Water in the Movies

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Water is a theme that runs through all forms of popular culture, from books to myths to Hollywood and international films, with a growing number of shorter video pieces posted online at YouTube and similar sites. A surprising number of popular movies, going back almost to the first days of movie-making, have incorporated the issue of water disputes and conflicts over water rights and allocation as a central theme. Below is a list of some of these classic (good and bad) films. I've also included a few links to online shorter videos related to water. Huge numbers of these are available; here are just a few of my favorites. Feel free to send suggestions of others to info@pacinst.org.

Popular Movies/Films

- Three Word Brand (1921): Paul and Brand (twins separated at birth, played by William S. Hart) become, respectively, governor of Utah and a partner in a ranch where neighboring ranchers are trying to get control of local water rights.
- *Riders of Destiny* (1933): Government agent Saunders (John Wayne) fights a local rancher who controls the local water supply and is trying to force other ranchers into contracts for water at exorbitant rates.
- *King of the Pecos* (1936): John Wayne stars in a classic battle over western water rights and land in the Pecos River country.
- Law of the Ranger (1937): Another western with a monopolistic rancher claiming local water rights. Bill Nash (John Merton), owner of the local water company and town boss, tries to control the valley's water rights by building a reservoir, but he must get control of the key property and murders the rightful owner to do so.
- Oklahoma Frontier (1939): A land rush leads to an attempt to control the water rights in the Cherokee Strip (with Johnny Mack Brown).
- Treasure of the Sierra Madre (1948): Humphrey Bogart and Walter Huston seek their fortune in gold in Mexico. Around the 28-minute mark, Huston says, "Water is more precious than gold." Winner of three Academy Awards: Best Supporting Actor (Walter Huston), Best Directing (John Huston), Best Screenplay.
- Stampede (1949): Brothers Mike and Tim McCall (Rod Cameron and Don Castle) own a large ranch in Arizona. Stanley Cox (John Eldredge) and LeRoy Stanton (Donald Curtis) sell land to settlers, who arrive to find that the McCalls control all of the water. Fights ensue.
- The Big Country (1958): Retired, wealthy sea captain Jame McKay, played by Gregory Peck, arrives in the west to marry fiancée Pat Terrill. Pat's father, Major Henry Terrill (Charles Bickford), is involved in a ruthless civil war over watering rights for cattle.

- Dr. Strangelove or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (1964): U.S. Air Force general Jack Ripper (Sterling Hayden) goes off the deep end and sends bombers to destroy the U.S.S.R because he suspects that the Communists are conspiring to pollute the water supply and the "precious bodily fluids" of the American people. Also starring, of course, George C. Scott and Peter Sellers, Peter Sellers, and Peter Sellers. Nominated for four Oscars, including Best Picture, Best Actor (Peter Sellers), and Best Director (Stanley Kubrick).
- *El Dorado* (1966): John Wayne plays Cole Thornton, a gunfighter for hire who joins forces with an old friend, Sheriff J.P. Hara, played by Robert Mitchum, to help a rancher and his family fight a rival rancher trying to steal their water.
- *Chinatown* (1974): This is perhaps the classic water movie: a murder mystery centered around the political manipulations of water and land in turn-of-the-20th-century Los Angeles, with Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, and John Huston, directed by Roman Polanski. Nominated for ten Oscars. Won for Best Original Screenplay.
- *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976): David Bowie and Rip Torn in a brilliant sci-fi story of a humanoid alien who comes to Earth to get water for his dying planet. The alien's story is complicated by love and the ruthlessness of the business world.
- *The Crazies* (1978): George A. Romero's low-budget film of a town affected by the accidental dumping of bio-weapons in their water supply, leading to murder, crazy psychoses, and a military crackdown.
- *Dune* (1984): Frank Herbert's classic sci-fi story of the desert planet Arrakis and the fight for control of the drug melange. Has a strong underlying ecological story about the control of water and other resources.
- *Pale Rider* (1985): Directed by and starring Clint Eastwood as a mysterious preacher who comes to a gold-mining camp near a small town in the mountains. The miners are facing a ruthless landowner who cuts off the water to drive them from their land and their gold claims. Eastwood kicks their butts, of course.
- Water (1985): A tiny poor Caribbean island (the island's governor is played by Michael Caine) is completely forgotten by its British colonial masters, until an oil well strikes mineral water. Suddenly, the British, French, Americans, Cubans, and an incompetent local rebel are struggling for control.
- *Solarbabies* (1986): Another in a series of apocalyptic sci-fi stories with a water theme. In the future, a nuclear war has left the Earth a desert wasteland where the oceans have dried up. Most of the water supplies are controlled by the elite corporation E-Protectorate, which takes children away from their families.
- Jean de Florette and its sequel, Manon of the Spring (1986): Movies from Marcel Pagnol's famous novel L'eau des Collines (or, The Water from the Hills, 1963). In a rural French village, an old man and his only remaining relative try to steal the waters of a spring from a neighbor. They block up the spring and watch as their neighbor struggles to water his crops. Starring Gerard Depardieu.
- Steel Dawn (1987): A post-apocalyptic world where a group of settlers are threatened by a murderous gang that wants the water they control. Featuring Patrick Swayze as the warrior who helps them. Swayze kicks their butts, of course.
- *Milagro Beanfield War* (1988): Milagro, a small town in the American Southwest, experiences conflict between developers and local Hispanic farmers over land and water.

- When one farmer diverts water to irrigate his beanfield, trouble arises. Directed by Robert Redford, with Rubén Blades, Richard Bradford, and Sonia Braga. Won an Oscar for Best Music, Original Score.
- *Xian dai hao xia zhuan* (1993): Another post-apocalyptic story, set after a city has been devastated by nuclear attack. An evil villain controls the city's scarce water supply, and three heroes fight to prevent a military takeover and to find clean water for the people of the city.
- Tank Girl (1995): Based on a British cult comic, a tank-riding anti-heroine (Lori Petty) fights a mega-corporation called Water and Power, which controls the world's water supply. With early performances by Ice-T and Naomi Watts.
- *Waterworld* (1995): Kevin Costner in, yes, another post-apocalyptic world, where the land has disappeared and control of freshwater is a key plot element. Check out the opening scene where Costner (on a boat in an endless ocean) pees into a little distiller, filters the water, and drinks the output. You'll get the idea.
- Christie Malry's Own Double Entry (2000): Johnson and Bent's film about a disaffected man who starts to revenge himself against society for perceived slights, escalating to environmental terrorism and poisoning London's water supplies.
- *Sabaku no kaizoku! Captain Kuppa* (2001): Japanese anime. Sometime in the future, the world is completely dried up and water has become the most valuable commodity. Whoever controls water will control the world.
- *The Tuxedo* (2002): Jackie Chan costars with an animated tuxedo. People who watch this movie forget that the bad guy is a power-hungry bottled-water mogul trying to destroy the world's natural water supply to force everyone to drink his bottled water.
- Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers (2002): Part of an epic trilogy directed by Peter Jackson. In this, the second film, water is used as a weapon by the Ents, who destroy a dam in order to destroy and symbolically cleanse the stronghold of Isengard. Nominated for four Academy Awards (including Best Picture); winner of Best Sound Editing and Best Visual Effects.
- *Batman Begins* (2005): Christian Bale, Michael Caine, and Ken Watanabe in one of the better Batman movies. Terrorists try to destroy Gotham by introducing a vapor-borne hallucinogen into the water system.
- Waterborne (2005): Ben Rekhi's remarkable independent film, which follows the fictional aftermath of a bio-terrorist attack on the water supply of Los Angeles.
- V for Vendetta (2006): Hugo Weaving, Natalie Portman, and Rupert Graves in a dark story about corrupt government leaders contaminating London's water supply in order to kill people, spread fear, and consolidate power.
- *Quantum of Solace* (2008): James Bond fights terrorists working to gain control over Bolivia's water resources. With Daniel Craig as James Bond; directed by Marc Forster.
- Well Done Abba (2009): A satirical look out of India at corruption rampant in Indian government departments, with a focus on water. The film tells the story of Armaan Ali, who takes a leave from work to build a well in his backyard to make life easier for his daughter and relatives, only to get trapped in a world of government corruption, bribes, and scandal.
- *The Book of Eli* (2010): Denzel Washington and Gary Oldman star in another post-apocalyptic world where the control of water is a plot element.

Water Documentaries

Cadillac Desert (1997): Directed by Jon Else and Linda Harrar.

Thirst (2004): Directed by Alan Snitow.

Running Dry (2005): Directed by Jim Thebaut. Also, Running Dry Southwest.

Flow: For Love of Water (2008): Directed by Irena Salina.

Grand Canyon Adventure: River at Risk (3D/Imax) (2008): Directed by Greg MacGillivray.

Poisoned Waters (2009): PBS documentary on how America's waterways are threatened by pollution; features interviews with some of the nation's environmental experts.

Blue Gold: Water Wars (2009): Focuses on privatization of the world's water.

The Story of Bottled Water (2010): Annie Leonard's nine-minute short take on the bottled water industry.

Last Call at the Oasis (2011): Participant Media's new major water documentary from Jessica Yu and Elise Pearlstein.

Short Water Videos and Films

Penn and Teller, "The Truth About Bottled Water," season 1, episode 7, including the famous "water sommelier" segment

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XfPAjUvvnIc

Southern Nevada Water Authority, "Mrs. Nuttington"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lhpevdl2Sng

"Water wasting cat" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahjojDl-rAc

"Bottle vs. Tap Water"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XNRu0GHBY4&feature=related

"Bottle vs. Tap Water 2" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0K5h3VBnXc

"That's not Tang! NASA Tests Water from Urine Converter"

http://pierceshow.blogspot.com/2009/06/thats-not-tang-nasa-tests-water-from.html

"No Reason" (from Circle of Blue)

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q4er1Bc8ETQ

"Drunk Flowers"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULSZzNit_IY&feature=player_embedded

"Running Toilets Waste Water"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-Fg0ykuQyw&feature=player_embedded

"Shower"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ebhBDmOwrfw&feature=player_embedded

"Fish Out of Water" http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvtBuKBr7-0

Jim Gaffigan, "Bottled Water"

http://comedians.comedycentral.com/jim-gaffigan/videos/jim-gaffigan-bottled-water