In the fall of 2014, I executed a performance project called Pre Apocalypse Counseling. These were one-on-one 50-minute sessions examining participants’ relationship to the probable or improbable apocalypse. Sessions took place in my car and consisted of conversations, visualizations, and skill building. There were audio components, simulations and an apocalyptic Rorschach test. While these sessions had a planned and ‘scripted’ agenda, there was a lot of space for tangents, musing and I often made critical choices to skip or add things depending on the participant. The consistent first question in every session was “What is your first memory of the apocalypse?” This inherently is a question of perception. There are very few people on this planet who have actually experienced an event, first hand, that could be classified as apocalyptic. I expected many participants to point out this discrepancy, but was taken aback by the quickness with which people responded, retelling the plotline of the first apocalyptic film they ever saw. Seventeen of the twenty-one participants answered with cinematic portrayals of the “the end of the world” being their first encounter with apocalypse and even further, that these encounters were impacting and meaningful. After identifying the first memory of the participant, we spoke about the plausibility of experiencing this event outside of the movies. Another touchstone question of this work is “Do you think you could/would survive this apocalyptic event?” A resounding “YES” was the common answer. After almost three years of researching and studying the many notions of the
apocalypse (interviewing and photographing preppers and survivalists, testing and cultivating my own survival skills, watching apocalyptic films, listening to apocalyptic songs, reading apocalyptic books, and having extensive conversations with as many people as possible), my stance was clear... I could not survive an apocalyptic event of any kind, nor would I want to. Each person came to these sessions with their own life stories, their own way of seeing the world, but somehow everyone’s first and often, most impactful apocalyptic memory was cinematic and almost all of those people believed with conviction that they would survive an apocalyptic event. In addition, the idea of experiencing catastrophe ignited excitement and anticipation in 90 % of participants. Using this research as a jumping off point, I will examine apocalyptic cinema as a site that conjures both denial of and desire for apocalyptic events.

The first apocalyptic film was made in 1933 and they have been commonly produced since then. Narratives of humanity’s demise are nothing new. What has changed is what these repetitive retellings mean for the psyche’s of viewers who have been inundated with this imagery for the greater part, if not all, of their lives. The genre has gone through different transformations, with varying themes at the forefront. For the purposes of this paper I looked into a period of time in history where the apocalypse played a big role inside and outside of the cinematic framework.

The 1990’s was a particularly potent time for apocalyptic cinema. As the turn of the century approached, the cold war ended, and a heightened and urgent awareness of global warming emerged. At once, the subject of our apocalyptic fears shifted from opposing forces to our own forces. Each and every one of us
became implicated in the anticipated extinction of the human race. The many apocalyptic films of this time have been labeled as “millennial movies”, which take advantage of the global fear of the end of days – specifically Y2K, Rapture, global warming, and the Mayan calendar prediction. In 1998, twenty-one disaster films were released. Two of the most notable were Deep Impact and Armageddon. These two films carried very similar plot lines of an asteroid headed towards earth. In both, the world is saved, but not before it is hit with smaller meteorites that cause notable amounts of damage. This repetition of story line and their huge success as blockbuster hits strongly indicates how our desire for catastrophe is functioning within cinema at this time.

Stephen Keane writes in his book, Disaster movies: the Cinema of Catastrophe, “certainly disaster movies can be said to have tapped into, and further energized, the ‘pop millenarianism’ of the time,” he goes on to say that these films “effectively worked in turning anxiety into interest.” (Keane, ch.3) I would push this further and argue that this cultivated interest in watching our own near destruction has created both a denial of and desire for the actual apocalyptic experience. We desire it, but only when the cinematic representations assure and support that this could never actually happen. I have been looking at three major elements within the genre to back up this argument: the repeated use of character tropes, catastrophe genre narrative structure, and the technical apparatuses of film that confuse our relationship to time.

Apocalyptic cinema often presents us with two main character tropes: the one who survives and the one who surrenders. More specifically, the character who survives great peril and catastrophe, despite facing any number of certain
death scenarios, and the one who chooses to die, always staged as a martyr, sacrificing his or her own life for another's chance at survival. In the case of Armageddon, Bruce Willis volunteers to die, effectively saving not only Ben Affleck's life, but also saving the world. This cinematic trope is known as “Honor Before Reason” and is found in cinema of all genres. When done well the decency and sacrifice in the character’s actions not only pull on the idealist heartstrings of the viewers, but also inspire a desire to be just as pure and honorable. The big disconnect here is that most humans will never get the real opportunity to exercise such honor. This honor can only be duplicated within disaster. We see this same trope used in Deep Impact. Jenny Lerner (played by Tea Leoni), a journalist who knew about the asteroid before it became public knowledge is easy to identify with and is clearly embedded within a victim role. She is plagued with insensitive and selfish parents, who have obviously never provided for her emotional needs. She is disempowered at work and is single. She gives up her spot in the underground government shelter so that her colleague can survive with her small child. This selfless act is framed as empowering, as an opportunity to take control in a moment of complete chaos – she will make her life mean something! Again, this narrative initiates desire within the viewer to be empowered by the selfless act.

While the survivor, on the other hand, does not get the same honor, he does get everything else: he gets to live, he gets the girl, he gets the world, and he gets the understanding of what all of that REALLY means. Ben Affleck in Armageddon and Elijah Wood in Deep Impact, both survive their harrowing journeys, to the edge of destruction and back, to live out their days with a new
lease on life and a new bride on their arm. Again, there is a sense that this divine appreciation for life and all the good it has to offer can only be achieved through experiencing near global destruction. Both of these tropes that the viewer identifies with, often at the same time, are saturated with promises of the ultimate human experience, and they set up our desire for the end.

In the book *Apocalypse Now and Then a Feminist Guide to the End of the World*, Catherine Keller points out, “The fantasy of the end of time itself renders every moment a battleground of meaning, with not a moment to waste.” (Keller, 85) This notion that everything is more meaningful on the apocalyptic stage is a key element in the narrative structure of apocalyptic films and is my second line of inquiry. There are certain repeating narrative clichés that can be found in almost all of these films. Relationships with loved ones are repaired after years of being broken, people find romantic love like never before, and great opportunities to give life meaning are presented to the characters. In *Deep Impact*, Elijah Wood and Leelee Sobieski play the teenage couple who first see the twinkle in the sky that would be the planet’s catastrophe. They are separated in their respective journey’s to survive and the star-crossed lover card is played. As Elijah’s character and his family enter the unloading area of the underground shelter, which is surrounded by fences and over crowded by rioters who have been denied access to survival, he decides he must go back for his young love. With less than forty-eight hours until impact, he hitchhikes, walks and rides a rusty old motorcycle through the pre-apocalyptic landscape to find her. This ignites a desire within the viewers for a love like theirs. That desire muddies our cognitive abilities to understand what it is that we actually desire. A love worth
dying for can only be tested when the possibility of death is present. If we desire a love like theirs, we also desire its accompanying disaster. Noel Carroll in his text, *Movies, the Moral Emotions and Sympathy* argues,

> Movies succeed...by addressing the emotions of spectators. The emotions are able to perform this function so well, because the emotions usually stirred up by the movies, are broadly convergent across vast populations that generally enjoy being thrust into the relevant emotional states, so long as they do not have to pay the price that those states standardly exact (as sadness, for example, correlates with personal loss). That is one of the reasons that viewers flock to the movies. The emotions not only contribute to the intelligibility of motion-picture narratives, but they do so in a way that promotes pleasure. (Carroll, 1)

We find pleasure in the emotional landscape of cinema. In this case, we find pleasure in the emotional landscape conjured by cinematic catastrophe represented in hyper speed, with hyper drama and unrealistic outcomes. I would argue that this pleasure gets translated onto these apocalyptic scenarios because they signify the environment necessary for these meaningful experiences to occur.

Armageddon was equally saturated with this; simple every day moments are transformed into something profound with the end of the world as a backdrop. These moments in catastrophe films become icons. In the case of Armageddon they even become anthems.

Laying close to you
Feeling your heart beating
And I’m wondering what you’re dreaming
Wondering if it’s me you’re seeing
Then I kiss your eyes and thank God we’re together
I just wanna stay with you
In this moment forever, forever and ever
Don’t wanna close my eyes
Don’t wanna fall asleep
Liv Tyler and Ben Affleck sit in a secluded landscape one day before Affleck will board a spaceship in an attempt to drill into the asteroid and embed a nuclear device. Tyler lies with bra and stomach exposed as Affleck jokingly traverses the curves of her body with a gazelle shaped animal cracker. They laugh, look into each other’s eyes and Tyler says, “Do you think it’s possible that anyone else in the world is doing this very same thing at this very same moment?” Affleck replies, with a sternness in his eyes, “I hope so, or otherwise, what the hell are we trying to save?” Then, the famous anthem of the song builds and climaxes as they embrace in a kiss.

In this context, the song becomes a metaphor for refusing death and encapsulates most people’s fear of it. We don’t want to die because we will miss everyone and everything we have ever loved. The triumph over death becomes the ideal. Not only does apocalypse cinema tell us we can survive the fate we must all face, but it fuels our desire to live through these devastating events with the promise of a life that is more meaningful than the one we live as we sit in the movie theatre or on the living room couch.

While we have been retelling the history of our future for centuries, the experience of watching catastrophe condensed in an hour and half is most people’s only reference for what an apocalypse might actually look like, feel like, sound like... Keller writes, “The apocalypse does not unfold IN time – and
certainly not outside of time – but rather constitutes a specific form of time.” (Keller, 87) Apocalyptic time constitutes its own form because it only exists within its representation. The technical apparatuses of film confuse our temporal relationship to the world. Not only do these cinematic representations condense time, but they manipulate time for the sake of narrative and emotional thrust. In Armageddon we see eighteen days leading up to possible global annihilation in ninety minutes. What is particularly notable when it comes to compressing apocalyptic time is that all the moments in between emotional thrusts get left out. We are always on the edge of our seats, always engaged with the big feelings of the characters and never witness the actual agony that might take place in the moments between these scenes. What might it be like to take a shower nine days before the end of the world? Or make your child a meal? Deep Impact and Armageddon use overlaid text at different points within the film to inform the viewer of how much time is left before possible total planetary destruction. “Time To Impact: 5 Days” directly translates into twenty minutes of screen time in Deep Impact. Of course, we are aware of this as a contextualizing tool within the film, but somehow this falsely roots us in a time we can understand. As we identify with the characters in the film, we identify with what it means to have 5 days to live and our relationship to those 5 days is solely informed by what we see on screen. Alexander Sesonske writes in his text, Time and Tense in Cinema, “A fictional work presents an imagined spatiotemporal world of events in fictional time, but in which we assume unless told otherwise that the form of time, the direction and rate of flow, exactly resembles natural time.” (Sesonske, 422)
Cinema depends on this compression of time that does not disrupt our sense of real time so that the viewer can be fully immersed in these stories.

*Deep impact* solves this problem with variations of montage. Montage is defined as “a technique in film editing in which a series of short shots are edited into a sequence to condense space, time, and information.” (Wikipedia) The film as a whole could be classified as montage as it follows more than four different story lines within the greater catastrophe plot, often jumping quickly between locations, time frames, and what is not absolutely necessary to inform the plot is dismissed completely. At one moment we are in outer space on an asteroid and at the next moment we are in a small American town. A year of time passes within an instant, or five days passes within 20 minutes. We are sheltered from all human experience outside of the main characters’ because that information is deemed unnecessary for the plots immersive structure. On the micro level, there are several 3-minute montage scenes characterized by piano music and cross dissolve transitions. These scenes not only illustrate vast amounts of passing time, but they also provide a platform for moments in time to bleed into one another. As the population accepts their fate, with an understanding that most of humanity will perish (this does not happen, the world is saved in the nick of time) the film slips into montage by collaging moments of two main characters getting married, the mother of a main character committing suicide, the president of the united states crying in the oval office, and faux news footage of rioting and chaos in the streets of America. This compression of time squarely illuminates and signals to the viewer that what they are seeing is not real and in a sense refutes the notion of apocalypse as a whole (we cannot believe in something that does not
exist in real time) while conjuring overwhelmingly real feelings in the viewers. These short montages do what film does, but in an intoxicating dose. At once the viewer is disoriented in space, disconnected from time, and saturated with emotive propaganda. The manipulation and limits of cinematic time reinforce this emotional experience that we desire by compacting it into potency, while supporting our denial of actual apocalyptic events through massive abstraction. Unfortunately, these apocalyptic illusions that act as gateways to meaning and a refusal of humanity’s vulnerability serve as our only reference for the end of world. They are all we know.

While over two hundred and fifty apocalyptic films have been made, only a handful have actually depicted total global annihilation. When the asteroid is diverted in the nick of time, when the world never ends, over and over and over again, the apparatus of filmmaking works its magic and convinces us that we will always prevail. Eugene Thacker writes in his Book, In the Dust of this Planet, “The question is, what happens when we as human beings confront a world that is radically unhuman, impersonal, and even indifferent to the human? [...] this unresponsiveness of the world is a condition for which, arguably, we do not yet have a language.” (Thacker, 19) In absence of language to speak to or about this world that exists with no consideration of our existence, we have co-opted the cinematic form in both narration and technique in order to tell the story of our future. Andrey Tarkovsky writes in his book, “Sculpting in Time, “Bereft of memory a person becomes prisoner of illusory existence.” (Tarkovsky, 57) Unfortunately, this construct is holding us captive with depictions of the end as constant near misses packed with meaning, survivability and even pleasure.
Cinematic representations have created a deceiving dialect where any notion of real possibilities is absent. But, how do we create language for something that we have never experienced? For something we have no memory of?

I do believe that looking to film to explore a new apocalyptic language is a legitimate starting place. While the illusions of cinematic time will be difficult to challenge, the elimination of character tropes and narrative clichés that promote unrealistic, seductive representations of the apocalypse is possible. There are several films in recent years that have strived to subvert the norm. 4:44 Last Day On Earth and Melancholia present alternative narratives and characters to what we have grown accustomed to. In both, every human on earth dies, every human on earth knows they will die, and while these films are still packed with emotional thrusts – Anxiety, terror, acceptance, the understanding that everything has lost its meaning in the shadow of the end – they are not the kind of feelings humans generally enjoy experiencing. These films illuminate some of the real possibilities that are perpetually edited out of apocalyptic cinema... You will die. You will not be able to save the people you love. The world will not be saved in the nick of time.

It is of paramount importance that we abandon the notion that the world will always overcome and that, somehow, in the process of overcoming, each human will get a more meaningful life. Not only do these homogenous representations of the end of the world invoke desire and denial for that which they represent, but they also rob humanity of profound truths that are waiting to be unearthed. There is so much to reflect on in apocalyptic narrative that has not been addressed. Why are we so attached to the survival of the human species?
Perhaps, death is not the end. Endings are not always bad and survival is not always good. It may not be climate change that annihilates the human race, or nuclear war, or anything else that we can make movies about, but, one day, the sun will burn out and this earth will turn to ice. Since the first recorded apocalyptic narrative presented in cinema in 1933 there have been two hundred and fifty films about the end of the world. Humanity will one day encounter the end. Wouldn’t it be a shame if we were still so scared; if we met the end without any real psychological or emotional preparation, despite the abundance of apocalyptic narrative we have sat through at the cinema. There is great utility in truly examining the inevitable fate we all face, and my hope is that the apocalyptic fantasy embedded within our culture can begin to contemplate what it would actually mean to exist before extinction.
Works Cited


Thacker, Eugene. *In the Dust of This Planet*. Ropley: Zero, 2011. Print
Francis Ford Coppola’s grandiose masterpiece returns to the big screen. Winner of the Palme d’Or, two Oscars, and three Golden Globes, Apocalypse Now is one of the most powerful (anti-)war films in history, showing war as an immersion in primitive madness. Like nothing else on earth, this hallucinogenic Wagnerian epic translated the tension and confusion of the Vietnam War and the 20th century at large into the timeless language of film. This is the first time that the Redux director’s cut is being released in Russia, including material not included in the first version released for movie th Apocalypse Now is a 1979 epic war film that follows Captain Willard on a dangerous mission to assassinate a renegade Green Beret who has set himself up as a god of a band of brutal guerrillas in the jungles of Cambodia. It is a very loose adaptation of the 1899 novella Heart of Darkness by Joseph Conrad. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Written by Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius. The Horror... The Horror...taglines. Earlier this year, Coppola introduced Apocalypse Now: The Final Cut at the Tribeca Film Festival. The usual restoration has taken place. The sound has been juiced up to the Dolby Atmos standards that recently made Roma such an arresting experience in the cinema. More chopping and re-editing has taken place. Most sensible people felt that the Vietnam epic had attained its finished (or at least final) condition when Apocalypse Now Redux emerged in 2001. Speaking to me at the time, Walter Murch, the film’s legendary sound designer, spoke about extracting footage that had been stored deep within m