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### When a Real Storm Hits the Shores

*Representing Climate Crisis in the Television Series 'The Swell'*

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Ian KENNY & Irina SOUCH

When a Real Storm Hits the Shores:

Representing Climate Crisis in the Television Series *The Swell*

#### Samenvatting

Aan de hand van een gedetailleerde analyse van de Nederlands/Belgische klimaatfictie-serie *Als de dijken breken* (EO/VRT, 2016), bespreekt dit artikel hoe een populair televisieverhaal klimaatverandering laat zien alsook de oprukkende positie van klimaatverandering als onderwerp van publieke bezorgdheid. Naast een *close reading* van de serie, maken we gebruik van empirische ecokritische methoden zoals uiteengezet door Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner en W.P. Malecki (2020). Zo komen klimaatfictie-verhalen naar voren als culturele teksten die “ondubbelzinnig op één lijn staan met planetaire imperatieven” in een tijdperk van snelle ecologische degradatie en veranderingen in milieu. Als we ons met deze verhalen bezighouden, kunnen we aantonen dat klimatologische schommelingen en veranderende atmosferische omstandigheden geen puur natuurlijke fenomenen zijn, maar sterk afhankelijk zijn van specifieke historische, economische en sociale kaders, en altijd bepaalde affectieve en ideologische standpunten voeden. Het blootleggen van dergelijke afhankelijkheden maakt het mogelijk verschillende verstrengelingen van eco-discoursen, geopolitieke belangen en intersectionele ongelijkheden bloot te leggen, en bemoeilijkt zo het onderscheid tussen natuurrampen en antropogene rampen. Series zoals *Als de dijken breken* hebben daarom het vermogen om het huidige denken te helpen heroriënteren op de overwegingen van een toekomst, en bieden een productieve blauwdruk voor speculatief denken.

#### Abstract

Through a detailed analysis of the Dutch/Belgian cli-fi series *The Swell* (*Als de Dijken Breken*, EO/VRT, 2016), the article discusses how a popular television narrative can speak of the climate change and its surging position as a subject of public concern. Alongside a close reading of the series, we also employ empirical ecocritical methods as outlined by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner and W.P. Malecki (2020). Accordingly, cli-fi narratives emerge as cultural texts that are “unambiguously aligned with planetary imperatives” in an age of rapid environmental degradation and change. Engaging with these narratives, allows to demonstrate that, instead of being purely natural phenomena, climatic volatility and changing atmospheric conditions are strongly dependent on specific historical, economic and social frameworks, and always foster particular affective and ideological positions. Unveiling such dependencies enables the exposure of various imbrications of eco-discourses, geopolitical interests, and intersectional inequities, and thus complicates the distinction between natural and anthropogenic disasters. Series such as *The Swell* therefore have the capacity to help reorient present-day thinking to the considerations of the future, providing a productive blueprint for speculative thought.

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## WHEN A REAL STORM HITS THE SHORES: REPRESENTING CLIMATE CRISIS IN THE TELEVISION SERIES *THE SWELL*

In the 2016 Dutch/Belgian television series *The Swell* (*Als de Dijken Breken*) an exceptional “once in every ten thousand years” tempest damages the dunes along the North Sea coast, putting the western provinces of the Netherlands and Belgium at the risk of a devastating flood. The limited six-episode series was first aired by the Flemish Radio and Television Broadcasting Organisation (VRT) and the Dutch Evangelical Broadcaster (EO). Released on the streaming platforms Sundance Now, Netflix, and Amazon shortly after, the series was considered one of Europe’s top-rated television performers that year.<sup>1</sup>

*The Swell* revolves around the hypothetical possibility of a storm surge that lays human-created and maintained landscapes and urban centres to waste. The transliteration of the original title, “*When the Dikes Break*” positions it firmly within the climate fiction (cli-fi) genre conceived as a variation of speculative fiction that “invents nothing we haven’t already invented or started to invent”.<sup>2</sup> It depicts a plausible—if currently unlikely—“what if?” scenario that visually reimagines an age-old struggle between coastal people and the management of their estuaries, dikes, and barrier dams. In line with the genre conventions, axioms are put forth at the outset that are then tested and followed to their narrative conclusions.<sup>3</sup> In addition to figuring potential future events, the series’ subject matter situates it within the historical continuum of large-scale flood disasters.<sup>4</sup> Though floods are a common narrative subject, Lieven Ameel and Stef Craps have argued that such events are underrepresented in the Dutch media landscape.<sup>5</sup> By figuring a catastrophic flood in a fictional but nonetheless recognizable present, the series links actual past events to a prospective future. Ameel and Craps contend that such depictions act as “indeterminate allegories” that juxtapose competing realities and responses to disastrous events, and thus invite layered readings of what appears on screen.<sup>6</sup> While Ameel and Craps focus on the complexities of narrating floods in various novels, due to *The Swell*’s visual components, each storyline here is developed not only

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<sup>1</sup>Produced by JOCO Media and Menuet Productions on a modest budget of € 750,000 *The Swell* delivered, upon its release in November 2016, 25%-29% market shares in the Netherlands on the Dutch Public Broadcaster NPO1 (of which the EO is a member), and 39%-44.8% shares in Belgium on EEN, an umbrella channel for the VRT (Jamie LANG, “Director Hans Herbots on ‘The Swell’ and Dealing With Social Issues Through Fiction.” *Variety*, Apr. 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/tv/festivals/hans-herbots-the-swell-social-issues-fiction-1202031568/>).

<sup>2</sup>Margaret ATWOOD, *Oryx and Crake*. 1st Edition, London, Folio Society, 2019, introduction.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>To demonstrate the importance of cultural artefacts in understandings of environmental change and the Anthropocene, in her monograph *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands* Katie Ritson, for one, looks at a variety of literary depictions of flood disasters and recovery drawn from the countries around the North Sea (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, and England) from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Katie RITSON, *The Shifting Sands of the North Sea Lowlands: Literary and Historical Imaginaries*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Lieven AMEE, Stef CRAPS, “Flooded Cities in Low Countries Fiction: Referentiality and Indeterminate Allegory in Renate Dorrestein’s *Weerwater* and Roderik Six’s *Vloed*”, in *Green letters* 24.1, 2020, 36–50. Web, 36.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

narratively, but also aesthetically. The series relies on a split narrative and group cast, cycling between different factions of protagonists, all living out different possible scenarios that are themselves responses to the hypothetical question the series treats. While the government agencies struggle to react to and mitigate the impacts of the flooding, ordinary people are shown coping with an extraordinary situation to a variety of ends.

Although the theme of ecological crisis has lent itself to a large array of literary and cinematic interpretations, cli-fi has been relatively late to come to the small screen and has only recently been taken up as a worthy subject for the quality television drama. Among the most artistically and narratively successful examples of such projects are the internationally acclaimed Norwegian series *Occupied* and the British series *Fortitude*.<sup>7</sup> This new engagement with environmental issues is important: compared to other media, television, and especially complex forms of serial storytelling, have an extra advantage in terms of pedagogical potential and promotion of ecomedia literacy, owing to the transnational reach, extended duration, and dynamic online forums which allow viewers to develop intimate affective relationships to the depicted places and events. In the broader landscape of Dutch cultural objects, *The Swell* fills an important gap. Though Ameel and Craps point out that flood narratives are not entirely absent from cultural representation in the Lowlands, they are few and far between, and those that exist are often ambiguous in their treatment of the subject.<sup>8</sup> Though at times fantastical, *The Swell* deals with both the hypothetical questions and historical practices that came to shape Dutch water management in the last centuries, giving insight into both historical and future processes through a widely viewed serial fiction narrative.<sup>9</sup> In a region whose very identity is contoured and defined by water, we contend that *The Swell* invites viewers to examine their affective relationships with the landscapes in which they live, ultimately prompting them to reconsider encounters between people and place that go beyond the screen.

In this article, we investigate the series' critical promise to both imagine and instruct in an interwoven approach. We begin with analysing the benefits of culturally situated eco-fiction accounts in a time of global climatic crisis. From there we consider how the aesthetics of the various screened responses to the flood

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<sup>7</sup> Filmed in Iceland and Svalbard, the British series *Fortitude* (2015-2018) focuses on the effects of an ancient pestilence loosed upon the international community of a sparsely populated outpost north of the Arctic Circle. *Fortitude* provides a sinister metaphor for the unknowable outcomes that will undoubtedly continue to plague the High North, particularly as the planet moves deeper into the epoch of the Anthropocene. Set in the near future, the Norwegian geopolitical thriller *Occupied* (2015-2019), in turn, shows Norway suspending all hydrocarbon production in response to the climate crisis. In its screening of an (imagined) Nordic "eco-exceptionalism," *Occupied* takes up the issue of the Anthropocene, and Norden's role as a "good" actor (at least in comparison to "bad actors" in the North such as the US, Russia, and China).

<sup>8</sup> AMEEL, CRAPS, *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> It is without doubt that the coastal regions of the Netherlands represent a co-constitutive natural and human landscape, both historically and in the present whose "settlement history of more than 2000 years is still mirrored in its maritime-agricultural landscape" (Linde EGBERTS, Meindert SCHROOR, Jos BAZELMANS, editors. *Waddenland Outstanding: History, Landscape and Cultural Heritage of the Wadden Sea Region*. Amsterdam University Press, 2018, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7xbrmk>, 19). People have been living in and reclaiming the fresh and salt-water marshes of the region for millennia and have "set worldwide standards for land reclamation" since, continuing a living legacy of environmental planning and management (EGBERTS, SCHROOR, BAZELMANS, *ibid.*, 19).

ultimately allow viewers develop anticipatory practices that help imagine and plan for disasters in the future. Alongside our close reading, we also employ empirical ecocritical methods as outlined by Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, Alexa Weik von Mossner and W.P. Malecki.<sup>10</sup> Cli-fi narratives like *The Swell* are cultural objects that are “unambiguously aligned with planetary imperatives” in an age of rapid environmental degradation and change.<sup>11</sup> Engaging with these narratives, therefore, matters “socially, culturally, and politically”, and is of the utmost importance in a rapidly warming and destabilizing world. Combining both a classic ecocritical close-reading with an empirical approach that examines a wider body of historical, journalistic, and cultural commentary on the series itself, we argue that series such as *The Swell* have the capacity to help reorient present-day thinking to the considerations of the future, providing a productive blueprint for speculative thought.

### Culturally Situating the Flood

To emphasise the educational value of *The Swell*, director Hans Herbots explained in an interview that the choice of the series’ subject was not incidental but driven by the “interest in environment but also ... the whole refugee crisis... mak[ing] people aware of existing problems. You never know what will happen if a real storm like that hits the shores”<sup>12</sup>. Accordingly, from the outset *The Swell* attempts to unravel the sociocultural dynamics set in motion by the “natural” catastrophe and to unveil the twinned threats (in many regions) of climate change and the problem of environmental refugees. In a world that is rapidly warming on account of anthropogenic interventions with the result of creating an increasingly “human-dominated planet”<sup>13</sup> imagining a situation in which various crises are imbricated within one another enables thinking through the “what ifs” that these phenomena are bound to visit on many in real life.

If, as Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus argued in 2012, “the abstractions of time and space and belonging which dominant climate change narratives often assume are not universally shared,” then depicting specific “cultural values and practices of *particular* groups...in *particular* places are important for understanding the meaning and consequences of climate change”<sup>14</sup>. While Farbotko and Lazrus draw on historical examples of climate crises and ensuing displacement of people, their considerations about the abstract nature of climate narratives in a globally connected world are nonetheless relevant to speculative fiction. Speculative

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew SCHNEIDER-MAYERSON, Alexa WEIK VON MOSSNER, W.P. MALECKI, “Empirical Ecocriticism: Environmental Texts and Empirical Methods”, in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, Volume 27, 2, 2020, 327–336, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa022>.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>12</sup> LANG, *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Simon L. LEWIS, Mark MASLIN, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, London, Pelican an imprint of Penguin Books, 2018, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Carol FARBOTKO, Heather LAZRUS, “The First Climate Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu”, in *Global Environmental Change*, vol. 22, no. 2, May 2012, 82–90, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2011.11.014>, 381, italics not in original.

narratives can effectively help fill a gap in local knowledge and subsequent cultural expression where little or no contemporary climatic accounts exist. In the case of *The Swell*, Herbots was also keen to point out that in order to render the story maximally “accurate”, “we talked to a lot of people that work on disaster programs”<sup>15</sup>. In order to create a high fidelity story that addressed realistic concerns, one of *The Swell*’s producers, Ingmar Menning, recounted that “to know exactly what kind of a situation could lead to a disaster on this scale... our research included interviews with Rijkswaterstaat [the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management]—which is responsible for the development and maintenance of the water defenses—plus weather services, crisis managers and the Red Cross”<sup>16</sup>.

It is not surprising therefore, that *The Swell* was experienced by viewers as disconcertingly real in that it provoked immediate associations with the North Sea flood that struck the Netherlands, Belgium, England, and Scotland in the winter of 1953, resulting in thousands of casualties and causing massive material damage. In the Netherlands, the 1953 *Watersnoodramp* is not only part of the collective memory regarding the nation’s longstanding and tumultuous relationship with the sea: it also represents a moment of change in Dutch water infrastructure policy that is re-explored in a contemporary setting throughout *The Swell*. The protective barriers that burst in 1953 showed both experts and the public at large that higher dikes alone would not keep extreme storms and tides at bay forever.<sup>17</sup> In their article on the impact of cultural determinants on infrastructure, Egberts and Renes have argued that local history and heritage play an increasingly important role in human-landed landscape change, the prime goal of which is risk mitigation, “often driven by a sense of crisis and emergency”<sup>18</sup>. In the intervening years, a series of storm flood barriers, including the Delta Works in the Netherlands and the Thames Enclosure in the United Kingdom have been built not to keep surges out, but to let flood waters into coastal inland waterways, spreading the effects of rising sea levels throughout an integrated and resilient system. It is precisely this more modern infrastructure that is put to the speculative test in *The Swell*. The acute public awareness of the historical precedent of 1953 and the possible exposure to similar risks in the future became apparent directly after the release of the first episode of the series, when the experts of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management were called upon to comment, through an online forum, on the durability of the coastal protection line, the reliability of the national emergency plan and the susceptibility of specific areas to flooding.<sup>19</sup>

And yet, despite its explicit allegiance to realism, the series is not an eco-documentary or realist drama, but a piece of speculative fiction. In contemporary media studies, speculative fiction is considered a particularly suitable genre for

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<sup>15</sup> LANG, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> “The Swell”, *Drama Quarterly*, May 2017, <https://dramaquarterly.com/tag/joco-media>.

<sup>17</sup> Linde EGBERTS, Hans RENES, “A Local Heritage and Climate Nexus: The Past in Planning for Climate Change on the Dutch Island of Goeree-overflakkee”, in *Tijdschrift Voor Economische En Sociale Geografie*, vol. 111, no. 5, Dec. 2020, 771–85, <https://doi.org/10.1111/tesg.12462>, 775.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 771.

<sup>19</sup>Source: “Experts van Rijkswaterstaat Reageren op de Series” <http://www.rijkswaterstaat.nl/water/waterbeheer/bescherming-tegen-het-water/onze-experts-over-als-de-dijken-breken/index.aspx> (accessed 10 November 2019).

facilitating human perception of and preparedness for continuously deteriorating climatic conditions. Echoing Farbotko and Lazrus' insistence on representative media, Julia Leyda, for one, argues that popular television and film often appear to give expression to the "climate unconscious" that "can be located ... nestled into our screen cultures: a trace of meaning that points to climate change, which is not overtly signalled yet arguably informs significant structures of feeling in the early 21st century".<sup>20</sup> Investigating "how fictional climate-changed scenarios can spark our imagination and how our experiences of cli-fi can work to prepare us for possible futures"<sup>21</sup>, Leyda further suggests that "engrossing audiences in ... fictional narratives means allowing them to process emotionally the implications of what they may well already know via facts and figures"<sup>22</sup>. Telling even troubling climatic stories, therefore, takes on a distinctly pedagogical tone, as it helps portray and give body to what is often already known.<sup>23</sup> In her influential discussion of the implications of climate change and the Anthropocene in *Staying with the Trouble*, Donna Haraway equally remarks that such science fiction narratives are both "storytelling and fact telling; it is the patterning of possible worlds and possible times, material-semiotic worlds, gone, here, and yet to come"<sup>24</sup>. Though slight slippages in categorization occur between speculative, science, and climate fiction, for the purposes of this article, we contend that these subgenres employ similar speculative and pedagogical approaches. What they hold in common are potential avenues for grappling with Lawrence Buell's seminal assertion that the crisis in human-environmental relations is primarily a crisis of the imagination.<sup>25</sup>

Although *The Swell* does not contain any explicit mention of "climate change", the futurist vision of a catastrophic flood vividly demonstrates its very concrete and tangible consequences. Because of their frequent mythic and historic figurations, floods are "the most common disasters known to humankind", and have a varied aesthetic resonance, at least in the Western cannon.<sup>26</sup> Floods are not only summoned in religious traditions to cleanse Earth of sin as, for instance, in the Judeo-Christian Bible, but also represent regular aspects of living in flood zones, and "help to drive biodiversity and are essential to the functioning of ecosystems"<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Julia LEYDA, "Post-Air-Conditioning Futures and the Climate Unconscious", in *Screen*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2021, 100-106, 101.

<sup>21</sup> LEYDA, *ibid.*, 102.

<sup>22</sup> Julie LEYDA, "The Cultural Affordances of Cli-Fi", in *The Dystopian Impulse of Contemporary Cli-Fi: Lessons and Questions from a Joint Workshop of the LASS and JFKI*, Potsdam: Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies, 2019, 11-17, 14.

<sup>23</sup> The pedagogical potential of climate narratives is the focus of Roman Bartosch's recent monograph Roman BARTOSCH, *Literature, Pedagogy, and Climate Change: Text Models for a Transcultural Ecology*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, in which the author discusses a variety of novels, films, and digital media artefacts to develop a notion of transcultural ecology that understands works of fiction as textual models that allow to address the diverse and incommensurable scales inherent to climate change.

<sup>24</sup> Donna Jeanne HARAWAY, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2016, 31.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence BUELL, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*, Cambridge (MA), Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995.

<sup>26</sup> Paul DOBRASZCZYK, "Sunken Cities: Climate Change, Urban Futures and the Imagination of Submergence", in *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, vol. 41, no. 6, Nov. 2017, 868-87, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12510>, 871.

<sup>27</sup> "The Many Effects of Flooding," *National Geographic Resource Library*, 14 Sept. 2021, <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/article/many-effects-flooding/>.



Floods bring not only destruction, but also rich mineral deposits that replenish agricultural land in both saltwater and freshwater environments, as along the Nile or on the Frisian Islands, and human history as well as the evolution of the natural world in many regions has relied on the dynamics of flooding landscapes for millennia. For that reason as Trexler argues, “the cultural resonance of floods offers a ... familiar entrée to climate change” that is at once multifaceted and accessible on account of its embeddedness within human (cultural) memory and imagination both historically and in the present.<sup>28</sup> To further concretise the relation between floods and ongoing climatic alterations, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen aptly observes that “[t]he world is ending through the melting of polar ice and the rising of the seas, and the Deluge, a disaster God promised never to send again, crashes anew”.<sup>29</sup> While in *The Swell* the sacred moral structure of the biblical narrative is erased, presenting the deluge as a form of secular apocalypse, it remains “the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal”.<sup>30</sup> By bringing the anthropogenic elements of the disaster into relief, the series posits the literal flood as “a symbolic image for life in the Anthropocene: unpredictable, overwhelming and engulfing”<sup>31</sup>.

It is in this sense that *The Swell* can also be located within the archive of the Anthropocene as an object of apocalyptic speculation. Floods represent a distinct sort of apocalypse that elicit a specific response in those who witness or live through them. If, as Colin McAllister has argued, “apocalyptic thinking is ubiquitous and continues to inform nearly all aspects of modern-day life,” then pausing briefly to consider the inclusion of the apocalyptic turn in cli-fi – and *The Swell* in particular – provides insights into the intertwined aspects of speculative fiction and apocalypica.<sup>32</sup> When evaluating mediations and discussions of the Anthropocene, Lewis and Maslin have suggested that “the story we choose to tell matters”<sup>33</sup>. Following them, we see the Anthropocene as a “heady mix of science, politics, philosophy, and religion linked to our deepest fears and utopian visions of what humanity, and the planet we live on, might become” that is mediated through diverse narrative experiences and objects, each producing their own impacts.<sup>34</sup> Providing context for these narratives is what renders climate fiction and apocalyptic narratives a speculative quality and makes them highly suitable for imaginative and practical use.

*The Swell* represents a fascinating cultural text precisely because it addresses widespread and common anxieties related to climate change, while also setting those

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<sup>28</sup> Adam TREXLER, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2015, 83.

<sup>29</sup> Jeffrey Jerome COHEN. “Drown” in Jeffrey J. COHEN, Lowell DUCKERT (eds.) *Veer Ecology: A Companion for Environmental Thinking*, Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2011, 246-267, 248.

<sup>30</sup> BUELL, *ibid.*, 285.

<sup>31</sup> Astrid BRACKE, *Climate Crisis and the 21st-Century British Novel*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2019, 278.

<sup>32</sup> Colin MCALLISTER, “Through a Glass Darkly: Time, the End, and the Essence of Apocalypica”, in Colin MCALLISTER (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108394994.001>, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>34</sup> LEWIS, MASLIN, *ibid.*, 7.

fears in the particular cultural and ecological context of the low-lying countries that border the North Sea. What is more, the human predicament here is emphatically situated within a gallery of iconic landscapes which appear to play an essential role in navigating the ideological and existential questions likely to become more regular features of life in the Anthropocene. As the narrative space of the series becomes inundated with apocalyptic landscape imagery, viewers are also asked to consider this hypothetical inundation as a potentially real one. Apocalyptic discourses like the one presented in *The Swell* “address universal human concerns: the search for identity and belonging, speculation about the future, and are (for some) a blueprint that provides meaning and structure to a seemingly chaotic world”<sup>35</sup>. Within the secular apocalyptic turn the series features, the intended stimulation is not only behavioural (with regards to planning specific interventions and strategies to help mitigate the likelihood of such a disaster) but also imaginative, envisaging a variety of human responses that touch on both personal and larger social dynamics. The apocalyptic exigencies effectively become a narrative engine that enables speculative questions about the climate and the future to take centre stage, transforming often abstract entities and phenomena into graspable concepts, situations, and reactions by means of a known narrative trope.

The sense of urgency exuded can be thus attributed to the particular ways in which concrete geographic landscapes appear at the various stages of narration. Tangibly, this means that the portrayal of the physical and natural environments throughout the storm and in the days after it passes is of primary interest as it produces the affective link between the (fictional) televisual narrative and the real physical world which we see around us and in which we live. While the importance of landscape in cinema is well-established<sup>36</sup> critical attention to landscape in television narratives is a relatively new tendency. And yet, in contemporary transnational quality drama, landscape largely exceeds the role of a static backdrop for the human action. Robert Saunders, for one, recently suggested that landscape is a foundational element of any television series’ dramatic setting: “whether those depicting wild spaces bereft of human activity, precipitous urban realms overflowing with people, or a suburban street in Middle America – [landscapes] inform the motivations of the characters, shape the narrative, and, most importantly, make the mood”<sup>37</sup>.

Building upon Saunders’ contention, it can be argued that in a narrative concerned with the implications of climate change, landscapes are directly affected by climatic volatility and changing atmospheric conditions thus producing what McKim calls an “ecological meta-narrative”<sup>38</sup>, connecting humans (both on and offscreen) with their environment. To illustrate how the viewer’s intellectual and

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<sup>35</sup> MCALLISTER, *ibid.*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> cf. Martin LEFEBVRE (ed.), *Landscape and Film*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2006; Les ROBERTS, *Film, Mobility and Urban Space: A Cinematic Geography of Liverpool*, Liverpool, Liverpool Univ. Press, 2012; Sue THORNHAM, *Spaces of Women’s Cinema: Space, Place and Genre in Contemporary Women’s Filmmaking*, London, Bloomsbury on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Robert A. SAUNDERS, “Landscape, Geopolitics, and National Identity in the Norwegian Thrillers ‘Occupied’ and ‘Nobel’”, in *Nordicom Review*, vol. 41, no. s1, Sept. 2020, 63–83, <https://doi.org/10.2478/nor-2020-0006>, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Kristi MCKIM, *Cinema as Weather*, Oxfordshire, Routledge, 2013, 28.

affective engagement can be switched on through a particular figuration of a fictional landscape, *The Swell* starts with one of the female characters witnessing the terrifying death of a kite surfer whose body is suddenly lifted into the air and smashed against an apartment building by a violent wind surge. The howling gales and the enormous roaring waves make the sparse figures of walkers and kite surfers on the sandy beach appear minuscule, vulnerable, and simultaneously hubristic in their attempt to ignore the signs of the upcoming hurricane. This potentially triggering scene holds even more meaning as an ecological metanarrative when considered in relation to the historical parallels of the 1953 Watersnoodramp, which occurred overnight from Saturday January 31<sup>st</sup> to Sunday February 1<sup>st</sup>. Though government agencies had predicted dangerous storm surges on account of the confluence of the spring tides and a north-westerly gale in the North Sea, local media outlets and communicatory bodies were closed for the weekend. Later evaluations of the (effects of) the flood unveiled that if these predictions had been properly reported the disaster could have been mitigated and lives saved.<sup>39</sup> *The Swell* echoes the patterns of the handling of the 1953 storm and its aftermath: in the first episode, characters go about their daily routines despite the growing storm. They are lulled into a false sense of security by the government's decision not to pre-emptively evacuate coastal regions for fear of unduly alarming citizens, which recycles the hubristic sense of trust in the built environment and human systems in the face of not only overpowering, but increasingly likely, natural disasters.

Hubris also colours the opinions of the Dutch government representatives and experts gathered at the crisis response centre in The Hague to decide whether to declare the Code Red weather alert in the threatened and highly vulnerable western part of the Netherlands; a ring of cities called the Randstad. The Randstad (both real and fictional) is a densely populated metropolitan agglomeration that is home to some eight million people. It is built around an agricultural zone in the form of a deep polder area with a varied elevation of two to six metres below sea level. The dilemma the authorities confront in the series is to weigh humanitarian concerns against logistical challenges, since evacuating thousands of people from the endangered zone would involve crossing the deepest polders, and therefore, the areas at the highest risk of flooding. While the windstorm rapidly gains in power, bending and breaking trees, sweeping up piles of dirt and debris, the sombre group in the control room contemplate the probabilities of the hurricane's cascading effect on the infrastructure: their deliberations appear to be firstly oriented to mitigating economic damage, and their relative disregard for human and non-human casualties are fallaciously buoyed by their faith in the dike infrastructure. Seemingly oblivious to the outside physical world that is worsening quickly, in several scenes, the ministers and meteorological experts focus their attention upon large monitors on which the paths of the severe weather are projected in familiar graphs and animations. The screens show the massive storm quickly approaching the coast: yet the people in the room decide not to act. Apart from emphasising the state's unpreparedness to fully cope with an emergency of such scale (the Prime Minister in the series, Hans Kreuger, played by Gijs Scholten van Aschat, remarks that it will

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<sup>39</sup> D. ROLLEMA, "Amateur Radio Emergency Network During 1953 Flood", in *Proceedings of the IEEE*, vol. 92, no. 4, Apr. 2004, 759–62, <https://doi.org/10.1109/JPROC.2004.825908>, 759.

take until 2050 before all flood defences have a safety level according to new standards),<sup>40</sup> the scene is particularly illustrative of the human relation to the weather as a physical phenomenon. Here, the understanding of the tangible effects of extreme weather on both natural and built landscapes is primarily informed by mediated images (aerial shots and futuristic-looking live webcams) and abstract graphic representations. The same disconcerting alienation from the real physical environment out of doors can be spotted in the manner in which ordinary citizens value television and even radio forecasts above their visceral experience, remaining passive in the face of the approaching disaster.

Emblematic of the tendency to have a heavily mediated relation to the environment is the fact that the collective awareness of the situation's gravity (and the ensuing public panic) takes place only at the moment when a video showing the Prime Minister's wife evacuating her father from a care facility leaks to social media and goes viral.<sup>41</sup> Watching the privileged and powerful take precautions in private while telling the public not to panic or (re)act, the viewer experiences a near-instantaneous change of pace, as if directly involved in the fictional drama. In the diegetic space, people are finally waking up to the calamitous storm, running to their cars, gathering loved ones, and taking to the roads *en masse* in a largely feeble and chaotic attempt to outrun or hide from its violence. Due to their movements, the government's worst fears are realized, and the infrastructure is clogged with fleeing citizens. The pandemonium that ensues occurs in rapid flashes, as a series of vignettes portrays the disorganisation, anxiety, and futility of the characters' uncoordinated responses.

Following the generic convention of disaster narratives, *The Swell* meticulously registers the violent destruction of familiar worlds: a woman is killed in front of her lover by a metal traffic sign hurled by the wind as they venture to escape the storm; a Flemish family who lives at a marina right behind the dunes sees their child being washed away in front of their home by a tremendous wave; a well-to-do family becomes separated when abandoning their car and taking to boats and high ground while attempting to cross the rapidly inundating polder; a small school-aged girl fails to reach home in the heavily pouring rain and is looked after by a retired musician as they take shelter on the second floor of his house; the rising water penetrates the building of the Rotterdam penitentiary leading to a tense confrontation between guards and prisoners, resulting in a prisoner revolt and the

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<sup>40</sup> The creators of *The Swell* went to great lengths to ensure that while sensational in its depiction, their series was based on research and data. In 2008, the *Delta Wet*, or Delta Law, was enacted in Dutch parliament, a list of amendments to the Delta Laws that had been initiated immediately after the *Watersnoodramp* that formed the political and legal framework for the enormous engineering projects that were created in response to the disaster. The Delta Laws also delineate what acceptable levels of occurrence are for such catastrophes: currently, they dictate that for the Randstad area (largely in the province of South Holland and linked directly with the North Sea through its series of waterways) an event of such nature is permissible once in every 10,000 years (*Nieuwe Normering Water Veiligheid*). Constantly under review for their resilience and ability to deal with future stresses, water infrastructure and safety projects in the Netherlands are updated and changed as needed, hence the 2050 timeline for the project's completion.

<sup>41</sup> This scene also illustrates how in the face of a catastrophe the risks and suffering are unequally distributed. The Prime Minister's wife takes advantage of "privileged information" to put her father in safety. People who can respond to the alert quickly belong to the affluent, gentrified and relatively transient group of citizens.

total disintegration of order. To mitigate the risks for the Dutch government's stable functioning amidst the breaking dikes, its headquarters are moved from The Hague—the seat of government, right behind the dunes in South Holland and below sea level—to the more secure location of Apeldoorn, elevated roughly 18 meters above sea level in the east of the country.<sup>42</sup>

For those caught in the grip of the storm, there is no place outside the landscape anymore, no space to retreat and contemplate the sublimity of the weather from a safe distance, or through the quiet electronic peeps and ambient blue glow of screens as they had before. Citizens are forced to navigate the tempestuous and fluctuating landscape to find refuge. Floods of water produce floods of refugees who appear to be in denial of their new status as such: “we are not refugees!” shouts a particularly angry character in aftermath of the hurricane, waiting in a long line of people to receive shelter and aid.<sup>43</sup> Her comments, and those of others, indicate not only the displeasure at their government's inability to take action to alleviate the effects of the disaster; they also pinpoint the characters' fragile psyches as they witness the structures of their known world disintegrate. Unable to think of themselves in this altered, inundated world, without land or property, the “ordinary Dutch citizen” is unable to reconsider their relationship to everything around which they had previously oriented their lives, as well as what “rights” they have in relation to others. These comments illuminate the politics and power at play in climate change imaginary and bring up questions about representation of the real-world phenomena. To that extent, Farbotko and Lazrus contend that within contemporary climatic narratives, those vulnerable to the effects of climate change are perceived as both victims and proof of climate change, struggling to find meaning within conceptual structures that are new or alien to their experience.<sup>44</sup>

### Spectacularizing climate catastrophe and its socio-political complexity

While caught-up in displaying an event of catastrophic proportions for the sake of instructive speculation, *The Swell* also articulates a sense of Rob Nixon's concept of the “veneration of the spectacular”, developed in his 2011 book *Slow Violence*.<sup>45</sup> Popular narratives like *The Swell* occupy important positions within the cultural imaginary precisely because of their affective power.<sup>46</sup> Nixon writes that modern

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<sup>42</sup> Source: *Worldatlas* <https://www.worldatlas.com/eu/nl/ge/where-is-apeldoorn.html> (accessed 15 May 2020). In the series proper, when a new geographic location is introduced, the initial image invariably features information about this place's position with regards to sea level.

<sup>43</sup> *The Swell*, Episode 3.

<sup>44</sup> FARBOTKO, LAZRUS, *ibid.*, 383.

<sup>45</sup> Rob NIXON, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2013, 3.

<sup>46</sup> In their wide-ranging edited collection *Affective Criticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment* (2018) Kyle Bladow and Jennifer Ladino, for instance, argue that affect creates and renders visible connections, works across scales, and offers an expanded, nonhuman, conception of agency (Kyle BLADOW, Jennifer LADINO (eds.), *Affective Ecocriticism: Emotion, Embodiment, Environment*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2018). By combining ecocriticism with affect theory and encouraged by the idea that “climate and social justice activists require altruistic emotions as a foundation for action,” the editors strive to acquire “a clearer sense of what those emotions are and how they work” (3). See also, Alexa WEIK VON MOSSNER, *Affective Ecologies: Empathy, Emotion, and Environmental Narrative*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2017.

media and journalism are fixated on spectacular depictions of climate change, effectively shaping “public policy... primarily around perceived immediate need”<sup>47</sup>. Much as Farbotko and Lazrus have asserted, Nixon also makes the claim that this overt fixation on spectacular mediations creates a disproportionate imbalance, which in turn reinforces societal taste for such narratives, obfuscating the panoply of other climate change events that occur on less visible or grand scales. The question Nixon poses is: “how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifference to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world?”<sup>48</sup>

*The Swell* occupies a fascinating terrain in relation to Nixon’s argument. On the one hand, the series attempts to visualise exactly the long-in-the-making and slow disasters that Nixon writes about. After all, climate change and extreme weather events are not isolated or random: they are the culmination of several human and natural processes and feedback loops that result in dynamics of intense change. On the other hand, the sensationalist moments *The Swell* contains fall perfectly in-line with the oversaturation of media space by fantastical depictions of climate volatility that leave little breathing room for the slower, less easily envisaged forms of environmental transformation and associated human and other-than-human suffering. Remarkably, the series does not stop with fantastical rescues or the brute force of the volatile weather. The later episodes treat the aftermath of the flood, featuring a spectrum of responses and realities that indicate an interest in the longer-term and far-reaching effects of climate change. Yet, these effects too are captured only passingly, hinting to the future for each of the characters in a climatically and socially unstable world due to the storm.

It is, therefore, on account of inhabiting and presenting a sort of ethical crossroads in cli-fi narratives that the series prompts viewers—who are, as we have suggested, also a situated and particular audience—to confront the differences at play in the uneven distribution of life’s general precarity and to contend with global inequalities Judith Butler addresses in *Frames of War*.<sup>49</sup> Though Butler took conflict situations as the focal point of their analysis, similar forces are at stake in climate change narratives which equally expose inherent “operation[s] of power”<sup>50</sup>. While engaged with a regional manifestation of climate change, the characters and viewers are all implied in phenomenological processes that (also) occur at a larger scale. By staging the confrontation with what would otherwise be “distant” phenomena in an environment that is familiar to the audience, the series exposes the politically saturated dynamics at work in labelling some lives grievable and others not. In the case of *The Swell*, grievability is not explicitly addressed, but becomes an essential theoretical tool for understanding the varied affective impact of the “naturally inflicted” violence that characters must endure. While the protagonists are primarily white, typically Dutch, Germanic people who resemble the “autochthonous”

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<sup>47</sup> NIXON, *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Judith BUTLER, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?*, London, Verso, 2016, 13.

<sup>50</sup> BUTLER, *ibid.*, 1.

inhabitants of Northern Europe, there is also a minority of racialized characters, the otherwise “allochthonous” (i.e., non-white) citizens who also battle through the storm’s worst consequences. Reflecting on the Dutch sensibilities about their own cultural imaginary as an open and inclusive country where opportunities (and arguably, therefore, precarity) is equally distributed, the narrative also calls these assumptions into question. If “everyone” is presented as affected by the storm to the same extent, and all lives are equally important within its frame, then the audience is also prompted to extrapolate the impact of this normalizing, Eurocentric gaze, regarding climate narratives on a global scale. Such an approach implies that norms operate as locally calibrated means of belonging, and any life could be considered equally vulnerable and grievable, even if it is geographically distant. The speculative immediacy of the series has the potential to render climate crisis, future catastrophes, and human responses more legible. And so, though inexplicit, the question of grievability and precarity remains central to its pedagogical thrust as the narrative frames these dynamics within familiar terrain.

Bringing in relief the challenges and contradictions inherent to dealing with the complex problems of climatic volatility and atmospheric alterations, *The Swell* also reveals the difficulties involved in the representing these issues on screen. On the one hand, the dramatization of climate change through a flood narrative always bears a risk of creating passive and detached audiences through the iteration of the conventional doomsday scenario which, according to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, makes the pending cataclysms appear “familiar, almost comforting ... If the world must end in fire or flood, the ecological devastation we foster through every car trip, meal and vacation ceases to trouble”.<sup>51</sup> On the other hand, the high “reality effect” of the series encourages both phenomenological and visceral engagement with the depicted extreme weather conditions. The critical promise of such catastrophic futurist vision resides exactly in its capacity to induce in viewers what Anne Kaplan calls “pretraumatic stress”<sup>52</sup>, facilitating the necessary realisation of the urgency of ecological risks and of the humans’ embeddedness in environment as a condition of their individual and social being.

Throughout the series, viewers are emphatically invited to ponder a wide variety of implications of the ongoing climate crisis, here represented as the apocalyptically driven storm, but also as the placid, inundated, post-flood landscape. Through indeterminate allegory within a specific localized setting, *The Swell* emphatically draws attention to the interwoven nature of living in the present exposing a world that is constantly undergoing a radical change that must be navigated not only through screens and apparatuses, but also at times in intensely physical ways that remind us about the precarity and resilience of human and non-human life.

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<sup>51</sup> COHEN, *ibid.*, 246.

<sup>52</sup> E. Ann KAPLAN, *Climate Trauma: Foreseeing the Future in Dystopian Film and Fiction*, New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2016.

## Imagining the aftermath of the flood

When the hurricane finally abates, large parts of the affected area are immersed in water, and the televisual rendering of the landscape drastically changes. The aerial view depicts regular rows of defunct power masts above the endless plane of the overflowed polder, providing striking visual imagery. The metropolis of Rotterdam becomes transformed into an archipelago with the rooftops of its modern architectural structures encircled by a river of shimmering blue, the outlines of the submerged streets barely discernible below. According to Astrid Bracke, flooded landscapes, and especially destroyed landmarks punctuating the serene looking watery expanses effectively function as “narrative devices through which flood fictions show the vast spatial aspects of the destruction of climate crisis on a smaller scale”<sup>53</sup>. Bracke argues that the radical metamorphosis of iconic sites “holds much more significance for the audience than a similar fate befalling an unfamiliar or geographically remote location”<sup>54</sup>. The altered landmarks prompt reconsideration of the trusted technological achievements and governmental contingency programmes that now appear insufficient both in preventing the climate catastrophe and ensuring the safety of the population in the face of the real disaster and its aftermath.

However, spectacular aerial images of post-deluge landscapes may also be problematic. As Cohen points out, “[t]hey assume a perspective serenely floating above observed facts”<sup>55</sup>. Distant perspective always presupposes human externality to and detachment from environment, whereas “[i]n the midst of things, it is muddy, messy, and uncomfortable. You’ll get soaked. You might get stuck. You may even drown”<sup>56</sup>. It is striking how quickly in the series this abstracted perspective replaces the violent disorder of the swift ecological catastrophe. Leaving the horror of the overflowing waters behind, the government routinely retreats to their safely elevated position (in both figurative and literal senses) to negotiate the economic and (geo)political implications of the rebuilding programmes, while architects and engineers draw up sophisticated blueprints for the regeneration of infrastructure and industrial activity. The unwavering human faith in “technofixes,” to use Donna Haraway’s term,<sup>57</sup> once again reduces the tangible landscape to abstract lines on paper, easy to contain and control. And yet, Haraway’s work equally endeavours to counter the claims that climate change is to be immediately disregarded because it is too gargantuan a problem that cannot possibly be resolved, that “the game is over, it’s too late, there’s no sense trying to make anything any better” (3). She reminds us that “situated technical projects and their people ... are not the enemy; they can do many important things for staying with the trouble”.<sup>58</sup> Staying with the trouble means acting in the present in order to create liveable common future, while also recognising there must be a collaboration between people and environment, because “alone, in our separate kinds of expertise and experience, we know both too much

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<sup>53</sup> BRACKE, *ibid.*, 282.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> COHEN, *ibid.*, 249.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>57</sup> HARAWAY, *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



and too little”<sup>59</sup>. *The Swell* serves as a cultural text that gives insight into how speculative storylines can give rise to (real-life) planning. Asking viewers to interpret a variety of “what ifs” not only as hypothetical narrative devices for the fictional characters to deal with, the series effectively operates as an instructional model that presents different strategies for living through the trouble depicted on screen. Showing characters who struggle to plan for the future sets the narrative apart from many other texts only engaged in the veneration of the spectacular.<sup>60</sup>

Rather than exclusively concentrating on the sheer decline of social order in the wake of the flood—though many scenes do gesture to the chaos within civil society that the storm creates, upending institutional and social frameworks—*The Swell* sets out to tackle infrastructural questions that arise given the scale of the inundation. As the head of Dutch society, the Prime Minister, Hans Kreuger, is confronted with “what is left” after the flood, in a physical world which has been completely blanketed in water. Contrary to the opening scenes showing a flurry of activity—city streets filling with cars; school-aged students being picked up by parents; recreational sporters making use of the high wind for their daredevil leisure time on the beach—the images of the landscapes in the aftermath of the flood are reminiscent of a nuclear fallout: largely depopulated of life, where (nearly) all human and other life have been engulfed by the waves. Much in line with the apocalyptic genre conventions, the storm has ushered in the possibility of a new age that is distinctly hopeful. In the relative vacuum that has replaced the industrious urban and agricultural areas, a near-blank watery canvas functions as a “clean slate” from which government officials can start afresh. John Collins has suggested that despite its stifling effects, the apocalyptic genre can also offer “indomitable hope, which is not always supported by rational analysis of human affairs, but may well be indispensable to human flourishing”<sup>61</sup>. While actual destruction is not a prerequisite for flourishing, *The Swell* shows how its metaphorical or narrative depictions can perhaps be mobilized as a helpful tool to imagine climate-proof futures, jump-starting resilient planning.

Envisaging the post-flood terrain as symbol and site of opportunity, *The Swell* equally exposes the ensuing struggle for power, providing interesting insights into the dynamics of integrated national and European politics (the diegetic world mirroring the real one), as well as how they clash, when different visions of the future compete. Once he is told about the devastation wrought in the Netherlands, one of the European ministers who plays a minor but crucial role in the series utters the phrase, “crises are also opportunities”<sup>62</sup>. Building back at the timeline and scale required for Europe to remain (financially) stable after a crisis of this magnitude within one of its member states will require nearly unlimited resources. With the Dutch infrastructure destroyed—and therefore their economic and cultural capital and collateral—the European Parliament will play an essential role in helping affected regions regrow. The series aptly, if not summarily, presents the complex network of actors and agents outside of the affected area as they attempt to assist

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<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>60</sup> NIXON, *ibid.*, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Collins, in MCALLISTER, *ibid.*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *The Swell*, Episode 4.

with the management of the crisis, turning the regional suffering into an opportunity for the broader community: as with most real-life investments, in *The Swell*, there are strings attached. Confronted with the European-led plan to leave the port of Rotterdam in ruin and, instead, to turn Schiphol into the largest regional airport in Europe, the Dutch Prime Minister sees a conspiracy. He is not only suspicious but angered that Europe would take advantage of the disaster to enhance their own position in the forthcoming build-up. While the port of Rotterdam plays an important role in the Dutch national economy, the European parliamentarians see the destroyed area merely as one of many European regions that can be left in the present state in favour of optimizing the less-affected infrastructure of the Belgian port of Antwerp. Here, nationalism and European dreams compete with one another on screen in a way that mimics very real tensions within European life writ large.<sup>63</sup> In line with what we argued before, this helps draw attention to the precarity of life in ways that might otherwise remain unexplored. It is only through the thought experiment of a potential crisis that the true vulnerability of living in the Lowlands is exposed to the contemporary audience, revealing the competing interests nestled within the built environments and natural landscapes of the affected zones, both national and supra-national.

In juxtaposition to the cutthroat European-Dutch negotiations, *The Swell* also brings in relief nationalistic attempts to unify the country after the flood. In the wake of the storm, the government announces a memorial harvest dinner to compensate for their largely inactive stance during the disaster, and to promote national heritage and unification. While mob-style politics have settled into the countryside with small waystations and depots charging egregious prices for everything from gas to a cell phone charge, the harvest dinner and day of remembrance are meant to counteract the social unrest in the wake of recent personal and societal crises that were lived through. The authorities' initiative represents a particular sort of reunification project where, despite the continued presence of destruction, survivors are asked to live in the ruins with an eye for the future. This is done primarily by means of orienting their attention to the long relationship between the Dutch people and the landscapes that they have built and maintained. As we have already demonstrated, the landscape plays a paramount role in the narrative. It is instrumentalized in line with geographer Edward Relph's theorization in his 1976 book *Place and Placelessness*, where he claims that "places are [always] emerging or becoming; with historical and cultural change new elements are added and old elements disappear. Thus, places have a distinct historical component"<sup>64</sup>. This suggests that landscape is never merely referential or static, but instead, both living and pliable.

Interestingly, while overtly focused on the future, the harvest dinner scenes are suffused with nostalgic feelings in that they consistently foreground the storyline of a family who flee "back" to the idyllic, pastoral landscape of their youth that was

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<sup>63</sup> It is worth noting that despite its futuristic (and therefore speculative) nature, this last part of the narrative overtly relies on social realist conventions in the depiction of complexities of the European inter- and intra-national political and economic relations.

<sup>64</sup> Edward RELPH, *Place and Placelessness*, London, Pion Ltd, 1986, 3.

spared the worst effects of the flood. As the family gradually settles into their new circumstances, farms, fields, and agricultural activities appear front and centre, continuing the trope in Dutch media and the cultural imaginary that rely on a distinct form of “the rural idyll, derived from idealised literary and painterly renderings”, employing the uncomplicated vision of an agrarian arcadia to the extent of widespread cultural fantasy or myth.<sup>65</sup> Yet here, such uncritical veneration of the countryside is complicated by reminding viewers that the very existence of farmland in the Netherlands requires sophisticated and well-functioning waterworks, polders, and dikes. In this sense, *The Swell* upholds the notion of the landscape as a “store of information that can be accessed by users”<sup>66</sup>, gesturing to the reality that lived-in and living landscapes achieve their meaning on account of the interplay between the natural world and human plans, interventions, and mediations, be those actual or imagined.

Relph argues that the dynamics of self and environment are mutually constitutive, indicating that complex relationships between the land, natural processes and human actions combine to (in)form a cohesive structure that is more than location-only. He writes:

In our everyday lives places are not experienced as independent, clearly defined entities that can be described simply in terms of their location or appearance. Rather they are sensed in a chiaroscuro of setting, landscape, ritual, routine, other people, personal experiences, care and concern for home, and in the context of other places.<sup>67</sup>

In the context of *The Swell*'s harvest dinner, Relph's contention helps to position landscape at the centre of this imaginative process. It is conceived not as a seemingly blank canvas for the schemes of rebuilding, but as a crucial factor to ensure that those remaining nodes of un-inundated land anchor the broader Dutch psyche within its cultural history and collective memory. The palpable nostalgia and longing in the series therefore are generated by the immediacy of the landscape, which triggers characters' realisations that the lives they have been living must be entirely reconceived.

To propel the imaginative process, in the series' final moments, the viewer is given a glimmer of hope amidst the chaos and devastation. Dissatisfied with the suggestions of the European Union, The Prime Minister ultimately comes up with his own plan to rebuild the country better and smarter than it has ever been, to fix the “errors of the past”<sup>68</sup>. His proposed plan, *Nederland Boven Water*, or “The Netherlands Above the Water,” represents a complete redesign and reimagination of the country. The concept, described by the Prime Minister himself as “science fiction,” is an attempt not to keep the water out, but to live with it in a cluster of

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<sup>65</sup> Esther PEEREN, Irina SOUCH, “Romance in the Cowshed: Challenging and Reaffirming the Rural Idyll in the Dutch Reality TV Show *Farmer Wants a Wife*”, in *Journal of Rural Studies*, vol. 67, Apr. 2019, 37–45, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.02.001>, 38.

<sup>66</sup> Jan SKALOŠ, Ivana KAŠPAROVÁ, “Landscape Memory and Landscape Change in Relation to Mining”, in *Ecological Engineering*, vol. 43, June 2012, 60–69, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecoleng.2011.07.001>, 63.

<sup>67</sup> RELPH, *ibid.*, 29.

<sup>68</sup> *The Swell*, Episode 6.

islands and channels that work with the effects of nature and provide nodes of dry land within the delta.<sup>69</sup> Moving from the seemingly impossible to the thinkable, and finally, to the actionable, the series demonstrates how speculative climate fiction can give a fascinating glimpse into the dynamics of response and resilience that will come to define much of the future, even as they remain hypothetically framed within the generic boundaries of the television drama.

The series' critical promise aligns with memory studies scholar Stef Craps' idea that we must begin to cultivate future-anterior thinking in the present that will help contour what the future might look like.<sup>70</sup> Anticipating potential disasters represents a new realm for memory studies that moves it away from its predilection with the past towards envisaging different possible futures on a rapidly warming and increasingly volatile planet. It isn't to say that a storm such as the one depicted in *The Swell* is a certainty, but on more abstract terms, cultivating anticipatory memory through engaging with such narratives allows to develop the sort of future-perfect thinking that we will ultimately need to employ in our own real-world responses to climate change. Couched in the terms of inevitability, the Prime Minister's ingenious plan delineates that, while for 600 years Dutch people battled against the water, current and future circumstances require more creative solutions, ones where humans no longer separate themselves from nature or keep it at bay, but where they "let it in." Having repudiated the European Commission's policies, the Dutch parliament adopts this strategy, forging a new identity for the Netherlands as it grapples not only with its history, but also as it confronts its future through an allegorical narrative that invites a multiplicity of responses.

We suggest that throughout *The Swell*, viewers are encouraged to reconsider a host of dynamics that get to the heart of being human in the Anthropocene: an age wherein our actions and reactions matter not only for us and other human lives, but for a far broader spectrum of being and phenomena than we might have previously considered. The series attests that speculative climate fiction as a genre is particularly suited to depicting and wrestling with the dynamics of living on a human dominated planet. Objects of speculative fiction "are able to provide a sense of qualia, of what it feels like to live under possible future environmental circumstances"<sup>71</sup>. Far from being abstract concerns, cultural texts like *The Swell* pose questions about storytelling and the effects of possible genre conventions available in narrative form: these objects are at our disposal to help "narrate past, present, and future engagements with our changing environment"<sup>72</sup>. The stories that we tell matter, providing timely thought experiments into everything from the operations of power, to the exposed precarity of human life even in affluent societies in relation to climate change, to human relationships with landscapes and the aesthetics of natural disasters themselves. As such, *The Swell* belongs to a vast archive of media that encourages viewers not merely to follow the plot, but to consciously take stock

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<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Stef CRAPS, "Climate Change and the Art of Anticipatory Memory." *Parallax*, vol. 23, no. 4, Oct. 2017, 479–92, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2017.1374518>.

<sup>71</sup> AMEEL, CRAPS, *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

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of the human history of changing the environment that is in dialogue with discourses of societal resilience in relation to environmental duress. Such active considerations of the implications and legacies of these changes facilitate understanding of the ongoing mediated and natural feedback loops of which we are a part, in which we exert influence, and in which we live.

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