The End of the World

Malus puis tost alors mourra, viendra,
De gens et bestes une horrible defaite:
Puis tout à coup la vengeance on vera,
Cent, main, soif, faim quand courra la comet.

Michel de Nostredame, *Centurie II: Quatrain 62*

[Malus will then soon die and there will come a terrible destruction of people and animals. Suddenly vengeance will be revealed, a hundred hands, thirst and hunger when the comet will pass.]

Harbingers of doom have been generating business for centuries.

In 1555, a hitherto unknown French physician published a collection of quatrains – four-line stanzas – with a twist: each of the more than 1000 verses was a snippet of a prediction, appearing to foretell such cataclysmic events as world wars, famines, disasters, and the rise and fall of three despots, whom he called "antichrists" – the last of which, "Malus", would be born in "greater Arabia".

Thanks, in large part, to these doomsday prophesies, Nostradamus turned into something of a pop icon of the sixteenth century, and *The Centuries* remains a bestseller, even if the original Medieval French text has undergone countless revisions and interpretations to cater to modern tastes.

Hollywood got its start in the end-of-the-world frenzy four centuries later, cranking out considerably more prophecies than anything even the French seer could have imagined. From hyper contagious mutant viruses to machines that have assumed control of the future to Earth-shattering collisions with comets, movies have already killed us in a kaleidoscope of ways.

If anything, the ghoulish, peril-and-perish genre is more popular than ever as people look for answers and direction in an age of gloomy headlines and uncertain economies. The latest ancient prophecy of doom turned Hollywood blockbuster is *2012*, a $200-million production of untold destruction, mayhem and death. Using a murky blend of Amerindian legends as its premise, the doomsday scenario centres on claims that the end of the Mayan calendar – the winter solstice of 2012 – will signal the end of time when an obscure planet crashes into Earth.

To be sure, humanity has a warped, almost morbid fascination with its own demise; and there is nothing quite like pessimism to bring out our wallets. In terms of ticket sales alone, *2012* raked in a stellar $65.2 million at the US box office in its debut weekend.

But in the wake of the film's release, it is the online debate and rumours about the end of the world that have taken a life of their own. Indeed, the rumours have been so widespread and

passionate that the US space agency NASA felt compelled last month to state publicly that there was no such planet on a collision course with ours: officially, at least, 22 December 2012 is set to be just another, Armageddon-free day.

No planetary alignments are on the cards either for the foreseeable future and even if they were to line up like neat billiard balls, scientists insist that the effect on our planet would be negligible to none.

This spike in interest in pseudoscience and Earth-derailing paranormal activity – including theories about a pole reversal, geomagnetic storms and wobbly tectonic plates – is particularly curious coming as it does in the run-up to the international summit on climate change in Copenhagen, in what arguably constitutes mankind's last chance to keep global warming in check.

Indeed, it is also odd why – as a species – we choose to pay to see humanity nearly wiped out. Of course, movies make cataclysms fun in a grisly kind of way, especially when they occur on a planetary scale.

But perhaps a deeper reason is that the disaster genre provides cathartic release. After all, the best stratagem against terror is to look at it in the face, literally – and this is hardly new. Ancient man lived in a constant nightmare. In order to screw up his courage, he depicted himself as half-beast, half-human and he worshipped wolves and mythical monsters. This could explain the painted scenes, blood-splattered by stone-age artists, of lions, horned beasts and all manner of wild fauna in perpetual combat.

Civilization has barely changed these basic existential phobias. In addition to creating a calendar with an expiry date (that would be exploited by film studio execs), the Mayans painted murals that depict tortures that even Gestapo sadist would find unsettling.

But whether futurity appears set to follow the Mayan path of ruin is up for debate. The chances are better than even that the Gregorian calendar will survive a while longer than 2012. Even Nostradamus's quatrains refer to events up to 3786 AD, which to his diehard fans would seem to indicate the real year of the end of the world. This later date is more realistic if for no other reason than that it provides humanity with enough time to raise the global temperature irreversibly to boiling point.

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Allez les Bleus!

The captain of the French team kissed the World Cup trophy and then lifted it high above his head to mark France's historic World Cup victory. The crowd in the bleachers was ecstatic; French tricolour banners and flags waved to the beat of "*Allez les Bleus!*"

This is not a flashback to France's extraordinary win over Brazil at the Stade de France back in 1998. Nor is this a flight of fancy. The celebrations, which took place last month, were real

enough as the boys from France ran around the pitch with their prize to the rousing adulation from their fans.

The contrast could not be starker.

In the FIFA World Cup that was held in South Africa, France was the laughingstock of the football world. Seen as undeserving competitors even before the tournament began, les Bleus never made it past the first round, losing to the host nation after a very public display of Gallic arrogance by both the players and their coach. Even in Paris, fans who gathered near the Eiffel Tower to watch France's last match on video screens booed their own team and cheered for South Africa.

But at the end of last month's alternative world cup tournament in Gaza, France beat Jordan in an exhilarating final and carted off the 36-cm Coupe Du Monde Statuette. Ad victorem spolias: to the victors go the spoils of war in more ways than one. Unlike the 18-carat gold trophy, which is worth more than $10 million, the winning prize was a replica made from melted shrapnel from Israeli missiles that were dropped on Gaza in 2008.

Sixteen teams took part in the alternative world cup, mostly made up from players from the amateur Gaza Football League alongside foreign workers from the respective countries. To be sure, the tournament will not lead to fame or lucrative European contracts for any of the players, and the two-week event barely raised an eyebrow from pundits and sports commentator alike for its amateurism.

But to judge from the loud support and excitement of the fans, there was just as much passion on the dust-swept playing fields of Gaza – only the deafening vuvuzelas were notably absent. Indeed, the boys from Palestine proved that, far from being a bad thing, amateurism was at the heart of the game – a word that originates from Old French meaning lover as in fervent about an activity.

In that sense, the parallel world cup was perhaps a more faithful reflection of the original game, whose strict set of rules were first laid down in 1869 by the Football Association in England. Before those rules and regulations, the game was played ferociously – almost akin to war. In medieval times, towns and hamlets across Europe played against rival towns and hamlets and indulged in punching, biting and cutting into the flesh of players during the course of the game. There was no limit to the number of players as entire communities would be involved and the game would last the entire day. Moreover, only one "goal" could be scored, which was to move the ball to a predefined spot that had been agreed on before the start. Football was played in the name of honour and valour, and was often used as a medium to settle scores with enemies.

Interestingly, in a bid to limit the number of physical assaults and bodily harm, the Football Association discouraged any kind of handling of the ball. However, another leading club representing Rugby school disagreed with that, which resulted in a split and the creation of two separate games, rugby and football (known as soccer in Britain and America).

While football has grown steadily in fame to become the world's most popular spectator sport, these days it is money rather than fancy footwork that makes the World Cup go round. FIFA earned an estimated $2 billion from the games in South Africa in the sale of television and marketing rights. And all bids to host the tournament are assessed in terms of how much revenue can be generated for FIFA as well as such practical considerations as the infrastructural level and security arrangements of a bidding nation. For those reasons, Qatar stands a good chance of pulling off its bid for 2022, thereby becoming the first to host the World Cup in the Arab region.

But in a less formal sense, that honour has already gone to the boys from Gaza who reminded us that football used to be less about sponsorship and prize money and more about the fun of kicking a ball. More to the point, they brought the rest of the world to shame by showing how, from one of the poorest and most populated and conflict-stricken parts of the planet, football could unite people.

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Hummus

The emotive power of food cannot be overstated. Some of the world's most vociferous conflicts have easily moved into kitchens, with historic disagreements over common foodstuffs. For instance, Irish Protestants and Catholics have lightly bickered over whiskey; and Greeks and Turks have feuded over coffee for centuries.

But it is in the Middle East where food fights are the most vocal. Take for instance, hummus, which is the focus of relentless national and even sectarian rivalries.

It is, of course, originally an Arab dish – linguistically, *hummus* is Arabic for the humble chick pea – with variations all over the broader region from Greece to Iran. Egyptians eat it with fava beans, while Moroccans plump for a topping of harissa. In the West, fusion experiments have yielded such bizarre and downright unpalatable creations as artichoke and spinach hummus.

But it is the adoption by Israelis as one of their national culinary treasures that has fed into and indeed fuelled the cycle of Arab-Israeli resentment. In the most recent skirmish in the hummus wars, a division of 300 chefs in Beirut brought their spatulas and forks together earlier this year to whip up the largest plate of hummus ever – a colossal ten tonnes – to counter the record set in January 2010 by Israeli cooks of four tonnes, which itself outweighed last year's two-tonne offering by Beirut.

The latest barrage was actually a synchronized two-pronged attack by the Lebanese army of chefs; a day after firing their ten-tonne volley of hummus, they mashed up and cooked five tonnes of falafel – another dish that is hotly disputed by both sides.

Of course the Arab-Israeli food fight has a darker side. The hummus and falafel salvos come amid a very real fight between Lebanon and Israel, which, technically, have been at war since the 1940s.

Given the chronically bloody and bitter Arab-Israeli conflict, it may come as a surprise that Israelis have in truth been making their own hummus for over a century. Zionism has always been perfumed by a whiff of romance with Arab culture. Jews who flocked to Palestine in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rejected their European pasts in favour of a return to their ancient roots. Unwittingly, Arabs and what they ate provided the first Jewish settlers with the perfect paradigm to connect with their biblical pasts.

These days – several wars, intifadas and iniquities later – most Arabs believe that the policy aimed at grabbing Palestinian land and water extends to filching traditional Arab food. To be sure, tins of hummus and packets of falafel mixes in supermarkets across the European Union and US are more likely to have labels written in Hebrew than in Arabic. According to some estimates, Israel exported $115 million worth of food to the United States in 2009, up from $30 million a decade ago; and almost $3 million worth of hummus was sold in Britain alone.

In 2008, the head of the Association of Lebanese Industrialists, Fady Abboud, even went so far as to ask the European Union to grant exclusive naming rights for the term “hummus”. He based his argument on the jurisprudence set by Greece in 2002, which won the legal right to exclusively label goat and ewe milk cheese as “feta” over its EU rivals, France, Denmark and Germany.

However, it has so far been easier to prove that feta is traditionally Greek than that hummus is solely Lebanese or, more broadly, Arab. More to the point, a common cherished food is about as likely to bring enemies together as asking them to share the same piece of land.

At its most basic expression, a culinary tradition is a source of identity – both personal and national – which can easily turn into an issue of confused identity; and food reflects the wider conflict precisely because it touches on debates over territory and history.

With time, Israelis could eventually come to acknowledge the provenance of falafel and hummus in the way that they may one day recognize the inalienable rights of Palestinians to a contiguous territory with East Jerusalem as its capital.

Similarly, Arabs may grow more tolerant of Israeli enthusiasm for hummus and falafel, accepting their variety in the way they have accepted another Greek cheese: the Cypriot haloumi, which, despite an Arab root, has become generically Middle Eastern.

The end of the hummus and falafel wars may need a tooth-for-a-tooth solution. For instance, the round, pretzel-type of traditional buns – the Lebanese *ka’ak* – which are commonly sold by street vendors in Beirut, could be repackaged for export to the West and labelled as long-established bagels.

Ultimately, though, the food debate will become academic in a hundred years, akin to trying to determine who stole pasta from the Italians, which in turn had been lifted from the Chinese.

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