

Composing Catastrophe: Robert Polidori's Photographs in "After the Flood" and Comparative Visual Records of Post-Katrina New Orleans

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INTRODUCTION

The form of cities, their design, and their construction have long made it possible to think about human society, its representation and its values. Likewise, the destruction of cities through various means, accidental circumstance or human error, and the representation of urban ruin have given historical, visual, and narrative form to diverse values governing ethical conduct, individual desires, and collective responsibilities. In recent years a spate of natural disaster films like *Volcano* (1997), *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), and *2012* (2009) have cast the city as a prime target for cataclysm or as a place to escape from following an apocalyptic event (think of escape films like *I am Legend* [2007] and *The Road* [2010]). The appeal of these films might be understood in view of present day environmental uncertainties or perhaps a state of anxiety in the world more generally. However, their coincidence with documentary coverage of very real cataclysmic events—such as the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami's destruction of Banda Aceh and Hurricane Katrina's impact on New Orleans in 2005—leads one to question how different media represent the complex reality of a fallen city, the circumstances which bring such events about, and their social and personal costs. The coincidence between fictional and non-fictional representations and the topicality of disaster leads one to wonder if there are not interpretive parameters, disciplines, or visual economies of a kind that are wholly or partly responsible for representing the subjects one contemplates in viewing these scenes. Is their evocative appeal, content, or meaning governed by factors other than the image or the eye alone? The phrase "scopic regimes" comes to mind to describe these social, material, and conceivably psychical dimensions of vision (this phrase will be discussed in further detail later). The likely influence of these regimes prompts one to ask: how do shared perceptions and understanding and common ways of seeing and

interpreting these scenes facilitate their circulation among different kinds of audiences—potentially for different reasons and effects? Do demands placed upon them for factuality or plausibility influence our perceptions of some types of images differently than others; if so, how?

This paper takes the opportunity to reflect further on other writing about urban disaster and its representations as well as on the imagery itself.¹ Underlying this undertaking are historical and philosophical parameters that accompany perceptions of fallen cities. Historically, culturally determined ways of seeing create regimes that can be further particularized according to different contexts for viewing and interpreting images, including journalism, the milieu of fine art, and socio-legal and personal arenas, among others. In philosophical terms, awareness of change in the urban environment writ large by observations of wholesale cataclysmic collapse encourages thoughts of a more abstract kind—of the transience, complexity, or incomprehensibility of modern life, for instance, or its characterization by ceaseless transformation and risk. Both awareness of change and interpretations of its meaning are brought into sharp relief by representations of urban disasters, past and present, as well as more everyday or “ordinary” manifestations of change.

In a film like *The Day after Tomorrow*, for instance, viewers are provided with evidence of the changefulness and interdependence of natural and human-made environments (notably the changing weather and the vulnerability of cities to its extremes). Many of these phenomena seem “ordinary” at first, but are rendered ominous by the scriptwriter, director, and cinematographer as manifestations of global climate change, by hinting at human excess and unsustainable behavior and portending the collapse of civilization. There is no one single or easy reading here. The film’s leanings towards dramatic excess have been both celebrated by environmental activists for emphasizing the dire consequences of climate change and condemned by some experts for getting its science wrong.² Likewise, the “facts” served up in documentaries like Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and the personal stories narrated in Spike Lee’s *When the Levees Broke* (released in the same year) make for a datum of historical evidence to confirm or contest the details of fictional accounts on film and television screens of late—though of course neither of these films

¹ Taylor, William M. “Urban disasters: visualising the fall of cities and the forming of human values.” *Journal of Architecture* 11:5 (2006), 603–611.

² Monbiot, George. “A hard rain’s a gonna fall.” *The Guardian* (May 14, 2004).

are in themselves immune to charges of bias. Changefulness is given narrative form by cinematic and documentary films which cast the city as a stage for momentous events, just as it is implicated in more static and two-dimensional images of fallen cities, like the many photographs taken in the days following the San Francisco earthquake of 1906 or after Hurricane Katrina's destruction of New Orleans in 2005.

This paper focuses on the latter medium, specifically Robert Polidori's photographs of New Orleans following Katrina. The images comprising *After the Flood*, the title of Polidori's exhibition shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (2006)³ and the accompanying book/catalog, are meant to be an evocative reminder—a "psychological witness" according to the book jacket—of the lives interrupted when the fabric of a city is destroyed ([Figure 1](#)). One can question what this means. Does witnessing require factuality, conveyed by images that are, by some measure, accurate representations of a subject? Or, does it more likely demand the subjective interpretation, by the photographer and his audience, of an event and picture? Can either approach make for lessons that are both generally recognizable and personally meaningful?

After some reflection on urban disaster and its representation in history, this paper will describe the particular environmental sensibilities engaged by Polidori's photographs. These sensibilities are foregrounded by historical developments resulting in a particular way of seeing, but are further reinforced by viewing the images themselves. The paper questions how these sensibilities circumscribe the photographer's role as an eyewitness to Katrina's wake and the viewer's relationship to the scenes his photographs convey. Perceptual awareness of the myriad of organic and inorganic, meteorological and hydrological phenomena accompanying the inundation of the city and recorded in these images links the photographer's project to other contemporary representations of disaster. They include those in popular cinema as well as other visual records of Katrina. Environmental awareness forms one parameter for interpreting images of this kind and locates them within a cultural milieu, a distinctly modern and arguably "Western" one. This is a regime in which changing understandings of nature—notably changes where an understanding of nature's wholeness

³ Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Robert Polidori: After the Flood." 2006. http://www.metmuseum.org/special/new_orleans/images.asp (accessed 15 November 2010); Polidori, Robert. *After the Flood* (London: Steidl, 2006).

characterizing pre-Enlightenment thought give way to modern and complex perceptions of organic existence—are linked to particular interpretations and values. Awareness of the myriad of actions and reactions governing climate, geo-physical, and organic nature and perceptions of human involvement in these images foreground a key political debate concerning the “natural” or “human” origins of the disaster that befell New Orleans.

Polidori’s photographs are positioned to be a wake-up call for governments and their constituents, urban planners, engineers, and architects. They point out what is at stake when such an inundation occurs and consequently threatens the forms of social stability, security, and “normalcy” the built environment can engender. This paper suggests that doubt is engendered by this particular kind of awareness, resulting from disquiet and uncertainty as to what one is looking at—the cause, in the end, for Polidori’s scenes of destruction. It requires one to question any easy distinction between fictional and non-fictional representations of such an event. Doubtfulness partly accounts for the mixed character of the photographer-as-artist versus her or his role as an observer, thereby making the position of witness a fluid one at best. The framing of the photographs, the images’ technical and artistic mastery, and their positioning within a celebrated museum make them more than mere documents or factual records of a historical episode. Viewers of these photographs are likewise called upon to supply the missing pieces or elements in narratives explaining the destruction. Most are likely to draw upon prior knowledge of how water moves, rises or falls, and inflicts damage. Some may distill from the images a sense of what was there before the flood or possibly imagine what may follow by way of apportioning blame and demanding reparation for the victims. This makes all viewers likely witnesses to Katrina, though the range of observations possible does not necessarily point to an unequivocal public record.

REPRESENTING URBAN DISASTERS

The Jan T. Kozak Collection at the University of California at Berkeley provides a useful starting point for understanding the history of visual regimes governing urban disasters and their

representation.⁴ Largely the work of a geoscientist, the collection is an online archive comprising several hundred images of “allegorical” and historical earthquakes and supports research into seismology and earthquake engineering. It portrays the impact of earthquakes on cities in times past, from Sparta, in ancient Greece (destroyed 464 B.C.) to Messina, in Eastern Sicily (1908). Many of these images seem intended to capture the moment of disaster as though to encompass in a single frame a chain of events culminating in catastrophe. The collection of woodcut prints, lithographs, and paintings is telling, not only of the longstanding impact upon the western imagination of disasters, but of the particular perceptions and values brought to bear on such representations relative to a given period.

For instance, in the accompanying image (Figure 2), identified in the collection as a “medieval” view (executed in 1493) of some unknown biblical earthquake, the buildings represent northern European architecture as it was perceived in late 15th century Europe. A church, complete with Christian cross, towers, and remnants of a town gate and walls, equally communicate (anachronistically, given the scene depicted is probably from the Old Testament) understanding of what an ancient city at the moment of its destruction would look like. By comparison, another image (Figure 3), depicting the destruction of Lisbon by earthquake, fire, and tsunami in 1755 (executed in 1887) is more readily associated with the perceptions of a more secular age, exhibiting features of a seemingly more accurate account (by today’s measure) of the movements of the earth’s crust, its earthquakes, and floods. Drama is equally in evidence in this latter illustration, though the image’s visual realism corresponds to a more modern showing of the facts (seismic, hydrological, and social, among others), leading to an understanding of cataclysm that prevailed at the time. The Lisbon earthquake of 1755 is often described in terms of it being the first “secular disaster.” This is partly owing to the many period representations made of it (such as Figure 3), the rapidity with which they spread across Europe, and the considerable commentary on the event’s significance.⁵ One could compare the social and political character of

⁴ Jan T. Kozak Collection: Macro seismic Images of Historical Earthquakes. Pacific Earthquake Engineering Research Center. University of California at Berkeley.
<http://nisee.berkeley.edu/kozak> (accessed 15 November 2010)

⁵ Jack, Malcolm. “Destruction and regeneration: Lisbon, 1755.” Eds. Braun and Radner. *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), 7-20; James, Charles and Kozak, Jan. “Representations of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake.” *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755* (details as above), 21-33. See also: Tobringer, Stephen. “Earthquakes and Planning in the 17th and 18th Centuries.” *Journal of Architectural Education* 33:4 (1980), 11-15.

much of this historical commentary with worldwide reactions to 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Likewise, emerging communication networks that allowed for the close scrutiny of Lisbon's rebuilding prefigure the global media coverage given to the plight of New Orleans and the slow pace of its reconstruction.



Figure 2. Medieval illustration of biblical earthquake (1493).
Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC,
University of California, Berkeley



Figure 3. View of the Lisbon earthquake, November 1st, 1755.

From Hartwig, Georg Ludwig. *Volcanoes and Earthquakes:*

A Popular Description in the Movements in the Earth's Crust. London. 1887.

Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC,
University of California, Berkeley

Together, these and other historical images reveal the city to be an important and longstanding vehicle for thinking about the philosophical issues and values attendant to urban disaster. Stories describing such events—some entailing the dispersal of entire peoples as a result—form a recurrent theme within the Judeo-Christian tradition in particular. Illustrating the workings of divine justice, many commonly entail assertions of a divide between right and wrong and between causes and effects of a certain, moral kind. Biblical accounts of The Tower of Babel, Babylon, and the twin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah are telling in this way, while their portrayal throughout the history of Western art reveals variations on a common theme. In one of the earliest known representations of the Tower of Babel, on an ivory panel carved sometime between the years 1050 and 1080 at the cathedral in Salerno (Italy), the oversized figure of an omnipotent God descends from heaven to disperse the tower builders. In Pieter Bruegel the Elder's well-known painting of "The Tower of Babel" (1563), one finds a secular and worldly significance attributed to the story. Typically, in illustrations from

this period onwards, an emphasis on the details of construction (foreboding its subsequent destruction) transforms the Tower into an immense, though vulnerable, hive of human industry emblematic of the city itself. Further variations on this mixed theme of common purposes and thwarted social ambitions can be seen in some 19th century salon paintings. Conceivably, the chief attraction of Théodore Géricault's "The Raft of the Medusa" (1818-1819) is not the storm-tossed raft shown, but the community of citizens that the painting allegorically represents.⁶ Likewise, on William Strutt's immense canvas "Black Thursday, February 6th, 1851" (executed 1864) the raging Australian bushfire is arguably only the backdrop for what is really on show: the terror-stricken, mobile "city" of fleeing settlers, their livestock, and their belongings.

Compared to and growing out of these intertwined philosophical and artistic traditions, one can argue that a uniquely modern and ecologically nuanced way of thinking about our surroundings is related to particular patterns of sentiment, perceptions, and anxiety organized around the built environment and its relationship to nature.⁷ What is interesting when considering past sources for contemplating disaster is that something akin to our understanding of the environment does not exist at all. Recent representations of urban disaster, in science fiction and on the screen—equally, in Polidori's photographs—though distantly related by earlier ancient, biblical, or allegorical catastrophes, are not entirely encompassed by them. Rather they owe more to this environmental way of thinking.

Consider the spectacular visual effects of films like *Armageddon* (1998) or *The Day After Tomorrow* or the 1970's blockbuster movies that are their precursors. It is interesting to question how these films engage with the narratives that accompany the rise of empirical science and its fictionalization, particularly since the time of Darwin. In *Armageddon*, for instance, an enormous meteor threatens to crash into the earth just as similar impacts are believed to have once extinguished life on the planet. In *The Day After Tomorrow* scenes of cracks appearing abruptly in arctic ice or birds flying south out of season are made to prefigure worse disruptions to life to come. They are the effects of some undiscovered force likely to have an impact on

⁶ Much has been written on this painting, its aesthetic and social contexts, and also its political overtones. A good account is given in Miles, Jonathan. *The Wreck of the Medusa* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007).

⁷ Taylor, William M., *The Vital Landscape: nature and the built environment in 19th century Britain* (Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2004).

organic nature and human society as a whole. In the *Poseidon Adventure* (1972) and the *Towering Inferno* (1974), a tsunami-stricken and capsized ocean liner and a burning high-rise are not only emblems of an imperiled society. The imprisoning structures also introduce characters to the contingency and uncertainty of raw nature so that survival will only reward the fittest among them. These film narratives entail representations of causes and effects, actions and reactions whereby everyday physical phenomena and potentially cataclysmic events are meant to be understood (however partially or imperfectly) in terms of underlying natural forces—allowing for the possibility that these may be interfered with, for better or worse, by humankind.

These narratives raise questions of the predictability, likelihood, or inevitability of one or the other natural event—the degree to which one can predict the weather, for instance, or of the likelihood of an earthquake, a fire, or disastrous flood. These narratives delimit an ethical domain whereby human actions enter into equations that determine a range of phenomena impinging upon its designs—actions modeled along, as Immanuel Kant would write, the “oscillations of the weather and biological and other natural phenomena.” These words are taken from an essay Kant wrote in 1784 entitled, “The Idea of History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” in which the author described the unfolding of human actions in the world to be as predictable, if not as obvious, as the facts of life and death—even the weather.⁸ Whereas in the natural world, the passage of time was registered on the bodies and forms of animate and inanimate matter, in the human world, for Kant and many who followed a similar line of thought, it was “the city” upon which was written the movement of history. Kant’s essay prefigures a significant shift in the visualization of urban disaster, where fallen cities are seen not so much as a consequence of divine wrath or representation of an unforgiving natural world that followed the fall of Adam. Rather, this imaginative shift involves a move towards a more objective, specifically causal understanding of such phenomena, so that human responses to disaster move away from forms of penance and towards a calculation of probabilities and likelihoods whereby natural, cataclysmic events become understood in new and complex ways.⁹

⁸ Cited in Hacking, Ian. *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16.

⁹ An important development in this process coincided with the rise of the empirical sciences. Various sciences, from those more immediately concerned with an abstract understanding of nature like chemistry and physics to others more obviously aimed at predicting and controlling natural forces—like geophysical sciences (including seismology, meteorology, and hydrology),

Consequently, by means of this conceptual shift, the city is understood in relation to observations of organic and inorganic nature and nature's constituent elements like earth, air, and water. Understanding, predicting, and reacting to the forces that act upon a city and which make it a part of the geophysical and organic worlds—invoking a broad kind of environmental awareness—highlight the human structures and dwellings affected by disaster, the sites upon which they once stood, and the cities of which they were a part. Photographs of destroyed cities, like those of the San Francisco earthquake or inundation of New Orleans, reveal the physical and social structures of a city by means of recording the traces left upon them by the movement of earth and water respectively. In the case of Polidori's images, they make for viewing that moves both inward—close-up to discern the multiple and sometimes minute traces left by rising and receding floodwater—and then outwards to survey wholesale inundation. This viewing requires a kind of mixed perceptive, cognitive, and moral self-positioning by the viewer that results neither in entirely "factual" understanding as regards the objective content of the images nor results in a situation that is wholly "interpretive," implying an infinite range of meanings. Rather, this positioning entails a kind of visual regime that enlists varied discourses on Katrina and its aftermath, degrees of background knowledge and opinion (informed or otherwise)—and sometimes personal experience—in order to judge the significance of what is being seen. By comparison, the pre- or early-modern images in the Kozak Collection were seen differently relative to their times and prevailing social expectations. Factuality could mean something different, particular when empiricism and its forms of causal reasoning were less common, if exerting a determining influence at all. It would be hard to say Kozak's pictures were "read" in the modern sense of the word—that they were perceived as meaningful and subjectively interrogated along one or several recognized lines of investigation and self-questioning and that meanings were then channeled through modern discourses, media, and language.

ROBERT POLIDORI "AFTER THE FLOOD"

building statics, and engineering—have played a role in determining how we view, understand, and respond to "the city" and to urban disasters. Though concerned with different objects of study, these fields commonly bring into play forms of causal reasoning (basically, thinking that one action results in another) and encourage awareness of the myriad of forces and counter-forces acting upon the city. See *The Vital Landscape*, Chapter 4 "Elemental Existence", 95-119.

Robert Polidori's photo essay *After the Flood* provides a fitting set of images to illustrate the key themes of this paper. Having previously made subjects of such phenomena as the slow decay of Havana, the bombed out remains of Beirut, and the abandoned, contaminated cities of Chernobyl and Pripyat, he turned his camera on New Orleans in the weeks following its inundation in September 2005. His photographs, mainly of the ruined facades and the interiors of houses, simply identified by their street address, capture not so much a moment of disaster but the multiple and complex interactions of so many physical, organic, and inorganic "events" initiated when the city's levees broke. They portray the inevitable interruption of innumerable manifestations of human activity. As John Updike wrote in his review of the MOMA exhibition:

Arresting though the outdoors photos are, with their silent testimony to a catastrophe that swept through humble neighborhoods accustomed to being ignored, it is the wrecked, mildewed interiors that take our eye and quicken our anxiety. Would our own dwelling quarters look so pathetic, so obscenely reflective of intimate needs inadequately met, if they were similarly violated and exposed?¹⁰

The scenes are chaotic in one sense, though they invite one to imagine what happened, logically and predictably, after the waters rose then subsided. The scenes are "alive" in this sense, as there appears considerable evidence of upheaval and warping, rotting, and mildewing, all presumably still going on at the time the photographs were taken. They also appear static given the staged character of the photographs that, though random in their content of overturned and decaying belongings, are conventionally executed from fixed vantage points, with carefully-framed shots and considered lighting. The architectural photographer's desire for images free of people was conveniently satisfied by the depopulated state of the city, rather than any obvious action on the part of Polidori. Another reviewer of the exhibition writes:

The inevitable rush of sympathy and pity elicited by these pictures is soon joined by a forensic impulse. We scan the

¹⁰ Updike, John. "After Katrina." *New York Review of Books* 53:19 (2006), 8-12

wreckage with accumulating questions about the residents' lives, their shoes and hobbies, the souvenirs they collected and the fancy chandeliers they prized. There are questions, too, about income and race, poverty and destiny, all of which may be a rational refuge from the over-whelming urgency of the real mystery: what on earth has become of the people?¹¹

The cover photograph for the exhibition catalog anticipates many of these mixed qualities characterizing images inside the text ([Figure 4](#)). The house at 2732 Orleans Avenue is positioned obliquely, relative to the camera lens, as though it were simply a conventional typological study of building facades. The attention to detail invited by this genre of visual representation (common in many architecture books) gradually reveals evidence for an event that is far from straightforward. Signs of moderate building decay that are commonly and picturesquely included in books on New Orleans and its architectural heritage are amplified and rendered ominous as the eye detects additional signs of ruination in the parallel lines of oil and other stains left by the receding water. These extend to adjacent buildings and material surfaces leading the viewer to anticipate the line naturally spreading across the immediate neighborhood and possibly the entire city. The car is similarly stained, pushed on top of the curb by the force of water and left at an angle to the sidewalk as though abandoned following a hold-up getaway or roadside accident. The kitchen depicted at 5417 Marigny Street is typical of the interior images in *After the Flood*. An upended refrigerator and overturned cupboards, extended drawers and displaced appliances, all covered with mud and debris, contrast with household items that seem securely placed or hanging above the high water line ([Figure 5](#)).

The photographs comprising *After the Flood* are noteworthy in that they do not communicate obvious or dramatic action which, conversely, characterizes many of the images in the Kozak collection or a Hollywood disaster film. They are composed, but not heroic in the sense that old woodcut prints, lithographs, or paintings of collapsing buildings, turbulent seas, and raging bushfire scenes—or the statuesque victims and survivors who people them—can be. The photographs are conceivably moralizing, but not in the visually explicit and “old-fashioned” way that Salerno’s ivory carving of the Tower of Babel seems to modern eyes. Some audiences may

¹¹ Vetrocq, Marcia. “New Orleans, Lost and Found.” *Art in America* 95:3 (2007), 141

nonetheless discern in them evidence of divine retribution.¹² Polidori's photographs are perhaps (if any photograph could be) more Darwinian than a Bruegel, Géricault, or Strutt painting could ever have been. Nurturing an unsettling fascination for the abundance of furnishings, household goods, materials, and surfaces that comprise the everyday interior of the home, the photographs reveal the invisible forces of decay working upon them. Polidori's scenes deal with the reality of "overcrowding, waste and disorder" that concerned Darwin and his followers and which provided the worldview behind theories of cataclysmic upheaval and natural selection.¹³ Equally, the viewer's absorption in the minute details of the images—the innumerable instances of ruin—can be counterpoised by fascination with the wholeness and the plenitude of nature that inspired theologians and artists in early- and pre-modern times as well as its seemingly irresistible force. Providing the logical counter-image to an idealized home, such that views of chaos supplant an idyll of domestic order and bliss, the photographs implicate the reality of randomness and chance characterizing modern life. All the while, they call upon our expectations of order as well as other kinds of background knowledge to heighten their dramatic impact. Above all, the photographs engage with an environmental sensibility portending modern life—entailing in its most basic terms an awareness of particular spaces, streetscapes, and rooms as unique, ominous, and formative of human identity, character, and well-being—the latter, now obviously lost. Attentiveness to the "placefulness" of cities as the probable sites for momentous events and the uncertain dangers hidden in even their most intimate spaces is cultivated in many disaster films, as well as Polidori's photographs. The couch shown in the living room at 5417 Marigny Street ([Figure 6](#)) seems only slightly askew, as though moved to facilitate spring cleaning (the vacuum rests on an adjacent side-chair). Coupled with other objects, however, such as the furniture and fixtures piled on it by the receding flood waters and the background covered in the same patina of mold and decay, a scene of

¹² Notably, there were those people who, in the aftermath of Katrina, saw the city rightfully destroyed for its "embrace of sin." Reported by Dewan, S. "Lady Liberty Trades in Some Trappings." *Memphis Journal* (July 5), electronic website edition. <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/05/us/05liberty.html?ex=1309752000&en=633335bb68bac96a&ei=5088>, (accessed 15 November 2010).

¹³ Levine, George. *Darwin and the novelists: patterns of science in Victorian fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 34–39.

heightened disorder appears—a jungle almost, of moving, changeful material surfaces.

Polidori's camera fixes these movements and material transformations. But another important part of these photographs is that the viewer approaches them with some knowledge of the hurricane, New Orleans itself, and the fact that the city rests largely below sea-level. Prior knowledge of this kind and degree characterizes the "reading" of these and other scenes of disaster (including two comparable visual records of New Orleans, post-Katrina, introduced shortly) so that, in each case, images are never entirely transparent to an extant reality. Prior knowledge alerts one to the possibility—now the certainty according to government officials in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—that the cause of the disaster was not entirely "natural." The storm left the city relatively unscathed after passing over it, yet Katrina's waters, working on a poorly maintained levee system, caused them to collapse. The city's pumps, once the largest in the world and the pride of a robust civil engineering and public service sector, failed to deliver as they were but barely operational. Additionally, of course, the broader issue of global warming that may have spawned so large a storm in the first place furthers a sense of portentousness about the photographs. Among the range of likely factors contributing to the ruined kitchen or living room scenes at 5417 Marigny Street, for instance, we are left wondering about their ultimate, final cause. As representations of urban disaster of a particular kind, Polidori's images represent "the city" as a part of nature and site for all-important social relations that require maintenance and civil justice.

Accompanied by extensive press coverage and conflicting evidence regarding the cause of the inundation of New Orleans in the years immediately after the storm, Polidori's images draw upon our knowledge, however incomplete, of causes and effects, actions and reactions whereby everyday physical phenomena and potentially cataclysmic events are understood in terms of underlying natural forces in which humankind has had a hand. Part of their dramatic effect (which provokes some questions about the ethical issues they raise) is based on the exploitation of uncertainty that has always accompanied the expansion of science and our reliance on standards of objectivity (scientific, empirical, and others) as a means of explaining things. These standards account for a certain ambiguity in assessing the "documentary" or "aesthetic," the "factual" or "interpretive" qualities of the images—distinctions that give the idea behind "scopic regimes" some of its theoretical saliency. Coined by

Christian Metz in a study of film and psychoanalysis and introduced to the English-speaking academy by Martin Jay, the phrase has become a convenient tag for contextualizing practices of “visuality.”¹⁴ The idea supplants a common-sense view that images “speak” for themselves—that they are largely self-evident, transparent, and intrinsically objective. By counterpoising the “social” and constructed and the “visual” and ideally transparent, thoughts on scopic regimes animate the play of these and similar sources of value. Scopic regimes of one kind or another circulate within and between various academic disciplines and support theories of the domains of power, knowledge, and subjectivity. Partly because of their ambiguity (involving “inward” and “outward” ways of looking that are simultaneously empirical and contextualizing) Polidori’s images provide evidence for contemplating the strata of social relations, material culture, and, particularly, the environmental sensibility (our expectations, hopes, and fears, for our surroundings), which bring these domains of experience together. They invite us, drawing in some measure on the authority of an art museum and the aesthetic appeal of a coffee-table book, to scrutinize familiar objects of domestic life to discern just what has “gone wrong” in the scenes conveyed (the warping, rotting, and mildew) and then compel us to ask ourselves “Why?”

Further highlighting these relations between images and ways of seeing, there are different kinds of photographs taken of New Orleans “after the flood.” In order to distinguish Polidori’s journalistic and fine art perspective on scenes of urban disaster from others, consider two additional sets of photographs, in particular, that have been largely overlooked by writers on Katrina and its aftermath so far. Each served specific purposes and was directed to distinct audiences.

The first set of images highlights the subjective and sentimental aspects of Katrina’s photographic record. It was directed to the many victims who lost prized photographs of family members and friends, familiar places, and important events. This set arose in the innumerable instances of image sharing, photograph reproducing, and exchanging in the days and months after disaster struck, as victims realized that the extent of their loss included the visual record of their entire lives, loved ones, and homes. Yet to be commented on as far as I can tell, this “collection” became an important feature of

¹⁴ Jay, Martin. “Scopic Regimes of Modernity.” *Vision and Visuality*. Ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 29–50.

post-Katrina life and an elusive visual record of far greater extent than the images in *After the Flood*. They comprise, in a manner of speaking, the “before” shots counterpoising Polidori’s views of “after” the flood, though this prefiguring does not diminish their own distinctiveness and value. Some of these lost, possibly reproduced, and retrieved images are evident in *After the Flood*, photographed as fixed to water-stained and mold-ridden walls, resting atop furniture rising above the high water line, or scattered among the detritus cast upon sodden, warped, and rotting floors. They appear in Polidori’s view of 5000 Cartier Avenue as the family portrait perched precariously on an organ or a graduation portrait fallen from its hook ([Figure 7](#)). Unlike Polidori’s work there is nothing necessarily authoritative or “official” about this other collection. Many are obviously “staged” (like a scene from a family picnic) though this hardly makes them works of art in a conventional sense. However, imagine if the viewer were equipped with a victim’s intimate knowledge of their provenance and memorable place in personal, family, and domestic experiences. They would be able to appreciate and possibly participate, emotionally and empathetically, in the ruptured social fabric which Polidori’s images are only able to invoke from a distance, from the exhibition wall or catalog page. Though disparate, and seemingly “ad-hoc” compared to the photographer’s, the family images may be, in one sense, more “real.”

The second set of images has provided material evidence for the destruction in ways that Polidori’s photographs have not—basically, because these photographs were intended and prepared as evidence from the start. These were the images made for insurance companies. This set was formed by the countless photographs of damaged homes, interiors, and furnishings taken by distressed homeowners (and possibly insurance company and government relief representatives) that record another aspect of the personal response to Katrina—one of fear brought on by forms of emotional, familial, short- and long-term financial insecurity generated by the loss, wholly or partly, of one’s neighborhood, home, and its possessions. These images have yet to be addressed critically, but they circulate—mainly in digital form—in far greater numbers than Polidori’s images. For every one of the shots comprising *After the Flood*, there are conceivably many tens of thousands, less carefully

framed, darkly-lit, and stitched-together images showing similar scenes (Figure 8).¹⁵



Figure 8. House near the Canal Street levee breach, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 2005.
Photo by the author.

There is a visual ambiguity and doubt in this second category of Katrina photography that is more socio-legal than intentionally provocative, purposively “artistic” or necessarily sentimental. Consider how in parts of the United States, including Louisiana, reasoning governing the identification and mitigation of storm-

¹⁵ The figure shown is not an image from the set of insurance photographs. Rather, it stands in for them in the paper. The photograph could have illustrated a third set of photographs, in addition to Polidori’s and the other two. These were the images taken by tourists, former residents and academics (such as the author), and a host of other people interested in Katrina and New Orleans and (hopefully) concerned by what they were seeing. There is not enough time to do justice to these photographs, though reactions to the commonly-called “disaster tours” provided by local tour companies sparked considerable debate in the city about the ethics and purposes served by this kind of spectatorship. Widespread pain as well as the now infamous photograph taken of George W. Bush looking down on the city from Air Force One remained fresh on many people’s minds.

incurred risk dictates that evidence for water damage can take two forms. One must look for signs of either flooding, caused by rising water, or, alternatively, storm damage, caused by falling or wind-blown water. Given the widespread views, neo-liberal or otherwise, of the incapacity of the government to get its own house in order, much less fathom the workings of nature, prevailing thought dictates that private corporations are better suited to distinguish between the two likely causes of damage. More reliably than government or independent insurance assessors, corporate insurers are better able to determine limits of liability. The government acts as the insurer of last resort for regions prone to flooding (or earthquake and bushfire, for that matter—so called “acts of God”) where publicly-funded insurance is available and purchased. However, it is the responsibility of private corporate authorities to determine in which instances the government must pay for damage incurred by the insured. Litigation and further anxiety inevitably follows, as it has in Louisiana in storm-damaged areas, as corporations attempt to limit their exposure and pass on costs for reconstruction to the taxpayer. In cases where disaster relief is promised, this situation—which, in effect, constitutes an unacknowledged form of corporate welfare—is equally problematic as funds can be tied to all kinds of measures that further enlist and benefit the corporate sector in the provisioning of relief. Ambiguity in photographs of storm (or flood) damage circumscribes their status as evidence of an uncertain kind. In other words, while the casual viewer may wonder what the scenes are about, corporate interests are given reign to fix their meaning.

On the whole, these different sets of images—Polidori’s collection, the photographs of loved ones, and the images of insurance damage—either depict or give meaning to (by counterpoising them) similar scenes of ruin, however they engage different, though conceivably overlapping, visual economies. Similarly, the sets draw the viewer’s attention to an environmental context (calling on both nature and human culture) for interpreting the damage wrought by the storm and associated human, technical, and political failures. They are all equally provocative, if not equivalent in artistic intention and execution, reception, and use, to the acclaimed photographer’s work.

The images compiled for insurance companies to substantiate countless claims for compensation serve an evidential purpose similar to Polidori’s intention to act as “witness.” In contrast, however, the former are associated less with aesthetic predilections and the rules of museums and publishing houses. In practical terms,

unlike Polidori's collection, were the sets of photographs of either loved ones or insurance damage to appear in public for some reason, their display would not, most likely, raise concerns over intellectual property rights associated with the images. (Along with ways of seeing associated with environmental and other kinds of awareness, proprietorship can also play a role in "scopic regimes." This partly explains why Polidori's photographs are not reproduced in this paper). Perhaps due to their ubiquity, but near public invisibility, both the photographs of loved ones and insurance damage provide better testimony to the extent of urban disaster in New Orleans than any collection likely to be shown in an art gallery or revealed in an exhibition catalog. They evince the personal losses, the uncertainty, and the relative absence of retribution following in Katrina's wake.

CONCLUSION

Like the narratives of recent disaster films, Polidori's photographs invite a distinctly modern kind of discernment, and this underscores their value as evidence for the extent and character of destruction wrought on New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina. With knowledge of the storm, its impact, the subsequent failure of the city's flood defenses, and the range of explanations for the broken levees, the photos also implicate human agency in the city's demise. I have called this kind of discernment "environmental" because it raises a context for understanding the relationships arising between human beings, their culture, and their living and non-living surroundings—the subject of environmental studies.¹⁶ Broadly speaking, this way of looking at photographs is "scientific"—empirical and deductive—though this does not mean that interpretations of the images are necessarily certain and unequivocal. Polidori's photographs invite us to distinguish between what we see and most likely know and what we do not see, but suspect. Assessment of their factuality or plausibility has a bearing on the range of consequences and human responses that might follow.

¹⁶ Bullock, Alan & Stallybrass, Oliver. *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought* (London: Fontana, 1983 edition, originally published, 1977), 207.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Book cover, Robert Polidori. *After the Flood*. Steidl. 2006.

Publisher's website URL:

<http://www.steidlville.com/books/423-After-the-Flood.html>

[accessed 15 November 2010]

Figure 2: Medieval illustration of biblical earthquake (1493). Image

source: Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC, University of California, Berkeley

Figure 3: View of the Lisbon earthquake, November 1st, 1755. From Hartwig, Georg Ludwig. *Volcanoes and Earthquakes: A Popular Description in the Movements in the Earth's Crust*. London. 1887.

Image source: Courtesy of the National Information Service for Earthquake Engineering, EERC, University of California, Berkeley

Figures 4 – 7: Photographs from Robert Polidori's *After the Flood* exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. MOMA special exhibition website: URL:

http://www.metmuseum.org/special/new_orleans/images.asp

[accessed November 1st, 2010]

Figure 8: House near the Canal Street levee breach, New Orleans, Louisiana, December 2005. Photo by the author.

FILMOGRAPHY

2012 (2009), Roland Emmerich, Columbia Pictures.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006), Davis Guggenheim, Paramount.

Armageddon (1998), Michael Bay, Touchstone Pictures.

I am Legend (2007), Francis Lawrence, Warner Brothers.

The Poseidon Adventure (1972), Ronald Neame & Irwin Allen, 20th Century Fox.

The Day After Tomorrow (2004), Roland Emmerich, 20th Century Fox.

The Road (2009), John Hillcoat, Dimension Films.

Towering Inferno (1974), John Guillermin & Irwin Allen, 20th Century Fox.

When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts (2006), Spike Lee, HBO.

Volcano (1997), Mick Jackson, 20th Century Fox.