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SCREENLAND

Why Are We Obsessed With the Destruction of L.A.?

A video appeared to show Dodger Stadium in ruins. Was it a religious sign, climate disaster or something else entirely?

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The clip is short — about 30 seconds — yet it evokes an entire Hollywood history. Posted to Los Angeles Dodgers Aerial Photography, a little-followed account on X, formerly known as Twitter, it opens on an out-of-focus shot of Dodger Stadium, filmed through a rain-slicked helicopter window. The rhythmic thump of propellers is the only sound we hear. Eventually the camera focuses, and we see what it is we're meant to see: The stadium appears as if it's sitting in the middle of a moat amid Elysian Park's sparse red-brown hills. Its iconic palm trees jut out of the water like props in a postapocalyptic movie. In the background, the downtown skyline emerges from a pillowy haze.

The post itself doesn't tell us what we're looking at. Its caption, as sparse as those hills, offers only "Dodger Stadium this morning" — Aug. 20, the day that Tropical Storm Hilary doused Southern California with unusually heavy rains — followed by a wave of innocuous Dodgers-related hashtags. But to anyone who grew up watching the bombastic disaster flicks of the 1990s and aughts — fare like "Escape From L.A.," "Independence Day" and "The Day After Tomorrow" — it might have seemed as if some of Hollywood's prophecies had finally come true. The movie industry's obsession with Los Angeles's destruction has made this kind of image a key part of the country's psyche, after all. In his film essay "Los Angeles Plays Itself," Thom Andersen argues that, if Hollywood's obsession with the topic is any indication, the destruction of Greater Los Angeles is one of those widely held fantasies, like the bootstrapping myth, that binds Americans into something like a common purpose. In John Carpenter's 1996 B-movie classic, "Escape From L.A.," an earthquake floods the San Fernando Valley and cuts Los Angeles off from the rest of California, turning the city into an island. The nation's newly elected, fanatically evangelical president condemns all those he considers heathens to life in L.A.

In these movies, Los Angeles represents some moral offense rectified only by the region's drowning (or burning, or crumbling). When the aliens in "Independence Day" position a ship over the U.S. Bank Tower in downtown Los Angeles, ditsy rooftop revelers gather atop the skyscraper to welcome them — only to become the first of the invaders' victims, incinerated by a laser beam. In the thriller "2012," Los Angeles is among the first cities claimed by an ancient prophecy of doom. The movie's protagonist escapes by plane just as an earthquake along the dreaded San Andreas Fault demolishes the city; we're treated to gratuitous images of terrified motorists disappearing into the earth, dying as they lived, sitting in traffic. In a cheekier take, Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg's "This Is the End" stages the biblical apocalypse as a bummer disruption to a Hollywood party, casting L.A. as Sodom's logical successor.

This subgenre suggests that the city is a stand-in for America's worst tendencies — environmental depredation, materialism, the worship of celebrity, venal capitalism. It's as if we might exorcise these flaws by ritually punishing L.A. via film. Within the context of Tropical Storm Hilary, X users assimilated that brief stadium clip into a series of disaster narratives that had the yearning quality of wishful thinking. Don Van Natta Jr. of ESPN posted a still of the venue and proclaimed, very matter-of-factly, that "Dodger Stadium is an island." That loosed a cascade of critics. Holier-than-thou urban-planning enthusiasts chirped that the supposed flooding was the city's comeuppance for its poor land-use policies. Amateur historians claimed that the stadium was built onto Chavez Ravine, the site of a Mexican district that was destroyed to make way for what was then the Brooklyn Dodgers' new home in Los Angeles, and therefore prone to flooding.

Wrathful, extremely online conservative Christians crowed the loudest. For them the flooding was ordained by God, a sign that they were vindicated in a running feud with the team. Incensed at the club's decision to honor the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence — a California-based charity organization made up of drag performers parodying Catholic nuns — during its annual Pride celebration, the religious activists made the Dodgers a national example of what is, in their view, secular society's disrespect for Christianity. Marco Rubio wrote a public letter to the M.L.B. commissioner complaining that the club was honoring "a group that mocks Christians through diabolical parodies"; Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, compared it to inviting a group of blackface minstrels to perform. For many of these conservatives, the ultimate decision to host the Sisters earned the Dodgers a special place in hell. X users with names like Spunky Conservative Patriot denounced the club, proclaiming "God Wins!" and spinning the incident as

divine justice, a reboot of Noah's Ark, the original disaster narrative.

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None of these people stopped to investigate whether the stadium had actually flooded. It turned out that the lake was an optical illusion, about as real as Carpenter's backlot visions of an annihilated Southern California. The next day, the Dodgers' official X and Instagram accounts posted images of a dry and sunny scene at the ballpark. The Los Angeles Times explained that the original image depicted nothing but a wet parking lot reflecting gray light, which made it impossible to judge the depth of the water on the surface. More geographically perceptive people pointed out that the stadium sits on top of a hill, from which water would sluice back down into the city's basin. The idea that a moat could form up there defied physics.

In the end, though, disaster movies are never about the imagined cataclysms they claim to be about. They're the stories we tell ourselves about how we got where we are — and how we might trace our steps back to Eden. For example, the 1974 Charlton Heston vehicle "Earthquake" traffics in images of exploding Craftsman homes and frightened white residents, like a nightmare vision of what the 1965 Watts riots (and countless other late 1960s race riots) *could* have been like, if the L.A.P.D. and the National Guard had not contained it to Black neighborhoods. In the movies, L.A. is the place where everything goes wrong; at least the rest of the nation can take lessons from its failures.

Historically, film as a medium has, for better or worse, helped us make sense of the world. This is not to say that schlock like "Escape From L.A." is instructional, but it's an entry in the visual and verbal library from which we draw in order to parse life's moral, political and personal challenges. How, I wonder, does the new visual language of social media train us to understand the world? Just as disaster flicks are never really about the supposed calamity they depict, that clip of Dodger Stadium is less about climate change, religious course correction or the crisis of urban planning than how far we've slid into this new, confused discourse, like so much muddy storm water sloshing down into the gutter. The images that circulate on platforms like X (a virtual disaster zone) encourage us to extrapolate erroneous conclusions from a cascade of often conflicting clips that are ultimately meaningless outside their initial contexts. This is not new — from "Birth of a Nation" to "Nanook of the North," film's history is entangled with the question of how we tell fact from fiction. Now, as then, we would do well to discern when we're only looking at projections.

Opening illustration: Source photograph by Tom Szczerbowski/Getty Images

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