

DISASTERS IN POPULAR CULTURES

Giovanni Gugg - Elisabetta Dall'Ò - Domenica Borriello
Editors

Preface by Joël Candau



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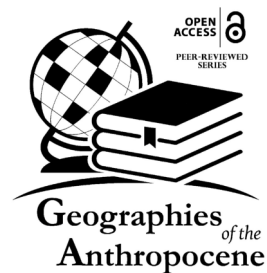
DISASTERS IN POPULAR CULTURES

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Introduction

Giovanni Gugg¹, Elisabetta Dall'Ò², Domenica Borriello³

The varied, multifaceted and endless popular literary heritage, written and oral, is the means by which the word stages human desires and passions (Valière, 2006). Nevertheless, Italo Calvino says, fairy tales and legends are all «true», because *«they are, taken together, in their ever-repeating and ever-changing casuistry of human events, an explanation of life, born in ancient times and kept in the slow ruminate of the peasant consciences up to us; they are the catalogue of the destinies that can be given to a man and a woman»* (Calvino, 1956: 11). Therefore, far from being inventions disconnected from reality, the works of popular literature represent the kaleidoscope of a certain way of being in the world, of looking at the territory, of relating to nature, of facing life and death. In this sense, they are not “stories of the past”, but specific ways in which collective memory (Halbwachs, 1950) selects and passes on what is worth remembering. *«In this way it becomes possible to tell, to make visible the most disturbing and elusive aspects of reality»* because *«myth, legends, fairy tales do not say something but speak through something»* (Niola, 1990): they are stories with a pedagogical and interpretative function of places, such as, for example, sirens identified with certain rocks, which indicate the danger of certain seabeds or specific marine currents, a giant carp that reminds the Japanese of the seismicity of their archipelago and a dragon that for centuries has represented the threat of glacial advancement in the Alps; the pied piper who, instead, acts as an allegory of the possible dramatic epidemic (or landslide) in Hamelin... In their great variety of fairy tales, novels, stories, legends, tales and proverbs, this type of cultural production is extremely composite, because it includes religious topics, myths of foundation, explanations of the character of animals, explanations of space, origins of certain places, especially sacred and cult ones, up to the narrations of historical characters or devils and other figures of the fantasy, hidden treasures and urban legends, with their countless other variants (Gunther,

¹ Università di Napoli “Federico II”, Naples, Italy / LAPCOS Université de Nice Sophia Antipolis, Nice, France, e-mail: giovanni.gugg@gmail.com.

² Department of Cultures, Politics and Society (CPS), University of Turin, Italy, e-mail: elisabetta.dall.1@gmail.com.

³ Department of Letters and Cultural Heritage (Dilbec), University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli”, Italy, e-mail: mimmaborriello@libero.it.

1976; Sanga, 1985; Iacobello, 2006). Since the very beginning of the studies (Van Gennep, 1908; Lanzoni, 1925; Cocchiara, 1949), laborious classifications by types and genres have been made at different scales: local, regional, national and international (Thompson, 1955-58; Aarne and Thompson, 1964) and there are many aspects investigated relating to the “meaning” and transmission methods of oral stories and their variations related to the forms of collective communication. The lived experience of the present, as Walter J. Ong explains, it becomes important, through the succeeding of generations, in the process of oral transmission, so that the oral story can preserve a “sense” and not vanish. In fact, the oral mentality ensures that in the generational transmission is preserved a basic structure of the story but remodeled, ie adapted to the needs of the present at the expense of other aspects of the narrative, forgotten because now devoid of a current value (Ong, 1986). The different ways of transmitting the traditional oral heritage and not only (Finnegan, 2009; Buonomo, 2013), let us reflect also on the documentary value that this heritage can assume in the processes of communication and dissemination of knowledge (Vansina, 1977; Portelli, 2017), especially if it is integrated by other documentary sources, such as the iconographic ones in close relation with the “knowledge” of popular literature (Borriello, 2006).

This book collects contributions that, investigating popular and oral literature, focus on the narratives related to (“natural”, “technological”, “health”, “ecological”, and so on) risk and disasters, as declined in the collective imaginary, from the earliest times to the most pressing current events. The volume represents a piece in the reconstruction of cultural resources that, at an international level, have enabled us to face and manage the problems and material and spiritual anxieties arising from disasters.

Considering the heterogeneity of sources, cases, origins, epochs and narrative modalities, the volume is to be considered an interdisciplinary work that, through highly significant case studies, analyzes the ways of representing the disaster in a vast corpus of “popular” texts, collected in the archive or ethnographically, but all related to natural disasters, epidemics and catastrophic events related to wars, invasions and political upheavals. In this sense, the emotional and private dimension of the catastrophe, the superstitions and fantastic figures that often populate fairy tales and legends take on a new and surprisingly “rational” guise. While recognizing the importance of systematic and formal study of the vast and varied field of popular literature, both written and oral, it is equally important to highlight the great fluidity of its characters, since this book is based on a conscious and refined con-fusion of narrative genres, in order to show that behind the

multiplicity can be identified a common strategy (Della Bernardina, 1997). Oral traditions have changed over the centuries and, indeed, oral and written traditions have always been merged in a single way of communication (Schenda, 1986). By questioning the hierarchy of values between genres – be it a fairy tale, a riddle or a joke – the volume forces the typological barriers that separate myth and legend, saga and epic, way of saying and conspiracy, in order to bring the whole of these narratives back to a general anthropological function, crossed by a wide panorama of social sciences.

The structure of each narrative is rather steady, however it is also sufficiently ductile to adapt to multiple declensions. Each story contains at least three notions: on the one hand the story told (the *thing*), on the other hand the enunciation of the story itself (the *how*), consequently the narrative, understood as a narrative act, then as a real situation – or fictitious – in which it is placed (the *when*) (Ferraiuolo, 1997: 33). However, the uses of the story can be countless: it sometimes can appear as a potential avatar of counterculture elements, more times as a celebration of marginality, some other times as a representation of the childish condition, or the one of the poor and, ultimately, as a way to narrate the dependence of slaves, or the distrust towards foreigners, the subalternity of the woman or of a minority. However, it is always a form of intergenerational bond (Valière, 2006: 127-129). In the case of a catastrophe, what has been handed down from generation to generation is a specific selection of the memory of what has happened, that is, salvation despite the destruction and continuity of the community despite the fracture brought by the calamity. In this sense, oral/popular literature acts as a “memory of lived experience”, so that, it transmits a story of the present that is measured day by day with forms of existential precariousness, in a vision of – personal and collective – risk that is now conceived as a perennial state in which society pours (Gugg, 2017).

The case analyzed by Paolo Apolito in the aftermath of the earthquake that struck Campania and Basilicata on November 23, 1980 is eloquent in this regard. After a couple of months from the disaster, in mid-January 1981, all over the areas affected by the earthquake quickly spread “the story of the Old woman”: *«This was rather meager, with some marginal variations, entirely oriented to the pathos of the prophecy: an old woman (rare an old man) stopped a car on the street, asked for a ride and got it. Along the journey she invited not to complain and cry for 23 November because it was very little what had happened. There would be a next cataclysm much more destructive [she stated]. Immediately afterwards she would have asked to come down and leave»* (Apolito, 1983: 123). In effect, in the context of the aftershocks, on February 14 a stronger but a very short

one came, which was not disruptive, but enough to lend life to the narrative that, in this way, multiplied at great speed. During the following weeks the oscillations of the ground diminished and, likewise, one felt less and less even of the Old woman story. However, a few months later, towards the end of October/beginning of November, with the approach of the first anniversary, the mass media resumed talking about the areas affected by the earthquake, in a growing up of emotion that, wrote Apolito, *«repeated in a certain sense an archaic ritual mechanism, which for example in the funeral lamentation worked perfectly to distance and divide the periods of pain so as to concentrate it to support it better»* (Apolito, 1983: 124). The rebirth of the speech on the earthquake, around the anniversary, relaunched the dormant anxieties for a year or so and, just as in the funeral lamentation, required a new work of reassurance. At that point a new story spread – at even greater speed – but this time concerning a child, born in that area, who *«spoke foreseeing anticipating the date of a catastrophic shock, he urged not to cry over his death, and right then the child died»* (Ivi).

Although it may seem paradoxical, in these prophecies of an even more ruinous earthquake it is possible to see a form of reassurance because it was a recovery of the indigenous capacity for forecasting, in opposition to the scientific forecasts released by the media in the first weeks after the earthquake and on the occasion of the first anniversary. Apolito observes that *«the prophecy was a confirmation of being there, of being present at a culture, against the disintegrating thrusts of the first weeks, which, as in all moments of tragic upheaval, had made us doubt the same possibility of remaining [...]». The prophecy of the next date of the strong shock shifted the irruption of nature over time and therefore culturalized it, tamed it in terms of cultural defences»* (Apolito, 1983: 125, 126).

In other words, the shifting of fear to a fixed date offered, on the one hand, the possibility of overcoming daily fears and, on the other, of waiting for the event collectively and not of living it/submitting it individually. In a similar way, fear – an essential condition of the supernatural stories that break into the ordinary life – is the link with reality, what makes certain narratives realistic, making evidence acceptable to us or, to put it differently, allowing us to integrate the principle of reality (Carlier, 1998: 79). These stories are produced “on a regular basis” (Lavinio, 1997: 27): occasions when it is appropriate to comment, explain, elaborate on a specific situation that has arisen in the context, interweaving educational, documentary and informative purposes. This is a need for reassurance that is therefore also entrusted to the narratives, which, performing a function of mediation between an uncertain present and a past selected and sweetened, but still

“known”, are presented as conventional and formalized ways in which to express specific emotions of communication and relief, protection and continuity.

The semantic area that refers to the term “legendary” allows to build oxymorons, to create hybrids between reality and fiction. This is what Della Bernardina defines as the “delegation effect” (Della Bernardina, 1997: 4), i.e. a way to derealize an event full of ambiguity, to remove it from the historical contingency by remaining crystallized in an image of high metaphorical (Bronzini, 1985) and symbolic content (Simonnet, 1997). As Valière observes, *«the novella is not to complicate life»* (Valière, 2006: 109), on the contrary it has a therapeutic function, because *«it allows us to re-actualize, under different forms, inner anxieties and concerns, hidden in the depths of each of us, revealing, while maintaining a necessary critical distance, the tensions inside [...] the social group to which we belong»* (Valière, 2006: 143). Therefore, this kind of cultural production works because it evokes a déjà-vu, of which their parabolic structure acts as a guarantor, giving a life lesson: no one is able to carry out the critical activity without wearing and tearing, for this reason the use of sublimations and stereotypes fulfills the task of exercising in our place the principle of authority: *«Legitimized by tradition, or simply by convention, these operators, both symbolic and moral, exempt us from the obligation to evaluate, and therefore to argue our choices, fixing a priori, once and for all, the field of the good and the bad»* (Della Bernardina, 1997: 6).

The legendary is therefore that place halfway between the existing and the imaginary which allows us to resolve on a symbolic level contradictions inherent in the real: they allow us to recognize the known, to expand the experience through information that has remained inaccessible, to escape and console ourselves, to identify and solidarity, to overcome the difficulties of life and to elaborate *«a social dimension in which and through which a human group finds itself and expresses itself»* (G. Léser cit. in Valière, 2006: 51).

The volume we offer the reader is very rich: thanks to the themes, the disciplinary glances, and, finally, to the ethnographic fields. It includes twelve contributions (three in French, four in English, five in Italian) covering a wide spectrum of locations around the world: from Hawaii to Sicily, from the Alps to the Neapolitan area with the Phlegraean Fields, Ischia island and mount Vesuvius, from the Democratic Republic of Congo to India, from Papua New Guinea to South America. Moreover, they proceed from anthropological, sociological, geographical, philosophical and psychological perspectives, thus providing a wide range of readings that, as

mentioned above, have the merit of overcoming disciplinary boundaries by providing interpretative cuts that complement and integrate each other. The same variety is present both in the field of disasters and in popular/oral literature. In the first case, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, droughts, landslides and mudflows, glaciers and global warming are evoked. In the second, instead, we analyze popular legends, proverbs, fairy tales, myths, collective memory, plausible tales, conspiracy theories and urban legends. The Virginia Garcia Acosta's essay, by which the book ends, brings a theoretical contribution of anthropological-philosophical cut, about the concept of Anthropocene and on the importance of resorting to History.

The encounter — symbolic, cultural and of research — that took place within the pages of this volume thanks to the many authors who have contributed, builds on from another encounter, which took place during the conference of the Italian Society of Applied Anthropology, SIAA, held in Catania in 2017; where editors had compared and identified new possible trajectories of epistemological and methodological analysis on the theme of disasters, climate change and anthropocene, aware that *«the historical, social, cultural and political character of disasters makes even more evident the relationship of causality and co-implication that interconnects them to the processes of climate change underway»* (Dall'Ò et al., 2018).

In the Preface of this volume, Joël Candau observes that *«thanks to the incessant work of memory, disaster is not so much an end as a beginning»*. This assumption has guided the work of editors and of each author: to reflect on the “memorable” to open new horizons of analysis and understanding of the contemporary. In our present, which is marked by global concerns and individual disorientation (Latour, 2018), the climate that changes beyond our control – and that of politics and science – is the underlying theme of an ongoing disaster, invisible but in flashes, that explicitly or implicitly has oriented all the contributions of the book.

In his fundamental essay *The Climate of History*, Dipesh Chakrabarty (Chakrabarty, 2009) examines the proposal of climatologists and geologists to define the current era as Anthropocene. Although there is no full agreement on the possible dating, for certain the Anthropocene era defines the period in which humanity, as a species, acquires the power to modify the natural processes of the Earth in a similar way to that of a geological force, so that in recent years the concept has gradually assumed more and more historical, anthropological and political consistency. According to Chakrabarty, “environmental history” has always had a lot to do with biology and geography, yet it has also had great difficulty imagining the human impact on the planet on a geological scale: *«It was still a vision of*

man “as a prisoner of climate”» (Chakrabarty, 2009: 206), and not of the man as its producer. Defining human beings as geological agents, as climatologists do, it means “scale up our imagination”, extending our imagination of the human. In this regard, we can define human beings, in their own right, as geological forces, or rather as “atmospheric agents”, albeit unconsciously. In this vein, what Elena Bougleux says about human restlessness is particularly incisive, that feeling that makes us lose when we are dealing with something that goes beyond the scope of our actions and our understanding: «*The restlessness that makes us think about ourselves as actors of epochal environmental changes that we cannot stop, control and even understand is the consequence of a huge leap in scale, too big and unexpected, of the human capacity to impact on the environment: a leap that as a species we have already made, we do not even know when, but that as individuals generates more than a reflection on the meaning of the term “possibility”*» (Bougleux, 2015: 82). In the frame of Anthropocene’s thought, therefore, man becomes an agent of change, his agency of species becomes important again, on a par with that of the great forces of nature, in giving shape – a deteriorated, worsened form – to the environment. An agency that, if on the one hand, in an aggregate form, of species, is powerful and acts as an agent of impact on the planet and on the climate, on the other, on an individual level, is lost when faced with an absolute awareness of impotence, smallness and ineffectiveness.

The scientific and media narrations on the present of the Anthropocene find themselves – and our – despite having to do with invisibility; the great blindness on which Amitav Ghosh (2017) warns us is echoed by the intrinsic invisibility of the very object of our speeches which, perhaps precisely because it is “global”, seems not only to escape an overall glance, but also to escape any attempt to grasp it. The impacts on our planet, the melting of the Arctic glaciers, the extinction of species, the alterations in the composition of the atmosphere, the flow of sea currents, the disappearance of coral reefs, are phenomena that do not fall within our perceptual scope, although they are told and described by official information, we do not have the ability to figure them, to make them real. However, on a smaller, local scale, environmental changes are perceived and narrated. In the contexts we have dealt with in this volume, in which the history of places is rooted in the memory of the territory lived in, and in that of those who live there, the perception of these phenomena is perceived as a “real” and “present” experience, even if disjointed with respect to the “official” narratives on a large scale. We find it in the oral narratives, in the myths, in the speeches that make it current and that shape it in everyday life, acting on a deep level

and reminding us, with Gilbert Keith Chesterton, that «*fairy tales do not tell children the dragons exist. Children already know that dragons exist. Fairy tales tell children the dragons can be defeated*».

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Generations pass on to each other a specific selection of memories, which is a “memory of the lived experience”. Through that narrative, the story of the present is measured day by day with forms of existential precariousness, in a vision of risk which is conceived as a perennial societal state. By investigating popular and oral literature, focus on narratives related to risk and disasters, as described in the social imaginary, from the most remote eras to the most stringent current affairs, this book is a precious element for a comprehensive reconstruction of cultural resources have allowed to face and manage material and spiritual concerns and problems arising from disasters.

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SERIES

Giovanni Gugg, PhD, is adjunct professor of Urban Anthropology at the department of Engineering of the University of Naples “Federico II” (Italy). His research focuses on Anthropology of Risk and Anthropology of Landscape: his studies concern the relationship between human communities and their environment, especially when there are territories at risk. He is member of LAPCOS (Laboratoire d’Anthropologie et Psychologie Cognitives et Sociales, University of Nice, France) and he teaches in some Erasmus Mundus+ masters.

Elisabetta Dall’Ò, PhD, is a Post Doctoral Research Fellow in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the department of Cultures, Politics and Society (CPS) of the University of Turin, Italy. She is conducting an eco-historical and ethnographic research on the perceptions, representations and socio-cultural effects of climate change in the Alps. Her academic interests focus on Environmental Anthropology and Anthropology of Disasters. She is a founding member of ANPIA, the National Professional Association for Italian Anthropology.

Domenica Borriello is a contract professor of Demo-ethno-anthropological Disciplines at Department of Letters and Cultural Heritage (Dilbec) - University of Campania “Luigi Vanvitelli” - Italy. She deals with oral sources, patrimonialisation and popular religiosity, intertwining field research with the analysis of archival and iconographic documentary sources. She has collaborated with the MAM (Multimedia Anthropological Museum) and with the CRA (Interdepartmental Center for Audiovisual Research) of University of Naples Federico II. She has taught in various Anthropological and Social Health Master's degrees.