Filming imagined and real catastrophe: Environmental trauma and natural disasters

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Abstract

This article sets out to illustrate the power of fictional film to present cautionary tales around climate change. Three commercially and critically acclaimed films are randomly selected from the same period across what can roughly be categorized as mainstream and independent sectors of Hollywood production. Their reception together with their authorial intentionality is examined to help tease out some of the unique environmental affordances presented by such texts. Close textual readings are carried out to help point towards their emotional and ecological preoccupation with loss and trauma, which reflect ongoing global tensions around humans' undeniable role and responsibility in the struggle to actively address climate change concerns.

Keywords

auteur

bereavement

climate change

eco-cinema

everything-is-connected

Jungian psychology

Introduction

This article emanates from the long-held proposition by film and literary scholars that the creative artefacts produced in a culture ostensibly speak to the dominant tensions, contradictions and the system of values that appear to be privileged across contemporary society (Dunlap 2008). Such tensions are especially evident when focusing on successful popular texts that de facto have garnered large audiences and tend to speak to the pervasive Zeitgeist of a culture. Consequently, it is argued by eco-film scholars (Rust et al. 2013) that since climate change has become *the* dominant conflict evident in our world, it makes sense to uncover how such mediated artistic practices highlight and address the ongoing crisis. Destructive climatic events have particular currency within eco-film scholarship that explores the creative potential and resonance of cautionary environmental parables (Brereton 2016; Dunn 2014; Rust et al. 2013). Plausible environmental cautionary tales that speak directly to climate change concerns actively draw on the emotional and aesthetic power of loss and bereavement through natural disasters.[1]

Three films were chosen for extended analysis. *The Descendants* (Payne, 2011) deals with the less spectacular fears of its protagonists in coping with family bereavement, and the need to find the right course of action in protecting a future inheritance of land from the ever-present dangers of commercial despoliation. *The Impossible* (Bayona, 2012) on the other hand addresses the deep trauma of one western family that survived a major tsunami that killed over 230,000 people across Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and eleven other countries throughout the region. This relatively big-budget, real-life disaster story can in turn be contrasted with the quirky independent and art-house-influenced feature *Take Shelter* (Nichols, 2011) which focuses on the psychology of a troubled blue-collar worker with recurring nightmares. These

evocative narratives call up fears around climate change, overlaying a pervasive fear of loss and total annihilation that permeates the creative imagery of each film.

Eco-trauma, unconscious environmental fears

Whether ecological catastrophes meet us as experiences or indirectly as images circulating in the media, they tend to confront us, stifle us and even paralyse us politically and psychologically. Media representations of environmental disasters can induce passive resignation (Baykoff 2013; O'Neill 2013). This sense of ongoing paralysis remains a pervasive danger and is embedded within much eco-trauma cinema. Psychologist Tina Amorok theorizes in her study 'The Eco-trauma and eco-recovery of being' that we defend 'ourselves from the fearsome side of inter-connectedness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religion, fantasies, racism and sexism) in addition to psychological defence mechanisms (denial, dissociation, psychic numbing) and an array of debilitating behaviours and responses that bear the signature of trauma' (Narine 2015: 29). At the same time eco-trauma results from a paradox that characterizes our age of anxiety. 'We know our ecosystem is imperilled, but we respond in contradictory ways. On the one hand we want to take action to protect the natural world', but 'it is also undeniable that we disavow our growing knowledge of climate change and dwindling natural resources in order to function more happily in a global economic context, replete with unsustainable practices' (Narine 2015: 1). Such pervasive trauma and cognitive dissonance feeds into the back-story and pressures heaped upon the contrasting protagonists who are highlighted within this article. This in turn leaves an indelible mark on such characters' inability to perceive outside the fog of individual psychological trauma and related forms of depression. These psychological troubles have to be appreciated

and firmly grasped in the struggle to help fight against the ever-increasing and complex manifestations of climate change:

> Cinema is pre-eminently the medium that engages people in a virtual dialogue with their own and their culture's unconscious, more deeply than is commonly taken for granted. The movie theatre shares symbolic features with both the church and the therapy room: all are sacred spaces where people can encounter the archetypical and ease personal suffering, in the case of the cinema whether through laughter or tears, without inhibition or fear. (Izod and Dovalis 2015: 1)

According to such Jungian theorists, individuals need to develop the capacity to effectively grieve to mature fully and uncover their core sense of individuality. This drive constantly underpins the narrative trajectory of the contrasting storylines for the films discussed in this article. All three films deal with loss and bereavement across a wide range of registers from the more conventional level of individual and communal human bereavement, to the more psychotic registers of seeing dystopic futures.

Uncovering the inherent power of cinema must, however, constantly walk the tight rope between accusations of avoiding the obvious and pervasive ideological top-down control and manipulation of the Hollywood studio machine (or the less hegemonic power of Indie-productions) and most pointedly not fully appreciating or foregrounding critical analysis of what mainstream audiences actually perceive or believe, while engaging with such powerful narratives. Furthermore, scholars could be accused of simply seeking out a preferred, pro-environmental interpretation that

audiences might hypothetically at least take on board, while actively reading media 'against the grain', as against reinforcing conventional interpretations (Ivakhiv 2013; Rust et al. 2013; Brereton 2016). Such ongoing tensions certainly come to the fore in these readings that privilege explicit ecological interpretations.

Jungian psychology can certainly provide a useful method to bolster this difficult environmental media mode of interpretation. John Beebe has noted for instance that cinema and psychoanalysis have grown up concurrently as 'close siblings nurtured on a common Zeitgeist, and sharing a common drive to explore and realize the psyche' (1996: 579). Jung 'was radically optimistic about the healing possibilities of the self', continues Beebe, 'so audiences seem to approach film, like Dorothy and her friends off to see the Wizard, with the expectation of a miracle, which has an extraordinary effect upon one's state of mind' (Beebe 1996: 582). The goal of such a psychological (even Jungian) transformation, through their articulation of a utopian strand of dreaming, represents a deep form of individuation, involving 'the process of psychic growth that occurs independently of the ego's will' (Izod and Dovalis 2015: 3). One could similarly suggest that film as an art form can also be re-interpreted as an active mirroring guide, with a corresponding potentially therapeutic value for spectators. This is augmented as audiences cross-identify with the traumatic journey of mediated protagonists, striving to reach their heightened sense of individuality. Whether or not spectators consciously experience film as such a positive stimulus, much less fully appreciate its therapeutic effect, is another matter. Some cultural and film scholars balk at such apparently naive and unidirectional media effects theory (Nisbet et al. 2018). Nonetheless, environmental scholars like Bron Taylor (2013) and others often

take a leap of faith by constantly attesting to the power of cinema to project an often

hidden or unconscious, in other words deeply spiritual, environmental agenda.

The Descendants: Tragedy of the commons – an ethical allegory

While *The Descendants* does not initially appear to reflect a worked out

environmental agenda, its ethical fixation with land and 'doing the right thing' with

respect to succession rights, coupled with coping with a partner's coma and eventual

death, leads to an active preoccupation with environmental and emotional trauma and

grief.

Based on a novel by Kaul Hemmings, the Hawaiian lawyer Matt King (George

Clooney) is faced with two dilemmas: his large extended family is thinking of selling

their inherited 25,000 acres to a developer and he must help the consortium decide

what to do for the benefit of all, and his wife Elizabeth is in a coma on life support

following a severe water skiing injury.

Despite deep emotion and trauma, King wants to do the right thing and find his wife's

lover, who he has just found out about, in case he wants to say goodbye. When

eventually discovered, the lover does not want to take any responsibility for his

behaviour, glibly suggesting that the affair 'just happened'. Instinctively, King affirms

a very deep environmental ethical precept pronouncing 'things don't just happen.

Everything happens for a reason'. There are coincidentally five basic assumptions

implicit across such a broadly environmental ethical perspective: (1) everything is

connected to everything else, (2) the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, (3)

meaning is context dependent, (4) process has primacy over parts, and (5) humans and

non-human nature are one (Carter 2007; Brereton 2016). The progressive manifestation of such environmental ethical assumptions remains an idealized dream of a pure environment movement, where for instance consensus is easily secured, and protagonists do not have to worry about the material consequences of such a philosophy. Of course, the reality of lived human experience is always messier and more contradictory. Coincidentally or not, King embraces this broadly benevolent philosophy, deciding *not* to sell the land and thereby taking the right environmental path, while setting out to conserve the land as a nature reserve.

This ethical philosophy emulates Aldo Leopold's seminal 'land ethic', which rests upon a single unifying premise: 'that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts' (1949: 204). Leopold's thesis has become a central tenet of environmental thinking and the symbiotic relationship proposed between human and nature has remained the dominant orthodoxy of much deep ecological thinking. Such a simple notion can in many ways cut through the psychological fog of individual obsession and trauma and help to connect individuals and their communities within a long-term therapeutic symbiotic relationship.

A recuperative notion of a land ethic is most clearly manifested in debates around the 'Tragedy of the Commons', which is used to read film from an environmental perspective and occurs when individuals, sharing a resource held in common, act in their own self-interest and in turn progressively degrade this collective resource through their selfish actions. This phenomenon is historically illustrated through the classic Hollywood western in particular, with representations of cowboys placing more and more cattle (or sheep in some cases) on land held in common and having to

fight over securing scarce resources, most notably water (Moore 2017; Keller 2010). Such a conflictual scenario similarly calls attention to the legal versus the ethical allocation of land as a scarce finite resource that is played out for more contemporary audiences in films like *The Descendants*.

At a macro level the film clearly labels the land-ethic as a defining theme that encapsulates its explicit environmental and ethical agenda. King sets this core theme up by pontificating how he has remained totally ethical, by not squandering his inheritance and embracing the 'Rule against Perpetuity' to remind the audience that such a stance would have potentially spoilt his family: 'I lived only on my income from my legal practice and never drew down anything from the prospect of the sale of land'. Not surprisingly this idealistic stance is instinctively frowned upon by his grieving father-in-law who is looking for any excuse to explain his daughter's unfortunate accident. Furthermore, this land dilemma comes to a head, as his expanded family have to decide whether or not to dispose of a desirable piece of real estate on a nearby island.

Viewers get to see a first glimpse of this inheritance dilemma and the precious land in question, when the distraught and broken family go on a quest to find Elisabeth's ex-lover. The land is shown in its more 'natural state' full of grazing cattle. Future architectural drawings highlight the prospect of the construction of a highly lucrative hotel and golf course with magnificent views of the sea. Looking out over the romanticized landscape, the father nostalgically memorializes how over the years the growing family had camped on the beach in its shelter. Everything has its time becomes the holistic mantra for human's craving to be at one with their habitat.

Meanwhile, the camera pans over the magnificent view, privileging a mise en scène frequently valorized in eco-cinema that holds the perfect vista and landscape image for audiences to immerse themselves within (see also a similar reading of the 1991 film *Grand Canyon* in Brereton 2005: 91–123). Refusing to sign away ownership of the land to the rest of his extended clan remains the unexpected final decision of a traumatized chief protagonist. He has finally reached environmental ethical and legal maturity, which is confirmed by a final scene involving the sacred rites of burial on water rather than land.

This environmental ur-scene affords a close-up image of beautiful native flowers, before pulling out to reveal a native small boat containing King and his two daughters wearing garlands of flowers, as they begin a ceremony of burying Elisabeth's ashes at sea. While gently pouring the precious human remains – momentarily polluting the water – the grieving family complete their ritual by also placing their ceremonial garlands onto the surface of the water and the screen audience witness these sacred proceedings filmed also from underneath the sea. This unusual nature-focused point-of-view is reminiscent of similar scenes in the lost-at-sea narrative starring Robert Redford titled *All is Lost* (2013), the religious allegory embedded in *Life of Pi* (2012) or alternatively the art-house and spiritual tour-de-force captured in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011). At a macro, cosmic and holistic level, nature in all its stages of being – especially encapsulated by the primary elements of land and sea – has been ritualistically appeased, as further illustrated across other eco-readings (see Brereton 2005, 2016). But this sense of learning from loss and bereavement is echoed on a different scale in our second example. Here nature and the sea are visualized in total extremis through the environmental and human destruction wrought by a tsunami.

***The Impossible*: Environmental disaster and survivor guilt**

Peter Bradshaw's review in *The Guardian* (Thursday, 27 December 2012) focuses on how the film adaptation was based on a real-life Spanish family who went on a Christmas holiday to Thailand and got caught up in the tsunami that hit South East Asia: 'With simplicity and conviction, it manages to do something other than a conventional disaster movie'. Yet at the same time the film remains open to accusations of manipulation and magnifying the dilemma of the western (white) tourist experience of global disasters. At the outset, it would appear little is made through the story of the majority indigenous communities who suffered most from the tragedy, compared with the over-represented middle-class western family who remain the central focus of this and the previous narrative.

Henry (Ewan McGregor), together with Maria (Naomi Watts) and their three boys pull at all the heart strings; Lucas (Tom Holland) in particular pulls off a masterful performance keeping the whole family together, together with Thomas (Samuel Joslin) and his other brother Simon (Oaklee Prendergast).[2] The environmental calamity and deluge is rendered 'viscerally real' and almost unwatchable, according to some commentators.[3] Certainly, *The Impossible* effectively brings home the simple agony and terror of such a huge natural disaster and most specifically focuses on one family being separated, creating a psychological void that is in many ways worse than physical injury.

The fictionalized mediascape concentrates on the wave's impact, the 'thrilling moment of nature's allegedly exceptional violence' and on the debris left in its wake,

all but producing a form of 'ruin-pornography, which symbolically abjected communities across the Indian Ocean'. As such, the disaster marked a global watershed in the emergence of what Julia Leyda and Diana Negra (2015: 2) call 'extreme weather media' in which large-scale disasters are constructed as media events, through a broad range of convergent media environments. It is suggested that just as Vietnam changed the template for covering war, the tsunami changed the model of broadcasting and filming disaster (Leyda and Negra 2015). With new technology at one's command, real-life images of what had happened just a few hours earlier could be beamed instantly around the globe. Mediated disaster is becoming more prevalent with a proliferation of weather television channels and more time and space devoted to documenting, and dramatizing the awesome power of nature (McKim 2013).

In the event's aftermath, Charles Sarvan argues that 'tsunami aid paved the way for disaster capitalism and political profiteering' (in Deckard 2015: 2). Other scholars remain equally critical of the way mainstream media and film speak to very worrying trends across real-life environmental disasters. Reflecting on the politics of disaster representation, Junot Diaz for instance suggests that writers (alongside filmmakers) should simply refuse easily available tropes of disaster as apocalyptic 'ends of all things', and instead deploy apocalyptic visions as a revelation of an inherent structural violence deployed in the service of transnational capital (in Deckard 2015: 2). The waves were so lethal, environmental geographers suggest, because the coral reefs that should have protected the vulnerable coasts had been dynamited to facilitate the free movement of tourists and commercial shipping (Diaz in Deckard). Reminiscent of similar debates around the lack of protection for the levees in New Orleans after

2005's Hurricane Katrina (Leyda and Negra 2015) or the commodification of land simply for tourism as invoked in *The Descendants*, the regions that suffered most were those that had most to lose because of their total dependence on easily accessible sites for satisfying open modes of global tourism.

Taking into account the appeal of such disaster narratives, alongside various psychological studies of mass unconscious desires, one could at least hypothesize that audiences are crying out for filmic mediations and new creative imaginaries to help call attention to global environmental catastrophes in teasing out explicit models of cognitive engagement.

Maria's story – coping with trauma

While as also suggested by Deckard, science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke compared the tsunami to the Hollywood disaster movie *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), any comparison with this film seems a bit unfair. *The Impossible* poured millions into special effects to create realistic sequences of tidal waves and in turn providing vicarious forms of identification and empathy for mass audiences. At another level, such efforts could still be dismissed as a distraction from the film's reluctance to adequately represent the collective suffering and trauma of millions of native survivors. Thai nationals only appear peripherally on-screen. According to Deckard's review, they serve as mute servants, unintelligible nurses or as 'mystical minorities', who drag Watts's barely conscious body to safety and remain passive surrogates, simply reinforcing the distresses of the wounded white woman.

But one can take issue with such knee-jerk and overly dismissive interpretations. The bonus features and audio commentary in the DVD version paint a more nuanced vision of what was intended. The creatives (Director, Writers, Actors and others on the creative team) make it very clear that they were concerned from the outset with the dangers of such negative ideological connotations entwined with the focus on white characters. They explicitly highlight how they did *not* want to just show the Thai people as victims and used all their narrative and creative skills to counter this form of stereotypical misrepresentation. For instance, the aforementioned scene where an old native man saves and carries Maria into his village is directly followed by a sequence that shows several old 'mother figures' essentially 'nurturing' her out of her state of distress, while they ritualistically clean and dress her. The traumatized outsider is alternatively presented like a helpless baby having all her basic human needs met with both dignity and respect. Furthermore, the native Thai people substitute their now useless timber front door (and a clear symbol of homestead) as a stretcher to transport the injured mother to hospital. In addition, the voice-over commentary further highlights the danger of crudely differentiating between 'natives' and 'westerners' as binary others, while more productively striving to tell a counter-story. This sense of tension reminds readers of the holistic deep ecological edict that *all* life is sacred and that everything is connected (Sessions 1995). Of course, it could be counter-argued that this strategy and associated respect is designed to simply pay lip service to a cosy form of early environmentalism where natives embodied a deep ecological sensibility. Essentially the film appears to remain wholeheartedly focused on a well-heeled white family that survived the natural disaster. But on balance, I suggest, the textual evidence paints a more complex and inclusive story around human trauma and disaster.

The bonus features on the DVD constantly place emphasis on attempts to capture the visceral sensation and power of the tsunami, using a massive water tank to enable filming from a controlled environment and dramatizing the medical response in its aftermath. The so-called money shot of special-effects movies is sensitively replayed as audiences witness first-hand the sheer power of the tsunami churning everything in its path. This phenomenon is dramatically re-framed and intertextually captured for example through amateur camera footage during the later real-life Japanese tsunami, with rivers of displaced cars and all types of found material in total free flow. The 'rules of nature' become literally turned on their head as the force of water cascades across an urban landscape that has never been flooded before. Big budget fictional re-creations of natural disasters can of course only simulate such traumatic events. Nothing appears to stand firm in the wake of the screen disaster, except a very deep-rooted and majestic tree, where the mother and son find shelter, together with another lost blond child they take under their wing. Over a major part of the film's screen time, Maria is shown struggling to stay alive with her injuries through visceral scenes of fear and physical pain. Such potent images of trauma and psychological struggle for survival recall Walter Benjamin's analysis of the flashback as an important technique in the development of the cinema (Hirsh 2002; Traverso and Broderick 2010).

While *The Impossible* is not especially complex or even subtle in its overall diegesis, through the simple idea of survival being the most agonizing primal focus and final state that individual protagonists have to face, the narrative draws close attention to

the dilemma of 'survivor's guilt' – the psychologically aftershock of a shattered and irreparable blow to those left behind.

Closure: Recalling global catastrophe through emotional catharsis

The final journey 'back to civilisation', which sees the protagonists escaping onto a private plane, is claimed by the creative team to convey de facto a 'plastic bubble', which alternatively dramatizes how 'stupid normal life is', while also highlighting the universal, illusionary world of materialism and the impossibility of total escape from the past. Certainly, the sanitized space of the aeroplane affords only a tentative sense of safety and security.

Struggling to provide the appropriate ending to the movie, the scriptwriters focus on three pieces of performative exposition that help to connect and anchor the global environmental trauma with the local and the personal: Lucas finally takes off his orphan tag that defined him as a disaster victim and that most traumatized him earlier, as he believed he had lost his family for ever; Henry opens a note from a fellow survivor who was also looking for his family but was probably not as fortunate as himself. The note reads 'we are at the beach'. (This piece of business effectively dramatizes how most survivors were *not* as lucky in being reunited with their loved ones. Hence the scale and horror of the tragedy is further dramatized and brought back into focus); Maria is shown looking at the wrong name scrawled on her arm. She could have been that person and simply another statistic, reflected in the huge casualties of the disaster. All of these crude yet pointed semiotic elements and pieces

of performative business help to pull focus away from total identification with this apparently 'lucky family', escaping the horrors and aftermath of the tsunami.

Every element in the mise en scène becomes important to appreciating the character's psychological attributes and their deeply felt emotional scars. In varying ways, the whole family as individuals must first face up to their personal trauma and recognize the unreality of the hermeneutically sealed bubble created by the process of escaping and the prospect of going back home. As highlighted earlier by Jungian theorists, the goal of such transformation is 'individualisation' (Izod and Dovalis 2015: 3). Yet such elusive notions of psychological individualization are nonetheless foregrounded and cogently called into question by isolating these lucky (white) survivors. I believe this remains the creators' preferred eco-reading and primary focus of identification for mass audiences in the final sequence: overplaying the psychological potency of the movie, the director talks of how it finishes with an 'emotional tsunami, as Naomi releases a tear', highlighting again the suffering and pain that she and many others had endured during this catastrophe. Dovetailed in the background through the plane's window is the devastated beach down below, contrasting with the family's first touristic visions of the idyllic island resort only a few days earlier. This image further isolates the true visual reality of what has occurred. But as the aeroplane moves up higher into the stratosphere, a clear blue sky is revealed, affording some home comforts and memories one suspects.

Take Shelter

Unlike *The Impossible's* big budget and conventional disaster storyline, *Take Shelter* is a slow-paced Indie-movie. It opens with the actor Michael Shannon having a very

convincing nightmare, where the sky rains down a strange form of liquid that is so thick and viscous that it feels and appears like oil, which he later tries to wash off after waking up from a nightmare. Shannon plays a psychologically damaged, working-class family man named Curtis who is also fearful for his own sanity. He endures more explicit dreams throughout of nature *in extremis* with lightning storms and bats flying through the sky and an oncoming climate catastrophe.

To help overcome his fears and at the same time protect his family, Curtis proceeds to re-build his somewhat derelict storm shelter and re-create a form of allegorically framed 'Lifeboat' (Hardin 1974), where they can be safe from all that is going on in the real world. He almost loses everything, however, through his irrational striving to complete this Ark-like project, which can be seen as an act of (male) hubris or even madness by all around him in the same way that Sarah Lichtman describes the Cold War craze for DIY fall-out shelters as a patriotic way to assert masculinity (2006). Leading up to the final denouement, Curtis had apparently found use for his tenaciously constructed storm shelter, while confronting his unconscious fears. Incidentally, from a Jungian perspective the audience is visually introduced to the shelter, through a camouflaged door in the perfect green of his lawn, suggesting a psychoanalytic portal into a deeper unconscious. But on re-opening the protective shelter following its first usage, the aftermath of a minor storm is revealed, rather than the 'big one'.

Employing a Freudian reading, E Anne Kaplan describes the film as future-tense trauma, deploying provocative memories for the future where protagonist suffers from *pre*traumatic stress disorder, instead of the usual *post*traumatic disorder (Kaplan 2013:

53). The protagonist suffers from hallucinations of violent climate change. Consequently the 'hero's life is all but destroyed because of his case of future-tense trauma' and 'his vivid hallucinations and dreams of violent climate events that destroy the natural world'. Through identification with Curtis as the chief protagonist, 'audiences apprehend what drastic and fatal climate events would mean' and audiences at least 'vicariously experience the future as probable catastrophe' (Kaplan 2013: 57). Environmental communication scholars like Julie Doyle (2009) believe that the slow temporal movement of climate change requires dramatically new forms of 'creative imaginaries' to help reinforce the pervasive, yet often unpredictable environmental dangers facing the future. Such dramatic filmic strategies evident in *Take Shelter* help develop new creative imaginaries to potentially visualize such slow-paced disasters.

Curtis' often erratic action and paranoid agency is counterpointed and illustrated by a striking scene where he reveals his extreme environmental fears to his local community. Dramatized on the floor of a hall – which is usually reserved for local events, evoking conviviality and communal social harmony – he enunciates one of the most charged ecological cautionary tale speeches of cinema history. Prophetically his monologue begins, 'there is a storm coming'. This premonition certainly plays into theoretical debates and concerns over appropriate strategies around warning the public of the dangers of climate change as opposed to rationalizing and dismissing the speaker as being simply delusional, suffering from some form of psychosis or paranoia. Consequently, if only measured on a predefined psychological barometer, it appears relatively easy to dismiss such fears as simply irrational when embodied by a psychologically flawed character.

In a narrative where audiences are cued to actively question the main character's mental state, this remains a key aspect of revelation and cognitive engagement; everything is focused around questioning the protagonist's dreams, thought-patterns and behaviours. Recalling great literary classic tragedies like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, up to contemporary filmic protagonists like Bess, in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves* (1996) from the outset audiences have a strong inkling of the chief protagonist's psychological impairment, if not full-blown pathology from the start of the narrative. But while this may serve to facilitate his total dismissal by many in his community for his dramatic forebodings, those who know him best together with screen audiences who grow to appreciate the tenor of his psychological trauma, learn over the source of the narrative to appreciate, if not connect, with his deep psychic relationship towards such climate change foreboding.

As Curtis violently overturns a table laden with food onto the floor – while being confronted by his erstwhile friend who has betrayed him – audiences are left vicariously feeling the psychic trauma of Curtis' fears. But labelled as crazy becomes too easy a cop-out for cognitively diagnosing, even in totally dismissing such behaviour, as many appear to do. All of this appears a long way from the uncontested traumatic (but at all times realistic) behaviour and emotional reactions evident in *The Impossible*, much less witnessed in *The Descendants*.

Furthermore, Curtis' prophesy somewhat surprisingly does not cast explicit religious judgement on the end times in which he lives. Instead he embodies a particular kind of instability, which one could characterize as 'post-sustainability', or at least

displaying some sense that things cannot continue as they are. This sense of a phenomenal prophesy that has relevance for us all is highlighted in the film by the omission of moral judgements in favour of continual references to unsustainable environmental practice. This register is noticed by several reviewers of the film, as encapsulating either environmental or social tensions. These cues include the vacation money saved in a biscuit tin, the overpriced sleeping tablets, the un-cooperative insurance company, the insufficient health care infrastructure, news reports of disastrous chemical spills, land stripped for development and even the unnatural yellow food served at every meal and somehow fetishized by the camera. In calling attention to the latter motif in particular, some reviewers suggest that *Take Shelter* draws the viewer's gaze to the everyday signs of unsustainability and the complex meta-discourses around the philosophy and ethics of environmentalism generally. This aspect appears a long way from the more mainstream direct address intensification and explicit preoccupation with global natural disasters explored in *The Impossible* or the land ethic as highlighted in *The Descendants*.

Finally, at the conventionally beautiful and erstwhile recuperative sea-shore, as the father helps build sand castles with his daughter, the family finally recognize the 'storm to match all storms' heading towards the land. This is the end. His (albeit psychotic) fears around the possibility of radical climate change have been validated, but at what cost. As the two parents exchange knowing looks, recalling the traumatic ending of *Melancholia* (2011), there is literally nothing to do or look forward to. Yet at the same time the film's closure might alternatively be decoded as a productive environmental cautionary tale for audiences. Most especially viewers are actively

encouraged to appreciate and recognize the psychic potency of their dreams, along with other forms of trans-human feelings and environmental sensitivities.

Concluding remarks

All three contrasting case studies draw on an emotional and traumatic engagement with the most significant threat to our planet and way of life, one that society needs to appreciate and learn to face up to. Post-Jungian and trauma theorizing can assist in understanding the relationship between film, psychological representation and its emotional impact, while addressing the more abstract nature of environmental concerns that affect our way of life that manifest through natural disasters. Eco-trauma theory in particular remains a very useful tool and lens to analyse such narratives and help audiences appreciate their potency. These very different filmic examples call attention to audience's environmental learning and engagement by closely examining a number of revealing scenes like those around coping with bereavement and the therapeutic expression of a sea-burial of a beloved wife in *The Descendants*, the drama of Maria under-water facing her deepest fears in *The Impossible*, together with the climatic sequence in *Take Shelter* where the apocalyptic vision of the hurricane/tsunami is finally witnessed coming onto land. Such engaging and memorable scenes among others are effectively knitted into compulsive narratives, which help to dramatize the emotional punch necessary to communicate with mass audiences. Coping with the cycle of life and death, while dealing with extreme forms of natural disaster and imbalance remains emotionally challenging, especially with increasing levels of disruption and conflict forecasted. But such

provocative films at least can provide useful narrative and imaginative modes of active engagement.

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Notes

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[1] Well-regarded, art-house films like *The Tree of Life* (2011) and *Melancholia* (2011) have been examined with respect to how their storylines foreground psychological

traumas around bereavement and end-of-the-world scenarios, specifically from a deep ecological and climate change perspective (see Ivakhiv 2013; Sinnerbrink 2014; Brereton 2016).

[2] Directed by Juan Antonio Bayona and scripted by Sergio Sanchez, *The Impossible* recreates the massive ocean tsunami of Boxing Day 2004 and focuses on the Orchid Restaurant hotel in Thailand where Maria Belon and her boys Lucas 10, Thomas 8 and Simon 5 were playing nearby with their dad, before literally all hell breaks loose.

[3] Clint Eastwood's 2010 movie *Hereafter* had a similar opening sequence but was less engaging and by all accounts not as financially successful.