

## Disaster movies

### Review of Ewa Kowal, 2019, *The Post-Crash Decade of American Cinema. Wall Street, the "Mancession" and the Political Construction of Crisis*, Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press.

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The word crisis implies an extraordinary situation that interrupts an otherwise smooth and unobstructed passage of events. Then everything, more or less, goes back to normal. Yet, this somehow makes one think twice when looking back at the over two decades of the current millennium. The feeling is that an extraordinary situation is actually this brief moment in between various crises that seem to be a trademark of the 21st century. It began with a bang (9/11), stumbled upon the financial disaster of 2008 and only then went downhill at breakneck speed with the first attack on Ukraine in 2014. After a short breather, it entered two surreal years of Covid-19 to swiftly merge into a full-blown Russian assault on Ukraine. Whatever the nature of those events (political, financial, health, military), they have affected societies on all levels and it seems that this series of events is far from being over.

Ewa Kowal's book investigates the cultural response to one of these crises and discusses the filmic representation of the 2008 financial crash by asking a number of relevant questions like "[how] has culture depicted the unfolding of the crash and its consequences? What story or stories have been told about them and how? What sort of narratives – and whose narratives – have emerged? What has been selected, what has been omitted? Are there any patterns? What can we learn from cultural products about the 'Great Crash' and the 'Great Recession'? Can culture – especially the most influential kind, that is, popular culture with its 'soft power' – play any didactic role for the masses 'ignorant of finance'?"

Finding answers to such questions requires a clear delineation of the analytical material. Kowal focuses her critical attention on American cinema in the decade of 2008–2018. Her decisions were motivated by the observation that virtually only cinema came with a quick and multifaceted response to this crisis

in depicting the effect of the economic collapse in the form of mass unemployment, various forms of foreclosures and, especially, the housing crisis. The literature of the period did not seem to come to terms with these issues, relegating them, at best, to the background of the narrative. If such a decision appears to be limiting, it nevertheless informs Kowal's claim with sufficient consistency and clarity. She is looking for, in her own words, a direct realistic approach to the 2007/8 financial crash and its aftermath as well as political engagement.

Ewa Kowal's choice of methodological approach ("a combination of structuralism and poststructuralism" (p. 28) with nods to the Frankfurt School and references to Raymond Williams) serves the purpose very well. It is only logical that the discussion of filmic representation of real political and economic events must be referenced to the actual events. Kowal, nevertheless, acknowledges her general pessimism regarding the belief in culture's subversive power in relation to the dominant ideology and power structure. Her leaning is more towards Adorno's and Horkheimer's view on culture as a conveyor belt of the official ideology of the capitalist state aiming at the maintenance of the status quo. In the case of the films discussed in her book, it is difficult to disagree with such an opinion, though this generalisation certainly requires some fine-tuning.

The book splits into two sections with the first one dedicated to the crash itself with the outline of the context, a sort of "the making of": the cases and the consequences. Part one is divided into three chapters introducing the figure of the 'supermanager' with two case studies: Oliver Stone's diptych *Wall Street* (1987) and *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010). Kowal dissects both films, referring to the category of 'hegemonic masculinity.' Stone's case is also interesting in the broader discursive framework of the book (and Kowal's aforementioned more pessimistic view of culture). This filmmaker has always positioned himself (or, at least, pretended to) as a subversive director, making frequent references to the pathologies of the American dream. However, his films have come out as being classic stories perpetrating this very dream, additionally strengthening a highly masculine and patriarchal 'message' included in their narratives.

The pathology of the 'Super-CEO' image is further explored in Chapter II with the discussion of Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013). The controversy here revolved around critical reactions to the film that "can be divided into those which expressed unease about the film's glamorisation of white-collar crime, illegally obtained wealth and the lifestyle it made possible, and those praising and defending the film as an autonomous and unconstrained work

of art.” But it is also about the battleground where ancient gender animosities and inequality come to the fore and are played out in the broader context of money, power and sexual exploitation. Kowal explores here the pathology of big business with its perverted forms of gratification, where women serve as objectified trophies to be acquired by “successful business warriors.” Here masculinity becomes synonymous with power and privilege.

The third chapter discusses three productions dealing directly with the mechanics of financial speculations that led directly to the financial crash: *Margin Call* (J. C. Chandor, 2011), *The Big Short* (Adam McKay, 2015) and *Money Monster* (Jodie Foster, 2016). Although it is Adam McKay’s film that received the most publicity, it is *Margin Call* that seems to most adequately demonstrate the mechanics of the world of big money. It is also the most artistically accomplished and most gripping of the bunch. As Kowal rightly observes, “two years before Scorsese’s film, Chandor made *The Anti-Wolf of Wall Street*” (p. 110). This is the world where the only thing that matters is money and Kowal’s analysis accordingly focuses on this issue. Since the other two films discussed in this chapter are clearly less accomplished, the author tries her best to explore the narratives in equal measure, but eventually she also admits to a number of shortcomings that can be attributed to *The Big Short* and *Money Monster*. If the former at least tried to educate through entertainment, the latter is just entertaining, switching its direct focus from the world of finance to the media and their role. Kowal suggests that both *Margin Call* and *Money Monster* may be labelled as morality tales. Well, maybe. But perhaps the difference between them is that *Margin Call* tells a story that in itself turns into a morality tale, whereas *Money Monster* strives at being one but ultimately remains what it really is: entertainment.

The book on the financial crisis is, unsurprisingly, also about the (proverbial and never ending) crisis of masculinity, or ‘manceSSION’. It seems that the economic crash has always affected male workers in greater measure since the more substantial “concentration of men in critically sensitive industries contributed to the higher rates of unemployment among men, contributing to an increase in women’s share of the work force over the course of the downturn.” (p. 134) Kowal dissects this issue by discussing a film that may serve as a text book example of ‘manceSSION.’ Here, *The Company Men* (John Wells, 2010) is particularly effective as a narrative dramatising three parallel stories of men occupying three different social positions. Three different reactions, yet each one of them seems to be a version of what Kowal refers to as ‘ornamental culture.’ Social roles, just

like male roles, have been turned into 'image-based' entities. The final section of the book serves as a kind of coda focusing on women and children – two 'second rate' types of characters in the series of films on the 2008 financial meltdown. Kowal discusses *99 Homes* (Ramin Bahrani, 2014) and *The Florida Project* (Sean Baker, 2017), both of which at least touch upon the female perspective on the crisis and its consequences.

Ewa Kowal's book presents a comprehensive and insightful description of the 2008 financial crash told from a variety of perspectives presented in the selected films. Although the crisis deprived many individuals and their families of their livelihood, the films almost uniformly focus on the cost borne by male characters and – by extension – real men in the real world. Turning those men into victims works to somewhat obscure the fact that it was predominantly other men who were responsible for this crisis. The author rightly points out that, as a hundred years ago the task to 'explain' the former crises fell on literature, this time it is film and social media that have been fulfilling this role.

Firstly, they are (one way or another) a form of entertainment and this aspect is an inherent quality that, to various degrees, colours their message. Also, paradoxically, the brutal and ruthless world of Wall Street receives its own portion of glamour, becoming, as Kowal rightly summarises, a "mixture of wealth porn and mainstream pornography targeting mainly white male heterosexual audiences" (p. 202). This supposedly critical presentation generates not only a distancing effect, but, one may speculate, makes some members of the audience even jealous of this extravagant lifestyle well beyond their proverbial wildest dreams. Two additional aspects of these films concern a visible disproportion in terms of race and gender representation combined with the winner/loser dichotomy. Needless to say, it is always white heterosexual males who tend to be the winning party.

Ewa Kowal's book reads as an insightful and informative account of the events captured on the silver screen. Completed in the pre-pandemic and pre-war era, it reminds the reader of the times that seem to be comprehensible and, paradoxically, less threatening. One may wonder if, with the passage of time, there will emerge another selection of films addressing this crisis. Hopefully it will be worthy of another, equally interesting book.