

# The Disaster Movie and its Implications for Genre Theory

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Sibel ÇELİK NORMAN

anadolu üniversitesi, iletişim bilimleri fakültesi  
scnorma@anadolu.edu.tr

## Özet

*Bu araştırmanın konusu 1953-59, 1972-79, 1993-96 olmak üzere üç ayrı dönemde Amerika'da felaket filmlerinin üretimindeki artıştır. Bu dönemlerin temel özelliği söz konusu türde çok az filmin gösterime girdiği belirgin zaman aralıklarıyla birbirinden ayrılmalarıdır. Bu üç dönemde üretilen filmlerin, üretildikleri dönemin politik ve kültürel ruh haliyle bağlantılarını saptamak için bu dönemlere damgasını vuran temel ulusal ve uluslararası olaylar göz önünde bulundurulacaktır. Söz konusu dönemler; tarihçiler tarafından "güvensizlik kültürü" şeklinde tanımlanan, sırasıyla Kore Savaşı, McCarthyizm, Watergate, Vietnam Savaşı ve Başbakan Clinton'ın etrafında dönen skandallar gibi bir dizi olayların sonucunda halkın devlete karşı güvensizliğinin arttığı yıllardır. Bu durum, felâket filmlerinin, tehdit altındaki topluluklar arasında birleştirici bir dayanışma ruhunun güçlenmesi, bilimsel kurumlaşma ve bürokrasi gibi tipik anlatım öğeleriyle bağlantılanmaktadır. Akademik eleştirmenler tarafından çok sık gözardı edilen benzer eşzamanlılık özelliğinin, kalıplaşmış film türleri hesaba katılarak tür kuramcıları tarafından yararlı bir şekilde araştırılabileceği ileri sürülmektedir.*

**anahtar kelimeler:** felaket filmleri, tür kuramı, kültürel üretim, anlatı yapısı

## Résumé

*Le sujet de cette étude est la prolifération des films de désastre aux États-Unis dans trois périodes séparées, 1953-59, 1972-79 et 1993-96, identifiables comme trois cycles de film qui se sont exposés aux coupures distinctes pendant lesquelles très peu de tels films ont été réalisés. Ces trois cycles sont comparés avec des événements nationaux et internationaux principaux pendant les périodes historiques correspondantes afin de déterminer s'il existe un raccordement reconnaissable entre la disposition politique et culturelle contemporaine et la production des films en question. La particularité saillante commune de ces trois périodes est définie en tant qu'un manque de confiance publique au gouvernement, associé respectivement à tour de rôle à la guerre Coréenne et le McCarthyism, le scandale de Watergate et les dernières années de la guerre de Vietnam, et les séries de scandales entourant le Président Clinton, collectivement décrites par des historiens comme « culture de la méfiance ». Cette particularité est liée avec les éléments narratifs caractéristiques des films de désastre, qui sont l'esprit qui s'est fortifié d'une solidarité d'unification parmi les communautés menacées, l'établissement scientifique et l'administration. On discute que des aspects semblables du synchronisation pourraient profitablement être recherchés par des théoriciens de genre, particulièrement en ce qui concerne les genres de film figés, qui sont souvent négligés surtout par des critiques académiques.*

**mots-clés :** *films de désastre, théorie de genre, production culturelle, structure narrative*

## Abstract

*The subject of the study is the proliferation of disaster films in the US in three separate periods, 1953-59, 1972-79 and 1993-96, identifiable as three film cycles separated by distinct gaps during which very few such films were released. The three cycles are matched with major national and international events during the corresponding historical periods in order to determine whether there exists a recognisable connection between the contemporary political and cultural temper and the production of the films in question. The salient feature common to the three periods is identified as one of a lack of public confidence in government, associated respectively with the Korean War and McCarthyism, the Watergate scandal and the latter years of the Vietnam War, and the series of scandals surrounding President Clinton, collectively described by historians as " culture of mistrust". This feature is linked with the characteristic narrative element of disaster films, which is the forging of a unifying solidarity among the threatened communities, the scientific establishment and officialdom. It is argued that similar aspects of synchronicity might profitably be explored by genre theorists, especially with regard to the more formulaic film genres, which are often overlooked by academic critics.*

**keywords:** *disaster movie, genre theory, cultural production, narrative structure*

## Introduction

The subject of this study comprises three cycles of films with clear generic similarities, both semantic and syntactic, according to Altman's distinction (Altman 1986: 95). The films were all produced in the United States and have in common narratives built around the reaction of a community, whether small or large (in some cases the entire population of the planet), to a fearsome external threat, together with the sense of impending disaster which constitutes the predominant ambience of the films. The first cycle consists of twelve films of the years 1953 - 1959; the second cycle of twenty-two films of 1972 - 1979; the third cycle of thirteen films of 1993 - 1996. The films in question are listed, with the names of their directors, in Table 1. The periods before, between and after these film cycles, while not devoid of films classifiable as 'disaster' movies, reveal a significantly fewer number. In 1953-59, there was an average of two mainstream disaster films per year; in 1972-79 and 1993-96, of three per year. Outside these periods the average falls to less than one a year, and in many years there were none at all (Kay and Rose 2007: 391ff.). What is examined, therefore, is a periodical multiplication of disaster films in three separate cycles, on a scale impossible to dismiss as coincidental.

The term 'cycle' is employed in the sense explained by Neale as referring to 'groups of films made within a specific and limited time-span, and founded, for the most part on the characteristics of individual commercial successes' (Neale 2000: 9). Referring to the Western, Gallagher suggested that 'cyclicism rather than evolution' provided the appropriate basis for theories of generic development (Gallagher 1986: 208). The term 'mainstream' is loosely used to refer to films made for the large screen, enjoying a substantial budget. The cast of many of the films contained well-known Hollywood stars, and the directors included major figures such as Stanley Kramer, Roger Corman, Robert Wise, Steven Spielberg, Ron Howard and James Cameron. Small-budget movies and films made for television have been excluded. In terms of earnings, the films of the three cycles are hardly comparable, due to ticket price inflation, but all three cycles included box-office successes: *War of the Worlds*, *Titanic* and *On the Beach* in the 1950s, *The Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno*, *Jaws* and *Alien* in the 1970s, and *Titanic*, *Independence Day*, *Armageddon*, *Twister* and *Deep Impact* in the 1990s. These last five films collectively earned around \$1.5 billion in the US and over \$4 billion worldwide (Kay and Rose 2007: 353).

The popularity of the films, measurable in terms of commercial success, is significant in view of Tudor's argument that 'genre is a conception existing in the culture of any particular group or society; it is not a way in which a critic classifies films for methodological purposes, but the much looser way in which an audience classifies its films' (Tudor 1975: 145). The distinction between the 'critical genre', such as *film noir*, the social problem film or melodrama - labels never employed by studios in order to attract audiences - and primarily 'commercial genres' such

as thrillers and disaster movies may explain why the disaster movie has largely been overlooked by genre theorists. A similar point was made by Wood regarding Horror films: 'The horror film has consistently been one of the most disreputable of Hollywood genres ... dismissed with contempt by the majority of reviewer-critics, or simply ignored' (Wood 1979: 13). Neale's work *Genre and Hollywood* contains only three passing references to disaster movies, whereas it has dedicated sections on the science fiction film, the war film and even 'teenpics'. There is no mention at all of disaster movies in the 400-page *The Cinema Book*, a comprehensive digest of critical and theoretical writings. In general, the disaster movie is viewed solely as a journalistic or promotional term; the assumption that it is therefore of little critical interest is implicitly challenged in the present study.

The central question here addressed is whether the three cycles of the disaster film can legitimately be understood as the expression of anxieties and insecurities in the popular mentality of the time, parallel to the way in which the Hollywood musical is seen as a form of escapism or utopianism during the depression years (Dyer 1977; Feuer 1982 et. al.). The terms 'anxiety' and 'insecurity' are not meant to indicate the presence of suppressed experience, as in the Freudian analysis (Freud 1953, *passim*), but are used in the more general sense employed in studies of mass psychology as, for example, in this comment on the early 1940s in the US: 'The prolonged economic unrest and the consequent insecurity ... was another cause for bewilderment ... The lack of a sophisticated, relatively stable economic or political frame of reference created in many persons a psychological disequilibrium' (Cantril 1954: 15). Is it possible to identify a discernible *zeitgeist*, common to the early 1950s, the early 1970s and the early 1990s, but *not* to the preceding, intervening and subsequent periods, which might explain the phenomenon? In seeking an answer, an interval between the relevant political and cultural events, the emergence of a public mood or temper and the appearance of a specific cultural response is assumed, in addition to the passage of time during the conception and making of a given film. It is also assumed, in line with the writings of critics such as Shatz and Jauss, that within a generic cycle can be observed the operation of an internal dynamic, resulting in stages of hybridization and, ultimately, dissolution. (Jauss, 1982: 106). As a consequence, it is principally in the historical period immediately preceding the emergence of a cycle that the origins of a particular intellectual and emotional climate must be sought (see Table 1).

### **Narrative Conventions and Structure of the Films**

Of the forty-four films under consideration, around a quarter are concerned with the plight of a stricken vessel (airplane, ship, spaceship), a quarter with natural disasters such as volcanoes, floods, earthquakes, tornadoes and epidemics, a quarter with attacks by aliens or monsters, from outer space or the depths of the oceans, and the remainder with man-made disasters such as fires and explosions. Examination of the subject matter of the three cycles reveals only

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one significant difference in this regard: the films of the second cycle are all concerned with localized incidents - airplanes, ships, a hotel, a small coastal community, a mountain resort - whereas the first and third cycles both contain a number of films involving catastrophe on a global scale: the imminent end of the world, caused usually by threats from outer space. The magnitude and extent of the threat, however, does not affect either the sense of impending disaster or the response of the community involved, which together determine the narrative structure. The threat constitutes the external enemy but its precise nature makes little difference. What is important is that the community concerned is united within itself, and with the forces of law and order, especially if the danger threatens them all indiscriminately. This response can be seen clearly in the 1952 version of H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*. Almost as soon as the alien creatures raise their heads from the smoking crater, an alliance is formed between the local citizenry, police officers, forest wardens, members of the scientific establishment and all ranks of the armed services, up to the commander-in-chief. Similar alliances between citizenry, officials and experts can be observed in every example of the genre. In the case of near-catastrophe aboard airliners or spaceships, the wider community, consisting of airline officials, mission controllers, aircraft engineers and anxious relatives, becomes part of the action via radio and televisual links. In *Apollo 13* (1995), for example, the camera spends as much time at mission control, and in the houses of relatives crowded round the television screen and the telephone, as it does within the spacecraft. The jubilant scenes of celebration when the spacecraft makes a safe landing illustrate the strength of the solidarity: officials at mission control cheer aloud, leap from their seats, shake hands. In the 1952 *War of the Worlds*, the policeman who thinks of his own escape before that of his colleagues is annihilated by the aliens' ray guns, as if in punishment for transgression of the fundamental rule of solidarity. In *The Towering Inferno*, the man responsible for putting the hotel at risk by cutting construction costs falls to his death from the top floor. The mayor in *Jaws* is punished for his refusal to put the safety of the community above his personal greed: his son is eaten by the monster shark. The 'villains' of the films are the anti-social elements within the community - the unreliable, the corrupt and the selfish. The source of the threat itself is generally too huge and too impersonal to play the part of villain. Even the shark in *Jaws* represents more 'a force of nature' than an evil monster with a brain.

The forging of civic solidarity within the threatened community (whether local or global) is matched by the creation of a parallel identification between the film's audience and the community in question. Russell Lack makes the interesting point that the familiar musical motif that acts as a cue for the presence of the shark in *Jaws* is never used to mislead the audience [Lack 1997: 330]. The use of irony or ambiguity is common in horror films and thrillers, either to reveal to the audience information concealed from the participants in the drama or simply to deceive the audience: to make them fear when there is nothing to fear or to relax when they should be alert. In disaster films, the aim

is to unite the audience with the film's characters. The forging of this unity at two levels, within the diegetic community and between the audience and the victims of the disaster, constitutes the unmistakably characteristic narrative element of the genre. In the terminology suggested by Altman, it is a syntactic and a semantic element, syntactic in that it is conveyed in the familiar iconography of uniforms, learned scientists, disaster tracking and control centres, screens, radios, urgent meetings and hurried plans, and semantic in that there can be no victory over the disaster unless it be a collective victory, shared by participants and audiences alike. The *meaning* of the victory is the victory of collective humanity over the forces of evil or the powers of nature. Even when there can be no ultimate victory, as in *Titanic* (whether the 1953 or 1997 version), the examples of togetherness and heroism are represented as a victory in themselves, just as the favouritism and cowardice (the priority accorded to the first class passengers) are represented as a disgrace. The most memorable scene in the British-made version of the Titanic story (*A Night to Remember*, Roy Baker, 1958) has proved to be the playing of the band as the ship went down: the tragedy transcended in a moment of heroism and pathos.

In all of the films listed in Table 1, the solidarity of the community is deliberately built and emphasised. Typically, this process of building solidarity occupies the first half of the narrative, with the encounter (struggle, battle, siege, offensive and defensive strategies) occupying the latter half. The 'encounter' is secondary, not only in terms of chronology but because it cannot be successfully undertaken if the solidarity is absent. In sum, the unity of the community in question is the *sine qua non* of disaster movies. *A Perfect Storm* (Wolfgang Petersen, 2000) depicts a (real-life) disaster aboard a fishing boat, in which the whole crew lost their lives, yet arguably does not belong to the genre of disaster movie: the heroism is too restricted, there can be no contact with the shore, no alliance is forged, the character of the boat's captain (played by George Clooney) is represented as complex and ambivalent, and there is no sense of collective victory. The narrative in *A Perfect Storm* does not conform to generic convention because its purpose is the recreation of an actual small-scale tragedy, as the book's author made clear: 'I toyed with the idea of fictionalising, but that risked diminishing the value of whatever facts I was able to determine' (Junger 1997: foreword). For a writer to turn to conventional characters, conventional situations, conventional dialogues is to fictionalise, by definition. Genre conventions are 'repeated patterns' (McArthur 1972: 23); the 'knowledge of concepts and themes is the common property of the regular audience of the movies' (Alloway, 1963: 5). In other words, the needs and expectations of the audience are the source and rationale for generic convention. In the case of disaster movies, the primary 'need and expectation' is reassurance that in an emergency the community will act in togetherness.

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### **Historical Contexts of the Three Cycles**

The years previous to the initiation of the first cycle of films were dominated in the United States externally by the Korean War (1950 - 1953) and internally by McCarthyism, both of them outcomes of the Cold War, then at its height. In Korea, the Chinese army penetrated deep into South Korea, 142,000 American soldiers were killed, and General Douglas MacArthur, America's best-known military commander and the man who had accepted the surrender of Japan in September 1945, was dismissed by President Truman, returning home to an extravagant public welcome. When a peace treaty was finally signed in Korea, it proved impossible to reunite the country, which had been the war aim of the United States. At home, McCarthyism, expression of hysterical anti-communist sentiment, dominated domestic politics between 1948 and 1954, triggered by the high profile treason trial of Alger Hiss, who was prosecuted by Richard Nixon. Over 300 Hollywood personalities were blacklisted by the senate committee chaired by McCarthy, one hundred university professors were dismissed and many thousands lost jobs and reputations as a result of its investigations. Ambassadors, five-star generals and university presidents were attacked. In 1953, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, a husband and wife in their 30s, were sent to the electric chair for selling atomic secrets to the USSR, despite strong doubts over the validity of the evidence. In the same year, Russia exploded its first hydrogen bomb, and four years later became the first country to launch a satellite into space. In 1951, the Truman government was rocked by a series of corruption scandals; in 1952, a strike among steelworkers was quelled by force and in 1957 paratroopers were sent to Little Rock in Arkansas to enforce mixed-race schooling. 'Everything's booming but the guns,' said a Republican election poster of 1956, but beneath the superficial affluence, was an increasingly assertive Civil Rights movement, evidence of government corruption and, in Africa and in Latin America, the expansion of Soviet influence. (Calvocoressi 2001:118-120; Johnson 1997: 833-836; Jones 1996: 538-541).

The period preceding the initiation of the second cycle, the late 1960s and early 1970s, was also a time of political disillusionment, marked by the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King (1968), widespread protest against the Vietnam War, and the social tensions resulting from the anti-war movement and the radicalisation of the civil rights movement. The terrifying and inexplicable Charles Manson murders took place in the same period, and the Kent State campus shootings, in which protesting university students were shot dead by police, occurred in 1970. The early years of the 1970s were dominated by the Watergate scandal and the resumption of the bombing of North Vietnam. The US dollar was effectively devalued in 1971, and the notion of a stable world economic order was severely damaged by the collapse of the international exchange rate regime. The OPEC oil crisis of 1973 led to a leap in oil prices and triggered a global economic recession which was to last for the remainder of the decade. Also in 1973 came the murder of eleven Israeli athletes by Palestinian

guerrillas at the Munich Olympic Games, the denouement of which was watched live on television. The Cold War entered a period of détente with Nixon's visits to Moscow and Beijing and the signing of the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, but there was unease in the US that the overall nuclear balance was in favour of Russia: in 1972, the USSR possessed 2,090 strategic missiles and the US 1,710, an advantage predicted to increase during the decade. Tension between the superpowers intensified following aggressive Russian initiatives in Angola, Vietnam and Afghanistan. (Calvocoressi 2001: 44-45, 175; Kennedy 1988: 534).

Regarding the third cycle of disaster films, the late 1980s saw the end of the Cold War with the implosion of the Soviet empire in 1989/1990, but President Bush was criticised for indecision abroad - an unrepentant Saddam Hussein was left in power in Iraq, while control of the Panama canal was lost, despite the invasion of the country by US troops - and a lack of a coherent domestic policy. The first Clinton administration (1992 - 1996) was marked by media attacks on suspect property deals, which developed into the 'Whitewater' scandal that pursued Clinton throughout his presidential tenure, exacerbated by accusations of sexual impropriety. There were a series of crises inside the US, including the Los Angeles riots of 1992, the Waco massacre of 1993 (in which 80 people were shot by police), the Cuban refugee crisis of 1994 and the Oklahoma bombing of 1995, in which 168 people died. In the same year, an explosion aboard a TWA flight over Long Island resulted in 220 deaths. (Johnson 1997: 931-933, 937/8; Jones 1996: 613/14.)

The late 1960s and early 1970s had witnessed the first widespread awareness of such issues as the pollution of rivers by lead, mercury and phosphates, the effects of indiscriminate logging in tropical forests, the long-term ecological damage of DDT and the threat of extinction to animal species. The scale of global concern was reflected in the convocation of the UN conference on the Human Environment in 1972 and the founding of Greenpeace in 1975. By the end of the decade, it was calculated that a total of 20 million Americans had taken part in ecologically-motivated meetings and demonstrations. The late 1980s and early 1990s were also a time of intensified concern over ecological matters, following a series of environmental disasters: in 1984, 3,000 people had been killed in an explosion at Bhopal in India and in 1986 came the explosion at the nuclear reactor in Chernobyl. In 1989, the oiltanker *Exxon Valdez* sank off the coast of Alaska causing a huge spillage of oil and an oil slick covering 250 square kilometres appeared off Morocco after the sinking of the *Kharg V*. There was growing public concern over acid rain, the 'greenhouse effect', the extenuation of the ozone layer and the first signs of global warming and its connection with tropical deforestation and the indiscriminate burning of fossil fuels. By the mid 1990s, the issue of climate change was the dominant environmental concern, intensified by the effects of the El Nino phenomenon, observable from around 1995. The UN conference on climate change was convoked in 1996. (Cook and Stevenson 1998: 330-332).



Table 1: Disaster Films and Their Historical Contexts

First Cycle: 1953 - 1959		
Year	Events	Films
1951	Dismissal of General MacArthur Corruption scandals and 'sleaze' in government	
1952	Height of McCarthyism Steel strike crisis	
1953	Execution of the Rosenbergs for betrayal of atomic secrets '50-'53 140,000 US soldiers died in Korean War Russians test their first Hydrogen bomb	<i>The War of the Worlds; Titanic</i>
1954	Dulles and Cold War threat of 'massive retaliation' Completion of the Kinsey report on sexuality	<i>The High and the Mighty</i>
1955	First US military advisers in Vietnam	<i>The Day the World Ended</i>
1956	US Sixth fleet despatched to E. Mediterranean to counter threat of Nasser's Egypt	<i>Flight into Danger</i>
1957	Launching of Soviet 'Sputnik' satellite Paratroopers quell violence at Little Rock, Arkansas	<i>Zero Hour; The Night the World Exploded</i>
1958	Evidence of government scandals revealed	<i>The Lost Missile; The Day the Sky Exploded</i>
1959		<i>On the Beach; The Last Voyage; The Last Days of Pompeii</i>
Second Cycle: 1972 - 1979		
Year	Events	Films
	1968 - 1971 Assassinations of RFK and MLK; anti-war demos; campus disaffection; Kent State killings; Charles Manson murders; leaking of the Pentagon Papers	
1972	Watergate break-in; Munich Olympics killings; resumption of Vietnam Bombing; UN environment conference	<i>Survive! Poseidon Adventure</i>
1973	Oil crisis; devaluation of US \$	<i>... And Millions Die</i>
1974	Resignation of Nixon; economic recession until end of decade	<i>Towering Inferno; Earthquake; Airport '75</i>
1975	Fall of Saigon to north Vietnamese troops; founding of Greenpeace	<i>Jaws; Bug; The Hindenberg</i>
1976	Revival of Soviet expansionism: Angola, Ethiopia, central Africa	<i>City on Fire; Drive-In; The Cassandra Crossing</i>
1977	Continued decline in US competitiveness in major industries	<i>Gray Lady Down; Airport '77; Fire!</i>
1978		<i>Avalanche; Jaws 2; The Swarm</i>
1979		<i>Alien; Hurricane; Beyond the Poseidon Adventure; Airport '80</i>
Third Cycle: 1993 - 1998		
Year	Events	Films
	Late '80s: Chernobyl; acid rain; greenhouse effect, ozone layer; oil spillages and oil slicks; oil fires in Persian Gulf	
1993	Waco Massacre; emergence of 'Whitewater' scandal	<i>Jurassic Park</i>
1994	Florida Refugee Crisis;	<i>Speed</i>
1995	Oklahoma Bombing	<i>Apollo 13; Outbreak</i>
1996	Further strikes in Iraq; 220 die in Long Island aircraft disaster; El Nino warnings of floods, fires, climate change	<i>Daylight; Twister; Independence Day</i>
1997		<i>Dante's Peak; Hard Rain; Titanic; Volcano</i>
1998		<i>Armageddon; Deep Impact</i>

### **Analysis of the Tabulation**

The historical overview is presented in tabulated form in Table 1, with the disaster films listed in the final column of the table. No correlation is suggested between the events and films of any one year; given the time needed for the conception, preparation and making of a film, any such connection would be coincidental. Although it might be possible to associate the release of *Hard Rain* in 1997 with the widespread El Nino warnings that appeared in the press the previous year, such direct cause-and-effect, even where it could be proved, would have no place in a hypothesis which depends on the dominant mood of a society matched with film cycles considered collectively rather than on the individual concerns or calculations of filmmakers.

The major analytical task is the identification of elements shared by the three historical periods, a task that can be simplified by first identifying elements which are not. The latter half of the 1970s was one of economic recession, whereas the 1950s was a period of growing prosperity. The late 1980s and early 1990s were also a time of economic growth and rising wages. No linear connection can therefore be proposed between the disaster movie and economic recession, such as is widely held to exist in the case of the Hollywood musical. The 1950s, 1970s and 1980s were dominated by Republican administrations (respectively Eisenhower, Nixon, Reagan and Bush Sr.) but during the critical 'gestatory' period for the first cycles there was a Democrat administration (Truman), as there was for the whole period of the third cycle itself, under Clinton. Equally, therefore, there can be no suggestion of a direct link in terms of party politics or of the broad differentiation of policy (which was anyway becoming narrower) between the Republican and Democrat parties. Nor can any direct connection be hypothesised between the film cycles and major developments in foreign affairs. The Korean war was costly in terms of casualties among soldiers, but much less so than the war in Vietnam, for which there was no comparable cycle of disaster film. The 1970s were characterised by international détente, as were the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet empire. The first Iraq war was supported by the majority of Americans and achieved its stated objectives; Operation Desert storm was judged by Paul Johnson as 'one of the most brilliant campaigns in US history' (Johnson 1997: 933). The evidence concerning superpower rivalry during the Cold War suggests that there was anxiety during the 1950s (McCarthyism was clearly an expression of it) and again during the 1970s, despite détente. Yet both the Bush administration of 1988 -1992 and the first Clinton administration that followed were notably free of superpower rivalry, initially during the Gorbachev-Bush era, described by Jones as 'a rapport so close as to be called a "partnership"' (Jones 1996: 615) and even more so during the Yeltsin-Clinton era by which time Russia was in disarray.

One element, however, is common to all three periods under consideration: a lack of public confidence amounting at times to a conspicuous

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mistrust in government, and officialdom in general. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the tenor of politics was profoundly disturbed by the McCarthyite witch-hunt, affecting not only those lost jobs and reputations but all those who might do so, *without due processes of law*, the central plank of the system of American (and universal) justice. In addition there were allegations of government corruption in 1950/51, under Truman, and again in 1957/58 under Eisenhower. Public mistrust in government reached an even lower ebb during the Nixon years (the Kent State shootings, the leaking of the Pentagon Papers, the Watergate break-in and enquiry). Watergate, in particular, involving mendacity and deceit at the highest levels of government, dealt a severe blow to public confidence. 'It was a ugly moment in America's story and one which future historians ... are likely to judge a dark hour in the history of a republic which prides itself in its love of order and its patient submission to the rule of law' (Johnson 1997: 904). When, in a separate development, Vice-President Agnew was accused of involvement in a series of corrupt practices, there existed the distinct possibility of simultaneous impeachment by Congress of both President and Vice-President.

Mistrust in government has always existed among disaffected groups and perhaps as early as 1968 it was widespread in the US, as indicated by the anti-war marches, the campus protests and the civil rights movements. Yet until about 1970, clear signs of disaffection were restricted to students, anti-war veterans, political radicals, 'leftist' teachers and artists and African Americans. It was during the Nixon years that the protests extended to middle-aged, middle-of-the-road, middle America and it was due to Watergate, which eventually led to the forced resignation of the president, that mistrust in government reached unparalleled levels. At such a time, it may be argued, there existed within the US a collective need for reassurance - reassurance that in times of extreme crisis, a community or nation, or even the whole world, would rediscover its sense of unity and solidarity. Crucially, this solidarity would extend to, and often depend on, the orderly, responsible and skilled functions of official bodies: the emergency services, the army, the scientific establishment and the political decision makers.

In 1991, Suzanne Garment published a book entitled *Scandal: the Culture of Mistrust in American Politics* which suggested that official scandal and public mistrust had become endemic, and detailing among other things a consequent reluctance among public-spirited US citizens to run for high office (Garment 1991: 9ff). The years of the Clinton presidency (1992-1998) were marked by the Whitewater allegations, soon exacerbated by the series of sexual improprieties which came close to forcing Clinton's resignation. Naturally there was a degree of prurience involved in matters which had never threatened Kennedy's position even though he was as susceptible to such accusations as Clinton, or more so. But the apparent seriousness of Whitewater increased, especially in the wake of the unexplained death of a Clinton aide called Vince Foster. Despite Clinton's successes as a negotiator of peace settlements, and his growing international

popularity, it must be argued that his presidency did nothing to remedy the 'culture of mistrust' and may even have served to intensify it.

Major events in the country at large during Clinton's first administration included the Waco massacre (1993) and the Oklahoma bombing (1995) two incidents which in their different ways, shocked the American populace. At Waco, there was the spectacle of a US secretary of state ordering police to open fire on a body of civilians that included women and children; while the bombing of the civic centre in Oklahoma, in the heart of middle America, was carried out by an individual claiming to act out of motives of idealism. In both cases, the shock was caused not only by the loss of life involved, but by the awareness of deep and potentially violent divisions within the society.

The death of 220 people in the Long Island airplane disaster in 1996 was an incident of a very different nature and a reminder that the connection between real-life tragedies and disaster movies is not a straightforward matter of cause-and-effect. On the contrary, an actual airline disaster is likely to ensure that the subject is tabooed on screen for a certain period: the disaster film does not and must not mirror actual events. After the 9/11 terrorist attack, films involving disasters which were then in the process of production were immediately cancelled and for several years afterwards the only disaster movies to appear concerned such 'safe' topics as crop circles (*Signs*, 2002), turmoil in the earth's electromagnetic field (*The Core*, 2003) and remakes of *King Kong* and *War of the Worlds* (2005). The fact is that the third cycle of disaster films appears to have ended well before the attack of 9/11, with a virtual absence of major disaster films in the years 1999 - 2002. A film such as Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006), dealing in a quasi-fictional way with the events of 9/11, is unclassifiable as a disaster movie, not because the generic conventions are absent but because the generic label undermines the seriousness of the film purpose. This is not a genre film but a testament to individual heroism at a time of national disaster and a solemn celebration of 'the goodness we forgot could exist', a line from the filmscript referring precisely to the sense of civic solidarity which had been lost during the previous decades.

If the demise of the third cycle predated the real-life tragedy of 9/11, an alternative explanation must be sought. Thus far, only the relationship between film cycles and external events has been considered, but a generic cycle of films has also an internal, self-generating dynamic, with film production companies eager to imitate or build on previous successes. This dynamic was variously expounded in the works of critics such as Shatz and Erlich, who identified specific stages in genre development (Shatz 1981: 38ff.; Erlich 1981: 260ff) and discussed by Neale under the heading of 'self-reflexivity' or 'self-consciousness' (Neale, 2000: 212/3). One generic tendency noted by critics was for cycles progressively to lose the vigour and originality present at their initiation, summarised thus by Jauss: 'Successful genres ... gradually lose their power

through continual reproduction' (Jauss 1982: 106). Such theories are readily applicable to film sequels, such as the four sequels to *Airport* and the second chapter of the *Jaws* story, but also to films clearly belonging to the same category. The success of *Independence Day*, for example, a film that generated \$811 million worldwide (Kay and Rose 2007: 354) must surely have influenced the making of *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* two years later, just as the release of *City on Fire* and *Drive-In* in 1976 can be assumed to have been affected by the success of *The Towering Inferno* in 1974. *Armageddon* attempted to repeat the formula of *Independence Day* but was considered by journalistic film critics to be an inferior work, dismissed by Tom Charity, for example, writing in *Time Out*, as 'idiotic and boorish'. Similarly *Drive-In*, featuring a fire at a drive-in cinema and appearing two years after *The Towering Inferno* was assessed by John Pym as 'frantic' and 'indulgent' (*Time Out* 2007: 53 and 320). *Drive-In* was fully aware of its generic pedigree: the fictional film being viewed at the cinema in question was entitled '*Disaster '76*'. Examples of self-reflexivity, according to Neale and others, become more frequent as a cycle develops.

In other words, even if the emergence and success of a film cycle can legitimately be traced to a public mood, to public anxieties, the termination of the cycle may be attributable to an inherent dynamic. As Shatz expressed it: 'Once the story is repeated and refined into a formula, its basis in experience gradually gives way to its own internal narrative logic' (Shatz 1981: 36), illustrating his point with reference to the increasingly 'self-reflexive' nature of post-war musicals and 1950s westerns. This tendency towards self-reflexivity - and therefore towards a lack of originality - can be detected in the cycles of disaster movies of both the 1950s and the 1970s, in the appearance of such obviously imitative films as *The Day the World Ended*, *The Night the World Exploded* and *The Day the Sky Exploded* (1955 - 1958) which clearly fed on the success of *The War of the Worlds*, and of *The Hindenberg* and *Gray Lady Down* (1975/6), which stood in the same relation to *The Poseidon Adventure*. A final development is parody which, in highlighting the most familiar clichés of the genre, may herald its imminent demise. The appearance of *Airplane!* in 1980 effectively terminated not only the five-film series of *Airport* (1969-1979) but also, it may be argued, the entire cycle of 1970s disaster movies. The third cycle survived the appearance of Tim Burton's parody *Mars Attacks* (1996), but only by two years. It is notable that one of the principal 'anti-conventional' elements of *Mars Attacks* was its depiction of the disunity of a generally unlikeable populace.

## Conclusion

The hypothesis presented in this study may be summarised as follows: three separate cycles of disaster films are identifiable in the 1950s, the 1970s and the 1990s. The historical periods relating to the gestation and inception of these cycles were marked in each case by an increase in public mistrust in government, anxieties about environmental issues and fears for the unity of

society in the US. The central narrative element in all the films concerned was the creation of a sense of civic solidarity, expressed in the collective action of citizens, officials and experts in countering a fearsome external threat. The initiation of these filmic cycles can therefore be understood as a cultural expression of the dominant socio-political mood. The cycles came to an end partly as a result of an innate cyclical dynamic, and partly in response to changing political circumstance (specifically, the election of Kennedy in 1960 and the renewal of confidence and prosperity during the Reagan years, 1980 - 1988).

These findings indicate that further research into the relationship between genre development and historical events would be a rewarding area for genre theorists and that the identification of coherent cycles might constitute a useful starting point. Such research should not neglect the more formulaic cinematic genres where aspects of synchronicity might be studied more readily than is the case for genres of greater narrative and thematic complexity.

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