



MEDIATING THE MORALS OF DISASTERS

Hurricane Katrina in Norwegian News Media

by Kyrre Kverndokk

The Norwegian media responses to Hurricane Katrina were structured around three well-established sets of motifs in a globalized late modern disaster discourse: 1) The collapse of civil society, 2) Social vulnerability 2) Extreme weather and global warming. These sets of motifs portray relationships or non-relationships between natural evil and moral evil. Starting with Voltaire's description of Candide's arrival in Lisbon after the earthquake I discuss how an 18th century disaster discourse is echoed in contemporary media narratives. This paper explores a folkloristic and narratological approach to writing nature. I use Hurricane Katrina as a case for studying Norwegian media disaster narratives. In these narratives I am concerned with how such narratives transform disasters from being acts of nature to become issues of morale. Modern disaster narratives have more complex historical roots than often claimed. This complexity is mirrored in the media representations of Hurricane Katrina.

Keywords: Disaster; Hurricane Katrina; mass media; natural evil

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Introduction

As soon as they recovered themselves a little they walked toward Lisbon. They had some money left, with which they hoped to save themselves from starving, after they had escaped drowning. Scarcely had they reached the city, lamenting the death of their benefactor, when they felt the earth tremble under their feet. The sea swelled and foamed in the harbour, and beat to pieces the vessels riding at anchor. Whirlwinds of fire and ashes covered the streets and public places; houses fell, roofs were flung upon the pavements, and the pavements were scattered. Thirty thousand inhabitants of all ages and sexes were crushed under the ruins. The sailor, whistling and swearing, said there was booty to be gained here.

"What can be the *sufficient reason* of this phenomenon?" said Pangloss.

"This is the Last Day!" cried Candide.

The sailor ran among the ruins, facing death to find money; finding it, he took it, got drunk, and having slept himself sober, purchased the favours of the first good-natured wench whom he met on the ruins of the destroyed houses, and in the midst of the dying and the dead. Pangloss pulled him by the sleeve.

"My friend," said he, "this is not right. You sin against the *universal reason*; you choose your time badly." (Voltaire [1759] 1918:19–20)

In his poem of 1756 on the Lisbon earthquake and in the paradigmatic novel *Candide* three years later, Voltaire used the earthquake as an opportunity to argue against the optimism of the mid-18th century. In polemic terms he argued against the idea that, despite such a dreadful disaster, we still live in the best of all possible worlds, and claimed that no meaning could possibly lie behind such a catastrophe. At the same time, he also argued against an opposite position, what the historian Kevin Rozario has termed a pessimistic cosmic fatalism, the widespread idea of calamities as the rightful divine punishment of sinful man (Rozario, 2007:15). The Lisbon earthquake and Voltaire's polemic writings on the disaster are often referred to as a turning point in the western thought. It changed the way of thinking about disasters, nature, evil and morals (e.g. Löffler, 1999). In her now classic book *Evil in Western Thought*, the philosopher Susan Neiman writes: "Since Lisbon, natural evils no longer have any seemingly relation to moral evils; hence they no longer have meaning at all. Natural disaster is the object of attempts at prediction and control, not of interpretation" (Neiman, 2002:250). If this is the case, it is tempting to ask a rather naïve and simple question; if natural disasters really are fundamentally meaningless, how do we then make them understandable?

The ways Candide, his preceptor Pangloss, and the sailor respond

to the Lisbon earthquake in the opening quote seem surprisingly familiar to us today. Pangloss' call for a sufficient reason is referring to Leibniz and his concept of theodicy. We still call to have universal reasons behind disasters explained, though not in the same terms as Pangloss. Candide and the sailor's responses seem even more familiar, and are echoed in late modern disaster discourse. We still fear an apocalypse either in secular or religious terms and we too associate disaster areas with an uncontrollable state of looting and violence. The literature scholar Isak Winkel Holm claims that modern disaster discourse, or what he, with a reference to the philosopher Charles Taylor, terms the *social imaginary of disasters*, is structured according to a number of symbolic forms (Holm, 2012a; Holm, 2012b:21). He even claims that since the Lisbon earthquake, this cultural repertoire "of images structuring the cultural imagination of disaster in the Western world has, in fact, been surprisingly small and surprisingly stable" (Holm, 2012b:24). Following up on this claim, I will point out the very limited number of symbolic forms or cultural models of morals and disasters that appear when natural disasters are being mass mediated in a late modern world. To be more precise, the paper will discuss the ways relationships or non-relationships between disasters, nature, morals and evils were articulated in Norwegian media representations of Hurricane Katrina.

Writing nature from a folklore studies perspective involves a history of ideas written from below. Folklore studies is a discipline examining how cultural understandings, ideas and evaluations are distributed and negotiated through vernacular and popular cultural expressions, with an emphasis on culturally distributed narratives. Hence, the practice of writing nature in folklore studies may just as well be described as a practice of reading nature. Such reading of nature could, within folklore studies, be undertaken from a number of theoretical positions. My contribution has some connections to actor-network theory. It is often emphasized that the key term in actor-network theory, *actant*, is taken from the semiotics of Algirdas Julien Greimas. What is less known is that Greimas based his concept on the formalist Vladimir Propp's study of the morphology of folktales (Holbek, 1987:349–354). What Greimas describes as an actant, is in Propp's narratology called a *sphere of action*. In a sphere of action, the narrative character – the dramatis personae – and the narratological function of the character are amalgamated into one narratological unit (Propp, 1968:79). As an approach to a narratological reading of nature, I will focus on the spheres of action of natural forces and mankind in Norwegian media representations of Hurricane Katrina. Hence, in this narrative and rhetorical analysis, vernacular concepts of nature, social structure and human behavior represents the starting points for discussing how certain cultural models of morals and evil are articulated in the Norwegian media response to Hurricane Katrina.



Mediating Hurricane Katrina

Mass media is an arena for public sense making, and brings distant events to local audiences. Media audiences today are able to follow extreme and spectacular events around the world, such as natural disasters, in real time. Hence, media-made spectator aesthetics and well-structured narrative scripts have become crucial for how we perceive and understand disaster (Ekström, 2013:473). As such, global media networks put disasters on display by drawing on prefigured imaginations of disaster scenes. This became obvious when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans, and became a global media event.

Hurricane Katrina was a tragedy for the people of New Orleans and the surrounding areas. However, it was far from being the most devastating natural disaster in modern history. It was even far from being the most devastating disaster in 2005, but it was without doubt one of the most media-exposed disasters ever. The track of the hurricane was broadcasted live around the world almost minute by minute even before it hit the coast of Louisiana and Mississippi on the morning of August 29, 2005. The sociologists Russell Dynes and Havidán Rodríguez have shown how the American TV coverage of the hurricane was structured after a limited number of narrative motifs, such as a state of chaos, looting and the absence of the authorities. They argue that these motifs followed a well-established script of disaster narratives. These narratives were displayed almost before the catastrophe became reality (Dynes and Rodríguez, 2007). These motifs framed the disaster as a globally exposed, vivid TV drama. The European and the Norwegian media representations of the disaster were structured around topics and narrative motifs similar to those on American

TV. Hence, the media coverage first and foremost illustrated how globally integrated the media world is.

Western disaster discourse has been claimed to be heavily influenced by Hollywood movies and popular culture (Tierney et al., 2006; Webb, 2007; Žižek, 2005). However, it is certainly not only popular culture that structures how we imagine and represent disasters. Late modern disaster discourse has deep historical roots (Holm, 2012a:65). The Norwegian media coverage of Hurricane Katrina was, roughly speaking, structured after four main topics. One of them was the increase of petroleum prices, due to reduced oil production in the Mexican Gulf and heavily damaged oil refineries in the Gulf region. Several newspaper articles and national broadcast news reports discussed the impact the hurricane had on the Norwegian economy. Such kind of news illustrates how calamities and expectations of ruin and renewal are integrated in capitalism as a premise for economic development (Rozario, 2007). They illustrate how one man's profit is another's loss. However, such kinds of news first and foremost tell how the global economy works, and put little direct emphasis on either the disaster, or the disaster area. I will therefore leave this topic out of my further discussions, and concentrate on the three remaining topics, which I have called: "The collapse of civil society", "Social vulnerability" and "Extreme weather and global warming". These topics are all, in one way or another, dealing with relations between disasters, morals and evil. They are all handling the shocking news in ways that make it possible to cope with the meaninglessness of the disaster, in the sense that they place it into structures that make them morally and intellectually explainable for the media audience.

The collapse of civil society

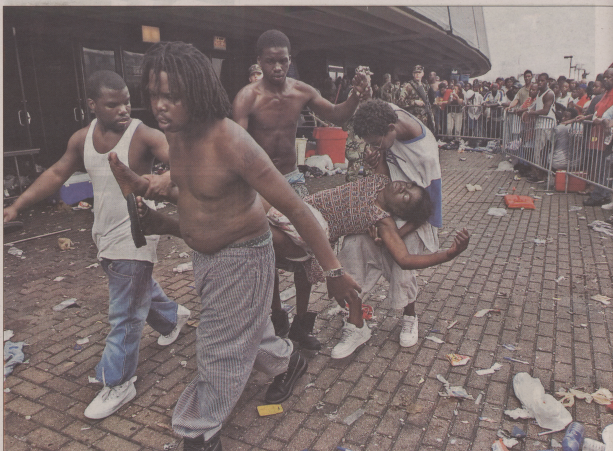
On September 2, 2005, four days after Hurricane Katrina made landfall, the tabloid *Dagbladet* could report that a state of lawlessness and helplessness dominated the flooded city of New Orleans. An article simply titled "Lawless and helpless" described a chaotic, dangerous and desperate situation where: "Criminals and desperate armed survivors are making the rescue work life-threatening, and the police lack resources" (*Dagbladet*, September 2 2005:12).¹ The article is heavily illustrated. Six illustrations document a seemingly tense state of chaos and violence. The state of chaos is especially emphasized in the two main illustrations placed above the text. One of these pictures shows four men helping a woman who has fainted (left main illustration, fig 1), while the other one shows armed police driving through the city in an armored vehicle (right main illustration, fig 2).

All the pictures in the article were distributed to the newspaper

through the international press agency Associated Press (AP). The picture of the armed police troops driving through the streets of New Orleans was shot by the AP photographer Eric Gay, and distributed globally. It was, among other places, also published in *Paris Match*. The French magazine commented upon it in laconic terms: "The only response: The army". *Paris Match* blamed the US authorities for treating New Orleans as another Afghanistan or Iraq (Kempf, 2013:14). The skepticism to American militarism was also present in Norway in the days after Hurricane Katrina. However, in this particular news report in *Dagbladet*, no such skepticism is uttered. The military presence is instead described as a necessity, which the pictures serve to illustrate. The caption to this picture reads: "(...) Armed gangs are now controlling most of the city center and the authorities lack resources" (*Dagbladet*, September 2, 2005:13),² while the caption the left main illustration reads:

¹ Translated from Norwegian: "Kriminelle og desperate overlevende med våpen gjør redningsarbeidet livsfarlig, og politiet mangler ressurser."

² Translated from Norwegian: "(...) En pansret bil med væpnede politifolk ruller i går inn i New Orleans gater. Væpnede gjenger kontrollerer nå store deler av sentrum, og myndighetene mangler ressurser."



PLYNDRING OG LIDELSE: New Orleans preges av kriminelle gjenger og ofre som lider. Her bæres en kvinne vekk etter å ha besvimt i det enorme tilfluktsstedet Superdome. Evakueringen av Superdome ble i går avbrutt etter at det ble avfyrt skudd mot et militærhelikopter. Foto: M. Scott Mahoney/Army Times/AP

Lovløst og hjelpeløst



SAVNET: Musikkløperen Fats Domino (77) ble medt savnet i New Orleans i går. Foto: AP



TUNGT BEVAPNET: Kystvaktssoldater holder vakt for å stoppe omfattende plyndring. Foto: AP

Kriminelle og desperate overlevende med våpen gjør redningsarbeidet livsfarlig, og politiet mangler ressurser.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Flere sykehus i New Orleans ble i går beskjert da helikoptre prøvde å evakuere pasientene.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
I går ble amerikanske myndigheter om internasjonal hjelp og den amerikanske krigsindustrien etterpørsel nå kritisk som kan brukes til å finansiere overlevende.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Byen ble beskjert. Folk ble skrytet med politi og helikoptre og fanget av de kommer og hjelper familier dør, sier leikant i kvartalsen Chan Ben-Isaac til AP.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Sykehusene mangler mat, vann og strøm. Legene, forverrer og ringte media for å få hjelp i går.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Vi prøvde å fly inn forsvaredegjere til et sykehus i går, men ble møtt av en væpnet gjeng på landingsplenen og politiet nekter å la oss på hjelpe, sier Richard Zauchlag, som leder Azadon Ambulance Service.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Evakueringen av den enorme tilfluktsstedet Superdome ble i går avbrutt etter at det ble avfyrt skudd mot et militærhelikopter.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Behov for mer politi
50 000 soldater stanset i går den amerikanske politistyrken for å gjenopprette orden og gi nødvendige systematiske utrykninger.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Norske Espen Jensen (23) kom i går som førstemann inn til hjembyen Slidell, utenfor New Orleans.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Dagen etter orkanen får han som en av de første overlevende til å evakuere folk fra sykehus i byen Slidell. Han har 25 000 innbyggere og is og kjøleskapp i hjemmet.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Det er nå et stort område som er blitt ødelagt. Det er nå et stort område som er blitt ødelagt.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Hjelpen er fortsatt ødelagt. Vi snakker om snakk utfor for å få strøm igjen i området, sier han.



ENORM OPPGAVE: En pansert bil med væpnet politikkjøllet i går inn i New Orleans gater. Væpnete gjenger kontrollerer nå store deler av sentrum og myndighetene mangler ressurser. Foto: Eric Gay/AP

Lovløst og hjelpeløst

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
norske militære ressurser forberedes med en naturkatastrofe i amerikanske historie. Men det er behov for flere flere.

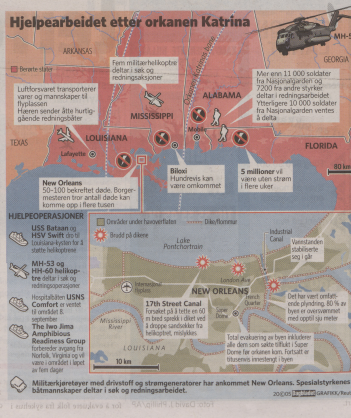
Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Dette katastrofen får ut det beste i enkelte folk, og det verste i andre, sa guvernør i Mississippi, Haley Barbour i går.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Superdome evakuert
Jeg behandler ikke hundene min på dem måten, sa Edwards. Rundt hjørnet lå en gammel mann død på gaten.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Tilskuddet ble beordret evakuert i går. Folk kjemper om en plass på bussene ut av katastrofeområdet.

Tilskudd: Lars Inge Staveland
Hjelpen er fortsatt ødelagt. Vi snakker om snakk utfor for å få strøm igjen i området, sier han.

Tilskudd: Espen Jensen
Hjelpen er fortsatt ødelagt. Vi snakker om snakk utfor for å få strøm igjen i området, sier han.



Figures 1 and 2, from *Dagbladet*, September 2, 2005 (Reproduction: The National Library of Norway)

Looting and suffering: New Orleans is dominated by criminal gangs and suffering victims. A woman is carried away after she has fainted in the enormous shelter of the Superdome. The evacuation of the Superdome was stopped yesterday after a gunshot was fired at a military helicopter (*Dagbladet*, September 2, 2005:12)³

This caption sums up the content of the article. It is noticeable that no persons are named in this text, not even the fainted woman, and the four men carrying her are just mentioned indirectly. The text is written in a passive form and contains remarkably few concrete persons. Even though both of the captions refer to looters, the actual pictures do not expose any looters, just victims and armed police. Hence, the captions are framing the pictures in ways that turn them into illustrations of a state of helplessness and lawlessness. This kind of portrayal of the situation inscribes the inhabitants of New Orleans into three possible subject passions.

³ Translated from Norwegian: "Plyndring og lidelse: New Orleans preges av kriminelle gjenger og ofre som lider. Her bæres en kvinne vekk etter å ha besvimt i det enorme tilfluktsstedet Superdome. Evakueringen av Superdome ble i går avbrutt etter at det ble avfyrt skudd mot et militærhelikopter."

The term *lawless* defines two active positions, the looters or snipers shooting at the helicopter and the law represented by the military and the police, while the term *helpless* defines the rest of the population as passive victims.

However, stories of looting in the aftermath of the disaster were not unique for New Orleans. Such kinds of stories are among the most frequently told disaster narratives in modern times. Moreover, they are both told locally in disaster areas and distributed widely through mass media. The opening quote from *Candide* illustrates how looting was a topic already in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake. Reports of looting were published all around Europe after the earthquake. 151 year later, in 1906, local circulation of such stories caused a state of public fear after the San Francisco earthquake. The mayor of the city, Eugene Schmitz, encouraged the military troops and the police force to "KILL any and all persons found engaged in Looting or in the Commission of Any Other Crime" (quoted in Solnit, 2009:36).



In the aftermath of the Great Kantō earthquake in Japan in 1923, Korean guest workers were accused of starting fires and looting the ruins. As a consequence, groups of vigilantes in Kyoto and Yokohama lynched Koreans (Reilly, 2009:101). The examples of rumors and news reports on looting mobs in disaster areas are numerous. After the earthquake in Japan in 2011, Western news media even asked why the Japanese did *not* loot, implying a presumed normality of looting in disaster areas (*Dagbladet*, March 14, 2011, *The Washington Times*, March 14, 2011).

The disaster scholar Kathleen Tierney has remarked that stories about looting are not only frequently told and broadcast. Disaster narratives also frame how we handle disasters. Tierney and her colleagues have pointed out that such stories suddenly turned the often used metaphor for describing disaster areas – a war zone – into reality when 69 000 troops from the National Guard arrived New Orleans (Tierney et al., 2006). The governor of Louisiana, Kathleen Blanco, announced the appearance of these troops with a warning: “I have one message for these hoodlums: These troops know how to shoot and kill, and they are more than willing to do so if necessary, and I expect they will” (CNN, September 2, 2005). These words went around the world as an echo of the San Francisco mayor 99 years earlier. It later turned out that the stories of looting were highly exaggerated.

Stories of looting and destruction become urban legends, presented and widely distributed as true stories of extraordinary events, yet their truth content is difficult or impossible to verify. The chaos of a disaster scene generates such narratives, especially when the disaster wipes out an entire city. The folklorist Carl Lindahl even claims that: “The death of a city is the ultimate urban legend” (Lindahl, 2012:141). The collapse of modern city life followed by chaos and lawlessness is portrayed in a long list of disaster stories narrated and distributed in both Hollywood blockbusters and news reports. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, legends about looters and snipers were told locally and distributed globally. These kinds of stories belong to what Lindahl terms as the master script of chaos. They are, according to him, projected from pre-existing cultural fear. Even though some gunshots probably were fired, the countless number of gunshots reported was for the most part never fired. The noisy soundtrack of the storm could perfectly well

be mistaken for gunshots, he claims (Lindahl, 2012:145). The intense noise worked as a vehicle in a literary transformation of meteorological forces into human forces, and into the sphere of action of the criminal antagonists in a human drama of chaos and order.

In general, legends are distributed narratives that are tested and shaped in collective processes of telling, transmission and re-telling. They are renegotiated and reformulated in a continual interplay between tellers and audiences in order to be accepted by the audience and eventually to be re-told (Bogatyrëv and Jakobson, [1929] 2005). In this sense they reflect culturally shared imaginations, evaluations and values. The article from *Dagbladet* was far from the only Norwegian news report focusing on looting and criminals shooting at helicopters. Such stories actually dominated the Norwegian press coverage of flooded New Orleans. Hence, it is likely to assume that the re-telling and re-contextualization of looting narratives from a local American context to a Norwegian media context to some extent reflects that the cultural imaginations these stories are based on also found resonance among a Norwegian media audience.

The article from *Dagbladet*, along with a number of similar news reports, reveals a certain kind of disaster imagination. In the Norwegian press, the lawlessness and helplessness of the people in New Orleans was explained partly in light of American social structures and partly due to fundamental human behavior uncovered when civilization was literally swept away. Hence, the true disaster was not the hurricane; it was rather the lawless and chaotic situation that apparently appeared in its aftermath. The hurricane was just a necessary background for the story. The storm prepared the scene for the incomprehensible actions of the looting antagonists. Nature, understood as the meteorological forces, had no active part in the drama and was thus not ascribed any explanatory value. Instead the stories about looting framed the disaster as a fundamental human-moral situation. The writer Rebecca Solnit, has pointed out that this kind of framing of disasters draws on an idea best formulated in Thomas Hobbes' concept of the state of nature, as a war of all against all (Solnit, 2009:91;241–242). My point is that this kind of narrative framing, so to speak, converts the catastrophe from a natural to a moral disaster, caused by the true nature of mankind.

Social vulnerability

An article in the regional newspaper *Adresseavisen* from December 28, 2005 was looking back on 2005 as a year of disasters. The chaos and disorder of the directly broadcast disaster in New Orleans was commented upon by asking these questions:

How can the wealthiest and most resource-rich country in the world not manage to help the population of New Orleans? How can a tourist city suddenly look like a city in the third world ravaged by civil war? (*Adresseavisen*, December 28, 2005:50)⁴

⁴ Translated from Norwegian: “Hvorfor klarte ikke verdens rikeste og mest ressurssterke land å komme befolkningen i New Orleans til unnsetning? Hvordan kan en turistby i Vesten plutselig se ut som en borgerkrigsherjet by i den tredje verden?”



The war metaphor was again repeated, but why was it put in connection to the third world? What was it with the pictures from New Orleans that made such an analogy possible?

This analogy reflects an idea about the interrelationship between development and vulnerability, and is based on an idea of a divide between natural hazards and disasters. This distinction is well established in both disaster studies and popular disaster discourse. Over the last 30 years it has been emphasized that it is social vulnerability that makes it possible for hazards to turn into disasters (Hewitt, 1997). This is by now a well-documented empirical fact. Nevertheless, this way of understanding disasters also has a discursive dimension. The concept of vulnerability implies an idea about the opposite – invulnerability, often referred to as resilience. While countries in the third world are generally considered to be more or less vulnerable to natural hazards, the western countries, on the other hand, are presumed to be more or less invulnerable. Vulnerability and development are in other words two sides of the same coin.

Hurricane Katrina exposed the vulnerability of American society to the world. It was a tremendous shock when the USA was unable to handle the situation. In an editorial article, the social democratic daily *Dagsavisen* wrote for instance: “The pictures from the disaster area are such pictures one would expect from a developing country, not a superpower” (*Dagsavisen*, September 10, 2005:3).⁵ In the aftermath of the hurricane, the phrase “the world’s only superpower” was used as a fixed rhetorical figure around the world; by Reuter’s news agency, in the German press, in Indian press and in Norway (e.g. NTB, September 2, 2005a; *Dagbladet*, September 3, 2005:9; Spiegel Online International, September 12, 2005; The Times of India, September 4, 2005). With the term *superpower*, a global, power political discourse was connected to a disaster discourse. The example from *Dagsavisen* clearly shows how the use of the term was based on a presumption that a superpower is supposed to be resilient per se. And likewise, that the third world as such was most likely to be vulnerable to disasters.

One consequence of the rhetoric in the quotes from *Adresseavisen* and *Dagsavisen* is that New Orleans and Louisiana are textually framed as semi-developed or as a third-world-like area. However, the problem seems to be that the development-vulnerability model did not necessarily fit reality. In the following example picked from a commentary in *Dagbladet*, this model collides with

the author’s knowledge about disaster management in two so-called developing countries:

One could almost believe this to happen in one of the least developed countries in the world, apart from the paradox that it is precisely the poor countries that are often very good at dealing with natural disasters. Bangladesh has simple and effective measures concerning flood and are doing reasonably well, in the same way as Cuba manages to handle the annual returning hurricanes. (*Dagbladet*, September 3, 2005: 9)⁶

The critique of the disaster management in the aftermath of the hurricane was highly politicized both in the USA and abroad. In quite direct terms it was directed against the Bush-administration, and in the USA also against FEMA (The Federal Emergency Management Agency). However, on a more fundamental level such kind of critical reports was about more than the stupidity of the Bush-administration. While narratives on looting thematize the collapse of social structures, reports on social vulnerability represent the opposite. They are all about social structures – political and institutional structures one would expect to be working but didn’t, and the structures that were working all too well – in this case, the armed forces.

In American public debates, Hurricane Katrina was characterized as an unnatural disaster (Lee, 2006; Reed, 2006; Hartman and Squires, 2006). The term *unnatural* was not used in the Norwegian press. Yet, both the news reports and the commentary referred to in this article were still in line with such an understanding of the disaster in the sense that *nature* was completely written out of this kind of analysis, in favor of structural and political explanations. An impression was given that modern, developed societies were expected to be natureproof, so to speak.⁷ When the disaster was written entirely into a political sphere of action, the possibilities were opened for drawing parallels to radically different catastrophe discourses; such as war, concentration camps and genocide discourses. *Dagbladet*, one of the largest Norwegian tabloids, for instance drew parallels between a temporary prison at a bus station in New Orleans and Guantanamo Bay (*Dagbladet*, September 14, 2005:9), while Norwegian News Agency (NTB) called the Superdome a concentration camp (NTB, September 2, 2005b). The concentration camp analogy gives a hint of a cultural model on structural evil, drawing on the idea of the banality of bureaucratic evil in Hannah Arendt’s sense.

Extreme weather and global warming – when nature strikes back

In the USA as well as in Europe, Hurricane Katrina was almost immediately linked to global warming, (Mooney, 2007:150; Boykoff,

2011:136). The profiled American environmentalist Bill McKibben called it “the first of many global warming disasters destined to

⁵ Translated from Norwegian: “Bildene fra katastrofeområdet er slikt man ville ventet fra et utviklingsland, ikke en supermakt.”

⁶ Translated from Norwegian: “Man skulle nesten tro at dette skjer i et av verdens minst utviklede land, bortsett fra det paradoksale at nettopp verdens fattige land ofte viser seg svært flinke til å håndtere naturkatastrofer. Bangladesh har enkle og gode tiltak mot flom og klarer seg brukbart, akkurat som Cuba klarer sine årvisse orkaner.”

⁷ Thanks to Adam Dodd for the term “natureproof”.



strike in the twenty-first century” (quoted in Hertsgaard, 2006:19). In Europe leading politicians such as the British Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott and the German Minister of the Environment Jürgen Trittin both related Hurricane Katrina to global warming, and in more or less direct ways blamed President Bush for the disaster, by not cutting down the emission of climate gasses and by not signing the Kyoto protocol (NTB, September 30, 2005; *The Observer*, September 11, 2005).

In Norway the climate debate connected to Hurricane Katrina was related to an upcoming parliamentary election, held on September 12. The hurricane was used to argue for the need of more radical measures in Norwegian environmental politics. Several Norwegian editorial articles used the hurricane as an example of what will happen in the near future. This excerpt is from an editorial in *Dagbladet*, August 31, 2005:

Katrina's ravages provide an object lesson in what happens when weather becomes extreme. The experts are careful not to directly link this particular hurricane to global warming. This year's hurricane season can become one of the worst, yet it may be a part of a 50 to 60-year weather cycle. But however, only various supporters of the oil industry, found among politicians and scientists, doubt that climate gas emission is warming the planet, causing climate changes and extreme weather. Hurricanes are not the only forms of extreme weather.

Warm, still weather that causes drought can be even more destructive.

Extreme weather in our own country [Norway] manifests itself as summer storms in the Western regions. Or we see it as bushes and small trees growing in the mountain plateaus where we are used to alpine vegetation. The Minister of Environmental Affairs, Knut Arild Hareide, promises that as long as his government is allowed to stay in power, the loss of Norwegian nature as we know it will be halted during the next Parliamentary term. This is an impressive promise that Hareide will be unable to keep when nature strikes back. (...) The goals of the Kyoto agreement are far from adequate in order to stop the increase in climate gas emissions. Extreme weather is a reminder of what awaits us if we don't do much, much more. Now. (*Dagbladet*, August 31, 2005:2)⁸

The message of this editorial is addressed to the prospective new Norwegian Minister of Environmental Affairs, yet the rhetorical use of Hurricane Katrina is not merely political. It is rather a way of reasoning that reflects a certain kind of catastrophe rationality.

The first paragraph of the quote is seemingly drawing on established climate research, but as the argument evolves, another kind of reasoning emerges. The climate research referred to in the first paragraph is based upon complex probability calculation with a long range of uncertainties, while the journalistic and popular climate discourse that soon brakes its way through the textual surface argues for simple and direct causality with global warming as the cause and singular weather disasters as the consequence (Kverndokk, 2011:171-174). This editorial does not only understand Hurricane Katrina as a foreshadowing of what is to come, but also associates Katrina with other kinds of weather phenomena. Rather than focusing on statistics or general, global impacts of climate change – such as rising sea levels – the article focuses upon concrete, Norwegian examples of extreme weather.

The term extreme weather is closely linked to a climate discourse, and works as a linguistic technology transforming different kinds of weather phenomena into phenomena of the same kind. This editorial links Norwegian summer storms and woodland where there used to be bare mountains to Hurricane Katrina by the use of this concept. As extreme weather, these weather phenomena are all indicators of global environmental processes. They work seemingly as direct evidences for how global warming is affecting the environment. However, the text tends to focus upon the message of these dramatic events, rather than the underlying causes of them. Consequently, quite different kinds of weather phenomena work together, establishing a worldwide pattern pointing towards a forthcoming climate crisis. In this sense the weather events operate rhetorically as communicative signs,⁹ bringing messages from nature about the future, and not as strict scientific evidences.

There are some striking structural similarities between the argumentative pattern in this text and early modern reasoning about disasters as divine signs or so called omens. In early modern sign-reading practice, phenomena in nature were interpreted as semiotic signs. Omens predicted a forthcoming disaster, most often Judgment Day. Natural phenomena were interpreted in light of eschatological verses in the Bible, working as modeling examples. Hence, this kind of reasoning was based on exemplarity, not probability. The particular sign was further linked to other peculiar incidents. An earthquake could, for instance, be associated with floods, heavy rainfall or even comets. Each one of these incidents was remarkable, but the semiotic pattern first appeared when they were linked together, and authorized each other as signs of the same kind. Together they would form a pattern of divine signs, predicting the end of the world. This was the case with most of the religious interpretations of the Lisbon earthquake (Kverndokk,

⁸ Translated from Norwegian by Heidi Støa: "Katrinas herjinger er anskuelserundervisning om hva som skjer når været blir ekstremt. Ekspertene er forsiktede med å sette akkurat denne orkanen i direkte sammenheng med global oppvarming. Årets orkansesong kan bli blant de verste, men dette kan være del av en syklus på mellom 50 og 60 år. Det er likevel bare oljeindustriens ulike talspersoner blant politikere og forskere som betviler at utslipp av klimagasser varmer opp planeten, forårsaker klimaforandringer og ekstremt vær. Ekstremt vær trenger ikke være orkaner. Varmt, stille vær som forårsaker tørke, kan være minst like ødeleggende. Ekstremt vær i vårt land kan arte seg som stormer på Vestlandet mens det fortsatt er sommer.

Eller som småskog på vidda der vi var vant til høyfjellsnatur. Miljøvernminister Knut Arild Hareide lover at bare regjeringen får beholde makta, skal tapet av norsk natur slik vi kjenner den, stanses i løpet av neste periode. Det er et voksent valglofte som Hareide er ute av stand til å holde når naturen slår tilbake. (...) Målene i Kyoto-avtalen er langt fra tilstrekkelige til å stanse økningen i utslipp av klimagasser. Ekstremt vær er en påminnelse om hva som venter om vi ikke gjør langt, langt mer. Nå."

⁹ Søren Kjørup has suggested the term communicative sign as a generic term for what Pierce terms as icons and symbols (Kjørup, 2002).



2010:64–67). Such signs in nature were, argumentatively speaking, empty examples, in the sense that the interpretation of them was not fixed, but depended upon the argumentative framing (Nicolaysen, 1999:131). A similar sign-reading practice can be traced in the editorial article from *Dagbladet*. The text establishes connections between phenomena of different kinds, appearing at totally different geographical locations by the use of the term extreme weather. By the use of this term they are transformed into being incidents of the same kind, working argumentatively-speaking as similar types of signs predicting a dark future.

Modernity is often described as the emergence of an ontological divide between nature and culture and between nature and morals

(Latour, 1993; Neiman, 2002:250). However, Bruno Latour has long since pointed out how hybrids of nature and culture are constantly being produced in the modern world. The modern divide between nature and morals also seems to blur in late modern climate discourse. Zygmunt Bauman describes modernity as a long detour in the way we think about fear and disasters (Bauman, 2006). Nature and morals are again intertwined, and natural evil and moral evil are again interconnected. There are similarities between late modern popular understandings of the relationship between disasters and global warming and early modern disaster interpretations in the argumentative structure, in the semiotic reading of nature, and in the idea of an interrelationship between nature and morals.

Conclusion: Disasters, morals and nature

The relationship between nature, morals and evil are set out rather differently in the three models sketched. Nature is written in and out of these models of disasters, morals and evil. These models are, however, not mutually exclusive. The differences between them are rather a question of scale. The Hobbesian model works on a cultural and local level, the banality of evil model works on a national, political level, while the 'nature strikes back' model operates on a global political level. The analysis in this paper further shows that the notion of (natural) disaster is not fixed in late modern disaster discourse. Its different conceptual levels make it complex, flexible, and interpretative. It is quite clear that a disaster is an object of continual interpretation and cultural negotiation and not merely "the object of attempts at prediction and control" (Neiman, 2002:250).

This paper has examined how rather different sorts of well-established cultural models on morals and evils structured representations and narrations of Hurricane Katrina in the Norwegian press. Such narrations always evolve in an intersection between cultural imaginations and the particular historic situation, and imply a renegotiating of the cultural model. This was also the case in the three cases discussed. The narration of the collapse of the civil society in the media representations of Hurricane Katrina drew heavily on legends circulating in the disaster area and in American mass media. The legends transformed the drama of the natural incident into dramaturgic raw material for stories about human morals and fundamental human evil. While in the media representations of social vulnerability the natural incident were completely written out of the discourse. Further, a rather fixed model of vulnerability and development was tested, but maintained by textually framing

New Orleans as semi-developed. This was done by drawing on rhetorical recourses pointing towards a model that has dominated thinking on structural human evil since the 1960s.

These models worked efficiently producing pure interpretative categories of nature and culture in the way they emphasize human morals and evil, rather than natural forces as explanatory factors. The last case I discussed is however far more complex, producing hybrids of nature and culture, and of nature and morals. The editorial article from *Dagbladet* treated the crucially important question about the consequences of the anthropocene in almost metaphysical terms. This kind of language is not merely metaphorical. It also reflects a reasoning that connects particular disasters to the climate crises. In this way of reasoning, nature is ascribed an agency and an autonomous sphere of action. Like God was considered as a rightful punisher in early modern Europe, nature, in this kind of late modern popular discourse is presented as an autonomous and rightful punisher. Nature and morals are again intertwined.

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