

The Climate Catastrophe as Blockbuster

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Abstract

Modern disaster films constitute a specific cultural form that speaks to the anxieties of the “risk society.” This essay looks at how risks like climate change is presented and constructed in popular culture. It regards blockbuster representations as part of a wider discourse of “catastrophism” within the realm of public climate change communication. For that reason, the essay centers on the interplay between news media and entertainment. It argues that blockbuster disaster films represent an inversion of traditional risk and disaster news.

Keywords Climate change, disaster films, catastrophism, risk society.

Introduction

The idea that modern society produces its own risks (Beck, 1992; 2007) is perhaps nowhere as evident as in the discussion of anthropogenic climate change. While human actions frequently involve some sort of risks, the sum of human activities has recently become so massive that it now influences the entire eco-system. Consequently, it has been suggested that we have entered a new period in

the history of the earth, the so-called *anthropocene* (Crutzen and Stoermer, 2000). Climate change may be the best illustration of this fundamental shift in which man now has the capacity to influence the destiny of its natural surroundings, for better or worse.

Because of this, climate change has been surrounded by a host of discourses ranging from the dystopian to the optimistic. Dryzek has identified close to ten environmental discourses (Dryzek, 2005), most of which are also to be found in relation to climate change (Eskjær, 2014). Recently, ideas of ecological modernization has again become popular as a consequence of the economic crisis, suggesting that the risks of climate change provides the impetus for an economic transition to green and climate friendly technologies.

Thus, climate change is far from representing a monolithic discourse. In fact, it has been suggested that it is exactly this diversity which hampers any coordinate effort to mitigate and adapt to climate change (Hulme, 2009). Climate change has become a vehicle for all sorts of environmental, economic, or energy-related issues and concerns that a comprehensive answer to all these problems seems increasingly unlikely.

Nevertheless, John Urry suggests that three discourses dominate the debate on climate change (Urry, 2011). These are (a) skepticism, which denies that climate change is a problem; (b) gradualism, which considers climate change a “calculable probabilistic risk” that can be averted; and (c) catastrophism, which argue that major changes in the social and economic system will have to take place to avoid catastrophic climate change.

This essay focuses on the latter, looking at how popular culture, represented by blockbuster films, contributes to the discourse of catastrophism. The aim, however, is not only to investigate popular representations of climate, but also the interplay between climate change news and entertainment. Thus, a central question is how the climate catastrophe is presented in popular culture compared to news media.

The surge in disaster films since the 1970s suggests that the blockbuster disaster film represents a specific cultural form that speaks to the anxieties of the “risk society” (Beck, 2007). Disaster films may be considered a cultural equivalent to social risk calculation producing its own cultural imaginations of risks and disasters. As

such, it participates in generating and sustaining public preoccupations and social anxieties.

What is important, however, is less that popular culture reflects social anxieties (almost a truism) but how these social fears and concerns become articulated and find a particular cultural form. What are the visions of climate change in cinema? How are we solving, surviving, and fighting climate change in blockbuster representations of contemporary risks and disasters? And to what extent is disaster films repeating or challenging dominant ideas of climate change?

Between popular culture and political communication

This approach suggests that political communication cannot be restricted to news media. After all, most of our ideas of gender, politics and law enforcement, to take but a few examples, probably derive from commercials, motion pictures and entertainment as much as from news programs and public debates. The tendency to equate political communication with news is a consequence of academic compartmentalization, but also the result of a limited interpretation of political communication. The latter is often defined as informing, educating, providing platforms for discussions, and a channel for political views and monitoring the authorities (McNair, 2011, pp. 18-20).

Popular culture, however, also educates, informs, and so forth, but based on myths, narratives, and identification rather than facts, arguments, and discussions. In that respect, the following assessment concerning disaster coverage may be equally true of popular culture: "Media and communications [...] increasingly *constitute* disasters, conditioning how they become known, responded to and politically aligned" (Pantti, et al., 2012, p. 13).

Considering popular culture an instant of political communication may challenge academic categorizations. Public opinion research and political actors, however, rarely question the political influence of popular culture. Prior to the release of *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), there were numerous predictions and investigations of the film's impact on public risk perceptions (Leiserowitz, 2004). Pundits like the Danish climate skeptic Bjorn Lomborg warned against the film, claiming that "It is wrong - I would even

say amoral - to overplay the case for combating climate change" (Lomborg, 2004).

The aim of this article, however, is not to assess the influence of popular culture on public opinion, but to look at how risks and disasters like climate change is presented in popular culture in contrast to news media. The assumption is that entertainment offers a virtual side of news. Whereas news is structurally orientated towards the actual, entertainment is concerned with the virtual (Görke, 2001). Entertainment offers visions of that which have not yet occurred, but might take place if things were to unfold as suggested in the news.

It is this virtual side of risks and disasters that is the subject of the present essay. It looks at how visions of climate change are constructed in blockbuster cinema. Moreover, it argues that we are not only presented with a virtual side, but rather an "inverted" vision of climate change compared to how climate change information is presented in the press.

The discussion primarily draws on Hollywood films. Not all of them are directly related to anthropogenic climate change in the sense defined by UN institutions. Nor are they all typical blockbuster films. So far, *The Day After Tomorrow* may be the only box-office hit about "a change of climate that is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere" (IPCC, 2007, p. 30). There are, however, a larger group of films alluding to a changing climate (for example, Roland Emmerich's *2012* [2009]), frequently as a consequence of human activities such as war (*The Road* [2009]), exploitation (*After Earth* [2013]) or fights against aliens (*Oblivion* [2013]). In this context, blockbuster films refer to a loosely defined commercial strategy of spectacular "high concept", big-budget films (Wyatt, 1994) rather than a well-defined narrative alternative to classical cinema (Thompson, 1999; Bordwell, 2006). Nevertheless, these films embody what appears to be an emerging popular culture on the climate catastrophe.¹

Disasters as entertainment: imagining catastrophes

The catastrophe has always had a firm grip on cultural imaginations, whether it is eschatological ideas of the end of the world (Wagar, 1982), news about natural disasters (Pantti, et al., 2012), or popular fascinations with catastrophes and calamities (Keane, 2001;

Sontag, 1966). The Lisbon earthquake in 1755 has been called “the first event to become major news” (Murteira, 2004), and today disaster reporting has become a stable feature of most news media.

Cinema, considered as the most representative art form of the 20th century (Hauser, 1979, pp. 463-464), has been particularly important in placing the catastrophe at the center of cultural imaginations. The list of “end of the world” films and cinematic depictions of natural and historical disasters is remarkable. It represents an unbroken continuum from early silent films (for example, *The Last Days of Pompei* [1913]) to the most recent releases (*World War Z* [2013]; *After Earth*; *Oblivion*; *Elysium* [2013]).

The catastrophe contains many of the essential features of popular narratives: spectacular events, patterns of identification, heroic deeds, nail biting deadlines, and so on. Early, classical, and so-called post-classical cinema has all taken advantage of popular fascination with disasters and catastrophes (Gunning, 1999; Wyatt, 1994; Keane, 2001). Early blockbusters repeatedly centered on “post-industrial disasters,” including modern means of transportation (periled airplanes, capsized ocean liners, runaway trains), ways of living (burning skyscrapers), or leisure activities (avalanches, stadium and amusement park terror). However, cataclysms inflicted on post-industrial societies by natural disasters (volcanoes, meteors) also featured frequently.

Disaster films entail a number of elements associated with blockbuster culture. First and foremost, there is an emphasis on spectacular settings and actions, sometimes at the expense of traditional narrative virtues such as character development and psychological realism. Spectacles often require elaborate special effects, which lead to high production costs. To diminish the resulting financial risks, film stars are frequently engaged to secure popular appeal (further raising the financial stakes). The intimate relations between disaster films and blockbuster films make it somewhat difficult to separate the two phenomena. As a consequence, the list of blockbusters and disaster films frequently overlap (for example, *Titanic* [1997]).

The blockbuster catastrophe draws on both diachronic and synchronic elements. On the one hand, there is a deep-seated cultural fascination with “terminal visions,” whether of a religious or more secular nature (Wagar, 1982). Visions of cataclysm and doomsday

are an integral part of our cultural register. It represents a script that can be activated in relation to different social and cultural phenomena. Thus, in most cultural imaginations of disasters, there is a contemporary dimension that “taps into a national trend or sentiment” (Wyatt, 1994, p. 15).

The popularity of disaster films follows a cyclical pattern, in which the genre appears to have experienced a surge every second decade (Keane, 2001). Looking at recent disaster films, two lines of development can be discerned. First, the 1970s disaster film was typically about man-made disasters such as runaway trains, blazing high-rises, periled airplanes, ocean liners turned upside down, and so on. In the 1990s, when the disaster film experienced a sort of revival, there was a shift towards natural hazards and disasters such as volcanoes, meteor impact, weird weather phenomena, pandemic threats, and so forth. Recently, the two tendencies have merged into a greater interest in man-made, or anthropogenic, natural disasters; what has elsewhere been called “(un)natural” catastrophes (Cottle, 2009).

The concern with man-made disasters has been a regular sub-theme in disaster films. It draws on well-anchored cultural figures like the mad scientist, the notion of hubris, or the Frankenstein myth. Modern cinematic expressions of this tradition include *Arachnophobia* (1990) or *Jurassic Park* (1993). However, man-made disasters have taken on new meaning as they have become increasingly global (for example, *Waterworld* [1995]). And that is the second line of development in recent blockbuster catastrophes. The disaster is no longer particular or regional, limited to a single burning skyscraper or crashed airplane. Rather, the modern disaster involves worldwide catastrophes and global apocalypse (*The Day After Tomorrow*; 2012; *The Road*).

According to Mike Hulme, climate change is loaded with fundamental cultural assumptions about the world (nostalgia, fear, pride and justice). So far, cinema has mainly employed a disaster vocabulary, sustaining a vision or “myth” about global climate change as “presaging Apocalypse” (Hulme, 2010).

Global disasters and traditional narratives

Disaster news and disaster fiction are sharing a common concern. Both are increasingly dealing with disasters in a globalized con-

text. A recent study suggests that “In an interconnected, globalized and mediated world, disasters are often best conceptualized [...] in relation to endemic and potentially encompassing global crises” (Pantti, et al., 2012, pp. 32-33). In a similar manner, recent blockbusters seem to speak to anxieties of global disorder and a planetary system out of control.

The global orientation in mediated disasters (news as well as fiction) implies what has been called the “geopolitics of disaster.” The concept refers to how media disasters “construct narratives that allow citizens to make sense of disasters within the framework of the nation state and its relations to global power relations” (Pantti, et al., 2012, p. 35).

Two episodes from *The Day after Tomorrow* may illustrate the point. At the beginning of the film, we witness a UN conference on climate change in which the traditional image of global climate change positions and power relations are reproduced. Whereas representatives of the global south appear concerned, the US is skeptical, and apparently blocking any action. Later, as the catastrophe unfolds and threatens to engulf the Northern parts of the US in a new ice age, global power positions are redefined. Thus, in order to open the Mexican border for North American climate refugees, the US has accepted to remit all Latin American debts.

While the latter may suggest that *The Day after Tomorrow* contains somewhat subversive episodes, it could also be considered a fleeting side story in an otherwise traditional narrative about (white) male heroism and restored love relations acted out in a modern flood myth (Salvador and Norton, 2011). Nevertheless, it does indicate that recent blockbuster disaster films increasingly imply some sort of global framework, which may or may not reflect, question or negotiate global power relations. Moreover, the film’s visualization of climate change as a global disaster is reinforcing a perception of climate change as a “mega-problem,” something that increasingly appears to be a problematic approach to the complex interdependencies of climate change (Hulme, 2009, p. 334).

From facts to fiction: narrativizing disasters

While blockbuster disaster films both draw on and articulate social anxieties and/or contemporary risk perceptions, it rarely offers any realistic picture of (un)natural disasters based on scientific or his-

torical facts. *Titanic*, for instance, omitted the fatal details about the nearby ship, *The Californian*, which turned off radio contact. As a consequence, it did not receive the SOS calls from *Titanic*. However, according to the director James Cameron, this crucial historical fact would have been a sort of epic noise: “If *Titanic* is powerful as a metaphor, as a microcosm, for the end of the world in a sense, then that world must be self-contained [...] Ultimately, it [*The Californian*] wasn’t important” (Schulz, 1997). While this historical inaccuracy in *Titanic* created little stir, a film like *The Day After Tomorrow* met considerable criticism for distorting scientific facts regarding climatic shifts, meteorology and basic rules of physics (AP, 2004; Climatesight 2012; DMI 2013).

The latter critique is rather symptomatic. It illustrates the prejudices that still govern cultural attitudes towards popular culture. Just as politicians warn that the film may influence public opinion on climate change, so scientists fear that the film misinforms the public regarding scientific evidence. The irony is, of course, that no one criticizes science for the lack of narrative coherence or *belles-lettres*. Science is concerned with the distinction truth/false, not cultural expressions of popular anxieties. Thus, while politics is regarded as the quest for legitimate power, and science as bound by truth, popular culture is obliged to observe *both* scientific facts and political neutrality, while doing so in a spectacular and entertaining manner based on cultural norms and conventions.

It demonstrates two things. First of all, it is a token of the cultural asymmetries that exist between different social fields. In principle, social systems are functionally autonomous (Luhmann, 1997). However, in the social realm of competing individuals and interests they become subject to social distinctions and institutional power relations. Thus, the art system has traditionally been able to impose its norms and values (innovation, formal autonomy, ambiguity, contingency, and so on) on other cultural expressions, while the opposite is rarely the case. Who would criticize art-cinema disaster films like *Stalker* (1979), *The Element of Crime* (1984), or *Le Temp du Loup* (2003) for lack of realism or narrative fragmentation? In a similar manner, scientific knowledge is regarded as belonging to a higher social order than commercial entertainment based on popular myths.

Secondly, it reveals the typical fear of popular culture and its assumed influence on the (uneducated) masses, which tradition-

ally has surrounded cinema. The speculations about the influence of, for example, *The Day After Tomorrow* on public opinion show that this fundamental suspicion is still thriving.

Nevertheless, the quote by Cameron suggests that fiction films are not compelled by historical or scientific facts. The aim of cinema is to entertain, offer solutions to self-produced conflicts and facilitate structures of identification. Cinema, in other words, is structured by its own codes and norms that primarily derive from the media system (Luhmann, 1996). Thus, despite the lack of realism or scientific accuracy, blockbuster films contribute to public risk perception by offering a particular version of global catastrophes based on popular, self-enclosed narratives of disasters.

Blockbuster disaster films: the inversion of news

News of climate change generally provides fragmented scientific facts about likely outcomes of anthropogenic activities as well as reporting on collective responses and solutions to probabilistic risks. In contrast, blockbuster disaster films offer coherent but unrealistic visions of future risks based on unscientific cause-effect chains as a backdrop for individual rather than collective survivalism. Herein lies the basic principle behind the inversion of risk and disaster news in popular culture. It explains both the public fascination with, and the cultural suspicion of, blockbuster disaster films.

Firstly, in blockbuster products (literature and films) risks become disasters. Technological and natural risks turn into full-blown catastrophes in blockbuster fiction, wrecking havoc on local communities, entire nations or, as recently witnessed, the global ecosystem. Thus uncertainty is turned into certainty and the future becomes the present. The end of the world is no longer something to fear but something to be experienced.

Secondly, classical narration focuses on individuals or a small group of individuals, also known as the ensemble play or *Grand Hotel* formula. Thus, unlike disaster news – which is mainly preoccupied with collective “catastrophism,” impacts on communities, and political (in)action – disaster fiction is about individuals enduring all sorts of catastrophes. Abstract and anonymous risks become individualized struggles for survival. However, in the ritualized communication of popular culture, the real question is

rarely *if*, but rather *how* the protagonists escape from a burning tower, a sinking cruiser, a deadly virus, a post-apocalyptic world, or major climatic shifts.

One of the theoretical discussions surrounding blockbuster fiction is to what extent it breaks with, or is continuation of, classical narration. It has been argued that blockbuster films represent a post-classical cinema that is more concerned with “the look, the hook and the book” rather than character psychology and narrative coherence (Wyatt, 1994). Others have argued that while the blockbuster represents an intensified form of filmmaking, it still rests on classical narrative principles (Bordwell, 2006).

While disaster blockbusters certainly excel in spectacular effects, it also seems as if the subject matter of disasters require a rather classical character presentations in order to counterweigh the somewhat implausible settings. There are exceptions, but in general disaster films entail traditional patterns of psychological realism and character development. That may also account for the rather steady popularity of the genre.

Thirdly, risk coverage and disaster news is often about solutions to actual or future disasters, the wider consequences to communities and nations, questions of responsibilities and guilt, or the prospect of learning from present disasters and avoiding future repetitions. Disaster fiction, however, is about the here and now, of survival from one moment to the other in which the future and the wider community is of little importance.

Finally, being concerned with probabilistic risks of global disasters, news reports nourish anxieties about social stability and personal consequences. In contrast, disaster fiction is a constant reassurance that personal survival, however unlikely it may seem, is not only possible, but also the norm. As spectators, we will experience mayhem and horror; we may even watch entire countries and continents perish, but our fictive *alter ego* tends to survive leaving the spectator with a glimmer of hope and comfort.

Blockbuster disasters are fascinating in and for themselves. But they become even more fascinating when regarded as part of a wider discourse of “catastrophism” and resonating with a broader culture of disaster. As the climate is changing, so will our ideas and stories of climate change also find new forms and articulations (Hulme, 2009, p. 330). This essay has related blockbuster disasters

to public anxieties and elitist fears of popular culture; to scientific uneasiness with distortion of facts and science; to the visualization of climate change as a mega-problem and a myth of the apocalypse; as an inversion of disaster news and the improbable but comforting focus on individual survival. It is in this sense we may consider disaster blockbusters a cultural equivalent to social risk calculations: one that probes into public fears and concerns by speaking to the anxieties and imaginations of the risk society.

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Notes

1 For a somewhat similar tendency in popular literature see Andersen (2014).