

## Framing Disaster

# Images of Nature, Media, and Representational Strategies in Hollywood Disaster Movies

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### Introduction

When the secretary of Charles Caiman (Harry Shearer), the unscrupulous news reporter in *Godzilla* (1998), tells her boss that “I think, Sir, your story just went by the window” while watching the gigantic saurian pass the office window, she is pointing to one of the golden rules of news reporting: to be at the right place at the right time in order to see what is going on. On a different level, the image of *Godzilla* walking right by the window of a news-office is also indicative of prominent concerns dealt with in many of the recent disaster movies produced by Hollywood: an interest in news reporting, in the media, and their strategies of representing nature and (natural) disasters. In these movies, media and their images are everywhere, or so it seems.

In the following, I will explore, from an ecocritical perspective, the representational strategies of recent Hollywood movies vis-à-vis natural catastrophes and their concern with the media. I will use ecocriticism as one of the more recent analytical tools for studying cultural expressions. Slightly modifying Cheryll Glotfelty’s oft-quoted definition of ecocriticism, one could say that it focuses particularly on the “relationship between [texts] and the physical environment.”<sup>1</sup> To be more precise, an ecocritical approach to ‘texts’ (in-

1 Cheryll Glotfelty speaks about “the relationship between literature and the physical environment,” a definition that has since been modified. Ecocritics are not only interested in all kinds of texts (including films); they also work with an understanding of the ‘physical

cluding films) analyzes cultural conceptualizations and representations of ‘nature’ as well as the ideological implications visually expressed therein. In my analysis of Hollywood disaster movies I will thus look at two aspects more closely: first, I will analyze how the catastrophes are represented or ‘staged’ in the movies in order to show how certain ideological implications of these representations are reinforced by the films’ narrative structure. Second, by looking at both the ways in which they are represented and at the images they broadcast within the movies, I will examine the role the media themselves play in these movies. My argument will be that natural disaster is ‘framed’ in an ambivalent way: on the one hand, it is staged in an excessive and spectacular manner that emphasizes its destructive powers, frightening scale, and terrifying consequences. On the other hand, this depiction includes formal and narrative characteristics which help to contain and control nature and its forces. In consequence, these movies serve as reassuring rather than as critical, let alone ecocritical, narratives. Moreover, the ways in which the media and their ‘meta-medial’ representations are used within the films underline such an ambiguous ‘framing’ of the disaster: on the one hand, the movies utilize the strategies and imagery of ‘real-life’ news reporting so that the character of the disaster as a threatening possibility is linked to the viewers’ reality; on the other hand, they multiply and echo their own ‘realistic’ images of the disaster, turning the disaster into a media spectacle that is securely contained and framed as just another act of representation.

The examples chosen in this essay include Hollywood blockbuster movies that range from the mid-1990s to the present - two decades that witnessed what one could call a revival of the disaster-genre. These movies need critical attention, since their images of ‘nature’, ‘culture’, and related environmental issues travel on a global scale, as do, by implication, their underlying ideologies. They are also particularly striking examples of the construction of a strict opposition between ‘nature’ (loosely understood as the non-human environment, particularly animals and natural forces like water and fire) and ‘culture’ (understood in the sense of human-made structures or ‘civilization’). In their staging of the natural catastrophe, these films construct and uphold an

environment’ that can include, for instance, urban spaces. See Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. Cheryll Glotfelty & Harold Fromm (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1996): xviii. For ecocritical approaches that go beyond literary criticism, see, for instance, the essay collection *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster & Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 2001). Recently, films have become the focus of ecocritical scholarship, too; see David Ingram, *Green Screen: Environmentalism and Hollywood Cinema* (Exeter: U of Exeter P, 2004).

incompatible, essential difference between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, which disregards the various complex interconnections as well as interdependencies between these two realms;<sup>2</sup> moreover, this serves to uphold ‘nature’ as the threatening ‘Other’ that has to be kept under control, ‘framed’, as I will show in the following.

### ‘Extinction level event’:

#### Disaster as boundary transgression and apocalyptic spectacle

Generally speaking, disaster movies stage a crisis, showing a catastrophe that threatens to change or even terminate ‘the world as we know it’, either on a global or on a local scale. Yet, by the end of these movies, the threat of radical change or annihilation is turned into a more moderate act of ‘purification’ that promises a new beginning but keeps most of the old and conservative structures in place. Ostensibly dealing with change, disaster movies are nevertheless a deeply conservative genre. According to Nick Roddick, for instance, they are “‘reactionary culture’ par excellence.”<sup>3</sup> What makes this genre so interesting is the fact that the catastrophic events shown in these movies serve as metaphors for real-life issues, hence allow “anxieties to be avoided in their real form”<sup>4</sup> while still exploring them successfully on the filmic level.

Accordingly, many recent natural-disaster movies can be read in the light of environmental concerns and anxieties with regard to the growing number of natural disasters and the ongoing destruction of the natural environment.<sup>5</sup>

- 2 Although I am well aware of the impossibility of differentiating ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ in any definite and precise way, I will nevertheless use them as ‘working terms’ throughout the essay. For a discussion of the problems involved in upholding a strict nature/culture divide, see, for example, Frederick W. Turner, “Cultivating the American Garden” (1985), in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, ed. Glotfelty & Fromm, 40-51.
- 3 Nick Roddick, “Only the Stars Survive: Disaster Movies in the Seventies,” in *Performance and Politics in Popular Drama: Aspects of Popular Entertainment in Theatre, Film, and Television 1800-1976*, ed. David Bradby (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1980): 245.
- 4 Michal Ryan & Douglas Kellner, “Crisis Films,” in *Camera Política: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1988): 51.
- 5 Although Hollywood movies can certainly be read as a response to the Zeitgeist, the movie cycles and recyclings also attest to the studios’ strategic replications and re-makes when a certain topic or genre proves successful. Advances in special effects can also be related to the growing number of disaster movies in recent decades, as they enable an ever more realistic staging of large-scale destruction, which in turn promises to draw people (back) into the cinema. The relatively recent breakthrough in CGI with regard to the depiction of water is a case in point, leading to a number of movies and re-makes with ‘water-based’ plots such as *Titanic* (1997), *The Perfect Storm* (2000), and *Poseidon* (2006). Moreover, one should also heed Geoff King’s warning that “any transmission of social currents

And although not all of these movies are explicitly concerned with environmental issues such as climate change or pollution and none, I would argue, are “environmental texts,”<sup>6</sup> to use Lawrence Buell’s term, all of them reflect ongoing discussions about human responsibility for the physical environment. Hence, some movies, such as *Outbreak* (1995), *Godzilla* (1998), *The Core* (2003), or *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), blame human technology at least partly for its disastrous effects and thus concentrate on human manipulations of the natural environment. Others, such as *Dante’s Peak* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *Deep Impact* (1998), or, most recently, *Sunshine* (2007), simply focus on the role of technological facilities in coping with a catastrophe.<sup>7</sup> Still others - for instance, *Twister* (1996) or *Volcano* (1997) - only hint at a possible causal relationship between human behaviour and disaster: in *Twister*, global warming is mentioned in passing as a possible cause of the growing number of tornadoes, and in *Volcano*, the extension of the subway in an area prone to seismic activity is loosely related to the volcanic eruption. However, whether the films see humans as being responsible for the catastrophe or not, they do not provide ecologically sensible discussions of causes, consequences, or (political) solutions for such disasters and their future prevention; rather, true to the genre’s pattern, they alleviate any environmental anxieties and boost confidence in technological progress, even when it is directly responsible for the disaster in the first place. Additionally, all of these films convey a certain attitude towards nature and its relation to culture that is problematic, particularly from an ecocritical point of view, depicting nature as the cause of the disaster and thus naturalizing what could be perceived as ‘cultural catastrophe’.

‘Nature’, in these movies, only ever comes to be visible and is only allowed to be relevant or significant as ‘culture’s Other’. ‘Nature’ is marked as the ‘Other’ in the sense that catastrophe movies construct a strict and clearly de-

into Hollywood films is complex and multi-determined” and that a film’s production and publication process can often take years or decades, hence qualifying any direct connection between the *Zeitgeist* and a movie. King, “Apocalypse, Maybe: Pre-millennial Disaster Movies,” in *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000): 159.

- 6 According to Lawrence Buell, in environmental texts the nonhuman environment is a presence that points to the intertwining of human and natural history; human interests are not the only legitimate ones; human accountability to the environment is emphasized; and the environment is depicted as process, not as something static. Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge MA; Belknap P/Harvard UP, 1995): <>8.
- 7 Strictly speaking, *Sunshine* is not a Hollywood film but a British production; yet its status as a blockbuster and its thematic concerns justify its inclusion in this essay.

finer opposition between nature and culture rather than showing them to be mutually interdependent. This opposition becomes particularly visible in the moment of the catastrophe, which is usually enacted as a boundary-crossing: natural forces literally ‘cross the threshold’ and leave their designated space to enter human space and annihilate it. One of the most striking examples of such a transgression can be found in *The Day After Tomorrow*. The movie deals with global warming and the resulting climate change. It is one of the few movies which explicitly blames humans for these developments. An increasing number of weather ‘anomalies’ culminate in a ‘superstorm’ that will bring about a new ice age. Among other things, the storm features a huge tidal wave that approaches the US east coast and threatens to annihilate everything in its way. The destruction is clearly represented as a transgression of the boundaries between nature and culture (Fig. 1): the wave enters culture’s realm to drown one of the major symbols of American and, by implication, Western civilization, the Statue of Liberty. Moreover, the wave floods the city of New York, which can be read as another signifier of civilization.



Figure 1: The Tidal Wave in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)

Another striking example of the catastrophe as boundary transgression is the volcanic eruption in *Volcano*. Here, Los Angeles - of all mega-cities the epitome of the media business - is ‘invaded’ from below, and nature in the form of lava disrupts the thin crust separating civilization from nature’s destructive forces. The act of transgression that is implied by such an image is reinforced

by the personification of the lava stream, which is, as Cynthia Belmont notes, described as “determined stuff”; such a personification characterizes the lava stream as a deliberate gesture rather than seeing it as a natural phenomenon.<sup>8</sup> That “nature is personified as having emotions and desires” and is often depicted as “working] consciously to destroy the lives of the protagonists” is part of the genre’s pattern, as Belmont points out.<sup>9</sup> Thus, nature becomes by implication an enemy that has to be fought accordingly.

Such depictions of catastrophe as boundary transgressions are quite abundant in the genre: much like the tidal wave in *The Day After Tomorrow*, an earlier example can be found in *Deep Impact*, which, unlike its later echo, topples the Statue of Liberty and washes it away together with other debris of civilization. In *Deep Impact* and *Armageddon*, meteors enter the human sphere and cities in particular are destroyed in an almost war-like fashion. Similarly, various personifications of nature ‘invade’ the cultural space: in *Godzilla* (an americanized re-make of a classic Japanese original with similar preoccupations yet more immediate socio-historical justification), the eponymous monster serves as an embodiment of nature manipulated by humans, an accidental mutation caused by radioactive pollution; by contrast, the little monkey in *Outbreak* carries a manipulated virus which gets out of control.<sup>10</sup> Both creatures leave their ‘natural habitat’, Mururoa Atoll and the African jungle respectively, and wreak havoc in the city. While *Godzilla*’s gigantic size makes the point even clearer as it literally tramples on signs and symbols of human culture, the little monkey’s virus ‘invades’ the human body invisibly to undermine civilization from within. Moreover, both *Godzilla* and the monkey with its virus signify a manipulation of nature, a blurring of boundaries between nature and culture that proves highly dangerous and leads to a loss of control: just like parasites, the creatures ‘breed’ inside the ‘body’ of culture, *Godzilla* in New York, the monkey’s virus literally inside the human body. They can

8 Cynthia Belmont, “Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine,” *Women’s Studies* 36 (2007): 357.

9 Belmont, “Ecofeminism,” 357 58.

10 Cynthia Belmont’s argument that disaster movies depict nature as an “agent [that] tends to be constructed as female - as ‘Mother Nature’ ” (352) adds another dimension to the depiction of nature as culture’s ‘Other’ As Belmont convincingly shows, there is a close connection between the view that ‘Mother Nature’ has to be (violently) tamed and dominated by culture and the fact that the films promote conservative gender roles, turning their female heroines from women who are independent and powerful (and single) at the beginning into characters who are passive and largely dependent on men for survival at the end. Disaster, then, serves as an image for ‘unnatural’ gender relations, an imbalance that can be repaired by returning women to their ‘natural’ position of subordination, just as nature is dominated by (male) culture in the end. Belmont, “Ecofeminism,” 352.

be read as personified boundary transgressions, linking the realms of nature and culture permanently. Yet, as *Godzilla's* ending in particular makes clear, there is no place for such a hybrid creature. In this respect, the killing of the monster ensures that a strict boundary remains in place.

The necessity of drawing and enforcing a definite boundary between nature and culture, which is signified by staging the catastrophe as a boundary transgression, is further emphasized by the threatening quality of nature's forces: natural catastrophes are visualized as spectacles of death and destruction. They are presented as 'visual celebrations' not only of special effects but also of the catastrophe itself. If a spectacle can be understood either as an impressive and exciting event or as an awe-inspiring sight, these film catastrophes are both. The disasters are large-scale, breathtaking events, powerful and dangerous; they are also impressive and awe-inspiring sights. Nothing is small in disaster movies, nothing subtle, and, as one of the taglines of *Godzilla* suggests, "Size Does Matter" in these films. The tidal wave in *The Day After Tomorrow*, for instance, is awe-inspiring as well as terrifying by virtue of its sheer size (and because of the quality of the special effects involved), exemplifying in an updated cinematic manner Edmund Burke's notion of the 'sublime'. *Volcano's* eruptions and lava streams are designed as eye-catching compositions of colour (and sound), which underline impressively - and paradoxically - both a certain beauty in the catastrophic event and its destructive force and power.

In addition to the awe-inspiring or beautiful quality of such 'sights', there is the aesthetic appeal that seems to be inherent in annihilation as such. In this respect, Susan Sontag speaks of "the aesthetics of destruction, [...] the peculiar beauties to be found in wreaking havoc, making a mess," while Geoff King, with reference to Bakhtin, points to the "carnavalesque appeal in this licensed enjoyment of destruction."<sup>11</sup> The feeling of pleasure seems to increase when "familiar landscapes or cultural edifices" are being destroyed.<sup>12</sup> A familiar site becomes the centre of the spectacle, so much so that, in the words of Stephen Keane, "if a building or city is not instantly recognizable then it's not worth destroying."<sup>13</sup>

11 Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster" (1965), in Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969): 213. King, "Apocalypse, Maybe," 162.

12 King, "Apocalypse, Maybe," 162.

13 Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies. The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower, 2006): 83. Keane calls this use of familiar landmarks the "'postcard' theory of disaster movies that was initiated by *Independence Day*."

Instantly recognizable landmarks of that kind not only generate a certain feeling of ‘involvement’ on the part of the audience, since what is being destroyed is part of the world the viewers are familiar with, but also function as markers for the extent and severity of destruction. Moreover, such landmarks can serve more easily and on a very general level as symbols of certain ‘cultural’ values. Watching the end of the world becomes highly entertaining, a mix of fear, dread, and excitement caused by grandiose spectacles of large-scale destruction as well as the distinct feeling of safety, since the catastrophe is both securely contained within the movie frame and certain to have a happy ending.

Moreover, the audience can see and even ‘live through’ the catastrophe without really having to worry about underlying issues; the spectacular staging of the catastrophe turns it into a short-lived, singular event, limited in time and space.<sup>14</sup> Disaster movies never show the long and traumatizing ‘clearing-up’ phase of the catastrophic consequences. The emphasis on spectacular yet momentous scenes of devastation stands in stark contrast to real-life catastrophes, which tend to be slow, long-term processes rather than temporary events.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while such spectacles capture the powerful forces and dangers that characterize disasters, such spectacular visualizations also ‘freeze’ the disaster (at least momentarily) into a breathtaking sight that we are invited to enjoy. In the end, cinematic disasters function more as a celebration of special effects than as a serious warning.

Another striking aspect of the spectacular staging of catastrophic events is their incorporation of well-known biblical images of apocalypse and doom, which, in turn, reinforce later, Christian concepts of punishment and redemption.<sup>16</sup> The image of the tidal wave in *The Day After Tomorrow* is reminiscent of the biblical deluge sent by God in order to annihilate human civilization. However, in accordance with the biblical story, the wave does not only signify destruction; the biblical reference also suggests purification and renewal, so that the catastrophe comes to signify a new beginning. Similarly, the tidal

14 This ties in with Ryan and Kellner’s observation that the “metaphor of catastrophe [...] permits anxieties to be avoided in their real form” and is “a therapeutic turning away.” “Crisis Films,” 51.

15 It is significant that such an emphasis on the event-like character of catastrophes can also be found in ‘real-life’ news reporting, which also tends to ignore causes as well as consequences. See Greg Garrard, who notes that “news media often report environmental issues as catastrophes not only because this generates drama and the possibility of human interest, but also because news more easily reports events than processes”; Garrard, “Apocalypse,” in *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2004): 105.

16 See Garrard’s discussion of the function of apocalyptic narratives in environmentalist discourse in *Ecocriticism*, especially his chapter “Apocalypse.”



wave in *Deep Impact* can be read as alluding to the deluge, even more so as references to the bible and the rhetoric of a new beginning pervade the movie. In turn, *Sunshine* provides an interesting variation on this theme: central to the narrative is one character's belief that the catastrophe is sent by God, a deserved punishment that has to be accepted. In a slightly different manner, yet also connecting nature's destructive force with the possibility of purification, Christian symbolism underlies the opening sequence of *Volcano*. The cuts between scenes of L.A., a signifier of decadence and immorality, and the bubbling magma underneath suggest that the volcanic eruption is not simply a destructive stream of lava but also a fire from hell that will purify the city of evil.

Hence, in terms of images of cultural annihilation, the metropolis as a predominant symbol of decadence and sin is a highly preferred motif. These cities can easily be identified by the majority of the movie audience. Moreover, they can be read as signifiers of 'Old-World' values, whose destruction becomes a sign of change, especially in an American context.<sup>17</sup> In many disaster movies, these sequences are filmed as 'end of days' scenarios, taking their visual cues from St John's "Book of Revelation." In *The Core*, for example, Rome is destroyed; dark clouds cover the sky, and the Vittorio Emanuele Monument is split by a lightning bolt and explodes (figure 2). Similarly, in *Armageddon*, Paris and its most prominent sight, the Eiffel Tower, are extinguished by asteroids that shoot like fireballs from the skies. The destruction scene is shot from the roof-top of Notre Dame so that the scene is framed by gargoyles, which act as prophetic messengers of impending doom. By referring to the Bible, disaster movies liken the human struggle against nature to God's 'final' battle with Satan, identifying nature as an 'evil' enemy that has to be defeated. And just as the spectacular and highly entertaining staging of the disaster draws attention away from both its causes and its effects, such references to the "higher" realm of biblical inevitability" hide any 'earthly' human responsibility as well as the necessity of dealing with disasters on a social or political scale.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, by illustrating this apocalyptic quality,

17 Arguing that disaster movies can be seen as a specific form of the frontier narrative, King reads *Armageddon*'s Paris as "quintessential 'Old World' metropolis," whose destruction provides the possibility of renewal. "Apocalypse, Maybe," 151.

18 King, "Apocalypse, Maybe," 157. The turn to apocalyptic, end-of-the-world rhetoric ties in with millennial and more generally conservative evangelical ideology, in which catastrophes are signs of the impending end of the world. In this context, the films' silence on possibilities of averting the catastrophe makes perfect sense, since it is seen not only as God-sent and inevitable but also as the only possible form of salvation for humanity.

the biblical rhetoric helps to mark the disaster as a purifying event, signifying a new beginning for humanity rather than its destruction.



Figure 2: The Destruction of Rome in *The Core* (2003)

The emphasis on purification and on the possibility of new beginnings in the wake of catastrophes is reflected in the narrative structure of these films, especially in the way they end and how this ending is visualized. In this respect, *The Day After Tomorrow* provides a good example. As it turns out in the end, Miss Liberty has ‘survived’, as have the values she symbolizes. She is shown holding up her guiding light over tons of frozen water. This is underlined by a shot of the frozen city landscape lit by the rising sun, which looks rather beautiful and not at all like the predicted inhospitable environment. Moreover, there are quite a large number of survivors who are saved by helicopters, technological angels miraculously descending from above. The survival goes hand in hand with the (re-)formation of the nuclear family, since it signifies both the survival of humankind and a new beginning. In fact, the motif of the reunited family is, in variations, emphasized in many disaster movies: in *Dante’s Peak*, for instance, the divorced mother and the widower become a pair, while in *Twister* as well as in *Outbreak* the formerly separated couples are reunited. *Armageddon* ends with a wedding and in *Deep Impact* two teen-agers and a baby form a nuclear family. Even in the British production *28 Days Later* (2002), which deviates from the genre’s pattern in many respects,

it is a family-like group that manages to survive: a young woman, a young man, and their 'adopted' daughter.<sup>19</sup>

Hence, the problems, fears, and anxieties concerning the destruction both of nature and by nature played out in disaster movies are rendered unimportant in the end or, rather, by the end. Even *The Day After Tomorrow*, widely celebrated as an environmentally concerned movie that reminds us of our responsibilities, qualifies its critical stance at the end. Its last frames may be taken as a summary of this point: the film ends with a distanced look at the earth from space. This iconic image of the blue planet is accompanied by an astronaut asking, "Have you ever seen the air so clear?" The catastrophe is reduced to a moment of purification by means of which its consequences are quite literally diminished.

The genre's typical ending is also problematic with regard to the causes of the catastrophe. More often than not, these films set out to criticize and condemn the values and structures that are responsible for the disaster, only to confirm and reinstate them at the end. The pattern that becomes visible in *The Core*, for instance, holds true for many other disaster movies as well: AI- though the US military is responsible for the catastrophe, the movie itself, in particular the ending, thoroughly celebrates military technology, its structures, and its resources. As in many disaster films, the spectacle of the catastrophe is countered by a technological spectacle emphasizing culture's ability to dominate nature.<sup>20</sup> Such a confidence in technological superiority and its ability to 'contain' nature can also be seen in the abundant use of media and their images.

### Media reflections: (Live) images of the disaster scene

Media seem to be everywhere in disaster movies. On the one hand, there are those media which collect data in order to observe and, in a sense, control

19 Such an emphasis on the family can also be read in terms of the conservative gender politics that the disaster genre generally displays. The catastrophe ends with the return to more traditional values and ways of life, of which this celebration of the nuclear family is a sign. Or rather, one could say, the catastrophe ends because of this return, precisely in the moment when the 'imbalance' of traditional gender roles has been reversed and traditional (family) values have been reinstated. See Belmont, who reads this emphasis as "reflecting cultural disapproval of the current decline of the nuclear family." The catastrophe itself can then be seen as the event that helps society to remember and return to more traditional values, a "mainstay of apocalyptic religious rhetoric." "Ecofeminism," 369.

20 The most ironic form of such a technological spectacle is, arguably, the celebration of weapons of mass destruction, which help to save the world in a number of recent films, such as *Armageddon*, *Deep Impact*, *The Core*, and *Sunshine*.

nature: these include, for example, buoys and sensors to measure ocean temperatures, wind speed, and seismic activity; there are cameras, telescopes, and satellites to watch the skies; there are computer programmes to calculate the changes detected by all these media; and there are computer simulations and models which predict future developments. On the other hand, there are the mass media, which capture and multiply images of the catastrophe and spread them around the globe. One could say that disaster movies are obsessed with viewing and showing catastrophes through media images, especially TV, as part of their own story. In virtually all of them, the 'first-hand', direct view of the disaster (through the characters' eyes) is 'doubled' or 'echoed' by news coverage and media images of the same or similar scenes. It is this aspect of the use of the media that I will focus on in the following.

Significant parts of the films in question are devoted to showing reporters on the scene, filming and commenting *live* on the catastrophe. In *Godzilla*, we accompany camera man Victor 'Animal' Palotti (Hank Azaria) on his quest for a good shot of the monster, and we actually view Godzilla through his camera lens; cuts between the view through the camera and the 'direct' one show that they are virtually identical. *The Day After Tomorrow* also empha



Figure 3: The Destruction of L.A. in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004)

sizes the reporters' proximity to the events. In the sequence of L.A.'s destruction, the view of the city features not only thunder, lightning, and tornadoes but also a number of news helicopters (figure 3). Similar scenes can be seen

in *Volcano*, where helicopters and their camera crews hover directly above the scenes of destruction, emphasizing the immediacy as well as ubiquity of news reporting and its images. In this way, the view of the disaster is closely linked with the view of the media which are involved in its representation.

Such an intertwining of the disastrous event with the media and their images, such ‘echoes’, serve a number of functions. The emphasis on the close relation between a disaster and its media representation can be read as a reminder of the ‘artificiality’ and fictionality of these movies. In a self-referential way, they seem to insist on their own cultural status as acts of representation. Hence, when *Godzilla’s* main character, Dr Nick Tatopoulos (Matthew Broderick), actually pulls out his little snapshot camera to take a picture of Godzilla, we are confronted with the fact “that Godzilla owes its existence to an act of representation.”<sup>21</sup> The self-referentiality of the shot becomes even more obvious in a scene from *The Day After Tomorrow*. A reporter comments ‘live’ on the destruction of the famous Hollywood sign by a tornado, a film disaster symbolically ripping apart the film industry.

However, such scenes can also be read in quite the opposite way: namely, as confirmations of the ‘truth’-quality of such representations. In the sequence of L.A.’s destruction in *The Day After Tomorrow*, ‘direct’ images of the catastrophic storm are intertwined with news coverage of the very incident (Figs. 4 and 5). The images produced by the media are almost indistinguishable

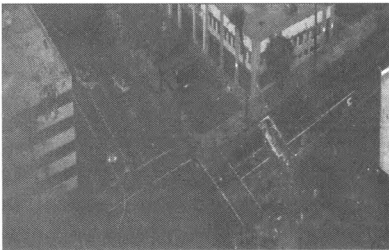


Figure 4: ‘Direct’ view of the disaster



Figure 5: Media image of the disaster

21 King, “Apocalypse, Maybe,” 162. King’s reading of the intertwining of the spectacle and its media representations within the movies is similar to mine, seeing how these films draw attention to being “a constructed artifact,” on the one hand, while emphasizing the “moment of direct engagement” in contrast to the surrounding mass media and their representations, on the other. While I agree with his reading, I would see this intertwining of mass media and “direct engagement” as an attempt to actually blur the boundary between the two and imbue the media representation with the kind of authenticity associated with first-hand experience.

from the 'unmediated' view, which can be read as a meta-medial comment on representational truth. Even more significantly, both scenes are connected on the narrative level: the character who is watching the news on TV is simultaneously talking on the phone to the man who is killed - live on TV - as the car he is sitting in is destroyed by the storm. This kind of 'breaking news' representation not only ostensibly reflects reality directly and objectively, but seems to confirm an otherwise unbelievable truth. This is not a unique occurrence: near the end of *Volcano*, we are twice presented with the good news that the catastrophe has been averted. Here, too, 'direct' images of the re-routed lava stream are intertwined with the news images of the same scene, a 'confirmation' via TV. The 'exact' echoing of the disaster by media images serves to illustrate the 'truthful' nature of media representations, their immediacy, so much so that, as Geoff King observes, "the presence of the camera, in a world in which so many events are mediated through television, acts paradoxically as a signifier of the reality at which it is pointed."<sup>22</sup> By bridging the gap between 'reality' and media representations, these movies draw attention to the fact that the media, to a large extent, determine what kind of world we look at and how we see it. For our globalized news network this can even mean that if a disaster is not on TV, it is not 'real' (at least not for those who are not involved).

Such an insistence on immediacy and representational truth is also articulated in a number of scenes that can be read as comments on the ways in which we consume media images. That the media and their news can and should be used as a reliable source of information is very much emphasized: the Presidents and mayors in various disaster movies appear on TV to address and warn their citizens. *Deep Impact's* President Tom Beck (Morgan Freeman) uses channel NNC while Vice-President Becker (Kenneth Welsh) appears on the Weather Channel in *The Day After Tomorrow*, linking the 'film media' more or less subtly to the media the audience knows from their own TV. Furthermore, in the emergency headquarters in almost every disaster movie the TV is running: in *Volcano*, the office of emergency management keeps itself informed by CNN, in *The Core*, mission control watches a non-descript TV channel for the same purpose, and in *Godzilla*, the local TV station WIDF provides the military headquarters with information.<sup>23</sup> In fact, here the military learn via the news channel about the existence and location

22 King, "Apocalypse, Maybe," 163.

23 Interestingly enough, some of these people actually never leave the TV in their attempt to 'save the world', so that direct experience of the disaster is replaced by the consumption of media images.

of the monster's nesting-place, so that the news media play a vital part in the rescue mission. Watching TV, it seems, is basically just the same as being live at the scene - with the exception that it is much safer.

Furthermore, all of these films depict ordinary people watching the news, relying on it for information and guidance. Watching TV, one could say, serves to unify two different kinds of eye-witnesses - the fictitious American citizens portrayed in the movie and humanity in general as represented by the cinema-goers - by literally bringing the same images to 'everybody': at the moment of catastrophe when the audience is connected to the scene of the disaster, initiatives, terror, and grief can all be shared, just as, after the catastrophe, the survivors are united in their celebration of collective achievement. Thus, such scenes reflect the cinema audience to a certain extent: just as the news programmes in the films transport the catastrophe live to their TV audience, these films bring the catastrophe to us.

A last point to be made concerning representational strategies within disaster movies has to do with the figure of the reporter. In an interesting scene from *The Day After Tomorrow*, a reporter is killed by a large billboard whirling through the air. Although his cameraman anticipates the danger, he only points to the billboard silently instead of saying, let alone doing, anything to save the reporter. More importantly, the camera keeps running, providing a live recording of his death, so that the audience can witness the scene through the eye of the camera. Similarly, in *Volcano* a man is reporting live from the disaster scene via his cell-phone, describing two firemen who are trapped in their truck. Rather than rescuing them, he continues his live report of how they are burned alive before he himself dies in the flames. Risking their own lives to be able to witness the events first-hand and to report live from the disaster, the characters nevertheless appear strangely uninvolved; in the end, it seems, they are killed precisely because they remain passive observers - there is nobody left to help. Their death is deeply intertwined with our own habits of consumption concerning these movies: the continuous flow of media images enables us, too, to witness these disaster spectacles 'live' and in full colour. Their deaths, in a way, enforce the 'realistic' quality of the movies on two different levels: first, it illustrates the threat of the disaster; and second, the reporter's being 'killed in action' metonymically further underlines the 'immediacy' by bridging the medial gap between the audience and the disaster spectacle.<sup>24</sup>

24 Thanks to Mark McCutcheon for pointing this out to me.

## Conclusion

Disaster movies do more than mediate natural catastrophes, implying certain ideas about nature and environmental issues in relation to human behaviour. They are also deeply interested in the mechanisms of these mediations and make them part of their narrative structure and imagery. However, both their depiction of catastrophe and their reflections on the nature of media and their representational strategies turn out to be highly problematic.

In representing catastrophe as an act of boundary transgression, these films routinely construct an absolute difference between nature and culture; moreover, they suggest that it is both necessary and possible to exert control over nature. The issue of control also lies at the heart of the visualization of catastrophe as an apocalyptic spectacle, which emphasizes sensational, short-term qualities and glosses over the fact that it is firmly intertwined with social and economic factors and should be seen as a call for political action. The genre's narrative structure likewise tends to ignore both causes and consequences of disaster, and, despite the threat of radical change, the films end up reinforcing what they started out to criticize.

The formal staging of a disaster as a containable, short-term event and an awe-inspiring or beautiful sight can be seen as an attempt to 'frame' disaster and thus to control it. This desire for control finds its equivalent in the proliferation of media and their (disaster) images within the movies. By taking up their own representations of the disaster and echoing them in a self-referential way, the movies 'frame' their disasters as 'representations within representations', making them vicariously 'safe' by increasing their distance from the audience. Significantly, while drawing attention to their own character as representational acts by including in their story both the images and the ways they are made, disaster movies seem at the same time to insist on the immediacy of media representations. The films intertwine their own fictionality with allusions to 'real-life' media images, ultimately blurring the boundary between real catastrophes (as shown on TV) and Hollywood renderings of the same or similar disasters.

This realist claim, which is further emphasized by the extensive use of special effects, is contradicted by the escapist quality visible in the narrative structure as well as the ideological implications of the formal staging of the catastrophe. By framing nature and its disastrous forces, albeit in a spectacular way that emphasizes their destructive potential, these films contain their catastrophes in a terrifying and awe-inspiring, yet ultimately quite safe, manner. Although happy endings are not problematic *per se* and, as Greg Garrard rightly observes, "only if we imagine that the planet *has* a future, after all, are



we likely to take responsibility for it,"<sup>25</sup> the systematic omission of socio-political dimensions fosters ignorance about humanity's complex involvement. This is highly problematic, as it not only encourages a passive stance but might also lead us to consume 'real-life' disasters in the same way as those on the movie screen: as highly entertaining spectacles which require a certain involvement only so long as we actually view them. And if, as many ecocritics argue, our current environmental crisis is largely a crisis of the mind, these films might contribute to making it worse rather than improving it.

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25 Garrard, "Apocalypse," 107.

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