

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Disaster Fiction, the Pedagogy of Catastrophe, and the Dominant Imaginary

Mankind, which in Homer's time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.

—Walter Benjamin<sup>1</sup>

**B**uena crisis: *hacia un mundo postmaterialista* (2009) by Jordi Pigem and *La buena crisis* (2010) by Alex Rovira are two of the many examples of recent Iberian texts that understand the ongoing crisis as an opportunity to challenge the cultural hegemony and to abandon the dominant imaginary.<sup>2</sup> However, the notion of crisis is also co-opted by neoliberal reason as a business opportunity for those equipped with entrepreneurial adaptability and personal flexibility. A number of recent blog posts and op-eds with titles such as 'Bendita crisis' (Blessed crisis) and the like offer acritical celebrations of personal strength and private motivation as recipes for navigating the current crisis, leaving no room for a political or historical interpretation of its root causes.

Thinkers who openly criticize the neoliberal order of things disagree on whether financial crises and ecological catastrophes can serve as pedagogical opportunities. Naomi Klein, for instance, examines the mechanisms of 'disaster capitalism' that produce all sorts of crisis with profitable aftermaths for the capitalist elite, as well as new opportunities for appropriation

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 242.

<sup>2</sup> Jordi Pigem, *Buena crisis: hacia un mundo postmaterialista* (Barcelona: Kairós, 2009); Alex Rovira, *La buena crisis* (Madrid: Santillana, 2010).

through dispossession.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Rob Nixon's notion of 'slow violence' denounces the invisibility of the pervasive socioecological violence and massive environmental injustice unleashed by neoliberal global dynamics.<sup>4</sup> Conversely, Serge Latouche—an intellectual at the center of the degrowth movement—has articulated on several occasions the potential usefulness of a non-naïve 'pedagogy of disaster' for challenging the 'blissful (and passive) optimism' ingrained in the dominant imaginary.<sup>5</sup> Along these same lines, Jean-Pierre Dupuy advocates an 'enlightened doomsaying' committed to actively countering 'the invisibility of harm' that is prevalent in capitalist modernity.<sup>6</sup> Dupuy claims that the main danger for humanity lies in techno-scientific optimism, and that an enlightened doomsaying can disrupt such destructive optimism.<sup>7</sup> Both positions are useful for viewing the neoliberal crisis in critical and fruitful ways. Unfortunately, the most popular recent cultural depictions of environmental catastrophe in post-2008 Spain are far from being pedagogical, as they perpetuate a neoliberal rationality oblivious to the harm it produces. Although catastrophe can be pedagogical under certain circumstances, the current hegemonic perception of disasters does not challenge the growth imaginary. Cultural critics are also to blame for the unchallenged perpetuation and reinforcement of an agenda that manufactures unprecedented risks and unleashes monumental catastrophe. Timothy Clark is right to suggest that 'received or mainstream modes of reading and criticism, even when socially "progressive" in some respects, are now, despite themselves, being changed into what are effectively implicit forms of denial as the world alters around them'.<sup>8</sup>

This chapter will focus on audiovisual disaster narratives that explore the disturbing ecological consequences of our current scientific hubris and socioeconomic dysfunction in both the recent past and the immediate future. The rapid anthropogenic changes in the Earth's ecological systems regularly unleash widespread catastrophes on a regional and global level. Sensationalizing these catastrophes has commonly been assumed to have pedagogical implications because it highlights the destructive practices

3 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007).

4 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*.

5 Serge Latouche, 'Disaster, Pedagogy of', in *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, ed. Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria, and Giorgos Kallis (New York: Routledge, 2015), 95; Latouche, *La apuesta por el decrecimiento*, 255–260.

6 Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, trans. M.B. Debevoise (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 28, 36.

7 Dupuy, *The Mark of the Sacred*, 29–30.

8 Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), xi.

of humanity and promotes an activist lifestyle in order to correct them. I hope to demonstrate, by studying two of the most popular catastrophe fictions of post-2008 Spain—the TV series *El barco* and the movie *The Impossible*—that the utility of pedagogical interpretations of catastrophe should be re-evaluated. First of all, many studies in social and behavioral science indicate that promoting fear is not a good basis for mobilizing activism.<sup>9</sup> Second, disaster fiction—at least in visual media—tends to focus on sensationalist and spectacular effects and individual heroism, ignoring the root causes of catastrophic events involving drastic anthropogenic change and pervasive environmental injustice. Fictional catastrophe does not necessarily constitute a good pedagogy for shaping an effective political ecology in the Anthropocene because it often perpetuates the current post-political and managerial mainstream culture rather than challenging it. Catastrophe-oriented fiction also tends to ignore or, in the worst cases, conceal the pervasive structural violence against humans and nonhumans resulting from global neoliberal policies. Third, even in cases when pedagogical readings might be derived from disaster fiction, cultural scholars may not be trained to engage in (or perceive the possibility of) such criticism. In order to encourage an effective political ecology, other kinds of narratives might be much more effective and more resistant to co-optation by the dominant imaginary—namely, stories and projects that either expose the toxic fantasies of the growth imaginary (e.g., the political ecology of waste articulated in Chapter 3) or envision and depict *desirable* postgrowth imaginaries (e.g., the narratives of transition towns studied at the end of Chapter 2).

In the concluding chapter of the edited volume *Culture, Catastrophe, and Rhetoric*, Ralph Cintron considers the notion that ‘the trope of revolution has been superseded by the trope of catastrophe as a primary means for imagining social change’.<sup>10</sup> As Robert Hariman points out in the introduction to the same book, the twenty-first-century popularity of post-apocalyptic narratives in all media implies a

9 George Marshall, *Don't Even Think About it: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014); Per Espen Stoknes, *What We Think About When We Try Not to Think About Global Warming: Toward a New Psychology of Climate Action* (White River Junction, VT: Chelsea Green, 2015); Eddie Yuen, ‘The Politics of Failure Have Failed: The Environmental Movement and Catastrophism’, in *Catastrophism: The Apocalyptic Politics of Collapse and Rebirth*, ed. Sasha Lilley et al. (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012), 15–43.

10 Ralph Cintron, ‘What Is Next? Modernity, Revolution, and the “Turn” to Catastrophe’, in *Culture, Catastrophe, and Rhetoric: The Texture of Political Action*, ed. Robert Harriman and Ralph Cintron (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 231–255.

reconfiguration of the era's central myth of progress ... The catastrophic model comes without that [capitalist] teleology: progress can occur, but the processes of modernization can also lead to disaster and decline. Thus, catastrophe ... expose[s] the fragility and teleological vacuity of modern economic, technological, and political systems.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, from the critical postgrowth perspective I propose, challenges to the hubristic and linear hegemonic conception of progress are welcome. Nevertheless, it is vital to acknowledge that the catastrophe trope can easily lead to a dangerous securitization discourse that serves to justify the implementation of a constant state of emergency and extreme forms of neoliberal biopolitics. Along these lines, Robert Marzec's recent book *Militarizing the Environment* studies with historical depth the way in which this disturbing discourse (which the author calls 'environmentality') has become a significant part of today's dominant reformist environmental (not ecological) thought.<sup>12</sup> Marzec explains how accepting climate change as inevitable and preparing for worst-case scenarios of environmental catastrophe through market and military adaptation is already being used as an excuse to further militarize, privatize, and enclose ecological commons. This dominant 'environmentality' frames the problem in terms of national security, technical and military management, and energy geopolitics, completely ignoring the historical root causes of ecological depletion. As a result, the environment is depicted as something separated from humans and as a threat which must be feared and managed with the same technological, economic, and utilitarian logic that alienated humans from their ecological context and created the ecological crisis in the first place. Obviously, the rapid acceptance of environmentality by the elites shows not only that catastrophe is neither pedagogical nor politically disruptive *per se*, but may actually reinforce neoliberal cultural hegemony and growth-oriented framings. Environmentality, similar to eco-modernist approaches, is a depoliticized environmentalism. It implies that there is nothing we can do to change the ongoing disaster trajectory of rapacious capitalism, other than preparing to weather the storm. As such, this discourse is 'politically disempowering and demobilizing'.<sup>13</sup> It is true, as shown in the previous chapter, that catastrophic socioecological events

11 Robert Hariman, 'Introduction', in *Culture, Catastrophe, and Rhetoric: The Texture of Political Action*, ed. Robert Hariman and Ralph Cintron (New York: Berghahn, 2015), 12.

12 Robert P. Marzec, *Militarizing the Environment: Climate Change and the Security State* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015).

13 Kallis, *In Defense of Degrowth*, 198.

could move to the forefront the powerful agency of nonhuman forces that tend to be conceived of either as mere background or passive resources. But if this agency is simply perceived as a threat to be managed and countered by a separate human agency, rather than being understood as an inextricable part of the ecological totality in which humans are inscribed, the core logic of the dominant imaginary is not challenged at all and, worse, dangerous geoengineering projects could be encouraged.

#### 4.1. *El barco*

In the following paragraphs, I will show how the television series *El barco* (The Boat, 2011–2013) aligns much better with the cultural logic of ‘environmentality’ than with the pedagogy of ‘enlightened doomsaying’. For several reasons, *El barco* (produced by Globomedia for Antena 3) is a paradigmatic example useful to test dominant Spanish cultural sensibilities: it is one of the most successful and profitable TV series ever produced in Spain, setting records for viewership. It is also one of the first TV shows in Spain to successfully incorporate transmedia storytelling to enrich and extend the narrative through different digital platforms (Tweetsodes, Facebook, a videogame, a blog, an official website), as well as the first to deploy a 360-degree market strategy to integrate all media.<sup>14</sup> The series’s aggressive pre-broadcast publicity paid off as it enjoyed an average audience of five million viewers. *El barco* narrates the adventures of 42 people, most of them very young, on a training ship. After a global catastrophe, presumably caused by a particle accelerator like the Large Hadron Collider in Geneva, the ship’s crew are among the last surviving humans on the planet, whose land is now mostly underwater. The main plot of *El barco* could function as the ultimate Anthropocene narrative, given that the unintended consequences of human large-scale technological intervention are a massive ecocide claiming many terrestrial species. Extradiegetically, the Large Hadron Collider is ‘the largest machine in the world’, as proudly noted on its official web page,<sup>15</sup> and the first experiments performed there were conducted from 2010 to 2013 (paralleling the broadcast of *El barco*).

*El barco*, in which most of the diegetic action takes place on the reduced space of a ship with limited resources, can be read as an allegory of an

14 Luis Deltell Escolar, Florencia Claes, and José Miguel Ostero López, ‘Audiencias televisivas y líderes de opinión en Twitter. Caso de estudio: El Barco’, *Estudios sobre el Mensaje Periodístico* 19, no. 1 (2013): 350; Francesc Mayor Mayor, ‘Transmedia Storytelling desde la ficción televisiva serial española: el caso de Antena 3’, *CIC Cuadernos de Información y Comunicación* 19 (2014): 77–79.

15 <http://home.cern/topics/large-hadron-collider>.

overstressed and overpopulated finite Earth that cannot sustain the economy of growth much longer. Such an interpretation would entail an invitation to humbly acknowledge ecological restrictions on capitalist activity and rethink humans' function and place as earthlings who need to learn how to live and thrive on a finite planet. However, the camera arrangements and the plots of the episodes push the ecological catastrophe into the background until it serves as a mere excuse for developing the mainly romantic (and competitive) social relationships among the human—mostly white and heterosexual—characters. The redeeming power of romantic love is a repeated motif, replicating the neoliberal insistency on erasing the visibility of political and historical structural problems by focusing on the personal and subjective level. The Western- and human-centric frames and narratological strategies of the series either exclude nonhumans or construct them as a threat to humans, rather than depicting nonhuman agency and presence as a *sine qua non* for human existence.

The ecophobia and biophobia of *El barco* do not extend ethics to nonhuman living beings but, far from it, almost completely erase or separate their agency in order to embrace the fantasy of human self-sufficiency and autonomy. The ship, the main setting of the story, is depicted as a human-made ecology without nonhuman ecologies (a biophysical impossibility). When nonhumans infiltrate the ship, they must be quickly expelled to keep the human environment safe. As Bruno Latour would put it, the desperate and futile modern attempt to separate the social and the natural is, ironically, radically marked and obsessively maintained in *El barco*, even after most humans have been wiped out as a consequence of the most dramatic naturecultural event in history.<sup>16</sup> The catastrophe is both historical and geological, blurring the boundaries between natural history and human history. There is, as Timothy Morton points out regarding the Anthropocene, a 'horrifying coincidence of human history and terrestrial geology'.<sup>17</sup> At this geo-historical crossroads it is impossible to distinguish whether the cataclysm is due to the agency of humans or that of nonhumans (it is actually due to the entanglement of both). Paradoxically, the world without us produced by the catastrophe is filmed by the camera as claustrophobically human. The density of human (mainly white) flesh framed by the camera is overwhelming, especially considering that most of the planet has no humans. Nonhuman agency is mostly foregrounded as a threat to be managed with paternalistic, hierarchical, martial, and secretive plans formulated by the boat-owning elites, usually combining the mediation

16 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

17 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 9.

of scientific authority and the heroic actions of some individuals. The rest of their problems are triggered by conflicts between characters as well as the lack of communication and trust among the crew. After the end of the world, caused by technocratic capitalism, the last humans seem incapable of generating a more functional participatory and inclusive system of decision-making to enhance their collective intelligence.

Interestingly, on a couple of occasions the crew's dominant environmentality—which seeks to solve self-generated threats with the managerial, aggressive, and technocratic authority that created them—fails miserably and the problem is resolved without violence by Burbuja, one of two characters who show deep empathy towards nonhuman living beings and try to understand their feelings and motivations (the other empathetic character is the only child on board).<sup>18</sup> Considering that Burbuja has brain damage, these two sequences call for an interesting ecocritical interpretation that combines posthumanism and disability studies. Burbuja's condition, however, is of recent origin, and before his accident he was a brilliant Harvard-educated scientist involved in the experiment that set the catastrophe in motion. The sequences featuring Burbuja may suggest that a radical change of logic which moves towards a posthuman ethics, combined with current techno-scientific capabilities, might be desirable. However, these sequences are the exception to the rule; most of the episodes promote the environmentality approach.

*El barco*, where food and energy scarcity due to the inaccessibility of biomass becomes the norm, could have provided an opportunity to challenge consumer capitalism and its unsustainable exploitation and depletion of planetary ecosystems. In this dystopic setting, however, there is an endless supply of Coca-Cola, a brand that symbolizes capitalist global omnipresence and is also an industrial product infamous for using enormous amounts of fresh water and other vital limited resources to make a very unhealthy beverage. A study of product placement in the first season of *El barco* shows that Coca-Cola was mentioned 31 times and appeared in ten of its 13 episodes.<sup>19</sup> Ironically, the show implies that even if most humans do not survive a global cataclysm, capitalist ideology certainly will. As Timothy Morton points out, 'Ideology is not just in your head. It's in the shape of a Coke bottle. It's in the way some things appear natural ... A profound political act would be to choose another aesthetic construct'.<sup>20</sup>

18 See two episodes in the first season: episode 5, 'El graznido' (Cawing), broadcast on February 14, 2011, and episode 8, 'Pesca mayor' (Sport fishing), broadcast on March 7, 2011.

19 Erika Fernández Gómez, 'La presencia de las grandes marcas en la ficción española: el caso de Coca-cola en El Barco de Antena 3', *REMARKA UIMA* 9 (2012): 74.

20 Morton, *Hyperobjects*, 106.

*El barco* is incapable of imagining a disruptive postgrowth, posthumanist, non-Eurocentric aesthetic even after a near-human-extinction event has occurred. This is another indication that, from the standpoint of cultural hegemony, ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism’.<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, this excessive Coca-Cola marketing campaign has ended up being unintentionally pedagogical for some segments of the show’s audience. A number of Facebook groups were created to mock the ridiculously overwhelming presence of this brand in a diegetic context of supposed scarcity and rationing. The ironic names chosen by these groups speak for themselves, for example: ‘Se acabará el mundo pero seguiré teniendo Coca-cola’ [The world will end but I will still have Coca-Cola], ‘El Barco, el único lugar donde sólo Coca-cola perdura’ [El Barco, the only place where Coca-Cola remains], and ‘Yo también creo que en El Barco está la fábrica de Coca-cola’ [I too believe that there is a Coca-Cola factory on El Barco].<sup>22</sup>

Paul Julian Smith, one of the few cultural scholars to discuss *El barco* (interestingly, most of the academic publications dealing with *El barco* appear in journals devoted to marketing, journalism, or communication studies and focus on topics such as audience response, transmedia strategies, and applied marketing), interprets the TV show as ‘an allegory of a Spain adrift in the grip of unprecedented circumstances’.<sup>23</sup> Although his reading of *El barco* as a Spanish audiovisual text ‘emblematic of the long running [economic] crisis’ is perfectly valid, the complete absence of the ecological global crisis in his analytic frame is revealing—especially when we consider that *El barco* depicts a global ecological catastrophe, not a national economic collapse.<sup>24</sup> Smith’s interpretation of *El barco* as a fiction of the economic crisis focuses on the identification of individual lines of desire frustrated by the economic crisis. Again, it is the critical interpretation of the culture of crisis as a personal, subjective, and private navigation of a social or economic situation independent from the ecological context in which it is embedded that prevents cultural critics from reading the crisis as a socioecological issue. The invisibility of nonhuman agency in a series in which major diegetic action—as well as most of the episodes’ overall dramatic tension—is motivated by drastic anthropogenic changes of global

21 Fredrick Jameson, ‘Future City’, *New Left Review* 21 (2003): 76.

22 Erika Fernández Gómez, ‘La presencia de las grandes marcas en la ficción española’, 85.

23 Paul Julian Smith, ‘Notes on the Future (and Past) of Spanish and Latin-American Media Studies’, *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 92, no. 3 (2015): 338.

24 Smith, ‘Notes on the Future (and Past) of Spanish and Latin-American Media Studies’, 338.

ecosystems indicates that we urgently need, as Ursula Heise suggests, to develop ‘a holistic understanding of ecological connectedness, as well as of the risks that have emerged from human manipulations of such connected systems’.<sup>25</sup>

It is worrisome to witness how, in the current age of social inequality and ecological collapse, most cultural critics and popular media audiences routinely disregard the relevance of nonhuman matters in all human affairs—even in fictions such as *El barco*, where anthropogenic intervention unleashes an unintended nonhuman agency with massive consequences. It is more urgent than ever to question this human-centric neocolonial cultural hegemony that directs both our theoretical radars and our focus of attention to our navels while our common (human and nonhuman) boat sinks. Put otherwise, ‘the climate crisis is upon us because we are intoxicated by our subjectivity’.<sup>26</sup> This human-centric (or, to be fair, Western-centric) ‘regime of the visible’ cannot see what it is not trained to see, no matter how obvious and dangerous it becomes. In this regard, Jane Bennett’s posthumanist reading of Rancière is enlightening. According to Bennett, we urgently need to make an effort to think of the political act as a human and nonhuman assemblage if we are to become capable of imagining a disruptive political ecology that can really modify the dominant partition of the perceptible.<sup>27</sup> I believe that a cultural criticism helpful to overcome the Capitalocene would pay due attention to material culture and nonhuman agency in order to recognize our unavoidable *naturecultural* interdependency and to challenge the dominant ideology of human-nonhuman disconnection. From this posthumanist critical perspective, *El barco* fails to be pedagogical because it foregrounds and privileges the visibility of human agency and personal desire over the collective and unequally distributed agency of human-nonhuman connections, as well as differential power relations. This failure perpetuates the illusion of human autonomy and independency: ‘there was never a time when human agency was anything other than an interfolding network of humanity and nonhumanity; today this mingling has become harder to ignore’.<sup>28</sup> In this regard, *El barco* can be interpreted as a postapocalyptic audiovisual narrative of ecological denialism: even after a global cataclysm has exposed the fragile ecological interdependency of the human species, the show’s narrative focus desperately strives to

25 Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 22.

26 Clive Hamilton, ‘Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change’, paper presented at the ‘Climate Controversies: Science and Politics’ conference, Museum of Natural Sciences, Brussels, October 28, 2010, 15.

27 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 104–109.

28 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 31.

‘re-impose the Enlightenment’s allocation of humans and Nature to two distinct realms’.<sup>29</sup>

The most disturbing aspect of *El barco*, other than its ecological denialism, is its depiction of the post-political environmentality that the fictional ‘Proyecto Alejandría’ (the Alexandria Project) promotes and which is represented by the pathological social Darwinism of the antagonist Gamboa. This project was a top-down backup plan intended to ensure the survival of the human species in the event that the particle collider should generate a global cataclysm. It is unclear whether this plotline is intended as a critique of the current global neoliberal biopolitics that massively destroys and administers life, or whether it is merely a way to maintain diegetic tension and dramatic intensity. I am inclined to believe the latter because an intentional critique of neoliberal biopolitics would be inconsistent with the show’s ecological denialism as well as its massive mobilization of intradiegetic and extradiegetic corporate marketing. In any case, the secret project that led to the disaster in which the ship’s crew find themselves uses the manufactured crisis as a justification for assassinating, torturing, and manipulating any person who represents an obstacle to the project’s plan. The environmentality of the technocratic and militarized characters implicated in the Alexandria Project—the ones who know the real reasons for the disaster and are following a prearranged plan for its aftermath—perpetuate and amplify the logic of neoliberal biopolitics after the catastrophe without questioning the role of such technocratic, hierarchical, anthropocentric, and militarized logic in the activation of the disaster. The vast majority of people are part of the plan without knowing it. This remaining assemblage of human life was selected in advance, and each person has a specific function in the technocratic plan. Their humanity is reduced to bare life and denied political agency, as Agamben would put it, and consequently it is strictly regulated by technocratic and hierarchical interventions.<sup>30</sup> The minds administering the Alexandria Project decide who lives and who dies at every moment. They cure de la Cuadra’s cancer without his consent or knowledge, but assassinate several other characters who might compromise their plan.

Another problematic aspect of *El barco* is the lack of attention to environmental justice in the context of the Anthropocene, namely the uneven distribution of risks and the inverse correlation between agents’ degree of responsibility for the environmental crisis and their

29 Hamilton, ‘Why We Resist the Truth about Climate Change’, 15.

30 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

degree of exposure to its deleterious consequences. Dispossessed and underprivileged populations not responsible for climate change are those most vulnerable to its resultant environmental risks, but they are not even considered worth mentioning in *El barco*. The series, as Rob Nixon notes in relation to the dominant ways of narrating the Anthropocene, depicts the consequences of collective human agency without considering ‘the question of unequal human agency, unequal human impacts, and unequal human vulnerability’.<sup>31</sup> As I will show shortly, to understand the importance of this systemic neocolonial erasure for the maintenance of the hegemonic politics of representation, a convergence of ecocritical and postcolonial criticism is vital.

#### 4.2. *The Impossible*

On December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean tsunami, one of the deadliest ‘natural’ disasters ever recorded, claimed over three hundred thousand lives and devastated entire regions in countries including India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Thailand, and Sri Lanka. The catastrophe affected more than two million people. This destructive event generated a lot of media attention as well as an intense mobilization of humanitarian aid from the international community. Subsequently, a number of audiovisual cultural manifestations depicted the tsunami and its aftermath. *The Impossible* (2012), an English-language movie by Spanish director Juan Antonio Bayona, was arguably the most popular.<sup>32</sup> *The Impossible* was a great success, nationally and internationally, in terms of both box office numbers and the quantity of awards it received. Based on the true story of a Spanish family who survived the tsunami, the film focuses on a white, well-off, British family of five who are enjoying a vacation at a luxury tourist resort in Thailand. Their vacation is interrupted by the tsunami and, from that point on, the dispersed members of the family struggle to find each other and eventually reunite and fly back to their homeland in a private jet provided by their high-end insurance policy.

Most of the reviews in magazines such as *Film Journal International*, *Rolling Stone*, *Film Comment*, and *Variety* were overly celebratory, highlighting the director’s gift, the film’s technical accomplishments, and the actors’ talents. A few commentators, however, noted the banality of the story of the separated and reunited family (David Denby, *New Yorker*),<sup>33</sup> the

31 Nixon, ‘The Great Acceleration and the Great Divergence’.

32 Juan Antonio Bayona, dir., *The Impossible* (Summit, 2012), DVD.

33 David Denby, ‘Stiff Upper Lips’, *New Yorker*, January 28, 2013, 80.

worrisome whitewashing narrative (David Cox, *The Guardian*),<sup>34</sup> and the sensationalist treatment of the disaster (Erik Kohn, *Indiewire*).<sup>35</sup> Beyond reviews, blog comments, and feature articles in the cultural sections of newspapers and magazines, the movie has not yet been studied in depth by cultural scholars in order to understand its politics of representation. I believe that a postcolonial ecocritical reading of *The Impossible* is well suited to illuminate the film's disturbing politics of invisibility—the enormous blind spots afflicting the film's narrative and visuals. Using this approach, the hegemonic order of the visible and the ideology of disconnection which *The Impossible* espouses and perpetuates can be exposed and radically challenged.

This high-budget transnational production incorporates a number of technically sophisticated special effects to depict the sudden, unexpected violence unleashed by the tsunami in a specific location and how a family of European tourists deals with the disaster. It grossly ignores economically and socially different vulnerabilities to environmental events and culturally and racially different perceptions of environmental risk, as well as the slow violence that preceded the catastrophe and will continue to affect the local communities for many years to come. The film presents the tsunami as a 'natural disaster' (mainly ahistorical and apolitical) that suddenly threatens the taken-for-granted bodily safety of the wealthy European family—a family that succeeds in heroically overcoming this disruptive force of nature and thus ironically confirms not the unpredictability, power, omnipresence, and relevance of nonhuman agency, but rather the idea that 'Nothing is stronger than the human spirit', as one of the official trailers of the movie puts it. Not only is the movie not pedagogical, socioecologically speaking, but what is worse, it re-centers humans in a context where the obvious lesson should be that humans are not in control of an ontologically external nature, but rather interconnected, interdependent, ecological beings that are inextricably enmeshed in a web of ecological processes and differential power relations.

In the Anthropocene, a geo-historical crossroads where the distinction between nature and culture can no longer be sustained, *The Impossible* uses the disaster trope not to erase such a distinction but, paradoxically, to reinforce

34 David Cox, 'Attempting the Impossible: Why Does Western Cinema Whitewash Asian Stories?', *The Guardian*, January 2, 2013.

35 Eric Kohn, 'Toronto Review: Juan Antonio Bayona's "The Impossible" Is an Intense Realization of the 2004 Tsunami at Odds With Overstated Sentimentalism', *IndieWire*, September 9, 2012, <http://www.indiewire.com/2012/09/toronto-review-juan-antonio-bayonas-the-impossible-is-an-intense-realization-of-the-2004-tsunami-at-odds-with-overstated-sentimentalism-241703/>.

it. Moreover, the movie privileges—and tries to universalize—a single cultural response to the disaster (a white, heterosexual, European, wealthy one), ignoring two facts: first, the vast majority of victims of the tsunami were neither white nor European, and second, ‘not all cultural responses are equal ... and disasters result in fierce competition over which interpretations hold sway over the collective imagination and, more to the point, the political establishment’.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, given the fact that the movie interprets the destructive disaster (its unequally distributed consequences are not even suggested) as something disconnected from economic, social, and political issues, the neocolonial legacy implicated in neoliberal global tourism and in the ecologically disruptive consumerist lifestyle of rich countries is not even suggested. Far from it, in a perverse turn, the members of the European family—the unconscious perpetrators of the global structure of privilege—are depicted in the film as universal victims with whom a global audience must fully empathize. Most of the special effects of the movie are intended to submerge the audience in the main character’s experience. This simplistic treatment of the tsunami’s symptoms, from the locus of perception and enunciation of wealthy Western European tourists, serves to avoid systemic thinking and, as a result, socioecological problems are viewed as a matter of personal misfortune rather than understood as the semiotic and material consequence of neocolonial historic processes of unequal economic relations and pathological socioecological metabolisms that need to be radically confronted. Reading the film from a postgrowth critical perspective and focusing on the socioecological aspects it conceals can help to unmask the movie’s acceptance and perpetuation of the harmful dominant growth imaginary.

The destruction brought on by the tsunami, viewed through a postcolonial ecocritical lens, will be interpreted here as a symptom of a long, multiscale, socioecological process rather than as a sudden natural event without ties to social, political, cultural, and economic hegemonic structures. I will emphasize how the interaction of human and nonhuman agency plays out in the material and semiotic network from which the tsunami emerges as a naturecultural disaster. In other words, the destructive force that *The Impossible* depicts as an expression of sudden, spectacular, natural violence with no political or historical ties will be reread as part of a long process of slow violence that can be traced historically on different temporal and geographical scales. My intention is to disrupt, in Rancière’s sense, ‘the distribution of the sensible’ prearranged by the disaster narrative of

<sup>36</sup> Mark D. Anderson, *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 2.

*The Impossible* and its symbolic order that determines what can and what cannot be visible and thinkable.<sup>37</sup> To significantly ‘reconfigure the map of the sensible’ in politically meaningful ways, I will call attention to the long-term slow violence that the visual aesthetics of *The Impossible* hides and disguises. As a reminder, Rob Nixon defines slow violence as

violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence, a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales. In so doing, we also need to engage the representational, narrative, and strategic challenges posed by the relative invisibility of slow violence.<sup>38</sup>

*The Impossible* is a paradigmatic example of how the framing of violence as an ‘explosive and spectacular’ event of ‘instant sensational visibility’ results in the perverse obliteration of the slow violence implicated in that event and, consequently, the erasure of all political, historical, and ethical alternative interpretations of the destructive consequences of the tsunami.

There are obvious links between anthropogenic climate change and the increase in the number and intensity of tsunamis.<sup>39</sup> Arguably, the carbon-intense lifestyle of the wealthy European tourist family is more responsible for greenhouse emissions than that of most of the locals affected by the tsunami. Surprisingly, although the film is about a family of tourists affected by a disaster, it does not even suggest that ‘there are many ties between tourism and disaster’ and that a neocolonial pattern of ‘tourism-related dispossession’ exists.<sup>40</sup> The setting of the movie is a luxury coastal resort where the main characters are staying along with many other white tourists. From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, it is obvious that a luxury coastal resort is a significant locus that could be related

37 Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

38 Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.

39 McGuire, *Waking the Giant*.

40 Anthony Carrigan, “‘Out of This Great Tragedy Will Come a World Class Tourism Destination’: Disaster, Ecology, and Post-Tsunami Tourism Development in Sri Lanka”, in *Postcolonial Ecologies: Literatures of the Environment*, ed. Elizabeth DeLoughrey and George B. Handley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 274, 287.

to a neocolonial and neoliberal history of rapid and dire socioecological transformations of postcolonial regions. The resort should be understood in context, as one of multiple examples of how the coastlines of many regions in the global South have been ecologically transformed beyond recognition in past decades by massive foreign tourism, not to mention the industrial production of commodities to feed global markets.

These top-down technocratic adjustments transformed functional local economies into transnational industrial operations that displaced local inhabitants from their ancestral land and dispossessed them of their traditional livelihoods while radically altering and depleting regional ecosystems. As Indian ecofeminist Vandana Shiva explains, ‘The effects of the wave that struck the coasts were mainly the fault of the human race. The coasts, bereft of their natural defenses because of the construction of tourist villages and the destruction of the mangrove forests for agro-industrial purposes, have been left completely exposed’.<sup>41</sup> According to Carlo Petrini, ‘the presence of mangroves is extremely important in these areas because they protect the coast against the force of the sea (significantly, the tsunami did less damage along those parts of the coast that were still protected by the mangroves)’.<sup>42</sup> Thus, from a historical perspective of neocolonial dynamics and changing ecologies, intense neoliberal slow violence preceded and conditioned the tsunami’s socioecological destruction significantly. The growth-oriented policies imposed in these regions made their population extremely vulnerable to the deleterious environmental effects which such policies exacerbated.<sup>43</sup> Many of the locals in the affected areas were already developmental refugees, ‘those forced into flight by development and barred from once-accessible commonage’,<sup>44</sup> long before the tsunami turned them into environmental refugees.

Without a historical postcolonial environmental perspective, the movie’s representation of wealthy tourists as universal victims seems to be unproblematic, because the implication of tourism’s neoliberal dynamics in the socioecological transformations that exacerbated the disaster are ignored. The movie is not pedagogical, because it reinforces the dominant ideology of disconnection by refraining from making any relevant

41 Cited in Petrini, *Slow Food Nation*, 111.

42 Petrini, *Slow Food Nation*, 112.

43 For a really insightful and rhetorically powerful explanation of these issues in relation to Haiti’s 2010 earthquake, see the brilliant article by Junot Díaz, ‘Apocalypse: What Disasters Reveal’, *Boston Review*, May 1, 2011, <http://bostonreview.net/junot-diaz-apocalypse-haiti-earthquake>.

44 Rob Nixon, ‘Neoliberalism, Genre, and “The Tragedy of the Commons”’, *PMLA* 127 (2012): 596 (paraphrasing Thayer Scudder).

socioecological connections. Instead, the movie focuses on the symptoms of the tsunami from a Eurocentric perspective, ignoring its root causes. The result is the perpetuation of the dominant interpretation of the tsunami and the victimization and celebration of those who benefit more from the neoliberal/neocolonial status quo and whose lifestyles are more responsible for the slow violence of which the tsunami is only a part. The movie does not help to find systemic solutions to socioecological issues—quite the opposite, because ‘if the key actors responsible for ecological destruction are systematically erased from environmental discourse then the danger is that solutions are sought at the wrong level’.<sup>45</sup>

The end of the movie is immensely revealing. It coincides with the moment when the white tourists leave on a private plane provided by their insurance company. Once they stop being affected by the problem (a problem to which their carbon-intensive lifestyle contributed), the problem disappears and becomes irrelevant because everything returns to what the dominant imaginary conceives as ‘normal’: namely, white, wealthy Europeans return to their privileged spaces while underprivileged and disenfranchised people fade into invisibility. The destructive lifestyle of the well-off can continue undisturbed without anyone recognizing its negative effects elsewhere. The long-term continuity of slow violence after the tsunami seems irrelevant and not worth considering from the Eurocentric perspective of the film. The family members board a private jet—which could have been put to good use to help many of the locals affected by the disaster—and return to their intact homes as heroes. The space of the airplane is exclusively reserved for the family, a disturbing (and unethical) waste of resources and fossil fuel in the context of an emergency situation. The spacious and quiet interior of the plane contrasts with the hectic and dense post-disaster environment that the tourists leave behind. The end of the movie is by no means the end of the socioecological violence; the long-term, attritional, slow violence suffered by the locals and regional ecosystems due to capitalist growth dynamics (including global tourism) orchestrated from above will continue long after the Europeans have flown off into the sunset.

The politics of representation in the movie actually contribute to reinforcing the dominant interpretation of the tsunami, which permits the implementation and justification of neoliberal slow violence after the tsunami. By prioritizing a white tourist family as the camera’s main interest, as well as focusing on individuals helping individuals and on the emotional and physical strengths of specific characters, the film conceals the systemic sociopolitical and economic structures of power and domination

45 Stibbe, *Ecolinguistics*, 148 (paraphrasing Mary Schleppegrell).

intertwined in the disaster, as well as the need to radically challenge, politically and collectively, those dynamics and, more importantly, the imaginaries that legitimate them. In other words, the film privileges the dominant interpretation of the disaster and serves as effective global publicity for such an interpretation, as the box office numbers attest. This publicity might be unintended, but it nonetheless has significant political consequences. According to Mark Anderson, 'Political power is at a premium during the recovery process':

The process of narrating the disaster mobilizes existing social and political power relations at the same time that it negotiates them ... Disaster narratives serve to legitimize and to delegitimize political discourse, always in competition with rival versions ... In the end, the triumphant version of events ... achieves canonical status as the basis for political action.<sup>46</sup>

For this reason, cultural scholars should analyze 'the politics of interpretation' deployed by a given disaster narrative to understand the nuances in its negotiation of meaning.<sup>47</sup>

*The Impossible*, despite its pretense of political neutrality (the director insisted in several interviews that the movie is not about class, race, and so on because, according to him, all that was wiped away by the tsunami), perpetuates the dominant interpretation of the disaster, an interpretation that is not going to prevent (quite the opposite) growth-oriented politics from controlling the reconstruction process and displacing the remaining locals—using the disaster as an excuse—to make room for the next generation of tourist development. Actually, 'for many doubly disenfranchised locals, reconstruction came to be viewed as "the second tsunami"'.<sup>48</sup> In fact, in most of the regions affected by the tsunami, neoliberal global institutions (the World Bank, IMF, and WTO) working in tandem with regional technocrats and elites have been using reconstruction funds and international aid to expand, implement, and reinforce the same infrastructures (tourist resorts, industrial prawn farms, and so on) that deplete the environment, compromise food sovereignty, and displace local communities.<sup>49</sup> Not surprisingly, the slow violence which is perpetuated by post-tsunami developmental politics

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, *Disaster Writing*, 2, 7.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, *Disaster Writing*, 7.

<sup>48</sup> Carrigan, 'Out of This Great Tragedy Will Come a World Class Tourism Destination', 274.

<sup>49</sup> Petrini, *Slow Food Nation*, 110–113; Carrigan, 'Out of This Great Tragedy Will Come a World Class Tourism Destination', 273–275.

is completely disregarded by *The Impossible*, a movie where the main heroes are foreign tourists who benefit from neoliberal developmental violence prior to the tsunami and will continue to do so in the post-tsunami context. Under disaster capitalism, manufactured catastrophe opens up further growth opportunities for capitalists who will generate subsequent dispossession and disaster.

From a postcolonial ecocritical perspective, the title of the film is also highly problematic and intriguing. What is *The Impossible* referring to? Is it really referring to the survival of the white tourists with intensive carbon lifestyles supported by a global structure of privilege and fully covered by private insurance policies? To me, it seems much more 'impossible' to oppose and end the structure of neocolonial privilege in which the lives of white, rich tourists are considered more worthy of preserving (and representing) than the lives of more vulnerable populations. What really seems impossible (although the movie does not even register it as a problem) is to prevent the global growth dynamics (from which the white tourists benefit) from manufacturing environmental and developmental refugees and then making them irrelevant and invisible (as the movie does). What seems impossible, thanks to movies like this, is the possibility of challenging the dominant politics of representation and conceiving alternative interpretations of the disaster that look for systemic causes without perpetuating the cultural hegemony. And what seems truly impossible is for the film to imagine the end of a disaster capitalism (because it is impossible to imagine the end of something that it is not even perceived and recognized) that makes room for luxury tourist resorts by transforming regional ecologies at the price of displacing, dispossessing, and impeding the continuation of traditional, low-carbon livelihoods.

What the movie does not mention is that the traditional ecological knowledge that is disappearing thanks to the proliferating tourist-intrusive infrastructures was, in part, what saved the lives of some of the tourists. In many regions, locals fled to the mountains to save themselves and, after the wave hit, returned to the coast to help the tourists. The end of the movie indicates that nothing was learned, as it embraces a cruel optimism that celebrates a return to the hegemonic normality in which privileged people remain blind to the dire social and ecological consequences of their lifestyle. Is that ending really the materialization of an impossible or unlikely event, or is it just the logical outcome of a neocolonial, growth-oriented inertia? *The Impossible* imagines no avenues for collective political engagement as a response to neoliberal disaster, because the systemic dimensions of such a disaster do not exist from the film's privileged perspective. Privilege, hegemony, and colonial/neocolonial dynamics are invisible to such a degree

that their negative socioecological consequences are completely obliterated and their positive influence on the privileged characters is confused with an unlikely, almost miraculous (the impossible!) combination of their individual strength and personal luck.

Jane Bennett is right in affirming that ‘the locus of political responsibility is a human-nonhuman assemblage’.<sup>50</sup> The post-political narrative of *The Impossible* actively avoids the visibility of such an assemblage, making it difficult to think of the tsunami politically in any meaningful way. It is disturbing to witness the absence of socioecological issues even in movies that represent socioecological disasters. The two audiovisual narratives studied in this chapter focus on personal consequences and not the systemic causes of the disasters. In such narratives, the catastrophe functions as an entertainment-driven spectacle for consumption, rather than a denunciation of the cultural consumerism and dominant economic ideology that exacerbate and manufacture such socioecological disasters. Both narratives are overwhelmingly human-centered—a paradoxical irony, given that the main cause of diegetic action is the unexpected intrusion of nonhuman agency. Neither is pedagogical, for their depictions of catastrophe do not encourage a radical rethinking of our disaster-producing socioecological metabolism. Neither *El barco* nor *The Impossible* is useful to ‘counter those maladaptive forms of reason that radically distance us from the non-human sphere’. They both fail to ‘situate humans ecologically and nonhumans ethically’, as Val Plumwood recommends if we are to successfully navigate the current ecological crisis.<sup>51</sup> Both cultural manifestations actively avoid the issue of environmental justice and frame the disaster mostly from the locus of enunciation of white Europeans. They ignore the most vulnerable populations, the ones most affected by environmental degradation although they are the least responsible for it. Both narratives are examples of the epistemological limitations self-imposed by the dominant imaginary: ‘Amid generalized historical amnesia concerning the past, and impoverished abilities to imagine the future except in fantasy sci-fi mode, human existence on the planet is increasingly “poor on future” to adapt Heidegger’s phrase’.<sup>52</sup>

To conclude, I concur with Jason Moore:

We are frequently warned of the alleged dangers of civilizational ‘collapse’. But is the ‘collapse’ of capitalism—a civilization that plunges

50 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 36.

51 Plumwood, *Environmental Culture*, 239.

52 Srinivas Aravamudan, ‘The Catachronism of Climate Change’, *Diacritics* 41, no. 3 (2013): 17.

a third of its population into malnutrition—really something to fear? ... The most pessimistic view is one that hopes for the survival of modernity in something like its present form. But this is impossible, because capitalism's metabolism is inherently an open-flow system that continually exhausts its source of nourishment.<sup>53</sup>

Most mainstream disaster fictions depict the collapse of the dominant system as something that should be avoided at all costs, perpetuating the cruel optimism that it is better to tolerate a perverse status quo that constantly becomes more socially and ecologically costly than to actively transition to something else. At best, these fictions force audiences to think about the unsustainability of the current system, but they never encourage them to develop alternatives to it. Steve Mentz writes that 'The great weakness of our industrial fossil-fuel economy is its exclusion of other forms of production, so that when systemic catastrophes come—wars, oil spills, financial crises—we have few alternatives. We need options, not sustainability'.<sup>54</sup> We need desirable postgrowth imaginaries.

In order to truly challenge the dominant imaginary, I suggest that we abandon the apocalyptic frame and move from the ineffective—usually counterproductive—pedagogy of catastrophe to a more assertive 'pedagogy of degrowth'.<sup>55</sup> Alternatives can emerge only if we think beyond the self-imposed epistemological limitations of the cultural hegemony, and in order to mobilize activism and collective politics, it is much more effective to depict and perform socially desirable and ecologically sound alternative ways to be in the world. I believe we need more narratives that represent a society that happily degrows and learns how to live better with less, embraces more fulfilling and less intensive material and energy lifestyles, and seeks meaningful and just prosperity without growth (*decrescita felice* or *décroissance conviviale*, as the Italians and French like to call it). As Del Río, coordinator of the Transition Town movement in Spain, laments:

Dónde están las películas que hablan de una sociedad que, siendo capaz de prever una crisis inminente y evitable, responde ante ella de forma imaginativa, empleando la creatividad y la reflexión participativa para conseguir, finalmente, alterar el curso de la historia?<sup>56</sup>

53 Moore, 'Nature in the Limits to Capital (and Vice Versa)', 19.

54 Steve Mentz, 'After Sustainability', *PMLA* 127, no. 3 (2012): 591.

55 Luis I. Prádanos, 'The Pedagogy of Degrowth: Teaching Hispanic Studies in the Age of Social Inequality and Ecological Collapse', *Arizona Journal of Hispanic Cultural Studies* 19 (2015): 81–96.

56 Del Río, *Guía del movimiento de transición*, 10.

[Where are the movies that talk about a society that, being able to anticipate an imminent and evitable crisis, responds to it imaginatively, using creativity and participatory reflection to succeed, eventually, in altering the course of history?]

The lack of such postgrowth stories in mainstream media is an indication of the crisis of imagination that the hegemonic culture perpetuates and that a postcolonial ecocriticism can help to correct. However, as demonstrated in the preceding chapters, there has already been a significant emergence of counterhegemonic postgrowth imaginaries in post-2008 Spain.

Jeffrey Cohen describes 'Apocalypse' as 'a failure of the imagination, a giving up on the future instead of a commitment to the difficult work of composing a better present'.<sup>57</sup> I hope this book encourages us to commit ourselves, as cultural critics, to this difficult task of imagining and materializing a better present, one that dares to imagine life beyond economic growth and capital accumulation. I hope our field embraces 'ethics that produce more than just an apocalyptic sentiment ... an ethics that does not center on the human—or its non-existence—as the only axis that is of significance ... A proper ethics moves on multiple ecological scales'.<sup>58</sup> We need not inevitably be trapped between Scylla and Charybdis, as the dominant imaginary insists. And we do not have to grow at all costs, limiting our politics to a pre-framed choice between a suicidal, fearful, and conservative 'business as usual' model and a risky, more or less progressive, techno-optimist version of the same logic. Both offer only the illusion of democratic choice while excluding the possibility of a historically informed, meaningful politics that will enable us to collectively build the present we want. Fortunately, as this book has demonstrated, there *is* an emerging and hopeful cultural resistance to the growth imaginary in the Iberian Peninsula. The time has come to dare to imagine prosperity without growth for all!

<sup>57</sup> Cohen, *Prismatic Ecology*, 285.

<sup>58</sup> Parikka and Richterich, 'A Geology of Media and a New Materialism', 223.

