

"What you see is happening right now."

THERMAGEDDON AND A SEARCH FOR TOMORROW

BY BLAIR MILLER

"The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist."
—Roger "Verbal" Kint, *The Usual Suspects*

The question hangs over anyone concerned with the broad malaise of contemporary society: How does one fight back against an entity able to turn revolution on its head? Resistance is not futile, but it must be complex and overly conscientious. Care must be taken with regards to the ways that those shaping public discourse and popular culture co-opt said resistance and sap away its meaning. In

the case of full-blown hegemony the power structure even uses the tomes of resistance for its own benefit. Failure to heed the hegemonic forces that succeed in shaping our everyday lives can result in acts of revolt that not only fall upon deaf ears but also get transmogrified into something that in the end further serves the goals of those in power, blinding others to their very existence.

Conceived and championed by deeply integrated members of the rich ruling class, Hollywood blockbuster films often serve as case studies for hegemony. Virtually any dissident issue these films

purport to address is turned against itself to the extent that said issue is softened and made meaningless for the viewer. Viewers leave feeling as though the issue at hand is not of great consequence, reminding us of the Devil's greatest trick. This phenomenon is *itself* of high importance. More than perhaps any other popular culture artefacts, films – especially the blockbusters, and the socialites who spawn them – stand as either highly sanguine or deeply lobotomizing, depending on the film. Within Hollywood the latter wins out ever increasingly. As privileged members of such an auspicious group, the task ahead of filmmakers like Roland Emmerich, the director of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) is to maintain a pathological machine designed to articulate and uphold social conventions, in no small part by debasing, trivializing, depoliticizing or exaggerating potentially subversive subject matter. The films which arise from this process do so under the guise of what is all too sheepishly called art (with all its assertive and perhaps anaesthetizing



characteristics), further complicating the relationship between blockbuster films and the elite class which they help to keep safely rich, and richly safe.

The Day After Tomorrow stands as an exemplar of the Hollywood blockbuster's hegemonic force. Emmerich's film shows that the breadth of Hollywood hegemony includes the fight against global warming. The film examines several groups of Americans (and one trio of Irishmen) as the world is ambushed by the environmental outcome of global warming – an outcome which any self-respecting and conscientious climatologist fears is looming on our proverbial horizon. The global crisis takes place at a fantastically accelerated rate during the film, surely killing millions of inhabitants of the Northern Hemisphere as tidal waves, floods, multiple tornados, killer hail and other calamitous climate incidents leave the survivors struggling against the impending lethally cold weather that sweeps in. The overarching storm is the event that ushers in a new Ice Age. Though the events that shape thermageddon – a term coined by

environmental activist and inaugural chairman of Greenpeace Robert Hunter which indicates both the role of global warming within current environmental trends and the impending severity of it should humanity do nothing to lessen our role in it – happen within a time span of several days in Fox studios' blockbuster, the science behind *how* it comes about does, for the better part, adhere to prevailing scientific theories about potential global warming effects.¹ As an isolated narrative, *The Day After Tomorrow* comes off as emotional, traumatic, and even thought-provoking about the severity of global-warming. Watching the film, however, is another story. Though the film concerns an impending crisis for Americans and (as an afterthought) the world which begs thought, discussion and action, it is all too easy to forget – especially while viewing it – that *The Day After Tomorrow* is a film about global warming. It adheres to several maxims – speed, a formulaic narrative, and an overemphasis upon personal perspectives – which are

symptomatic of a film that uses the very seriousness of a subversive issue to hold said issue at arm's length. In other words, *The Day After Tomorrow* actually makes it *more* difficult for the viewer to access possible thermageddon on a meaningful level.

In Hunter's book, *2030 – Confronting Thermageddon In Our Lifetime*, 2030 signifies the year in which Hunter and countless respected scientists believe that the climate change induced by global warming will reach a threshold whereby the impacts will be irreversible. Even more frightening than such a close date (can any realistic and informed individual *truly* see the leaders of capitalism reversing their ways within the next two decades?) are the points in 2030 at which Hunter points out that all the scientific projections around this date are supported by projection models and contingencies that fail to include certain atmospheric variables which may speed up the process within the coming years. With *The Day After Tomorrow*, Emmerich accelerates this climate process even



further, unavoidably bringing the narrative along with it. Any sequence that is not a hyperbolic effects and action scene never lasts longer than three minutes; the film sequences themselves rush by as though swept up in its own storm. The characters in turn end up being shallow and distant, the editing is frenetic, and the matter of a narrative of impending climate change exists as afterthought.

Emmerich takes an issue of huge importance that warrants substantial discourse and submerges it under the rushing tide of *The Day After Tomorrow*, blurring the concern and making it difficult to ponder. In a meeting with the President of the United States during which climatologist Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) solemnly declares that the people left in the northern states are trapped ("it's too late for them. If they go outside, the storm will kill them. At this point, their best chance is to stay inside, try and ride it out . . . pray."), the film waits all of two seconds before rushing off to a sequence after the meeting in which Jack is rushing down a hallway on his way to make preparations for a quickly-planned three-man excursion through the storm and towards Manhattan to try and save his trapped son, Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal). The viewer is now focused upon how much time Sam has left, while the massive loss of lives due to multiple and widespread climate disasters in the film should serve as a point of contemplation for viewers about what may happen to our planet if we fail to revolutionize our lifestyles. During Jack's risky trip, his lifelong colleague Frank Harris (Jay O. Sanders) dies by falling through the glass ceiling of a shopping mall buried in the snow over which he, Jack and Adam (Dash Mihok) unknowingly traverse. Hanging by a rope connected to his two coworkers, Frank cuts himself free in order to prevent the whole trio from falling through the ceiling. Frank's death is not shown onscreen. He merely severs the rope, and the film immediately cuts to Jack's bewildered face as he watches his old friend fall to his death. This prevents the viewer from having any sutured experience with the death, a distancing move strengthened by the following sequence when Adam and Jack are in their tent later that night. Adam pours out some cups for the two to drink out of and three cups fall into view. After a pause,

Adam grimly puts one cup back in his backpack. It should be a touching scene, but like Jack's comment to the president, there is but seconds of contemplation allowed the viewer before the film cuts to another location and other characters. The frustrating thing about *The Day After Tomorrow* and so many other blockbuster films is that while characters abound throughout the film, almost every one developed beyond the status of a mere dialogue extra, the majority of them are either killed off or left behind in the tidal wave that is generic narrative, reducing the film to a sort of melodramatic diarrhoea – a pell-mell mess of characters, events and sequences that begin to illicit emotion, and then are quickly swept away in order to make room for the next mess.

Frank could have survived and the following narrative would have been unaffected. There is no action following Frank's death that makes his death worthwhile, such as a depletion of supplies for the rescuers. Why, then, did Frank die? The sacrifice of a secondary character in order to further the life of the protagonist is a common narrative device in Hollywood blockbusters. This is but one of the drab, formulaic aspects of the narrative of *The Day After Tomorrow*. Jack, of course, is a harsh, speak-his-mind expert who is so obsessed with his job that his relationship with his son has deteriorated. Sam is trapped in Manhattan because he joined a school club in order to get closer to a girl, Laura (Emmy Rossum) he has fallen for – as pointed out by his black sidekick, Brian (Arjay Smith). Until the crisis forces them closer, Laura has no idea how Sam feels and once the two finally share their feelings Laura becomes critically ill. *The Day after Tomorrow* is a film characterized by characterization and by framing the issue of global warming within such a typical and formula-laden narrative, any informative message is rendered meaningless.

Nevertheless, it is the role of several characters within the film – archetypes though they may be – that form the weak cohesion it needs to survive as a narrative. There are two points at which *The Day After Tomorrow* threatens to ponder pressing questions about humanity and its role in the degradation of the environment. How the film ends up trivializing the issue by offering highly per-

sonal and dramatic answers gives an indication of the problematic of personalizing global concerns with melodrama. In a private moment, Laura – an academic overachiever – confesses having huge difficulty adjusting to the consequences of global warming and the fact that all of her aspirations now amount to "preparation for a future that no longer exists." Laura tells Sam that he was right to make light of her intense approach to academics contests, because, now, "It's all for nothing." Instead of being a voice for the film which would address the hard questions about global warming and its undeniable significance upon our present-day lives, Sam responds by saying that his making fun of Laura was only to hide the truth – that he joined her in academic contests only to try and get closer to her. Upon hearing this, Laura leans forward and kisses Sam – with a burning fireplace in the background for effect. The only comfort *The Day After Tomorrow* can offer in response is more melodrama. Later on, as the last stages of the era-changing storm are playing out Adam asks Jack – the scientific voice within the film – what he thinks will become of civilization after this climate shift is over. Jack responds, "Mankind survived the last Ice Age. We're certainly capable of surviving this one. It all depends on whether or not we're able to learn from our mistakes. I sure as hell'd like a chance to learn from mine." Jack then indicates that he was referring to his deteriorated relationship with Sam. Again, *The Day After Tomorrow* breaches a potentially contemplative moment only to cover it over with more melodrama – in this case, the nostalgic power of the nuclear family.

Both such dialogue responses amount to a skirting of the issue. The film has taken pressing thoughts and replaced them with the distraction of an appeal to people's personal lives in a way that uses concerns about global warming against itself. Personal lives are always intertwined with public consequences and as such we should be more aware of our collective lifestyles and what they are doing to the planet. However, *The Day After Tomorrow* mitigates the consequential aspects with personal melodramas, obscuring the matter at hand by examining it solely through the personal. This sort of move calls to mind films like *The Matrix* trilogy, where scores upon scores

of anonymous – and often unseen – people are killed in what should be catastrophes, yet these deep tragedies are mere background noise for the personal drama that serves as the film's melodramatic narrative. This is a dangerous game that blockbusters play given that the significance of personal actions upon greater society is already manipulated and obfuscated for the public through other forms of mainstream media. The intensely personal issue of the safety of the traditional family and all of life's characters that help to threaten-cum-protect it like rhythms of consonance and dissonance in music are more palatable than environmental disaster, and they thusly win out over consideration for the future of our planet. The gravitas of drastic climate changes stemming from global warming intertwines cleanly and deeply with maxims that form key parts of the blockbuster formula, showing the sick serendipity that power enjoys through hegemony. Removing deep importance from a social issue by *transferring* this importance onto personal melodrama is an addiction of everyday life justified by the blockbuster film.

As its own end result of personalizing and dramatizing the public, *The Day After Tomorrow* creates a reckless sense of typical triumph at the end of the film. This is because most of the principal characters survive the initial storm. At one point, a survivor in the library, Bob (Kenneth Moskow), clings to a book he claims as the original Gutenberg bible and mentions that it "represents the dawn of the age of reason" and that "if western civilization is finished, I'm going to save at least one little piece of it." But the message of the film is that western civilization *does* survive.ⁱⁱ While viewers watch Laura cuddle up with Sam in a helicopter as he looks lovingly at his rescuer, Jack, they are reassured of both the reuniting of the nuclear family and the likely perpetuation of it. During the final sequence of the film other groups of survivors are visible on Manhattan rooftops, as – on a personal and melodramatic level – triumph dominates the sequence. Now, why is it, again, that the world is covered in snow?

"This can't be real"

—Gil Scott-Heron, *Did You Hear What They Said?*

This chorus evokes a dissociative appeal to surrealism in the face of overwhelming human consequences. The same desperate remark could be used in reference to humankind's current 'watershed generation,' mostly unwitting members within the contemporary era who are *undeniably* able to make important choices concerning the future of the global environment as global warming and the human component helping to propel it force upon us terrifyingly difficult decisions. The title of this essay is a line uttered by a news anchor during *The Day After Tomorrow* as she reports one of the multiple weather disasters that kills thousands. Indeed, global warming is happening before our very eyes. While the same mainstream media that holds evidence of global warming at arm's length also prints *Newsweek* cover articles about the 'Greening of America' in celebration of the supposed heightened awareness Americans have towards environmental matters, their inconsistent scepticism betrays a shrewd denial of the issue at hand. As such, carbon emissions continue to rise around the world and we grow ever closer to the deadly turning point Robert Hunter and his brethren are trying to warn the world about. In other words, *it is real, and it is happening. Right now.*

This was not, by any means, a democratic choice; our current stranglehold over the environment is the bi-product of an unaware and uneducated public and highly private, narrow-minded decisions continually made by members of a deeply exclusive and self-perpetuating fraternity within the global upper class. Entangled within this close-knit, yet amorphous enclave is the Hollywood film industry, with what has come to be known as the blockbuster film strengthening the core of the relationship between film and propaganda for big business. As long as this remains the case, blockbuster films about subversive standpoints will only be permitted to use that revolutionary energy to further capitalist causes. After all, as Hunter puts it when trying to explain why Newfoundland fishermen knowingly fished whole species to the brink of extinction, there are mortgages to be paid. The mortgages in Hollywood are large indeed.

Despite the hegemony of the system that the film exemplifies, the namesake of *The Day After Tomorrow* is still up for

grabs. Underneath all of the despondent cynicism and fearful re-iterations on either side of the matter, the arguments in and around global warming may still be open-ended. One of the initial tasks for the average filmgoing audience is to at least see through the propaganda of Hollywood and still consider it an issue at all. To coin Scott-Heron's most famous song, if we do not try and seep through Hollywood hegemony – and hegemony everywhere – the revolution *will* be televised, and like the emphasis on personal melodrama in *The Day After Tomorrow*, all we will care about is if "Dick got down with Jane on *Search for Tomorrow*." Scott-Heron again puts it well in "A Sign of the Ages":

**It's a sign of the ages,
Markings on my mind
Man at the crossroads,
At odds with an angry sky.
There can be no salvation,
There can be no rest.
Until all old customs
Are put to the test.**

Those we carelessly trust police a network of social systems that takes attempts for change and uses them for its own benefit. This state of affairs is not a call to succumb; it is a reason to redouble efforts, to put things to the test, and viewing popular films with an ever-critical eye is no exception.

Blair Miller is a graduate of the MA program in Film at York University and lives in Toronto.

NOTES

1. In 1996, even one of the top officers of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration was quoted in newspapers, saying "For the first time, I feel confident in saying there's a human component," to current warming trends. Robert Hunter, *2030 – Confronting Thermageddon In Our Lifetime* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2000), 54. For anyone even remotely aware of our use of carbon-based fuels and how they relate to global warming, the human element is obvious, and shall be assumed in this paper. Others who wish to deny our obvious – and scientifically supported! – role in the current environmental demise on Earth do so not only at their own peril, but at the peril of all.
2. American survivors are now an enormous mass of refugees displaced to Mexico, a possibility only made real by the forgiving of all third-world debt by the U.S. Once again, this represents a sound opportunity to address complex global issues both in and around global warming and global capitalism, but the film treats it as a mere afterthought.