

Workshop

The overwhelming catastrophe. Perceptual Constellations of destructive natural events in European Realism

(16.12.2022, DFG-Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe »Imaginarier der Kraft«,
Gorch-Fock-Wall 3, 20354 Hamburg)

Catastrophes are caught between overpowering and coping with the occurring natural events. On the one hand, the violence emanating from them, as well as the unexpectedness of their appearance, puts one under a spell; it leaves one speechless, reduces everything inferior to pure phýsis, in which a supposedly timeless and unknowable, supra-worldly power reveals itself. On the other hand, the initial shock also releases political, social and creative energies for the transformation (or restitution) of the governed world. This readjustment of this tension at the threshold of modernity in the late 18th century is characterized by an increasing secularization and empiricization. In post-Kantian epistemology, the metaphysical search for ultimate truths is replaced by a fundamental dynamization, which is reflected in the emerging disciplines of biology and geology, among others. In the course of the 19th century, nonetheless, fundamental epistemological uncertainties manifest themselves. In addition to the fundamental fragility of human perception, these also concern the problem of cognition of the now emerging spatial and temporal horizons. Thermodynamics and evolutionary biology also demonstrate the contingency of the real.

At this point, the workshop would like to start and explore the interferences between science and literature in the concrete epistemological situation of 'disturbed' perception. These occur when extremely small or large catastrophes disturb the prestabilized equilibrium of the ordinariness. In an epoch that labels itself 'realistic', the concrete individual cases in which epistemological uncertainties find their way into narrative literature, where they are integrated into contexts of meaning beyond the romantic escape from reality are of special interest. Due to the growing knowledge of the causes of devastating natural events, this leads to a new awareness of catastrophes as well as to new strategies of forecasting, precaution and coping with destructive nature. But what are the aesthetic and epistemic preconditions of disaster perception that make such strategies possible in the first place? This is the topic of the planned workshop, whose guiding questions are:

- What is the literary mode of speaking about an incomprehensible force of nature?
- How and by which figures can the future and the barely perceptible be anticipated within the narrated world?
- How do the texts relate these figures to the cultural and narrative modes of restitution of an existing order?
- How can one scale the turn from the lawful to the extraordinary, how can one mark and represent this threshold?

The Workshop on Literary Negotiations of Catastrophic Perceptual Constellations in European Realism is scheduled to take place in Hamburg, Germany, on Dec. 16, 2022. We invite the submission of contributions that deal with:

- Animal perception of nature and the associated implicit and explicit readjustment of anthropological difference.
- Narrative procedures of prognostication and anticipation of disruptive events in specific discursive entanglements
- Argumentative constructions of catastrophic events in the tension between causality and contingency

Please send your proposals in the form of an abstract (approx. 500 words) and a short CV to Laura Isengard (laura.isengard@uni-hamburg.de) and/or Dr. Clemens Günther (clemens.guenther@fu-berlin.de) until June 15, 2022.