In her 1965 essay, *The Imagination of Disaster*, cultural critic Susan Sontag argued that science fiction/disaster films provide “inadequate responses” to major socio-political issues: while the concerns they raise might be valid, their conclusions tend to be formulaic and unsatisfactory. Sontag was concerned about the threat to the world posed by the Cold War and saw science fiction films as cultural imaginings of the disaster to mankind that nuclear weapons represented at the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s. She found these imaginings sorely lacking in moral and political urgency. Instead of challenging the political systems that had brought the world to the brink of destruction, films like *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (1962), made in the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis, created a fantasy for audiences that, according to Sontag, inured them to the reality of the Cold War and the possibility of the extinction of mankind. “There is a sense in which all these films are in complicity with the abhorrent,” Sontag wrote. “They inculcate a strange apathy concerning the process of radiation, contamination and destruction which I for one find haunting and depressing.”

Three years earlier, in October 1962, the Cuban Missile Crisis had raised serious questions about the government’s credibility and their ability to protect the American people in the event of a nuclear war. For seven days the world waited with bated breath as the United States and the former USSR engaged in a nuclear stand-off over Soviet plans to build missile silos in Cuba. It was the nearest mankind has ever come to all out nuclear war, and for many people it seemed during those seven days that the end of the world had truly come. Thankfully, war was averted through political solutions, but arguably America was never the same again. As Alice L. George writes in her account, *Awaiting Armageddon*, the American people emerged from the crisis “like convicted felons who receive a reprieve after being strapped into the electric chair: they sighed with relief but they could not shake the memory of near-sudden death.”

The crisis forced Americans to examine civil defence policy and other aspects of the Cold War after years of averting their eyes from the details—and the plans that had been put in place to protect them were found to be sadly lacking. During this era “information” films such as *Duck and Cover* (1952) had taught children to respond to nuclear attack by hiding under their school desks, and Cold War
Literature routinely assured Americans that they, the government, and the American way of life could survive a nuclear war. In reality, strategies to protect the civilian population were inadequate. The Gaither Report, submitted to the President by the Security Resources Panel of the Sciences Advisory Committee in 1957, had advised the government to embark on a nationwide fallout shelter programme to protect the civilian population, describing it as the “only feasible protection for millions of people who will be increasingly exposed to the hazards of radiation.” President Eisenhower, however, elected not to follow these recommendations (although he committed billions of dollars to “defence” spending and building ICBMs). Later, in 1962, President Kennedy’s bid for funds to institute a shelter programme was turned down by Congress. The population was instead left to build its own fallout shelters and the few public ones that were built were not stocked with adequate food or survival supplies. The message was clear and the Cuban Missile Crisis brought it home: if war came, the vast majority of Americans would be on their own.

Confronted with this, some Americans began to recognise the faulty underpinnings of their boundless belief in the nation’s power and started to see the flaws in the whole Cold War culture. Many of the issues that would create rifts in the late 1960s emerged at the time of the crisis. The government’s credibility suffered during and after the crisis because it became clear that officials could not protect the population at large. In addition, the rise of the Peace Movement in the 1960s demonstrated declining faith in a foreign policy driven by an overpowering fear of Communism. The emergence of the “New Left” in the late 1960s and early 1970s signalled a growing rejection of patriarchal authority in all its forms, including government, which found vindication in Nixon’s resignation following the Watergate Scandal in 1974.

By then the American government had lost the trust of the people and desperately needed to win their confidence back. In order to get the population to submit once again to their authority, the government needed to convince the public that their protection and care was uppermost in the government’s mind. To do this, patriarchal authority needed to be rehabilitated.

The era of the disaster movie coincides with this. The genre saw its heyday at the time of the Watergate Scandal and then re-emerged (with an emphasis on sci-fi/disaster) in the 1970s—at the time of millennial angst when audiences once again wanted reassurance that governments would protect them in the event of disaster. The underlying project of the disaster movie, I would argue, is to rehabilitate patriarchal authority in the eyes of mainstream audiences, by telling them “Hey, it’s ok to trust the government: when the big one comes, the government will be there to protect you!” Science fiction/disaster movies continually reinforce the values of strong male leadership and the regeneration of traditional institutions like the patriarchal family. In the typical sci-fi/disaster movie, a scientist, politician or other such patriarchal authority figure, will inevitably lead a chosen group of survivors to safety through co-ordinated, obedient action.

Science fiction/disaster movies since the Cuban Missile Crisis are replete with benevolent patriarchs who make it their responsibility to protect us. Charlton Heston in Earthquake (1974) and The Omega Man (1971), sacrifices himself Christ-like to prove to the younger generation that, like Nixon, he was firing off the big guns just to keep us safe. In Earthquake, Heston plays a company executive who is having marital problems. But he puts these issues aside after the quake strikes to rescue his employees who have been caught in the office block. Not content with this act of heroism, he then goes on to save another group of survivors trapped in an underground garage, including his estranged wife whom he realises he can’t abandon after all, even if it means losing his own life. Heston, of course, also laid down his life for noble ends in Beneath the Planet of the Apes (1970) and El Cid (1961), and his self-sacrifice for the younger generation in The Omega Man was even more emphatic in its attempt to rehabilitate patriarchal authority in the eyes of youth audiences. As if to ram the point home, we are presented early on in The Omega Man with a scene in which Heston—playing the last man on earth following a plague—passes time in an abandoned cinema repeatedly watching—of all things—Woodstock (1970). During the course of the film we discover that Heston was formerly an Army scientist developing a vaccine against the biological weapon that had wiped out mankind. Based on Richard Matheson’s I Am Legend, The Omega Man’s vampire—zombies are a cult of nocturnal albino mutants who seek to destroy all technology. In case audiences missed the distinct counter-cultural undertones, this cult calls itself “The Family,” a la Charles Manson. The heavy-handed allegory culminates in Heston’s Christ-like death by spear in the side, but not before he has passed the hippy-like survivors a flask of his serum blood, so that humanity can be restored. In the process, Heston rehabilitates himself as a representative of patriarchal authority worthy of respect by showing the hippies that he is really on their side and willing to sacrifice himself in order to save humanity from the mutants.

The disaster movie genre was so hot in the 1970s that most Hollywood leading men were lining up to play heroic patriots. The unlikely casting of edgy anti-hero-type Gene Hackman in The Poseidon Adventure (1972), illustrates the notion that patriarchal authority, even in its most improbable forms, was ultimately trustworthy. Hackman plays a surly preacher, struggling with his faith, who leads a group of survivors to safety, despite the fact that some of the party blame him for deaths along the way. At the film’s climax, Hackman makes the ultimate sacrifice to God and the survivors by giving up his own life so that his flock can live. The Poseidon Adventure was one of the first to fully explicate the theme of redemption for its patriarch-hero, the notion that the disaster itself activates the true patriarchal impulse to protect others, even if it calls for self-sacrifice. Patriarchal authority, in other words, is posited as inherently benevolent.

In Deep Impact (1998) we have not one, not two, but three benevolent patriaruchs, including Morgan Freeman as the President who vows to save as many as he can from the approaching asteroid. In addition the film interestingly takes as its protagonist a woman, through whose point of view the main plot unfolds. Téa Leoni’s reporter is a career minded singleton who distrusts authority because her father left his wife for a younger woman. This distrust extends to the political system, which Leoni suspects is morally corrupt and protecting its own interests. As the story unfolds, Leoni learns to trust the system again—in the form of caring Morgan Freeman—and is finally reconciled with her father, who protects her in her moment of need, sacrificing himself in the process.

A subplot sees veteran astronaut Robert Duvall overcoming similar distrust amongst his younger generation crew mates by demonstrating a calm authority and fatherly benevolence as disaster strikes the spaceship. It is Duvall who saves the day by blasting the asteroid in half so that the earth can survive the impact. Deep Impact, then, recognises the need of authority to conquer the distrust shown by the younger

“When Advice Is Given by the Authorities on How to Survive the Attacks, It Is Confusing, Sporadic and Changes by the Hour.”
generation towards patriarchal institutions —family, military (NASA), and government. The issue, the film argues, is not with these institutions themselves (which are shown as fundamentally warm, caring and efficient), but in our perception of them clouded as it is by the media. We must overcome our cynicism and learn to trust the patriarchy again.

Post-9/11, disaster movies have displayed a greater urgency in the need to rehabilitate their patriarchal heroes. The Iraq War, Hurricane Katrina, and Anti-Globalisation deepen public distrust of government during the time of Bush. In films like The Day After Tomorrow (2004), 2012 (2009) and The Road (2009), the protagonists were shown as fathers struggling with the responsibilities of fatherhood, until the disaster strikes and they see the errors of their ways. They start as failures as fathers but through the course of the film manage to prove to their children that their authority is worthy of respect. The collapse of society forces them (and their children) to recognise the importance of patriarchal family, and to act accordingly.

In Spielberg’s version of War of the Worlds (2005), Tom Cruise’s character archetypal is all about his rehabilitation from ambivalent/irresponsible parent to protective father who will do anything to ensure his daughter’s safety. This even extends to killing a man whose irrationality places the child in danger. Of course, Cruise is shown to have been the good guy all along; his failure as a father at the start is down to his divorce, which has created a distance between him and his daughter and son (whose refusal to recognise Cruise’s patriarchal authority doesn’t help). Added to this is the fact that Cruise has been supplanted by the kids’ seemingly faultless stepfather and—hey, what’s a dad to do? All it takes, though, is a Martian invasion to clear these issues aside, so that Cruise can prove his mettle as a back to basics patriarch by carrying authority and commanding respect and using violence when necessary to protect his family.

These representations of innately protective patriarchs tend to be at odds with controversies that arise from the government’s handling of real-world disasters such as the attacks on the World Trade Center and Hurricane Katrina. Here the Bush administration was taken to task for not adequately protecting the American people from terrorism despite being warned that such attacks were imminent. Katrina showed, as well, that the protection of the government does not necessarily extend to all sectors of society, particularly if you happen to be poor and black.

Of course, not all sci-fi/disaster movies seek to rehabilitate patriarchal authority in this way. There are a few subversive entries in the genre, like 28 Weeks Later (2007), which depicts male authority as ultimately disclaiming responsibility for the welfare of those under their protection, but those films are in the minority. Perhaps the most influential has been Night of the Living Dead (1968), whose zombie apocalypse brings about a collapse of society that is exacerbated by patriarchal institutions. In Romero’s classic, Washington officials are seen retreating from reporters who are seeking clarification, aid and information about the virus on the public’s behalf. When advice is given by the authorities on how to survive the attacks, it is confusing, sporadic and changes by the hour. At first people are told to stay put in their homes, and then later they are told to risk travelling to rescue centres for evacuation from the towns and cities. This speaks to a lack of civil defence planning on the part of the authorities that had echoes of the Cuban Missile Crisis and also anticipated future events like Katrina (which is uncannily echoed in Romero’s later sequel Land of the Dead [2005]).

The authorities have in effect turned their back on the population in Night of the Living Dead and it is left to vigilante groups to enforce order. Meanwhile, would-be patriarchal heroes like Ben and Harry are too busy engaged in a pissing contest to lead the other survivors to safety. Each man’s inability to defer to the other’s plan of action (both of which are shown to be mistaken, incidentally) prevents the rest of the group from accepting the authority of either, leaving the voice of reason to the eldest woman (Harry’s wife, Helen) and the youngest male, (Tom), both of whom are ignored because of their place in the group hierarchy.

Romero expanded on these themes in Dawn of the Dead (1978). Here we witness those in authority within law enforcement and the emergency services deserting their posts as the disaster strikes. Those who remain, act irresponsibly towards the public, like the TV station manager who knowingly broadcasts erroneous civil defence information, risking the lives of many. The government is conspicuous by their absence (presumably all have flown off to their private islands), again leaving law and order in the hands of beer swilling rednecks who seem to be enjoying the whole thing.

Even the recent Contagion (2011), I would argue, bails out when it comes to confronting the implications of mass civil disorder and the government’s response to it, preferring instead to negate the dissenting message of “anti-government” blogger Jude Law, in favour of that of the caring father and the caring scientist, Matt Damon and Laurence Fishburne, who each fight to save their families and the population from the plague. Soderbergh’s film purports to be a “balanced” viewpoint in terms of its portrayal of government response in the face of disaster. The so called “hyperlink” narrative strategy that Soderbergh adopts, which gives the impression of following several storylines almost randomly, injects a sense of “objectivity” in the plot. This is, perhaps, endorsed by claims that the film was supported by the scientific and medical community who held it up to be factually accurate in terms of its depiction of scientific and medical practices.

But strip away the hyper-real veneer of the film and its scientific jargon and there are revealed some hoary old sci-fi/disaster movie chestnuts. Matt Damon, for example, is proven immune from the disease affecting the country, so that he can rehabilitate his patriarchy following his wife’s infidelity (which, the film moralisingly implies, helped spread the contagion, undermining as it does the patriarchal family). The ensuing social collapse forces Damon to man up and protect his daughter even though they have been quarantined by the authorities against their will.

The film attempts to inoculate the viewer by admitting some criticism of those in authority who act selfishly during the outbreak. There are instances of Enron-like political cronyism when a plane intended to evacuate a vitally important doctor is instead diverted to fly away a Congressman. The film also depicts the prevarication of those in authority in their handling of the outbreak (public health officials consider delaying the closing of shopping malls until after Thanksgiving).

These criticisms of authority figures however, are reneged upon by the film, which presents the majority of patriarchs as ultimately well-meaning and selfless. Laurence Fishburne, who has earlier used his position as a government scientist to protect those closest to him, in contravention of the quarantine laws, redeems himself by giving his own vaccine away. Other scientists in the film risk their own lives, or even lay down their lives, in their search for a cure. When a vaccine is finally developed, it is distributed fairly amongst the population by random lottery. Contagion, like Deep Impact, contends that America is basically an equal society. There is, therefore, no truth to conspiracy theories, such as those created by the blogger Jude Law.

Indeed social media is portrayed in a negative light in Contagion, as a source of disinformation and public fear—as dangerous as the contagion itself. We must trust the authorities, not the internet. In the face of disaster, we need patriarchal authority—scientists, the military, government—to protect us. We cannot survive without them. We must trust them to be there for us when we need them, and in the meantime we must submit to their authority—it is for our own good.

In conclusion, Sontag’s evaluation of the genre in 1965 still holds true today, with the vast majority of sci-fi/disaster films unwilling to construct a rational response to the apocalyptic scenarios they present; namely, to admit that most disasters since the Cuban Missile Crisis—be they military, humanitarian or economic—have, at least partly to blame, the very governments whom seek to rehabilitate themselves through these films.

For as long, then, as sci-fi/disaster movies instead opt to propagate the ideology that patriarchal authority is infallible and governments are necessary to protect us, we should consider them as “inadequate responses.”