

Summary

The main objective of my doctoral dissertation *Expel Tiresias! Culture and Productive Catastrophes* can be shortly summarised as an attempt at finding the methodology to describe productive effects of catastrophes in the context of culture. Firstly, I ask, if the importance of security – understood in a very general sense – has been overestimated and undeservedly enjoys the reputation of incontestable value. If so, then uncertainty, chaos and randomness unexpectedly may lay claim to be valued positively. Secondly, I try to prove that – given recent cultural and technological trends – we should look for new ways of understanding the role of art, namely as an experimental field for provoking dangerous and yet not totally destructive catastrophes. As I show in the first chapter, European culture helped to familiarize the unexpected events for over 2000 years and achieved that through taming their dynamic and unforeseeable impact on society. In my thesis I try to convince the reader that catastrophe can function as a tool for cultural change. A tool that remains nevertheless peculiar and uncanny, as it cannot be fully controlled.

The text is divided into two parts. The first one consists mainly of theoretical considerations, whilst in the second I analyse specific case studies. I begin my argument by interpreting the classical myth of Tiresias whom I use as a metaphor for the way European culture dealt with catastrophes in the past. As I argue, this paradigm is characterized by individualizing and subjectifying catastrophes, or in other words, by reducing the complexity of such events and making sense of them through oversimplifying dramatizations. Many examples of individualizing responsibility for crisis and scapegoating can be found also today and the attack on World Trade Centre on 9/11 can serve as the most expressive example. For this reason – as I contend – we should look for an alternative paradigm and a different way of understanding and dealing with catastrophes in postmodern reality which is shaped by complex networks and new mass media. This can be achieved only when we establish a different point of view and look for inspirations in modern science, especially in physics of information, nonlinear thermodynamics and chaos theory. These branches of science allow us to take notice of the dynamic and productive (in evolutionary sense) potential of catastrophes. After grounding my analyses in already existing theories of performance and performativity I define catastrophe in my own terms, though relying heavily on works of scientists working within the fields of aforementioned disciplines and media theorists interested in materiality of communication (Friedrich A. Kittler and Vilém Flusser). I finish my theoretical

considerations by formulating a definition of catastrophe as a non-programmable message and by explaining evolutionary role of the unexpected events.

After establishing the theoretical framework I begin to analyse case studies of catastrophes which lead to “creative destruction” of different networks, mediums or communicational situations. Every case study serves to show a different kind of benefit which a system may derive from an unexpected aberration. The variety of topics helps to enrich and contextualize the basic observations and definitions and to prove their usefulness in different situations. All chapters were organized in descending order – from the most complex networks to the simplest ones.

In the first chapter entitled *Cities that benefit from catastrophes* I talk about architecture and town planning in New York, while trying to prove that productivity of catastrophes relies on the existence of a proper context – in this instance of diversified urban structure and “reactive architecture”. To this end I describe the rapid growth of the city, which became a metropolis in the beginning of 20th century, and I analyse a more recent debate about the future of the city after the attack on World Trade Centre. Following the conclusions of such thinkers as Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford and Luciana Parisi, I take the view that balanced and diversified urban tissue provides responsivity and plasticity so crucial when facing disastrous events.

The next chapter – *What happened to Anna Kournikova?* – is devoted mainly to recent trends in internet development (Web 3.0). I argue that a network opened to the risk of infection by computer viruses should be valued higher than a completely safe network, as the absolute security of information traffic is only possible through standardisation of network architecture and interfaces. I inscribe the process of securing the internet into the wider trend of contemporary obsession with security. In my critique I follow the footsteps of Jean Baudrillard, who speaks about dangers of excessive prophylaxis, and Martin J. Blaser, American microbiologist, who developed the theory of “missing microbes”. I state that his observations work well also in the context of internet which should be regarded as a semi-biological network.

The chapter *Theatre catastrophe and the open dialogue* is concerned with sudden ruptures in communication in theatre. I put forward a hypothesis that theatre always emerges as medium in the process of communication, or in other words, its mediality is never predetermined. Moreover, its apparent stability is a result of securing the communicational

situation – the performers and the audience are given a set of fixed and seemingly unchangeable rules. After introducing the reader into the mechanisms of securing the communicational situation in theatre – f.e. in American theatre in early XIX century, or Elizabethan theatre, so these forms of theatre that allowed for lively audience participation – I explain that catastrophes can possibly open the communicational situation in theatre and allow for a more dialogical relation between the performers and the audience. Theatre after a catastrophe reveals its own plasticity and adaptability to sudden changes. I conclude that these abilities should be valued especially high in the times when aesthetic experience is often determined by technological automata.

In the next chapter – *Dancing with the textures* – I analyse catastrophes in computer games focusing primarily on the positive effect of absurd bugs and glitches which transcend the field of possibilities determined by the game's engine and interface. I focus on three case studies: changes of gameplay in *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* caused by revealing a fundamental glitch in game's graphic engine by internet players; glitch-driven gameplay of *Goat Simulator*; and creative output by gaming community which used bugs and glitches to produce stories about characters in *Team Fortress 2*. Analysis of all these cases leads me to a conclusion that minor catastrophes may free the computer user and stimulate her/his creative behaviour.

The last chapter – *Catastrophe and film* – deals with the so called *mind-game films* and this time the creativity of catastrophes lies in loosening the causal chains of the narrative and opening the viewer onto a nonlinear (multidimensional) mode of experience. The fluid or unstable identities of the main characters – who introduce the viewer with the ontology of the fictional world – enable acquiring surprising or uncanny perspectives. Schizophrenic or paranoid protagonists function as an important counterbalance for superheroes whose role consists in reinstating order in society after a disaster. Schizophrenic perspective allows to explore the broken, improbable world, whereas superheroes represented on screen remind us only about the inherent need of stability after turbulent times.

All the summarized analyses are connected by a one common idea: every single time I tried to show the unexpected profits that may be gained from unexpected and unpredictable events. In the first chapter I stressed the importance of reactive environments that enable such profits. Then I went on to explain how a complex biological network may paradoxically benefit from insecurity (or suffer from the excess of security). In the next chapter, which was devoted to the medium of theatre, I extended this argument stating that evolution of theatre

towards the paradigm of the artistic *mise en scène* involved securing the theatrical situation and determining the behaviour of the performers and the viewers. From such perspective a catastrophe in theatre may be as well treated as a positive event which stimulates creative behaviour by all theatre attendants. The same rule applies for computer games. As I argued, "bad design", which allows micro-catastrophes to happen, introduces randomness and freedom to the experience of the gamer. In the last chapter on film – the most deterministic medium of all analysed – I described how the "cognitive catastrophes" helped to open the perception and enrich the viewer's experience. To sum up, every analysis was designed to prove the productivity of a catastrophe for a given medium or network and – on the other hand – to show, how ambivalent – as a value – absolute security actually is. It can be therefore said that in *Expel Tiresias! Culture and Productive Catastrophes* I oppose to the idea of security as a transparent value and praise the advantages derived from exposure to risk and possible advantages derived from exposure to risk and unpredictable encounters.

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