**How to Survive a Sharknado and Other Unnatural Disasters, or The Citizen-Body Under Arrest**

Apocalyptic rhetoric is nothing new; campy films with a cult following aren’t either. The combination, however, is perfected in the SyFy trilogy, Sharknado. These films, however, are not without value, particularly from a biopolitical perspective. To represent the films’ characters *en masse*, this paper will employ the term “citizen-body” to illustrate the unwilling subject who is bound up by regulatory forces and unnatural disasters. I view “citizen-body” as a two-fold concept: one that functions within the regulatory structures of what we typically think of as biopolitical (at least from a Foucauldian perspective), and another that considers the agency of the citizen-body and how it resists and/or responds to the situations. Throughout the films, the citizen-body is regulated by and forced to respond to several outside agents, including locally controlled emergency response teams, weather, and marine life. With such agency enacted upon it, the citizen-body becomes a representation of the overextended (and some might say abusive) existing structures of power, as witnessed too often in today’s news cycles. While this paper begins by interrogating the growing popularity of the Sharknado franchise because of its absurd plot, it will ultimately argue such popularity reinforces the role of the citizen-body in daily life.

**First, let me give background of movies**

**Sharknado**: We are introduced to a slew of characters (strangely enough, the main character is named Finn) who are banding together in California simply to survive the Sharknado. This first installment is full of disaster movie tropes: a divorced couple grappling with how to keep their kids safe, a relationship reblossming, and extremely unrealistic disasters (the movie is named Sharknado, after all). There’s really only one coherent scene in a shop where someone tries to explain that Sharknado is a government conspiracy. Oddly, that’s the most realistic thing that happens.

**Sharknado 2: The Second One**: Seriously, that’s the subtitle. This time, it happens “because of global warming.” We shift to the east coast where we learn that “even sharknados are tougher in New York.” Rather than focusing on survival, which is of course a focus, the second one attempts to destroy the sharknado by throwing a bomb into the center of it.

**Sharknado 3: Oh Hell No** [\*\*insert summary\*\*]

**In the first one, we see Finn (Ian Ziering) trying to convince everyone of the Sharknado.**

To quote Jeff Nealon from *Foucault beyond Foucault* at length

In sum, the critical history of thought is neither a history of acquisitions nor a history of concealments of truth; it is the history of ‘verdictions,’ understood as the forms according to which discourses capable of being declared true or false are articulated concerning a domain or thing. *What the condition of this emergence were, the price that was paid for it, so to speak,* its effects on reality and the way in which, linking a certain type of object to certain modalities of the subject, it constituted the historical a priori of possible experience for a period of time, an area, and for given individuals (18).

Nealon’s discussion of Foucault and cost obviously reminds me of *Fearless Speech*, but I am most interested in the part that mentions the ‘discourses capable of being declared true or false.’ To be labeled a *parrhesiastes*, this assumed that the individual was truthful—there was no ‘being declared’ to be sought. The cost, here, is the individual coming forth to speak. The cost was not in the discourse itself since it was assumed to be true because it could cost the individual everything. Cost would also be found on the side of the King—by listening to the *parrhesiastes*, he was creating the possibility for his own downfall (well, at minimum he might be proven wrong). Therefore, cost is an interesting spin on power in general—the one who has the most to lose is the one currently with all the power.

What we see in Sharknado is what I believe is the critical difference between “risk” and “cost.” I should point out that I do not think these terms are separable; however “risk” does seem to evade the consequential nature of “cost” i.e. “he risked his reputation” = he still has it, compared with “that move cost him his reputation” = he risked and lost. What Finn demonstrates is this intersection between asking “what’s the difference or the connections between “risk” and “cost”?”

**We see in the series that there is very little intervention on behalf of the “authorities,” causing the citizens to resist the Sharknado on their own. Here, the “citizen-body” supersedes the authorities and demonstrates resistance with their tools (bar stools, guns, bats) and very little help from “authorities”:**

I’m reminded of Bernard Stiegler here, and the idea of exteriorization and tool use, when he remarks: “With the advent of exteriorization, the body of the living individual is no longer *only* a body; it can *only* function with its tools” (148, emphases mine). And while Stiegler is referring more so towards the literal exteriorization of the body (think: memory), I think these ideas have value when we consider the battle of the individuals against the sharknado. Such normal tools (the bats, barstools, guns) are not useful against the actual storm. They are, however, useful against the individual bits of the storm (the flying sharks—or at least those that fly off the main storm). Here, exteriorization works in both ways—the citizens are literally using extenstions of themselves to stave off attack from the Sharknado while the Sharknado is simultaneously extending its reach by projecting marine life towards the cities under attack. Such an image – the sharks appearing to be extending from the actual storm – is quite rhizomatic.

This rhizomatic image of the sharks brings it back to the sense of control, or at least how control and disciplinary societies function, particularly with the citizen-body of these films. For Foucault, this disciplinary society is more of an archipelago – one is jumping from one sense of discipline to another. When leaves one island, one is no longer under its disciplinary powers, but is now disciplined by the new island. That being said, one never escapes any disciplinary powers, since they are simply replaced by another form of discipline. Rather, “control” here names a purely instrumental or “conceptual” (rather than particular or practical) force that forms the conditions of possibility for systematic integration of moments of spontaneity or difference; i.e., the “control” of “technosociety” is not a series of structures that rigidly dictate what may take place, but rather a force field that actively and flexibly responds to these outbreaks in a way that continues the maintenance (and evolution) of the present system. Thus, in a sense then, the system “itself” is premised on spontaneity and invention as its driving force, rather than being “vulnerable” to such instances as acts or forces of resistance.

**On Truth/Fiction and the inanity of Sharknado:**

For Isabelle Stengers, truth and fiction are inseparable, and ultimately these modes invent

“an antidote to the belief that makes us so formidable, the belief that defines truth and fiction in terms of an opposition, in terms of the power that makes the first destroy the second, a belief older than the invention of the modern sciences, but whose invention constituted a ‘recommencement’” (164-5).

Inventions and interest are two crucial terms for Stengers, and she maintains throughout *The Invention of Science* that truths are initially invented fictions. With Sharknado, one cannot distinguish between what is real (truth) and simply what is fiction. They are not in opposition, but instead become so blurred that they are essentially both creations of each other. Truth and fiction are therefore inventions in which individual interest is taken. Science, as “performed” in labs, is thus the result of an individual’s interest in “making” an idea come true. People, then, are more ‘interested’ in interest as opposed to truth since the former is what actually unifies (to quote Stengers again):

“It is precisely *because* interest, as opposed to ‘truth,’ does not claim the power to create unanimity, but lends itself to proliferation and association with other disparate interests, that it can bring together authors for whom the event poses the problem of history” (Stengers 96).

After reading Beller’s *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, I was specifically interested in the Lacanian notion of “active annihilation” (266). Based upon the idea that subjectivity is a “bipolar reflexive action,” Beller illustrates this concept through the use of Stone’s *Natural* *Born Killers*. I am intrigued with the idea of active v. passive annihilation and Beller’s approach to the formation of self-as-subject. In her essay “Asymmetrical Reciprocity,” Iris Marion Young makes this point clear when she states, “each person’s identity is a product of her interactive relations with others. […] By this knowledge that they have a perspective on me that is different from my immediate experience of myself, I experience them as subjects, as ‘I’s” (46). I view this situation as passive annihilation: I am interacting with somebody else’s perspective that is forming his/her perspective of his/herself all the while forming myself through them. Thus, I am passively annihilated because I am reformed through the other person ‘finding’ his/herself through me.

Returning to Lacan’s example, conversely if ‘I see myself seeing myself,’ then I am both forming and destroying my own subjectivity—I cannot experience both subjects as they are both versions of myself. Here’s where I believe the bipolarity fits in: if we can identify ourselves ‘by seeing ourselves,’ then one of those ‘selves’ must be annihilated. One ‘I’ can no longer be ‘me,’ as it must be the other from whom I construct myself. In turn, we end up gazing at ourselves in order to form our own subjectivity, which Beller later notes is an act that occurs when we try to be like those we see on the screen—the self/other divide is dissolved, and we can only formulate our subjectivity through ourselves (or, what we have made ourselves into).

In *The Crossing of the Visible*, Jean-Luc Marion notes a contradiction between the visible and the invisible: “the gaze strives to see what it is not able to see, but differently: the paradox offers a counter-appearance, while perspective suggests a breakthrough of the gaze. The paradox poses a visible that belies the visible, perspective a gaze that pierces through the visible” (2). Especially if the self-reflective gaze is indeed an active annihilation, I am not certain if it offers a counter-appearance as difference. Rather, I believe the counter-appearance is sameness, and that is the difficulty with, or perhaps the point of, active annihilation. There is no counter-appearance, as both “I”s are diminished through the self-reflective gaze.

**On Sharknado being a complex interaction between man and animal:**

Kafka’s “A Report for An Academy” distinctly reminds me of Poe’s “Murders in the Rue Morgue.” In both, Kafka’s ape and Poe’s “Ourang-Outang” both successfully pass as human beings, while their actual identities as animals remain concealed. In Poe’s story, the brutal murder of a mother and her young daughter remains a mystery because no witness can seem to identify the sounds heard from the apartment in which the crime took place. There are many speculations on the criminal’s voice—one man claims “the shrill voice was that of an Italian,” while another, convinced the voice belonged to a man, “could not distinguish the words uttered. They were loud and quick – unequal – spoken in fear as well as in anger. The voice was harsh – not so much shrill as harsh” (201). Notably, none of the witnesses distinguished between the sounds of a human and that of an animal. When Dupin discovers that it was an Ourang-Outang that committed the crime, its startlingly human linguistic qualities are recognized as the clue that sidetracked the case. In fact, the reason for the Ourang-Outang’s escape to begin with results from it imitating its owner shaving. Actually, the idea “imitation,” or “appearances v. the real” seems to be the point of interest. Kafka’s ape realized he could “be human” literally because he said so: “I cried out a short and good “Hello!” breaking out into human sounds. And with this cry I sprang into the community of human beings, and I felt its echo—“Just listen. He’s talking!”—like a kiss on my entire sweat soaked body” (5). The ape became human because language made him so; by talking or sounding like ‘one of us,’ the ape was no longer separate, but related.

Throughout *How to do Things with Words*, J.L. Austin repeatedly argues that speech is actually an action, and further that some words imply specific action (i.e. christening a ship). When Austin states, “there is something which is at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering,” it is clear that when the ape utters his first human words, he is doing more than just uttering—he is becoming something else (60). Since apes and humans do not speak the same language, when Kafka’s ape begins to speak ours, he could transcend his identity as an ape in order to be recognized as human. Following Austin’s logic, Kafka’s ape can, in truth, pronounce himself human simply by saying that he is human.

Nietzsche says, “There is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything” (*Preface* pt. 13). The deed, then, is Kafka’s ape convincing the Academy that he is a human while at the same time persuading them that he was an ape. Actually, he can be neither *or* both, as the two identities are only “discursively fabricated.”

**On how Sharknado represents control**

The readings for this week insisted that we rethink how control is signified currently by tracking the historical development of being in control, being controlled, and even the appearance of control; but as *Discipline and Punish* illustrated, control, while it is always shifted from one place to another (home – school – possibly hospital – possibly prison), is usually imposed by someone. However, if our course readings are moving us into the post-postmodern (to borrow Nealon’s term), Foucault and Bentham’s panopticon are therefore moving us into the posthuman, a moment in which we no longer need the presence of the body to enforce any control. Further, if the body is no longer necessary, what do control and the body signify now, in a Burkean sense?

Previously, control required the presence of bodies; take, for example, the public executions. The theatricality of torture relied upon witnesses for effective punishment—those in the audience realized the consequences of one’s misdeeds, and thus would not repeat them. Here, control is not yet located simply in the incarceration of criminal, but in the reception of the execution. Control is in the spectacle itself, as the presence of the townspeople was necessary for its efficaciousness. The execution disciplines the crowd against future crimes, rather than the criminal.

On the contrary, the panopticon functions by controlling the criminal, not the crowd. Whereas the success of the public execution’s control thrived upon the presence of others, the panopticon does not need anyone except the prisoner. It is simply the representation of control. In the Burkean analogy sense, the panopticon’s only function, then, is as the implied sense of order and control, and not the actual imposing of control. For example, while driving, one sees a parked police car on the side of the road, and immediately slows down. Even though there is no one in the police car, its mere presence stands for order and obedience. There need not be a police officer present inside of the car, as the object, representing control, is (usually) enough.

Foucault notes that the panopticon is the “perfect exercise of power” for several reasons, although most significantly “because it can reduce the number of those who exercise it, while increasing the number of those on whom it is exercised” (206). The panopticon, just as the parked police car, does not need a physical body behind it to instill a sense of control. Because any of the prisoners may be watched at any time, simply the possibility of being watched should be enough to maintain order. Further, Foucault says that, “because without any physical instrument other than architecture and geometry, it acts directly on individuals; it gives ‘power of mind over mind’” (206). The panopticon’s strength lies within the ‘power of mind over mind’ since it is the prisoner’s mind that is being controlled. One could assume that no one is ever looking, but one assumes that one is always looking, without ever knowing which is true at any given time. (And, heck, the current political-we’re-listening-to-your-telephone-conversations-rhetoric is doing this, too, although it does not seem to be working as well). Becoming posthuman, or becoming body-less, is previewed by the panopticon. Some sort of actual human presence is not necessary for the panopticon to function—it is self-sufficient. This self-sufficiency is not the issue though, but rather that human presence is no longer needed. And it is when this human presence is no longer needed when the citizen-body becomes most aware of its precise lack of control—or even how much it is wrapped up in the modes of disciplinarily. Even it is because of sharks. Thanks!