

## COMMENTARIES

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# Representing politics in disaster films

Since its resurgence in the 1990s, the disaster film genre oscillates between the demands of two competing desires, the desire for realism and cultural relevance, and the desire for fantasy and spectacle. The premise of the genre, its narrative dependence on threats, attacks or natural disasters, can be adapted and used to interrogate the meaning of political institutions, but can also occasion purely spectacular narratives that traffic in paranoid nightmares of threat as well as utopian fantasies of patriotic unification. From the shaky camera work and mysterious alien of *Cloverfield* (Matt Reeves, 2008) to the dramatic intensity and realistic threats of *Contagion* (Steven Soderbergh, 2011), and the references to current biotechnology research in *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (Rupert Wyatt, 2011), disaster films operate in a hybrid representational space that combines realistic fears and conditions with their imaginary and exaggerated counterparts.

But even when the premise of a disaster film is outrageous or far-fetched, there is important political content in the representational gestures of the genre. Despite the formulaic tendencies of disaster films, their fantasmatic depictions of trauma retain political and emotional connections with historical events and real-world catastrophes (Dixon 2003). In what follows, I outline the ways in which political realities shape the genre's fantasies, drawing from three films that span the latest waves of disaster movies: Roland Emmerich's *Independence Day* (1996), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009).

Partly because they signal one director's return to the genre, a tendency reviewers often note (Gray, 2009), these texts allow us to see how disaster films appropriate and interpret real historical events, translating, for example, the racial tensions that follow the Rodney King events and trial into a thematics of interracial collaboration in *Independence Day*; transforming the intensified sense of environmental danger, political responsibility and global connectivity of the early 2000s, especially after the events of September 11, into warnings about climate change in *The Day After Tomorrow*; and echoing the troubled political relationships that affected the scale of disaster in the Gulf and in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina in the depiction of massive floods, tsunamis and cities washing away in *2012*. Not only is the type of disaster used in *2012* evocative in relation to Katrina, but the treatment of the fictional government's response to the disaster seems influenced by an implicit interpretation of the failures of the US government's response to the hurricane, the breaking of the levees, and the evacuation and aid needs of the area's residents.

Each film also presents a different stance towards the idea of a multicultural global community. The scale of the alien attacks in *Independence Day*, with ominous spaceships hovering around the world, promises to unify the international community by triggering an expansive response – a promise that is quickly betrayed when the heroic projects depicted in the film remain limited to American characters and their individual and individualistic hands-on contributions. The threat may be global, but it is a specifically American, though, importantly, diverse, group that 'saves the day', inscribing the national message of the American 'Independence Day' onto the rest of the world (Rogin 1998; Taubin 1996). By contrast, *The Day After Tomorrow* presents a problem of clearly global scale, a radical version of climate change, and invites the reading that such a shared problem requires coherent, swift and global collective action. Similarly, *2012* depicts international organizations, scientific collaborations and governing bodies such as the G8, supported by an almost infallible network of global communication technologies. But in political terms, this community is haunted by institutional structures that are secretive, proprietary, supremacist and uncaring. In the film, only a select group of nations know of the looming disaster, the melting of the Earth's crust, and only a select group of very rich patrons are allowed to purchase passage in the secretly built arks that will save part of humanity. Barely 400,000 people survive worldwide and about 7 billion die in the film, with the survivor group consisting of the super-rich, the politicians that worked to facilitate their survival and some of their accidental beneficiaries. In contrast to the interracial collaboration of *Independence Day*, and the call to political awareness and activism of *The Day After Tomorrow*, *2012* depicts a world immune to connectivity, collaboration or fairness, a world that demands political and ideological compliance. The underrepresented or unrepresented masses in this film have only two options: accept the charity of the newly ensconced plutocracy that has created the arks, or smuggle their way into the vessels. They can neither demand nor argue for representation or inclusion. Implicit in the film's depiction of political processes, we thus find the fear that despite the survival of the 'human race', always a complicated notion in these films, democratic or pluralistic forms of government may not endure under extreme conditions.

In order to see the processes of translation by which actual political developments re-emerge in fantasmatic ways in disaster films, we need to note the ways in which the disaster film genre is structured by the dynamics of response and responsibility: some disaster stories elucidate forms of political, social and

personal responsibility, while others use the disaster narrative in order to activate massive action-based response storylines that focus on the ways professionals, emergency responders and government agencies react to the disaster. In a rough sketch, this delineation is related to the agent of the disaster. What causes the disaster? Can it be avoided? Is someone responsible? Is the agent of the disaster conscious or sentient? And is there room for political negotiation with the agent of the disaster? If negotiation is possible, in the case of a human enemy, a purposeful aggressor or a sentient and reasonable alien, for example, then the disaster premise highlights issues of responsibility both for the enemy, for threatening or causing the disaster, and for the human negotiators, for working to avert it. This is the primary modality of nuclear threat films of the 1950s and 1960s, in which the threat of destruction is translated into narratives of political choice, ethical obligation, and public and private responsibility (Shapiro 2001). If, on the other hand, the agent of the disaster appears to be non-sentient, a non-sentient alien, a zombie, an insect or a natural force such as a comet, earthquake or volcano, then the focus shifts to questions of response: since there is no way to negotiate with the agent of the disaster or to avoid the destruction altogether, all we can do in these stories is launch a merely reactive counter-attack, or fight to survive.

We see this response-focused narrative style in disaster films of the 1970s and 1990s, in which accidents, earthquakes, volcanoes and comets inspire intensely active but not necessarily morally fraught reactions. But the political potential of the disaster film genre is not evacuated when response-based storylines bypass or avoid issues of human responsibility. In films such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972) and *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974), for example, responsibility revolves around troublesome choices made by ship owners and skyscraper builders (Newman 2002). These corporate entities do not cause tidal waves or fires, but in their negligence, greed or disregard for safety regulations, they exacerbate the scale of the destruction. In the 1990s, natural disaster films focus on the *quality* of the human response, and highlight methods of warning or alerting those in danger, the characters' abilities to collaborate effectively, and the coordination of agencies with overlapping or competing powers and jurisdictions. Incorporating a post-Cold War vocabulary, disaster films emphasize multiculturalism, globalization and the professionalization and privatization of response scenarios, inventing and debating the kinds of responsibilities that accompany emergency response.

Considering films in relation to this response/responsibility rubric allows us to see some of the ideological work they aspire to in their narrative choices. I am reading these films with a sense that what they depict and what they express may be two different things. *Independence Day* depicts a classic alien attack scenario, in which the aliens attack, the humans band together even under difficult circumstances, and perseverance, courage, collaboration, quick thinking and great flying save the day. But what the film expresses is an anxiety about whether these modes of collaboration *will* emerge in order to save the day. In contrast to earlier alien invasion films, the aliens of *Independence Day* are not the real enemy: we know what to do with them, and their presence, threatening and destructive though it may be, is neither confusing nor ideologically demanding. Consider how differently the aliens function in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956): the very definitions of self and other come into play in the film, and the presence of aliens among us destabilizes our certainties of action and identity. By contrast, the aliens are

one-dimensional and almost irrelevant in *Independence Day*: we know little about them, and they do not challenge our thinking about self and other or action and identity. The real questions of *Independence Day* revolve around the survivor group, a motley group of people whose differences may indeed become a problem in the project of survival, and whose successful negotiation of these cultural, ethnic, racial, gender and class differences is what the alien attacks inspire and the film's action produces (Kakoudaki 2002; Nama 2009; Webber, 2005). By the end, the humans survive because they manage to work together, and the film's spectacles of alien destruction are thus revealed to have had an unexpected impact, facilitating secondary and much quieter, though ideologically more potent, spectacles of reconciliation, multicultural understanding and collaboration. The notion that humans, neighbours, citizens or families would come together when faced with a common enemy is not a given in many disaster films of the 1990s, but instead functions as the main ideological question of these representations.

Disaster films traffic in spectacles of the massive destruction of public and private property, and often present a paradoxical mix of capitalist ideologies and anti-capitalist fantasies, all within the aggressively capitalist profit structures of blockbuster Hollywood as these have evolved since the 1970s (Ryan and Kellner 1988). Fuelled by the advent of a new generation of special effects technologies, the availability and high quality of computer generated imaging (CGI) and the success of action film genres, the disaster film resurgence in the 90s also reveals a cultural desire for political and social relevance, evident in the constant return to narratives of national and international scale. In the US cultural context, films of the 1990s refer to the spectacles of racial violence and public unrest of the Rodney King incident, trial and verdict (1991–92); the rise of environmentalist agendas; the cultural fascination with extreme weather, partly sparked by the El Niño phenomenon through the 1990s; the rise of apocalyptic fervour in religious subcultures, as in the mass suicide of 38 members of the Heaven's Gate cult timed to coincide with the passage of the Hale-Bopp Comet in 1997; the escalating paranoia surrounding the approaching millennium and the threats of Y2K; and so on. But in the early 2000s, a new tone takes over the genre. After the events of September 11, the narrative tendencies and heroic resolutions of the 1990s quickly become limited and problematic, while the exaggerated rhetoric and violence of the genre seem irrelevant to the current state of the world. Destructions, explosions and endangered crowds evoke different meanings in a post-9/11 world, and their depiction cannot hold the vicarious joyride feel of similar images from the 1990s.

Responding to this need for seriousness, *The Day After Tomorrow* makes a case for political relevance by centring its narrative on a realistic scientific premise. Although the film accelerates the processes of climate change radically, bringing on a new Ice Age for the northern hemisphere in a matter of months, it utilizes current scientific insights and debates. In the process, the film engages the spectacles of destruction necessary to the vicarious pleasures of the genre, but without rendering such pleasures purely voyeuristic. The film is also able to obliquely refer to the visual landscape of 9/11, to destroyed cities and office buildings, and includes scenes of people running in panic and office papers flying in the air, even if it moves these sights from the Financial District to Midtown Manhattan. The environmentalist message and implicit call to political action evinced in *The Day After Tomorrow* indeed have had an indirect after-effect, by partly inspiring the production of *An Inconvenient Truth* (Davis Guggenheim, 2006). Producer Laurie David saw Gore's presentation at

a town-hall meeting on global warming on the same day that *The Day After Tomorrow* opened in film theatres. After this coincidence of life and fiction, David met with producer Lawrence Bender and director Davis Guggenheim in order to adapt Gore's presentation into a film. Indeed *The Day After Tomorrow* mirrors an audience's concerns over pollution and habitat destruction, the melting of the polar ice caps, the depletion of the ozone layer, and the devaluation of air, water and soil conditions worldwide. The film thus balances the notions of response and responsibility, since, despite the text's narrative and visual exaggerations, a contemporary audience connects the premise of environmental disaster in the fiction to its possibility in the real world (Murray and Heumann 2009).

In 2012 we also see the desire for ideological and social relevance, as the film engages debates about human and humanist values overtly in the diegesis. But this very impulse confuses the film's moral landscape: the narrative stages numerous moments of showy ethical conflict and moral dilemmas that are then either deferred or resolved in facile or cynical ways. What should governments do when faced with the prospect of mass extinction? Is it better to act, even if in the process one may disenfranchise much of the world's population? In effect, the film presents the spectre of a global 'state of exception', in Giorgio Agamben's terms (2005), as the crisis at hand facilitates the formation of an autocratic and totalitarian regime of global proportions. The rich, the developed nations, the leaders of the G8 – none of these groups have to report or be accountable to anyone under the exaggerated global emergency. Legal processes, democratic institutions, the rights of citizens and the principles of national sovereignty are undermined. The film's representation of self-preservation and survival for the richest does not conform to the imperatives of self-sacrifice and democratic participation that most disaster films value (Keane 2001).

The narrative of 2012 expands the concept of response both temporally, by depicting a multi-year response process, and ideologically, by exploring dubious political processes. Of course, no one can negotiate with the massive natural event: sun flares and solar radiation heat up the Earth's core, displacing the Earth's crust and leading to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and a series of tsunamis that flood and destroy most of the Earth's landmasses. The destruction becomes the basis for an exaggerated "action formula" narrative (LaSalle, 2009). Yet the film sets up numerous debates between generosity and self-interest, between democratic idealism and a cynical, practical and rather efficient elitism, between government structures that should represent the people and the choices government officials make without the people's consent or vote, without the people's knowledge and against the people's interest. Structured in a classic melodramatic manner, with a family story running parallel to a national story, the film also posits the possibility of a grand family narrative, the creation of a multinational final human family after the end of the world. We see this dream of collectivity in the film's final images, as the arks sail on the calm and infinite ocean that now covers the Earth. Such imagery carries a certain political wistfulness, since, after the acrimony of earlier debates, everyone remaining alive on the planet is now finally and literally onboard, on the same course, and moving towards a common future. When survivors walk onto the outdoor decks wearing grey uniforms, it is as if the melting of the Earth's crust turned the world into a new global melting pot, obliterating difference and producing a uniformity that is as suspicious as it is costly.

Despite the golden glow of this seemingly utopian ending, what resonates most in the film is the representation of conflict and the retrogressive, nostalgic tone of the final resolutions. The film resolves the family story through a fantasy of collaboration and unification, in which two fathers save the family by working together: the father, struggling writer Jackson (John Cusack), and stepfather, affluent cosmetic surgeon Gordon (Thomas McCarthy), take turns driving manically through the collapsing landscape of LA, flying a small airplane, hitchhiking across mountains, negotiating with paranoid talk-radio conspiracy theorists, Russian billionaires and Chinese peasants, and in the end managing to smuggle everyone inside one of the life-saving arks. Gordon dies in a fluke accident, and the nuclear family is reconstituted with Jackson returning to his wife and kids, as if in restoration of a pre-lapsarian state, before betrayal, conflict and divorce. At the political level, we find a similar tale of two father figures, whose ideological and practical responses to the disaster inform the dilemmas of scientist Adrian Helmsley (Chiwetel Ejiofor). Helmsley warns the US government of the destabilization of the Earth's core, only to be caught between the idealistic president of the United States (Danny Clover) and his practical and cynical Chief of Staff, Mr. Anheuser (Oliver Platt). While the president's address to other leaders creates the survival plan, it is up to Anheuser to execute the details while forestalling public debate.

The two men play out a classic, if old-fashioned, scenario of the contrast between self-sacrifice and self-preservation. The president dies in solidarity with the people, choosing to stay behind to inform and console the public. Anheuser boards one of the arks, taking on the Chief Executive role as a matter of expediency, in yet another unchallenged emergency procedure in a series of sublime emergency procedures. In the film's final scenes, Helmsley contests Anheuser's task-oriented ruthlessness, when he pleads for a final act of kindness: as the floods approach the Chinese mountain range where the arks were constructed in record time by a secret local workforce, Helmsley demands that the privileged passengers open the gates and save the Chinese workers along with a crowd of displaced passengers whose own arks are too damaged to sail. 'To be human means to care for each other, and civilisation means to work together to create a better life', Helmsley insists: 'The moment we stop fighting for each other, that's the moment that we lose our humanity'. But Helmsley's impassioned speech comes after all the decisions have been made and all the limits set. When the ark leaders agree to allow entry to these last-minute survivors, this is a matter of *appeasing* guilt, not restoring the ethical order.

Despite its grand terms, Helmsley's question is quite local: should these particular people right outside the gates die when they can be saved? In addition to the imagery of flooding, or people waiting for airlifts that never come, and of drowning cities, this diminished political demand carries echoes of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and the cultural memory of institutional mismanagements. This is a realist's bitter and limited complaint, full of disclaimers: perhaps it is impossible to predict the scale of such catastrophic events, and perhaps the design problems that lead to the scale of the disaster (the design of the levees for example) are too far in the past to be truly accounted for in the present, but couldn't direct, immediate, available aid at least have been dispatched sooner? The translation of a natural disaster into a narrative of political responsibility in this case pivots on issues of planning and response, and in both contexts the film highlights the ability of the rich to plan for even the most outrageous eventualities, and the inability of governments

to respond well even in merely palliative ways. Considered in a US context, the film presents a post-Katrina critique of government response, but also expresses a surprising post-Katrina desire for planning and action: at least in 2012, someone had a plan, and despite being plutocratic and totalitarian, the plan worked.

Similarly surprising is the realization that the film offers a supremacist First World survival story: just at the moment when the global South is on the verge of challenging the North, or the young, hungry and aggressive Third World may challenge the ageing, bloated and protectionist First World, the displacement of the world's crust allows the upper crust to retain its privileges, wipe out the southern hemisphere and take over the remaining landmasses, in this case a dreamy and unpopulated Africa. The new non-guilty survivors, who didn't after all cause this planetary event, can become an aristocracy of pioneers, all debts and histories wiped clean. Even discussions of who survives are punctuated by generalizations, from 'nature will take its course', to fate, chance, evolution and 'they are in God's hands now'. An evolutionary logic, the strong survive, is here translated into a plutocratic logic, the rich survive, and a northern hemisphere logic, the nations of the G8 survive. In its inclusion of many prominent African American characters, the film clearly tries to avoid a racial perspective (the white people survive), and it is this treatment of racial diversity that forestalls the realization that this is partly a story of supremacy, a story that presents the attractions and efficiencies of totalitarianism.

Examining the political gestures of disaster films thus allows us to see their inclusion and diffraction of current political concerns. Despite their fantastic translations of real-world events into the spectacular formulas of the genre, disaster films express a range of ideological tendencies in contemporary culture, channelling debates about responsibility, political participation and globalization.

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