

Making Sense of Disaster:
Exploring Environmental and Social Collapse
in *True Detective*

Greta Karoline Heien



A Thesis Presented to the Department of Literature, Area
Studies and European Languages
Faculty of Humanities
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master's Degree

University of Oslo

Spring 2017

**Making Sense of Disaster: Exploring
Environmental and Social Collapse in *True
Detective***

Copyright Greta Karoline Heien

2017

Making Sense of Disaster: Exploring Environmental and Social Collapse in *True
Detective*

Greta Karoline Heien

<http://www.duo.uio.no>

Print: CopyCat Skøyen

Abstract

This thesis adds to a growing body of work on how cultural texts interpret and present disaster, and how this theme influences audiences' perceptions of social and environmental issues. As cultural phenomena, disasters can be a productive means to rethink the social-environmental sphere, because disaster sits in a nexus of natural occurrences, human activity, and practices of meaning and interpretation. In this vein, cultural studies of disaster have emerged as an important field in which to understand the wide range of implications disaster produce in human society.

This thesis discusses the cultural imagination of disaster using the first season of the American television series *True Detective* (2014) as the main source material. Cultural depictions of disaster permeate cultural life as witnessed in news media and popular culture. While studies of the cultural life of disaster is in a relatively early phase of being established as a field, in recent years, scholarly attention has begun to be directed toward the issue, especially as a cultural output in for instance television, the dominant medium in the U.S.

The subject of disaster is approached from two angles in this thesis. The first part demonstrates the series' emphasis on place as a site of disaster. The setting of *True Detective* is the real-life southern Louisiana region known as "Cancer Alley," or the "Chemical Corridor." The series adapts elements from environmental photography and tourism, in order to convey the corrosive interdependency between characters and landscape in this region. Through framing, naming, and strategic juxtapositions, *True Detective* points to vulnerable human bodies and a precarious ecology in a region distraught with past and present disasters.

The second part addresses the use of myth, which connects *True Detective* to debates regarding disaster fiction, a genre routinely criticized for propagating false claims about the reality we live in. This part addresses critique of *True Detective* specifically, and engages critics who have argued the series propagates false claims about moral panic. This works as a point of departure to discuss the two competing understandings of myth and its role in human society presented in *True Detective*. This in-betweenness is expressed both visually and narratively through the lens of liminality, a state of being that produces a social drama. The social drama resulting from the dual presentation of myth is expressed in the characters, and it is reflected in the reception to the series' finale.

To my father.
Though you are no longer with us,
everything I do is about making you proud.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my advisor Mark Luccarelli for his thoughtful guidance throughout this process. To Lars, whose support has been invaluable to me, thank you for your honest reality checks, humor, and patience. Thank you to my mom and sister for your support and encouragement along the way.

Thank you to Christine Eggestad and Jørgen Aske for reading early drafts, and for your comments and discussions. A special thank you to Brandon Pedersen for proof reading, and to Nikita Mathias for indulging my fascination for disasters since the early stages of this project.

Thank you to Tiril and Desiré for being my sweet and funny cheerleaders; to English Master Society for providing an arena to discuss and exchange ideas (and anxieties); and to Marianne, my spirit animal in so many ways. Thank you for your support and kindness, and for being an unyielding inspiration to us all.

To Åshild, Monica, Amnah and all the other girls who have taken this journey these past few years. This process would have been a lot more challenging without you.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1	2
Background and Purpose	4
Focus and Approaches	6
Material	8
Plot Description	8
Chapter Outline	10
Chapter 2	11
Disaster Research and Cultural Studies of Disaster	11
The Cultural Life of Disaster	16
The Tremor Heard Around the World	20
Locating Themes of Disaster in HBO's <i>True Detective</i>	27
Concluding Remarks	32
Chapter 3	33
Sense of Place	34
Orienting Cancer Alley	39
Toxic Imagery	42
Toxic Tourism	49
Toxic Screen	52
Concluding Remarks	57
Chapter 4	58
Disaster Narratives and Myth	59
Satanic Panic in <i>True Detective</i>	64
Competing Senses of Myth	68
Liminal Space	73
Social Drama	78
Concluding Remarks	84
Chapter 5	86
Conclusion	86
Bibliography	91

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

On a Sunday evening in 2014, twelve days into the new year, HBO premiered its new drama series titled *True Detective*. The anticipation among critics and regular viewers had been building for months. Several factors contributed to this, of which one reason is the reputation of HBO programming itself. To viewers familiar with HBO and the network's original content, there was already an expectation that this will be a quality show. As Gary R. Edgerton writes, the successful slogan "It's Not TV, It's HBO" has resulted in HBO becoming an idea and a concept, and an "identity brand. . . the TV equivalent of a designer label."¹ The second factor was the artists linked to the production. The series would feature Hollywood actors Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. This attraction of Hollywood film actors to the small screen was made possible because *True Detective* is an anthology series. The time constraints are less imposing in anthology series, which consists of stand-alone seasons that are either connected by a theme, actors, or setting. Two seasons of *True Detective* have been released thus far, and they are connected by a crime theme, whereas actors and setting are different. The second factor was the artists linked to the production, for instance the season director Cary J. Fukunaga, the director behind the critical successes *Sin Nombre* (2009) and *Jane Eyre* (2011). In contrast, this did not include the writer-creator of the series, Nic Pizzolatto, who in 2014 was relatively unknown as a television writer. He had worked as a script writer for nearly two seasons on another crime themed drama, AMC's *The Killing* (2011-2014). Even though the central marketing content included all of the main cast, McConaughey played a central role in more ways than one. Beginning in the years briefly prior to *True Detective*, McConaughey has rebranded himself and has in a few short years moved away from being type-cast as the romantic-comedy gentleman toward a string of more serious and dramatic roles. He won his first Oscar in the category of Best Actor in a leading role for his portrayal in *Dallas Buyer's Club* (2013) among several other awards. This artistic transformation was at its height when it became

¹ Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones, ed. *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 9.

known that McConaughey and Harrelson would star in a television drama on HBO, and so, the news came at the height of what critics dubbed “The McConaissance.”²

The first season of *True Detective* became a pop culture phenomenon, drawing in millions of viewers and spanning lengthy and passionate discussions in online communities. Another term that had made its way into the canon of popular culture terms at this point is binge-watching, meaning with on demand streaming services such as HBO and Netflix, people can watch entire seasons of television without the traditional one-week scheduling break in-between episodes. When the show first aired, without the possibility of consuming the entire season in one sitting, critics and fans became heavily invested in trying to piece together every possible hint and fashioning a range of fan theories before the next episode became available. One of the series’ aspects that became the object of scrutiny was McConaughey’s character, Cohle, with all his dark and pessimistic philosophical musings.

Television critics were largely in agreement when it came to the first season. Chris Cabin wrote in *Slant Magazine* that director Fukunaga found “a kind of picked-at beauty in the Southern sprawl, as if he were looking over the dried-up remains of an exquisite corpse.”³ In *Vanity Fair*, Richard Lawson also praised the show’s visual aesthetic as having a “richly realized sense of place,” and that it was “quietly engaging” and “deeply human,” providing the audience with a “brooding lecture about the nature of man. . . concerned with bigger, deeper things than simply whodunit.”⁴ Robert Lloyd, writing in *Los Angeles Times*, commented on some of the subversive qualities the show exhibits, noting that some would “prefer that their answers come within the hour. But this is closer to the speed of life. . . As [the main characters] travel from place to place . . . [they] talk about religion and existence and love and morality, uncomfortably but compulsively.”⁵ Christopher Orr in *The Atlantic*, argued that *True Detective* is “Fincherian in the best sense,” praising the “hyper-literal

² Rachel Syme, “The McConaissance,” *The New Yorker*, January 16, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-mcconaissance>.

³ Chris Cabin, “True Detective: Season One,” *Slant Magazine*, January 8, 2014, <http://www.slantmagazine.com/tv/review/true-detective-season-one>.

⁴ Richard Lawson, “Review: HBO’s *True Detective* is Mind Over Murder,” *Vanity Fair*, January 9, 2014, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/01/true-detective-review-hbo9>.

⁵ Robert Lloyd, “Review: ‘True Detective’s’ slow and steady pace a winning formula,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/tv/showtracker/la-et-st--true-detective-review-20140110-story.html>.

dialogue,” arguing that *True Detective* is influenced by both cinematic and literary elements.⁶ Finally, Ben Lawrence in *The Telegraph* wrote *True Detective* falls within an esteemed company of other dramas that have “brilliantly realised the link between geography and community . . . from the muscular proselytizing of its evangelists to the insularly of its bayou-dwellers, you are given a complete picture of a very precise world.”⁷

Background and Purpose

Since I began the process of researching, writing, and re-writing this thesis, one thing has been constant, and that is the interest in exploring the first season of *True Detective*. It was not until I researched the reception to the series and its production process that a clearer approach emerged. After reading numerous review articles referencing a broken landscape, broken people, and a dystopian presentation of contemporary U.S. society, I began to think about the possibility of examining the themes of disaster in the series. After watching the season a few times and not looking for anything specific, my prerequisite knowledge of these themes was the lines of dialogue referencing recent hurricanes that have struck the region, and their (fictional) implications for the plot. There are other television series in recent years that more explicitly depicts the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, for instance *Treme* (HBO 2010-2013) and the forthcoming *Katrina: American Crime Story* (FX 2018), yet *True Detective* seemed to do more than just comment on one specific natural disaster and its aftermath. Hurricane Katrina is not the first event mentioned in the series, hurricane Rita is, and that event sets the main plot in motion. In addition, the main characters Hart and Cohle were another intriguing aspect, with their incessant quarrels about the meaning of life, death, humanity, and stories people live by. Taken together, these elements opened the series up for examining its representation of disaster, and I could more clearly formulate an idea that had been circling in my head since the first time I watched the series in 2014: the relationship between the characters and the landscape. I began to think about how the series comments on the present environmental crisis by way of showing an interdependency between the places

⁶ Christopher Orr, “*True Detective*: The Best Show on TV,” *The Atlantic*, February 11, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/02/-em-true-detective-em-the-best-show-on-tv/283727/>.

⁷ Ben Lawrence, “What British Drama Can Learn From *True Detective*,” *The Telegraph*, March 14, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tvandradio/10675559/What-British-drama-can-learn-from-True-Detective.html>.

and people we see. In my research, I found that the setting of *True Detective* is set to the region in the U.S. with the highest number of chemical industries leaking an unfathomable high number of toxins, which in turn affects both human residents and the surrounding ecology. The other important component in the series, the relationship between Hart and Cohle, became clearer as well during the research into representation of disaster in popular culture. In a timely coincidence, in just the past few years, cultural studies and social science scholars have provided insight into the preeminence of disaster imagery in popular culture, which has provided me with a conceptual foundation on which to elaborate *True Detective*'s treatment of disaster. Additionally, and a little surprisingly, in a recent article in *American Quarterly*, Matthew Schneider-Mayerson argues that thus far American studies has remained "aloof" to the present focus on "the consequent social, economic, and political" implications of environmental issues and their attendant cultural implications.⁸ Furthermore, Schneider-Mayerson writes, scholars should investigate "the relationship between culture, energy, and the environment."⁹ Approaching these aspects through the lens of disaster is arguably one way of productively re-thinking the socio-environmental sphere. Disaster, as Joanna Bator writes, "is always a cultural phenomenon because the moment it happens it becomes a part of the human world. All [disasters] have cultural, social, and political dimensions and the trauma of a disaster can shake the very foundations of the cultural, social and political structures."¹⁰ The insight here is that disasters – whether they stem from nature or from man-made activities; whether they strike as a personal tragedy or as regional crisis – are an essential part of the human experience. The challenge lies in determining how we interpret disaster and their significance, which in turn depends on the stories, or myths, we subscribe to. It is worth investigating these themes, and perhaps especially in the context of television. In the U.S., Christopher Bigsby writes, television "has assumed a dominant position. . . [television is] where America could have a dialogue with itself. . . with the social and political realities of the time, interrogating the myths and values" in the early decades of the 21st century.¹¹ In the cultural context of disaster, then, popular culture can arguably do the

⁸ Matthew Schneider-Mayerson, "Necrocracy in America: American Studies Begins to Address Fossil Fuels and Climate Change," *American Quarterly* 67, no. 2 (June 2015): 530.

⁹ Schneider-Mayerson, *Necrocracy in America*, 539.

¹⁰ Joanna Bator, "The Cultural Meaning of Disaster: Remarks on Gregory Button's Work," in *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 21, no. 1 (March 2012): 92.

¹¹ Christopher Bigsby. *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), i.

work of bridging the gap between environmental and social issues, and in *True Detective*, these aspects are intimately linked to one another.

Focus and Approaches

The main question I structure this thesis around is how themes of disaster are represented in *True Detective*. Specifically, how this series' depiction of disaster can provide insight into the environmental-cultural nexus. I will address this topic with a set of sub-questions that together make up the textual analysis of this thesis. The following sub-questions inform two chapters where I engage with a close-reading of *True Detective*: How does this television series make use of its visual and narrative strategies in order to represent disaster to a broad audience? What does the relationship between the two main characters, Hart and Cohle, tell us about the role of myth in communities marked by disaster?

My approach to answering these questions is through examining some of the most significant constituent parts of television. Throughout this thesis, I refer to *True Detective* as a television text. In this usage, text refers to a broad understanding that encompass a range of different media forms, including television film, that open themselves up for analysis. When looking at a television series, there are different elements that work together in order to complete the world depicted on screen: visual imagery, event sequences, framing, and dialogue. I will refer to these elements to illuminate my main points.

In Chapter 3, I argue that the relationship between landscape and characters serves as commentary on the adverse effects of disasters – past and present. Central to that discussion is the series' depiction of a southern Louisiana landscape ravaged by both natural disaster in the form of hurricanes, and man-made disaster in the form of toxic pollution from a real-life petrochemical industrial complex. The latter, I argue, adversely affects a range of characters we see, as well as the vulnerable state of ecological processes. The main challenge I will address is, as Rob Nixon writes, “how [we can] convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world.”¹² One of the potential solutions to this challenge is a text like *True Detective*, which visually connects the effects of the “slow violence” of chemical

¹² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 3.

pollution and ecological devastation to the landscape and the people who inhabit it. I aim to show this correlation by looking more closely at the non-televisual influences in the series' visual expressions including the environmental justice practices of toxic imagery and tourism, as well as the way the show deliberately frames and makes connections between vulnerable ecology and vulnerable communities. This approach is inspired by the notion that disaster fiction can be said to function as a "cultural seismograph," in which the cultural fears and anxieties of the time are mirrored and reimagined. Furthermore, film, television, and other popular cultural text will over time also function as archival evidence of historical events, threats, or cultural fears that dominated the time of their production.¹³ Thus, with its portrayal of a paradoxical society, one in which the industrial practices supporting modern life is juxtaposed with a society suffering from the excesses of modernity's constituent elements, *True Detective* is an example of such a fiction.

In Chapter 4, I move toward a discussion of the significance of myth, as it is one of the central concepts pertaining to the cultural dimension of disasters. Here, myth refers to human-made stories about the world we live in, and as such, those stories are presented either explicitly or implicitly in the cultural products we consume. I provide an overview of how fictional disaster narratives are subject to critique due to their empirically unfounded presentation of disaster myths. I also discuss similar critique directed at *True Detective* for its portrayal of moral panic, which is an example of recent myth-making in American history. Against this backdrop, I argue that *True Detective* presents two opposing understandings of the role of myth, and it does so through the diametrically different personalities of Hart and Cohle. Hart is a representative for people who view myth as something with an intrinsic social value, one that guides and shapes norms and values of people and uphold order. The other understanding, represented in much of Cohle's monologues throughout the season, supposes that myth is a negative as it is something that conceals the very true nature of human society. These competing senses of myth, and in a broader sense, the struggle of meaning, is expressed through the lens of liminality, a concept that configures the environmental and the social implications of disaster. Consequently, liminality produces a social drama, one in which I argue is present in the fictional narrative itself, and further reflected in the reception to the series' finale. Together, these two chapters address

¹³ Karsten Wind Meyhoff, "Freak Ecology – An Introduction to the Fictional History of Natural Disaster," in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 295-297.

environmental and social spheres, and they show that through the lens of disaster, we can see how closely these issues are connected to one another.

Material

The primary source material in this thesis is the first season of *True Detective*. The season consist of eight episodes, each episode lasting approximately one hour. It first aired on HBO January 12th, 2014, and the final episode aired March 9th. In preparation for this thesis I have acquired a DVD copy of the season, and watched each episode several times. One might ask why I have not included additional primary texts. The answer is, that, despite its relatively small number of episodes, the first season of *True Detective* provides sufficient material to do an in-depth investigation of its setting and the development of the main characters. For example, the narrative spans across several timelines, making the eight episodes a dense presentation of events and characters that span seventeen years. When I refer to specific episodes, I will include in parentheses the number of the episode cited as well as a time stamp in which the cited material appears. For example, a line of dialogue in episode seven will be referred to as this; (1.7, 14:30). In several instances, I have made my own composition of two or three images. These images are referred to as *Figure* (with added successive enumeration).

Plot Description

Season one of *True Detective* revolves around former detectives Marty Hart and Rust Cohle. Hart is a gregarious and sociable man; he has a wife and two daughters he continuously lies to engage in affairs with younger women. Hart is a self-proclaimed steady, yet middle-of-road detective. Cohle, on the other hand, is very smart and among the best detectives on the force. He espouses a pessimistic attitude towards life and people, which quickly makes him an outsider. He has a troubled past he mostly keeps to himself, but we learn that he had been married once, and had one daughter who tragically died in an accident.

In 2012, Hart and Cohle are being interrogated by another set of detectives concerning a case they are investigating, a case that is very similar to an old case Hart and Cohle worked on seventeen years earlier in 1995. Hart and Cohle recount the details of their investigation into the murder of a young woman named Dora Lange, whose body was found in a sugar

cane field in rural southern Louisiana. Hart and Cohle tell the new investigators of the murder case in separate sessions, and their stories are shown in flashbacks interspersed throughout the first five episodes. The last flashbacks to 1995 show that Hart and Cohle were treated as heroes for finding out who murdered Dora Lange. The truth, however, is that they ventured out to find the person they believed was the murderer, Reggie Ledoux. Despite the element of surprise, they are not able to arrest him, because Hart kills him after discovering two children Ledoux and his partner have kidnapped and abused. The father-of-two Hart is overcome with rage and shoots Ledoux before he can give them any information. Hart and Cohle stage the crime scene and make up a false story of how Ledoux ended up dead. This is the story Hart and Cohle retell to the detectives in 2012. This marks the point where the story moves into the narrative present, 2012. Soon after Hart finishes talking with the new detectives, Cohle catches up to him on the road, and asks if they can go somewhere and talk. At this point in the story, the present-day Hart and Cohle have not talked to each other in almost a decade, after they had a falling out and Cohle quit working as a detective. Hart continued for a few more years, but retired soon after and started his own private investigative firm. Cohle wants to talk to Hart, because he has spent two years following up on their 1995 case, and he has collected evidence that prove a theory he developed in 1995 is correct. He convinces Hart to join him, because they both know the left things undone in 1995. They begin collecting more evidence, and Hart's connections as a private detective lead them to discover a geographical pattern in which cold murder cases occurred. They find a main suspect, and travel to the house of Erroll Childress, who quickly reaffirms their suspicion that he is behind many disappearances and ritualistic killings along the southern Louisiana bayou. Fighting quickly ensues, and both Hart and Cohle make it out alive. Their 1995 case is finally solved, though their resolution to find the truth nearly kills them both. In the final moments of the season, Hart and Cohle sit outside the hospital where they have been recovering from their wounds. Their redemption comes to them in different forms. Hart reunites with his estranged family. Cohle, visibly shaken, tells Hart that while he was comatose, he could sense the love of his deceased daughter and father, an experience that seemingly shifts his former cynical outlook on life toward something more hopeful. The season ends with Cohle's observation that life is just one story repeating itself: the metaphorical consideration of good versus evil (light versus dark), and he concludes that, despite the vast territory of darkness, the light is winning.

Chapter Outline

In this chapter I have introduced the notion that disasters can provide insight into the socio-environmental sphere, which links environment and culture. Disasters are cultural phenomena at the moment of their inception, and thus, cultural studies of disaster are a fruitful avenue for investigating these themes. In chapter 2, I will present the main conceptual framework and explicate key concepts related to disaster, disaster research, disaster fictions, and the cultural history of disaster interpretation. In chapter 3, I will build on the conceptual discussion, and discuss the question of how *True Detective* represents disaster in the context of toxic pollution. Central to answering this question is the show's presentation of the toxic relationship between landscape and characters as representatives of the socio-environmental sphere. In chapter 4, I will address the question of how myth is presented in *True Detective* through the lens of liminality, a concept that can express both the environmental and social implications of disaster. This leads to a social drama, both among the two characters Hart and Cohle, as well as in the final episode's reception, which caused several critics to lament the final moments of dialogue that seemed to reinforce an understanding of myth which the series spent much time criticizing.

Chapter 2

Disaster as Theme and Point of Departure

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the central concepts and ideas I will be discussing in this thesis, with particular attention given to the concept of disaster. I will provide a historical overview of a few select - albeit important and dominant - ways in which disaster has been interpreted and understood, beginning with a seminal event in the 18th century that crystallized the problem of (natural) evils in the face of (natural) disaster. Lastly, I will outline the main elements and aims of disaster fiction, as it relates directly to *True Detective*.

Disaster Research and Cultural Studies of Disaster

Studies of disaster events have become increasingly important, not only in the social sciences, but also in the news media reporting on events, or in popular cultural texts that (re)imagines disaster. Consequently, there are a plethora of disaster images circulating in and around us at all times. The meaning of the word disaster is derived from Middle French and Old Italian forms and it refers to the belief that the positioning of stars decided the fate of human life. The Italian form, *disastro*, refers quite directly to the loss of protective stars, or the disavowal of stars, which in turn leads to chaos, destruction, and despair.¹⁴

A classic definition of disaster tells us that it is “an event concentrated in time and space, in which a society or one of its subdivisions undergoes physical harm and social disruption, such that all or some essential functions of society or subdivisions are impaired.”¹⁵ Seeing as disasters vary greatly in terms of scale, temporality, and sources, it is helpful to briefly point out these distinctions. In terms of scale, a disaster can occur on a global or regional level, for instance a military conflict or an environmental situation; on a societal level where it negatively impacts social, political and financial structures; or on an intimately personal level, with situations that “unsettle the existence of the individual,” such

¹⁴ Zrinka Bozic Blanus, “Touched by Disaster: Writing and the Political,” in *Myth and Its Discontents: Memory and Trauma in Central and East European Literature*, ed. Danijela Lugaric, Milka Car, and Gábor Tamás (Wien: Praesens, 2017), 251.

¹⁵ Holm, Isak Winkel, “The Cultural Analysis of Disaster,” in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 16.

as trauma-inducing experiences or a long-term illness. This brings us to the second distinction, namely the difference in temporality. A disaster can be either a brief and short-term event, often referred to as a catastrophe, or a long-term event with long-lasting and far-reaching implications, referred to as a crisis. The third and last distinction is the source of disaster, which is typically divided into two categories: natural and man-made. Natural disasters include things such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and tornadoes. Man-made disasters include technological disasters such as oil spills and explosions, as well as intentional man-made acts of terrorism.¹⁶

It is no longer a theoretical assumption that human agency influences changes in the atmosphere, changes that in turn have very real negative effects on communities. In this sense, disasters such as hurricanes and earthquakes, which occur in our “halfway anthropogenic” atmosphere, can no longer be described as purely natural, in the sense that some disaster are merely inherent characteristics of the environment.¹⁷ Hurricanes are a good example, for though they stem from common elements in our atmosphere, such as warming and cooling temperatures, the strength and duration of these phenomena are exacerbated by human activity. Thus, the dissenting view with regards to calling hurricanes purely “natural disasters” can be seen in light of the developing notion that we are living in an epoch some scholars refer to as the “Anthropocene,” referring to our present time in which human activity is seen as adversely impacting the warming of Earth’s atmosphere. As Adam Trexler explains:

Anthropocene indicates that atmospheric warming is not merely a theory, but a phenomenon that has already been measured and verified across scientific disciplines and conclusively linked to human emissions of fossil fuels. . . . Thus, *Anthropocene* productively shifts the emphasis. . . . to a human process that has occurred across distinct social groups, countries, economies, and generations: the wholesale emission of fossil fuels that began in the Victorian period and has intensified through the present day.¹⁸

This concept brings us to yet another distinction central to modern day disaster conceptualization. As Trexler’s explication suggests, there is a significant human-made component when it comes to disasters. These aspects are arguably part of why studies of

¹⁶ Holm, introduction to *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, ed. Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1.

¹⁷ Holm, *The Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 16.

¹⁸ Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, University of Virginia Press Series in Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 4.

disasters as cultural phenomena have garnered increased attention from a range of academic disciplines.

Cultural studies of disaster have grown out of the field of disaster research; consequently, a brief overview of these roots is helpful. The Disaster Research Center (DRC) is perhaps one of the most well-known academic centers wholly committed to the social sciences that conduct disaster research – it is surely one of earliest academic institutions to do so in its field. Studies of disasters started in the late 1940s, coinciding with the start of the Cold War. Thus, in the earliest years of the field, the focus was on preparation for one specific kind of disaster, namely nuclear war.¹⁹ Today, the DRC is located at the University of Delaware with a mission to advance:

... the state of the art in disaster research and its scientifically guided practice; educating the next generation of disaster science scholars and informed practitioners in the fields of disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery; and creating, gathering, and disseminating disaster knowledge in a dynamic and responsive way.²⁰

Guided by a vision to:

[Be] the leader in advancing disaster knowledge, through multi-disciplinary research, that contributes to solving complex social problems related to disasters.²¹

Searching through peer-reviewed journal articles alone, disaster research is clearly a vibrant field of study, with a wide range of research areas. On the topic of one specific disaster event, Hurricane Katrina (2005), we see that this event has engendered an array of various analyses and social criticism, cutting across such issues as race, class, and mental health. Scholars from varying fields have investigated issues including how disasters and the role of government response impact people's trust in government (Nicholls and Picou 2013); how Katrina impacted the lives of low-income African American young adults (Bosick 2015); how Katrina impacted mental and physical health in low-income parents living in New Orleans (Rhodes and Chan et al 2010); how dominant mainstream media narratives and

¹⁹ Kathleen Tierney, *The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 199.

²⁰ University of Delaware, "Mission, Vision & History," *Disaster Research Center*, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.drc.udel.edu/about/misison>.

²¹ University of Delaware, "Mission, Vision & History," *Disaster Research Center*, accessed April 12, 2017, <https://www.drc.udel.edu/about/misison>.

frames in the wake of Katrina reinforced racial myths and fears about African Americans, and reinforced myths of criminalization practices and moral panic (Fleetwood 2006; Berger 2009); how local and national policy was impacted by the disaster (Powell 2007); and how inadequate American neoliberal policies regarding disaster preparedness became clear before, during, and after Katrina's impact (Giroux 2006; Allen 2006).

In this vein, disaster research has historically taken on the important task of finding out what needs to be done to reduce risk, health issues, and response in the face of disasters. The field is thus important for understanding the range of implications in which disasters can inflict on both human society and the natural world, and consequently learning from and improving ways to reduce the severity and duration of disasters. As Carol E. Allen wrote almost a year after Katrina:

We come to the conclusion that a complete reconstruction of our understanding of disaster and our responses to them must include a much broader perspective: one that accounts for the historical, cultural, social, economic, political, and other meaning structures that surround this tragedy and its aftermath . . . in order to understand the circumstances surrounding [disasters], we must examine the social construction of disasters in our society.²²

The research articles listed above do much to work toward a better understanding of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical circumstances of disasters and their consequences. In recent decades, the predominately sociological field of disaster research has witnessed stronger presence of culturally informed analysis of the role of disaster in our society. One of the first scholars to introduce the notion of the “cultural turn” in disaster research was Gary R. Webb, who contributed a chapter in *The Handbook of Disaster Research* (2007) entirely devoted to the significance of broadening the scope of disaster research to include the “cultural infrastructure” in society, namely the ways in which disaster is framed in mass culture, as well as how this cultural output determines and influences how people interpret disaster.^{23 24} The cultural analysis of disaster can contribute meaningful insight into some of the aspects Allen mentions above, namely, the social and cultural constructions of disasters.

²² Carol E. Allen, “Putting Katrina in Context,” *The Alabama Nurse* 33, no. 1 (March-May, 2006): 24.

²³ Gary R. Webb, “The Popular Culture of Disaster: Exploring a New Dimension of Disaster Research,” in *The Handbook of Disaster Research*, ed. Havidán Rodríguez, Enrico L. Quarantelli, and Russel R. Dynes (New York: Springer, 2007), 432-433.

²⁴ Holm, *The Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 17.

In *Disaster Research: Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives* (2016), Peer Illner and Isak Winkel Holm provide a helpful introduction to understanding how cultural studies and disaster studies have merged, as well as an overview of the ways in which the relation between disaster and culture has been conceptualized in various academic disciplines. Cultural practices, such as media framing, shape the way we perceive disasters. Other cultural practices that contribute to this perception include fiction and nonfiction books, film, television, documentaries and other texts that in one way or another react to disaster events. Disaster narratives do not necessarily dwell on any given event, real or fictional, but rather focus on the life after and various effects on the human condition. Cultural studies of disaster, in short, help to shape the “common sensibility” through which we recognize and understand disaster.²⁵ Illner and Holm argue that the term “aesthetic” can be used to denote, not just artistic forms, but rather, “how our everyday cultural practices *produce* what presents itself to sense experience in the first place, about how they configure our common regime of the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the imperceptible.”²⁶ Cultural studies of disaster, then, contribute to making sense of the various aesthetic practices that enable a common sense or common understanding and interpretation of disaster. This overarching cultural studies approach to disaster views culture as a “repertoire of practices, images, narratives, genres and styles” that shape and determine what we discern as reality and how a common sense of disaster is produced.²⁷ Furthermore, cultural analyses of aesthetic practices enable us to understand disaster in “a larger collective sensibility that configures our awareness of the world.”²⁸ Whether we watch disaster images on the news, on film or television, or if we read about it in a memoir or in a graphic novel, the plethora of disaster images we are subjected to contribute in shaping different ways of collectively interpreting and processing disasters.

²⁵ Peer Illner and Isak Winkel Holm, “Making Sense of Disaster: The Cultural Studies of Disaster,” in *Disaster Research: Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives*, ed. Rasmus Dahlberg, Olivier Rubin, and Morten T. Vendelø (New York: Routledge, 2016), 51-52.

²⁶ Illner and Holm, *Making Sense of Disaster*, 51.

²⁷ Illner and Holm, *Making Sense of Disaster*, 51.

²⁸ Illner and Holm, *Making Sense of Disaster*, 51-52.

The Cultural Life of Disaster

The growing attention given to the ways in which disaster is framed and interpreted in our cultural imagination is further illustrated in Isak Winkel Holm's discussion of the "cultural life" of disaster, particularly of its "man-made" and "media-borne" dimensions.²⁹ We have briefly looked at the different categories of disaster, of which "man-made" was one distinct category. However, in line with the notions of our living in an age of anthropogenic catastrophes and crises, the categories separating purely natural and (in part) man-made, or man-influenced disaster, is becoming more complex. This is a rich avenue for cultural studies of disaster, because it focuses on the ways in which humans exacerbate already natural phenomena, as well as how the dominant cultural narratives frame and make sense the disaster. The latter aspect consists of media reporting as well as other cultural products disseminated through mass culture. To better exemplify these components, let us look at a brief case study of the ways in which one event, Hurricane Katrina (2005), embodies both the "man-made" and "media-borne" elements of disaster, as well as how this event has subsequently been imagined in a recent cultural text.

Hurricane Katrina is an example of a natural phenomenon, but its strength and capacity for destruction was exacerbated by human activity (man-made components). For instance, increasing ocean surface temperatures has been proven as a source that enhanced the hurricane's intensity.³⁰ Consequently, despite numerous warnings and pleas for strengthening the levees in preparation for an event like Katrina, they breached in several places and contributed to the near complete flooding of New Orleans (Allen, 2006; Tierney et.al., 2006; Berger, 2009). These are examples of how we as humans contribute to the severity and duration of a singular disaster event, something philosopher Peter Sloterdijk further illustrates when he describes modern human beings as "atmosphere designers" and "weather co-producers."^{31 32}

The aftermath of Katrina is where we see the "media-borne" component most clearly at work. In other words, the grounds on which the struggle for meanings and explanations were fought. In the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, major American and international

²⁹ Holm, introduction to *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, 1.

³⁰ Holm, *Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 16.

³¹ For a related critique, see Nicole R. Fleetwood's discussion on "weather citizens" and media framing of Hurricane Katrina: "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event," in *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (September 2006): 767-789.

³² Holm, *Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 16.

news media reported on the apocalyptic state of New Orleans, citing looting, criminal behavior, floating bodies, and a general state of chaos or emergency. News media and other reporting outlets contributed to frame the disaster and its aftermath in ways that impeded relief efforts and victimized certain groups of people when, after just a few days, the National Guard was deployed to the “war zone” in downtown New Orleans to deter and combat crime.³³

The narrative that pervaded news outlets in the days and weeks following Katrina’s impact had very real consequences, and serves as an example of how media narratives shape and influence our understanding of a disaster event and its aftermath. More specifically, in the context of media reporting, Kathleen Tierney et.al. argue: “... the notion that U.S. disasters are followed by looting activity has long been contradicted by empirical evidence. Nonetheless, the media continue to assume that looting and lawlessness are significant elements in the public response to disaster.”³⁴ While there were instances of looting in the aftermath of the disaster, Tierney’s aim is to highlight the powerful influence of what she and other disaster scholars view as the “promulgation of [disaster] myths,” which continue to uphold “the mythical notion that disasters result in lawlessness and social breakdown.”³⁵ The reason these empirically unsubstantiated media presentations are problematic is that more than seven hundred studies on the presence of panic in the aftermath of disaster, leading to social unrest and lawlessness, have found that panic is a “vanishingly rare phenomenon.”³⁶ However, the “media-borne” aspects of disaster are still a powerful shaping influence. Indeed, as another study of the Katrina aftermath as seen in mainstream media shows, the media coverage on TV following Katrina was “structured after a limited number of narrative motifs, such as state of chaos, looting and the absence of the authorities,” and these narrative motifs follow a “well-established script of disaster narratives.”³⁷ If this sounds like familiar narrative motifs it is probably because we have seen these motifs play out numerous times in a different cultural sphere, namely the Hollywood disaster movie. As Kverndokk notes, “Western disaster discourse has been claimed to be heavily influenced by Hollywood movies

³³ See Holm 2012: 18; Fleetwood 2006: 785; Kathleen Tierney et al 2006: 61.

³⁴ Kathleen Tierney et al, “Metaphors Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina,” *The American Academy of Political and Social Science* 604, no.1 (March 2006): 64.

³⁵ Tierney et al, *Metaphors Matter*, 73, 78.

³⁶ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 124.

³⁷ Kyrre Kverndokk, “Mediating The Morals of Disasters,” in *Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 80.

and popular culture,” which in turn underlines the interest in studying just how much of a shaping influence fictional media has on news media, and vice versa.³⁸ Holm further underscores this complex and interdependent relationship between the various elements of the “cultural life” of disasters, observing that “disasters are media-borne because they are primetime news in the media,” and also “because they are culturally mediated, filtered through society’s collective repertoire of metaphors, images, narratives and concepts that governs how we make sense to senseless disasters.”³⁹ The “media-borne” component thus contributes to the framing of the disaster which in turn becomes part of our collective and cultural imagination.

Though the real, physical event is over, the event itself lives on in our collective cultural imagination, and its processing is spread across a plethora of mediums (news, television, film, music, and books). In other words, the event is continually being reimagined, most notably today, over a decade since the event, in popular culture texts. For instance, in the HBO drama series *Treme*, the Katrina event is introduced by one of the main characters Creighton Bernette (played by John Goodman) as such: “What hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast was a natural disaster, a hurricane, pure and simple. The flooding of New Orleans was a man-made catastrophe, a federal fuck-up of epic proportions, and decades in the making,” and he proceeds to angrily confront one of the British reporters interviewing him, essentially questioning why he, a “limey vulture,” is in New Orleans if he dislikes everything the city has to offer.⁴⁰

This brief case study of Katrina presents the components that contextualize and constitute the “cultural life” of disasters.⁴¹ The “culture life” of disaster is the cultural processing of various events, and it can be communicated in a range of mediums. The “cultural life” of disaster can, as we saw above, be seen most vividly in news narratives about specific events, as well as in cultural output, such as film, television, novels, and comic books. In *Treme*’s case, Bernette summarizes the two components of disaster’s “cultural life” in his dual lament of the failure on part of the government to prevent flooding, as well as his sharp critique of the news media on scene, framed in this drama as “vultures” praying on a post-disaster community.

³⁸ Kverndokk, *Mediating The Morals of Disasters*, 80.

³⁹ Holm, *The Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 19.

⁴⁰ Holm, *The Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 15.

⁴¹ Holm, *The Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 22.

This drama is just one example of an ever-growing body of cultural work that function to process disaster events and their implications on various levels of human society. In the long cultural history of disaster events, one aspect has been constant, and that is humans' need to understand, interpret, and make sense of disasters. Rebecca Solnit provides a succinct explanation for why this cultural sphere of disaster exists, and why it is integral to human life. She observes that “[the] history of disaster demonstrates that most of us are social animals, hungry for connection, as well as for purpose and meaning.”⁴² Here we enter into a significant aspect of disasters' cultural imaginary. Though the cause and effect of different kinds of disaster varies depending on the context in which it occurs, the reaction to disaster is very similar, and it cuts across imagined boundaries. Solnit's observation encapsulates this idea quite well, because no matter the source, the ways in which humans react to nearly all sorts of disaster bear striking similarities. Disaster is paradoxical in the sense that it may cause substantial material and bodily harm, yet it is also something that brings people together, contrary, as we have seen, to what news mediated disaster narratives would suggest. These events highlight the ways in which humans have more things in common, and one example of this commonality is the need to make sense of whichever event or situation that upsets the normal state of affairs. This is true for disasters in all spheres of life, be it environmental, political, or personal. It is also true for different kinds of disasters. Consider the observation of Salman Rushdie: “Man [is] the storytelling animal, the only creature on earth that tells itself stories to understand what kind of creature it is.”⁴³ We are dependent on interpreting not only our own lives, and ourselves, but also on understanding how we as individuals and groups constitute parts of a whole social world. Disasters have a special place in this regard, because they symbolize a potential threat to the social, political and economic foundations of civil society. All kinds of disaster have political, social, and cultural dimensions, seeing as they can have deep and long-lasting impacts on the structures shaping our cultural, social, and political lives.⁴⁴ In this sense, disasters are always already cultural, because they intervene in our already established social and cultural world. They in turn become a constituent element in our existence. This notion is presented in a recent collection of essays that process Hurricane Katrina from a multitude of different cultural texts, genres, and mediums, including film, graphic novels, and memoirs. In a collection titled *Ten Years After Katrina*, editors Mary Ruth Marotte and Glenn Jellenik writes that “after ten years we

⁴² Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, 305.

⁴³ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton* (New York: Random House, 2012), 19.

⁴⁴ Joanna Bator, *The Cultural Meaning of Disaster*, 92.

have the space and the distance to begin to analyze how deeply Katrina reaches into our culture, to move beyond remarking on the horror and injustice toward an exploration of what these texts are doing in and to our cultural landscape.”⁴⁵

There are many aspects of culture that determine how we view and interpret disaster, and nonetheless culture is also what engenders various interpretations in the first place. Tierney notes that culture in this sense can be seen as a “tool kit,” consisting of “shared beliefs, norms, and socially constructed realities [that] provide part of the basis for the social order.” Furthermore, culture thus “provides frameworks through which events in the past and present are understood, as well as frameworks through which to view the future.”⁴⁶ Additionally, according to recent scholarship of the cultural dimensions of disaster, the cultural imagination of disaster can be conceptualized in similar vein to the “social imaginary,” which means the ways in which humans imagine social life and existence.⁴⁷ In the “cultural life” of disaster, the cultural elements are what makes possible a deeper sense of meaning (what a disaster means) and understanding (how disaster affects the social world). One of the most common approaches in viewing disasters in relation to human society is to view them in the framework of vulnerability, which is seen in both social science research as well as in images of disaster in the broader sphere of popular culture. In the remainder of this chapter, we will look at the origins of the vulnerability perspective as it seen to have developed in philosophical debates in the aftermath of the catastrophic 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. We will then move on the fictional depictions of disasters in popular culture, and I will situate *True Detective* within a canon of previous disaster narratives.

The Tremor Heard Around the World

Most of the dominant ways in which disaster is imagined in popular culture have some roots in Christian mythology. This is also true for the origin of the dominant modern way of framing disaster in the context of human vulnerability. Before I provide a brief discussion of its historical context, it is helpful to point out a few examples of how disaster is commonly depicted in popular culture. Vulnerability encompasses a range of different narrative motifs

⁴⁵ Mary Ruth Marotte, and Glenn Jellenik, ed., *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015), ix.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Tierney, *Social Roots of Risk*, 47.

⁴⁷ Holm, *Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 21.

and forms, some of which are the trauma, meaning the emphasis on injuries (mental or physical) caused by disaster; the Act of God perspective, which refers to the view that natural disasters are sent by God as punishment for man's sins; and finally an apocalyptic perspective, which signals the collapse of human civilization.⁴⁸ This cultural form of disaster is arguably most familiar as it has been popularized in contemporary television series, books, and films such as *The Walking Dead* (2010-), *The Road* (2009), and *2012* (2009) respectively.

Today, vulnerability pertains to social life and the interconnectedness we undoubtedly share with one another; whatever color, creed, or cultural convictions we subscribe to.

Sociologist Kathleen Tierney provides an explanation of the concept, writing:

Put simply. . . disaster and their impacts are socially produced, and the forces driving the production of disaster are embedded in the social order itself. . . this is equally true whether the culprit in question is a hurricane, flood, earthquake, or a bursting speculative bubble. The origins of disaster lie not in nature, and not in technology, but rather in the ordinary everyday workings of society itself.⁴⁹

In the context of the cultural imagination of disaster, then, whenever someone approaches their subject using a vulnerability framework, it often refers to the human contribution to disaster, or to the duration and severity of a disaster's impact. This is also the case with social science research in the fields of sociology, for instance. This concept has deep historical roots, which I will illustrate with a brief case study of an earthquake that shook both the port city of Lisbon in 1755, as well as the philosophical (and theological) understandings of disaster.

The concept of vulnerability stems from an interpretive frame which requires some explication, namely, the philosophical question regarding the nature of evil in human society, which in the late 17th century was coined by German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz as the theodicy problem.⁵⁰ The central problem theodicy poses is the reconciliation of God (or a god-like entity) with the persistence of evil and suffering. If there is an all-powerful God, why create a world with evil and suffering? One of the common religious and older philosophical explanations is that catastrophes and crises serve as a test of faith. In short, these explanations rest on the assumption that whatever horrible and life-altering events humans face, it nevertheless serves a higher purpose, and everything is a part of the Creator's

⁴⁸ Holm, *Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 24-26.

⁴⁹ Tierney, *Social Roots of Risk*, 4-5.

⁵⁰ Holm, *Cultural Analysis of Disaster*, 26.

plans. Another explanation argues that it is humans endowed with free will and agency who are to blame. David Hume arguably once summarized the problem of theodicy when he wrote: “Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then where does evil come from?”⁵¹ This was the context in which the Lisbon earthquake appeared, and in a sense, the quake put the notion of “theodicy” and its credibility on trial.

On November 1st, 1755, Lisbon endured an earthquake so severe and intense that it became known as the first modern natural disaster. Approximately 30,000 people died, though the final death toll is undoubtedly much higher as a result of later calamities caused by the aftershocks of the quake. It subsequently sent cultural shockwaves throughout all of Enlightenment Europe.⁵² The instances of pointing fingers and blaming others for the calamity was far from missing in the immediate aftermath of the quake. Kate Rigby offers a succinct summary of the immediate aftermath, where she outlines the differences in Catholic and Protestant attempts to explain why the people of Lisbon suffered to such a severe extent. On the one hand, Protestants mainly pointed the blame on the clergy and their flock of believers, as well as the Lisbon-based Inquisition. On the other hand, Catholics directed their blame toward the immoral and faithless attitudes that they believed permeated the commercial and merchant class – mainly Protestant Dutch and British dealing in lucrative businesses.⁵³ Clearly, the human need for understanding the purpose of this catastrophe was apparent in the divisions of different social groups.

Despite being a terrible catastrophe, the Lisbon disaster did inspire entertaining debate throughout the European intelligentsia. In the aftermath, many prominent thinkers of the time debated the problem of theodicy, two of which included Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Francois Voltaire. Recall, the term theodicy coined by Gottfried Leibniz. It was an artificial word he put together from the Greek words *theo* (God) and *dike* (justice, judgement), otherwise known as the problem of evil. In short, the pervasiveness of evil in the world puts God’s justice and judgment into question, formulated in the perhaps well-known question “If God has almighty powers why is there still evil in the world?”⁵⁴ ⁵⁵ The central issue that

⁵¹ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 11.

⁵² Isak Winkel Holm, “The Frailty of Everything — Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* and Modern Disaster Discourse,” in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 236.

⁵³ Kate Rigby, *Dancing With Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 30.

⁵⁴ Holm, *The Frailty of Everything*, 236.

manifested itself as a problem, or a challenge, was the reconciliation of a merciful and all-powerful God (or God-entity) with the fact that evil existed.

The aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake represents the theodicy debate perfectly. It challenged the notion of one universal explanation for what at the time was called natural evils (of which earthquakes are an example). Those engaged with the theodicy debate could largely be divided into two camps. On one hand, the Leibniz-Rousseau camp tried – using the Lisbon earthquake as case in point – to explain the catastrophe using a more moderate version of what the traditional Church espoused. Instead of blaming the people and their sins for the earthquake, Rousseau argued that there is indeed a hidden and imperceptible “providential order” to seemingly meaningless and chaotic events like earthquakes.⁵⁶ Building on Leibniz’s defense, Rousseau argued that the world humans live in is indeed created and given by God, but there is a separate and contained order in the world we live in, one in which humans are not able to perceive, for example, the explanations for natural evils such as earthquakes. As Susan Neiman explains, Leibniz created a framework for humans to understand misery. There were three spheres of evil: the metaphysical, the natural, and the moral. Metaphysical evil corresponded to the degradation of the world’s substances, which, importantly for Leibniz, one could not criticize God because he had limitations, despite being all-powerful. A modern version of this argument is that humans are endowed with means to create a better life, however the potential harm this causes cannot be blamed on God, but rather, humans who chose a certain manner of living. The latter categories of evil, natural and moral, according to Leibniz, were parts in a casual relation in which natural evils – floods and hurricanes - was the punishment for moral evils (sin). Thus, Leibniz was able to prove a correlation, albeit a precarious, between sin and suffering. However, people began to question whether this framework was credible or if it was signaling a breach in the collective imagination.⁵⁷

The challenge to Leibniz’ framework came almost immediately after the Lisbon event, and is most famously represented with Voltaire’s attack on Rousseau for his Leibnizean defense. Voltaire went as far as to make fun of the Leibnizean optimism in his satirical novel *Candide* (1759). Only a few short weeks after the Lisbon earthquake, Voltaire penned the poem *Poeme Sur Le Desastre De Lisbonne* (1756), which he himself described as

⁵⁵ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 9-11.

⁵⁶ Holm, *The Frailty of Everything*, 236.

⁵⁷ Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 22-23.

a “kick in the rear of Providence.”⁵⁸ Furthermore, in Voltaire’s view, the earthquake was neither “divine punishment nor. . . divine rationality,” it was a “meaningless atrocity.”⁵⁹

Compelled to offer a rebuttal, Rousseau attempted to find a middle ground between what the Church saw as divine punishment and Voltaire’s refutation of providence’s existence. Consequently, in a letter to Voltaire, Rousseau wrote on the Lisbon earthquake: “[...] the majority of our physical misfortunes are also our work. . . If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all.”⁶⁰ Thus, Rousseau was able to pin at least some of the responsibility of disaster on people and their social (and architectural) organization. This represents a significant shift in the ways disaster is perceived, as Rousseau, although defending a theological explanation for disasters, argued humans are, in fact, at least in part to blame for calamities if they do not do the work of preparing for such events. Inadvertently, Rousseau sketched out the foundations for the cognitive scheme most often engaged with in both social science research of disaster, as well as in cultural imaginations of disaster, namely, the vulnerability of society and social groups. Though it may seem cynical (and obvious), Rousseau tapped into an essential element of human kind’s role in disaster events, namely that, more often than not, we are implicitly or even explicitly exacerbating the duration and severity of disasters. In short, we are partly to blame for our precarious situation. This signaled a radical change of perspective. The debate before Rousseau’s argument existed with the notion that theodicy was vertical, meaning, we really do not control anything that happens (to us), because everything that happens is already a part of the order of things. Judgment comes from above (God), and human society has no way of assuring itself against it, other than living a life free of sin. Rousseau, however, made it possible to envision a “horizontal theodicy,” one in which the human order was in part to blame for the suffering of other humans.⁶¹

Though the theodicy debate might seem antiquated in the progressively secularized modern world, there is ample evidence to the contrary, for remnants of the theodicy question, the problem of evil, still lives on. Thus far, we have seen that this debate made possible the

⁵⁸ Holm, *The Frailty of Everything*, 236.

⁵⁹ Neal Ascherson, “Lessons from earthquakes: there isn’t always someone to blame When the earth goes from under our feet, we’d rather feel guilty than helpless,” *The Independent*, accessed April 12, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/lessons-from-earthquakes-there-isnt-always-someone-to-blame-when-the-earth-goes-from-under-our-feet-1569149.html>.

⁶⁰ Holm, *The Frailty of Everything*, 237.

⁶¹ Holm, *The Frailty of Everything*, 237.

vulnerability perspective that, to many scholars, is a popular and significant approach to human society in the face of disaster. If Rousseau, writing in the late 18th century, managed to secularize theodicy in terms of the vulnerability of the human order, then several other contemporary scholars have secularized the debate even more.

Ted Steinberg's *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America* (2006) and Majid Yar's *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order* are examples of books where the theodicy problem is re-contextualized to fit modern and more secular sensibilities. "When it comes to interpreting natural disasters," Steinberg writes, "Americans have quite the imagination."⁶² Steinberg's book is a forceful indictment of the American tradition of seeing nature or God as sole culprits when disaster strikes. Though he never refers to the paradigm shift of the post-Lisbon theodicy debate specifically, the themes of that debate are nevertheless central to Steinberg's argument. In fact, judging from the numerous examples of civil servants and other officials invoking hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods as acts of God – the American response to disaster in the late 19th and throughout the 20th centuries echo a pre-Lisbon era - an era where the fear of God (and his punishments) were instilled by the likes of revivalist pastor Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). In Steinberg's book, we see how, in the aftermath of disaster, the Act of God perspective is no longer used to deter from moral irresponsibility, but rather, as means to "[abdicate] moral reason" and evade responsibility on the part of the ones who supposedly should be in charge of ensuring social and material resilience where it is possible.⁶³ In Steinberg's view, what is being evaded and explained away as events beyond human control, is the underlying fact that we are indeed "architects of destruction," both when it comes to worsening the effects of natural calamities, and in turn, when it comes to lack of preparedness for such events.⁶⁴ On this topic of who is to blame for disasters, Steinberg laments the long tradition of pinning the blame of nature. He writes:

This constrained vision of responsibility, this belief that that [disasters] stem solely from random natural forces, is tantamount to saying that they lie entirely outside human history, beyond our influence, beyond moral reason, beyond control. In truth, however, natural calamities frequently do not just happen; they are produced through a chain of human choices and natural occurrences, and in this sense they form a legitimate topic for social and historical study.⁶⁵

⁶² Ted Steinberg, *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disaster in America*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), xi.

⁶³ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, xxiv, 61.

⁶⁴ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, xxv.

⁶⁵ Steinberg, *Acts of God*, xxi.

In concurrence with the familiar victims of Rob Nixon's "slow violence," the same groups of people are constantly at risk in Steinberg's diachronic critique of the role of business leaders and government officials, namely, groups of people who are at the bottom steps of the socioeconomic ladder.⁶⁶ This is a viewpoint exemplified by news anchor Wolf Blitzer, who in the aftermath of Katrina remarked that the victims were "so poor" and "so black."⁶⁷

While Steinberg offers a survey of the ways in which the lingering theodicy problem has been misused in order to evade much needed disaster preparation and recovery, Majid Yar delineates the progression from theodicy to the contemporary reimagined version "sociodicy," or, the problem of society.⁶⁸ This means that the problem of evil, as furiously debated by Rousseau and Voltaire, has been recast as suffering that challenges "modernity's self-image as a progressive movement," the goal of which is to erase all roots of evil. It refers to the "persistence of social suffering in the face of humanity's [apparent] capacity to change the world for the better."⁶⁹ Instead of attributing evil in its many forms to acts of God, the modern understanding is that evils in the world can largely be attributed to human behavior. Evil as we see it today is still present as it begets suffering and misery in the same vein as it did centuries ago, when Rousseau and Voltaire debated the roots of suffering in society. Thus, human society's confrontation with this problem is acted out in the willingness and ability to confront the various sources manifested as evil, identified in the present as objectively identifiable insufficiencies in human society. According to Yar, then, our modern definition of evil can be defined as various forms of lack, for instance lack of proper resources and social organization that most evidently results in behavior that goes against the collective understanding of how our society should function. Hence, when we refer to evil acts we most likely are referring to such acts deemed as criminal, which goes against the collective notions of the behavioral boundaries set up by law and order.⁷⁰ Consequently, in the modern version of theodicy, it is no longer the explanations for divine punishment that is in focus, but rather the consequences of the frailty and social vulnerability that are at stake. We have, on the one hand, established social norms and legal regulations in order to deter

⁶⁶ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2.

⁶⁷ Nicole R. Fleetwood, "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (September 2006): 770.

⁶⁸ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 14.

⁶⁹ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 14.

⁷⁰ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 14.

criminal behavior. On the other hand, though, we still observe suffering daily, which begs the question of how effective and resilient human society is when it comes to ridding ourselves of this modern problem of evil. The theorization of crime-as-evil is arguably mirrored in what we see in the various scholarly responses to disasters, notably among those who engage in criticizing environmental man-made destruction, lack of preparedness in anticipation of natural disasters, and loss of faith in basic democratic values, like the ability and readiness to mend and limit disaster aftermaths. Thus, seen from the viewpoint of our modern and progressive notions of history, one that teaches us that human society moves us further in the direction of progress and peace, theorizations of the end of the world (apocalypse) have become unnecessary. “There is no need,” Yar argues, “for a final, decisive moment of reckoning to answer the problem of evil, as suffering will be eradicated through humanity’s remaking of the world,” however, “the apocalyptic (like the problem of theodicy itself) persists and in fact continues to play an important role in our modern cultural responses to crime-as-evil.”⁷¹ In fact, in the landscape of contemporary cultural depictions of crime, evil, and the insufficiencies of human society, one of the dominant modes is the cultural imaginary depicting the apocalyptic, seen through the lens of a “dystopian vision of disaster and regression.”⁷² One of the more recent examples of this fictional mode is arguably the first season of HBO’s *True Detective*. The explication of this series as a dystopic disaster narrative will be the topic of the next and final section of this chapter.

Locating Themes of Disaster in HBO’s *True Detective*

The discussion in this chapter has thus far oriented the reader towards the “cultural life” of disaster in general. This term signals the growing attention to the ways in which cultural aspects in our society shape and determine how we view disasters. This growing scholarly attention to “cultures of disasters” has arisen out of the “cultural turn” in disaster research.⁷³ Depictions and imaginaries of disaster circulates within a broad range of cultural media texts (news, film, television, novels). These depictions in turn are “structured around a limited number of narrative forms and motifs,” some of which are the theodicy and the apocalyptic frame. These motifs and forms structure the disaster imaginary, and in turn, they structure

⁷¹ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 17.

⁷² Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 17.

⁷³ Anders Ekström and Kyrre Kverndokk, “Cultures of Disasters,” *Culture Unbound* 7, no. 3 (2015): 358.

how we confront and deal with the various forms disaster takes.⁷⁴ We have seen that the “cultural life” of disasters encompass both a man-made and media-borne dimension, which further underlines the notion that we, as creative and social creatures, imagine past, present, and future disasters on levels ranging from the personal to the global. Bearing in mind this backdrop, I will now contextualize *True Detective* as a disaster narrative specifically. Disaster narrative is a broad notion, which encompass a range of media and communication practices about disasters. Seeing as the textual examples throughout this thesis are gathered from a single fictional television series, however, I will limit the following discussion here to the disaster fiction genre.

Contextualizing *True Detective* within one specific genre is complicated by the fact that the series arguably sample a range of various established genres. In the context of the disaster imaginary then, Yar contributes a succinct overview of the dominant genres in which themes of disaster (i.e. dystopic portrayals) circulate. Disaster fiction, one could argue, is more of a field than a specific genre. For instance, images of the post-apocalyptic, Yar writes, “exists at the intersection of three [...] well-established genres, namely those of science fiction, action, and crime.”⁷⁵ Though marketed as a drama, *True Detective* can with ample evidence be regarded as an example of all three genres Yar mentions, with elements of still other genres. In addition to the explicit citations of detective fiction with its offshoot associations to the buddy cop drama and hardboiled detective fiction, the series fits neatly within the typology of disaster fiction.

Karsten Wind Meyhoff is among the scholars who have argued that disaster fiction is its own genre, especially when it comes to themes of natural and ecological disasters. Disaster fiction has long been regarded as a subgenre to science-fiction, and has engendered its own subcategories of different ways of framing the disaster as apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic, or dystopic. The latter mode is of interest here, as some of the definitions of dystopic fiction mode illustrates where we can situate *True Detective* as an example of a dystopic disaster narrative.

Meyhoff argues that “the interest in (natural) disasters has developed into a genre of its own in recent decades, a genre built upon particular patterns, rules, and elements.”⁷⁶ Meyhoff locates five dominant elements and patterns of disaster fiction which constitute its generic qualities. These are an emphasis on place; depiction of heroes and villains; disaster

⁷⁴ Ekström and Kverndokk, *Cultures of Disasters*, 358.

⁷⁵ Yar, *The Imaginary of Disaster*, 20.

⁷⁶ Meyhoff, *Freak Ecology*, 297.

ethics; as well as the imagery of disaster events seen in a narrative structure of a “before, during and after disaster scenario.”⁷⁷ These five elements are all present in *True Detective*, albeit there is a lesser emphasis on the spectacle nature of disaster imagery which we are used to seeing in Hollywood blockbuster productions. Nevertheless, we can locate these five elements in the series, seeing as it has an apparent emphasis on place, or, as Meyhoff puts it, the “site of disaster.”⁷⁸ The spatial emphasis in *True Detective* is southern Louisiana, which is a place known for its vulnerable ecology due to both human-made (technological) and natural disasters (hurricanes). The heroes of the series are the two main characters, detectives Hart and Cohle, and the apparent villain is a serial killer whom the detectives are hunting throughout the season. In addition to the single characterization of a classic villain, there are also other, more systemic and industrial portrayals of villainous practices. For instance, the series depicts law enforcement and political authorities who impede the detective work, which lead us to another element present in the series, namely the ethics aspect. The detectives (heroes) must rely on their own expertise and moral compass in order to navigate their various situations. As we see in the series, as well as in numerous other examples of disaster fiction, the heroes come into conflict with the interests of the establishment authorities.

The last element regarding the temporal aspects of disaster images (before, during, and aftermath), is perhaps the one aspect that sets *True Detective* apart from most other depictions of disaster in popular culture. However, if we think about the generic prerequisite to depict a before, during, and after disaster scenario, the series opens itself up as a relevant example of disaster fiction. This aspect is made clear in the temporal organization of the narrative, depicting three main periods in recent American history. The multiple temporalities in the series, ranging from the past (1995, 2002) to the present (of the narrative, 2012), is a way to, Cristina Demaria writes, “refer to a past *in* and *for* the present, and vice-versa: the present containing a past that is being re-written.”⁷⁹ In a literal sense, the past is being rewritten by Hart and Cohle who contribute to restoring the flooded historical archive of their 1995 case, although they rewrite the past because their versions of what happened, as audiences see in flashbacks, is not what really happened. The series, by way of its temporal complexities, is able to show a world in which past disasters are acting upon the present. On

⁷⁷ Meyhoff, *Freak Ecology*, 304-306.

⁷⁸ Meyhoff, *Freak Ecology*, 304.

⁷⁹ Cristina Demaria, “*True Detective Stories: Media Textuality and the Anthology Format Between Remediation and Transmedia Narratives*, *Between* 4, no. 8 (November 2014): 16.

an individual level, the event that sets in motion the narrative of Hart and Cohle is the hurricane-induced destruction of police archives. On a societal level, we see remnants of still other disasters who have put a distinct mark on the landscapes and infrastructure shown in the series, for instance in imagery of derelict ecology, schools, and entire neighborhoods.

Demaria further remarks that “[dystopian] narratives usually grow in time of crisis. . . a period of transformation.”⁸⁰ The complete timeline of *True Detective* portrays moments in recent American history marked by “crisis-as-change,” perhaps most apparently by framing the narrative in a pre-9/11 and hurricane Katrina world, two disasters, though different in kind, which serve as the more explicit references to past events that still haunt the present.⁸¹

The elements of disaster fiction pertaining to a dystopian portrayal of disaster imagery further open the series for investigation. Yar notes that the dominant mode of cultural response to society’s lack can be seen through the lens of dystopian depictions of the world. Imagined as a catastrophe, Yar writes, the dystopian imagery depicts a world

in which civilization, law, order, peace and plenitude (in short, *progress*) are undone. It is a dystopian view of the future built upon pessimism about humankind’s historical direction of travel – the feeling and fear that what awaits us is a disastrous accumulation of collectively self-inflicted woes, a world of risk, danger, pain and suffering.⁸²

In *True Detective*, this worldview is supported and propagated by one of the two main characters, Rust Cohle. It is also the aspect of the series that garnered a substantial amount of commentary and analysis. The philosophy espoused by Cohle throughout the season is permeated with direct references to philosophical pessimism and nihilism. In one instance, Cohle seems to echo the above-quoted dystopian sensibilities, when he questions the illusions of history and time itself, which according to him just amounts to “a big drama,” and “never anything but a jerry-rig of presumption and dumb will” (1.3, 56:46-56:51). This echoes what Yar calls a “dystopian sensibility,” which refers to the idea that “the present is worse, not better than the past, and the future is an even darker and more dangerous place.”⁸³

In the following chapters, I will address what I argue are the central themes of disaster in *True Detective*. The underlying concept in both of the proceeding chapters is vulnerability, which is a central assumption about the nature of human society in most writings about

⁸⁰ Demaria, *True Detective Stories*, 18.

⁸¹ Demaria, *True Detective Stories*, 17.

⁸² Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 18.

⁸³ Yar, *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster*, 19.

disaster. The term vulnerability is a well-known concept, yet I will clarify here that in the context of this thesis, when I use the term I am referring to the assumption that vulnerability is systemic, which in turn encompasses a broader recognition of the vulnerability of society as a whole or social group. This contrasts with another and related understanding of the term, witnessed for instance in philosopher Judith Butler's work. However, the notion of "corporal vulnerability," pertains to the individual level of human interaction, albeit with societal consequences.⁸⁴ The understanding of vulnerability in the following chapters refer to a an influential definition which states that "[vulnerability is] the characteristics of a person or group and their situation that influence their capacity to anticipate, cope with, resist or recover from the impact" of technological or natural disasters.⁸⁵ This understanding is in line with what we saw previously in this chapter, specifically Rousseau's observation in the wake of the first modern natural disaster, the Lisbon earthquake, in which he stated that human society is already vulnerable to suffering caused by "natural evils," and thus bear a distinct responsibility to mitigate those vulnerabilities.

Central to depictions of disaster in the fictional realm is a critique that myths serve as false or misleading narratives about the world we inhabit, especially in the face of disaster. In the case of *True Detective*, some scholars have criticized the series for propagating myths related to the satanic panic in the U.S., which reached a peak level of moral panic in the 1980s and into the 1990s. In addition to this critique, the season finale itself was both praised and criticized for not staying true to the worldview espoused by Cohle (referring to a happy ending), which, witnessed in the reception to the final episode, most viewers and critics did not anticipate. Thus, in the series, myths and their function operate on two levels simultaneously. On the one hand, the series makes references to real-life instances where a supposed crisis resulted in moral panic, for which the series received some dissent. It was furthermore expected to present a solution to the dual senses of myth, one in which the expectation was that the series would conclude with Cohle's understanding of myth. On the other hand, up until the final episode, the series was seen to take the audiences in the direction of a complete deconstruction of some of the oldest and most recognizable mythological tropes. When the final moments in the season did just the opposite, it broke with expectations that had been building throughout the season.

⁸⁴ Judith Butler, *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 28-29.

⁸⁵ Holm, *The Frailty of Everything*, 235-236.

It is my aim, then, to address how these multiple levels of myth discourse comes across in *True Detective*. In chapter 3, I will establish that the place and people in the series are marked by disaster. In the chapter on myths, then, I will situate the dual senses of myth within the series as a result of living in such a place. Ekström and Kverndokk argue that disasters “inhabit a liminal character, in the sense that they put our understanding of the world on trial. Fundamental norms and values are made visible when the world is tossed and turned, simply because they can no longer be taken for granted,” and as such, “disasters work as catalysts for negotiations of cultural meaning, norms and values, and the patterns of social organization.”⁸⁶ I will show how the dual senses of myth create a liminal space in which we can trace the different interpretations of myth. Furthermore, this notion is supported by numerous images of specific liminal places and characters, which complement and mirror the drama engendered by liminality, which we witness in the struggle of sense-making represented by Hart and Cohle.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter I have shown the rise of disaster studies as a multi-disciplinary field. Arising from that field, I have addressed the turn towards studying the cultural dimensions of disaster, seen in studies of various disaster narratives, ranging from news media to popular cultural mediums like film and television. The object of study is the “cultural life” of disasters, which point to the notion that humans have an inherent need to interpret the meaning of disasters, while simultaneously, also have a distinct role in framing and guiding various meaning-making practices. I have shown that the debate regarding the interpretation of disaster have deep historical roots, and in the case study I provided, I have shown that the dominant way in which to view human society as vulnerable has its roots in this debate. In the final section of this chapter, I have pointed to the significance of disaster fiction as a cultural category in fictional depictions of disaster. Within this genre, the interpretation of disaster is a central element. I have also discussed and highlighted the central role of myths in relation to disaster narratives.

⁸⁶ Ekström and Kverndokk, *Cultures of Disasters*, 357.

Chapter 3

Screening Toxicity

The aim of this chapter is to show how environmental disaster is represented in *True Detective*. One of the most significant tropes in disaster fiction is an emphasis on place. Consequently, in the following discussion, I will emphasize the spatial aspect in the series, namely the real-life location in which the fictional narrative takes place. I will argue that the season employs elements associated with tactics used by various environmental movements, specifically the *toxic image* and *toxic tourism* as means to achieve greater public awareness and activism centered around issues concerning environmental vulnerability, environmental justice, as well as human exploitation of natural resources. I will address how *True Detective* can be seen as a pastiche on both the use of toxic imagery, as well as toxic tourism, in an effort to convey the vulnerable state of landscape and people in southern Louisiana. The real place *True Detective* is set to is a region in the U.S. which is colloquially known as “Cancer Alley.” This name is a result of the well-documented effects of chemical industries in this region.

Starting in the 1960s, cultural responses to disaster entered a new epoch in which “ecocatastrophe” became prevalent tropes in disaster fiction, notably reacting to the public awareness of vulnerable trends such as pollution, overpopulation, and climate change.⁸⁷ Seeing as cultural responses to disaster do not occur in creative vacuums, this chapter’s discussion is situated in the context of cultural depictions of ecological disaster, and specifically centered around one concrete region in which these themes are prevalent. In this vein, *True Detective* functions as a “cultural seismograph,” in which cultural anxieties are reflected. Furthermore, film, television, and other popular cultural texts will over time serve as an archival resource, one in which dominant cultural anxieties are preserved for posterity.⁸⁸ In a broad sense, the cultural (and academic) zeitgeist today regarding ecological disaster is global climate crisis and its human activity dimension. Though inexorably linked, the following discussion is, however, limited to the regional level as it will focus on the specific locations presented in *True Detective*.

⁸⁷ Meyhoff, *Freak Ecology*, 298.

⁸⁸ Meyhoff, *Freak Ecology*, 295-297.

The combined elements of environmental photography and tourism that shape and influence the visual and narrative style and aesthetic in *True Detective* culminate in the notion of the (television) screen as source of environmental awareness; a televisual narrative that combines various strategies in order to form one cohesive argument about the effects of living in a society that has a lethal dependency on nature's resources. The method for addressing these aspects is by way of showing the interrelatedness of *True Detective's* characters and landscape in the context of the show's realistic setting.

Sense of Place

Among the most commonly noted aspects of *True Detective* is the depiction of a richly realized sense of place. Season director Cary J. Fukunaga and cinematographer Adam Arkapaw afforded a cohesiveness in the visual language of the text in which they rooted the series in a specific place. In an interview, director Fukunaga explained this choice, speaking of the already present southern Louisiana landscape as “densely green” landscape intertwined with “industrial detritus of refineries and other industries.”⁸⁹



Figure 1 Hart and Cohle driving past what seems to be an abandoned factory building. Color palette (green, brown, gray) apparent in the foreground of the image.

The image above serves as an example of the series juxtaposition of a green natural environment with gray and brown remnants of industry (see Figure 1).

⁸⁹ Stated in a behind-the-scenes mini-episode available on HBO's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zoYq2bDaGt4&t=365s>

Place serves as a central element and narrative trope in disaster fiction, as cities and sometimes the entire planet is subject to violent destruction. As Meyhoff notes “the typical scenery [in disaster fiction] is densely populated cities. . . . Being the centers of national and global power (economically, politically, culturally and militarily) these key metropolises are powerful symbols of human civilization.”⁹⁰ The symbolism here goes deeper, however, than just mere material and human destruction. The fundamental building blocks of civilization are at risk when the ties that bind social organization of human society together are ruined: schools, hospitals, homes, skyscrapers. Often, a disaster fiction is concentrated on cities like New York, Los Angeles, and London, seeing as these cities are the places in which we can locate headquarters of vast networks that shape, influence, and help to stabilize the world we live in. What usually follows in the aftermath of such destruction is the all-encompassing chaos and confusion among people, seeing as the pillars of society that maintain law and order are left either entirely washed out or in a severely lacking state.

By contrast, the site of disaster in *True Detective* is not a large and urban metropolis. There are no towering skyscrapers or densely populated neighborhoods. The constructions towering here, mostly in the background, are industrial cranes and large factory sites which refers to the vast network of fossil fuel industry located in southern Louisiana. The symbolism inferred in the depiction of the landscape is, however, similar to the symbolism inferred in the images of large-scale metropolises. The setting in the series is a site in which economic, cultural, and political centers are located, seeing as southern Louisiana, and New Orleans especially, is a nexus of all these aspects. Notably, the economic and political power inherent in industry, and the soft power inherent in the region’s distinct culture and traditions, which in turn is also economic in the sense that the region attracts tourists.

Delia Byrnes writes of *True Detective*’s opening credit sequence and the show’s presentation of oil as “constitutive role in American aesthetic practices, discourses, and cultural forms.”⁹¹ Concerning the significance of the place in which the series is set, Byrnes argues “[the] geography of oil invokes the long relationship between the pleasures of petromodernity and the material violence of its extractive regimes, inviting us to consider the ways in which the industrial landscapes of southern Louisiana reflect broader cultural, political, and economic practices.”⁹² The writer and creator of *True Detective*, Nic Pizzolatto,

⁹⁰ Meyhoff, *Freak Ecology*, 304.

⁹¹ Delia Byrnes, ““I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here”: Oil’s Intimate Ecologies in HBO’s *True Detective*,” *The Global South* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 87.

⁹² Byrnes, *I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here*, 87.

stated in an interview that the show is depicting a world in which “the weak (physically or economically) are lost, ground under by perfidious wheels that lie somewhere behind the visible, wheels powered by greed, perversity, and irrational belief systems,” and these weak and lost souls “dwell on an exhausted frontier, a fractured coastline beleaguered by industrial pollution and detritus, slowly sinking into the Gulf of Mexico. There’s a sense here that the apocalypse already happened.”⁹³ Furthermore, Patrick Clair, the creative director behind *True Detective*’s opening credits, observed that the “relationship between broken landscapes and broken people” was the guiding concept in making the one and half minute presentation.⁹⁴

Seeing as place is a central aspect in *True Detective*, the series depends on employing narrative and expositional cues that orient viewers. The ways in which television communicates information about its setting is, however, becoming increasingly more complex. Much of contemporary television does not depend on explicit exposition in their storytelling, because the present media environment enables more complex television storytelling. If television shows “can make you curious enough, there’s this thing called Google,” show-creator David Simon (*The Wire*, *Treme*) states, which in turn “can provide its own creative freedom, releasing writers from having to over-explain.”⁹⁵ An important aspect in television narrative is thus the ability for audiences to orient themselves to the text’s location. Jason Mittell writes of the four main categories of orienting practices in fictional narratives: characters, events, time, and space. These elements are necessary to orient the audience by providing the who, what, when, and where of the fictional story. In the age of “complex TV,” as Mittell notes, in the past decade or so, the landscape of American television has shifted toward narrative experimentation, innovation, and distribution, all of which challenge the television business model of providing a “base level of narrative comprehension.”⁹⁶ Contemporary television programs do not shy away from temporarily confusing its audience and they award long-term viewing and audience engagement.

This complexity is apparent in *True Detective* as well, as the following examples illustrate. One of the main recognizable features in *True Detective* is the absence of a

⁹³ Kate Aurthur, “The “True Detective” Creator Debunks Your Craziest Theories,” *Buzzfeed*, March 6, 2014, https://www.buzzfeed.com/kateaurthur/true-deetective-finale-season-1-nic-pizzolatto?utm_term=.eeYvpWRw6#.waRRJ1pL8.

⁹⁴ Alexis C. Madrigal, “The Sacrificial Landscape of *True Detective*,” *The Atlantic*, March 7, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/03/the-sacrificial-landscape-of-em-true-detective-em/284302/>.

⁹⁵ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 262.

⁹⁶ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 261-263.

straight-forward, chronological narration. Instead, the narrative unfolds across three main timelines, which in turn enable an organic character development across several years. In this vein, *True Detective* efficiently orients its viewers by establishing temporal and spatial markers in one of the first frames of the first episode (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Shot-by-shot presentation of the opening scene's first frames establishing the narrative present as well as the setting.

The image on the far right contains an example of temporal and spatial orientation: in the bottom left corner, lingering for a few seconds, the viewer can read important information about the narrative present (2012) and the setting (Louisiana).

The image in the middle, as well as the one on the left are also significant. The camera is certainly essential for visual storytelling, and here, the close-up of the camera underscores this aspect. Furthermore, it reminds the viewer of a camera's agency in televisual stories. The viewer is only able to see what the camera frame shows. Consequently, the viewer is at an early stage in the series confronted with the notion that aspects such as framing and the order in which images occur relay important information and meaning that other elements, like dialogue, do not mention explicitly. Furthermore, in this instance, the viewer is transported from being a casual onlooker to what Jason Mittell calls a "forensic" viewer, a hallmark of complex television such as *True Detective* where the narrative functions as "drillable," encouraging viewers "to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling."⁹⁷

Another orienting practice follows from this: the ways in which the camera works to convey implicit meaning, where dialogue or other expositional aspects are absent. Throughout the season, *True Detective* features many long-shots, which typically show characters in a certain environment. One example of is the numerous tracking shots (camera

⁹⁷ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 288.

following an action) of Hart and Cohle driving in their car through the southern Louisiana landscape. Jeremy Butler notes “[in] fiction television, the long shot is – among other things – used for positioning characters within their environment, and can thereby construct aspects of those characters.”⁹⁸ The emphasis on these kinds of camera movements in the series, sometimes referred to as establishing shots, function then to underscore and establish the important relation between the characters and the environment they occupy. In short, the camera points out and creates strategic connections between broken people and the broken environment they inhabit. This is further elaborated throughout the season, in the numerous scenes in which Hart and Cohle are driving to the most broken-down and prosperously desolate areas of southern Louisiana. This works to broaden the scope of the narrative to not only focus on one murder case. Rather, the numerous locations we follow Hart and Cohle to expose the broader spatial context in which the state of the environment comes across as equally troubled as the people Hart and Cohle speak to. In this way, southern Louisiana becomes a well-integrated backdrop. This aspect is what Bjerling and Holm refer to as *True Detective*’s “temporal extension,” as the show suggest that Dora Lange is not the only problem at work in this region, but rather:

It is the latest tragedy in what appears to be an endless series of tragedies that has befallen the land. The landscape is a chaotic swamp in which everything seems to live in the shadow of past disasters, a desolate region already destroyed by violent hurricanes and by monstrous oil extraction facilities long before the events of the show.⁹⁹

Rather than pointing out exactly what makes the landscapes we see so broken, or what exactly makes the people we see so damaged, *True Detective* relies on a visual presentation in order to convey the interrelatedness of landscape and the characters. One of the ways the visual presentation infers this relationship is by employing elements of the Gothic. The Gothic as a visual element, reinforces the emphasis on place, considering one of the potent meanings suggested by Gothic imagery. As Kirsten Thomson writes, Gothic imagery, with its haunting houses and natural environments, “[reflect] the fact that society [has not] come to terms with its own violent social conflicts and hypocrisy, and ultimately suggests the illusion

⁹⁸ Jeremy G. Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 3rd ed. (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2007), 175.

⁹⁹ Jens Christian Borrebye Bjerling and Isak Winkel Holm, “The Dora Lange Archive: Jacques Derrida Watches *True Detective*,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49, no. 4 (2016): 708.

of social progress.”¹⁰⁰ There are scattered and subtle references to the past tragedies Bjerling and Holm allude to, which in turn orients the viewer toward and awareness of the precarious state of this region. For example, we are given brief references to recent hurricanes that have struck this region. In each instance, they are referenced as important events that have directly influenced and impacted the region in different ways. For example, Hurricane Rita (2005) is responsible for destroying case files which sets in motion the interviews of Hart and Cohle in the show’s narrative present. This is, in other words, the premise on which the story unfolds. Because archival evidence was destroyed by flooding, Hart and Cohle have to recount the way in which they worked on Dora Lange’s murder investigation in 1995. Archival flooding is of course a realistic scenario in this region of the U.S., and it functions as a reference to the material destruction commonly seen in the aftermath of hurricanes. A second reference to hurricanes is Hurricane Andrew (1992), which is the reason why a school was shut down, the same school attended by several of the victims we encounter. Cohle unassumingly speaks to serial killer Childress in one of the early episodes, and he speaks of the state of the abandoned school: “Andrew blew it out... Guess, they didn’t think it was worth cleaning up” (1.3, 52:24-52:30) Lastly, Hurricane Katrina (2005), is referenced as Cohle, in 2012, assumes that the aftermath of that disaster resulted in a “good year” for the killer, making large areas prime “hunting grounds” for the serial killer (1.7, 14:32-14:44).

Orienting Cancer Alley

The “fractured coastline” Pizzolatto alludes to is Louisiana’s industrial corridor. The setting of the series is then a real place wherein people with minimal financial resources coexist with large-scale and environmentally imposing industrial complexes. The landscape shots were filmed on various locations in southern Louisiana. Shooting on location is a common practice in procedurals and crime shows. It heightens the sense of authenticity and “true-to-reality” atmosphere in a series, seeing as the already established setting like the one in *True Detective* thus, Butler writes, functions as “a guarantor of television’s verisimilitude – its allusion of truth and reality.”¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Butler remarks, the “setting – whether built or selected – is not iconographically neutral. It always has the potential to contribute meaning to the narrative

¹⁰⁰ Kirsten M. Thompson, *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 35.

¹⁰¹ Butler, *Television*, 147.

or the program's theme."¹⁰² The landscape we see on screen is not just the noirish and Gothic backdrop of the action up front, where we see Hart and Cohle's storylines, but it arguably serves a character with its own agency, an idea showrunner Pizzolatto had in mind when he wrote the script: "The landscape is literally the third lead in the show. . . Very detailed, prosaic descriptions of setting were a large part of the script: taking these opportunities to witness the contradictions of place and people, to feel a sense of a corrupted, degrading Eden," Pizzolatto remarked in one interview. Speaking of his own knowledge of the region's history and culture, Pizzolatto further noted that the prerequisite understanding of Louisiana (as he is a native of the state) afforded him with an opportunity "to write landscape that was almost as full as the characters. . . the awareness of contradiction, the landscape as culture."¹⁰³

Though the interior scenes are staged more so than the exterior shots, the vast majority of exterior shots in this show feature images of an environment that is already present. In a "Making Of" mini-episode that is available both online and in the DVD extra features, we learn that the production team had to contend with both shifting weather conditions as well as critters during filming in the Louisiana bushlands.¹⁰⁴ The season director, Cary J. Fukunaga, describes the approach to filming on location in the above-mentioned behind the scenes footage: "It's really densely green sort of landscape mixed with sort of industrial detritus, refineries and other industries, and that's all kind of part of the texture of our story, and I wanted to make sure we got all that." The iconography of the southern Louisiana landscape was consequently readily available to the creators.

The region in which the narrative unfolds is thus situated in Louisiana's "Chemical Corridor."¹⁰⁵ Consequently, the setting of *True Detective* is a real-life petrochemical corridor, ominously nick-named "Cancer Alley," denoting the adverse effects of industrial activities, and the disproportionate amount of toxic exposure, felt most by communities of ostensibly low-income and minority inhabitants. It is an around 85-mile stretch of land between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, wherein at least one hundred and fifty oil refineries and chemical

¹⁰² Butler, *Television*, 148.

¹⁰³ Justin Steele, "Interview: Nic Pizzolatto, creator/writer of HBO's *True Detective*," *The Arkham Digest* (Blog), January 21, 2014, <http://www.arkhamdigest.com/2014/01/interview-nic-pizzolatto-creatorwriter.html>. Accessed April 15, 2017.

¹⁰⁴ The "Making of True Detective" episode available on HBO's YouTube channel: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0Yq2bDaGt4> [02.21.17].

¹⁰⁵ Byrnes, *Oil's Intimate Ecologies in HBO's True Detective*, 87.

plants are located.¹⁰⁶ Though the exterior locations visited throughout the show do not encompass the entire industrial sprawl that make up this conspicuous region, the places in which the narrative action unfolds are nevertheless firmly situated within Louisiana's chemical region.

It is also a paradoxical region, where on the one hand, as Singer notes, "the petrochemical and related chemical industries shape everyday life and experience," and not only for those whose livelihood is in this region, but for everyone who consumes the oily products produced here, ranging from a plastic wrapped chocolate bar to the fuel in a car.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand, the region is predominately inhabited by those on the lower steps of the socioeconomic ladder, those communities in the industrial corridor that suffer the most from the ill-effects of industrial manufacturing. If there is one instance where a number may speak for itself it is arguably in the case of "Cancer Alley," where air pollutants from over one hundred oil refineries and petrochemical plants results in twenty-seven kilograms of toxins per individual resident. The national U.S. average of toxic air pollutants per capita is by contrast a mere three kilograms.¹⁰⁸ As a result, the people who live here suffer from illnesses and die from causes such as cancer and lung disease in a disproportionate number compared to the nation's average of the same illnesses and deaths.¹⁰⁹

"Cancer Alley" is not just the geographical and cultural context of *True Detective*. It also retains its own rhetorical force, especially in light of seeing how the series connects characters and their environment. Accordingly, if we consider the notion that the setting is never neutral, we can begin to see the underlying agency of the series' depiction of place.

The phrase "visual commonplace," as developed by David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke, illustrates the significance of *True Detective*'s spatial context, namely, "Cancer Alley" is the visual context of the show.¹¹⁰ As mentioned above, the text presents a visual argument about the toxic relations between environment and people. Consequently, a text's meaning is not always limited to what the characters do and say, or what events transpire. Often, and especially in a show like *True Detective*, the full extent of the conveyed meanings

¹⁰⁶ Merrill Singer, "Down Cancer Alley: The Lived Experience of Health and Environmental Suffering in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2011): 141-142. doi: 10.1111/j.1548-1387.2011.01154.x.

¹⁰⁷ Singer, *Down Cancer Alley*, 141.

¹⁰⁸ Vallero, Daniel A. and Trevor M. Letcher, *Unraveling Environmental Disasters* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2013), 402.

¹⁰⁹ Byrnes, *I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here*, 87.

¹¹⁰ David S. Birdsell and Leo Groarke, "Toward a Theory of Visual Argument," *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33, no. 1 (1996): 6.

(or, arguments) should be understood in the context of both the characters and the landscape – space – in which they occupy. This region of the U.S. is perhaps a particularly powerful reservoir for thinking about the present situation and its meaning. For instance, considering the diverse and long cultural history of New Orleans or the economic and political implications of the vast sprawl of chemical industries in this region, the haunting atmosphere of the series not only denote the present environmental dimensions (toxic industries and pollution), it also denotes the troubled history of the region, because the series makes numerous references to the present and past industries of the region, observing the haunting presence of lingering remnants of the south’s most infamous industry, namely plantation slavery. “*True Detective*,” Byrnes notes, “asserts a thematic link between the violence of petromodernity and that of [...] plantation slavery,” emphasizing in this vein an argument about the violent legacy of this region’s past economic dependence on the backs of slaves.¹¹¹

The significance of the show’s “visual commonplace,” suggests that the setting itself has rhetorical force and consequences, and that there is argumentative usefulness in the act of connecting the interdependency of the environment and human bodies. As Joshua T. Barnett notes, “victims of toxic contamination must be depicted in ways that foreground the interconnectedness of human bodies, built environments, and the toxins that circulate in those spaces.”¹¹² Thus, having introduced the real-life implications of living in “Cancer Alley,” the following discussion will turn to the various influences that I argue reinforce *True Detective*’s visual context; the costs inherent in occupying this space; and how the series employs the environmental awareness strategies of particular strands of photography and tourism.

Toxic Imagery

One of the shaping influences that informs much of the cinematography in *True Detective* comes from the related visual medium of photography, and especially, environmental photography. Cinematography as we know it from film and television is quite similar to photography in their shared aim of telling a visual story. The difference, though, is that with cinematography the visual story unfolds across a series of images posited together, whereas in still images, the aim is arguably to capture a story in one single frame. I am interested here

¹¹¹ Byrnes, *Oil’s Intimate Ecologies in HBO’s True Detective*, 94.

¹¹² Joshua Trey Barnett, “Toxic Portraits: Resisting Multiple Invisibilities in the Environmental Justice Movement,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 2 (2015): 409. doi: 10.1080/00335630.2015.1005121.

in the aspect that unites cinematography and photography, seeing as both use the same strategies in order to capture one or several images.

A “determining influence in shaping what catastrophes and crises we pay attention to,” wrote Susan Sontag about the power of images.¹¹³ Images, like the ones Sontag described, evokes the moving images we see on television, and especially images we see on television that feature images from war, conflict and human suffering. One familiar supposition is that, while images (still or moving) can convey a deeper sense of understanding and an awareness of the subject at hand, we are nevertheless living in an image-saturated world. As Sontag remarks, “those [images] that should matter have a diminishing effect: we become callous,” making us just a little more accustomed to seeing the worst of human nature.¹¹⁴ The familiarity and normalization of being exposed to the suffering of others works against the notion that certain images are able to call attention to issues that matter. Or, they will call attention to issues in the sense that people see and reflect on the content. However, the challenge is moving beyond the sense of familiarity, and moving beyond the instant moment of recognizing atrocity as something deeply troublesome in need of fixing. Though this observation may contain some validity, perhaps especially in the times we live in now, there is still evidence to the contrary. Examples from the past few years demonstrate the “determining influence” of which Sontag writes. The history of one image in particular demonstrates the potential power and active engagement one single image can produce. Reflecting the racial violence and tension in the transformative 1950s, the image of slain teenager Emmett Till “put a shocking and monstrous face on the most brutal extremes of American racial injustice,” and even today “it refuses to be filed away in a dusty archive of American civil rights history.”¹¹⁵ Concerning the powerful political agency engendered by the (ostensibly African American) community witnessing the image of Emmett Till, Harold and DeLuca argue: “[The image] produced *real* sensations and *real* social relations,” and those “who consumed the image confronted face-to-face what for many had long been mired in legend. For those who engaged in its visual consumption, the abject body of Emmett Till had significant transformative effects.”¹¹⁶

The example of Emmett Till is arguably easy to understand in terms of its rhetorical power. It was one child who came to represent a whole race struggle, and it was one act of

¹¹³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 105.

¹¹⁴ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 105.

¹¹⁵ Christine Harold and Kevin M. DeLuca, “Behold The Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 265.

¹¹⁶ Harold and DeLuca, *Behold the Corpse*, 277-278.

severe injustice which further fueled the political movement whose aim was to establish equality and civil rights for the century old practices of suppression and discrimination. In many ways, images of the effects of a system of supremacy broadened peoples' minds and reinforced the need for political activism. Moving, then, from the sphere of civil rights struggle and racial injustice, the goal of environmental photography seeks to attain similar goals: political activism and, perhaps at a fundamental level, awareness of environmental destruction, exploitation, and, for the human lives affected by these processes, environmental (in)justice.

The specific genre of photography that arguably helped to inform the moving images in *True Detective* is environmental photography and, perhaps equally influential, the genre within photography called environmental portraits. In environmental photography, artists are ostensibly concerned with landscapes or various sites of pollution or destruction, in short, the visual evidence of environmental degradation. Jennifer Peebles observes: "In dealing with environmental problems, a lack of visual representation can mean a lack of social or political power as there is nothing to show, no compelling visual evidence of the extent or severity of the problem."¹¹⁷ This is perhaps most crucially apparent in the context of environmental pollution, or toxins which have very real impacts on surrounding nature and the people who live in close proximity to sources of pollutants.

Some of the ways in which the invisibility of toxins can be made more visible is located within environmental photography. The first strategy is what Joshua T. Barnett calls the "toxic portrait," which he argues is "one way of making visible the often-pernicious relation of toxins and human bodies, as well as the pain and suffering this relationality can entail, visualizations that make it possible for viewers to imagine ways of responding to such interdependency."¹¹⁸ The toxic portrait, unlike its landscape relative, shows individual human beings often within their toxic environments. This is done with the aim of suggesting "that toxic exposure might lead directly to the deaths and dying of individuals."¹¹⁹ One of the visuals that arguably mirror this rhetorical strategy in *True Detective* is the home-visit to the mother of Dora Lange (see Figure 3).

In 1995, detectives Hart and Cohle pay a visit to the murdered woman's mother, Kelly Lange. During the interview, the mother stops and puts her hands to her head, rocking

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Peebles, "Toxic Sublime: Imagining Contaminated Landscapes," *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 (2011): 374.

¹¹⁸ Barnett, *Toxic Portraits*, 406.

¹¹⁹ Barnett, *Toxic Portraits*, 406.

back and forth in pain, saying she gets “headaches that’s like storms.” She then shows the detectives her hands, saying she was exposed to chemicals while she was working with dry-cleaning, and “that’s what’s wrong with my nails,” she explains (1.2, 5:36-6:02).



Figure 3. Kelly Lange’s painful headache (left), followed by a close-up of chemically damaged hands (right).

What the show does here is to put a face on the pain and suffering felt by people who usually do not have a voice of their own. It is fictionalized here, though the representation the above images point to is something deeply felt and deeply real to many inhabitants of “Cancer Alley.” Singer’s study of the local “Cancer Alley” residents and their perceived health risk based on information disseminated from the state level health authorities argue that there is “a broader tendency of dominant voices in health to emphasize ‘the centrality of genetic makeup and individual lifestyle practices [obesity and tobacco being two central concerns]’ [...] rather than environmental pollution” as a source of illness.¹²⁰ Recall that studies have shown that rates of illnesses such as asthma and cancer are far higher within the region of Cancer Alley than the national average. Though Kelly Lange blames her workplace for her present suffering, what the show wants us to infer is arguably that she lives in a nexus of pollution and toxic chemical release, and as such illness will follow.

The second strategy in which toxins are made more visible is through a strategy of employing elements of the sublime - a characteristic of nature photography, and, before the photo technology had arrived, natural landscape painting. In this arena of environmental photography, the subject is not a person, but rather a place, situation, or a site of contamination and pollution. In *The Oxford English Dictionary* the word sublime, in its aesthetic usage, is defined as a “feature that fills the mind with a sense of overwhelming grandeur or irresistible power; that inspires awe, great reverence, or other high emotion, by

¹²⁰ Singer, *Down Cancer Alley*, 2011

reason of its beauty, vastness, or grandeur.”¹²¹ In the context of environmental destruction, then, the implication of the use of a concept such as the sublime invokes the paradoxical nature of the term: it is something that is at once beautiful to behold, yet it invokes a sense of fear. Jennifer Peebles argues that a certain movement within environmental photography employs the “toxic sublime,” which she defines: “the tensions that arise from recognizing the toxicity of a place, object or situation, while simultaneously appreciating its mystery, magnificence and ability to inspire awe.”¹²² The toxic sublime in these images attempt to convey the effect of contamination and furthers (or invites us into) a contemplation and realization of our toxic environments.

In the 1970s, a collective of photographers gathered with a shared vision and aim to depict American altered landscapes. The collective featured images in an exhibition titled “New Topographies: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape,” (1975) displaying the work of photographers like Robert Adams, Stephen Shore, and Nicholas Nixon. They were “less concerned with portraying an ideal image of nature and were more interested in showing plainly how man has altered it,” and the photos “were descriptive, unemotional and simple – a fusion [of sorts] of traditional landscape and social documentary photography.”¹²³ These artists employed three main compositional strategies to convey the effects on human altered environments. The first composition features beautiful sites that are either under the threat of being destroyed, or sites that have already been altered adversely. The second compositional feature, called “the environmental nightmare,” depicted an apocalyptic vision of what was to happen if growth and exploitation continued without markedly regulations, resulting in images depicting waste, destruction, and pollution. The third and final composition would contrast the two previous ones, juxtaposing “the unspoiled and the despoiled in one neat pictorial package.”¹²⁴ The review of these various compositions known in environmental photography is important to note, because the visual composition of *True Detective* arguably bears the marks of these three compositions.

When driving through a waterway riddled with oil and gas pipelines, Cohle remarks “this pipeline covering up this coast like a jigsaw. Place is going to be under water within thirty years,” alluding to the geophysical process of subsidence, meaning that the ground will

¹²¹ "sublime, adj. and n.". OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/192766?rskey=5b3s1L&result=1>. Accessed April 3, 2017.

¹²² Peebles, *Toxic Sublime*, 375.

¹²³ Claire O’Neill, “New Topographies (Redux),” *NPR*, June 10, 2009,
<http://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2009/06/topographics.html>.

¹²⁴ Peebles, *Toxic Sublime*, 376.

sink further and further into the enveloping waters surrounding it (1.3, 47:40-47:46). Cohle's ominous prediction, Holm writes, "points toward a future disaster that is going to submerge the whole part of the state within thirty years."¹²⁵ The aerial shot of the landscape in this scene is similar to the aerial shot seen on the left in the example above (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Image on the left is an aerial view of Hart and Cohle driving on a dirt road encompassed by dead trees. In the background, cranes and industry. Image on the right is the 'Bunny Ranch,' with young girls, perhaps minors, employed as sex workers.

The trees are dead; the green of the ground is merging with the blue of the water. In the top section of the image on the left, we see industrial cranes towering in the sky at a distance. The image then juxtaposes and infers a mixture of the above mentioned two first compositional features: the image is simultaneously showing the slow deterioration of the natural landscape (evidence of subsidence), coupled with the ominous source of this contamination (the industrial site in the background). The image on the right, showing the Bunny Ranch, invokes the third composition where you see the unspoiled innocence of young women standing in a forest that functions a sex worker locale. They are totally encompassed by towering branches of trees – branches that work as if to accentuate the negation of movement outside the bounds of the women's precarious situation.

Another element that suggest the influence if environmental photography is visible in the opening credit sequence, as well as throughout the episodes with dispersed wide-angle landscape shots (see Figure 5).

¹²⁵ Isak Winkel Holm, "Under Water within Thirty Years," *Behemoth – A Journal on Civilization* 9, no. 1 (2016): 91.



Figure 5. Left image: A photo from Misrach’s *Petrochemical America*. Right image: still from Episode 2 (“Seeing Things”) where we see the similarity in juxtaposing built and natural environment.

The source of these images comes from the collaboration of Misrach and landscape architect Kate Orff, where they juxtapose Misrach’s photos with Orff’s explanation of the ecological devastation in the “Cancer Alley” region.¹²⁶ This work arguably bears a resemblance to environmental photography, and the work echoes the various compositional features mentioned above, as Misrach photographed both broken down built environments as well as ecological systems that have since been destroyed by pollution.

Some of the images from *Petrochemical America* (2012), the collaborative work by Misrach and Orff, are seen in the opening credit sequence of *True Detective*; they form the under layer upon which portraits and images of characters are superimposed. The visual characteristics of Misrach’s photos are also present in the cinematography in the narrative itself, and thus served as an influence on how the show would look (see Figure 5).

One of the challenges in environmental photography – as with perhaps all still images – is the aspect of a more complete narrative underlying the images. This is something *True Detective* succeeds in apprehending, with narrative elements of everyday people bearing the marks of the toxic communities they inhabit. We are taken to different locations and we get a glimpse into the everyday lives of people living in this environment, and as such, the narrative underlines the visual arrangement of the characters.

Thus, the way in which television can convey toxic imagery is similar to what Peebles calls the “toxic sublime.” Toxins are ostensibly difficult to spot with the naked eye. The effects, however, from contact with chemicals and polluted air, are far more tangible, even on screen. Peebles argues that the sublime effect upon viewing images of natural and man-made

¹²⁶ Suzanne Shaheen, “Petrochemical America: Picturing Cancer Alley,” *The New Yorker*, September 14, 2012, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/petrochemical-america-picturing-cancer-alley>.

disaster leaves the spectator with a range of conflicting emotions. The landscape, the polluted environment, and the significance of natural disaster are so thoroughly blended in with the narrative with which most people focus on, that it becomes unattainable. By focusing on the way in which the show frames and composes what we see, the relation between characters and their environment becomes more apparent.

Toxic Tourism

Joshua T. Barnett identifies at four ways in which the invisibility of toxins pose obstacles for people who want to challenge the dissemination of, for instance, toxins into toxic sites' surrounding communities. I have addressed the ways in which photography may bridge the gap between the invisibility of toxins and their effects. Another strategy environmental activism can take is not within the sphere of photography, but rather in a sphere most people do not associate with toxic pollution and human suffering: tourism. By now, some readers are perhaps familiar with the concept toxic tour, a tactic used mostly by activists and journalists, who, in different ways, work to show and document the evidence of ostensibly invisible toxicity. Toxic tours, Phaedra C. Pezzullo writes, are “noncommercial expeditions into areas that are polluted by toxins.”¹²⁷ These tours take average citizens into areas where they are forced, by the very nature of our senses, to see, smell, hear, and taste the environment, and further, how it must feel to live in such a community.

Susan Sontag writes that the main sense we employ when considering photographs are our eyes. We can look at images of atrocity and pain, but we are at a safe distance. This is what toxic tours attempt to mitigate. As Sontag writes, “[in] a modern life – a life in which there is a superfluity of things to which we are invited to pay attention – it seems normal to turn away from images that simply make us feel bad.”¹²⁸ This act of distancing oneself is not possible when individuals are in the middle of the physical environment they are invited to experience. In this sense, toxic tours show people the explicit consequences on human lives who inhabit toxic environments.

Pezzullo considers the significance of toxic tourism in places like Louisiana, where “Cancer Alley” is one destination. Louisiana is a peculiar example of this trend, as the state

¹²⁷ Phaedra C. Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism: Rhetorics of Pollution, Travel, and Environmental Justice* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 5.

¹²⁸ Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 116.

has combined two of the most familiar aspects in the state's culture: tourism and chemical industries.¹²⁹ A number of regular citizens are collected in groups and are taken by various means of transportation to places and sites that are being affected by toxic industries. They also talk to the locals, the residents of these places, in order to broaden their perspective on the adverse effects of said industries. The aim of these tours, Pezzullo writes, is to "attempt to persuade tourists (or outsiders) to help mobilize further democratic action for environmental justice."¹³⁰ An important distinction in this regard is the aspect of justice. These tours do show how nature and various ecological systems suffer from destructive chemicals released into air, water, and ground. However, for justice advocates, the local communities are an important element in creating awareness for how people can and are disproportionately and adversely affected by the very nature and placement of their dwelling. As Pezzullo writes in the concluding chapter of *Toxic Tourism*: "Those who host toxic tours are posing a relatively simple challenge: If you want to live, if you want the next generation of children to live, join us in the struggle to end the ongoing toxification of our world [...] it beckons us to act."¹³¹ Television cannot transport its viewers to a place in which they can smell or taste the environment. Thus, in the traditional sense of the word, television is not tourism. However, if we consider the aims of toxic tours, which is ostensibly to show and inspire action, then a series like *True Detective* is arguably, if not a tourist experience itself, something that has the power to inspire tourist action.

A relatively new area of study is the impact on film and television on tourism destinations and consequent the economic impact these tours have on communities. The form of tourism that originates in film and television is by several scholars called "on-screen tourism," and it refers to "tourists travelling to a destination as a result of films or TV drama series."¹³² Audiences are able to visit either the locations of films, such as New Zealand's tourism industry capitalizing on films like *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, or they can visit the fictional universe in the form of theme parks, of which Disney franchises are the most successful.

In this way, television and film creates interest and influences participatory action. People travel to the locations and places they have seen on screen, and they seek to have a

¹²⁹ Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*, 78.

¹³⁰ Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*, 78.

¹³¹ Pezzullo, *Toxic Tourism*, 172.

¹³² ShiNa Li, Hengyun Li, Haiyan Song, Christine Lundberg, and Shujie Shen, "The Economic Impact of On-Screen Tourism: The Case of The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit," *Tourism Management* 60 (2017): 177. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2016.11.023.

real experience (see, hear, smell) where a television series or film is made.¹³³ This is also the case with *True Detective*, as the first season inspired various tours to distinct locations in southern Louisiana which are featured in the show. Louisiana is in fact one of the states in the U.S. with not only an inviting and rich scenery, but is also, since the passing of the Motion Picture Tax Incentive Act (2002) which enables on-location filming, more affordable than in other states. Though many films and television series depict places in other parts of the country, Louisiana is often the *real* place in which the fictional places are set. Christopher Lirette argues that *True Detective* escapes this paradox because it “incorporates, and critiques the official narratives of Louisiana optimism, its representation of rural poverty porn, and the flashy exposés of the state’s political, economic, cultural and medical ineptitude.”¹³⁴ Lirette, a Louisiana native, further notes “[it is] clear to me [...] that the show was mostly shot on location [...] the show provides ample evidence of [show creator Pizzolatto’s] familiarity with Louisiana geography and politics,” and the show “takes full advantage of its setting, filming a Louisiana rarely found on television.”¹³⁵

On the online homepage of Louisiana Travel (the official travel authority in the state of Louisiana), the information for the screen-inspired tour reads:

The critically acclaimed HBO crime drama *True Detective* is not one for the squeamish. The show depicts the lives of two detectives [...] who are following a trail of murder across south Louisiana’s bayous and backroads. *True Detective*’s wild ride takes viewers through landscapes and towns that are also home to some of the state’s beloved cultural and natural landmarks.¹³⁶

In terms of the connection between toxic tourism and on-screen tourism, the activist potential inherent to ostensibly commercial tours lie in the fact that, like the noncommercial organized toxic expeditions, people are nevertheless fully present in the places they see. Arguably, there is still a sense of distance, because on-screen tourists are likely given a positive vision of the places they visit. It would not be in the tourism industry’s interest to label the destinations as

¹³³ Claudia-Elena Tuclea and Puiu Nistoreanu, “How Film and Television Programs Can Promote Tourism and Increase the Competitiveness of Tourist Destinations,” *Cactus Tourism Journal* 2, 2 (2011): 27.

¹³⁴ Christopher Lirette, “Something True About Louisiana: HBO’s *True Detective* and the *Petrochemical America* Aesthetic,” *Southern Spaces*, August 13, 2014, <https://southernspaces.org/2014/something-true-about-louisiana-hbos-true-detective-and-petrochemical-america-aesthetic>. Accessed July 28, 2016.

¹³⁵ Lirette, *Something True About Louisiana*.

¹³⁶ LouisianaTravel.com, “Investigate These Three True Detective Filming Locations,” <http://www.louisianatravel.com/articles/investigate-these-three-true-detective-filming-locations>. Accessed April 4, 2017.

part of “human sacrifice zones.”¹³⁷ Recall that television series orients its viewers to the place and time the story is taking place. Jason Mittell notes: “[Orienting paratexts] reside outside the diegetic storyworld, providing a perspective for viewers to help make sense of a narrative world by looking at it from a distance,” and is thus “used to create a layer atop the program to help figure out how the pieces fit together or propose alternative ways of seeing the story that might not be suggested or contained within the original narrative design.”¹³⁸ One of the aspects of *True Detective* that arguably become more apparent by use of paratextual practices is the significance of “Cancer Alley,” the place in which the story unfolds. It helps to inform and explicate what Birdsell and Groarke call a text’s “visual commonplace,” referring to the visual context of a text, a notion that it seemingly of substantial informative importance when it comes to visual texts such as *True Detective*.¹³⁹

Toxic Screen

The influence of various forms of photography and environmental tourism arguable shapes and informs a major theme in *True Detective*. The previous sections have outlined the ways in which an ostensibly invisible permeation of toxins affects people, and consequently, how human alterations of environments in equal turn contribute to a toxic relationship between people and landscape. Regarding *True Detective* as a text that comments upon this toxicity in place and people, we may aptly expand the descriptive concept used in art and activism, culminating in describing *True Detective* an example of a “toxic screen,” designating the medium’s potential power to “dramatize toxic exposure.”¹⁴⁰

Concerning the opening credit sequence and its use of Robert Misrach’s toxic landscape photography, Kelly writes:

This pastiche of haunting portraits, both real and fictional, helps to introduce a narrative that is less of a noir-themed murder investigation than a visual exploration of the degradation of the human condition in advanced industrial society [...] the series resonates as a visual and narrative portrayal of a culture and ecosystem polluted by our collective dependence on industrial chemicals.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Burnett, *Toxic Portraits*, 406.

¹³⁸ Mittell, *Complex TV*, 261-262.

¹³⁹ Birdsell and Groarke, *Toward a Theory of Visual Argument*, 6.

¹⁴⁰ Kelly, *The Toxic Screen*, 41.

¹⁴¹ Kelly, *The Toxic Screen*, 40.

The relation between landscape and character in *True Detective* is an essential means to convey the themes of poverty, pollution, and toxicity (in both environment and people). This is done by connecting sequences of shots with dialogue and the overall landscape.¹⁴² The relative invisibility of toxicity becomes more apparent when connecting these elements of the series. In episode one, we are introduced to Cohle's view of the world (see Figure 6): "People out here," he says, "they don't even know the outside world exists. Might as well be living on the fucking moon" (1.1, 14:12-14:22). Cohle's ruminations start as the camera displays a wide angle aerial view of the landscape in which the detectives are driving through. As the aerial shot cuts to the interior of the car, the ensuing conversation between Hart and Cohle is framed in the context of the place they are currently observing, as well as the "people out here" who inhabit it. This way of framing scenes is used several times in the show, specifically to highlight the relation between specific characters and their surrounding environment. Viewers have already met the ill mother, Kelly Lange, previously in this chapter. The way in which this scene is framed is helpful to illuminate how the series makes inferences to the visual context ("Cancer Alley") and its implications.



Figure 6. Aerial view of landscape with Cohle's voice-over. Cut to interior of car where the dialogue continues.

The scene where Hart and Cohle speak to Kelly Lange is framed in such a way that we first see the detectives driving up to the house through a poor neighborhood which emphasizes the immediate surroundings of this person. During the conversation, the camera drifts around the room, and it lingers for a moment on the stash of pills next to Lange's seat. We also see a close-up of her hands and nails, which she explains is damaged due to chemical exposure (see Figure 3). As the scene cuts away, we see another aerial shot of the detectives driving away, through a waterway, similar in appearance to the left-hand aerial shot above (see Figure 6). The framing of the ill woman and the emphasis on medication and aches, calls to

¹⁴² Kelly, *The Toxic Screen*, 48.

mind the rhetorical strategies of toxic portraits. In a similar vein as toxic portraits, the series here lingers on the pain and suffering and the need for medical mitigation (pills), which in turn makes the possible exposure to invisible toxins readily visible. We see and hear the effects of the exposure. The show consequently works against one of the challenges to identify toxins and their implications, as noted by Barnett, who writes “the pain and suffering associated with toxins evade both verbal and visual representation.”¹⁴³ The inferential power inherent in television’s visual language then actively resists this obstacle. The scene with Lange is, first, framed by two exposition shots of the surrounding landscape which is seemingly under threat as well, and second, we both hear and see the pain Lange experiences while in conversation with Hart and Cohle. Thus, the framing of the scene with Kelly Lange establishes the visual context of the place she occupies and it further establishes her poor health. The visual argument here is that the series’ puts forth an idea that, maybe, the woman is sick because of the place she inhabits.

The invisibility of toxins is arguably easier to comprehend for viewers if it is situated within an established narrative. Hart and Cohle travel to several different places and talk to many different people whose apparent connection is the derelict state of both. In this sense, the series is commenting upon the devastation of environmental harm on both the individual and the societal levels. The latter is perhaps more understated, though. However, fans and critics quickly found out that the references to the people doing physical harm -- the satanic ritual cult to which the serial killer belongs and was born into -- all stem from the mythology described in Robert W. Chambers’ short-story collection *The King in Yellow* (1895) which contains stories with the overarching presence of a play that, if read, causes madness and eventual death. Writing about this collection, Scott D. Emmert notes: “Certainly something ‘yellow,’ with all its connotations of sickness, pervades *The King in Yellow*. Even in the stories that do not feature the titular mythic play, Chambers portrays an unhealthy society with a sick past, an ailing present, and a jaundiced future.”¹⁴⁴ Emmert contributes another perspective on Chambers’ work, which, though it is long over a century old, still can be seen as relevant to the present political and social climate in the U.S.: “As it is, however, the future Chamber’s imagines remains frightening in its implications: the story’s pervasive paranoia reflects a national ideology that there are ‘others’ – immigrants, Jews, blacks – out to sully

¹⁴³ Barnett, *Toxic Portraits*, 406.

¹⁴⁴ Scott D. Emmert, “A Jaundiced View of America: Robert W. Chambers and *The King in Yellow*,” *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 40.

American ideals.”¹⁴⁵ The work that influences much of the evil personified in *True Detective* is then from Chamber’s work that sought to channel the degradation of empire and make the attendant anxieties visible by way of ill or dying characters. This can also be seen as the case in *True Detective*, in the link between the petrochemical empires and the unhealthy condition of the (fictional) lives we see on screen, those Henry Giroux defines as “disposable bodies,” designating groups of people compartmentalized in to racial or class distinctions, who often bear the weight of civilized society’s failures.¹⁴⁶ One such failure is evident in the social, economic, and political decisions leading activists to name a region like “Cancer Alley,” reflecting the unjust ways in which human lives are affected disproportionately by the excesses of modern industries.

Recalling the image of Emmett Till, one could make the case that there are similar visual-rhetorical strategies at work in the images we see of people in *True Detective*. Henry Giroux describes Till’s body as almost “inhuman,” due the brutal violence done to it, describing the “melted, bloated,” visage of a “teenage boy who came to bear the burden of the inheritance of slavery and the inhuman pathology that drives its racist imaginary [...] this image made visible the violent effects of a racial state.”¹⁴⁷ Similar photos appeared in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, as well. Bloated and drowned bodies of people who were in different ways unable to flee the deadly surge of water could be seen broadcast on news across the globe. What started out as a natural disaster soon unfolded into a spectacle of social and material disarray. Just like the body and face of Emmett Till that was visible to a greater public, precisely five decades later, the images of the people, symbolizing the failures of response measures, were visible to the public in equal measure. However, as Sontag observed, images in the modern image-saturated society have a tendency to work against their intended purpose. One image of a floating dead body is tragic, but without context, it is easy to get distracted. Images of entire groups of people at risk, still, engenders a certain dissonance.

Another way in which *True Detective* establishes the crucial linkage between landscape and characters, between the societal and the individual, is through naming. With regards to naming, the detective Rust Cohle’s name can be seen as an implicit reference to

¹⁴⁵ Emmert, *A Jaundiced View of America*, 41.

¹⁴⁶ Henry A. Giroux, “Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability,” *College Literature* 33, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 174. doi: 10.1353/lit.2006.0037.

¹⁴⁷ Giroux, *Reading Hurricane Katrina*, 171-172.

what Delia Byrnes calls the petrochemical industry's "insidious permeation of the body."¹⁴⁸ In chemical terms, rust denotes something that is in the process of deteriorating. The phonetically similar coal (Cohle), is of course among the main sources of fossil industries, which in turn contributes to the devastation of the global atmosphere. This is made clearer in some of Cohle's remarks. In the first episode, in a flashback to 1995, Cohle remarks: "I get a bad taste in my mouth out here. Aluminum, ash. Like you can smell a psychosphere" (1.1, 17:40-17:51). In the final episode, while Hart and Cohle are driving into the wilderness to locate the serial killer's home, Cohle mirrors his own comment seventeen years prior and says: "That taste. Aluminum. Ash. I've tasted it before" (1.8, 25:36-25:50). The implication of these observations and with the usage of the term "psychosphere," Byrnes argues, "links the aluminum and ash of coal industry with the collective consciousness of petromodernity, thereby implicating globalized oil markets in the atmospheric 'bad taste' hovering over southern Louisiana."¹⁴⁹

True Detective as an example of a "toxic screen" makes the invisible connections between industrial pollution and illness more visible, and as Tom Bowers argues, enables the visual medium to "generate the desired effect of presence."¹⁵⁰ Through visual and narrative cues, television is able to achieve the "desired effect of presence," and in doing so, creating a more immersive experience on the part of the viewer. Bowers discusses "toxic tourism" as one means to achieve awareness of environmental injustice. However, this practice is arguably limiting to people who either are already in a close proximity to the destination or have financial resources to travel from afar to those destinations used as "toxic tour" destinations. Bowers emphasizes the role of mapping and satellite image technology (Google Earth) as a way to decrease distance, and consequently create a space for further activist engagement.¹⁵¹

Fundamental to the conception of the "toxic screen" is that televisual texts have the capacity to "subversively un-muffle the cries and anguish silenced elsewhere in the culture, forming the basis of a new common sense about environmental justice."¹⁵² Visualizing the effects caused by toxicity on the personal and societal levels enables the screen to highlight

¹⁴⁸ Byrnes, *I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here*, 102.

¹⁴⁹ Byrnes, *I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here*, 102.

¹⁵⁰ Tom Bowers, "Mountaintop Removal as a Case Study: The Possibilities for Public Advocacy through Virtual Toxic Tours," *Environmental Communication* 7, no. 3 (2013): 373. doi: 10.1080/17524032.2013.807860.

¹⁵¹ Bowers, *Virtual Toxic Tours*, 375-376.

¹⁵² Kelly, *The Toxic Screen*, 54.

the “everyday eco-disaster,” meaning the representation of disaster in common settings.¹⁵³ Humans are highly responsive to various types of patterns, and if and when television continues the environmentally informed depictions of precarious communities, even the least environmentally aware viewer will eventually be primed to make the connections between a toxic environment and toxic-induced illness. For some, this will in turn inspire further explorations of the factual aspects informing the images on screen, and, perhaps inspire activism.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have addressed the significance of place in *True Detective*. The setting in this series functions as a rhetorical visual context, where the relationship between toxic people and a toxic landscape is reinforced. I have addressed how the series adapts strategies from environmental photography and toxic tourism, which in turn opens up for an understanding of *True Detective* as a visual tour of one of the most precarious regions in the U.S. Traces of both past and ongoing tragedies, as well as the framing of vulnerable bodies, work to underscore *True Detective*'s presentation of toxic disaster.

The most important aim of environmental photography and environmental tourism is to invite participants to reflect of the causes and effects of, especially here, toxicity that circulates in and around natural and human environments. The same is true for fictional depictions of these kinds of disasters, where, for instance a television series like *True Detective* can work in the same way. The power inherent in a combination of both visual expressions of disaster, as well as a narrative to complement it, is arguably something that makes it easier for audiences to apprehend and investigate further the real-life context in which this series springs out from.

In the next chapter, I will turn to a discussion about another aspect closely tied to the series' spatial context. Namely, how *True Detective* shows that living in a place where a range of everyday tragedy reinforces the human need for something to believe and hold on to, while at the same time challenging this very need for existential structure.

¹⁵³ Kelly, *The Toxic Screen*, 53.

Chapter 4

The Liminal Space of Disaster

What I aim to show in this chapter is that *True Detective* offers viewers two competing senses of myth and its relation to society, and I argue that this is illustrated in the critical reception to the series. The range of disaster may, as Rhys Owain Thomas writes, “encompass billions of people or just one person;” it may designate effects on the global, national, local, and down to the “intensely personal.”¹⁵⁴ As Holm further illustrates, disaster not only happens on a global or national scale, but often on a personal level where the disaster in question is something that creates “situations which unsettle the existence of the individual.”¹⁵⁵ This chapter will survey *True Detective*’s presentation of a personal dimension of disaster, witnessed most clearly in the two main protagonists Marty Hart and Rust Cohle.

There are two levels of myth in the context of this series. On the one hand, myth is a central concept that connects the series to debates about myth-making in disaster fiction as well as to fictional representations of the U.S. South. Within the field of disaster studies, as well as from scholars from other fields, disaster fiction is routinely criticized for propagating false claims about the reality we live in. *True Detective* is an example of these texts, because it has been criticized for its depiction (and myth-reinforcement) of cult culture, referring to specific events where a fear of satanic cults permeated across the nation. On the other hand, myth is also central to the narrative of the series, depicting two men who struggle with the conception of myth as something with a social value. This struggle is further illustrated in the end-of-season reception to the show, where both the positive and negative reception illustrates that the series is presenting a struggle, embodied in the two main characters, between two competing senses of myth.

To illustrate myth’s role in this series, I will first provide an overview of the central criticism directed at myths in relation to disaster fiction, and provide a brief case study of the myth-related critique directed towards the series’ portrayal of cult culture, specifically, and as a southern narrative in general. I will then illustrate what I see as the two competing senses of myth, and how they are represented in *True Detective*. Building on the concept of liminality,

¹⁵⁴ Christine Cornea and Rhys Owain Thomas, ed., *Dramatising Disaster: Character, Event, Representation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 8.

¹⁵⁵ Holm, introduction to *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, 1.

a state of being in-between, I will show how this mythical duality comes across both in the series' visual aspects, as well as in its characters. I will then build on some of liminality's implications, namely the social drama that it produces, and show how this is represented both in the fictional universe of the series, as well as how it was mirrored in the reception to the final episode. Thus, this chapter argues that *True Detective* presents places and people who exist in a liminal state. They are, on the one hand, drawn in-between a belief in social progress and solution to crisis, and on the other, toward a dystopic view that human progress is an illusion.

Disaster Narratives and Myth

Myth is a well-known term for most people. Considering the numerous ways in which myth is defined, as well as the term's centrality in both fiction and nonfiction disaster narratives, a summary of the most fundamental definitions is helpful. The concept of myth is an integral element in how a society and its people view themselves and their role in the world. The concept's history and the literature on its definition, meaning, and function is vast. This underscores the interest in studying myth and its role in human society. The following dictionary entries assume myth to be an untrue story, or something that is not rooted in real life. A version of this definition is given in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), which defines the term as "a traditional story, typically involving supernatural beings or forces, which embodies and provides an explanation, aetiology, or justification for something such as the early history of a society, a religious belief or ritual, or a natural phenomenon."¹⁵⁶ A related definition (from the same online OED entry) states that myth is "a widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth. . . something existing only in myth; a fictitious or imaginary person or thing." These definitions are somewhat narrow because they remove myth from the realm of having a central part in *real* social experience and bonding, and relegate the concept to the sphere of legend and fairytales. Perhaps a more productive, albeit broad definition of the term is what Robert A. Segal contends. Myth, Segal argues, is in the simplest sense "a story about something significant. The story can take place in the past [...] or in the present or the

¹⁵⁶ "myth, n.". OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/124670?rskey=nIaHTm&result=1>. Accessed March 15, 2017.

future.”¹⁵⁷ In this sense, myth in its most basic understanding is a story people hear, tell, and pass on because it carries a message inherent to people’s understanding of themselves and the world. In most of the familiar myths, however, the stories told do not necessarily have firm roots in real life, but are nevertheless a substantial element in social and cultural meaning-making. Thus, central to the pervasiveness of myth in human society is the influential power inherent in telling a story, which we remember from Salman Rushdie’s quote in an earlier chapter, being at the center of human nature. As the following discussion illustrates, myth is also an important element in (fictional) stories about disaster.

Gary R. Webb was among the first disaster scholars to conceptualize and defend “the cultural turn” in the otherwise social science dominated field of disaster studies. In his contributing chapter in *The Handbook of Disaster Research* (2007), Webb argues that disaster scholarship should develop a new perspective on disaster by studying cultural output, including film, television, novels, and music.¹⁵⁸ Before this recent turn in the field of disaster studies, though, the intersection of myth-making and disaster was an established field of study, as scholars often focused on how disaster events were portrayed in the news media. This continues to be a relevant and fruitful arena of study, evidenced in the number of studies published in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and other similar disasters (Tierney et al 2006; Kverndokk 2014; McKinzie 2017).

In terms of one specific kind of cultural output, the Hollywood blockbuster has been especially important in relation how these popular texts incorporate specific myths related to disaster. Some of these studies suggest, Webb argues, that “disaster movies perpetuate various myths that alter people’s perceptions of risk and understanding of protective measures” in the face of disaster.¹⁵⁹ One of the relevant studies Webb refers to is a multi-authored study from 2000 titled “Catastrophe in Reel Life versus Real Life: Perpetuating Disaster Myth through Hollywood Films.”¹⁶⁰ This study investigates the assumptions inferred by a select number of popular disaster myths presented entertainment media (Hollywood blockbusters). Focusing on eleven Hollywood movies released after 1990, the researchers concluded that all films perpetuate at least one of five predominant myths (i.e. falsehoods)

¹⁵⁷ Robert S. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 5.

¹⁵⁸ Webb, *Popular Culture of Disaster*, 433.

¹⁵⁹ Webb, *Popular Culture of Disaster*, 434.

¹⁶⁰ Jerry T. Mitchell, Deborah S. K. Thomas, Arleen Hill, and Susan L. Cutter, “Catastrophe in Reel Life versus Real Life: Perpetuating Disaster Myths through Hollywood Films,” *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 3 (November 2000).

attributed to disaster risk, vulnerability, and response.¹⁶¹ Granted, two myths form the basis of the Hollywood disaster model, namely the focus on large-scale events (earthquakes and cosmic calamity) and high-level impacts (destruction on a regional, national, or global scale). Nevertheless, one of the most significant misrepresentations of real disaster scenarios are these myths' relation to scale. Contrary to the Hollywood portrayals, it is often the localized and slow developing disasters that have a more decisive and substantial impact on communities, more so than earthquakes, tornadoes, and similar large-scale events which are common imagery in disaster fiction. On this point, the entertainment dimension of these kinds of films should not be underestimated seeing as disaster fiction of the blockbuster variety frequently overemphasize the vulnerability dimension of society, which several disaster researchers have found to be a significant gap in depictions of disaster.¹⁶²

Hollywood's portrayals of disaster usually do not linger on the long-term aftermaths of disaster, but do focus on an instigating event. We see this for instance in *Deepwater Horizon* (2016), one of the first movie treatments of the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. The film depicts the hours leading up to the technological disaster event and the people involved in it. The film did not, however, comment on the still-present ecological devastation the disaster brought to the Gulf Coast, with one exception: during the oily explosion, an oil-drenched oceanic bird is seen flying into a glass-enclosed bridge, which serves as a slight reference to the ecological dimension of the disaster's aftermath.

An important point made in Mitchell's study is that disaster films usually do not represent disaster reality, and this is potentially critical if people see disaster depiction on screen as close to reality.¹⁶³ One of the key elements here is that the human response dimension is either downplayed significantly, or it is absent altogether. The same is true for mitigation aspects, which the study claims to be wholly ignored (at least in the nine films featured in the study). Mitchell et al argue "how people might recover after the fact or even mitigate against future disasters" is usually left out of the story.¹⁶⁴ As the authors write in the study's concluding section on the films' depiction of disaster aftermaths: "The post-impact period for films is invariably short or nonexistent. After all, the action is over by this point.

¹⁶¹ The myths in this study are "Dramatic high-energy events not necessarily significant in global terms"; "large scale impacts rather than small events"; "using death tolls as the most reliable statistic"; "unpredictability of natural events and powerlessness of humans"; "the technocratic approach as the most valued solution;" Mitchell et al: 388.

¹⁶² Mitchell et al, *Reel Life versus Real Life*, 388.

¹⁶³ Mitchell et al, *Reel Life versus Real Life*, 400.

¹⁶⁴ Mitchell et al, *Reel Life versus Real Life*, 400.

[Clean-up, recovery, and rescue sequences occur], but [these aspects] are glossed over and move quickly into a time of celebration for having survived the threat.”¹⁶⁵ When this study was published in 2000, the cultural imagination of disaster arguably did not keep up with the social science (sociological) dimension of disaster research, where studies on disaster impacts on the individual level and community level had already become an established area of study.

In an interview featured in Rebecca Solnit’s *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009), disaster scholar Kathleen Tierney remarks that what studies have shown, contrary to the panic and chaos often displayed in disaster fiction, is that people usually act more altruistic than selfish; more creative and flexible than stunned; and people also display ingenious methods for helping the stricken community.¹⁶⁶ The bridging of this information (and factual) gap when it comes to disaster is reflected in Mitchell’s study, where the authors state that popular culture “[plays] a significant role in forming cultural attitudes” about disasters, which in turn illustrates the importance of asking the following question: “If [film and television] is a source of hazard information for the public, what messages about disasters and hazards do they take away with them, and how do they act on this knowledge?”¹⁶⁷ This question arguably underscores the significant value of studying how disaster fictions present and interpret all kinds of disaster events, because what we see on screen influences how we think about such things as disaster aftermaths, societal vulnerability, and people’s ability to cope in the face of disaster.

As the above-mentioned study is nearly two decades old, yet the myth-making trends highlighted in the study’s selection of disaster narratives are still apparent in more recent and comparable examples. The disaster blockbuster is a popular avenue for presenting various disaster narratives, and I would argue, if a similar study was made of films released after 2000, it is likely that many of the same myths are still being reinforced. For example, among the 1990s films which checked off four out of five myths were *Outbreak* (1995) and *Dante’s Peak* (1997), representing an epidemic and a volcanic eruption, respectively. Similar, if not identical plotlines are found in disaster films of recent years as well, some of which are *Contagion* (2011; virus outbreak) and *San Andreas* (2015; earthquake). There is, however, a significant area of development when it comes to popular culture and depictions of disaster aftermaths, particularly in terms of the effects on individual and societal dimension of disaster. Hurricane Katrina was for example a significant event, both for social scientists and

¹⁶⁵ Mitchell et al, *Reel Life versus Real Life*, 399.

¹⁶⁶ Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, 131.

¹⁶⁷ Mitchell et al, *Reel Life versus Real Life*, 386, 400.

in the cultural imagination of disaster. In the years since this event, numerous depictions of the aftermath specifically have been released. In 2006, director Spike Lee made the four-part documentary *When the Levees Broke* which details the impact of the hurricane in everyday life, predominantly depicting the African American community in New Orleans. The post-disaster environment in New Orleans was also the setting of the HBO series *Treme* (2010-2013), as it was in Benh Zeitlin's film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), depicting a post-Katrina community adapting, quite literally, to life without solid ground. In the academic sphere, two recent books illustrate the importance of looking at disasters through the lens of cultural texts. One example is *Ten Years after Katrina* (2015), where the editors argue that hurricane Katrina serves as an event on par with 9/11 in terms of national trauma, witnessed in the numerous cultural texts attempting to cope and make sense of the disaster (some of which are the television series and films mentioned above). The second example is also an edited collection, entitled *Dramatising Disaster* (2013), where editors Christine Cornea and Rhys O. Thomas writes: "In media entertainment, disaster can function as a device for speculative contemplation or diverting spectacle [the blockbuster model], but it can also be understood as a narrative strategy and mode or representation that focuses upon a variety of contemporary social and cultural concerns."¹⁶⁸

References to such cultural concerns can be located in *True Detective*. In one of the main storylines in the series, Cohle develops a theory about the murder of Dora Lange. He believes the ritualistic nature and positioning of Lange's body resembles a sacrificial altar. This is an aspect of *True Detective* which received criticism, because the narrative reinforces the existence of ritualistic crime. Consequently, as we will see in the following section, the critique is in line with the general criticism directed toward disaster fictions and to fictional depictions of the American South. In *True Detective*, though, the critique is not directed at the myths related to disaster events, but to a more specific cultural moment in recent American history. According to some critics, the series is breaching an ethical line where we find fictional representations of cultural concerns on one side, and the potentially harmful consequences in real life on the other. In the following section, I will present this critique of *True Detective* in a case study with which I aim to challenge this aspect to *True Detective's* reception.

¹⁶⁸ Cornea and Thomas, *Dramatising Disaster*, 4-5.

Satanic Panic in *True Detective*

The background of some of the critique of *True Detective* is that a central storyline references events in recent American history marked by a collective fear of the potential existence of satanic cults and ritualistic abuse. Thus, the series has been criticized for furthering cultural myths about the persistence of dangerous and destabilizing satanic cults that engage in criminal behavior. In the series, one of the normalizing events is the interferences of a higher authorities who attempt to intervene in the Dora Lange investigation and establish a special task force neatly trained to investigate murders of an occult nature. Furthermore, in Cohle's individual investigation into the Dora Lange case (between 2002 and 2012), he finds evidence that the Lange murder is likely a part of a long-lasting cult of men who perform rituals and abuse women and children. This is made possible by that dislocations and breakdown of social structures in the aftermath of disasters in the rural areas of southern Louisiana. The conspiracy in the show is portrayed as encompassing various individuals of authority, including the local police chiefs, a powerful reverend, and even the state governor. This hypothesis turns out to be true, as both Hart and Cohle eventually track down one of the culprits that turned out to be the serial killer they spent seventeen years locating.

A few textual examples taken from the first episode illustrate the series' direct referencing of this cultural zeitgeist in U.S. culture. In one of the flashbacks to the 1995 timeline, we see Hart and Cohle approaching a crime scene where a young woman is positioned in such a way as to reflect an offering, her body being the sacrificial element. Cohle moves over to examine the scene in more detail. Meanwhile, Hart stands further away, his facial expression seemingly reflects his disbelief of the crime scene in front of him. Hart exchanges some words with another law enforcement agent, Sheriff Tate, about the nature of the crime, an exchange where viewers for the first time see the series' referencing of satanic panic (1.1, 05:58-06:10):

Sheriff Tate: You ever see something like this?

Hart: No, Sir. Eight years in state CID.

Sheriff Tate: Resembles the satanic. They had a 20/20 on it a few years back.

Seeing as the timeline in which this dialogue occurs is in 1995, the 20/20 episode Sheriff Tate alludes to as "a few years back" situates it during the height of the cultural concern for

satanic cults in the U.S. A few moments after this exchange, Cohle explains his theory to Hart (1.1, 10:46-11:18):

Cohle: This is gonna happen again. Or it's happened before.

Both.

Hart: Go on.

Cohle: It's fantasy enactment. Ritual. Fetishization.

Iconography. This is his vision; her body is a paraphilic love map.

Hart: How's that?

Cohle: An attachment to physical lust, fantasies, and practices forbidden by society.

In addition to these direct references, Hart and Cohle's investigation is soon interrupted by a special task force tasked with finding out if there is an occult nature to the Lange murder. Thus, at the end of the first episode, *True Detective* shows law enforcement, religious leaders, and political leaders take the issue of potential satanic cult acts seriously.

This provides an introduction to the context of which *True Detective* was criticized for reinforcing harmful myths about cultural anxieties. This critique, then, positions *True Detective* within a range of fictional texts featuring similar mythical themes of the occult, and some of these cultural texts have had direct influences on the public, as the following quote from Laycock illustrates:

While evil conspiracies have arguably existed throughout human history, many of the claims made during the satanic panic of the 1980s and 1990s appear to have been directly inspired by depictions of satanic cults in popular films [i.e. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973)] . . . This saturation of satanic imagery combined with other events and social forces [created] a modern mythology of satanic crime.¹⁶⁹

The familiarity with which popular culture texts depict these specific kinds of cultural myths was what certain critics regarded as problematic in *True Detective*. Legal scholar Paul Campos, for instance, presents his critique of the show within a frame of ethics. He notes that “[given] the history of profound injustices perpetrated as a consequence of false charges of satanic ritual abuse, it's not unreasonable to expect artists to treat that history with a degree of

¹⁶⁹ Joseph P. Laycock, “Time is a Flat Circle”: *True Detective* and the Specter of Moral Panic in American Pop Culture,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 226.

circumspection.”¹⁷⁰ Furthermore, Campos argues that *True Detective*’s depiction of satanic cults can be likened to older, more infamous works such as D.W. Griffith’s glorification of the Ku Klux Klan in *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and Leni Riefenstahl’s Nazi-propaganda epic *The Triumph of the Will* (1935). This raises the question of the moral responsibility of artists when it comes to depicting these aspects of our cultural history: “Our shameful history of panics and persecutions over the imaginary satanic ritual abuse of children should have been treated. . . as a cautionary tale, rather than as an opportunity for further myth-making.”¹⁷¹ In a similar vein, author Maurice Chammah argues that accusations of satanic ritual abuse reflects “a shameful relic on the order of the Salem Witch trials. A shameful relic [of the] 1980s and the 1990s,” and that “[we] may have for the most part moved past the Satanic abuse panic, but the popularity of *True Detective* suggests why we may have been so primed for the Satanic abuse hysteria in the first place. We all love a good story.”¹⁷²

Neither Campos nor Chammah mention the potential of whether *True Detective* may directly inspire or influence portions of the public to act on what the distinctly fictional text is presenting as realistic. Especially in terms of Campos’ critique, his comparison of *True Detective* to two of the most infamous works of art in the 20th century seems misplaced. The reason for this is that the series in question and the works by Griffith and Riefenstahl have at least one significant difference. While Griffith and Riefenstahl depict explicit glorifications of white supremacy and eugenics, respectively, *True Detective* does not present a glorified version of either the existence of real-life satanic culture, nor does it present a solitary perspective of this cultural phenomena. Indeed, Cohle, as Laycock writes, is “critiquing popular claims about Satanism [...] One of the most celebrated features of the show is the sullen diatribes delivered by Cohle [who] appears to deconstruct and mock the values of a culture that supports satanic panic [i.e. the Christian Right].”¹⁷³ Much of the criticism of myth-making in *True Detective* sidesteps the notion that, as a relatively realistic portrayal of crime, the series is partly taking place at a time when one of the most significant cultural zeitgeist was satanic panic. Whether this representation is a reflection of actual and real

¹⁷⁰ Paul Campos, “*True Detective*’s Dangerous Lies About Satanic Ritual Abuse,” *The Week*, March 12, 2014, <http://theweek.com/articles/449542/true-detectives-dangerous-lies-about-satanic-ritual-abuse>.

¹⁷¹ Campos, *True Detective*’s Dangerous Lies.

¹⁷² Maurice Chammah, “True Detective and the Satanic Panic,” *The Huffington Post*, June 11, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maurice-chammah/true-detective-and-the-sa_b_5134345.html.

¹⁷³ Laycock, *Time is a Flat Circle*, 221.

events causing panic is less significant, because the satanic panic of the 1980s and 1990s – and the unfortunate consequences resulting from that panic – is not fiction.

On the topic of fictions that reinforce stereotypes about southern life, Erich Nunn includes *True Detective* in a collection of recent television texts that contribute to shape a collective image of the U.S. South. Southern stereotypes, Nunn writes, “help obscure the complex relations between southern people, places, and situations on the one hand and the media industries that traffic in and profit from their representations on the other.”¹⁷⁴ This remark is arguably in line with the general critique of disaster fiction as well, though in Nunn’s critique, *True Detective* has the dual feature of being a southern narrative and a disaster fiction simultaneously. Considering the manifold representations of the American south as a “disaster area,” Nunn asks if there is “something significantly southern about [the] ravaged landscapes” that this and other television texts are presenting.¹⁷⁵ These remarks illustrate one of the main features in *True Detective*, for while the series does present a villain similar to those in *Deliverance* (1972) and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), there is also a substantial critique of a society that ostensibly enables such characterization. Specifically, Cohle is arguably the main representative of this view, when he in several instances comments upon the worn-down state of both people and places, while also noting the social structures (or lack thereof) that enable this existence.

The underlying theme of both the series’ fictional portrayal of satanic panic (myths) and the subsequent critique is in my view a result of *True Detective*’s dual presentation of myth itself. This, I argue, means that the series’ neither resists nor reinforces this particular kind of myth, because until the final moments in the last episode, the audience has been presented with two differing positions. In the following section, we will look more closely at what I see as the two main, competing senses of myth, represented by the contrasting personalities of Hart and Cohle.

¹⁷⁴ Erich Nunn, “Screening the Twenty-First-Century South,” *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (2016): 187.

¹⁷⁵ Nunn, *Screening the Twenty-First-Century South*, 189-190.

Competing Senses of Myth

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, myth is an integral part of human society. Segal noted that, in the broadest sense, a myth is “a story about something significant.”¹⁷⁶ For instance, several stories have functioned as myths, where they carry specific meaning about various aspects of progress in American society. Some well-known examples of instances where myth is defined broadly, and thus informs a certain set of belief about social mobility and geographic and economic expansion, are the Rags to Riches story and the Frontier Myth. These two examples were especially informative for how Americans viewed their ability to achieve greater economic freedom, and up to the end of the 19th century, the Frontier Myth denoted a kind of predestined belief in America’s manifested destiny of becoming a vast and powerful nation.

In the context of human society, we have seen that modernity denotes progress. Now, modernity is not a myth, insofar as it refers the social, political, and technological progression. However, we can use this idea as a point of departure for thinking about the two main understandings of myth’s role in society. The first position is that myth is something with an inherent social value and importance. If we think about the myriad of various forms of myth, from foundational stories in religious mythology, to more modern and secular appropriations of myth, the concept represents an important and thus valuable role in how people view themselves and society. Myth unites people and it establishes a commonality, whether one subscribes to, for instance, a foundational myth or not. Myth can function positively in the sense that it bridges the gap between a known world and an unknown reality. As Segal writes, “an adult clings to an internalized object – a hobby, an interest, a value, or . . . a myth – that then enables the adult to deal with a much wider world.”¹⁷⁷ Myth, then, can positively function to make sense out of our existence and our role in society.

The second position one can take is that myth is destructive, because, while it serves as a normative tale, it limits and conceals a certain possibility or alternative for human progression. Roland Barthes provides a poignant definition of this version, arguing that “myth has a double function: it points out and it notifies, it makes us understand something and it imposes it on us.”¹⁷⁸ Furthermore, according to Barthes, myth functions then in much the same way as a dominant ideology – the latter of which in this context is understood as “an

¹⁷⁶ Segal, *Myth*, 5.

¹⁷⁷ Segal, *Myth*, 139.

¹⁷⁸ Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind*, 2nd ed. (Westport: Praeger, 1994), 7.

unconscious set of beliefs and assumptions, our imaginary relation to real conditions that may not match what we imagine.”¹⁷⁹ Myth is in this sense understood as something that masks society’s real foundations, and it thus functions as a veil separating human society from its true nature.

This dual sense of myth comes across in an early episode of *True Detective*, where the optimistic and pessimistic stances on myth are represented by Hart and Cohle, respectively. In a flashback to 1995, Hart and Cohle engage in a discussion of the role of myth in society, and we recall that myth in this context refers to stories of significance. The context here is established by Hart’s voiceover, explaining that the two detectives went to a tent revival in order to learn more about their victim’s background: “We put out an APB [interstate alert] on Friends of Christ,” Hart explains, “a week later, we were in Franklin. . . revival ministry. Old time religion. You can imagine what Mr. Charisma thought of that” (1.3, 4:11-4:35). While observing the revivalists, Cohle engages Hart in an evaluation of the group of people attending the sermon, and what follows is a portion of this exchange, where we clearly see Hart and Cohle defending two, quite different views on the function of myth, and the consequences of subscribing to those different understandings (1.3, 4:18-6:38).

Cohle: What do you think the average IQ of this group is, huh?

Hart: Can you see Texas from up there on your high horse?

What do you know about these people?

Cohle: Just observation and deduction. I see a propensity for obesity; poverty; a yen for fairytales. Folk putting whatever few bucks they do have in a little wicker basket being passed around. I think it’s safe to say nobody here is gonna be splitting the atom, Marty.

Hart: You see that? Your fucking attitude. Not everyone wants to sit alone in an empty room beating off to murder manuals.

Some folks enjoy community; a common good.

Cohle: Yeah, well if the common good’s gotta make up fairytales then it’s not good for anybody.

Hart: I mean, could you imagine, if people didn’t believe or things they’d get up to?

Cohle: Exact same thing they do now – just out in the open.

Hart: Bull. Shit. It would be a fucking freak show of murder and debauchery and you know it.

Cohle: If the only thing keeping a person decent is the expectation of divine reward, then brother, that person is a piece of shit. And I’d like to get as many of them out in the open as possible.

Hart: I guess your judgment is infallible piece-of-shit wise. You

¹⁷⁹ Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 231.

think that notebook is a stone tablet?

Cohle: What's it say about life, huh? You gotta get together, tell yourself stories that violate every law of the universe just to get through the goddamn day. What does that say about your reality, Marty?

This exchange illustrates the two competing senses of myth at work in this series. On the one hand, in Hart's evaluation, the role of myth is defended by Hart's reference to the possibility of pervasive evil if there were no prescriptive rules or order to things, saying the world would "be a fucking freak show" if there was no belief system in place, and if there were no universal normative guidelines for human society. Of course, the specific context here is religious myth, but the sentiment applies to secular examples of myth as well. Consider the Rags to Riches story, which is a constitutive element in the national ethos that make up the American Dream. Dating back to The Declaration of Independence, this myth describes America "as if it were a haven for opportunity," and thus it elicits and produces inspirational tales of people who have taken this journey of upward social mobility.¹⁸⁰

Cohle's evaluation of myth, on the other hand, is more or less a denouncement of it. He is thus a representative of the opposing sense of myth, namely that it is destructive. As he claims, it imposes itself on the people they are observing, and it enables people to live according to "fairytale" that have real consequences – it is something they imagine that does not correlate to reality. The notion of myth according to Barthes, that myth imposes itself on us, is mirrored in many of the monologues Cohle delivers, not only in the passage exemplified above. The following comment encapsulates what most fans and critics thought to be an overarching goal of the series, namely to denounce the notion that myth is in some ways productive. In the narrative present (2012), during his interview with the new detectives, Cohle explains his comments that we saw in the 1995 flashback moments before. "Transference of fear and self-loathing," Cohle says, "to an authoritarian vessel. It's catharsis. He absorbs their dread with his narrative. Because of this, he's effective in proportion to the amount of certainty he can project. Certain linguistic anthropologies think religion is a language virus. . . Dulls critical thinking" (1.3, 7:22-7:49). This is in line with the view that myth obfuscates reality and rearranges ways of thinking about the world.

Consequently, we have two different ideas about the function and role of myth in society, as seen through the statements made by Hart and Cohle. On the one hand, myth is something that benefits individuals and society at large, because it provides meaning and

¹⁸⁰ Segal, *Myth*, 139-140.

purpose. Specifically, in relation to the above discussed Rags to Riches story, myth then also serves as a potential source of hope for a better future. On the other hand, myth is also presented as a veil that functions to impose itself as a dominant way of thinking about ourselves and our relation to society, something that does not benefit most people. Using the same example of Rags to Riches in the context of a pessimistic stance of myth, for example, it is an erroneous belief that potentially diminishes the true reasons behind the possibility (or lack thereof) to make a better life for oneself.

At this point I have explained two ways in which myth can be viewed and how this is presented in *True Detective*. In the last part of this section, I will briefly address the larger context with which we can more clearly see the relevance of myth discourses in *True Detective*, because, it is not only in the personalities of Hart and Cohle where myth is a central concept. If we position *True Detective* in the broadest sense, as a television series set to the American south, the centrality of myth is further illustrated in light of scholarship on both the television medium and this region of the U.S. Both the medium of television and the region known as the South have been described by some scholars through the lens of myth.

In his seminal work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, critic Neil Postman (quoting Roland Barthes) writes, “[t]elevision has achieved the status of ‘myth’ [. . .] a way of understanding the world that is not problematic, that we are not fully conscious of [that which seems] natural. A myth is a way of thinking so deeply embedded in our consciousness that it is invisible.”¹⁸¹ This explication of television-as-myth is arguably similar to Barthes’ notion of ideology as myth: both serve a function that seeks to establish the veracity for a dominant way of thinking and imagining the world. It is also similar to what Cohle claims is the dubious function of myth in society. Furthermore, this explication of television-as-myth must be seen in the context in which it appears, namely Postman’s critique of the television medium as something Aldus Huxley warned against in *Brave New World*: the dulling of critical thinking and public discourse in the face of mass media – of which television is the dominant avenue for mediating culture. It also should be seen in the context of the power of fiction in general, and the visual (film, television) medium specifically. As scholar Theodore A. Turnau writes, a common conception is that “popular culture influences minds and worldviews,” it manipulates “passive minds,” and over time reshapes both you and your

¹⁸¹ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 79.

world view.¹⁸² Accordingly, as Rachel Franks argues: “fictional characters help shape the way we think about ourselves, and hence articulate what it means to be human.”¹⁸³ According to scholar Hal Himmelstein, television consist of what he presents as television’s “mythical frame,” consisting of a set of “potent ideological constructs that pervade television programs.”¹⁸⁴ In other words, Himmelstein argues that television transforms dominant ideologies into a commonsense narrative, which, if we think about Franks’ notion about fictional characters, in turn influences audiences toward a certain way of viewing social relations and institutions. Consider Cohle’s lines about a certain kind of myth (religious myth) that dulls critical thinking. This notion of television-as-myth, which is indeed a storytelling medium, is reflected within the narrative of *True Detective* itself, which not only makes the series a commentary about myths in general, but more precisely, the television medium itself.

Seeing as *True Detective*’s narrative unfolds in the American south, it could also be approached as a southern narrative. This in in turn where we again are confronted with the role of myth, because, according to some scholars, the American South is a myth. In *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (2010), editors Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino write that the characteristics that ostensibly make up the mythical southern region of America, is actually in line with the characteristics of the national ethos of American exceptionalism. “The notion of the exceptional South,” Lassiter and Crespino argues, “has served as a myth, one that has persistently distorted our understanding of American history.”¹⁸⁵ Lassiter and Crespino argue that the separation between national and regional spatiality expands divisions in America, as opposed to unifying cultural, social, and political differences. Furthermore, as the various essays collected in this book argue, there are far more similarities than discrepancies that exist between the historical northern and southern regions.

In this section we have looked at how myth is a central concept in several aspects of *True Detective*. It appears significant when looking at the fictional characters presented; the setting in which this action takes place; and the medium in which it is communicated. In all

¹⁸² Theodore A. Turnau, III, “Inflecting the World: Popular Culture and the Perception of Evil,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 2 (2004): 385.

¹⁸³ Rachel Franks, “A Fear of the Dark: Landscape as a Gothic Monster in HBO’s *True Detective* (2014),” in *No Escape: Excavating the Multidimensional Phenomenon of Fear*, edited by Dean Cavino (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016), 25.

¹⁸⁴ Himmelstein, *Television Myth*, 10.

¹⁸⁵ Matthew D. Lassiter and Joseph Crespino, ed., *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 7.

these areas, as I have addressed, myth is a central idea. In the next section, I will discuss a concept that I argue is helpful in understanding how *True Detective* illustrates the tension that arises from being in a state of in between two different ways of interpreting and understanding myth.

Liminal Space

Liminality is a helpful concept that functions as a lens through which to view the competing senses of myth apparent in *True Detective*. Furthermore, liminality is a central concept in the interpretive work regarding disasters or post-disaster societies: “Disasters,” Ekström and Kverndokk note, “inhabit a liminal character, in the sense that they put our understanding of the world on trial.”¹⁸⁶ *True Detective* is set to a precarious time in recent American history, as it shows the time before, during, and after various kinds of well-known disaster events, namely hurricanes Andrew (1992), Rita (2005), and Katrina (2005); the terrorist attacks in 2001; and the technological oil spill disaster in 2010. Though only the first category of disaster serves as explicit plot points in the show, each with their own set of implications, all of the mentioned events are important backdrops in which the series unfolds. They are also important in light of accessing a broader historical context of which *True Detective* is a reflection.

The term liminality is commonly thought to originate in anthropology, in the context of the study of rituals in primitive societies. The Oxford English Dictionary defines liminality as “a transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person’s life; such a state occupied during a ritual or rite of passage, characterized by a sense of solidarity between participants.”¹⁸⁷ Apparently, a French ethnologist, Arnold van Gennep, first coined the term, though it was widely disseminated by the British social anthropologist Victor Turner in his book *The Forest of Symbols* (1967). In the original explication, van Gennep argued that there are certain cultural rites of passage which are seemingly universal. He codified the concept to encompass four key features of ceremonial and initiating social movements. First, a change in civil status, initiated my marriage; second, the passage from one place to another, for instance when moving and settling elsewhere; third, a passage from one situation to another, for instance starting a new school or job; and lastly, a passage of

¹⁸⁶ Ekström and Kverndokk, *Cultures of Disasters*, 357.

¹⁸⁷ "liminality, n.". OED Online. March 2017. Oxford University Press.

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/248158?redirectedFrom=liminality&>. Accessed March 16, 2017.

time, for instance marked by New Year celebrations. These rites of passage (status, situation, place, period) are marked by three equally universal patterns: separation, transition (the liminal stage) and incorporation.¹⁸⁸ In his adaptation of the term, Turner describes the threshold and in-between-space of different social identities (child/adult, alive/dead), commonly compared to the threshold of a door frame, which marks the boundary between two rooms. Consequently, the original context of liminality then refers to a social state of being in-between that one must transcend in order to reach a new or different state. Though the original strict meaning of liminality is intact, it has nevertheless been broadened out in order to apply liminality to describe processes that are not only ritualistic in nature. In addition to religious or faith-based ritual, the term can also be applied to contexts of social norm (custom, convention), as well as contexts of law. One of the classic examples of stages of liminality and liminal figures is found in religious and mythical contexts, where one of the things liminality can refer to is death.¹⁸⁹ Christians (and presumably people of other religious affiliations) could be viewed as being liminal figures, where existence (life) is situated between two concrete stages: birth and death. The implication of liminality here comes with the belief that death is merely a transition to something else. For instance, by way of becoming dead one transcends the liminal stage of being alive – a state whose duration we measure in time. Thus, being alive is marked by a temporal liminality. In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), Turner writes the following about the ambiguousness of the liminality concept:

The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (“threshold people”) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and the persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states or positions in cultural space. Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonials [...] Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death... to darkness... to the wilderness.¹⁹⁰

A well-known example of the liminal figure Turner describes is J.M. Barrie’s character Peter Pan, who was first introduced in the *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (1906). Barrie’s famously not-child and not-adult character is described in the book as neither human nor

¹⁸⁸ Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts, “Liminality,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. James Wright (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 132.

¹⁸⁹ Victor Turner, “Liminality and Communitas,” in *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 95.

¹⁹⁰ Turner, *Liminality and Communitas*, 95.

animal, but “a Betwixt-and-Between.”¹⁹¹ Either this is a direct influence on Turner’s later formulation of liminality, seeing as *Peter Pan* was published nearly half a century before Turner published his seminal work, or it might just be a curious coincidence. Nevertheless, the liminal figure has made its way into popular culture, even to the extent that a liminal being serves as its own trope in literary, cinematic and televisual fictions, where it commonly designates a being that is continually situated in/on a threshold, often characterized by uncanniness. One of the clearest examples of this figure in *True Detective* is the serial killer and main antagonist, Erroll Childress. We meet him at various brief moments throughout the season before a more detailed introduction to the character in the opening scenes of the final episode. Childress is arguably both a liminal figure and a person who is amid a self-proclaimed liminal transition. Childress, it is revealed toward the final episodes, has committed his own form of rituals, consisting of the abduction, rape, and torture of young women and children. In the opening scenes in the final episode, Childress tells his sister: “It’s been weeks since I left my mark. . . I have very important work to do. . . I’m near final stage. Some mornings, I can see the infernal plane” (1.8, 4:19-5:20). Childress, in his own words, conveys the notion that he is in-between two states, though we never learn what “the infernal plane” is. The point of this is to highlight the mythology this character subscribes to. Childress is ambiguous, on the one hand, because it is confusing and difficult to grasp the mythology (twisted and subverted as it is) that guides and informs his ritualistic killings. On the other hand, though, when the final episode is done, we have learned that Childress belongs to a well-respected and influential family – a dynasty of sorts: “My family’s been here a long time,” he says to himself (1.7, 52:14). In this vein, Childress is not as mysterious insofar as he is the product of a malevolent family tree: a patriarchal lineage of systematic evils enacted upon predominantly young women and children. We see the discarded legacy of this socially unacceptable practice inside Carcosa (the temple like dwelling next to Childress’ home), as Cohle, in his search for Childress, passes by a substantial amount of children’s clothing and shoe attire which are remnants of past rituals. The torture, rape, and murder of Dora Lange is then a piece in the puzzle of who perpetrated the act, as well as a piece in the liminal practice of Childress. He needs to make his mark, namely sacrifice victims in order to transition over to a different plane. One of the important aspects that enables Childress to act out the sacrificial rituals is the environment he is in. The southern Louisiana we see on screen is distinctly marked by past disasters and their continuous

¹⁹¹ J.M. Barrie, *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906), 14-15.

implications. For instance, the first time we meet Childress, we are in the 1995 timeline, and unaware of his role in the investigation, Cohle briefly speaks to him as he is mowing a lawn belonging to a school that has been shut down after hurricane Andrew. Thus, the children in this surrounding communities have lost a significant institution, and they are furthermore left increasingly vulnerable, because we learn that many of the victims Hart and Cohle discover are linked to this school. This in turn leads us to the significance of liminality's spatial dimensions within which we can contextualize the implications of this example of disaster in the series.

A recent and broader definition of liminality is offered in a brief article which states that the term designates “a transitory and precarious phase between stable states,” marked by “conceptual, spatial and/or temporal barriers, within which individuals, groups and/or objects are set apart from society and/or the everyday. . . It denotes the social non-space in which transformation is experienced and achieved.”¹⁹² This definition emphasizes space and time as inherent elements in liminality. It denotes a process that can happen over time (temporal), and it can also be applied to something that happens in a space or a location (spatial). Thus, against this backdrop, the visual and temporal aspects of *True Detective* enable us to see the abstract notions of liminality comes across in concrete examples of spatial and temporal locations. The following image illustrates this liminal space, of which we see several in *True Detective*: a broken-down church, which at once connotes a strong symbolic meaning (broken faith/loss of faith) and simultaneously exists in-between something on the brink of collapse and something that still, halfway, retains its initial and intended structure. The church structure is beginning to be overgrown by the surrounding flora. It is captured as a kind of relic or ruin, and it is framed in such a way as to highlight the marks of modern industrial civilization seen in the background (1.2, 54:45).

¹⁹² Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen and Joshua Edelman, “Liminality,” *Ecumenica: Journal of Theatre and Performance* 7, no. 1-2 (2014): 33.



Figure 7. The liminal space where we see a halfway burned down church with industries in the background. Also, a site where Cohle and Hart find evidence of ritual iconography drawn on the walls of the damaged building.

The tensions this image presents are both literal and metaphorical. In a literal sense, the church symbolizes the in-between state of being halfway destroyed. In a metaphorical sense, the church, which is in focus, is seemingly situated in a liminal space: on the border between the natural and the human world. Surrounded by grass, water, and trees, the image presents a clear juxtaposition between a deteriorated built environment, and in the background, a possible source of this deterioration. One of the ways we can interpret the background, where we make out a skyline of industry, is that it represents modernity's threat to the practices of more ancient ways in which to process and make sense of the world.

Wary of the broadening conceptualization of liminality, some scholars have emphasized the spatiotemporal implications of the concept, arguing that those dimensions are among the most relevant and instrumental in the application of liminality today. As Andrews and Roberts write, “[liminality is] closely bound up with experience and the processes of change, transformation, and transition that individuals undergo as part of that experience.”¹⁹³ These scholars are specifically preoccupied with the liminality of space and place. The emphasis on liminal landscapes is especially important today, seeing as they can inform “the increasingly destabilizing landscapes of global capitalism.”¹⁹⁴ In the context of *True Detective*, one such example of liminal phenomena is the region discussed in the previous chapter, “Cancer Alley.” There I address the tensions between global capitalism (chemical

¹⁹³ Andrews and Roberts, *Liminality*, 136.

¹⁹⁴ Andrews and Roberts, *Liminality*, 134.

industry) and the precarious social situations witnessed in communities and individuals (poverty, illness). This tension is also reflected here, in the liminal expression of the church (see Figure 7).

Liminality, then, refers to all manner of in-betweenness, such as cultural, social, political, and even personal movements, be they literal or symbolic. As the image above suggests, we see a real transition from ascension (up to God) to decay (back to earth). We also see a symbolic transition in the sense that a house of worship is abandoned, suggesting the personal and societal loss of myth-based faith toward a secular world view. Liminality may also be used to designate a middle phase in which a person (the individual) transitions from one stage to the next, as for example in various cultural rites of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood, or in the subverted version of this ritual as seen in the Childress character. Furthermore, liminality may also designate a transition on the societal level, something Victor Turner called “social dramas,” meaning “the ways in which societies could use rituals to creatively respond to crises such as [...] schisms, or other disasters.”¹⁹⁵

As we have seen in this section, liminality functions in this series as a temporal and spatial lens through which one can view two opposing senses of myth. We have also seen that liminality is commonly linked to a description of various transitions. However, it may also designate a more static state of being in between two conditions. The series presents a world where various forms of societal and spiritual disaster are at work. On the one hand, we see characters who struggle with their selfhood, and on the other hand, we see references to distinct consequences of living in the nexus of so-called natural and technological disaster, some of which enable and construct liminal spaces. In the next section, I will address the consequences that arise from these tensions, namely a social drama. Interestingly, the social drama in *True Detective* can be approached from two different levels. The first is the social drama contained within the narrative itself, performed in the developments of the main characters. The other level is found in the reception to this series, which is directly linked to the series’ presentation of mythical liminality.

Social Drama

If we think about liminality as something that denotes a space in-between two things, then that in-betweenness engenders a kind of drama and conflict. Contrary to the traditional ways

¹⁹⁵ Skjoldager-Nielsen and Edelman, *Liminality*, 34.

of interpreting the implications of a liminal state as being part of a transition, I argue that it can also signal a more static in-place situation, where tensions result in a social drama. There are two levels of this drama in relation to *True Detective*. One level is found in the narrative itself, with the opposing senses of myth espoused by Hart and Cohle. This in turn produces the level of drama caused by the conclusion of the series. The reception of the final episode mirrors the notion that viewers were led down a path toward a denouncement of myth's role in society all together, notably led by the cerebral musings of Cohle. However, in the final exchange in the final episode, the series concludes and leaves us with the notion that even Cohle, the pessimistic non-believer, finds solace in the tenants of religious mythology, specifically the ancient struggle of light and dark and good versus evil.

Before we arrive at the response to the conclusion of *True Detective*, it is necessary to summarize the developments in the two main characters. In a broad context, Hart and Cohle can be situated within a contemporary trend in the depiction of male leads in television drama. They can be labeled antiheroes, portraying someone who defies the clear boundaries between good and evil. They are, in a sense, in between the two extremes, as they are not fully good, and yet they are not fully evil either. Contemporary television drama is increasingly recognized as an avenue in which the storytelling is marked by a more complicated narrative construction, as well as giving characters more time to be develop and become nuanced, like real people. "Nowadays," Demaria argues, "modern TV heroes are indeed serial killers [*Dexter*], meth producers [*Breaking Bad*], heartless murderous politicians [*House of Cards*], living in a brave new world where bad is the new good."¹⁹⁶ Other shows that feature ambivalent heroes are for instance *Deadwood*, *Sons of Anarchy*, and, perhaps one of the most celebrated dramas in the past decades, *The Wire*. Geraldine Harris writes that these dramas "re-inscribe and reclaim for contemporary (white) masculinity the position of the (anti)-hero/subject as constructed by canonical tragedy [Aristotle's *Poetics*; Shakespeare], and defined in terms of the experience of existential 'crisis.'"¹⁹⁷ In this sense, the word *trend* should be understood in the sense that it naturally is not an invention of the television medium to establish complicated and existentially distraught male figures. However, as Harris notes, these shows arguably evidence a "return to (tragic) form," in several of the past

¹⁹⁶ Demaria, *True Detective Stories*, 13.

¹⁹⁷ Geraldine Harris, "A Return to Form? Postmasculinist Television Drama and Tragic Heroes in the Wake of The Sopranos," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 443.

decades' depiction of broken men.¹⁹⁸ In *True Detective*, the two male leads toe the line between bad and good as much as their fictional predecessors. Due to the temporal reach in this series we are witnesses to the development and consequent decline in the lives of detectives Hart and Cohle. Seen across a timeline of seventeen years, the series focuses on showing the relationship between these two men and their roles in the social drama of their partnership and, possibly, friendship.

Social dramas are ostensibly universal, as they may apply to the intensely personal conflicts arising between individuals, as well as to conflicts of a more national or global scale witnessed in revolutions, rebellion, and even in political scandal – of which Turner mentioned the Watergate Scandal as example of the latter form of drama.¹⁹⁹ Building on this notion of social drama as defined by Turner, we are able to track the trajectory of Cohle and Hart through their “living drama,” focusing on four phases, termed “breach, crisis, redress, and *either* reintegration *or* recognition of schism.”²⁰⁰ The following events that make up the development of the two characters are presented throughout the series, by way of narrative exposition and flashbacks. By putting these temporally fragmented character developments into the framework of Turner’s social drama, we are able to see a more clear progression, leading up to where we leave the characters in the final episode.

The first phase of the social drama, Turner writes, “first manifests itself as the breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette, in some public arena [...] The incident of breach may be deliberately... or emerge from a scene of heated feelings.”²⁰¹ In Cohle’s case, the breach in his life happens before the story time in the series, and it is arguably something that does not occur deliberately. He recounts the death of his daughter, who died tragically in an accident, and his subsequent immersion in his police work which had severe consequences. He lost his wife and, rather than early retirement, Cohle opted to work undercover in a brutal and violent environment. The breach for Hart, in contrast, was arguably what Turner calls the “infraction of a rule of morality,” and this is marked by deliberate actions. Hart, though married and with children, engages in extramarital affairs and familial isolation, which eventually leads to him losing his wife and becoming estranged from his daughters. Both characters also experience a breach in their relationship, as they argue, fight, and dissolve their partnership in 2002, after it comes to light that Cohle

¹⁹⁸ Harris, *A Return to Form*, 444, 461.

¹⁹⁹ Victor Turner, “Social Dramas and Stories About Them,” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 152-154.

²⁰⁰ Turner, *Social Dramas*, 149.

²⁰¹ Turner, *Social Dramas*, 150.

has had sex with Hart's wife Maggie – a decision *she* consciously made with the awareness that it would definitively end her relationship with Hart. Furthermore, the two men circumvent the bounds of law and morality in order to further their investigation. The clearest example of this is when Cohle, with the assistance and loyalty of Hart, reconnects with his former undercover identity, and engages in a violent gang brawl to elicit information about a suspect.

The second phase is marked by a crisis, a “turning point [...] at which seeming peace becomes overt conflict and covert antagonisms become visible.”²⁰² The turning point in Cohle's case, the crisis, is clearly seen in his philosophy after his daughter's death, and furthermore, after witnessing the most violent and malicious sides of the human condition while he was working undercover. The turning point for Hart is when he is confronted with his affairs, and though he manages to salvage his family unit for a time, he eventually makes the same immoral breach which leads to his total isolation and estrangement from his family. These events then correlate to Turner's notion of redress, the third phase, witnessed for instance with Hart, as his breach engenders a redress which reverts him to the previous phase of crisis.²⁰³

The fourth phase, which Turner argues is marked by either reintegration or recognition of schism is a fruitful stage in the context of how Hart and Cohle view themselves and the larger world. Keeping in mind the anthropological perspective inherent in Turner's explications, after a potential redress, social actors are either integrated back into whatever they were or whichever group they belonged to prior to the breach. Alternatively, they may recognize that there is no way back, and that a schism, a shift, has taken place, and they will have to act accordingly. In *True Detective*, this last phase is what caused a sense of confusion in terms of the series' finale. If we think about Hart and Cohle as the social actors engaged in a process of social drama, the final phase comes to pass in the latter two episodes, where the mystery is resolved and the two men resurface from their hellish endeavor. It is also a stage in the series' where the story is fully in the narrative present, and thus, the viewers only have the information available to them as the episode progresses. This in turn fuels the anticipation and expectation regarding what happens next.

After the killer is caught, and the two men are starting to recover from their wounds, they go outside and reflect on their achievements in light of what they had just experienced. Throughout the series, they have both represented a version of myth: Hart's naïve view of

²⁰² Turner, *Social Dramas*, 150.

²⁰³ Turner, *Social Dramas*, 152.

what myth means to community and the social (law and) order could be mistaken for a dreaded fear of the potential legitimacy of Cohle's claims. Yet, he nevertheless espouses this view and thus forms the opposition to Cohle's thinking, summed up in the pessimistic contention that the human condition is an abnormality: "We are things that labor under the illusion of having a self. The secretion of sensory, experience and feeling. Programmed with total assurance that we are each somebody, when in fact anybody is nobody" (1.1, 16:26-16:42). In another scene, which appeared in the first episode, with Cohle's description of what he experienced while being in a liminal state between life and death. Cohle says to Hart (1.8, 49:11-51:17):

There was a moment, I know, when I was under in the dark, that something... whatever I'd been reduced to, not even consciousness, just a vague awareness in the dark. I could feel my definitions fading. And beneath that darkness there was another kind – it was deeper – warm, like a substance. I could feel, man, I *knew* my daughter waited for me, there. So clear. I could feel her. I could feel... I could feel a piece of my Pop, too. It was like I was a part of everything I've ever loved, and we were all, the three of us, just fading out. And all I had to do was let go, man. And I did. I said, 'Darkness, yeah, yeah.' And I disappeared. But I could still feel her love there. Even more than before. Nothing. Nothing but that love. And then I woke up.

Cohle then breaks down and sobs, to which Hart responds: "Didn't you tell me one time, dinner once, maybe, about how you used to ... you used to make up stories about the stars?" (1.8, 51:34-51:45) Cohle says he did not watch television until he was seventeen, and so he had to entertain himself by exploring the Alaskan wilderness and conjure up stories in the night sky. We leave the two men, still broken, if more battered and bruised than before, but now they have both approached common ground. They recognize and affirm that the kind of world they live in is a world where nothing is ever neatly tied up and solved. This is something Cohle had been alluding to throughout the series, only now, Hart is the one making this bleak observation.

This was the final moment in the series, where the men philosophized about good and evil with ostensibly religious undertones. They had both, in different ways, been redeemed and obtained absolution: Hart was reunited with his family, at least to the extent that while he was recovering from the dramatic events in the hospital, his family came to see him. The symbolism here, considering the location of a hospital, is that of healing. That in turn denotes

hope, and not further decay (of the family in this instance). Cohle was also redeemed from his own self and pessimistic stance of life. His affirmation that love as a powerful mechanism in life is a distinct contrast the younger versions of this man, and the cynical viewpoints he contended with. The series thus concludes with the recognition of the power inherent in the stories we tell. The very narrative construction of *True Detective*, at least in the majority of the season, is two people telling a story. The majority of the season is told through flashbacks and narrated by the present time Hart and Cohle. In this way, the past and the present is blended together to tell one largely false narrative about their past. The final moments where Cohle acknowledges that everything, every story we ever tell ourselves, comes down to “Light versus Dark” (1.8, 52:36-52:52).

Considering the manifold responses to the final episode of the series, the conclusion (or, as some critics would argue, the lack thereof) garnered a substantially divided reception. The reception to *True Detective* and the critical response to it amount to a social drama itself, witnessed in the confusion and shattered expectations in the final episode. The common theme is that nearly all responses to the season as a whole were the series’ presentation of myth, and perhaps Cohle’s born-again remarks in the final moment of the season. The expectation that the series would end on a similar note as expressed by Cohle throughout was thoroughly resisted. A sample of the negative reactions is found in *The Atlantic*’s Amy Sullivan, who lamented: “Did we watch eight hours of a beautifully directed, superbly acted show with maddeningly inconsistent writing only to be reminded that all of human history boils down to a struggle between light and dark?”²⁰⁴ Likewise, *The New Yorker*’s Emily Nussbaum noted that “all that talk about how the two men hadn’t ‘averted their eyes’ to evil, the show did just that. And it ends with stories told in the stars?”²⁰⁵ Though some did not take kindly to the reversal of the myth stance offered in Cohle’s final moments, others were not as scathing, such as *Slate*’s David Haglund, who stated that he did not see “Rust’s parking-lot epiphany as some spiritual *deus ex machina* [...] His bleakness made him a fascinating character, but we always knew it was rooted in pain – of the worst kind, the death

²⁰⁴ Amy Sullivan, “The *True Detective* Finale: That’s It?” *The Atlantic*, March 10, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/the-em-true-detective-em-finale-thats-it/284312/>.

²⁰⁵ Emily Nussbaum, “The Disappointing Finale of ‘True Detective’,” *The New Yorker*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-disappointing-finale-of-true-detective>.

of a child.²⁰⁶ *Vanity Fair*'s Joanna Robinson observed that "[if] the show didn't give you the monsters and interconnected conspiracies you hoped for then maybe you, like [Cohle], should turn your gaze inwards. What kind of storytelling are you looking for?"²⁰⁷ This reception is interesting to consider, because it reflects the unexpected finale to a show that spent much of its screen time on pointing out the failings of modern society, seen in a microcosm of the different layers in the lives of Hart and Cohle. *True Detective* is indeed a dark and brooding commentary on the evils humans are capable of. After eight episodes, where we have seen both an optimistic and pessimistic stance on the foundations of human life, stories, the series ends with another and perhaps equally integral elements of human society, namely hope. Echoing one of the critics, *True Detective* is not just able to portray a fictional universe in which myths are the root of rampant evil. It also presents, by way of the reception, a somber commentary on the large portion of audiences who were dismayed that Cohle's nihilistic and cynical view of the human condition did not complete the story.

Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, I have addressed the prominence in which myths function in relation to disaster fiction. Furthermore, I have pointed to a specific critique of *True Detective* in the context of myth-making, where the series was criticized for propagating false claims about the real life existence of ritualistic murder. Building on this, I have demonstrated that *True Detective* present two stances on myth, each represented by the two main characters. I have argued that the liminal stage of this in-betweenness comes across in the visual aspects of the series, as well as in conversations between Hart and Cohle. This liminal stage in turn produces a social drama, one in which we see in the fictional universe as well as in the reception to the series. The reception to the final episode reflects the notion that *True Detective* presents two dominant ways in which to view human society and the role of myths, which was not the expected conclusion to this series. When considering the final moments in the series, hope and love are underlying themes, which can be understood as one potential

²⁰⁶ David Haglund and Willa Paskin, "Crawling Out of the *True Detective* Rabbit Hole," *Slate*, March 10, 2014, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/03/10/true_detective_finale_on_hbo_form_and_void_a_recap_and_debate.html.

²⁰⁷ Joanna Robinson, "The *True Detective* Finale Was Exactly What We Deserved," *Vanity Fair*, March 10, 2014, <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/03/true-detective-finale-review>.

outcome of the liminal state of southern Louisiana depicted on screen. As I have noted in the early pages of this chapter, in the face of disaster, be it personal or societal, we have a distinct ability to act on the social nature of our being. Consequently, we act altruistically rather than egotistically, and we act with creative and ingenious drive rather than fatalism. Though *True Detective*, for the most part, can be understood as a dark vision of contemporary U.S. society, where small and large emergencies permeate the social and natural landscape, the conclusion to this is arguably that out of tragedy, disaster, and emergency, hope arises, and the continued belief in the human condition.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The two analyses of *True Detective* demonstrate the initial supposition that the series could be regarded as a work of disaster fiction that connects environmental and social issues present in “Cancer Alley.” The series makes these connections in different ways, some of which are the past natural disasters that each have their own distinct implications for people, built environment, and the natural environment. Additionally, the series’ portrayal of toxic industry suggests that *True Detective* may be understood as a commentary on the long-term, destructive, and precarious consequences of contemporary man-made disasters.

Chapter 2 provided an overview of this thesis’ conceptual framework. There, I pointed to the important disaster research being done in the social sciences. I underscored the significance of the cultural turn in disaster studies, which opens the study of disaster up to investigating cultural output, such as film, television, books, and graphic novels.

Furthermore, I illustrated the cultural dimension of disaster by providing a case study of hurricane Katrina, as well as underscoring the notion that whenever a disaster occurs in human society, it becomes a part of our collective cultural imagination. Considering the historical roots of this specific cultural imaginary, I delineated the start of this modern discourse as being influenced by the schism of the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, an event highly regarded as the first modern disaster, and in turn sparked intense debates about the meaning of disasters in general. I provided an overview of the generic tropes of disaster fiction which we find in *True Detective*, some of which formed the basis of my subsequent analysis.

In Chapter 3, I argued that *True Detective* can be seen as a television series where one of the central tropes of disaster fiction, the site of disaster, is continually emphasized. The real-life place in which the series takes place is called “Cancer Alley.” I argued that the ways in which the series does this is by taking advantage of other mediums in order to accentuate environmental disaster which impacts people, infrastructure, and landscape. I pointed to one specific influence that is apparent in the opening title sequence, as well as in examples given from the numerous landscape images in the series, many of which are drawn from the environmental photo essay *Petrochemical America*. Furthermore, I demonstrated that the series frames certain characters as if they were toxic portraits, and how this illustrates the

visual and narrative connections between the toxicity circulating in both human bodies and the natural environment. The analysis brought up several significant adapted elements. These elements reinforce the assumption that *True Detective* is a text where past and contemporary disaster and their implications are presented, as it is shown to adversely affect the economically marginalized and vulnerable body politic in “Cancer Alley.”

In Chapter 4, I provided a brief overview of the centrality of myth in disaster fictions. The most familiar avenue for criticism myth-making in disaster fiction is the Hollywood blockbuster. Nevertheless, *True Detective* received criticism for its portrayal of occult crime. My argument in this vein was that the show is not a fruitful example from which to trace apparent falsehoods about real life, because the series is predominately set in an era of recent U.S. history where moral and satanic panic permeated crime stories deemed as occult in nature. Furthermore, one critic noted that the series is propagating myths belonging to the darkest moments in recent American history, and that this should best be left untouched. This critique strategically overlooked the show’s direct critique of this phenomenon, witnessed most clearly in the character Cohle’s deconstruction of religious myth which leads to such panic. Further on in the chapter, I used this critique of myth-making as a point of departure to address my argument that there are two competing understandings of myth in *True Detective*. The quarrels between Hart and Cohle represent the larger conflict of myth’s role in society. I demonstrated that this in-betweenness of two positions regarding myth can be seen through the lens of liminality, and I pointed to both liminal spaces and liminal figures as examples of this underlying consequence of living in a disaster environment, of which we see both natural and man-made causes. Illustrating this point further, I addressed the notion that disaster itself embodies a liminal character, as it uproots the existence of both individuals and entire communities. In the final section of the chapter, the product caused by being in a liminal state, namely a social drama, was addressed. Tracing the phases of this drama in the character developments of Hart and Cohle, whose final remarks in the last episode defied expectation that the series would conclude with a deconstruction of myth’s value in human society.

To demonstrate the broad scope of disaster present in *True Detective* the analyses focused on disaster on a societal and individual levels, though with varying emphasis. Chapter 3 emphasized the regional disasters in southern Louisiana and their effects on human lives. Chapter 4 emphasized the effects on individuals, though seen through the lens of the society these individuals occupy.

The focus on a disaster imaginary in popular culture situates this thesis within a broader field of interdisciplinary research aimed at investigating how disaster is interpreted

and presented in dominant cultural mediums. In the U.S., television is the dominant medium for cultural output, and as such, this present study of *True Detective* also coincides with a broader discussion about television's capacity to present valuable social criticism. I have argued that we can locate these aspects by looking at what this series infers about the complex nature of disaster, as well as how it presents these themes. This thesis has addressed how *True Detective* can productively be seen through the lens of disaster, consequently, this approach has provided insight into the complex socio-environmental issues pertaining to our modern society in which disasters encompass all spheres of human life: from the intimately personal to the global, and everywhere in-between.

Bibliography

Primary Source

True Detective. Written and created by Nic Pizzolatto. Directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga. Originally aired January 12, 2014 – March 9, 2014 (Season One). New York: HBO Home Video, 2014. DVD, approx. 438 minutes.

Secondary Sources

Allen, Carol E. "Putting Katrina in Context." *The Alabama Nurse* 33 [2006]: 24.

Andrews, Hazel, and Les Roberts. "Liminality." In *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed. Vol. 14. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015.

Aurthur, Kate. "The "True Detective" Creator Debunks Your Craziest Theories." *Buzzfeed* 3.6.2014. https://www.buzzfeed.com/kateaurthur/true-detective-finale-season-1-nic-pizzolatto?utm_term=.eeYvpWRw6#.waRRJ1pL8.

Barrie, J.M. *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1906.

Barnett, Joshua Trey. "Toxic Portraits: Resisting Multiple Invisibilities in the Environmental Justice Movement." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 2 (April 2015): 405-425. doi: 10.1080/00335630.2015.1005121.

Bator, Joanna. "The Cultural Meaning of Disaster: Remarks on Gregory Button's Work." *International Journal of Japanese Sociology* 21 [2012]: 92-97. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-6781.2012.01156.x

Berger, Dan. "Constructing Crime, framing disaster: Routines of criminalization and crisis in Hurricane Katrina." *Punishment & Society* 11 [2009]: 491-510. doi: 10.1177/1462474509341139.

Bigsby, Christopher. *Viewing America: Twenty-First-Century Television Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Birdsell, David S., and Leo Groarke. "Toward a Theory of Visual Argument." *Argumentation and Advocacy* 33, no. 1 (1996): 1-10.

Bjerring, Jens Christian Borrebye, and Isak Winkel Holm. "The Dora Lange Archive: Jacques Derrida Watches True Detective." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 49 [2016]: 705-721. doi: 10.1111/jpcu.12435.

Blanusa, Zrinka Bosic. "Touched by Disaster: Writing and the Political." In *Myth and Its Discontents: Memory and Trauma in Central European and East European Literature*, edited by Danijela Lugaric, Milka Car, and Gabor Tamas. Wien: Praesens, 2017.

- Bosick, Stacey J. "Pushed Out on My Own": The Impact of Hurricane Katrina in the Lives of Low-income Emerging Adults." *Sociological Perspectives* 58 [2014]: 243-263. doi: 10.1177/0731121414561124.
- Bowers, Tom. "Mountaintop Removal as a Case Study: The Possibilities for Public Advocacy Through Virtual Toxic Tours." *Environmental Communication* 7, no. 3 (2013): 372-390. doi: 10.1080/17524032.2013.807860.
- Byrnes, Delia. "I Get a Bad Taste in My Mouth Out Here": Oil's Intimate Ecologies in HBO's True Detective." *The Global South* 9, no. 1 [2015]: 86-106. doi: 10.2979/globalsouth.9.1.07.
- Campos, Paul. "True Detective's dangerous lies about satanic ritual abuse." *The Week* 3.12.2014. <http://theweek.com/articles/449542/true-detectives-dangerous-lies-about-satanic-ritual-abuse>.
- Chammah, Maurice. "True Detective and the Satanic Panic." *Huffington Post* (Blog) 6.11.2014. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/maurice-chammah/true-detective-and-the-sa_b_5134345.html.
- Cornea, Christine and Rhys O. Thomas. (Ed.) *Dramatising Disaster: Character, Event, Representation*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013.
- Demaria, Cristina. "True Detective Stories: Media Textuality and the Anthology Format Between Remediation and Transmedia Narratives." *Between*, 4, no. 8 [November 2014]: 1-25. URL: <http://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/viewFile/1332/1101>.
- Edgerton, Gary R., and Jeffrey P. Jones. (Ed.) *The Essential HBO Reader*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2008.
- Ekström, Anders and Kyrre Kverndokk. "Cultures of Disasters." *Culture Unbound* 7, no. 3 (2015): 356-362. doi: 10.3384/cu.2000.1525.1573.
- Emmert, Scott D. "A Jaundiced View of America: Robert W. Chambers and The King in Yellow." *Journal of American Culture* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 39-44. doi: 10.1111/j.1542-734X.1999.2202_39.x.
- Fleetwood, Nicole R. "Failing Narratives, Initiating Technologies: Hurricane Katrina and the Production of a Weather Media Event." *American Quarterly* 58 [2006]: 767-789. doi: 10.1353/aq.2006.0058.
- Franks, Rachel. "A Fear of the Dark: Landscape as a Gothic Monster in HBO's True Detective (2014)." In *No Escape: Excavating the Multidimensional Phenomenon of Fear*, edited by Dean Cavino, 19-30. Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2016.
- Giroux, Henry A. "Reading Hurricane Katrina: Race, Class, and the Biopolitics of Disposability." *College Literature* 33 [2006]: 171-196. doi: 10.1353/lit.2006.0037.

- Haglund, David, and Willa Paskin. "Crawling Out of the True Detective Rabbit Hole." *Slate* 3.10.2014.
http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2014/03/10/true_detective_finale_on_hbo_form_and_void_a_recap_and_debate.html.
- Harold, Christine and Kevin M. DeLuca. "Behold the Corpse: Violent Images and the Case of Emmett Till." *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (Summer 2005): 263-286. doi: 10.1353/rap.2005.0075.
- Harris, Geraldine. "A Return to Form? Postmasculinist Television Drama and Tragic Heroes in the Wake of The Sopranos." *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 10, no. 4 (2012): 443-463. doi: 10.1080/17400309.2012.708272.
- Himmelstein, Hal. *Television Myth and the American Mind*. 2nd ed. Westport: Praeger, 1994.
- Holm, Isak Winter. "The Cultural Analysis of Disaster." In *The Cultural Life of Catastrophe and Crises*, edited by Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel, 15-32. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.
- "Under Water within Thirty Years: The Prophetic Mode in True Detective." *Behemoth – A Journal on Civilization* 9 [2016]: 90-107. doi: 10.6094/behemoth.2016.9.1.893
- "The Frailty of Everything — Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and Modern Disaster Discourse," in *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012): 233-248.
- Illner, Peer, and Isak Winkel Holm. "Making Sense of Disaster: The Cultural Studies of Disaster." In *Disaster Research: Multidisciplinary and International Perspectives*, edited by Rasmus Dahlberg, Olivier Rubin and Morten Thanning Vendelø, 51-65. London: Routledge, 2016.
- Kelly, Casey Ryan. "The Toxic Screen: Visions of Petrochemical America in HBO's True Detective (2014)." *Communication, Culture & Critique* 10, no. 1 (March 2017): 39-57. doi: 10.1111/cccr.12148.
- Kverndokk, Kyrre. "Mediating the Morals of Disaster." *Nordic Journal of Science and Technology Studies* 2, no. 1 (2014): 78-87. doi: 10.5324/njsts.v2i1.2140.
- Lassiter, Matthew D., and Joseph Crespino. *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Laycock, Joseph P. "'Time is a Flat Circle': True Detective and the Specter of Moral Panic in American Pop Culture." *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 220-235. doi: 10.3138/jrpc.27.3.3101.
- Li, ShiNa, Hengyun Li, Haiyan Song, Christine Lundberg, and Shujie Shen. "The Economic Impact of On-Screen Tourism: The Case of The Lord of the Rings and The Hobbit." *Tourism Management* 60 (2017): 177-187. doi: 10.1016/j.tourman.2016.11.023.

- LouisianaTravel.com. "Investigate These True Detective Filming Locations." <http://www.louisianatravel.com/articles/investigate-these-three-true-detective-filming-locations>.
- Madrigal, Alexis C. "The Sacrificial Landscape of True Detective." *The Atlantic* 3.7.2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/03/the-sacrificial-landscape-of-em-true-detective-em/284302/>.
- Marotte, M.R. and Glenn Jellenik. (Ed.) *Ten Years After Katrina: Critical Perspectives of the Storm's Effect on American Culture and Identity*. Lanham: Lexington Books 2015.
- McKinzie, Ashleigh Elain. "Deconstruction of destruction stories: narrative, inequality, and disasters." *Disasters* 41, no. 1 (2017): 3-22. doi: 10.1111/disa.12184.
- Meyhoff, Karsten Wind. "Freak Ecology – An Introduction to the Fictional History of Natural Disaster." In *The Cultural Life of Catastrophe and Crises*, edited by Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel. De Gruyter Series in Concepts for the Study of Culture. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012.
- Mitchell, Jerry T., Deborah S. K. Thomas, Arleen A. Hill, and Susan L. Cutter. "Catastrophes in Reel Life versus Real Life: Perpetuating Disaster Myth through Hollywood Films." *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* 18, no. 3 (November 2000): 383-402. URL: <http://www.ijmed.org/articles/308/>.
- Mittell, Jason. *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Neiman, Susan. *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004.
- Nicholls, Keith & J. Steven Picou. "The Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Trust in Government." *Social Science Quarterly* 94 [2013]: 344-361. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-6237.2012.00932.x.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Nunn, Erich. "Screening the Twenty-First-Century South." *PMLA* 131, no. 1 (2016): 187-190. doi: 10.1632/pmla.2016.131.1.187.
- Nussbaum, Emily. "The Disappointing Finale of 'True Detective'." *The New Yorker* 3.10.2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-disappointing-finale-of-true-detective>.
- Parker, Robert Dale. *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*. 3rd Ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Paskin, Willa. "David Simon: Most TV is Unwatchable." *The Salon* 9.23.2012. http://www.salon.com/2012/09/23/david_simon_most_tv_is_unwatchable/.

- Peebles, Jennifer. "Toxic Sublime: Imaging Contaminated Landscapes." *Environmental Communication* 5, no. 4 [2011]: 373-392. doi: 10.1080/17524032.2011.616516.
- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Powell, Lawrence N. "What Does American History Tell Us about Katrina and Vice Versa?" *The Journal of American History* [2007]: 863-876. doi: 10.2307/25095149.
- Rhodes, Jean, Christian Chan, Mary Waters, Christina Paxson, Cecilia E. Rouse, and Elizabeth Fussell. "The Impact of Hurricane Katrina on the Mental and Physical Health of Low-Income Parents in New Orleans." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 80 [2010]: 237-247. doi: 10.1111/j.1939-0025.2010.01027.x.
- Rigby, Kate. *Dancing with Disaster: Environmental Histories, Narratives, and Ethics for Perilous Times*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- Robinson, Joanna. "The True Detective Finale Was Exactly What We Deserved." *Vanity Fair* 3.10.2014. <http://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2014/03/true-detective-finale-review>.
- Rushdie, Salman. *Joseph Anton*. New York: Random House, 2012.
- Schneider-Mayerson, Matthew. "Necrocracy in America: American Studies Begins to Address Fossil Fuels and Climate Change (Review)." *American Quarterly* 67 [2015]: 529-540.
- Segal, Robert S. *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Shaheen, Suzanne. "Petrochemical America: Picturing Cancer Alley." *The New Yorker*. 9.14.2012. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/petrochemical-america-picturing-cancer-alley>.
- Southern Spaces. Review of HBO's True Detective (Season One), by Christopher Lirette. 8.13.2014. <https://southernspaces.org/2014/something-true-about-louisiana-hbos-true-detective-and-petrochemical-america-aesthetic>.
- Skjoldager-Nielsen, Kim and Joshua Edelman. "Liminality," *Ecumenica: Journal of Theatre and Performance* 7, no. 1-2 (2014): 33-40.
- Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster*. New York: Penguin Books, 2009.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Steele, Justin. "Interview: Nic Pizzolatto, creator/writer of HBO's True Detective." *In The Arkham Digest* (Blog). 1.21.2014. <http://www.arkhamdigest.com/2014/01/interview-nic-pizzolatto-creatorwriter.html>.

- Steinberg, Ted. *Acts of God: The Unnatural History of Natural Disasters in America*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford Press, 2006.
- Sullivan, Amy. "The True Detective Finale: That's It?" *The Atlantic* 3.10.2014. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/the-em-true-detective-em-finale-thats-it/284312/>.
- Syme, Rachel. "The McConnaissance." *The New Yorker*. 1.16.2014. <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-mcconnaissance>.
- Thompson, Kirsten M. *Apocalyptic Dread: American Film at the Turn of the Millennium*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007.
- Tierney, Kathleen. *The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience*. Stanford, C.A.: Stanford University Press, 2014.
- Tierney, Kathleen, Christine Bevc, Erica Kuligowski. "Metaphor Matter: Disaster Myths, Media Frames, and Their Consequences in Hurricane Katrina." *The American Academy of Political and Social Science* 604, no. 1 [2006]: 57-81. doi: 10.1177/0002716205285589.
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015.
- Tuclea, Claudia-Elena, and Puiu Nistoreanu. "How Film and Television Programs Can Promote Tourism and Increase the Competitiveness of Tourist Destinations." *Cactus Tourism Journal* 2, no. 2 (2011): 25-30.
- Turnau, Theodore A., III. "Inflecting the World: Popular Culture and the Perception of Evil." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 38, no. 2 (2004): 384-396. doi: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.2004.00118.x.
- Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago, Aldine Publishing, 1969.
- , "Social Dramas and Stories About Them." *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 141-168. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343180>.
- Vallero, Daniel A. and Trevor M. Letcher. *Unraveling Environmental Disasters*. Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2013.
- Yar, Majid. *Crime and the Imaginary of Disaster: Post-Apocalyptic Fictions and the Crisis of Social Order*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

