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Cinematic Incursions into the Anthropocene: Roland Emmerich, Dystopia and Ontology

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The Anthropocene has disrupted modern boundaries between human and non-human agency. While humans become an agent of geohistory (Latour, 2014), planetary epiphenomena – climate change, extreme weather events, the sixth mass extinction – indicate that modern extractivism is taking a toll on Earth System processes, suggesting that, soon, the planet may no longer be “a safe operating space for Humanity” (Rockstrom *et al*, 2009).

The modern political project often assumed that the environment could be enframed as “performative islands of stability” (Pickering, 2017). This mechanistic understanding of non-humans as “raw materials” has historically

legitimized human projects of exploitation and domination (Mies & Shiva, 2014). However, global warming and sociotechnical disasters (Fukushima, Chernobyl, the Bhopal gas tragedy) are grim illustrations of how projects to harness non-human agency often fail, creating monsters that, as Dr. Frankenstein's creature, feed off of the human fear of technology gone wild.

This essay draws on the work of the German filmmaker Roland Emmerich as ways of staging the Anthropocene, understood as a form of ontological theater (Pickering, 2007), allowing us to revisit a set of tropes – control, non-human agency, evil, politics – entwined with our current Zeitgeist. This paper focuses on three popular disaster movies: *Independence Day* (1996) depicts an alien attack on Earth, including the destruction of several cities as part of a planned invasion of the world. *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) delves into the topic of climate change, focusing on a series of catastrophic storms that lead into a new Ice Age. *2012* (2009) is about a set of apocalyptic tectonic events linked to the cataclysmic pole shift hypothesis, with only a small fraction of humanity surviving.

While only one of these movies is directly linked to climate change, they foreground planetary ontologies that put a dent on modern and anthropocentric ways of engaging with the environment, plunging humans into dystopian scenarios where they are no longer in charge. Atmospheres, soils and the Cosmos suddenly escape their “performative islands of stability”: as the Planet is no longer a “safe operating space”, it acquires new and dangerous properties, turning into a threat to the human species. The work of Roland Emmerich can thus be understood as ontological theater, setting the stage for planetary and spatial performances of uncertainty, threat and chaos that problematize human exceptionalism. In sum, these movies allow us to revisit several tropes that are key to understanding human and non-human couplings in the Anthropocene.

The first trope concerns the loss of human control over planetary (and extraterrestrial) elements. In these movies, the environment is no longer predictable and starts reacting in strange ways. This includes tsunamis, freak storms, major earthquakes, and waves of destruction caused by alien technology. In order to monitor and control the ways in which oceans, atmospheres, soils and space act, human civilization has developed numerous surveillance technologies. In Emmerich's movies, these technologies often fail

alongside the illusion of control – in *The Day After Tomorrow*, buoys used to monitor the ocean's temperature suddenly malfunction; in *Independence Day*, satellites stop responding, after being destroyed by the alien ship; in *2012*, when the tectonic plates begin to shift, the ability to assess the degree of global destruction is jeopardized, with Caltech and the city of Pasadena being destroyed by a major earthquake. Surveillance technologies allow human societies to constantly monitor the weather, space and soils. Their demise hampers the human control over the non-human world, subverting hierarchies and upsetting the traditional role played by humans.

The second trope staged by Emmerich's movies has to do with non-human agency. These films allow us to engage with the clamor of non-human voices that manifest themselves as weather events, alien intelligence or elementary particles, such as neutrinos. As Thacker (2011: 13) wrote, "culture is the terrain on which we find attempts to confront an impersonal and indifferent world-without-us". By depicting themes such as catastrophic climate change, crust displacement and alien invasions, Emmerich shows us a world that does not care about us. Millions, even billions, perish under a new ontological regime where non-human agency is out of joint. The modern system put in place to harness non-human value crumbles, and some of the hallmarks of our civilization are destroyed – the Empire State Building, the White House, or the Christ the Redeemer statue in Brazil. One could argue that the modern, extractivist contract between humans and non-humans is turned upside-down, and Mankind is no longer invested with the God-given power to rule the Earth. In *2012*, there's a particularly insightful scene: *The Creation of Adam* painting starts cracking, forming a line between the finger of Man and God. This scene, followed by the destruction of the Vatican, allows us to witness the emergence of non-human hubris, where humans are no longer protected by their special status among other creatures – the "world-without-us" suddenly becomes alive and overshadows all organized attempts to be contained. The aesthetics of non-human agency, supported by computer-generated imagery, are articulated by the ruins of a collapsing human civilization, including in some cases the rewilding of urban areas. For example, in *The Day After Tomorrow*, there is a scene where wolves are roaming around freely in New York, attacking the surviving humans who are scavenging for food and medicine.

The third trope has to do with evil, both human and non-human. In *Independence Day*, aliens are depicted as locusts, moving from planet to

planet to extract natural resources. Aliens are presented as the embodiment of extractivist modernity and capitalism, with little or no regard for human lives. There is a scene in which one of the aliens is captured and briefly interacts with the President of the USA. The latter asks whether there could be a peaceful cohabitation between the two species, to which the extraterrestrial replies that there could be no peace and that humans should “Die... die...”. The alien civilization is supported by an extremely advanced technological apparatus and evil is enacted as a “failure to think” (Arendt, 1963: xiv) *beyond* the imperatives of extractivism and calculation. The banality of alien/non-human evil is embedded in a technological rationality that conceives human life as a nuisance that must be eliminated. While alien evil seems to have a purpose – getting rid of humans to fully access natural resources – Emmerich’s movies depict other forms of non-human evil that stage a “world-without-us” acting randomly and shattering the illusion of human control. In those cases (floods, extreme weather events, the shifting of the magnetic poles), evil is the antithesis of the modern course of things: humans are unable to resist – and, in most cases, to survive – the waves of destruction cast by the non-human world.

Finally, Emmerich’s movies help us to (re)think about politics in the Anthropocene. In *The Day After Tomorrow*, the main character unsuccessfully tries to warn the Vice-President of the USA that tougher policies are required to fight climate change, but the latter seems to be more concerned with economic issues. Later in the movie, US citizens start crossing the Rio Grande into Mexico, signaling an ironic reversal of the historical migration dynamic between the two countries. Thanks to its warmer weather, Mexico turns into the safe place and Americans into migrants. In *2012*, world leaders had prior knowledge about the cataclysmic events about to take place and built massive arks in the Himalayas for the survival of a selected few. Those who had a chance to embark had to pay one billion euros per ticket, meaning that only the elites – and a few lucky others – survived the catastrophe. This echoes current concerns with the deep-rooted economic, social and political inequalities characterizing the Anthropocene, with some authors proposing terms such as “Capitalocene” (Moore, 2016) or “Plutocene” (Solón, 2019), which more accurately illustrate the economic and political contours of this proposed epoch.

The work of Roland Emmerich illuminates some of the recurring tropes of the Anthropocene, creatively articulating the ontological reconfigurations that characterize our planetary zeitgeist. The heterogenous imaginaries of

destruction fostered by these films have reached millions of viewers across the world, reaffirming the role popular culture plays in the production of tectonic, climate and alien dystopias, and allowing us to engage with some of the most pressing political, ethical and social concerns of our times.

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