



Book review

Review: Disasters in Popular Cultures (Il Sileno Edizioni, Geographies of the Anthropocene book series, Rende, Italy, 2019, 253 pages), Editors: Giovanni Gugg, Elisabetta Dall'Ò, Domenica Borriello

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Disasters in popular cultures (Il Sileno Edizioni¹, 2019, 253 pages) is the third volume of the series “Geographies of the Anthropocene”, edited by Giovanni Gugg, Elisabetta Dall'Ò and Domenica Borriello with a preface by Joël Candau, a work of critical, multidisciplinary and multisituated reflection that allows the reader to understand the methods and techniques of popular narration of natural and man-made disasters. For popular cultures, storytelling had and continues to have meaning preventing danger with magical and legendary detection systems (and revelations), attributing a symbolic epicenter to the phenomena, securing from the eruptions of history the fact of living in a place, to contain the cultural limits of tragedy in a discourse based on salvation. The enormous patrimony of fables, myths, legends and stories that in the history of the precarious relationship between man and nature has been handed down and transcribed and so has the function of reconstructing a relationship of trust and coexistence by basing the same motivations at regular intervals of being in the collective world: we live in existential balance but we can only find the point of cultural equilibrium through the story that explains, teaches, interprets the causes of phenomena prior to the definitions of science or as they still cannot close the circle of interpretative explanations. Thus, before philosophers, naturalists and scientists, popular cultures are equipped to prevent symbolic causes of catastrophe and aid survival through the magic-empirical method and the creation of a universe populated by benign and malignant forces that both destroy and create. The cases, applied and practical, are manifold, not only respect the narrative structures of the happy ending

¹ Download the book: www.ilsileno.it/geographiesoftheanthropocene.

consequent to the entanglement of the story but go deeper, digging into the cause/effect nucleus to find the remains of staying alive, united, firmly on the ground eternally dancing. It is not wrong to suppose that if there had been no founding legends villages would not have been rebuilt, without the agency of a mythical animal the rescued would have been “acted on” failing to overcome the tragedy, lacking a miracle it would make no sense continue everyday life. And this collection of essays proves it, finding among the rubble of popular cultures the pillars within which there was security.

While the preface by Joël Candau allows us to reflect on the subjective and first-person origin of the testimony and the heroic narrative of a catastrophe, the introduction by Giovanni Gugg, Elisabetta Dall'Ò and Domenica Borriello provides a complete theoretical and methodological framework of the topic, drawing on Italian and European literature, helping to bring together ethnographic cases with the historical-anthropological academic work that, especially in the 80s and 90s, has been consolidated. The writers clearly demonstrate, in the light of the recent advancement, the wealth of material available for a collection of work on the anthropology of disasters which will strengthen the ethnographic evidence of the risks faced by popular culture. Putting aside geological or statistical data, the prevention of the destruction of human lives, houses and cities must necessarily pass through the narration of their origin, just as the reconstruction's dynamics of destroyed communities must start from the intangible heritage. The essays, in Italian, French and English cover the Italian, European, Oceanic, Amerindian and African contexts, and are organized into four sections that present a sort of journey of the folktale hero full of adventures. This imaginary hero accompanies the reader to the discovery of legends and myths that tremble across different types of catastrophic events and the consequences of an uncontrolled nature that, it is hoped, will return, in more benign forms.

The first section, *Magnitude*, shows us the unit of measure for the capacity of memory and overcoming risk in three imaginative islands. In the first essay (*L'isola nata in mezzo al mare. Mitopoiesi, disastri e microcosmi* by Ugo Vuoso) the study of historical sources and recent chronicles tells us of two islands facing each other in the Gulf of Naples: the Ischia of the living and the Ischia of the dead, opposite poles of the catastrophe of those who re-emerge and resist and those who are overwhelmed by fear; legends allow the building of a bridge linking the two islands in the long seismic history of the area, supported by historical sources and the psychopathological analysis of the survivors, with the specificity of Mercalli (the earthquake measurement scientist) who becomes, iconographically, the dismantler of prophecies and, consequently, of the bridge. The second contribution (*The Main Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas Project and the moral decay of the universe* by Michael Main) reveals to us how the subsoil of the oceanic island, which has become the subject of energy research, proves indomitable to both the cosmogonic plant of the Huli population and to the multinationals, forced to rewrite, along with their seismographs, the cultural strata. The last research work (*Pozzuoli, 2 marzo 1970: lo sgombero del rione Terra nella memoria dei puteolani* by Maria Laura Longo) shows the collective memory the island of memory of the Rione Terra in Pozzuoli slowly rising; the testimonies of the ancient inhabitants return us to a forced eviction that we seek to understand through life stories.

The second section explodes in *Eruptions*, four enchanted volcanoes that distort symbolic landscapes through the debris of centuries of destruction and creation. The Vesuvius of the first study (*Il vulcano meraviglioso. Antropologia del racconto fantastico vesuviano* by Giovanni Gugg) appears as the historical metaphor of the cohabitation between divine and human, monument generating monuments and body that is always vital and traversed by symbolic fire, despite its

quiescence. The second essay (*Les Volcans des Virunga à l'Est de la République Démocratique du Congo, une perception populaire: a mythe ou une réalité?* by Patrick Habakaramo, Gracia Mutalegwa, Justin Kahuranyi and Katcho Karume) presents the Congolese volcanic chain of the Virunga, mountains that respond to the will of the gods, despite continuous animal sacrifices, as told by the locals under multiple perceptive and cultural aspects, analyzed in the form of surveys from the group Observatoire Volcanologique of Goma. The third contribution (*Ka wahine 'ai honua, la donna che divora la terra: un'analisi ecoantropologica del mito di Pele* by Emanuela Borgnino) introduces us to the goddess of fire and volcanoes who generates and destroys the earth, the active Hawaiian Kilauea represents the contemporary ecological and political sense of the local population that, respecting this divinity, works to safeguard the landscape. The latest contribution (*The Veil of Saint Agatha in Popular Narratives of Etna Risk* by Salvatore Cannizzaro and Gian Luigi Corinto) takes us back to Italy and to a saint, Agata of Catania, retracing the history of the sacred female on the slopes of Etna to outline a geography of a festival which spans urban and symbolic spaces.

Conspiracies, the third in the essays's collection, allows the reader to see that behind the linearity of the cause/effect relationship there is also a disturbing dark element, the disorder of the unfolding of stories. The first case (*Les théories du complot: entre croyances, légendes et menaces sociales* by Christine Bonardi), drawing from literature and popular narrative, reports a definite and precise analysis of the social origin and definition of conspiracies, theories, and fakes-news regarding historical events and local facts. The second contribution (*Une esthétique de l'impensable. Miettes pour une anthropologie généralisée du count vraisemblable* by Charlie Galibert) presents the methods of narrative understanding of the unknown through a theoretical analysis and recent cases in which the elements of contemporary orality explain the causes of catastrophes by computerized means reverting to techniques of the past.

The last section is dedicated to *Impacts*, as the consequences of disasters need to re-enter the local narrative paradigm to be understood and overcome, or at least absorbed by normality, in a discourse becoming more and more global. The first case (*I draghi delle Alpi. Cambiamenti climatici, Antropocene e immaginari di ghiaccio* by Elisabetta Dall'Ò) demonstrates the historical-anthropological path of how climate change impoverishes the popular universe of specific elements that have described the Alpine cultural landscape, where the ice dragons find themselves defeated by modernity, and together with men are the object of divine punishment. The second research work (*Drought in folklores of India: Mapping the change and continuity in traditional knowledge through orality* by Amit Kumar Srivastava) maps Indian orality with respect to the catastrophic phenomenon of drought, between prevention, spirituality and linguistics. The last text in the publication (*Unnatural Disasters and the Anthropocene: lessons learned from anthropological and historical perspectives in Latin America* by Virginia García-Acosta) asks whether and in what forms the prevention of contemporary risks in Latin America is still of a social and community nature in an age, that of the Anthropocene, in which popular cultures struggle to define semantically the sudden changes in climate.

Analyzing the individual essays, therefore, it appears even clearer how much the goal of the editors of *Disasters in popular cultures* has been reached, allowing a in-depth diachronic and geographical analysis and, at the same time, a theoretical and ethnographic depth difficult to find in other collective works. There is an acute attention to the use of sources (historical, literary, anthropological, oral), the different applied research methodologies and the multiple nuances of different yet united perspectives. The same close attention is given to the popular narratives of the

destruction of what is socially built in different, not only geographical, contexts, enriching the opportunity for of future work in this area. More attention could have been paid to the reconstruction post-catastrophe communities through traditional narrative forms, aware that this interpretative and intangible heritage is the most vulnerable and delicate in a state of calamity.

Conflicts of interest

Author declares no conflicts of interest in this paper.



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