

EDITORIAL

A Glance at Various Types of Vulnerabilities

Since time immemorial, disasters have been part and parcel of human existence, whether we speak about earthquakes, floods, fires, avalanches, tsunamis, epidemics, or battles and wars. Human beings have always had to cope with disasters of various kinds and have had to find ways to deal with their aftermath. Therefore, disasters have constantly been a topic of reflection and have featured in legends, folk songs, myths or other forms of the oral tradition, to say nothing of representations brought to light as archaeological evidence, to which massive written evidence has been added in the last centuries.

However, in recent years, there has been an increase in terms of efforts made to understand disasters, to look into ways of preventing them, and to come up with strategies of dealing with their effects on the population, given the fact that disasters have diversified both in terms of scale and of form. Quarantelli et al. correctly state that “[t]he newer disasters and crises are additions to older forms; they recombine elements of old threats and new vulnerabilities” (61). Indeed, besides natural disasters, a lot of man-made disasters have emerged, such as nuclear, chemical or biological threats, terrorist attacks, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, missile or drone attacks, genocides. All these potential threats have generated an unprecedented sense of anxiety and have contributed to the feeling that life is endangered, that there are no certainties left and that life on earth can end any time.

Fiction has come to mirror this feeling of anxiety and of intense vulnerability. Not only past disasters but also imaginary future catastrophes have come to feature in literary works. Man-made climate change and its effects upon the environment have led to a profusion of ecodystopian novels set in futuristic, climate-changed landscapes with apocalyptic or dystopian futures. What is worth dwelling on in such narratives is not the scenarios they create, but rather what they disclose about human nature when confronted with extreme situations, what they reveal about the essence of things. They highlight the ultimate reality that can only be revealed by calamities, showing human nature stripped of all the varnish of civilization, a humanity deprived of all the safeguards of culture. Fictions about the Last Man and the Apocalypse – both in literature and in movies, have proliferated, with the Last Man both a spectator and a victim of extinction, experiencing and reflecting at the same time on ultimate truths. It is precisely here that the appeal of catastrophe fictions can be found. As Eva Horn argues, “they enable the analysis of a society’s fragility while outsourcing it to a distant future, to the imagination or to science fiction. This space allows people to develop and play through ideas that in fact lurk as realities beneath the surface of our civilization and our social bonds” (97).

The articles included in this volume look into various types of disasters, foregrounding the idea of vulnerability and resilience. Some of them investigate narratives dealing with potential futures in which ecological disasters are foregrounded. The articles look both backward and forward, exploring past disasters, such as wars, but also future man-made catastrophes. They all foreground, in one form or another, the effects of disasters on human nature and the necessity of taking steps in order to address socio-political, as well as ecological, challenges.

Thus, Diana Benea scrutinizes the impact of ecological disasters on its human and more-than-human worlds by focusing on the Ping Chong + Company, one of the best-known companies on the New York City theater scene over the past 50 years, and their

2017 production of *Alaxsxa | Alaska*. Benea examines the transformative potential of community-specific Indigenous theater in reshaping socio-political and ecological landscapes, looking into its contributions to the development of an Indigenized perspective on Alaska's history. Drawing from ethnographic material, the analysis aims to document the agenda of community engagement that underpinned the play's development, production, and reception.

Man-made climate change and its effects upon the environment are foregrounded in Manoj Rajbanshi and Nagendra Kumar's article, which explores Varun Thomas Mathew's 2019 novel *The Black Dwarves of the Good Little Bay*. The article points to the way in which Indian writers imagine future societies coping with the effects of ecological calamity and climate change, examining the way in which Mathew's novel uses the depiction of a metropolis, following an environmental catastrophe, to illustrate the dystopian imagination in the Anthropocene. The representations of the agency of the non-human world and the politics of memory in a collapsing ecosystem are also critically examined.

Another novel that falls into the category of climate-fiction is *The Light Pirate* by Lily Brooks-Dalton, in which the writer imagines a disastrous situation brought on by hurricanes and floods in the book. Li Kang and Yang Wanyin analyze the development of communities during the climate crisis from three angles, based on critical posthumanism and community theories. Overall, by exploring the fate of the community during the climate crisis, the article highlights the need for environmental protection, the intricate relationship between humans and nature, foregrounding a potential solution to the threat posed by climate change: peaceful coexistence with other living things.

Representations of disaster were bound to include a glimpse into film studies, a field which has been flourishing in the last decades. Thus, Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* is analyzed from the perspective of the first-hand account of the USS catastrophe during World War II – the torpedoing of the USS Indianapolis by a Japanese submarine after carrying atomic bomb components to the

US air base on Tinian Island. Set in the context of the confidence crises and “disaster” film genre cycle of 1970s America, *Jaws* is interpreted as a challenge to the conventional narrative of Hiroshima, by emphasizing the suffering of the crew. Sebastian Croft also points to how the movie plays on audience fears that a nation still recovering from the Watergate scandal and military defeat in Vietnam was now vulnerable to moral and nuclear retaliation for Hiroshima thirty years later.

The catastrophe of the Vietnam War – one of the worst military catastrophes in American foreign policy - is the focus of Alexandra Mitrea’s article, which examines how Yusef Komunyakaa portrays in his poetry a war which he personally witnessed firsthand while serving as a war correspondent. Since Komunyakaa proceeds almost like a painter, Mitrea analyzes the poet’s use of powerful, visceral imagery. She also examines how music – jazz in particular – helps to paint a picture of the conflict that allows the reader plenty of room to navigate the images that appeal to all five senses. She demonstrates that Komunyakaa’s war poetry is distinguished by more than just a documentary drive since, beneath the apocalyptic imagery that depicts the war, one can notice self-renewal and an incipient process of healing.

The war ethos also informs Oksana Starshova and Polina Myronenko’s article. Their focus is the Russo-Ukrainian war that is still raging, more than two years after its inception. The authors analyze the role played by popular culture in wartime, dwelling on war morale songs – particularly those pieces that feature in music videos. The authors set out to document the wartime songs as a personal and political reaction to the events, irrespective of their quality, with a view to probing into the hermeneutics of the messages encoded in their lyrics, music and images.

The effects of wars also loom large in Ishiguro’s first two novels, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982) and *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986), which are both set in the shadow of WWII. Iris Rusu focuses on Ishiguro’s fascination with traumatic memories and time, which are correctly seen as originating in the high modernist

tradition. Rusu skilfully argues that the issues of memory and trauma, both personal and collective, cause time to bend, memory to become merged with fantasy and cognitive dislocation in both books. Ishiguro's treatment of themes like guilt, confusion, and unhomeliness, as well as a narrative strategy that openly draws on the displacements, lyricism, and unreliability that are demonstrated to result from traumatic experiences and the conscious mind's inability to confront them, are investigated by resorting to the methodology and terminology of trauma studies, which has been one of the abiding trends in the humanities.

Another trend which has marked the humanities has been the affective one. The language of affect and emotional intensities in fiction has gained ground together with the implications of the "cultural politics of emotions" in recent years. It is against this background that Swarnika Ahuja analyzes how "naivety" was developed in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in relation to reading practices. She explores the way in which anti-novel discourse re-produced the "naïve reader," allowing the circulation and re-production of the affects, aesthetics, and intensities it sought to censor. She identifies first, the "naïve reader" in the era's popular magazines, essays, and conduct literature; she then concentrates on how "the naïve reader" and "naivety" itself are re-produced in the novel form, as well as how feelings like "shame" "work" to censor this "naivety," especially in Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*.

The last article in the volume is addressed to a general readership as it examines how self-efficacy affects secondary school students' acquisition of foreign languages in light of a recent change in the field's emphasis that places the needs, abilities, and efforts of the learner at the center of the process. Artur Cedzich finds it necessary to demonstrate that self-efficacy can be considered a significant indication of foreign language competency in order to close the current study gap. He argues, based on a study that he conducted on 78 participants in a higher secondary school, that students who are extremely effective get the best mean grade in

English, are proficient in other languages, and have confidence in their abilities. They also avoid getting discouraged by taking chances in the context of foreign language acquisition and dealing with unforeseen circumstances. The author also offers a number of suggestions that could be applied to future teaching methodologies.

The present volume closes with an invitation to reading a very challenging book, *Monsters: A Fan's Dilemma* by Claire Dederer, whose title dilemma is a question the author raised in a 2017 article, "What Do We Do with the Art of Monstrous Men?" As always, the answer belongs to the reader.

Works Cited

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