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### Disasters and Human Nature

“Magnificent Desolation” is an essay written by Elisa Gabbert about the human fascination surrounding natural disasters. Through her own fascination with the Titanic (the real-life event and the film), she explains the glorification of horrifying events such as 9/11, war, natural disasters, etc. Humans have a desire to be entertained, and when our lives are separate from these disasters, they become spectacles. These events become so rare and fantastical that we separate the horrid nature of the disaster from the “beauty” of how it unfolded. These explosions feel like a movie, not our own reality. “Magnificent Desolation” takes a step back and evaluates the cult following surrounding the adoration of these events. Gabbert explains that the desire by humans to be entertained reveals the true nature of humanity; enjoyment over empathy.

When looking at the fascination behind natural disasters, we must look to Hollywood. Would the Titanic be the ‘fan favorite’ disaster it is without the film by James Cameron? There have been over 40 films made about the September 11th attacks on the twin towers. These events become dramatized, and the audience becomes desensitized to tragedy. These natural disasters are reduced to media for an audience to consume. Gabbert talks about a photo published after September 11th that showed men and women who jumped off the building as an act of suicide, “An Associated Press photo dubbed ‘The Falling Man’ captures one of these jumpers: a man ‘falling’ as if at ease, upside down and in parallel with the vertical grid of the tower.” (Gabbert 6). Although the photo was criticized for its desensitization, it was still widely published and

consumed by an audience. This lack of empathy and call for “adventure” has been specifically crafted by the most influential members of the movie/TV industries. [Thenumbers.com](http://thenumbers.com), which showcases statistics for the domestic and international grossing of movies, shows that the action movie genre has grown by over 34.2% from 2018 to 2022 in market shares (The Numbers). If the world is turning to action movies for entertainment, can we not say there is a desire for that in the real lives of everyday people?

This fascination has a name, “survivor’s elation.” Survivor’s elation is a term for those who witness disaster but are not a part of it. Those whose lives see no impact by the disaster than others watching an “exciting” event happen. Gabbert herself says that “it’s the spectacle...that makes a diaster a disaster.” (Gabbert 10). Is pleasure in disaster inherently driven by the selfishness of the individual? Not in the slightest. It is human nature to be awed by larger-than-life occurrences. This is primarily because we have been bred to react that way. The entertainment portion of human nature, again, derives from external forces. Gabbert eloquently explains this by saying, “...the news turns disasters into ready-made cinema; the way war movies, which are meant to critique war, can really only glorify war.” (Gabbert 12). Survivors’ elation occurs because of this glorification, which results in one of the worst parts of a disaster, the complacency. With the widespread nature of social media, we sometimes witness multiple disasters per day. Mass shootings, floods, fires, and destruction are all at our fingertips within seconds of their occurrence. The complacency aspect comes at the cost of society’s empathy. We become numb to the disaster part of the tragedy because of how often it occurs. The only way to cope is to find some kind of enjoyment in it.

Not only do humans enjoy disaster, but we also invite it. Although sometimes, unintentionally. When we look at technological disasters, such as the Challenger space shuttle

explosion, they seem like a thing of the past, but this is far from the truth. As technology advances, the possibility of and opportunity for disaster arrives quicker than ever before. One interesting (and somewhat terrifying) occurrence was when artificial intelligence developed by Facebook learned to communicate in their language, which humans could not understand. The AI was shut down after this. While an article published by The Independent about the experiment claims, “Researchers did not shut down the programs because they were afraid of the results or had panicked,” (The Independent) we can only wonder what these results could mean in a disaster scenario. Is an artificial intelligence takeover conclusion made simply because they developed a faster communication method improbable? Yes. However, as Gabbert cites in her essay, the idea of improbability and “the concept of hubris lets us off too easy.” (Gabbert 16). We never expect disasters. As Gabbert states, “Disasters always feel like a thing of the past. We want to believe better technology, better engineering will save us” (Gabbert 16). Society’s desire to want more, more entertainment, more knowledge, and more technology invites these tragic events. Is an artificial intelligence takeover improbable? Yes, but the idea of the disaster is fantastical.

What we know about the cult following around these natural disasters is the desire for the audience to be entertained. While the audience may lack the empathy to sympathize with the gravity of the actual situation, it is only because a glorified pre-packaged version of it is spoon-fed to them. There will always be a profiteering market around tragedies as long as there are consumers. Disasters have happened, are happening, and will always happen not only because of technological improvements but because of human nature.

## Works Cited

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