

## 4 Making sense of disaster

### The cultural studies of disaster

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#### Introduction

We have a sense of disasters long before we have an actual sensation of them. In the last days of August 2005, before Hurricane Katrina hit the coast of Louisiana, newspapers and news networks visualized the possible path of the hurricane through the Gulf of Mexico with computer simulations and speculated on the damage that would be caused by the hit. In the direct aftermath of the hurricane's landfall on 29 August, when aid was painfully slow to arrive, unfounded media reports of looting and killing in the flooded streets of New Orleans caused George W. Bush to mobilize the National Guard, which further delayed relief operations. In the ten years that went by after the destruction of New Orleans, news stories, political speeches, insurance cases, Katrina tourism, novels like Dave Egger's *Zeitoun* (2009), movies such as Benh Zeitlin's *Hushpuppy* (2012), TV documentaries like Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* (2006) and cartoons like Josh Neufeld's *A.D.: New Orleans After the Deluge* (2007–8) have continued to make sense of the events in August 2005. The legacy of the most lethal storm to hit the US since 1928 equally lives on through monuments such as the Katrina Memorial Park (2008), and music such as Mos Def's *Dollar Day* (*Katrina Klap*).

It is the wager of this chapter that the way we perceive disasters is shaped by the cultural practices of designing computer simulations, editing news stories, documenting damage in insurance cases, as well as by writing novels, making movies and composing music. Such practices create our common sensibility for disasters and, consequently, determine what we see and how we act in a world ravaged by disaster at an ever-increasing rate. We suggest naming those cultural practices 'aesthetic', in the sense developed by German idealism; not as a concept from the realm of fine arts, but, more fundamentally, as a concept for the sensible as such – the *aisthesis* – in this case the common sensibility through which we perceive Hurricane Katrina. When speaking of aesthetics in the following, we therefore do not mean works of art that *represent* an original raw experience of Katrina. Rather, we are talking about how our everyday cultural practices *produce* what presents itself to sense experience in the first place, about how they configure our common regime of the visible and the invisible, the sensible and the imperceptible.

Cultural studies is a discipline committed to the study of the aesthetic in this wider meaning of the term. Hence, cultural studies of disaster contribute to



disaster research by exploring the manifold aesthetic practices through which we produce a common sense of disasters. Rather than restricting culture to the sphere of habits and rituals, as in anthropology and ethnography, or analysing culture only in terms of the *habitus* of scientific research, as in science studies, cultural studies suggests viewing culture as a repertoire of practices, images, narratives, genres and styles that determine what can be experienced as reality.

For an Anglo-American reader, cultural studies is likely to connote the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies founded in the 1960s by Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall and Angela McRobbie, among others. At the University of Birmingham, the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies set out to challenge the academic conservatism of the 1950s by collapsing the boundary between 'high' and 'popular' forms of culture, and analysing culture as a battleground of linguistic and symbolic meaning-systems, directly connected to people's identities. For a German or Scandinavian reader, on the other hand, cultural studies is more likely to connote the German tradition of *Kulturwissenschaft*, born in the Weimar Germany of the 1920s (but recognized only much later) through the culture-philosophical writings of German-Jewish thinkers such as Aby Warburg, Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin. Whereas the traditional German humanities, or *Geisteswissenschaften*, viewed culture idealistically as emerging from the realm of pure spirit, the early *Kulturwissenschaft* argued that culture was always technically conditioned by its various media of expression.

British cultural studies and German *Kulturwissenschaft* have markedly different objects and different theoretical approaches, but both traditions originate from a critique of the 'frontier police' who try to deter researchers from crossing the conventional borders between academic fields (as the art historian Aby Warburg quipped). In both versions of cultural studies, cultural analysts study aesthetic practices in the context of a larger collective sensibility that configures our awareness of the world.

In this chapter, we will honour the cross-disciplinary ambition of both cultural studies and *Kulturwissenschaft*. Rather than listing the various aesthetic disciplines (musicology, art history, museology, visual culture, film studies, literary studies and theatre studies) and their contributions to disaster research, we will move between the borders of university departments in order to give an overview of the most important theoretical approaches used by cultural analysts of disaster, these being: a *trauma* approach, a *vulnerability* approach, a *state of exception* approach and a *cultural history* approach. After discussing these four major approaches and demonstrating their relevance to the case of Hurricane Katrina, we will conclude by sketching a lesser-known theory, which we suggest dubbing an *emergency regime* approach.

## Trauma

In *Testimony: Crisis of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1992), literary scholar Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub ask how it is possible to bear witness to traumatic events. Analysing works of literature, as well as films and video archives, Felman and Laub explore the remembrance of the Second World

War generally, and the Holocaust specifically. Starting from the psychoanalytic assumption that a trauma constitutes a shock so powerful that it is not immediately absorbed by the psyche, the two writers diagnose a problem at the heart of testimony:

As a relation to events, testimony seems to be composed of bits and pieces of a memory that has been overwhelmed by occurrences that have not settled into understanding or remembrance, acts that cannot be constructed as knowledge nor assimilated into full cognition, events in excess of our frames of reference.

(Felman and Laub 1992: 5)

For Felman and Laub, narrating a traumatic event is difficult because trauma escapes a direct expression in language. Witnessing is the careful reconstruction of inchoate memories into a coherent whole. According to the authors, both literary and psychoanalytic practice constitute narrative acts with a fragile relation to a real event, which can only be grasped retrospectively. Exploring representations of the Second World War in video testimony, in Albert Camus's 1947 novel *The Plague*, and in Claude Lanzmann's landmark documentary *Shoah* (1985), Felman and Laub reconstruct trauma as a crucial problem for the writing of history.

With *Testimony*, Felman and Laub helped establish what is today called trauma studies. When we perceive disaster through the lens of trauma, we focus on the wound (in Greek *trauma*) inflicted on to the human psyche by a violent event. The theory of trauma was developed within the field of psychology in the wake of railway accidents of the 19th century and the industrialized warfare of the 20th century (Micale and Lerner 2001; Schivelbusch 1977). While treating veterans returning from the front after the First World War, Freud observed that many soldiers – while not displaying any traumatic symptoms in their everyday lives – vividly relived painful scenes from the war as nightmares during their sleep. Freud concluded that the psyche records traumatic events unconsciously. He believed the shock of the traumatic impact to be so overwhelming that the event itself escaped symbolization. For Freud, trauma only persisted as a trace, manifesting itself in dreams, anxieties and breakdowns later in life. For trauma studies and memory studies today, this view remains the fundamental insight into the psychological processing of trauma.

The trauma framework is active whenever cultural analysts approach disaster as a matter of an individual's or a group's psychic health, impacted by the shock of a sudden and unexpected event. An important issue for trauma scholars is the question of the trauma's representability in memory and in language. If trauma is a senseless shock, a pure hit that cannot be absorbed into the human psyche, then how is it to be narrated and spoken about? While the trauma itself escapes direct representation, witness reports, testimonies and memoirs can circle around the fragmented event, providing us with a palliative language to mourn and commemorate lives lost or damaged. Today, trauma is beyond doubt the dominant interpretative model in the cultural studies of disaster. Cultural analysts



have explored the role of disaster-induced trauma in, to name only a few examples, the atrocities of the Second World War as witnessed in survivor literature (Caruth 1996; Kilby and Rowland 2013; LaCapra 1994, 1998; Sebald 2004), disasters as represented in literary works in the genre of magical realism (Arva 2011), in visual art (Foster 1996), in photography (Zelizer 1998), and in media and cultural life more generally (Kaplan 2005; Meek 2010).

In the case of Hurricane Katrina, this ongoing process of witnessing is materially traceable in the Katrina National Memorial Park that commemorates the damage wrought on the city by the hurricane. The debate that followed the construction of the memorial also shows the conflicted nature of commemoration and witnessing, where different actors often argue over which personalized or nationalized story of loss becomes the dominant trauma narrative. Commenting on the aesthetic of the Memorial Park that literally adopts the spiral shape of a hurricane, leading visitors and tourists to its metaphorical eye, Lindsay Tuggle has critiqued the 'architectural re-enactment' performed by the memorial, 'that reconstructs aspects of trauma within structural design' (Tuggle 2011: 71). For Tuggle, this mimetic relationship between the memorial and the disaster relegates the process of commemoration to the architecture, thereby liberating the visitors from working through the painful elements of trauma themselves. Furthermore, according to Tuggle, the hurricane shape of the Memorial Park disregards the ways in which Katrina was just as much a social as a natural disaster.

To sum up, the trauma approach views the function of aesthetic practices as a commemoration of disaster. Consequently, the relation between culture and disaster can be conceptualized as a *working-through*. The trauma approach understands cultural practices as a means to inscribe traumatic events within individual or collective memory in order to fight against forgetting, and aid the therapeutic process of coping with the destructive mental and material effects of disaster. The strength of the trauma approach lies in its potential to generate a unique insight into the individual and the collective memory of disaster survivors. In addition, it is a useful heuristic tool to make sense of the many cultural artefacts that surround a disaster event in the weeks, months and years after its occurrence. However, the conceptualization of disaster as a single instant or hit also significantly limits the trauma approach's scope. The focus on the psychic health of the individual human being, caused by an unrepresentable and quasi-religious event, tends to foreclose an analysis of the social and political dimension of disasters.

## Vulnerability

In *The Social Roots of Risk: Producing Disasters, Promoting Resilience* (2014), sociologist Kathleen Tierney asserts that the origins of disaster lie not in nature, and not in technology, but rather in the ordinary everyday workings of society itself: 'Put simply, the organizing idea ... is that disasters and their impacts are socially produced, and that the forces driving the production of disaster are embedded in the social order itself' (Tierney 2014: 4). Tierney's book is a forceful articulation

of the vulnerability approach that dominates contemporary sociological and anthropological disaster research. This methodological framework extends the analytic gaze beyond the immediacy of the disaster onto the everyday workings of society, exploring the social, cultural, political and ecological conditions that play a role in the production of disaster (or exacerbate its severity). New Orleans, for instance, was a highly vulnerable city, due to its bad levees, its location beneath sea level, the eradication of the coastal vegetation outside the city, its poor transportation system, but also as a consequence of its impoverished black population and racially segregated urban structure. All too often, natural disasters are talked about in a vocabulary that effaces their social logic. The zooming-out movement of the vulnerability approach makes it possible to 'denaturalize' disasters, and tease out their underlying political economy (Klinenberg 1999).

Tierney devotes a chapter to the relationship between culture and disaster. When dealing with the hard facts of disaster, culture is important, she explains, 'in that cultural frames such as those involving nature, technology, growth, and progress, along with the perceptions, beliefs, and cultural practices associated with those frames, are strongly implicated in the social production of risk' (2014: 81). According to Tierney, cultural frames constitute our pre-scientific belief systems. As such, she concedes to them a primarily negative role, arguing that they contribute to the social production of disasters by functioning as 'blindness' that prevent social actors from becoming aware of their own risk production. According to Tierney, culture impairs our accurate grasp of disasters by placing 'cognitive limits on people and institutions so that they are blind to worst cases' (2014: 81). If, for Tierney, the roots of both risk and resilience are social, a subset of these roots can be defined as 'cultural' (2014: 68).

Tierney's discussion of the relationship between culture and disaster is characteristic of cultural analysts inspired by the vulnerability approach. In 2007, sociologist Gary R. Webb anticipated that, even if the field of disaster research 'has not fully made a cultural turn, it is moving in that direction', adding that this 'cultural path is worth taking' (Webb 2007: 432ff.). Disaster studies' 'cultural turn' sets out from the concept of vulnerability. Hollywood disaster movies, Webb suggests, 'often perpetuate harmful stereotypes about race, class, and gender' (2007: 435), hereby propagating misperceptions that contribute to disasters. In an early and important work in this research tradition, anthropologists Anthony Oliver-Smith and Susanna Hoffman list 'ideology', 'prejudices', 'mores and many other sociocultural elements' (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 1999: 25, 22, 29) as examples of 'pre-disaster conditions' (p. 4), which activate or aggravate disasters. The bulk of sociocultural vulnerability studies explore how the news media create 'disaster myths' or 'disaster fictions' that in turn create an inaccurate perception of disaster. Recent analyses have contributed to our understanding of the cultural production of disaster concerning deviant behaviour, such as panic, looting and price gouging (Fischer 1994: 70); the feeding of infants during disasters (Gribble 2013); processes of social change (Russil and Lavin 2011); as well as issues of race and disaster (Dyson 2006).



In a number of articles, Tierney has applied the vulnerability approach to the US media-constructed regime of public visibility during Hurricane Katrina:

Initial evidence suggests that the media's relentless adherence to disaster myths and to frames emphasizing civil unrest and urban insurgency, along with the strategic response measures these reports justified, had a number of immediate negative consequences. ... Distorted images disseminated by the media and public officials served to justify calls for greater military involvement in disasters.

(Tierney *et al.* 2006: 75)

Even if the disaster images disseminated by the media and public officials turned out to be fictitious, they had important consequences for the facts on the ground. Three days after the collapse of the levees, the Governor of Louisiana and the Mayor of New Orleans suspended lifesaving operations, and ordered emergency responders to concentrate on arresting looters and deterring crime; 63,000 troops from the National Guard were deployed in what came to be perceived as the 'war zone' of downtown New Orleans, many with fresh combat experience from Iraq. Thus, the vocabulary of the distorted media coverage of Katrina was strongly implicated in the social production of the disaster.

In conclusion, according to the vulnerability approach, the function of aesthetic practices is to trigger or exacerbate disaster. In this theoretical perspective, the relation between culture and disaster can be conceptualized as *causation*. Sociologists and anthropologists tend to view the aesthetics of disaster as a kind of 'anaesthesia', a harmful way of being unaware of the social production of disaster. As we shall see in the following sections of this chapter, aesthetic practices also do other things than directly causing disaster by disseminating erroneous beliefs. However, as Tierney's interpretation of Hurricane Katrina shows, there is no doubt that the vulnerability approach opens up a forceful critical perspective on disaster media and disaster fiction.

### State of exception

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* can be understood as an extended meditation on the political application of the state of exception. Accordingly, 'in our age, the state of exception comes more and more to the foreground as the fundamental political structure and ultimately begins to become the rule' (Agamben 1998: 20). If we understand disasters as exceptional 'moments of interruption and novelty' that disrupt an otherwise normal state of affairs (Aradau and Munster 2011: 10), then Agamben's continued relevance to disaster studies becomes clear. For Agamben, the state of exception (or state of emergency) concerns the definition of an event that can be separated from a normal, everyday rule. Arguing on a legal scale, Agamben defines the exception as a case that cannot be grasped within the regular legal order and thus necessitates an extraordinary response. In legal theory, this entails a suspension of civil

law, including the civil liberties normally granted to citizens in a constitutional democracy. Under the exceptional rule of America's 'War on Terror' for instance, the combatants captured in Afghanistan were neither defined as prisoners of war, nor as ordinary criminals. At Guantanamo, they were treated as outlaws, men outside the law, who were not eligible for a trial and whose bodies could be disposed of without providing any justification for their killing or abuse.

Agamben draws his argument from a long tradition within state law. According to the Roman constitution, the Senate could, in cases of emergency such as invasions or natural disasters, appoint a dictator who would enjoy unconstrained sovereignty for up to six months. The legal concept of the state of exception entered political theory through a controversy between the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt and the German-Jewish philosopher Walter Benjamin. While Schmitt defended the sovereign use of the state of exception and even defined the sovereign as 'he who decides on the exception' (1985: 5), Benjamin sought to create an emancipatory version of the exception, which would not strengthen, but instead abolish, sovereign rule (Benjamin 1986).

In the years following the attacks on the World Trade Center, the state of exception has come to play a vital role in the attempts to understand a modern social and political life, constantly threatened by disasters. Cultural analysts have, among other things, focused on the state of exception in politics (Lazar 2009), in the theory of democracy (Honig 2009), in the American War on Terror (Butler 2004) as well as in architecture (Aureli 2011) and literature (Martel 2011, 2012; Spanos 2011). A prominent example is *Creaturely Life* (2006), a book by American literary scholar Eric Santner on the German author W.G. Sebald. According to Santner, Sebald's literary works are 'visions of world destruction and ruin (by war, by erosion, by entropy, by natural disaster, by combustion)' (Santner 2006: 178). Using the works of Sebald as a prism, Santner intends to 'open a new way of understanding how human bodies and psyches register the "states of exception" that punctuate the "normal" run of social and political life, ... a specifically human way of finding oneself caught in the midst of antagonisms in and of the political field' (p. xix).

Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has shown how a state of exception approach to Hurricane Katrina can shift the analytical focus onto the way a segment of the population is structurally excluded from social participation. Analysing the political rhetoric and media reports in the aftermath of Katrina, he comments on the impression of social collapse that was generated by the media: 'For a few days, New Orleans apparently regressed to a wild preserve of looting, killing, and rape. It became a city of the dead and dying, a post-apocalyptic zone where those the philosopher Giorgio Agamben calls *Homini Sacer* – people excluded from the civil order – wander' (Žižek 2008: 93).

According to the state of exception approach, aesthetic practices open a way of understanding the deeper meaning of disaster. Hence, the relation between culture and disaster can be conceptualized as an *exposure* – an uncovering of the dominant political structure through works of art. Similar to the vulnerability approach, the state of exception approach mobilizes a powerful critical potential



by extending the analytical gaze beyond the immediacy of the disaster, and onto the underlying structures of social and political life. However, its scope runs even deeper, as it not only highlights differential conditions of vulnerability in the lead-up to disaster, but instead focuses on the production of social inequality at large. On the other hand, the elevation of the state of exception to a general social condition can also make it seem unspecific and inept at analysing specific disaster situations. By relying on a static definition of sovereignty – assumed to be unchanging over time – this approach risks equating disparate cases of political violence, while overlooking their historical specificity.

### Cultural history

In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), literary scholar Frank Kermode explores how we make sense of the world by telling stories about its end. 'Men, like poets, rush "into the midst," in *medias res*, when they are born; they also die in *mediis rebus*, and to make sense of their span they need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems' (Kermode 1967: 7). Since the writing of the Bible, the apocalyptic narrative about the end of the world has lived on in Western culture as a pattern that gives meaning to lives and to poems. 'The paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world', Kermode claims (1967: 28), and they do so because they can be used to construct a meaningful plot with a beginning, middle and dramatic ending. Inasmuch as we are living in the middle of things, in *mediis rebus*, we experience historical time as senseless chaos and contingency, but the paradigms of apocalypse can help us construct a narrative that organizes chaotic time into a concordant plot. As such, '[a]pocalypse, which resumes the Bible, projects its neat, naive patterns on to history' (Kermode 1967: 14).

Inspired by the German tradition of *Kulturwissenschaft*, Kermode does not approach the apocalyptic texts of the Bible as vessels of theological truth, but rather, as templates for apocalyptic thinking and feeling. The apocalypse provides 'models of the world', 'paradigms', 'patterns' and 'figures' (1967: 4, 6, 9, 27), and the task of cultural history is to explore how these models work. In Kermode's programmatic words, the critical business consists in 'making sense of some of the radical ways of making sense of the world' (p. 29).

The cultural history approach to disaster has pursued this critical business by making sense of the vast repertoire of cultural patterns (concepts, images, narratives, genres and styles) by help of which humans make sense of disaster. Among the cultural patterns thoroughly studied are the apocalypse (Boyer 1992; Bull 1995; Derrida 1982, 1984; Robinson 1985; Wojcik 1997; Zamora 1989); the theodicy (Israel 2011; Kendrick 1957; Lauer and Unger 2008; Löffler 1999; Neiman 2002); the sublime (Adorno 1983; Ray 2005), and the risk calculus (Walter *et al.* 2006). Some works within the cultural history approach focus on specific geographical places such as Los Angeles (Davis 1998), Switzerland (Utz 2013) and Latin America (M.D. Anderson 2011). Other works focus on specific art forms and fictional genres such as disaster movies (Keane 2001; Sontag 1965)

and zombie movies (Bishop 2010). Comprehensive accounts of the cultural history of disasters are available in Horn (2014), Schenk and Janku (2012) and Walter (2008).

Anthony Dyer Hoefer offers an example of the cultural history approach applied to Hurricane Katrina. The 'apocalyptic imaginary', Hoefer argues, has played a vital role in the production of the regional identity of the American South, from William Faulkner up to today (Hoefer 2012: 13). Hoefer ends his book with an analysis of how apocalyptic patterns were used by poets, preachers and playwrights to make sense of Katrina: 'In no time in recent years has the landscape of the apocalyptic imaginary come so close to materiality in the South as it did in the Crescent City in late 2005' (2012: 156).

To sum up, according to the cultural history approach, the function of aesthetic practices is to make sense of the world by projecting neat patterns on to human life. Thus, the relation between culture and disaster can be conceptualized as a *schematization*. This approach is markedly different from what we saw in the first two sections of this chapter. Aesthetic practices are not commemorating or working through the unspeakable experience of disastrous event, as in the trauma approach, nor are they causing disasters by preventing social actors from becoming aware of their own risk production, as in the vulnerability approach. Rather, they project cognitive schemes on to our experience of disaster.

To be sure, it is vital to understand the historical depth of the modern disaster imaginary. But by turning towards the vast archive of historical disaster patterns in literature, film, art, philosophy, theology and popular culture, cultural analysts run the risk of blinding themselves to the way these patterns are actually used and misused in specific social practices, as the vulnerability approach convincingly argues. If it is true that the critical business consists in making sense of our ways of making sense of the world, it ought also to consist in exposing what is systematically overlooked when we are busy making sense of disasters.

### Emergency regime

In this final section, we will call attention to a subset of cultural history, which combines the latter's historical rigour with an attention to the way in which frames of emergency are used in contemporary modes of government. This *emergency regime* approach, as we suggest calling it, has its roots in Michel Foucault's studies of the connection between the birth of the modern state and the simultaneous containment of elements, deemed threatening to that state. In a number of influential books and lectures, Foucault showed how the key institutions of modernity – the penal system, modern health care, the psychiatry, as well as urban planning and architecture – constituted themselves specifically in order to regulate the dangers of crime, illness and social deviance that were seen as threatening the smooth functioning of the nascent state (Foucault 1995, 2007). Rather than situated outside the social, disaster is in this narrative constitutive of modern society itself, whose *raison d'être* becomes to protect itself from internal and external harm. According to this approach, disaster is at the centre of contemporary society, since



the emergency regime isolates, stigmatizes and pathologizes certain parts of the population and the environment that are seen as the bearers of danger.

'Contagion is more than an epidemiological fact', asserts literary scholar Priscilla Wald (2008). In line with Foucault's account, she inquires into the role of culture within the modern emergency regime. For Wald, epidemiological figures, phrases, images and story lines are used to make sense, not only of strictly medical phenomena, but also find application in wider social domains. In her exploration of the epidemiological imaginary, Wald focuses on 'the outbreak narrative', a paradigmatic story of an infection emerging, spreading through the global networks, and finally being contained. Such outbreak narratives not only represent specific infections, they also produce the way we experience infections in the first place:

Outbreak narratives ... have consequences. As they disseminate information, they affect survival rates and contagion routes. They promote or mitigate the stigmatizing of individuals, groups, populations, locales (regional and global), behaviors, and lifestyles, and they change economies. They also influence how both scientists and the lay public understand the nature and consequence of infection, how they imagine the threat, and why they react so fearfully to some disease outbreaks and not others at least as dangerous and pressing

(2008: 3)

Outbreak narratives have consequences, and according to Wald, these consequences are not only destructive, as in the kind of harm done by the cultural frames described by the vulnerability approach. Rather, the consequences of the outbreak narratives are productive; they reframe and reconfigure social life by creating and disseminating new models of public life, based on the principles of public health.

According to the emergency regime approach, to sum up, disasters are more than brute facts, but also more than cultural figures to be studied in canonical works of fiction and theology. Instead, they function as cognitive frames, epistemological technologies, embedded in specific social practices and legitimating specific forms of social control. These frames enable us to make sense of social life, understood as a distribution of dangers and threats across the politic body. 'Emergency', in the words of sociologist Craig Calhoun, 'is a way of grasping problematic events, a way of imagining them that emphasizes their apparent unpredictability, abnormality, and brevity and that carries the corollary that response—intervention—is necessary' (2004: 55).

Scholars have studied the emergency regime operative in a variety of practices. Among others, in humanitarian interventions (Fassin 2012; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010), in the campaigns of the New Deal policy-makers during the Great Depression (Dauber 2013), in the management of Palestinian territories by the Israeli Defense Forces (Ophir 2010; Weizman 2011), in contemporary disaster exercises (B. Anderson 2010; Aradau and Munster 2011), and in the 'creative

destruction' of American capitalism (Rozario 2007). Approaches like these ask what is legitimated when social life is imagined—framed, verbalized, problematized or constructed—as a disaster.

Media researcher Chris Russil and political theorist Chad Lavin have explored the emergency regime at work in the management of Hurricane Katrina. In the legal aftermath of the disaster, FEMA's officials made frequent use of the 'tipping point' metaphor in order to explain why things went wrong. Already a common trope during the US war in Iraq, FEMA's choice of rhetoric was based on Malcolm Gladwell's 2000 *The Tipping Point*, a bestseller in management literature, which suggests social change be explained by means of the terms and tropes of epidemiology. FEMA's use of the tipping point metaphor is an example of the epidemiologic imaginary that explains social phenomena as diverse as fashion trends, crime waves, television programming and poorly managed hurricanes in the language of epidemiology. 'Americans', Russil and Lavin propose, 'have become increasingly prepared to view the world through the lens of infection and contagion' (Russil and Lavin 2010: 66). In this perspective, the epidemic is neither a brute scientific fact, nor a mere cultural figure, but rather a cognitive frame, a cultural 'lens' that configures our awareness of the social world.

Methodologically, the emergency regime approach views the function of aesthetic practices as a way of naming something a disaster. In this case, the relation between culture and disaster can be conceptualized as a *configuration*, a construction of the public image of social life in the language of disaster. The task of the disaster researcher, then, is to unearth the deep-seated cultural notions of victimization, stigmatization, aid, abnormality and heroism that format our everyday experience.

In this chapter, we have introduced five approaches in the contemporary cultural study of disaster. Our ambition has been to show that these five approaches present five very different notions of disasters, as well as of culture (see Table 4.1). They zoom out gradually from the individual human being to the whole world: (1) the trauma approach tends to view disaster on the level of the individual, focusing on the working-through of the rupturing event by a single human being; (2) the vulnerability approach tends to view disaster on the level of the community, describing the social and cultural 'pre-disaster conditions' that activate or aggravate disaster; (3) the state of exception approach views disaster on the level of the state, extending the scope of the exploration to the fundamental political structure of the Western national states; (4) the cultural history approach, in this case exemplified by the cultural history of the apocalypse, views disaster on the level of the world, studying the famous TEOTWAWKI question (about the end of the world as we know it); and (5) the emergency regime approach, finally, views disaster on the level of social practice, as a configuration that manages bodies and populations, and is therefore halfway between the individual and the world.

The emergency regime approach is our own term since, at present, this is not an acknowledged and demarcated approach with a methodological framework of its own. It is constituted rather loosely as a connected group of contributions



Table 4.1 The cultural study of disaster: five approaches

Approach	Inspired by	Function of aesthetic practices	Scope
Trauma approach	Psychology, Psychoanalysis, Memory Studies	Working-through, commemoration	Individual
Vulnerability approach	Sociology, Anthropology	Causation	Community
State of exception approach	Political Theory, State Law	Exposure	State
Cultural history approach	Kulturwissenschaft, History of Ideas	Schematization	World
Emergency regime approach	Michel Foucault, Science Studies	Configuration	Social practice

from the fields of cultural studies, sociology, anthropology and political science. Nevertheless, we find this emerging approach highly promising. By taking this approach, cultural analysts do not restrict themselves to describing how the perceptions of disaster have changed since the first religious legends of the flood. Instead, they explore how disasters change the structure of the modern world, from the famous 1755 Lisbon earthquake, through to the increasingly frequent and increasingly violent man-made and natural disasters of today. By making sense of our ways of making sense of disaster, cultural studies gives us access to the way we see and the way we act in a contemporary world threatened by future disasters.

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