Dressing for the Apocalypse: Fashion at the End of the World

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ow do you dress for the end of the world? If you have paid any attention to the news lately, this is doubtless a thought that's crossed your mind, whether you care about fashion or not. With Zooms replacing conference tables, pajamas have become the new business wear and pants are largely optional. The apocalypse is a well-explored cinematic subject, and in these times of extreme uncertainty (and extra hours of availability for movie-watching), apocalyptic films can be a subversive source of sartorial inspiration. If we're really going to be living in a dystopian future, we may as well investigate how we can dress the part.

Apocalyptic films come in many different varieties. Seeing as the subject matter involves a broken-down society, there are no rules: Dusty western aesthetics can mingle with industrial punk (*Mad Max: Fury Road*); a wedding gown can feel like a shroud (*Melancholia*); logos and flag insignias can become grotesque parodies of themselves (*Idiocracy*). In a category of films that spans science fiction, fantasy, prestige drama and satire, the fashion possibilities are endless, but the most common guiding principles are either crushing conformity or stylish rebellion. When society breaks down, dress codes do, too. The apocalypse is often presented as gritty and colorless, so the characters out fending for themselves in these broken worlds dress for survival above all else.

In the extremely bleak Cormac McCarthy adaptation *The Road*, a father and son wander through a wasteland in the wake of an extinction event. They wear utilitarian layers: hoodies under thick coats, gloves, backpacks. The colors range from brownish to grayish. The clothes look like something that could have been bought off the rack. When the costumes in an apocalypse film don't loudly announce themselves as costumes, there's an added layer of existential terror that arises from seeing recognizable sartorial elements. If we find ourselves wandering through a world of unimaginable horror, will a dull puffer coat be able to protect us?

It might seem strange to refer to any movies set at the end of the world as escapist, but the more action-packed and stylized films in this group are just that, and become even more so when we consider just how soul-deadening and aesthetically displeasing our current timeline is. A viral tweet about *Mad Max: Fury Road* amusingly described the film as a tale of models trying to find their way to Burning Man. Images of an armored, bald Charlize Theron have become shorthand for "badass" womanhood. Costume designer Jenny Beavan is a woman of great range — she first made a name for herself designing the genteel period costumes of Merchant Ivory films, the polar opposite of her Oscar-winning looks for *Fury Road.* The styling in the film is full of sandy fabric scraps and intimidating metal, like a sword-and-sandal epic reimagined for a chaotic future.

Over-the-top costuming often lends itself to films having cult followings, and apocalypse films are no exception here. The 1995 comic book adaptation, *Tank Girl,* was a box-office bomb, but its hodgepodge, riot grrrl-inflected style lives on as a poppy predecessor to

recent films such as *Birds of Prey* and countless '90s-channeling Instagram girls. The film exemplifies how contemporary fashion can mesh with visions of the future. The protagonist's bleached hair, graphic tees and tough yet femme accessories are the '90s equivalent of all those go-go boots and mini dresses in '60s visions of the future. The vision of a drought-ravaged 2033 (not too long from now...) is dark yet campy. Any apocalypse that features a cameo from Iggy Pop has to have some anarchic fun in store.

In a dystopia, forcing people to dress alike is often a manifestation of evil power. The red robes of *The Handmaid's Tale* are a potent visual signifier of a society hell-bent on controlling women's bodies. The wives in *Mad Max: Fury Road* are the inverse of this puritanical styling — they're all dressed alike in pale, skimpy rags, and while it may be "sexy" on the surface, the uniformity suggests something creepier. In *The Hunger Games*, the young protagonists dress mostly in darkly colored, utilitarian ensembles while the higher-ups dress far more extravagantly. At the end of the world, personal expression through fashion is often a privilege in which only the elite can partake.

Idiocracy, the 2006 film frequently cited for its prescience regarding our dumb political moment, is the opposite of an aesthetically austere apocalypse. In this vision of the future, everyone wears bright colors and corporate logos. While flashes of color in an apocalypse are always welcome, here they are rendered queasy and garish. Everyone is a walking billboard, and the shiny, street-wear influenced garments recall some of the tacky fast fashion made under poor labor conditions and sold on the cheap that's popular today. These fashions just might be the closest thing to the athleisure that's become a pandemic uniform for so many.

It's often felt like the 2010s and beyond don't have much to offer in terms of a defining sartorial style. There are yoga pants and crop tops and Kardashian-style bandage dresses, and as a whole, the fashion of the last few years feels undefined and not particularly exciting. Dystopian visions often present a vision of a future where stylistic influences work in more exciting ways than they do now. *Blade Runner* (a film which, as of last year, actually shows "the past," given its 2019 setting) is frequently cited by the fashion world for the way it merges gritty yet glamorous '40s film noir and '80s punk. The Replicants are perfectly dressed for a moody, rain-soaked world. In *The Matrix*, another touchstone of style in sci-fi conversations, the look is sleek and goth-inflected, with leather, long coats and sunglasses. The ensembles are simple yet iconic — you can't go wrong with all black.

The dystopia we live in today isn't particularly fashionable, and when stuck at home indefinitely, nice clothes begin to feel like the stuff of fantasy. The extensive body of apocalyptic and dystopian films can serve as not just a temporary distraction but also a future source of fashion inspiration. When "normal life" (whatever that means) resumes, perhaps we'll all be more conscious of just how our clothes will protect us, whether they offer utilitarian function or give us some much-needed aesthetic enjoyment.

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