some extent, in France (there is a wonderful non sequitur account of new wave French feminist directors), this book is illuminating and well-stocked with interesting facts. For example, one learns the inner details about the fight between Oprah Winfrey and novelist Jonathan Franzen (note that neither has anything to do with film), and how he refused her book club system of 'dumbing down' America. We also learn that Jean-Luc Godard has such

integrity that he is now making his own films with independent financing. In a hardly more relevant section (to the title of the work), one learns -- in cursory fashion -- how subtitle and dubbing choices influenced the distribution of foreign films in the US between 1945 and 1972.

Between 1945 and 1972? Yes, there is an arbitrary assemblage of films and dates in this historical overview, as there is an arbitrary assemblage of films and dates in the sections where Dixon directly discusses films having to do with the apocalypse. For it is true that every so often Dixon dives into the subject of 'visions of apocalypse', in breathless sections listing as many as 30 film titles on a page (see page 138 -- where Dixon suddenly and unexpectedly rolls off a list of atomic apocalypse films in a crescendo, as if rushing to reclaim his title, right before he finishes his book). These sections are practically useless, except as source lists, as they do not distinguish between different periods in which these films were made -- whether during the Cold War or the Vietnam War or now -- which is crucially important when it comes to American visions of apocalypse.

Dixon's nod to historical analysis is to state that the films being made today are similar in their \*us-versus-them\* approach to the war movies of the 1940s and 1950s, except that now the enemy is more generalized (i.e. terrorists are everywhere). This in itself is an interesting point, and one wishes Dixon had used his wealth of film knowledge to analyze the differences, and set up the periods separately, rather than separating them out after the wash. One also wishes he had looked at previous film-history books treating the connection between war politics and film, such as Siegfried Kracauer's *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*, which carefully looks at how each film between the world wars reflected political concerns (or even more directly, the book he does cite often, Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema*). Instead, Dixon alerts us that the US is now in a state of paranoia, and joins in himself: suggesting that Microsoft's *Flight Simulator* video game was a portent of September 11th, as was *King Kong* (1933) and *Deep Impact* (1998), all filmic counterparts to Nostradamus.

The most disturbing oversight in the book, however, given its purported subject, is the lack of reference to the apocalyptic literature that predates cinema by millennia, or any of the millennial movements, from the early Christians to the Thuringian peasants. Moreover, there is absolutely no dialogue with theorists who have probed the actual topic of this book -- mass culture -- more thoughtfully. Missing are references to such classics as Guy Debord's

\_The Society of Spectacle\_ or even Theodor Adorno's \_The Culture Industry\_. A dialogue would have greatly helped. Stating, *\*ex nihilo\**, that in most American films 'all that matters is destruction' is simply not illuminating (124).

Nonetheless, the thrust of Dixon's underlying argument is compelling and topical: how independent film (and thought) is struggling in an Americanized climate of conglomerate control. Having myself just returned from the Venice Film Festival, where the collusion between journalists and film (journalists, for the most part, asking dainty questions to the directors and, more usually, to the glitzier actresses, to sell their papers) exemplifies the ever tighter grip that a mass industry has on which films reach audiences, I can appreciate Dixon's emotional invective. I personally was offended by the fact that St Marks Square in Venice was closed one evening to show the upcoming American blockbuster \_Shark Tale\_. When I asked director Victoria Jenson what she thought her film actually offered the world (to justify such cultural dominance), she stammered a response about how the 'orphan struggles and makes it', which is a 'nice story'.

Dixon is evidently beset by personal frustration as well. He tangents briefly into his own history as a filmmaker, who left LA in disgust, to become an academic. He finishes his book on the apocalypse not by talking about the apocalypse, but by talking about his friend, Andrew Meyer, who was, like Dixon, an independent filmmaker in the 1960s, and unlike Dixon, sold out to make, among other things, a mass movie of apocalypse (hence his relevance). Dixon last saw Meyer at a premiere where his friend had sold out to the point of wearing a tux, among such industry pleasers, while Dixon remained in suit and tie. It is an interesting story -- and engagingly written -- so this book is not completely written off as a loss. Dixon's artistic expressiveness in these anecdotal asides saves his argument from being mere apocalyptic rant, a danger he entertains in other sections.

For at times Dixon does risk philosophical statements about the apocalypse -- an area for which he unfortunately shows no scholarly preparation. In his Introduction he makes the claim that we all long for death: 'the end of all is the defining moment we all seek' (4). He talks about this 'death impulse', as well as our desire for 'eros' in film, without ever mentioning predecessors in this thought, such as Sigmund Freud or his follower, in cultural criticism, Herbert Marcuse. This is strange. 'The longing for death' is a subject that deserves -- and has attracted -- careful cinematic and philosophical study. Already several

theoreticians, from Walter Benjamin to Gilles Deleuze, have broached this subject, and more recently Mary Ann Doane, whose *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* is one of the most rewarding academic books to date to reflect on issues of time/death and the flickering image.

Doane states: 'Because a fascination with contingency raises the specter of pure loss, the possibility of complete obliteration of the passing moment, the degradation of meaning, it also elicits a desire for its opposite -- the possibility of structure'. [1] She then goes on to make the opposite argument to Dixon, that cinema (and its creation of the 'event') is a way to deal with the contradictions of passing (or obliterated -- to keep to the apocalyptic theme) time. Film, in many ways, is a way for the spectator to assume immortality, even if the topic is death: the media is the message, even if the message is about apocalypse. Andrei Tarkovsky, in his famed *Sculpting in Time* (University of Texas Press, 1986) similarly argues that time in film is a way to preserve life -- not deny it. 'The image becomes authentically cinematic when . . . not only does it live within time, but time also lives within it, even within each separate frame' (68). [2]

'Separate frame' is the key word here. At no point in Dixon's book -- and in his erudite lists of films -- does he mention a single 'separate frame', nor the technical processes of editing, cutting, or dissolves so central to the 'visions of the apocalypse' that can be achieved in film. He bases his analysis on plot summaries, which reduces all films -- from the American blockbusters to his Japanese film of choice *The Last War* (1961) -- to the same narrative implosion of any content. He could of course do more. Dixon, Chair of the Film Studies Program at the University of Nebraska, as well as a filmmaker himself, is the co-editor *Experimental Cinema: The Film Reader*, an important textbook that I have relied upon for thoughtful and intricate analyses of often forgotten filmmakers, such as Maya Deren. He is also the author of several books on contemporary cinema, straddling topics relevant to the book at hand: i.e. digital cinema, the American media's fascination with disaster, and experimental filmmakers.

So what *does* the book do?

The Coda, 'The Copenhagen Defense' -- which begins with Werner Heisenberg, the physicist who aimed to design the atomic bomb for the Nazis, and ends with Dixon's erstwhile sell-out friend Meyer -- states the point of the book: that

experimental art is dead, and commercial films make money selling death. Which is something the author is doing as well. Why call this book 'Visions of the Apocalypse' -- such an inappropriate title -- except to excite, thrill, and attract readers? Why scare people that an apocalypse will result from American imperialism? In so doing, Dixon, who never openly considers the historical rooting of the apocalyptic narratives he describes (the tradition of Puritan eschatology, ably discussed by historians such as Perry Miller or Richard Hofstadter) which would have been illuminating, to separate American apocalyptic films from their counterparts, is participating in a rehashed version of the American jeremiad. 'Ye are all sinners in the hands of an angry god', warned eighteenth century thinker Jonathan Edwards, sidestepping from his role as a thoughtful philosopher.

To end with a vision of the apocalypse: in the recent film, *The Day After Tomorrow*, German director Roland Emmerich resuscitates the world from climate devastation at the last minute, by having a US scientist simultaneously save the day and his family. The ending received a great groan of disapproval at its premiere in Frankfurt, by journalists and publicists alike, all invited by 'Twentieth Century Fox', the film's producer. 'It's too American' was the general refrain -- an oddly subversive critique, given their employer. The director was coerced, they suspected, to change the ending to make it positive, to have the apocalypse forestalled. And that is the way the apocalypse goes, in the US model -- from the Puritans onward. Not appealing to our longing for death, as Dixon warns us, but rather the blithe opposite: the longing for heroes, for prophets, for those who can save us at the last minute, no matter what we do to destroy geo-political systems. A more responsible scholarly study on how media images of apocalypse work to destroy political thinking in American culture would take that into account, at a time when Bush (the most dramatic version of the 'beast') has just won again.

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#### Notes

1. Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 140.
2. Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), p.

68.

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