

It's the end of the world... again



Varying threats to humanity are found in *11-11-11* (main image), *2012* (above) and *Independence Day* (below)



As yet another prophecy – and accompanying action movie – predicts the apocalypse this week, *Rob Garratt* looks at the genre's history, and ponders cinema's preoccupation with the end of the world

As you read these words, the world as we know it is either on the verge of an apocalyptic collapse – or it could be all over already.

The day of reckoning is November 11 – Friday to me and you, but 11-11-11 to your average fanatic – or cinema lover. According to popular prophecy, the exceptional mathematical properties of the date mean it cannot pass without some kind of irrevocable metaphysical shift. In the new movie *11-11-11* – set to be released in the UAE on that very date – this threat comes as a portal to another world opens, letting through an alien entity to wreak havoc.

Film fans will inevitably lap it up, and nowhere is that truer than in Dubai. The last big end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it film, *2012* (2009) – which gives us a good 13 months more to live after predicting a 12-12-12 apocalypse – was the fourth biggest blockbuster to grace the UAE's screens, ever.

But what is it about a looming end-is-nigh scenario that seduces directors and cinema-goers alike? It could be the universality of the theme; while only some people

care about warring factions of transforming robots, or Jennifer Aniston's latest fictional relationship strife, absolutely everyone has a vested interest in the world's existence.

Based on the premise that a given date will hold an irrevocable, nasty fate for mankind, *11-11-11* and *2012* sit in familiar company. In *The Fifth Element* (1997), Bruce Willis is enlisted to help thwart an evil black

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planet destined to extinguish the Earth in 2263, while the threat comes from religious prophecies in *The Omen* and the dawn of the year 2000 in *Last Night* (both from 1998).

Millennium-fever was milked twice more that year with movies that predicted the end of the world

not in scripture, but in the stars – apocalyptic-asteroid fables *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* (yes, a sweaty Bruce Willis again).

The natural world also provided the fresh threat of a new Ice Age in *The Day After Tomorrow*, from the paranoid lens of Roland Emmerich; the director also behind both *2012* and *Independence Day* (1996), a film that leads us into a whole subgenre of apocalyptic scenarios: aliens.

Invaders from outer space have threatened the Earth onscreen countless times. According to theorists the genre exploded in the '50s as a way of channeling America's anxieties about the rise of communism. The cinematic genre is neatly book-ended by two takes on HG Wells' *War Of The Worlds*: the tale provoked mass-panic in the US when performed as a (seemingly real) radio play by Orson Welles in 1938, while Steven Spielberg's 2005 movie, starring Tom Cruise, is one of the better examples of the genre.

A mutation of the apocalypse brings us to zombies; ever since George Romero's classic *Night, Dawn and*

Day Of The Dead trilogy the undead has provided a startlingly visceral threat to humankind, feeding off cinema-goers' fears of dwindling individualism and growing alienation in an increasingly consumerist world.

And if it's not aliens or zombies out to get us, it's robots. Will Smith saved the world for a second time by fighting off artificial rather than extraterrestrial life in futuristic thriller *I-Robot* (2004). But what the bulk of these films have in common is a consistent conclusion – the threat is never realised, the apocalypse is averted and popcorn-chomping audiences go home happy in the knowledge mankind will live to fight another day.

However there is one notable exception to be found in this muddled, man-versus-machine genre; at the close of the third installment of *The Terminator* saga, (*Rise Of The Machines*, 2003) it becomes clear the machines were always going to rise, that 'Judgement Day' was inevitable. This brave move rendered all the lead characters' efforts over the previous three movies – and all of the audiences' precious time – useless. A similar poignancy is achieved in *Planet Of The Apes* (1968), with the discovery of a post-apocalyptic earth, and in British zombie thriller *28 Weeks Later* (2007), which hints that the virus will win out.

While it is unlikely *11-11-11* will conclude with an unhappy ending, looking at the sense of despair these films created sheds fresh light on the genre's appeal. Taking a chance is a thrill, and an audience contemplating the end of the entire human world makes a much larger emotional investment than any other scenario. But the flipside is that when the apocalypse is averted, there's a much bigger payout as the credits roll.

So sit back and enjoy the ride, and if we get through 11-11-11, then let the countdown to 2012 begin...