

## Writing Catastrophes: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Semantics of Natural and Anthropogenic Disasters

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This Special Focus Section is devoted to representations of natural and anthropogenic catastrophes and ecological transformation in literature in German and English from 1950 to the present. The contributions analyse the semantics and narrative functions of disasters in fictional and autobiographical texts. The authors engage with the 'third wave' of ecocritical research (Slovic), in particular Hubert Zapf's concept of literature as a medium of cultural ecology, Gernot and Hartmut Böhme's 'aesthetics of nature', Ulrich Beck's 'world risk theory' and postcolonial theory. But they also adopt broader approaches to literary analysis such as Mikhail M. Bakhtin's concept of dialogic imagination and Joseph W. Meeker's theory of the comic.

Literary disaster discourses are characterised by a fundamental tension between the aesthetic and ethical aspects of destruction. Assessing examples in the form of novels, short prose and an eye-witness narrative of the 2004 tsunami, the special section explores three aspects of disaster narratives: i) apocalyptic scenarios and risk narratives; ii) narrative patterns and the semantics of disaster literature; and iii) the role of literature as a medium of cultural discourse.

i) *Apocalyptic scenarios and risk narratives*: In contemporary environmental literature, disasters are often depicted using the dramatizing rhetoric of the Apocalypse which has become a master narrative in this body of texts (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination* 285; Garrard 95-107). Apocalyptic scenarios typically contain the idea that the catastrophe is some kind of punishment by a divine entity (Jakubowski-Tiessen; Walter 10) or, more secularly, the result of nature taking revenge (Goodbody, "Nature's revenge"). The punitive narrative gives encompassing meaning to the anxiety, suffering, loss and displacement described in literature. However, these environmental apocalypses are written in a specific historical constellation which has rendered the very notion of an apocalypse problematic. In the eyes of many thinkers, after the trauma of the Third Reich and the Holocaust the Apocalypse lost its cathartic effect and was 'truncated' (Vondung 134). This view appeared to be confirmed by a series of 'end-of-the-world' books, particularly in German post-war literature: first in apocalyptic scenarios of a third World War, atomic war and nuclear devastation; and later, in the 1970s and 1980s, in dark fictional treatments of environmental pollution, the 'population bomb', the limits to growth, climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the extinction of the human race as a result of dangerous technologies getting out of control. The disaster narratives of well-known authors like Arno Schmidt, Hans Magnus Enzenberger, Günter Kunert, Günter Grass and Christa Wolf (Goodbody, "Catastrophism" 165-176) often gave a stark pessimistic outlook on the future, although some optimistic

traces are to be found (Lilienthal 193). These authors already deployed many of the motifs, dystopian fantasies and meanings which can still be found in the environmental apocalypses of contemporary American, English and German literature. These include the motif of humankind beyond rescue, warnings against blind faith in technologies with incalculable risks, critique of the ruthless exploitation of natural resources, and examination of the individual and social origins of aggression and destruction. Although the assessment of the dramatic ecological situation often does not offer any concrete solutions, the apocalyptic scenarios always – implicitly or explicitly – point to the necessity and urgency of social change (Killingworth and Palmer 41). Some, however, also “include an ideal socioecological countermodel” (Heise 141) with visions of a better, more sustainable life. Others develop more pragmatist utopias, based, for example, on the principles of bioregionalism, or centred around the usage of renewable energy sources and alternative forms of living.

Recent ecocritical research has stated that our “historical place” is defined by the fact that “environmental catastrophe does not lie before us, but we are standing in the midst of it” (Böhme, *Die Natur* 261; Rigby 98) and we need to find “a way of dwelling actively within [...] crisis” (Buell, *From Apocalypse* 206). Because there is no evidence of a significant decline in apocalyptic narratives in contemporary literature, Ursula Heise has suggested that literary critics differentiate between apocalyptic and risk scenarios as “different mode[s] of projecting the future” (Heise 141). While in apocalyptic narratives “utter destruction lies ahead but can be averted and replaced by an alternative future society”, in the risk perspective environmental crises are “already underway all around” and can only be mitigated, but “a future without their impact has become impossible to envision” (Heise 142). In other words, risks are omnipresent and can be ignored only at our peril. The challenge is therefore how institutions and practices can be developed to avoid the most dangerous risks and a broader societal crisis. So the risk discourse – which is theoretically grounded in Ulrich Beck’s concept of the ‘risk society’ – is mainly pitched at a pragmatic level, often linked to managerialist, reformist and incrementalist perspectives (Feindt and Oels). On the other hand, the apocalyptic discourse emphasises “the fate of the world as a whole” (Heise 141), draws on holistic or global imaginaries, is often based on moral or religious considerations, and aims at a fundamental transformation of societies, consciousness and ways of life.

ii) *Narrative patterns and semantics of disaster literature*: Apart from the master narrative of the apocalypse, environmental disaster literature deploys a range of other narrative patterns and semantics, some of which inscribe these texts into long-lasting literary traditions. One example is the motif of ‘shipwreck with spectator’ (Lucretius). Revitalized and modified from its origins in ancient Roman literature, it provides the idea that a distant spectator can actually enjoy catastrophe as an object of contemplation; the philosophically mature observer can even use catastrophes to practise the acquisition of mental distance from the irregularities and turbulences of an atomised world. Later, the ‘shipwreck with spectator’ perspective was combined with many different discourses on nature. Immanuel Kant, for example, stressed humans’ ethical distinction from nature, which he considered a raw, inhuman, unpredictable

power. At the same time, for Kant, nature can be a source of aesthetic enjoyment. However, a distant, non-involved view is required of spectators, if they are to be able to enjoy the sublime immensity of nature's catastrophic eruptions. The ambivalence of "flirting with catastrophe while remaining sure of security" (Kerridge, "Ecothrillers" 248) is also a pattern of contemporary environmental literature. The narrative model of the distant spectator, however, may disguise to what extent people are eventually involved in the environmental crisis; it suggests distance and control and can hence create an ambivalent sub-semantic, running contrary to any intended warning function where an imminent catastrophe is the subject matter.

Furthermore, analysis of contemporary disaster discourse reveals that religion or the sacred continue to play an important role (Walter 12, 204). Across a broad spectrum of literary genres the sacred still serves as a source of meaning-making in the face of contingent events like natural disasters; religious and secular coping strategies often converge. For example, when traditional religious tropes such as the already mentioned theology of punishment are replaced with more secular tropes such as nature's revenge, the resulting narratives still resonate with religious thinking. From this perspective, in biocentric world views such as James Lovelock's Gaia theory, the planetary ecosystem as an all-encompassing entity takes the place of the sacred. Interestingly, not least in the mundane eco-thriller genre, rescue from anthropogenic catastrophes is often linked to story-lines which suggest the validity of natural religion or pre-modern knowledges preserved by indigenous cultures; these are in turn presented as supporting an alternative, non-technocratic, non-anthropocentric attitude towards nature.

iii) *The role of literature as a medium of cultural discourse*: Literature gives meaning to catastrophes either through scientific explanations and religious, ethical or political interpretations, or by transforming events into artfully shaped images and tropes, thereby integrating them into the cultural discourse (Walter 22). Ecocritical research analyses cultural constructions of natural environment and conceives "nature as a cultural responsibility and project" (Goodbody and Rigby 3). If we combine ecocriticism with insights from literary anthropology (Iser), the anthropological potential of fictional environmental literature comes into focus. Considering literature as a cognitive and creative force within the larger cultural system, Hubert Zapf has suggested differentiating between "a cultural-critical metadiscourse, an imaginative counterdiscourse, and a reintegrative interdiscourse" (Zapf 138). On these three levels, environmental literature, and hence also eco-catastrophic narratives, can serve (i) as a "sensorium for what goes wrong in a society", (ii) as "a medium of constant cultural self-renewal" counteracting economic and political discourses, and (iii) as "symbolic space of expression and (re-)integration into the larger ecology of cultural discourses" (ibid.). While Zapf's model stresses the systemic aspect and is grounded in Peter Finke's cultural ecology approach, Gernot and Hartmut Böhme's call for a new 'aesthetics of nature' focuses on subjectivity and sensibility. From this perspective, literature serves as a cultural archive which mediates between humans and ecology and facilitates strategies of renaturalization through the retranslation of nature's language and through reflection on human embeddedness in nature. This ideal relies on "a premodern episteme marked

by the nonalienation of nature and culture” (Müller 74). Despite their differences, both approaches emphasize the cultural potential of literature as a medium of criticism and imagination. Both functions can also be recognized in disaster narratives, with their representations of natural and anthropogenic catastrophes and the environmental crisis.

Many environmental disaster narratives also employ comic, ironic and satirical strategies which make a rather ambiguous contribution to the ecological message. Although catastrophic literature is often grounded in the model of tragic drama (Groh et al. 16; Walter 16f.), we can differentiate between a tragic and a comic frame of the apocalypse, drawing on a distinction that Greg Garrard (95) introduced into ecocritical discourse. The two frames differ in their “mechanism of redemption”: in the tragic frame it is “victimage” and sacrifice recompensating guilt, while in the comic frame it is “recognition” of failure and error (O’Leary 68). While tragedy ends with a definitive catastrophic conclusion, in comedy, time is “open-ended and episodic” (Garrard 95), providing the possibility of rethinking, self-correction, and survival through accommodation (Meeker 168). While both modes of environmental apocalypse can serve as –optimistic or pessimistic – vehicles for ecological warnings, the comic mode can also relieve the reader of responsibility. When fictional characters escape by the skin of their teeth, the disaster may not have been as bad as it first seemed. Such narratives resonate with popular opinion regarding environmental doom, so long as it has not struck in the global centres of wealth.

On the other hand, disaster narratives, in particular those of higher literary quality, often employ a reflective rhetoric of irony and satire which engenders tensions between ethics and aesthetics. In particular, some disaster narratives display a deconstruction of apocalyptic tropes and a switch to comic and carnivalesque forms; this complicates the identification of ethical ideas and ecological messages. As a result, “literature of catastrophism has revealed itself as playing a highly ambiguous role in ecological debate” (Goodbody, “Catastrophism” 176). Furthermore, as genres, environmental apocalypses and eco-thrillers oscillate between deriving pleasure from and warning against the destruction of nature and the world (Kerridge, “Ecothrillers”, 245f). They strive to entertain the reader and draw delightful horror from suspense and the depiction of extreme natural disaster and destruction, thereby overlaying or sidelining the ecocritical warning message.

The six contributions to this special focus section are arranged in two groups. The first group (articles by Utz, Gerstenberger, Dürbeck) consists of papers which scrutinize the narrative patterns and semantics of disaster literature (shipwreck with spectator, nature’s revenge, the religious imaginary, the search for individual, national and cultural identity after the catastrophe). The second group (articles by Zbytovský, Zemanek, Bartosch) assembles articles which critically analyse the apocalyptic trope and its combination with irony, satire and the picaresque. We now turn to the individual contributions.

*Peter Utz* analyses the cultural construction of catastrophes and identifies a distinctive Swiss “catastrophe culture” (Pfister 231). In his readings of Swiss authors

since the 18<sup>th</sup> century such as Samuel Gessner, Jeremias Gotthelf, Carl Spitteler, Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Max Frisch, Peter Utz elaborates three themes: i) the role of natural catastrophes in the formation of national solidarity and identity in the absence of major military events; ii) the Swiss people as a nation of distant but myopic spectators who watch catastrophes happening to others without recognizing their own entanglement with disaster; and iii) the dialectic tension between local and global perspectives, for example when a local landslide following a summer of thunderstorms is amplified by universal statements on the role of erosion and destruction in Earth history. Here literature fulfils a reflexive and critical function, deconstructing the fallacies of the theatrical metaphor of the morally elevated spectator.

*Katharina Gerstenberger's* reading of *Phi Phi Island* (2007) by the Austrian author Joseph Haslinger is the only autobiographical disaster report treated in this special section. After a short review of paradigmatic literary texts on historical disasters (Voltaire, Kleist, Fontane, Bulwer-Lytton, Jelinek), Gerstenberger analyses Haslinger's account as the documentation of a personal trauma which reveals the various stages of coping with his survival of the 2004 tsunami. Only after gaining detachment, following a second journey to the scene of the events a year later, is Haslinger able to write up his report. Gerstenberger also shows the text's reflective and critical status, through its search for an appropriate genre – neither travelogue, adventure novel nor any other form of fictional narrative appear suitable – and through Haslinger's reflection upon religious patterns of meaning like the apocalyptic trope of the Last Judgment. Considering the proposition that there is a continuing 'presence of the sacred' in contemporary writing, Gerstenberger argues that the text explicitly states the inadequacy of any religious and moral imaginary. Instead, the author looks beyond his individual trauma to ecological concerns about the devastated landscapes in the tsunami regions, where the debris and layers of garbage even a year later witness to the human neglect of the former tourist 'paradise'.

From an ecocritical point of view, *Gabriele Dürbeck's* paper on Frank Schätzing's novel *The Swarm* (2004) analyses the possibility of representing the environmental crisis as a long-term phenomenon through the medium of the eco-thriller. She shows that Schätzing employs not only a wide range of strategies popularizing ecological knowledge, deep-sea research, swarm and network theory, but also apocalyptic rhetoric. This includes the motif of nature's revenge, when a mysterious swarm intelligence in the ocean attacks humans for their ongoing pollution and exploitation of the sea. The novel combines the apocalyptic scenario of a global-scale disaster with a risk scenario of further impending catastrophes which have to be managed. Adopting O'Leary's distinction between the tragic and comic frames of apocalypse, Dürbeck demonstrates that the novel has two elements providing closure: punishment for environmental guilt and the postulate of a global rescue through alternative thinking and action. She argues that the novel's pseudo-religious, pantheistic narrative strand, which envisions a merging of human power with that of nature (i.e. the swarm's power) undermines the appeal to the reader to rethink anthropocentric attitudes towards nature which is articulated in the epilogue.

Štěpán Zbytovský's article analyses the aesthetic, intertextual and poetic reflections in Arno Schmidt's early apocalyptic texts with their gruesome, grotesque phantasmagoria. Examining the secondary literature on Schmidt's writings, Zbytovský argues for a modification of the notion of a complementary relation between dystopia and idyllic nature: Schmidt's texts reflect the collapse of an idyllic vision of human harmony with nature, but provide no catharsis. Nevertheless, Schmidt supports the idea of the responsibility of the subjects, and the superiority of reason over the destructive 'Leviathan nature'. Applying Hubert Zapf's model of the three cultural-ecological functions of literature, Zbytovský stresses not only the author's literary strategies of alienation, deliberate intransparency and withholding of coherence (in analogy to the Leviathan's cataclysmic nature), but also his crucial use of 'mind play' (Gedankenspiel). He demonstrates that the latter serves as a redemptive, counter-discursive force which temporarily overcomes the 'Leviathan nature', while the subject is paradoxically left aware of its ultimate inadequacy. By this means, literature claims its place in an 'ecological niche' (Hutchinson) where the fundamental catastrophic situation may be averted, albeit only tentatively.

In her reading of Ian McEwan's novel *Solar* (2010), Evi Zemanek introduces the term "satiric-allegorical risk narrative" for a new genre of eco-fiction (based on Ulrich Beck's concept of risk theory): Instead of providing an apocalyptic environmental scenario or a dystopia, McEwan's novel represents climate change as a global risk, which is, however, mirrored in the catastrophic climax of the anti-hero's reckless personal life. Zemanek demonstrates how the protagonist is satirically exposed as a morally corrupt scientist and a hypocrite who simultaneously adopts and decries scientific risk discourse. Engaging with the criticism that by separating his protagonist's "intellectual and personal appetites" McEwan fails to "explore the emotional complexity of our responses to the threat" (Kerridge, *The Single Source* 159), Zemanek stresses the allegorical connection between the notion of the 'sick Earth' and the protagonist's personal risk-taking and worsening physical condition, which she reads as a dark prognosis for the planet. Zemanek argues that satire stands a better chance of initiating reflection in the reader than yet another apocalyptic or realistic narrative.

Roman Bartosch's article analyses *Animal's People* (2007) by the Indian-British author Indra Sinha from a posthumanist perspective, which he supplements with a postcolonial ecocritical approach (Huggan and Tiffin). The novel's protagonist "Animal", a grotesque figure with a dreadful spinal deformation caused by the 1984 Bhopal disaster, performs the utter alterity of a posthuman existence. The novel negotiates not only the common nature-culture distinction but also the human-animal gap. In two steps, Bartosch demonstrates that the novel transforms the literary disaster discourse. First the novel unsettles a cultural difference between 'the West and the rest' (Stuart Hall) which has been problematized in postcolonial theory. Then Bartosch argues that the novel's hybrid form which combines apocalyptic tropes and the picaresque genre (Nixon), its polyphony (e.g. the 'subaltern' protagonist's voice is transmitted by fictive audio-tape records with background voices) and its carnivalesque language (Bakhtin) deconstruct the totalizing claim of apocalyptic narratives. Postcolonial mimicry and

subversion challenge the reader's gaze and draw attention to the fact that distance from the disaster which is being described can no longer be taken for granted.

In sum, the contributions to this special section confirm that disaster narratives and apocalyptic patterns have been and continue to be essential for key texts of environmental literature. The authors inscribe their texts into old literary traditions which, however, are critically reflected and significantly transformed. The trope of the distanced observer (shipwreck with spectator), for example, is widely deployed and at the same time subverted: a common strand in disaster literature is that the supposedly distant observers become inadvertently entangled in environmental catastrophe, conveying the impression that we already and always face ecological crisis. This raises the question whether we should fatalistically "dwell in crisis" or embrace novel thinking in an attempt to avoid ultimate environmental doom.

At this point the pervasive presence of the apocalyptic trope becomes significant. The opposition between fatalism and belief in the possibility of change is mirrored by the distinction between the tragic and the comic frame of apocalypse. The apocalyptic trope has also been transformed into more ironic and reflective narrative patterns: negotiation of the 'Leviathan nature' through 'mind play'; subversion of the climate risk management discourse through the reckless personal decline of the risk manager; picaresque comedy of survival after what has been described as apocalypse in Bhopal.

The traditional tension between the ethics and aesthetics of natural disasters gives way to more ironic play with aesthetic traditions and ethical assumptions. Subversive narrative strategies reflect the loss of clear-cut moral and cultural identities vis-à-vis nature and allow elaboration on the difficulties arising from people's entanglement in complex socio-ecological constellations beyond the reach of simple individual choice. While ironic play, polyphony and intertextuality, satirical and picaresque forms at first appear to blur and undermine the ecological message by generating highly ambivalent characters and plots, this enables them to avoid falling into the trap of well-intended 'eco-literature' ("Ökoliteratur") which lacks literary quality. In this sense, the disaster component of ecological literature has taken a reflexive turn.

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