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The Imagination of Eco-disaster: Post-disaster Rebuilding in Asian Cinema

Kiu-wai Chu

“A time to tear down and a time to build”

Ecclesiastes 3.

“... the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination.”

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement*, 9.

Since the turn of the century, massive environmental disasters have taken place in various parts of Asia. The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; 2008 Sichuan earthquake; 2011 Tohoku earthquake and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster; Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in 2013, to mention a few, had each caused over tens of thousands of casualties, as well as long-term impacts to the affected areas. Numerous Asian films have since been produced to depict their occurrences and the aftermaths. One could argue that eco-disaster films have quickly emerged as a definitive genre in Asian cinema today. These films, however, are most often seen in the form of commercial action thriller, with the likes of *The Sinking of Japan* (*Nihon Chinbotsu*, Japan, 2006); *Tidal Waves* (*Haeundae*, South Korea, 2009) and *Deathwaves* (*2022 Tsunami*, Thailand, 2009). These Asian films modelling after their Hollywood counterparts like

Roland Emmerich's *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009), have a common tendency to reduce climate change and natural catastrophes into cinematic spectacles that are uprooted from real-life environmental contexts. What characterizes these formulaic spectacles are scenes after scenes of tsunami and earthquakes collapsing and engulfing cities on a global scale, while the protagonists, together with hundreds and thousands of desperate civilians, race against time for survival. (Fig 1.) It remains questionable how these cinematic spectacles could bring insightful reflections upon our relationships with the environment, and how representations of environmental catastrophes and the aftermaths help us to cope with post-disaster realities in today's world.

Fig 1: Eco-disaster as media spectacle. (*Tidal Waves* /Haeundae)

In “The Imagination of Disaster” (1965), Susan Sontag argues that disaster movies, as a form of fantasy, can “normalize what is psychologically unbearable, thereby inuring us to it. In one case, fantasy beautifies the world. In the other, it

neutralizes it.”(Sontag, 225) What Sontag sees as the “neutralizing effect” of disaster films, has in recent years been approached more scientifically in interdisciplinary ways by cognitive psychologists and humanities scholars, as reflected in Paul Slovic and Scott Slovic’s recent research on psychophysical numbing towards media information. As they argue, human sensitivity towards changes often decreases with the increase in numbers and data. In their book *Numbers and Nerves: Information, Evolution, and Meaning in a World of Data* (2015), they suggest,

“In some circumstances we fall prey to *compassion fade*, actually becoming less concerned and less prone to take appropriate action as the number of lives at stake increases. This desensitization or numbing occurs when we contemplate numerical information about cancer clusters, casualties of war, environmental change, and a host of other phenomena that crowd the headlines of today’s news publications.”(Slovic & Slovic, 2015: 7)

Slovic and Slovic’s research proves that living in an age of Big Data, human minds are so prone to being desensitized by the overloading numerical information. It has been said that “a single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.” In this present world saturated with media spectacles, the famous saying could perhaps be rephrased in the following way: “One death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a disaster movie.” To contemporary viewers who are constantly exposed to these spectacle-driven media texts, disaster movies are not much different from statistics with visual narratives. The “psychic

numbing” effect which the Slovics discuss (borrowing psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton’s term), does not apply merely to our perception of numbers, statistics, the big data. Instead, psychic numbing can also be seen when we are bombarded with similar images over and over again. Large-scale tsunami, hurricanes, earthquakes, and the exaggerated destruction scenes in recent disaster movies, are all turning into generic cinematic spectacles no matter how realistic and intense the scenes are represented.

As the Slovics warn us, “[e]ven more worrisome, perhaps, is the possibility that the desensitizing inundation of vaguely worrisome information will result in (or continue the ongoing trend of) a collective shutting down of compassion that will be difficult to overcome.”(Slovic & Slovic, 7) One thing that is important for eco-disaster films to achieve would therefore be to develop more engaging representations that could effectively trigger viewers’ empathy and compassion. In trying to avoid the “neutralizing effect” (Sontag) and the blurring of individual sufferings in collective big data, the Slovics suggest,

“sidestepping collective information and emphasizing individual examples, is a way to empower audiences as engaged citizens. Instead of numbing audiences with blizzards of nerveless information, skilled communicators can navigate accurately and vividly between large-scale phenomena and small-scale illustrations, between the remote and the proximate.” (Slovic & Slovic, 8)

In the context of eco-disaster films, we could translate their two major points as a need to focus on personal narratives (“emphasizing individual examples”); as well as to navigate between representation of eco-disasters (“the large-scale phenomena”, “the remote”) and individual stories (“small-scale illustration”, “the proximate”), in order to place personal narratives into broader socio-environmental contexts. This article examines several Southeast and East Asian films to demonstrate how eco-disaster films could offer more than just media spectacles and shock value, by re-focusing on individual human stories and reconstructions in post-disaster realities.

Brillante Mendoza’s post-disaster film *Taklub* (2015) closes with a biblical quote from *Ecclesiastes* 3, “A time to tear down and a time to build...” With the collapses of physical infrastructure as well as social order and values, catastrophes blur and break down multiple boundaries, which in a way signify the opening up of spaces for redefining and reconstructing social and cultural identities. With cities and villages being torn down all over Asia, this article questions: what exactly has been built or rebuilt, both physically and ideologically?

This article is divided in three sections, each focusing on fictional films that are produced based on an actual environmental catastrophe that took place in Asia since the millennium. From Thai films produced after the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami, such as Toranong Srichua’s *Deathwave/ 2022 Tsunami* (2009) and Aditya Assarat’s *Wonderful Town* (2007); to Feng Xiaogang’s *Aftershock* (2010) which depicts the two great earthquakes in China in 1976 and 2008, this article argues that global environmental crises in this new era of Anthropocene offer

filmmakers an opportunity to reimagine, reconstruct and redefine sense of identity, often in ways that are more reflexive of current social and political agenda, than about the environmental crises and the post-disaster realities in Asia. Focusing on Brillante Mendoza's *Taklub/Trap* (2015), a docudrama that represents the devastating reality in the Philippines after the 2013 Supertyphoon Haiyan/Yolanda, this article suggests that post-disaster realism, which reconfigures our way in perceiving time and temporality of eco-disaster, enables us to see the often neglected prolonged impacts and consequences.

This article does not intend to compare and comment on particular countries' efforts in their post-disaster reconstructions based on the analysis of selected films, nor will it engage in the debate between nationalism and cosmopolitanism in post-disaster cultural identity constructions. Instead, it wishes to call for closer examination in how cultural ideologies are shaping current eco-disaster narratives in Asian cinema. As Amitav Ghosh rightly puts it in *The Great Derangement* (2016), "the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination." (Ghosh, 9) I would expand the saying to suggest that not climate crisis but all environmental crises in general, reflect, and are themselves, crisis of culture. To a great extent, eco-disaster narratives in Asian cinema reflect identity crisis of Asian nations in the present world, just as much as it is about ecological crisis. Lastly, this article cautions of a reductive eco-disaster cinema that fixates in celebratory narratives of national and cultural rebuilding, instead of reflecting the persisting sociopolitical and environmental problems and injustice in the post-disaster realities in Asia today.

2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami: Cosmopolitan Imaginary and the Shared Sense of Catastrophe

Following the Indian Ocean Earthquake and Tsunami in 2004, a good number of films and series were produced internationally to depict the destructions in affected regions,¹ with particular focus on Indonesia and Southern Thailand which suffered the most severe damages in Southeast Asia. These films range from Hollywood productions *Hereafter* (dir. Clint Eastwood, U.S.A., 2010) and *The Impossible* (dir. J.A. Bayona, Spain, 2012); miniseries *Tsunami: The Aftermath* (dir. Bharay Nalluri, U.S.A. and England, 2006), Tamil romance drama *Kayal* (Prabhu Solomon, India, 2014) to Thai disaster action movie *Deathwave* (a.k.a. *2022 Tsunami*, dir. Toranong Srichua, Thailand, 2009) and arthouse drama *Wonderful Town* (dir. Aditya Assarat, Thailand, 2007).

Environmental disasters do not differentiate among nations, and pay no attention to geopolitical and cultural boundaries, thus placing all countries at risk. Coining the term “risk society”, Ulrich Beck suggests,

“*risk-sharing* or a ‘*socialization of risk*’ (Elkins, 1995) can, in my view, become a powerful basis of community, one which has both territorial and non-territorial aspects. [...] [Risk may be seen] as a positive phenomenon too, when it involves the

¹ The earthquake and tsunami affected various parts of Southeast and South Asia, including countries such as Indonesia, Thailand, Myanmar, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, as well as Maldives, Somalia and elsewhere on the rim of the Indian Ocean.

sharing of risks without borders. Post-national communities could thus be constructed and reconstructed as communities of risk.”(Beck, 1999:16)

Beck envisions a “world risk community” that could encourage transnational efforts in sharing the burdens and responsibilities of global environmental crisis, for developing more powerful cosmopolitan movements in the near future. Such cosmopolitan vision is also shared by scholars whose methodologies emphasize the similarities, resemblances and shared experiences among different communities, when doing transnational, comparative ecocritical studies. Adopting a comparative approach to assess a range of literary works from East Asian countries, Karen Thornber’s analysis stresses universality and commonalities among different nations, based on the shared, collective sense of environmental issues:

“Just as significant, focus on cultural specificity, much less cultural essentialism, also can obscure the even more important resemblances among disparate societies, resemblances that allow us to understand more deeply our common humanity, and in particular the fundamental similarities of contacts between people and environments, throughout time and space, in life as well as in literature.”(Thornber, 95)

In a similar line, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s broadly cited essay on the Anthropocene, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, concludes in the following way:

“climate change poses for us a question of a human collectivity, and us, pointing to a figure of the universal that escapes our capacity to experience the world. It is more like a universal that arises from a *shared sense of a catastrophe*.”² (Chakrabarty, 2009:16)

By focusing on risk-sharing (Beck); common humanity reflected upon human-environment relationships across different countries (Thornber); and the universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe (Chakrabarty), these scholars shows the importance of taking global environmental crises and people’s similar experience of them as a way to construct a collective identity within a cosmopolitan framework. However, the article attempts to go further and ask, in what way do real-life eco-disasters bring positive development to the affected regions towards the construction of a cosmopolitan society? Can eco-disaster films go beyond the creation of cosmopolitan imaginaries that seems to contribute little to Asia’s post-disaster rebuilding? On that note, we will turn to a few eco-disaster films produced in post-tsunami Thailand, to examine how post-disaster cosmopolitan identities are imagined in cinematic terms.

In 2009, Thailand has responded to the emerging disaster action genre with the modest budget *Deathwave*. The film tells the story of the near future, 18 years after the 2004 Indian Ocean catastrophe, when Thailand is once again faced with another even larger tsunami. Tribhop, the capable and heroic Prime

² Emphasis (in Italic) by author.

Minister is determined to do whatever it takes to protect and save his country from another peril. He lectures world leaders on the urgency of global environmental crisis, and takes the lead to renew the Kyoto Protocol with a new international treaty (the “Bangkok Protocol”). Throughout the film, we see constant updates of news footages and reports on global eco-disasters taking part all around the world: the massive volcanic eruptions in the Philippines and Indonesia; the United States losing 25% of its population to hurricanes; and various parts of Europe and Russia being buried by severe snowstorms. As Tribhop reminds us in one of his many preachy lines, “We are on the same planet as everybody else. If the world ends, we are done too.” Towards the end, the film even turns him into an action hero who joins the rescue team to save school children in collapsing buildings. *Deathwave* closes with a shot of Prime Minister Tribhop standing by all the survivors in the post-disaster ruins. The shot zooms out gradually from the ruins to reveal the map of Thailand, then the whole of Asia, and eventually the “Blue Marble” shot of the earth from space, the “symbol of a new mythology that celebrated our common humanity.” (Elverskog, 963) With the very clear idea of a globally shared sense of catastrophe, and the huge efforts made by the protagonists to build a world risk community, *Deathwave* reflects a cosmopolitan imaginary of post-disaster Thailand that is exemplified largely by narrative cliché based on an ungrounded global connectedness.

Such cosmopolitan imaginary did not only appear in action thrillers. In Aditya Assarat’s slow paced, arthouse drama *Wonderful Town* (2007), we too are able to see post-tsunami Thailand with aestheticized, cosmopolitan outlooks that are

almost free from recognizable cultural traits. *Wonderful Town* focuses on a romance in a post-disaster town in Southern Thailand. The quiet, ghostly town of Takua Pa was a humble tourist spot in Southern Thailand, prior to the severe damages caused by the tsunami two years back. Ton, an architect from Bangkok, comes to the small town to supervise the rebuilding of the area, and gradually falls in love with the young and pretty owner of a rundown hotel, Na. From the architect – a cosmopolitan outsider's point of view, *Wonderful Town* leads viewers to stroll along the post-disaster natural landscapes and the seemingly peaceful, scarcely populated town, depicted throughout the film in contemplative long takes. (Fig. 2) Having studied and stayed in the United States for over a decade, Aditya Assarat admitted that when he first went back to Thailand, it was "like going to a foreign country," and Thailand in his films are also "seen through some kind of foreign eye." ("Interview with the director", Press Kit for *Wonderful Town*.) Positioning itself as an arthouse film for the international film festival circuit (evident in it being selected for international film festivals including Pusan, Rotterdam, and Berlinale, etc.), the slow-paced, dreamlike atmosphere of *Wonderful Town* invites a detached tourist gaze, or what could be seen as a cosmopolitanized gaze, towards the highly aestheticized and culturally diluted post-tsunami environment in Southern Thailand. By placing the emphasis on depicting Ton and Na's repressed emotions and growing affection for each other, the universal theme of romantic love, the film has largely ignored the actual hardship, trauma and daily problems experienced more generally by the people who survived the disaster, thus sustaining a romanticized cosmopolitan imaginary of post-tsunami Thailand. (Fig. 3)

Fig 2. The peaceful, ghostly Takua Pa after the tsunami. (*Wonderful Town*)

Fig 3. Ton and Na's post-disaster romance. (*Wonderful Town*)

Despite not being an eco-disaster film, Pen-ek Ratanareong's arthouse crime thriller *Invisible Waves* (2006) includes a segment in an old and rundown hotel

in post-tsunami Phuket. Like *Wonderful Town*, the film makes culturally blurred liminal spaces such as hotel rooms and cruise ship interiors as the story's major settings, where traces of anything Thai can hardly be seen. In *Invisible Waves*, an obvious intertextual reference is made to *The Shining*, where a framed picture of Phuket's beautiful beach scenery is shown in a hotel room, but with the word "redrum" scribbled on it,³ thus imposing a haunting cosmopolitan imaginary to the post-disaster environment.

Despite the cultural diversity among Southeast Asian countries, and the different types of sociopolitical problems they have been encountering, post-disaster films based upon the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami have turned eco-disaster into a cultural imagery for depicting shared experience that unite different nations and classes. These internationally-marketed films make use of the disaster narratives to reinvent cosmopolitan images that are often aestheticized and culturally blurred, yet offer an imagination of nation re-positioning after the catastrophic destructions.

Chinese Earthquakes of 1976 and 2008: Blockbuster Propaganda and Nation Rebuilding

Examples from the previous section have shown that simply by focusing on the universality and shared experience among different nations, we face with the danger of turning regional environmental problems into de-contextualized

³ "Murder" spelled backward, which is a plot device originated from Stephen King's *The Shining* (1977) and Stanley Kubrick's 1980 film adaptation of the same title.

global spectacles, thus distancing us from better understanding of environmental problems faced by specific regions/ countries. On the other hand, Feng Xiaogang's state-approved, big budget Chinese blockbuster *Aftershock* (唐山大地震, China, 2010) presents far more nationally-rooted, culturally-specific perspectives in its representation of eco-disasters, but often to the extent of promoting nationalistic agenda which shifts the focus away from insightful environmental reflections.

Aftershock is produced in memory of one of the deadliest natural catastrophe in modern Chinese history, the Tangshan earthquake, which took over 240 thousand peoples' lives in 1976. The film places its focus on one family, whose story encompasses over three decades between two deadly earthquakes in China. During the Tangshan Earthquake, Fang Daqiang was killed while trying to save his children, while his wife Yuanni and son Fang Da made it out alive. Blaming herself for failing to save their daughter Fang Deng, and believing that she has been killed, Yuanni chooses to live a life in remorse. Little did she know that Deng was rescued from the rubble, and was later adopted and raised by a kind hearted couple out of town.

The trauma will haunt the Fangs for the next thirty years, until another disaster brings them back together. Three decades passed, Da has his own travel agency business, while Deng has migrated to Vancouver with her husband and daughter. In 2008, when they learn about the Sichuan Earthquake from the news, the Fang siblings instantly feel the urge to join the voluntary rescue team, to prevent others from suffering the same tragic experience they have been

through. Deng and Da arrive in Sichuan, and in the process of aiding the rescue, the twin siblings found each other. The film ends with Deng coming home to her mother, and the family of three reconcile and reunite after 32 years of separation.

Being a family melodrama that is marketed as a blockbuster disaster epic, *Aftershock* broke domestic box office record in 2010 by successfully grossing over RMB 500 million (with a budget of 130 million). At the same time, *Aftershock* is also a “main melody” (*zhuxuanlü*), propaganda film with a clear political agenda. In 2007, the Tangshan Municipal government decided to re-brand the city and clear away its reputation as a dirty and unsophisticated heavy industrial city in Northern China. They invited renowned film director Feng Xiaogang to direct the film that tells a moving story of an ordinary family which experienced the 1976 earthquake, and live to witness the city’s rebuilding and recovery from mid 1970s to 2008. The narrative of the film is chronologically structured in four parts, with the years 1976, 1986, 1995 and 2008 indicating the changes and development of Tangshan in a 32-year timeframe.

In order to recreate an aura of historical authenticity, a website was set up by *Aftershock*’s production team to call for public donations of old household goods and appliances, clothing and other material artifacts from the period between 1970s to early 1990s, for use as props for the film’s production. In doing so, the film romanticizes environmental disasters and post-disaster human lives by “subtly displac[ing] the traumatic memory of the catastrophe with a collective warm nostalgia for the past”(Li, 136-7), as a way in boosting national sentiments.

There is also a stark contrast between the portrayals of the two earthquakes. With CG effects that resemble conventional Hollywood disaster epics, *Aftershock*'s 9-minute sequence of the Tangshan earthquake has costed about one third of the film's total budget. (Li, 135) With intense shots of collapsing buildings and countless deaths, the complete destruction of the city is depicted in highly visual ways, highlighting the extreme horror and grief of the incident. The sequence ends with an establishing long shot overlooking Tangshan city, which is now nothing but a vast landscape of ruins. (Fig 4) On the contrary, the Sichuan Earthquake of 2008 has been depicted in a much smaller and intimate scope, and in a light-handed manner. We do not see establishing shots of the city, nor do we see large scale building collapses or massive deaths, thus giving us little sense of how large the impacted area could be. Instead, the focus of the earthquake sequence is shifted to Deng and Da's participation in the Tangshan Rescue Team. The high efficiency and professionalism of the team is also highlighted to juxtapose with the disorganized and inadequate effort of the rescue team back in 1976, which also led to Deng's three decades of separation with her family. Such bold contrast glorifies the present Chinese authority's prompt actions and cross-provincial cooperation that reduce the casualties to a minimum, and implies how far the country has advanced in three decades time. (Figs 5 & 6)

Fig 4: Post-disaster ruins in Tangshan, 1976. (*Aftershock*)

Fig 5. Massive deaths in Tangshan, 1976. (*Aftershock*)

Fig 6. The efficient and professional Tangshan Rescue Team in Sichuan, 2008. (*Aftershock*)

The twin siblings Deng and Da's coming-of-age enables us to see eco-disasters in *Aftershock* as a means towards reimagining and redefining national identity, in both nationalistic and cosmopolitan ways. When the Tangshan Earthquake separated Deng from her parents and brother, it also ended her life as a humble peasant girl. She is adopted by a loving couple who happens to be respected officers in the People's Liberation Army. Unlike her brother Da, Deng is therefore raised in a privileged literate family and receives proper college education. Meanwhile, Da lives a relatively hard and underprivileged life in Tangshan, but stays optimistic and works hard nonetheless. Although the twin siblings both encounter problems of their own growing up under different social environments, by the year of 2008, they both obtain some degree of success and stability in life. Deng lives a peaceful middle class life in Vancouver with her caring husband (a Caucasian lawyer) and teenage daughter. For Deng,

it is a cosmopolitan dream comes true for a girl with humble Chinese origin. Da, on the other hand, owns an expanding travel agency in Hangzhou, financially supporting his family and his aging mother in Tangshan. He, too, represents another kind of success whose hard work pays off and achieves higher social status and wealth locally in China.

The earthquake that destroyed Deng and Da's family and ended their happy childhood, but eventually offers each of them a turning point in life, and shapes them into the persons they become – Deng, a well-educated cosmopolite in the West; and Da, an emerging middle class in China. When the two of them reunite to rescue victims in the Sichuan earthquake in 2008, the two sets of ideologies and values they embody are also brought together to empower the nation facing a new crisis. Cosmopolitanism and localism are thus brought together to serve the larger goal of Chinese nationalism. (Figs. 7 & 8)

Aftershock is both a commercial success and an effective propaganda film that facilitates the reshaping of national identity. However, by turning the representations of eco-disasters into cultural imaginations of national rebuilding, the film falls short in offering more critical reflection on the broader sociopolitical, cultural and environmental consequences of the two earthquakes. Corrado Neri rightly points out some important questions which are not explored in the film: "What happened to the school that fell down killing hundreds while government buildings are still standing? Is there something that government and politicians could do, if not to prevent a natural catastrophe, at least to minimize its disasters?" (Neri, 133) In Du Haibin's *1428* (2009) and Wang Libo's

Buried (Yanmai, 2009), two independent documentary films that explore the facts and stories behind the Sichuan Earthquake, it is suggested that the eco-disaster was in a huge extent human-induced, caused by both infrastructural problems and corruptions of government officials and land developers. However, being a state-funded, commercial blockbuster film, such political critiques are completely absent from Feng Xiaogang's *Aftershock*.

Aftershock's promotional tagline "23 Seconds, 32 Years" highlights the fact that the earthquake may have taken place in a very short period of time, but its impacts have lasted for three whole decades. However, considering the emphasis the film places on the earthquake's long term impacts, little effort has been made to show the exact role the earthquake has played in shaping the characters' lives over the 32 years; nor did it suggest any actual correlation between the disaster and the development of the region. With a heartwarming reunion of the Fang family, *Aftershock* ends on a note that all things bad are finally over, and the environmental disasters are now closed cases. The prolonged environmental and social impacts brought by the earthquakes to Tangshan and Sichuan in reality, is beyond the interest or concern of the film.

Fig 7: Deng determines to return to China to assist the earthquake rescue in Sichuan.

(*Aftershock*)

Fig 8: A heartwarming family reunion. (*Aftershock*)

**2013 Typhoon Haiyan:
Post-disaster Realism and the Changing Perspectives
towards Eco-disaster**

In contrast to the spirit-lifting and national-sentiment-boosting portrayal of post-disaster rebuilding in *Aftershock*; and the detached, decontextualized and aestheticized depictions of post-disaster environments in *Wonderful Town* and *Invisible Waves*, Brillante Ma Mendoza's docudrama *Taklub* (*Trap*, The Philippines, 2015) reflects a less often seen post-disaster realism that offers viewers new perspectives towards eco-disasters in the world today. It urges us to see eco-disaster as an unending, ongoing condition, and confront us with the unresolved problems and perpetual suffering of people and the environment in post-disaster realities of today.

From an ecocritical perspective, I wish to argue that Mendoza's post-disaster realism enables us to perceive the eco-disaster in two specific ways: first, to see catastrophe as an ongoing process, a catastrophic condition; with impacts that continue to affect and threaten the humans and the environment in the world today. Secondly, it stresses that we should continue to cultivate "a shared sense of catastrophe", which, however, should not be built upon some unrealistic cultural imaginations of global interconnectedness and disintegration of social stratifications and human inequalities in post-disaster realities. Instead, we should be constantly reminded that different countries in the world are not experiencing the eco-disasters on the same level of severity, nor do they have the same capacity to recover from the destructions.

In November 2013, the Philippines was hit by Typhoon Haiyan (also known as Super Typhoon Yolanda), the strongest typhoon on record in Filipino history. In

the city of Tacloban alone, over 10,000 people were killed, and many of the 220,000 population were made homeless.⁴ Filmed shortly after the disaster, Brillante Ma Mendoza's docudrama *Taklub* (*Trap*, 2015) focuses on four characters to reflect how residents of Tacloban struggle to live and rebuild their home, their faith in God, their hope for the future, and to find purpose in life. Bebeth is a middle-aged divorcee whose desperate effort to find out about her three missing children's status proves futile. Without any sign that they could have survived the disaster yet unable to confirm their deaths has placed her in a perpetual unsettling state. Erwin and his siblings, who are made orphans by the typhoon, encounter numerous obstacles in trying to obtain compensation from the government. Their attempt to rebuild their house by the sea also appears more complicated than they thought. Larry, who lost his wife in the typhoon, tries to get on with life by renewing his faith in God, only to be challenged again and again by more disasters, accidents and personal losses. Renato, whose family was burnt to death in a fire accident in the camp shelter, tries to get himself drown by sailing to the sea on every stormy night. As the film's title "taklub" (literally meaning "trap") fittingly describes them, the characters are both physically trapped in the devastating post-disaster situations; and psychologically trapped by grief, anxiety, frustration and uncertainty. By the end of the film, none of the protagonists really get anything rebuilt or their personal goals fulfilled.

Being a key figure in the Filipino independent film movement, Brillante

⁴ "Tacloban: City at the centre of the storm", BBC News Asia. 21 Nov, 2013.

<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-24891456>

Mendoza's films are characterized by "a 21st century appropriation of Italian neorealist aesthetics and the socio-political themes previously explored by [Lino] Brocka."⁵ Despite being a fictional film, placing his actors in actual locations obliterated by the typhoon and blending them in with the real residents and victims in Tacloban, Mendoza has rooted his characters and their stories deeply in the post-Haiyan reality. (Figs 9 & 10)

Fig 9: Post-disaster ruin in Tacloban. (*Taklub*)

⁵ Valerio, Elvin Amerigo. "An Interview with Brillante Mendoza, Part 1", ASEF Culture260, 30 Nov, 2011. <http://culture360.asef.org/film/an-interview-with-brillante-mendoza-part-1/>

Fig 10: Frequent floods in Tacloban. (*Taklub*)

Unlike films discussed in previous sections, *Taklub* resists placing the emphasis in post-disaster rebuilding of national and cultural identities; or conveying any kind of optimistic and wishful cultural imaginations. Instead, the film reminds us of the difficulties with life in post-disaster realities, and the persisting risks people face on daily basis.

As media theorist Steve Shaviro suggests, for us today, a crisis is no longer just “a sudden rupture, a sharp and immediate moment of reckoning.” Instead, it has increasingly “become a chronic and seemingly permanent condition. We live, oxymoronically, in a state of perpetual, but never resolved, convulsion and contradiction.”(Shaviro, 9) Instead of seeing eco-disasters as particular instants or abrupt incidents of destruction, *Taklub* shows us how a realist post-disaster film may facilitate in reconfiguring the way viewers perceive the temporality of eco-disasters. Filmed one year after Typhoon Haiyan’s destructions, *Taklub*

portrays a country that is in no way gaining good and speedy recovery. There are regular rainstorms and threats of typhoon attacks; landslides and fire accidents in the shelter tents (which also take away Larry and Renato's loved ones); and with the reminders Bebeth gets from other residents about the area's security problems, we are constantly reminded that the characters and ordinary people in post-disaster Tacloban are still living in an ongoing state of crisis that they are unable to escape from. *Taklub's* post-disaster realism depicts the instants of occurrence of an earthquake or a hurricane as merely the beginning of a "catastrophic condition," in which long term and multiple impacts are felt continuously, and reflected in the representations of "post-disaster" everyday life conditions.

In 1980s, Ulrich Beck famously proposes that in the world of global environmental crisis, "risk" has turned into "a major force of political mobilization, often replacing references to, for example, inequalities associated with class, race and gender." (Beck, 4) Beck thus suggests risks are reaching across existing stratifications and divisions to create a new collective social structure on a global level. As summed up in one of his most cited aphorisms, "Poverty is hierarchical, smog is democratic," (Beck, *Risikogesellschaft*, trans. in Heise 2008:146) in which the same can be said about eco-disasters.

In a similar way, Chakrabarty's proposal for a new understanding of "a universal that arises from a shared sense of catastrophe" (2009:16), also points to the growing awareness of human collectivity and global connectedness in an ecological sense. In one way or another, Asian eco-disaster films discussed in

this article have all depicted what Beck and Chakrabarty would see as a “shared sense of risk and catastrophe.” However, it is also important to consider what the basis of such may be, in order to avoid it being reduced to unrealistic cosmopolitan imaginaries. In *Aftershock*, the siblings who survived Tangshan Earthquake 32 years ago, are reunited in their cross-provincial rescue of victims in the 2008 earthquake in Sichuan. While the two earthquakes have brought Chinese people of different regions together, and is conveying a trans-regional, collective sense of risk and catastrophe, it is by and large constructed as means for national building. On the other hand, in *Wonderful Town* and *Invisible Waves*, the representations of a shared sense of catastrophe is generally built upon an imagined cosmopolitan identity, which is at times aestheticized, decontextualized and uprooted from the post-disaster reality of Thailand. In both cases, there is the risk of erasing and disregarding existing problems in post-disaster realities.

Taklub, too, stresses the universality of eco-disaster experience in the present world. As director Mendoza suggests, “[t]hese existential stories of coping-up and moving-on, of people who suffered a detrimental loss and trying to get-by are universal. It happens, or at least happened, to all of us.”⁶ However, what distinguishes it from the abovementioned films lies in its realism that goes beyond spirit-lifting positivism and decontextualized aestheticization of post-disaster conditions. One of the scenes in *Taklub* was filmed during an actual rice relief distribution event in Tacloban organized by a Taiwanese Buddhist

⁶ “Taklub: A Film by Brillante Ma Mendoza” (Press Book)

https://www.hesge.ch/head/sites/default/files/documents/pressbook_taklub_0.pdf

foundation, in which we see Bebeth (played by actress Nora Aunor) blends into the crowd of real Haiyan victims to queue for free rice. (Figs. 11 & 12) The semi-documentary footage of a real-life transnational event reflects the cosmopolitan responsibilities of privileged countries and the marginalization and difficulties faced by the underprivileged and the poor in post-disaster realities. It makes visible the environmental and social inequalities, and promotes a realistic vision of eco-cosmopolitanism that unites people across the world without erasing the existing cultural and political gaps and differences.

However, by avoiding an unrealistic cosmopolitan imagination of global interconnectedness, it keeps us aware of the environmental injustice and inequalities in the present world, and acknowledges the shared sense of risk and catastrophe without fantasizing a disintegration of class divide or social stratification in the world.

Fig 11: Transnational rice relief distribution event. *Taklub*

Fig 12: Bebeth queues for rice relief. *Taklub*

Conclusion: Rebuilding under Global Catastrophic Conditions

Eco-disaster cinema has emerged as a significant Asian film genre since the beginning of the century. This article begins by pointing out the psychophysical numbing effect of spectacle-driven disaster movies, to argue that an eco-disaster cinema that places emphasis on individual human narratives is still needed, at a time when ecocentric, biocentric and non-anthropocentric film narratives are celebrated in ecocinema studies.⁷ To a certain extent, though,

⁷ For further discussion and debates on anthropocentric and ecocentric cinema, see Paula Willoquet-Maricondi's "Shifting Paradigms: From Environmentalist Films to Ecocinema" in *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film* (2010); Adrian Ivakhiv's "Green Film Criticism and Its Futures." *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 15.2 (Summer 2008): 1–28; and Ivakhiv's "An Ecophilosophy of the Moving Image: Cinema as Anthrobiogeomorphic Machine" in *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (2013).

eco-film critics' skepticism towards anthropocentric film narratives is valid. Representing the shared sense of catastrophe in a world risk community (Beck), recent Asian films have revealed a great tendency to turn eco-disasters into aesthetic or political expressions to satisfy cultural imaginations of cosmopolitan longing and nation rebuilding. As a result, existing problems in post-disaster realities are often downplayed or neglected.

Climate change and extreme weathers have turned our planet into one with an un-ending catastrophic condition, in which sociocultural, political, financial and environmental crises can no longer be considered separately. Building on Ghosh's words that climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, this article agrees with the notion in seeing environmental crises represented in films, as reflections of crisis of culture. From recent Asian eco-disaster films, we see a common tendency in imagining a rebuilding of cultural or national identity, as a way to lessen the trauma of post-disaster devastations. It should be noted, however, that such ungrounded cultural imaginations are far from adequate as measures required for alleviating concrete issues faced in post-disaster realities. While the promoting of such imaginings may go some way in reducing the traumatic impacts, it has the adverse effect of concealing physical real-world problems. As Ghosh suggests, we are living at "a time when most forms of art and literature were drawn into the modes of concealment that prevented people from recognizing the realities of their plight". (Ghosh, 11) This article therefore demands a realist eco-disaster cinema that does not rely on ungrounded positivism and cultural imaginations; but one that is ready to confront us with the unresolved sociocultural and environmental consequences

in post-disaster realities, or more precisely, realities in global catastrophic conditions, to put an end to denial of our shared responsibilities as global environmental citizens or eco-cosmopolites. That could take us forward towards rebuilding a more hopeful future.

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Bio

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