Natalie Lanci

Professor Scott McClintock

Film Studies 104

February 23, 2013

The Lure of Disaster: *The Iliad* to Modern Blockbusters

Humans have always been fascinated by stories about terrible things happening to other humans. One of the oldest stories in Western civilization, *The Iliad*, describes the destruction of Troy by its enemies, the Greeks. But of course, before Troy is destroyed, the story introduces us to the people inside the city. Thus, when we finally reach the violent climax, we are swept up in the personal cost of the Trojan War.

To judge by the enormous box office earnings for movies like *2012*, the same basic formula is still effective today. In this paper I will present a brief history of disaster movies, starting with the silent film era and continuing on through some more recent movies. Throughout, I hope to illustrate the way directors get us to care about the characters, and then unleash the forces of disaster against them. In the hands of a true artist, this formula can create exciting, interesting drama.

Disasters in Silent Films

Disaster movies have been popular since the beginning of cinema. Directors of the silent film era readily understood the value of good disaster. Such works tend to fall into two categories, personal dramas and epics.

Personal dramas focus on an individual working out a private problem against a backdrop of impending catastrophe. *The Last Days of Pompeii*, for example, capitalizes on the excitement inherent in the eruption of Mount Vesuvius and the devastation that we, the modern viewers, know will follow this cataclysmic event. Because the majority of the movie focuses on the people of Pompeii, living their lives unaware of the impending eruption, the disaster, when it finally comes, is all the more overwhelming.

The main character is a girl named Nidia, who struggles to gain the attention of her beloved, a powerful citizen. As at least one critic has observed, this creates an interesting contrast between Nidia’s lowly state in society and the destruction that is about to be caused by the legendary volcano. Film historian Lee Kinsella argues that a movie about the eruption of Mount Vesuvius has dramatic interest, but a movie about a lovelorn girl in the shadow of an erupting volcano has both drama and pathos.

Epics also featured destruction on a large scale. For example, Cecil B. DeMille’s *The Ten Commandments* is famous for stupendous scenes, such as the parting of the Red Sea, followed by the death of the soldiers who rush into the opening, only to be drowned by huge, crashing waves.

World War II Cinema

American movies of the World War II Era focused, understandably, on a very real type of disaster: war. While earlier movies tended to use disasters as a way to thrill the audience, movies of this period used the devastation of warfare to inspire patriotism and courage on the home front.

The First Modern Disaster Movies

In the 1950’s and early 1960’s, American audiences flocked to movies about alien invasions and rampaging creatures. These movies played on widespread fears that communists were attempting to undermine democracy.

The 1956 thriller *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* dramatizes the dehumanization that occurs when conformity is imposed on a community. Like all good disaster movies, it focuses on a likeable character, a small-town doctor. Aliens begin to take over the bodies of his fellow citizens, turning them into mindless alien soldiers. As the doctor struggles to combat the deadly threat, he struggles to distinguish between his real friends and those who have been taken over by alien minds.

Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* takes creatures we normally think of as cute and harmless, and transforms them into deadly agents of destruction. This represents a completely new type of disaster film. In earlier movies, the reason for the disaster generally made sense. After all, the eruption of a volcano is a geological necessity. Invading aliens, although strange and frightening, are doing what invading armies have always done—attempting to conquer the weak.

In *The Birds* we see otherwise harmless creatures working together deviously to attack humans. The fact that the threat does not really make sense makes it even more frightening. The movie suggests that, if something so strange and random can happen, perhaps *anything* can happen.

The Seventies and Beyond

Advances in cinema technology made the 1970s the beginning of a huge array of disaster movies. Suddenly, filming disasters become easier, the results more realistic. The looming threats in these movies included out-of-control computers, biological mutants, crashing airliners, and an amazing variety of rampaging creatures, including frogs, bees, fish, and, mutant flesh-eating rabbits, just to name a few. Unlike some earlier disaster films, most of these works were intended to be amusing entertainment, with very little attempt at real seriousness.