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?The Dog Stars?: When the World Ends, What Remains

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When the World Ends, What Is Left to Love?
Apocalypse films have always been fascinated with what happens when everything familiar disappears. Cities fall, governments collapse, people turn against one another, and survival becomes the only remaining priority.

The Dog Stars, however, is less interested in the spectacle of the world ending than in the quieter question of what remains inside a person after it already has. Its German title, Das Ende der Sterne, captures something that the English title only partially suggests. There is an end here, certainly, but the film is not simply concerned with the end of civilisation. It is concerned with the end of a life as it was once understood, and with the strange possibility of finding something human in what comes afterwards.

Hig (Jacob Elordi) has already lost almost everything before the film truly begins. A virus has devastated the world around him, taking his wife and unborn child with it. He lives in isolation with his dog Jasper, flying across an increasingly empty landscape and maintaining a life built around routine, caution and survival. There is something particularly painful about the way the film presents this existence because Hig does not feel like someone actively living through the apocalypse. He feels like someone living after it, carrying the remains of a life that has already disappeared. The catastrophe itself is almost secondary. What matters is what it has left behind.

That distinction gives The Dog Stars its emotional force. Hig is not simply afraid of dying; he is afraid of losing the few things that still make his life meaningful. When Jasper is eventually taken from him, the loss feels devastating precisely because the dog represents so much more than companionship. Jasper is Hig's connection to the life he had before the virus, to affection without conditions, to routine and to a form of love that does not require explanation. In a world where almost every human relationship has become complicated by fear and violence, Jasper represents something uncomplicated. Losing him is another reminder that even the smallest pieces of the old world can still be taken away.

Jacob Elordi plays Hig with a restraint that makes the character's grief feel particularly real. He does not turn him into the kind of hardened survivor that so many post-apocalyptic stories rely on. Hig is capable of violence, but he does not embrace it, and his discomfort with killing becomes one of the most important parts of his character. I found that hesitation deeply understandable. When survival begins to demand

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violence as a matter of routine, refusing to become comfortable with it can almost seem impossible. Yet Hig holds onto that resistance, and in doing so, the film suggests that morality may not be something separate from survival. Perhaps it is one of the things that makes survival worth pursuing in the first place.

This is also where The Dog Stars begins to move beyond the conventions of the apocalypse genre. The film does not constantly ask whether Hig will survive. It asks what kind of person he will remain if he does. That is a much more intimate question, and one that McGehee approaches with considerable patience. The film allows its characters to sit in silence, to travel without constant dialogue, to look at landscapes that would normally be used as dramatic backdrops and simply exist within them. Its slow pace is not an absence of storytelling. It is the storytelling.

That rhythm is established almost immediately through Hozier's “Like Real People Do,” which plays at the beginning and returns toward the end. The choice feels almost like a statement of intent. The song carries a softness that seems initially at odds with the world Hig inhabits, but that contrast becomes increasingly meaningful. The Dog Stars is not trying to make the apocalypse feel exciting. It is trying to make us feel what it means to remain human inside it. The quietness of the song becomes the quietness of the film itself, and by the time it returns, it carries the weight of everything Hig has experienced since we first heard it.

Margaret Qualley brings another kind of warmth to the film as Cima. Her arrival changes the emotional landscape around Hig because she represents the possibility of connection returning to a life that has been organised around isolation. The chemistry between Qualley and Elordi did not always completely convince me romantically, but both actors bring something affecting to their individual performances, and their scenes together gradually develop a tenderness that feels more important than conventional romance. Cima gives Hig a reason to consider that survival might not have to mean remaining alone.

Some of the film's most beautiful moments come from that possibility. The scenes of Hig and Cima looking at the stars are simple, but they carry an emotional weight that much larger sequences struggle to achieve. There is something almost heartbreaking about two people standing beneath the same sky after so much has been lost. The stars have survived everything that happened on Earth, but they remain indifferent to it. They continue to appear, night after night, as they always have. In those moments, looking upward becomes a reminder that the world is still larger than the grief of any one person.

The cinematography understands this beautifully. The landscapes are often vast and almost unbearably quiet, making Hig's isolation feel physical. Yet the film never treats the emptiness purely as something frightening. There is beauty in it too. That contradiction becomes central to the film's atmosphere: the world is devastated, but it is still beautiful; Hig is grieving, but he is still capable of happiness; the old world is gone, but life has not completely disappeared with it.

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And that is perhaps what makes the title Das Ende der Sterne so fitting. The phrase sounds absolute. It suggests that even the stars themselves might have disappeared, that there could be nothing left to look toward. But the film gives us the opposite. The world may feel like it has ended, yet the stars remain. So does Hig. So does Cima. So does the possibility of love. The title becomes less a declaration of complete extinction than an expression of how an ending can feel when you are standing inside it.

What moved me most about The Dog Stars is that it understands grief does not simply disappear because life continues. Hig does not need to forget his wife, his child or Jasper in order to care about Cima. The film does not ask him to replace one love with another. Instead, it allows the past and the possibility of a future to exist alongside each other. That feels much more emotionally honest than giving him some clean transformation in which the old life is simply left behind.

The ending therefore works because it refuses the easy comfort of pretending that everything is going to be fine. There is no miraculous restoration of civilisation, no heroic mission that suddenly gives meaning to everything that has happened, and no promise that Hig will never experience loss again. There is only a man who, after losing almost everything, has found a reason to look toward someone else again. That is a very small victory in the context of an apocalypse, but the film understands that small victories are sometimes the ones that matter most.

When “Like Real People Do” returns, the song no longer feels like the beginning of an apocalypse. It feels like the beginning of something else. Hig is still carrying his grief, and the world around him is still broken, but he is no longer entirely alone within it. The stars are still above him. Cima is beside him. Jasper remains somewhere within his memory. None of these things cancel out the loss. They simply become part of what he carries forward.

The Dog Stars ultimately suggests that perhaps the opposite of the end is not survival. It is connection. It is remembering someone after they are gone. It is caring for another person when there is no guarantee that they will stay. It is looking at the sky with someone else and allowing yourself, even briefly, to believe that there might still be something ahead.
That is what makes the film so unexpectedly emotional. Beneath the virus, the guns, the empty landscapes and the fear, The Dog Stars is really about something much smaller and much more universal: the human need not to be alone.
And perhaps that is why the stars matter.
Because even at what feels like the end of everything, they are still there.

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