

Locating the Quotidian in Catastrophes and Crises

Elizabeth Kovach

Abstract:

This volume edited by Carsten Meiner and Kristen Veel investigates how catastrophes and crises are processed by the cultures in which they occur. Drawing from many disciplines within the study of culture, the volume groups essays according to the categories of understanding, remembering, imagining, and desiring catastrophes and crises. A wide range of historical events, medial forms, and cultural artifacts enter into the discussion, which makes the book best suited to those seeking an expansive overview of and insight into the diversity of the latest cultural-studies work on the subject.

How to cite:

Kovach, Elizabeth: „Locating the Quotidian in Catastrophes and Crises [Review on: Meiner, Carsten; Kristin Veel (Hg.): The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2012.]“. In: KULT_online 38 (2014).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2014.831>

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Meiner, Carsten; Kristin Veel (Hg.): *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*. Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2012. 322 S., 89.95 Euro. ISBN: 978-3-11-028283-2

In his contribution to the volume *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (Ed. Carsten Meiner and Kristen Veel), Knut Owe Eliassen writes of modern critical theory that: “Catastrophe is no longer that which is to come, but it is rather given, already there – it is as imminent as it is immanent” (49). One does not need to be a scholar of the study of culture to immediately understand what Eliassen means, given the many forms of lived and impending catastrophes and crisis – financial, security and privacy-related, nuclear, environmental – that saturate daily life. It is, therefore, no wonder that the field of cultural studies is also saturated by work related to these subjects. This volume, nonetheless, makes a unique contribution by inquiring how catastrophes and crises are culturally produced, diagnosed and perpetuated. The editors are not simply interested in catastrophes and crises in and of themselves but in the “multi-layered and complex interlinkage between actual events and the cultural processing of these events” (1). They have assembled a diverse set of essays, casting a wide net in terms of disciplinary perspectives, cultural objects of study, geographical places and historical times. This provides readers with an expansive introduction to the range of work being done in the field, not to mention the myriad ways in which catastrophes and crises impact – and are impacted by – cultures across space and time.

The thesis driving all contributions to the volume is that catastrophic events, defined as sudden occurrences, and crises, defined as sustained predicaments, must be understood in terms of their cultural life. They are to be considered in terms of the way they are prefigured by cultural motifs and scripts, how they are interpreted once they occur, and what kinds of cultural representation they subsequently engender. Contributors cover disciplines ranging from sociological disaster studies through to narratology and media studies. They introduce numerous cultural artifacts and medial forms, from documentary film, photography and sound art through to literary fiction. And they handle many different historically and culturally situated ‘genres’ of catastrophes and crises: natural disasters, political upheaval and war, genocide, terrorist attack, apocalypse. All contributions, despite their topical specificity, emerge as variations of a shared theme or premise: no matter how historically and culturally exceptional catastrophes and crises may be, they are necessarily entangled with, and must be understood in terms of, the “reservoirs of imagination and memory, logic and desires which help us to cope with the inconceivable and intolerable” (12).

The volume thus analyzes catastrophes and crises according to their cognitive and cultural mediation. It is structurally divided into categories related to the (1) understanding, (2) remembering, (3) imagining and (4) desiring of these phenomena and begins with theoretical texts on "Thinking Catastrophes and Crises". Isak Winkel Holm offers an overview of concepts central to disaster studies, and includes a typology of cultural forms of disaster. This is followed by Eliassen's survey of the conceptual evolution that 'catastrophe' has taken from Greek Antiquity through to the late 20th century, which is sketched via punctuated analyses of 'catastrophe concepts' in the work of Rabelais, Rousseau, Vonnegut Jr. and Beckett. Ansgar Nünning forcefully argues for the importance of metaphorological and narratological research in understanding crises and catastrophes as discursively constructed and culturally diagnosed. Carsten Meiner's discussion of Voltaire's *Candide* demonstrates how the critical theorists of the post-WWII period, like Adorno dealt with in Agus Soewarta's preceding article, were by no means the first to relegate catastrophe and crises to the realm of the quotidian. Already in 1759, Voltaire produced a work in which the trauma of catastrophe is not its suddenness but rather its ubiquity.

The second section on "Witnessing and Remembering Catastrophes and Crises" covers a wide range of events, from the Rwandan genocide and war in Yugoslavia to the Partition of India and Pakistan. Isabel Capeloa Gil offers an in-depth contribution with a reading of Ernst Jünger's photo books from which she distills a "visual literacy of disaster in Weimar Germany" and discusses how Jünger's photos both echo and deconstruct codified notions of disaster of the time (148). Jaap Kooijman provides a critical reading of "The Cultural Life of 9/11" and the rhetorical usages of the narrative "I" and "we" in describing the event. The latter two sections, on "Imagining" and "Desiring and Consuming" catastrophes and crises make for lively reading, not least due to the sheer diversity of cultural products covered, from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to sound art recorded within the WTC towers years before their collapse. Alberto Brodesco demonstrates how the shopping mall is a metaphor for the end of humanity in post-apocalyptic films, integrating premises from Zygmunt Bauman's *Consuming Life* to, for instance, interpret zombies as perpetually unsatisfied consumers. While he and others introduce interesting theoretical frameworks, one is often left desiring more analysis and argumentation.

Indeed, one of the volume's most appealing facets results in its main weakness: breadth comes at the price of depth. Further elaboration of the intriguing arguments and examples presented would have strengthened many essays and the volume as a whole. Key concepts such as "premediation" and "remediation" are, for example, introduced without mention of their scholarly origins. This volume is most suitable for readers looking for an overview of topics and frameworks related to the cultural life of catastrophes and crises. It certainly makes a contribution to the field in this regard. And its thesis that catastrophes and crises must be understood in terms of their cultural lives takes on fascinating nuances and builds in strength due to the diversity of cases included.