

***Environmental-Trauma and Natural Disasters – An
Ecological and Cultural Reading of *The Impossible* (2012)
and *Take Shelter* (2011)***

Pat Brereton

School of Communications, Dublin City University, Ireland.

Abstract

Foregrounding the destructive power of environmental disasters and its resultant eco-trauma, while alluding to post-Jungian interpretations, this paper sets out to illustrate the power of film to speak to contemporary ecological issues through cautionary tales around climate change. Two recent popular films are randomly selected across what can roughly be categorised as mainstream and Independent sectors of production, while focusing on a range of paratextual assertions by the creatives (Brereton 2012 - namely, the makers of the film, captured on DVD bonus features, often including commentary by the director, scriptwriter, actors and other production personnel). These close textual readings suggest an ecological preoccupation with the emotional potency of loss and trauma that echo on-going global tensions around human agency's undeniable role and responsibility for climate change.

Key words: berevement, climate change, creatives, eco-cinema, everything-is-connected, Jungian psychology

Introduction

Climate change has replaced the spectre of atomic war in the cultural imagination of disaster. Furthermore, it has become less acceptable to rationalise such climatic (natural) disasters as simply outside of human control or responsibility. Through robust scientific investigation, we have discovered in recent years that human nature is directly involved with and closely responsible for an escalation of global catastrophic events in nature. Scientists now agree that over 50% of climate (warming) change since the 1950s, has been directly caused by humans. This scientific consensus nonetheless belies the lack of preparation for disasters like Hurricane Katrina for instance hitting the Mississippi Gulf Coast on August 29th 2005, or recalling the highly destructive 2004 tsunami that directly affected Thailand and other countries in the Indian Ocean, as illustrated in *The Impossible*. Such real life weather events are more creatively imagined for global audiences in 'end of the world' climate change parables, like *Take Shelter* that speak directly to natural disasters made worse by human (in)activity. Increasing hurricane intensity and climate change generally, either directly or indirectly results in a rise in sea levels and surface temperature caused by global warming.¹

This paper 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 as well as the normalised, naturalised and legitimised values that appear to be inherent in society. Especially focusing on successful popular texts, which de facto have large audiences, it is suggested that such narratives tend to speak to the pervasive zeitgeist inherent in contemporary discourses. Consequently, it is

argued, since climate change has become the dominant conflict of our world, it makes sense to uncover how such artistic practices might potentially at least serve to address these on-going dilemmas.

Destructive climatic events have particular currency in eco-film scholarship, which explores the creative imaginative potential and resonance of such cautionary environmental parables (see Brereton 2016; Dunn 2014; Rust et al. 2013). As Žižek famously wrote about the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre and how American disaster fiction had already contemplated an unimaginable event like that: ‘the unthinkable which happened was the object of fantasy, so that, in a way, America got what it fantasized about, and that was the biggest surprise’ (Žižek, 2001: 16). Coincidentally, a similar rationale can be applied to explain the growth in representations of humans as ‘natural disaster victims’ on film. The way human beings deal with disasters is of course closely dependent on ways of interpreting such events and in turn are framed by the ‘social imaginary’ created by the potential of film that underlies this interpretation (Winkel 2012: 23).²

Well-regarded, ostensibly art-house films like *The Tree of Life* and *Melancholia* have been extensively examined with regards to how their narratives 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). This paper will alternatively focus on more immediate and plausible environmental cautionary tales that speak directly to climate change worries, while actively drawing on the emotional and semiotic power of loss and bereavement through natural disasters. Mainstream big-budget vehicles like *The Impossible* address 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 across the region. This big real life disaster story is contrasted with the quirky independent and art-house influenced feature *Take Shelter*, which concentrates on a troubled blue-collar worker with recurring nightmares that coincidentally call up authentic fears around climate change, overlaying a pervasive fear of loss and total annihilation that permeates the whole psychotic imagery of the narrative.

Eco-trauma, Unconscious Environmental Fears: Post-Jungian interpretations

Whether ecological catastrophies confront us directly as experiences, or indirectly as images circulating in the media, these events tend to confront us, stifle us and even paralyze us politically and psychologically. Often media representations and environmental catastrophies can induce passive resignation, as suggested by recent studies (Baykoff, 2013; O’Neill, 2013). At the same time, the very narratives about nature that can enliven our best political and social activities, aimed at protecting our imperilled planet – often disguised simply to save ourselves - may also appear so blinding in their intensity that they overwhelm us and prevent any activity whatsoever. This form of paralysis remains a pervasive danger embedded within eco-trauma cinema.³

Eco-trauma results from a paradox that characterises 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 et al., 2015: 1).⁴ Such pervasive trauma feeds into the back-story and pressures put upon the very differing protagonists highlighted in this paper, and leave an indelible mark on their inability to see outside the fog of individual psychological trauma and related forms of depression. These psychological troubles have to be appreciated and firmly grasped 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 archetypal 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 grieve in order to mature fully and discover their deep core sense of individuality. One could argue, this drive underpins the narrative trajectory of the contrasting storylines discussed in this paper. Both stories deal with loss and bereavement across a wide range of possibilities, from the global scale to the psychologically troubled individual level. 'Archetypal symbols penetrate the emotions at a deep level and give the cinema its power to bypass the conscious state and go into the unconscious. Immersion in film viewing distracts the ego so that it disengages from its usual function as the primary filter of awareness.' In their insightful reader, Izod and Dovalis further suggest that the unconscious, 'stimulated by symbols in the film, releases archetypal energies in the spectator's psyche'. Consequently, they conclude that through their involvement in this process, 'spectators are freed from their usual inhibitions, which allows them to connect to their emotional lives' (Izod and Dovalis 2015: 1).

While most film scholars may not fully go along with such deep seated and orthodox Jungian direct correlations, nevertheless the tenor of such a hypotheses corresponds in ways with recent eco-film scholarship seeking to make connections between environmental concerns and actively cueing desired filmic and responses by audiences. Uncovering the inherent power of cinema must however constantly walk the tight rope between accusations of avoiding the obvious and pervasive ideological control and manipulation of the Hollywood studio machine and not appreciating or even withholding critical analysis of what mainstream audiences actually believe or perceive. Alternatively scholars seek out a preferred ideal, pro-environmental interpretation that audiences might hypothetically perceive, while reading 'against the grain' across mainstream analysis and consensus (see Ivakhiv 2013; Brereton 2015). Such on-going tensions permeate these subsequent readings and textual analysis.

Like many other critics in this field, John Beebe has noted that cinema and psychoanalysis have grown up concurrently, 'close siblings nurtured on a common zeitgeist, and sharing a common drive to explore and realize the psyche' (1996: 579). Beebe perceptively continues, as Jung 'was radically optimistic about the healing possibilities of the self, 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: 582).

The goal of such a 'miracle' or psychological (even Jungian) transformation, in their articulation of a utopian strand of dreaming is 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 be interpreted as an active mirroring guide with a corresponding potential therapeutic value for spectators, as they cross-identify with the traumatic journey of protagonists striving to reach their heightened sense of individuality. This certainly appears to be the case, if one wished to make a jump of faith with regards to the potency of a film medium working at full tilt and being most engaging. Whether or not spectators consciously experience the result as a positive stimulus, much less appreciate its therapeutic effect, is another matter. But again it must be recognised that cultural and film scholars rightly balk at such apparently naive and unidirectional effects and cross-connections. Nevertheless, eco-film scholars constantly attest to the power of cinema in foregrounding an often hidden or unconscious environmental agenda and in this case a most prescient and pervasive climate change conundrum. Such psychological debate and analysis can nonetheless be re-applied to eco-cinema studies and the very different texts under discussion in this paper.

Recalling the real life tsunami disaster in Japan (March 11th 2011), with the subsequent explosions in the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant that was particularly severe, resulting in extensive natural destruction and causing high human casualties. While Japan is historically accustomed to such geological disasters, Tani affirms, '3/11 however was more than a natural disaster. It was a complex mixture of natural and man-made calamities caused, in part, by a byproduct of what we call "civilisation"' (Tani, 2012: 292). Our man-made structures, including the world's largest seawall (reminiscent of the levees in New Orleans) were easily swept away. 'The brute force of nature, previously hidden from us by the veil of civilisation, suddenly "appeared" to us in all its nakedness' (Tani, 2012: 293). Real life disaster cautionary tales, like the huge success of Cameron's *Titanic* for an earlier generation, serve to call to mind the growing hubris of humans with their advanced technological know-how, into believing they can control the forces of raw nature.

Incidentally the reality of such a disaster trope is apparently transferred into a very explicit right-wing agenda in another recent end-of-the-world disaster movie, titled *2012*. Despina Kakoudaki argues that one of the most commercially accessible and early climate change cautionary tale namely *The Day After Tomorrow* presents a problem on a global scale and invites a reading that such a shared problem requires coherent, swift and global collective action.⁵ Similarly *2012* depicts international organisations, scientific collaborations and governing bodies such as the G8, supported by an almost infallible network of global communication technologies, all striving to deal with the extremes of climate change. 'But in political terms, this community is haunted by institutional structures that are selective, proprietary, supremacist and uncaring' (Kakoudaki, 2011: 350).

Consequently the predominant drive to manage dissensus and total chaos results in a totalitarian elite who literally 'Play God' as they make global utilitarian decisions that tend to reinforce tropes around the 'survival of the fittest'. At least such dreams are

necessary to secure a fighting chance for the future. By all accounts, such responses to climate change do not paint a benevolent scenario that would secure support from the greater populace facing into catastrophic destruction. Working back to ensure the right ethical values are ascribed and framed, while dealing with climatic disasters, appear to be more beneficial and useful in narrative terms, while striving to produce a radical sea-change in attitudes, values, beliefs and behaviour patterns.

At a deep psychological level for instance, beneath the abstract nature of such devastation, Freud closely observed the phenomenon of fright in patients who had been traumatised for whatever reason and who subsequently suffered from flashbacks and compulsive repetition disorders. Consequently, he discovered that with repeated flashbacks, the fright is experienced as new every time. Freud called events of this kind 'mnemic traces' or 'mnemic fragments' (Tani, 2012: 303). This evocation of fear and fright also permeates the trajectory of several disaster filmic narratives around climate change; including the Indie-produced *Take Shelter*, or the art-house vehicle of *Melancholia*, recalling more superficial trauma-fixated Hollywood films like *The Day after Tomorrow*. Let's begin however our two close textual readings with a contemporary real life and global disaster environmental story, before getting inside the head of a psychotic visionary in *Take Shelter*.

The Impossible: Environmental Disaster and Survivor Guilt

Peter Bradshaw's review in *The Guardian* (Thurs Dec 27th 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, killing over 230,000 people. 'With simplicity and conviction, it manages to do something other than a conventional disaster movie'. Nonetheless, the film remains open to accusations of manipulation and magnifying the dilemma of Western tourist experience in particular. So little appears to be made in the story of the indigenous communities who suffered most from the tragedy, compared with the over-represented Western family.

Ewan McGregor gives a studied performance as Henry, together with Maria (Naomi Watts) and their three boys; Lucas (Tom Holland) pulling off a masterful performance keeping the whole family together, alongside Thomas (Samuel Joslin) and Simon (Oaklee Prendergast).⁶ The deluge is 'viscerally real' and almost unwatchable, according to some commentators.⁷ By all accounts, *The Impossible* effectively brings home the simple agony and terror of such a natural disaster and most specifically of a family being separated, creating a void which is worse than physical injury.

The global mediascape focused 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 'ruin-pornography, which symbolically abjected communities across the Indian Ocean'.⁸ As such, the disaster marked a global watershed in the emergence of what Julia Leyda and Diana Negra (2015) call 'extreme weather media' in which large scale disasters are constructed as media events through a broad range of converged media environments.

At a media and mass communications register, it is suggested by post-colonial scholars in particular that just as Vietnam changed the template for covering war, the tsunami changed the model of broadcasting and filming disaster. 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. Millions of displaced people felt overawed and vulnerable. This mediated phenomenon is becoming more prevalent with a proliferation of weather television channels and more time and space devoted to documenting, as well as dramatizing the awesome power of nature, foreshadowing the effects of climate change in reeking horror and destruction (see McKim 2013).

Furthermore, Charles Sarvan astutely observes in its aftermath, 'tsunami aid paved the way for disaster capitalism and political profiteering' (Deckard, 2015: 2). Other scholars are equally critical of the way mainstream media and film speaks to very worrying trends in real-life environmental disasters. Reflecting on the politics of disaster representation, Junot Diaz suggests that writers (alongside filmmakers) should 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. The waves were so lethal, apparently because the coral reefs that might have protected the vulnerable coasts had been dynamited to facilitate the free movement of tourists and commercial shipping. Reminiscent of similar debates around the lack of protection of the levees in New Orleans, the regions that suffered most were in fact those that had most to lose, because of their total dependence on tourism etc. Naomi Klein usefully quotes Herman Kumara who speaks of the 'second tsunami of corporate globalization' (cited in Sugirthalajah, 2008).

An environmental turn is hopefully occurring in contemporary political life and certainly needs to be taken on board when constructing fictional as well as documentary representations of natural disasters, dramatizing the epic scale of human loss. Taking into account the relative success of such disaster narratives, alongside various psychological studies of mass unconscious desires, one could at least hypothesise that audiences are crying out for filmic mediations and creative imaginaries to help call attention to such environmental catastrophies and provide assistance towards teasing out explicit models of cognitive engagement and interpretation. Yet paradoxically critics also remain concerned that such cautionary tales can equally remain embedded within regressive narrative structures and tropes.⁹

While science fiction writer Arthur C Clarke compared the tsunami to the Hollywood disaster movie *The Day after Tomorrow*, *The Impossible* poured millions into special effects to create 'realistic' sequence of tidal waves carrying the Naomi Watts' character far inland and providing vicarious forms of identification and empathy for mass audiences. Nonetheless, one could simply dismiss the result as 'whitewashed' from the outset, finding it 'impossible' to represent the collective suffering and trauma of millions of native survivors. Thai nationals for example only appear peripherally on screen, and according to some critics, simply 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.

[Maria's Story]

But in this so-called 'against-the-grain' environmental textual analysis, one can take issue with such knee-jerk and overly dismissive interpretations. The bonus features and audio commentary in the DVD version paints a more nuanced vision at least of

what was intended, making very clear that the creatives remained concerned from the outset with the possibilities of such negative connotations as cited above. They explicitly highlighted how they did *not* want to just show the Thai(land) 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 followed by a sequence that the makers read as showing several old 'mother figures' essentially 'nurturing' her out of her state of distress, as they ritualistically clean and dress her. The traumatised outsider is presented like a helpless baby having all her basic human needs met with both dignity and respect. Furthermore, the native Thai people provide their now useless timber front door (and clear symbol of homestead) as a stretcher to transport her to hospital. What more could any traumatised indigenous natives do as an instinctive act of humanity in the circumstances.

Furthermore, the creatives in the voice-over commentary constantly highlight the danger alluded to earlier in crudely differentiating 'natives' and 'westerners' as binary others, which in turn calls to mind the holistic deep ecological edict that *all* life is sacred and that everything is connected. Of course it could be further insinuated that this strategy and mindset is simply paying lip service to a cosy form of environmentalism, while the film remains focused on a white family that survived the disaster. But on balance, the film paints a more complex and inclusive exposure around human trauma and disaster.

The bonus features on the DVD puts great 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, alongside the medical response in its aftermath. The so-called 'money shot' of special effects movies is sensitively replayed, as audiences witness the sheer power of the tsunami churning everything in its path. This phenomenon is incidentally captured through amateur camera footage during the 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 such disasters can only simulate such wild natural events.

Nothing appears to stand firm in the wake of such disaster, except a very deep-rooted and majestic tree, where the mother and son find shelter, together with another lost blond child they adopt. Ironically, from an environmental perspective, the cinematic tree is made of concrete and painted green with leaves added. The creatives on the DVD talk of the mythological male nature of such iconic trees and their important role across culture. Such an image calls to mind 'the tree of life' explored in classic eco-narratives such as *Avatar* and *The Tree of Life*, which have also been discussed from an ecological perspective in several recent studies (see Taylor (2013) or Ivakhiv (2013)).

Unlike the mimetically constructed opening scene of total destruction recreated in a giant water tank, the extended hospital scenes was shot, we are informed in the real life hospital where over 5000 people were treated following the disaster. Indigenous medics and nurses worked selflessly to assist patients as best they could, with no consideration for themselves. The whole film ostensibly recreates what happened in

the first 48 hours after the tsunami, before the media and press arrived, and therefore before the West could actively mediate and replay the disaster as a global media story for home audiences to consume in pre-digested emotional nuggets.

Over a major part of the screen time, Maria is shown struggling to stay alive with her injuries, as audiences witness severe visceral emotional scenes of fear and physical pain. Such potent images of trauma recall Walter Benjamin's analysis of the flashback as an important technique of the cinema, explicitly in relation to the unconscious. 'We encounter for the first time unconscious optics through it [the camera], the way we encounter unconscious impulses through psychoanalysis' (Tani, 2012: 304). Interestingly, Benjamin did not try to conceal or heal trauma per se, but rather sought to shoulder it and get on with life. Meanwhile, Emmanuel Levinas found in trauma the possibility of a primal form of morality. Consequently, adapting a Levinasian ethics, in Japan and in other disaster zones like those portrayed following the 2004 tsunami dramatised in *The Impossible*, people *can* transform themselves and become more humane, even altruistic and in turn selflessly act 'for others'. They sometimes also see the faces of disaster victims and felt themselves accused (Tani, 2012: 305), enduring a form of survivor guilt. This form of deep empathy and cross-identification with trauma is certainly played out in varying levels across such disaster films.

Western news media frequently report on such tragedies by focusing on the scale and number of victims killed. This remains a contentious ethical dilemma within media coverage, where such a horrific news tragedy is reduced to dead bodies and sanitised using statistics. Alternatively, in this micro-fictional narrative, we have the pain of a single family struggling 'like a grain of sand', while becoming the focus of audience attention. The creatives speak of the abiding need to develop empathy, which in turn helps audiences to imagine so many ways of experiencing pain and identifying with the protagonists. Henry the father becomes obsessed with his loss. Looking irrationally through the dark night for signs of his wife and oldest child, he has all but lost control of his faculties having dispatched his two younger children to the nearby hospital. This loss of emotional control and recounting his psychological imbalance is further illustrated when he makes a precious long distance phone call to his father-in-law and sobs uncontrollable on the phone, realising he can do nothing to protect his family. Critically it must be always emphasised that such family fixation remains a dominant trope for Western fathers, which is constantly privileged at the expense of the great majority of Othered inhabitants.

Meanwhile in another part of the desolate area of Thailand where his two younger boys have been sent for safe-keeping, the children are allowed a reflective moment and a quiet time and space not afforded to the adults. Again showcasing a critical difficulty with the film's Western-centric focus, is the casting of a cameo role by the famous actress Geraldine Chaplin playing a nurse, who actively encourages the boys to 'connect with the stars', which coincidentally infers a deep ecological mindset, affirming they should 'be at one with nature'. In spite of the truly awesome trauma 'raw nature' has bestowed on them; as the creatives affirm, the monster (tsunami) *must* at the same time be humanised as Susan Sontag (1966) historically argued about other forms of trauma and disaster, if it is to remain part of the cycle of life. This paradoxical mystery and philosophical reflection encourages the children to look up into the stars and 'commune with nature'. The creatives excitedly talk of a deep

connection beyond the physical level that actively recalls environmental values, where 'life is about mystery and we have to leave space for this'.

This explicit quotient of transcendent ecological thinking and philosophising, affirmed explicitly by the makers of the film, is tangentially echoed through Maria's dream, recalling Benjamin's thoughts on the flashback discussed earlier. Like her husband she faces her own personal trauma. Emerging to the surface of the water and into the light, recalling a shorthand signifier of a death/rebirth trope that further corresponds to a pervasive psychological/religious and Jungian myth. Such archetypal re-enactments are designed to travel straight into the deep unconscious soul of audiences, making visible what is not otherwise perceived. Such revelation, on suspects is common enough in personal trauma narratives, but more powerfully dramatized when linked to major environmental disasters like this one.

Later in the miraculous reunion of Maria with her husband and children, the tsunami's on-going destructive aftermath is foreclosed by the restoration of the nuclear family; a conservative balm, counterpointing the initial chaos of disaster. According to one scholar at least, the film thus charts a neatly formulaic arc through individual horror, grief and catharsis towards comedic reconciliation (Deckard, 2015: 6).

However, I would take issue with Deckard's somewhat dismissive reading and her reductive ideological interpretation, calling attention to what the film may not do so well, but at least tries to initiate. The denouement dramatically and pointedly has an overhead shot showing rows of dead bodies, laid out with military organisation and precision, which is not visible elsewhere across the shattered chaotic landscape. This is the reality of news media representations and is certainly not forgotten by the film, as some critics insinuate. While *The Impossible* is not especially complex or subtle, nonetheless there is judgement and intelligence in the simple idea of survival being the most agonising primal agenda individual protagonists have to face. Most certainly, the film draws close attention to the problem of 'survivor guilt' - the psychologically aftershock of a shattered and irreparable blow. Film scholars like E. Ann Kaplan, using a form of Freudian theory, calls attention to this as evident in a reading of *Take Shelter*.

Meanwhile Maria's oldest son Lucas, literally has to carry the film's emotional trauma at times, for example in helping others find their loved ones in the chaotic activity of the hospital complex. Immediately after inhaling the fruits of such selfless altruism, Lucas himself faces unbelievable shock and distress, believing he has lost his mother along with the rest of his family. Such an emotive sequence, powerfully demonstrates how it feels like to be an orphan, being given a sticker with his name on it, like all the other children held in the liminal space of a tent constructed outside the hospital walls. This sequence serves to aggravate a form of survivor's guilt and of irrationally being ashamed of one's good luck. While on a textual level, it is easy to be dismissive and critical of such overt emotional manipulation of trauma, nevertheless, as film scholars often attest to, rationality and logic do not always feature as prominently within audience identification and engagement with such narratives. This is most evident in the closing sequence.

[Closure: Reading Against the Grain]

The final journey back to ‘civilisation’ and escaping onto a private plane seems like a cheap cop-out from the absolute chaos of the region. But as the creatives rightly assert, this site of escape is 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. By all accounts the sanitised space of the aeroplane affords only a tentative sense of security. Recalling similar discussions concerning the coded ending of *Captain Phillips*, with the final safety of the Tom Hanks character assured, having been saved from a violent hi-jacking of his cargo ship by Third World pirates, who in turn remain victims in a global power struggle (see Brereton 2016: 47-52). Similarly, attention in this narrative ark is drawn to Third World human injustice and trauma, counter-intuitively called to attention by its very absence, while moving dramatically away from the site of trauma and pain. 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 trauma with the local and the personal:

- Lucas takes off his orphan tag that defined him as a disaster victim and which most traumatised him 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. 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 called into attention.
- Maria is finally shown looking at the wrong name scrawled on her arm. She could have been that person and simply another statistic in the casualties of the disaster.

All of these somewhat crude semiotic elements and pieces of performative business help to pull focus from total identification with this apparently ‘lucky family’, escaping the horrors of the tsunami. Instead, if one is open to a more positive and productive reading, audiences are encouraged to appreciate the bigger environmental picture. Facing the deep trauma of such events, while acknowledging such uncertainty might hopefully serve to dramatize inherent contradictions for viewers to explore and digest. Of course such a positive reading could nevertheless be easily dismissed as a Hollywood strategy around having it both ways and providing the illusion of thinking bigger and developing a benevolent ethical conscience. But like many seemingly ‘tagged on’ happy endings and recalling ‘Screen Theory’ debates around recuperating otherwise hetro-normative Hollywood tales for radical feminist agendas (see MacCabe 1985), every element in the *mise-en-scene* becomes important in appreciating the character’s psychological and emotional scars, as they face up to their personal trauma and recognise the hermeneutically sealed bubble around the process of escaping and going back home. As highlighted earlier by Jungian theorists, the goal of such a ‘miracle’ or psychological transformation is ‘individualisation’ (Izod and Dovalis 2015: 3). Such elusive notions of psychological individualisation are nonetheless foregrounded and called into question by isolating these lucky survivors. This remains the primary focus in the final sequence, having faced the most awful trauma and natural disaster any human could face.

While maybe overplaying its psychological potency, the director talks of how the film finishes with an ‘emotional tsunami, as Naomi releases a tear’, sparking off again the

suffering and pain she and many others have endured. While probably over-egging the therapeutic and critical engagement with the reality on the ground, nonetheless, one can at least counter-balance the film's total dismissal by some critics simply as a one-dimensional happy ending. Dovetailed in the background through the plane's window is the devastated beach down below, contrasting with their first touristic visions of the idyllic island resort, which further isolates the true reality of what has occurred over the last few days. But as the aeroplane moves up higher, a clear blue sky is revealed affording some home comforts and memories one suspects. Yet recalling the title of the movie '*The Impossible*', the creatives strive to nail down the overall theme of the film, circling around the difficulty of going back to 'normal life' after such a traumatic event.

In contrast with this large-scale and real-life disaster movie, let's now turn to a small-scale individual psychological drama, which explores a complex range of psychological fears around a natural disaster that may happen in the future.

Take Shelter: Melancholia and Life-Boat Ethics

Unlike *The Impossible*'s relatively big budget and conventional disaster storyline, *Take Shelter* is a slow paced movie, opening with the actor Michael Shannon having a very convincing nightmare, where the sky rains down liquid that is so thick and viscous that it feels and appears like oil, which he later tries to wash off after waking up. Shannon plays a psychologically damaged working class family man named Curtis, who is also fearful for his own sanity as he endures more explicit dreams of nature in extremis with lightening storms and massive movements of bats flying through the sky and escaping an oncoming climate catastrophe. At one stage some of the birds fall dead on the ground, recalling 'Old Testament' fears for the future and which can be read as activating a cautionary environmental tale around how humans refuse to take into account their increasing carbon footprint on the planet.

Earlier on, witnessing the lightening charges on the side of the highway; 'Is anybody seeing this', the chief protagonist muses, still worried that all this activity is simply in his head. This is a long way from the documentary reality of extreme weather explored in *The Impossible*. Yet this dramatic exposition of 'extreme weather' could easily be applied to the unpredictable hotter summers and more frequent natural disasters that has characterised the first decades of the 21st century. Scientists in turn agree that the clearest manifestation of climate change will be more severe weather conditions. Curtis' self-help project offers mainly symbolic protection, a factor that may not be recognised in the latest scientific reports on climate change, which in turn insinuates it's already too late to introduce useful evasive measures.

[Pre-trauma and Deep Unconscious Fears]

Alternatively Kaplan employing a Freudian reading of the film, describing it as future-tense trauma and deploying provocative memories for the future. The protagonist, she argues, suffers from *pretraumatic* stress disorder instead of the usual *posttraumatic* disorder. Curtis La Forche suffers from hallucinations of violent climate change: consequently the 'hero's life is all but destroyed because of his case of future-tense trauma, that is, 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. We

vicariously experience the future as probable catastrophe' (Kaplan, 2013: 57). The slow temporal movement of climate change, requires dramatic 'creative imaginaries' to help reinforce the pervasive environmental dangers for the future.

To help overcome his fears and protect his family, Curtis proceeds to re-build his somewhat derelict storm shelter and re-create a form of allegorically framed 'Lifeboat ethics' (Hardin 1974), where he and his family can be safe from all that is going on in the 'real world'. He almost loses everything through his irrational striving to complete this Ark-like project, which is considered as an act of male hubris or even madness by all around him. Leading up to this final denouement, he had apparently found use for his tenaciously constructed storm shelter, while confronting his unconscious fears. But on re-opening the 'protective shelter', the aftermath of a minor storm rather than the 'big one', like in *The Impossible* is revealed. Significantly from a Jungian perspective, the audience is visually introduced to the shelter through a door in the perfect green of his lawn, suggesting a psychoanalytic portal into a deeper unconscious.¹⁰

His action and paranoid agency is counterpointed and illustrated by a most striking scene where he reveals his extreme environmental fears to his local community. In a tour-de-force performance that is dramatised in a hall, which more usually is reserved for local events, evoking conviviality and communal social harmony. Enunciating one of the most charged ecological cautionary tale speeches of cinema history, he prophetically begins: 'There is a storm coming'. This promonition certainly plays into theoretical debates over strategies around warning the public of the dangers of climate change,¹¹ as opposed to rationalising that the speaker is simply delusional, suffering from some form of psychosis and is paranoid and therefore being able to dismiss such fears as irrational.

In a narrative where audiences are cued to actively question the main character's mental state, this remains a key moment of revelation towards cognitive engagement and questioning his thought patterns and behaviours. Recalling literary classics like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, up to contemporary filmic characters like Bess, in Lars von Trier's *Breaking the Waves*. From the outset, in such narrative trajectories we have a strong inkling of the chief protagonist's psychological impairment, if not full blown pathology.

[The Pathology of a Climate Change Believer]

In *Breaking the Waves*, like in Curtis's role in this film, the 'smart' viewer one suggests is not hypnotised by their apparent psychosis.¹² Such oscillation of cross-identification and engagement with troubled psychotic protagonists also inform Curtis' behaviour. Essentially, the narrative's contradictory imagery speaks to audiences in varying ways, rather than simply reductively, dismissing them as protagonists who are simply victims of their own pathology (see Elsaesser and Hagener 2010).

As Curtis violently overturns a table laden with food onto the floor, while confronted by his erstwhile friend who has betrayed him - but with some justification, having lost his job - audiences are left feeling the psychic trauma, immediacy and seriousness of Curtis' fears. Labelled as crazy, this is too easy a cop-out for cognitively diagnosing, categorising and dismissing such behaviour, unlike the uncontested traumatic behaviour in *The Impossible*. Meanwhile, very much aware of his own irrational

behaviour, Curtis can only strive to rely on a stubborn self-belief and the unfaltering support of his wife and deaf child in believing that he is considering their best interests. Finally however, the well regarded psychiatrist diagnoses that Curtis has to be committed, like his mother before him, but recommends a recuperative holiday by the sea before this medical solution is executed.

Curtis' prophecy does not cast explicit religious judgement on the end times in which he lives, but rather suggests a particular kind of instability, which one could characterise as 'post-sustainability', or at least some sense that things cannot continue as they are.¹³ This sense is highlighted in the film by the omission of moral judgements in favour of continual references to unsustainable practice, as noticed by several reviewers of the film, whether environmental or social; these cues include the vacation money saved in a biscuit tin, the overpriced sleeping tablets, the un-co-operative 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 fetishized by the camera. In calling attention to the latter motif, *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 is a long way from the more mainstream direct address intentification of *The Impossible* explored earlier.

Finally at the beautiful and erstwhile recuperative sea-shore, as the father helps build sand castles with his daughter, they recognise the 'storm to match all storms' heading towards the land. This is the end. His (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*, there is literally nothing to do or look forward to. Yet at the same time, being an eternal optimist, the film's closure can be read as a constructive environmental cautionary tale for audiences around the day-to-day ethics of climate change and the need to faithfully take on board the signals and recognise the psychic potency of our dreams and feelings. All the while serving as a counterpoint to the more rational and pervasive 'business as usual' hegemonic philosophy with its economic 'bottom line' that drives Hollywood and Western values generally. One most pointedly recalls the vociferous climate change deniers and their continuing foothold across public media discourses.

Not Taking Responsibility for Climate Change: Becoming Fixated with Self

While *The Impossible* simply dealt with the consequences of surviving a tsunami, *Take Shelter* focuses on possible fore-knowledge and prevention. Like in *The Impossible*, the bonus features on the DVD of *Take Shelter* are particularly revealing, especially in foregrounding one deleted scene from the cinematic version that helps to explain why Curtis wanted to get his friend off his work team, following the illicit building of the extended storm shelter, using 'borrowed' equipment from work. He explains to his health councillor about how he had a dream where his friend tried to kill him with a pickaxe. The councillor queries; what does it mean, people attacking you in your dream? Curtis responds that it's probably 'part of the storm. It's in the air.' Rationality, logic and order have less of a foothold in this topsy turvey world.

Curtis is further questioned regarding why he actually went through with building the shelter. 'Better safe than sorry' is his curt reply. When pushed that surely this

decision resulted in a lot of time and money being expended, Curtis responds by recalling the horrible news accident that screen audiences were privy to earlier, as a piece of extra-diegetic television news, recalling a train going off the tracks and chlorine gas being spread over a wide area. Ulrich Beck's pervasive notion of a 'Risk Society' clearly manifests itself in this incident that further psychologically affects the main protagonist, as he concludes, 'it can happen'! But the astute councillor probes further into why is knowing that important to you? 'If you really believe in your dreams, why not warn people'? To which Curtis responds that he will do anything to protect his family, but the rest of the world will have to take it up with whoever.

Following some further discussion of God, Curtis affirms 'nature has a balance'. The 'storm is a way of evening things out', essentially if the storm happens, its 'because something is wrong'? Again recalling a form of 'Old Testament' or Fundamentalist binary approach to moralising and a reversion to first principles and primal concerns for family protection. Rather than reclaiming the notion of the 'Public Good' and the necessity of a series of pre-defined precautionary principles, much less affirming the healing powers of community values - a conservative shift in emphasis that is echoed in recent very old-fashioned blockbusters like *Noah*.

Why the director chose to leave this revealing scene out is open to question of course. Probably it was considered too pointed, but I believe its inclusion would have actively helped confirm Curtis's non-pathological reasons for action. In any case the scene certainly pushes a clear ecological and ethical agenda.

Earlier, in another bonus feature 'Behind the Scenes', the director Jeff Nicholas talks of how he wrote the screenplay in 2008, during the first year of his marriage. He was in love and life was good, but he had a sense that the world had something bad stirring on the horizon. Nichols does not go further to say what this unease might consist of, but this all-consuming environmental reading would insinuate that such cosmic imbalance can be framed around growing concerns over climate change and the long term destruction it will wreak on the planet. While obviously feeding off (irrational) emotional and psychological fears, academic scholars can easily critique these paranoid hunches. All the while however, the spectre of such psychic fears remain tantalising real, both in the creative imaginations of filmmakers and manifested in such evocative texts, if also (hopefully) in the audience's perceptions of such traumatic storylines.

Concluding Remarks

Contrasting such creative imaginaries in film that explicitly speak to major natural disasters, from the documentary-like realistic recreation of a major tsunami to the purely fictional and psychic exploration of foretelling such an event. Both of which draw on an emotional and traumatic engagement with the most significant threat to our planet and way of life, one that society needs to face up to.

Post-Jungian and trauma theorising can assist in understanding the relationship of film, psychological representation and its emotional impact, alongside the more usually abstract nature of environmental concerns that affect our way of life and become manifested through such natural disasters. Eco-trauma in particular remains a very useful tool and lens to analyse such narratives and help us appreciate their potency for mass audiences. These filmic examples explored in this paper call

attention to revealing scenes, like the dream of Maria under-water facing her deepest fears in *The Impossible*; or the climatic sequence in *Take Shelter* where the apocalyptic vision of the hurricane/tsunami is finally witnessed coming onto land. All of these engaging and memorable scenes help to dramatize the emotional punch necessary to relate to mass audiences and how such scenes and storylines might help to illustrate and anchor climate change debates.¹⁴ Hopefully such provocative narratives can also help to garner active engagement in making such environmental and ethical connections, while provoking proactive responses at all levels. This paper spells out how these filmic examples use real historical as well as fictional ecological traumas to explore both personal psychological and emotional effects of natural disaster.

Earth, air, water and fire remain the four primary elements that make up any habitat, with land remaining the most salient in defining a deep ecological agenda, as humans strive to protect their patch of earth. As illustrated in these two very different films explored in this paper, human agency has a major role to play in protecting and preserving our long-term heritage, as we face many global struggles. Water and land turbulence in *The Impossible* drive the narrative throughout its disaster storyline. Meanwhile, air and skyscapes are most actively foregrounded in *Take Shelter*, as the main protagonist attempts to read and decode the signs of storms, while constantly looking up into the heavens.

Hopefully as the corpus of eco-cinema and nature disaster movies in particular expands, more creative imaginaries will be constructed to help audiences to engage with these complex nature debates that marry emotional, ethical, scientific and environmental frameworks and agendas, coalescing around 'doing the right thing' to protect our planet. 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 forecasted. Essentially, we must think and feel more creatively and long term for the very future of our species and the planet.

Filmography

2012 (2009) Roland Emmerich
Avatar (2009) James Cameron
Breaking the Waves (1996) Lars von Trier
Captain Phillips (2013) Paul Greengrass
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1957) Jack Arnold
Logan's Run (1976) Michael Anderson
Melancholia (2011) Lars von Trier
Noah (2014) Darren Aronofsky
Soylent Green (1973) Richard Fleischer
Take Shelter (2011) Jeff Nichols
The Day after Tomorrow (2004) Roland Emmerich
The Descendants (2011) Alexander Payne
The Impossible (2012) B. A. Bayona
The Tree of Life (2011) Terrence Malick
Them (1954) Gordon Douglas
Titanic (1997) James Cameron

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¹ See for instance *The Guardian's* scientific response to many denier assertions re global warming: (<http://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2014/may/06/top-ten-global-warming-skeptic-arguments-debunked>)

² When we perceive disaster through the cognitive scheme of the sublime, we focus on the violent sense experience overwhelming the observer who, stricken with terrified dumbness and bodily stupor, experiences a masochistic blend of pain and pleasure (Winkel 2012: 24).

³ As psychologist Tina Amorok theorises in her study 'The Eco-trauma and eco-recovery of being', we defend 'outselves from the fearsome side of inter-connectiveness through separation ideologies and practices (war, religion, fantasies, racism and sexism) in addition to psychological defense mechanisms (denial, dissociation, psychic numbing) and an array of debilitating behaviours and responses that bear the signature of trauma' (Narine et al. 2015: 29). Incidentally, disavowal most usefully is defined by Jacques Lacan 'I know very well, but nonetheless'. This response characterises some of the research into public responses to climate change messages

⁴ Dr Mears (Kate Winslet) remarks in *Contagion* (2011) about a killer SARS-like virus; a plastic shark kept millions of people out of the water, but a warning label on the side of a cigarette carton can't keep millions of people from smoking.

⁵ Reminiscent of the Great Lisbon Earthquake back in 1755, which had a wide-ranging effect on the intellectual development of Europe; the effects of March 11 2011 (and other natural disasters like the 2004 tsunami and the New Orleans hurricane) will no doubt be studied in similar ways and certainly remains influential in our responses to environmental disaster (Tani 2012: 299).

⁶ 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.

⁷ Clint Eastwood's 2010 movie *Hereafter* had a similar opening sequence, but was less engaging and not as financially successful.

⁸ Echoing Susan Sontag's (1966) seminal research.

⁹ Like in New Orleans and other coastal regions of the world, environmental risks around flooding and destruction are not taken seriously enough by all accounts. Even afterwards, as the 100 meter zone in Sri Lanka which forbade poor coastal survivors from rebuilding their destroyed homes, alleging that they would be vulnerable to a new tsunami, can be read through a more malign lens. Such 'precious' land – like those disputed in *The Descendants* – was alternatively sold off to multinational paradise tourism resorts and agro-forestry plantations. Thailand, the Maldives, Indonesia, and India all imposed 'buffer zones', declaring land 'terra nullius', alternatively making it ready for transnational corporate development. It was precisely these populations most marginalised by class and ethnicity who were disproportionately killed in the tsunami (as opposed to several hundred European tourists) (Deckard 2015: 3).

¹⁰ Note, Sarah Lichtman describes the Cold War craze for DIY and particularly fall-out shelters as a patriotic way to assert masculinity (2006). Rather than preparing for some future environmental catastrophe he should be labouring his way through the present economic one. Presuming, one could argue, the two triggers and tipping points can be so easily separated.

¹¹ See for instance EU publications (alongside numerous academic studies in the journal *Environmental Communication*:

http://ec.europa.eu/environment/integration/research/newsalert/pdf/17si_en.pdf

¹² For instance Bess's 'in-camera glance encourages us to identify with the camera, thereby taking the imaginary position of an all-seeing subject, who is also all-knowing, to the extent to which the reality of the film exists only as it is perceived by the viewer' (cited in Wuss 2002: 134).

¹³ Religious publications such as *The Christian Century* sum up the character of Curtis as 'a prophet of the Old Testament' whose storm shelter is 'like an ark' on which he must keep 'hammering away'. One should note that unlike Bess with her very strong religious convictions in *Breaking the Waves*, Curtis is not a practicing Christian. Like the atheist characters in *Melancholia* with their more art-house, agnostic world-view, he refuses to go to church with his wife and child. His prophetic notions consequently seem to lack explicit religious motivation, despite obvious biblical and psychological symbology that oozes across such narratives, recalling potent images from the Gospels and clearly recognisable passages from the Bible, including specific pieces from Ezekiel and the Book of Revelations.

¹⁴ In contemporary energy policies, Germany, Switzerland and other countries have radically decided to move away from Nuclear energy in favour of ramping up alternative energy solutions following the disaster in Japan. It is suggested the media and the creative imaginary for example can help support this radical transformation happening across the world as it strives to cope with reductions in Co2 emissions and the need to move away from 'dirty' carbon-based energy production.