



4-1-2007

Age before Beauty: A Comparative Study of Martyrs in American Disaster Movies and Their Medieval Predecessors

Lena Roos

Uppsala University, lena.roos@teol.uu.se

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Roos, Lena (2007) "Age before Beauty: A Comparative Study of Martyrs in American Disaster Movies and Their Medieval Predecessors," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 1.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32873/uno.dc.jrf.11.01.01>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol11/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.

Age before Beauty: A Comparative Study of Martyrs in American Disaster Movies and Their Medieval Predecessors

Abstract

A study of a selection of American disaster movies from the past decades reveals the presence of a certain kind of martyr character. These martyrs do not die for their religious or ideological faith but rather in order to save loved ones, sometimes the entire planet. These movie martyrs differ to a great extent from classical Christian martyrs as portrayed in medieval legends. The modern movie martyrs are usually old, and often social outcasts in different ways. Often they have failed as parents, are alcoholics or criminals. Their death is their way of redeeming themselves.

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

What is worth dying for? In this study I will focus on martyr characters in a group of recent American disaster movies and analyse how they compare to martyrs as rendered in a popular medieval collection of medieval legends of saints.

The point of studying expressions of martyrdom in a given culture is quite simple: if you know what causes that were considered worthy of sacrificing your life for in a given context, that tells you something important about what was valued in that particular society.

Who should then be considered a martyr? When it comes to medieval Christian legends, it seems that the distinction is quite simple. The authors themselves usually refer to them as martyres, that is people who give their lives for their Christian faith. The Greek term *martyrs* means witness, and that reminds us of the fact that in Christian theology, the death of the martyr was not only of significance for that person but also served as a powerful testimony to the truth of the claims of the Christian church. This testimony served to strengthen other Christians during times when they were threatened by persecutions, or as a model for the medieval reader, who was rather in jeopardy of the cardinal sin of *acedia*, lack of zeal for religious matters. But this definition, a person who is willing to die for his or her religious conviction, is too narrow for the present purpose, since the martyrs found in the films under scrutiny are of a different kind. I have therefore settled on the following, more inclusive definition: A martyr is a person who

voluntarily sacrifices himself or herself for something that is perceived as more valuable than one's own life.

It is important to stress that this must be a voluntary act. A person who simply is swept away by a tornado, or buried in a stream of lava, without doing anything actively to put his or her life on the line for a greater cause or in order to save others, is not included in this category.

Since I want to highlight the values perceived to be worth dying for in a given society, there is an advantage to focusing on products of popular culture, rather than the works of an intellectual elite. The products of popular culture can be assumed to represent attitudes and values that are representative of a large portion of the population in that particular society. The fact that these works were seen, read, or heard by a major portion of their contemporaries testifies to the fact that they were perceived to be relevant, interesting and engaging.¹

For this purpose I have chosen to focus on a series of major Hollywood productions which must be considered "popular" based on the following three criteria:

- At least one or several of the leading roles were interpreted by well established actors.
- They were expensive to make and thus required a major financial investment for actors' salaries as well as well as for special effects.

- They were seen by many people, either at the movie theatres or when subsequently released on video or DVD.

The films I have chosen are: *Twister* (1996), *Independence Day* (1996), *Dante's Peak* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1998), *Armageddon* (1998), and *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004). With the exception of one, all these films are films that deal with various kinds of natural disasters. In *The Day after Tomorrow*, the theme is the climate chaos with global storms and a new ice age that is caused by global warming. *Twister* and *Dante's Peak* have a more local perspective and deals with how small town America is struck by a massive tornado and a volcano eruption, respectively. The plot lines in *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact* are almost identical, which is interesting since the films appeared the same year. Earth is on collision course with a comet/an asteroid that threatens to extinguish all life on Earth. Also in the final film, *Independence Day*, the threat reaches Earth from outer space, but then in the form of aliens of vastly superior technology who have come to "harvest" the natural resources on Earth, like some kind of intergalactic locusts.

Since I wanted to compare this modern material to something that could be considered a medieval equivalent, I have chosen to focus on the thirteenth century collection *The Golden Legend* (Legenda aurea).² This book is a collection of legends on saints and martyrs and must be considered a medieval blockbuster. Already during the Middle Ages it was translated into all the major Western European vernacular languages, and it has been preserved in around a thousand

manuscripts, something which is unique for a medieval text. During the Late Middle Ages, these manuscripts were followed by hundreds of printed editions, and it has therefore often been said that the only book that was more widely disseminated in Europe in the Late Middle Ages was the Bible.³

It is uncertain what purpose Jacobus de Voragine had in mind when he set out to gather all these Christian legends from the second to the thirteenth centuries into one great volume. It has been argued that since Jacobus was a Dominican friar, *The Golden Legend* was meant to function as an aid for preachers for preparing sermons on the various saints' and martyrs' days of the Christian calendar. This is supported by the fact that it was written in Latin, and that the legends are ordered according to the calendar of the Church year. The enormous quantity of preserved manuscripts in Latin as well as the various vernacular languages, however, seems to indicate that the book was also used outside of clerical circles, for private devotion and spiritual edification.⁴

There are several characteristics of these medieval Christian martyr texts which are also found already in early Christian martyr texts from the first centuries of the Christian era:

- The martyr is willing, often joyous, to die for his or her faith.⁵
- The martyr is convinced that death is merely the passage to the eternal, heavenly life.⁶

- It is often stressed that the martyr was admirable in every way even before his or her martyrdom. The martyr is described as pious and chaste.⁷ Often the youth and beauty of the martyr is highlighted.⁸

All these characteristics should most likely be connected to the didactic purpose of the Christian martyr texts: reading about the earlier Christians who had been willing to give their lives for their faith was meant to strengthen the Christian identity of subsequent generations. They were role-models for the medieval readers.

What can be said about martyrs in the modern disaster movies? In most cases the movie martyr is a supporting role. In *Twister* it is the father of the leading female character. The father saves his entire family by holding the door to the cellar where the family has sought shelter from a tornado. In doing this, he is swept away by the tornado, and it is understood that this was what motivated the leading character, played by Helen Hunt, into dedicating her life to tornado research. In *Dante's Peak* the story focuses on the family of the mayor of a small town, a single mom played by Linda Hamilton. When the family flees the volcano eruption, they discover that the lake has turned into acid and that the boat that they are travelling in is being dissolved. The grandmother then jumps into the water and pushes the boat in to the shore, thereby saving the family but sacrificing her own life. In *Independence Day* the martyr is an old Vietnam veteran. At a crucial point in the great battle between earthlings and aliens, he is the only one who has a missile left. The launching mechanism is jammed, however, and he chooses to crash his plane

into the heart of the alien space ship, sacrificing himself like a kamikaze pilot, which gives the humans the break they need to defeat the aliens and save Earth. In *The Day after Tomorrow* the martyr character is a very minor role, that of the older scientist Frank who has been cooperating with the main character Jack (Dennis Quaid) for a couple of decades. Frank also decides to join Jack on an expedition across the frozen continent in order to save Jack's son from the advancing ice age. On the way, Frank falls through the glass roof of a shopping mall. His friends try to pull him up, but as the roof begins to crack he realizes that he might pull down his younger colleagues and cuts his lifeline in order to save them.

In a couple of cases the martyr characters have major roles in the plot. This is the case in the two thematically similar movies *Armageddon* and *Deep Impact*. In *Deep Impact* a rescue mission has been sent out to try to blow the comet into smaller, less threatening pieces. The mission fails but the members of the team decide to sacrifice their lives by landing on the comet and their detonating their remaining explosives, thereby saving Earth. In *Armageddon* the rescue mission is made up by a crew of oil drillers whose task it is to place a series of nuclear war heads deep into the asteroid in order to blow it to bits. At the last moment the detonating mechanism fails and the crew members realize that one of them must stay behind to detonate it manually. The lot falls on one of the younger crew members, played by Ben Affleck, but when merely seconds remain for take-off, the

crew leader, played by Bruce Willis, by force takes Affleck's place. The drama is enhanced by the fact that Affleck's character is engaged to Willis's daughter, a relationship Willis has been trying to prevent throughout the movie.

Something that all these martyr characters have in common, which sets them apart from their medieval predecessors, is that they do not die for an idea but rather for other people. More specifically: in all these cases, possibly with the exception of *Deep Impact*, there is a reoccurring motif, that of the older sacrificing themselves for the young. Often it is the case of parents giving their lives to save their children or younger relatives, and at the moment of death, focus lies on the parent-child relation. In *Armageddon* this translates into an emotional dialogue between Willis and his daughter before he detonates the bomb. When he has taken her fiancé's place, he also reconciles himself with him with the words: "I always thought of you as a son", thereby transforming himself into a father, sacrificing himself for his son. In *Independence Day* the pilot Russell Case realizes that his final missile won't launch and that he must crash his plane into the extraterrestrials' ship in order to save the world, he does so with a final look at the picture of his children taped to the control board, and announcing over the radio: "Do me a favour. Tell my children I love them very much."

The film that to a certain extent goes against this pattern is *Deep Impact* where not merely the aged leader of the mission, played by Robert Duvall, but the

entire crew, young and old, sacrifice themselves. But even in this film, the fact that Duvall is unusually old to participate in a space mission is a reoccurring theme throughout the film. The film also ends with an emotional scene where the crew members over video link say good bye to their families on Earth, and one of the members meets his son who had been born after he had left on the mission.

It is striking that in many of these cases these martyrs are in different ways social misfits. In *Armageddon*, Willis's crew of oil drillers are either criminal, of low moral standards or psychologically instable individuals. Willis's character has raised his daughter himself after his wife left them, and we are led to understand that this upbringing, on oil rigs around the world, has left a lot to be desired. In *Independence Day* the martyr character Russell Case is an alcoholic single father who cannot even manage his crop dusting job. The family is poor and living in a trailer. We are told that his alcoholism began after he, according to his own account, was abducted by aliens and subjected to experiments in a space ship. This is something he often talks about, to the great embarrassment of his children. The motif of the martyr as a social failure has an interesting variation in *Dante's Peak* where the martyr character is Ruth, the grandmother of the children in the family that is in focus, who lives by herself high up on the mountain. She is bitter at her daughter-in-law for having divorced her son. She also comes across as stubborn and foolish since, in spite of signs of an imminent eruption, she refuses to leave the

mountain, thereby jeopardizing the lives of her grandchildren who come to rescue her when the eruption starts. In the end, however, Ruth redeems this foolishness by saving the entire family.

This element of the redeeming, reconciling death of the martyr is thus a reoccurring theme in these movies. Persons who have been bad parents, criminals, alcoholics, or just foolish compensate these earlier shortcomings by sacrificing their lives for the younger generation.

Let us compare these modern martyrs with their medieval predecessors in order to see what differences and similarities there may be and what these can tell us about our time.

If we start with the element of the joyful death which is so common in the medieval legends, at first glance this appears to be missing in the modern movies. A closer examination, however, shows some elements that may point to a joyful dimension in the death of these martyrs as well. The clearest case is that of the pilot Russell Case in *Independence Day* who has been harbouring a desire for "some pay-back" ever since his abduction. The moment before he crashes into the alien space ship, his face breaks into a wide smile and he says: "Boys, I'm back...". In the case of the old woman Ruth in *Dante's Peak*, she expresses joy at the fact that she is allowed to die on her mountain where she has spent most of her life. In *Deep*

Impact we see how the leader of the mission, just before dying, takes a final look at a picture of his late wife and says: "Mary, I'm coming home." This is also the only reference which I have found where a movie martyr testifies to the conviction that death is merely the beginning of a new existence, a fact that separates the movie material from the medieval martyr legends.

What separates the modern movie martyrs the most from their medieval predecessors is how they are described. In the medieval legends, the martyrs are portrayed as role-models, not just because of their death as a martyr, but also because of their righteous lives leading up to that death. They are unselfish, pious and chaste. On top of that, it is often stressed that they are young and beautiful, something that seems to add to the drama. It seems like in this genre it is seen as more tragic if the one sacrificing his or her life is young and beautiful rather than old and hideous. The sacrifice is greater, which in turn elevates the idea that they are dying for, the Christian faith, accordingly. Since these young, beautiful, chaste, and pious people are prepared to die for their Christian faith, the reader is convinced that this is something that is worth more than the temptations of earthly life.

The martyrs in the modern disaster movies are of another kind altogether. They are anything but pious and chaste. Not until their death do they manage to redeem their earlier transgressions. These modern martyr tales seem to be governed by a completely different logic. The movie martyr is not the noblest of his or her

time like in the medieval legends but rather an unlikely hero. In addition to this, the medieval legends have their aim set for the heavenly afterlife. Their purpose is to convince the reader that the hereafter is what really counts, and that you should abstain from sins of the flesh in order to gain eternal life. In the modern disaster movies focus is rather on survival in this world.

The reoccurring theme of the old that sacrifice themselves for the young probably reflects what is most valued in our society. This motif probably indicates a change in what we consider worth dying for. Few people today would be prepared to die for their religious conviction, and those who are and do are generally seen as fanatics. Many would, however, at least say that they would be prepared to sacrifice their own lives if that would mean saving their children. The religious conviction has been replaced by family.

We can probably also see this motif as a reflection of another value in our society, that we value youth more than old age. No doubt it has been found in test screenings that movie audiences do not appreciate an ending where the beautiful young heroine sacrifices herself so that her frail old grandmother might live. In modern disaster movies, age goes before beauty.

This can also be connected to another interesting detail that occurs in some of these movies (*Twister*, *Independence Day*, *Dante's Peak*). In these films there is

a family dog which is always saved. This probably also reflects something of the value system in our time: the old people are sacrificed but the dogs are saved.⁹

¹ For earlier research on disaster movies as popular culture see for instance Schechter, Harry and Molesworth, Charles, "'It's Not Nice to Fool Mother Nature': The Disaster Movie and Technological Guilt", *Journal of American Culture* 1:1, 1978, pp. 44–55; Broderick, Mick, *Nuclear Movies. A Critical Analysis and Filmography of International Feature Length Films Dealing with Experimentation, Aliens, Terrorism, Holocaust and Other Disaster Scenarios*, McFarland & Co., Jefferson, NC and London, 1991; Dixon, Wheeler Winston, *Visions of the Apocalypse. Spectacles of Destruction in American Cinema*, London and New York, Wallflower Press, 2003; Feil, Ken, *Dying for a Laugh. Disaster Movies and the Camp Imagination*, Wesleyan University Press, Middleton, CT, 2005.

² The Latin text of this work by Jacobus de Voragine has been published in a critical edition by Th. Graesse, *Jacobi de Voragine Legenda aurea*, Breslau, 1890 (reprinted in Osnabrück, 1969). I will refer to the modern English translation by William Granger Ryan, *The Golden Legend. Readings on the Saints*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, 2 vols.

³ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, pp. xiii–xiv (introduction)

⁴ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend*, pp. xvii–xviii (introduction)

⁵ See for instance the accounts on St. Andrew, St. Amand, St. Agnes, St. Vincent, St. Ignatius, and St. Blaise, all in *The Golden Legend*.

⁶ See for instance the accounts on St. Blaise, St. Andrew, St. Secundus, St. George, all in *The Golden Legend*.

⁷ See for instance the accounts on St Anastasia, St Agnes, St Blaise, all in *The Golden Legend*.

⁸ See for instance the accounts on St Andrew, St Lucy, St Silvester, St Agatha, all in *The Golden Legend*. This can be compared to martyr texts from the first centuries of the Christian era, cf. the collection *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs*, Herbert Musurillo (ed.), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, where these traits are found in almost every one of the texts.

⁹ There is one interesting exception to this rule, the recent *Snakes on a Plane* (2006). In it, we find the classical motif of the oldest of the stewardesses who sacrifices herself for a baby, but there is also a dog that is killed. This dog, however, is a severely traumatized lap-dog that probably does not quite qualify into the "family dog"-category of the sturdy dogs in the other films.