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Behavior: The Deluge of Disastermania

Armageddon seems to be just a payday away

Hal Lindsey's book *The Late Great Planet Earth* sold more than 10 million copies. The semidocumentary movie made from it, with Narrator Orson Welles rumbling warnings that the world may be coming to an end, is currently among the top ten moneymakers out of Hollywood. Why the success of an apocalyptic message? "Storm warnings, portents, hints of catastrophe haunt our times," says Historian Christopher Lasch. "Impending disaster has become an everyday concern."

Indeed, Armageddon is something of a growth industry. In an avalanche of recent books, polar caps melt, a new ice age begins, the oceans disappear, the ozone level is destroyed, terrorists touch off a nuclear war, astronauts bring back a deadly Andromeda Strain. Destruction may also come from a maddened god (Gore Vidal's *Kalki*). Or in an unending snowstorm (George Stone's *Blizzard*). Or from the scorching "greenhouse effect" of too much CO₂ in the atmosphere (Arthur Herzog's *Heat*). Or through global political disintegration (*The Third World War: August 1985* by a group of English officers and writers). Or even by a reversal of the earth's magnetic fields (Fred Warshofsky in *Doomsday*).

For Hollywood too, calamity pays. From *Earthquake* to *The Towering Inferno* and *The Last Wave* disaster flicks have been the most profitable genre of the 1970s. Nor is the deluge tapering off. Coming attractions include: *Meteor* and *The Day the World Ended* (by earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tidal waves).

One explanation for this disastermania: it is merely a harmless byproduct of popular entertainment. Explains Science Writer Isaac Asimov: "Hollywood just happens to be very good at special effects, primarily destructive effects." Indeed, in a forthcoming book, *A Choice of Catastrophes*, the polymath popularizer

seeks to soothe anxieties about global disaster. Says Asimov: "All the scenarios are either very low in probability, or very distant in the future."

Another view holds science writers themselves responsible for all the doom and gloom: because scientists write only for one another, usually in terms all but incomprehensible to lay people, word of new theories and breakthroughs is sometimes passed on to the public in overly dramatic and exaggerated form. Still, the most deadpan writing cannot disguise the drama of some of science's recent discoveries. The Big Bang theory of the universe, for example, has quite correctly convinced much of the public that the cosmos is unimaginably terrifying and violent. In the light of such findings, even theories that have been repudiated by the scientific community, like those of former

Psychiatrist Immanuel Velikovsky, continue to have a cultlike following. In his original 1950 book, *Worlds in Collision*, and its popular successors, Velikovsky argued that catastrophe is the central agent in evolution. Says Warshofsky, himself a Velikovsky buff: "Catastrophe is an essential force in nature, not aberrational, but inevitable."

Some scholars think that this kind of writing may be a reflection, rather than a cause, of the preoccupation with disaster. Roy Peter Clark, an English professor at Auburn University, links the spread of millenarian fever with the approaching end of a true millenium—the year 2000. Says he: "We must prepare ourselves for the mass psychological hysteria, the conscious or unconscious sense of terror that may build to a climax." Others, like Psychoanalyst Eric Fromm, say that love of calamity shows a sense of alienation and powerlessness that seeks release through images of destruction.

Art Historian Andrée Conrad sees disastermania in sociological terms. In a recent review of 20 catastrophe books for the quarterly *Book Forum*, she argued that disaster writing and entertainment are safety valves for hostility toward a complicated culture. Says Conrad: "For one exhilarating and guilt-free moment, the whole teeming supermarket cart of capitalist goodies is sent hurtling down the aisle and crashes through the façade." The films, in her view, also ease the dread of death, since there is comfort in knowing that everyone almost always dies together. Concludes Conrad: "The success of disaster entertainment is rooted deep in the concerns and apprehensions of the American psyche." his pessimistic *The Culture of Narcissism*, argues that modern civilization is beginning to show signs of the breakdown that marked the end of the medieval world—the same point made by Barbara Tuchman in her bestseller *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*. As Lasch tells it, disastermania and the selfishness of the "Me" decade indicate that humanity has lost faith in the future and awaits some kind of ending.

Few historians would care to push the analogy with the chaos and disintegration of the Middle Ages too far. Nonetheless, a few tantalizing similarities exist between then and now, among them the revival of

millenarian sects and predictions about the world's end. Psychics and E.S.P. fanciers, for instance, have dusted off the 1934 predictions of Edgar Cayce: he forecast upheavals at the poles, the sinking of most of Japan into the sea, and the destruction of Los Angeles, San Francisco and New York. In his recent book *We Are the Earthquake Generation*, Jeffrey Goodman explains that the latterday mystics are generally agreed that worldwide destruction will occur between 1990 and 2000 by earthquakes, tsunamis and floods; then John the Baptist will announce the Second Coming.

On the other hand, the end could come from mutated praying mantises, killer bees, flying saucers, aerosol cans, a shortage of STP, the retirement of Charlton Heston..

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