CONCEPTUAL FIGURES OF FRAGMENTATION AND RECONFIGURATION

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AN UNNATURAL HISTORY OF DESTRUCTION: CATASTROPHE AND THE CITY

Gianfranco Ferraro[1]

ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the urban space as a space of catastrophe. In particular, it considers earthquakes and human-caused destructive events. By drawing on Foucault's notion of heterotopias, De Martino's reflections on cultural apocalypses and Assmann's notion of cultural memory, it reveals the key role played by catastrophes in the recreation and re-imagination of urban spaces. It also considers their relevance to art – in particular architecture, sculpture, and poetry – when it comes to reconfiguring forms of living and recreating a common ethos for survivors and inhabitants.

KEYWORDS

Heterotopia, Catastrophe, City, Earthquake, Reconstruction.

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"*All is good,* you say, and all is *necessary*.
What? Would the whole universe, without this infernal abysm,
without devouring Lisbon, have more evil?
Voltaire, *Poem on the disaster of Lisbon*

What does it mean to be born or to live in a place where a catastrophe has occurred, or in a place that is vulnerable to catastrophe? What does it mean to live in a world, made of symbolic relations and gestures – the very gestures that permit us to recognize that world as ours, and ourselves as its inhabitants – that is at the point of disappearing? Throughout this paper, I do not simply aim to approach the phenomenology of catastrophe as a human place (ontologically speaking). Such an approach would begin with an analysis of the epiphanies through which individuals face their own finitude: the extreme weakness of the body and the voice, the possibility of disappearing. Instead, my aim is to approach the catastrophe as a social and collective experience that, rather than merely implying the disappearance of the individual, implies the actual or possible disappearance of an entire world. I thus wish to consider the cultural meaning of such apocalypses for concrete forms of life. Whereas the individual, facing the end, can still hope that the world will survive her, in the case of a "cultural apocalypse" death corresponds to the death of the world. In this case, throughout her unique life, the individual lives and experiences the progressive death of her world. What is at stake is thus the notion of a world as experience that carries the possibility of disappearance. From this perspective, the world must be considered the techniques of life that produce the symbolic and relational field of those who inhabit a present. In itself, a "world" thus contains the various techniques through which it can survive and give the individual at least the perception that her specific individuality can be transcended. The symbolic, cultural horizon of a world implies the belief that this world will exist indefinitely: its techniques are thus designed to resist the possibility of disappearance.

Nevertheless, approaches based on cultural and anthropological studies of apocalyptical phenomena[2] allow for an understanding of the notion of a "world" as an experience exposed to disappearance. These approaches clarify how the "world" contains its own negative, the image of its own end as its reverse image: no world exists without a memory – a terrible and agonizing memory – of the void from which it was born and the silence into which it is expected to fall. In this sense, beyond being a concrete event, the catastrophe is above all a "spectre", a ghost, a possibility, removed rather than present like all repressed memories.[3] A world without the memory of catastrophe is simply unimaginable: its techniques of living thus inherit, incorporate, the possibility of its own end. Following this approach, we must observe the world through this extreme boundary, through the possibility of catastrophe. Reading a world through the lens of catastrophe can mean the following: if a world is based on its – present, historical, or imaginary – catastrophes, then it is possible to understand it through the forms it adopts to survive. These forms are forms of looking, or specific ways of living.

A first theoretical consequence can thus be determined: the permanence of a world must be connected to its ability to be exposed to nothingness. The projection of the catastrophe onto the living, cultural world is what permits the latter to challenge and continuously verify and fortify its boundaries. In this case, as memory and/or prevision, the catastrophe is also what allows a world to change its forms. But even if we can understand the relation between

2 An anthropological approach to apocalyptical events is offered by the Italian anthropologists Ernesto De Martino (2002) and Vito Teti (2017), who consider experiences of the end in their studies on the villages of Southern Italy, stressing their paradigmatic aspects. A more philosophically based point of view on these themes cannot omit the works of Andrea Tagliapietra (2010) and Augusto Placanica (1985). Where Bronisław Baczko's (1999) pivotal text studied the effects of historical catastrophes on eighteenth-century thought, more recently, François Walter (2008) has offered a wider panorama of the cultural history of catastrophes. Also important is the interdisciplinary study of contemporary apocalyptical experiences commonly designated as "collapsology" (cf. Cochet, 2019; Durieux, 2020). Some contemporary philosophical approaches to the Anthropocene likewise fall under apocalyptical thought (cf. Giuliani, 2020).

3 The Freudian category of "repression" is used by the theorist Francesco Orlando in his studies on literary images of non-useful, non-functional things, which are explicit paradigms, on his view, of repressed, unconscious cultural memories of death: on his view, literature becomes "the site of an antifunctional return of the repressed" (Orlando, 2006, p. 13).

catastrophe and world from an abstract perspective, how are we to spell this out more concretely? The city appears in this case as a perfect field of analysis: as a cultural, anthropological phenomenon in which the human "world" is concretely exposed to forces that provoke the catastrophe. The city appears as a knot in which cultural and natural forces, techniques and materials, come together. To look at the form of a city is therefore to look at the compromise between the catastrophe and the resistance it meets. For the city, a catastrophe can be both a condition of its existence and a fear: in some cases, such as those cities that have suffered (or are vulnerable to) earthquakes, the catastrophe appears as a cultural image that is part of their effort to constitute a living place. As the opposite of the city, as a rupture that breaks the compromise between the forces that constitute the city, the catastrophe exposes the cultural world of the human being to an irruption of the forces it seeks to dominate: as a threat to the city's ability to persist within its form, the catastrophe acquires the semblance of evil.

1.

In the 1950s, the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino developed an anthropology of cultural apocalypses.[4] His point of departure was the fact that the cultural world is above all a collection of signs and relations. These signs and relations constitute what he calls the "enhanceable horizon". In other words, our living experience is always situated within a perspective from which it is transcended, from which it is observable in terms of the relations it has with other living experiences. In this way, it acquires a sense: in this sense, a "world" can only exist when this perspective is reached, when the signs and the relations continue to permit the individual to transcend his or her own limited experience. Opposing this, we have a "psychopathological past", which every culture lives out in its own way: this is a lived experience, typical of agony, in which it is possible to experience death as the experience of the end, not just of that specific world but of any possible world. In this experience, the world becomes cold, static; it "lives its 'dying'" (De Martino, 2002, p. 631):[5]

4 Cf. De Martino, 2002.

5 If not stated otherwise, all translations are my own.

> As the psychopathological past, the end of the world is the experience of radical risk, incompatible with culture, the experience of not being able to start any possible world, of not being able to pass beyond the situation, into the realm of value. Precisely because we are in-the-world as operative presences, we emerge and remain in it; inasmuch as we carry out the valorizing energy of transcending the situation, the risk of not being able to carry out this energy, experiencing its fall assumes the form of the radical risk of a final and definitive catastrophe […]. (De Martino, 2002, p. 632)

The tools through which a world can be useful are precisely what constitutes an intraworldly ethos, an "ethos of transcendence", according to De Martino, based on the presence of intersubjective values: it is the "human past par excellence as energy trespassing situations, as enhanceable making and, at the same time, operative valorization" (De Martino, 2002, p. 674). In other words, a world exists to the extent that it contains an ethos of transcendence. The end of the world, by contrast, can be approached as a phenomenon that concerns the disappearance of this intraworldly ethos. Taken together, aptitudes, gestures, and relations thus constitute this ethos. A world can maintain itself only by maintaining this ethos. Nevertheless, it is equally true that every world faces the possible disappearance of this ethos as its most terrible risk. At base, this ethos is comparable to that which the ancient Greeks associated with *bios*, life characterized as human life, that is, containing all habits, gestures, and forms that distinguish the human ability to exercise its freedom in order to model life. This is a characteristic that animal life does not share. Animals do not have the same ability to model their habits, their forms of life, and thus their bare form of life was called *zo*ē. As such, "the world of the animals 'cannot' finish": its end simply corresponds to a catastrophe for the race itself. By contrast, "man 'goes beyond', from one world to the other, precisely because he is the moral energy that survives the catastrophes of his worlds" (De Martino, 2002, p. 631). We can thus affirm that it is precisely *bios* that is in question at the end of the world, and therefore in the catastrophe. The human horizon must be characterized as a space in which this ethos of transcendence is preserved.

As a way of life and an object of cultural transformation, the ancient *bios* was recovered by Michel Foucault in the 1980s. In particular, Foucault developed a complex analysis of the techniques or technologies of the self that give form to the subject. The several examples offered in antiquity in this field concern, for instance, daily rules, confession, and examination of one's conscience: all ways of defining habits and exploring the means by which humans define their aptitudes in order to construct themselves (Foucault, 2001b, p. 1607). The object of these techniques continues to be *bios*. Through the technologies of the self, the individual transcends herself: what is at stake is not merely her survival but the existence of her culture. In other words, what is at stake is the possibility – inherent in the human being – of developing a world as an *ethos*. Foucault clarifies that the ancient notion of *ēthos*, built through the cultural uses of the *bioi*, corresponds precisely to the modern notion of aptitude. A life deprived of its techniques, of the ability to transform itself and to ethically create its own worlds, would merely be a life reduced to *zoē* (see Foucault, 2001, p. 1607).[6] It is *bios* that is thus at stake both in the case of these technologies of the self and in the case of De Martino's ethos of transcendence.

The characteristics examined by De Martino when he writes about the ethos of transcendence are not dissimilar to those considered by Foucault when he writes about the techniques of the self. The *ethos of transcendence* is what guarantees the permanence of *bios*, preventing the reduction of human life to *zoē*. Nevertheless, just as bare life is the phantom of all forms of life, the possibility of any individual life's falling into the simple necessity of satisfying biological needs, the "crisis of the presence" – the cultural catastrophe – seems precisely to be the phantom of any ethos of transcendence. The catastrophe can thus be read as the crisis of that field in which the *bios* is based: all forms of life run this risk, as De Martino says, and because of this they develop specific techniques for avoiding the precipice. The *ethos of transcendence* thus manifests itself in the techniques developed to maintain a world in which, through a cultural labour of sorts, its crises can be made useful. In this sense, every world is also

6 Following Foucault's approach to *bios*, Giorgio Agamben developed his paradigm of *Homo sacer*, the individual reduced to pure *zoē* (exemplified by the prisoners of Auschwitz), who can be killed without its being a crime from a legal point of view: cf. Agamben, 1998.

characterized by an effort directed at working on and transforming suffering: all the cultural practices of expiation, of remembering, of grief, must be approached as techniques that aim to prevent cultural traumas from becoming individual psychopathological crises, or "ends of the world": "Nevertheless, the pivotal point remains the following, to carry the proof, to model again and again, through the enhancing work, the domesticity of the world" (De Martino, 2002, p. 479).

Can we approach the urban space as a scenario in which what is at stake is the ethos of transcendence, in which a culture manifests its own techniques, aimed at guaranteeing the cultural and psychological permanence of a "world"? If we consider cities of catastrophe in particular, we must answer in the affirmative, and this for two reasons: on the one hand, because in these spaces we observe concrete ways of overcoming trauma through a reconstruction – sometimes utopian – of the city and through the construction of memorials or monuments dedicated to traumatic events; on the other hand, because the city is the scene of a catastrophic past that can be narrated anew, becoming an object of historical and artistic forms of re-presentation.

2.

Taking as an example the relation between the city and the catastrophe, as an event and cultural phenomenon, we are not far from the contexts in terms of which Michel Foucault explains his own concepts of *utopia* and *heterotopia*. For the French philosopher, utopias are simply imagined places, whereas heterotopias are very real: both are characterized as reverted images of real, living places, however, and of the cultures in which they manifest themselves. They are thus mirrors of culture: techniques through which a society provides a reflection of itself. Through these mirrored images, a culture is able to look at its forms, at its concrete ways of living. It defines itself, its ability to be a world:

> In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent – a mirror utopia.

> But it is also a heterotopia in that the mirror really exists, in that it has a sort of return effect on the place that I occupy. Due to the mirror, I discover myself absent at the place where I am, since I see myself over there. From that gaze which settles on me, as it were, I come back to myself and I begin once more to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (Foucault, 1998, p. 179).

Utopias and heterotopias are thus symbolic, cultural institutions, the aim of which is precisely that of collaborating to constitute the form of that culture, from many points of view. Just one year before writing the text quoted above (1967), in *Les mots et les choses*, Foucault explained the inventive capacity of utopias and heterotopias in more detail. Belonging to the same "order of discourse", utopias and heterotopias provoke different effects on the real body of the city by questioning its orders of discourse and by transforming them:

> *Utopias* afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. *Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this *and* that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy "syntax" in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to "hold together". This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the *fabula*; heterotopias (such as those to be found so often in Borges) desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilize the lyricism of our sentences (Foucault, 2002, p. 19).

Utopias and heterotopias seem to be two different plants with the same root: utopias define the forms of the expected transformation of an order of discourses; heterotopias put in question the grammar, norms and obviousness of a legitimated discourse. They both make sense within a heteropoietic approach: a cultural world is not simply composed of its evident and explicit norms, but rather of other tools that allow for critical consciousness of its boundaries. In this sense, Foucault writes of a "heterotopology", a "sort of systematic description that would have the object, in a given society, of studying, analyzing, describing, 'reading', as people are fond of saying now, these different spaces, these other places, a kind of contestation, both mythical and real, of the space in which we live" (Foucault, 1998, p. 179). This method should study limit places such as cemeteries, forms of transportation, literary images, specific techniques of living in architecture, urbanism, art, and even forms of modifying and transforming the body, all of them characterized – even in their differences – by a specific, reverted relation to "normal" ways of living, normal structures of the city.

Based on these Foucauldian suggestions, our question is thus: Can we see "images" – the figurality – of the catastrophe as a possible object of a "heterotopology"? Does the catastrophe occupy, within the life of a culture, a place similar to that occupied by utopia or heterotopia? What is common to these places is their specific kind of existence: apparently non-useful, these images and places play a role in the normativity of a culture. Where a catastrophe has occurred, we find remains. A piece of an ancient building, a church: ruins are similar wherever a catastrophe has occurred, but they are not equal. These remains continue to characterize the place, reflecting its memory and establishing it as the location of precisely *that* catastrophe and no other. What remains of a church in Lisbon, a city destroyed by an earthquake in 1755, is not the same as what remains in the rotten walls of ancient buildings in Messina, a Sicilian town destroyed by an earthquake in 1908. The ways in which these remains are included within the structure of a city can also vary. In the case of a monument to preserve the memory of a human catastrophe, such as the *Gedächtniskirche* in Berlin, the *Genbaku Dome* in Hiroshima, and the *National September 11 Memorial* in New York, we encounter a similar problem.

These remains are not neutral in themselves: they are used to redefine the space of the rebuilt city. The techniques that were applied to "make something"

of these non-useful images and places are precisely those that belong to utopias and heterotopias. These techniques build "places" where new cities – or more generally, post-catastrophic forms of living – can mirror themselves. These places are real in different ways, in the sense stressed by Foucault: their truth is not understandable just by looking at them, but rather through a relation with normal space. At the same time, they are places, devoid of life, that are themselves located in spaces. They *do not* merely exist to preserve the memory of a past form of life: rather, their function is that of rendering the present place unfamiliar and strange and of offering a point of escape from the "normal", daily gaze of their inhabitants. In this sense, ruins and rubble can have different destinies following a catastrophe: they can become both "monuments" and the rubbish of history, something that must be removed as soon as possible. However, a heterotopology of catastrophe must investigate not only objects – ruins, images – but the techniques that are developed to make them useful. These techniques can tell us much more about the form in which a culture pretends to live and to survive. In this sense, the use of the catastrophe – the image or memory of an event – can tell us how a culture conceives of danger and the spectre of its end through an image of it: an image that is embodied in its own forms.

3.

As in the case of heterotopias, "places of catastrophe" become a mirrored technique through which a traumatic, cultural memory is included in the space of living activity. In order to understand the connection between the mirroring techniques of utopia and heterotopia and the techniques through which a traumatic experience is absorbed and represented in a culture, it is worth considering what Jan Assmann has said in this regard. For him, cultural memory must be separated from personal remembering:

> However, this *art of memory* has very little in common with what is subsumed here under the concept of memory culture (*Erinnerungskultur*). The art of memory relates to the individual and presents techniques to help form personal memory. By

> contrast, "memory culture" is concerned with a social obligation and is firmly linked to the group. The question here is: "What must we not forget?" (Assmann, 2011, p. 16).

Remembering a past, traumatic experience is pivotal to many therapeutic approaches. We find examples of this in those approaches to critical situations in which an individual is taken to determine the genealogy of a present crisis through a narrative that recovers a path that reverberates in the present. The therapeutic approach of psychoanalysis is a clear example of this, both with regard to the interpretation of dreams and in the case of jokes and (Freudian) slips of the tongue. This individual practice of remembering can be traced back to ancient mnemo-techniques, the use of which was studied by Foucault and Hadot, who sought to understand the development of technologies of the self and spiritual exercises in antiquity (cf. Foucault, 2001). By contrast, cultural memory appears in this sense as a set of collective practices that aim to include in the present experiences that are other, belonging to both a past and a future generation, for instance when the memory of a catastrophe is transformed via the expectation of a future catastrophe. Different spaces, but also different times, intersect in these cultural techniques:

> Through cultural memory, human life gains a second dimension or a second time, and this remains through all the stages of cultural evolution. The heterogenization of time, the production of nonsimultaneity, the possibility of living in two times, is one of the universal functions of cultural memory or, to be more precise, of culture as memory (Assmann, 2011, p. 68).

By absorbing the event of the catastrophe culturally, the fatal destiny of the place, a community re-writes both its history and its own present. Through its ruins, the memory of a catastrophe also draws a specific cartography of a place, of a city: a re-writing of its roads, of its squares, a new relation between the past, the present and the possibilities of the future. A city that has lived through a catastrophe necessarily has its own inner relations, its models of cartography: ruins occupy a specific place, define an order of discourse that

involves a way of conceiving of the space and its languages. In this sense, the city of the catastrophe can produce its own architectonic or urban utopias, can invent "models of being" that are necessary both for moving beyond the trauma and for reinventing a way of reimagining the possibility of living through another catastrophe, should one occur in the future. Its cultural techniques develop utopias based on new materials, on new kinds of construction. In the city of catastrophe, the images of apocalypse and utopia find a common root. The city itself represents a heterotopia for its inhabitants: their steps remain in a present that is intersected by the steps of other times. The steps taken by unknown people, citizens of the same space, persist in the present, through the habitual paths along which the present layout of the city forces its inhabitants to walk. Like utopias, which present mirrored forms of life in another hemisphere, and like heterotopias, which represent a space of exception in the middle of normal spaces, the cities of catastrophe live continually at the junction between normativity and the disruption of norms. In this sense, the place of the catastrophe is a place of effective experimentation with utopia and dystopia – a void in which it is possible to imagine an entirely new way of life, experimenting, for instance, with new materials, new construction techniques and new political paradigms.[7] Also in this sense, the most representative place of catastrophe is without doubt that of the city: an archetypical place, because it implies a direct confrontation between the forces of nature and human attempts, a place in which the human effort to construct is above all an effort of imagination born in a mirror-like reflection.

The city is represented as a site of catastrophe not only in Western culture but in other cultures as well.[8] The long-term cultural memories involving cities appear anew in the cases of cities of catastrophe. Also in modernity, the city reappears as the place of catastrophe *par excellence*. Lisbon's earthquake undermined both the eighteenth-century notion that this is the "best of all possible worlds" and the basis of the theology of the age. The theologians

7 In reference to Lisbon, cf. Carreira, 2012. On urban catastrophes as moments of construction of new political paradigms (particularly in the case of the earthquake in Messina), cf. Dickie, 2008; Farinella and Saitta, 2019.

8 Examples include the biblical archetypes of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen, 19, 24-28), the destruction of Atlantis in Plato (*Timaeus*, 24d-25d; *Critias*, 108e-121c), and the Apocalypse of Saint John (*Apocalypse of Saint John*, 18, 17-24).

asked, "Why did God want Lisbon to be destroyed?" The answer, following biblical exegeses, was that the cause was the evils of the world. Could God want there to be evil? The "libertine" philosophers answered that perhaps God does not exist – or if he does, he is indifferent to what happens on Earth, and thus his existence is likewise indifferent to us. Either way, the catastrophe threatening the city is an epiphany that reveals the terrible loneliness of the human path: a loneliness that can be mitigated through the establishment of a "human chain", as expressed by the Italian poet Giacomo Leopardi at the beginning of the nineteenth century.[9]

The catastrophe enters into the cultural memory of the West as a catastrophe of the city: the *forma urbis* is the setting in which evil enters history. The catastrophe is above all a cultural phenomenon that appears as such not just through destruction but through reconstruction and understanding the present through the imagistic repetition of a traumatic history (cf. Walter, 2008; Tagliapietra, 2016). In the ruined city, the catastrophe expresses not only its natural but also its cultural power – the emergence of evil not in an abstract void but in a concrete human history, at an intersection that realizes the mediation between unconscious nature and human agency: collective, repressed angst and normal life.

9 Important references regarding the impact of Lisbon's earthquake on the culture of its time are undoubtedly Voltaire, who writes on the topic in his *Candide* and in his *Poem about the disaster of Lisbon*, as well as Kant's essays *On the causes of earthquakes on the occasion of the calamity that befell the western countries of Europe towards the end of last year*, *History and natural description of the most noteworthy occurrences of the earthquake that struck a large part of the earth at the end of the year 1755*, and *Continued observations on the earthquakes that have been experienced for some time*. In the case of Giacomo Leopardi, the reference is not Lisbon but the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD, which destroyed the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum. This topic can be found in his poem *Wild Broom, or the Flower of the Desert*. Even though he focuses on a different setting, Leopardi uses arguments that are already present in the works of Enlightenment authors to explore the human condition in the face of evil and nature. On this theme, see also Baczko, 1999, pp. 55-80, and Placanica, 1985.

4.

On the morning of 28 December 1908 – when the telegraph was still the preferred means of communication – the Sicilian city of Messina awoke completely in ruins following a terrifying earthquake, followed by a seaquake. The first responders were alerted to the fact that something had happened precisely by the lack of "sound" in the city: a complete lack of telegraphic communication. A great silence descended on what had been a tumultuous harbour just moments before. With more recent events, such as the earthquakes in Belice (1968), Irpinia (1980), and Friuli (1976), we have recordings of sounds interrupting radio programs and family conversations. In these situations, the catastrophe appears clearly as a negative force, inundating, unexpectedly, the minute gestures of daily life: those gestures that are represented – in another example – in the plaster casts of the inhabitants of Pompeii, which mirror their gestures at the precise moment the ash cloud hit the city (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Pompeii's gypsum casts

The signs of the disasters in Lisbon and Messina evoke the condition of anomie into which an urban community falls: the survivors, naked or covered only with bedsheets, the pillagers assaulting the ruins of houses, the bodies abandoned

in the open air, the cries arising from mountains of walls and stones. Where before there was a city, built on daily habits, we now face a collection of dispersed phenomena, the almost impressive characteristic of which is a break with social ties: what defines the specifically human type of behaviour – *bios* – is its collapsing in on itself, surrendering to the bareness of life. Instead of human works, the catastrophe seems to leave space for the absence of work, of techniques. More recently, the earthquake that touched the city of L'Aquila (2016) left the large historical centre completely deserted; especially in the inland villages, catastrophes are frequently followed by a state of abandon.[10]

Where this state of radical absence does not occur, the "absence" holds the space of a moment: the catastrophe immediately becomes a human phenomenon, giving form to gestures – such as those of the first responders, of the workers who begin to arrange and accommodate. In the midst of roads full of stones, life begins to effervesce: accounts, conversations, open life in a place that has been destroyed, where a city once stood (Figures 2 and 3). In this sense, the cultural work on the catastrophe begins in the moment immediately following. The reconstructed city is a "place of catastrophe", a space that lives through a reflection (via signs, memories) of its catastrophic past.

Figure 2
Messina's harbour, after the earthquake, 1908

10 As clarified, in this sense, by the anthropologist Vito Teti, 2017.

Figure 3
A street in Messina, after the earthquake, 1908

It is the work of reconstruction that gives form to and makes possible the place of catastrophe. What does this work consist of? It consists of all those specific techniques of human knowledge in which the catastrophic event becomes a scene or object. In his documentary *La terra trema* [*The Earth Trembles*], the director Mario Martone depicted the immediate rise, stemming from the needs of the survivors, of bread factories. The same types of themes can be seen in other films, such as Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* and – in the context of a man-made catastrophe – *Germania, anno zero* [*Germany Year Zero*]. For the centenary of Messina's earthquake, the poet Jolanda Insana dedicated a collection of poems to the forms of life, the gestures (movements, first signs of activity), that arose just after the earthquake (cf. Insana, 2017. See *infra*). Clearly, speaking about reconstruction implies above all speaking about urbanistic and architectonic techniques, as well as those "governmental" measures that imply the governance of places of catastrophe.

What are the techniques that define the forms of life in places of catastrophe? As many studies demonstrate, places of catastrophe are not neutral: they are spaces of experimentation with new urbanistic paradigms and variations on a defined paradigmatic model. This is the case, for example, with the application of the model of a "theatre of the sea" to the buildings that dominate the harbour of Messina: following a first baroque construction in 1623

by Simone Gullì (Figure 4), which was destroyed by an earthquake in 1783, the same model was applied to the subsequent construction (the "Palazzata") by Giacomo Minutoli (Figure 5).

Figure 4
Simone Gullì's "theatre of the sea", destroyed in 1783

Figure 5
Giacomo Minutoli's "Palazzata" (before 1908)

The latter was destroyed by the earthquake of 1908. In Lisbon, a similar kind of experimentation, with the application of the neoclassical scenographic model instead of a labyrinth of medieval streets, was evident in the construction of the *Baixa Pombalina*.

The work of reconstruction does not end when the building is completed, however. When reconstructed, the city grows a new, urban skin within its own cartographic conformation, and thus within the contract that gives rise to a new urban *corpus*: something of its own catastrophe, of the event that gave rise to its reconstruction and experimentation. If it continues to exist, the urban space survives with its own heterotopias, with its negative passing through memory. The gestures of the survivors and its own space continue to live in the city: the accounts of ghosts seen on dark nights are the *controcanto* of the ruins of the dead city that still inhabits the new city, or of the slums that the utopian reconstruction locates concretely in its suburbs.[11] As a place of catastrophe, the city is always followed by another city, one that coexists with it, sometimes repressed, sometimes by giving form to its own body.

5.

In 1983, fifteen years after the earthquake in Gibellina, Sicily, the artist Alberto Burri was called on to create a memorial "work" for the new village that was being built twenty kilometres away from the old one. Burri's idea was to make something out of the ruins of the old village, assembling them into blocks of white armoured concrete, separated by small trails that, seen from above, seem to redraw the old

11 I myself recall hearing accounts from older people referring to appearances of "ghosts" in the old houses of Messina, many decades after the earthquake. Many of these appearances can be directly connected to the traumatic experience: an abandoned dog, a crying girl in the ruins of a house, the sound of steps in rooms where no one was present. In truth, the new city was built thanks to the migrants of other Sicilian cities and villages: in some cases, these accounts seem to testify to the feeling – and the fear – of living in a place that was not built for those who currently occupy it. Some familiar stories refer to real escapes from these houses, precisely because of that feeling. Of course, Messina's inhabitants experienced a second trauma with the Allied bombings during the Second World War: in the period between July 19 and 17 August 1943, 6,532 tonnes of explosives were flung onto the city, even though this resulted in fewer victims than the earthquake. The recent horror film "Cruel Peter" (2020) is partially based on Messina's images of traumatic ghosts.

streets. In this way, visitors could travel through the memory of the village, not simply by looking at a monument but rather by miming the steps taken by the ancient inhabitants (Figure 6). At the same time, the huge construction – a "cretto", a "land crack"– appears as the effect of the earth's movement: movement that could have been provoked by summer dryness or indeed by an earthquake. Burri had already created (in the 1970s) works using the technique of dryness, an artifice miming nature's work. In them, the force of nature acts together with the human artifice to give form to matter (Figure 7). The memorial work that substitutes the old village of Gibellina thus aimed to reveal this connection between forces of nature and the human hand: a whole miming the work of reconstruction and at the same time constituting a heterotopia of memory, a "place" that can be crossed through giving life to what was apparently silenced. The steps taken by the visitors are not the same as those of the ancient inhabitants, but the movements of the former are forced to mirror those of the latter: the Great Cretto of Gibellina permits different times to meet within any given new step, and the image of the earthquake is established in memory through big, white blocks. In this sense, Burri gives form, through a "living technique", to the cultural memory of the catastrophe.[12]

Figure 6
Alberto Burri, *Grande Cretto di Gibellina*, 1984-1989. Gibellina.

12 A similar approach was taken by Peter Eisenmann in his *Denkmal für die ermordeten Juden Europas* in Berlin. Here too, the visitor is forced to walk through a village of silent blocks.

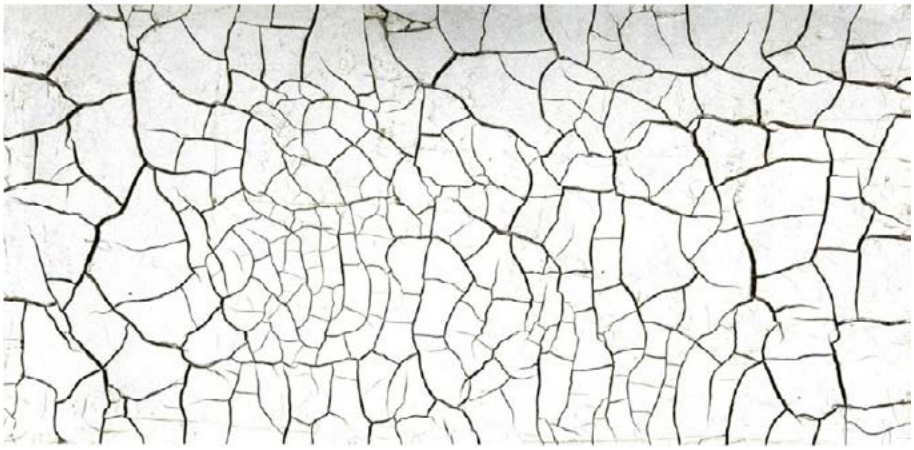

Figure 7
Alberto Burri, *Cretto bianco*, 1975.
Fondazione Palazzo Albizzini, Collezione Burri e Città di Castello

A technique of poetic crossing through the ancient roads of a city can be found in the "Oratorio", dedicated by the poet Jolanda Insana to the earthquake of Messina, a work on the event that embodies the aim of intervening directly in the memory of living inhabitants through the presentation of images of disaster:

> They move from one shelter to another
> and hope to meet someone they know
> a face, they know
> and stumble among the debris
> canes and sticks
> dispersed hands and feet
> in nooks of hutches and bricks
> heads decapitated by mirrors and glasses
> of broken palaces[13]
> (Insana, 2017, p. 49)

13 "si spostano da una tettoia all'altra / sperando d'incontrare qualcuno che conoscono / qualche faccia nota / e inciampano tra i rottami / canne e pali / mani e piedi dispersi / negli anfratti di credenze e mattoni / teste decollate da vetri e specchi / dei palazzi sbriciolati".

Here, oral memories are transformed into a poetic text by preserving the realistic gaze of the former. The objects of the poem are not emotions, feelings, but rather names, facts, personal stories and even the names of the city that still exists.[14] This poetic technique preserves the characteristics described by Foucault in the context of heterotopias and gives the time of the poem the characteristic of being intersected. In this sense, this poetic technique connects Insana to Burri: the movements of the earth – which once destroyed human artefacts, fear of which runs through the present – are contained in the poetic and architectural images. They reveal what happened, forcing the living to traverse and to bring the event into the present, at the same time allowing them to perceive the fragility of the form of life that returned to these places. Like a meditation on the past, or on death, they represent forms of spiritual exercise that create, through the "different places" of art, the possibility of life where a catastrophe has occurred. This need for expression ultimately concerns Burri's influence on Insana, particularly in her choice to accompany her poetic work with paintings that are very similar to Burri's crettos (Figure 8).[15]

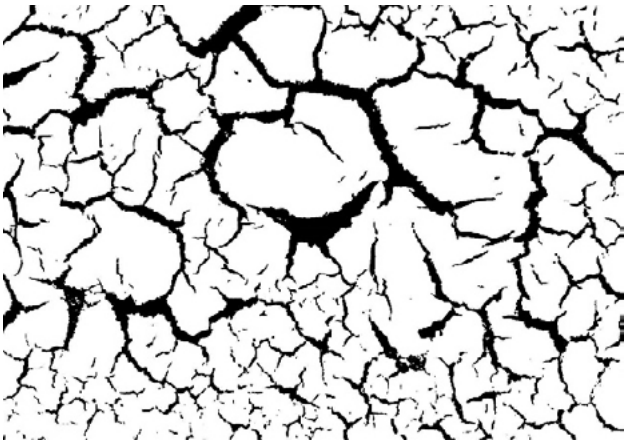

Figure 8
Jolanda Insana,
Cretto della Fiumara di Monforte, 1976

14 "Lost the municipal archive / lost the judicial archive / Messina city / is no more […]" ("perduto l'archivio municipale / perduto l'archivio giudiziario / Messina città / non c'è più […]") (Insana, 2017, p. 53). "Lillu Parapanti / after the shake / that lasted 31" and 42 / found himself in open air […]" ("Lillu Parapanti / dopo la scossa / che durò 31" e 42 / si ritrovò all'aria aperta […]") (Insana, 2017 p. 56).

15 Cf. also Enrico Crispolti's essays on Burri (2015).

6.

This memorial work of art on the site of a catastrophe results, finally, in an attempt to recreate a conscious ethos of transcendence for the survivors. On the other side of the catastrophic event, we can highlight attempts to deal with human catastrophes. We have already mentioned the use of ruins in Berlin and Hiroshima, but the trauma of Allied bombings has been the subject of other narrative recreations, such as the journal of the Japanese doctor Hachiya, commented on by Elias Canetti in *Das Gewissen der Worte* (cf. Canetti, 1984). After the atomic bombing of Hiroshima (Figure 9), in which, De Martino argues, "politics coincide[d] with the instinct of death" (De Martino, 2002, p. 476), Hachiya – a survivor – returns to encounter the place of the dead:

> "It was a horrible sight," said Dr. Tabuchi. "Hundreds of injured people who were trying to escape to the hills past our house. The sight of them was almost unbearable. Their faces and hands were burnt and swollen; and great sheets of skin had peeled away from their tissues to hang down like rags on a scarecrow. They moved like a line of ants. All through the night, they went past our house, but this morning they had stopped. I found them lying on both sides of the road so thick that it was impossible to pass without stepping on them" (Hachiya, 1955, p. 14).

Figure 9
Hiroshima after the bombing in 1945

Here too, we see a need to return to the site of the catastrophe and to face it through the lens of one's own life:

> He turned to Dr. Sasada and said brokenly: "Yesterday, it was impossible to enter Hiroshima, else I would have come. Even today fires are still burning in some places. You should see how the city has changed. When I reached the Misasa Bridge this morning, everything before me was gone, even the castle. These buildings here are the only ones left anywhere around" (Hachiya, 1955, pp. 14-15).

A new, terroristic mode of war, directed at civilians, the final chapter of which was Hiroshima, had already begun during the Spanish Civil War, in which German and Italian bombing had destroyed Guernica. Just after that episode, Pablo Picasso decided to paint his *Guernica* for the 1937 World Exposition in Paris. An act of denunciation, the image is also a sort of artistic heterotopia of that catastrophe.

More difficult was the attempt to remember and deal with the destruction of the bombing of German cities in the post-World War II era. Only in 1997, following the reunification of Germany, did W. G. Sebald return to that trauma, through conferences devoted to the "natural destruction" of German cities such as Hamburg and Köln. The unstoppable mechanisms of war are similar to the power of nature, as are their consequences. Sebald describes the experience of the RAF's "Operation Gomorrah" against the city of Hamburg as follows:

> the fire, now rising two thousand meters into the sky, snatched oxygen to itself so violently that the air currents reached hurricane force, resonating like mighty organs with all their stops pulled out at once. The fire burned like this for three hours. At its height, the storm lifted gables and roofs from buildings, flung rafters and entire advertising billboards through the air, tore trees from the ground, and drove human beings before it like living torches. Behind collapsing façades, the flames shot up as high as houses, rolled like a tidal wave through the streets at a speed of over a hundred and fifty

> kilometers an hour, spun across open squares in strange rhythms like rolling cylinders of fire. The water in some of the canals was ablaze. The glass in the tram car windows melted; stocks of sugar boiled in the bakery cellars. Those who had fled from their air-raid shelters sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt. No one knows for certain how many lost their lives that night, or how many went mad before they died. When day broke, the summer dawn could not penetrate the leaden gloom above the city. The smoke had risen to a height of eight thousand meters, where it spread like a vast, anvil-shaped cumulonimbus cloud. A wavering heat, which the bomber pilots said they had felt through the sides of their planes, continued to rise from the smoking, glowing mounds of stone. Residential districts so large that their total street length amounted to two hundred kilometers were utterly destroyed (Sebald, 2003, pp. 29-30).

Sebald's accounts of the bombing appear as a re-presentification of a trauma on which none had had the courage to write in Germany. What is at stake in these pages is not just a chronical or a recovery of proofs but, as was the case in Insana's poetry, an attempt to recover images by transforming them into the heterotopian space of a literature based on cultural memories. At the new beginning of German history, those images of trauma had to be recalled, just as the images of the "great guilt" of the Holocaust were recalled. Only if the experience of one's own collective suffering is made explicit (and not omitted) can a new *ethos* be successfully recreated, according to Sebald.[16] For his study, Sebald recovers the words, and even the title, of a report that a witness to Köln's destruction – as an enemy – decided not to write, overpowered by the emotion of what he saw. Nevertheless, through Sebald's recovery, the "natural history of destruction"

16 "And in addition to these more or less identifiable factors in the genesis of the economic miracle, there was also a purely immaterial catalyst: the stream of psychic energy that has not dried up to this day, and which has its source in the well-kept secret of the corpses built into the foundations of our state, a secret that bound all Germans together in the postwar years, and indeed still binds them, more closely than any positive goal such as the realization of democracy ever could. Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves of that context now, when the project of creating a greater

becomes an "unnatural" history, belonging to the field of cultural techniques of memory. A photo, an account, an image of the trauma re-establish for the living city the possibility of resisting the extreme apocalypse it lived through – an apocalypse that, if not elaborated, risks inhabiting its memory as a dark spectre, representing itself in unexpected forms. Like a living heterotopia, the literary image of the blackened cathedral permits the present to face its mirror image:

> On his return to London he still felt overwhelmed by what he had seen, and he agreed to write a report for Cyril Connolly, then editor of the journal *Horizon*, to be entitled "On the Natural History of Destruction." In his autobiography, written decades later, Lord Zuckerman mentions that nothing came of this project. "My first view of Cologne," he says, "cried out for a more eloquent piece than I could ever have written." When I questioned Lord Zuckerman on the subject in the 1980s, he could no longer remember in detail what he had wanted to say at the time. All that remained in his mind was the image of the blackened cathedral rising from the stony desert around it, and the memory of a severed finger that he had found on a heap of rubble (Sebald, 2003, p. 33).[17]

As in the case of Burri and Insana, and also in Hachiya's and Sebald's accounts, we can observe artistic techniques aimed at reconstituting an "ethos of transcendence". For preserving this ethos, the abovementioned "places of catastrophe" must preserve, and mirror, their "cultural memory" through the re-presentification of the event. Those who are born and live in such places are thus continuously forced to face the catastrophe as a foundational event in

> Europe, a project that has already failed twice, is entering a new phase, and the sphere of influence of the *Deutschmark* – history has a way of repeating itself – seems to extend almost precisely to the confines of the area occupied by the *Wehrmacht* in the year 1941" (Sebald, 2003, p. 16).

17 Zuckerman's (and thus Sebald's) reference to this "natural history of destruction" may trace back to the *Vestiges of a Natural History of Creation*, written by the pre-Darwinist philosopher Robert Chambers. In any case, Sebald clearly aims to reverse the progressive image of evolution, the "natural" – precisely because human – conclusion of which is the destruction of the bombing.

their "cultural memory". Their present always lives at the intersection of that traumatic past, and their steps always risk slipping into the ghost steps they are forced to follow by the form of the city around them. In this sense, places of catastrophe are not heterotopias that are detached from "normal" ways of living, providing a reflected image of them. They are living heterotopias. As such, they are among the places in which new utopian urbanisms are produced. As proved by the cases of Lisbon and Messina, new urbanisms are indeed encouraged for the redefinition of the space and the forms of buildings. The places of catastrophe imply destruction as a constant memory (and sign of the possibility) of the catastrophic event: the "new city" rises precisely with the aim of avoiding, or delaying, a new catastrophe in the future. In doing so, places of catastrophe inscribe in their bodies both what happened and the highest risk, on which the new "urban contract" is written. New urbanisms in this sense also imply new utopias of memory. As Yona Friedman argues, if "*the city is in itself a realized utopia*" (Friedman, 2020, p. 156, *my translation*), this appears to hold even truer in the case of a city of catastrophe, present and living *in spite of* its past and possible annihilation. In this sense, places of catastrophe need utopian architectonic and memorial tools to ensure the specificity of their boundaries. As "realized", utopias in these places acquire a sense akin to Foucault's conception of heterotopia: to make places of catastrophe living heterotopias is to use utopias as specific urbanistic and architectonic techniques.

The catastrophe is precisely what makes the city recognizable to its inhabitants. Because of this, only by developing specific techniques that are able to absorb (to assume) the trauma without pretending to remove it – i.e. through a detached memory embodied by a monument – can the memory and the presentiment of the end be prevented from becoming angst provoked by the feeling of the end of all possible worlds: "The catastrophe of the world and of being-in-the-world constitutes a more impressive risk, as more limited and precarious is the field of the world of the usable and of technical, material and mental tools to be used" (De Martino, 2002, p. 643). If narrated, mediated, and transformed into a social and cultural value, the image of the natural or human catastrophe turns that original event into the result of an unnatural, cultural effort in which human beings, the inhabitants of the city, reinvent their norms and their forms of life, in full consciousness of the extreme fragility of their finitude.

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