

Article

The Appearance and Resonance of Apocalyptic Archetypes in Contemporary Disaster Films

Chi-Ying Yu

Department of Arts and Design, National Tsing Hua University, Hsinchu City 30014, Taiwan;
chiying.yu@mx.nthu.edu.tw

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has roused the apocalyptic fear that was foreseen in religious prophecies. This research will focus on the post-9/11 and pre-COVID-19 disaster films, in an attempt to understand the representation and pre-presentation of the collective disaster psychology. Aligned with Jungian film studies, this essay regards films as a convergence of generations' collective unconscious. Apocalypse may as well be considered the psychic archetypes that emerge in our civilization in the name of religion. This essay aims to construe the ways that apocalyptic archetypes appear and are elaborated in contemporary films, in hope of recognizing the new apocalyptic aesthetics formed in the interval between the two disastrous events. Consistent with the meaning in classic doomsday narratives, the archetypal symbols in these films are found to have carried a dual connotation of destruction and rebirth. Through empirical cinematographic style, these archetypal images are revealed in an immersive way. Disaster films from this time place emphasis on death itself, fiercely protesting against the stagnation of life, and in turn triggering a transcendental transformation of the psyche. Unlike those in the late 1990s, viewing the doomsday crisis through the lens of spectacularity, disaster in these films is seen as a state of body and mind, and death a thought-provoking life experience.



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1. Introduction

Since the end of 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in more than 152 million cases of the virus, causing over 3.2 million deaths (Dong et al. 2020). Though the COVID-19 situation in the U.S. seems to be more under control, the situation may worsen at any time, for which Rochelle Walensky, the director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, expresses her concern by still describing the pandemic as an “impending doom” (as cited in Maxouris and Yan 2021). Gerald Flurry, an Evangelist pastor, believes that the pandemic is clearly in line with the description in The Book of Revelation: “the epidemic, disguised as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, will wipe out a quarter of the planet’s population” (as cited in Dein 2021). The association between the pandemic and the prophecy is prevalent. Stephen Moore (2020) typed in “COVID-19 Book of Revelation” last May and found a surprising 40 million results. Apparently, the apocalyptic fear foretold in religion and ancient prophecies has become manifest in the midst of the pandemic.

In face of the disaster, the apocalyptic metaphor is arousing the public’s insecurity, but when the notion of apocalypse is reflected by or even practiced as an aesthetic expression, what meanings, emotions, and psychic undercurrents does it evoke? Apocalypse, a term derived from Judaism, bears the weight of the history, doctrine, and worldview of the religion: it emphasizes the end of time and the salvation by the almighty God (Collins 2014, 2016). As time passed and civilization developed, however, the term gradually became a synonym for doomsday (DiTommaso 2014, p. 473). In its secularization, the term can refer to any large-scale catastrophic events or cultural works related to the subject.

DiTommaso (2014) characterizes the contemporary obsession with the apocalyptic with the phrase “apocalyptic turn”. In other words, apocalypticism is not a unique notion that appeared only in Christianity. It is more of a cultural phenomenon that is of a global scale, and the notion may be altered in a culturally diverse context. In this essay, the use of the term “apocalypse” does not ignore or confine itself to the Biblical origin. Disaster cinema, an apt vehicle for interpreting and understanding apocalypse, is the subject of this study. More specifically, this essay looks at the disaster films released so far in this century to understand what kind of worldview is gaining popularity. These films, created in the interval between the attacks of 11 September 2001, and the COVID-19 pandemic, are referred to as post-9/11 films since they are produced after that attack. However, looking back from the midst of the pandemic, it would also be reasonable to refer to these films as pre-COVID-19 films. The analysis in this essay aims to help recognize the representation and the pre-representation of the collective disaster psychology and define the apocalyptic aesthetics formed between those two large-scale catastrophes.

Keane (2001) holds that the disaster film is not a genre with a fixed structure, but disaster is a topic that is repeatedly used and appears in a cycle. As a result, the films are often seen as a reflection of the lurking social crises of the times from which they are made. Research tends to explore the meanings representative of the times that inspire the production of these films. In the 1970s, for instance, man-made disasters were repeatedly seen on the screen when American society was facing both domestic and diplomatic hardships. This, according to Hanson (2006, pp. 128–31), can be seen as the first wave of disaster films. The second wave of disaster films started in the 1990s, owing to the rising environmental awareness and the millennial fever (Keane 2001). Toward the 21st century, however, the approach in disaster films has gradually become to portraying disasters as they are, these films have either become the real-time narrative of the disaster events or the reliving in the authenticity of the past disasters: the film *World Trade Center* (2006) that relives the terrorist attacks of September 11, or the film *Lo Impossibile* (2012), an adaptation from the disastrous event of the South Asian tsunami, just to name a few. The film’s simulation of reality and its rapid spreading has blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, extending the past into the present and vice versa.

Through sociological interpretation, the significance of our times and the postmodern characteristics of the visual culture imbued in the disaster films can be shown, meaning that disaster films are closely related to or significantly representative of the contemporary world. However, in an even more disastrous contemporary society, a new interpretative perspective is called for. As apocalyptic stories are common in ancient culture and religion, it is perhaps reasonable to assume that the disaster films can be seen as displaying a certain collectiveness and commonality of humankind. This research, adopting the perspective from Jungian film studies, regards film as a carrier and a convergence of generations’ collective unconscious. Through Jungian analytical psychology, the films are analyzed and deconstructed in an attempt to discover the shadowy psychical meanings (Hauke and Alister 2001, pp. 1–13).

The collective unconscious is a core concept of Jungian theory, and it refers to ancient and heritable psychic contents. Archetypes, on the other hand, are the psychic elements within the collective unconscious. They are not likely to be directly received or comprehended by contemporary minds (Henderson 1968, pp. 113–84). Archetypes can generate images, so, in addition to their appearance in dreams, they are often represented in symbolic forms—most often in primitive materials such as myths, fairy tales, and legends (Jung 1979). Davies et al. (1982) consider the form of film as a pure and instinctive expression of Jung’s collective unconscious, as film is a mixture of reality and fantasy, a certain way of weaving in the conscious with the unconscious. Preston (1996) states that films are contemporary myths, they are the projection of the dream of the public as a whole, and they shape the consciousness and desire people have. Film critics Janice Rushing and Frentz (1995) suggest earlier than Preston that if films are the dream of people, then the

role of the critics is more of a psychoanalyst, interpreting the unconscious content, in quest of the yet-to-be-discovered cultural contents.

Based on the Jungian theory of the archetypes, this research looks into the disaster films released up to the present from the beginning of this century, in an attempt to understand how apocalyptic archetypes were elaborated in the contemporary films, aiming to figure out whether a new apocalyptic aesthetics were formed in this post-9/11 and pre-COVID-19 period, and within and underneath the period what collective values are at work globally. In the second section, the essay delves into religious literature and ancient stories for apocalyptic narratives and images, trying to derive commonalities about the destiny of humankind and the workings of the universe from these apocalyptic contents. In the third section, the essay will analyze the constantly used images symbolic of the Jungian archetypes in the apocalyptic narratives for the meanings of each image and for the mental outlook formed through the representation of these images. In the fourth section, the focus will be on the relation between the shooting style and audience experience, further exploring the psychological effect of those images on the viewers. In the fifth section, based on the analysis of the previous two sections, the essay attempts to show that perhaps underlying the disaster films is a collective self-destructive inclination shared among the contemporaries, and it moves on to suggest plausible explanations for this. Based upon arguments established through the essay, in the final section, the psychological and psychical meanings of the disaster films will be summarized in the hope to reflect on the current pandemic.

2. The Classic Apocalyptic Narratives and Images in Religion and Prophecy

Apocalypse is the most widely known and studied religious concept connoting the ultimate destiny of mankind. It is the cultural context that most Hollywood-made disaster films are rooted in. On the one hand, apocalypse is regarded as prophecy from the Bible, and on the other hand, it can be seen as a literary genre that emerged from the Hellenistic period (Collins 2016). The thought of apocalypse emerged at the time when the Jews were eager to escape and move past the harsh circumstances, they were in. For example, the earliest apocalypse in the Bible, The Book of Daniel, likely received its final redaction by 164 BCE, when the Greeks had just seized Jerusalem and the Jews were martyred for their religion (Cook 2003). Considering that background, even though the description of the destruction denotes despair, it reflects the Jews' hope for Judgement Day to come. The Book of Revelation ends with a final trial and the fantasy scene of heaven, which describes the eternal life of the believers and the unbelievers' eternal punishment in a flaring lake (LaHaye and Ice 2001). Apocalyptic texts, therefore, are sometimes regarded as literature of the oppressed. Carr (2014, p. 5) points out, "The Jewish and Christian scriptures arose out of and speak to catastrophic human trauma". A sense of reversal is embedded in the description of devastating scenes (Collins 2014). As Whitaker (2020) comments on The Book of Revelation, the scripture provides an imaginative way for those who undergo racial and religious persecution to seek justice. Under the trial by God, those who do evil are to be punished, and the victims are to become the victors.

Regarding the origin of apocalyptic thought, Norman Cohn contends that the concept of apocalypse came to the Jews from Persian religion. The prophet Zoroaster predicted that the world will undergo a major transformation in the future, which he called "the making wonderful" (as cited in Thompson 1997, p. 15). Similarly, there is judgment for good and evil, the evildoers will be sentenced to permanent damnation, and the good will be rewarded to live in a brand-new world. This view of apocalypse echoes the previous one, denoting a cycle of destruction and rebirth. The end of the old world leads to the creation of a new one. Thus, it is only partly correct to regard apocalypse as meaning the end of the world.

To explore the meaning of apocalypse, it is essential to start by rethinking the word itself. The final chapter in New Testament, The Book of Revelation, is the apocalyptic text most familiar to the world. Revelation is translated from the Ancient Greek word

ἀποκάλυψις, which is also the first word used in the prologue of the text. It refers to an act that uncovers and discloses. Accordingly, the scripture may suggest nothing about disaster or destruction as the general public understands it. Instead, it implies an opportunity to contemplate the present situation with a new perspective (Kovacs et al. 2004, p. 2). As James (1988, p. 2) puts it, Revelation emphasizes “a new way of seeing, experiencing, and knowing”. Collins (2014, p. 12) also agrees that apocalyptic literature can bring hope to those who despair. However, he is not proposing that it be reduced to the literature of the suffering that contains critical reflection on society. That would take away the mysticism and insights in Revelation. (Collins 2016, p. 18). John Collins defines apocalyptic literature as “a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world” (as cited in Collins 2016, p. 14). In that description, the termination of time is followed by a supernatural spatial extension. Not only does this reinforce the duality of apocalypse—destruction and creation—but it also points to the transcendentalism of the experience of suffering. Therefore, even though many frightening images of disaster are described in the apocalyptic texts—wars, giant beasts, earthquakes, pests, a darkening of the sun and moon, falling plants, flaring lakes in The Book of Revelation, for instance—the ultimate meaning of apocalypse is not the end of the world.

What then is the significance of the terrible disasters described in the revelatory literature? Critically, Pippin (1999) argues that the Christian ideology is spread and solidified by the images of physical violence in the Bible, and apocalyptic prophecy that urges the belief that violence would ultimately lead to spiritual transformation is a way to justify the violent deeds. Over time, these values have gradually fused into people’s unconscious, and they have become the standard of judgment for morals and beliefs. Such criticism raises the awareness of the possible dogmatic imprint on the public’s unconscious. This may be a reasonable explanation. However, from the Jungian perspective, is it the Christian values in the apocalypse that are imprinted on people’s minds, or is it the pre-existing psychic archetypes that appear in our civilization in the name of religion?

Collins (2014, p. 13) agrees that the cruelty depicted in the apocalyptic texts can lend to moral explanations, but his suggestion is to view the texts from a literary, and not a theological, perspective. He suggests treating them as a long-lasting human narrative, that is “an indispensable resource for making sense of human experience”. Moreover, as literary works, apocalyptic texts are closer in nature to the forms of myth and poetry. Their presentation and symbolism should be the focus of attention (Collins 2016, p. 24). As the Jungian view of religion suggests, religious totems are cultural embodiments of psychic images. The psychic energies are contained in these cultural symbols, and through them, the energies are released to the view of human beings and, in turn, shape their minds (Kugler 1995). As such, religious stories are not to be seen simply as ways to establish authority for the church or to convey moral principles. They are actually a medium where the unconscious dwells, and they provide the drive for human consciousness to progress.

Christianity obviously is not the only religion in the world that uses doomsday imagery. Nevertheless, while Christianity regards time as moving linearly, most religions from the East construe time as cyclical (Heinzekehr 2012). In Buddhism’s view of the world, for example, everything goes in a cycle, there has no beginning and no end. This endless cycle appears to have different stages, one of which is a “destroy-all” disaster. According to the description in *Long āgamas*, *Aggañña Sutta*, *Abhidharma Mahāvibhāṣā Śāstra*, *Nyāyānusārīṇī*, and *Fayuan Zhulin*, the world’s unfolding can be seen in four consecutive stages: kalpa of formation (vivarta-kalpa in Sanskrit), kalpa of continuance (vivarta-sth yin-kalpa kalpa in Sanskrit), kalpa of decline (sa varta-kalpa in Sanskrit), and kalpa of disintegration (sa varta-sth yin-kalpa in Sanskrit). The initial stage, kalpa of formation, is where the world starts; the second stage, kalpa of continuance, is when the world is in a rather stable state, where deaths and births are in balance; the third stage, kalpa of decline,

however, is a period of calamities, including fires, flooding, and storms; and the last stage, kalpa of disintegration, is a lasting state in which everything dies off, and the world retreats into emptiness and desolation ([Fo Guang Dictionary of Buddhism 1990](#), p. 1694; [The Soka Gakkai Dictionary of Buddhism 2021](#)).

According to the above, stability is followed by calamities, and human doings are closely related to this downturn. The 7th Living Buddha Xiukang explained in 2013 that in the beginning of the kalpa of continuance, the life of the people was stable and not of competitive nature. However, the greed arose in people later on in this stage, and with the gradually insufficient amount of the Earth's resources came plunder, exploitation, and looting, all of these resulting in the end of the stability. Written in modern Tibetan, Padmasambhava, Guru Rinpoche, prophesized the future for the offspring of mankind at the end of the eighth century CE. In his description, the apocalyptic signs include: temples turning into tourist attractions, disturbing the serenity and solemnity of the temples; monks beginning to make money under the name Buddha; secularization and blasphemy of the incorporation of Buddhist scriptures and mantra into songs ([The 7th Living Buddha Xiukang 2013](#)). His words are strong in moral preaching, warning people that any sign of disrespect for the Buddha is not allowed, and that one should not fall for unrestrained desire and greed.

The world's periodic destruction and rebirth is also widely seen in ancient civilizations' prophetic stories. For example, the Mayan civilization, located in today's Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala etc. and prospered between the third century and the end of the ninth century, has shown to the world to have developed a grandeur of culture and art, and are shown to have possessed advanced scientific knowledge, whose mysterious disappearance has roused the curiosity of many archeologists and has led to various interpretations. Mayan myth shows that the world circulates in cyclical creation and destruction. The vices of human beings such as disrespect, greed, lack of temperance eventually caused God to initiate severe calamities to start the world all over again ([Taube 1993](#)). According to a popular interpretation, the Mayan calendar ends on 21 December 2012, which is also the date when the world ends ([Hancock 1995](#)).

Likewise, the Aztecs, another ancient Mesoamerican civilization, believed that our world is destroyed and renewed in cycles. Each disaster is caused by God's dissatisfaction with his creation. Before our current era, the world has endured four solar epochs, often called Suns, and each Sun ended in a catastrophe that destroyed the whole world. According to the *Codex Vaticanus*, the first Sun was Matlactil Ail, eventually destroyed by a great flood, coinciding with the story of Noah's Ark in the Bible. The second Sun was Ehecoatl, which ended in a hurricane caused by the god of wind. The third Sun, Tleyquiyahullo, ended in fire and lava and the fourth Sun, Tzontlilic, ended in war and fire. The pattern engraved on the Sun Stone, erected by the sixth emperor Axayacatl in 1479, shows slightly different catastrophic stories about the end of each Sun. However, it also reveals that the world has experienced four different eras and that our age's symbol is the face of the sun god Tonatiuh, whose emblem Ollin means movement; thus, predicting that the fifth Sun will be destroyed by a strong earthquake ([Hancock 1995](#)). Some compare the Mayan myths with the Aztec myths, believing that our era is the fifth solar epoch, and that the end of our era is the same end mentioned in the Mayan calendar ([Hancock 1995](#)).

Although the prophecy of 2012 being the apocalypse are proven false, these Mesoamerican myths mentioned undoubtedly implies a drive to purify. [Cooper \(2009\)](#) believes that the many disasters stricken before 2012 were signs that the stage of purification has begun. These occurrences of disasters have behind them significance that humans should learn to cherish the environment. According to many ancient prophesies, there were to be 25 years of purification before 2012. Therefore, some believe that the date 21 December 2012, is a pivotal turning point for a spiritual transformation, rather than a doom for the world. To the Mayans, 12 December 2012 is "creation day". On this day, the Kundalini force will be released to help to recall people's memories of their past lives, to gain insight of their soul's journey, and to accelerate the transformation of the spirits. However, this

force might cause physical discomfort, and even mental illness, for those not mentally prepared (Cooper 2009). In short, apocalypse may denote a transformation in spirits or in force, and does not necessarily mean the extinction of mankind. In any case, tracing the spread of the 2012 phenomenon, DiTommaso (2014, p. 154) regards it as “the first Internet Apocalypse” that is mostly created and disseminated by Internet users. One may say it was the emergence of a button-up revelation of mankind’s final destiny.

Although Christianity, Buddhism, and the Mesoamerican myths suggest different worldviews with variations of apocalyptic narratives, none of the versions implies a termination point in time where the world ends at. On the contrary, a disastrous calamity is just one stage that leads to another new stage of life, thus hinting at the possibility of the transformation of the soul. The apocalypse is here both an end and a beginning, and destruction an opportunity. When the civilization approaches its apocalypse, a spiritual awakening becomes a necessity, and so does a transformation of the world.

The commonality of apocalyptic beliefs in Christianity, Buddhism, and the Mesoamerican myth may demonstrate the work of the collective unconscious and how it continues to dwell in people’s minds. Jung (2002, pp. 272–74) believes that religion is essential to mankind—it forms the collective unconscious beyond human beings themselves. He points to people’s detachment from religion as one cause of many contemporary mental problems. Dogma is a prescription for activating souls, while science can provide only static explanations at the level of the conscious. Through religious rituals, human minds can reach a harmonious reconciliation with natural symbols. Therefore, as science views them, many apocalyptic prophecies are merely superstitions or fads in pop culture, as DiTommaso (2014) observed. However, the very fact that the public is highly interested in apocalyptic prophecies reveals that contemporaries cannot resist their charm. Moreover, even the desire to understand them or to be familiar with them can be seen as an intent to reconcile with certain otherworldly powers. Such tendency may also be demonstrated by the popularity of disaster films.

3. The Collection and Exhibition of the Transformative Archetypes

The apocalyptic prophecies in religions and legends are an inspiration to and are used in Hollywood movies. The movie 2012 (2009), for instance, is based on the Mayan 2012 prophecy, and it was filmed and advertised according to this background. Millennialism or Chiliasm is a concept that has its direct roots in the Book of Revelation. In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, The Book of Revelation conveys doctrines, of which the world will undergo great change every thousand years, and in a series of calamities, the unrighteous will be eliminated and the righteous be given life (Gould 1997). Underlying the series of the best-selling novel *Left Behind* by Tim LaHaye and the movie adapted from them in 2014 under the same title by Jerry B. Jenkins, is the notion of Pre-tribe, an idea found between Chapter 4, section 1 and Chapter 5 Section 14 in The Book of Revelation, believing that the faithful will be taken away before the happening of disasters, and the pagans are left to suffer from the calamities for a lasting 6000 years. In the form of sci-fi and thriller movies, the movie *Signs* (2002) and *Knowing* (2009) explore the loss and regain of the Christian faith. Similarly, Wynn Gerald Hamonic (2017) pointed out that one of the functions of apocalyptic cinema is to provide people with information about faith revival, spiritual awakening, and redemption.

Although religions and legends lend narrative forms to disaster movies, the meaning of the archetypes will have to rely on or convey through forms of images in order to be powerful. While Freud’s theory places desire as prior to experience, and as a key to driving the world forward, Jung attributes the workings of the world to the energies brought about through images, and that how images constitute experiences and minds. As he put it, “The psyche consists essentially of images” (as cited in Kugler 1995, p. 103). A sensible entity or condition of imagery nature is, therefore, the key to accessing individual and collective minds. In disaster movies, it is through the narrative forms and the rendering of the image that apocalyptic signs and thoughts continue to pass on from one generation to the next.

The auditory and lighting special effects used in the movies are no doubts a powerful tool in simulating the disaster scene, and in awing the audiences. Keane (2001) believes that the rise of disaster movies in the 1990s was related to the advances in digital technology, which facilitated the production of spectacles the movies intended to showcase at that time. Video technology is making progress every day, and to some extent, the disaster films after 2000 adopt a continued liking for spectacles. Take Roland Emmerich's *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) and *2012* (2009) for example, both display contemporary crises of climate change and environmental damages, such as extreme cold, flood, earthquakes, volcanic eruption, etc., and with them, the movies constitute scenes of awe and spectacle. From a commercial perspective, these scenes have certainly become a selling point, but more importantly, they place overly emphasis and exaggerate the force and the symbolic meaning of these natural phenomena.

In *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004), phenomena of extreme climate such as storms, thunder, lightning, and snow are seen. These archetypal symbols reflect the idea of both destruction and rebirth, and movies can thus be seen as an effective medium for these transformative archetypes.

The movie begins with a calamitous scene caused by a sudden storm in New York City. In Christian classics, storm is a symbol of the advent of God, and in the Old Testament, the image of storm is often representative of God's power and rage. The sacredness of the storm is also commonly seen in myths from around the world, showing the elemental commonality and exchange among them (Cirlot 1962, pp. 300–301). In these myths, storm brings not only destruction, but also rain, a source of creativity (Cooper 1978, p. 162). In addition, the image of storm in literary works often suggest turbulence in the characters' inner world. This use of storm can be seen in many works, such as *King Lear*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, and often follows the storm scene is a change in characters. The storm represents the intensity of the mental activities, the inner spiritual journey and extreme conflict, and even renewal and purification (ARAS 2010, p. 66).

In the film, accompanying the storm is lightning and thunder, and the lightning, seen as an archetype, can mean both destruction and creation (Cooper 1978, p. 93). In Genesis in Hebrew, lightning is considered the God's ejaculation, and in Australian Aboriginal myths, the lightning is even said to be the erected penis of the son of Thunder (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996, pp. 606–7). For Hinduism and Buddhism, lightning is a weapon that help break away from self-illusions (ARAS 2010, p. 70), and thunder that accompanies the lightning carries both the meaning of death and awakening. In The Book of Job, lightning is a demonstration of God's power, implying a threat to destroy and the revelation of truth (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996, p. 1001). In *I Ching*, lightning symbolizes an immense shock to people, causing possibly fear and a temporary state of loss, as well as reflection and self-reflection. The Pawnee Indians believe the sound of thunder in spring represents the return of the God, from the dormant unconscious it awakens them (ARAS 2010, p. 68).

The extreme climate shown in *The Day after Tomorrow* (2004) changes in a short period of time from torrential rain, to heavy snow, and then finally in a land covered completely in white. Snow is a natural object that is both dangerous and beautiful, its flakes having a perfect crystalline structure, enough for arousing a feeling of awe in people. Snow is a simple form of beauty, and it stirs up a fantasy for reform. In the medieval alchemy, the "falling like snow" concept in the white sublimate period is key to the achievement of philosopher's stone (ARAS 2010, p. 78). As ice is the solid form of water, it symbolizes the freezing of the water's fluidity and flexibility. Psychologically, ice therefore represents a watershed between the conscious and the unconscious (Cirlot 1962, p. 148). In movies, images of snow are also used as watershed for changes before and after disasters. Disasters lead people into a state of chaotic unconscious and then a temporary calmness, before the expectation of rebirth after the ice melt starts.

Aside from the storm scene, the movie *2012* (2009) has also put on screen the scene of fire and flood. The first destruction scene in the movie is the eruption of the volcano in Yellowstone Park—lavas and flares bursting overwhelmingly. In addition to this scene's

apparent reference to Mayan and Aztec myths, in the legend, according to *The Seeress's Prophecy*, of the apocalyptic conflict between the Nordic Germanic gods and the giants, giants toss torches and the world come to an end in great flames, with the sun turned dark, the land sunk into the sea, and the star disappeared. However, the female prophet envisions the arrival of a brand new golden age, where lands are to rise again, the gods return and the earth become green and lively (Larrington 2017). It can be said that fire is a symbol of fear and hope for changes, and a rebirth of the world can be expected from the residue or the ashes of it. The Greek Heraclitus believes that the universe and the soul are composed in part of the burning ether (ARAS 2010, pp. 82–84). Adopting this view, alchemists regard ether as the beginning and the end of everything (Cirlot 1962, p. 100), believing that immortality is made possible through fire (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996, p. 379). Similarly, in Christian legends, the God resuscitates the dead through fire, and Buddhism releases the weight on body with fire (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996, p. 379). Overall, fire is symbolic of termination, rebirth, inspiration, and purification.

The movie ends with a devastating flood, a disaster common in apocalyptic stories. Apart from the story of Noah's Ark, the similar story prototype can also be found in Egyptian legend. It is said that the creator of Nile and Tianhe rivers Nun will one day return and drown the world with flood. According to Ions (2001), Nun is of spiritual nature. In these legends, flood terminates eras, and yet it also gives life to the world with the water it brings. The image of flood, a trigger for alchemy, connotes the idea of excess and of complete immersion, which represents an opportunity of self-transformation and rebirth (ARAS 2010, p. 50). The flood symbolizes an overthrowing of the old, and with it the start of a new era (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996, p. 394). In the last scene of 2012 (2009), the survivors are on the deck of a rescue ship alluded to the Noah's Ark, facing the endless sea and the overturned plates—both of political and geographical significance. When the flood recedes, the world resets.

Leggatt (2015) observes that, the disaster films directed by the same director Emmerich, see disasters differently in perspective. The pre-9/11 films *Independence Day* (1996) and *Godzilla* (1998) emphasize the greatness of the destruction brought about by the catastrophe. They show the shocking blasting scenes of famous landmarks, presenting an epic disaster aesthetics. According to Keane (2001, p. 79), this reflects more of the carnality of the millennium fanaticism, than of the millennium panic. These disastrous scenes in the 1990s have even become the referential images in references to the 9/11 terrorist events (Yu 2003; Muntean 2009). However, the post-9/11 films differ in that they move the emphasis onto the depiction of overwhelming natural force and the total extinction of species, and thus making survival and the rebuilding after disaster the focus of these films.

In these films, the all-powerful God is absent, and it is natural phenomena that men must fight or seek reconciliation with. Rather than portraying these films as reflecting the apocalyptic thoughts in Christianity, it would be more reasonable to interpret them as showing a mythical world in which everything has its own will. Keller's (2018) political theology of the earth, grounded on an ecofeminist theological view, urges a similar cosmological image. She suggests a counter-apocalyptic view where individuals and the ecosystem are in mutual dependence. As capitalism expands, the time left for human beings is decreasing. In films, people attempt to survive in face of a powerful natural force. It is a clash between psyche and archetypes. Eschatology is not about placing hope in the omniscient gods, but about a search for a way toward survival. This is not to say that gods do not exist. They do, but not as supernatural powers that are typically known to us. As Jung put it, gods are metaphors of archetypal action, and myths are the enactments of archetypes (Samuels 2012). The apocalyptic archetypes in these films have redefined gods as natural forces that should be respected.

To summarize, archetypal symbols related to natural disasters are consistent with the view of the periodic destruction and rebirth of the world, and the spirit of awakening in the apocalyptic legends. For this, the spectacular scene of disasters may not only be an exciting stimulation and entertainment to the audiences, but also a viewing experience

within which the audiences feast on transformative archetypal images, which may arouse, revive, and heal the mind from the depths.

Analyzing the characters in disaster films with Jungian psychological concepts, Elisabeth Anne Sumpster (2016, p. 68) points out that these movies inspire our creativity and arouse our instinct for survival. It is through suffering that people are led through the unknown unconscious, and as a result, reach stages of evolution and enlightenment in the process of individuation. With practical experience of art therapy, Politsky (1995) points out “that the presence of dark art is actually functioning as a collective psychic symbol series, which, in portraying the elements neglected by the collective conscious, is providing a curative and healing effect”. The dark art referred to by Politsky are some images of the avant-garde art that impose discomfort and trigger insecurity in people. Taruffi and Koelsch (2014) also found that positive energy may be kindled, and imagination be stimulated even, when listening to sad music in a sad mood. The possible reverse therapeutic effect of disaster films in art therapy has been confirmed.

4. A Turn from the Celebration of Spectacles to the Exploration into the Suffering Experience

Thoret (2012, p. 54) observes three shooting styles from the post-9/11 American movies: “forms of chaos”, “forms of ordeal”, and “epileptic forms”. He believes that catastrophe is rooted in the American movies, and more widely, in the contemporary cinema. Different from the truth-investigating movies appeared in the 70s, the time Kennedy was assassinated, the collective trauma brought about by the 9/11 event has urged the disaster movies to create an empathetic atmosphere among audiences. These movies no longer focus on the investigation of the cause of disaster, but more on people’s perception of disasters. “What did those trapped in the World Trade Center actually experience? What would the ordeal of these individuals, plunged into the midst of destructive chaos, of indecipherable reality, possibly have been like?” (Thoret 2012, p. 55). Similarly, *Lo Impossible* (2012), an adaptation from the real event of South Asian tsunami, spends as long as two and a half minutes in showing the female protagonist in the moments of tsunami, and in fast and slow motion the film repeatedly put focus on the experiencing of the tsunami, forcing audiences to look at and think about the meaning of suffering. In the scene, the emphasis is not of the spectacularity of the tsunami, nor of the destruction it brings to the construction on shore, but on an ordinary person being helplessly and hopelessly taken by the strong wave. The female protagonist’s body is caught in the enormous wave, rolling in it, and once swirling quickly down to the depth of the sea and then swirl again quickly back to the surface. The whirlpool is like an entrance for another world, representing the unknown of the consciousness. (ARAS 2010, p. 46) The powerful force of the whirlpool can symbolize an era uncontrollable to human beings, it may be an irreversible regress, or a rapid progress (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1996, p. 1105). The retrospect can be said to be presented from the female protagonist’s perspective, or an unconscious perspective—the retrospect begins after she passes out from the anesthesia. It can thus be argued that audiences seem to share the experience with the protagonist, or that their consciousnesses are aligned, as both are within this ruthless natural disaster bodily and unconsciously—and they may be sharing whole new experience in perception. As can be seen from the two examples, disaster movies have now moved from visual spectacularity to a focus on empathetic immersive experiencing.

The similar immersive pseudo-documentary *Cloverfield* (2008), however, through its shaky camera style creates a distinct “epilepsy” view (Thoret 2012, pp. 54–55). Compared with the 1990s, the digital technology is certainly more advanced, yet the interesting part is that instead of showing off their digital skills with elaborate, eye-catching special effects and scenes, these movies deliberately try to insert a sense of authenticity with the use of handheld camera and less professional editing. For the movie to seem like it is in the instant of the disaster, *Cloverfield* (2008) is filmed in a shaky shooting style, purposely placing the audience under an uncomfortable viewing situation, for them to directly sympathize with the discomfort in it. Bevan (2008) reported that many audiences, including himself, suffer

from nausea and headache, and some even had to escape the cinema for a while. The report had also interviewed an ophthalmologist to explain why shaking camera would result in such reactions. The shifted focus from the portrayal of authentic disastrous scenes, to audiences' experience and their reactions, has become a new strategy for realism.

In the 21st century, disaster movies have turned its camera to focus on the victims' experience of disasters from a personal viewpoint, instead of showing more spectacular images. This turn to phenomenology, the adoption of a phenomenological viewpoint and a return to the things themselves, have greatly changed the audiences' viewing experience. In previous disaster films, the meaning of disaster was defined through blasting images produced by special effects; the disaster films in the twenty-first century, however, turn toward revealing personal experience, the trembling, the suffering, and the helplessness. This phenomenological presentation of the disaster films can be said to have something to do with the overall atmosphere in the films. In both *The Happening* (2008) and *Knowing* (2009), suspense is added to the air in the process of explaining the cause of the disaster. In the latter part of *The Happening* (2008), when the protagonists temporarily took shelter in a suburban house, with its awkward labyrinth-like appearance and its eccentric owner, the story goes off the main line to show a tense and weird thriller episode. Labyrinth suggest a return to the core, and it symbolizes a revelation after struggles and trials (Cooper 1978, p. 92). The characters in these movies are confused as if they are in a labyrinth, where they try to figure out the cause of the chaos and at the same time to understand the relationship between one another. The labyrinth is also a cross-culture archetypal symbol, it takes us on a spiritual journey and unite people, and with its archetypal energy it helps harmonize individual and its surroundings (Simpson 2002). This implies a resolution between human beings and the nature in the film.

In *Knowing* (2009), dark elements are added to render a horrific atmosphere. The darkened scene, the mysterious characters in black, and the dark stones they pass on among them, are all reinforcing the horror of the near apocalypse. As the plot unfolds, audiences will gradually realize that the dark tone used in the movie is not a sign of evil supernatural power, but a boding of the termination of human beings and of the continuity of humanity. Cooper (1978, p. 50) points out that darkness does not represent evilness, it is actually the beginning of light, the chaos before the formation of the universe. Darkness, as an archetypal symbol, is an absence of light, suggesting moral or spiritual flaws. On the other hand, however, in alchemy, Nigredo, the dark state, is a process where people face their own earthiness—their unknown potential, or their evilness. Darkness is in fact the sources of mysterious transformation, spiritual growth, and healing (ARAS 2010, pp. 100–102). Under the gloomy atmosphere of the movie, the Earth is eventually burnt in the flames of the sun, and human species comes to an end. This resonates with the concept of termination and purification in the image of fire mentioned in the previous section, but the story has not ended just yet. In the last scene of the movie, the movie shows the scene of the human survivors and other species being placed in a beautiful realm resembled the Garden of Eden, and this suggests that the ultimate ending of the movie actually lies in the reformed and revived humanity.

Overall, in the movies noted earlier, archetypal images do not convey themselves only through visual presentation. They are engaging the audiences in a more immersive way and through a more holistic and empathetic cinematographic style. With audiences more engaged in a catastrophic state, they may have an apocalyptic perception, which is close to what James Collins (as cited in Daschke 2014, p. 463) referred to as an “apocalyptic cure”. Daschke (2014) argues that apocalypse, either as faith or an imagining, is powerful for both injured individuals and communities. Apocalypse and trauma are both about the shattering of order—a conflict between remembering and forgetting. Eventually, however, the cure lies in the revelation. Lange (2009) points out that trauma is a near-death experience, and the constant recalling of the traumatizing experience means the contemplation of death—also a struggle for existential meaning. Take the 9/11 events as an example, the film *World Trade Center* (2006), an adaptation of those events, or *The War of Worlds* (2005)

and *Cloverfield* (2008)—which imply the events—might be able to create a collective cure through the empathetic reconstruction of the experience of suffering. Some argue, however, that these films are controversial. They should not draw on recent disaster events. Muntean (2009), quoting Freud’s trauma theory, argues that by reliving the temporal perception of the events, these films can, to some extent, alleviate the trauma in people.

In the state of empirical representation, a new attitude is formed in the face of apocalypse. Even though there are survivors of the disasters both in the past movies and the 21st-century movies, the latter, instead of stressing yet again of the undertone in the former that human wisdom will eventually surpass anything, it emphasizes humanity’s luck of surviving the disasters. In *The War of Worlds* (2005), for example, the aliens are poisoned to death due to the human-made pollution on the Earth, and that it is not mankind, but luck, that defeat the aliens. In the past, scholars often defined disaster films as unexpected, but not unreasonable (Yacowar 1977; Roddick 1980). However, in the 21st century, many disasters are presented as something unfathomable, or beyond the reach of science, and the only solution for catastrophes is to wait for them to die down. For example, the inexplicable attack launched by plants in *The Happening* (2008), or the solar storm in *Knowing* (2009), may be interpreted as concern for the environment that began in the 1990s, while the films show a passive attitude toward the disasters. The confidence of humans over nature that one often finds in the disaster films of the 1990s has been replaced by an attitude of insignificance and helplessness. From the above analysis, the shift away from investigation or downplaying of the cause of disaster may add to the view that humans can actually do nothing about their fate. This change resonates with the folk psychology under both the 9/11 events and the COVID-19 pandemic. To explore the large-scale impact caused by the virus epidemic, Cohen-Louck and Levy (2021) coined the term “viriism” to point to the fact that both the virus and terrorism subject people to the anxiety of being randomly attacked. Shared insecurity is the psychological state under the two seemingly disastrous circumstances. The attempt to clarify the cause of a specific disaster is insignificant at the moment of suffering and struggling.

As Walliss and Aston (2011) observe, post-9/11 disaster films present an attitude of fatalism: as the disasters are triggered by certain powers beyond understanding, it would not be possible to rely on human power to resolve them. Some films even imply that human beings actually deserve the suffering and that their survival is not a good thing for the world. All the apocalyptic traditions that involve standards of moral judgment are mentioned, including apocalyptic thoughts in Christianity, the cycle of four kalpas in Buddhism, and the myths from Central America. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, as we mourn the loss of lives, we also observe that it has been pointed out widely that the outbreak has benefited ecological recovery. For instance, on Earth Day last year, an article titled “7 ways the planet has gotten better since the coronavirus shutdown” reported that the shutdown of the factories and the grounding of flights have resulted in better air quality, and the lockdown has allowed animals to return to their original habitats (Kummer 2020). Despite that, in terms of long-term development, academic research shows that the negative impacts of the pandemic would still outweigh the positive ones (Ankit et al. 2021), the breathing space given to the Earth, created by the pandemic, can facilitate a meaningful rethinking of the impacts of human civilization on the planet. However, “Can and should we be saved?” is the very same question asked by multiple disaster films released since the 2000s (Walliss and Aston 2011, p. 56). The issue has become even more critical at the moment, as the U.S. plans to lift lockdowns before Independence Day this year: the compensatory consumption that is likely to come with the lifting of lockdowns will again create burdens for the Earth. Le Quéré et al. predicted in 2020 that if the lifestyle of the people does not change, there is no doubt that carbon emissions will rise again after the pandemic (Le Quéré et al. 2020).

As an ongoing apocalyptic event, many wonder if the COVID-19 pandemic would result in a profound rethinking or if the current lifestyle and values are too rooted in people’s minds that they cannot be changed. Could it be that the disaster films since 2000

are a representation of the deep helplessness that is reflected by the inexplicable and irresistible disasters depicted? Or could it be that they represent people's unconscious desire for the disaster?

Walliss and Aston (2011) argue that apocalyptic cinema serves as a social critique and signifies people's underlying desire to resolve and reorganize the social order all at once. Apocalypse is the approach to completely detach from the past and the unresolvable corruption in society. With Heidegger's existentialism and phenomenology, Corey Anton explains the mentality behind the apocalyptic imagination: "The dream of a great apocalypse is but a subconscious desire to expiate the guilt of such transgenerational burdens" (as cited in McFadden 2015). The transgenerational guilt and chaos, be it environmental, political, or religious, have been causing too great a hardship and suffering in contemporary life that makes reforms impossible, and thus the all-destroying disaster becomes the outlet for the mind. Extended from Corey Anton's interpretation, McFadden (2015) further employs Heidegger's theory to interpret disaster films: the individual, *a they-self*, trapped in a collective entity, needs to rely on apocalyptic films in order to be released from the constraints of *Dasein*. One of the film's protagonists, a little girl, says that she has overcome her bed-wetting in the ending scene. Compared to the idea of mass extinction, this seemingly insignificant line actually implies the ultimate individual growth and transcendence, and the beginning a new era of humanity and civilization.

Perhaps the perspective from the above paragraph can help shed light on why the disaster films from the post 9/11 period are indifferent to the cause of disasters, and that the causes are even unexplainable. In addition, as Leggatt (2015) points out, while the protagonists in the disaster films from the 90s often actively confront the disaster, those from the post-9/11 films, focusing on survivors rather than the heroes, tend to wait for the disasters to pass in passivity. They waited till the storm to die down, the aliens to leave, and the virus to weaken, and only then did they begin to think of the possibility of rebuilding and rebirth. Some of these post-9/11 films, even skip the disaster part and go straight into filming the reorganization of order after disasters (Golder 2015), including *The Maze Runner* (2014), *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* (2015), *The Hunger Games* (2012), *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013), *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay-Part 1* (2014), and *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay-Part 2* (2014). Also some films such as *I am Legend* (2007) explore the transitional period from the disaster to post-disaster, depicting the coexistence between human beings and disasters.

5. The Call for the Archetypal Symbols of Death in the Contemporary Conscious

If indeed the collective fear and anxiety expressed in the disaster films is actually a call for collective rebirth and redemption, then can the passive turn that the 21st century disaster films take reflect an extreme despair for the future, and undermining in survival will, and even a subconscious death wish. Woolley (2015) explains from a viewer's perspective, that disaster films tend to romanticize death, often ignoring the details of the death images, and presenting the great destruction with a distancing and fantastical tone, in attempt to avoid the discomfort likely to be brought about by the large-scale catastrophe. This feature may well be seen in the spectacle-oriented disaster films from the 1990s, but like it was analyzed earlier in the essay, the disaster films after 2000 do not shun from showing the suffering itself, and they even further try to make an empathetic conveyance of fear, panic, and pain through these films to the audiences. Many vivid death scenes are included in these movies. In *The War of Worlds* (2005), for example, a horrid scene of a number of floating bodies is shown when the protagonists are in the flee. In one of the intense scenes in *World War Z* (2013), in groups the zombies crawl up the wall and fall, and the fallen are either crushed by their zombie companion or by the military, with their body crooked and deformed. As McReynolds (2015, p. 161) describes, "waves of zombies pile upon each other and wash over the walls of Jerusalem like a swarm of bees or ocean waves washing over a sand castle". Here, the spectacle does not involve the destruction of landmarks but the distortion of human bodies.

The aforementioned images of large-scale deaths have no doubt shocked audiences. However, as noted in the previous section, the disaster films of the 21st century are unlike the disaster films in the late 1990s: they shift away from the celebration of spectacle and emphasize the experience of suffering instead. Similarly, the abundant use of the archetypes of death is embodied in the mass numbers of corpses and recreating the experience of death reveals the initiative of the human consciousness. What should be noted here is that, as a carrier of the apocalyptic imagination, a film's style and its presentation in images are central to interpreting the very concept of apocalypse. As said by Collins (2016), apocalyptic literature is conveyed through its poetic expression, or as Marshall McLuhan famously puts it, "The medium is the message" (McLuhan and Fiore 2001). The limitation and the transcendence of film technology perhaps represent the duality of the notion of apocalypse—destruction and creation. Szendy (2015) points out the affinity between film and apocalypse. A film has a time frame, and it is within its limited technology that it attempts to reveal the truth that no longer exists or that cannot be relived. One may always wonder about what will be after the end of a film, just like people unlimitedly and in-exhaustively imagine the time and space after the end of the world. Thus, the shaky camera style adopted in the movie *Cloverfield* (2008), is not only about testimony. It is a meta-critical investigation into testimony itself. Both male and female protagonists say their last words through the camera. Their wills are carried within the camera, and wills are documents that exceed the existence of the dead. As Szendy (2015) said,

"Keep moving" is the very injunction of the cinematograph as a writer of movement. But in *Cloverfield* it is as if kinetic writing were moving beyond itself, as if it were carrying itself beyond its cine-testamentary function, as dated documentary testimony addressed to future spectators, to pursue its recording without reason or destination: It's rolling, stubbornly; it keeps on rolling and filming when there is nothing and no one to see on the screen.

After the ends of both the film and their lives, space and time endure. Similar to apocalypse, an eternal and cross-cultural presentation of the collective unconscious, it drives people with its will to see, to experience, and to understand the concept of death and the end of the world. In this example, death is an archetypal experience that transcends subjective human consciousness. Apocalypse appears here as an archetype with an autonomous consciousness, which can be captured by the image or escape from the image. It demonstrated its very existence by the jumpy black screen that leads to previously recorded image after the shutting down of the handheld camera and before the official end of the film.

In *The Happening* (2008), collective death is presented to the audiences and it even portrays the horror of collective suicide. People in the film form groups to kill themselves in various ways, and in ways unexplainable or without clear reasons. Every short while, the audiences would have to face uncomfortable scenes of mass self-injury. Similar to the situation in the film *Lo Imposible* (2012), the female protagonist, examining disasters repeatedly through her experience, begins to realize the nature of disaster. Here, death, and particularly of the self-executing death, repeatedly stimulate audiences to deliberate and rethink about death. Alvarez (1971, pp. 143–45) argues that people who kill themselves are in an isolated world, in which they are immersed in their own solipsism. In psychoanalysis, intended death is still a mystery to be explored and the suicidal experience unclear of its meanings. Kugler (1995) believes that imaging is a bridge to the sublime, it symbolizes the exploration and connection that points to the future, it is beyond objectivity and subjectivity, and beyond individuals and commonalities. The job of a psychoanalyst is to explore and connects the symbols appeared in life, which may be in dreams, visions, or in artworks. Every unfathomable attack event, and every collective suicidal scene can be seen no other than an analysis on the suicidal behaviors—and through collectivity the director aim to magnify the shock toward audiences. Similar films about suicide includes the Korean movie *Deranged* (2012), and the widely debated *Bird Box* (2018) released in Netflix. In the former suicidal behavior is caused by the fatal microbes that parasitize in the brain, and

in the latter, the self-killing tendency is triggered by human being's inner darkness. The causes of disaster tend to be more from within and tend to move from the conscious level to the unconscious. Despite the fact that disaster is still portrayed in spectacles, it differs from the films in the 1990s in that the destruction starts within the human bodies, and not suggests by collapse of civilization. These direct death scenes add weight to significance of death, and death can be said to be a symbol itself.

What if what these movies offer is not a romanticized version of apocalyptic imagination, but a tangible direct death symbols, then how should we construe the psychological meanings of it through interpretation of the symbols? Freud believes that every cell of a creature has two opposite qualities, and these constitute the two important instincts for human beings. Eros is the first instinct, also known as life instinct, and it is related to sexuality, reproduction, creativity, harmony, and self-protection; and the other is a death instinct, which represents aggressiveness, destruction, abuse, desire to control, and for dominance. When the death instinct turns inward, the individual will express themselves in the form of self-blame, self-injury, and suicide, and when it turns outward, of attack, hatred, and murder. Though the desire to die comes with destruction, it is also an extreme form of serenity (Fromm 1973, p. 15). From the above, it can be said that the continued popularity of the disaster films, with the calmness in the contemporary disaster films and the trend of post-disaster films, may be resulted from the collective death drive.

Furthermore, Freud thinks that death instinct is a process of disassociating things from groups: "seeking to dissolve those units and to bring them back to their primaeval, inorganic state" (as cited in Fromm 1973, p. 15). The emphasis of the contemporary disaster films on the subjectivity and the desolation after disaster, is manifestation of a primitive and inorganic state. This shows a desire to return to peace, and by amplifying the subjective perception of the disaster, it focuses on one's state of existence in face of disaster. Hillman (1997), an Jungian psychologist, puts aside the moral judgment for suicide, opposes the psychology to view suicide as some illness, and argues that the significance of suicide should be interpreted from a spiritual perspective: "it is natural because it is a possibility of our nature, a choice open to each human psyche" (Hillman 1997, p. 63). The suicidal death is not only driven naturally, but also a choice of the soul. Hillman (1997) believes death is not just a biological phenomenon, but also a state of mind to be experienced. All transformation of soul starts with the death experience, and death represents a forced transition from the old order to the new world. Chevalier and Gheerbrant (1996, pp. 277–79) point out that in many coming-of-age ritual, death is always used as a symbol in one ceremony, as a necessary stage toward birth. Through death, spirituality can finally be released from the material structure. Suicide can therefore be interpreted as a strong discontent toward the present and as a mechanism that actively try to trigger the transformation of spirituality.

In Dante's *Inferno*, the second round of the seventh circle is the execution ground for suicides. Although this reflects that suicide is a condemned act in the middle age, in Dante's work he shows sympathy to the suicides, which impresses many critics. Elliott Jaques, a psychoanalyst, believes that the chapter reflects a typical midlife crisis, a time when hopes are lost and death are called for (Alvarez 1971, p. 169). Through the hell of suicides, the description goes:

In the middle of the journey of our life I came to myself within a dark wood where the straightway was lost. Ah, how hard a thing it is to tell of that wood, savage and harsh and dense, the thought of which renews my fear! So bitter it is that death is hardly more (as cited in Alvarez 1971, p. 169).

In life, the panic resulted from a lack of creativity, or the exhaustion of mind power, is enough to lead to a suicidal decision (Alvarez 1971, pp. 169–72). If so, can the mentality in contemporary disaster films be interpreted as a worldwide sense of midlife crisis, a collective despair of human destiny, and a desire to press the restart button?

Self-execution is thus not to be interpreted as an act of passivity and of despair, but rather an active desire for a new start. Dixon (2003) believes that films with apocalyptic

visions suggest an idea of a worldwide termination, offering audiences to think about the possibility of the ultimate end of their life. This is to some extent similar to choreography, with each audience rehearsing their own death. In fact, people's obsession with disaster seems to be an innate source of creative inspiration. Drama scholar Brian Sutton-Smith has studied the stories created by young children and found that "the typical actions in orally told stories by young children include being lost, being stolen, being bitten, dying, being stepped on, being angry, calling the police, running away or falling down. In their stories they portray a world of great flux, anarchy, and disaster" (as cited in [Gottschall 2012](#), p. 34).

Similarly, Vivian Paley, a kindergarten teacher with many years of teaching experience, has found that despite the stories male and female students create in a game are different, boys tend to create stories of battles and adventure, while girls prefer to create stories of role-playing in domestic life. However, in a closer look at the plots they create, they are just as disastrous. In the girl's game house, there too are plenty of troubles and the intrusion by bad guys. Under violence and harm, these girls are forced to implement self-rescue measure such as "throwing a bomb" ([Gottschall 2012](#), pp. 34–42). From a perspective of neuroscience and evolutionary psychology, [Gottschall \(2012\)](#) explains that story is like a teaching manual by which human beings learn to deal with difficult situations. Through stories, humans develop the adaptability they need to live in the reality, and it is a primitive way of experiencing a struggle for survival. In fact, it is revealed that recent research points out that audiences who prefer to watch horror and apocalypse films have better mentality and adaptability in face of COVID-19 pandemic. The "prepper" films have prepared the audiences with the mentality and the judgment needed in time of crisis, and thus under the strike of the pandemic they are better prepared and show better mental resilience ([Scrivner et al. 2021](#)). Disaster, however, does not only reflect midlife difficulties, but with its power of destruction opens an opportunity for creativity, enabling people to move away from a stagnant midlife to regain the bravery of facing crisis and the innovativeness in their childhood. The lasting popularity of the disaster can perhaps be seen as a collective subconscious against the old generations, and it also implies people's desire for innovation, and exhibit their endurance to disasters.

6. Conclusions

In the 21st century, various disasters have occurred, and they are both frightening and heartbreaking. Paradoxically, just as apocalyptic thoughts are common in ancient cultures and religion, disaster is a periodically popular theme in the history of cinema. In the disaster films after 2000, discussed in this essay, apocalyptic imagination carries a dual metaphor, underneath the chaos and despair is a hidden desire for awakening and innovation. Through analysis of archetypal images, natural disastrous symbols often have dual meanings. That is, storm represents both conflicts and renewal, lightning destruction and creation, thunder death and awakening, snow danger and reform, ice stagnation and rebirth and fire termination and inspiration. Comparing the many widely circulated version of apocalyptic narratives, it is found that these narratives carry similar values or ideologies: underneath the great destruction of the apocalyptic images carried through nature is the possibility of both awakening and survival—for example, the revelation in Christianity, the cycle in Buddhism, the purification in Mesoamerican myths, etc. Through films, the desire for transformation of soul is shown. In particular, the adoption of the empirical cinematographic style revealed the archetypal images not only in graphics but in holistic experience, with the narratives focusing on the audiences' experience in disaster and after disaster—disaster is here not shown in spectacle, but as a state of body and mind. Audiences drawn into the archetypal symbols can experience emphatically the disaster in the films, and may also experience the disaster images' power to transform.

On the other hand, the apocalyptic images discussed in this essay represents both an urge to survival, and an emergence of death instinct, and this is most apparent in suicidal disaster films. In these films, death is not presented in a romanticized spectacle to be watched, but a thought-provoking experience with transformative archetypes that make

reverse healing on the audiences possible. As for dreaming disasters, Jung believes it suggests the possibility for enormous transformation of the individuals, or a collective state of mankind that is about to undergo major changes. This is a time of crisis, and of opportunities. The dream may transform, if through in-depth psychoanalysis it is explained, but otherwise it might backfire into anxiety and melancholy (Hall 1983, pp. 49–50).

By categorizing these films as post-9/11, the analysis above suggests that people in their depths are eager to recover from the trauma of serious events such as the 9/11 attacks. The disaster film appears to be an effective platform for converging transformative archetypes. In most of these films, the events of 9/11 are not mentioned. They are used only for reference, as apocalyptic archetypes. The immersive experience of disaster has been opened to interpretation: some desire rebirth and some become indifferent to life, death, and the human future. Cohen (2021) points out that the September 11 attacks have shattered the belief of many people on an affective, and not the doctrinal level. After the event, the database of the American Theological Library Association (ATLA) has as many as 296 articles that contain the term post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Thus, perhaps the post-9/11 disaster film can be regarded as a version of PTSD–apocalypse. This echoes the view that apocalyptic literature is trauma-based, but with therapeutic effects (Daschke 2014).

Looking back during the COVID-19 pandemic, then these movies pre-presented a possible turning point of mankind's collective fate, or imply a collective desire for a large-scale transformation of souls. Shamdasani (2012, pp. 18–19) points out that archetypal images are everywhere in the shared conscious. They are either discovered by, or they reveal themselves to the artists, and are developed into an artwork. The collective unconscious is not something waiting passively to be realized, it will actively connect with the conscious of individuals. In crisis or in social turmoil, the collective unconscious is more likely to be at work. For example, the art world in Europe is filled with artworks of apocalyptic images right before the outburst of the World War I, such as Wassily Kandinsky's apocalyptic writings and Ludwig Meidner's apocalyptic paintings. Before the war, Jung himself too underwent the invasion of collective unconscious, seeing visions of Europe turning red with blood. Barreto (2014) believes that the Jungian theory was complete between 1913 and 1961 when Jung was suffering from numbers of nightmares, and one of the characteristics of his theory is the rethinking of disaster symbol.

Indeed, there is no evidence showing that films discussed in this essay is a prediction of the COVID-19 pandemic—and this research has no intention of claiming thus. This essay intends to explore and shed lights on the meanings of the current situations through symbols. Symbols, according to Stein (1998), drive the mind to expand, extend and to create, and they are connected to instinct and spirituality beyond a conscious level. The apocalyptic images shown in these movies can be seen as a profound exploration of the meaning of disasters, and perhaps a rehearsal of the state of mind during disasters. In other words, the passive attitude may not merely reflect the PTSD brought on by the 9/11 events. It is a mentality required in face of disaster.

The largest difference between 9/11 and the COVID-19 pandemic is that the former has a clear starting and end point, and the latter is continuing, and no one can predict when it will end. We live in both disaster and post-disaster, and in trauma and post-trauma. The phenomenological description of disaster in the previous section particularly characterizes the current situation we are in. Under the threat of COVID-19, patience and endurance are the two mentalities people attempt to develop. Until now, many countries have implemented lockdown and lifted it repeatedly, and yet the pandemic is still plaguing in the continuing mutation of the virus. In the past, the act of doomsday prepping was deemed subculture has become mainstream in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Smith and Thomas 2021). Büssing et al. (2020) found that the measures used under the pandemic such as social distancing, isolation, and border control—though they bring a sense of fear and segregation—have facilitated people to rethink their role in society, to deliberate about and experience nature in meditation and quietness, and to figure out the

meaning of life. In many films discussed in the essay, the above describes the exact state of those waiting for the disaster to abate. In dealing with the disaster, it is not only the public mental health that should be considered. It is also a critical time to examine both the individual and collective outlook on life and on the world. At this very moment of the pandemic, the apocalyptic symbols are not in dreams, religious stories, ancient prophecy, or on movie screens, but around us and within our lives, questioning the desires and intent of our souls.

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