

# Natural Disaster: Representation, Spectatorship, and Loss in the Flood Stories *L'Inondation*, *Trouble the Water*, and *Low and Behold*

Juliana STARR  
University of New Orleans

## RÉSUMÉ

*Publié cinq ans avant le célèbre roman Germinal, la nouvelle moins connue L'Inondation (1880), dans laquelle le je-narrateur observe du haut d'un toit l'inondation de la Garonne qui eut lieu en 1875, résonne de manière particulièrement significative aujourd'hui chez les habitants des côtes de la Louisiane et du Mississipi, en raison de sa ressemblance frappante avec quelques-uns des récits filmographiques de l'inondation catastrophique provoquée par l'ouragan Katrina en 2005.*

*L'un de ces films est le documentaire Trouble the Water (2008), dans lequel la rappeuse en herbe Kimberly Roberts dirige son caméscope de vingt dollars sur elle-même et ses voisins bloqués dans un grenier du Ninth Ward alors que les digues se rompent et que les eaux montent. Un autre film concernant Katrina, Low and Behold (2006), reprend un aspect important à l'intrigue des deux récits – la récupération d'une photographie qui fait l'effet d'un baume face à une perte énorme.*

*Cet article vise à explorer des questions ayant trait au spectateur, à la photographie et au traumatisme, et qui rapprochent ces cinéastes de Zola. On montrera que Zola est l'un des premiers à avoir capté le potentiel psychologique (perte, traumatisme, mémoire) des récits d'inondation que reproduiront plus tard réalisateurs et photographes.*

The great filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein avidly devoured the entire cycle of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels at the age of ten. He admitted an affinity between his films and key works in the cycle claiming he reread an appropriate Zola volume before he began any new project.<sup>1</sup> Though he never adapted a Zola novel for the screen and was unable to realize his project of making a film about the Dreyfus Affair, he was one of the first to recognize the writer as an “astonishing master of color” whose fiction possesses the visual, musical and poetic qualities ideal for film, dubbing the twenty-volume *Rougon-Macquart* “the twenty pillars of montage architecture.”<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, recent Zola criticism links him to the world of movies, focusing on his fiction as a locus of an innovative process of imaging, as a type of writing predicated on the desire for the image, and as an art that positions the reader as cinematic spectator. For critics like Anna Gural-Migdal and Tony Williams, Zola not only creates unforgettable images, but he also associates them syntactically, like a filmmaker. Hence, we can read his texts like we view a film.<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere are the cinematic qualities and emotional impact of his work more evident than in his disaster stories. In fact, in *Germinal* (1885), with its mine explosion and ensuing flood, he can be said to have created the large-scale disaster narrative exemplified by movies like *The*

---

<sup>1</sup>See Tony Williams, “Eisenstein and Zola: Naturalism, Cinema, and Mythography,” *Excavatio* 8 (1996): 143.

<sup>2</sup>See Anna Gural-Migdal, *L'Écrit-Écran des Rougon-Macquart: Conceptions iconiques et filmiques du roman chez Zola* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2012) 22-23.

<sup>3</sup>Gural-Migdal 13-14.

*Poseidon Adventure*, *The Towering Inferno*, *Volcano*, *Twister*, *Titanic*, and *Armageddon*. Indeed, today's Hollywood disaster movies offer a classic formula that corresponds perfectly to Zola's experimental project: assemble a microcosm of representative characters, subject them to catastrophe, and watch how they cope.<sup>4</sup> The genre presents people teetering on the edge of destruction, while survival is the goal. This too appeals to the naturalist interested in portraying the most basic instincts of the human animal confronting the violent upheavals of social change, revolution, and rebirth. Of course disaster narratives go back to the *Odyssey* and the Old Testament, and the earliest American disaster films were Biblical epics. Critics have convincingly demonstrated that Zola often attempted to rewrite Biblical stories, especially from the Old Testament, like "Genesis" (*La Faute de l'abbé Mouret*), Samson and Delilah (*Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*), Jacob struggling with the angel (*L'Œuvre*), and Noah and the flood (*Germinal*).<sup>5</sup>

Published five years before the famous *Germinal*, Zola's lesser-known novella *L'Inondation* (1880), a harrowing, first person, rooftop account of the actual flood of the Garonne river in 1875, offers special resonance today, especially for inhabitants of the Louisiana and Mississippi Gulf Coasts, due to its familiar subject matter and striking resemblance to some of the filmed accounts of the catastrophic flood caused by Hurricane Katrina in August 2005. One such film is the award-winning documentary, *Trouble the Water* (2008), directed by Tia Lessin and Carl Deal, in which aspiring rap artist Kimberly Roberts turns her twenty-dollar camcorder on herself and her neighbors trapped in their Ninth Ward attic as the levees fail and the flood waters rise. Another Katrina film, a full-length feature bearing documentary-like qualities, *Low and Behold* (2006), directed by the Louisiana filmmaker Zack Godshall and filmed on location in New Orleans in the months immediately following the hurricane, echoes an important plot element of both of the other stories – the recovery of a photograph that functions as psychological balm in the face of tremendous loss. In this article, I explore the issues of spectatorship, photography, and trauma common to both Zola and the filmmakers. All are artists who adopt the realist aesthetics for which Balzac and Zola are models, all offer survivor stories based on actual events, all create heroes whose destiny is tied to their inscription in a deterministic spatial milieu, and all see windows and picture frames as metaphoric screens useful in exploring representation as an artistic expression of loss. I hope to show that not only is Zola proto-cinematic, but he is one of the first to capture the psychological potential (loss, trauma, memory) of flood stories that is later replicated by film directors and photographers.

The disaster spectacle extends back to ancient myth, in the tale of Icarus who notoriously perished due to his own hubris.<sup>6</sup> Seventy-year-old Louis Roubieu, the wealthy patriarch, farmer, and narrator of Zola's story can be seen as an Icarus-like character. Though he survives, he

---

<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe* (London: Wallflower Press, 2001) 6-7.

<sup>5</sup> See Elizabeth Emery, "Zola and the Tree of Jesse," *Excavatio* 11 (1998): 75. See also Clélia Anfray, *Zola biblique: La Bible dans les Rougon-Macquart* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2010) and Philip Walker, *Germinal and Zola's Philosophical and Religious Thought* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984). In *L'Inondation*, some of the Biblical allusions, in addition to Noah and the flood, are Jesus and the twelve disciples (there are thirteen people in the house including the servants), the Last Supper (the meal before the disaster), the Tower of Babel (Roubieu has plans to add another floor to his house), and the Virgin (the youngest grandchild, Marie, is described as a saint). See Emery 76 and Anfray 209 for the importance of the Biblical name Marie. For the role of Christian martyr figures in disaster movies, see Lena Roos, "Age before Beauty: A Comparative Study of Martyrs in American Disaster Movies and Their Medieval Predecessors," *Journal of Religion and Film* 1 (2007): 1-6.

<sup>6</sup> See Matthew Sorrento, "Last Man (With) Standing: The character-disaster film," *Film International* 11.3-4 (2013): 41.

witnesses the death, one by one, of his entire family, a loss he sees as punishment for taking his happiness and prosperity for granted. This story of a modern-day Noah thus shares a number of similarities with the *Rougon-Macquart* series, notably an organization that relies upon Biblical, mythical, and genealogical motifs.<sup>7</sup>

The disaster tradition on-screen comes from the tradition of spectacle, and both *L'Inondation* and *Trouble the Water* offer first-hand accounts of extraordinary ones. Zola's begins with a tidal wave, while the documentary film offers thrilling eye-of-the-storm video. The reader/viewer benefits from an ideal vantage point from which to fully enjoy the broadest of panoramic perspectives – a rooftop, in the case of Zola, and an attic window in the case of *Trouble the Water*. In both stories, the reader/viewer witnesses the water's gradual invasion of the house, the family's ascent to higher and higher floors, the transformation of the town into a lake, quantities of floating debris, and a number of heroic rescues. Zola's prescience is manifest in the fact that he understood early on the dramatic appeal of the flood narrative and its potential for creating a moving work of art. He anticipated the modern obsession with environmental disaster and flood stories' special place in our emotional register. Darren Aronofsky's biblically inspired epic film, *Noah* (2014), based loosely on the story of Noah's Ark from the Book of Genesis, is one of the modern signs of Zola's prophetic eye. And John Seabrook investigates the phenomenon of one of the top American cable television channels, The Weather Channel (TWC), and what he dubs “weatherporn” – the obsessive, voyeuristic weather-watching experience that has become a condition of modern life, noting that fifteen million Americans watch TWC every day in hopes of somehow gaining control of the elements.<sup>8</sup>

Eisenstein considered Zola to be “in the methodological sense the greatest school for a filmmaker (his pages read like complete cue sheets)”<sup>9</sup> or as a writer supplying directors with concrete examples of purely cinematic *mise-en-scene*. Zola stages the arrival of the water, a veritable tidal wave, through the skillful use of sound. Linger in the dining room one evening, the family of eleven suddenly hears screams of distress coming from the street: “La Garonne! La Garonne!” (15).<sup>10</sup> This frantic refrain, repeated twice more, punctuates the text and gives it a rhythm, like a musical score. It also serves as a transition between interior and exterior scenes, repositioning everyone outside in the courtyard, ready to witness the wave's dramatic arrival. The reader's “viewing” pleasure is thus enhanced by the fact that he shares the viewing experience with the spectators in the story. Five years later, Zola will use the same technique in *Germinal* where the refrain “Du pain! Du pain!” announces another type of wave – the wave of women miners marching defiantly across the countryside. Zola skillfully links sound to emotion. Pre-disaster contentment, expressed in laughter, singing, children's voices, and the tinkling of wine glasses, contrasts with blood-curdling screams, roaring water, and the awful cries of drowning livestock. The refrain of “La Garonne!” is replaced by several others that pepper the text with increasingly desperate pleas: “Mon dieu!” (22-23), “L'eau monte!” (29), and “Je ne veux pas mourir!” (40).

Zola builds suspense through making us wait. Curtains of poplar trees, “[D]es rideaux de peupliers” (15), obstruct the view of the river, serving as a visual barrier, and rendering it

<sup>7</sup> Emery 75.

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Cynthia Belmont, “Ecofeminism and the Natural Disaster Heroine,” *Women's Studies* 36 (2007): 353.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in Williams 144.

<sup>10</sup> Quotations are taken from Émile Zola, *L'Inondation et autres nouvelles* (Québec: Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, 2013). Henceforth page numbers only will appear in the text.

impossible to see the impending disaster.<sup>11</sup> We see only a small group of people, two men and three women – one of whom holds a baby in her arms – running in terror and screaming the refrain, “La Garonne!” The author involves us in the action by the use of jump cuts going back and forth between this terrorized group, eventually engulfed by the water, and Roubieu’s family positioned at a more distant, stable vantage point. This allows him to vary the focus by distancing and generalizing his shot from the point of view of the family, and then zooming in on details of the other group. The reader/viewer thus experiences the sequence of events through two groups of people, through their tension and their wounds. By frequently changing focus and shifting perspective, Zola, like Eisenstein in the famous Odessa steps sequence from *Battleship Potemkin*, carries his audience onward in a quickening of anticipation until the inevitable climax of destruction.<sup>12</sup> When the water finally bursts through the wall of trees like an enemy army, “like a giant stampede of animals, with the thunder of a charging battalion,” it is all the more impactful due to the building sense of anticipation and dread. The modern film viewer cannot help but think of the water bursting through the wall of the ship in the movie *Titanic* (1997).

The use of the theatrical term “curtains” suggests that the limits of representation themselves are tested. Rather than obeying the rules requiring the curtains to open, revealing the drama behind them, the water bursts through, invading the representational space and engulfing everything in its wake. Staccato-like sentences evoke the acceleration and indiscriminate destruction: “Une cabane de planches fut engloutie; un mur creva; des charrettes dételées s’en allèrent...” (17). This scene, though meant to reflect chaos, is presented with nuclear concentration within an easily intelligible frame and with particularly powerful images. Indeed, floodwaters shown as a giant stampede of crazed animals presents an especially terrifying metaphor in the rural farm community. The scene illustrates why flood stories, in violating our sense of the real, are both exciting and disconcerting. They provide an outlet for the aesthetics of excess, another source of kinship with Eisenstein. For Williams, “Zola’s writings [...] contain their moments of lyrical excess transcending the boundaries of literary naturalism in the same way that Eisenstein’s later films subtly undermine standard definitions of social realism.”<sup>13</sup> As we shall see, this action-packed and elaborate symphony of images and sound, this complex visual counterpoint, will live in startling contrast to the silent witnessing photograph offered as the final image of the story.

Eisenstein greatly admired Zola’s sense of the concrete, his skill in choosing and organizing objects in such a way as to imbue them with the maximum emotional impact. In reference to several of the *Rougon-Macquart* works, he writes “in each of these novels, the theme of love and its elaboration is attached to some definite material.”<sup>14</sup> In *L’Inondation*, a proliferation of circular objects conveys the pre-flood happiness and prosperity. The sun, the cycle of seasons, the family circle, coins, loaves of bread, cakes, plates and bowls, spoons, mouths, full stomachs, the table where the family dines for the last time – all these round objects express pre-disaster abundance and harmony. The first mention of the recent rains, however, a harbinger of disaster, is made at the dining room window. In this way, the device of foreshadowing is not just with a plot element but is also associated with specific objects, shapes,

---

<sup>11</sup> For the meaning of the poplar tree in Zola’s texts, see Emery 78. These trees, planted after the Revolution to symbolize the people’s victory, were highly symbolic, suggesting that the floodwaters in Zola’s story represent a catastrophe of epic proportions. The giant waves are an attack on the whole French nation.

<sup>12</sup> See Joy Newton, “Zola and Eisenstein,” *The French Review* 44.2 (Winter 1971): 110-13.

<sup>13</sup> Williams 155.

<sup>14</sup> Cited in Williams 145.

and forms. The movement from the round table to the square window signals both a transition in the action and a change of emotion. When the family takes refuge on the second floor, square and rectangular shapes indeed predominate, notably windows and playing cards, the latter suggesting their uncertain destiny in a game of chance. On the roof, they suffer an increasingly violent assault of wooden beams that attack them in unpredictable angles, while the main images are slanted rooftops and the sharp point of the church steeple. In this way, mounting fear takes the form of specific spatial areas and increasingly angular shapes. Form is imbued with emotion. Again, for the Russian director, Zola “sees concretely. He writes in terms of people, windows, shadows, temperatures.”<sup>15</sup>

Having reached the rooftop, in Zola, and the attic, in *Trouble the Water*, the characters’ spatial predicament is both panoramic and claustrophobic. They can see for miles, but they are nonetheless confined to a tiny, precarious space. Zola describes this as “spectacle,” hence underlining the cinematic aspect of the rooftop experience: “[...] autour de nous, le spectacle devenait d’une grandeur souveraine” (28). “Nous nous étions pris les mains [...] sans pouvoir détacher nos regards de l’affreux spectacle” (36). This type of story lays out the body for constant threat and surprising shocks. The enjoyment for the viewer stems from the fact that we crave seeing the final threshold of physical and psychological security.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as victims of a violent assault of water that threatens to shake their house off its very foundation, neither narrator thinks he will live to tell the story. In *Trouble the Water*, twenty-four-year-old Kimberly Roberts, trapped in her Ninth Ward attic with husband Scott, loved ones, and neighbors, fills three roles: spectator, narrator, and filmmaker. Her eye-of-the-storm video recordings earned her a co-credit as the movie’s director of photography. As such, she incarnates Eisenstein’s concept of the cinematic spectator as an active co-creator less invited to observe reality than to shape it.<sup>17</sup> Nothing in this excellent film comes close to matching the brute force of her low-resolution Hi-8 footage. The intensifying thump of wind battering the camcorder’s condenser microphone has its own artistic integrity and historical value. The soundtrack is “like the roar of an express train racing through a tunnel.”<sup>18</sup> The camera flies wildly from one hand to the next, with glimpses out the window as the water, full of waves, rises to the second floor of the house.

Only fifteen minutes of Roberts’ material appears, out of a running time of ninety-six minutes, but it so dominates that the film will surely be known as the “*Blair Witch Project* of Hurricane Katrina documentaries,” according to one critic.<sup>19</sup> The comparison involves more than the distorted, front-lit close-up of Roberts’ face, grayed-out and floating in a nocturnal void – the darkness of the tiny attic where she has taken refuge. “Nor does the *Blair Witch* analogy stop with the viewer’s sense of trespassing into someone else’s viewpoint as she haphazardly glimpses chaos engulfing her: water rising through the windows, water dripping through the roof, water filling the street to the level of the stop sign on the corner, while more water pelts from the sky and the wind riles the surface of the newly made lake.”<sup>20</sup> The most important similarity is that Roberts seems to have conceived of her video as a self-contained movie, with a setting, a cast of characters and a narrative that risks ending abruptly, midway through the horror.<sup>21</sup> No

---

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Williams 144.

<sup>16</sup> Sorrento 36.

<sup>17</sup> Gural-Migdal 28.

<sup>18</sup> See David Denby, “Storm Warnings,” *New Yorker* 84.28 (September 2008): 97. See also Rob Nelson, “Trouble the Water,” *Film Comment* (July-August 2008): 69.

<sup>19</sup> See Stuart Klawans, “Closely Watched Water,” *The Nation* 1.8 (September 2008): 51.

<sup>20</sup> Klawans 51.

<sup>21</sup> Klawans 51.

wonder David Denby calls it “a terrifyingly expressive struggle to record what’s going on without dying,” and furthermore, “This is filmmaking at its most primal and existential. I shoot therefore I am.”<sup>22</sup>

The directors recorded Roberts’ return to the mud-carpeted, wrecked neighborhood, where she learns that some of the people she interviewed before the storm have since died. People get on with their lives, but the film does not move in chronological order. Roberts’ footage, like a nightmare, returns again and again, and the general effect is to reveal more of her temperament and skill as she emerges from the hurricane a heroine. In the end, “trampling over tribulations,” as she puts it, she performs a rap song that tells of her earlier life, a kind of “Song of Myself” that feels justified as an anthem of endurance.<sup>23</sup> This toweringly self-possessed heroine, a great story-teller, offers a refreshing contrast to the array of meek, passive female characters peopling recent American disaster films like *Mimic* (1997), *Deep Blue Sea* (1999), *Volcano* (1997) and *Dante’s Peak* (1997), where, according to Cynthia Belmont, “heroines who are initially characterized as ‘modern women’ – capable, intelligent, and employed – are quickly returned to the domestic sphere and to helpless dependence on masculine physical prowess and technological know-how.”<sup>24</sup>

All three stories, including the Katrina film *Low and Behold*, explore the limits of representation and its link to trauma and loss through the use of photography – a photograph of lost loved ones recovered from the catastrophe. Each narrative dramatizes the limits of realist representation, that is, the degree to which any representation can capture or reveal the essential qualities of its subject, because each conveys the limits of visual representation in terms of the death or disappearance of its subject. In all three stories, therefore, the power of the image is drawn in part from the fact that the photograph can stand for the deceased and that through the photograph the narrator does in some sense recover them. These stories thus underline the importance of photography as a practice for documenting trauma, death, and survival.<sup>25</sup>

In *Trouble the Water*, Roberts returns home weeks after the flood, and is delighted to find the only photograph she owns of her mother – who died of AIDS when Roberts was thirteen – relatively intact and still hanging on the wall of her wrecked home. Not surprisingly, it is the first item she recovers. Her reunion with the photo is much like a reunion with a loved one. As she takes it off the wall, she twice says, “I longed for this,” kisses it, and holds it in a full embrace. The viewer gets a better look at the work, featured in a close-up, as she holds it up on her porch and tells its story. We can see her smiling mother seated at a table, but the picture is damaged, possibly from the storm, with a large white crease covering some of her face. Roberts speaks only of her love for her mother, however, “the woman of my life, my baby.” Figure 1 is a

---

<sup>22</sup> Denby 97. Nicholas Mirzoeff astutely draws the comparison between the film’s cramped attic space and the interior of a slave ship: “With its simple wood frame construction, constricted space and poor light, that attic filled with African American people could not help but recall the middle passage to the film’s viewers.” Mirzoeff’s analyses of painted seascapes, furthermore, offer valuable insights. We can see the affinity of Kimberly’s segment with certain seascapes by Joseph Turner, one of the first artists to portray human interaction with unruly water and to understand the sea as a place between life and death. See Nicholas Mirzoeff, “The Sea and the Land: Biopower and Visuality from Slavery to Katrina,” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 50.2 (2009): 302.

<sup>23</sup> Denby 97.

<sup>24</sup> See Belmont 350. For recent discussions of gender and race in disaster movies, see also Sean Brayton, “The Racial Politics of Disaster and Dystopia in *I Am Legend*,” *The Velvet Light Trap* 67 (2011): 66-76, and Despina Kakoudaki, “Spectacles of History: Race Relations, Melodrama, and the Science Fiction/Disaster Film,” *Camera Obscura* 17.2 (2002): 109-53.

<sup>25</sup> See Marja Warehime, “Writing the Limits of Representation: Balzac, Zola, and Tournier on Art and Photography,” *Substance* 18.1 (1989): 51-52.

publicity-still featuring Roberts and husband Scott, post-storm, posing in front of their home with their dogs. Kimberly proudly holds up the photograph. The still serves as a family portrait and a testament to survival.



Fig.1. Still from *Trouble the Water*. Courtesy of Elsewhere Films.

In *Low and Behold*, the New Orleans resident, Nixon (played by Eddie Rouse), shares a photo of his family, whom we later learn perished in the flood, with claims adjuster and friend, Turner Stull (played by Barlow Jacobs). His request for Stull to wipe his hands before he handles the small, double-creased photograph underlines its enormous value for Nixon. We see it in a close-up as he speaks of his family – including himself, his wife, his two girls, ages five and seven, and their dog – as if they were still alive. Figure 2 is a film still featuring Nixon contemplating the photo as Stull looks on.



Fig. 2. Still from *Low and Behold*. From left: The actors Eddie Rouse and Barlow Jacobs. Photo courtesy of Zack Godshall. Photo credits by Daryn Deluco.



Here, Roland Barthes may offer some insights. His famous book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981) is simultaneously an inquiry into the nature and essence of photography and a eulogy to his late mother.<sup>26</sup> As such, it is as much a reflection on death as it is on photography.<sup>27</sup> For Barthes, every photograph, in a sense, records a death. He writes of “that terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead.”<sup>28</sup> In addition, every photograph contains an essential “catastrophe” in that it represents either people who are already dead or who will eventually die: “Whether or not the object is already dead, every photograph is this catastrophe.”<sup>29</sup> The work investigates the effects of photography on the spectator, as distinct from the photographer, and also from the object photographed. In a deeply personal discussion of the lasting emotional effect of certain photographs, Barthes considers photography as irreducible to the codes of language or culture, acting on the body as much as on the mind. The book develops the twin concepts of *studium* and *punctum*: *studium* denoting the cultural, aesthetic, and political interpretation of a photograph, *punctum* denoting the wounding, personally touching detail which establishes a direct relationship with the object or person within it. Clearly, the photographs in these flood stories operate on the level of the *punctum*. They are damaged and carry little to no cultural or aesthetic value. Their value lies wholly to their personal, poignant connection to their owner/viewer.

The final scene of *Low and Behold* offers an interesting reflection on photography, representation, and loss. Like Roubieu of Zola’s story, Nixon has lost his entire family in the flood, something we learn only in this final scene when he gives Stull a tour of his devastated home. Nixon tries to tell of his plans for rebuilding, but totally breaks down. As the viewer is coming to the full realization of what he has suffered, the slow-moving camera offers a haunting series of blank screens and empty frames: doors, doorways, windows, frames propped up against an empty wall, the spaces between the rungs of a ladder, the refrigerator (covered with photographs too far away to decipher), a blank television screen, a mirror with no reflection, the empty mattress that was the couple’s bed. Just as squares and rectangles are imbued with emotion in Zola’s story so too is the case here. These shapes indicate pain, loss, and mourning. Doorways, windows, screens and frames become liminal spaces marking the threshold between life and death. A diaphanous sheet covers the bedroom doorway like a shroud. We hear only Nixon crying. In this series of blank screens, the director explores the emotional impact of both the image and the lack of the image, suggesting that one is as powerful as the other. The image is there even when it is not. We sense its presence even in its absence. Again, Barthes’s thoughts are relevant: “As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for ‘sentimental’ reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound...”<sup>30</sup>

For some proponents of nineteenth-century realism, the photograph served as a metaphor for the supposedly cold, precise, and unmediated representation of reality. Zola, an enthusiastic amateur photographer (he owned at least ten different cameras, had three dark rooms, and took 4,000 photos during the last seven years of his life), used his camera to observe and record, insisting that: “You cannot claim to have really seen something until you have photographed

<sup>26</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> Neil Badmington, “*Punctum Saliens*: Barthes, Mourning, Film, Photography,” *Paragraph* 35.3 (2013): 304.

<sup>28</sup> Barthes 9.

<sup>29</sup> Barthes 96.

<sup>30</sup> Barthes 21.



it.”<sup>31</sup> But ironically, he considered photography a practice and a hobby, not an art. He refused to use photographs in service to his writing and did not include them in his research dossiers, since for him the realist artist went beyond mere recording to arrange, reinterpret and confer meaning on events.<sup>32</sup> Zola’s story furnishes an interesting example of the traditional realist view of photography coexisting with a mythical or mythic view. The grandfather has watched the floodwaters carry off his family members one by one. Alone at the end, he has one wish – to recover and bury his dead. He hears that a large number of bodies were recovered in Toulouse, but when he arrives in the city all the flood victims have been buried. However, the authorities have been careful to photograph the unidentified. Among these photographs he recognizes his granddaughter Véronique and her fiancé, Gaspard.

Et c’est parmi ces portraits lamentables que j’ai trouvé ceux de Gaspard et de Véronique. Les deux fiancés étaient demeurés liés l’un à l’autre, par une étreinte passionnée, échangeant dans la mort leur baiser de noces. Ils se serraient encore si puissamment, les bras raidis, la bouche collée sur la bouche, qu’il aurait fallu leur casser les membres pour les séparer. Aussi les avait-on photographiés ensemble, et il dormaient ensemble sous la terre. Je n’ai plus qu’eux, cette image affreuse, ces deux beaux enfants gonflés par l’eau, défigurés, gardant encore sur leurs faces livides, l’héroïsme de leur tendresse. (59-60)

The photograph is produced in the name of scientific progress and exactness. However, it provides much more than documentary evidence that the two bodies were recovered. Roubieu cries every time he looks at it, in keeping with the photograph’s physiological effect on the spectator described in Barthes.<sup>33</sup> More is visible than the grotesque naturalistic details of physical decay because the photograph has captured a significant configuration of reality. The lovers’ interlocked forms repeat what the grandfather sees in their faces, “the heroism of their tenderness.” Their love transcends physical death to be visible in their intertwined forms, which then suggest their spiritual union. This transcendence is encoded in the symbolic level of the narrative: Zola fuses physical death with the transcendent love of Tristan and Isolde, and the encoding is supported by a system of reference that links the representation to the “real,” if absent, subject.<sup>34</sup> In fact, their intertwined forms evoke not only the figures of Tristan and Isolde per se, but also the two interlocked trees that grow out of the lovers’ graves in the legend, and in turn the family tree that serves as the organizing model for this story as well as all three of Zola’s novel cycles, and in turn the Tree of Jesse, the medieval ancestor of the family tree. Hence, one could argue that the network of mythological and Biblical themes nourishing Zola’s story expand it far beyond the boundaries of a purely naturalist work.<sup>35</sup>

All this suggests that, for these artists, naturalism is not just a scientific recording of reality, but also possesses mythical dimensions. What is more mythical, after all, than a flood?

---

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Warehime 52. Among his great accomplishments, Zola as a photographer has provided us with the best and perhaps only visual record of the World’s Fair of 1900. See John A. Lambeth, “Zola Photographer” in *Émile Zola and the Arts*, ed. Jean-Max Guieu and Alison Hilton (Washington, USA: Georgetown University Press, 1988) 55-60.

<sup>32</sup> Warehime 52.

<sup>33</sup> See Barthes 21.

<sup>34</sup> Warehime 54-55.

<sup>35</sup> Emery 75.

Zola and the filmmakers have adopted, at least to some extent, the naturalist aesthetic but see it as much more than an empirical transcription of events. For them, art seeks to convey the “pathos” described in both Barthes and Eisenstein. Achieving an emotional and physical connection with the spectator is paramount. It is the mythical, even visionary possibilities of the image, its emotional impact, and its power to convey something beyond itself that intrigues. The photograph’s visceral effect on the body described in Barthes is akin to the adrenaline rush and physical jolt we feel when watching a disaster film. The silent witnessing photographs in Zola and *Low and Behold* are linked with death and loss and as such serve as grave markers. They contrast with the moving and sound-filled cinematic testimonial that is the uplifting survival story told by the photograph in *Trouble the Water*. Though they differ in media, they share a common representation of fear and grief. Zola led the way, and these filmmakers have followed suit in seeking to use representational media to capture and share our deepest emotions, belying a seriousness of purpose and an artistic expression reaching far beyond today’s blockbuster disaster films. Indeed, their project strives to erect a screen where the visible and the corporeal create meaning that ventures beyond the picture frame. As the tenth anniversary of Hurricane Katrina fast approaches (August 29, 2015), these works seem more moving and relevant than ever.