

Disaster on Film

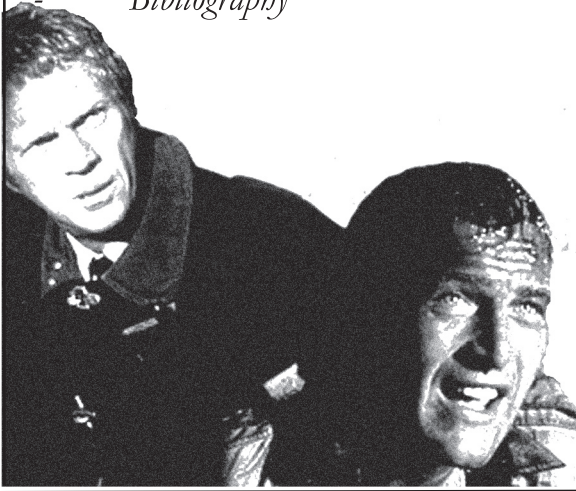
A Behind the Scenes Look at Hollywood Disaster Movies

by John William Law

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Behind the Scenes of Hollywood Disaster Movies

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introduction

Behind the Scenes of Hollywood's Disaster Movies



Opening Remarks

At first glance it seems easy to grasp the genre of the disaster film. And while it's simple to rattle off names of disaster pictures like *The Towering Inferno*, *Airport*, *Twister* and *Titanic*, and even credit the likes of Irwin Allen, Ross Hunter, or even Alfred Hitchcock, as the creator of the disaster picture, understanding the development of the disaster film as a genre takes time and consideration.

While it's true that the memorable films and people like Hunter, Allen and Hitchcock played important roles in furthering the genre, even stabilizing it into a cohesive body, the disaster picture's origins go back to the early years of film itself. And while it had peaks and valleys, and general periods of stagnation, the genre grew stronger as the film industry progressed. In recent years the disaster movie has taken hold, becoming one of the most popular and profitable types of movies on theater screens today.

What makes a successful disaster movie, many might say, is an easy formula to follow – A good story,

fantastic special effects, a first-rate cast, and talented direction are the obvious elements. But a lot can happen from formula to finished product, and even films which appear to have all the elements can falter, while those with little can reap box office rewards because of great marketing or a timely release.

“The bigger the tragedy, the bigger the audience,” Producer Irwin Allen once quipped. “People chase fire engines, flock to car crashes. People thrive on tragedy. It's unfortunate, but in my case, it's fortunate.”

Allen may have touched on the truth, but that truth expands way beyond the disaster picture and encompasses film as a whole. Audiences flock to dramas, horrors, science fiction flicks, thrillers, and even comedies, as an escape from reality. Whether they step into a theater to see a hockey-masked villain killing teen-agers, or the sinking of an ocean liner, or spaceships visiting far-off planets, it's still the escape moviegoers are after.

The disaster film enables viewers to take part in a tragedy from the comfort of a movie theater, or their own living room couch. The experience of tragedy without real death, danger and destruction drives viewers to these films. The more real the experience, the more we as viewers want to experience it, to feel as if they really been there and survived.

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Even the theme park industry has caught on and in recent years, Universal Studios and Disney have brought the movie going experience to a new level, bringing movies off the big screen and introducing closer looks at disaster films like, *Earthquake*, *Jaws*, *Twister*, *Dante's Peak* and others.

Billions of dollars have been earned on the success of the disaster movie. *Titanic* alone pulled in more than \$600 million making it the biggest moneymaking picture of all time. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Disaster pictures over the decades have been some of the most financially successful pictures Hollywood has produced.

And now, today's advances in technology are enabling moviemakers to bring the reality of the disaster film ever closer to the real thing. The computer-generated effects of *Twister* led to a new generation of disaster films as Hollywood realized the computer-generated simulations were so life-like that everything from tornados, to volcanic explosions, comet impacts, tidal waves and any imaginable disaster could be created with a series capable keystrokes. As the costs came in line new life was breathed into the disaster movie, and when *Twister* topped \$200 million at the box office, Hollywood saw an opportunity and once again, just as in the 1970s, the genre flourished.

But with opportunity comes challenges, and with the challenges come the inevitable failures. Just as the genre swept through the 1970s with a string of successful pictures it burned out with a subsequent string of high-profile failures.

To uncover the full story behind the success, failure, past, present and future of the disaster film, one must look at the genre from many angles.

Chronologically, the genre has seen growth, but the disaster film of the 1920s was a mere experiment in filmmaking, while those of the 50s were more closely associated to the fears of the nation, and the true start of the genre in the 1970s stemmed from numerous factors like the advent of television, advances in special effects techniques, changes in the Hollywood system, among others.

Looking at the genre through those who helped give it life sheds light on the nature of filmmaking, the quest for box office success, fame, industry recognition and a host of other issues. Directors and producers like Irwin Allen, Ross Hunter, Alfred Hitchcock, Jennings Lang, Ronald Neame and others helped shape the genre through their films. Their struggles offer fascinating views from behind the scenes of some of Hollywood's most spectacular films.

The disasters themselves also offer an interesting view of the genre. Flood and water

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disasters like *The Poseidon Adventure* and *Titanic*; fire and explosion disasters like *The Towering Inferno*, *Dante's Peak*, *Volcano* and *When Time Ran Out*; collisions like *Meteor*, *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*; attack disasters like *The Birds*, *Jaws*, *Bug* and *Swarm*; and the airline disasters of the *Airport* features each offer a glimpse at the progression of the genre and the quest for new and unusual directions to take the disaster picture.



Finally, the films themselves offer telling tales of history of Hollywood movie making. The stars, the directors, the production troubles, the successes and the failures offer probably the most interesting picture of the making of a great disaster.

The coming chapters will attempt to offer a full view of the history of the genre through its films and those who created them. Because, just as the horror film or the science fiction movies have had an unforgettable impact on the history of filmmaking, so has the disaster film. The rich and expansive tapestry of filmmaking is that much richer and that much more expansive because of the disasters of the silver screen.

one

I Feel a Disaster Coming On



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Categorizing Disaster

Often, the most logical method for finding one's way through a large collection — whether it be books, music or film — is to use logic and organization. That's why when paging through a film guide or walking through the average DVD or video store the organization is often by the type of film. The action/adventure pictures, the dramas, the classics, comedies and other categories help people focus their attention and direct them to where they wish to be. But rarely do we find a category for disaster pictures.

One might suspect it's because the genre is so small, or perhaps too specific, and that's a fair assessment. Therefore disaster pictures are dropped into other categories where they also fit. But while a film like *Armageddon* may fall under science fiction, *The Poseidon Adventure* will end up under adventure. And while *The Birds* will be categorized as horror, *Titanic* will be considered a drama. Others may end up under subjects like classics or suspense. And if you want to consider spoofs like *Airplane* and its sequel, as legitimate disaster films, the subject of comedy could

be considered a home for at least two disaster pictures.

The disaster picture really came into its own as a genre in the early 1970s. Some would pinpoint the origin to the release of *Airport* in 1970. The success of the big-budget Universal feature led to a series of sequels that spanned the decade and, as mentioned earlier, spawned two spoofs of the series.

Aside from *Airport*, others credit producer Irwin Allen for the development of the disaster genre. Allen, who has long been referred to as the Master of Disaster, really took the disaster and turned it into an event. By casting major stars from past and current Hollywood, like Shelly Winters, Paul Newman, Fred Astaire, Faye Dunaway, Olivia DeHavilland, Henry Fonda, Michael Caine and others, and adding monstrous special effects, Oscar-winning theme songs, and major promotional efforts, Allen turned the films into all-star spectacular events and often kept the audience wondering who would live and who would die.

But even if the 1970s was the era when the disaster genre took hold, the style of film actually took to the big screen years earlier. In fact, as far back as 1915 the elements that would make up a successful disaster picture were finding their way onto film. In the decades that followed countless films would touch upon the disaster to create emotion, suspense, thrills,

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horror and drama for viewers. Few of these films are actually categorized as true disaster pictures, but as mentioned, even “true disaster” films like the *Airport* series of films by Irwin Allen are not categorized as disaster pictures, because for many the category simply doesn’t exist.

The Early Days

In the early days of the film industry, short films were the standard. When Edison’s Kinetoscope offered the first films, the coin-operated “peep viewers” presented a 20-second show. The shows were often of basic scenes, like a speeding train or a horse race. In time the features expanded, telling more of a story. The most successful film of these early years, *The Great Train Robbery*, can be viewed as the great-grandfather of the disaster picture, offering the action and suspense that would become standard elements of all disaster films to come. Other early mock-news footage, as far back as 1902 depicted erupting volcanoes.

In 1912, an Italian version of Lord Lytton’s *The Last Days of Pompeii* again captured the disaster of an erupting volcano with 10,000 people fleeing its wrath.

When *Birth of a Nation* offered the first

disastrous look at the Civil War in 1915, the film was a tremendous hit. D.W. Griffith’s epic film touched on the vast tragedy of the war, but viewed it through its impact on two families that struggled through it, bringing the disaster down to a human level. Most disaster films of later years found this the easiest route for audience identification.

The King of Kings in 1927 by Cecile B DeMille was a biblical epic that captured a massive earthquake that hits during the Crucifixion, killing onlookers and helped expand the use of special effects to create awe on the big screen. Audiences were being drawn to the spectacular footage and Hollywood was quick to take note and expand on the concept.

The 1930s

In the 1930s the film disaster took a number of different forms, but most often catastrophic events in nature proved to be the ticket at the movies.

King Kong in 1933 brought a disaster in the size of a monstrous ape and the destruction came to modern day New York City. It still wasn’t a textbook disaster picture, but Hollywood was getting closer and the carnage around the Empire State Building made for one of the most memorable disaster scenes in movie history.

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The Last Days of Pompeii was remade by Hollywood in 1935 and again featured a climax with an erupting volcano creating fear for the crowds beneath it. It also created fear for the moviegoers who sat in the theater watching it. The film has been heralded for its use of special effects and the realism set the stage for more natural disasters that would find major success on the big screen.

San Francisco in 1936 captured the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Directed by Woody Van Dyke with uncredited help from D.W. Griffith, the film used melodrama and a romantic plot with Clark Gable and Jeanette MacDonald to build to the climactic event that everyone was waiting for. Moviegoers were not disappointed by the destruction and the film was a hit.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Sabotage*, also in 1936, featured a bomb planted on a bus and the tragic explosion that follows. It was one of Hitchcock's first forays into disaster, and certainly not his last. *Lost Horizon* in 1937 again featured a plane crash while *Hurricane*, from director John Ford, was released that same year and climaxed with winds and the rains wreaking havoc on a small island.

Disaster up to this point was usually held for the climactic scenes of a film that kept the films from actually evolving around the disasters themselves, as later films would do. The disaster was an element of

the film, often what the film led up to.

In 1939, two major hit films utilized disasters to tell their stories. *Gone With The Wind* featured the disaster of the Civil War, as in *Birth of a Nation*, and again brought the war to a human level. But this time the sprawling scenery of a burned-out Atlanta and a struggle to survive created suspense, drama and characters the audience could love. *The Wizard of Oz* also brought disaster to a new level, because this time the trauma came at the beginning of the film, leading the way to the entire story that followed. While quite different from a standard disaster picture, the twister at the beginning was a spectacular visual effect for its time and set the stage for more trouble from Mother Nature on the big screen. *The Rains Came*, also in 1939, won an Oscar for its special effects and was another early natural disaster picture of note.

The 1940s

In 1940, Alfred Hitchcock returned to the disaster with *Foreign Correspondent* when a plane crash takes the film's major characters by surprise and created added suspense for moviegoers. Hitchcock began his 1943 film *Lifeboat* after the disaster had happened, leaving the characters to struggle for survival after their ship has been sunk during the war.

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The war provided the backdrop for these disasters and it is possibly because of the war that so few disaster pictures found life on the big screen. Moviegoers, during this period, looked for musicals and comedies to escape the trouble in reality.

The 1950s

The 1950s took disaster in several different directions. The first was a continuation of earlier films, but by now the disasters were becoming for central to the storyline, not just a major climax at the end.

Twentieth-Century Fox's *No Highway in the Sky* in 1951 was directed by Henry Koster and starred James Stewart as an aerodynamic engineer who theorizes that metal fatigue is a leading cause of plane crashes. Glynis Johns, Stewart's love interest in the film, and Marlene Dietrich, as a famous actress, are on a doomed flight that's the focus of Stewart's attention.

Titanic in 1953 chronicled the doomed ocean liner on its maiden voyage and used drama and character development to keep audiences watching and waiting for the inevitable iceberg. Barbara Stanwyck and Clifton Webb brought the story to life and the film earned an Academy Award for Best Story or Screenplay.

In 1954 it was back to disaster in the air when John Wayne starred in *The High and the Mighty* as a troubled pilot who takes over control of a crippled commercial plane flying over the Pacific Ocean. This time the film featured an all-star cast, including Claire Trevor, Laraine Day, Robert Stack and Jan Sterling. It was a Warner Bros. hit from Director William Wellman that used Cinemascope to thrill audiences. The film succeeded, taking in more than \$6.1 million at the box office that year.

Then in 1956, Doris Day starred in *Julie*, as the title character, an airline stewardess whose psychotic husband, played by Louis Jourdan, creates terror and suspense while the plane is in flight.

The second type of disaster picture that caused a stir throughout the 1950s was of the science fiction nature. As the cold war took hold the threat of danger in Hollywood came from monsters, often created by nuclear radiation and threatened the future of the entire planet. Some of the most memorable of this type of picture included *Them* (1954), *Godzilla* (1954), *It Came from Beneath the Sea* (1955), *The Beginning of the End* (1957), *The Blob* (1958) and *Earth vs. The Spider* (1958).

The third type of film that threatened worldwide disaster again came in the form of a science fiction picture, but this time, the threat came

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from outer space. Hollywood was playing its part as the United States and the world began exploring the unknown beyond earth. The fascination with other planets and what else was out there led to films like *War of the Worlds* (1952), *Invaders from Mars* (1953), *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (1957) as mutants threatening the future of mankind landed on our planet.

And in 1959, nuclear Armageddon was the basis for a dramatic look at the demise of mankind when Anthony Perkins, Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner took to the big screen in *On the Beach*.

The 1960s

The 1960s seemed to put the threat from beyond the planet Earth away and began focusing the disasters from within. *The Devil at Four O'clock* in 1961 starred Spencer Tracy and Frank Sinatra on a fight against an erupting volcano on a small island in the South Pacific. *Atlantis, the Lost Continent*, also in 1961, featured Greek fishermen who discover the lost continent shortly before it blows up and *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1962) found the earth spinning out of control and headed straight for the sun all thanks to nuclear testing.

Alfred Hitchcock brought the disaster to a

small town for *The Birds* in 1963. The suspense classic had flocks of birds attacking the small Northern California town of Bodega Bay and starred Tippi Hedren, Rod Taylor, Jessica Tandy and Suzanne Pleshette. The film was really one of the first full-fledged disaster pictures with feathered friends taking the part of the natural disaster as the stars struggled to survive. Hitchcock kept us wondering who would live and die and used special effects to make the terror look real. It was one of Hitchcock's biggest financial hits and most expensive pictures to make.

In 1964, *Failsafe* brought the threat of nuclear destruction back to the big screen as Henry Fonda, playing the president of the United States, sends a bomb to New York City, killing his own wife, so he can convince the Russians his first strike on the Soviet Union was an accident. The destruction was never shown, but the threat was all too real. *Seven Days in May*, also in 1964, brought an all-star cast including Burt Lancaster, Kirk Douglas, Ava Garner, Frederic March and others out with a look at the potential disaster behind a military coup in the United States and again the threat of nuclear destruction plays in the background.

Crack in the World in 1965 was another science fiction stab at disaster. This time underground nuclear testing causes a crack in the earth and a

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portion of the planet blasts off into outer space. The film was a throwback to the late 1950s and was about the last of its type.

The remainder of the decade steered away from disaster pictures. Perhaps it was because the war in Vietnam came crashing into American living rooms through the nightly news. Assassinations of our leaders also became all too common and racial tensions had erupted in city streets bringing disaster closer to home. Disaster was no longer an escape, but a very real part of our everyday lives.

In 1970, however, the disaster picture took a grand step forward and came back in a big way.







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