

Jörg Dünne / Gesine Hindemith / Judith Kasper (eds)

Catastrophe & Spectacle

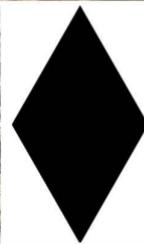
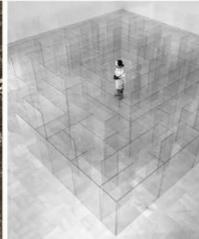
Variations of a Conceptual Relation from the 17th to the 21st Century

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Introduction

Jörg Dünne / Gesine Hindemith / Judith Kasper

At the beginning of each essay in this volume, there is an image. Some of these images, which have been brought together and combined within the montage of this introductory chapter, depict so-called ‘natural catastrophes’, some refer to technical or historical events, while others display a theatrical scene or simply a seemingly peaceful meadow. In most cases, if not all, the ‘catastrophic’ aspect of these images calls for some explanation, meaning that the images are dependent upon an annotative text that situates the initial image within a historical, philological or pragmatic context.

With this combination of iconic depiction and textual commentary, the contributions in this volume provide a form of critical commentary on recent theoretical discussions concerning the modern understanding of catastrophe in the 18th century as a phenomenon emerging from these images. From the perspective of the contributions

in this volume, this assumption requires a number of modifications:

1) Spectacularity: Catastrophes are inseparably bound to their modes of visual display, and yet these modes of display are not simply the product of one specific medium as opposed to another. The essays in this volume seek the genealogy of a modern understanding of the catastrophe in medial practices of staging, rather than solely within the medium of the image (Trempler¹). They thus closely relate the history of the term ‘catastrophe’ (Briese / Günther) to that of the spectacle and the spectacular (Hamon-Siréjols / Gardies, Moindrot), and assume that, in varying the title of Hans Blumenberg’s essay on the shipwreck metaphor, catastrophes are always already “catastrophes with spectators”. This new emphasis also accompanies a return to the theatrical origins of the term catastrophe.

2) Historicity: Recent studies assert that the catastrophe was an “invention” (Mercier-Faivre/Thomas) of the 18th century. Indeed, the term undergoes a significant semantic change during the 18th century when the theatrical origins of the term are expanded to include both geological and political-historical events. The hypothesis regarding the creation of the catastrophe during the 18th century, however, must include the observation that narratives of catastrophe in the fields of both fiction and non-fiction had already been evolving during the 16th and 17th centuries (Lavocat). Whether an epidemic, a fire or a shipwreck: The catastrophe is always written from the perspective of the witness and thus exhibits an inherent observer constellation. And, especially in the age of so-called ‘technical’ media, such techniques of the observer (Crary) serve to intensify the tension between the catastrophe and the spectacular, thus facilitating the “society of the spectacle” according to Guy Debord.

3) Reflexivity: The combination of image and textual commentary in this volume ultimately refers to a critical approach toward the nexus of catastrophe and spectacularity, perhaps most prominently figured in Guy Debord’s well-known criticism of what he refers to as the “society of the spectacle”, which is fueled by an endless series of catastrophic moments. In the course of this criticism, the desire for catastrophic

staging is increasingly confronted by skepticism toward catastrophic images, which finds expression in philological work on the term “cata/strophe” (Kasper), that is, within the search for alternative concepts (such as those of the unspectacular ‘disaster’), as well as in images themselves, which refuse to be embedded within a spectacular staging.

The essays in this volume are arranged in chronological order according to the relationship between spectacularity and catastrophe, taking the relationship between image and text as a starting point for considering the changes that have taken place in literature, in the media and cultural history. Starting with the representation of catastrophes in the early modern period, that is, in baroque theatrical stagings (Françoise Lavocat, Bettine Menke), two subsequent essays (Jörg Dünne, Walburga Hülk) then deal with the interdependence between natural and cultural history during the Enlightenment, before attention shifts to a major focal point of the contributions in the volume at hand (Kati Röttger, Marie-Hélène Huet, Gesine Hindemith, Johannes Ungelenk, Giulia Palladini), which is examining the culture of the spectacular catastrophe in the 19th and early 20th centuries. A striking rupture in our fascination with the spectacularity of the catastrophic is documented in the contributions that describe the catastrophic spectacle and its criticism from the

middle of the 20th century on (Jean-Pierre Dupuy, Martina Bengert, Vittoria Borsò, Davide Caliaro, Judith Kasper) – an ambivalence that is clearly recognizable in the search for new forms of engagement with the spectacular in the sense of global or planetary catastrophes since September 11, 2001 (Markus Ophälders, Gianluca Solla, Jörn Etzold).

Although these collected essays take different approaches toward the relationship between spectacularity and catastrophe, they all process a relationship of tension in the same way (variously accentuated depending upon the chosen subject and its historical localization). On the one hand, the contributions show to which extent the process of visualization provides a basis for understanding catastrophic events. In addition, they analyze visual procedures with regard to their inadequacy as well as their collapse in light of the catastrophe being observed. At times, the imagery itself becomes affected by something catastrophic, making the iconic depiction of catastrophes impossible at a representational level, even causing depictions to implode in themselves. (Martina Bengert explains in her essay that even the rhombus within the pictorial montage of this introductory chapter can bring forth an implicit challenge to the imagery.) The spectacularization of

catastrophes on the one hand and the challenge to the spectacular as a catastrophe of a second order on the other both follow, as will become apparent in this volume, a clear historical arrangement.

The spectacular staging of the catastrophe and the critique of catastrophe within the impossible image reorganize the human relationship to the past as early as during the early modern period and the Enlightenment, but increasingly from the 19th century onward (Huet). They contemplate history from its contingent end, from its sudden interruption and its hopeless downfall. It is a disruptive presentation of history, which is epistemologically formed from the images of the spectacular catastrophe (Dünne). History becomes a sequence of time periods that overlap and that are separated from each other by catastrophes, for example, by catastrophes of a geological nature. This assumption also corresponds with the idea of a geological *deep time* which is catastrophically separated from *human time* and can no longer be made historically perceivable. History is no longer a continuous narrative, but rather appears as a sequence of discontinuous tableaux whose appearance and disappearance seem at times to possess spectacular traits in themselves (Rudwick). An affinity for catastrophe and spectacle can be found in the theater as well. Although the concept of the spectacular

is explicitly established for the first time within the context of the 19th-century theater (Roger), its roots go back to the baroque machine theater. Having inherited the intensive use of theater machinery from the baroque theater, popular theater since the French Revolution has been particularly affected by the affinity between catastrophe and spectacle, a factor which is evident in the popular French genre of the *féerie* (Dünne / Hindemith). Originating on the theatrical Parisian stage, the culture of spectacular theater begins to take over urban spaces in the 19th century, and new forms of entertainment are born (Schwartz). Spectacle and catastrophe thus find their place in the consumer culture of flourishing capitalism.

Moving past theatrical catastrophe, which was merely a (downward) turning point and could also be found in comedy (Briese), the essays in this volume also ask to which extent the spectacular is inherent to the catastrophe: Does the spectacularization of the modern catastrophe occur as a part of consumer culture? And does it inevitably lead to Debord's society of the spectacle? Or does the spectacular itself have the potential to defy the simple consumption of the catastrophes presented? Is what we would call modernity in an aesthetic and epistemic sense perhaps based on the articulation of spectacle and catastrophe?

While spectacular catastrophes function as a historical foundation for the modern episteme and for aesthetics, they are also challenged by a movement of unfounding (what Deleuze calls *effondement*). In the 20th century, the two World Wars and the annihilation of the Jews in Nazi concentration camps marked critical watersheds in European history and its representation of catastrophes, forcing us to ask what it means to speak of events without end and to probe the limits of representation (Benjamin, Adorno). New ways of working at and on these limits have included the use of non-linear, multi-directional narratives, visual and verbal fragmentation, and belated, traumatic temporality.

The fact that it was possible to kill six million Jews in Nazi camps spread throughout Europe without that annihilation being *effectively* documented – that is, without it leading to attempts by the Allies and others to stop it – is a scandal that has shattered the relationship between catastrophe and visibility, seeing and knowing, representation and responsibility.

The Shoah – the Hebrew word for catastrophe – has been described as a “historical attack on perception” (Felman). Such an attack has made it necessary to reconceptualize the relationship between catastrophic events and their perception. The devastating experience of the Shoah cannot

be represented by conventional means or can only be 'represented' to the extent that it shatters these means. Its traumatic impact registers belatedly and often elsewhere than one might expect it. Here it is important to stress that the traditional mimetic ordering of an event and its representation may itself be shattered, making it necessary to view the former paradoxically as an after-effect of the latter. One could argue in this regard that the catastrophe emerges as an after-effect of its depiction and visualization. In short, with the Shoah, the catastrophe itself breaks into its depiction, smashing not only the means of representation but the very relationship between before and after, event and image.

The historical catastrophe as an absolute, even ontological disaster (Blanchot) cannot be portrayed as a discrete event. Indeed, it is the historical catastrophe that destroys everything – including the perception of the radical loss itself. The catastrophe as a disaster no longer brings about the collapse of the heavens as a firmament, but instead the demise of each subjective observer position. The catastrophe as disaster is the alarming experience that images and reality, as well as words and things, constantly disintegrate. The catastrophe as a disaster is above all an infinite void that leaves one disoriented, traumatized and anesthetized throughout space, time and history.

Given this completely faceless catastrophe, the task of art, science and philosophy is no longer to present the catastrophe, which will never be anything else than an act of trivialization that bestows a face and a history upon a destruction that can no longer be captured by any image, face or story. Their task is rather to interrupt the anesthetic reporting with their rhetorical constructions of language and image, which are all placed on the image like a shroud hung over a catastrophe that has long since become normal. Viewed as such, the spectacle is not a means of increasing awareness, but rather a perfect defensive shield against it – unless we can ascribe to the spectacular (or at least some of its manifestations) a character of staging beyond Debord's critique of the spectacle, a staging that is in itself already disrupted. In this context, the importance of writing and oral testimony returns: In writing and the spoken word, something of this catastrophe can be articulated, which tends to be negated by images. As such, the critique of the spectacle in light of the Shoah sharpens our awareness of those structurally resistant moments in potentially every form of the spectacularization of catastrophes, in which the images, recalled once more, fail: in that the language of tropes begins to stutter, or the images called upon suddenly begin to blur or in any other form prove to be

disrupted precisely because the Real of the catastrophe penetrates the medium of illustration.

But has the last word in the complex history of the nexus of catastrophe and spectacle already been spoken with the 20th-century crisis of catastrophic spectacularity? Faced with current figurations of global or even planetary catastrophe (cf. Dupuy, Horn), it seems that, in light of the ‘Anthropocene’, the catastrophic spectacularity of human history inextricably refers back to natural history, thus picking up aspects of the catastrophe theories of the 18th century. Will this shift in understandings of the catastrophic also, for its part, shift the boundaries of their ability to stage the spectacular? The melodramatic apocalypse in Lars von Trier’s film *Melancholia*, which the last essay in this volume addresses, calls forth the assumption that new modern forms of the relationship between spectacle and catastrophe are being established, as does the title image of this volume, a reactor merry-go-round which is built inside the cooling tower of a planned atomic reactor, the main attraction of the “Wunderland Kalkar” amusement park in Niederrhein. While this may certainly be understood as a late-capitalist product of the society of the spectacle according to Guy Debord, it may also be understood as an entirely ironic repurposing that contrasts

the reflexive force of the spectacular with the life-threatening catastrophic agency of mankind in the atomic age.

Be that as it may: In their confrontations with the spectacularity of catastrophes, art, science, philosophy and perhaps even popular culture, the contributions in this volume become seismographs that document shocks affecting not only the geologic dimensions of Earth and larger historical changes, but also ways of dealing with theatricality and imagery, language and thought themselves.

Most of the essays in this volume were first presented at the international conference “Spectacular Catastrophes, Catastrophic Spectacles”, which was held from March 4 to March 7, 2015, in Erfurt and funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). The conference was the joint concluding event to two DFG-funded research projects with related questions: the project “Die katastrophische Feerie” (Jörg Dünne and Gesine Hindemith) at the University of Erfurt and the project “Der traumatisierte Raum” (Judith Kasper) at the University of Potsdam. The English-language publication of this volume was also made possible by DFG funding.

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*

- 1 For detailed bibliographic references see the bibliography of this introduction which is supposed to give an overview of basic readings on the subject of this book.

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