

Doom-laden Sundance

The Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, sets the agenda for independent cinema. At this year's festival, which runs until 31 January, science-related films are most concerned with disaster scenarios, both real and imagined.

A handful of documentaries chart the spread of man-made catastrophes. *Countdown to Zero* exposes the post-cold war proliferation of nuclear weapons and public denial of their danger. *Climate Refugees* tracks the coming wave of human migration caused by rising waters and changing weather, from Bangladesh to Sudan. On a lighter note, Australian film-maker Mark Lewis returns with a sequel to his classic 1988 documentary about the environmental havoc caused by the invasive Australian cane toad — this time in three-dimensional splendour.

A contrasting selection of documentaries offers some hope of escape from these planetary woes. *Life 2.0* follows the masses who retreat into the virtual sanctuary of Second Life. *Space Tourists* tracks a wealthy Iranian engineer's quest to become the "first female private space explorer" with help from the Soviet space programme in Kazakhstan.

The slate of fictional films also reveals a preoccupation with end-of-time scenarios. *Pumzi*, a Kenyan science-fiction short, depicts a botanist trying to nurture a single plant in parched post-apocalyptic Africa. The monster movie *Splice* taps into fears of genetic engineering by raising the possibility of a vicious human-animal chimaera. And with a gentler touch, *Obselidia* follows a salesman whose efforts to compile an encyclopaedia of obsolescent things leads him to a scientist who predicts the end of civilization.

"Not all the films are doom and gloom," said John Nein, who organized a panel on the 'discovery process' that will bring together film-makers and scientists, sponsored by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. "Others provide a beautiful reflection of our relationship to nature." ■

Jascha Hoffman is a writer based in San Francisco, California.