

Representing Natural Catastrophes: Nature and Technology in Hollywood Disaster Movies

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“Mankind survived the last ice age. We’re certainly capable of surviving this one. All depends on whether or not we’re able to learn from our mistakes.”

Jack Hall, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)

When the character Dr. Serge Leveque (Tcheky Karyo) in the movie *The Core* (2003) leans back into his chair and laughs—somewhat hysterically—“It’s a disaster!” while watching tons of magma, rock, and other debris on collision course with his mission vessel, he can be read as an embodiment of the film’s audience.¹ It is a metafictional comment on the role that audiences have when they watch disaster movies: to sit back and enjoy the show while the world around them is blown to smithereens. In the face of the overwhelming and spectacular staging of catastrophic events, the audience is invited to follow the film’s plot and accept its solution unquestioningly. Seemingly about change, which is visualized as threatening destruction, these films really present the return to or preservation of conservative structures and values as a successful way of dealing with the disaster, and it is precisely the spectacular staging of the disaster that serves to uphold the status quo. Any critical questions that might arise are—literally and metaphorically—‘muted’ by the visual and sonic spectacle of the disaster.

Audiences seem to take a special pleasure in watching the world end, a mix of delightful (because contained) fear, shudder, and excitement caused by grand spectacles of large-scale destruction as well as the distinct feeling of safety in the secure knowledge that everything will be well in the end. In “The Imagination of Disaster,” Susan Sontag even speaks of “the aesthetics of destruction, the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess” (213). The delight in the beauty of destruction seems to go hand in hand with our desire to have our world reconfirmed; recurring threats of destruction which are overcome time and again with reassuring regularity appear to stabilize it.

1 This scene takes place during a simulation before the real mission so that Leveque is actually sitting in front of a screen, watching a ‘disaster movie’ as preparation for the ‘real’ thing.

Disaster movies are about crisis situations that arise when civilization is endangered, when the boundaries surrounding it are breached and transgressed. The causes of such film catastrophes can change over time (and are, for that matter, recycled as well), yet the primary concern remains the same: they focus on a catastrophe that threatens to end, or at least change, “the world as we know it” either locally or globally. Nonetheless, I would argue, these films are not about change. Although disaster films spend much time on staging the violation of the status quo and the disruption and transgression of boundaries, in terms of which the various disaster scenarios can be read, they are mainly about reestablishing these boundaries in the end. Disaster movies seemingly set out to question certain social structures, behavior patterns, norms, values, and attitudes, only to reinstate them in the end: “Order is reasserted” (Yacowar 288).² Hence, they “provide therapeutic narratives, which enact crisis, then assuage it” (Ryan and Kellner 56). This becomes especially obvious in the way these films juxtapose nature and culture in the staging of disaster: nature is routinely portrayed as culture’s enemy, a terrible force that needs to be controlled and subdued. Such a juxtaposition not only ignores the fact that nature and culture are intricately intertwined, it also furthers an attitude towards nature that is problematic, not least with regard to our involvement in the causes of natural catastrophes and the increasing need for an environmental awareness.³ To illustrate this point, I will give a brief overview of the genre’s structures before I look more closely at two recent examples in terms of their regulation and negotiation of the boundaries between nature and humans, Jon Amiel’s *The Core* (2003) and Roland Emmerich’s *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004).

Disaster movies come in various shapes and sizes, as it were, and from the very beginning, the spectacle of large-scale destruction in one form or another has entertained Hollywood’s audiences.⁴ This attests to the entertaining function of disaster spectacles as well as the fact that these movies, as Keane argues, “are born out of times of impending crisis” (7-8) and relate very closely to the *Zeitgeist*. In fact, I would argue that the aspect of entertainment goes hand in hand with the ‘therapeutic’ function.⁵

2 Cf. also Roddick, who states that “[disaster movies are ‘reactionary culture’ par excellence” (245).

3 It exceeds the scope of this essay to look at the concepts of nature and culture and the problems resulting from their juxtaposition in greater detail. For a discussion of defining ‘nature’ as opposed to ‘culture,’ see Turner.

4 For more detailed overviews as well as definitions of the genre, see Keane (especially the Introduction), Yacowar, and Roddick. Here, I follow Roddick’s contention that a disaster movie is “not just a movie with a disaster in it: it must be ‘about’ the disaster” (246).

5 A case in point are two recent movies based on the events of 9/11, *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006). Both films revisit a

Although the forms and causes of disasters differ, the basic plot structure and the ‘decorating’ elements remain largely the same. A group of people, often randomly thrown together, have to cope with the disaster, surviving or averting it. Representing different parts of society, the characters’ interactions vis-à-vis the disaster illuminate social structures and behavioral patterns, and even their deaths are ideologically significant as the characters can be ‘punished’ for ‘unacceptable’ behavior.⁶ Yet, the ending will be a happy one as the surviving characters get the chance of a new beginning, having learned from their mistakes. However, if one looks more closely, the rhetoric of change is only superficial. The spectacular quality of the destruction hides the fact that nothing has really changed, and indeed, the overcoming of the catastrophe coincides with the return to older, more conservative values.

In disaster movies that focus on the representation of natural catastrophes, the disaster consists in the violation of the boundaries that separate nature and human civilization. Natural forces are shown to be out of bounds as they intrude on and disrupt the safety of civilization, threatening to wreak havoc on humanity’s technological and cultural achievements. Humans, in short, face a force that is outside their control as nature threatens to blur, even erase the boundaries that they have so carefully constructed between nature and themselves. The largest part of these movies is consequently devoted to showing how the characters deal with this disruption.

Frequently, the natural catastrophe seems to be the sign of a ‘cultural’ crisis in the sense that these films show, for instance, military megalomania and irrationality, economic greed, or some other careless and irresponsible use of technology to be the cause of their catastrophes.⁷ Yet, it is mostly individuals or small groups who are blamed rather than social or political structures in general. Moreover, as I will illustrate in the following, these films end quite conservatively with an even stricter reaffirmation of the disrupted boundaries and validate the same structures, norms, and institutions they started out to criticize. Specifically from an ecocritical point of view, these filmic representations of crisis situations can be evaluated as a crisis of representation since they propose a view of nature as a threatening and dangerous ‘other.’ Ignoring the mutual interconnections and dependencies between what is commonly called nature and culture, these films cover the (cultural) causes of (natural) catastrophes.

traumatic event in terms of its meaning for national identity while the discussion about their ‘appropriateness’ clearly alludes to their entertaining function.

- 6 Despite some ‘modernization,’ Hollywood’s ‘standards’ have been notoriously conservative in this respect, particularly with regard to gender roles and sexual orientation.
- 7 Examples include *Outbreak* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1995), *Volcano* (Mick Jackson, 1997), and *Godzilla* (Roland Emmerich, 1998).

Hence, the cultural work of disaster movies lies not so much in an ecocritical education of the audience or the exploration of alternative ways of life than in furthering an acceptance of established social and political structures, an acceptance that is symbolized in the image of the audience watching the disaster happening on screen. The insistence on strict boundaries between nature and culture can also be read as a symbol of the return to a more rigid traditional, patriarchal value system, based on clear boundaries, strict opposition, and a hierarchical order, in which one can rely on culture (technology, progress) to ‘tame’ nature (chaos, uncertainty).

The two examples I will discuss here prove this point very clearly. While *The Core* is an example of a movie in which the catastrophe must be averted, *The Day After Tomorrow* concentrates on human survival strategies during and after the disaster. Both films, however, insist on a strict separation of culture and nature in the end with culture dominating nature, a separation that underlines the return to a world that is strictly ordered according to reliable values.

I. *The Core*: Celebrating (Military) Science and Technology

Although *The Core* features a global catastrophe that has been caused by a preemptive military strike, one of its taglines claims, interestingly enough, that “This Spring, Mankind’s Greatest Threat is Earth Itself.” A secret weapon called “DESTINI” (Deep Earth Seismic Trigger Initiative) has damaged the earth’s electromagnetic field, which leads to a destabilization of the natural climate and will eventually make earth uninhabitable. The disaster is heralded by images of an uncontrollable nature, ranging from pigeons randomly attacking people to Armageddon-like storm scenarios that destroy whole cities. Nature, in all these instances, transgresses into the realm of culture and destroys human achievements. To avert the catastrophe, the world’s finest experts are put together and a more than improbable plan is put into practice: a mission team has to drill from the surface to the earth’s core and use explosive charges to ‘restart’ it. The plot, therefore, follows the genre-typical structure: Four scientists, two NASA pilots and the world’s most advanced technology (including weapons of mass destruction) avert the catastrophe and put nature back in its place.

Although the plot’s set-up clearly invites a critical assessment of the military and its use of technology (the development and use of potentially annihilating weapons), the film does not seem remotely interested in being critical. In a gesture that is—again—quite typical of the genre, the film ‘rehabilitates’ the very cause that triggered the catastrophe in the first place: military structures, its resources, and its technology save the day in

the end. Moreover, the film constructs a strict opposition between hostile nature and human civilization, ignoring the fact that the natural disaster has been directly caused by human behavior. Despite some critical and ironic moments, *The Core* is mainly a celebration of technological advances and military gadgets, which can be seen in variations throughout the movie.

During the preparation for the mission the audience is extensively introduced to the wonderful world of science and technology. The movie spends quite some time on showing us how a vessel is built for an unprecedented journey through rock and magma by using a completely new, heat-resistant material (“unobtanium”) as well as a drill that would be the envy of *Armageddon's* Bruce Willis. In a sequence in which the camera focuses on the new technology while its principles are explained in impressive ‘scientific’ jargon, any doubts concerning the use value of such a technological advancement are wiped away and its high potential is aptly demonstrated: the laser-drill, for instance, eats its way into solid rock within seconds so that mission leader Dr. Josh Keyes (Aaron Eckhart) can only remark afterwards: “I’m officially impressed.” The fact that army General Thomas Purcell, who is one of the people responsible for the catastrophe, is left speechless in view of the new technology’s prospective military applications does not really add to the subversive potential of the movie. The visualization of the mission preparation underlines this celebration of technology: Building and training facilities as well as the respective equipment are ‘paraded’ before the audience, accompanied by stock military film music.

The non-stop display of technological gadgets is continued during the mission itself to prove its high potential in practice. The complete journey is built on the conflict between a dangerous and inhospitable nature (from the diamond-hard rocks to the hot magma core) and human technology and resilience. This is enforced by the alternation of sequences that juxtapose the progress of the mission with sequences that show the worsening of the situation above ground, where nature turns increasingly hostile and starts to destroy human civilization.

Although some accidents and near-failures occur during the mission, technology lives up to its promise. Additionally, a closer look reveals that the reasons for these near-failures lie in human errors for which characters have to make up by sacrificing their lives (again following the logic of the genre). The film’s climax, finally, coincides with the ultimate celebration of military technology: “[T]he world’s biggest weapons of mass destruction will help save the world,” remarks one of the cast.⁸ Even though meant as

8 This is similar to the celebration of the army and their fire power in *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998) and, not quite so blatantly, in *Deep Impact* (Mimi Leder, 1998). An earlier instance that takes the cold war as its background is *Meteor* (Ronald

an ironic comment, such a statement is only a 'logical' conclusion to the celebration of military technology during the whole film.

In this context, the ending is significant as well as typical, as here, too, the very structures that are responsible for the near destruction of the earth are not criticized but celebrated. The only two survivors of the mission, Dr. Joshua Keyes and NASA pilot Major Rebecca Childs (Hillary Swank), barely manage to get back to the surface, running out of energy just when they reach the bottom of the ocean. In an interesting 'teamwork' of whales—who are drawn to the mission vessel's ultrasonic waves and 'sing' to it—and the U.S. army—who trace the whales—they are rescued. That it is military power and equipment that helps to rescue them is further underlined by the mis-en-scene of this sequence. The search for the mission vessel is represented from the point of view of an army helicopter. A long shot shows the audience a panorama of several large military aircraft carriers together with smaller vessels and helicopters. This display of military power is rounded off by the now peaceful, sunlit ocean landscape with breaching whales and the heroic music: nature is calm again—mission accomplished.

In summary, although military structures are part of the problem, they are redeemed in the end, where they prove to be indispensable rather than problematic. Moreover, within the plot's logic nature proves to be the problem, the real danger, rather than the irresponsible use of military technology—cause and effect seem to have been confused here. The overcoming of the crisis coincides furthermore with the reestablishment of an orderly boundary between nature and civilization so that the ending perpetuates and even underlines a simplified and problematic opposition between the two realms, which in reality are interrelated in many ways. Frighteningly similar to many current U.S. political strategies of dealing with crisis situations, this film illustrates a focus on the disaster, its spectacular quality, and the threat it poses to 'culture' that completely ignores, even hides, the causes that have led to it in the first place. Instead of being thoroughly examined in the role they play as part of the problem, military values and principles are made part of the solution: *The Core* is not concerned with a critical examination of the preventive military strategy and its catastrophic consequences but suggests that even a global catastrophe can be 'repaired' by military technology. The ending suggests rather paradoxically that we need weapons of mass destruction in order to deal with and survive future catastrophes caused by weapons of mass destruction. From this point of view, the movie endorses an ideology that is

Neame, 1979). In all cases, nuclear weapons help save planet earth (partly) from a disastrous collision with asteroids.

similar to current political strategies of dealing preemptively with anticipated political conflicts and favoring military power to do so.⁹

II. *The Day After Tomorrow*: Images of Resilience and Purification

The second movie to be considered here, *The Day After Tomorrow*, is very interesting for its ambiguity with regard to the ecocritical dimension of its timely topic.¹⁰ It opens with the breaking off of an arctic ice shelf “about the size of the state of Rhode Island,” an indication for the melting of the polar caps. During a conference, climatologist Jack Hall (Dennis Quaid) maintains that this is a sign of global warming and calls for measures to reduce the pollution of the ecosphere. Tellingly, it is the American Vice President Raymond Becker (Kenneth Welsh) who maintains that this would be too expensive since “our economy is every bit as fragile as the environment.” Soon enough, the climate change shows its catastrophic effects.

While the beginning of the film explicitly links climate change and human involvement, the rest of the film focuses on the opposition of nature and culture. The disaster is again staged as a boundary transgression of uncontrollable natural forces disrupting the ordered realm of culture. True to one of the film’s taglines—“Nature has Spoken”—nature begins to wreak havoc as heavy rain, freak (ice) storms, tornadoes, hurricanes, and floods occur everywhere: Nature is clearly out of bounds. In order to show the force and scale of the upcoming disaster, the film treats us to many scenes of destruction, among them a super-tornado in L.A. that rips apart the famous Hollywood sign in an ironic self-referential gesture. In contrast to *The Core*, military structures appear to be useless during the storm—all over the world, helicopters and planes drop from the skies due to the sudden temperature drops. Nature threatens to erase civilization and cannot be stopped: the final super-storm approaches and threatens to bury earth under tons of ice and snow.

It is rather unusual for a blockbuster movie to blame society’s collective behavior (economic greed, irresponsibility, and wasteful use of resources) for the impending catastrophe. Similarly, it is unusual for a disaster movie

9 The film ends with the promise of ‘disclosing’ both the cause of the catastrophe, i.e. the secret military operation, and the names of those who saved the world. On closer examination, however, this ‘disclosure’ seems little more than a heroic celebration of those who died during the rescue mission, similar to a certain manner of media coverage in the aftermath of 9/11.

10 According to Franz Everschor, environmental activists and democrats used the film to criticize George W. Bush’s environmental policy while Twentieth Century Fox, the film’s distributor, partly owned by pro-Republican Rupert Murdoch, tried to play down the film’s ecocritical message (cf. 48-49).

to maintain that the catastrophe cannot be stopped once it has started. However, in the end the film does not go through with its threat of complete global destruction but tones it down to the usual Hollywood scale. While other parts of the world (notably Europe) disappear under a thick layer of ice, the USA is not as hard hit: people in the South can be evacuated and people in the North prove more resilient than expected so that many of them manage to survive. A closer look at these two scenarios proves to be interesting in terms of their function as part of the solution to the disaster.

The evacuation of the South in the face of the catastrophe provides one of the potentially subversive moments in the film. Jack Hall's suggestion is to evacuate people to Mexico, about which Vice President Becker is not very amused. The film reverses the usual flow of poor and desperate refugees: just as numerous undocumented workers have entered the U.S. in hope of survival and a (better) life, in the film it is now the U.S. citizens who cross the U.S.-Mexican border illegally in order to survive. Later on, however, traffic from the United States into Mexico is flowing "smoothly" because the President "was able to negotiate a deal to forgive all Latin American debt in exchange for opening the border." In Hollywood, money can indeed buy everything.

This exodus of southern people, however, is a very ambiguous sign. It can certainly be read as an ironic aside to have the American Vice President, of all people, survive as a refugee in Mexico, particularly in the context of the ongoing fortification of the U.S.-Mexican border.¹¹ Nonetheless, this can also be read as an affirmation of the status quo. Towards the end of the movie, Becker, securely sitting in the U.S. consulate in Mexico, addresses his nation in a televised speech, in which he admits his mistakes and expresses his gratitude for the refuge provided by the United States of Mexico. This speech can be read as an apologetic gesture to the so-called third world and even as an image of submission on the part of the once-powerful first world. Nevertheless, I would argue, it is also a neo-colonial gesture. After all, it is mainly the industrialized first world that is responsible for the disaster, which has destroyed their resources and territories. And considering the history of colonization and exploitation that many countries have suffered at the hands of the first world, one wonders why exactly they should welcome us. In the end, the film suggests a simple relocation of the U.S. to Mexico as a solution to the disaster. A reading of this as a neocolonial gesture is underscored by a number of film scenes that show the American consulate in Mexico not

11 President Blake hardly plays a role in the movie and dies before he can evacuate. The fact that the Vice President rather than the President is in charge of the country has been read by some reviewers as a comment on the political situation in the U.S.A., particularly since the character resembles current Vice President Dick Cheney.

only as a point of refuge for American citizens but also as the new headquarters of the U.S. government and a military base. Moreover, the Vice President ends his apologetic speech with the promise to bring “home” the survivors in the North—an interesting assurance in view of the fact that he is speaking from Mexican ground.

The disaster scenario in the North can likewise be seen as quite ambiguous. While the South serves to demonstrate the efficiency and comparable orderliness of the evacuation, the North functions as an illustration of human resilience in the face of the unrelenting and ruthless force of nature. New York City, symbolizing ‘Western’ civilization and cultural achievements, is destroyed by a huge tidal wave that is reminiscent of the purifying biblical Deluge. The moment of the actual disaster, the flooding of the city, is literally staged as a transgression with the tidal wave ‘invading’ the city. Moreover, due to the enormous temperature drop during the super-storm, the water freezes in seconds and buries the city irrevocably under tons of ice. Thus, the ice age turns the blurring of the boundaries between nature and civilization into a permanent image: New York City becomes a lasting monument to natural forces out of bounds, seemingly signifying human powerlessness vis-à-vis the forces of nature.¹²

Nonetheless, the symbolic impact of this is lessened in several ways. The threatening image of nature’s ‘victory’ over civilization is reduced to a scene of destruction that provides the basis for a new beginning, the stock ending for disaster movies. Jack Hall walks (!) to New York City during the super-storm and rescues his son Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal). On finding him, Jack sends word to the Vice President and the army so that military helicopters are sent to help. These rescue scenes are significant for a number of reasons. First of all, the rescue coincides with the formation of a new family since Sam’s love interest Laura (Emmy Rossum) survives.¹³ This ‘new beginning’ is underlined by the weather conditions—white glistening snow, sunshine—that suggest a bright morning in a purified new world rather than a new ice age. Moreover, Sam and his friends are not the only people to survive the disaster. As the rescue helicopters circle over New York City, the skyscrapers’ roofs fill with numerous survivors, who are then brought “home” to Mexico. Thus, the film is careful to point out, the seemingly doomed citizens have not simply died but survived and once again shown their resilience in the face of insurmountable obstacles.

12 The zoo’s wolves, which have managed to escape earlier on, also roam the frozen city, marking it as a space of ‘wilderness’ rather than one of civilization.

13 The scenes inside the rescue helicopter treat the viewer to several such images of reconciliation, harmony and peace. Sam and his father are reunited; Sam’s African American schoolmate Brian Parks (Aijay Smith) and his opponent from the school competition J. D. (Austin Nichols), a white upper-class boy, smile contently at each other; even the homeless man, an African American, and his dog survive the disaster and become part of the new beginning.

Fittingly, in one of the last scenes of the movie, we see quite clearly that the frozen ocean has covered the continent but that, nevertheless, Miss Liberty is still standing, holding up her torch to the appropriate musical accompaniment and, with it, the ideas and values for which America supposedly stands (fig. 1). In the end, culture again prevails over nature.



Fig. 1: The Statue of Liberty (*The Day After Tomorrow*, 2004).

Similarly to *The Core* and other disaster movies, *The Day After Tomorrow* ends with the survival of a potential family as an image of the procreation of the human race and a bright future. Although the film shows the results of a careless use of the environment and its resources explicitly and on a large scale (one of the few Hollywood movies to take up current environmental concerns), the spectacular staging of the disaster and the literally and figuratively uplifting ending undermine this critical stance. The disaster is again staged as a transgression of nature into culture that underlines the threatening quality of nature rather than the danger involved in environmentally careless behavior. This is all the more problematic since the disaster here clearly has a purifying function that leaves the old structures and values of society not only unharmed but strengthened. Faith in technology is restored and humanity gets a second chance on a freshly cleaned planet: the film concludes with the view from a space station from which we see the familiar iconic ‘blue planet’ accompanied by the question of an astronaut: “Have you ever seen the air so clear?”

To conclude: it is certainly too much to ask of a Hollywood movie to act out a (more or less) bleak reality in front of its audiences.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is quite striking that even movies about man-made catastrophes time and again end in a most reassuring manner rather than with an examination of

¹⁴ Newman observes that particularly movies that are ‘realistic’ about catastrophes and their consequences are “among the perceived box-office losers” (258).

the actual causes of such disasters. In this sense, natural disaster movies are not interested in change but rather in upholding the status quo.¹⁵ What these movies depict as the real catastrophe, the real threat, I would suggest, are the various transgressions of boundaries and established hierarchies, notably those that have carefully been drawn between nature and civilization or culture. Accordingly, the staging of the catastrophe concentrates on the opposition between nature and culture, a violent spectacle that leaves the real (cultural) causes of the catastrophe largely unexamined. By acting out the need for a clear opposition of nature and culture, disaster films turn nature into civilization's threatening 'other' so that catastrophes are pictured as aggressive, transgressive acts of nature rather than as consequences of human behavior. The more dangerous nature becomes in these movies and the more sensational the survival, the more attention is drawn away from the need to examine and deal with the complex causes of the disaster. Hence, the spectacular quality does not only have entertaining function but serves as a 'noise' that mutes critical discussion concerning its wider social and political implications.

Moreover, the clear and simple opposition between nature and culture is not only problematic because it proves the unwillingness to accept human (i.e., one's own) responsibility for 'natural' disasters. The assumption of a strict opposition between nature and culture also indicates a similarly reductionist approach to the complexity of (social) life in general: here, too, the assumption and construction of any simple, strict and fixed oppositions, e.g. between 'good' and 'bad' (perpetrators and victims, us and them etc.), leads to an inadequate handling of crisis situations. The ways in which these films handle disasters reveal an endorsement of confrontational politics that are based on power and test of strength instead of a more cooperative handling of conflicts that includes the willingness to compromise. What the genre of the disaster movie seems to teach us, in short, is a reliance on the 'self-healing' powers of social and political structures that make any changes or the consideration of alternatives unnecessary. The cultural work the genre performs seems to lie in the spectacular selling of old structures as new beginnings, beginnings that in truth are simply a return to already established, conservative structures. In this sense, if our survival of a disaster indeed depends, as Jack Hall claims, "on whether or not we're able to learn from our mistakes," these films tell a bleak story.

15 Cf. Keane (chapter 2), who maintains that 1970s disaster movies, for instance, are a most conservative reaffirmation of social hierarchies with regard to class and gender. Similarly, Newman points out that nuclear movies are not critical but indeed teach their audiences how to 'love the bomb.'

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