

Risk and Transculturation in Contemporary American Science Fiction Film

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ABSTRACT

Technological risks inspire increasingly urgent scenarios of catastrophe in popular culture, including global pandemics, nuclear cataclysm, and intelligent machines taking over the world. Unlike the fossil technologies associated with global warming, the technologies that inform these scenarios—nuclear technology, genetic engineering, nanotechnology, and robotics/AI—have been conceptualized as risk technologies from their inception and remain suspended between the promise of universal wellbeing and the danger of cataclysmic destruction. As a new way to conceptualize the future, risk arose in the context of an emerging global capitalism that relied on technology to accomplish its successes and to manage its fears. Since then, risk has been transformed from a commodity (the object of marine insurance) to a figure of unmanageable uncertainty, and now appears to anticipate catastrophe more powerfully than profit, freedom or pleasure. Yet between these opposing poles, risk still serves to establish individual freedom and as a means of controlling populations.

Contemporary American science fiction film addresses this contradiction between global catastrophic risk (the loss of self) and individual risk-taking (the assumption of self). Representing the crisis of technoscience as material threat to the narrative world and its characters, these films navigate the fundamental ontological, epistemological, and moral uncertainties this crisis has produced. Many of these films, including the film series *Alien* (1979-1997), *The Matrix* (1999-2003), *X-Men* (2000-2017), and *Resident Evil* (2002-2017), paradoxically combine a fundamentally apocalyptic imagination with radically serial narration. These series are particularly revealing in an exploration of risk in popular fiction film because they not only engage with risk as central narrative force, but also show that the seriality of risk combines its recursivity (managing one risk engenders another) and its commodity status (made for serial consumption). As material artifacts, the films are themselves transcultural and transmedial commodities that depend on and celebrate technologies as sublime at the same time as they engage the inescapable horror of such technologies.

This presentation focuses on the unapologetically eclectic film series *Resident Evil* in relation to its most powerful predecessor, the *Alien* series. Based on a Japanese video game, *Resident Evil* has a multinational pedigree, including Germany, the UK, France, Canada, the United States, and Australia. The narrative centers on the global risks of genetic engineering expressed in a Zombie apocalypse (a genre the first film in the series helped to revive) and with its genetically modified female protagonist continues the famous intervention of the *Alien* films—with some significant twists. The presentation will examine how and to what effect these films experiment with representations of the female body in relation to the grotesque monster as its counterpart and in the narrative terms provided by risk. On a deeper level, this talk also addresses the question of how such risk narratives, while they do negotiate contemporary fears and anxieties about technologies, also use the structure and aesthetics of risk to engage with the circulation of knowledge and ignorance or non-knowing across languages and cultures. In general, filmic risk fiction places the anticipation of catastrophe in contradictory frames of reference (science, religion, and law) in ways that ultimately disrupt the sense of agency that thinking about the future in terms of risk affords.