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Marie-Hélène Huet, *The Culture of Disaster*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press. 2012. 272 pp. ISBN: 978-0-226-35821-5

The environmental crisis is foremost a cultural and economic crisis with visible consequences on the planet and on those unevenly affected by them, according to their social condition or place of living. Climate change is its most visible and immediate result, which was announced as a disastrous future in the beginnings of the environmental movements and accepted as the contemporary reality of our planet nowadays. The compelling story of climate change from possible disastrous future to our tangible present reality is told by the rise of the planet's temperature, the invisible networks of chemicals, plastic decomposed into tiny particles mistaken by plankton and the acidification of the oceans, among many other examples. When Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), or Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (1972), two of the most influential works in environmentalism, were published, climate change was still something that could be averted.¹ However, today the scientific community, humanists and politicians discuss either or not to adopt the concept of the Anthropocene, proposed by Crutzen, a Nobel Prize in chemistry, to designate the "human-dominated, geological epoch, supplementing the Holocene – the warm period of the past 10–12 millennia."² In the Anthropocene, Humankind is now a geological force whose undeniable impact has made the world a truly global network of interconnections, either by the invisible but known circulation of radioactive materials in the air or chemical residue in the

¹ Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962); Ehrlich, Paul. *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968).

² P. J. Crutzen, "Geology of Mankind". *Nature* 23 (2002): 23.

water streams. The rhetoric of catastrophe used by Carson and Erlich (invisible contamination, overpopulation and exploration of resources will have disastrous consequences) has now become the rhetoric of normality. In this process, the metaphor of the apocalypse, which is “the most powerful metaphor that the environmental imagination has at its disposal,”³ has somehow been reread and its futurity lost to an evident catastrophic present. Dealing with this catastrophe is the fundamental question of our time with implications in every aspect of human life. Because environmental change is a tangible reality, a crisis we live in, the solutions for it reflect the social and political implications of disasters and the imagination of disasters as a cultural mechanism, as discussed by Marie-Hélène Huet’s *The Culture of Disaster*.⁴

This is a valuable work of cultural history that traces how post-Enlightenment society came to interiorize the imagination of disaster, connecting discourses of catastrophe with contemporary debates on the state of exception. Arguing that “our culture thinks *through* disasters,”⁵ Huet traces the interiorization of the catastrophic experience in Western philosophical and political thought since modernity. In the two final parts of the work, the author applies this argument to the analysis of post-Enlightenment Western imagination to argue that it was also contaminated by anticipation of disaster. Looking at some representative works of art, literature and film, as examples of narrative fragmentation and of the limits of narratological representation, Huet reads how the “memory of disasters plays a specific role in our cultural imagination.”⁶

Part I of the work focuses on three major disasters that struck Europe: the 1720 Marseilles plague; the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake; and the 1831-32 cholera epidemic; to argue that the Enlightenment put an end to theological interpretations of disasters and to the idea that those were purely natural. Evidence of human responsibility in the

³ Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination – Thoreau, Nature Writing and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 285.

⁴ Huet, Marie-Hélène. *The Culture of Disaster* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 2.

⁵ Huet, *The Culture of Disaster*, 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 12.

widespread destruction caused by the Lisbon earthquake helped to shift disasters from an unpredictable nature to a properly human concern. Huet's argument is that the Enlightenment scientific project was, from the start, "fraught with perils and anxieties,"⁷ because it also set the stage for the interiorization of the catastrophic experience, fundamental to the culture of disaster. Anxiety about catastrophic events became embedded in the administrative institutions and in the politics of exception that came out of the emancipation of disasters from nature to the *socius*.⁸ The implication of human agency in disasters also explicitly grounded them in the limits of political administration, particularly when dealing with epidemics. Huet draws a compelling analysis of the debates that opposed advocates of the theory of contagion against those who defended that disease was propagated by atmospheric conditions. Depending on which of the sides held the administrative power, the fight against cholera was made with "highly politicized measures that alternately condoned expulsions and internments."⁹ Human agency in disasters, thus, became an integral part of the political exercise.

In part II, Huet moves from the institutional interiorization of the catastrophic experience to a discussion of the concept of the modern subject as fragmented body and mind that fraught the Illuminist social project, as seen in Rousseau and Chateaubriand. As the author shows, there is "a strict parallel between the state of exception, as suspension of the juridical order itself, and the state of emergency brought by disastrous events."¹⁰ The argument is made that, living in a state of exception, like the French Revolution and the Terror, "the sense of living through disastrous circumstances became interiorized as a unique form of individual destiny."¹¹ The "dis-astered" bodies¹² were a form of political disaster for Rousseau and echoed his conception of denaturalization of the human soul, which Huet argues was a form of personal interiorization of disaster. Accordingly, Chateaubriand turned

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 9.

the end of monarchy “into a personal tragedy [and a] deliberate step” in the integration of the political disaster in his own self.¹³

After showing how the imagination of disasters became a fundamental element of the modern thought, Huet addresses, in the third part of the work, representations and narratives of tragedy by discussing nineteenth-century narratives of catastrophes at sea. The author argues these narratives of tragedy became fragmented as they tried to reconstruct the unknown elements of disaster as seen in the wreck of the French ship *Medusa*, on its way to reclaim the colonial outpost of Saint-Louis-du-Sénégal in 1816; and the disappearance of the two ships *Terror* and *Erebus* of the English polar expedition, around 1845. Because both these voyages had explicit colonial intentions, their disappearance also struck a symbolical blow in the civilizational project they stood for. As Huet convincingly argues, the resort to cannibalism by both crews brought to the surface an unknown or unrecognizable dark nature, while also definitively installing the fragmented body in the modern imagination. Examples of fragmented narratives and representations are analyzed, as Gericault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, which was sketched using severed heads and limbs from the guillotine to portray the cannibalized bodies. Poe’s *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pin* and Jules Verne’s *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields* are also discussed to show how narratives of disaster faced the limits of representation.

Finally, the last chapter argues that fragmentation, unsustainable narrative and collapsing architecture are present in contemporary western cultural imagination. Huet reads Coppola’s *The Conversation*, Antonioni’s *Blow-Up*, and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner*, as narratives of “disastrous events [seen] as solitary confrontations between the self and its desire for knowledge.”¹⁴ Technology denies the possibility of constructing a whole narrative of those confrontations, imposing a consciousness of a fragmented reality. As Huet argues, “thinking through disasters is best exemplified in our incapacity to reassemble fragments into a reassuring whole.”¹⁵ Ultimately, disasters such as Fukushima,

¹³ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

pandemics such as AIDS or Ebola, reinstate what Huet considers as the power of nature over Humankind, which seems to imply that disasters also paradoxically reinstate fragments into the unity. In a way, the Anthropocene concept, as it was first stated by Crutzen, expresses this through optimism and confidence in science that has the task to, as the Nobel winner puts it, “guide society towards environmentally sustainable management during the era of the Anthropocene.”¹⁶ Thinking human action in the planet in terms of species is precisely one way of narrating the crisis and giving unity to fragments. Of course this is a simplistic narrative that does not take its various fragments into consideration: that countries behave differently toward the planet. It is in this sense that recent environmental criticism stresses the need for an imagination of the global environmental crisis, precisely as a unifying narrative composed and aware of its many social, cultural, economic and environmental realities. Government structures, civil society, grassroots activism, environmental criticism, among many others, all give examples of the imagination of disasters, either in the solutions they offer, either in the blunt disregard for the environmental crisis. It is crucial to understand how the use of the apocalypse metaphor in environmental narratives as call for action may still be useful in our present time, without falling into the easy acceptance of mega technological projects, such as geoengineering, or GMO based industrial farming, as solutions to the contemporary environmental reality, possibly fostered by the Anthropocene concept with its narrative of the end of all catastrophes.

¹⁶ Crutzen, “Geology of Mankind,” 23.