Narrative Strategies and Author's Vision in Disaster Cinema Docudramas

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Abstract. This article investigates disaster films, particularly the genre of docudramas. Docudramas address social issues with the aim of sparking debate and generating discussions on social and political matters that are often in the public eye. Disaster cinema docudramas explore the theme of survival as a common topic, addressing aspects such as heroism and resilience, and are portrayed in various ways by directors and screenwriters. Therefore, this article approaches the topic from an interpretative paradigm and with a qualitative methodology. A case study was designed to understand the author's differing perspectives on the representation of survival in two disaster film docudramas that recount the same real-life event, *Viven* and *La Sociedad de la Nieve*. The films were selected because the accident involving Uruguayan citizens depicted in both movies has regained relevance due to the success of the latter on Netflix and its nomination for the 2024 Oscars in the Best Foreign Language Film category. A content analysis guide was applied to 16 scenes from both docudramas based on three categories of analysis: plot development, characters, and settings. The narrative analysis of the films helped identify patterns or differences in each director's vision in constructing the same story. The different narrative and characterization strategies used by the directors to represent survival in extreme situations were evident. On one hand, a story focused on the event itself, and on the other hand, a story centered on the depth of the characters facing the catastrophic event. These differences in focus and representation contribute to the variety of cinematic narrative in docudramas. This research contributes to research on formats such as docudramas, as well as to narrative studies of film genres such as disaster cinema.

Keywords: Docudrama, Disaster Cinema, Narrative

1   Introduction

1.1   Disaster Cinema: Messages that Consolidate American Citizenship

Disaster films belong to the subgenre of action and adventure cinema, consisting of narratives that, following various devastating events, threaten the lives of a society or a minority of people and can be caused by technological or scientific failures as well as natural disasters [1]. In the United States, the economic crisis of 1929 generated a difficult situation; however, Hollywood underwent a beneficial growth, as cinema gained popularity by becoming the escape route from the reality of Americans. In the 1960s, the three fundamental beliefs that underpinned the confidence of Americans suddenly collapsed, as the belief that the Army was invincible, the president incorruptible, and the economy indestructible were destroyed [2]. In the 1970s, disaster films exalted the military, aiming to bolster patriotic love by instilling fear of an external enemy, always depicting a triumphant American army and transforming reality to reflect the constant success of Americans [3]. This is evident in most films of the genre, where the police and the military are the last resorts for the survivors, as these entities oppose any threat against society and the state [2]. Films like *Aeropuerto* (1970) and *El coloso en llamas* (1974) are characterized by revolving around a collective disaster caused by a technological event, featuring a male protagonist who leads collective actions in the face of the disaster, highlighting the innate virtue of the average, respectable, and common American citizen [4]. *La Aventura del Poseidón* (1972) features a group of survivors, led by a police officer and a minister, who promote a message suggesting the need to restore order and change the course of history in the United States. [2]. Disaster cinema is a type of film that generates suspense and tension, and portrays the story in a way that the main protagonist is the theories, discoveries, science, or technology [5].

1.2   Docudramas: Based on Real Events in Disaster Cinema

Films based on real events showcase the relevance of point of view in visual storytelling. They present images related to a character's thoughts and others that are unrelated. They universally demonstrate the disparity in how different individuals or groups perceive the same event [6]. *Lo imposible* (2012) directed by Juan Antonio Bayona shows real experiences lived by the Alvarez-Belón family in Thailand. It highlights the vulnerability of the well-being of a developed society and the presence of a sacrificial maternal figure [4]. Bayona explores the genre, delves into family ties, and his main resource is research, that is, delving into who his characters are, what led them to the climax, and what their world was like before the conflict arose [7]. On the other hand, there are various categories related to the documentary: pure narrative fiction on stage, narrative fiction with a documentary appearance, mockumentary, docudrama, television documentary, dramatized documentary, found footage documentary, and archival documentary. The term "docufiction" is also mentioned [8]. Also, in the docudrama format, it is necessary to have a precise use of the camera, using different movements to create tension, suspense, and emotion.

1.3   Cinematic Landscapes: Beyond the Narrative Setting

The cinematic space, whether explicit or implicit, contributes to the plot, interacts with the characters and the story, while also providing information to the viewer [9]. The landscape not only provides physical context to the story, but also enhances the behaviors of the characters and the drama of the narrative [10]. In documentaries, stories are told in specific environments that play an important role in the narrative, and the so-called "empty shots" (scenes without people) are loaded with meaning and emotion, as the cinematic landscape conveys emotional and moral depth, serving as a backdrop for actions and characters [11]. In *Corazón de Cristal* (1976), Hias, a character who starts by facing away from the audience and observing nature, extends his arm to show a series of apocalyptic images narrated by his voice (voice-over), constantly displaying landscapes where nature imagery alternates (first a river, then a meadow, a river, among others), offering a representation of nature that feels alive [12]. Throughout the history of cinema, various film techniques have significantly impacted how geographic spaces are represented on screen, influenced by the historical and social context of the story [10]. Additionally, the physical environment where a film is shot can have varying levels of connection to the story, ranging from simply being a passive setting to becoming an essential element of the plot, acting as an ally, protagonist, or antagonist [13].

1.4   The use of narrative resources in the plot to position the viewer

The plot is the sequence of events in a story where certain events of the narrative are emphasized or minimized [14]. The narrative structure consists of three parts: The setup, which initially may reveal the characters' identities, their roles in the plot, the setting, the time, and may begin with explanatory text or voice-over narration; the conflict, which can be internal (moral or psychological) or external (physical); and the resolution, providing a situation that allows for the story's conclusion [15]. *San Francisco* (1936) narrates the interconnected lives of a businessman, a priest, and a singer in San Francisco, both before and during the 1906 earthquake. This film begins with text that establishes the setting and the time period in which the movie takes place. *Cuando los mundos chocan* (1951) is about a group of scientists and survivors who build a space-craft to escape Earth before it is destroyed by colliding with another planet. This movie starts with a voice-over that sets the premise and provides information about the scientists to the viewer. In disaster movies, the catastrophe serves an essential function in the narrative, dividing it into three stages: before, during the disaster, and the period after it [2]. In the film, *San Andres* (2015) Ray Gaines, the search and rescue pilot, relives a painful moment through a flashback. Ray remembers Mallory, one of his two daughters, whom he took rafting and suffered an accident from which Ray was unable to save her. Now, Blake, the only daughter he has left alive is trapped in a building after the earthquake and he is the only one who can rescue her. This narrative device is used to highlight the emotional burden the protagonist has in trying to redeem the past and save the only daughter who is still alive. In this way, flashback is used either for aesthetic or dramatic reasons, allowing the interest to focus on the psychological evolution of the characters and on the dramatic construction [16].

1.5   The Complexity of Characters in Catastrophic Cinema

By reviewing the dimensions of a character (physical, psychological and social dimensions) we can deconstruct the character and understand its complexity [17]. Characters experience growth throughout the plot and achieve a transformational arc. Whether in character-centered or plot-driven stories, internal conflicts can lead to significant changes in their emotional development and behavior [18]. Arc can be positive, flat or negative. In the positive arc, the character undergoes positive change throughout the story, overcoming his or her own limitations. In the flat arc, the character is already complete and does not experience significant change. In the negative arc, the character ends up in a worse state than at the beginning [19]. To see this complexity, we must also take into account whether the characters are moving in a suspense or slow cinema story. The theory of suspense arises when there is fear of a negative outcome, hope for a positive outcome and doubts about the outcome [20]. Slow cinema challenges the speed of contemporary cinema by using long shots to immerse the viewer in space, making the public aware of the passage of time to show everyday life and human experiences with respect and without dramatization [21]. This indicates that these stories are separated from the conventional and may have as protagonists antiheroes or marginal characters, and their stories may focus on anecdotes or everyday situations. Also these films present the shots in order to evoke the viewer a long time that can be associated with both trauma experiences and memory processes [22].

2   Methodology

The article was carried out from the interpretative paradigm [23] and qualitative approach [24]. A case study was designed [25] in order to know the differences in the author's vision in the representation of survival in two docudramas of catastrophe cinema that narrate the same event based on real events: *Viven* and *La Sociedad de la Nieve* (see Table 1).

Table 1. Films analyzed

Film	Technical sheet
¡Viven! (V)	Director: Frank Marshall
	Country: Estados Unidos
	Year: 1993
	Length: 123 min
	Screenwriter: John Patrick Shanley
	Cast: Josh Hamilton, Ethan Hawke, entre otros.
	Genre: Drama, Adventure, Survival
	Synopsis: In 1972, a plane carrying a Uruguayan rugby team crashed in the Andes. The survivors had to resort to extreme measures to survive. They fed on the bodies of their deceased teammates, while others made a perilous journey through the mountains.

La Socie-dad de la Nieve (LSN)	Director: J. A. Bayona
	Country: España
	Year: 2023
	Length: 144 min
	Screenwriters: J.A. Bayona, Bernat Vilaplana, Nicolás Casariego, Jaime Marqués
	Cast: Enzo Vogrincic, Agustin Pardella, Matías Recalt, entre otros.
	Genre: Drama, Adventure, Survival
	Synopsis: In a plane crash, a plane carrying a Uruguayan rugby team crashed in the Andes in 1972. Only 29 of the 45 passengers survived the crash. Trapped in a desolate environment and at high altitude, they were forced to resort to extreme measures to survive, including consuming the flesh of their deceased teammates.

The films were selected because the theme of the accident of the Uruguayan citizens narrated in both films has taken relevance due to the great success of the latter on Netflix and its nomination for the Oscar 2024 awards in the category of Best Foreign Film [26]. Therefore, a content analysis guide [27] was applied to 16 scenes based on three categories of analysis: plot development, characters and scenarios [28]. To select the scenes, a synopsis breakdown of both films was performed, and the first act was chosen, which allows observing the initial state, the trigger, the protagonist's action and the first turning point; the third act covering the climax and denouement, and the main character's conflict, which analyzes the external and internal conflict of the character and the protagonist's action.

Table 2. Content Analysis Guide

Categories	Sub-Categories	Indicators
Plot development	Narrative Structure	Initial State
		Trigger
		First Plot
		Development
		Second Plot
		Climax
		Resolution
	Narrative Elements	Narrative Point of View
		Flashbacks or Flashforwards
		Plot Twists
	Narrative Arc	Evolution of the Initial Situation
		Conflict Development and Resolution
Characters	Transformation Arc	Initial State of the Character
		Final State of the Character
Scenarios	Geographic Location	Physical Setting
		Geographical Setting, Natural Features
	Social Environment	Cultural Context, Environment
	Temporal Setting	Historical Period, Season of the Year

The data collection process included the creation of transcriptions and manual coding. The generated codes contributed to the mentioned categories (see Table 2), revealing crucial findings from the context, dialogue, character personalities, changes and complexities of the setting, as well as visual and thematic elements.

2.1   Ethical Considerations

The movie *La Sociedad de la Nieve* was viewed through a paid subscription on Netflix and the movie *Viven* was purchased virtually on the Amazon platform.

3   Results and Discussion

3.1   Power Structures in the Plot of *Viven* and *La Sociedad de la Nieve*

The catastrophe docudramas *Viven* and *La Sociedad de la Niev*e (see Table 1) begin years after the event and are narrated by people who suffered the Andes accident. However, the beginning of both stories is different. *Viven*, which leaves in suspense what is going to happen, relates the beginning as a healing experience and with certain heroism. On the other hand, in The Snow Society, the voice-over is melancholic and even sad, interpellating the audience to get involved in the story from the beginning. The suspense is present in different ways, as in *La Sociedad de la Niev*e it is already revealed that there will be an accident, so there is doubt on the part of the viewer as to how the accident will happen, and in *Viven* a death is mentioned, so the viewer has doubts as to what caused the death and whether the speaker is a survivor. The context of *Viven* highlights the accident more because it unfolds only in the setting of the Andes and the plane; on the contrary, the spaces shown in *La Sociedad de la Niev*e emphasize more the personal lives of the passengers, as it shows them days before the accident. The characters are shown in their daily lives, the lives of young people with a future ahead of them.

In both films, the characters are confronted with extreme challenges after the plane crash, followed by the threat of an avalanche, which intensifies the tension and drama in the story [1]. In both stories the army is a key element in the rescue [3]. As in the film *La Aventura del Poseidón* (1972), the army is presented as the last resort for the survivors [2]. The scene of the plane crash in the Andes is a notable difference, mainly because *Viven* was filmed at a time when technology was not as advanced as in *La Sociedad de la Nieve*, which makes the latter seem even more realistic. *Viven* is narrated from the perspective of Carlitos Paez, one of the survivors, while *La Sociedad de la Nieve* is narrated by Numa Turcatti, who passes away. Both films show different perceptions of the same event [6]. *Viven* is closer to the suspense genre [11], while "The Snow Society" is closer to slow cinema. Although both films use text as a narrative device, the latter focuses more on recounting the events of daily life after the day of the accident, such as the content of letters written by survivors and naming those who died on the day. These are elements that increase the viewer's awareness of time. [11].

3.2 Resilience Profiles: Exploring Identity and Survival through Characters

Nando Parrado and Roberto Canessa, two of the main characters, stand out among the survivors. Together, they set out on a trek in search of help, which fits the archetype of the average male protagonist as in *Aeropuerto* (1970) and *El Coloso en Llamas* (1974). [4]. In *Viven,* Parrado is portrayed as an incredibly optimistic character who motivates others with his words, unlike the depiction of him in *La Sociedad de la Nieve*, where the focus is more on the actions he performs rather than his dialogues. Religion and ethics are visible in both stories in the scenes of anthropophagy. The conflict of the survivors is whether consuming meat is right in the eyes of God.

Table 3. Character Profiles

Film	Character	Physical	Social			Psychological	
		Appearance	Family Relationships	Friends	Goals	Characteristics	Ambition
V	Fernando Parrado	Long hair, prominent beard, very fair and youthful skin	Mom and sister on the trip	Rugby team	Surviving and Return Home	Very optimistic Dreamer Leader	-
LSN	Fernando Parrado	Long hair, a little beard, fair and youthful skin	Mom and sister on the trip	Rugby team	Surviving and Return Home	Optimistic Leader	-
V	Roberto Canessa	Long hair, no beard, very light and young skin	-	Rugby team	Surviving and Return Home	Dissatisfied Serious Distant Leader	Doctor
LSN	Roberto Canessa	Medium hair, light brown skin, beardless and young	-	Rugby team	Surviving and Return Home	Serious Rational Reserved Leader	Doctor
LSN	Numa Turcatti	Medium hair, fair skin, beardless and young	-	Gastón, Pancho	Surviving and Return Home	Noble Calm Optimistic Persevering	Lawyer

In these cases, we can see that the three characters in the films share the same objective (see Table 3) and therefore each one, from his profile and from what he knows, will contribute to achieve his objective, which also allows us to know the role he will play in the plot [17]. A clear example is Roberto Canessa, who despite having little time in medicine, will do everything possible to heal the wounded, with his leadership skills he will help make decisions for the group, added to the objective of surviving and returning home, a key piece in the story. In both films both Nando and Roberto are contrasting characters, because both characters have different behaviors (see Table 3) and according to what happens, they will make decisions that they previously thought inadmissible, such as anthropophagy. Likewise, they are dynamic characters because there is an

evolution. However, it can be observed that the characters in *Viven* are flat, their objective is to survive and get out, and the film revolves around that purpose. On the other hand, in The Snow Society the characters are rounded because they are more like real people, their relationships, their ambitions, the evolution of the characters, knowing what they were doing before the accident, allows us to know them more as humans and question if their decisions are correct or not, who they affect [28]. They have internal conflicts about the beliefs instilled in their lives as discrepancies with their peers [29]. They have a positive arc of transformation [19]. The boys traveled happily with the mentality of enjoying their trip, but the accident tests them and makes them grow as people, although Marshall in *Viven* continues with the parameters of the military being the last resort for the survivors [2], who are happy to have accomplished their goal and return home. While Bayona in LSN, emphasizes more on how the boys feel after being rescued, showing the families welcoming them and the sadness of not returning together [7].

3.3   The Narrative Impact of Setting and Context in Catastrophe Filmmaking

In both adaptations, images of nature and survivors alternate, showing the representation of a living scenario (see Table 4) [12] and the interaction of the character with the environment that makes him look tiny against an immense nature [10].

Table 4. Story Context

Films	Spaces
V	Airplane
	Snowy Mountains
	Rugby field
	Dressing room
	Church
	Streets
LSN	Restaurant
	Numa's house
	Airport
	Airplane
	Andes Mountain

Although the landscape in both cases is active, the difference is that in *Viven* it is shown more as an antagonist scenery, as it threatens the lives of the characters on different occasions, walks and even snowstorms are even more outrageous. In *La Sociedad de la Nieve*, he is shown as another protagonist, who interacts with the characters but does not have such dramatic scenes, with constant precipices, on the contrary, the tranquility of the place is appreciated [13].

In disaster films, settings and context play a fundamental role, as they act as indispensable tools for narrative construction. These elements serve to situate the plot in a specific space and become key components for generating tension in the story [9].

The environment serves two functions in film narratives: to show the setting where the actors operate and to situate the viewer [10]. In the case of *Viven*, there are two settings: the interior of the airplane and the mountains, which help situate the viewer regarding where the event occurs. Additionally, text and voice-over are used for the same purpose [15]. In the case of *La Sociedad de la Nieve*, there are a total of seven settings that reflect more intimacy and focus on the internal universe of the characters.

La Sociedad de la Nieve uses more settings to place the viewers in the daily lives of the characters and provide clearer indications of their personalities [9]. For example, the rugby field and the locker rooms where they are seen interacting, or the fact that one setting is a church, allows us to understand their attachment to religion, as they are practicing Catholics who attend Mass. Similarly, the streets filled with people holding signs indicate social movements in Uruguay, evidencing discontent among the population.

4   Conclusions

The main results focus on the evidence of the different narrative and characterization strategies used by the directors to represent survival in extreme situations. On the one hand, a narrative focused on the event and on the other hand a narrative focused on the depth of the characters in the face of the catastrophic event. These differences in approach and representation contribute to the variety of cinematic narrative in disaster docudramas. In *Viven*, Marshall focuses on the struggle for survival in a hostile environment, with an emphasis on the physical challenges and extreme situations faced by the characters. The narrative approach emphasizes more action and suspense, with a more optimistic and heroic tone, especially in the character of Nando Parrado, who is portrayed as an optimistic leader who motivates others. On the other hand, *La Sociedad de la Nieve*, directed by J.A. Bayona, presents more rounded and complex characters, with greater psychological and emotional depth. The lives and relationships of the characters before the accident are explored, providing a broader context for who they are and how they got there. This contributes to a more realistic perception of the characters and their moral dilemmas, especially regarding the theme of anthropophagy and ethical decisions in extreme situations. In terms of context and setting, *Viven* shows the natural environment as an antagonist, highlighting the dangers and challenges faced by the characters, while *La Sociedad de la Nieve* presents it as a contemplative environment, which interacts differently with the characters and the plot. This research contributes to the research lines on formats such as docudramas, as well as to narrative studies of film genres such as catastrophe cinema.

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