



An alien spaceship hovers over New York City in  
*Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, US, 1996).

## **Spectacles of History: Race Relations, Melodrama, and the Science Fiction/Disaster Film**

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This essay, on the political and cultural significance of the disaster films of the 1990s, was completed in 1999. I had just finished the editorial revisions on the original version for inclusion in this issue when the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 changed the stakes of the visual, moral, and political landscape I trace in the spectacle of disaster. Personal accounts of the aftermath of the attacks often revisited the disaster film genre. “I thought it was an ad for a new blockbuster movie,” “I thought I was in a disaster film,” “This was just like *Independence Day*,” were some of the responses I heard from friends and in news reports. Such references to disaster films are not surprising given how many of these films were released in the last decade, and how successful they were in terms of box office, video, DVD and merchandise sales. Because of their pervasive presence in the visual landscape of the last decade, these films seem to provide the referent of disaster. Even people who do not routinely watch these films acquire the necessary genre literacy through advertisements, trailers, print,

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and newspaper media. Neal Gabler's editorial for the 16 September issue of the *New York Times*, "This Time, the Scene Was Real," thematized this process of visual recognition: "The explosion and fireball, the crumbling buildings, the dazed and panicked victims, even the grim presidential address assuring action would be taken—all were familiar, as if they had been lifted from some Hollywood blockbuster."<sup>1</sup> The real scenes of the disaster zone, around the Twin Towers especially, and the photographic and filmic reporting of these scenes shared an uncanny similarity with the preexisting fictional depictions of disaster movies.

I am certain that there will be more analyses of this effect in the next months, and possibly renewed critical interest in the disaster films of the 1990s. Since I was caught in the process of revising what was already a finished article, I am acutely aware of the temptation to look back in wisdom and find prophetic relationships and correspondences between the imagined landscape of the disaster and the recently experienced real events. It is ironic to have to explore the unprecedented reality of this attack in terms of a kind of *déjà vu*.<sup>2</sup> In the political and journalistic sphere, the quest for precedent has different effects. Political commentators and analysts fall back to historical links with Pearl Harbor as the last attack on American soil and revisit World War II (not Vietnam or the Gulf War, interestingly) to remind the public of its own resiliency. After a while, the incomprehensibility of terrorism is translated into the frightening but orderly demands of war, and the stunned silence of the first days is replaced by other emotions. To understand what happened politically, we do indeed need a wide range of referential historical analyses, going back and forward in time and place, in our search for relevant conditions, strategies, and approaches. But what do we do with the emotional impact of the literally "screened" false memory of the disaster we carry from the spectacular movies of the 1990s? Do these memories constitute an emotional precedent, and, if so, what is its effect?

The visual landscape created by the science fiction/disaster films of the last decade was pervasive, obsessive, and, in my view, politically eloquent despite its lack of depth.<sup>3</sup> But it seems

clear to me that it was not motivated by or enjoyed through a need to understand the global political landscape, and it did not overtly thematize the political responsibility we seek in our present situation. Given the recurring feeling of visual referentiality, it may be tempting for film and cultural critics to discuss these films as prescient heralds of a new world order and redeem their cultural relevance a posteriori. These types of readings are already coming up in relation to *The Siege* (dir. Edward Zwick, US, 1998), and many editorials seem invested in researching a kind of quotational possibility between fiction and terrorist reality.<sup>4</sup> It is different, though, to desire and enjoy a spectacular disaster film in the middle of a robust Internet economy, with little American military engagement abroad and few casualties in the engagements that were undertaken (reluctantly and with caution), with constant reports of unprecedented personal wealth in the news, and while enjoying the lowest unemployment since the 1970s. Part of the pleasure of the spectacle of disaster derived from the perceived safety and comfort of the world. The digital creation of comets, floods, earthquakes, tidal waves, and enemies made these threats safe too. Many critics writing about these popular films at the time were frustrated by their lack of serious reference to the real world and to real emotions, and it was this distance from any recognizable political impact that I was trying to address in this essay.

In other words, I contend that in order to understand what the personal references to disaster movies mean now, and before we can understand what kind of precedent these films constitute, we need to figure out what they meant, what desires they expressed, and what political spectacles they staged at the time. This was indeed my quest in the original article, and here it follows without post-September 11 additions. More of my present thoughts and questions about this relationship follow the essay, again separated from it but trying to revisit its argument—my attempt to both present this work and to create a responsible frame for it.

Describing the plot and cultural relevance of *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, US, 1996), Amy Taubin writes, “*Indepen-*

*dence Day* is a feel-good picture about the end of the world, or rather about how the end of the world is averted by good men who put aside their racial and ethnic differences to come together in a common cause. It's the answer to Rodney King's plea in the aftermath of the LA riots: 'Why can't we all just get along?' We can, it seems, but only under the threat of an alien invasion."<sup>5</sup> This is an apt description of the disaster/apocalyptic films of the nineties. In Taubin's formulation, the need to repair the social rupture felt after the LA riots necessitates the filmic emergence of a multiracial male group, which then affirms the "American" value of working together for a common cause. At the same time, it is only under extreme and life-threatening conditions that such interracial communication is possible. The "alien invasion" that she identifies serves as a major incentive for the revival of humanist notions of community and patriotic identification; after all, the us-versus-them narrative of most war propaganda works along the same lines. In the tradition of the science fiction films of the Cold War era, the threats and enemies in the diegetic space may represent or hint at perceived political threats, and "alien" figures work quite well to allegorically include many possible enemies without specifically identifying them.

But is this really what is going on in the films that engage the "fear and pity" of the grand disaster? Do they consistently affirm traditional values? What do these values mean politically? Are all disasters equivalent? Are all the heroes men? What happens when the destruction is not global, does not thematize race relations, or is not set in Los Angeles? In this article, I want to explore the melodramatic encounters that are staged within the disaster/apocalyptic film in order to complicate how race and gender differences are negotiated in these crises. Thinking about the disaster genre in terms of melodrama allows us to resolve the critical dilemma of how to read spectacular genres politically. I propose that, despite the apparent racial/gender integration of the hero team, we are nowhere near a post-Rodney King landscape. On the contrary, these films try to resignify the "American" landscape and "American" values from within an intense awareness of the literal and metaphorical "disaster" of racial and gen-

der misunderstanding. By staging an insistent replay of exactly the events of the Rodney King landscape, disaster films of the nineties mark the rupture of meaning and national understanding, use the disaster as an organizational force, and propose a fantasy/utopian alternative to complex political conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Major cultural events of the 1990s have brought to the American public consciousness an increased awareness of difference, of the noncongruence between competing interpretations of equality, justice, multiculturalism, citizenship, and the role of the state. In media accounts, this is often described as a racially specific divergence in point of view. I am referring to the cultural effects of the Rodney King incident (the beating, the video, the *California v. Powell* trial and verdict, and the ensuing urban unrest), the O.J. Simpson trials and verdicts, and the public attention given to an assumed racially specific bias in people's response to these cases. Both events resonated through the nineties, and they have been linked to a variety of national-level debates, from "Say it in American" to discussions of public policy.<sup>7</sup> This assumed gulf between differently raced/gendered people's perceptions of the contemporary moral landscape is in itself a melodramatic topos and may provide a helpful clue as to what makes representations of the disaster so insistent. In his conclusion to *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks describes the "decentering" of modern consciousness as the standpoint of the ironic, antimetaphorical mode. Against this "lack of central plenitude," melodrama "represents a refusal of this vertiginous but possibly liberating decentering, a search for a new plenitude, an ethical recentering."<sup>8</sup> In this framework, the melodramatic disaster would enable the creation of a common ground, a shared national point of view now lacking. Destruction also means liberation in a way that utopian/apocalyptic films always engage: destroying what looked like home is necessary in order to reaffirm what home really means. The destruction allows a new beginning, especially where the weight of the past and past political mistakes seem to have eliminated the possibility for change. For Brooks, melodrama would function politically by positing a "constant bipolar dynamism with the enemy," which could be a political power, leader, or "a natural scourge on which 'war' is declared, poverty or hunger

or simply inflation” (203). This formulation would work very well in terms of the disaster film. We could configure the volcano, comet, or alien spaceship as one pole of the conflict, with the humans/Americans on the other, and the clear division between the two as the Manichaeian split that satisfies our need for moral legibility (203).

But precisely because legibility is the issue, this clear-cut division is actually too clear and therefore cannot carry the force and weight of the melodramatic encounter that these films engage. What would be satisfying about the irrevocable comet, whose actions cannot be construed as evil in any meaningful way, and whose function is not aggressive but just natural? Would we have any doubts about the allocation of virtue faced with a lethal virus? Neither comets nor viruses can function as melodramatic villains against whom the ethical protagonists triumph. Discussing disaster/apocalyptic films as melodrama would thus require figuring out what counts as “virtue” in the films, and what resolutions the disasters offer.<sup>9</sup> For this account, instead of focusing on the overt and central conflict between the humans and the threat they face, we should also consider the regional human conflicts and melodramatic encounters that form a response to the threat.

Part of the problem in understanding the cultural role performed by these disaster/apocalyptic films is the inability of traditional critical language to discern or explore their meaning. On 3 May 1998, for example, the “Arts and Entertainment” section of the *New York Times* was dominated by announcements of films scheduled for summer release. Full-page color ads announced *Deep Impact* (dir. Mimi Leder, US, 1998) (“Oceans Rise. Cities Fall . . . Hope Survives”) and *Virus* (dir. John Bruno, France/Germany/Japan/UK/US, 1999) (“On August 14 Mankind Is History . . . Virus . . . It Is Aware”). The hyperbolic language of the advertisements promises grand-scale disaster, guaranteed by production trademarks such as “DreamWorks,” “Industrial Light and Magic,” “Digital Domain,” and “The Creators of *Independence Day*.” This celebratory rhetoric is, however, counteracted by the uneasiness of the rest of the issue about these films, their success, and their apparent domination of movie production, especially of the sum-

mer months. In the main editorial, “Dazzled or Dazed? The Wide Impact of Special Effects,” William McDonald identifies the predominance of special effects as the main theme of summer movies. “Will it ever end?” he asks. “Of course not. But that’s no reason not to ask, Have we had enough yet? Which is to say, are we not becoming bored with all this computer-generated excitement?” McDonald warns us that special effects diminish the ability of audiences to imagine things for themselves (“films have colonized the imagination”) and overwhelm whatever story there is in “hyped-to-the-heavens” films like *Independence Day*. “It is not a stretch to say that movies that peddle the digital pyrotechnics engage in a kind of technological pornography,” he claims.<sup>10</sup> Central to his argument is the distinction between “a good special effect” (one that is “integral to the film”) and bad ones that “leave little to the imagination,” “never really satisfy,” and are analogous to drug addiction.

McDonald’s response to the big-budget, multimedia event that is the contemporary blockbuster film is understandable. The 1990s have indeed been dominated by one US disaster/apocalyptic/science fiction epic after another. In 1995 alone, *Waterworld* (dir. Kevin Reynolds), *Tank Girl* (dir. Rachel Talalay), *Outbreak* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen), *12 Monkeys* (dir. Terry Gilliam), *Apollo 13* (dir. Ron Howard), *Species* (dir. Roger Donaldson), and *Strange Days* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow), to name a few, were released; in 1996 *Twister* (dir. Jan de Bont), *Independence Day*, *Mars Attacks!* (dir. Tim Burton), and *Mimic* (dir. Guillermo del Toro); in 1997 *The Postman* (dir. Kevin Costner), *Volcano* (dir. Mick Jackson), *Dante’s Peak* (dir. Roger Donaldson), *Men in Black* (dir. Barry Sonnenfeld), *Alien Resurrection* (dir. Jean-Pierre Jeunet), *Starship Troopers* (dir. Paul Verhoeven), and *Titanic* (dir. James Cameron); in 1998 we saw *Hard Rain* (dir. Mikael Salomon), *Event Horizon* (dir. Paul Anderson, UK/US), *Deep Impact*, *Species II* (dir. Peter Medak), *Armageddon* (dir. Michael Bay), *Godzilla* (dir. Roland Emmerich), *Virus*, and so on. And this list does not include the many films released in related genres, positing disaster as the result of terrorist attack, police work, or blackmail, or those depicting the destruction of property common in action films generally.



Hollywood's top film producers and studios invest ambitious budgets and engage in massive media campaigns on at least two films per summer. Critics often evaluate these films on a binary opposition between story and special effects, two realms considered mutually exclusive. They also make condescending statements about audience demographics (the fourteen-year-old audience is out of school, and that is what they want to see), or they lament the single-mindedness of producers and directors now riding the "technology" wave. The negative emphasis on special effects supports a general claim that film technology undermines film art. Another *New York Times* critic, Franz Lidz, bemoans the release of the new *Godzilla* film: "I see that a new \$120 million computer-generated *Godzilla* is about to clump through the nation's multiplexes, and I feel that tug of regret you get when you leave an old friend you may never see again."<sup>11</sup> Ironically, by focusing on how expensive a film is to make, who created its special effects and how, and the expense and extent of its release campaign, these critics actually praise and advertise the films on their own terms. The aspects of expense, promotion, and special effects technology are positive qualities for blockbusters. They are what secures their potential *as* blockbusters.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, McDonald longs for "meaningful" films. The other kind of storytelling, the good kind, would be something that resists the repeated roller-coaster ride of the blockbuster and rather embarks on an "adventure of the heart." "Had I found," McDonald claims, "impetuous love in the seat behind me on that roller coaster ride . . . now, that might have been a story." Thus he ignores the standard love story subplots that dominate the genre. As if to answer to his desire, the extreme success of *Titanic* immediately comes to mind as a sublime version of the kind of story that would make special effects meaningful for critics—but it is a problematic and suspicious example. The sublime love story is a politically questionable entity to begin with, but in this film it is actually impossible to locate *where* the sublime love story occurs, whether in the film itself or in the media representation of the film. Even as it creates a saturated sentimental landscape, the film tries to balance real-life choices with romantic ideals and allows

its central character a long, happy life beyond her brief love affair on the sinking boat. The media explosion about the romance on the Titanic, however, saw no such complication. The television and magazine publicity (and the best-selling Celine Dion soundtrack) focused on creating exalted portraits of the young actors and a sublime romantic version of the affair. None of the contemporary and realistic frame of the action was present in the publicity. Is that what we want our spectacular genres to do? Does McDonald really mean that the only meaningful special effects are the ones found in direct aid of star-crossed lovers? Are romantic plots “good storytelling” as a matter of course? Why is conducting sublime romance more “meaningful” than fighting a lethal virus?

I am interested in these questions because they showcase the difficulty in discussing contemporary media, especially in relation to genre allocation. Genre specifications are increasingly fluid in both contemporary Hollywood and contemporary film criticism. At the same time, ideas about genre seem all-powerful in the way they structure audience expectations and critical approaches.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the films I am discussing, the presence of special effects seems to be an important typological characteristic: it admits a film into the category of the “roller coaster”—unless, of course, the film evolves into a romance, as in the case of *Titanic*. It is as if the special effects in *Titanic* are secondary to the love story; in a film such as *Volcano*, the special effects are the story. McDonald’s description of good and bad storytelling depends on the hierarchical (studio publicity-related) position of the special effects in the text. Love stories win for McDonald because of our collective training in resolutions and endings. After all, romance plots often resolve the classic Hollywood narrative and seem to be a necessary ingredient in classic narration.<sup>14</sup>

The simplified division between the story and the effects means that we cannot really tell offhand what the story is in these spectacular genres, what they insist on retelling and reimagining. Understanding films in terms of good and bad special effects is thus related to a critical inability to discern what is *in/of* the film and what is not.<sup>15</sup> Even defenders of the big-budget productions

have to explain where the story occurs. Jerry Bruckheimer, the producer of *Armageddon*, comments: “We couldn’t make this movie without these effects. But it’s ultimately about characters. The special effects will just lure you in. Look at *Independence Day*: if it didn’t have the Will Smith character, I don’t think it would have been as successful.” Asked whether she could have done the movie without special effects, Mimi Leder, director of *Deep Impact*, replies, “Not a movie about a tidal wave. You need the special effects to support this kind of story.” But she continues, “This is about people facing the end of the world, facing awesome choices, and it forces you to ask, what would you do?”<sup>16</sup> These comments define the story in terms of three melodramatic representations: a film such as *Deep Impact* is “about” a tidal wave that destroys all urban landscapes on the East Coast. It is also “about” the choices people have to make faced with ultimate destruction. And “about” certain kinds of characters whose presence seems necessary both for story and box-office success.

In what follows, I will discuss the genre according to these three poles: the agent of the destruction, the response of the human group—their choices and personal or political resolutions—and the presence of African American characters as a major force within the narrative, along with African American actors as a factor in box-office success. These three aspects taken together allow us to engage the disaster/apocalyptic film through a reading of racial melodrama. I propose that it is exactly an “adventure of the heart” that we embark on in these seemingly mindless, heartless flicks. Instead of positing the lack of story, I will try to focus on the importance of “The Story,” the racial encounter as the main story. Reading the disaster/apocalyptic film through the perspective of racial melodrama helps us understand the political stakes of the disaster as spectacle. In staging violent encounters between individuals and between rigidly defined groups, the disaster/apocalyptic film operates through embodied representations of moral legibility, which expands to encompass, destroy, and resignify the landscape. Furthermore, by thematizing race relations and racial understanding, these films participate in and fundamentally affect the cultural discourses on

race. It is no accident, therefore, that Bruckheimer identifies “the Will Smith character” as a major factor in the success of *Independence Day*. Throughout the nineties, apocalyptic and disaster films portray the negotiation of racial and gender difference as the necessary and central moral issue of the survival story, and at the level of production, they have themselves negotiated the changing position of African American actors within Hollywood hierarchies.

Based on this thematic understanding of the melodramatic encounter, what I call the “disaster/apocalyptic film” actually encompasses about eight or nine accepted film genres. The films I will discuss could be cross-listed as action, action-adventure, science fiction, horror, comedy, disaster, postapocalyptic, nuclear, environmental, war, drama, and even romance. Grouping these films together means that we also have to rethink what counts as a disaster, which disasters matter, and if they make different kinds of sense.<sup>17</sup> What are the differences between the many agents of destruction, which range from volcanoes, comets, and hurricanes to alien invaders, nuclear war, corrupt government agencies, or the police? Do specific disasters affect specific places, and, if so, why?

In order to discuss the other melodramatic encounters these films stage, we first have to account for the main one between humans (Americans) and the something that threatens everything, be it aliens, volcanoes, or comets. I understand the difference between these agents of destruction as a gradation on a scale of allegorical and didactic possibilities. Since apocalyptic genres are consistently invested in exploring human responsibility and utopian vision, we have to see how this genre characteristic is negotiated in the nineties, a time of intense millennial paranoia and few politically utopian schemes. This reading depends on understanding the difference between a natural disaster and an apocalyptic disaster as the function of allegory and politics. Since the apocalyptic or postapocalyptic film (*Planet of the Apes* [dir. Franklin J. Schaffner, US, 1968] or *Logan’s Run* [dir. Michael Anderson, US, 1976], for example) is saturated by Cold War paranoia and often showcases an ethical or didactic imperative, it

focuses on issues of political responsibility, group identity, and survival. In US apocalyptic or nuclear warning films, such as *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (dir. Robert Wise, 1951), *On the Beach* (dir. Stanley Kramer, 1959), *The Andromeda Strain* (dir. Robert Wise, 1971), *The China Syndrome* (dir. James Bridges, 1979), *The Day After* (dir. Nicholas Meyer, 1983), and *The Quiet Earth* (dir. Geoff Murphy, New Zealand, 1985), both actual and potential disasters are used to make overt political statements about government action and responsibility. This allegorical dimension is seemingly lost when the disaster film (*The Poseidon Adventure* [dir. Ronald Neame, 1972] or *Earthquake* [dir. Mark Robson, 1974]) does not propose an agent or reason for the destruction, now delivered unintentionally by nature or accident, and replaces the didactic premise with spectacular entertainment and a focus on the special effects needed in order to represent the natural. By bringing all these kinds of film together, I want to allow a more culturally relevant understanding of their political function, which is unevenly distributed and most often ignored. When critics lament the loss of emotional investment in recent films, they are responding to precisely this loss of overt allegorical narrative, which would make the melodramatic encounter more visible, or visible in more traditional ways as political statement. Intensely didactic films are rarely accused of being too entertaining. But, even though the films I will discuss look neither politically invested nor utopian in any way, is the political dimension lost? What is the ideological undercurrent of films that do not overtly use the apocalyptic threat in order to advise or warn the viewer? What kinds of myths about changing the world do these representations evoke?

Compared to the supremely allegorical films of the sixties and seventies, films of the nineties have evacuated the didactic narrative of human responsibility. They effect this evacuation through a double simplification: first, a simplification of the agent of destruction, which is now most often presented as outside human agency or responsibility; and second, through a simplification of the alien characters, which are now almost always represented as insects.<sup>18</sup> The combination of these two narrative

moves allows a rhetoric of the inevitable: the inevitable violence that has to be engaged in response to these threats, the inevitable deaths that ensue from this conflict, the inevitable destruction of urban and natural landscapes, and so on. One cannot argue with a volcanic eruption—no way. Also, nobody is negotiating or is expected to negotiate with fifty-foot cockroaches; their total lack of recognizable humanity makes war against alien invaders legitimate in ways that other wars are not and allows a use of force, including nuclear weapons, that no political narrative, at this point, would find acceptable.

Human *responsibility*, thus, is removed from the main encounter of the films and becomes *response*, which most often thematizes the coordination of government agencies, the organizational principles that appear in the background of these films, and the mediation of difference between the human characters. As a result, the new apocalyptic films are not about ethics or choice in averting disaster. Whatever is happening more or less has to happen and can be dealt with in kinder or more involved ways, by more or less competent professionals. But it could not have been avoided, and in the end, no one is to blame, really.<sup>19</sup> Since the apocalyptic film also constructs a national *we* at the end of the narrative and after the massive destruction, the negotiation of power that the disaster has enabled affects the very definitions of being human (American) in the survivor group. The integrated survivor group is a marker of a very specific national story that the films offer, that of a new community forged by extreme circumstances. As race and gender relations become increasingly central in these films, we have to understand their political and ideological content by tracing their containment of difference.

In the scale of allegorical/didactic potential I am constructing, four categories emerge based on what causes the destruction, what kinds of ethical responsibility can be assigned to it, and what resolution or containment each disaster mode offers. Given that the disaster film has not received much critical attention in terms of genre specification and plot typologies, I propose this as a basic exploratory structure.<sup>20</sup> The list of examples is by no means exhaustive, and, in my later discussion, I will approach some

of these films through selected readings of the melodramatic encounter.

First, we have films that revolve around natural disaster events, such as hurricanes and volcanoes, entities that have no ethics or motives and whose actions in the narrative are extreme but nonnegotiable. In films such as *Volcano*, *Twister*, and *Dante's Peak*, the mysterious and uncontrollable workings of nature allow for the emergence of a seemingly benign state mechanism, which comes to the rescue through engaging solutions offered by science/technology along with humanistic values of courage and self-sacrifice. By positing an unconscious agent, these films stand at the furthest remove from a clear allegorical reading of race relations and, on the surface level, seem to be responding to actual catastrophes that have occurred in recent years (e.g., extreme weather caused by Hurricane Bob in 1991 or the "El Niño" phenomenon in 1991–94 and 1997–98). By featuring a comet as an "extinction level event," *Deep Impact* could also fit in this category, although it merges the natural disaster with a wider science fiction iconography.

Second, we see disaster films that posit human or government responsibility at some point in the destruction, through negligence or, more often, a secret plan. Interestingly enough, these films thematize the limits of the biological sciences: what delivers the destruction are viruses, used by the military, as in *Outbreak*, or by the scientific/industrial complex, as in *12 Monkeys*. I would place disasters that occur after messing with DNA, as in *Jurassic Park* and its sequel, *The Lost World* (dir. Steven Spielberg, US, 1993 and 1997), in this category also. Although the dinosaurs have the same allegorical status as the volcanoes and twisters in that they do not negotiate, a major theme of the films is the responsibility of the scientists and the companies/governments that support the experimentation with DNA. The virus-DNA link would then allow us to think about the microscopic as the realm of threat here, which would constitute a marked contrast to the other megadisasters.

Third are films that represent the destruction as coming from recognizable and sentient, although nonhuman, agents.

Despite their affirmation of patriotic values, alien invasion films such as *Independence Day*, *Mars Attacks!*, *Men in Black*, and *Starship Troopers* engage a sustained questioning of military efficacy, government complicity, and corporate capitalism; thus, they continue some of the themes introduced by *Alien* (dir. Ridley Scott, UK, 1979) on a lighter tone. Despite their connection to invasion films of the fifties, whose vocabulary they employ, the new versions do not engage in the kinds of antistate paranoia that dominates television apocalypticism (*The X-Files*, *Millennium*) or other action film genres (*Conspiracy Theory* [dir. Richard Donner, US, 1997], *L.A. Confidential* [dir. Curtis Hanson, US, 1997]). On the contrary, they use a tongue-in-cheek apocalypticism, parodic representations, and metanarrative effects. At the same time, and perhaps precisely because of this lightness of tone, these films are the most successful in negotiating difference and result in completely integrated multicultural groups and a reaffirmation of “American values.”

Finally, the last category attempts to bring together the films that posit a clear allegorical reading but fail to capture the public imagination. Films such as *Waterworld* and *Strange Days* are making overt gestures toward a warning film in the tradition of earlier apocalyptic dramas. Both posit a future that is fundamentally different from the “now,” with little focus on, or explanation of, how we got there. This is the most traditionally recognizable apocalyptic/utopian premise, and it references films of the seventies such as *Logan’s Run*, *Zardoz* (dir. John Boorman, UK, 1974), or *Soylent Green* (dir. Richard Fleischer, US, 1973). The commercial failure of these films is as important to my discussion as the success of the others, since what is possible in a lighthearted tone seems heavy-handed when this overt allegorical invitation is extended to the viewer. *Strange Days* is especially useful for this discussion, as it provides us with a clear representation of what disaster films in general are at work to obscure and dispel, namely the reason behind all this cultural investment in working out the meanings of violence: the unspectacular disaster that characterizes black/white, male/female, parent/child, state/individual, police/citizen relations. By explicitly thematizing the police-



men's beating of Rodney King and the urban violence that followed their acquittal, *Strange Days* undertakes to compose an allegory out of what most would consider a tragedy or a disaster. The commercial failure of the film also counteracts the complaints of the critics cited above: it turns out that when our ethics as viewers are directly involved and questioned, or when the films stage references to actual events of racial misunderstanding, the critique seems too insistent and inappropriate. On the other hand, when the viewers are rewarded a priori with an assumption of interracial, intergender understanding, we are willing to do all the emotional work that these films may demand, sustain all kinds of identifications, and accept the films' multiracial agenda as our truth and national program. Only when race is itself "no big deal" does this kind of film appeal to a massive and devoted audience.<sup>21</sup> Or, to put it another way, race can be part of the solution but not the problem. Racial difference matters in these films only under the containing principles of diversity, a positive force that strengthens the collective.<sup>22</sup>

In this, *Strange Days* fails precisely because it tries to remedy a gulf that is still clearly the whole genre's moral ground zero in the nineties. The fantasy of black/white, citizen/police reconciliation comes at great price because the film tries to impose a morally right way to rethink the Rodney King incident and the LA riots. The emotion/thought transfer technology represented in the film makes interracial communication actual and absolute in overt reference to the Rodney King video, which marked, for a while at least, a clear convergence in point of view among all who saw it. Many characters in the film "play back" the event of the cold execution of the African American rapper/political leader Jeriko One (Glen Plummer) by two white racist policemen. The experience of the playback leaves nobody in doubt of who did it and why. But their response after that point is divided, and divided along race/gender lines. Iris (Brigitte Bako), the young white woman who was with Jeriko One at the time and who records the incident (along with her emotions and thoughts during the murder) decides to make this truth public, while fully aware of the personal danger and social cost of this unveiling.

Philo (Michael Wincott), Jeriko One's white manager, burns one copy of the disk and makes up a media story about gang warfare to account for his death. Lenny Nero (Ralph Fiennes), a white "playback" dealer who finds the original disk, attempts to exchange it for a chance to win back Faith (Juliette Lewis), his white ex-girlfriend who is now with Philo. Max (Tom Sizemore), his sadistic best friend, also white, kills Iris, intimidates Faith, murders Philo, and attempts to murder and set up Lenny. Every one of these characters knows that the disk would incriminate the two white policemen who executed "the most powerful black man in America," and they also know that exposing them is the right thing to do. In a confrontation with Lenny, Mace (Angela Bassett), his black woman friend who is also in love with him, acts as the moral conscience of the film and sees the choice as one between personal gratification and political responsibility. But she does not hesitate. To Lenny's claim that allowing the truth to come out would result in race war, she replies "Well, maybe that's what people need right now." Her allegiance is "American," in the abstract, raceless aspect of treating the disk as the truth that should not be repressed. It is also specifically "African American" in the way that she treats the incident with a demand that it become meaningful in terms of race, even at some cost. When Lenny attempts to exchange the disk, she gives the final word on where the personal and political stand in this film. She declares her love for him, but adds, "This is bigger than you, bigger than me, bigger than Faith. I have feelings for you, Lenny, more than you will ever know. Which makes us both pretty stupid, eh? . . . But if you pawn this disk you are nothing to me."

The film thus allows Mace to take a moral stance that refuses to sacrifice the partial point of view to a larger sense of social justice. A social justice perspective would repress the awareness of racial division. This is what self-sacrifice means in the disaster/apocalyptic genre in the nineties. In a nutshell, the murder of the black man is treated by the women of the film as a major political event and by the white men as an incidental effect of widespread violence. Philo's cover-up scheme is all too familiar: if black men are being murdered, it is because they are mur-

dering each other. The white police commissioner, who asks for the arrest of the two guilty policemen in the last two minutes of the film, arrives too late. The first policeman kills himself, the other is killed (by the armed crowd-control forces), and nobody is tried or convicted. The murder of Jeriko One thus remains a politically invisible event.

As one of very few films in this genre that features a principal African American female character, *Strange Days* clearly privileges the race/gender axis that other texts of the decade work to obscure. The centrality of the African American woman as carrier of moral truth undermines the basic premise at work in the “postracist” integrationist terrain of the disaster/apocalyptic film. Robyn Wiegman explores the historical emergence of this postracist perspective in contrast to an older “blacks and women” identification. In her terms, present representations of racial difference revolve around interracial male bonding that is used to reinstate “the centrality of Anglo-Americans as the heroic agents of racism’s decline.”<sup>23</sup> As I will discuss later, the levels of this heroism escalate significantly in the films of the decade, and so does the disavowal of difference that is subsumed under “color-blind” principles.



Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones in *Men in Black*  
(dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, US, 1997)

This brings us to “the Will Smith character.” If most apocalyptic/disaster films are orchestrating the reemergence of heroic Anglo-Americans, what is the function of the increasingly central African American (usually male) characters? Within the action genres, the “buddy film” is usually posited as a main vessel of interracial understanding and common suffering, with complex political effects. According to Wiegman, the main political implication is the rescue of white masculinity from the peripheral position it occupied after the emergence of multicultural discourse in the seventies.<sup>24</sup> The alignment of the white male hero with the black male hero enables the reaffirmation of a patriarchal bond, which is used to reestablish white supremacy. The integrationist agenda that dominates the buddy films of the eighties seems to continue in the nineties but also to leap through a variety of other genres especially nonintegrated before. Within the science fiction film, for example, the presence of African American characters as main carriers of the action is very recent and often submerged under alien makeup. Wiegman discusses *Enemy Mine* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, US, 1985) within the patriarchal narrative of the buddy film. The casting of an African American actor (Louis Gossett Jr.) as Drac, the lizardlike alien, allows Wiegman to uncover the film’s appropriation and reorganization of race relations.<sup>25</sup> But given the preoccupation of science fiction films with figures of alienness and with alien contact, how are we to delineate the functioning of racial categories? On the one hand, we can understand all alien figures as representations of the other marked for racial and gender difference. Recent films, however, are characterized by a diegetic insistence on representing the racial encounter between humans, instead of an abstract or sublimated encounter between humans and aliens. What are the effects of this transition, as the difference that science fiction always stages now becomes literalized and thematically central in the narrative? What happens when the African American body is finally there in the narrative of national survival, as a savior or a valuable ally, and participates in the myths of nationhood and of “America”?

In her review of *Independence Day*, Taubin comments that

even in “team hero” films, one of the heroes “comes out just a little bit on top”:

I don't know if it was the film-makers' intent from the start to make Smith the lead, or if they only realized during production that he was the most vivid personality on the screen and moreover that his performance epitomized the style they were trying to achieve in the film as a whole. In any event, *Independence Day* is proof that black culture has become the sign of hipness, coolness and above all in-touchness not just for subversive types (from beatniks to skateboarders) but for the mainstream middle-class.<sup>26</sup>

Taubin identifies a style of cultural appropriation that helps forge and prove the interracial bond between men. The model for this relationship comes early in the film between Captain Steven Hiller (Will Smith) and his friend Captain Jimmy Wilder (Harry Connick Jr.), whose references to African American culture are often also impersonations. The two men share a common vocabulary (“when the fat lady sings”) and folklore (that's when they light their cigars) that is also the result of their army bond. The connection between men that this sharing of cultural references (and specifically African American references at first) enables is most visible when Wilder impersonates Reverend Jesse Jackson as the whole squadron is about to face the aliens (over downtown LA): “Or, as the good Reverend would say: ‘Why we on this particular mission we will never know. But I do know here today that the Black Knights will emerge victorious once again.’” The importance of this double performance is accentuated by a series of cuts during Wilder's Jackson speech that shows every pilot in the team: they are smiling and shaking their heads as they all (black and white) “get it.” They also look at each other, as the Black Knights, and say “Amen.” From Captain Hiller's point of view, this performance cannot be questioned or challenged, and his collaboration is what enables the shared cultural bond, or the white entry in black culture that Taubin describes.

These early homosocial scenes provide a central thematic basis for our viewing of this new hero and for other men's relation

to him. By casting the nerdy Jewish man, David Levinson (Jeff Goldblum) to be his next flying partner, we get to have the privileged position of knowing all about “the fat lady,” while Levinson is obviously baffled. Captain Hiller gives him a cigar and says, “This is our victory dance. We don’t light up until the fat lady sings.” Levinson looks at it perplexed. Hiller insists “This is important.” Then Levinson says, “Hmm. Fat lady. I got you.” The two men are represented as opposites, Hiller with his look of dreamy self-confidence, Levinson with his airsickness. His equivalent of “the fat lady” is “checkmate.” They misunderstand each other and know it: “We got to work on our communication.” When they get a last minute chance to make it, Hiller shouts “I ain’t heard no fat lady” and Levinson responds, “Forget the fat lady, you’re obsessed with the fat lady, drive us out of here.” They make it, and Hiller shouts, “Elvis has left the building.” Levinson now “gets it” and replies “Oh. . . . Thank you very much. . . . I love you, man.” This is the first cultural reference they share in the film, and it is appropriate given the early hope of a young woman about the aliens’ intentions: “I sure hope they bring Elvis back.” The ability of white men to become black through an appropriation of African American culture is insistently restaged and thematized in the film, and, as Taubin points out, this accounts for the success of the film for white audiences as well. It is this flexibility of appropriated racial categories that allows the WASP president to congratulate Captain Hiller with more heartfelt pride than Levinson. The Jewish man remains Jewish and thus different, and the handshake/reconciliation between these two white men is somehow the moral resolution of the story. To Hiller the president says, “Good job,” and to Levinson, with great reluctance, “Not bad. Not too bad at all.”

Will Smith, in Taubin’s interpretation, is “probably the only African American actor in Hollywood guaranteed to be non-threatening to a white middle-class audience” (8). Similar arguments have been made about Sidney Poitier, Harry Belafonte, Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, and other African American actors who arrive at the front lines of film production. The persistent white fantasy about the inherent danger of black men

assumes, first, that black men are supposed to be threatening, and second, that in particular texts and through particular strategies, they have now been contained. Taubin does not relate this imagined threat to the Rodney King incident (even though it is mentioned in her title), but this formulation of the black body as always already dangerous connects in an uncanny way to Judith Butler's reading of the visual economy of the *California v. Powell* court experience.<sup>27</sup> Butler describes the reversal of the aggressor/victim position as the function of racist seeing. The visibility of the African American body in the video, replayed obsessively by both defense and prosecution in court, was used by the officers' defense to recast the police as "victimized victimizers," who put themselves between the white jury and the black threat. Butler explains: "That body [King's] thus received blows in return for ones it was about to deliver, the blows which were that body's essential gestures. . . . According to this racist episteme, he is hit in exchange for the blows he never delivered, but which he is, by virtue of his blackness, always about to deliver" (19). Corroborating with this understanding of the fundamental African American threat, the films I discuss often give us a legitimizing narrative about the African American man's presence in positions of authority. They do the same for the white woman, whose drive, ambition, or centrality in the disaster narrative is similarly narrativized, and often psychologized.

Let me explain how this kind of narrative containment of African American male and Anglo-American female characters works in *Outbreak* and *Twister*. Both films open with a scene set in the late sixties. *Twister* starts in 1969, when young Jo Harding (Helen Hunt) loses her father in a tornado that destroys the town. *Outbreak* begins in 1967, when two masked doctors see the first Matabe epidemic, take a blood sample from a dying man, and decide to bomb the African village in order to exterminate the virus. The masked men are later revealed to be two high-ranking military doctors, African American general Billy Ford (Morgan Freeman) and Anglo-American general Donald McClintock (Donald Sutherland). Quite consciously, it seems, these scenes give us a clear narrative base from which to judge our char-

acters. The moment of this recognition for Jo comes when her ex-husband “gets it” and describes her fearless devotion to the science of predicting tornadoes as a quest to find (or exact revenge for) her father’s death. In *Outbreak*, the route is more circuitous. General Ford is morally confusing for most of the film; he refuses to recognize the gravity of the viral infection, hides the fact that there might be an antidote, intimidates his subordinate officers, and seems completely career-driven in a film full of self-sacrificial characters. His seeming callousness is explained when we realize that not only was he one of the doctors that ordered the bombing of the African village, but he is also being blackmailed into silence and complicity by General McClintock. His moral integrity is reinstated when he responds to Colonel Sam Daniels (another white military doctor, played by Dustin Hoffman) who calls for collaboration and thereby relieves McClintock (Sutherland) of his command. By giving us a psychological view on why these central (also read “problem”) characters are doing what they are doing, the films explain the woman’s success, ambition, and lack of fear as a need to defeat what scared her as a little girl, and the black man’s executive authority as the result of a white man’s failure. By finding reasons for the transfer of authority, an explanatory technique widely used in contemporary popular media, these films seem to apologize for the very integration that they take pride in. In a similar scene in *Crimson Tide* (dir. Tony Scott, US, 1995), for example, another nonthreatening black man, Lieutenant Commander Hunter (Denzel Washington), becomes the captain of a nuclear submarine by relieving his white commanding officer Captain Frank Ramsey (Gene Hackman). Their conflict is about following military protocol, and the implication here, again, is that if the white commander had not seriously compromised his position by being rogue, the black man would not have taken his place.

The flashbacks in *Outbreak* and *Twister* allow us to gain a privileged point of view in the films. We know why things are going on before others find out, in direct correspondence to what Steve Neale describes as “melodramatic narration.” According to his essay, “Melodrama and Tears,” narration in melodrama



“involves the production of discrepancies between the knowledge and point of view of the spectator and the knowledge and points of view of the characters, such that the spectator often *knows more*.”<sup>28</sup> This discrepancy creates the “moving effect,” which is the convergence of the two points of view that may lead to our tears. The narrative potential for tears is quite visible in *Twister* (Jo’s loss of her father), but the moving effect Neale describes is similarly present in the narrative of the other films. In *Outbreak*, for example, the pivotal moment of the film comes when all resistance to cooperation has been won over, when General Daniels figures out that General Ford acts against finding an antidote because he is being blackmailed. This triggers Ford’s change of heart and unifies the viewer’s prior knowledge of the truth to the point of view of the characters. The action-packed saving-the-day intensity of the rest of the film proceeds from there. But why are these moments important enough to warrant such narrative cushioning? In terms of melodrama, the overdetermined representation of these pivotal moments may lead to very strange tears. If, as Neale describes, crying is the effect of a “fantasy of union,” which one would it be in these cases? A union with our female or black male protagonist, whom we are now able to accept? Or a union with the lost white man, whom we are made to want back?<sup>29</sup>

I think that we have to allow both interpretations to play into what may be happening at those moments. We may, as audiences, both celebrate and lament what may be felt as a world-changing chain of events. At this point, the childhood scenes also affect our point of view. *Contact* (dir. Robert Zemeckis, US, 1997) repeats *Twister*’s explanation of the woman’s intentions through a psychological narrative of loss in almost identical ways. The woman astronaut (Jodie Foster) acquires her place in the experimental spaceship after the first choice, a white man, is killed by a religious fanatic, another white man. We know why she wants that space—the film has opened with her as a little girl right after the death of her mother, working on her home CB radio to find travelers from far away places. Representing the woman as a little girl counteracts her actions as a powerful and central adult figure at the same time that it facilitates our acceptance of her point of

view, but it also assumes that we would not have accepted it otherwise. The flashback sequences also establish a “space of innocence,” which is then shattered before our eyes: we see her young self before and—interestingly—during the event of the loss of a parent (her father dies too). In *Outbreak*, this prelapsarian space occurs in a small village in Africa, where General Ford still had ethical integrity before he got implicated in army cover-ups and white hierarchies. The same place is the location of a younger black doctor’s loss of innocence, and the difference between black and white people in that scene is intense. All the people affected by the virus are black, all the doctors in protective metallic suits are white, except for our young doctor, Major Salt (Cuba Gooding Jr.).<sup>30</sup> He gets really upset by the sight of the infected black bodies, starts vomiting, and tears up his suit, thus exposing himself to the virus at the same time that he shows a sympathetic response to black suffering. Major Salt’s reaction is the virtuous, melodramatic, and moral response to suffering, while General Ford’s callous decision to bomb the village is the unacceptable moral liability that the film works hard to dispel.

The presence of the army, and the breakdown in the chain of command, is again related to black/white dynamics: the white man is replaced by a black man whose ethics are either impeccable (*Crimson Tide*) or revived through trauma and an act of naming by another white man (*Outbreak*). By using an invisible attacker (virus), *Outbreak* is also about crossing over: the virus crosses over the sea and arrives in the US, then it mutates and becomes airborne, and the infection crosses over an invisible racial boundary and affects the white citizens of a small California town. The virus has thus succeeded in equalizing suffering between the First and Third Worlds.

Rhetorically, the comparison between these two worlds is a dominant mode of describing catastrophe from a First World point of view. It is as if certain scenes of poverty, destruction, war, or displacement are familiar in Third World contexts through news reports, but unfamiliar, inappropriate, and frightening in developed countries. Films that make this rhetorical contrast warn us about some larger loss of innocence and posit the uncanny

possibility that home may start looking like other places. Again using the technique of the personalized flashback, *Dante's Peak* opens with an early incident in the life of geologist Harry Dalton (Pierce Brosnan): a volcanic eruption in Indonesia, where he and his girlfriend are caught in the small town until it is too late. She dies during that eruption, which provides the same moral grounds for understanding his motivation that I propose for *Contact* and *Twister*. A second effect of this opening is the parallel it creates between Third World suffering and the new First World experience of this suffering, which, in terms of the narrative, matters differently. The little Indonesian town is unnamed, and it functions more as a visual reminder that we have seen these scenes of destruction before, in other (implicitly more acceptable) contexts. In *Volcano*, the geologists often mention the names of well-known volcanic eruptions in Southeast Asia, along with Mount St. Helens, the only American volcano (or disaster) mentioned. Toward the end of *Outbreak* the president and the whole cabinet have to be reminded that the infected are US citizens and should not be killed off with the same facility as those unnamed others in little African villages. "These people are not the enemy," General Daniels warns the pilots who are about to bomb the town.

The female and African American characters in positions of authority can thus be celebrated as reviving previously lost "American" moral values. And authority, power, and professional competence are exactly what are being thematized in the disaster/apocalyptic films of the nineties. Contrary to earlier versions of heroism that showcased the everyman-hero, problematic or unwilling ordinary people who "rise" to the occasion and save the day, these new films are populated by specialists. In *Independence Day*, it turns out that the president has *always* been a fighter-plane pilot (during the Gulf War). The drunk crop duster has also *always* been a fighter-plane pilot (in Vietnam). And the fighter-plane pilot (Hiller) gets his chance to be a fighter-plane pilot and also an astronaut ("You will all get your chance," his commander says) when the aliens attack, which is pretty rare. White women can also be hero astronauts (*Contact*) on their own (not as part of

a male team)—when the aliens arrive. They can also save the day—when the world is about to end. In literalizing social prohibitions this way, the disaster/apocalyptic film posits a melodramatic use of the landscape as the externalization of usually invisible forces, thus making the social landscape morally visible. The animation of the environment that ensues is considered a major aspect of the melodramatic mode by Eric Bentley, who describes it as paranoia: “Melodramatic vision is paranoid: we are being persecuted, and we hold that all things, living and dead, are combining to persecute us. Or rather, nothing is dead. Even the landscape has come to life if only to assault us.”<sup>31</sup> Although clear at the level of action and objects, this animated, socially legible, and active landscape may be undercut by the film’s overt agenda. In the beginning of *Independence Day*, Captain Hiller finds out that he has been turned down by NASA, and in the same scene tells Wilder that he is thinking of marrying his girlfriend Jasmine. Wilder delivers both the bad news of his rejection and the “truth” about the world: “You know what you have to do? You have to kiss some serious booty to get ahead in this world.” And later, “You know that I really like Jasmine. . . . But you never gonna get to fly the space shuttle if you marry a stripper.” The underlying truth is that he may never get to fly the space shuttle because he is African American.

I am not arguing here that the limitations experienced by disenfranchised groups are only imagined. On the contrary, the ability of disaster films to render social problems or limitations visible is their political dimension and potential. The “when the comets hit” stipulation for public office is a cynical but also necessary way to see how racial and gender difference works in these films. I want to believe that even though a conservative reading is completely possible, these films use the space of fantasy to allow potential action, potential visibility to the politically unrepresented. It might not happen in other genres or in reality for many years, but the first represented African American president of the United States (Morgan Freeman in *Deep Impact*) is very potent iconically. The representation of an exceptional African American character as the conscience of white people is by no means

new. In these narratives, however, it functions as another form of the type of interracial, cultural sharing that both uses romantic racist fantasies and hides them. Reacting to his dignified, restrained, and controlled response to the absolute extinction of the human “race,” viewers can entertain such notions of the higher moral conduct of African American characters, but they are not called on by the narrative to account for those feelings. As in the case of “the Will Smith character,” whose presence is necessary for the narrative to work, the race of this particular president is an added advantage to the moral landscape of the narrative, as long as it is not thematized in terms of difference. The payoff in having *this* president deal with *this* ungraspable sense of terror comes in his last address to the nation before the “end of the world”: “I believe in God. I know many of you don’t.” This is a much more emotional and direct response to what is going on, and few politicians would address the loss of faith so blatantly. There is a specifically racial notion of embodied suffering that he represents, and to which we can allow ourselves to respond emotionally, as “we” now have to suffer in the narrative.

The representation of the moral landscape as a natural or visible landscape, therefore, is equivalent to the use of flashbacks offering a psychological perspective on the characters: both render visible what is past, hidden, forgotten, or lost. Understanding this rhetorical mode thus allows for seeing the didactic aspect of disaster films, which function as social commentary (social inequality skews the survivor group), warnings about globalization (Third World living conditions are affecting the First World), and warnings about the state of racial conflict (successful survivor teams “manage” their differences). What they offer in return for these warnings is a fantasy of interracial, intergender communication, a fantasy of union with the lost ideal of humanist community.

But does this fantasy have a price? I want to explore this issue in *Volcano*, a film that appears conscious of its aim to unify a fragmented Los Angeles landscape. The film’s preview trailer starts with a huge typed number (1,500) that slowly moves on our screen, and which I for one first took to mean casualties. But its

function is immediately clear in the poetically short phrases that emerge on the screen: “There are at least 1,500 / active volcanoes / in the world / that we know about / and at least one / that we don’t.” Fire and debris accumulate on the screen to spell “VOLCANO” and then drift away as the red fiery letters of the word disappear except for two, which change into yellow: “LA.” Over that, in white capital letters, appears “HAVE A NICE DAY.” The volcano that we don’t know about is the economic and racial instability of the city. Quite literally, the two main volcano films of the nineties thematize moral or economic ground that looks stable but is not. *Dante’s Peak* features a small picturesque town, which has just emerged from economic depression, with a “Mt. Fuji-esque” (Japanese) volcano always sublimely in the background. Los Angeles is not a visible volcano, except, of course, for the always possible and immanent potential for the eruption of racial violence. Once again, the characters in *Volcano* go around for half the film trying to figure out what is causing tremors and temperature changes, while we know very well already (“It’s a volcano, stupid!”). Mark Roark (Tommy Lee Jones), a heroic white man, saves the city, with help from Dr. Amy Barnes (Anne Heche), a heroic white woman. Roark even jumps in front of an exploding building to save his daughter and an unidentified little boy. White men sacrifice themselves everywhere: they order themselves blown up in an underground parking lot, they save Latino Metro drivers by carrying them through the lava, they drive through “bad” parts of town in order to warn others on their cell phones. Soon enough, however, we realize that these are all professional heroes. The first Heroic Man is exactly the one responsible for emergency preparedness. The Heroic Woman is a geologist conducting research in LA. The blown-up heroes are soldiers. The Metro-driver savior is the chief engineer of the LA Metro construction team. The man with the cell phone is a reporter. They are each at their workplace, doing what they are paid to do. The literalization is so extreme that each professional dies according to his or her job: as the underground train melts into the lava, so does the man who built the Metro.



Professionals battle lava on Wilshire Boulevard in *Volcano*  
(dir. Mick Jackson, US, 1997).

I see a number of effects of this change from the emergent hero to the professional who performs well. First of all, in the response to the volcanic eruption in *Volcano*, the coordination of professionals is exactly what is at stake, in a move oddly reminiscent of the kinds of agencies involved in the state and federal response to the LA riots. There we witnessed military deployment along with “every branch of federal law enforcement, including marshals, FBI, DEA, Border Patrol, and the Bureau of Tobacco and Firearms,” the INS, and of course, the LAPD.<sup>32</sup> Mike Davis calls this system of coordination “the domestic version of the Rapid Deployment Force,” which makes LA “the exemplar of their [The White House and the Justice Department’s] New Urban Order.” In the last scenes of several of the films I have been discussing, we do indeed see the rescued characters (any combination, and often all, of men, women, children, mostly girls, and pet dogs) emerge in the midst of a mass of differently uniformed men (usually just men) whose cheers and applause end the film. Surprisingly, even within the seemingly dominant racial/gender-

related resolution of the films, we often see a second investment in showcasing the organizational challenge of responding quickly and efficiently to the disaster. Even though the climactic rescue scenes start from close-ups of the rescued couples, children, and dogs, they usually move to the clapping men who did it and whom we actually celebrate in this genre.

Response methods fundamentally form the rhetorical basis of *Volcano*. This marks a major difference between films of the nineties and their predecessors. None of the films I have been discussing are actually “about” panic or emotion in general; if anything, panic and emotion may keep professionals from doing their jobs. At the end of *Volcano*, the chief of emergency preparedness and the geologist as co-heroes praise each other’s methods. She says that if she had been in charge, she would have evacuated the city to save people but would have let the volcano take its course. He instead blew up some buildings to redirect the volcano and thus saved more of the property. At her praise he returns the favor: “If you had been in charge we would have known about this days ago.” This mutual understanding is possible precisely because of the professionalization of the hero, which destabilizes an older gender-based understanding of heroism. In the old version, men fought these natural disasters because they were men. Instead, in films of the nineties, they can fight the disaster because of special training, not naturalized and essentialized gender categories. Female heroes can also participate since this new heroism seemingly has nothing to do with gender. The fact that the female hero of *Volcano* is a geologist makes her contribution to the survival plan a matter of specialty, and not feminine intuition (or some other gender stereotype). Her professional position in the film allows her to be loudly instructive to a lot of men that do not know how to respond to the volcano. On the one hand, by insisting on professional reasons why she has to be so “bossy,” the film displays a certain familiar anxiety about women in positions of authority—but this is the case for its male heroes as well. A natural “rise” into heroism is impossible given the emphasis on professional response in these films, and this is where the political implication of class-based heroism becomes



visible. In order to be heroic, one has to belong to this special professional class. Though seemingly open to all, professional heroism has its own glass ceiling, which the melodramatic scene between the two specialists works to conceal.

The general reinvestment of professional positions of authority with meaning through personal sacrifice is marked by only one deviation. The only man who is congratulated for doing his job in a nonsacrificial situation is a white police officer who allows some fire trucks to go and help put out fires in a predominantly African American neighborhood. He is thanked for it, and another white policeman tells him, "You're a good man!" even though he has refused to help before, has handcuffed a black man who was asking for help, and has behaved in a most racist and ungenerous manner. The negotiation between these two characters becomes central when we read the film as occupying the "Rodney King landscape," which it quite literally does. The disaster as a premise makes it possible for someone else to take off the handcuffs so that the black man can also help with the volcano (he is quite strong) and so that everybody can see his usefulness in the national project. He is the only nonprofessional hero in the film, and his inclusion has apparently come at great cost, given the reluctance of the policemen to even listen to him throughout the film. The black/white cooperation is didactically posited as resolution. At the end of *Volcano*, a rescued little boy confers the moral content of the event. "Everybody looks exactly the same," he says in a voice of wonder, as survivors emerge covered with mud and volcanic ash. What the volcanic disaster has created, through the mobilization and the coordination efforts of professional agencies, is a unified human population. It is a revised community humanism, precariously dependent on momentary delusions such as the ash and mud. In the final moment of the film, it actually rains, both to provide literal catharsis of the traumatic event and to reinstate the racial and gender differences that the event both represents and erases.

The racial encounter and melodramatic resolution, however, are only part of the visible virtue of the disaster film. The reconciliation between the black man and the white policeman is

again too visible and too overt, and the emphasis on massive professional resignification and armed mobilization requires a more expansive understanding of what is at stake. In terms of the melodramatic recognitions that these films engage, we see many kinds of visible virtue. On the level of plotline, the resolution of each film is a reaffirmation of a number of emotional bonds severed before the disaster. We see black/Jewish understanding (*Independence Day*), a divorced couple getting back together (*Twister*, *Outbreak*, *Independence Day*, *Men in Black*), a divorced mother with two kids and a bereaved single man getting together (*Dante's Peak*), black man/white man understanding, handshake, or look of communication (*Volcano*, *Outbreak*, *Independence Day*), estranged father/daughter reunion (*Independence Day*, *Volcano*, *Deep Impact*) mother-in-law/daughter-in-law understanding and mutual forgiveness (*Dante's Peak*), white male sacrifice (*Volcano*, *Dante's Peak*, *Outbreak*, *Independence Day*, *Deep Impact*), white female sacrifice (*Volcano*, *Outbreak*, *Independence Day*, *Deep Impact*), presidential self-sacrifice (*Independence Day*), black army/policeman heroism (*Independence Day*, *Outbreak*, *Volcano*, *Men in Black*), and the list could go on, it seems, indefinitely.

These resolutions seem to me to propose two kinds of utopian horizons as the result of the disaster, both of which work to contain racial and gender differences. First, we see a private resolution that reunifies the family and recognizes its renewed moral value. Second, we see a public resolution, which is preoccupied with how to coordinate massive military and police mobilization, how to reorganize the chain of command, and how to make the human group more effective by resolving racial tension. Why do these resolutions have to be mediated through an emphasis on technology? To resume my earlier line of questioning, why are particular special effects key in representing the spectacle of danger, the spectacle of survival, and the spectacle of looking at each other as part of a group?

To answer these questions, let me end with a reminder of the many shots of "seeing" that ground the unified national point of view in *Independence Day*. For long minutes we observe people seeing not each other, but the alien invaders, in frames composed

of deliberately staged differences. One such frame presents two African American teenagers, who have just stopped playing basketball, and one white middle-aged man in white shirt and tie. Another depicts a frantic taxi driver and a young woman with a dog and groceries. Scenes of seeing in New York City streets follow scenes of seeing on LA freeways. What unifies the point of view is the looming spaceships of the alien invaders that hover over the main cities of the world and destroy them in synchronicity (the one time that everybody is in exactly the same position). But in this and many similar scenes in the disaster/apocalyptic films I have been discussing, the alien spaceship, erupting volcano, or enormous tidal wave operate within the two poles of the sublime.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, we have the natural sublime—chasms, voids, waves—represented in the films through digital effects. On the other, we have the technological sublime—grand human efforts to contain or resignify nature, also mediated by the same computer technology. Disaster films thus work as a new version of older forms of popular spectacle. Explaining this history of spectacular seeing, David Nye describes the American fascination with the sublime and for technology as a method of community building: “For almost two centuries the American public has repeatedly paid homage to railways, bridges, skyscrapers, factories, dams, airplanes and space vehicles. The sublime underlies this enthusiasm for technology. One of the most powerful human emotions, when experienced by large groups the sublime can weld society together. In moments of sublimity, human beings temporarily discard divisions among elements of the community” (xiii). Even though I agree with Nye’s understanding of the sublime, I think that in the disaster film the sublime moment also accentuates a feeling of loss about the scarcity of such unifying moments. As the characters in the film look at each other with the wonder of belonging together, they also understand that this belonging is not true on an everyday level. The spectacle thus affirms a nostalgia for a lost community rather than a renewed belief in the future of people together. The fact that they are all looking at a representation or manifestation of the latest in com-

puter imaging technology points to a desire that perhaps through this technology some of the communal feeling will be restored.

To Nye's list of sublime events that Americans witness, therefore, we have to add the insistent witnessing of a computer-generated space or event as the latest technology of the sublime. What makes the spaceships appear in the film text is also what makes the solution or resistance possible for the characters. "Seeing" computer space and computer power in some concrete form should thus be considered one of the main unconscious desires of the disaster narrative. In their use of computer-generated special effects, these films literally naturalize a technology that is often experienced as completely outside nature (computer space as tidal wave). Even as disaster films often seem politically progressive, due to their liberal treatment of race or democratic agenda, their dependence on sublime seeing is very suspect, perhaps because the pleasures of seeing are almost impossible to resist. Even against very specifically other aliens and comets, any claim for a unified point of view is a return to an idealized nostalgic version of an identity beyond problems of signification—and this nostalgic longing is in itself a melodramatic desire for unification, simplicity, and transparency. The films' dependence on computer-generated effects is thus a central part of the story rather than an extraneous addition to it. Similarly central is our inability to resist the allure of these films as spectacle and as physical manifestations of our understanding of race relations, community, citizenship, and the possibilities for computer-enabled modes of being.

### **November 2001**

In the disaster and science fiction films of the 1990s, the imagined space of innocence posited by Peter Brooks, Christine Gledhill, and Linda Williams as the backbone of melodramatic narration appears as a desire for a unified, sublime, collective, computer-mediated point of view. Partly because of the action genre's need for heroic involvement, this is not a desire for safety per se. Focusing on personal safety would undermine the Ameri-

can project of constant innovation and self-transformation, turning it into a very uncharacteristic “stay at home, don’t get involved, do what others do.” Even films that politically or implicitly “say” that to their viewers use the very terms of self-transformation, movement, involvement, and newness to promote more conservative agendas.

The spectacular moments that “we” as (an imagined collectivity of) the characters in the film and “we” as the audience see together thus negotiate a number of complex possibilities for what is safe, what is dangerous, and what is desired as a utopian topos. The represented disaster (for example, the volcano, tidal wave, or collapsing building) is rendered safe through the known, publicized, and celebrated use of digital effects. The computer technology used to create these effects emerges as safer in the movies than in other venues, such as at work. Building a new network or implementing a new technology at the workplace is costly and threatening, often leads to reorganizations of the company and perhaps layoffs, and usually exacerbates the need for a more specialized and computer-literate workforce. Innovation itself as a computer-generated wave, then, is animated and rendered visible in the film. The new is desired from a distance but often frightening up close, and so the disaster film’s containment and naturalization of computer technology has a domesticating effect.

I am trying to clarify this issue about safety to bring the discussion back into the present moment, when issues of safety on the “home front” dominate the public response to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. In traditional readings of the Kantian sublime, the viewer is at a distance and experiences the awe and speechlessness of the event from a safe vantage point. Obviously, the privileged safe position of this imagined witness establishes a maximum visual pleasure as well, allowing for the scope and scale of the event to be perceived in its entirety. Film viewing can allow for this, but real events do not, experienced as they are through partial, threatened, unsafe, and noncomprehensive points of view. But here the reality of American political practice complicates what the movies do. What we see in disaster films of the 1990s is an insistent desire for a reunified, postracial, sublime

point of view. You would think that, given the urgency of this desire in the films, people would be happy to have it in reality. But this is not the case, and I think it is good news. Even just a few weeks after the terrorist attacks, and despite the patriotic rallying under the American flag and the heroic performances of particular groups of people, political debate is back and has invigorated the public's need for more information about difference, politics, and the world. This may sound trite to some readers at this point, but it looks like the divergence of point of view that we often identify as a characteristic of political life in the US is actually there—it is a “real” attribute of this culture, not just a favorite assumption or traditional concept to fall back on. And that essential divergence may well be why the movies have to supply us with images of phantasmatic sublime unification.

Let me close with some thoughts on what is involved in the recurrent reference to the disaster films of the 1990s in the present situation. As others have noted, understanding the real events in terms of their fictional paradigms stems from an inability to find appropriate language to describe what is going on. It would be great if this indeed were a movie; then we would know that underneath it all lies a momentary sense of contained danger, and we would know what to expect. In part, the real scene of the terrorist attacks brings to mind the pleasures of aggression and of vicarious viewing with a feeling of underlying guilt. We did enjoy these disasters; we felt the thrill of the annihilation of objects and cities, and people clapped in theaters at moments of destruction that were particularly fun. Now, like children caught in the act of forbidden pleasure, we feel that we should have cared more about the loss of human life, that a sense of the real world should have been on our minds at that moment but was not. Maybe we should have taken the plots of these films (often reviled and dismissed as irrelevant) more seriously. Of course these are understandable reactions and somewhat unfair: fantasy is fantasy after all. But what also seems to be at stake in our mental contrast between the *then* of fictional disaster and the *now* of real events is the domesticating effect I have outlined in the technological mediation of the natural disaster through computer imaging technolo-

gies. In real life, the spectacle of the destruction does not domesticate anything; on the contrary, it ruptures the fabric of reality and creates frighteningly open-ended realms of meaning. We cannot know what happens next, to whom, why, and to what effect. It seems to me that what we learned from disaster films of the 1990s is to recognize the connection between diversity, technology, and social unification and to expect a utopian political future through the negotiation of difference as well as through computer applications. The current debates about what to do next are in keeping with this issue. If what happened in the digital effects wave of the 1990s was a collaboration between the film industry and the computer industry, what we are about to experience now is a new and intensified collaboration between the computer industry and the state. We already imagine and read about elaborate databases for tracking foreign student and visitor visas, new biometric controls for facial and retinal identification, new technologies for sensing microscopic particles, and many new biotechnological means for preparedness and response. Even when the questions posed by imagined and real trauma are not the same, it seems that the answers we come up with are quite related.

### Notes

I am grateful to Linda Williams for her support of this project and for her ongoing research on the role of black/white melodrama in popular culture. My thanks also to Linda Voris, Roswitha Mueller, Tom Andrae, Jen Neuber, Tamar Abramov, Panagiota Batsaki, and Sharon Willis for their comments and advice.

1. Neal Gabler, "This Time, the Scene Was Real," *New York Times*, 16 September 2001.
2. Some critics have already identified *déjà vu* as a characteristic of this experience and have tried to move beyond simply referring to these films. See, for example, Michiko Kakutani "Struggling to Find Words for a Horror beyond Words," *New York Times*, 13 September 2001; A. O. Scott, "Film: A Buffer for the Terror," *New York Times*, 13 September 2001; and also Elvis Mitchell, "Good at Action Films: Maybe Too Good," *New York Times*, 18 September 2001.

3. Recent books that discuss disaster films and their political implications include Wheeler Winston Dixon's *Disaster and Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) and Stephen Keane's *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower, 2001). Also see Richard Dellamora's *Postmodern Apocalypse: Theory and Cultural Practice at the End* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995) for historical and theoretical perspectives on apocalyptic expectations.
4. One of the first questions that emerged after the terrorist attacks was whether the World Trade Center was destroyed in *Independence Day*. It was not; the Empire State Building was one of the New York landmarks destroyed in that film. But the street location of the Empire State Building was changed to appear as if it stood on an intersection and to allow for maximum visibility of the spaceship and the destruction of the building. The World Trade Center towers were actually on an intersection, so perhaps the shot style is a relevant referent between the film and the attack, even if the buildings are not. The familiarity in this case would be to the traditional shot highlighting the tall, narrow, perspectival street grid of New York City, as seen for example in Roland Emmerich's films *Independence Day* and *Godzilla* (US, 1998).
5. Amy Taubin, "Playing It Straight: R.E.M. Meets a Post-Rodney King World in *Independence Day*," *Sight and Sound* 6.8 (1996): 6–8.
6. This essay emerged out of a graduate seminar offered by Linda Williams, titled "Melodramas of Black and White" (Departments of Rhetoric and Film Studies, University of California, Berkeley, spring 1998). In that seminar and her book, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), Williams discusses racial melodrama as a mode seeking the revelation of moral and emotional "truth" in the suffering body. Used through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to evoke sympathy for racially marked representations of virtue, racial melodrama has been culturally resonant in both racist and antiracist rhetoric. The definition of melodrama I use in this paper is informed by Linda Williams's summary of the five "axioms of melodrama," a combination of elements she selects from Peter Brooks, Christine Gledhill, and other theorists of the melodramatic mode. They are: (1) melodrama begins, and wants to end, in a



“space of innocence”; (2) melodrama focuses on victim-heroes and the recognition of their virtue; (3) melodrama borrows from realism but realism serves the melodrama of pathos and action; (4) melodrama involves a dialectic of pathos and action—a give and take of “too late” and “in-the-nick-of-time”; (5) melodrama presents characters who embody primary psychic roles organized in Manichaeian conflicts between good and evil. For a longer discussion of these concepts, see Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, chap. 1: “The American Melodramatic Mode,” esp. 28–41.

7. It is also significant that both occurred in Los Angeles and were used to explain, lament, or point at the racial situation in LA. The representation of Los Angeles in film has been the focus of many critical perspectives, among them a special issue of *Wide Angle* (20.3 [1998]).
8. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 200. In Brooks’s description of the alternative to melodrama we can see in reverse all the elements that are at play in the disaster film: “Plot and action are de-dramatized, voluntarily insignificant. Desire, the relation of intention to action, the coherence of subjectivity, ambition as the self’s project are all stripped of significant status, shown to be inauthentic or illusory” (198).
9. For a discussion of melodrama in film, see Christine Gledhill, ed., *Home Is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Women’s Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1987). Also, see Steven Neale, “Melodrama and Tears,” *Screen* 27.6 (1986): 6–22.
10. William McDonald, “Dazzled or Dazed? The Wide Impact of Special Effects,” *New York Times*, 3 May 1998. Even though most of the tricks we understand as special effects have nothing to do with computers, critics increasingly use the term as a short cut for describing the use of computer technologies, digital processes, or digital manipulation in film art. Digitally created effects include computer-generated images (CGIs, or images that are created and rendered digitally from start to finish) and digital composites (images that may include photographic or filmic elements that are then transferred to digital format and manipulated by special software).

11. Franz Lidz, *New York Times*, 17 May 1998.
12. Furthermore, Lidz's response reminds the fourteen-year-old crowd that "baby boomers" (who, according to Lidz, long for the "old Godzilla" of their more innocent childhood) will hate the "new Godzilla." This play on generational appeal is in itself a guarantee of the film's success. For a discussion of the production process and budget demands of blockbuster films, see Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 8–36.
13. For a more detailed exploration of these questions, see Rick Altman, *Film/Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1999). Through a semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach, Altman proposes that we understand the concept of genre as a set of complex interactions between film texts, their audiences, and their uses.
14. In *The Classic Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), David Bordwell, Janet Steiger, and Kristin Thompson use their random sample of a hundred films from the period 1915–60 to delineate the structure of the "classic" film, which they find depends on heterosexual romantic plots in between 85 percent and 95 percent of the films they consider "typical." This percentage points to the social and cultural function of these films as a training course in normative heterosexuality. In my view, the preponderance of heterosexual romantic plots is a perfect example of the reproduction of sexual and gender norms effected through dominant ideological vessels, such as the classic Hollywood film.
15. Contemporary modes of production and distribution have blurred the boundaries of where the filmic text ends and the rest of culture begins. Some components of an expanded film text (or film event) thus already belong to traditional film study (plotline, character development, and visual imagery), while others are still questionable in terms of film criticism (production gossip, fandom, special effects, and soundtracks).
16. Bruckheimer and Leder qtd. in McDonald, "Dazzled or Dazed?"

17. My decision to blend traditional genres is motivated by a need to explore the unconscious fantasies and political implications of these films. Sharon Willis explains this approach best: “Because popular films read, consume, and even offer partial analyses of fantasies and anxieties circulating in the social field, they are always ambivalent, and their address to us is ambivalent. If we recognize that films may tell us what we are really thinking about—are really anxious about, collectively—then we have to assume that we do not automatically understand these anxieties any more than the films do, because surely the unconscious is at work in the social field as well” (*High Contrast: Race and Gender in Contemporary Hollywood Film* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997], 58).
18. In the *Alien* series, for example, the alien starts out as a human-machine merger in the first film (dir. Ridley Scott, UK, 1979), with metallic “skin,” corrosive chemical blood, and an affinity for hiding in circuits. The aliens become more insectlike in the rest of the series (*Aliens* [dir. James Cameron, US, 1986], *Alien 3* [dir. David Fincher, US, 1992], *Alien Resurrection*). In *Men in Black*, the final conflict involves an alien who starts out in human form but slowly deteriorates to a huge insect. In *Starship Troopers*, there is no question about the humanity of the aliens at all.
19. The action films that posit terrorists, hostage situations, blackmail, ransom demands, etc., have also simplified the issue of responsibility by having an identifiable enemy/agent of the disaster. While “mad scientists” are not as common in nineties films, greedy corporate moguls, terrorists, Cold War–obsessed military men, and psychotic killers abound.
20. The typological features I include here are only a sample of what goes on in disaster films. My inclusive and expansive definition of what counts as a disaster film (including alien invasion films, for example) is a response to the genre manipulation characteristic of the New Hollywood. I argue that when we respect the “old” genre definitions for these spectacular films, we are unable to discern their allegorical potential.
21. The success of *Men in Black* is a case in point here, as it prompted repeated viewings and record revenue in terms of videocassette, audio soundtrack, and merchandise purchases.

22. I am indebted to Linda Williams for suggesting that these films configure racial difference in a solution/problem binary opposition.
23. Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 2.
24. For a complex reading of the white male action hero in Hollywood, see Willis, *High Contrast*, chap. 1.
25. Wiegman, *American Anatomies*, 126. The voice of James Earl Jones as Darth Vader in the Star Wars films constitutes a similar case of disavowal making race invisible in science fiction. Wiegman writes against a critical tradition of understanding the alien figure as other, but usually not in racial terms. For example, science fiction critics have read *Enemy Mine* as a negotiation of Cold War enemies and would see Drac as a Russian or communist other.
26. Taubin, "Playing It Straight," 6–8.
27. Judith Butler, "Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia," in *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (New York: Routledge, 1993), 15–22.
28. Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," 7. Emphasis original.
29. According to Neale, tears are "the consequence of loss, the loss, particularly, of a sense of union with the mother. However, crying isn't simply an articulation of this loss, it is also a demand for its reparation—a demand addressed most commonly to the mother, who thus is situated in fantasy as a figure capable of fulfilling that demand. Crying, therefore, is not just an expression of pain or pleasure or nonsatisfaction. As a demand for satisfaction, it is the vehicle of a wish—a fantasy—that satisfaction is possible, that the object can be restored, the loss eradicated" ("Melodrama and Tears," 22).
30. In the opening sequence of the film, during the first Matabe epidemic, the suffering bodies are both black villagers and white soldiers (some of them American) that are helping out during a civil war. The underlying message seems to be that cross-racial suffering has not happened since the late sixties.

31. Eric Bentley, *The Life of Drama* (New York: Atheneum, 1964). From Shakespeare's use of the moving forest in *Macbeth*, to Emily Brontë's description of the Yorkshire moors and weather as "the very devil," Bentley sees the animation of the landscape as a major tool in the representation of what is evil, or what the characters of the melodramatic plot see, in paranoid fashion, as out to get them. "Popular Victorian melodrama," Bentley continues, "made extensive use of bad weather and dangerous landscape. High seas and deep chasms threaten to swallow our hero up. The very fact that I describe such events as 'swallowing up' shows that a little of the animism rubs off, even on a critic" (202).
32. Mike Davis, "Uprising and Repression in L.A.: An Interview with Mike Davis by the CovertAction Information Bulletin," in Gooding-Williams, *Reading Rodney King*, 150.
33. I understand these two components of the sublime in relation to David E. Nye's discussion in *American Technological Sublime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994).

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The White House is destroyed by aliens in *Independence Day*.