Denis Newiak

A Disaster Guide from TV and Cinema

Preparing for the Global Blackout

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at http://dnb.d-nb.de.

Cover picture: © Agnormark | stock.adobe.com

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Numbers indicate playing time in minutes.

Marginalia summarize the core statement of a paragraph.

THIS TIME, WE KNOW BETTER: LEARNING FROM CINEMATIC DISASTERS

Planes full of frightened passengers suddenly can no longer land normally because the pilots cannot find the runway after the airport lights failed, the entire country is in the dark. Doctors operate with flashlights and improvised cutlery in their completely overcrowded hospitals: since the emergency power has been cut, the number of victims from raging fires, diabetics suffering from insulin deficiency, and patients waiting for dialysis continues to grow. Not even the governmental radio communication is working anymore. Because you can no longer get on the Internet, you can only get information (if you still have one lying around) from the radio: the last stations with emergency power still report on where there is looting and rioting or where a nuclear power plant is about to meltdown (the reactor cooling has failed, because there is no more diesel). Those who want to communicate with each other need either radios or, those who can afford it, a satellite phone. Card payment terminals are out of service anyway, so if you need food or medicine, you pay for it with whatever you have on you, if necessary with your grandfather's gold watch to get a box of antibiotics. Because the hygienic conditions on the lower floors of high-rise buildings have become unacceptable (no one has been able to flush the toilet for a week), millions of people have to be relocated to stinking emergency shelters (the

last wet wipes have long since been used up). If there were not this constant fear, since in the local prison the inmates used the opportunity to free themselves: now murderers and rapists are running around freely, and because police officers no longer come to work, no one will catch them anytime soon...

These scenes sound like something out of a movie or television, and that's what they are: highly speculative, dramatized and spectacularly staged – seemingly completely unrealistic, purely fictional, entertainment for an evening of horror that ends with everything being fine in reality, thankfully. But that's what we thought of pandemic movies like *Outbreak* and virus series like *The Rain* – until March 2020, when arenas became emergency hospitals, people in bright yellow protective suits buried hundreds of body bags in New York's Central Park, and conspiracy ideologues railed against vaccination. Suddenly, the television news and our everyday reality were filled with incubation periods and infection counts, social distancing and quarantine policies, personal tragedies and moments of hope when the antigen test comes back negative. *It's all been there before*, namely in popular culture and especially in feature films and television series: here, rapidly spreading viral illnesses were a standard motif long before the Corona pandemic, and reality caught up with it. Although researchers had warned of an impending pandemic for years, politicians and society were caught largely unprepared by the crisis, with the familiar terrible consequences: while some still indulge in the luxury of discussing mandatory

vaccination instead of finally enacting it, two years into the pandemic, there are at least 6 million deaths worldwide, tens of millions of long-term damages, and hundreds of millions of children without orderly schooling – and the next variants are already waiting to strike immunologically naïve hosts.

Pandemics are a perfidious affair: they seemingly arise out of nowhere and appear as if out of the blue, while the dangerous viruses themselves are not directly perceptible and only indirectly reveal their dangerousness through the tragic consequences. It requires not only a great deal of self-discipline but also sound scientific knowledge to confront an invisible enemy like a plague, while denial of reality and recklessness can prove deadly. The last comparably fatal pandemic, which was caused by the HI virus and the immune deficiency AIDS, seems to have been largely forgotten, although a high six-digit number of people still die from the treacherous disease every year. Until 2020, pandemics were not part of our everyday perception, but rather a niche problem that experts in laboratories and clinics struggled with. At the very least, however, many people had already become acquainted with globally rampant pathogens through film and television, whether via genre classics such as *Contagion* or zombie series like *The Walking Dead*: here as there, humanity is fighting against a plague of immense proportions, while we as a cinema and TV audience are entertained by it (Newiak 2021). Then the Corona virus swept over us – and suddenly hand disinfection, N95 masks and

death statistics were no longer movie props, but part of our everyday lives.

After a year of working on the topic of blackouts in movies and television, I feel like I'm caught in a never-ending déjà vu: the warnings are getting louder, that a widespread blackout could be one of the most significant risks for the next five to ten years, even more urgent than climate change. In film and television, blackouts have always been present anyway. Beyond cinematic pop culture, two books in particular have brought the issue to public attention in the past ten years. In 2010, the "Office of Technology Assessment at the German Bundestag" (TAB) published its final report on "Endangerment and Vulnerability of Modern Societies – Using the Example of a Large-Scale and Long-Lasting Power Supply Failure," commissioned by the Bundestag's Committee on Education, Research and Technology Assessment two years earlier. The official researchers came to the frightening conclusion that, in the event of an incident, "even after a few days, it is no longer possible to guarantee area-wide supplies of vital/necessary goods and services to meet with the public's requirements within the region affected by the blackout" (Petermann et al. 2011, 32). In sometimes disturbing detail, the experts describe the short-, medium- and long-term consequences of a blackout for politics, society, the economy and every individual, when the state can no longer fulfill "its duty of protection, as anchored in the Basic Law [the German Constitution], to protect the life and limb of its citizens" (Petermann et al. 2011, 32). The

researchers show how in the case of a blackout, for example, the supply of food, medicines, and reliable information collapses, potentially leading to the loss of the state's monopoly on the use of force.

The study obviously served not only as a great inspiration for the novel *Blackout – Tomorrow Will Be Too Late* by Marc Elsberg, which was published in 2012 and still enjoys a large readership worldwide. Here, terrorists, driven by a crude ideological mix of hostility to civilization and a yearning for anarchy, destroy the power supply in Europe and the USA by hacking and manipulating the control elements of power plants – very much like the very real Stuxnet worm did in 2010, albeit with less fatal consequences than in the novel. In the book, one character feels remarkably reminiscent of the movie *Live Free or Die Hard* (USA 2007) with Bruce Willis, when someone claims that the issue of energy security is simply not yet present enough. Now, at least in fiction, the damage has been done, and "we've only ourselves to blame, because back then, everyone wrote off the dangers as so much craziness from doomsday prophets," as one of Elsberg's (2013, 117) character's exhorts. His main hero, the gifted computer scientist Monzano, sees the military driving through the streets and thinks to himself: "Like in a disaster movie"(Elsberg 2013, 236). Even in the highly acclaimed science fiction novel *2034 – A Novel of the Next World War* (Ackerman and Stavridis 2021), attacks on technical and electrical infrastructure are carried out to weaken the enemy militarily. After The White House's computers are

infiltrated and undersea cables are destroyed, email accounts and cell phones no longer work, not even the candy machine does its job. *"This is bad, this is bad, this is bad,"* goes through a character's mind when nothing works anymore (Ackerman and Stavridis 2021, 49).

These dangers played out in fiction are not plucked out of thin air. In the event of a blackout, everything could quickly be at stake: our accustomed modern standard of living and the things we take for granted, such as running water, stable nutrition and health care – but also our concepts of security and order, which could no longer be fully guaranteed by an overstretched state, as well as our idea of solidarity, which is put to a severe test while any crises. The TAB study and many recent novels, but especially film and television, have recently brought remarkable attention to the subject. The current situation of the invasion of Russian troops into Ukraine and the discussion about missing gas supplies from Eastern Europe, but also the planned shutdown of nuclear power plants and missing power lines between North and South in Germany, the increasing grid complexity due to the desirable increase in renewable energies, dangerous electricity speculations in an over-liberalized market and near-collapses of the grid, awareness of possible operator errors, cyberterrorism and hacker attacks, but also recent natural disasters such as on the Rhine in July 2021 and during the hurricanes in February 2022 – all these recent events have catapulted the neglected problem of an impending blackout into the evening

news. While editorials, reports and essays are warning more and more perceptibly and seriously of the growing danger of a blackout, the German tabloid *Bild-Zeitung*, for example, criticized a public television report for giving important tips on social media on how to prepare for a widespread prolonged power blackout. *Westdeutscher Rundfunk* recommended that people keep a basic supply of food, drinking water, medicines and cash for 10 days, as well as flashlights and a radio, in order to be able to bridge a supply gap self-sufficiently and thus "relax into the blackout." With apocalyptic panic imaginings – which of course would be caused by the hated green energy turnaround – the right-wing *Bild-Zeitung* accused *WDR* of 'trivializing' such a crisis, instead of making clear that in fact with comparatively little effort, as described by the public broadcaster, major damage during such a catastrophe could easily be avoided. In fact, risk assessors from TAB already showed ten years ago, with reference to previous studies, that the public is not prepared for a power blackout to any noticeable degree […] and people are therefore unable to cope adequately with the consequences" (Petermann et al. 2011, 231). On the other hand, anyone who warns of the obvious immediate consequences of a blackout and wants to point out the lack of awareness of it quickly finds themselves accused of either scaremongering or appeasement – but this does not make things any better.

However, the lack of preparation for such a scenario affects not only the civilian population, but

also society as a whole, including the authorities and institutions that are actually responsible for it. To date, as the German Federal Office of Civil Protection and Disaster Assistance (BBK) also concludes, "there is no national strategy in Germany that promotes comprehensive disaster risk management as a cross-cutting task," and thus no significant cross-state and cross-agency prevention against the disaster event of a blackout (BBK 2022; own translation). Germany is not alone in facing this problem: in hardly any European country – exceptions are perhaps Austria and Switzerland – has the topic of "blackout" been on the agenda so far. The consequences for practically all areas of society would be devastating: a widespread power blackout would cause damage worth billions of Euros within hours, grow into a national crisis within days, cause social life to collapse after just one week and could endanger democracies as a whole. This is not doom and gloom, but rather a scientifically proven, quite plausible and also probable matter against the background of expert discourse.

Pandemics, climate change, blackouts – all these crises were easily foreseeable and came with long advance warning from experts and popular culture alike. Hardly any catastrophe, however, was announced more carefully than the blackout. Scenarios of a widespread, prolonged power blackout are now almost part of everyday life in movies and on television, and they have become more widespread in recent years. Now we are waiting for it. But what exactly will happen when the time comes?

How do you think the people affected will behave? What effects will occur that could not have been predicted in academic papers? From a film and television studies perspective, the question then arises: What stories of the blackout do film and television tell? What images of the future, figuratively and literally, do these works create? And what insights can be derived from them that official recommendations cannot bring themselves to, that remain abstract and unapproachable in scientific description but become vivid and tangible in cinematic processing?

Few things are more strongly associated with modernity than electricity: power lines are the blood vessels of modern civilization, the current flowing through them the lifeblood of all modern facilities – from the water tap to the automated stock exchange to the Internet. With a widespread power outage, the entirety of modern life quickly threatens to fail. Today, virtually all technologies that enable and facilitate modern life – communications, health care, logistics – depend on electricity: When electricity is gone, toilets stop flushing, hospitals have to shut down after two days, traffic lights, milking systems and refrigerators fail. The loss of electricity is perhaps the only disaster that could challenge modernity as a whole. A blackout could not only temporarily disable modernization, but reverse it altogether. Film and television bear witness to this ever-present but publicly and politically underestimated danger: in a complex, increasingly globally interconnected 21st century

world struggling with novel threat scenarios such as resource scarcity and terrorism, the likelihood of blackouts is increasing – as is their fatality. In the German feature film *The Coming Days* (*Die kommenden Tage,* D 2010), for example, mentally deranged globalization critics attack the power supply in order to force a violent coup – they use the blackout to destabilize an already battered society that has to wash its hair with water from a tetrapak. For the employees and patients of a hospital in Houston, Texas, the powerless *14 Hours* (USA 2005) becomes a nerve-racking ordeal after the emergency power system is flooded – although, as a result of climate change, extreme weather events must be expected more frequently in the future, the power grid as well as replacement systems need to be prepared for that. In a psychologically dense way, *Into the Forest* (CA 2015) shows how narrow the line is between electrified modernity and de-electrified post-modernity: even if food shortages can be bridged for a short time, at the latest at the moment of accident (such as an injury requiring treatment), danger (crime), or simply a lack of division of labor (in the end, the moldy house collapses), it becomes apparent how strongly we depend on functioning modern infrastructures and the observance of social roles and obligations, all of which ultimately depend on electricity (cf. fig. 1).
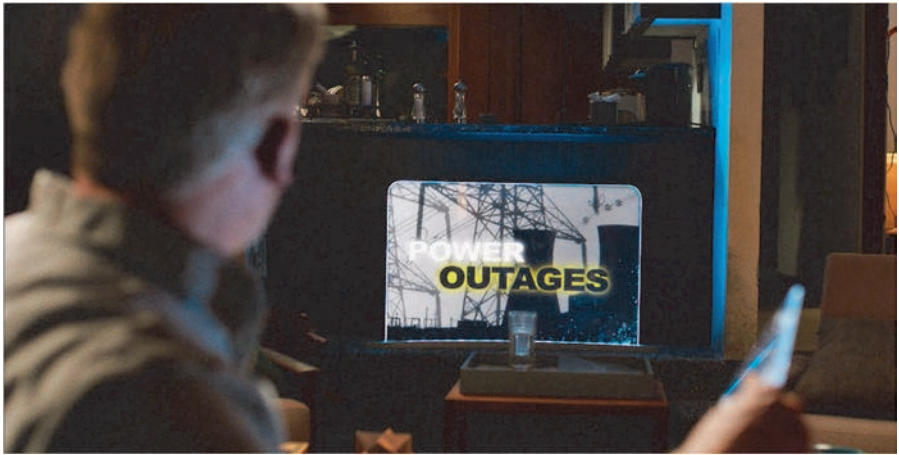
Figure 1: The small family of Into the Forest *(M04) is warned by radio shortly before the nationwide blackout – but by then it is too late to prepare adequately. Fortunately, the single father has some supplies, a power generator and battery-powered radio equipment in the secluded forest cottage. The moment when you have to rely on outside help (the police) and modern infrastructure (a hospital) becomes your undoing.*

Movies and series show that modern society as a whole, as well as individuals, are usually caught completely unprepared by the widespread power outage. The characters often still find a flashlight and a few candles – but the food, drinking water, and medicine reserves run out surprisingly quickly. Who has a supply these days, when you can easily buy everything you need for your daily needs in the supermarket or even have it delivered to your door? In blackout films and series, moments of surprising helpfulness and solidarity often arise out of necessity. In hospital series like *Grey's Anatomy* (USA 2005–), for example, medical staff perform emer-

gency surgery on their patients in stuck elevators until they are totally exhausted. The firefighters of *Chicago Fire* (USA 2012–) fight against carbon monoxide poisoning, because some freezing citizens have tried to warm up at the fireplace without airing their room. In sitcoms – whether *Friends* (USA 1994–2004), *The Big Bang Theory* (USA 2007–2019) or *Family Matters* (USA 1989–1998) – neighbors and family members who previously lived anonymously next door to each other encounter each other anew as they help and keep each other company in times of need, sometimes bringing them closer together again than they would have thought possible. And in crime series and thrillers, such as *Bones* (USA 2005–2017) or *Designated Survivor* (USA 2016–2019), a blackout initially makes work more difficult, but also produces innovative ideas and creative solutions that would never have come to mind under normal circumstances.

But when sooner or later there is a lack of necessities, fictional characters quickly tend toward irrational behavior that is overridden by the instinct for self-preservation. When push comes to shove, in fiction every individual is out for his or her own. In the French series *L'Effondrement* ("The Collapse" FR 2019), inspired by collapsology, for example, people fight for every morsel and last drop of fuel they can still get in a world where energy supplies have completely collapsed due to shortages – although the modern world was clearly warned, here it is running into the open knife (as in the case of the pandemic). Even the last characters who stand

up for others in the midst of hopelessness feel compelled to give up sooner or later, such as the self-sacrificing caretaker of an old people's home: at the end, he tearfully euthanizes the starving and pain-stricken residents.

If blackout films and series have one thing in common, it is the shared awareness that precautions are comparatively easy to take, on both a small and a large scale, at least in relation to the potentially serious damage that can occur: each individual can easily make preparations to better withstand a widespread blackout with an adequate supply of food, water and medicines, a battery-powered radio, a portable charger, and a camping stove. But governments and businesses also need to take greater precautions – ministries and hospitals as well as nuclear power plants – to prevent catastrophic chain reactions. In addition to large reserves of food, fuel, and emergency generators, what is needed above all is greater risk sensitivity and innovative concepts, not least in view of the growing challenges posed by the more complex grid structure as a result of the energy transition as well as the imminent dangers posed by hacker attacks on utilities and infrastructures. In the German TV series *Blackout* (D 2021), for example, not only the control instruments of power plants but also the supposedly 'smart' digital electricity meters in individual households are attacked en masse in order to set domino effects in motion that lead to the collapse of the European power grid – and thus to the collapse of the entire social life, paid for with thousands of victims.

How can one prepare today – as an individual as well as a state – for such a situation, which hopefully will never occur, but which nevertheless cannot be ruled out and is potentially devastating if it does happen? There are various ways of acquiring the necessary knowledge to act. One can read professional articles and scientific papers, but academic studies, with few exceptions, have the unfortunate feature of being cryptic to a non-specialist audience. Their findings may be empirically validated, but they remain inaccessible, technical and abstract, and are therefore not particularly helpful to individuals when it comes to concrete action – which is not a problem, because that is not their purpose either, as they are meant to advance scientific discourse for a highly qualified audience. Of course, you can consult one of the thousands of guidebooks, but many of these guides are quite bold and speculative, occasionally quite tendentious, and sometimes overtly interest-driven – sometimes even propagating conspiracy theories. Some books, which actively address the so-called "prepper" and "survivalism" scene (for whose followers crisis preparedness becomes the most important purpose in life), seem to literally wish for the social decline, as probably some of their readers do, in order to reset liberal democracy in the moment of weakness and to install a power order according to their own anti-democratic ideas. Of course, you can also trust the videos of missionary "Youtubers" – they seem to know exactly what they are talking about, right? The commitment of the many, often unpaid informing video

makers must be appreciated, but among them, as among the "influencers" in so-called "social networks," there are many charlatans: they tend to overdramatize their stories for selfish interests, hoping that you click on their links to emergency generators, water canisters and silver coins, through which the self-proclaimed enlighteners receive not insignificant commissions. The more people are afraid of such a video and click there, the more can be earned with the blackout, even before it has taken place.

In comparison, the cinematic art forms of cinema and television series appear much more illustrative, informative, and trustworthy. Of course, they don't exist simply out of goodwill either: they primarily want to attract our attention in order to tie us to a streaming platform, increase viewer ratings, or justify the investment of a movie ticket – which is justified given the immense costs and creative work behind every film and TV series. The great advantage of fictional cinematic art forms is that they hardly have to obey any rules and can develop freely in terms of design and content: film and series makers can choose the themes and motifs that they believe will achieve the greatest audience success, which leads screenwriters, directors and popular actors to turn to those subjects that affect the audience. The fictional world should have something to do with our own hopes and desires as well as fears and worries about the future, so that we can identify with the story and make it meaningful to us. In this way, films and television series expose, in Angela

Keppler's sense, "what is *relevant in* different areas of society, what matters in politics and economics, culture and art, science and lifestyle" (Keppler 2006, 317; own translation).

Wolfgang Bonß had described that modernity tends to "exponentially increasing, industrially generated catastrophic potentials" (Bonß 1995, 11; own translation), since "the growing possibilities have to be bought with an unintended increase of uncertainty and ambiguity" (Bonß 1995, 22; own translation). To put it in one sentence: the comfortable, dynamic, and stimulating life in the globalized late modern age can probably only be had if one is willing to accept an airplane crash, a pandemic, or a nuclear meltdown now and then. In spite of the drastic experiences that such catastrophes entail (not only those directly affected, but also through public reporting), they do not become part of everyday perception as exceptional situations of civilization. At the same time, individual psychological processes force a temporary repression of the omnipresent dangers, since a domestication of modernity would not be possible at all under constant feelings of fear. While we, as risk sociologist Ulrich Beck puts it, live through and suffer the everyday experiences of this increasingly threatening modernity with "its turmoils, contradictions, symbols, ambivalences, fears, ironies, and hidden hopes [...] without grasping them and without understanding them" (Beck 2007, 19; own translation), films and television series about catastrophes and crises allow us to

deal with these dangers without damage in order to react appropriately in the event of an incident.

Severe accidents, fires, storms, and hazardous substance releases can unleash the potential to make parts of modernity uninhabitable or unlivable, which is why modern society must have an interest in also being able to deal with the exceptional situation of disaster. Because catastrophes that are potentially associated with great damage have not yet occurred naturally, and therefore do not reveal themselves of their own accord in the present with their possible causes and consequences, a modern society must first develop an awareness of future dangers in order to be able to avert them in advance, to control them by prophylaxis in the event of damage, or, if nothing else helps, at least to get through them alive. A naïve modernity that is caught off guard by its inherent forces of destruction can, in the worst case, turn into its opposite. Blackout films and series conspicuously prefer narratives that show a modernity struggling to survive the widespread blackout (for example, in the Belgian series *Black-Out*, 2020–2021), or that unwind the de-electrified society directly into a *pre*-modernity (for example, in *Fear The Walking Dead*, USA 2015 –, or in *Tribes of Europa*, D 2021).

By bringing dangers such as a blackout 'into the present,' films and television series achieve by means of their fictional liberties what Beck calls the "*reality staging of* world risk": "For it is only through the visualization, the staging of world risk, that the future of the catastrophe becomes present –

often with the aim of averting it by influencing present decisions." (Beck 2007, 30; own translation) For Eva Horn, this is the special quality of cinematic fictions of catastrophe, because they "seem to depict something that we consider possible and perhaps even imminent, but at the same time cannot imagine, cannot grasp" (Horn 2014, 21; own translation). For Elena Esposito, it is precisely in this fictionalization of possible futures that a particularly dense experience of reality emerges – denser than immediately perceptible social reality can ever achieve:

> *Fiction allows for the portrayal of deception, intrigue, or observational relationships that cannot be observed in actual reality, which is rarely realistic. Consequently, those who are able to engage with these features of fictional texts are better able to navigate the real world and the complexities of its relationships.* (Esposito 2014, 56; own translation)

Modernity, according to Esposito, is characterized by the fact that "real reality is becoming increasingly opaque," i.e., it is more and more escaping immediate perception due to a rapid pace of change, complex interdependencies, and a high degree of mechanization (Esposito 2014, 199). At the same time reasonable decisions in the present determine whether the future unfolds as a space for shaping or closes itself off as a zone of danger. This is why procedures through which one can gain access to reality and thus also to possible futures are

becoming essential for the survival of modern society. Whereas until recently 'the fronts' were clearly settled – just think of the division of the world into two hostile camps until 1990 – the high degree of abstraction of present-day dangers (cyberterrorism initiated from afar, the multiplication of conspiracy ideologies, disruptive events arising from cascading effects, etc.), according to Slavoj Žižek, brings the problem that we as modern people can no longer directly confront the uncertainties arising from them: we cannot look the causative sources in the eye due to their opacity (Žižek 2011, 360). Disaster films and series, on the other hand, cast their 'spotlights' on otherwise hidden discourses, such as unjust relations of "class, race and gender" (Keane 2006, 74), which in the light of artistic engagement emerge as directly visible figures in their own right – for example, in the form of cinematic characters in whose position viewers can put themselves and whose decision-making dilemmas can be comprehended.

Keppler is convinced that television in particular – "[i]n its continuous articulation and variation of what the current landmarks of what is real and important are" – is what enables modern society to develop "a collective consciousness of the present" in the first place (Keppler 2006, 317; own translation), and thus also of the catastrophic potentials smoldering within it. For Marcus Kleiner, the accompanying strong media presence of crises is "a traditional way of coping with crises that lends a higher teleological sense to the experience of uncer-

tainty and threat" (Kleiner 2013, 228; own transla-
tion), i.e., conveys the feeling that the dangers and
risks confronting us are not random and thus un-
controllable, but a logical consequence of the pro-
cess of modernization – if not preventable, maybe at
least containable. Kay Kirchmann describes for tele-
vision how, through "the *reflexive thematization of
alternative selection options in the narrative process
itself,*" it is capable of producing "alternative and at
the same time antinomic plot designs within *one*
narrative" (Kirchmann 2006, 163; own transla-
tion): through the "subjunctive narrative forms"
specific to television series (Kirchmann 2006, 167),
in the media view, the possibility arises to take a
look at different possible courses of events and to
observe how decisions in the narrated present
within the fictional logic affect the future of the
plot, whether they lead to desirable and undesirable
consequences.

As can be seen here, film and television research
consistently sees a high importance of its objects of
study in the participation in socially relevant pro-
cesses of creating and conveying meaning, especially
in the context of future issues and crises (cf. chapter
1). Against this background, it is also not surprising
that films and television series are being taken up in
a conspicuous manner more and more frequently in
specialist and non-fiction books, but also in press re-
porting, in order to activate the assumed pop-cul-
tural knowledge of the readership, listeners, and
viewers and to profit from the familiarity and appeal
of such works by allowing their glamor to radiate

onto their own presentation. How often have we heard in recent years, for example in the context of the Corona pandemic, that we would see 'pictures like from a science fiction film'? In this way, authors and journalists prove that the otherwise elusive discourses of scientific problems become more comprehensible and tangible with the help of cinematic fictions. In most of these cases, however, there is no real interest in the filmic works themselves as a form of expression; rather, the series and movies on which they focus often serve only as cues and have to serve as illustrations of a complex context that would otherwise have to be skillfully and elaborately formulated or illustrated by the authors themselves. The sophisticated cinematic forms of expression then threaten to become banal decals of a certain idea of 'social reality,' which become more easily recognizable in the 'mirror' of the medium, but in fact only conceal the construct character of such presuppositions.

However, this book is not about explaining the problem of blackouts on the basis of movies and TV series, anecdotally stringing scenes together to misuse them as evidence of the 'real' danger of blackouts. Rather, we want to let the films and television series speak for themselves: What imaginaries of blackout do such works develop? Which narratives dominate the blackout scenarios and which ones stand out in particular? What forms of staging appear in such works and in what light do they cast the problem of the blackout? And how do the fic-

tions position themselves in relation to the objectively real danger of a widespread blackout? What have the artworks "thought of" that is not even "on our radar" yet? Needless to say, feature films and television series are subject to a different logic, a particular form of knowledge order, than scientific discourse or everyday language arguments: cinematic art forms are not primarily concerned with whether we, as viewers, perceive the scenarios they show as warnings of a future risk that is relevant to society as a whole, or whether we can even read out courses of action that help us deal with them. It is not part of the production intention of cinematic art forms to serve the audience something extraneous (didactic, alarming, prophetic) on a silver platter – strictly speaking, they don't want *anything* for themselves. Certainly, one may also assume that the production collectives and the individuals acting in them have certain interests, ideas, perhaps also some idealism and missionary aims that crawl into the finished work. However, since the creators of such works are themselves part of the social totality and do not move in a hermetically sealed special sphere, but rather are forced to respond to the (actual and assumed) wishes, needs and hopes of the audience in order to generate a large viewership, it is unlikely that problematic systematic errors, denials of reality, or attempts at manipulation will take root in a collectively produced film or television series. Rather, a society generates precisely those films and television series that must emerge from it at a certain point in time; they then appear as a mosaic of the

countless fragments of discourse that circulate in the fast-moving late-modern social present.

Of course, standard film and television research methods, even the elaborate experimental setups of media psychology, do not allow us to make any firm statements about a concrete "learning effect" on individuals from watching a series or a film – the interplay between a consciousness that cannot be directly observed and an aesthetically complex play with images and sound is too dynamic, interdependent, and ultimately inscrutable for that. Because individuals naturally derive their knowledge of the world not only from film and television, but from upbringing in family, school, and clubs, through peer groups and special caregivers, other mass media, and direct experience in dealing with the environment, it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to neatly separate these various fragments. However, it seems not only intuitive but also plausible to assume that films and television series make a considerable contribution to the transmission of knowledge, which is then circulated and made usable in a society. Ultimately, maybe it is not important to be able to say that a certain person has acquired flashlights, camping stoves, and emergency supplies just because he or she was shown doing so in a film or television series (even if, I may say with certainty, this is true at least for myself). What seems decisive for the context underlying this book is that popular art forms, and above all cinematic forms of expression, can contribute to sensitizing people to certain trends and constellations that are just becoming relevant,