

Blu-ray Review: '4:44 Last Day on Earth' Meditates on the World's End

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CHICAGO – Apocalyptic dramas are a dime a dozen these days, and it's not difficult to determine why. While the Mayan calendar has singled out the specific day of our demise, record-breaking temperatures have caused some to worry that the planet has indeed reached its final act. Neither of these theories may be true, but that hasn't stopped them from permeating our collective consciousness.

While many indie flicks have centered on characters living out the final days of life on Earth, no picture has matched the operatic intensity of Lars von Trier's under-appreciated masterpiece, "Melancholia." Yet Abel Ferrara's "4:44 Last Day on Earth" has a power all its own, and like Von Trier's film, it's an immensely personal work. Ferrara cast his long-time girlfriend, Shanyn Leigh, opposite Willem Dafoe, and their dramatic age difference mirrors that of the director and his leading lady.



Blu-ray Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Instead of saddling the narrative with a contrived plot, Ferrara is more interested in exploring atmosphere and tone. Nearly all of the action is confined to a single apartment inhabited by Cisco (Dafoe) and his young lover, Skye (Leigh). The outside world is observed through radio commentators, televised news bulletins and voices echoing through Cisco's window. Instead of mass chaos engulfing the streets, the majority of humanity seems to have become resigned to their untimely fate. With unsettling self-discipline, a news anchor calmly explains that the following broadcast will be the last. Instead of an asteroid hurtling toward Earth, Ferrara's apocalypse is in the form of a rapidly diminishing ozone layer. Footage of prophetic interviews with Al Gore and the Dalai Lama are rebroadcast as evidence that humanity heard and ignored the warnings that ultimately led to their doom. Many of the film's conversations take place through Skype, as Cisco and Skye share their final moments with loved ones. A young delivery boy asks if he could telephone his parents in Vietnam. Skye's mother launches a bitter tirade against the politicians and private interests that extinguished any hope of humanity's survival. The most melodramatic moment occurs when Cisco desperately calls his estranged daughter, and ends up getting into a shouting match with his ex-wife. These sequences are a testament to how modern technology has enabled even the most isolated of locations to no longer feel as claustrophobic, allowing the collective family of man to bask in their shared experience.



4:44 Last Day on Earth was released on Blu-ray and DVD on July 17, 2012.

Photo credit: IFC Films

Despite these diversions, much of the film resembles a sad duet between its two central crestfallen souls as they cling to one another while the clock ticks toward certain disaster at 4:44 a.m. Ferrara is no stranger to lensing bold depictions of sexuality (having directed one of his former lovers in a porno), and in the opening moments of this film, he has Cisco and Skye take part in a startlingly potent sexual interlude. In prolonged close-ups, the lovers take turns stroking each others' genitals, while Ferrara's masterful cinematographer Ken Kelsch conceals most of the nudity through shadow without diminishing the scene's visceral eroticism. Sex is one of the last refuges the couple has to distract each other from their impending fate. Skye also busies herself by working on a painting, and there's a chilling moment when the face of a dragon materializes out of the murky blotches on her canvas.

Dafoe and Leigh are so compelling that it's almost a letdown when Ferrara repeatedly cuts to collage-like montages blending archival footage with religious iconography, as if the very history of mankind is flashing before the characters' eyes. It's an intriguing concept, but Ferrara overuses it in the film's final act, while making distractingly ironic use of the old rock tune, "Ain't That a Shame." The film is far from flawless, but its provocative, disarmingly thoughtful meditation on the apocalypse is preferable to any exploitative, fear-mongering B-movie. The warmth shared between the characters as they reflect on a life well-lived may be a small consolation, but it's also an essential one, and perhaps all that's stopping the lovers from leaping off their balcony. Cisco and Skye may not be able to save the world, but they can choose to watch the "light show" together, and that is a triumph in itself.

"4:44 Last Day on Earth" is presented in 1080p High Definition (with a 1.78:1 aspect ratio), accompanied by English and Spanish subtitles, and includes no extras aside from a trailer. Considering the film's endlessly fascinating audacity, the disc's absence of interviews and featurettes is especially frustrating. Yet it certainly won't stop viewers from engaging in post-film discussion, which is perhaps the best "special feature" of all.

'4:44 Last Day on Earth' is released by IFC Films and stars Willem Dafoe, Shannyn Leigh, Natasha Lyonne, Paul Hipp, Dierdra McDowell, Triana Jackson, Trung Nguyen and Paz de la Huerta. It was written and directed by Abel Ferrara. It was released on July 17, 2012. It is not rated.



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