

RESEARCH PAPER

The Putative Dialectic of Catastrophes

—

Luis Druschke

MSc3 Borders&Territories graduation studio  
Transient Liquidities along the New Silk Road II  
Theory Paper Luis Druschke, id: 5603730

Filip Geerts [research tutor]  
Marc Schoonderbeek  
Stefano Milani  
Oscar Rommens

TU Delft  
Department of Architecture  
Borders&Territories

Academic Year 2022/23  
28 November 2022

|                   |   |           |
|-------------------|---|-----------|
| <b>[body]</b>     |   |           |
| <b>I</b>          | Introduction  | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>II</b>         | On Catastrophes, Disasters, and Accidents                               | <b>6</b>  |
| <b>III</b>        | On Man-Made Catastrophes<br><i>The Art of the Accident</i>              | <b>8</b>  |
| <b>IV</b>         | On Natural Catastrophes<br><i>The Coexistence of Quake and Creation</i> | <b>9</b>  |
| <b>V</b>          | Discussion & Reflection   | <b>11</b> |
| <b>[appendix]</b> |   | <b>14</b> |

## I Introduction

It is not easy yet increasingly important to acknowledge that architectural interventions cause harm. “Every building is a gaping hole of material ripped out of the earth, the cause of poisoned waters and destroyed habitats. Every building is a giant exhale of Co2 (..) Every building holds the promise of gentrification and displacement.”<sup>1</sup>

This research, however, does not reside in postulating the negative environmental effects of material accumulations nor in positing the solutionist techno-driven sustainability movements. Instead of following this positivist path, the paper starts from an understanding of destruction as an intrinsic condition of creation and proceeds by analyzing different characteristics of the interdependencies of creation and destruction to engage creatively with the anthropocentric notion of a catastrophe.

*The Dialectic Nature of Catastrophes* stems from a fascination with the inherent destructive condition of creation – in other words, the creation through destruction. This paper argues for a paradigm shift from the dichotomy of creation and destruction to an intrinsic understanding of these phenomena. Therefore, it becomes pertinent to transcend the catastrophic aftermath of an accident to understand the complexities and more importantly the reciprocal affects of the creative and destructive act. Introducing the clear aim of this investigation, the primal premise of this proposal becomes apparent: To what extent is destruction a necessary condition for creation? Are creation and destruction two separate entities or are they mutually dependent and merely expressed in different manners?

Contemplating these questions, the main body of the paper is structured into three sections which will each examine the putative dialectic understanding of catastrophes from a different perspective. While the first chapter is an initial theoretical elaboration on the key terms under investigation, the two following chapters shall be directed toward a specific example of man-made and natural catastrophes. Acknowledging the limited nature of this investigation that can only inappropriately capture the multidimensional essence of the topic, this paper intends to be understood in its deliberate bluntness.

## II On Catastrophes, Disasters, and Accidents

Let us depart from a clarification of the terminology at hand that will inevitably direct us toward a different understanding of creation and destruction. Supposing we agree that the notion of catastrophe, disaster, and accident do not represent the same thematic construct, it becomes more intricate in dissecting the fundamental differences between these terms.

Today, the terms of catastrophe and disaster are widely used interchangeably, more often than not with the prefix “natural” and intend to communicate the sudden occurrence of a destructive event. Looking at the etymological origin of both words allows us to derive a more nuanced, profound, and less eclectic understanding. The term disaster originated from the French *désastre* and the Italian *disastro* and is composed of the prefix *dis-* (pejorative, equivalent to English *mis-*) and *astro* (star, planet).<sup>2</sup> The literal translation “unlucky star” indicates an astrological and mythological reference in which an unfavorable position of a planet is blamed for a calamity. Important to emphasize here is the occurrence of an event that is solely based on misfortune and that implies a certain unpredictability. The force majeure that a disaster is originally ascribed to resonates with the contemporary understanding that clears humans of all responsibility. Reflecting on this denotation under the current anthropocentric conditions induces some doubt if this conception is still legitimate.

In *The Arcades Project* (1982)<sup>3</sup>, Walter Benjamin calls for an intrinsic catastrophic condition for the notion of progress. He argues that “the concept of progress must be grounded in the idea of catastrophe. That things are “status quo” is the catastrophe.” He strongly relates here to the etymologic origin of the term catastrophe that is derived from the Greek word *katastrephein* (eng. to overturn). Contemplating this thought, we shall identify that the idea of a catastrophe is associated rather with a rupture, a discontinuity of the existing, a conceptual overturning than with a disastrous event. This understanding could be further elaborated by examining Benjamin’s *Selected Writings I* (1991). The aphorism “catastrophe is progress, progress is catastrophe”<sup>4</sup> exacerbates the hypothesis that natural progression – in itself conceived calamitous - can only be overcome by a genuine catastrophe.

<sup>1</sup>Lev Bratishenko, Charlotte Malterre-Barthes, “How to: do no harm,” CCA, accessed November 19, 2022, <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/85366/how-to-do-no-harm>.

<sup>2</sup>“Britannica dictionary definition of disaster,” *Britannica Encyclopedia*, accessed November 19, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/science/disaster>.

<sup>3</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, (Boston: Belknap Press, 1982).

<sup>4</sup>Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften I*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 1244. Translated by the author, original quote: “Die Katastrophe ist der Fortschritt, der Fortschritt ist die Katastrophe“.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Virilio, *Politics of the Very Worst: An interview with Philippe Petit*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Paul Virilio, "The Museum of Accidents," *Art Press* no. 102 (1986). This article appeared as part of the inauguration of a new science and technology museum La Cité de la Villette.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Cohen, "Accidental Beings in Aristotle's Ontology," *Reason and Analysis in Ancient Greek Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Springer), 231-242.

Considering the ordinary use of the terms of disaster, catastrophe, and accident, we could establish a common ground by referring to the unintentional and unpredictable nature of these events. Paul Virilio however, mediates the accident in his theorization in a contrasting way claiming that "the accident is the hidden face of technical progress"<sup>5</sup> and thus becomes an inherent condition. With every invention, there is a concurrent creation of a new accident, or how Virilio puts it "to innovate the vessel was already to innovate the shipwreck, to invent the steam engine, the locomotive, was again to invent the derailment, the rail catastrophe"<sup>6</sup>. As we clearly conveyed the intrinsic condition of accidents in technological advancement, let us move to a more ubiquitous approach explaining the interdependencies of accidents. According to Aristotle, reality is made of two principal dimensions, the substance (lat. *substare* – hold firm) and the accident (lat. *accidere* – to fall down, to happen). The substances are independent entities while accidents depend and exist through substances.<sup>7</sup> A person, for instance, is a substance, his dark hair the accident that is inherent in the substance. Thus, it is to be understood that we cannot separate reality from the accident and acknowledge its fundamental existence.

The clear approach to dissect the notions of disaster, catastrophe, and accident by analyzing their etymological origin and drawing on the conception of selected philosophers allows us to reveal a multiplicity of dimensions that creates a dialectic relationship with their everyday use. Specifically, we shall advocate transcending the pejorative connotations of catastrophes and accidents. This leads us to an understanding in which every catastrophe and every accident is a fundamental constituent in the creation of novel conditions. Scrutinizing the meaning of the term disaster based on its etymological root puts forth the cause of misfortune and fate. In the recent anthropogenic context, where many effects of climate change are disguised as "natural" disasters, the idea of a certain innocence seems inappropriate. We may conclude that the use of the terms under investigation will rather reveal the personal interpretation of an event than relate to an objective description.

### III On Man-Made Catastrophes - The Art of the Accident

After this etymological analysis with digressions into different ontologies that blurred the putative dialectic of creation and destruction, let us look at the catastrophic event through the gaze of its artistic potential. The question here is, whether the accident unveils another productive dimension and overcomes its destructive nature. Contemplating destruction in the context of art, it is eminent to refer to the avant-garde movement of the early 20th century. The Futurists called most radically for the destruction of existing aesthetic, social, and political principles. "We want to glorify war – the only cure for the world (...) the destructive gesture of anarchists."<sup>8</sup> While the avant-garde was primarily concerned with the destruction of the current order to create a new order, in the very sense of *katastrophein*, we will expand this elaboration by a discussion on the aesthetics of destruction.

Therefore, we might look at the epitome of man-made catastrophes, namely the attack on the World Trade Center in 9/11 that created strong resonance in the art world. Bluntly rendered as "the greatest work of art imaginable"<sup>9</sup> by Karheinz Stockhausen, the crash of the airplanes into the buildings and the subsequent collapse of the towers induced a certain admiration from an artistic standpoint. The seduction that inheres the event of this catastrophe is twofold – with both dimensions being inextricably related.

The first layer concerns a visual aesthetic that is based on overcoming technocratic boundaries and determinism in its physical expression. Virilio expands on it by foregrounding that "the accident is what remains unexpected, truly surprising, the unknown quantity in a totally discovered planetary habitat", especially in the context of "a world which is now foreclosed, where all is explained by mathematics or psychoanalysis."<sup>10</sup> Further described as "visually stunning"<sup>11</sup>, the attack transcends all imaginable scales and thus creates a new visual language that can be conceived as an enticing and fantastic spectacle. One could argue that the act resembled a sublime performance that was planned, rehearsed, and staged.

The second layer we shall put forth relates to the subversive intentions of the avant-garde. Here the event of 9/11 enters a new realm of tragedy. "(R)eality outstrips consciousness: the word catastrophe applied to the event (...) is insufficient." It can be described as both "post-conceptual and post-scientific."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as discussed earlier, the attack has an aesthetic value, yet it does not reside there. Speaking in the realm of

<sup>8</sup>Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *20th Century Art Futurist Manifestos: The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, (Art Press Books, 2013).

<sup>9</sup>Richard Schechner, "9/11 as avant-garde art?," in *PMLA*, Vol. 124, no. 5 (2009), 1820 – 1829.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Virilio, *Unknown Quantity*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2003), 129.

<sup>11</sup>Rebecca Allison, "9/11 wicked but a work of art," in *The Guardian*, accessed November 19, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11>.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Virilio, *Unknown Quantity*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2003), 78. Quote from Svetlana Aleksievich.

art, it is essential to connote it to its conceptual reality. The pictorial expression of the event is subjugated, though immanently connected to the iconographic meaning of the attack. The message conveyed by the jihadists of al-Qaeda was an assault on western values, standards, and culture. Hence, what followed were major changes in politics and public life. In that sense, the attack can be rendered as a destruction in the very notion of the avant-garde.

With the intention to unveil the intrinsic creative condition of destruction, we can certainly state that a disaster becomes productive in its aftermath as it engenders change and can propel progress. The question at hand here is if also the very event of a catastrophe, interpreted as an artistic act, creates something new. This has been discussed with the example of the attacks from 9/11. Based on the enormous decomposition and disintegration of the event, we entered a new dimension of sublime aesthetics. Kant addresses the catastrophe in its “chaos or in its wildest and most irregular disorder or desolation (...) it gives signs of magnitude and power... chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime.”<sup>13</sup> Hence, we can infer the creation of a new visual reality that is inherent in the destructive act of 9/11 and transcends imagination.

#### IV On Natural Catastrophes – The Coexistence of Quake and Creation

After having centered man-made disasters, in this section, we shall work in the realm of natural catastrophes. Let us begin by clearly identifying one specific incident that will enable us a clearer understanding of the interdependencies of creation and destruction. Among the different typologies of natural catastrophes, the earthquake constitutes a specific role as it is the primordial reason for a myriad of subsequent events such as tsunamis, landslides, sedimentations, and subsidence. We localize our interest in one of the most active seismic regions in the world that follows the North Anatolian Fault from eastern Turkey, across northern Turkey into the Aegean Sea.

The first question we shall identify to challenge the perception that seismic activity entails solely destructive repercussions is to ask whether tectonic plates produce more than the rupture of an earthquake. To dwell on this thought, let us apply Virilio’s theoretical construct of the accident. The hypothesis that every technological invention, creates a new kind of accident, establishes the event as one constituent of a system. Relating it to

the catastrophe of the earthquake, it becomes important to comprehend it as an inevitability of the independent system of continuously moving tectonic plates. Further, this shall lead us to an understanding of the earthquake not as a single catastrophic event, but as one logical consequence of the interdependencies of this system. This shifts the question from the productive dimension of the earthquake itself to the productivity of the system from which the earthquake emerges as one mere probability.

In 1999 the last major earthquake along the North Anatolian Fault occurred in Izmit following a sequence of ruptures moving from east to west. It had a magnitude of 7.6 with devastating casualties of 17,200 dead and more than 44,000 injured people.<sup>14</sup> Firstly, we must ask if the rupture, operating independently, killed the people or if it is the collapsed buildings that have not been built for the earthquake. Secondly, as we understand the earthquake as one constituent of the system, the question emerges what the other effects are that are engendered by seismic activity. Therefore, we will shed the focus on the geological characteristics of the adjacent landscape induced by the accumulation and release of pressure of the tectonic plates. In a case-study approach, we will briefly outline the genesis of the landscape around Lake Izmit which shows specific territorial conditions that can be traced back to seismic activity.

The North Anatolian Fault (NAF) formed around 13 million years ago, propagated westward and reached the area around Izmit no earlier than 200.000 years ago. The subsequent process of a right-lateral strike-slip fault, in which two tectonic plates slide horizontally past each other created the pull-apart basin of Lake Izmit. The pressure of the fault led to an interesting morphology, where the lake is bordered by two mountain chains.<sup>15</sup> The erosion of these mountains carved deep cuts into the surface, detailing triangular mountain facets and creating deltas adjacent to the lake. These deltas provide favorable conditions for agriculture that can be read as direct results of the system of tectonic plates, just like the event of the earthquake itself.<sup>16</sup>

In this chapter, we distanced ourselves from the single event of a catastrophe and interpreted creation in the context of its system. As analyzed before, the accident is intrinsic to the substance – to speak in Aristotle’s terms – and thus also the productive nature of the substance cannot be separated from the accident (in this specific case the earthquake). With the ambition to unravel the dichotomy of creation and destruction, we encounter here that the cycle consists of two constituents: the system and the event. Which part of it, we consider productive or destructive is merely a matter of interpretation.

<sup>13</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment: Immanuel Kant Philosophical Writings* (New York: Continuum, 1986), 129-246.

<sup>14</sup>“North Anatolian Fault,” Wikipedia, accessed November 19, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\\_Anatolian\\_Fault](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Anatolian_Fault).

<sup>15</sup>Çenk Yaltırak, Bedri Alpar, “The Relationship between the Tectonic Setting of Lake Izmit Basin and the Middle Strand of the North Anatolian Fault,” *Turkish Journal of Earth Sciences* (2009), DOI: 10.3906/yer-0803-4.

<sup>16</sup>Cengiz Zabcı, Interview by author, semi-structured interview, Technical University Istanbul, October 31, 2022.

## V Discussion and Reflection

The initial discussion of the different notions of catastrophe, disaster, and accident provided us with an analytical background that we applied to the subsequent analysis of man-made and natural catastrophes. As the limited frame of this research lacks the ambition to holistically examine the productive dimensions of destruction with an emphasis on incisive events such as catastrophes, we elaborated on two specific layers: its artistic potential and the context which produces these events. Here, we identified three different types of how destruction can become productive.

First, a catastrophe has the potential to engender change. It must be understood in its ability to produce discontinuity. Benjamin goes even further by claiming that real progress can only be achieved through a catastrophe. This understanding puts forth the etymological origin of catastrophe (*katastrephein* - eng. to overturn).

Second, the elaboration from an artistic standpoint revealed that the event of a catastrophe itself has the potential to become productive. Here we are pointing to the act of destruction as an artistic performance that inheres its own visual language. The analysis of 9/11 proved that material decomposition creates a certain aesthetic that addresses the sublime of chaos and unexpectedness.

Third, a catastrophe is always the outcome of a system. Acknowledging its inevitability puts the accident in line with the other outcomes of a system with the sole difference of being conceived unfavorable as it overcomes determinism. Hence it performs in a context of production where creation and destruction are interdependent entities. The focus here is not on the catastrophe itself but on the intrinsic creative condition of its context.

Aiming at overcoming the dichotomy of creation and destruction, we can constitute that accidents are an eminent part of creation. "Accidents, in the deterministic sense, are not designed, but simply "happen". They are out of control in that we can never predict exactly what, where, or when. But they are designed, in the Virilian sense, because the creation of any working system insures their probability, thus their inevitability."<sup>17</sup> Hence their existence is a fundamental consequence, yet their articulation is spontaneous which enables their potentiality of being productive.

<sup>17</sup>Lebbeus Woods, "The Fall," in *Unknown Quantity*, (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2003), 156.

## Bibliography

- Allison, Rebecca. "9/11 wicked but a work of art". in *The Guardian*. accessed November 19, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/sep/11/arts.september11>.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Gesammelte Schriften I*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Boston: Belknap Press, 1982.
- Bratishenko, Malterre-Barthes. "How to: do no harm." *CCA*. accessed November 19, 2022. <https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/85366/how-to-do-no-harm>.
- Britannica Encyclopedia. "Definition of Disaster." accessed November 19, 2022. <https://www.britannica.com/science/disaster>.
- Cohen, Marc. "Accidental Beings in Aristotle's Ontology." in *Reason and Analysis in Ancient Greek Philosophy*. Dordrecht: Springer Verlag, 2013.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement: Immanuel Kant Philosophical Writings*. New York: Continuum. 1986.
- Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. *Century Art Futurist Manifestos: The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*. Art Press Books. 2013.
- Schechner, Richard. "9/11 as avant-garde art?." in *PMLA/Publications of the Modern Language Association America*, Vol. 124, no. 5. 2009.
- Virilio, Paul. *Politics of the Very Worst: An Interview with Philippe Petit*. Cambridge: MIT Press. 1999.
- Virilio, Paul. "The Museum of Accidents." in *Art Press* no. 102. 1986.
- Virilio, Paul. *Unknown Quantity*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. 2003.
- Wikipedia. "North Anatolian Fault." accessed November 19, 2022. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North\\_Anatolian\\_Fault](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Anatolian_Fault).
- Woods, Lebbeus. "The Fall." in *Unknown Quantity*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd. 2003.
- Yaltirak, Cenk. "The Relationship between the Tectonic Setting of Lake Iznik Basin and the Middle Strand of the North Anatolian Fault." in *Turkish Journal of Earth Sciences*. 2009.
- Zabci, Cengiz. interviewed by author. Technical University Istanbul. October 31, 2022.

