

# Christopher Nolan's Interstellar: A Secular End Times Myth

Christopher Nolan's Interstellar is a galactic epic--and the first biblical end times narrative for secular science fiction.

[David Crow](#) April 1, 2015

*The Blu-ray for Interstellar, the latest epic from Christopher Nolan, is out now, and there is still much to discuss. Indeed, if one gets past the mechanics of the ending, it can be a downright spiritual experience...*

End of Days, the Day of Judgment, Gozer the Gozerian or whatever else you want to call it, since the dawn of man we as a species have often wondered how that time would come to a close. As a result nearly every religion has had its end times narrative, usually culminating in a cyclical rebirth with Heaven on Earth. Christopher Nolan's **Interstellar** is no different in its attempt to close the cinematic cycle that began shortly after **2001: A Space Odyssey's** opening overture. And indeed, the most remarkable facet of Nolan's science fiction magnum opus is that it mostly succeeds in its audacity to create a 21<sup>st</sup> century parable that looks past the end of the world—finding true salvation without once invoking prayer.

**Interstellar** is also of course this weekend's big budget Hollywood studio picture, intent on selling an epic space adventure yarn on a grand scale. If you had the fortune of seeing this film on 70mm in an IMAX theater, then you realize that there have been few grander scales ever attempted in the medium. Yet, while crafting a space opera that is both profound and ponderous with its overlapping interests in hard science fiction and

Spielbergian sentimentality, Nolan seems most transfixed, like his characters, on the fate of humanity, and what we as a species will face in the coming century. As Matthew McConaughey's Cooper quips in the Brother Nolans' patented lecture-dialogue that "we used to look up at the sky and wonder about our place in the stars; now, we just look down and worry about our place in the dirt."

Without ever once explicitly using the words "climate change" or "global warming," Nolan is conjuring modern day prophecy—science—to foresee a new kind of eschatological apocalypse, but for once it is not in service of a science fiction dystopia (words that have become synonymous in the last 30 years). Rather, Nolan aims to create a scientific euphoria, instilling viewers with a new genesis story brought about by our own ingenuity. More than a clarion call for NASA, *Interstellar* is a secular pep talk about self-determination in the face of final climatologist judgment.



At first glance, the whole crux of the movie hinges on the benevolence of a greater force giving mankind the ability to weather a dust bowl so severe that it appears biblical when compared to the actual Great Depression of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In these darkest days, when a sparsely populated world can grow only corn, an intellect of unknown origin creates a wormhole past the rings of Saturn that could be humanity's only hope. While the film is centered on the universality of a parent's love and the promises that we make our children, its driving momentum comes from an initially unknown benefactor who mysteriously appears in a child's bedroom through the manipulation of gravity.

During much of the film's first act, Cooper is simply preoccupied with surviving a future that doesn't seem that far off from recent [UN World Food Programme projections](#). As a result, he is quick to dismiss his daughter, the

young and formidable Mackenzie Foy in the role of Murph, and her ramblings about “ghosts” that are haunting her bookshelf. Along with the characters, we soon learn this is a gravitational anomaly created by a “they,” which the film’s NASA treats with the giddy reverence of the Lord in Sunday school. The film’s other main explorer who will chart our future across the stars, Brand (Anne Hathaway), is the daughter of a scientific patriarch who has imbued her with a zealous love for these “fifth-dimensional beings.” They don’t fully understand how these anomalies are created or the total extent of what’s in that mysterious galaxy on the other end of a wormhole, but they are in awe of it. One could even speculate that they only believe Cooper must pilot the Endurance because *they* led him to them.

Their fervor is hardly any different than Murph and Cooper, who initially stare at the dust-divided clues of the aliens’ existence with the piety of the converted. This point is underlined when Coop’s father-in-law Donald (an underutilized John Lithgow) passes by and snarks that they can come downstairs when they’re done “praying to it.” It’s almost as spiritually charged as Hans Zimmer’s organ-based score.

***Interstellar***’s staggering vision of space is only made possible because of this vaguely (and intentionally) supernatural force that creates the pathway for an out-of-this-world adventure. The whole film posits on the touch of the celestial, be they ghosts, aliens, or gods. This murkiness is interchangeable since in most Hollywood science fiction, they’re all of equal magic.

In the contemporaries that ***Interstellar*** seeks to stand alongside, it matters little if forces are extraterrestrial or metaphysical. The Monolith in Stanley Kubrick’s **2001** could be from God or a UFO, either way it is undeniably divine to that film’s ape-men. Similarly, Robert Zemeckis’ truly underrated ***Contact*** (which incidentally also features McConaughey as a Christian minister), is a two-hour allegory on the symbiosis between science and

religion. Yet ***Interstellar***, with its equally foreboding alien beacon into the great unknown, is no more reliant on God than it is of the little green men that crackpots use as an alternative faith these days. As the end of the film confirms, God nor any alien life created these wormholes and anomalies—*humans did*. Cooper is the ghost that haunts young Murphy's bedroom.

In a stunning third act revelation that will likely cause an equal number of people to both love and hate the ***Interstellar*** plot, it is discovered that the fifth-dimensional beings that Brand is so inspired by are actually a far more advanced futuristic strand of humanity that has mastered gravity-manipulation and time itself—channeling the quantum physics of black holes to turn any lifespan into a living, breathing library of archival access. There are no aliens in ***Interstellar***, nor an omnipotent being, just humanity looking out for the betterment of its fellow man.

Not only is this a rejection of two-thirds of the movie's exposition, it even is an about-face on [the 2007 \*Interstellar\* screenplay](#) drafted by Jonathan Nolan for Steven Spielberg once upon a time. In that original vision for the story, there is both primitive life on the *single* alien world that Cooper and Brand visit, as well as an intelligent design that has mankind's best interest at heart. Obviously, both aspects are entirely absent of the romanticized humans-only finished film. Instead of godlike aliens creating the time-loop that allows humanity to master gravity and space station survival, it is Cooper reaching out to his daughter by accepting the role of a ghost for her, a designation he once feared becoming, fulfilling their shared destinies. In doing so, he passes along a preternatural "vision" that allows her to save mankind from certain extinction on our dying world.

There is no good and evil in this story, it is only people and the vastness of space. In a bit of acclamation so glowing that humanists like Thomas Jefferson would applaud, Brand extols the virtue of man and how their

mission across the stars represents the best of the species. Cooper asks her if she thinks nature can be evil, which she denies, causing Cooper to smirk his retort: the only imperfection then is what they as humans bring along with them.

And to be sure, there is some true imperfection in their group's human leader, the aptly named Dr. Mann, played with effete intellectual arrogance by Matt Damon. As the only truly antagonistic presence in the whole three-hour experience, Mann is a self-admitted coward who embodies the role of the turncoat that goes native in ancient frontier and explorer narratives. However, even in his faintheartedness, Mann is understandable: he's been removed from any other human contact for some 30 years, thus his desire to embrace the gloriousness of his brotherhood is treated sympathetically, if miscalculated in its desperation.

But by and large, humans are a marvelous breed in *Interstellar*, and they chart a course through the cosmos with the sort of manifest destiny not seen in sci-fi for decades. The world may be ending, but our ability to turn to science and solve our problems is almost never in doubt, particularly when Cooper discovers that there is a way to converse with Murph that spans time and space like an overeager *Doctor Who* episode. Murph, now played by Jessica Chastain as an adult, reads the signs in the tealeaves and becomes the benefactor of her entire species. With science, she saves the world.

Whether Murph is the ultimate messiah for mankind or Cooper is—after all, he is the one with a second coming years after people stop believing in his return—is ambiguous, but like most end time narratives, there is a rejuvenation. According to Hinduism, mankind, which is currently in its fourth and most decadent age, will one day be redeemed when Vishnu incarnates for at least the tenth time into his final form, Kalki, allowing a new cycle to start. Islam believes that Mahdi and Isa will one day join forces to triumph

over a false messiah (Masih ad-Dajjal), and of course Christianity believes that Christ will return and banish Satan first into an underground pit for a thousand years and then into a lake of sulfur, permitting the Kingdom of Heaven to reign on Earth in a New Jerusalem forevermore—mostly Judaism's endgame except with way more Christ.

This cyclical revival of Heaven on Earth, essentially a happily ever after utopia, is what ***Interstellar*** chases too, albeit just not on Earth. By creating their own new genesis during a time of global warming revelations, Cooper and Murph's scientific zealotry saves man and sets him on a new mission to repopulate our world with Brand in a Garden of Eden. This is a new beginning for Adam and Eve, embodied by two people so defiantly logical that it must make some kind of sense.

Humanity saw the world end, finding in its absence a rapturous new beginning.

Several years ago, Nick Dear adapted Mary Shelley's ***Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*** for the stage in a Danny Boyle production. While explaining his approach to the material, Dear called Mary Shelley's novel—generally the first widely regarded work of science fiction in existence—an unintentional creation myth for the secular world; a genesis story without God. In ***Interstellar***, that Alpha may have finally found its Omega.

*This article was first published on November 10, 2014.*

*\*\*\*Also, feel free to go further into the fifth dimension (or challenge my Interstellar interpretations) by following me on Twitter with [@DCrowsNest](https://twitter.com/DCrowsNest).*

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