FILM CULTURE IN TRANSITION

Disaster Cinema in Historical Perspective

Mediations of the Sublime

NIKITA MATHIAS

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The text in this book is in large part consistent with the author's research and writing for Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen.

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1. Introduction

Abstract

The reception of disaster films has been predominantly shaped by ideology-critical, semiotic, psychoanalytical, and eco-critical approaches that prematurely abstract from the films' imagery in order to foreground capitalist, chauvinist, and racist discourses, narrative patterns, repressed collective anxieties, and states of crisis of the political mind. In my opinion, these approaches fail to grasp the disaster movie at its receptive core. In contrast, I argue that this core is located within the visuality and sensuality of the films, within their visceral images that agitate the spectator in a sensorily and affectively intense manner, within their ethical and spiritual sides which emerge in reaction to the receptive violation of the viewer, and finally within the complex relations between the films' elements of attraction and their narrative elements. The predestined means of analytically uncovering these various facets of the reception of disaster cinema is, I believe, the aesthetic category of the sublime.

Keywords: The Art, Media and Technological History of the Sublime; Oliver Grau; Jonathan Crary; Siegfried Kracauer; Michel Foucault; Erwin Panofsky

[…] and numerous are those films which, like *San Francisco*, *In Old Chicago*, *Hurricane*, *Suez*, and recently *The Rains Came*, present natural disasters in a drastic manner. […] Not to mention that only film is able to present complex events like natural disasters or episodes of war which cannot be explored only from one point of view. Therefore, it is film alone which, as the unbiased observer, penetrates deep into the zones of terror, leading to the conclusion that film's affinity with terrifying topics is indeed aesthetically justified. By taking its chances, film not only breaks through the boundaries of artistic presentability, but it also visualizes events which do not tolerate any witness where they actually occur, for under their influence every witness must turn into a being filled with fear, anger, desperation. Film illuminates the appearance of the terrible, which we

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> normally encounter in the dark, and turns the in reality unimaginable into an object of attraction. The fact that the sheer exposure of the terrible primarily appeals as spectacle is inevitable. Now, most films seek to avoid this effect by connecting their objects with ideal purposes. The gruesome undergrounds of human existence are presented in their brutal nakedness in order to derive, even more emphatically, moral or social demands from them: in American films, earthquakes, deluges, blasts of fire, and sand storms are never shown without simultaneously making sure that the raging of the elements serves the ethical purification of the hero. Well-meant sublimations and attempts of refinement, which nonetheless do not manage to sanction the images of terror adequately. These images rather reveal their meaning when they are not immediately associated with conscious life. Which meaning is ascribed to them? Every representation is also a play with the represented object, and perhaps the one with terror serves the purpose of people gaining control over things at whose mercy they utterly are for the time being.[1]

In his article '*Das Grauen im Film*' ('The Horror in Film') from 1940, Siegfried Kracauer points out some of the key characteristics of disaster cinema's reception.[2] He considers the interrelation between the terrifying effects of the depicted disasters and the physical safety of the spectator sitting in cinema. From this interrelation derives the aesthetic appeal of the disaster film genre, which can be best described as a mixed emotion. Instead of fleeing a real disaster event in naked fear, the spectator experiences an artificial disaster event as a both terrifying and stimulating cinematic spectacle. The disaster object is convincingly made present, and yet, there is no real danger for the audience. Moreover, based on this experience of pleasurable terror, Kracauer identifies a transcendent sphere. He speaks of 'ideal purposes' and 'moral or social demands', whose functioning is closely related to the sensory and affective agitation of the spectator. This is the attempt to regain control on a metaphysical level over an object that, by its sheer force of appearance, overwhelms and shatters our faculties of perception.

As for the receptive inter-functioning of spectacle and narration in disaster films, Kracauer describes this relation as a failing reciprocity: narrative themes, such as the 'ethical purification of the hero' and 'moral

1 Translated from German by the author; orig.: Kracauer, 26f.

2 If not explicitly mentioned otherwise, all subsequent translations from German to English are done by the author.

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or social demands', do not fully manage to justify the violence of the films' elements of spectacle. In turn, the disaster spectacles reinforce the rhetorical impact of the narration. But Kracauer also urges his readers to look beyond this interdependence and acknowledge the sensory quality and innovation of the films' disaster scenes. Accordingly, only the recording technology of the film camera can penetrate and present spaces in destruction from various perspectives and proximities. With its widened means of illusionism and immersion and its dynamic perception and expression of movement, cinema becomes the privileged medium for presenting disaster imagery in a hitherto unparalleled way. At the same time, by visualizing catastrophic events 'which do not tolerate any witness', disaster cinema also transgresses the arts' ethical boundaries, in that it spectacularizes catastrophic events and their terrifying and fatal impact on man.

In terms of the reception of cinema's visualizations of volcano eruptions, deluges, earthquakes, storms, and tornadoes, these are the central issues addressed in Kracauer's text: first, disaster cinema prompts mixed aesthetic experiences, combining terror and pleasure; second, the pleasurable side of the cinematic experience is based on the physical safety of the spectator; third, the films' spectacular disaster events are closely related to themes of transcendence and ethics; fourth, in disaster cinema, the unpresentable and unexperienceable is being presented, due to the medium's specific technological and expressive means; and fifth, the films employ an intertwining of spectacle and narrative, aesthetics and ethics, immanence and transcendence, sensory and affective agitation and reasoning. Without naming the term, Kracauer discusses some of the essential features of an aesthetic experience and category which goes beyond the mere evocation of fear and horror: *the sublime*.

The sublime is an offshoot of a varied theoretical tradition, reaching as far back as late antiquity, which has undergone numerous transformations over time and developed a vast variety of subtraditions and subcategories. Because of the complex character of the sublime, critics have been at loss to find an exhaustive definition. Thus, I can also merely give an approximate definition, describing the sublime as a mixed aesthetic experience triggered by a specific external object which is perceived from a safe distance. In this experience, terror and pleasure become intertwined in a symbiotic relationship. The sublime functions as a counterpoint to beauty, which in this regard is conceived as a source of aesthetic pleasure devoid of any element of terror. This definition certainly applies to the theoretical accounts of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, both of whom are particularly relevant. More precisely, their theories provide the analytical framework to explore

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the receptive functioning of disaster cinema. By employing Burke and Kant's theoretical accounts of the sublime, I attempt to answer the question: *How do disaster films work* (*in terms of their aesthetic reception*)*?*

Despite Kracauer having laid the foundation for this task as early as 1940, such an extensive investigation into the cinematic reception (and historical formation) of disaster movies is still warranted. For in spite of this early trail that Kracauer explores, the critical and academic history of reception of the disaster movie genre has been shaped by other approaches. Most of the film analytical contributions thus far have been dominated by ideology-critical, semiotic, feminist, political, and psychoanalytical readings, which prematurely abstract from the immediate sensory appearance of their objects of study. Not only are these approaches often speculative, they also exclude the films' phenomenal, affective, and receptive domain, as well as their historical dimension in order to emphasize a further subtext (repressed collective anxieties, states of crisis of the political mind, racist, sexist and capitalist discourses).[3] In turn, those who actually analyze disaster movies on the basis of the theorems of the sublime often tend to be imprecise in their theoretical handling or eventually return to the speculative readings mentioned above.[4] Finally, there are several introductory works and attempts of identification and designation which find the essence of the disaster film genre primarily within its narrative structures.[5] The same focus on narrativity can be noted in the contributions coming from the field of disaster studies. They discuss cinematic and other fictional disaster narratives alongside real disaster events (as they are televised and discursively represented), thereby failing to consider disaster movie viewing as a specifically aesthetic and cinematic experience.[6]

In my opinion, these approaches fail to grasp the disaster movie at its receptive core, from which it gains its power and fascination.[7] In contrast, I argue that this core is located within the visuality and sensuality of the films, within their visceral images that agitate the spectator in a sensorily and affectively intense manner, within their ethical and spiritual sides which emerge in reaction to the receptive violation of the viewer, and finally within the complex relations between the films' elements of attraction and

3 Among others: Maruo-Schröder; Grigat; Dixon; Kakoudaki; Ramonet; Sontag.

4 Among others: Hockenhull; Natali; Jeong; Herrmann, 221-230.

5 Among others: Sanders; Mitchell; Roddick; Yacowar.

6 See for example: Webb; Cornea; Meiner.

7 Viewed in a broader film theoretical context, my criticism against these tendentially abstracting and textual approaches also coincides with earlier critical arguments expressed by scholars like Steven Shaviro and Noël Carroll: Shaviro; Carroll.

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their narrative elements. The predestined means of analytically uncovering these various facets of the reception of disaster cinema is, I believe, the aesthetic category of the sublime. Thus, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the effects of the sublime do not only play a role within the elitist art sector but also within the lowbrow and middlebrow fields of popular culture.[8] This relevance of the sublime in mass entertainment most notably manifests within disaster cinema.

Theories of the Sublime: Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant

Deviating from Pseudo-Longinus's leading question about the possibility of a sublime rhetoric (c. first century AD), Edmund Burke, in his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), examines the mixed aesthetic experience of the sublime ('delightful horror') in its impact on the physiologic-psychological apparatus of the subject.[9] Burke's treatise contributed significantly to the popularization of the sublime in British culture in the course of the late eighteenth century.[10] The dichotomic relation of beauty and sublimity is applied here to a systematic aesthetic framework for the first time. Beautiful objects are small, bright, delicate, clear, and smooth, whereas sublime objects are vast, dark, rough, obscure, and boundless. Burke grounds both main categories in the existential drives of *self-preservation* (the sublime) and *society/love* (beauty). The first surpasses the latter by far in terms of their respective agencies. The effects of the sublime are portrayed as an 'irresistible force', a pre-cognitive and affective overpowering of the subject.[11] Therefore, Burke's concept is particularly suited to be joined with somatic film theories focusing on the bodily and affective experience of the cinema, which will be introduced in detail at a

8 To be named in this respect are some of the artists of American Abstract Expressionism such as Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Clyfford Still, whose works – especially those of Newman – inspired Jean-François Lyotard in the 1980s to conceive his postmodern theory of the sublime. Even though these artists sought to create art to be experienced by everyone, their works are usually presented within the elite realm of art galleries, museums, and academies. Already in 1948, Barnett Newman, in his essay 'The Sublime is Now', established the connection between Abstract Expressionism and the sublime (Newman). Later art historical attempts to substantiate this connection include for instance: Rosenblum; Brandt.

9 Burke, 67. – For a general introduction to the sublime's history of theory, see: Pries; Shaw; Costelloe.

10 For the popularization of the sublime in the eighteenth century, see: Monk; Ashfield; Wilton, Chap. 1f.

11 Burke, 53.

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later point. A linking between Burke's psychophysiology of the sublime and the 'psychophysiology of cinematic experience' might result in a fruitful model for analyzing disaster films and their effects on the spectator.[12] Furthermore, Burke creates a catalogue of numerous characteristics and types – an extensive phenomenology of the sublime. Although his theory occasionally lacks coherence and terminological precision, Burke provides a rich vocabulary to describe sublime phenomena of nature, the same type of phenomena that the recipients of disaster movies are confronted with.

Within the context of his critical philosophy, as part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Immanuel Kant relocates the experience of the sublime entirely into the *mind* of the perceiving subject.[13] The participants during the sublime event are *sensibility* and *reason*. While sensibility collapses at the sight of the (merely implicit) sublime object, reason uses this breakdown as an opportunity to demonstrate to the mind its superiority over nature. This alternation of *pleasure* and *displeasure* can occur in two different ways: in the *mathematically sublime* and in the *dynamically sublime*. While the former results from the sensation of a seemingly infinite object, the dynamically sublime arises because of the sensation of overpowering and almighty forces of nature. The two-stage structure of Kant's model, as it employs a receptive interlocking of sensibility's crisis and the transcendent moment, provides a productive analytical tool for describing points of contact, intersections, and interrelations between the realms of aesthetics and ethics, disaster imagery and moral narratives, affect and thought, which also represent crucial moments within the reception of disaster cinema. It is furthermore of importance that Kant and Burke primarily apply their theories to natural phenomena, often catastrophic ones. Hence, in terms of their motifs and examples, their models of the sublime are already essentially connected with the subject matter of the disaster film genre.

In addition to these preliminary explanations on Burke and Kant's accounts of the sublime, their theories will be discussed in greater detail and depth on several occasions. On top of that, they will be modified and enriched by bringing them into contact with other theories of the sublime. Generally, the deployment of such additional theoretical positions will help achieving a more precise, productive, and nuanced conjunction between Burke and Kant's classical theories of the sublime, my historical trajectory, and the analysis of disaster cinema. This demand for precision and nuances

12 Shaviro, 53.

13 The following deliberations are based on Kant's line of argumentation about the sublime in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant).

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cannot be stressed firmly enough in the face of a flood of publications since the *Renaissance des Erhabenen* ('renaissance of the sublime') in the mid-1980s.[14] Numerous enriching contributions to the debate aside, the recent decades' reception of the sublime shows a tendency toward theoretical dilution and randomness, especially within the disciplines of art history and media studies.[15] Then again, this theoretical diversity may also result from the incoherencies and blind spots inherent to the classical theories of the sublime, encouraging further development and adaptations into various directions. However, apart from these 'attenuating circumstances', one cannot be surprised when James Elkins positions himself decidedly 'Against the Sublime'. With his essay, whose title announces his position, Elkins criticizes the transhistorical usage of the concept of the sublime, which eventually leads to arbitrariness in its analytical application.[16]

Now, one might object that my approach of bringing disaster cinema prolifically in contact with classical theories of the sublime is just the kind of transhistorical approach that Elkins criticizes. In response to this potential objection, I claim that the theoretical concept of the sublime does not only function as a film analytical tool; much more than that, its usage justifies itself with the visual history from which the disaster movie genre and the medium of cinema generally emerged.[17]

This is where a second question of interest to be answered in this book emerges: W*here does disaster cinema come from?* I argue that the sublime does not merely represent an aesthetic-theoretical discourse. It is understood as a complex and culturally specific meeting point between philosophical thought, artistic creation, social and technical development, and popular imagination. The characteristics of the sublime are essentially defining for

14 Pries, 1.

15 One might want to merely consider the vast quantity of typological varieties which have come into existence in the last years only within the Anglo-Saxon discussion – a selection: Natural, Gothic, Traumatic, Apocalyptic, Terrible, Ecological, Capitalist, Antipastoral, Commodified, Ironic, Cinematic, Feminine, Chastened, Clumsy, Ethical, American, Rude, Scientific, After-Auschwitz, Contemporary, Political, Sticky, Biological, Grimy, Arrested, Corporate, Expressionist, Urban, Temporal, Vicious, Technological, Visual-Verbal, Abstract, Romantic Anti-, Material Sublime.

16 Elkins. – This view is also shared by James Kirwan who not only criticizes the sublime's proliferating typologies but also attempts to view the sublime and its contemporary relevance (such as in disaster cinema) as part of a broader historical trajectory (Kirwan).

17 My use of the term 'visual history' focuses on its implied diversity in terms of visual phenomena, artefacts, and related discourses. Thus, my historical trajectory is not exclusively an art history of the sublime or a history of media technologies but an amalgam of various artistic genres and disciplines, pictorial media, as well as aesthetics and other discourses. I will elaborate on this in the upcoming section on the iconography of the sublime.

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one branch of cultural history that is currently most popularly represented by disaster cinema. Essentially, the sublime functions as the connecting methodological and theoretical link between my two questions of interest – how do disaster films work? Where does disaster cinema come from?

Crucial for my understanding of the sublime as a major component of the aesthetic reception of natural disaster events in the Western world is its shift from being regarded as a category of classical rhetoric (Pseudo-Longinus) to becoming the primary mode of experiencing nature's terrifying sides.[18] Roughly, this shift took place in the mid-eighteenth century, during the decades around the publication of Burke's treatise. This transformation of the sublime made itself felt within a wide range of cultural phenomena and discourses such as landscape art and its ascendency as an academic discipline, fictional and non-fictional writing, the natural sciences, garden design, travel culture, tourism, and so on. In addition to this, I argue that the aesthetic and receptive principles of the sublime also prompted new developments in terms of the content matter, the formal pictorial features, and the media technologies associated with visual culture.

Paradoxically, the sublime triggered these developments, even though the notion of the unsuitability of visual media as mediators of the experience of the sublime has been a common theme within its theoretical and broader cultural discourses.[19] As for Burke and Kant's theories, only the encounter with real phenomena of nature could provoke the sublime's crisis of sensibility. Works of visual art, in contrast, were only considered approximations and insufficient imitations of the real object's sublimity.[20] However, the simultaneity of the establishment of the sublime's iconography and its theoretical dismissal is paradoxical only at first sight. In opposition

18 It should be noted that the concept of the sublime in Antiquity is far more complex than and not limited to questions of rhetoric and the production of speech and text. As demonstrated by James Porter, the sublime governs a whole range of aesthetic disciplines and experiential modes in ancient thought. It even takes on a corporeal and phenomenological quality in the Presocratic concept of what Porter labels *sublime matter*. However, when it comes to the sublime's history of reception in post-ancient Europe, it is clearly the notion of a rhetoric of the sublime that dominates (Porter).

19 Brady, 118-129.

20 Burke's argument is based on the premise of obscurity (of ideas), which cannot be presented in painting, 'because the images in painting are exactly similar to those in nature'. A painting 'can only affect simply by the images it presents' (Burke, 58). Hence, the pictorial presentation of sublime objects of nature always entails a degeneration of its affective force. There is no genuine contribution by painting to the sublimity of the object. In a comparable manner, Kant claims that the seemingly formlessness and boundlessness of sublime natural objects cannot be reproduced in the visual arts, for artistic production is always spatially limited and clear in its usage of form (Kant, 136).

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to this, I argue that the sublime's very rejection of visual media, conceived as a productive and challenging problematic, triggered media technological innovations. What these new pictorial technologies had in common was the aim to overcome the limitations of traditional easel painting. The mutual goals of the men responsible for these media technological innovations were the increase of affective intensity and visual dynamic, illusionistic immersion and multimedia technological interplay, violence against the viewer's faculty of sensibility, the disciplining of the viewer's body, and the channeling of his/her aesthetic attention and subjectivity.

The Archeology and Iconography of the Sublime

My tracing of this historical trajectory corresponds in some crucial points with Michel Foucault's principles of historical analysis expressed in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. There is, first, his notion of the history of ideas, which – when viewed through the lens of archeology – is not limited to singular thinkers, books, concepts, and œuvres, but which is mapped out as a network of 'institutions, social customs or behavior, techniques, and unrecorded needs and practices'.[21] Foucault conceives his archeology as the description of discursive (and non-discursive) relations and formations, which constitute complex (synchronous and diachronous) networks. As will become clear in short, my take on the sublime's history will similarly take into view and describe the relations between diverse practices, discourses, actors and institutions, objects and technologies. Second, Foucault sets his historical model in opposition to concepts of historical continuity, causality, influence, teleology, and anthropomorphism. Following his archeological tracing of discontinuities and ruptures, my historical trajectory is not to be thought as one continuous strand but as a more complex fabric involving fissures, gaps, side branches, repetitions, transformations, varying temporalities, and successions. And third, Foucault's insistence on the *positivity* of discourse, that is, on its condition of materiality, on the material circumstances of the enunciation of a statement or object promises to be a productive framework for my tracing of natural disaster depictions among a broad variety of media, practices, and social situations.

As this historical trajectory centers around pictorial media, it is necessary to consider the sensory, affective, and general aesthetic particularities of pictorial experiences as well as the genuine ways in which images travel,

21 Foucault, 154.

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occur, and transform. For this reason, in order to live up to the complexities that the historical analysis of pictorial media entails, I will not only treat the sublime and its alliance with natural disaster depictions as a network of discursive formations but also as a matter of *iconography*. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault himself sketches an archeological investigation of painting, trying to

> discover whether space, distance, depth, colour, light, proportions, volumes, and contours were not, at the period in question, considered, named, enunciated, and conceptualized in a discursive practice; and whether the knowledge that this discursive practice gives rise to was not embodied perhaps in theories and speculations, in forms of teaching and codes of practice, but also in processes, techniques, and even in the very gesture of the painter.[22]

In 1967, Foucault also reviewed two texts by Erwin Panofsky, insinuating a connection between his thinking and Panofsky's iconographic-iconological methodology that has been explored further on several occasions. Michael Ann Holly, for instance, considers Panofsky's emphasis on the basic principles underlying the representation, production, interpretation, formal arrangements, and techniques of images as a precursor of Foucault's work; and Joseph J. Tanke demonstrates how Foucault's thought evolved from Panofsky's exploration of the complicated relations between the visual and discourse.[23]

Panofsky's iconographic-iconological methodology puts together various perspectives and fields of analysis (*pre-iconographical description*, *iconographical analysis*, *iconological interpretation*; *history of style*, *types*, and *cultural symptoms*) into a systematic correlation.[24] Although I will not strictly follow the steps of Panofsky's model of pictorial analysis, his concept is nonetheless prolific for my historical inquiry, first, for it allows for an encompassing tracing of visual and artistic traditions, lines of development, continuities but also ruptures and gaps; second, it allows for a working out of correlations between a work's content matter, its sensory, formal, and stylistic characteristics (pre-iconography, iconography), its broader signification, and its overarching cultural discourses (iconology); and third, it makes possible a reflection of the media technological dimension of the

22 Foucault, 213f.
23 Holly, 185-187; Tanke, 54-60. – See also: Fornacciari; Merquior, 78f.
24 Panofsky 1955, 26-54.

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sublime's visual history, taking into account comparative relations between specific technological means of pictorial presentation.[25]

On the other hand, Panofsky's concept requires a supplement for my analytical purposes. For good reason, Panofsky has been criticized for regarding the particularities of works of art merely as indices for an underlying broader cultural horizon, that is to say, he has been accused of attaching too much weight to the procedures of iconological interpretation.[26] To counteract these tendencies, one must take into account and emphasize the immediate sensuality and the affective dimension of pictorial experiences. In this respect, images cannot be reduced to contextual representations and meanings to be 'read'; rather, they also must be regarded in their capability to haunt, violate, and affect their viewers. The affective agency and evocation of a blending of pleasure and terror employed by pictorial media of the sublime do not simply derive from the mere representation of sublime subjects (volcano eruptions, thunder storms, shipwrecks, avalanches, earthquakes, etc.); of equal importance are their formal characteristics, receptive tactics, technological particularities, and means of staging. The irreducibility of the iconic experience remains an ineluctable principle of my analysis.

In summary, I will make use of the term iconography of the sublime to describe the emergence of certain subject matters, formal features, receptive implications, and media technological innovations, which together brought forth pictorial mediations of the sublime. These mediations are to be located within the tension area of a dynamically changing and complexly intertwined media history. At the same time, it should be clear that natural disasters do not represent the only iconographical strand of the sublime, though it is a decisive one, I would claim. So why did I not choose to explore the sublime's relations to other film genres such as horror, war, science fiction, or narratives set in urban spaces? Arguably, a case could be made for all four of them.[27] But then again, as Jihae Chung's recently published monograph, *Das Erhabene im Kinofilm* ('The Sublime in Film') shows, applying the sublime to a broad variety of film genres is not helpful either to gain a precise understanding of what this aesthetic theory might mean to

25 In terms of the media technological aspects of cinema's iconography, it was Panofsky himself who laid the groundwork with his essay 'Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures', in which he compares the moving pictures of cinema with different visual media such as wood engraving, theater, painting, and comic strips (Panofsky 2004).

26 Such criticism has been expressed by Didi-Huberman, Otto Pächt, and Max Imdahl (Didi-Huberman; Pächt; Imdahl).

27 In fact, Scott Bukatman has already traced the visual history of the sublime from the eighteenth century to special effects in the science fiction film genre in: Bukatman.

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film culture.[28] Even though this book is very thorough in its discussion and application of the Kantian sublime, its reader is not necessarily left with a clear understanding of what the cinematic sublime actually might be, or rather, following her argumentation, it might just as well be anything. Essentially, the question of why I did not investigate the sublime's relevance in other genres misses the point, for it was not the sublime that led me to disaster cinema by singling out one specific iconographical strand. Quite the opposite, it was the disaster film genre that caught my curiosity in terms of its receptive functioning and its broader historical dimension, thereby leading me to the sublime and its affinity for natural disaster motifs.

As for the specific practices and discourses of pictorial production and reception permeating the iconography of the sublime, several historical phenomena need to be addressed. In general, these include artistic considerations concerning matters of representation, ethics, proximity and distance, affect and meaning, immersion and illusion, as well as the framing, disciplining, locating, and moving of the recipient's body and mind. In turn, the broader reception of sublime disaster depictions involves a diverse range of social, political, cultural, scientific, and economic discourses and phenomena, which will be discussed in detail.

One of the essential branches of cultural history coinciding with the sublime's emergence as the primary mode of presenting nature in its untamed and disastrous states is the aesthetic phenomenon of *immersion*. According to Oliver Grau's understanding of the term, immersive techniques are defined by emotional involvement, the diminishing of critical distance, sealing off the observer and rendering a totality of image-space.[29] In his book *Virtual Art; From Illusion to Immersion*, Grau identifies and analyzes several immersive media, ranging from ancient frescoes and Baroque church ceilings to Panoramas and digitally created experiences of virtual reality. Thereby, he demonstrates that the need for an unlimited and sheer frameless illusionism – the need to overcome and transgress the boundaries of traditional easel painting – has prompted media technologies of immersion for a relatively long period, easily exceeding the time frame of the immersive media of the sublime, which evolved in the mid-to-late-eighteenth century. The receptive framework of the sublime, as it is applied to pictorial disaster depictions, is embedded within a broader historical field of immersive technologies. On the one hand, such technologies are used to present natural disaster

28 Chung.

29 Grau, 13-18. – Another historical account of immersion is given by Alison Griffiths in: Griffiths.

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events as sublime spectacles; on the other hand, the sublime's employment of immersive effects can lead to experiences during which these very effects are transcended and dissolved. In this regard, bear in mind that the sublime is essentially a border phenomenon oscillating between sensibility and reason, affect and intelligibility, immersion and media reflexivity. Thus, as a side effect, my analysis will also problematize all too puristic notions of immersion, which, in fact, can never be encountered in reality (as Grau himself admits).[30]

Another historical strand closely intertwined with the iconography of the sublime is what Jonathan Crary, in his monograph *Techniques of the Observer*, describes as the production and establishment of a new type of observer in the nineteenth century. Taking a wide perspective on early-nineteenth-century culture, encompassing scientific and aesthetic discourses, optical technologies, forms of visual entertainment, and social structures of capitalist modernity, Crary defines this observer as no longer being part of a '"free", private, and individualized subject' (as represented by the paradigm of the camera obscura) but as an embodied, examined, and disciplined subject.[31] Within this new aesthetic paradigm, the body of this new observer 'would be increasingly subjected to forms of investigation, regulation, and discipline throughout the nineteenth century'.[32] It is these practices of controlling perception on a physiological level (with the aim to create experiences of illusionistic immersion), arranging bodies in space, managing attention, as well as fixing and isolating the observer that are at work within the developing visual history of the sublime.

While my aim is to trace a specific iconographical tradition from its beginnings in the eighteenth century until today, I at the same time will not discuss all elements of the visual history of the sublime in equal parts. Rather, I will combine general media analytical reflections with the investigation of a number of singular works, technologies, and artists.[33] Within the field of painting, I will focus on landscape depictions from the eighteenth century

30 Grau, 17.

31 Crary, 137f.

32 Crary, 73. – Further on, this production of a new observer and subject represents the common foundation and initiation for later phenomena and narratives such as impressionism's overcoming of perspectival space and mimetic codes vs. the continuity of media of realism (photography, cinema), which have falsely become to be regarded as the oppositional founding myths of modernity.

33 Regarding my use of the term 'artist', I do not distinguish between the producers of traditional art forms and the producers of works of popular entertainment. It will be equivalently applied to both sectors. However, as for modern mass media, whose production often is a collective effort, I will operate with a broader conception of the term, including various positions of artistic production.

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onward, as an iconography of the sublime was then first established in a comprehensive manner.[34] In terms of media technological innovations seeking to enable intensified experiences of sublime disasters, I will focus on the following pictorial devices: Eidophusikon, Panorama, the American Great Picture and Diorama.

Continuing to trace this media technological trajectory, I will also discuss cinema's technological ramifications in relation to their potential to convey aesthetic experiences of the sublime. The central question is: to what extent can cinema function and be regarded as a medium of the sublime? In juxtaposition with the preceding pictorial media, I will address cinema's technological premises and its repertoire of techniques of perception and expression (movement, montage, focal length, sound and music, visual effects, etc.). Primarily, these various means will be examined in terms of their potential to overpower the spectator's sensibility and agitate him/her on a somatic level.

Particularly the aspect of cinematic movement will be analyzed in its potential to capture and express the dynamics of sublime events. Panofsky describes this aspect strikingly as a '*dynamization of space* and, accordingly, [a] *spatialization of time*'.[35] In differentiation from other media, one must ask what this spatio-temporal novelty means for the experience of sublime disasters on the cinema screen.[36] In a wider sense, cinematic movement does not merely revolve around the ability to produce motion within the pictorial space, it also involves both the restriction of the viewer's body to move around physically and his/her compulsion or freedom to be moved by cinema's moving images in a sensory, affective, emotional, ethical, or intellectual manner. Inextricably linked to these various receptive movements is the addressing and localization of the spectator's body. This concerns, for example, how this body is situated in the viewer-space and related to the screen-space. Moreover, how does it interact with the bodies and objects presented on the screen, and how is it affected by cinematography's means to capture, illuminate, obscure, dissolve, organize, scale up and down, move and cut through those diegetic bodies and their environment?

34 I am stressing the word 'comprehensive' since scattered tendencies toward the formal qualities and content matter of the iconography of the sublime can already be witnessed in the seventeenth century, as will be shown in Chapter 2.

35 Panofsky 2004, 291.

36 As Anne Hollander demonstrates in her much-noticed monograph *Moving Pictures*, phenomena of static images which approximately contain cinematography's dynamic potential of movement, although only within the medial boundaries of the single picture, can be found throughout classical art history (Hollander). – See also: Paech, 94f.

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Analyzing Disaster Movies

In order to bridge the historical gap between Burke and Kant's theories of the sublime and the works of disaster cinema, I perform two procedures: the first is to historicize the sublime as a broader cultural phenomenon, which encompasses not only aesthetic discourses but also specific branches of visual history and media technological innovations. This is what I introduced on the previous pages as the iconography of the sublime. The second procedure brings Burke and Kant's theoretical accounts in contact with current theories of the cinematic experience, film affect, and film ecology.

Before these theoretical approximations can be contoured in greater detail, some general principles regarding the film analysis are called for. By using the theories of the sublime, I expect to gain terminological access to the receptive functioning of disaster cinema. Regarding the interdisciplinary interface between aesthetic philosophy and film studies, it must be clear that there can be no question of using the films as an instrument for demonstrating philosophical theorems.[37] The aim of my approach is not to use the disaster movies as sheer illustration for theoretical explanations but to analyze these films by means of Kant and Burke's concepts. As for the reception of disaster cinema, I do not aim to speculate on the recipients' actual responses or to carry out an empirical survey of any kind. Instead, I will deal with receptive strategies employed by the producers of the films. Following Carl Plantinga, I will treat cinema's receptive dimension as a set of 'preferred or intended congruent responses'.[38] Essentially, I operate under the assumption that 'elicited emotions and affects are characterized and differentiated by structural features, such that the film's intended affective focus can be reasonably well determined in many cases'.[39] On the other hand, one ought to keep in mind that cinematic experiences are further shaped by the spectator's relations to historical contexts and contemporary socio-cultural discourses (even though this contextual dimension of the cinematic experience will only play a minor role in the film analysis).

Furthermore, my way to approach and analyze disaster films orients itself with respect to art historical practices and perspectives. This means that my analytical focus lies first and foremost on the visuality

37 As it is done for instance in *Introducing Philosophy through Film*, an essay collection edited by Richard Fumerton and Diane Jeske. These essays demonstrate inter alia how epistemological questions (Descartes, Locke, Hume) can be illuminated by films like *The Matrix* or *Total Recall* (Fumerton).

38 Plantinga 2009, 14.

39 Plantinga 2009, 11.

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and sensuality of disaster films. Meticulous attention will be paid to every detail of the moving images of disaster cinema, to their specific textures, compositions, patterns, and visual effects, their dialogicity and ambivalences. Based on the comparative practices of art historical research, I will also juxtapose and compare various images of disaster films in order to enable a profound inquiry of their reception. My art historical perspective on cinema and film history is located within art history's broader involvement with film studies, a rather young development, originating in the *Iconic* and *Pictorial Turns* – just to mention the two most influential Turns – which were identified in the early 1990s.[40] With these turns, the academic discipline of art history has been able to expand its competencies and its field of research.

The epistemic gain entailed by art history's renewed interest in film (since Panofsky) is particularly emphasized by Martin Warnke in his essay '*Kontinuitätslinien von alter Kunst zu den Neuen Medien*' ('Lines of Continuity Between Old Art and the New Media'). Fundamental to his advocacy for art history's competence and responsibility regarding the understanding of new media (esp. film, TV, photography) is the idea of existing lines of continuity between traditional pictorial media and modern mass media. Warnke claims 'that the new media imply the popularization of modes of perception, which, in earlier times, were developed by the arts. Within the field of the visual media, certain techniques, strategies, and functions were preserved which, in the previous centuries, were provided by the fine arts'.[41] Also, Karl Prümm, even though not an art historian himself, acknowledges the surplus of viewing films through the eyes of an art historian. In his essay '*Von der Mise en scène zur Mise en images*' ('From the Mise en Scène to the Mise en Images'), he calls for a change of perspective from a primarily narrative conception of film to an accentuation of its visual and pictorial-photographic form. The consequences of this terminological shift are explained by him as follows:

> The process indicated by this term concentrates on the materiality of the image, on its technicality, on the pictorial forms, structures and segments, on the differentiations of light, as well as on the shades and contrasts of color. With this, another view is established, one which focuses on the

40 See the essay collection *Bilderfragen* (ed. Hans Belting) which contains the correspondence between the initiators of the two mentioned *Turns*, Gottfried Boehm (*Iconic Turn*) and W.J.T. Mitchell (*Pictorial Turn*).

41 Translated from German by the author; orig.: Warnke, 75.

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> dynamic of the image, on the movements and correlations across the medial borders, on the genealogy of pictures, and on the iconographic traditions.[42]

More specifically, by analyzing the imagery of disaster cinema both from the perspective of an art historian (who considers the broader scope of the historical formation of the sublime) and by employing classical theories of the sublime, I will also re-interpret various techniques and conventions of cinema such as point of view, shot size, tracking, panning, montage procedures, continuity editing, and so on.

As for the current film theoretical contributions to be brought in contact with Burke and Kant's models of the sublime, I will primarily focus on theories that investigate the affective and somatic sides of the cinematic experience. Particularly, the somatic film theories of Vivian Sobchack and Thomas Morsch will be employed extensively and juxtaposed with the aesthetic and receptive framework of the sublime. In her book *The Address of the Eye; A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, Sobchack develops an encompassing phenomenological theory of the cinematic experience based on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology. By constituting the somatic notion of *being-in-the-world* as the irreducible essence of any cinematic experience, her model transgresses dichotomic relations between subject and object, viewer-space and screen-space, affect and meaning and establishes a complex set of interrelations between the bodies of *spectator*, *film*, and *filmmaker*.

While Sobchack's work rather provides an aisthetical foundation of the cinematic experience, Morsch grounds the bodily as the key concept of a distinctively aesthetic experience of the cinematic. In *Medienästhetik des Films; Verkörperte Wahrnehmung und ästhetische Erfahrung im Kino* ('Media Aesthetics of Film; Embodied Perception and Aesthetic Experience in Cinema'), he develops his somatic theory of cinema through critical readings of Merleau-Ponty, Sobchack, and Steven Shaviro, applying it to the analysis of several films which represent typical 'body genres' like action or horror.

In this respect, my film analytical deployment of the sublime is also to be understood as a contribution to the ongoing discussion on film affect and the somatic dimension of film and cinema in general.[43] Regarding my understanding of the notion of affect, I follow Gregory J. Seigworth and

42 Translated from German by the author; orig.: Prümm, 17.

43 See for example: Weik von Mossner; Ivakhiv; Plantinga 2009; Rutherford; Marks; Plantinga 1999; Shaviro.

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Melissa Gregg's broader definition given in the introductory essay within their *Affect Theory Reader*:

> [A]ffect is found in those intensities that pass body to body (human, nonhuman, part-body, and otherwise), in those resonances that circulate about, between, and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds, and in the very passages or variations between these intensities and resonances themselves. Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces – visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion – that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability.[44]

Inscribed within the polarity between affects as precognitive, presubjective, and predicative intensities on the one side and conscious rational thought on the other, there is an endless number of hybrid forms and variations, such as emotions in which affective forces surface in combination with cognitive procedures and a heightened degree of consciousness. Accordingly, this permeability corresponds to the sublime's hybrid character, operating on the thresholds between affect, emotion, and thought.

In addition, my film analysis will take a stand on the theoretical strife between two antagonistic historical and ontological concepts of cinema, namely between the *cinema of attractions* and *narrative* (or *Classical Hollywood*) *cinema*.[45] Linked to these oppositional concepts are the overarching notions of cinema as a medium of spectacle, visuality, and presence and as a textual medium. Recent publications show that the opposition between cinematic attraction and narrative – and the question of how to reconcile both sides – has remained a pressing topic among film scholars.[46] With my film analytical employment of the sublime, I will offer an alternative model of mediation between the spectacular and textual dimensions of cinema. However, this model will not attempt to provide a theoretical

44 Gregg, 1.

45 Tom Gunning coined the term *cinema of attractions* within the context of his revaluation of early (that is pre-classical) cinema (Gunning 1990). – On top of that, the term was also attributed to cinema's postclassical period from the mid-1970s onward. An overview of the impact of this new understanding of film and cinema history is offered by Gunning himself in: Gunning 2000.

46 Among others: Nessel, *Wort und Fleisch*; Nessel, *Kino und Ereignis*; Morsch; Tasker; Wood; King.

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solution for film and cinema in general but only for the disaster genre with its generic features. Viewed through the lens of the sublime, the receptive mechanisms of disaster cinema will be presented as a complex (and often fragile) intertwining of spectacle and narrative, the bodily and the textual, immanence and transcendence, sensibility and reason.

The Disaster Movie Genre and the Film Selection

Facing the task of outlining the defining features of the disaster film genre, one inevitably becomes involved with more general problems of film genre theory. Over the years, this theoretical discourse has put forth a wide range of criteria which ought to be decisive in regard to identifying genres.[47] In terms of film-immanent criteria, aspects of style, theme, plot, conflict, and character are among the most prominent. As for the production side of film, one can point out the producers' intentions as well as the historical, economic, and cultural ramifications of the production process, as all being potential criteria for genre definition. Finally, aspects of reception and the broader contextuality of film are of equal importance when it comes to genre defining features. This involves receptive intentions, film historical contexts, the audience's geo-cultural identity and its social class, the conventional and vernacular usage of genre, social, cultural, and ideological implications, and collective psychological archetypes.

At the same time, scholars have become increasingly aware of the general problematic of genre definition and, as a result, have realized the futility of attempting to freeze genre into a fixed structural order with definite types and categories.[48] Against film genre theory's commitment to terminological precision and unambiguousness stands the much older establishment of filmic genres, which was initiated by the film industry as a means of standardization. Before genre became a topic of theoretical interest in the late 1960s, its conventional use in everyday life and in the film industry had been practiced for decades.[49] It is this essentially pragmatic reality of genre, this vibrant *Genrebewußtsein* ('genre awareness') that eludes any final determination.[50] Accordingly, typical problems faced by genre theory regard, for example, the dynamic shifting and the blurriness of genre borders as

47 The frequently republished *Film Genre Reader* (edited by Barry Keith Grant) gives a good overview of this discourse's development (Grant).

48 Tudor; Schweinitz.

49 For a concise reflection of the beginnings of genre in film, see: Schweinitz.

50 Schweinitz.

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well as the discrepancy between the abstract body of films constituting a specific genre and the individual works that ought to represent it. The latter problem is rooted in the tautological configuration according to which the derivation of a genre from a specific film can only be executed under the premise of a given set of generic genre rules matching this film.[51]

What has just been summarized is the general theoretical framework that must be taken into consideration when investigating the defining features of the disaster genre. Thus, whenever I speak of the 'disaster movie (or film) genre' in this book, bear in mind that it is applied against this backdrop of the inherent ambiguity of film genre and its general theoretical complications.

It is worth investigating the origins of the terms 'disaster movie' and 'disaster film' as specific genre designations. According to Stephen Keane, the use of the term 'disaster film' can be traced back to the 1930s, a decade which witnessed the release of a multitude of films with disaster spectacles.[52] Yet, he does not substantiate this assertion by naming his sources. The results of my investigation on this matter deviate slightly from Keane. While it is true that the term 'disaster film' had been in public use even before the 1930s, it is problematic that those early 'disaster films' do not normally designate works of fiction. Instead, the term is used for film footage that captures factual disasters. For instance, the *Los Angeles Times* calls the cinematographic material of the tragic capsizing of the ship Eastland, which took place in 1915 on the Chicago River, a 'disaster film'.[53] Other early 'disaster films' cover the Japanese Kantō earthquake of 1923,[54] the crash of the Hindenburg Zeppelin of 1937 in New Jersey,[55] the Ohio River Flood (1937),[56] the Texas City Disaster of 1947,[57] and the Illinois mine blast from the same year.[58] The term also referred to films simulating disaster scenarios made by organizations like the Red Cross for educational and training purposes.[59]

Even though fiction films with disaster spectacles existed alongside the film coverage of factual disaster events, they were usually not explicitly

51 Tudor, 5.

52 Keane, 13.

53 Kingsley; 'Olympic Will Present Chicago Disaster Film'.

54 'Disaster Film Features New Pantages Bill'.

55 The ads of the screenings promoted the footage as 'disaster films'; see for instance: *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

56 'To Show Disaster Films'.

57 'Disaster Film To Be Shown At Nazarene Church'.

58 'New Firm to Make Mine Disaster Film'. – The film addressed in the article was released in 1947 as an episode of the anthropology TV-series *The Seven Lively Arts*.

59 One of the rare exceptions of this conventional use of the term can be found in an article by the Honolulu Star-Bulletin about the fiction coal mine disaster film *Through Fire to Fortune*, which was released in 1914 ('Coal Mine Disaster Films at Ye Liberty Theater').

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labeled as 'disaster films' (at least not within the public discourse). A broader terminological implementation, now mainly based on the term 'disaster movie', did not take place before the 1970s under the impression of a wave of films with catastrophic themes hitting the theaters.[60] In order to label popular films like *Airport* (1970), *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), or *The Towering Inferno* (1974), film critics started writing about 'disaster movies'.[61] Occasionally, they also used the term 'disaster drama'. The terminological shift from 'film' to 'movie' might not merely represent a case of Americanized English; it could also indicate a semantic change reflecting the rather low artistic value ascribed to these commercially produced Hollywood films. In this book I use both terms, 'disaster movie' and 'disaster film', with no semantic difference intended.

How has the disaster genre been defined by film scholars so far? Frank Eugene Beaver's *Dictionary of Film Terms* locates the genre's essence in its combination of melodramatic elements with 'extensive action sequences' exhibiting the 'efforts of a number of characters to escape a man-made or natural disaster'.[62] While John Sanders stresses narrative elements (a scenario disrupted by violent events, a hero figure, a diverse range of characters, a series of obstacles, etc.) as genre-defining features, Stephen Keane also addresses aspects of spectacle and film historical factors.[63] Charles P. Mitchell distinguishes between *Apocalyptic* and *Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*, defining the first as a depiction of 'a credible threat to the continuing existence of humankind as a species or the existence of Earth as a planet capable of supporting human life'.[64] A rather narrow definition is offered by Nick Roddick, giving some basic requirements:

> [the presented disaster] must be diegetically central; factually possible; largely indiscriminate (in that it could happen to all sections of the population [...]); unexpected [...]; all-encompassing, in the sense that potential victims cannot simply opt out of it; and finally, ahistorical, in the sense of not requiring a specific conjuncture of political and economic forces to bring it about.[65]

60 Feil, 2; Keane, 13; Hobsch, 11; Grigat, 20. – This assertion is also backed by the conclusions I have drawn from my own investigations on this matter.

61 This shift of genre terminology ('From "Meller" to "Disaster"') is reflected in: Feil, 5-9.

62 Beaver, 74f.

63 Sanders, 18-20; Keane, 1-6.

64 Mitchell, xi.

65 Roddick, 246.

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Contrary to Roddick, Maurice Yacowar's broad typological definition of the disaster genre bears the risk of including films that are intuitively ascribed to other genres. He distinguishes the following eight narrative categories: *Natural Attack*, *The Ship of Fools*, *The City Fails*, *The Monster*, *Survival*, *War*, *The Historical*, *The Comic*.[66] Finally, a more cautious attempt of definition is made by Manfred Hobsch in the introduction of his *Lexikon der Katastrophenfilme* ('Encyclopedia of Disaster Films'). By regarding the disaster movie as a subgenre which principally can merge with every other genre, he emphasizes its openness and hybridity.[67]

I do not intend to contribute another ultimate definition of the disaster movie genre. What I offer instead is a description of what I believe constitutes the receptive core of the films to be analyzed. *In all of them, destructive* (*natural*) *forces, which are threatening humankind with its far inferior existence, are staged as sublime cinematic attractions.* At the same time, I think that this definition would do justice to a lot of films beyond the works in question. However, given the outlined general problematic of film genre, I do not insist too firmly on the disaster movie's exclusiveness as a distinct and clearly demarcated genre. What is most crucial in this regard is that the selected films draw on and continue the visual history of sublime disasters, as they proceed in employing the receptive and general aesthetic characteristics of the sublime for their depictions of catastrophic events.

My selection of films is further confined by two criteria: first, the disasters presented in the films all originate from the phenomenological realm of the natural world. Thus, while all kinds of natural disasters and even giant monsters like Godzilla are included, catastrophic events of alien invasions, war scenarios, and cultural disasters like economic crises will not be dealt with in the analysis. The disasters I am interested in are strictly natural agents. This means that man-made and social disasters, as they are often discussed within the broader conception of disaster studies, will be neglected. The main reason for this first limitation is my historical trajectory itself, which takes it point of departure from a constellation of discourses and phenomena in the eighteenth century. Iconographically speaking, this trajectory is concerned with natural disaster motifs and deeply connected with various discourses, media and, phenomena, negotiating man's relation to nature. Therefore, while it is not out of the question that the disaster film genre may also include non-natural scenarios, the historical trajectory I am interested in does not.

66 Yacowar, 277-284.
67 Hobsch.

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Second, my selection is limited to US-American and European films. While there can be no doubt that also non-Western film industries have produced a variety of arresting disaster movies (one need only think of the Japanese and South Korean contributions to the genre), the fact remains that the sublime, viewed in its specific theoretical, cultural, and historical dimensions, is first and foremost a European and then later on an US-American phenomenon.[68] This is why films and other media from non-Western parts of the world are deliberately neglected (although not ignored) in this book. Apart from that, one also has to acknowledge the Hollywood studio system's role as being the dominant film industry since the early twentieth century. Its means and scales of production, global distribution, and market capitalization are decisive factors in terms of Hollywood's immense potential to depict spectacular (and costly) disaster scenes. Within the range of these self-given boundaries, the body of films to be analyzed encompasses works from the very beginning of the medium of cinema up until today.

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68 As for example: *Haeundae* ('Tidal Wave'), directed by Yoon Je-kyoon, 2009; *Tawo* ('The Tower'), directed by Kim Ji-hoon, 2012; the *Gojjira* franchise with almost 30 Japanese productions to date.

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