

Introduction

Cultural Responses to Catastrophes from Early Modern to Modern Times

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Abstract

By examining disasters via the thematic fields of ‘emotion’, ‘blame’, and ‘time’, this edited volume opens up new viewpoints within historical disaster research. The introduction places the individual contributions in a theoretical context. Primarily, it underlines the importance of cultural studies contending that media are crucial in shaping human perception of destruction. After all, dissemination, interpretation, and signification take place primarily through cultural media. To fully grasp the meaning of a disaster to contemporaries and later generations, scholars should analyse representations of these events, using multidisciplinary methods of history, art history, and literary studies. Only then can we identify voice, medium, discourse, and communities involved in production, perception, and transmission of disaster experiences. Subsequently, it becomes possible to identify general patterns and, more importantly, to carefully scrutinise historical sources.

Keywords

disaster studies – cultural representation – medialisaton – identity – memory – community building

In August 1925, the Dutch political-satirical magazine *De roskam* published an issue with a cover depicting a devastating storm that had ravished

parts of the Netherlands ten days prior to publication (Fig. 0.1).¹ The artist Graafland who signed the lithograph plate depicted a scene of destruction against a pitch-black night sky.² Several forces of nature are at play: the wind rips doors and shutters from houses, rain pours from the heavens, and two lightning bolts simultaneously cleave the firmament as they strike buildings and cause fires. A church spire collapses in the process. Some people look in disbelief at the falling steeple as they recoil in reaction to the anticipated force of the impact. Holding firmly onto her child, a woman flees the scene of horror, while the storm is raging and rain is gushing from the heavens.

The scene seems straightforward enough in its depiction of tragedy, but we get a better sense of its meaning when we read the caption below. It directly addresses the magazine's readership: 'All of you!! Support the unfortunate sufferers of this disaster, without distinction as to faith and denomination of the victims'.³ This caption tells us different things: On the one hand, the editors of *De roskam* felt the necessity to urge their readers to donate for the victims. At first glance, it highlights solidarity. On the other hand, it underlines that this solidarity was not self-evident. The town of Borculo, which was hit the hardest by the storm, is situated in a part of the Netherlands where most people adhered to the Reformed Church. The collapsing structure is in fact the church building of the Reformed community of Borculo, which was severely damaged during the 1925 storm. In contrast, *De roskam* served a Catholic readership, mainly living in the south of the Netherlands.

1 The work on this introduction was funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO and carried out with a Vici grant for the research project *Dealing with Disasters. The Shaping of Local and National Identities in the Netherlands (1421–1890)*. The volume as a whole is the result of a two-day conference, titled 'Dealing with Disasters. Cultural Representations of Catastrophes, c. 1500–1900', held on 17–18 June 2021 at Radboud University. We thank the members of the research group, Adriaan Duiveman, Marieke van Egeraat, Fons Meijer, and Lilian Nijhuis, for their invaluable support in organising this event. Furthermore, our gratitude goes to Radboud Institute for Culture & History (RICH) for funds that allowed the editors to see this edited volume through. We would also like to thank Kate Delany for the editorial assistance in preparing this volume as well as the reviewers of the unpublished manuscript for their comments and suggestions.

2 This is probably the same Rob Graafland who was born in 1875 and active as illustrator of magazines and children's books until 1940. Cf. RKD explore, <https://rkd.nl/explore/artists/33171> (latest update 30 March 2023; accessed 3 April 2023). The magazine *De roskam* was published between 1912 and 1929 as a bi-weekly supplement of *Het katholieke volk*, later *De volkskrant*.

3 The caption in Dutch reads: 'Gij allen!! Steunt de ongelukkigen van deze ramp, zonder onderscheid van geloof en richting der getroffen'. Translation from Dutch is ours.

The cover was designed to activate an emotional response in *De roskam*'s principally Catholic audience.⁴ It does so in various ways: Firstly, the image itself primarily focuses on the impact of the storm. In order to reach the magazine's audience, the artist Graafland tried to capture the tragedy in all its horrifying magnitude. Those depicted seem helpless against the destructive forces of darkness, rain, wind, and lightning. Their homes, their lives, their loved ones are at risk. The storm's violence breaks down the barriers that some of *De roskam*'s readers may have felt when confronted with people from different denominations. The disaster seems to be depicted as an equaliser. In the eye of the storm, everybody suffers regardless of their religious conviction.

Just as important in understanding the cover's message is the image's context, the added elements complementing the image. These frames can change the reception or its interpretation. On the cover of *De roskam*, the caption below the image points out an additional function that is more directive and instructing in nature: to offer support to the victims of the disaster. The image's context thus clarifies the intention behind it. However, the caption also calls attention to religious differences, to the dividing lines marking society. The people from Borculo are identified as Protestants and they are represented here as 'the Other', deserving of solidarity and assistance but different from Catholics nonetheless.⁵ Moreover, the caption implies that helping others of different denominations is not self-evident but must be stimulated explicitly.

The cover of *De roskam* is but one example of a representation of a disaster and its (inadvertent) effects. In times of disaster, people expressed themselves through a wide variety of media, such as newspapers, chronicles, songs, sermons, poems, paintings, prints, and novels. This book deals with the materialised and surviving versions of these in early modern and modern times: the contributors from various disciplines – art history, literary and environmental history, and culture and media studies – chart and analyse how authors and artists have represented disasters in a wide variety of genres and art forms across time in different regions and countries, both textually and visually.

4 Much has been written on disasters and emotions. See Jennifer Spinks and Charles Zika (eds), *Disaster, Death and the Emotions in the Shadow of the Apocalypse, 1400–1700* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

5 For more on otherness, see Fred Dervin, 'Cultural Identity, Representation and Othering', in Jane Jackson (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Representation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

In different geographical contexts and times, people have crafted specific representations of disasters for certain purposes. Although most chapters deal with European disasters, case studies on the Japanese, US American, and Mesoamerican contexts demonstrate that the general patterns are applicable more broadly. Artists and authors tried to make sense of the events, grasp their impact, and communicate moral, religious, or political messages. Representations of disasters strengthened group identities, on different levels. Differences in terms of religious or social background could either be bridged, as becomes evident in the above-mentioned example of the storm in Borculo, or be exacerbated, by scapegoating or setting groups apart.⁶ Either action makes dividing lines in society visible.

As such, representations are never straightforward nor unambiguous. People commenting on disasters in written reports or visual depictions transformed the disasters in question. They re-arrange or even adapt details to serve their goals and intentions. They use tropes and narratives that – consciously or unconsciously – colour their disaster experiences. Thus, representations of disasters are inspired by memory as much as by history. Because memory is a dynamic process, cultural representations of disasters are always the result of manipulation and appropriation.⁷ Part of memory – and therefore of representations of disasters – is rooted in history, but another part is ‘forever open to the full range of its possible significations’, as historian and memory researcher Pierre Nora eloquently phrased it.⁸ This leaves a task for scholars to disentangle the different guiding forces that shape depictions of disasters; only then can we understand the reasons how and why disasters are represented and remembered in the first place.

6 For religious divides caused by crises in early modern England, see Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). A framework for cultural history research on catastrophes is presented in Lotte Jensen, Hanneke van Asperen, Adriaan Duiveman, Marieke van Egeraat, Fons Meijer, and Lilian Nijhuis, ‘Appropriating Disasters. A Framework for Cultural Historical Research on Catastrophes in Europe, 1500–1900’, *Journal of Historical Geography* 76 (2022), 34–41.

7 Pierre Nora, ‘Between Memory and History. Les Lieux de Mémoire’, *Representations* 26 (1989), 7–24, at 8. Some recent examples of research focusing on memory and nature-induced disasters include Adam D. Sundberg, *Natural Disaster at the Closing of the Dutch Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Felix Mauch, ‘Betwixt and Between. A Reflection on the Scale and Scope of Disaster Memories’, *International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity* 7 (2017), 110–41; Marco Folin and Monica Preti (eds), *Wounded Cities. The Representation of Urban Disasters in European Art (14th–20th centuries)* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Christian Pfister, ‘“The Monster Swallows You”. Disaster Memory and Risk Culture in Western Europe, 1500–2000’, *RCC Perspectives* 1 (2011), 1–23.

8 Nora, ‘Between Memory and History’, 24.

In various chapters in *Dealing with Disasters*, we focus on nature-induced disasters, including floods (van Asperen, Meijer, van Egeraat, and Duivenman), earthquakes (Jacoby, Koopmans, and Rohr), explosions and fires (Hulsenboom, van Egeraat, and Rohr), avalanches (Rohr), famine (van Os), and various epidemics including cholera and rinderpest (Jensen, Wieser, Scholten, and Dekker).⁹ We do so fully acknowledging the many areas of overlap between man-made and nature-induced disasters: scholars in all disciplines agree that human factors play a role in most – if not all – disasters, including in those severely aggravated by natural forces.¹⁰ Human beings may be responsible for the occurrence of ‘natural’ disasters (for example by not maintaining the dykes properly or ignoring warning signals). They may heighten the negative effects of a disaster by not responding swiftly or adequately, or even deliberately cause disasters (as was the case with certain floods or famines and subsequent epidemics in wartime).¹¹ Nevertheless, we exclude calamities that were a direct result of warfare, genocide, or terrorism. To limit the scope of this volume, we focus instead on unplanned catastrophes aggravated by biological, meteorological, or geographical forces. Humans may have facilitated and/or exacerbated the destruction, devastation, and suffering, but these effects were not intentional. Although a catastrophe could be explained as divine punishment for unvirtuous human behaviour and people could therefore have seen the disaster coming and prevented it, contemporaries did not envisage the catastrophes as the result of human *intention*. Still, we fully realise that there is a large grey area in between.

Cultural Approach

During the past fifteen years, historical disasters studies has developed into a flourishing area of research.¹² Historians have convincingly argued

9 On the term nature-induced disasters, see Gerrit Jasper Schenk and Monica Juneja, ‘Viewing Disasters. Myth, History, Iconography and Media Across Europe and Asia’, in Monica Juneja and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds), *Disaster as Image. Iconographies and Media Strategies Across Europe and Asia* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2014), 7–40.

10 Bas van Bavel, Daniel R. Curtis, Jessica Dijkman, Matthew Hannaford, Maïka de Keyzer, Eline van Onacker, and Tim Soens, *Disasters and History. The Vulnerability and Resilience of Past Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 29–31.

11 At the far end, Niall Fergusson argues that all disasters are man-made and political, in *Doom. The Politics of Catastrophe* (New York: Penguin Press, 2021).

12 Foundational were articles by, amongst others, Monica Juneja and Franz Mauelshagen, ‘Disasters and Pre-Industrial Societies. Historiographic Trends and Comparative Perspectives’,

that historical sources can be used as a 'laboratory' to gather data that help us to understand and predict which societies cope with severe crises better than others.¹³ Key concepts are 'vulnerability' and 'resilience', often interpreted from economic and socio-geographic perspectives: quantitative data on death toll, fluctuations in prosperity, and demographic patterns offer indications of how urban and rural societies dealt with crises in the past.

More recently, researchers have pointed out the necessity to include cultural responses as a topic of disaster research. Scholars in the fields of media, memory, culture, and literary studies have demonstrated that media play an essential role in our perception of destruction and catastrophe, because the dissemination of information and the interpretation of events takes place primarily through stories using narratives, tropes, and visualisation.¹⁴ Furthermore, vulnerability and resilience also have social, moral, and religious dimensions, which are determined by cultural values.¹⁵ Such beliefs and practices are also mirrored in and shaped by media which repeated and distributed them. As a result, there is a fascinating interaction at play between values, disasters, and media. Media transmitted and shaped interpretations of events, defined by cultural values. Subsequently, media influenced responses, which were in their turn infused and formed by cultural values. Therefore, the role of discursive patterns, narrative frameworks, and visual imagery must be included in order to fully understand how societies, past and present, have dealt with disasters. Cultural responses in literature and chronicles, paintings and prints, newspapers,

The Medieval History Journal 10: 1–2 (2007), 1–31 and Gerrit Jasper Schenk, 'Historical Disaster Research. State of Research, Concepts, Methods and Case Studies', *Historical Social Research* 32: 3 (2007), 9–31.

13 Bas van Bavel and Daniel R. Curtis, 'Better Understanding Disasters by Better Using History. Systematically Using the Historical Record as One Way to Advance Research into Disasters', in *International Journal of Mass Emergencies and Disasters* (2015), 1–32; van Bavel et al., *Disasters and History*, 43; Gerrit Jasper Schenk, "Learning from History". Chances, Problems and Limits of Learning from Natural Disasters', in Fred Krüger, Greg Bankoff, Terry Cannon, Benedikt Orłowski, and E. Lisa F. Schipper (eds), *Cultures and Disasters. Understanding Cultural Framings in Disaster Risk Reduction* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 72–86.

14 Judith Pollmann, 'Of Living Legends and Authentic Tales. How to Get Remembered in Early Modern Europe', *Transactions of the RHS* 23 (2013), 103–25; Juneja and Schenk, *Disaster as Image*; Carla Meyer, Katja Patzel-Mattern, and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds), *Krisengeschichte(n). 'Krise' als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2013), 117–44; Raingard Esser, "Ofte gheen water op en hadde gheweest". Narratives of Resilience on the Dutch Coast in the Seventeenth Century', *Dutch Crossing* 40: 2 (2016), 97–107.

15 See, for example, Christoph Mauch and Christian Pfister, *Natural Disasters, Cultural Responses. Case Studies Towards a Global Environmental History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

commemoration books, songs, and so on reveal much about the way societies have dealt with disruptive and destructive events such as floods, fires, storms, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and epidemics. Yet interpreting these cultural responses is not a simple or straightforward task. Every case needs cultural and historical contextualisation to fully grasp its meaning: words and pictures can be used with very different meanings and aims; these may vary in different contexts and change over time.¹⁶ Furthermore, recipients may add further meaning to these cultural representations and re-use them to create new narratives with additional or entirely different connotations.

Generally speaking, the process of interpretation is at work on three different levels: perception, transmission, and reception. The first step is always perception. Disaster only becomes a disaster if it is perceived as such.¹⁷ Natural violence then does not necessarily have to be a disaster. It gains its meaning from its social context. In other words, 'natural' disasters are the direct result of an interaction between the natural environment and the social realm. Only if humans perceive events as disasters – often because a group is deeply affected – will they represent them as such in the media. Considering that experience and perception are inherently subjective, disaster is inextricably linked with subjective interpretation. For example, one person or group may not perceive an event as a disaster, but this does not mean that others did not. Therefore, it is important to realise who does the 'perceiving' in order to expose individual, social, religious, or political inclinations, and even bias and prejudice.

The next stage in the process of cultural representation is transmission, a form of communication which may take many different forms. Here the

16 Jensen et al., 'Appropriating Disasters', 38–40.

17 Gerrit Jasper Schenk, 'Lektüren im Buch der Natur. Wahrnehmung, Beschreibung und Deutung von Naturkatastrophen', in Susanne Rau and Birgit Studt (eds), *Geschichte Schreiben. Ein Quellen- und Studienhandbuch zur Historiographie (ca. 1350–1750)* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag), 507–21; Gerrit Jasper Schenk, 'Historical Disaster Experiences. First Steps Toward a Comparative and Transcultural History of Disasters Across Asia and Europe in the Preindustrial Era', in Gerrit Jasper Schenk (ed.), *Historical Disaster Experiences, Transcultural Research – Heidelberg Studies on Asia and Europe in a Global Context* (Cham: Springer, 2017), 3–44, at 15–23; Gerrit Jasper Schenk and Monica Juneja, 'Viewing Disasters. Myth, History, Iconography and Media Across Europe and Asia', in Juneja and Schenk, *Disaster as Image*. Jörg Trempler has argued that images played a decisive role in the modern conceptualisation of 'catastrophe' in *Katastrophen. Ihre Entstehung aus dem Bild* (Berlin: Verlag Klaus Wagenbach, 2013); Jörg Trempler, 'Catastrophes and Their Images. Event and Pictorial Act', *RES. Journal of Anthropology and Aesthetics* 63–64 (2013), 201–14. Vera Fionie Koppenleitner argues that this conceptualisation through images started earlier, see her *Katastrophenbilder. Der Vesuvausbruch 1631 in den Bildkünsten der Frühen Neuzeit*, I Mandorli 22 (Berlin and Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2018).

process of transforming an experience into a representation takes shape: visibly or audibly, tangibly or intangibly. In the communication of the event, others learn how people lived through the events and reacted to them.¹⁸ In the (paraphrased) words of music scholar Dorothea Redepenning: with the help of natural sciences and the study of historical documents, we can reconstruct what has happened, but via works of art we learn how people experienced these historical events.¹⁹ In this way recipients learn even more than just about the disaster and its consequences. The person who communicates the disaster (orally, ritually, textually, or visually) to an audience adds a new layer of interpretation to the event. In the exchange the disaster is again transformed, because – as with perception – transmission is never neutral but always informed by context and loaded with new associations, sentiments, and convictions.

Finally, another layer can be added in the third phase: reception. In fact, reception is a subsequent form of perception. When an audience learns about a disaster via cultural representations, they add their layer of interpretation, mentally but also physically. With the physical expression of thoughts and emotions, the audience adds another representation, e.g. a person might express personal thoughts and feelings, add notes to a manuscript or pamphlet, or sometimes create an entirely new representation of their own informed by others.²⁰

To understand the complex dynamics of this simplified description of the process, it is crucial to point out the many areas of overlap between perception, transmission (or communication), and reception (which is again a form of perception with the addition of a new layer of interpretation). The people involved in these three stages might be one and the same. Artists

18 For recurrent literary structures of disaster narrations, see Ansgar Nünning, 'Krise als Erzählung und Metapher. Literaturwissenschaftliche Bausteine für eine Metaphorologie und Narratologie von Krisen', in Meyer, Patzel-Mattern, and Schenk (eds), *Krisengeschichte(n)*, 117–44; Ansgar Nünning, 'Towards a Metaphorology of Crises, or: The Uses of Cognitive Metaphor Theory for the Study of Culture', in Ana Margarida Abrantes and Peter Hanenberg (eds), *Cognition and Culture* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2011), 71–98; Ansgar Nünning, 'Making Crises and Catastrophes. Metaphors and Narratives Shaping the Cultural Life of Crises and Catastrophes', in Carsten Meiner and Kristin Veel (eds), *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises. Facts, Forms, Fantasies* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 59–88.

19 Dorothea Redepenning, 'Musik und Katastrophe – Katastrophenmusik', in Gerrit Jasper Schenk, Monica Juneja, Alfried Wiczorek, and Christoph Lind (eds), *Mensch, Natur, Katastrophe von Atlantis bis heute* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2014), 129–33, at 133.

20 See for emotive responses to disaster images and texts: Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003); Thomas Labbé and Gerrit Jasper Schenk (eds), *Une histoire du sensible. La perception des victimes de catastrophe du XIIe au XVIIIe siècle* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2018).

creating a representation may have personally experienced the disaster they are describing or depicting, making them both the perceiving and transmitting agents. But even if they learn about a disaster from personal experience, they combine this knowledge with other sources of information. What people are transmitting is never informed merely by individual experience but also by historical documents and cultural representations. In other words, they combine perception with reception. In other instances, recipients of a cultural representation – who are never passive but rather add their own layer of meaning to a disaster text or image – may become communicating agents. In the end, the cultural representations are always the results of the closely intertwined stages of perception, transmission, and reception.

After a while, some disasters may become part of collective memory, while others do not. This difference in outcome is the result of many variables. Scholars of memory culture have analysed the different elements that increase an event's chances of being remembered. A connection with stories, images, gestures, rituals, and places has a decisive effect, sometimes more than facts and figures.²¹ You could say that narratives and images sell a disaster.²² However, the opposite is also possible: once a disaster has become part of collective memory, it may become a unique selling point. Illustratively, in 2021 a so-called States Bible in very bad condition was put up for sale on a Dutch online sourcing and selling platform.²³ The seller described the item as 'an 1846 States Bible with water damage from the North Sea Flood of 1953'. With this description, they presented the mangled book as an artefact of a disastrous flood that has become part of collective memory for many Dutch citizens.²⁴ Because 'memory installs remembrance within the sacred', to quote Nora, the objects connected to disaster memories become relics.²⁵

In a joint article of the research group *Dealing with Disasters*, we have proposed using the concepts of 'appropriation', 'representation', and

21 Nora, 'Between Memory and History', 9. For an example of St Elisabeth Flood, see Pollmann, 'Of Living Legends', 108–15.

22 For the connection between images of disasters and sales figures, see Paul Hockings, 'Disasters Drawn. *The Illustrated London News* in the Mid-19th Century', *Visual Anthropology* 28 (2015), 21–50.

23 'Statenbijbel 1846 met waterschade door overstrooming van 1953', advertisement on the online selling platform *Marktplaats*, published online 21 December 2021, <https://www.marktplaats.nl/> (accessed 9 February 2022).

24 Lotte Jensen, 'Floods as Shapers of Dutch Cultural Identity. Media, Theories and Practices', *Water History* 13: 2 (2021), 217–33, at 221.

25 Nora, 'Between Memory and History', 9.

'identification' as main analytical categories in studying the cultural responses to disasters.²⁶ We argue that people appropriate disasters through two simultaneous and interdependent acts: representation and identification. Representation substitutes a disastrous event with a cultural artefact, a monument, a text, an image, or a combination of these. In this creative process, an event is categorised as disastrous and framed within certain narrative patterns: it is transformed into a story with a logical order (logical at least to the producers and theoretically to their intended audience as well) and an ending or consequence, for instance punishment for those who will not improve their sinful way of living which was believed to have caused the disaster. The narrative enables producers, reproducers, and consumers to relate to the events and identify themselves with (parts of) the representation. This perhaps motivates them to adjust behaviour accordingly or to feel strengthened in their already chosen approach.

Historical analyses of representations of disasters should therefore consider four aspects: voice (of performer, author, or artist), medium (including generic conventions and intended audience), discourse (narrative and visual structures), and community. As the above-mentioned example of Borculo illustrates, all these layers are at work at the same time. To grasp the full meaning of the cover, information about the producers, their intended consumers, and medium is necessary. By 'discourse' we mean that representations have a narrative or visual structure. While crafting representations of disasters, producers work with existing tropes, narratives, and lines of thought. In other words, existing vocabularies and images influence new representations. In fact, it is nearly impossible, and quite undesirable, to invent entirely new vocabularies or images of disasters; in order to relate to horrific events, an audience needs to recognise these as such. Therefore, intertextuality – and intervisuality – are very important to cultural artefacts of disasters. They can hardly survive without them.

Besides voice, medium, and discourse, scholars must scrutinise the communities that producers of images and texts are cultivating, criticising, or ignoring. Sociologists have demonstrated that catastrophes have been used in the media to increase community building, because, for example, people reach out to each other seeking comfort, solidarity, and support.²⁷ Disasters

26 Jensen et al., 'Appropriating Disasters', 34–42.

27 John Drury, Chris Cocking, and Steve Reicher, 'Everyone for Themselves? A Comparative Study of Crowd Solidarity Among Emergency Survivors', *British Journal of Social Psychology* 48 (2009) 487–506; Anthony Oliver-Smith, 'The Brotherhood of Pain. Theoretical and Applied Perspectives on Post-Disaster Solidarity', in Oliver-Smith and Hoffman, *The Angry Earth*, 156–72; Allen H. Barton, *Communities in Disaster. A Sociological Analysis of Collective Stress Situations*

have time and again turned out to be occasions for artists to strengthen communal ties on religious, social, or political grounds and on the local, regional, and even transnational levels. Yet, at the same time, cultural media could also set groups apart: by stressing communality between people from a specific group, others were, sometimes consciously and explicitly, excluded or ignored. By studying cultural representations of disasters, it is possible to scrutinise such processes of in- and exclusion, both implicit and explicit, and to gain more understanding of how people relate to different communities, what binds them and what sets them apart. They develop different identities, strengthening communal bonds and accentuating social divides in the process.

Frames of Interpretation

The volume *Dealing with Disasters* attempts to show how communities responded to disasters. The authors investigate how people perceived, transmitted, and received disasters using cultural representations, i.e. texts and images, as their primary source material. Many of the contributors focus on one type of medium, such as pamphlets (van Egeraat), the illustrated press (van Os), chronicles (Dekker), newspapers (Koopmans), or commemorative books (Duiveman). Others discuss multiple genres over a longer period (Meijer, Jensen, Wieser, Jacoby, and Rohr). Susan Broomhall analyses natural violence in the written works and drawings of one artist. Finally, other contributions include case studies focusing on one disaster representation, such as a printed image (van Asperen), a poem (Hulsenboom), or a novel (Scholten). Looking at disasters from these diverse angles, this volume investigates what roles cultural representations play when the events are mediated and moulded according to different wishes and desires.

The fourteen contributions have been divided over three thematic sections: 'Disaster and Emotions', 'Disaster and Blame', and 'Disaster and Time'. Each of these play a crucial role in cultural responses to disasters. The first of the three sections is dedicated to emotions which help artists to make sense of catastrophic events. Moreover, emotions tie people together, because they reflect shared feelings or even prescribe appropriate responses to people's misery. Another common type of immediate reaction

(New York: Doubleday, 1969); Anthony F.C. Wallace, *Tornado in Worcester. An Exploratory Study of Individual and Community Behavior in an Extreme Situation* (Washington, DC: National Academy of Sciences – National Research Council, 1956).

to disasters is to assign blame: after large-scale catastrophes people often look for scapegoats who are presumed to have provoked or aggravated the crisis. Finally, time is an important factor. Some authors and artists place recent disasters in a long-term perspective, relating them to events in the more distant past. Additionally, stories and images about the one and the same disaster irrevocably change after time has passed. Furthermore, responses are always time-bound: every period has its own time-specific values and predominant ways of coping. Nevertheless, comparing cultural responses from different periods inevitably reveals patterns of continuity. Although different times ask for different emotional responses and different scapegoats, cultural media have always been indispensable when trying to increase societal resilience. They have continually offered an outlet for emotions, provided consolation, propagated solidarity and charity, or accentuated social divides. In other words, emotions, blame, and time are used here not to categorise cultural responses and divide these into separated groups, but rather as thematic lenses to help scholars understand how contemporaries conceptualised and appropriated disasters.

The first part of this volume, 'Disaster and Emotions', is devoted to the visualisation of feelings in, and affective responses to, representations of disasters. The first chapter focuses on one artist's 'voice': that of the early modern *uomo universale* Leonardo da Vinci. Susan Broomhall investigates how the creative mind tried to capture essential elements of natural violence and to explore its meanings in various works. Perception of natural violence – disasters from the human perspective – operated through fear and other emotions, which Da Vinci tried to visualise on multiple occasions. However, in his approach natural violence was not just destructive but also generative. Nature could destroy human creation but at the same time transform and regenerate herself, offering Da Vinci an artistic framework in which natural violence is a conceptually female counterpart to the artist's genius, which was – traditionally – conceived as male.

The next chapters highlight the workings of emotions, elaborating on the theoretical framework of historian and medievalist Barbara Rosenwein, who recognised and investigated the formation and effects of 'emotional communities' in society.²⁸ In his contribution, Paul Hulsenboom demonstrates how a seventeenth-century author forged an emotional bond between literates across nations (Chapter 2). Because of economic and

28 Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Generations of Feeling. A History of Emotions, 600–1700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 3; and Barbara H. Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (New York and London: Cornell University Press, 2006).

cultural relations, there was a lively exchange of news about disasters that happened in foreign countries. These accounts inspired cultural expressions that promoted solidarity among the international scholarly community. To demonstrate these transnational connections, Hulsenboom focuses on the prolific Silesian-Polish author Joachim Pastorius, who wrote a Latin poem about a 1654 gunpowder disaster in Delft in the Dutch Republic. Written in Gdańsk in 1657, this Latin poem stimulated feelings of solidarity between educated people and shaped an emotional community which transgressed state borders.

Next, Hanneke van Asperen shows how a printed image could trigger emotional engagement within the Dutch Republic by presenting a geographic map as a focus of emotional attention (Chapter 3). To create an efficacious visual discourse, the Dutch printmaker Simon Fokke consulted traditional Catholic images of pity focusing on the suffering body of Christ, which had served to stimulate compassion and co-suffering for centuries. Fokke addressed the predominantly Protestant readers of the *Nederlandsche jaerboeken* ('Dutch Yearbooks') with the image, thus introducing the iconography of the suffering body to a larger audience. Reaching an audience across the Dutch Republic, the image also shows the budding wish to tie the relatively independent provinces together.

In the fourth chapter, Fons Meijer investigates nineteenth-century effects of national identification. For the concept of 'emotional communities', Rosenwein built on Benedict Anderson's notion of 'imagined communities', which he outlined in his study on the invention of national identities.²⁹ In their footsteps, Meijer uses occasional poetry and eyewitness reports in the periodical press to demonstrate how, in the aftermath of disasters, representations could be used to generate transregional affection for people in other, distant parts of the country. The author argues that authors did not simply evoke feelings of compassion but that they helped to shape this emotion using a typical 'disaster discourse', creating a culture of compassion that focused on national or 'Dutch' disasters.

In the final entry in this section, Lotte Jensen focuses on cholera outbreaks (Chapter 5). She shows how religious explanations could compete with or exist parallel to scientific and institutional interpretations. Most nineteenth-century writers urged Dutch citizens to repent their sins and pray, although there were some contemporary critics, including a physician, who claimed that the outbreaks had nothing to do with sinful behaviour

29 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

and could be attributed to poor hygiene and poverty. By collectively raising money for the sufferers, some also aimed at fostering a sense of the nation as a moral community. The narrative framework of blame, sin, and repentance increased people's sense of a national community and of the responsibility to help others. Jensen argues that these cultural responses help to enhance societal resilience. Together, the chapters of 'Disaster and Emotions' highlight how disasters were appropriated to bolster feelings of community.

The second part, entitled 'Disaster and Blame', is centred around the search for explanations by looking for scapegoats after a disaster had occurred. After all, people often appropriated disasters to draw or accentuate social divides. Through the ages religion has been at the heart of cultural responses; the providential explanation – with its defining characteristic of recognising divine intervention – often went hand in hand with placing blame on certain groups of people. This could be the given community, which had to repent their sins, or competing religious, denominational, social, or political circles. The contributions demonstrate how the focus on solidarity and community in one group could often lead to the exclusion of another.

The first two chapters show how producers of representations (authors, artists, and publishers) carefully considered the way they portrayed catastrophes. Marieke van Egeraat focuses on explanations of disasters in sixteenth-century pamphlets (Chapter 6). She observes that Dutch pamphlet sellers downplayed apocalyptic interpretations, while their German counterparts highlighted an eschatological view. Subsequently, van Egeraat argues that pamphlet sellers in the Low Countries preferred the less polemic idea of divine punishment as an explanation, because it fitted the diverse religious landscape and helped to increase sales figures.

Florian Wieser investigates the ways both Spanish invaders and indigenous elite made sense of the epidemic depopulation in sixteenth-century Mesoamerica (Chapter 7). Members of the clergy, *conquistadores* and their successors, and Mesoamerican intellectuals offered religious explanations. All of them stated that sinful behaviour provoked the diseases, but each blamed different groups depending on their own position in society. Both Wieser and van Egeraat emphasize the importance of identifying the voice behind the medium.

Sophie van Os focuses on the depictions of the Great Irish Famine in the Victorian illustrated press (Chapter 8) and demonstrates how visual depictions belong to a larger nineteenth-century cultural discourse of poverty, hunger, and famine. Representations of the famine combined elements from established visual repertoires and in their turn influenced how later disasters were depicted and interpreted. Van Os observes how techniques

and pictorial elements were employed to create a distance between viewer and the famine victims, reaffirming social divides.

Blame, exclusion, and scapegoating are at the heart of the novels analysed by Anneloek Scholten (Chapter 9). Her sources engage with group dynamics in small rural communities during an outbreak of rinderpest. Depicting fictive situations against the historical background of the cattle plague, novelists describe the processes of in- and exclusion in rural communities. A close reading of Josef Cohen's *Ver van de mensen* ('Far from the People', 1910), a novel set in a rural area in the Low Countries, reveals how the author challenges and scrutinises dynamics of exclusion and notions of belonging by encouraging the audience to imagine grief as a shared experience across nations and generations.

The third and final section, 'Disasters and Time', deals with aspects of temporality, memory, and (dis)continuity. Each of the essays examines a different type, or types, of medium – chronicles, newspapers, prints, and/or commemoration books – over a longer period. These enable the contributors to identify patterns and transformations in discourses. The sources often bring past and present together, sometimes even looking forward into the future. The contributions thus relate to the work of historian Michael Kempe, who defined a phase in which collective memory crystallises into a 'culture of disaster'.³⁰ In these amphibian societies, cultural representations reminded the audience that floods might happen again so that they could adapt their attitudes and living environment accordingly.

First, Theo Dekker reflects on issues of continuity and discontinuity regarding fatal epidemics between 1500 and 1850 (Chapter 10). His main sources are Dutch chronicles, in which predominantly male, white literates describe their personal experiences. Dekker demonstrates that while natural explanations became more detailed and complex over time, they remained supplementary or subordinate to divine explanations. Religious and scientific explanations were not incompatible discourses. On the contrary, they could easily exist side by side and even complement each other. Although the role of God also underwent significant changes, from a punishing to a more benevolent being, in desperate circumstances both Catholics and Protestants turned to traditional religious practices.

30 Michael Kempe, "'Mind the Next Flood!' Memories of Natural Disaster in Northern Germany from the Sixteenth Century to the Present', *The Medieval History Journal* 10: 1–2 (2007), 327–54. Petra J.E.M. van Dam elaborates on this idea of 'amphibian cultures' in 'An Amphibious Culture. Coping with Floods in the Netherlands', in Peter Coates, David Moon, and Paul Warde (eds), *Local Places, Global Processes. Histories of Environmental Change in Britain and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2017), 78–93.

Joop W. Koopmans focuses on the discourse of early modern Dutch newspapers reporting about earthquakes and tremors before the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake (Chapter 11). According to a widely accepted religious idea, earthquakes were punishments from God, and people should repent their sins to prevent more and worse disasters from happening. This thought was neither denied nor questioned, nor openly proclaimed in the reports, but they were implicitly taken for granted.

Julia Mariko Jacoby then analyses remarkably consistent cultural representations of Japanese earthquakes in different media in early modern and modern times (Chapter 12). The almost mythical creature of the catfish is at the heart of many Japanese images in which the trembling of the earth was paralleled with Western power: both could entail business opportunities and pose dangers at the same time. Single-page newsprints appeared anonymously and were tolerated only as long as the content was not offensive to the Tokugawa Shogunate. Jacoby also describes the discourses in commemoration books that assessed and mapped damage; narrated tragedies, heroism, and absurdities that emerged from disaster; and concluded on a positive note with first reports on reconstruction. These gave cosmological or scientific explanations for the disaster and contextualised it in the long history of similar events.

Unlike chronicles and newspapers, commemoration books often situate a catastrophe in longer historical perspective: Their authors deliberately reflected upon the repetitive occurrences of floods and other disasters to provide moral and practical lessons for the future, as Adriaan Duivenman shows (Chapter 13). In his analysis of the memorial functions of four commemoration books, he demonstrates that the authors emphasised a cyclical recurrence of floods in the Netherlands and that they provided their audience with technological and religious advice to prevent future ones, thus counteracting the decline narrative that was also prominent in eighteenth-century Dutch thought.

This book ends with some valuable reflections on the present. The fourteenth and final chapter is devoted to disaster memory in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and in our own time. Looking at floods, avalanches, storms, and earthquakes in Europe and the United States of America, Christian Rohr argues that societies that do not actively remember disasters are less prepared for unexpected extreme events and therefore more vulnerable. Rohr thus promotes a new culture of disaster memory, making use of new media and new forms of knowledge transfer between people whose families have lived in vulnerable areas for centuries, on the one side, and newcomers, on the other.

Combined, the three thematic sections on emotions, blame, and time offer an overview of the various ways to study cultural representations of disasters across academic disciplines from three complementing and often overlapping perspectives. Together, the contributions demonstrate who appropriated disasters, i.e. whose voices we hear when we investigate cultural representations. Furthermore, they show for what reasons people appropriated disasters and which media and discourses people used to achieve their goals.

Future Paths of Investigation

As scholars have done in the past, some contributors to this volume mention the somewhat paradoxical trope of human incapability to describe pain and destruction on a large scale.³¹ Despite this often-used disclaimer, many authors and artists in the past and present have tried to capture suffering and loss in their work. One important goal of visual art and literature focusing on disasters is the aesthetics, which was the subject of the exhibition 'Entfesselte Natur' ('Nature Unchained') in Hamburg in 2018.³² People enjoy – and have enjoyed – looking at and contemplating images that show the violent and destructive side of nature. Additionally, art in different shapes and forms has given humans a tool to come to grips with destructive forces that are beyond immediate comprehension.

One of the explicit goals of this volume is to demonstrate how representations in different media work to achieve goals of identification and appropriation. The chapters demonstrate how people in different times produced and distributed cultural representations of disaster in different media to cope with crises, come to terms with them, and manipulate them. In other words, this book investigates how people mould disasters into visuals and narratives to appropriate them and make them manageable or even functional.

Nevertheless, *Dealing with Disasters* leaves unanswered questions. To start, this volume focuses on tangible and surviving sources, e.g. printed texts, printed images, manuscripts, and drawings. After time has passed, we are only able to read about the songs people sang, the rituals they enacted, and the stories they told in materialised, solidified, and crystallised form.

31 e.g. van Asperen (Chapter 3), Jensen (Chapter 5), and van Os (Chapter 8) in this book.

32 Markus Bertsch and Jörg Trempler (eds), *Entfesselte Natur. Das Bild der Katastrophe seit 1600*, exh. Hamburger Kunsthalle, 29 June–14 October 2018 (Petersberg: Imhof, 2018).

These performances, however, are flexible and dynamic.³³ Moreover, voices do not fall silent once the stories, songs, and ceremonies are put to paper, which leaves the question of how the surviving material sources relate to oral culture, as both their informant and their percipient.

Secondly, it would be worth investigating more of the blind spots and prejudices in the surviving source material. Historians mostly read and learn of those people who left material sources for us to study. The perspectives are therefore often elite, white, and male. Even when they acknowledge this, scholars still struggle to overcome this bias. Furthermore, it is difficult to investigate those who are not (or hardly) mentioned in the sources and who did not write, draw, or paint themselves. This does not mean, however, that it is entirely impossible to study their experiences and memories. Sometimes we do have sources that were produced by marginalised people, but these may take different shape and form. A few examples are textiles, votive images, or additional handwritten notes.³⁴ A case in point is presented in a manuscript obituary book (*obituarium*) from the convent of Mariënborg, a religious community of Tertiaries in 's-Hertogenbosch, situated in the Southern Low Countries (the present-day Netherlands).³⁵ The manuscript book contains a calendar with the names of the sisters and the convent's major benefactors who had died and were to be commemorated on specific days during the liturgical year (Fig. 0.2).

An anonymous author, closely connected to the convent and probably living there, added three short notes to the book's flyleaf. The third and final one is a recollection of the 'big fire' ('den groten brant') in 1463. In that year, a conflagration destroyed a substantial part of the city of 's-Hertogenbosch. The note comes after two others. The first mentions the date of the convent's confirmation 'on the day of St John's birth', i.e. 24 June, in 1459.³⁶ The

33 Paul Post, 'Introduction. Some Conceptual and Historiographical Explorations on Ritual, Disaster, and Disaster Ritual', in Martin Hoondert, Paul Post, Mirella Klomp, and Marcel Barnard (eds), *Handbook of Disaster Ritual. Multidisciplinary Perspectives, Cases and Themes* (Leuven, Paris, and Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2021), 1–48.

34 For examples of votive gifts as representations of disasters, see Giovanni Gugg, 'The Missing Ex-Voto. Anthropology and Approach to Devotional Practices During the 1631 Eruption of the Vesuvius', in Domenico Cecere, Chiara de Caprio, Lorenza Gianfrancesco, and Pasquale Palmieri (eds), *Disaster Narratives in Early Modern Naples. Politics, Communication and Culture* (Rome: Viella, 2018), 221–36.

35 The anonymous sister wrote: 'Item den groten brant ten boesch was a^o m cccc lxijj', which translates as: 'The same, the great fire in 's-Hertogenbosch was in the year 1463' in the *liber obituum*, or *obituarium*, of the convent Mariënborg, kept in Brabant-Collectie of Tilburg University library, Ms KHS 6.

36 This year 1459 might be an error, because the sisters took up the rule of St Francis only in 1469. There may be another explanation: the book itself was probably not written until the first quarter of the sixteenth century, so the notes were most likely copied. Perhaps the author

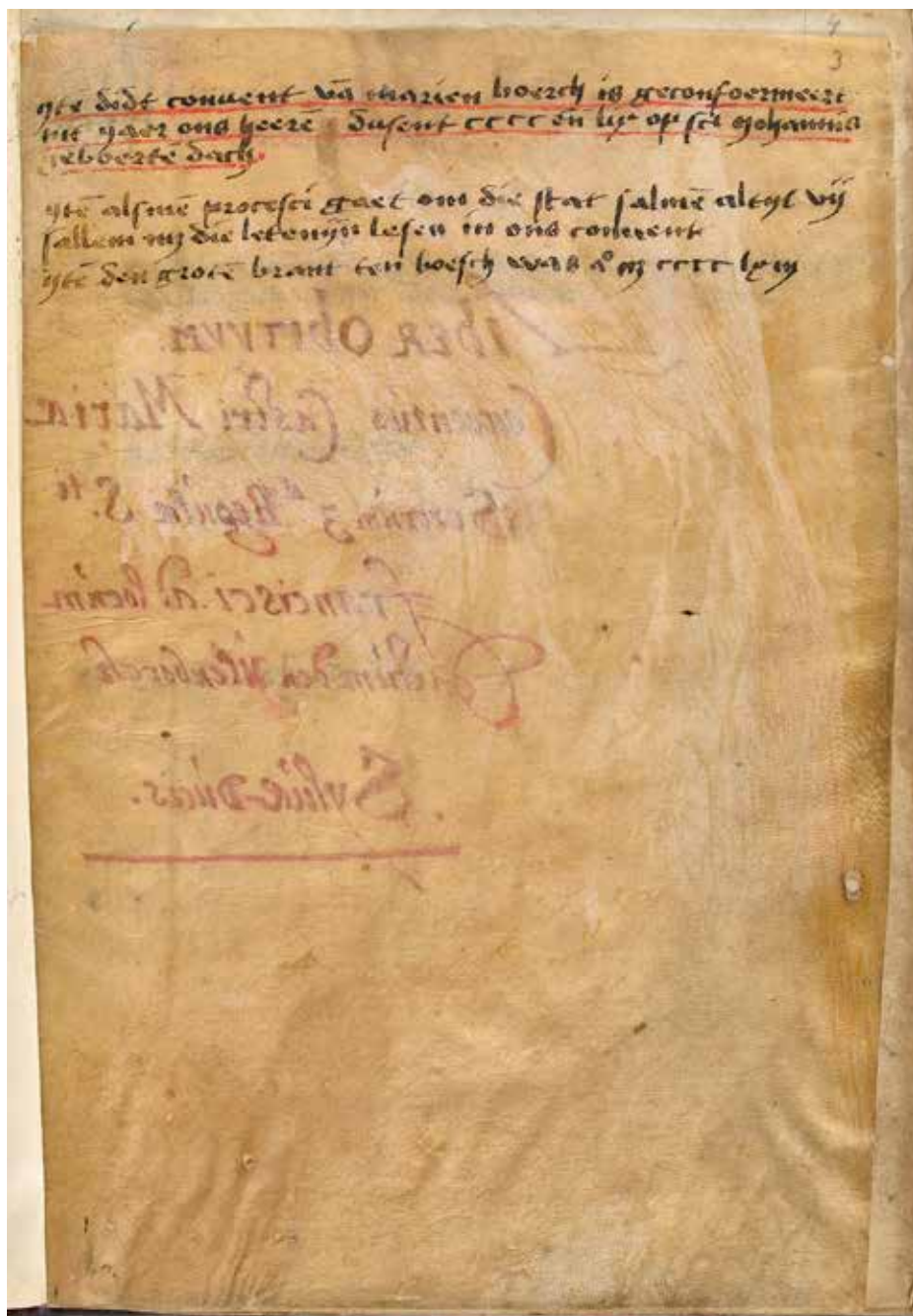


Figure 0.2 Handwritten notes on the flyleaf (fol. 3r) of an *obituary*, convent of Marienburg, 's-Hertogenbosch, first quarter of the sixteenth century. Brabant-Collectie, Tilburg University Library, KHS 6

second note is a reminder to read the psalms and litany on the day of the procession of 's-Hertogenbosch, which was always held on the first Sunday after 24 June. This type of evidence is important for our understanding of disaster experiences in the early modern period. First, the note identifies communities of religious women as bearers of memory.³⁷ Additionally, it indicates how significant dates for the sisters and the larger local community were combined with rituals and how disasters were embedded in an existing calendar of commemoration.³⁸

Along with a quest for additional source material, we must keep on carefully scrutinising the sources that we already have and realise that there are always people who are forgotten, ignored, or stigmatised. We should ask ourselves, who is *not* addressed? Throughout the centuries, cultural representations – be they sermons, poems, paintings, songs, prints, handwritten chronicles, or commemoration books – offered consolation and explanation but also reflected and affirmed hierarchy, authority, and social status. These cultural products have been used as instruments to enhance resilience because they aimed to forge connections between people across time and space. However, inclusion always entails exclusion, and scholars benefit from an awareness of the exclusion processes. Furthermore, there is a lesson for society to learn as well, particularly for creative industries and (government) communications offices. The manifold links between past and present-day situations underline the value of the historical discipline for modern debates about cultural and creative strategies in response to disasters.

About the Authors

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also copied the note from an older source. On the procession of 's-Hertogenbosch, see Anton Schuttelaars, 'De Heeren van de Raad. Bestuurlijke elite van 's-Hertogenbosch in de stedelijke samenleving, 1500–1580', PhD dissertation, Radboud University Nijmegen, 1998, 116–17.

37 These women helped to create the necessary *lieux de mémoire* to remember the fire. On *lieux de mémoire*, see Nora, 'Between Memory and History', 12.

38 For another example of research into rituals and disasters, see Adriaan Duiveman, 'Praying for (the) Community: Disasters, Ritual and Solidarity in the Eighteenth-Century Dutch Republic', *Cultural and Social History* 16: 5 (2019), 543–60.

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