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Susanne Leikam

Of Storms, Floods, and Flying Sharks: The Extreme Weather Hero in Contemporary American Culture

When channel-hopping through Saturday's prime time TV programs, looking through recent literary best seller lists, or browsing the latest movie releases, it does not take long before you encounter (frequently American-produced) stories that are set against the backdrop of spectacular weather disasters: storms, floods, blizzards, and, in some cases, even hilarious peculiarities such as flying sharks. In the very same narratives, you also often meet the extreme weather hero, a figure who knows exactly how to defy even the angriest outbursts of "nature," keep cool, and save his community from harm, transforming chaos and turmoil into stability and security.

Not surprisingly, this heroic idol tends to be a young, white, heterosexual man in prime athletic shape. As increased awareness of the devastating impact of human-induced climate change permeates societies all around the globe, more and more popular culture texts featuring extreme weather events—commonly known as climate fiction or "cli-fi"—are being published (Leikam and Leyda 2017). Due to their sensational plots and emotional thrills, they are being disseminated, appropriated, and emulated worldwide. In the following, I will briefly lay out why the study of these often highly commodified narratives fills current research gaps in the humanities. Then, I will analyze the disaster parody *Sharknado* (2013) as a case study, in order to show how its representation of the extreme weather hero exposes many of the subtle (and not so subtle) underlying assumptions framing our imaginations about environmental crises and the ways in which masculinity is decisively entangled with them.

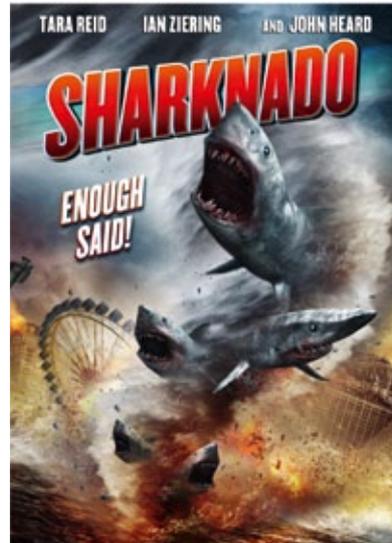


Figure 1:
Sharknado movie poster.

Seriously, Why Study *Sharknado*?

With the pervasive increase in the cultural production of climate change narratives, scholarship in the humanities has recently started to embrace the relevance of storytelling and the emotional impact the vicarious experience of fictional scenarios has on our environmental imaginations—i.e., our conceptual beliefs of how humans and their natural environment are currently entangled and, more importantly, how social and environmental interrelations ought to develop in the future. Yet, the gist of this research has exclusively looked at the stories' green agenda in isolation and neglected social concerns such as gender roles, perpetuating a long-held belief that social and environmental challenges exist independently from each other. So far, the academic studies that actually have addressed the important connection between gender constructions and their import for environmental politics, practices, and imaginations have—as Nicole Seymour and Sherilyn MacGregor point out in their introduction to this *Perspectives* issue—largely been limited to discussions of “women.” As a result, apart from a few pioneering examples, there has not yet been an academic endeavor that systematically and profoundly researches the intersection of masculinity and the environment, particularly its theoretical conceptualization, aesthetic representation, and the involvement of masculinity in causing real and imagined environmental crises and bringing about their solutions.

Given the recent wealth of climate change narratives in the commercial mainstream, this lack of research into the nexus of masculinities and the environment is all the more troubling. In many disciplines, serious academic engagement with (American) popular culture has long been dismissed by many on account of the latter's high degree of commodification and its strict adherence to rigid genre conventions. Yet, as scholars such as Noël Sturgeon (2009) and Nicole Seymour (2013) have convincingly argued, American popular cultures are powerful sites to turn to when researching dominant environmental narratives and related cultural ideologies since they perform powerful cultural and environmental work.

Out of the multiplicity of different types of masculinities, narratives of extreme weather tend to particularly celebrate so-called “hegemonic” masculinities as the normative ideal. Following R. W. Connell (1990), hegemonic masculinity is understood as a highly desirable and “culturally idealised [rather than statistically prevalent and common] form



Figure 2:
Screenshot from
Sharknado showing
Fin fighting a great
white shark (*Carchar-
odon carcharias*); great
white sharks are classi-
fied as “vulnerable” on
the red list.

of masculine character” (83), whose “exaltation stabilizes a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole” (94). As with all other kinds of masculinities, hegemonic masculinities are not bound to a biological sex, but are conventionally associated with men. They are historically contingent, depend on cultural emplacement, emerge in complex relations to other gender constructions, and need to be discussed in ways that recognize their intersection with other identity formations such as ethnicity, class, and age, to name but a few. Thus, the exploration of masculinities in extreme weather narratives grants deep insight into how American popular cultures imagine the nexus of gender, nature, and power in the United States.

Extreme Weather and Hegemonic Masculinity in *Sharknado* (2013)

Anthony C. Ferrante’s 2013 film *Sharknado* serves as an example of how American popular cultures typically frame extreme weather crises. *Sharknado* is a blatant and self-ironic parody of a disaster film that features many of the paradigmatic rhetorical scripts, visual iconographies, and genre conventions (such as the rhetoric of weather hyperbole and the staging of extreme weather as media spectacle). Deliberately styled as a B-movie, and indulging in its tacky special effects, the film tells the story of a giant global-warming induced supercluster of tornadoes that is able to lift sharks *en masse*

out of the ocean near Los Angeles (where they have gathered in large numbers due to global warming) and drop them over the city, where they kill hundreds of people. When the film was first broadcast on the Syfy Channel, the audience delighted in the cheesy combination of sharks and tornadoes, engaging in an unprecedented amount of Twitter activity that was soon termed a “Twitternado.” The film’s enormous popularity is evidenced by repeated TV and movie theater showings, an increasing number of sequels—*Sharknado 2: The Second One* (2014), *Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No!* (2015), and *Sharknado: The 4th Awakens* (2016), with a fifth installment and a documentary about the film already in the making—and a growing number of American celebrities (e.g., Michelle Bachmann, Elvis Duran, David Hasselhoff) willing to play themselves on screen.

In keeping with the tendency of popular culture parodies to lampoon the stock elements of the genres or texts in question, *Sharknado* stars an emblematic extreme weather hero who saves his family and, ultimately, the entire city of LA. As a young, white, heterosexual, extremely physically fit, and courageous male, protagonist Finley “the Fin” Shepard (Ian Ziering) exemplifies many of the conventional traits of the extreme weather hero. Since all hegemonic masculinities are influenced by their cultural emplacement, the American extreme weather hero also embodies popular national ideologies. His Franklinian moral integrity and rags-to-riches entrepreneurial spirit, for instance, are indicated by his proprietorship of a small business: he owns a bar at the beach and treats his staff and regulars like friends. Fin has made his passion, surfing, his profession and, as an at least one-time world champion in his field, he has acquired the status of a “surf legend” at his relatively young age. Through the numerous hours Fin spends surfing and at the beach every day, he has acquired intimate knowledge of the weather, the ocean, and wave dynamics and has developed a great respect for the powers of nature. It is specifically this cognitive and affective bond to nature that enables him to fulfill his role as extreme weather hero and save others. His supposed close connection to nature is also spotlighted in the film through Fin’s status as a caring father—the prototype of masculinity (Meuser 2006, 55)—who follows what is portrayed as his “natural” instinct to save his offspring in the case of disaster.

Since hegemonic masculinities are not absolute but relative, fluid, and dependent on historical, cultural, political, economic, and environmental contexts, as Connell and Messerschmidt have aptly demonstrated (2005), none of Fin’s character traits is a *priori* hegemonic. When the storm sets in, however, Fin lives up to his last name, Shepard

(a homophone of the paradigmatic shepherd who takes care of his “flock”), and develops a heroic agency that affirms the types of masculinity he performs as hegemonic. Taking his most immediate friends with him (a female bartender named Nova, a surfer buddy from Australia, and one of his older regulars), his first reaction to the extreme weather is to reunite his nuclear family, first driving to his ex-wife and daughter and then retrieving his son. Fin only succeeds in arriving at his ex-wife April’s place by violently and aggressively butchering sharks with more or less elaborate weapons and by cleverly dodging waves and storm twisters. Over the course of the movie, this battle between man and extreme weather intensifies: Fin and his son finally resort to the use of technological gadgets, first blowing up single twisters and, finally, the larger supercell with a car that they convert into a giant bomb. It is important to note that Fin and his teenage son do not only lead this venture, they also enjoy the violence, destruction, and aggression.

Unlike other members of his small group, Fin manages to navigate the chaotic, flooded streets of LA without being killed thanks to his intimate knowledge of the laws of nature, and his past experiences that have taught him not to prematurely dismiss the weather as (too) predictable. In the course of the film, his behavior, a cornucopia of male-connoted actions and tropes such as leadership, fighting, violence, bravery, and rational analytic cognition, proves efficient and successful in the fight against the sharknado. Displayed in the traditional role of the fragile and emotional damsel in distress, many of the female characters are used as a foil for the heroic actions of Fin and his son, which magnifies their heroic hegemonic masculinity while at the same time perpetuating binary gender oppositions. Interestingly, *Sharknado* does not entirely limit its depiction of hegemonic masculinities in extreme weather situations to men, but includes one exception that makes for a more complex gender construction. Just like Fin, the bartender Nova has a close connection to the sea. As a child, while on an overnight boat trip, she encounters a shark that kills her entire family but only wounds her. This moment signifies her initiation into the intimate knowledge of nature and enables her to show similar, albeit less pronounced, bravery and physical strength in the struggle against the storm. She equally delights in slaughtering the sharks and blowing up the twisters. Ultimately, this makes her the only nonbiological family member of Fin’s initial group to survive in the end. It is thus Nova’s special insight into “nature” in general and the sea in particular—not her biological sex—that allows her to develop hegemonically masculine behavior, adding greater complexity to *Sharknado*’s rendering of gender and the environment.

As mentioned above, American popular culture extreme weather narratives tend to affirm national ideologies. *Sharknado*, for example, stipulates the biological family as the safe haven that shelters individuals in the event of a crisis. This becomes most obvious during the reunion of the nuclear family, when Fin and April decide to stick together during the storm and then rediscover their love for each other toward the end of the film. Strikingly, April's new boyfriend, Collin (who does not even have a last name and, obviously, is not masculine enough to survive), is one of the sharks' first victims; his death occurs somewhat in passing, and he is mourned neither by April nor her children. Further, when the clouds clear away at the end of the movie, the newly reunited family embraces, indicating that the social order has been restored. Moreover, the fact that the survival of LA depends on individual masculine agency—and not on the nation (e.g., FEMA), the state (e.g., the National Guard), or any other emergency- or disaster-related institution such as the Red Cross—can be read as a vindication of neoliberal disaster politics, which increasingly shifts the responsibility for disaster preparedness and recovery toward private individuals (cf., e.g., Joseph 2013; Leyda and Negra 2015).

Conclusion

Through its caricature of typical genre conventions, *Sharknado* nicely illustrates and partly also satirizes the popular contemporary American imagination of how to respond to environmental crises successfully. In this undertaking, masculine behavior such as analytical thinking, resourceful tinkering with technological gadgets, athletic prowess, and, ultimately, physical violence plays an important part. Throughout the film, Fin's heroic masculine agency emerges as the most effective antidote to weather crisis and hence becomes the desirable and glorified ideal. Exaggeration—especially of the shark fights and rescue scenes—renders both the privileging of heroic masculine agency over empathy with human and nonhuman others, as well as collective and institutional cooperation in the field of disaster preparedness in times of environmental crises, hyper-visible. It thus has the potential to make the audience reflect critically on the need for solidarity and collaboration in environmental activism and politics.

Other, perhaps less obvious, linkages between the natural environment and masculinity surface in the American extreme weather hero's close connection to wild nature. This intimate relation emerges as the hero's pivotal character trait and is the source of his skills and power, enabling him to overcome the weather disaster and rescue endangered

communities. Accordingly, *Sharknado* and many similar weather disaster films—such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004) and *Interstellar* (2014)—can be seen to take up a much older WASP tradition of thought: one that not only mythologizes male-dominated frontier wilderness as the basic ingredient and central generator of “American civilization,” but which also claims that the “uniqueness in American character came from *men’s* experiences in nature” (Allister 2004, 2). This narrative renders women and men who do not display hegemonic masculinity invisible in one of the grand narratives of the nation, demonstrating not only the impact the environment has had on national myths, but also how gendered they are.

As in many other American popular culture texts, the confluence of hegemonic masculinity and extreme weather is presented as an opportunity to affirm cultural ideologies (such as neoliberal disaster preparedness) and to correct alleged social ills (such as the decline of the nuclear family or the feminization of society through increasing urbanization). By interpreting disaster as opportunity, extreme weather narratives also continue a centuries-old tradition of Western disaster optimism (cf. Klein 2007; Rozario 2007). As my analysis of *Sharknado* has demonstrated, the focus on the American extreme weather hero provides valuable insights into the imagination and the conceptual framing of environmental crises in American popular culture. In this context, the intricate entanglement of cultural constructs, such as masculinity and national ideologies, with environmental discourses is among the most noteworthy contributions to the study of the nexus of men and nature. Even stories of chainsaw-wielding surf champions and snarling sharks raining down on LA’s skyline turn out to be valuable research objects, relevant not only to the academic community but also to environmental activism at large, calling for an even deeper awareness of the interconnectedness between social and environmental concerns.

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