

ISSUES

## Dying of Thirst: Matt Damon, HBO to Tackle the Global Water Crisis

By JAY A. FERNANDEZ

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Regardless of political bent, when pop-culture saturated Americans think of potential water-related catastrophes — if they think about them at all — it’s usually in the context of the type of global-warming apocalypse best represented by Roland Emmerich films such as “The Day After Tomorrow” and “2012,” or even the notorious “Waterworld.” Temperatures get too high, glaciers melt — or a meteor hits(!) — and sure enough there’s another behemoth wave flooding the New York Public Library, turning the Rockies into beachfront property, and leaving a few scrappy survivors floating around on gigantic boats. Awesome in scale and — let’s admit it — kinda pretty to look at. This kind of liquid destruction may have its masochistic pleasures, but it’s also easy to dismiss, because, like the astronomical number for the national debt, it’s just too enormous for the human mind to grasp. As a pressing issue it may as well not even exist. (For some stubborn outliers, it doesn’t.) And anyway Hollywood concocted it, so it’s only just make-believe.

In the last decade, however, some scientists have been trying to warn us that the looming problem we’re facing may not be that there’ll be too *much* water, but that soon there will be too *little*. Seventy percent of the Earth’s surface may be covered by it, but only about three percent of it is fresh water suitable for drinking and irrigation, and most of *that* is frozen inside glaciers, distributed unequally around the world, and increasingly wasted, dried up, polluted, and mismanaged. Poor sanitation and spreading disease already affect billions of people, but once consumption levels make drinking water genuinely scarce, the resulting strain on humans will dramatically

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change our interactions with each other. Nothing drives desperate behavior quite like hunger or thirst.

Which brings us back to Hollywood. “In the Heart of the Sea” and “Blood Diamond” screenwriter Charles Leavitt has been pressed into service by HBO and producer Matt Damon — a very public advocate for bringing safe water and sanitation to developing countries with his group Water.org — to craft a gripping ground-level story about the growing emergency. “They wanted to do some kind of movie in the vein of ‘Traffic’ or ‘Syriana,’” says Leavitt, “but around the global water crisis.” Titled “Thirst,” the film is designed to articulate several aspects of the problem using multiple storylines that eventually connect in surprising ways. As of late November, Leavitt had completed a detailed outline and was beginning to write the screenplay, with the hope that he’ll have something solid for director Elliott Lester (“Nightingale”) to begin building pre-production around by the Spring. (Since things tend to move a lot faster in the cable television world than in movies, this is not as much of a stretch as it seems.)

After digging into the relevant research, Leavitt decided on an approach to the material that will both illustrate the issues and double their impact: by projecting them forward. “I thought, *What kind of movie would I want to see? What would make me turn on HBO to see a movie that dealt with this issue?*” says Leavitt. “And I came up with this rather out-of-the-box take about presenting a story that took place both in the present and twenty-five years in the future. Because when you talk about the global water crisis, you look at all the dire predictions — that by 2030 *this* part of the world will be out of drinking water, or by 2040 droughts will occur *here* and *there*. That’s a lot of what the literature is. But for a movie it’s: Don’t talk about it, show it. I thought, *Well, it would be interesting to actually show the world in 2040.*”

Though “Thirst” won’t have the science-fiction elements of “Elysium” and “Interstellar,” it will strive for the same kind of grounded and recognizable futuristic realism that they employed for “Elysium’s” resource-depleted cityscape and “Interstellar’s” crop failures and dust storms. Leavitt is constructing four storylines that play out in different parts of the world and ultimately intertwine in a way that shows how interconnected all of us, and our resources, really are, much the way “Babel” and “Syriana” did. An almond grower and his family struggle in California’s bone-dry Central Valley; a political tangle plays out in Washington, D.C.; rain forest deforestation for cattle farms causes freshwater shortages in Brazil; and an aquifer in India, one of the largest in the world, shrinks to alarming levels. “By 2030, it will have passed what they call its sustainability tipping point, and the prediction there is that you’re going to have massive water refugees,” says Leavitt about this last scenario. “If we think we have a refugee crisis now, wait until two hundred million people are on the move.” We’ll also then see how drastically these present-day crises have shifted geopolitical dynamics a quarter-century later. “A couple of these characters will carry over, and the children of the characters in the present will now be dealing with the world their parents left them,” says Leavitt.

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Hollywood may not have the power to influence public policy, but it does have one of the widest-reaching, most attention-getting megaphones when it comes to increasing awareness about serious issues, an impulse it indulges frequently. (Note the release of “Concussion” and “The Big Short” this holiday season.) The industry has a gift for inspiring and agitating, for finding ways to concretize and humanize big, scary issues by employing charismatic movie stars to play-act through plots that illustrate them. “Traffic” (2000) and “Syriana” (2005), both written by Oscar winner Stephen Gaghan, focused on subject matter — the drug culture/war and the ties between the oil industry and terrorism, respectively — that had already reached a certain level of public consciousness. “Thirst,” on the other hand, tackles a topic that Americans — who as recently as 2012 were bypassing tap water to casually spend as much as \$7.50 per gallon on bottled water, an industry that grossed \$12 billion that year — hardly think about at all, and certainly not on the ground-level human scale that it will eventually affect them.



Marc Reisner's 1986 classic *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* was one of the first books to try to give context to all of the forces fighting over the planet's most precious resource. Along with Global Water Policy Project director Sandra Postel's 1997 book *Last Oasis: Facing Water Scarcity*, it was used as source material for a 1997 docu-series called "Cadillac Desert: Water and the Transformation of Nature." For the film, directors Jon Else and Linda Harrar spoke with, among others, Oscar-winning "Chinatown" screenwriter Robert Towne, who built the plot of his masterful 1974 thriller around the real-life Owens River Valley water grab of the 1920s that arguably created Los Angeles as we know it today. (The climactic chilling exchange between the antihero and the amoral heavy is just as resonant today: "Why are you doing it? How much better can you eat? What can you buy that you can't already afford?" asks disillusioned private eye Jake Gittes. "The future, Mr. Gits! *The future!*" bellows Noah Cross.)

Over the last decade, an increasing number of activists and authors have stumped for the crisis and its related issues, especially the fight over privatization of water and for-profit uses of it. Blue Planet Project co-founder and former U.N. senior advisor on water Maude Barlow has written many books on the subject, including *Blue Covenant: The Global Water Crisis and the Coming Battle for the Right to Water* (2009) and *Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop the Corporate Theft of the World's Water* (2005, with Tony Clarke), which inspired Sam Bozzo's 2008 PBS documentary "Blue Gold: World Water Wars." Additional documentaries "Flow: For Love of Water" (2008) and "Water on the Table" (2010) delve into the subject, as do the recent nonfiction books *When the Rivers Run Dry: Water—The Defining Crisis of the Twenty-first Century* (2007) by Fred Pearce and *Water: The Epic Struggle for Wealth, Power, and Civilization* (2011) by Steven Solomon.

We're still not paying attention, but there are increasing signs that our ignorance won't last. One of the most unnerving comes courtesy of Adam McKay's soon-to-be-released financial drama "The Big Short," which informs us via an end title card that Michael Burry, the number-crunching hedge fund manager who predicted the 2008 housing-market crash and made hundreds of millions of dollars by shorting it, is now single-mindedly trading on one commodity: water. And with shocking articles (and photos) about the California drought making it onto front pages everywhere this year, we may finally be reaching a tipping point in public awareness. HBO's "Thirst" project could be an effective way to push it over the line, especially if delivered with the kind of realism that makes the crisis easier for audiences to visualize. "I look at it as, How would David Simon write the future?" says Leavitt, referring to the revered creator of gritty dramas "Homicide: Life on the Street," "The Wire," and "Treme." "It's very lived-in, and we understand exactly what's happening, the whole world politically and everything. That's how I pitched this whole idea [to Damon and HBO]. I really didn't expect them to go for it, but they did."

The bigger question is: Will the rest of us?

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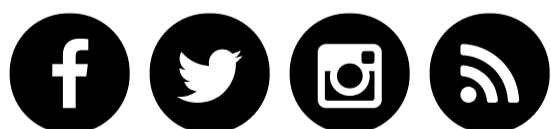
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