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Ghosting Us All: How Hollywood Obscures the Same Environmental Issues It Foregrounds

Abstract: There is no shortage of disaster films in Hollywood. Be they natural, technologically driven, and/or the result of ideological structures that act on exploitative terms, film protagonists and societies at large engage with environmental disasters with regularity. However, if there is any change in the proliferation of such disasters and their causes, it is an increase, not a decrease or even critical discourse. Why do moviegoers experience such undeniable displays of environmental issues, yet generally are not granted access to such critical discourses by those displays? Using two blatantly similar endings to the films *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper* as a starting point, this paper examines the phenomenon of haunting to help explain how and why it can be that some of the more overt themes in Hollywood disaster films have such minimal effect upon the collective consciousness. Part theoretical considerations, part filmic narrative analysis that follows from them, the work here will bring together iterations of hauntology, Freud's death drive, and capitalism to demonstrate shared aspects of all three that reduce the real environmental concerns at the forefront of the films' plots to eco-ghosts. As ghosts, those concerns are present but also avoid direct discourse or resolution in virtue of haunting. Along with those of Thanos from the films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the experiences of the two protagonists played by Dwayne Johnson in the aforementioned films will be shown to be haunted themselves in ways that take them and the viewer close to eco issues at hand, but not in any substantive way – thus reinforcing and safeguarding the very capitalism that repeats such disasters.

Keywords: disaster films; technology; media; capitalism; Mark Fisher; hauntology; Freud; Hollywood film.

Emma Gaines (Carla Gugino): "So, what now?"
Ray Gaines (Dwayne Johnson): "Now, we rebuild."
 – Ending of *San Andreas* (2015)

Will Sawyer (Dwayne Johnson): "What're you going to do now?"
Zhao Long Ji (Chin Han): "Rebuild."
 – Ending of *Skyscraper* (2018)

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There is an elephant in the room that haunts humanity regularly throughout the cinema of popular culture. Humanity is perplexed – piqued, even – at filmic depictions of its own planetary destruction yet spends comparatively more time and energy running the risk of bringing about that demise. Culture as industry reproduces not only the structure and content of art but also this elemental contradiction of capitalism: to survive on a logic of expansion with fixed resources. This context of repetition helps demise stand exposed, yet unaltered – to the extent that the veneer peels off to minimal protestation, and popular art becomes palimpsest of the mechanistic way in which unfettered capitalism is destroying environments. The endgame looms over human existence like a specter. Popular culture reproduces the specter along with the wreckage of our own progress in our art, it is abject, we are scared, and yet if the behavior is any indication we are largely unmoved.

The impetus for reproduction in mainstream cinema is a longstanding phenomenon, reaching new highs with haphazard sloganisms such as the one(s) uttered in the epigraphs above during endings for *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper* – both Hollywood summer blockbusters of typical order, starring Dwayne Johnson, also known as the personality The Rock. Released barely three years apart by different studios, these insultingly similar endings to tirelessly similar entries in the pseudo-homogenous genre of big-budget disaster films just about says it all so far as the recapitulative tendencies of mainstream cinema: the two films do not just play out similarly, they end with the same dialogue, with the same actor performing it, just on opposite ends of the exchange.

Perhaps the repetition is apt, though, because humanity seemingly has yet to learn. The strikingly similar endings to *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper* indeed provide the same problematic epilogue that helps environmental issues persist: accounts of human environments, natural and urban, imposing themselves upon protagonists and onlookers alike in catastrophic fashion, whereby the problems are addressed by a small group surviving the moments of mass death and 'rebuilding' – not by attempting to solve the initial problems in any sustainable way. Repeated to the formulaic extent that they are – and centered around protagonists who are haunted by a tragic past that they overcome in tandem with the disaster they must weather – such faux and flimsy narrative statements allow viewers to experience a sense of victory or solution over external environmental threats that falls well short of addressing the real issues. This in turn implies even more repetition – the earthquakes will return, and we will continue living on their fault lines in densely-populated cities. Buildings will get taller and taller regardless of the risk.

Such formulaic narrative resolutions are not benign. As the aforementioned elephant in the room, the threat of environmental payback – be it force(s) of nature or human-made – manifests itself in Hollywood in ghostlike ways. Mainstream disaster films evoke real environmental problems, real environmental fears, but only insofar as they are allowed to dovetail straight into easy, marketable conclusions, taking the edge off of their real nature, making them appear as apparitions as opposed to

persistent problems at hand. In other words, Hollywood eco-disasters, which here include ones perpetrated by tectonics and urban sprawl, haunt viewers by showing them truly immediate technological and natural problems but stymieing direct discourse by claiming the problem has been conquered. (Even in cases where the disasters aren't clearly preventable, such as earthquakes in *San Andreas*, this distracting effect can easily bleed over into more strictly "eco" concerns brought on by capitalist production.) The problem is there, it is fearful, but it is also gone at the same time – a ghost. This ghost is then reproduced faithfully by Hollywood's film factory, the confidence in its efficacy laid bare by blatant repetition to the extent of the example at the end of both *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper*. All of this aids in the sustenance of the capitalist contradiction of expansion that courts environmental demise, or death. A critical space of such haunting shall be explained through a confluence of hauntology, Freud's death drive, and capitalism. Once articulated, this critical space will apply the antagonist of the last two *Avengers* films, Thanos, and The Rock's two disaster films to two major reproduced methods in Hollywood for keeping environmental crises as ghosts, respectively: the Other and its return, and the privileging of personal narrative scope over a more societally aware one that might better accommodate real change.

Hauntology, Freud, death, and capitalism

The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical,
at once they 'return' and make their apparitional debut.
 – Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, *Ghosts: Deconstruction,*
Psychoanalysis, History

The return to inorganic matter is paradoxically the result of a formative process which is
the formation of the organism's own death.
 – Catherine Malabou, "Plasticity and Elasticity in Freud's
Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives
the more, the more labour it sucks.
 – Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume One*

What is a ghost if not something that resorts to haunting because it longs to return to where it once was, but cannot? This 'ghostly nostalgia' manifests in the films examined below as an eco-ghost that accesses concerns about human safety in the face of environmental blowback. This ghost binds together three core ideas that all work through death, the thing that most thoroughly hides in plain sight within (North)Western culture: hauntology, Freud's death drive, and capitalism. The trio of quotations immediately above already demonstrate the similarity with which they can

be articulated. Examination of each core idea in this Hollywood eco-ghost can help drive through the tedium of their repeated manifestations, helping to understand the ghost in proper terms and expose the capitalist paradox that entraps it.

At its inception hauntology is coined by Jacques Derrida in his book *Specters of Marx*, flipping Marx's famous claim that the specter of Communism haunts Europe in order to examine how Marx's theories have had the same effect.[1] Accounted for in more contemporary terms, it is a way of interacting with art and culture that is concerned with the past, has its own electronic music genre, and also boasts a rigorous contemporary critical base, of which the late Mark Fisher was a prominent figure. For Fisher, the death that gives birth to hauntology is that of the modernist teleological promise of unquestioned progress, which is present in hauntology music that seeks to reanimate sounds in order to harken back to those lost times. Caught in the imperfect space between what is and what was – memory – the music is relegated to haunting from there.[2] Central to hauntology but in more broad terms that include artforms other than music, including cinema, is this notion that "time is out of joint." As such its artifacts distinguish themselves with characteristics that "won't allow us to fall into the illusion of presence."[3] Ghosts' acts of haunting are so thorough that *presence* becomes the illusion; the paradox is unlocked, as Fisher's reference to Peter Buse and Andrew Stott's quote above indicates.[4] Seen this way, hauntology is about acts of haunting. It is expressed in art as a wish to revive the past – a wish that, in hauntology's case, is already unfulfilled.

For this reason, when confronted with each films' environmental crisis the protagonists undergo a relationship with their own personal narrative that involves being haunted by a past that is lost to them, which shall be touched on below. They end up having to deal with both the environmental and personal obstacles in parallel fashion. In fact, as the films play out, resolution of one cannot occur without resolution of the other, conflating relationships to the environment with relationships to one's personal life: Thanos' sacrifice of his own adopted daughter, Gamora, serves as a precursor to the mass sacrifice that is his 'Endgame' in the two most recent *Avengers* films, and both come back to haunt his conscience; Ray must come face to face with the previous drowning death of his daughter while he saves his surviving child from the same fate before peace can be reached in *San Andreas*; Will's physical challenge of surviving the ordeals of *Skyscraper* are made more difficult by his amputated leg, the result of a regretful decision on the job years prior. While our own decisions and lifestyles no doubt effect environmental degradation such as urban development and

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 6.

[2] Mark Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology," *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 5, 2 (2013): 42–55.

[3] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life. Writings On Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures* (Hampshire, UK: Zero Books, 2014), 21.

[4] As quoted in Fisher, "The Metaphysics of Crackle," 44.

(geographical) population density – factors central to the films in question – confusing the two allows for a false sense of widespread accomplishment in the place of a personal one. In hauntological terms, the paradox of presence by absence is attached to the paradox of living by deadly terms – something capitalism requires in order for itself to survive.

Emotionally resonant as they may be, these hauntological desires require more grounding with intersecting theories. Freud's psychological writings speak to hauntology by placing death in a similar temporal contradiction, as observed above by the work of Catherine Malabou. But there are even stronger connections here. For Freud, the desire to return to the past is much more deeply ingrained. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he introduces the dichotomy within the self of the life drive versus the death drive. The latter is characterized by a desire to return to one's original state. Freud puts it more shrewdly:

> It would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never yet been attained. On the contrary, it must be an old state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons – becomes inorganic once again – then we shall be compelled to say that '*the aim of all life is death*'.[5]

Freud also ascribes compulsions for repetition to the death drive, which links it to Hollywood's ability to mechanically reproduce art, in this case, that of the eco-ghost.[6] By asserting that the death drive makes up part of the internal logic of the human self, Freud not only makes a preoccupation with returning to the past constant – he makes it constitutive of the individual psyche. In this sense, capitalism itself can be understood as an expression of the death drive – not so much to return to one's past as to be forced to negotiate a life lived by the contradiction that what makes up progress might also create our environmental demise. In other words, with each move to expand outward, capitalism sets back relationships to the space(s) around individuals. This internal frustration occurs within the protagonists; viewers can sense that they understand the cost of progress all too well, given their pasts.

Capitalism is concerned with the past insofar as it satisfies the ideology's tenet of growth and expansion, but it also leads toward death in the same DNA-deep manner that Freud describes, because, as mentioned above, the constant expansion plays out within a context of fixed resources. For decades now, across the globe, among the loudest voices against environmental sustainability have been claims that it is not

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[5] Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 32.

[6] Ibid, 29.

cost-effective, that it stands in opposition to the instrumentalization of earth that has fueled capitalism so successfully for centuries.[7] This debate still plays out, knowingly, at the cost of billions of lives and hundreds of species. Furthermore, the artifice of the digitalization of economies – propped up by the more foundational artifice of money as a *thing* instead of its true role as a *concept* – effectively has capitalism haunting itself, thrust ahead into a virtual space it asked for as much as humanity asks for another *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie: "The late capitalist world, governed by the abstractions of finance, is very clearly a world in which virtualities are effective, and perhaps the most ominous 'specter of Marx' is capital itself."[8] This serves as an updated version of the vampiric paradox Marx already observes in "capital itself," drawing meaning and function from one reified concept (labor and traditional monetary capital for Marx and Fisher, respectively) in order to reify itself. In either case, when juxtaposed against hauntology and the death drive, capitalism seems much more at home than might be readily observable. All three ideas occupy a space of death that, thusly, wants to go back, cannot, and so affects society in paradoxical ways as ghostlike.

These are not superficial connections. While hauntology, the death drive, and capitalism are not unconditionally compatible upon surface readings, a sameness in core expression like the quotations above betrays these deeper connections between them as they apply to eco-concerns. The connections are non-reductive in the sense that folding them into a singular term or expression would distort each as much as it might simplify. Nonetheless, with shared stakes in a paradoxical proclivity for survival through demise and nostalgia, these three phenomena are mutually inclusive, and, in totality, speak for presence-absence – an eco-ghost. As an expression of shared qualities in hauntology/haunting, our inherent death drive, and capitalism, this eco-ghost's manifestations in mainstream film maintain the environmental status quo by giving the impression of dealing with the issues that make up our relationships with the world, while in actuality reinforcing them with cinematic narrative elements of the haunting of protagonists, as we shall see below.

Now that this critical framework has been established, what sort of things are repeated wholesale within Hollywood to help empty out environmental concerns? As Fisher points out, modernism's desired future can no longer be had. This echoes death, as well as the return of the repressed, so a contemporary incarnation of these forces arguably at their capitalist peak serves as a useful point of analysis. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is a well-oiled capitalist machine that boasts a highly lu-crative Freudian personification whose name even has roots in the psychologists' work.

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[7] Thankfully, some of the world is coming around on this point, understanding at least that (so far!) living citizens are required for an economy, and that eco-sustainability can be cost-effective.

[8] Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life*, 18.

Thanos, the Other, returned

I will shred this universe down to its last atom and then, with the stones you've collected for me, create a new one teeming with life that knows not what it has lost but only what it has been given…a grateful universe.
– Thanos, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019)

Freud names the life and death drives after their counterparts in the pantheon of Greek gods: Eros and Thanatos, respectively. The notion of the life and death drives serving as yin to each other's yang, and that this mirrors the inherent contradiction in capitalism between expansion/growth and murder/death, deserves its own discursive space more thorough than here. For now, it suffices to say that this dynamic already lives and breathes in contemporary Hollywood's eco-disaster canon in the form of a major MCU antagonist, the aptly-named Thanos, whose own goal to optimize quality of life by eradicating half of all living things in the universe is an incisive take on environmental solutions to overpopulation and/or capitalist expansion, but in specifically moral terms.[9] He is even a celestial return of the repressed in the context of the MCU, traveling across the vastness of space throughout end credit cutaway scenes in Phase One and Phase Two of the movie franchise, culminating in Phase Three with *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*. There, his arrival to our world triggers his aforementioned goal like a twisted half-life version of the Dionysian return, whereby instead of Eros-like ecstasy citizens perform Thanatos-inspired panic and mass 'death.'[10] In this sense, Thanos represents issues of overpopulation imposing themselves upon the MCU hero protagonists in ways that force them to reconcile the past similarly to how The Rock's characters in *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper* must in order to 'overcome' the environments that threaten safety.

Though the conundrum is misrepresented on ethical terms by his cold utilitarianism, Thanos' desire to optimize quality of life for the survivors of his genocide is an expression of the death drive. Thus, he is of the subconscious, the Other – a robust cinematic designation that in this case and others extends to anxieties about the natural world as well, and capitalism's impact upon it. Just as hauntology, the death drive and capitalism transpose characteristics onto one another, so does the self see the Other – other humans, the nonhuman, the self-body, other facets of the self – as a

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[9] The ideological infrastructure of Hollywood film does not play a neutral role here: In the original *Infinity War* comic book narrative upon which the films are based Thanos aims to kill off *all* life in the universe in order to save the woman he loves: the embodiment of death. (At first, he succeeds in only killing half as many, which is where the film adaptation gets the idea.) Once transferred from its original source to a more monolithic corporate art machine, capitalist environmental premises of overpopulation and/or overabundance are introduced to the narrative.

[10] Technically, those living beings who disappeared during "the snap" of Thanos' fingers that halves all life in the universe don't "die" in the traditional sense of the word, since they do eventually return following a series of superfluous temporal twists and misrepresentations of quantum physics, the latter also a discussion for another more suitable discursive space.

screen upon which to project its own fears, insecurities and shortcomings. Thus, there is a distinct contemporary pattern of subconscious and/or symbolic alarmist fears of the Other coming to take our natural vitality. This is embodied by Thanos.

If Thanos' interpretive yield here is not yet seen as potent enough, consider the echoes of the three quotations that unify hauntology, death and capitalism that can be inferred from the Thanos quote from *Avengers: Endgame* found above. The latter may not have the same bell-ringing pseudo-equivalence as the trio of quotations, but the spirit is definitely there. Thanos makes eco-concerns explicit by opening up the pragmatic debate around overpopulation exacerbated by capitalism: how much life on earth is too much, and whether or not the end of preserving the natural world justifies *any* means, including wanton sacrifice of life. To wit: in recent years it has been calculated that by 2030 the global human population will have risen from 7.5 billion to 8.6 billion, 9.8 billion by 2050, and 11.2 billion by 2100.[11] Given that overpopulation is already a hot-button topic, it is hard to imagine an increase like this being manageable for overall life on earth. When Thanos makes this dilemma relevant for humanity, he articulates a collective eco-anxiety from a fantastical fictional position, partially obscuring its application to real life, and thus haunting because the 'solution' is both present and out of reach, like a ghost.

As Other, aliens spook and haunt us. Thanos is alien to earth, but not alien to capitalist reproduction. He has served as a stereotypical Hollywood alien Other to a somewhat unprecedented capitalist effect, in that he has been one main character across a film franchise that has dominated the box office for decades now, a MCU monoculture that is building its own globalized and antiseptic infrastructure within the largest artistic one to date: Disney, its parent owner. Endemic of reproduction, there is even repetition in Thanos' return. Not only does he return to battle the Avengers multiple times under similar circumstances throughout *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, but the whole final film is wrapped up in temporal repetition, leaving the only place to make change within circularity – another paradox. Overall, the MCU franchise is repetitive not only in its episodic narrative genre derived from its comic book origins, but also in its constantly self-referential moves required to satisfy its marketing needs as a capitalist monolith.[12]

Holding calamities such as mass loss of life in the face of environmental issues as accountable to the Other lets them be recognized clearly, but without call to action because they are acted out by unreal personifications. The dynamics of the dilemma of capitalism and overpopulation exist in both emotional and moral paradoxes of scale: taken from a distance, en masse, the issue seems unsurmountable; taken on a personal, and thus more intimate level it feels far less so.

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[11] David Roberts, "I'm an Environmental Journalist But I Never Write About Overpopulation. Here's Why," Vox, updated November 29, 2018, https://www.vox.com/energy-and-environment/2017/9/26/16356524/the-population-question, acc. on March 24, 2021.

[12] Marvel has expanded on the existential fallout from "the snap" and its undoing during its first two forays into television, *WandaVision* and *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*. Both series have dealt with the incident largely through flashbacks, looking to the preferred past to look for a lost future – very hauntological, especially by Fisher's estimation.

Making it personal

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change.
– Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage – An Inventory of Effects*

There is another key force at work within these cinematic eco-ghosts, and that is something I have detailed in previous work, which I will refer to here as narrative redistribution to the trivial or personal in Hollywood film, whereby weighty and/or imminent social matters are emptied out through melodrama. Put differently, culture's stories collapse environmental concerns right before the viewers' eyes via a rendering of scope reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan's view of ratio above. As media, film changes the scope of our perceptions, and this is not always a good thing. Often, while the mainstream film can call attention to important societal issues, it treats them in ways that are accessible, easy, and self-reinforcing in order to garner a large audience. This amounts to misrepresentation and is particularly prevalent when trying to appeal to scores of individual viewers on emotional levels while still examining themes that exceed atomized individual consideration, such as eco-disasters. These attempts tend to manifest themselves as intensely personal melodramas that stand in stark contrast to the pan-cultural crises they treat, again haunting the issue(s) at hand by accessing them, albeit in a way that prevents access that is 'accurate to scale.' In other words, the viewer is affected deeply and personally, but only by the deep and personal – *not* by any altruistic worldview that purports to be the message. This, in part, is how we are able to watch people die by the stadium-full, with relative detachment. Whereas one might dissociate upon witnessing an actual catastrophe of such scale, film does that legwork for viewers through a myriad of cinematic devices such as CGI effects and depth of field that render anonymous crowds out of focus, a sterile absence of blood and gore, and others – but for our purposes here, there is also haunting as a narrative device(s).

Hollywood warps the scope of eco-issues when personal melodrama is prioritized over the societal or environmental consequences that frame it. This amounts to examining an issue that is no longer properly assessed from within. We can see the ghost, hear its haunts, but they are forever tabled until later on when everything within a solely personal scope is dealt with. The fact that the personal and the collective are necessarily conjoined within environmental issues is ignored; somehow we are led to believe that so long as one single Character-, Couple-, or Family-X survives, humanity as a whole will as well. In disaster film maven Roland Emmerich's *The Day After Tomorrow*, Laura (Emmy Rossum), Sam (Jake Gyllenhaal), and a host of other Americans are trapped in a NYC library while climate change literally freezes the outside air. Laura tells Sam that her academic life has now become "preparation for a future that no longer exists," speaking to Sam and also articulating the very same sentiments that hauntology is couched within. What happens next is not any sort of meaningful dialogue on the environment. Rather, Sam turns the conversation into a confession of his

crush for Laura, which is consummated with an onscreen kiss.[13] It takes all of about 40 seconds to empty out meaningful discourse in favour of melodrama. In other words, "*The Day After Tomorrow* is a film characterized by characterization and by framing the issue of global warming within such a typical and formula-laden narrative, any informative message is rendered meaningless."[14]

True to form(ula), *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper* carry out the same technique, whereby substantive discourse is immediately followed by personal stakes, but it is disjunctive. It fails to hold up personal life as a call to further discourse and/or action in light of the onscreen crises. This might be due to marketing imperatives (one can easily imagine a screening survey demanding "less critique of how to live our lives, more bright lights!") but does that not reiterate the point, if not the prioritizing, of capitalism? The most severe dialogue scene in *San Andreas* occurs when Cal Tech seismic specialist Dr. Lawrence Hayes (Paul Giamatti) and his ragtag team hack into a television network to explain and warn the United States that the worst quake in a series of them that day has yet to come. After this, the film immediately cuts to Ray (Johnson) and Emma (Carla Gugino) Gaines talking about the drowning death of their daughter years ago, the brief exchange amounting to, as Emma puts it, the most Ray has talked about the death since the day it happened. These are the most expositional moments for both core themes of the film – natural disaster and the loss of a family member – and they occur back-to-back, as though the initial problem of the natural world and its instability has to be re-scaled to the personal as soon as filmically possible.

The loss of his daughter during their rafting accident together haunts Ray in particular, given his role as a protector that extends beyond mere paternal duty (he is a Fire and Rescue pilot by trade). Not only does he unfairly blame himself for the tragedy, but he is also haunted by the past he shared with his nuclear family that has since been torn apart by the grief. When the aforementioned conversation continues a few scenes later, Ray explains to Emma that he cannot reconcile life after their daughter's death "because nothing is the way it used to be, and the way it used to be was perfect." Fisher or Freud could not have put it any better. This is a double-haunting: Ray is haunted by his own past while the viewer is haunted by the natural disaster that should be the focal point of the film yet is substituted for emotionally by this formulaic family melodrama.

San Andreas opens with a signifier of the Gaines' family tragedy: a closeup of late daughter Mallory's keepsake necklace as it floats alone underwater on that fateful day from the past. This vision haunts Ray, Emma, and their living daughter Blake (Alexandra Daddario) throughout the film, having splintered the family to the point of divorce proceedings. Shot against a dark background with tiny bubbles, it looks almost like snow falling in the night sky, which happens to be the opening shot of *Skyscraper* before the camera tilts down to show the site of Will Sawyer's (Johnson

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[13] Blair Miller, "'What You See Is Happening Right Now' – Thermageddon and a Search for Tomorrow," *CineAction* 70 (2006): 68.

[14] Ibid, 68.

again) own tragedy. Will does not grieve for a lost family member like Ray. Instead, he copes with the loss of his own leg in an explosion that occurred during a law enforcement sortie on the job that not only literally scarred him and his best friend for life, but also helped *form* his family, since the naval surgeon that operates on him after the incident ends up becoming his wife and the mother of his two children. These narratives trump the massive loss of human life in *San Andreas*, as well as the urban environmental dangers caused by the destruction of the titular building in *Skyscraper* – so much so, that at times what should be the overwhelming sensory experience takes a back seat to personal affairs.

Like Ray, Will struggles with self-imposed guilt over his personal tragedy. Both men undergo a rigorous series of tests of mental and physical feats of Homeric proportions – Ray versus the natural world and the obstacles it poses to rescuing his daughter, and Will versus The Pearl, the obnoxious phallic declaration that is 'The Skyscraper.' The Pearl becomes an obstacle course within which Will must (re)prove his worth – in front of an enthralled crowd on the street, standing in for a Greek chorus, no less. In both films, The Rock is driven to superhuman levels of strength and endurance by his guilt, his *refusal to repeat* the past. His reward in both cases is the restoration of the nuclear family.

By contextualizing the narrative with either closeness to or distance between family members at almost every turn throughout what are meant to be eco-disaster films, The Rock's characters' quests to overcome what he sees as his past failings parallel a vague sense of accountability the viewer might feel about what capitalism is doing to the planet. When he resolves his own traumas by the end, it muffles any trace critical discourse that could resonate after the films. In light of how intensely the personal struggles are depicted in *San Andreas* and *Skyscraper*, large-scale environmental disasters feel manageable. Why work so hard to fix the environment when The Rock can return to his 'perfect' past after some innocuous death-defying acts? Here, the disjunction is laid bare.

Giving up the ghost[15]

I thought that by eliminating half of life, the other half would thrive. But you have shown me that's impossible. As long as there are those that remember what was, there will always be those that are unable to accept what can be. They will resist.
 – Thanos, *Avengers: Endgame* (2020)

This discourse began with the analogy of the elephant in the room that is environmental degradation. Elephants get quite large – look at the *size* of Thanos and The Rock. On one hand, one of them embodies a global reckoning. On the other hand, one is engaging the matter on a physical plane reserved for people unlike us. It can be

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[15]This is both the header in a chapter of Fisher's *Ghosts of My Life* as well as the title of a DJ Shadow track from his 2002 album *The Private Press*. Given DJ Shadow's sample-reliant genre of electronic music that fits with hauntology, it is unlikely that this is a coincidence.

difficult to distinguish who is whom in those descriptions, which says a great deal. On 'personal' levels, their roles in the films examined haunt on multiple levels, namely how they activate nostalgic desires to return to the past by "subordinat[ing] technology to the task of refurbishing the old. The effect [i]s to disguise the disappearance of the future as its opposite."[16] For our purposes, eco-disasters signal the disappearance of the future, and the fulfilled narrative arcs that eat up viewer attention disguise the crises as more manageable than they truly are. The arcs are satisfied through communing with the past for the future, longing for it, but in paradoxical ways that inherently court death and disaster, and fuel capitalism. Hollywood is an exemplar of a capitalist structure – not just through the messages its films send overtly and subconsciously, but also in its own economy, its alienation of labour, and its historically unchecked environmental degradation. The propaganda it creates and circulates will not threaten that existence; its heroes will bravely confront eco-concerns made urgent by capitalism, but their victories are only against the eco-ghost, not the real problems foregrounded in their films. After all, they are already "rebuild[ing]" after life-changing disasters in those worlds. We have yet to come to grips with the endangered future in ours.

What is needed are systemic solutions for systemic capitalist problems, as opposed to the sort of hyper-masculinized individuality Thanos and The Rock impose as icons who should feel more at home during the Reagan-Schwarzenegger era of excess but fit in well today because in our age of globalization, capitalism is more ubiquitous and entrenched than ever. As viewers, we join them because privileging the personal makes it easy to do so. We mourn the loss of awareness and appreciation of the natural world that would make its loss (finally) meaningful and thus prevent its apparition in cinema from appearing as merely that. This predicament itself is a true ghost, an oversight on our collective part, reminding us constantly of what we still do wrong to nature, and how the consequences are here to stay as well, as we watch while refusing to admit. But we *are* still freely watching, even if hauntologically. We can refuse to refuse.

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