FORDHAM CENTER ON RELIGION AND CULTURE
Apocalypse Now: America’s Fascination with Doomsday and Why It Matters

Fordham University | Lincoln Center Campus
140 West 62nd Street | McNally Amphitheater
Wednesday, September 12, 2012 — 6:00–8:00 p.m.

**Moderator**
Kurt Andersen
NPR and WNYC, host of Studio 360 and King’s County; author of True Believers

**Panelists**
Elaine Pagels
Princeton University, author of Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics in the Book of Revelation

J. Hoberman
Film critic and author of An Army of Phantoms and Film after Film

Andrew Delbanco
Columbia University, author of The Puritan Ordeal and The Death of Satan

JIM McCARTIN: Good evening. I am Jim McCartin of the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, and it’s my great pleasure this evening to welcome you to Fordham University’s Lincoln Center campus. Thank you all for joining us.

Our first forum this academic year brings together an exceptional panel to explore why we Americans are so drawn to apocalyptic scenarios. If we are known the world over for our persistent optimism, for our dreams of prosperity, why are we also so enamored with the end times? Does this fascination with Doomsday somehow distinguish us from other nations of the world? And how might our visions of destruction, subtly or not so subtly, shape who we are and how we behave?

Certainly, religious visions of the end times, drawn from biblical admonitions to be attentive to signs and wonders, these biblical visions remain alive and well in the United States today. Tens of millions of Americans — maybe some of them here — believe that the world is headed toward a period of violent destruction, when God will punish the wicked and reward the just. And on a day like today, when you pick up the newspaper and read it from a certain perspective, developments in the Middle East seem to announce the imminence of that cataclysm.

But contemporary Doomsday scenarios extend far beyond these kinds of religious visions. Remember the Y2K scare? Or, more recently, we have seen attention lavished on The Hunger Games and we have seen an up-tick in Doomsday speculation fueled by the Mayan calendar.

Listen to the radio for an afternoon, tune into the TV, and you’ll potentially hear musings about a host of grave and impending threats — global water shortage, economic collapse and hyperinflation, extreme weather, nuclear catastrophe, global pandemic,
overpopulation. The list goes on.

How does such speculation influence us? How or why does it matter that we seem so prone to think in cataclysmic terms? Tonight we’ll mine a full spectrum of religious and secular life to understand the implications of all this for the American nation.

Before I introduce this evening’s moderator, let me ask one simple favor of everyone here. Please, please turn off or to silent mode your electronic devices.

You have already found at your seats a brief handout from Elaine Pagels. She’ll reference that later.

You’ve also found a card and a pencil either on or under your seats. As you listen with rapt attention to the proceedings tonight, please don’t forget to make use of that card and pencil to write down your questions for our panelists. I would ask that you write legibly — please print — and briefly — no speeches. Once you’ve finished writing, just hold up your card and one of our gang of student assistants will take it and bring it up to the front.

Now, with these matters of housekeeping aside, I want to introduce to you our moderator, Kurt Andersen. Kurt Andersen is an eclectically talented man. He is a critically acclaimed writer as well as the host and creator of Public Radio’s Studio 360. He has served as the editor of both Spy and New York magazines, and his three novels include Turn of the Century; Heyday, which was a New York Times bestseller; and True Believers, released earlier this summer. He writes regularly for Vanity Fair and The New York Times, and he has been a columnist for The New Yorker and for Time magazines, as well as a writer for TV, movies, and the stage. As I said, he is a man of eclectic talent.

Please welcome Kurt Andersen.

KURT ANDERSEN: Thank you, Jim. It is my pleasure to be here.

Since I started doing this radio program a decade ago, I get asked to do a lot of these things. I have started selfishly, reflexively declining. Basically, my rule is: if it is promoting myself, sure; or, in rare cases, if the subject is sufficiently interesting to me. This qualified on the second grounds.

Exactly six years ago, I was having breakfast with a friend of mine at a neighborhood restaurant in Brooklyn and I saw a poster on the wall for a talk that was to be given that September 11, 2006, by a guy named Daniel Pinchbeck, who is a former downtown literary impresario who has become a kind of over-the-top New Age impresario and author.

My breakfast companion said to me, looking at the poster, “Wow! The guy is selling his apocalypse thing hard.”

I had not known about Pinchbeck’s new book, called 2012, in which he interprets ancient Mayan prophecies to mean “our current socioeconomic system will suffer a drastic and irrevocable collapse in 2008” and that “in 2012 life as we know it will pretty much end.” He said recently, at the time in 2006, “There’s not going to be a United States in five years.”
That same day, I had lunch in Times Square, and another friend happened to mention that he was thinking of buying a second home in Nova Scotia, he said, and I quote him, “as a climate change/end-days hedge.” He was smirking, but he wasn’t joking.

On the subway home that afternoon, I read an essay in *Vanity Fair* by the Harvard historian Niall Ferguson arguing that Europe and America are like the Roman Empire around 406 — that is, we’re at the beginning of the end.

And that weekend I started reading Cormac McCarthy’s new novel, *The Road*.

Journalism has a rule of three — this was a rule of five or six. So I wrote an essay for *New York* magazine about all this in which I said, among other things, apocalypse is obviously on our minds right now. In other words, apocalypse is hot!

Now, Doomsday, as Jim said and as you’ll hear the panelists describe, has always been a distinct strand in American culture, from the Puritans in the 17th century, to people like the Mormons in the 19th century, to in my youth and the last bit of the 20th century the Weathermen and Jim Jones and the Branch Davidians and more. But there is, unquestionably, a definite upsurge in this 21st century, an increase of believers by orders of magnitude since I was young.

Just to give you one metric, 65 million copies of the *Left Behind* series of novels have been sold to Christians. For a lot of Christians of that ilk, their support of a militant Israel is driven by their fervent wish to see biblical stories, in their view, realized.

As I was doing research for this, I noticed that on some of their Web sites they are particularly quoting Isaiah 17:1 right now, which reads: “Behold, Damascus is taken away from being a city and it shall be a ruinous heap.”

And there are Muslims, as well, eagerly awaiting a blessed Armageddon. For some, in fact one noted prominent theologian in Saudi Arabia, for instance, the target year is 2012 for Allah’s Day of Wrath, meaning the destruction of Israel and the Muslim re-conquest of Jerusalem.

The thing that most interests me, I guess, or a thing that interests me, is that apocalyptic preoccupations have leached into respectable thought and conversation. Even among people sincerely fearful of global warming or a nuclearized Iran enacting a second Holocaust by attacking Israel, I do sometimes detect a frisson of hysterical excitement.

Anyhow, greater minds than mine will explain and discuss this in all of its aspects. I am going to introduce you to each of our panelists and then we’ll begin.

Andrew Delbanco holds the Mendelson Family Chair of American Studies at Columbia, and his books include: *Melville: His World and Work*; the great book *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope*; and most recently, *College: What itWas, Is, and Should Be*. Earlier this year, he is probably the only person in this room whom the President has awarded the National Humanities Medal. I could be wrong, but he got it earlier this year.

Jim Hoberman is one of our leading film critics, and for three decades he was that at *The Village Voice*, until earlier this year. Among his many books are: *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War*; *The Dream Life: Movies, Media,*
and the Mythology of the Sixties; and his brand-new one, which is called Film after Film: (Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?), and along with that he has curated an exhibit that’s open until the end of October at the Museum of the Moving Image in Queens.

Finally, Elaine Pagels, who is the Harrington Spear Paine Professor of Religion at Princeton, probably the best-known scholar in the world on the religions of the first millennium by means of her books, including The Gnostic Gospels, which she published, I guess, when she was a child; Beyond Belief; and her latest, which is called Revelations: Visions, Prophecy and Politics in the Book of Revelation.

Professor Pagels.

ELAINE PAGELS: Thank you so much. I’m very happy to be here and be part of what’s certainly going to be a fascinating conversation.

Now, in the eight minutes I have to discuss the last nine years of research, I’d like to do two things: First, do a sort of Cliff Notes version of the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which is, you might say, the progenitor of the mother of all apocalypses. The first thing I want to do is do a run-through of the Book of Revelation very fast, in case you haven’t read it lately. Second, take a mad dash through 2000 years of various ways to interpret this in terms of politics, war, and social conflict. So that’s a small agenda.

[Slide] You probably know, if you know the Book of Revelation, that it begins as its author, who calls himself John, says he was on a small island off the coast of what is today Greece but was then off the coast of Ephesus in Turkey, when suddenly he heard a loud voice behind him and saw a divine being telling him what was going to happen soon. He recognized this divine being, he says, as Jesus, who had died some sixty years earlier and was back to life.

John said he looked up in the sky and he saw a door open, and a voice said “Come up here.”

[Slide] He went up in the Spirit — this is another picture of John receiving the apocalypse.

[Slide] When he went up into the heavens, he was allowed to glimpse the throne of God, much as Ezekiel had envisioned it 600 years earlier, with flashes of lightning and fire and brilliant jewels and a sea of crystal, and a slaughtered lamb next to the throne who offered to show him what would happen in the future.

[Slide] At that, as you recall, an angel sounds a trumpet and one of the first Horsemen of the Apocalypse comes forth on a white horse given power to kill a third of the inhabitants of the Earth.

[Slide] Following that is a second horseman who brings death and destruction all over the world.

[Slide] The third and fourth horsemen of the Apocalypse bring catastrophe, death by wild animals, and war and famine and plague and every kind of disaster.

[Slide] John says that next he looked up in the sky and he saw two great omens. One was
a woman clothed with the sun, writing in the pain of childbirth, she’s about to give birth to the Messiah. Stalking her is a great red dragon — this one is William Blake’s image, not so red — who is about to devour the child the moment that it’s born.

But the child is born. John said he watched that and watched the child taken up into Heaven. This is, he thinks, Jesus of Nazareth. The woman escapes the dragon, and the dragon went up and began war in heaven, fighting against Michael and his angels, and then was thrown out of heaven, the story that Milton tells in *Paradise Lost*. When he’s thrown out of heaven, the dragon is furious and stalks off to make war on the woman and all her progeny on Earth.

[Slide] The next thing the dragon does, John says, is call forth two great monsters, Leviathan and Behemoth, here pictured as a male and female pair as they are in Jewish legend.

[Slide] John says, as he watched, the first dragon came out of the sea with seven heads, crowns on its heads, and was given power to dominate the Earth.

[Slide] The second beast is one who supports the first beast. You know that John says he has a human number, which he dares his readers to understand. You know the number is 666.

[Slide] John says, after this cosmic war is reaching its climax, he sees seven angels, each holding an enormous bowlful of the wrath of God. As each angel sounds a trumpet, each pours the wrath of God on the Earth and horrible things happen.

This is the sixth angel. He pours his bowl right over the Tigris and Euphrates River, over Israel’s ancient enemy, which is Babylon, and there are enormous, overwhelming, loud noise and brilliant light, and the people below in Babylon curse God as they lie dying in agony.

[Slide] Then, John says, he saw Babylon as the Prophet Isaiah had pictured Israel’s ancient enemy. She’s there on the left, the great whore. She doesn’t look so bad here. She is riding on a great red dragon with seven heads and crowns on his heads, and she represents, of course, the great goddess Roma, but here pictured as a hideous whore drinking from a golden cup the blood of innocent people.

[Slide] This is a contemporary version of the whore of Babylon.

[Slide] At this point, John says the cosmic war reaches its climax, Jesus comes forth from heaven leading an enormous army of angels to destroy all the evil forces on Earth. He takes the beast and casts him into a pit for 1,000 years, chains him up, as you see.

[Slide] Then Jesus comes back as the divinely ordained Judge of the World, in this painting by Bosch, to judge the living and the dead.

[Slide] This is a contemporary picture of the dead being punished.

[Slide] Finally, Christ comes as judge with the damned on the left, as you see, and the righteous on the right about to be taken up into the New Jerusalem.

So that’s the story.

[Slide] If you wonder who is John and what was he doing — this is, of course, a very
famously hard book to understand — it does help to know one thing, that this is wartime literature. It was written right after the Jewish war against Rome.

[Slide] John is writing in Ephesus and in the environs of Ephesus, at Patmos, here the world is being ruled not by God but by Roman emperors who picture in their propaganda and in their temples every one of the thirty nations they have conquered as a female slave being humiliated, raped, and killed by a Roman emperor.

[Slide] The first one was Britain.

[Slide] This one is Armenia being defeated by Nero.

It’s at that point that John says he wrote this massive religious and political polemic against the enemy of his people, who had destroyed the Jewish people and their capital Jerusalem in this remarkable set of visions he had.

[Slide] Now this is the second part. This is a few contemporary interpretations.

This one comes from the 15th century. The artist of the Duke of Berry pictures the black plague, which kills about 30 percent of the inhabitants of Europe. He sees it as the coming of the First Horseman of the Apocalypse. Here you see the horseman coming, given power to slaughter the Earth. The beginning of the end-time.

[Slide] When Martin Luther divided the Christian world with his revolution, he didn’t like the Apocalypse. He said, “There’s no Christ in it” in 1522. Later, he realized how he could use it against the Catholic Church and he decided to include it.

This is what you will find in the first Luther Bibles, pictures in the Apocalypse showing you exactly who the whore of Babylon is. In this case, it’s pictured by Luther’s friend as the Pope of Rome.

[Slide] Luther’s first Catholic biographer retaliated by picturing Luther as the seven-headed beast in his first biography.

[Slide] This is Napoleon pictured as “the beloved son of the Devil” — that’s how that conflict was read.

[Slide] In the Civil War — and you see that this book can be read by people on both sides — on the southern side, the Civil War and the horrible carnage of that war in this country was read in the South as Lincoln being strangled by the monster that is the Union.

[Slide] On the Northern, as you recall — we need a way to get the music here — you know this “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” It is written out of the words of the Apocalypse and out of the words of the Prophets because the writer, Julia Ward Howe, saw the Civil War as punishment for the sin of slavery and the beginning of the end-time.

[Slide] Finally, this is London as Babylon. You remember Hobbes pictured his contemporary society as Babylon as well.

[Slide] This is the Second World War, in which Dr. Seuss, of all people, pictured Hitler as the Great Beast of the Book of Revelation.
At the same time, Hitler’s propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels, did an enormous amount of propaganda trying to persuade — and quite effectively did — Lutheran and Catholic Christians in Germany that Hitler was bringing in Das Dritte Reich — that is, the Third Kingdom of Christ, the Third Millennium.

Simultaneously, of course, on the other side, people here were reading Hitler as the Beast. You may recognize the music of the French composer Gabriel Messiaen [sic — Olivier Messiaen?], who wrote in a Nazi prison camp when he looked out of the prison camp in 1941 that he saw a rainbow and it reminded him of the rainbow in the Book of Revelation over the head of the angel, who says, “There shall be no more time,” and Messiaen wrote this brilliant quartet, called “The Quartet for the End of Time.”

[Slide] You may remember the operation called “Shock and Awe” in Baghdad. Well, this was understood by those who were in the know as “shock to those who are unbelievers and awe to those who understand,” because this of course is where the sixth angel pours God’s wrath over the Tigris-Euphrates, right over Baghdad. So these bombs were seen by some as delivering God’s wrath.

[Slide] Finally, this remarkable book has been also read by people in other kinds of conflict. Many people saw the suffering of Americans who were enslaved as the cry of those who stood under the Throne of God saying, “How long, Lord; how long before You judge and avenge our blood on the people of the Earth?” In preaching and in music and in art, African-American artists have often loved this particular book because it talks about the transformation of the world.

[Slide] This I saw in the Guggenheim Museum a few years ago. The artist is James Hampton. He calls himself “Director of Special Projects for the Third Millennium.” He created in his garage out of cardboard and aluminum foil a throne for God and the lamb of God as seen in the Book of Revelation.

The final thing I wanted to share with you is just a fragment of a spiritual. [Audiotape played] “John the Revelator, Book of the Seven Seals.”

That’s just a short run-through. I’ll now turn it over to the rest of our colleagues.

KURT ANDERSEN: And now Andrew Delbanco.

ANDREW DELBANCO: I will try to stick within my time limit, as Professor Pagels did so admirably. But I don’t promise.

She’ll correct me if I’ve got this wrong, but my sense is that the origin and etymology of the word “apocalypse” suggests a meaning beyond what we usually think of as a catastrophic event. It suggests “an act of disclosure”; “revelation,” to take the title of the Book that we just heard expounded; “an unveiling.”

I don’t think most of us take that notion very seriously. I think probably for most people who come to an event like this we think of that meaning as belonging to other people, not to us.
We were reminded that there are a lot of other people who take that meaning seriously in the world. On that occasion that we now refer to as 9/11 and that we commemorated yesterday and of which we were reminded this morning by the latest horrific events in the Middle East, that is to say we took that event to mean that there had been a collision, actually as well as theoretically, between religious zealotry and secular Western culture.

Still, I don’t think that our relation to the concept of Apocalypse — presumptuously using the “our” and the “we”; I don’t mean to assume that everybody in this room believes the same things about this matter — but I think for most of us our relation to the concept of Apocalypse did not fundamentally change on that occasion and that we still have a rather abstract and attenuated sense of what it means. We think of it as an academic subject.

In fact, I would propose that we think of a certain fault line between believers and disbelievers in such an idea as Apocalypse — maybe not a line that corresponds exactly with the divide between red states and blue states, but we probably figure there are more believers in the red states and more skeptics in the blue states.

Now, there is a case to be made for this divide, I think, as an accurate sociology of the contemporary United States. But I want to suggest very briefly — I want to take this idea seriously for a moment, and then I guess I want to push against it a little bit, but first let’s take it seriously — and I want to make the argument that this divide has been with us in our culture for a very long time.

When I make that point to my students, as I will be this week when we’re reading Puritan texts together, I usually avail myself of the convenient example of the notorious witchcraft controversy in late-17th-century Massachusetts, specifically in Salem, where the scion of the great Mather family, Cotton Mather, wrote a book at the end of the 17th century, called *Wonders of the Invisible World*, which is a book about this outbreak of witchcraft, which he construed as meaning that Satan took New England seriously enough to be interested in waging war against it, and he was going to wage that war against it by invading the souls, and bodies in fact, of young women.

Here is Cotton Mather in this book, *Wonders of the Invisible World*. “The Devil,” he writes, “is now making one attempt more upon us, an attempt more difficult, more surprising, more snarled with unintelligible circumstances, than any that we have hitherto encountered, an attempt so critical that if we get well through we shall soon enjoy halcyon days with all the vultures of Hell trodden under our feet.”

That passage leads me to make what is possibly my only substantive point for the evening. That is that it is one of the characteristics, I think, of the apocalyptic imagination that it allows one to construe bad news as good news. The worse it seems, the better it’s going to be. That is, the darkness before the dawn is a deep part, I think, of this tradition, at least the limited part of it that I know anything about.

Now, I spoke of the divide between believers and skeptics. It turns out that while Cotton Mather and his father Increase were conducting, in effect, medical examinations of these young girls in New England to try to determine whether they had in fact been invaded by minions of the Devil, they were being followed around by a guy named Robert Calef, who was a merchant in New England and who was very skeptical that there was any reality behind all of this. He literally was in the room watching the two Mathers, father and son,
conducting their investigations in a scene that probably reminds us of something like *The Exorcist* movies of our own time.

Here, in a book that Calef had the temerity — or chutzpah, though I imagine he wouldn’t have used that word — to entitle *More Wonders of the Invisible World* — I like to say to my students it’s the first ironic title in American literary history; it was such an act of presumption, in fact, that he couldn’t possibly publish it in New England, he had to publish it in London, because the Mathers were too important in New England to allow that to happen — anyway, this is how he describes what the Mathers are up to.

Speaking of a young woman, “She was in a fit and he rubbed her breast, etc. [that is Cotton] and put his hand upon her breast and belly, viz on the clothes over her, and felt for a living thing, as he said, which moved the father also to feel and some others.” In other words, to Calef these Apocalyptists, who were so excited about this evidence of the presence of the Devil and the implications for the future, were actually a couple of dirty old men who were molesting young women.

I think we can scan our history — and I won’t take much time doing it — and we can find a lot of analogous pairs that seem to fit into that same pattern. An obvious one would be William Jennings Bryant and Clarence Darrow at the Scopes trial, one Bible-thumping, the other a rational skeptic.

In the progressive story that we like to tell about American history, it’s the Bible-thumpers who lose and the rationalists who win. The former get consigned to the dustbin of history and the latter emerge as those in charge.

Now, what I want to suggest after setting up this straw man — I want to sort of knock him down and suggest it’s more complicated than that, that a certain kind of apocalyptic imagination, broadly construed, also exists on the other side of that divide, where we find the skeptical rationalists.

Here, for instance, a resolute deist, Thomas Jefferson, who did not really believe in a god who took a personal interest in the moral drama of individual human lives, spoke with a sense that history was indeed, just as the author of the Revelations believed, moving out of darkness toward the light. The opening lines of the Declaration of Independence, after all, “When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another,” and so on. In that word “necessary” you feel the presence of a kind of mastermind of history. He doesn’t call that force “God” so often, but there is a force that is pushing history in a progressive direction, out of darkness toward light.

When, a few years later, he wrote — and he was very conflicted about the issue of slavery that Professor Pagels mentioned — when he wrote, “The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust,” here too he felt that history was moving out of the darkness toward the light. We might call this a kind of secular apocalypticism. Sometimes he feared it would create a rupture in history. Sometimes he thought the transformation could take place peacefully and gradually. That’s a difference that corresponds to some differences in the Christian tradition.

Fifty years after Jefferson, we find the ultra-intellectual Ralph Waldo Emerson, whom we don’t tend to identify with evangelical religion or backward thinking, concluding one of
his most famous lectures by saying, “I look for the hour when that supreme beauty which ravished the souls of the Hebrews shall speak again. I look for the new teacher who will teach us that the world is the mirror of the soul.”

And thirty years after Emerson, we find Abraham Lincoln, a non-churchgoing president who almost lost his first congressional campaign because he was accused by an itinerant preacher of being an infidel, interpreting the Civil War in his great second Inaugural Address, as nothing less than “an apocalyptic war of deliverance, a punishment for our nation’s collective original sin of slavery, that would lead us forward into a world more faithful to the equality principle of Mr. Jefferson’s Declaration.”

In an earlier speech, Lincoln the infidel had said, “Let us wash our republican robe in the spirit, if not the blood, of the revolution,” alluding of course to the blood of the lamb in the Book of Revelation.

Now, this was the kind of thing that led one Southern slave owner to charge Lincoln, and I quote, with “elevating the idea of union to the level of religious mysticism.” In a sense, I think that was a fair critique; that is, that in the struggle over slavery apocalyptic religion was generally on the side of abolitionism. John Brown, for instance, was an apocalypticist, while, according to the slave owners anyway, all the decorum and reason and modernity itself were on the side of slave owning.

My point is a simple one. That is that apocalyptic language and thinking have not always been the possession of the bad guys and secular rationalism has not always been the possession of the good guys. It moves around. It takes different forms.

Sometimes it disguises itself, as when in the 1930s many quite irreligious intellectuals saw the Great Depression as the darkness before the dawn. The dawn of socialism they hoped for proved to be a false dawn.

Or consider Martin Luther King, who described himself in that extraordinary speech delivered the night before his assassination as “ascending the mountaintop to catch a glimpse of the Promised Land,” what might be called an apocalyptic vision of the future that he would not live to see but that he believed was coming.

In short, I think the apocalyptic imagination, in America at least, which is the only place I know anything about, has not been the exclusive property of the party of regression and superstition. I think we all share it to one degree or another. Perhaps we might say we are all apocalypticists now. Everyone, I think, likes one kind of apocalypse or another, in the sense of a climactic, clarifying, reorganizing experience that sweeps away obstructions to satisfaction and opens the vista into a delicious future.

Just consider the two best-selling genres we’ve got today. One has already been mentioned. On the one hand, books like Tim LaHaye’s *Left Behind* series, which locates the rapture, to use the dispensationalist term, in an unearthly or post-earthly Christian fellowship. And on the other hand, the other reliable bestselling genre, the bodice-ripping romance novels that have now gone mainstream with the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series, which locates rapture more or less exclusively in the genital organs. You might think that these books appeal to two different constituencies, but I suspect that there are plenty of people who read both.
Maybe, if we recognize these commonalities, we could get on with making a better society instead of waiting for some supernatural force to do it for us.

Thanks very much.

KURT ANDERSEN: And now Jim Hoberman.

JIM HOBERMAN: Thanks.

I’d like to revisit the rubric for tonight’s event, Apocalypse Now, the movie, or the movies.

Apocalypse Now, as you know, is the title of a 1979 movie by Francis Ford Coppola that famously repackaged the disaster known as the Vietnam War as spectacular entertainment, which is to say as an esthetic experience.

I would say that the Book of Revelation, as it was just synopsized by Professor Pagels, was a great pitch for a movie, but so far I don’t think anyone has risen to that challenge — not for lack of trying.

Apocalypse Now appeared towards the end of a trend related, I believe, to the late stages and aftermath of the Vietnam War. This was the so-called disaster film, which flourished in the 1970s, and which, among other things, returned movies to their fairground origins by offering audiences the treat of spectacular cataclysms.

And there was something else as well, I think. Movies like Towering Inferno, in which the biggest building in the world bursts into flames and really endangers an entire city, or Jaws, in which an unstoppable beast comes out of the depths of the ocean and devours children and young women, were events which everyone had to see in order to fully participate in American life, which is to say they were collective experiences as well as individual ones.

These disaster films were very much parsed in their time. I mean they were recognized as having some kind of sociological significance, often discussed as reflections of the economic crisis precipitated by the OPEC oil embargo in late 1973. Some of them offered a populist critique, by blaming the catastrophe on rapacious corporations, and in almost every case, the disaster was worsened by mendacious, greedy, corrupt, and inadequate leadership.

These movies appeared not just in the context of Vietnam and Watergate, which was a kind of disaster film, or a disaster miniseries I think, but the bestselling book The Late Great Planet Earth and a host of underground homemade pre-millennialist disaster films, most famously A Thief in the Night, which, made in Des Moines in 1973 for less than $70,000 and distributed by church groups, was seen by an estimated 100 million Americans during its first decade.

One thing that I want to emphasize, though, is despite their cataclysmic subject matter and apocalyptic imagery, Hollywood disaster films were fundamentally reassuring, in that ultimately they celebrated the inherent virtue of decent, everyday, middle Americans and linked their survival skills to traditional social roles and conventional moral values.
I don't know if this is an example of what Professor Delbanco said as “bad news is good news,” but certainly these movies did have happy endings. It didn’t matter how many people drowned when the boat capsized in The Poseidon Adventure, the people who we cared about always managed to come out on top.

Now, what I would like to suggest is that the vision of disaster is intrinsic to motion pictures. Georges Méliès was producing fake newsreels of volcanic eruptions in 1900. The very first Edison actuality films contained footage of real events — electrocuting an elephant or searching ruins on Broadway Galveston for dead bodies. And there were others that depicted fires and firefighting, sometimes in stage reenactments, as fighting the flames, which documented the show at Coney Island where all manner of battles, fires, floods, and other disasters were reenacted daily for an appreciative audience.

The first feature-length movies, in fact, were Italian spectaculars, like Quo Vadis and The Last Days of Pompeii.

Now, apocalyptic imagery, as you’ve seen, has a very long history. As opposed to something like Signorelli’s frescoes in the Orvieto Cathedral or the John Martin paintings that used to tour, movies provided a more, let’s say, immersive experience, unfolding in time and regarding a kind of fixed concentration to them, or submission to the narrative.

In a well-known 1965 essay called The Imagination of Disaster, Susan Sontag wrote on cheap science fiction movies that allowed one to “participate in the fantasy of living through one’s own death and more, the death of cities, the destruction of humanity itself.”

Rather than participate in the fantasy, I would say enjoy the experience of living through one’s own death and the death of cities and so on. There’s obviously some pleasure derived from these movies; otherwise people wouldn’t go to see them. They wouldn’t be made if they didn’t make money.

There is something that the film critic Andre Bazin called “the Nero complex.” He wasn’t thinking of the statute of Nero defeating Armenia so much as the story of Nero fiddling as Rome burned.

It’s no wonder, I think, that Hitler, Stalin, and Nixon were all big movie fans. I think that, among other things, cinema elevated schadenfreude to the heights of megalomania. But at the same time, it also democratized this esthetic experience, and that’s what Bazin was getting at when he spoke of this Nero complex.

Now, to return to Sontag for just a moment, she is of course referring to a new situation. There was something different that happened in the 20th century. Sixty-three years ago next week President Truman announced the loss of America’s nuclear monopoly, and two days later a then-unknown, thirty-one-year-old Baptist evangelist, with a staccato delivery modeled on radio journalists like Walter Winchell, opened a tent revival in Los Angeles.

Where earlier evangelists could evoke fire and brimstone, the young Billy Graham had the most potent scare tactic of all. “People,” he said, “are afraid of war, afraid of atomic bombs, fearful as they go to bed at night. Mr. Truman said in yesterday’s press conference that we must be prepared for any eventuality at any hour.” So I guess that would be a definition of apocalypse now.
It certainly inspired one of my favorite examples of cine-pathology, a movie called *The Next Voice You Hear*, which is kind of like an unfunny situation comedy in which God gets on the radio every night for a week and speaks to the people of the world. Although the movie takes care to explain that you hear God in whatever your language is, they don’t bother — it’s kind of an inoculation. It is interesting that God is always on the radio when it’s prime time in Los Angeles. Anyway, a mediocre movie but a very potent fantasy, the idea of the radio becoming a vehicle to announce the end-times.

I grew up in the era of shelter drills, in a state of mild terror throughout my childhood. Every time the school public address system would come on, I would wonder: *Oh, is the principal now going to announce the outbreak of World War III?* This became an automatic response that I would have to the little chimes.

Then one day the principal came on and did make a cataclysmic announcement, namely that the president had been assassinated. I experienced that, just speaking of myself, with a tremendous sense of relief. The worst had happened and it wasn’t — I mean I was still here, the school was still there. That was very powerful.

I believe that the movie *Dr. Strangelove*, which was released only a few months after the Kennedy assassination — in fact, it was delayed because of the Kennedy assassination; they had to wait to open it — which was, as Robert Brustein wrote at the time in *The New York Review of Books*, “despite its cataclysmic conclusion, a particularly heady, exhilarating experience,” is connected. I mean I felt that way myself at fourteen. It was the first movie that I ever really wanted to see a second time, I liked it so much.

So I think that, in addition to the Nero complex, it’s possible that these movies can acknowledge something that’s real. Certainly, the seminal zombie film, *Night of the Living Dead*, was exhilarating in another way, because it was released in 1969, after the most violent four-year period in American history since the Civil War, and offered the most literal possible image of America devouring itself.

There is another haunting quote, something to ponder, a famous one from Theodor Adorno, to the effect that he who imagines disasters in some way desires them, that people want this or want to think about it somehow.

Certainly, in the 1990s, the run-up to the millennium was characterized by a whole panoply of apocalyptic visions, really starting with *Jurassic Park*, in which prehistoric monsters came back somehow to Earth — this was in 1993. And then you had the powerful, monopolizing *Independence Day*, which kind of started to unite the world behind one movie. Anyway, there were fifty-six disaster movies released in the 1990s, fourteen of them in the peak year of 1997.

*Titanic*, which came out that year, of course was the greatest catastrophe of all. Since it was for a time the most expensive and highest-grossing movie in Hollywood history, this is true in more ways than one.

Nine-eleven was anticipated in a sense by the movie *Pearl Harbor*, which came out that June, representing the last aerial attack on American territory. It’s worth noting that, unlike this $140 million remake, which actually doesn’t even seem like a lot of money now for something like that, the Pearl Harbor of December 1941 occurred in a media black
hole. That it was recorded at all is largely due to the coincidental presence of a Fox Movietone camera crew in Hawaii, which was there to shoot background for a B picture, *To the Shores of Tripoli*. This footage was confiscated by the War Department and not fully cleared for a year after the raid. Then, the catastrophe finally received its definitive screen form in 1943, when it was incorporated into a documentary, if you use the term somewhat loosely, by John Ford, *December 7th*, which, despite its use of miniatures and rear-screen projections, was then itself appropriated for later documents.

My point is that Pearl Harbor as we think of it was something created in the movies and that movies survive on — or thrive, let’s say — disaster, that the experience of living through a cataclysm in the movies is not only entertaining but can provide a form of mastery, a thrill, and is also educational.

I just want to end with something else that is learned from the movies, for what it’s worth, assuming that there is a kind of collective imagining going on if certain patterns are repeated over and over.

That is, from the late 1990s on, *Apocalypse Now* is signified by the presence of an African-American in the White House. Now, there could be a number of explanations for this trope, which I’m not going to go into now. I just want to stress that it exists.

In *The Fifth Element*, for example, with the entire universe under threat of obliteration, there was Tommy “Tiny” Lister as president. In the more provincial *Deep Impact* the following year, which only had a comet hurtling towards Planet Earth, our leader was embodied by Morgan Freeman. Dennis Haysbert served two seasons as president in the nonstop-terror world of TV’s *24* and then was succeeded by his brother D.B. Woodside. Lou Gossett presided over the Christian fundamentalist Armageddon of *Left Behind World at War* and its sequel *Solar Attack*, as did Terry Crews in the more humorous cretinous future foretold by *Idiocracy* and Danny Glover in the most recent example, the multi-cataclysmic end of the world of Roland Emmerich’s *2012*.

In the dream life that the movies provide for us as parallel universe, a black man becomes America’s president only when civilization is doomed or life as we know it has come to an end, as it did in a sense with the crash of September 2008 that swept Barack Obama into office. So I just leave you with the thought that, in this imagined world, that’s further proof that we are living in the latter days, or perhaps even in a post-apocalyptic situation, and I would suggest that you will find this percolating in the lower depths of political discourse as we head towards November.

Thanks.

KURT ANDERSEN: Thank you, all.

Like Jim and like a lot of you I’m sure in the audience, I too was a child at the height of the Cold War. However, because I grew up only a few miles from Strategic Air Command Headquarters, my schools never even went through the motions of an air raid drill. I once asked a teacher, “My cousins, who live hundreds of miles away, go through these air raid drills.” She looked at me and just smiled and shook her head. I asked my parents what that meant. They told me, at age ten, that that’s because we live a few miles away from what will be the Soviet’s prime target in the case of nuclear war. So I was reassured.
Now, the title of this program is “America’s fascination.” I want to ask any or all of you: to what degree do we think or do we know that the apocalyptic imagination as an impulse is American? Is it not uniquely American, but is it a thing that distinguishes 21st-century American discourse, imagination, all of it, from other, let’s say, developed countries?

ANDREW DELBANCO: I said I don’t know anything about any culture except America, so I’m best situated to answer the question, right, which is to say I have no comparative context. But I doubt it.

We tend to think in America that everything we do is sort of unique and all our impulses are special and unlike everybody else’s. I think there’s zero reason to think that. If you think of the way in which much of the world has been animated by anti-Semitism, for instance, discovery of secret texts that are supposed to hold the key to the satanic enemy, like the protocols of the Elders of Zion, or various expansionist, imperialist nations that manage to construe their conflict with whatever enemy they have in mind at the moment as an apocalyptic one, I think actually you could make the argument that Americans are relatively light on the apocalypse.

KURT ANDERSEN: Really?

ANDREW DELBANCO: Well, I mean just so we don’t have to play —

KURT ANDERSEN: With the Puritans?

ANDREW DELBANCO: I mean we heard, I think, an interesting presentation, that you could think of an American film as a kind of therapeutic activity by which we get this out of our system by living through it virtually as it were. So I don’t know. I’m leery of generalizations about an American penchant for this and an American penchant for that.

KURT ANDERSEN: I want to ask all of you, Elaine in particular: Given the degree that is a strain in the American character or way of looking at the world, it is scriptural in its basis, as we saw in the Book of Revelation and as we know, 100 years ago, 150 years ago, there was no significant difference between the United States and Europe in terms their countries’ religious piety or the robustness of Christianity; today there is a great difference. I wonder. I ask every religion scholar I ever meet, how come, and is that connected to — even if we do it, as you’re saying Andrew, with happy endings courtesy of Hollywood — is there something about our greater religiosity compared to the rest of what we used to call Christendom, and certainly the developed world, and a predilection for apocalyptic thinking?

ELAINE PAGELS: I would say that as Americans we often have a rather persistent, and sometimes pernicious, habit of thinking that we’re good and that this nation has a particular relationship to God. I was thinking of the book called Redeemer Nation that talks about how this pervades our rhetoric politically and otherwise.

It’s now being challenged by a book called Damned Nation?, which is written by Kathryn Gin, one of my colleagues at Princeton, who says the flip side of that is recognizing America as particularly vulnerable to being evil.
I don’t think we’ve had a great deal of balance in any event.

KURT ANDERSEN: Speaking of evil, Andrew, you published a very interesting book sixteen years ago, called *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*. The next day there began a kind of craze for finding satanic murderers around America. Five years later, of course, came 9/11. Have we, since you wrote that book, regained, or begun to regain, our sense of evil in the sense you were talking about?

ANDREW DELBANCO: It was a catchy but very misleading title, because my point was really not that America has lost interest in Satan but that we had lost touch with the complex idea of evil that had once been personified in Satan, and it’s an idea that involved the recognition that evil is part of ourselves. That was really the argument I was trying to make, that it was sort of a Niebuhrian view of sin as not belonging to the other guy but as belonging to all of us. I appreciate you asking me about this book that I wrote when I was a very young child.

But on the question of the special religiosity of Americans, Tocqueville had an answer to that question. In fact, when he came here in the middle of the 19th century, he did think it was different already then from what he knew in Europe. He said this was the most vital, robust Christian nation that he had ever encountered. His explanation was essentially that we didn’t have a history of an established church, that there was no animosity toward this religious establishment, that the genius of the separation of church from state released the possibility for all citizens to find their own form of belief, and he believed deeply that everybody had a restless need to believe and that America was sort of liberating that impulse and had found a way — and so far it has been a pretty good assessment — found a way for everybody to do their own religious thing without getting into religious wars with one another.

KURT ANDERSEN: So our entrepreneurial free-market approach to religion has enabled it to thrive?

ANDREW DELBANCO: Exactly.

KURT ANDERSEN: It seems to me — and certainly, again, harkening back to my childhood, when mainline Christian religion did not seem to emphasize biblical literalism, did not emphasize this kind of end-times apocalyptic thinking — extrapolating back, as you said, Andrew, we have this sense of progress that the bad guy, crazy people lose and progress is victorious. That was certainly the sense when I was a child.

But taking the longer view, is the trend-line of established religion that this kind of theology is in decline with occasional up-ticks, or does it just go back and forth over the hundreds of years that we’ve seen religion?

ANDREW DELBANCO: I’m going to shut up after this answer because I’m talking too much.

But I did want to say — your very interesting comment about sitting in Brooklyn and suddenly everybody was talking about the Apocalypse, and it wasn’t just three but five, so there was something going on — I take your point.

On the other hand, as has been implicit in a number of things that were said, we are very
much more immediately aware of everything that’s going on around us than we used to be. So this nut job in Florida who put “Burn the Quran” in front of his church, even twenty-five years ago he would have been an anonymous nobody — and he’s back in the news today because of what happened in Libya — now he’s got the capacity to stir up hatred against the United States on the other side of the world.

So I’m not quite convinced in fact that we’ve seen an up-tick or an upsurge. If you go back in American literary history, James Fenimore Cooper wrote an apocalyptic novel, Ignatius Donnelly wrote an apocalyptic novel in the late 19th century. There has been a long tradition of this.

KURT ANDERSEN: Of course. But since, let’s say, 1970 I would argue empirically an upsurge. But what do you think?

JIM HOBERMAN: I think if you are looking just at the popular culture as well as the rhetoric, that we began living in, let’s say, the world of a cosmic struggle in 1946. As soon as there were bombs that could destroy entire cities and we were engaged in a war with godless communism, which made us by definition Godful America, it didn’t really matter whether people were taking this literally, although I think that people did. Certainly Billy Graham, who is, I would guess — correct me if I’m wrong — I would think that he would have been the outstanding man of God in postwar America. We were making this connection.

I think that all these movies that, for example, Susan Sontag was writing about are fascinating. Why were there all these movies about America being destroyed by aliens from outer space, radioactive monsters, and so on? I mean we were the people who dropped the bomb on somebody else. So there’s an interesting, I think, psychological transference going on, that we would then expect or be thinking about what it would be like to have this happen to us. So it seems to me that it’s almost natural for people to be preoccupied with this.

ELAINE PAGELS: Yes. I started work on the Book of Revelation out of being intrigued by it, having at one time in my life been part of an evangelical church that read it very literally. But you don’t have to read it literally to take it seriously.

I came to appreciate this book because I realized, as the other speakers spoke about it too, it’s not just about terror and catastrophe. It’s as though you take all your worst fears and you wrap them up into one gigantic nightmare. The Book of Revelation is like that. And then at the end it isn’t bodies all over the stage, it’s not like the end of a Shakespeare tragedy; suddenly there’s a new world, there’s a brilliant world which is full of the light of God, and God wipes away the tears from every eye. I mean it doesn’t end in disaster. So it allows you to think — I wouldn’t say to construe bad news as good news, but to hope that in spite of all the bad news the end could be joyful, whether we’re looking at one person’s death or the catastrophe that destroys the whole universe.

KURT ANDERSEN: Well, again that strikes me as not uniquely American, but this possibility of a do-over in the most existential sense seems to me present from the beginning.

Jim, I thought you would mention, and you didn’t, and I wonder why — we have seen just in the last year or two, not just 2012 and Independence Day kind of big Hollywood
movies where there’s apocalypse and then happy ending, but we have seen a few movies that are literally without a happy ending about the end of the world — Abel Ferrara’s 4:45 Last Day on Earth, Lars von Trier’s Melancholia, a Steve Carell comedy called Seeking a Friend for the End of the World Earth — none of which were big box office successes. But what is it? Did Hollywood just decide, “Yeah, the Apocalypse is hot?”

**JIM HOBERMAN:** Well, I think that most of the movies that you talked about were not Hollywood movies. They were either foreign films or independent films. I think that all of these movies — I didn’t see the Steve Carell one, sorry to say — but the other ones are films that I would describe as experiential, because they’re all about like “What are you going to do?”

**KURT ANDERSEN:** In those last hours.

**JIM HOBERMAN:** You know the world is going to end; what are you going to do about it?

Not to dwell too much on my childhood in the 1950s, but that occurred to me and I’m sure that occurred to lots of people, that there was going to be a moment, like you heard that war had broken out, and you’d be lucky if a bomb fell on your head before that, because otherwise you’d have to wait and figure out what you were going to do with your last moments. What I remember from junior high school is that nobody wanted to die a virgin. [Laughter]

But I think that those movies are playing with that anxiety: What is it like to experience this waiting?

**KURT ANDERSEN:** But it seems to be almost a new genre, that in various allegorical and implicit ways the end has been dealt with as you suggested over and over again, but now, at least in the case of these art house movies and in the case of the big Steve Carell comedy, looking squarely at how you’re going to spend the last hours or days. In the previous answers you were giving, Elaine and Andrew, you were suggesting that this sense of imminent doom comes, at least in the American tradition, sort of welded to this flip side of hope. Has that always been so and is that always so, that it’s not just “Oh, my God, we are godless people, therefore the flood or whatever is going to hit us,” or is it always “and out of this Apocalypse will come a new Zion”?

**ELAINE PAGELS:** I think that’s the deepest part of the religious impulse that’s in this book, and it pervades the book in fact. It is a book that offers hope to many people who read it, as well as terror.

**KURT ANDERSEN:** In your book, which I’ve read, you suggest that it was written out of wartime. It seems as though it was conceived, written perhaps, as allegory, because he didn’t say “it’s Rome,” he talked about this beast. Is it possible that it was written as allegory then, not meant to be taken literally, and only subsequently and today is taken literally?

**ELAINE PAGELS:** A lot of people who work in this think that John wrote — he didn’t make up these images of the whore and the beast and the monster. These all come out of Daniel, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and these are the images for the foreign nations that conquered Israel. I don’t know. I think John has very specific things in mind. But it's
very dangerous if you’re a Jewish prophet now writing forty years after the Jewish war against Rome in which the Romans killed Jesus because he was inciting rebellion, so they said, and his followers for the same reason. It was dangerous to be a Christian. So you don’t attack directly, but you can talk about Babylon and it looks just like Rome does on the coins, just like the goddess Roma, only in a hideous parody. And the seven-headed beast is probably the dynasty of Augustus with the seven emperors from the time of Augustus. I mean everybody could read it. It talks about a great mountain blowing up and polluting the Earth and polluting the seas. This is written ten years after the explosion of Mount Vesuvius. So people who read it would know.

KURT ANDERSEN: Was it thereby just a safe way to write this polemic against the overlords?

ELAINE PAGELS: It’s partly that, and it’s partly because the power of those images invokes all of Israel’s cultural history with everything the prophets wrote, and the sense of divine judgment finally will restore justice to the world.

KURT ANDERSEN: Andrew, I’m glad you brought up the idea of it’s not just red-staters who believe in Apocalypse, the idea of, as you suggest, apocalyptic environmentalism. In that case particularly, is it your sense that prudent people who are concerned about climate change in some cases go overboard, or are people with an apocalyptic instinct, impulse, mindset, in some cases drawn to the environment as a secular means to express that impulse?

ANDREW DELBANCO: I’m not equipped, I don’t have the scientific knowledge, to take a position on how fast the climate change is going and how worried we should be. But I just make the simple observation that it’s interesting to me that you have scientists, many of whom don’t have any particular religious commitments, telling us that the polar icecaps are melting and we ought to be plenty worried about it, and you have actually significant commitment to the environmentalist movement on the part of evangelicals. That’s an example of where I think this divide that we tend to think of as unbridgeable might be in fact bridgeable.

I have this cranky optimism about America and I have a notion that if we get through this election with the right result we might actually start to talk to each other a little bit more. But maybe that’s Pollyannaish.

But if I could, just to go back to two other matters that I want to not forget about before I do, you asked about hope and has it always been a characteristic of Americans to try to see the light through the darkness. I think it’s the characteristic of every human being. It’s a desperate need we all have. Otherwise it’s hard to get up in the morning.

When I alluded to Lincoln, what he does in such an extraordinary way in the second Inaugural — you see it happening in some earlier speeches leading up to it — is he’s struggling on behalf of the nation, although not everybody was listening to him yet, to find meaning in this cataclysmic, unbelievable carnage that had just taken place in which, as you all know, I think, more Americans died than in all of our other wars before and since combined.

So what did this mean? Well, one thing it meant was it was a struggle to preserve the
union. But what Lincoln comes to see in the second Inaugural is that it meant that the institution of slavery was done, and that that was a meaning that was worth clinging to, when he says at Gettysburg, “We must resolve that these men shall not have died in vain.” Everybody needed to find a reason for this. It seems to me that’s the way we are in the face of any cataclysmic event.

The other thing I just want to say very quickly, to go back to how American is all of this and the Cold War and the nuclear stuff, it’s not that surprising, I think, that around the middle or the last quarter of the 20th century, after the Holocaust, after the gulag, after the demonstration as it were over Hiroshima and Nagasaki of the atomic bomb — it’s not that surprising that apocalyptic imaginings are getting heated up.

It’s my impression — I have very limited knowledge of this — it’s not just in America. The Japanese post-World War II movies, like the Godzilla movies; Ingmar Bergman’s movies have a certain apocalyptic; Nevil Shute, was he —

KURT ANDERSEN: On the Beach.

ANDREW DELBANCO: On the Beach.

Going out on a limb here, and I’m no film critic, I think actually what may be special about the American response to all of this — and Dr. Strangelove is a great example — is that a certain Jewish-American imagination took hold of these events in a figure like Stanley Kubrick, later on Mel Brooks’ The Producers, that you could actually take these subjects and make comedy out of them. That was a departure, that was a new thing. I would argue that if America made a contribution to the apocalyptic tradition in the 20th century, that might have been it.

JIM HOBERMAN: It wasn’t Ingmar Bergman?

ANDREW DELBANCO: No. Anybody here ever laughed at an Ingmar Bergman movie? [Laughter].

KURT ANDERSEN: Not in a way that it intended me to. As I was thinking about this, I also realized that a subject that I’ve been thinking about a lot lately and writing something about, which is the so-called singularity, also falls into this, which is to say that lots of respectable academics believe, the founders and owners of Google believe, that we are heading inexorably — twenty, thirty, forty years hence — toward a moment when essentially computers will be as, and then more, intelligent than us, and indeed conscious. Again, these ultimate secular rationalists in almost all cases believe that at that point a utopian Zion of their own will come to exist.

It really leads me to second, Andrew, your idea that it’s not just red-state rustics who have the impulse. There’s room for all of us in the apocalyptic tent. And indeed, in their vision, while there are at least some disruptions along the way, it’s basically the happiest days are here at last.

ALBERT DELBANCO: But check in with Stanley Kubrick on that, right?

KURT ANDERSEN: Yeah, exactly. That’s because he was Jewish. Jim, as you suggest, the Apocalypse in pop culture and movies is often, if not always,
science fictional, either as a result of our out-of-control, our nuclear waste, or extraterrestrial beings, extraterrestrial objects. Is that because these days the Apocalypse is seldom explicitly religious, just because that’s a way to get a bigger audience if you don’t limit it to one religious schema?

JIM HOBERMAN: Well, it doesn’t suit the nature of the movie industry to be sectarian in any way. I mean generally politics try to reach as many people as well.

I think that when you come down to it the greatest of these movies don’t necessarily offer an explanation. To my mind, *The Birds*, the Hitchcock film, is the great movie of the Apocalypse precisely because it is so innocuous and at the same time so completely inexplicable. There’s that scene where the ornithologists explain that there’s no reason for it. That’s why it’s such an unsettling movie. It was so unpopular, and they had to put end titles on it and so on for him.

So I think that there’s something — clearly, religions are founded on this idea and provide the imagery for it and a narrative. But I don’t think you have to be religious at all to have this sense of impending doom. Maybe you do to see it as leading to a better world. But communists certainly thought that too.

KURT ANDERSEN: Well, communism.

You don’t have to be religious, but it seems to me — and as you say, many religions have these various apocalyptic visions in their founding. It seems to me all religions are also derived from the need to deal with our individual deaths inevitably.

Six years ago, the story I told at the beginning, I developed a minor theory — and you can all denounce it or not as you wish — that perhaps as the Baby Boomers have dominated culture for the last fifty years, as the Baby Boomers now approach death, I wonder — this is just an extrapolation.

ANDREW DELBANCO: A little easy on that. I’m just getting into late middle age.

JIM HOBERMAN: Getting into view.

ANDREW DELBANCO: Or Social Security.

KURT ANDERSEN: That apocalyptic mania is — just as the Boomers in 1967 began controlling culture, now as they reach, say, age sixty-seven, that “I’m going to go and it’s all going to go,” it’s kind of an unconscious solipsism. Maybe? [Laughter]

ANDREW DELBANCO: We can blame it all on Dr. Spock, right? [Laughter]

KURT ANDERSEN: But do you think, if you’ll stipulate — and I think we have a roomful of people interested in it, it means it is true — or perhaps, as you say, Andrew, it’s just that we are more aware of things today — but I do believe that there has been an uptick in this kind of thinking in its various flavors left and right, utopian and dystopian. What’s your hunch? Ten years from now, twenty years from now, will we look back and say, “Whoa, we went through a strange period there at the turn of the 21st century”?

ELAINE PANELS: Well, I don’t know. I study history 2,000 years ago and it’s all
I think the Germans decided today that they're going to try to keep Europe from going
down the drain, at least for the moment. So maybe it's not so bad.

KURT ANDERSEN: And stocks are worth twice what they were four years ago. So if
you're rich, you are better off than you were four years ago, a lot. [Laughter]

ANDREW DELBANCO: That's a good point.

JIM HOBERMAN: I like this one-liner that President Eisenhower had in his great
soothing speech, the communal fears, when he said, “Things are more like they are now
than they have ever been before.” [Laughter]

ANDREW DELBANCO: President Eisenhower has been invoked. This will maybe
explain some of my attitude. I had a very gentle grandmother on my mother's side of the
family. Despite my Italian-sounding name, I'm of German-Jewish background. Her
name was Bernstein. She didn't suffer horribly under the Nazis because she got out. But
anyway, she got out. She was in America.

I remember her attitude in this period that we've been talking about, when everybody was
getting ready to go into the fallout shelter. What she said always stuck with me. She
looked quizzically and she said, “You know, I really have no wish to go into the shelter
and come out tomorrow morning if the milkman doesn't come.” [Laughter]

KURT ANDERSEN: So she wasn't inclined to the apocalyptic imagination.

ANDREW DELBANCO: That's right, she was not.

KURT ANDERSEN: I believe we perhaps have the questions from you all that we will
now ask to our panelists, who I will urge to speak directly into their microphones rather
than, as someone put it, being polite and looking at one another as they speak.

First question is: “To what extent does gender and gender stereotyping play in how we
imagine and depict the Apocalypse?” It's for anyone.

ELAINE PAGELS: I'll take it on.

It's very interesting. There has been an interesting book written by Catherine Keller
about apocalyptic thinking as oppositional.

When I look at the other revelation texts, as Andrew said, the word “apocalypse” doesn’t
mean end of the world; it means the revelation of a divine truth.

When I was working on this book, I realized there are many other revelations, and they
are not about the end of the world and they are not about catastrophe. They’re about revelation of divine truth. I gave little hors d’oeuvres of them on that handout.

Interestingly, for example, the one called “The Thunder, Perfect Mind” has been used by women artists from Toni Morrison to Leslie Marmon Silko and many others because it’s the revelation of a divine presence who speaks in everyone and doesn’t oppose, say, as the Book of Revelation does, the Bride of Christ, the virgin Jerusalem, and the whore of Babylon, but speaks as the whore and the holy one; she speaks as war and peace, she speaks about an enormous range of human experience all together.

Other texts here, like the one called *Trimorphic Protennoia*, speak of the divine presence speaking in everyone. The last one means the triple-formed primal thought. It is from a Jewish mystical tradition, that the eminent form of God in the world is Shekinah (which is presence) or Ruach (which is spirit) or Chokmah (which is wisdom), all of these feminine words in Hebrew and feminine in Greek. It’s as though the presence of a divine speaks often in feminine form.

This you don’t find at all in the kind of apocalyptic tradition that did become part of the New Testament. These other texts were all suppressed. One thing they have in common is a universal vision of humankind, and not just humans but animals, plants, stars, and stones.

**ANDREW DELBANCO:** I would just throw in — this is a gross generalization but I’ll risk it — that there seem to be a lot of people in the world today who see the darkness in the form of a modern updated version of the whore of Babylon; that is to say, the sign of decadence, the sign of the godless culture, is the liberation of women. The most distinctive feature of Western culture that disturbs a great many people who hate Western culture is the emancipation of women.

One could make the argument that in our country we do have a sort of cultural war still going on over the extent to which women should be allowed to control, as we say, their own bodies.

So I think the status of women, the future of women, the role of women, the question of whether women will emerge from millennia of subjugation into a genuinely equal place, is a very divisive issue that seems to be a pretty fundamental fault-line in the world.

**JIM HOBERMAN:** I have nothing to add to that. I’m far from being an expert. But I never heard of the gigolo of Babylon. [Laughter]

**KURT ANDERSEN:** Another question is: “How much of our focus on apocalyptic visions comes from the fact that we innately recognize our own lack of power to create a perfect world, and consequently rely on some external force — God, luck, nature’s capacity for self-renewal — to bring something better into being?”

Perhaps the most intelligent question ever asked by an audience. Please.

**ELAINE PAGELS:** I think that’s a great question. [Laughter]

**ANDREW DELBANCO:** It’s such a good question there’s no answer, but one can mumble. [Laughter]
You know that book that we all read in the 1960s, *The God that Failed*, by Richard Crossman? There have been forms of faith that don’t take conventional religious form, that this is how we are going to get to the millennium, this is how we’re going to get to the utopian society: it’s going to be science; it’s going to be a socialist reorganization of property; it’s going to be, as you suggested, the ascension of artificial intelligence to a point where the computers will protect us from ourselves. But it never seems quite to work out. Maybe that’s when you turn to religion.

**KURT ANDERSEN:** There is another question that suggests looking at it on a sort of Freudian level, which is to say: “If altercations with evil help to constitute selfhood, do stories about the apocalypse serve a cathartic function? How does catharsis operate in apocalyptic fiction and film?”

**JIM HOBERMAN:** I think it’s evident in the movies that have happy endings. In fact, it’s probably true that the happy endings — I mean people save themselves. There’s some luck involved, but in these movies there is very little faith; religion doesn’t really enter into it. Its people turn out to be self-sufficient, they have exhibited a certain amount of solidarity, they may have attributes which can be perceived as good in religious leaders. But to the degree that these movies have a positive message, it’s that people are doing it for themselves. That’s some kind of comfort, I imagine.

**KURT ANDERSEN:** Another movie that I’ll mention that I saw recently, and to my surprise liked a great deal, was *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Killer*, which recast the Civil War as a truly religious apocalyptic battle because the Confederacy was teamed up with vampires. It surprised me that in this day and age, where we don’t call the South evil — we call slavery evil but not the South — and this cast them as evil.

Anyway, you mentioned, Andrew, Lincoln casting the Civil War as sort of the price we paid for the original evil of slavery.

A question from the audience: “Is it possible that Americans feel guilty about the abundance of their good luck, and therefore feel that it can’t last, that we’ll pay the price, and it is that today? As opposed to paying for the evil of slavery, we will now pay the price instead for our century of abundance?”

**ANDREW DELBANCO:** I don’t know a lot of people who feel guilty about their abundance. I wish more did actually. Then they might share it a little bit more generously through willingly paying taxes and the like.

That’s a good question, and I don’t really have a thoughtful answer. Therefore I should be quiet.

Although I do think there is — we’re very anxious right now and there’s a kind of consensus that the next generation will not have it as good as we had it, that the abundance will prove to have been temporary. That’s probably right. The standard of living of the American middle class is probably unsustainable as the world reorganizes itself, and we better get used to it.

**JIM HOBERMAN:** Is that something new, do you think, that feeling?
ANDREW DELBANCO: That’s another tough one. I remember in the 1970s — and there were even some movies, like the Michael Crichton film *Rising Sun* — there were some movies about how Japan was going to squash us. Now it’s China that’s going to squash us.

In the late 19th century there was great racial anxiety that all these swarthy immigrants coming in from eastern and southern Europe were going to overwhelm the “real” Americans, and we are going through that again now with anxiety about Hispanic-Americans and Asian-Americans.

So there is a certain kind of continuity in this anxiety. But it feels a little more realistic now that we’re not in a permanent expansionist state, economically speaking.

KURT ANDERSEN: I feel that along with my theory about Baby Boomers seeing down there the horizon and therefore extrapolating, I do feel as though this sense that the American Project is no longer new and fresh, that sense of declinism can feed into that sense of apocalypse as well.

ELAINE PAGELS: But also we are aware of how much of the world’s goods we use up and how much of the resources we use at the expense of other people in the world. That is changing. I think that is an awareness more than guilt about abundance. It’s about how much we got and how much that deprived other people in the world. That’s going to change.

KURT ANDERSEN: Interesting question from the audience: “Why does Protestantism seem more disposed to the apocalyptic [than, I presume, Catholicism or Judaism]?”

ELAINE PAGELS: Am I the only Protestant? I don’t know. That’s a very interesting question.

When I was working on the Apocalypse, I realized that when you look at a lot of churches in Europe — and I’m thinking of Spanish, Italian, French — you walk out the back door — this is true in the Vatican with the Sistine Chapel — what you see is the saved and the damned. That’s supposed to make you very aware of what the evangelists would say as “Where will you spend eternity?” You’re supposed to worry about that as you walk out. I’m not sure that’s true, although in this country you hear a lot more, from evangelicals I guess, about it.

KURT ANDERSEN: And there’s a second question: “Why are Catholics less apocalyptic than Protestants?”

ELAINE PAGELS: I don’t know. Maybe they’re happier.

KURT ANDERSEN: I wonder, Andrew, if it fits in with your answer to my question earlier about the lack of a state religion in this country, that perhaps in this entrepreneurial religious condition we find ourselves that apocalypse is a more vivid selling tool.

ANDREW DELBANCO: These are really good questions. Protestantism, to the extent that I understand anything about its origins, is motivated, driven, by a profound distrust of institutional authority, the baseline conviction that
institutions are corrupt, and that individuals need to find a way to withdraw from
institutions and maybe form more virtuous communities with other individuals.

That sensibility is still there very strongly in our politics. We’re having some kind of an
inarticulate conversation about how much we do or do not trust government and how
much we want it in our lives. That’s a kind of a Protestant conversation, you might say.

But I’m really not equipped to speak about the apocalyptic dimension of Catholicism or
any other religion.

KURT ANDERSEN: Despite your pseudo-Italian surname?

ANDREW DELBANCO: I’m pseudo in a lot of ways. [Laughter]

KURT ANDERSEN: A question: “I appreciate the link made by J. Hoberman between
the apocalyptic imagination and the nuclear threat. If we engage in comparing cultures, it
is natural to ask about apocalyptic imagination and Japan. So what about Japanese
film?”

JIM HOBERMAN: That’s a good point. You did mention Godzilla in passing, Godzilla,
particularly in the original Japanese version — because it was re-edited to be shown in the
United States, and what was taken out were all the extremely graphic and naturalistic
references to how the war was experienced in Japan — if you see the original Japanese
version, you have a rather downbeat, in some ways melodramatic, movie about wartime
— privation, the fire bombing of Tokyo, people being displaced from their homes — in the
context of this absolutely inexplicable prehistoric thing that has risen out of Tokyo Bay,
that is clearly radioactive, and there’s no other way to look at it, as opposed to a
manifestation of the bomb. So it’s a very powerful movie.

I think it’s comparable to Dr. Strangelove actually in attempting to visualize this,
although the Japanese perspective is quite different since the worst thing did happen to
them, so they’re dealing with the aftermath of it.

The movie was so popular that, as you probably know, there were about thirty or forty
versions of it. Godzilla ultimately became a kind of a good monster.

The thing that struck me when I was in Japan in the 1980s was that you could buy little
plush velvet Godzillas. I brought one home for my daughter. Godzilla had become like a
mascot.

I think that is a really fascinating example of a culture giving itself an explanation for
something that happened and also a way to work it through, let’s say.

KURT ANDERSEN: Another very smart question that follows almost as though
ordained by Providence upon that one: “What effect does a truly apocalyptic event have
on a culture’s perspective in Apocalypse? I think of post-World War II Europe. Did the
extreme trauma of that contribute to or take away from apocalyptic expectations?”

ELAINE PAGELS: We have an example in New York — I remember when I was living
here in the 1990s — of Menachem Schneerson, the rabbi in Brooklyn. I was thinking
when you said that of what happened in the 1990s with Menachem Schneerson, the rabbi
in Brooklyn whose father-in-law had lived through the terrible catastrophes in Europe and the death camps. The legend grew up that his son-in-law, Menachem Schneerson, was the Messiah because the rabbi had said, “Either this is the birth pangs of the Messiah or there is no God.” Since that was unacceptable, many concluded that this was the birth pangs of the Messiah, the Messiah is coming.

You remember that when Menachem Schneerson was in the hospital in New York, I remember that in The New York Times every day his followers would say, “He cannot die; he’s the Messiah.” When he died, some said, “He’s coming back.”

It was like watching Christianity being born all over again. I saw people in Israel who were waiting for him. There was a huge billboard on the West Side Highway that said, “Moshiach Has Come,” with a picture of Menachem Schneerson.

I think that’s one way people respond.

KURT ANDERSEN: Another one — again as providence — for Elaine Pagels: “If there has not been an opportunity yet, please explain the handout, especially the Trimorphic Protennoia.”

ELAINE PAGELS: Trimorphic Protennoia in Greek means the triple-formed primal thought. It is supposed to be the first thought that occurs to anybody in spiritual consciousness. This thought is the thought of the divine, it’s the awareness of God. That is why this voice speaks, as I said, in feminine form, because it is an imminent form of the divine presence.

I don’t have it here, but she says, “I cry out in everyone. I am the true voice.” Not everyone hears her, but she speaks in everyone. That is typical of these kinds of apocalyptic writings in which everyone has access to the divine intrinsically, without a trauma, without a catastrophe, if they will listen.

KURT ANDERSEN: Finally, the last question: “We may all have apocalyptic fears, but only some of us believe it’s a good thing. Those who believe the latter seem very dangerous to me. Am I the only one?”

JIM HOBERMAN: No, I don’t think so. I think that it’s — well, depending on — there are different kinds of apocalypses. There are apocalypses where some people are saved and others are not.

To go back to the thinking of a twelve-year-old — I must be permanently there — I was very disturbed when I was a kid because I lived in an apartment house and the fallout shelter was in the basement — I mean it was like no kind of fallout shelter — whereas I could see on television and in Life magazine people with what we called private houses could build these fallout shelters. That seemed so unfair to me. How could God permit this anti-democratic distribution of —

KURT ANDERSEN: “Not only will I die a virgin but I’ll die not in a good fallout shelter.” [Laughter]

Elaine?

ELAINE PAGELS: What I came to really think is one of the great liabilities of this
apocalyptic thinking is the way it divides the world between good and evil people. What this Apocalypse does — if you ask, “Who goes into the lake of eternal fire to burn forever?” John’s Apocalypse says, “the evil, the filthy, the dogs, the sexually promiscuous, the abominable.” Now, that could be just about anybody you don’t like. [Laughter]

But if you look in the Gospel of Matthew, where the parable of the sheep and the goats is attributed to Jesus, and he is asked the question “Well, what about the judgment?” you remember the answer, that in that parable Jesus says: The Son of Man will speak to those who go into the kingdom and say, “I was naked and you gave me clothes, and I was hungry and you gave me food, and I was in prison and you visited me, I was sick and you came,” and those who don’t go in are those who lack compassion. So it’s about specific deeds the way Matthew tells the story.

The way the Book of Revelation tells the story, that’s why you can read it by people on both sides of the same war — whether it’s Nazis or the Allies — can both read it as if they are the good fighting against the evil because the evil are spoken of in these absolutely meaningless kinds of vituperative language. It teaches us that the conflict is between good and evil people, and the response to the evil people is to annihilate them.

KURT ANDERSEN: Do I sense that you want the last word, Andrew?

ANDREW DELBANCO: What I want actually is to give the last word or the last paraphrase to Mr. Lincoln again, if I may, by which I mean there is Apocalypse and there is Apocalypse.

I said that his second Inaugural Address is an apocalyptic interpretation of the Civil War. But the greatness of the speech, why it’s so powerfully moving no matter how many times you’ve read it, is it is precisely what Elaine just said that he doesn’t do. He doesn’t say, “This was a judgment on our enemies.” He says, “This was a judgment on all of us,” and he refers to slavery, as my colleague Eric Foner uses this as the subtitle in his recent book about Lincoln, as “American slavery,” not “Southern slavery,” that we were all implicated in this, the Boston banks and the New York merchants and everybody else.

So the Apocalypse in that sense doesn’t lead to a threshing division of the world into the sheep and the goats, which I’m not so happy with, but it leads to a different view of human beings and a certain kind of humility about oneself. That’s to me a pretty good use of Apocalypse.

KURT ANDERSEN: I will end with a couple of stanzas from a Robert Lowell poem that I came across as I was doing research for tonight, which was published almost precisely fifty years ago. It was called “Fall 1961.” Lowell wrote:

Back and forth, back and forth

goes the tock, tock, tock

... 

All autumn, the chafe and jar

of nuclear war;

we have talked our extinction to death.

Thank you all.

JIM McCARTIN: Thank you, Kurt, and thanks also, of course, to Elaine Pagels, Andrew
Delbanco, and Jim Hoberman. We've learned a lot tonight.

Before we adjourn, however, I want to invite all of you to return to Fordham for the Center on Religion and Culture's next event: “My Generation: Muslim Millennials on the Future of Islam.” You will find a flyer about this event available outside on our tables. It will take place on Wednesday, October 17th, in Pope Auditorium on the other side of the building.

Please also make note of December 11th, when we will host a Forum entitled “Call and Response: How American Catholic Sisters have Shaped the Church Since Vatican II.”

Finally, if you are not currently on our mailing list or if you’ve never formally signed up to be on our list, please stop by the table to do so.

Many thanks to all of you for coming, and thanks again to our panel. Have a wonderful evening.
Award-winning journalist David Gibson assumed the title of director of Fordham University’s Center on Religion and Culture on July 1. In a wide ranging interview, he discusses his vision for the center’s future, including his dream panel discussion, and where Star Wars fits in it all. 45 episodes. Welcome to Player FM! Player FM is scanning the web for high-quality podcasts for you to enjoy right now. It's the best podcast app and works on Android, iPhone, and the web. Signup to sync subscriptions across devices. Take it with you. Start listening to #Fordham News on your phone right now with Player FM's free mobile app, the best podcasting experience on both iPhone and Android. Your subscriptions will sync with your account on this website too.