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Dying For A Laugh: Disaster Movies And The Camp Imagination



Synopsis

First study of disaster movies through reception theory and queer theory. "Dying for a Laugh" looks at the evolution of the contemporary disaster film from the 1970s to the present. Ken Feil argues that contemporary camp culture has influenced and reformed the conventions of the 1970s disaster film, in both its production and reception. This book chronicles how the genre rose to prominence, sank into critical and popular disrepute, and became unintentionally campy. Through close readings of films including "The Swarm", "Ghostbusters", "Independence Day", and "Mars Attacks!" along with film reviews, entertainment reports and publicity materials as evidence, Feil shows that the renewal of the disaster genre in the 1990s hinged on self-parody, ironic self-consciousness, and state-of-the-art effects. Feil also looks at the impact of 9/11 on the genre's campy, sadistic pleasures through movies such as "The Sum of All Fears", "The Core", and "The Day After Tomorrow". This analysis of "high concept camp" draws from diverse methodologies and theories, such as historical reception, textual analysis, neoformalism, political economy, genre analysis, feminism, and queer theory.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Essentially an attitude depending on an educated aesthetic, detached, deconstructive, and usually bemused disposition, "camp" is a slippery concept. One person's camp can be another person's earnest literalism. Camp doesn't have a simple or comprehensive definition. Over two pages in the Introduction, Feil enumerates some attributes of camp: "...variety of coded meanings, from 'declass  ' vulgarities and underground subcultures...juxtapose low, trivial pop culture

sensationalism with the high and important fight for group survival...exploit serious topical concerns...self-parody, ironic pastiche, and special effects...." And throughout the book, he specifies other aspects of camp before analyzing or interpreting certain horror movies to show how they participate in camp, sometimes unintentionally. Starting with the campy disaster movies of the 1970s, the book moves right up to date in dealing with the changed perspective on disaster, threat, and survival after 9/11 and some recent, tentative, ambiguous gambits to reinvigorate camp. As expected in any book on camp. Feil makes regular references to Susan Sontag's perceptive, seminal essays on camp in the mid 1960s. Feil greatly elaborates on Sontag's central, stimulating insights with his "hybrid" method involving "historical reaction analysis, genre criticism, queer studies, and historical poetics" applied to many disaster movies and the reviews, notices, promotional materials, and marketing surrounding them. Feil is with the Department of Visual and Media Arts at Emerson College.

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