

Imaginaries of Collapsology in Experimental Film

One of the manifestations of collapsology in contemporary visual culture can be found in the apocalyptic visions of mainstream media, based on spectacle of nature. However, it is also possible to find alternative visions that reveal the complexity of the relationships that human beings establish with the planet, perspectives that could help reverse the effects of collapsology, as defined by Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens. The aim of this article is to analyze a number of experimental films that effectively represent environmentalist discourses and forms, thereby offering alternatives to the catastrophist imaginaries characteristic of certain mainstream productions and omnipresent in the media. Beyond the filming of nature, these films adopt a phenomenological and kinesthetic perspective in order to explore different possibilities of cinematographic language and technology.

Date submitted: 14/03/2023

Date accepted: 01/09/2023

Keywords

COLLAPSOLOGY

COLLAPSE

ECOCINEMA

EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA

EXPANDED CINEMA

POST-ANTHROPOCENTRISM

CHOREOCINEMA

LANDSCAPE

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al_Film](https://www.academia.edu/110499602/Imaginaires_of_Collapsology_in_Experimental_Film)

[...]

**From the minerality of the planet to
the texture of the digital**

Jacques Perconte's premise
in *Avant l'effondrement du
Mont Blanc* (2020) makes his
environmentalist stance clear. With the
rising temperatures on the planet

accelerating the melting of the glaciers, the artist (indirectly) poses the question: Will we be the last to have the chance to see the peaks of Mont Blanc? To answer it, Perconte begins his film with a daguerreotype of the mountain taken in 1854 by John Ruskin and Frederick Crawley: *Aiguilles, Chamonix*. The texture of the picture, with its stains and imperfections, evokes André Bazin's ontology of the photographic image (1975, 23–31), the idea that what we see represented is the trace of a moment, the record of a (geological) time emulsified in the image. An abrupt cut then takes us suddenly from the photographic texture of that image to endless rows of meteorological data on Mont Blanc: weather, latitude, height, and so on. In the era of big data, it is worth noting that our understanding of environmental issues is often mediatized by the kind of data presented on the screen here with a vertical logic, literally showing us a “mountain of data” that scrolls quickly upwards before our eyes to the sound of the blustering winds on the mountain peak (Fig. 6). In short, we see two languages, analog and digital, representing a single motif of nature: the mountain. But rather than establishing a distance between one and the other, Perconte creates a kind of visual correspondence between them. He turns the environmental issue into a representational issue, establishing a relationship between the geological evolution of Mont Blanc and the evolution of the images that have represented it. The rise of the digital is thus highly significant for the representation of collapsology.

Having presented this initial dialogue between geological time and digital texture, Perconte goes on to present some cartographic views showing Mont Blanc and its surroundings on a map of the territory

whose printed imagery seems to take on a life of its own. The aerial view of the map serves as a counterpoint to the soundtrack (cow bells tinkling) that seems to offer a more horizontal, almost “ground level” view.

Following this cartographic view, we are taken fully into the question of the minerality of the mountain and the materiality of the image with a dialogue between opposites, playing with tensions mainly on the basis of the apparently inorganic nature of the digital and the organicity of nature, which takes shape through the deconstruction of the image. Thus, for example, the spectacular sequence of an avalanche that concludes the film evokes a decomposition, creating different levels of abstraction that at times, as contradictory as it may seem, makes the snow appear as if it were an oil painting of a sky (Fig. 7). For Vincent Deville (2022), in this film Perconte creates a geology of images that posits a dialogue between the geological history and the history of the images themselves, by means of a parallel between the pixel and the mineral elements of the mountain. Similarly, a parallel is also established between the compression of the images and the snow tumbling down the mountain, which is presented almost alchemically as a living being thanks to an organic use of digital technology, as we can see in the sequence where a vertical pan up to the peak of Mont Blanc gradually breaks down into pixels that translate the minerality of the million-year-old rocks. And at the same time, the soundtrack evokes the roar of the sea or of the tumbling snow, in a natural movement which, like a Leviathan, shakes the very foundations of the Earth. Perconte depicts the tectonic shifts that gave the mountain its shape, rising up like a wave of stone.

Perconte's attitude towards the environment being filmed is also

[This table contains a large amount of repetitive data, likely representing a film script or a data table, with columns including coordinates, timecodes, and technical details. The text is mostly illegible due to its size and repetition.]

Fig. 6: Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc (Jacques Perconte, 2020).



Fig. 7: Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc (Jacques Perconte, 2020).



informed by two aspects mentioned before: decentering and kinesthesia. In the case of *Avant l'effondrement du Mont Blanc*, to be able to reveal the different space-time in which nature exists, the filmmaker, as he explains in an interview with Della Noce (2022), connects with the mountain on an inner journey to stillness. Indeed, the dialectic of mobility and immobility (or “quietude” and “inquietude”), which is key for representing an eternal state of becoming that fuses past, present, and future, is perfectly represented in the sequence where the shot of the snowy peaks of Mont Blanc unexpectedly enters an airplane. Quietude is represented by the “humble” and contemplative mood of the artist, who allows the plane itself to choose the framing: “My attitude is not to look through the lens; I look only at the beginning, Mont-Blanc is in the image, then the plane does the rest, I hold the camera” (2022, 227). This “quietude” stands in opposition to the economic “inquietude” of these kinds of “tourist” mountains that tumble down (2022, 227), revealing another of the tensions Perconte plays with in his work.

[...]

Translation by Martin Boyd

Funded by European Union-NextGenerationEU, Ministry of Universities and Recovery, Transformation and Resilience Plan, through a call from Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona).

- 1/ The term “Anthropocene” was coined in the early 1980s by the ecologist Eugene Stoermer of the University of Michigan to refer to the evidence of the transformative effects of human activity on Earth. It gained currency in the year 2000 when the Nobel prizewinner Paul Crutzen argued that the time had come to baptize a new geological epoch with this name.
- 2/ It is interesting to note that this French term can in fact be translated into English as either “breakdown” or “collapse.”
- 3/ “If biopolitics was the management of the lives of populations with the objective of maximizing capitalist profits and national purity, necropolitics was its negative operation: the processes of capture, extraction, and destruction carried out during colonial modernity” (Preciado 2022, 117). Unless otherwise stated, all the quotes from sources which are not in English have been translated by Martin Boyd.
- 4/ This is why a significant proportion of this “collapsology cinema” uses audiovisual techniques and devices that operate in opposition to the idea of acceleration, making “slowness” and contemplation central pillars of their aesthetic (Martínez-López 2023a).
- 5/ The term *dispositive* is used here to refer to “a schema, a dynamic play of relations which articulates discourses and practices with one another, and can be described with reference to three terms that in each case need to be entirely redefined and understood in their reciprocal relations: the spectator, the machinery, the representation” (Albera & Tortajada 2015, 44).
- 6/ In an interview for *Variety*, Emmerich talks about Twentieth Century-Fox’s reaction to the ending to *The Day After Tomorrow*: “When they finally saw the movie, they had a little trouble with it. They said, ‘Oh, my God, there is no real happy ending.’ It was there on the page, but it really hit them when they saw it. I said, ‘Guys, I can’t make this a happy ending because if humanity keeps going like this, there will be no happy ending’” (Donnelly 2019).

7/ The term “ecocinema” was coined by Scott MacDonald in 2004 to define a type of cinema that provides “something like a garden—an ‘Edenic’ respite from conventional consumerism—within the machine of modern life, as modern life is embodied by the apparatus of media” (2004, 109). However, it should be borne in mind that the definition and delimitation of the term is still being discussed and debated in both audiovisual studies and ecocriticism due to the growing interest in this field. A valuable contribution to this evolution that helps to contextualize existing studies of ecocinema is *Ecocinema Theory and Practice* (Rust, Monani & Cubitt 2013).

8/ The most revealing films made by Jean Epstein on the islands of Brittany are *Finis Terrae* (1929), *Mor’vran* (1930), *L’Or des mers* (1932), *Chanson d’Ar-mor* (1934), and *Le Tempestaire* (1947).

9/ Slow motion would also be one of the most oft-used techniques by Maya Deren—a profound admirer of Epstein—in her films. Deren used it like a microscope to reveal a nature of reality that was invisible to the naked eye. For more on Deren’s work and style, see *El universo dereniano. Textos fundamentales de la cineasta Maya Deren* (Deren & Martínez, 2020).

10/ It is unclear which version of *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* the film reel contained; Reble himself is not even sure that this was in fact the film, as he mentions in the comments included on the website of the film’s current distributor, Light Cone (Reble n.d.).

11/ The way that the images act on the spectator in this case recalls the effects produced by the Dreamachine (1960), the expanded cinema device created by Brion Gysin and Ian Sommerville.

12/ For further information, see Carolina Martínez-López, “Una aproximación al cine coreográfico de las pioneras norteamericanas” (2023b).

13/ “Organicist” here refers to the “principle of organicity” derived from Gestalt theory, organismic theories in psychology and general systems theory in biology and physics, where it designates the phenomenon evidencing a process of evolution that increases the degree of organization possessed by open systems (Von Bertalanffy 1979).

14/ The concept of the “poor image” is used here in the sense given to it by Hito Steyerl (2014, 33–48).

15/ In the exhibition *Sunset. Ein Hoch auf die sinkende Sonne* [Sunset: Hooray for the Sinking Sun] (Kunsthalle Bremen, 2022), there was an explanatory poster beside the video installation featuring Cecchetti’s film, where the curator Annett Recker expresses this idea.

16/ In this respect, it is also interesting to consider Rosi Braidotti’s proposals for a new post-human world (2015).

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How to quote Salvadó-Romero, Alan & Carolina Martínez-López. 2023. "Imaginaries of Collapsology in Experimental Film." *Comparative Cinema*, Vol. XI, No. 20, pp. 113–137. DOI: 10.31009/cc.2023.v11.i20.07