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The Catastrophic Imperative: Subjectivity, Time, and Memory in Contemporary Thought

Dominiek Hoens, Sigi Jöttkandt, and Gert Buelens (eds), Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2009, £55.00, 292pp.

The University of Disaster

Paul Virilio, trans. Julie Rose, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010 (2007) £14.99, 166pp.

‘Catastrophe’ and ‘disaster’, along with a variety of associated terms (‘accident’, ‘calamity’, ‘cataclysm’, ‘crisis’, ‘emergency’), pervade contemporary public discourse. In the shadow of a host of devastating occurrences that range from artificial to natural (and in some cases indissociably blend the two) – including the September 11 terrorist attacks, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the ‘credit crunch’, the swine flu pandemic, the Boxing Day tsunami, Hurricane Katrina, the Haiti earthquake, and the ongoing threat of climate change – there is a widespread perception that ours is a catastrophic or disastrous age. These two books overtly position themselves in relation to this atmosphere of shock and anxiety. While each offers much of interest, however, neither succeeds in providing a thorough critical engagement with the perpetual state of emergency that seems to characterize the contemporary moment.

Hoens, Jöttkandt, and Buelens’ collection of essays, *The Catastrophic Imperative*, boasts an impressive roster of contributors, ranging from giants of the contemporary intellectual scene (Alain Badiou and J. Hillis Miller) to distinguished senior scholars (such as Gil Chaitin, Tom Cohen, and Joanna Hodge) to emerging researchers (including Patience Moll, Aaron Schuster, and Sjoerd van Tuinen). The jacket copy describes the collection as ‘evoking the contemporary *zeitgeist* of looming

ecological, political, and economic disaster'. Similarly, the introduction locates the book against a 'contemporary catastrophic horizon' defined by such phenomena as the 'conflagration currently engulfing the Middle East', the 'cataclysmic environmental destruction and mass starvation predicted as a consequence of human-induced climate change', and the 'new devastating illnesses that are being spawned by industrialized farming practices, pollution, technological "advances" such as cloning, and so on' (p. 2). Only three of the twelve chapters, however, engage directly and sustainedly with such pressing contemporary concerns: Tom Cohen's meditation on the challenge of climate change via a reading of Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*; Dany Nobus' reflections on the 'unpredictable inevitability' (p. 172) of catastrophe in the post-9/11 world; and Sjoerd van Tuinen's exploration of obscenity in the thought of Peter Sloterdijk, Jean Baudrillard, and Slavoj Žižek, which pays particular attention to the obscene spectacle of terrorist atrocity. The majority of contributors construe catastrophe in much broader terms, whether historically (by focusing on the social and political disasters of earlier eras) or conceptually (by mobilizing the figurative potential of the term's etymological meaning – 'to turn down, overturn', as J. Hillis Miller notes [p. 10] – in order to analyse inter-personal, psychic, or philosophical transitions as instances of rupture, breakdown, or upheaval). Phenomena considered as forms of catastrophe, then, include twentieth-century history in its entirety (Erik M. Vogt); the proto-fascism of the turn-of-the-century French writer and politician Maurice Barrès (Gil Chaitin); the gang rape at the centre of J.M. Coetzee's 1999 novel *Disgrace* (Gert Buelens); the act or experience of decision (J. Hillis Miller); the 'science' of phrenology or craniology in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Patience Moll); and Friedrich Nietzsche's characterization of his philosophy as an 'explosion' in thought (Alain Badiou). In addition, the collection includes three essays only

tangentially related to the notion of catastrophe, however broadly conceived: Justin Clemens' excavation of Jacques Lacan's concept of 'the swarm'; Aaron Schuster's consideration of Lacan's and Gilles Deleuze's approaches to the categories of pleasure and *jouissance*; and Joanna Hodge's elaboration of a Derridean 'topography of the border' as a rewriting of Kant's transcendental aesthetics.

Ultimately, then, the expansive (indeed, virtually comprehensive) sub-title – *Subjectivity, Time, and Memory in Contemporary Thought* – more accurately captures the book's contents than the main title itself, let alone the editors' claims for the acute timeliness and urgency of the contributors' interventions with respect to present-day global conditions. In short, *The Catastrophic Imperative* does not deliver on the terms in which it is framed, and with its diverse – at times incongruous – variety of topics, it lacks the tightly-focused coherence of the best edited collections. That said, however, some significant strands of continuity can be traced between the chapters: key theorists – Derrida, Lacan, Žižek – appear repeatedly, for example, while what the editors refer to in their introduction as a catastrophe 'shorn of its eschatological foundations' (p. 3), a catastrophe that is not so much imminent – looming in the future towards which we bound – as immanent – already here, already woven into the fabric of things – is detectable across several contributions.

More importantly, perhaps, on their own terms, the chapters that make up the collection are of a uniformly high standard – scholarly, probing, and incisive. Amidst this consistently strong group, a handful of essays are particularly noteworthy. The stand-out piece is undoubtedly Tom Cohen's 'Notes on the Bird War: Biopolitics of the Visible (in the Era of Climate Change)', an exemplary piece of criticism in its own right, as well as one of the few contributions to make good on the book's framing invocations of the catastrophic *zeitgeist*. Cohen, author of the two-volume *Hitchcock's*

Cryptonomies (2005), probably the most important study of the director, reads the avian swarm in *The Birds* (1963) – a relentless, inscrutable, and implacable threat, wholly indifferent to human singularity, antagonism, or symbolization – as modelling a shift in ‘critical force ... from a focus on the otherness of the (human) other to something “wholly other”’, which ‘arrives in the form of glacier meltoff, or dying seas, or biodiversity collapse’ (p. 114). ‘In the era of climate change’, Cohen suggests,

the political may migrate from a social struggle (class domination, identity positions) toward what we may call the X-factors of the now planetary and biomorphic orders impinging on geographic regions, communities, and so on. Such X-factors would include a swarm of logics incompatible with today’s economic, political, and epistemographic programs – ‘global warming’, inundated cities, a global underclass of ‘disposable’ humans (already used to cull ‘organs’ from), predicted oil and water wars, mass drought, and what has been referred to, in a suppressed Department of Defense report, as expected ‘population culling’. (p. 117)

In order to ‘incorporate the archipelago of mutations now calculated under the general rubrics of climate change’, there will, Cohen predicts, ‘likely emerge a critical discourse of *catastrophics* in the twenty-first century’ (p. 115). His deft, penetrating, and imaginative analysis of *The Birds* stands as a prototype of such a mode of criticism, and provides a tantalizing glimpse of what *The Catastrophic Imperative* as a whole might have offered.

Also to be commended both for its inherent strengths and its contemporary relevance is Sjoerd van Tuinen’s ‘Breath of Relief: Peter Sloterdijk and the Politics of

the Intimate'. The jacket copy is, again, rather misleading in claiming that the book's coverage of Sloterdijk 'marks the long-overdue introduction of the renowned German philosopher ... to the English-speaking world', given that his major early work, *Critique of Cynical Reason*, has been available in English since the late 1980s, and – more to the point – that his writings as a whole were the subject of a 2007 special issue of the journal *Cultural Politics*, introduced by van Tuinen himself. It is true, though, that this important social and cultural thinker remains unjustly neglected in Anglophone intellectual circles, and, situating his ideas in relation to contemporary interrogations of the obscene over-abundance of information and communication in contemporary life (principally as articulated by Baudrillard and Žižek), van Tuinen provides a highly-informed, wide-ranging survey.

If Sloterdijk remains a peripheral figure outside Europe, Alain Badiou is a contemporary continental thinker who, over the last five to ten years, has achieved global prominence. Though, in the context of his oeuvre as a whole, his contribution to this volume, 'Who is Nietzsche?', is plainly a minor work, its account of the way in which Nietzsche's insistent declaration of his intention to cleave 'the history of the word in two' (p. 201) becomes indistinguishable from the performative enactment of that very event displays the hallmarks of Badiou's best writings: clarity, directness, and steely intelligence.

I earlier identified essays by Justin Clemens and Aaron Schuster as anomalies within the collection, since they are only distantly related to the notion of catastrophe. Ironically, however, they are, viewed independently, amongst the most impressive contributions. Seeking to refine understandings of particular psychoanalytic concepts (the little-known Lacanian notion of 'the swarm' in Clemens' case and the utterly central topics of pleasure and *jouissance* in Schuster's), the two chapters are models

of detailed, rigorous theoretical inquiry. These essays will be of major value to scholars in psychoanalytic theory. Likewise, there is much in the collection that will interest social and cultural theorists, literary and film scholars, and philosophers on the continental wing of the field. Neither discipline-specific, however, nor sufficiently tightly focused around a core problematic to lend coherence to its diverse array of disciplinary perspectives, it is difficult to imagine *The Catastrophic Imperative* being an essential acquisition for any particular constituency.

In contrast to *The Catastrophic Imperative*, Paul Virilio's *The University of Disaster* is, if anything, too intensely fixated on the various lurid spectacles of crisis that pervade contemporary life, with the result that it is unable to offer a sustained, reflective articulation of their shared logic and wider implications. Over the course of an intellectual career spanning more than forty years, Virilio has emerged as the pre-eminent theorist of catastrophe, disaster, or – in his own preferred term – ‘the accident’. Having initially achieving renown as an architectural critic and practitioner in France in the 1960s and early '70s, Virilio's first work of social and cultural theory, *Speed and Politics* (1986 [1977]), established the framework for his subsequent writings: a ‘dromocratic’ (from the Greek *dromos*: avenue or race course) analysis of technological acceleration and its effects on politics, the military, art, and everyday life. Virilio has persistently reiterated that the invention of new, faster, more advanced technologies is at one and the same time the invention of new forms of accident: the invention of the railway is simultaneously the invention of the rail crash; the aeroplane makes possible the air disaster; and so on. He has been particularly preoccupied with accidents that are not, like these examples, confined to particular points in space and time, but rather radiate across territories and seep into the future: in the 1980s, his central concern was nuclear weapons; since the '90s his focus has

shifted to new information and communications technologies, which present the danger of an ‘information bomb’, a cataclysmic explosion of signs, images, and code. *The University of Disaster* follows texts such as *Open Sky* (1997 [1995]), *Polar Inertia* (1999 [1990]), *The Information Bomb* (2000 [1998]), and *The Original Accident* (2007 [2005]) in exploring the catastrophic potential of the latest digital technologies. Many of the ideas in *The University of Disaster* are familiar from these earlier texts: the latest book, for example, reasserts the claims that the ‘extensive’ time of calendars is being superseded by the ‘intensive’ time of media instantaneity (p. 55), that interactivity should be understood as the telecommunicational equivalent of radioactivity (pp. 7, 28, 49, 65), and that ‘a century driven by ... acceleration’ demands ‘the invention of a “political economy of speed” instead of just wealth’ (p. 133). At the same time, the book adds to Virilio’s conceptual armoury, arguing for such notions as a ‘globalisation of affects’ (pp. 23, 49), in which a fully planetary emotional response to events like the September 11 attacks is synchronised by the mass media, or ‘trajectivity’, a supplement to the familiar philosophical categories of subjectivity and objectivity that takes account of the ways in which ever-accelerating motion conditions the relation between subject and object (pp. 62, 101, 107, 112). The book’s final chapter also constitutes Virilio’s most sustained treatment to date of the dangers of climate change, ‘under the auspices’ of which, he tells us, ‘the atmosphere has become one long nosocomial sickness whose symptoms never cease to evolve with each fresh medical examination’ (p. 140). The titular ‘ECUMENICAL UNIVERSITY OF DISASTER’ (p. 150; caps. original), meanwhile, is an extension of Virilio’s long-standing vision of a ‘museum of the accident’ (see pp. 122-23); this projected institution of higher learning would aim to ‘face up to [the] accident in

knowledge resulting, not so much from mistakes and failures, as from the spectacular success of the technosciences of matter and life' (p. 117).

In its elaboration of these and other ideas, *The University of the Disaster* stands as a particularly pronounced example of a general predisposition in Virilio's work towards a historical pessimism that surpasses even the likes of Theodor Adorno and the Frankfurt School in its relentlessness. The present is always, for Virilio, the culmination of a mounting state of instrumentalisation, dehumanisation, subjugation, and alienation. While this stance is bracing, particularly in the face of the 'techno-utopianism' of so much contemporary commentary, the lack of a dialectical imagination in Virilio's writings means that they tend towards the one-dimensional. At times in *The University of Disaster*, as when lamenting that university students today would rather utilise notes available on the internet than actually read their course text books (p. 42), there is, moreover, a slippage in tone from the critical to the merely curmudgeonly.

The unmitigated negativity of Virilio's thought is not, however, a disabling characteristic when it is wedded to a clearly elaborated thesis. A case in point is his strongest book, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (1989 [1984]), a lucid, rigorous, and extensively researched argument for the mutual constitution of military and filmic technologies around a shared imperative to command the field of vision. Lacking an expressly articulated, overarching argument of this kind, however, the reflections that make up *The University of Disaster* – clustered around such phenomena as an atom bomb-simulating supercomputer (pp. 43-44), the freely accessible planetary surveillance tool that is Google Earth (pp. 67-70), and the role of automated or 'programme' trading systems in stock market crashes (p. 153) – while often arresting and insightful, cohere only insofar as they convey a diffuse mood of

dismay in the face of the seemingly out-of-control acceleration of contemporary technoscience. The level of analysis that would weave together these disparate observations and stake out the intellectual position of the project as a whole can only be discerned in its outlines. Like *The Catastrophic Imperative*, though for different reasons, then, Virilio's latest book falls short of its promise to diagnose the crisis-stricken present. Those unfamiliar with Virilio's work would be best advised to begin not with *The University of Disaster* – for all its insistent contemporaneity – but with writings such as *Speed and Politics*, *War and Cinema*, *The Vision Machine* (1994 [1988]), and *Pure War* (2008 [1983]), which, though they may have been published twenty or even thirty years ago, offer more robust theoretical frameworks within which to conceptualise the accidents of today and tomorrow.

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