

Final fantasy

THE END IS, LIKE, ONLY THREE YEARS AWAY. OR IS IT? BRE EATON DEBUNKS THE LATEST DOOMSDAY FLICK.

A television news reporter in the year 2012 stands in front of a temple, explaining how a mass suicide adheres to a prophecy that began with the Maya — the end of time will occur on Dec. 21. Trembling worshippers are crushed as the Sistine Chapel's ceiling masterpiece caves in, beginning with a strategically placed eruption where God's hand reaches out to Adam: symbolically leaving us separated from the creator.

"I thought we had more time," John Cusack whispers, desperately driving a limo carrying his ex-wife and kids to the Santa Monica Airport runway where a waiting plane enables them to escape the destruction of Los Angeles.

We're doomed.

Just as we were in director Roland Emmerich's other major destruction films "Independence Day" and "The Day After Tomorrow." Instead of evading aliens and paying our debt for causing global warning, his latest doomsday film, "2012," bases our demise on the end of the Maya Long Count Calendar. While many claim Emmerich's previous global destroyers don't exist, this time around the enemy is time itself. The premise of the Columbia Pictures epic opening in theaters nationwide on none other than Friday the 13th does have some factual basis — the Maya were a highly advanced ancient Mesoamerican civilization who made laudable developments in mathematics, astrology, language and calendaring, and their calendar does indeed end on the 21st of December 2012.

Just as our modern calendar would seem arbitrary or confusing to someone who lived in ancient times, the complex Maya Long Count Calendar with its three calendars in one is difficult for the uninitiated to understand. Hollywood is not afraid to stir a pot of ignorance into fear if they stand to profit from it, even with a claim as extreme as the world's demise.

"Everyone looks at the end of 2012 as the end of the world, but it's not," Sandra B. Schreffler, professor of Spanish and linguistics at Roger Williams University and a native of Guatemala, who has studied Maya culture and literature.

"The 21st of December 2012 will be the end of this particular cycle for the Maya civilization. The idea is that the last day really does not signify the arrival of calamity. Instead, it is the arrival of a new cosmic conscious and the beginning of a new civilization in terms of a spiritual transition. It's not that human beings are going to disappear, it's just that consciousness, point of view and spirituality will transform, which will change civilization."

The Maya recognized the pattern of such changes occurring at the end of their calendar cycles, such as the coinci-



Disaster porn. A 10.5 earthquake sends California falling into the sea in '2012,' coming to a theater near you on Friday the 13th. Why do we believe that our civilization will someday come to an end? PHOTO COURTESY OF COLUMBIA TRISTAR MARKETING GROUP



Get a grip. If the Maya calendar doesn't continue after Dec. 21, 2012, then what will follow? Lisa Lu, left, and Amanda Peet, right, assess the damage in Roland Emmerich's latest doomsday movie. PHOTO BY JOE LEDERER

dental arrival of the Spanish explorers who destroyed their civilization. While this correlation may corroborate the film's claims, the truth is that the Maya weren't annihilated — their descendants who survived European influence still thrive in Guatemala today.

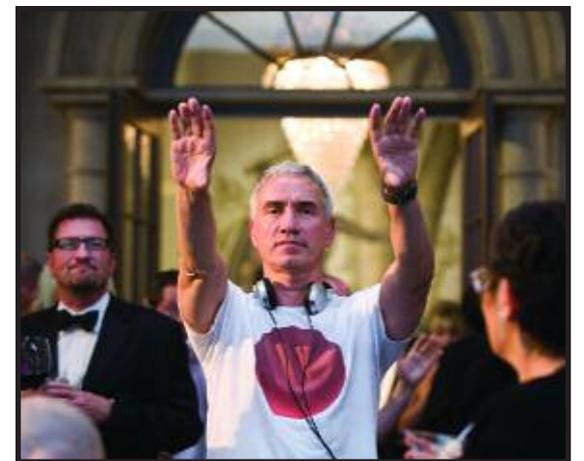
But the true story isn't going to translate into big numbers at the box office so Hollywood embellished it to cash in on the human tendency to obsess about our imminent demise. On Oct. 1, Columbia Pictures' parent company, Sony Pictures Entertainment, launched a multimillion-dollar promotional "road block" to debut the "2012" trailer nationwide on 450 North American television outlets. The

media blitz aimed to get the footage in front of 90 percent of all households watching commercial-supported television, or about 110 million viewers, *Variety* reported. Viewers were encouraged to "Find out the Truth" by Googling 2012. The search engine points them to the film's Web site where they can vote for the leader of the post-2012 world from a pool of survivors, the election being managed by the fictitious Institute for Human Continuity.

The invitation to search the Web seeks to capitalize on the gossip magazine and Internet hype that already exists about the date and maintain the momentum surrounding our fearful curiosity over

the end of the world. As witnessed on Oct. 30, 1938, when Orson Welles and his fellow Mercury Theatre colleagues aired "The War of the Worlds" and had frightened radio listeners pulling out shotguns and hiding in their basements in fear of an alien attack, there's nothing like good old mass hysteria to help craft a story about how we're all going to die.

"I don't know if there is something comforting about putting the responsibility in the hands of other beings," Schreffler said. "We are people of extremes — it's either great or awful, otherwise it's boring."



Man with a vision. Director and co-writer Roland Emmerich, shown on the set of '2012,' has stuck every natural disaster you can imagine into the film. PHOTO BY JOE LEDERER