

## DISASTER MYTHS AND REALITY: A STUDY OF THE REPRESENTATIONS OF DISASTER IN ENGLISH BLOCKBUSTERS

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Representation of disaster in celluloid is not a recent phenomenon, rather the subject of disaster has been explored in English films since 1913. *Mikkel Fugl Eskjær* in his article, "The Climate Catastrophe as Blockbuster" (2013), has stated:

*Cinema, considered as the most representative art form of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ... has been particularly important in placing the catastrophe at the center of cultural imaginations. The list of "end of the world" films and cinematic depictions of natural and historical disasters is remarkable. It represents an unbroken continuum from early silent films (for example, *The Last Days of Pompei* [1913]) to the most recent releases (*World War Z* [2013]; *After Earth* ; *Oblivion*; *Elysium* [2013]). (340)*

The entertainment industry has found the subject rather lucrative in the sense that the enormous spectacle of mass destruction and death easily captures popular imagination, and commercial movies capitalize on people's latent fear of experiencing disaster in real life. A common feeling lurks in the minds of most human beings that what will happen if the normal world around them to which they are well accustomed suddenly goes topsy-turvy, and in such conditions how should they react? This very fear has been turned into a product of popular entertainment where scenes of horror compiled with action and adventure are being sold to the public who can very well identify themselves with the victims of disaster in celluloid and thereby imagine similar happenings in real life. Therefore, disaster films "both draw on and articulate social anxieties and/or contemporary risk perceptions", and this explains the popularity of disaster movies and their grossing millions of dollars at the box office worldwide (*Eskjær 342*). Way back in 1979, the *Time* magazine in its "Behaviour" section had noted in an article entitled, "The Deluge of Disastermania", that recent production in the popular culture sector dealing with disasters and catastrophes 'is something of a growth industry' (qtd. in Quarantalli 2). True to the verdict, the business made by disaster movies has seen steady growth over the last three decades with the latest blockbuster *2012* (2009) collecting \$230.5 million at the box office on its worldwide opening weekend.

Following the trajectory of the research on disaster films done by social scientists like E. L. Quarantelli and Russell R. Dynes in the 1970s and 1980s and the present day

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scientists like *Mikkel Fugl Eskjær*, Erik Auf der Heide and Gary R. Webb, *this paper will identify some of the common trends followed by most of the Hollywood disaster movies, and thereby try to understand and relate the popular myths of disaster prevalent among the common people. This task will be accomplished through content analysis of some popular movies like The Poseidon Adventure (1972), The Towering Inferno (1974), Independence Day (1996), Twister (1996), Titanic (1997), Volcano (1997), The Day After Tomorrow (2004) and 2012 (2009), paying much attention to the credibility of the physical features of disaster and disaster management shown in these films, and the portrayal of individual and group behaviour in situations of disaster.*

During the silent era of films the subject of disaster was dealt with probably for the first time in 1913 in *The Last Days of Pompeii*, a cinematic representation of a few days before the colossal eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79A.D, which led to the cataclysmic destruction of the city of Pompeii. It was based on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's 1834 novel of the same name. *Noah's Ark* (1928), released in the transition period between the silent movies and the talkies, depicted a wartime situation wherein the main protagonists were pitted against a great deluge. As the tag line described the film as "The Spectacle of the Ages", the film in its attempt to bring alive action and adventure on screen ended up in the drowning of three extras, injuries to several others and the heroine's contracting pneumonia. Several other movies like *Metropolis* (1927), *San Francisco* (1936), *Old Chicago* (1937) etc. constituted the first few decades of English disaster movies. Eventually with the advancement of film technology disaster films started presenting more accurate and detailed scenes of disaster, and the 1970s witnessed as thick crop of immensely popular disaster movies like *Airport* (1970, 1975, 1977, 1979), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), *The Towering Inferno* (1974), *Earthquake* (1974) and *The China Syndrome*(1979). Nineteen nineties onwards the disaster films aimed at being truer to life and incorporated much scientific research in the production, presentation and managing of disaster on screen. Examples include *Independence Day* (1996), *Twister* (1996), *Titanic* (1997), *Dante's Peak* (1997), *Volcano* (1997), *Deep Impact* (1997), *Armageddon* (1998), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *The War of the Worlds* (2005), *World Trade Centre* (2006), *2012* (2009). *Mikkel Fugl Eskjær* sums up the two trends of the disaster movies of the 1970s and 1990s in the following manner:

*First, the 1970s disaster film was typically about man-made disasters such as runaway trains, blazing high-rises, periled airplanes, ocean liners turned upside down, and so on. In the 1990s, when the disaster film experienced a sort of revival, there was a shift towards natural hazards and disasters such as volcanoes, meteor impact, weird weather phenomena, pandemic threats, and so forth. Recently, the two tendencies have merged into a greater interest in man-made, or anthropogenic, natural disasters; what has elsewhere been called "(un)natural" catastrophes. (341)*

Here on, this paper will discuss some of the common traits of the disaster movies by taking recourse to content analysis of a few very popular movies of the 1970s, 1990s and 2000s with a view to its correspondence to real life as it is deemed that movies have a great influence in shaping public opinion of disaster and post-disaster social response.

Popular culture of disaster has been an important subject of study in disaster management for the social scientists over the years. Gary R. Webb opines that "... disasters have an important cultural dimension. Disasters impact culture, and culture contributes to disasters. ... the field of disaster has begun to take a cultural turn" (434). The beginning of research on popular culture of disaster can be traced back to the beginning of the last century. Dynes and Quarantelli note:

*"Perhaps the first attempt to apply social science concepts to the study of disaster was Samuel M. Prince's investigation of the munitions ship explosion in the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1917. During the 20's and 30's, there were sporadic studies, primarily by single investigators. World War II and the bombing of cities stimulated a number of studies, focusing on reactions under stress. While these studies were not directly on reactions to natural disasters, they did provide useful observations on individual reactions to crises. (7)"*

There after in the 1950s and 1960s "a more coherent program of disaster studies emerged" supported by various government agencies and institutes like the National Opinion Research Centre (1950-54) at the University of Chicago, Disaster Research Centre (1963) at the Ohio State University and many other centres run by different universities of America from where research teams have gone all around the world studying earthquakes, cyclones, floods, tornadoes and so on, thereby accumulating a "large body of social scientific knowledge on individual and group reaction to disaster. This knowledge is well founded, based on repeated observations by several different observers in a variety of disaster situations" (Dynes et al 7-8). Extensive research has thereby been done on "social behavior during natural disaster situations" (Wenger et al. 33).

Eminent social scientists like E.L. Quarantelli, Russell R. Dynes, Dennis E. Wenger and the like have often directed their study to popular culture content and the extent to which it affects public conceptions and misconceptions about disaster and disaster behavior. E. L. Quarantelli in his essay, "The Study of Disaster Movies: Research Problems, Findings and Implications" (1980), points out,

*"It can be logically argued that [a] major source of beliefs about disasters is derived from popular culture. We use the term popular culture to denote films, novels, comic books, advertisements, songs, television and radio entertainment shows and programs, and other nonjournalistic products disseminated via the mass media. (2)"*

Social scientists have highlighted the role of movies in the construction, propagation and prevalence of disaster myths in human society. Empirical studies over the years have shown how disaster movies along with the electronic media and the newspapers have been the most influential sources of information about the physical and human features of disaster for those people who have not been exposed to real disasters in life.

*Mikkel Fugl Eskjær* points out, "Disaster films may be considered a cultural equivalent to social risk calculation producing its own cultural imaginations of risks and disasters. As such, it participates in generating and sustaining public preoccupations and social anxieties" (337-38). With this view in mind this paper proposes to study the incorrect facts depicted in the movies by dividing the area of study into three categories – "the pre-impact, trans-impact and post-impact" periods of disaster, a model propounded by Quarantelli himself (10). In each of these time phases of disaster impact our focus will be to concentrate on the physical nature of disaster and its social response as depicted on screen. In the pre-disaster phase the social life seems to be normal with only a few individuals, most often underrated scientists and experts, identifying "various kinds of forewarning cues and feel[ing] something is amiss" (Quarantelli 11). Drawing on the examples of *Earthquake* (1974) and *Avalanche* (1978) Quarantelli has pointed out that a "subordinate, usually ineffectively challenging the complacency, scepticism or denial of danger by presumably better informed higher echelon officials, is a minor theme depicted in various ways in some disaster movies" (11). What Quarantelli had deduced from the disaster films of the 1970s is valid till date with the new crop of disaster blockbusters showing the same trend. For example, in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) we find that Professor Hall and his associates discover while working in Antarctica that rapid global warming is taking place. An entire shelf of ice breaks away from an Antarctic glacier and the team of scientists become alarmed. However, when in the U.N Conference on Global Warming held in New Delhi, Professor Hall tries to convince the vice-President of America about the possible threats and the necessary preventive measures, we find that all that the Vice-President is concerned about is economy and nothing else.

Most of the movies, portraying either man-made or natural disasters, are not "based on scientific or historical facts" (*Eskjær* 343). For example in *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972) we find that the ship has capsized but it floats up-side-down on the surface of the sea. This is an unnatural and impossible phenomenon around which the entire story of the film revolves. The popular disaster movies usually show the virtual side of risks, something which has not occurred yet but can occur in the future, be it global warming or meteor strike or alien attack or the apocalyptic destruction of the world. Examples can be found in films like *Independence Day*

(1996), *Deep Impact* (1997) and *Armageddon* (1998). Only few exceptions like *The China Syndrome* (1979) can be cited where the predictions of a possible nuclear meltdown coincided with America's first major nuclear crisis that happened in Three Mile Island, Pennsylvania just twelve days after the release of the movie. In 1986 a similar nuclear meltdown gave rise to catastrophic disaster in Chernobyl, Ukraine, thus turning into reality the fictitious claims of disaster risks made in the movie.

In the trans-disaster phase in most of the movies the impact seems to be pervasive. As Quarantelli opines, "... the graphic depiction of physical destruction in most disaster movies is quantitatively large" (13). However, the catastrophic events presented, their impact and the modes of dealing with them rarely correspond with reality. For example in *2012* (2009) it is shown that the end of the world has come; massive earthquakes, tsunamis, snow storms and various other cataclysmic events are taking place at the same time, destroying human civilization and killing human beings. Finally a few individuals find out a way of escape from this catastrophe, and that is by devising a boat in the model of Noah's Ark which enables them to float in the midst of the great deluge. These things are thoroughly fantastic and can barely have any correspondence with reality.

About the social aspects of the trans-disaster phase it can be said that there are certain trends which have undergone change over the years, yet there are certain others which have remained the same. For instance Quarantelli had pointed out in 1980 in his essay, "The Study of Disaster Movies: Research Problems, Findings and Implications", "... disaster movies focus on the white, middle class population, ... The poor and minorities, who are more vulnerable to disaster impacts in actuality, are not conspicuous in disaster films" (14). It can be said that this trend has changed with changing social perspectives and improving race relations. In movies like *Independence Day* (1996) and *2012* (2009), we find Afro-American characters playing vital roles in the management and prediction of disasters. In the former film among the two brave pilots who succeed in exploding the alien spaceship, one is a black American – Captain Steven Hiller (played by Will Smith); and in the latter film, the chief investigating scientist, Dr. Adrian Helmsley (played by Chiwetel Ejiofor) and the President of America himself (played by Danny Glover) are shown as black Americans.

Social scientists have made in-depth studies on prevalent disaster myths that exist in every culture all around the world. The most common myths about disaster response are panic flight, spontaneous mass evacuation, shock or hysterical breakdown, known as "disaster syndrome", looting, increased crime rate etc. (Dynes et al 14). However, contrary to popular notions, extensive research done by social scientists in disaster-hit areas all over the world has established the fact that these myths have

no foundation in reality. Victims of disasters do not react in the way they are believed to react in situations of crisis, at least not to the extent they are presented by the electronic media, popular films and novels. Dennis E. Wenger and other social scientists of the University of Delaware and the Ohio State University, in an article entitled, "It's a Matter of Myths: An Empirical Examination of Individual Insight into Disaster Response" (1975), state:

*Numerous investigators have observed that panic flight ... is rare in natural disaster situations .... It has been inferred that most individuals espouse this belief due to its perpetuation through mass media. Popular film portrayals of mass behavior in the face of imminent threat picture 'crazed hordes' fleeing from the approach of such varied phenomenon as tsunamis, fires .... (34-35)*

Such scenes can be found in most of the recent disaster movies like *Independence Day* (1996), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009). Whereas empirical data show that people in a disaster situation rarely panic and engage in crazed behavior or disorderly flight. Dynes and Quarantelli point out:

*"It is clear from the overall evidence that far from fleeing precipitously at sips or warnings of danger, it can be assumed that the bulk of people will probably not move at all. Certainly there is far more of a problem in getting movement than there is in preventing unruly or disorderly flight or wild panic -- in fact, there is no real comparison between the two problems since the latter one almost never exists. (11)"*

In close association with panic flight is another popular disaster myth and that is about evacuation. Notions prevail in popular culture that in the pre-impact and trans-impact phases of disaster mass evacuations take place, that people are desperate to leave their houses and native places and take shelter in safer areas. Such scenes are very common in disaster movies like in *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) we find that the entire American population has come to the border of Mexico, leaving their mother land and trying to cross over to the neighbouring country. However, the account given by social scientists is once again different.

*"While press accounts frequently report "thousands" or whole communities fleeing upon the receipt of hurricane warnings, systematic studies of such situations do not bear out many such reports. In most cases the evidence indicates that the withdrawal behavior that does occur is primarily by transients including tourists and not by the resident population. Even when there is evacuation of an area, the majority of people simply do not leave. (Dynes et al 10)"*

Such opinion is corroborated by Erik Auf der Heide when he says "[i]n contrast to panic, a more common problem is getting people to evacuate and keeping them from returning before the danger is over" (347).

“Disaster syndrome” is another popular myth often portrayed in disaster movies. Popular notions prevail that “disasters leave victims dazed and disoriented” (Dynes 14). It gives rise to a “state of stunned psychological incapacitation that results in the inability to take care of oneself or others. Those suffering from this supposed state are thought to be unusually dependent on and susceptible to strong leadership from authorities” (Auf der Heide 350). It is believed that this kind of disaster shock is very common in individuals suffering from disaster, and that the victims in stupor do not know what to do and are thoroughly dependent on external organizations for help. Disaster movies usually perpetuate this kind of myth. For example, in *Titanic* (1997) that a commanding officer while managing the crowd desperate to get into the life boats loses his mind, gets panic-stricken and starts shooting at random, and finally, being unable to manage any further, commits suicide. Contrary to such representations it has been studied that “disaster syndrome” is very rarely noticed in victims and is usually very short-lived. Usually individuals and communities show resilience and courage in the face of disasters and there are hardly any signs of social breakdown. It is due to this resilience instead of disaster shock that the initial rescue work is done by the survivors of disasters all around the world. According to Erik Auf der Heide:

*“In contrast to this image of dependency, most disaster victims take the initiative to help themselves and others. In numerous disasters, going back for decades, it has been observed that a large part, if not most, of the initial sheltering, feeding, relief, rescue, and transport of victims to hospitals was carried out by survivors in and near the stricken area. (350)”*

Therefore, it is obvious that this active participation of the victims in the rescue work contradicts the popular myth of “disaster syndrome.”

About the depictions of the physical and social aspects of disaster in the post-impact phase very little can be said because most of the films do not concentrate on post disaster recovery and rehabilitation. This is a trend that has not undergone much change over the years. The movies usually end “somewhere near the end of the trans-impact stage” (Quarantelli 15).

The study of the disaster films therefore show that they very often provide incorrect information about the physical nature of and social response to disaster. They draw on popular disaster myths as well as contribute to the perpetuation and propagation of those myths. However, there are two different schools of opinion regarding popular representations of disaster. On the one hand, social scientists like Erik Auf der Heide assert:

*... this [erroneous] image is believed by the public, by members of emergency and public safety organizations ... by governmental officials, and by the news media. ...*



*Unfortunately ... decision making based on these beliefs can lead to inappropriate responses and an inefficient use of available resources. (341)*

Such a remark obviously forecasts inimical effects of presentation of erroneous facts about disaster in films and mass media, thus calling for scientific research, and acknowledging the social responsibility of being truer to life. On the other hand, social scientists like *Mikkel Fugl Eskjær* claim:

*... fiction films are not compelled by historical or scientific facts. The aim of cinema is to entertain, offer solutions to self-produced conflicts and facilitate structures of identification. Cinema, in other words, is structured by its own codes and norms that primarily derive from the media system (Luhmann, 1996). Thus, despite the lack of realism or scientific accuracy, blockbuster films contribute to public risk perception by offering a particular version of global catastrophes based on popular, self-enclosed narratives of disasters. (344)*

Such an opinion acknowledges cinema as an art form having no obligations to historical or scientific facts, and therefore free to fictionalize events associated with disaster. However, critics may argue that as movies play a vital role in shaping popular notions about disaster, issues of improbability associated with disaster films should not be treated so lightly. Whichever opinion is right or wrong can be proved only by the passage of time with more research done on the movies yet to appear in the cultural arena along with various kinds of disasters continuing to affect public life.

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