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1970s Disasters: Irwin Allen, Twentieth Century-Fox’s Marineland of the Pacific, and Disaster Films

Abstract

This paper focuses on the career of Irwin Allen, a Hollywood producer best known for his many popular 1960s television series like *Lost in Space* and his early 1970s disaster films *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974). When Twentieth Century-Fox decided to open their own theme park, Allen was put in charge of turning his many science fiction and fantasy franchises into rides and attractions. What should have been the culmination of his career quickly became his downfall, as his ability to cut costs and maintain a sense of mystique on screen did not translate to the real world, where cotton balls are not so easily mistaken for snow. While the 1970s is often written by film historians as a period of unparalleled artistic and economic heights, Allen’s career and his long ignored theme park complicate such accounts by highlighting some of the more unseemly and at times hackish business practices that propped up the beginnings of new Hollywood.

In this article, I will focus on what could have been the culmination of the career of Irwin Allen, one of Hollywood’s most successful and prolific producers, whose career spanned from 1938 to the late 1980s. I hope to chart out Allen’s career and his mid-1970s decline in order to complicate some of the larger narratives of New Hollywood and bring to light the story of at least one of the many forgotten showmen who were left behind.

Allen is a perfect person to discuss in a journal issue dedicated to disastrous failures. Primarily famous for being the auteur producer-director of two of the most successful disaster films of the early 1970s, *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (1974), as well as several hit sci-fi series from the 1960s including *Lost in Space* (1965-1968) and *Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea* (1964-1968), Allen gained several monikers, including “The Master of Disaster,” and “Hollywood’s caliph of crisis.”1 As the press release for *The Towering Inferno* pointed out, he is the “profit of doom [sic]. … His name is synonymous with calamity.”2 During a period that created many cinematic heroes, I like to think of Allen as the anti-hero of New Hollywood and in this spirit will narrativize this movement’s history as a tragedy, rather than its normal consideration as a high point of cinematic history.

After nearly 45 years of working in show business, Allen had became known as not only “a writer, director, and producer, but also a campaign creator, traveling salesman and exploiter extraordinary, carrying his promotional efforts across-country and on a scale designed to penetrate all the way down to the point of sale.”3 This style of huckster-auteurism became his calling card throughout his career as he even spent time during the marketing of *The Poseidon Adventure* and *The Towering Inferno* to discuss with exhibitors how to market and show off the films in their lobbies. These efforts garnered him several awards from various film exhibitor organizations, including being named “the Producer of the Year” by the National Association of Theater Owners, and “the Showman of the Year” by the Publicist Guild.4 He even won the...
“Drive-In Producer of the Year” award from the Pacific Drive-Ins Association. It is important to remember that Allen was a producer whose ability to sell himself and his product knew no bounds. Even far earlier in his career, he single-handedly took credit for coming up with what he referred to in 1959 as “the portentous notion of ‘packaging,’” the process by which a talent agency would buy a script and attach a director and a cast to it and then sell the entirety to an interested studio for production. This is widely recognized as the most important business practice of the post-classical Hollywood era, though its creation is often credited to either the much more famous Lew Wasserman or, just as likely, a large group of people, all working toward the same end. Granted, Allen had by 1948 worked his way up from being the host of an early Hollywood-centric radio magazine, the “Hollywood Merry-Go-Round,” to starting what became one of the largest literary agencies in Los Angeles. He more than likely did play a role in the formation and proliferation of the agent-driven packaging system, but to take complete credit for this idea requires a personality that is dedicated toward the art of self-promotion. Because of Allen’s success with these special effects laden films and popular family television series in which children are constantly almost killed by aliens, giants, sea creatures, and communists, Twentieth Century-Fox put him in charge of their latest venture, a major theme park. What could go wrong?

In 1973, Fox acquired Marineland of the Pacific, an oceanarium on the coast in Palos Verdes, just south of Los Angeles. Originally opened in 1954, a year before the opening of Disneyland, it was billed as the world’s largest oceanarium, filled with huge tanks of fish and aquatic mammals including whales and dolphins. A 3000 seat “sea arena” was built soon after to showcase the trained sea lions and porpoises; a SkyTower, the park’s first ride, was erected to give visitors an expansive view of the ocean. This site quickly became a popular tourist destination, complete with a “Marineland Restaurant,” Inn, and a 1,600-car parking lot. This period also saw a rise in films concerning marine life, including the only two oceanographic documentaries to ever win an Academy Award until 2009’s The Cove. These included The Silent World (1956), by Jacques Cousteau and Louis Malle, and The Sea Around Us (1952), produced and directed by Irwin Allen himself.

Nearly twenty years after its opening, Marineland of the Pacific was already something of a failure. After a series of restructuring plans by its parent company, Oceanarium, Inc., Fox became the management operator of the park. In part due to his early experiences with producing oceanographic documentaries, many Swiss
Family Robinson-esque television series, and the aquatic Poseidon Adventure, Allen was placed in charge of transforming the park into a major Fox themed tourist attraction like Universal Studios or Disneyland that would instead center on many of the characters specifically from Allen's productions. The only other person to ever have such an opportunity was Walt Disney himself. Yet with such an amazingly glowing comparison being made, it is shocking that only twenty years after he assumed control over Marineland, as one Boxoffice Magazine reporter put it, Allen had become only “a half remembered name—a ‘whatever happened to…?’ trivia question redolent of the pre-disco 70s like ‘superfly’ or Rodney Allen Rippy.”

I would argue that part of the reason Allen has been forgotten while so many others have been remembered is that his narrative is not the one preferred by those who study the 1970s New Hollywood period. Many, like Peter Biskind, Robert Kolker, David Cook, and Geoff King, celebrate this period as a Hollywood Renaissance and focus mainly on a notable but still small handful of aesthetically unconventional films made by auteur directors that still managed to be seen by a large mainstream audience. Others, like Justin Wyatt and Thomas Schatz, both, to some extent, discuss this period in terms of High Concept industrial practices and the birth of the “corporate blockbuster.” Both of these camps focus on the aspects of the 1970s that are in tune with younger, more rebellious demographics, whether that shows up in Hollywood’s depictions of drug cultures, free love, hip new music, and/or European art house aesthetics. The changes in Hollywood’s aesthetic, industrial, and exhibition practices that scholars tend to focus on are those that allowed for teenagers to go see movies on their own that their parents would not necessarily want to see; Allen’s films, by contrast, were widely advertised as wholesome family fare and do not mesh with this dominant trend.

While his disaster films, with huge casts, big budgets, new songs, and exploding skyscrapers, certainly display some of the aesthetic and industrial properties of High Concept filmmaking, they do so in a nostalgic rather than an avant-garde way. Most of the actors in these films had been out of their teenage years for quite some time, and Poseidon Adventure, after all, does take place on a cruise—a set piece that speaks to a more moneyed, older set of patrons. To add to this, Irwin Allen, who had actually been working in Hollywood during the classical Hollywood era in advertising, was constantly comparing himself in the 1970s to Cecil B. DeMille, one of the most well known directors of classical Hollywood. This comparison appears to be made both to tie Allen's films to a classical style and to label Allen himself as an auteur in the way that advertising in the era of New Hollywood seemed to demand. During an era that heavily stressed the artistic role of the director above that of the producer, Allen, who did not receive directorial credit for many of his most famous films and television series, was a figure at odds with his historical moment.

At the same time, it was exactly those qualities that made him an unlikely auteur for the period that also made him desirable as the mastermind of a theme park. His decades of knowledge as a producer—rather than as a director of large budget projects geared toward children—was an important business and accounting background for anyone attempting a project on the scale of a theme park. Also, during a period celebrated for its Young Turks, Allen’s years of experience in commercial production provided a necessary backlog of well known, child-centric properties from which rides and attractions could be generated.

Yet, these years of producing could not prepare Allen for the changes that were occurring in New Hollywood. Just months before Steven Spielberg’s Jaws (1975) would firmly cement the blockbuster season’s movement from winter to summer, Allen decided to inaugurate his new park with a heavily advertised “Winter Wonderland” extravaganza from December 21, 1974, to January 5, 1975. Even at his December wedding to actress Sheila Mathews, Allen managed to invite a Variety reporter who ended up writing an article on both the wedding and Allen’s simultaneous work “overseeing the 212 craftsmen winding up Winter Wonderland attractions.” Winter Wonderland at Marineland was billed as an “all-new, old-fashioned holiday adventure for the whole family,” which cost Fox well over $500,000. The main selling point of this “extravaganza” was a thousand tons of “real live snow,” along with two
frozen ice lakes for skating and a “Giant Alpine Snow Slide.” Other exciting attractions included a train called the “Snow-Ball Express,” the world's largest Christmas tree, rising 403ft above sea level, and the possibility of seeing Santa ride a dolphin and hang out with Orky and Corky, the park’s two impressive killer whales. This grand opening was meant to be the first of a number of huge changes to the park that would gradually incorporate more and more Fox themed characters and rides along with four seasonal festivals a year. Allen also planned, during a moment of synergistic excess, to use the Fox record company to supply the park with regular nightly live music entertainment. With such events and changes, the hope was to transform the park from a one-time attraction, where a visitor would come only once in his or her lifetime, to a park that demanded return visits. Allen commented that by the spring of 1975, a $2.5 million “Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea” ride would be finished and open to the public. The ultimate plan was to make the new Marineland the “biggest entertainment package of any park for one price.”

This writer’s tone, while perhaps a bit hyperbolic, does seem to accurately describe the gravity of the situation. Allen had seemingly relied too heavily on the idea that movie magic and special effects are the same thing as actual magic and reality. It is important to remember that this event took place during an era in which multiplexes began showing individual films on more and more screens at a time; this was done largely in an effort to make it possible for more spectators to see a film on opening night before negative reviews would have a chance to dissuade the public. This mode of wide-release exhibition makes it possible for a film’s marketing to promise special effects that are better than they actually are in the feature, as by the time the spectator has discovered this, they have already paid to see the film. With the Winter Wonderland opening, Allen appears to have treated Marineland in much the same way by promising far more than he could deliver. While he was known as a producer for his ability to create fantastic looking special effects on a relatively modest budget, it seems as though he simply used these same special effects. In a real world scenario, cotton is not so easily disguised as snow and observation towers are in no way similar to Christmas trees. This was a disastrous mistake for Allen, as his attempt to get more people into the park during its opening weekend made it less likely that they, or anyone else, would return at a later date.
For their failure to convince anyone that what they had provided was in fact a Winter Wonderland, Marineland was hit with a Los Angeles Superior Court Civil Suit. Deputy Attorney General Michael Botwin charged Marineland with “falsely promising children snow” and painstakingly described how “[t]he igloo was plastic, the ‘giant Alpine snowslide’ was fiberglass, the snow train ran through cotton on an asphalt walkway and youngsters were not allowed to break snow over each other’s heads as advertised.”

These “snow-hungry children” went unfed. In a settlement, Marineland agreed to pay $15,000 in civil penalties and $5,000 in attorneys’ fees and “agreed to a judgment in which they will no longer tell children a snow-filled Winter Wonderland is available where it is not and will not claim their stationary observation tower is the world’s tallest Christmas tree.”

After this anti-climax, Allen and Twentieth Century-Fox did continue to work on incorporating movie and television memorabilia and exhibits throughout the park, but none of Allen’s grand plans ever really came to fruition. By May of 1975, just months after the park opened, Allen left Fox for a two-year contract with Warner Bros. It is clear that Warner Bros. believed that this was anything but the end of his career. In fact, they gave him and his staff an entire three-story building on the lot in which to work and plan productions, along with what at the time was potentially one of the largest contracts in history, representing $100 million in production money. However, only a small percentage of this money was ever actually spent. Instead of the myriad huge productions that this contract promised, Allen ended up making only a few made-for-TV films and two largely forgotten disaster flicks, including The Swarm (1978), a film about Africanized killer bees, and When Time Ran Out… (1980), a restaging of The Towering Inferno on an island with volcanoes. He still kept a connection to Fox and eventually made Beyond the Poseidon Adventure with them in 1979, but far before that, by 1976, he had basically cut all other ties with the studio and had sold off his share of Marineland.

Two years later in 1978, Fox also abandoned their dreams of having a theme park of their very own and Marineland was again sold off, this time to Hanna-Barbera, whose parent company Taft Broadcasting owned a handful of Hanna-Barbera theme parks throughout the country, though few remained branded in this way for more than a year or two. During this troubled time for Hanna-Barbera, Marineland fell into a rather steady decline, and by 1987, it had again been sold to
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Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, the owners of the Sea World Franchise. These new owners immediately liquidated the park and shipped the animals to Sea World San Diego, where many of them continue to live.

By 1980, only a few years after being crowned the king of the disaster epic, with two films that grossed in excess of $420 million and with 31 projects in the works, Allen gave up on calamity. While he continued to make a few films for television, his name and presence all but vanished in the proceeding years and his fame has not managed to survive past his death in 1991.

Whereas New Hollywood has been periodized as a renaissance in the sense that it was an emergence of a new and contemporary aesthetic in American film, Allen's renaissance appears to be defined more as a revival, a renewed interest in an earlier style and mode of production that had fallen out of fashion. While film scholars continually highlight a handful of filmmakers who focused on themes of rebellion and teenage angst, their hagiographic accounts largely discount the middlebrow, mainstream style and production experiences of the majority of the industry. Like these tremendously popular films that are no longer remembered for their artistry but rather only for their impressive grosses, Irwin Allen is not simply absent from the histories. Rather, like these films, like Marineland, he is positioned as a forgotten failure, an iconoclastic footnote to a history that he was central to at the time but now has been all but written out of.

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End Notes

6 Ibid.
10 While now referred to as 20th Century Fox, from 1935-1985 this corporation was known as Twentieth Century-Fox.
13 “The Towering Inferno Press Kit.”
14 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
21 Ibid.