

The background of the cover is a vibrant yellow with several thick, diagonal red rays emanating from the bottom left corner. There are also various red splatters and blotches scattered across the yellow field, particularly concentrated near the base of the rays.

CATASTROPHE AND CATHARSIS

**Perspectives on Disaster and Redemption
in German Culture and Beyond**

**Edited by Katharina
Gerstenberger
and Tanja Nusser**

Catastrophe and Catharsis

Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture

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Perspectives on Disaster and Redemption in German Culture and Beyond

Edited by
Katharina Gerstenberger and Tanja Nusser



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Katharina Gerstenberger and Tanja Nusser

Introduction

Katharina Gerstenberger and Tanja Nusser

CATASTROPHE CALLS FOR INTERPRETATION. Over two thousand books pertaining to catastrophe or disaster have come out in the United States alone since 2000, ranging from popular genres to scientific volumes in fields as different as ethnography, geology, history, gender studies, literature studies, media studies, sociology, and philosophy. Disaster movies entertain large audiences with gripping plots and spellbinding images. Our volume investigates this fascination with catastrophes or disasters. *Catastrophe and Catharsis: Perspectives on Disaster and Redemption in German Culture and Beyond* explores approaches to catastrophe and its representations in Germany and neighboring countries from a variety of disciplinary perspectives within the humanities and the social sciences, drawing on literary texts, films, visual images, as well as historical documents. Cultural and political contexts determine the meaning of disastrous events and the narratives we create about catastrophe therefore change over time. Whereas the 1883 eruption of the Indonesian volcano Krakatoa is commonly considered to be the first catastrophe whose effects could be measured around the globe, the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster marks a shift away from local or national frameworks toward a global or transnational reception of catastrophes and their sociopolitical impact. Scholars, in turn, increasingly focus on larger historical and sociopolitical contexts as they analyze how we represent and cope with disaster in a global world. But even centuries before international disasters such as the Chernobyl reactor accident, catastrophes like the 1755 Lisbon earthquake inspired the literary and visual imagination beyond cultural or national borders. The majority of catastrophes discussed in this volume did not take place in Germany but had a strong resonance within German-speaking culture, underscoring the significance of disaster discourse at the intersection between the national and the global.

For the scholar of catastrophe and its representation the ubiquity of the disastrous presents rich material but also significant classificatory challenges, beginning with questions of definition. Following common practice in the English language, we use the terms “disaster” and “catastrophe” synonymously in this volume. What qualifies as a catastrophe, furthermore, very much depends on the context and the rhetorical intent.

The terms “catastrophe” and “disaster” show up frequently in a variety of frameworks and genres, ranging from everyday speech, where they are often used in the hyperbolic referencing of comparatively minor incidents, to events resulting in the loss of tens of thousands of lives or quantified by an economic cost in the millions or billions of dollars. Catastrophe, in the words of Eva Horn, is a “Schlagwort der Zeitdiagnose. Irgendetwas ist immer im Begriff sich zu einer Katastrophe auszuwachsen oder bereits eine zu sein“ (catchy diagnosis of our present. There is always something that threatens to turn into a catastrophe or to be one already).¹ Quantitative, financially based delineations, such as the one offered by the insurance company Swiss Re that defines a catastrophe as an event causing material losses of at least US \$96 million or taking upward of twenty lives are useful to assess dimensions but cannot address the cultural connotations or the analytical implications of catastrophe that are the focus of most humanities or social science studies, including the ones in this volume.² The anthropologists Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman emphasize in the introduction to their volume *Catastrophe and Culture* that the “multidimensionality and the multiple subjectivities involved make formally defining disaster highly problematic.” They go on to suggest that a disaster means the collision of a “potentially destructive agent/force” emanating from either the natural or the built environment with an economically and socially vulnerable population. The historian Greg Bankoff supports this approach when he rejects the idea of a natural catastrophe altogether, emphasizing the importance of social and economic structures for the ways in which catastrophic events affect a given population.³ Building on these classifications, we define as catastrophe or disaster destructive, disruptive, and highly visible events that command public awareness beyond the local or regional level and are labeled as such in literature, film, and mass media. We consider different types of catastrophes, including those of a technological nature such as a meltdown in a nuclear power plant, as well as natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods. We also include intentional catastrophes such as war and the devastating losses they cause in terms of human life and the damage they do to social structures. Disaster derives its meaning through representation. Individual and collective mechanisms of coping with destructive events, both in the immediate aftermath and over periods of time, play a significant role in determining the weight and the resonance of disaster in a given cultural context.

The various academic disciplines concerned with disaster studies pose different sets of questions and apply distinctive scientific categories when they examine catastrophic events, adding to the broad scope of definitions of and perspectives on catastrophe. Where there is agreement, certainly in the humanities and the social sciences, is that disasters can be understood only in the context of culture, and that any analysis, whether

it addresses communal strategies for coping with calamity, literary renditions of catastrophe, or Hollywood disaster films, must be mindful of their embeddedness in and implications for human society. Even those charged with addressing the material or logistical aspects of a disaster operate within cultural frameworks. In an article about participants in a summer course for radiological protection specialists held in England in 1995, the anthropologist Sharon Stephens draws attention to what she calls the “cultural grounding” that shapes these experts’ scientific discussions and in turn influences their recommendations to the European Union and other political bodies regarding the safety of radiation levels.⁴ Catastrophe, the literary scholar Peter Utz has remarked, is a “cultural pattern” that governs the reception and representation of an extraordinary and destructive event and that cannot be understood or defined outside of its historical or social context.⁵ This volume takes a closer look at the ways in which Western countries, in particular German-speaking cultures, try to make sense of catastrophic occurrences. How and to what purpose, we ask, is a disaster or a catastrophe depicted within specific media—be they textual, pictorial, or filmic: literary texts or feature films, news reports and documentaries, firsthand accounts or scholarly essays—and what do these narratives contribute to our understanding of catastrophe as a social, cultural, and human experience? Which cultural patterns shape disaster discourses? And which narratives form our understanding of disasters and catastrophes?

Making Sense of the Incomprehensible

Catastrophe must be represented, symbolized, and processed. Borrowing from the philosopher Slavoj Žižek’s reflections on the impossibility of withstanding the onslaught of what the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan has termed “the Real,” it can be argued that a catastrophe is an experience “we are able to sustain only if we fictionalize it,” which is to say that in order to cope with the reality of catastrophe we must approach it as if it were fiction.⁶ We are thus faced with a fundamental paradox that shapes narratives about catastrophes: catastrophes constitute a moment of shock and resist synthesizing, resulting in a “loss of language” because words seem to fail as we seek to transmit the experience of the catastrophe. Yet at the same time there is the need to bring catastrophes into a linear narrative order that makes sense, producing meaning often well beyond the event. Thomas Klinkert and Günter Oesterle, in the introduction to their volume *Katastrophe und Gedächtnis*, reflect on the importance of the temporal dimension in the creation of meaning through fictionalization when they observe that a disaster narrative must bridge for the potential reader the time between destruction and restitution by projecting the story of a destroyed past into a future the narrator may not even live to

see.⁷ Catastrophes and disasters thus contain a significant interpretational potential: tales about catastrophe might offer philosophical reflections on helplessness in the face of massive assaults on the individual's physical and mental integrity; they can be vehicles of religious, moral, or political commentary on human society; they can also serve to reconsider the relationship between humans and nature. However, as the Latin American studies scholar Mark D. Anderson has pointed out, "disasters result in fierce competition over which interpretations hold sway over the collective imagination."⁸ Our volume considers some of these competing narratives through a range of case studies that highlight disciplinary differences in the approach to disaster as well as historical change.

Although every catastrophe is unique regarding the specific circumstances, representations of disastrous events follow genre conventions that have been established over the course of time, beginning with religious and mythological descriptions of natural disasters. Each new catastrophe will invoke individual or collective memories of and response patterns to previous disasters, with existing narratives and coping mechanisms being reproduced and adapted while also inspiring new forms of expression that seek to challenge the traditional models of representation. Such processes are complex and at times counterintuitive, as for instance the historian François Walter has shown in his study of catastrophe from the sixteenth to the twenty-first century in which he argues for a continued existence of the sacred in narratives about disaster even in our presumably secularized era.⁹ Another example is the ethnographer Urte Undine Frömming's study of Icelandic and Indonesian survival strategies vis-à-vis the volcanic eruptions that threaten communities in both countries. Her comparative analysis of coping rituals and explanatory myths opens up new perspectives on the cultural implications of disaster beyond simply observing that there is significant diversity in terms of actual practice.¹⁰ In challenging the presumed differences between modern and premodern societies in their responses to disaster in favor of a much broader understanding of human interaction with nature and the threats it presents, studies such as Frömming's also call into question the oft-invoked connection between catastrophe and modernity that can be traced back to Horkheimer and Adorno's contention about catastrophe as modernity's other.

Yet although the "grand narrative" of modernity, understood here as the human capacity to deploy technology in both the making and the mastery of catastrophe, has come under significant scrutiny (see Franz Mauelshagen's chapter in this book), the meanings of catastrophe in modern culture continue to exert a powerful interpretative force. Marie-Hélène Huet argues in *The Culture of Disaster* that the "state of emergency that characterizes current Western culture . . . stems from a pervasive anxiety about catastrophic events now freed from their theological meanings and worsened by human failures."¹¹ Huet's case for

modernity's paradoxical claim on being able to ward off disaster through technology and science and its inability to actually do so shares in Ulrich Beck's analysis of Western society as a risk society and echoes his contention that the possibility of disaster has become an integral aspect of what Beck calls our second modernity.¹² Although human beings have always faced dangers, Beck argues, modern society accepts risk as a fundamental condition that must be calculated, managed, and accounted for. A disaster such as the one at Chernobyl in 1986, which occurred shortly after the publication of Beck's book, confirms his analysis of contemporary society's acceptance of risk in the name of technological progress.

One of the most important paradigm shifts in the approach to catastrophe is the turn away from viewing it as a rupture of normalcy—an assumption that recalls the word's origin in Aristotelian dramatic theory, where it denotes a turning point in the plot—and toward perspectives that emphasize continuity. Not surprisingly, historians as well as cultural anthropologists tend to insist that catastrophes must be viewed in long-term contexts, arguing that catastrophic events take place in unpredictable yet recurring intervals and emphasizing the importance of continuity in the sociocultural response patterns to disaster. "Disasters," the anthropologists Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna M. Hoffman contend, "are not 'bolts from the blue,'" but instead draw our attention to a "society's pattern of vulnerability." Oliver-Smith and Hoffman therefore suggest that we view disasters as "embedded in natural and social systems that unfold as processes over time."¹³

Yet even if in fields like sociology, political science, and anthropology the focus on continuity and patterns of behavior in the analysis of catastrophe has largely displaced the paradigm of disaster as rupture, a catastrophic event does of course shatter a perceived normalcy. "Catastrophes and crises are exceptions, disruptions of order," write the editors of the recent volume *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, distinguishing between the "immediate chaotic experience" and the "composed retrospective comprehension" of the disastrous event.¹⁴ The catastrophic rupture, often thought of as unspeakable or indescribable, compels the transformation of every new catastrophe into narrative and thus inevitably depends on the "cultural processing of previous events."¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek's famous observation that filmic representations of airplane disasters in a sense prepared us for the catastrophe of 9/11 is worth keeping in mind here because it points toward the inseparable connection between the catastrophic event as such and its transformation into narrative. Catastrophes are embedded in cultural representations from the moment they happen. Žižek's provocative suggestion that the TV images of people running toward the camera and away from the billowing smoke emanating out of the collapsing Twin Towers were "reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others,"¹⁶ seeks

to capture the inseparability of reality from representation. The cultural processing that both precedes and follows any given catastrophe hints at its interpretative scope but also at its spectacular power well beyond the actual event.¹⁷

Catharsis and Narration

If catastrophe as a cultural and scientific topic is in vogue, the vicissitudes of interest in catharsis are much more complex. Whereas catharsis seems to have fallen out of favor in literary texts and films, a renewed interest in the concept can be observed in academic fields such as philosophy. A term that goes back to Aristotle's *Poetics* and its analysis of Greek theater, "catharsis" denotes the purification of the audience through emotional engagement. Even though catharsis is only briefly mentioned in the sixth chapter of Aristotle's *Poetics* it had a significant impact on aesthetic and later psychoanalytical theories. Aristotle identifies and labels the emotional trajectory from fear to pity that is experienced while watching a tragedy as *katharsis*, which is typically defined as a "cleansing of these states of feeling"¹⁸ or even a purification. Aristotle's definition of *katharsis* invited a wave of interpretations that mainly focused on the emotional implications of catharsis and less on the intellectual aspects, which have only really been discussed since 1995 in philosophy.¹⁹ Martha Nussbaum writes that "*katharsis* and related words . . . have a strong connection with learning," and further argues that "we would have a strong reason not only to translate the word this way but also to think of the 'clearing up' in question as psychological, epistemological and cognitive, rather than as literally physical." Certainly this "clearing up" can "take place *through* emotional responses" but such responses can "give us access to a truer and deeper level of ourselves, to values and commitments."²⁰ Following Nussbaum's interpretation of the term, "catharsis" can be understood as a "clarification of moral values"²¹ in an act of self-reflexivity that is triggered in the audience of a tragedy through the emotions they experience.

This philosophical interest in the intellectual component of catharsis harkens back to the eighteenth-century German context and the concept's prominence in the definition of the enlightened human subject through the person's intellectual capabilities. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing takes up the term *catharsis* in his *Hamburger Dramaturgie*, developing it further as playing a central role in Enlightenment aesthetics as well as ethics and capable of producing the enlightened human being through empathy with those who suffer on stage. For Immanuel Kant, catharsis becomes subsumed under the concept of the "sublime," an idea that refers to the subject's elevation while observing catastrophic events that unfold beyond the realm of the onlooker's influence. Over one hundred years later and at the threshold of stripping the modern self of its

Enlightenment sovereignty, Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud further developed the notion of “catharsis” by linking it to the psychoanalytical healing process and the idea of “working through” traumatic events through the creation of a narrative. Whereas Breuer and Freud started out by hypnotizing patients with the intent of overcoming trauma, Freud later used the knowledge from these early insights to develop his own psychoanalytic method:

Die Reaktion der Geschädigten auf das Trauma hat eigentlich nur dann eine völlig “kathartische” Wirkung, wenn sie eine adäquate Reaktion ist, wie die Rache. Aber in der Sprache findet der Mensch ein Surrogat für die Tat, mit dessen Hilfe der Affekt nahezu “abreagiert” werden kann.²²

[The reaction to the trauma of the person injured has really no perfect “cathartic” effect unless it is an adequate reaction like revenge. But man finds a substitute for this action in speech, through which help the affect can well nigh be ab-reacted (“abreagiert”).]²³

Even if the focus in this excerpt is on the moment of emotional purification, it is connected to a process of symbolization that posits the subject as someone who overcomes the emotional turmoil or trauma through representation and/or reenactment. From today’s perspective, the performative aspect articulated in Freud’s psychoanalytic theory marks catharsis as the product of a surrogate—the word stands in for the act. This means that even if Freud’s theory is concerned with the overcoming of a trauma, the cathartic effect is connected to not only emotional but also intellectual work; transforming affect into verbal narrative transposes the emotional reaction or trauma into something to be managed within the symbolic order.

Even if it can be said that the concept of “catharsis” was an integral part of Freud’s emerging analytic method,²⁴ the concept is seldom used and applied in the Freudian sense (as part of working through a trauma) to the coping mechanisms we employ after disaster has struck. Yet this does not mean that we do not look for redemption, meaning, and the restoration of order and the return to normalcy in the wake of catastrophe. If narratives of disaster tell us something about a particular culture or a specific period in time, so do the mechanisms of managing, the attempts at coping, and the efforts for commemorating. This includes the rhetoric about learning from catastrophe and rebuilding a better and safer world that often accompanies the aftermath of a disaster itself. All of these, we argue, are ways of overcoming the effects of disaster and are as such aimed at achieving catharsis, be it through aesthetic representation, psychoanalytical working through, or intellectual comprehension. Understood like this, the transformation of catastrophe into

fiction, very broadly conceived as the imposition of a narrative structure and order onto an event that seems to defy any structure or order, is itself a form of catharsis.

Catastrophes as Global Events

Disasters do not stop at political or cultural borders. They make the news and thus must be examined not only in their local or national contexts but also under the aspect of their international and global reception. This volume analyzes catastrophes or disasters that occurred in German-speaking countries but it also examines the reception in German-language culture of catastrophes or disasters that occurred elsewhere. As an industrialized nation of the Western hemisphere, Germany views itself as less vulnerable to disaster than developing countries with fewer resources, less sophisticated response systems, and a greater degree of structural vulnerability,²⁵ but of course German-speaking countries have had their share of disasters historically and continue to today, ranging from severe storms and flooding on the coasts and along rivers to avalanches in the Alpine regions to devastating train accidents and toxic contamination of air, soil, or water.²⁶ The depiction of natural disasters in the German-language tradition includes Johann Georg Zimmermann's religious poems on the Lisbon earthquake (1755–56),²⁷ narratives such as Heinrich von Kleist's *Das Erdbeben von Chili* (1807) with its reflections on the social consequences of a catastrophe, or Franz Grillparzer's description of a devastating flood in Vienna in his novella *Der arme Spielmann* (1848); similarly, Theodor Storm's 1888 classical disaster narrative *Der Schimmelreiter* is about a destructive storm on Germany's North Sea coast and the conflict between tradition and technological progress. Recent decades have seen catastrophes that transcend borders both physically and culturally. Nuclear catastrophes in particular have consequences far beyond the countries in which they occurred. The 1986 Chernobyl disaster threatened Germany's population with radioactive fallout, uniting the then-divided country under a cloud of nuclear contamination. In response to the reactor failure in geographically faraway Fukushima in 2011, the German government reevaluated its energy politics and devised a plan to phase out nuclear energy by 2022.²⁸ The combined disasters of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe have made their mark also on the German literary scene through the writings and interviews of the Japanese German author Yoko Tawada in response to the events in Japan. An example of the international reception of a disaster of a different kind is 9/11 and its representation in a number of German literary works, including Kathrin Röggla's *really ground zero* (2001), Katharina Hacker's *Die Habenichtse* (2006), and Thomas Lehr's *September* (2010). The latter two link an American national trauma to German cultural discourses about victimization and

perpetration, teasing out national reverberations of a catastrophic event with global impact.²⁹

In the age of global travel, furthermore, disaster can catch up with Western tourists who travel to regions that are exposed to the structural vulnerabilities postindustrial nations are believed to have overcome. One such example is included in this volume in Lars Koch's analysis of the Austrian writer Josef Haslinger's survivor's report from the 2004 tsunami in Thailand. The argument that the subjection to and the representation of disaster are increasingly global also applies to the 2012 film *The Impossible*, a Spanish production about the survival of a British family of the same event.³⁰ Yet the international reach of catastrophe is not limited to the contemporary period. The depiction of catastrophe and its reception has transcended political, social, and linguistic boundaries well before the emergence of modern mass media and the global popularity of Hollywood-style disaster movies today, going back to at least the European reception of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. The chapters in this book offer analytical perspectives on catastrophes that ensued in German-speaking settings as well as those occurring on international scales, illustrating that the meanings of disaster and disaster discourse emerge in the interplay between their local, regional, and global contexts and through various disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses.

The Contributions to This Volume

Taken together, the essays in this volume argue for a move away from the idea that catastrophes must primarily be read as ruptures of and incursions into the normalcy of everyday life, even though specific narrative texts continue to make powerful cases for exactly that. Approaching catastrophes and their aftermath from the perspective of multiple disciplines, including history, cultural anthropology, sociology, literary analysis, and film and media studies, they all bear out that catastrophe is embedded in the cultural imagination and gets reworked and reconceived over time. Questions of representation and the changing traditions of narrating disaster inform the analysis in several chapters. Like any other type of narrative, be it visual or rhetorical, stories of disaster are products of their historical period and follow genre conventions, adapting to technological and social shifts while at the same time retaining traditional elements. Conversely, canonical disaster narratives can shape the discourse on catastrophe over centuries, at times impeding alternative interpretations. The perhaps most famous case in point is the 1775 Lisbon earthquake, the disaster that has been said to have defined European modernity. Voltaire's often-cited *Poème sur le desastre de Lisbon* with its challenge to the assumption that God is good but also Immanuel Kant's shift from religious to scientific earthquake explanations together with the Marquis

of Pombal's (1699–1782) pragmatic management of the disaster have become the core of an argument about the Lisbon earthquake's paradigmatic importance in the emergence of a secular and scientific modernity. Although the earthquake's reputation as a symbol of secular modernity has come under significant scrutiny,³¹ including by Franz Mauelshagen, who calls it a “weak symbol” at best for the connection between modernity and disaster, this does not mean that the catastrophe of 1775 and its representations cannot be usefully explored as an event that continues to incite the European imagination.

Christoph Weber's opening chapter is about the traditions of representation at work in J. H. Kühnlin's *Das glückliche und unglückliche Portugall und das erschreckte Europa* (Fortunate and Unfortunate Portugal and Frightened Europe). Kühnlin, a contemporary who had not personally witnessed the disastrous occurrences, drew on traditional tropes in his rendition of the Lisbon disaster to arouse emotion and to achieve a cathartic effect in his readers. The reliance on a familiar vocabulary, Weber shows, also applies to the many visual images that circulated throughout Europe in the aftermath of the 1775 catastrophe. The fascination with disaster not only has a long tradition but its depiction tends to follow certain aesthetic rules to distill sense out of the unspeakable for the audience.

Continuing on in chronological order of the events under consideration, Janine Hartman's chapter on the Paris Commune and Claudia Jerzak's examination of World War II bombings reflect on war and genocide as national and international disasters. Intentional rather than unexpected and unplanned, war and genocide differ from earthquakes or technological disasters not only regarding their causes but also concerning their symbolic function within narratives of national identity. The cultural historian Janine Hartman's discussion of the Paris Commune and the profound destruction caused by the clashes between the Commune's revolutionary troops and the army of the Versailles government in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian War draws our attention to national consequences of international conflict and, yet again, the importance of reception. Whereas French writers and intellectuals commented on the devastation of the French capital through class war in considerable detail, the events of 1871 were largely excised from the formation of a French national narrative, which, Hartman argues, in itself had catastrophic consequences for the evolution of French democracy.

Not everyone agrees that war indeed should be considered a catastrophe precisely because of its intentional nature. Peter Utz, in his recent book on catastrophes in Swiss culture, rejects the use of the term as “problematic” in this context because it runs the risk of eliding the human accountability in such occurrences.³² Following the linguistic convention in German-speaking cultures that does apply the term “catastrophe” to

the wars of the twentieth century as well as the Holocaust, we include an essay on the commemoration of the Allied bombings of Hamburg and Dresden during World War II in this volume. The sociologist Claudia Jerzak's comparative analysis of the memorialization of the World War II bombings of Hamburg and Dresden as a political and cultural process complements Hartman's chapter on the French example of nonexistent commemoration. Beginning with the immediate postwar decades into the post-1989 unification period Jerzak draws attention to significant differences in the cultures of commemoration that have emerged in these two cities—one of them in the former FRG, the other in the former GDR. The catastrophe of war, Jerzak argues, must be made meaningful by placing the past into the service of the present and the future through symbolization and the formation of group identity. In the case of Germany, with its history of the Holocaust, such processes require complex negotiations between perpetrator and victim narratives, which, as Jerzak's analysis demonstrates, persist in a tense relationship to one another. Unlike the French writers who witnessed the ruination of Paris and were unable to develop a perspective from which the French nation could achieve closure, the citizens of Hamburg and Dresden, over the course of decades and through decisive, if often controversial, political action, have reached for themselves a degree of collective catharsis. Taken together, these analyses illustrate the diverse and complex cultural but also political processes through which a society represents, processes, and commemorates the catastrophe of war.

The next cluster of chapters explores technological catastrophes. The earliest literary depictions of industrial disasters are descriptions of railway accidents and include Theodor Fontane's canonical "Die Brück' am Tay" (The Bridge at the Tay, 1880) as well as Max Eyth's 1899 novel *Berufstragik* (Tragedy of Profession) about the same 1879 bridge collapse over Scotland's Firth of Tay and the loss of the train crossing it at the time. The reflections on human hubris and the necessity to respond to the pressures of capitalism that we find in nineteenth-century texts still resonate in narratives about nuclear accidents over one hundred years later. The reactor failures of Chernobyl (1986) and Fukushima (2011), disasters with regional and global consequences, have found their way into German literature with works ranging from Christa Wolf's canonical 1987 novel *Störfall* to Elfriede Jelinek's *Kein Licht* (2012), her postdramatic theater and radio play about Fukushima. The chapters by Torsten Pflugmacher, Carol Anne Costabile-Heming, and Yasemin Dayioğlu-Yücel offer readings of literary renditions of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster and the 2011 catastrophe of Fukushima. The texts under consideration as well as the perspectives offered by the contributors vary widely, bearing out that similar disasters can result in very different depictions. Torsten Pflugmacher draws attention to questions of genre and narrative perspective in his

analysis of texts about the Chernobyl and Fukushima accidents by the German filmmaker, writer, and critic Alexander Kluge. Kluge, much of whose work addresses questions of German history, blurs fact and fiction in hyperbolic and often highly comical form, opening up new ways of looking at the catastrophes that plague our age. A decisive departure from the coupling of catastrophe with catharsis that we find in the traditional disaster narrative, the combination of serious political analysis with the blatantly absurd that characterizes much of Kluge's output hints at yet another paradigm shift in our responses to disaster. Change over time in our political, moral, and aesthetic responses to disaster is the topic of Costabile-Heming's rereading of Christa Wolf's 1987 novel *Störfall* and its reflections on patriarchy, East German society, and the possibility of resistance grounded in humanist feminism. In the context of accelerated globalization and the concurring environmental devastation, she concludes, Wolf's novel remains valuable even after the end of the GDR and well beyond its original sociopolitical context. Questions of cultural difference between German and other European responses and Japanese reactions play a role in Dayioğlu-Yücel's chapter on earthquake narratives by the German Japanese writer Yoko Tawada and the Japanese author Haruki Murakami. Defining disaster as contemporary routine rather than rupture, the disaster narratives by writers like Tawada, Murakami, and Kluge refute all expectations of emotional closure or cathartic cleansing.

A present-day counterpart to Christoph Weber's analysis of the prevalence of traditional iconography in the contemporary depictions of the Lisbon earthquake and in contrast to the narratives by Kluge and Tawada discussed in the previous chapters, Tanja Nusser's reading of disaster movies confirms the continuing importance of conventional tropes in the creation of cathartic closure. As in the case of the Lisbon earthquake, the viewer of disaster films is invited to watch dramatically staged scenes of sensational destruction and, Nusser argues, in the end "feels fine" in an act of catharsis that is owed not only to the happy ending that most disaster films, the majority of which are produced by Hollywood, offer but also to the exuberance of the images and the contemporary version of the Kantian sublime elevation they induce in the viewer. Disaster movies invite us to witness the end of the world but, as a rule, they confirm rather than challenge Western capitalist belief systems.

As all the chapters have shown so far, catastrophes cannot be understood outside the realm of representation but, of course, real people get caught up in them. The challenge is how to narrate such experiences for a contemporary audience and in light of a tradition that tends to interpret disaster with an eye toward its moral implications and the promise of catharsis at the end. Lars Koch's chapter on the Austrian writer Joseph Haslinger's recollections of the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, the only contribution that deals with a disaster from the perspective of the survivor,

raises questions of authentic experience and the possibility of its representation. Here, too, rhetorical devices and narrative coping strategies come into play, but, in contrast to other literary genres or observer reports, we are confronted in this autobiographical text with the realization that extreme physical and mental vulnerability persists into the contemporary period and can touch any one of us. Coping with disaster is also the concern of the cultural anthropologist Jan Hinrichsen, whose chapter details the case study of the Austrian village of Galtür and its responses to avalanche disasters over a period of several decades in the twentieth century. Arguing that the “tradition of disasters” is deeply historical and that catastrophes must be understood in their long-term cultural context, Hinrichsen interprets the catastrophic event through a framework of precedent and repetition. Hinrichsen’s case study shows avalanche management to be a question of communal actions and narrations whose purpose it is to create and stabilize the community both physically and culturally. Hinrichsen makes clear that although local culture and traditions play a significant role in disaster narratives, they are by no means stagnant or immune to change.

The volume’s closing chapter, by the historian Franz Mauelshagen, addresses the thorny issue of defining disaster and the dilemmas such attempts pose. In placing this chapter last, the volume critically reflects its own multiple definitional approaches to disasters. On the one hand, Mauelshagen argues, definitions are indispensable. On the other hand, adherence to any one definition inevitably takes place at the exclusion of others. More fruitful, therefore, is the analysis of historicophilosophical traditions that have shaped definitions of disaster, as such inquiries yield insights into the self-image of a society in the face of the vulnerabilities to which it is exposed by real or potential catastrophes. Echoing the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty’s reflections on climate change and his sobering conclusion that because there is no historical precedent for a global event such as the human-induced alterations of our atmosphere the likelihood of a global response sufficient to combat its effects is highly improbable,³³ Mauelshagen pushes for a paradigm shift away from the traditional divisions between science, the humanities, and the social sciences toward a rigorous interdisciplinarity in the face of present and future catastrophes. With its range of approaches and perspectives, our volume aims at making a contribution toward this goal.

Catastrophe and disaster loom large not only in the imaginations of academics in a range of disciplines but also in those of the general public in response to actual catastrophic events circulated through mass and, increasingly, Internet-based media, as well as the productions of writers and filmmakers. Although the traditional paradigm of the disaster narrative as a vehicle of social and political critique continues to reverberate even today, new forms of representation call into question older humanist

models of moral or social criticism in favor of modes of expression that confront the reader with the dilemmas, ambivalences, and definitional insecurities posed by disaster. Globalization brings home even those catastrophes that occur far away. National narratives evolve in response to international disasters. Catharsis as an aesthetic and an intellectual category may well have become elusive yet this does not mean that we, as individuals and as members of society, do not still come to terms with catastrophe through the narratives we tell. As these forms evolve and innovative approaches to thinking about disaster emerge, perhaps we will also find new ways of coping.

Notes

¹ Eva Horn, *Zukunft als Katastrophe* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2014), 16.

² SwissRe, http://www.swissre.com/media/news_releases/nr_20131218_sigma_natcat_2013.html. The company's distinction between "natural catastrophes and man-made disasters" echoes the German preference for terms such as "Naturkatastrophe" but is not necessarily consistent with English-language usage that tends to apply "disaster" to events such as earthquakes, floods, etc., and "catastrophe" to technological failures, war, train or plane crashes, terrorist attacks, and the like.

³ Susanna M. Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith, eds., *Catastrophe and Culture: The Anthropology of Disaster* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press; Oxford: J. Curry, 2002); Greg Bankoff, "In the Eye of the Storm: The Social Construction of the Forces of Nature and the Climatic and Seismic Construction of God in the Philippines," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 1 (2004): 91–111.

⁴ Sharon Stephens, "Bounding Uncertainty: The Post-Chernobyl Culture of Radiation Protection Experts," in Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, *Catastrophe and Culture*, 92.

⁵ Peter Utz, *Kultivierung der Katastrophe: Literarische Untergangsszenarien aus der Schweiz* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 2013), 11.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (London, Verso, 2002), 19. An example of such an act of fictionalization is the writer Kathrin Röggla's description of 9/11 as an "event" that is so real that it endows the narrator's life with a heightened degree of authenticity: "jetzt also habe ich ein leben. ein wirkliches." Kathrin Röggla, *really ground zero: 11. september und folgendes* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2001), 6.

⁷ Thomas Klinkert and Günter Oesterle, eds., *Katastrophe und Gedächtnis* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 10.

⁸ Mark D. Anderson. *Disaster Writing: The Cultural Politics of Catastrophe in Latin America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 2.

⁹ François Walter, *Katastrophen: Eine Kulturgeschichte vom 16. bis 21. Jahrhundert*, trans. Doris Butz-Striebel and Trésy Lejoly (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010).

¹⁰ Urte Undine Frömming, *Naturkatastrophen: Kulturelle Deutung und Verarbeitung* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2006).

¹¹ Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

¹² Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992).

¹³ Hoffman and Oliver-Smith, *Catastrophe and Culture*, 3.

¹⁴ Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel, eds., *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 1.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, 11.

¹⁷ The literary scholar Ansgar Nünning has taken this line of thinking further in a recent essay in which he reflects on the degree to which metaphors “serve to shape the cultural life of catastrophe,” because metaphor is “involved in the actual generation of ways of thinking, feeling and of attitudes and thus of something that stands behind historical developments” (84–85). Here, too, we have an excess of sorts that shapes the thinking about catastrophe independent of actual events. Nünning, “Making Crises and Catastrophes—How Metaphors and Narratives Shape Their Cultural Life,” in Meiner and Veel, *Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises*, 59–88.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans., with introduction and notes, Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), 26.

¹⁹ See for example Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Leon Golden, *Aristotle on Tragic and Comic Mimesis* (Atlanta, GA: Scholar’s Press, 1992).

²⁰ Nussbaum. *Fragility of Goodness*, 388, 390.

²¹ Terrence C. Wright, “Phenomenology and the Moral Right,” *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 6, no. 4 (2003): 107.

²² Sigmund Freud, “Über den psychischen Mechanismus hysterischer Phänomene,” in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol 1, *Studien über Hysterie: Frühe Schriften zur Neurosenlehre* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1999), 87.

²³ Sigmund Freud, “The Psychic Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena,” in Sigmund Freud, *Selected Papers on Hysteria and Other Psychoneuroses* (New York: The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company, 1909), 5.

²⁴ See for example Freud’s own description of the evolution of his methodology, in Sigmund Freud, “Die Sexualität in der Ätiologie der Neurosen,” in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, 1: 512, and the second chapter in Sigmund Freud, “Selbstdarstellung,” in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 14, *Werke aus den Jahren 1925–1931* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer 1999), 43–53.

²⁵ According to Peter Utz, this is very different for Switzerland, a country in whose national self-understanding Alpine catastrophes such as avalanches and landslides are firmly inscribed. Important here is the reception of catastrophe

within a specific national context rather than the comparison with other, possibly “bigger” disasters. Utz, *Kultivierung der Katastrophe*, 17–18.

²⁶ Interesting in this context are the statistics provided in a study by the insurance company Swiss Re, according to which weather-related events in Northern Europe, including Germany, in the past two years are among the most expensive catastrophes ever. The study notes that catastrophic events in countries such as the Philippines, which in 2013 suffered the highest wind speeds ever measured during Typhoon Haiyan, are less costly because “insurance penetration is low in the country.” The cost of disaster depends on who is doing the accounting.

²⁷ Johann Georg Zimmermann, *Drei Gedichte zum Erdbeben von Lissabon*, ed. Martin Rector and Matthias Wehrhahn (Hannover: Wehrhahn, 2005).

²⁸ For an insightful analysis of the responses to Fukushima, see Jens Kersten, Frank Uekötter, and Markus Voigt, *Europe after Fukushima: German Perspectives on the Future of Nuclear Power*, ed. and intro. Samuel Temple (Munich: Rachel Carson Center Perspectives, 2012).

²⁹ Kathrin Röggla, *really ground zero*; Katharina Hacker, *Die Habenichtse* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006); Thomas Lehr, *September: Fata Morgana* (Munich: Hanser, 2010). Conversely, the American author Jonathan Safran Foer makes the connection between the Second World War, the Holocaust, and 9/11 in his novel *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2005).

³⁰ *The Impossible*, dir. Juan Antonio Bayona (Spain/USA: Summit Entertainment, 2012).

³¹ An insightful rereading of the 1755 Lisbon earthquake’s cultural significance can be found in Jürgen Jacobs’ essay on the topic in which he argues that, contrary to often repeated assumptions, the earthquake did not unsettle the contemporary’s belief in a benevolent Christian God. Jürgen Jacobs, “Auswirkungen eines Erdbebens. Zur Katastrophe von Lissabon 1755,” *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 126, no. 2 (2007): 186.

³² Utz, *Kultivierung der Katastrophe*, 13.

³³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (2009): 222.