

## When One Apocalypse is Not Enough: Representations of the End Times in Spanish Cinema (1962–2017)

*Carmen Moreno-Nuño*

The explosive eruption of Donald Trump into the political arena has put the topic of the apocalypse on the table. The anxiety that Trump's policies generate has been denounced by Mexicans, Middle Eastern immigrants, Muslims, women, the LGTB minority, people with disabilities, scientists, humanists, and also by all those who fear that the president's erratic decisions in international affairs could have disastrous consequences. The gloomy tone of Trump's Inauguration Day speech on January 20th 2017, which can be condensed in the cry "This American *carnage* stops here" (emphasis added), is just one example of the fact that fear has become one of the pivotal forces within American politics.<sup>1</sup> Although the invocation of the catastrophic has been frequently used as a trope by other populist political movements across the globe, the uncertainties brought forth by this president are unprecedented in American history. The showing of the movie *1984* (Michael Radford, 1984), based on George Orwell's eponymous novel, at theaters in 43 states in April 4th 2017 reflects the widespread belief that life as we know it is under threat. Countries around the world are responding to the new international order in different ways, from serious political debate to lighter fare. For example, in Spain, the TV comedy-show *El Acabose*, led by comedian José Mota and shown in prime time on channel *La 1 de TVE*, has opted for cathartic humor. After the world is destroyed by Donald Trump in 2017, the audience is transported to a post-apocalyptic future where Mota interviews a few survivors/guests amidst scrap metal.

The apocalypse has become a timely topic; it will be interesting to see if the production of Hollywood movies on the 'end of the world' increases in the coming years, as the relationship between apocalyptic cinema and politics is a close one. In *Projecting the End of the American Dream: Hollywood's Visions of U.S. Decline*, Gordon Arnold has shown how the most significant political

**Writing in the End Times: Apocalyptic Imagination in the Hispanic World**

*Hispanic Issues On Line* Issue 23 (2019)

figures and events in contemporary American history have found expression in multiple cultural artifacts that represent the end times. The importance of this cultural production should not be underestimated. Annie Rehill, in *The Apocalypse is Everywhere: A Popular History of America's Favorite Nightmare*, joins other cultural critics in examining the variety and ubiquity of the works of fiction that represent the end of the world. In Spain, the apocalypse has never been a favorite topic for the big screen. However, the representation of the end times has become increasingly popular in the last few years, creating a filmic trend that invites a comparative analysis between American and Spanish cinema. Although Spain and the United States are worlds apart in their political cultures, it is possible to interpret these films from a purely political perspective and discover elements that mirror the close relationship existing between the American apocalyptic genre and politics. The deep distrust that Spanish citizens feel is possibly the result of a prolonged economic crisis, ubiquitous institutional corruption, the persistent separatist attempts by Cataluña, and the questioning of the *Pacto de la Transición* (or pact for a peaceful but politically conservative transition to democracy). It could be argued that this institutional distrust is an expression of yearning for a *new Spain* arising from a more inclusive and transparent Social Contract. The compulsive repetition of the symbolic death and rebirth of the nation seems to require critical examination as part of an apocalyptic hermeneutics. There are some commonalities between the type of populist discourse employed by both Donald Trump and Pablo Iglesias, the controversial leader of the populist left-wing party Podemos, including aggressive tactics such as the attack on the free press.<sup>2</sup> However, a quick look at Spanish apocalypse movies shows that they blend national political issues with elements of a more international nature, such as deadly viruses and global war.

Any comprehensive reading of Spanish apocalypse film production needs to take into account both the political and the cinematic. The study of Spanish apocalypse films shows the transformation of a genre that evolves from the imitation of Hollywood to its parody, and to a utilization of the end of the world as a tool for critical political discourse in twenty-first-century movies. Apocalyptic Spanish cinema in the new millennium has developed as a result of a dialogue between the national and the global that represents the end of time through the blending of Hollywood and Spanish cinematic conventions. In a metaphorical sense, it could be said that Spanish apocalypse cinema projects Hollywood images onto the national screen. For the analysis of these movies, it is essential to keep in mind two essential factors: the undeniable influence of Hollywood on Spanish cinema; and the recognition of apocalyptic fantasies as arguably one of three cinematic genres that best capture a sense of innate Americanness, the other two being *film noir* and the western.

It must be noted that this comparative essay references Hollywood's apocalyptic production only to shed light on Spanish films depicting the end times, as any attempt to study this vast Hollywood genre in just a few pages would be destined to fail.

## Background

As is the case in American movies, the end of the world has been a trope of Spanish cinema for several decades. The famous 1916 novel by Vicente Blasco Ibáñez *Los cuatro jinetes del Apocalipsis* (Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse) inspired the plot of an American eponymous feature film directed by Vincente Minnelli in 1962. Spanish apocalypse films date back to at least the 1960s. The title of Luis Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* (The Exterminating Angel, 1962) made use of this figure from the last book of the Bible to metaphorically uncover, in the particular auteurist style of the filmmaker, the deeply embedded ills that are the foundations of any social order. *La hora incógnita* (1963) can be considered the first Spanish apocalypse film in the contemporary sense of the term. It approaches the end of the world not through humor, as could be expected from well-known comedy-director Mariano Ozores, but through a provincial drama where a small city has to confront the unforeseen possibility of nuclear war. The international anxiety unleashed by the Cuban missile crisis in October of 1962, the closest the Cold War came to escalating into a full-scale nuclear war, is the most likely historical background for this story released a year later. The American popular media, especially television, made frequent use of the events in both fictional and documentary forms, at a time when elements of the 13-day confrontation were widely televised across the globe. By offering a local setting as a likely scenario for an international crisis, the movie *La hora incógnita* exemplifies the most important trait of Spanish apocalyptic cinema: the dialectics between the national and the transnational. The unique nature of this film within Mariano Ozores's comic production explains why it has been mostly ignored by critics, despite the quality of the work. Released in the midst of the Francoist regime, *La hora incógnita* offers an allegorical representation of social vices reminiscent of *El gran teatro del mundo*, the *auto sacramental* by seventeenth-century dramatist Pedro Calderón de la Barca: those who are not evacuated on time will see their lives exposed (through dialogue) in front of the others, confront certain death, be forced to converse with a central moral figure (a priest), and be subjected to Divine judgment. The only characters allowed to survive, unanimously elevated by the group, are the three members of a modest family comprised of a mother/Virgin Mary, father/Saint Joseph, and baby/Jesus. As this movie il-

lustrates, the Francoist dictatorship finds in the Hollywood genre a useful tool to perpetuate the moral code of *nacionalcatolicismo*, or allegiance between national politics and the Catholic religion. In the 1970s, Spanish filmmakers will continue to depict the fear of nuclear war.<sup>3</sup>

Apocalypse movies are usually considered a subgenre of the horror, fantasy, and science fiction genres. Although in Spain the tradition of fantastic cinema dates back to the beginning of the twentieth century, thanks to Segundo de Chomón, horror and science fiction do not make an appearance until the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> The 1970s witness a proliferation of fantasy and horror movies that are made possible through the endless repetition of the same thematic scheme. Zombies become the most popular characters, as zombie movies make the slasher subgenre more attractive by introducing significant amounts of eroticism. The Spanish-Italian film, shot in English, *No profanar el sueño de los muertos* (Let Sleeping Corpses Lie, 1974) by Jorge Grau, “tuvo una carrera comercial más que aceptable y terminó por desatar la moda de los muertos vivientes” (Lucena Cayuela 91) (had a successful commercial run and ended up giving rise to the popularity of the living dead).<sup>5</sup> In 1976, Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, who entertained millions as director of the popular TV gameshow *Un, dos, tres . . . responde otra vez* (One, Two, Three... Answer Again), also terrifies audiences with *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* (Island of the Damned). Ibáñez Serrador had long paid public homage to writers such as Edgar Allan Poe and Henry James in his horror TV series *Historias para no dormir* (Stories to Stay Awake, 1966–82). The 8-minute opening sequence of *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* denounces the atrocious death and extreme hunger suffered by millions of children in war zones, subverting the socio-political inefficacy of the NODO documentaries through a montage of documentary footage.<sup>6</sup> The movie tells the story of a British couple who discover that maniacal grim-faced children have murdered just about every adult on an isolated island where they seek refuge from the tourist crowds on the mainland. It is implied that the horrors brought upon the young by adults at war have caused the children of the island to take matters into their own hands. The movie ends with a small group of children preparing to head to mainland Spain in a motorboat in order to continue with their murderous *game*. A huge success at the box office, *¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* is also a groundbreaking movie in its use of the apocalyptic genre as a tool for political denunciation: it can be read as a political allegory. By creating a scenario of overarching death, the movie criticizes Francoist *desarrollismo* (economic growth): the *milagro económico* (economic miracle) of the 1960s obscures the persistence of the same Freudian death drive that fueled the dictatorship for decades. The dialectics between modernity and tradition permeates the movie, as the British couple leaves overly crowded tourist sites in a quest for

a more traditional Spain. Tourism is portrayed not as an engine of economic development, but as an ineffectual means of sociopolitical change. By manipulating the audience's identification with the protagonists, the British couple, Ibáñez Serrador reverses the traditional relationship between Spaniards and the Other, transforms Spain into the object of the Europeans' gaze, and consequently exposes modernity as a mere façade in a country that is still riddled with death.

In the 1980s, the expanding video market encourages the production of a considerable amount of low-budget fantasy and horror movies. *Total* (1983), by José Luis Cuerda, stands out from these facile offerings that incorporate an excess of erotica that borders on pornography. A surrealist comedy, the events take place in the year 2,598 in Londres (London), an ironically-named Castilian village, three days after the apocalypse. Its great success paves the way for the other two movies that, together with *Total*, make up Cuerda's surrealist-rural trilogy: *Amanece que no es poco* (1989) and *Así en el cielo como en la tierra* (1995). In *Total*, Cuerda rehearses the irreverent style that characterizes his later film production. *Total* can be described as a mixture of different Hispanic cultural traditions, which, dating back to the *avant garde*, have cultivated the absurd and the grotesque, especially Luis Buñuel's surrealist cinema, Latin American literary Magical Realism (markedly influential in Spanish culture since the 1970s), and Ramón María del Valle Inclán's *esperpentos*.<sup>7</sup> The shocking effect of *Total* lies in its capacity to join two apparently contradictory logics in a not-so incongruous whole: the annihilation of the urban (Londres) as an emblem of the decay of modern civilization, one of the most basic conventions of apocalypse cinema; and the long-lasting but unstoppable shrinking and final dismemberment of rural populations in Spain since the 1960s. In 1983, *Total* allows us to see, through distorted images and concave mirrors, how Spain is still decades away from completing the process of both modernization and Europeanization so longed for after the dictator Franco's death. *Total* proclaims the necessity that democracy configure new political institutions and permeate social structures at all levels. Socialist President Felipe González and his party Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), elected just a year prior, will have to respond to that challenge.

*El día de la bestia* (1995) by Álex de la Iglesia reinvigorates the genre after the run of inferior films in the 1980s, with a current and attractive look based on the parody of genre conventions. *El día de la bestia* paves the way for later movies such as *Los otros* (The Others, Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) and *El orfanato* (The Orphanage, J. A. Bayona, 2007), which have brought fantasy cinema in Spain to a new level. The new film production confirms that the reworking of genre conventions, which finds in Pedro Almodóvar's melodramas one of its highest expressions, is the way to go for Spanish audiences.

*El día de la bestia*, which has received much critical attention, is a parody of the satanic thriller subgenre, which goes hand in hand with apocalyptic cinema in predicting the unavoidable coming of the end times. If we take a quick look at pre-apocalyptic, apocalyptic, and post-apocalyptic movies, we can find the following basic conventions: there may be different causes for the event, such as nuclear war, pandemic diseases, zombies, or natural disasters; the announcement of the catastrophe brings the collapse of civil society and the impossibility of governmental policies; the plot line follows a group of protagonists that will try to survive on their own; a sense of urgency binds members of the group together by placing them uniquely at the focal point of history's most decisive event; elements and symbols of urban and modern life are destroyed; devastation is the most common ending. Also, most apocalyptic stories focus on the ways characters react to severe adversity with primitive fear and extreme violence in the pursuit of self-preservation. These generic expectations have been parodied in recent Hollywood movies with great success. The parodic comedy-drama *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World* (Lorene Scafaria, 2012), the critical satire of torture porn and comedy-slasher-sci-fi genres *The Cabin in the Woods* (Drew Goddard, 2012), and the metafictional disaster comedy *This is The End* (Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 2013) have proved appealing to audiences that applaud the post-modern tendency towards bricolage, pastiche, intertextuality, and metafiction. Álex de la Iglesia's brilliant reworking of genre conventions, which is key to *El día de la bestia* and his later movies, has been so successful both with critics and at the box office that it makes us wonder if parody is the best strategy to approach the apocalypse, not only for Hollywood but also for Spanish cinema.

Genre hybridity is central to twenty-first-century end-of-the-world fantasies in Spanish cinema. Audiences derive pleasure from both the recognition of established genre conventions and the filmmaker's ability to take an especially fresh approach to the genre or, simply put, genres rely on repetition as much as variation (Sikov, 143–46). Spanish apocalypse films constitute a fluid and changeable genre that shows dynamic variability more than a set of relatively fixed meanings. Rick Altman has studied how genres respond to a constant process of reconfiguration, recombination, and reformulation, called genrification. While traditional genre criticism stresses the manner in which separate genres are unproblematically embodied in specific films, Altman has sought “to destabilize the apparently clear and fixed relationship between genres and their practitioners. While in some periods genres play a predictable formative role, at other points they are mashed, twisted, and reshaped into unrecognizably new forms” (195). As they are multiple things serving multiple purposes for multiple groups, genres are in fact permanently contested sites.



Moreover, “genres can even teach us about nations” (195) because they work as regulatory schemes, facilitating the integration of different factions into a single unified social fabric that can function as the public sphere—Jürgen Habermas—or as an imagined community—Benedict Anderson. Altman’s theory invites us to look at twenty-first-century Spanish apocalypse movies in a different light. Do these films simply imitate commonly used Hollywood genre conventions, or do they, on the contrary, modify these conventions, thus giving birth to a process of genrification?

The dystopian sci-fi drama *Children of Men* (2008), by Mexican Alfonso Cuarón, may offer a preliminary answer to this question. While the movie perpetuates basic generic expectations such as the unavoidable death of the population, the destruction of social and governmental structures, and a desperate fight for survival, Cuarón’s political denunciation of migrant discrimination reveals the implicit background of the never-easy relationships between Mexico and USA. The French movie *Time of the Wolf* (2004), by Michael Haneke, is another example of skillful blending of genre elements. The movie recounts the story of one family, as a global cataclysm ends all hopes for safety. Their individual experience eventually becomes representative of a collective tragedy. The quiet tone of the movie, together with its aesthetics of simplicity, so removed from Hollywood’s excess, suggests a story of sacrifice with mythical overtones. Twenty-first-century Spanish apocalyptic cinema is the result of an analogous dialectics between the national and the global that pushes Spanish cinema in new, unexplored directions. Close textual analysis reveals that these movies represent the end times through the combination of Hollywood and Spanish cinema traditions. In other words, Spanish apocalyptic cinema borrows Hollywood conventions but projects them through the national lens. This brings us back to the oft-debated issue of the nature of Spanish national cinema or, to put it plainly, to the classic question “¿De qué hablamos cuando hablamos de cine español?” (Zunzunegui qt. in Pérez Rubio and Hernández Ruiz 13) (What are we talking about when we are talking about Spanish cinema?). This problem, which has fueled an intense debate since the 1920s, has traditionally divided critics and filmmakers into *españolistas* (nationalists) and *cosmopolitas* (cosmopolitans), depending on how they respond to “la supuesta necesidad del cinema español de dotarse de medios culturales propios para librar batalla contra el ya entonces inconmensurable poderío de la cinematografía estadounidense” (Pérez Rubio and Hernández Ruiz 16) (the alleged necessity for Spanish cinema to provide for itself the cultural means to fight against the already incommensurable power of American cinematography). However, in recent years Spanish movies are fusing national and international elements in creative and surprising ways. A closer look at the cinema of the apocalypse reveals the intricacies of these films, showing that the tradi-

tional separation between *españolistas* and *cosmopolitas* may well turn out to be, in the twenty-first century, a false divide.

### Apocalypse Movies for the Twenty-First Century

If we focus on twenty-first-century Spanish cinema, we find a continuation of the emphasis on diversity that characterized the 1990s. National cinema is made up of a plurality of contributions because the audience is understood as plural. Reflecting this all-inclusive vision, Spanish cinema comprises a variety of trends that include the production of the *auteurs* of the 1960s and 1970s (Saura, Armendáriz, Mario Camus), the younger directors of the 1990s (Alejandro Amenábar, Julio Medem), social cinema (Icíar Bollaín, León de Aranoa), vulgar comedies (Alex de la Iglesia, Santiago Segura), movies by female directors (Isabel Coixet, Paula Ortiz), and a variety of genres that compete with the ever-present dramas and popular comedies (Triana-Toribio *Spanish National* 144–45), to name just a few directors and trends. There are pragmatic reasons for upholding diversity, such as the proliferation of new sources of financial support since the beginning of the 1990s and the rise in co-productions with Latin America and Europe. There is also a political reason, as the policy of the conservative Partido Popular (PP) has been set firmly on the path of deregulation and commercial viability. The steady production of movies that represent the apocalypse in twenty-first-century Spain is a good example of the emphasis on diversity in this new context of film production.

Apocalyptic Hollywood movies number in the hundreds since the dawn of the Atomic Era. The popularity of the genre can be attributed, according to Gordon B. Arnold, to the fact that “Hollywood and the idea of the American Dream are deeply intertwined with each other” (vii). The notion that the United States is a good and just nation and its way of life will persist into the future has been repeated in countless American films. However, American cinema also possesses, as a flip side of this optimistic and even triumphal view, a darker undercurrent that fills this cherished American narrative with anxiety and dread. In apocalyptic movies, the military and economic might of the United States, along with its moral stature, could fall into ruin. As noted, the apocalypse can be considered one of the genres that best represents a self-construction of American identity. Post-apocalypse movies, such as the *Mad Max* franchise (George Miller 1979, 1981, 1985, 2015), *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), and *The Book of Eli* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2010), use frequent extreme long shots of vast and devastated landscapes to convey, through the representation of an open and desolated space, dismay at the extermination of the American Way of Life. The land, full of possibilities in westerns, becomes a



testimony of destruction and death. Apocalypse is often re-imagined as a traumatic zero-point. A propos of the zombie apocalypse, David Castillo and John Edgar Browning have claimed that “This zero point may be envisioned as an opportunity to rethink not just the individual but the collective as well, as the human survivors struggle to recreate a sense of community following the catastrophic collapse of all political and civic institutions” (4), which can be seen in movies such as *The War of the Worlds* (Steven Spielberg, 2005) and *2012* (Roland Emmerich, 2009). For their part, Spanish movies have to respond to a double challenge: a frightening hypothetical future, but also the real-life industrial subordination to Hollywood. The consequence is that, contrary to widely-held opinion, Spanish apocalypse movies are not just cheap imitations of Hollywood films. It is in the hybridity that results from the mixing of Hollywood and Spanish cinema conventions, that is, in the dialogue between the national and the global, that twenty-first-century Spanish Apocalypse cinema finds a creative potential that invites further study.

In Spanish films, landscape extreme long shots do not abound, to say the least. This is not surprising, as the *mise en scene* necessary to fill these shots is very costly. Making virtue of necessity, Spanish movies utilize disquieting interior settings to create a claustrophobic effect that helps convey the lack of hope for the human race. Thus, industry constrictions interestingly give rise to effective rhetorical tools. The sci-fi movie *La hora fría* (The Dark Hour, 2007), directed by Elio Quiroga, is a good example. The film follows a group of eight people, survivors of a cataclysmic war, who are living in a crumbling, unknown installation, in fear of becoming infected by the zombie-like Strangers and Invisibles. When food, medical supplies and ammunition begin to run out they must travel to a supply depot outside of their underground safe zone, but ill feelings escalate. The abundance of shots lacking depth of field reveals the degrading effect of adverse contexts, which is present in movies that revolve around the theme of confinement. Frank Darabont’s *The Mist* (2007) is paradigmatic of how these movies invite a reflection on the human condition. In *La hora fría*, when the group is forced to go outside, the Earth suddenly rises over the buildings: as the camera zooms out it is revealed that the complex is under a geodesic dome on the moon, while the Earth is clearly surrounded by debris, completely shattered to the core. The perspectival change—human life on Earth is not coming to an end but has already ended (see figure 1)—reminds us of Alejandro Amenábar’s *Los otros* (The Others, 2001), as the unexpected final twist of this gothic movie turns humans into ghosts and vice versa. Like *Los otros*, *La hora fría* points to the possibility of a different cinematic gaze that could be brought forth from different cultural traditions.

*Tres días* (Three Days, 2008), directed by Francisco Javier Gutiérrez, is

an excellent example of how Spanish cinema manipulates Hollywood's extreme long shots, in which people appear as small dots within a vast surrounding space, in order to create a destabilizing effect. The film tells the story of Ale, an aimless young handyman who will come to accept responsibility for the safety of his brother's children in the mist of the chaos generated by the United Nation's announcement that a meteor is about to impact the Earth with deadly force. The menacing appearance of a vengeful murderer blends the conventions of the apocalypse genre with those of both the serial killer thriller and the rural drama. The action takes place in Andalusia, portrayed as a barren landscape inhabited by characters with strong accents. Symptomatically, the killer's nickname, El Soro, is reminiscent of Vicente Ruiz Soro, a famous bullfighter known for his skill in *la suerte de banderillas*.<sup>8</sup> The humble *cortijo*, or farmhouse where the children live, and the deserted landscape of Seville imply that economic and moral scarcity go hand in hand, as is often the case in rural dramas. Genre hybridity justifies the lack of costly special effects or extreme long shots filmed with a wide-angle lens. The film is shot on location in order to capitalize on the expressive value of a land that is relentlessly burned by the summer heat. The image of the mown field full of nettles and the road that unites and at the same time separates the farm from the nearest town is subject to manipulation in composition, area of focus, camera angle, and frame. The commonly-used bird's eye view, or extreme overhead shot that looks straight down on the subject, has been replaced by an unobtrusive eye-level camera angle. The frame is no longer the border of the filmed image, but rather a spigot and a basin that respectively frame the road from above and below, creating a frame within a frame that produces feelings of claustrophobia and uneasiness (see figure 2). In other shots, the road is glimpsed through a myriad of every-day life objects, such as blinds, that emphasize the impossibility of escape. The result is a layering of meanings: the road brings nothing but death, the serial killer; the farmhouse's sordid interior settings are inhabited by death/social inequality/omens of the apocalypse; the impossibility of escaping the burning sun/poverty/the meteor, which is underlined by the high-key exteriors, determines the characters' actions. This skillful cinematography, added to a meticulously crafted *mise en scene*, creates unexpected, almost surreal effects that prove that terrifying apocalyptic cinema can follow different, unconventional paths. The result is, using the famous concept by Sigmund Freud, a feeling of the strangely familiar or uncanny.

Although Spanish movies do not focus on the effects of climate change, most likely because they can't afford the construction of large film models and other special effects, pandemics have been brought to the big screen several times. *28 semanas después*, *Infectados*, and *Los últimos días* entertain the idea of a deadly virus, while *REC* relies on a dormant parasite. In these movies,

nature becomes a powerful vengeful force that humans are unable to control. We could think of M. Night Shyamalan's *The Happening* (2008), a movie that personifies nature in such a way as to become the absolute protagonist of the story. In the American road movie *Infectados/Carriers* (2009), filmed by Catalan directors Álex and David Pastor —also known as *Los hermanos Pastor* (the Pastor Brothers)—, a viral pandemic has spread worldwide, killing almost the entire population. Fleeing to Turtle Beach, Florida, where they believe they can wait for the pandemic to die out, the movie tells the story of two brothers and their female friends, who have to strictly follow a set of rules that will prevent them from becoming infected. *Infectados* exemplifies how the pandemic has become a popular topic in Spanish apocalypse cinema. Beyond the universal fear that incurable diseases could be unleashed, I would like to suggest an interpretation that brings us to the national scenario again. In 2014, Spain became the focus of international media attention due to the 2013–2016 West Africa Ebola epidemic, which was the most widespread outbreak of the Ebola virus in history, causing major loss of life (the fatality rate reported at 70 percent) and socioeconomic disruption, mainly in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, and Senegal. Between August and November 2014, Spain repatriated three sick missionaries and a doctor. The nurse María Teresa Romero Santos became infected and was quarantined for weeks, as was her husband; their dog was put down. This contagion, the first in history outside Africa, created a media frenzy that reflects a fascination with death, a certain degree of surprise that Spain could become an agent of global history, and the shocking realization that we can indeed turn nature into our worst enemy. It could be said that, in retrospect, *28 semanas después*, *Infectados*, and *Los últimos días* foresee the importance that pandemics will acquire in the national scenario.

*Los últimos días* (The Last Days, 2013), by the Pastor Brothers, also reworks the topic of the pandemic with agoraphobic overtones. Following a cataclysmic event that trapped him and his fellow employees in their office building for months, computer engineer Marc reemerges to look for his girlfriend Julia. Flashbacks reveal that Marc faced possible termination and worked long hours of overtime, resisting Julia's desire to have children. Other flashbacks show people trapped in their buildings for months, including one in which a co-worker who had been covertly living in the office convulsed and died when evicted from the space. *Los últimos días* is a response to the economic crisis that originated in 2007 in the United States as a consequence of the subprime mortgages debacle and the real state failure. The crisis arrives in Spain in 2008 with devastating consequences: the foreign debt reaches 400 percent of the gross domestic product and unemployment hits 25 percent of the population. Other problems worsen the crisis, such as the corruption of the political elite (more than 42,000 million euros defrauded), the discrediting

of the monarchy and the Catholic Church, the separatist attempts of Cataluña, and the political polarization of the nation. The result is *el desapego*, or rejection of all things political, that permeates civil life today. *Los últimos días* focuses on the economic side of the crisis. The metaphor of agoraphobia as inability to leave the work place denounces the effects of abusive contracts, exploitative working conditions, and low wages on the generation of *mileuristas*.<sup>9</sup> Flashbacks are inserted frequently into the chronological order of events. As is well known, flashbacks transport the audience to an earlier time and are often used to prove or contradict something in the present. In the Pastor Brothers' movie, flashbacks move the protagonist to the realization that things could have been different, that the catastrophe could have been avoided: extreme capitalism can in fact be contradicted. Surrealist techniques are also employed in *Los últimos días*. The unexpected juxtapositions of the deer in the empty avenue and the bear in the middle of the church pay homage to Buñuel's *El ángel exterminador* but, most importantly, to Surrealism as a revolutionary movement: since it seems easier today to picture the end of humanity than a change in the current global economic structures, the proposal that there could be a different world economic order today is, without a doubt, revolutionary. The unending trip through the city sewers offers a vision of Barcelona that has nothing to do with the romanticized city portrayed by Woody Allen in *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* (*Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, 2008). It is important to notice the centrality of the city in apocalyptic cinema: uncanny, dysfunctional, unmanageable, hostile. In fact, these movies would welcome a textual analysis as case examples of Henri Lefebvre's idea that the entrenched concept of space as receptacle has to yield to a new notion where different views, categories, and dimensions coexist. In *Los últimos días*, Marc's journey takes him to Barcelona's Olympic City, emblem of the international success of the Olympic Games of 1992, which sharply contrasts with the city of the sewer system. The Adamic ending of the movie shows how millenarianism is deeply ingrained in contemporary portrayals of the end of the world scenarios: "There is also a nostalgia for a long lost time in the past when humanity was closer to God or nature (the so-called Golden Age)" (Aveni 56). The last sequence, in which urban structures are covered by wild vegetation, Marc and Julia are dressed as cavemen, and their now teenage son is walking in the streets with other youth towards the reconstruction of civilization, may be seen as evidence of the current impossibility to realistically conceive of a post-capitalist world order (see figure 3).

*Los días no vividos* (*Unlived Days*, 2012), by A. Cortés Cavanillas, combines drama and romance in an attempt to answer the question: if the world were to end tomorrow, what would you do? The movie tells the story of a group of friends who decide to spend together the little time they have left

following the announcement that the Earth will be destroyed by a meteorite in 24 hours. The group includes two best friends, a father, a pregnant friend, a drug dealer, and an unknown woman who happens to be a prostitute. The movie explores the characters' emotional reactions through myriad personal exchanges: fear, desperation, acceptance, love, sexual desire, friendship, cooperation, loyalty, empathy, gratitude, generosity, etc. In Hollywood movies like *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009), personal relationships reproduce Thomas Hobbes' famous sentence *homo homini lupus*, or total degradation of the human condition. Focusing on how friendship and love make final hours more bearable, *Los días no vividos* proposes a more positive view of human nature, aided by a representation of an urban space where serenity overcomes panic: streets and plazas are empty not because everybody is fleeing in desperation but because neighbors are enjoying the comfort of their loved ones. While Cortés Cabanilla's film depicts group solidarity through a plurality of equally important characters, Hollywood movies such as Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009), or Ruben Fleisher's *Zombieland* (2009), tend to follow a protagonist/hero that endures all obstacles. These movies' reliance on moral discourse (the hero's correct ethical choices) perpetuates the classical narrative, which includes linear temporality, a coherent story, and clearly motivated actions. The consequence is that many Hollywood apocalypse movies depend on a modern notion of the subject that, although successful at the box office, can be easily deconstructed. In other instances, the protagonists are three or four people who will be able to survive thanks to their moral superiority, as in Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (2016). This convention, which is also present in Spanish movies such as *Infectados*, is challenged by *Los días no vividos*: affect displaces the moral norm. At the same time, Spanish movies deploy a moral ambiguity that is not so common in Hollywood cinema. *28 semanas después/28 Weeks Later* (2007), structured as a sequel to the critically and commercially successful 2002 film *28 Days Later*, by Danny Boyle, is a good example. *La hora fría*, *Tres días*, and *Los últimos días* could be mentioned here too. Although *28 Weeks Later* is a British movie, I include it here because it has been co-written and directed by Juan Carlos Fresnadillo, who was born in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. The plot depicts the efforts of NATO military forces to salvage a safe zone in London following the events in *28 Days Later*, the consequence of two young siblings breaking protocol to find their infected mother, and the resulting reintroduction of the highly contagious Rage Virus to the safe zone. The series of morally controversial acts that fill the story (husband abandons wife to the zombies, policeman and doctor break work protocols, sister does not recognize that her brother got infected) suggests a moral ambiguity that effectively invites

reflection on contemporary constructions of subjectivity.

*REC 4: Apocalipsis* (*REC 4: Apocalypse*, 2014) is the final installment of the *REC* horror series *REC* (2007), *REC 2* (2009), and *REC 3: Génesis* (*REC 3: Genesis*, 2012). Written and directed by Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza, the *REC* series has been filmed as found footage, a subgenre in which all or a substantial part of the story is presented as if it were discovered film or video recordings; the events on screen are typically seen through the camera of one or more of the characters involved, often accompanied by their real-time voice off commentary, and shaky camera work, and naturalistic acting are routinely employed. The first installment, *REC*, received numerous awards and recognitions in Spain, Europe, and the United States, and the whole series has found significant international success at the box office. On February 2008, at the Glasgow Film Festival, the co-directors explained: “Our main reference was TV; was not other films, or a tradition of previous features. I think the main influence for us was TV. What we wanted was to build a classic horror story, but, ahh, telling it in the way of a TV show.” Although the four movies tell the story of a large parasite that infects humans, I will limit my analysis to *REC 4: Apocalipsis*. In this film, young television reporter Ángela Vidal awakes inside an oil tanker miles off shore and finds that she is locked in her cabin in quarantine. She will be joined by other survivors as she attempts to leave the ship where a doctor is trying to isolate the source of the outbreak of the strange contagion that turns humans into ghouls. The figure of the imperiled reporter, key to the series, and the abundance of cameras, screens, and compulsory recordings denounce the obsessive non-critical consumption of technological media images in our current world. In *REC 4*, the ship functions as a panopticon, as a group of cameras records passengers and crew uninterruptedly. The movie, consequently, critically exposes our insatiable voyeuristic desire for media images, inviting us to share “the conviction that *media literacy* is of the most importance today, as our lives are increasingly framed by all manner of screens and indeed ruled by optical codes generated and refined by these screens” (Castillo and Browning 2). At the same time, and contradictorily, the movie perpetuates this consumption drive by turning spectators into violence-devouring viewers. This makes *REC 4*, together with the rest of the franchise, a pertinent symptom of the internal contradictions of our present time. Interestingly, *REC 4* connects with American present-day in important ways: the obsession with scandalous media news has been key to Donald Trump’s rise to the U.S. presidency, as demonstrated by the astronomical benefits obtained by CNN and FOX news during the campaign period. By resorting to found footage, *REC 4* warns that reality can be supplanted by monstrous post-truth, media-based constructions. The success of the first *REC* installment in the American film market shows that Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza have been able to find a formula that puts the Spanish and American



contexts in dialogue, appealing to both audiences alike.<sup>10</sup> Wrapping up the three previous movies, the ending of *REC 4* impels Ángela to destroy cameras and, as a result, her own recorded image, so cherished before. The oil tanker sinks, and Ángela and her not-so-good looking and nerdy admirer (the good guy) survive, but all those who were in the ship inevitably die (see figure 4). Media image obsession can thus lead to death.

## Conclusion

It is commonly held that popular genres are to be taken seriously only insofar as they imitate the familiar Hollywood look, while lack of competitive funding inevitably leads to poor quality products, particularly for those genres that rely heavily on special effects. These basic assumptions need to be revisited in light of the increasing production of films from different genres, including apocalypse movies, especially in the last decade. Over the years, the Spanish film industry has produced a variety of apocalyptic movies that range from Francoist propaganda, to the imitation and parody of Hollywood films, to a utilization of end-of-the-world fantasies as tools for critical discourse. The most interesting films are those that spring from a dialogue between the national and the global, which, blending Hollywood and Spanish cinema conventions, create new representations of the end of time. Like Hollywood, Spanish apocalyptic cinema uses fiction in order to urge us to reflect on pressing sociopolitical anxieties. The political value of the genre is, however, difficult to determine. The word ‘apocalypse’ comes from the Greek *apokalypsis*, and it means *uncovering*. Following this etymology, the apocalypse can be read as a symptom of the evils of the neoliberal world order: apocalyptic cultural artifacts denounce existing inequalities that may lead to catastrophic results; and, in fact, “apocalyptic literature has often been used to incite fear and promote hatred of the establishment” (Aveni 54). On the other hand, it can also be argued that these films reinforce the social order insofar as fear is followed by a sense of relief because *we are not there yet*.

The fear of losing the American Way of Life that Hollywood cinema routinely projects over spectacular apocalyptic landscapes does not find a parallel expression in Spanish cinema. However, Spanish cinema greatly stresses the anxiety suffered by an individual who is suffocated by an oppressive sociopolitical system where traditional forms of life have yielded to a world threatened by the contemporary ills of globalization, pandemics, extreme capitalism, and natural disasters. A close look at these Spanish films reveals that lack of substantive funding together with artistic creativity has resulted in discursive effects that accentuate the uncanny and the claustrophobic. The fact

that this outcome may be unintentional on the part of the filmmaker does not make it less effective. While Hollywood emphasizes the spectacularity of vast desolated lands, Spanish cinema recreates the psychological effects of such devastation for the people; while Hollywood references the nation, Spanish cinema refers to the individual. The consequence is that Spanish apocalyptic cinema can be utilized as a very effective tool for understanding the deep uneasiness resulting from our rapid-fire, interconnected, global world; and, also, for the uncovering of the conventional nature of representation, as the comparative analysis with Hollywood shows. Moreover, it can be instrumental for the questioning of our historical time, as the apocalypse is a dramatic social and political disjuncture in which extreme events reshape the relations of the individual to history. In his study of the connections between the apocalypse and Modernity, and apropos the George Bush administration's decision to pursue a basically unilateral and fundamentally militaristic strategy, John R. Hall comes to a realization that has become even more relevant today: "The challenge of the Empire of Modernity thus is whether it is possible to contain the apocalyptic, or to eliminate the conditions that spawn it in the first place" (222). The history of Spanish cinema offers examples of movies that brilliantly convey the anxiety of a confined subject who knows that *we may already be there*, including *El ángel exterminador* (1962) by Luis Buñuel, *La cabina* (1972) by Antonio Mercero, and, recently, *El bar* (2017) by Álex de la Iglesia, among others. The economic crisis of the last few years has exacerbated this malaise, producing interesting, and even excellent movies such as *Tres días* and *28 Weeks Later*, which invite close examination under this light.



Figure 1. In *La hora fría* the perspectival change points to the possibility of a different cinematic gaze.



Figure 2. In *Tres días* the frame within the frame produces feelings of claustrophobia.



Figure 3. In *Los últimos días* Marc and Julia, dressed as cavemen, represent the impossibility to realistically conceive of a post-capitalist world order.



Figure 4. In *REC 4* the final scene shows how media image obsession can lead to death.

## Notes

1. “. . . mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted out factories scattered like *tombstones* across the landscape of our nation; an education system flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and *the crime and the gangs and the drugs* that have *stolen* too many lives and *robbed* our country of so much unrealized potential. This American *carnage* stops right here and stops right now” (emphasis added).
2. On March 6th 2017, the Asociación de la Prensa de Madrid (Madrid Press Association) denounced Podemos of harassing journalists who write about the party in negative terms. The newspaper El País covered the story.
3. Some of these movies are *El refugio del miedo* by José Ulloa, *La casa* by Angelino Fons, *Último deseo* by León Klimovsky, *Memoria* by Francisco Macián, and *Perdidos en el tiempo* by Joaquín Gómez Sáinz.
4. Regarded as the most significant Spanish silent film director, Segundo de Chomón was a pioneering film director, cinematographer, and screenwriter. He produced many short films in France and has been compared to Georges Méliés due to his frequent camera tricks and optical illusions.
5. All translations are mine.
6. NODO is the colloquial name for *Noticiarios y Documentales* (News and Documentaries), a state-controlled series of cinema newsreels produced in Spain from 1943 to 1981. They contained a good deal of propaganda and servile reporting in favor of the Franco regime.
7. *Esperpento* refers to a literary style in Spanish literature that uses distorted descriptions of reality in order to criticize society. It was first established by author Ramón María del Valle-Inclán.
8. *Suerte de banderillas*: the second stage of a bullfight, in which the *banderillas* are stuck into the bull’s back.
9. Colloquial word that refers to young workers who earn less than \$1,000 per month.
10. On July 2016, the review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes* reports a 90 percent approval rating for *REC. Bloody Disgusting* awarded the film four-and-a-half stars out of five, and later ranked the film eleventh in their list of the ‘Top 20 Horror Films of the Decade.’ In the early 2010s, *Time Out* conducted a poll with several authors, directors, actors and critics who have worked within the horror genre to vote for their top horror films, *Rec* placed at number 54 on their top 100 list.

## Works Cited

- 28 Days Later*. Dir. Danny Boyle. 2002. Film.  
*28 Weeks Later/28 semanas después*. Dir. Juan Carlos Fresnadillo. 2007. Film.

1984. Dir. Michael Radford. 1984. Film.
2012. Dir. Roland Emmerich. 2009. Film.
- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: BFI Publishing, 1999.
- Amanece que no es poco*. Dir. José Luis Cuerda. 1989. Film.
- Arnold, Gordon B. *Projecting the End of the American Dream: Hollywood's Visions of U.S. Decline*. Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2013.
- Así en el cielo como en la tierra*. Dir. José Luis Cuerda. 1995. Film.
- Aveni, Anthony. *Apocalyptic Anxiety: Religion, Science, and America's Obsession with the End of the World*. Boulder: Colorado University Press, 2016.
- Blasco Ibáñez, Vicente. *Los cuatro jinetes del apocalipsis*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 2005.
- Calderón de la Barca, Pedro. *El gran teatro del mundo*. Penguin Clásico, 2015.
- Carriers/Infectados*. Dirs. Álex and David Pastor. 2009. Film.
- Castillo, David, and John Edgar Browning. "Introduction: Our Zombies, Our Remnants." *Zombie Talk: Culture, History, Politics*. David Castillo, David Schmid, David A. Reilly, and John Edgar Browning. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016. 2–8.
- Children of Men*. Dir. Alfonso Cuarón. 2008. Film.
- El ángel exterminador*. Dir. Luis Buñuel. 1962. Film.
- El bar*. Dir. Álex de la Iglesia. 2017. Film.
- El día de la bestia*. Dir. Álex de la Iglesia. 1995. Film.
- El orfanato*. Dir. J. A. Bayona. 2007. Film.
- El refugio del miedo*. Dir. José Ulloa. 1974. Film.
- Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. Dir. Vincente Minnelli. 1962. Film.
- Hall, John R. *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009.
- Independence Day*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. 2016. Film.
- "Interview with REC co-directors." Glasgow Film Festival (April 8, 2008).
- La cabina*. Dir. Antonio Mercero. 1972. Film.
- La casa*. Dir. Angelino Fons. 1976. Film.
- La hora fría*. Dir. Elio Quiroga. 2007. Film.
- La hora incógnita*. Dir. Mariano Ozores. 1963. Film.
- Los días no vividos*. Dir. A. Cortés Cabanillas. 2012. Film.
- Los otros*. Dir. Alejandro Amenábar. 2001. Film.
- Los últimos días*. Dirs. Álex and David Pastor. 2013. Film.
- Lucena Cayena, Núria ed. *El cine español: Historia. Actores y directores. Géneros. Principales películas*. Barcelona: Larousse, 2002.
- Mad Max*. Dir. George Miller. 1979, 1981, 1985, 2015. Film.
- Memoria*. Dir. Francisco Macián. 1978. Film.
- No profanar el sueño de los muertos*. Dir. Jorge Grau. 1974. Film.
- Perdidos en el tiempo*. Dir. Joaquín Gómez Sáinz. 1983. Film.
- Pérez Rubio, Pablo and Javier Hernández Ruiz. *Escritos sobre cine español: Tradición y géneros populares*. Zaragoza: Excma. Diputación de Zaragoza, 2011.
- ¿Quién puede matar a un niño?* Dir. Narciso Ibáñez Serrador. 1976. Film.

- REC 4*. Dir. Jaume Balagueró and Paco Plaza. 2014. Film.
- Rehill, Annie. *The Apocalypse is Everywhere: A Popular History of America's Favorite Nightmare*. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2010.
- Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*. Dir. Lorene Scafaria. 2012.
- Sikov, Ed. *Film Studies. An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.
- The Book of Eli*. Dir. Albert and Allen Hughes. 2010. Film.
- The Cabin in the Woods*. Dir. Drew Goddard. 2012. Film.
- The Day after Tomorrow*. Dir. Roland Emmerich. 2004. Film.
- The Happening*. Dir. Night Shyamalan. 2008. Film.
- The Mist*. Dir. Frank Darabont. 2007. Film.
- The Road*. Dir. John Hillcoat. 2009. Film.
- The War of the Worlds*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. 2005. Film.
- This is The End*. Dir. Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg. 2013. Film.
- Time of the Wolf*. Dir. Michael Haneke. 2004. Film.
- Total*. Dir. José Luis Cuerda. 1983. Film.
- Tres días*. Dir. Francisco Javier Gutiérrez. 2008. Film.
- Triana-Toribio, Nùria. *Spanish National Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Último deseo*. Dir. León Klimovsky. 1976. Film.
- Vicky Cristina Barcelona*. Dir. Woody Allen. 2008. Film.
- Zombieland*. Dir. Ruben Fleisher. 2009. Film.

---

Moreno-Nuño, Carmen. "When One Apocalypse is Not Enough: Representations of the End Times in Spanish Cinema (1962–2017)." *Writing in the End Times: Apocalyptic Imagination in the Hispanic World*. Ed. David Castillo and Brad Nelson. *Hispanic Issues On Line* 23 (2019): 206–225.

---