

“It’s theoretically possible”:

Disaster and Risk in Contemporary American Film

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In the opening sequence of *The Core* (2003), the crew of the space shuttle *Endeavor* is about to land when, due to an electronic fall-out, the navigational system fails and the shuttle approaches downtown L.A. instead of Houston, TX. Nobody knows what to do, except for Major Rebecca Childs (Hilary Swank), who suggests an alternative landing scenario based on her own manual calculations. Faster than the ground computer, she has come up with the L.A. River as a potential landing site for the shuttle. When, finally, the computer has calculated the risk of such a landing maneuver, it projects a possible fail scenario; asked by the flight director on ground Dr. Talma Stickley (Alfre Woodard) whether that would work, the technician simply shrugs and says “It’s theoretically possible.” Despite this rather bleak assessment, Stickley gives the shuttle crew her go-ahead and, after a couple of near collisions with the river bridges, the shuttle lands more or less safely, proving Childs right.

This sequence highlights a number of aspects that dominate the genre of disaster film. First of all, technology is shown to be unreliable, a potential risk, which may lead to a catastrophe: the navigational system failed and the computer calculations for the landing scenario were wrong. Secondly, the scene emphasizes the necessity to take a risk in order to avoid the disaster: ground and shuttle crew risk a potentially disastrous landing (and silently accept the sacrifice implied in it) and are rewarded. Finally, trust, particularly the trust in human capacities, is essential: the scene suggests that the potential failures of technology can and, indeed, must be compensated for by human creativity and intelligence. Once this is assured and technology is put - again - under human control, the risk is minimized and under control as well. Seen this way, disaster movies are not simply about disaster but also about risk and risk management, that is the ways in which risks can be contained and managed with the help of technology.

Hence, in the following, I will analyze how contemporary disaster movies represent risk and functionalize it as part of their narrative structure. As a number of theories point out, risk is not simply an objective category, an event whose likelihood can be calculated based on scientific data and facts but a culturally and socially constructed phenomenon (Lupton 28-33, Slovic

et.al. 311, Zinn 6, 11-14).¹ Similarly, risk perception is not an objective assessment of facts but determined by a variety of socio-cultural as well as individual factors that influence a person's evaluation of risk. As Ursula Heise points out, "perceptions of ecological and technological risk scenarios are shaped by and filtered through narrative templates that manifest themselves in both visual and verbal artifacts" (Heise 122; see also 138-142). In other words, cultural texts can have a vital role in forming and perpetuating our understanding of the concept of risk and may influence both what we perceive as risk and how we act on this in a number of ways. Disaster movies can therefore be seen as an important part of such a discourse on risk, even more so because they are texts that circulate globally and thus have a far-reaching impact. A case in point is the film *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), which had quite a huge impact on the discussion of climate change, even though it was accused of portraying it in an unrealistic way. Indeed, experts were divided on the question whether the film would have a positive or negative effect on the public perception of climate change (Leiserowitz 23, 25-26).²

The focus of this essay will be the visual and narrative patterns with which disaster movies present risk scenarios and the ways in which these risks are assessed and coped with. It is my contention that disaster films deal with the notion of risk in various contradictory ways: on the one hand, these films routinely turn risk scenarios into disasters that threaten to be of an apocalyptic, often also global scope, thus emphasizing the uncontrollable and 'random' nature of risk; on the other hand, the worst-case risk scenarios that have been conjured up during the movie are hardly ever fully transformed into film reality in the end, a plot device that somewhat paradoxically suggests that risks can be controlled and successfully managed after all. In this way, disaster movies can have it both ways: they visualize the catastrophic extent and consequences of high-risk scenarios and provide a happy ending at the same time. Technology as well as human ingenuity are vital for such a successful mitigation of disaster consequences and both are celebrated as indispensable tools in a variety of ways, even though (and maybe especially if) the disaster was caused by the misuse of technology in the first place. In consequence, risks are visualized as a highly dangerous and also contingent part of our daily lives, which - should they become reality - can nevertheless be controlled under certain circumstances that I will discuss in more detail further down. I will begin my discussion by highlighting some important general characteristics and patterns of the genre of disaster movies and how they interrelate with the concept of risk before I will illustrate my

1 For an excellent brief overview of various concepts of risk see, for instance, Renn. See also Heise (124-136) and Lupton.

2 A number of reception studies (in the U.S., the U.K., Japan and Germany) could show that the film sensitized most viewers regarding their perception on climate change. For an overview of the five different reception studies on the movie see Weik von Mossner.

points with disaster films that were released during the last two decades. I will close my paper with a brief analysis of *Contagion* (2011), a recent film that provides a counter example to the typical pattern of the disaster genre and hence, as I will show, a different approach to the notion of risk.

The Concept of Risk and the Genre of Disaster Movies

Like other (film) genres, the disaster genre cannot be neatly distinguished from other genres as it shares a variety of features with them and thus, most disaster films could be categorized under different labels as well, notably as action (*Volcano*), thriller (*The Sum of All Fears*), drama (*Titanic*), science fiction (*Independence Day*) or even war films (*Battle Los Angeles*).³ For my purposes here, I will understand the disaster film as being centrally about a disaster (Roddick 246), which means that the disaster, which can be either global or local in scale, influences the plot in a decisive way. In other words, the films' focus lies on both the scale and impact of the disaster as well as on how the disaster is dealt with. Thus, they either portray the protagonists' attempt to avert the disaster, which, as discussed in more detail below, means to prevent its worst extent, as for example in *Armageddon* (1998) or *Godzilla* (1998), or they deal with how the protagonists cope with a disaster that they cannot do anything about, for instance the sinking ship in *Poseidon* (2006) or the flooding of major parts of the earth in *2012* (2009).⁴ For both types of movies, risk plays a role in two distinct but related ways. In the first part of the narrative, risk is the starting point as it serves as a foreshadowing of the future, an anticipation of the nature and scope of the disaster that threatens to disrupt everyday life. Thus, risk is connoted clearly negatively with danger, loss, and destruction. Once the predicted risk starts to become reality and the actual disaster unfolds, risk again plays a significant role, determining how the protagonists deal with the disaster and its consequences. Here, risk is portrayed as a necessary coping strategy for both the aversion of the worst-case scenario and the survival of the catastrophe. Like courage and sacrifice, the willingness to take risks is one of the distinguishing qualities of the films' (mostly male) heroes. To risk one's life, for example, is a high-risk stake that usually pays (at least for the main protagonist) and hence, risk becomes positively connoted with hope and success.

3 For overviews and definitions of the disaster genre see, for instance, Keane (Introduction), Yacowar, Roddick.

4 The lines between these two 'types' of film are, of course, fuzzy - averting the worst extent of a catastrophe necessitates survival while the mere survival of a catastrophe, whose extent cannot really be influenced, means arguably that its worst extent (death of the protagonists) can be averted.

It is important, then, to differentiate between risk and the disaster itself. As Ulrich Beck points out, “[r]isk means the anticipation of the catastrophe,” a future scenario that is not merely speculative but possible and controversial. Put differently, for the concept of risk to apply, the disaster has to remain a possibility because “[t]he moment risks become real, [...] they become catastrophes. Risks are always future events that may occur, that threaten us” (9) and therefore, they have an enormous influence on our present and future lives.⁵ While being a possible, if not necessarily likely, threat in the future (and it is important to note that Hollywood movies frequently use rather fantastic and improbable risk scenarios), a risk is still controversial; to some extent it is uncertain whether a risk will become reality or not, otherwise it would simply be a danger. Moreover, Jens Zinn emphasizes that “[t]he concept of risk is tied to the possibility that the future can be altered - or at least perceived as such - by human activities” (4). Risk implies that something can actually be done in order to prevent the worst from happening. For this paper, I will therefore not consider films in which neither the extent of the disaster nor the survival of those affected can be influenced by human action, as in *Knowing* (2009) or *Melancholia* (2011). For similar reasons I will not consider post-apocalyptic disaster movies, in which protagonists have to deal with the consequences of a catastrophe that has already happened and cannot be reversed, such as *The Book of Eli* (2010) or *The Road* (2009).

The necessity to distinguish between risk and actual catastrophe renders the relationship between disaster films and the concept of risk somewhat complicated since the point of disaster movies is to let the disaster happen, at least to a certain extent. A disaster movie in which the disaster can be completely averted, in which the risk is not at least partly realized, would be ‘pointless,’ so to speak, since large-scale spectacular destructions, the “money shots” as Alexa Weik von Mossner rightly calls them (107), are a key characteristic of the genre both visually and with regard to their narrative structure (cf. Keane 78). In other words, disaster movies do not just invoke a (worst-case) risk scenario but turn it into film reality. In a sense, disaster films can be seen as what Ulrich Beck calls the “staging” of a risk - they actualize, make present a future risk scenario. However, in how far the films actually function as a warning to change the structures and conditions that lead to the disaster will be discussed below.⁶ As Beck notes, “only by

5 Beck emphasizes that the danger, which a risk imagines, “shapes our expectations, lodges in our heads and guides our actions,” becoming “a political force that transforms the world” (10).

6 In this context Beck also emphasizes that staging is not to be understood as “deliberate falsification of reality” (10). In this regard, the comparison between the staging of risk in disaster movies and Beck’s notion of risk staging is somewhat stretched since the film genre is less concerned with likelihood, scientific accuracy, or realism than with a gripping storyline and impressive scenes of destruction.

imagining and staging world risk does the future catastrophe become present - often with the goal of averting it by influencing present decisions. Then the diagnosis of risk would be 'a self-refuting prophecy,'" something that will not happen precisely because it is imagined to happen (10). It is also important to note that the worst-case risk scenario is almost never completely realized in films and more often than not the most serious disaster consequences can be prevented. In this way, the danger and threat that the risk and the subsequent disaster pose to civilization can be emphasized while enough of the world is left to be saved and build a better future. Hope, as it turns out, is an essential part of the disaster narrative.⁷ The fascination disaster movies exert on their audiences is therefore the 'safe' realization of risk, the playing out of a 'what if: From the safe vantage point of their cinema seats, viewers can watch (parts of) the world being destroyed all the while knowing that there will be a happy ending. Such a combination of thrill and reassurance is part of the films' entertaining and "therapeutic" (Ryan and Kellner 56), one could also say escapist, quality.

However, I would argue that the genre needs the disaster not just for entertainment purposes - although this is undoubtedly an essential point as the occurrence of ever bigger, more fantastic, and arguably more impressive, computer-generated disaster sequences in Hollywood movies indicates. As much as the disaster is about entertainment of the audience, it can also be seen as a warning, which is made more pressing by the visualization of its catastrophic consequences for the world 'as we know it.' In this sense, disaster movies, particularly those that envision apocalyptic end-of-world scenarios, appear to be modern-day, secularized variations of the jeremiad: they conjure up the end of the world while at the same time insisting on the possibility to turn things around just in time to survive.⁸ Risk becomes connected to the notion of hubris, and the actual disaster doubles as warning and punishment for a careless society that has deviated too much from standards of morality.⁹ Depicting a world disrupted by catastrophic events, disaster movies provide in one sense a 'tabula rasa' from which to start anew. Nevertheless, their endings often confirm traditional norms and values: "Order is reasserted" as Maurice Yacowar so aptly observes (288). Seemingly about change and new beginnings, disaster movies are deeply conservative and Nick Roddick's contention that disaster movies of the

7 Cf. Greg Garrard, who writes that "only if we imagine that the planet has a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it" (107).

8 The frequent use of religious symbolism and narratives that can be found in many disaster movies underlines this point and I am grateful to Antje Kley for drawing my attention to it. *I am Legend* (2007) is an excellent example for this as its ending imagines a new beginning in the form of a small, religious community that is reminiscent of 17th century Puritan settlements.

9 For a more detailed discussion of the use of end-of-world rhetoric and biblical images see Schroder.

1970s are “‘reactionary culture’ par excellence” (245) is still true for today’s movies, even if to a lesser extent. Somewhat paradoxically, the genre uses the disaster as a warning while frequently leaving the ‘risky’ structures that caused it in place.

This intricate interdependence between disaster and risk leads to several narrative patterns that I find significant: First of all, the risk scenario - a disaster that is in most cases quite fantastic and improbable - is contrasted with the risk management, the rescue mission which is equally fantastic and unlikely. In other words, one risk narrative (the risk of the future disaster) is balanced with another (the risks involved in the management of the disaster). Secondly, and connected to the first point, most films visualize the catastrophe as nature out of bounds regardless of the cause or origin of the catastrophe, whereas the disaster management, the rescue mission, is clearly set in the realm of culture and technology. Thirdly, although the disasters are visualized as spectacles of an impressive destructive force, they can nevertheless be partly averted and survived; even films in which the catastrophe actually takes place have a happy ending, and it is frequently a happy ending that insists on the superiority of technology vis-à-vis nature and serves to promote trust in the self-healing forces of both nature and culture.

“Against All Odds and In the Face of Tremendous Adversity”: Controlling the (Risk of) Disaster

I will begin my analysis with the first pattern, the opposition of the disaster on the hand and the rescue mission on the other. Despite their (visual) verisimilitude through computer-generated images and the elaborate scientific explanations and facts that disaster movies use to construct their risk scenario, it is not the concrete risk that these films are interested in but rather, how people react in the face of its realization (cf. Hofmann 191). Basically, disaster movies routinely turn a rather improbable risk scenario into (film) reality and, moreover, following the logic of the genre, show a just as improbable solution to be successful. In both *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon* (both 1998), for instance, the rather unlikely event of a meteor hitting the earth with fatal consequences for the whole planet becomes real. In 2012 the earth’s core is heated up by unprecedented amounts of solar radiation causing tectonic shifts and the flooding of the whole planet, whereas in *The Core* the earth’s core stops rotating causing the atmosphere to become unstable, again with fatal consequences for the whole planet. In *Godzilla*, nuclear tests cause a saurian to mutate and turn into a monster, which destroys NYC. In *Independence Day* (1996) and, more recently, *War of the Worlds* (2005), *Cloverfield* (2008), *Battle L.A.* (2010), and *Battleship* (2012) aliens invade planet earth to exploit its resources. Even movies that

take more realistic or likely risks as their topic, such as *The Day after Tomorrow*, stage them in ways, to use Beck's term, that highlight the fantastic and extraordinary. Thus, one could say, that even and maybe especially risk scenarios that are highly unlikely if not impossible in our real world are realized. In a way this mirrors the fact that people are more concerned about risks that - if realized - "have catastrophic effects on humans and the environment" than about 'low-impact' risks, even though the former might have a much lower probability (Renn 55; see also Slovic et.al. 320). On a more symbolic level, this impossibility underlines the random and unexpected nature of the disaster that hits earth. Serving the blockbuster quality of the movies, it also indicates that the nature of the disaster or a realistic assessment of its causes and effects are not that important. Instead, the movies highlight its symbolic quality as both punishment and purge and its function as a test in the face of which humans have to react and prove themselves.

This is where the rescue missions that are attached to the various disaster scenarios become significant: they are just as fantastic (and fantastically unlikely) as the disaster and serve as 'playground' to put humans to a test. Their dangerous and audacious character turns them into highly risky affairs both with regard to their likelihood to succeed and for those who carry them out. Frequently, lives are lost in the course of action and sacrifices need to be made for a positive outcome. In other words, the risk scenario and the subsequent disaster are matched and balanced by a risk management that is also characterized by a high risk, and death plays a major role in both. While the majority of people simply die in order to illustrate the scale and danger of the catastrophe, death has also a symbolic function within the films. Generally, and in line with the genre characteristics, the disaster can be seen as a form of punishment, something that purges a society that has grown corrupt and immoral and now has to 'pay' for its sins. The idea of the disaster as punishment is frequently taken up in the form it takes. The giant wave in *The Day after Tomorrow* and *Deep Impact* (1998) is reminiscent of the deluge, for instance, and in both cases New York City, a pars pro toto for metropolitan lifestyle and society, is literally and metaphorically cleansed. Similarly, the volcano eruption in *Volcano* (1997) can be read as a purgatory, cleansing and renewing L.A., which is marked at the beginning of the movie as morally corrupt. This idea of the catastrophe as punishment relates to the fact that sacrifice is often part of the rescue mission.

Hence, people frequently die as part of the sacrifices that have to be made in order to avert the catastrophe - such a heroic death becomes especially obvious and meaningful when main characters die. Sacrifice - originally a religious rite - is an act in which the sacrificial victim is exchanged for redemption. In her study on the function of sacrifice in Hollywood movies, Claire Sisco King explains that the "suffering and noble death [of the sacrificial victim-hero] allow for synecdochic figurations of the nation as

traumatized and then recovered, lost and then found, ruined and then repaired" (15). More specifically, in disaster movies a seemingly lost or ruined world can be saved in time through the (mostly male) hero's sacrifice of his own life. In *The Core*, for instance, most of the characters on the rescue team sacrifice themselves to ensure the success of the mission, thus making up for technological shortcomings some of them are responsible for. The shuttle crew in *Deep Impact* dies for the same reason and in *Armageddon*, main protagonist Harry Stemper decides to give up his own life in order to save the world.

While such a sacrifice means the end of the hero's life, it ensures mission success and thus, it is symbolically a reconstitution of life. It 'repairs,' as it were, a society that has been fragmented and destroyed by the disaster. As Claire King puts it, "sacrifice redresses a crisis or breach within a community through expiatory substitution wherein the sacrificial object takes on and atones for the imperfections of the larger social body" (15). It also helps to impart a quasi-religious aura to the dead hero and thereby reinforces notions of traditional masculinity and male heroism (King 37,41). By extension, the sacrifice likewise helps to reinstate control over a world that has gone out of bounds so that humans become the rulers of their own fate again. A case in point can be found in *I am Legend* (2007), which shows a post-apocalyptic world in which a virus has either killed humans or turned them into so-called "darkseekers," human-like creatures that avoid daylight. Main protagonist Robert Neville sacrifices his life in order to ensure that the cure he found against the virus can be brought safely to a community of not yet infected survivors. Not only does his death turn him into a martyr-like figure, a reading that is reinforced by the religious imagery that can be found throughout the film, it also ensures control over a disease that was generated by humans in the first place. Life is sacrificed in order to contain the disaster, that is to minimize risk (again), reinforcing trust in human institutions and structures while at the same time also (seemingly) diminishing the risk they carry. In short, not only is risk-taking required to contain the consequences of the disaster; sacrifice as well often helps to both justify and contain risk in these movies.

Culture's Other: Disaster as Nature out of Bounds

Discussing Max Weber's argument that the disenchantment of the world led to a replacement of magic by technology and rationality as means of mastering the world, Jens Zinn points out that "[r]isk implies that an uncertain future can be made available to human action foremost with the help of positivist science and technique" (10). This is mirrored in the ways many movies contrast the disaster and how it is 'managed': While the disaster as such is mostly visualized as a disruptive force of nature, which

invades the space of culture to destroy it, the containment of the disaster - its (partial) reversal - is very much connected to the realm of science and technology. Put differently, the ways in which many of these films visualize their risk scenarios does not so much highlight the cause of the catastrophe than its consequences: whereas the catastrophe is linked to nature (even in cases where its origin is anthropogenic), its containment is connected to culture and, more specifically, technology. In *The Core*, for example, the disaster is triggered by a secret weapon, which leads to a destabilization of the earth's core; the disaster itself, however, is pictured exclusively as a natural catastrophe of global scope. Nature stops behaving according to natural laws and takes revenge on humans by causing electronic gadgets to become dangerous for those who use them.¹⁰ It appears to be out of bounds destroying famous landmarks and cities around the globe. The destruction of Rome, for instance, is pictured as apocalyptic thunderstorm that destroys the city, which can be taken to symbolize both cultural achievements and moral degeneration. Despite the technological cause for the disaster, nature is visually blamed for the catastrophe. Along the same lines, both *Godzilla* and *The Day After Tomorrow* picture the catastrophe as nature invading human space: while in *Godzilla* the eponymous creature wreaks havoc in New York City, in *The Day After Tomorrow* a giant wave floods the city.¹¹

Such natural disaster sequences are almost invariably contrasted with scenes of the rescue mission, which foreground the role that science, technology, and human effort play in the aversion of the apocalypse. To stay with the present examples, in *The Core* the saving of the world is made possible by the latest (military) technology. The sequence in which the protagonists prepare for their rescue mission is a parade of state of the art technology. It is accompanied by military music as well as the voice-over of its hero, scientist Dr. Josh Keyes (Aaron Eckhart), who explains the technological details of the endeavor and comments that "With luck, irony will break for the good guys for once and the world's biggest weapons of mass destruction will help save the world," adding an ironic twist to the sequence. Indeed, the whole preparation for the world-saving endeavor is a rather obvious celebration of technology and human ingenuity, which borders on parody.¹² However, this (exaggerated) emphasis on technological

10 At the beginning of the film, people die because their pacemakers stop working while later on, in the sequence discussed here, people are hurt using things like an espresso machine or a TV.

11 On second glance, however, *Godzilla* provides a more ambiguous reading as it is the military that causes most of the destruction in its pursuit of the monster.

12 In his study of the relation between the genre of disaster movies and the concept of camp, Ken Feil reads *The Core*'s self-ironic humor and parodic elements as a "replay of 1990s disaster movie discourse" (134) with its pleasure in destruction. He also sees it as an attempt to get away with reveling in scenes of large-scale destruction without conjuring up unwanted associations with the real disaster of 9/11, an incident that

achievements is typical for the genre and also characterizes the entire rescue mission to the core: despite immense obstacles, technology saves the day in the end, helping to control nature and to put her (back) in her place. In a similar manner, in *Godzilla* fighter jets help to destroy the monster's nest, and in *The Day After Tomorrow*, military helicopters descend angel-like onto New York City to rescue the survivors. Slightly less obvious is the role of technology in *I Am Legend*, in which the hero Robert Neville uses technology both to survive and to find the cure for the fatal virus. Yet, here, too, it plays a vital role: his home, equipped with a number of automatic defense mechanisms, and especially his laboratory serve as a technological enclave in a world that has deteriorated into a dangerous wilderness. Such successful endings of the missions suggest that it is the people, not technology, that pose a risk, namely the risk of abuse. Risk, thus, becomes tied to the taking of action (cf. Renn 50) rather than to technological errors. In this way, most disaster films emphasize that technology, provided that it is put in the right hands, is indispensable and can - and should - be trusted.

Nevertheless, even the latest technology together with seemingly limitless material and financial resources cannot always guarantee the success of the mission.¹³ Again a typical feature of the genre, the plan to avert the catastrophe is audacious and requires certain human characteristics such as courage, resourcefulness, and the ability to make judgment calls in the face of danger. In addition to the trust in technology as well as the willingness to sacrifice oneself, another human quality becomes vital: many of the decisions that are made as part of the risk management are based more on emotions than on rationality. Frequently it is "gut feeling" rather than purely scientific considerations or calculations of probability that lead to decisions that turn out to be successful. Indeed, frequently such an emotional assessment of risk is shown to be (more) accurate and reliable, something which relates to how risk seems to be assessed in real life. As Paul Slovic et al. argue, in people's judgments of risks affect and emotion are at least as important as rational calculations, particularly if complex situations are judged (Slovic et al. 315). The above-mentioned shuttle landing in *The Core* is a case in point: Major Childs' calculations and her trust in the

makes any pleasure in destruction seem perverse. In the face of its box-office failure, however, he reads it as an attempt that was not successful (140).

- 13 Interestingly enough, money is never tight in the realization of even the most expensive and large-scale rescue missions; neither are material resources or man-power. In 2012, to give a recent example, the money to put the fantastic plan of building eight giant arks to survive the flood into reality comes from tickets (1 billion Euro each) sold to those who can afford it. The work is - quite ironically - provided by Chinese labor. When in *The Core* scientist Dr. Brazzleton (Delroy Lindo) is asked what he would need to realize his plan of building his specially modified rescue vessel he answers "Fifty Billion dollars" General Purcell (Richard Jenkins) simply asks whether he would take a check.

commander's ability to fly the shuttle prove more accurate than a 'rational' computer calculation - lives can be saved not despite but because of what one could call the 'human factor' within risk assessment. While experience and expert knowledge often provide the basis for such decisions (so that they are based on rationality to a certain extent), the films take care to emphasize that the heroes (less often heroines) make their decision against the odds and use their personal judgment in order to come to the right decision. Thus, in addition to state-of-the-art technology, both the willingness to take risks and a partly 'emotional' assessment of risks become central ingredients for the containment of the catastrophe and the movies' happy endings.

It's (not) the End of the World as We Know It: Spectacular Catastrophes and Happy Endings

The contrast between the risk scenario - the natural catastrophe - and the risk management - the technologized rescue mission - finds a parallel in the opposition of the disaster as a disruptive spectacle of considerable size and the happy ending, which promises order and containment. While disasters are usually visualized in dimensions that emphasize their nature as extremely dangerous events that have far-reaching consequences, their actual effects as suggested by the films' positive outcome are relatively short lived and can be quickly overcome. Film disasters (even the local ones) are awe-inspiring spectacles because of sheer size and destructive force - nothing is small or subtle about these catastrophes. This underlines the size and terror with which the catastrophe threatens humanity and thus emphasizes the idea of a sublime nature, which is completely unaffected by any human concerns. These spectacles of destruction are also characterized by a certain beauty, an "aesthetics of destruction" as Susan Sontag calls it (213), so that they are spectacularly beautiful sights as well. Moreover, it is enjoyable to watch the destruction itself as Geoff King explains: "Part of this pleasure may be rooted in a general delight sometimes taken in the imaginary destruction of familiar landscapes or cultural edifices. There is a certain carnivalesque appeal in this licensed enjoyment of destruction" (162).¹⁴

The wave in *The Day After Tomorrow* is indeed both big and beautiful - it is a spectacle of enormous proportion, which, like the biblical deluge, does not just destroy but also purify the city thus making possible a new beginning. Similarly, the wave in *Deep Impact* as well as the meteor impact in *Armageddon* are spectacles both beautiful and terrifying. Moreover, these

14 Cf. Ken Feil, who argues that especially the films of the 1990s "perfect the art of pleasurable destruction," which stands in contrast to the sympathy they evoke for the characters affected by the disaster (68). Stephen Keane speaks of the "postcard theory" of disaster movies and maintains that "if a building or city is not instantly recognizable it's not worth destroying" (83).

catastrophes are also technological spectacles, impressive feats of computer-generated imagery, which helps to visualize the unimaginable.¹⁵ Here also lies another ambiguity of these spectacles: while size and destructive force serve to impress the danger of the uncontrollable destructive force of nature on the viewer, the technology which brings it to the screen, suggests the opposite: CGI controls nature in the sense that it can make nature do what we want. Furthermore, the catastrophe's visual character, exaggerated and hyper-real at the same time, turn it into a theme-park ride, a short-lived spectacle of destruction that can be enjoyed without any consequences.¹⁶

The ways in which film disasters are staged suggests that they are short-lived affairs as they are reduced to one or, at most, very few climactic moments; long-term consequences are simply not part of the narrative and, in fact, blended out by the positive imagery that their typical narrative structure provides, the happy ending. Despite large scale destruction and any hopelessness and despair that the catastrophe might have brought about humanity, in the end, civilization prevails and, even more importantly, culture's dominance over nature is re-established. Even in films, in which a global catastrophe actually happens, a happy ending seems to reverse its terrifying impact on human civilization. While *Armageddon* ends with multiple marriages, reinforcing the idea of a new beginning on a social level, *The Day After Tomorrow* ends with the iconic image of the blue planet seen from space by an astronaut who comments that "the air has never looked so clear." Similarly, in *The Core* the beginning disintegration of earth can be stopped and "earth is healing itself" as one of the characters observes at the end. The ending of *I am Legend* is a variation of this theme of peaceful nature as it closes with the image of domesticated wilderness, an idyllic, pre-modern, self-sufficient village that brings to mind 17th century Puritan New England. In a way, the film's ending is reminiscent of the "pastoral countermodel," which is, as Ursula Heise argues, frequently evoked as part of an environmentalist rhetoric that Lawrence Buell has called "toxic discourse" (140).¹⁷ In *I am Legend*, the toxic pollution would be the man-

15 Referring to Michael Allen, Pam Cooke and Mieke Bemink, Stephen Keane points out that "contemporary special-effects technologies represent the next justified step in a longstanding and ongoing cinema of spectacle" (78).

16 However, see also Alexa Weik von Mossner's discussion of *The Day After Tomorrow* and her argument that it is the "visceral effect" of the film's spectacular disaster sequences that influenced viewers and generated the film's impact on the public discussion of climate change (98).

17 This image of a rural community is actually complicated by the film's plot, which contrasts 'us' (the humans) and 'them' (the so-called darkseekers). Although during the film these darkseekers are mostly pictured as less than human, there are moments when it becomes clear that they are capable to think, act, and feel like humans. The peaceful Puritan village, whose most prominent features are a church and fortified wall, turns into a gated (religious) community, a protected area which excludes the different 'other' (the name of the darkseekers here also attains religious connotations).

made virus while the pastoral is here not just evoked as a countermodel but, in fact, realized at the ending of the movie as the de-facto future of the survivors.

Such happy endings tend to take away most of the terror or anxiety that the risk scenario, which is visualized as an impressively 'real' event of breathtaking magnitude, might have. This is underlined by the rather short-lived nature of the catastrophe, which is visualized as a climactic moment rather than an ongoing process. Therefore, it is not so much the consequences of the catastrophe that are emphasized as the possibility of a new beginning and with this the realization of a 'better' world. As Heise so aptly points out in her discussion of risk and narrative, "[i]n the apocalyptic perspective, utter destruction lies ahead but can be averted and replaced by an alternative future society; in the risk perspective, crises are already underway all around, and while their consequences can be mitigated, a future without their impact has become impossible to envision" (142).¹⁸ Paradoxically, in their visualization of risk scenarios, disaster movies seem to erase the risk to a certain extent: With the realization of the catastrophe, the risk seems to be over and contained and its consequences are no longer relevant.

The Risk of Contagion: The Invisible Catastrophe

As I have argued, the spectacular quality of the visualization of the catastrophe in contrast to the happy ending as well as the related opposition of nature (disaster) and culture/ technology (rescue) are essential aspects of the ways in which the concept of risk is usually visualized in the disaster film genre. Such patterns and their influence on the notion of risk become even clearer if one takes a closer look at a recent film that does not adhere to these typical genre characteristics. Steven Soderbergh's aptly named *Contagion* (2011) is a film about a pandemic which is caused by a mutated, highly contagious and potentially fatal virus that travels around the world in a matter of days. The film has variously been reviewed as an "international thriller" (Denby n.p.), a "medical thriller" (Benson-Allott 14), a "bio-threat suspense film" (Covert n.p.), an "outbreak film" (Yamey and Hwang 850) as well as a disaster film (Longworth n.p.), a mixed classification that points to *Contagion's* hybrid character in terms of its genre.¹⁹ Indeed one could argue that it is this hybridity that allows the film to explore a different approach to the disaster genre and undermine some of its conventions and implications

18 Heise sees apocalyptic narratives as a form of risk perception but points out that they envision the future in different ways than theories of risk or risk narratives (141).

19 In a phone interview, Steven Soderbergh has explained that he wanted to avoid "all the traps and tropes of the typical disaster movies. We don't go places our characters haven't gone; no shot of Paris where a bunch of extras we haven't met are dying. No scenes with the president. No helicopter shots floating over the city" (Covert n.p.).

for the notion of risk.²⁰ While thrillers are also concerned with issues of risk and potential catastrophes, they tend to take on a more 'realistic' approach, which is particularly true for medical thrillers with their focus on medical and scientific details. Thus, these films emphasize the everyday character as well as the high probability of risk, which distinguishes them very much from the 'typical' disaster film with its (visual and narrative) focus on the extra-ordinary.

Thus, in contrast to most examples of the genre, *Contagion* chooses a risk that is possible, even probable and stages its realization in a quite realistic way.²¹ For instance, the catastrophe is not visualized as a climactic spectacle but rather as an ongoing process throughout the film. In a certain sense the catastrophe is not visible at all as the virus and the ways in which it is transmitted are invisible. And although it is of natural origin, the pandemic is not characterized as a natural catastrophe but in fact, rather closely linked to social and economic structures. And while the ending certainly provides closure, it is not necessarily an overly 'happy' one that counters or even ignores the consequences of the catastrophe. All of these characteristics influence the notion of risk, as it emerges in *Contagion*, in decisive ways.

The film opens with a black screen and the sound of coughing, which is, as it turns out, one of the symptoms of the disease, before we see Beth Emhoff (Gwyneth Paltrow) waiting for her connecting flight at Chicago's O'Hare airport. The black screen underlines the nature of the catastrophe we are about to witness, the spread of an infection that is largely invisible and goes unnoticed. Being one of the first infected people, Emhoff has just carried the virus from Hong Kong to the U.S., where she will die very soon after this scene. Without a long exposition that prepares the viewer (and protagonists) for the upcoming disaster, the film starts right at the beginning, if not the middle, of the catastrophe. Moreover, instead of one linear storyline, which leads to a climactic disaster sequence, the film offers a number of not always intersecting plotlines, a decentralization that is continued into the visualization of the catastrophe itself. Rather than one spectacular, highly visible catastrophic climax, *Contagion* features a catastrophe that is ongoing and, what is more, largely invisible.²²

This invisibility of the catastrophe necessitates a deviation from the typical visual politics of the disaster genre with its emphasis on highly visible

20 I would like to thank Alexa Weik von Mossner for helping me to develop this point.

21 In contrast to most disaster movies, *Contagion* has frequently been praised for its scientific accuracy. Yamey and Hwang, for instance, praise *Contagion* as "smart, true to life, and informative without being dull" (850) in their review published in the *British Medical Journal*. Similarly, in *Science* Kristen Mueller calls the film a "gripping yet refreshingly accurate warning" about a potential pandemic (1064).

22 Cf. Caetlin Benson-Allott, who argues that *Contagion* emphasizes the "limits of visibility" and therefore goes against the "hypervisibility" that CGI makes possible, namely the "convincing depictions of things impossible to see in everyday life" (14).

and spectacular scenes of mayhem and destruction. Instead of such visual spectacles, *Contagion* utilizes characteristics that are typical for the (medical) thriller: the narrative focuses on a mysterious disease, pictures a mission that is structured as a race against time, and highlights the significance of (mis-)information for instance. In fact, it is the absence of visual spectacles and, arguably, the invisibility of the virus that contribute to the realistic atmosphere of the film, which focuses on the consequences of the quickly spreading and highly fatal pandemic instead: empty streets, supermarkets destroyed by looting, and, finally, sick patients that are dying (alone) in public places that have been turned into make-shift hospitals.²³ Moreover, the invisibility of the virus also emphasizes the risk of infection since it can potentially be everywhere. Accordingly, the film focuses on the various ways in which the virus can spread and draws our attention to doorknobs, elevator buttons, glasses, (finger) food, the shaking of hands, coughing and the like; it also makes visible how often we perform these simple actions every day, again highlighting the risk of infection. As a logical consequence, the virus spreads very quickly around the globe, killing people before they really know what is going on.

Moreover, the film underlines that the pandemic cannot easily be cured - indeed, the film emphasizes the length of time it takes to first of all identify the virus and the ways in which it spreads and then find a possible cure or vaccine. In other words, science and technology - finding a solution as well as attempting to contain the catastrophe - are not (immediately) successful. Rather, the film portrays a society that tries to save itself by social isolation, which rapidly turns into selfish egoism, so that the movie's taglines - "Nothing spreads like fear" and "Don't talk to anyone. Don't touch anyone" - are aptly visualized. In contrast to other movies, it is not so much nature that is the problem here; instead, the catastrophe is characterized as a social and cultural one. The film suggests that the mutation of the virus is ultimately caused by "the destructive power of corporate globalization" (Benson-Allott 15): the demolition of a forest in Macao leads to the accidental meeting of an infected bat with a pig, which is subsequently sold to a chef in Hong Kong, who in turn infects an American business woman by shaking her hand. It is people themselves, via the various routes of global economy, who help spread the virus literally in a matter of hours around the globe, thus killing large numbers of people. Furthermore, an essential part of the catastrophe lies also in the breaking down of the social systems, from the medical facilities, which quickly become dysfunctional because of the huge number

23 John Wirt, for instance, writes that "*Contagion* depicts its devastating, plausible scenario with urgency and style" (n.p.). Similarly, David Denby points out that "*Contagion* confronts reality head on; it's a brief against magical thinking" (n.p.), and Colin Covert claims that the film is "a reality-show approach to the end of the world" (n.p.).

of sick and dying people, to the problem of riots and looting, which endangers the basic supply of necessary goods.

Finally, although the ending could arguably be called happy - after all, a vaccine has finally been developed - it does not necessarily seem that way.²⁴ Rather than with a hopeful shot of the world saved in time, *Contagion* ends literally where it began: with the infection. It traces the way the virus was accidentally created ("Somewhere in the world, the wrong pig met up with the wrong bat" as Dr. Ally Hextall (Jennifer Ehle) explains) and then ends with a photo of its first victim Beth Emhoff, which shows how she got infected by a coincidental handshake. Framing the movie with images of the infection does not so much suggest a happy ending than foreshadow a possible repetition of the events: a mutated virus just like this one can start any time anywhere, underlining the contingent and uncontrollable nature of such a catastrophe. Again, the narrative deviates from the typical pattern found in the disaster genre, utilizing characteristics of the thriller instead. In consequence, the notion of risk appears very differently in this movie: Here, the risk is not easily controllable with sufficient knowledge and technology or even through courageous and selfless behavior, just as the catastrophe itself cannot simply be stopped or reversed.²⁵ While in *Contagion* the catastrophe is visualized less spectacularly, it appears by no means less threatening, which holds also true for the way risk and risk-taking are portrayed. Through such a portrayal, the risk of infection, in fact, becomes a lot less controllable since it is everywhere rather than just concentrated in the realization of a brief catastrophic event. Moreover, the realized risk - the catastrophe - cannot easily be contained or stopped since the finding of the vaccine seems lucky rather than foreseeable and therefore does not provide a quick solution or happy ending.

Conclusion

Utilizing the generic characteristics of the (medical) thriller, *Contagion* goes beyond the conventions of the disaster genre, a 'deviation' that results in a more realistic approach to the portrayal of the disaster. In consequence, the film's unusual patterns seem to highlight a notion of risk that is characterized by its random, contingent, and uncontrollable nature, which stands in

24 It takes months until the vaccine is developed and it takes even longer to produce it in sufficient amounts and to distribute it around the globe. This time period underlines the 'anti-climactic' visualization of the catastrophe by emphasizing the consequences of the global pandemic rather than offering a quick solution.

25 Dr. Erin Mears (Kate Winslet) of the Center for Disease Control tries to help contain the outbreak of the catastrophe. Although she is quite conscious of the fatality of the virus and careful with regard to how it can be contracted, she is soon infected and dies a quite unheroic death despite her selfless commitment.

contrast to the idea of risk as it can be found in typical examples of the genre. The thrill of disaster movies lies in making real the most unlikely risk scenarios and also those that are most destructive - part of their appeal is their visualization of the disaster as extraordinary event, a spectacle that serves as a substitute for the disaster's invisible causes (Keane 101). This spectacle - formally a feat of technology - is a celebration of both large-scale destruction and human resilience and it is more often than not staged as an uncontrollable force of nature that invades culture's space. This spectacularly visualized risk scenario is countered by a risk management that glorifies human achievements (technology) and qualities (endurance, courage, resourcefulness). It is a technological spectacle that helps to gain back control over nature and to re-establish confidence in technology. Moreover, a successful handling of the catastrophe requires that further risks are taken so that risk and risk-taking actually attain positive qualities. Significantly, it is not so much scientific probabilities and facts that play a role in the evaluation of these risks but rather factors such as gut-feeling, guesswork, and plain luck. Therefore, despite the staging of risk as a catastrophe of enormous proportions, the successful rescue mission seems to suggest that it is both calculable and containable, an aspect that is underlined by the short-lived character of the catastrophe and the happy ending, that is by both visual and narrative patterns of the genre.

As a genre, then, disaster films participate in western risk discourses in a number of interesting ways. Staging highly devastating but rather unlikely risk scenarios, the films not just correspond to but exaggerate the types of risk most people actually fear: high-impact, low-probability risks as well as risks that lie beyond the control of the individual. This exaggerated nature of the film disasters propels them safely into the realm of the fictional, which makes the films so enjoyable and entertaining. Moreover, while such a focus on the extraordinary at the expense of what one could call everyday risks emphasizes the dangerous, contingent and uncontrollable nature of risks, the technology-oriented solutions that are offered as part of the disaster mitigation stand in contrast to this: they serve to instill a sense of control and safety, thus promoting a notion of technology and science as unailing and all-powerful. As apocalyptic narratives in Heise's sense, disaster films paradoxically stage risks that threaten to annihilate the world as we know it only to end up with a world, in which the consequences of the disaster are not really relevant. Thus, rather than being self-refuting prophecies *à la* Beck, the narrative templates of most disaster films encourage an almost limitless confidence in human technology and progress precisely by visualizing worst-case scenarios. Hence, although contingent and dangerous at first glance, our environment is ultimately shown to be controllable and foreseeable as technology and humans work together to regain control over nature - which in most disaster movies turns out to be the real risk that needs to be contained.

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